

# Mahatma Gandhi's Spiritual idea about politics

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## Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi is one of the great figures of the twentieth century. In a century marked by the excesses of Nazism and Communism, the struggles against Colonialism, and two World Wars, his theory and practice of nonviolence shined like a beacon of hope.

He tried to create a religiously tolerant and inclusive civic nation in his own country, divided as it was along religious, linguistic and ethnic lines. How to live in peace, justice and prosperity in today's pluralistic societies is a lesson that he never tired of teaching, and from which people everywhere can learn.

When Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on January 30, 1948, the world hailed him as one of the greatest spiritual leaders, not just of the century, but of all time. He was ranked not just with Thoreau, Tolstoy, and St. Francis, but with Buddha, Mohammed and even Jesus. "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth," Albert Einstein wrote at the time.

Gandhi's legacy includes not just the brilliantly waged struggle against institutionalized racism in South Africa, the independence movement of India, and a ground-breaking path of interreligious dialogue, but also boasts the first widespread application of nonviolence as *the* most powerful tool for positive social change. Gandhi's nonviolence was not just political: It was rooted and grounded in the spiritual, which is why he exploded not just onto India's political stage, but onto the world stage, and not just temporally, but for all times.

Gandhi was, first and foremost, a religious man in search of God. For more than fifty years, he pursued truth, proclaiming that the best way to discover truth was through the practice of active, faith-based nonviolence.

Along the way, he unleashed a new method of social change, which he called "Satyagraha" (from the Sanskrit for truth force.) He led a movement against racial injustice in South Africa and then brought about a nonviolent revolution in India that secured independence from the British Empire. His example and teachings inspire us to apply the same single-mindedness in our pursuit of an end to war, nuclear weapons, environmental destruction, violence, hunger, poverty and injustice, and the creation of a culture of peace, justice and nonviolence. In other words, he challenges us to become prophets and apostles of nonviolence.

## Gandhi's Writings: Overview of literature

Gandhi was a prolific writer. One of Gandhi's earliest publications, *Hind Swaraj*, published in Gujarati in 1909, is recognised as the intellectual blueprint of India's freedom movement. The book was translated into English the next year, with a copyright legend that read "No Rights Reserved". For decades he edited several newspapers including Harijan in Gujarati, in Hindi and in the English language; Indian Opinion while in South Africa and, Young India, in English, and Navajivan, a Gujarati monthly, on his return to

India. Later, Navajivan was also published in Hindi. In addition, he wrote letters almost every day to individuals and newspapers.

*South Africa* about his struggle there, Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule, a political pamphlet, and a paraphrase in Gujarati of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. This last essay can be considered his programme on economics. He also wrote extensively on vegetarianism, diet and health, religion, social reforms, etc. Gandhi usually wrote in Gujarati, though he also revised the Hindi and English translations of his books.

“My writings should be cremated with my body,” Gandhi once wrote. “What I have done will endure, not what I have said or written.” Happily, the government of India disregarded his advice and spent over twenty years collecting every statement, letter and word written by Gandhi, in one of the most exhaustive publishing projects ever undertaken. In 1983, India completed the publication of ninety-five volumes of *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, a massive undertaking with over 43,000 pages of letters, speeches, essays, telegrams, memos, and books by Gandhi himself, every piece of writing they could find. (There are probably thousands of letters scattered around the world still to be added.) Gandhi’s writings comprise one of the largest collections by a spiritual and political figure ever gathered.

### **Objectives**

This paper deals with Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of spiritual politics. It deals with the basic essence of his idea and its application in the modern world. The main objectives of the paper are as follows:

- To bring to light the impact of the idea preached by Mahatma Gandhi in modern times.
- To discuss the idea of Gandhi on spiritualisation of politics and non violence as the major weapon in fighting all the odds of the society and his contribution in the spiritualisation of politics

