**POL 3013: SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT**

**TUTORIAL 3: GANDHI’S SATYAGRAHA, INTERPRETED AS PRINCIPLE AND AS EXAMPLE**

The following passage from Akeel Bilgrami’s article on “Gandhi’s religion and its relation to his politics” (included in course reading list) sets out two approaches to interpreting Gandhi’s satyagraha. The questions below will form the basis for discussion in tutorials.

Two claims of [Gandhi’s] conception of religious and moral virtue pull in different directions and need to be reconciled. On the one hand, there is his repudiation of the idea that one’s religious and moral convictions generate principles that apply to everyone because that leads to a moral psychology of criticism and contempt for those who fall foul of those principles. On the other hand, there is his insistence that one’s own judgements and convictions are of universal human relevance.

The reconciliation would be possible if there was *another way* of establishing the general human relevance of the moral and religious truth based on one’s own experiences, than by erecting them into principles. There is a well-known slogan, which says, “When I choose for myself, I choose for everyone.” Gandhi’s commitment to the universal human relevance of one’s personal choices would applaud this principle, but *only* if it was *not* read as saying: *“When I choose for myself, I generate a principle for everyone to follow.”* That is not a satisfactory way of reconciling personal experience and choice with universal relevance of that choice and experience. So how else would one read the slogan, if this *principled* way of reading it is not allowed?

At this point, one has to introduce Gandhi’s notion of satya [truth] and his ideal of the satyagrahi [person enacting the force of truth]. . . . Gandhi . . . conceived of the satyagrahi as the ideal of the public individual. . . . He or she represented the ideal of an individual’s life because the actions of such an individual were self-consciously conceived by him or her as *exemplary*. This is the vital element in the conceptual transition from individual choice in the realm of religion to a public and universal relevance of one’s choices. I had said that we need a reading of the slogan “When I choose for myself I choose for everyone” that did not erect principles out of one’s personal choices and convictions and amount to saying, “When I choose for myself, I generate a principle for everyone.” We are now given such a reading: *“When I choose for myself, I set an example for everyone”*. . . . To set an example is not at all to generate a principle.

When one generates a principle, one sets up something normative of a kind that releases a whole set of moralistic attitudes towards those who transgress the principle, more specifically criticism and its woeful implications—the downward path to interpersonal hostility and possibly even violence. By contrast, if in one’s individual choices and actions one is merely setting an example and not pronouncing a principle that can be transgressed, the moral psychology of response to those who fail to follow one’s example is much weaker. It is not criticism but something altogether more humane, perhaps best described as disappointment. And often, as Gandhi would say, the disappointment is in oneself that one’s example has not set.

1..What is the difference between establishing a principle and setting an example? Do you agree that a politics of principle leads to personal criticism (and possibly violence) while a politics of exemplarity need not?

2. How, if at all, does Bilgrami’s idea of exemplarity help to explain: (i) Gandhi’s support for the British during the South African war (*Satyagraha in SA*, pp. 96-100); (iii) Gandhi’s statement that whoever knowingly breaks a pledge before God “forfeits his manhood” (pp. 143-44)? (iv) Gandhi’s argument that satyagraha, unlike passive resistance, is not a weapon of the weak (p. 153)?