

A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE BREADTH OF
MAHATMA GANDHI'S RELIGIOUS PLURALISM
THROUGH AN EXAMINATION OF HIS
ENGAGEMENTS WITH ATHEISTS, QUAKERS AND
INTER-RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi's religious thought and pluralism have received attention from scholars and activists. This thesis provides an original contribution by addressing underexplored areas which reveal shifting boundaries in his pluralism. It explores Gandhi's relationship with atheists, in particular his Indian friend Gora; the relationship between Quakers and Gandhi, in particular Marjorie Sykes and Horace Alexander; and Gandhi's approach to inter-religious marriage in an Indian context, exploring both religious and societal dimensions. Throughout the thesis religious pluralism is addressed both in its philosophical or theoretical dimension and in the practical dimension of how one relates to people of other faiths.

I provide a critique of the breadth of Gandhi's pluralism in dealing with atheists in an inclusivist fashion and in his early opposition to inter-religious marriage. I also draw out its strengths in placing religious/ethical life above beliefs. This provides a framework for strong friendships with Quakers and atheists, and a positive approach to inter-religious marriage (in his later years) by allowing individual interpretations of religious life as opposed to community belonging. Gandhi's theology and friendships offer a critique to theories of dialogue emphasising commitment to a particular tradition. They open a way to include marginalised groups in dialogue and respect the whole person rather than treating religion as a compartment of a person's life.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to John Hick, who opened up the field of religious pluralism and used to ask me every Sunday after Quaker Meeting how my PhD was coming along, for his inspiration and encouragement.

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Glossary

Advaita Vedanta – Monist philosophy emerging from the teachings of the Upanishads, the most famous proponent was Shankara. The most important teaching is the unity of *Atman-Brahman*

Ahimsa – Non-harming, non-violence, in its positive sense self-less love

Anatman – The Buddhist doctrine of no-self

Anekantavada – Jain doctrine of the plurality of views, the many-sidedness of reality

Ashram – A religious community centred around a guru or teacher

Atman – Self or soul

Bhajan – Religious or devotional song

Bhajanavali – Gandhi's collection of hymns from his Ashrams, including songs, chants and poetry from a variety of traditions

Bhakti - Devotion

Bhoodan – The land-gift movement of Vinoba Bhave

Biraderi – Kinship group among South Asian Muslims

Bodhisattva – Being who has gained enlightenment, but chooses to remain in the world to help others rather than entering full *Nirvana*

Brahmacharya – Chastity, control of the senses in pursuit the holy life or religious knowledge

Brahman – The one universal soul, divine essence, the absolute, the eternal, the self-existent

Brahmin – The highest *varna*, traditionally the priestly caste and guardians of religious practises and ritual

Brahminic –Following the interpretations and practises of *Brahmins* as opposed to popular traditions or understandings

Charkha – Indian style spinning wheel, the symbol Gandhi used in his promotion of self-sufficiency; also the *Charkha* or wheel is a symbol of Buddhism, and the central motif in the Indian flag

Carvaka – Materialistic, atheist philosophical tradition from India (also known as *Lokayata*)

Dalit – The oppressed, the name former Untouchables have adopted for themselves, especially among followers of Dr. Ambedkar

Devadasi – Temple dancers (literally servants of god(s)), in the colonial period when this system often meant giving (or selling) young girls to a temple, who would then become temple dancers/prostitutes it became a source of great controversy and criticism

Dharma – Duty, morality, justice, law, religion, right, truth. Gandhi most commonly uses *Dharma* to mean moral duty, which he found synonymous with religion

Dharmashastra – Collections of Hindu laws and customs, the most famous of which is *The Laws of Manu*

Dharmakaya – Truth-body, one of the 3 manifested bodies of the Buddha, the absolute, the essence of the universe, the unity of all things and beings unmanifested, beyond existence and non-existence and concepts

Dhyana – Meditation, profound abstract religious thought, reflection or meditation,

Gopi – Cow-herd girl, the lovers and companions of Krishna forming a model for devotees

Gotra – Exogamous kinship group

Harijan – Gandhi's name for former Untouchables meaning 'children of God', this name has been rejected by many Untouchables as condescending. Also the title of Gandhi's weekly newspaper from 1931

Harijan Sevak Sangh – Gandhi's society for the service of Harijans

Himsa – Harm, injury, violence

Ishtadeva – One's preferred or chosen deity – Gandhi's *ishtadeva* was Rama

Izzat – Honour, in particular community honour in relation to women's perceived purity/violation

Jati – Hereditary sub-caste grouping, a subdivision within Varna

Khadi – Homespun cotton cloth – a central motif in Gandhi's nationalist movement

Karma – Action, the law of cause and effect, accumulation of merit/demerit from past actions

Kshatriya – The second *varna*, traditionally the warrior and ruling classes

Moksha – Liberation, enlightenment, emancipation

Nai Talim – Gandhi's new education, focussing on self-sufficiency, handicrafts and local language

Navajivan – Gandhi's weekly Hindi newspaper between 1919 and 1931

Neti, Neti – 'Not this, not this' – a common refrain from the *Upanishads* pointing to the transcendence and ineffability of *Brahman*

Nirguna – Without qualities – *Nirguna Brahman* conceives God as absolute, beyond all description, beyond qualities or characteristics as in Advaitic philosophy

Nirvana – State of ultimate release, liberation, enlightenment, beyond existence and non-existence

Pad-yatra – Footmarch, used as a form of *satyagraha*

Pranami – The sect Gandhi's mother belonged to, which combines elements of the Hindu and Muslim religions. Temples are devoted to Krishna, but do not contain images, with practices centring on fasting, religious songs and readings from sacred books (including both the Qur'an and *Srimad Bhagavatam*)

Puja – Form of worship, commitment, offering devotion common to Indic traditions

Ramanama – Repetition of the God Rama's name as a mantra

Saguna – With qualities – *Saguna Brahman* conceives God with qualities, made personal and reachable to the devotee, in this conception the ultimate is personal as in the dvaitic philosophy of Ramanuja

Sanatana/sanatani – *Sanatana dharma* means the eternal *dharma*, used to refer to Hinduism by Hindus, a *sanatani* Hindu refers to a follower of *sanatana dharma*, usually used to designate an orthodox Hindu, although Gandhi, a reformist Hindu calls himself a *sanatanist*.

Sangh – Society, organisation

Sarva-dharma-samabhava – Equal regard for all religions, one of the Ashram vows

Sarvodaya – The welfare of all – the name of a movement among Gandhi's followers which continued after his death

Sat/Satya – Truth, the Real, also has connotations of ultimacy, beauty and goodness

Sati – Literally a good woman/wife, in this context refers to a widow who burns herself on her husband's funeral pyre, a practice which gained notoriety and great criticism in the colonial period

Satyagraha – Gandhi's method and philosophy of peaceful non-co-operation, literally holding firmly to truth

Seva – Service

Sloka – Verse or section of Hindu scripture

Shaivite – Devotee of Shiva

Shuddhi – Purification. This was developed into a ceremony for those becoming or returning to Hinduism after conversion. In many of Gandhi's writings *Shuddhi* therefore refers to Hindu conversion and proselytization.

Shudra – The fourth and lowest caste in the Hindu *varna* system, traditionally the servants to the other three *varnas*

Sramanic – From the ascetic, or Jain and Buddhist traditions

Sunyata – Emptiness (of permanent self), voidness, interdependence, the essential nature of all things in Buddhist thought

Swadeshi – Self-sufficiency, coming from one's own country

Swaraj – Self-rule, used by Gandhi both in the sense of sovereignty and control of one's self and home-rule for India

Syadvada – Partiality or incompleteness of views

Tabligh - Propagation of the message of Islam and conversion

Tapas – Austerities, spiritual practices

Tyaga – Leaving, abandoning, giving up, sacrificing one's life

Vaishanava – Devotee of Vishnu, *Vaishnavite* spirituality typically focuses on personal devotion and morality, especially non-harming (in the Hindu trinity, Vishnu is the preserver)

Vaishya – The third *varna*, traditionally the mercantile classes

Varna – Literally colour, usually refers to the four-fold division of the society of the Vedic tradition into *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra*. The system is hereditary, and

hierarchical, different *varnas* traditionally form endogamous groups with different hereditary duties and occupations. A differentiation is often made between an ideal of *varna* and the realities of caste.

Varnashrama – *Varna* and stage of life, this determines one's place or position in Hindu society

Varnadharma – Duties and character associated with one's *varna*

Yoga – System or path leading to union of the self with God or the individual and universal soul; self-concentration, abstraction, meditation, contemplation; union of soul with matter; devotion, pious seeking after God

Yogi – A person practicing yoga, or having attained union, person with superhuman powers, a saint, devotee or ascetic

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This thesis interrogates the breadth and basis of Mahatma Gandhi's religious pluralism and interfaith relations in three important and under-explored areas – his relationship with atheists, with Quakers and his attitude to inter-religious marriage. These throw light upon how his vision of religious harmony developed and was enacted, as well as revealing certain limitations and implications for contemporary inter-religious relations.

Mahatma Gandhi was an important figure of the 20th Century, with an influence and relevance beyond his native faith, Hinduism, and historical context. His religious vision emphasised the equality of religions and he cultivated strong friendships with people of diverse faiths. This study develops a fuller understanding of his conception of religious pluralism and critically interrogates it. There is a tendency when thinking of interfaith relations to think of the mainstream or orthodox interpretation of two or more religions. Yet some of the most important movements, figures and groups are precisely those who do not conform. This study examines Gandhi's underexplored relationships with people and groups who are outside of the mainstream and therefore directly or indirectly challenging it, either, through their belief (e.g. atheists) or their behaviour (e.g. couples who marry across religious boundaries). I ask how broad Gandhi's lauded

pluralism really was, what limitations he had, and how it developed with time and engagement.

The theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue are established fields of research. This thesis adds to this body of literature drawing on and relating to the theories developed by Alan Race, John Hick, Mark Heim, Paul Knitter and Catherine Cornille. The major debates it picks up are the relation between religious pluralism and dialogue, and commitment to a tradition versus an individual search for truth. In Gandhi's thought, philosophy and praxis are not separate; he considers philosophical questions when they have practical implications, such as the relations between communities in India. As such, throughout this thesis the philosophical questions of religious truth are considered as part of the question of how one relates to other people.

Religious pluralism is considered by Gandhi in connection with the practical exigencies of living together peacefully...the discussion of religious truth is not a mere theoretical matter but has a direct bearing on how men behave towards each other.¹

Three recurring themes emerge throughout the thesis: valuing individuality in belief and practise, shared values as a bond and motive for inter-religious action and giving room for growth and change. I argue that by emphasising inter-religious friendship as a process and goal for inter-religious relations, it is possible to include and value the diversity of all people, give room for change and fluidity of belief, whilst being sustained

¹ Margaret Chatterjee *Gandhi's Religious Thought* London: Macmillan 1983
p8

and deepened by shared values, actions and the challenge of others in a context of personal affection and respect.

Methodology

I use a textual method focussing on Mahatma Gandhi's writings, speeches and correspondence and also the writings of those he engaged with. These primary sources are interpreted through the lens of contextual social and political events. This historical sense gives the thesis grounding in its own context and enables a strong sense of chronology through which to trace and understand significant changes and developments in Gandhi's religious thinking and relationships. Although I draw in places on his early years, this research predominantly concerns Gandhi's life from 1926 until his death in 1948. This time period contains his most important statements on interfaith marriage, his deep engagement with Quakers after meeting Horace Alexander in 1928, and his friendship with Gora in the 1940s. It also has the strength of showing his more mature and established thinking and lifestyle.

The models of pluralism, inclusivism and exclusivism, are applied in a flexible way, as a starting point for assessing the breadth and nature of Gandhi's religious pluralism. Paul Knitter's theory of eco-human liberation provides a model of socially engaged inter-religious action, with an underlying pluralist assumption, which aptly fits Gandhi's lifestyle and the relationships he developed with atheists and Quakers. It is explicitly considered as a means to include atheists in dialogue, and implicitly drawn upon throughout the thesis. Cornille's qualities for inter-religious dialogue are selectively and critically used. Her emphasis on commitment to a tradition is challenged and critiqued

both through Gandhi's inter-religious relationships and by the areas explored in which individual philosophies and commitment to ethical-spiritual values are more important than orthodoxy.

My purpose in relating Gandhi's religious pluralism to current inter-religious discourse is not to understand or categorise Gandhi in terms of any of these frameworks. I intend to use these debates, theories and models as a critical lens to tease out issues in Gandhi's thinking and dialogue and to explore his contemporary relevance. Indeed my explorations of Gandhi's relationships and response to inter-religious marriage, in some cases, leads to a critique of the limitations of these theories. By exploring the interpersonal as well as the theological/philosophical dimensions it is argued that for inter-religious dialogue to move forward it is necessary to pay more attention to individuality and fluidity and change in people's positions. This can be done by considering inter-religious friendship between individuals as a valid model and goal for inter-religious dialogue.

Outline of chapters

The three themes are each divided into two chapters, the first, explores philosophical and faith based questions, whilst the second attends to the social dimension, how people relate to one another.

Chapter Two sets out Mahatma Gandhi's religious pluralism, founded in the conviction that all religions are based on or expressions of an underlying Truth, but also contain falsehood and distortions through human imperfection. His understanding of

religion as the search for Truth through active non-violent love, combined with his relative approach to the phenomenon of religion but a conviction in the ultimate reality behind that, provide a consistent framework for his pluralist approach and basis for religious harmony. However, this is philosophically challenging and unacceptable to many orthodox interpretations of religion, especially those with a strong authority structure or single revelation.

The third and fourth chapters examine Gandhi's relationship to atheism, with an emphasis on his friendship with Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (Gora) an Indian proponent of Positive Atheism, who established the Atheist Centre at Vijayawada, a project which combines the rejection of religion typical in Western atheism with Gandhian values and vision.

Chapter Three shows how far Gandhi's pluralist philosophy was able to stretch in the attempt to accommodate atheism and where the dangers or limitations lay. Gandhi's identification of ethics with religion leads him to give a place to moral atheists within his pluralism, thus his formula of 'God is Truth'. This shift is important in giving the follower of Truth an equal regard, however on closer examination we find that Gandhi's continued relation to God as both personal and interactive in the world and an impersonal reality is incompatible with atheism. Gandhi's Truth as *satya*, containing a transcendent and moral quality, is different to the truth an atheist may follow or live by. The notion of a power

within is vital to Gandhi's faith and acceptable to some atheists but not to Gora.² There is a danger of inclusivism in this, especially when we look at the relationship with Buddhism. Like most Hindus, Gandhi is influenced by the Buddha's teaching, but regards Buddhism as part of Hinduism; he does not acknowledge its distinctive differences over matters of God, impermanence and the individual soul. Gandhi sought to include the moral atheist by recourse to the idea they are 'anonymous believers' this inclusivist approach does not respect the atheist position – however, over time, and dialogue with Gora, he shifted from seeking to convert and incorporate to respect for the difference.

Chapter Four examines the engagement between Gora and Gandhi, bringing to light the importance of inter-faith dialogue between theists and atheists. Gora's distinctive position, Positive Atheism, is defined with attention to the Atheist Centre's social programme. This engagement based on shared ethical commitments relates to paradigms of inter-religious engagement based on Global Ethics and fits into Knitter's vision of inter-religious engagement on the basis of eco-human liberation as a criterion of religious truth and means for engaging together in the sacred. Further, the atheists offer a critique and challenge, which introduces the hermeneutic of suspicion, in regard to Gandhi's position on caste. Gora's position is more in line with Ambedkar, but as a member of the Harijan Sevak Sangh he worked within Gandhi's programme, although going further at his own Centre and pushing Gandhi toward greater radicalism.

² Gora was an Indian convert to atheism, he founded the Atheist Centre to propagate Positive Atheism, which emphasised a social programme based on the equality of all people and improving their current situations. He had a significant friendship with Gandhi.

Chapters Five and Six explore Gandhi's relationships with Quakers, drawing out the unusual unity between East-West, coloniser-colonised and Hindu-Christian traditions. In spite of the substantial literature on Gandhi and Christianity, the relationship with Quakers specifically has been only superficially covered. This study draws out new insights and directions in Gandhi's relation to Christianity and in Quakers' relation to Christianity and other traditions.

Chapter Five argues that there is a strong similarity in the way of being religious in Gandhian and Quaker thought, arising from different sources or traditions. Both emphasise religion as the totality of life, and one's way of living as expressive of religion. Just as Gandhi remained rooted in Hinduism, but through his notion of Truth reaches out to include others, the Quakers whilst rooted in Christianity, have space for non-Christians and even atheists, through the non-creedal stance, suspicion of theologising and openness to Light or Truth as terms substituted for God. Indeed, the distance between Quakers and orthodox Christianity has given Quakers an advanced position within the interfaith movement. Finally, whilst acknowledging many similarities between Quaker and Gandhian beliefs, I have examined that between Quaker pacifism and Gandhi's *ahimsa*. This certainly led to a deep mutual respect and formed the basis of shared action and concern, yet there are interesting nuances in each – Gandhi's pacifism is subservient at times to loyalty to the empire and courage; the Eastern peace work was more concerned with injustice, rather than the Western emphasis on war and its effects, as such Gandhi's non-violence instigated conflict in a non-violent manner, whilst the

Quakers engaged in conflict mediation; and ahimsa extends to the animal world in a way which Quaker pacifism has only recently begun to consider.

Chapter Six uses case studies of two Quaker friends of Gandhi, Horace Alexander and Marjorie Sykes to explore these interfaith friendships grounded in shared ideals. These are important examples of a rare kind of friendship in a colonial context, and practical examples of the ideal of religious pluralism which Gandhi stood for. These friendships cover a broad spectrum of issues of historical and contemporary relevance. With Horace issues covered include, personal affection and intimacy in a colonial context, individuality as mediation, maintaining independent views and Horace's self-critical relation to Christianity and establishment of the Fellowship of Friends of Truth to bring forward Gandhi's vision of religious harmony and unity through a Quaker organ. With Marjorie we explore her experience of enculturation, and the internal intercultural dialogue she fostered, the constructive programme as peace work, how a Quaker ran Gandhi's Basic Education, the ideals of Gandhi and Tagore, how she brought Gandhi's thought into environmental concerns, and Christianity and Quakerism's place in India and the issues of roots and openness this raises. Fundamentally the chapter demonstrates through real individuals with shared values the establishment of deep friendship across culture, nation, politics and religious difference.

Chapters Seven and Eight show how Gandhi's changing attitude to inter-religious marriage, an area yet to receive serious scholarly attention, relate to his religious pluralism and the social context and vision of a unified yet diverse India. Gandhi opposed

his son's desire to marry a Muslim woman in 1926 on account of their religious difference. Thus in practice contradicting his expression that the Hindu and Muslim are his two eyes and all religions are one, in favour of respecting their difference and particularity, it also contradicts his positive experience of living as an inter-religious community in his *ashrams*. Yet this attitude changed over time to welcome interfaith marriage.

Chapter Seven explores religious components of this. Firstly the traditional Hindu and Islamic attitudes to inter-religious marriage are explored, to set the scene in which Gandhi was operating. Secondly I identify the changes Gandhi underwent in his attitude to inter-religious marriage. Then Gandhi's *brahmacharya* and encouragement of restriction in marriage are explored. The role of diet in religious observance is considered, but found to be a problem to be overcome rather than a genuine cause for opposition. The major issue is that of conversion – this throws new light on Gandhi's well-known opposition to conversion and to missionaries. The opposition to conversion for marriage and of a Muslim to Hinduism confirms the reality and impartiality of his objection to changing faith. When he finally comes to accept interfaith marriage it is on the condition of each keeping their own faith, which his pluralist and individualistic philosophy gives room for. Sociological research into inter-religious marriage in India demonstrates that couples are able to come up with acceptable adaptive strategies to create harmony in religious matters within a multi-religious home. In many ways these couples use strategies similar to those Gandhi advocates.

Chapter Eight pays careful attention to the particular social context, expanding to consider the relation between inter-caste, inter-provincial and inter-religious marriage and the communal situation in India in the late colonial period. Unusually in the context of arranged marriages Gandhi gives room for the individuals' choice. He underwent a marked change from support for the restrictions of *varna* and region to encourage caste-breaking in marriage as a social reform. This represents a generally liberalising trend which eventually also accepted interfaith marriage, though always with some reservation, on account of communalism and the difficulty before peace came. During the Partition, Gandhi refused to accept interfaith marriage as self-chosen and pleaded for the acceptance of raped and kidnapped women – this refutation of the war fought over the bodies of women is admirable, but has a darker side in supporting the policy of the Central Recovery Operation which often forcibly 'returned' women married to the 'other' community. Inter-religious marriages present a challenge to communal ideologies and are an intimate dialogue, of friendship and love between individuals. They help to develop the values of harmony and equality of religions. Gandhi's acceptance of inter-religious marriage in his later life shows a practical deepening of his religious plurality and its implications. His thoughts have relevance to inter-religious couples which I draw out as a Gandhian vision for interfaith marriage.

Finally the conclusion evaluates Gandhi's pluralism and the implications for contemporary inter-religious dialogue, suggesting the importance of a dialogue which values individuals and sees religion in a holistic way. A combination of a friendship model and shared ethical action is suggested as a means to this.

CHAPTER TWO

‘ALL RELIGIONS ARE TRUE MORE OR LESS’ – ISSUES IN GANDHI’S

PLURALISM

I believe that all the great religions of the world are true more or less. I say ‘more or less’ because I believe that everything that the human hand touches, by reason of the very fact that human beings are imperfect, becomes imperfect.³

This is a succinct statement of Gandhi’s response to religious diversity, raising questions about the meaning of religion, truth and relativity.

Gandhi’s concept of religion

Gandhi understands religion as the search for Truth (or God, terms he uses interchangeably) through non-violent means.

Gandhi’s use of the term religion reveals a two-fold nature in his thought between Religion as an absolute concept and religion as an empirical phenomenon.⁴ At times ‘religion’ is used to signify specific religions, at other times it is not equated with any existing religion, but in the pre-enlightenment sense of *religio*.⁵ Religion in this sense signifies the religious life, or the religious impulse. Wilfred Cantwell Smith drew attention to the two-fold nature of the term religion and its changing use, distinguishing between

³ M K Gandhi, *All men are brothers*, compiled and edited by Krishna Kripalani, Paris: UNESCO 1958 p61

⁴ P. S. Daniel, *Hindu response to religious pluralism* Kant Publications: Delhi, 2000 p193 and Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and the challenge of religious diversity; religious pluralism revisited* New Delhi: Promilla 2005 p322ff

⁵ See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The meaning and end of religion* London: SPCK 1978

faith, described as human responses to the divine, and the cumulative tradition. For Gandhi, Religion, with a capital R does not only refer to faith/piety/the religious impulse, but has a reality beyond its expression in human beings. There is such a thing as Religion which he calls upon in condemning untouchability as irreligion.⁶ He is referring to 'the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature'.⁷ For Gandhi Religion, in this unbound sense is the fundamental core of all religions, thus he is able to say 'If a man reaches the heart of his own religion, he has reached the heart of the others too.'⁸ The religions are authenticated by their relation to this notion of Religion, in so far as they reflect, enable one to see and reach Truth/God. 'Religion, to Gandhi, is simply the pursuit of Truth under a different name.'⁹

Gandhi finds a unity underlying all religions, in the transcendent which undergirds and is the focus of religion. The similarities and commonalities between the religions are not the unity itself, but are evidence of this. Gandhi encourages us to focus on commonalities rather than differences between religions. For instance common morality, forms of worship and practices such as fasting.¹⁰ Gandhi encourages the sharing of these commonalities between different faiths, with each participating in the others' religious life. However the unity is not reduced to such graspable, empirical commonalities which would reduce religion to its phenomenal expression. For Gandhi, the unity of religions is

⁶ CWMG Vol. 45 p397 refers to Untouchability as satanic.

⁷ *All men are brothers* p56

⁸ *All men are brothers* p59

⁹ Rex Ambler 'Gandhi's Concept of Truth' in Hick and Hempel (eds.) *Gandhi's significance for today* London: Macmillan 1989 p102

¹⁰ For an example of the way Gandhi integrated different forms of worship see the account of his mutli-faith prayer-meetings in Ved Mehta *Mahatma Gandhi and his Apostles* London: Deutsch 1977 pp.8-11

Truth/God. Gandhi encourages these commonalities and the perception of them as evidence of Truth/God. Yet the practical and phenomenal is not Gandhi's focus; his focus is the spiritual. This manifests itself and is developed through involvement and concern for the material. Thus when Gandhi encourages Hindus and Muslims to unite in a common task (such as spinning) there is a primary purpose of producing *khadi*, but more importantly there is the deeper purpose of creating heart-unity between religions. In prayer one may recite words, yet it is not the recitation and format of prayer which is important, but the deeper purpose of creating spiritual awareness, and the adoption of a correct attitude that is the true meaning. Throughout his life Gandhi retained immense faith in the efficacy of the *Ramanama* mantra. Yet he recognized that the word "Rama" in itself contains no magic. A parrot could learn to repeat the sounds, but it would be meaningless, an empty movement of the lips. Yet repeated silently, with faith, it touches the heart and makes an impact. It is this movement of the heart which is of importance.¹¹

Daniel elucidates this idea of the relationship between one true Religion and the historical religions, which correlates to Gandhi's ideas of Absolute Truth and relative truth.¹² As ultimate Truth is to be found by clinging to the smaller truths, and by being truthful in word and deed, so Religion is reached through adherence to the phenomenal religions.

Gandhi refers to all major world religions as true, justifying this by reference to the power and ability to fulfil the spiritual needs of their adherents that they have shown. He

¹¹ CWMG, Vol. 65, p102

¹² Daniel *Hindu response to religious pluralism* pp.192-3

does also admit that people may be religious without adhering to any of these great religions.¹³

Unity of religions

All religions are true for Gandhi in the sense that they contain Truth. Their fundamental unity is based on God. He switched to a preference for the term Truth, in later life, believing it to be a more inclusive and better understood term than God.¹⁴ One element of Gandhi's pluralism is theocentrism. He upholds that there is one God, and it is the same God, who is expressed and mediated through the religions, which God himself transcends. Thus he offers 'a prayer that goes up to God, not the God of white men, not the God of the negro, not of the Mussalman, not of the Hindu, but the God of all, the God of the Universe.'¹⁵

When speaking of the necessity for, and his faith in, the eventual attainment of Hindu-Muslim unity, he asserts the truth of unity, for it is the same God in the heart of everyone.¹⁶

Gandhi's assumption that it is the same Truth in all religions is contentious. Do not each of the religions present us with a different God? For example, whilst certain traits are ascribed to both Vishnu and the God of Israel such as mercy, love, power, and creation of the universe; the relevant scriptures, myths and traditions certainly appear to

¹³ The chapters on atheism draw this out, and beyond the major religions we find him acknowledging the same spiritual source in the traditional Zulu religion in South Africa and among modern groups such as theosophists.

¹⁴ J.T.F Jordens *Gandhi's religion: a homespun shawl* Basingstoke: Macmillan 1998 pp.118-119

¹⁵ CWMG Vol. 29 p361

¹⁶ CWMG Vol. 30 p532

describe two different Gods, active and revealed in distinct socio-historical and geographic spaces. Gandhi however would hold that it is the one true God in both. The different conceptions are the different ways God has been perceived and represented by distinct communities.¹⁷ God is one, human conceptions differ, just as the Vedic saying goes 'To what is one the sages give many a title, they call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan.'¹⁸

This explanation can take us only so far. What if the different conceptions are contradictory? How do we judge which is an authentic representation? Gandhi answers by explaining contradictions arise from our human fallibility and our inability to fully comprehend God. As for which may be an authentic representation, Gandhi has a number of criterion for judging, such as does it conflict with morality or reason?¹⁹ But he would reject the notion that any one may be authentic over another, all are human conceptions and representations. For instance he says that God alone is perfect and 'we limited beings fancy all kinds of things and impute our limitations to God' and 'difference in creed there must be so long as there are different minds. But what does it matter if all these are ... upon the common path of love and mutual judgement.'²⁰ Furthermore as all lead to the same end and come from the same source it does not matter to which religion one belongs, so long as it enables the individual to progress along his/her spiritual path.

A further problem arises with non-theistic religions. It is curious this problem should arise in the pluralism of a Hindu, given that Hinduism contains both non-theistic and

¹⁷ This is a typical view for a Hindu, with the acceptance of the plurality of revelations, as well as according with the Jain position that any particular view is necessarily partial and incomplete. See Margaret Chatterje, *Gandhi's Religious Thought* London: Macmillan 1983 p43

¹⁸ Rg Veda 1.164.46 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv01164.htm> accessed 13th August 2012

¹⁹ Robert Ellsberg *Gandhi on Christianity* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1991 pp.66-69

²⁰ CWMG Vol. 65 p82 and Vol. 30 p241

polytheistic strands, yet Gandhi was raised in a *Vaishnavite* household, and thus in a strongly devotional and theistic context.²¹ If the unity of religions lies in one God, this excludes non-theistic religions. It is the fact that Gandhi is a Hindu which overcomes this. His concept of God includes both that of a personal caring God, in whom he puts his faith and trust, who he prays to and sees acting in his life, and that of an impersonal absolute.

Gandhi falls in a class apart in that if we make a distinction between those religions which aim at an enlightened consciousness and those which aim at a special relationship, that between man and God, Gandhi in a sense straddles the two. The religious life is a life of self-purification, but it is also a dedicated life, dedicated to God and man.²²

As his idea of God includes an impersonal absolute it is compatible with the *advaitic Brahman*, or Buddhist *Dharmakaya* or *Nirvana*. Once again the differences in descriptions of the impersonal absolutes of non-theistic religion, may lead some to posit that the Tao, *Dharmakaya*, *Brahman* etc. are different realities (or indeed fantasies). Gandhi however when asked about *Brahman-Nirvana* (described as *sat-chit-ananda* – truth-consciousness-bliss) and Buddhistic-*Nirvana* (described as pure emptiness) responds that he holds both to be the same.²³

With his religious background it is unsurprising that Gandhi finds one Truth, one God, one morality, one aim and one source in all religions, expressed in different ways and with different emphases. Mark Heim's theology of multiple religious ends presents a

²¹ Judith Brown *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* London: Yale University Press 1989 p17

²² Chatterjee *Religious Thought* p94

²³ CWMG Vol. 29 p397

challenge to this typical Hindu pluralism, which overcomes difference and conflict by affirming the unity of all:

I suggest instead there are real, different religious fulfilments. Gandhi wrote 'Religions are different roads converging to the same point,' and asked what does it matter if we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarrelling?' ... But I ask, 'What if religions are paths to different ends that they each value supremely? Why should we object?' ²⁴

Heim's concern is that an explanation which sees all religions having one end contravenes what the religions themselves say about their final goals and how to achieve them. His suggestion instead is that there are different human fulfilments which each religion leads to.²⁵ Affirming that all religions lead to the same end either interprets religions in terms they do not themselves use and recognize, or uses neutral terminology which obscures the distinctiveness and difference between religions. Heim holds that his hypothesis

...allows us to affirm, as religiously significant, a much larger proportion of the *distinctive* testimony of the various faith traditions. We can specify conditions under which various believers' accounts of their faith might be extensively and simultaneously valid, affirming the various religious traditions as truthful in a much more concrete sense than either the most liberal or most conservative options in the current discussion allow. ²⁶

²⁴ S. Mark Heim 'Many True Religions and Each an Only Way' *Ars Disputandi* Vol. 3 2003 <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/index.html?http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000120/index.html> accessed 20th September 2012

²⁵ John Cobb is another theologian who posits the possibility of ontologically different religious realities. See John B. Cobb Jr. 'Order out of Chaos: A philosophical model of inter-religious dialogue' in J. Kellenberger *Inter-religious Models and Criteria* London: Macmillan 1993pp.71-86

²⁶ Heim 'Many True Religions'

Whilst Heim's hypothesis does seem to validate the greatest possible extent of each religion's distinctive content, as directly expressed, it takes the religions at their face value. It does not allow for the numinous reality behind the religions, but only what they each say, and ignores the ineffability of the ultimate, which all religions proclaim regarding their ultimate, be it God or Nirvana. This ineffability is a fundamental part in the claims of pluralists who uphold the unity of all religions. His solution also in holding that there are other ends, co-existing simultaneously contravenes the affirmation religions make that the ultimate is ultimate and there are not other equally good and valid options.

Relative and Absolute Truth

What does Gandhi mean by true when he says 'all religions are true'? He means that they contain truth, are genuine paths towards spiritual advancement. As he does not mean factually correct, but containing deeper, spiritual truth, the question of conflicting truth-claims does not arise. There is in this sense no problem of religious diversity. Furthermore they are 'true, more or less'. Not everything which passes for religion is true, all religions contain error and are subject to human fallibility.

The complete transcendence of God counterpoised against the limitations of human beings is a key factor in Gandhi's pluralist philosophy. Hick says Gandhi's own solution to religious pluralism came from the Jain tradition of his native Gujarat,

This held that all religious awareness is inevitably partial and incomplete, so that different traditions can complement and enrich one another, rather than being mutually exclusive rivals.²⁷

Gandhi's approach was influenced by Jainism, and the twin doctrines of *anekantavada* and *syadvada*.²⁸ *Syād* meaning maybe, perhaps, *anekānta* – not alone or exclusive and *vāda* – view, assertion, proposition give *syadvāda* – the assertion of possibility or non-possibility, the partiality of views and *anekāntavāda* – plurality, multitude or non-exclusivity of views. These two doctrines, lead to the recognition and validity of multiple views of reality and the recognition that any explanation is partial and relative to one's own viewpoint.

Relativity is essential to Gandhi's pluralism. His is not, however, complete relativism. God/Truth is absolute. It is therefore a somewhat paradoxical relativity, resting on an absolute. This relates of the Hindu concepts of *nirguna* and *saguna Brahman*. *Nirguna Brahman* (Brahman without qualities) is the absolute in its pure form, but it is understood and conceived or revealed as *saguna Brahman*, through form and qualities. Human conceptions and descriptions are partial and approximations. The utter transcendence and ineffability of God are affirmed by Gandhi, when he asks,

The Reality which we call God is a mysterious, indescribable and unique power. If we cannot comprehend Him with our mind, how can our poor speech describe Him? ²⁹

²⁷ John Hick 'Foreword' in Chatterjee, *Gandhi's religious thought* px

²⁸ Chatterjee, *Religious Diversity* p306

²⁹ CWMG Vol.30 p287

A prayer from the *Ashram BhajanaVali* demonstrates the same,

In the early morning, I worship Him who is beyond the reach of thought and speech and yet by whose grace all speech is possible. I worship Him whom the Vedas describe as *neti, neti* (not this) him they (the sages) have called God of gods, the unborn, the unfallen, the source of all. ³⁰

It is essential to Gandhi that God cannot be conceptualised, to do so would be bringing God down from reality to our plane.

...even as an absolute definition of God is impossible, so is that of Truth impossible. When I can evolve an absolute definition of Truth, Truth will cease to be my God. ³¹

Scripture

Gandhi takes a relative approach to scripture and doctrine. Gandhi did not accept any book as the absolute Word of God, however he does believe in the human potential for perfection and self-transcendence, such personal experience has more authority for him.

³⁰ CWMG Vol. 45 p39

³¹ CWMG Vol. 65 p398

It is necessary for us all to aspire after perfection, but when that blessed state is attained, it becomes indescribable, indefinable. And, I, therefore, admit, in all humility, that even the Vedas, the Koran and the Bible are imperfect word of God and, imperfect beings that we are, swayed to and fro by a multitude of passions, it is impossible for us even to understand this word of God in its fullness.³²

Gandhi accepts scripture as inspired but emphatically not the final, complete, exact word of God. He finds a double taint in scripture; the words pass through two levels of distortion, that of the author, and of the reader/interpreter.³³ This approach gives Gandhi a solution to one of the major challenges of religious pluralism. At the same time, his solution creates its own problems. The Indian religions are less orientated towards scripture than the Abrahamic religions.³⁴ Gandhi therefore may underestimate the primacy of scripture for others.

For all Gandhi's efforts to bring forth Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhi's insistence that the Qur'an contains only relative truth directly contradicts one of Islam's most fundamental beliefs. Gandhi's relativism alienates him from those who hold more conservative views, both in his own and other faiths. Many of the conflicts between Gandhi and Christians are based on his strong dislike for missionary activities and his interpretation of such activities, which are based in the claim that one's own scripture represents *the* truth, as

³² Gandhi *All men are brothers* p61

³³ Nirmal Minz, *Mahatma Gandhi and Hindu-Christian dialogue* Madras: Christian Literature Society 1970 p28

³⁴ Sharada Sugirtharajah *Imagining Hinduism: a postcolonial perspective* Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press 2003 clarifies that one of the mistakes or strategies used to undermine Hinduism, by orientalist and missionaries was to apply their protestant understanding of scripture to Hinduism, which whilst replete with texts has a different approach to them. Regarding Ward's understanding she writes, 'What he fails to note is that the Hindu attitude to scriptures is rather less formal, and that one is not bound by them in all their complex details. Ward operates on the Protestant assumption that that the written word plays a central role in the lives of Hindus.' p77

arrogant. This unwillingness to acknowledge and accept that for believers the claims of a scripture are literally true in their entirety is partially responsible for the cleft between Gandhi and missionaries.³⁵ This same difference between Gandhi and *sanatani* Hindus is seen in debates over untouchability.³⁶ With Muslims we see it causing differences over non-violence, and the sanction for violence found in the Qur'an.³⁷

Gandhi did maintain a high regard for scriptures of all the major world religions. He considered them sacred, often encouraging followers to read scripture daily, his correspondence shows particular testimony to this, and notably always encourages people to read their own scriptures. Addressing Sikhs he writes,

I hold Granth Sahib in high reverence, several parts of it have passed into our daily speech. So far as my reading of it goes, it inculcates faith, valour and an invincible belief in the ultimate triumph of right and justice. I would ask you to derive your inspiration and guidance from it.³⁸

³⁵ Ellsberg *Gandhi on Christianity* pp.24 and 41-43

³⁶ Harold Coward 'Gandhi, Ambedkar and Untouchability' in Harold Coward (ed.) *Indian critiques of Gandhi* Albany: State University of New York Press 2003 p46

³⁷ For instance one of Gandhi's most successful moments of achieving a level of Hindu-Muslim unity in public protest against the British was through his support for the Khilafat movement, however 'He knew, and they made it very clear, that as Muslims they would not accept non-violence as a moral absolute, but they would accept it as an appropriate expedient in this situation.' Sheila McDonough *Gandhi's Responses to Islam* New Delhi: D K Printworld 1994 p43. Gandhi was unable to accept that the Qur'an sanctioned violence, Vinoba Bhave's work on the Qur'an stresses how it limits anger and violence, in line with Gandhi's interpretation, but even a Muslim as sympathetic as Maulana Azad finds sanction for violence in the Qur'an. McDonough pp.121-2. However, Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Khudai Khidmatgar movement stand out in contrast to this as an Islamic movement deeply committed to Gandhi's non-violence.

