

Gandhi's Religious Ethics as Touchstone

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Abstract

Gandhi was often called a saint among politicians. His saintly adherence to nonviolence brought him comparisons to St. Francis of Assisi, St. Paul, and even to Christ. And yet, when one thinks about it, that appellation bears a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, it would seem that politics with its power-mongering, amoral Machiavellianism, and its valorisation of expediency over principle, and of successful outcomes over scrupulous means is an unpromising avenue for saintliness. Bringing politics into the spiritual realm invariably coarsens and corrupts it. On the other hand, introducing spirituality into the political arena would seem to betoken naivete and ineffectiveness in an area driven by worldly passions and cunning. Gandhi weakens the traditional dualism between religion and politics and attempts to fashion a non-dual relation between the two. In this new conception, religion seen primarily, though not exclusively, in ethical terms connotes a reverence for truth and a service to life which do not stop at the door of the meditation room or the temple but spill over necessarily into the social sphere. Politics in turn is reconceptualised as public service on the largest possible scale and is, at least ideally, far removed from the factionalism, raw ambition, and power-games usually associated with it. It is this Gandhian notion of ethics which mediates the non-dual relationship between religion and politics. On the one hand, Gandhi makes ethics both personal and social, the core of religion, and on the other this ethicised religion seeks its fulfilment in the realm of politics seen as the arena for both the realisation of truth and the greatest potential public service.

Keywords: God, religion, politics, *moksha*, *dharma*

Gandhi was often called a saint among politicians. His saintly adherence to nonviolence brought him comparisons to St. Francis of Assisi, St. Paul, and even to Christ.¹ And yet, when one thinks about it, that appellation bears a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, it would seem that politics with its power-mongering, amoral Machiavellianism, and its valorisation of expediency over principle, and of successful outcomes over scrupulous means is an unpromising avenue for saintliness. Thus, Bal Gangadhar Tilak among others warned Gandhi before he embarked on a political career in India, "Politics is a game of worldly

1 See among others Rolland, R. *Mahatma Gandhi*. London: The Century Co., 1924, and Andrews, C. F. "The Tribute of a Friend"; in: *Mahatma Gandhi: Essays and Reflections on his Life and Work*, ed. Radhakrishnan, S. London: Allen and Unwin, 1949.

people and not of *sadbhus*.”² Bringing politics into the spiritual realm invariably coarsens and corrupts it. On the other hand, introducing spirituality into the political arena would seem to betoken naivety and ineffectiveness in an area driven by worldly passions and cunning. It is perhaps for these reasons that Christ himself appeared to be in favour of a dualism: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

Gandhi by contrast without denying the distinction between the domain of Caesar and that of God repudiates any rigid separation between the two. “To the hungry person God appears in the form of bread”, he often said, a statement that he meant both literally and symbolically. He weakens the traditional dualism between religion and politics and attempts to fashion a non-dual relation between the two. In this new conception religion seen primarily, though not exclusively, in ethical terms connotes a reverence for truth and a service to life which do not stop at the door of the meditation room or the temple but spill over necessarily into the social sphere. Politics in turn is reconceptualised as public service on the largest possible scale and is, at least ideally, far removed from the factionalism, raw ambition, and power-games usually associated with it. It is this Gandhian notion of ethics which mediates the non-dual relationship between religion and politics. On the one hand, Gandhi makes ethics both personal and social, the core of religion, and on the other this ethicised religion seeks its fulfilment in the realm of politics seen as the arena for both the realisation of truth and the greatest potential public service.

What I suggest in this essay is that the non-dual relationship that Gandhi sees between religion on the one hand, and ethics and politics on the other, gives his conceptions of all three domains a dialectical and fluid character, which allows for their progressive and mutual enrichment. But this dialectical mediation is not without the risks and dangers that any attempt at reconceptualisation often carries. I shall divide this essay into three parts: first, I will provide an account of three key terms of Gandhi’s religious ethics; second, I shall offer a few reflections on Gandhi’s notion of *moksha* or spiritual liberation and its relation to *dharma*; and finally, I shall try to relate these Gandhian conceptions to our present day situation.

