

Gandhi and Truth: Analysis, Assessment, and Reflection

Boxter Kharbteng

India has given birth to many great sons and daughters, but the greatest of them all is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948). Gandhi was not only India's greatest son, but he was also the father of free India, and one of the most outstanding personalities of the twentieth century. Among the tributes that poured in after Gandhi's assassination, Albert Einstein's stands out as a unique description of Gandhi: "Generations to come will scarcely believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth" (Jack, 1987, p. 565).

Generally, we know Gandhi as the one who led India to freedom from 350 years of British colonial rule. But to think of Gandhi only as a freedom fighter and father of our nation is to look only at one side of the coin. We must turn to the other side in order to get a full-orbed understanding and appreciation of the stature and greatness of Gandhi. And this is summed up in one word, "Mahatma"— "the great soul." The title is essentially a spiritual one, and deservedly so. Gandhi delved deep into the spiritual realm and felt compelled to work for India's social, economic, and political freedom. Though he accomplished the political mission bloodlessly and nonviolently, a year later (1948), Gandhi fell a victim to the bullet of his own countryman and fellow Hindu. What an irony that the one who had been called the "apostle of nonviolence" would himself become a victim of ultimate violence!

Gandhi and Truth

One of the major concepts that Gandhi repeatedly and passionately emphasized and taught is truth. Truth for Gandhi was like oxygen for his lungs. He just couldn't live without it. He said that he worshiped "Truth" and none other and that he was ready to give up his life for the sake of Truth. This article explores Gandhi's understanding of truth. However, his exposition of this subject is less than straightforward and simple. The subtitles that follow are indicative of this deep, multifaceted, and, hopefully, instructive exposé of his thought on this subject as well as his relationship to truth and Truth (his own preference of writing the word). The subtitles are my own choice, and so is their order. An inclusive summary of the various sections follows, showing how they relate to one another. This is followed by a critical assessment of and reflection on Gandhi's view of truth from the Christian perspective. The article concludes by considering the contemporary relevance of Gandhi's devotion to and embrace of truth.

Analysis of Gandhi's Concept of Truth

"Truth" is a familiar term in Hinduism. According to Chatterjee, the whole of the Hindu tradition is characterized by a "relentless pursuit after truth." (Chatterjee (1983, pp. 60-61). Being a devoutly practicing and informed Hindu, Gandhi was at home with this term.¹ So, how did Gandhi understand truth?

Relative Truth

Gandhi looked at truth in two ways: absolute truth ("Truth") and relative truth ("truth"). Accordingly, he had one explanation for relative "truth" and another, for Absolute Truth—which he claimed he worshipped. Says Gandhi:

[God's manifestations] are innumerable. But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him. I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. Even if the sacrifice demanded my very life. But as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 66).

Gandhi elucidated his understanding of relative truth as that "which you believe to be true at this moment, and that is your God. If a man worships this relative truth, he is sure to obtain the Absolute Truth, i.e., God, in course of time." (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 72). In Gandhi's eyes, the main reason for having to live with a relative understanding and perception of truth is due to the inherent imperfections of human nature on account of its physical dimension. This imperfection leads to different and contradictory interpretations of beliefs (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 61). Within this context, Gandhi admitted his progress had only resulted in having "faint glimpses of the Absolute Truth, God." (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 66; see also Gandhi, 1927/1982, p. 453). Even in his sunset years, Gandhi still considered himself a "humble seeker" of Truth, waiting for the time when his seeker status would come to an end when he would experience "a full vision of Truth" and thus becoming "one with God, for Truth is God." (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 67). Gandhi further held that in order to get to see Truth, to "[see] God face-to-face, I count no sacrifice too great" (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 75; Gandhi's views on truth, n.d. *Young India*, 3-12-1925). "I am devoted to none, but Truth and I owe no discipline to anybody but Truth. Truth is the first thing to be sought for, and Beauty and Goodness will then be added unto you. For this quest, I would be willing to die." (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 72). Unfortunately, Gandhi was pessimistic about the realization of Truth while in flesh and blood.

It is impossible for us to realize perfect Truth so long as we are imprisoned in this mortal frame. We can only visualize it in our imagination. We cannot, through the instrumentality of this ephemeral body, see face to face Truth which is eternal. That is why in the last resort one must depend on faith. (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 75).

¹Gandhi prized Hinduism above all other religions. However, he held that real religion transcends Hinduism and all religions (See Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 56).

Gandhi also defined relative truth as “what the voice within tells you.” But this relativity of hearing is also due to the difference in “evolution of the human mind” with different people, resulting in different and contradictory voices (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 71).