³⁸ CWMG Vol. 45 p231

For Gandhi, to consider scripture as not entirely and wholly true does not lower his regard for scripture. It necessitates more careful reading to discern the true meaning, the spirit not the letter. It means scripture must be read, and reflected on and if what is found does not coincide with the true meaning of religion, Truth and non-violence, it must be rejected. Scriptural claims which conflict with reason or morality should be discarded or understood allegorically.

Having outlined the problems created by a relative approach to scripture it must be noted that relative approaches are widely held in many religions. They have gained increasing credence with the rise of modernism, the associated values of reason and liberalism and biblical criticism.³⁹

For Islam, however, it presents a deeper problem. The Qur'an is believed to be the final and complete revelation, not a creation of man, but dictated by God, thus the long-held untranslatability of the Qur'an. The Qur'an holds a central and elevated place in Islam which is not synonymous with the position of the Bible in Christianity or Vedas in Hinduism. 'For the vast majority of Muslims the Quran is the speech of God, dictated without human editing. It is more than a sacred text such as is found in other traditions.'⁴⁰

To suggest it is only partially true, tainted by the hands of man, as Gandhi does, is to undermine one of the most central tenets of Islam. This effect of Gandhi's attitude is

³⁹ See the entry 'Liberal Theology' in Fahlbusch et al (eds.) *The Encyclopedia of Christianity, Vol. 3* Cambridge: William B Eerdmans 2003 pp.247-255

⁴⁰ Malise Ruthven *Islam: A very short introduction* Oxford: OUP 1997 p21

incidental and not intended as an attack on any religion. We can cite the voracity with which he criticizes those within his own religion who take fundamentalist attitudes to Hindu scriptures justifying practices he considers immoral such as the justification of war from the Bhagavad-Gita, and justifications of untouchability. Curiously, however, the Qur'an does not seem to have occupied a major place in Gandhi's controversial relations with Muslims. The issues of contention were largely political and practical.⁴¹

Just as Christians and others coming from their own background and understanding of religion interpreted the Hindu religion in terms of their own concepts, thus textualising the tradition, Gandhi does the reverse. From a background in which text is not central he interprets other religions in a way which takes away the centrality, importance and literal interpretation of the text, replacing it with his own attitude in which scriptures are useful aides to religion, but do not hold central authority. However, Gandhi was aware that his interpretation of other religions may not satisfy adherents. Thus,

Of the *Mahabharata* I can write without restraint, but the most devout Mohammedan will not, I hope, deny me the privilege of understanding the message of the Prophet.⁴²

⁴¹ For Gandhi's response to Jinnah's demand for Pakistan and to Partition see Brown *Gandhi* pp.346-384, for his dealings with Muslims in the first ten years after his return to India, especially non-co-operation and the Khilafat see B R Nanda *Gandhi Pan-Islamism, Imperialism and Nationalism in India* Oxford: OUP 1989

⁴² CWMG Vol. 22 pp487-8

There is acknowledgement and sensitivity to the fact that his interpretation is that of an outsider. However, he would challenge others over his right to read and use their scriptures in his prayer-meetings, as for instance with the inclusion of the Qur'an in prayer-meetings at the height of Hindu-Muslim tension between 1946 and 1948.⁴³

Creed

Gandhi also takes a relativist approach to creeds and formulations regarding the nature of God, deeming them appropriate to believers but not for all. A follower sent verses of the Bhagavad-Gita he was translating for Gandhi's opinion. To a verse rendered 'People cannot recognize me because I am in the form of a human being' Gandhi responds 'the meaning will do for you personally, but it assumes belief in the Divine incarnation of Krishna'.⁴⁴ This meaning is correct for the follower who believes it, but not for all. The alternative meaning Gandhi suggests is that it refers to the God hidden in all human beings. Gandhi concludes 'The ultimate result of both the meanings is the same.' It does not matter whether a religious statement is objectively true; the central point is not whether Krishna was incarnated in human form in a particular time and place, but the effect of religious beliefs on the faithful.

Gandhi objects to the Christian idea of Jesus as the exclusive, unique Son of God, through whom one attains salvation.⁴⁵ Yet he shows deep reverence for Jesus. He appreciates the value of referring to Jesus as Son of God, in the sense that he was an

⁴³ Chatterjee *Religious Diversity* pp.134-137

⁴⁴ CWMG Vol 65 p123

⁴⁵ Margaret Chatterjee 'Gandhi and Christianity' in Hick and Hempel p158

extraordinary spiritual person and teacher. In this sense other great spiritual people are also sons of God. The doctrine may be of value for those wishing to reach truth, to emulate and hold in highest regard Jesus, but when it becomes an exclusive creed it is maligned. He sees creeds used in this way as a divisive force, asking

Do you not think that religious unity is to be had not by mechanical subscription to a common creed but by all respecting the creed of each other? In my opinion difference in creed there must be so long as there are different brains. ⁴⁶

Mythological truth

Gandhi shows deep respect and reverence for mythological and relative truths, when he denies the absolute truth of certain religious claims, there is no denigration. The importance of a religious claim is not in its factual truth, but in the attitude, orientation and power it inspires. The internal, personal element of religion is elevated.

Relativity allows recognition that something may be true as we say it, in worship, whilst rationally we know it not to be so. The following examples illustrate Gandhi's orientation which emphasises faith and belief, through which one experiences Truth in a far stronger way than the factual. In a speech encouraging faith in the *charkha*, Gandhi holds up the example of Ekalavya's faith in the image of Dronacharya, explaining

⁴⁶ CWMG Vol. 30 p241

The real thing here is not the image, but our attitude towards it. In one sense the world is real, in another God alone is the one thing real. Both are true in different ways. If we can see God in our symbol it represents truth for us.⁴⁷

A personal letter to his Western disciple Mirabehn contains a revealing explanation of Gandhi's ideas on Truth and the importance of mythological truth. Translating and explaining verses from the Ashram Bhajanavali, he writes:

The imaginary gods are more real than the so-called real things we perceive with our five senses. When I recite this verse, for instance, I never think that I am addressing an imaginary picture. The recitation is a mystical act. That when I analyse the act intellectually, I know that the goddess is an imaginary being, does not in any way affect the value of the recitation at prayer time.⁴⁸

In this light we can understand how Gandhi claims 'all religions are true' in spite of contradictions between the religions doctrines, creeds and truth-claims. The meaning of true is far deeper than factual, it refers to spiritual truth, and the ability to connect believers to that. This understanding allows him to find comfort and peace in his own religion and to encourage others to place their faith and trust in their own.

Religious experience and the revelation of God through morality and our lives are the sources of religion Gandhi considered most important. Gandhi's primary concern was

⁴⁷ CWMG Vol. 65 p123

⁴⁸ CWMG Vol. 45 p98

not the externals of religion, but the personal spiritual journey.⁴⁹ For Gandhi it is the lives of the saints and personal experience validated by *tapas* which is authoritative.⁵⁰ He often calls on his own striving and exercises in spiritual living as a source of authority. However it is worth noting whilst his experience is absolute for himself he does not regard it as such for others. He writes in his autobiography:

I hope and pray that no one will regard the advice interspersed in the following chapters as authoritative. The experiments narrated should be regarded as illustrations, in the light of which everyone may on his own experiment according to his own inclinations and capacity.⁵¹

Conclusions

Gandhi holds all religions to be true. True, in the sense that they are all valid paths to religious fulfilment, they are human expressions of Truth. Truth is the ultimate principle revealed through the religions, to which all lead. The Indian context of Gandhi is vital to his conception of religion. He understands Truth as *satya*, as that which is, reality, the ultimate, the pure and good. It is truth and honesty but beyond literal, factual, logical

⁴⁹ Elton Hall 'Gandhi's Religious Universalism' in Hick and Hempel p174

⁵⁰ Chatterjee notes how Gandhi had a low opinion of theologians and God-talk. *Religious Thought* p13. This emphasis on individual experience is not a free for all to interpret and choose as one pleases for in order to know one's religious experience to be authentic it is necessary to be practising a spiritual path, and undertaking such trainings – religion is judged by its outcomes in the style of a person's life. There is a parallel here with Hick's use of saintliness as a criterion for judging the salvific potential of a religion. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion; Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd Edition, New Haven : Yale University Press 1989 p307

⁵¹ M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: the story of my experiments with truth* New York: Dover Publications 1983 px

truth. It is God. This Truth is the unifying principle of religions. The search for Truth is Religion.

Truth as the ultimate is indefinable and inexpressible. It may be realized, but cannot be spoken.⁵² Therefore whenever we talk of the transcendent our understanding and expressions are incomplete, partial or approximations. No religion is absolutely true. Ambler makes an interesting point, that 'Gandhi preferred to say all religions were "equally false" than to say they were "equally true"!'⁵³ God alone is perfect 'But we limited beings fancy all kinds of things and impute our limitations to God.'⁵⁴

The statement all religions are true, is therefore qualified by the clause "more or less". It represents the partiality and inadequacy of human minds to comprehend the divine. It maintains humility in matters of religion. As partial truths, approximations and mythological truth is all we have they are held in reverence. One attains Absolute Truth through worship of relative truth.⁵⁵

...as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long I must hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler.⁵⁶

⁵² This calls to mind the opening verse of the Tao Te Ching, 'The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao; The name that can be defined is not the unchanging name.' Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, tr. Ch'u Ta Kao, London: Allen and Unwin 1959

⁵³ Ambler, *Gandhi's Concept of Truth*, in Hick and Hempel p104

⁵⁴ CWMG Vol. 65 p82

⁵⁵ Joy Kachappilly *Gandhi and truth: an approach to the theology of religions* New Delhi: Akansha 2005 p24

⁵⁶ Gandhi *An Autobiography* p10

Scripture and creeds/dogmas provide examples of Gandhi's relative approach. Scriptures he considers inspired, but not the literal, exact word of God. Dogmas and creeds may be appropriate for believers, but he strongly opposes exclusivist dogmas. He is acutely aware of the dangers of religious arrogance, warring factions and creeds. Gandhi's approach however necessitates a liberal attitude to some traditional sources of authority, and a relative understanding of the claims of one's religion. It leaves no room for the direct revelation of a scripture or of an incarnation, such as Christ. It is therefore unacceptable to many believers.

Although posing some problems to others' interpretations and understandings, Gandhi's understanding is internally consistent. It resolves the existence of contradictions. It provides a hermeneutic which transforms competition between religions in favour of a mutually helpful and enlightening relationship aware of the fundamental unity of all. Joy Kachappily goes so far as to say Gandhi presents a new solution for theology of religions, Satyo-centrism.⁵⁷ I suggest that Gandhi's idea is not such a 'new' solution. Kachappily suggests it absorbs and transforms the other models in theology of religions, however, I do not find in Gandhi a new approach, beyond existing models, but a religious pluralist. His ideas have many correspondences and a similar basis in the idea of a reality beyond the traditions, which he called *satya* or Truth, experienced

⁵⁷ Kachapilly, *Gandhi and Truth* the whole thesis is an argument for the adoption of Satyo-centrism in religious pluralism, especially pp.163-216;

through them by humans in their particular, contextual and limited ways as with Hick's concept the Real.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Sharada Sugirtharajah 'The Mahatma and the Philosopher: Mohandas Gandhi and John Hick and their Search for Truth' in *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World: an ongoing engagement with John Hick* Basingstoke: Palgrave 2012 pp.121-133

CHAPTER THREE

PLURALISM WITH A PLACE FOR ATHEISM?

Gandhi's pluralism seeks to include atheists as well as all the religions. This breadth is expressed by authors such as Rex Ambler: 'Gandhi does not merely concede their right to be atheists, but in John Dunne's sense, he "passes over" into atheism and positively affirms it'⁵⁹ and Margaret Chatterjee: 'he does not even speak out against atheism, for he finds in many atheists that very desire for truth which he himself believed was identical with the religious impulse.'⁶⁰ In this engagement Gandhi pushes the boundaries of inclusion to their farthest point. Yet, comments on his inclusion of atheism tend to be short, demonstrating the breadth of his vision, rather than in depth considerations. The atheist family of Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (Gora) have written several good books on his engagement with atheism and with themselves.⁶¹ Arne Naess includes a useful, but brief chapter 'Gandhi and militant atheism' largely dealing with Gandhi's relationship with Gora and depending almost exclusively on Gora's book, 'An atheist with Gandhi'.⁶² Sunanda Shet's biography of Gora provides many insights into his

⁵⁹ Ambler 'Concept of Truth' in Hick and Hempel pp. 105-6

⁶⁰ Chatterjee *Religious Thought* p5

⁶¹ Gora was an Indian convert to atheism, he founded the Atheist Centre to propagate Positive Atheism, which emphasised a social programme based on the equality of all people and improving their current situations. He had a significant friendship with Gandhi which is examined in detail in Chapter Four. G. Ramachandra Rao *An Atheist with Gandhi* Ahmedabad: Navajivan 1951; G. Ramachandra Rao *We Become Atheists* Vijayawada: Atheist Centre 1975 (Gandhi is not the subject of this book, but his influence pervades Gora's story and experience); Lavanam Gora *Of Gandhi, Atheism and Social Experimentalism (A collection of speeches and articles)*, K H S Sundar (ed.), Vijayawada: Atheist Centre, 2003; Lavanam Gora and Mark Lindley, *Gandhi As We Have Known Him*, New Delhi: National Gandhi Museum, 2005

⁶² 'Gandhi and Militant Atheism' in Arne Naess, *Gandhi and the Nuclear Age*, New Jersey: Bedminster Press, 1965 pp. 51-7

engagement with Gandhi.⁶³ As far as I am aware no other academic studies devoted to this aspect of Mahatma Gandhi's inter-religious engagement exist, and as Lavanam says 'Gandhi's approach to atheism is not yet properly examined'.⁶⁴ This chapter shall consider how Gandhi viewed atheism and included it within his religious pluralism; the following chapter will focus on Gandhi's engagements with atheists, using Gora as a case study. Filling this gap in scholarship the first chapter concerns the philosophical and theological questions, the second practical concerns.

Defining atheism in different cultural contexts: problems and concerns

It is important to differentiate between common meanings of atheism. In the quotations above, atheism is a denial of the existence of God and validity of religion, in particular reference, for instance, to Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891), British atheist, political activist and MP whose moral courage Gandhi admired.⁶⁵ This is the same kind of atheism (complete rejection of religion) as Gora embraced and propagated. A fuller description of Gora's self-styled Positive Atheism is given in the following chapter. On the other hand there is the Indian atheism of certain Buddhist, Jain and Hindu philosophies.⁶⁶ Here, God is rejected, although sometimes similar concepts which may conform to Gandhi's use of God and Truth may be found. This atheism which either rejects, or regards as inconsequential the existence of God, remains religious, often devoutly so. It is

⁶³ Sunanda Shet *Gora: His life and work* Podanur: Premanand 2000 especially pp.128-140

⁶⁴ Lavanam, *Gandhi, Atheism and Social Experimentalism* p35

⁶⁵ Chatterjee *Religious Diversity* pp.330-334

⁶⁶ See Richard King *Indian Philosophy: An introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1999; also Satis Chandra Chatterjee 'Hindu Religious Thought', in Kenneth Morgan *The Religion of the Hindus* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas 1996 pp.206-261 contains a good discussion of theism (and its absence) in Hindu thought; Paul Dundas *The Jains*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge 2002 pp.110-111

independent of the idea of God. The terms non-theistic and supertheistic may be used to make this distinction. Gandhi was familiar with some of these non-theistic interpretations of religion. This is important for understanding his philosophy and inclination to include rather than exclude atheism. He was strongly influenced by Jain thought, and Raychandbhai was highly influential in shaping his understanding and appreciation of Hinduism in his early years of religious exploration.⁶⁷ He was an admirer of the Buddha, although he challenges the idea Buddha denied God, he follows the Buddhist tradition of considering theological reflection and philosophical questions secondary to religious life. Gandhi was a follower of *Advaita Vedanta* philosophy - a monist school of Hinduism, without a personal God – however it would be a mistake to think this sums up his interpretation of Hinduism as his thinking is also replete with the more popular Hindu myths and gods, *bhakti* and *karma yoga*, his religious thought encompasses both the impersonal ideas of *Advaita Vedanta* and personal devotional images of the divine.⁶⁸

It is atheism of the first kind – complete rejection of God and religion which interests us most as a radical challenge. How far was Gandhi successful in including atheism in his religious pluralism?

As self identification as atheist and the public voice of atheism, especially in the West, is increasingly common we must be aware of the dangers of a religious pluralism

⁶⁷ Chatterjee *Religious Thought*: 32ff; For the correspondence and spiritual questions between Raychandbhai and Gandhi see Appendix I of G. Smith *Gandhi's moral and religious philosophy* pp.224-236

⁶⁸ See Chapter Two, on Gandhi's religious pluralism, which situates Gandhi within the Hindu (and other) philosophical systems.

developed in opposition to atheism.⁶⁹ The plague of misunderstanding and conflict which has existed between religions should not be transformed into a similar gulf between the religious and atheists. The Indian religions and philosophies can help here, and their influence had an effect on Gandhi's ability to appreciate atheism. Lavanam emphasises the different contexts of atheism in the East and the West. In the West atheism is constructed against a Judeo-Christian background and the suppression of science and free-thought; in the East atheist philosophies have been a part of the religious traditions, and with less concern over dogma and orthodoxy free-thought has not been suppressed, the problems have been more over orthopraxy. He believes

a proper study and understanding of Indian philosophy and thought in relation to atheism can be an eye opener, both to religionists of the West, and to atheists, humanists and free-thinkers.⁷⁰

Atheism, within the Indian religions, has already been accepted in inter-religious dialogue, although sometimes this acceptance is questioned and challenged by other parties or the atheistic philosophy in the religion may be marginalised.⁷¹ I argue for the necessity of considering atheism of the Western type also. In a fairly crude sense of approaching religions as distinct broad categories, if we look at census or survey

⁶⁹ Bikhu Parekh 'Gandhi and inter-religious dialogue' in Douglas Allen *The philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi for the twenty-first century* Oxford: OUP 2009 pp.1-2

⁷⁰ Lavanam *Gandhi, Atheism and Social Experimentalism* p141

⁷¹ See for instance the difficulties Buddhists have encountered in interfaith initiatives in Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel (eds.), *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* London: SCM Press 1993 the section headed 'In the name of God? The Buddhists' objection' pp.61-5

questions 'atheist' is a significant category. Atheism forms an important part of the spectrum of religious views. Some people may object- how can atheists be included in inter-*religious* relations when they are avowedly not *religious*? I consider dialogue to be inter-religious where it is a dialogue between people with different religious backgrounds, beliefs or commitment. I argue that to the extent that 'atheists' have been treated and considered to be a distinct religious group, and are defined as such by questionnaires etc, they should be included in dialogue as such – although it is my hope that dialogue will go beyond such categorizations through the cultivation of inter-religious friendships. There is an extent to which their possible incorporation in some dialogue topics may be forestalled. Where a meeting between different religious believers could take place on theological issues, such as the nature of God, it is difficult to see how an atheist could contribute. The question seems farcical if starting from the assumption God does not exist. Yet, this question is perhaps something very necessary to discuss with atheists - as will be demonstrated below it may well be the definition atheists have of God, and assume religious people share and accept, which causes them to reject God and religion.⁷²

However, there are different kinds of atheists. Those who bring up objections are probably referring to the Western conception of atheism. Inter-religious dialogue today does benefit from the contributions of the non-theistic religions and philosophies of Asia

⁷² The winter issue of the journal *Concilium* 2010 picks this up nicely in the title 'Atheists of which God?' articles in it deal with issues of how popular atheists today see God, how Christians may need to adapt to new circumstances and religion in the public realm. Of particular relevance here is an article by an atheist, who is atheist with regards to a very specific concept of God (from within Christian culture) but has been deeply affected by Taoism and Buddhism, Andre Comte-Sponville 'Saving the Spirit', in *Concilium* Vol. 4 Winter 2010 pp.29-36

to theological questions, such as the purpose of life and nature of ultimate reality. Atheists may not engage in questions on the nature of God/gods, but still have contributions to make to theology or religious philosophy and faith. The interface between theistic religion and non-theistic religion is a realm where atheists are already part of inter-religious relations. This could open the way for atheists outside of any recognized religion to engage and be included in inclusivist and pluralist theologies. Gandhi's conception of religion and God or Truth, stands in this middle ground between an impersonal and personal, theistic and non-theistic conceptions of the ultimate.⁷³ He can therefore be considered to play a mediating role between the extremes, having engaged positively and gained acceptance from both perspectives. Furthermore Gandhi did explicitly consider the place of atheists in his religious pluralism, therefore making Truth central. As he considered atheism, even the Western atheism of Bradlaugh and Gora to need addressing, we too must address this area when elucidating and evaluating his pluralism.

When Hick developed his pluralism, a problem he overcame was developing a philosophy of religions that adequately included religions with and without a God on an equal footing.⁷⁴ He did this through making 'the Real' central, of which God is only own expression. In doing so he gives centrality to transcendence. This may distort the place transcendence actually has for Buddhists, particularly Theravada or Zen, which focus more on the here and now, the reality of suffering in the world than on transcendence – it is the aim to reach Nirvana, not to respond to it. I hold that there is more of a spectrum

⁷³ See previous chapter on Gandhi's concept of religion

⁷⁴ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* pp.245-296

to religious belief and living, and to recognition and responsiveness to transcendence than a discontinuity between religious and non-religious, with atheists as completely beyond the pale and concern of the religious and of pluralist philosophies.⁷⁵ This idea is supported by Cantwell Smith's insistence that

in their classical form both secularism and humanism were movements that used to inculcate not merely an acknowledgement, but a commitment to an active pursuit of transcending ideals.⁷⁶

And more clearly still, 'It is sloppy thinking to imagine that all so-called religious positions can be lumped together as of one sort, with the secularist as of a basically different sort.'⁷⁷

The reasons for including non-theistic religions in pluralism extend to Western atheism. One of the challenges the theology of religions sought to address was the expression of God's love in people of other faiths in their good lives. This questioned the idea of God's love being expressed through Christ alone. The exclusive ideas which deny salvation to non-Christians is challenged by Humanists' firm moral lives exemplifying justice, compassion, love and truth, as well as those of Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus. As one accepts the possibilities of other explanations, that one's own religion is not the only

⁷⁵ Cantwell Smith argues that this polarity is a recent invention of secularists with an agenda to discredit religions, a highly problematic concept in itself, and demonstrated this with reference to such borderline cases as Confucianism, which secularists wished to call a philosophy due to their affinity with it, whilst religious people expressed their affinity by considering it a religion.

⁷⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith 'Shall next century be secular or religious' in Wilfred Cantwell Smith (ed. John Burbidge) *Modern Culture from a Comparative Perspective* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997 p70. Having said this I would be more cautious of the identification of transcendent ideals and aspiration with acknowledging a metaphysical or transcendent reality than Smith seems to be on p71.

⁷⁷ Cantwell Smith *Modern Culture* p77

true response, it will perhaps extend further to see not only other religious forms as authentic responses, but the reactions of atheists too may be authentic responses, true explanations, and as Gora in the next chapter shows, provide a valuable basis for life in truth.⁷⁸

The necessity to include atheists in inter-religious initiatives today on the basis of community, overcoming conflict and misunderstanding between believers and atheists and to address ethical challenges are dealt with in greater detail in the next chapter which focuses more on interpersonal engagement.

Gandhi's appreciation of atheists

It is one of Gandhi's potential contributions to inter-religious relations that his pluralism included atheism and it is possible to study his relations with atheists and free-thinkers. He enjoyed four years of friendship and worked with Gora, an advocate for atheism. Bipan Chandra draws attention to Gokhale (his political mentor) and Nehru who were agnostics.⁷⁹ In South Africa and London he was influenced by free-thinking Jews and vegetarians.⁸⁰ A study of his relations with them may help in forging positive relations between believers and non-believers, and between secularists and religionists. It also reveals nuances in Gandhi's religious pluralism and understanding of religion.

⁷⁸ It is worth noting here that although Hick has not expanded on the position of atheists he has made some tantalizing comments such as when arguing that based on the fruits of religions in life we have no basis for assuming one is right and all the others wrong 'We find both the virtues and vices are, so far as we can tell, more or less equally spread among the population, of whatever major faith – and here I include Humanism and Marxism as major (though secular rather than religious) faiths'. John Hick *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical dialogues on Religious Pluralism* London: SCM Press 1995 p13

⁷⁹ Bipan Chandra 'Gandhiji, Secularism and Communalism' in *Social Scientist* Vol. 32 nos.1/2 2004 pp.3-29

⁸⁰ See Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish friends*, Macmillan Press: Basingstoke, 1992

Gandhi's religious pluralism and principle of the equality of all religions was wide enough to encompass not only the major world religions, but also atheism. He converted his proposition "God is Truth" to "Truth is God", to include atheists, agnostics and non-theists in his vision.⁸¹ 'Atheists, provided they accepted Truth as the Supreme End, had an equal place in his *sarva-dharma-samabhava* with theists.'⁸²

His relationship with Gora is particularly significant in its influence on Gandhi and providing a record, through their discussions, of Gandhi's attitude towards atheism. As in so many other aspects of Gandhi's thought, a development can be traced. Gora discerned this:

...there was a visible change in his attitude to atheism between 1941 and 1948. In his letter to me dated 11-9-'41, he said, "Atheism is a denial of self. No-one has succeeded in its propagation." But by 1946, while stating emphatically the difference between him and me, he was willing to leave the future to judge whether the theistic or the atheistic thought was better. In 1948, he agreed to perform the marriage of my daughter dropping out references to God from the ceremony.⁸³

Gora took Gandhi to be opposed to atheism at their initial contact, equating it with godlessness. During a discussion with a friend of Gora, Shri Ramaswamy, Gandhi had said

⁸¹ See below for a more detailed discussion of this

⁸² Shri K. G. Mushrawala, 'Introduction' to *An Atheist with Gandhi* p14

⁸³ Gora, *An Atheist with Gandhi* p59

The fellow-feeling which makes you feel miserable because of your brother's misery is godliness. You may call yourself an atheist, but so long as you feel akin with mankind you accept God in practice. I remember of clergymen who came to the funeral of the great atheist Bradlaugh, they said they had come to pay their homage because he was a godly man.⁸⁴

Gora comments, 'Gandhi's reaction conformed to the common meaning of atheism, namely that atheism is something incapable of and even contrary to goodness and goodwill.'⁸⁵ Suggesting that 'fellow-feeling was the outcome of godliness, and conversely that those who had no belief in god could have no fellow-feeling either.'⁸⁶

In Gandhi's earlier life we see prejudice against atheism. He refers to the Sahara of atheism, and dismisses Bradlaugh's atheism as 'so-called atheism'. This implies atheism to be a wasteland, with no purpose to serve. Bradlaugh being a man he admired could not in fact be an atheist, but was merely a so-called atheist. He further relates the heckling of an atheist in the crowd and admits 'This talk still further increased my prejudice against atheism.'⁸⁷ We find this negative attitude to atheism continuing as late as 1945, where his 'Thought For the Day' on Sept 7th is 'He who doubts the existence of God perishes' and for the 8th 'He who denies the existence of God denies his own.'⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Gora, *An Atheist with Gandhi* p30-1

⁸⁵ Gora *An Atheist with Gandhi* p31

⁸⁶ Gora *An Atheist with Gandhi* p31

⁸⁷ Gandhi, *An Autobiography* p61

⁸⁸ CWMG Vol. 81 p458

However, this confessed prejudice, was ideological not personal, as his regard for Bradlaugh shows. Although dismissive of Bradlaugh's atheism his regard for the man was great. Gandhi records in his autobiography attending Bradlaugh's funeral, he had a link with theosophist Annie Besant former co-worker with Bradlaugh - following with interest her conversion from atheism. Although Gerald Smith observes, no further connections have been established, this is sufficient to establish his influence on Gandhi's perception of atheism.⁸⁹ The influence must have been significant for Gandhi to record it so many years later in his Autobiography, and in 'Ethical Religion'. Gandhi admired Bradlaugh's devotion to Truth, identifying this as his reason for rejecting God, and admired his high moral stance. 'Ethical Religion' is Gandhi's summarisation in a series of articles of the arguments of Salter's book of the same name into Gujarati. In 'Morality as a Religion' Gandhi refers to Mr. Bradlaugh, as a moral man proud to call himself an atheist, who runs away from the name religion.⁹⁰ The argument in this chapter is that religion and morality are not separate, but united. He says the view of Bradlaugh is mistaken as is the view of men who call themselves religious whilst engaging in immorality.

Let us take two men, one who believes in the existence of God, yet breaks all His Commandments; and another who, though not acknowledging God by name, worships Him through his deeds and obeys His laws, recognizing in the divine laws, their Maker. Which of the two men shall we call a man of religion and

⁸⁹ Gerald Smith, *The Development of Gandhi's moral and religious philosophy from 1888-1921* University of Birmingham: MPhil Thesis 1992 p30

⁹⁰ M K Gandhi *Ethical Religion* Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1968 p20; This is the translation into English of Gandhi's paraphrase/translation of William MacIntyre Salter's book 'Ethical Religion' into Gujarati for Indian Opinion in January and February 1907

morality? Without a moments thought, one would emphatically reply that the second man alone is to be considered religious and moral.⁹¹

This is an accepting stance towards atheists as people, but propagates the assumption Gora challenged- that atheism is something opposed to goodwill and morality, thus the moral atheist is in fact a religious man. At the same time, it testifies to Gandhi's willingness to find goodness and Truth in all people. One can hardly think of a higher compliment from Gandhi than to regard someone as a truly religious or Godly person.

The change which Gandhi underwent from this starting point is a strong testimony to the power of dialogue and understanding to overcome prejudice, change attitudes and develop fellowship and friendship. By the end of their relationship, in response to Gora's question "I want atheism to make man self-confident and to establish social and economic equalities non-violently. Tell me, Bapu, where am I wrong?" Gandhi replied

I can neither say that my theism is right nor your atheism wrong. We are seekers after truth. We change whenever we find ourselves in the wrong. I changed like that many times in my life. I see you are a worker. You are not a fanatic. You will change whenever you find yourself in the wrong. There is no harm as long as you are not fanatical. Whether you are in the right or I am in the right, results will prove. Then I may go your way or you may come my way; or both of us may go a third way. So go ahead with your work. I will help you, though your method is against mine.⁹²

⁹¹ CWMG, Vol 6, p313; *Ethical Religion* pp.21-2

⁹² Gora *An Atheist with Gandhi* p44

Gandhi's inclusion of atheists stems from his Indian background and emphasis on action. It is therefore not such a leap for him to see elements of religion which are independent of God, which he was familiar with through Indian philosophies, in confessed atheists. His emphasis on action meant he would judge a person by their life rather than what they profess, making a moral atheist closer to God than a hypocritical believer.

The compatibility of Gandhi's definition of God with atheism

Gandhi's conception of God is wider than a personal God or a being to be worshipped and placated. His is a God who can be seen in the heart, actions, even beliefs of atheists too. He says God 'is even the Atheism of the atheist.'⁹³

His God however is definitely different from, and in opposition to, what an atheist may be able to accept. The breadth of his inclusion, in seeing that the ultimate destination of man is absolute Truth explainable through theism, pantheism or atheism circumvents questions of incompatibility by by-passing rationality. Whilst 'Truth is God' enables agreement and inclusion for atheists, when we observe Gandhi's use of the concept of God it includes a personal God of the kind no atheist could accept. Gandhi's God is personal and does play a part in directing the course of the world and his own life. For instance writing in his autobiography he talks of God intervening when a friend took him to a brothel

⁹³ CWMG Vol. 26 p224

I went into the jaws of sin, but God in His infinite mercy protected me against Myself... I have ever since given thanks to God for having saved me.... As we know that a man often succumbs to temptation, however much he may resist it, we also know that Providence often intercedes and saves him in spite of himself. How all this happens, - how far free-will comes into play and where fate enters on the scene, - all this is a mystery and will remain a mystery.⁹⁴

Similarly, he gives up his life-insurance policy because it displays a want of faith in God to provide for and protect him and his family.⁹⁵ God is not just an abstract principle or power, but personal and involved in his life, indeed even in intimate details. Whilst some authors emphasise the impersonal and moral aspects of Gandhi's religion and notion of God, the other side, that of a personal being is certainly present in Gandhi's life and thought. At times this may be a rhetoric device to express gratitude for a lucky chance escape, or an indulgence or use of familiar terminology to communicate with the multitude.

However the regular references to God as a personal being, his actions based upon the inner voice, such as changing his mind instantaneously, undergoing personal penance/ testing of his own will power and sexual self-control in response to external large scale events, such as the rioting in Noakhali,⁹⁶ are convincing evidence that Gandhi genuinely does relate to God as a supernatural being, whom he and others can relate to, with a will and intervening in the world in response to circumstances and individuals even

⁹⁴ Gandhi *An Autobiography* p20

⁹⁵ Gandhi *An Autobiography* p230

⁹⁶ For accounts of his most controversial experiment – sleeping naked with his 19 year old Grand-niece, Manu Gandhi, and its relation to the political circumstances see Arvind Sharma 'Gandhi and Celibacy' in Hick and Hempel pp.51-60 and Brown *Prisoner of Hope* pp.377-8

in very minor, personal affairs. This aspect of his personality and faith was difficult for some to accept, such as Nehru, however it is one factor which may have helped in his relations with Quakers which we consider in the next chapter.⁹⁷

This personal aspect of God is incompatible with atheism, in both its Western and Eastern forms. It is important to be aware of this difference and tension, but it should not override other aspects of Gandhi's concept of God. The personal is only one element. It has already been discussed that Gandhi subscribed to the Jain doctrines of *anekantavada* and *syadvada*. He thus saw Truth as fragmentary and subject to different perspectives. Gandhi's own notion and differing, even contradictory ways of relating to and describing God are best seen in this light. The complexity of his ideas reflect different sides of Truth and the different perspectives within his own self, depending on from which perspective the question is approached. So Gandhi personally relating to God draws out the very personal aspects of the divine - seeing his guiding hand in personal affairs and decisions. When Gandhi is asked questions about the nature of God, his response is more philosophical, tending to draw more on the impersonal aspect of God, and in his most definitive saying simply, yet profoundly, 'God is Truth'. And yet again, when Gandhi is referring to God as a motive and backing for his campaigns and actions we see him drawing on the rich traditions of his own Hinduism and of other traditions, to explain his ideas, to lend them the support of religious authority, and to enable people to relate to

⁹⁷ Quakers emphasise being led by the Spirit and following the promptings of God. This has caused difficulty within the community when people have behaved in strange and embarrassing ways. On the other hand perhaps the ability of the British Quakers to accept Gandhi's extreme actions even when detrimental to them may be due to the emphasis on the leadings of the Spirit and obedience to the inner voice and conscience.

them from within their own traditions. This many-sidedness philosophically justifies and explains his humility in matters concerning the nature of God. Thus Gandhi is open to a number of different views and would not seek to confine Truth to one perspective. Because he sees God in a personal way (at times) does not mean he would expect others to acknowledge that. He believed it acceptable all should have their different ideas. The important aspect is what one does rather than what one believes, and which words one chooses. This doctrine enables Gandhi to consider religion both non-theistically and theistically and thus to engage fruitfully with staunch theists and with atheists. In his pluralism he says one must judge another believer through their own eyes, reading the Qur'an, with the eyes of a Muslim and the Bible through the eyes of a Christian. He extends this affirmation to atheism.

Gandhi does not just merely concede their right to be atheists, but in John Dunne's sense, he "passes over" into atheism and positively affirms it. That is why he can say of his friend and humanitarian Charles Bradlaugh that, 'that which sustained Bradlaugh throughout all his trials was God. He (God) is the Denial of the atheist'; and again, 'He is even the atheism of the atheist' as a part of the *definition* of God. Since it was 'self-styled believers (who) are often not so in reality', who pushed others into unbelief, their unbelief was wholly right.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Ambler '*Concept of Truth*' in Hick and Hempel pp.105-6

Going even further, just as he made the claim to be not only Hindu, but Buddhist, Muslim and Christian he claimed to be a super-atheist.⁹⁹ Both theistic and atheistic ways of seeing and relating to Truth are considered genuine.

