

GANDHI'S DEEP RELIGIOUS PLURALISM
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Read chapters from my book

The Virtue of Non-Violence: From Gautama to Gandhi

at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/vnv.htm.

I've advanced from tolerance to equal respect for all religions.
--M. K. Gandhi¹

I've broadened my Hinduism by loving other religions as my own.
--M. K. Gandhi

There are basically two responses one can take to the rich diversity within the world's great religions. Many religious conservatives maintain that their religion is the only true faith and that the others are false. Fundamentalists go further to declare spiritual war on all other religions, some insisting that physical combat will be necessary. Muslims jihadists raising AK-47s in the air and Hindu extremists waving their banners on the top of the rubble of the Babri Mosque are dramatic examples of this. Just as alarming, however, is Lt. Gen. William Boykin, who, in full dress uniform in front of evangelical congregations, said this of a Somali war lord: "I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol." Equally troubling is Ed Kalnins, Sarah Palin's former pastor, who, with reference to Iraq, stated that Jesus operates "from that position of war mode."

The second option to religious diversity is the liberal one. (I'm using "liberal" in the original sense of *liberalis*, "pertaining to the free person.") Traditionally, religious liberals were instrumental in establishing freedom of religion in the liberal democracies of the world. The religious liberal believes that there is some value in every religion, and that people should celebrate any common ground they can find. Problems arise, however, when we attempt to define that common ground. When the Rev. John Henry Barrows opened the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, he blithely assumed that the delegates shared "the blessed truths of divine Fatherhood." Although always polite and dignified, Buddhist,

Hindu, and Confucian representatives still made it clear that they did not embrace this belief.

More often, however, religious liberals have defined the common ground as an impersonal Godhead from which all the various personal gods are but manifestations. The most famous exponent of this view is Aldous Huxley, whose book *The Perennial Philosophy*, although drawing on mystics all over the world, still has a very definite Asian bias. Mystics have always stood at the center of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism, but have always been on the periphery of the Abrahamic religions. At one point in his life Gandhi appeared to agree with Huxley: "What of substance is contained in any other religion is to be found in Hinduism"; and "I do want you to become a better Christian by absorbing all that may be good in Hinduism that you may not find in Christian teaching."² Far too many Hindus have been guilty of proclaiming that "Everyone is a Hindu," but Gandhi finally realized that this view was wrong. As we shall see, this led Gandhi to embrace a complementary view of religious diversity, sometimes called "deep" religious pluralism.

Today the most prominent spokesman for Huxley's view is philosopher John Hick, who argues that all the world's religions have the same object of worship and the same goal for human salvation. Hick calls the ultimate object "the Real" and the religious goal is to move from selfishness to a selfless union with the Real. Lately there has been substantial criticism of Hick's theory of religious pluralism. First and foremost, not all religions are included in this view. For example, Confucians do not have a single object of worship nor do they believe that total selflessness is a realistic goal. The Buddha himself worshipped no gods and some Buddhists believe that ultimate reality is "empty," which is obviously not an object of worship.

Hick also believes that the Real has no personal qualities, so the hundreds of millions of personal theists appear to be short changed. The Real does not have any moral qualities either, so there appears to be an insufficient basis for ethics. Religious morality and laws based on it have one of the greatest contributions of the world's religions. (Even some critics of religion are willing to concede this.) A religion that is immoral is condemnable, but one that is amoral is also problematic. It seems reasonable then to bring the world's religions together under moral categories such as justice, nonviolence, tolerance, and compassion. Insisting that "there is no such thing as religion overriding morality," Gandhi states that "true religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other."³

Growing up in Gujarat near the Pakistani border, Gandhi was immersed in religious diversity. The area around his home town of Porbander was heavily

Vaishnava and his father was member of this Hindu sect. His mother, however, followed the Pranamis, a hybrid Muslim/Hindu religion, whose devotees read both the Qu'ran and Hindu scriptures and whose temples contained no sacred images. As a boy Gandhi's best friend was a Muslim, who once convinced Gandhi to conduct a disastrous experiment of eating meat. Jainism, an ancient religion that first preached non-violence and strict vegetarianism, also has a very powerful presence in Gujrat. Struggling as a young activist in South Africa, he sought spiritual advice from a Jain saint from his hometown. Gandhi's mother required that Gandhi take vows of abstinence from alcohol, sex, and meat before he went to London, and a Jain monk presided at the vows.

While in London Gandhi was very much influenced by theosophical views of religious unity, and also by William Salter's book *Ethical Religion*, and he observed that two of the most effective English moral reformers of the day were atheists. This fact convinced him that, no matter how much they resisted, Gandhi would include atheists in his view of true religion. As he once said: "Even the atheists who have pretended to disbelieve in God have believed in truth."⁴

Gandhi was fond of claiming that the two statements "God is Truth" and "Truth is God" are convertible. He came to prefer the latter over the former because there is far less dispute about the existence of truth than about the existence of God. Proclaiming "Truth is God" also avoids the destructive ways in which personal gods have been used to wage wars and further national goals. Truth can be "found by diligent search and meticulous observance of the well-known and well-tried rules of search." Gandhi was convinced that a genuine search for truth would necessitate the development of the virtues of love and nonviolence.

Applying the scientific method to his personal life, Gandhi conducted what he called "experiments in truth." Gandhi believed that truth is a virtue, the virtue of being true to one's self. One can do this only by constantly testing one's self in many different situations. To find truth people should rely on their consciences, the "still, small voices" within them. The quest for truth will not succeed if one is not spiritually prepared. In order to prevent the appeal to false conscience, the person must follow the utmost discipline and have a pure heart.

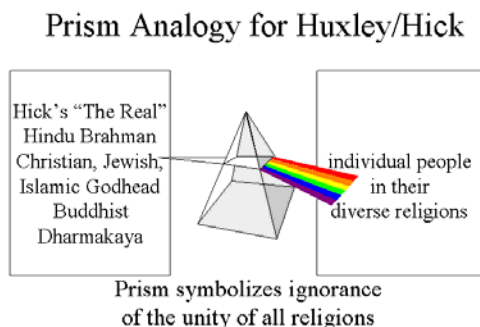
While Gandhi believed that truth is absolute, he followed the Jains in holding that individual views of it will always be "relative, many-sided, and plural."⁵ Their most famous parable is the story of the five blind women and the elephant. By grabbing on to one part of the elephant, each woman would know something true about the animal but that truth would only be partial. Gandhi once said that "I very much like this [Jain] doctrine of the many-sidedness of reality. It is this doctrine that has taught me to judge a Muslim from his own standpoint and a

Christian from his. Formerly I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me and vice versa.”⁶ Gandhi also said that “I’ve broadened my Hinduism by loving other religions as my own.”

Gandhi did not foresee nor favor a single religion dominating the world, and he did not want people to convert to other faiths. Just as the Dalai Lama is now telling his non-Buddhist admirers, Gandhi insisted that people find value and spiritual sustenance in their own faith traditions: they "should adhere to their own faiths more strictly and pay greater attention to their moral teaching."⁷ While each religion has truths, each also contains errors. Gandhi was especially keen to reject the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy and humility must reign supreme in claiming definitive religious knowledge.

The claim that all religions are one in the divine fatherhood of the Abrahamic religions or Huxley's impersonal Godhead could be analogized as a mountain peak that all spiritual pilgrims ascend. But mountain fortresses have always been places of dominance and oppression, so this could be viewed as an image of religious imperialism. Gandhi's reach is horizontal not vertical; it is egalitarian and not hierarchical.

