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## **Religion as Source of Much War & Gandhi's Insights**

**- by Prof Douglas Allen**



Prof. Douglas Allen has based his paper on his talk at an international webinar on 23 February 2023, organized by Dr. Satish K Jha, Convenor, Gandhi Study Circle, Aryabhata College, University of Delhi.

## Introductory Remarks

The title of my paper, focusing on how religion has often been a source of war and M.K. Gandhi's insights on this topic, raises many questions on topics that I find are often uncritically assumed, oversimplified, or completely ignored. We often raise questions about the meaning of "religion" and about how just what religion is and what religion is not. We often raise these as seemingly simple questions that do not receive adequate simple responses. Similarly, we often raise questions about the meaning of "war" and about just what war is and what is not war. We often raise these as seemingly simple questions about war, but such questions do not receive adequate simple answers. As you will see in my presentation, there are no simple questions and answers when we formulate and analyze issues about the nature of war, peace, violence, nonviolence, Gandhi's insights, and Gandhian, non-Gandhian and anti-Gandhian interpretations and practices.

I will begin by presenting some background that you might find interesting that was very formative in my youth. This background, I believe, is essential for my approach to the topics in this presentation. Briefly, in 1963 and 1964, I was fortunate to have a special teacher Fulbright Grant, one that no longer exists. One week after I graduate from Yale University and received my degree, I was in India, I spent a year at Banaras Hindu University where I taught upper-level English and also immersed myself in the postgraduate Ph.D. studies in the Philosophy Department. now it is very interesting for me to reflect back on the formative year. I have been to India so many times since then, probably 25 times, and have spent at least five years in India. I have seen more of India than I have of the United States. I have observed Banaras Hindu University and India have changed so much.

The Philosophy Department at Banaras Hindu University was in my view the number one department in the country at that time. The Head of the Department was my mentor, Professor T.R.V. Murti, who had authored a famous book on Madhyamika Buddhism. He was a South Indian, high-caste Brahmin, and a devoted follower of Adi Shankaracharya. The Philosophy Department was very large at that time, with distinguished faculty members, most of whom were *Advaitin* followers of Shankara. Banaras was completely different from my Western/USA background and very different from Bombay, [now Mumbai], Calcutta [now Kolkata], New Delhi, and other more urban and developing places. We mistakenly thought that traditional Banaras/Kashi/Varanasi would never change. We would go, for example, for one week without seeing an automobile; there were no malls; we would go down to the Ghats on the Ganga and participate in very meaningful rituals and activities. Banaras was a centre for music and flourishing culture. It was a place where I would meet the remarkable yogis, pandits, and other spiritual leaders, who could be encountered with patience and perseverance and separated from the charlatans.

As part of this formative past, it is very important to share that with regard to M.K. Gandhi, in the philosophy department and in all of my Ph.D. postgraduate studies, Mahatma Gandhi's name was never mentioned! He was not considered a philosopher or worthy of philosophical study. At the same time, Gandhi's presence was ubiquitous. Politicians and vice-chancellors and others would wear Gandhi's caps and their Khadi vests. They would make Gandhi speeches, like our BHU vice chancellor, a retired judge, who would make the same weekly ritualized speeches: "in the words of Bapu, the Father of the Nation," "in the words of the great Mahatma," and so forth. It was often obvious that much of this was mere slogans, with a lot of hypocrisy. People would often then return to their non-Gandhian values and ways of living. All this was so instructive for me.

I obtained a volume, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, that was first published in 1936 and was edited by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (and J.H. Muirhead). Dr. Radhakrishnan was well-known as a scholar, and I was familiar with his Oxford background. He wrote numerous works in English, small works like *The Hindu View of Life*, and larger works of philosophy. He

was the President of India when I was in India, and Pandit Nehru was still the Prime Minister of India. When Nehru passed away in 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri from Banaras became the new Prime Minister. If one looks at the book, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, it is very informative for our topic today. There are about 24 essays, each averaging about 20 pages in length. The essays are written by most of the so-called big names in Indian philosophy at that time. On the cover and in the table of contents, the name "M.K. Gandhi" appears first, and it is followed by the names of the influential Indian philosophers. The first essay is authored by Rabindranath Tagore, and other essays include writings by Radhakrishnan, K.C. Bhattacharyya, Ananda Coomaraswamy, P.T. Raju, and my mentor T.R.V. Murti.

Now what is very instructive is this. We know through the 100 volumes of *The Collective Works of Mahatma Gandhi* and many other writings that Radhakrishnan greatly admired Gandhi greatly admired Radhakrishnan. Radhakrishnan reached out to Gandhi and asked him to write an essay on "*Contemporary Indian philosophy*." Gandhi responded that he was incompetent and could not write an essay for such a philosophical volume. He respected philosophers, but he was not a philosopher. Nevertheless, Radhakrishnan was persistent. So what did Radhakrishnan finally say to Gandhi? I will pose three simple one-line questions for you, just answer the three questions and that will be your contribution. Gandhi agreed.

## **Gandhi & Religion**

It is very interesting and revealing to note the three questions and Gandhi's responses take less than one page, although this is featured as the first page in volume. What to me is most interesting, bearing on our topic, is that Dr. Radhakrishnan's three questions are all about religion. First questions: What is your religion? And Gandhi's response: My religion is Hinduism, which is a Religion with a capital R; which is the Religion of all humanity and embraces the universal truth of all other religions.

Second question by Radhakrishnan: How are you led to your religion? Once again, Gandhi's brief response is so meaningful and significant: Gandhi answer that he is led to his Religion based on Truth (with a capital T), *Satya*, and Non-violence (with a capital N), *Ahimsa*. Gandhi continues that he used to say that "God is Truth." Truth is then viewed as an attribute along with many other Divine attributes of God. Many followers of religion still believe that it is fine for them. But Gandhi tells us that he has now reversed this. He prefers to say "Truth is God." Truth is God, and Truth is many other things. As Gandhi tells us: He is trying to be more inclusivist and more pluralist. He wants to embrace the positions of those religious people who don't use God language or have different beliefs, and also atheists, agnostics, and others who believe in truth but don't believe in God. he can embrace such diverse approaches and perspectives as integral to his view of Truth.

