

Martin Luther King Jr.



Today, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is known most widely as the Baptist Minister whose faith journey inspired the U.S. Civil Rights movement. His deeply held belief that all people are created in God's image inspired Dr. King to embrace the wonderful diversity of religious beliefs and to struggle non-violently for social justice around the world. His heartfelt conviction that God called on all people of faith to confront social injustice encouraged Dr. King to reach out to all communities of faith in creating a Beloved Community of shared values, mutual understanding, and positive social action.

We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now ... We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: "Too late." ... We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation.

King's interfaith journey began when he encountered the work of a Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi. His concept of *satyagraha*, or the force of truth, had helped India gain its independence from British colonial rule in 1947. King began to seriously examine *satyagraha* in 1950 after he attended a lecture on Gandhi given by Mordecai Johnson, then the President of Howard University. The description of this devout Hindu profoundly impressed King, the equally devout Christian.

Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I was seeking.

As he became one of the most influential leaders of the civil rights movement, King saw the great potential for Gandhi's principles in The United States. In 1955, at the young age of 26, Rev. King led the Montgomery Bus Boycott. As a nonviolent protest against injustice, the Bus Boycott ended with the United States Supreme Court decision outlawing racial segregation on all public transportation. King's leadership and the inspiration he drew from the example of individuals like Gandhi proved to transform American society and ensure equality for every American regardless of race, faith, or class. Returning from a month-long visit to India in 1959, he described his interfaith dream of The United States as a *Beloved Community*.

The way of violence leads to bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. But the way of nonviolence leads to redemption and the creation of the beloved community. I returned to The United States with a greater determination to achieve freedom for my people through nonviolent means. As a result of my visit to India, my understanding of nonviolence became greater and my commitment deeper.

Until his assassination in 1967, King reached out to friend and foe alike through love and non-violence. He called upon all faith communities to join him in making the interfaith dream of the Beloved Community a reality in the United States.

What did King mean when he spoke of "non-violence"? How was his understanding of non-violence influenced by those outside of his tradition?

Abraham J. Heschel



Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish theologian and leader of the Conservative Jewish Movement sought to transform the United States through the concept of *Tikkun Olam*, or healing the world. Born in Poland, Heschel obtained a traditional Jewish education and then went on to study theology in Germany. He fled to the United States when the Nazis came to power. The Holocaust, which killed six million Jews, convinced Heschel that the leaders of all faith communities must expose social injustice. Having witnessed the horrible affects of prejudice and hatred in Europe, Heschel recognized the power of individuals to ensure that such a pattern would not repeat in America.

In regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible.

Remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power. Never forget that you can still do your share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and frustrations and disappointments.

All it takes is one person... and another... and another... and another... to start a movement.

Heschel stressed the importance of social activism. He was deeply involved in both American and Jewish social and political issues. Heschel believed that God called on all people of faith to work together in confronting and defeating social injustice.

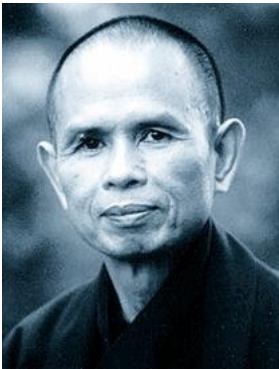
The way we act, the way we fail to act is a disgrace that must not go on forever. This is not a white man's world. This is not a colored man's world. It is God's world ... We have failed to use the avenues open to us to educate the hearts and minds of men, to identify ourselves with those who are underprivileged ... Repentance means a new insight, a new spirit. It also means a course of action.

And for Heschel, this action was active cooperation with individuals from other religious backgrounds, such as Rev. Martin Luther King. Heschel and King became close friends leading their faith communities in the struggles for African American equality. Between March 21 and 25, 1965 they peacefully marched from Selma to Montgomery to demand voting rights for African Americans. Heschel explained his response to God's call to heal the world in terms of prayer.

For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was both protest and prayer. Legs are not lips, and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.

How did Heschel's religious identity inspire him to work for social justice? How and why was collaboration with other faith communities an essential part of this work?

Thich Nhat Hanh



In Southeast Asia the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, was using the principles of compassion and nonviolence to stop the war in Vietnam. Hanh believed that people of faith, especially youth, couldn't remain silent in the face of social injustice. They must work together to heal the world. He founded the School of Youth for Social Services in Saigon, a grass roots relief organization that rebuilt bombed villages, set up schools and medical centers, resettled homeless families, and organized agricultural cooperatives.