Truth is God

Gandhi stresses God as an impersonal force, a power, moral law. Most importantly Gandhi describes not only God as Truth, but says Truth is God. It is this concept which bridged the gap between Gandhi and atheism. This change was influenced by political concerns. It was during the non-co-operation campaign started in August 1920 that he used God and Truth interchangeably with an increasing frequency in his use of Truth.¹⁰⁰ This enabled (or was intended to enable) unity between diverse religious groups and avoided alienation of communities through allegiance to a particular name for God. Although we can trace political roots it also expressed an ideological change. With further thought and reflection he came to prefer God is Truth as a more accurate statement. Chatterjee identifies the precise event of this decisive change

His famous conversion arose in the context of discussion with conscientious objectors in Lausanne [December 1931] who could not subscribe to orthodox belief but were passionately devoted to peace.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Lavanam *Gandhi, Atheism and Social Experimentalism* p32

¹⁰⁰ Gerald Smith *Gandhi's moral and religious philosophy* p118

¹⁰¹ Chatterjee *Religious Thought* p162

It was an outcome of his encounter and sympathy with atheists, humanists, and those who found doctrine a stumbling block. It is indicative of his belief that action and practice constitute true religion, not belief and doctrine. Truth formed a common factor all could accept,

...even atheists had not demurred to the necessity or power of Truth. But in their passion for discovering the truth, the atheists have not hesitated to deny the very existence of God- from their own point of view rightly. And it was because of this reasoning that I saw that rather than say that God is Truth, I should say that Truth is God.¹⁰²

This is not without problems. His notion of Truth is a supernatural one, incompatible with an atheist's notion. Atheism is here used in the 'western' sense of an outright rejection of God, religion and the supernatural. An Indian atheist perspective from within the atheistic philosophical traditions raises different questions. Gora's atheism is of the Western type, in that he associates with no religion. Even after four years of friendship with Gora, Gandhi underestimates the difference. His adaptation of a pledge to call on the assistance of 'some power which we may or may not call divine' is unacceptable to the atheist, as it still asserts an external power over human affairs, which opposes one of Gora's fundamental reasons for propagating atheism.¹⁰³ It violates the self-confidence and independence from any outside controlling forces which atheism inculcates.

¹⁰² M K Gandhi *Truth is God*, ed. R K Prabhu, Ahmedabad: Navajivan 1955 p13

¹⁰³ Gora *An Atheist with Gandhi* p58

Gandhi's understanding of Truth has this quality to it- it is more than an ideal, but a reality, and a powerful one. Thus Ambler in his analysis of Gandhi's concept of Truth says

His attitude to Truth, we have to conclude, goes beyond a humanist idealism and becomes a confident faith in the universal, if partially veiled, reality of Truth and its power to disclose itself through ordinary people perceiving and professing [professing here refers to more than declaring, it is satyagraha, professing through one's life] it.¹⁰⁴

Satyagraha cannot fail because it relies on Truth. It has a quasi-eschatological significance.

This is a different understanding and belief in Truth to that which an atheist might assert. Therefore, I contend that, Gandhi's formula 'Truth is God' does not include atheists on their own terms. For if we have clarity regarding Gandhi's notion of Truth, which is a supernatural force rather than the factual truth regarding the nature of the universe atheists aspire to, we find it would be rejected by atheists. When conscientiousness to clarity and detail surrounding the semantics are upheld some points of view cannot be brought in line and made to agree in essence, they simply are contradictory. The disparity between atheism and theism is one such instance. They may use the same word, i.e. Truth as a shared fundamental, universal principle, but the meaning given to truth is inescapably different.

Gerald Smith brings out this point when examining Gandhi's claim "Truth is God."

¹⁰⁴ Ambler, *Concept of Truth*, in Hick and Hempel p97

He believed it was a truly universal description of reality and even an atheist would claim to be following truth in their very denial of a personal God. This is a large claim which needs to be examined. What is the actual content and meaning of this expression “truth is God”.¹⁰⁵

Smith examines what is meant by “reality itself” and “seeing things as they truly are”, and living in accordance with this. On this level Gandhi and an atheist might agree on the importance of Truth, however the understanding of reality is on an entirely different level. Whilst for an atheist it may be necessary to see things as they are it does not follow they are making truth their God, and certainly not in the sense Gandhi meant. ‘When Gandhi said, ‘God is Truth’ and ‘Truth is God’, Gora could only agree that ‘truth is truth’ nothing else.’¹⁰⁶

In line with our problematisation of Gandhi’s notion of truth as conforming to an atheist conception Smith focuses on the moral component of Truth.

For Gandhi, reality included moral laws which were as certain as gravity, in other words he ascribed *goodness* to reality. An atheist, however, might see reality as being morally neutral. Terms like good and evil could then be interpreted as, for example, human constructs arising out of complex biological and social instincts for survival. In this scenario, truth or reality is not an object of worship or reverence but simply a brute fact to be faced ... It is important to notice the subtle difference in the meaning of the term truth. For the atheist it might mean reality, “that which is”, in a purely

¹⁰⁵ Gerald Smith *Gandhi’s moral and religious philosophy* p208

¹⁰⁶ Shet Gora p132

physical sense, while for Gandhi reality included good and evil, it included the existence of the *atman* the true self, and it included the experiences of those who had followed the “tried and tested path” to *moksha*, liberation.¹⁰⁷

In spite of the differences mentioned above, what this approach and affirmation that “Truth is God” does achieve is a basis on which to treat and genuinely consider atheists as equal with all other religions. What Gandhi draws attention to is that religion is not a matter of profession it is how one lives. If one lives constantly seeking Truth, that is to be religious, what one calls it does not matter. This realization comes in part from his encounter with atheists, from dialogue, which showed many atheists were deeply committed to Truth and morality. In their lives they showed what true religion is. This recalls one of Gandhi’s favourite poems, *Vaishnava Jana To* which draws out the qualities of self-giving, sympathy with another’s plight, purity and honesty, drawing attention to the fact that it is the quality of a person’s character that make a true *Vaishnava*, not birth and supposed identity and allegiance.¹⁰⁸ For Gandhi those atheists who display all these qualities should be considered as equal with religious people.

His faith in the in-dwelling *atman* further demands on a philosophical level this equal consideration. The acknowledgement of the divine in all people and thus their divine potential is applied to all - even those who reject the idea.¹⁰⁹ Vivekananda displays a similar attitude in his interpretation of *Advaita Vedanta* where he is convinced that all

¹⁰⁷ Smith *Gandhi’s moral and religious philosophy* pp. 208-9

¹⁰⁸ The poem is by Gujarati poet-saint Narashinh Mehta is recalled in Gandhi’s article ‘To Vaishnavas’ in *Navajivan* 15th Dec 1920, CWMG Vol. 22 pp.55-58 (Gandhiserve)

¹⁰⁹ This idea may also be compared with the reactions of Quaker responses to atheists, who have drawn similar conclusions from the call to ‘answer that of God in everyone’. See chapter 6

people are journeying toward the ultimate truth and to *moksha*.¹¹⁰ His idea however is different in that whilst he grants a place, with respect and inclusion, even necessity, for all he also maintains an idea of stages toward the ultimate goal, which has as sort of 'spiritual hierarchy' to it.¹¹¹ Gandhi judges by morality and it is the morality of atheists which requires equality of consideration, and is evidence of their responsiveness to God or the indwelling *atman*.

This view necessitated a modification of his ideas to include atheists as equals. Gandhi had challenged Christians that if Jesus were to come again many who did not call themselves Christians would be claimed as his true followers.¹¹² His encounter with atheists taught him an analogous lesson: many of those who do not call themselves religious are the truly religious people, true seekers and followers of Truth. He wished to acknowledge this and find a common ground with them by affirming what he believed they could accept- the absolute of Truth- thus preferring "Truth is God" over the more exclusive "God is Truth."

Is Satyagraha dependent on God? Relying on the power within

Gandhi's understanding of Truth is brought out in his notion of *satyagraha*.

Satyagraha is the term Gandhi coined for his campaigns of non-co-operation with the Government in South Africa. He derived the word by posing a competition to find a new term for passive resistance. He rejected passive resistance, as it was considered a weapon

¹¹⁰ Swami Vivekananda *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* Vol.2, 10th edition, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama 1999 p365

¹¹¹ Arvind Sharma believes Vivekananda's view could be summed up in the motto: 'Advaitic preference but no exclusion.' Sharma *The Concept of Universal Religion in Modern Hindu Thought* Basingstoke: Macmillan 1998 p72

¹¹² Ellsberg *Gandhi on Christianity* p27

of the weak, of those who could not fight with violence, and for the implication of passivity in the title, when in fact his movements were an actively non-violent force, peaceful out of conviction and self-control not lack of strength for armed conflict. *Satyagraha* consists of two Sanskrit words, *satya* - truth and *agraha* – to hold firmly to, giving the meaning holding firmly to truth. Thus the very term itself contains the commitment to truthful and righteous method to bear witness to truth, or justice. It invokes both the commitment and dependence of *satyagrahis* on Truth – for Gandhi identical with God – which enabled Gandhi to claim that *satyagraha* could not be defeated. Whilst the term refers usually to particular organised and public non-violent campaigns, there were also times in the National movement when he implemented individual *satyagraha*, and *satyagraha* came to imply a whole ideology of fair treatment, converting the opponent through suffering, and respecting the free choice of individuals, which one attempts to change through conviction and making them see your side not by force.

The many statements regarding *satyagraha*'s infallibility, except due to people's failure practice it, are evidence of its transcendent foundation. Gandhi addressed explicit questions about whether this forestalled the participation of atheists. At a Gandhi Seva Sangh meeting Gandhi was asked whether *satyagraha* should be considered closed to those who do not believe in God. His answer which is a rich source for understanding his philosophy is given below.

I am sorry, but I shall have to say, 'Yes'. God alone is the strength for a satyagrahi. He wants to walk on his own legs. He does not want a stick for support. He does not depend on any strength from outside. Faith in God is an inner strength. Hence the path of Satyagraha is closed to those who do not accept this. They must take the path of unarmed protest. They can even be non-co-operators. But they can never be satyagrahis. Because anyone who does not believe in God will be defeated in the end. Should I then admit that there can be no victory through non-violence? On the contrary, I would say that with non-violence there can be no defeat. Faith in God is itself the power behind non-violence. Hence we must put up with it even if somebody feels hurt. But it should be made absolutely clear that this path is not meant for the people who do not believe in God. There is no other way. The socialists who do not understand my point of view would say that I have worked out a trick for getting rid of them. I cannot help it. I shall face even that charge. You may say that this will keep out many gallant co-workers while hypocrites professing faith in God but without any evidence of it in their practical life will get in. But I am not talking about hypocrites. I am rather talking of those people who are ready to sacrifice their all in the name of God.¹¹³

His initial response seems exclusive. It is worth bearing in mind that this was in 1939, prior to his meeting with Gora. The affirmation 'Anyone who does not believe in God will be defeated in the end' conforms to his earlier identification of religion and morality in 1907 in 'Ethical Religion' which leads him to suppose that atheism cannot produce true morality, 'So long as the seed of morality is not watered by religion, it cannot sprout. Without water it withers and ultimately perishes.'¹¹⁴

it is worth comparing this to his later acceptance that in time it may be shown Gora's atheism, not Gandhi's theism is right. In dealing with these conflicting sources one should bear in mind Gandhi's own hermeneutical principles, that when one detects an

¹¹³ CWMG Vol. 69 pp.226-8

¹¹⁴ Gandhi *Ethical Religion* p21

inconsistency in his thinking that from a later date should be considered more accurate, and to judge him by his work over his word.

This is a particularly significant source for determining Gandhi's attitude to atheism, as it is action he is dealing with. It is his exclusion of atheists from the Gandhi Seva Sangh, and from *satyagraha*. This demonstrates the extent to which reliance on Truth is axiomatic to Gandhi. It is important to stress that whilst a simplistic reading of this discussion would suggest antagonism to atheism it is not borne out by a deeper reading and understanding of Gandhi and his life. Further questioning brings out a more nuanced response.

Kripalani: Does this mean that the non-believers like the Jains and Buddhists cannot join the satyagraha movement?

G: If there are certain Jains or Buddhists who do not believe in the atman they cannot join satyagraha. But these people do believe in the atman. And those who believe in the atman believe in God. Their quarrel is only with a particular idea of God. I do not want any disputation over it. A certain Jain even asked me at Rajkot. I gave the same reply. He then remembered that the Jains too believe in Divine Power. Anyone who accepts a power that helps us in all situations is not a non-believer. He is a believer in God. What does it matter if he is a Jain or a Buddhist? But if some Jains or Buddhists themselves say that they cannot join satyagraha because they do not believe in God I shall not argue with them. I shall say that they are right.

Krishnan Nair: What is the criterion for judging whether a person does or does not believe in God? If an individual accepts God as a metaphysical probability but not as a mysterious Power, will he be called an atheist?

G: This is a subtle question. It is not even necessary to go so deep into it. I do not insist that everybody should have the same idea of God as I have and describe Him in the same vocabulary that I use. There is no ready-made test to determine whether somebody does or does not believe. Still, it is possible to test it.¹¹⁵

G: Let me begin with Radhakrishna's question which I took up yesterday but could not finish. The question about God has been more or less dealt with. A discussion on it was going on. Shri Krishnan Nair had raised a subtle point. But it does not allow much scope for discussion. I am indifferent about the names or attributes which a man may apply to God. I had made a general statement that any man who had no faith in God could not stay a satyagrahi to the end. What I had meant was that so long as the satyagrahi is not convinced that there is some great subtle Power that would give him strength in all situations, he cannot face tyranny, strife and humiliations and sustain his non-violence. These days we do not suffer anything that may be described as torture. Nobody places us on burning coals or pierces us with needles. This would be the extreme form of cruelty. But in the face of even such torture not to have any malice against the torturer is non-violence. Man cannot show such supreme non-violence in the face of such suffering relying on his own efforts. So long as he does not have faith in some Power and feel the presence of that Power behind him he will not have the strength calmly to put up with such tyranny. This Power that thus sustains is God. Not to bear any malice towards the tyrant even on such occasions is another name of faith in God.¹¹⁶

This leaves a different impression to the exclusion in his first answer. Firstly, Gandhi leaves it the individual to decide if they accept a power and are able to be part of *satyagraha*; it is not an imposed discrimination. Secondly, his idea of God as an inner power is something many atheists may accept, by a different name and Gandhi does not mind by what name it is called. This discussion took place after his conversion of "God is Truth" to "Truth is God." It is therefore worth re-reading the discourse, substituting the

¹¹⁵ CWMG Vol. 69: 226-8

¹¹⁶ CWMG Vol. 69: 231-2

word God with Truth. This is particularly the case with atheists from within the Indian religions as confirmed by further questioning on Jains and Buddhists. Someone who believes in an internal strength, soul-force or *atman*, can be accepted as a *satyagrahi*. It is this *atman*, to which Gandhi refers, when talking of God. Whilst the labelling of it God and thus alignment with more conventional theistic ideas may wish to be avoided by certain Buddhist and Jain atheists the idea is essentially acceptable and inclusive. For Buddhists, following the philosophy of *anatman* this may be more problematic, yet there remains in Buddhist thought concepts which can be equated to this Power, to Truth as Gandhi conceives it, such as the Buddha-nature, or the concepts Hick identifies with in his pluralism, *Sunyata* and *Dharmakaya*.¹¹⁷

For a Western-style of atheism, rejecting any supernatural interpretation of the universe, the problem is more subtle. Gandhi is talking about belief in the power to change coming from the self. That it is, and must be, an internal power, independent of external support or events. An atheist could agree here in the power for change coming from one's self – indeed self-reliance is a primary reason for Gora's atheism. Gora is therefore able to say 'if atheism means the assertion of the freedom of the individual, Gandhi's method of *satyagraha* is an outstanding contribution to advance civilisation towards atheism in practice.'¹¹⁸

However, when Gandhi is talking of this power from the self, he means the *atman*, which is indistinct from God. Thus faith in God can be used interchangeably with faith in

¹¹⁷ Hick *An Interpretation of Religion; Human Responses to the Transcendent* pp.283ff

¹¹⁸ Gora, 'Clarifications', *The Atheist*, February 1974 p23 cited in Shet p135

the *atman*, faith in Truth and soul-force. For non-religious atheism, however the self, means only the limited currently existing self, it is independent of other selves or *Brahman*/God. Gora follows this kind of atheism, rejecting any other as leading once again to theism. His reasons for rejecting Gandhi's adaptation of a pledge bring this out.

Of course the outlook of the atheist is quite different to what Gandhi evidently took it to be when he stated 'all atheists know that there is some power within them.' Really, atheism is the manifestation of the free will in man. The hypothesis of 'some power which we may or may not call divine,' subordinates human life to that power and thereby leads to theism again.¹¹⁹

For Gandhi belief in God is not determined by a profession of belief which is not borne out in practice, but by a person's actions, 'Not to bear any malice towards the Tyrant even on such occasions is another name of faith in God.' Non-violence itself is faith in God. In spite of his strong statements against atheism he suggests different ways for them to be involved in the independence movement and is known to have worked alongside atheists. In particular a number of years later and therefore to be taken as more representative, showing a more developed philosophy, he worked with and supported Gora and his Atheist Centre. He did not reject Gora, even when Gora asserted "Atheism is my Method", but accepting his own method *satyagraha*, which as we have seen does have belief in a power greater than the self, to be different he agreed to support Gora in his endeavours.

¹¹⁹ Gora *An Atheist with Gandhi* p58

This acknowledgement of difference, mutual openness to the others point of view and continuation of a positive working and personal relationship display a mature attitude deserving of emulation.

Having drawn out this difference in conception of Truth, it must be noted the opposition is limited to the supernatural component. In other regards and as a value it is shared. There is a good deal of overlap and commonality between the atheist perspective of Gora and the religious perspective of Gandhi, as we will see in the following chapter. This was facilitated by Gandhi's concept of Truth, and insight that striving after Truth is the essence of religion.

Inclusivism toward atheism

Atheists as 'Anonymous Believers'

Alan Race developed the standard characterisation of Christian responses to other religions: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.¹²⁰ This model is applicable beyond the Christian context it was designed for. The inclusivist view, represented in Christianity by Karl Rahner, is one in which other religions are affirmed in so far as they conform to Christianity. Christianity remains the yard stick, the true and final religion, but truth and a salvific potential is recognised in other religions as Christ working through the other religion. 'Inclusivism avoids confrontation, but seeks to discern ways by which the non-Christian faiths may be integrated creatively into Christian theological reflection.'¹²¹

Rahner coined the phrase 'anonymous Christian' to describe the idea that in moving

¹²⁰ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, 2nd Edition, London: SCM Press 1993

¹²¹ Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* p38

toward salvation, in a non-Christian religion, a person is in a sense, Christian already, coming to God through Christ's unseen work of Grace.¹²²

Pluralists and people of other religions may find inclusivists have not gone far enough, inclusivists are held back in the assertion of the final truth of their own religion by which others are measured. To some-one of a different religion this is condescending, it may have the advantage over exclusivism that it is not an outright dismissal, but the inclusivist theology redefines your experience, and does not accept your own understanding of who you are, to what you respond and what your faith means. On the other hand the exclusivist whilst dismissive does not arrogate to him or herself the ability to define and correct your faith.

Pluralists accept the multiplicity of expressions of truth, thus coming up with philosophies which consider each religion valid in its own right, rather than in reference to the pluralist's own religion. John Hick for instance, rather than putting the Christian God at the centre posited the Real, unknowable in itself, which is experienced by humans through our human interpretations, cultures and backgrounds, as the Christian God or equally authentically as the Buddhist *Sunyata* or Hindu *Brahman*.¹²³

I argue that Gandhi seems to employ a strategy analogous to inclusivism, whereby atheists are considered as 'anonymous believers.' The above consideration of satyagraha

¹²² Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* pp.45ff.

¹²³ The pluralist hypothesis although not posing other religions in the image of one's own as inclusivism does is not free of the charge of distorting the religions' own self-understandings. Hick addresses this challenge (often put to him by inclusivists) in *The Rainbow of Faiths* pp.40-9

and Truth suggest this. The following quotation from a prayer-meeting at Sabarmati Ashram in 1930 makes it explicit.

I believe that prayer is the very essence of religion, and therefore prayer must be the very core of the life of man, for no man can live without religion. There are some, who in the egotism of their reason declare that they have nothing to do with religion. But it is like a man saying he breathes but that he has no nose. Whether by reason, or by instinct, or by superstition, man acknowledges some sort of relationship with the divine. The rankest agnostic or atheist does acknowledge the need of a moral principle, and he associates something good with its observance and something bad with its non-observance. Bradlaugh, whose atheism is well known, always insisted on proclaiming his innermost conviction. He had to suffer a lot for thus speaking the truth, but he delighted in it and said that truth is its own reward. Not that he was quite insensible to the joy resulting from the observance of truth. This joy however is not at all worldly, but springs out of communion with the divine. That is why I have said that even a man who disowns religion cannot and does not live without religion.¹²⁴

This sort of approach may be criticized as lacking respect for the other in terms of taking them at their word, in an honest way, and respecting their right to self-definition.

The question of what God is, once again is raised. An example worth consideration is found in the contemporary atheist debate. Richard Dawkins addresses this issue:

Some people have views of God that are so broad and flexible that it is inevitable that they will find God wherever they look for him. One hears it said that “God is the Ultimate” or “God is our better nature” or “God is the universe.” Of course, like any other word “God” can be given any meaning we like. If you want to say

¹²⁴ CWMG Vol. 42: 411

“God is energy,” then you can find God in a lump of coal... if the word God is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way people have generally used it: to denote a supernatural creator that is “appropriate for us to worship.”¹²⁵

What we are actually dealing with here is not a totally different worldview and orientation, but a conflict over the proper use of words. At the start of his book, which openly declares its intention to convert people to atheism and to encourage atheists to openly and proudly declare themselves as such, Dawkins confines his argument against God to a specific notion of God and religion.

My title, *The God Delusion*, does not refer to the God of Einstein and other enlightened scientists of the previous section...In the rest of this book I am talking only about *supernatural* gods, of which the most familiar to the majority of my readers will be Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament.¹²⁶

It is a distinctively Western concept of God he attacks. In India the words translated as God have been used to denote a very different concept.¹²⁷ *Nirguna Brahman*, is a very widely understood and well-established concept. It is by nature and of necessity extremely broad. The dual belief in *nirguna* and *saguna Brahman* convey the understanding of God (*Brahman*) as impersonal, indefinable, indescribable, beyond all

¹²⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London: Transworld Publishers, 2007 p33

¹²⁶ Dawkins *The God Delusion* p41

¹²⁷ We here hit upon an interesting issue of translation and the appropriateness of translating a wide range of terms such as Brahman, Ishwara, Bhagavan, and the great array of particular deities in the pantheon, God. Interesting as it would be to delve into these issues, such specialist linguistic questions are beyond the scope of this work.

comprehension and confinement, as such *Brahman* is beyond all comprehension. When humans relate to this, it is to *saguna Brahman*, *Brahman* with qualities. Through the description and application of attributes in human terms, whilst necessary, limitation is brought to it, which is not there in itself. The Ultimate is no longer ultimate, in its purity.

Gandhi can accurately be described as one of the many who use the term God in a very broad and flexible way, such that God is found everywhere. Indeed he positively delights in seeing God even in a worm and a weevil!¹²⁸ This situates him squarely in the Indian tradition, although he does have his own specific nuances and ideas. Gandhi's definition (or more accurately, vagueness regarding definition) of God and his repeated assertion he does not mind by what name it is called enables him to include and consider moral, truth-seeking atheists as religious. Perhaps he would even have considered Dawkins as religious, and God to be the basis of his atheism, which is rooted in the uncompromising striving for truth, through science, in spite of Dawkins' protestations. Why should Dawkins be the one to define what it is appropriate to call God rather than Gandhi? Those who believe in God should be able to define what it is they believe in, and those who do not, should also be able to define what they reject.

This argument, that the divergence between Gandhi and critics of religion is more a question of semantics than a genuine difference is backed up by Nehru's interpretation of Gandhi's thought. Nehru refers to Gandhi's assertions that 'there are some who in the egotism of their reason declare that they have nothing to do with religion...' and '...that

¹²⁸ CWMG Vol.45 p20-22

those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.'

Commenting

Perhaps it would have been more correct if he had said that most of these people who want to exclude religion from life and politics mean by that word 'religion' something very different from what he means.¹²⁹

It is important to emphasise the way in which one's culture and understanding of religion and God will affect how one relates to religion and to atheism, and to go beyond superficial contradictions by investigating how people are using these words. However, there are cases of genuine difference in concepts, beyond a different use of words. Gandhi's approach imposes his own interpretation of God onto those who do not believe, to bring them in line with his conviction that God or Truth underlies everything. I argue that this is an inclusivist strategy which does not have the respect of allowing the other self-interpretation. As we have seen in his discussions with Gora it became clear there is a root difference – Gora will not accept Gandhi's change of words for God, he rejects the entire notion of a power above the human and that of nature, which leads back to a fatalistic position. Coming from India, Gora already had a broad idea of religion. He had studied religious thought and ideas. Therefore Gandhi's alternative explanations were not different from the concepts Gora had explored and rejected. However, for many atheists from cultures where Abrahamic religions dominate, with their concept of one personal

¹²⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru *An Autobiography*, abridged edition, Oxford University Press: Delhi, 1991 p182

God, Gandhi's ideas may provide a fresh insight and way to appreciate and relate to religion.¹³⁰

Inclusivism and Buddhism

This question of inclusivism is perhaps even more pertinent when it comes to a consideration of atheism in Buddhism. The relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism has long been contested. Many Hindus consider Buddhism as a branch of Hinduism, rather than a distinct religion, in much the same way as differing Hindu sects, such as *Vaishnavites*, *Shaivites* and *Advaitins* whilst forming distinct religious identities are included in the umbrella term Hinduism. This attitude has in certain times and places caused resentment from Buddhists who consider themselves a different and independent religion. They perceive a danger in this Hindu inclusivism. Krishna B. Bhattachan brings this out in his chapter on Buddhist views of Hinduism in Nepal.¹³¹ Whilst any inclusivism in Gandhi is not a megalomania and desire to assert Hindu nationalism, inclusivism is a sensitive issue for Indian religions. Inclusivism is a charge which has also been held against Gandhi by Sikhs.¹³² Ambedkar warned his followers against Hinduism and reabsorption which would result in the collapse of their religion and also their status as

¹³⁰ From personal experience I can attest to this. I had been an atheist with regard to a monotheistic (mostly Christian) concept of God, but have found myself able to come to appreciate the idea and use of the word God through Gandhi and other Hindu philosophers' concepts. In turn this has developed in me a greater appreciation and softening from my initial rejection of Christian theology and religion.

¹³¹ K.B. Bhattachan 'Nepalese Buddhists' View of Hinduism' in J.D.Gort et al. (eds.) *Religions view Religions* Amsterdam: Rodopi 2006 pp.227-239 Bhattachan's arguments are simplistic and treat Hindus in a monolithic way, however it is important in drawing attention to the dangers of ignoring a minority and bringing out some of the differences and contradictions in Hindu and Buddhist beliefs against the notion they are not essentially different religions. Many aspects of Hinduism identified as different and in opposition by Bhattachan are certainly not relevant to Gandhi's Hinduism, which is infused with the Buddha's teaching and challenges many common beliefs and practices of Hindus.

¹³² See Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The Mahatma and the Sikhs*, in H. Coward (ed.), *Indian Critiques* pp.171-192

freed from untouchability.¹³³ The 22 vows Dalit converts take explicitly renounce Hindu beliefs and practices.¹³⁴ This practical issue of being subsumed and then discriminated against brings out the sensitivity and caution needed against Hindu inclusivism in the Indian context especially in relation to Buddhism.

Gandhi's interpretation of Buddhism is in places at variance with Buddhists' interpretations of their religion. He does not appreciate the Buddhist philosophy of *anatman* and in speeches to Buddhists challenges their atheism and interpretations of the Buddha's teachings.

I have heard it contended times without number and I have read in books also claiming to express the spirit of Buddhism that Buddha did not believe in God. In my humble opinion such a belief contradicts the very fact of Buddha's teaching. In my humble opinion the confusion has arisen over his rejection and just rejection of all the base things that passed in his generation under the name of God. He undoubtedly rejected the notion that a being called God was actuated by malice, could repent of his actions, and like the kings of the earth could possibly be open to temptations and bribes and could have favourites. His whole soul rose in mighty indignation against the belief that a being called God required for his satisfaction the living blood of animals in order that he might be pleased - animals who were his own creation. He, therefore, reinstated God in the right place and dethroned the usurper who for the time being seemed to occupy that White Throne. He emphasized and redeclared the eternal and unalterable existence of the moral government of this universe. He unhesitatingly said that the Law was God Himself.¹³⁵

¹³³ This issue shall not be dealt with here, in order to avoid a substantial tangent overcoming the main argument about theism and atheism.

¹³⁴ Sangharakshita *Ambedkar and Buddhism* Glasgow: Windhorse 1986 p137

¹³⁵ CWMG Vol.35 pp.245-6

Gandhi goes on to address *Nirvana*,

God's laws are eternal and unalterable and not separable from God Himself. It is an indispensable condition of His very perfection. And hence the great confusion that Buddha disbelieved in God and simply believed in the moral law, and because of this confusion about God Himself, arose the confusion about the proper understanding of the great word *nirvana*. *Nirvana*, is undoubtedly not utter extinction. So far as I have been able to understand the central fact of the Buddha's life, *nirvana* is utter extinction of all that is base in us, all that is vicious in us, all that is corrupt and corruptible in us. *Nirvana* is not like the black, dead peace of the grave, but the living peace, the living happiness of a soul which is conscious of itself, and conscious of having found its own abode in the heart of the Eternal.

The Eternal features heavily in Gandhi's interpretation, in contradiction to the Buddhist doctrine that all is in a constant state of flux, there is no constant eternal principle, no *atman*, or God. It can thus be seen as a Hindu interpretation. It is also influenced by Jain philosophy- his understanding of *Nirvana* and God are strikingly similar to Jain ideas and the answers given by Raychandbhai to Gandhi's questions on religion.¹³⁶

However, this is not a one way situation of Hinduism interpreting Buddhism in its own terms. Gandhi's interpretation of Hinduism is equally influenced by Buddhism. He admits this and refers to Buddha as a purifier and reformer of Hinduism. The Buddhist influence, among others enabled his openness to the idea of religion without a personal God, and

¹³⁶ These letters are reproduced in the appendix of Gerald Smith, *The Development of Gandhi's moral and religious philosophy from 1888-1921* University of Birmingham: MPhil Thesis 1992

the association of God and God's law, or morality, as one, and his concept of *ahimsa* owes more to Buddhist and Jain thinking than the Vedic.¹³⁷

The concept Gandhi espouses, that Truth is God, would be acceptable to many Buddhists in a way it is not to atheists who reject religion and absolutes of any kind. Many Buddhists could accept Truth as a moral and value-laden reality, although some may challenge the idea of any eternal principle. Buddhists do have certain analogous ideals. There is an acceptance of a moral order, of *dharma* and in particular, compassion - which aptly matches Gandhi's central focus of *ahimsa* interpreted in an active way. The heart of Buddhism is seeing things as they really are, beyond a mundane scientific explanation, it includes the reality of *Nirvana* and the Buddha's experience. Some Buddhist traditions also teach faith in Buddha-nature, *Bodhisattvas*, gods and demons, and various afterlives.

Gandhi finds points of unity between Hindus and Buddhists, and attempts to reform both, from their present manifestations to his idea of perfect Religion, that pure essence which transcends all forms of religion in this world. He worked alongside Buddhists, such as the Japanese monk Fujii Guruji, and is admired today by many, especially among 'engaged Buddhism'.¹³⁸ His interpretation of Hinduism and understanding of religion is

¹³⁷ Unto Tähtinen *Non-violence in Indian Tradition*, London: Rider 1976 p121: Throughout the book Tähtinen distinguishes between the ascetic and Vedic conceptions of *ahimsa*

¹³⁸ The interview with Kakasaheb Kalelkar's disciple and scholar of the Lotus Sutra Naresh Mantri gives some details of the link between Japanese Buddhists, Gandhi and striving for a peaceful world. <https://indianfolklore.org/journals/index.php/lsh/article/viewFile/553/657> accessed 21/07/2012. For an example of Gandhi's influence on Engaged Buddhism see Ken Jones' article from the Network of Engaged Buddhists http://www.engagedbuddhists.org.uk/?page_id=958 accessed 21/07/2012. Sallie King also identifies Gandhi as one of the foremost influences on Engaged Buddhism in *Socially Engaged Buddhism* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2009 pp.2 and 11

certainly more acceptable to Buddhists than many interpretations of Hinduism, and does to an extent deal with the conflict between theism and non-theism. However he does not overcome differences between *atman* and *anatman*, and between the eternal and constant change, which he overlooks or does not acknowledge. These limitations in his understanding of Buddhism and appreciation of some of the differences may prove a liability for Hindu-Buddhist relations, falling into the trap of inclusivism and subsuming the other religion. Yet Gandhi's philosophy which was influenced by Buddhism, may well be accepted by both Hindus and Buddhists. It demonstrates the overlap rather than antagonism of their concepts of the Ultimate.

Conclusions

To summarise Gandhi's engagement with atheists I would argue his attitude was predominantly that of an inclusivist. In identifying morality and religion as identical, he saw moral, Truth-seeking atheists as anonymous believers, quite openly referring to them as so-called atheists. He saw in them, and acknowledged their communion with, what he termed God. In applying this interpretation to atheists, they held an equal place in his regard for all religions as people of any other religion. In his transformation of the adage "God is Truth" to "Truth is God" he sought to find a way of truly including all, especially those who took issue with the idea of God and religious doctrine. This was precipitated by his contact with atheists, specifically conscientious objectors in Lausanne. I have shown how this had a measure of success, many atheists could affirm their devotion to Truth,

particularly atheists from the Indian traditions, who while denying or considering unimportant belief in God retain a religious outlook. However, the understanding and nuances are different between staunch atheists who cannot countenance any supernatural beliefs, and Gandhi's concept of Truth which contains a supernatural element and most significantly and undeniably a moral outlook and absolutes.

Gandhi never fully appreciated the fundamental difference in belief, and always saw identity between morality and religion. Ambler cautions that atheists should be careful not to read in Gandhi a subtle apologetic for belief in God.¹³⁹ However, I would argue that though Gandhi's intention appears to be genuine acceptance it is apologetic. He remained an inclusivist not a pluralist. Even after his momentous proclamation that "Truth is God" in 1931, he made speeches to the effect no-one, not even atheists live without religion, and refers to their denial of God as the egotism of their reason.

His relationship with Gora at the end of his life necessitated a growing acknowledgement of the difference, and the beginnings of a pluralistic outlook. This is shown in his admission of the difference, the contradiction, between their outlooks and that time would tell who was correct.

Although as we see in the next chapter his relations with atheists were in advance of his practice, we see the danger of inclusivism, particularly with respect to Indian religions and Buddhism, and must critique Gandhi's pluralism. In applying an

¹³⁹ Ambler, *Concept of Truth*, in Hick and Hempel p106

inclusivist perspective people are denied the opportunity of self-definition and there is an element, even if not intended, of disrespect in this.

CHAPTER FOUR

GORA AND GANDHI: FRIENDSHIP AND DIALOGUE BETWEEN ATHEISTS AND THEISTS

Including atheists in inter-religious dialogue

Dialogue between believers and atheists is as important as that between believers of one religion and another. Atheists have been subjected to persecution and censorship; just as people of minority religions have. There is an evident conflict between the beliefs of atheists and religious believers. Both sides may seek converts, and in doing so criticize and demonize one another. Many of the issues are much the same and as deserving of attention as inter-religious issues. There are however added complications. First, in definition: atheist is a negative definition. It designates what a person does not believe, rather than what they do believe. There is a great diversity in beliefs among atheists, no representative organisation (although there are various atheist, humanist and naturalist societies which seek to give a voice and community to those rejecting religion¹⁴⁰) and no established set of beliefs, doctrines and scriptures. Further, attempts to bring together atheists and believers may be a more difficult task due to the lack of a common belief in God.

In his article 'The religious "nones": a neglected category' Vernon Glenn drew attention to how those people who do not self-identify as belonging to one of the

¹⁴⁰ See for instance Atheism UK, <http://www.atheismuk.com/>; American Atheists <http://www.atheists.org/>; The British Humanist Association <http://www.humanism.org.uk/home>; and <http://www.naturalism.org/> all accessed 17/07/2012

religions explicitly stated on surveys have been overlooked in research.¹⁴¹ He draws attention to the contribution this group have to make. He also raises awareness of the misleading approach of identifying all those who do not fit in the boxes as one group when they are in fact highly diverse. Further, classification as “none” disregards their various positive religious beliefs (or disbelief, which again can be a positive belief in a different explanation of the universe rather than an absence of any belief). Glenn proposes the more useful and less biased classification as religious independents, in the same sense people not belonging to a particular political party are not characterized as having no political opinion, but as independent.

Glenn’s contribution was in the field of social science. It is in this context rather than a theological one that he raises concerns about their neglect and the potential contribution and importance of studying them in their own right.

Since Glenn wrote in the late 1960s this category has been receiving more attention. With the concept of “fluid religions” a way has been opened up for study of people not classifying themselves within one of the formal or major world religions. Research into the beliefs of these groups and also into the actual beliefs of those within formal religions has yielded interesting results, showing the fluidity of belief and individual variance from official belief or doctrine as opposed to the more simple fixed classification by “the religions”.¹⁴² An inter-religious project in Denmark has included

¹⁴¹ Glenn Vernon ‘The Religious “Nones”: A neglected category’ *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 7 No. 2 Autumn 1968 pp.219-229

¹⁴² Frantisek Stech ‘Fluid Religions in a Liquid Age? De/Traditionalization and its implications for youth ministry in the Czech Republic’ in *Journal of Youth and Theology* Nov. 2010 Vol. 9 No.2 pp.61-77

creating a website which is both inter-religious with portraits of particular religions and personal to individual's diversity of belief, incorporating atheistic and non-religious views.¹⁴³ The designers of the project emphasise the individuality and flexibility of belief, calling for us to embrace diversity rather than searching for unity.

