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Religion, Morality And Politics In Gandhi

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Gandhi's life and thought shows a self-conscious inability to separate religion and morality from the political. There is in Gandhi a frequent and constant overlap and interchange of religious and moral terminology, both in the domain of politics and the freedom struggle. I believe that the relationship of religion and morality to politics was a well thought out and central Gandhian thesis. In Gandhi's understanding, it appears that religion, understood correctly, is inseparable from morality and that an ethico-religious insight must inform all of man's political activity. The centrality of this claim does not, by itself, confer clarity to Gandhian thought. Frequently, Gandhi's religious fervour is seen as the tactics of a political leader. Thus, his contemporaries often criticized him for being 'slippery' and using the religious factor as a superb political tactician. In much of the debate, the essential moral core of his position remains completely ignored and unarticulated. Thus philosophers tend to largely disregard Gandhian moral notions as utterances of a moralist who is uninterested in, or incapable of, philosophical reflection about morality. This is primarily due to the distinction made between philosophical reflection about morality and moral practice itself. In twentieth century analytic philosophy, this distinction attained the status of almost being a basic unquestionable fact about the nature of philosophical thought. Moral philosophy was supposed to be a second order intellectual activity which itself was morally 'neutral'. Its purpose was to reflect on first-order moral activity with a view to uncovering the 'logic' of such activity. This act of uncovering is purely intellectual and not part of what may be called the practical engagement of the moral life. That this distinction itself has an important line of argumentation against it, from within the tradition of moral philosophy, is evidenced in the work of Aristotle. Aristotle's notion of 'phronesis' or practical episteme is a clear rejection of this twentieth century view; and Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition of philosophical thought is a central strain of Western philosophical thought. However to come to the point at issue, the Gandhian thesis of

the dynamic unity between religion, morality and politics and his practical engagement with the political life as a supreme moral and religious endeavour, enforced the distinction and led to the neglect of his moral ideas, by professional philosophers. The thesis also shrouded his moral ideas in a mist of religious notions and seemed to obscure them for want of a clear understanding of his position.

Further Gandhi's conception of politics and engagement with the political life becomes confused and problematic to the purely political. Thus leave aside opponents, even Gandhi's friends like the Nehrus, were often bewildered by his stubborn ethico-religious stance in political matters. He completely confused the other national political leaders with his moral and religious arguments. During his *satyagrahas*, for example, Gandhi was engaged in what appeared to be mass political action. Yet, he prepared himself and others for the action by ethico-religious discipline including fasting and observance of the vow of silence. Further, he made a study of the issue at hand in the greatest detail to assure himself that righteousness and virtue were to be defended. He kept himself open and flexible to new elements which emerged in the course of the movements, was ever ready to change his stance on being morally convinced by his opponents. Again, he was stubbornly untractable if he was convinced of the moral uprightness of the issue at hand. These factors made Gandhi extremely unpredictable to his political colleagues for he listened to none but what he called his 'inner voice'.

To put it differently, Gandhi was alive to the complexity and indeterminacy of the life of goodness and of the vulnerability of the moral life. He showed this insight during his political action, being ever open to respond to new factors and understandings from within an authentic moral way of life. This, in political terms, translated into much unpredictability: a tendency to shift stance, to call off plans of action overnight and without consultation with other members of the Congress Working Committee and making compromises with opponents like the British Government when his moral insights dictated so to him. Obviously, this made Gandhian politics terribly enigmatic and irritating to his purely political colleagues just as it has been obscurantist, and confusing to the purely political analyst.

The importance of understanding Gandhi's conception of the dynamic unity between religion, morality and politics therefore becomes urgent. To begin with, Gandhian thought is grounded in a basic moral vision or moral sense of the world. Thus, one way we might begin to understand this thesis is by arguing that politics morality and religion

are inalienably interlinked, for the bedrock is the moral enterprise. Religion correctly understood is inseparable from morality. It is a culture-specific articulation of a community's moral sense of the world and it's spiritual experiments in order to internalize that moral vision. Thus morality can, in turn, comfortably articulate itself in religious and spiritual terminology. Politics is an extension of individual lives, it is the very condition of making possible the good life for its citizens. Politics then, as one very important form of human activity, must be part of the individual's moral enterprise. It must, therefore, again be grounded in morality. This leads to what I consider the central Gandhian thesis, namely, that religion is inseparable from morality which in turn must inform all of man's political activity.

However, an attempt to argue for an explication of the relationship between religion, morality and politics in the Gandhian framework assumes that Gandhi has a particular kind of understanding of religion, and of the relation between morality and religion. It also assumes that Gandhi has a conceptual understanding of politics which allows for the use of religious and ethical terminology.

The paper consists of three sections. In the first section, I will attempt to construct and articulate one kind of understanding of the predominant modern notion of politics. In contrast it will state briefly some elements in the traditional Indian conception of man, society and politics. The purpose is to show the opposition between the two understandings, as also, to try and establish an affinity between the Gandhian conception and the traditional Indian notion of man, society and politics. In the second section, I will attempt to argue that on a certain conception of the Hindu tradition it can theoretically accommodate Gandhi's idea of religion and morality. This is important as the central enterprise here is to argue that given a certain understanding of religion and morality, it is possible to explicate the relationship between religion, morality and politics, as articulated in Gandhi. The last section suggests that given that Gandhi had available to him the traditional Indian notion of politics and a particular kind of understanding of religion and morality from within the Hindu tradition, his central thesis which powerfully relates religion, morality and politics finds one plausible explanation.

I

There have been different conceptions of politics and the political in western thought. Western political thought divides itself into distinct

schools like conservatism, authoritarian idealism, different forms of anarchism, liberal democratic theory and so on. Each political theory formulates its own unique conception of the political sphere and the state. The theories differ widely in the role assigned to historical experience and established institutions; in the belief in the powers of individual reason and will. They have very varied conceptions of administration, of governance and of political progress. They however, agree in assigning an ethical and political priority to the 'ends' or goals which each theory emphasizes. Western political thought has, therefore, usually been content with the treatment of means as an abstract method, on the one hand, or as social and political machinery on the other. One result of this tendency has been to foster a rudimentary ethical utilitarianism about means in politics.

