

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

An Inquiry Into What's Missing

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4j95w25g>

Author

Jefferson, Nikayla

Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

An Inquiry into *What's Missing*: The Beginning of a Crusade for Structural Nonviolence

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Political Science

by

Nikayla Jefferson

Committee in charge:

Professor Leah Stokes, Chair

Professor Matto Mildenerger

Professor David Pellow

June 2024

The Thesis of Nikayla Jefferson is approved.

Professor David Pellow

Professor Matto Mildenberger

Professor Leah Stokes, Committee Chair

June 2024

ABSTRACT

An Inquiry into *What's Missing*: The Beginning of a Crusade for Structural Nonviolence

by

Nikayla Jefferson

Gandhi, King, and their movements organized on different continents, at different times, with different populations in different social conditions. They made different demands of their governments, organized with different strategies, and uplifted different visions of the future. History remembers them together because of their deep conviction and mastery of the nonviolent method in political, social, and economic change. The American youth climate movement holds the practice and value of nonviolence as core to the movement. When one wonders what's missing, they speak to the differences in understanding and application of the nonviolent method. In this thesis, I explore the question of what's missing in the American youth climate movement's understanding, practice, and application of nonviolence. First, I examine modern social scientific understanding of nonviolence and argue that the social sciences have focused primarily on pragmatic nonviolence in contrast to principled nonviolence, and that as a result existing research largely misses the actual observed practice of nonviolence. I argue, through my observations, the activists practice a form of nonviolence neither strictly principled nor pragmatic, but a blend of both: socially pragmatic nonviolence. Then, I

seek to understand how socially pragmatic nonviolence differs from the Gandhian and Kingian nonviolent method. I explore the religious roots of their respective methods and argue that the religious perspective and foundation was key to both their practice and philosophies of nonviolence. Lastly, I argue that socially pragmatic nonviolence is a practice of nonviolence that does not meet the moral, ethical, or spiritual imperative of this moment. I argue for consideration of a maximalist, principled practice of nonviolence to meet the catastrophic scale of violence suffered in our moment. I argue that the sense of something missing from the activist's current understanding of nonviolence is a nonviolence that is both spiritual and structural. I argue that the potential of nonviolence has yet to fully be realized by the climate movement, and that it is worth exploring as more than just a pragmatic political toolkit, but as a liberatory practice for transformation of the self and society. I argue that if activists want to take more seriously the process of answering what's missing, nonviolence is a crucial place to begin.

I. Introduction

While I painted the *G* of *greed* in bold, black letters across the yellow banner, I wondered aloud to the other activists at the art build: “What did Gandhi and King have that we don’t?” It was the New York City Week of Climate Action. A few of us lingered after dinner, in part to keep the banner production on schedule ahead of the big march, and in part to catch up on life since our staff jobs at Sunshine. We speculated around the room, but eventually agreed the Indian Independence Movement and Civil Rights Movement possessed a religiosity, a spiritual solidarity, an unshakeable faith in the greater power of love, justice, and truth. Gandhi and King, while both strategists and organizers, are remembered best as deeply spiritual beings that tried to lead their people from oppressed to liberated. An activist said, “We always be out here talking about Gandhi and King, studying their movements, trying to be like them, but we just totally ignore how religious they both were.” After this conversation, I felt curious to explore and expand this discussion into a thesis project.

During the period of September 2019 to September 2023, I was a participant-observer in the American youth climate movement. I worked as both a volunteer and on staff of one of the largest organizations in the youth climate coalition, and for this paper, I will refer to it as *Sunshine*. I write based from notes, journal entries, essays, videos, and memories of conversations. I consulted with a few former comrades turned real friends during the research and writing phase of this thesis on the validity of my observations, interpretations, and arguments. I relied heavily on work of Weeden’s *Reflection on*

ethnographic work in political science (2010); Longo and Zacka's *Political Theory in an Ethnographic Key* (2019); Schatz's *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (2013); and Emerson's *Writing Ethnographic Field Notes* (2011). I also made use of studying political science ethnographic methods through the work of Thea Riofrancos' *Resource Radicals* (2020), Bob Bullard's *Dumping in Dixie* (2018), Kathy Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment* (2016), and Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in their Own Land* (2016).

I sought an answer to the *what's missing* question raised in the above conversation, with a more specific question: "What is the difference between the nonviolence as practiced by the American youth climate movement, and the nonviolence as practiced by Gandhi and Dr. King?" Gandhi, King, and their respective movements serve as the gold-standard blueprint for many nonviolent social movement activists. During my time in *Sunshine*, both the Indian Independence Movement and Civil Rights Movement served as the training material for nonviolent direct action campaign strategy. It is unsurprising that the activists observed often compare themselves and their movements to the icons of social movement history. I was not the first, nor will I be the last, to make the comparison and wonder about the present movement's path towards the heights of discipline, sacrifice, courage, and mass, popular participation. In this time of climate crisis, it's worth exploring every avenue of *what will it take*. Whether or not these comparisons are useful, right, or worthwhile is an open question, but not the question addressed in this paper. This is not a technical case study, comparing and contrasting the American youth climate movement to its movement predecessors. Here, I take the

comparison itself and resonance among the activists about the spiritual as the subject of study and ask *why*. What does the comparison itself reveal about what the activists feel is missing?

Gandhi, King, and their movements organized on different continents, at different times, with different populations in different social conditions. They made different demands of their governments, organized with different strategies, and uplifted different visions of the future. History remembers them together because of their deep conviction and mastery of the nonviolent method in political, social, and economic change. The American youth climate movement holds the practice and value of nonviolence as core to the movement. When one wonders *what's missing*, they speak to the differences in understanding and application of the nonviolent method. In this thesis, I explore the question of *what's missing* in the American youth climate movement's understanding, practice, and application of nonviolence. First, I examine modern social scientific understanding of nonviolence and argue that the social sciences have focused primarily on *pragmatic nonviolence* in contrast to *principled nonviolence*, and that as a result existing research largely misses the actual observed practice of nonviolence. I argue, through my observations, the activists practice a form of nonviolence neither strictly principled nor pragmatic, but a blend of both: *socially pragmatic nonviolence*. Then, I seek to understand how *socially pragmatic nonviolence* differs from the Gandhian and Kingian nonviolent method. I explore the religious roots of their respective methods and argue that the religious perspective and foundation was key to both their practice and philosophies of nonviolence.

After the art build conversation, an activist loaned me their copy of Dr. King's *Strides Towards Freedom* and remarked, "It's the most spiritually grounded movement book I've ever read. I don't know we become a movement like that, but we need to." Lastly, I argue that *socially pragmatic nonviolence* is a practice of nonviolence that does not meet the moral, ethical, or spiritual imperative of this moment. I argue for consideration of a maximalist, principled practice of nonviolence to meet the catastrophic scale of violence suffered in our moment. I argue that the sense of *something missing* from the activist's current understanding of nonviolence is a nonviolence that is both *spiritual* and *structural*. I argue that the potential of nonviolence has yet to fully be realized by the climate movement, and that it is worth exploring as more than just a pragmatic political toolkit, but as a liberatory practice for transformation of the self and society. I argue that if activists want to take more seriously the process of answering *what's missing*, nonviolence is a crucial place to begin.

II. Nonviolence in the Social Sciences

There is no shared or universal understanding of nonviolence in the social sciences, and the subject of nonviolence is largely ignored (Chenoweth, 2013). Here, I engage with the few leading scholars on the definition, theory, and practice of nonviolence. I establish the American youth climate movement as nonviolent by the standards of these social scientific definitions. When nonviolence is taken up as a subject of study, there is almost exclusive focus on *pragmatic nonviolence*, in contrast to what the social sciences considers *principled nonviolence*. I argue that current climate

activists' practice in the youth movement most closely resembles *socially pragmatic nonviolence*.

