

# Understand the Philosophy and Principles of Nonviolence Under the Leadership of Martin Luther King

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**Abstract:** *The rich social and political philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr., is encompassed in his nonviolence philosophy and principles. Since the very first day he became a world icon in 1955 until his brutal assassination by James Earl Ray in 1968, King had preached and practiced the nonviolence philosophy with all his might. Scholars might write voluminous books on King's nonviolence philosophy alone because he dedicated his whole life on it. He tried to convince his fellow Americans into espousing this philosophy through eloquent speeches and attracting articles. He perceived violence as a spiral of evil forces underpinned by bitterness and hate that only results in chaos, whereas he conceived nonviolence as a solution that offers peace of mind and heart in a beloved community. This paper highlights that King was an arduous proponent of nonviolence by principles in both his way of life and struggle strategy. The principles he applied hinge on self - discipline, courage, moral strength and nonviolent direct actions.*

**Keywords:** American studies, nonviolence philosophy, nonviolent direct actions, violence.

## 1. Introduction

Nonviolence is the abstention from violence as a matter of principle. It is also the quality or state of being nonviolent, or the avoidance of violence (Merriam - Webster, 2024). However, when analysing King's own perception of nonviolence, one needs deeper reflections than being limited to the definitions given by dictionaries. Thus, for a better understanding of the concept of nonviolence in King, it is preferable to distinguish it from both cowardice and violence as in this analysis:

The way of acquiescence leads to moral and spiritual suicide. 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.

(King, 1986)

The concept of nonviolence can also be defined as a doctrine of collective actions advocating the refusal to resort to violence in order to solve conflicts. Its fundamental meaning and understanding find repercussions in the philosophy of King's references and spiritual guides such as Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau (Diop, 2024). Nonviolence is more powerful than violence in seeking social change as in the following quotation:

The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation. The aftermath of violence are emptiness and bitterness.

(King, 2012)

Often confused with pacifism or passive resistance, the concept of nonviolence actually depends on a relation of forces through the implementation of political, economic or cultural means of pressure. On the philosophical and ethical

fields, nonviolence is presented as a creative utopia. It makes an appeal to the rules of social etiquette and the manner of acting in a conflict. Furthermore, the concept of nonviolence is founded on the respect of the person and it rejects the idea of using human beings as things (Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia, 2024).

As he was increasingly impregnated with those nonviolent virtues, King came to the conclusion that nonviolence was the only road to freedom (King, 1986). And time proved him right. He summarizes the substantial gains obtained thanks to nonviolent direct actions in this passage:

The 1960 sit - ins desegregated lunch counters in more than 150 cities within a year. The 1961 Freedom Rides put an end to segregation in interstate travel. The 1956 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, ended segregation on the buses not only of that city but in practically every city of the South. The 1963 Birmingham movement and the climactic March on Washington won passage of the most powerful civil rights law in a century. The 1965 Selma movement brought enactment of the Voting Rights Law. Our nonviolent marches in Chicago last summer brought about a housing agreement which, if implemented, will be the strongest step toward open housing taken in any city in the nation. Most significant is the fact that this progress occurred with minimum human sacrifice and loss of life. Fewer people have been killed in ten years of nonviolent demonstrations across the South than were killed in one night of rioting in Watts.

(King, 1968, p.58 - 59)

The main interest of this paper is to facilitate the understanding of the philosophy and principles of nonviolence in King's thinking. This goes beyond boycotts and other forms of protest. For King, nonviolence was the most efficient method for justice gains in an era when science and technologies are soaring up, in an era when firearms are increasingly lethal, in an era when teargases are making

demonstrators or marchers sicker and sicker, and in an era when war itself is obsolete. King recognizes that there was a time when war was a “necessary evil” or a “negative good” to end the rise of evil forces.

