

MAHATMA GANDHI: CHARISMATIC SAINT OF NONVIOLENCE

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M. K. Gandhi, better known as the Mahatma, would have been 137 years old on October 2. I would like to take the occasion of his birthday to reflect on what it means to be a saint. The title Mahatma means "great soul," and I would like to suggest that a great person need not be morally perfect.

Philosopher Susan Wolf has defined a saint as one "whose every action is as morally good as possible," but she finds that moral perfection alone does not make a normal life or an especially rich one. She finds this conclusion disturbing because we have always been told to be as morally perfect as we can be.

In his response to Wolf, fellow philosopher Robert Adams claims that she has made moral perfection too central to the life of the saint. Adams says that "saintliness is not perfectionism," and if we look at the lives of our saints we will indeed find a few moral flaws. Even Jesus said that "no one is good but God alone" (Mark 10.18), and the Buddha begged his disciples not to deify him.

Adams also criticizes Wolf for viewing the saints apart from their religious lives, and the transformative role that God allegedly has had on these exemplary persons. Religious saints have sacrificed everything because they have faith that God will provide not only for them but also for their great projects.

The achievements of both Gandhi and other saints appear to go far beyond the resources of their respective background and character. Like the prophets of old they were very unlikely and somewhat reluctant political and spiritual leaders. Many attributed their success to divine grace, and this presumably explains why they were able to exhibit great love and compassion while still remaining flawed human beings.

To be fair to Professor Wolf, she does offer a broader vision of the saint by adding the qualities "personal bearing, creativity, and sense of style" as necessary to the saintly life. These qualities could be summed up by the word "charisma," so I propose that we should look for moral charisma in our saints.

The souls of saints are not morally perfect; rather, they are great in vitality, compassion, and courage. The saint also has a broad vision of cultural, political, moral,

and spiritual possibilities. Gandhi's commitment to recognizing the good in every religion and every person, his strong empathy for his enemies, and his ability to draw diverse people to his cause make him an outstanding charismatic saint.

Contrary to common perceptions, Islam in India and Indonesia was not spread by the sword, but by Sufi missionaries and saints. When I visited a Hindu friend in Jaipur in 2005, the first religious site we visited was the shrine of a great Sufi saint in Ajmer. There were just as many Hindus there as Muslims.

In 1995 Hindu friends from Panjab University invited me to join them in celebrating a Sikh saint's birthday. The Hindu men and I were conspicuous in a throng of thousands because we did wear turbans. Except for the minority Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist families, Indian children are taught to revere all saints regardless of religious affiliation. Gandhi embodied this Indian tradition in spades, as only a true saint could do.

The Buddha and Christ are two of our foremost ancient practitioners of nonviolence. Christ's message that we are to love even those who hate us is essentially the message of the Buddha. Both knew very well that hate burns a hole in the heart. Both were Great Souls whose virtue shines down through the ages.

Equally remarkable, particularly because we know their personal histories and weaknesses so well, are the lives of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Mother Theresa. Taking the ancient saints of nonviolence or our more recent charismatic saints as our models, let us all try to develop the virtue of nonviolence until it becomes as natural as taking a breath.