Absolute Truth (*Satya*)

In order to appreciate Gandhi’s understanding of Absolute Truth (*satya*), we begin with the etymological consideration of *satya*. *Satya* is Sanskrit for truth and is derived from *sat*, “which literally means ‘that which exists.’” Moreover, *sat* has its roots in another Sanskrit word, *asti*, meaning “to be”—or “is”. In its noun form, *Satya* means “being” or “essence.” (Bondurant, 1965, p. vi). But since Gandhi shared the Hindu pantheistic worldview that “God alone is, and nothing else exists” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 70), he accordingly saw all aspects of life as being “part of the united whole,” and that this totality of life is none other than God. Accordingly, Gandhi held that *Satya* should be associated with God because only God is a “being”; He alone Is. All other things, humans included, “have no separate reality of their own.” (McLaughlin, 1974, p. 33; also, Minz, 1970, p. 2). Gandhi expressed this as follows: “Truth is not a mere attribute of God, but He is That. He is nothing if He is not That.” (Bondurant, 1965, p. 19).

Location of Truth

To Gandhi, Truth and God are interchangeable or “convertible terms.” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 69). Accordingly, where God is, there Truth is. So when Gandhi talked about “the realization of God within,” also called “self-realization” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 58), he obviously located Truth within the person—and not objectively out there as in the case of the Ten Commandments and Scriptures. “God is... in everyone.” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, pp. 71, 58-59). “God resides in our hearts,” he added. “If we could completely obliterate the consciousness of our physical body, we would see him face-to-face.” Since truth resides in every human heart, one “has to search for it there, and be guided by truth as one sees it.” This is relative truth, of course. But Gandhi also said: “God is in His creation,” there is, therefore, no other way to find God except through service to humanity, through one’s country (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, pp. 65, 71, 63). “[God] is in every atom about us, around us, and within us.” He is neither in heaven nor on earth, but “in everyone.” (Gandhi’s views on truth, n.d. *Harijan*, 14-11-1936; 25-5-1935).

Function of Truth

Gandhi looked at Truth as the ultimate harmonizer between humans and their Maker. He regarded it as the “highest wisdom” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 73) and the ultimate basis of all religions when he said, “It is my unshakable belief that there is no religion other than truth.” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 72). Truth permeates the world and unites all lives in their essentials with the essence of Reality and of Nature (Iyer, 1973, p. 156). Truth is the necessary basis of all life, and so is “the same whether we say that the universe is a function of Truth or a function of Law. As such, Truth is identical with *dharma* (moral law or cosmic order), and *rta* (cosmic equilibrium). (Iyer, 1973, p. 176).

The function of truth can also be perceived from the way Gandhi used certain function-loaded words when he referred to the truth as “that Great Power.” In this connection, he

remarked: “I may be a despicable person, but when Truth speaks through me, I am invincible.” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, pp. 80; 74). But Gandhi also referred to God as “an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything” — the Power that “transcends the senses and defies all proof.” Gandhi called God the “Living Power, the informing Power, the Spirit that is changeless” and “holds everything else together and creates, dissolves, re-creates. God is Life, Truth, and Light. He is Love. He is the Supreme Good.” (Gandhi’s views on truth, n.d.).

[Truth] should be the sole justification of our existence, the supreme value in ethics, politics, and religion, the ultimate source of authority, the *raison de’tre* of all existence...; and the philosopher’s Stone, the sole talisman available to mortal man. It is *paramarthasayta* (the highest of human ends), transcending and endowing value to *artha* (or material welfare), *kama* (or human affection and happiness), *dharma* (or the moral law and cosmic order) and also to *moksha* (or eventual emancipation) ... It is the source of eternal and universal values like truth, righteousness, and justice... and is logically prior to all the other human excellences. (Iyer, 1973, pp. 150-151).

Truth is the law of our being, and man “without a particle of it would be dead,” for one is alive only to the extent that one is truthful. And it is this that makes him different from the brute and causes him to evolve into a human and moral being. Without truth, it is impossible to observe the principles of the rule of life (Iyer, 1973, pp. 151; 156-157). To act according to truth is, therefore, to fulfill ourselves; to do otherwise— to act untruthfully is to disrupt ourselves. “The thing to do then is to identify ourselves with truth, do the true thing always, and a true result will follow.” (Jones, 1948, p. 86). Gandhi also believed that political and economic independence and moral and social wellness can be attained only by truth and nonviolence (Jesudasan, 1984, p. 63).

The Nature of Truth

Truth can also be identified with underlying eternal principles and as one that is causal of all phenomena. Yet Gandhi did not see truth as an abstract quality—in the fashion of ‘first principles’. Perhaps in order to gain a better understanding of the nature of truth in Gandhi, we need to return to his remark that Truth and God are interchangeable. This being the case, Gandhi’s understanding of the nature of God should therefore be regarded as his understanding of the nature of Truth, and vice versa.