Had it not been thanks to violence, the American Revolutionary War would not have erupted, the Treaty of Paris would not have been signed in 1783, and Great Britain would continue her exactions. Had it not been thanks to violence, the American Civil War would not have broken out, there would never have been the United States of America, and the lives of millions of African Americans would have come to naught. Had it not been thanks to violence, Adolf Hitler would have applied his deadly final solution, and the whole world would have lived under the yoke of half - men and half - women condemned to eternally work like slaves. For King, in many times, war was preferable to surrender to a totalitarian system (King, 1991, p.39). But those times are no more. Moreover, as good it might be, violence cannot be an absolute good, whereas nonviolence can be.

In this paper, I will first explore the maturity development of King in his pilgrimage to nonviolence. This involves the different nonviolent direct actions that prevailed during the Civil Rights Movement. Second, I will investigate how he came to draw his own roadmap that enabled him to specify his nonviolence principles and his methodology of nonviolent direct action based on truth and love, the most sacred values in the Judeo - Christian heritage. King was not a blind nonviolent apostle because he was mindful of its limitations. In many circumstances, the voice of violent actions had indeed louder echoes than that of nonviolent direct actions. Third, I will explain through examples drawn from King’s works the rhetoric that convinced millions of Americans of the 1950s and 1960s that nonviolent resistance was the only solution.

## 2. Nonviolence Discipleship

Before totally embracing nonviolence to make it a precious asset in combating internal and external violence, King underwent a transformational process. His transformation from a non - believer in nonviolence to a nonviolence guru started from his formative years as a student at Crozer Theological Seminary. His intellectual encounters with emeritus scholars and proponents of nonviolence gave him a firm conviction that nonviolence was the only way for the oppressed to be rehabilitated their full citizenship rights without any bitterness or sense of vengeance (Diop, 2022).

During his training at Morehouse College, King met Benjamin Mays. For Mays, “To be a Morehouse man was a mark of distinction, pride, and intellectual excellence. Morehouse men were known for their courage, dedication to scholarship, and determination to succeed in life in spite of the forces of racism and oppression” (Young, 1981). Martin Luther King, Jr., was among those Morehouse men. He rose to prominence against all odds to lead the greatest African American movement which ever existed. When King left Morehouse College to study divinity at Crozer Theological Seminary, his mental world was beginning to change drastically into a dogmatic belief from a critical mindset (King, 1986).

King had only read books about nonviolent direct action when he was at Crozer Theological Seminary but Bayard Rustin, a civil rights activist who would become his collaborator, had lived it. Both civil rights leaders met in February 1956 (Podair, 2009). Rustin could teach King many things about nonviolence, including how to behave and what kind of messages to deliver. He played a key role during the Montgomery bus boycott.

When Rustin showed up in King’s life, he was an internationally respected pacifist who was committed to the ideals of world peace and racial brotherhood. He took the Gandhian position that cheerful acceptance of punishment might make a better witness for the cause than lawful evasion. As a homosexual, he welcomed several imprisonments and a few beatings, including one in New Orleans that left him without some of his front teeth (Branch, 1988). Rustin’s nonviolent influence on King made the latter avoid all forms of violence even during the harsh periods of death threats.

After being informed, during a speech, of the first bombing of his house, King kept calm and adopted a steady demeanor, which stunned the audience (Garrow, 1986, p.60). Many officers of the church and other trusted friends urged King to hire a bodyguard and armed watch men. He agreed and went down to the sheriff’s office to apply for a license to carry a gun in his car, but the application was refused. Besides, Rustin also convinced him he should not carry, or keep weapons at home, which would make his nonviolent fight paradoxical (Podair, 2009).

In his nonviolence apprenticeship, King had measured the consequences of violence within and outside the African American community, and he had identified its causes. He knew that a check of the hospitals in any African American community on any Saturday night would make one painfully aware of the violence within. In another analysis, King purported that all the acts of violence perpetrated by African Americans were just unplanned eruptions, uncontrollable temper tantrums brought on by long - neglected poverty, humiliation, oppression and exploitation (King, 1986).

