



# A Schism in Nonviolence Philosophy: Progressive Vs. Reactionary Nonviolence on the Question of Spiritual Truth

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Received: 📅 January 07, 2025

Published: 📅 January 15, 2025

## Abstract

Nonviolence philosophy is widely associated with 'progressive' social and political causes. Such causes have included organized opposition to colonial domination, to racial segregation and apartheid, to modernity's perpetual war machine. Associated with these causes, nonviolence is progressive, looking forward to a better world, achieving spiritual unity and amity between former antagonists, between those once divided as oppressed and oppressors. That nonviolence should also be associated with non-progressive, or rather 'reactionary,' causes may occasion some surprise. However, I want to explore the idea that nonviolence may also take a reactionary, backwards-looking direction. Its causes are not associated with creating a better world tomorrow, leaving behind the violent divisions of the past. Instead, they are concerned with keeping alive in a hostile present much older, indeed ancient worldviews whose values prove inconsistent with those of modernity. This alternative version of nonviolence philosophy is predominantly negative in its backwards looking orientation. It does not promise a better future – that is, better than anything from the past – as much as it *strives to forestall the complete erasure* of a past better than the present. In other words, it aims to forestall such erasure by reacting against modernity's false promises of unity and amity, preserving pockets of resistance to, or dissent from, modernity's *thoroughly violent* vision of 'enlightenment,' obliterating the so-called 'prejudices' and 'superstitions' of the past.

## Introduction

In this lecture, I explore this schism between the progressive and reactionary versions of nonviolence philosophy. I first lay out the more familiar, progressive version by appealing to perhaps the most famous practitioner of nonviolence, Mahatma Gandhi, and the American Catholic theologian, Walter Wink. Both twentieth century figures emphasize direct nonviolent confrontations with the purveyors and perpetrators of violence, exposing to them their own transgressions of what they profess to believe about the nature of truth and common humanity. Such confrontations aim to motivate a fundamental realignment of action and belief resulting in the spiritual unification of those formerly divided as oppressed and oppressors. I then lay out the less familiar reactionary version of nonvi-

olence philosophy by appealing to the Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the contemporary American Orthodox Christian dissident Rod Dreher. By contrast, this avoids any such direct confrontations with violent oppressors, adopting instead strategies of simply refusing to participate in the lies and propaganda of violence and, wherever possible, withdrawing into 'enclaves' of nonviolent belief and practice. This schism between nonviolence as direct confrontation and nonviolence as refusal and withdrawal has ancient roots. It originates in differing interpretations of Christ's message of peace in opposition to Rome's occupation of Judea. However, despite the enormous influence of the direct confrontation model in the last century, this alternative refusal and withdrawal model is becoming increasingly influential in the new century.

This is not to say the influence of the progressive model in the twenty-first century is diminishing, as evident, for example, from direct action campaigns over climate change. Nevertheless, it is to say the reactionary alternative is reemerging today in unmistakable ways. What are the political drivers of this schism and what is at stake between its two parts, their radically different strategies and goals, as respectively progressive and reactionary? I argue that the progressive and reactionary practitioners of nonviolence ultimately fight over the concept of truth. This is not a fight over theories truth as correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, or any of the other standard conceptions of truth in the philosophy canon. Instead, progressive and reactionary practitioners of nonviolence fight over truth as *spiritual* category. I say 'spiritual' because both equate truth with sacrifice and suffering in repudiating the evil of violence. For both, violence is a function of overvaluing material existence, of seeking power and advantage through strategies of physical coercion, manipulation, suppression and domination. It is tempting, but misleading, to say that the question between them is whether this is a truth-in-the-making or rather an ancient, forgotten truth to be revived or renewed in the present. This is misleading because both progressives and reactionaries appeal to the spiritual truth of nonviolence as ancient and eternal. The question then between them is twofold. On the one hand, can progress towards a revival or renewal of such truth be facilitated by direct confrontational tactic or the passive, nonconfrontational tactic of preserving as much truth as remains in the modern world? On the other hand, and related to the first question, can the spiritual value of truth be revived in such a way that it can coexist with the materialist values of modernity, or must this value be preserved much as possible by disengaging from modernity and creating separate enclaves and communities of truth?

