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Pakistan's Gandhi

John Dear | Nov. 24, 2010 On the Road to Peace

As we celebrate Thanksgiving, President Obama, Congress and the Pentagon continue our wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. Thousands of U.S. soldiers march through these impoverished lands, bringing fear and the threat of death, all of course in the name of peace, often in the name of Christ. This week Obama announced that the Afghanistan war will continue at least through 2014. Other reports indicate that the U.S. is dramatically increasing the number of its drone attacks in Pakistan. We must speak out against these plans.

On TV, no one speaks of the need to end these wars immediately, to cut the military budget or to use those funds to rebuild our economy, much less feed the world's poor, heal the sick and house the homeless. So the killings go on, hundreds of billions of dollars will be wasted, further economic collapse is guaranteed, and the ancient wisdom of nonviolence is once more rejected.

When I hear the lies used to justify our so-called "war on terror" and the bombing of children in Central Asia, or when I hear the stereotypes against Muslims, my thoughts turn to Abdul Ghaffar Khan and I take heart. He's the best of Pakistan and Afghanistan, one of the greatest peacemakers in modern history, one of our most prominent teachers of active nonviolence.

Everyone knows about Gandhi, few know Ghaffar Khan. Coming from Pakistan and Afghanistan, he fought for peace and justice with the power of active nonviolence for more than eighty years -- and did it all because of his Muslim faith.

Over the past few months, as I have struggled to pray for and think about the suffering people of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq, I have carried around a favorite book, Nonviolent Soldier of Islam (Nilgiri Press, 1984, 1999, originally titled, A Man to Match His Mountains), a biography of Ghaffar Kahn by the late Eknath Easwaran. The best introduction to Khan, it's well worth studying.

"A devout Muslim, Khan showed in his life a face of Islam which non-Islamic countries seldom see, proving that within the scope of Islam exists a noble alternative to violence," Easwaran writes. Instead of ignoring his legacy, we should build on it, teach it and practice it ourselves.

Born in 1890, Abdul Ghaffar Kahn was a Pathan political and spiritual leader who led hundreds of thousands to oppose British rule in Western India and later resisted tyranny in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Pathans were known throughout Asia as warriors, but Khan was a noble exception who showed how they could become soldiers of nonviolence. After he befriended Gandhi, Khan became known as his most faithful follower. A giant of a man, Khan was as nonviolent, peaceful, prayerful, and revolutionary as Gandhi?but unlike Gandhi who drew from the West and his own Hindu tradition, Kahn learned nonviolence from the Koran and the Prophet Mohammed.

From his youth in far western India, in what became the North-West Frontier province of Pakistan, he emerged as a leader. A devout Muslim, he built his first school for peacemaking in 1910, and worked diligently throughout that decade to reform his country by visiting hundreds of villages, building many schools and

teaching social transformation. During this time he became known as "Badshah Khan," the king of kings. In the early 1920s, he met Gandhi who confirmed Khan's belief in active nonviolence as the path to social change.

In the 1920s, Khan formed "the Servants of God" movement which eventually trained 100,000 Muslims to be full-time nonviolent resisters against British rule along Gandhi's lines of satyagraha. They organized strikes, sit-ins and other resistance campaigns against British imperialism. In 1930, during a rally, 250 of his followers were unexpectedly surrounded by armed British soldiers. They stood calmly and fearlessly as the British took aim at them. They were all killed. Throughout those years, the British burned the homes and tortured and imprisoned the resisters.

"If Badshah Khan could raise a nonviolent army out of a people so steeped in violence as the Pathans," Easwaran writes, "there is no country on earth where it cannot be done."

By the 1940s, as the British prepared to leave India, Khan spoke out against the Muslim League's plan to separate India into two Pakistans. From then on, he was perceived as a subversive threat to the new nation. After partition, civil war and Gandhi's death, Kahn continued to lead nonviolent campaigns against the violence of the new Pakistani government.

In 1948, Kahn was arrested and spent six years in prison. He would spend most of the 1960s and 1970s in prison or exile. In 1973, for example, after denouncing the Pakistani government as "the worst kind of dictatorship," he was imprisoned. During his lifetime, he survived two assassination attempts, and spent at least 30 years in prison?most of in hard labor or solitary confinement.

"One learns a good deal in the school of suffering," Khan wrote. "I wonder what would have happened to me if I had had an easy life, and had not had the privilege of tasting the joys of jail and all it means."

In 1985, he was arrested again for speaking out against his government's violence. When he died in 1988, at the age of 98, he was under house arrest. He asked to be buried in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, as a symbol of reconciliation for his war-torn corner of the world. Tens of thousands marched across national borders to mourn, and a cease fire was declared. The Afghan civil war stopped for five days in his honor.

"For today's children and the world, with all this talk of the atomic bomb, my thoughts are that if they accept nonviolence, they can escape destruction and live a life of peace," he told an interviewer in 1985. "If this doesn't happen, then the world will be in ruins."

Kahn advocated revolutionary political nonviolence but also a spirituality of nonviolence which he learned from the Koran and his daily prayer. When he first explained the fundamental laws of nonviolence in the Koran to Gandhi in the early 1920s, Gandhi was stunned. "Khan demonstrated conclusively that nonviolence is in perfect harmony with a vigorous, resurgent Islam," Easwaran writes. "Khan's simplicity, deep faith, and selfless service represent the Islamic tradition at its purest and most enduring."

"There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pathan like me subscribing to the creed of nonviolence," Abdul Ghaffar Khan said. "It is not a new creed. It was followed 1,400 years ago by the Prophet all the time when he was in Mecca."

"Not to lie, steal, and harm is true Islam," Khan taught.

"From 1910 with the opening of his first school, Khan went on serving, reforming, and resisting tyranny for almost eighty years," Easwaran concludes. "I cannot imagine finding anywhere in the world's history a life of more unbroken service in the cause of freedom."

Abdul Ghaffar Kahn insists that to be Muslim is to be a person of nonviolence. He invited the people of Pakistan, Afghanistan and India to disarm and live up to this spiritual calling of love and peace. In doing so, he challenges every stereotype against Islam. He stands out not only as a heroic Pakistani, but as an exemplar for the peacemaking life.

Ghaffar Kahn's lifelong pursuit of peace gives me hope for the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and ourselves. He points the way forward out of the quagmire of violence in which we are stuck. More, he inspires me to follow Jesus on the journey of nonviolence come what may, until my last breath. And he reminds me of the blessings that come for loving our enemies. If we befriend those declared to be our "enemies," we learn so much, especially about peace.

"Today's world is traveling in some strange direction," he told a reporter in 1985 while living in Afghanistan. "You see that the world is going toward destruction and violence. And the specialty of violence is to create hatred among people and to create fear. I am a believer in nonviolence and I say that no peace or tranquility will descend upon the people of the world until nonviolence is practiced because nonviolence is love and it stirs courage in people."

Thank you, Ghaffar Kahn for your peacemaking life. May we honor you by working to end our wars, reclaim the ancient wisdom of nonviolence, and forge a new frontier of interfaith peace.

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John's collection of the writings of Nobel Laureate Mairead Maguire, *The Vision of Peace*, has just been republished by www.wipfandstock.com. His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace* , are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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