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By DONALD H. SMITH

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MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., was America's foremost exponent of non-violent resistance. Nonviolence was for him both a philosophy and a method of social persuasion. He held true to this philosophy in spite of a national proclivity toward violence and in spite of the recent movement toward violent protest in the cities. The evolution of King's philosophy and method has resulted from a multiplicity of experiences.

Henry David Thoreau provided King's introduction to social resistance. Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience*, discovered by King during his Morehouse College days, so stirred him that he found himself returning to it again and again.

In 1849, Thoreau had questioned why men resign their consciences to legislators. He declared, "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right."¹ This later became a fundamental principle of King's reform movement — the obligation to place the question of "right" before the question of "law."

Chiding his readers for accepting the dictates of unfair edicts, Thoreau wrote:

... Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? . . . if it [government] is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. . . . What I have to do is to see . . . that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.²

Thoreau possessed a militant spirit and, unlike King, was not opposed to violence, if need be, to resist evil. Thoreau also chose to protest social evils on an individual basis; he was not especially interested in proselytizing, but instead he sought to free himself from the guilt of acquiescence to evil. His isolation at Walden and his refusal to support the government of Massachusetts were his personal ballots against the state.

Thoreau's intense antipathy to slavery and his personal solution to the problem are thus reflected:

... I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name — if ten *honest* men only — ay, if one HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves*, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the country jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery

¹ Carl Bode (ed.), *The Portable Thoreau* (New York, 1947), p. 111.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be; what is once well done is done forever.³

Once having taken his moral stand, a man should not fear retaliation by the government or dread incarceration: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."⁴

Martin Luther King — social reformer in the making — was not alone in his deep admiration for the counsels of Thoreau. As he sat in a classroom in Atlanta, in intellectual agreement with the Concordite, a little brown man on the other side of the world, who had also been inspired by Thoreau, was putting civil disobedience to actual practice in ridding his country of a foreign government. Just before King's graduation from Morehouse, the frail Mohandas K. Gandhi was struck down by an assassin's bullet. King and Gandhi would never meet in the flesh, but the ideas of men transcend their earthly forms.

At this point for young King, the musings from Walden Pond could be only an academic stimulant. Later, combined with the teachings of other men, that stimulant would be a basis for social reform.

During his years at Crozer Theological Seminary, King encountered some of the most important ideas of his life. One of these was the concept of the *social gospel* as espoused by the Reverend Walter Rauschenbusch. Of this experience, King wrote:

I came early to Walter Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* which left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up in me as a result of my early experiences. . . . It has been my conviction since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried.⁵

King did not find complete philosophical compatibility with Rauschenbusch, for he felt that the Reverend Rauschenbusch had unwittingly succumbed to the "nineteenth-century cult of inevitable progress, which led him to a superficial optimism concerning man's nature."⁶ King also felt that the former "Hell's Kitchen" pastor had made the mistake of almost "identifying the Kingdom of God with a particular social and economic system."⁷

King, however, agreed fully with Rauschenbusch that "if the pulpit is willing to lend its immense power of proclamation and teaching, it will immeasurably speed the spread of new conceptions [of social reform]."⁸

Another point on which there was a meeting of the minds is Rauschen-

³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York, 1958), p. 72.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York, 1912), p. 357.

busch's belief in the dual purpose of religion: "There are two great entities in human life — the human soul and the human race — and religion is to save both."⁹

Religion which failed to concern itself with man's social well-being, "like the desire for power and the overweening love of property, was for him [Rauschenbusch], evil."¹⁰

Rauschenbusch helped King to realize that Christian men must act "to overcome the evil in the present world, not by withdrawing from the world, but by revolutionizing it."¹¹

After Rauschenbusch, there was little doubt for King that his own would be a pulpit deeply concerned with man's tribulations on earth.

