

INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

“Heart Unity”: Gandhi’s Dynamic Approach to Religion, Education, and Personal Transformation for Interfaith Relations

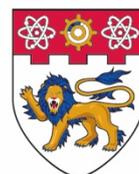
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INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

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**“Heart Unity”: Gandhi’s Dynamic Approach to Religion,
Education, and Personal Transformation for Interfaith Relations**

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Abstract

While contemporary interfaith movements aim to unite the voices of the multiple faith traditions for confronting injustices and inequities, the emergence of religious extremist groups and multicultural societies pose challenges arising from the mixing of different religions. Reflecting on Mohandas K. Gandhi's writings, this paper analyses Gandhi's vision of heart unity for creating communal harmony among the many religions of India at a time when the forces of fanaticism, bigotry, and hatred are raising their heads. Despite historical and contextual differences in the time Gandhi lived, his moral and critical approach to religion presents dynamic solutions for salvaging it from dogmatic and violent systems and for situating it in a moral context. His emphasis on the equality of all religions, while grounding himself in Hinduism, presents a model for serious and honest interfaith interactions. His insights on the issues of conversion, the study of scriptures of different religions, interfaith marriages, and parenthood can be experimented with to disrupt the othering of religions different from one's own in order to build interreligious relations, with the goal of mutual respect and deep understanding, not simply tolerance.

Introduction

At a time when the contemporary terminology of “interreligious interactions,” “interfaith dialogue,” “multifaith movement,” and “multiculturalism” was virtually absent from the general lexicon, Mohandas K. Gandhi (popularly known as Mahatma, meaning “Great Soul”) lived as a pluralist visionary offering guidelines for building interreligious harmony and relations.¹ He based his ideal of strong interreligious relations, especially between the Hindus and Muslims of India, on what he termed “heart unity.” Gandhi specifically defined “heart unity” as cultivating the understanding of equality of all religions, while staying fastened to one’s own faith, beliefs, and practices. His efforts were particularly pertinent in colonial India where differences of faith traditions, distress of minority communities, and the British rulers’ policies created a fertile ground for sentiments of mistrust and self-preservation among lay people and opportunities for fuelling divisiveness by political and religious leaders.² Although ample scholarship focuses on Gandhi’s leadership in fighting for India’s Independence Movement with nonviolent methods, his theoretical and practical approaches for developing positive relations among people of various faiths, which were integral to his philosophy of nonviolence, have not adequately been analysed.

In 1921, Gandhi wrote in the *Young India*: “I do not want my house to be walled in all sides, and my windows to be stuffed. Instead I want cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.”³ This quote crystallizes his approach to religion, which was constituted by a deep grounding in his own faith while fostering profound respect for other religions. Gandhi’s approach can be signified as “*dialectical* openness to the religious other,” using Daniel Soars’ phrase.⁴ Gandhi, however, claimed not to be a theologian, nor did he desire to engage with the people of different cultures and religions as “others.” On the contrary, as this paper will show, he used different methods to disrupt the idea of religious otherness in order to build interreligious relations, with the goal of mutual respect and understanding, not simply tolerance. A number of studies focus on Gandhi’s deep pluralism and his unique form of secularism, which encompassed respect for all religions.⁵ In addition, some studies analyse Gandhi’s encounters with

¹ Even though throughout the world’s history, interactions and dialogue within and among religious traditions and their sects existed, the World’s Parliament of Religions of 1893 was the first global gathering of leaders of different faith traditions. It has been recognised as the “occasion of the birth of formal interreligious dialogue worldwide.” Over the last four decades, interfaith interactions and the number of interfaith movements and organisations have exponentially increased all over the world. The groups advocating interfaith, intercultural, and multicultural responses to the critical issues of gender equality, diversity, environmental challenges, etc. have moved from the periphery to the centre. The fact that current existential issues in a globalised world demand a collective response and the hope that the faith traditions can play an important role marks a massive shift toward unified action for personal, social, and political change. A number of scholarly studies explore the status, value, and scope of the expanding interreligious field, e.g. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah Silverman, *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018; Fathi Mansouri, *Interculturalism at the Crossroads: Comparative Perspectives on Concepts, Policies, and Practices*, Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2017; Anna Halafoff, “Multifaith Movements and Critical Religions Pluralism: Precarity, Performativity, and Peacebuilding,” *Interreligious Relations*, 12 (2020): 1-13, available at: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/IRR-Issue-12-January-2020.pdf>; Catherine Cornille, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion of Interreligious Dialogue*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013; Diana Eck, “Challenge of Pluralism,” *The Nieman Reports*, 47.2 (1993).

² Anna Bigelow provides a historical overview of the Hindu-Muslim situation in colonial India as well as Gandhi’s and Abdul Ghaffar Khan’s efforts in confronting communal violence and the use of nonviolent resistance to overturn the British rule. Anna Bigelow, “Muslim-Hindu Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion of Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Cornille: 279-295, 285.

³ Mohandas Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 23, New Delhi: Publications Division Government of India, 215. All 98 volumes available at: <https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/gandhi-literature/collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi-volume-1-to-98.php>. Gandhi Heritage Portal offers the updated 100 volumes of CWMG at <https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/the-collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi>.

⁴ Julius Lipner quotes Daniel Soars in analysing various ways of doing comparative theology. Julius Lipner, “Comparative Theology in the Academic Study of Religion: An Inquiry,” *Interreligious Relations*, 6 (2019): 1-21, 17, available at <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/IRR-Issue-6-July-2019.pdf>.

⁵ See Nicholas Gier, “Gandhi, Deep Religious Pluralism, and Multiculturalism,” *Philosophy East and West* 64.2 (2014): 319-339; T.N. Madan, “Perspectives from Gandhi and Indian Islam,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 41.1 (2014): 153-164; Sarah Claerhout, “Gandhi, Conversion, and the Equality of Religions: More Experiments with Truth,” *Numen* 61.1 (2014): 53-82; and Malabika Pande, “Gandhi’s Secularism: An Inclusive Philosophy,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 70 (2010): 1124-1133.

various religious groups under the rubric of “interreligious dialogue.”⁶ However, no study supplies a systematic analysis of Gandhi’s theoretical arguments and moral methods, which might offer guidance to us for addressing the problems of religious fanaticism, and for developing interreligious understanding and relations for building cohesive societies.

Gandhi personally experienced the positive power of religion, but he also encountered how religions have historically caused divisions, hatred, and violence. Because of his convictions regarding the universal truths and concern for the consequential effects of religious divisions on the multireligious Indian landscape – including people of such faiths as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and many subsets of different religions – he made “communal harmony” an essential part of his constructive program. He uniquely advocated for healthy interreligious relationships through what he termed, “heart unity.” Through a close analysis of Gandhi’s writings, this paper examines how Gandhi, notwithstanding differences of doctrines, food, festivals, and languages between various religions, sought “heart unity” based on mutual respect and understanding. Gandhi’s ideal of “heart unity” goes beyond “dialectical openness” toward the religious other; it seeks to build interreligious bonds on the basis of shared humanity. Furthermore, this paper explores how Gandhi’s novel ways of defining religion in terms of ethics, his philosophical approach to bringing mutual understanding and respect, his innovative hermeneutic for reading religious texts, and his practical tactics to pulverise the walls of misunderstanding and bigotry, hold the potential for deepening interreligious relations.

