# WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS IN ACUTE CONFLICTS FOR BELIEVERS IN PRINCIPLED NONVIOLENCE?

Gene Sharp[1]

Individuals who believe in principled — moral or religious — nonviolence often face the problem of how to practice such a belief.

Should that belief be simply a personal creed, affecting only individual behavior? Or, should that principle permit believers, or even oblige them, to participate actively in society and politics in attempts to decrease violence, especially when violence is extreme?

How believers in principled nonviolence choose to act may vary, as there may be more than one course of action that is compatible with their beliefs as well as actions involving using or endorsing violence.

These alternative courses of action may take different forms and have different consequences. All possible courses of action may not be equally desirable. Therefore, it is important to consider some issues involved in the selection of the form of action and in evaluating possible consequences.

Some believers in principled nonviolence assume that the sole important issue is whether their personal actions are harmonious with the principle, or instead violate it. Do they commit violence or not?

It can be argued that there may be times and conditions when exclusive concentration on one's own behavior, and perhaps development of one's spirituality, doing no harm to others, is an adequate application of principled nonviolence.

Yet, the argument may continue, human beings obviously do not live in a world based on principled nonviolence but instead in a world of much violence.

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When grave conflicts bring suffering, danger, and death to others, does not the believer in principled nonviolence have a responsibility to try to act effectively? How are believers in principled nonviolence to act in such a world?

In such cases, it is clear, the answer to the question of how best to practice a belief in principled nonviolence ought not be determined solely by assessment of the relationship between the principle and the individual behavior. What about the needs posed by human suffering, hostile violence, and oppression? Can the individual live in harmony with the principle while simultaneously attempting to meet the needs of the wider society, and if so how?

The individual, the principle, and the society constitute a three-way relationship.

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A second important question arises: can a moral or religious principle of nonviolence be practically applied in the harsh political world? Or, must the principle be violated or compromised in acute situations because actions in harmony with that principle are believed to be irrelevant or too weak to be effective?

Do not believers have a responsibility to attempt to oppose and remove social and political wrongs imposed by hostile violence? Is not submission to violence in the form of oppression and tyranny morally unacceptable? Does not a belief in principled nonviolence require one to confront and attempt to remove such oppression and tyranny, not blindly but with good judgment, skill, and effectiveness?

As many have demonstrated and some have learned, pleading, talking, and negotiating do not remove such expressions of hostile violence. How then are believers to act?

The basic issue becomes, at least in part, how believers in principled nonviolence can move toward correcting those expressions of violence without themselves participating in violence. Can the belief in principled nonviolence be applied in face of hostile violence in sufficiently powerful ways as to be at least as effective as violence in the same conflict?

Applying principled nonviolence in the wider society is often very difficult, especially in acute conflicts. It has often been assumed that “the world” necessarily operates by different means than are appropriate for individuals, especially those individuals who believe in principled nonviolence. Those means, it is thought, must be evaluated by different standards than those appropriate for individuals.

Consequently, it is thought by some, the best that the believer in principled nonviolence can do is to refuse to participate in the violence or perhaps protest against it.

In an acute conflict with violent opponents —such as foreign invasions, occupations, dictatorships, and extreme oppression — it has been often assumed that it is necessary to apply strong violence if the perpetrators of hostile violence are not to be given free rein.

Strictly nonviolent behavior often seems to most people unrealistic in such situations. Failure to wage violence has been seen to be abdication of a responsibility to the whole society.

This counter-violence clearly violates the avowed principle of nonviolence. Yet, in the absence of an effective alternative means of struggle, resort to resistance violence has appeared to be almost inevitable.

Simple rejection by believers in principled nonviolence of the use of violence also has its problems. It can be argued that people who passively submit to the hostile violence of others are themselves violating their own principles, albeit in different ways than those who use violence. By submitting, instead of opposing the violence, they passively help the hostile violence to succeed.