A discussion of the predominant modern notion of politics however bypasses the vast differences in ideological commitments of western schools of political thought, for all western political thought is cast in the same civilizational mode defined by modernity. Therefore, the differences and arguments fall within the same metalanguage of modern western civilization. The schools of western political thought speak the same language and share a civilization. Their opposition and debate therefore falls within the broad commitments and general framework provided by modernity. At this stage it is important to try and clarify, even if briefly, the concept of modernity. Ultimately rooted in Graeco-Roman Judaic civilization, modernization as a process of change was indigenous to the west. Hence, the constant overlap between the terms modern and western. As Edward Shils puts it being modern means being western without the onus of dependence on the west.[1] Though there is no consensus among social scientists on any single theoretical formulation of modernity it can be safely suggested that the predominant modern paradigm of man and society is, what has been termed, as 'anthropocentric humanism' by Dante Germino. This is a humanist, individualist, anthropocentric and utilitarian conception of man and society. As mentioned earlier, modern politics took its birth in the west, when a shift in world view occurred in Europe in the seventeenth century. This was a shift rejecting all earlier world views that placed man as a small but integral part of a larger conceptual order and made a distinction between a life completely devoted to satisfying ordinary needs and a life given to actualizing certain higher purpose. Whether this be the search, for truth, reality and meaning, the grace of God, religious salvation, the 'telos' of Aristotle etc. True, man must cater to his ordinary human needs in order to survive, yet such a life was

considered incomplete and imperfect. A good life—a complete and perfect life—is one in which life's activities are grounded in, and informed by, the pursuit of a higher purpose. This is possible only when man relates himself to a larger, conceptual order or holds the virtuous life as an end in itself. On this view, man is not a self-sufficient and self-complete subject who defines for himself his ends and selects means to realize them. It is the larger order that is the locus of norms and values that shape man's ideas, customs and institutions or it is the virtuous life that is the ultimate value.

The anthropocentric conception of the world had important consequences. There was a denial of a transhuman anchor for grounding the search for reality and truth, such a search focused on man himself yielding what Iris Murdoch calls, 'broken totality'. That 'man' was interpreted and understood purely in body-centered materialistic terms. His goals were also those of material well-being. Thus virtue, as an intrinsic value in itself, was lost. The goal of a virtuous life as fulfilling in itself could not make prudential or rational sense and was therefore not rational. There was denial of a higher purpose in life. The pursuit of happiness, subsequently identified with self-interest or the augmentation of fortune, through the satisfaction of desires, became the defining and organizing principle of man's life activities. Man had to have freedom to choose his own purposes (all in materialistic terms in order to be 'rational' pursuits). Gradually there was as emergence of man as a self-defining and self-sufficient subject whose uniqueness really lay in the power to plan and execute. However, the rest of the cosmos was reduced to the status of a means to such execution. There was an alienation from other men, beings, nature and the cosmos. Rationality became instrumental reason rather than the apprehension of the true nature of reality.[2] Though this is only one aspect of modernity it is important as it evidences the spirit and epistemological commitment of modernity.

It is in this view that the structures, practices and institutions of modern society are based. It is this view that sustains the modern liberal humanist view of politics. In this perspective society is viewed simply as an aggregate of autonomous self-defining subjects and is valued for its instrumental role in facilitating the realization of individual purposes. The point to note is that where society is a putting together of individuals each pursuing with freedom her self interest; it becomes a sort of a dynamic aggregate where there is constant readjustments of balance. Self-interest, the power to plan and achieve, and freedom-these are the values that emerge from the givens of society and nature.

The point is that within the structure of modernity and with the scientific conception of knowledge and rationality there remained no possibility of an independent commitment to value, whether religious or in terms of virtue for virtue's sake. There simply was no realm other than the given, and no standard of reference other than man. Even the avowed values of modernity like freedom, autonomy and equality, really had no theoretical room or independent existence within this structure. This was an anomaly of modernity, that within its meta-language, even its own-values (?) found no theoretical base. The relevance of this discussion, to Gandhi's central thesis (as in the powerful relation between religion, politics and morality) is simply that the Gandhian thesis presented a powerful alternative to the modern view.

The political order within such a framework of understanding (i.e. the modern view) is conceived to play a reactive and responsive role by functioning as an effective watch-dog, referee and arbitrator. There are, as mentioned earlier, no values which can ensure an independent commitment to society, to order, and to justice over and above individual self-interest. This creates the dilemma of modern politics, i.e. the dilemma between freedom and order, between interest and justice. Society lacks attributes either to instill civil values in individuals or to curb their egoistic tendencies. The responsibility for this falls on the political order. However, that order has no recourse to any value system either, beyond an appeal to the ideal of freedom. Thus it depends for its effectiveness on the appropriateness and legality of procedures. Moreover, no matter how legal the procedures may be, law-making needs must favour some rather than others. When this happens there are conflicts and there is no mode of conflict resolution available which can have recourse to values and a wider order. There have, of course, been valiant efforts in liberal humanism and by post-enlightenment philosophers to bring in value into the meta-language of civilization. Thus a non-spiritual foundation for ethics is elaborately worked out in Kant's moral philosophy (there is intrinsic value in 'duty for duty's sake') and more recently there have been the efforts of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. However, it is no exaggeration to say that these efforts notwithstanding, modern civilization does content itself with self-interest as the dominant motive and material well-being as the goal of human life. It therefore lends itself to a rudimentary utilitarian position. An important consequence is that there is a complete separation of religion from politics. Further that moral and ethical considerations do not find any platform or rational justification. Politics then is reduced to bargaining, and the only

acceptable mode of conflict resolution available to it is compromise that gradually reduces to a sort of barter. Thus Bondurant, speaking on liberal democratic theory, mentions compromise as a dynamic method of conflict resolution. However, as Bondurant argues, when compromise breaks down into barter or when the issues involved in a conflict do not lend themselves to settlement through the simple arts of accommodation the search for refinement in technique becomes crucial.[3] Refinement in technique is possible only if there is some standard of reference or value commitment in terms of which solutions can be found. This is not permissible in the meta-language of modernity which confines and defines the predominant modern notion of politics and gives it a scientific-utilitarian face.