The Crozer experience was one of profound meditation and exploration. King delved into the writings of many of the great philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau, Hobbes, Bentham, Mill and Locke, and to the existentialists: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger and Sartre. He read social theories, including Marxian Socialism. Finally, he investigated various theories of theology. Later he was to read the works of Freud, Jung, Adler and the Watson behaviorists.

One of the most important changes in his thinking took place at theological school, where his strict fundamentalist upbringing was shaken and uprooted by Crozer's atmosphere of liberalism.

Liberalism, with its emphasis on the freedom of man and its insistence on sober, critical judgment, had a deep effect on King. In fact, he came dangerously near accepting all of its preachments. After a time of grappling with a fuller dimension of liberalism's implications, he came to reject its extremely optimistic view of man's nature, its uncompromising faith in the triumph of reason.¹²

Rejecting parts of liberalism, however, did not mean that King accepted the doctrines of neo-orthodoxy. Neo-orthodoxy seemed too extreme in the opposite direction. Its pessimistic explanation of man and its narrow Biblicism were also to him untenable. Before his death, King held that "an adequate understanding of man is found neither in the thesis of liberalism nor in the antithesis of neo-orthodoxy, but in a synthesis which reconciles the truths of both."¹³

During this period, King had begun to have doubts concerning the power of love in dealing with human affairs. His reading of Nietzsche's *The Genealogy of Morals* and *The Will to Power* with their attacks on Judeo-Christian morality, had caused him to reexamine his thinking on love.

And then it happened. One Sunday afternoon Martin Luther King went to nearby Philadelphia to hear a speech by Dr. Mordecai Johnson,

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

¹⁰ G. Bromley Oxnam, *Personalities in Social Reform* (New York, 1950), p. 70.

¹¹ Rauschenbusch, *op. cit.*, p. 412.

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York, 1963), pp. 135-36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

then president of Howard University. Dr. Johnson had recently returned from India and spoke enthusiastically of the life and teachings of Mohandas K. Gandhi. His address was so moving that King left the meeting alive, almost as if his life had changed that day. He immediately purchased six books on Gandhi's life and works.

As he read Gandhi, his thinking concerning the power of love in solving social problems began to crystalize:

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 of social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method of social reform that I had been seeking for so many months. The intellectual and moral satisfaction that I failed to gain from the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, the revolutionary methods of Marx and Lenin, the social-contracts theory of Hobbes, the "back to nature" optimism of Rousseau, and the superman philosophy of Nietzsche, I found in the nonviolent resistance philosophy of Gandhi. I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.¹⁴

It is intriguing how the lines of Eastern and Western thought interlace in the formation of King's social philosophy. As has been mentioned earlier, both King and Gandhi were strongly affected by Thoreau's example. In turn, the mystical Thoreau and his close colleague mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in their pilgrimages to transcendentalism, often read and discussed together the great Hindu works, the Bhagavad-Gita and the sacred Upanishads. From these works Thoreau derived Hindu concepts such as the immortality of the soul, the unselfish performance of one's duty, and the meditative preparation for union and identification with Brahma (the Divine Reality). Thoreau's Walden sojourns to commune with nature were probably in large measure motivated by these Hindu classics.¹⁵

Gandhi, too, being Hindu, had read these works, and he also had found guidelines for his existence. Interestingly enough, besides having a scholarly interest in the significant philosophical and religious writings of the East, the Mahatma was equally conversant with the teachings of the Bible, and in particular with the Sermon on the Mount, the classic statement of the Christian ethic. King, of course, having been raised in the shadow of his father's church and himself a minister, was influenced early by the teachings of Jesus.

The parts of the Sermon which held special meaning for Gandhi and for King are those which stress the principles of tolerance and love for one's enemies such as: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁵ See Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* (New York, 1932).

them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”¹⁶

Gandhi loved Jesus¹⁷ and accepted the teachings of the Sermon as one of the bases of his own doctrine of nonviolence.¹⁸ Gandhi had also read Thoreau and was inspired by the “masterly treatise on the duty of Civil Disobedience.”¹⁹

Gandhiji, as he was affectionately known, drew further wisdom from Count Tolstoy’s interpretation of Christian teaching, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and from John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*.

