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**Inspired by Gandhi:  
Mahatma Gandhi's  
Influence on Significant  
Leaders of Nonviolence**



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Review article

## **Inspired by Gandhi: Mahatma Gandhi's Influence on Significant Leaders of Nonviolence**

The leader of the Indian independence movement, Mahatma Gandhi, left an invaluable legacy: he proved to the world that it was possible to achieve political aims without the use of violence. He was the first political activist to develop strategies of nonviolent mass resistance based on a solid philosophical and uniquely religious foundation. Since Gandhi's death in 1948, in many parts of the world, this legacy has been received and continued by others facing oppression, inequality, or a lack of human rights. This article is a tribute to five of the most faithful followers of Gandhi who have acknowledged his inspiration for their political activities and in choosing nonviolence as a political method and way of life: Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Martin Luther King, Louis Massignon, the Dalai Lama, and Malala Yousafzai. This article describes their formative leadership and their significance and impact on regional and global politics and history.

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### **KEYWORDS:**

Gandhi, nonviolence, Ghaffar Khan, Martin Luther King, Massignon, Dalai Lama, Malala Yousafzai, Gandhi's legacy, human rights, passive resistance

One of the most revolutionary and influential figures of twentieth-century history is undoubtedly Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the Father of the Indian Nation. The outstanding bravery Gandhi, his companions, and his followers demonstrated and the victory they achieved has remained a positive example to inspire others who have been deprived of their rights and live under oppression but wish to refrain from the use violence. This paper examines the actions of four men and one young woman who have shaped the world as we know it today and still continue to inspire us. All of them acknowledge having been influenced by Gandhi. Some of them are very well known, while others have remained relatively outside the global spotlight. However, their work remains respected in their own geographical areas and disciplines. Although most likely there are many who have been influenced by Gandhi's teachings and actions, this paper focuses on the following leaders: Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Martin Luther King, Louis Massignon, the Dalai Lama, and Malala Yousafzai. First, I will briefly recapitulate Gandhi's main teachings that influenced them.

### **Gandhian Theory and Practice**

Mahatma Gandhi's importance cannot be overexaggerated. Certainly, his greatest achievement was independence for India, which marked the end of a thirty-two-year struggle. Undoubtedly, besides Gandhi's charisma and political activity, other global historical factors were decisive in the final achievement of Indian independence. Still, the importance of Gandhi's role as a leader for over three decades is unquestionable, as was his insistence on nonviolent means of opposition. Gandhi's relevance, however, is far from being limited to India only.

Gandhi's political activity grew organically from his philosophy, which was centered around God. For him, God was the same as Truth and Love. God made all people and all nations equal. Consequently, within a nation, political equality is desirable among the country's citizens, and internationally, each nation should be self-governed. Since God is Love, and no one wants to hurt whom he or she loves, the only method open to someone who follows God is the path of nonviolence in its broadest possible meaning. This was the philosophical foundation of Gandhi's political actions. He started out seeking equal political and social rights for Indians in South Africa, whose rights were limited due to the ruling British elite. This struggle lasted for twenty years, from 1893 to 1914. After his return to India in 1915, he emerged to lead his homeland against her colonizer of three centuries, the British Empire, on the basis of the same principles. After a struggle of more than three decades, which was often answered with violent and aggressive punishment from the British side, in 1947 India finally gained independence. Gandhi had always been the first and foremost leader of this struggle, and had always insisted on nonviolence and setting an example for his fellow-countrymen.

The greatest contribution Gandhi presented to humankind was the introduction of nonviolence as a method to achieve political goals. After a global history of more than 5,000 years of war and bloodshed, this "half-

naked fakir" from India, as Winston Churchill called him,<sup>1</sup> ordered a halt to aggression and brutal physical force, and proved to the whole world it was possible to achieve serious political aims without the use of violence.