### Gandhi and Wink on Confrontation and Progression

Writing within a Hindu theologic framework, Gandhi contends "Truth transcends history." Indeed, that "which is permanent eludes the historian of events." In this respect, he looks upon Western historians of events, like Gibbon and Morley, as offering "inferior versions of the *Mahabharata*." In its stories, "name and forms matter little, they come and go." This does not mean that events are maya, or mere illusion. On the contrary, events are ever present and ceaseless for "nothing in the world is static, everything is kinetic." The likes of Gibbon and Morley offer no more than a chronicle of the "doings of kings and emperors," that is, "a record of the wars of the world." Their conventional histories of events are nothing more than a "record of every interruption of the workings of the force of love or of the soul." In other words, they are records of interruptions of love or soul force, or *satyagraha*. This is the inner freedom or spirit dwelling within each individual soul, or *atman*, holding fast to truth; the permanent, eternal spiritual reality underlying the ceaseless activity of worldly events. *Satyagraha* entails voluntary self-suffering, renouncing the external freedom to indulge greed in pursuit of material advantage and power over others, in the manner of kings and emperors. This entails spiritually *heroic activity*

confronting, challenging the power of kings and emperors, risking limbs, even life, worldly existence, itself in the name of truth. In context of his morally, spiritually earnest commitments to noncooperation and civil disobedience movements, Gandhi sought to inspire heroic, self-suffering actions as necessarily nonviolent; truth and nonviolence proving utterly inseparable from one another. Spiritually earnest, solemn, sober self-suffering *satyagrahis* directly, nonviolently confront the agents of power, melting their hearts through their willingness to endure the suffering inflicted upon them without retaliation. Melting their hearts through voluntary self-suffering, Gandhi's *satyagrahis* facilitate humanity's progress in truth.

As for Wink, he writes within a Catholic, as opposed to Hindu, theologic framework, but one influenced by 1960s gonzo activism. He is equally on board with Gandhi's proposition that Truth transcends history, and that conventional historians of events chronicling the 'powers that be' cannot access truth; or, not at any rate, spiritual truth. For Wink as much as for Gandhi, realizing such truth is a function of nonviolent action, exemplified by avatars of nonviolence. That said, Wink reinterprets the relevant avatars – such as Jesus of Nazareth – not as spiritually earnest *satyagrahis*, but rather as pranksters. Wink's prankster *satyagrahis* aim to burlesque, clown, lampoon, parody the powerful, leaving them feeling uncomfortable, even powerless. Hence, Jesus is no sober self-suffering *satyagrahi* when he advises his disciples, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Turning the other cheek poses "enormous difficulties for the striker [1]." He cannot use a "backhand" because the cheek turner's nose is now in the way. Neither can the striker use his "unclean" left hand because "at Qumran" that "carried the penalty of exclusion and ten days' penance." If he strikes directly "with a fist," then he acknowledges the cheek turner *as his equal*; "fistfights" being the prerogative of peers, according to the standards of the time [2]. The Winkian disciple of Jesus therefore adheres to Saul Alinsky's first rule for radicals, *that the powerful have only the power they think they have*. Their 'power' may be taken from them by turning their violence and cruelty into an unsettling, humiliating burlesque. This is not merely a "tactic of vengeance [3]." On the contrary, as an expression of Catholic 'tough love,' humiliating and taking their power from them is a necessary component to acknowledging even one's "enemy" is a "child of God [4]." Only then might they be redeemed, no matter how uncomfortable this directly confrontational redemptive process may be. In sum, and in contrast with Gandhi, Wink's nonviolent Gonzo pranksterism facilitates humanity's progression towards *realizing spiritual truth through nonviolence*.

