Title of Lesson: Part II: How Would Gandhi and King Respond the Nuclear Threat in a Post 9/11 World?

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Grade Level/Subject Areas: 11/12 U.S. History, U.S Government, Philosophy

Class Size: Variable

Time/Duration of Lesson: Two Fifty-Five Minute Periods

Guiding Question:

- What coping mechanism do you use to live in an age of possible nuclear inhalation?

Lesson Abstract: Part one of this two-part lesson detailed three lesser-known historical concerns and/or events regarding nuclear weapons - the first occurring in 1945, the second 1962, and the third 2007. Part two hypothesizes the psychological framework that Gandhi and King would apply concerning the nuclear threat in a post 9/11 world.

Lesson Content:

A Problem

The danger and horror of nuclear weapons is very real. So why aren’t more people alarmed? In his autobiography Gandhi writes: “It is the reformer who is anxious for the reform, and not society, from which he should expect nothing better than opposition, abhorrence and even mortal persecution (Gandhi, 190). Could it be that the danger is so real that most of us choose not to think about it too much? Is it possible that we can’t, that we are just not “wired” that way; our survival instinct is such that we cannot conceptualize our own demise? Is our denial a product of evolution or a gift from the Devine?

Civilization?

In his introduction to Gandhi’s Hind Swaraz, Anthony Parel writes that “Gandhi was anxious to teach the Indians that ‘modern civilization’ posed a greater threat to them than did colonialism” (Parel xv). Gandhi was particularly concerned with man’s worship of the machine, especially when used to supplant human labor; place the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few; and produce an excess of unneeded goods. He criticized modern civilization as “purely material” (130, 166, 190, Fisher 85). Perhaps one of Gandhi’s most interesting quotes on machines was written in 1931:

Machinery is a grand yet awful invention. It is possible to visualize a stage at which the machines invented by man may finally engulf civilization. If man controls the machines, then they will not; but should man lose his control over machines and allow them to control him, then they will certainly engulf civilization and everything (Parel 167).

Enter the Devine

“Mankind would die,” said Gandhi, if there were no exhibition any time and anywhere
of the divine in man” (Fischer 162). I have come to the conclusion that this “divine in man” is Ahimsa, non-violence, at the micro level. Two years before his death Gandhi wrote that “truth and non-violence …are not possible without a living belief in … [an] all knowing living force which inheres in every other force known to the world… I am unable to account for my life without belief in this all-embracing living Light” (Parel 189). Gandhi was not a denominationist. He believed in a “religion that underlines all religions” (42). Nor was he a mystic. He “never heard a voice, saw a vision, or had some recognized experience of God” (Fischer 109). As Gandhi’s spiritualism matured, he altered his maximum “God is Truth,” to “Truth is God.” Naturally, this not only widened his audience, but made the Devine more palpable to secular humanists (Parel 10). In his autobiography, Gandhi writes of his “overwhelm[ing]” experience in 1894 reading Leo Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (Gandhi The 120). As Dr. Parel points out, Tolstoy speaks of the “modern social scientist[s’] tend[ency] to reject the primacy of the conscious, inner illumination and inner change in favor of external or institutional changes” (xxxvi).

**How Do We Cope?**

Both Gandhi and King extolled that “the means must be as pure as the ends” (202, iv). This means, of course, that if one really wants to end violence, he or she has to stop participating in it. This is ahimsa at the micro level. On the page it sounds quite simple; in the flesh it requires the aide of the divine. “You must be willing to suffer the anger of your opponent,” wrote King, and yet not return anger” (Carson 70). Gandhi believed that “the betterment of society begins with [inner change within] the individual,” (Parel xliii, lxi) He proposed that there was “an irrefragable moral link between the order of the soul and order in society. Of equal importance was the doctrine of the ultimacy of the inner conscience and the option to suffer harm rather than inflict it” (xxxv).

**A Key to Their Success**

Gandhi and King achieved the success they did not due to their martyrdom, but because their faith in the divine delivered them from the fear of death. “If you have never found something so dear and so precious to you that you will die for it,” wrote King five months before his assassination, “then you aren’t fit to live” (Carson 344). In 1956 King told reporter of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, Joe Azbell, “I think when a person lives with the fears of the consequences for his personal life he can never do anything in terms of lifting the whole of humanity and solving many of the social problems which we confront in every age and every generation” (Carson: The 202, Carson 88). “Those who defy death,” wrote Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj*, “are free from all fear” (Parel 95). “The believer in nonviolence,” said King, “is the person who will willingly allow himself to be the victim of violence but will never inflict violence upon another” (Carson 119). In a mass meeting held in 1956, King told his supporters, “If one day you find me sprawled out dead, I do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence” (76). In response to praise of his composure when a bomb was thrown at him during a sermon in Delhi (upon hearing the explosion, Gandhi told the agitated crowd, “Don’t worry about it. Listen to me”), Gandhi replied, “I would deserve praise only if I fell …and yet retained a smile on my face and no malice for the doer” (Fischer 187). Both Gandhi and King saw this personal commitment to nonviolence integral to human survival in the modern age.
This purification of mind; this elimination of anger and fear, exemplifies Gandhi and King’s ultimate approach to saving all of humanity. “One who is free of all hatred,” wrote the Mahatma, “requires no sword” (Parel 99). In a 1946 post Hiroshima interview, Gandhi revealed his “vision of the relationship between the individual, the state and the world community:”

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the oceanic circle of which they are integral units [emphasis added] (189).

Here in lies a profound liberating wisdom for living with the threat of nuclear violence, and I was startled to learn that it was recognized and expressed a year earlier by America’s modern men of science. In a letter written to FDR’s vice-president, Henry Wallace, before the death of Roosevelt and the extermination of hundreds of thousands of Japanese, on behalf of Robert Oppenheimer, Ernest Lawrence and Enrico Fermi, brilliant minds who helped birth the bomb- the 1927 Nobel laureate for physics, Author Compton wrote: “We feel that [the development of a hydrogen bomb] should not be undertaken, primarily because we should prefer defeat in war to victory obtained at the expense of the enormous human disaster that would be caused by its determined use [emphasis added]” (Bird 418).

California State Content Standards:

Historical Interpretation

1. Students show the connections, causal and otherwise, between particular historical events and larger social, economic, and political trends and developments.
2. Students recognize the complexity of historical causes and effects, including the limitations on determining cause and effect.
3. Students interpret past events and issues within the context in which an event unfolded rather than solely in terms of present-day norms and values.
4. Students understand the meaning, implication, and impact of historical events and recognize that events could have taken other directions.

Materials Needed:
- LCD Projector
- Laptop Computer

Suggested Teaching Activities:
- Socratic seminar centered on the “guiding question.”
- Lecture on Gandhi and King’s nonviolence coping mechanisms.
Bibliography:


