

Conceptualising Man, Religion, and Morality in Gandhian Thought: Towards a Pedagogy of Truth

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Abstract

Philosophical inquiry offers diverse perspectives on the nature of man, from sociological definitions of man as a social animal to existential explorations of essential human characteristics. Mahatma Gandhi, however, perceived these characterizations as incomplete, positing that man is a complex being endowed with profound essential capacities. He identified qualities such as consciousness, the capacity for reasoning, will, and passion not as mere physical attributes but as manifestations of an inherent spiritual power that constitutes man's true nature. When addressing the concepts of 'Religion' and 'Morality,' Gandhi asserted their intrinsic interconnectedness, viewing them as two facets of the same fundamental Truth. For him, the authentic nature of religion is indistinguishable from the authentic nature of morality. This paper critically examines the intricate links between Gandhi's conceptions of man, religion, and morality. It further aims to elucidate how this integrated understanding can form the basis of a coherent and transformative methodology of learning, one that moves beyond mere instruction towards the cultivation of character and the pursuit of Truth.

keywords: Truth, Religion, Good, Morality, Gandhian Philosophy, Methodology of Learning, Spirituality, Non-violence.

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Introduction

This paper endeavors to analyze the Gandhian perspective on man, religion, and morality, exploring how these interconnected concepts can contribute to the formation of a vibrant and ethically grounded society. It is an undeniable truth that human beings are endowed with a unique and complex nature, granting each individual a distinct identity. Mahatma Gandhi readily acknowledged these individual differences, yet he firmly believed that at a deeper spiritual level, all humanity is interconnected. To fully appreciate the distinctiveness of his thought and its enduring relevance in contemporary times, it is imperative to understand his nuanced conceptualizations of man, religion, and morality. This exploration will also emphasize how Gandhi's holistic vision can be articulated as a profound methodology of learning, one that prioritizes the development of the whole person—mind, body, and spirit—and aims at self-realization and social harmony. This learning extends beyond formal education, permeating all aspects of life and endeavoring to awaken the inherent goodness and spiritual potential within each individual.

The Gandhian Conception of Human Nature

The philosophical quest to understand the nature of man and his status within the cosmic order has yielded a plethora of theoretical speculations. Psychological introspection, particularly Freudian analysis, often portrays man through the lens of unconscious inclinations and primal driving forces, with subsequent psychologists identifying individuals primarily through their impulses, desires, and emotions. Concurrently, some socio-political theories, notably those underpinning social contractarianism, suggest that man is an inherently selfish individual who, for pragmatic self-interest, recognizes the necessity of social adjustments. Sociologists frequently define man primarily by his social conditioning, asserting that human beings are essentially social creatures, incapable of existence outside a societal framework. Metaphysicians, on the other hand, often approach the concept of man by seeking to unveil his universal and fundamental attributes. Aristotle, for instance, famously depicted man as a rational animal, a characteristic he believed to be universally shared.

In contrast, humanists and existentialists often contend that defining man solely in terms of class-characteristics or universal traits provides an inadequate portrayal. They argue that an individual's unique characteristics and lived experiences are far more significant than abstract, common denominators. Each person, in their view, is unique, possessing qualities peculiar to

Themselves. Existentialists, in particular, insist that any adequate description of man must give due deference to these individual idiosyncrasies and the freedom that defines human existence.

Gandhi critically engaged with these diverse perspectives, deeming many of them to be "shallow and fractional" because they often failed to underscore what he considered the essential truth about man (Lal, 2014). For Gandhi, man is an infinitely complex being. While the physical body is subject to natural laws of growth and decay, man transcends his mere physical existence. He is endowed with consciousness, reason, will, emotion, an aesthetic sense capable of discerning good and bad, and profound sensibilities. Gandhi posited that these qualities are not simply epiphenomena of physical processes but are expressions of the real man, animated by an indwelling spirit or soul. This spiritual core is not an afterthought but the very essence of human identity.

Gandhi's conception of human nature is deeply rooted in his metaphysical convictions. A staunch monist, he believed in the ultimate reality of one supreme God, whom he equated with Truth. Consequently, he viewed all phenomenal existence, including humanity, as a manifestation of this singular divine Reality. Thus, both the corporeal and spiritual aspects of man are expressions of God. However, Gandhi placed paramount importance on the spiritual dimension, considering it the true and superior aspect of human nature, intrinsically akin to the divine.

