

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-

tinction 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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