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There is no way to peace, peace is the way.

—A. J. Muste

Course Objectives

This course has two basic objectives. The first takes as its starting point that the American educational system leaves students largely ignorant of the rich and complex history of nonviolence. The second course objective starts with the assumption that even those people who are knowledgeable about nonviolence in theory and practice rarely are aware of the range of expressions of nonviolence in different religious and cultural traditions. Religiously-based, nonviolent activists may be less-informed about secular, and even anti-religious, philosophies of nonviolence, as well as the philosophies and underlying metaphysical and ethical presuppositions in other traditions. For some people, nonviolence is a matter of a choice of tactics in a social campaign; for others it is a matter of personal spiritual practice and diet.

While they may have heard the names of Martin Luther King, Jr., Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, and the Dalai Lama, most students know little of the content of these men's thoughts and actions beyond some safe generalities. King's opposition to the Vietnam War, and Gandhi's trenchant critique of capitalism, for example, rarely appear in the standard hagiographies. Nor will most students have heard of other important figures in the history of nonviolent action such as A. J. Muste, Dorothy Day, Susan B. Anthony, Ammon Hennacy, Alice Paul, Jeannette Rankin, Bayard Rustin, Cesar Chavez, and Barbara Deming. The history of active resistance to every war in this century, and the role of radical pacifists in the labor, women's, and civil rights movements are all vital parts of American history that are left out of the standard high school and college textbooks. Many students come away from an exposure to this alternative history with a broadened understanding of American history and a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which values such as justice and equality have been expressed and pursued in that history. For students who define themselves as Christian, reading a discussion of a Biblical basis for nonviolence such as that provided by Walter Wink in his *Engaging the Powers* (Fortress Press, 1992) can come as a revelation. The study of history provides us with the tools to respond to our own situations; studying this nonviolent alternative history of the U. S. (and global civilization more broadly) can provide students with new ways of thinking about and responding to problems they will inevitably confront in their lives.

Diverse Resources

There are several useful resources to help meet this objective of providing students with a fuller historical sense. Robert Cooney and Helen Michalowski's *The Power of the People: Active Nonviolence in the United States*

(New Society Publishers, 1987) is an excellent, well-illustrated history of nonviolence in American history, with a thorough coverage of both the religious and nonreligious expressions of nonviolence. It is unfortunately out of print, but well worth the effort of arranging to photocopy it for class use. A second excellent book, long out of print but now reissued in an updated edition, is Staughton and Alice Lynd's classic reader of original sources,

Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History

(Orbis, 1995). With entries from colonial times through the Gulf war and contemporary environmental activism, this is a wonderful teaching resource.

Another resource is to call upon outside speakers. The first time I offered this course, at Columbia University, I was fortunate to have access to a speakers fund, and so was able to bring into the class representatives of the International Mahavir Jain Mission, Office for Tibet, Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Fellowship of Conciliation, Catholic Workers, American Friends Service Committee, War Resisters League, and Peace Games. But there are few places where, with a little research, one can't find people either currently engaged in nonviolent social movements, or else who are former activists or resisters.

A further resource is to have the students read publications concerning contemporary nonviolent campaigns. I urge students to explore [The Nonviolence Web](#) . I assign issues of magazines such as

The Turning Wheel

(Buddhist Peace Fellowship),

Reconciliation

(FOR),

Catholic Worker

, and

Nonviolent Activist

(WRL). Many students start these readings with trepidation and suspicion, and are relieved to learn that nonviolent activists "are people just like us." Further, they provide students with resources for further exploration of nonviolence after the course has ended.

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Course Methods, Practices, and Outcomes

As indicated above, the second objective of the course expands the students' perceptions of the goals, expressions, and metaphysical underpinnings of nonviolence as a global phenomenon.

Christian activists, for whom nonviolence is usually a matter of reducing human violence against other humans, and whose worldview traditionally posits that only humans have souls, may not have been exposed to the Jain emphasis on nonviolence as a matter of diet intended to prevent harming any living being. Animal rights and vegetarianism are debated issues within Christian and western secular nonviolent circles; being vegetarian is a sine quo non for Jains. According to the Jain worldview, all beings, even some things considered inanimate by Western metaphysics, are seen as the bodies of souls. The ethical bases for nonviolence therefore extend well beyond the human species, and bring nonviolence into direct dialogue with environmental concerns. At the same time, Jains rarely have been exposed to the distinctly Western and Abrahamic understandings of justice that underlie American nonviolent campaigns. The Jain emphasis that violence can be done equally through action, speech, and thought provides some challenging new ways to think about violence for some students. The focus on breathing meditation taught by the Buddhist activist Thich Nhat Hanh, which aims at restructuring the very neuro-psychological bases of one's being in a nonviolent manner, can be empowering for other students. Ways in which nonviolent thought and action have in recent decades extended to cover issues of gender relations and environmental relations further expand the scope of the course.

The course aims at both intellectual and experiential understanding of nonviolence. Intellectual understanding comes from the readings, in-class discussions, and the research paper. Each student is called upon to research and write a long case-study research paper. In this paper, the student must first provide the background to the topic — the "Who?"; "What?"; "When?"; "Why?"; and "Where?"; necessary for a thorough understanding. The second part of the paper involves an investigation of the tactics and strategies, both nonviolent and violent, employed in efforts to bring the conflict to a conclusion. The third part then involves a detailed analysis of the successes and failures, as well as an exploration of possible alternative tactics and strategies. The case-study approach is modeled on the many such case studies in Gene Sharp's classic *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Porter Argent, 1973). Some students choose to research historical campaigns, some to research contemporary issues, and some even to use the paper as a way to evaluate a campaign or organization with which they are presently involved.

The experiential component is layered throughout the course. For every class session each student must write a 1-2 page paper in response to the readings. The assignment for most of these is intentionally open-ended, allowing for the student to choose his or her own way of responding. The papers are graded on a simple modified pass-fail basis: four points for an on-time paper, one point for a late paper, and zero points if the paper is more than one week late or clearly irrelevant to the course material. As teacher, my comments can then be aimed at improving the students understanding, and engaging in extended conversations about nonviolence, rather than a grade-oriented evaluation. Some of these response papers involve more structured experiential assignments. For example, while the students are reading about Jain understandings of ahimsa, they conduct an "experiment with Jainism." For one week they

are to attempt to refrain from *all* forms of violence towards other human beings, including (but not limited to) anger, hate, gossip, personal criticism, evil thoughts, jealousy, and physical violence. In accordance with Jainism, they try to remove violence from speech, mind, and action; and try not to support others if they engage in violent speech, thought, or conduct. They are to maintain a record of their experiences. When reading about Buddhism, in particular the works of Thich Nhat Hanh, for one week they are to attempt to observe the sixth precept of the Order of Interbeing: Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to penetrate and transform them when they are still seeds in your consciousness. As soon as they arise, turn your attention to your breath in order to see and understand the nature of your anger and hatred and the nature of the persons who have caused your anger and hatred.

I find that these "experiments" are among the most popular parts of the course. For some students they can prove transformative and empowering.

A final point is that this is a fun course to teach. The readings and experiments allow me a chance to reevaluate my own sense of self as educator. Reading the students' responses to the texts and experiments provides the satisfaction of seeing some students gaining a more confident sense of their own voices, and discovering that thoughts and feelings concerning nonviolence which they might have thought were out of the norm in fact have a long and rich heritage.