Leaving Egypt: *Satyagraha* echoes in Jan Assmann's *Religio Duplex*

 -by Soledad Sofia Merlo
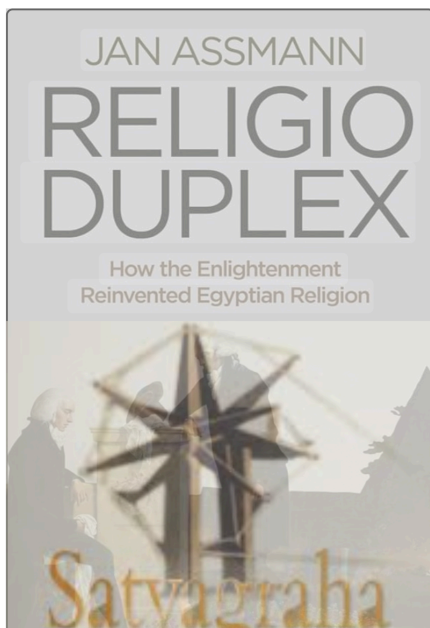
Abstract

Moses never physically entered Israel, but his words did. He understood that the conquest of Israel transcended geography; it symbolised ethical and religious

independence. This narrative depicts seemingly powerless people transformed into a formidable force. Moses recognised that power could reshape both the external world and the internal landscape. His mission was to build a resilient and compassionate nation where religion served not as a means of control but as a channel for individuals to express their influence and values. Taking a cue from Jan Assmann's analysis of the Mosaic distinction and his subsequent exploration in *'Religio Duplex': How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion*, this essay will draw parallels with Gandhi's concept of "Religion with a capital R." The objective is to examine how Assmann's 'archaeological' reflection on the origins of violence in monotheisms leads him to consider Gandhi's example in *Religio Duplex*. The essay will explore how Assmann references Gandhi in his work, why Gandhi is deemed a significant figure in Assmann's historical and philosophical framework, and whether Gandhi can be seen as an interlocutor in Assmann's thought. The research proposes that the convergence of these perspectives signifies a call to action for the future—a genuine "exodus from Egypt" towards the "Promised Land" envisioned by Gandhi in the context of a "religion of humanity".

"If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty."

(M. K. Gandhi)[1]

1. Assmann's Mosaic Theory

The core of Assmann's theory revolves around the concept of the "Mosaic distinction." This term denotes the covenant of fidelity established between Moses' people and God, an event that, Assmann argues, introduces monotheistic religion into the realm of violence. Rather than offering a radical critique of religions, Assmann's research seeks to understand them as unfolding historical phenomena, reconstructing their organic development over time. His perspective explicitly aims to promote collaboration among faiths, a collaboration deemed increasingly necessary in light of contemporary challenges. Indeed, monotheistic traditions grapple with a significant discomfort regarding their history of bloodshed and

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[1] *Young India,* Sept. 2, 1927

violence.[2] Assmann meticulously explores the intricate processes through which religious identities are formed, maintained and transformed. This exploration provides a robust academic foundation for Gandhi's theory, as recognising past violence and the commitment to overcoming it are essential steps in the journey towards interfaith collaboration and the shift from conflict to dialogue.

1.2   Historical context

The genesis of this striking and unexpected theology of distinction within Judaism can be traced back to specific historical motivations. The distinct Judaic theology emerged during a period of political uncertainty, marked by traumatic events such as the fall of the Northern Kingdom (722 BCE), the religious reforms of King Josiah (648-609 BCE), the Babylonian exile, and the subsequent return of exiles under the Persian king Cyrus II. According to Assmann, during the Exile, the Jews perceived the failure of the Kingdom of Judah as a divine punishment. They began to adopt a more spiritual and rigid form of monotheism. Traditional forms of worship, which required a temple that no longer existed, were replaced by a focus on adherence to God's law and justice. The Jewish religion took on more intimate traits, with religious practices such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and purity laws governing daily life. Even after their return to Jerusalem, the conditions of exclusive monotheism persisted. The barrier or boundary between God and man, and between ritual and daily life, was eliminated, making the life of the faithful, as described in Exodus,[3] Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the highest form of worship.[4]

1.3   Truth-functionality and a new form of religious subjectivity

Truth-functionality—the differentiation between true and false, pure and impure—established a clear boundary between authentic faith and what was consequently regarded as idolatry. The outcome of this radical shift was the

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[2] E. Colagrossi (2016), *Il disagio dei monoteismi. Sentieri teorici e autobiografici,* Morcelliana, Brescia

[3] Ex 19, 6; Ex 20,3.

