



# Introduction to the Special Issue “Nonviolence and Religion”

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Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001, many scholarly debates have focused on the relationship between religion and violence. The four editors of this Special Issue participated for this reason in the Fall of 2018 in a research workshop on religion and violence at the Center of Theological Inquiry (CTI) in Princeton. During this semester, we frequently asked ourselves if it would not be necessary to broaden this perspective by focusing not only on how religion relates to violence but also by taking the religious potential for peace into account. We decided to study Mohandas K. Gandhi’s development of nonviolent resistance during the 21 years that he spent in South Africa fighting racial discrimination against Indians. We aimed at a better understanding of Gandhi’s concept of *satyagraha*—his term for active nonviolent resistance—and attempted to explore its potential as well as its limitations. Special attention was also given to the religious dimension of Gandhi’s understanding of nonviolence. We studied his religious view, his interpretation and use of holy scriptures, and his long-ongoing practice of interreligious collaboration. By reading Gandhi’s active nonviolence through the lens of Judith Butler’s recent book *The Force of Nonviolence* (Butler 2020) we were able to engage with Gandhi’s work in view of contemporary discussions about violence and nonviolence and could also reflect on how nonviolence relates to gender. The Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study hosted the four editors to collaborate in Spring 2021, with our own contributions to this Special Issue as the result.

From the start, however, this Special Issue has aimed beyond the Gandhi project to broaden the debate to include more aspects and proponents of faith-based nonviolence. In view of the unbalanced debate about religion since 9/11, we especially invited scholars to address nonviolence in relation to Islam.

The thirteen contributions that we received could be organized into two parts. The first part consists of articles that deal directly with Gandhi’s concept of nonviolence and how it influenced later peace activists. Understanding Gandhi also requires looking at how he related to different religions. This Special Issue also broadens the usual focus on physical violence by addressing economic violence and environmental degradation in an article that connects Gandhi with sustainability. The second part comprises contributions that study the use of holy scriptures in relation to (non)violence, its problems, its boundaries, and its inspiration. Religious authoritative texts play a major role in the continuation and legitimation of connected belief systems. Their history of reception demonstrates actualization and contextualization of the time gap between their origins and actual use. Especially on the topics of violence, war, and peace, different interpretations have led to the legitimation of murderous actions and the justification of wars on the one hand and to the inspiration of peace processes and liberation on the other. A toxic combination of holy scriptures, political power, ethnocentric thinking, and religious exclusivism has often extinguished the potential for peacebuilding.

Gandhi’s inspiration connects to some degree the two parts of this Special Issue. Several articles in the second part deal directly with his hermeneutic of authoritative texts and traditions. *Adnane Mokrani’s* Islamic hermeneutic of nonviolence maintains that it was



**Citation:** Du Toit, Louise, Ephraim Meir, Ed Noort, and Wolfgang Palaver. 2023. Introduction to the Special Issue “Nonviolence and Religion”. *Religions* 14: 403. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030403>

Received: 3 March 2023

Accepted: 10 March 2023

Published: 16 March 2023



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a “Gandhian moment” that enabled such readings of the Qur’an in the 20th century. This expression references the title of a book by the Iranian philosopher Ramin Jahanbegloo where he addresses the “transformative power of nonviolent resistance in the hearts and minds of all those struggling for the opening of a democratic political space” (Jahanbegloo 2013, p. 3). Mokrani’s example of a Muslim scholar whose work results from taking the Gandhian moment seriously is the Syrian theologian Jawdat Sa’id (d. 2022). Rüdiger Lohlker’s contribution deals explicitly with the latter and mentions the fact that Sa’id had a picture of Gandhi on the bookshelves of his study.

This Special Issue further commemorates the murder of Gandhi on 30 January 1948, seventy-five years ago. That is why the book-cover of the printed version of it shows a photo from the garden of the Birla House in New Delhi, where Gandhi was killed when he walked to the prayer meeting that was to be held there later in the afternoon.

### 1. Part 1: Nonviolence and the Legacy of Gandhi

Recent discussions about the potential for nonviolence in connection with Putin’s war against Ukraine often dismiss Gandhi’s approach as a utopian idealism that has nothing to contribute to such an immediate case of aggression. Such statements, however, result from a serious misunderstanding of Gandhi’s view of nonviolence. Throughout his life, Gandhi fought against an understanding of nonviolence that remained passive and refused to resist evil. He maintained for this reason that pacifism is not an adequate translation of *satyagraha*, his special term for an active resistance that literally means truth-force or love force (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 74, p. 254). He also understood that the means for nonviolent resistance are not always available in every case and repeatedly claimed that violence, “when it is offered in self-defense or for the defense of the defenseless, it is an act of bravery, far better than cowardly submission” (Gandhi 1958–1994, vol. 85, p. 483; cf. Chenoweth 2021, p. 78).

