

Nonviolent Living in a Violent World SKOL 4011

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Course synopsis:

This course is intended to help reconcile the ideal and the real; the ideal is nonviolent living as exemplified by the life of Mahatma Gandhi; the real is the commodified, consumer-oriented culture that permeates both individual and institutional life in the developed world.

We will begin with a brief study of Gandhi's life and writings, focusing on his responses to violence and his philosophy of economics. We'll then examine our current socio-economic-political context, paying particular attention to the often invisible and indirect violence perpetuated by consumer society and the global economy. Finally, we'll explore some contemporary pioneers who are offering tools and methods to live in accord with the religious principle of nonviolence.

Intentions:

The fundamental question we'll explore in this course is the product of two prepositions: 1) that the corporate global economy encourages people to engage in violent interactions with other people and the natural world, and 2) people do have the capability to make moral decisions about how they interact with other people and the natural world. The question that follows is: what will it take for people to stop engaging in violent behavior from which they are superficially isolated? For example, few people would choose to leach acidic chemicals through the soil in their own backyard, but they do choose to purchase metal products that are mined with this process in other parts of the world. Or, most people would choose, when hiring someone, to pay them a living wage and not force them to work long hours under oppressive conditions, but they do purchase products they know are made under just such circumstances.

In engaging this question, we'll study some academic and popular literature relating to the global economy and try to better understand the systemic problems and potential alternatives. But this not being an economics or political science course, our primary focus will be the presence (or absence) of moral agency in people's day to day decision making – particularly our own and those closest to us. In other words, we have an agenda: to encourage people to live a morally responsible life and promote ways of doing so.

Expectations:

Students are expected to complete weekly readings and contribute to class "discussion" by posting at least a "one page" reflection on the readings each week. All are encouraged to deepen our discussion with reflections relating to our individual and family economic decisions, and the roles of the institutions of which we are a part (churches, employers, etc.) in human economies. Finally, students are asked to complete a course project detailing one particular area of research or activity related to the questions posed in the course syllabus. This project could be in the form of a conventional academic paper, or could take a variety of other forms such as a course outline, sermon, etc. Discussion of these options with the course instructor is recommended.

Texts:

Listed below are the primary texts for this course. These readings will be fundamental to our work. However, equally fundamental will be our critical reflections and self-examination of our roles in human economies. Examining our roles as consumers, we will not be “required” to purchase any books. Although I have attempted to include books published by small independent presses and authors that I believe worthy of economic support, I also respect student’s economic limitations in purchasing books as well as your moral authority to choose to not be a consumer to take part in this course. We’ll keep in mind that students can find copies of these works through libraries or other shared sources, and/or purchasing them used or, if new, through independent booksellers such as can be found on www.BookSense.com. Similarly, purchasing a computer and an Internet Service Provider is not required; public libraries can also be utilized to access the Internet.

That said, it will be helpful for students to have ready access not only to the Internet but also to these books. My hope is that this access will be acquired with some thought as to what consequences result.

Furthermore, although the bulk of the readings are listed as “required,” completion of the course doesn’t depend on each and every reading. Some may be omitted or replaced with similar tracks for the benefit of diversifying the range of views presented to the class. For example, there are a wide variety of compilations of Gandhi’s writing available, and students are encouraged to explore various sources. (From the listed compilation we will be primarily reading from Gandhi’s Autobiography “The Story of My Experiments with Truth” and “*Hind Swaraj* [Indian Home Rule].”)

1. Homer Jack, Ed., “The Gandhi Reader: A Sourcebook of His Life and Writings.” Grove Press/Indiana University Press 1956.
2. Tolstoy, Leo, “The Kingdom of God is Within You.” Bison Books/University of Nebraska Press 1984.
3. Nolt, John, “Down to Earth: Toward a Philosophy of Nonviolent Living” Earth Knows Publications 1995
4. Korten, David C., “The Post-Corporate World: Life After Capitalism” Berrett-Koehler Publishers/Kumarian Press 1999
5. Moe-Lobeda, Cynthia D., “Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God” Fortress Press 2002
6. Shiva, Vandana, “Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply” South End Press 2000
7. Berry, Wendell, “Citizenship Papers” Shoemaker & Hoard 2003
8. Merkel, Jim, “Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth” New Society Publishers, 2003

Part 1: Ghandi on Nonviolence and Economics

- Week 1: Gandhi's early life and development.
Reading: Gandhi/Jack Chapters 1 & 2
- Week 2: Economics according to Gandhi.
Reading: Gandhi/Jack Chapter 5 (home rule),
pp 136-144 (ashram), 157-161 (labor), 167-172 (Hinduism)
On the Web: "Poverty in the Midst of Plenty"
- Week 3: Gandhi's inspiration
Tolstoy pp. 1-16, chapter 12
- Week 4: In dialog with Gandhi.
Reading: Gandhi/Jack Chapter 9 (Tagore), 326-331 (communism);
Nolt chapters 1 & 2

Part 2: Violence in the global corporate economy

- Week 5: Introduction to the global corporate economy
Reading: Korten Chapters 1-3
- Week 6: Systemic causes of economic violence
Reading: Berry, pp. 17-22, 63-76;
Nolt chapters 3 and 5
- Week 7: Food and the global economy
Reading: Shiva Ch 1-5;
<http://www.foodfirst.org/12myths>
- Week 8: Humans as agents of economic freedom.
Reading: Moe-Lobeda chapters 1, 2, & 3

Part 3: Alternatives, Responsibilities, and Change

- Week 9: A vision for a new economic order
Reading: Korten Parts 2 & 3
- Week 10: Philosophies of nonviolent living
Reading: Berry pp. 113-125, 143-152
Nolt chapters 7 & 8
- Week 11: Enabling human moral agency
Moe-Lobeda chapter 6
- Week 12: Crisis and the need to change
Reading: Merkel Intro. & chs 1-5
- Week 13: A possible sustainable world
Reading: Merkel chs. 9-12
- Week 14: Passive resistance in the legacy of Gandhi
Reading: "Sister Medha" by Jacques Leslie