[4] J. Assmann (2015), *Exodus. Die Revolution der Alten Welt,* C.H. Beck, München

removal of violence from the realm of sacrifice, integrating it into the believer's everyday life. This process peaked during the reforms of King Josiah, which Jan Assmann describes as the first radical-puritan operation known to have taken place in history.[5] Unlike its contemporary religions, Jewish monotheism possessed a remarkable feature: each believer stood (and stands) as an individual before the omniscient gaze of God, bound to him intimately. Simultaneously, as part of a "collective self",[6] the believers bore a broader moral burden due to their membership in (and belonging to) the Jewish community. This gave rise to a new form of subjectivity absent in traditional religions. In these traditions, there was no room for repentance for straying from the path, which would require a "conversion" back to the right path. Furthermore, traditional religion did not distinguish between truth and falsehood; in fact, what happened to the Jews represents an extraordinary anomaly in history. The biblical narrative repeatedly portrays combat against idols and falsehoods through spiritual and tangible means. Consequently, the "monolatry of truth" became closely intertwined with the relationship between religion and violence.

1.4 A new dichotomy in the history of religions: "monolatry of fidelity" and "monolatry of truth"

The main critical distinction in Assmann's theory involves the "monolatry of fidelity" and the "monolatry of truth." This dichotomy represents the initial steps toward religious intolerance and highlights the pivotal moment in Israel's religious history, marked by the Mosaic distinction. The exclusive covenant with YHWH[7] contrasts sharply with ancient ethnic religions, which, despite sharing socio-political origins, lack the friend-enemy distinction inherent to this new form of monotheism. Assmann uses the term "monolatry of fidelity" to describe the theology of the covenant with God, particularly emphasised in the Book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic tradition within the Torah. This concept is exemplified by the commandment, "You

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[5] J. Assmann (2016), *Totale Religion. Ursprünge und Formen puritanischer Verschärfung*, Wien, Picus

[6] J. Assmann (2010), *Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory*, in: Assmann – Conrad (ed.), *Memory in a Global Age Discourses*, p. 121-137

[7] The Hebrew word for God (Yodh, Heh, Waw, and Heh).

shall have no other gods before me," which is central to the Decalogue. These commandments, resulting from the covenant between God and His people, demand adherence to divine law. God liberated the Israelites from Egypt, and in return, He expects their unwavering fidelity. However, this claim is not universal but specific to the chosen people rather than all humanity. This complexity arises when categorising Judaism, which combines both ethnic and universalistic elements. The term "fidelity" provides insight into the distinctions between the monolatry of fidelity and the monolatry of truth, revealing their nuanced hermeneutical differences.

2. Engaging with Gandhi: Assmann's Philosophical Counterpart[8]

The *archai* identified by Assmann in his studies facilitate mutual communication among various faiths, enabling them to recognise both their uniqueness—due to their distinct historical singularity—and their pluralism, as multiple expressions of the same underlying truth. Intellectuals whom he refers to as "theorists of religio duplex" are primarily located in Ancient Egypt, within the context of what Assmann terms "Greek Egyptology," or the Platonic dualism of the sensible and intelligible. This concept then transitioned to Europe through Roman assimilation. The notion of "religio duplex", or "double religion", extends into the Middle Ages, notably through figures such as Moses Maimonides. It continued through the Renaissance with thinkers like Nicholas of Cusa, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and John Locke, and reached the Enlightenment with Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, eventually culminating in Gandhi's thought. Gandhi represents a significant synthesis of previous examples of tolerance and dialogue. According to this perspective, historical religions are seen as doctrinal divergences that cannot be considered superior to one another due to their lesser status compared to the absolute Truth. This view does not fall into relativism; instead, it fosters a form of perspectivism, recognising that our vision is limited in the face of the absolute vision of God.

2.1 Complementarity of religions

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[8] See also A. Vigilante (2009), *Il Dio di Gandhi. Religione, etica e politica*, Levante Editori, Bari.

In Jan Assmann's analysis, Gandhi occupies a distinctive role in the context of the "religio duplex" in the modern globalisation era. Gandhi differentiates between historical religions—such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—and a higher, ultimate religion of Truth, to which all these traditions aspire. This dual framework, established by Gandhi, reflects a belief in an overarching truth that transcends individual religious expressions.