From the analysis of modernity and its conception of man and politics it has emerged that Gandhi's vision of the political life as belonging firmly in the ethical and religious domains, was definitely in powerful contrast. Within the metalanguage of modernity, Gandhi's treatment of politics was extra-rational and to understand Gandhi at this point therefore one has to look beyond modernity. Beyond modernity, not towards what is called post-modernity but into the pre-modern past. Let us look therefore, very briefly, at the traditional Indian conception of politics as a precursor to Gandhi's own conception. Here politics and religion are not separated theoretically. Politics is still within the fold of the religious instinct. There is a strong platform for ethical arguments in law-making, as in administration of justice and maintenance of order. The traditional Indian thought locates collective life not in legality, but rather in morality and emphasizes the preservation of the structure of interdependence that evolves through division and specialization of functions. Hence the traditional division of occupational groupings i.e. the *varna-vyavastha.* Also in this vision, the cosmos itself is essentially a moral order. The substratum of existence manifests itself in particulars, constitutes the norm of being, and more generally, holds everything together.

The details of the philosophical anthropology obviously differ in the metaphysics of the different systems. However, the world has an ordered moral government as it is itself an expression of divine essence. This is evident in the concepts of *rta* and *dharma.* The Vedic concept of *rta* is that of a universal and eternal law. *Rta* represents the law, unity or rightness underlying the orderliness of the universe'.[4] The concept of *dharma* which later replaced *rta* is used in several widely different senses. However, the most general sense is provided by its root, *dhr* which signifies the action of maintaining, sustaining, or supporting.[5]

Applied to the universe, *dharma* signifies the eternal laws which maintain the world. The universe has an objective order inherent in the very nature of things. During the Vedic period the fundamental laws of the universe were identified with the laws of sacrifice and consequently *dharma* was the sacrificial act which maintains and even conditions the cosmic order. It must be noted, however, that the *Veda* makes a distinction between the mere performance of *yajna* and *yajna* as a means of spiritual transformation. The concept of *dharma*, then, is one that envelopes the moral world as much as the physical, and the norm of ritual becomes a norm of conduct. In external terms *dharma* is the action which, if it is conformable to the order of things, enables man to realize his destiny, sustains him in this life and assures his well-being after death. In internal terms *dharma* signifies the obligation binding upon every man who desires that his actions should bear fruit to submit himself to the laws which govern the universe and to direct his life in consequence. From here it is an easy step to the sense which '*dharma*' most frequently bears in the Indian texts. This is the totality of duties which bear upon the individual according to his status (*varna*) and the stage of life (*asrama*) at which he stands. He must conform to these if he is anxious about the hereafter. What is important from the point of view of the discussion here is that this morality is addressed to man in society. It is based on a belief in retribution for one's acts and on the operation of transmigration. Thus there is a wider order which is the standard of reference and man is not the center of things. Its foundations and its sanctions are religious, but it is essentially social in the sense that, in a social order visualized as one with the natural order, the individual who obeys its precepts performs a duty which is as much social as religious.

Another important point which had bearings on the traditional Indian conception of politics, is the fact that this notion of *dharma* is intimately linked with *yajna* or sacrifice which was the contribution of each individual to the divine order. The order of *dharma* as the law of living, can be maintained only when each person contributes in his own way to the preservation of that order. Actions that support the cosmos are characterized as sacrifices or *yajna*. The importance of *yajna* is strongly emphasized in the *Bhagavad Gita*. This notion is at complete variance with the spirit of modernity, for by definition it involves the transcendence of self-interest and identification with a wider reality. Such a social order will encompass a hierarchy of sacerdotal, royal and administrative powers and '... every function from that of the priest and the king down to that of potter and scavenger is literally a priesthood

and every operation a rite'.[6] This *varna-vyavastha*, then in spirit and intention signifies at once the division of labour, specialization and the coordination of functions for reciprocal need satisfaction. Gandhi had a deep sense of appreciation for the spirit of *yajna* as it was reflected in the institution of *varna-vyavastha*. At the same time, he was acutely aware of its terrible degeneration in Indian society.

In a society which is thus conceived, the whole social life and political order is immersed in religion and morality. The social divisions, functions, the different stages of life are all given ethical connotations. The ultimate source of values lies in the spiritual reality and salvation provides the overriding motive. The point I see here is that there is a structure, a master narrative as it were, within which ethical language and religious arguments make sense. In the classical Indian tradition then there are sufficient elements to provide for the construction of a world view in which the social order and the natural world are together linked up in a common ethical religious concern. Man in this world view is not exhaustively defined in materialistic terms but has definite relations to a wider natural order, those relations come eventually from their common source in a spiritual reality. As a consequence of such an understanding of man and society, politics becomes a part of the ethical and religious enterprise. Therefore the enforcer of order here, is not legislation, the state or self-interest in the sense of prudence, but religious and moral considerations (In the meta-language of modern civilization however, such arguments are incoherent and irrational). Given this background, it is understandable why the king in ancient India was not conceived as a law-maker. The concept of positive law in the sense of legislative act or judicial decisions, which govern men actually and imperatively in space and time, is absent in the Indian tradition. It has, instead relied on rules of conduct specific to a particular stage and station of life rather than relying exclusively on the constraints implicit in an external or physical sanction for the performance of life activities. And when the emphasis is on conduct the vitality of collective life depends on the performance of duties.[7] The point is well put by R. Lingat when he says that the Hindus relied on religious concepts peculiar to their world, and they taught people the rules of conduct which they ought to observe by reason of their conditions in society. It is from and amongst these rules, that the rules of law are to be found'.[8]

