

Making Sense of Gandhi's Secularism

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Abstract

This article is an attempt to re-examine the M K Gandhi's secularism. The key problem with which I am concerned here is: how did Gandhi's religion and spirituality deal with the communal problems to the secular end in Indian society, which is essentially multi-religious one. Whereas secularism makes a wall between state and religion Gandhi didn't believe in making such wall of distinction between them, rather he believed in putting religion into politics to promote its values. Of course, his religion is not any traditional religion, like Christianity, rather such a 'religion' which underlies all religions, embraces morality and spirituality. Through spiritual activities and thoughts he searches for a secular end all through his life. Here I like to examine how he understands religion as morality and spirituality and puts it into politics. I also wish to raise some critical issues on his interpretation of secularism. In the conclusion, I like to show that his spiritual secularism is different from religious fundamentalism, and also that spiritual secularization may be the royal road to minimize communal tensions in our multi-religious country.]

Keywords: Secularism, Spiritualism (Ādhyatmavāda), Communalism, Materialism, Pragmatism, Dharma, Dayādharma, Nehruism, Denominationalism.

Introduction:

In this paper I would like to focus on the M K Gandhi's spiritual secularism in order to see how his spiritualistic endeavour promotes Indian secularism as well as secularization of social process in our multi-religious society. Though secularism has multiple meanings in the context of different countries and has no 'one standard form', it generally refers to the separation between religion and politics. Whereas western secularists draw a line of distinction between religion and politics, Gandhiji has erased such a line. It is thus a challenge to any Gandhi's scholars to interpret, to defend his prescribed secularism. Thus this paper is also an attempt to argue against those who blame Gandhiji for putting religion into politics.

Though the term 'secularism' was first coined by British social reformer George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906) in 1851 to mean a code of morality without religious considerations which 'can be tested by the experience to this life'¹ Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United State, developed and popularized the concept of secularism in 19th century during and after the long conflict between Christian church and state on the priority of state authority. Most of the western liberal democratic countries accept more or less the form of Thomas Jefferson's model of secularism; wall of separation between the State and the Church. Contemporary French scholar Jean Bauberot holds three fundamental principles of western liberal secularism: 1) Separation of religious institutions from state, 2) Religious liberty for all citizens and 3) Non-discrimination on the ground of religious identity.² Thus western liberal political theory prescribes that societies are divided into spheres: the public sphere

governed by State and private sphere, where we ought to live freely according to our own religious beliefs and values.

However, in the first section I try to briefly compare the relation between religion and politics as we find in western thinkers, mainly following Jefferson, side by side, Gandhi and V. D. Savarkar from Indian perspective. In section- II I like explicate what Gandhi means by 'religion' and Section- III will make clear how Gandhi puts the religion in his politics through its spiritualization. In the Section- IV I will be concerned with a paradoxical dilemma regarding his secularism and a new resolution of it. In conclusion on the basis of previous discussion, I will try to explain how his experiments with religion as spirituality promote the Indian secularism.

I

Before proceeding to Gandhi's secularism, the main part of this article, I would like to sketch a comparative image on the relation between religion and politics according to Thomas Jefferson, who prescribes the strict separation between religion and politics, as well as to Gandhi and Savarkar, both of them want to put religion into politics, in its western backdrop.

Thomas Jefferson, the founder of secularism in United State, was a very follower of Deism³ which didn't believe in orthodox Christianity. As a true Deist he rejected the supernatural aspects of Christianity and instead he believed in the moral teaching of Jesus Christ. He didn't believe in Jesus' divinity, Christian Trinity (Jesus as co-equally the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit), resurrection, and biblical miracles. He also had written his own version of Bible, entitled as The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, to him, is 'a teacher of common sense', basically concerned with morality and ethical conduct. Though he was supportive of the morality in Christianity, he had no intention to put such religious morality in politics as Gandhi did in India. He recommended excluding religion from politics; a government should not intervene in the personal religion. In a reply letter in 1802, 1st January to the Danbury Baptists, he first invoked his famous metaphor 'Wall of Separation' between state and church by writing down: "Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church & State."⁴ His theory became the secular model of the United State and most of the western liberal democratic countries accepted that model more or less in form.

Anyhow, Gandhi and Savarkar are two most influential thinkers in Indian politics. Savarkar is a Hindu nationalist and one of the leading figures of RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh). Initially, he was an atheist; in his early life he seemed to be a secularist. His first major book, Indian War of Independence 1857 (1909), he reveals his attitude as religious neutralist.⁵ But after his imprisonment in Andaman, he was a completely changed man. In his book Essentials of Hindutva (1923) he writes: "Every person is a Hindu who regards and owns this Bharat Bhoomi, this land from Indus to the seas, as his Fatherland and Holy Land, the land of the origin of his religion and the cradle of his faith."⁶ The third component of this definition, India is the 'Holy land' (punyabhoomi), meaning "land of one's prophets and seers, of his God man and gurus, the land of piety and pilgrimage", excluded the Muslim and Christian indirectly

as Indian, as the first class citizen. They only live as subordinates, co-operating with the Hindu nation whereas by the virtue of being majority Hindus will hold the dominant position. Thus it clearly shows that Savarkar's definition of Hindutva is not about religion, Hinduism, rather about citizenship. After 1937, as president of RSS he continued his anti-Muslim, anti-British politics and opposed Gandhi's non-violence as well as spiritual ideology, 'passive resistance' until his death in 1966.