### **Gandhi as a Spiritual Teacher and Religious Leader**

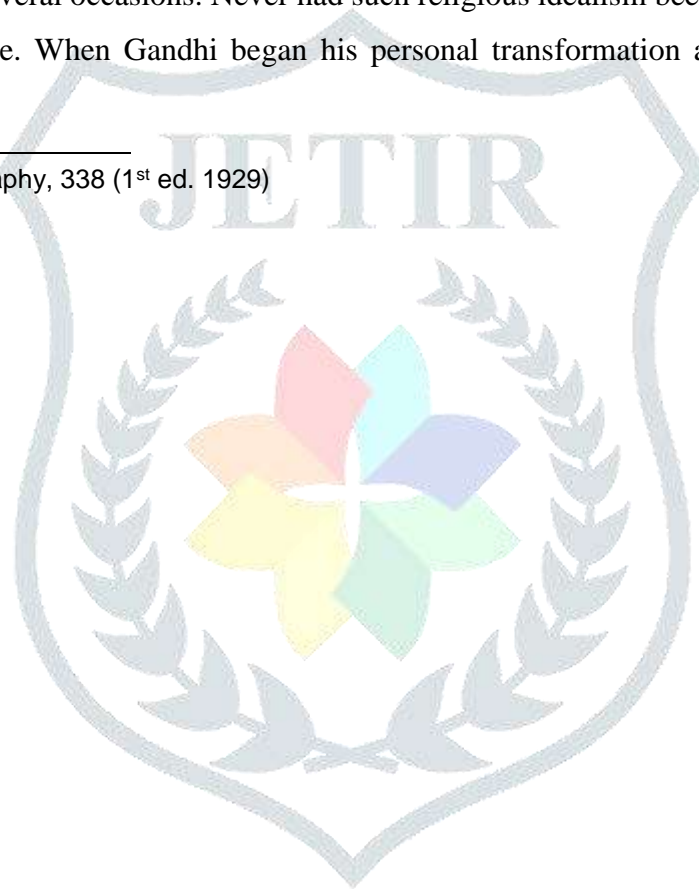
“I am not a saint who has strayed into politics,” Gandhi once wrote. “I am a politician who is trying to become a saint<sup>1</sup> .” While Adolf Hitler organized genocide in Europe, Franklin Roosevelt militarized America, Winston Churchill cheered on the Allies and Harry Truman ordered that atomic bombs be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Gandhi was attempting an entirely new kind of politics based on the transformative spirituality of nonviolence. Gandhi wanted independence for his people, but he did not want to kill anyone for it. He wanted basic human rights of food, clothing, shelter, education, jobs, healthcare, and dignity for hundreds of millions of impoverished Indians. But he called for justice by first living in radical solidarity with the poorest of the poor. He demonstrated in his daily life, through the use of the spinning wheel and communal living, how they could transform their own lives, even as they sought political independence. He wanted to stop oppression everywhere in the world, but he did not want to use the methods of the oppressors and in the process become just another imperialist. He wanted to reach the heights of sanctity in his own life, and so he disciplined himself ruthlessly, denied himself basic pleasures, and shared his mistakes and faults with the world. He also refused to give in to a narrow world worldview, and instead led daily interreligious prayer services, called for religious unity, and opposed any injustice committed in

the name of God. The tie that binds Gandhi's life together is that Gandhi tried to be a person of integrity and authenticity. He wanted to do God's will, and he did not want to be a hypocrite. That meant he had to identify as radically as possible with the poorest people on the face of the earth. If he wanted to achieve the heights of divinity, he said to himself, he had to touch the bottom of humanity and become one with the starving millions. He learned quickly that the path to God required the ongoing purification of his own heart and life.

Through fifty years of letter-writing, he always maintained that the way to peace, justice and salvation, begins first with the purification of one's own heart and daily life. As he purified his innerself, he stepped deeper into public turmoil and willingly suffered for his political beliefs, undergoing repeated arrests, trials, imprisonments, death threats, attempts on his life, constant verbal abuse, and fasting for his causes, coming to the brink of death on several occasions. Never had such religious idealism been practiced politically and socially on the world stage. When Gandhi began his personal transformation at the turn of the century in

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<sup>1</sup> M.K Gandhi, An autobiography, 338 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1929)



South Africa, he realized that he could never hurt or kill another human being, or indeed, any creature; that there was no cause, however noble it may appear, that justified the taking of another life. At the same time, he knew he could not be passive or indifferent in the face of violence, racism, poverty, and war. Gandhi thought that an honest spiritual search for God must thrust a person into the world in search of justice for the poor and peace between warring peoples. But he also quickly concluded that the only way to pursue social change and justice for the poor—in the name of God—was through strictly nonviolent means. “I am not endeavouring to see God through the service of humanity, for I know that God is in heaven, nor down below, but in every one,” Gandhi wrote to a friend on August 4, 1927. If God is in everyone, Gandhi believed, then he would have to love everyone, even his enemy. He would have to side with the most oppressed, impoverished, suffering people on the planet, and not just once, but every day and for the rest of his life, come what may. If he remained true to this hard road, he knew his outcome was assured: not only political independence and peace, but the vision of God.

