

CAN SPIRITUALITY RESOLVE VIOLENCE?

A ESPIRITUALIDADE PODE RESOLVER A VIOLÊNCIA?

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Received: 19 Sep 2026

Accepted: 24 Sep 2026

Published: 01 Oct 2026

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It situates violence within the framework of the state and political power, arguing that structural violence exceeds what individual consciousness alone can address, and warns against spiritual bypassing as a way of avoiding injustice. Weighing seven contributions of spirituality—including its capacity, when organized, to become a political force, as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. showed—against five limitations, the article concludes that no tradition resolves violence: each merely administers it. Genuine progress requires a spirituality that descends from inner pacification into collective, socially engaged action.

Keywords: violence; spirituality; nonviolence; comparative religion; structural violence.

Abstract: This article examines whether spirituality can resolve violence by tracing how a wide range of traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, pre-Christian paganism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—name violence, explain its origin, and propose paths toward its overcoming. The analysis proceeds in two movements: a comparative survey of each tradition's diagnosis and remedy, and a philosophical critique of their internal contradictions and historical instrumentalization, from the Crusades to

Resumo: Este artigo examina se a espiritualidade pode resolver a violência, percorrendo o modo como um amplo conjunto de tradições — hinduísmo, budismo, taoísmo, paganismo pré-cristão, zoroastrismo, judaísmo, cristianismo e islamismo — nomeia a violência, explica sua origem e propõe caminhos para sua superação. A análise se desenvolve em dois movimentos: um levantamento comparativo do diagnóstico e do remédio de cada tradição e uma crítica filosófica de suas contradições internas e de sua instrumentalização histórica, das Cruzadas à violência jihadista. Situa a violência no quadro do Estado e do poder político, argumentando que a violência estrutural excede aquilo que a consciência individual, por si só, pode enfrentar, e adverte contra o desvio espiritual (*spiritual bypassing*) como forma de evitar a injustiça. Ponderando sete contribuições da espiritualidade — inclusive sua capacidade, quando organizada, de tornar-se uma força política, como mostraram Gandhi e Martin Luther King Jr. — diante de cinco limitações, o artigo conclui que nenhuma tradição resolve a violência: cada uma apenas a administra. O progresso genuíno exige uma espiritualidade que desça da pacificação interior para a ação coletiva e socialmente engajada.

Palavras-chave: violência; espiritualidade; não violência; religião comparada; violência estrutural.

Introduction

Violence has accompanied the human species since its most remote origins, and with it, the question of how to overcome it. In the face of brute force, plunder, war, and the subjugation of the other, the world's spiritual and religious traditions have each, in their own way, raised a set of responses built from precepts, practices, foundational narratives, and exemplary figures that promise, with varying degrees of conviction, a way out.

This article proposes a twofold movement. The first is descriptive and comparative: to survey a broad set of traditions—Indian traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism), Taoism, pre-Christian paganism, Zoroastrianism, and the three great Abrahamic religions—in order to identify how each one names violence, explains it, and proposes a remedy for it. The second movement is critical: to subject that map to a philosophical examination that asks, without condescension or cynicism, whether these proposals withstand the weight of their own contradictions and can affect the structural violence that characterizes contemporary societies, or whether they are

exhausted on the terrain of individual consciousness.

This is neither an apology for spirituality as a universal solution, nor a dismissal of it from secular skepticism. It is an exercise in rigor: taking these traditions seriously—their texts, their internal contradictions, their historical uses, including the darkest ones—and honestly asking what remains for the contemporary reader after passing through them. This article therefore does not claim to offer a definitive answer. Rather, it seeks to leave open a question that has accompanied humanity since its earliest narratives.

Before beginning this journey, it is worth clarifying the two concepts that frame the article. By violence we will understand here the irruption of one will imposing itself upon another to the point of reducing, denying, or instrumentalizing the other's status as a subject, limiting their freedom, dignity, or capacity for self-determination. In simpler terms: any act that seeks to dominate, subjugate, or harm another person. Spirituality, by contrast, will refer to the personal search that seeks to contemplate the ultimate meaning of life and its relation to the transcendent, without necessarily entailing adherence to an organized religious system; this distinguishes it from religion, understood as the structured set of beliefs, practices, rituals, and community that a specific tradition offers as an institutional channel for that same search. This article examines traditions that combine both planes: organized religious doctrine and personal spiritual practice.

1. Some Spiritual Traditions in the Face of Violence

To answer the question of spirituality's function with regard to violence, we will now survey different spiritual and religious traditions—arising in geographic, historical, and cultural contexts quite diverse from one another—in order to understand how they have named violence and how they have proposed to overcome it. This survey does not aspire to be exhaustive, but rather to be representative of the diversity of responses humanity has offered in the face of one of its most persistent problems.

1.1 Nonviolence in the Indian Tradition

The Indian tradition offers one of the most elaborate systems of reflection on nonviolence, articulated through the Sanskrit term *ahimsa*. Other harmful attitudes, such as hatred, anger, fear, greed, or selfishness, are often associated with violence. Violence, however, is the attitude that departs furthest from the goal of yoga. In

turn, what yoga seeks to find is inner peace and freedom, and nothing disturbs our peace or enslaves us more than violence.

It should be noted that the origin of violence, like that of all the ills that afflict us, is attachment, or the compulsive desire that blinds us. Calming attachment enables the attainment of yoga's goals. The less attachment, the more peace. The more attachment, the more violence. It must be stressed that nonviolence requires active exercise and therefore has nothing to do with passivity or conformism. On the contrary, being at peace demands many battles. Nonviolence is not apathetic; it cannot serve as a shield for lack of tenacity, cowardice, or the absence of struggle.