From the discussion it has emerged, that the traditional Indian conception of man and society is not anthropocentric, or individualistic. The constant frame of reference is a wider, in this case, specifically

ethico-religious order. The kind of contribution this made in terms of social and political order, is obvious from the fact that positive law in the sense of acts of legislation were not required by traditional societies. The concepts concretizing classical Indian political thought are cloistered around three different areas.[9] The first relates to the functions a polity is supposed to perform. The second relates to the question of what constitutes a polity, or what the elements are that are necessary to constitute a functioning political system. The third set of concepts relates to the problems of war and peace or to the relations which a polity can have with other polities. To begin with the second issue. The technical term used for describing the essential nature of what constitutes a polity is '*prakriti*'. It is supposed to consist of *svami, amatya mantri, pradhana mantri, mitra, kosa, rashtra, durga* and *bala.* To these are sometimes added *janapada, danda* and *pura.* The basic idea seems to be that the polity consists of the king, a chief executive, an advisory council along with a chief advisor, friends, a treasury, a kingdom, a fort and an army. Some thinkers add to this list the people or those who are ruled and for whose sake the ruling function is exercised.

To look now specifically and very briefly at the first issue, i.e. the function of the king as the head of the state. The theory of the function of the king is absent from the *Dharma Sutras* which mention only some elements of it. It takes an important place in the *Dharma Shastras* starting with the code of Manu, who moreover furnishes the most complete expression of it.[10] The *Dharma Shastras* envisage no other form of government than monarchy. Kingship is regarded as an institution necessary to the maintenance of the social order established by the creator for the good of creatures. Therefore, the gods gave the royal person the mission to protect the creatures and to give them, (as Yajnavalkya says), the guarantee of security (*abhaya-dana*). That mission and function is a *dharma* or a religious duty. Since each man's performance of his own duty, (*svadharma*) depends on the protection secured by the king, it is perfectly correct for the *Mahabharatha* to declare that all *dharmas* are comprised in the *raja-dharma* and that all have *raja-dharma* at their head. A point which brings out the traditional interdependence emphasized in Indian social and political thinking. More on this point later.

There are two associated elements in kingship, *ksatra* and *dharma.* The kingship: belonged to him who possessed *ksatra* i.e. the power to command. However *ksatra,* the foundation of all royalty, is associated in the Indian doctrine with *raja-dharma,* the totality of duties which

constitute the king's mission. *Dharma* as seen above is essentially a rule of interdependence founded on a hierarchy corresponding to the nature of things and necessary for the maintenance of the social order. The peculiar *dharma* of the king is the protection of his subjects. If he is free to act as he pleases without having to account to anyone for his acts, he acquires merit only when acting in conformity with his *dharma*. So in the ultimate analysis the destiny of the king depends on the way in which he has been able to protect his subjects. Further, the merits and sins of the king are measured by those of his subjects. It is because of the protection that he has afforded to them that they have been able to perform their duties; just as it is a fault in his kingship where they have sinned. This *dharma* of the king and his subjects links them both in a solidarity and common ethical religious concern. The king has the all important role of ensuring the conditions for the *dharma* of the common man. The political order, then, is responsible for the conditions of good living for the people. In, and through, the righteous performance of his duties, the political head also grows in his own moral and religious stature. As R. Lingat puts it, 'the real Indian formula to express that solidarity between king and subjects can best be stated thus : "the salvation of the king depends on his subjects, just as the salvation of the subjects depends on their king".'[11]

This point is important, from the standpoint of the present discussion on politics. It indicates sufficient elements in the classical Indian tradition which allow for a theoretical formulation of 'politics' as part of the ethical and religious domain. The purpose of kingship and that of *raja-dharma* is that the subjects should be able to perform their *dharma* and thereby ensure their own ethical well-being. Therefore, politics conceived theoretically has links with religion and morality. This conceptual connection defines man, society and politics in a manner which makes for an intimate practical connection between politics and religion and morality. That a strain of argumentation in the classical Indian tradition allows for the construction of such an conception of politics, shows that the emergence of Gandhian ideas within this tradition is not altogether a matter of surprise. I do not here wish to enter into a discussion of issues relating to power and administration implicit in the second and third problems raised earlier. That will be to stray too far afield from my main concern here which is to show the deep chasm between the predominant modern notion of politics and paradigm of man and society, and elements in the traditional Indian thinking on these matters. The reason for the discussion of the traditional Indian view of the political, is at one level,

to give an idea of the pre-modern non-anthropocentric conception of man and of politics. At another level it is to posit that conception as a precursor to Gandhian ideas.

The Gandhian opposition to modern conceptions of man, society and politics makes use, quite self-consciously of elements in the Indian tradition. It does this at a very primary level in its interlinking of the moral and religious with the political. Gandhi here evokes the idea of *yugadharma* and operates within the classical Indian conception of society and man. Gandhi's thought was in keeping with the pre-modern and traditional Indian conception of man as a part of a larger order, bound to a value system structured around the scheme of the *purusarthas* with the *varnas* and *asramas* to provide a social structure of interdependence. Further his attempt to reconcile in his political practice *karma* and *jnana* was an attempt to resolve the deep problematic at the heart of the Indian tradition. We have not yet had occasion to refer to one very important element in the traditional Indian conception of man, society and politics. This was the traditional debate between *karma* and *jnana*, between *dharma* and *moksa*. The problem was to reconcile the life of the householder with all its duties and obligations with that of the ascetic renouncer with no social or political obligations, who alone had access to the ultimate truth. The *Bhagavad Gita* makes an attempt at overcoming the problematic by bringing in the important ethics of *nishkama karma* or duty with detachment and equanimity. The predicament of choosing between a life of action and renunciation, between performing one's *dharma* and becoming an ascetic, was resolved by Shri Krishna in the *Gita* by the idea of renunciation in action. The Gandhian effort to integrate *dharma* with politics and social reconstruction, to translate the *yugadharma* into his constructive programme and to revive ancient Hindu categories like *dana* and *tapas* in political terms can really be seen as a creative return to the classical Indian traditional conception of politics and society. Further, his attempt to reconcile the problematic chasm between *karma* and *jnana* puts him in a continuity with that tradition itself. Here he tries to resolve an issue that was at the heart of the traditional Indian thinking about man and society.

