

**GUJARAT NATIONAL LAW UNIVERSITY
GANDHINAGAR**

Course: **Gandhian Approach to Welfare and Development**
Semester- II (Batch: 2019-24)

End Semester Online Examination: February 2021

Date: 10th February, 2021

Duration: 8 hours

Max. Marks: 50

Instructions:

- The respective marks for each question are indicated in-line.
- Indicate correct question numbers in front of the answer.
- No questions or clarification can be sought during the exam period, answer as it is, giving reason, if any.
- Prescribe Word Limit: Maximum 1000 words

	Marks
Q.1 Critically review the article, “The Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi’s Philosophy for the 21st century” written by Dezs Szenkovics. Provide the suitable references for your answer. (Attachment Number 1)	(10)
Q.2 Write the review for the Vinay Lal’s article, “Gandhi’s Religion: Politics, Faith, and Hermeneutics”. Critically comment with the suitable sources for your answer. (Attachment Number 2)	(10)
Q.3 Critically review the article written by Rudolf C Heredia, titled “Interpreting Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj in contemporary times”. Provide the suitable references for your answer. (Attachment Number 3)	(10)
Q.4 Compare Gandhi’s concept of Nai Talim with the New Education Policy. Write the important sources with reference to your answer.	(10)
Q.5 Discuss in detail about the various forms of conflict and Gandhi’s idea of resolving the disputes. Write the important sources with reference to your answer.	(10)



The Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy for the 21st Century¹

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Abstract. The central question emphasized by the paper is that whether in the 21st century's globalized world the Gandhian message still has or could have any actuality in managing our century's real challenges such as terrorism or the deepening moral crisis of the humanity.

In order to be able to do this, the paper will first of all present, analyse and comment on the most important concepts I consider the Gandhian thought is based on such as satya (Truth), ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagraha (as Gandhi loosely translated: holding on to truth, which in fact is the philosophy and practice of the non-violent resistance). I have to admit that in my paper I will consider Gandhi as a philosopher or a thinker even if he did not agree with me or even if it were hard to consider him a philosopher according to European traditions and European canon regarding philosophy. As we know, he personally declared that writing an academic text was beyond his power and he was not built for such kind of writings.

Secondly, the paper will emphasize those aspects and concepts of the Gandhian thought which could give an answer to the core question of the paper, trying to prove that at least two of the presented concepts could be considered relevant and useful in our times, even if at first impression all of these key concepts of the Gandhian thought seem to be a utopia and useless. It seems that Gandhi, through his ideas and thoughts, "is still alive" and is among us after more than 60 years of his death. It seems that we, all human beings, still have to learn from the ideas, from the writings and acts of the Mahatma.

Keywords: Gandhi, Mahatma, truth, satya, ahimsa, satyagraha, relevance

1 This study is an edited version of a paper presented at the international conference entitled *The Character of the Current Philosophy and its Methods*, organized by the Institute of Philosophy, Slovak Academy of Sciences (Bratislava, March 15–16, 2012).

*„The problem of human conflict is perhaps
the most fundamental problem of all time”*

(Joan V. Bondurant)

„My life is my message.”

(M. K. Gandhi)

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, one of the greatest and well-known personalities of the 20th century, had a very deep influence on the second part of the last century, which is incontestable and beyond any dispute. Then again, there are voices which proclaim that even in our globalized world the Gandhian spiritual heritage still has its actuality and relevance.

What this paper tries is to give an answer regarding the relevance of the Gandhian thought in the 21st century. Thus, I will try to demonstrate that the Gandhian spiritual heritage – with accent on the concepts of satya (Truth), ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagraha (as Gandhi loosely translated, holding on to truth or “[T]he force which is born of Truth and Love or nonviolence” (Gandhi 1999a: 93), which in fact is the philosophy and practice of the nonviolent resistance) – should have or must have an important role in dealing with the real problems of our globalized world. In order to do this, first of all, I will have to outline the meanings of the three above-mentioned categories and, after having done so, I will try to emphasize those aspects of the Gandhian concepts which I think that could be considered relevant in our times or could be useful and helpful in managing some of the real challenges of the 21st century such as the problem of armed clashes, globalizing terrorism or the moral crisis of humanity.

At the beginning, I think we can agree that we are living in a world which is divided increasingly day by day by global unrest, fear, anger, hatred, discontent, despair, immorality etc., and the number and intensity of ethnic and religious conflicts seem to grow, gaining higher and higher intensity all around the world.

In my opinion, Gandhi’s political and social philosophy in general and his approach to the concepts of Truth, non-violence and satyagraha in particular, could be the starting point of the regeneration or rebirth of non-violent or less violent cultures and societies. The whole non-violent philosophy of the Mahatma, based on the two core concepts of the Gandhian heritage, is not a new proposition. Gandhi himself says that “I have nothing new to teach the World. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try experiments in both on as vast scale as I could.” (Gandhi 1960: iii) In other words, we can say that the Mahatma just tried to revive and to make much more understandable those old teachings for the whole world, to make them usable in the new social and political context.

Gandhi pictured to himself how an ideal society, based on love, truth and non-violence must look and function, and he tried to realize it as much as possible in

the real life. His attempts and results in making this operable have had echoes and followers all around the world. For example, Edward Thompson wrote in his paper, *Gandhi: A Character Study*: “he will be remembered as one of the very few who have set the stamps of an idea on an epoch. That idea is ‘non-violence’ which has drawn out powerfully the sympathy of other lands.” (Radhakrishnan 2010: 297)

As I said before, one of the most important fundamental concepts of the Gandhian thought should be considered the concept of satya or Truth. The importance of satya is underlined, too, by the fact that the Mahatma's *Autobiography* was entitled by himself “The story of my experiments with Truth”, which let us deduce the importance of Truth in his everyday life. As a self-statement of the Mahatma regarding the importance of the Truth in his life, I will quote a part from one of his letters addressed to Narandas Gandhi.

“Generally speaking, [observance of the law of] Truth is understood merely to mean that we must speak the truth. But we in the Ashram² should understand the word satya or Truth in a much wider sense. There should be Truth in thought, Truth in speech and Truth in action.” (Gandhi 1999b: 383)

As we can conclude from this quotation, for Gandhi, the concept of Truth has a much deeper sense than it is understood by the majority in the everyday life. Over and above of truth-saying or abstention from lies, for Gandhi, the term of satya has extensions on all levels of the everyday life, such as the level of thinking, of talking and even the level of acting, which means that Truth is the category which has to be permanently present in our life and, at the same time, it is the measure of our thought, speech and acts.

I think it is not necessary to make a detailed presentation regarding the role and the importance of the satya in the major Indian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism. I consider that it is enough to state that the above-mentioned term – just like the another core concept, the ahimsa – has a central role in every Indian religion which influenced the thought of the Mahatma. We have just to remember the “Satyannasti paro dharmah” or “there is no Dharma higher than Truth” aphorism, which is well-known in every village in India and which propagates the superiority of the Truth above all. But equally known is the postulate “Ahimsa paramo Dharmah” or the “Non-violence is the supreme religion or engagement”. These terms can be easily found in the religious texts of Hinduism (such as the Upanisads, Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata, The Laws of Manu, etc.) and, at the same time, it could be considered basic concepts both in Jainism and Buddhism.

In the next part of the paper, I will try to sketch what Gandhi was thinking about these concepts. As we could find in his writings – especially in his *Autobiography* – Gandhi, except for a short period of his youth, was deeply

2 Traditionally, the word's meaning is spiritual hermitage, a place far away from populated areas, suitable for meditations and prayers. Today, the sense of the word has changed and it could be described as a teaching or cultural space, a kind of school.

religious. In his *Autobiography*, he states: “What I want to achieve—what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years—is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain moksha.” (Gandhi 1999c: 90)

However, his piety does not mean that he is simply a follower of Hinduism. During his studies in England and his work in South Africa, he continuously and thoroughly studied the major religions of the World, such as Jainism, Christianity, Buddhism or Islam. Quoting Lord Bhikhu Parekh’s words: “Although he was profoundly influenced by Hinduism, Christianity and Jainism, his religious thought cut across all of them and was in a class by itself. Belief in God was obviously its basis.” (Parekh 1997: 26) His religiosity, according to Akeel Bilgrami, was “eclectic and individual” (Bilgrami 2011: 93), a mix between what was given to him as a child by his mother and what he achieved from other religions and philosophies during his study in England and his stay in South Africa, such as Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and even Christianity. Due to these influences, his religiosity became a very maverick mix, and that is why he was considered very often Christian or even Jain among the Hindus.

The Mahatma himself makes a statement regarding his open-minded and open-hearted interest shown in other religions than Hinduism. He says that “My religion enables me, obliges me, to imbibe all that is good in all the great religions of the earth.” (Gandhi 1999d: 27) And to have an idea how the Mahatma was selecting all the good things from a religion, we have to quote him again. In one of his writings entitled “Sanatana Hindu”, he states: “I am not a literalist. Therefore, I try to understand the spirit of the various scriptures of the world. I apply the test of Truth and Ahimsa laid down by these very scriptures for interpretation. I reject what is inconsistent with that test, and I appropriate all that is consistent with it.” (Gandhi 1999e: 335)

It is very important to observe that the attitude of Gandhi regarding the major world religions was rather an interpretative–explanative attitude than a dogmatic and mystic one. The Mahatma was concerned about the spiritual, philosophical message of a religion and not about the written revelation of the sacred books. This kind of attitude allowed Gandhi to formulate critical remarks and disapprobative observations and to oppose some elements of his own religion (for example, child marriage, the status of the harijans or untouchables, etc.). This kind of interpretative–explanative attitude characterizes his philosophical approach towards the concepts of ahimsa and satya, too. These two concepts have been developed and improved in their meanings and became the core concepts of the Gandhian heritage.

The concept of ahimsa was used as a synonym of the Brahman (God) in the ancient religious literature of the Hinduism. According to this religious tradition, the Mahatma considers that the Truth must be more than a moral idea or an ethical demand. He states that God is Truth: “My religion is based on truth and non-violence. Truth is my God. Non-violence is the means of realizing Him.” (Gandhi 1999f: 61–62)

A direct consequence of this statement is that in his early period Gandhi is thinking about truth as one of the many other qualities or attributes of the God. At the same time, the concept of God enjoys logical priority over ahimsa because the last one only describes or characterizes the first one.