A. *The American Youth Climate Movement as Nonviolent*

Sociologist and peace scholar Johan Galtung in *The Meaning of Nonviolence* (1965) writes that nonviolence is “an effort to influence...how human actions are decided upon,” (p. 252) and “nonviolence is built around the basic hypothesis that persuasion is more effective if it is expressed in action terms, rather than in words” (p. 252). He makes the distinction between negative and positive definitions of nonviolence. Positive nonviolence “would exclude all negative techniques (violent in the broad sense) of influence.” Negative nonviolence “would include all possible techniques of influence short of ‘deprivation of biological health’ (called violence in the narrow sense)” (p. 233). From this perspective, Galtung distinguishes five main types of nonviolent resistance:

1. One, a symbolic form that aims to point out to the adversary what are positive and what are negative actions.
2. Two, the use of physical means such as nonviolent sabotage, emigration, escape and their positive counterpart: close social contact.
3. Three, the use of positive and negative sanctions.
4. Four, the use of positive and negative 'amplification' (a way of increasing the impact the adversary's actions have, whether they are good or bad).
5. Five, role-playing which includes such techniques as noncooperation and civil disobedience.

Over the course of my ethnographic study, I observed understandings of both the negative and positive concept of nonviolence, and I observed or participated in actions that more or less fit into Galtung's five types of nonviolent resistance: strikes, boycotts, sabotage, public suffering, noncooperation, civil disobedience, direct action, dialogue, and reward.

Political scientist Gene Sharp in *Social Power and Political Freedom* (1980) includes the following definition:

“Nonviolent action refers to those methods of protest, resistance, and intervention without physical violence in which the members of the nonviolent group do, or refuse to do, certain things. They may commit acts of omission – refuse to perform acts which they usually perform, are expected by custom to perform, or are required by law or regulation to perform; or acts of commission – perform acts which they usually do not perform, are not expected by custom to perform, or are forbidden by law or regulation from performing; or a combination of both” (p. 218).

Here, Sharp defines nonviolence as a technical methodology of acts without violence, and I can confirm through observations that the activities of the activists observation did not include or support physical violence.

Political scientist Iain Attack defines nonviolence in *Nonviolence in Political Theory* (2012) as: “collective action outside the formal institutions or procedures of the state that avoids the systematic and deliberate use of violence or armed force to achieve its political or social objective” (p. 8). Force, coercion, or threats of physical violence were never observed, and their use was never considered over the course of my ethnographic observations.

Sociologist Kurt Schock writes in *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (2005), that nonviolence “involves an active process of bringing political, economic, social, emotional, or moral pressure to bear in the wielding of power in contentious interactions between collective actors. Nonviolent action is noninstitutional, that is, it operates outside the bounds of institutionalized political channels, and is indeterminate, that is, the procedures for determining the outcome of the conflict are not specified in advance...Rather than being viewed as half of a rigid violent-nonviolent dichotomy, nonviolent action may be better understood as a set of methods with special features that are different from those of both violent and institutional politics” (p. 5). Through my ethnographic observations I can confirm the activists sought to build and wield collective power outside of established political institutions, and both borrowed and invented creative, flexible, and emergent nonviolent tactics. The activists often employed a strategy of “inside and outside game,” meaning, a strategy that worked both inside and outside of formal channels of institutional process. In this thesis, I focus only on “outside game.”

Gene Sharp writes in the introduction *Waging Nonviolent Struggle* (2005) that the nonviolent method does not need to appeal to ethical questions of right or wrong, or incorporate a belief system with nonviolence as a fundamental principle. Gene Sharp was the first scholar to split nonviolence into two distinct camps, the *pragmatic* and the *principled*. He placed himself squarely in the camp of the pragmatic: a nonviolence concerned only with struggles of power and the achievement of social and political outcomes. Principled nonviolence, in contrast, is concerned foremost with ethics,

morality, or religious virtue, and often is described as akin to pacifism. On the whole, traditionally the social sciences are dismissive of principled nonviolence even as it is here where the origins of nonviolence are found, as practiced by Gandhi and King. I argue that the distinction between principled and pragmatic nonviolence is only real in the abstract, and in practice, activists make little to no distinction. In fact, I argue, there is a real danger in only conceptualizing nonviolence as acts without physical violence. This understanding of nonviolence may serve to justify nonphysical harm and coercion. It's a bit like handing someone a baseball bat and saying, "as long as you don't leave any bruises or break any bones."

It is also worth noting while Sharp claims to champion nonviolence for pragmatic reasons, he champions nonviolence with a righteous passion, and is personally committed to principled nonviolence as a philosophy for life (Richards, 1991). I understand the desire for mass appeal to a skeptical and secular society, and I cannot help but read Sharp's division of nonviolence from the moral or ethical as a strategic choice.

The young climate activists meet or exceed every major definition of nonviolence as put forward by the social sciences over the last seven decades. However, these definitions of nonviolence are rather broad and seem to imply: nonviolence is the absence of violence. My ethnographic observations indicate that to the youth activists, nonviolence is much more than just the absence of violence, but also actions *against* violence. I asked one activist, "what does nonviolence mean to you" and I received a lengthy answer about the nonviolent nature of the political tactics themselves, but also about the power of a people organized and resistant against violence and oppression.

Nonviolence is seen not just as taking actions without violence, but also taking action *against* violence. This understanding of nonviolence more closely reflects the theory of sociologist Stellan Vinthagen's *socially pragmatic nonviolence*.

Stellan Vinthagen defines nonviolence in *A Theory of Nonviolence Resistance* (2015) with a definition much closer to the Gandhian—action without violence, against violence—and also writes, “As a practice, nonviolence encompasses persuading people that something of higher value transcends the brutality of violence. By merging this value with their practices, practitioners attempt to embody the former in a violent world” (p. 61). Vinthagen writes of nonviolence as not just a toolkit of political or social actions, but a framework for individual and collective transformation, as a morality as well as a technique. He writes that he has observed the aim of nonviolent movements as “trying to apply the nonviolent future in the present as an alternative to and disobedience against current society’s violence and oppression,” with both *nonviolent construction* and *nonviolent resistance* (p. 62).

In my participant observation, I saw activists frame their resistance as both against racial capitalism and the fossil industry, but also for a vision of a Green New Deal. Activists attempted to use nonviolent action to both tell the story of the problem and the villain, and also tell a story of a very hopeful future. Activists thought very carefully about public perception, and sought to strike a tone that positions them as the moral authority and responsible bearers of their nonviolent vision of the future.

Vinthagen uses the term *socially pragmatic nonviolence* because, largely across contemporary society, nonviolence is embedded in social life, and nonviolence is

“normatively rooted in community” (p. 70). Vinthagen writes that the dichotomy of principled, moral nonviolence and tactical, technical nonviolence overlooks the connection between social morality and social effectiveness. In other words, activists choose nonviolence because nonviolence is a social norm, and adhering to this norm is what is typically most effective for a movement.

Times have changed since Gandhi and King, and the choice to be nonviolent is not much of a choice at all. It is simply the most pragmatic thing to do. I recall one internal conversation at Sunshine about the nonviolent principle: “it’s not whether it’s right or wrong, but we just need to say we are nonviolent if we are going to be taken seriously by the public, have relationships with politicians, or attract funders.” Social movements must mobilize resources, maintain legitimacy and moral authority with the public, and be attractive for mass participation. Today, activists understand principled nonviolence as an essential element for any strategic, pragmatic movement for social change.

