

# The Role of Religions in Promoting Non-Violence

Ira Chernus

University of Colorado at Boulder, USA

Diogenes  
2017, Vol. 61(3–4) 46–58  
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0392192116648595  
journals.sagepub.com/home/dio



Among all the nonviolence movements that succeeded in creating political and social change in the twentieth century, two stand out for their worldwide fame and lasting influence: the movement for independence in India and the movement for African-Americans' civil rights in the US South. Both of these movements were steeped in religious tradition, language, and commitment. Both had such great success in part (though only in part) because of their charismatic, prophetic leaders, who also achieved worldwide fame and lasting influence: Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In both cases, the leaders were devoutly religious men who insisted that there is a necessary connection between nonviolence and religion.

So these two movements are especially good case studies for examining questions about the relationship of religion and nonviolence, particularly the question of efficacy: What, if anything, does a religious context add that gives a nonviolence movement a better chance to create political and social change?

Of course the movements led by Gandhi and Luther King were quite different from each other in many ways. In this essay, though, I shall focus on the religious elements they shared that help to explain their success and worldwide impact. I shall suggest that those elements are logically connected with each other in important ways, so that what we might call "the religious effect" in nonviolence is not merely a set of disparate elements but a relatively unified effect. And I shall make my case by contrasting these prominent religious leaders with two of the most prominent advocates of nonviolence on a strictly secular basis, Gene Sharp and Barbara Deming.

This is not to suggest that one must choose between secular and religious foundations for nonviolence. In the lived reality of efforts for change, both contribute greatly. The theoretical or potential conflicts between them are rarely evident in practice. There is no reason to assume that those conflicts will inevitably intrude on the partnership. Whether the foundations of nonviolence are framed in religious or secular terms is, in practice, a secondary question.

However, an analysis of the difference between the two kinds of motivations for nonviolence does yield some useful theoretical reflections on nonviolence, its relationship with religion, and the best ways to use nonviolent techniques to create change. Understanding "the religious effect" can be a heuristic device to help even the most rigorously secular nonviolence movement to progress more effectively toward its goals.

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**Corresponding author:**

Ira Chernus, Department of Religious Studies, University of Colorado at Boulder, 292 UCB, Eaton Humanities 240, Boulder, CO 80309-0292, USA.

Email: [chernus@colorado.edu](mailto:chernus@colorado.edu)

## Contrasting views of human society

Gandhi and King typify all people who embrace nonviolence for religious reasons in at least one crucial respect: they do not define nonviolence as merely refraining from physical violence. That is only an effect of their commitment to nonviolence. In fact, nonviolence in their view is not primarily defined by behavior at all but by attitude and motivation.

The key word that Gandhi and King share to describe the essential attitude behind nonviolence is *love*, a love extended to all people, even those whose behaviors or policies one strongly opposes. There is nothing uniquely religious about the concept of love extended to all people. Plenty of purely secular people have embraced it as a principle by which they try to live.

To find the distinctively religious element in the teachings of Gandhi and King we must ask them: Why should we love all people? Each answered in the language of his own religious tradition. But their answers met in a common perception – and they insisted that it was a perception, not merely a belief – that human societies are not merely collections of discrete individuals, with each person seeking ways to create connections to others. On the contrary, human societies are much more accurately described as patterns or webs of relationships. Each of us, from the moment we are conceived, is always already enmeshed in an incredibly complex pattern of interactions.

As Martin Luther King memorably put it, we are all “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. This is the interrelated structure of all reality. You can never be what you ought to be until I become what I ought to be” – and vice versa. “The self cannot be a self without other selves. I cannot reach fulfillment without thou.... All life is interrelated” (King, 1991: 210, 122).

Martin Luther King consciously took care to offer secular arguments that paralleled his religiously-based appeals for nonviolence. So he explained his view of human society in the context of his notion of freedom as “the opportunity to fulfill [his] total capacity untrammelled by any artificial barrier” (King, 1991: 121). He argued that every person wants to fulfill their own potential. But we cannot gain or even seek fulfillment on our own. Every step toward fulfillment requires some help from others. Those others must be free to fulfill their fullest potential in order to offer us the most help in fulfilling ours. Therefore, to fulfill ourselves to the fullest we should obviously help others to do the same. Since we are only free when fulfilling our own potential, we are only free when we are also helping others to be free to fulfill their potential.

For King, though, this secular argument was only part of the story. The whole story had to include another crucial point: this pattern of necessary human interdependence did not come to be by chance. It was created quite intentionally by God, a divine Person with a conscious will. “Creation is so designed that my personality can be fulfilled only in the context of community” (King, 1991: 122).