A few years later, due to his experiments with truth, the Mahatma reconsiders his view and he decides that it is much more exact and correct to say that Truth is God than God is Truth. About this process of enlightenment he wrote: "I would say with those who say God is Love, God is Love. But deep down in me I used to say that though God may be Love, God is Truth, above all. If it is possible for the human tongue to give the fullest description of God, I have come to the conclusion that, for myself, God is Truth. But two years ago I went a step further and said that Truth is God. You will see the fine distinction between the two statements: God is Truth and Truth is God. And that conclusion I came to after a continuous, relentless search after Truth which began so many years ago. I found that the nearest approach to Truth is through love. But I found also that love has many meanings, in the English language at least, and human love in the sense of passion becomes a degrading thing also. I found too that love in the sense of ahimsa and nonviolence has only limited number of votaries in the world. And as I made progress in my search, I made no dispute with 'God is love'. It is very difficult to understand 'God is love' (because of a variety of meanings of love) but I never found a double meaning in connection with Truth and not even atheists have denied the necessity or power of Truth. Not only so. In their passion for discovering Truth, they have not hesitated even to deny the very existence of God—from their own point of view rightly. And it was because of their reasoning that I saw that I was not going to say 'God is Truth', but 'Truth is God.'" (Gandhi 1999g: 261)

We have to mention that, as a Hindu, Gandhi understood satya to be synonymous with the stem *sat*, which is reality itself, which means being. In this way, Truth became God and not only an attribute of God. Thus, Satya (Truth) and Sat (Being) became denominations of the very same substantial because, in the new definition given by Gandhi, Truth is described as Being. In a letter written to P. G. Matthew, Gandhi himself explains that in the "Truth is God" statement truth has to be interpreted as God and not as an attribute of God. At the same time, the one and only being is God; God is, besides him, nothing else exists, which means that "therefore the more truthful we are, the nearer we are to God. We are only to the extent that we are truthful." (Gandhi 1999h: 128)

As we could see, in Gandhian interpretation, the Truth – in addition to its ethical or moral dimension – gets a new, ontological dimension, too, because the Truth denotes Being, the complex entirety of all beings, including those we know and those we did not or could not know. Thus, the Truth gets a transcendental meaning and becomes synonymous to God, taking God's role in the life of Mahatma and becoming appropriate as the subject of religious practices, of

unconditioned human adoration and devotion. According to his idea of Absolute Truth, Gandhi was able to consider not only the satya as the real basis of every being – and in such a way, the basis of the whole human society –, but at the same time he defined every human being as “truth-seeker”. He could do this because the direct consequence of the faith in the Absolute Truth is that every human being will share in this Absolute Truth or God. A human being could remain a moral one only if it embodies and continuously seeks the truth, because the truth is the substratum of morality, where morality means not only the forbearance from lying or the conviction that we must say the truth because this is the most adequate and profitable attitude in the long run, but it has to mean that our whole life must be subordinated to the law of truth, even in cases when such a situation can have an undesirable consequence. Gandhi claims that the abstracted and unworldly truth has its worth only in case that it is embodied in human beings who are ready to die for the truth. For this Western part of the world, it could be hard to understand what Gandhi means because in our minds the truth is an epistemological question and not an ontological one or a question of practical philosophy. In Gandhi’s way of thinking, the truth in his narrow epistemological sense is only a part of what satya means. This could be called latent truth because, according to the Gandhian thought, the truth is realized or materialized only when it is enacted, when it is embodied in action.

According to Hinduism, a human being is not able to realize the Absolute Truth while imprisoned in the cycle of rebirths, which means that we have to accept that everything we can grasp is only relative. Because of this, every human being has a fragmentary grasp of the truth and in order to be able to get closer to the Absolute Truth we have to recognize the partiality of our perception of truth and to act open-minded towards the truth that comes from other people. That is why is wise not to impose one’s truth on another. And if we could accept and understand that not one single man can be the possessor of the Absolute Truth, we would exclude violence from our lives because we would be able to recognize our partial perception of truth, to listen to others and to accept their point of view regarding truth. At the same time, the relativity of truth led Gandhi to teach the necessity of making the means continuous with the ends sought. If a human being could see only partially the truth, then he or she had to focus on the purity of means. Paying attention to the means is very important because, according to the Gandhian thought, only good means lead to good ends. It is impossible, for example, to obtain peace through violence or violent acting. Gandhi repeated several times that those who sow violence, will reap violence, but who sows peace and non-violence, will reap peace.

As in the case of the satya, the roots of the Gandhian concept of ahimsa could be found in the religious tradition of India, being “a cardinal virtue of the Hinduism through the centuries”. (Rynne 2009) In addition to satya, the ahimsa

can be considered the second fundamental category of the Gandhian philosophy. According to his religious thought, he had been rejecting violence from early beginning. He was proud that the religious tradition of the Hinduism and of India in general refused the use of violence. "The most distinctive and the largest contribution of Hinduism to India's culture is the doctrine of ahimsa. It has given a definite bias to the history of the country for the last three thousand years and over, and it has not ceased to be a living force in the lives of India's millions even today. It is a growing doctrine, its message is still being delivered. Its teaching has so far permeated our people that an armed revolution has almost become an impossibility in India, not because, as some would have it, we as a race are physically weak, for it does not require much physical strength so much as a devilish will to press a trigger to shoot a person, but because the tradition of ahimsa has struck deep roots among the people." (Gandhi 1999i: 143)

Besides his religious belief, he declined violence because of historical experiences and observations. He witnessed the ongoing carnage that resulted from the practice of retaliation during the years he spent in South Africa, in the First and Second World War, in the Hindu-Muslim conflicts and between individuals. He read and knew history, but at the same time he experienced, too, the destructive power of violence several times. That is why he states: "My experience daily growing stronger and richer tells me that there is no peace for individuals or for nations without practising truth and nonviolence to the uttermost extent possible for man. The policy of retaliation has never succeeded. We must not be confounded by the isolated illustrations of retaliation, including frauds and force, having attained temporary and seeming success. The world lives because there is more love than hate, more truth than untruth in it. This is a proposition capable of being verified by everyone who will take the trouble to think. Fraud and force are diseases, truth and non-violence is health. The fact that the world has not perished is an ocular demonstration of the fact that there is more health than disease in it." (Gandhi 1999j: 29)

During the Second World War, he declared that Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini will demonstrate once again the emptiness of violence, which means in his perception that all the violence used by the above-mentioned people has an immediate effect, which is, as a matter of fact, transitory and will leave behind hatred and devastation. From his point of view, only the "effects of Buddha's non-violent action persist and are likely to grow with age." (Gandhi 1999k: 261)

As he did in the case of the concept of satya, he operates important meaning changes in the sense of the ahimsa, too. Despite of its negative prefix (ahimsa or non-violence), Gandhi was able to make from this fundamental concept an active force and to charge it with positive energy and sense. Ahimsa went beyond its usual understanding: refusal to do harm and become a quality or attribute of a satyagrahi, which enables him in conflict situations to act in "a positive, non-

judging, creatively forbearing and loving way.” (Rynne 2009: 58) Ahimsa has to be more than a rejection of everything which needs violence; it is not a passive status or condition. In Gandhian philosophy, it is one of the most active forces of the world, which could be understood as love or charity in the positive, biblical sense of the word, which is exposed in the Sermon on the Mount or in a poem of a Gujarati poet that sounds like this: “There is no merit in returning good for good. Merit lies in returning good for evil.” (Rynne 2009: 60)

As we could see, in the Gandhian spiritual heritage, the concept of ahimsa gets a positive sense and it is understood as a “universal law acting under all circumstances” (Gandhi 1999l: 93-94), as “one of the world’s great principles which no power on earth can wipe out”. (Gandhi 1999m: 374) It is considered by the Mahatma as a new weapon in politics, which is in the process of evolution. Its vast possibilities are yet unexplored, and this exploration can take place only if it is practised on a big scale and in various fields.

In the Gandhian spiritual heritage, as we could see, there is a mutual relationship between satya and ahimsa, between Truth and non-violence. This mutual relationship could be useful to treat the negative aspects of the globalization, such as the ethnic and religious conflicts are or the existing moral crisis, which is the source of economic and financial crises. Using the words of Margaret Chatterjee, Gandhi has “pinpointed violence as the chief malady of the modern times”. (Rynne 2009: 57) One of the fails of our modern time is that its trying to manage those violent acts we can see all around the world and almost day by day has been unsuccessful till now.

If this statement is true, it remains a very logical question to ask: if the globalization, which is sustained on several levels all around the world, was not able to cope with this violence, if the history of the last two decades shows us that our efforts in violent fighting has had as goal the domination of the other, the political and economic control of the other, then what are we waiting for? A domination of the other, obtained by using brute force and violence, is not a guarantee of less violence on the part of those who are dominated, and this way the dominant party could become very easily the dominated one and, at the same time, the sufferer of the resulting violence.

Our question must be what we have to do to cure this malady with good results. And the answer could be: to listen to what Gandhi says about ahimsa and satya, about non-violence and truth, and to follow his teachings. We have to understand to be aware of using violence against others because violence leads to violent responses and, at the same time, it concentrates power in the hands of a few people, which is the contrary to what democracy means. And, finally, the violence leads to psychical suffering and degradation, which contradict human dignity.

We have to remember that the Gandhian way of non-violent resistance against the brute force of the colonialism was successful. At the same time, we are not to

forget that the social reform and civil rights movement of Martin Luther King in the USA or the anti-apartheid resistance of South Africa under the leadership of Nelson Mandela became effective after the leaders managed their campaigns on the basis of the Gandhian satyagraha, which relies on the concepts of ahimsa and satya. The same story happened in Poland in the late seventies – early eighties with the anti-communist movement of *Solidarity*, and the result is well-known: Poland became the first democratic country in the former Eastern Bloc of the communist countries.

All these are obvious and self-evident examples of the fact that the Gandhian political philosophy, the so-called “moral jiu-jitsu”³ (Gregg 1966: 43-51) could have real and concrete results in cases when violence and brute force are not efficient. His multidimensional social and political thought is derived from India’s thousand-years-old religious and philosophical traditions, but it was rethought and developed according to the real challenges of the modern times by his own experiments during his non-violent fight against the colonialism in South Africa and India.

Finally, at the end of my paper, to stress and underline the great personality of the Mahatma, let me quote two character-drawings concerning Him. The first one is from an Indian thinker and former president of India, the second one from a German, one of the first Christian leaders arrested by the Nazis.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan says in his book that “[s]ince Buddha, Gandiji was the greatest moral force in Indian history. For the accomplishment of liberty, justice and peace, he rediscovered the old techniques of Ahimsa and Satyagraha. He revealed to the masses a power not of rifles and machine guns, but the power innate in each individual, a power which this war-haunted world can exploit fully in making wars impossible.” (Radhakrishnan 2010) At the same time, Martin Niemoeller’s words are quoted by Rynne in his book: “When the Christian church and Christian world did not do anything effective about peacemaking, God found a prophet of nonviolence in Mahatma Gandhi [...]. In our days Gandhi has shown this to a great part of the world, and I wish that Christians would not be the last group of men and women to learn the lesson that God is teaching us through this prophet.” (Rynne 2009: 169)

After all these being said, the only questions for me remains whether we, the people of the 21st century, are moral, open-minded and wise enough to understand the Gandhian teaching and to apply it in our everyday life, irrespective of the fact that we are statesmen, policy makers, businessmen or simple world citizens.

I only could hope that the answer is yes. I hope an affirmative answer because I think that the message of the Gandhian heritage could be considered universal,

3 The term of “moral jiu-jitsu” is a very plastic expression because it creates an analogy with the martial art jiu-jitsu, which is based on the fact that a person will be able to defeat his enemy only in case that he is able to use the energy of the opponent against him.

irrespective of time, geographical space and cultural background, thus relevant even in the 21st century because it is based on such values as truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa), human dignity and respect and the love of our fellow beings.