Third question by Radhakrishnan: What is the bearing of your Religion on social life? Gandhi responds that his religion has bearing on his social life in every aspect of his daily social contact. In Religion, you need to lose yourself completely in continuous social service. Without such social service, recognizing the unity and oneness of Truth and Reality, there is no happiness. As he writes elsewhere, the ideal and goal is to reduce your ego to zero; reduce your ego to a cipher as much as possible. To do this, you have to completely let go of any attachment to your ego. You have to become one with others, with the world, with the unity and the oneness of reality. In that regard, Gandhi's view of Religion involves how one unites with others through social service, through Sarvodaya; how one is dedicated to the uplift and the well-being of all, especially those who have the least; how one experiences and expresses Swaraj, especially by addressing the needs of those with the least freedom and the greatest suffering. That's how you are able to experience your unity, the interconnected oneness of all of reality. That encapsulates and expressed a lot of profound ideas that are developed in thousands of pages written by Gandhi.

Gandhi refers to religion (with a lower-case r) and the many religions of others. In my understanding, Gandhi's approach, concepts, and practices regarding religion are very diverse, pluralist, inclusivist, tolerant, sometimes confusing, and sometimes even contradictory. This has allowed

Gandhi's admirers, Gandhi's critics, and others to focus on specific passages in presenting their positive and negative interpretations of "the true Gandhi" as embracing a Gandhian religion. These interpretations attributed to Gandhi and his admirers, critics and others are sometimes amazingly insightful, sometimes ill-informed, sometimes revolutionary, and sometimes conservative and reactionary. They are sometimes most significant for us in India and the world today, and they are sometimes hopelessly irrelevant.

That is why I usually emphasize that my readings, formulations, interpretations, evaluations, and applications are necessarily selective when focusing on Gandhi's perspectives on religion, war, peace, nonviolence, and related topics. There are many questions and many insights regarding my topic today that will not be addressed. Because of limited time, I won't address all of the significant issues, although in my books and other writings, I have spent a tremendous amount of time on them. Therefore, let me just mention a few issues that may be of interest to you, may lead to discussion, and may lead to future reflections on your part.

In Gandhi's brief responses to Radhakrishnan, he uses Religion with a capital R, and what Gandhi usually means by this Religion is some pure, perfect, universal, spiritual essence of all religions. He often contrasts this with religion with a small r, by which Gandhi means what 90% of us mean by religion: namely, traditional religion, institutionalized religion, historically formed religion, culturally formed religion, linguistically formed religion, ancient and later scriptures, rituals, religious hierarchies, and numerous religious practices. The question arises: What is this Religion with a capital R and how does Gandhi know this? He has faith, absolute faith in this, but how does he know this Religion? What makes this claim controversial and problematic is that Gandhi keeps acknowledging that he only has temporary "glimpses" of such perfect Religion, such pure Spirituality. As Gandhi repeatedly tells us, he then necessarily returns to this spatial, temporal, conditioned, limited, finite, human mode of being in our imperfect world with its imperfect religions.

Gandhi makes the same points and claims when he talks about perfect Nonviolence, perfect Truth, perfect Morality and Ethics, perfect Satyagraha, perfect Swaraj, perfect Sarvodaya, and so forth. He says that we and even he only at most have temporary glimpses of these. For example, he was such an exemplary moral and spiritual proponent of Ahimsa, and he believed in the absolute unconditional purity of Nonviolence. Yet he says that he often miscalculates, sometimes even committing “Himalayan blunders” in his own life and in his relations with and expectations of his followers. So, it’s a matter of life and of our human existential mode of being in the world as Gandhiji writes in his Autobiography: *My Experiments with Truth*, that even he experiences and expresses many “failed experiences” with truth.

When it comes to how we can practice the perfect exemplary ideals that every religion offers, many questions arise. How do we relate ideal Religion to all the religions, religious beliefs, scriptures, practices, and rituals? How did Gandhi face this challenge throughout his life? On the one hand, how do we and how did Gandhi respond to those who reject any view of ideal Religion, perfect Religion, or who reject any view of worldly religion with innumerable imperfect religions with their religious phenomena? On the other hand, how do we and how did Gandhi respond to Christians, Muslims, and others who claim that they possess the absolute exclusive Religion of Truth and Reality? Who claim that their religious founders, scriptures, teachings, revelations, institutions, rituals, and paths are not legitimate perspectives amidst other legitimate perspectives, but instead that all other approaches are false and even evil? These were challenges that Mahatma Gandhi faced, often with remarkable success, but sometimes with failure.

## **War and Peace**

Let me move on and clarify several key concepts. What do we mean by war and peace, violence and war? War is always violent, either directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly. But not all violence is war. In fact, we do not want to classify most forms of violence as war. For example, a teacher might respond to a student using linguistic expressions in ways that are angry or hateful, that control or intimidate or shame the student. For

Gandhi, that is violence, but it is not war. For example, an unfortunate aspect of being a human being in the world is that we inflict some violence (*ahimsa*, harm, injury) on some human and nonhuman life, even when done unintentionally, when clearing roads, building dwellings, practicing hygiene, and much more. For Gandhi, that is violence, but it is not war.

Most human beings and most religions easily affirm that they are against war and that they are for peace. Peace is better than war. Ideally, we want to live peaceful lives and in peaceful relations with other human beings, other nations, and nature. Gandhi claims that most of us who claim to be nonviolent are actually overtly and/or covertly very violent. Most of us who claim to be for peace either directly contribute to or are complicit with the perpetuation of war. How can Gandhi justify these radical claims?

In my writings, I've introduced two key concepts, principles, and clarifications that allow us to broaden and deepen our understanding of Mahatma Gandhi's approach, philosophy, and action-oriented practices with regard to nonviolence and violence, peace and war, truth and untruth, morality and immorality, and other significant concerns: the multidimensionality of violence and the structural systemic violence of the dominant status quo. These two clarifications are central to the topic today of religion and why religion is a source of so much violence and war.

