

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR'S THEORY OF NONVIOLENCE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

This article on Martin Luther King Jr examines the power of non-violence philosophy in conflict resolution. Before Luther King Jr philosophy of non-violence, Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy and other advocates of peace had vigorously pursued non-violence as the only tenable and acceptable paradigm in conflict resolution. In this essay, Martin Luther King Jr. is shown to be deeply influenced by his moral and spiritual background upon which his father had endowed upon him. For Luther King Jr, the racial discrimination experienced in Montgomery can only be defeated by non-violence and nothing more, for violence begets violence upon which continuous use of violence leads to the vicious circle of violence. The essay concludes that human beings ought to use non-violence in conflict resolution especially in the face of dehumanization and racial discrimination.

Keywords: Martin Luther King Jr, non-violence, conflict, conflict resolution.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther King Jr. was a man of destiny, an apostle of peace who had risen to the lofty heights of spiritual awareness, a towering hero and a historical role model whose mission in life was to serve others. His wisdom, words, deeds, commitment and dreams

for a new cast of life intertwined with the noblest of human aspiration. As a charismatic figure, he attracted people by the magnificent of his concepts and the brilliant of his insights. His visions and goals were simple, yet breathtaking in their scope - the complete liberation of mankind and the elimination of injustice. it was in this sense that Ezechukwu maintains the King was a man of extraordinary physical courage who believe in non-violence never swerved (Ulafor 2020).

King, in his speeches, kept redefining the standard of human relations through the religious theme - most especially, the Christian religion (Edor & Ayuk 2020). He espoused the concept of the nobility of the human soul justice, the oneness of humanity and agape (love). Most often King explained that the nonviolent movement was a righteous movement by moral courage and not by cowardice. He emphasized the spiritually active component of the movement which is love and discouraged physically aggressive actions. He emphasized the point that only a spiritual prescription can be an effective antidote to nagging problems and thorny issues that confront us in the world today, which are rooted in moral ignorance. King affirmed that physical action uninspired by spiritual principle based on love (agape) is violent and vengeful and can only perpetuate the pain and justice suffered by the oppressed (Kuusisto 2009). His theory of non - violence in conflict resolution, therefore focuses at its very core on a spiritual conquest of the human soul with the weapon of love for restorative justice for both the oppressed and the oppressor. King, in his speeches, stressed the inestimable worth of the individual and the importance of mutual respect and dignity in human relationships.

DISCUSSION

Influence on Martin Luther King Jr's Theory of Nonviolence in Conflict resolution

Martin Luther King Jr. was greatly influenced by his father - Martin Luther King Snr who was constantly concerned with social and political issues. He participated in the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). As a pastor of a local church, he embedded strong religious ideas in his son. According to Iluebe, King “was raised to believe that quality of character, not race should be the basis on which a person is judged” (Alomes 2007: 198). Following his Christian background, King believed that without God, non-violence lacked substance and potency.

King was equally influenced by Henry David Thoreau's essay; "Civil disobedience". he maintained that this essay was his first intellectual contact with the theory of nonviolence and peaceful resistance. Thoreau's concept of refusing to cooperate with an evil system left a strong impression on Martin Luther King Jr.

In his days in the seminary, King passed countless hours studying philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Bentham, Mill, Hobbes, Marx and Hegel. Hegel's contention that "truth is in the whole" fascinated King and convinced him that growth comes through the struggle on the side of truth. While on the other hand, King deplored the substituting of materialism for spiritual value in Marx's philosophy, he applauded Marx for exposing the injustice of capitalism, promoting class consciousness among the workers and challenging the complacency of Christian churches.

