

Reason in Religion and Religion in Politics: A Gandhian View

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‘Superstition cannot be religion. Truth and morality are its substance.’
(Gandhi, *Young India* 1921)

Reason has its limits. Beyond that begins faith.’ (Gandhi, *Harijan* 1938)

Reason and Religion

There is hardly a dichotomy more fiercely debated than reason and religion. While one prompts unrelenting questioning, the other demands unquestioning surrender. Apparently, the two seem to be irreconcilable. But, are reason and religion really so incompatible, so uncompanionable and fundamentally opposed to each other?

A huge amount of human intellectual energy has gone into this enquiry and two main positions have emerged on the issue. One, there are those who tend to believe that the two are inherently different and belong to two completely separate domains of human cognition. This intellectual tradition has an impressive line-up of scholars like Hume, Kant, Durkheim, Max Weber and Richard Dawkins. Opposed to this, there are scholars like Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Henry Newman who argue that the two are complementary and fairly compatible. Gandhi, as an intellectual, appears to draw insights from both the schools but with a definitive tilt towards the complementarity view as most of his discourse on religion evinces. However, rather than getting directly into Gandhi’s view of religion, a glance at the general understanding about religion will help contextualize the discussion for a more nuanced perception of his religious practice.

Of course, there is no easy consensus on what religion *per se* means. There exist numerous definitions, pointing to the differences that cultures are inescapably inscribed with. Even so, since it is a near universal phenomenon, some distilled understandings of it seem to be acceptable to more humans than not. One such view is that it is essentially 'a belief in supernatural beings' (Taylor) and this implies the existence of some parallel cosmographies, iconographies, systems of rewards and punishment, qualifications of a true follower etc. As such, every religion, more or less, offers a full configuration of life from ontological conceptions to the eschatological visions. In other words, it offers an entire narrative from the supposed origins of life to the envisioned conclusion of existence itself. Accordingly, a follower is enjoined upon to conduct one's life believing that this is the worthiest way to serve the tenure. Since different religions are claimed to offer different versions of the best way of living, the followers are left with little choice but to unquestioningly stick to the one they have traditionally subscribed to. As one's adherence to its vision is often seen as a proof of loyalty, at times, asserting one's religion as superior to all others or creating fear that one's religion is in danger of being subsumed/subordinated by others becomes a sure way of rallying the followers around any issue/person/event/institution. This not only turns religion into an instrument of power politics, but also sows the seeds of communalism as it throws all creeds or sects into a conflictual mode of interaction. When the State interferes, it gets even more intensified. And these were the forces Gandhi found himself beset with when he entered the political arena of British-governed India.

To begin with, he, being a devout Hindu, faced the challenge of forging a mid-way between the injunctions of religions and the compulsions of democratic politics. If one demanded that he work to serve his fellow Hindus and their interest, the other expected of him a more accommodative approach whereby the followers of all religions could be given space in a democracy trying hard to be born. This perhaps called forth his unique view of reason-driven religion which not only sought to be all-inclusive but also to churn out all scriptural legacies into

one code of humanity, compassion, love, non-violence, and welfare of all. The commitment did arguably come of his ethical reasoning that he managed to chisel out of his brand of Hinduism. Unlike some other Jingoist versions, this understanding of religion enabled his vision of life to be fairly reasonable without being non-religious.

Interestingly, his idea of God was neither fully in line with the *advaita* nor *dvaita* conceptions. While he saw God as an all-pervading spirit, he also believed in *Bhakti* and *sevas* the methods of worship, which were typical of the *dvaita* school. Arguably, the first part enabled his staying clear of all sectarianism, the second, at the same time, helped him instrumentalize religiosity as the driving force for all moral, socio-political transformation. He writes:

The forms are many, but the informing spirit is one. How can there be room for distinctions of high and low where there is this all-embracing fundamental unity underlying the outward diversity? The final goal of all religion is to realize this essential oneness. (Gandhi, Harijan 3)

This was innovative insofar as infusion of reason into religion was concerned. Seen this way, religion did not remain an abstract, private matter of personal salvation; rather, it turned into a divine force yoked to human welfare. In this, he was very much like Kabir whose religion was not simply a tool for union with God. In a like manner, his conception of truth too steered clear of any single 'ideological encampment' by being rather relative yet, at the same time, remaining sufficiently anchored in a semblance of absolutism guaranteed by his benevolent, all-loving God. This too appears to have been carefully crafted to admit of plurality of truths while still keeping them all tied to the path of altruism and egalitarian mode of living. In a nutshell, his religiosity mostly determined whatever he did all his life. He rather candidly admits:

I could not live for a single second without religion. Many of my political friends despair of me because they say that even my politics are derived from my religion. And they are right. My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion. I go further

and say that every activity of a man of religion must be derived from his religion, because religion means being bound to God, that is to say, God rules your every breath (Gandhi 57,199).

