

Autumn 2019

Course: Activism and Moral Action

Instructor: Bradley Gasser, Ph.D

Summary

In a world of abounding injustice and inequality, how have people acted in order to achieve a moral vision for their societies? What methods are available for moral actors in the world to leverage against injustice in order to bring about positive change? More formally, how can one take the lessons of theology and moral philosophy and apply it programmatically to everyday life to essentially “bend” King’s “arc of the moral universe”? In this course, students engage with modes of struggle for justice and equality from history – and the contemporary world – in order to answer these questions. By examining and analyzing a diversity of examples from nonviolent civil disobedience to armed revolution, students will equip themselves with the necessary tools to think about what movements succeed in re-creating societies to better approximate a moral vision for the world.

Topics explored include:

- The Childrens’ March, Freedom Riders, and the Civil Rights Movement in America
 - In the 1960s in the American South, African-American civil rights campaigners leveraged various methods of nonviolent civil disobedience to (i) raise awareness of the injustices visited upon black citizens by the local and state governments, and (ii) to pressure lawmakers to pass legislation ending institutionalized discrimination.
- The Catholic Worker and Plowshare Movements
 - Dorothy Day was a leader and co-founder of the radical Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s in America, which opposed war-making and other injustices in American society. The Plowshares movement, growing out of the broader Catholic Worker Movement, used radical direct action techniques to challenge the logic of nuclear weapons and their ‘omnicidal’ potential, often involving acts of sabotage that potentially carried decades-long prison terms.
- Contemporary Environmental Movements
 - Greta Thunberg, a 2019 nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, became world famous by skipping school every Friday, in protest of a lack of serious legislation combatting climate and environmental destruction. Initiating a global campaign of (primarily) school-age children and young adults, this campaign has successfully raised awareness in the general public the world over to the severity of on-going environmental destruction. However, environmental campaigns have a strong history from literally all corners of the world, and a dedicated examination of these struggles – from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, to centuries-long Indigenous struggles in colonized lands – provides significant context to understanding the diversity of these contemporary campaigns and the methods they utilize.

In addition to these select topics, students look at and analyze movements that leverage hunger strikes, acts of self-immolation, divestment campaigns, direct action techniques, strikes, and acts of violent revolution, from the Sandanistas in Central America to the Kurds in Rojava.

Selected Readings

Ingram, Catherine (ed.) "In the Footsteps of Gandhi." (Selected book chapters.)

Roy, Arundhati. "Walking With the Comrades."

Sharp, Gene. "How Nonviolent Struggle Works."

In addition, students read novel research from Erica Chenoweth on nonviolent resistance, philosophical essays on animal liberation from Peter Singer and Aph Ko, testimonials from nonviolent resisters, whistleblowers and conscientious objectors like Cesar Chavez, Edward Snowden, Muhammad Ali, Rosa Parks, and others, and longform journal articles from outlets like *The New Yorker*, *The Intercept*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and more.