The first section of this paper focuses on Gandhi’s approach, reminiscent of “critical theory,” in a Horkheimerian sense, to defining religion as an emancipating force, and forming a rational relationship with scriptures. Gandhi broadens the category of “religion,” emancipating it from the narrow and exclusive boundaries of doctrines.⁷ His approach presents religion as a dynamic force holding the promise of confronting all forms of violence: inequality, hatred, and domination. The second section explores how Gandhi, as a political and spiritual leader, theoretically justified the respect for religions other than one’s own, while identifying himself as a “Hindu.” He confronted the difficult issues of religious conversion and doctrinal superiority and presented an alternative ideal of the “equality of all religions.” The third section assesses Gandhi’s practical tactics, including creating multi-faith prayer meeting platforms, the pedagogical tools for the study of scriptures of other faiths, and imploring charitable attitudes when assessing those texts. Gandhi used these methods to foster his vision of interfaith community based on the shared goals of justice and equality. Finally, the essay evaluates Gandhi’s vision for “heart unity,” which he deemed essential to a just, progressive, free India, and how his moral and spiritual approach to the questions of interfaith marriages and conversion might offer guidance to promote a culture of interfaith harmony and to resist the tide of violent and intolerant forces engulfing India and the rest of the world.

Gandhi’s Approach to Religion: Trust in Universal Moral Truths

Having personally experienced discrimination and violence sanctioned by religions, Gandhi realised that the deep truths of religions often become obfuscated by “superstition and evil customs” leading to extremist and divisive factions. From his childhood experiences and his study, Gandhi had also observed the deep insights and spiritual tools offered by religion. Douglas Allen summarises Gandhi’s approach in which “all religions contain significant ethical and spiritual insights and contributions but they also contain impurities, multidimensional and structural violence and untruths.”⁸ To cultivate the spiritual wisdom found in different religions and confront the violence caused in the name of religion, Gandhi committed himself to a broader concept of religion: “Mine is not a religion of the prison-house. It has room for the least among God’s creation.

⁶ See Devadatta Dabholkar, “Mahatma Gandhi: A Living Embodiment of Hindu-Christian Dialogue,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 5 (1992): 1-3; A.K. Dasgupta, “Gandhi on Hindu-Muslim Marriage,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 35.11 (2000): 854+948; Anantanand Rambachan, “Hindu-Christian Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Cornille: 325-345, 339; and Bigelow, “Muslim-Hindu Dialogue.”

⁷ Critical theory seeks human “emancipation from slavery”, acts as a “liberating ... influence”, and works “to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers” of human beings. Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, tr. Matthew J. O’Connell, New York, NY: Continuum, 1972, 246.

⁸ Douglas Allen, *Mahatma Gandhi*, London: Reaktion Books, 2011, 50.

But it is proof against insolence, pride of race, religion or colour.”⁹ Gandhi’s conception of religion included the marginalised and confronted the divisive elements.

Notwithstanding India’s pluralistic and diverse cultural context and often quoted aphorisms, such as “*ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*” (“truth is one; the wise call it by various names”) and “*āno bhadrāḥ kratavo yantu viśvataḥ*” (“may noble and auspicious thoughts come to us from all over”) (Ṛg Veda 1.89.1), the tendencies of intolerance and bigotry had invaded the 20th century Indian social and political scene.¹⁰ To disrupt the surge of religious hatred, which posed a danger to his vision of a free, just, and pluralistic India, Gandhi defined religion in what he saw as the most inclusive terms, beyond the “prison-house” of dogma.

Religion as Morality

Gandhi focused on the shared moral truths and principles found in all the world’s religions. While religious and political leaders looked to theological, legal, and ritualistic differences among religions, Gandhi defined religion in inclusive terms. He focused on the moral virtues of love, compassion, justice, tolerance, and human goodwill to fill the chasm among religions. He then sought to bring the world’s religions together under moral objectives such as justice, dignity, and concern for our fellow beings. Gandhi perceived an inextricable relationship between religion and morality, and boldly claimed: “I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality.”¹¹ Thus, he made morality and reason the yardstick with which to assess religious doctrines and practices.

To substantiate his definition of religion as morality, Gandhi used the Indic term *dharma*. *Dharma* is derived from its Sanskrit root *dhṛ* meaning, “to hold,” “to support,” or “to sustain,” and defies a single definition or definite interpretation. However, the term is used in Indic traditions (also known as Dharma Traditions) for ethics, law, duty, personal calling, and religion.¹² Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist religious and philosophical traditions use this concept differently, but share the core idea as “ethics.”

Thus, *dharma* as “ethics” encompasses moral principles that guide human conduct, laws that maintain order, and duties that lead to individual fulfilment and social harmony. Gandhi defined *dharma* in terms of ethics and endeavoured to live according to ethical disciplines. He held that, “[D]harma means morality. I do not know any *dharma* which is opposed to, or goes beyond morality. *Dharma* is morality practised to its ultimate limits.”¹³ Yet he also transformed ethical disciplines as tools for his nonviolent activism. Within the codes of morality and disciplines of India’s philosophical and religious traditions, nonviolence (*ahimsā*)¹⁴ holds the essential and the primary place. The common list of five essential ethical disciplines includes, nonviolence, truth, non-stealing, control of the senses, and non-possession—and nonviolence precedes the other four.¹⁵ Gandhi promoted observance of all five disciplines in his personal life and makes nonviolence central to his philosophy and approach to interreligious relations.

While scholars of Indic traditions often use the term *dharma* to refer to legalistic rules as well as caste and gender duties, and believers of religion speak in communal terms, Gandhi interprets *dharma* as one’s own conduct. “One’s *dharma* is a personal possession. One is oneself responsible for preserving it.” Then, he

⁹ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 23, 216.

¹⁰ Scholars cite textual references to show Indian civilization’s pluralistic tendencies and “the acceptance of diversity and dialogue.” Priyanka Upadhyaya, “Intercultural Dialogue: Lineage and Practice in the Indian Subcontinent,” in *Interculturalism at the Crossroads: Comparative Perspectives on Concepts, Policies, and Practices*, ed. Fethi Mansouri, Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2017: 195-212, 195.

¹¹ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 21, 74.

¹² Since the concept of “*dharma*” is so central to the traditions that originated in India, namely Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, they are categorised as Dharma Traditions.

¹³ Jain Pushparaj analyses Gandhi’s notion of *dharma*. Jain Pushparaj, “Mahatma Gandhi’s Notion of Dharma: An Explication,” in *Dharma: The Categorical Imperative*, eds Ashok Vohra, Arvind Sharma, and Mrinal Miri, New Delhi: D.K. Printworld Ltd., 2005: 103-112, 109-10.