Who is God?

Gandhi said that “God is not a person... God is a force. He is the essence of life. He is pure and undefiled consciousness. He is eternal.” God is a force like electricity—and is useful only to those who know its laws. Not only is God not a person, but He is also formless (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, pp.65; 76). God is fearlessness, Truth and Love, ethics and morality, and conscience. “He is even the atheist of the atheists. For in his boundless love, God permits the atheist to live.”² God is omnipresent and omniscient. He is also “a personal God to those who

²When Gandhi said that God is “the atheist of atheists,” I gather it to mean that God permits the atheist to live because God alone exhaustively understands why, from the atheist’s perspective, he comes to the conclusion that there is

need His personal presence.” (Gandhi’s views on truth, n.d. *Young India*, 5-3-1925, “Speech at the Guildhouse, London,” 23-9-1931). Gandhi called God “My God and my Maker,” One to whom he is ultimately answerable. “He is long-suffering, and always forgiving, but He is also terrible.” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 77).

God is the greatest democrat the world knows, for He leaves us “unfettered” to make our own choice between evil and good. He is the greatest tyrant ever known, for He often dashes the cup from our lips and, under cover of free will, leaves us a margin so wholly inadequate as to provide only mirth for Himself at our expense. (Gandhi’s views on truth, n.d. *Harijan*, 25-5-1935).

God has many forms, yet “we consider Him to be formless”; He has “as many names as there are creatures,” yet He is nameless; He speaks to humans through many tongues, yet He is speechless (Gandhi’s views on truth, n.d. *Harijan*, 25-5-1935). “God is His whole creation, the whole Existence.” (Gandhi, 1961, p. 10). To the above, Gandhi also spoke of Truth’s eternalness and its encapsulation within itself that of knowledge (*chit*) and bliss (*ananda*). “God is, therefore, Sat-Chit-Ananda, and who combines in Himself Truth, Knowledge, and Bliss.” (Gandhi, 1961, p. 10).

Truth as God (“Truth is God”)

Gandhi loved to identify truth with God. “God is Truth,” he would often say. In one particular document that contains excerpts of his writings, Gandhi used the phrase “God is Truth” six times (Gandhi’s views on truth, n.d.). Again, he said, “There are innumerable manifestations of God, but I worship God as Truth only.” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 66). “Truth is Ramanarayana, Ishwara, Khuda, Allah, God.” (Banyapadhyaya, 1969, p. 20). “God’s names are a legion. Truth is the crown of them all. He is because Truth is.” (Iyer, 1973, p. 163; Gandhi, 1869-/1969, pp. 65-66).

Search for Truth is search for God. Truth is God. God is, because Truth is. We embark upon the search, because we believe that there is Truth and that it can be found by diligent search and meticulous observance of the well-known and well-tried rules of search. There is no record in history of the failure of such search. Even the atheists who have pretended to disbelieve in God have believed in Truth. The trick they have performed is that of giving God another, not a new, name. His names are legion. *Truth is the crown of them all* . [emphasis added] (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, pp. 9-11).

Gandhi went one step further — and a significant step. He made a transition from “God is Truth” to “Truth is God.” This transition was a conscious and deliberate one when he said: “... two years ago I went a step further and said that Truth is God. You will see the fine distinction between the two statements, viz., that God is Truth and Truth is God. And I came to this conclusion after a continuous and relentless search after Truth, which began nearly fifty years ago.” (Gandhi’s views on truth, n.d. “Speech at the meeting in Lausanne, 8-12-1931). Gandhi explained why for him, “Truth is God” is better than “God is Truth” or “God is Love.”

no God. This unique and comprehensive knowledge of God about the atheist leads to His respect for the atheist’s position and to a consequent divine justification of the atheist.

The nearest approach to Truth was through love. But I also found that love has many meanings in the English language [including passion].... I found too that love in the sense of *ahimsa* had only a limited number of votaries in the world. But I never found a double meaning in connection with truth and not even atheists had demurred to the necessity or power of truth. But, in their passion for discovering truth, the atheists have not hesitated to deny the very existence of God — from their own point of view, rightly. And it was because of this reasoning that I saw that, rather than say that God is Truth, I should say that Truth is God. (Gandhi's views on truth, n.d. "Speech at the meeting in Lausanne, 8-12-1931).