Wolfgang Palaver highlights in his contribution Gandhi’s active understanding of nonviolence by using Martin Luther King’s expression “militant nonviolence” to characterize this position. Palaver also mentions Gandhi’s use of the term “almost nonviolence” to refer to violent reactions against an overwhelmingly powerful act of aggression, as was the case, for instance, when Poland defended itself militarily against Hitler’s troops in 1939. Palaver uses René Girard’s anthropology to explore Gandhi’s concept of nonviolence. Both Girard and Gandhi recognize the escalating dynamic of violence and prefer, for this reason, nonviolent means wherever they are available. This comparison also shows that Gandhi emphasized more strongly the necessity to actively resist evil and thereby contributed to a better understanding of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount.

Louise du Toit and Jana Vosloo similarly highlight the active dimension of nonviolence in their contribution. They discuss Gandhi’s work in the light of Judith Butler’s book *The Force of Nonviolence*. This allows them to claim that nonviolence need not be divorced from rage, indignation, or aggression and might even be “aggressively” pursued, as Albert Einstein also claimed when he described himself as a “militant pacifist”. They compare Gandhi and Butler on a systematic philosophical level and explore four themes in which they complement and enrich each other: the ontological roots of the nonviolent imperative; their rejection of an instrumental view of violence; nonviolent resistance seen as communicative action; and nonviolence viewed as a way of life.

Ephraim Meir too highlights the active side of nonviolence by showing that Gandhi, as well as the Jewish theologian and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel, developed nonviolent liberation theologies. Gandhi became famous for his fight against the discrimination against Indians in South Africa and later for freeing India from British colonial rule. Heschel was a close associate of Martin Luther King’s fight against racial injustice in the USA and against American warfare in Vietnam. Meir shows how these liberation theologies are rooted in their religious praxis and also highlights what separates and what joins these two spiritual activists.

*Louise du Toit's* article focuses on Gandhi's understanding of nonviolence and how it relates to gender. She particularly asks whether Gandhi's approach holds any value for women's struggles and for contemporary feminist politics. The author discusses this question in view of the recent empirical work conducted by Erica Chenoweth on the impact of women's participation on the outcomes of mass movements over the past century. By comparing Gandhi and Chenoweth, she draws out the value and limitations of Gandhi's thinking for contemporary women's struggles and feminist resistance. Although the direct focus is on the relation between women and nonviolent revolutionary campaigns and movements, indirectly, the unstable gendered dichotomies, male-female, masculine-feminine, and violence-nonviolence, are simultaneously drawn upon and problematized.

Reflecting on Gandhi's concept of nonviolence must not be restricted to physical or visible forms of violence. One must address structural violence as well as violence that sabotages and destroys the environment and more-than-human lives. *Wilhelm Guggenberger's* contribution widens the understanding of Gandhi's concept of nonviolence in this way by showing that it refers to a fundamental attitude in different areas of life, such as the economy and the use of technology. Seeing it in this way, sustainability, as it is currently being promoted by the United Nations in the *Agenda 2030* and Gandhi's concept of *satyagraha*, pursue identical goals. Gandhi, as well as elements of the Christian ethical tradition, can enrich political programs with a spiritual dimension, without which profound changes in human attitudes would not be possible.

Gandhi left a legacy of nonviolence that inspired different movements of nonviolent resistance all over the world. The most famous of these movements is Martin Luther King's civil rights movement against racial injustice in the United States. King was influenced by Gandhi and also by the Dutch-born American clergyman and political activist Abraham John Muste. Muste admired Gandhi's use of nonviolence in large-scale political actions and, in turn, inspired King to oppose the war of the USA against Vietnam. Muste was rightly called the "American Gandhi" ([Danielson 2014](#)). He moreover influenced conscientious objectors in Australia during the Vietnam War, as *Geoffrey A. Sandy* highlights in his article. He shows how Muste's understanding of nonviolent individual action, as he expressed it in his pamphlet *Of Holy Disobedience*, motivated young Christian men to become conscientious objectors ([Muste 1952](#)). Their holy disobedience contributed to ending Australia's participation in the Vietnam War and military conscription for it.