King's inclination towards non-violence as a philosophy of social change and a method of conflict resolution gained new grounds when in 1948, in Philadelphia; he attended a lecture by Mordecai Johnson, who discussed the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Hence in his speech, "Loving your Enemies," King maintained that,

There is a power in love that our world has no discovered yet. Jesus discovered it centuries ago. Mahatma Gandhi of India discovered it a few years ago, but most men and most women never discover it for they believe in hitting for hitting.... (Anagwonye, 2008: 55)

Thus, from the teaching of Jesus Christ, Gandhi and Thoreau came the philosophical roots of King's theory of non-violent social change; from Christ Sermon on the Mount, with its emphasis on humility, self - criticism, forgiveness, and the renunciation of material gain, came the initial inspiration for a non - violent approach. Thoreau's example had taught King the rightfulness of civil disobedience against unjust laws and systems, and Gandhi showed explicitly that there was a method for mass non-violent resistance to the state. King in his stride towards freedom argued that,

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. it was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and non-violence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking... I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom (Filice 2008: 96).

Gandhi's idea of a non-violent community, became the central goal of King's campaign, for he now believed without a doubt in non-violence as a viable option for black Americans and the oppressed all over the world (Eyo 2016; Eyo 2019; Eyo & Etta 2020). Hence, through these various influences on King, the non-violent civil rights movement was born. And as King's career and involvement in the non-violent struggle went on, his words continued to echo Gandhi's own sentiments.

Martin Luther King Jr's Theory of Non-Violence in Conflict Resolution

King, in his theory of non-violence in the resolution of conflicts, sought after racial equality and social justice, central to King's struggle was his commitment to change the nature of public opinion in America, most especially through the mass media. In his essay, "Nonviolence: The Only Root to freedom", King argues:

Our experience is that marches must continue over a period of thirty to forty-five days to produce and meaningful results. they must also be of sufficient size to produce some inconveniences to the forces in power or they must demand the attention of the press, for it is the press which interprets the issues to the community at large and thereby sets in motion the machinery for change (Alfoqahaa & Jones 2020: 220).

King argues that if one passively co-operates with an evil and unjust system such co-operation would make the oppressed as evil as the oppressor. he viewed non-violence as a positive expression of soul force. He is convinced that the method of non-violent resistance is the most effective weapon available to the oppressed in their struggle for freedom and human dignity. In his speech at the Great march on Detroit, King states that;

For we've come to see the power of non-violence. We've come to see that this method is not weak. For it's the strong man that can stand up amid violence being inflicted upon him and not and not retaliate with violence (Alfoqahaa & Jones 2020: 227).

King developed a strong commitment to non-violence that became the basis of his plea to his country to put aside the shackles of racism and segregation. he strongly advised his followers that they ought to follow the path of non-violence, because if they succumb to the temptation of using violence in their struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of the long and desolate night of bitterness, and the pending daybreak of hope and promise will be transformed into gloomy midnight of retrogression (Bloom & Breines 2003).

King argued against the impression that nonviolence as a philosophy of action and social change will work miracles overnight. he thought that men are not easily moved from mental ruts or purges of their prejudice and irrational feelings (Eyo & Udofia 2011). He maintained that when the underprivileged demand freedom, the privilege first react with bitterness and resistance. Thus, the non-violent approach to conflict resolution does not immediately change the hearts of the opponent or the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it - it gives them a new sense of self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they never knew they had. it finally reaches the opponent and stirs up the conscience so that reconciliation becomes a necessity and a reality.

Accordingly, King, in a letter from a Birmingham Jail, states eloquently:

Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from bondage of myths and half-truth to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the mind of tensions in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open door to negotiation (Gillon et al., 1996: 1090).

King maintained that nonviolence is by far more than a tactic or a strategy. he insisted that it is a way of life. It is the force of active love and truth that seeks justice and peace for every human being and all creation. it resists injustice anywhere, reconciles with everyone, and transforms violence into love and wholeness. Therefore King understood the world's crisis and an addiction to violence. He saw every human right abuse as an act of violence whether towards individuals, nations, or the whole of the human race. he sought to end, heal and transform the violence in society by refusing to accept the notion that nations must thread the path of the "militaristic stairway into the hell of thermonuclear destruction" (Nobel prize Acceptance Speech).

King maintained that the method and goal of his theory on nonviolence in the peaceful resolution of conflicts are one. He drove his point home by arguing the end is preexistent in the means (06) loving your enemies) (46) He opined that we cannot reach peace, justice and equality by waging war and supporting systems of injustice, and those we cannot attain our common human right by any method that violates human rights.