I do not here endorse the view that there were no modern elements in Gandhian thought about politics or that his formulations were an unqualified retreat to the past. At the same time, I believe that the failure to locate Gandhi in the tradition that he self-consciously owned as his, will be to make a grave mistake. What I have attempted to do in this section is to articulate one kind of understanding of

modernity which focuses on the chasm it creates between politics and a wider ethico-religious order. In contrast there are elements in the classical Indian tradition which construct a world-view in which politics is a part of a basic ethico religious commitment which all men make to a wider spiritual order. Such a conception makes it possible to understand Gandhi's conception of politics and his constant appeal to religious and ethical categories while being engaged in political life. I am also convinced that Gandhi's particular thesis on the relationship between morality, politics and religion is primarily based on his understanding of the Hindu tradition. It would be proper now to address issues connected with the nature of the Hindu religious tradition and Gandhi's own relationship to it.

II

A word now about tradition. Modernity represents a vision basically western, that inculcates a secular rational scientific world-view, and a particular conception of knowledge—empirical, rational and disenchanted of spirituality. Further, it is a process; something that people and nations participate in and adopt as their own. In contrast, tradition (in the generally accepted sense) refers to the wisdom of past heritage, of settled habits, customs, attitudes and ways of life. A short discussion of tradition is merited here in order to bring out the essential features of the Hindu tradition.

By tradition is basically meant the sum total of all the ideas, habits and customs that belong to a people and are transmitted down from generation to generation. It has been described as social heritage, for its mode of operation closely resembles that of biological heredity. For it moulds actions and determines behaviour, and is essentially a principle of continuity that transmits to future ages the achievements of the past.[12] Three kinds of conception of tradition may be distinguished: the religious, the metaphysical and the sociological.[13] From the religious point of view, 'tradition' is the sum of values and norms which are transmitted from generation to generation. The source however is transcendent and tradition is integral and perennial. Witness the term *'Sanatan'* (perennial) as expressive of this character of the classical Indian tradition. More importantly, this means that the notion of change and innovation of tradition can be accepted only within certain fixed parameters determined by the system of beliefs and practices. To what extent a particular tradition is open to interpretation and change obviously depends on the tradition and the

rigidity or openness of its conceptual framework . For the *metaphysical conception* of tradition again, the source of the tradition remains transcendent as opposed to existential or social. However, that source is not a theistic world view but a rationalistic—often mechanistic and atheistic world-view. The *sociological* conception stresses continuity and conservation. Tradition is not a static but a dynamic integrative principle which subsists between the past heritage of man and his constantly changing future, as an assimilating principle.

One way of interpreting Gandhi's interlinking of religion, morality and politics (thus transforming politics into an ethico-religious domain), can be to understand it as a part of traditional philosophical thinking around certain basic themes such as the values of life, the basic ends of human existence, the ethical norms which are to be the standards for human life and the truth behind existence and the world. Gandhi's preoccupation with truth, non-violence, *sarvodaya*, *ram rajya* are all a part of a response within a rich intellectual and religious tradition to questions with which that tradition had always been concerned. What kind of response was this and what precisely is to be its location within that tradition.? Gandhi's religious interpretation of politics was, for instance, not a response like that of Savarkar or again like that of the Muslim League. Gandhi was not religious in the sense of being non-secular or committed to a Hindu State. Again he was not secular like Nehru with his socialist leanings.

At the very beginning then I must raise the crucial question, namely, what is the Hindu tradition? The Hindu religious tradition is a 'tradition' in the sense earlier defined. Thus it is a complex collection of norms, habits, customs from time immemorial which is constantly transmitted from generation to generation. As a religious tradition, it has a sense of transcendence based authority, a fixedness, a sense of pre-determination which means that change has to be in terms of interpretation and innovation within certain fixed parameters. However, what this means with regard to this tradition is very different from what meaning it takes on in, say, the Christian tradition.

'The term Hinduism as it is sometimes used is more a name for the whole cultural tradition of the Hindus than for beliefs which are narrowly religious'.[14] Unlike religions like Christianity or Islam, Hinduism cannot be located within any centralized body of canonical teaching. It is not associated with the sacred personage of any one founder. Therefore, it did not suddenly come into being, come into conflict with the then prevalent religious beliefs and override them. It developed over centuries of thought in which millions of men

contributed. It is a complex network of beliefs which are specifically religious in character, as also other beliefs and practices which are social in character. This, then, is the important difference between Hinduism and other religions like Christianity or Islam which were founded at a specific time in history and can, thus, be distinguished from the cultural ethos and practice preceding that time. Further, such religions being spread through preaching and propagation require institutional support which they gradually build up along with a clerical order. This prevents them frequently from having an organic relationship with the whole practice, culture and customs of that society. A religion which grows out gradually from a way of life has that organic relationship with the social, political and aesthetic aspects of life. This is the case with Hinduism, as is borne out by the absence of rigid clear cut distinctions between the religious and non-religious behaviour. All aspects of life are invested with a religious dimension.

Allegiance to the *Vedas* marks the pivotal point of 'the Hindu religious tradition' (rather than Hinduism). The four *Vedas* alone with the *Brahmanas, Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* are the foundation of Hindu religious beliefs. It is interesting and important from the standpoint of this discussion, that historically this tradition has always slowly assimilated and amalgamated beliefs which were distinct to it. Even the process of amalgamation which grew into Hinduism involved three distinct people—the Aryans, Dravidians and the tribal groups. Hinduism or the Hindu religious tradition is therefore diffused and open-ended. This is evident from the fact that the Vedic literature itself uses everywhere a multiplicity of approaches to the divine and to truth. This literature is the home of vastly different strands of religious thinking; also many Vedic assertions are open to multiplicity of interpretations. All this diversity exists without any theoretical confusion because the Hindu religious literature itself, at all points, admits a multiplicity of ways to the Divine and to salvation, depending ultimately, on the spiritual competence and inclination of the devotees.