He acknowledged that each individual is a composite of the bodily and the spiritual. Initially, the bodily aspect may appear predominant, but through a process of conscious evolution, the spiritual aspect can and should become more prominent. For Gandhi, true human evolution is a journey from the predominantly bodily to the increasingly spiritual. Therefore, the "real essence of man is his spirituality" (Lal, 2014, p. 127). Capacities such as reasoning, intellect, conscience, and free will are, for Gandhi, indicators of this inherent Divinity within man. He firmly believed that if these divine elements are cultivated and utilized rightly, humanity can transform this earth into a veritable heaven.

Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of Gandhi's description of human nature is his unwavering faith in the inherent goodness within every individual. While acknowledging the external manifestations of selfishness and inhumanity, he maintained that, at the core, "essentially, there is good in him" (Lal, 2014, p. 127). This conviction was the bedrock of his belief in the essential unity of mankind. He eloquently expressed this in *Young India*: "I believe in absolute oneness

of God and therefore also of humanity...though we have many bodies, we have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction, but they have the same source” (Gandhi, *Young India*, 25-09-1924). This unity is not an abstract ideal but a lived reality, expressed both in individual life and in the broader social fabric. Gandhi believed that a universal spiritual law is active not only in individual, social, economic, and political spheres but also in unifying them into a cohesive whole. Thus, he declared, “I believe in advaita. I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that lives” (Gandhi, *Young India*, 04-12-1924). For Gandhi, understanding this inward, spiritual nature of man is paramount, as it is only through this "inward journey of life" that true self-realization and unification with all beings can be achieved. The profound implication of recognizing this essential unity is the imperative for equal treatment and universal love, which directly informs his views on religion and morality.

The Intertwined Nature of Religion and Morality

Philosophically, 'religion' and 'morality' are often treated as distinct domains. Morality is typically concerned with human conduct in this world, focusing on right and wrong actions as they pertain to lived existence. Religious values, conversely, often reference a transcendent realm or a 'beyond.' While it is possible for these two spheres to coincide, they are often considered theoretically separable. Gandhi, however, challenged this separation profoundly, asserting that "true religion and true morality are indistinguishably bound up with each other" (Lal, 2014, p. 129). He would unhesitatingly reject any religious doctrine that contradicted fundamental moral principles. While he might tolerate non-rational aspects of religious sentiment, he drew a firm line at immorality. He stated unequivocally, “As soon as we lose 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” (Gandhi, *Young India*, 24-11-1921, p. 385). This raises the pivotal question: What, then, did Gandhi understand by 'religion'?

Gandhi's primary conviction, as noted, was the singular reality of God, which he defined as Truth. All his subsequent ideas regarding religion flow from this foundational belief. If Truth is God, then the pursuit and adherence to Truth constitute true religion. While generally describing religion as an awareness of a higher power or force, Gandhi specified that this higher power is Truth, and wisdom directed towards it is religion. He provided a compelling outline of his understanding:

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 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, know its maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself. (Gandhi, Young India, 12-05-1920, p.2)

This passage suggests that, for Gandhi, religion is the active expression of the permanent, divine nature of man, an inherent goodness that seeks full manifestation. It is a purifying force that elevates human nature and instills a spiritual restlessness—a divine discontent—that propels individuals to seek self-knowledge, understand their relationship with the Divine (the Maker), and cultivate a sensitivity to righteousness. Religious aspiration, therefore, stems from a deep-seated longing to know the 'beyond,' which is ultimately the realization of God as Truth. Consequently, Gandhi proclaimed that "there is no religion higher than truth and uprightness" (Lal, 2014, p. 130).

For Gandhi, religion was not a mere hypothetical construct for intellectual satisfaction; it was a way of life, a pragmatic necessity. He believed that any religion disconnected from functional life issues and incapable of offering solutions to lived problems could not be considered true religion. True religion must be inherently practical and should permeate every facet of human existence, including the political sphere. He saw no dichotomy between the religious ideal and the moral ideal; for him, the religious path was unequivocally the path of Truth – Satyagraha. The ultimate ideal is the 'realization of God,' and one progresses on this path by adhering to Truth and Non-violence.

Furthermore, Gandhi emphasized specific religious practices such as prayer, selfless action (Niskama Karma as taught in the Bhagavad Gita, which he called his guru), surrendering to God's will by aligning one's body and mind with the call of Truth, renunciation (understood as selfless action for humanity's good, practiced within society), universal love, and resistance to evil through non-violent means. He placed particular importance on prayer, especially in times of crisis. Gandhi often retreated into quiet contemplation and prayer, emerging with renewed vitality and conviction. He described prayer not as mere petitioning but as "a yearning of the soul," the "very soul and essence of religion," and therefore, "the very core of the life of man, for no man can live without religion" (Young India, 23-01-1930). Prayer, he believed, purifies, brings one closer to God, imparts strength, and enables individuals to share in the sufferings of

others. It is also a potent means to overcome fears and negative habits, though it requires a living faith in God to be effective.

As established, the core of Gandhian religious virtue is the realization of Truth or God, which embodies the essential unity of all existence. To truly acknowledge this unity, one must transcend selfish considerations and embrace universal love. This act of self-transcendence, this living out of universal love and truth, is precisely what Gandhi understood as morality. In essence, morality for Gandhi is Satyagraha—clinging to Truth. The principles of morality are the very prerequisites that a genuine *satyagrahi* must fulfill. This is why a consideration of the cardinal virtues, as articulated by Gandhi, is essential. These virtues are not abstract ideals but practical disciplines for a devout and moral life.

Indian philosophy has long emphasized the necessity of practicing cardinal virtues to enable individuals to tread the correct path. Traditional Indian ethics often highlights five such excellences: Non-violence (*Ahimsa*), Truthfulness (*Satya*), Non-stealing (*Asteya*), Non-acceptance or Non-possession (*Aparigraha*), and Chastity (*Brahmacarya*). Gandhi embraced all these and expanded upon them, emphasizing their practice in thought, speech, and action with a unique relevance for everyday life. The aim of moral exercises, for him, is the attainment of purity, which is only complete when an individual is virtuous in deed, thought, and word.

The key virtues Gandhi elaborated upon are:

1. **Ahimsa (Non-violence):** Gandhi considered *ahimsa* the highest virtue (*ahimsa paramo dharma*). The realization of God necessitates love for every being, achievable only through *ahimsa*. No other virtue can be practiced, he argued, unless all creatures are permitted to live, as all virtues presuppose love and a measure of self-sacrifice, which is impossible without it.
2. **Satya (Truthfulness):** With Truth conceived as God, regard for Truth, or truthfulness, is a paramount virtue. Practicing *satya* involves a constant endeavor to free oneself from evils like anger, greed, infatuation, pride, and falsehood, thereby cultivating moral purity and courage.
3. **Asteya (Non-stealing):** This implies not taking the belongings of others and also refraining from keeping or holding things that are not genuinely required. Gandhi saw this as fundamental because taking is incompatible with the highest virtue of 'love.' He urged a serious commitment to this virtue.

4. **Aparigraha (Non-acceptance or Non-possession):** For Gandhi, this meant contentment with the necessities of life and not craving more. He believed the tendency to possess is a root cause of many evils, and thus, one must cultivate the discipline of living with what one has, fostering a foundation for universal love.
5. **Brahmacarya (Chastity/Self-Control):** Gandhi interpreted *Brahmacarya* broadly as the conduct that leads one to Brahman (Truth/God). This requires gaining knowledge about reality and refraining from all forms of sensual indulgence. Practically, it means leading a disciplined life, controlling all senses, not just sexual desire.
6. **Abhaya (Fearlessness):** Fearlessness is an essential precondition for practicing *Ahimsa*. It is a demanding discipline, requiring not only overcoming common fears but also freedom from the dread of starvation, embarrassment, physical violence, and even death. Gandhi repeatedly asserted that "cowards can never be moral" (Lal, 2014, p. 138). Fearlessness is the virtue of maintaining moral courage amidst adversity.
7. **Faith in God:** Gandhi believed that the practice of the aforementioned virtues is impossible without an unwavering faith in the ultimate goodness of God/Truth. Unless one truly accepts the universe's definitive nature as good, the impetus to cultivate virtue would be lacking. This faith is not merely religious but a moral prerequisite for a virtuous life.

Gandhian Thought as a Methodology of Learning

Having explored Gandhi's interconnected views on man as a spiritual being, religion as the pursuit of Truth, and morality as the active practice of truth and love, we can now articulate how these concepts coalesce into a profound methodology of learning. This Gandhian pedagogy moves far beyond mere literacy or the impartation of information, aiming instead at the holistic development of the individual and the cultivation of character conducive to self-realization and societal well-being.

