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Jim Douglass' new book, 'Gandhi and the Unspeakable'

John Dear S.J. | Feb. 14, 2012 On the Road to Peace

Jim Douglass is one of the world's great teachers, theologians and practitioners of Christian nonviolence. I regularly return for inspiration to his classic works *The Nonviolent Cross*, *Resistance and Contemplation* and *Lightning East to West*, which have been recently republished by wipfandstock.com [1]. Based at Mary's House Catholic Worker in Birmingham, Ala., Jim spent the last two decades completing his groundbreaking work, *JFK and the Unspeakable*, which detailed the forces which aligned to kill President John F. Kennedy in order to stop his work for peace and disarmament.

Douglass has planned other books on the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Robert Kennedy. In the process, he began to study the widespread conspiracy to kill Mahatma Gandhi and the latent support for his assassination within the new Indian state. That study has resulted in another powerful book, *Gandhi and the Unspeakable: His Final Experiment With Truth* [2], a shocking exposé and inspiring meditation published this week by Orbis Books. I urge all those interested in Gandhi and nonviolence to read this profound work.

As we all know, Gandhi was assassinated in New Delhi by a Hindu fundamentalist on Jan. 30, 1948, as he walked to his public evening prayer service. Since the previous summer, more than a million people had been killed in the civil war between Hindus and Muslims as Pakistan split off from the new India. Right-wing Hindu extremists such as the assassin were enraged by Gandhi's nonviolent campaign to reconcile Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi spent his last months walking, campaigning, praying and fasting for an end to the violence, and at the time of his death, was planning to go to Pakistan on a mission of peace.

Just as Douglass investigated the reasons why JFK was assassinated by myriad forces, including members of the U.S. government, he explores the reasons why Gandhi was killed and why the Indian state might have benefited from his death. Douglass' journey took him to the Library of Congress, where he read the sole "Printed Record of Mahatma Gandhi Murder Case, Vols. 1-8," the court record that once belonged to Nathuram Godse, Gandhi's assassin. Douglass used this massive material and other original sources to explore Gandhi's mythic struggle of nonviolence against the forces of what Thomas Merton called "the Unspeakable."

Douglass learns that as Gandhi pursued his "redemptive vision of a united, nonviolent India in the nuclear age," he was murdered "by an anti-Muslim, Hindu nationalist group, with the silent complicity of forces in the newborn Indian government" that wanted instead a national security state rooted in nuclear weapons and Hindu fundamentalism. Those forces of violence continue to affect India, Pakistan and the world today.

Gandhi was threatened with death for more than five decades and was quite prepared to give his life for his vision of nonviolence. As Douglass writes, he had been stoned and beaten on several occasions and faced countless death threats. But what many people do not know is that Gandhi knew his assassins.

Because he understood the power, structures and forces of violence, Gandhi was constantly preparing for his inevitable death over the long course of his public campaign for nonviolence. That's why *Gandhi and the Unspeakable* is far more than an historical examination of a political murder. It's a meditation on Gandhi's

astonishing creative nonviolence in this face of a conspiracy of violence by his own people.

"Just as one must learn the art of killing in the training for violence," Gandhi once wrote, "so one must learn the art of dying in the training for nonviolence."

Douglass explores how Gandhi spent his life learning the art of dying in his training for nonviolence. Like Jesus with his eyes on the cross, Gandhi was always preparing for nonviolent martyrdom, hoping and praying to be ready with a heart of love and forgiveness.

Douglass takes us through the attacks and beatings Gandhi suffered in South Africa and his steadfast nonviolent response, and then walks us through the conspiracy to kill Gandhi and destroy his vision of a nonviolent India. Douglass not only offers an original contribution to the study of Gandhi and modern India, he once again confronts "the Unspeakable" and places before us the choice of state-sanctioned violence versus the vision of a new world of nonviolence.

He writes:

> Soon after helping give birth to his country's independence, [Gandhi] was killed by forces determined to destroy both him and his vision of a nonviolent, democratic India. Yet Gandhi walked hopefully into that conspiracy against hope. Gandhi, like Martin, Malcolm and the Kennedys, foresaw his violent death. He prepared for the conclusion to his life for half a century. His increasing readiness to meet his assassin with love is the key to his encounter with the Unspeakable. As he became the prophet of the world's salvation by nonviolence, Gandhi trained himself, step by step, to die nonviolently to violence. It would be his final experiment with truth. ...
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> This book celebrates dying, in the specific way Gandhi prepared to die, from the roots of his journey on the path of nonviolence and throughout his life. Walking with Gandhi means walking joyfully and nonviolently into God's arms -- the arms of truth and love -- through death. That is a way of hope. Because he prayed and prepared himself to die with love, Gandhi could meet his assassins' destructive conspiracy with hope. ...
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> In the trial, the defendants tried to murder [Gandhi] all over again, this time by the assassination of both his character and his vision for the world. That process has continued for six decades. The successors to the organizations that nurtured Gandhi's assassins have kept on disseminating propaganda against him and his vision, while glossing over the assassination. In the twenty-first century, they remain a threat to India's democracy. Their continued power is a measure of their success in repressing the truth of Gandhi's life and martyrdom.