Motives for dialogue include forging relationships and harmony with people of different beliefs, contributing to community, developing understanding and as an antidote to conflict and prejudice. In all these areas atheists ought to be included and have important contributions to make. Members of different religions often live closely together and awareness has been raised and initiatives put forward to help foster community among diverse religions. Many communities also contain atheists, and the desire to include both atheists and religious people in communities is the same as for people of different religions. Other inter-religious initiatives call for religions to come together to work on areas of mutual concern, for instance the challenges of poverty or environmental degradation, pointing out the benefits of co-operation on such large-scale issues. Although atheists do not, like other religions, have a set code of morals and beliefs, most atheists are morally aware and concerned individuals. This moral concern is central to humanists and was at the heart of Gora's atheism. There is therefore strong reason to include humanists and moral atheists in co-operative work on ethical issues which are of shared concern. Whilst interfaith collaborative action is important Ursula King points out its limits

¹⁴³ www.reliflex.nl accessed 15th June 2010

But this view is too narrow, too exclusive of much of the secular and scientific world. While the global collaborations of people of faith make an important, indispensable contribution to meeting the spiritual challenges of our time, they are not sufficient for the creation of a universal, planetary civilisation or for the emergence of a truly global 'interspirituality', since the religions themselves need to undergo radical transformation.¹⁴⁴

The need to develop understanding and respect between atheists and people of religion is also pressing. Atheists have suffered prejudice and discrimination, historically and currently. The modern, popular spokesman for atheism, Richard Dawkins, cites examples in his book *The God Delusion*. Tom Paine, had the following epithets hurled at him for his anti-Christian views, "Judas, reptile, hog, mad dog, souse, louse, archbeast, brute, and of course infidel."¹⁴⁵ He cites political prejudice in George Bush Senior's answer to whether he recognized the equal citizenship and patriotism of American atheists: "No, I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God."¹⁴⁶ The Free-thought Society of Philadelphia set up the Anti-Discrimination Support Network, which receives, evaluates and responds to reports of discrimination against atheists and humanists. The need and existence of this service shows atheists do still experience discrimination on religious grounds.¹⁴⁷ The situation is two way and atheists are not simply victims, but also contributors through a failure to respect and recognize the sincerity of the convictions of religious people, often invoking ridicule and attack.

¹⁴⁴ Ursula King 'Interfaith Spirituality of Interspirituality?' in Sharada Sugirtharajah (ed.) *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World: an ongoing engagement with John Hick* Basingstoke: Palgrave 2012

¹⁴⁵ Dawkins *God Delusion* p59

¹⁴⁶ Dawkins *God Delusion* p65

¹⁴⁷ <http://www.fsgp.org/anti-discrimination-support-ne/> accessed 21/10/2010

Gora experienced similar discrimination, including being thrown out by his parents, socially ostracised and twice losing his job over his atheism.¹⁴⁸ Yet, he also tells us that

My association with Gandhi is a hotly debated question with some rationalists. They see no common point between an avowed atheist and a man of God, as Gandhi called himself.¹⁴⁹

The lack of understanding, preconceived notions and hostility is two-way. Lavanam argues for the importance of theists developing understanding of atheists in his article 'Religion vs. Science'.¹⁵⁰ He sees a need for theists to actually engage with atheists, discover what they think and how they behave to overcome fears, prejudices and maligning of atheism. In this context it is important to bring atheists and theists together as well as people of different religions in inter-religious endeavours.

The reasons for including other religions in one's pluralism and the humanist and practical basis for cultivating amicable and peaceful inter-religious relations between the religions logically extend to atheism also. If one accepts that a loving God would not arbitrarily condemn a large proportion of the population to hell because they did not receive his revelation, it also goes against this loving and forgiving nature to condemn to hell a sincere and moral atheist, simply because he or she does not believe in a particular revelation. If efforts for inter-religious relations stem from humanitarian concern and the

¹⁴⁸ Gora *We become Atheists* Vijayawada: Atheist Centre 1975 see p18ff. For the conflict with his family and pp.27-8 and pp.39-40 for the conflict and discrimination experienced at work.

¹⁴⁹ Gora *We become Atheists* p63

¹⁵⁰ Lavanam *Of Gandhi, Atheism and Social Experimentalism* Vijayawada: Atheist Centre, 2003 'Religion vs. Science' pp.119-124

practical necessity of living with diverse neighbours and in the diversity of a global world, these concerns extend to atheists too. Bikhu Parekh draws our attention to this in his chapter on Gandhi and inter-religious dialogue. He is conscious of the conflict between the secular and religious, including the rise of secular fundamentalism and the dangers of neglecting or fighting against secularism in inter-religious dialogue. 'Coming together to fight secularism creates a new source of violence and does not ensure that there will be no conflict between religions.'¹⁵¹

Some inter-religious initiatives draw support from a shared opposition by the different religions to atheism. This is a problematic basis for inter-religious relations, as whilst encouraging harmony between religions it does not encourage harmony between all people, in fact, it encourages enmity between people. The lines of battle are changed from between religions to between religion and no-religion, but the battle itself remains. It is problematic that this is a recurring theme in inter-religious relations. 'The struggle of "inter-religion" against the "absence of religion" in modern secularism'¹⁵² is a perennial theme in dialogue.¹⁵³

There are two separate issues here: a) religions coming together to challenge atheism and b) religions collaborating to counter their marginalisation in the public realm. The former bears the assumption that what 'we' believe is right and what 'they', atheists, believe is wrong. This basis must be challenged as counter to pluralism, in that it

¹⁵¹ Bikhu Parekh, 'Gandhi and inter-religious dialogue' in Allen, *The philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi for the 21st century* pp.1-2

¹⁵² Race *Interfaith Encounter: The twin tracks of theology and dialogue* London: SCM Press, 2001 p102

¹⁵³ It is also identified as a ground or motivation for dialogue by Catherine Cornille *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* New York: Herder and Herder 2008 pp.98-102

disrespects and presents a conflict with another worldview undermining the very foundations and intentions of respect and mutual understanding on which dialogue is based. The latter is a valid role for inter-religious relations, a shared concern to be addressed, which does not base itself in opposition. However, to be successful a dialogue must be held between those who want religion to play a public role and those who do not- this would suggest the need to get together with atheists and secularists to work through this issue.

It could even be suggested that the divergence between secularist and atheist perspectives against religious perspectives are an immediate need for today's interfaith work. The actions of fundamentalists are seen to be a response to the perceived threat to their religion. This threat is often not of another religion, but the absence or weakening of religion, the challenge of the transformation of the modern world in the technical age.

¹⁵⁴ On the other hand these fundamental and damaging expressions of religion have strengthened and led to the rise in atheism, including what is characterised as the 'new atheism'. This is a popular atheism, producing best-seller books in the Western world, strong on rhetoric, aggressive and outspoken in its denunciation of religion. 'Religion is portrayed as being intrinsically and characteristically dangerous, poisonous, and evil.

¹⁵⁴ Bruce Lawrence identifies several characteristics of fundamentalisms and describes the characteristic of being a direct response to modernization as the sine qua non of fundamentalism, which no other religious protest group displays. Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern Age*, Columbia, South Carolina: University of Carolina Press, 1995 p101

There is no allowance the religion may have even one or two redeeming features.’¹⁵⁵ On each side there can be opposition, aggression and misunderstanding.

This line of argument, to include atheists, raises another question. We may accept the need for dialogue between atheists and religious people, but is it still *inter-religious*? Would atheists want to be included in inter-religious dialogue with atheism treated as a religion? Whilst I think they may object to being conceived as a ‘religion’ some forms of atheism - particularly our case study, Positive Atheism - display many of the features of religion in providing an ideological worldview, with meaningful and moral implications. The idea of religions in itself is problematic, Buddhists have contended that Buddhism is not a religion like the others, and Christians too have proclaimed that Christianity is not one of the religions but a revelation¹⁵⁶. On the other hand, many atheists do wish to have their views on religious issues heard, taken seriously and understood, and seek to understand other’s views as well, giving them motive to join inter-religious discussions and initiatives.

It may prove necessary in time to develop new terminology for this expanded dialogue - perhaps dialogue of worldviews or ideologies or a dialogue of values, philosophies or commitments. For now however I find religions more fitting – in keeping continuity and building on the insights, practice and developments of inter-religious dialogue and keeping and extending its spirit of respect and understanding for others

¹⁵⁵ Alister McGrath, ‘Bestseller Atheisms: The New Scientism’ in *Concilium*, Atheists of what God? 2010 issue 4 London: SCM Press pp.11-19 (p11)

¹⁵⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981 p137 also see pp. 145-150 where he considers how a secular-rationalist might be part of comparative theology

with the acknowledgement of difference yet striving for harmony and connection, even perhaps unity. It also keeps the issue we are dealing with present – that is religious difference, where other terminology may suggest a dialogue addressing other areas of difference and conflict, such between political ideologies.

It seems to me the spirit and logic of inter-religious dialogue extends to atheists. It has extended already to atheism in the Indian tradition, moving from ‘God’ as a point of contact to ‘transcendence’ or values, experience and transformative potential. If the Indian religions are only included in so far as they conform to theistic religions, and have concepts of transcendence, we may find that the atheistic philosophies which are important parts of Buddhist, Hindu and Jain traditions are being marginalised. There is not a discrete divide between atheist and religious, but continuity. The move to extend inter-religious dialogue to Western atheists seems the logic of that spirit which recognises the worth and need to seek harmony with all people, rather than setting up a new dividing line a religious in-group against a secular out-group.

The significance of Gandhi for today’s dialogue with atheists

Gandhi’s inter-religious relations and pluralism sought to include atheists on an equal footing with religious believers. This shows openness to a different perspective. He discusses atheism openly and freely with Gora. He does not enter into a heated debate, seeing Gora’s ideas as a challenge to be attacked, even though so different, and Gora approaches Gandhi similarly. However at times, especially prior to knowing Gora personally and about his work through a mutual co-worker and correspondence, Gandhi was dismissive and hostile to his atheism.

Their friendship is particularly relevant in understanding the issue of conversion. Both Gandhi and Gora initially had a desire to convert one another. This is an attitude and attempt which changes with time, and is testimony to the power of dialogue to overcome prejudice. Their example is applicable to those wishing to convert from one religion to another. It suggests that in the process of inter-religious dialogue, development of understanding of the other's point of view and bonds of affection may lead one to give up the desire to convert. Some theories suggest it is necessary to give up the desire to convert before embarking on dialogue.¹⁵⁷ This is a high demand, which could prevent dialogue from taking place. Gandhi's dialogue with atheists suggests it may not be necessary to give up this desire prior to dialogue; it may be the outcome of that engagement.

Fundamental values or attitudes in forging inter-religious bonds come out in the relations between Gora and Gandhi. These are the personal friendship, working together for change on shared ethical concerns, and allowing the other to define who he is, accepting individual interpretation and nuances of faith. These factors are important in each of the three issues addressed in this thesis. The correlation is striking between the bond with atheists and that with Quakers. In inter-religious marriage the personal friendship, individuality and value of the individuals own interpretation of their faith is vital, although shared moral action may not be relevant for all couples.

Atheists form the furthest limb from those traditionally accepted as true and equal by religions. This draws attention to Gandhi's basis for affirming others, morality and truth.

¹⁵⁷ Cornille *Im-Possibility* pp.69-72 discusses the ambivalence between dialogue and proclamation

Ahimsa and truth were the very basis of Gandhi's thought and action understood as both means and end. Looking at this enables one to perceive with greater clarity where the boundaries lie for Gandhi in accepting the religion of others. His inclusion of atheists is not a denial of religion. He maintains boundaries and rejects certain ideas and practices as irreligion. Its significance in understanding his pluralism is that religion consists in how one lives not what one professes. Irreligion is the denial of God by one's behaviour, to live with no regard for his Law, with no recognition of the Divine. His understanding of religion is radically different from formal or recognized religion. True religion, 'That religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes our very nature...' is found in atheists also.¹⁵⁸ It is proved by the quality and fruits of a person's life.

Gandhi's engagement with atheists – Gora and his centre

This study focusses on Gandhi's atheist friend and co-worker Gora. I shall also draw on the relationships which extended from this, with Gora's atheist family, his atheist colleagues and friends. This relationship provides a case study of co-operative engagement on moral issues between atheists and theists.

The previous chapter followed correspondence between Gandhi and Gora and the change in Gandhi's attitude to atheism, from a common attitude associating atheism with immorality to a respect and appreciation for Gora's atheist convictions. This chapter will focus on the specific content of Gora's atheism; the relationship between Gora and Gandhi, and later between the Atheist Centre and Gandhian activities; the formation of a

¹⁵⁸ Gandhi, *All men are brothers* p56

bond through united moral action, and the ethical challenge of atheism to religion, focussing on caste.

Gora's journey to atheism

Gora's distinctive interpretation of atheism, and the reasons he became atheist are important for developing an appreciation of his thought, his challenge and how this developed into a stimulating and changing dialogue between atheism and Gandhi's religion. Gora's atheism was a result of his free-thinking and questioning of the established norms of religion and society around him. Its most important feature is self-reliance, taking charge of one's own destiny.

Gora came from an orthodox Telugu Brahmin family, his deep thinking about religion was stimulated by the offer of a position of a PhD at Yale, on the condition he became Christian. His reaction was more that of a Hindu than an atheist, but it stimulated questions. What is Hinduism, and what are Christianity and other religions? He studied and read about religion over a number of years - a response similar, though with a different outcome, to Gandhi's response to evangelism, which stimulated his journey into religion, starting in England and especially strong in South Africa. Gora read English and Telugu translations of the Bible, Bhagavad-Gita, the Qur'an, the Vedas, Upanishads and Max Muller's Sacred Books of the East and looked up references in the Encyclopedia Brittanica for God, soul and salvation in his quest to understand.¹⁵⁹ He became interested in abnormal and religious psychology, which gave theories on belief in God or the soul. Gora reflected on the authority of books, preferring his own thought to what others had

¹⁵⁹ Gora *We become atheists* p8-9

said. He concluded primitive humans had invented God out of psychological necessity and civilised people justified God 'to preserve faith, at best for its use as a sanction for moral conduct and at worst for aiding exploitation of the gullible masses.'¹⁶⁰

His reasons for becoming atheist were rooted in a combination of rational thought, with superstition forming a major objection to religion, and in concern for justice against the exploitation he witnessed, sanctioned by religion. This was both on a personal level, as seen in his Aunt's trances, in which she criticised his mother, provoking Gora to expose them, and in social matters like the inequalities of caste and ill-treatment of women. He saw dependence upon God and fate as a major impediment to change; even the poor and exploited did not revolt against their condition, finding their inner-strength, but accepted their condition as ordained.

Negative responses to his questioning of religion were also a factor. A Hindu scholar's reaction to his question on the use of the neutral gender for God is an example. The scholar asked if Gora was an atheist, he replied yes, but the question still stands. The scholar 'said he would not talk to atheists and asked me to leave the meeting'. He said he would leave if Gora did not, and the following day put up a sign: 'atheists are not allowed'.¹⁶¹ This negative response to atheism steeled Gora's attitude and commitment, confirming religion maintained a closed mind, without room for examination, disagreement and questioning. The incident which best marks his decisive conversion to atheism was his discarding of the sacred thread – a problem of practice more than belief.

¹⁶⁰ Gora *We become atheists* p10

¹⁶¹ Gora *We become atheists* p11

His rejection of caste and its attendant inequalities led him to discard the sacred thread enraging and estranging his family. His father commanded him to wear it, but Gora responded 'Father, I have great respect for you. But I have no regard for caste...let me make up my mind and be honest to my convictions. I'll discard this thread from today.'¹⁶²

This response is characteristic of his atheism: it is based on honesty to his convictions and to social equality, lived out in practice. His orthodox father, however, shouted 'Get out of my house. You are a sinner. I won't look at your face.'¹⁶³ His parents reconciled themselves with Gora, after two and a half years – in part due to the influence of Gandhi's movement against untouchability which led the priests Gora's father consulted to encourage him to review his opinion in light of modern events. His parents thereafter moved in with Gora's family and their orthodoxy began to relax.

Gora's Positive Atheism

Gora in spite of much prejudice, discrimination and social exclusion persisted and propagated his atheist philosophy of life. He wanted atheism to be socially acceptable and fought against the prejudices against it, which associate atheism with wickedness and immorality, instead promoting 'Positive Atheism'.

Gora's atheism provides a positive basis as an alternative way of life to the religious, centred on humans. It is emphasised by Gora himself, remains the cornerstone of the Atheist Centre at Vijayawada and his family and co-workers vision of atheism as a way of

¹⁶² Gora *We become atheists* p19

¹⁶³ Gora *We become atheists* p20

life based in reality and promoting harmony between people and improvement in people's situation.

Atheism was not an intellectual understanding with me. I wanted to know how an atheist was different from a theist in the ways of life...people close minds with God, lose initiative and cling to beliefs...If we reject them [god and fate] we stand on our own feet, feel free, work well and live equal since all of us belong to the same kind.¹⁶⁴

Similarly to Gandhi he says 'if atheism were only theoretical, I would not have cared for it, nor wasted your time. We have practical programmes based upon the atheistic outlook.'¹⁶⁵

Self-help is emphasised, Gora holds that by removing dependence on outside factors, God and fate, people will become aware of their potential, power, free-will and responsibility. Gora sees atheism as the way to action, whereas belief in religion he sees leading to inertia, saying to Gandhi,

Belief in God implies subordination of man to the divine will. In Hindu thought man's life is subordinated to karma or fate. In general, theism is the manifestation of the feeling of slavishness in man. Conversely, atheism is the manifestation of the feeling of freedom in man.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Gora *We become atheists* p23

¹⁶⁵ Gora, *An Atheist with Gandhi* p33

¹⁶⁶ Gora, *An Atheist with Gandhi* p33

Yet this understanding may be juxtaposed against interpretations of religion, which affirm the individual's power, rather than making people into slaves before fate. Vivekananda, constantly emphasised freedom, he saw the striving for freedom as the fundamental impulse of religion, and the realisation of our identity with Brahman as no subjugation but the realisation of full liberty.¹⁶⁷ Gandhi's emphasis was upon freedom and power. Dennis Dalton's analysis emphasises the combination of *swaraj* (self-rule) and *satyagraha*, as Gandhi's distinctive qualities.¹⁶⁸ Self rule implies and relies upon freedom rather than subordination, and *satyagraha* is the manifestation of power from within, coming from Truth. Humans are not subordinated to this, through it they realise their power. Gandhi and Vivekananda's conceptions, seek to empower people through religion, rather than subordinating them to it. They seek to make people strong, commanders of their own destinies and able to resist and to act in the world.

Another essential feature of Gora's atheism is the removal of superstition. Gora's first public work involved exposing phony holy men, who exploited the masses. He and his supporters would demonstrate how tricks were performed such as fire-walking and moving objects using hidden magnets.¹⁶⁹ In this sense there is a strong basis in promoting truth, what is real and demonstrable and awareness of the harm wrong beliefs may cause intentionally or unintentionally. There is however no recognition that there may be some truth in theistic thoughts and religious beliefs, or of the benefit they may have in

¹⁶⁷ Vivekananda's discourse 'What is religion' is centred on a discussion of the impulse for freedom. Swami Vivekananda *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 1* Tenth Edition, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama 1999 pp. 333-343

¹⁶⁸ Dalton, Dennis *Mahtma Gandhi; Non-violent power in action* New York: Columbia University Press 1993

¹⁶⁹ Gora *We become atheists* pp.50-51

providing meaning and guidance to people's lives and giving solace in times of need.

Today, work at the Atheist Centre includes promotion of scientific knowledge and understanding as well as exposing and combating superstition, witchcraft and sorcery.¹⁷⁰

Here we find a materialist and scientific approach to truth, similar to the *Cavarka* philosophy.¹⁷¹ Truth as the provable; the central importance of truth and its role in Gandhi's accommodation of atheism is considered in depth below.

Humanism is central to Gora's atheism. We noted above how a defining moment in his acceptance of atheism was his refusal to wear the sacred thread. He characterised atheism as being focussed on people, recognising their equality. This leads to his atheist social work to break down the barriers between people, establish equality and harmony based on common humanity. Caste, communalism and gender equality are the main features of this which will be considered in greater detail in the following section. For Gora, atheism was essential – unlike Gandhi, but in line with Ambedkar he held religion responsible for caste and understood caste as an inherently unequal system. He saw religion not as a bringer of peace, but dividing people between the different religions, and justifying a downtrodden place for women. His understanding of religion was based on orthodox Hinduism and the society he saw around him, with its many injustices. He saw religion itself as the culprit, unlike Gandhi who similarly fought against these features, but saw them not as essential flaws of religion, but a corruption of religion.

¹⁷⁰ <http://www.atheistcentre.in/> accessed 11/10/10

¹⁷¹ See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles Moore (eds.) *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1957 pp.227-249; *Cavarka* is an Indian materialist philosophy, emphasising rationality and living only once against the ritual and philosophical speculations.

Gora's atheism is atheism in the Western sense of a denial of all religion, as opposed to the "Indian" sense of religion independent of God, as found in Indian philosophical traditions and Jain and Buddhist thought. It is similar to *Cavarkar* philosophy, but with a moral rather than hedonistic value system. It relies on scientific explanations of the universe, and the rejection of religion as untrue, although it would appear to have arisen from his independent thought, observation and learning rather than any contact with Western ideas of atheism. In spite of the atheistic philosophies within Indian religious thought, Gora's experience brings out suppression of atheism and opposition to it as the dominant response to atheism in his culture.

His son, Lavanam, however, in his speech 'Atheism in India' presents a different picture, focussing on the positive response to atheism in India. He emphasises Indian philosophy's tolerance and freedom of thought in the quest for truth. Lavanam cites the room for scepticism and prioritisation of man [sic] within the earliest Hindu text, the Rig Veda; the existence of '*Nireeswara Dharma*' (godless religion) in *Sankhya* philosophy, Buddhist thought and the Jain tradition; and the *Lokayata* and *Cavarka* traditions' opposition to the superiority of Brahmins, animal sacrifice, idolatry and other social evils.¹⁷²

The positive stance Gora's atheism takes and the central importance of people makes it closer to what most of us would think of as humanism (with its essential moral base alongside the rejection of religion)– yet he was adamant about maintaining the word atheist, and changing perceptions and prejudice against it. Thus, in line with Gora's own

¹⁷² Lavanam *Gandhi, Atheism and Social Experimentalism* pp.138-141

wishes and self-description atheism is used, although humanism would also be an accurate definition. Lavanam continues to maintain atheism, yet seems more strongly identified with humanism, interchanging the two, he also has travelled and been more directly influenced by atheist thought globally.¹⁷³ Perhaps a limitation to humanism, and the preference for atheism, is that one can emphasise, as Lavanam does with Gandhi, the humanist vision of a religious thinker,¹⁷⁴ therefore it is not reliant on atheism running the risk of back-sliding or re-absorption, rendering the improvement temporary. This impermanence of changes is certainly seen in the case of some of Gandhi's reforms to Hindu thought, in India post-1947. I will investigate short-term versus long-term change in relation to reforming the caste system in the final section of this chapter. Though Gandhi's interpretation was influential it may have been held back and ignored by many followers due to his hesitation to distance himself too far from traditional Hindu thought - thus constructing a revised interpretation of caste, from which people could easily continue or revert to their original practices - rather than wholesale rejection.

Lavanam says that:

The main platform of atheists in India has been rational social reform rather than free thinking and science.

¹⁷³ See Lavanam *Gandhi, Atheism and Social Experimentalism* especially Chapter 3 'Atheist approach' pp. 113-141 shows identification with atheism in the West.

¹⁷⁴ Lavanam *Gandhi, Atheism and Social Experimentalism* Chapter 1 'Gandhian thought' pp. 1-40

Therefore, I feel that when we, with the Indian background, speak about atheism, we have in mind some thing more constructive and more positive than that of Western atheism.¹⁷⁵

This sums up the positive nature of Gora's atheism and its distinctive quality.

Global ethics and inter-religious engagement for change

The idea of working towards a global ethic as means and end in inter-religious dialogue has gained prominence in current inter-religious scholarship.¹⁷⁶ The thought of Paul Knitter on inter-religious engagement based in soteriology, addressing the ethical challenges of the present situation, and the work of Hans Kung toward the development of a 'global ethic' are two widely respected examples. Both engage with atheistic thought, Knitter has engaged deeply with Buddhism, and the Global Ethic adopted by the World Parliament of Religions is addressed to 'all people, religious and non-religious'. After setting out the problem of the agony of the world and declaring a commitment to transformation it says 'We invite all people, whether religious or not, to do the same', it also conscientiously avoided naming God or even referring to God at all out of respect for non-theistic philosophies.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Lavanam Gandhi, *Atheism and Social Experimentalism* p140

¹⁷⁶ See for instance, sections in Alan Race, *Interfaith encounter: the twin tracks of theology and dialogue*, London: SCM Press, 2001 and Martin Forward, *Inter-religious dialogue: A Short Introduction*, One World: Oxford, 2001; Paul Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions; multifaith dialogue and global responsibility*, Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 1995 and several works by Hans Kung.

¹⁷⁷ Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel (eds.), *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* London: SCM Press, 1993 p16

This idea of common ethics, with foundations of dialogue in shared concerns, responsibilities and compassion, rather than common beliefs or commitments may prove to be of particular consequence for initiatives including atheists. Gandhi can be considered a fore-runner to this idea. He encouraged and used it, prior to the notion of a global ethic being popularised. The necessity of working with a diverse religious population in South Africa drew him into this kind of dialogue towards a common moral purpose to address the injustices of the governments upon the Indian population. His discourse regarding other religions often states the necessity of amicable relations because of the need to free India from colonial rule. Addressing the blight of Hindu-Muslim discord he encourages working on common projects as a cure, saying that people are brought into spiritual communion during such tasks.¹⁷⁸ This is paralleled in Knitter's insight that 'Working together for justice becomes or can become, a *communicatio in sacris*- a communication in the Sacred- available to us beyond our churches and temples.'¹⁷⁹

I suggest that this is not confined to religious people and could prove a non-confrontational way to bring atheists and religious believers together and to challenge some of the pre-conceptions each has about the limits of the others morality. Because the focus and assumptions are not explicitly religious as in some other inter-religious endeavours, atheists are able to participate and contribute on their own terms, yet the experience may still be appropriately described as inter-religious and need not

¹⁷⁸ M K Gandhi *The Way to Communal Harmony*, compiled and edited by U R Rao, Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1963 p14

¹⁷⁹ Knitter *One Earth* p113

marginalise the contributions of people of religions to secular agendas. There are resources from both religious and non-religious sources to combat and challenge the destruction of the environment. It is worth pooling and utilising all these sources. People are diverse, they understand things in different ways and will be convinced by different arguments and encouraged and enabled to take action in different ways. A religious argument for the sanctity of the earth will convince some people and the organisation of their religious institution will provide an outlet to take action. Some secular people will be put off by association with religion and be motivated and empowered by a scientific argument, focussing on the practical consequences of environmental destruction. It is clearly better for all for these different viewpoints to co-exist and work together for the common good. Furthermore the presence of atheists and other unconventional thinkers may help in utilising the 'hermeneutic of suspicion' which Knitter emphasises in his 'liberation theology of religions'.¹⁸⁰

Gandhi called for all men and women to work together for the common good of the nation. It is easiest to see this in his work for the liberation of India. Whilst he was motivated by religious and spiritual forces and reasons, which he propagated, he also worked with those of other religions and viewpoints.

Jawaharlal Nehru was a secularist and agnostic, who was at times embarrassed by Gandhi's continuing references to God.

¹⁸⁰ Paul Knitter 'Toward a liberation theology of religions' in Hick and Knitter (eds.) *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness; Toward a pluralistic Theology of Religions* Maryknoll: Orbis 1987 pp.178-200

I felt angry at his religious and sentimental approach to a political question, and his frequent references to God in connection with it. He even seemed to suggest that God had indicated the very date of the fast. What a terrible example to set!¹⁸¹

It would have been possible to get so entangled in the divergence and disagreements at the root of their worldview that the endeavour for freedom would have failed in internal conflict. On the contrary, people with great divergences worked together, forming deep bonds in the process. The differences were not hidden or overlooked, but openly debated, discussed and resolved, or held unresolved, in a tension which managed not to over-ride their fundamental agreements. Their common mission enabled relationships of mutual helpfulness in spite of ideological and methodological differences.

In the case of Gora and Gandhi social action and ethics are central to their worldviews and form the basis of their engagement. The agenda set by the 'Global Ethic' is one we can easily imagine Gora and Lavanam agreeing to, springing from and necessitated by Positive Atheism, commitment to a culture of: non-violence and respect for life; solidarity and a just economic order; tolerance and a life of truthfulness; equal rights and partnership between men and women. The idea of a Global Ethic may be criticised or limited by the vagueness of its terms - it does not spell out what is meant by a 'just social order', or 'equal rights and partnership between men and women', and one imagines that to have done so, to pinpoint the matter instead of allowing different

¹⁸¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography*, [abridged edition] Delhi: Oxford University Press 1991 p176

definitions on these issues may have caused much dispute and harm to the project, revealing the difficulty of finding common ethics, once we are precise about matters.

In practice however we do find people working together on these shared concerns coming together across religious and cultural boundaries, without necessarily any awareness of this Global Ethic formulated at a high level. Knitter focusses on grassroots engagement rather than overarching shared values, and provides case studies (including a Gandhian project) living this out locally.¹⁸² This grassroots approach is more applicable to Gandhi and Gora, than the global projects.

I now turn to examine the inter-religious engagement between Gora and Gandhi as an example of engagement or dialogue of atheists and theists through ethical action, starting with an outline of Gora's social programmes before moving on to consider his engagement with Gandhi. The applicability of Knitter's theory is considered below, following the overview of Gora and his Atheist Centre's social work.

The social programme of Gora's Atheist Centre

As I have shown, social work was an integral part of Gora's atheist vision and I will argue it is this practical action which formed the primary reason for the positive engagement between Gora and Gandhi, in spite of their differences.

Education is a central concern. Gora started a night school in an untouchable slum very early in his life. At the time he was working in a College, then teaching in the night school after his regular work, before dedicating his life entirely to social work and

¹⁸² Knitter *One Earth* pp.157-180

atheism.¹⁸³ However, he discovered the immediate need was not education, but food.

Education, however remained central, and with the start of the Atheist Centre in Mudunur, the first programme was adult education. From this start, by providing a needed service, he began to encourage intermingling and the breaking of the barriers in society.

...the students who were drawn from all castes and religions of the village, Brahmins and Untouchables, Hindus, Christians and Muslims, grouped into twos and threes and played host to the rest at tea by turns every Saturday evening. The teas mingled up all castes in their homes. Brahmin houses or Untouchable slums. The social mix-up raised an uproar, but the band of 86 adults braved the opposition.¹⁸⁴

This was the start of concerted work for inter-mixing, breaking the walls of division between people and resisting the opposition faced. Cosmopolitan meals followed, pushing the boundaries further – directly confronting restrictions on inter-dining – some Brahmins found their parents would not allow them back into the home after these meals, but they had the sympathy of the village, and an ideal. Gora himself had been outcaste, not only from his parents, but also from two jobs, for propagation of his atheistic ideas and behaviour. He associated himself with all, particular the most outcaste, and would insist on taking lodgings in Untouchable slums whenever he was called for a public meeting. His efforts were not only to gain sympathy between the ‘high’ and ‘low’ castes, but among the Untouchables themselves he recalls success, with the

¹⁸³ Gora, *We become atheists* p24

¹⁸⁴ Gora *We become atheists* p47

mingling of the Mala and Madiga who ordinarily did not inter-dine or draw water together.¹⁸⁵

The natural extension of this removal of barriers was into marriage, he was supportive of all unconventional marriages, such as re-marriages of widows and inter-caste marriage. Although many people were willing to help with these couples, they would not do so publicly. Thus 'Saraswati [Gora's wife] and I [Gora] were the common hosts for every marriage feast of an unconventional alliance.'¹⁸⁶ This support was both working for the unity and harmony of society and also supporting women's uplift, especially in widow remarriage, but also in inter-marriage, where on the whole women experience greater opposition and restriction than men.¹⁸⁷

Saraswati was an active campaigner along with her husband. He recognises her co-operation as a great assistance and says 'Later, when we took up economic and political programmes of atheism, Saraswati rose to the occasion and was repeatedly imprisoned in that connection.'¹⁸⁸ Throughout the various programmes, men and women work together as equals.

We can also see developmental work, with attention to sanitation, the building of latrines and other items of infrastructure, work and education to support an improved quality of life.¹⁸⁹ This was carried out in line with Mahatma Gandhi's Constructive Programme to which Gora makes reference. Later, as part of this, they became involved

¹⁸⁵ Gora *We become atheists* p50

¹⁸⁶ Gora, *We become atheists*: 32

¹⁸⁷ See Chapter Eight for discussion of the feminist aspect of inter-religious marriages

¹⁸⁸ Gora *We become atheists* p15

¹⁸⁹ Gora *We become atheists* p53

in the Nationalist movement, which was felt to be a necessary part of social reform and development, drawing them into politics. The Atheist Centre was prominent in the Quit India campaign of 1942, with leading participants going to jail.¹⁹⁰ Also, Gora's second son born in 1930 was named 'Lavanam', meaning Salt, honouring the Salt Satyagraha.¹⁹¹

Gora and Gandhi: atheists and theists in practical action

The social work of the Atheist Centre, as we see above, has a 'Gandhian' character, many of the projects undertaken, though independent of Gandhi, parallel his Constructive Programme. Later in the life of the Atheist Centre, we see more explicit involvement with Gandhi's movement. Gora's immediate family were involved in the Nationalist struggle, spent time living and working with Gandhi in Sevagram and Gora was active in the Harijan Sevak Sangh. After Gandhi and Gora's deaths there is a continued association of the Atheist Centre, run by Saraswati Gora, and Gandhian activities, for instance the association between, Lavanam and Vinoba Bhave, and the promotion of a Gandhian vision, by the Centre. More personally, Gandhi agreed to conduct the marriage of Gora's daughter, Manorama, removing all references to God and had her fiancé to stay at Sevagram for two years before the marriage. This marriage is considered in more detail below, in the section on caste.

Social work, which is integral to Gora's Atheist Centre and his conception of the atheist life and philosophy, in which the human is the central concern, is the main reason

¹⁹⁰ Gora *We become atheists* p 55

¹⁹¹ Gora *We become atheists* p 57

for the positive relationship developed with Gandhi. As with the example of the Quakers it is through these activities that the inter-religious dialogue was established and flourished. In spite of the philosophical differences - which I argue are to an extent ameliorated by Gandhi's conception of truth and the Indian philosophical acceptance of atheism as a path to truth, yet at root still do persist - this central shared concern for others and the Constructive Programme enabled mutual understanding, respect and learning to develop and a continued relationship between the Atheist Centre and Gandhians even after the passing of both Gandhi and Gora.

Alongside this practical concern, is the development of friendship, a personal bond and affection. Again we can point to the similarity with the inter-religious bond with Quakers where personal friendships are a prominent feature, and also to the way in which inter-religious marriages centre on and bring out the importance of personal friendship and the bonds between individuals for inter-religious relations, bringing us away from high-level concerns on the relation between religious ideas and convictions, official policies of religious institutions or religion's role in politics, to the level at which it all takes place, between people. In studying people representing heterodoxy or heteropraxy we are reminded of the reality of individuals and their differences instead of being caught in the mainstream or philosophical problems.

In this element of friendship, another vital insight is the permissibility of disagreement, this is particularly central, when we deal with such a large figure as Gandhi. In his deepest friendships we find people who are willing and ready to question

him, and whose questioning he encourages. These individuals are equals with Gandhi, not cowed by his fame, following sheepishly, but engaging and disagreeing, as equal partners. While his Quaker friends display a very similar religious view, disagreeing at times adamantly on his policy, in the relationship with Gora, the religious is the main difference and area where Gora critiques and challenges Gandhi.

The ability to critique and to accept criticism, are essential for a meaningful relationship, perhaps in particular a meaningful relationship with a foundation in social transformation and ethical action, where self-criticism is paramount. Lavanam opens his book 'Gandhi, as we have known him'¹⁹² by saying 'No one cherishes Gandhi more than we; but we abjure the idolatry that he himself often disparaged', citing several passages from Gandhi saying he should not be followed sheepishly, or accepted as a guru, that we are fellow students and pilgrims, each must follow his or her inner voice and most strongly 'Let Gandhism be destroyed if it stands for error...You are no followers, but fellow students, fellow pilgrims, fellow seekers, fellow workers.'¹⁹³

Knitter and other pluralists such as Hick are careful to be self-critical and to maintain criteria for judging religions as inauthentic if they contravene justice. Knitter's liberation theology of religions includes the 'hermeneutic of suspicion' which emphasises the way religions can be used destructively and oppressively and the need to clear out these harmful interpretations before it is possible to 'hear God's word'.¹⁹⁴ The humanism of the

¹⁹² N.b. Lavanam's use of we, as with Gora's book 'We become atheists', it is not only a personal view, but it represents a shared experience among this group of atheists

¹⁹³ Lavanam Gora, *Gandhi as we have known him*, New Delhi: National Gandhi Museum, 2005 p12

¹⁹⁴ Knitter 'Toward a liberation theology of religions' pp.181ff.

atheists and their lack of reverence allow them readily to criticise and spot where a hermeneutic of suspicion is needed. Gandhi's relative approach enables him to accept and consider these critiques.