Truth as Force (*Satyagraha*)

When it comes to *Satyagraha*, Stanley's observation is noteworthy. In his estimate, *Satyagraha* is the quintessence of Gandhism. It is Gandhi's greatest contribution to the world. "If we do not get this, we have missed the meaning of his life and death." Equally significant is that Gandhi recognized Jesus Christ as the "prince of *Satyagraha*", and His death as the supreme manifestation of *Ahimsa*, which is also a manifestation of God himself. (Jones, 1948, p. 82; 85; 192).

The Sanskrit term, *Satyagraha*, is a composite of *sat*, which is the root word for truth, and *agraha*, for "polite resistance," or "holding firmly." Gandhi disagreed with those who translated *Satyagraha* as "passive resistance" because he felt that his movement was anything but passive. Accordingly, he preferred the translation "soul force" or "truth force", and a *Satyagrahi* is a warrior of truth and love (Gandhi, 1927/1982, p. 291; Kytile, 1969, p. 90). *Satyagraha* is, therefore, "the force of truth and love," and this soul force originates in Truth. A *Satyagrahi* is fearless of the enemy and punishment, disappointment or defeat, and "*Satyagraha* is a priceless and matchless weapon." (Chadha, 1998, pp. 113; 129; 192). It is a nonviolent struggle against falsehood. (Fox, 1989, p. 277). It is "the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence." Gandhi further stated:

[*Satyagraha*] postulates the conquest of the adversary by suffering in one's own person. It is based on self-help, self-sacrifice and faith in God. *It is a fight on behalf of truth consisting chiefly in self-purification and self-reliance. Satyagraha* seeks to secure reform or redress grievances by taking suffering upon oneself rather than inflicting it upon the other. (Minz, 1970, p. 7).

A *Satyagrahi* will offer *Satyagraha* even unto death, and he or she does so nonviolently because he or pledges to nonviolence in thought, word, and deed. Moreover, *Satyagraha*, by nature, is peaceful, and only those capable of being peaceful under all circumstances can participate in the *Satyagraha* movement by offering civil resistance peacefully (Chadha, 1998, pp. 235; 241).

Truth and Service for Humanity

Truth not only makes a person worthy of a moral being, it also binds him indissolubly to his fellow human beings and brings them together as comrades. The world, therefore, is not "merely a spectacle"; it is "a field of battle . . . which those who care for the truth must play

their part whether as victors or martyrs” (Iyer, 1973, pp. 154-155). A man who wishes to see Truth face to face cannot afford to keep himself out of any field of life. This includes loving the meanest of creatures as oneself, including one’s neighborhood (*swadeshi*) (Minz, 1970, p. 5). For Gandhi, to regard a human being as inferior or untouchable is to deny the Truth. He once said: “I know that God is found often in the lowliest of his creatures than in the high and mighty. I am struggling to reach the status of these. I cannot do so without their service. Hence my passion for the service of the suppressed.” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, pp. 63; 75; Gandhi, 1927/1982, p. 453). On another occasion, he declared: “I recognize no God except God that is to be found in the hearts of the dumb millions. They do not recognize his presence, I do, and I worship the God that is Truth, or a Truth which is God through the service of these millions.” (Jesudasan, 1984, p. 91).

Another form of service for truth’s sake is active participation in politics. Gandhi claimed that his devotion to truth has drawn him to politics (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, pp. 56; 58). He also held that politics is a search for the truth at individual and collective levels (Chatterjee, 1983, p. 71). “Truth is the end and freedom, political power, and independence, are a part of it. Only in truth and freedom could God be worshiped. And only a free people could worship a true God.” (Jesudasan, 1984, p. 96).

The Path to Truth: *Ahimsa*

As far as Gandhi was concerned, there is but only one destination to which man should be heading, and that destination is the realization of Truth within. He also held that the most effective means of reaching this destination is *ahimsa* or nonviolence or love (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 79; Gandhi, 1927/1982, p. 504; Jesudasan, 1984, p. 95; Bondurant, 1965, pp. 16-19). “But this much I can say with assurance, as a result of all my experiments, that a perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realization of *Ahimsa*.” (Gandhi, 1927/1982, p. 453). Gandhi was so certain of *ahimsa* as the perfect path to the realization of the truth that he said:

If every page of these chapters does not proclaim to the reader that the only means for the realization of Truth is *Ahimsa*, I shall deem all my labor in writing these chapters to have been in vain. And, even though my efforts in this behalf may prove fruitless, let the readers know that the vehicle, not the great principle, is at fault. After all, however sincere my strivings after *Ahimsa* may have been, they have still been imperfect and inadequate. (Gandhi, 1927/1982, pp. 452-453).

[It is] the positive state of love, of doing good even to the evildoer. It is resisting [him] by love and suffering. *Ahimsa* is the complete absence of ill will against all that lives. It is goodwill toward all lives: it is pure love. It is the opposite of anger, and pride; it is forgiveness, a quality of the brave and fearlessness, not of the cowardly and fearful. (Minz, 1970, p. 4).

But what is the extent of *Ahimsa*? Gandhi’s final words in his autobiography give us his answer: “In bidding farewell to the readers, for the time being at any rate, I ask them to join with me in prayer to the God of Truth that He may grant me the boon of *Ahimsa* in mind, word and deed.” (Gandhi, 1927/1982, p. 454). This being the case, the principle of *Ahimsa* is then

violated in the presence of an evil thought, undue haste, lying, or hatred, or wishing ill to anyone, including the enemy (Jesudasan, 1984, pp. 38; 95).

Furthermore, since Gandhi held that means and ends are also “convertible terms,” there is no practical difference between Ahimsa and Truth. They are like the “smooth metallic disk. Who can say which is the obverse and which is the reverse?” (Gandhi, 1869-/1969, p. 81). Nevertheless, Ahimsa is still maintained as the “royal” road, and Truth as the end (Jones, 1948, pp. 86-87; Jesudasan, 1984, p. 95).

Summary

The above sections portray Gandhi’s understanding of truth in its various dimensions. The portrayal begins with his identification of truth as being both relative and absolute. Relative truth is only a partial and fragmentary aspect of Absolute Truth. Relative truth participates in the quality of trueness of absolute truth, but the bodily mode of human existence severely limits its vision and the difference in the speed of evolution of individual minds. Accordingly, “what is true” is bound to be different, and sometimes contradictory to one another, and hence relative. Despite this, however, Gandhi taught that a person must implement in his life what he believed to be true as if he was carrying out God’s mandate for him. This intuitive as well as rational sense of what is true is also supplemented by the “voice within”, that is, the voice of conscience.

Then there is also the other form of truth, which Gandhi called Absolute Truth or Truth with a capital T. This is truth in its ultimate form; it is truth as is in itself —probably akin to Kant’s “noumenon,” and relative truth to that of “phenomenon.” Absolute Truth no longer exists as perceptual, rational, or vocal as is in the case of relative truth. It is not even personal; nor does it have a name, for it is nameless; or a form, for it is formless. It is, nevertheless, real. In fact, it is the only reality that there is. Truth is the sum total of what is. ‘Is-ness’ is its essential nature. To put it more precisely, Truth is not simply about the essence or being, but, to borrow Paul Tillich’s terminology, the “ground of being” and hence, of “being” itself. Having embraced pantheism, Gandhi would say, “God alone is and nothing else exists.” There is no other reality than God; reality is one; and all aspects of life are “part of the united whole called God but which he preferred to call Truth, and longed to be united with it even at the cost of his life. Gandhi called this union “realization” or “self-realization.”

The other dimensions of this truth are in terms of its location, function, nature, force (or *satyagraha*), service, and *Ahimsa*. We begin with the location of truth — where is it? Is it in the heavens, on the earth, or under the earth? While admitting to Truth’s omnipresence, Gandhi’s identification of the location of this truth is chiefly in two places: within the human heart, and in humankind, especially the lowly, deprived, and oppressed ones. Finding this truth is therefore done not by looking upward or outward, but by looking inward, in one’s own heart, as well as through service for humanity. In fact, Gandhi saw service as the best way to find Truth. This only shows that Truth for Gandhi is far from verbal and propositional. The next dimension of this truth has to do with its function. As far as Gandhi was concerned, Truth is the basis of everything. It is the “oxygen”, the actualizer and harmonizer of the universe. It permeates and unites all life so that it is the cosmic order and equilibrium, life, light, and love.

What about truth’s nature? Since Gandhi identified God with truth (“Truth is God” — rather than “God is Truth”), his description of God can also be taken to be his description of Truth.

As pointed out, in His essential being, God is not a “person” and so is not personal. But though God is non-personal, it does not mean He is abstract, remote, and inaccessible. Truth is “He” and yet is formless—One which even atheists are unaware of because they gave Him a different name. Actually, Gandhi went as far as even identifying God as the author of evil, though He is “untouched by it.” (Gandhi’s views on truth, *Young India*, 11-10-1928). Ultimately, Truth is identified with the “ground of being” and with being itself.

The other aspect of truth that had become, in Jones words, the quintessence of Gandhi’s mission, is truth force or *Satyagraha*. This refers to the dynamic energy of truth, to its ability to obtain a particular objective or desire. Specifically, *Satyagraha* refers to the manner in which one goes about reaching this goal, which is characterized by nonviolence in thought, word, and deed. But to get to that level, it is necessary that a *Satyagrahi* be first and foremost pure in heart, and ready to suffer pain and affliction in oneself without doing that to those that are in authority in giving you what you are asking for in the name of truth and justice.