¹⁴ *Ahimsā*, literally, “to not cause harm,” has been generally translated as nonviolence, non-injury, and non-harming. Gandhi used the term “nonviolence” and also interpreted in terms of a method to confront violence, as well as defined it positively as love and compassion.

¹⁵ Hindu yoga system’s five disciplines (*yama*), namely nonviolence (*ahimsā*), truth (*satya*), non-stealing (*acaurya*), sexual control (*brahmacharya*), and non-possession (*aparigraha*), are identical to Jain Dharma’s five *anuvratas* or vows. Buddha Dharma’s *pañcaśīla* or five ethical precepts have a slight variation. Four of these precepts are identical with Jain and Hindu traditions, but it includes abstaining from intoxication instead of non-possession.

categorically adds that, “What can be defended in and through a group is not *dharma*, it is a dogma.”¹⁶ Gandhi’s move to define religion in terms of “morality,” especially nonviolence toward all beings, is consistent with the interfaith movements that identify such mandates as the “Golden Rule,” found variously in religions, to negotiate their dogmatic differences. The “morality of the Golden Rule” offers “an essential ingredient” to work toward reconciliation in the Judeo-Christian religions as well as to build a culture of reciprocity of extending goodwill to not only our friends and neighbours, but to those who are strangers and even to our adversaries.¹⁷

Intriguingly, Gandhi himself broadened the definition of nonviolence by defining it not simply as refraining from acts (including speech and thoughts) of violence toward others but performing acts of compassion and good will. His rendering of nonviolence (i.e. *ahimsā*) as compassion seeks to embrace the “Golden Rule” in both its negative and positive forms: on the one hand, inculcating an attitude of love and compassion for all, irrespective of different religious orientations; on the other, confronting any acts of hate and bigotry as violent. For example, Gandhi considered hateful and abusive speech a form of violence. Karen Armstrong, an advocate for applying the Golden Rule globally, warns, “unless we learn to apply the Golden Rule globally, treating all peoples, all nations as we would wish to be treated ourselves, we are unlikely to have a viable world to hand on to the next generation.”¹⁸ Armstrong’s emphasis on the Golden Rule is akin to Gandhi’s notion of religion as a way of acting to create harmonious interreligious relations and shared human flourishing.

In 1926, many years before the “golden rule” came to be perceived as a shared truth of religions, Gandhi defined the golden rule thusly: “the golden rule of conduct, therefore, is mutual toleration seeing that we will never all think alike and that we shall always see Truth in fragment and from different angles of vision.”¹⁹ In 1926, he warned, “We cannot live in peace if the Hindu will not tolerate the Mohammedan [Islamic] form of worship of God and his manners and customs or if the Mohammedans will be impatient of Hindu idolatry or cow-worship.”²⁰ Gandhi provides specific examples of differences. He accepts the human inability to completely understand the truth of others, and he reasoned for “mutual toleration” of doctrinal differences while advocating the *dharma* of nonviolence and compassion in the treatment of others.

Truth is God and Many Names of One God: An Approach to Inclusive Spirituality

Gandhi defined religion as morality to create interreligious and intrareligious (within many sects of religions) harmony, which was essential to his vision of an independent India. In addition, he was aware that theological variations in formulating a conception of God or Supreme Being also created divisiveness among religious and non-religious people. Gandhi, who integrated religious virtues with his political aspirations, proceeded to define God as Truth. By doing so, he sought to provide the most inclusive and non-sectarian vision of God. In this rendering he drew on the ancient Hindu dictum of the Ultimate Reality (*Brahman*) as *Sat* (Truth, Being), which is a transcendent and inclusive reality, beyond any humanly imagined classifications. However, when Gandhi described God, he did so consistently with his definition of religion as morality. In 1925, he wrote: “To me God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience.”²¹ Gandhi defines God in terms of the relational virtues of fearlessness, truth and in terms of morality and love. For him, defining religion in the most inclusive and non-dogmatic terms was the key to strengthen interfaith relations.

After having met many atheists, who were people of integrity and care, Gandhi revised his definition of God, as “Truth is God.” Furthermore, Jainism, Buddhism, and some other Indian religio-philosophical schools

¹⁶ Pushparaj, “Mahatma Gandhi’s Notion of Dharma,” 107.

¹⁷ Ionut Untea further elucidates this point: “In the spirit of the Chicago Declaration, the authors of *In Search of Global Ethical Standards* recommended two ethical principles considered vital for ethics at individual, social, and political levels: ‘(1) Every human being must be treated humanely. (2) Do unto others as you want others to do unto you. This Rule is part of every great religious tradition.’” Ionut Untea, “Contemporary Uses of the Golden Rule of Reciprocity in Abrahamic Interfaith Discourses,” *Studies in Religion*, 47.1 (2018): 107-136, 120.

¹⁸ Karen Armstrong, “A Charter for Compassion,” *Religions/Adyān*, A scholarly journal published by the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue 1 (2011): 21-28, 24, available at: <https://www.dicid.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/1En.pdf>.

¹⁹ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 36, 344.

²⁰ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 19, 20. Gandhi uses Mohammedan (literally “follower of Muhammad), Mussalman, and Muslim interchangeably. “Mohammedan” is considered a misnomer by the majority of Muslims.

²¹ In 1925 Gandhi responded to a friend who expressed concern about Gandhi’s use of the term “God” in taking a pledge by Congress workers. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 30, 334.

do not adhere to theistic beliefs, defying belief in God as an essential property of religion. In a 1931 speech in Lausanne, Switzerland, Gandhi explained the subtle distinction between “God is Truth” and “Truth is God.” His decision to invert this equation resulted from his interaction with atheists: “In their passion for discovering truth, they [atheists] have not hesitated even to deny the very existence of God – from their own point of view rightly. And it was because of their reasoning that I saw that I was not going to say ‘God is Truth,’ but ‘Truth is God.’”²² For Gandhi, Truth was the basis of all beings, our existence, not limited by any particular name. “Proclaiming ‘Truth is God’ also avoids the destructive ways in which personal gods have been used to wage wars and further national goals,” writes Nicholas Gier.²³ However, it is important to note that in his own life Gandhi remained connected to his personal Hindu God, Lord Rama; he claimed Rama to be another name for God.

For Gandhi, his dictum “God is Truth” was not inconsistent with his devotion to Rama as his personal God. However, some of Gandhi’s adversaries accused him of being “Hindu” and sectarian. Gandhi explained his logic to a group of Hindu and Muslim refugees who were victims of religious violence: “Call Him Ishwar, Allah, God, Ahur Mazda. His names are as innumerable as there are men. He is one without a second.... He is timeless, formless stainless. Such is my Rama.”²⁴ Toward the end of his life, when clashes between Hindus and Muslims began to grow, Gandhi incorporated the singing of a popular devotional song in his daily prayer meetings: “Ishwar [a Sanskrit term for Lord] and Allah [a name of God in Islam] both are your name, Oh God. May you grant us wisdom!” Gandhi had made every effort to engender Hindu-Muslim unity along with fighting for India’s independence from the colonial regime. He developed many constructive approaches to strengthen interreligious relations in India, a country with a history of multiple faith traditions.