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Believers in principled nonviolence who have tried to live in this world, and to be responsible to their fellow human beings as they face hostile violence, have frequently concluded that they needed to use or support violence. They saw no other way effectively to oppose the hostile violence. They have hoped that their own use of violence would be preferable to passive submission to the violence by others.

In facing such situations, several religions, including Buddhism and Christianity, have widely accepted that in “the real world” military action and other violence are often necessary, despite their original avowed belief in principled nonviolence. Believers usually have seen no other realistic alternative to capitulation.

This view is quite explicit in Christian theories of “just war.” It is also encountered at times in the Buddhist tradition. Hajime Nakamura of Tokyo University investigated the response of early Buddhism to the problem of invasions. He reported that an Indian Buddhist who went to China was asked by the Chinese king,

> When foreign armies are going to invade my country, what should I do? If we fight there will be many casualties. If we do not repulse them, my country will be imperiled. Oh, Master, tell me what to do!

Though the Indian Buddhist did not believe in violence, he took the problem of how to respond to a military attack seriously. He advised the Chinese king that because he had a duty to protect his country, he must repel the invading armies by military means. Nakamura concluded that wars were tolerated by early Buddhists insofar as they were regarded as beneficial for the state and the people.[2]

The advice to the Chinese king was that it was necessary to use military resistance rather than passively to submit to the invaders' violence. The Indian Buddhist's advice was based on the assumption that if capitulation and submission were rejected there was no realistic alternative to the use of violence. He saw no available effective nonviolent way to resist hostile violence.

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Today in both predominantly Christian and predominantly Buddhist countries, respect for life may be practiced by individuals. But killing in civil or international wars is practiced by society as a whole. Governments in Buddhist countries act much the same as governments have acted in predominantly Christian countries in Europe and elsewhere. Governments in both Christian and Buddhist countries commonly practice military aggression, impose dictatorships, wage civil wars, and inflict massive slaughters. Violence is also practiced by various non-governmental resistance groups to oppose foreign occupations, dictatorships, ethnic domination, and social oppression.

This should not be surprising. Governments, resistance groups, and people generally will not choose to be powerless in a threatening world. They usually assume that in acute conflicts effective power requires the threat or use of violence.

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The present problem is not solely how to deal with a foreign invasion. That is only part of the broader problem of how people whose beliefs prohibit violence should respond to hostile violence by attackers, occupiers, oppressors, and dictators.

Individuals may, of course, refuse to participate in such violence, and thereby remain personally faithful to their belief in principled nonviolence.

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[2] Hajime Nakamura, "Violence and Nonviolence in Buddhism," in Philip P. Weiner and John Fisher, eds, *Violence and Aggression in the History of Ideas*, p. 178. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1974. I am grateful to Robert Irwin for this reference.

However, when fundamental issues are at stake, simple refusal to participate in the violence usually means not only withdrawal from the violence but also withdrawal from the conflict in which other important issues are at stake that may have high moral, religious, or human significance.

Is there a better solution to the problem of how believers can apply principled nonviolence?

How can believers in principled nonviolence who face hostile violence both resist the attackers or oppressors and also act to support the important issues at stake without themselves using violence?

Not all answers to this question are equally satisfactory. Sometimes, believers in principled nonviolence have attempted to use certain mild peaceful methods that lacked a powerful struggle capacity. For example, they have at times conducted public education and also have sought to negotiate or to engage in dialogue with their violent attackers or oppressors.

While these methods have their uses in some situations, they are not substitutes for violence in the conduct of open struggles. In any case, the outcome of negotiations and dialogue is rarely, if ever, influenced by an assessment of where justice lies. Instead, an agreed outcome of negotiations usually is largely determined by a comparison of the power capacities of the two sides. The weaker gives ground to the stronger. Power capacities are often calculated by the ability to wage violent struggle.

However, this requirement of effective negotiations for a supporting power capacity could potentially be met by an alternative nonviolent form of struggle, if that could be developed and made effective. This alternative to violence could be of assistance during negotiations, provided that the nonviolent struggle capacity is genuine and that the occasion for negotiations has been well chosen.