Gandhi’s Religious Ethics

Gandhi is a moralist through and through and yet it is difficult to write philosophically about his ethics. This is because Gandhi is fundamentally concerned with practice rather than with theory or abstract thought, and such philosophy as he used was meant to reveal its “truth” in the crucible of experience, hence the subtitle of his

2 Aiyar, “Gandhi, Gokhale, and the Moderates”, 103.

autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The experiments refer to the fact that the truth of concepts, values, and ideals is fulfilled only in practice. Prior to that practical fulfilment they remain spectral and abstract. Furthermore, Gandhi's ethics are inextricably linked with his religion, which itself is unconventional. Though an avowed Hindu, he was a Hindu in a philosophical rather than a sectarian sense, and there was much Hindu ritual and practice that he subjected to critique. In accordance with this religio-philosophical ideal, his religion could be described as the life of the self attempting to realise itself as Self, and thus achieving *moksha* or spiritual liberation. But *karmayogi* that he was, Self-realisation had to be expressed through work in the world and the details of daily life rather than through renunciation of the world. Gandhi's own ethics have a decidedly spiritual cast, but because he takes pains to express them in a neutral philosophical manner, he intends them to have general validity. Thus, when he switches from affirming that God is Truth to saying that Truth is God, his rationale is that the latter is a more general statement which has resonance even for unbelievers:

God is Truth, but God is many other things also. That is why I prefer to say that Truth is God [...]. You may simply worship what you find to be the truth for Truth is known relatively. Only remember that Truth is one of the many qualities that we name. It is the living embodiment of God, it is the only Life and I identify Truth with fullest life and that is how it becomes a concrete thing, for God is His whole creation, the whole Existence, and service of all that exists.³

This statement is a testament to Gandhi's innate sense of tolerance and inclusiveness in that he believes that his ideals of truth and nonviolence are accessible even to those who do not share his religious metaphysics. It is a feature of some moral statements that they can be differently interpreted and justified and yet be shown to have validity at different levels of understanding. Thus, the precept of honesty can be justified on the grounds of prudence ("honesty is the best policy"), or of promoting trust and social harmony in society (utilitarian), safeguarding one's own integrity and righteousness before the law (Kant), as duty owed to others as autonomous moral agents (Kant and some versions of Christianity), as a cosmic obligation (a *dharmic* justification), to mention only some possibilities. Likewise, people may agree on certain human rights, even though they ground those rights quite differently. In a similar spirit, Gandhi wanted his teaching of nonviolence to have the widest possible adherence. But if one wants to understand his own particular justification and interpretation of his ethical ideas, one cannot escape the religious metaphysics that serves as their ground and presupposition. James Hart captures this well when he writes:

3 *CWMG*:68:81.

When the Vedantic tradition holds that each self as Self is profoundly and irreducibly nonobjectifiable, it moves in the direction of holding that the truth of things and other selves has a form of causality other than that of material objects. The fundamental sense of oneself and the other which the commitment to Truth awakens is the incommensurability of selves with material, unserved, unbesouled objects. *Abhinna* is the practice of a kind of transcendental reduction because it preserves this most basic truth. And being awakened to this most basic Truth, the truth about selves and meanings, is what provides the central importance of *abhinna*.⁴

With these prefatory remarks I shall briefly analyse and comment on some of Gandhi's key ethical concepts. Truth for Gandhi is not merely, or even primarily, the property of statements, though Gandhi does not deny the importance of factual truth or the correspondence between propositions and states of affairs in the world that either confirm or refute them. Rather, his multifaceted notion of truth emphasises ontological, moral, and existential aspects. Ontologically, *satya* is derived from *Sat*, the self-existent essence, both the Is and the Ought of reality. It was this derivation that led Gandhi often to say, "Nothing exists in reality except Truth, everything else is illusion." Beyond the illusory temporal flux of phenomena lies the eternal Truth, what Gandhi also called Absolute Truth. However, we humans with our finite capacities can have access only to relative truth, an assertion Gandhi uses to justify epistemological humility and tolerance. All our perceptions of truth are inevitably partial and therefore claims of cognitive absoluteness are both unwarranted and dangerous.