Just as Thoreau had coined a term, *civil disobedience*, to describe his personal protest, Gandhi also invented an expression, *Satyagraha*, to embody his social philosophy. At first Gandhi had referred to his actions as passive resistance but finding these terms misleading — too often *passive* connoted doing nothing — devised a more concise terminology.²⁰

Satyagraha is derived from the Hindu terms *satya* meaning truth and *agraha* meaning force, hence truth-force. Since the Hindu interpretation of truth is also spirit or soul, Gandhi finally decided upon soul-force.²¹

Truth and love (*ahimsa*) are the essential elements of *Satyagraha*. These two terms, *ahimsa* and *truth* are so interrelated that one does not appear without the other in the Gandhian philosophical lexicon:

Ahimsa is the means; Truth is the end. . . . If we take care of the means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later. . . . Whatever difficulties we encounter, whatever apparent reverses we sustain, we may not give up the quest for Truth which alone is, being God Himself.²²

Gandhi thought of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) as an instrument of supreme courage and strength, not a subterfuge of the weak. He believed that it could be used in resisting all forms of man’s injustice to man. Any kind of political, social, economic, or religious oppression or exploitation would succumb to the moral pressure of *Satyagraha*.²³

For nonviolence to be a valid creed, it must be pursued in the face of violence. Used *vis-a-vis* an opponent who himself is not violent, it has no meaning. The real test of allegiance to *ahimsa* is when its adherent is confronted by those who would do him harm and willingly chooses to meet force with soul-force.²⁴

What are the requisites for one who would practice *Satyagraha*? Parulekar extracts six principles from Gandhism:

1. He or she must have a living faith in non-violence. This is impossible without a living faith in God. A non-violent man can do

¹⁶ St. Matthew 5:44.

¹⁷ M. K. Gandhi, *Harijan* (July 7, 1940), quoted in M. K. Gandhi, *Non-Violent Resistance*, ed. by Bharatan Kumarappa (New York, 1951), p. 176.

¹⁸ Louis Fischer, *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World* (New York, 1954), p. 129.

¹⁹ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India* (March 23, 1921), quoted in Kumarappa, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁰ Kumarappa, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²² M. K. Gandhi, *Yeranda Mandir*, chaps. I-III, VI, cited in Kumarappa, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

²³ N. B. Parulekar, *The Science of the Soul Force or Mahatma Gandhi’s Doctrine of Truth and Non-Violence* (Bombay, 1962), p. 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

- nothing save by the power and grace of God. Without it he won't have the courage to die without anger, without fear and retaliation. Such courage comes from the belief that God sits in the hearts of all, and that there should be no fear in the presence of God. The knowledge of the omni-presence of God also means respect for the lives of opponents. . . . It is needless to say that one must be a seeker after truth and must, therefore, possess a spirit of humility.
2. The exercise of non-violence presupposes ability to strike. It is a conscious deliberate restraint put upon one's desire for vengeance.
 3. Fraud, lying, deceit and all the brood of violence will have absolutely no room in the method one adopts. He must therefore thoroughly cleanse himself of all these impurities and thus make his character beyond reproach.
 4. Everything is done by him openly and above board, for Truth hates secrecy. The more open he is the more truthful he is likely to be.
 5. If "martyrdom complex" creeps in, if one has that pride of egoism, there is no non-violence.
 6. One must have unshakable faith in the ultimate success of one's self-sacrifice and self-suffering.²⁵

The Mahatma, like Thoreau, believed that a God-fearing man should be answerable only to God and to the dictates of his conscience, and that when the laws of men conflict with one's conscience then one should break those laws.²⁶ A true *Satyagrahi*, by definition coming as close to the Divine as man is able to do, would not be able to pursue any course but the good. If this nonviolent seeker of truth encounters man-made rules which are uncivil, or as it were, evil, then the *Satyagrahi* is obligated to resist the law. One who breaks laws, however, accepts, in good conscience, the penalty for the act.