Nonviolence appears simple to understand in theory, but the difficulties grow the more one attempts to practice it. This is where it becomes possible to link it to philosophy, provided we understand the latter as practical knowledge rather than mere theoretical babble.

A radical and inflexible conception of nonviolence comes from the Jain religion. Its adherents, known as Jains, scrupulously observe a vegan or lacto-vegetarian diet. They consider it unacceptable to eat foods that involve the suffering or death of living organisms. Jains argue that not even a small insect should be harmed, and in some cases they go so far as to sweep the ground in front of their feet, with the sole intention of not stepping on any living being while walking.

Another conception of nonviolence is found in the Bhagavad Gita, one of the foundational texts of Indian philosophy and a cornerstone of yoga. The text presents a compelling narrative in which Arjuna, the leader of a faction at war, must defeat his own relatives. Krishna's advice to Arjuna is the following: “devote yourself to the performance of your duty, abandon attachment, and remain balanced in success or failure. This equanimity is called Yoga” (Bhagavad Gita, 2017, p. 68; II.48; translation by the author). The crucial point, therefore, is Arjuna's state of consciousness: a yogi must act, but must do so without attachment to the fruits of his actions, with a calm and unperturbed mind.

The Gita also offers a profound analysis of the concept of inactivity. What should we do if we witness a situation that could lead to violence and suffering? We are told: “Perform your duty, Arjuna, for action is superior to inaction. Without acting you could not even sustain your body” (Bhagavad Gita, 2017, p. 85; 3.8). Thus, in the conception of yoga found in the Bhagavad Gita, inactivity has no place; on the contrary, action without attachment is proposed over passivity. The term *ahimsa* refers to a particular state of consciousness, one that entails equanimity and detachment. From this state of mind, one has the possibility of choosing to do what is right, whether or not it involves the use of force.

I present below an adapted version of a parable attributed to the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna (1996) and recorded in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*:

The story tells of a sadhu [a wandering monk who visited several villages every year] who, one day, upon entering a village, saw a huge and threatening snake. The snake was terrorizing the villagers and making their lives unbearable. The sadhu spoke with the snake and taught it *ahimsa*; it was a lesson the snake listened to attentively and took to heart.

The following year, the snake was gaunt and bruised. Since it was no longer so threatening, the children had begun to mock it and throw stones at it. It could hardly hunt, and it was afraid to venture far from its hiding place. The sadhu shook his head and said that it was true he had taught it the importance of *ahimsa*, but that he had never told it to stop hissing [rattling its tail] (p. 27).

This fable teaches that it is necessary to practice *ahimsa* toward ourselves as well: to protect ourselves, mentally and physically, from others' unjustified aggression. Our bodies, emotions, and minds are valuable gifts that sustain us in our spiritual evolution, and there is no reason to harm them or to allow others to do so.

Patañjali's Yogasūtra [aphorisms of yoga] (around the third century BCE) present a system of yoga with various stages: techniques of posture, breathing, withdrawal of the senses and the mind, concentration, and meditation, leading up to the ultimate state of samadhi, or total fusion with one's own inner Self or Subject. However, the starting point for all of this consists of two steps, embodied in a series of abstentions (*yamas*) and ethical practices (*niyamas*).

The first of the *yamas* is *ahimsa*, nonviolence: abstaining from every kind of violence—physical, verbal, and even mental—toward oneself and toward others. The principles of Patañjali's five *yamas* are, in various ways, contained within the Decalogue of Moses: not killing or harming (*ahimsa*), not lying [telling the truth] (*satya*), not stealing (*asteya*), controlling the senses (brahmacharya), and not coveting or accumulating unnecessary things (*aparigraha*).

Nagarjuna, for his part, founder of the Madhyamaka school [Middle Way], proposed distinguishing between *upadhi* (appearance, simulation, veiling) and not enslaving ourselves to it. In the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* [Verses on the Middle Way], he proposed the principle of the emptiness of things, according to which there is no reality whatsoever in our thoughts, since they depend on being thought in order to exist. This is so because reality is independent of us, unlike our thoughts, which arise dependently. Attachments are not our reality, precisely because they arise from a mechanism of that kind.

Instead of confronting destructiveness with its opposite, one should grasp

the empty category of destructiveness —the fact that it arises from inappropriate thoughts. It is true that attachment can diminish through independence, but too much independence generates an attachment to independence itself; it is true that anger is countered by optimism, but optimism can be false or excessive; it is true that ignorance is fought with knowledge, but the accumulation of knowledge probably leads us to a greater ignorance: believing that we know everything or that we have ceased to be ignorant. On the contrary, understanding the emptiness of attachments, of the motive behind anger, and of the vanity of wanting to know everything proves more liberating.

Violence is overcome when its emptiness is understood, by becoming aware that everything ends and that any longing we hold in the present will be extinguished in the future. The other person toward whom we are violent is a stranger. The other is not what we believe we see in them. If we do not know who the other is, we are confronting an illusion; we are being violent toward a deception. That awareness of emptiness dethrones violence. It is no simple achievement. Reaching it requires effort and discipline.

Finally, two concrete recommendations can be identified that allow one to integrate the practice of *ahimsa* into one's own life: a) Watching what we think about ourselves: when one feels caught in a loop of negative thoughts, one must notice it and stop; b) Watching what we think about others: just as we are hard on ourselves, we tend to be hard on those around us.

Yoga, in sum, proposes something more than an ethics of abstention: a complete reconfiguration of the subject's relationship with their own attachment, understood as the ultimate root of violence.