Before Gandhi's appearance in the political arena, there had only been sporadic use of nonviolent methods. It was undoubtedly he who introduced mass nonviolent action during his struggle in South Africa from 1893 to 1914.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this twenty-year struggle against oppression and discrimination the Indian residents of South Africa suffered under the British, Gandhi earned the title Mahatma, which means Great Soul. It was during this long movement that his theory of *satyāgraha* (nonviolent civil disobedience) and its practical methods were formed and crystallized. "Truth (*Satya*) implies love, and firmness (*agraha*) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement 'Satyagraha,' that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or nonviolence."<sup>3</sup> As Rotherman states, "*Satyāgraha* always refers to conscious actions of individual human beings who bind themselves by vows not to resort to violence."<sup>4</sup>

This attitude, however mild its outlook, requires much courage and mental stamina. According to Gandhi, this internal strength is gained from an intimate relationship with God, who is at the same time Truth and Love. God gives the power to face physical blows and strikes without returning them, even to the extent of self-sacrifice.

True guidance comes by constant waiting upon God, by utmost humility, self-abnegation, by being ever ready to sacrifice one's self. Its practice requires fearlessness and courage of the highest order. [...] There is no escape for any of us save through Truth and nonviolence. I know that war is wrong, is an unmitigated evil. I know too that it has got to go. I firmly believe that freedom won through bloodshed or fraud is no freedom. [...] Not violence, not untruth, but nonviolence, Truth is the law of our being.<sup>5</sup>

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Gandhian nonviolent resistance, however, did not and does not simply mean passivity. On the contrary, it is a very active form of involvement that always seeks out new and creative ways to mobilize the masses. One of

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<sup>1</sup> "It is [...] alarming and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Vice-regal palace, while he is still organizing and conducting a defiant campaign of civil disobedience, to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor." Winston S. Churchill, "To the Council of the West Essex Unionist Association," in *His complete speeches, 1897-1963*, ed. R. R. James (New York: Chelsea House, 1974), 5: 4985.

<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, Gandhi dedicated two books to the twenty-year struggle of the passive resistance movement in South Africa. One of them describes the movement itself and is titled *Satyagraha in South Africa*. The Mahatma wrote it while he was imprisoned in Yeravda Prison, 1922-24. M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1968). The other is his autobiography, which also covers this first half of his life, and was published in weekly installments in his newspaper *Navajivan* between 1925-29. M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography. The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1940).

<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*. Ahmedabad, 107. Accessed at [https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/satyagraha\\_in\\_south\\_africa.pdf](https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/satyagraha_in_south_africa.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Dietmar Rothermund, *The Routledge Companion to Decolonization* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 56.

<sup>5</sup> M. K. Gandhi, "Nonviolence in Peace and War," in *Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Ronald Duncan (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1951), 63-64.

the most spectacular and symbolic acts was the Dandi Salt March in 1930, when Gandhi walked more than 380 km from his Sabarmati Ashram inland to the seashore to take a pinch of salt. His message to the people was clear: we do not need heavily taxed British salt when we are able to extract salt from the abundance of nature. Another strong symbol was the *charkhā*, the spinning wheel. Earlier, the British companies had destroyed local Indian textile industry, and forced the inhabitants of the subcontinent to import textile from British manufacturers. Thus, using the spinning wheel conveyed a message that even the poorest of Indians were able to make clothes for themselves.

### **Leaders Inspired by Gandhi**

*Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890–1988)*<sup>6</sup>

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, or Badshah Khan, as he was generally known, received the name “Frontier Gandhi.” The term is a reference to the North-West Frontier Area, today called Khyber Pakhtunkwa in Pakistan. He was a leader of the Pashtun tribe, an ethnically and linguistically separate people living in the mountains on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Pashtun tribe is a Muslim tribe that has historically been associated with violent behavior. The area even today is a hiding place for terrorists and is generally considered to be beyond the reach of law and order.