I find Vinthagen’s *socially pragmatic nonviolence* to most closely resemble my first hand observations of nonviolent practice among the youth climate activists. *Socially pragmatic nonviolence* bridges both the principled and pragmatic concepts of nonviolence in the social sciences. *Socially pragmatic nonviolence* describes the social science pragmatic and principled concepts of nonviolence as inextricably linked in actual movement strategy and practice. In *socially pragmatic nonviolence*, nonviolence is both the ends and means, the journey and the destination, much like Kingian and Gandhian nonviolence.

B. *The Choice to be Nonviolent*

In my direct observations of the youth climate movement, I noticed that the strategic effectiveness of nonviolence was not the entire story of the activists' choice and experience of nonviolence. I argue that both social scientific research on nonviolence, as well as the majority of activists in the youth climate movement, overlook the psychological, spiritual, and emotional value of nonviolence. This spiritual dimension of nonviolence is what's *missing* for activists.

The social sciences understand the motivation for nonviolence to be one of strategy. Political scientist Joan Bondurant outlines the major reasons why activists choose the nonviolent course of change in *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (1965). She writes that nonviolent methods are methods needed when processes of political or social change permitted by the government fail or do not exist. The nonviolent method is of preference to groups because it offers:

1. One, greater chance to win public support, violence can marginalize and isolate a movement.
2. Two, attracts widespread participation because violence has physical demands and severe consequences.
3. Three, displays the goal of nonviolent society and prefigurative politics.
4. Four, violence has devastating and lingering consequences on society.
5. Five, violence may be totally impractical, resistance groups simply do not have the weapons or the means .

My ethnographic observations support Bondurant's reasoning. The activists shared with me, either implicitly or explicitly, similar reasons for the nonviolent method.

Recent research has provided evidence that nonviolence is an effective strategy. Political scientist Erica Chenoworth and Maria Stephan wrote in *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011) "between 1900 and 2006, nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their nonviolent counterparts" (p. 11). Among the 566 campaigns that have started or ended in the last 120 years, 51% of nonviolent campaigns succeed, compared to 26% of violent ones. An updated data set tells the same story, albeit one a bit bleaker: in 2010-2019 only 34% of nonviolent revolutions were successful, compared with 8% of violent ones (Chenoworth, 2020). I do not interpret these findings as nonviolent methods weakening, but the opponents solidifying the necessary alliances and strengthening their ability to hold onto power. The point still remains true that nonviolence works at achieving social and political outcomes.

Chenoweth et al., certainly boosted the activists conviction in the nonviolent methods. I recall the powerpoint slides at my first nonviolent direct action training referenced *Why Civil Resistance Works* as the "proof" for the nonviolent method as an effective strategy. Still, evidence for the effectiveness of nonviolent methods predates Chenoweth. Before nonviolent statistics were available, social scientists relied on case studies to make the claim for the nonviolent method. During the course of my research, I found that the early scholars saw direct psychological and spiritual benefits for nonviolence activists that later scholars have largely ignored.

Sociologist Clarence Marsh Case was likely the first scholar to analyze nonviolence in his book *Nonviolent Coercion* (1923). He writes in the introduction:

“Disobedience without violence wins, *if it wins*, not so much by touching the conscience of the masters as by exciting the sympathy of disinterested onlookers. The spectacle of men suffering for a principle and *not hitting back* is a moving one. It obliges the power holders to condescend to explain, to justify themselves. The weak get a change of venue from the will of the stronger to the court of public opinion, perhaps the world opinion” (p. 3).

Case published *Nonviolent Coercion* in 1923 after observing, both personally and as a scholar, the Women’s Suffrage Movement and the American Labor Movement use nonviolent tactics such as the boycott and the strike. He also wrote that was inspired by the nonviolent resistance of the Koreans against Japanese imperialism in the March 1st Movement. Most obviously, he was moved and intrigued by the nonviolent philosophy of the emergent leader of the Indian Independence Movement, Mahatma Gandhi.

Case writes that the Buddha, the Chinese Philosophers, and Jesus all made the principle of non-resistance (nonviolence) a religion, that contemporary participants are people under strong spiritual control, and the movements are “proving that truths which have been accepted because of religious authority, are really true because they work” (p. 235). Like cracking open an atom and witnessing the electrons spin around the nuclei for yourself, the abstract truth manifests as the real. For this early scholar of the nonviolent method, the connection between the religious practice of nonviolence and the political resistance practice of nonviolent was clear. For Case, nonviolence as a truth at the heart of the human condition was a key element of its effectiveness. In my research, I have found that the social sciences have dropped this perspective from serious study as a

consequence of secularization. I grieve this loss because in my ethnographic observations, I found Case's writings to speak to something very real and very true about political nonviolent action.

"What no one ever says," one activist told me as we chatted about this project on a park bench, "is that violence just feels bad and nonviolence just feels good. Sure it makes confronting these giant, evil, oppressive systems a lot harder sometimes, but my soul is nourished because it feels like nonviolence allows me to do some good in the world." He went on to say, "Like nonviolence really does just *work*. I've been doing one-on-one with this guy for weeks, trying to get him onto our side because he's in such an important role, and then one day it's like the dam just breaks and suddenly he understands and wants to help us win our demands. That feels so much better than if I were to put a gun to his head or beat him into it. I do some good, he does some good, and we win some good. Only good comes out of the nonviolent process." Social science has paid very little attention to the psychological and spiritual benefits of nonviolence on all parties involved. The process itself is rewarding to the activists, and this reward in itself makes the work worthwhile, even if the political outcomes are not always attained.

Another early scholar of nonviolence, Richard Gregg, defined nonviolence in the *The Power of Nonviolence* (1935) as a "moral jiu-jitsu." The concept describes the activist continuous contraction of the opponents expectations of behavior in conflict: flee, violently fight, or quit. The activist neither responds with retaliation or obedience, and creates confusion for the opponent. This both demoralizes the opponent in their violence, and re-moralizes the relationship between activist and opponent. They are knocked off

the ingrained, dominant relationship and open to a new relationship with the activist, one of reconciliation and transformation. Richard Gregg also writes of another component of nonviolence often ignored by the social sciences: humans typically do not want to do unjustifiable harm to another human because it *feels bad*. Nonviolence relies on the assumption that for the typical soldier or police officer, *violence feels bad to inflict*. Nonviolence relies on the assumption that for the public *violence feels bad to witness*. Obviously, for the nonviolent activist, violence feels bad on the mind, body, and spirit, and there is such universal recognition violence *feels bad* to intentionally suffer violence is a mark of deep commitment, one could say spiritual, commitment to the cause. It causes the opponent or an onlooker to consider that the truth for which they are willing to suffer just might be true after all, and so hearts open, and so minds change. This is the core of nonviolent theory.

While we were discussing my own Buddhist practice, one activist told me, “the issue I have with Buddhism is that there is so much emphasis on the self and interpersonal relationships. It doesn’t have much of an answer for the collective and structural violence.” She went on to say, “nonviolence feels like my path towards enlightenment.” She experiences nonviolence in her climate activism as a liberatory path, the nonviolence she believes in is closer to a liberation theology than a pragmatic political tool. She agreed with me when I said, “for structural violence, we need structural nonviolence.”