Satyagraha was also the name Gandhi gave to his national campaign of civil disobedience. A *Satyagraha* consisted of inspiring his Indian followers to stage mass *hartals* (strikes), which stopped all labor on given days or during a specified period, and convincing them to refuse to cooperate with intolerable government measures, such as the Rowlett Acts of 1919.

Originally Gandhi had used civil disobedience in an effort to persuade the British to allow Indians more freedom (in their own country) but, in 1929, the annual Indian Congress session in Lahore, presided over by Jawaharlal Nehru, adopted a resolution calling for complete independence from Great Britain. After that date, the rallying cry of *Swaraj*, which had formerly meant home-rule, came to signify total freedom.

The crowning achievement of Indian *Satyagraha* came in the spring of 1930, when the little yogi led a "march to the sea." Protesting the British policy of taxing Indians one day's pay a year for the privilege

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁶ Kumarappa, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

of using salt, Gandhi, then sixty-one, and thousands of his devotees marched twenty-four days, two hundred and forty-one miles, to the sea. Arriving flagged of physical vigor but high in the spirit of *ahimsa*, the *Satyagrahis* proceeded to take salt from the sea and to prepare it for their use. The British troops on duty cracked the heads of the marchers until the sands of the beach were splattered with crimson and mass arrests were made, Gandhi and Nehru among them.

The tremendous strength and courage with which the nonviolent protesters withstood the assault of the soldiers, giving no retaliation and offering no resistance, signaled the end of British dominance in India. The Indians had demonstrated to the British, to the world, and to themselves — those present, the peasants in the villages, the wealthy potentates, all — that no form of cruelty, indeed nothing, could hold back freedom on the march. Independence would have to wait until after World War II, but its coming was inevitable now. Gandhi, himself, had not used salt in over six years, but he knew that such a test of personal endurance and sacrifice on his part and by the marchers, combined with the brutality of British retaliation, would focus world attention on the plight of the Indians and would also unite the various Indian factions as perhaps nothing else could. Thus it was for sheer dramatic impact that Gandhi planned and executed the “salt march.” As Ved Mehta has so astutely observed:

When the century closes, Gandhi and his followers — whether in Asia, Africa or America — may go down as the influential men of our time not because they revived religion, not even because they scored political successes, but because they were imaginative artists who knew how to use world politics as their stage.²⁷

Not only was King impressed by Gandhi's *Satyagraha* as a method of social protest, but he must also have admired the Mahatma's showmanship skills.

There was much in Gandhi that appealed to King: love, nonviolence, humility, self-sacrifice, good means to the good end, the obligation to take action against social evils, as well as other concomitants to these principles. Much of Gandhism would go into the formulation of the philosophy and technique of King's social protest movement.

During King's last year at Crozer, he encountered the works of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.

Niebuhr disagreed with Gandhi's spiritual interpretations of nonviolent resistance — for Niebuhr believed Gandhi failed to understand the coercive nature of *Satyagraha* and the violence it can and did unleash, emitting both from Indians and Britons. In spite of this disagreement, Niebuhr did perceive nonviolence as a “particularly strategic instrument for an oppressed group which is hopelessly in the minority

²⁷ Ved Mehta, “Gandhism Is Not Easily Copied,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 9, 1961, p. 45.

and has no possibility of developing sufficient power to set against its oppressors."²⁸

In 1932, Niebuhr predicted that nonviolent resistance as a political and social strategy would provide the means for the second emancipation of Negro Americans. He dismissed violence as a hopeless policy for Negroes to pursue.²⁹

Niebuhr realized that white men, however well meaning and however understanding of the plight of Negroes, would never, of their own accord, "admit the Negro to equal rights if it [the white race] is not forced to do so."³⁰

Anticipating a Negro nonviolent movement in America, Niebuhr wrote: "One waits for such a campaign with all the more reason and hope because the peculiar spiritual gifts of the Negro endow him with the capacity to conduct it successfully. He would need only to fuse the aggressiveness of the new and young Negro with the patience and forbearance of the old Negro, to rob the former of its vindictiveness and the latter of its lethargy."³¹