More substantially, the grounding in *praxis*, in the preferential option for the poor and nonpersons, is seen to be at work here. (Although how far Gandhi really put into practice a preferential option for the poor and nonpersons is open to conjecture – as will be discussed below with regard to caste and Harijans.) Knitter's argument emphasises the constant corrective this brings to theology and the need to leave theological questions aside in favour of the common work. This idea developed through liberation theology for Knitter, is paralleled in Gandhi's life. He often condemned theorising and philosophising in favour of doing, and dismissed questions as impractical and unnecessary. This grounding in *praxis* is seen in Gora and Gandhi's relationship.

Although Knitter did not design his argument for atheists, but for relations between religions assuming a common core in soteriology, it can be applied beyond this. His emphasis is placed first on the suffering of the world, and thus the need for action together. His soteriology which emphasises individual and social transformation in the here and now, rather than in the after-life, is a kind of soteriology that can be applied to Positive Atheism. It is a response and a call to a less self-centred life-style and to social transformation, which stems from faith (in Positive Atheism rather than any religion). This may represent a critique of Knitter's theory but now is not the place to consider this - I am interested here in applying this theory and as an entry point for inclusion of atheists.

With common action, rather than a common core in belief, engagement and potential commonalities are opened. In the engagement of Gora with Gandhi, we find that the differences in belief, while present and connected, are subordinated to the common *praxis*, the common transformations for which they both strive.

It indeed puzzled many as to how Gandhi with his absolute faith in God could have accepted an atheist “as a member of his family” and in a very real sense dear to himself...A strict adherence to goodness and truth was, to Gandhi, as good as a sincere devotion to God, and when he found the former in Gora he did not care to think if the latter was missing.¹⁹⁵

It is because Gandhi knows of Gora’s practical action that he invites him to visit, engages in discussion, coming to see that Gora’s atheism results in and undergirds his ethical practice and develops respect for this alternative viewpoint.

Atheists’ ethical challenge: caste discrimination

Knitter’s prioritisation of orthopraxis is prioritisation of ethical practice. He uses the term *praxis* in the liberation theology sense of the term. I am wary of accepting this definition when dealing with Hindu culture. Hinduism, it has often been observed, values orthopraxy over orthodoxy, thus the variety of beliefs and relative freedom of religious ideas. But the binding of orthopraxy can be as dangerous as that of orthodoxy as the case

¹⁹⁵ Shet p133

in question demonstrates – caste. This is a matter not of theological belief or dogma (orthodoxy), but of practice, of the ordering, control and functioning of society (orthopraxy). When I refer to orthopraxy in the following section, I am therefore referring to what is considered to be orthodox practice and behaviour, not the *praxis* of liberation theology which Knitter has in mind.

Gora's atheism was motivated by his rejection of caste, the oppression it subjected so many people to endure, and its fixed and sanctioned nature. His response which saw Hinduism as the cause of the problem and the cause of inertia can be fruitfully compared with the views of Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. A parallel can be drawn between Gora and Ambedkar, for whom the rejection of Hinduism freed them from caste and in whose programmes to combat caste the rejection of Hinduism was a source of empowerment to the oppressed, in which they could now take control of their own destiny, challenge hierarchy and oppression and improve their own situation. Both gave a very thorough-going rejection of caste, unlike Gandhi who remained ambivalent, condemning untouchability on the one hand, whilst asserting that he accepted the *varna* system and was a *sanatani* Hindu on the other. Ambedkar distrusted Gandhi, and saw his work with Harijans as demeaning, covering up an orthodox Hindu Congress agenda with the Harijan Sevak Sangh an organisation to alleviate the guilt of Hindus and not to help Untouchables, but to 'kill by kindness'.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁶ See B R Ambedkar *Writings and Speeches Vol. 9* Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra 1991. Volume 9 contains 'What Gandhi and Congress have done to the Untouchables' (first published in 1945 and 'Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables' first published in 1943) these two books contain Ambedkar's detailed assessment of Gandhi, his involvement in Harijan uplift, the

Gora, although closer to Ambedkar in his assessment of the problem of caste and of religion, worked closely with Gandhi, trusting his commitment to humanity and accepting his interest in reforming Hindus and serving Harijans as genuine and helpful. Whilst close to Ambedkar in theory, Gora was in some respects more in line with Gandhi in method, focussing on social problems, engaging with higher castes to reform themselves and in programmes of temple and well opening as well as alleviation of the immediate conditions. In other respects his method was close to Ambedkar, encouraging (from a very early time) inter-dining and inter-marriage, complete freedom of social intercourse, of employment and career and education, with no regard for caste practice and without Gandhi's accommodation of caste Hindus sentiments and apologetic for *varna*.

Assessments of Gandhi and caste, in the light of Ambedkar and the conflict between them vary widely, from those who side wholeheartedly with Ambedkar, are unable to understand Gandhi's fast against the Poona Pact and, with Ambedkar, have to conclude that Gandhi and his programme are harmful to the Untouchables and offer no real hope of change. On the opposite side, many writers on Gandhi hail him as the champion of the Untouchables, and uncritically accept that his fast against the Communal Award to Depressed Classes was in their best interests and was indeed not against the Depressed Classes but against the caste Hindus.¹⁹⁷ Naturally there is a range in between, some skirt over the issue lightly, admiring the work and character of both and not wishing to stir the muddy waters of the controversy, others offer explanations of each, siding with one or

debates surrounding the Round Table Conference, and the Poona Pact and Ambedkar's views and mistrust of this.

¹⁹⁷ Horace Alexander's displays this approach, see Chapter Six.

another, while recognising the other's view point, pointing to a difference in method and understanding of the basic problem and thus solution, rather than fundamental incompatibility.¹⁹⁸

Lavanam's book offers the view which Gora and his followers had of Gandhi's approach to caste. The importance of caste to their atheism is clear from a simple look at the structure of his book. In the chapter 'Gandhi's Hinduism'¹⁹⁹, Lavanam dedicates more than two-thirds of the chapter to the issue of caste from various angles. His analysis sees a very definite change and improvement in Gandhi's attitude to caste. Gora and the Atheist Centre associate themselves in line with Ambedkar rather than Gandhi, however they see Gandhi as good willed, but conservative and very slow to change. They trace the influence of Ambedkar and his eloquent and fiery criticism of caste, the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal and Gandhi's association with Gora on the changes Gandhi was to make.²⁰⁰

The Atheists consider their social policies to have been in advance of Gandhi, in particular on caste, which for Gandhi was a secondary concern to Independence. Thus Lavanam is fond of saying

While Gora's character would certainly have been incomplete without Gandhi's influence, Gandhi's career was in fact incomplete because he was assassinated...and

¹⁹⁸ The Preface to Vol. 9 of Ambedkar's Speeches and Writings by a governor of Maharashtra is an example of this. See also Harold Coward 'Gandhi, Ambedkar and Untouchability' in *Indian Critiques* pp. 41-66 which likewise emphasises a difference of method and political vision rather than fundamental incompatibility.

¹⁹⁹ Lavanam *Gandhi as we have known him* pp.91-173

²⁰⁰ Lavanam *Gandhi as we have known him* pp.116ff. and 124. The Jat Pat Todak Mandal is the 'Caste-breaking Society', an offshoot of the Hindu reform movement, the Arya Samaj.

at a time when the fruits of Gora's growing influences on him years had only begun to ripen.²⁰¹

He relates the story of Dasu Ramaswamy an Untouchable who upon graduating from Madras University 'had to decide whether to pursue graduate studies or else live and work with Gandhi or Gora or Ambedkar'. Encouraged by Gora, Ramaswamy stayed with Gandhi in Sevagram but before long, 'Ramaswamy had occasion to tell Gandhi that he would rather work with Gora after all, because *he* was serving the "untouchables" better.' Gandhi, surprised by this asked Ramaswamy to keep him informed on Gora's work, which led to the association and invitation to Gora and his family to stay at his ashram and lasting friendship.²⁰²

Gandhi's idealised Varna system in its early years was very limited. He maintained the four divisions of the Vedic text, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, as occupational divisions for the healthy society and unlike other reformers continued to apply the hereditary principle. He did condemn untouchability, suggesting the former Untouchables should be absorbed into the *shudra varna*. Gandhi claimed there was no superiority and inferiority in this and personally took on tasks traditionally ascribed to these castes insisting all people should become Shudras. Yet it is clear that in practice, in society, there always would be some kind of hierarchy, and this system could not facilitate change and uplift from the position of birth. Gandhi's continued belief in *karma* further underlines

²⁰¹ Lavanam *Gandhi as we have known him* p20

²⁰² Lavanam *Gora Gandhi as we have known him* pp. 20-1

this and justifies the low position and ill-treatment those at the bottom receive. Although he calls for an end to this treatment, the system he draws in its place is impractical. Maintaining heredity preserves a fixed system without fluidity and change. Likewise, initially he held to the traditional restrictions on eating and drinking and of marriage within the *varna* (although beyond sub-caste). In his later years this begins to change, but only so far. He disposed of his ideas about restrictions on inter-dining and inter-marriage. Louis Fischer observes, in 1921 the prohibition of inter-caste marriage and dining were 'essential' to the soul, in 1932 these same prohibitions were 'weakening Hindu society' and 'no part of the Hindu religion', by 1946 he was refusing to attend a wedding unless it was an intercaste marriage. 'From 1921 to 1946 Gandhi had gone full circle: from utter disapproval of intercaste marriages to approval of only intercaste marriages.'²⁰³ Gandhi for the most part seems to have maintained caste as an ideal and a divinely sanctioned feature of Hinduism, often calling himself a *sanatani* Hindu and including caste and *karma* in his definition of Hinduism however condemning untouchability.

A striking feature of Gandhi's view is his refusal to accept that untouchability is the corollary and product of caste, insisting it is an aberration of caste, and of Hinduism. The defensiveness of caste and Hinduism are better understood in context. In the first place the colonial context made Gandhi (and others) seek to justify caste against the attacks levelled at Hinduism from outside, and drawing on the Orientalist view which found a way to justify *varna* in an idealised Vedic past, whilst rejecting its current manifestation. A dominant matter in this is the criticism of Christian missionaries and their focus on

²⁰³ Louis Fischer *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* Harper Collins: London 1997 pp.419-421

Untouchables with mass conversions, which he sees as underhand and is linked to the view of Christian conversion and denationalisation. A second factor was the internal political position of India. Gandhi, even when opposing untouchability, was ever sensitive to the feelings of caste Hindus and reluctant to alienate or aggravate them. Thus, whilst giving such strong rhetoric against untouchability he is hesitant about practical actions, for instance he objected to some *Satyagrahas* for well and temple entry (although later he established a temple-entry movement) preferring to plead with Hindus to reform themselves than support the demands of Untouchables which may endanger his popularity. Finally, caste appears to have played an important role for Gandhi in his vision for India's economy. In his idealised world, the division of labour by heredity provides for a co-operative economy, in which each does his own work which is valued and each has equality, against the European model of a competitive capitalist economy.

Ambedkar concludes when assessing Gandhi's work with Harijans that he is not in earnest, but a fanatical Hindu wishing to preserve caste and Hinduism at any cost beneath a veneer of liberality. He is frank, well-evidenced and to the point in his criticism. I concur with Ambedkar in criticising Gandhi's refusal to acknowledge the need for political change and safeguards, true equality and genuine representation through their own leaders, as the separate electorates which Gandhi fasted against would have ensured. In making untouchability a matter for caste Hindus, Gandhi made their emancipation dependent on the generosity of the group who had for centuries oppressed

them and stood in the way of their own self-determination and agency.²⁰⁴ However, I do not see Gandhi as working with false intent to maintain caste, but as caught in the knot of his own religious and political web. I shall focus on the religious dimension of this, looking especially at how, freed of the demands of religion, the Atheists were able clearly to see and fight the injustice of Hindu orthopraxy and were able to influence Gandhi on this.

The Atheists challenged Gandhi's understanding and interpretation of religion, broadening to a more humane and realistic approach in the area of caste. Gandhi took a real interest in Gora, because of the work he was doing. Gora willingly engaged with and challenged Gandhi (even where he considered Gandhi was held back). He took an active role in Gandhi's programme, attending meetings of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, suggesting changes and programmes of action and providing an example of good action, breaking caste barriers in his own life and in his village. Gora is prominent at several points in the changes we see. This is most clear with inter-caste marriage, where Gandhi changed his position and made the declaration he would only offer his blessing to inter-caste marriages, completely undoing the social barrier. The choice of marriage for Gora's daughter, Manorama 'engaged his immediate and active response'²⁰⁵. She became engaged to Arjun Rao 'an untouchable from a nearby village who had been a volunteer at the Atheist Center' and had been involved in the Independence struggle. Gandhi supported their marriage (although he sent a Telugu-speaking colleague to test her commitment, who told her the planned marriage was a poor idea, the marriage would

²⁰⁴ This is particularly clear in Gandhi's Harijan Sevak Sangh, which had no representation of Harijans on its board to direct its work, but was an organisation of caste-Hindus seeking to alleviate in everyday ways some of the hardships they faced. It was not a radical or representative organisation of change.

²⁰⁵ Lavanam Gora *Gandhi as we have known him* p33

have so many difficulties and Arjun was penniless). He adopted them both, announcing the engagement though (as so often) making them wait two years before the actual marriage, during which time he had Arjun to stay with him in Sevagram.²⁰⁶ It is worth noting Arjun was put in charge of the communal kitchen, testing the eradication of the taboo of untouchability in the Ashram. Even more significantly Gandhi told Arjun 'You should become like Ambedkar. You should work for the removal of untouchability and of caste. Untouchability must go at any cost.'²⁰⁷

Gandhi's progress and recognition of the harm of caste, as well as untouchability were given impetus and enacted with Gora's family. Outside of religion and able to clearly point out the deficiencies, Gandhi was reformed further through this engagement.

One may however ask, why only now, had not others outside of Hinduism been challenging him before? Yes, they had. Unfortunately, he often dismissed his objectors in this regard – thinking it was an attempt to damage and destroy Hindu society. When it came from outsiders, missionaries and colonialists, he did not take their opinion seriously. He was only too ready to consider it an attack on Indian unity. Similarly with Ambedkar and the representation of Untouchables themselves he was very dismissive, questioning their right to be representatives, claiming he represented the Untouchables and that the British had put up Ambedkar (and others at the Round Table Conference) who were not true representatives.²⁰⁸ Although Gora was closer to Ambedkar, he worked mostly on a social, rather than political level, and could not be seen (mistakenly) as a

²⁰⁶ Lavanam *Gandhi as we have known him* pp. 33-7

²⁰⁷ Lavanam *Gandhi as we have known him* p36

²⁰⁸ Ambedkar *Speeches and Writings* Vol. 9 p63

prop of the British to divide India. He also had a willingness to work with and high respect for Gandhi, even where they disagreed.

Still, a fundamental disagreement on the relation of caste and religion remained. For Gora, caste was religion, and to be free of caste Hinduism must be given up. Much of his rhetoric for atheism is based on becoming free. There is a clear parallel in this with Ambedkar's call to become Buddhist, gain self-respect and become free.²⁰⁹ Ambedkar emphasised leaving Hinduism in his mass conversion movement, with 22 vows along with the traditional going for refuge.²¹⁰ There is a clear question of backsliding and reabsorption. Gora too, never gave up the central place of atheism as a necessary method. Gora says that Gandhi's method of appeal to God had the advantage of immediate communication to the masses, however, 'Later it suffered the reaction of losing the essence of change and holding to the form of belief'. On the contrary he maintained the atheist method raises initial prejudice 'Yet the change achieved, however slow, is stable and firm.'²¹¹

Ved Mehta's interviews with disciples of Gandhi provide evidence of such superficial change, for instance Mrs. Bajaj carried on Gandhian activities even after his death

²⁰⁹ Vasant Moon *Growing up Untouchable in India: a Dalit autobiography*, tr. Gail Omvedt, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001 gives insight into the psychological impact of conversion amongst his Mahar community in Nagpur, he records the growth in self-esteem and freedom gained from leaving Hinduism. At the same time it is honest to the strain put upon these people in leaving Hinduism, how great its hold was and also the problem of violence and riots between Mahars and Hindus, as well as the exclusion Untouchables who did not convert received from the Ambedkarite converts; See also Eleanor Zelliot 'The Psychological Dimension of the Buddhist Conversion' in *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* New Delhi: Manohar, 2010 pp.218-222 and Sallie King *Socially Engaged Buddhism* pp.145-8

²¹⁰ <http://www.ambedkar.org/impdocs/22Vows.htm> accessed 23rd August 2012

²¹¹ Gora, *We become Atheists* p68

through the *Bhoodan* movement but she never gave up orthodox practices of purity and pollution and the prejudice they bring.

[Mrs. Bajaj:] “It was very hard, [walking with Vinoba Bhave] changing camp every day, because I never eat anything I haven’t prepared with my own hands. Everyone knows that Muslims and Harijans have dirty habits.”... “How did you manage in Gandhi’s ashrams, where you had to eat food communally prepared by Muslims, Harijans and all sorts of other people, whatever their caste or religion?” I ask. “In the ashrams, everyone was very clean,” she replies. “We all ate out of each other’s hands. But everyone knew that Muslims and Harijans outside the ashram had dirty habits, *Hare Ram, Hare Ram*”.²¹²

Similarly, even in his own Gujarat, higher-caste ladies attending his gatherings were reported to have taken purificatory baths on their return home lest they be polluted by the lower caste people with whom Gandhi freely associated.²¹³

Whilst reform may have this problem, so too may conversion – there is evidence of caste persisting (in milder forms) in the non-Hindu religions in India, and even Ambedkar found a lack of help amongst Buddhists for the new converts and that organisations such as the Maha Bodhi Society were Brahmin dominated or led.²¹⁴ In fact Ambedkar

²¹² Ved Mehta *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles* London: Deutsch 1977 p59

²¹³ Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* London: Yale University Press, 1989 p172

²¹⁴ See Sangharakshita *Ambedkar and Buddhism* Glasgow: Windhorse 1986. Chapter 9 ‘After Ambedkar’ details problems finding Buddhists to provide support for the new converts and p18 records Ambedkar’s reaction to the Brahmin President of the Maha Bodhi Society (who had opposed Ambedkar’s Hindu Code Bill and formerly been President of the Hindu Mahasabha) in his initial meeting with the author.

fashioned a novel interpretation of Buddhism and suggested reforms he considered necessary.²¹⁵

Whilst conversion has advantages, what hope is there for Indian society if overcoming untouchability is dependent upon forsaking Hinduism? Is this realistic or even desirable? There is a need for those outside and able to criticise Hinduism to speak to and with caste Hindus. The methods of internal reform and conversion may go hand in hand. If there is only conversion, but no reform then this would lead to continued discrimination against the converts, as documented for instance against Christian converts.²¹⁶

Even for those who remain within Hinduism it is important to hear and take seriously these critiques, heteropraxy may witness against orthopraxy, initiating change and self-criticism. Having left Hinduism, Gora was in a more free and powerful position to challenge the immorality of caste practice in the context of an honest and trusting friendship.

Conclusions

Gandhi's relationship with Gora shows equal regard for atheists with believers, even if his philosophy does not go all the way to achieving this. He had free, open

²¹⁵ Sangharakshita *Ambedkar and Buddhism* pp.115-126; 145-161

²¹⁶ See Mary Grey *A Cry for Dignity: Religion, Violence and the Struggle of Dalit Women in India* London: Equinox 2010 pp.84-95 a sensitive consideration of Christianity and caste especially in relation in Dalit women which appreciates the ambiguities of continued caste normativity alongside improvements and liberative aspects and Ninian Koshy, *Caste in the Kerala Churches*, Bangalore: Christian Institute for the study of Religion and Society 1968. Christian converts have continued to be treated as untouchable by Hindus and the books main thesis is on the continuation of caste (though in a milder form) within the Christian community

engagement with members of the Atheist Centre, who were friends and co-workers and was able to appreciate their critique of the repressive and limiting aspects of religion and this must have contributed to his reforms and attempted purification of religion. The emphasis on ethics and practicality formed the primary bond. His familiarity, from Indian religions, with religion which makes no recourse to God facilitated this approach to atheists. Yet this led to his underestimation of the difference between his religious outlook and meaning of Truth and an atheist perspective such as Gora's.

Applying these insights to current inter-religious relations, we learn the importance of including all in the dialogue, even atheists. It brings a critique to dialogue which makes an enemy of atheists, rather than treating them as valid dialogical partners. Theories of dialogue centred on shared ethical challenges are particularly applicable to this kind of dialogue. By taking the dialogue away from theology into practise tension is eased and a way in is created, yet in being centred on living up to one's deepest convictions and philosophy it is an expression of religion. As a result of this dialogue and practical working and living together, we see a friendship develop. In the context of friendship the two opposite worldviews can be respected on account of respect for the person. Even help is offered for a programme with a contradictory foundational philosophy, in Gandhi's support of the Atheist Centre, and Gora's participation in the Gandhian movement and ashram.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gandhian and Quaker beliefs and values

This chapter looks at the resonance between Quaker (Religious Society of Friends) and Gandhian religious thought and values, focussing on British Quakerism from the late 1920s to the present.²¹⁷ The dialogue and relationship between Gandhi and Quakers provides an example of intimacy across cultures and religions. It is a prime example of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue on several levels: personal relationships; resonances in religion and values; and in social action. Quaker and Gandhian thought have mutually helped and enlightened one another. In view of the apparent differences, Hindu-Christian, East-West and colonised-coloniser, this deserves attention.

Research into Gandhi's religious pluralism, both in the West and India has looked at his ambivalent relationship with Christianity, drawing out the criticism rooted in colonial and missionary Christianity as encountered and perceived by Gandhi on the one hand and on the other his admiration of Christ's ideals, in particular the Sermon on the Mount;²¹⁸ Gandhi's friendships with Christians, such as Charles Freer Andrews, the Dokes and others in South Africa;²¹⁹ and the impact of Gandhi's non-violence for Christian non-

²¹⁷ The term Religious Society of Friends, shall be referred to by the more common name 'Quakers' or the simply as 'Friends', a commonly used designation amongst members themselves, interchangeably.

²¹⁸ See A. J. Anandan *God for all, God for me; Gandhiji's religious dualism* Bangalore: SAIACS Publications 1998 and Nirmal Minz *Mahatma Gandhi and Hindu-Christian Dialogue* Madras: Christian Literature Society 1970

²¹⁹ See James Hunt *Gandhi and the non-conformists* New Delhi: Promilla 1986; Books on Charlie Andrews include Hugh Tinker *The Ordeal of Love; C. F. Andrews and India* Oxford: OUP 1979 and Chaturvedi and Sykes *Charles Freer Andrews: A Narrative* London: George Allen and Unwin 1949 which is co-authored by Marjorie Sykes (whom we shall study in the next chapter) and includes a Foreword from Mahatma Gandhi.

violent action for justice, as most famously encountered in Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights movement.²²⁰ A recent contribution to this area is Terrence Rynne's dialogue between *satyagraha* and Christian non-violence, which draws out the implications of non-violence for Christian soteriology.²²¹ A recurrent issue in assessments of Gandhi's relationship with Christianity is the uniqueness of Christ and from this the Christian call for conversion, which Gandhi vigorously challenged. In Gandhi's relationship with Quakers this controversy is conspicuously absent, giving a different view on his relationship with Christianity.

There are striking resonances between Quaker faith and practice and Gandhi's life and ideas, although coming from very different soil. These include pacifism and non-violence; the belief that "there is that of God in everyone"; simplicity; an emphasis on moral practice as true religion over profession of creed; Truth; equality of all, including the absence among Quakers of clergy above the lay people; silence and "waiting on the Spirit", corresponding to Gandhi's "still, small voice". This chapter focuses on the values and beliefs of Quakers and Gandhi and the development of religious pluralism within these two traditions. The following chapter concretises this and develops the significance of friendships as a model of dialogue with case studies of Marjorie Sykes and Horace Alexander. Personal connections and shared concerns, which are religious and moral in a tradition which does not separate the two, explain this deep and lasting dialogue.

²²⁰ See 'The Fellowship of Kindred Minds: Gandhi, Bonhoeffer and King' in James Deotis Roberts *Bonhoeffer and King; Speaking Truth to Power* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2005 pp. 61-74 and 'Mohandas, Malcolm and Martin' in Dennis Dalton *Mahatma Gandhi; Non-violent power in action* New York: Columbia University Press, 1993 pp.168-187

²²¹ Terrence Rynne *Gandhi and Jesus: The saving power of nonviolence* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2008

These chapters build on research by Vasant Bawa and Margaret Chatterjee, which examine the dialogue between Gandhi and Quakers and comparing Gandhi and George Fox respectively.²²² I relate the Gandhi-Quaker relationship to models of inter-religious dialogue and the pluralism debate – in particular bringing out friendship as a model of dialogue.

This chapter starts by examining the place of the Quakers within or beyond Christianity in relation to Christian ecumenism and interfaith. Quakers marginality to Christianity emerges as an advantage in interfaith relationships. I investigate the shifting attitude of Quakers as they have opened to other religions and secular worldviews and the Quaker basis for dialogue, emphasising in particular the non-finality of the Christian message and openness to change through encounter. This is compared with Gandhi's change in attitude to religious pluralism and the possible mutual influence and is followed by an analysis of a major point of connection: commitment to peace and non-violence. The two approaches to peace are compared and contrasted, examining the Quaker peace testimony in relation to Gandhi's ahimsa. Other areas of resonance, which it is not intended to elaborate upon here, appear throughout such as the emphasis on practice, on religion as experience, the centrality of simplicity, equality and truth.

The importance of practice over belief in Gandhi's thought and Quaker faith raises a contentious question – are we really witnessing a radical shift from exclusive attitudes

²²² Vasant Kumar Bawa *The Quakers and Gandhi – The start of a dialogue and an uncompleted journey* Woodbrooke Journal no.14 Autumn 2004; Margaret Chatterjee 'Gandhi and Fox' in *Gandhi Way* no. 72 Summer 2002 pp.8-10

to a new openness and harmony between people, or is it a shift in the point or criteria of exclusion, so that as shared morality paves the way for this interfaith harmony, it marks a new point of exclusion of those who hold different ethical values? This same question is raised by atheism and taken up in the Conclusion.

Context and significance of Quaker-Gandhi connections

There was a small group of Quakers in India during the British colonial period, including a few Hindu-Quakers.²²³ Marjorie Sykes has documented and traced some of these individuals and groups.²²⁴ There are no indications that Quakers had an impact on Gandhi as a student in London. One can assume therefore that Gandhi did not have former knowledge of Quakers or an awareness of their distinctive religious style in the early part of his life. His first engagement, with Michael Coates in South Africa, was not the most significant. 'He was a Quaker, but did not seem to display any of the characteristic doctrines of that faith.'²²⁵ Bawa asked

Why did no meaningful exchange of ideas between the Quakers and Gandhi take place until 1927? Probably because when Gandhi was working out the philosophy of life which was to guide his political action, in South Africa, the Quakers were going through a strongly evangelical phase.²²⁶

²²³ Sheila Laxman, *P C Sirkar of Kolkata (Calcutta): a Nineteenth Century Hindu Quaker* University of Birmingham: MPhil Thesis, 2001

²²⁴ Marjorie Sykes *An Indian Tapestry: Quaker threads in the history of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; from the Seventeenth Century to Independence*, ed. Geoffrey Carnall, York: Sessions Book Trust 1997

²²⁵ Hunt *Gandhi and the Non-Conformists* p31

²²⁶ Bawa *Gandhi and the Quakers* p12

This claim regarding evangelicalism contradicts the liberal trend identified amongst British Quakers at this time, and must be regarded as a limited to specific encounters in South Africa. Conversion was able to undermine Christian contacts of Gandhi's (at least in terms of a lasting relationship – one should not underestimate the significance of his Christian missionary contacts even if short lived) and its absence to enrich both.

Thus Gandhi's deep engagement began later in life. His most significant friendship was with Horace Alexander. Gandhi visited Woodbrooke Quaker College in Birmingham in 1931, calling it a pilgrimage in appreciation of Horace. The assumption about Gandhi's degree of prior contact with Quakers is borne out by Horace's comment in *The Indian Ferment*. 'I found that all the members of the *ashram* who discovered I was a Quaker responded in just the same way [as Gandhi had, with enthusiasm and excitement] – and with the same lack of actual knowledge.'²²⁷

Gandhi had been aware of Quakers, speaking of non-violent resistance in 1925 he said, history has shown us such soldiers who do not retaliate, 'Such is the history of the Quakers'²²⁸ and in 1906, he gave praise to the Cadburys' social concern for workers.²²⁹ But his knowledge and engagement was not significant prior to 1928.

Thus Gandhi's ideas and his important place in Indian society were well-established before his deep involvement with and appeal to Quakers. This means the

²²⁷ Horace Alexander *The Indian Ferment: A Traveller's Tale* London: Williams and Norgate, 1929 pp. 222-3

²²⁸ CWMG Vol.28 p22

²²⁹ CWMG Vol.5 p256

similarities in spiritual and social thought arose spontaneously without mutual interaction. It also meant the relationships were established after the peace testimony had become the fundamental affirmation of Quakers during the inter-war period and after the All Friends Conference of 1920.²³⁰ The establishment of these similarities prior to any significant engagement may explain why once engagement began although stemming from different cultures and religious backgrounds the relationships proved meaningful and lasting.

Personal friendships are strong between Gandhi and Quakers. We find the Quakers with strong Gandhian ties were not only friends of Gandhi, but many were introduced to him through other visionaries in India of that period such as Rabindranath Tagore and Charlie Andrews. Indeed, Marjorie Syke's is more associated with Tagore than with Gandhi, having spent many years as a teacher in Santiniketan, learnt Bengali and translated a number of Tagore's works.

The totality of life as religion

*The Quaker testimonies to peace, equality, simplicity and truth are a challenge to alleviate suffering and seek positive social change. Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) works with and on behalf of Friends in Britain to translate faith into action.*²³¹

²³⁰ Thomas Kennedy 'Why Did Friends Resist?; The War, the Peace Testimony and the All-Friends Conference of 1920' in *Peace and Change; A Journal of Peace Research* Volume 14, Number 4, October 1989 pp. 355-371

²³¹ <http://www.quaker.org.uk/qpsw> accessed 23/04/2010

Although setting aside periods specifically for worship, Gandhi's view of religion and the Quaker insight concur, that faith must be translated into action, religion is not divorced from the rest of life, set aside for a sacred place and time, but religion is the whole of life, expressed in every action, every minute. Some of the distinctive elements of Quakerism come from this such as non-celebration of religious festivals as all days are sacred and the rejection of oaths, as every word should be truthful.

One of the most quotable sayings of Gandhi is "My life is my message", he challenged the division and compartmentalisation of life. Abdul Ghaffar Khan reminds us of the centrality of Gandhi's constructive programme.

Everything Gandhiji taught was hard to learn, and even harder to put into practice day after day. Who of us can say, for example, that we ever succeeded in putting into practice the crux of the Constructive Programme – his ideas on sanitation, which were as basic to his teaching as nonviolence? ²³²

Abdul Ghaffar Khan elaborates on efforts and challenges in sanitation reform, bringing out the centrality of this most mundane matter. Gandhi makes clear how such mundane affairs are part and parcel of the spiritual life in a letter to Horace Alexander, following his visit to Sabarmati:

You seem to think lightly of my having invited suggestions with reference to sanitary matters. In my own humble opinion we needlessly divide life into water-tight compartments, religious and other. Whereas if a man has true religion in him, it must show itself in the smallest detail of life. To me sanitation in a community such as ours is based upon common spiritual effort. The slightest irregularity in sanitary, social and political life is a sign of spiritual poverty. It is a

²³² Mehta *Mahatma Gandhi and his apostles* pp. 243-247

sign of inattention, neglect of duty. Anyway, the Ashram life is based upon this conception of fundamental unity of life.²³³

Though he had apparently overlooked sanitation, one imagines this insight would reach to Alexander's understanding of spirituality and life from his own tradition. It certainly must have affected him as he quotes it in *The Indian Ferment*.

The putting of values into action are amongst the most important reasons I feel for Quaker-Gandhian collaboration and unity. It is based on action for change. Mutual action based on faith is a powerful way to overcome differences and reach new levels of spiritual union or communion across faiths and traditions as theologians such as Knitter and Hans Kung have expounded. Ethics, religion as the way you live and put your values into action is paramount. Yet ethics is not seen as distinct from religion, belief, ritual and spiritual practice as in some secular understandings.²³⁴ They are two sides of the same coin.

Marjorie Sykes demonstrates the importance of both, suggesting Quakers learn from India.

The secret of a balance in life between action and meditation, between the regular periods set aside by both Gandhi and by Tagore for quiet and meditation, and their deep involvement in the world of action is something which I think India can help Friends to understand and share.²³⁵

²³³ Alexander *Indian Ferment* p227 –The letter and explanation are also included in the appendix of Horace Alexander, *Gandhi Through Western Eyes* Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1984 pp.189-191

²³⁴ See Raghavan Iyer 'Gandhi on Civilization and Religion' in Hick and Hempel pp.122-136 for a good exploration of the inter-connection between Gandhi's ethics, religion and politics.

²³⁵ Marjorie Sykes *Transcending Tradition: Excerpts from the writings and talks of Marjorie Sykes*, ed. Martha Dart, York: William Sessions 1995 p54

She quotes from the Upanishads

In the dark night live those for whom the Lord is transcendent only. In night darker still live those for whom He is immanent only. But the man for whom He is transcendent and immanent crosses the sea of death with equanimity and enters into immortality with the transcendent. So we have heard from the wise.

Commenting

One of the dangers of regarding Quakerism as a kind of reaction against thinking only of the transcendent is that we have fallen into a kind of thinking of the immanent which belittles the mystery of Being, the mystery of God. I think this Indian teaching is a splendid balance of the two.²³⁶

With this emphasis on action and spirituality, we see the relegation of creed and ritual, direct experience receives greater emphasis and authority than scripture. This way of understanding religion, is more open to inclusion of other religions, it emphasises inner unity over different creeds and religious practices. The emphasis on direct experience and way of life is a more natural point of contact for the Eastern religions than scripture and beliefs. This is explored further in the section on other religions. The basis in action and the way of living, lends itself to practical collaboration and bonds with any who share the same goals and values.

Are Quakers Christian or beyond?

The Religious Society of Friends was historically Christian and that is the root of their modern beliefs. The majority of members are Christian and the two books set out

²³⁶ Sykes *Transcending Tradition* p55

on a table in Quaker meetings are the Bible and *Quaker Faith and Practice* which is described as 'The book of Christian guidance' and contains many passages about Christ.²³⁷ Yet *Quaker Faith and Practice* also has Universalist tendencies, it is a compilation of insights into Truth, not all of which a Quaker is expected to agree with, and there are Quakers who are Buddhist, Muslim or non-theist rather than Christian. Given this, how far should we consider Quakers to be Christian?

Studying Quaker involvement in the ecumenical movement reveals ambivalence in the relationship of Friends to Christian identity. The Religious Society of Friends was until 1989 an associate member of the major ecumenical bodies. Since 1989 Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) is a full member of the ecumenical bodies of the UK, yet in a distinct way, which points to its marginality from the mainstream of Christian belief and practice. *The Challenge of Ecumenism for Friends* describes this.

The constitution [of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and adopted by other national ecumenical bodies] has the following Basis:

The Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland is a fellowship of churches in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In order to accommodate Friends, an exception was made in Clause 2(b) of the constitution. This allowed a majority of member churches which subscribed to this statement of faith to admit into membership a church which did not do so but which (a) they perceived as demonstrating in its life and works the marks of a

²³⁷ Individual Quakers belong to their own local Meeting (the Quaker equivalent to belonging to a local church) each of which belong to the regional Monthly Meeting and each of these to the national Yearly Meeting. Britain Yearly Meeting may thus be seen as the official representative and guiding body of the Society of Friends in Britain as a whole.

Christian community as they would define it and (b) they perceived as being committed to the aims and purposes of the new fellowship.²³⁸

First, it is significant that Friends cannot accept the statement which is the foundation for the other churches. On principle Friends have avoided a creedal statement which is central to other forms of Christianity. This Quaker feature has enabled easier interfaith relations for Quakers, if more difficult ecumenical relations.

Second, BYM had to apply to and be accepted by the other churches who did adopt this statement. This puts BYM in a marginal position, unlike the mainstream churches which do not depend on other churches for their acceptance. It is the mainstream churches professing this orthodox expression of Christian faith which play the decisive and in this sense power-holding role. On the other hand they did decide to accept BYM into full membership, thus Quakers are granted an equal status. It is significant that in spite of the difference in belief and practice the churches hold that BYM, '...manifests faith in Christ as witnessed in the Scriptures and is committed to the aims and purposes of the new ecumenical body, and that it will work in the spirit of the Basis.' The reaction of Friends to this was minuted at Yearly Meeting in 1989,

We are humbled by the way the churches have reached out in love to us. The care and sensitivity with which they have recognised our particular perception of Truth which is not enshrined in creedal statements shows this.²³⁹

²³⁸ Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations *The Challenge of Ecumenism for Friends: An outline of Friends' involvement in the churches ecumenical journey since 1979 for study and reflection* London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 2001 p16

However, the review of the ecumenical agenda at Yearly Meeting in 1997 expressed unease about the present arrangement and questioned how much this is a 'proper part of living with others of different practices, and how much we are disturbed because we are denying our own testimonies.'²⁴⁰ It asked for continued dialogue by representatives with the ecumenical bodies 'to communicate our sense that their description of us disturbs us, and that what they see as an affirmation of faith can appear exclusive to others.'²⁴¹ The pain and distress some Friends feel is recognised. Yet, on the whole there is a feeling that the ecumenical movement is an important area for Quakers, who do wish to be a part of it and whose involvement is valued by other churches.