While the ontological aspect of truth points to a more objective notion, the moral and existential aspects move in the direction of a more subjective, almost Kierkegaardian, notion of truth as subjectivity, the deeply personal intuition of truth which can be experienced only through action. Raghavan Iyer brings out the duality between the subjective and objective aspects of truth:

Gandhi could not regard truth either as solely the object of reason or as simply the product of human decision. For him [...] truth is nothing less than the splendour of reality and cannot be gained without an understanding of the Eternal Law of Nature, but when it is perceived and seized it must be acted upon. In this sense truth must be both discovered and created, found and enacted [...]. In this activist view of truth [...] it is not enough for thought to be based upon truth; the life of the thinker must express it, must represent it visibly in his actions.⁵

As already intimated, this idea of truth for Gandhi found its fullest expression in the field of politics, which in accordance with his moral outlook he regarded as the arena for

4 Hart, "Recent Works in Gandhi Studies", 156.

5 Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, 154.

doing good on the largest possible scale. The idea that Gandhi used to encapsulate this moral conception of politics was *satyagraha*. This was conceived as a practical experiment to introduce truth and nonviolence into the political field. Gandhi adopted this idea early in his political career when he chose *satyagraha* as the name for his resistance movement against the repressive South African government. Explaining his decision, Gandhi wrote, "Truth [*satya*] implies love and firmness [*agraha*] and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement *satyagraha*, that is to say, the force which is born of truth and love of nonviolence."⁶ The forceful and activist character of *satyagraha* should correct a common misperception; namely, that it denotes a passivity of resistance, a mere turning of the other cheek. Although Gandhi insisted that violence be met with love and understanding, the nonviolent means chosen should not obscure the powerful end – that of establishing justice and truth. In fact, he is on record as saying that if the choice were between the passive acceptance of injustice and violent resistance to it, he would choose the latter. He was convinced, however, that nonviolent resistance was superior to both alternatives.

Satyagraha begins with reasoning with one's opponent or adversary in an attempt to arrive at a just solution, recognising that no party has a monopoly on the truth, or is wholly in the right. The purpose, therefore, is to work out a rational compromise that will be agreeable to both sides. It is only when such processes of reasoning, persuasion, and compromise have been tired and have proved unsuccessful that one adopts the direct action techniques of *satyagraha*. *Satyagraha* involves performing actions such as noncooperation (strikes, boycotts, lockouts, fasts); civil disobedience (nonpayment of taxes, disregard of specific laws or injunctions); publicising one's cause through marches, rallies, picketing, and other forms of peaceful protest; and constructive programmes (low-cost housing, education, health facilities, cooperative banks for the poor). A big part of such nonviolent resistance is *tapas* or the willingness to suffer for one's cause. As Thomas Pantham puts it: "It is the assumption of *satyagraha* that when reasoning fails to move the head, the argument of suffering by the *saatyagrahis* helps move the heart of the oppressor or opponent. Self-suffering, moreover, is the truth-serving alternative to the truth-denying method of inflicting violence on others."⁷

Contained in this idea of *satyagraha* is the question of means and ends, which for Gandhi are two sides of the same coin. Gandhi disagrees strongly with the conventional political idea that the ends justify the means. To the contrary, he held that immoral means taint and distort potentially good ends and to that extent he placed at least as much, if not more, emphasis on the means, which he described as ends in actions. "The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same

6 CWMG:34:172.

7 Pantham, "Habermas' Practical Discourse and Gandhi's *Satyagraha*", 292–310.

inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree.”⁸ The forceful and activist character of *satyagraha* leads naturally to the idea of nonviolence.

