

Reflections from Thomas Merton on Gandhi's Witness to Christians

“Jesus died in vain,” said Gandhi, “if he did not teach us to regulate the whole of life by the eternal law of love.”

Gandhi believed that the central problem of our time was the acceptance or the rejection of a basic law of love and truth which had been made known to the world in traditional religions and most clearly by Jesus Christ. Gandhi himself expressly and very clearly declared himself an adherent of this one law. His whole life, his political action, finally even his death, were nothing but a witness to his commitment. “If love is not the law of our being the whole of my argument falls to pieces.” (p. 164)

What is certainly true is that Gandhi not only understood the ethic of the Gospel as well, if not in some ways better, than many Christians, but he is one of the very few men of our time who applied Gospel principles to the problems of a political and social existence in such a way that his approach to these problems was inseparably religious and political at the same time. (p.159)

Political action [for Gandhi] was not a means to acquire security and strength for one's self and one's party, but a means of witnessing to the truth and the reality of the cosmic structure by making one's own proper contribution to the order willed by God. One could thus preserve one's integrity and peace, being detached from results (which are in the hands of God) and being free from the inner violence that comes from division and untruth. The success with which Gandhi applied this spiritual force to political action makes him uniquely important in our age. (p. 160)

The radical difference between him and other leaders, even the most sincere and honest of them, becomes evident by the fact that Gandhi is chiefly concerned with truth and with service, *svadharma*, rather than with the possible success of his tactics upon other people, and paradoxically it was his religious conviction that made Gandhi a great politician rather than a mere tactician or operator. (p. 161)

Gandhi recognized, as no other world leader of our time has done, the necessity to be free from the pressures, the exorbitant and tyrannical demands of a society that is violent because it is essentially greedy, lustful and cruel. Therefore he fasted, observed days of silence, lived frequently in retreat, knew the value of solitude, as well as of the totally generous expenditure of his time and energy in listening to others and communicating with them. He recognized the impossibility of being a peaceful and nonviolent man if one submits passively to the insatiable requirements of a society maddened by overstimulation and obsessed with the demons of noise, voyeurism and speed.

From *Seeds of Destruction* by Thomas Merton,

Discussion Questions

What in Gandhi's thought inspired Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk, to pursue the path of non-violence?

Merton remarks that a society is violent when it is greedy, lustful, cruel and overstimulated by noise, voyeurism and speed. By this definition, how do we judge our society in the 21st century?

Can you identify instances when political action has been a means of witnessing to the truth? When has it been religious and political at the same time?

Prayer

We thank you, Prince of Peace, for the witness of our brothers, Thomas Merton and Mahatma Gandhi.

We pray that your great love for all of humankind may also inspire us to nurture love in our hearts and to act non-violently in all situations. Help us to be truly free in your Spirit so we can act with peaceful hearts, knowing it is a step along your path and that you will send your grace to do the rest. Let us work toward service, not success; to know that peace is the way, not only the destination. In you we put our trust and hope. Amen.