King’s discipleship in nonviolent resistance never ended until he deceased in 1968. He even confessed his powerlessness to calm down the younger activists during the James Meredith’s march as they were crying out “Black Power” (King, 1968). He would surely seek other ways to teach nonviolent resistance to these younger activists who started denying his philosophy for direct actions and retaliation, and who saw themselves more in the philosophy of late lamented Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon. However, all these fiery younger activists, under the leaderships of Stokely Carmichael, Floyd McKissick and Willie Ricks, recognized that King deserved respect because his nonviolent resistance fundamentally based on love and truth had born its fruit.

## 3. Violence Inefficiency

The time when war, the most eloquent form of violence, was effective is no more. War is no more a “necessary evil” since the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons is rampant. Given all this, King believed that a violent revolution, in circumstances such that the oppressed is

disadvantaged, becomes a romantic illusion and an empty philosophical debate (King, 1986). In the African American slavery experience, there were moments of violent rebellions. Those rebellions ended dramatically as they were repressed in a violent form that even surpassed the violence in which they had occurred.

One that is still notoriously fresh in the American memory is Nat Turner's rebellion, historically known as the Southampton Insurrection. It was a rebellion of enslaved Virginians that took place in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831. Led by Nat Turner, the rebels killed between 55 and 65 White people (Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia, 2024). Turner and his followers killed some of their oppressors, but they failed to kill the oppression system. Today, in year 2024, from the ashes of slavery, Black codes and Jim Crow laws have risen police brutality and harassments. Numerous footages show white police officers harass and kill African Americans.

One sad episode of police brutality is still on YouTube. On May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a 46 - year - old African American man named George Perry Floyd, Jr., was murdered after just being suspected to have used a counterfeit twenty - dollar bill. A footage shows police officer Derek Michael Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and lying face down crying "I can't breathe". Three other police officers at the scene did not even try to intervene and avoid the deadly accident (Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia, 2024). This act of unjustified violence is just the tip of the iceberg. The American society has gone mad on violence. King eloquently expands on the inefficacy of violence in this reflexion:

For through violence you may murder a murderer but you can't murder murder.

(King, 1986, p.175 - 176)

Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie; nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. [...] Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stress. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.

(King, 1968, p.64 - 65)

The only reason why this Turner's rebellion became notorious is its number of White casualties but its efficiency in freeing slaves leaves much to be desired. This explains why King was in total disagreement with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, in their attempt to create a separate black state in the USA, and to use violence to respond to violence. For King (1968, p.60), in a violent racial situation, the power structure has the local police, the state troopers, the national guard and finally the army to call on, all of which are predominantly white. In this case, the oppressed on the other side will not win any violent battle. The South African activists' experience under Nelson Mandela's leadership, with his sabotage acts and aborted guerilla project, is a relevant example.

#### 4. Nonviolence Principles

Kenneth B. Clark lists eight different strategies of positions African Americans implemented in their quest for freedom and justice. This is still valid in any community in the world. From the easiest to the hardest, they include prayer, isolation, accommodation, despair, alienation, law and maneuver, direct encounter, and truth. The strategy of prayer is a total reliance on divine intervention. This strategy was doomed as a social instrument whatever it has meant in terms of individual solace because it was ineffective in producing direct evidence of social change (Vatter & Palm, 1972).

The strategy of isolation is for wealthy African Americans who choose to live apart from the aspirations and despair of middle - and lower - class Blacks, secure as possible behind their wall of privilege, electing conspicuous consumption instead of responsibility in an abdication of leadership. The strategy of accommodation is the Puritan ethic of thrift, cleanliness, education, hard work, and rigorously proper sexual mores. The strategy of despair is the abandon of hope and the acceptance of hardships. The strategy of alienation was professed by the Communists and the Nation of Islam (Vatter & Palm, 1972) . This strategy is relatively efficient. For instance, the Nation of Islam failed to create a separate State in Uncle Sam's country, but they massively succeeded in converting numerous African Americans to Islam.