Gandhi’s Hermeneutic to Create Interreligious Relations

Gandhi uniquely combined religion, politics, asceticism, and social action in order to create a program for India’s political freedom as well as upliftment of all, irrespective of differences in religion, caste, or gender.²⁵ Gandhi founded *ashrams* (hermitages; spiritual communes) to give concrete expression to his conception of a free, harmonious, and self-sustaining society. The eleven ashram vows – truth, nonviolence, non-hoarding, etc. – included the vow of “Equality of Religions” (*sarva dharma samantva*), a commitment that he considered integral to his political and social vision for India. For Gandhi, “vow” meant “unflinching determination, and helps us against temptations. Determination is worth nothing, if it bends before discomfort.”²⁶ That Gandhi places respect for religions in the same list of the sacred commitments to the disciplines of nonviolence, truth, and self-control is revealing. The following sections elaborate on Gandhi’s approach to making “equality of all religions” an essential vow. His views on the question of “conversion” can offer valuable insights for modern conversations on interfaith relations and understanding.

Equality of Religions not Tolerance

Due to the diverse religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent, Gandhi deemed the unity among various religions of India essential to the political freedom of India as well as the personal and social flourishing of its people. Initially Gandhi advocated the virtue of *sahishñutā* (tolerance) toward all religions, other than one’s own belief system. Nevertheless, Gandhi later realised the negative implications of the terms “tolerance” and “respect” for other religions: “Tolerance may imply a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one’s own and respect suggests a sense of patronising whereas ahimsa teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as we accord to our own....”²⁷ Thus, Gandhi expresses dissatisfaction

²² Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 54, 268. The speech was published in *Young India*, 31 December 1931.

²³ Gier, “Gandhi, Deep Religious Pluralism, and Multiculturalism,” 331.

²⁴ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 93, 8.

²⁵ In my book, *Gandhi’s Ascetic Activism: Renunciation and Social Action*, I analyse how Gandhi creatively incorporates ascetic practices for social action. Veena Howard, *Gandhi’s Ascetic Activism: Renunciation and Social Action*, New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013.

²⁶ Mohandas Gandhi, *From Yeravada Mandir (Ashram Observances)*, trans. Valji Govindji Desai, Ahmedabad: Jitendrai T. Dasai and Navajivan Mudranalaya, 1932, Chapter 13. Available at: <https://www.gandhiashramsevagaram.org/from-yeravada-mandir/chapter-13-vows-importance.php>.

²⁷ Gandhi writes this in a 1930 letter to Narandas Gandhi. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 50, 78.

with the rubric of “tolerance” and the hubris of “respect” for other people’s religions. Both options are insufficient as they arise out of a faith in the superiority of one’s own religious tradition.

Gandhi suggests alternatively a third way to approach other faith traditions – that is to see all religions as equals, and to see them as repositories of wisdom. He explained in 1935: “Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we would not only not hesitate, but would think it our duty, to blend into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths.”²⁸ Thus, not only do we see each religion as valid, but we learn the best from each of them. Gandhi demonstrated this in his own life and philosophy as he adopted diverse teachings of various religions, including Jainism, Christianity, and Islam, and rejected some of the teachings of his own Hinduism. He was aware that the beliefs and practices of some religions might present challenges for the outsider of that religion; therefore, he urged humility in approaching other religions. According to Gandhi, “Equal-mindedness helps us to solve many difficulties and even when we criticise anything, we express ourselves with a humility and a courtesy, which leave no sting behind them.”²⁹ Gandhi presents an antidote to religious misunderstandings that may cause intolerance and bigotry. The attitude of “humility” and “courtesy” toward the teachings of other religions comprise the soul of interfaith movements.

Importantly, Gandhi’s argument for the equality of religions presupposes his notion of “real religion.” He often lamented that many clergy, brahmins, and priests distort the teachings of their religions and mislead people. In 1940, Gandhi responded to a question by a Chinese visitor, saying “real religion” is that “which inspires one from within with a spirit of love and service.”³⁰ For Gandhi, the test of true religion was compassion and goodwill for all. A person of religion “will not wish ill even to his enemy. Therefore, if people always want to follow the path of religion, they must do nothing but good.”³¹

Furthermore, he defined religion not in terms of “sectarianism,” but in terms of a unifying force: “[religion] means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe.... This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonises them and gives them reality.”³² Such an understanding of religion resists the idea of the perfection of any one religion and opens up the possibility of accepting the moral truths embedded in all religions. “True knowledge of religion,” he argued, “breaks down the barriers between faith and faith. Cultivation of tolerance for other faiths will impart to us a truer understanding of our own.”³³ Thus, on the one hand, Gandhi accepted the equality of all religions; and, on the other hand, he qualified what he accepted as “religion.” If religion propagates violence, superstitions, sectarianism, divisions, and such customs as untouchability in Hinduism, then it is “masquerading under the name of religion.”³⁴ In 1948, when Hindu and Sikh women were being abducted in the newly formed Pakistan, he condemned those acts as “irreligion,” even though some justified them within Islam.³⁵ For him, religion was not simply a belief system, nor was it following all that was written in scriptures, as most understand it, but it was the source of compassion, spirit of love, and harmony among of all people.

Respect for All Religions and the Question of Conversion

For Gandhi the principle of the equality of all religions implied neither an invitation to change one’s faith, nor did it suggest blindly accepting everything found in religions. In January 1928, he expressed his views to

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁹ Gandhi, *From Yeravada Mandir* (1932), Chapter 11. Available at: <https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/from-yeravada-mandir/chapter-11-tolerance.php>.

³⁰ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 78, 119. Gandhi responds to the question, “Can religion make a man moral?”.

³¹ In 1910 Gandhi published a eulogy at the death of Tolstoy and focused on the definition of religion. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 11, 176.

³² In 1940, Gandhi responds to a question. *The Collected Works*, Vol. 77, 292.

³³ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 50, 79.

³⁴ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 62, 249.

³⁵ On January 27, only a few days before his assassination by a Hindu fanatic, Gandhi pleaded for unity and good will among the people of different faiths and condemned the abduction of women: “Nowhere does Islam bid people to carry away women and keep them in such a disreputable condition. It is irreligion, not religion. It is worship of Satan, not of God.” Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 98, 317.

Members of the Council of International Federation. Devadatta Dabholkar summarises the main points of Gandhi's speech:

After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that (i) all religions are true; (ii) all religions have some error in them; (iii) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to one as one's close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith; therefore no thought of conversion is possible. The aim of Fellowship should be to help a Hindu to become a better Hindu, a Mussalman [Muslim] to become a better Mussalman, and a Christian a better Christian.³⁶

Gandhi offers a model for developing interfaith relations founded in mutual acceptance of different faith traditions. He focuses on being true to one's family's religion and to improve on one's faith and help others do so as well, instead of instigating change of faith. In 1946, when instances of religious extremism and intolerance as well as the increased activity of conversion to other religions overwhelmed the social and political discourse, Gandhi said:

All religions are branches of the same mighty tree, but I must not change over from one branch to another for the sake of expediency. By doing so, I cut the branch on which I am sitting. Therefore, I always feel the changeover from one religion to another very keenly, unless it is a case of spontaneous urge, a result of inner growth. Such conversions by their very nature cannot be on a mass scale and never to save one's life or property or for temporal gain.³⁷

While Gandhi showed an inclusive attitude toward all religions, he cringed at the thought of leaving one's religion for another. With regard to conversion, Gandhi's use of such ideas as "spontaneous urge" and a "result of inner growth" are consistent with his belief in the equality of all religions. Some may find inspiration from another religion and feel at home in that religion, but conversion due to fear, social pressure, or money was a form of violence towards one's indigenous belief system. Gandhi's views on the equality of religion challenge those who affirm respect for other religions, but who also propagate their religions as superior. Gandhi not only confronted violence toward the people of different faiths, but also resisted missionary activity that subordinated one religion to another.

Sarah Claerhout characterises Gandhi's emphasis on adhering to one's religion as "swadeshi spirit," namely, staying within one's ancestral religion.³⁸ Even though the term *swadeshi* (one's own region), has been primarily used in the context of economic goods, Gandhi implied it broadly as an insistence on using regional languages, indigenous agriculture and health technologies, and ancestral forms of worship. For him a move to another religion incites a sort of epistemic violence toward the religious rituals and knowledge systems that have been generated for centuries. "I cannot understand a man changing the religion of his forefathers at the insistence of another," writes Gandhi.³⁹ For Gandhi religion was not simply a dogma, but is comprised of the entire organism of the culture: festivals, songs, clothing, dance, literature, etc. Gandhi, however, allows conversion if it is spontaneous and results from "inner growth." In this way Gandhi keeps individual integrity intact, while questioning the missionary movements of religions.

Claerhout analyses Gandhi's views as follows: "If Christians were to understand that genuine conversion takes place within one's own tradition, they would stop investing in proselytism. Missionary activity, Gandhi suggests, sprouts from a flawed interpretation of Christianity, which understands the message 'Go Ye unto All the World' narrowly and misses its spirit."⁴⁰ Gandhi's repulsion toward missionizing may appear to be a form of *violence* toward the beliefs of those who unequivocally understand the mandate to spread the good news of salvation through a certain path. However, Gandhi offered a model for building interfaith relations

³⁶ Dabholkar, "Mahatma Gandhi: A Living Embodiment," 1. For a complete discussion, see: Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 41, 112-115.

³⁷ In 1946 Gandhi discussed the situation with his close associates. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 50, 78.

³⁸ Claerhout, "Gandhi, Conversion, and the Equality," 62.

³⁹ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 38, 144.

⁴⁰ Claerhout, "Gandhi, Conversion, and the Equality," 62-63.

founded on the conviction in the true equality of religions, which leaves no room for proselytization and consents to conversion only in the case of an individual’s spontaneous change of heart.

Applying the “Test of Reason” to Religion: Toward Interreligious Harmony

Gandhi realised that certain doctrines, laws, and beliefs in scriptures caused harm to individuals within a religion and among religions. He argued for “truth” in all religions and “equality,” but at the same time cautioned against *hamartia* in each religious tradition. According to Gandhi, all religions have “some error” in them. Gandhi pointed out what he considered errors, not just in his own Hinduism, but in other religions as well. He faced stark opposition, not just from those within Hinduism, but the believers of other faiths. Gandhi applied the test of reason in accepting some and rejecting other teachings found in all religions:

Every formula of every religion has in this age of reason, to submit to the acid test of reason and universal justice if it is to ask for universal assent. Error can claim no exemption even if it can be supported by the scriptures of the world.⁴¹

For example, Hinduism’s practices of caste and gender-based discrimination and untouchability, even though sanctioned by some scriptures, could not stand the test of reason. For Gandhi, within the traditional systems based in *dharma*, they did not even meet Hinduism’s own ethical standards of the adherence to nonviolence and the philosophy of the unity of all.

Gandhi’s critical analysis of religious practices evoke Horkheimer’s “critical theory” that identifies practices and “conditions that lead to harm and violence, resistance toward them, and the creation of more just, equitable, and non-violent conditions in their place.”⁴² Although unaware of such academic discourse, Gandhi developed his theory to not only confront unjust customs, but also to improve religions and harness their power to create nonviolent conditions for all.

Gandhi realised that transformation necessitates an acknowledgement of the imperfections of religions. “Gandhi’s doctrine of the equality of religions affirmed also their shared fallibility,” writes Anantanand Rambachan.⁴³ Gandhi therefore challenges any sentiments of pride and hubris among followers of religions, and offers two tools to assess any mandate sanctioned in scriptures. First, apply the test of reason to the rules and customs that may appear inconsistent with the overall philosophy and ethics of a religion. Second, examine whether a law or decree sanctioned by a scripture does not support “universal justice,” in other words, whether it is unjust to one group or people. For example, Gandhi rejected the norms and customs that perpetuated the practice of untouchability in Hinduism: “In my opinion, untouchability is a blot upon humanity and therefore upon Hinduism. It cannot stand the test of reason.”⁴⁴ For him, this practice of untouchability was inconsistent with Hinduism’s teachings of truth, nonviolence, and the unity of all beings.

Despite his efforts to eradicate the heinous practice of untouchability, Gandhi has been blamed for safeguarding the Hindu *varṇāśrama dharma* (the duties based on the birth and stage of life), understood as perpetuating hereditary occupations and supporting untouchability. B.R. Ambedkar, one of Gandhi’s contemporaries, openly criticised Gandhi for being an apologist of this “odious” caste system saying, “the outcaste is a bye-product of the caste system.”⁴⁵ Gandhi was aware of the violence caused by the modern interpretations of the *varṇa* system, but he also knew that this structure developed and protected indigenous knowledge systems.⁴⁶ The caste organisation offered an ecosystem that spawned and supported regional methods of natural medicine, agricultural tools, as well as local customs of worship, marriage, stories, dance, music, and visual arts. Gandhi, however, while defending the traditional system of family trades, rejected any birth-based hierarchy and inequality. Furthermore, his views evolved overtime as he directly experienced the

⁴¹ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 30, 311.

⁴² Halafoff, “Multifaith Movements,” 3.

⁴³ Rambachan, “Hindu-Christian Dialogue,” 339.

⁴⁴ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 30, 376.

⁴⁵ Gandhi published the entire statement by Ambedkar, “Dr. Ambedkar and Caste,” in 1933 *Harijan*. Even though he terms Ambedkar “bitter,” he sympathises with him for his feelings. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 59, 227.

