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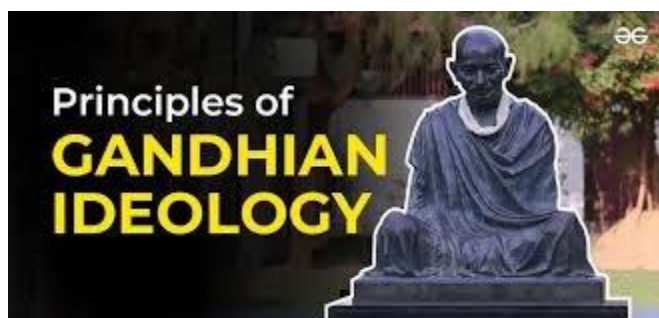
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Gandhi's Theo-centrism: Relevance and Challenges

– by Prof. John Chathanatt



Introduction

What is the foundation on which Gandhi built his philosophy of life, personhood, political activism and whole liberation movement for transformation? What is the basic premise of the Gandhian approach to the realities of life? How and from where did he get all his energy and insights?

It was Gandhi's firm belief that, irrespective of one's economic position, religious or political affiliation, class or caste, cultural differences, personal ideologies, and/or viewing point (that is, the horizon where one stands to view and perceive realities), everyone on this planet has some possession of truth. This is true for an atheist or, even, for the worst oppressive ruler or dictator, loser or victor in a conflict, and/or a loser bludgeoned into submission. With this intuition, he moulded a force around this truth and named it 'truth-force'. The proposal here is that this firm belief in 'truth-force', emanating from his notion and experience of what he considered God, became the foundation on which he built the edifice of his life and transformative actions. In a post-truth, post-politics and post-relational era of life, as experienced and discussed the world over, *a fortiori*, in our country, a search into the Gandhian foundation of faith and action has challenging relevance for our contemporary times; even for our dignified survival today. This unique leader fought colonial powers with this novel weapon of 'truth force' or the 'moral force' associated with it, which entailed self-denial even unto death rather than inflicting pain and suffering onto others. His conviction that God is immanent in all and that S/He/It can be attained only through other-regarding service of persons, particularly, the ones who are rejected in the socio-economic and political spheres, is fascinating and challenging in our times, especially when the self-regarding and other-disregarding mode of capitalistic trends are propping up all over the world, very often at the cost of inflicting needless suffering and pain onto others.²

The very idea of the absolute ultimate Gandhi, which has significant relevance for him, could, even, be a challenge for us. So I attempt to try to unravel the nuances of this theocentric foundation of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, whom we consider the Father of our Nation. As we try to unfold the significance of such a foundation in Gandhi's life and action, an attempt is also made to see what in him and his approach would be worthy of emulation by us, in facing the challenges that come our way today in the historical process of our living. So, the attempt here is more a descriptive search than a critical analysis of Gandhi's God and his theo-centric approach. As far as possible I have let Gandhi speak for himself and address our world as it unfolds today.

Gandhian Theo-centric Foundation

Who or what is Gandhi's theocentric foundation; why such a foundation; what relevance has 'It' for him as a person and for his actions? If an answer is possible to these base questions in Gandhi in one phrase, it is Gandhi's understanding of God; more specifically, his conviction of God as Truth that enabled him even to experiment with this truth.³ There is an *ethnocentrism* (that is, a god-centeredness), as opposed to anthropocentrism (that is, originating and hinging on human beings), that gives support to and lets energy flow into the liberating actions that Gandhi embraced. For Gandhi, this *theocentrism* could be rechristened as *truth-centrism*. His relentless pursuit of *satyagraha* and *ahimsa* hinges on this. It has ethical implications in the sense of deriving the rightness of his actions from such a foundation. He fought the colonial powers with his new and unique weapon called 'truth-force' or 'moral force'; his introduction of religion into politics and his judgement that politics cannot play its ennobling, elevating and emancipatory role if it is divorced from religion and the insightful values and norms that religion brings, or, in other words, the humanising or civilising power of Gandhi's political action; his assertion that the "only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with him", and the way that this can be done is "by service of all"⁴, that is, his endeavour to find God through service of humanity; his assertion that true religion's vocation consists especially in the service of the deprived, and in that process, identifying his God as *Daridranarayan* (Lord of the poor) – all these emanated from his insightful conviction that this phenomenon called God pervades every dimension of our life, both animate and inanimate. It is an inner force driving us onto liberative action, especially the liberation of the deprived ones of history.

Besides, his notion of *swaraj* is a God-oriented liberation. It is not the Kantian autonomy without God. Apart from God-oriented self-realization, there can be no autonomy or adequately genuine realization of full freedom in the liberating transformation agenda of Gandhi. The Augustinian call to "become what thou art" could very well be applied to Gandhi's notion of self-realization. A pattern somewhat similar to neo-Platonic, Aristotelian and Thomistic thought of everything coming from and returning to God,

existus et reditus, is discernible in Gandhi. Such a teleological theme gives rise to a theological conviction that all things have their *proper ends* towards which they are naturally oriented. When individual human beings are oriented toward the end of merging and becoming *Brahman*, then, they are rightly ordered morally and on the right path spiritually. So, Gandhi has woven his morality and spirituality around this theo-centric stance.

Gandhi's undaunted devotion to *satya* and its intrinsic relationship with *ahimsa* originate from such a theo-centrism. His consideration of *ahimsa* as a *creed*, not just a strategic policy or a matter of convenient political tactic, is born out of his conviction of what the human is in relation to God and what the inter-human relationships demand in a life of relentless pursuit of God as *Satya*. So Gandhi's notion of *ahimsatmak satyagraha* (that is, relentless pursuit of truth through non-violence and love) could be considered the core of Gandhian theo-centrism.

Gandhi's God and the perceived challenges

The God-talk that gushed out from the depth of his encounter with God and his continuous experiments with Truth was so connatural and central to Gandhi that inexperienced or unfamiliar minds found his overflow very difficult to digest! So much so that once an English correspondent wrote to Gandhi about the "God stunt" in *Young India* referring to the numerous citations on God that so abound in Gandhi's mature writings. Gandhi's publication of the same without any apologetic arguments leaving it to history to make any judgement, if necessary, and his continuation of Truth-experiments with added intensity, manifested Gandhi's inner experience and conviction of the power and depth of God's relation in human affairs.⁶

Gandhi's God cannot be contained in any particular theological or spiritual bag! Nor can his notions be fully aligned to a particular system of thought. As a "seeker" trying to articulate insights inspired by metaphysical views and concerns, and as a "doer" more interested in transformative action than

in mere speculative theory, Gandhi cared little for neat and tight philosophical or metaphysical arguments and abstract speculations concerning God. He is not a theoretician; nor a systematic thinker. As a “seeker” he is trying to articulate insights inspired by meditation, metaphysical views, ethical concerns, and his numerous experiments with life and truth itself. As a doer, he is more interested in action than theory. He could be called a person of contemplative action. His conception of God is very rich and deeply nuanced, though the formulation is unsystematic and sporadic. In his autobiography he writes: “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*. I live and move and have my being in 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.”⁷ This remark of Gandhi in the introduction to his autobiography manifests the ultimate goal of the Gandhian journey, the foundation of his belief system and the philosophy of his life.

God transcends any description

What God is in essence is not fully and adequately comprehensible to the human mind since, according to Gandhi, “(M)an can only conceive God within the limitations of his own mind.”⁸ Since “God transcends description,”⁹ and is “the mystery of mysteries,”¹⁰ Gandhi attaches no special importance to the term which one uses to address God (personal or impersonal) – *Ram*, Allah, Yahweh, God, Truth, or whatever. It depends on the individual concerned to hold on to one’s experiential understanding. As far as Gandhi is concerned his term for God is “Truth”. A glance at the variety of words and phrases he used to describe the indescribable will tell us that for Gandhi this phenomenon of what people call God transcends all particular descriptions; yet, it is an experienced reality. These would also give us an insight into the breadth and depth of Gandhi’s insightful understanding of God, and his attempt to fathom the unfathomable.¹¹

Gandhi grappled with qualitative attributes of God too, resulting in such recurrent expressions: “God, the Good, the Just, the Compassionate, the

Bountiful, the Giver of the daily bread, the Help of the helpless, the all-powerful, the all-knowing, the Ever vigilant, the Whole Truth.”¹² Nonetheless, he prefers to call God “Truth” and claims “to throw a new light on many old truth,” and endeavours “to follow and represent truth as I know it.”¹³ In a press meeting in 1939, while breaking one of his numerous fasts, Gandhi declared “I worship the God that is Truth or a Truth which is God.”¹⁴ Further, “God is life, Truth, Light. He is Love. He is the Supreme Good.”¹⁵ Positively Gandhi preferred to use the term *Satya* to designate God since it was the “only correct and significant” description of God. Thus we see that Gandhi is trying hard to name the unnameable. He jumps from one description to another to name the unfathomable supreme.

Various Attributes of God

The ultimate end of human life is the realization of God, and this aim is realized by one’s immersion into the world of human affairs:

“Man’s ultimate aim is the realization of God and all his activities, social, political, and religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour, simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all. I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity.”¹⁶

God is present, active, interested in human affairs and human history

In 1936 Gandhi articulated God’s immanent presence:

“The only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it ... I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity. My countrymen are my

*nearest neighbours. They have become so helpless, so resourceless, so inert that I must concentrate on serving them. . . . If I could persuade myself that I should find Him in a Himalayan cave I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity.*¹⁷

On Edwin Samuel Montague's enquiry about how a social reformer like Gandhi had "strayed" into politics, Gandhi replied:

"Politics is an extension of my social activity. I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind and that I could not do unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of man's activities today constitutes an indivisible whole. . . . I do not know any religion apart from human activity. It provides a moral basis to all activities which they would otherwise lack, reducing life to a maze of 'sound and fury signifying nothing.'"¹⁸

So, Gandhi's socio-political engagements are religious.

In his dialogue with Dr. Charles Fabri, published in *Harijan*, on August 19, 1939, Gandhi says, "The Divine Mind is unchangeable but that Divinity is in everyone and everything — animate and inanimate."¹⁹ Gandhi's experiment lies in finding his God in and through his interaction with others in society and the cosmos. In his service to others, especially the poor, Gandhi finds his God. God's presence is experienced right here in human history, even in plants and animals. Gandhi's meaning of religious engagement goes to the etymological meaning of religion itself. A Gandhian cosmology with a divine touch would be a challenge to the technological and robotic age of the 'modern person'.

Though "we may all have different definitions for 'God'. . . behind all that variety of definitions there would also be certain sameness which would be unmistakable. For the root is one."²¹ In his answer to Tagore's quarrel with him for considering the 1934 Bihar earthquake as a punishment, Gandhi

articulated his sense of the Divine in his firm belief that God's finger guides the entire field of life:

"If God is not a personal being for me like my earthly father He is infinitely more. He rules me in the tiniest detail of my life. I believe literally that not a leaf moves but by His will. Every breath I take depends upon His sufferance. . . . He and his law are one. The Law is God.²² Anything attributed to Him is not a mere attribute. He is the Attribute. He is Truth, Love, Law and a million things that human ingenuity can name."²³

Gandhi's God is right here in human history

Gandhi's God is not someone who is in "heaven," independent of human history. Tagore's poetic musings would very well be welcomed by Gandhi as sound theological meditation concerning God's presence in human undertakings: "He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path-maker is breaking stones. He is with them in the sun and shower and his garment is covered with dust."²⁴ Gandhi would join Tagore in challenging the person standing in the "lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut . . . chanting and singing and telling the beads," as the sole sign of worship, and would ask the same poetic question, "What harm is there if thy clothes become tattered and stained?" in the process of meeting him and standing by him "in toil and sweat of thy brow."²⁵

God as *atman*, the *Antaryamin*, resides in our hearts and the heart of the universe. The very breath of life, conscience, is within and among us, which makes *satyagraha* possible, and helps us find truth in this world. This atman through self-realization becomes *Brahman*. There is God's immanent presence in the world and through the service of one another, one finds God.

This implies that the totality of one's life of service would manifest one's orientation and devotion to God, and thus, one's religiosity. The meaning of one's very existence is manifested in caring for the other. This caring for the

other is self-realization. Martin Buber would be very closely interpreting the mind of Gandhi in saying that the “I” becomes the “I” only in the “Thou”.²⁶ Gandhi is bringing a God dimension into inter-relational activities since life is looked at as a continuum. The aim of the process is the realization of God. Various human activities ought to be guided by the end in view, that is, God-realization (become what thou art). So, for Gandhi, taking part in the social and political arena, then, needs to be guided by a God-vision, as he clearly expresses:

“Man’s ultimate aim is the realization of God and all his activities, social, political, religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings become a necessary part of the endeavour, simply because the only way to find God is to see him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all. I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity.”²⁷

Here Gandhi is moving to the realm of religion as the moral basis of human activities, including politics and political activities. This is one of the major challenges that Gandhi is placing before us, especially in a post-truth era. Despite the secularization process and the subsequent separation of religion and politics,²⁸ prevalent in the governance system in the world today, the Gandhian approach shows that belief in God should continue to play a significant role in political ideas, motivations and approaches. So the reconstruction of political ethics and the restoration of politics to its moral goals and contents, is a prerequisite, as far as Gandhi is concerned, for a just, participatory, and sustainable society. This requires reinstating moral considerations into politics. One of the seven social sins he mentioned is ‘politics without principle’.²⁹ Reflections of Raghavan Iyer, a prominent Gandhian scholar, resonate with many today: “Politics is inseparable from life – from human concerns, moral considerations, religious and secular beliefs, modes of living, inherited myths, dreams, nightmares; from preconceptions and presuppositions about fundamental issues, transcendent themes and values; and the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, pleasure and pain, freedom from tyranny, egotism

and altruism. Ultimate questions, even if unanswerable, are never irrelevant to the politics of free men.”³⁰

In one of his conversations with a few of his Muslim friends, Gandhi articulated his notion of God in very clear terms:

*“God is certainly one. He has no second. He is unfathomable, unknowable and unknown to the vast majority of mankind. He is everywhere. He sees without eyes and hears without ears. He is formless and indivisible. He is uncreated, and has no father, mother or child; and yet He allows Himself to be worshipped as father, mother, wife and child. He allows himself even to be worshipped as stock and stone, although He is none of these things. He is the most elusive. He is nearest to us if we could but know the fact. But He is farthest from us when we do not want to realize His omnipresence”.*³¹

God as the Supreme Principle of Order

As the supreme intelligence guiding and regulating the universe from within, God is not some person outside ourselves and our human history or away from the universe. He is immanent. The power of God’s existential presence transforms human nature itself. God rules the heart and transforms it; if only we allow that to happen. Transcending the senses, this mysterious power pervades every reality. Reflection on these insights of Gandhi would take us to an Ontology that is immanent and an anthropology that is relational and non-hierarchical. Besides, an epistemology, cosmology and teleology would spring from Gandhian moorings. These insights of Gandhi would challenge us in India, where one sees the existence of a hierarchical anthropology, or as Ambedkar puts it, ‘work dividing the worker’. If one is a true worshiper of this immanent God who pervades every reality, and we are part and parcel of this Ultimate being, then hierarchical anthropology has no place in the Gandhian scheme. This is a major challenge to us today from Gandhi.

If God is the only one creator, the Father of us all and we are his children, then, there cannot be inequality among the creatures and worshippers of this one and only God.³² God does not treat some children as untouchables from birth and hence as [the] low[est], and others as the high[est].³³ He made us all equal. In the order of creation, there cannot be high or low. Thus, Gandhi himself started to explain the implications of his faith. If we are all children of the same Creator, naturally there cannot be any gradation amongst us. We are one brotherhood and sisterhood in many personal realizations, and there cannot be any distinction of high and low amongst us:

“No matter by what name we describe Him, He is the same without a second and if we are all children of the same Creator, naturally there cannot be any caste amongst us. We are one brotherhood and sisterhood, and there cannot be any distinction between high and low among us. There are no savarnas and avarnas, or all are savarnas or all are avarnas.”³⁴

So, all persons are equal before God just as the children are equal before their parents.³⁵ The social issues of the caste system and untouchability were, thus, challenged by Gandhi on a sound theological basis. Gandhi condemned the prohibition of Harijans from entering temples and considered it a sin. If God is *Viswanath*, Lord of the entire universe, then to exclude one segment of society, with whom he is especially present,³⁶ from entrance into the special place of his presence and worship is a contradiction of the very meaning of the name of God itself. It is informative to note that, because of his association with Harijans, Gandhi himself was barred from entry into many temples, including the temple at Guruvayur, Kerala, considered to be very sacred, holy and important.³⁷

At the same, we see that the Indian mindset is so ‘religious’; yet, why is this persistence in some of our Indian minds and culture of a hierarchical ordering of life? This would be a question to Gandhi looking yet for answers.

Though God acts in accord with immutable laws, He and His laws are benevolent:

“That Law . . . which governs all life is God. Law and the law-giver are one. I may not deny the Law or the Law-giver, because I know so little about It or Him. Even as my denial or ignorance of the existence of an earthly power will avail me nothing, so will not my denial of God and His Law liberate me from its operation; whereas humble and mute acceptance of divine authority makes life’s journey easier. . . . I do dimly perceive that whilst everything around me is ever-changing, ever dying, there is underlying all that change a living Power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates. That informing Power or Spirit is God. And since nothing else I see merely through the senses can or will persist, He alone is. . . I see It as purely benevolent. For I can see that amid death, life persists; amid untruth, truth persists; amid darkness light persists. Hence I gather that God is Life, Truth, (and) Light. He is Love. He is the supreme Good.”³⁸

Consideration of God as the Ultimate Value has ethical implications for Gandhi. God makes a claim on us to direct our values in accordance with this Ultimate Value. Even Nietzsche spoke of the trans-valuation of old values in the sense that there are times of alteration in our valuation. Gandhi was convinced that religious beliefs or the way we look upon God matter greatly and they affect our lives. If a person is incessantly thirsting for riches and wealth, one could say that that person’s god is “Mammon’!

For Gandhi God is the Prime source and summit of all moral norms. Gandhi says, “God is ethics and morality”. In a short reply to Mr Nadkarni’s letter to the Editor of *Young India*, inquiring about the reasons for Mr Bradlaugh’s atheistic denial of God, Gandhi wrote: “The sum total of karma is God, that which impels man to do the right is God. . . That which sustained Bradlaugh throughout all his trials was God. He is the Denial of the atheist.”³⁹ He is the law guiding human actions.

Further, God is a preferential lover. Gandhi often speaks of God as *Daridranarayana* (Lord of the poor). God is “a servant of his servant.” Such a

concept is essential to the one dedicated to the path of love and service. His discussion of God as *Daridranarayana* is mainly to derive the ethical motivation to serve the poor and the oppressed:

“He (God) can be served in one way alone. To serve the poor is to serve God. . . . In serving those who suffer, one serves God.”⁴⁰

Even worship is offered through service:

“The best and most understandable place where He can be worshipped is a living creature. The service of the distressed, the crippled and the helpless among living things constitutes worship of God.”⁴¹

Thus, a human being, not the lord of creation but a servant of God’s creation, stands as God’s steward and co-worker “to serve all the lives and thus to express God’s dignity and love.”⁴² Gandhi’s conviction that we serve God through service, especially of the victimized, gushed from the depth of his heart in his press meeting of 1939 while breaking one of his numerous fasts:

“I claim to know my millions. All the 24 hours of the day I am with them. They are my first care and last because I recognize no God except the God that is to be found in the hearts of the dumb millions. They do not recognize His presence; I do. And I worship the God that is Truth or a Truth which is God through the service of these millions.”⁴³

This implies that the totality of one’s life of service would manifest one’s religiosity. Then, in the Gandhian scheme of things, if a person is not moral (in actions, behaviour, relationships), that person is not religious; and vice versa. Religiosity and morality have an intrinsic and intertwining relationship in the scheme of Gandhi. This, further, would imply that if one is performing all religiously prescribed rituals and rites, and following meticulously the prevalent and prescribed rites and rituals, in one’s attempt

at external manifestation of one's faith and religiosity, but lacks love and service for the neighbour, then, Gandhi would challenge the religiosity of those 'religious acts'. So, for Gandhi, to be religious is to be moral and relational. Secondly, one's service to others, especially to the least and the last, would manifest one's authentic spirituality.

And, finally, Truth is God.⁴⁴ As early as 1908 Gandhi very clearly expressed his conviction of the relation of God with Truth:

*"Where there is God there is truth, and where there is truth there is God. I live in fear of God. I love truth only, and so God is with me. Even if the path of truth does not please the community it pleases God. Therefore, I will do what pleases God even if the community should turn against me."*⁴⁵ The centrality of his notion of truth resulted from his search for a firm foundation for his political programme of action. Gandhi moved slowly from understanding Truth as a quality of God to his final position that God is Truth (Truth is the essence, the substratum of God). "For me, truth is the sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle that is God."⁴⁶

The foundation of all reality including politics is truth. The supreme value in politics, religion, ethics and morality is truth. Almost at the end of his autobiography, he says, "There is no other God than Truth". From his deep conviction that "morality is the basis of things and truth is the substance of morality" he reversed the expression God is Truth to "Truth is God" to make it to be the ultimate foundation of all life and actions. Gandhi's insight of God as Truth involves an ontology. Gandhi described God as truth in the sense of being that which is, whose essence is *sat* (to be). This primary ontological meaning of *Satya* (derived from *sat*), meaning "to be," or "to exist," connotes the idea of changelessness. Everything else is momentary and fleeting. Truth is the reason for being moral. Gandhi's reversal of 'God is truth' to 'Truth is God' is simply a consistent philosophical argument embedded in a sustained theological journey.

Gandhi seems to enclose three connotations in the various facets of his experiments with truth:

- i Truth as what facts are – Truth as veracity

- ii. Truth is that which one holds fast – a person’s ultimate commitment/concern; ultimate concern. Suppose one says ‘There is no God’. This is that person’s ultimate conclusion, and the person holds on to it. Also holding fast to this determines one’s (atheist) behaviour. Money and/or power could also be one’s ultimate concern.

- iii. Truth as sat, or Being, in the ontological sense, the ultimate unchanging reality. (for Gandhi: Truth is God). To exist connotes the idea of changelessness. Therefore Truth (hence God) has the quality of changelessness. This intrinsic characteristic, “to be” of God is exclusively his; only God is, nothing else is.⁴⁷ So, one could think of another way of putting Gandhi’s thought as ‘God is that than which no changelessness exists!’⁴⁸

What does the above teach us today? As a person more interested in action, he is searching, searching in discernment, for what is the best for us, not only what is good for us humans in our living process, irrespective of nationality, religious affiliation, colour combination, ethnic origins, or whatever that differentiate us. Difference is not the problem, but how we look at the difference is more important. So, one can say that there is a teleology in his approach, based on an ontology. His idea of God manifests a relational anthropology and a cosmology; one can also say that his epistemology is related to this ontology.

Conclusion

From the above descriptive expositions one can conclude that, in the Gandhian framework, God is the unitive factor of the five elements of

human search – Ontology, Cosmology, Anthropology, Epistemology, and Eschatology. To be human is to be inter-human, and inter-cosmic; to be religious is to be inter-religious. To be is to act; act in a manner manifesting *ahimsatmak satyagraha*. Reading the mind of Gandhi, one can come to the following set of conclusions.

To be religious is to be moral. If one is not moral in actions, behaviour, or relationships one is not religious. Religiosity and morality have an intrinsic and intertwining relationship. The essence of religion is morality. What does this imply? If a person is performing meticulously all religiously prescribed rituals and rites, in one's attempt at external manifestation of religiosity, it amounts to nothing in Gandhian terms if the person does not have the basic morality and moral principles in the person's actions of treating everyone as equal other having dignity, respecting justice, manifesting harmony, and considering all others as relational entity, a being-with.

Secondly, to be religious is to be rightly ordered. When individual humans are oriented toward the end of merging into the Ultimate Truth for which they have a natural inclination, that is, when they are directed by and toward this truth, they are rightly ordered morally and spiritually on the right path. So, for Gandhi, the ultimate end of humans is the attainment of God. This trajectory towards this ultimate enables a person to treat all others as brothers and sisters (relational anthropology), and then to treat the creation with reverence (a relational cosmology), and the movement to this ultimate (ontology) is the ultimate concern (teleology), and such an insight (epistemology) is a life-term achievement.

Besides, one's service to others, especially to the last and the least, is the manifestation of authentic religiosity and properly oriented spirituality. Gandhi's ontological notion can give a foundation, a basis for the equality of humans. The basis of our equality is in the very being of one's existence, not given by a law, or human agreement and contract; or the generosity of a ruler. In a system of hierarchical anthropology, his idea can give a basis for equality and acceptability, a life of relationality, not only with other human

beings but with nature and cosmos, with the whole of creation. Here one shall find a new definition of human being, beyond Russel's 'rational-animal' category, to a ratio-relational being-with.

Gandhi's move from his numerous conceptions of God to just one ultimate concept, that TRUTH IS GOD, helped him move from a cultic religion to be authentically religious; and to be religious is to be moral, ethical, and relational. Though he was not a temple goer (especially after the Vaikom *satyagraha*), all his political meetings were prayer meetings. But he was religious, the sacred had a place in him; he had a spirituality – a way of being and acting having an ultimate in view. Such spirituality and religiosity helped him move away from cults, rituals, shows of religion, and celebrations, to the lives of the people, their agonies and suffering, aspects of their freedom and liberation, their service, and, all the more, concepts like *ahimsatmak satyagraha*, *nishkamakarma*, *vsudaivakudumbakam*, *Daridranarayan*, *antyodaya*, so on and so forth. Now he can say, see God in his creation; one cannot find God apart from humanity. Thus, one can say that there is a cosmo-theandrisms in Gandhi, to use a term from Raimundo Pannikar.

Further, there is universalisation of love and service – i.e. service to all irrespective of culture, religious identity, colour or class identity, *Gotra* or caste identity and so on. We are all one; from one source, equally moving together to this source, becoming aware of being part of this oceanic entity.

From his basic philosophy of life, one can deduct the basis for reservation policies, minority rights, and primacy for the economically and socially weaker sections of people, i.e. in general the ideas of Common Good, understood as the good of all and the good of each, and social justice, i.e. being faithful to the demands of social relationality and relationship.

Finally, Gandhi's undaunted devotion to truth convinced him to hold on to the healing power of ahimsa. The attention of the world was drawn to Gandhi in his *ahimsatmaka Satyāgraha* (non-violent endeavour for truth) and to the healing power of the non-violent approach to personal as well as

institutional relationships and conflict resolution. Gandhi has translated this power into action in concrete historical situations. He acknowledges that he, in his way, is trying to “apply the eternal truths to our daily life and problems. . . . I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and Non-violence are as old as the hills.”⁴⁹ The closest paraphrase of *ahimsa* in the Gandhian spirit would be, then, ‘redemptive-self-suffering love.’⁵⁰

We see a real, innate desire in Gandhi to “see God face to face”. Gandhi would agree with Victorio Araya, a Latin American Liberation Theologian, that “God is the real utopic principle *pas excellence*.”⁵¹ Faith in God and Gandhi’s tireless attempt at conceptualization and articulation of God–experience (Truth experience) could be interpreted as his tireless giving of concrete historical form, however imperfect and limited it be, to such a utopia.

In the great mystical and wisdom tradition of India, Gandhi, perhaps, is teaching us that mysticism need not lead us outside the world; one need not be detached from the world to be a ‘mystic’ or holy or religious person; the secular can be made sacred, the sacred is here and now in the secular.

In fine, Gandhi’s relentless life of contemplative action is a saga of the pursuit of Truth, the foundation of his life and action. From his deep conviction that “morality is the basis of things and truth is the substance of morality,”⁵² search for Truth became the sole objective of his life. As he grew in wisdom and knowledge, “truth began to grow in magnitude and every day my definition of it has been widening,”⁵³ until he reversed the expression “God is Truth” to “Truth is God” to make It, as it were, the absolute and ultimate foundation of all his life and actions.⁵⁴

References

1. Professor Emeritus and former Principal of Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi.
jchatvj@gmail.com

2. Manipur – 2023 is a clear case in point

3. He titled the unfinished autobiography of his life as *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*.

4. *Harijan*, August 29, 1939

5. R.K. Prabhu (Editor) 1955:5, *Truth is God*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House

6. *Young India*, Oct 11, 1928; CW 37:347

7. Gandhi, M. K. 1945, *Autobiography: The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, tr. Mahadev Desai. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House. Reprint. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1983. P. viii

8. Gandhi, 1973, Vol. I: 18. *In Search of the Supreme*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House. To be faithful to the original, inclusive language is omitted.

9. Gandhi 1973: 10

10. Gandhi, 1973: 19

11. Though Gandhi has used the term Brahman to designate God, he was more at ease to use such terms as “Eternal Principle,” “All-Powerful” (Speech at public meeting in Comilla, Jan. 5, 1927; Amrita Bazar Patrika, Jan. 7, 1927; Young India, Jan. 13, 1927; Collected Works 32: 511, 571-72), “Viswanath” (Lord of the Universe) (Collected Works, 56: 246), “Supreme Consciousness,” “Pure consciousness” (Collected Works, 11: 92), “Intelligence,” “Mysterious Force,” “Cosmic Power,” “sakti or spirit” (Young India, October 11, 1928; Harijan, August 18, 1946), “atman that has attained moksa” (Collected Works, 11: 126), and “caitanya” (principle of life and consciousness) (Collected Works, 11: 189). On many occasions he has used other terms to designate that Ultimate Reality, that Supreme Being whom we call God: “Divine Mind” (Harijan, August 19, 1939) or simply “Divinity,” “Invisible Power” (Harijan, August 19, 1939), “Guide” (Young India, May 8, 1930; Collected Works, 43: 215 — at the time of one of his arrests Gandhi consoled his satyagrahis saying, “Let not my companions or the people at large be perturbed over my arrest, for it is not I but God who is guiding this

movement. He ever dwells in the hearts of all and he will vouchsafe to us the right guidance if only we have faith in Him”), “the Monitor within each one of us” (Collected Works 30: 493), “Witness of all our actions” (Collected Works, 30: 493), “Supreme Potter” (Letter of Feb. 16, 1931; Collected Works, 65: 180-81), “True Friend” (Collected Works, 69: 248), “Most exacting Master” (Harijan, May 6, 1933; Collected Works, 55: 121), “a ‘Being’ who is formless and all-pervading” (Letter to Kasamali, June 13, 1926; Iyer I: 577), one who is ‘perfect’ and who is ‘responsible’ for the wonderful phenomenon, the world” (Letter to Nirmal Chandra Dey, December 21, 1927; Iyer, *The Moral and Political Writings of Gandhi*, I: 578), “First Cause” (Letter to Shankaran, April 8, 1928; Iyer, I: 579), “the King of kings,” (Young India, October 11, 1928; Iyer, I: 584), “Life Force” (Harijan, August 18, 1946; Iyer I: 592), and “Ultimate arbiter” (Gandhi’s Correspondence with the Government 1942-4, 2nd edn. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, September 1945), p. 88. All these descriptive categories of God fade into oblivion in the presence of God as satya (Truth). Positively Gandhi preferred to use the term satya to designate God, since it was the “only correct and significant” description of God. See Chathanatt 2004:49-50.

12. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 52: 301.

