

# peace pledge union

## NON-VIOLENCE

This brief introduction to the thought and practice of nonviolence is of particular interest for teachers/ tutors of English and History at secondary level and beyond.

Some interesting work has been published on 'alternative history'. Whatever value this approach may or may not have, it works extremely well as a learning aid, stimulating students to both research and creative thought. When nonviolence is offered as a projected alternative to past wars and present conflict, 'What if...' lines of thought can be particularly fruitful.

Nonviolence means abstaining from the use of physical force to achieve an aim. It is a philosophy, a principle, and a practice. As an ethical philosophy, it upholds the view that moral behaviour excludes the use of violence; as a political philosophy it maintains that violence is self-perpetuating and can never provide a means to a securely peaceful end. As a principle, it supports the pacifist position that war and killing are never justifiable. As a practice it has been used by pacifists and non-pacifists alike to achieve social change and express resistance to oppression. For pacifists, of course, all demonstrations of their view and protests against violence must by definition be nonviolent.

Historically, nonviolent practices have included civil disobedience, non-cooperation, passive resistance or nonresistance, and nonviolent direct action. The first American Quakers, whose religion was pacifist, practised civil disobedience when they refused to pay taxes supporting the British war effort during the American War of Independence. During the Second World War, Danish shipbuilders practised non-cooperation when they feigned misunderstanding and worked so poorly that their ship could not be used in war. Passive resistance, 'turning the other cheek' and refusing to hit back, has been practised and promoted by followers of both Jesus and the Buddha. Tolstoy preached nonresistance in its pacifist sense, meaning that one should rather die than kill. Nonviolent direct action has recently become a high-profile manifestation of nonviolent principles, as when protesters damage fighter planes and other weaponry destined for use in war or by oppressive regimes. Many such protesters, having given their principled reasons in court, have been acquitted.

Also associated with nonviolence is 'nonrecognition'. Some saintly people have paid no attention to hostile constraints and threats: a response that can prove to be literally disarming. Some peace-witnessing communities, such as the European Christian brotherhoods or the American Amish, recognise a heavenly kingdom rather than any earthly ones, and accordingly opt to live apart from the state. Some people carry their freedom within them, which liberates their perceptions: 'stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage'. Nonrecognition is also a technique used in nonviolent protest. When Serb authorities closed down the Albanian schools in Kosovo, the teachers refused to 'recognise' the ban on their work and quietly continued it elsewhere. Nonviolent activists do not 'recognise' tyranny, in that they regard it as illegitimate rule; they refuse to comply with it, and thus don't become its victims. Tolstoy refused to 'recognise' the enforced oath of allegiance to the state, which directly or indirectly commits the oath taker to violence, military or political.

'Violence' means more than just physical force. It means the effect of any power structure in oppressing or restricting or harassing the people who live in it. Many pacifists would agree that violence is part of the fabric of the state, indeed of any social system or relationship where there is domination. Such violence can be variously classified. 'Behavioural violence' ranges from the use of damaging physical force between individuals, through group violence, to civil and international war. 'Institutional violence' occurs when killing and brutality are written into the social system: apartheid is a conspicuous example, and so are all systems, large and small, that incorporate prejudice and oppression. 'Structural violence' is a force of which protesters against globalisation are particularly aware: here people are deprived of economic and social liberty by systems and organisations over which they have no control. Nonviolent activists are aware of the many faces of violence, and are continually alert to new ways of resisting it.

The view that nonviolence should be not only a philosophy or principle but also a whole way of life has been put into practice. Gandhi's aim was no less than to build a new society. To do this, you start at the roots. A community run on Gandhian lines must practise nonviolent behaviour and honest dealings. Its members are equal whatever their gender, religion, colour or caste. As they act according to the nonviolent principle in all aspects of daily life, so daily life becomes the embodiment of a nonviolent value system which benefits everyone and harms nobody. In such a society, Gandhians believe, other methods of direct resistance to violence and oppression can emerge naturally and effectively. Certainly Gandhi's ashram communities and thousands-strong protest campaigns provided a thirty-year experiment in nonviolent practices from which much has been learned and gained. (Gandhi's aim, of course, was for all India to be a nonviolent society; but for that his project needed much more time to prepare.) Many have been inspired by Gandhi's work. The Service for Peace and Justice movement, for example, across the world in Latin America, insists that the struggle against oppression and militarism must be nonviolent in the Gandhian manner: 'nonviolence is not a method of non-aggression, but rather a way of life'.

There's no doubt that nonviolence requires courage. Much of this courage goes unnoticed, being part of private actions in private lives. Some examples of it, however, reach the headlines, such as the unarmed civilians who faced armed troops and tanks while resisting invasion in Prague (1968), or while resisting government oppression in Beijing's Tiananmen Square (1989). It takes courage to risk attack from an army or from the security forces of one's own country. The black demonstrators for civil rights in America, or against apartheid in South Africa, knew this, but marched on.

The civil rights movement in America, led by Martin Luther King began with single personal acts of nonviolent resistance, but grew to involve thousands. Mass civilian action has a solidarity that gives strength to its participants, and is quite different from the mass hysteria of a violent crowd. Nonviolent resistance can include the boycotting of goods, services, agencies, institutions and aggressive individuals; strikes of workers, strikes in sympathy, sit-downs and sit-ins; non-payment of relevant taxes and licences; non-co-operation with aggressive rules and laws; working to rule or to the letter, and creating obstacles to every task a tyranny imposes; civil disobedience by individuals, groups and crowds; silent marches, consciousness-raising parades, subversive theatre performances; leaflets and speeches, fasts and vigils; concerted nonviolent gestures - such as everyone wearing similar headgear or lapel decorations, everyone lighting candles or orchestrating noise at the same fixed times.

In most recorded instances of nonviolent action, four kinds of people have stood out. The nonviolent stance of one kind is rooted in their religious beliefs, and it is these people who have been speaking for peace the longest, since before the ages of Buddha and Christ. Workers are another kind, whose inspiration and motivation is mainly political; they have realised that nonviolent strategies often stand a much better chance of success (and a lasting one) than armed revolt. The miners' strike that led to a mainly peaceful change of government in Belgrade (2000) is a case in point. Thirdly, there is the distinguished roll-call of conscientious objectors and war-resisters, especially linked to the two world wars but still in some countries struggling to bring about an end to military conscription.

The fourth group is teachers. 'An education for peace is an education for co-operation, for caring and sharing, for the use of nonviolence in conflict-solving,' says a peace education expert: 'but an education that fosters competition, conquest, aggression and violence is an education for war.' Teachers world-wide are reported to be promoting nonviolent values, in the classroom by raising these issues, in the school by establishing procedures of mediation and reconciliation, in the community by upholding the right to a nonviolent education and education in nonviolence.

Teachers have also been exemplary in practising nonviolent resistance to aggression. All round the world there are conflict-zones in which teachers educate the young in almost impossible conditions. In Afghanistan women teachers are continuing covertly to teach girls, though the fundamentalist ruling regime forbids it. In Burundi, the Peace School brought together children from all backgrounds, encouraged them to imagine a world without war, and in the process stimulated local moves towards reconciliation in which the children took part. There have been other kinds of heroism: in Nazi-occupied Norway teachers, pacifists and non-pacifists alike, refused to obey orders to teach the Nazi party line, and consequently hundreds were imprisoned in harsh conditions (while others continued teaching secretly in their pupils' homes). Many of the teachers were interned in a concentration camp together, and so were able to support each other's resolve; significantly, they also made it clear to each other that anyone who wished to give in would also receive support and sympathy without judgement.

Nonviolence as a philosophy or principle can inform anyone's actions, anywhere and at any time. Nonviolence as an effective way of dealing with conflict needs thought (including lateral thinking), resourcefulness, vision, planning, patience and commitment. There are now organisations which provide training in nonviolent techniques, and groups of experts in nonviolent conflict resolution who go into troubled areas, much as relief workers do, acting as mediators and passing on their nonviolence skills. In a world where the currently prevailing systems are caught in the armlock of violence, nonviolence can't offer instant remedies or results. However, it is catching on. Most people reject violence and killing. People who are ready to kill and who actively seek out violence are in fact a very small, though horribly effective, minority. Nonviolence doesn't deny the existence of conflict - conflict of one kind or another will probably always be present in human society - but it does assert that no conflict need be dealt with using violence and armed force, ever. The aim of its supporters, therefore, is the dismantling of the power structures, military systems (including arms manufacture), and economic networks (including the arms trade) that make violence and war an option at all.