The strategy of law and maneuver is reminiscent of the legal endeavors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL) that were its ardent advocates. The strategy of direct encounter is about the direct encounter with the oppressor. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) professed this strategy and applied it through freedom rides and sit - ins throughout the USA. They often bore the brunt of the expense for freedom and justice in the forms of beatings, severe injury and even assassination (Vatter & Palm, 1972).

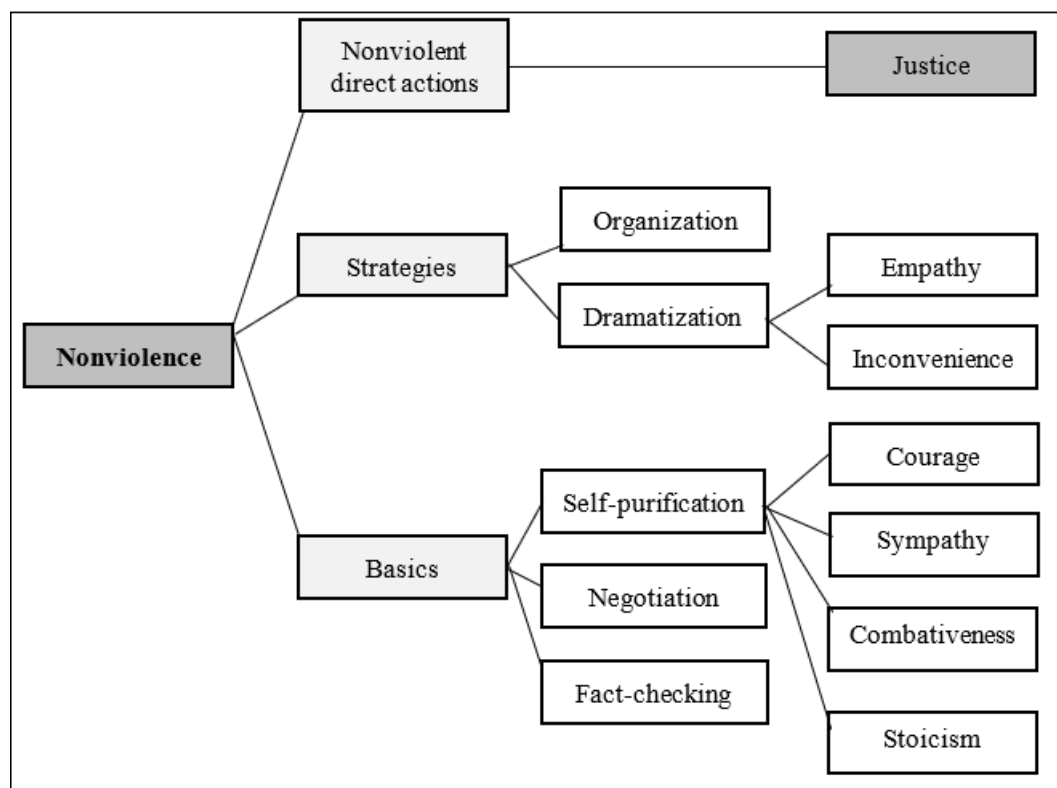
The strategy of truth is the belief that truth is in the beginning and at the end of everything (Vatter & Palm, 1972). The strategy of truth, in Clark, is the method of the intellectual who has sought, through academic research, through drama, writing and speaking to motivate others to achieve social change by the power of eloquent expression, a fusion of reason and feeling. So to speak, truth is the belief that men's minds and hearts can be reached and that truth has the power to transform society. The strategy of truth is the most abstract and nebulous of all, and often seems the least effective. There is much evidence that truth fails when selfish power is threatened by it.