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Gandhi's Religion: Politics, Faith, and Hermeneutics

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ABSTRACT India is widely regarded as an essentially religious society and Gandhi is commonly thought to have been preeminently a man of religion. For some, he was far too saintly to be involved in the life of politics, while others persisted in the view that he was ingenious enough to understand that he could best advance his political interests in a country suffused with the religious spirit if he appeared in the garb of a religious man. What is not disputed is that he lived, so to speak, under the sign of religion. This paper examines the content of Gandhi's religion which has been the subject of numerous inquiries, with a wide spectrum of opinions on his religiosity, his deployment of religious symbols and language, and his adherence to, or departure from, conventional understandings of religion. In the matter of religious belief and conduct, Gandhi was unusually reflective, practical, and wise — all at the same time. He emphasized reason, a need to understanding all faiths, and the freedom of religious conversion. He came to the realization that 'Truth is God' and had an unshakeable conviction that it was not possible to have a religion without politics or a politics without religion.

INTRODUCTION

Jawaharlal Nehru once reportedly said, 'Gandhi is India'. Some will be puzzled if not astounded by this statement, others will doubtless be inclined to ridicule it; and yet others, mindful that Gandhi was to become the supremely iconic figure of India, at least to the rest of the world, will attempt to unravel the precise ways in which Gandhi might have represented a distinctly Indian sensibility. As the Gandhi paraphernalia at the Gandhi National Museum in Delhi suggests, many in his own lifetime had formed an impression that Gandhi and India constituted an indelible and unbroken link: it sufficed to address an envelope as 'Gandhi, India', or 'The Mahatma, India', for it to reach its destination. India was inclined to congratulate itself as the spiritual repository of the world, as the land of many Mahatmas, "great souls" or, as Ananda Coomaraswamy has explained, enlightened beings, but to the rest of the world there appeared to be one person most deserving of that epithet. Gandhi had become, the world over, synonymous with India.

In the now familiar narrative that embodied the colonial wisdom about the essential nature of Indian society, India was also widely held to be an essentially religious society, and religion would be described in this narrative as having furnished the Indian with the indissoluble mark of her or his identity. Gandhi, in like fashion, is commonly thought to have been preeminently a man of religion, who could no more be understood outside the framework of religion than

Laloo Prasad Yadav or Bill Clinton might be understood as anything other than figures heavily invested in the life of normal politics. Some of Gandhi's contemporaries deplored the admixture of politics and religion in his thinking: in the tiresome version of a debate that has captivated and occasionally agitated many minds, he was, as some maintained, far too saintly to be involved in the life of politics, while others persisted in the view that Gandhi was ingenious enough to understand that he could best advance his political interests in a country suffused with the religious spirit if he appeared in the garb of a religious man. Nevertheless, whether religion was the very essence of his being, or whether Gandhi, as in more cynical readings, was scarcely beyond reproach in his instrumentalization of religion, it is not seriously doubted that he lived, so to speak, under the sign of religion.

RELIGION AND HUMAN ACTIVITY

Just what, however, was Gandhi's religion, and in what respects did he mirror or contravene the country's immensely rich religious heritage? For India's colonial rulers, Protestant Christianity constituted the template of religion, and there is a story to be told about how some Indians who sought the reinvigoration of Hinduism and transform it into a proper religion similarly sought to refashion an ancient, chaotic and highly decentralized faith according to the precepts of Protestantism.¹ I cannot venture into even the slightest elements of that story,

but suffice to note that the category of “religion” itself imposed new obligations, frames of reference, and interpretive modes in India. To be sure, India might have been, as 18th and 19th century British administrators were wont to argue, bereft of law, a den of Oriental Despotism and characterized by the nefarious nepotism to which natives were allegedly prone; as other colonial commentators remarked, India was also remarkably lacking in a sense of history and geography. But, with respect to “religion”, colonial views veered to the other extreme: India was dense with religiosity, and the density arose not merely from the sheer voluminousness of religious texts, the bewildering variety of rituals and practices, the proliferation of gods and goddesses — all “330 million of them” — and the exuberant displays of religiosity, but also from the opacity of a religion that carried with it all the signs of sheer otherness. Hinduism’s gods and goddesses — grotesque, fearful, vindictive, marked by licentious sexuality — were ‘much maligned monsters’,² bearing all the marks of a people sunk in depravity. Did Gandhi’s Hinduism partake of any of this? To another man of religion, Archbishop Cosmo Lang, Gandhi appeared as ‘a mystic, fanatic and anarchist’ (Chatterjee 1983: 90), an apt representative of an equally fanatic and obscure faith. Gandhi’s religion, however it may be characterized, has been the subject of numerous inquiries,³ and, as shall be seen, there is a wide spectrum of opinions on Gandhi’s religiosity, his deployment of religious symbols and language, and his adherence to, or departure from, conventional understandings of religion. Some commentators have found it difficult to acquire a firm grasp over “Gandhi’s religion”, and have directed their inquiries to formulations, which perforce must entertain a broader canvas, of “Gandhi and religion”.

If, as is the case in nearly all spheres of life in which Gandhi took an active interest, and most particularly in matters bearing on our private and public conduct, he left the imprint of his original thinking and a practice unusually and even stringently sowed to ethical mores, it is reasonable to expect that in the domain of religious thought as well he spoke in distinct idioms. Indeed, in the matter of religious belief and conduct, Mohandas Gandhi was, as I shall endeavor to argue, unusually reflective, practical, and wise — all at the same time. The dis-

inction between the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* has a long history, and will even appear clichéd to those who are persuaded that thought itself is the highest form of action. That thought has its own, scarcely less distinguished, history — and yet these debates are perhaps less germane than one might suppose to a consideration of the architecture of Gandhi’s religion. It should not be impossible to gain assent to the commonly encountered proposition that those who are reflective are often not practical; the thinkers have often been dismissive of the realm of action, and activists have seldom had the patience for reflection. Neither the life of thought nor the life of action is necessarily calculated to lead to wisdom, and conversely the wise, especially in India, have often eschewed action and even “thought” in the ordinary sense of the term. The sage of Arunachala, Ramana Maharishi, was of the opinion that Gandhi ‘was a good man who had sacrificed his spiritual development by taking too great burdens upon himself’ (Iyer 1986: 380). Gandhi, in other words, might have been a greater sage and certainly a better *advaitin* if he had not immersed himself in the affairs of the world. But for Gandhi there was no such thing as religion outside the sphere of human activity, and he was equally certain in his mind that religion was to be measured by the extent to which it impinged upon the activities of daily life rather than by religious rituals, temple observances, and, though perhaps one must be more guarded about such an assertion, even prayer.

RELIGION AND POLITICS

In beginning our inquiry into Gandhi’s religion, we are immediately confronted with two striking paradoxes. Gandhi insisted that there can be ‘no politics without religion’, and yet he was firm in holding to the view that the post-independent state in India should be resolutely secular. When he decided to accept the Presidency of the Indian National Congress, he wrote that ‘I must not deceive the country. For me there is no politics without religion — not the religion of the superstitious and the blind, religion that hates and fights, but the universal Religion of Toleration. Politics without morality is a thing to be avoided.’⁴ However, especially in the last years of his life, Gandhi stood by the view, as expressed in a letter published

in *Harijan* in February 1947, that the State cannot 'concern itself or cope with religious education.' 'Do not', he states in this letter, 'mix up religion and ethics. I believe that fundamental ethics is common to all religions.'⁵ In a similar vein, soon after independence, Gandhi described the government as a 'Government for all. It is a "secular" government, that is, it is not a theocratic government, rather, it does not belong to any particular religion.'⁶

One may be tempted into thinking that Gandhi adhered to these views in different periods of life, and that as the 1920s slipped into the 1930s and communal chaos eventually engulfed India, he stood back from his earlier view, which again appears in the concluding chapter of his autobiography, that religion and politics are far too intertwined to permit a thoroughgoing separation between the two spheres. Should we not suppose, as certainly his critics did, that this admixture of religion and politics, his claim more precisely that 'who who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means', would in time be recognized by Gandhi as another 'Himalayan miscalculation'? (Gandhi 1927 and 1929 Part V: 'Farewell' and Ch. 33). This is, however, a mistaken reading of Gandhi: not only did he affirm both positions simultaneously until the end of his life, but it is precisely the exclusivity of each position that suggests their nearness to each other. The aforementioned letter published in *Harijan*, in February 1947, furnishes some cues on this matter — when admonishing the recipient not to mix up religion and ethics, Gandhi further explains: 'By religion I have in mind not fundamental ethics but what goes by the name of denominationalism. We have suffered enough from State-aided religion and State church.' It is the same proximity of excluded views that could move Gandhi to pronounce simultaneously late in his life that he was a firm believer in *varnashrama dharma* and that he would only attend inter-caste weddings.

Secondly, if Gandhi commenced his religious life as something of a stranger to his own faith, first acquiring a knowledge of bookish Hinduism, as he candidly admitted, in the heart of the metropolitan West, it is perhaps apposite that his assassin should have justified his murderous act with the observation that Gandhi was indeed a stranger to the Hindu faith, or that, to put it differently, he had alienated himself from

religious-minded Hindus. Most people know Gandhi as a Hindu, a point underscored by his bitter foe, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the instigator and founder of Pakistan, who at Gandhi's death sent a condolence message to the Indian government expressing his sorrow at the death of 'Mr Gandhi', 'one of the greatest men', as he put it, 'produced by the Hindu community.' To the end, even after Gandhi's death, people like Jinnah remained to contest the idea that Gandhi might have represented not just Hindus but all Indians. We can better appreciate the irony of Jinnah's message if we recall that Nathuram Godse was a Hindu ideologue who objected to Gandhi's alleged betrayal of the Hindus. Godse rather agreed that Gandhi should be characterized as the 'Father of the Nation' — except that Gandhi was, of course, the Father of Pakistan. If Gandhi's assassin and his staunchest political foe came to diametrically opposed readings of the place of Hindu identity in Gandhi's life, one must ask what idea of the 'Hindu' dominated their thinking, and also whether the Hinduism that Gandhi came to embrace can at all be accommodated within the two different but related strands of political Hinduism embraced by his adversaries.