1.2 Benevolence in Buddhism

The Dhammapada is a collection of 423 verses attributed to the Buddha and is considered one of the most influential texts of the Pali canon. The opening verse of the chapter is devoted to hatred and establishes a principle that, with variations, will run through much of the traditions reviewed here: “hatred does not cease by hatred; hatred ceases by love” (Dhammapada, 2004, p. 22; I, 5). The formulation is not an abstract moral slogan, but the description of a law the text calls “very old”: violence, understood as a mirroring reaction to an offense received, perpetuates itself; only its interruption by a qualitatively different attitude —not a greater vengeance, but its absence— breaks the cycle.

The Dhammapada devotes an entire chapter to this question, insisting that

all beings fear punishment and love life, and that therefore whoever seeks their own happiness should not harm or cause another being to be killed. Buddhist *ahimsa* ethics (a term shared with the Indian tradition) is articulated in the five precepts that every lay practitioner commits to observing; the first of these is to abstain from harming life. It is further stated that “whoever, in seeking their own happiness, harms other beings, will experience nothing but pain in the future” (Dhammapada, 2004, p. 65).

The doctrinal foundation of this nonviolent ethic is found in the Four Noble Truths, expounded by the Buddha in his first sermon: the existence of suffering (*dukkha*), its origin in desire and attachment, the possibility of its cessation, and the eightfold path that leads to it. Violence, within this framework, is nothing but a particularly intense manifestation of *dukkha*: it arises from attachment (to objects, to opinions, to one's own self) and from aversion toward whatever is perceived as a threat to that attachment. In this sense, the Buddhist proposal in the face of violence coincides structurally with that of yoga. Although both traditions share the Sanskrit and Pali vocabulary of *ahimsa*, Buddhism adds a more systematic analysis of the psychological mechanisms that produce suffering, both one's own and others'.

Another text especially relevant for reflecting on violence directed toward others is the Karaniya Metta Sutta, or Discourse on Loving-Kindness. In this text, the Buddha does not merely prohibit harm, but proposes the active cultivation of metta [unconditional loving-kindness] as a concrete meditative practice: all beings are exhorted to be happy and to feel safe, and this aspiration extends to every living being, whether weak or strong, known or unknown, near or far (Karaniya Metta Sutta, 2009, Sn 1.8, vv. 143–152). The image the sutta itself uses to describe this attitude is that of a mother protecting her only child, even at the risk of her own life: loving-kindness toward all beings should be cultivated in this way, without distinction or limit.

Unconditional loving-kindness is part of the four “divine abodes” (*brahmavihara*), together with compassion (*karuna*), empathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*)—a set of dispositions that Buddhism considers direct antidotes to the mental states that produce violence: hatred dissolves with metta; cruelty with *karuna*; envy with *mudita*; and anxiety with *upekkha*. Far from being merely a prohibitive ethic, in the manner of “thou shalt not harm”, Buddhism offers a positive and trainable ethic: violence is not fought solely by abstaining from it but by actively cultivating its opposite.

Even so, this proposal should not be excessively idealized: metta meditation, practiced as an inner exercise, demands time, discipline, and a minimum degree

of vital stability that is not always available to those living under acute structural violence. This observation already anticipates one of the central tensions that will be developed in greater detail later.

1.3 The Patient Centering of Taoism

The Tao Te Ching, attributed to Lao Tse and composed around the third century BCE, contains one of the most explicit anti-war passages in classical Chinese literature. The text does not condemn weapons for their effectiveness, but for what they reveal about those who use them; it regards them as ill-omened instruments, foreign to the good man, and states that whoever delights in killing men cannot prevail in the world.

This stance rests on Taoism's central concept, *wu wei*, or “non-action”, which is not equivalent to passivity but to the renunciation of forcing the natural course of things. Applied to violence, *wu wei* suggests that true strength does not impose itself, but yields: “the soft overcomes the hard” is one of the recurring formulas, and the favored image is water, which does not fight obstacles but surrounds them and, over time, erodes them. “There is nothing in the world softer and weaker than water, yet nothing surpasses it in overcoming the firm and the hard, for nothing can take its place” (Lao Tse, 2006, p. 303; 43).

The Taoist rejection of violence derives from a cosmology: the harmony between yin and yang, as the dynamic equilibrium of the universe, of which war is a disturbance that, sooner or later, turns back against whoever provokes it. Of the sage it is clearly said: “he competes with no one, and therefore no one in the world is able to compete with him” (Lao Tse, 2006, p. 149; A2 29). That absence of competition renders violence unnecessary.

It is worth considering, however, the distance between the intellectual evidence of a principle and the effective capacity to live in accordance with it. Wu wei should not, however, be confused with resignation or with the absence of strategy. The ideal Taoist ruler is not one who imposes his will by force, but one capable of absorbing social conflict without reproducing it —a figure that resonates, historical and conceptual distances notwithstanding, with the critique Arendt would level centuries later against the arbitrary exercise of state power.

It is interesting to note the possible interaction between peace and violence that follows from reflections on complementary opposites: “being and non-being engender one another, difficult and easy bring about one another, long and short shape one another, high and low complete one another, tone and sound harmonize

with one another, front and back follow one another —this is a constant law” (Lao Tse, 2006, p. 309; 46 A9). If this is so, there is no way to eradicate violence completely, since it interacts, in a certain sense, with peace —as if one were always to be expected to be accompanied by the other.

Taoism also distinguishes between the Tao Te Ching, as a philosophical text, and the later development of Taoism as an organized religion (from the second century CE onward), which, at various points in Chinese history, actively engaged in armed insurrections and the religious legitimation of emperors. This bifurcation between philosophical Taoism (Daojia) and religious, institutional Taoism (Daojiao) anticipates a pattern that will repeat, with variations, across most of the traditions examined here: the distance between the foundational text and its later historical instrumentalization.