Most human beings and religions affirm their commitment to nonviolence and peace, but they use these terms in very narrow and limited ways. They are opposed to overt physical acts of war, such as widespread killing of innocent civilians, mass genocide, torture, rape, war crimes, and blatant violations of human rights. Consistent with Gandhi's insights, this is an important expression of violence and violent war, but it expresses a relatively small part of overall violence, war, peace, and religion. Gandhi informs us and challenges us to broaden and deepen our perspectives and understandings. In addition to issues and concerns involving overt physical violence and war, religion must address other issues and concerns of violence, war, and peace that are multidimensional and structural. Religions, for example, must include and transform inner war, psychological



war, economic war, social and political war, cultural and religious war, linguistic war with language as a violent weapon of war, class, caste, gender, and race as dimensions of war, and more.

It is true that most human beings and religions seemingly are against war. Even those that avoid glorifying war and do not promote “religious war” usually use the key terms in very vague ways. In addition, they usually qualify their doctrinal concepts and practices for peace in very diverse, often contradictory ways. For example, religions often uphold the view that war is tragic, but war is sometimes necessary for peace. For example, in anti-Gandhian views, religious people and others often uphold the view of peace as peace through strength, and such strength is based on accumulating superior weapons, superior nuclear forces, and other superior multidimensional and structural violent forces and relations. Such dominant positions use the threat of war as deterrence to ensure the so-called peace. Of course, we also have thousands of years of religions that extol and glorify violence and war as revealed by and commanded by their God, their founders and prophets, their scriptures, based on their views of ultimate reality and human nature as essential for their salvation and the destruction of evil-doers, infidels, non-believers. Gandhi, of course, radically opposes such dominant traditional and contemporary views of religion.

Now let us spend a little time on religion and why religion is seen as such a negative force and as a source of and justification for so much violence and war in light of what I have said so far. Due to shortage of time, I won't present the endless examples of how dominant religions are sources that promote and justify so much divisiveness, hatred, violence, conflict, and war. By contrast, the nonviolent religious forces for peace and those against war are usually rather passive, often silent, relatively powerless and ineffective when compared with the actively engaged, overwhelming religious forces promoting violence and war. It is easy to conclude, that when it comes to war, religion is a negative force and religion is an essential part of the problem and not the solution.

What I now propose is how M.K. Gandhi offers insights for providing dimensional, structural, and contextual openings for understanding ways that religion can also be a positive force in resisting war and for nonviolence and peace. In terms of insights on religion, nonviolence, and peace, in many hundreds of pages, Gandhi focuses on religion, on how and why he is religious, on how and why he is a Hindu, and on how and why he upholds a very tolerant, pluralistic, inclusivist, nonviolent, anti-war, morally egalitarian, service-oriented, action-oriented view of religion. However, it is not always clear what Gandhi means or how his multiplicity of perspectives on religion hold together in a unifying consistent way. In fact, many Christians, Muslims, and followers of other religions have claimed that Gandhi Hinduizes or Vedantizes their religions in rejecting their exclusive approach to absolute claims about their religion and their God as being the only truth and the only ultimate reality.

Let me quickly delineate a few of Gandhi's formulations. First, In many passages in his writings, Gandhi expresses his personal preference for the non-dualistic, unifying oneness of Hindu Vedanta. He says, this is his personal preference when it comes to the oneness, the unity and identity of Atman-Brahman, and so forth. Many scholars, especially Vedantists, have simply identified Gandhi with Hindu religion, in general, and Hindu Vedanta, in particular. There are many books and articles that identify Gandhi with the traditional Advaita philosophy founded by Shankara. Often these writers are followers of Shankaracharya, and they interpret Gandhi accordingly. His view of Religion as the highest expression of Spirituality, is identified with the non-dualistic Advaita.

There have been some other scholars over the decades and more recently who affirm that yes, Gandhi believes that the highest religion is non-dualistic Advaita Vedanta, but they then qualify this. Unlike Gandhi, Shankara is not so concerned about transforming this world of maya with its violence, oppression, and injustice. Traditional followers of Shankara focus on illusion, on our existential situatedness in the world, and on how we can liberate ourselves from this world in order to achieve moksha or mukti. Therefore, in order to be true to Gandhi's Vedanta, we need to emphasize his engaged action-oriented way, philosophy, and religion. As is

sometimes claimed, Gandhi's formulations are more like those of Swami Vivekananda and other neo-Vedantists.

Secondly, in many other passages on religion, the most in his writings on religion, Gandhi identifies his religion with a more theistic approach and perspective. This is expressed as his experiences, his faith, his daily prayer rituals, and his other religious practices. Such theistic formulations, relating to deities, embrace Gandhi's favorite God, Rama, and another incarnation of Vishnu, Krishna, as central to his favorite spiritual text, the Bhagavad Gita. So this is the second orientation of Gandhi toward his religion.

Thirdly, I might just quickly mention that there are some very dramatic significant writings in which Gandhi focuses on Shrimad Rajchandra, who was a Jain, a family friend, a poet, and mystic philosopher. Gandhi said that he never had a personal Guru, but if he had had one, the closest would have been Rajchandra as a spiritual advisor. In one of his very dramatic writings, while Gandhi was living in South Africa, he was in crisis and wrote to Shrimad Rajchandra for advice. Gandhi was under attack for his Hinduism by missionary Christians. Gandhi was full of doubt. Am I a Hindu? Do I even believe in God? Rajchandra sent back 28 responses to Gandhi's questions. What he basically tells Gandhi is that he can remain a Hindu and that he need not be ashamed of this. Be proud of being a Hindu, but you should be very patient. You should study Hinduism in depth. This will also allow you to develop your position on ahimsa (imperfectly translated as "nonviolence," so foundational in Jainism). It will allow you to understand your Hinduism as also embracing the insights and contributions of all other religions. So once again, this was deeply formative in much of Gandhi's view of religion.

Others greatly influenced M.K. Gandhi on our topic of religion and war. As Gandhi repeatedly acknowledges, one of the major influences came from Leo Tolstoy. Gandhi was influenced by several of Tolstoy's writings, and especially by *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*.

I want to emphasize that Gandhi repeatedly claims that true religion is dynamic, is the most powerful relational force, and is identical with truth-force, nonviolent-force, love-force, soul-force, ethical/moral-force, and so forth. Gandhi certainly recognizes that there is widespread, institutionalized, hierarchical religion that is violent, divisive, oppressive, exploitative, and unjust, but for Gandhi this is undeveloped false religion that must be resisted and transformed into true religion.