Whilst there are a number of reasons for potential unease and hesitation with ecumenism, the most important reason, in the context of this research, is the value placed on diversity of belief and practice, the emphasis upon the Spirit and concern for avoiding exclusive dogmatic or creedal statements. Whilst Christianity conventionally emphasises scripture, Quakers emphasise experience. In some ways the forces which make ecumenism difficult for Friends facilitate interfaith relations. Yet there are similar motivating factors behind ecumenical and interfaith relations, in particular recognition of the Light in others and the importance of working together for a better world.

²³⁹ QCCIR *The Challenge of Ecumenism* p23

²⁴⁰ QCCIR *The Challenge of Ecumenism* p28

²⁴¹ QCCIR *The Challenge of Ecumenism* p29

Other churches do value the particular insights or unfamiliar interpretations of Quakers. In hierarchical churches some value the presence of Friends, who bypass or question the authority of hierarchy, and point to a different interpretation of the New Testament. Similarly the Quaker testimonies are valued and 'both locally and nationally we are often approached instinctively for a lead on issues of social justice and war.'²⁴²

By contrast to more mainstream Christian groups Quakers seem to have more problems and difficulties on the ecumenical side, than on the interfaith side.

Expanding beyond Christianity: inter-faith

Ben Pink Dandelion considers the development of the Religious Society of Friends from a Christian group to its present form which includes non-Christian Quakers.²⁴³ By about 1905, Liberal Quakerism was dominant in Britain, with Christianity assumed rather than prescribed. This liberal trend continued, in 1921 the *Book of Discipline* (now *Quaker Faith and Practice*) replaced the section 'Christian Doctrine' with 'Illustrative Spiritual Experiences of Friends'. Whilst direct experience was always central, this moves from defining the central ideas as Christian to the fluidity of 'spiritual experience', making way for insights from other faiths and worldviews. The next key point was 1931, when London Yearly Meeting urged Friends to be 'open to new light from whatever quarter'. The question as to whether Quakerism was necessarily Christian was repeatedly raised through the next decade. By the 1960s non-Christian Quakers had emerged and the

²⁴² QCCIR *The Challenge of Ecumenism* p34

²⁴³ Ben Pink Dandelion *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction* Oxford: OUP 2008 pp. 65-70

present-day attitude is highly permissive with Quaker Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and non-theists within Yearly meetings.

There had been earlier hints of Quaker inclusion of non-Christians. Poorna Chunder Sirkar was a 19th Century Bengali Hindu-Quaker, who became convinced of Christ's message and resolved to follow Christ.²⁴⁴ Yet he did not wish to give up his Hindu identity, and through his Quaker understanding promoted the equality of Hinduism with Christianity. He wrote with great insight on similarities between aspects of Quaker and Hindu spirituality, such as the Yogi and the Quaker's patient waiting upon God; the silence of Meeting for Worship is equated with *dhyana*; *tyaga* with Christian self-giving and the suffering of Christ; and he equates passages from the Bible with the Gita, Upanishads and Vedas, the major Hindu renaissance sources.²⁴⁵ Although he called himself Hindu-Quaker he was not, in fact, a non-Christian, he was convinced of Christ, accepted the Trinity and salvation through the redemption of Christ's blood. He supported preaching the Christian message in a way which recognised the validity of authentic Hindu spirituality. He was a Universalist, whose ideas Laxman suggests would in some areas have been unacceptable to Christians and even many Quakers of the time.²⁴⁶ He can be seen as a fore-runner to today's Hindu-Quakers, who discovered in Quakerism a form of Christianity with room for Hindus. His vision of Quakerism's potential for a Universalist vision and interfaith fellowship has developed through the past century,

²⁴⁴ Sheila Laxman *P.C. Sirkar* p19

²⁴⁵ See Chapter 4 'The Yogi and the Quaker' of Laxman's thesis pp.39-49

²⁴⁶ Laxman *P C Sirkar* p75

though his hope that it would be the means to spread Christ's message through India has not.

The first deep engagement Gandhi had with Quakers was not until 1928, therefore the dominance of liberal Quakerism and the replacement of 'Christian Doctrine' with 'Illustrative Spiritual Experiences of Friends' was well-established. Gandhi had in the twenties made comments on Hinduism as the supreme religion, on account of its tolerance, although he affirmed the truth of all religions. By 1930, however, his opinion had changed to discredit the germ of superiority which it contained.²⁴⁷ In 1931 London Yearly Meeting encouraged Friends to be open to light from whatever quarter. The same year Gandhi made a significant development in his theological thinking - shifting from saying 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God', to include those who struggled with the idea of God and changing the *ashram* vow of tolerance to equal reverence for all religions. It is possible there was mutual influence here. Gandhi spent part of that year, 1931, in England where he stayed with, visited and gave talks to Quakers.²⁴⁸ Chatterjee traces Gandhi's change to Truth is God to his experiences in Lausanne with conscientious

²⁴⁷ Jordens, *Gandhi's Religion* pp. 148-158

²⁴⁸ He arrived at Friends House before staying with Muriel Lester at Kingsley Hall in London, who had sympathies with Quakers, Muriel Lester *Entertaining Gandhi* London: Ivor Nicholas and Watson 1932. He made a lasting impression on Woodbrooke from 17-19th October 1931, Chris Lawson *A Matter of Pilgrimage: The content and context of Gandhi's visit to Woodbrooke in 1931* The Woodbrooke Journal no.1 Summer 1997. During his time in England, Bawa says 'Gandhi attended several Quaker meetings for worship, and met representatives of the peace movement at Friends House, London' p17, the ground for establishing the ICG was also set up, Bawa *The Quakers and Gandhi* pp.18-22

objectors who struggled with the idea of God.²⁴⁹ Quakers would have been among these conscientious objectors and Gandhi was aware of Quaker sensitivities to God in oaths.²⁵⁰

These developments in Quaker inter-faith relations have precedents dating back to George Fox, who said Quakers should be open to light from whatever source. During expeditions and settlement in America, Quakers were amongst few Christian groups willing to engage with and see spirituality in the Native Americans. Jack Hoyland records such experiences in *The Cross moves East*, relating this early example of interfaith trust and friendship with Gandhi's principles.²⁵¹ The Quaker experiment in governance in Pennsylvania is noteworthy for the spirit of friendship and recognition given to the Delaware Indians who lightly inhabited the area. William Penn in an address to the Native People assured them of the friendship and the spirit of the Quaker peace testimony saying, 'I will consider you as the same flesh and blood with Christians, and the same as if one man's body were to be divided into two parts.'²⁵² This statement is remarkable for a British colonist at this time. 'Quaker Pennsylvania, in striking contrast to Britain's other North American colonies, remained at peace with its [Native American] Indian neighbours.'²⁵³

²⁴⁹ Chatterjee *Religious Thought* p162

²⁵⁰ See the article 'God and Congress' CWMG Vol. 26 pp. 222-225; Quakers do not make oaths on God, believing that all speech should be truthful in line with Jesus' teaching in Mat. 5: 33-37

²⁵¹ John S. Hoyland *The Cross moves East: a study in the significance of Gandhi's "Satyagraha"* London: George Allen and Unwin 1931 pp.44-47

²⁵² William Penn quoted in Peter Brock *The Quaker Peace Testimony, 1660 to 1914* York: Sessions Book Trust 1990 p90

²⁵³ Brock *Peace Testimony* p90

In British India, some Quaker missionaries sought converts, whilst others engaged without conversion in genuine dialogue and service.²⁵⁴ Amongst Gandhi's Quaker friends who spent time in India we find engagement with other Hindus, Muslims and Christians in India. They find correspondences between other religions and their own, learn about them and self-reflect on their own faith and practice. Martha Dart's book *To Meet at the Source* is an example of this encounter between Hindu and Quaker spirituality.²⁵⁵

There is a self-reflexive quality with Quakers placing themselves within Christianity, whilst also criticizing and distancing themselves from some Christians' practice of it. These attitudes and reflections on Christianity have resemblances with Gandhi's view of Christianity; often criticizing missionary activity, especially ignorant practice, where Christianity is seen as superior dismissing other forms of religion. They also appreciate Christianity - describing some Christians who were involved in their communities, engaging in the life of the people and social issues as "Christian" as an adjective denoting goodness, kindness, wisdom and other positive qualities, making possible the term 'unchristian Christians'.²⁵⁶ This attitude is stated with great clarity and force by Horace Alexander, writing only weeks after he first met and stayed with Gandhi.

I do not believe that the true disciples of Christ in the East to-day ought to be seeking for "converts". Of course there are plenty of people in India, as in the West, who need to be turned from darkness to light, from fear to love, from self to service; but baptism and Church membership cannot produce these things. Too

²⁵⁴ Sykes *An Indian tapestry*

²⁵⁵ Martha Dart, *To meet at the Source: Hindus and Quakers* Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet, No. 289, 1989

²⁵⁶ Alexander *The Indian Ferment* p176

often these acts stand for hypocrisy and self-seeking. Christ-like lives seem to be the only force that can save the world.²⁵⁷

Like Gandhi appreciation of Christianity is identified in the values of the Sermon on the Mount and the Cross - values of love and self-sacrifice. Their wish is to spread these values, not 'Christianity'.

Atheism in Gandhian and Quaker Thought – Light, Truth and suspicion of 'theologising'

As a tradition which emphasises silence, the inability to put religious experience into words, and rejects creedal formulations, Liberal Quakers are cautious with theological speech.²⁵⁸ Non-realists (or semi-realists) hold that words do not match the reality, but seek to symbolize our highest ideals – a position emphasised by Gandhi and common throughout the Indian traditions, in the Upanishad's *neti neti*, Jainism's *syadvada* and the Buddha's reluctance to teach and use of 'skilful means'. Dandelion explains that

...within the Liberal [Quaker] tradition, an implicit semi-realist position is dominant. God or 'God' is real, but statements about God are not facts about God but interpretations of the experience of God...Semi-realists believe that the experience of God is real but that theological statements cannot get close to describing the mystery of the Divine. In this sense, theology is not ultimately 'real' or true in anything other than a symbolic sense. Beliefs are held to be 'true' personally, partially or provisionally but not true for everyone for all time. This is based on a criticism of the ability of humanity and of language to describe adequately religious and spiritual experience rather than any critique of God.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ Alexander *Indian Ferment* p236. Other examples of little appreciation for conversion and concern for the spirit of Christ are found on pp. 135; 141-2; 176;

²⁵⁸ Dandelion *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction* p77

²⁵⁹ Dandelion *The Quakers: A very short introduction* p78

Theology has a limited role for Quakers and may often be considered inappropriate. This hesitation over speech coupled with deep faith is expressed beautifully by Gandhi:

The Reality which we call God is a mysterious, indescribable and unique power, if we cannot comprehend Him with our mind, how can our poor speech describe him? ²⁶⁰

Both Gandhi and Quakers' interpretation of religion emphasise experience and practice over beliefs, philosophy and formulations, experience which is personal and changing, not fixed and final. Therefore even when Quakers express themselves in orthodox Christian language, for most this is a means of expressing a truth, not the truth in itself.

Dandelion argues that Liberal Quakers are defined by 'an absolute perhaps', by definite uncertainty which brings openness to light from other quarters and makes it impossible to say anything is true for all time, for everyone.

Not only can Friends be open to new ideas and new revelation, but now they should be. The possibility of seeking in multiple directions and subsequent pluralism and difference within the group has become a norm and a boundary.

This approach to theology leads to and undergirds interfaith engagement, in its emphasis on openness and difference over preservation of an established coherent belief. Similarly Gandhi's convictions that religion is inadequately expressed in human

²⁶⁰ CWMG Vol. 30 p287

terms - that Truth is one, but expressed in different ways - means it is vital to both Quaker and Gandhian spirituality to seek to understand others, to be open to different expressions and forms of the divine. This may be contrasted with the struggle of many Christian theologians of religion to reconcile the inclusion of all people with the fundamentals of their religion and sometimes opposition from the Church itself.²⁶¹

Quakers often talk of Light, Truth or the Spirit rather than God. This language reaches beyond the traditional Christian understanding of God to commonalities beyond the Christian faith. Use of Light and Truth can go beyond even a religious worldview. An important new area which has not as yet received serious scholarly attention is consideration of atheism in Quaker and Gandhian thought.

There has been debate over the past few years on the inclusion of atheists and non-theists in the Religious Society of Friends, with numerous articles and letters in *The Friend*.²⁶² There is no unanimous Quaker response. There are non-theist Quakers in membership of BYM, yet this causes uneasiness amongst some theist Quakers. After seeing an advertisement for 'The Non-theist Friends Network' David Heathfield wrote: 'we are a "religious society" and I cannot reconcile that with their being non-theists in membership'. He called for the establishment of minimum criteria for membership.²⁶³

²⁶¹ One aspect of the Christian teachings where this conflict arises is explored by numerous Christian contributors in Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes (eds.) *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997. Race reports how both Stanley Samartha and Ignatius Hiradayum 'describe the growth of tension between the search for theological permission for dialogue and the experiential fruits of the dialogical encounter itself.' *Interfaith Encounter* p90

²⁶² *The Friend* is the weekly newsletter of Quakers in Britain

²⁶³ *The Friend* 27 May 2011 p9

This prompted diverse responses over the following weeks, with letters published each week from 3rd June to 15th July 2011.

Many wonder why atheists, humanists and non-theists would want to become members of a religious society, question how far they understand the Quaker way and whether they 'fully accept the nature of a Quaker Meeting for Worship [and also Meetings for Business] and the right manner of its holding'.²⁶⁴ Sarah Fox asks 'As a Society are we so desperate to be inclusive that we do not dare to draw a line?'²⁶⁵ and John Ward makes a similar point about being too keen to accept new members, he is concerned that non-theists define and therefore fix themselves in a limitation to beliefs which means, like a rigid theist, they are not open to new light.²⁶⁶

Many others, both theist and non-theist emphasise the Quaker insight that we cannot express accurately in words spiritual experiences and truths. They emphasise the diversity and openness of Quaker thought and belief, stressing that Quakerism is essentially about experience and action; who we are, not what we believe. Amongst these responses are individuals who investigate what God means to different people and feel that the reality theist and non-theist Friends seek to express is not so different.²⁶⁷ Leslie Stevenson picks up on the use of Light and Truth in the non-theist debate saying

²⁶⁴ Peter Leeming *The Friend* 1 July 2011 p9

²⁶⁵ *The Friend* 3 June 2011 p14

²⁶⁶ John Ward *The Friend* 10 June 2011 p14

²⁶⁷ Roger Beardsmore *The Friend* 10 June 2011 p14

Some of us prefer to talk of 'Light' with a capital L, or 'Spirit' with a capital S, or perhaps 'Truth' with a capital T. I suggest it may be an instructive verbal experiment to ask ourselves if anything is lost or gained if we replace those nouns with 'God' with a capital G...It seems to me that the overall meaning is very much the same, that we have alternative vocabularies for the spiritual journey.

A different response comes from those wondering what non-theism on the one hand and God on the other actually mean. Some Quakers are unaware of the subtle difference between atheism and non-theism which may be at the root of the discomfort Quakers such as David Heathfield find. Contributions from non-theists draw attention to long established religions without God (for instance Buddhism and Confucianism) and the powerful spiritual lives of non-theists.²⁶⁸ Where Gora was unhappy with Gandhi's use of 'Truth' which eventually leads back to the same thing as God, a power beyond the human, we find a very different attitude among Quaker non-theists who acknowledge a spiritual journey, a sense of the numinous and even experience of God and the transcendent. David Parlett's succinct contribution demonstrates this

I am a non-theist. I do not believe in the existence of God, which is an intellectual construct, because no one has satisfactorily demonstrated it to my intellect. What I do believe in is the presence of God, because I encounter it regularly in Meetings for Worship. And this I know experimentally.²⁶⁹

One imagines these Quaker non-theists would find Gandhi's solution 'Truth is God' satisfying and illuminating.

²⁶⁸ See for instances the letters of Paul Kingston and Muriel Seltman *The Friend* 10 June 2011 p14-15

²⁶⁹ David Parlett, *The Friend* 8 July 2011 p8

Dorothy Searle takes up the debate in 'What do non-theists not believe in?' ²⁷⁰

She is understanding of difficulties with the word God, and opts to use 'Reality' as an alternative, suggesting that 'what nontheists reject is a particular image of that Reality, rather than the Reality itself'. In spite of this conciliatory approach she ends her article with a reference to nontheists 'seeking what they already sense is there'. This caused difficulty for an atheist Quaker who is disheartened when theists presume

To understand the experiences of non-theists or atheists such as myself, to view it as something contained within, a sub-part of, their own experience, always characterised as an absence, a seeking. ²⁷¹

Yet he appreciates Searle's acknowledgement that atheists have access to the same experiences of the transcendent but characterise it differently. Once again more letters, predominantly from non-theist Friends, appeared emphasising their commitment to the Quaker way. Two responses which stand out are from Ron Hillier, who does not like to define himself as theist or nontheist, seeing himself as simply Quaker – a category which goes beyond these distinctions and Janet Quilley's wise advice

Whether we speak the language of nontheists or talk comfortably about the Trinity and the virgin birth, our Quaker way is to seek to understand the aspects of Truth that others have discovered in their own experience – never to dismiss one or other as of no consequence. ²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Dorothy Searle 'What do non-theists not believe in?' *The Friend* 2 September 2011 p14

²⁷¹ Christopher Tedd, *The Friend* 9 September 2011 p9

²⁷² Janet Quilley *The Friend* 16 September 2011 p13

Exploring these areas we see how varied contemporary British Quakers are, yet still with a common sense of belonging, values and vision. The experience of diversity within Quakerism itself gives a solid foundation and insights for interfaith understanding, which is not only an exigency in modern multi-faith Britain but the essence of the Quaker way itself. There is no single view point, nor even minimum criteria of belief for membership. The letters, whilst expressing some discomfort among theistic Friends, point clearly to the vibrancy of nontheist and atheist Friends, their commitment to Quakers and to the fundamental feeling among both theists and nontheists that the Quaker way is to accept diversity always seeking to learn from the experience - in the language of Fox to 'know experimentally' and of Gandhi's 'Experiments with Truth'.²⁷³

Gandhian *Ahimsa* and Quaker Pacifism

Gandhi's non-violent resistance originates in his understanding and application of *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* however, is a much wider concept than non-violent resistance, affecting everyday choices and behaviour, extending to all beings, not just humans. Gandhi called himself a *sanatani* Hindu, yet his understanding of *ahimsa* owes more to *sramanic* traditions

Gandhi's idea of *ahimsa* was not based on the Vedic concept of *ahimsa*. He ruled out all exceptions in the application of *ahimsa*. He derived his *ahimsa* from the

²⁷³ Chatterjee in 'Gandhi and Fox' reminds us that at the time Fox's phrase would have meant 'experientially' p9

ascetic sources, and it was this ascetic or sramanic concept which he applied, for the first time, to politics and economics.²⁷⁴

It may be illuminating, when speaking of Gandhi's ahimsa, to regard him more as a Jain than a Hindu – yet so powerful has his example and teaching been that he has altered and raised the view of *ahimsa* amongst Hindus themselves.

Quakers since 1660 have held to a peace testimony, and this has been a consistent witness through to the present day. This commitment to peace is the Quakers' most widely known feature and in 1947 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Friends Service Council and American Friends Service Committee.²⁷⁵ The Quaker peace testimony was first derived from the teaching and life of Christ, and has since been reinforced and understood in humanistic as well as religious terms.²⁷⁶

The connection on peace issues is natural, with Quakers a famous and effective pacifist tradition and Gandhi one of the most effective and well-known proponents of non-violence in the modern era. Yet, Gandhi's non-violence was not that of a full-fledged pacifist. In some ways he goes further - invoking justice, conscious of the violence of oppression to people as an equal problem to that of war and outward violence, and extending beyond human relations to all living beings and peace with the environment. Yet he also supported military action in certain cases.

²⁷⁴ Unto Tähtinen *Non-violence in Indian Tradition*, London: Rider 1976 p121: Throughout the book Tähtinen distinguishes between the ascetic and Vedic conceptions of ahimsa

²⁷⁵ www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1947/ accessed 22nd Nov 2011

²⁷⁶ For the origins and early rationale behind the Quaker peace testimony deriving from Christ's teachings see Brock's chapter 'The Crystallisation of Quaker Pacifism' in his *Peace Testimony* pp.24-31

It is interesting to see the similarity in the way two traditions are interpreted, with nascent ideas of pacifism and *ahimsa* in both Christianity and Hinduism, which have not been explored to such depths or put into action so thoroughly by the mainstream. For Quakers the origins of the peace testimony can be found in Christ's peaceful teaching and example; for Gandhi in the Hindu (and also Jain and Buddhist) teaching of *ahimsa*. For both it can be seen as the implication of the parallel teaching among Quakers "to answer that of God in everyone", and of the *atman* in Indian tradition. These interpretations were reached independently. Gandhi's strict non-violence was long established and the peace testimony central to Quakers before Gandhi met and formed deep personal friendships with Quakers.

The example of Christ's self-suffering is a source of inspiration for both Gandhi and for Quakers. Jack Hoyland, a Quaker who knew Gandhi, triumphantly regards *satyagraha* as achieving

the setting up once more upon earth of the Eternal Cross, the bringing of Christ's method and Christ's mind into direct and victorious contact with modern imperial and national problems, on a scale of operation involving populations which number in all one-quarter of the human race.²⁷⁷

Rynne makes Jesus' importance for *satyagraha* clear,

²⁷⁷ John Hoyland *The Cross Moves East* p156. John was commonly known as Jack. It is incredible how triumphal this announcement is, given that the book was published in 1931, it thus followed the enormous publicity of the Salt Satyagraha, yet preceded the ousting of British rule from India.

ahimsa was a cardinal virtue of Hinduism through the centuries. Gandhi, under the influence especially of Tolstoy and the Sermon on the Mount, made it the centrepiece of his thought and praxis and a *sine qua non* of the pursuit of human liberation.²⁷⁸

Horace Alexander notes that Gandhi said to Rev. Doke that he first found his inspiration for non-violent action in the New Testament. Yet, Horace does not turn this into an opportunity subtly to glorify and lift up Christianity, although Gandhi first came across this principle in the New Testament, he found it in the Bhagavad Gita later, which was his greatest inspiration, and acknowledges the teaching which had already come to him through his Hindu upbringing.

Nevertheless, it is clear that, when he found the teaching of returning good for evil in the Sermon on the Mount, his mind was ready for it; even in his childhood, he had been impressed by a Gujarati poem which taught that real beauty consists in doing good against evil.²⁷⁹

The poem referred to is Shamal Bhatt's which contains the stanza,

But the truly noble know all men as one,
and return with gladness good for evil done²⁸⁰

One should add the influence of Jain values, giving appropriate reverence to Gandhi's mentor Raychandbhai whose influence he ranks alongside Tolstoy and Ruskin.²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ Rynne *Gandhi and Jesus* p53

²⁷⁹ Alexander *Western Eyes* p12

²⁸⁰ Chatterjee *Religious Thought* p61

Gandhi's support for war

The different reactions of Gandhi and Quakers to the First World War, present a challenge. Whilst many Quakers in Britain were conscientious objectors, Gandhi was encouraging Indians to recruit and serve in the British army. Although already convinced of the value of *ahimsa* in political as well as personal action - having developed and led his famous *satyagraha* in South Africa - during the First World War Gandhi felt a sense of loyalty to the British, and believed if India wished to accept the benefits of British rule it must support Britain in her time of need.²⁸² Such ideas of loyalty to the Crown had not led to similar feeling among early Quakers, who would render taxes and other forms of loyalty and support, but conscientiously objected to militia service, provision of replacements or paying fines incurred, preferring instead to go to jail. Their loyalties were clearly divided. They distanced themselves from all preparations for war, even defensive warfare. Their Christian conscience meant they must have nothing to do with carnal weapons and killing, but would happily co-operate with government and 'render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's' and were eager to be seen as loyal citizens. For Quakers loyalty to the nation and loyalty to Christ's non-violent teaching were felt simultaneously, conversely Gandhi found it necessary to help in the nation's war efforts.

Gandhi still believed in the justice of the British Empire and trusted Britain could be called on to redress the wrongs against India, and that loyalty and sacrifice of Indians would further the cause of Indian independence. Loyalty, possibly as a political

²⁸¹ Gandhi *An Autobiography* (Dover) pp.75-77

²⁸² Brown *Gandhi* p96ff.

manoeuvre, combined with his conviction that bravery was a prerequisite to non-violence, led to his recruitment campaign. In previous British wars in South Africa, Gandhi had served in a non-violent way, forming the Indian Ambulance Corp, although conscious of the compromise involved.²⁸³ When Horace Alexander comes to the Boer War in his biography of Gandhi, he simply and uncritically states Gandhi's point of view - justification in terms of loyalty to the British for offering service as an ambulance unit.²⁸⁴ It seems surprising that Horace deals with this so briefly, without sharing his own opinion or the similar dilemmas he faced in the First World War. He had conscientiously objected, written articles about war and peace and redoubled his internationalist efforts.²⁸⁵ After conscription, Horace was exempted from fighting to work as a school teacher –however, 'Looking back on the experience in his old age, he wasn't sure that he ought not to have insisted on absolute exemption'.²⁸⁶ Given his own searching and anguish Horace seems surprisingly undisturbed by Gandhi's ambulance service in the Boer war (and also the Zulu Rebellion) observing

Already he was what in the West would be called a pacifist by conviction; so the only help he could offer in wartime was through ambulance work. The Indians showed themselves well disciplined and courageous under fire, and Gandhi received a decoration for valour.²⁸⁷

²⁸³ Gandhi *Autobiography* Dover pp.188-9 (Boer War); 278-280 (Zulu Rebellion) and p310-311 (WW1)

²⁸⁴ Alexander *Western Eyes* p10

²⁸⁵ Geoffrey Carnall, *Gandhi's Interpreter; a life of Horace Alexander* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010 pp.23-31

²⁸⁶ Carnall *Gandhi's Interpreter* p30

²⁸⁷ Horace Alexander, *Gandhi Remembered* [Pendle Hill Pamphlet 165] Lebanon, Pennsylvania: Sowers Printing Company, 1969 p8

Similarly regarding the First World War Horace is happy to take on board Gandhi's loyalty to the British in this period and his unwillingness to exploit the situation

So, while the war lasted, although he was prepared to act on behalf of the harassed villagers in Bihar or Gujerat, he accepted the British Government and proved his good faith by undertaking a recruiting campaign in the very area where he had helped the peasants to defy the government tax assessment.²⁸⁸

This recruitment provokes no criticism of his pacifism from Alexander.

The service Gandhi offered and elicited from others has not adversely affected the Quaker view of Gandhi, his example in non-violence remains strong, even if there are areas that could be problematised. To understand this it is important to remember that although the Society as a whole was committed to 'bear witness to the Peace Testimony, prepare for post-war reconstruction, and help relieve suffering', some individual Quakers did voluntarily sign up and serve in the First World War, most would have seen close friends and family serve and often die in the military.²⁸⁹ Brock has said that 'During the half-century or so before the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 neither British nor American Quakers displayed a consistently vigorous peace witness.'²⁹⁰ And Kennedy argues that it was only during the inter-war period that the centrality of the peace testimony was firmly established.²⁹¹ Whilst Brock's work questions this to some extent,

²⁸⁸ Alexander *Western Eyes* p35

²⁸⁹ Carnall *Gandhi's Interpreter* p28

²⁹⁰ Brock *Peace Testimony* p290

²⁹¹ Kennedy *Why Did Friends Resist?*

The renewal of Quaker pacifism in Britain and the United States found its *dénouement* during and after World War I. Those Friends who most effectively shaped the Society's response to that conflict had received their peace training in, or their pacifist inspiration from, the decades that preceded 1914.²⁹²

Both are agreed that it is post 1918 that the peace witness has been vital making 'pacifism and Quakerism almost synonymous terms with so many outside the Society (which of course they are not).'²⁹³ So although Quakers had an active peace testimony they were not immune from the ambiguities of war.

However, Quakers were shocked by Gandhi's support for war when the Indian army sent troops to Kashmir after the Prince responded to a raid by declaring Kashmir part of the Indian Union and calling for help.²⁹⁴ Press reports of Gandhi's support for this alarmed his friends in the West, who knew him as an apostle of non-violence

So I [Horace] went to see Gandhi about it. He assured me that he had not been misreported. Of course, he would have been happy if the people of Kashmir had the courage and discipline to meet the raiders unarmed...But he knew that they were not ready for this difficult venture.²⁹⁵

Awareness of such instances of Gandhi prioritising courage over pacifism and concessions from his own ideal of courageous non-violent resistance to armed conflict shocked and troubled his pacifist Friends, but has not unduly tainted their regard for him.

²⁹² Brock *Peace Testimony* p298

²⁹³ Brock *Peace Testimony* p298

²⁹⁴ See CWMG Vol. 90 p267 and pp.356-7

²⁹⁵ Alexander *Western Eyes* p169

Even when Gandhi did give limited support for war, he did not seek to justify this but acknowledged it as *himsa*, aware of the impossibility and complexity of maintaining perfect *ahimsa*, yet still striving for it. This is closer to the Buddhist and Jain concepts of *ahimsa* and a profound truth. This notion of the impossibility of complete non-violence combined with the need to strive for it is expressed by Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh.

It is very difficult to say that someone is nonviolent or violent. We can only say that a person is more or less nonviolent at a particular time. When I drink tea I know that it is not entirely nonviolent, because in the cup there are many tiny living beings...That is why people with love, compassion and nonviolence should be everywhere, even in the Pentagon, in order to encourage nonviolent attitudes within those we think are our enemies.²⁹⁶

This sense of the complexity of nonviolence and the willingness to recognise it in ourselves is intimately connected to Gandhi's willingness to reach out to opponents in *satyagraha*. Facing the truth of violence is identified by Mehta as his most significant thought – his unwillingness to enter into the 'common logic' of justifying war as necessary, the lesser of two evils, or for the maintenance of peace, but always seeing its violent character.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh 'Please Call me by my True Names' in Fred Eppsteiner (ed.) *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism* Berkely: Parallax Press 1988 p38

²⁹⁷ Uday Singh Mehta 'Gandhi and the Common Logic of War and Peace' *Raritan*, vol. 30 no. 1 Summer 2010 pp.134-156

Gandhi is so strongly associated with peace and in the arena of non-violent resistance shows such an outstanding example that many Quakers are happy to overlook his limited support for the military at times, focussing instead on his important example. It is also possible that the strong parallels between the experiences of Quakers conscientiously objecting and Gandhi's *satyagraha* movements, and the Friends Ambulance Unit and Gandhi's Indian Ambulance Corp form a place of experiential contact and sympathy. In both cases we see the struggles of loyalty and pacifism. The knowledge that to serve, even in an ambulance service, is to abet challenged both. Some pacifists resisted further, refusing even this, and were sent to jail for their non-co-operation.²⁹⁸ Both experiences resonate with Gandhi and his movement, those serving non-violently and bravely as ambulance services and those refusing to co-operate with a regime that contravenes morality, and serving jail sentences.

Different emphases and methods

Marjorie Sykes draws out another difference:

In a sense the Westerners said "This is a thing that has got to be stood out against, got to be fought with all our strength. We will not have anything to do with it." India felt that warfare is a symptom of a much deeper disease and ... an expression of a society which is basically violent in its social and economic dimensions and is accepting of a way of life which is injurious to others. Therefore most of Gandhi's teachings more or less ignored the symptom of what to do when war breaks out and concentrated almost wholly on how to achieve a society in which armed conflict would not happen...²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ For instance John Rickman - Carnall *Gandhi's Interpreter* p26

²⁹⁹ Sykes *Transcending Tradition* p34-5

This is difference in emphasis, rather than a complete differentiation between two conceptions of violence and its solution. Marjorie observes that Gandhi's complete faith was in human love, unprotected and vulnerable to meet face to face, and then proceeds with conclusions which absorb his ideas, presenting them to Quakers: 'It is a question of using all our powers, of mind and spirit, and all our compassion to give us the connection which will show us how we too may become channels of the energy which inspired him.'³⁰⁰ In spite of drawing out this difference, she is aware of Quaker contributions to peace which look at root causes.

Constructive effort has been stressed from the beginning...Sensitive and prophetic spirits, like John Woolman in America in the eighteenth century, saw that the phenomenon of physical war could not be isolated from the other evils of a society based on violence...³⁰¹

This differentiation has also been noted by the *Sarvodaya* movement

While the peace movement of the West is mainly concerned with conflicts arising out of aggression or war-situations, the Indian peace movement is concerned with the conflicts arising out of injustice or exploitation. Both are complementary to each other in the great search for world peace. Neither is complete without the other.³⁰²

³⁰⁰ Sykes *Transcending Tradition* p35

³⁰¹ Sykes *Transcending Tradition* p39

³⁰² Narayan Desai *Towards a Nonviolent Revolution* Varanasi: Sarva Seva Sangh Prakash, 1972 p11

Contemporary connections of Quaker Peace and Social Witness (QPSW) with India display this more balanced approach. Whilst the Nagaland peace work focuses on conflict resolution, others such as QPSW's support for Ekta Parishad, a Gandhian movement demanding land-rights for the excluded and marginalised in India using the *pad-yatra* and *satyagraha*, exemplify the non-violence of Gandhi with its focus on injustice.³⁰³ Another example is Quaker support for the Gandhi Peace Foundation, which again is primarily concerned with justice and poverty rather than violence and aggression of war.³⁰⁴

Expanding on these differences in emphasis and method Quakers have been leaders in conflict resolution. Gandhi, on the other hand, created conflict (in the sense of raising issues of injustice, issues of conflict between Indians and the Empire, which remained dormant, with Indians accepting their oppression) and developed a method to conduct such conflict in a non-violent manner. This bears on the often blurred distinction between conflict and violence. We can see these roles played out in the Indian Independence movement. As peace-makers, the India Conciliation Group, dominated by Quakers, acted as mediators between Gandhi and the Independence movement on the one hand and the British Empire on the other.³⁰⁵ At the same time Gandhi was leading Indians into this conflict, to demand their sovereignty, in a non-violent manner. This led to disagreement on appropriate action - as mediators and British citizens, his Quaker allies would attempt to dissuade him from non-co-operation, believing in the possibilities

³⁰³ See <http://www.ektaparishad.com/> accessed 04/09/2012

³⁰⁴ I visited this institution, speaking with the Chair Radha Bhatt and other members and visitors who were staying there at the time in July 2010

³⁰⁵ Bawa *Quakers and Gandhi* pp.18-21

of open communication, when Gandhi felt this was not working and he must embark on more dramatic action.

Elements of mediation and challenge are found in both - it is a question of emphasis. Bondurant's consideration of *satyagraha* and the sense of the meeting, draws out the way *satyagraha* strives for satisfactory resolution of differences without recourse to non-co-operation and dramatisation of conflict, in order to resist oppression and injustice.³⁰⁶ Likewise Quaker work, whilst responsive to conflict in mediation, peacemaking and conflict resolution, also addresses issues of oppression, poverty and human rights, the underlying causes of conflict which Marjorie Sykes identifies as the realm at which Gandhi and his followers addressed the issue.

Another factor is that between the public and the individual. Gandhi was a leader of a mass movement dedicated to non-violence. Thus Gandhi was not only acting as an individual, but had to be sensitive to the masses and the Congress, with the advantages and constraints this brought. Quakers have however acted largely as individuals rather than a movement and contrary to Gandhi's highly political endeavour, are considered quietists. These differences between private opposition to war and refusal to fight and waging a public non-violent conflict in *satyagraha* give rise to the Statesman's criticism of Gandhi's non-co-operation in war time. Amidst vehement criticism the article says

³⁰⁶ Joan Bondurant *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian philosophy of conflict* [revised edition] London: University of California Press 1971 pp.222-224

We have no quarrel with the Quaker or with any other quietist. He acts according to his conscience, but he seeks no converts, interferes with no one, and does positive good work in war time refusing true help and sympathy to no man whatever his nationality. But the man who preaches non-resistance and surrender in war time, whatever his motives, is weakening a nation's will to survive and is helping to destroy it and to deliver it to the enemy.³⁰⁷

The article whilst criticising both pacifists and *satyagrahis* for undermining the war effort brings out the difference. Quietists are seen as relatively harmless in their privatised refusal to fight, yet they are criticised for lack of courage to go to prison. On the other hand, 'the non-co-operator has a better case. He was at war against the Government of India and he did go to prison, but he spoilt his case by pretending to be a pacifist.' It continues in this vein attacking Congress for hypocrisy and claiming spiritual and moral integrity. Gandhi rebukes this

I claim that there is nothing immoral in non-violent non-co-operation. Violent resistance is itself non-co-operation, and it is immoral because of its violence. It becomes moral when it is non-violent. Non-co-operation with evil is a sacred duty. It is essentially spiritual because of its non-violent character.³⁰⁸

Comparing Gandhi's method and example with Quakers highlights different ways pacifism or non-violence may be employed. These are complementary rather than contradictory. Gandhi's example of challenging oppression in a non-violent manner is an inspiration and source of learning for Quakers. It shows a way to bring non-violent action

³⁰⁷ The Statesman 17/09/1940 in CWMG Vol. 79, Appendix 7 (Gandhiserve)

³⁰⁸ 'Some Criticism Answered' Harijan 29/09/1940 in CWMG Vol. 79 p258 (Gandhiserve)

out from a matter of the individual conscience into the wider, political world. Few Quakers would agree with the Statesman that Gandhi was 'pretending to be pacifist', although as Geoffrey Carnall explores, whilst Horace Alexander and others such as the India Conciliation Group supported Gandhi and the Nationalist movement this view 'did not instantly appeal to many Quakers'.³⁰⁹ When Tagore spoke at London Yearly Meeting in favour of independence whilst Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha was in full swing

Jack Hoyland was quick to underline Tagore's message by comparing the struggle for Indian freedom to the campaigns against slavery, and urging Yearly Meeting to pass Tagore's message on to the Labour Party. But this was far from the feeling of some of those present.³¹⁰

John William Graham, Quaker and father-in-law of Horace Alexander, is an example.