Both in Taoist philosophy and in Taoist religious practice, central importance is attributed to awareness of the center, or centering. “In this form of meditation, attention to the external world gradually withdraws, until the practitioner ceases to be attached to external sights, sounds, and events. When the causes of thoughts, emotions, and sensations cease to stir the mind, it grows still and centering can begin” (Wong, 1998, p. 225). Returning to the center does not mean withdrawing from the external, but including it from within wholeness. It is precisely there that everything looks different.

1.4 The Norse Example: Managing Enmity

Under the label “paganism” is grouped an enormous diversity of polytheistic, pre-Christian traditions—Norse, Celtic, Greco-Roman, Slavic—that do not share a unified doctrine on violence. For this reason, rather than generalizing, we will focus on a representative and textually documented case: the ancient Norse tradition, as preserved in the *Hávamál* [The Sayings of the High One], part of the Poetic Edda.

The *Hávamál* is not a philosophical treatise, but a collection of practical maxims on coexistence, hospitality, and prudence attributed to Odin. Unlike the traditions examined above, it does not propose overcoming enmity, but managing it prudently: it counsels loyalty toward the friend and extreme caution toward whoever does not inspire trust, and warns that “Crooked and far is the road to a foe, / Though his house on the highway be” (*Hávamál*, 1923, stanza 34), while shortcuts always lead to the friend.

This ethic is not pacifist: ancient Norse culture valued reputation earned in combat and considered vengeance a duty of family honor. Nevertheless, the *Hávamál*

also contains a sober reflection on the fleetingness of wealth and of life itself, set against the one thing that endures: the fame of one's own deeds after death (Hávamál, 1923, stanza 77). Violence, in this framework, is not fought for an ideal of inner peace, as in yoga or Buddhism, but is instead regulated by a code of honor that distinguishes legitimate violence—defense, justified vengeance—from treachery and the treacherous attack, considered the worst offenses.

It is significant that the Hávamál devotes its first stanza, the one that opens the entire poem, precisely to the threat of violence latent in any social encounter: “Within the gates ere a man shall go, / (Full warily let him watch,) / Full long let him look about him; / For little he knows where a foe may lurk, / And sit in the seats within” (Hávamál, 1923, stanza 1). This initial distrust is not gratuitous pessimism, but functional prudence in a culture where hospitality was, at the same time, a sacred duty and a constant risk: the guest had to be received with generosity, but the host could not take for granted the good faith of whoever arrived at his door.

This tension between hospitality and distrust structures much of ancient Norse social ethics: the poem distinguishes precisely between the true friend, with whom one should share everything without reservation, and the acquaintance of uncertain loyalty, toward whom it is wise to remain cordial without exposing one's own vulnerabilities. Unlike the ethic of universal reciprocity proposed by Christianity or Buddhism—loving the declared enemy—the ethic of the Hávamál is markedly particularist: it reserves generous treatment for the circle of proven trust, and openly acknowledges the existence of enemies toward whom that same generosity should not be extended. This principle of distinction, rather than gratuitous universality, may perhaps seem distrustful, but at least it is honest about its own sense of prudence and caution. In any case, it is entirely limited in scope, since it concerns social life, interaction, and coexistence with other people, leaving aside many other aspects of practical life that go beyond the mere consideration of friendship or enmity.

1.5 Free Will in Zoroastrianism

Founded by the prophet Zoroaster at some point between the eighteenth and sixth centuries BCE in the region of present-day Iran, Zoroastrianism offers one of the oldest cosmological frameworks for thinking about violence: a radical ethical dualism between two opposing principles.

According to the Gathas —the oldest hymns of the Avesta, attributed to Zoroaster himself— in the beginning there existed two twin spirits, one good and one evil in thought, word, and deed. These two principles are identified with Asha —truth,

cosmic order, righteousness— and with Druj —falsehood, deceit, chaos. Violence, in the Zoroastrian worldview, is not a social accident, but the concrete manifestation of Druj acting in the world through human decisions. This idea was later developed by Christianity, which erased Druj and put the forces of evil in its place.

What distinguishes this tradition from the previous ones is that it proposes neither the dissolution of conflict (as in Buddhist *Madhyamaka*) nor its prudent regulation (as in the *Hávamál*), but its cosmic politicization: every human being takes sides in a battle that transcends the individual. Zoroastrian ethics is not passive in the face of evil: it demands of the believer active participation on the side of Asha, which constitutes the ancient root of the idea of “just war” that will reappear, transformed, in Christianity and Islam.

A distinctive element of Zoroastrianism, one that separates it from dualistic fatalism, is that Zoroaster places the choice between Asha and Druj within the realm of human free will rather than a predetermined destiny. The same passage of the Gathas that describes the two twin spirits clarifies that, at the outset, they established life and non-life. In this sense, “the best will come to the person who propagates the true, thought-provoking message. This leads to Righteousness, Wholeness, and Immortality” (Gathas, 2010, song 4, 30). Violence, consequently, is not attributable to an inevitable cosmic fate, but to concrete human decisions that align, in each case, with one principle or the other: every lie, every act of cruelty, is a small tactical victory for Angra Mainyu (the Evil Spirit) in a cosmic war whose outcome, however, is already decided in favor of Ahura Mazda.

This eschatological structure —a cosmic battle between good and evil culminating in the definitive victory of light— exerted a considerable historical influence on the later development of Jewish apocalyptic thought during the period of the Babylonian and Persian exile and, through it, on certain currents of Christianity and Islam. The idea of a final judgment, a resurrection of the dead, and a final struggle between angelic and demonic forces appears far more clearly in Jewish texts written after contact with the Persian Achaemenid Empire, which suggests that Zoroastrian dualism between Asha and Druj may have served as one source, though not the only one, of these notions. This is a significant point: spiritual traditions do not develop in isolation, but through mutual contact, borrowing, and transformation throughout history.

