

Underlying Rationales of Some Types of Nonviolent Social Change

When attending a demonstration or otherwise working for social change, you will likely encounter people who are “nonviolent” for different reasons and in different ways. Below is a list of some of the types of nonviolence you are likely to encounter. Note that for many people, the basis for their nonviolent action spans several of these types.

Types	Quotes or Example	Rationale	Notes
Timidity or Cowardice	“We are afraid of being hurt.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Action is based on fear, not morality. – Relies on avoiding confrontation and running from conflict. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Not really nonviolence, but rather a term used to demean or dismiss proponents of nonviolence. – Timid people and cowards are seldom activists.
Passive avoidance of violence	“We should turn away from violence.” “God calls on us to live a righteous life.” Example: Amish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Attempts social change only by providing a good model of one’s own sterling behavior. – Emphasizes purity of one’s self and withdrawal from evil. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Not violent towards anyone, but willing to allow the violence of the status quo to continue. – NV seen as an integral part of one’s life and intrinsically good.
Rational persuasion	“We will convince the authorities to change.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Emphasizes the power of the presentation of evidence, and rational discourse. – Sometimes an assumption of intellectual superiority. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Not violent towards anyone, but willing to allow the violence of the status quo to continue if not able to convince authorities to change.
Religious/spiritual witness	“We must keep faith with our consciences.” “God called us to make a statement against this evil weapon/practice.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Recognizes the violence of the status quo and seeks to change it through witness vigils. – Action is based deeply on morality. – Emphasizes converting opposition through goodwill gestures, self-suffering, persuasion, rationality, and appealing to the conscience of the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sometimes an assumption of moral superiority and attempts to shame the opposition. – NV seen as an integral part of one’s life and intrinsically good.
Religious/spiritual direct action	“God called us to destroy these immoral weapons.” Ex: Plowshares actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – No attempt to convert the opposition, but only to act according to God’s will. – Based on answering the call to engage in acts of conscience that will directly stop evil. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sometimes an assumption of moral superiority. – NV seen as an integral part of one’s life and intrinsically good.
Self-empowerment	“We act to make/keep ourselves sane.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Recognizes the violence of the status quo and seeks to address it by making a personal statement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Emphasizes personal self-transformation rather than political change or cultural transformation.

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Direct intervention	“We will stop business as usual today.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The goal is to make it as difficult as possible for authorities. – Uses blockades and sometimes property destruction to prevent the violent status quo from physically continuing. – Forgoing violence is often seen as a tactical necessity only (often assuming that violence is necessary for effectiveness but not in the current situation). – Action is based primarily on expediency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sometimes an assumption of moral superiority and attempts to shame or demean the opposition. – Not necessarily nonviolent: sometimes an aggressive, adversarial tone — “un-violent.” – Sometimes so goal-oriented and pragmatic that opponents or even supporters are mistreated.
Strategic organizing	“We will build a large movement of people who will fight for peace and justice.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nonviolence is usually seen as a tactic useful for empowering the dispossessed and challenging the power elite. – Action is based primarily on expediency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Emphasizes intermediate-term political change. – Uses conventional tactics of lobbying authorities and defeating them in elections, but sometimes also uses boycotts, strikes, and blockades.
Strategic mass refusal to consent / Non-cooperation	“We will build a large enough movement of people so that we can refuse to allow evil practices to continue and can force the creation of a good society.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Uses NV coercion — either directly by physical blockades or, more frequently, indirectly by encouraging the entire community (or a strategic subgroup) to resist (or act) until the status quo must change. – Emphasizes converting the community by being virtuous and loving while illuminating the immorality of the status quo. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Emphasizes systemic political change and long-term cultural transformation. – Nonviolence seen as a <i>strategic</i> necessity, intrinsically good, and a full substitute for violence.
Satyagraha (Gandhi’s “truth force”)	“We must struggle toward truth.” “Your liberation is bound up in mine.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Attempts to find a mutual truth with opponents, not to coerce them. – Emphasizes loving one’s opponents, being willing to shoulder any sacrifice involved, and leaving a face-saving way out for opponents. – Action is based deeply on morality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Emphasizes systemic political change and long-term cultural transformation. – Nonviolence seen as an integral part of one’s life, intrinsically good, and a full substitute for violence.