One of the main emphases of Gandhi’s relationship to truth is that of service—particularly his service for the marginalized, the voiceless, and the underdogs. How Gandhi connected truth with service to make a lifeline from God to the service of the “dumb millions” is the high note of the Gandhian concept of Truth.

The above analytical presentation ends with the relationship between truth and *Ahimsa* — with the latter being the means for reaching the truth. As far as Gandhi was concerned, *Ahimsa* “is *the only means for the realization of truth*.” [emphasis added] (Gandhi, 1927/1982, p. 452). *Ahimsa* stands for nonviolence that embraces nonviolence in thought, speech, and action, which he called the “triple purity” (Gandhi, 1927/1982, p. 453) to be manifested to one and all, including those who are on the opposing side, including the enemy. Gandhi’s conviction was that though there may be many roads to the realization of Truth or God, as far as he was concerned, *Ahimsa* is the “royal road” to Truth.

Assessment and Reflection

Space limits our assessment of every aspect of Gandhi’s exposition of truth. Let me, therefore, begin this assessment with Gandhi’s concept of Absolute Truth. Because of the pantheistic worldview that identifies the universe as an extension and manifestation of God, the distinction between good and evil becomes indistinguishable at the formal level, but real at the material and practical levels. As a pantheist, Gandhi said that God could also be the author of evil as He is good. And yet, at the same time, he also said that we must shun evil and even give up our life in the fight against it. How could our moral sense of right and wrong, our moral outrage, and all the laws concerning morality be completely dissolved at the level of ultimate truth or reality? What encouragement is there for living a moral life when in the end, it is found out that there is no distinction between good and evil? If God created evil, as Gandhi maintained He did, how is God expected to punish those who commit evil? Will not God ultimately be held responsible for evil? The teaching about eschatological judgment and accountability always assumes two different parties, two different principles, and two different realities, with one of them having to submit to the other to be judged and destroyed, giving rise to a scenario where sin and sinners are disposed of, the ultimate triumph of righteousness over evil, and of God over Satan.

Furthermore, if reality is one, and if the only reality that there is, is God, then who was Gandhi praying to and worshipping? In worship, there is the worshiper (man) and the One being worshiped (God): two distinct realities — with the exception that the reality of the worshiper is derived from and dependent upon God, whose reality is “original, unborrowed, underived.” But pantheism does not allow for this plurality of reality. There seems to be a gap between what Gandhi actually believed and what he practiced. Without a doubt, Gandhi believed in pantheism, but there is equally no doubt that Gandhi believed in a single-hearted, pure devotion and worship of God. We were told that the dying words of Gandhi were—“*Hey Ram.*” This is to state that Gandhi did not draw a consistent line from pantheism to his own experience at the level of worship. As a worshiper, he came across as an uncompromising and steadfast theist; but at the level of his pantheism, his prayers and worship are in need of explanation and justification.

Gandhi’s identifying God with Truth was highly significant and effective for his mission. Perhaps the reason for its effectiveness lies in the fact that truth is one that is universally recognized and emphasized —atheists included. It is one of the cardinal values of humankind. Descriptions of God by whatever glorious words are meaningful only for those who believe in God. But the description of God as truth in the sense of it having the status, power, and authority akin to that of God’s, would not be a problem to any. Moreover, Gandhi’s fight for political freedom from British rule was also a fight for justice and fairness. Using truth as the tool in this fight would certainly strike a chord with the conscience of colonialists and rulers. In this respect, Gandhi’s choice of “truth as God” was a stroke of genius, and his launching of *Satyagraha* (truth force) was a practical application of this profound insight.

Gandhi’s reduction of God to Truth also served as a common rallying point for all communities. It afforded him the much-needed and sought for platform to reach Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians, Sikhs, Jains, etc. Gandhi liked to see the entire nation fight for freedom as children of one. Be that as it may, the idea of identifying God with truth is not without a problem when considered from the Christian perspective. In short, this reductionistic view of God (“Truth is God”) is unacceptable because it is unbiblical and even anti-biblical. For instance, one wonders why, with all its emphasis on a loving God, the Bible never states that “love is God”? It only says that “God is love.” In the same vein, the Bible also states that “God is truth,” which is indicative of God’s identification of Himself with truth not as His alter ego, but as being its source, and hence truth bears the divine impress, without itself being God, perhaps similar to a son bearing his father’s features and DNA without himself being the same as his father. The expression, “God is Truth,” should also be juxtaposed with “God is righteousness,” “God is light,” “God is love,” and so on. But the formula “Truth is God” restricts God to truth, which is biblically untenable. The Bible’s presentation of God does not allow us to choose which aspect or dimension of Him we can extract or select for our devotion and worship. It is God as a divine Person that is being worshipped, not His attributes.

Commenting on 1 John 4:8 (“God is love”), one author has this to say: The passage “does not teach that all love is God, nor that God and love are interchangeable things.” (White, 2007). “God is love” means that “love” is God’s attribute, without barring the other attributes. This attribute tends to get more emphasis in the Bible on account of man’s sin and its consequences. In the same way, when the Bible says, “God is light,” it does so without thereby reducing God to light. God is more than these attributes, but not without them, nor only one of them. God’s

character also includes righteousness, mercy, wisdom, justice, and many more. As White (2007) points out:

The Bible also says that “God is light” (1 John 1:5), but there is no suggestion that “God” and “light” are identical or interchangeable. In fact, to change “God is light” into “Light is God” transforms Christianity into a paganistic worship of the material world similar to the ancient Egyptians, who worshipped the sun and the moon, and so on. “God is light” means “God is full of light. (White, 2007)

The point that needs to be emphasized is that none of these attributes should be used the way Gandhi did with the truth. In so doing, we distort the biblical portrayal of God and end up with a picture of God that is much, much less than what has been revealed in the Bible. The Bible’s portrayal of God is manifestly along personal terms. While Gandhi admittedly used certain of descriptions of God that are pronouncedly personal, in the end, he shied from admitting that God is a person, though He could be such for those who need the personal aspect of God.

Truth’s intimate and direct relationship to service was Gandhi’s other major emphasis. He made it quite plain that his worshiping of Truth as God led him to the service for the “dumb millions” and to his involvement in politics. The connection Gandhi made between truth and service is intriguing. How his worship of the Truth God led him to service the “dumb millions” is one that challenges my comprehension. I am uncertain about this connection, even from the pantheistic point of view, and neither have I heard of similar services rendered by others “in the name of the Truth-God.” What I am certain of, however, is that service for humanity has not been brought about *only* by worshiping Truth as God. Gandhi’s case would be almost an exception. We see this from the history of Christian involvement in service to humanity. The tens of thousands of charitable institutions and organizations of all sorts and sizes of services that Christians operate worldwide — from ancient times to the present — have not been operated on the basis of truth deified. For example, Mother Teresa was the most well-known servant of the humanity of the twentieth century. What was it that led her to such selfless service to the abandoned, diseased, shelterless, and hungry? It was her love of and devotion to Jesus Christ, and her desire to follow His will and heart. Works of charity of all sorts — big and small, known and less-known, are being carried out by Christians for a reason similar or identical to Mother Teresa’s. It was and is because of their deep connection to and love of Jesus Christ, his words and teachings.”³

Conclusion

The conclusion will take up the relevance of Gandhi in relation to his understanding of truth and of implementing it in his mission and life. Gandhi’s wholehearted devotion to truth, which includes strict moral uprightness and transparency in dealing with oneself as well as with others, is a desperate need of our times. Ours is a society ridden with greed, graft, and corruption at all levels of life. Evils and crimes of all sorts are everywhere. The collapse of just-

³Probably one of the most compelling declarations of Jesus Christ when it comes to helping the desperate are those recorded in Matthew 25:37-40, where He identifies Himself with the oppressed, victims of disease, injustice, and poverty. Service rendered to them is service rendered to him.

built buildings and bridges and banks, months of delays in attending to much-needed works, unfinished projects, deception by companies big and small, fake medicines, drug cartels, and human trafficking—to name only a few—are directly traceable to greed and corruption. It has become clear that it is not the lack of money that is our problem but the lack of character of truthfulness. If we ignore Gandhi's emphasis on truth as the light that should guide us in both private and public life, we do that at our peril. And in doing so, we are only making our society worse. In some societies, corruption has become the "other norm." One just can't seem to be able to get anything done without paying a bribe. Think of the progress we would have made in all spheres of life had we been practitioners of truth and integrity. All would have had a taste of heaven while on earth.

It is significant to note that one source lists as many as fifteen "major causes" for the fall of the mighty Roman Empire. The decline in morals is second on the list, immediately followed by political corruption. The decline in ethics and values is somewhere right after the middle of the list (Causes for the fall, n.d.). Gandhi himself drew up his own list of what he called "the seven social sins" or "the seven blunders of the world." They are:

- Wealth without work
- Pleasure without conscience
- Science without humanity
- Knowledge without character
- Politics without principle
- Commerce without morality
- Worship without sacrifice. (Seven social sins, n.d.)