Badshah Khan initially opened a school to educate his Pashtun tribesmen and later decided that he could serve them better if he joined the movement for independence. A close associate of the Mahatma, Badshah Khan led his tribe to nonviolent resistance against British rule. Badshah Khan was a devout Muslim and a firm believer in nonviolence. To resist the British, he created a so-called nonviolent army, named Khudai Khidmatgar or Servants of God, in September 1929. In 1930, due to protests arising from the Dandi Salt March, Badshah Khan was imprisoned. His nonviolent “army” organized a protest at the Kissa Khwani Bazaar in Peshawar. The British troops opened fire on the unarmed crowd, killing between two hundred and two hundred and fifty people.

Khan strongly opposed the idea of the partition of India. His ideal was a united, independent, and secular India. This explains why he was considered an enemy by the British and later by the Pakistani authorities. He spent twelve years in prison under British rule and fifteen years in prison in Pakistan. In 1948, eighteen years after the Kissa Khwani massacre, a similar incident happened: in the newly born country of Pakistan, the Khudai Khidmatgar movement won the elections in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province. However, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan’s first Governor-General, dismissed the newly elected government and imprisoned its leaders, including Badshah Khan. A peaceful protest by the Khudai Khidmatgar movement was ended by gunfire ordered by the Pakistani government. Six hundred people died and one thousand were wounded in what became known as the Babra massacre. The movement was banned, Badshah Khan

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<sup>6</sup> The main source for this summary on the life of Ghaffar Khan is: Rajmohan Gandhi, *Ghaffar Khan. Nonviolent Badshah of the Pakhtuns* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

was placed under house arrest without charge, and was imprisoned until his death in 1988. According to his wishes, he was buried in Afghanistan.

At his funeral, two hundred thousand of his admirers staged a march through the Khyber Pass that connects Pakistan with Afghanistan. A ceasefire was held during the Afghan civil war on this day to pay respects to this beloved leader.

*Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968)*

Probably one of the best-known followers of Gandhi, Martin Luther King led the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Besides Christian theology, King drew serious inspiration from the Mahatma's teachings. His courage was instrumental in organizing a nation-wide resistance to achieve equal rights for Blacks. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Similarly to Gandhi, King was also assassinated, which accelerated the process of Black emancipation. Although his activities are well known, it is less known how he reached the path of nonviolence. Initially, he believed in self-defense.

I had grown up abhorring not only segregation but also the oppressive and barbarous acts that grew out of it. I had passed spots where Negroes had been savagely lynched, and had watched the Ku Klux Klan on its rides at night. I had seen police brutality with my own eyes, and watched Negroes receive the most tragic injustice in the courts. All of these things had done something to my growing personality. I had come perilously close to resenting all white people. I had also learned that the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice.<sup>7</sup>

He started to look for a way to achieve social change. Although in his private life he was a devout Christian, he believed that Jesus' teachings were valid only in one-on-one relationships and could not be extended to the scale of social justice. His enlightenment came through his acquaintance with Gandhi's writings and the reports of his actions on a mass social scale.

Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationship. The "turn the other cheek" philosophy and the "love your enemies" philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was. 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 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 had been seeking for so many months.<sup>8</sup>

Inspired by Gandhi's writings, King took a trip to India in 1959, which deepened his devotion to nonviolence. Following the spirit of Gandhian protests, King and his associates organized the Great March on Washington on 28 August 1963, with more than two hundred and fifty thousand participants,

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King, *Stride toward Freedom. The Montgomery Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 77.

<sup>8</sup> King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 84.

where he delivered his most famous and moving speech, starting with the words "I have a dream." This and other similar protests paved the way for the acceptance of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. King was not only the most famous but probably also the most successful of Gandhi's followers in terms of achieving his political goals.