As a Christian, King stressed the tragedy of human life: people so often act against the design of God. Sin is separation. All humans are moved by an impulse to act as if they were separate beings in competition with others, rather than recognizing and acting upon the fact of inter-connectedness. This is how he understood the classical notion of original sin.

However, as King understood Christianity, God is always working to reunite that which has been separated. “The universe is under the control of a loving purpose.” That is why “the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice.” Even those who do not believe in God must believe in “some creative force that works for togetherness,” King asserted, “a creative force in this universe that works to bring the disconnected aspects of reality into a harmonious whole.” The objective moral order, the fact of our interconnectedness, works to overcome all separation and corrects all injustice (King, 1991: 88, 40).

This view of human society was the logical foundation of King's commitment to nonviolence as an attitude of universal love. Every human being has been created by God – is a "child of God" – and thus deserves love. Moreover, the only way to follow the moral law of the universe is through reconciliation of what has been separated; responding to hate with love "is the only way to reestablish the broken community" (King, 1991: 103). "We adopt the means of nonviolence because our end is a community at peace with itself" (King, 1991: 485). And principled nonviolence uses love to bring people together at every step of the way in order to reach togetherness in the present as well as the future; its ends are fully present in its means.

Gandhi was equally certain that human society is, fundamentally, a network of relationships. But he never expressed his view in strictly secular language; he always invoked religious premises. And his view of God was not as personal as King's. "God is the sum total of all life," Gandhi wrote; "the Life Force, immanent and at the same time transcendent" (Iyer, 1993: 156, 162). More commonly he talked about God using the Sanskrit term for truth, *satya*:

The word *satya* is derived from *sat*, which means that which is... Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why *sat* or *satya* is the right name for God. In fact it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth... Pure and absolute truth should be our ideal ... reaching it is attaining *moksha* [the highest state of spiritual perfection] (Iyer, 1993: 231, 236).

Sometimes Gandhi denied that our sense of individual existence has any real truth to it at all: "One ought always to remember, while dwelling on Him, that one is but a drop, the tiniest of creatures of the ocean that is God" (Iyer, 1993: 161). "Realization of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in and identification with this limitless ocean of life" (Iyer, 1993: 159). At other times he spoke as if the individual self has real existence: "We are all sparks of the divine and, therefore, partake of its divine nature. ... We are all sparks of Truth. The sum total of these sparks is indescribable, as-yet-Unknown Truth, which is God" (Iyer, 1993: 174, 159).

At still other times he captured the ambiguity of his thought quite precisely: "Individuality is and is not even as each drop in the ocean is an individual and is not. It is not because apart from the ocean it has no existence. It is because the ocean has no existence, if the drop has not, i.e., has no individuality. They are beautifully interdependent" (Iyer, 1993: 174).

Interdependence is a central theme in Gandhi's understanding of human society and of Truth as God. Every creature survives only because others make sacrifices for the sake of its survival, he asserted. Each helps to sustain all the others by sacrificing for others. All are linked in this endless chain of mutual giving. From this perspective, *sat* – what really is – is the pattern of relationship, of mutual sacrifice, among all people and indeed among all aspects of reality.

Those relationships are dynamic and constantly changing. In this sense, *sat* is not only the way things really are, but the way things really ought to proceed in the cosmos. It is the dynamic moral order at the heart of reality.

Gandhi described the essential quality of that moral order as sacrificial love, the force of interdependence that binds all beings together. We have the opportunity to sacrifice for others. This opportunity is also our sacred duty, he insisted. To do one's duty, by making the required sacrifice, is the only act of love; the only way to love is to do one's duty. Any act that helps keep the pattern of loving dutiful sacrifice going is participation in Truth and brings the doer closer to Truth.

Therefore, serving others is not serving discrete individual beings. It is serving brahman, ultimate reality itself. Reality "is an undivided and indivisible whole; and, therefore, what is or may be good for one must be good for all" (Iyer 1993: 175). The ideal of nonviolence is to be aware at all times that one is merely a drop in the ocean of Truth, obligated to lovingly sacrifice oneself for the good of all. Any act that aims at the good of all, done out of love, is inherently nonviolent. It

serves Truth and thus is a manifestation of Truth, bringing the actor closer to the spiritual goal of a perfect realization of Truth; that is, a perfect awareness of the interdependence that is the essential pattern of reality.

Starting from quite different religious premises, Gandhi and King pointed to much the same kind of argument for principled nonviolence. The lives of people who press for social and political change (let us call them, for convenience, “the activists”) are directly interwoven with the lives of the people whose practices and policies the activists are trying to change. Everything that happens in human life, including every unjust practice and policy, is a product of the entire web of relationships. Since all people contribute to the web, all – including all the activists – bear some degree of responsibility for every practice and policy, including the most immoral ones.