How is the dilemma that may face believers in principled nonviolence about using violence or refusing to use violence against hostile violence to be solved? If neither the use of violence nor personal refusal to do so is fully satisfactory, is there a better option?

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The common assumption that violence and war are needed because they are believed to be the most powerful means available is a judgement about political reality. It is not a judgment based on a moral or religious principle, doctrine, or scripture.

Of course, violence is the most destructive means available. However, the assumption that in face of hostile violence, counter-violence is the only available powerful means, or the most effective means, to achieve a humane or moral objective is factually false.

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There exists an alternative to violence: nonviolent struggle, also called nonviolent action. It can be very powerful. This is a broad technique consisting of many methods, ranging from mild symbolic protests and social boycotts, through more powerful economic boycotts, labor strikes, political noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention. Nonviolent action has been widely practiced historically, in different parts of the world, by diverse populations, for different objectives.

The ability to wage nonviolent struggle provides an alternative technique to wield power without the use of violence. Nonviolent struggle also has been used to conduct struggles against extreme violent opponents in acute conflicts.

This technique has sometimes failed and sometimes succeeded. The use of this technique does not eliminate all possible problems in political ethics. However, the new ones are very different from those derivative of the use of violence.

When nonviolent struggle succeeds it only rarely does so by causing the opponents to change their opinions. More often nonviolent struggle succeeds because it imposes unacceptable costs on the opponents by slowing or halting certain operations of the opponents' society. Some methods cause nonviolent disruptions.

Nonviolent struggle has at times been successful against extreme dictators and despite ruthless repression. This technique can at times paralyze and even destroy dictatorships.

In past conflicts many people have used nonviolent struggle for practical reasons without a belief in principled nonviolence. In fact, most cases of nonviolent struggle have been practiced by people who did not believe in a moral or religious principle of nonviolence but who saw its practical advantages. These nonbelievers were often able to gain significant objectives by using this nonviolent technique.

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However, if the population that is going to use nonviolent struggle widely believes in principled nonviolence, their belief may (or may not) give their coming struggle increased credibility and respect, along with broader international attention and support. But they must conduct the struggle skillfully.

Sometimes, believers in principled nonviolence have participated in nonviolent struggles alongside large numbers of nonbelievers. On occasion the believers have played highly important roles in the conflict or have led such struggles.

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There are important reasons why believers in principled nonviolence should explore the option of nonviolent struggle very seriously. It may prove a superior solution to the problem of how believers in principled nonviolence can practice their principle in an often violent world.

Many believers in principled nonviolence accept that they have an opportunity and an obligation to attempt to counteract and reduce violence in social and political life, if their action can be taken without violence. Nonviolent struggle provides such a type of action.

Nonviolent struggle has already served as an alternative to violence in diverse conflicts. It is therefore possible in the future. Kenneth Boulding's "First Law" was "That which exists is possible."

With this technique the resisters can apply potentially powerful forms of psychological, social, economic, and political action, that under appropriate circumstances can wield great power. If applied with genuine strength and sound strategic judgment, this type of struggle potentially can achieve the objective of liberation, defense, or other purpose. Furthermore, this type of conflict can do so without violating the beliefs against committing violence. Nonviolent struggle can thereby provide a practical alternative both to one's own use of violence and to passive submission to the hostile violence of others.

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This participation of believers in nonviolent struggles with nonbelievers who are using this form of action solely for pragmatic reasons need not compromise the believers' convictions. These believers can, as Mohandas Gandhi did, operate on two levels. In his personal life he held to his full convictions and shared them with a handful of people. At the same time, Gandhi also deliberately operated on the political level with people who would never share his full personal convictions. For them, Gandhi presented nonviolent struggle as a practical way in which nonbelievers could achieve goals without using violence. Gandhi was very clear that the nonviolent action he offered in social and political conflicts was social and political. This practice did not weaken or compromise his personal conviction in principled nonviolence. However, it enabled masses of people who did not share that belief to use nonviolent struggle against oppression. These included the leaders of the pro-independence Indian National Congress.