I argue that today’s youth climate activists practice socially pragmatic nonviolence, however in the social science emphasis of the strategic choice of

nonviolence, the spiritual and psychological value of nonviolence is left out. It is clear through my ethnographic observations that many of the activists involved in the youth climate movement feel a spiritual connection or power through the nonviolent method, and it provides intangible value and benefits to their lives. Many of the activists observed nonviolence as a *calling* and recall experiences of *transcendence* through group experiences of both loss and grief, and victory and joy. Activists spoke of nonviolence as the *truth*, and their entry point into nonviolence as preceded by an *awakening*. Nonviolence offers the activists a sense of greater purpose and belonging, and many described the glory days of Sunshine as a *church*. Many of the activists practice nonviolence not just in the streets, but through relationships with themselves, their families, friends, and communities, and strive for a nonviolent relationship with the Earth itself. However in conversations, the activists struggled to articulate *why* nonviolent movement work feels spiritual or have any clear idea about how to build on this spiritual dimension, beyond just the occasional experience or personal practice. I do not argue that this *missing piece* is the spiritual experience on a personal level, but the spiritual experience at the scale of the movement. When I compare the contemporary American youth climate movement's practice of nonviolence to Kingian and Gandhian nonviolence, I can see this gap. These earlier political leaders of social movements had an intentional, spiritual framing to their work, and engaged in collective spiritual practice in their movements.

III. Spiritual and Religious Origins for Nonviolence

“Every major world religion has some tradition of nonviolence” (Nepsted, 2015, p. 5)

As I have argued in this thesis, my observations of the American youth climate activists best reflect the social science concept of *socially pragmatic nonviolence*. However I argue that both social sciences researchers and today’s youth activists have paid little attention to the religious underpinnings of nonviolence, or spirituality’s importance to the practice and philosophy of both Kingian and Gandhian nonviolence. In the following section, I explore the religious roots of Kingian and Gandhian nonviolence and argue that the religious concept of nonviolence is essential to its full political understanding and practice.

Nonviolence has its origins in religion. Through my observations, I discovered the historic roots of nonviolence are unknown to the activists. The iconic nonviolent figures cited and referenced by the activists as embodying the full power and potential of nonviolence were inspired and grounded in the importance of nonviolence in religious history and their own religious practice. I examine the religious concept of nonviolence in Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity because of its contribution to the social movement concept of nonviolence in both Gandhian and Kingian nonviolence. I argue that understanding the religious roots of nonviolence would help activists reveal its greater, and much more spiritual, potential in activism both in and off the streets. In this section, I first, unpack nonviolence in religious history, and then examine its connection to the major nonviolent political thinkers that the activists credit their own understanding

of nonviolence: Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., Henry David Thoreau, and Leo Tolstoy.

Nonviolence can be traced back to the ancient Indian subcontinent with Jainism and the core virtue of *ahimsa* (nonviolence). The exact origin date of Jainism is unknown to scholars, but evidence suggests it emerged between the 6th and 5th century BCE with the teachings of the 24th Jina, Mahivira (Long, 2009). In summary, Jainism is a religion without a god or divine creator and prescribes the cultivation and practice of nonviolence in mind, body, and spirit as the path to moksha (eternal, spiritual liberation) (Long, 2009). One of the first definitions of nonviolence is found in the Jainist doctrine, as taught by Lord Mahavira:

“All living beings desire happiness, and have revulsion from pain and suffering. They are fond of life, they love to live, long to live, and they feel repulsed at the idea of hurt and injury to or destruction of their life. Hence no living being should be hurt, injured, or killed. All things existing, all things living, all things whatsoever, should not be slain, or treated with violence, or insulted, or tortured, or driven away. He who hurts living beings himself, or gets them hurt by others, or approves of hurt caused by others, augments the world’s hostility towards himself” (Howard, 2023, p. 1).

In Jainism, nonviolence is not a passive practice of simply avoiding physical violence, but is absolute nonviolence, and so extends to any and all forms of himsa (violence): thoughts, words, actions, and deeds. Each life, no matter how small, possesses a divine soul with inherent worth, deserving of reverence, and capable of spiritual liberation (Long, 2009). For the Jains, violence accumulates as negative karma—the causes of suffering in the cycle of birth and death (samsara) (Long, 2009). When violence is done it does not just harm the other, but also harms the self in the interconnected,

karmic Jain worldview. Therefore, Jains are assiduous in all ways of being as to purify negative and karmic diminishing virtues and open the gateway to spiritual liberation.

In the ancient times, “the traditional Jain concept of nonviolence is not necessarily used to make the world a better place, but as a reminder that the outside world is a cruel place and one must refrain from engaging in it.” (Sims, 2015, 2) More recently, ahimsa has “evolved to reveal a more cooperative sense of nonviolence that focuses on helping others” (Sims, 2015, 2). While not all Jains agree on the right practices, they are unified by their belief in ahimsa and karma. The later section demonstrates how Thoreau, Tolstoy, Gandhi, and King all credit the development of their nonviolent philosophy, in part, to Jainism (Sims, 2015).

Hinduism has its critical distinctions, but shares ahimsa as a core element of its religion and philosophy (Gier, 2004). In Hinduism, ahimsa is woven through the Hindu canon (Brahmanas, the Laws of Manu, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana) and Hindu Dharma code as the most superior and sacred virtue (Gier, 2004). For Hindus, like Jains, the nonviolent path, if strictly adhered to and well-cultivated, was a wise path to spiritual liberation. From the Mahābhārata XIII: 116: 38–39: “Ahimsa (nonviolence) is the highest dharma (law, sacred duty). Ahimsa is the best tapas (religious austerity). Ahimsa is the greatest gift. Ahimsa is the highest self-control. Ahimsa is the highest sacrifice. Ahimsa is the highest power. Ahimsa is my best friend. Ahimsa is the highest truth. Ahimsa is the highest teaching.”

However, nonviolence in Hinduism is not absolute, and many of the Hindu texts, the *Mahabharata* for example, are sagas of mythological wars. Hindu texts are dubiously

conflicted on the permissibility of violence, but generally, violence was permitted to stop violence and acts of aggression, defense of the nation and people, and through the legal system to maintain the social order (Howard, 2023). Hindu teachings do not ban violence outright, but draw attention to the cycle of suffering and misery as the inevitable consequence of violent actions. “The ethical principle of *ahimsā* and the doctrine of personal karma helped create a framework that allows violence only as a last resort, without losing sight of the spiritual goal of liberation” (Howard, 2023).

Gandhi was a Hindu, but heavily influenced by Jain saints and scholars, and believed that Hinduism includes both Jainism and Buddhism, and nonviolence has its highest expression in Hinduism (Mishra, 2019). More can be said on Gandhi’s personal relationship to Hinduism, but that is outside the scope of this paper. Later sections will instead demonstrate how his understanding of *ahimsa* was central to his nonviolent teaching. And, as mentioned above, Buddhism was highly influential in the nonviolent practice and philosophy of Gandhi. This paper will avoid grappling with Gandhi’s proclamation on the superiority and ambient inclusivity of Hinduism, and instead briefly examine Buddhism and nonviolence as a truth, a virtue, and a path of spiritual liberation.

Like Jainism, nonviolence is inseparable from Buddhism. The Buddhist doctrine of *ahimsa* is nonviolence as the right way of being in action, speech, thought, livelihood, and relationship, both to the self, the other, and the Earth itself. Through the contemplation of the dharma, and meditation and mindfulness practice, one accepts suffering as a truth of life, seeks to lessen personal suffering and the suffering of others. The unique contribution of Buddhism to nonviolence is an understanding of the dual

path: to heal and the self and society are one in the same. Violence in the outer world mirrors violence in the inner world, and the path to peace begins with the mind of the human being. Violence in both the external and internal worlds as caused by “three poisons:” hatred, greed, and delusion. The three antidotes, loving-kindness, generosity, and wisdom as their cure, respectively. Buddhism, for this reason, places a premium on the spiritual training of the self, and the perspective of the individual as an impermanent manifestation of the one life in a great web of interdependence and mutual belonging ().