### Solzhenitsyn and Dreher on Exile and Retrogression

This alternative vision of passivity is typically attributed to the Soviet dissident, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. In "Live Not by Lies," [5] Solzhenitsyn lays out his position as dogged refusal to participate in perpetuating the ideological untruths – the 'lies' – of the Soviet powers that be. This is refusal to perpetuate lies whether in speech, print, or by attending public meetings. He proclaims, even if "all is

covered by lies, even if all is under their rule, let us resist in the smallest way: Let their rule hold *not through me!*" Our "personal nonparticipation in lies" does not call upon us "to step out onto the square and shout out the truth, to say out loud what we think—this is scary, we are not ready [6]." Here Solzhenitsyn acknowledges humanity's "deep seated organic cowardice." Nevertheless, he insists our small, modest, less than heroic commitment to live not by lies "will not be easy" but it is "much easier than" directly confrontational "civil disobedience à la Gandhi [7]." To be sure, personal nonparticipation in lies will incur costs and "at first it will not be fair." Someone "will have to temporarily lose his job." Moreover, life will be "severely complicated" for "the young who seek to live by truth" as their "tests and quizzes, too, are stuffed with lies [8]."

Hard choices must be made, but not heroically self-suffering choices risking banishment to the terrifying Gulags or soul-destroying reeducation in a mental hospital. While an unheroic concession to our organic cowardice, the passivity of personal nonparticipation in lies is nevertheless an effective means of resistance to evil. For, as Solzhenitsyn contends, "when people renounce lies, lies simply cease to exist. Like parasites, they can only survive when attached to a person [9]." This last line about lies dropping like parasites from those immunized by truth-telling reveals that Solzhenitsyn does not simply appeal to the least amount of courage necessary to defeat evil. On the contrary he makes a strong metaphysical claim about the efficacy of truth telling for progress towards "liberation," as deliverance from evil's clutches. On the one hand, he appeals to mundane acts of refusing to participate in lies, such as refusing to participate in "a meeting where a forced and distorted discussion is expected to take place [10]." On the other hand, he appeals plaintively to his childhood recollections "older people" reflecting on "the great disasters that had befallen Russia" with the Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent Russian civil war: viz., "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened [11]."

Such an appeal to God and His Judgement harkens back to a decidedly non-Winkian reading of Jesus. Indeed, contrary to Wink, when Jesus said, "resist not evil," he was not simply advising his disciples to resist the temptation to "retaliate against violence with violence [12]." He was rather advising them against violently resisting Roman imperialism because Judgment Day is imminent and Rome is 'Armageddon toast,' anyway. The community of the faithful should remain *true to their faith* until the arrival of God's Apocalyptic Judgement. As a first century Jewish Apocalypticist [13], Jesus taught his followers that passivity is resistance to evil because "God will soon usher in redemption and justice." One must therefore resist "in the short term until God's kingdom comes" by "maintaining one's faith," and "not succumbing to the outlook of the empire [14]." This is not cowardice, but instead "passivity with inner strength, dignity, and self-worth." In this Apocalyptic vision, passive resistance is defined by how "the oppressed, not the oppressor" interpret and internalize the encounter with evil [15]. Indeed, they embrace resistance as faith in the truth of God's justice at the end of days.

Resistance as keeping the faith and not succumbing to evil underlies the approach of present-day Christian dissenters to the "soft totalitarianism" of Western liberal democracies. Toning down the language of first century Jewish Apocalypticism, Rod Dreher draws inspiration from Solzhenitsyn, appropriating his language of everyday commitment to living by truth [16]. Contrary to the "hard" totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, he contends the new soft totalitarianism "demands allegiance to a set of progressive beliefs" rather than to "the Party [17]." As "politically correct" or "woke," these progressive beliefs are frequently "incompatible with logic – and certainly with Christianity." They are enforced less by Party or the state "than by an elite who form public opinion, and by private corporations that, thanks to technology, control our lives far more than we would like to admit [18]." Appealing to "the hunger for a just society, one that vindicates and liberates the historical victims of oppression," this soft totalitarianism "masquerades as kindness." Despite employing a "therapeutic" language of "helping and healing," it thoroughly demonizes "disfavored demographic groups," such as Christians, to "protect the feelings of victims in order the bring about social justice [19]."

