

**José-Antonio Orosco. *César Chávez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence*.  
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. 151 pp.**

César Chávez, in my opinion, is one of the great American spiritual leaders in the twentieth century. As the head of the mostly Mexican and Filipino farm workers movement beginning in the early 1960s, Chávez accomplished what had never been done before –successfully organize farm workers– but also in his praxis and reflections displayed a profound spirituality based on his deep Catholic faith. This spiritual side of Chávez, despite the voluminous literature on him and the farm workers, has not been focused as much as it should be. You cannot understand Chávez, the labor and civil rights leader, without also understanding the spiritual side to him. Chávez, himself, provided the clue to this understanding when after many years of struggle he stated: “Today I don’t think I could base my will to struggle on cold economics or on some political doctrine. I don’t think there would be enough to sustain me. For me the base must be faith.” The base must be faith –that said it all and yet so many have missed this over the years.

Fortunately, this is beginning to change. Besides John Frederick Dalton’s sweeping *The Moral Vision of César Chávez* (Orbis Books, 2003) and my own edited volume *The Gospel of César Chávez: My Faith In Action* (Sheed & Ward, 2007), there is now also José-Antonio Orosco’s stimulating volume on Chávez and what he called “the common sense of nonviolence.” This is a very useful and manageable volume that can easily be used in classes, but, more importantly, is an important philosophical analysis of Chávez’s best-known spiritual value, that of nonviolence. A professor of philosophy at Oregon State University, Orosco brings his training to effectively shed new and important ways of re-examining Chávez’s stress on nonviolence. Indeed, Orosco, and I agree with him, calls Chávez a philosopher of nonviolence. One could modify this by perhaps suggesting that he represents an organic philosopher just as he was an organic intellectual or “community intellectual” (a term Orosco borrows from my work not on Chávez but on Bert Corona, the long-time Chicano labor and community organizer) based on his many other political and social views. In fact, Orosco also correctly labels Chávez a social critic.

Besides providing a useful although short introductory biography of Chávez for those less familiar with him, Orosco then develops certain chapters to more systematically explore Chávez’s nonviolence. One of the most excellent chapters compares Chávez’s nonviolence with that of such proponents of revolutionary violence such as Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, and Ward Churchill. Although Chávez, himself, never contrasted his views with these three, nevertheless, his views on the use of violence are in sharp disagreement.

Most importantly, as Orosco notes, Chávez always believed that violence represented a sign of weakness rather than strength and that it further reflected a lack of organization that through the use of nonviolence could achieve the goals desired but nonviolently. In a profound observation, Orosco notes that Chávez believed that the use of violence even in wars of anti-colonial liberation would lay the foundation not for a democratic society but an authoritarian one. Violence once released would not end with national liberation but would turn inward and lead to the use of violence by the revolutionary elite against its own people. Here Orosco develops Chávez's belief in the possibilities of conversion to nonviolence. In still another section, Orosco emphasizes one of the most profound characteristics of nonviolence attached to Chávez: his belief that nonviolence was not a strategy but a moral principle that not only guided his life but that of the farm workers movement. This linked Chávez with Gandhi whose life he had studied. Yet, in a fascinating revision, Orosco further observes that where Chávez differed from the great spiritual leader of India was in the farm workers leader acceptance of the use of nonviolent "sabotage" by the farm workers in their fight against the growers. By sabotage, Chávez meant worker slowdowns in the fields, picketing, and, of course, the use of the boycott that proved to be an indispensable tool that forced the growers to negotiate the acceptance of a farm workers union. Sabotage was what was implied when Chávez used the term "militant nonviolence." In another very good chapter, Orosco, here influenced by the work of Jorge Mariscal, examines how Chávez extended his concept of nonviolence to include redefining machismo. Rather than the traditional and perhaps more violent-prone traditional machismo, Chávez through his personal example provided an alternative form of maleness centered on nonviolent action. And in still another provocative chapter, Orosco compares the concept of time in both Chávez and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He notes that while both men embraced nonviolent social change, both had different views on the pace of that change. King believed, according to Orosco, that into the 1960s the historical time for civil rights had arrived and hence change was indispensable in that historical moment less it not come again soon. By contrast, Chávez had a less urgent view of time believing, as he often said, that time was on the side of the poor and that time was what the poor had in abundance. For Chávez, this meant that over time the poor would find their liberation and that this time would be needed to seek out the conversion of still others to nonviolent social change. Time and conversion represented what Chávez referred to as "the common sense of nonviolence."

Above all, as Orosco correctly brings out, Chávez believed that nonviolence would lead to a more democratic society in the United States and elsewhere. As a guiding moral principle based on the acceptance of the humanity of all and that all were children of God, nonviolence socialized its adherents to accept the linkage between nonviolence

and democracy or what Orosco refers to as “radical democracy” based on a respect for all peoples’ rights and dignity especially the marginalized. In the end, Chávez as a moral philosopher and spiritual leader was addressing not only his constituents but also all Americans and all people elsewhere struggling for their liberation.

In reflecting on Orosco’s fine study, I find that he might have probed more specifically into the Catholic nature of Chávez’s nonviolence and of his spirituality in general. Chávez’s spiritual and moral values were not just generic ones; they were steeped in his deep Catholic religiosity. Chávez was Catholic just as other great spiritual leaders evolve out of their own specific faiths. This does not mean that Chávez did not convey values such as nonviolence that connected with a wider audience, but it does mean that the source of his nonviolence lay in his foundational Catholicism and this is where Orosco might have explored more.

Although they do not detract from the overall significant impact of this study, some mistakes of historical information exist. For example, Orosco incorrectly notes that Chávez’s and the farm workers famous march (that Chávez called a *peregrinación* or religious pilgrimage) from Delano to Sacramento in 1966 lasted a week while in fact it lasted 25 days. Orosco also suggests that not until the 1980s did Chávez transform the farm workers movement from a labor struggle to a broader social movement that included environmental issues. Yet, already in the 1960s Chávez had observed that his movement represented a social revolution aimed at bringing human dignity and social justice for the farm workers. Moreover, he then also expressed concerns over environmental issues such as pesticides. Orosco also errors in stating that the Plan de Santa Barbara that inspired the Chicano student movement and the founding of Chicano Studies programs in California and elsewhere was drafted in 1970 when in fact this occurred in 1969. My graduate students in my Chicano Studies seminar where we read and discussed the Orosco text observed that while his study clearly revealed the author’s training in philosophy and his conversation with other moral philosophers, it did not reveal his connections to Chicano Studies nor his conversation with Chicano Studies scholars including those who have worked on Chávez and the farm workers struggle.

These inaccuracies and omissions, however, should not detract from what represents the first significant full analysis of the nonviolence philosophy of the most recognized Chicano/Latino figure in the history of the United States and a further and welcomed attention to the spirituality of César Chávez.

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