The notion of free will and the accountability of human decisions for the world's unfolding is a significant and relevant contribution, insofar as it does not position a spiritual worldview as the party responsible for solving violence, since it falls to each person to wage that battle with their own strength and resources —even

when it concerns one's own wrongdoing and the harm inflicted on oneself.

Through “good thoughts, good words, and good deeds”, Zoroastrianism's central maxim, a person chooses their own destiny and influences the decisions of those around them. What one holds in the mind, what comes out of the mouth, and what is done with the hands is, therefore, a bulwark against violence. In the end, “whether one speaks the truth or not, whether one is wise or not, one expresses what is in one's heart and mind” (Gathas, 2010, song 4, 36).

1.6 Kabbalistic Reparation in Judaism

The Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) is not a pacifist text: numerous episodes narrate wars of conquest ordered by God. Nevertheless, the prophetic tradition introduces an eschatological vision of peace into the canon itself that contrasts with those war narratives. The most-cited passage is that of Isaiah, who announces a time when the nations “will beat their swords into plowshares” and “will no longer train for war” (Biblia de Jerusalén, 1998, Isaiah 2:4). The image does not describe immediate pacifism but a future messianic peace, conditioned on divine justice among nations.

Later rabbinic tradition developed the concept of shalom not as mere absence of conflict, but as fullness, wholeness, and relational well-being, and elevated the pursuit of peace to a central virtue: the rabbinic maxim calls for loving peace and pursuing it as an inalienable part of ethical life. For example, “the Talmud relates that when two scholars meet they are like warriors facing each other in battle, and that, nevertheless, they do not part until their disagreements have been resolved in peace and love” (Rabinovitch, 1976, p. 61).

Kabbalah —the mystical current of Judaism, whose foundational text is the Zohar [Book of Splendor], composed in thirteenth-century Spain and traditionally attributed to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, though modern scholarship by Scholem (1974) places it as the work of Moses de León— offers a symbolic reading of rupture and repair that proves especially fruitful for thinking about violence. In the sixteenth century, the kabbalist Isaac Luria developed in Safed the doctrine of *tzimtzum* (the divine contraction that makes Creation possible) and of *shevirat ha-kelim* (the “breaking of the vessels” that could not contain the divine light), a cosmic event that left the world fractured and scattered into fallen sparks. From this arises the concept of *tikkun* [repair]: the conviction that every human being, through their acts, words, and thoughts, participates in restoring the world's original fractures.

Read through the lens of violence and social reconstruction, Lurianic doctrine offers a singular image: the world itself is born already broken, and the human task

is not to prevent every fracture (which is impossible), but to participate actively in repairing it—a shift that moves the problem of violence from the question “how do we avoid it?” to the question “how do we repair what is already broken?” Responsibility, therefore, is fully human, inasmuch as “when men's conduct is evil, abandoning the precepts of the Law and transgressing before the Lord, they distance, so to speak, the Shekhinah [the feminine presence of the divine] from this world, and the Earth becomes corrupted, for the Divine Presence remains hidden and no longer dwells in it” (Bar Lojai, 2016, p. 203).

Between the biblical-prophetic plane and the mystical-kabbalistic plane lies a third stratum, perhaps the most influential in everyday Jewish life: the rabbinic ethical literature compiled in the Mishnah, particularly in the tractate known as Pirkei Avot [Ethics of the Fathers]. One of its most cited passages explains that “the world stands on three things: on justice, on truth, and on peace” (Pirké Avot, 1988, 1:18), placing peace on the same ontological level as justice and truth—not as an optional addition to them, but as one of the three pillars without which the world itself, literally, could not stand.

Rabbinic tradition also developed the figure of the peacemaker as an ethical model superior even to that of the warrior or the strict judge. In this view, peace is not a state that simply arises when conflict ceases, but something that must be deliberately pursued, including through direct mediation between opposing parties.

It is worth noting that these three layers of Judaism—the biblical-prophetic, the rabbinic-ethical, and the mystical-kabbalistic—are not successive stages that replace one another, but strata that coexist and remain in dialogue within the living tradition to this day. While they may agree on several points, among the principal ones is dispassion toward evil as a guiding principle; Heschel, the eminent twentieth-century Polish rabbi, makes this point forcefully: “to be stronger than evil, the moral imperative must be more powerful than the passion for evil. An abstract norm, an ethereal idea, is no match for the gravitational pull of the ego. Passion can only be subdued by a stronger passion” (Heschel, 1982, p. 254). It follows that overcoming evil is not the province of the faint-hearted, but of true warriors. The world cannot be repaired through passivity or isolation.

1.7 The Love of Christianity

Christianity inherits the Jewish tension between justice and peace but radicalizes it on one point: the explicit commandment to love one's enemy, formulated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as a break with the law of talion. The passage

is unequivocal: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Biblia de Jerusalén, 1998, Matthew 5:44). Unlike the prudent reciprocity of the Hávamál, evangelical ethics does not regulate the legitimate use of force: it suspends it as an ideal and replaces it with a logic of unilateral giving that expects no reciprocity.

The history of institutional Christianity, however, soon departed from that radicalism. Augustine of Hippo, in the fifth century, laid the foundations of the doctrine of just war (*bellum iustum*), which Thomas Aquinas (2001), in his *Summa Theologiae* (II-II, q. 40, a. 1), systematized into three necessary conditions for a war to be considered morally justified: 1) that it be declared by a legitimate authority (*auctoritas principis*) and not by a private individual or faction lacking recognized power; 2) that a just cause (*causa iusta*) exist, typically the redress of an injury or defense against aggression; 3) that a right intention (*intentio recta*) exist on the part of those undertaking it, so that the war does not serve as a pretext for ambition, cruelty, or enrichment.