It is not deniable that Gandhi deeply embraced religion, mainly Hinduism, throughout his whole political career. But, unlike Savarkar, he did never identify his religion of Hinduism with Indian nationhood. He said in his *Hind Swaraj* that India, where the people follow different religions, do not cease to be one nation. He had also realised that India could not win freedom without the unity of Indians, regardless of religious identities. Thus, whereas Savarkar excluded Muslim and Christian from his Hindutva, Gandhi spoke of such a religion which includes all religions. We will come to know in the next section that religion, to Gandhi, is not any customary or institutional religion, rather a set of values, moralities. In this context Jefferson's position on religion is closer to Gandhi. Religion (here Christianity), to him, like Gandhi, is basically morality. But, unlike Gandhi, he could not put the religion into politics; instead he recommended 'wall of separation' between religion and politics. Again, whereas Gandhi being a religious tried to spiritualize the politics through moralities, values inherent in religion, Savarkar being an atheist rejected spirituality in religion but tried to politicize religion through excluding non-Hindus.

II

At the beginning of my article, I have framed its key purpose as analyzing Gandhi's spiritual secularism; how he spiritualized the religion and put it into politics. Thus I like to explain what he means by religion. Gandhi's concept of religion, surely, has an originality and freshness, but he was influenced by many saints, and religious teachers and their scriptures. At the very early age he had an opportunity to come close to the other religions. He was born and raised in a Vaishnav family which is traditionally Hindu. His family members practiced daily Hindu ritual and also respected to other religions. He read the *Bhagavatā*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Manusmriti* etc in Gujarati language from his father's library. He also studied Vaisnava and Jaina scriptures. These all had added moral sense and religious insight in the early days of his life. While in London young Gandhi came to acquaint himself with the Theosophical society and read Sir Edwin Arnold's translation of the *Gītā*, *The Song Celestial* and *The Light of Asia*, he was also influenced by many religions, especially by Christianity. The new interpretation of Christianity by Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is within You* and Ruskin's *Unto This Last* left a deep impression upon him. He had developed his own notion of *Satyāgarha* from Tolstoy's spiritual interpretation of Christianity.⁷ Moreover, American moral reformer Henry David Thoreau's essay on *Civil Disobedience*, Thomas Carlyle's essay *The Hero as Prophet*, Madame Blavatsky's *Key to Philosophy* etc and all these made a deep impact on his religious beliefs and led him to believe in different religious preach of love, morality and truthfulness.

Anyhow, what does Gandhi mean by religion? When a journalist asked Gandhi: "How would you dream one common political strategy in a country of dozens' of religions?" He replied that "It's sure." He does not think about politics without religion but we should be very careful about the word 'religion'. It doesn't mean to any extremist ideologies, but a faith in morality.⁸ He cleared by saying: "Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion ... but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and

whichever 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.”⁹ This quoted passage of Gandhi’s view brings to light the silent features of his religion. Firstly, religion is the expression of the permanent human nature, i.e., divinity – essential goodness present in everyone. Secondly, religion is the tool of purifying and elevating the man’s nature to that goodness. Thirdly, the most relevant for this paper; religion is the power of awakening our spiritual aspect inherent in us. It is a kind of thirst which cultivates and develops morality; power of choosing good and righteousness within us. According to Gandhi religion without morality is like a ‘sounding brass’ which makes noise and breaks heads. “I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality”¹⁰ he said. Fourthly, his religion is striving for truth (God), ‘religion of love’¹¹, universal brotherhood.

Thus religion, according to Gandhi isn’t any intuitional or traditional religion like Hindu or Muslim though he shows respect to all equally. He prefers to equal respect to all religions rather than religious tolerance. It is because religious tolerance, according to him, may be meant a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of the other faith to one’s own. His popularized Hindu tenet “Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava”¹² (equal respect to all religions) is the sole principle of Indian secularism. He said: “If I would call myself, say, a Christian, or a Mussalman, with my own interpretation of the Bible or the Koran, I should not hesitate to call myself either. For then, Hindu, Christian and Mussalman would be synonymous terms”¹³. Prof. Bhargava, in his article Distinctness of Indian Secularism, points out that in this tenet there are three fundamental principles which are the hallmark of the Indian secularism – (1) Religious co-existence (2) Religious liberty and (3) Equal respect to all religions.¹⁴