Nevertheless, the search for truth, while impotent without implementation in action, is the underlying ideology behind every other strategy on behalf of constructive social change. None could proceed toward democratic ends without it. In his leadership, King had opted for the strategy of truth combined with the strategy of nonviolent direct encounter. With this strategy, he faced demonization, jails and physical death. The white community derogatively called him a dangerous "rabble - rouser," an "agitator" and a "troublemaker". The black community snidely referred to him with Uncle Tom

labels such as “De Lawd” or “Booker T. King” (King, 1991, p.348).

Because of his inflexible belief in the strategy of truth, King got threats of hate, went to jail several times, saw his house dynamited and received beatings. Furthermore, in 1968, when he became more involved in this strategy by fighting racism

in all its ugly forms, by militating for the rights of the poor, and by being a conscientious objector, a white racist killed him. With the strategy of truth, King applied nonviolence according to several principles drawn from his personal experience. The figure below illustrates those principles in detail.



**Figure 1:** The principles of nonviolence as applied by Martin Luther King, Jr.

To synthesize the diagram, King’s philosophy of nonviolence rests on two principal strategies that hinge on four fundamentals. These four fundamentals combine fact checking, negotiation, self - purification and nonviolent direct action. For nonviolence to be effective, the oppressed must apply the strategy of organization and the strategy of dramatization. Organizing a nonviolent movement implies training, mobilizing, sensitizing, meeting the participants and activists, and finding a consensus on the principles. Dramatizing a nonviolent struggle means utilizing all propaganda means available and the press to let everyone know that something abnormal is happening, and it must stop.

Here, the press becomes both a collaborator and a breaker. If the press covers the events faithfully, the world will discover the stark reality of the injustice that is taking place. But if the press does otherwise demonizing, slandering and libeling the movement leaders, this might be an inconvenient. In any case, the nonviolent protesters have several occasions to dramatize the situation not by roleplaying but by genuinely exposing their bodies to clubs, hound dogs, water hoses and hateful spits. These are not suicidal deeds but acts of valor because:

No one wants to suffer and be hurt. But it is more important to get at the cause than to be safe. It is better to shed a little blood from a blow on the head or a rock thrown by an angry mob than to have children by the

thousands grow up reading at a fifth - or a sixth - grade level.

(King, 1986, 129)

Inhuman treatment and physical abuse covered by the press contribute to evidencing that the protestors are unarmed and harmless victims of injustice. By dramatizing a crisis, the oppressed not only stir sympathy in people of good will and understanding, even if these people are comfortably sitting in their armchairs, and listening to the reporter’s dramatic story, or watching brutal scenes on a television channel. But the oppressed also install their oppressors into an inconvenient situation awakening in them a sense of moral shame. This ends up pressurizing the forces of power to meet the needs of the oppressed. Eventually, the end of nonviolence is justice and freedom through forgiveness and reconciliation.

Freedom is twofold. It is physical and psychological. A person might be physically free but psychologically in bondage as long as he does not think critically for himself and take enlightened decisions according to the dictates of his clear conscience. Freedom is not won by a passive acceptance of suffering. Freedom is won by a struggle against suffering because freedom never comes on a silver platter (King, 2012). And as King puts it:

By this measure, African Americans have not yet paid the full price for freedom. And Whites have not yet faced the full cost of justice.

(King, 1968, 20)

As long as the mind is enslaved the body can never be free. Psychological freedom, a firm sense of self - esteem, is the most powerful weapon against the long night of physical slavery. No Lincolnian Emancipation Proclamation or Kennedyan or Johnsonian civil rights bill can totally bring this kind of freedom.

(King, 1968, p.44).

The nonviolent resister needs courage and moral strength to resist against evil. For instance, numerous civil rights protestors used their own bodies to face water hoses and hound dogs in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. These protestors voluntarily accepted unearned pain and suffering. Captured by cameras and dramatically related by the press, this put pressure in the local authorities and obliged the resister to take federal actions. They employed passive resistance physically and active resistance spiritually (Diop, 2013). Without the collaboration of the press, even the best organized nonviolent protest cannot give highly positive results. The press gave a national and international credit to the Civil Rights Movement's nonviolent methods. King depicts the usefulness of the press in these terms:

The press interprets the issue to the community at large and thereby sets in motion the machinery for change.