GANDHI AND CHRISTIANITY

It is, however, not so much with Hinduism as with Christianity that Gandhi commenced his interrogation of the idea of religion and his initiation into a life of religious thought. His religious sensibility, much like his vegetarianism, was decisively shaped by his long stay in Britain and much more so in South Africa. It is not that Gandhi became a vegetarian in London: rather, having been a vegetarian in his native Gujarat, except for some intermittent experiments in meat-eating which he has described vividly in his autobiography, he now came to embrace vegetarianism from principle rather than from habit. Similarly, he had followed the ancestral faith of his parents, but had little awareness of the central precepts of Hinduism. Towards the end of the second year of his stay in London, in 1890, Gandhi declined an invitation to join the Theosophical Society: 'With my meagre knowledge of my own religion', he told his Theosophist friends, 'I do not want to belong to any religious body' (Gandhi 1927: Part 1, Ch. 20). Around the same time, Gandhi

tells us in his autobiography, he ‘met a good Christian from Manchester in a vegetarian boarding house’, and so became acquainted with the Bible. Though Gandhi found the book of Genesis of interest, the rest of the Old Testament put him to sleep; by contrast, the New Testament left him deeply impressed, and the Sermon on the Mount went straight to his heart (Gandhi 1927: Part I, Ch. 20). It was not, however, until a few years later in Pretoria, South Africa, that Gandhi came to acquire something of an awareness of the fundamental teachings of Christianity. His knowledge of Christianity, far from making him a likely candidate for conversion as his Christian companions hoped, made him uncomfortable with some of the claims advanced on behalf of Christianity even as he Gandhi made it amply clear that he would have no hesitation in embracing Christianity if he felt the call. As he was to write in one of his more lengthy expositions on his encounter with Christianity, ‘It was impossible for me to believe that I could go to heaven or attain salvation only by becoming a Christian. When I frankly said so to some of [my] good Christian friends, they were shocked. But there was no help for it.’ While altogether willing to ‘accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher’, Gandhi nonetheless found it difficult to swallow the idea that he was ‘the most perfect man ever born’, and similarly he could not ‘regard Christianity as a perfect religion or the greatest of all religions.’ (Gandhi 1927: Part II, Ch. 15). Little did the Christian missionaries who sought to convert him know that they had, altogether unknown to themselves, another role to perform in history, namely that of deepening Gandhi’s interest in religion and moving him to acquire a more profound understanding of Hinduism. His very first meeting with those who were to become his Christian friends, Gandhi would recall many years later, had prompted within him this question: ‘And how was I to understand Christianity in its proper perspective without thoroughly knowing my own religion?’ Equally, how was he to comprehend his own faith unless he had understood another faith — first Christianity, later Islam — reasonably well?

Before moving into a broader discussion of Gandhi as a man of religion, indeed as the pre-eminent Hindu of modern times, it may be instructive to consider a few anecdotes touching

on Gandhi’s lifelong interaction with Christian leaders and clergymen that have a considerable bearing on my narrative. In 1919, E. Stanley Jones, perhaps the greatest American missionary of the first half of the twentieth century, arrived in India on a special mandate from the Methodist Episcopal Church to act as missionary-at-large in an endeavor to turn India into a fertile ground for Christ’s ministry. He encountered only one problem he had not anticipated, unaware as he was then of the presence of Mohandas Gandhi. One of the many reasons why Jones was unsuccessful in converting Gandhi to Christianity is that he came to the realization, as he put it in an appreciative biography, that Gandhi was a better Christian than any he had ever known in his life. In his remarkably understated but subtle ways, Gandhi could disarm virtually every opponent. When Jones once asked him how he could become a better missionary, Gandhi did not attempt to dissuade him from his work; rather, he said simply, ‘By becoming more like the man that you follow’ (Jones 1925). As the venerable Thomas Merton, a Christian monk with a wide appreciation of Asian schools of philosophy and meditation, wrote much later in an article called ‘The Gentle Revolutionary’, ‘Gandhi knew the New Testament thoroughly. Whether or not Gandhi “believed in” Jesus in the sense that he had genuine faith in the Gospel would be very difficult to demonstrate, and it is not my business to prove it or disprove it. I think that the effort to do so would be irrelevant in any case. What is certainly true is that Gandhi not only understood the ethic of the Gospel as well, if not in some ways better, than most Christians, and he is one of the very few men of our time who applied Gospel principles to the problems of a political and social existence in such a way that his approach to these problems was inseparably religious and political at the same time.’⁷

In 1921, an American pastor by the name of John Haynes Holmes delivered an address at the Community Church of New York where he asked, ‘Who is the greatest man in the world today?’ (Holmes 1953; Holmes and Harrington 1982; Holmes and Southworth 2012). In this rather remarkable address, the Rev. Holmes entertained numerous possibilities, among them those of Woodrow Wilson and, implausible as this may seem to those who would shudder to have his name mentioned in a house of God,

Vladimir Lenin, the architect of the Bolshevik Revolution. At long last, though, the Rev. Holmes settled upon the name of Mohandas Gandhi. Just how did the Rev. Holmes, who had never met Mohandas, recently transformed into the Mahatma, decide upon the name of Gandhi? That he could do so, at a relatively early stage in Gandhi's life in India after his 20-year sojourn in South Africa, and at a time when mass communications had nothing remotely resembling the reach of today, is a question worth pondering. Is this a testament only to Holmes's liberalism and religious pluralism, that he chose a Hindu who was far from being known the world over at this juncture, or is it also a testament to Gandhi's own ecumenical conception of religion that he could appear attractive to a Christian clergyman?

This brings me, then, to my third anecdote. In 1930, after a short political hiatus, Gandhi decided upon commencing what would become known as the Salt Satyagraha. He first took the unusual step of dispatching a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, outlining the precise course of action he proposed to undertake if the British were not willing to enter into negotiations with the Congress.⁸ The contents of Gandhi's letter have been endlessly scrutinized, and many commentators have marveled, as indeed they should, that Gandhi should have made known to his political adversary his precise plans for fomenting revolution. If other eminent revolutionaries of the twentieth century have been dedicated to stealth as much as to violence, Gandhi sought to disarm his opponents by advertising his plans. Neither Lord Irwin nor Reginald Reynolds, the bearer of the letter, realized at that time just how dangerous Gandhi could be, but Reynolds, at least, came to an awareness of this soon thereafter. 'Gandhiji would always offer full details of his plans and movements to the police,' wrote Reynolds some years after Gandhi's death, 'thereby saving them a great deal of trouble. One police inspector who availed himself of Gandhi's courtesy in this matter is said to have been severely reprimanded by his chief. 'Don't you know,' he told the inspector, 'that everyone who comes into close contact with that man *goes over to his side?*'" (Reynolds 1952).

Lord Irwin, the recipient of Gandhi's missive, was a man of Christian belief who subscribed to the school of thought that Christianity could be rightfully harnessed to the project

of empire; the messenger, a young English Quaker, represented a much softer strand of Christianity, whose adherents, never more than a small minority in the church, would have had no difficulty in understanding Gandhi's injunction to listen to the still small voice within oneself; and the author of the message, who declared himself a believer in sanatan dharma, had been hailed by an eminent American clergyman as 'the Christ of our age' (Holmes 1922: 48) and had by his own admission learned much about nonviolent resistance from the Sermon on the Mount. In this interaction, we might say that Gandhi opened the world to three faces of the Christian West.

There had doubtless been many Indians before him who had something of an intellectual and spiritual engagement with Christianity, but Gandhi must be numbered among the first Indians whose interpretations of Christianity, and of the Christian West, would acquire a wide public dimension. He brought to his reading of the Sermon on the Mount a different spirit, and perhaps strove to resuscitate and strengthen traditions in the West and in Roman Christianity that had long been marginalized. Gandhi's letter to Irwin has been put under scrutiny, but we have curiously been inattentive to the manner in which Gandhi had it delivered: he sought to bring Christians who were unaware of other traditions of Christianity into conversations with each other. There is, as (to take one example) Hindus and Christians in India appear to be locked in battle over the question of conversions, and as the competition over religious faith stiffens, something to be learned from the long history of Gandhi's engagement with diverse strands of Christianity and his many conversations with Christian missionaries. Gandhi did not view Christian missionaries as merely agents of divisive politics, or as charlatans convinced of the superiority of their faith: he accepted their challenge to further his knowledge of both Hinduism and Christianity.

GANDHI'S RELIGION

Let me turn, then, from Christianity to some broader considerations about Gandhi's religion. More so than any other major political figure of modern times, Gandhi was a man of religion – though perhaps not in the most ordinary sense of the term. One reason among many why

Gandhi has not been taken seriously by figures of the secular intelligentsia, even — shall I say so — in India not to mention the Western world, is that religion is viewed as something of an embarrassment, or at least as something that is, or ought to be, a private affair.⁹ As I have already argued, no political figure of the last few hundred years brought religion, or more properly the religious sensibility, into the public domain as much as Gandhi. One should recall that he affirmed in his autobiography, first published in 1927, with the observation that those who sought to disassociate politics and religion understood the meaning of neither politics nor religion. Indeed, I will go further and suggest that the most pointed inference we can draw from Gandhi's life is the following: the only way to be religious at this juncture of human history is to engage in the political life, not politics in the debased sense of party affiliations, or in the sense being a conservative or liberal, but politics in the sense of political awareness. After Gandhi, to invoke Arnold Toynbee, we must clearly understand that the saint's religiosity can only be tested in the slum of politics. And, yet, the criticism that Gandhi introduced religion into politics has persisted, displaying a tenacity that is oblivious to Gandhi's definition of religion. Replying to one of his critics in 1920, Gandhi wrote: 'Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion, which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature . . . which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself.'¹⁰

What, then, can we say of Gandhi's religion, of his life as a Hindu, his relations with other Hindus, Muslims, and practitioners of other faiths, and his views on conversion? In relation to the question of religion, Gandhi's life presents itself to us as a series of paradoxes. Let me offer a number of illustrations. He described himself as a devotee of Ram, and venerated the *Ramacaritmanas* of Tulsidas, but he unequivocally rejected passages in Tulsidas that he found offensive or degrading to women and the lower castes. Though he viewed himself as much of a Hindu as anyone else, Gandhi seldom visited

temples and, it is safe to say, did not generally view worship in temples as intrinsic to Hinduism. One can, of course, find passages in his voluminous writings which are contrary to what I am suggesting. 'I do not regard the existence of temples as a sin or superstition. Some form of common worship, and a common place of worship', he responded in 1925 to some readers of *Young India*, 'appear to be a human necessity' (5 November 1925, in *CWMG* 33:203) Much stronger is this passage, from an article he wrote in response to an American correspondent in 1933: 'I know of no religion or sect that has done or is doing without its house of God . . . Nor is it certain that any of the great reformers including Jesus destroyed or discarded temples altogether.' However, in the same article, he wrote in a rather matter-of-fact tone: 'I have ceased to visit temples for years, but I do not regard myself on that account as a better person than before.'¹¹ Lest anyone should think that Gandhi merely viewed visits to temples as necessary for the masses, while quite unnecessary for people of elevated thinking such as himself, he at once sets the record straight: 'My mother never missed going to the temple when she was in a fit state to go there. Probably her faith was far greater than mine, though I do not visit temples.' Moreover, for someone who seldom experienced any need to go to a temple, Gandhi was an extraordinarily strong advocate of the right of others to worship at temples. It is over the entire question of temple-entry, that is the right of "Untouchables" to worship at Hindu temples, that Gandhi diverged most significantly from the principal leader of the Dalit community, B. R Ambedkar, who felt that the issue of temple-entry was peripheral to the lives of Dalits.

The same kind of paradox can be found in Gandhi's views on caste. On more than one occasion Gandhi described himself as a believer in *sanatan dharma*, or the idea of Hinduism as an eternal faith, and he often declared his belief in the institution of *varnashrama*, or the idea that a well-regulated society is to be understood as a collection of varnas or classes, each of which performs the duty for which it is best fitted. These views appear to place Gandhi firmly in the orthodox Hindu camp. Yet the indubitable fact remains that few public figures of his time in India endeavored as much as Gandhi did to lessen the impact of caste in Indian life and to

erode the disabilities under which lower castes had labored for tens of generations. Gandhi made it known openly that the system of Untouchability, which condemned, and still condemns, millions of Hindus to a life of degradation, humiliation, exploitation, indeed servitude, was a blot of immense proportions on Hinduism and shamed every Hindu. While Gandhi himself was not from the lower castes, he publicly declared that he would want to be born as an Untouchable in his next life. Particularly in the last decade of his life, Gandhi was adamant that he would attend only inter-caste weddings.

