

## **The Intersection of Religious and Secular Cores in Undergraduate Liberal Arts Education**

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### **GANDHI AT THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION AND POLITICS**

[15 minutes, c. 2000 words]

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George Orwell published a review of Gandhi's *Autobiography* in January 1949, a year after Gandhi's assassination. Orwell opened the essay with a memorable point: "Saints should always be judged guilty until proven innocent." He then went on to ask the pertinent question "To what extent did he [Gandhi] compromise his own principles by entering politics, which of their nature are inseparable from coercion and fraud?"

I'd like to answer Orwell's question by highlighting a conception of politics that Gandhi elaborated and which, *precisely*, dispenses with coercion and fraud. In this way, Gandhi practiced—and theorized—a political space squarely inside his religious practice and commitments. This way of looking at politics bridges the divide between secular and religious spheres and, in my experience, comes as paradigm-shifting revelation to my students, most of whom have never imagined the possibility of such a convergence.

I'd like to show that Gandhi's politics only make sense in the context of his religious commitments. That is the basic point I wish to make in this paper. And, with that point, the broader point that Gandhi is a uniquely powerful case-study of the intersection of secular or, in this case, political, and religious thought. By Gandhi here, I mean a text, as well as a person. His writings come mainly in the context of his long editorship of various newspapers and it is in that day-to-day, situational negotiation of complex political situations that his thought and his uniquely pragmatic approach come to light.

Gandhi's first organizational efforts, his first political activities, come by way of vegetarianism, when he began to organize vegetarian clubs as a lonely and dislocated student in England. Gandhi initially maintained a strict vegetarian diet in order to honor the vow he made to his mother upon leaving India. His first months in England were quite a gastronomic trial, and he had to survive almost exclusively on boiled vegetables cooked without salt or condiments, porridge, and bread. When he finally found a vegetarian restaurant, he noticed books on sale on vegetarianism, and he bought Henry Stephen Salt's *Plea for Vegetarianism*. It is this book, rather than his orthodox Hindu upbringing, that Gandhi credits with turning him into a vegetarian by choice. This road to principled vegetarianism is illustrative of Gandhi's ecumenical approach to his religious education. (Let me

mention, as as aside, that one of the characteristics that makes Gandhi a uniquely effective thinker to teach alongside a Western canon, is the deep influence that some Western thinkers had on him, from Jesus, to Ruskin, to Thoreau, to Tolstoy).

Immediately upon arriving at *moral* conviction about vegetarianism, Gandhi notes in his autobiography “The choice was now made in favour of vegetarianism, the spread of which henceforward became my mission (*Autobiography*, Part I, Ch. XIV., p. 14). And so he began assembling vegetarian clubs in London and learning the rudiments of grass-roots organizing. Though this isn’t yet a political issue proper, we do see that Gandhi makes an immediate connection between a moral conviction and social mission to advance it.

Gandhi’s organizing impulse turns explicitly political in South Africa. There’s no time to even sketch his evolution here, but suffice it to say that Gandhi arrived in South Africa as a tongue-tied, pathologically shy young lawyer in 1893 and left it 22 years later a political and spiritual giant. In South Africa, Gandhi framed his basic spiritual growth and his political activism as one and the same struggle against racial discrimination in South Africa.

The outlines of Gandhi’s emerging political consciousness become evident only days after his arrival, on his first encounter with South African racial prejudice. Having been given a first-class ticket to travel by train to Pretoria, in

the middle of his trip, train officials demand that he leave the first class compartment and board the “van compartment” instead. Gandhi refuses, and forces the official to carry out his threat of calling for a constable and forcibly removing Gandhi. Gandhi, along with his luggage, is thrown out of the train. Humiliated, he spends a cold night sitting on the platform and wait for the next train. Waiting in the freezing cold, he muses “Should I fight for my rights or go back to India, or should I go on to Pretoria without minding the insults...? It would be cowardice to run back to India...The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial—only a symptom of the deep disease of color prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process.”

(*Autobiography*, Part II, Ch. VIII, p. 97).

There it is: Gandhi views political wrongs as spiritual diseases and thinks of their remedy as a spiritual labor involving the endurance of suffering. The method he would elaborate in South Africa and then carry to India would try to treat not the political symptom, but the root spiritual problem. For him, the field of politics was merely a theatre for carrying out his religious commitments. His South African reinvention is as much spiritual as it is political, and it is reflected in his personal life as much as in his public activities. In South Africa, he takes on the vow of *Bramacharya*, which meant not only celibacy but “control of the senses in

thought, word, and deed...And aspirant to *Bramacharya* [he writes] will always be conscious of his short-comings, will seek out the passions lingering in the innermost recesses of his heart and will incessantly strive to get rid of them.” (*Autobiography*, Part III, Cha. 8, p. 184). He also takes on the discipline of *Aparigraha*, or non-possession. Years later, reflecting on that period of his life, he notes “I must confess to you that progress at first was slow...It was also painful at the beginning. But as days went by I saw I had to throw overboard many other things I used to consider as mine, and a time came when it became a matter of positive joy to give up those things. One after another, then by almost geometric progression, things slipped away from me...the possession of anything then became a troublesome thing and a burden.” (Fisher, p. 55). In South Africa, he also changed his manner of dress, giving up Western clothes and adopting the garb of indentured servants. In all, Gandhi’s immersion in politics required of him the strictest self-discipline and the fiercest form of spirituality. Only from a secure basis of personal purity could he venture into the public field and command the moral authority that he deemed the only legitimate weapon in a political struggle.