Therefore, it makes no sense for the activists to call themselves “good people” and the perpetrators of injustice “bad people,” a dichotomy that would deny the inherent link between the two. It makes no sense for the activists to aim to defeat or conquer anyone. Such an attitude would only increase each activist’s sense of separation from others, which both King and Gandhi argue is the source of human injustice and suffering. For a nonviolent activist, as Gandhi wrote, “there is no room for an enemy; he denies the existence of an enemy” (Iyer, 1993: 285).

Rather, the goal of the activists must be to move the world toward wholeness, to mend the entire garment, to improve the behavior, and thus the moral quality, of the entire web of relationships. From the activists’ viewpoint, this will benefit everyone in the web, even those whose practices and policies are the targets of the activists’ efforts. Hence the call to feel and show love even for the perpetrators of unjust practices and policies.

In theory, a thoroughly secular sociologist might find this line of reasoning persuasive. In fact, though, if we survey the writings of the most influential figures in the history of nonviolent activism, it turns out that only those rooted in a religious tradition and community have emphasized this approach.

To add just one more example of religious nonviolence – a particularly clear example from the many that could be chosen – let us look briefly at Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist monk who has become the most prominent advocate of “engaged Buddhism,” the movement for nonviolent social and political change based upon principles of Buddhism. The most basic principle is what Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing”: “All phenomena are interdependent ... endlessly interwoven” (Nhat Hanh, 1993: 129). He relates this directly to the traditional Buddhist concept of “no-self” (anatta): “Life is one. We do not need to slice it into pieces and call this or that piece a self. What we call a self is made only of non-self elements ... We have to discard all distinctions between self and non-self” (Nhat Hanh, 1993: 133).

Nhat Hanh also relates “interbeing” directly to another central Buddhist concept, “emptiness,” meaning that nothing has any independent permanent essence; nothing can exist by itself. Rather, “all things rely on each other to be” (Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, 1975: 113) Since everything is dependent on and interrelated with something else, the chain of interbeing stretches out infinitely. Ultimately, everything is linked with everything else. “Empty, in this sense, means that it is full of everything, the entire cosmos” (Nhat Hanh, 1987: 46).

The implication for human relationships is obvious yet quite radical: all the other people in the world – the perpetrators as well as the victims of injustice – exist within each one of us. As Nhat Hanh put it in a poem:

I am the 12-year-old girl, refugee  
on a small boat,  
who throws herself into the ocean after

being raped by a sea pirate,

and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving (Nhat Hanh, 1987: 64).

Therefore, “when you kill a living being, you kill yourself and everyone else as well.... When we realize our nature of interbeing, we will stop blaming and killing, because we know that we inter-are” (Nhat Hanh and Berrigan, 1975: 136, 137). And if we even intend harm to another, we intend harm to ourselves. Compassion for ourselves requires compassion for all other beings as well (and vice versa).

This religious view, shared by Gandhi, King, and Nhat Hanh, contrasts markedly with the basic assumption of the most influential secular theorists of nonviolence.

Gene Sharp (1973) based his argument for nonviolent techniques for change on an analysis of political power: those who hold power now can maintain it only as long as others permit them to do so. If those others consistently ignore the commands of the powerful, the latter lose their power to command. Sharp cited Gandhi as a major source of this theory. As he noted, Gandhi constantly reminded the people of India that they were ultimately responsible for British colonial rule; the British could rule only because the Indians had allowed themselves to be ruled.

However, in Sharp’s context, this is a question of two very distinct groups of people – the rulers and the ruled – who are pitted against each other. Indeed, all of Sharp’s theorizing about nonviolence has assumed this image of society as a collection of separate individuals or groups, each with quite separate interests, opposing each other and struggling against each other for power.

Sharp did not directly invoke the broader context of Gandhi’s thought, which saw British rule as a product of the interaction between the British and the Indians. Gandhi focused on the Indians’ share of responsibility precisely to underscore the point that both groups were caught up in, and responsible for, a single pattern of colonial relationship.

Barbara Deming (1995) offered a philosophical argument to justify nonviolent aggression against perpetrators of injustice. She defined violence as the attempt to dominate another person and deprive that person of their own free will, which implies that violence can be done in many non-physical ways. Nonviolence is action that does not deprive anyone of the freedom to do anything they are entitled to do.

Nonviolence can and does deprive the opponent of the freedom to do some things. But those are things the opponent had no right to do in first place, she asserted, because they involve depriving others of their due freedom: “The man who acts nonviolently insists upon acting out his own will, refuses to act out another’s – but in this way, only, exerts force upon the other, not tearing him away from himself but tearing from him only that which is not properly his own, the strength which has been loaned to him by all those who have been giving him obedience” (Deming, 1995: 414–415).

