

The Theology and Practice of Peace and Nonviolence

This Year 11/12 RE unit (1 lesson x 10 weeks) is the product of a collaboration between Pace e Bene (Australia) and the Anglican Schools Commission (WA), with development assistance from the Australian Research Theology Foundation. The unit is being piloted in ASC (WA) schools in Term 1 and 2, 2018. Enquiries: Michael Wood (0435 065326) or Brendan McKeague (0429 448090)

1. Premise

Nonviolence is central to the Gospel of Jesus. The term, 'nonviolence' is more than the absence of violence. It is the exploration of the conditions required to embody peace with justice, expressed variously as Shalom; The Reign of God; Reconciliation and forgiveness. Refer to Pope Francis's statement for the 50th World Day of peace (2017):

https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html

2. Exploring Terms

We explore what we mean when we use words like 'peace' and 'nonviolence'. Through this exploration we discover that there are no sustainable hard and fast definitions. What constitutes peace for one person might be experienced by another as injustice. Rather than try to force agreed definitions we explore what experiential or cultural factors influence perceptions of peace and nonviolence.

3. The culture of violence

Where does violence come from? What is the root of the problem? We draw on the work of Rene Girard (Mimetic Desire and Scapegoating) and Walter Wink (The myth of redemptive violence) to understand how we are culturally embedded in forms of violence which are often invisible to us and which we often unconsciously imitate (specific examples which students may relate to include advertising and social media). We discover that 'free choice' is actually somewhat illusory when we are trapped within these deep cultural norms

4. The gospel of peace and the lived example of Jesus

How then do we recognise and detach from cultural violence? From a Christian perspective, the way to peace is via a 'positive mimesis' of Christ in which our desire (negative mimesis) is disentangled from culture. We explore the example of how Jesus lives and demonstrates a creative 'third way' in relation to conflict, which is neither fight nor flight, but which presents a moral choice for the adversary which is aimed at their transformation.¹ Drawing on Walter Wink's work on the gospels the students explore a number of specific ways in which Jesus acts nonviolently.

5. Inspirational Stories

We look at international, national and local examples of nonviolence and peacemaking. Using some suggested starting points students research contemporary examples of people working for peace using the principles and practices of nonviolence. Such examples begin to form an alternative cultural narrative of 'positive (Christlike) mimesis'.

6. Five steps of Nonviolence

We teach students a simple five-step nonviolent communication process which can be used in any situation of conflict, whether that be the family or school and invite students to think about how they could practice this process in every day conversations.

7. Project

Students undertake, individually or in small groups, a specific project which invites them to experiment with aspects of the course in their family, community, school, church or other relevant context.

¹ There is significant scope to explore not only Christ as 'model' but also nonviolence as participation in the life of Christ through the Spirit. For the pilot unit it was decided that this would take a lot of time to explore and would require a prior theological basis that high school students are not likely to have acquired. There is scope here for future development.