It may be pointed out that the Hindu tradition has no theoretical problem with the worship of other gods or other ways of truth because the underlying truth is one and the same and the paths to salvation are varied. This tolerance, whether it is within or without the religion, is characteristic of this tradition. Assimilation and amalgamation of ideas are part of the tradition, as long as the religious notions are accepted as being true to the spirit of the Vedic literature. There are certain characteristic Hindu beliefs and there is the entire interweaving with the social customs and practices which provide the necessary cohesiveness

and fixed parameters.

Given these elements which serve to characterize the Hindu religious tradition, it becomes easier to locate Gandhi in relation to it. Gandhi's ethical and religious ideas as well as his practical engagement with the political life, point to a relationship to tradition in which there are a number of, seemingly contrary, elements. There is in Gandhi a strong sense of rootedness in a tradition. This is evident from a sincere participation in the Hindu way of life, use of religious language and concepts and so on. At the same time there is an equally strong sensitivity to the need for reform in various aspects which characterized the Hindu religious tradition. From here, perhaps, there accrues a strong reformist zeal. A related factor is a religious openness which reveals itself in Gandhi's sympathetic readings of other religious traditions including Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. This is important, for these 'cross cultural borrowings' have led a scholar like Bhikhu Parekh to construct an argument which contends that Gandhi understood tradition and his own religious tradition in a non-religious and primarily scientific and social sense.[15] So that Gandhi's ethical understanding eventually approached closer to modernity, in that value terms were not sacred or incorrigible. Without going into the details of Bhikhu Parekh's argument here, it will be sufficient to note that this openness is an element in Gandhi's conception of religion which has to be understood and if it cannot be accommodated theoretically within the Hindu religious tradition an argument like Parekh's has to be accepted.

From the above discussion of the Hindu religious tradition, one factor that has stood out strongly is precisely the openness and assimilative character of that tradition. This then makes it possible to argue that Gandhi's openness of vision and contemporaneous religious commitment, can be theoretically accommodated within the framework of the Hindu religious tradition.

What bears this last point out is that Gandhi was a reformer of the Hindu tradition who was open to dialogue not only with other traditions, but with all kinds of ethical and philosophical speculations. Further, a point often missed and well brought out from his criticism of Christian missionaries,[16] is that he was equally insistent that other traditions would benefit from such exchanges with Hinduism.

The point then is that Gandhi had an understanding of religion which was able to accommodate assimilation and sympathetic reading across different religious traditions. All religions in his avowed opinion, benefited from such exchanges. At the very same time Gandhi was

insistent on the need and importance of rootedness in one's own inherited tradition. He also had a sense of the inviolability of ethical notions which constituted the core of religious traditions. Thus, in his own life and practice he had a religious and spiritual commitment to norms like *ahimsa*, truth and a strong belief in the Divine. These elements in Gandhi make it possible to retrospectively make a case for the reasoning that Gandhi had a religious understanding of tradition. There were elements, such as a sense of the divine and the sacred, which make it impossible to locate his understanding of tradition in science and modernity. Thus, Gandhi, can, quite plausibly be located within his own religious tradition. His openness and assimilative tendency can quite comfortably be accommodated within the structure of that tradition. The religious tradition in itself had no theoretical problem with Gandhi's freedom of thought.

The discussion on tradition, the Hindu religious tradition and Gandhi reveals interesting consequences on Gandhi's notion of the political domain. In the first place Gandhi conception of religion as a culture specific articulation of a community's moral vision, came from an experience of, and an intimate acquaintance with, the tradition he was born into. It also developed from his readings of other traditions. But to learn from other traditions one has to first be rooted in the experience of one's own. This was Gandhi's firm conviction. His experience of the Hindu way of life gave him the distinction between the moral 'core' as in the specifically religious beliefs which were value-based and the cultural/social periphery.

Further Gandhi's conception of the unity between religion, morality and politics was infused with a spirit of toleration and equal respect for all religions. Thus Gandhi's politics was unique for its pan-Islamic sympathies: he was often more generous to Muslims than to his Hindu brethren. This kind of spirit came from the confidence of a genuinely religious person rooted in his own tradition. Further it was more of a conformity to, rather than an aberration of, the religious tradition itself.

Further Gandhi's own reformist zeal and awareness of the theoretical distinction between the core of a religion and its cultural periphery gave him the spiritual confidence to be able to fearlessly use religious symbolism in politics. This liberal use of religious symbolism, of religious categories like *dana*, *tapas*, *yajna* and of culture specific religious terminology, had its genesis in another Gandhian belief. This was, as mentioned above, Gandhi's stress on the importance of tradition and heredity — Gandhi had a strong sense of roots; 'Environment does

play an important part, but the original capital on which a child starts in life is inherited from its ancestors'.[17]

An important argument for this belief was that rootedness and security in one's own tradition acts as a basis for a self-confidence and surety which also leads to a more tolerant understanding of other traditions, as also, engenders better behaviour. Therefore, Gandhi was very comfortable articulating ethical ideas in the meta-language of religion, just as he was equally insistent on stressing that the 'core' of a religion is its moral and ethical vision. This is very interesting for there is here a conception of religion and politics which is not secular in the scientific modern sense—as having nothing to do with religion—yet, it is not sectarian. It is secular in the sense of giving respect to all religions and not in that of excluding religion from politics.

Indeed, in Gandhi's world view religion pervaded a way of life and could not be excluded from so crucial a domain as the political. Religion was not restricted to certain ceremonial, private moments but characterized a life well lived. This insight was again in its genesis traceable to Gandhi's acquaintance with his own religious tradition.