According to Gandhi, historical religions are various manifestations of a singular, unseen, and original Truth. They are seen as diverse pathways converging towards the same divine reality. Each sacred text, within this framework, is viewed as a unique and valuable path towards understanding this ultimate Truth. Gandhi's perspective emphasises that religion is not merely about following formal rituals or traditions but is about engaging with the fundamental essence shared by all religions. According to Gandhi, this essence guides humanity towards a direct encounter with the Creator. However, this does not imply a descent into syncretism – an accusation also directed at Assmann. According to Gandhi, historical religions bear the imperfections of human influence and cannot claim to be perfect: he considers each of them only "more or less true". In fact, only God possesses the attribute of perfection, which remains beyond translation or definition. The pursuit of unity is a central point shared by both Assmann and Gandhi; it represents the pathway for establishing a communicative agora[9] between religions, thereby escaping the cycle of religious violence. Indeed, subordinating historical religions to this universal Religion. Every historical religion can promote peaceful coexistence by recognising shared values and seeking common ground, allowing us to build a communicative bridge between them. Rather than translating them into each other, engaging them in an active and fruitful dialogue is possible. Recognising shared values and seeking common ground, every historical religion can promote peaceful coexistence. This does not imply that historical religions are inherently flawed and should be replaced by a single, overarching "Religion" that supersedes all others; such a replacement would be counterproductive to a dialogue that seeks to preserve and celebrate diversity. Instead, the aim is to make religions distinct from

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[9] A gathering place, the marketplace in ancient Greece.

one another through a genuine process of 'archaeological' excavation—understood as a search for their origins—to uncover the shared essence of each. For Gandhi, every positive religious experience becomes a form of universal orthopraxy, as he believed that religious violence arises not from the essence of religions but from their theological and political distortions. Only by distinguishing these layers can authentic interreligious dialogue flourish.[10]

2.2. For a universal orthopraxis: ethics and religion cannot be divided

Religion without ethics collapses and proves fallacious; ethics is nourished by religion and *vice versa*. Gandhi, like Assmann, is not interested in an accommodating soteriological perspective but rather in a universal ethical theory, empirically traceable in the sacred texts of every religion. There can be no religion without ethics, nor is there ethics without religion. In this sense, God is not an exclusive father: all faiths have some truth value, confirmed, in quasi-Kantian manner, by the court of moral reason. It was, in fact, the reading of the New Testament that connected Gandhi to the heart of the Christian religion and made him understand the purity of the message, which he could also relate to his beloved *Bhagavadgītā*, a Hindu religious text of great cultural resonance in India and beyond. As Gandhi states in *Ethical Religion*:

"So long as the seed of morality is not watered by religion, it cannot sprout. Without water it withers and ultimately perishes. Thus it will be seen that true or ideal morality ought to include true religion. To put the same thought differently, morality cannot be observed without religion. That is to say, morality should be observed as a religion. "[11]

According to Gandhi, a religion that seeks to resolve conflicts through non-violent methods must undertake a radical reform of its traditional religiosity, which has

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[10] E. Colagrossi (2018), *Sviluppi recenti del pensiero di Jan Assmann tra Religione totale e Religio duplex*, L'indice dei libri del mese 35/2, p. 7.
[11] M. K. Gandhi (1968), *Ethical Religion*, Jitendra T. Desai, p. 18

historically been closely linked to war and conflicts between different religions: this fact is illustrated in a striking and vivid manner in the Old Testament. The prerequisites for adopting *ahimsa* include, in addition to the importance of orthopraxy over orthodoxy, the search for the self as the foundation of spiritual and religious life and the harmonisation between conscience (what Gandhi calls "the silent voice") and reason. Additionally, it is necessary to re-read the sacred texts of one's religion, particularly the iconic *Bhagavadgītā*, and to interpret them in the context of modern times. Finally, a new ethic, arising from the attention to orthopraxy and the practice of nonviolence, must be extended also to resolving social conflicts, such as the removal of "untouchability"[12] and the rejection of the practice of *sati*. This ethic is the genuine traditional one, particularly the commandment "Thou shalt not kill",[13] Even though Western politics has for centuries theorised on the necessity of wars, perpetuated with other peoples and, in internal political life, the separation of ethics from decisions regarding populations (which is a form of more-or-less veiled Machiavellianism).

On the other hand, Jan Assmann's reflection sheds light on the concept of identity and its formation: During the period of the Mosaic distinction, the Jewish people underwent a revolutionary "cultural leap" that significantly impacted monotheism. As highlighted, this transformation coincided with a puritanical intensification—a self-contained stance asserting a distinct identity separate from other cultures. The truth-functionality observed in theological contexts similarly manifests in cultural separation: the fear of contamination led to the Jewish community closing itself off. Cultural memory ensures that the collective identity is preserved and transmitted across generations, emphasising the importance of historical experiences and collective memory shaping religious identity.