An obvious question today is whether Gandhi's true religion can be relevant and effective? In fact, Gandhi claims that true religion not only is desperately needed and is effective, but it is even the strongest force that human beings can experience and express. So, the challenge for me is this: If that is the case, if true religion is the strongest effective force, why are religions such a negative powerful source of so much war today?

Let me conclude my presentation in the next few minutes by sharing what I have formulated on how to deal with what I consider a very strong challenge to Gandhi and his topic of religion. In terms of the time suggested to me, it looks like the timing is going to be perfect and will allow time for questions and comments.

It is extremely important to reflect on how and why dominant religious cultures and their dominant religious narratives are such a negative force in our contemporary world regarding issues of war and peace. It is also extremely important to reflect on how the less dominant religious cultures and their narratives can resist and change this so that they become stronger positive forces today regarding issues of war and peace. In attempting to understand these very complex questions I propose that we need to contextualize our formulations and responses. In today's world and for the future, religion is not absolutely dichotomized as essentially or necessarily violent or nonviolent, peaceful or hateful, cruel or loving or compassionate, divisive and intolerant or unifying and mutually respectful, and so forth. If that is the case why is religion today such an overwhelmingly negative force?

To understand this, we need to contextualize our approaches and interpretations of religious and non-religious narratives, paradigms, phenomena, values, relations, structures, and practices as they are interconnected with dominant and secondary economic, social, political, cultural, psychological, linguistic, educational and environmental variables. In my view, we live in a corporate, capitalist, and globalized multi-dimensional and systemically structural world in which ego-driven greed and attachments are promoted and with the conditioned and enforced desire to maximize profits and possessions. The expansion and domination of capital is viewed as more powerful than Gandhi's meeting the needs of disadvantaged and marginalized people and social service to promote the well-being of all. We live in a world in which the alienation, dehumanization, and anger of the dominated classes, castes, and others are exploited by diversionary demagogues and by their dominant economic, political, and religious ideologies, institutions, and policies.

Here we find the dominant forces and relations of the military-industrial complex with their anti-Gandhian short-term and long-term imperatives and objectives. Here we find the dominant paradigms, narratives, values, priorities, policies, and actions that interconnect the military, industrial, consumerist, fossil fuel, nuclear, private war contracting, media, educational, religious, and so forth. In such a dominant approach, worldview, and view of human beings, our modern criteria are object-centric, thing-centric, and fetishized as anti-human, immoral, violent, oppressive, exploitative, inequitable, and unsustainable. Modern quantifying assessments of gross domestic product, global development, and wealth are the criteria for success and happiness. Here we find the complex and increasingly powerful forces that shape and dominate all areas of life. Mahatma Gandhi offers a radical critiques of this dominant "Modern Civilization."

Only when we address these and related dominant contextualized forces in our contemporary world can we understand why dominant religion is such a negative force and why it is also important to reflect on how the relations between the dominant and secondary religious cultures are dynamic open-ended, conflicted, contradictory, and dialectically structured. The

related, different, contextualized situations reveal how the dominant-secondary relations can be transformed and even reversed. The dominant and subordinate religious cultures are shaped by the dominant economic, political, social, and other forces, as well as by other forces in our lives and in our world. For example, many jihadis, religious warriors, martyrs, and others are willing to die because of their religion, as was Gandhi, granting that he was not willing to inflict violence on others as part of his religion. In very negative ways today, many white supremacists, xenophobic nationalists, patriarchal misogynists, hierarchical caste and ethnic proponents, and even powerful capitalists and militarists claim that their perspectives are based on their religious facts, narratives, and cultures. The open-ended, dynamic, dialectical relation also holds true between the dominant and less powerful religious cultures in our contemporary world. In much of my presentation. I have emphasized dominant religion as a negative force provoking and justifying violence, conflict, war, divisiveness, and intolerance.

Nevertheless, under different contextualized situations, the dominant-secondary relations between religious cultures can be reversed. Contextualized positive religious culture can become the strongest religious force in promoting and justifying a radically transformed religious paradigm. It is possible to construct a Gandhi-inspired religious narrative and to live as fully as possible emphasizing nonviolent resistance and transformation for inner and outer peace, love, compassion, kindness, ethical living, tolerance, mutual respect, social justice, equality, the uplifting and well-being of all, and organically sustainable living, enabling human and planetary development and flourishing.

So on my major topic, this is a most significant challenge today for religious and non-religious cultures, including those that selectively embrace many Gandhi-informed insights and other religious and non-religious insights regarding violence and non-violence, war and peace. The challenge for us is to envision a radically and qualitatively different paradigm shift with contextually significant perspectives, values, theoretical constructions, and action-oriented, engaged, transformative practices that are meaningful, bringing hope and inspiring us with alternative nonviolent and peaceful

ways of living. Central to the spirit of my presentation has been my conviction that we have the necessary experiences, values, knowledge, human and other resources to engage cooperatively in such a desperately needed transformation. We can work for more value-informed, more developed levels of existence in the world, including developing religions promoting nonviolence and peace informed by many of Gandhi's works.

## **Gandhi and Hinduism**

To clarify your main critique of my presentation, I do not think in any way that Gandhi was giving up on institutionalized religion. I don't think that Gandhi was against traditional religion, traditional Hinduism, institutionalized religion. In fact, when Gandhi writes about traditional ancient Indian civilization, Hinduism, and even scriptures, he tends to present a very romantic and uncritical view. If you just take him literally, he presents a very romantic idealized view and then this raises many questions for me. For example, why does he make bold assertions often claiming that ancient Indians and villagers fully understood the truth of nonviolence? That they had never attempted to settle arguments through violence or through war? And as I've addressed in many of my writings, Gandhi accepts the ancient, traditional, Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, as his most influential text. Unlike the long history of major Hindu commentators on the Gita, as well as hundreds of millions of Hindu devotees who have accepted the Gita as their sacred scripture, Gandhi even interprets this as his major "gospel of nonviolence." So, my position is that Gandhi did not give up on traditional religion, and the danger today is the exact opposite. Many Indians, especially some Hindus with political, cultural, and religious power, along with some very traditional orthodox Hindus with very conservative positions, take some of Gandhi's formulations admiring ancient, traditional, institutional Hinduism as claiming the superiority of ancient India, of Indian culture, of Indian morality, of Indian civilization. They are using Gandhi in their very chauvinistic ways, and for Gandhi I think that this is a very intolerant and violent misuse of his approach to religion.