As we endeavor to comprehend Gandhi's religiosity and his practice of religion, several other considerations of great import come to mind.

Religious Scriptures

Gandhi has something eminently sensible to tell us about how should one approach, whatever's one faith, the scriptures of one's own religion. One has only to consider Hindu militancy in India, the rise of Islamic extremism, Christian fundamentalism in the United States, and Buddhism's turn towards intolerance in Sri Lanka to recognize that in all religions one has witnessed in recent years a tendency to turn towards excessively literal and narrow readings of scriptural works. An exchange Gandhi had in 1925 with a prominent Muslim clergyman in the Punjab, in northwestern India, offers an entry point into this discussion. On February 26th of that year, Gandhi took to the pages of his newspaper, *Young India*, to write of the stoning to death of two Ahmadiyahs at Kabul that 'the stoning method is enjoined in the Koran only in certain circumstances which do not cover the cases under observation. But as a human being living in the fear of God I should question the morality of the method under any circumstance whatsoever. Whatever may have been necessary or permissible during the Prophet's lifetime and in that age, this particular form of penalty cannot be defended on the mere ground of its mention in the Koran.' Remarkably, for someone who was firmly of the view that modern education had greatly undervalued the heart, Gandhi also opined that 'every formula of every religion has in this age of reason, to submit to the acid test of reason and universal justice if it is to ask for universal assent.'¹² Thereupon

Maulana Zafar Ali Khan (1873-1956), later to become a keen advocate of the movement for the creation of Pakistan, while expressing his great admiration for Gandhi, wrote to him that 'to hold that even if the Koran supported such form of penalty, it should be condemned outright as an error, is a form of reasoning which cannot appeal to the Mussalmans [Muslims].' Writing again in *Young India* on 5 March 1925, Gandhi did not hesitate to declare that 'even the teachings themselves of the Koran cannot be exempt from criticism. Every true scripture only gains by criticism. After all we have no other guide but our reason to tell us what may be regarded as revealed and what may not be.'¹³ This was not an incidental thought on Gandhi's part but entirely reflective of his thinking: thus as early as 1921, in a longish piece on 'Hinduism' appearing in *Young India*, Gandhi declared that he 'decline[d] to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense' (6 October 1921, in *CWMG* 24:371). In 1937, he was to write in similar terms, 'Truth is superior to everything and I reject what conflicts with it. Similarly that which is in conflict with non-violence should be rejected. And on matters which can be reasoned out, that which conflicts with Reason must also be rejected.'¹⁴

Now if Gandhi's stress on reason seems somewhat at odd with what we know of his life,¹⁵ his advocacy of 'criticism' can be put in other idioms. Quite simply, with respect to the question whether one is bound to accept the most venerated scriptures of one's own faith, Gandhi furnished a litmus test: if something in the scripture is contrary to your conscience, you must accept that there is no better guide than your own conscience. Scripture must pass the test of conscience: thus, when it was suggested to Gandhi that his interpretation of the Gita as a work which supported his advocacy of *ahimsa* [non-violence] was an egregious mistake, he wrote in defense: 'I still somehow or other fancy that "my philosophy" represents the true meaning of the teaching of the Gita. I may be totally mistaken. Such a mistake can do no harm either to me or to anybody. For the source of my inspiration is of no consequence if what I stand for be the unadulterated truth.'¹⁶ 'I derive my belief in non-violence', he told his interviewer Dr. Crane on another occasion, 'from the Gita, whereas there are others who read violence in

it.' Yet, had he not received sustenance from his reading of the Gita, that would not have altered his belief in *ahimsa* an iota. 'It is enough', Gandhi concludes his thought, 'that my non-violence is independent of the sanction of scriptures.'¹⁷ When some Hindus quoted the Manusmriti in support of orthodoxy, and the rigid separation of the castes, Gandhi unhesitatingly described a number of the verses as 'apocryphal' and 'meaningless'.¹⁸ What Gandhi calls the conscience is also, famously, one's inner voice, as in this passage: 'Indeed I would reject all authority if it is in conflict with sober reason or the dictates of the heart. Authority sustains and ennobles the weak when it is the handiwork of reason but it degrades them when it supplants reason sanctified by the still small voice within.'¹⁹

Knowledge and Understanding of Other Faiths

Gandhi embraced the view that a true understanding and practice of one's own religion requires an understanding of other faiths. At his daily evening prayer meetings, conducted not in temples but under the open sky, passages were read from the Koran, the New Testament, the Gita, the Upanishads, and even from modern Christian literature, such as Cardinal Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light". 'This study of other religions besides one's own', as Gandhi was to write in an article on 'Religious Education' in 1928, 'will give one a grasp of the rock-bottom unity of all religions and afford a glimpse also of that universal and absolute truth which lies beyond the "dust of creeds and faiths."²⁰ One would be perfectly justified in viewing this as a form of ecumenism, as an illustration of Gandhi's tolerance and liberal mindedness, but Gandhi also engaged in such religious practice because he understood it to be the best way of being a better Hindu — or, rather, a better practitioner of one's faith, whatever it may be. Addressing a gathering of Buddhists in 1925 on the occasion of Buddha's birth anniversary, Gandhi recalled that the Jains had often mistaken him for a Jain, the Christians for a Christian, and his Muslim friends for a Muslim. But, crucially, none of them had come to the recognition that his veneration for other faiths made him more, not less, of a Hindu.

Conversion

As a corollary, Gandhi came to embrace a very particular position on the vexed question of conversion, a position that has won him few friends but which I believe to be the most humane and reasonable view that one can possibly hold. As someone who believed unequivocally in the right to freedom of religious expression and worship, Gandhi also supported one's unimpeachable right to convert to another faith. Some of Gandhi's contemporary Hindutva critics, who deplore his supposed appeasement of Muslims but applaud his courage in resisting Christian missionaries, have attempted to depict Gandhi as a firm foe of conversion. In an article he published on 23 April 1931, he stated that his position had been misrepresented, and he went on to affirm: 'I am, then, not against conversion. But I am against the modern methods of it. Conversion nowadays has become a matter of business, like any other.'²¹ Yet, in an interview he gave to the Reverend John Mott in 1931, he took what appears to be a contrary position. 'I disbelieve in the conversion of one person by another.' When, however, Gandhi was asked, 'Will you under swaraj allow Christians to go on with their proselytizing activity without any hindrance?', he replied: 'No legal hindrance can be put in the way of any Christian or of anybody preaching for the acceptance of his doctrine.' Predictably, Gandhi then complicates his own argument with an observation that takes us to heart of his position: 'My effort should never be to undermine another's faith but to make him [or her] a better follower of his [or her] own faith.'²² Gandhi's philosophical opposition to conversion arose from the conviction that conversion presumes, at least on the part of those who proselytize, a hierarchy of faiths, just as it presumes, on the part of those who are candidates for conversion, an inadequate comprehension of the spiritual resources of their own faith. In sum, his views on conversion, and on religious practice, are best encapsulated in his idea of what constitutes the 'fundamental truth of fellowship': 'So, we can only pray, if we are not Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu; or if we are Mussalmans, not that a Hindu, or a Christian should become a Mussalman; nor should we even secretly pray that anyone should be converted; but our inmost prayer should be that a Hindu

should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, and a Christian a better Christian' (Sharma 1996: 3).

The Meaning of Religion

Last but not least, there is the consideration, to which I have adverted earlier but would now like to elaborate at somewhat greater length, whether by religion Gandhi at all meant what we ordinarily understand to be religion. I have said that Gandhi was preeminently a man of religion, and religion seems so inextricably intertwined with every aspect of his life that without religion Gandhi's life seems utterly inexplicable. Writing nearly towards the end of his life, on 21 July 1946, Gandhi affirmed that 'man without religion is man without roots.'²³ However, in this matter as in all others, Gandhi gives no comfort to those who wish to see the world in black and white terms and who are unable to live with ambiguity. One should not be utterly astounded, if we have at all followed the trajectory of Gandhi's thought, that he even thought it possible to be a Hindu and not believe in God at all. A more nuanced view of this question can be entertained by the thought that, in authoring the idea of satyagraha or non-violent resistance, in tendering resistance not by physical force but rather through the force of truth, Gandhi had effected a fundamental transformation in his worldview. His own autobiography furnishes the only guidance we need on this point: as he says, though his religious awareness commenced with the formulation, commonly encountered in every religion, that 'God is Truth', he eventually came to the realization that 'Truth is God'. There are many who cannot be persuaded about the existence of God; there are others who outright deny the existence of God. But is there anyone who can deny the existence of truth? If the true meaning of being religious is that one should never view anyone as outside the pale, if indeed religion obligates us to never disregard the other as unworthy of our consideration and regard, then cannot this objective be better pursued if we remain dedicated to the quest for truth? Responding to a student's query in 1928, Gandhi averred: 'To me religion means truth and *ahimsa* [non-violence] or rather truth alone, because truth includes *ahimsa*, *ahimsa* being the necessary and indispensable means for its recovery.'²⁴ It is from *satya*, meaning truth, that

Gandhi derived the idea of satyagraha, the practice of nonviolent resistance. And, so, with this concluding thought, I return to the formulation with which I began, namely that nothing is more extraordinarily novel than his unshakeable conviction that it is no longer possible to have a religion without politics or a politics without religion.

NOTES

- ¹ For a brief survey of 19th century developments in Hinduism, I would refer the reader to my piece, "Hinduism" (Lal, 2008). The present article is derived, in its essentials, from a keynote speech on 'Gandhi's Religion' delivered before the San Fernando Valley Interfaith Council in 2005 on the occasion of Gandhi's birthday, and it retains some of the flavour of remarks given to a general audience.
- ² I borrow this phrase from Mitter (1992).
- ³ See Rao (1978); Jordens (1998); and Tidrick (2008). Lesser known, but more insightful than other commentators, is Saxena (1988). Chatterjee (2005) has continued her reflections on this subject.
- ⁴ M. K. Gandhi, 'May God Help', *Young India*, 27 November 1924, in *CWMG*, 29:374.
- ⁵ *CWMG* 94:19, letter to R. W. Aranyakum, *Harijan*, 23 March 1947.
- ⁶ *CWMG* 97:414, Speech at Prayer Meeting, 27 November 1947.
- ⁷ *Ramparts* (San Francisco, December 1964), also online at: <http://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/gentle.htm> (accessed 10 September 2012)
- ⁸ Letter to Lord Irwin, 2 March 1930, *Young India* 12 March 1920, also in *CWMG* 48:362-67. In this paragraph and the one following, I have drawn upon my introduction in Lal (2011).
- ⁹ This assessment will surely seem at odds with the proliferation of books and articles on Gandhi that one has witnessed in the last four or five years, but I am thinking of Gandhi's reception in the Western academy over the course of the last several decades. In a paper that I published in 1999, 'Gandhi, the civilizational crucible, and the future of dissent' (*Futures*, Vol. 31), I pointed to the singular lack of interest in Gandhi among postcolonial scholars, even as they issued calls for "resistance" or described themselves as critics of colonialism and racism (pp. 205-19). Moreover, even today I do not see any substantive engagement at all with Gandhi's thought among those who are not specialists on Indian history or on the life and work of Gandhi. One does not read Gandhi in the academy with the seriousness of purpose which, it is commonly supposed, is called for one when is tackling the work of Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, Foucault, Derrida, Habermas, or, to cite the thinkers who have now become the current fashions, Levinas, Agamben, Badiou, etc.
- ¹⁰ 'Neither a Saint Nor a Politician', *CWMG* 20:304, first published in *Young India*, 12 May 1920.
- ¹¹ 'Are Temples Necessary?', *Harijan* 11 March 1933, in *CWMG* 60:16-17.
- ¹² 'Stoning to Death', *Young India* 26 February 1925, in *CWMG* 30:

- ¹³ 'My Crime', *Young India* 5 March 1925, in *CWMG* 30:336.
- ¹⁴ 'Interview to Dr. Crane', *Harijan* 6 March 1937, in *CWMG* 71:1.
- ¹⁵ Consider, for example, his response to an interviewer: 'Intellect takes us along in the battle of life to a certain limit but at the crucial moment it fails us. Faith transcends reason. It is when the horizon is the darkest and human reason is beaten down to the ground that faith shines brightest and comes to our rescue.' *Young India*, 21 March 1929, in *CWMG* 45:146.
- ¹⁶ 'A Revolutionary's Defence', *Young India* 12 February 1925, in *CWMG* 30:248.
- ¹⁷ Interview to Dr. Crane', *Harijan* 6 March 1937, in *CWMG* 71:1.
- ¹⁸ 'A Stain on India's Forehead', after 5 November 1917, in *CWMG* 16:139; and see also his 'Speech at Public Meeting, Bhavnagar,' 1 July 1934, in *CWMG* 64:116-21.
- ¹⁹ 'The Caste System', *Young India* 8 December 1920, *CWMG* 22:69.
- ²⁰ *Young India*, 6 December 1928, in Iyer (1986:450).
- ²¹ 'Foreign Missionaries', *Young India* 23 April 1931, in *CWMG* 51:414.
- ²² Interview to Dr John Mott, *Young India*, 21 March 1929, in *CWMG* 45:145.
- ²³ "Question Box", *Harijan* 21 July 1946, in *CWMG* 91:273.
- ²⁴ *Young India*, 6 December 1928, in Iyer (1986: 450).

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Interpreting Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*

Rudolf C Heredia

Gandhi's Hind Swaraj is not rejection of the liberative contribution of modernity. Rather his effort can be interpreted as an attempt to integrate these positive elements with a liberating re-interpretation of tradition. With his critique from within the tradition, Gandhi becomes the great synthesiser of contraries within and across traditions.

GANDHI's *Hind Swaraj* (HS) is surely a foundational text for any understanding of the man and his mission. In dialogue with the text in its context, with the author and among ourselves, we hope to locate the text within its own horizon of meaning and then interrogate it from within our own contemporary. For Gandhi's text is "a proclamation of ideological independence" [Dalton 1993:16] he never compromised, his "confession of the faith" [Nanda 1974:66] he never abandoned, "a rather incendiary manifesto" [Erikson 1969:217] to enkindle his revolution. No wonder it was banned by the colonial government in 1910 for fear of sedition.

I Gandhi's Critique of the Modern West

For Gandhi civilisation was by definition a moral enterprise: "Civilisation is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty" (HS, Ch 13). Hence it is the very basic ethos of this modern west that Gandhi sets himself against. For he finds two unacceptable and unethical principles at its very core: 'might is right' and the 'survival of the fittest'. The first legitimated the politics of power as expounded earlier by Machiavelli; the second idealised the economics of self-interest as proposed by Adam Smith. In the west "with rare exceptions, alternatives to western civilisation are always sought within its own basic thought system" [Saran 1980:681].

The three recurrent themes in *Hind Swaraj* which we will discuss here are: colonial imperialism, industrial capitalism, and rationalist materialism.

Colonial imperialism: Gandhi categorically insisted that "the English have not taken India; we have given it to them. They are not in India because of their strength: but because we keep them" (HS, Ch 7). He was one of the earliest to realise that colonialism was something to

be overcome in our own consciousness first [Nandy 1983:63]. Unless this 'Intimate Enemy' was exorcised and exiled, unless we addressed this 'Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism' (ibid), we would always be a people enslaved by one power or another, whether foreign or native. Certainly, Gandhi would not want to exchange an external colonialism for an internal one, a white sahib for a brown one, or compensate the loss of 'Hindustan' with 'Englistan' (HS, Ch 4).

British India colonialism was first justified by a supposedly Christianising mission, but very soon this was articulated in terms of a civilising one. In rejecting this modern civilisation, Gandhi is subverting the legitimacy of the colonial enterprise at its core. For there could be no colonialism without a civilising mission [Nandy 1983:11] since it could hardly be sustained in India by brute force.

Industrial capitalism: Gandhi sees capitalism as the dynamic behind colonial imperialism. Lenin too had said as much, and like Marx, Gandhi's rejection of capitalism is based on a profound repugnance to a system where profit is allowed to degrade labour, where the machines are valued more than humans, where automation is preferred to humanism.

It was this that moved Gandhi to his somewhat hyperbolic claim: "Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilisation; it represents a great sin" (HS, Ch 19). However, by 1919 his views on machinery do begin to change right up to 1947, as he gradually comes to concede some positive aspects like time and labour saving, even as he warns against the negative ones of concentrating wealth and displacing workers [Parel 1997:164-70]. He was acutely sensitive to how machinery can dehumanise and technology alienate, and he extends his critique to the professions of medicine and law (HS, Chs 11, 12). The poor hardly benefit from these professional services, though they are often

their victims. He backs up his criticism of these professions in *Hind Swaraj* with a later suggestion for their nationalisation (CW, 68:97).

Rationalist materialism: Technology is but the expression of science, which in modern civilisation becomes an uncompromising rationalism. For Gandhi this is but a dangerously truncated humanism. His incisive remark is much to the point: "Just as dirt is matter misplaced, reason misplaced is lunacy! I plead not for the suppression of Reason, but for a due recognition of that in us which sanctifies reason itself" (CW, 6:106). Certainly, Gandhi is right in insisting on the unreasonableness of not setting any limits to reason.

More recently a post-modern world has emphasised the aggressive and destructive march of this 'age of reason'. However, Gandhi would test his faith with his reason, but he would not allow his reason to destroy his faith. What makes such technological rationalism even more destructive in Gandhi's view, is its flawed materialism. That is, the negation of the spiritual, the transcendent, or in other words, the denial of a religious worldview.

For Gandhi truth, was much more than could be grasped by science or reason. For him there was a reality beyond that perceived by the senses. It is this transcendent reality that gave meaning and value to our present one. In this Gandhi is very much in the mainstream of Hindu tradition. Indeed, most religious traditions would be similarly sensitive to such a transcendent world, even when it is not perceived as wholly other-worldly. In a more secular world today we may not be sympathetic to such a worldview. And yet a materialism that is deterministic leaves no scope for human freedom and hope. Gandhi emphasises this reaching out to a beyond, that gives this freedom and hope its dynamism and a reach beyond its grasp.

II Relevance of Gandhi's Critique Today

Gandhi's critique of modern civilisation does overlook many of its strengths: its scientific and critical spirit of inquiry; its human control over the natural world; its organisational capacity. Such achievement would imply a certain 'spiritual dimension' that Gandhi seems to have missed [Parekh 1997:35]. However, the focus of his criticism is modern civilisation of a specific period; his condemnation of colonialism

focuses on its imperialistic inspiration; his rejection of industrialism derives mostly from its capitalist context; his apprehensions about rationality regard its truncation by materialism.

However, once the real limitations of Gandhi's critique are acknowledged, then we can better contextualise and interpret his relevance for us today, whether this be with regard to politics in our neo-colonial world, or technologies in our post-industrial times, or culture in our post-modern age. These will now be some of the issues on which we must allow Gandhi to interrogate us. For "the kinds of questions Gandhi asked nearly eight decades ago are the ones which now face both the underdeveloped and the post-industrial societies caught up in a deep upsurge of confusion and disillusionment" [Sethi 1979:3].

Neo-colonialism: Gandhi's rejection of the supposedly civilising mission of colonialism brings into question the whole legitimacy of colonial rule, at a fundamental ethical level. He would have India unlearn much that she has from the modern west. For if Indians "would but revert to their own glorious civilisation, either the English would adopt the latter and become Indianised or find their occupation in India gone" (HS, Preface to English edition).

Thus, he opens up a host of ethical issues between the coloniser and the colonised, the dominant and the dominated, the oppressor and oppressed. The post-colonial era brought such issues into sharper focus across the world. Now with globalisation leading to a unipolar world, such concerns with empowerment and disempowerment, dependency and inter-dependency, have gained, not lost their urgency. Moreover, closer home this widening divide bears down on us more decisively than ever before.

Our new economic policy increasingly represents a whole new vision of society, that takes for granted the internal colonialism we are experiencing today, as for instance between Bharat and India, the bahujan and the twice-born jatis, the avarna and the savarna castes, the toiling masses and the privileged classes, the oppressed people and the oppressor groups, the minority traditions and the majority one.

Thus, our post-colonial world can only be described as a neo-colonial one, internationally divided into developed and developing nations, as also intra-nationally between privileged and underprivileged citizens. Moreover, these divisions are mutually reinforced, not just economically and politically but culturally and socially as well.

Moreover, the west is still the centre of our world for we have not the self-respect, the self-reliance, the self-sufficiency to centre ourselves and so we condemn ourselves to remain on the periphery of someone else's centre. For the colonial masters had stripped our collective identity of any intrinsic dignity by denigrating us as a cowardly and passive people. Gandhi sought to reverse the damage to our collective psyche by his "redefinition of courage and effective resistance in terms of, or through non-violence" [Roy 1986:185].

The issue then of our identity as a nation and a people still remains to be resolved. Such identities are only viable in a genuinely multicultural world. Gandhi's urging in this regard is certainly relevant today in our own society where the propagation of a cultural nationalism is growing every day. Yet "nothing could be more anti-Indian than attempts to make an ideology of Indianness and to fight, instead of incorporating or bypassing non-Indianness" [Nandy 1980:112].

Post-industrialism: With the new technologies there was much hope for a new freedom from degrading and monotonous work. However, what seems to have come in to replace this degrading monotony is not a new dignity of labour but rather a compulsive consumerist society, which is but dehumanising in newer ways. This should hardly surprise us since the ethic underlying post-industrialism is the same as that which underpinned industrial capitalism, namely, the profit motive and the market mechanism.

Gandhi's critique was precisely a condemnation of these. If we find his ideas of trusteeship a little naive and impractical, we still have no alternative answer to humanising a system that seems to have betrayed what possibilities it might have had of bringing freedom and dignity to the toiling masses. Moreover, technology has its own intrinsic dynamism, that instrumentalises our world and inevitably leads to a disenchantment that bring us to the 'iron cage', as Weber warned long ago.

Our environmental crises are surely a manifestation of this loss of innocence, even to the point when we want newer technologies to repair the damage already done by the older ones. Gandhi was precisely rejecting such a naive "nineteenth century optimism which sought for the positive sciences the liberation of humanity" [Nandy 1986:102]. But such anti-modernism then was ahead of its time!