He felt that the masses of India

...were difficult and childish. To leave India now would be to enslave it the more, because of its many hostile divisions. What Tagore and Andrews should be doing ('Horace too', one imagines him thinking) is getting Gandhi to stop his rebellion.

In today's Quaker responses to Gandhi we see appreciation of his non-violence dominating. Eleanor Nesbitt found that non-violence is central in the lives of Quaker scholars of Indian religions. For Rex Ambler, Owen Cole and John Hick '...it was conflict,

³⁰⁹ Carnall *Gandhi's Interpreter* p81

³¹⁰ Carnall *Gandhi's Interpreter* p85

and non-violent alternatives to it, that introduced (or strengthened) a Quaker element in their life stories.’³¹¹ Another similarity has already been touched on, religion as the totality of life, non-violence is not confined to the sphere of action. It encompasses thought, word and deed. This is common to both Quakers’ and Gandhi’s conception.

Ahimsa, peace and the place of non-human animals

Ahimsa is applied to all living beings, not confined to the human world. Thus we find Gandhi’s strict vegetarianism, avoidance of the milk of cows and buffalo, opposition to vivisection and animal sacrifice and *ashram* dilemmas such how to deal with monkeys interfering with agriculture and euthanasia of a sick calf.³¹² This wider conception is to be expected given his Indian context, and is missed in Quaker interpretations of pacifism. This area is particularly important to explore when we consider the words of Jeremy Holtom: ‘Much of the distance between Gandhi and Christianity resulted from what he felt was the limitation of its compassionate ideal to the human species, a limitation he did not see in the eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism.’³¹³ On the whole Quakerism does not extend the same value to non-human life, though individual Quakers may well do, and see this as part of their religion. In spite of the distance between Quakers and Gandhi and between Christianity and the Indic religions here, Quakers have reconsidered the place of animals in moral philosophy more readily than other Christian

³¹¹ Eleanor Nesbitt ‘Interrogating the experience of Quaker scholars in Hindu and Sikh studies: spiritual journeying and academic engagement’ *Quaker Studies* vol. 14 no.2 2010 pp.134-158 (p142)

³¹² M K Gandhi *An Autobiography* (Dover) pp.50-52; 208; 240; 288-290 and *Ashram Observances in Action* (tr. Valji Govindji Desai) Navajivan: Ahmedabad 1955 pp.20-22

³¹³ Jeremy Holtom ‘Gandhi’s interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount’ p543 in Michael Lieb et al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, Oxford: OUP 2011 pp.542-556

denominations which inherited the scholastic and dualistic disregard for animals of Western philosophy and theology. 'The Quaker tradition, freed from scholastic influence, was one of the first [Christian] bodies to register concern for animals.'³¹⁴

Non-violence - Extending the Concept to Animals was the theme for a conference held at Woodbrooke by Quaker Concern for Animals in 1984. This conference considered and made resolutions regarding issues of animal welfare/rights from farming and laboratory animals to wild animals and pets. Most interesting in comparison with Gandhi is the section 'Campaigning for Animal Rights' which looks at the troubled place of animal rights campaigning: the public at large, and vested interests particularly, feel threatened by the prospect of losing their long established positions which depend on the exploitation of other species; against this, animal rights activists feel angry and aggressively challenge the established ways; which in turn 'vents itself on them'. The section concludes

Against this troubled background the group on campaigning met. The dangers of taking part in demonstrations based on hatred and persecution of individuals were pointed out. As Quakers, what should we be doing on behalf of the animals? Do we shelter behind the peace testimony or do we use it positively?³¹⁵

³¹⁴ Andrew Linzey *The status of Animals in the Christian Tradition* Birmingham: Woodbrooke College 1985 p24

³¹⁵ *Regarding Animals: Some Quakers consider our treatment of animals in the modern world* Essex: Quaker Concern for Animal Welfare 1985 p3

Gandhi trod a similar middle path on issues of animal abuse in India. In the context of the emotive use of cow-slaughter to incite hatred and violence against Muslims, Gandhi returns to the root of *ahimsa*. He neither allows anger and the self-righteousness of the orthodox to touch him nor forgets the importance of *ahimsa* and animal suffering in the face of communal tension. In fact animal suffering is the central point:

Cow-protection societies must turn their attention [from cow-slaughter] to the feeding of cattle, prevention of cruelty, preservation of the fast-disappearing pasture land, improving the breed of cattle, buying from poor shepherds and turning pinjrapoles [institutions for aged cattle] into model, self-supporting dairies. Hindus do sin against God and man when they omit to do any of the things I have described above. They commit no sin, if they cannot prevent cow-slaughter at the hands of Musalmans; they do sin grievously when, in order to save the cow, they quarrel with the Musalmans³¹⁶

An interesting statement in the light of facile arguments which oppose animal and human interests (such as in debates on animals for medical research) is this: 'I would not kill a human being for protecting a cow, as I will not kill a cow for saving a human life, be it ever so precious ...'³¹⁷ A truth Gandhi lived by as well as preaching.

The cow-protection of Gandhi's conception means the protection of all life, of *ahimsa*, and the unity of all the earth. It is the dearest fact of Hinduism.³¹⁸ Yet his method

³¹⁶ M K Gandhi *Communal Harmony* pp.102-3

³¹⁷ M K Gandhi *Communal Harmony* p95

³¹⁸ In light of this it is surprising that Leela Gandhi's chapter '*Ahimsa* and other animals: the genealogy of an immature politics' in Debjani Ganguly and John Docker (eds.) *Rethinking Gandhi and Non-violent*

is one of persuasion, example and self-improvement. It is truly peaceful and transcends moral philosophy's conundrums and oppositions of duty in simple, powerful action. This strikes a chord with the Quaker movement for animals in particular John Woolman, who 'had ideas so far ahead of his time that we still have not caught up with them.'³¹⁹ The methods of Woolman were gentle resistance, such as paying slaves for the work they did when he visited the houses of slave owning Friends, to walk rather than see the exploitation of boys or horses pulling the post-chaise. His compassion challenged the slavery of his day and extended to concern for animals and the soil. Bowman finds inspiration and resources in Woolman's example for today's Quakers to address the status quo exploitation of animals. She draws Quaker attention to animal suffering and to the principles of peace in opposing this.

Gandhi's example is similarly important for Hindus and others today. Woolman's concern for the soil and its inheritance for future generations echoes Gandhi's 'the Earth produces enough for every man's need but not for every man's greed'. Reginald Reynolds, who emphasised Woolman's way of taking on himself societies' guilt and addressing injustice without condemnation but through gentle persuasion, was a Quaker friend of Gandhi.³²⁰

Relationality Abingdon: Routledge 2007 pp.17-37 concentrates on the political influence of end of the century vegetarianism's other concerns such as anti-colonialism and openness to foreigners for Gandhi. In doing so it does not consider in any detail the import of the value of ahimsa for animals as a topic worthy of consideration in itself, but only how this influenced his political progression.

³¹⁹ Joanna Bower 'John Woolman and his Relevance Today' speech to AGM of Quaker Concern for Animal Welfare, May 12th 1973 (copies available from Quaker Concern for Animal Welfare)

³²⁰ John Woolman, *The Wisdom of John Woolman: with a selection from his writings*, compiled and edited by Reginald Reynolds, London: Quaker Home Service, 1988

The growing environmental movement suggests potential for widening the sphere of interest and moral concern beyond human beings. It gives a value to the non-human, yet this may be for the sake of humans, given the effects of environmental devastation, or give value to nature, rivers, forests and mountains, as the Gaia principle suggests.³²¹

Ahimsa recognises in animals the same spirit and value as in humans, it is not concerned with human suffering alone. *Atman* is not seen as confined to humans as the soul traditionally has been in Christian and Western traditions.³²² Furthermore, as Gandhi emphasised, it is the duty of more intelligent beings to protect the weaker, not to exploit them. There is a basis in harm. In the West, as books such as Peter Singer's acclaimed *Animal Liberation* highlight, the sentience of animals has been overlooked, if not flatly denied, as has the corresponding duty of welfare.³²³ Whilst Quakers are prominent in peace movements such as anti-nuclear campaigns, challenging and addressing unjust structures causing human suffering and poverty, the Quaker presence is not felt in the animal rights or welfare movements in the same way, though individuals tend to be sympathetic. This broader view that *ahimsa*, as opposed to pacifism brings, would be a valuable addition to Quaker values and actions to address injustice and suffering in the world.

Amidst resonance between Gandhi's *ahimsa* and the Quaker peace testimony, Gandhi's thought raises the question and the challenge for Quakers of extending the

³²¹ James Lovelock *Gaia: A new look at life on Earth* Oxford: OUP 2000

³²² See Andrew Linzey *The status of Animals in the Christian Tradition* Birmingham: Woodbrooke College, 1985 pp.15-6 for the synthesis of Greek and Christian thought which lead to the emphasis on rationality and the soul as unique attributes of humankind. Linzey's books however challenge this view as unbiblical and contrary to the Christian message.

³²³ Peter Singer *Animal Liberation* New York: Ecco, 2002

concept of non-violence and peace to animals, as the biblical vision of Creation (in which humans may only eat plants), Isaiah's vision (Is. 11:6-7) and the ultimate teaching of love and care for the weak suggest.³²⁴ In this way the Indian tradition offers the Western a critical lens, to ask 'As Quakers, what should we be doing on behalf of the animals? Do we shelter behind the peace testimony or do we use it positively?'³²⁵

Conclusions

Quakers are on the margins of Christianity, and this marginality and difference particularly in the rejection of creedal conformity and elevation of individual conscience give the Quakers a greater level of interfaith freedom and encouragement for dialogue. They are free to follow the spirit of dialogue without being hampered by the theoretics.³²⁶ Through a united attitude of faith and action, a person's way of life is more important than professed belief. Their approach to religion although stemming from a very different source has much in common with Gandhi.

The Quakers combined the piety and personal discipline of Nonconformist evangelicalism with a theology of the spirit which had certain affinities with Hindu philosophy and a peace witness that was akin to *ahimsa*: it was a combination which Gandhi found compelling, and by 1930 it could be said that "both Gandhi and Tagore regard the Society of Friends as the nearest representation of what they themselves have read about the Christian life in the Gospels."³²⁷

³²⁴ See Andrew Linzey *Animal Theology* London: SCM 1994 who argues for concern for animals as a Christian duty, relating contemporary animal rights and welfare to the Biblical ideals and Christian practice.

³²⁵ *Regarding Animals* p3

³²⁶ *Race Interfaith Encounter* p99

³²⁷ Hunt *Gandhi and the Non-conformists* p19. The final quotation comes from Charlie Andrews, an Anglican friend of Gandhi – it is significant that such recognition of Gandhi's closeness to Quakerism comes from a non-Quaker, although one who was sympathetic and shared friendships with Horace Alexander and others.

The shared values, particularly commitment to peace, formed a solid ground for interfaith engagement leading to lasting and spiritually illuminating friendships. Although there are differences and tensions between Quaker and Gandhian interpretations of peace and its application, the fundamental shared commitment to a non-violent world is more important than these tensions. This chapter has considered the importance of pluralism and shared values in inter-religious encounter. The following chapter demonstrates friendship as a new model of inter-religious dialogue.

CHAPTER SIX

Horace Alexander and Marjorie Sykes: Gandhi's Quaker Friends

Inter-Religious Friendship as Dialogue

The previous chapter explored resonances in Quaker and Gandhian values and philosophy. This chapter takes a different style, presenting a narrative to demonstrate through two case studies inter-religious dialogue between Gandhi and Quakers as friendship. For Quakers, with no representative clergy or body, friendship is of particular import.

Do you work gladly with other religious groups in the pursuit of common goals? While remaining faithful to Quaker insights, try to enter imaginatively into the life and witness of other communities of faith, creating together the bonds of friendship.³²⁸

There are a variety of models of and meanings given to interfaith dialogue. Here, personal friendship among ordinary individuals takes on significance as an end in itself. In the colonial context this development of trust and friendship between Hindu and Christian is more demanding than in today's pluralistic societies. Alongside this personal affection and intimacy, many issues arise from education and ecology to Ambedkar, the two modes of dialogue are friendship and common ethical action.

³²⁸ *Advices and Queries* 1.02: 6 (Advices and Queries is a part of Quaker Faith and Practice the distinctive book of guidance of the Religious Society of Friends)

http://qfp.quakerweb.org.uk/pdf/QFP_Chapter_01.pdf accessed 26th September 2012

Amongst the friendships Gandhi established with Quakers, I focus on Marjorie Sykes and Horace Alexander. These contrasting but complementary figures enable me to unearth different and individual ways in which shared values and friendships took shape. Each Quaker had a significant relationship with Mahatma Gandhi. Primary sources are available for both in the form of several books and shorter pamphlets they authored, letters preserved in the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, and the Horace Alexander papers. Secondary material is available in the biography of Marjorie Sykes by Martha Dart and in Geoffrey Carnall's recent biography of Horace Alexander.³²⁹ Both biographers were Quakers who knew Horace and Marjorie respectively during their lifetimes. This gives enough depth to explore and analyse important dimensions of Quaker-Gandhi relationships. By choosing Horace and Marjorie I provide balance between genders, social and political work, and involvement within India and from England.

Marjorie went to work in a school in Tamil Nadu in 1928.³³⁰ She became naturalised to India, learning Tamil and Bengali, took on the social programme of Gandhi and invested herself in the problems of India at the grassroots level. Already an admirer of Gandhi, she met him in 1938, on her way to Santiniketan.³³¹ She wore *khadi* and comments how with her tanned skin, dark hair and fluent Tamil she was often mistaken

³²⁹ Martha Dart *Marjorie Sykes: Quaker-Gandhian* York: William Sessions, 1993 and Carnall *Gandhi's Interpreter*

³³⁰ Dart *Marjorie Sykes* p18

³³¹ Marjorie Sykes *The Story of Nai Talim: Fifty years of Education at Sevagram India* 1988, Chapter 1, final paragraph, online version: <http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/naitalimmarjoriesykes.htm> accessed 23rd Feb 2012

for an Indian. With Independence she officially became Indian - the thought of leaving had never occurred to her.³³² We see in Marjorie a co-worker or fellow traveller.

Horace Alexander was introduced to Gandhi by their mutual friend Charlie Andrews whilst in India in 1928.³³³ His engagement emphasises his Englishness: he was involved in mediation and political issues in which his status as a sympathetic Englishman, loyalty to his country and contacts with British politicians were important.³³⁴ A specialist in international relations it was here that his contribution stood out. We see Horace, in contrast to Marjorie, as a mediator and interpreter.

Each in their own way collaborated, shared ideas and was influenced by Gandhi – these each represent modes of inter-faith relations, but most important was the establishment of a personal friendship, which did not rely upon agreement, a common project, but simply the bond of two individuals. Through friendship a number of the other features of positive inter-faith theology and social work came into being.

Horace Alexander

Horace Alexander acted as a mediating figure representing Gandhi to the British, striving to keep alive a dialogue and sense of trust in the midst of non-co-operation. The factors I wish to draw out in this chapter are the importance of person-person relationships, maintaining individuality by questioning and challenging Gandhi and the uniting potential of religion. The importance of personal friendship and individuality are

³³² Dart *Marjorie Sykes* p53

³³³ Carnall *Gandhi's Interpreter* p79

³³⁴ Geoffrey Carnall 'Horace Alexander and Agatha Harrison as peacemakers: A contrast in style' Lecture at Friends' House, London, 23rd November 2010

explored in the affection of letters between the two, the conviction that individual British people may be trusted, and in their personalities and hobbies; bird watching, love of nature and delight in children. Challenge is considered in relation to Gandhi's declaration of non-co-operation at the outbreak of WW2, but is questioned by Horace's willingness to put to one side Ambedkar's critique. The uniting potential of religion is seen in the ability to form relations with British officials with faith, in Gandhi's prayer meetings, Quaker meetings at the Simla conference and in Horace's creation of the Fellowship of Friends of Truth.

Affection and Friendship in the Colonial Context

When Horace Alexander spent a week at Sabarmati Ashram in March 1928 he was immediately impressed by Gandhi's personal character.³³⁵ This friendship grew with Horace a significant ally forging links with the British administration and sympathisers. Horace is described by Gandhi as a 'friend of India' and likened to Charlie Andrews – when Gandhi asks for Horace's judgement "As a Christian" on one of the controversial experiments of his life, sharing a bed with Manu, 'I felt as if he was thinking of me as a substitute for his beloved Charlie Andrews'.³³⁶ And is described as 'one of the devoted English friends of India. He was introduced to India by C.F.Andrews whose place he, more or less, took in the affections of India.'³³⁷ Horace visited Gandhi in prison following the Salt Satyagraha with the leave of Lord Irwin who hoped to find some basis for improved

³³⁵ Horace Alexander *Gandhi Remembered* [Pendle Hill Pamphlet 165] Lebanon, Pennsylvania: Sowers Printing 1969 p3; Alexander *Indian Ferment* pp. 213-229

³³⁶ Alexander *Western Eyes* p142

³³⁷ The Horace G. Alexander Papers, (Friends House Library) Temp MSS 577 Box 38 Photocopy of 'Gandhi and Reverence for all faiths' from *Gandhi Marg* Vol. 1 No.1 Jan 1957

relations. Following this Gandhi came to Woodbrooke in 1931, when he was persuaded to attend the Round Table Conference, forging more Quaker links and finding allies among British Quakers. Gandhi 'had been looking forward to this visit ever since he came to England. It was not a matter of business; it was a pilgrimage of gratitude.'³³⁸ Firstly, Woodbrooke had spared their Professor, Horace Alexander, to go to India to study the situation whilst Gandhi and other nationalist leaders had been in jail (in 1930), and secondly, in gratitude of the personal sacrifice of Horace in leaving his ill wife, Olive.

There is affection in the correspondence with Gandhi in phrases such as 'My dear Horace' and 'I have your dear letter', questions and wishes for Alexander's wife, and the humour of 'My Dear Horace, Naughty of you to be ill. I must make a desperate effort to see you in your bed and make you laugh. Love Bapu'³³⁹ One of the most touching examples of this affection is seen in a typed letter from Gandhi ending 'Yours Sincerely', which Gandhi in his own hand crossed out to replace with 'our love to you and Olive, Bapu'.³⁴⁰

This affection and respect for Horace is expressed publicly when Gandhi refers to Horace's letter on the thorny subject of the Quit India resolution:

³³⁸ Ingeborg Olden 'Gandhi at Woodbrooke' in *Woodbrooke Log Book*, 17th October 1931

³³⁹ CWMG Vol.87 p397

³⁴⁰ Horace Alexander Papers, Temp MSS 577 Box 4 Letter 1418 from Gandhi to Horace Alexander, 5 Jan 1933

This is a letter from a well-known English friend, who is also one of the best English friends India has. It demands as gentle and genuine an answer as his letter is gentle and genuine.³⁴¹

When it comes to a difficulty and grievance the affection and personal friendship plays its most vital role – maintaining friendship amid discord. The unwillingness to allow conflicts of opinion to interfere with personal admiration, civility and affection is characteristic of Gandhi. For instance, Gandhi and Tagore would disagree and publicly attack one another, but sprinkle such disagreements with praise for the other's character and devotion to Truth, the nation and the world.³⁴²

More light-heartedly, there is a charm and humour in the way Horace records the challenges of Sabarmati and the indulgence shown to him.

The 4.15 a.m. event sounds rather alarming; but a bell is rung with such violence that no one can fail to wake; and there is nothing to prevent you from going back to bed and to sleep again from 5 till dawn, if you happen to be a Western dormouse like me.'³⁴³

Alexander also describes how he was given 'luxuries': a good room for guests, a proper bedstead and chairs (before they were required for Motilal Nehru's talk!)

³⁴¹ CWMG Vol. 83 pp.165-7 (Gandhiserve)

³⁴² T. S. Rukmani 'Tagore and Gandhi' in Coward *Indian Critiques* pp. 107-128

³⁴³ Alexander *Ferment* p214

Horace's emphasises in his biography the personability of Gandhi, considering Attenborough's film he counters critics of Ben Kingsley who say he did not capture Gandhi's charisma:

Did the true Gandhi have charisma? I rather think not. He allowed himself always to be on a level with the innumerable people he met. He never put on airs. There was no sense of being reminded: Don't forget that I am a Mahatma? On the contrary: Do please forget my Mahatma-ship. I am a plain human being, just as you are.

Mr. Gandhi was the easiest man in all the world to meet and to know. He was ready for a laugh at any time...³⁴⁴

Horace's final memories of Gandhi are of him playing with children.³⁴⁵ Horace's book 'Indian Ferment' is interspersed with evocative descriptions of nature, and he is well-known for bird watching. Gandhi too placed a great emphasis on nature, with daily walks, sleeping and holding prayer gatherings beneath the sky and his various lifestyle and health fads sought a return to nature. There would have been shared appreciation and connection with nature between these two men.

The final testimony to the depth of friendship is not from Gandhi, but his personal secretary Pyarelal, who in the week following the devastating assassination of their friend invites Horace as a member of Gandhi's family to Sevagram.

³⁴⁴ Alexander *Western Eyes* pxiv

³⁴⁵ Alexander *Western Eyes* p173

... it is proposed to hold a sort of domestic conference of members of Bapu's 'family' at Sevagram, as soon as possible after the 12th. I hope you and Amiya will be able to come...I entirely agree with you that all those who were privileged to belong to his 'Family' will need one another more than ever in the blank, unchartered future that lies ahead.³⁴⁶

Individuality as mediation

Perhaps the most significant factor in enabling positive interfaith relations is the ability to view others independently, as people, differentiated and personal, rather than as representatives of their group. I here differ from the conventional theologies and models of dialogue and their Western assumptions, with their emphasis that we must enter dialogue firmly committed and rooted in our own traditions. Cornille is an example of this approach, which shall be critiqued in the conclusion.³⁴⁷ I suggest we must enter as people with our own mix of allegiances, feelings and personality, primarily as oneself, not 'a Christian' or 'a Buddhist', ready to form long-lasting friendships and greet others as individuals. In which our dialogue may not be that of a Buddhist and a Christian, but simply of two friends, shaped and affected by our friendship.

Quakers as a non-creedal group, have this experience of individuality and difference within the Society. As we saw in the previous chapter within a single Meeting there are diverse beliefs and religious views. While the testimonies, way of worship/business meeting and so forth form a common core, individual differences remain. The Meeting itself provides a context for each to find, understand and pursue

³⁴⁶ Horace Alexander Papers, Temp MSS 577 Box 4 Letter 1447 from Pyarelal to Horace Alexander 7th Feb 1948

³⁴⁷ Cornille *Im-possibility* pp.59-94

their own truth, supported by others, but without the expectation that there is a single absolute truth. Similarly Gandhian thought emphasises following truth as it is revealed to the individual. There is the room for difference and appreciation of the individuality of others.

Gandhi displays this differentiation between the group and what it represents, and the individuals who form that group, with the British – whilst opposing the British as a colonising force, he cultivated friendships with individuals. *Hind Swaraj* is a rejection of Western civilisation but not British people. Horace observes

...he saw the whole British system as diabolical, though he was willing to believe that individual Viceroys or other officials could be approached as men who might to some extent redeem a Satanic system.³⁴⁸

With other members of the India Conciliation Group (ICG), Horace concentrated time and energy into cultivating trust - encouraging the links between individuals and the possibility of continued dialogue amidst distrust for the system. Alexander for instance 'particularly commended Lord Irwin, insisting that his unassuming Christian discipleship had made a deep impression in India.'³⁴⁹ This was done informally, outside political debates. During the 1945 Cabinet Mission in Simla, Horace Alexander and Agatha Harrison stayed in the Congress house, making up 'one-sixth of the Congress team,' they were well known to both Sir Stafford Cripps and Lord Pethick-Lawrence. Here they made representations and pleas for understanding as well as simply upholding and supporting

³⁴⁸ Alexander *Western Eyes* pp. 37-8

³⁴⁹ Carnall *Gandhi's Interpreter* p97

the fraught life of the Congress group.³⁵⁰ Hugh Tinker describes the work of the ICG as consistent with the values of conservative upper-class England.

They believed that in the sphere of public policy the indirect, personal approach brings bigger dividends than the direct, public confrontation. They held the faith that those who were directing public affairs were reasonable men, who could be influenced by a rational presentation of the case, if it were put informatively. They believed that when people differed this was usually because they did not understand each other's point of view; and so it was vital to open up channels of communication between people that mattered.³⁵¹

Horace's position as a mediator and someone trusted by Indian Nationalist leaders was important. Although Horace became aware how corrupt some British officials were, saying

When I first visited India in 1927, I was startled to find British officials who quite openly said "So long as we keep the Hindus and Muslims in conflict, our Government will not be in danger."³⁵²

He also felt despairing of Indians' distrust of the British.

During these last weeks I have suffered more and more from the sense that no Indian seems now to believe in the possibility that we British as a people can ever understand their needs or meet them with generous, humble sympathy. Again and again I have been pleading – wherever I dared to plead – for patience; urging them to try to believe, even in the face of all they see, that the light can come, even into our proud British hearts.³⁵³

³⁵⁰ Carnall *Gandhi's Interpreter* p198 – This episode is examined and the contribution analysed from pp.195-204

³⁵¹ Tinker 'The India Conciliation Group' p225

³⁵² Alexander *Western Eyes* p53

³⁵³ Alexander *Indian Ferment* p219

In this environment Horace trusted Gandhi would understand, and so he did, beginning a long lasting alliance. Although no great political breakthroughs were facilitated by this work, in the context of our discussion, interfaith engagement, it is significant, for the friendship with individuals amid difficulties and the effort, persistence and trust shown.³⁵⁴

Sensitive to the climate in India, Alexander and Richard Symonds met with Gandhi regarding the arrival of the Friends Ambulance Unit in 1942, just after the Quit India resolution, to help with relief work and training in the event of a Japanese bombing.³⁵⁵ They asked Gandhi about the propriety of the arrival of a group of English men and women when the British were being asked to withdraw. Gandhi's reply encourages them to continue, explaining they mean the withdrawal of British dominion, not of British people, willing to humbly serve and accept an equal position with Indians.³⁵⁶ He agrees with Nehru that as well as the obvious service rendered to the villages, famine relief and establishment of more stable post-independence economic position

...a body of people from the West serving the people here would act as an antidote to racial feeling which might otherwise oversweep the country in the first flush of freedom.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁴ This conclusion accords with Tinker's assessment that 'The main ICG contribution was to hold together the bonds of friendship between British liberals and progressives and the leaders of the Congress... India and Britain might have been in conflict, but Indians and British people had never abandoned the spirit of friendship. The ICG had always stood for friendship through good times and bad: Gandhi, Nehru – and many like them – never ceased to think of Britain as the country of Charlie Andrews, Agatha Harrison, Horace Alexander – and many like them.' Tinker 'The India Conciliation Group' p238

³⁵⁵ See Alexander *Quakerism and India* [Pendle Hill Pamphlet 31] Wallingford, PA : Pendle Hill 1945 pp. 14-24 for an account of the work of the FAU and AFSC in Bengal and surrounding areas in the period between 1942-1945

³⁵⁶ CWMG Vol.76 pp.244-5

³⁵⁷ Harijan 7th April 1946

Challenges and intellectual independence

Gandhi felt disappointment in the way many Indian followers idolised him, yet failed to follow his teachings. In the Quaker's we find the opposite, the freedom to correspond, discuss and debate as equals, questioning, critiquing and advising Gandhi, whilst simultaneously sharing ideals and putting these into practice. I argue that these relationships are extremely important ones, influencing and advancing the ideas and practices of both parties. Brown's biography is attentive to Gandhi's friendships and the loneliness and ageing he felt in late 1938, as close companions passed on and the political scene and values of his colleagues altered. She counts newer foreign friends such as Horace Alexander and Agatha Harrison among those who gave him some relief and the friendship of intellectual equals. 'But though they could provide sympathy and understanding, they were rarely present to provide the companionship of equals so sorely needed.'³⁵⁸

Alexander shared concern for the welfare and basic needs of India with Gandhi. He worked on issues such as opium use, famine and refugees both before meeting Gandhi and after his death. There is awareness and reference to Gandhi, but no reliance. His relationship with Gandhi was based on shared values not idolisation.³⁵⁹ There is a

³⁵⁸ Brown *Gandhi* p287

³⁵⁹ Horace calls on the Indian Government to honour savings of refugees made with post-offices which are now in Pakistan. He says India could afford to do this, suggesting it would be far better to have no new statue to Mahatma Gandhi or new State capitals until such savings were honoured. Horace Alexander *New Citizens of India* Oxford: Geoffrey Cumberledge 1951 pp.110-111; He also describes Thakkar Bapa, as a man

freedom to differ and express this frankly and openly, as we saw with Gora too. Gandhi clearly appreciates this saying 'Dear Horace, I love you all the more, if more were possible, for your frank letter.'³⁶⁰

This independence of thought is not necessarily complete, however. One aspect which questions it is Alexander's meeting with Dr Ambedkar around the time of the Poona Pact. Alexander rejected Ambedkar's view in favour of Gandhi's claim to represent the Untouchables. Saying Ambedkar was assumed to represent them, but outside a small area around Bombay they would almost certainly have nominated Gandhi 'who had been fighting for them against caste Hindus ever since his return from South Africa.'³⁶¹ Whilst he acknowledges Ambedkar as a 'remarkable man' it is surprising to see someone so willing to question Gandhi in other areas and with a concern for equality and oppression disregarding Ambedkar as seeking political power rather than taking on board his critique. The fact he met with Ambedkar at all shows a willingness to engage, but the outcome of the meeting begs the question of how far Alexander and other Quakers who admire Gandhi are closed to his critics.

It is perhaps especially curious as in spite of vehement disagreement Gandhi and Ambedkar were often admiring of one another, for instance in the Vaikam Satyagraha led by Gandhi in 1924 and the Chawdar Tank Satyagraha led by Ambedkar in 1927.³⁶²

Following the Second Round Table Conference and the Poona Pact, Gandhi and

whose fame 'in a truly civilised world...might well have outshone the fame of others, perhaps even of Gandhi himself.' Alexander *Western Eyes* p142

³⁶⁰ CWMG Vol.59 p81

³⁶¹ Alexander *Western Eyes* p73

³⁶² Harold Coward 'Gandhi and Ambedkar' p45

Ambedkar became more removed; the claims for representation had driven a wedge between them and the demands of each regarding how untouchability was to be removed became more extreme. Ambedkar advocated complete abandonment of Hinduism and Gandhi the service of Harijans by caste Hindus – an approach Ambedkar in his most concerted attack, ‘What Gandhi and the Congress have done to the Untouchables’ describes as ‘killing by kindness’.³⁶³ Yet by the 1940s, Gandhi had come round to Ambedkar’s more radical approach that caste must go and the Untouchables should participate in politics to secure their own uplift. Indeed Gandhi persuaded Nehru and Patel to include Ambedkar in India’s first cabinet, which cleared the way for Ambedkar’s drawing of the constitution which made untouchability illegal.³⁶⁴

Quaker scholar Eleanor Zelliot, who specialises in Dalits and Mahars, holds admiration of Gandhi and Ambedkar in tandem.³⁶⁵ Sallie King likewise finds in Gandhi a forerunner to Engaged Buddhism, although he is vehemently rejected by the majority of India’s Engaged Buddhists working to change caste and the position of Dalits. One might have expected Alexander to have a balanced approach, like these contemporary Quakers.

³⁶³ Ambedkar criticized Gandhi’s Harijan Sevak Sangh saying ‘Removal of Untouchability had only a nominal place in the programme. Constructive work became the main part of the work of the Sangh...Removal of Untouchability as a platform was very good, but as a programme of action it was bound to have made Mr. Gandhi very unpopular with the Hindus...He therefore preferred the programme of constructive work which had all the advantages and no disadvantages...On the other hand, it had a positive advantage to recommend it. It had the possibility of destroying the independent movement which the Untouchables had built up...It could make Untouchables Congressmen and most gracefully too. The programme of constructive work had the possibility of being converted into a plan to kill Untouchables by kindness. This as a matter of fact has happened.’ B R Ambedkar *Writings and Speeches Vol. 9* p141

³⁶⁴ Coward ‘Gandhi and Ambedkar’ pp. 41, 62 and 64

³⁶⁵ Eleanor Zelliot ‘Gandhi and Ambedkar: a study in leadership’ in *From Untouchable to Dalit* pp.150-178

By way of comparison, Alexander's response to difference between Gandhi and Tagore is even-handed and complimentary.

...it may well be that each method is needed for various types of men: Tagore will appeal to those men and women who are by nature individualistic and revolutionary; Gandhi to the numbers who are attracted by a hard discipline – those who become Jesuits or join the army.³⁶⁶

The friendship which existed between Tagore and Gandhi themselves, in spite of philosophy and method, would promote an ease of understanding and guard against prejudice. We will return to Gandhi and Tagore below with Marjorie Sykes.

Horace certainly did not mind criticism of Gandhi indeed he encouraged it:

...one of them asked if I thought Mr. Gandhi was a chameleon – always changing his colour, as he had seen suggested somewhere. I energetically combated the suggestion, but I could not help approving the proper critical mind of the youth that seemed to prompt the question.'³⁶⁷

One of his criticisms of the Gandhi film is its failure to portray the independence of Gandhi's friends and followers in India.

British officialdom, from some of the Viceroys down, was fond of declaring that Gandhi's close associates were all just pale copies of Gandhi himself. Nothing

³⁶⁶ Alexander *Indian Ferment* p228-229

³⁶⁷ Alexander *Indian Ferment* p136

could be further from the truth. Gandhi never surrounded himself with “yes men.” To gain his respect, it was almost essential that you should show yourself to be at some point sharply critical of him.³⁶⁸

Horace himself is exemplary in regard to this willingness to criticise strongly, yet courteously, as his response to the Quit India resolution at the outset of the Second World War illustrates.

Uniting potential of religion

In friendships between Quakers and Gandhi, we see spiritual values undergirding and supporting the bond and friendship.

Biblical scholar Jeremy Holtom has said

The Sermon on the Mount was in a sense the religious, moral, and cultural interface between Gandhi’s followers and the British rulers. The text was at the heart of the dialogue that led to Indian Independence.³⁶⁹

This is the dialogue which Horace and the ICG were so keen to keep alive. The *values* of the Sermon on the Mount, though not so much the text or scripture itself, are seen in Quaker-Gandhian relations. In one sense the whole relationship could be considered under the heading of religion, for the sacred and secular are not separated in Gandhian or Quaker faith. On Horace’s first visit to Sabarmati he noticed how Gandhi immediately launched into a tally of spinning

³⁶⁸ Alexander *Western Eyes* pxvi

³⁶⁹ Jeremy Holtom ‘Gandhi’s interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount’ p554

The calling of names begins the very moment prayers are ended. There is no break – no suggestion that we are turning from the sacred to the secular. It seems evident that Mr. Gandhi believes that *laborare est orare*, [to work is to pray] or, at least, that the two things are intimately connected.³⁷⁰

Horace like Gandhi was critical of Christian missionaries, and other religious ‘pretenders’. He keeps a distance from Christian institutions, alongside his praise and following of the message of Christ.

I seemed to see how success turns the Christian missionary from humble service to proud domination. In India the same thing can be found: ambassadors of Christ who are doing their master the greatest disservice. They have forgotten the one thing needful.³⁷¹

The essential message of Christianity as love, justice and truth resonates with Gandhi and forms a basis for religious unity. Both reach out to one another’s spirituality and recognise it in others. Horace Alexander was influenced by his father who had involvements with the Chinese and cherished cultural and religious openness.³⁷² The importance of religious unity is seen, in Horace’s appreciation of others and avoidance of

³⁷⁰ Alexander *Indian Ferment* p216

³⁷¹ Alexander *Indian Ferment* p141

³⁷² Carnall *Gandhi’s Interpreter* p2-3

exclusive ideas, in fact he sees that 'the attitude of respect for the faith of others springs direct from the central faith of the Society of Friends'.³⁷³

Horace is prepared to criticise his own culture, even as a Westerner still abiding in many ways by Western life, he does not play down Gandhi's denunciation of Western civilisation in *Hind Swaraj*,

It may well be accepted as the main text of the Gandhian revolution, the revolution based on truth and non-violence and aiming at the welfare of all, not just the majority or one class, and it stands therefore to the Gandhian way of life as the 1848 Manifesto stood to the whole Communist movement.³⁷⁴

Religious values gave Gandhi and Horace trust and hope in others, and prospects for transformation and peace. When Horace records his time in Calcutta with Gandhi and Suhrawardy, during their peace campaign amid Hindu-Muslim violence, it is very personal. Suhrawardy was implicated in the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946.³⁷⁵ Horace was willing to see the much criticised partnership and trust in Suhrawardy.