What I did not put in—and I considered including it until late yesterday—was a whole section in my talk from my work in phenomenology of religion. In my early books, there are hundreds of pages on what is religion. Let me just say Religion, as some perfect, pure, unconditioned, universal, spiritual Religion—that is beyond religious and other institutions, beyond the historical, beyond the temporal, beyond traditional religious beliefs and practices—doesn't exist for us as human beings. It is an imaginary ideal and an essentialized abstraction. Such a metaphysical, ontological, or theological view is not Gandhi's major focus or his complete view. There is no pure Religion without religious traditions, institutions, cultures, histories, linguistic formulations, and more. Gandhi is not saying if you simply believe in this absolute pure perfect religion, which he does, then you will be a spiritual being and can just forget about all traditions. This is not Gandhi at all.

In fact, Gandhi is mainly concerned with engaging in a contextual way with people, real imperfect human beings, whose beliefs, faith, practices, prayers, and rituals reveal profound insights and profound truths. In our actual world with its human beings, there are religious and non-religious contradictory and often very undeveloped human beings, and this leads to divided views on racism, on oppression, on exploitation, on casteism, on gender oppression, on patriarchy, and on other issues. Gandhi wants to purify and develop imperfect traditional religions and institutional religions. At the same time, imperfect religions, with their imperfect believers, shouldn't be shamed by proponents of some antireligious, dominant, modern science. In his talks and in his writings. Gandhi repeatedly admonishes us not to be intimidated, shamed, and controlled into falsely accepting that the modern West, science, technology, and civilization is so superior and possesses the absolute truth.

You are right in pointing out that Gandhi talks about how one of the problems of modern civilization is this separation of the material, of the body, from the spirit. Gandhi talks about the integration of the whole human being. You cannot reduce everything to mind, to modern concepts of mind, or to materialism. He is against that kind of modern reductionism that destroys the spirit and the whole human being. The questions that I



have raised are related to Gandhi's philosophy and religion as organically holistic. How his approach and perspective really broaden and deepen our understanding.

For example, Gandhi says, consistent with some religious positions and traditional religions, that the human being and the spiritual are more than the rational. There are many other dimensions of our human mode of being, of truth and of reality, that are nonrational. But Gandhi is not against religion developing our capacity to reason. Instead, Gandhi says that traditional and contemporary religions can never be allowed to tell you to do what is blatantly irrational. Gandhi repeatedly tells religious believers that if they believe that their God, their scriptures, or their religious leaders command them to do what is blatantly irrational, this is unacceptable false religion, and they should ignore or reject such commandments. This is a real critique of a lot of traditional religion on violence and war. In his view of religion, Gandhi tells us that he (and we) should never believe in a God or in religious scriptures that instruct us to believe in what clearly contradicts our empirical and factual experience, our conscience and morality, and what our reasoning shows us to be really rational. Gandhi can never believe in such a God or such a religion. This makes Gandhi much more interesting and significant for our topic.

What Gandhi said about religion, violence, and war is so important with regard to what he said about nationalism, nation states, and how they are often related to religion today. I could have given this whole talk on my critique of the modern nation state, including what is happening in India, the USA, and other nations. I am not an uncritical apologist for modern ideologies of nationalism with their formulations and practices as nation states. So my target in this presentation has not been to attack religion as such a negative force regarding violence and war, in order to embrace uncritically formulations of the secular modern nation state, including its limited modern views of science, technology, and reason. Such views are usually expressed or simply assumed as a kind of scientific instrumental rationality, which to me is a very impoverished view, even of science and of reason.

On one hand, Gandhi is anti-nationalist in his critique of modern nationalism. Gandhi is a decentralist, who wants a weak central nation state. He wants to empower grassroots people from the bottom up, not a hierarchical, top-down nation with its centralized government and other governing institutions. He repeatedly quotes Thoreau and others that power corrupts and that the best nation state is the weakest or least empowered nation state. On the other hand, Gandhi also knows that the nation state has its limited but necessary place. It had a place in the struggle against British colonialism as part of the movement of Swaraj, as self-rule and self-empowering freedom from the domination of British imperialism. So this is dialectical dynamic process engaging forces of nationalism and anti-nationalism.

In addition, there are philosophical, religious, and other ways for expressing how Gandhi is profoundly internationalist, not nationalist. As we have seen, in his views of religion, truth, and reality, Gandhi submits that we are integrally interconnected with each other and with all of life; that what unites and unifies us is more essential than what separates and divides us, including our identities as members of separate nations. Gandhi's most profound views are not restricted to Indians, Hindus, or the Indian nation. At the deepest level, they're universally accessible to people of any nation, culture, or religion.

My concerns in my presentation today focused on religion as such a negative force for multidimensional and structural violence and war, and, not unrelated, on nationalism (and even many recent formulations of globalized post-nationalism) as such a negative force for violence and war. In the United States, political and economic leaders with dominant power, as well as ordinary citizens, invariably talk nationalistically about America's superior exceptionalism with its national ideals and values of individual rights and freedoms and its modern democracy. Similarly, powerful Indians talk nationalistically about India's superior exceptionalism, with its superior ideals and values and its expressions as "the world's largest democracy." In both nations, such dominant nationalistic perspectives are used to promote and justify so much anti-Gandhian violence, intolerance, oppression, exploitation, and injustice. In fact, most people in the United

States have tried to embrace this nationalism as deeply religious. India, of course, is so much more deeply religious than the United States, so that India's religious nationalism, including virulent Hindu nationalism, has led to anti-Gandhian views, policies, and actions. For me, the danger today in the nationalistic glorification, whether promoted and justified by religion or as completely secular, is how the modern nation state is increasingly so xenophobic, so violent, and often so anti-science in its violent and destructive priorities and actions

## **Gandhian Way of Life**

Gandhi was remarkable in making connections between Religion as pure, universal, spiritual essence, and imperfect religion and the numerous diverse imperfect religions. His focus was more often on religions and on how religious beings lived, but the way he did this was so insightful, and it raises a lot of questions. In this regard, you raised the challenging question about Partition and all that is related to that tragic development. Elsewhere, I have spent a lot of time on this subject. In my interpretation, Gandhi was remarkable throughout the decades, but the most remarkable Gandhi for me was Gandhi in the last 10 years of his life. I think that he really developed economically, politically, in terms of caste and class, and in so many other ways.