Hanh coined the phrase "Engaged Buddhism" which refers to Buddhists who want to act on the insights of their meditation practices to address situations of social, political, and economic suffering and injustice. After watching the suffering of the Vietnam War, Hanh felt compelled to act and saw this work as a part of his meditation practice, not separate from it.

I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be a son of the living God. Beyond the calling of race or nation or creed is this vocation of sonship and brotherhood, and because I believe that the Father is deeply concerned especially for his suffering and helpless and outcast children, I come to speak for them. This I believe to be the privilege and burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions.

Hanh asked faith communities to support a worldwide revolution of values based on compassion and non-violence. According to the Buddhist principle of compassion human beings should love one another because they were not the source of social injustice. Instead, ideas were the source.

I believe with all my heart that ... [our] enemies are not man. They are intolerance, fanaticism, dictatorship, cupidity, hatred and discrimination that lie within the heart of man.

Hanh recalled a prayer offered by one of his students.

Lord Buddha, help us to be alert to realize that we are not victims of each other. We are victims of our own ignorance and the ignorance of others. Help us avoid engaging ourselves more in mutual slaughter because of the will of others to power and to predominance.

Hanh also had a strong relationship with the Rev. Martin Luther King, who spoke out against the Vietnam War at Hanh's urging. King was so moved by Hanh's commitment to peace and understanding that in 1967 he nominated Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize, writing,

He is a holy man, for he is humble and devout ... He has traveled the world, counseling statesmen, religious leaders, scholars, and writers, and enlisting their support. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to a world brotherhood, to humanity

How did Hanh view the power of people to affect change in the world? How did this view of humanity encompass more than just his own co-religionists and co-nationalists?

Mahatma Gandhi



Mahatma Gandhi was a Hindu whose concept of *satyagraha*, or love force, helped India gain its independence from British colonial rule in 1947. Gandhi was both a political and spiritual leader of India and is recognized as the “Father of the Nation.” Although the British authorities repeatedly jailed Gandhi and his followers, his calm commitment to loving his enemies while resisting them nonviolently, never wavered. As pioneer of the idea of *satyagraha*, Gandhi emphasized the resistance of tyranny through civil disobedience and non-violence. Not only did his ideas lead to independence in India, but also motivated movements for civil rights worldwide.

Non-violent resistance implies the very opposite of weakness. Defiance combined with non-retaliatory acceptance of repression from one's opponents is active, not passive. It requires strength, and there is nothing automatic or intuitive about the resoluteness required for using non-violent methods in political struggle and the quest for Truth.

After experiencing racism and prejudice in his mid-20s in South Africa, Gandhi worked to secure the Indian community's civil rights there. Upon returning to India, he went on to organize against discrimination in India. He led nationwide campaigns for the alleviation of poverty, the liberation of women, cooperation among religions, and Indian economic self-sufficiency and independence. Even in the most extreme situations, Gandhi remained committed to non-violence and truth.

Gandhi derived most of his principles from Hinduism and also believed all religions to be equal. He believed that at the core of every religion was truth and love. He read extensively about other religious traditions but rejected all efforts to convert to a different faith. Gandhi drew strength to stand up to his ideals from his strong religious commitment.

Hinduism as I know it entirely satisfies my soul, fills my whole being ... When doubts haunt me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the Bhagavad Gita, and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of tragedies and if they have not left any visible and indelible effect on me, I owe it to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita.

I am a Hindu because it is Hinduism which makes the world worth living. I am a Hindu hence I love not only human beings, but all living beings.

Gandhi was an inspiration not to just the movement for equality and civil rights in India, but to movements worldwide, including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement in the United States, and Nelson Mandela in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith. Work without faith is like an attempt to reach the bottom of a bottomless pit.

What does it mean that “work without faith is like an attempt to reach the bottom of a bottomless pit”? How did Gandhi enact this in his life? How do you do so in your own life?

Dorothy Day



Dorothy Day was a journalist turned social activist and devout member of the Roman Catholic Church. She became known for her social justice campaigns in defense of the poor, forsaken, hungry and homeless. She founded the Catholic Worker Movement in 1933, espousing nonviolent action and hospitality for the impoverished and downtrodden. She opened a "house of hospitality" in the slums of New York City. The movement quickly spread to other cities and today well over 100 communities exist.

What we would like to do is change the world— And, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, of the poor, of the destitute...we can, to a certain extent, change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever widening circle will reach around the world. We repeat, "there is nothing that we can do but love, and, dear God, please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as well as our friend.