⁴⁶ Ashok Das Gupta, “Is Caste System a Kind of Indigenous Knowledge System?” *Antrocom Online Journal of Anthropology* 8.1 (2012). Available at: <http://www.antrocom.net/upload/sub/antrocom/080112/08-Antrocom.pdf>.

hegemonies of and ostracization by the upper caste Hindus. He sought to disrupt the caste system not through legal means but by attacking the untouchability through physically transgressing the boundaries imposed by the system. India's first prime minister Jawahar Lal Nehru recalled Gandhi's words, "If Untouchability goes, the caste system goes."⁴⁷ To this end, Gandhi admitted people from all castes and no castes in his ashrams and advanced inter-caste marriages between upper caste Hindus and untouchables—a bold move in his time. In 1946, he "made the startling announcement that no marriage would be celebrated in his ashram at Sevagram, unless one of the parties was 'untouchable' at birth."⁴⁸ He also used moral methods including fasting and public pressure to transform the conscience of the caste Hindus and the laws of temple entrance. Toward the end of his life, Gandhi made the harshest declaration, "if untouchability live[s], Hinduism must die."⁴⁹ In this claim, he did not hesitate to abdicate his fidelity to his own Hindu faith because of his adherence to a "real religion," imbued with love and compassion for all, not violence and superstitions.

In the same vein, he opposed certain unjust practices in other religions, including religious conversion, child marriages, torture, and "stoning to death."⁵⁰ In numerous conversations with the followers of Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Islam, Gandhi challenged customs and creeds (e.g. rules about consuming meat, cow protection, purity laws, treatment of women, and dogmatic hubris) that justify violence and relegate humans to a lower status. Some might consider Gandhi's critiques as an impediment to establishing religious harmony. However, Gandhi sought true unity of hearts, which requires challenging draconian laws while honouring the truth in different traditions.

His attempt to put all religious claims to the "acid test of reason" and "universal justice" were motivated by his zeal for building strong and trusting communal bonds in the following ways. First, for Gandhi, communal trust requires not only finding a common ground, such as the "Golden Rule," among religious traditions, but also openly engaging with the issues that create distrust and deep chasms within and between religions. Second, he believed that to build strong communal relations, each religion has to purge itself from the ill-customs that degrade its own segments of people on the basis of gender, caste, and various forms of hubris. Finally, Gandhi considered that the project of interreligious harmony mandates working for universal justice, as promised by the teachings of various religions. Thus, any doctrines and practices antagonistic to the truth of justice must be challenged.

Gandhi's Practical Approaches to Disrupt Interreligious Antagonism

The foregoing discussion has outlined how Gandhi theoretically defined religion in terms of morality and truth, and how he argued for the equality of all religions while simultaneously challenging the doctrines and practices that cause distrust and hatred among followers of different religions. He examined categories of religion, truth, and morality in order to create a practical program for building strong interreligious relations. Gandhi once said, "Philosophy to be worth anything has got to be applied in one's own life."⁵¹ Gandhi's life and works reveal that his philosophy pertains to the realm of action. The following section focuses on the specific practical strategies Gandhi deployed to bring heart unity to religions at a time when the forces of bigotry, hatred, and religious violence were rampant in India. Gandhi sought concrete acts of "kindness" from both Hindus and Muslim friends, not simply speeches.⁵² His strategies hold the promise of building strong interfaith relations in our contemporary world.

⁴⁷ B.R. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, 26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁹ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 96, 380.

⁵⁰ Gandhi published an article, "Stoning to Death" that dealt with the question of whether the "stoning method was enjoined in the Koran." Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 30, 311. He applied the same "test of reason and universal justice" to this practice as he did for other customs sanctioned in Hinduism and other religions.

⁵¹ Howard, *Gandhi's Ascetic Activism: Renunciation and Social Action*, 38.

⁵² Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 18, 157.

Multi-faith Prayer Meetings

Gandhi is considered to be the progenitor of “inter-religious worship,” even though he himself never used this phrase, nor did he organise his “Prayer Meetings” like contemporary interreligious worship events.⁵³ In India’s cultural context, numerous spiritual and political leaders such as King Ashoka, Sant Kabir, and Swami Vivekananda espoused inclusivist attitudes toward religions, but Gandhi uniquely created the platform of “Prayer Meetings” in which he personally practiced and publicly demonstrated the value of learning from other religions. In his personal life, Gandhi drew inspiration from various religious and spiritual sources and made the reading of scriptures an important part of his daily regimen. His writings reveal how distraught he was by violence inflicted in the name of religion and how he sought to confront it. Gandhi’s *ashrama* regimen and vows were intended to train activists in moral methods, while prayer meetings became performances intended to bring together followers of different religious traditions and publicly demonstrate the value of shared spiritual teachings.

Phillips Talbot, an American journalist, travelled with Gandhi in 1947 – a time when India was rife with communal violence. He provides an account of Gandhi’s prayer meetings:

In his daily prayer meeting Gandhi meets the world; this is his best platform. Welcoming all who will come to his open-air meeting, he proceeds through a ritual that reveals his eclectic faith. One by one, the audience hears an extract from Buddhist scriptures (suggested by a Japanese monk who stayed at Gandhi’s ashram until he was interned at Pearl Harbor); several recitations from revered Hindu writings; ashramite vows (truth, nonviolence, nonstealing, celibacy, nonpossession, removal of untouchability, etc.); readings from the Quran; a Zend Avesta (Zoroastrian) quotation; a hymn which may be Hindi, Bengali, or some Christian song in translation; and a joyous tuneful recital of the name of Ram, to the accompaniment in cadence of hand-clapping. This devotional exercise is followed each day by a talk in which Gandhi gives expression to almost any thought exercising his mind.⁵⁴

Talbot’s snapshot of the well-orchestrated content of Gandhi’s prayer meetings shows Gandhi incorporating religious readings from followers of many faiths. Gandhi spiritualized his political efforts and demonstrated the unity of the sacred and the secular, public and private, and religion and politics. Gandhi’s favourite hymn, *Raghupati rāghav rājārām/ patit pāvan sītārām* (“O Lord Rāma, descendent of the Raghu clan, Lord Rāma / protector of the downtrodden, Sitā and Ramā”) was sung in the prayer meetings, which included the verse, *Ishvara, Allah are both your name. Give us wisdom to understand this*. In 1946, in a talk to refugees, he stated, Call him Ishvara, Allah, God, Ahur Mazda. His names are innumerable as there are men.⁵⁵ Gandhi’s intent was not simply to publicly display examples of interfaith harmony and unity, but to create a platform where participants were able to listen to and process the shared teachings of religions. In his personal life, he drew inspiration and friends from many religions and strove to follow a religion not of the “prison-house.”

Gandhi’s emphasis on the study of sacred texts and the creation of his prayer meetings were motivated by a practical goal of creating a safe community for people of all faiths and traditions in India. In independent India, when the newly formed nation was facing violence among religious groups, on January 13, 1948, he expressed his ultimate wish at a prayer meeting: “So my wish is that Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians, and Muslims who are in India should continue to live in India and India should become a country where everyone’s life and property are safe. Only then will India progress.”⁵⁶ Gandhi invoked the teachings of those religions to guide the warring groups to reconcile and halt the tide of violence.

⁵³ Michael Amaladoss, SJ, “Inter-religious Worship,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Cornille, 87-98.

⁵⁴ Gandhi incorporated many hymns from scriptures of different religions. Phillips Talbot, “With Gandhi in Noakhali, February 16, 1947,” in *An American Witness to India’s Partition* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 205-6. Quoted in Veena Howard, “Gandhi’s Experiments in Spiritual Disciplines: Hermeneutic to Disrupt Structures of Violence and to Create Interfaith Understanding,” in *Spirituality and Deep Connectedness: Views on Being Fully Human*, eds Michael C. Brannigan and Fred Boehrer, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018, 95.

⁵⁵ Margret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and the Challenge of Religious Diversity: Religious Pluralism Revisited* (New Delhi: Promilla & Publishers Co., 2005), 131.

⁵⁶ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 98, 227.

However, in the culminating years of India's colonial struggle, Gandhi was blamed by zealous followers of religions for taking sides with one religion or the other. In a 1947 prayer meeting, Gandhi denied such allegations and affirmed, "I belong to the Muslims no less than to the Hindus. I belong to the Sikhs, Parsis, and Christians in the same measure."⁵⁷ Gandhi, who repeatedly aligned with Hinduism "by birth and faith," focused on the Hindu teaching of the ultimate unity of all beings. Sadly, Mahatma Gandhi, who was pleading for peace, was himself assassinated on his way to address his evening prayer meeting on 30 January 1948, by a man with a narrow view of Hinduism who abhorred the reasons behind Gandhi's methods of nonviolent resistance and respect for other faiths. The news of his death shocked the nation and thus mollified the conflagration of violence amongst religious communities.

Study of Scriptures

Gandhi intended not only to publicly display interfaith harmony and unity, but also emphasised the study of religious texts, which offer repositories of wisdom. In his personal life, he drew inspiration from many religions and had friends and followers of many religions. As noted above, he often remarked, "My religion is not a religion of the prison-house." He uniquely argued for instruction in schools focused on the "universal essentials of religion." In his personal life he had benefited from the deep insights offered by a variety of religions. In 1928, Gandhi wrote in *Young India*:

A curriculum of religious instruction must include a study of the tenets of faiths other than one's own. For this purpose the students should be trained to cultivate the habit of understanding and appreciating the doctrines of various great religions of the world in a spirit of reverence and broad-minded tolerance.⁵⁸

Gandhi adds a salient caveat in the study of scripture saying that students must study primary texts. The only example of such study in modern times exist in the Classics programs in centres for higher learning. For him, a study of scriptures of other faith traditions holds the promise to create deeper interfaith relations. Gandhi was cognisant of the fact that extremist groups draw on select passages from religious texts to bolster their views of communal divisions, or to justify unjust treatment of minority groups within a religion. Gandhi asked for applying "the spirit of reverence" while studying scriptures and argued for rejecting passages that perpetuate injustice and violence.

Gandhi also addressed those orthodox religious groups that discourage their followers to study texts of other religions fearing they might cause confusion about one's own faith. In 1928, he published an article, "Religious Education," through which he argued for incorporating study of religion in the school curriculum. Gandhi says, "Let no one even for a moment entertain the fear that a reverent study of other religions is likely to weaken or shake one's faith in one's own." He continues, "Study and appreciation of other religions need not cause a weakening of that regard; it should mean extension of that regard to other religions."⁵⁹

Gandhi considered religions as an important part of culture, each religion representing a unique epistemic system including literature, art, music, rituals, ethics, and philosophy. He argued for the "assimilation of the best" in other religions, not merely detached or critical reading of texts.⁶⁰ He warned against groundless fear that keeps people from engaging with the texts of other religions, which he characterised as "a nightmare of fear."⁶¹ He emphasised that study and understanding of other religions will help cultivate respect for other religions and their followers. The study of scriptures of other faiths can also result in choosing select passages to criticize those faiths. Gandhi provided advice in this regard saying, it is "no business of mine to criticise the scriptures of other faiths or to point out their defects. It is and should be, however, my privilege to proclaim and practice the truths that there may be in them."⁶² If certain content in scriptures "present difficulties," he advised

⁵⁷ On 1 May 1947, Gandhi responded to his critics who accused him of taking the side of Hindus. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 95, 5.

⁵⁸ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 42, 458.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 459.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 459.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 459.

⁶² In the 1937 article, "Need for Tolerance." See Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 70, 372.

seeking the help of devout followers and experts of that faith for clarifying the meaning of the text. Gandhi presented a way to create strong interfaith relations on the basis of serious understanding of each other’s faith traditions.

“Heart Unity”: Gandhi’s Model for Interfaith Relations

Gandhi underscored the importance of constructive actions that involved physically transgressing the walls of segregation through direct communion with the people of other faiths. He made “communal harmony” central to Indian independence: “There are innumerable communities like Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, and others in India and unless all the communities are united, we shall continue to be weak and sickly. That is to say we shall remain slaves and even if we achieve independence there will be no happiness in it.”⁶³ Specifically, Gandhi expressed concern about distrust between Hindus and Muslims, which was making his vision of a united India only a dream.

From the very beginning of his mission to free India, he made communal harmony, specifically Hindu-Muslim unity, central to fighting against the British rule: “Ever since I came to India I have made it my profession to work for communal harmony, and I wish that though our religions are different we may live in amity like brothers.”⁶⁴ He invoked the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, Guru Nanak Dev, Jesus, and many Hindu saints to create trust among various communal factions. He was ready to sacrifice his own life for restoring harmony and peace. Even though he did not succeed completely, his methods of seeking heart unity among people of different faiths, especially Hindus and Muslims, exemplify a way to build stronger communal bonds.

He often emphasised taking concrete actions in building communal harmony. He was frustrated by speeches from the leaders of both Hindu and Muslim camps and urged that what was essential “was Hindu-Muslim not lip unity, but a unity of heart and spirit.”⁶⁵ Gandhi was aware of the deep distrust between the two communities, not to mention differences of doctrines and practices. He made efforts to convince his Hindu followers on the basis of the shared humanity of Hindus and Muslims as well as through invoking the pluralistic nature of Hindu philosophy. T.N. Madan writes: “As early as 1921, Gandhi said in the context of Hindu-Muslim unity for which he was then striving, that the objective was not ‘uniting the religions,’ but ‘uniting hearts, despite the separateness of religions’”⁶⁶ Gandhi confessed that his attempt was “new” in that “its aim is to see that the orthodox Hindu remains what he is and yet respects an orthodox Muslim and sincerely wishes him prosperity.”⁶⁷ Such an attempt underscores heart unity not on the basis of diluting one’s own views about religion but safeguarding the uniqueness of one’s own faith while accepting the faith of others on their own terms. This novel approach attempts to unite hearts, despite differences. Although Gandhi had not considered the challenges that interfaith marriages might present in real life situations, his approach to religion as morality and God as Truth offers guidelines to navigate dogmatic differences.

In his “Constructive Program” Gandhi made communal harmony a top priority.⁶⁸ Gandhi made every effort to build trust among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and other religious groups. He often appealed to the hearts of both Hindus and Muslims to realise their shared humanity and fraternity. He expressed sorrow when he saw violence being inflicted in the name of religion. In a 1919 leaflet, “The Vow of Hindu-Muslim Unity,” he pleaded to both Hindus and Muslims to show respect for each other’s faith:

We shall behave towards one another as children of the same parents, that we shall have no differences, that the sorrows of each shall be the sorrows of the other and that each shall help the other in removing them. We shall respect each other’s religion and religious feelings and shall not stand in

⁶³ In 1947, Gandhi spoke with students about the importance of unity among various religious groups in India. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 94, 257.