Exploring Gandhi's concept of nonviolence does not only mean investigating its potential but also addressing its limitations. By describing Gandhi's view on Judaism and Zionism and placing it in the framework of an interreligious theology that appreciates differences between cultures and religions with the aim of building bridges between them, *Ephraim Meir*, in his second contribution, shows that Gandhi's understanding of Judaism was limited because he mainly looked at Judaism through Christian lenses. He reduced Judaism to a religion without considering its peoplehood dimension. This reduction, together with his political endeavors in favor of the Hindu-Muslim unity and his advice of nonviolence to the Jews in the 1930s, determined his view on Zionism. Notwithstanding Gandhi's problematic views on Judaism and Zionism, his *satyagraha* nevertheless opens a wide-open window to nonviolent possibilities for transformation and reconciliation in Israel and Palestine. Meir's article discusses Martin Buber's famous letter to Gandhi and compares Gandhi's critique of Zionism with Buber's dialogical Zionism.

Zionism, however, is a very broad concept that comprises very different versions of it. *Michaela Quast-Neulinger* criticizes in her contribution the theo-political mission of Yoram Hazony's national conservatism. Hazony promotes a nationalist version of Zionism that he distinguishes explicitly and clearly from Buber's understanding of it, whom he even depicted as the enemy of the State of Israel. Gandhi, on the other hand, is mentioned by Hazony as an exemplary advocate of nationalism. This view of Gandhi neglects the fact that he had a quite similar view of nation and state as Buber. Both represent an open patriotism that roots in a religious relativization of nationalist ideologies ([Palaver 2021](#)). Hazony bases his national conservatism on his particular reading of the Hebrew Bible. As

Quast-Neulinger correctly states, however, this reading of the Bible is highly problematic. She calls it a “choose and pick” exegesis that leaves out all those texts that are seriously critical of immanent political rule. With this reflection on the importance of hermeneutics for all types of theopolitics, this article addresses the question that is at the center of the second part of this Special Issue.

## 2. Part 2: Hermeneutics of Scriptures

Some biblical texts served as a legitimation for crusades and colonialism, and others were a source for pacifism and liberation theologies. So-called “sword verses” in the Qur’an and the interpretation of *jihad* were used to justify violence, but a nonviolent and peaceful interpretation of the Qur’an has been defended, too. While Gandhi based his belief in *satyagraha* and *ahimsa* on the Bhagavad Gita, both Tilak and Gandhi’s murderer Nathuram Godse justified violence and warfare for a righteous cause using the same text.

A survey of the histories of reception may exclude two extreme positions in a search for hermeneutical keys. The first view denies any value of religious scriptures for today on historical or moral grounds. Their supporters claim that scriptures too often serve as texts of terror. The second opposite view defends a literal interpretation of sacred texts prescribed by divine inspiration or revelation. Their supporters deny any time gap obstacle. The mainstream of research, however, interprets using a hierarchy of texts or a key concept that reigns over and bridges contradicting texts. An important insight is that Gandhi, as well as Jewish, Christian, and Islamic interpreters, notwithstanding different contexts and influences, meet the same obstacles and use the same methodological ways. Aspects of their approaches emerge in the five articles below.

*Ed Noort’s* first article discusses Gandhi’s use of scriptures. According to Gandhi, scriptures should not be read literally. Scriptures of all religions are equally true and equally imperfect, and therefore, the instruments of reason and *ahimsa* are needed in an everlasting search for truth. Gandhi found an important key in 2 Cor. 3:6 (“the letter kills, but the spirit gives life”). Noort provides the context of this “proverb-like” statement in Paul’s letter and shows how Gandhi used the exegetical freedom symbolized by the life-giving spirit. Contextual and practical examples include Gandhi’s choice for the first mantra of the *Isha Upanishad* as the *summa* of the Bhagavad Gita at the opening of the temples to all Hindus in Travancore. This key should bridge the deeply divided modalities of Hinduism. Another example demonstrates his need for a nonviolent reading of the Gita, either allegorically or with different levels of possible actualization, against the interpretation of the revolutionaries who read it to legitimate violence and armed resistance.