III

Religion, according to the western, is a personal set or a institutionalized system of religious beliefs and practices; the service and worship of God (Gods). If by ‘religion’ we mean any particular institutional organize in this sense, of course it is far away from Gandhi’s spirituality. Spirituality, though closely tied to religion is not the same. Thus I have to draw a conceptual connection between them after Gandhi. We all know that he was not a familiar to those who believed in institutional religion and he also said: “by religion I do not mean formal religion, or customary religion”¹⁵ but “that religion which underlines all religions.”¹⁶ Religion as Gandhiji stresses can’t be separated from spirituality; rather be the essence of his religion. In Indian tradition spirituality is known as Ādhyatmavāda. It is a Sanskrit word, derived from Ādhi (means pertaining to the topic) and Ātmā (means the soul). Sri Aurobindo defines spirituality as “the attempt to know and live in the highest self, the divine, the all – embracing unity, and to raise life in all its parts to the divinest possible values.”¹⁷ Thus spirituality refers to the existence of soul apart from our physical bodies and material world and also to a moral empathy to all as they are identical with the supreme soul (or the part of the supreme soul). Gandhiji also believes that although man’s bodily activities represent his physical aspect, they are not merely a physical or material body. Their consciousness, reason, conscience, will etc are the expressions of the spiritual or Divine nature present in them. Indeed unlike Sāṅkhya Gandhi believes plurality of soul rather oneness of soul like ĀdyaitaVadānta. He argues that “though we have many bodies, we have but one soul.”¹⁸ Thus his metaphysical concept of soul (ātmā) is a fundamental principle behind his prescribed secularism. He believes that when one realizes his own ātmā, he also can realize the other peoples’ ātmā; that is to say

he feels a unity with others, universal brotherhood. No doubt that such ātmā (soul), though it is not paramātmā, is inseparable to paramātmā (God). In the Gandhi's philosophy, thus spirituality is the realization of God, oneness of soul, may be called self-realization. Such spiritual universalism thus leads us to ethical universalism, i.e., worrying for others; a type of thirst for doing well for others. Therefore, his religion, spirituality and morality are interrelated. In this context, he said: "In my experiments, spiritual (adhyātmik) means ethical/moral (naitik); religion (dharm) means ethics (nīti); ethics observed from the perspective of ātmā, it is religion (ātmānīdr̥ṣṭepālelīnitēdharm)"¹⁹

Furthermore, his concept of God is far reaching. He did not believe in personal God. "I don't believe God to be a personal being in the sense that we are personal beings....He is a personal God to those who need His personal presence. He is all things to all men. He is in us and yet above and beyond us"²⁰ he said. In the initial stage, till 1931, Gandhi used to say 'God is truth' but later on he came to assert that 'Truth is God'. Reason behind such change is a realization of Gandhi that he thinks anyone can doubt or even denies the existence of God, but doubting or denying truth for anyone is self-contradictory. In this perspective no one can be atheist because an atheist can deny the existence of God, but never can deny the truth. Gandhi perhaps came to influence the Vedic sage Dirghatama who wrote about 1500 B.C. in the Rigveda (1:164:46): "Ekam sat viprabahudhavadanti"²¹ i.e, Truth is one; sages call it by various names. To theists God is truth and atheists say non-existence of God is truth. Thus each seeks truth in his own way. However, by such assertion Gandhi puts not only the theists, but also all the persons under the shadow of one umbrella without any religious consideration. Such interpretation about God thus helps to eradicate conflicts in traditional religions and maintains communal harmony in our multi-religious society. This is because the basic component of traditional religions is God and the ways of worshiping Him. But every traditional religion is different, even contradictory in believing God's nature and the ways of worshiping Him. To get rid of these religious conflicts and to unite the different religious communities, Gandhi perhaps makes such assertion.

Now, I wish to address another crucial question regarding his spirituality. Is Gandhi's spirituality applicable in practical field? Is his spirituality pragmatic? First of all, application of spirituality in Indian tradition is not absurd possibility. If we look after Gandhi's socio-political activities, it is seemed to us that his spirituality is not merely impractical rather pragmatic in nature. By 'pragmatic spirituality' I want to mean here the contrary of dogmatic spirituality, which is applicable in practical field. He didn't believe that spirituality works itself on its own field but through the activities on the field of economic, social and politics. He realized that real enemy of Indians isn't British government but 'materialism and aspiration to be modern' within them, thereof it can be overcome with spirituality. He, in his thoughts and actions, had adopted spirituality as a tool to guide socio-political actions for the secular end.²² His famous Satyāgraha which is called by him 'truth force' was believed to generate spiritual force. It is, to him, spiritual commitment to pursue truth by nonviolent techniques. Gandhi and his followers followed it according to different situation in socio-political field.²³ Moreover, his concept of Swaraj refers to self-rule which is based on pure morality and spiritually.