A lot of people, including many devotees and other admirers, do not realize significant things about Gandhi at the time of the partition and at the end of his life, Gandhi was in crisis. He was very depressed. He felt that no one was listening any longer to him as he experienced the horrific violence, ethnic and religious cleansing, and genocide unfolding in the most anti-Gandhian ways. For example, he sadly and tragically acknowledged that for 50 years he had emphasized the need for Hindu-Muslim communal harmony. Indeed, this is the very first part of his Constructive Programme (Constructive Work). Now in 1947, as he observed Muslims and Hindus slaughtering each other, he felt that no one was listening to him, and he was a complete failure.

Now, to me, the remarkable thing that we have to learn, as we experience and respond to the topic today in the midst of overwhelming challenges, is our focus on this: How can we be resilient? How can we not give in? So many of my friends and colleagues in the United States have worked to advance women's rights, civil rights, human rights, voting rights, environmental concerns, and more, and we have been successful in gaining significant achievements. When Donald Trump got elected, they were so shocked, depressed, traumatized, and devastated emotionally, physically, and mentally. They lacked positive motivation, became passive, and withdrew from active engagement with life's pressing issues. They were so overwhelmed with disbelief, so traumatized, depressingly feeling that everything they had achieved in the last 50 years was being undone, and continues to be undone to this day. I know many people in India who have the same reactions to the present government and the many disturbing political, social, cultural, religious, and other developments in India.

For me, part of the remarkable lessons from Gandhi's life is trying to describe, analyze, and apply how Gandhi was able to continue and even to be effective considering how much despair and depression he faced. How was he able to tap into all of that energy, that remarkable moral, political, and spiritual energy, during the last years of his life? When one reflects on that, we need to include some of the earlier points about mind-body-heart unity of the whole person, about the importance of moral and spiritual ideals, about the need for a radically different value-based vision and revolutionary paradigm shift that inspires us and gives us hope for a better world that is not now, but could be. There is a lot there to consider. For me, a big part of Gandhi's strength is that he didn't deny or ignore the horror, the hatred, the rapes, the killings, and all that was going on at the end of his life, and he responded courageously, often in very remarkable ways.

Thank you for sharing some of what is tragically happening in Nigeria, with the interconnected religious violence, terrorism, and fundamentalism. You offer insightful comments and questions about such religious visions and ideologies as adopted by many terrorists, who are often fundamentalists. I think that what you say about Nigeria is greatly relevant to religious (and other) terrorism in the United States, Iran, the Middle East, Pakistan, and

many other places. And many terrorists are certainly fundamentalists. I think that the term “Fundamentalism” originated in the early 1900s in the United States among particular Protestant Christian denominations or groups to characterize their strict belief in their interpretation of their religious scriptures. The Bible is to be accepted literally and entirely as God’s perfect revelation. For religious fundamentalists, their faith and beliefs absolutely guarantee that their fundamental particular religious perspective has been divinely revealed, is the perfect absolute truth, is literally the only truth. And everyone else, religious and nonreligious, who does not accept the fundamentalist, absolute, unerring, literal, divine truth, is wrong, evil, sinful, and is a threat to the purity of the perfect fundamentalist religion. Such a characterization of fundamentalism also applies to various movements and groups within Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and other religions today.

Gandhi knew Christian, Muslim, and Hindu fundamentalists, some of whom were terrorists. And he reached out, empathized, and tried to deal with contextualized religious opponents. Much of the appeal of fundamentalism for fundamentalists in our complex, confusing, contradictory, troubling world is that it provides believers with very simple, clear, black-and white messages about what to believe, how to live, and what to do. Gandhi, who is radically different from such fundamentalism, would say that the fundamentalist message is inadequate, intolerant, immoral, violent, and untruthful.

You can’t reduce all of terrorism to fundamentalism, or all fundamentalism to terrorism. Certainly, fundamentalism provides a clear, absolute, rigid ideology and practices for many who are terrorists and who believe in waging “holy war.” We have to be careful using the terms like “holy war” and “righteous war.” These terms have many meanings and should not be hijacked by violent terrorists. There’s clearly a certain jihadist meaning, but even within Islam, you know that there’s “the greater jihad.” There’s the teaching of the more developed sense of spiritual holy war. This emphasizes the focus of religious believers on the war within each of us and within our religions. As imperfect religious beings, we are struggling with the forces of

good and evil within all of us. You can also find very similar formulations and messages in Gandhi's life, his struggles, and his writings.

Much to the distress of many admirers of Mahatma Gandhi, who accept him as the exemplary proponent of ahimsa and assume that he would only use gentle peaceful comforting language, Gandhi sometimes uses dramatic disturbing war-like language. He portrays himself and his dedicated Satyagrahis as holy warriors. As in the Gita, he often describes our human situatedness in this imperfect, immoral, violent, and untruthful world as a battlefield. Of course, unlike fundamentalists and many terrorists. Gandhi tells us not to read, interpret, and apply his message literally. As a nonviolent warrior, a warrior for peace, Gandhi is not telling us to go out and kill the others on the other religious sides. That would deny the deeper symbolic, allegorical, and mythic meanings of Gandhi's message and his moral and spiritual interpretations in which we are engaged in the battles within each of us and the forces of good and evil shaping our relations and our world.

Finally, I think we have to be careful when people start talking about or simply assume "holy war" and deciding how best to engage with them. In terms of my work in the United States, I find that people often use holy war language or other language expressing the holy war messages. In some cases, they are not expressing explicit religious positions. They believe in an economic holy war, a political holy war, a cultural holy war, a military holy war, and so forth. This is very dangerous. It is used to justify how you can use the weapons of mass destruction, how you can use nuclear weapons, how you can use capital punishment, how you can use violent sexism and violent racism and violent nationalism, as part of that holy war.