13. Iyer 1973:4

14. See Chathanatt, 2004:65

15. *Young India*, October 11, 1928

16. *Harijan* August 29, 1936

17. *Harijan*, August 29, 1936

18. Gandhi 1948:I:170-171; M.K. Gandhi, *Nonviolence in Peace and War*, 2 Vols. 1948. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House

19. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Writings of Gandhi*, I:558

20. The word religion comes from two root words, namely, re+ligare (bind back), implying ‘that to which one is bound’

21. Young India, March 5, 1925; Iyer I: 571

22. Harijan, March 23, 1940; February 16, 1934; Also Young India, October 11, 1928

23. Harijan, Feb. 1, 1934

24. Rabindranath Tagore 1980: 7, *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings). Introduction by W.B. Yeats. Reprint. Delhi: The Macmillan Company of India Limited

25. Tagore 1980: 7

26. Martin Buber, in his classic work, *Ich und Du (I and Thou)*, says "I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter." Transl. by Walter Kaufmann, 1970: 62. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. Life is relational. The African notion on 'Ubuntu', in Zulu language of South Africa, also conveys the same sentiment.

27. *Harijan* August 29, 1936

28. Ordinarily secularism is understood as a separation of religion from politics and political governance. One should make a distinction here. The belief system, rites and rituals, and cultic aspects of religion whereby the community gets into emotions and sentiments of a particular community following the same faith need to be made distinct from the values and principles derived from religious faiths. In the Indian context when we talk of secularism what we are saying is that the political governance should not favour one particular religion over another religion economically, politically. No preference is given to any over against another; all faiths are treated equally. This does not deny use of values and norms of religious faiths in the political or any other arena; In fact what Gandhi says is that the humane principles and values prevalent in various religious faiths ought to be sustaining the political, economic and other activities making the latter rich in that process. For him Truth is the guiding principle.

29. Seven social sins were identified first by an Anglican priest, Frederick Lewis Donaldson and later Gandhi adopted them and wanted them as guiding principles for the people of India: 1. Wealth without work 2. Pleasure without conscience 3. Knowledge without character 4. Business without morality 5. Science without humanity 6. Religion without sacrifice 7. Politics without principle

30. Iyer, Raghavan *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973:10ff
31. *Young India*, Sept. 25, 1924; Iyer, 1:567-68. While publishing this conversation in *Young India*, Gandhi quoted a poem from Goethe's *Faust* that chimes the omnipresence of God in resonance to his own divine reverberations.
32. *Harijan* Dec. 22, 1933
33. *Collected Works*, 56:585-86
34. Desai, *Epic of Travancore*, pp 169-71; CW 64:254
35. *Collected Works*, 56:409
36. CW 56:247-48
37. *Harijan* June 20, 1936. Gandhi himself was not a regular temple goer. See Chathanatt p. 53-54
38. *Young India* October 11, 1928
39. *Young India* April 30, 1925
40. *Navajivan* October 25, 1925
41. *Navajivan* May 6, 1928
42. *Young India* March 24, 1927
43. *Navajivan* October 25, 1925

44. A full exposition of Gandhi's understanding of the relation between God and Truth and his journey from God is Truth to Truth is God need much more elaboration and articulation. I am just pointing out the conclusions of his decades of journey with his deep understanding of God as Truth.

45. *Indian Opinion*, December 9, 1908.

46. Gandhi, *Autobiography*, p.ix.

47. Letter to Amrit Kaur, CW, 64:432. See Chathanatt, p.71.

48. One could think of Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God: 'God is that, than which no greater being exist.'

49. *Harijan*, March 1936, p.49.

50. Speaking in a Christian ambience, the famous theocentric ethicist, Bernard Haring, speaks of the healing power of love. See his *The Healing Power of Peace and Nonviolence*, 1986. New York:Paulist Press

51. *God of the Poor: The Mystery of God in Latin American Liberation Theology*, Transl. Robert R. Barr 1987. New York:Orbis Books

52. Gandhi 1945:30

53. Gandhi 1945:30

54. Gandhi's manifest claims of the reversal could be seen in many of his letters and speeches. The following could be a selective sample: Speech after morning prayers, July 22, 1930; Letter to Narandas Gandhi MMU/I; Iyer 2: 162-64; Speech at Meeting in Lausanne, Mahadev Desai's Diary, December 8, 1931; Iyer 2: 164-70; Letter to Boys and Girls, March 21, 1932, Mahadevbhaini Diary; Iyer 2: 172

- About the Author

Prof. John Chathanatt, SJ is a Jesuit priest belonging to the Delhi Province of the Society of Jesus and is Professor (Emeritus) and former Principal of Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi. He is now the Vice-President of the Jesuit Research and Development Society, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi. He has degrees in Mathematics, Economics, Philosophy, and Theology. He has a Masters's in Economics from Rajasthan University, in Theology from Woodstock Theological Centre, Boston, USA and his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, USA.