

Mandela vs. Gandhi and King: How Does He Compare?

By Nick Gier

Martin Luther King helps us to see that to be a saint is not to be morally perfect, but to be exemplary in love.

—Jean Porter, *Virtue and Sin*

In the last chapter of my book the *Virtue of Non-Violence*, I discuss the Saints of Non-Violence: Jesus, the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In what follows I will determine how the recently deceased Nelson Mandela compares to these spiritual giants.

Mandela Eventually Chose Violence; Gandhi and King Did Not

The first objection would of course be the fact that Mandela eventually chose violence over non-violence. He was forced to conclude that Gandhi's non-violent policy was a strategy and not a principle. Recognizing truth in the African proverb—"attacks of the wild beast cannot be averted with only bare hands"—Mandela reluctantly came to the realization that the African National Congress needed a military wing. Ironically, it was the Communist Moses Kotane who objected saying that "we will be exposing innocent people to massacres by the enemy."

Mandela studied paramilitary tactics in depth and he assured himself, naively as it turned out, that his commandos could destroy specific targets without causing civilian casualties. Kotane was also right in his fear that the white South African government would retaliate brutally and on a wide scale.

Many White South Africans Supported Hitler

In response one could say that Mandela's enemy was more determined and ruthless than the British with whom Gandhi negotiated. (This was also clearly the case with King and most American authorities.) A great many White South Africans sided with Hitler during the war. Hundreds of thousands of them joined the Nazi Ossenwabrandwag and its elite Stormjaers.

Modeled on the Nazi Stormtroopers, these Afrikaner militants committed many acts of sabotage and targeted assassinations. Prime Minister John Vorster (1966-1978) was a member of this Nazi organization, and his secret police chief Hendrik Van den Berg, as military historian Rodney Warnick relates, "brought his Gestapo-type methods into security policing during the 1960s and 1970s."

Contrary to wide-spread opinion, Gandhi did not believe that the principle of non-violence was absolute. In fact, he stated quite clearly that if given a choice between cowardice and responding with violence, one should definitely choose the latter. Gandhi's acts of civil disobedience, however, were clearly acts of

courage not cowardice. Indeed, by immediately pleading guilty and joyfully accepting imprisonment, Gandhi was able to achieve moral and spiritual victories over the British time and time again.

Critics of Gandhi condemn him for his letter to Hitler in which he addressed him as “my friend,” and urged him to make peace not war. In 1931 he praised Mussolini for his “service to the poor, his opposition to super-urbanization, his efforts to bring about a coordination between Capital and Labor, and his passionate love for his people.”

Gandhi admitted that a German Gandhi during the time of Hitler would have been summarily executed, but he still recommended that the Jews openly protest even if it meant their total liquidation. Gandhi, however, should have realized that the Nazis were not like the British, and that this was not a situation where active non-violent resistance was going to work. Knowing his enemy well, Mandela refused to be a coward and he was determined to stop the South African government’s oppression of his people.

We Cannot Expect Moral Perfection from our Saints

We always expect moral perfection from our saints, but they seldom achieve it. Jesus and the Buddha seemed to be the exceptions, but the accounts of their lives have been written by loyal disciples. The Dalai Lama is perhaps a better candidate for moral perfection, but he has his critics, even among his fellow Tibetan Buddhists.

Although not moral defects, I agree with those who believe that the Dalai Lama has been naïve in his dealings with the Chinese Communists. Many Tibetans must have winced when, on May 21, 2010, they heard their beloved saint laugh and say: “I have come to feel that the Dalai Lama system is no longer important. . . . The Chinese government cares more about this than I do.”

The Sexual Sins of Mandela, Gandhi, and King

Gandhi’s moral failings came from his insistence that the only way he could prove his vow of chastity was to sleep naked with women of his choosing. When his disciples objected (some deserted him forever), he told them that he would sleep with thousands of women if his vow of chastity required it. He believed that he had committed no sin and, therefore, he required no penance for his sexual “experiments,” a term that Gandhi used in its scientific sense.

As far as we know, primarily because there was open sleeping in his ashrams, Gandhi never broke his vow. King, however, was, on many occasions, engaged in sexual relations with women other than his wife. Unlike Gandhi, King confessed his sins and sought repentance. Without repentance and absolution, Dante would have sentenced King to Hell’s second level, where we find all of history’s “carnal malefactors.”

Dante has no specific level of punishment for Gandhi's unabsolved sins, which I would describe as arrogance and sexual abuse. He might, however, now reside in the 17th level of the Chinese Buddhist Hell. Here sinners are ground up in a stone mill (only to be restored to repeat it) for their abuse of power.

Gandhi's most frequent sleeping partner was his grandniece Manu, who, although she was 19, was a very innocent young woman. Manu was an orphan, and, although she considered Gandhi her adopted mother and saw nothing wrong with their sleeping together, I join other Gandhi admirers (including Indians I know) in a sad but firm allegation of sexual abuse.

Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton's other lovers knew full well what they were doing. This must be the reason why we have so easily forgiven Bill Clinton, but we still condemn Richard Nixon for his arrogance and abuse of power. We should do the same for Gandhi's refusal to see how manipulative he was in his notorious celibacy tests.

The first years of his 13-year marriage to Evelyn were harmonious and Mandela doted on four children. Increasingly, however, he spent more and more time with his duties in the African National Congress, and his marriage was strained beyond repair. In his political circles Mandela was a charismatic figure who drew people to him, including many women willing to make love to him. It is said that Mandela brought his secretary home with him, and some of their "work" was done in the bedroom.

Mandela Unites and Heals a Nation

Mandela's 28 years in prison were a transformative period for him, and his final years were ones that have assured him a place alongside Gandhi and King. His political accomplishments were mixed. He was unable to make good on the many promises he made for millions of poor and illiterate South Africans. He was rightfully criticized for being slow to address the AIDS problem. His eldest son died of the disease in 2005.

Mandela's charismatic leadership, however, brought South Africa together in ways that arguably exceeded Gandhi in India and King in America. At the 1995 World Cup Rugby match, the first time that the South African team had played internationally in years, President Mandela appeared wearing a Springbok jersey. The capacity crowd, mostly white South Africans, chanted "Nelson! Nelson! Nelson!"

In 1996 Mandela initiated one of his greatest civil rights and, I would argue, spiritual achievements. He appointed Bishop Tutu to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, one of the most successful experiments in overcoming national wounds ever attempted.

In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu explains how his fellow commissioners rejected the Nuremberg trial model. Tutu reasoned that "while

the Allies could pack up and go home after Nuremberg, we in South Africa had to live with one another.” Long, costly trials would have built up resentment and would most likely have led to violent reaction by heavily armed whites.

As a student of Christian theology, I can say with confidence that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—led by black and white religious leaders, attorneys, and civil rights leaders—embodied Jesus’ ethics compassion and forgiveness more than any other religious institution in human history.

I agree with Marcus Eliason of the Associated Press that Mandela, and I would add Tutu, were “masters of forgiveness,” and as such they have earned their place among the saints. Philosopher Jean Porter is right to propose that what we should seek in our saints is not moral perfection; rather, it they should “be exemplary in love.”

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho. His book “The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective” will be published by Lexington Books in 2015. For more on Tutu and Boesak go to the tab on columns from Southern Africa at www.NickGier.com.