If early Christians had to resist succumbing to the temptations of collaboration with a brutal empire, then Christian dissenters to social justice progressivism must resist the temptations of succumbing not just to a political ideology but also a "competing religion." Today's progressive social justice warriors draw upon that aspect of Soviet communist ideology which looks beyond "might and coercion." Instead, the religion of social justice spreads by appealing to "an internal longing for harmony and happiness that lies deeper than ordinary fear or the desire to escape misery or physical destruction [20]." In this respect, it appeals to essentially the same spiritual desire for redemption from misery and sin as Christianity. Like many religious ideologues or "cultists," however, "social justice warriors" feel justified in calling for the "suppression" of Christian dissenters from its creed "as a matter of righteousness." According to Dreher, even "theologically progressive Christians" are guilty of this totalitarian temptation to embrace suppression, and "silencing," of dissent in the name of righteousness and progress [21].

That said, his response is not to resist left wing progressivism and totalitarianism by engaging a religious war, suppressing and silencing the other side before it can do the same to the followers of Christ. Dreher instead adheres Jesus's advice to resist not evil by interpreting this along the lines of 'do not retaliate against the soft totalitarian control of society *by succumbing to a different version of the same.*' Instead, Christian dissenters must resist not righteously suppressing and silencing the "woke" but exercising the Benedict Option. Passive rather than active, Christian dissenters exercising this Option emulate the sixth century Monk, Benedict of Nursia, by embracing voluntary exile from mainstream culture. Voluntary self-exile need not require them to withdraw completely from the cultural mainstream, migrating into physically isolated, self-contained Christian centers [22]. It requires Christian dissenters to adopt everyday practices of resistance not unlike those advocated

by Solzhenitsyn under the banner of 'live not by lies.' Adapted to the soft totalitarian Western societies, these may include turning off smartphones or watching only movies and television shows aligning with Christian values and faith. Here the "resistance cells" of voluntary self-exile from the 'lies' of progressivism are traditional families and churches [23], upholding Benedictine principles of order, hospitality, stability, and prayer.

Dreher ultimately presents exile from mainstream progressivist culture as a way for Christian dissenters to resist succumbing to the lies of a new Dark Age of the West. Are his concerns with passively resisting descent into this new age of darkness and error by keeping faith with truth correctly seen as retrogressive? To be sure, a more progressive 'spin' could be put on such passive resistance as preventing a total descent into darkness and holding open the possibility of 'progress' in justice and truth. However, from the perspective of social justice progressivism, the creation of a robust Christian subculture is not the foundation for future progress as much as a retreat into pre-enlightenment darkness and error concerning Christian doctrine, lifestyle, and prayer. This produces what might well be called an 'irony of self-exile.' As passive resisters, Dreher's Christian dissenters do precisely what the 'politically correct' and the 'woke' want them to do. True believers in the alternative religion of social justice have no need to take active steps towards 'canceling' or silencing them, if Christian dissenters voluntarily exile themselves from the soft totalitarian regime of thought and opinion. This might lead one superficially to think passive resistance as self-exile is no resistance at all; compliance without confrontation amounts to little more than capitulation. Nevertheless, the irony of self-exile does not mean the dissenters capitulate totally to this soft totalitarian regime, defining and controlling who they really are. Indeed, their passive, as opposed to active, resistance is *fundamentally reactionary* in the sense it is resistance to being absorbed into the soft totalitarianism of social justice progressivism and surveillance capitalism. Christian dissenters therefore do not give the woke Rati everything they want; the dissenters do not give up their souls by succumbing to pervasively false worldview.