Gandhi is obviously invoking the Jain precept of *ahimsa*, or not causing deliberate injury or harm to any being, but Gandhi takes the precept far beyond its merely negative formulation to mean the largest love, the greatest charity. “If I am a follower of *ahimsa*, I must love my enemy or a stranger as I would love my wrong-doing father or son. This *ahimsa* necessarily includes truth and fearlessness.”⁹ *Ahimsa* then is the deployment of moral force to persuade one’s opponent or adversary. It differs from violence in that it respects the autonomy and dignity of the other, whereas violence does not. It differs from violence in the perpetual willingness to dialogue and negotiate with the other and, as far as is consistent with rightness, to come to a compromise. Given that one’s grasp of the truth is at best partial, it is imperative to see and appreciate the truth in the position of the other and to try and achieve a higher or dialectical reconciliation of conflicting ends. This negotiated compromise has the opposite effect of violence, which involves vanquishing and putting down one’s opponent that inevitably sets up a cycle of resentment, ill will, and further violence.

Of course, Gandhi was not so naïve as to think that such moral persuasion would come about easily. He was all too aware that people who exercise power over others are not likely to give it up without some pressure being exerted. All the means of *satyagraha* mentioned above should then be adopted as a way of morally coercing one’s opponent to negotiate. It is true that coercion is being exerted, but it is a coercion that still respects the moral agency and dignity of the other, not least by the willingness to undergo self-suffering. The strategy presupposes that the opponent does have a minimal openness to such moral appeal, a trait that Gandhi was willing to grant to most people. However, he also recognised that there are madmen and tyrants, rapists and aggressors who would not fall within that category. In those extreme cases Gandhi was willing to use physical force for the purpose of self-defense, as, for example, when he sanctioned the use of military force to drive back the Pakistani Army in what he considered to be the invasion of Kashmir in 1948. Less satisfactory was his response to Martin Buber, when the latter sceptically asked Gandhi whether he thought that the Jews should use *satyagraha* against Hitler.¹⁰

The three concepts I have discussed, *satya*, *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*, might give us some idea of the texture of Gandhi’s ethical thought. As mentioned earlier, the ideas of

8 CWMG:10:431.

9 Letter in *Modern Review*, October 1916, quoted in Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, 180.

10 Buber, M., J. L. Magnes, *Two Letters to Gandhi*. Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, april 1939, mentioned in Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*, 228. See also Gandhi’s exchanges with other Jews, which Dalton discusses on pages 134–138.

truth and nonviolence are certainly to be found in the Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, but there is a big difference between Gandhi's conceptualisation of these ideas and traditional ones. The high standards of moral and spiritual discipline that Gandhi invokes were traditionally part of the *sadhana* of monks and saints, but decidedly not of people in political life. To the contrary, political thinkers like Manu and Kautilya sanctioned the use of physical force both for self-defense and for purposes of political order. Gandhi by contrast considerably softens the traditional dualism between ethics on the one hand, and religion and politics on the other. Instead, he attempts to forge a non-dual relationship between the two, where religion seen as reverence for and service to Life necessarily leads to politics, the arena for the greatest potential public service; and where politics in turn is saved from power mongering and the conflict of factional interests by the moral purification involved in religion at its best. It is very important to distinguish Gandhi's highly moral notions of both religion and politics from the ideological conceptions of them all too common in our time. Certainly, the rise of religious fundamentalism and right wing religious groups would make any peace-loving person nervous about the marriage of religion and politics. It should be clear, however, from what I have written that the moral checks and balances that Gandhi exercised over religion and politics purified both domains and offered the world a far different and more noble conception of them that we have yet to measure up to.