Both Buddhists and Jains believe in an objective moral law (*dharma*) operating by action (*karma*), but a key difference between Buddhism and Jainism is intention. For the Buddha, actions without intention cannot be considered himsa or ahimsa, they are simply actions, and do not carry negative karmic consequences (Adam, 2006). For the Jains, karma is a physical, sticky substance on the permanent, underlying self, and no matter the intention of this self in their actions, accuse or diminishes their karmic balance. For Buddhists, there is no permanent physical self, and karma is conceived as a component of action which follows from either pure or impure mental states (Adam, 2006).

Both Buddhists and Jains believe *ahimsa*, nonviolence, and is the essential path to awakening. For the Buddhists, the nonviolent path purifies the mind of the three poisons, therefore will attain mental liberation, and achieve the nonviolent way in all their doings without effort. “Nonviolence is thus viewed as the natural, spontaneous expression of the highest spiritual realization. The intent to harm, on the other hand, is an expression of hatred, which is based on delusion. Such hatred is simply not possible for a person who realizes the emptiness of self and others, who truly sees the interdependence of beings”

(Adam, 2006). The state of internal liberation cannot be described only experienced because the nature of nirvana is emptiness, however, the actions can be known and seen by others, so the mark of an enlightened one is an effortless nonviolence.

I go to such lengths to describe the Buddhist, Jainist, and Hindu notions of *ahimsa* to draw a direct link to the practice of nonviolence as conceptualized by Gandhi: nonviolence as the supreme virtue, the right way of life, the Truth, and the utmost foundational ideal for just society (Gandhi, 2010). I will also note that the English translation of *ahimsa* to nonviolence is distinctly modern, and the influence of Tolstoy on Gandhi's interpretation, and later the Dalai Lama should not be understated (Davis). However, the point is moot in the context of this paper: I do not argue that the correct understanding of *ahimsa* is nonviolence, but rather the impact and importance of its modern translation as "nonviolence" to 20th and 21st century social movements.

Christianity is rooted in the teachings and life of Jesus Christ, a disobedient and nonviolent revolutionary himself. He sought to heal others throughout his life, and chose the nonviolent route when faced with betrayal, conflict, and violence. Jesus died the nonviolent death of a martyr. While other sections of the Bible, expressions and uses of Christianity throughout the centuries do contain violence, Jesus taught love, compassion, forgiveness, and selflessness. While nonviolence is not explicitly worded in the Bible, the Sermon on the Mount was quoted by both Gandhi and King as the core nonviolent teaching in Christianity.

Within the Book of Matthew, chapters 5-7 are known as The *Sermon on the Mount*. From a hillside flowed the longest of Jesus' teachings in the New Testament and

expanded on the Ten Commandments. The sermon opens with the Beatitudes, a series of blessings that highlight the values of spiritual poverty, meekness, mercy, purity of the heart, the pursuit of peace, promising the kingdom of heaven to those who embody these values. Jesus preaches the righteousness of God's commandments as being superior to the law or money, calling for a deeper, more heart-centered adherence to morality and virtue. Jesus explains how the external acts of sin begin with internal thoughts and attitudes, like anger or lust, and instructs reconciliation, faithfulness, honesty, and high ethical standards for all actions. One of Jesus' most famous teachings is found in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45).

Jesus is considered by many the most adherent prophet of love. The New Testament spills with love: "Faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love" (Corinthians 13:13). God is love written once, God is love, written twice. As the story goes, Jesus was ultimately killed for preaching a message of love and behaving not by Roman law, but by God's will.

The first three centuries of Christianity revolved around the message of love, especially for enemies, and early leaders taught and expected followers of Jesus to abide by his doctrine of love and nonviolence. After Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire, the nonviolent teachings gradually diminished, except when rediscovered and preached by rogue Saint from time to time. St. Francis of Assisi is a notable example. During the 5th crusade in 1219: "in the midst of wartime, Francis went to the enemy

unarmed and loved the enemy as a brother. Francis attempted to embody Jesus' words 'to love the enemy' and face the enemy within" (Butigan, 2003, 2). St. Francis of Assisi led what scholars now call the Franciscan Movement: "The Franciscan movement became so widespread that there are indications that, in parts of medieval Europe, war was stymied at various times during the Middle Ages because potential soldiers had become Franciscans and were bound by their vows not to engage in armed conflict" (Butigan, 2003, 8). He taught that God is all good, and all good comes from God; the gospel is the way of active love; and voluntary poverty serves and sustains true peace. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be the called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9).

By outlining these sources, I aim to demonstrate: the concept of nonviolence is very, very old, and very, very essential to the foundational philosophies of the contemporary world. Nonviolence, for the ancient peoples, pointed the path towards enlightenment, liberation, and the heart of God. Nonviolence has survived as "the way" through time and history, civilizations and cultures, and maybe its endurance is the best testament to its veracity. As Gandhi said, nonviolence is "a truth as old as the hills" (Chatterjee, 1983, 137). Gandhi also said: "For me different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden or branches of the same majestic tree" (Chatterjee, 1983, 53). He often said he was as much a Moslem, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain and Parsee as he was Hindu and added: "The hands that serve are holier than the lips that pray" (Chatterjee, 1983, 153). Nonviolence is a core tenet of all major religions, and while Gandhi borrowed much of his philosophy from Jainism, it is not without the influence of others.

It is important to note in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, even in the absolute nonviolence of Jainism, while nonviolence was core to the original teachings, certain texts allowed for the circumstantial use of violence, and violence was often employed by followers for self-defense and matters of war. I will let the readers recount for themselves the history of holy wars. To return to the note above on *ahimsa* interpreted and repurposed for a modern, political purpose, I will also extend the same consideration to the modern Christian conception of nonviolence. Narratives are constantly revised to serve whatever present moment purpose, the concept of nonviolence in religion is of course without exception.

A. Modern, Political Conceptions of Nonviolence

Over the 19th and 20th century, the religious conception of nonviolence found its way into politics. Nonviolence expanded from the virtuous way of the human spirit, to the righteous way of the discontent political subject. I'll begin with Thoreau and Tolstoy as two key figures that first merged the concept of nonviolence with political resistance, inspiring Gandhi, and later on, King. Throughout the development of nonviolence as a political concept, religion remained crucially embedded within. I argue the original, religious path of nonviolence was a liberatory path for the self, but in more recent times, nonviolence is conceptualized as a liberatory path for society.

Henry David Thoreau's contribution to nonviolence was the seminal essay (and term) *Civil Disobedience* (1849). For six years Thoreau refused to pay his state poll tax as a protest against slavery, the genocide of Indigenous Americans, and the Mexican-

American war. When the tax man demanded he pay back his taxes, he refused and as a consequence, spent a night in jail. Thoreau became the first American to intentionally break a law and accept the legal punishment as a practice of nonviolent resistance to an unjust state (Powell, 1995, 27). The experience and justification became the basis for his lecture: “The Rights and Duties of the Individual in relation to Government,” and later on the essay, “Resistance to Civil Government.” The final title of *Civil Disobedience* was settled on posthumously.