In his second article, *Ed Noort* discusses Gandhi’s use of the figure of Daniel, who, after Jesus, was his most important biblical character. Next to Daniel, Plato’s Socrates plays an important role in Gandhi’s personal experience as a prisoner, and both are significant for their exemplary function as *satyagrahis*. Both followed virtue to the end and were prepared to die for it. The Gandhian Daniel represents nonviolent resistance against unjust laws as a weapon of the strong, not of the weak. His opposition was a deliberate choice, an example of Gandhi’s intuitive exegesis. In the next step, Noort highlights the context of the Book of Daniel, the persecutions in the second century BCE, and the apocalyptic visions contained in the second half of the biblical book. These visions are resistance literature against the state propaganda of the Hellenistic rulers. They represent a nonviolent answer with radical visions of hope in contrast to the violent resistance of the Maccabees. The article concludes with *desiderata* in two directions. In the direction of Gandhi, it is suggested that, in line with Gandhi’s own view of the right of expansion of later interpreters, the court stories and apocalyptic visions should be read together. Secondly, in the direction of biblical studies, it is proposed that more attention be paid to apocalyptic literature as resistance literature.

The following three articles deal with the Qur’an and its potential to inspire non-violence. *John J. Ranieri’s* article opens with the view that the Qur’an sides with the marginalized and the oppressed and that Muslims must therefore be defenders of victims.

He rejects the abrogation theory, in which the later Medinan surahs overrule the Meccan ones, and offers an explanation of the different contexts of the periods. Ranieri recognizes that the Qur'an contains multiple voices, from patient endurance to forceful defense. For the much debated "sword" verses (Q 9:5.29), the author sides with Muhammad Asad that every verse must be interpreted in view of the Qur'an as a whole. Ranieri sees a possibility to underline the unity of the Qur'an in *taqwa* that Asad rendered as "God-consciousness". Deliberating whether force and violence should be used, Ranieri states that *taqwa* may be compared with Augustine's role of love in his famous phrase, "Love, and do as you will." *Taqwa* is a process that aims at an ongoing conversion of mind and heart. Ranieri's balanced view is an example of how awareness of diachronic problems can be used in combination with a central concept, *taqwa*, bridging conflicting texts and the time gap.

The strong point of Rüdiger Lohlker's article is that his protagonist Jawdat Sa'id developed his ideas and hermeneutical views as a member of the nonviolent opposition in Syria during the Arab Spring. This combination of practice and thought should be understood as a hermeneutical engagement with the revelation of the Qur'an. Sa'id's core text is the Qur'anic narrative of Cain (Qabil) murdering Abel (Habil) (Q 5:27–32). The Qur'an rewrote the biblical story (Gen. 4:1–16) in a way that emphasizes Habil's refusal to answer violence with violence. The universal meaning of this narrative is, according to the Qur'an: killing a person means killing all mankind, and saving the life of one person means saving the life of all mankind (Q 5:32) as already discussed in Mishna and Talmud (bSanhedrin 4:5). For Sa'id this narrative and Q 2:256 ("there is no compulsion in religion") justify nonviolent resistance against tyrannical regimes. Sa'id sides with the Sufis, who state that even the illiterate can ascend to a supreme level of sincerity and good will. Nonviolence is a possibility for every human being who is willing to act accordingly. Sa'id's theoretical reflections and practice demonstrate how Muslims can engage with the Qur'anic revelation and nonviolent resistance.

Adnane Mokrani's article offers a broad range of hermeneutic guidelines to make an Islamic theology of nonviolence plausible. First, it is necessary to acknowledge the historical gap between the past of Muhammad's time and our present time. Secondly, it is also paradoxically important to trust in one central message of the Qur'an that transcends historical, political, and cultural boundaries. Mokrani states that the Qur'an has its limits because there is no explicit nonviolent model in the text. The Qur'an accepts defensive war under certain conditions. Contextualization is, in Mokrani's eyes, the key to distinguishing between principles, and historical forms. For him, the verses favoring peace and nonviolence belong to the group of principles and the verses on defensive warfare to the group of historical applications. This is not a crystal-clear solution because the search for hierarchy and its answers will always be a human attempt. Two principles as a starting point demonstrate his view. A mercy-centered theology must be the main principle together with the Qur'anic verse "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q 2:256). Non-compulsion is even more radical than nonviolence. To communicate this cornerstone, Mokrani makes a plea for a narrative theology exemplified by a symbolic reading of the Qabil-Habil (Cain and Abel) story (Q 5:27–32). Habil refuses to imitate the violent Qabil and creates a mimetic model of peace. Such an interpretation of the Qur'an is enabled by the "Gandhian moment"—the power of faith-based nonviolent practice and its results in our time.

**Author Contributions:** A first draft of this introduction was written by E.N. and W.P. that was afterwards refined and finalized by L.D.T. and E.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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