III

Through the last two sections it has emerged that the classical Indian tradition of thinking about man and polity, has sufficient elements to allow for the construction of a conception of politics that is an alternative to the utilitarian scientific face of modern politics. Further, the Hindu religious tradition, as an open-ended assimilative and diffused sort of tradition, is able to accommodate a non-sectarian, yet profoundly religious, view of the world. That view, it appears from the discussion, can be located around a core of specifically religious and moral insights — with a surrounding periphery of a customs and belief framework that is very varied. Thus within the structure of the Hindu tradition there are different orthodox systems upholding vastly different metaphysical and epistemological ideas. Yet, they all claim allegiance to the *Vedas* and share a common commitment to salvation and a broad ethical discipline, as in subscription to the purusarthas, commitment to values like truth, *ahimsa, asteya,* and so on, most importantly, a view of the world in which there is a commitment to a wider spiritual reality, (*Atman, Brahman, Purusa*), and where the moral life becomes central to man's existence. Viewed in a broader perspective this means that the Hindu tradition has a structure that allows for a genuine respect for other alternative religious ethical commitments. Coming back to

Gandhi, the above two sections, have at least indicated the possibilities of a conception of politics, and of religion and morality that could possibly make for an intimate relation between the three.

In this section, I shall attempt to construct just such an argument, from the premises of the last two sections to provide one possible explanation of Gandhi's conception of the relationship between religion, morality and politics. The first step in the attempted explication of what I take to be Gandhi's central thesis, is to posit that perhaps the dynamic unity between morality, politics and religion in Gandhi accrues from the centrality of Gandhi's moral vision. From the discussion on the nature of the Hindu religious tradition, it has already emerged, that it was a tradition in which the participant could commit himself to a ethical, religious way of life. Thus, Gandhi had the experience of being a sincere participant in a religious way of life which could, perhaps, have enabled him to read religion as a primary moral commitment. In any event, the ethical and the spiritual were enmeshed in his own religious tradition and from there, it was possible to have such an insight. Thus Gandhi, it can be argued, had a view of religion, in which a moral insight became very basic. That moral insight in his own case was structured around concepts like *ahimsa*, truth and God. One way in which that moral insight can be articulated, is to say that for Gandhi, man is essentially involved in the moral enterprise of getting at the truth—very fundamentally, at the truth of himself by overcoming the ego and its self-projection, as also and consequently, at the truth of the other, in one's knowledge of the other. All of life's activity must be based in truth and for this *ahimsa* or love and non-violence is the key word. The point is that love which is *ahimsa* in its positive form and freedom from ego-projection must inform man's, life and action so that man through his mundane life actualizes the moral enterprise. Further in keeping with the Hindu tradition or rather the Hindu way of life, morality has to inform a complete life. It cannot be the domain of just one aspect of man's existence while he lives out the other moments using whatever means he deems appropriate. There is consequently no distinction between means and ends in Gandhi's moral thinking and the moral life cannot be alienated from the rest of man's existence. The moral vision, if it is to be genuine, is the core of a good life and must be reflected in the whole of life.

Gandhi's thought, then, can be understood as relating morality to religion so intimately that the very conception of religion becomes one in which religion is nothing if not a culture specific articulation of a community's moral vision, and its spiritual experiments in trying to

internalize that vision. Religion attempts, with culture specificity, to actualize the moral enterprise in men and to provide each individual with a set of ethical rules and value systems. It gives a conception of the divine who presents a picture of moral perfection. That divinity actualizes in it's person the morally perfect life, and holds out hope and belief in that life, to the imperfect mortals that be. As mentioned, while discussing the Hindu religious tradition, a religious tradition has the moral, the social and cultural elements interlinked into a system. When religion is grounded in a moral response to the human predicament it is certain to share elements of that response with other religions born of other cultures, for the fundamentals of morality and moral consciousness remain the same. We might look at some statements Gandhi made on morality and religion in order to substantiate the argument above:

> I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality. I tolerate unreasonable religious sentiment when it is not immoral.[18]
>
> As soon as we loose the moral basis, we cease to be religious. There is no such thing as religion overriding morality. Man for instance cannot be untruthful, cruel and incontinent and claim to have God on his side.[19]
>
> Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the maker and itself.[20]

Therefore, Gandhi's understanding of religion and morality can be taken to imply that religion articulates a moral vision and it shares the core moral vision across traditions with other religions. This kind of understanding lends itself to certain conclusions:

1. There is a core moral consciousness within every religion.
2. Different religions share elements of their basic moral core, for humanity has a common moral response to the human predicament.
3. This has important lessons for religious toleration and for the cross cultural borrowings mentioned above in Section II. Where different religions are culture-specific articulations of a fundamental

moral vision the dichotomy between them is peripheral and secondary. At heart they are all about righteousness and virtue. This is an important lesson in religious toleration and explains Gandhi's own views on the same.

4. Each religion can evaluate itself from time to time and question its cultural and social periphery in terms of the core moral vision. It can, if it finds certain customs and practices wanting, rejuvenate them by bringing aspects of the moral vision to bear upon their understanding and evaluation. It is the moral vision which is sacred and not the customs and social framework. That is simply part of cultural baggage, as it were.

One very important point has however, yet to be raised which is that for Gandhi the culture-specific religious framework was also equally important to the moral growth of a people. Thus Gandhi himself was most comfortable articulating his own ethico-political ideas in terms of his own religious framework. This can, perhaps, be understood by saying that, since morality is the core of religion, moral consciousness and moral ideas can quite comfortably be articulated in religious and spiritual terminology. This is in contrast to the Kantian enterprise which tries to understand morality as independent of religion. Though both Kant and Gandhi here have a common opposition to utilitarianism in morality, they differ in this important aspect. For Gandhi's moral sense can be grounded in religion and use its spiritual and belief framework. Thus: 'True religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. Religion is to morality as water is to the seed that is sown in the soil'.[21] Further, given the importance of tradition in generating cultural security and self-confidence, it is very important to locate the moral life in religious foundations.