This line of argument assumed that society is made up of separate individuals, each having the right to exercise their own free will as long as they do not deny others that same right. Deming, like Sharp, saw the perpetrators of injustice and the activists who resist them as quite separate groups of people with quite opposing interests.

Why, then, be strictly nonviolent? Deming answered that, in virtually every case, nonviolence is more effective than violence for ending, or at least reducing, the greater violence of injustice. She agreed with Gandhi and King that nonviolence must involve concern for the well-being even of those who do the most immoral things. But her reason was purely pragmatic: “This is the heart of my argument: We can put *more* pressure on the antagonist for whom we show human concern” (Deming, 1995: 415). Still, the antagonist remains quite separate from the activist; the relationship is created in the act of putting pressure. It does not exist inherently before the two encounter each other.

## Principled versus practical nonviolence

The difference in views of society between religious and secular nonviolence leads to another essential difference between the two. As the discussion of Gandhi, King, and Nhat Hanh has shown, their assumptions about the nature of human relationships lead them inexorably to their commitment to nonviolence. To harm, or intend to harm, another would simply make no sense within their basic assumptions about human life; it would violate the very foundations of their worldview. This is generally true of all those who embrace nonviolence on a religious basis.

So they do not choose nonviolence because they think it is the most effective strategy or tactic for gaining their social and political goals. They choose it out of principle, not merely for practical purposes.

Gandhi, in particular, often emphasized this distinction. He called the purely practical approach “nonviolence of the weak”; that is, those who adopt nonviolence only because the physical force they command is too weak to defeat their opponents’ violent response. “The weak” would use physical force if they thought it would achieve their goals. So they stick with nonviolence only as long as it seems the most efficacious tactic, and they abandon it as soon as it no longer proves efficacious.

“Nonviolence of the strong” implies that a group has sufficient physical force to attain practical goals by violence and has the courage to do violence, but refrains from violence on principle – in Gandhi’s case, principle based in his Hindu religion. As he understood Hinduism (and he always based his views on his particular, sometimes idiosyncratic interpretation of his religion [see Chernus, 2004: chapter 7]), actions should never be motivated by desire for results, nor should the value of actions be judged by their results. “You have a right to the action, but not to the fruits of the action,” says his most beloved Hindu text, the *Bhagavad-Gita* (2, 47). So it would make no sense to choose nonviolence merely because that tactic is likely to achieve desired results. Only “nonviolence of the strong” would count as genuine nonviolence.

Martin Luther King, who was influenced by Gandhi but also by the theological “realism” of Reinhold Niebuhr, was more open to choosing and judging tactics by their results. So he offered some arguments for nonviolence that were based on tactical and strategic value. And he saw no contradiction between choosing nonviolence for tactical and for principled reasons. Rather, he saw the two sets of reasons reinforcing each other (see Chernus, 2004: 169–176). Nevertheless, his most common and most strongly phrased arguments for nonviolence were based on principles derived from his Christian religion. He made it clear that, from the Christian point of view as he saw it, people should always maintain a nonviolent stance regardless of its likelihood to achieve practical goals.

No doubt in both movements there were some participants who abided by the rules of nonviolence only because they thought it tactically wise. However, the official rationales the movements offered for nonviolence were always based on principle rather than pragmatic tactical calculations.

Sharp and Deming, on the other hand, were concerned only with the practical value of nonviolence, its ability to achieve social and political change. Sharp has devoted most of his work to historical examples proving that nonviolence can in fact effect meaningful change. And he has drawn from this data a theory of why nonviolence is effective.

Deming’s writing was more strictly theoretical but it, too, was devoted to explaining why nonviolence works. She explicitly avoided religious motivations because she claimed that they could undermine the political effectiveness of nonviolent activism. Religious people too often assume, wrongly, that appeals to conscience would be sufficient to produce change, she charged. They use petition and prayer, rather than force, to achieve their goals: “The challenge to those who believe in nonviolent struggle is to learn to be aggressive enough” (Deming, 1995: 425) if they expect to succeed in forcing change.



Paradoxically, though, movements based strictly on principle may very well be more likely to reach their pragmatic goals than movements that are nonviolent merely for pragmatic reasons. To be sure, as Sharp and many others have shown, there are many cases where violent actions would not have been able to create change, but strictly nonviolent actions were successful (see Zunes, Kurtz and Asher, 1999). However, for every such case in which nonviolence worked it is easy to point to any number of cases in which it did not work, leaving open the question of whether violence would have been a more effective tactic.