(King, 1986)

We got a good press throughout our stay. Thanks to the Indian papers, the Montgomery bus boycott was already well known in that country. Indian publications perhaps gave a better continuity of our 381 - day bus strike than did most of our papers in the United States.

(King, 2012)

The march on Washington spurred and galvanized the consciences of millions. It gave the American Negro a new national and international stature. The press of the world recorded the story as nearly a quarter of a million Americans, white and black, assembled in grandeur as a testimonial to the Negro's determination to achieve freedom in this generation. (King, 1991, p.351)

Fortunately the liberal coverage of the press had carried the word of our struggle across the world.

(King, 1991, p.444)

But the press also did a disservice to the movement. Sometimes, it failed to cover the events objectively. Sometimes, it spread unfairly critical rumors. Sometimes, it distorted the information for some reasons. In these passages, King elaborates on the biased view of reality from the press:

...if the press, radio, and television had turned their powerful instruments in the direction of educating and elevating the people on this issue [school integration]; [...] federal troops might not have been forced to walk the corridors of Central High School.

(King, 1991, p.472)

This undue gullibility is also seen in the tendency of many readers to accept the printed word of the press as final truth. Few people realize that even our authentic channels of information, the press, the platform, and in many instances the pulpit, do not give us objective and unbiased truth.

(King, 1991, p.492)

The fact that most white people do not comprehend this situation, which prevails in the North as well as in the South, is due largely to the press, which molds the opinions of the white community.

(King, 1991, p.321)

The concept of nonviolence does not seek to defeat the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding. The nonviolent resister uses efficient means of protest such as non - cooperation to provoke his opponent. Whenever his opponent gets tired of being provoked, and decides to inflict violence on the nonviolent resister, the latter then victimizes himself, and then makes his cause reach high dramatic proportions. Accepting to suffer is meant to seek sympathy of one's opponent who surely desires to humiliate, and often kill the nonviolent resister. But that attitude ends up placing the opponent in a state of shame and permanent regret (Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia, 2024).

The philosophy of nonviolence imposes the oppressed to take nonviolent direct action against the evil itself, and not against the person of the oppressor. King made up his mind on the fact that achieving victory over injustice, racism, hate and oppression was the end of the power of nonviolence. Attaining the strength of democracy for all in the United States was the final victory of good over evil. Thus, King's struggle found echo in the struggle of religious men who found themselves caught into the contradictory directions of God and evil forces (Diop, 2013). In addition to boycotts, civil disobedience picketing, slowdowns, hunger strikes, among others, King gives colorful details about nonviolent direct actions in the passages below:

Our experience is that marches must continue over a period of thirty to forty days with a sufficient size to produce any meaningful results.

(King, 1986)

I call upon you to take your money out of the banks downtown and deposit your money in Tri - State Bank; we want a "bank - in" movement in Memphis. [...] You have six or seven black insurance companies in Memphis. Take out your insurance there. We want to have an "insurance - in".

(King, 1986, p.199).

Theirs [African Americans' nonviolent resistance] is a revolt against the whole system of Jim Crow and they are prepared to sit - in, kneel - in, wade - in and stand - in until every waiting room, rest room, theatre and other facility throughout the nation that is supposedly open to the public is in fact open to Negroes, Mexicans, Indians, Jews or what have you.

(King, 1991, p.165)

Meanwhile, with the number of volunteers increasing daily, we were able to launch campaigns against a variety of additional objectives: kneel - ins at churches; sit - ins at the library; a march on the county building to mark the opening of a voter registration drive. And all the time the jails were slowly but steadily filling up.

