Liberation Curriculum:

African American Gandhians - Nonviolence Advocates in the Civil Rights Movement
Part One: Early Disciples of Gandhi's Principle of 4. Additional Activity - Reading Primary Sources

From:


"WITH OUR NEGRO GUESTS"
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The highlight of Thurman’s tour to India, Burma, and Ceylon as chairman of the Negro Delegation is his meeting with Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the Indian independence movement and advocate of nonviolent social change. Gandhi’s campaigns against British colonial rule had brought him worldwide fame, and he is widely revered among African Americans as the most prominent non-white critic of imperialism and racism.

Thurman recounts in his memoir that never in his life has he been examined in such a persistent fashion about the history and current realities of African Americans. In their interview Gandhi wants to know about "voting rights, lynching, discrimination, public school education, the churches and how they functioned. His questions covered the entire sweep of our experience in American society."

Although the meeting of the Negro Delegation with Gandhi is extensively covered in the black press and throughout the United States, the actual interview, written by Mahadev Desai and published in Gandhi’s English weekly Harijan has never before been reprinted in its entirety. Gandhi’s final comment, “It may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world,” takes on a life of its own and will become a watchword in the Civil Rights Movement.

The meeting with the members of the American Negro Delegation was the first engagement of an important nature undertaken by Gandhiji since the breakdown in his health. He could not think of letting them leave our shores without meeting them, and I had the honor one early morning to receive them at Nasvari station and to escort them to Bardoli.

It was a privilege to meet these friends, and even a two hours’ concentrated conversation with them did not seem to tire Gandhiji, who asked Dr. Thurman all kinds of questions about the American Negroes, in order to acquaint himself a little with his subject before he could talk with them with confidence. One of the best alumni of the Negro Universities, Dr. Thurman explained to Gandhiji, with the cautious and dispassionate detachment characteristic of a professor of philosophy, the various schools of Negro thought. Booker T. Washington represented the economic school which had its place when America was less industrialized than it is today and there was more demand for skilled labor. A young man of thirty-four is now in charge trying to adjust Tuskegee to the new situation. Du Bois, the mulatto representative of the “Talented Tenth” was still directing part of the intellectual section of the Negroes, teaching Sociology in the Atlanta University, and offering a challenging intellectual solution of the Negro problem through his latest book—Black Reconstruction. He was now editing a big Encyclopaedia of the American Negro, giving the entire story of the American Negro from 1619 to the present time. Dr. Thurman explained the State theory of the separate but so-called “equal” education of the Negro and told how Harvard University in Washington was the only illustration of the Federal Government participating directly in the running of a Negro University, giving 80 percent of the expenses of its running. Up to ten years ago the whole of the teaching staff were European, now most of them are Negroes. “The President Dr. Johnson,” said Dr. Thurman with kindly emotion, “is one of the greatest of your admirers.” He explained how the situation in the Southern States was still difficult, as the flower of the aristocratic
Whites were all killed in the War of 1861–64 and as soon as the armies of occupation moved to the North the economic structure was paralysed, leaving the whole structure in the hands of the poor Whites who smarted under the economic competition of the Negro.11

"Is the prejudice against colour growing or dying out?" was one of the questions Gandhiji asked. "It is difficult to say," said Dr. Thurman, "because in one place things look much improved, whilst in another the outlook is still dark. Among many of the Southern White students, there is a disposition to improve upon the attitude of their forbears, and the migration occasioned by the World War did contribute appreciably to break down the barriers. But the economic question is acute everywhere, and in many of the industrial centres in Middle West the prejudice against the Negro shows itself in its ugliest form. Among the masses of workers there is a great amount of tension, which is quite natural, when the White thinks that the Negro's very existence is a threat to his own."12

"Is the union between Negroes and the Whites recognized by law?" was another question. "Twenty-five States have laws definitely against these unions, and I have had to sign a bond of 500 dollars to promise that I would not register any such union," said Mr. Carroll who is a pastor in Salem. "But," said Dr. Thurman, "there has been a lot of intermixture of races as for 300 years or more the Negro woman had no control over her body."13

But it was now the friends' turn to ask, and Mrs. Thurman, nobly sensitive to the deeper things of the spirit, broke her silence now and then and put searching questions. "Did the South African Negro take any part in your movement?" was the very first question Dr. Thurman asked. "No," said Gandhiji, "I purposely did not invite them. It would have endangered their cause. They would not have understood the technique of our struggle nor could they have seen the purpose or utility of non-violence."14

This led to a very interesting discussion of the state of Christianity among the South African Negroes and Gandhiji explained at great length why Islam scored against Christianity there. The talk seemed to appeal very much to Dr. Thurman, who is a professor of comparative religion. "We are often told," said Dr. Thurman, "that but for the Arabs there would have been no slavery. I do not believe it."15 "No," said Gandhiji, "it is not true at all. For the moment a slave accepts Islam he obtains equality with his master, and there are several instances of this in history."16 The whole discussion led to many a question and cross-question during which the guests had an occasion to see that Gandhiji's principle of equal respect for all religions was no theoretical formula but a practical creed.