In 1924, back in India, he would write in one of his newspapers:

For me the road to salvation lies through incessant toil in the service of my country and there through of humanity. I want to identify myself with everything that lives.... So my patriotism is for me a stage in my

journey to the land of eternal freedom and peace. Thus it will be seen that for me there are no politics devoid of religion. They subserve religion. Politics bereft of religion are a death-trap because they kill the soul.

(*Young India*, April 3, 1924)

In a sense perhaps unfamiliar to most American readers, for Gandhi, the personal was political. Writing to his nephew, he advises “Please do not carry unnecessarily on your head the burden of emancipating India. Apply everything to yourself. Nobility of soul consists in realizing that you are yourself India. In your emancipation is the emancipation of India.” Gandhi understands his own political struggle almost exclusively in terms of his personal unfolding along a spiritual path rooted in traditional Hindu spirituality. He returns to this theme at the end of his *Autobiography*:

To see the universal an all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep himself out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without any hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means (*Autobiography*, “Farewell,” p. 454).

In our political culture, where the echoes of John Calvin’s collapse of the traditional Christian posture of leaving matters political to Caesar while concentrating of spiritual issues, the idea of mixing politics and religion seems eminently dangerous. Today, the religious influence in our politics evokes ideas if

intolerance, anti-intellectualism, and the arrogance of certitude. But one should not confuse that noxious variety of religion in politics with what Gandhi is talking about. Indeed, Gandhi did not tire of repeating that his idea of religion boiled down to two basic principles: truth and non-violence. These two cardinal commitments are the necessary safe-guards to prevent the religious practice of politics from becoming an invitation to bigotry and authoritarianism.

And, in fact, religious intolerance is Gandhi's greatest enemy upon his return to India in 1915. His struggle to bring about Hindu-Muslim unity and his struggle to end the abhorrent practice of untouchability in orthodox Hinduism were his primary preoccupations in India. Independence from England was secondary and he saw India's subservience as only a symptom of the same spiritual disease that sustained the practice of untouchability and the enmity between Hindus and Muslims.

As an orthodox Hindu, Gandhi felt the crime of untouchability was a particularly intolerable stain on religion, and he insisted on the link between untouchability and subjection the British rule:

Hinduism has sinned in giving sanction to untouchability. It has degraded us and made us the pariah's of the empire. What crimes for which we condemn the [British] Government as satanic, have we not been guilty of toward our untouchable brethren?...It is idle to talk of Swaraj [Home-rule] so long as we do not protect the weak and the helpless...

And then in words that dramatize his inner agony, he adds:

I do want to attain *Moksha* [Salvation, merging with God]. I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them in order that I may endeavor to free myself and them from that miserable condition." (*Young India*, September 13 and 14, 1921)

He called untouchables *Harijans*, children of God.

We see in Gandhi's agony again how the personal is political. Gandhi insisted that if India was able to liberate itself from its self-imposed spiritual chains, the British would have no choice but to walk away, for then India would be ungovernable by an unjust government. Whenever Gandhi speaks of *Swaraj*, or self-rule, he has in view, first and foremost, personal liberation. National liberation, he says, would follow effortlessly, like a ripe fruit falling from a tree. He writes in *Young India* "This struggle [for independence]...can give us victory only if we become indifferent to everything through which the state can press us into subjection to its will." (January 12, 1922). The state of *personal* freedom Gandhi seeks deprives the state of the power to compel the citizen because it neutralizes the only weapon it can command, that is, violence.

As with the untouchables, whose pain and humiliation he wants to feel in his person so as to, through that suffering, expiate the sin of untouchability and



awaken a higher moral sense in the nation, Gandhi's vision of political struggle relies of what he called "Soul-force"—the capacity of an individual to transform his opponent through the acceptance suffering. "A non-violent revolution" he writes "is not a programme of seizure of power. It is a programme of transformation of relationships, ending in a peaceful transition of power" (quoted in *A very Short Introduction*).

This attitude of non-violence and strict adherence to truth are the requisite conditions for Gandhian politics. They are difficult states for mere humans to attain. Yet Gandhi's example makes it possible to imagine the intersection of the religious and the political in entirely different ways than what we see in Abrahamic traditions. As Martin Luther King, Jr., one of Gandhi's most astute students, realized, the political techniques Gandhi introduced cannot be deployed merely as techniques; they require first a kind of inner fortification that can best be described as a religious awakening.

Having begun this reflection with how Orwell opens his essay on Gandhi, I will end with the words with which he closes that essay: "One may feel, as I do, as sort of aesthetic distaste for Gandhi, one may reject the claims of sainthood made on his behalf (he never made any such claim himself, by the way), one may also

reject sainthood as an ideal and therefore feel that Gandhi's basic aims were anti-human and reactionary: but regarded simply as a politician, and compared with other leading political figures of his time, how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind."