

The Mystic versus the Politician

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Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography

By Arvind Sharma

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This is an important, if disturbing, book about Gandhi. It's important because it offers an interpretation that runs against the grain of the domesticated Gandhi that can be found in such books as Joan V. Bondurant's *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, Bhikhu Parekh's *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination*, and Ramin Jahanbegloo's recent *The Gandhian Moment*. Their Gandhi is largely reasonable, sensible, interpretive, a theorist whose ideas can serve as a model for political practice. By contrast, the Gandhi we encounter in *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography*, by McGill University professor of comparative religion Arvind Sharma, is a little crazy, since he's a mystical creator rather than an interpreter, and his ideas are similarly meant to bring justice via inspiration. So it is because of its focus on the centrality of religion for Gandhi that Sharma's book is so valuable. And yet, as I said, there's also something disturbing about it, which is all the more troubling for coming near the end, after almost 200 clearly written pages of sensible judgments and intriguing, sometimes profound, insights.

Before we get to it, however, it's important to appreciate just what it means to say that it is not Gandhi the practical political theorist but Gandhi the prophet or saint, the one that sociologists would identify as a charismatic leader, that correctly answers the question Sharma poses about the source of his power – about how he was able to get people to face blows without defending themselves, much less retaliating. For one thing, Gandhi was well aware that he often contradicted himself; indeed, he was clear that there was no question of his “leaving behind any code.” For another, any proper interpretation of his approach needs to appreciate how, as a Hindu, he conceived of morality as a matter of truth understood not as something propositional but as what one upholds in practice, as when we keep a promise. So Gandhi's practice of *satyagraha* or “clinging to truth” must be grasped in this light. This is also why his vision of the ideal society, that of a decentralized, participatory village republic driven by an economy of love and capable “of defending itself against the whole world,” is utopian in the strictest sense.¹ That is, it's a fictional “no place” meant to inspire creativity rather than to serve as a model to be applied. This makes it comparable to Gandhi's position on celibacy, according to which married men and women should have sex only for the purpose of procreation; once they've had three or four children they should sleep separately from then on. Teach people this, Gandhi once said, though if it fails, “Why not a law?”

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¹ The quote is from Gandhi's “Village Republic,” in *The Village Reconstruction*, ed. Anand T. Hingorani (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1998, 2nd ed.), p. 117.

Gandhi was 37 when, after much deliberation and discussion with his co-workers, he informed his wife that he had taken a vow of celibacy. Sharma is excellent on the complex biographical realities behind this decision, as well as on the many tests that the vow would later undergo. He explains its fundamentally religious basis and how it was designed to assist Gandhi in making sacrifices for the common good. To Gandhi, doing good is the chief means of worshipping the divine, since ethics and religion are synonymous. However, they are also, on occasion, paradoxical.

Consider *satyagraha*. It requires respecting numerous principles, including non-violence, a focus on specific injustices rather than generalities, and a willingness to compromise as well as to never treat one's opponents furtively, not to mention kick them while they're down. Yet it would be wrong to conceive of *satyagraha* as a technique in the everyday, rational sense. For that its principles would have to cohere and so be capable of being skillfully applied, since this is how skills work. *Satyagraha*, however, is not something that "works."

We can see why by going back to Aristotle's account of the form of practical reason he called *technē*. It requires taking an oblique approach, since the skillful actor should never aim directly for his or her ultimate end. For example, the rhetorician should strive to produce persuasive expressions, not to persuade; just as the doctor should work to produce effective remedies, not to bring health; and the player should try to make outstanding plays, not to win the game. If these distinctions seem a bit strained, it's because Aristotle seems to me to have been exaggerating somewhat; still, he was on to something in identifying the latter goals as external to the skills in question – even if they are ultimate purposes. This, then, is the sense in which a skillful activity must be coherent. Not so *satyagraha*, which goes beyond obliquity in that its practitioners need to uphold the sometimes paradoxical relationship between religion and morality: by transcending the good, the hope is, ultimately, to fulfil it to a degree far greater than if we simply aimed to do good directly. But we truly must transcend it, which is to say that it cannot serve the role of even an external purpose. This, I think, is what's behind Sharma's reference to "the alarming statements by mystics that a bad deed done without attachment [to our quotidian existence] is better than a good deed done with attachment." It also account for his exploration of the "desire to serve," which Gandhi saw as a temptation against which he had to struggle throughout his whole life.

Or we might think about the contrast between rational technique and *satyagraha* this way. "I was never a real guitarist," George Harrison once confessed to a friend. What he meant is that he never achieved technical mastery of the instrument – unlike, say, a professional studio musician. Yet few would object to idea that Harrison's playing was inspired. This, then, is the difference between a craftsman or technician, on the one hand, and a true artist, on the other; otherwise put, it is what distinguishes an interpreter from a creator, or reason from revelation. All of which is to say that the rules of rational technique are unlike the incoherent kind that may bring creativity, since the point of the latter is not fluid, skillful behaviour but the forcing open of a gap (or as Leonard Cohen sings, a "crack") in meaning in order to bring openness to inspiration. *Satyagraha*'s principles are just like this, which accounts for why Gandhi's ideas were in constant evolution, never settling into what might be consider a "theory." For his ideas followed

his mystical practice. No wonder he subtitled his autobiography “The Story of My Experiments with Truth.”

Although Gandhi did not himself recognize this sometimes paradoxical priority of religion to ethics (for he subscribed to a monist metaphysics according to which all parts of reality cohere as one), his observance of *satyagraha* nevertheless deepened as he overcame the temptation of “desiring to serve” by increasingly getting the priority right. Thus, as Sharma states, “Gandhi began by identifying God with truth, but in 1929 he reversed the equation and identified truth with God.” Evidently, he sensed the non-commutative nature of such concepts, of how, when we reverse the order, their meanings change. This is key to understanding him, as Sharma shows repeatedly. For example, as a Hindu who believed in reincarnation, Gandhi did not see people as human beings who had spiritual experiences but as spiritual beings from the start (i.e. from before their re-birth) who had human experiences. This was how he complied with “high mystical theory,” as Sharma describes it, according to which God turns his face to us before we turn our face to Him. Indeed, as Gandhi himself explained:

What I want to achieve, – what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha* [freedom]. I live and move and have my being in the pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end.

Other Gandhian reversals include his response to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), in which he asserted that we have rights only when we have done our duties to the world; or his telling Indian South Africans that if they wanted to be treated well they must first deserve it. Evidently, Gandhi didn’t believe that people inherently bear rights; on the contrary, to him duty, by which he also meant spirituality, must come first.

This, then, is how we should understand Gandhi’s politics. Yet much of it was not really “political” – at least if by politics we understand the practice of responding to conflict with dialogue. Because dialogue consists of the exchange of interpretations, whereas mysticism aims, as we’ve seen, for creation rather than interpretation. This should become especially evident when we give the role of force, as distinct from reason, its due in all in creation. Not that this must take the form of physical force, though Sharma is right to point out that Gandhi was engaged in “a new form of warfare.” Regardless, it should be clear that his approach should not be conceived of as a form of “dialectic” (Bondurant and Parekh), much less “dialogue” (Jahanbegloo). True, dialogue can also be seen to have a religious dimension (an idea that’s central to Martin Buber’s philosophy) but it remains different from mysticism in being non-paradoxical. This is why we should (almost) always try it first, before employing alternatives such as Gandhi’s non-violent resistance, with its attendant dangers.

Which brings me to the disturbing part of Sharma’s book. On page 190, he opens a discussion that contains some astounding comparisons. Gandhi, he says, “is not the only towering giant of the twentieth century, which also produced a Churchill, a Mao, and a Stalin.” Sharma then claims that “their greatness matches Gandhi’s in some ways” for they all staked their lives on the truth as they saw it. To be sure, “Gandhi attributed his outstanding achievements to his faith in

God, but these three political leaders achieved as much by keeping God out of the picture.” The discussion ends thus: “Churchill, Mao, and Stalin believed that their ends justified their means. And this belief might have led to their impressive achievements. But Gandhi did not believe in that justification. And this belief led to *his* achievements.”

Now the second thing that comes to mind upon reading these words is: What about Hitler? Didn't he also manage to get the proverbial trains to run on time? But the first thing is that, while Churchill had major faults, surely he deserves to be included with Gandhi as one of the great men of the century, whereas Mao and Stalin (each of whom arguably murdered more people than Hitler) were two of its most evil dictators. Any other interpretation is beyond me.

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