If people adopt the way of nonviolence mainly because they believe that it will accomplish their goals, it is surely possible, and perhaps probable, that they will be disappointed. Then it is likely that they will abandon their nonviolent stance, since they are evaluating the question of violence only by the standard of tactical efficacy. If they then find that violence is not likely to achieve their goals, there is a real possibility that they will simply stop trying to promote the change they desire.

People who are working for social and political change nonviolently out of principle respond to frustration quite differently. They certainly try to achieve the best outcome they can. They do pay attention to results. Even Gandhi would take note of the results of his actions and revise future actions accordingly. However, he, and all those who are nonviolent out of principle, would not allow results to be the ultimate judge of the value of their actions. Indeed, they would not necessarily expect any results. They value their nonviolent efforts as ends in themselves. Their goal might be expressed colloquially as “doing the right thing simply because it is the right thing to do.”

In that sense, as long as they “do the right thing” their efforts always achieve their goal, by definition; they can never fail. Thus they are much less likely to “burn out.” They have more motivation and energy to sustain their commitment and activities over the long run. Since they are more likely to be persistent, they have a better chance to succeed eventually in achieving their practical goals, precisely because they are not motivated primarily by the desire to achieve those goals.

Thus, while the distinction between “principled” and “practical” nonviolence is very meaningful in theoretical analysis, the principled stance ultimately blurs the distinction since it proves to be very practical indeed.<sup>1</sup>

Gene Sharp and Barbara Deming, two of the most influential strictly secular writers on nonviolence in the twentieth century, both omitted two key, logically related principles we have identified as essential to “the religious effect” in nonviolence: an image of society as a web of relationships rather than a disparate collection of separate individuals and, on the basis of that image, a commitment to nonviolence out of principle rather than mere pragmatism.

Again, though, in principle this worldview and the nonviolence based upon it need not be solely confined to religious movements. One could easily imagine a strictly secular movement based on the same viewpoint arising in the future and attaining great influence. Indeed, King’s collected speeches and sermons offer, in parallel with his religious preaching, a rich, sophisticated secular case for principled nonviolence based on the principle of interconnectedness and interdependence.

## Authority and the sources of truth

What, then, is the defining quality that marks religious movements as distinctively religious? This raises the larger question of what makes any phenomenon “religious”? Scholars of religion have been debating this question for decades and will probably go on debating it forever. Let us consider two influential answers that are directly relevant to the issue of religion and nonviolence.

One theory looks to the question of authority as the crux of the distinction between religion and secularity. Secular truth claims are grounded in human thought and experience, according to

this theory. Religion founds its truth claims on some basis that purportedly transcends the purely human realm.

This theory applies quite readily to the eminent figures of the nonviolence tradition we are examining here. Suppose, for example, we ask the secular writers, Sharp and Deming, a fundamental question: Why should those who suffer injustice assert their power against those who inflict injustice upon them? For Sharp, this was a relatively incidental question. He was concerned almost entirely with explaining why and how the powerless victims can achieve power using nonviolent means.

Deming answered the question with a theory that roughly equates justice with the right and ability to exercise free will, as long as that exercise does not violate anyone else's right to freedom and justice. But she merely asserted and assumed that right. So she left unanswered the deeper question: Why should every person have the right to exercise their own free will in that strictly defined way?

The right to freedom, as Deming expressed it, harkens back to eighteenth century Enlightenment thought, which generally rooted individual rights in the purportedly self-evident, universally and eternally valid, truths of reason. However, in recent decades that notion has come to seem naïve, simplistic, and in many quarters unsupportable. The possibility of objective truth is besieged by evidence that all thinking is, to some extent, subjective, biased, and always liable to change. Freedom, justice, and the worth of every individual are more likely to be viewed as ideas created by individual human minds. So other individual human minds might very well reject these ideas and all thinking based upon them. Any way of life based purely on individual reason, and a view of society as a collection of rational individuals, now rests on a shaky foundation.

By contrast, King based his call for the powerless to resist the powerful, as he based all of his words, on a claim to truth derived from a trans-human source: the will of the divine person, God, the source of universal, eternal, unchanging truth. "The end [i.e., goal] of life is to do the will of God, come what may," he said categorically (King, 1991: 10). Since God's will is to reunite what has been separated, and the injustices inflicted by the powerful inevitably create more tension and division in society, the only way to do God's will is to resist injustice and equalize power relationships, so that tensions can be reduced and divisions overcome.

Gandhi also looked to a source of truth beyond human reason, a direct intuitive realization of universal Truth and awareness that each one of us is, essentially, that Truth itself: "To the man who has realized this truth in its fullness, nothing else remains to be known, because ... all knowledge is necessarily included in it" (Iyer, 1993: 232). Since one can move toward that realization only by sacrificing for others, the exercise of unjust power over others is directly contradictory to the goal.