(King, 1991, p.541)

Indeed, in Mr. Williams' [Robert F. Williams] own community of Monroe, North Carolina, a striking example of collective community action won a significant victory without use of arms or threats of violence. When the police incarcerated a Negro doctor unjustly, the aroused people of Monroe marched to the police station, crowded into its halls and corridors, and refused to leave until their colleague was released. Unable to arrest everyone, the authorities released the doctor and neither side attempted to unleash violence. This experience was related by the doctor who was the intended victim.

(King, 1991, p.33)

Comparing the eternal showdown between good and evil, King came to the conclusion that his crusade was not meant to oppose Blacks and Whites but to wipe away the forces of evil. He sought to defeat those forces so that the opponent is won over and converted into a reconciled and redeemed friend. This principle is based on the premise that unearned suffering is redemptive. So, the nonviolent fighter must be willing to suffer without retaliation. He must also make sure that the hatred of the oppressor does not infiltrate his mind. Otherwise, the oppressed will not accomplish his nonviolent mission because violence engenders violence (Diop, 2013).

As beautiful and charming as King's rhetoric on his philosophy and principles of nonviolent resistance might be, nonviolence does have limitations. King himself knew it very well even though he gave the impression that nonviolence was the panacea to all evils. Nonviolence gives better positive results when the opponent is at least reasonable because:

When there is rocklike intransigence or sophisticated manipulation that mocks the empty - handed petitioner, rage replaces reason. Nonviolence is a powerful demand for reason and justice. [...] Negroes hold only one key to the double lock of peaceful change. The other is in the hands of the white community.

(King, 1968, 21 - 22)

King recognized in his speech on "South African Independence" made in London, England, on December 7, 1964, that nonviolence has its limits. He declared that Africans in South Africa, and their friends of other races, strove for half a century to win their freedom by nonviolent methods which was met by increasing violence from the South African state, increasing repression, culminating in mass killings and imprisonment. In the following confession, King reveals that the African American community would never arrive at so many justice victories if the USA context was the same as in South Africa:

Clearly there is much in Mississippi and Alabama to remind South Africans of their own country, yet even in Mississippi we can organise to register Negro voters, we can speak to the

press, we can in short organise the people in non - violent action. But in South Africa even the mildest form of non - violent resistance meets with years of imprisonment, and leaders over many years have been restricted and silenced and imprisoned. We can understand how in that situation people felt so desperate that they turned to other methods, such as sabotage.

Today great leaders, Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe, are among many hundreds wasting away in Robben Island prison. Against the massively armed and ruthless state, which uses torture and sadistic forms of interrogation to crush human beings, even driving some to suicide, the militant opposition inside South Africa seems for the moment to be silenced: the mass of the people seems to be contained, seems for the moment unable to break from oppression. I emphasise the word "seems" because we can imagine what emotions and plans must be seething below the calm surface of that prosperous police state. We know what emotions are seething in the rest of Africa.

(King, 2012)

King did admit that nonviolence could only give positive results in a democratic country rather than in an autocratic one. The white South African authorities had been less harsh with Mahatma Gandhi during his twenty - one - year stay in Chaka Zulu's country than they were with the native black South Africans. This discrimination was purely race - biased as South Africa racially classified its populations by citizenship order as a country of Whites, Asians, Colored and Blacks. So what strategy would King have adopted if he had been in Mandela's or Sobukwe's shoes?

King confessed that if he had lived in South Africa in those days, in the midst of the white supremacy law, he would have joined Chief Luthuli and others in saying "break these unjust laws" (King, 1991, p.50). Luthuli was known for his moderation. Mandela and Sobukwe were known for their radicalizations. King admired all of them. As nonviolent King might have been, it is difficult to guess which side he would have been in a tyrannical country, but it is certain that he would have fought against injustice no matter what the circumstances.

## 5. Nonviolence Rhetoric

King was not only a pastor who would see his congregation on Sundays. He was not merely a civil rights activist who actively participated in the progress of the African American community. His roles and responsibilities went further. King was a mass leader of Americans. White people, Black people, Hispanic people, Native Americans, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and animists could listen to his baritone voice comfortably. Had King embraced a different struggle strategy, his works and ideas might not have reached this high pedestal.