Following an earthquake during Day's childhood that put her father out of a job, Day was forced to move with her family to a tenement flat in Chicago's South Side. This marked a step down in their relatively well-off lives. While the family was later able to move to a more comfortable home, this experience influenced Day for the rest of her life. She learned the feeling of shame that comes with failure and began to read books that stirred her conscience, feeling a sense of solidarity with the poor.

Day became involved in Catholicism as a young adult, seeing "worship, adoration, thanksgiving, supplication ... [as] the noblest acts of which we are capable in this life." She understood the Catholic Church to be "the church of the immigrants, the church of the poor" and was fascinated by the Catholic spiritual discipline. Day struggled to find a way to bring together her religious faith and her radical social values. She prayed that a way would open up for her to use her talents to help the poor.

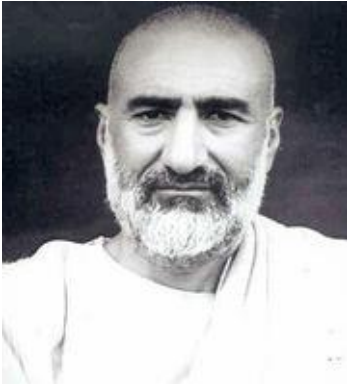
We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.

Her prayers were answered when she met Pater Maurin, a French immigrant, who suggested she start a newspaper to publicize Catholic social teaching and promote steps to bring about the peaceful transformation of society. And so the Catholic Worker began, espousing ideas that were both radical and religious, calling on people to take action. As winter approached and many homeless people began knocking on her door looking for a place to stay, Day acted on the message of hospitality she advocated in the paper and welcomed them in. Day's apartment became the seed of many houses of hospitality to come. In response to criticisms from some who argued that these people were not the "deserving poor," Day responded,

We let them stay forever. They live with us, they die with us... Once they are taken in, they become members of the family. Or rather, they always were members of the family. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

How did Day's faith and political beliefs inform one another? How did she enact these values in her life?

Badshah Khan



Abdul Ghaffar Khan, later known as Badshah Khan, was a Pashtun (Afghan) political and spiritual leader known for his non-violent opposition to British rule during the final years of the Empire on the Indian sub-continent. He was a lifelong pacifist and a devout Muslim. Education as a means of social advancement was a central ideal throughout his life.

I am going to give you such a weapon that the police and the army will not be able to stand against it. It is the weapon of the Prophet, but you are not aware of it. That weapon is patience and righteousness. No power on earth can stand against it.

Ghaffar Khan was born into a generally peaceful and prosperous family from Charsadda (in present day Pakistan). As a child, he did well in school and began to see the importance of education in service to the community. Unwilling to take a prestigious but second-class position under the British rule of India, Ghaffar Khan instead decided to continue his studies. His mother, however, did not want him to study abroad in London because of the perception that he would lose his culture and religion by doing so. Unable to continue his own studies, Ghaffar Khan instead looked to help other start their own education as a way to counteract British oppression, the repression of the mullahs, and an ancient culture of violence and vendetta. At just 20 years old, Ghaffar Khan opened his first school with great success. He worked tirelessly to raise the consciousness of his fellow Pashtuns.

My religion is truth, love and service to God and humanity. Every religion that has come into the world has brought the message of love and brotherhood. Those who are indifferent to the welfare of their fellowmen, whose hearts are empty of love, they do not know the meaning of religion.

When you go back to your villages, tell your brethren that there is an army of God and its weapon is patience. Ask your brethren to join the army of God. Endure all hardships. If you exercise patience, victory will be yours.

Ghaffar Khan went on to found the *Khudai Khidmatgar* (“Servants of God”), also known as the “Red Shirts,” calling for the formulation of a united, independent, secular India. The *Khudai Khidmatgar* was founded on a belief in the power of Mahatma Gandhi’s notion of *satyagraha*, a form of active non-violence, and attracted many members. It opposed the British-controlled police and army through strikes, political organization, and non-violent opposition.

Today’s world is traveling in some strange direction. You see that the world is going toward destruction and violence. And the specialty of violence is to create hatred among people and to create fear. I am a believer in nonviolence and I say that no peace or tranquility will descend upon the people of the world until nonviolence is practiced, because nonviolence is love and it stirs courage in people

How did Badshah Kahn’s faith identity influence his means of working for social change? In what ways does your own faith tradition call on you to work for change?