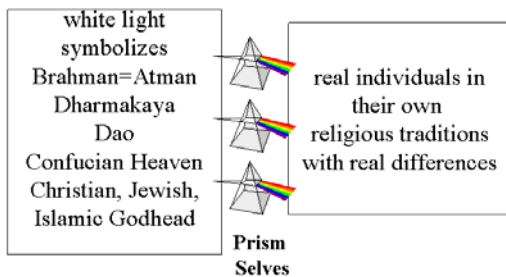
Gandhi also envisions the world's religions as individual branches (the leaves being their devotees) of a single tree.⁸ One can enrich this image by adding that the tree has many roots for its nourishment in the soil. The fact that Gandhi said that the individual leaves stood for individual human faces demonstrates that he is interested in preserving human uniqueness and religious diversity. Gandhi spent a lot of time spinning cotton thread, so it is natural that he also appealed to weaving metaphors. He once quoted a medieval Indian poet as follows: "Even as the thread spins out so be your life. Do what you may, and receive the grace of Hari [Vaishnava God]."⁹ If one imagines a myriad of colored threads becoming the warp and weave of the fabric of life and God as a master weaver, we have metaphor that not only combines unity and particularity but also individual initiative, which was essential for Gandhi.



Gandhi also used the analogy of refracted light, so the Huxley/Hick view of religious pluralism would have the white light stand for the impersonal Godhead as it refracted through a prism to produce a rainbow of colors--the religions of the world. If we take the prism away, the illusion of plurality is removed and the unity of all religions is made

manifest. What now becomes evident, however, is that the Huxley/Hick view is really not a theory of religious pluralism at all.

Revised Prism Analogy
Deep Religious Pluralism



Gandhi believed very strongly in the reality and integrity of every single individual, and I would now like to revise the prism analogy to reflect that belief. Rather than standing for the ignorance of unity, I propose that there are as many prisms as there are individuals each refracting the white light of the Godhead and each producing a fully differentiated world, one in which both individuals and their religious preserve their rich variety and differences. In this image we can see the possibility of genuine religious dialogue in which religions preserve their own

identities, but, also have the possibility of complementing and enriching each other. John Ruskin's book *Unto This Last* profoundly influenced Gandhi and Ruskin once said that "the purest minds are those that love colors the most."¹⁰

The leading spokesman of complementary or deep religious pluralism is John B. Cobb, Jr., professor emeritus at Claremont School of Theology. For many years religious liberal tolerance has been a sincere but passive respect at a distance rather than a mutual transformation of each others' views. Cobb's position has been described as "fidelity to Christ with unqualified openness to other faiths."¹¹ After 1931 Gandhi appears to have his own view of mutual transformation: "I've broadened my Hinduism by other loving other religions as my own."

In contrast to Huxley and Hick, Cobb proposes, drawing on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, that there is not one Godhead but three ultimates on which the world's religions have focused. Here are the three, as explicated by Whiteheadian philosopher David R. Griffin:

- **Theistic Religions:** loving union with a personal God. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Pure Land Buddhism, and Vaishnava/Shivaite theisms. Whitehead's God is the reference here.
- **Acosmic Religions:** impersonal ground of being. Focus on enlightenment and contemplation. Jainism, Theravada Buddhism, philosophical Daoism, and neo-Vedanta. Whitehead's principle of Creativity is the ontological reference here.
- **Cosmic Religions:** Focus on cosmic order and finding right relations with all beings. Indigenous religions, Shinto, religious Daoism, and Confucianism. The Whiteheadian reference is the Cosmos, which rounds

out the three ultimates in his metaphysical scheme: God, Creativity, and Cosmos.

Complementary religious pluralism would recognize and honor the source of each of these great religious traditions and would encourage openness to each and willingness of to be mutually transformed by each. If we included the indigenous faiths that are still alive in India's tribal areas and are still present in many of its religious texts, Hinduism could adapt to this theory of plural ultimates very well.

In my book *The Virtue of Non-Violence*,¹² I argue that Gandhi's thought that can be seen as a form of the constructive postmodern thought inspired by Whitehead. I also maintain that Gandhi's ethics of non-violence is best founded on a process concept of the self drawn from the Buddhism, whom Gandhi believed was the father of the pragmatic non-violence that he preferred. I contrast this with the absolute non-violence in Jainism and their view that political activism could never be compatible with strict non-violence.

