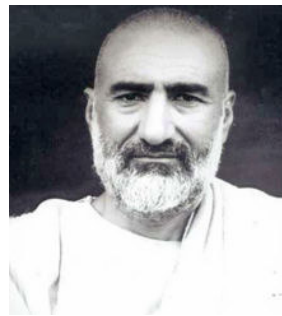


Abdul Ghaffar Khan:  
Faith, Love, and Nonviolence in Islam

By Adam Ericksen

*Today's world is traveling in some strange direction. You see that the world is going toward destruction and violence. And the specialty of violence is to create hatred among people and 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.*

-Abdul Ghaffar Khan, 1985



The world is spinning out of control. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was the most violent century the world has known. Unfortunately, the 21<sup>st</sup> century already threatens to surpass the 20<sup>th</sup> in terms of violence. We seem to be stuck in a cycle of destruction and violence that breeds intense hatred, fear, and misunderstanding. Some seem to suggest that the only way out is more destruction and violence, but is there a better way? Do we have to use violence to root out violence?

Part of the hatred, fear, and misunderstanding in the West is directed at Islam. Some Christians suggest that Islam is inherently violent, intolerant, and stuck in a never ending war instigated by the Prophet Muhammad himself. (See Robert Spencer, *Religion of Peace: Why Christianity Is and Islam Isn't*, Regnery Publishing, 2007.) It is easy to fall into this trap. It makes us feel good to think that we (the West, Christians, or whomever) are good, and they (Islam) are bad. But this view is fatally flawed and overly simplistic. Christianity is not peaceful or violent; Christians are peaceful or violent. Islam is not peaceful or violent; Muslims are peaceful or violent. Sacred texts from any religious tradition can be interpreted in a way that leads to violence or in a way that leads to peace. Even the meek and peaceful Jesus said, "I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). The responsibility for people of any faith, and ultimately of any faith community, is to interpret sacred text in a way that leads to love and compassion.

But is Islam inherently violent? Those who think it is will have a difficult time explaining the life of Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Khan, a Muslim, was moved by his faith to

live a life of nonviolence. He was born in 1890 in the Northwest Frontier Province of British India. He was born a Pathan, and Pathan culture was well known by the British to be fiercely violent and cruel. Pathans were stuck in a cycle of internal feuds that culminated in revenge killings. This cycle of violence turned against the British. The British Empire was locked in a series of wars with the Northwest Province. They were successful in The First Afghan War of 1838, but in 1842 the Pathans sought revenge, massacring a British force of 4,500. These violent acts produced fear and hatred among the Pathans and the British people respectively, each believing their own violence was justified because of the barbaric acts of the “other.”

Ghaffar Khan knew this cycle of violence had to change. He knew that the Pathan culture of violence was self-destructive. There was a better way, and Khan found it in his faith. He stated that “Islam is *amal, yakeen, muhabat* (work, faith, and love) and without these the name ‘Muslim’ is sounding brass and tinkling cymbal.” (Eknath Easwaran, *Nonviolent Soldier of Islam*, Nilgiri Press, 1999, page 63). His interpretation of the Qur’an led him to live a life of love and nonviolence.

Khan’s faith led him to serve his people by attempting to root out injustice. For example, education was only available to rich young men. He created schools for the poor and for girls. But he continued to be deeply troubled by the culture of violence. How could this culture of violence be stopped? Education was part of the key, but it wasn’t enough.

At this crucial time, Khan met Gandhi. He was inspired by Gandhi’s courage and commitment to nonviolence, and took that commitment upon himself. Khan began to make speeches to his people about nonviolence. He recruited his students, who in turn recruited others. Many Pathans who were deeply rooted in a culture of violence, dropped their weapons and lived a life of nonviolence against British occupation. One of the key points Khan made was about the nature of God: Allah was All-Merciful, All-Loving, and All-Compassionate. He formed a nonviolent army called Khudai Khidmatgars, “Servants of God.” They refused to retaliate, signing a contract in which they stated:

I am a Khudai Khidmatgar; and as God needs no service, but serving his creation is serving him, I promise to serve humanity in the name of God.

I promise to refrain from violence and from taking revenge. I promise to forgive those who oppress me or treat me with cruelty.

I promise to refrain from taking part in feuds and quarrels and from creating enmity.

I promise to treat every Pathan as my brother and friend.

I promise to refrain from antisocial customs and practices.

I promise to live a simple life, to practice virtue and refrain from evil.

I promise to practice good manners and good behavior and not to lead a life of idleness. I promise to devote at least two hours a day to social work.

Their understanding of God as loving, merciful, and compassionate was at the heart of the movement, therefore they would forgive everyone, including their enemies. The second point of the contract is the epitome of grace for people of any religious tradition: there was no need for the British oppressors to admit they were wrong and in need of forgiveness, they were already forgiven.

The surprising thing was that this radical belief in love, nonviolence, and forgiveness worked! Pathan violence didn't work. It only created hatred and fear among the British people. Pathan nonviolent resistance allowed the British to see their own violence and the suffering it caused for what it really was: absurd and inhumane.

Khan played an integral role in ending the British occupation of India, but unfortunately, few have ever heard of him. His faith in Islam led him to forgive and love his enemies even in the face of brutal violence. He is a beacon of hope for our strange world that continues to travel toward destruction and violence. Khan shows us that the way to change hearts and minds is not through violent actions or violent words, but through faith, love, and nonviolence.

For further reading see:

Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1969). *My life and struggle: Autobiography of Badshah Khan (as narrated to K.B. Narang)*. Translated by Helen Bouman. Hind Pocket Books, New Delhi.

Rajmohan Gandhi (2004). *Ghaffar Khan: non-violent Badshah of the Pakhtuns*. Viking, New Delhi.

Eknath Easwaran (1999). *Non-violent soldier of Islam: Ghaffar Khan: a man to match his mountains*. Nilgiri Press

On the web see: <http://www.globalnonviolence.org/islam.htm>. You will find a free downloadable book called *Islam and Nonviolence*. It was written by contemporary Muslim scholars dedicated to nonviolence.