This doctrine allowed the Church to justify crusades, wars of religion, and, later, colonial conflicts, and thus represents the institutional reverse of the evangelical commandment of peace and love, exemplifying a tension that will repeat itself in the other Abrahamic traditions: the distance between the foundational ideal and its later political management.

In contrast to this institutional tradition, some Christian movements, minoritarian but persistent throughout history, have insisted on taking the commandment to love one's enemy in its literal sense, denouncing the doctrine of just war as an institutional deviation from the evangelical core. This tension, far from being resolved, runs through the entirety of Christian history down to the present.

The commandment to “love your neighbor” does not specify what concrete actions love requires in a real dilemma. Two people can invoke the same commandment and arrive at opposite conclusions—for instance, on whether love demands radical tolerance or firm correction of the other. The precept orients, but does not decide. An ethic centered on love and forgiveness can, if misapplied, discourage legitimate resistance to abuse; for this reason, “turning the other cheek” has historically been used to demand submission from victims, not only virtue from aggressors. This is the risk that various currents of liberation theology have pointed out within Christianity itself.

1.8 The Struggle in Islam

Islam articulates its relationship with violence through the concept of jihad, which in Arabic literally means “effort” or “struggle”, and which the tradition distinguishes on two planes. The so-called lesser jihad refers to the effort, including armed combat, in defense of the Muslim community. The most cited Quranic passage in this regard authorizes fighting, but under an explicit principle of proportionality: “fight in the way of God against those who fight you, but do not transgress, for God does not love transgressors” (Corán, 2005, 2:190). Implicit in the text is a principle of proportionality in the use of force: armed struggle is authorized in defense of the community, but explicitly limited, so that it does not constitute an open authorization for violence, but for defense. Alongside this lesser jihad, the Islamic tradition —especially Sufism, its mystical current— develops the notion of the greater jihad: the inner struggle against one's own ego (*nafs*) and its destructive passions, considered by much of the tradition as the decisive struggle. Sufism, with figures such as Rumi or Al-Hallaj, radicalized this idea to the point of proposing *fana* —the annihilation of the individual ego in union with the divine— as the culmination of the spiritual path. In this way, only those who have dissolved their own attachment and inner enmity can, according to this current, cease projecting violence outward.

From this it follows that wrongdoing, as well as excess in the use of force, is a decision made by the person. Even in the words of Rumi (1996), “for man there exist only two states: either he wills, or he does not will. Not willing is not a characteristic of man: it would mean that he is empty of himself and has ceased entirely to exist” (p. 168). A starting point for confronting violence would be to calmly and attentively examine what one desires and what one chooses.

The Quran is explicit in limiting, not merely authorizing, recourse to force. It states clearly that if the adversary ceases hostilities, retaliation must likewise cease: “let there be no hostility except against the wrongdoers” (Corán, 2005, 2:193). Later Islamic legal tradition (*fiqh*) developed, from these verses and from the documented practice of the Prophet Muhammad, a detailed body of restrictions on legitimate conduct in combat: the prohibition against attacking those who do not directly participate in hostilities (women, children, the elderly, clergy devoted to worship), the prohibition against destroying crops and water sources, and the requirement that the lesser jihad may only be declared by a legitimate authority, never on individual initiative.

Such legal restrictions, close in content to the modern principles of international humanitarian law, contrast sharply with the interpretations that certain

contemporary extremist groups have made of the concept of jihad, deliberately ignoring both the Quranic principle of proportionality and the body of law that Islamic tradition developed to limit it. This is understood considering the hermeneutic responsibility that Sufism attributes to the individual: “The human mind is an organism in which what is absorbed will be food for one man and poison for another. This effect depends on the mind of the reader far more than on the book” (Shah, 1988, p. 290).

Ibn Arabi (2002), one of Islam's most influential mystical thinkers, for his part developed a doctrine of the “oneness of being” (*wahdat al-wujud*), according to which all reality is, ultimately, a manifestation of the divine; from this perspective, harming another human being amounts, in a literal and not merely metaphorical sense, to harming a manifestation of the very same divine reality that the aggressor shares with the victim. This metaphysical insight —the ultimate identity between self and other— is one of the key concepts of the mystical path, along with divine love, the annihilation of the ego, and the oneness of being (Schimmel, 2002).

Rumi (1996), for his part, understands that not everything can be metaphysical, and that the context or environment surrounding people can shape how they interpret what they hear. In this sense, “for the ear, continuous repetition acts like sight and produces the same effect” (p. 270). Consequently, in this survey of the relationship between spirituality and violence, the social aspect —or, properly, the political question— cannot be left aside.

2. Violence and the State

Violence always occurs within a social context. Citizenship, in turn, is organized around the boundaries of the community or the state. For this reason, violence always arises within the framework of a specific state or sociopolitical organization. Among the state's main functions is that of constituting itself as the “organizing entity of the population within a territory [with the aim of] ensuring the integrity of the human beings under its charge” (Gutiérrez et al., 2010, p. 106). Consequently, there is a correspondence between the organization of the state and violence, one that transcends the spiritual dimension. If violence affects the totality of the person, it cannot be resolved exclusively from one of its dimensions.

This does not imply that individuals' conduct is the direct responsibility of the state or of the organized system that structures and delimits their interactions; what can be affirmed is that “much of what happens can be considered violence that results from the absence of law” (Williams, 2010, p. 17), or rather, from the lack

of a culture of legality that promotes respect for the law. Likewise, when the state shows favoritism toward certain sectors of the population, to the detriment of the rest of society, resentment arises, creating fertile ground for violence.

The link between violence and the state is as important as the one that exists between violence and politics. In the words of Arendt (2006), “no one engaged in thinking about history and politics can remain unaware of the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs, and it is at first glance rather surprising that violence has been singled out so seldom for special consideration” (p. 16). Thus, to a considerable extent, social violence results from the misuse of state power, not from inadequate spiritual practice on the part of individuals.