IV

Now, again I wish to turn the question which is mentioned in the section II; did Gandhi want to separate religions from politics? Religion, as he concerned, should be the basis of the politics; that means he wants to put religion into politics. He is very clear that if religion can be brought into politics, the

politics must be benefited for that. He believed that spirituality and morality, gained through religion, promote the politics. But Gandhi himself makes a self-contradictory image on this regards. Let me explain. He used to say “I am trying to introduce religion into politics”²⁴ and again “Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.”²⁵ But later on, somehow it is seemed to me that he makes far-off himself from his previous position. This is because in the Harijan on 28th December, 1936, he stated: “Religion is a personal matter which should have no place in politics.”²⁶ Furthermore in September 1946, in conversation with a Christian missionary he said: “If I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate. I swear by my religion, I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state would look after your secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. This is everybody's personal concern.”²⁷ There are two recent interpretations on Gandhi’s secularism.

Firstly, Bipan Chandra and K. Sangari argue that in the early life (most probably before 1940) Gandhi moved away from ‘fundamental religion underlying all religions’ towards ‘fundamental ethics common in all religions’. Thus during that time his conception of religion was based on ethics or morality. And he wanted to put religion into the politic for its ethical promotion. But after communal violence in 1940 he came to realize that a religion could no longer ‘be a binding force in a multi-religious society.’ This realization might be led him to advocate the ‘religion as personal matter’. His concept of secularism in this stage is interpreted by Chandra as ‘Nineteenth- century Europe’ and by Sangari as ‘Nehruvian’ model.²⁸

Secondly, on the contrary, Ajay Skaria in his No politics without religion argues that Gandhi’s secularism in his last years was consistently same as his early concept of that. He, with the reference of the Hind Swaraj, claims that his religion in his last life was not grounded on any otherworldly or transcendent God, rather it was basically inspired by Jain ascetic ‘SrimadRajcandra’s idea of ‘dayādharma’ which is a secular concept.²⁹ Moreover, the term ‘duniyā’, used in the Hind Swaraj, does not mean the separation from religious matters.³⁰

Accepting those above interpretations, I will propose a different interpretation from either of the above. In order to do so, I will stress the necessity of attention to the following two points. First at all, it’s seemed to me that when he said about religion as ‘personal matter, he might to restrain us from the ‘communal religion’ which are often dogmatic, full of superstitions, a means of political weapon and the seed of communalism. On the other hand, when he wants to put religion into politics, he wants to mean ‘spiritual religion’ which is rational, moral in nature. And it is not a fact that he realized it in the last years of his life rather he was conscious forever. On 19th January, 1928 he said: “I came to the conclusion long ago ... that all religions were true and also that all had some error in them...”³¹ Secondly, I have another interpretation and solution of this contradiction in my mind and I hope that it will be also significant in this context. I have already stated that to Gandhi nation couldn’t be determined by any particular religious identity what Savarkar desired and tried. According to him, religion has nothing to do with nationality. In the Harijan on 29th June, 1947, he said: “Religion is no test of nationality. But a personal matter between man and his God. In the sense of nationality they are Indians first and Indians last, no matter what religion they profess.”³² Thus one may be a Hindu, be a Christian, or be a Muslim but that religion is his private matter and we should remember that we are only Indians. He personalizes or individualizes the intuitional religion because he realized that such religions promote the denominationalism.³³ On the contrary in his earlier position where he picked up

religion to promote political values, ‘religion’ means ‘fundamental ethics which is common in all religion’.

Conclusion:

It is not deniable that Indian culture is obsessed with dharma (religion being its one important component). T.N. Madan truly claims that religion, to Indians, is not the part of life but it gives the meaning of our life also.³⁴ Thus the western model of secularism; ‘strict separation between religion and politics’ can’t be imposed upon our culture. If so, we have to give a dignified turn to religion for living peacefully in our multi-religious society. Gandhi had done that. He tried to spiritualize religion and put it into politics and society to promote socio-political values. This religion is not any traditional religion, even not his own religion, Hindu rather he spoke of such religion which is a set of moral values, fundamental ethics of all religion and it necessarily refers to spirituality. In this present socio-political scenario, communal tensions such as communal violence, religious discrimination, and using religious sentiments for political advantages and so on are increasing highly day to day. He through his spirituality teaches us to respect other religions and religious equality. I don’t claim that such spiritual ideology makes all of us secular certainly. But it may maximize communal harmony as well as minimize communal tensions in our multi-religious society. I bind my conclusion with great secularist Franklin’s line, “When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and, when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support it, so that its professors are obliged to call for the help of civil power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one...”³⁵ This line, of course, is not written about Gandhi, but it is an equally applicable to his religion and secularism.

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