Gandhi's Ethical Religion

The relation between *dharma* and *moksha* has been much debated in the Indian tradition. While it is generally agreed that the ideal of *moksha* trumps the claims of *dharma*, the exact relationship between the two ideals and the validity of *dharma* when seen from the perspective of *moksha* have been subjects of debate. On the one hand, *dharma* is seen as a means to the attainment of *moksha*, but from the perspective of *moksha*, *dharma* with its rigid clan/caste/family structure is often regarded as an obstacle to *moksha*. Orthodoxy often held that *dharma* had absolute validity even for the person who attained *moksha*; but there were – and are – many influential views that question this assertion. After all, *moksha* is a state of consciousness consequent upon the true nature of things, while *dharma* belongs to the realm of action and will. Put otherwise, *dharma* upholds the established social-ethical order, whereas *moksha* is “release” from this order in order to achieve self-realisation, a free spiritual individuality that transcends the ethical realm.

For Gandhi, however, it is *dharma* that holds pride of place. While he does speak of *moksha*, it is the ethical worthiness for *moksha* rather than *moksha* in itself that he emphasised: “I have come to the conclusion that no one can be called a *mukta* while he is still alive; one may be said at the most to have become fit for *moksha* [...]. The

necessity for deliverance remains so long as connection with the body remains.”¹¹ The parallel here with Kant is strong: just as Kant stresses the right over the good and virtue over happiness, Gandhi accents the quest for *moksha* rather than *moksha* itself. There is the same moral rigourism and accent on process rather than outcome. This is borne out among much other evidence by Gandhi’s extraordinary wish to be reborn as an untouchable in order to serve the lowliest of the lowly. This flies in the face of all conventional ideas of *moksha* as release from the ethical demands of the social order to realise a free spiritual consciousness. Gandhi like a *bodhisattva* has no desire to be released from such demands. His frequent invocation of *Advaita Vedanta* is misleading – at least in its Shankarite version: he is not much interested in attaining a higher state of consciousness where the veil of *maya* might disappear. Rather, it is this world that he takes with full seriousness as the area in which we fulfil our *dharmic* responsibilities.

In contrast to much of the Indian religious tradition that has a largely contemplative character, Gandhi’s religion is strongly activist in nature. It is in practice rather than in thought or gnosis that the rightness or wrongness of beliefs is established. This activism goes together with the decidedly ethical cast of his religion – the formation of right dispositions, attitudes, and relationships in relation to the demands of one’s fellow men and women and of nature. It is only in and through such demands that a right relationship to God is established. Gandhi is in full agreement with St. John that he who talks of loving God whom one does not see without loving one’s neighbour whom one does see is liar and a hypocrite.

John Maynard Keynes, the economist and philosopher, once distinguished between religion and ethics by saying that religion has to do with one’s relation to oneself and the Ultimate, while ethics deals with one’s relation to others and the penultimate. Gandhi would have thought that both sets of dualities in Keynes’s account are misconceived – that of self and other and of the Ultimate and penultimate. Regarding the first, given his firm belief in the interconnectedness of all life and a relational view of the self, Gandhi would have strongly concurred with the sentiment of the English poet John Donne: “No man is an island complete in himself [...]. Every man’s death diminishes me because I am a part of the whole [...] and therefore do not ask to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.” Regarding the second duality, that of the Ultimate and penultimate, while not denying the realm of the supernatural, Gandhi firmly believes that access to it is achievable primarily through the full embrace of the natural. It was in the faces of his fellow men and women, in particular of the poor and oppressed, that Gandhi hoped to see God.

Four features of Gandhi’s ethical religion may be commented on. First, it is a solidly this-worldly affair. In a culture where cyclical views of time and a belief in *karma*

11 *CWMG*:32:136.

and reincarnation often lead – mistakenly I would argue – to temporal indifference, Gandhi shares the Buddha's sense of urgency that it is in this life that we have to work out our salvation and that we have to do so in the fully embraced present in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves. Gandhi was able to reconcile this sense of urgency usually associated with a linear view of "one life, one chance," with his belief in *karma* and reincarnation via the explanation that our present actions determine the nature of future rebirths. But he was not especially interested in speculating either about those rebirths or about any other world than this present one.

