

NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE
& RELIGIOUS PACIFISM

Not Wed Together

"An apostle of nonviolence."
"Preaching nonviolence". We hear these expressions so often, we don't question them. But there is a crucial difference between soporific preachifying and nonviolent action. So let's clear this up.

The fact that people come to struggle using nonviolent methods has nothing to do with faith or a hardcore belief in nonviolence as a panacea for the world. There are no such requirements, no need to buy into a philosophical "package" before groups can start using nonviolent action. Nonviolent struggle is not a dogma, a religion, an abstraction. Most of those who have used nonviolent tactics successfully didn't even call them nonviolent.

People of faith and strong believers in anti-war principles have played a major role in many nonviolent movements. But some of these movements have at times faced serious opposition from religious leaders and prominent pacifists. One reason is that nonviolent organizers do not shy away from conflict. They "wage" conflict, like armies wage war. This displeases those more comfortable with an unjust

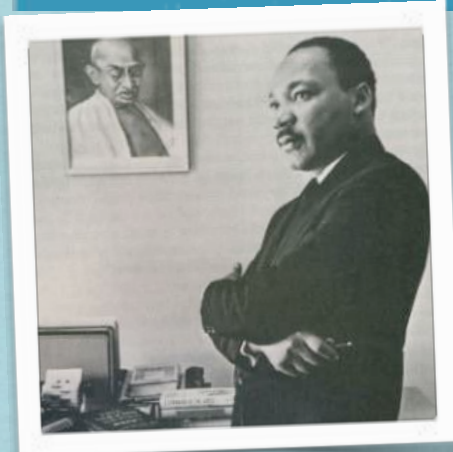
status quo, than with stormy disruptions in the service of justice.

Pacifism is based on a philosophical rejection of violence. "Violence is bad, so it must be rejected." But knowing that violence always involves a measure of injustice and death doesn't mean that we can easily dispense with it. Faced with a life-threatening disease, a potentially harmful

medicine is better than no medicine at all. If violence serves a purpose, then that purpose must be served by other means, before one can refuse violence.

Nonviolent struggle is such an effort aimed at shifting the balance of power. Thought, creativity and planning serve to devise tactics on the battlefield of public opinion. It is a practical method, not a philosophy.

A NECESSARY TENSION



"I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."

— Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from the Birmingham Jail, Alabama, April 16, 1963

* "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.

My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.

Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help [humanity] rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brother[sister]hood."

ACTION THAT IS NONVIOLENT

Nonviolent action is a means of combat, as is war. It involves the matching of forces and the waging of "battle," requires wise strategy and tactics, and demands of its "soldiers" courage, discipline, and sacrifice.

This view of nonviolent action as a technique of active combat is diametrically opposed to the popular assumption that, at its strongest, nonviolent action relies on rational persuasion of the opponent, and more commonly it consists simply of passive submission.

Nonviolent action is just what it says: action which is nonviolent, not inaction. This technique consists, not simply of words, but of active protest, noncooperation, and intervention.

Overwhelmingly, it is group or mass action.

— Gene Sharp

The alternative to violence is not reconciliation, it is not peace, it is not love, all of which belong to categories of a different order. The alternative to violence is — and can only be — nonviolent action. Nonviolent action truly is of the same order as violence: it serves the very function that violence claims to serve; it sets in motion a strategic struggle against injustice; it aims to create a contest for power in favour of the oppressed, to get their rights recognized and respected.

— Jean-Marie Muller