The argument so far has been able to put together strands in the classical Indian tradition that presented to Gandhi a vision of politics and of the human enterprise which was pre-modern and a powerful alternative to modernity and its anthropocentric vision. This translates into an attempt to understand against these premises, Gandhi's constant connecting of religion, morality and politics in his political life. Thus, it can plausibly be argued that one way to understand Gandhi's interlinking of religion and morality, is to understand religion as articulating a basic moral vision of the world. Further, the central thesis can be understood by constructing an argument which takes morality and the moral enterprise as the central endeavour in Gandhian thought. Thus, it can be argued that for Gandhi morality furnishes the connecting link between religion and politics. Which is why his spiritualisation of politics is non-dogmatic and non-sectarian. Religion

as a moral and spiritual sense of the world must pervade a whole life and thus politics is no exception. On the contrary the conception of politics itself has ethical undertones. Recall here the classical Indian tradition on polity, as a precursor to the Gandhian thinking on this point. The *dharma* of the king is to ensure the possibility for the exercise of *dharma* of the people for whom he rules. In Gandhi's own conception of it, politics must be grounded in morality, in the moral vision. Politics can ensure the possibility of civilized human existence and provide the framework for the pursuit of the good life. Thus politics must not be alienated from the moral enterprise. However, an important point to be kept in mind here is that when he speaks of politics, Gandhi makes the crucial conceptual difference between politics as the art of governing and politics as setting the conditions for the good life. Of course, the latter sense is to pervade the business of government as well. Yet there is a conceptual distinction. Gandhi thus distinguishes between 'power politics', and 'true politics'. When in 1940, he asked the members of the Seva Sangh to withdraw from politics he made powerful use of this distinction. To quote him:

> We used politics to put our principles into practice. Now after some experience we are renouncing politics. The politics we are renouncing is the politics of acquiring positions of power within the Congress. But this power politics is such a dreadful snare that even individuals may have to quit it.[22]
>
> Politics pervades all our activities. But I am not talking of retirement from politics in this broad sense. I am referring to the politics of the Congress and elections and to groupism... I have not forbidden all political activity. I know that in this country all constructive activities are part of politics. In my view that is true politics. Nonviolence can have nothing to do with the politics of power.[23]

This distinction is really a fairly important one. There is a certain sense in which politics is ethics at work, in that it provides conditions of civilized and good living for a mass of people. It provides for the proper structuring of society. If laws and norms are framed with justice as the 'telos' (in Aristotelian terms), there can be a life-like connection between happiness and the good life. This can provide an answer to the problem of moral motivation which can be a crucial issue for the generality of people. Most people, ordinary people, are neither decidedly good nor bad, and for such people a properly structured society can make all the difference to their choice of a good/bad way

of life. It will provide them with a society, with a state, in which the good way of life is not only possible , but also coincident with happiness and faring well. Therefore, it will answer the question 'why should I be moral', in very convincing terms. I think Gandhi was deeply concerned about the masses of people who were thus susceptible to moral despair. Here then, politics as 'true politics' could make for the moral life, it could also provide the conditions for a civilized and just existence for the masses, and in that sense, it could become 'moral politics'. Thus there is an argument of great ethical relevance, in Gandhi's conception of politics as a truly moral activity. The opposition to the modern conception of politics is evident.

We come now to the notion of 'power politics'. It is important to recognize the conceptual distinction between the business of government, democratic process, and administration from true or moral politics. Gandhi's recognition of this distinction could be read as evidence of his keen awareness of the moral vulnerability of the life of governance. The important point is that the business of government is essentially open to ethical corruption. 'Power politics', as Gandhi saw clearly, has an inherent tendency to corrupt and to disrupt the life of virtue. It is difficult for good men to remain virtuous in the realm of the business of government which has an internal tendency to degenerate into 'power politics'. This is why Gandhi speaks of voluntary poverty for the statesman to maintain the purity of public life. The Gandhian stress on this purity and the conceptual difference is ethically significant, because, while recognizing the unity of politics morality and religion, his ethical conception has an awareness of the pitfalls of government. Once this awareness is built into an ethical theory , it is also possible to have potential safeguards—at least at the theoretical level.

The above distinction removes any ambiguity which may arise concerning Gandhi's statements about politics as a moral and religious affair. When Gandhi speaks about politics as a supreme ethical and religious duty, he is speaking thus, about politics as service and as ensuring the conditions for good living. His argument cannot be taken to apply to any historical government or to any group of politicians involved in 'power politics'. Further, since politics is grounded in morality and morality can be well articulated in religious and spiritual terms, the whole political enterprise can also be spoken of in religious terms. He said, 'Yes, I still hold the view that I cannot conceive politics as divorced from religion. Indeed religion should pervade every one of our actions. Here religion does not mean sectarianism it means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. It is not less real because

it is unseen. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality'.[24]

As long as religion is understood in terms of the moral vision, politics can be interpreted as a spiritual exercise of moral growth. This can be done by understanding politics in terms of service and social well-being. Contemporaneously the whole exercise can be one of self-purification and overcoming of ego-aggrandizement by a practical *ahimsa* interpreted in terms of love and service, beautifully coordinating the political, and religious into an enterprise of moral growth and development.

I have, here, attempted to argue that the basic point of connection between religion and politics is furnished by morality. Given that for Gandhi, religion is to be understood as a spiritual understanding of a moral vision from within particular religious traditions, it is the means to articulate moral and ethical insights within a particular cultural and spiritual tradition. Thus religion and morality are inalienable. Politics—'true politics'—should be based in morality. For it is the means to provide the very conditions of a life of goodness for the citizens. Thus in Gandhi the three—the moral, the political and the religious—become inalienable elements in a moral sense of the world. There is a moral consciousness which is articulated in religious terminology and this kind of moral consciousness is the nerve of 'true politics'. This left Gandhi with a unique conception of politics and it was this conception which he actualized in his political experiments. The empathy of this conception with the traditional Indian view of man and society and of the state as providing the conditions for the exercise of *dharma* by its members, is I think, evident . So is its deep distaste for modern politics and well thought out opposition to utilitarianism. Further this reasoning enables us to understand the sense in which Gandhi spoke, as he did, about politics as a religious and moral activity. It also lends some clarity to Gandhi's treatment of politics as an area in which ethical considerations are crucially relevant. Whereas the scientific-utilitarian epistemology of modernity, cannot but judge, Gandhian politics as irrational in its constant resort to ethics and religion; an alternative understanding can be constructed in terms of various elements in the classical Indian tradition, that put together a world view in which the Gandhian politics and ethico-religious perspective makes eminent sense.

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