An unbridled desire for material things goes hand-in-hand with monetary greed and corruption. Gandhi's emphasis on *Ahimsa* is another *sine qua non*. Besides greed and corruption, violence is endangering human societies everywhere. The spiraling increase in violence against women and children, the aged, and violence caused by racism, religious bigotry, and sectarianism are common knowledge. It is time that schools, colleges, and universities be given the opportunity to once again hear Gandhi's voice on *Ahimsa* by offering a short-term course on it. *Ahimsa* is "the gospel of the hour" that needs to be heard. I know I am dreaming when I say, "Gandhi must come back to save India from violence." But a good dream is better than a bad dream!

What can India do to curb violence and build a creative society of love, truth, and non-violence? The apostle of nonviolence wished India to make it her "special calling" to be a "missionary of nonviolence" to the whole world (Jesudasan, 1984, p. 38). As things are, it looks like India has forgotten the real Gandhi by the increasing violence against women and children, those with a religion or worldview that is different from one's own, and so on. It's up to his fellow countrymen and women to bring him back to our living memory and life so we can once again hear him speak truth and *ahimsa* to us and to the rest of the world. We know this significance for the one whom Gandhi ranked as the "Prince of Satyagraha," Jesus Christ declared: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:32 (New Living Translation).

References

- Banyapadhyaya, J. (1969). Social thought and political thought of Gandhi. Allied Publishers.
- Bok, S. (1993). Foreword. In Gandhi an autobiography: The story of my experiments with truth. Beacon Press.
- Bondurant, J. V. (1965). Conquest of violence: The Gandhian philosophy of conflict (rev. ed). University of California Press.
- Causes for the fall of the Roman empire. (n.d.). <http://www.tribunesandtriumphs.org/roman-empire/causes-for-the-fall-of-the-roman-empire.htm>
- Chadha, Y. (1998). Rediscovering Gandhi. Arrow Books.
- Chatterjee, M. C. (1983). Gandhi's religious thought. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Fox, R. J. (1989). Gandhian utopia: Experiments with culture. Beacon Press.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1869–/1969). In K. Kripalini (Comp.) and Y. New (Ed.). All men are brothers: The life and thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi as told in his own words (2nd ed). Columbia University Press.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1927/82). An autobiography or the story of my experiments with truth M. Desai (Trans.). Penguin.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1961). In search of the Supreme, 2. Navajivan Publishing.
- Gandhi's views on truth: Truth is God. (n.d.). Retrieved August 6, 2014. http://www.gandhi-manibhavan.org/gandhiphilosophy/philosophy_truth_truthisgod.htm
- Hick, J. (Ed.). (1970). Truth and dialogue: The relationship between world religions. Sheldon Press.
- Iyer, R. N. (1973). The moral and political thought of Mahatma Gandhi. Oxford University Press.
- Jack, H. A. (1987). Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand (mahatma). In Collier's Encyclopedia, 10. Macmillan Educational.
- Jesudasan, I. (1984). A Gandhian theology of liberation. Orbis Books.
- John. (2007). Holy Bible, New Living Translation. House (2nd ed). Tyndale, 8, 32.
- Jones, E. S. (1948). Mahatma Gandhi: An interpretation. New York, NY. Cokesbury Press.
- Kytle, C. (1969). Gandhi, soldier of nonviolence: His effect on India and the world today. Grosset & Dunlap.
- Matthew. (2007). Holy bible, new living translation (2nd ed), 25 (pp. 37–40). Tyndale House.
- McLaughlin, E. T. (1974). Ruskin and Gandhi. Bucknell University Press.
- Minz, N. (1970). Mahatma Gandhi and Hindu Christian-dialogue. Christian Literature Society.
- Mother Teresa (ND). from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Teresa_Satyagraha. En.wiki. Retrieved August 15, 2014. Retrieved August 13, 2014. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satyagraha>. In.
- Seven social sins. (n.d.). Wikipedia. Retrieved August 27, 2014. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_Social_Sins
- White, J. (2007). God is love: Love is God? http://www.makestraightrights.com/god_is_love.htm

Author Biography



Boxter Kharbteng holds two bachelor's degrees (B.L.A.; B.Th.) from then Spicer Memorial College (Pune), in addition to M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Andrews University, Michigan, USA. Prior to his retirement in 2016, he had served in various capacities, such as the editor of *Our Times*, head of Spicer's Theology department, Vice President for Academic Administration of the same institution; acting dean of the School of Theology and Religion, and a ranked professor of Theology, Ethics, and Philosophy of the University of the Southern Caribbean, Trinidad, West Indies. His writings have appeared in both academic and non-academic publications within as well as outside of India.