*Louis Massignon (1883–1962)*<sup>9</sup>

On 28 October 1965, Pope Paul VI promulgated the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*). This declaration marks a paradigm shift with regard to how the Roman Catholic Church relates to other religions, especially to Muslims and Jews, and ushered in a new age of mutual respect.<sup>10</sup> It is less known, however, that one of its proponents, if not the main one, of this new attitude was Louis Massignon, an exceptional Christian scholar of Islamic studies, who worked toward mutual Christian-Muslim-Jewish understanding. Additionally, he also worked on promoting peace between France and her former Arabic colonies on the basis of Gandhi's theoretical teachings. He is credited with the acknowledgment of Islam in the West as an Abrahamic religion. He considered Gandhi to be a modern saint who inspired him to embrace and understand other religions outside Christianity with a tolerant attitude. He was an influential professor of Islamic studies and educated generations of Islamists with a tolerant attitude. His teachings significantly contributed to acceptance and tolerance toward Islam within the Catholic church. After World War II, he turned to politics, focusing on Arab Christians and Muslims. Among other projects, he became involved in peace talks in Palestine, and promoted the peaceful coexistence of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the area. He was also involved in Algeria, where he advocated peaceful solutions for the fierce colonial tension and bloody liberation war. Besides religion, his political involvement as a diplomat in France's often tense and war-ridden relations with her former colonies and his promoting peace and understanding between them is also remarkable.

He had a sudden turning point in his life when, in 1908 on an archaeological research trip to Baghdad, he was captured and mistaken for a spy during the outbreak of the Turkish Revolution. He later describes the events of this life-threatening situation:

[I was] struck, threatened with execution, attempt at suicide through holy horror of myself, sudden self-recollection, eyes shut before an inner fire that judged me and burnt my heart, certainty of a pure, ineffable, creative Presence, suspending my sentence at the prayer of invisible beings...<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This summary is based on the following book chapter: Anthony O'Mahony, "Louis Massignon: A Catholic Encounter with Islam and the Middle East," in *God's Mirror. Renewal and Engagement in French Catholic Intellectual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, ed. Katherine Davies and Toby Garfitt (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 230–51.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy C. Buck, ed., *Louis Massignon: A Pioneer of Interfaith Dialogue. The Badaliya Prayer Movement* (Clifton: Blue Dome Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Massignon, "Voyage en Mésopotamie et conversion de Louis Massignon en 1908," *Islamochristiana* (Rome) 14 (1988): 129, quoted by Ian Latham, "The Conversion of Louis Massignon in Mesopotamia in 1908," *Aram: Society for Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 20 (2008): 245–67.

He was saved from the situation by his host family, a noble Arab-Muslim family. The fact that his conversion or re-conversion to Christianity came in a Muslim environment, along with his preceding studies of Islam, convinced him that his mission was to promote Christian-Muslim understanding. Following this moment of conversion, he worked on the reconciliation of the two religions. He was also active in the political and diplomatic arena: he was present for diplomatic activities in Syria, Palestine, and other parts of the Middle East and in Algeria, Morocco, and Madagascar.

He explicitly regarded Gandhi as his role model for his political activities, especially concerning the ideas of nonviolent action and social justice. He was one of the first French intellectuals to translate Gandhi into French, thus making Gandhi known in France. Romain Rolland also became acquainted with Gandhi through Massignon's translations. Massignon regarded Gandhi as "transcending religious boundaries."<sup>12</sup> In the 1930s, Massignon became the leader of an association named Amis de Gandhi, founded to promote Gandhian ideas, and remained active in it until the end of his life.

#### *The Dalai Lama (1935-)*

One of the few followers of the Great Soul who is highly influential and still living is the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who continues to inspire and lead millions today. The spread of Buddhist teachings, a religion whose core ethics focus on nonviolence and compassion, in the Western world is mainly due to the efforts of the Dalai Lama. Forced out of his home country of Tibet after the "incorporation of Tibet into China" in 1950, the Buddhist leader had to face violence and the oppression of his own people, which resulted in around one million Tibetans losing their lives due to violence in the 1950s.<sup>13</sup> After the 1959 Revolution, the Dalai Lama fled to India where he has been living as a refugee ever since. About one hundred thousand Tibetan exiles followed him in order to avoid being killed by Chinese troops in Tibet.<sup>14</sup> Thousands of Buddhist monasteries were destroyed during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1967-76).<sup>15</sup> Forcefully removed from the political leadership of his people, the Dalai Lama became one of the most important religious and spiritual leaders in the entire world. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. In his acceptance speech at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo, the Dalai Lama said:

I accept the prize with profound gratitude on behalf of the oppressed everywhere and for all those who struggle for freedom and work for world peace. I accept it as a tribute to the man who founded the modern tradition of nonviolent action for change—Mahatma Gandhi—whose life taught and inspired me.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Claude Markovits, *The UnGandhian Gandhi* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 23.