⁶⁴ In 1947 Gandhi was disheartened by the communal violence among Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 97, 29.

⁶⁵ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 21, 360.

⁶⁶ Madan, “Perspectives from Gandhi and Indian Islam,” 156.

⁶⁷ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 22, 289.

⁶⁸ In a short booklet, *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place* (1941), Gandhi outlines his vision of complete independence. See at: <https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/mahatma-gandhi-books/constructive-programme-its-meaning-and-place#page/12/mode/2up>.

the way of our respective religious practices. We shall always refrain from violence to each other in the name of religion.⁶⁹

Toward the end of his life, in a 1947 speech he declared, "Those who have imbibed the true spirit of religion cannot hate any man for his faith."⁷⁰ Gandhi's axiomatic actions for building heart unity demonstrate his dedication to his belief in heart unity as a way to build harmonious societies. Gandhi himself travelled to Bihar and Calcutta to quell the violence inflicted upon Muslims and observed long fasts to establish peace among combatting Hindu and Muslim groups.

Toward the end of his life, when distrust among various religions grew, he pressed heart unity even more boldly to his Hindu followers by asking them to treat Muslim children with full affection, permitting interfaith marriages, and not resenting cow slaughter by Muslims for food. He invited Hindus to be ideal friends to Muslims:

Hindus should behave so affectionately that even if a Muslim child comes into their midst, they should wash and clean him, dress him well and shower him with such love that the child should feel entirely at home. Only when this happens will Muslims realize that Hindus have become their friends.⁷¹

Through this concrete example of action, Gandhi offered Hindus a way to enter into the heart of Muslims – a method to disrupt the tide of hatred and distrust among warring factions.

Intent upon creating communal trust and harmony for building a cohesive society, Gandhi changed his views about interreligious marriages, another concrete step historically exceeding any interfaith efforts made by any individual or religious group. Gandhi also supported inter-caste in addition to interfaith marriages by saying, "Do we not look upon all religions as equal? It is with some purpose that we have accorded a place to other religious faiths in our prayer. The offspring may choose either religion. The couple of our conception will give the children liberal education in that regard. In my view this should be quite easy."⁷²

In our current times, most interfaith marriages result in the conversion of bride or groom to the religion of the other. Keeping consistent with his earlier views about conversion, Gandhi argued, "There was no question in this of conversion. 'Hence the marriage ceremony would be performed by priests belonging to both faiths. This happy event could take place when the communities shed mutual enmity and had regard for the religions of the world.'"⁷³ Gandhi gives his blessings for interfaith marriages but with the condition of shedding mutual enmity and building respect for other religions. He imagined such couples as exemplary for building strong interfaith bonds based on love and true respect for all religions.

He specified guidelines for both interfaith marriages and parenting through which he aimed to create a meeting of the hearts and minds among people of different faiths. Interfaith marriages and adopting children of other faith traditions hold the promise to create true relationships among faith traditions. Visiting Muslim areas stricken with violence and direct communications with Muslim men and women exemplify his approach. That Muslim women removed their veils when they visited him is a testament to his sincere dedication to create heart unity. He also encouraged Hindus to attend Muslim festivals and mingle with them as friends. Gandhi's views on cultural mingling, marriage bonds, and care of children of other faiths hold the promise of building strong interfaith relations.

Conclusion

Reflecting on Gandhi's writings, this paper has attempted to systematically analyse Gandhi's vision of heart unity for creating communal harmony among the many religions of India at a time when the forces of fanaticism, bigotry, and hatred were raising their heads. Despite historical and contextual differences in the time

⁶⁹ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 17, 402.

⁷⁰ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 93, 271-272.

⁷¹ Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 94, 78.

⁷² Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 86, 316-317.

⁷³ Dasgupta, "Gandhi on Hindu-Muslim Marriage," 948.

Gandhi lived, his theoretical approach to religion presents dynamic solutions for salvaging it from dogmatic and violent systems and situating it in a moral context. His emphasis on the equality of all religions, while grounding himself in Hinduism, presents a model for serious and honest interfaith interactions. His bodily transgression of communal walls through multifaith prayer meetings, communion with the people of other faiths, and dedication to building communal harmony remain exemplary. In the current times, the intensifying of tensions among various religious groups, combined with the simultaneous strengthening of interreligious dialogue offers an opportunity to draw inspiration from Gandhi’s philosophy and actions to create interreligious good will.

In today’s India, many Hindu-Muslim communities co-exist in mutual toleration – consistent with Gandhi’s ideal of a free India – especially in the rural areas, sharing even religious customs and visits to the holy sites of Sufis and saints. Nevertheless, communal tensions simmer underneath the calm. Competing nationalistic ideologies, hard-line religious identities, post-independence political conflicts (over the India-Pakistan partition and in Kashmir, for example), the emergence of extremist factions, and different visions of the free modern state continue to enflame conflict between Hindu and Muslim communities. Notwithstanding its secular-democratic constitution, the laws extending civil liberties to all, and the reality of a multi-ethnic and religious culture, the Indian state is redefining itself through Pre-Islamic Indian symbolism and Hindu narratives. Such ideological and political tensions have resulted in mutual distrust spawning extremist elements. In these times, rife with the forces of fanaticism and distrust, both communities can find guidance in Gandhi’s example to build cohesive communities grounded on communal harmony.

As has been underscored above, Gandhi confronted dire challenges in building heart unity among distinct religious groups. He had candid conversations with numerous warring leaders of both Hindu and Muslim communities, but he failed in persuading them to compromise rigid positions.⁷⁴ Gandhi importantly relied on mass action for defying the violent forces that masquerade as religion; he believed that it is only when religious people focus on their shared moral values that change and conciliation can be realised. In the contemporary context, Gandhi’s historic efforts and his strategies beckon lay religious followers and grassroots interfaith movements to take charge in fighting religious extremism and reclaiming the vision of a society where all can flourish together, living in peace and harmony. His insights on the nature of “real religion,” study of scriptures of different religions, interfaith marriages, and parenthood can be experimented with across religions. The goal of common human flourishing mandates us to stop the othering of religions different from one’s own and build interreligious relations and create mutual respect and deep understanding, not simply tolerance.

⁷⁴ For example, Gandhi had many conversations with both Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the unyielding leader of the Muslim League, also considered as the Father of Pakistan, and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, a Hindu revolutionary and chief leader of All-India Hindu Mahasabha, who advocated the vision of the Hindu nation. In 1940, Gandhi quotes Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who insisted the formation of Pakistan on the basis of uncompromising differences between the two communities: “The Hindus and Muslims have two different religious philosophies, social customs, literatures. They neither intermarry, nor dine together, and indeed, they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions.” *Harijan*, 4 June 4 1940. See Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 78, 110. Savarkar was a revolutionary and held irreconcilable differences with Gandhi on the grounds of his vision of an “undivided Hindu nation.”

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