> That non-violence which only an individual can use is not of much use in terms of society. Man is a social being.[3]
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> I placed it before Congress as a political method, to be employed for the solution of the political questions. . . . I am talking political wisdom. It is a political insight.[4]

This pragmatic nonviolent action had the advantage that many people who did not believe as he did could nevertheless participate fully in nonviolent struggle for an identified purpose. The struggle could potentially defeat the hostile violence being used by opponents to dominate people. If successful, the struggle would also reduce the extent of violence in that society.

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Most people, groups, and institutions that face hostile violence do not believe in principled nonviolence. They are going to act by some means. That may be by violence. However, under some circumstances they may act by nonviolent struggle. Even if the practice of nonviolent struggle is highly imperfect, it has significant advantages over the violence that otherwise might well have been applied.

What are the believers in principled nonviolence to do in such acute conflicts? Are they to stand aside? Or, are they to assist in making the nonviolent struggle more effective? Do not believers in principled nonviolence have an obligation to attempt to apply their principle along with nonbelievers in order to help to ensure that the conflict is conducted both effectively and nonviolently? Successful nonviolent struggles have demonstrated the ability to defeat hostile violence in social and political life without resort to violence.

Nonviolent struggle thereby provides the basis for an answer to the problem of how believers in principled nonviolence can act in society and politics while remaining true to their belief. They can use this technique and support its use without using or supporting violence. Then they are able to act against hostile violence and the oppression it can impose without using violence and without abdicating responsibility to assist people suffering from oppression and direct hostile violence.

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[3] Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist with Essays on Ethics and Politics* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1979), p. 283. The quotation is from 1947.

[4] Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, p. 116. The quotation is from 1942.

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Let us be clear: The resolution of the problem of how believers in principled nonviolence should act in conflicts is *not* for them to urge others to become believers also. Seeking converts will not increase the effectiveness of nonviolent struggle. Faced with pressures to become believers, most people will continue to support violence.

If believers in principled nonviolence can with advantage participate in broader nonviolent struggles, what does this participation require of them? Do not both the believers and the pragmatists have a responsibility to make the struggle as effective as possible? That increased effectiveness will not only help to lift the oppression imposed by hostile violence but will also reduce the pressures by some skeptics to resort to violence.

Both the believers and pragmatists require special skills to strengthen their struggle capacity and to increase the chances of success over hostile violence. It is not sufficient to remain nonviolent, to be committed, and to be courageous. It is also important to have the skills to help the nonviolent struggle succeed over violence.

Often, however, nonviolent struggles in the past have been weaker and less effective than they might have been because of the lack of competent advance planning. In the future the leaders and planners of a coming struggle need to think rigorously in advance about how to conduct the struggle in order to achieve most effectively the desired objective with the available resources.

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Such planning involves the preparation of a grand strategy to guide the whole action and development of the course of the struggle. Specific plans and competent strategies can be prepared for a particular conflict in order to conduct it as effectively as possible. Within the grand strategies will be smaller strategies for limited phases of the conflict.

A strategy is a conception of how to act in order best to use the available means most effectively to attain one’s objectives in a conflict or effort. Strategy has been defined by one venerable Tibetan monk as wise action and skillfulness in the choice and use of means and methods to increase the possibilities of success.

The effectiveness of nonviolent struggles can be greatly increased if a wise choice of strategy has been made. It needs to have been fully developed with appropriate more limited tactics and specific methods. Such calculations are, of course, more complex than can be explained in depth here.

There is a need for believers in Christian or Buddhist nonviolence, or other principled nonviolence, to learn how to act wisely and skillfully in acute conflicts along with nonbelievers in order to make the nonviolent struggle more effective.

Believers in principled nonviolence who want to act in acute conflicts therefore need to become good strategic thinkers and planners, as Gandhi did. This development is a matter of the training and exercise of the mind for such action.

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If believers in ethical or religious nonviolence are to assume leadership or planning roles in a nonviolent struggle, especially those in which nonbelievers are participating, they should not be granted the leadership position solely on the basis of their belief in principled nonviolence.

