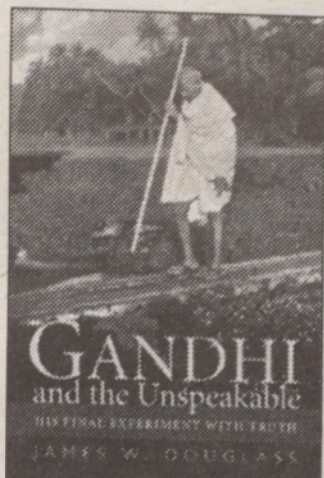


# The Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and his use of nonviolence

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Gandhi and the Unspeakable by James W. Douglass

The "unspeakable," according to author James W. Douglass, "exists in the shadow of all government and corporate power, but reaches a special depth of murderous deceit in a democracy with nuclear weapons."

The term is derived from the Catholic monk Thomas Merton and his profound meditation on the vile corruption, mendacity and violence that permeates much of our contemporary world. In Merton's own trenchant prose, the unspeakable "is the void that contradicts everything spoken even before the words are said; the void that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss. It is the void out of which (Nazi war criminal Adolf) Eichmann drew the punctilious exactitude of his obedience."

Our murderous epoch has seen world wars, endless armed conflicts, genocidal atrocities, increasingly sophisticated killing devices and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Early in the 20th century an unlikely figure strode onto history's tumultuous stage. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi would emerge as the most steadfast and eloquent proponent of nonviolence the modern world has ever witnessed. He would be revered as the Mahatma or Great Soul.

In his riveting new work, "Gandhi and the Unspeakable," Douglass details the Mahatma's extraordinary journey for Indian independence, which ended in his assassination. Of Gandhi's pacific message Douglass writes: "In the nuclear age, it had come right on time. If we awaken to truth and nonviolence in the depth of a new world, we can confront the Unspeakable with hope."

Gandhi and his unwavering dedication to peace and truth stand in luminous opposition to the unspeakable. Loved by Indians from a diversity of religious, cultural, class and ethnic backgrounds,

Gandhi's personal spiritual practice embraced an eclectic blend of the deep wisdom found in all authentic religious experience. His spirituality and politics were inextricably intertwined. Yet there were individuals and movements vehemently opposed to him. It was not only the Islamic separatist Muhammad Ali Jinnah, whose obstinacy would divide India and bring about the nation of Pakistan. Certain right wing nationalist Hindus subscribed to a doctrine of revolutionary violence, and such a one would assassinate the Mahatma in 1948.

On a visit to London in 1906 Gandhi met Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, "the leader of a cadre of militant Indian students living at a London hostel he ran, India House." Their philosophical and political differences were clear from the start. Savarkar openly supported "revolt, bloodshed, and revenge" to rid the British from India. In 1909, a young Indian man groomed by Savarkar assassinated a British official. The young man was executed. Savarkar escaped prosecution.

Gandhi arrived again in London only days after this incident and suspected Savarkar was behind the deed. "For the next four decades, Gandhi's and Savarkar's own lives would embody their diametrically opposed visions of social change, with both visions culminating finally in Gandhi's assassination by Savarkar and his followers."

In addition to developing a nonviolent revolutionary alternative to violent rebellion, Gandhi pursued genuine reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims. Savarkar and his followers would have no part of it. In 1925, an adherent of Savarkar founded the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (rss), "an organization that consciously copied the strategy of Mussolini's fascist Blackshirts. The rss would become infamous by terrorizing Muslims in order to gain political power in India at the end of the twentieth century." Today the rss remains a huge and influential presence in Indian politics.

In the wake of Britain's evacuation and the partition of the country, chaos erupted

between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi's last fast was undertaken in order to stop the murderous mayhem that engulfed the land. His hope for a united India had been dashed. Even his closest disciples seemed unwilling to adopt policies that might point to a new and hopeful nonviolent direction, not only for India, but for the future of all humanity. In the midst of stark disappointment, he remained focused on peace, truth and forgiveness. "Gandhi's death dramatized his commitment to a nonviolent vision that included yet transcended India ... (H)e sought God in the hearts of his enemies, including those who wanted to kill him."

The philosopher Hegel stated that history is an abattoir, a slaughterhouse. Oceans of blood have been shed in the name of God, the state, the tribe or political ideology. Firebrands and fanatics have rationalized the subjugation and eradication of perceived enemies deemed dangerous, different or inferior. By way of numbers, organization and superior weaponry, bullies with imperialist designs have beaten and subdued the weak. Victims of injustice have seethed with understandable anger and resentment awaiting the opportunity to visit violence on the oppressor. Indeed there is much to substantiate Hegel's view of history as a slaughterhouse.

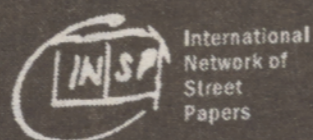
Upon this blood-soaked tapestry of history stands the legacy of Gandhi pointing to a way out of the sanguine quagmire. Of this great peacemaker, Albert Einstein said, "Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth." Let us hope that there is a future for humanity in all its vibrant manifestations. Gandhi's greatest American disciple, Martin Luther King Jr., said, "The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence." Concluding this exigent and most critical little tome, Douglass says: "The choice is ours."



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