Gandhi was critical of the prevailing system of education, which he felt merely produced literate individuals without fostering true understanding or moral depth. For him, "literacy is not education" (Lal, 2014, p. 140). The true aim of education should be to "bring out the inherent capacity of learners," to draw out the best in the child and man – body, mind, and spirit. This involves several key principles that form his methodology of learning:

1. **Learning as Self-Realization and Character Building:** The ultimate goal of learning, in the Gandhian framework, is self-realization—understanding one's true spiritual nature and its connection to the Divine and all of existence. This is intrinsically linked to character building. The virtues discussed earlier (*Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Aparigraha, Brahmacharya, Abhaya*) are not just moral ideals but educational objectives. Learning involves the conscious cultivation of these qualities through practice and introspection.
2. **Experiential Learning and the Pursuit of Truth (Satyagraha):** Learning is not a passive reception of facts but an active, experiential engagement with Truth. Satyagraha, or "clinging to Truth," is itself an educational process. It involves constant experimentation with Truth in one's own life and in societal interactions. This implies that learning is a continuous process of inquiry, reflection, and action aimed at discerning and living by truth.
3. **The Primacy of the Inward Journey:** True learning begins with self-knowledge and inner purification. Understanding one's own strengths, weaknesses, prejudices, and inherent goodness (the Divine spark) is crucial. Practices like prayer, introspection, and self-discipline are thus integral to the learning process, as they purify the mind and heart, making one more receptive to truth and wisdom.
4. **Learning Through Action (Karma Yoga and Dignity of Labor):** Gandhi strongly advocated for education through productive work and craft, such as spinning, weaving, carpentry, and agriculture (*Nai Talim* or Basic Education). This was not merely vocational training but a pedagogical principle. Learning a craft fosters discipline, self-reliance, respect for manual labor, and an understanding of the interconnectedness of life and the immediate environment. It connects intellectual learning with practical application, making knowledge relevant and useful. This approach embodies the principle of *Karma Yoga* – learning through selfless action and dedication to one's work.
5. **Education for Non-violence and Universal Love:** Given that *Ahimsa* is the highest virtue and love for all beings is a necessary condition for realizing Truth, a Gandhian methodology of learning must be rooted in these principles. Education should foster empathy, compassion, and a sense of kinship with all humanity and creation. It must actively counter tendencies towards exploitation, prejudice, and violence by cultivating an understanding of the essential unity of all life.
6. **Developing Fearlessness and Moral Courage:** As fearlessness (*Abhaya*) is a prerequisite for moral action and the practice of *Ahimsa*, education must aim to develop

7. moral courage. This involves encouraging critical thinking, the ability to stand up for one's convictions (based on Truth), and the willingness to face adversity for a just cause.
8. **Religion and Morality as the Foundation:** The inseparability of true religion (the pursuit of Truth/God) and true morality (living by truth and love) provides the ethical and spiritual foundation for this learning methodology. Learning is not value-neutral; it is imbued with the purpose of moral upliftment and spiritual growth. The "permanent element in human nature," the divine goodness, is what education seeks to nurture and bring to full expression.

By adopting such a methodology, Gandhi believed individuals would not only acquire skills and knowledge but also develop into morally upright, self-reliant, and socially responsible beings. They would understand the "true correspondence between the Maker and itself" (Gandhi, *Young India*, 12-05-1920, p.2) and contribute to a society based on truth, non-violence, and justice, effectively becoming masters of their own destiny rather than objects of exploitation.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to comprehend and articulate the Gandhian perspective on man, religion, and morality, analyzing how his profound insights can be synthesized into a potent and transformative methodology of learning. Gandhi's understanding of man emphasizes an inherent spiritual core and an essential goodness, which forms the basis for the unity of all humanity. His conception of religion transcends sectarian doctrines, defining it as the relentless pursuit of Truth (God) and a purifying force that elevates human nature. Morality, for Gandhi, is not an abstract code but the lived practice of truth and non-violence, epitomized in Satyagraha and cultivated through cardinal virtues.

When these interconnected concepts are viewed as a pedagogical framework, they offer a vision of education that is holistic, experiential, and ethically grounded. This Gandhian methodology of learning prioritizes character development, self-realization through the inward journey, learning through action and service, and the cultivation of universal love and fearlessness. It seeks to draw out the divine potential within each individual, fostering not just literate individuals but morally sound, self-reliant, and spiritually aware human beings capable of contributing to a just and harmonious society. In an era grappling with educational crises

and ethical dilemmas, Gandhi's vision of learning as an inward journey towards Truth offers enduring wisdom and a compelling pathway towards genuine human flourishing.

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