With regard to Whitehead's three ultimates, Gandhi gave value to both the theistic and non-theistic schools in Indian thought, and he also praised the Hindu Goddess and her *shakti* power, the strongest indigenous religion in India. He praised women for exhibiting this power and he was convinced that non-violence worked most effectively through their *shakti* power. Gandhi carefully planned his daily religious services and balanced texts and hymns without bias and without melding the various traditions together into an undifferentiated unity.

During my 1992 sabbatical to India I was hosted by the Gandhian Studies Department at Panjab University. Some of the graduate students were pursuing a project in which they would visit a poor Muslim village each week. Their main goal was to offer English or Hindi lessons to the village's children. On December 6th I was invited to join the students and their graduate advisor. As we approached the village I was surprised to see a huge temple to the Hindu Goddess. There were 8 students, 6 Hindus and 2 Sikhs, and when we arrived, they, including the Sikhs, went directly to the temple to pray. I could see that the priests were preparing rice and curry in huge cauldrons. I was told that this would be the only meal that day for many of the Muslims in the village.

Gandhi always thought that India's villages were the key to the future peace of his country. People from up to six major religions help each other in their daily struggles, respecting each other and celebrating each others' sacred holidays. Over the centuries these people had become mutually transformed by India's deep religious and cultural pluralism. As the day progressed and as I learned more about

how Indian villages operated, I was inspired by Gandhi's vision that the Indian people could be a prime example of fostering peace among the world's religions.

When I returned to my faculty hostel that evening, I noticed a large crowd of people in the TV lounge. On the screen I saw Hindu fundamentalists waving their banners on the top of the rubble of the Babri Mosque. I had been following the controversy about Hindu claims that the mosque had been built on a sacred site, namely the birthplace of the Hindu God Rama. No one ever imagined, however, that the Hindu fanatics would be able to get through the army barricades and then, solely with pick axes, sledge hammers, and bare hands, actually bring down the huge three domed structure.

Violence broke out in the major cities and did not die down for three months, but then only after 3,000 people had died. The Indian people searched their souls for reasons why this would happen and why sectarian violence had risen from 153 dead in the 1950s, spiking to 3,246 in the 1960s, returning to 1,108 in the 1970s, rising to 2,772 in the 1980s, and then over 3,000 in 1992-93 alone. Panel after TV panel discussed the issue and every group included a Jain monk. Although comprising only 7 million of the 1.2 billion population, Indians look to the Jains with their impeccable record of non-violence for spiritual guidance. Everyone who spoke referred to Gandhi's vision of India and how the great majority of Indians did not support Hindu nor Muslim fundamentalists. My experience in that Muslim village in 1992 leads me to agree and to have hope that there are ways that we all can live in peace. As it happens far too often, the international press was focused on the exception—riots in India's cities—and not on the India I saw in that village or the many other places I visited during five trips.

Let me close with a Gandhian benediction from the International Fellowship of Religions at Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram in January, 1928: “We can only pray, if we are Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu, or if we are Muslims, not that a Hindu or a Christian should become a Muslim, 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.”

Endnotes (not complete)

¹Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 56, p. 155.

²Gandhi's *Collected Works*, vol. 29, p. 194; vol. 37, p. 224.

³N. K. Bose, ed., *Selections from Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1948), p. 223.

⁴Quoted in D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi* (Bombay, 1951-1954), vol. 3, p. 359.

⁵Cited in Raghavan Iyer, ed., *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), vol. 2, p. 176.

⁶Gandhi, *Young India* 8 (January 21, 1926), p. 30.

⁷Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, p. 274.

⁸Gandhi, *Harijan* (July 22, 1934).

⁹Cited in *Towards Understanding Gandhi*, ed. D. K. Bedekar (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1975), p. 81.

¹⁰John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), p. 145. I'm indebted to Jay McDaniel for this reference.

¹¹David R. Griffin, "John Cobb's Whiteheadian Complementary Pluralism" in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. David R. Griffin (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 60.

¹²Nicholas F. Gier, *The Virtue of Non-Violence: From Gautama to Gandhi* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004).