As they urged resistance to injustice, King and Gandhi exemplified the theory that defines religion in terms of a claim to be in touch with a source of truth that transcends the strictly human plane. This view of truth fits very well with the view of human society as a single web of relationships. If all truth comes from human minds and experiences, then from our contemporary perspective what we call truth is nothing but a vast collection of separate truths coming from separate people. If, on the other hand, truth comes from a supra-human source then there is a single truth that is valid for the entire web of humanity as a single entity. Since King and Gandhi always sought to act upon the truth that is best for the whole, it makes sense that they would seek a single supra-human source for that truth.

Of course any claim to a trans-human source of truth can easily become a claim to absolute truth, with all the risks of intolerance such a claim entails. Gandhi addressed this problem directly and turned it into yet another reason for adopting principled nonviolence: "Absolute truth alone is God. It is beyond reach.... The truth we see is relative, many-sided, plural and is the whole truth [only] for a given time" (Iyer, 1993: 236). So it is always a mistake to feel absolutely certain about



anything. And on non-essential matters it is best to compromise for the sake of peace and harmony (see Dalton, 1996: 116).

But if an essential truth or moral principle appears to be at stake, a person should hold fast to their own view of truth:

There is nothing wrong in every man following Truth according to his lights. Indeed it is his duty to do so.... We ourselves assume the function of a judge. It is true. But in this world, we always have to act as judges for ourselves. That is why [the nonviolent person] does not strike his adversary with arms. If he has Truth on his side, he will win, and if his thought is faulty, he will suffer the consequences of his fault (Dalton, 1996: 53; Iyer, 1993: 233).

At the same time, the nonviolent activist “gives his opponent the same right of independence and feeling of truth that he reserves to himself, seeing if he wants to fight for truth he will do so by inviting injury upon his own person” (Dalton, 1996: 62). Therefore, nonviolent activists never aim to coerce another, no matter how wrong the other appears to be. By taking all the risk of suffering upon themselves and protecting the other against any threat of suffering, the activists avoid imposing their own view of truth and maintain the attitude of love.

If activists coerce others to promote their own view of truth, they are acting as separate individuals and detaching themselves from the totality of reality. They are more concerned about winning the contest than discovering Truth. Then they close themselves off to the possibility of discovering new truth, which moves them further away from absolute Truth. When they pursue Truth for its own sake, not motivated by any desire for victory, they participate in the totality, which is Truth itself. Thus they come closer to the absolute Truth. The sole motivation of nonviolence is to discover Truth, not to gain a victory.

This approach to truth combines uncompromising certainty, at least at the moment, with tolerance for differences. It offers the virtues of both absolutism and relativism simultaneously. Again, though, the price is to take all the suffering in the situation upon oneself.

King did not address this epistemological issue directly. And he was more open than Gandhi to coercing opponents for the sake of gaining greater justice. Nevertheless, he did count among the virtues of nonviolence that it “helps us to see the enemy’s point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves” (King, 1991: 237), which implies agreement with Gandhi that no one could claim to possess the totality of truth. And, of course, King agreed with Gandhi on the obligation to act upon truth as one sees it in situations of grave injustice, as long as the action is nonviolent; that is, done with the aim of bettering all humanity, with a loving concern for the well-being of the opponents as well as oneself and one’s own group.

With these limitations on absolutism as a safeguard against intolerance, religious nonviolence can claim that its appeal to trans-human sources of truth gives it a significant practical advantage. Since the activists’ source of truth transcends all human reason, by definition, there is no way that mere reason can challenge the activists’ truth. Once the initial claim to a foundation of truth is accepted as a basic premise, reason can go on to derive any number of other truth claims from that premise (as King and Gandhi both showed with crystal clarity). But as long they are logically consistent with the basic premise, they too are immune from any challenge.

The certainty that comes from religion provides a powerful cognitive and emotional support. Nonviolence needs this support, because it requires a willingness to endure suffering and perhaps even death, while maintaining an attitude of love toward one’s tormentors. It is surely possible to endure suffering and face death with a loving attitude if one is motivated by, and acting for the sake of, truths derived purely from human reason. But most people would probably find stronger support in truths that they believe stem from some eternal force or being.

Suffering for a religious truth makes a person feel more deeply embedded in the cosmic source of that truth. The cosmic source becomes more fully a part of the person. The suffering takes on cosmic meaning, and the suffering person expands, as it were, to a level of universal being. So does the cause for which the person is suffering. At least that is how it often feels to the religious nonviolent activist. The secular activist has the satisfaction of doing what seems to be indubitably right. But that satisfaction occurs on a more limited, mundane level of existence. With shallower roots, it may more easily be swept away by the threat of suffering and death as well as the recognition of the multiplicity of truths. And the attitude of love may be harder to maintain as suffering grows.

Once again we arrive at a paradox: although religiously-based nonviolence does not evaluate its validity on the basis of pragmatic success, it may very well provide a stronger foundation for pragmatic success than a strictly secular nonviolence.

## The role of religious symbols

There is another scholarly answer to the question: What is the defining characteristic that makes a movement “religious”? – an answer that may well be the simplest and most obvious one. Movements are religious when their efforts are supported and legitimated primarily by language, symbols, and cultural traditions of communities that call themselves religious, or communities that are widely and conventionally considered religious.

This theory is related to the theory based on the question of authority in at least one important way. Writers like Sharp and Deming, who based their truth claims only on human thought and experience, expressed their truth in the language of logical exposition. Sharp’s language was hard-edged, logically rigorous academic prose. Deming was stylistically more versatile, writing poetry and fiction as well as prose. Her writings on nonviolence, all prose essays, combined intellectual rigor with a passion that came through in some of her strongest sentences. Yet it was still linear logical argument, the language of one human mind speaking to others.

Religious advocates of nonviolence like Gandhi and King also offer logical arguments. But they almost invariably express themselves most often and most powerfully by using symbolic language. Their movements also employ symbolic images and actions as well as words.

Symbols are multivalent; they communicate many messages about the nature of reality and human life in compact form. Packed into a single symbol, the messages seem to fit together and reinforce each other (even if they are sometimes logically disparate or even contradictory). They are all communicated together instantaneously. They appeal to the emotional and aesthetic as well as cognitive aspects of the mind, uniting all those modes of appeal into a unity so that each reinforces the other. For all these reasons, symbols can affect people more powerfully than logical arguments.

Secular nonviolence movements, like all political movements, make some use of symbols that go beyond logical argument. Most commonly those symbols are words like *freedom*, *justice*, and *peace*. Yet they wield relatively little power compared with the potency of religious symbols. Why should that be?

One answer comes from the theory of religion as a system of symbols, proposed by Clifford Geertz (though I am well aware of the important critique of Geertz’ work launched by Talal Asad 1993). All symbols serve as “models of” and “models for” reality: “They both express the world’s climate and shape it.... They shape it by inducing in the worshipper [or, in our case, the nonviolent activist] a certain distinctive set of dispositions (tendencies, capacities, propensities, skills, habits, liabilities, pronenesses)” (Geertz, 1973: 95). Most important among those dispositions, in any analysis of nonviolence, are motivations: “A motivation is a persisting tendency, a chronic inclination to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain sorts of feeling in certain sorts of situations” (Geertz, 1973: 96).

Symbols become distinctively religious when they meet several criteria. First, they “place those dispositions in a cosmic framework ... affirm [something] about the fundamental nature of reality” (Geertz, 1973: 98). Just for that reason, religious symbols meet the criterion of trans-human authority discussed above. They imbue “a certain specific complex of symbols – of the metaphysic they formulate and the style of life they recommend – with a persuasive authority” (Geertz, 1973: 112); they communicate “conceptions of a general order of existence and clothe these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz, 1973: 90).

Thus both the metaphysic – the view of how things are – and the style of life – the view of how humans should act – are firmly rooted in unquestioned assumptions about the fundamental nature of reality. So the two functions of symbolism reinforce each other: religious symbols “formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other” (Geertz, 1973: 90). In the process, as Geertz explains at length (1973: 98–108), symbols serve the crucial role of making suffering more endurable.

This theory goes far to explain why religious symbols play such a crucial role in principled nonviolence. Nonviolent activists virtually always meet opposition. Often it is violent, perhaps lethal. In such moments, their symbols communicate many messages simultaneously: Opposition is inevitable, a part of the fundamental nature of reality; the same nature of reality requires them to maintain their nonviolent resistance in the face of such opposition, not merely for the moment but as a persisting tendency; they must be prepared to accept whatever suffering comes their way; persistence in nonviolent suffering is the only effective way to create meaningful change; even if no change occurs, persistence in nonviolence is the only way to act in accordance with the nature of reality; reality is so constructed that nonviolence is uniquely fulfilling.

Martin Luther King, for example, constantly invoked the biblical models of the Israelites, who had to risk death in the sea to make an exodus from slavery to freedom and reach the promised land, and of Christ, who had to suffer death to save others but was ultimately resurrected. Gandhi constantly invoked the model of Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, who learned from Krishna that he had to do his duty, even unto death, not for the sake of any results but simply because it was his duty.

When religious symbolism undergirds nonviolence, models of reality and models for the behavior required by reality reinforce each other. The symbols carry powerful emotional and aesthetic as well as cognitive appeal. And they seem uniquely realistic and authoritative; both the symbols and the actions motivated by those symbols serve as confirmation of the truth of the activists’ worldview and lifestyle, making suffering more tolerable. For all these reasons, activists moved by religious symbols are more likely to persist even in the face of the gravest risks.

Religious symbols offer another significant advantage, one first analyzed in the earliest days of the academic study of religion by the great sociologist Emile Durkheim. This can be summed up best in the term “group bonding.” Certainly even the most secular nonviolent activists find themselves more firmly bound together by sharing an action of nonviolent resistance together. These are what Durkheim called “effervescent social environments” (1964: 218), which are uniquely powerful in binding individuals to their social group.

But Durkheim first laid out a theoretical path that many sociologists of religion have followed (despite their copious criticisms of his work) when he argued that religious symbols, and ritual acts celebrating those symbols, are uniquely powerful forces for binding the individual to the group. At times he overstated his case, making it seem that the symbol represents nothing but the group itself. In his more careful formulations, he made it clear that the symbol represented the “collective consciousness” of the group, meaning the highest ideals that the group shared. In this sense Geertz was developing a deeper analytic framework for Durkheim’s original insight.

Religious symbols have this power, Durkheim argued, because they are held as “sacred” – which many later scholars, including Geertz, have more or less equated with a sense of being rooted in, or relating to, the fundamental nature of reality. The key point is that symbols imbued with a sacred quality have the strongest power to bind a group together, as do actions motivated by sacred symbols.

Every religious movement applies a pre-existing set of symbols in new, creative ways. Since symbols are multivalent, different people can take different meanings from them but still be bound more strongly to the same community, simply because all the participants share the same symbolism. Religious symbols gain additional power to motivate people to persistent action because they are steeped in an ongoing religious tradition. They create a sense that one is a member, not merely of the current community of activists, but of community that is often centuries old, embracing many thousands of people, and thus likely to continue after one’s own death.

So religious symbols are especially well suited to making a nonviolence movement a living representation of the web of human interconnectedness, which is, as leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King taught, the true nature of reality.

## Conclusion

This brings us back to our starting point: “the religious effect” in nonviolence is not merely a collection of separate elements. It mirrors the premise of religious nonviolence itself: that all elements of reality, which may at first seem quite separate, actually form a unified web of mutually reinforcing threads – most importantly, in terms of human society, a pattern of relationships rather than a collection of individuals. This premise is the root of the notion of principled, as opposed to practical, nonviolence; to aim to harm anyone would violate the interconnectedness.

What makes these movements religious is, according to one theory, the claim that this premise is not merely a historically conditioned invention of the human mind. Although it accords perfectly well with human reasoning, it is based on a direct perception of the fundamental nature of reality itself. And that claim to know and follow a single truth, valid for all humanity, reinforces the image of society in which unity prevails over separateness.

The symbols used to express that claim of unity tie together all of the cognitive and emotional experiences of groups motivated by those symbols, and they tie those groups more closely to all other people. The more a life is built around religious symbols, the more the premise of interconnectedness underlying them becomes the authoritative truth at the foundation of the life. In particular, the more those symbols are acted upon, the more fully activists experience in their own lives the truth and power of that foundational reality.

Of course there is no strict correlation between “the religious effect” and concrete effectiveness in producing social and political change. Few religiously-based nonviolence movements have been as successful as Gandhi’s and King’s. Thich Nhat Hanh’s efforts to end the conflict in his native Vietnam in the 1960s, for example, bore no tangible fruit. On the other hand, some nonviolent movements largely devoid of “the religious effect” have been quite effective in producing change.

Still, most nonviolent movements are less successful than they hope to be. And all are, or should be, looking for ways to be more successful. This analysis of “the religious effect” offers lessons that can be useful to any nonviolence movement. In theory there is no reason that secular nonviolence should necessarily be less effective than religiously-based movements. One could easily imagine movements with a strictly secular basis incorporating all the lessons gleaned from analyzing “the religious effect” and thereby improving their chances of attaining their goals. The challenge to secular movements is to go beyond cooperating with religiously-based movements, which they already do quite well, and start learning more from those movements.

## Note

1. I recognize the irony here: I am writing an article lifting up the value of principled nonviolence, but judging that value by very practical criteria – precisely the criteria that adherents of principled nonviolence would dismiss as invalid. However, I also recognize that the community of principled nonviolence advocates is quite small, while there are many readers who are eager to evaluate nonviolence on practical grounds. So I have chosen this approach to the subject, with apologies to the principled nonviolence community.

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