<sup>13</sup> The numbers are debated. See John Powers, *History as Propaganda: Tibetan Exiles Versus the People's Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 136, 142.

<sup>14</sup> Powers, *History as Propaganda*, 138.

<sup>15</sup> Powers, *History as Propaganda*, 142.

<sup>16</sup> The 14th Dalai Lama, *Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech*, NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1989/lama/26133-the-14th-dalai-lama-acceptance-speech-1989/> [Retrieved March 30, 2020].

He is a true manifestation of nonviolence and an example for carrying on, not for the sake of his own life, but to give hope to his nation.

*Malala Yousafzai (1997–)*<sup>17</sup>

The youngest and only female representative here is Malala Yousafzai, and with her we come full circle, as she comes from the same geographical area as the first leader, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan: the Pashtun tribe in the North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan. Born in 1997, Malala lived in an area where the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is sometimes little more than a symbolic line on a map. The totalitarian and oppressive rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan also extended to the border area in Pakistan. The ultra-extremist Taliban group rejected equality for women and education for girls. Malala had been active as a blogger for BBC Urdu, and her activity caused anger among Taliban followers. In 2012, she was shot on a school bus by a Taliban gunman. After her condition was stabilized, she was taken to the United Kingdom for medical treatment. After a complete recovery, she continued to advocate for children's and especially girls' right to an education. She believes that Islam also provides space for women's equality and education. In 2014, she became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. In her speech in the United Nations, she invoked Gandhi:

Dear sisters and brothers, I am not against anyone. Neither am I here to speak in terms of personal revenge against the Taliban or any other terrorists' group. I am here to speak up for the right of education of every child. I want education for the sons and the daughters of all the extremists, especially the Taliban.

I do not even hate the Talib who shot me. Even if there is a gun in my hand and he stands in front of me. I would not shoot him. This is the compassion that I have learnt from Muhammad—the prophet of mercy, Jesus Christ, and Lord Buddha. [...] This is the philosophy of nonviolence that I have learnt from Gandhi Jee, Bacha Khan, and Mother Teresa.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Having briefly examined the lives and thoughts of these exceptional leaders, some common features can also be identified. All of them had to face oppression and physical assault. All had a free choice between responding to hardships with either aggression or nonviolence, isolation or tolerance, silence and negligence or taking on the responsibility of raising their voices and working toward change. Although all of them had to face serious threats and physical force, all decided to choose the path of nonviolence, tolerance, and acceptance—contrary to the suffering they endured. Many also initiated grass-root movements focused on achieving social and political improvements.

Similarly to Gandhi, most of them drew their strength from their strong religious faith, even though they belong to different religions:

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<sup>17</sup> There are many articles on Yousafzai, and one of the most commendable ones is her autobiography: Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb, *I am Malala. The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Malala Yousafzai's speech at the United Nations in 2013, <https://malala.org/newsroom/archive/malala-un-speech>.

Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity. Their examples demonstrate that all these religions can be interpreted in order to foster peace and tolerance, and that nonviolence as a method can be efficient regardless of the faith of its proponents.

I find it important to remember the examples of these charismatic leaders, and I hope that they can inspire current and future leaders in the world. I also hope that this paper has inspired its readers to accept the challenge and choose the path of nonviolence in their everyday activities, and to bear in mind the famous words of Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you wish to see in the world."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, this quotation, which is most often associated with Gandhi, is in fact a paraphrase from a medical paper: "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him." M. K. Gandhi, "Accidents Snake-Bite," in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XII, 158, Accessed at [gandhiheritageportal.org](http://gandhiheritageportal.org).

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