Second, as already pointed out, Gandhi's religion was social and corporate in its emphasis rather than individualistic. His idea of *swaraj* or moral self-governance was not the Kantian idea of autonomy with which it is sometimes mistakenly compared. While he certainly values the self-discipline involved in Kantian self-legislation, Gandhi had he been presented with a Kantian view, would almost certainly criticise its atomistic and insulated character – the sense that self-legislation is to be carried out free of social ties and local belonging. For Gandhi by contrast there was no question of being released from such ties, because it is such ties that constitute the warp and the woof of human existence, and to seek to be free of them is to shirk our fundamental human responsibility. The ascent to the Divine and the Universal is to be achieved not by detaching oneself from the human and the particular, but rather by embracing them and seeking to make them worthy expressions of the Divine presence. Over and over again, and particularly in the commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Gandhi stresses the synthesis of two moral ideals, the outer one of social obligation and the inner one of renunciation and detachment. The goal then is renunciation not of action but in action, the true goal of *karmayoga*, the path of selfless service.¹²

Third: in tune with his stress on this-worldliness and on particularistic ties is Gandhi's emphasis on the continuity of means and ends. The mention was made in the first section of the organic metaphors that Gandhi uses of seeds and trees and of root and branches to indicate how indissolubly linked means and ends are for him. In sharp contrast to those who emphasise ends and the success in achieving them whatever means one adopts, Gandhi accents the moral and existential priority of means. For one thing, ends lie in the future and the future is by definition not fully under our control. For another, there are also the unintended consequences of our actions and the actions of other agents than impinge on our own. Ends therefore lie beyond our reckoning; what we can and must focus on are means. But here too Gandhi distinguishes means seen purely instrumentally and means seen as expressive as goals. Seen as instruments means become a set of necessary and often tedious steps towards a goal, but it is the goal that

12 See Gandhi, M. K. *The Gospel of Selfless Action or the Gita According to Gandhi*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1946.

commands our attention as for instance when we perform an irksome job merely to earn some money. Seen as expressive, however, means become ends in action and even if one knows that one may not achieve the goal it does not really matter. Success is measured not in the actual achievement of the goal but in fidelity. Thus, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi's famous disciple, delivered a well-known sermon the night before Mahatma was assassinated which echoes Gandhi's sentiments: "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it does not matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountain top ... and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But ... I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything ... My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."¹³

Fourth: Gandhi's religion was holistic. Earlier, mention was made of how Gandhi saw religion leading naturally to politics and social service. Those who attended his prayer services were often struck by how smoothly Gandhi could interrupt and break away from pressing political matters and then take them up again spontaneously after prayers were recited. This holism provides a clue to the remarkably wide range of interests and concerns that attracted his attention: everything from theology to tooth care, conflict resolution to sanitation, political organisation to endless experiments with his diet. Inner life and outer activity, self-development and service to others formed a seamless whole. Gandhi saw all of life as sacred and all of his own life as a prayer.

A Brief Evaluation

In the first part of this essay, I focused on Gandhi's religious ethics and in the second on his ethical religion in order to highlight the non-dual character of the relation between his ethics and his religion. In this final section, I want to make a few brief comments first with reference to Indian traditions and then more broadly to the world at large.