In this spiritual search, Gandhi came up with the method of satyagraha as a holy strategy for social and political revolution and widespread structural change. If one was willing to suffer and die for justice and peace, Gandhi taught, without the desire to retaliate or kill, then the spirit of all-encompassing redemptive love would capture even God’s attention, win the sympathy of the world and wear down the opponent in the process until justice and freedom were achieved. It is a foolproof method, he insisted. As Gandhi sought the spiritual roots of political struggle, he realized more and more that he was merely applying ancient spiritual teachings of Jesus, Buddha and other religious figures to today’s political crises. His great achievement was simply the scientific, systematic, steadfast application of ancient spiritual truths to widespread national and international problems. To understand Gandhi, we need to notice his daily dedication to prayer, meditation, and scripture study. When he was a child, Gandhi’s nurse taught him, whenever he was scared, to repeat God’s name over and over again throughout the day. He tried to continue this practice every day for the rest of his life. He sought to experience the presence of God every minute of his life. This personal spiritual search, coupled with his dramatic public search for God’s nonviolent transformation of the world, inspires us today to attempt the same spiritual journey in our own lives. “I have grown disillusioned with Western civilization,” Gandhi said after returning from the Round Table conference in London. “The people that you meet on the way seem half-crazy. They spend their days in luxury or in making a bare living and retire at night thoroughly exhausted. In this state of affairs, I cannot understand when they can devote themselves to prayers<sup>2</sup>.” Prayer was critically important for Gandhi. Each morning, he spent one hour in silent meditation before sunrise. Each evening, he spent another hour in silent meditation. Every day for nearly fifty years, he read from the Sermon on the Mount, the Koran, and most importantly, the Bhagavad Gita, with a focus on the second chapter, which calls for renunciation of selfishness. There, he found instruction on how to do God’s will and “see God face to face.”

Gandhi viewed the Hindu scripture as a radical call to complete renunciation, steadfast love, and perfect nonviolence. He wrote many commentaries on the Gita, translated it several times, and tried to change his life and habits to fit its teachings. Using the teachings of the Gita, he summed up the model human being as

one “who is jealous of none; who is a fount of mercy; who is without egotism; who is selfless; who treats alike cold and heat, happiness and misery; who is ever forgiving; who is always contented; whose resolutions are firm; who has dedicated mind and soul to God; who causes no dread; who is not afraid of others; who is free from exultation, sorrow and fear; who is pure; who is versed in action yet remains unaffected by it; who renounces all fruit, good or bad; who treats friend and foe alike; who is untouched by respect or disrespect; who is not puffed up by praise; who does not go under when people speak ill of him; who loves silence and solitude; and who has a disciplined reason.” Gandhi spent his days trying to incarnate this spiritual ideal.

Gandhi then was not just a lawyer, politician, activist, social reformer, or revolutionary: Gandhi was a contemplative, a person of God, a saint. He showed the possibilities not just of Hinduism and Christianity in practice, but what it means to be human. He did so because he relied on God. He allowed God to disarm his heart and in the process became an instrument for God’s disarmament of the world. Indeed, he not only rediscovered the possibilities of peace and justice, but also of holiness, innocence, and Godliness. That is why his life and martyrdom have become so influential, not just for Indians, but for all people. He inspires us to seek God, to promote peace, to walk with the poor, to pursue justice, to meditate and to speak the truth.

<sup>2</sup> Easwaran, Eknath (1 August 1997). *Gandhi, the man: The story of his transformation*. Nilgiri Press.