In his essay on civil resistance, Thoreau argues that individuals have a duty to follow their moral principles and conscience, and this duty is greater than an individual’s obedience to government authority and social order. In fact, exercise of this duty is their right and responsibility as citizens with a good conscience” and less is an abdication of their values and responsibility in the face of government action or policies that violate principles of justice. He writes his essay after a night spent in jail for his refusal to pay a poll tax in protest of slavery and the Mexican-American War. He urges his readers to cast their vote with not just their ballot, but with their full-body: “just voting for the right is doing nothing for it. A wise man will not leave right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority” (Thoreau, 2012, 134). Thoreau uniquely argued that individual citizens have both a right and imperative to follow their conscience above the rule of law, an admonishment very similar to Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*. Thoreau was as principled as he was pragmatic about nonviolent resistance, and his vision of society if all men deferred the ultimate authority to their conscience was nothing short of utopic (Thoreau, 2012).

The influence of Civil Disobedience on the philosophy of nonviolent resistance as a means for social and political change cannot be overstated. Gandhi and the Indian Independence Movement were profoundly influenced by Thoreau's essay — as Gandhi remarked: “the essay contained the essence of my political philosophy, not only as India's struggle related to the British, but as to his own views of the relation of citizens to the government” (Hendrick, 1956, 426). King, as well, was both “fascinated” and “deeply moved” by Thoreau's essay (Powell, 1995, 26). Thoreau, and later on King, both adopted nonviolence as a direct answer to the shortcomings of democracy: the majority's oppression of the minority; the presence of injustice; the need for immediate action; the appropriate method of protest in a democratic society; the inherent obstacles to reform inherent in American democracy (Powell, 1995, 28).

Leo Tolstoy was something of a transnational prophet of his time, writing a number of influential texts on Christian love, pacifism, and nonviolence, “The Kingdom of God Is Within You”, “The Law of Love and The Law of Violence”, “Resurrection and What Then Must We Do?” and inspired the *Tolstoyan movement* (Hartnett, 2020, 266). *Agape*, divine love, for Tolstoy was the supreme law: “the love he comes to commend is agape: self-emptying, disinterested and universal with every individual...phenomenologically replaceable by any other as the object of love. Tolstoy's conception of love is inextricably bound to his conception of its antithesis: violence” (Hartnett, 2020, 270).

Tolstoy had an expansive definition and understood violence as “doing unto others that which you would not have them do unto you” (Tolstoy, 2012, 105). Tolstoy

describes war, imprisonment, revolution, imperialism, government, “any injury to life and liberty” as entailing violence (Harnett, 2020, 270). “Tolstoy conceived of violence as concomitant with all politics” and did not see violence as just perpetuated by “the soldier, the jailer, the revolutionary, the colonial officer, civil servant but also by the individuals who either condoned or cooperated with any of these actions or structures” (Harnett, 2020, 271). *The Sermon on the Mount* stood center in his law of love and various rewritings of the Gospel, and grounded his commitment to a non-resistance to violence (nonviolence).

Tolstoy, for better or worse, admonished the West as culturally violent, and valorized the spiritual superiority of the East. His prescribed practice of peace as holding tight to the law of love and rejecting the law of violence was very similar to the prescription by Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism: “Essentially, this comprised three steps: to ‘bethink’ oneself, to return to religiosity, and to not engage in violence. The former was an act of introspection, a self-examination of one’s complicity in violence” (Harnett, 2020, 271). Violence is made visible through contemplative exercise, then renounced, and supplanted a Christian love. The transformation of society begins with the individual’s awakening to the pervasive violence characteristic of modern life, choice to live according to Jesus’ teachings, and from there, a natural process of change in the direction of love and nonviolence will occur. Tolstoy’s vision of a new society is a vision of Christian anarchism: social and political structures based on free and voluntary association, not force. It’s important to note that Tolstoy was problematic and contradictory in his nonviolent philosophy, but for the purposes of this paper, I only

briefly explore his contribution to nonviolence philosophy as it relates to King and Gandhi.

Until Mahatma Gandhi, nonviolent resistance was practiced just at the level of the individual. Through the Indian Independence Movement, Gandhi “raised nonviolence action to a level never before achieved” (Hardiman, 2013, 47). Gandhi lived during the time of British colonial rule over his native country, India. This essay will not dive into the anti-colonial struggle or the biography of Gandhi, but explain the nonviolent philosophy that guided the Indian Liberation Movement and inspired oppressed people in all cultures and traditions to adopt nonviolence as their path to social liberation. Gandhi fused nonviolent resistance, political strategy, and Hinduism, and what follows is a brief overview of his nonviolence philosophy and practice: satyagraha. Satyagraha literally translates as *to cling to truth* (Gandhi, 2010). There are three components of Satyagraha: Satya (truth), Ahimsa (nonviolence), and tapasya (self-suffering), and these components are interdependent and inseparable from the whole (Vinhagen, 2015, 27). Understanding of satyagraha is crucial for the modern, social movement understanding of nonviolence.

On *satya* (truth): Gandhi was a seeker. What is true, he believed, is what is. There is only the truth. The entire universe is true. There is no difference between that which works in reality, and that which should work. There is no difference between what is effective and what is moral. If you follow what is moral, what is real and true, then actions will only be successful (Vinhagen, 2015, 28).

Gandhi’s justification for nonviolence comes from his belief that all human beings are small parts of a unified whole, a total truth. In seeking the whole truth, in

seeking God, you must seek to understand each person. To kill another, or to deny them their truth, is to deny the seeker free inquiry into the truth. In the same logic, one must hold onto their truth, their conscience, their inner voice through the conflict because it is a vital slice of the whole truth. In Gandhi's philosophy, spiritual practice of the activist is necessary to connect with inner truth, conscience, or voice. (Vinthagen, 2015, 29).

On *ahimsa* (nonviolence): Violence hinders the path to self-realization. Not just for the individual, but the collective realization of humanity. Collective self-realization is the dissolution of all individual egos, and violence and oppression hinder one's path to that realization. Ego here as greed, hatred, and delusion on the level of the self, the collective, and the institutional. To not resist violence is itself participating in violence. Gandhi believed that exploitation is the core of violence—profiteering from a person entraps them in a situation where they are unable to achieve self-realization. Obviously, it is impossible to stop all oppression and violence from happening in the world at all times. Gandhi expressed the true mark of a nonviolent act as an attempt to further self-realization or an attempt to fight violence. “Pitting one's soul against the will of the tyrant (Vinthagen, 2015, 31) Nonviolence is, as Thoreau wrote, “the friction in the machine.”

On *tapasya* (self-suffering): Suffering is inevitable. Either one suffers under oppression, or suffers while resisting oppression. The key question is: how does this suffering lessen the total suffering? Violence and compliance with violence increases total suffering, resistance lessens total suffering. The nonviolent practitioner should be prepared to suffer, accept suffering, and understand their suffering as noble. Suffering not

for itself, but to demonstrate humility, sincerity of action, and proactive acceptance of the consequences of resistance (Vinthagen, 2015, 30).

“Satyagraha can be seen as the fight for truth and collective self-realization through nonviolent resistance against falsity, violence and oppression, and a preparedness to endure the personal consequences of this fight and struggle ” (Vithagan, 2015, 31).

Satyagraha, in summary: Through nonviolence and suffering, truth is attained.

Nonviolence and selflessness as a duty and practice, and truth as the end. Truth is God.

Campaigns were means to practice satyagraha. In the Indian Liberation Movement, campaigns were two-part: resistance and construction (Vithagen, 2015, 45). A steady escalation of civil disobedience and non cooperation as the resistance, and alternative institutions, ashrams, nonviolent training, and other world-building projects as the construction. Both these paths twisted together as a long and winding road for the end: liberation and self-actualization of the collective.