At theology school, King was taking in all that he heard and read holding it in preparedness for an eventual synthesis. Reinhold Niebuhr's penetrating awareness of man's social disposition helped King to reject superficial optimism, such as that found in Rauschenbusch, and to arrive at a more realistic position for social action. King recalled: "While I still believed in man's potential for good, Niebuhr made me realize his potential for evil as well."³²

King's matriculation at Boston University placed him in an environment which was sympathetic to pacifism, so that many of the professors under whom he studied and speakers whom he heard provided still further incentives toward nonviolence.

It was at Boston University that King developed what came to be his basic philosophical position: personalism. His major professor during the beginning of the Boston years was Edgar Sheffield Brightman, Borden Parker Bowne Professor of Philosophy.

Both Brightman and his predecessor Bowne were among America's leading proponents of personal idealism or personalism. In the personalistic school, personality is held as the ultimate key to reality. Bowne's ideology:

Personalism conceives reality as a self or belonging to a self. By self is meant a unitary, self-identifying conscious agent. A self capable of the realization of values may be called a person. . . . Synopsis is the ultimate form of intelligibility. All parts can be understood only when interpreted through their membership in the whole person to which they belong. . . . Reality is rational and hence

²⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1932), p. 252.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

³² King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 79.

in some way an organic whole. . . . In the final synopsis of thought all reality must be viewed as conscious experience . . . [meaning] that concrete reality is a self or person.⁸³

Personalism is primarily a Christian view of life, stressing religious and ethical values.⁸⁴ Its close ties with a philosophy of religion⁸⁵ made it a philosophical position compatible with King's theological proclivities.

Brightman, though a disciple of Bowne, nevertheless contributed some divergencies to personalism. Professor Brightman, for example, was more willing to recognize and deal with "the dysteleological and the evil in nature and in man."⁸⁶ Also, Brightman makes greater application of personalism to the area of social philosophy.⁸⁷

It was while studying under Brightman and, after his death, with L. Harold DeWolf, that King was introduced to the writings of Georg Hegel. Brightman, interpreting the Hegelian theory of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, saw all experience as a form of opposition and struggle: "Everything which exists stands in contrast with something else . . . every thesis implies some sort of antithesis . . . every opposition leads to a higher level of life, and every struggle points to a higher meaning or synthesis."⁸⁸

Under Brightman and DeWolf, King read Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. On his own he perused the German thinker's *Philosophy of History* and *Philosophy of Right*. The Hegelian analysis of the dialectical process gave King insight that "growth comes through struggle."⁸⁹

Atlanta is a thousand miles from Boston, but for Martin Luther King the distance was measurable in intellectual light years. From the teachings of Christ and Gandhi he learned the power of love in countering evil. Christ provided the spiritual impetus; Gandhi supplied the method.

Thoreau and Gandhi impressed King with the moral obligation not to cooperate with injustice, to break man-made rules if need be. Rauschenbusch showed him the role of the pulpit in effecting social change. Niebuhr awakened him to the fallacies of the doctrines of inevitable progress and explained nonviolence as the ideal technique for Negro Americans to use in achieving emancipation. Brightman, DeWolf and the Boston University Theological School introduced him to personalism and gave him metaphysical insights into the values of human personality. Hegel demonstrated that social, or any change, for that matter, could be wrought only through conflict.

⁸³ *The Development of American Philosophy*, ed. by Walter G. Muelder and Lawrence Sears (Cambridge, 1940), p. 222.

⁸⁴ W. E. Werkmeister, *A History of Philosophical Ideas in America* (New York, 1949), p. 319.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Muelder and Sears, *op. cit.*, p. 489.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Edgar S. Brightman, *The Problem of God* (New York, 1930), p. 135, cited in Werkmeister, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

⁸⁹ King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 80.