## **Terrorism**

Whenever "terrorism" is reported, it most often is portrayed as "Islamic terrorism" and the terrorists are Muslims. Why is that the case? in my work, all of these questions have very multi-dimensional, multi-sided responses,

including when I try to understand why we so often talk about terrorism in terms of fundamentalism and Islam.

I have to be very careful because I know that in the United States, for many religious and also nonreligious reasons, there's a lot of Islamophobia. This in no way is intended by me to ignore or minimize the brutal killings, torture, and suffering committed by Islamic terrorists, and this includes the extreme ongoing violence directed at Muslim women, teachers, journalists, dissenters, and other Muslims. Nevertheless, in the virulent Islamophobia in the U.S. and elsewhere, it is too easy in a self-justifying way to say, look at those horrible fundamentalists and terrorists in Iran and in other Islamic countries. We are completely different from them. We are so much more rational, more moral, more culturally developed at a higher level of civilization, and so forth. Gandhi is completely wrong in his philosophical and religious perspective that what unites us is more essential than what divides us. We have nothing in common with those Islamic terrorists.

I find that such unqualified, dogmatic, self-serving responses can be very dangerous. They are being used to deflect attention and to justify a lot of intolerance, oppression, injustice, and violence right now that is being exercised in the United States by some Christians, corporate capitalists, dominating globalists, and others, not only globally against Muslims, but also against millions of Muslim and non-Muslim U.S. citizens. That's one dominant narrative and force, I think, for helping us to understand why there has been such an overwhelming focus on Islamic terrorism. This can be related, in diverse alarming ways, to what is happening in India and other countries today.

There are many other reasons for this phenomenon of the reality of Islamic terrorism and our focus on it. I can't understand the violent development of this terrorism, for example, without understanding the 9/11 terrorism in the United States over 20 years ago, and how that has been used ideologically, politically, economically, and religiously in the so-called U.S. "war on terrorism." In addition, I can't understand the 9/11 terrorism without understanding why so many powerful interests and forces in the

United States over many decades have supported and armed so many fundamentalists, terrorists, jihadists, and dictators because it was regarded as in the U.S. American interest. And this can be related to understanding what has happened in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and so many other examples of nations, rulers, and power elites, some that have no connection with Islam, but which also use forces of terror to establish and maintain their brutal domination.

In other words, the fact that nations, economic elites, political rulers, military and police, and others were and are extremely violent and terroristic has not meant that the United States and other modern nations have opposed them. Often the opposite is true. Often this has involved the kinds of modern means-ends relations that Gandhi warned against, in which the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and in which the modern calculations of what furthers the interests, objectives, and ends of the powerful look at Gandhian morality, nonviolence, and truth as at most annoying and as completely irrelevant to “the real world.”

Furthermore, when considering the existence of Islamic terrorism and the usual focus on it, I have to include the abovementioned reasons and many other related reasons. This means that I have to give economic, political, social, and cultural interpretations of the rise and domination of the modern world, colonialism, imperialism, the destruction of the Ottoman Empire, and so many other examples in which there have been asymmetrical power relations in the world dominated increasingly by the non-Islamic modern West. And in which there were certain relationships with the oil and other economic interests in ways that most Muslims have felt disempowered, even humiliated. Increasingly, large numbers of Muslims felt that their powerful economic, political, and other leaders were not acting on their behalf. So, this gave rise to a lot of alienation, humiliation, resentment, and anger. This resulted in the fact that there was and remains a large resource of Muslims that could be motivated and activated for terrorism.



It is instructive to recall that M.K. Gandhi, starting in the early twentieth century, spoke out and wrote about Hindu and other Indian terrorism. He felt that there were certain Indian patriots, some courageous and not cowardly, who cared deeply about India and its suffering and its lack of freedom, felt humiliated and full of moral outrage, and were led to believe that terrorism against British colonialism was the only way. And they were sometimes willing to die, to become martyrs, in their commitment to Indian swaraj. Gandhi attempted to engage these Indian terrorists in nonviolent transformative dialogue, and the results, then and until the end of his life, were often impressive, but were sometimes failures. So, I think, there are a lot of complex answers to questions about what we call terrorism, what we oppose, and how we oppose it.

At the same time, it is often challenging in trying to understand and agree with Gandhi's essential theory and practice upholding the perspective that what unifies us is more fundamental than what divides us. How can we understand that so many human beings, human beings who are essentially like us, can take these paths that to us are so blatantly violent, immoral, untruthful, and destructive? And how can we establish some meaningful dialogue in which we attempt to transform that situation, especially with terrorists and others who may have no interest in talking with us as diverse, valued, and respected others?

One topic that I have not mentioned today regards my subject matter of religion and war and violence and of how we can uphold Gandhi-informed ideals and values, while still relating effectively to terrorists and others violently promoting extreme anti-Gandhian views. Although it surprises some dogmatic admirers of Gandhi, he says that there are some times where no nonviolent responses, religious or non-religious, are meaningful effective options. More than 95 percent of the time when religions and non-religions are violent, we have nonviolent options. But there are cases where there is no nonviolent option that can be effective in resisting and overcoming the violence. And so, Gandhi does allow, even reluctantly, for violent responses. This is how I interpret Gandhi-informed responses to 9/11 terrorism in New York, 26/11 terrorism in Mumbai, and many other cases, where the most nonviolent thing you can do is to use force, even

violent force. Gandhi even has passages where killing can count as *ahimsa*. Gandhi says this because that may be the most nonviolent approach you have in responding to life-threatening menacing monkeys, to rabid dogs, to mad persons actively killing others, to rapists engaged in raping victims, and more.

Nevertheless, unlike most proponents justifying violence, Gandhi tells us to never glorify the violence, even when it is permitted and necessary. What you do is not moral. It is tragic, not glorious, and reveals human failure. Because Gandhi always upholds the absolute value and ideal of *ahimsa*, he tells us to minimize the necessary violence in its intensity, duration, and extent in order to stop the greater violence. Then do everything in Gandhi-informed ways to change the contexts, the variables, the structures and relations so that you don't become trapped in endless vicious cycles of violence and terrorism. So that's some response on the subject matter of the question.