In most cases, “violence is exercised when power wanes, when the legitimacy of that power, which is founded on collective consent, disappears” (Bergman, 2012, p. 67). The negligent use of power, its absence, or its limited influence are factors that favor social hostility.

Another factor that triggers social discontent is labor exploitation. Drawing on the concepts of animal laborans and homo faber, Arendt (2003) clearly distinguished among different worker situations. The animal laborans refers to the person who remains occupied in an uncreative way, repeating procedures or behaviors, always bound by the logic of consumption; the homo faber, for its part, implies greater possibilities of initiative for the worker through creative making.

Remaining without protest in the face of the injustices typical of a life in the style of the animal laborans is to permit violence. If the power of the state manifests itself in a mediocre way, or if the labor context limits creative potential, personal power should assert itself to prevent violence.

This last point marks the transition to the following section: if structural violence depends to a great extent on the use of state power and on the material conditions of life, it is worth rigorously asking whether spiritual proposals have anything to say in the face of a problem that, as we have seen, far exceeds the isolated subject.

3. Limits of Spiritualities in the Face of Violence

Subjecting spiritualities—in the plural, not spirituality in the singular—to critical examination does not seek to discredit them, but to gauge their real scope honestly. This is not only to understand their limits, but also to understand and appreciate their possibilities. To accomplish this, we will address four considerations: a) the paradox of legitimate violence; b) evasion through spirituality; c) the gap between

individual consciousness and structural violence; d) the historical instrumentalization of spirituality.

Let us begin by acknowledging that none of the traditions reviewed in the first section upholds an absolute pacifism without exceptions. The Bhagavad Gita justifies violence in self-defense; Christian just war doctrine, systematized by Aquinas, requires legitimate authority, just cause, and right intention; the Quranic lesser jihad permits combat under the principle of proportionality. This convergence raises a problem: if the traditions admit exceptions to their own foundational principle, it is worth asking whether nonviolence functions less as an ethical absolute and more as a regulative ideal, or a horizon that orients action without claiming to exhaust it. In other words: none of the spiritualities resolves violence; all of them administer it, establishing moral boundaries on when and how it may be legitimately exercised.

Another problem we must point out is the attitude of reducing personal, communal, and social problems to an exclusively spiritual exercise. While it is true that Buddhist Madhyamaka proposes overcoming violence by understanding the emptiness of the thoughts that originate it, and that Sufism proposes the annihilation of the ego as the dissolution of all enmity, there is a risk of displacing the problem of violence from the relational or structural plane to the plane of individual consciousness.

We will call this operation spiritual bypassing: the use of spiritual ideas and practices to avoid confronting unresolved psychological wounds or concrete structural injustices, substituting the necessary work (therapeutic, political, communal) with a conceptual reinterpretation that declares “illusory” what is, for the person suffering it, entirely real. Telling the victim of structural violence (racism, human trafficking, gender-based violence) that their suffering stems from an attachment to illusory thoughts, or that it is enough to dissolve the ego for violence to cease, risks becoming a sophisticated form of denial rather than a path to healing. Of course, the worst outcome occurs when the very person judges themselves responsible for what happens to them, believing everything is a consequence of their insufficient spiritual advancement. Seeing one's abuser as a life teacher is not “vibrating high”; it is, rather, psychopathology.

What is stated here does not invalidate spiritual introspection as a legitimate and valuable resource for personal healing, but a rigorous distinction must be drawn between when the dissolution of attachment is genuinely liberating and when it functions as an alibi for not confronting a violence that, besides having internal roots, has concrete material and political causes.

On the other hand, it must be distinguished that the development of individual

consciousness, and the consequent reduction of violence in one's personal life, in no way guarantee the eradication of structural, social-order violence. None of the spiritual traditions reviewed offers, strictly speaking, a satisfactory theory of how the transformation of thousands or millions of individual consciousnesses translates into the transformation of political and economic structures, so that these become more just and cease to be breeding grounds for violence.

Gandhi's case is, in this sense, revealing and at the same time exceptional: his application of *ahimsa* to civil resistance demonstrates that spirituality can scale to certain heights in politics, but this occurred through a deliberate organizational and media strategy, not through the mere multiplication of awakened consciousnesses. Herein lies a lesson: spirituality affects structural violence only when it translates into concrete forms of collective action, not solely through inner transformation, one person at a time.

We must acknowledge that no spiritual tradition has been immune to its own violent instrumentalization: communal Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the Crusades and the Christian wars of religion, jihadist readings of the Quran that deliberately ignore the text's own condition of proportionality, or the political use of religious Taoism under the Chinese imperial dynasties. This observation is not an *ad hominem* argument against the traditions themselves, but rather a weighty philosophical warning: no doctrinal corpus, however pacifist in its original formulation, is immune to later violent appropriation. The distance between the foundational text and its concrete historical use therefore deserves the same critical attention as its doctrinal content.

4. Can Spirituality Resolve Violence?

No, and it should not seek to. Even the mere proposition is disproportionate if what is desired is to eradicate violence from the world entirely. Prophets have come and gone; some have proclaimed themselves gods; various religions have become institutionalized, and in no case has the problem of violence been resolved. History and the evidence confirm this. Nevertheless, this does not mean that spirituality makes no significant contributions in certain cases, provided it is recognized that its mission is not to solve social problems without the intervention of citizens and the state.

To qualify this answer, seven arguments will now be presented in support of spirituality as a complement to, or reinforcement of, the struggle against violence, along with five further arguments alluding to its incompatibility with that task.