### **Gandhi’s Contribution to Modern Spirituality**

“If humanity is to progress,” King concluded, “Gandhi is inescapable. We may ignore him at our own risk.” Gandhi’s contributions to modern spirituality include not only his impact on social movements around the world through the political strategy of active nonviolence and satyagraha, but his transforming influence on religion itself. Thanks to Gandhi, many of the world’s religions have been inspired to return to their root beliefs of truth and nonviolence that they all share in common.

Gandhi’s influence is so great and yet so sublime that it is hard to categorize his many contributions and achievements. But a few essential teachings can be gleaned from his life work and testimony.

Gandhi’s primary contribution to spirituality and the world itself is nonviolence. Gandhi insisted that if our worship of God is honest, if our faith is sincere, if we want to be people of prayer, indeed, if we want to be fully human, we need to become people of nonviolence. Gandhi worshiped the God of nonviolence, and announced that every major religion was rooted in nonviolence. He taught that nonviolence could be put into practice at every level of human life, in our own hearts, among our own family and friends, in our local communities, as well as nationally and internationally. Gandhi urges us to get rid of our guns and bombs, stop hurting those around us, simplify our lifestyles, enter the public struggle for disarmament and justice, and pursue the depths of nonviolence. He said that each of us can do it, from the poorest prisoner to presidents and popes.

More than that, Gandhi challenges people of faith to recognize the hypocrisy in their lives. He argued that we cannot go to church, synagogue, and mosque one day, and

the next day, sanction war, support executions, foster racism or pay for nuclear weapons. We cannot claim

to be people of faith and Godliness and at the same time, contribute to the world's faithlessness and Godlessness, as seen in murders, executions, warfare and nuclear weapons. For Gandhi, the only authentic spirituality is the spirituality of nonviolence. Every facet of life from now on, he said, had to be gauged from the perspective of nonviolence. When he applied this spirituality of nonviolence in South Africa and India, he showed how we can transform politics, religion, social institutions, laws, and even empires. He knew it would work because nonviolence, he said, is the way of God.

### *Gandhi's philosophy of Spiritual politics*

- ✎ “Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good,<sup>3</sup>” Gandhi said during the Great Trial of 1922. If we want to work for peace and live in peace, we must, due to the nature of the world, also work against war and stand up against war. We need to be publicly active in promoting the common good as well as organizing against the common evil. Most people of faith have yet to grasp this essential spiritual insight.
- ✎ Gandhi thought that faith pushes us to promote peace and justice, but he revived a deep wisdom held by every ancient religious tradition that the way to positive, nonviolent social change for peace is through risk and sacrifice. Gandhi insisted that these issues are a matter of life and death and they are spiritual questions, and that peace and justice requires lifelong dedication and willingness to suffer and die. This is not a new teaching. Jesus commanded his followers to take up the cross. Early Christians wrote that the way to the reign of God lay in our participation of the Paschal Mystery, the cross and resurrection. Gandhi translated the cross to mean an active willingness to be arrested, tried, imprisoned and killed for the cause of justice and peace. “Freedom is to be won only inside prison walls and sometimes on the gallows,” he declared, “but never in council chambers, courts, or the schoolroom.” Gandhi’s path to political transformation is fundamentally rooted in the spiritual requirement of risk, renunciation, sacrifice, even martyrdom<sup>4</sup>.
- ✎ Gandhi teaches us to accept suffering, even to court suffering, if we want personal transformation, political revolution and a vision of God. “Nonviolence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering,” Gandhi wrote. “It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evildoer but it means the pitting of one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honour, his religion, his soul and lay the foundation for that empire’s fall or regeneration.” Indeed, Gandhi said that the soul of peacemaking lay not in the art of killing, but in the art of voluntary suffering and dying. When asked to sum up the meaning of life in three words or less, Gandhi responded cheerfully, “That’s easy: Renounce and enjoy.”

<sup>3</sup> Parekh, Bhikhu C. (2001). Gandhi: A very short introduction. Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Tendulkar, D. G. (1951). Mahatma; life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

Today, it is not popular to talk about self-denial or voluntary suffering, but Gandhi talked about it all the time. The key to his daring achievements lie in his own ongoing suffering, including his

poverty, celibacy, arrests, imprisonments, attacks and assassination. He testified throughout his life that the more he denied himself and sought God and the good of humanity, no matter what the personal cost to him, the greater the joy and peace he experienced within himself.