Nonviolence, therefore teaches that violence does not work and that violence in response to violence leads to further violence.

The theory of nonviolence that the king espoused carried with it the insistence that there is no cause however noble for which the killing of a human being would be supported. He argued that we cannot pursue the human right of others while violating others for the noble cause of justice or the ignoble cause of (global) hegemony or one's personal selfish interest, king accepted to undergo suffering in pursuit of justice and peace, without even the desire to retaliate or seek revenge. Thus, nonviolence begins in the heart where we renounce the violence within us, and then it moves out with active nonviolence to our families' local communities, cities, nations and world. King was of the view that when nonviolence is organized on the large-scale level active non-violence can transform individuals' group's society's nations and the world in general.

Furthermore, King made it clear that the nonviolent protester or activist does not seek to disgrace the opponent, but on the contrary desires to edify the understanding of his opponent and by the means bring about a better relationship based on mutual respect and love. This King argued that nonviolence is directed against level and not the people who are committing evil. The civil rights movement was not a fight or conflict between two races the white and black race, but on the contrary between justice and injustice.

it ought to be mentioned at this point that without the belief that God is always on the side of truth, King's theory on non-violence would have no substance. King proclaimed his strong and unwavering faith in the fact that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality, this for him, is the reason why the right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant (Anagwonye, 2008: 88). based on this point he urges his fellow African American activities to keep faith in the rightness of their cause without fear or doubt, thus in his speech, our God is marching on, King pointed it out clearly to America that,

We are on the move and no wave of racism can stop us. We are on the move now. The burning of our churches will not deter us. The bombing of our homes will not dissuade us..... The beating and killing of our clergymen and young people will not divert us..... the wanton release of their known murderers would not discourage us... like an idea whose time has come not even the marching of mighty armies can halt us. We are moving to the land of freedom (Anagwonye, 2008: 96).

Towards the end of his life, King moved beyond the issue of civil rights and racism and sounded a call for the eradication of poverty, and an end to the exploitation of the relationship between class and power in America. He argued that there must be a better distribution of wealth and opined that America ought to move toward a democratic socialism. Thus King brought his theory of nonviolence to practice by selflessly working to organize the poor of all colours to demand economic justice and to challenge the unfair distribution of wealth and the plight of the oppressed by questioning the very basis of the American system and not those who perpetuated the oppression using the state as machinery.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it could be observed that King's lifelong experiment with nonviolence evolved from his intellectual realization of its possibilities as a method of social change to its eventual adoption as a personal way of life. This conversion was not only the result of the insight he gained as he learned more about Gandhian nonviolence, but equally, as a result of his own lifelong experiment with the truth of nonviolence, as he lived it, applied it, refined it, and suffered through it. King, within the context of his theory of nonviolence in conflict resolution, articulated a radical but ethical doctrine that social justice, racial equality and economic reform were achievable in our world through successful appeal to the conscience of the individual in particular and the world in general. he mobilized people to stand against racial injustice and brutality and by so doing make the forces of injustice give round and yield to those of justice. He sowed deep into the consciousness of his followers the idea of doing all out for one's beliefs within the context of love.

King, in his theory of nonviolence, made it clear that we all share a human and moral responsibility to join hands in brotherhood in the quest for social justice and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. He preached and practiced a philosophy of racial integration and would not give ground when faced with the call for separation. His views on nonviolence as a positive expression of soul force were a revolutionary initiative as he moved to confront the existing state of affairs while refusing to accept institutionalized injustice.

In conclusion, King firmly based his theory of nonviolence in the redemptive, restorative and eternal powers of love, which was equally the foundation of the teachings of Jesus Christ and Gandhi. He believed that one-day mankind will bow before the alters of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will be proclaimed the rule of the land. Thus he was confident that love could serve as the most effective weapon against a racist and unjust social system. His method of nonviolent resistance despite the various good level of freedom and fairer treatment.

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