“Gandhi’s devotion to nonviolence was based on internalizing the ideas of these authors (Tolstoy and Thoreau), as well as the long nonviolent traditions of the major religions of India, including Hinduism” (Chakrabart, 2013, 31). From Tolstoy, Gandhi was most impacted by the Sermon on the Mount and love as the “only means to rescue humanity from all ills, and the only method to rescue people from enslavement,” and the vision of the the Kingdom of God made here and now by “inward perfection, truth, and love” (Chakrabarty, 2013, 32). Thoreau persuaded Gandhi to believe in Civil Disobedience, and shared his belief that “there will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power,

from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly (Chakrabarty, 2013, 32).”

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., is the final political nonviolent practitioner and philosopher I examine in this thesis. King was a student of Thoreau, Tolstoy, and Gandhi. He famously said of his nonviolent philosophy and pilgrimage to nonviolence as “Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method” (King, 2010). In his first book, *Stride Towards Freedom*, King writes:

“It was the Sermon on the Mount, rather than a doctrine of passive resistance, that initially inspired the Negroes of Montgomery to dignified social action. It was Jesus of Nazareth that stirred the Negroes to protest with the creative weapon of love. As the day unfolded, however, the inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi began to exert its influence. I had come to see early that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom” (King, 2010)

King’s nonviolent approach is deeply rooted in the Christian doctrines of love and forgiveness, and the moral and spiritual imperative of justice, reconciliation, and redemption.

King identified the “triple evils” of poverty, racism and militarism as the primary forms of violence, and nonviolence as the antidote (King, 2010). Together, these three evils perpetuate a violent cycle. He saw poverty as exploitation of human life and the total absence of social compassion, racism as hatred and estrangement for life, and militarism as arrogant and devastating abuses of power. Nonviolence as the antidote, and as defined by King, is grounded in love and expressed through thought, speech, action, and relationships that lead to personal, cultural, and societal transformation. Much like Tolstoy, he dreamed of a Christian law of love as the solution. Much like Gandhi, King

identified economic exploitation as the primary evil and cause of suffering in the oppressed of society and outlined a step-by-step nonviolent resistance program appropriate for his social context in the American South.

King outlined six principles of nonviolence, paired with six steps of a social change campaign, much like Gandhi's satyagraha resistance and construction program. His six principles, in summary, sought to delineate the right way of nonviolence: spiritually courageous, the end goal of understanding and reconciliation with the opponent, focus on evil deeds not evil-doers, a willingness to suffer, love over hate, and God is one of justice (King, 2010).

He held a vision of the Beloved Community: "King's was a vision of a completely integrated society, a community of love and justice wherein brotherhood would be an actuality in all of social life. In his mind, such a community would be the ideal corporate expression of the Christian faith." (Smith, 1974) This vision was one of total relatedness: "We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality." (Smith, 1974) One of justice for all, notably liberation from the economic injustices of capitalism and commitment to economic equity between all people. King was pragmatic in his visioning, and pinned the Beloved Community as maybe not one attainable in lifetime, but as an end worth the path of ceaseless struggle and striving (Smith, 1974).

For King, *agape* love was the basis of the beloved community. Agape love was the "love to preserve and create community...a willingness to go to any length to restore community" (King, 1991). Love for King, in this sense, did not describe affection. King

instead defined nonviolent love as *agape*: “it means nothing sentimental or basically affectionate; it means understanding, redeeming goodwill for all men, an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of the God working in the lives of men” (King, 1991). Christian *agape* is for King and Tolstoy as Jainist *ahimsa* is for Gandhi, the higher order truth. It is a universal, disinterested, and benevolent love for allies, opponents, and public alike.

Both King and Gandhi steeped in the religious nonviolent tradition, and aided by other thinkers like Tolstoy and Thoreau, expanded the concept of nonviolence as a liberatory path for society. I argue that the concept of nonviolence has been reduced from a liberatory path to a set of tools by the social sciences. I also argue that the religious concept of nonviolence, while unknown to most activists, is essential to the understanding of both Gandhi and King’s philosophy and practice of nonviolence. I argue that when comparisons are made between nonviolent movements famed by history and the contemporary climate movement, and activists wonder ‘*what’s missing?*’, it is this commitment to nonviolence as more than just a political tactic, but as a theology of liberation.

IV. Activist Concept of Nonviolence

Throughout this paper, I have woven in snippets of the activist’s conception of nonviolence, but in the following section, I will elaborate on my direct experience through participant observation and detail activists’ discussion of nonviolence. I argue that while youth climate activists practice a nonviolence closely fitted to Vinthagen’s

socially pragmatic nonviolence, they long for something more, a nonviolence that meets the spiritual, moral, and ethical imperative of this moment.

Once the topic of this paper was clear, I began to ask people in casual conversation: “How do you understand nonviolence?” Some of the answers I heard included: “Nonviolent in word and deed.” “Nonviolence is how we win.” “Nonviolence because there can be no other way.” “Nonviolence because we don’t have guns, and even if we did, we don’t know how or have the stomach to use them.” They speak of being “trained” in nonviolent direct action. Nonviolence is how they maintain moral authority, public legitimacy, and mass participation. Nonviolence, as taught and shared as a social movement concept, is strictly strategic. However, I argue that nonviolence is strictly strategic *at the surface*, and when pressed further, many of the activists personally claim for them it's something *deeper*.

Activists tell personal stories. It’s fairly formulaic: challenge, choice, and outcome; story of self, us, and now. I asked one activist about their story, they recited one along these lines about their family in Southeast Asia and a terrible typhoon season. I asked if that is really the reason why and to this they said, “Well, it's part of the reason I guess, but really it's just that I feel this deep compassion and connection for all life and this anger that it’s being harmed. I don’t know when I first felt that, but it's always been there, and I guess it's just kind of grown wider and wider over time.” Here the activist felt pressure or an expectation to tell a story with a clear political frame, and is less forthcoming about this deeper reason.

I interviewed one activist on the topic of nonviolence, and after nearly an hour of discussion on the strategic value of nonviolence, he confessed his personal motivation: “It’s like that agape love King talks about, just like that love for all people and all things and it’s love that is the reason why do I do organizing.” Love as the ultimate throughline connects this activist to King, to Gandhi, to Tolstoy, and Thoreau, and further back in time to religious thinkers. The concept of nonviolence as love is the throughline between the political and the religious concept of nonviolence. “I do it because I just love all people, I don’t know how else to say it, but it just really feels like the greatest expression of this love I can make.” This activist was not a member of Sunshine, but a similar youth climate organization. When I mentioned that as an outside viewer, I struggle to see his love in videos of their nonviolent actions, he said, “We just don’t think love gets the same number of views as anger.”

I noticed this again and again over the course of many conversations on nonviolence. At the private, personal level, the spiritual nature of the nonviolent practice is easily and readily confessed by the activist. However, there is an apprehension to express the spiritual nature in public, or consider a spiritual framework of nonviolence at the scale of the movement. I spoke to an activist who is a practicing Catholic, and while she speaks of Jesus and a calling to a life of service and compassion, she admits, “I do this work because of my faith but this is never something I would say in public.” In another conversation, I asked an activist about Sunshine’s nonviolent principles and if there is any moral or ethical motivation behind it. “I mean yes, clearly we believe in nonviolence on moral or ethical grounds, like I’m nonviolent for moral reasons, but we

can't really get into morality or truth or anything spiritual at the organization level because that would turn people off." It's interesting that the spiritual is what attracted many of the long-time and most devoted activists, but it is also the spiritual that keeps unspoken, in the shadows, and fear expressing at the public or organization level. Here, the activists implied that the spiritual, religious, or moral belongs to the private domain, but I argue, is a weakness of the movement. *What's missing* is that both Gandhi and King were both political and spiritual leaders, unafraid of morality, truth, or the greater love sometimes called God.