Now the talk centered on a discussion which was the main thing that had drawn the distinguished members to Gandhiji.

"Is non-violence from your point of view a form of direct action?" inquired Dr. Thurman. "It is not one form, it is the only form," said Gandhiji. "I do not of course confine the words 'direct action' to their technical meaning. But without a direct active expression of it, non-violence to my mind is meaningless. It is the greatest and the active force in the world. One cannot be passively non-violent. In fact 'non-violence' is a term I had to coin in order to bring out the root meaning of Ahimsa."17 In spite of the negative particle 'non,' it is no negative force. Superficially we are surrounded in life by strife and bloodshed, life living upon life. But some great seer, who ages ago penetrated the centre of truth, said: It is not through strife and violence, but through non-violence that man can fulfill his destiny and his duty to his fellow creatures.18 It is a force which is more positive than electricity and more powerful than even ether. At the centre of non-violence is a force which is self-acting. Ahimsa means 'love' in the Pauline sense, and yet something more than the 'love' defined by St. Paul, although I know St. Paul's beautiful definition is good enough for all practical purposes.19 Ahimsa includes the whole creation, and not only human. Besides love in the English language has other connotations too, and so I was compelled to use the negative word. But it does not, as I have told you, express a negative force, but a force superior to all the forces put together. One person who can express Ahimsa in life exercises a force superior to all the forces of brutality."20

q. And is it possible for any individual to achieve this?
Gandhiji: Certainly. If there was any exclusiveness about it, I should reject it at once.

q. Any idea of possession is foreign to it?
Gandhiji: Yes. It possesses nothing, therefore it possesses everything.
of the practice of non-violence, and my answer may not convince you. But I am striving very hard, and even if I do not succeed fully in this life, my faith will not diminish."

Mrs. Thurman is a soulful singer, and Dr. Thurman would not think of going away without leaving with us something to treasure in our memory. We sat enraptured as she gave us the two famous Negro spirituals—"Were You There, When They Crucified My Lord," and "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder"—which last suited the guests and hosts equally, as it gave expression to the deep-seated hope and aspiration in the breast of every oppressed community to climb higher and higher until the goal was won.

And now came the parting. "We want you to come to America," said the guests with an insistence, the depth of love behind which could be measured as Mrs. Thurman reinforced the request with these words: "We want you not for White America, but for the Negroes; we have many a problem that cries for solution, and we need you badly." "How I wish I could," said Gandhi, "but I would have nothing to give you unless I had given an ocular demonstration here of all that I have been saying. I must make good the message here before I bring it to you. I do not say that I am defeated, but I have still to perfect myself. You may be sure that the moment I feel the call within me I shall not hesitate."

Dr. Thurman explained that the Negroes were ready to receive the message. "Much of the peculiar background of our own life in America is our own interpretation of the Christian religion. When one goes through the pages of the hundreds of Negro spirituals, striking things are brought to my mind which remind me of all that you have told us today."

"Well," said Gandhi, bidding good-bye to them, "if it comes true it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world."  

M.D.  


1. WHAH, 132.
2. Harrijan was an English-language weekly published from 1933 to 1956 (published in Poona 1935–36) by the Harijan Sevak Sangh, a society founded by Gandhi to help untouchables.
5. Ji, from the Hindi, is a mark of respect and is usually added to a name.

7. Frederick D. Patterson was the third president of Tuskegee Institute, remaining in the position until 1953.


9. Harvard University should be "Howard University."

10. Moredecai Wyatt Johnson was one of Gandhi’s major American supporters and made frequent references to him in his addresses starting in the late 1920s. In 1930 he called Gandhi the most important religious figure in the world. Sudarshan Kapur, Raising Up a Prophet: The African-American Encounter with Gandhi (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 44. 86, 144–47.

11. For this argument, see W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction, 349–52.

12. Edward Carroll underestimated the scope of antimiscegenation laws in the United States in 1936. At the time, at least thirty states barred interracial marriages. It was from Virginia, the state that required Carroll to post a $500 bond, that a successful challenge to antimiscegenation laws was finally raised. In Loving v. Virginia (1967), the U.S. Supreme Court declared all antimiscegenation statutes, still on the books then in sixteen states, to be unconstitutional.