Post-modernism: The excessive and aggressive rationalism of the age of reason,

now seems to have turned on itself with the post-modern revolt. But this has thrown up its own irrationalities. It seems to have lost the liberating project that was implicit in modernity. For the kind of relativising and subjectivising of ethics that post-modernism has led to, undermines the claims of any justice. For there can hardly be any mutually accepted legitimacy to arbitrate conflicting claims, when consensus irrevocably breaks down. So, might becomes right, and the power its own legitimation.

Gandhi's trenchant critique of modernity was focused on modernist rationalism, but it was equally opposed to a post-modern rejection of rationality. What Gandhi was pleading for is a richer concept of rationality and a meta-theory of rationalism [Parekh 1995:165-66]. He wanted to contain excessive rationality within reasonable bounds without an irrational revolt against reason itself, but he would emphatically reject any forced choice between totalising rationalism and relativising subjectivism.

III Gandhi's Affirmation of Indian Culture

Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* presents us with an idealised version of Indian culture that is completely counterpunctal to the 'modern west'. Here we pick out three seminal themes: swaraj, swadeshi and satya.

Swaraj: Gandhi radically re-interprets 'swaraj' and gives it a dual meaning. The original Gujarati text uses 'swaraj' in both senses. Gandhi's English translation makes the duality explicit: swaraj as 'self-rule' and as 'self-government'. The first as self-control, rule over oneself, was the foundation for the second, self-government. In this second sense, local self-government was what Gandhi really had in mind. Gandhi very decidedly gives priority to self-rule over self-government, and to both over political independence, swatantrata.

Essential to both meanings of swaraj, was a sense of self-respect that is precisely Gandhi's answer to colonial rule. For Gandhi freedom in its most fundamental sense had to mean freedom for self-realisation. But it had to be a freedom for all, for the toiling masses, and the privileged classes, and most importantly for the least and last Indian. In this sense, sarvodaya was precisely the patriotism that Gandhi espoused. It focused on people's welfare not on national pride: "By patriotism I mean the welfare of the whole people, and, if I could secure it at the hands of the English, I should bow down my head to them" (HS, Ch 15). So he could write:

“my patriotism is for me a stage on my journey to the land of freedom and peace” (*Young India*, April 13, 1924, p 112). And yet swaraj was not something given by the leaders, Indian or British, it was something that had to be taken by the people for themselves.

Clearly, the foundation of swaraj in both its senses had to be threefold: self-respect, self-realisation and self-reliance. This is what Gandhi tried to symbolise with the chakra and khadi, both much misunderstood symbols today. For Gandhi khadi “is the symbol of the unity of Indian humanity, of its economic freedom and equality and therefore ultimately in the poetic expression of Jawaharlal Nehru, the livery of India’s freedom” (CW 75:146-66). Today the chakra and khadi have not retained this powerful multivalent symbolism.

Yet the ethic that Gandhi was trying to introduce and inscribe into Indian political life was that “real swaraj will not be the acquisition of authority by a few but the acquisition of the capacity of all to resist authority when it is abused” [Prabhu 1961:4-5]. For Gandhi “Civilisation is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path duty” (HS, Ch 13). The basis then of his swaraj could not be just rights, it had to be duties as well. For Gandhi real rights are legitimated by duties they flow from, for both are founded on satya and dharma. The modern theory of rights reverses this priority and finds rights on the dignity and freedom of the individual. But comprehensive morality can never be adequately articulated or correctly grasped in terms of rights alone.

Swadeshi: Swadeshi is the means for Gandhi’s quest for swaraj. Fundamentally it meant ‘localism’. This was not an isolated localism of the “deserted village”, that Goldsmith romanticised, or the degradation of caste oppression that Ambedkar revolted against, but rather the local neighbourhood community, the village as the node in a network of oceanic circles that over-lapped and spread out in its ever widening embrace. It is this commitment of the individual to his ‘desh’ that was Gandhi’s Indian alternative to western nationalism [Parekh 1995:56-57].

Gandhi perceived that power in India was inevitably monopolised by the urban elite, at the expense of village folk, and was trying to reverse this dependency to make the state serve the weaker sections. His was an egalitarian, not just a romantic, inspiration. Mao attempted as much in China. But the village Gandhi idealised was not just a geographic place, or a statistic, or a social class. It was an event,

a dream, a happening, a culture. As he used “the term ‘village’ implied not an entity, but a set of values” [Sethi 1979:23]. It brought together his three basic themes of swaraj: self-respect, self-realisation and self-reliance.

In privileging the rural over the urban, Gandhi was arguing for a minimal state, since he saw the state essentially as an instrument of violence. It was only in the communal cauldron at the time of partition, that he began to see the need of state power to contain and end the violence. And yet our experience of the post-colonial state in this country would bear out his apprehensions even as we seem to be careening into anarchy. Gandhi perhaps did not fully appreciate the role of the state as an agency for regeneration and redistribution, in planning and co-ordination. But he was acutely sensitive to the centralised state appropriating what belonged to the local community and the individual. He was deeply suspicious of power being used in the cause of freedom or to contain violence. His swadeshi was an attempt to address this complex dialectic on an ethical rather than a political foundation.

Satya: For Gandhi truth was not a matter of theory but of practice. His autobiography entitled *Experiments with Truth*, is surely an indication of this. But Gandhi’s truth has little to do with experimental science, concerned with external prediction. Rather his truth was an experiential one, a reflexive understanding of oneself very much in the tradition of the Buddha and the ancient rishis of this land. The whole of Gandhi’s life’s journey was not to predict the outcome of his life’s struggle, but rather to interpret and direct the struggles of the masses for what they themselves could legitimately claim.

For Gandhi satya, was an absolute reality that we could only partially grasp. Thus the many-sidedness of truth that we experience is nothing but a consequence of such relative knowledge. Overcoming these limitations of our ‘relative knowledge’ for a more comprehensive grasp of this ‘absolute truth’ could never be forced by violence. Only ahimsa, non-violence, could make the quest for such truth viable. Gandhi operationalised this quest in his strategy of satyagraha, or truth-force. Moreover, he makes no ethical separation between means and an end. Both must be morally good. For him “the goal did not exist at the end of a series of actions designed to achieve it, it shadowed them from the very beginning” [Parekh 1995:142].

Thus, satyagraha was not just a political strategy, it was both a means and an end.

It was basically a method of dialogue that would bring two disagreeing parties not just into mutual agreement, but into the realisation of a deeper truth together. The dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed is transcended in this ‘heightened mutuality’, but even beyond this “satyagraha ruptures the tricotomy among the oppressor, oppressed and emancipator” [Pantham 1986:179]. for it seeks to involve all three in this quest for greater self-realisation of the truth. From the satyagrahi as the initiator, this required a demanding discipline.

But satyagraha was also a political strategy. In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi defines ‘passive resistance’ as he called it then, as “a method of securing rights by personal suffering” (HS, Ch 17). Clearly, “Gandhi’s satyagraha then was an ingenious combination of reason, morality and politics; it appealed to the opponent’s head, heart and interests” [Parekh 1995:156].

This was a “vernacular model of action” [Parekh 1995:211] that the people understood. But it was Gandhi who first used it so effectively to mobilise them and to appeal to their oppressors. In fact he was the first leader to bring non-violence to centre stage in the struggle for freedom with the British. He was well aware that adopting “methods of violence to drive out the English” would be a “suicidal policy” (HS, Ch 15). And his *Hind Swaraj* was precisely intended to stymie such a soul-destroying venture.

Gandhi’s re-interpretation: Gandhi locates himself as an insider to mainstream Hinduism, the ‘sanathan dharma’. Hence, the radicality of his re-interpretation goes unnoticed. Gandhi does not reject, he simply affirms what he considers to be authentic, and allows the inauthentic to be sloughed off. For “Gandhi’s Hinduism was ultimately reduced to a few fundamental beliefs: the supreme reality of God, the ultimate unity of all life and the value of love (ahimsa) as a means of realising God” [Nanda 1985:86]. His profound redefinition of Hinduism gave it a radically novel orientation. In sum, “Gandhi’s Hinduism had a secularised content but a spiritual form and was at once both secular and non-secular” [Parekh 1995:109].

Thus one of the most remarkable and yet unremarked re-interpretations of Hinduism that Gandhi effected was that of the Gita, a text intended to persuade a reluctant warrior on the legitimacy and even the necessity of joining the battle. Gandhi reworks its ‘nishkamakarma’ to become the basis of his ahimsa and satyagraha!

We have only to contrast Gandhi's Hinduism with V D Savarkar's hindutva to see how starkly contrapunctal they are! Hence, in spite of its pretensions to be nationalist and modern, its militant chauvinism and authoritarian fundamentalism make hindutva the very antithesis of Gandhi's Hinduism. Hindutva is in fact but a contemporary synthesis of brahmanism! This is why in the end the Mahatma is vehemently opposed by the traditional Hindu elite, who felt threatened by the challenge he posed.

But precisely because he presents himself as a Hindu in his interpretation of Indian culture, he was seen as too inclusive by traditional Hindus, and at the same time as not ecumenical enough by contemporary non-Hindus. Hence his appeals for Hindu-Muslim unity were rejected, by the Muslims as being too Hindu, and questioned by the Hindus for not being Hindu enough.

Gandhi's failure to bridge the religious divide between Hindu and Muslim, was matched in many ways by his failure to bridge the caste divide between dalits and others. He never quite understood Jinnah, or his appeal to Muslim nationalism. One could say the same in regard to Ambedkar and dalits, who have never forgotten or forgiven Gandhi for the imposition of the Pune Pact. We can only wonder now whether separate electorates for dalits then would have made reservations for them unnecessary now. What we do know is that the caste divide has only deepened with increasing conflict and indeed the same can be said about the religious divide and religious conflict in this country.

Yet for Gandhi the unity of humankind was premised on the oneness of the cosmos, which was a philosophical principle that was ontologically prior to diversity. Once the legitimacy of religious diversity is rooted in the fundamental Jaina principle of 'anekantavada', the many sidedness of truth, then religious tolerance is a necessary consequence – not a negative tolerance of distance and coexistence, but rather one of communication and enrichment [Heredia 1997].

In cultural matters, Gandhi wanted all cultures to be enriched by each other without losing their identity. But such cultural assimilation, was opposed by political revivalists and religious nationalists. Yet for Gandhi open and understanding dialogue must precede, not follow, a free and adaptive assimilation. Thus, an enriched diversity would then contribute to a more invigorated pluralism and an enhanced unity. This was precisely Gandhi's understanding of Indian culture and civilisation, and he had, indeed,

grasped its fundamental strength and the secret of its survival.

IV Our World Today

We must now situate ourselves with regard to the critical issues of our world today to enter into dialogue with him. Here we have chosen three such issues as being the most fruitful for this encounter: the collapse of socialism and the crisis of capitalism, globalisation in an inter-dependent world, and the unresolved violence of our atomic age.