At the center of the conspiracy to kill Gandhi stood a mastermind of violence Gandhi knew well. Gandhi even knew the triggerman who eventually killed him. After the assassin tried and failed to kill Gandhi and was released, Gandhi invited him to come and live with him for a week in his ashram so they could talk. But the assassin was just an acolyte of the brilliant cult leader Vinayak Savarkar, a philosopher of revolutionary violence, assassination and terrorism. Savarkar spent his life building a right-wing movement of Hindu nationalism that still controls and threatens much of India today. For decades, Savarkar trained his disciples to kill Gandhi and others in order to create a more powerful, independent India.

Gandhi knew all of this. Once, on Oct. 24, 1909, he spent an evening in London debating Savarkar. The public debate was sponsored by Savarkar's own terrorist committee. Gandhi accepted the invitation because he wanted to try to show the violent revolutionaries "the uselessness of violence for securing reform." That night, Gandhi and Savarkar offered their audience -- and the world -- two opposing methods of social change: violence or

nonviolence, assassination or martyrdom, terrorism or satyagraha, war-making means or peaceful means. Their debate, Douglass writes, sums up the challenge of Gandhi's life and the choice that still confronts the world.

"For the next four decades," Douglass writes, "Gandhi's and Savarkar's own lives would embody their diametrically opposed visions of social change, with both visions culminating finally in Gandhi's assassination by Savarkar and his followers."

In 1927, Gandhi visited Savarkar at his home in one last appeal to reject violence and join the nonviolent campaign for a free and nonviolent India.

"Gandhi and Savarkar posed two choices in opposing state power in the nuclear age: satyagraha or terrorism, experiments with a transforming power of truth or attempts to control others by whatever means available," Douglass writes. "The means would in either case become in the process their own ends."

A week before Gandhi was killed, the assassins attempted to kill him by setting off a bomb during his evening prayer service. Although one conspirator was arrested and told authorities of the ongoing plot and plans, the police and authorities did nothing.

"It might be that it would be more valuable to humanity for me to die," Gandhi told American journalist Vincent Sheean three days before the assassination. Sheean was shaken by this statement, but as Douglass explains, Gandhi's death indeed ended the five months of senseless killings between Hindus and Muslims that wracked India and Pakistan since independence.

It all comes down to means and ends, Gandhi said to Sheean. Peaceful ends can only come about through peaceful means. We reap what we sow.

"Nonviolence is absolutely necessary for a good result," Gandhi said. It was a lesson Gandhi also tried to teach Savarkar, a lesson which the world has yet to learn.

"No other contemporary writer is exposing the mechanics of assassination as methodically and bravely as Douglass," *Publishers Weekly* said last month about this powerful new book. "But because he is a Catholic independent scholar and activist most well-known for his writings on nonviolence and suffering, this book is more than a fresh look at historical circumstances: it's spiritual spelunking into the depravity of unchecked political power."

With *Gandhi and the Unspeakable*, Jim Douglass deepens my understanding of nonviolence, particularly about how to face death with love, truth, trust and forgiveness. By taking us through the passion and death of Gandhi, if you will, Douglass sheds new insight for me into the passion and death of the nonviolent Jesus who spoke the truth, faced death threats and assassination attempts, saw the conspiracy forming against him, and forgave his assassins as he died. This book might make a good companion for Lent because it offers a stunning example of someone who followed Jesus by taking up the cross of love and truth to confront violence and empire.

In that spirit of love and truth, Gandhi tried to see his assassins as potential friends. He realized they were misguided victims of the culture of violence, children of God who could be redeemed. That spiritual vision helped him complete his journey to nonviolence.

"Gandhi believed that all of us -- no exceptions -- could be liberated from our own violent prison by experiments in a universal power of truth and love," Douglass writes. "His deepening willingness to confront his assassins with love was his last testament to us to the meaning of nonviolence. Gandhi's final experiment with truth was his death."

I highly recommend Jim Douglass' latest book as a tool to help us resist the evil forces of violence and empire, see everyone through the eyes of love and truth, learn the art of dying well and fulfill our own journey of nonviolence.

"The Unspeakable remains in our midst," Douglass concludes. "If we have the courage to confront it with the force of truth and love, as Gandhi did, hope prevails."

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John Dear will speak Feb. 17 at Newman Hall at U.C.-Berkeley; Feb. 18 in Half Moon Bay, Calif.; on Feb. 21 at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles; on Feb. 24 in Orange, Calif.; and on Feb. 25 in Flagstaff, Ariz. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [3], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [4]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [5] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[6]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[7]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[8]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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