- ✌ Though Gandhi was a lawyer, politician and revolutionary, he acknowledged that the most powerful weapon was prayer. Through his daily meditation, he came to believe in the presence and nearness of God in day to day life. He did not see visions or hear voices, but his prayer led him to a near total reliance on God that gave him the faith (much more important than courage) to undertake his bold public actions for justice and independence. Because Gandhi practiced peace through prayer and mindfulness, he was neither angry nor strident. He radiated peace. He laughed constantly. He was full of joy. The more influential his life became, the more he relied on prayer, seeking greater solitude, even taking one day a week of total silence for the last two decades of his life. His commitment to prayer and his devotion to the spirit working in his heart through prayer, transformed Gandhi from a politician into a saint, someone who does God's will, through whom God speaks and moves and touches the human race.
- ✌ Gandhi held that radical purity of heart bears enormous positive ramifications for the entire world. He firmly believed that the more we purify our inner lives, the more our lives will serve God's work to end war, poverty and injustice. He taught that personal integrity was necessary for an authentic spirituality, for nonviolence. To this end, he suggested regular fasting throughout one's life, and became an advocate and proponent of fasting as a way to repent for one's personal sins and the sins of those we love. He would tell all politicians, activists and religious leaders to get their own hearts in order, to let God disarm their hearts, if they wanted to be of any help to others.
- ✌ Gandhi practiced a living solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Long before liberation theology, Gandhi gave away his money and personal possessions, renounced his career, moved to a communal farm, made his own clothes, dressed like the poorest Indian peasants, and shared their meagre diet of fruits and vegetables. His willingness to go to jail and his defense of the untouchables were other ways to share in the poverty of the masses. "Self-realization I hold to be impossible without service of and identification with the poorest," Gandhi wrote. If we want to find God, he said, we must go to the poor, walk with them, serve the poor, learn from them, be disarmed by them and become one with them. The poor will teach us the truth, show us God, and share God's reign with us.
- ✌ Gandhi advocated powerlessness as the path to God. Though he mingled with kings and viceroys and was hailed as the father of India, he preferred the company of the poor and urged everyone to avoid attaining power over others. "Have nothing to do with power," he told journalist Vincent Sheean a few days before being assassinated. Gandhi believed that people of faith and nonviolence should not hold any position of authority over others because domination and the nation-state systems are rooted in violence. He himself could easily have become the first president of India, but he chose instead the path of downward mobility. He saw how power corrupts and blinds even the best people. He realized that it sets us against the God of the poor. Since he sincerely wanted to do God's will most of all, he knew he had to seek the powerlessness of the poor, just as Jesus did. If we all tried to

become powerless, instead of powerful, he taught, we would discover our common identity as equal sisters and brothers of one another, and begin to serve one another. Then, peace would grow among us.

✌ Gandhi taught that each of the world's religions has a piece of the truth and deserves respect. By advocating tolerance and equality of religions, Gandhi suggested that we all share the same common ground of nonviolence and can live at peace with one another, even while holding different faiths. With this basic wisdom, Gandhi paved a new path to peace. He understood that most wars and injustice have religious roots in ethnic hatred, pride and idolatry. Just as the violence he witnessed in India was based in religious division and hatred, so will future wars be rooted in division and ethnic hatred. The remedy is simple: Our peacemaking efforts must begin with interreligious dialogue and cooperation, regionally and nationally. This will not only hasten the coming of peace, but model the peace we seek. This new interfaith peacemaking becomes possible when people of different faiths discover the common ground of nonviolence in all faiths.

✌ Gandhi held that spiritual life, as well as all political and social work, requires a fearless pursuit of truth. Indeed, he consistently said that he worshiped God not just as the God of nonviolence, but as the God of truth. He came to the startling conclusion, as a devout Hindu, that Truth is God. In this journey, he demonstrated that power of John's Gospel declaration that, "The truth shall set you free." Over and over again he spoke the truth publicly, fearlessly, openly, and in total disregard of the consequences. He told the truth about poverty, war, racism, imperialism and nuclear weapons, when few could barely imagine it, much less speak it. Gandhi's spirituality was not rooted in any feel-good, warm-fuzzy, new age, false piety. It was based in truth and spoken openly with love. Rarely has any public figure spoken as boldly as Gandhi did. He knew that if he clung to the truth, he was clinging to God, and that truth once proclaimed would do its own work and lead to a new freedom and peace.