Post-socialism: In our present world, the socialist ideal is being discredited as a god that failed, when it is rather the once socialist states that have collapsed. Moreover, today the crisis of capitalism is everyday more apparent, with the collapse of the much acclaimed Asian tigers as the new model for the cornucopia of development and progress; and the growing unemployment in the west cannot but presage further crises there as well. With liberalisation and privatisation as accepted policy in our country today, the Bharat verses India divide, that Gandhi had intuited long ago, is, if anything, rapidly and disastrously growing. Only now the elite of Bharat seems to have been co-opted by the privileged of India, even as the refugees of India have been forced into an urbanised Bharat.

Much has been made about the disagreements between Gandhi and Nehru. But in the exchange of letters in 1945 [Parel 1997:149-56], it is quite clear that the axis of their reconciliation was precisely around this quest for equality. Their paths may have been different but Nehru's socialism and Gandhi's swaraj were both oriented to this quest for equity and equality across all the divides, of caste, class, region, etc.

Gandhi was quite radical in urging equality, even more so than the communists. He would have equal wages and bread labour for all. In his 'Constructive Programme' (CW, 75:146-66). Gandhi's concept of equality is not grounded in impersonal and competitive individualism, as it seems to be in the west, but in co-operative and compassionate non-violence, on 'fraternity' not just 'liberty'. In the beginning, he saw no contradiction between such fraternal equality and the idealised hierarchy of varna. But in his later years he reversed himself to urge that "classless society is the ideal, not merely to be at aimed at but to be worked for" (*Harijan*, February 17, 1946, p 9). By now he was promoting inter-caste marriages and hoping "there would be only one caste

known by the beautiful name Bhangi, that is to say the reformer or remover of all dirt" (*Harijan*, July 7, 1946, p 212).

But if Gandhi's quest for equality is something that our complex world cannot accommodate, we seem to have given up not just this ideal of equality, but even the quest for equity in the distribution of the rewards and burdens of our society. And yet today Gandhi's proletarian 'levelling down' certainly seems to be much more viable than Tagore's elitist 'levelling up'. In such a scenario the relevance of Gandhi's idea of sarvodaya as the goal of swaraj is something we need to re-examine. Certainly, a decentralised participative democratic and humane society, is a more attractive, and one may dare say, a more viable ideal today, than the kind of consumerism and inequitable divisions that the new economic policy in our country seems to welcome.

Indeed, the principle of subsidiarity seems to be the only viable solution to national governments that are too large to address local problems, while being too small to cope with global ones. Today the 73rd and 74th amendment to the Constitution once again affirm panchayati raj and tribal self-rule. We are coming back to a devolution of powers that Gandhi had urged in his ideal of swaraj and had tried to have written in to our Constitution. Hopefully this will be a presage of more to come.

Globalisation: Globalisation and the alienating homogeneity that it must inevitably promote, is the very opposite of the localism and the celebration of diversity that Gandhi's swadeshi was meant to encourage. However, Gandhi's principle of swadeshi, "simply means that the most effective organisation of social, economic and political functions must follow the natural contours of the neighbourhood," thus affirming "the primacy of the immediate community" [Roy 1985:114]. Gandhi's "goodness politics" as it has been called [Saran 1980:691], could only really operate on such a scale. For "Gandhi decentralisation means the creation of parallel politics in which the people's power is institutionalised to counter the centralising and alienating forces of the modern state.... Thus the Gandhian decentralised polity has a built-in process of the withering away of the state" [Sethi 1986:229].

But before this is dismissed as too naive or impractical for our sophisticated and complicated world, we might pause to think of the kind of politics our centralised states have in fact spawned. The very hegemonic homogeneity it promotes

succeeds less at obliterating difference than at alienating minorities and enkindling their resentment. On the contrary, to take a lesson from ecology, micro-variability is needed for macro-stability in political and economic systems as well.

Gandhi's swadeshi could never mean ethnocentrism. Unlike some Hindu and Muslim 'nationalists' Gandhi never used 'nationalism' for narrow sectarian purposes. He mobilised his people as 'Indians' not as Hindus or Muslims. His nationalism was anti-imperialistic not chauvinistic, a struggle for political justice and cultural dignity [Nandy 1994:3]. He was a patriot who wanted "Indian nationalism to be non-violent, anti-militaristic and therefore a variant of universalism" [Nandy 1995:14]. He was only too aware of the number of 'nationalities' that could be mobilised in India, once the genie was out of the bottle!

An ecological understanding is now propelling us to a new and deep realisation of our interdependence. We have only one earth, we must learn to share and care. We are but a contingent part of the cosmos, debtors born, whose proper response to life must be the 'yagna', service-offering of our lives for others [Parekh 1995:88]. Thus, with regard to the economy and polity, Gandhi would have the village as his world; but with regard to culture and religion, it was the world that was his village! Surely, here we have a viable example of thinking globally and acting locally. Indeed, our global ecological crisis has begun to press on us anew the relevance of Gandhi's paradoxical ideas. For the institutional individualism that seemed to be the very foundation of the democratic quest in the west seems quite inadequate to the ecological crises of today. For it privileges individual rights over the common good. But even enlightened self-interest has no answer to the 'tragedy of the commons' except an external coercion.

However, for Gandhi, "individuality" must be "oriented to self-realisation through self-knowledge... in a network of interdependence and harmony informed by ahimsa" [Roy 1986a:84]. Nor was this to be an interdependence of dominant-subservient relationships so prevalent in our local communities and global societies. His swadeshi envisaged a more personalised and communitarian society on a human scale, yet extending to include both the biotic and even the cosmic community. This was the logical extension of the Jaina doctrine of 'syadvada', that everything is related to everything in the universe in 'a great chain of being'.

However, the Gandhian ideal was a community modelled on the joint family and on varna as a non-competitive division of labour. Later in his life his own promotion of inter-caste marriages testifies to a change in his views. Yet even as we critique such Gandhian ideas, we must discover in dialogue what value and relevance they have for us today. For ultimately Gandhi insists on both: that the community is not a mere means for the self-interest of the individual and that the individual in not a mere resource for the concerns of the community. And this would go for the community of communities, that our global community must be.

Violence: There can be no negating the liberation that modernity has brought in our post-modern world to vast masses of people. But for all its much vaulted 'rationality' some would rather say because of it, modernity has failed to cope with this endemic irrationality of violence. If Gandhi's ahimsa seems impractical, what are the alternative we have trapped ourselves in? If Gandhi was right that "to arm India on a large scale is to Europeanise it," (HS, Ch 15) then what would nuclear arms do? Americanise us? And this is an initiative being pushed by our cultural nationalists! But then in a globalised world it is surely only the elite that will get to strut and fret upon this global stage, while the masses of our people are a passive and manipulated audience to this theatre of the macabre.

The whole effort of the modern world in dealing with violence has been to control the other. But mastery over others has not meant less violence for ourselves. Only now we become the perpetrators, not the sufferers of violence. Gandhi's attempt begins with controlling oneself – as the first source of violence one must master in order to fearlessly and non-violently win over the violent others. His concern was with "socialising the individual conscience rather than internalising the social conscience" [Iyer 1973:123]. Certainly Gandhi has much relevance to our present need to once again bridge this dichotomy between rights and duties, and integrate both in a more comprehensive freedom of choice and the obligation of conscience, in a humanist worldview and a more genuinely humane world-community. This is our only real chance for peace in our now globally interdependent world.

Gandhi's synthesis: Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* is not a rejection of the liberative contribution of modernity: civil liberties, religious tolerance, equality, poverty alleviation. Rather his effort can be

interpreted as an attempt to integrate these positive elements with a liberating re-interpretation of tradition, even as some see him as radical and others as reactionary. With his critique from within the tradition, Gandhi becomes the great synthesiser of contraries if not of contradictions, within and across traditions.

His 'purna (comprehensive) swaraj' would harmonise rights and duties, head and heart, individual and community, faith and reason, economic development and spiritual progress, religious commitment and religious pluralism, self-realisation and political action. He brings together philosophical discourse and popular culture in enlightened renewal and social reform. Not since the time of the Buddha, some have argued, has such a synergy between the philosophic and the popular in our traditions been experienced. Thus, Gandhi integrates the Upanishad and the Tulsi Ramayan in his religious synthesis. When it comes to bridges across traditions, Gandhi brings the Gita together with the 'Sermon on the Mount' and reads one into the other. In fact, if he has Christianised Hinduism he has certainly also presented us with a Hinduised Christian spirituality.

Precisely as a re-interpretation from within, Gandhi can so much to more effectively and authentically integrate into his synthesis elements from without. Thus he reconciles meaningful faith and reasonable modernity. In the best traditions of this land he combined both faith and reason, for each is implicated in each other. Gandhi would constantly critique faith to ascertain whether it was meaningful and reasonable in terms of basic human value commitments. And so too he would demand of reason the same fidelity to these values as well.

However, the ascetic dimension of Gandhi's integration at times loses the aesthetic one. A criticism of Gandhi's ashrams was that it grew only vegetables not flowers [Parekh 1995:209]. Growing vegetables represented more than the Gandhian pre-occupation with vegetarianism and bread-labour. But in rightly emphasising the need for renunciation, certainly a message that our consumerist and self-indulgent world needs more than ever today, the Gandhian ashram seemed to miss out on the need for celebration, which our tired and alienated, dis-spirited and pessimistic world needs almost as much.

A re-interpretation of Gandhi would precisely allow such a celebration. While Gandhi's understanding of 'moksha' as service is a seminal breakthrough, even this can be enriched by affirming, not

negating the other dimensions of life. It is only thus that we will be able to bring some wholeness to, in Iris Murdoch's unforgettable phrase, the "broken totality," of our modern world.

VI

Conclusion: Partners in Dialogue

Gandhi's life was a continuing series of controversies and contestations with those in power on behalf of the powerless. He never lacked opponents, among the British and even the Indian elites, and often found himself isolated and alone particularly at the end of his life, which was far from being one long triumphant procession. Yet one of the great contributions of Gandhi was precisely his centring of the periphery: in politics with 'anthyodaya'; in religion by de-brahmising Hinduism, de-institutionalising practice and personalising belief; in education by his proposal for 'nai talim' or basic education as it came to be called; in the economy by symbolically urging khadhi. Not all of these efforts were successful or perhaps even practical, but they did make a contribution which is still valid today. And all Gandhi's original ideas can be found seeded already in his *Hind Swaraj*.

Today we need a new developmental model, and increasingly people are beginning to see that, it has to begin by "Putting the Last First" [Chambers 1983], to come back to the last Indian that Gandhi would have as the talisman of our social planning. No one can claim that Gandhi's reformist appeal has fulfilled the 'revolution of raising expectations' of our masses. This only underscores the need for a more fine-tuned analysis and a wider dialogue in our society for constructive change given the limits of reformism and the constraints on revolution. If we are looking for a new synthesis for a counter-culture, we must take Gandhi as a dialogue partner in this project but first we must redefine and re-interpret him. Such an encounter will help us to re-examine and reconstruct ourselves as well.

Gandhi has been severely criticised as impractical, as someone who took out an impossible overdraft on human moral resources. But this is to claim that human beings are not capable of a metanoia, a radical change of heart, that can open up new perspectives, not just for individuals and groups, but for entire societies and whole cultures as well. We need organic intellectuals and transformative activists who can articulate and precipitate such a social movement. The cascading crises that our society and our world is experiencing, only underlines more em-

phatically the need to find new ways of redefining ourselves and understanding our problems, before we can begin to respond to the situation.

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