They also must have a deeper understanding of nonviolent struggle, its requirements, processes, and dynamics, than other possible leaders. Otherwise, protagonists who do not believe in principled nonviolence but who have superior understanding of nonviolent struggle and strategy, along with other personal qualities, should be in leadership positions or at least advising the leaders.

The leaders or planners must also be masters of the application of strategy for nonviolent struggle. Without deep understanding of both nonviolent struggle and also of strategy, a belief in principled nonviolence will be no advantage. It could even contribute to unwise guidance and actions if a false assumption is made that belief in the principle alone ensures superior strategic judgment.

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It is not wise to assume that just anyone who believes in principled nonviolence will be able to do the necessary thinking and skillful planning for a nonviolent struggle. Development of a wise strategy and competent planning are not matters of the depth of one’s convictions about principled nonviolence, nor are they the application of empathy, love, intuition, and emotions. Indeed, often it will be individuals who do *not* believe in principled nonviolence who may have the greater capacity for strategic thinking and planning for a nonviolent struggle.

Strategic planning and wise leadership require the use of the intellect. Gandhi was very clear on this.

> Non-violence to be a potent force must begin with the mind.[5]

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[5] Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, p. 97. The quotation is from 1931.

> A mere belief in ahimsa . . . will not do. It should be intelligent and creative. If intellect plays a large part in the field of violence, I hold that it plays a larger part in the field of non-violence.[6]

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Nonviolent struggle can be refined to increase its effectiveness. It can be increasingly made into a viable alternative to violence in acute conflicts. Therefore, nonviolent struggle can become more widely and effectively practiced as an alternative to violence in struggles against internal oppression, dictatorships, foreign occupations, as well as in civil and international wars. This can happen in many countries regardless of their beliefs. Violence in social and political life can then be reduced to make the conduct of the conflict closer to the standards of principled nonviolence.

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This major development can only be achieved, however, by making two significant changes: (1) by the deliberate refinement and application of strategic nonviolent struggle as an alternative to organized violence for political objectives, and (2) by the studious development among both adherents of principled nonviolence and also by pragmatists of the capacity to think, plan, and act strategically in the application of this alternative to both violence and passive submission.

The way is now open for both believers in principled nonviolence and also pragmatists to take the lead in developing practical nonviolent courses of action in specific acute conflicts.[7]

With the development of wise strategies and skilled applications of nonviolent struggle, the previous tension between being politically responsible in “the real world” and morally or religiously faithful can be resolved.

Then the basic principles of moral or religious nonviolence when applied strategically to acute conflicts will reveal themselves also as the basis of the highest pragmatism.

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[6] Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, p. 282. The quotation is from 1940.

[7] A word of caution: Just because a group chooses to use nonviolent struggle does not mean that its goal is just and should be supported. Also, it does not mean that the specific methods of nonviolent action the group is using are the best possible as measured by moral or religious standards. Within the context of nonviolent action there is much room for refinements, both in terms of how to increase effectiveness and, for those concerned, and also how to make the action more harmonious with the standards of principled nonviolence.

## For related readings by the author

*The Politics of Nonviolent Action.* Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973.

*Wielding Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential.* Boston: Extending Horizons Books, Porter Sargent Publishers, 2005.

"Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Nonviolent Struggle towards Justice, Freedom and Peace" in *The Ecumenical Review* (Geneva). Vol. 48, No. 2 (April 1996), pp. 233-250.

*Gandhi as a Political Strategist with Essays on Ethics and Politics.* Boston: Porter Sargent, 1979. New Delhi: Gandhi Media Centre, 1999.

Relevant chapters:

"Ethics and Responsibility: A Critique of the Present Adequacy of Max Weber's Classification of Ethical Systems," pp. 235-250.

"Morality, Politics, and Political Technique," pp. 251-271.

"Nonviolence: Moral Principle or Political Technique? Clues from Gandhi's Thought and Experience," pp. 273-309.

"Types of Principled Nonviolence," pp. 201-234.