2.3 Identity and alterity: "discovering God in Egypt"

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[12] The word "untouchables" refers to the inclusion and recognition of the Dalits, who are considered the lowest caste in the traditional Hindu caste system. The rejection of the practice of sati, furthermore, refers to the abolition of the historical Hindu practice where a widow would immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

[13] *Exodus* 20:13

Assmann's theses reveal a historical testimony: identity cannot exist without reference to the other. Identity defines itself through subtraction (*via negationis*). While defining the boundaries (*limes*) is essential for any entity, acknowledging the interplay between alterity and identity is equally crucial. Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari[14] notes that the different 'other' and the stranger are often seen as constituting a "contagious disease." However, the dream of an identical identity that doesn't require external boundaries is fallacious; it doesn't align with reality. Expelling the 'other' and 'diversity' in the process of identity clarification (*elimination*) creates a sterile prison, whereas true contamination leads to fertilisation. Major cultural shifts often involved violent encounters with external cultures (such as the assimilation of Christianity into the Roman Empire through Judaism or the fall of Constantinople in 1452, which introduced diversity to Europe and sparked fruitful interreligious dialogues).[15] As Elisabetta Colagrossi underlines,

> "*Discovering God in Egypt* in this sense means to discover the double, the alterity inside the identity. Assmann's research allows us to think about the origin as a space coloured by different tonalities, far from the purity of an uncontaminated and ideologically built identity."[16]

From this perspective, the importance of personal religious experience is highlighted: Assmann's "archaeological move" reveals that, given that the Scriptures do not hold an exclusive and absolute truth, religions must be tested by the orthopraxy of the individual. As Gandhi himself states, his own life experience is a story of experiments with Truth:[17] indeed, according to him, "the essence of religion is morality".[18]

3. Religion as an antidote

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[14] M. Cacciari (2000), *Nomi di luogo: confine,* in "Aut-Aut", pp. 73-79

[15] See also E. Colagrossi (2020), *Monoteismi in questione. Il pensiero di Jan Assmann tra indagine genealogica e* religio duplex, Brescia, Morcelliana

[16] E. Colagrossi (2022), *Colligere fragmenta Jan Assmann and Interreligious Dialogue*, RevSR 96/4, p. 375-391.

[17] M. K. Gandhi (1958), *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, in *The collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Publications Division, Government of India, New Delhi, vol. 39, pp. 1-402.

[18] M. K. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, cit., vol. 39, p. 3 in D. Conrad, *Gandhi*, cit., p. 58, footnote 128.

In today's religious landscape, and in line with Gandhi, the challenge lies in emphasising the role of religion as promoting "the renunciation of all forms of violence" and as an agent of civilisation and humanisation, using its own means rather than relying solely on political mechanisms. In this regard, Jan Assmann posits that religion serves as an antidote to violence that has "escaped" the sacred boundaries. This violence results from discomfort and a misunderstanding of religion's role, for in reality, every religion converges toward a fundamental ethical core—the pursuit of peace. When violence is religiously legitimised, this fact undermines the very essence of religion. Analysing the underlying causes of the transformation in religious perception, which facilitated its association with violence, constitutes the task of contemporary intellectuals, historians, philosophers, educators, and anyone involved in shaping collective understanding. Their mission is to educate for peace, replacing the binary "either/or" within religion with an inclusive "both/and"—a principle of peace and tolerance.

Navigating the challenge of transcending a particular religion without undermining it is a complex issue. While the philosophy of interreligious dialogue is undeniably essential, as affirmed by the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, it requires careful consideration. The existential and faith experiences of others can offer valuable insights into one's own spiritual journey, whether past, present, or absent. However, there is a boundary that, once crossed, risks creating a "universal religion" that, in its attempt to unify, fails to respect the inherent differences. This risk is especially pronounced in the Abrahamic religions, the religions of the Book, which claim divine Revelation, particularly Christianity, which professes "one way, one truth, and one life."[19] Even Eastern religions, which tend to be more inclusivist due to their distinct categorical frameworks, are not immune to this dilemma. Comparing the Christian or biblical God to Hindu deities, for example, may be perceived as a betrayal or, at the very least, as a form of inauthenticity. Yet, this is not what Gandhi's philosophy or Assmann's theory are about: according to both, it is necessary for each religion to seek its own path to the universal; Christianity has begun this journey, and other religions will also have to face it. The "lowest common