4.1 What Spirituality Does Achieve in the Face of Violence

Diagnoses that converge independently: traditions with no historical contact with one another have arrived, through distinct conceptual paths, at the same conclusion: violence is born of attachment, of the ego, or of the illusion of separation between self and other. This diagnosis deserves to be taken seriously as a genuine intuition about the human condition, rather than dismissed as a mere coincidence.

It offers practical tools, not only doctrine: unlike a legal code or a political theory, many spiritual traditions propose techniques that can be trained—metta meditation, the discipline of yoga, the Christian examination of conscience, Sufi dhikr—whose effects on emotional reactivity and violent impulsivity can be verified.

Political influence when organized: Gandhi's case shows that the spirituality of nonviolence can become a historical force capable of defeating an empire, and the example of Martin Luther King Jr., advised by Rabbi Abraham Heschel, confirms that this transition was not an isolated case, but a replicable pattern.

It contributes considerations for the reduction of violence: the Quranic principle of proportionality, the Christian doctrine of just war, and the respect for prisoners and non-combatants found in several of these traditions have functioned as real brakes on the use of violence, even though they have not managed to prevent it entirely. A world with such brakes is, verifiably, less brutal than one without them.

It strengthens ethical communities: the great spiritual traditions create communities sustained by shared values such as compassion, forgiveness, hospitality, solidarity, and mutual responsibility. When these practices are collectively embodied, they strengthen the social fabric and reduce conditions that favor violence. Spirituality, in this sense, can help rebuild deteriorated bonds and generate cultures of peace that transcend individual experience.

It offers meaning in the face of suffering: violence tends to reproduce itself when pain gives way to resentment, to the desire for revenge, or to the dehumanization of the other. Spiritual traditions offer frameworks of meaning that make it possible to work through suffering without necessarily converting it into aggression. They do not eliminate pain, but they can prevent it from becoming a new source of violence, favoring processes of reconciliation, forgiveness, or inner repair.

It shows that peace is an ongoing practice: spiritual traditions demonstrate that peace is not a spontaneous condition but the result of constant vigilance over one's thoughts, emotions, and actions. This understanding prevents peace from being regarded as a definitive achievement and turns it instead into a daily practice of self-correction.

4.2 The Limits of Spirituality in the Face of Violence

The transformation of individual consciousness does not entail structural change: much of contemporary violence depends on the use of state power, on labor exploitation, and on the absence of a culture of legality. None of the traditions reviewed convincingly explains how the sum of transformed consciousnesses produces, by itself, just institutions.

Spiritual experience does not guarantee ethical conduct: it is not enough to follow a few rules or adopt certain beliefs; spiritual experience can coexist with fanaticism, narcissism, or moral self-justification when it is not accompanied by critical thinking, self-criticism, and ethical responsibility. Consequently, spirituality, by itself, does not constitute a sufficient guarantee against violence. Even within religious life itself, in monasteries and convents, various forms of violence occur; referring to oneself as a spiritual person does not guarantee a change in attitude.

There is no universal spirituality: spiritual traditions agree on some diagnoses, but differ profoundly regarding the ultimate nature of reality, the origin of evil, the role of God, the meaning of the ego, or the legitimate use of force. If the spiritualities themselves cannot reach agreement on the ultimate causes of violence, it is difficult to maintain that spirituality, in a general sense, can offer a universal solution to the problem.

Violence responds to biological and psychological dimensions that spirituality does not encompass on its own: factors such as personality disorders, severe trauma, neurochemical alterations, or certain psychiatric conditions require specific clinical, educational, and social interventions. Spirituality can accompany these processes, but can hardly replace them.

The practice of spirituality will never be universal: although some individuals manage to make progress on the path of eradicating violence in their own lives and within themselves, the great majority of the citizenry in every country of the world does not, and will not, know the benefits of spiritual practices.

On these grounds it can be admitted that spirituality itself can be useful on the path toward resolving violence, both toward oneself and toward others, but only after much personal work and social and communal understanding, not from the contemplative isolation that dissolves attachment without touching the surrounding world, but from a spirituality that transcends the merely spiritual in order to become incarnate: one that descends from meditation to community organizing, from the temple to the concrete repair of harm, from the dissolution of the ego to the construction of less violent institutions. Only that world-centered spirituality

has any real possibility of contributing to the subject before us.

Conclusions

Abstaining, physically or mentally, from exercising violence against others or against nature is only part of the task, which continues as one discovers within oneself the root of that impulse and uproots it. That inner task, however necessary, is not enough: violence has material and political roots that no dissolution of attachment, by itself, can undo.

Philosophy, in its intimate sense as the desire for wisdom and love of it, is also a bulwark for achieving nonviolence. The less we exercise the right to philosophize, to find reasons and coherence in our lives, the more motives push us toward hatred and aggression. Such philosophy must be willing to examine its own contradictions, including those of the traditions it loves, rather than offering them as closed answers.

Spirituality does not resolve violence, but it can accompany us honestly and without easy promises as we confront it. What remains, then, is a task, not a formula: that of a spirituality that does not content itself with pacifying the interior of whoever practices it, but dares to descend into the public square, the street, the wounded community, and there sets to work shoulder to shoulder with justice, memory, and reparation. That is the only spirituality that can be proposed as an alternative to violence: not the one that flees the world to find peace, but the one that finds peace to return to the world. And if there is one thing the author can affirm without ambiguity, it is that as long as there is a single consciousness willing to turn its own wound into care for the wound of another, violence will never have the last word.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

During the preparation stage, the author used ChatGPT Plus, from 1 to 6 September 2026, to review the grammar of the translation in the abstract section. This use did not affect sections, data, code, images or other elements. The outputs were verified and validated through the author's own comparison. No personal, sensitive or confidential data were entered into unauthorized tools. The author reviewed and approved the final content and assumes full responsibility for its originality, accuracy, integrity, references, data, methods, results and conclusions.

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