It was perhaps this overly humanistic conception of religion and truth that earned him the wrath of militant sectarian groups whose long-pent-up resentment eventually culminated into Godse killing him. Wolfgang Palaver's recent study of Gandhi's idea of religion from Godse's point-of-view has underscored this aspect quite persuasively. As Godse unrepentantly confessed:

I firmly believed that the teachings of absolute 'Ahimsa' as advocated by Gandhiji would ultimately result in the emasculation of the Hindu Community and thus make the community incapable of resisting the aggression or inroads of other communities, especially the Muslims (Godse 42).

Thus, Gandhi's idea of *ahimsa* stemming from a unique blend of Indian religious traditions of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism combined with the Christian ethics of self-sacrifice, and the ideas of modern thinkers like Leo Tolstoy, David Thoreau, and others came to be mistaken for a want of vigor and vitality. However, what was sorely lost on his opponents was his ability to universalize it into a principle of transformatory love and truth-force, forging a spiritual idea into a political weapon. As Gandhi himself observed, "Religion is not a mere theory but a living force; it cannot be separated from the life of the individual or nation. Politics devoid of morality is empty, and morality without religion is blind" (*The Collected Works* 1926).

In his view of religion, that ran counter to the Hindu nationalist view, even India as motherland, for which he eventually laid down his life, did not have a claim greater than the well-being of entire humanity. So, the humanist in him born of religiosity did never give way to even the Hindu in him. He again avers, "My religion has no geographical limits. If I have a living faith in it, it will transcend my love for India herself" (*The Collected Works* 18,134).

Thus, Gandhi envisioned a society where reason would purge religion of all its dogmatic dross, and religion would so edify and ennoble politics

as to create an equitable and ethical order that balances material prosperity with moral responsibility. In a further deliberation on the subject, he clarifies, “By religion I do not mean formal religion or sectarianism, but that religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our Maker” (Gandhi, *Young India* 1922).

Religion in Politics

“Political power should be a means of service and not a means of domination.” (The Collected Works 1924)

Gandhi’s political praxis has given rise to a huge corpus of scholarship, covering some foundational analyses by Bhikhu Parekh, Ashis Nandy, and Pankaj Mishra to more recent critical endeavors by scholars such as Anthony J Parel and Tejas Parasher. With diverse emphases, these scholars have nonetheless turned attention to Gandhi’s *sui generis* infusion of religion into political activism. Of course, using religion for mobilizing the gullible masses has been a time-tested yet stale method; but what set Gandhi apart was perhaps his genuine, value-undergirded, ethics-oriented, welfare-focused, moral-transformation-bound conception of religion rather than just incendiary material for abetting communal disharmony.

The entry of Gandhi into the politics of pre-independence India at first did not even appear to merit attention. However, as his religion-inspired politics gained ground, it came clear that the politics hither-to had been of one kind but what this fragile-looking man was to roll out was something altogether different. Quite unlike most of his contemporaries on both sides—Indian as well as the British, Gandhi-styled politics did stem from the rich soil of ethics, faith, and all-inclusive humanism. Therefore, it began reaching out to the uneducated folks too rather than just the educated middle-class or the urban elites. Since he could speak to the concerns of all rather than simply critiquing the foreign rule and its atrocities, his methods baffled not only the British but even some of their Indian “counterplayers” (Nandy, *Intimate Enemy* xiii–xiv, 7–12,

68, 70–80), as Ashish Nandy has called them.

And to achieve all this, he insisted on taking recourse to *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* alone. The Machiavellian methods had no space in his political repertoire. This also proved to be a disarming technique on his part as all the old players hardly knew how to handle this. Churchill's exasperation at Gandhi's unruffled political responses is quite a commonly known case in point. The soul-force/truth-force that *satyagraha* seemed to get in Gandhi's practice was simply unprecedented in the then obtaining political atmosphere. For him, religion meant *dharma*—the cosmic moral order that preserved truth (*satya*), nonviolence (*ahimsa*), and selfless service (*seva*). He famously declared, "Those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means" (Gandhi, *Young India* 1924).

Yet, the pragmatists like B.R Ambedkar, Jinnah, Tilak, Nehru and even George Orwell tended to dismiss his politics as moral idealism and often portrayed it as something other-worldly, unsuited to the real politik required to handle the hard world of power-politics. Nevertheless, there is enough anecdotal evidence to suggest that it was Gandhi's magnetic persona alone that could pull the masses. It was his idea of *swaraja* or self-rule that first held out the promise of making every citizen a direct stake-holder in the affairs of the Nation-State.

On the whole, Gandhi's politics quite gingerly steered clear of religious dogmatism on the one hand; on the other, the perils of amoral secularism. Instead, he opted for a spiritualized politics ethically bound towards justice and human welfare. A clear statement of this position came from him as he affirmed, "For me there is no politics without religion—not the religion of the superstitious and blind, but the religion that binds one indissolubly to the truth within and without" (Gandhi, *Harijan* 1946).

It is this synthesis of reason, religion, and political praxis that continues to keep Gandhian political philosophy a subject worth going back to, especially whenever global political order seems to be caught up in the maelstrom of religion-engendered violence and economically motivated religio-political symbiosis.

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