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[19] *John* 14:6.

denominator theory," which is the idea of finding the most basic, minimal set of beliefs or values that different religions can agree upon, is not possible anymore; rather, philosophers and theologians must follow the path of *polemos*, in the exaltation of differences. The German philosopher, theologian and biblical scholar Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) had already rejected the idea of "natural religion", asserting the importance of historically engaging with religious particularism. Although Jan Assmann's work does not provide specific evidence of direct citations of Schleiermacher, their discussions on religious pluralism and the evolution of religious thought may intersect. The concept of "cultural memory", which examines how societies remember and reinterpret their religious past, resonates with Schleiermacher's idea on the historical development of religious beliefs. Both scholars acknowledge that historical experiences and collective memory shape religious identity. Furthermore, Schleiermacher's hermeneutical approach to interpreting religious texts finds a parallel in Assmann's analysis and in Gandhi's theory on how sacred texts are re-read and re-interpreted over time to address the needs of contemporary society.

3.1 Conclusion: Against hermeneutic violence: unique paths to the invisible Truth

This brief contribution has focused on Jan Assmann's reflection regarding the role of the Mosaic distinction in the historical impact on both religious and political fields, with particular attention to Gandhi's pivotal role. Assmann highlights the moment in history when violence and biblical monotheism became intertwined, a juncture that delegitimises intolerance toward other religions. Monotheistic traditions, asserting themselves as exclusive possessors of theological truth, led to both spiritual and physical violence. This profound shift represents a political and cultural choice, distinct from the context of ancient religions, which often coexisted without claims of exclusive truth.

Jan Assmann seeks to shed light on this pivotal historical insight, re-evaluating it through a historical-critical lens to mitigate the semantic volatility that perpetually looms. He argues that when even the Sacred Scriptures are subjected to

hermeneutic violence – such as using them to justify war or violence, imputing religious motives – the result is essentially a "war of words", echoing Erasmus of Rotterdam's sentiments in his renowned work *In Praise of Folly* (chap. 52), where he cautions against extracting densely significant religious expressions from their historical and social context.

According to Gandhi, there exists an underlying truth which transcends individual and historical religions and that unites all faiths. Therefore, according to him, individuals can belong to both historical religions and the ultimate true one: they are not mutually exclusive but complement each other. Satyagraha plays a central role in this context, or "truth force", which inherently coincides with "being true". For Gandhi, there is nothing in reality other than truth; it transcends the mere function of propositions, as it is regarded as the most important name of God. Gandhi posited a deeper reflection would lead one to realise that *Satya* is the most significant name of God. This profound understanding underscores the essence of truth as the foundation of existence itself. Consequently, Gandhi believed that truth is synonymous with God. This perspective aligns with the true "Pauline task"[20] of today, which Aldo Capitini considered an even broader mission than that of Saint Paul. As Gandhi sees it, the challenge lies in embracing and actualising this principle in every aspect of life, fostering a more profound and authentic connection with the divine. In this respect, Gandhi calls for a radical transformation in how people perceive and live ethical commitments, inseparable from every other aspect of life, emphasising the integral role of truth in shaping a just society. In short, Gandhi linked spiritual truth with social justice.

To conclude, the profound connection between Gandhi and Assmann lies in their shared belief that each sacred text and religious practice represents a unique path toward the same invisible truth. Gandhi advocates for harmonising these paths, moving beyond rigid formalism or tradition. Both thinkers emphasise the importance of transcending dogma and embracing a more fluid understanding of spirituality. This inclusive approach encourages religious communities to seek common ground

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[20] This assertion is from Aldo Capitini, an influential Italian philosopher and political activist who adopted for the first time in Italy Mahatma Gandhi's theories of nonviolence, earning the nickname "the Italian Gandhi". A. Capitini (1964), *Religione aperta*, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, p. 308

in peace and tolerance. Thus, Their teachings offer a timeless and universal message that continues to guide humanity.

This vision represents what Assmann, Gandhi, and others might describe as the actual "exodus from Egypt"—a metaphor for leading humanity toward a Promised Land of peace and tolerance.

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-About the Author

Soledad Sofia Merlo is pursuing a Master's in Philosophical Methodologies at the University of Genoa, specialising in the historical-theoretical curriculum. Her academic focus includes history of religions, philosophy of interreligious dialogue and theology. Her research interests span post-conciliar theology, history of Catholicism and patristics. She places particular emphasis on the works of Jan Assmann, Joseph Ratzinger and Jean Delumeau.

E-mail: soledad.merlo@yahoo.it