However, this produces another layer of irony, implicit to Dreher's analysis of different religions competing for the hearts and minds of all suffering humanity longing for harmony and happiness. In the language of John Rawls' late twentieth century political liberalism, righteous Christian dissenters and righteous woke progressivists represent incommensurable comprehensive doctrines of the good. In other words, both appeal to totalizing, but uncombinable, systems of belief about the nature of truth and reality. Moreover, both are uncombinable with Rawls' remedy for such titanic clash of incommensurables in an overlapping consensus requiring the adherents of uncombinable worldviews to set aside their deepest beliefs concerning truth and reality. That is, it requires them to set aside their deepest aspirations for harmony and happiness as political ends or purposes realized through our relationship to truth and reality as a whole or totality. Instead, it demands that our political goal should be to *maintain a relatively stable consensus-based*

civic peace among compatriots who otherwise profoundly disagree with one another. Clearly, though, Christian dissenters depart from this Rawlsian paradigm for living among those with whom we have such disagreements. They consider this liberal paradigm of consensus-based politics to have failed. In the twenty first century, such a consensus politics has proven unable to withstand the twin forces of uncompromising social-justice progressivism and surveillance capitalism.

What does this say about the rebirth of passive resistance among Christian dissenters to the current soft totalitarian regime of progressivism and digital surveillance? I contend the rebirth of passive nonviolent resistance is directly a response to the breakdown of liberal consensus politics. For many, today's 'culture wars' – which are in Dreher's estimation wars of 'competing religions' – threaten a rerun of the seventeenth century wars of religion from which political liberalism and public consensus politics emerged. As passive resisters adopting the strategy of voluntary self-exile in the name of truth, Christian dissenters substantially disengage from any active, confrontational war of resistance to the dominant soft totalitarian regime. Such a passive, disengagement strategy extends quite substantially even to a *war of ideas to discover the truth* in the sense once espoused by John Stuart Mill. There is no battle of ideas to be won or lost in the present climate of witch-hunting and surrendering autonomy to machines. If one cannot compromise with 'lies,' that is, systematic error concerning the reality of who we are pervading the established social order, then one's *best nonviolent option is passive*. One's best nonviolent option is voluntary self-exile in the interest of 'keeping the faith' and avoiding such fatal, systemic error, endangering soul or self.

## Conclusion

What sort of best option is this? It is a best option notably different from the best option of first century Christian dissenters from Roman domination and Russian Orthodox dissenters from the Soviet Union. For first century Christians, passivity and nonconfrontation was the best option given Rome's overwhelming might and the priority of maintaining faith and purity while awaiting the apocalypse. For Russian Orthodox dissenters to the Soviet Union, having forgotten God, nonparticipation in lies was the best option considering Solzhenitsyn's metaphor of lies as parasites destined to die absent participating human hosts. For contemporary Christian dissenters, it is the best option is defined by quite different circumstances. They face neither simple brute force, or 'might,' nor lies that everyone already believes to be lies. Quite the contrary! On the one hand, they face a competing religion of fervent, 'true believers' in social-justice progressivism and, on the other hand, the definition and control of humanity by soulless machines programmed to advance the materialistic interests of capital. For his part, Dreher appears to run together these two forces – progressivism as a competing religion and surveillance capitalism – as if they are the same thing. They are not.



If actively confronted through nonviolent Gandhian self-suffering or Winkian burlesque, some misguided souls may come to see the error of their ways, even if this cannot be expected any time soon. Consequently, the passive resistance strategy of keeping the faith alive in times of tribulation may facilitate some progress in truth. That is, it may facilitate some such progress by way of reaction against the new 'woke' religion of progress. As for surveillance capitalism and the cultural hegemony of algorithms in the service of consumer capitalism, I would hazard this is an even greater threat to the efforts of Christian dissidents to keep the faith in today's *post-liberal, post-consensus-politics* time of tribulation. I have focused here specifically on passive resistance motivated by appeal to Christian conceptions of truth. However, it is also possible to identify non-Christian expressions of the passive side of the active/passive schism in nonviolence philosophy. A notable example of the latter is the bai lan movement in China. Seeing Chinese state capitalism as failing to provide the meaningful, prosperous future it promised, Chinese youth adopt the despairing attitude of 'let it rot.' Distinct from Solzhenitsyn's concerns with always living by truth and Dreher's concerns with surviving the new Dark Age of the West, bai lan is nevertheless another expression of passive resistance to totalizing, dissatisfying modernity.

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DOI: [10.32474/JAAS.2025.10.000337](https://doi.org/10.32474/JAAS.2025.10.000337)



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