13. One aspect of Gandhi’s teaching that disturbed many African Americans was his apparent criticism of interracial marriage in the widely circulated summary of his teaching that appeared in 1930. See C. F. Andrews, Mahatma Gandhi’s Ideas, Including Selections from His Writings (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), 56–57, 57–59, 128.


15. In his letter of 12 February 1936, in the current volume, Henry W. Luce suggested that Thurman emphasize the complicity of Muslims in the African slave trade.

16. Thurman quotes Gandhi as saying to the delegation, "The Moslem religion is the only religion in the world in which no lines are drawn from within the religious fellowship. Once you are in, you are all the way in. This is not true in Christianity, it isn’t true in Buddhism or Hinduism. If you had become Moslem, even though you were a slave, in the faith you would be equal to the master." WHAH, 132.

17. Ahimsa is Gandhi’s term for nonviolence, derived from Jainist thought; Satyagraha is the term for civil disobedience campaigns.

18. Given that Gandhi was speaking to Christian leaders, he was most probably referring to Jesus, perhaps Leo Tolstoy’s pacifist interpretation of Jesus in The Kingdom of God Is within You: Christianity Not as a Mystic Religion but as a Theory of Life (London: Heinemann, 1894). Gandhi was, in his own words, "overwhelmed" by Tolstoy’s work, which he read as a young man shortly after its appearance in English, and its impact was lasting, Judith M. Brown, Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 78. Tolstoy’s work opens with an extensive tribute to the Quakers, William Lloyd Garrison, and the American pacifist tradition: “Christ’s teaching, which came to be known to men, not by means of violence and the sword, they [the Quakers] say, ‘but by means of non-resistance to evil, gentleness, meekness, and peaceableness, can only be diffused through the world by the example of peace, harmony, and love among its followers.” Kingdom of God Is within You, 1.

19. I Cor. 13:4-8.

20. Thurman’s account of this part of his conversation in his autobiography diverges from the Harijan text. Thurman remembers asking Gandhi, “Why has your movement failed of its objectives, namely, to rid the country of the British?” which has no counterpart in Harijan. According to Thurman, Gandhi’s answer was that the success of ahimsa relied on “the degree to which the masses of the people are able to embrace such a notion” and that “it cannot be the unique experience of the leaders.” According to Thurman, Gandhi argued the failure to embrace ahimsa was a consequence of the lack of vitality by the Indian people caused by a lack of economic self-sufficiency and a lack of self-respect caused by the continuing scandal of untouchability. WHAH, 132–33. In the Harijan interview, Gandhi argues conversely that one person, fully enlightened, could “resist the exploitation of 300 million Indians.” As Gandhi explained later in the interview, he still needed “to perfect himself” to become an adequate representative of the principals he was advocating. Gandhi’s deep belief that his own example, especially when fasting, could transform India and the world was one the justifications for his frequent fasting. Brown, Gandhi, 87–88.


22. The difficult doctrine of “self-immolation” was the subject of many queries by those who talked to Gandhi. In 1937 in discussion with Benjamin E. Mays and Channing H. Tobias, Gandhi argued the resistance of Ethiopians to the Italian invasion would have been much more effective if “they had retired from the field and allowed themselves to be slaughtered.” Of German Jews, writing shortly after Kristallnacht in 1938, he controver-
sially counseled, “Suffering undergone voluntarily will bring … an inner strength and joy.” Jack, Gandhi Reader, 310, 319.

23. Thurman’s two versions of the end of the interview differ slightly from the Harijan interview. In a 1958 talk Thurman gave to Indian students, he described the end of the meeting as follows: “Just as we were about to take our leave he made one request. He asked that we sing ‘Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?’ adding that it is in suffering that the full-orbed meaning of Truth stood most utterly revealed. We sang as his few companions were in the attitude of prayer.” It was after the long silence that the latterly quoted statement was made: “It may be that through your people and their suffering, America may be saved.” Thurman, “Talks to Students from India,” HTC-MBU: Box 203. In his autobiography, however, Thurman writes that Gandhi made a different final statement, that the biggest obstacle to the spread of Christianity in India is “Christianity as it is practiced, as it has been identified with western civilization and colonialism. This is the greatest enemy Jesus Christ has in my country—not Hinduism, or Buddhism, or any of the indigenous religions—but Christianity itself.” WHAH, 135.

24. Mahadev Desai.