First, within the Indian tradition Gandhi's ethics as ethics represent the most substantial ethical contribution by an Indian in modern times. Ethics as a singular and coherent body of thought is not a field to which Indian thinkers on the whole have devoted much attention, at least as compared to other areas of philosophical and religious thought. This remains true in spite of the fact that much of the Indian philosophical and religious tradition has a definite value orientation and is centrally concerned with the practical ideals of *dharma* and *moksha* and with spelling out how other values and concerns stand in relation to them. This is a seeming paradox. For instance, the late Bimal Matilal, one of India's most eminent philosophers, complained: "Certainly there exists a lacuna in the tradition of Indian philosophy. Professional philosophers of India

13 King, "I See the Promised Land", 279–286.

over the last 2000 years have been consistently concerned with problems of logic and epistemology, metaphysics and soteriology, and sometimes they have made very important contributions to the global heritage of philosophy. But except for some cursory comments and some insightful observations, the professional philosophers of India very seldom discussed what we call moral philosophy today.”¹⁴ Instead, the Indian thinkers incorporated moral considerations into various and sundry philosophical, literary, and theological texts in Sanskrit and the vernaculars without systematically elucidating the principles and norms that distinguish them as moral.

Now, Gandhi was neither a philosopher nor a systematic thinker, but rather a man of action. Nonetheless, in the course of his life he was forced to face many ethical challenges and ponder on several moral questions because, as already indicated, he was by disposition a moralist through and through. When non-Indian moral philosophers seek a contemporary Indian moral thinker to engage with Indian ethical reflection, it is invariably Gandhi to whom they turn.

His contribution to religious thought is perhaps more contested. India's religious traditions are dominated by sages and mystics, and Gandhi was neither. More accurately, Gandhi could be described as a deeply religious person who achieved great goodness. In any case, when we discuss religious thought it is the quality of reflection that is the relevant consideration. As a thinker, Gandhi offers a model of ethical religion which is relatively rare in the Indian tradition. As already indicated, given the primary interest in *moksha* which is said to lie “beyond good and evil”, there is in much of the tradition an ambivalence toward ethics. Both Tagore and Aurobindo, for instance, were quite critical of Gandhi's moralism, even if Tagore muted his criticism in public. Tagore, schooled in the speculative magnificence of the *Upanishads* and admiring the aesthetic vitality and spiritual profundity of the classical Indian traditions, disagreed with Gandhi on practically every important political issue from *swadeshi* to mass civil disobedience, fasting to the spinning wheel, celibacy to technology. Underlying these disagreements was a fundamental difference in attitude and outlook. Tagore, the metaphysical poet, strongly disagreed with Gandhi's puritanism and (to him) stifling moralism. “Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.”¹⁵

Aurobindo was even more scathing in his criticism of Gandhi. For one thing, Aurobindo in his days of political activism openly advocated violence when the occasion demanded it, and he found Gandhi's absolute stand on nonviolence to be one-sided and limited. And when he gave up political activism for yogic experience, Aurobindo,

14 See Matilal, B. “Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics”; in: *Collected Papers, Vol. 1*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

15 Tagore, *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore*, 34. See also Ray, S. “Tagore-Gandhi Controversy”; in: *Gandhi, India, and the World: An International Symposium*. Ed. Ray, S. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1970, 119–141.

with his quest for integral yoga and a kind of gnostic mysticism, considered Gandhi to be quite a pedestrian thinker, whose moral rigour far from leading to spiritual freedom more often than not led to self-alienation and violence to oneself. For Aurobindo, Gandhi's ethical reflections belonged to a low stage of the development of mind and even at that low level was partial and exaggerated.¹⁶

Such sharp differences were due not only to differences in personality but also to their respective appropriations of the Indian tradition. Both Tagore and Aurobindo were mystically inclined thinkers, sympathetic to and appreciative of the speculative and metaphysical richness of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and Indian philosophical traditions. Gandhi's knowledge of and sensitivity to ancient and classical Indian traditions was much narrower – he was attracted primarily to their moral and didactic aspects. In a way, this facilitated his notorious interpretation of the *Gita*, which many regard, with some justification, as idiosyncratic and hermeneutically arbitrary. The sources of his inspiration were the epics and the devotional saints of medieval Hinduism, with, of course, a deep Jain influence coming from his native Gujarat.