In this context of universal leadership, King opted for humanistic messages that welded separate communities, reconciled enemies and united the separate fragments of the whole nation of the USA. King tried to synthesize many diverse contexts. The theme of nonviolence is in the heart of

his rhetoric. The Whites and Blacks, the rich and poor, the upper class and lower class, the believer and nonbeliever, the politician and apolitical, were all brought together as King spoke to them in the one language of nonviolence they all understood and enjoyed listening to.

King used parables and metaphors to describe freedom through nonviolence. Images combined with rhetorical devices offered a fine painting of what it cost to fight nonviolently and what the results would be at the end. Inspiring by the biblical teachings on Israel in Egypt (*English Standard Version Bible* (2001), Exodus, 1: 1 - 13: 16), King makes correlations between the African Americans' struggle for freedom and the Israelis' freedom march through the Red Sea. He also parallels African Americans' ordeals to Jesus Christ's crucifixion. All these analogical interpretations are found in these passages:

Before you get to Canaan you've got a Red Sea to confront. You have a hardened heart of a pharaoh to confront. You have the prodigious hilltops of evil in the wilderness to confront. And even when you get up to the Promised Land, you have giants in the land. The beautiful thing about it is that there are a few people who've been over in the land. They have spied enough to say, "Even though the giants are there we can possess the land, because we got the internal fiber to stand up amid anything we have to face."

(King, 2012)

Those of us who call the name of Jesus Christ find something at the center of our faith which forever reminds us that God is on the side of truth and justice. Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumph of Easter. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ arose and split history into A. D. and B. C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name.

(King, 1991, p.88)

Pharaoh, Egypt, the Red Sea, the wilderness and the giants in the land are the prodigious hilltops of evil that had oppressed the Israelis for years. In correlation with his people's experience, King hints that those evils are the same as slavery, the Jim Crow laws, segregation and discrimination. Full of hope in a bright future, King correlates the Promised Land and Canaan with his people's freedom which was being materialized by several gains among which are the abolition of slavery, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, Montgomery's buses desegregation and Johnson's signatures of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act.

As for Jesus Christ's crucifixion, King demonstrates that it is only through pain that you can gain. Good Friday is the day in which Christian and Catholic Churches commemorate the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ. Easter is the celebration of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the tomb (Mendoza, 2024). King's rhetoric mostly uses images through figures of analogy such as allegories, similes, metaphors, personifications and periphrases. The allegory of Israel in Egypt depicts in colorful words the nonviolent movement King had led from 1955 to 1968.

## 6. Conclusion

The nonviolence thunder of King's fearless voice was louder than the cacophony of hate and the clamors of violence hysteria. King believed that in any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine traces of injustice, negotiation, self - purification, and direct action (King, 1991, p.290). The self - purification step is the most difficult one. It involves workshops on nonviolence and recurrent questions such as: "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?" (King, 1991, p.291).

The effectiveness of the nonviolence philosophy turns around five points. First, this method is passive physically but strongly active spiritually; it is nonaggressive but dynamically aggressive spiritually. Second, to win the opponent's friendship and understanding, the end of nonviolence should be redemption and reconciliation. The tensions were not really between white people and black people. The tensions were at bottom between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness (King, 1991, pp.7 - 8). In King, there is no dichotomy between Whites and Blacks, but there is a fundamental opposition between the abnormal and the normal, between good and evil. Fourth, to retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the hate in the world. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. The fifth point has a religious connotation. God, the nodal point in King's thinking, is on the side of truth.

Far from being a method for cowards, nonviolence does resist. It faces danger and experiences suffering. Violence is a method that proved its worth during World War II. Between 1939 and 1945, violence defeated violence. But in an epoch of sophisticated weapons of mass destruction such as nuclear bombs that can destroy a city and kill most of its people, violence becomes outdated (Ican, 2024).

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