I'll end this section by speculating that the activists' apprehension or fear of public expression of the spiritual is something I've observed generally common in our modern age. Not too long ago, it was decided in dominant western culture that nothing that cannot be known by scientific study can exist. The spiritual does not belong in the realm of the real. And too, it was decided there is an actual separation between animals and the *natural world*, and humans and society. Not too long ago, dominant culture severed us from the web of interdependence and estranged us from the spiritual. Now, what is spiritual is only associated with organized religion, and talk of the spiritual outside of that context is considered "woo-woo." Or worse for the youth climate activists, talk of grief or compassion for all Earth's creatures runs the risk of being perceived as "a crunchy granola environmentalist." I suspect that this is another sneaky consequence of racial capitalism, and by embracing the spiritual, activists chip away at its power.

V. Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have argued that the social sciences have focused primarily on *pragmatic nonviolence* in contrast to *principled nonviolence*, and that as a result existing research largely misses the actual observed practice of nonviolence. I argue, through my observations, the activists practice a form of nonviolence neither strictly principled nor pragmatic, but a blend of both: *socially pragmatic nonviolence*. I outlined the basic differences between socially pragmatic nonviolence, and Kingian and Gandhian nonviolence, and explored the religious perspective so key to both Kingian and Gandhian nonviolence. Here, I conclude this paper with a brief argument that socially pragmatic nonviolence does not meet the moral, ethical, or spiritual imperative of this moment: climate crisis.

When the activists spoke of the violence targeted by their nonviolent activism, they spoke not of classical violence (a physical force of direct harm), but structural violence. John Galtung defines structural violence as a form of violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs or rights (Galtung, 1969). Structural violence causes and perpetuates inequities, creating situations of avoidable and unnecessary suffering. In my conversations, the most cited cause of the climate crisis was, surprisingly, not fossil fuels, but “racial capitalism.” Racial capitalism is a term coined by Cedric Robinson as a modern world system dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide (Robinson, 2005). The activists argue that climate change is both a consequence and an amplifier of the structural violence of racial capitalism.

Both Gandhi and King spoke of economic exploitation, structural violence, as the primary evil, and so stretched the practice of nonviolence to the structural level: nonviolence as tactic for political resistance, nonviolence as the guiding principle for alternative, social constructions, nonviolence as an ethic in relationships, and nonviolence as a core virtue for the path of self-actualization. Gandhi and King aspired for nonviolence in all we are, do, and imagine.

While the activists understand their primary evil as racial capitalism, a form of structural violence, they do not practice structural nonviolence. Some of the activists personally practiced nonviolence in a broad, structural sense, as their own chosen path for self-actualization, but they are hesitant to advocate for this approach at the scale of the movement. I argue that when they speak of *something missing*, it is the full realization of themselves as both political and spiritual leaders, leading with a practice of nonviolence that is as all-encompassing as the violence of the climate crisis itself. I argue that the total potential of nonviolence has yet to be fully explored by the climate movement as a path for transformation of both the self and society.

Bibliography

Adam, M. T. (2006). Nonviolence and Emptiness: Buddha, Gandhi, and the “Essence of Religion”. *Arc: The Journal of the School of Religious Studies*, 34, 225–238.

Atack, I. (2012). *Nonviolence in Political Theory*. United Kingdom: Edinburgh University Press.

Bondurant, J. V. (1965). *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, by Joan V. Bondurant. Rev. Edition. United States: University of California Press.

Bullard, R. D. (2018). *Dumping in Dixie: Race, class, and environmental quality*. Routledge.

Butigan, K., Mary Litell, O. S. F., & Vitale, L (2003). *Franciscan Nonviolence: Stories, Reflections, Principles, Practices, and Resources*. United States: Pace e Bene Nonviolent Service.

Case, C. M. (1923). *Non-violent Coercion: A Study in Methods of Social Pressure*. United Kingdom: Century.

Chakrabarty, B. (2013). *Confluence of Thought: Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.*. United States: Oxford University Press.

Chatterjee, M. (1983). *Gandhi's Religious Thought*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Chenoweth, E., & Cunningham, K. G. (2013). Understanding nonviolent resistance: An introduction. *Journal of Peace Research*, 50(3), 271-276.

Chenoweth, E. (2020). The Future of Nonviolent Resistance. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(3), 69-84.

Cramer, K. J. (2016). *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press.

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. University of Chicago press.

Gandhi, M. K., Gandhi, M. (2010). *The Story of My Experiments with Truth: An Autobiography*. India: Om Books International.

Gier, N. F. (2004). *The Virtue of Nonviolence: From Gautama to Gandhi*. United States: State University of New York Press.

Galtung, J. (1965). On the Meaning of Nonviolence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 2(3), 228–257.

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of peace research*, 6(3), 167-191.

HARDIMAN, D. (2013). Towards a History of Non-violent Resistance. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(23), 41–48.

Hartnett, L. (2020). Love as a Practice of Peace: The Political Theologies of Tolstoy, Gandhi and King. In *Theology and World Politics* (pp. 265–288).

Hendrick, G. (1956). The Influence of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” on Gandhi’s Satyagraha. *The New England Quarterly*, 29(4), 462–471.

Hochschild, A. R. (2016). Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right. United Kingdom: New Press.

Howard, V. R. (2023). The Nonviolence Conundrum: Political Peace and Personal Karma in Jain and Hindu Traditions. *Religions*, 14(2), 178.

King, M. L. (2010). Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story. United States: Beacon Press.

King, M. L. (1991). A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.. United Kingdom: HarperCollins.

Long, J. D. (2009). Jainism: An Introduction. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic.

Longo, M., & Zacka, B. (2019). Political theory in an ethnographic key. *American Political Science Review*, 113(4), 1066-1070.

Mishra, R. K. (2019). Gandhi and Hinduism. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 65(1), 71-90.

Radhakrishnan, S., Diwakar, R. R., & Swaminathan, K. (2009). *Mahatma Gandhi 100 years* (2nd repr). Gandhi Peace Foundation.

Richards, J. (1991). Gene Sharp’s Pragmatic Defense Of Nonviolence. *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 6(1), 59–63.

Riofrancos, T. (2020). *Resource radicals: From petro-nationalism to post-extractivism in Ecuador*. Duke University Press.

Robinson, C. J. (2005). *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. United States: University of North Carolina Press.

Schatz, E. (Ed.). (2013). *Political ethnography: What immersion contributes to the study of power*. University of Chicago Press.

Schock, K. (2003). Nonviolent Action and Its Misconceptions: Insights for Social Scientists. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 36(4), 705–712.
doi:10.1017/S1049096503003482

Schock, K. (2005). *Unarmed insurrections : people power movements in nondemocracies*. United Kingdom: University of Minnesota Press.

Sharp, G. (1980). *Social Power and Political Freedom*. United States: P. Sargent Publishers.

Sharp, G., Paulson, J. (2005). *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*. United States: Extending Horizons Books.

Vinithagen, S. (2015). *A Theory of Nonviolent Action: How Civil Resistance Works*. United Kingdom: Zed Books.

Wedeen, L. (2010). Reflections on ethnographic work in political science. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13, 255-272.