I won't say much about the very insightful comments about how increasingly state-based persecution of citizens is used to bring about a more homogenous population. Now you have noted the obvious examples, such as in Iran right now, in Israel right now, especially with its new extreme right-wing government, in Palestine, in the Middle East, and we can give all kinds of examples from throughout the world. But it's also true for me about what's happening in India, where the national, state, and local governments are aggressively and violently persecuting Indian citizens in order to promote and bring about a more homogeneous Hindu/Hindutva population. This is also what is happening in my own United States right now and in other countries that like to say, well, we're democratic, we're pluralistic, but they're using state-based control, domination, and persecution of large sectors of the population in order to achieve their goals of greater homogeneity and domination.

So we have to understand how state-based persecution is being used to achieve more homogenous populations and what a dangerous threat this poses. That's a major threat in the United States today where the violent

agenda of grievances and persecutions includes changing laws to make it harder for Blacks, Indigenous People, and other “nonhomogeneous” citizens to vote or express their rights and freedoms. It includes drastically cutting the limited taxes on the super wealthy and the huge corporations, while cutting the programs that help the poor, workers, and the middle class. It includes the dominant state-based political forces, along with extreme conservative religious groups, changing education, texts, and curriculum so that students will not be exposed to books about oppressed minorities, slavery, racism, the genocide of indigenous people, homosexuals, transgender people, and more. This is now happening in the United States, with the goal of certain powerful forces and interests to create a more homogenous society expressing their nationalistic and global views, priorities, and values of what they express as “the true America.” Mahatma Gandhi, of course, would find this to be very dangerous, immoral, violent, and untruthful, just as he would respond to similar alarming developments in India and the world.

## **Interconnectedness of Life**

In my Gandhi-informed interpretation and selectively developed reinterpretation, Gandhi is very concerned with the interconnectedness of all life. Yes, we can find, in ancient Hindu and other Indian texts and spiritual orientations, philosophical and religious perspectives emphasizing the essential foundation of the harmonious unifying interconnectedness and oneness of all reality. Gandhi agrees with this essential foundation and claims that he can find it in all true religion. Gandhi agrees with the insight that when religions reject this essential unity and oneness, this has led and continues to result in divisiveness, intolerance, oppression, violence, and war.

Gandhi knows that there are many religions that disagree and believe that human beings are inherently evil. We are not essentially identical with or one with God or the ultimate religious reality. We’re not just imperfect; we are inherently evil. In such religions, that’s why we need a dominant God and religious institutional structures and practices that will control us and

prevent us from doing and being evil. Typically, if you persist in acting in an evil way, they will punish you. And throughout history, that punishment can be ostracism, excommunication, lynching, torturing, killing, and other violent enforcements. And India also has a long history of that, involving casteism, sexism, karmic impurity, and so much more. I say this while acknowledging that in my view, India's religious traditions have actually been comparatively more tolerant and nonviolent than most of the Western-centric religious traditions.

In my understanding of Gandhi's approach, with his belief in the unifying harmony and oneness of truth and reality and with his belief that human beings are basically good, Gandhi does not ignore or minimize the experiential reality that human beings often do extreme evil. Insightfully, he describes the strong force that is accessible to us, truthful, soulful, as love-force, force of compassion, force of service. This is the strongest force for Gandhi. Having said that, Gandhi is under no illusion. He says that socialized embodied human beings are driven by contradictory values and forces. We're a mixture of greater and lesser good and evil.

Therefore, it's not that people, who reject our essential unifying oneness and goodness and instead appeal to our violent aggressiveness, our fears and hatred and greed, our immoral untruthfulness, don't understand human beings. But they understand what Gandhi calls our lower nature, our less developed nature. Gandhi wants to tap into our higher nature, so that we can lessen our ego-defined perspectives, so as the respondent said, we can merge more in this unifying sense of the oneness of reality. Then we don't have to be so controlling or controlled, so dominating or dominated. For Gandhi, in our contextualized, relationally situated, limited mode of existing, this is a gradual struggle and transformational project. You don't just say to yourself and to others: "Just get rid of your ego and forget about your ego concerns, fears, and attachments to your grades, jobs, rewards and punishments." That is not contextually relevant and effective.

Instead, Gandhi advises us how to lessen the force of our constructed and driven egos and to act to change that balance. So, in more non-egoistic

ways, we voluntarily become more self-determining and self-empowering; we don't have to be so forced, controlled, and dominated. This is how we develop our self-rule, our religious and political and ethical realization of swaraj. This, for example, is how we are able to recognize and give unto ourselves the Golden Rule. When we perform service to meet the needs of others, we don't feel that we've sacrificed our self in narrow egoistic ways. Only by sacrificing our ego, in fact, are we really fulfilled. This is a more meaningful way of realizing the true self. The mind is integrally and harmoniously interconnected and unified with the body and with the whole spiritual self. This is how we realize our self in the most developed way.

So this is Gandhi's challenge. As Gandhi often says, too many students and other youth, too many citizens, and too many human beings universally are constantly living under fear. Not just physical fear that they'll be attacked, raped, shot, or victims of religious and nonreligious war and violence. They live daily lives dominated by psychological fear, social fear, cultural fear, patriarchal fear. They fear that if they speak up at the job or in class or in the community, they'll be shamed, regarded as stupid, or worse. So it's better to censor myself and not to say anything. And we live our whole lives under insecurity and fear. So for Gandhi, this is a major part of how we deal with the questions that have been raised. Gandhi thus insightfully instructs us that a key part of how we develop and realize our deeper moral and spiritual self is to lessen and transform our dominant attachment to our ego and that is how we can overcome our worldly fear. That is how we can become more self-empowering, more constructively engaged with others, the world, nature, and the cosmos, and better realize the harmonious unity and oneness of reality. And that's a Gandhi-informed legacy that challenges us to develop and flourish in contemporary India, the USA, and the world.

## **-About the Author**

Douglas Allen served as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Maine, USA, for 46 years (1974-2020) and became Professor Emeritus of Philosophy in September 2020. He served as Chairperson of the Department of Philosophy (1979-1982, 1998- 2003) and as the President of the international Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy (2001-2004) and now is the Editor of the Lexington Books Series of Studies in Comparative Philosophy and Religion.