And yet in spite of this narrowness of focus and perhaps because of it, Gandhi produced a model of ethical religion that drew upon a neglected and relatively unappreciated strand of the Indian tradition – the path of *karmayoga*, or spiritual realisation through social action. Even though others like the Buddha had emphasised the connection between compassion for suffering humanity and spiritual integrity, it was Gandhi who took the Buddha's message in a new direction, namely into direct political activity. This was a radical move. In doing so, Gandhi hoped to achieve dual transformation: on the one hand, he wished to purify politics by making moral and religious norms central to it, and, on the other, he hoped to purify religion by saving it from the dangers of self-absorption and narcissism. Modifying Christ's injunction slightly, only those who lose their life in socio-political service can hope to save it. Tagore, for all his disagreements with Gandhi, was perceptive enough to note this:

The influence which emanated from his personality was ineffable, like music, like beauty. Its claim upon others was great because of its revelation of a spontaneous self-giving [...]. That is why, though his realm of activity lies in practical politics, people's minds have been struck by the analogy of his character with that of the great masters, whose spiritual inspiration comprehends and yet transcends all varied manifestations of humanity, and makes the face of worldliness turn to the light that comes from the eternal source of wisdom.¹⁷

16 See Minor, R. "Sri Aurobindo's Dismissal of Gandhi and his Nonviolence." In: *Indian Critiques of Gandhi*, ur. Harold C. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.

17 Tagore, "The Poet's Verdict"; in: Radhakrishnan, S. (ed.) *Essays and Reflections on His Life and Work. Presented to him on his Seventieth Birthday October 2nd 1939*, 286.

This dialectical balance between morality, politics, and religion carries both great promise and significant risks. The danger of the spiritualisation of politics, for many regarded as the realm of the possible, is that it idealises human nature, sets impossible standards of behaviour, and ends up making the best an enemy of the good. As I am focusing in this essay more on the relation between religion and ethics, I shall not dwell further on the implications of Gandhi's moralism for politics. In making moral standards foundational in all spheres, there is a danger of the reduction of religion to ethics, as, for instance, in the moral philosophy of Kant. Gandhi avoids this danger by recognising and invoking the transcendent elements of the religious. He says: "So long as the seed of morality is not watered by religion, it cannot sprout [...] if we take out the essence of all moral laws, we shall find that the attempt to do good to mankind is the highest morality."¹⁸ Far from reducing religion to ethics, Gandhi attempts to elevate ethics to religion, while at the same time providing checks and balances on religion and its possible corruption.

Mention of the possible corruption of religion brings into focus one of the great perils of our time – the emergence of the dark side of religion as it becomes ideological in nature. Charles Kimball has highlighted four signals of the debasement of religion, which while they have been perennial dangers, have nonetheless emerged with particular force in recent times:

1. The insistence on the absoluteness of the truth claims in one's own tradition and the correlative demonising and dehumanisation of others who differ both within one's own tradition and those beyond.
2. The blind obedience to religious authorities who are thus given great power to make decisions that affect both the people of their particular traditions and those outside them.
3. The establishment of an ideal or messianic time bearing apocalyptic overtones, where destruction is seen as a prelude to some "final judgment."
4. The assertion that the ends justify all means, and where in the name of protecting the religion concerned or its interests, any means including violent ones are tolerated. This can sometimes lead to waging "holy wars" to achieve one's ends.¹⁹

The different forms of contemporary religion display some or all of these features in varying degrees, whether one discusses ethnic tribalism, fundamentalism, or the rise of religious violence. In such a situation, it seems to me, that Gandhi's unyielding insistence on moral self-examination and purification via the notion of truth, nonviolence, and self-suffering (*tapasya*) as a necessary corollary of any political engagement is a much needed touchstone and corrective.

18 Gandhi, M. *Ethical Religion (Nithi Dharma)*. Madras: Ganesan, 1922, quote in Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, 48.

19 See Kimball, C. *When Religion Becomes Evil*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002.

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