✌ Gandhi urged that we let go of results, and simply trust in the goodness of the struggle, for peace itself. Renunciation of results was a hallmark of the Bhagavad Gita and this became the centrepiece of Gandhi's personal theology. Every day he reflected on this spiritual requirement, and over time, grew freer from the compulsion of having to be successful or effective, even though he worked hard to change the world. "Our task is to work on behalf of what we consider to be right and just," he said, "and to leave the result to God, without whose permission or knowledge not a blade of grass moves."

✌ Gandhi understood these basic principles of truth and nonviolence not just as ideals or pious platitudes, but as actual laws of the universe, with the same palpable hold as the law of gravity. If we pursue truth and nonviolence, our lives will bear the good fruit of truth and nonviolence, Gandhi said. But he added that this outcome was as sure as Newton's discovery, that if we let go of an apple, it will in fact fall to the ground. Similarly, he observed, violence can only lead to further violence. Violence is not only immoral, it is always impractical. With this insight, Gandhi teaches that there



are no just wars, just revolutions, justified executions, or justified weapons of deterrence. Likewise, every action rooted in prayerful, peaceful, loving, committed nonviolence will bear good fruit.

“Whether humanity will consciously follow the law of love, I do not know,” Gandhi wrote. “But that need not disturb me. The law will work just as the law of gravitation works, whether we accept it or not. The person who discovered the law of love was a far greater scientist than any of our modern scientists. Only our explorations have not gone far enough and so it is not possible for everyone to see all its workings.”

### **Critical Analysis**

The major criticism that the philosophy of Gandhi faces in today’s world is its applicability. When we look upon India, where Gandhi is considered as the Father of the nation, how far do his ideals reflect the governing of the nation? It was for the Independence of India that Gandhi fought for his whole life and advocated truth and non violence as major weapons to fight the enemies. Today, not only in the world but also in India, Gandhi’s philosophy stands defied as violence and distrust have created such a situation that each and every individual as well as the nation works in the field of defence to oppress its enemies by the way of violence. Since independence India has gone a long way in developing its nuclear power and armed forces. In 2011 it was the third largest importer of arms and currently it has the third largest army in the world. Not only have these milestones been reached by the country but also terror attacks, naxalism and territorial disputes have increased more than ever before.

Although it is beyond doubt that all the nations in the world aim at establishing peace by negotiating with each other and avoiding conflicts, such peace keeping methods do not ensure peace and non violence completely as violence still is an acceptable and most effective method of oppressing one’s enemy. Hence it is to be seen that Gandhian philosophy is easier to understand but far more tough to apply in the running of a government. Had it not been the truth India would not have become one of the leading nation’s in the field of military and arms, where Gandhi is considered as The Father of the Nation but probably his ideals are not.

### **Conclusion**

In the end, Gandhi challenges each one of us to seek God through our own active pursuit of truth and nonviolence. He invites us to pursue the spiritual, political, economic and social depths of peace with the same fierce determination and sacrifice that he undertook. Gandhi urges us to let go of our desire for fame, fortune, power and ego, and instead to walk with the poor, simplify our lives, pray to God each day, practice nonviolence in every area of our life, and work publicly for the abolition of nuclear weapons, star wars, war itself, poverty, racism, sexism, hunger, the death penalty, abortion, the sanctions on Iraq, handguns, environmental destruction, homelessness, religious bigotry, animal exploitation and violence of any kind. He calls for nothing less than the total transformation of our lives and our world. In this call, he stands with Francis of Assisi and Dorothy Day, as a messenger of God and a model of faith and peace.

“We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence,” Gandhi once observed. “But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be

made in the field of nonviolence.”

Gandhi would want anyone who reads his words to undertake similar “experiments with truth” in their own lives, in pursuit of new discoveries in the field of nonviolence, so that a new day of peace with justice will soon dawn and we can all rejoice to see God face to face. May his hope and prayer come true.

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