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Community, Violence, and Peace: Aldo Leopold, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gautama the Buddha in the Twenty-First Century

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COMMUNITY, VIOLENCE, AND PEACE: ALDO LEOPOLD, MOHANDAS K. GANDHI, MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., AND GAUTAMA THE BUDDHA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY. *By A. L. Herman.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. xi + 245 pp.

At first glance, this title might seem a bit over the edge: how could an author intelligently juxtapose such diverse thinkers as an ecological scientist, two advocates of human rights, and an ancient religious founder? For the most part, the author succeeds in demonstrating that the twenty-first century requires a definition of community that includes environmental, social, and spiritual concerns. In a format partic-

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ularly helpful for undergraduate teaching, he carefully rehearses at the end of each section three central questions: how does this thinker contribute to our understanding of community? Does his approach lead to the diminishment of violence? Does it facilitate peace?

For the first quarter of the book, Herman explores various aspects of community. Drawing from Erich Fromm, Socrates, and Aldous Huxley, he demonstrates that out of enlightened self-interest, all people seek peace for themselves. He is careful to point out, however, that the Socratic virtues of wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice, which arise from within, are far superior to the uniformity of the World State as described in Huxley's *Brave New World,* which leaves nothing uncontrolled by the external authorities. Both lead to nonviolence and peace, but the World State can fall prey to what Fromm terms cultural insanity.

Supplementing his discussion of Aldo Leopold with references to the work of Rachel Carson and J. Baird Callicott, Herman emphasizes that ideas of community peace must be informed by holistic structures of nature, particularly as articulated in Leopold's *Sand County Almanac.* However, he also warns that if the welfare of the biotic community takes precedence over all other concerns, then society could fall into a state of ecofascism.

Herman's chapter on Mahatma Gandhi ably summarizes the life and works of this great political reformer, with particular focus on his formative years in South Africa. Influenced by John Ruskin and Leo Tolstoy, Gandhi developed the concept of the "Ashramic community," a means of collective, intentional living designed to effect social change. After describing the Phoenix Settlement (1904, Johannesburg), the Sabarmati Ashram (1915, Ahmedabad), and Sevagram Ashram (1933, Wardha), Herman presents a fifteen-page play script based on the Asian travel diaries of Professor George P. Conger, chair of philosophy at the University of Minnesota from 1937–1953. Conger spent two months at Gandhi's ashram in Wardha, India, in 1933, and in the play called "Salt," his students take up issues including the ill treatment of Jews in Germany, the definition of nonviolence, and emphasized, as does Gandhi, the necessity for self-transformation to achieve personal and community peace.

Martin Luther King Jr. inspired by the example of Mahatma Gandhi, employed nonviolent techniques to bring about the many successes of the American Civil Rights Movement. Herman provides a brief biography of Martin Luther King Jr., quotes several of his pivotal sermons, and emphasizes the notion of beloved community as critical to King's thinking. He writes that "in King's interpretation of *agape,* it is your being loved that gives you value; and it is your selflessly loving others that gives them value and makes the beloved community possible" (p. 138). According to King, fear and racial discrimination prevent one from entering into the beloved community. By changing laws, and, more importantly, changing the hearts of individual people, a more peaceful community can be built.

The least successful chapter of this book discusses Gautama Buddha and the "karmic community." Rather than focusing directly on Buddhist theories of Karma, Herman engages in a long discussion of the *Bhagavad Gita,* an important Hindu text, as a foil to explain Buddhist theories of self-determination. However, he seems

to interpret the devotional yogas of the *Gita* as preaching a helpless reliance on an abstract deity, without acknowledging the constructive energy or *tapas* on the part of the devotee in maintaining his or her spiritual practice. It would have been more effective for this chapter to focus on the life and work of a contemporary Buddhist activist such as the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh, which would have provided a parallel analysis in keeping with the other chapters of the book.

The conclusion of the book raises the centrality of self-transformation and refers to the work of Abraham Maslow on the peak experiences. Each of the thinkers under consideration underwent a process of self-transcendence: Leopold when he saw the green fire in the eyes of a wolf about to be killed; Gandhi when he was thrown from the train in South Africa; King when asked to move to the back of the bus; the Buddha when confronted with old age, sickness, and death. Each of the solutions posed by each thinker demands seeing the world from a more holistic perspective. For Leopold, this requires seeing one in terms of the larger biotic community; for Gandhi and King, it requires abandoning racism and prejudice; for Buddha, it requires seeing one's circumstance in terms of a network of past and future Karma. Herman suggests that each of these great thinkers demonstrates a need for communal egoism, a perspective through which one sees oneself in terms of the larger community. As a result of this perspective, one will act on one's own behalf in a way that will automatically benefit others, increasing societal peace and nonviolence.

This book, with the exception of the *Bhagavad Gita* discussion, would make an excellent class text for the study of comparative ethics. It includes solid historical information on the lives of Leopold, Gandhi, and King. It presents the processes of personal decision-making in an engaging manner, particularly as demonstrated in the play "Salt." It also suggests, correctly, that although concerns for oneself must be tempered by concerns for the community, we must guard against the sort of herd mentality that can lead to fascism.

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