After the horrors of the previous August [1946], it was not surprising that the Hindus of Calcutta thought ill of the motives that led Suhrawardy suddenly to throw in his lot with Gandhi. But I had been watching their relationship through

³⁷³ Alexander *Quakerism and India* p30

³⁷⁴ Alexander *Western Eyes* p34

³⁷⁵ See Gopal Das Khosla *Stern Reckoning: A survey of the events leading up to and following the partition of India* pp.41-68 available in David page et al., *The Partition Omnibus* New Delhi: OUP 2002 for a narrative of the events written by a civil servant from this period which places blame upon Suhrawardy as complicit in the devastation of the Great Calcutta Killing

the past year, and I do not believe that his 'conversion' was either sudden or wholly selfish.³⁷⁶

Alexander and Gandhi trusted individuals' ability for transformation. This basic trust arising from *atman* or "that of God" in the redeemability of human nature comes across. In the re-establishment of trust we find truth central - Gandhi called Alexander to him after a close encounter with troublemakers wishing to harm Suhrawardhy

...he particularly wanted me to understand what had just happened. The turning point, he said, was Suhrawardy's frank and open confession of his shame for his action a year before.³⁷⁷

Although Gandhi and Horace's engagement was political on many levels, Horace was conscious that Gandhi was not primarily a politician. 'He had the economic needs of the half-starved Indian villagers' constantly in mind; he cared far more about them than about any political issue, even the issue of independence.'³⁷⁸ The two had first met through Alexander's investigation into opium abuse in Asia, a social concern. The social view of religion, focussing on the alleviation of oppression and poverty united Gandhi and Horace even as their engagement became more politically/internationally based.

Alexander compares the approaches of Quaker missionaries in India and the Friends Ambulance Unit, spreading or acting upon Quakerism and contributing to the

³⁷⁶ Alexander *Western Eyes* p154

³⁷⁷ Alexander *Western Eyes* p157

³⁷⁸ Alexander *Western Eyes* p55

alleviation of social problems. He suggests two major problems with Christian (including Quaker) missions in Asia. Firstly, they are alien and '[t]heir spiritual imperialism is suspect', secondly, 'missionaries do not as a rule give much attention to the social, economic and political conditions under which their Indian neighbours are struggling'.³⁷⁹ Alexander finds this distinction between religious work, which includes humanitarian relief, and engagement in the social, economic and political conditions flawed. As Gandhi has said 'I can say without the slightest hesitation and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.'³⁸⁰ Vice versa, Gandhi is able to see the ethically minded, conscientious atheist as a seeker after Truth, so Horace is able to say of social service

Some will call their service humanitarian, some will call it religious. Love for God and love for man are so inextricably inter-twined that it is often difficult to know which is which.³⁸¹

When Horace visited Sabarmati Ashram and was invited to make suggestions, he suggested the addition of silence to daily prayers. Gandhi did not feel it was culturally appropriate.

³⁷⁹ Alexander *Quakerism and India* p28

³⁸⁰ Gandhi *Autobiography* (Dover) p454

³⁸¹ Alexander *Quakerism and India* p34

What you say about silent prayer and congregational silence I understand and appreciate in theory... In India it will fall flat. After all there are many ways of worship and it is not necessary to graft new ways, if old ones will answer.³⁸²

Although Gandhi held a day of silence, he continued to engage in life and write notes on these days, though they afforded him some space and relief from the demands of those who surrounded him. Later, with increasing Quaker friendships, Gandhi seems to have taken the spiritual significance of silence more seriously. It is seen as a means of withdrawal into the self, where it is possible to discern the 'still small voice within'.³⁸³ He incorporated silence into prayer-meetings, speaks of the 'communion of silence' and even attended and ministered in Quaker meetings.³⁸⁴

Horace Alexander lent Gandhi Quaker books, soon after they met, just as many former Christian contacts had lent Gandhi religious books.³⁸⁵ Gandhi's desire to learn about the religion of others was significant throughout his life, and was paired with desire to relate to others spiritually engaging with their traditions and ideas. What Gandhi learnt both by engagement with Friends such as Horace and from reading was remembered and recalled. In April 1946 Gandhi attended four Quaker meetings in Delhi. He was evidently familiar with Quaker beliefs and practices by this stage, contributing by quoting from

³⁸² Alexander *Western Eyes* p190

³⁸³ Chatterjee *Religious Thought* p100

³⁸⁴ Chatterjee *Religious Diversity* p154-5

³⁸⁵ Alexander *Western Eyes* p192

George Fox during one of these meetings, reflecting on the importance of silence and the legacy of Charlie Andrews.³⁸⁶

Fellowship of Friends of Truth

Horace Alexander set up the Fellowship of Friends of Truth (hereafter FFT) in India in 1949. The name appears rather grand, it is based on a play of words drawing both on Gandhi's 'God is Truth' and the original name of the Quakers, the 'Friends of Truth'. It sprang from a conversation between Gandhi and Horace, seeking to bring together people of all faiths, but grounded in Quaker-Gandhian heritage. Both Marjorie and Horace were active members. Horace had said to Gandhi whilst in Noakhali, that it seemed the need of the world was

a union of hearts, a fellowship in which men of each faith, Hindu, Buddhist, Parsi, Jew, Muslim, Christian, may find themselves at one because they are seeking together to practise the truth of God in the world.³⁸⁷

The interfaith engagement and religious vision of Gandhi was an important legacy to bring forward and Horace felt that the Quakers were an ideal group within which to nurture this. Gandhi's response to this suggestion is recalled by Horace:

³⁸⁶ Pyarelal *The Last Phase [Vol. 1]* Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1956 pp.181-3

³⁸⁷ Horace Alexander 'A Fellowship of Friends of Truth' in *Fellowship of Friends of Truth Quarterly* Vol.6, No. 2, January 1959 p61

...of the societies that I know, I do not think any other would be better or even so good. I think the Friends are the best. But on one condition: Are they prepared to recognize that it is as natural for a Hindu to grow into a Friend as it is for a Christian to grow into one?³⁸⁸

Horace felt it was, although as the previous chapter explored, there is still some debate over criterion for membership, and even someone as integrated as Marjorie emphasises that the Friends are a Christian fellowship.³⁸⁹ The FFT developed its own Quarterly in 1953, 'to stand on our own feet, without being sponsored by the parentage we boast of, Gandhism and Quakerism.'³⁹⁰ By 1958 the list of membership exceeded 430 people in a variety of countries.³⁹¹ It is impossible to judge the impact of the group, which set out to be a 'fellowship' bringing people together to find unity, strength and support, rather than an 'organisation' with quantifiable aims and objectives. Indeed Horace felt in two minds: 'Organisation is rarely a help to the true life of religion, though fellowship can be a great help.'³⁹² However, its significance here is not so much its achievements as how the membership and its existence testify to the aspirations of a group to find fellowship with others across the lines of faith, in a personal way on the basis of non-violence. It was set up to pursue a Quaker-Gandhian vision for religion in the world and shows Horace combining Quaker ideals and heritage with the ideals of Gandhi and his followers. It was a

³⁸⁸ HGA 'A Fellowship' p62

³⁸⁹ Marjorie Sykes *What are the Quakers?* Delhi: The Quaker Centre, 1955 p21

³⁹⁰ S.K. George 'The Editor' in *FFT Quarterly* vol. 1 no. 1 1953 p2

³⁹¹ *FFT Quarterly*, vol. 5, no.3 1958 pp.139-157

³⁹² Alexander 'Chairman's Message' in *FFT Quarterly* Vol 3 no.4 1956 p130

way to continue Gandhi's legacy. 'Let all who care for the heritage of Gandhiji strive to develop that true tolerance which is based on reverence and friendship.'³⁹³

Throughout Horace's life, even after the death of Gandhi, the friendship and common goals shared continued to inspire him, and he attempted to pass this on. He writes and makes public speeches about Gandhi and considers him important for all people, in the West as much as India. In a speech at Friends' House Horace encourages us to take Gandhi off his pedestal 'and keep him well down among us to inspire us in facing the world's problems.'³⁹⁴ Horace sees Gandhi's importance in two major areas: maintaining a sense of one's duties over rights (emphasising service) and his political philosophy of non-violence. I would add to these two, based on Horace's establishment of the FFT, the realisation of harmony and unity among religions. Horace, as we would expect of a Quaker pacifist, calls on the necessity of seeing Gandhi's legacy realistically yet radically, 'Gandhi's peace principles were of a different order' to the conventional view of peace-loving statesmen who seek disarmament as soon as their neighbours disarm.³⁹⁵ The majority of the audience at a Quaker venue celebrating Mahatma Gandhi's life would already be sympathetic to pacifism, yet Horace's speech is directed to the West as a whole. When he asks 'What has Gandhi to say to us?' the answer is not so much to us as Quakers and pacifists, but to us, as people living in the West in a system based on

³⁹³ Alexander 'Gandhiji and Reverence for All Faiths' in *FFT Quarterly* Vol.4 No. 3 1957 p102

³⁹⁴ Horace Alexander *What has Gandhi to say to us?* London: Friends Peace and International Relations Committee 1969 p1

³⁹⁵ Alexander *What has Gandhi to say* p7

power politics. He ends by suggesting the first place to apply Gandhi's principles is education, an area where Marjorie did bring his ideas into action.³⁹⁶

Marjorie Sykes

Marjorie became thoroughly immersed in India, she seems able to see and speak through the two modes as easily, Indian and Western. Where Horace entitled his biography *Gandhi Through Western Eyes*, Marjorie is so immersed in Indian culture she could not express herself that way, rather Marjorie is an example of someone who experiences and lives through the two cultures. Robinson in his book on Hindu-Christian dialogue *Truth is two-eyed* notes how “one-eyed” the constraints our Western education and cultural conditioning have made us.³⁹⁷ He makes a plea to see reality in a ‘two-eyed’ way, with a balance between the predominant ways of seeing which the East and West encourage, and the implicit challenges this brings. Marjorie lived in this ‘two-eyed’ way. Martha Dart, entitled her biography, *Marjorie Sykes: Quaker Gandhian* reflecting this. However Marjorie queried it: Gandhi himself strongly objected to anything called Gandhi-ism or Gandhi-an.³⁹⁸

The following year, Marjorie suggested the title she would have chosen, ‘Marjorie Sykes: At home in India’, which ‘expresses what I feel.’³⁹⁹ This impression is strong in her writings and modes of expressing herself as well as in her friendships and life. When in England she refers to herself as ‘homesick’ for India and keeps up contact with Indian and

³⁹⁶ Alexander *What has Gandhi to say* p8

³⁹⁷ John A T Robinson *Truth is Two-Eyed* London: SCM Press 1979 pp.viii-ix

³⁹⁸ Marjorie Sykes *In Quaker Friendship: Letters from Marjorie Sykes to Martha Dart 1967 to 1994*, ed. Martha Dart, York: William Sessions 1999 p109

³⁹⁹ Sykes *In Quaker Friendship* p121

Tamil friends, maintaining her connection and interest.⁴⁰⁰ In India, also she maintains contact with the West by hosting European and American visitors and corresponding with friends in the West. She also keeps in touch with her Quaker faith, receiving copies of *The Friend*, producing a newsletter for Quakers in India, *The Friendly Way* and making visits to the UK and US, with periods at Woodbrooke, Swarthmore College and Pendle Hill, Pennsylvania.⁴⁰¹ Whilst thinking of India as home, she also jokes that 'being incorrigibly English, I approve of the typical English summer!'⁴⁰²

Yet, although thoroughly enculturated, as an unmarried English woman Marjorie was quite different from the typical Indian woman; free from the family ties and obligations of Indian women, she was perhaps better able explore and integrate Indian spiritual ideas and make her values the focus of her life than most Indian women could.⁴⁰³ Marjorie shows awareness of this difference, and seeks to empower Indian women to contribute to public life, without disregarding gender norms. She travels widely and alone, whilst many Indian women who were beginning to come out in the National movement had

previously led such sheltered lives that when their picketing hours were over they did not know how to go home alone, and had to wait for husbands or sons to come and escort them.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰⁰ Sykes *In Quaker Friendship* pp. 51; 65; 87; 108

⁴⁰¹ Dart *Marjorie Sykes* pp. 123-127; 135-145

⁴⁰² Sykes *In Quaker Friendship* p52

⁴⁰³ In this way she was able to follow the unusual ideal Gandhi promoted of women remaining single and publicly active, devoted to a higher cause beyond the confines of marriage. See Madhu Kishwar 'Gandhi on Women' in A. Raghuramaraju, *Debating Gandhi: a reader*, Oxford: OUP, 2006 (pp.269-323) esp. p279ff.

⁴⁰⁴ Jehangir Patel and Marjorie Sykes *Gandhi: His gift of the fight* Rasulia: Friends Rural Centre, 1987 p44

The degree to which Marjorie was able to involve herself in Indian life, the National movement, *swaraj*, *swadeshi* and education, are therefore paradoxically eased as a Western woman.

Constructive programme as peace work

Marjorie noted a difference in emphasis and direction between Indian and Western conceptions of peace work. The Western pacifist focussed more upon war, its prevention, control of weapons and conflict mediation, whilst the Indian approach focussed more on injustice and poverty as the root cause of conflict. Although both Marjorie and Horace were English, Marjorie's approach to peace has a strong focus on the constructive programme and small-scale village affairs.

Marjorie speaks of Gandhi's ideal of *swaraj*, as a non-violent democracy, which is the only real security for all, over the change in rule from white to brown men. It is to this ideal of a non-violent society that *Nai Talim* and her fostering of village industries, homespinning, self-sufficiency, the removal of caste and creed, and care of the natural world were directed and sustained.

In 1939, following the outbreak of the Second World War, Marjorie attended the Ramgarh Congress session. Many within Congress were unhappy with complete non-violence.

The immediate question at the Ramgarh Congress, therefore, was whether and how 'the non-violence of the strong' could be brought to bear on the international situation, and particularly on the relationships between India and Britain.⁴⁰⁵

As we saw with Horace Alexander and Gandhi's desire to maintain individual friendships in the midst of non-cooperation, this was a period of tension. Was Congress taking advantage of Britain in her weakness? But Britain had declared India at war without consulting any of India's national leaders? Just as there was friendship, respect and affection for individuals in England such as Horace, Marjorie comments that

It was moving evidence of the pervasive influence of Gandhi that we [handful of English people] should be treated there as equals, given a natural unforced welcome, and be allowed to share, as fellow-learners in the school of non-violence, in the discussions that went on.⁴⁰⁶

One of the outcomes was to emphasise the constructive programme over mass civil disobedience.

However disciplined and non-violent they might be, however 'successful', they touched only the superstructure of power. But the constructive programme was aimed at the roots of power...⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁵ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p82

⁴⁰⁶ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* pp82-3

⁴⁰⁷ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p84

Marjorie stresses the interconnection between violence, injustice and poverty. She speaks about poverty and injustice as a form of violence, caused and maintained by the massive military expenditure of so-called democracies.⁴⁰⁸ Her own work for the constructive programme, education in particular, is seen as a necessary part of and training for non-violence not a separate issue of poverty and inequality. In 1941, in a meeting of Indian and British Quakers

...those who had previously thought of their peace witness as a confrontation with the military power of the nation-state were made aware of another dimension; they were challenged to consider how the seeds of war were nurtured by the economic and social injustices of our daily lives.⁴⁰⁹

As well as reflecting a distinctive approach between East and West, it may reflect the time-period when Marjorie became personally involved with Gandhi. As far back as 1928 when Marjorie first arrived in Tamil Nadu, she became involved in the constructive programme through Rajaji,⁴¹⁰ but she first met Gandhi in 1938. Their friendship began in the final decade of Gandhi's life, a time when the Second World War broke out, following which Britain determined to leave India. With Independence secured, Gandhi focussed on the kind of society India should become. From mass *satyagraha* we see a turn to the less dramatic, everyday task of building up a strong non-violent, village society.

⁴⁰⁸ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p85

⁴⁰⁹ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p87

⁴¹⁰ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* pp32-33

The emphasis on simplicity and everyday life is part and parcel of non-violence. In her pamphlet *What are the Quakers*, intended for curious Indians, Marjorie draws parallels between her own faith and Gandhi's teaching.

Many Quakers also realise that the emphasis placed by Gandhi on a life of simplicity, productive personal manual labour, on responsible corporate life in a small self-governing community, is closely parallel to the insight, teaching, and practice of their own most saintly and sensitive leaders. The traditional Quaker "testimonies" against war, against oaths, against extravagance in food and clothing, and so on, are not a collection of unrelated peculiarities, they are the fruits of one spirit.⁴¹¹

Simplicity is one of the four main Quaker testimonies: truth, peace, simplicity and equality. There is a resemblance in the resourcefulness between Gandhi's carefully sharpened pencil stubs and letters and articles written on the backs of envelopes with Marjorie's re-use of cards sent to friends, which she carefully pasted with clean paper to convert into postcards.⁴¹²

This is not to say that Marjorie was uninterested in peace work in terms of conflict resolution, as her experience in Nagaland demonstrates. In India, today, QPSW still works for peace in the Nagaland. This is not an explicitly "Gandhian" activity. It is a Quaker activity aimed at reconciliation and peaceful resolution of the on-going conflict between Naga people who wish to create their own independent country and the Government of India, who insist on a centralised nation. Marjorie Sykes moved to

⁴¹¹ Sykes *What are the Quakers* p24

⁴¹² I was shown some of these 'postcards' when I visited Eleanor Nesbitt, a friend of Marjorie from her time as a Quaker teacher in India

Nagaland in the sixties to work for peace, her friends Ram and Stefanie Ramamurthy who also spent time with and following Gandhi continue to be actively involved to the present day.

Trying to distinguish what is Gandhian and what Quaker makes it clear how similar the values, methods and work are. Take for instance Marjorie's speech on Nagaland Peace Day 1965

The spirit of prayer is a spirit of openness. We open our hearts and minds to One who knows us better than we know ourselves. I believe that this simple truthfulness, this openness and frankness is a condition of peace. In war, truth is the first casualty. If peace is to grow, it needs the pure fresh air of truth, openness, sincerity. Gandhiji always insisted on this open truthfulness in conducting his peaceful fight for Indian independence. He had no secrets from his opponents, no spies, no pretences, no hidden plans. Peace works in the daylight, in the open air; it has nothing to hide from God or man. For the sake of peace, we need to be fearlessly and openly truthful with each other, and especially with those from whom we differ.⁴¹³

The open, truthful approach is both Quaker and Gandhian. The dual identity attributed to Marjorie, "Quaker-Gandhian" could be applied to such actions and projects today. It is this openness and truth, so important to both Quakers and Gandhi which led to the significant breakthrough when advice was given to factions in the Naga resistance: 'I think we can trust the Quakers.' There is also a distinctive Quaker contribution. Nagaland is deeply Christian, mainly Baptist, and the place of forgiveness in Christianity

⁴¹³ Sykes *Transcending Tradition* pp.39-40

has provided an entry point and connection between Nagas and Quakers.⁴¹⁴ It is significant that for Marjorie peace was not simply confined to conflict, but the very kind of society we are part of and create.

Education, work and play

Marjorie dedicated her life to education. She led *Nai Talim*, the 'New Education', at Sevagram after Gandhi's death following from his unexpected request to her.

'Now,' he said, 'It's my turn to make a request. Would you consider joining us here to work for Nai Talim?' The words took Marjorie completely by surprise; they were totally unexpected. 'You know that I would like to work for Nai Talim, but what about this Andrews biography? I'm committed to that, and I don't know for how long'. 'I know that', he said. 'You couldn't come at once, I know; but if later on you feel it is right to come, you'll be warmly welcome at any time'.⁴¹⁵

Marjorie recalls that Gandhi did not press, with 'the courteous recognition that she too would be guided as he was, in times of critical decision, by the inner authority he knew as his Inward Voice.'⁴¹⁶ The same authority she would have trusted in Quaker terminology as the 'prompting of the Spirit'.

⁴¹⁴ Notes from Quaker South Asia Interest Group meeting, Friends House, October 2009

⁴¹⁵ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p143

⁴¹⁶ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p143

Marjorie arrived in Sevagram in summer 1949, to continue Gandhi's legacy in Basic Education where she remained until 1959.⁴¹⁷ Education to Marjorie and Gandhi is about the lifelong formation and development of individuals, therefore

In order to appreciate the idea of Nai Talim we must turn to a fundamental educational question, that of the relationship between the school and the society which it serves. For the teacher is the servant of society; his job is to turn out the children of the community as the kind of adults which the community wants to have.⁴¹⁸

Marjorie worked on Basic Education, years 7-14, focussing on community living, self-sufficiency and using the child's natural interest to learn by doing. She explains that

Basic Education is a part of Nai Talim, a plan of productive and co-operative activity covering the whole of life, and designed to shape and conserve a new social order based upon non-violence and truth.⁴¹⁹

It lays the foundations for the rest of life. I therefore contend that it is strong testimony to the trust Gandhi placed in Marjorie that she was asked to lead this aspect of his constructive programme. As Marjorie admits she was an unlikely candidate – British by blood and birth, raised in the system of education which supported British rule over India which Sevagram itself challenged and spending ten years in a school funded by the

⁴¹⁷ Dart *Marjorie Sykes* pp.52-4

⁴¹⁸ Marjorie Sykes *Foundations of Living* Pune: Parisar 1988 p18

⁴¹⁹ Sykes *Foundations* p24

imperial Government and bound to that system.⁴²⁰ Yet her principles and outlook accorded with those of *Nai Talim*. One could also see a link with Quaker concern for education as a lifelong process related to the construction of a good society.

In 1938 she went to Santiniketan, visiting Gandhi on the way to discover the principles she had eagerly read about in Harijan.⁴²¹ She spent more time associated with Tagore than Gandhi, teaching in Santiniketan for many years. She was as uncomfortable as Tagore with an unnaturally enforced uniformity stemming from devotion to Gandhi's leadership without genuine conviction. Marjorie must have been aware of the tensions from her own association and as translator of Tagore's *Muktadhara*, a play which explores the debates and concerns over Gandhi's methods.⁴²² Marjorie herself addressed the question of compliance at one of Gandhi's visits to Santiniketan in 1940. She habitually wore *khadi*, which was not unanimous in Santiniketan. For his visit almost everyone dug out their homespun, some buying it for the occasion. To Marjorie, who had questioned Gandhi on the seemingly 'disproportionate amount of spinning' in the school at Segaon⁴²³

...it seemed like a 'silent consent' to something with which many did not fully agree. Her reaction was to dig out the only non-khadi garment she possessed, a

⁴²⁰ Marjorie Sykes *The Story of Nai Talim: Fifty Years of Education at Sevagram (1937-1987)* 1987 available at <http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/naitalimmarjoriesykes.htm> accessed 20th April 2012 (Introduction)

⁴²¹ Sykes *The Story of Nai Talim* <http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/naitalimmarjoriesykes.htm> accessed 20th April 2012 (Introduction)

⁴²² See Rukmani 'Tagore and Gandhi' in Coward *Indian Critiques* pp. 118-121 for a consideration of this play and the themes and debates it reflects and explores

⁴²³ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p54-5

Madras handloom sari whose brilliant colouring was conspicuous in the white-clad crowd.⁴²⁴

Recalling the incident later, she is aware that many of those who wore *khadi* did so out of respect, and comments that 'She had clearly much to learn about the 'non-violence of spirit' which would refrain from judging the inner motives of other people!'

For all the temperamental differences between Gandhi and Tagore, and the disagreements over principles and method, the two came very close, sharing much and deeply admiring one another especially in their later years, when Marjorie came close to these two great thinkers.⁴²⁵ There never appears any tension in Marjorie's writings over the lasting significance of each, but a sense of admiration and learning important messages for the world from both.⁴²⁶ Indeed she suggests that the two were much closer and more compatible than commonly supposed, 'to live and learn at Santiniketan drew her almost as closely into Gandhi's orbit as into Tagore's.'⁴²⁷

Marjorie was struck by the gaiety of Sevagram, Gandhi's wit and good humour.⁴²⁸ Gandhi and Marjorie both delighted in children, engaging with them on their own terms and drawing them into the adults' world through purposeful play and work. She remembers

⁴²⁴ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p58

⁴²⁵ Rukmani 'Tagore and Gandhi' in Coward *Indian Critiques* pp.121-5

⁴²⁶ See the chapter in Patel and Sykes 'Gandhi and Tagore: The double Sadhana' pp. 52-70

⁴²⁷ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p57

⁴²⁸ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p141

Children skipped and danced around Gandhi on his evening walks; they clung to his hands and chuckled at his jokes. Gandhi himself was completely absorbed and relaxed; for that half-hour he gave himself up completely to his delight in the children.⁴²⁹

Gandhi's delight in children brings out the human, affectionate side of him, in contrast to the ascetic committed to saintly ideals or politician engaged in mass leadership and high-level negotiations and campaigns. Interfaith friendships are deeply nourished by this level of affection, intimacy and person-person interaction. Certainly there is the idealism and common work for shared ethical goals, and in the case of Horace and to a lesser degree Marjorie of political mediation and support, but to couch these friendships in terms of a dialogue on such grounds is to miss much of what made them so precious and important. Just as Horace was invited by Pyarelal to gather with Gandhi's 'family' after his death, Marjorie too became a part of this 'family' when she joined Sevagram.⁴³⁰ The significance of Marjorie, an English Quaker, leading *Nai Talim*, is brought home when we consider that Gandhi described this and his other project, for natural health, as his 'last and best' gift to India.⁴³¹

Bringing Gandhi into Modern Environmentalism

The contemporary environmental movement did not exist in Gandhi's lifetime. Global challenges such as climate change were not yet known, nor were the modern day chemical fertilizers and pesticides widely used. Environmental concern was expressed

⁴²⁹ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p51

⁴³⁰ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p130

⁴³¹ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p124

more in terms of the immediate local environment, where the effects of soil degradation, destruction of forests and biodiversity were experienced by ordinary peasants and farmers. To think of Gandhi as an environmentalist is anachronistic but he has been a source of inspiration to the Indian environmental movement.⁴³²

Though Gandhi was no philosopher of ecology, and can only be called an environmentalist with considerable difficulty, he strikes a remarkable chord with all those who have cared for the environment, practised vegetarianism, cherished the principles of nonviolence, resisted the depredations of developers, or accorded animals the dignity of humans.⁴³³

During Marjorie's lifetime realisation of the significance and scale of the environmental challenge has developed. Having worked in Gandhi's constructive programme emphasising self-sufficiency on the local and individual level, she converts these values and ideals into the new environmental context. She has a reverence for nature as an expression of God's nature, as well as for its significance in supporting life, especially for the poor. The language she uses reflects both the value of nature in itself and for sustaining human life. Reflecting the value of the environment in itself she writes

Both men [Gandhi and Tagore] felt a reverent love for the living earth with its animals, trees and plants, its very stones. 'How deeply it pains me,' Gandhi would

⁴³² For instance, Gandhi's disciples influenced the leaders of the Chipko movement and Narmada Bachao Andolan. Vinay Lal 'Too Deep for Deep Ecology: Gandhi and the ecological vision of life' in Christopher Chapple and Mary Tucker (eds.) *Hinduism and Ecology: The intersection of earth, sky and water* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000 (pp.183-212) p185

⁴³³ Vinay Lal 'Too Deep' p198

say, 'that people should pluck masses of delicate blossom to fling in my face or hang round my neck! We should feel a more living bond between ourselves and the rest of the animate creation.'⁴³⁴

This love of and connection to nature expresses itself in the urge to protect it, here expressed in a sentimental, anthropomorphising way.

He [Gandhi] protested when a friend brought in a handful of babul leaves, after dark, to clean his carding bow. 'Look! All these leaves are folded up, asleep,' he said. 'Trees need sleep as we do. It's a wretched thing to tear leaves off a tree while it is resting.'⁴³⁵

Marjorie feels this connection with nature, and sense of being uplifted and refreshed by it. Several passages in her writings and letters describe the beauty of her natural surroundings which are part of her religious nourishment. Describing her location in the Nilgiri Hills she comments 'I think that we are all pretty well drunk with beauty, and overwhelmed with the sense of the goodness of God in giving us these weeks at this time in such a place.'⁴³⁶

This connection with the earth, leads to the need to protect and not exploit the earth both for its own sake and for others (human and animal) around us and future generations. Living in India Marjorie adopted a vegetarian diet although like Gandhi himself she would not push this on others.

⁴³⁴ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p60

⁴³⁵ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p61

⁴³⁶ Sykes *Transcending Tradition* p49

She grew much of her food, and took a keen interest in gardening. Her lifestyle was simple, spinning her own cloth and sewing her own garments. Interpreting Gandhi's principles for a simple life in the 1980s, she writes

Diversified production of every kind of food crop in regular use means better farming, better nutrition and better basic security than the widespread practice of monoculture for a money market. Gandhi wrote [in favour of small scale production primarily for one's own needs not the money market] in the context of the national freedom struggle; his principles are as relevant as ever to the true freedom of the Indian village today.⁴³⁷

Espousing this simple rural life she keeps up with developments among Gandhi's followers, and the concerns of tribal people. She is conscious of land and its use, publishing on the *Bhoodan* movement, making it accessible to those removed from India and the Gandhi movement. She comments that most of her readers will live very removed from the land and the soil, in modern societies, but

Must we assume that it is 'impossible' to 'go back'? If we are 'off the track' of health and sanity because we have ignored the fundamental conditions of life on earth, then surely the sooner we begin to get back to it the better.⁴³⁸

In later life she was deeply concerned by the Narmada dam project, an issue which has been challenged by activists drawing inspiration from Gandhi and his techniques.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁷ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* pp.129-30

⁴³⁸ Marjorie Sykes *The Earth is the Lord's: Shri Vinoba Bhave and the land* London: Friends Peace Committee, 1952 p11

She also reflects upon the position of the cow in India's rural economy, and Gandhi's reverence for the cow as the symbol of our connection with non-human life. To the contemporary situation she says

If the "non-violent rural civilization" is to be saved, it will not be by appeals to emotion or sentiment; it will be saved by those who see the village economy as rooted in respect for the whole living world of which the cow is a symbol.⁴⁴⁰

Her approach is sympathetic to regard for the cow and other animals, yet she tends to speak in terms of connection and reverence for all of life and the world, including plants and as we saw above, stones. Her reflection on the cow and economy, to some extent misses the point of the special place of the cow and indeed all animals in the Hindu world view. The distinction of the special reverence due to animals, as possessors of souls, is submerged in the ecological view, which preserves the sanctity of all things, animate and inanimate. Whilst Gandhi was often unsentimental, and reserved the right of others to eat what they wished, and in famine even encouraged Bengali villagers to eat fish, I suspect Marjorie emphasises this too far when we remember that Gandhi placed animal life on a par with his own.

⁴³⁹ Vinay Lal 'Too Deep' p158; Marjorie published Geoffrey Maw's writings on the Narmada river saying 'This simple story may help a few readers to understand something of what is involved in current plans to use the water of the Narmada basin in ways which may have unforeseen repercussions on the whole culture and ecology of the region.' Geoffrey Maw *Narmada: The life of a river*, ed. Marjorie Sykes, Hoshangabad: Marjorie Sykes, 1990-1994? pviii

⁴⁴⁰ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p140

She identifies Gandhi's legacy in *swaraj* for the villages – the development of true, non-violent democracy, self-sufficient and free life. This contrasts with Nehru and other leaders who sought modernisation and growth against Gandhi's decentralised traditional village ideals. Marjorie and Patel read back into this ideal of a simple life, curtailing excessive wants and sustaining a co-operative life of balance, close to the land, and local conditions a way to avoid the calamities that unchecked capitalism has produced.

As far back as the 1920s Gandhi and his friend J. C. Kumarappa were challenging the "violence" of human attitudes to nature. They had few "fellow-travellers" then, but there are many today to be found in the "new ecology movement".⁴⁴¹

In 1947, Marjorie Sykes wrote 'Foundations of Living', when it was reprinted in 1972 she identifies only one change she would have made - to place more emphasis on the paragraph

The life of the human family as a whole can only grow to its full strength and beauty by accepting and obeying the ultimate laws of the universe to which it belongs. The aggressive, selfish, careless exploitation by the human race of other forms of life, and of the resources of the world which is our home, wounds the life of the world.⁴⁴²

In her preface of 1972 she adds

⁴⁴¹ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p205

⁴⁴² Sykes *Foundations* p29

It is only during the last ten years...that some men at least have begun to realise the serious and perhaps fatal nature of the wounds which our limitless greed for possessions and profits are inflicting on "space-ship Earth" It is a measure of the prophetic greatness of Gandhiji's life and work that in 1947, and long before, he had opened the eyes of his fellow-workers to some extent at least, to the folly of some forms of "modern" economics. In 1972 the implications of this aspect of his teaching both for education and for society ought to receive increasingly serious attention.⁴⁴³

Marjorie's life as a Quaker friend of Gandhi, as a fellow traveller in this vision seeking a renewed lifestyle reminds us that 'Gandhi's legacy to our generation therefore includes the "fight" to restore and preserve the sanctity of this living, mysterious world.'⁴⁴⁴ Whilst it is inappropriate to see in Gandhi an 'environmentalist' there are aspects of his rounded vision of non-violence, *swadeshi* and *swaraj* with implications for ecology in the contemporary world.⁴⁴⁵ Marjorie is one of Gandhi's followers who has made his relevance to the modern environmental concern felt, and drawn her inspiration for this new challenge from his contact and teaching. In this sense whilst a follower taking forth Gandhi's ideas she is also an interpreter, not like Horace from colonised to coloniser, but across time periods, and lifestyles (rural-urban), into new challenges.

Christianity and Quakerism in an Indian context

In view of the tensions of Christianity and its association with the West in colonial India how Quakers relate to Christianity is important in India. With the exception of

⁴⁴³ Sykes *Foundations* p29

⁴⁴⁴ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p206

⁴⁴⁵ See Larry D. Shinn 'The Inner Logic of Gandhian Ecology' in Chapple and Tucker *Hinduism and Ecology* pp.213-241 for an attempt at this.

Kerala, Christianity had been a Western import and it is only in the last few decades that indigenised and local theologies have begun to emerge and gain credence.⁴⁴⁶

In Marjorie's pamphlet for Indians and Pakistanis curious to know more about Quakers the spiritual, mystical and social justice elements of Quaker faith are stressed. Parallels are drawn with the teaching and example of Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave, whose spiritual challenges 'have raised issues which are testing the quality of Quaker insight into truth.'⁴⁴⁷ She perhaps over-emphasises the degree to which Quakers have taken on board Gandhi's teaching and campaigned for Indian Independence - there were a number of Quakers who were cautious of Nationalist leaders, holding to the paternalistic role of the Empire - in her own appreciation for Gandhi and eagerness to appeal to South Asians avoiding the associations of Christianity with imperialism, which she had rejected.⁴⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Gandhi has proved a profound figure calling Quakers to re-examine their ideas of non-violence, justice and the call to public action increasingly as the shame of colonialism is more deeply felt.⁴⁴⁹

Marjorie stresses the Christian nature of the Society of Friends, in relation to membership, whilst displaying a regard for other faith traditions and their insights. In India, 'From time to time the question is asked, more or less directly: "Can I become a

⁴⁴⁶ For instance, R. S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves *Readings in Indian Christian Theology* London: SPCK 1993

⁴⁴⁷ Sykes *What are the Quakers?* p21

⁴⁴⁸ See Carnall *Gandhi's Interpreter* pp. 81-96 for some examples of these misgivings among Yearly Meeting of 1930

⁴⁴⁹ As an illustration, a quick search on the Woodbrooke library catalogue for "Gandhi" reveals 125 hits. This is a very large number for a small Quaker library, consisting of only three rooms.

Quaker without becoming a Christian?”⁴⁵⁰ Her response outlines the history and spiritual inspiration of Quakerism in Christianity and the various meanings of Christianity. Whilst she holds ‘It is needful to tell applicants clearly and unambiguously that in entering the Society of Friends they would be entering a Christian fellowship’ and would be expected to study the Gospels, Pauline and Johannine epistles and draw from Jesus Christ, she also says ‘we must with equal clarity and force, explain to the inquirer what we mean, and what we do not mean, by calling the Society of Friends a “Christian Fellowship”’ in particular this does not mean subscribing to a particular doctrine or abandoning one’s traditions.⁴⁵¹ It is important Quakers look to Christ, but there should be no test for membership. ‘The question: “What think thee of Christ?” can only be rightly answered in deeds not words.’⁴⁵² This viewpoint was offered in 1955 in a British Quaker journal.

However her article of 1983 addressing Friends in India reflects a somewhat different viewpoint. She is concerned by the need to declare oneself Christian in India

...Indian Quaker groups as a whole have not been ready to accept applicants for membership who are unable to call themselves “Christian”. Such applicants have been accepted elsewhere, but remain somewhat separated from the main Indian bodies. These Quakers would joyfully acknowledge themselves to be “humble learners in the school of Christ”, but they feel that the Indian Christian community often acts more like a “caste”, with the self-interest of a caste, than like a fellowship of devotees.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵⁰ Sykes *Transcending Tradition* p59 (reproduced from *Friends Quarterly* no.9 1955)

⁴⁵¹ Sykes *Transcending Tradition* p60

⁴⁵² Sykes *Transcending Tradition* p61

⁴⁵³ Sykes *Transcending Tradition* p62

She does not abandon her former concern for the acceptance of a Christian fellowship, but calls for greater understanding on both sides, including why some Quakers would wish not to call themselves Christian. This is the challenge which Gandhi put to the Quakers when Horace initiated the FFT. Marjorie's answer is a little different from Horace's, emphasising the importance of Christianity as the source and root from which Quakers grow, although she is not exclusive. Her own practice draws heavily on the Indian traditions, and contrary to those missionaries who sought to create Westernised Indians, she became an Indianised Westerner.

Just as Horace struggled with certain kinds of Christianity and its reception in India so too did Marjorie. She experienced the suspicions of association with Christianity and its missionary practice which sought to press Christianity upon others. Working at Bentinck School she found the Christian element positive, teaching girls of all faiths to respond to the courage of the Biblical prophets whose struggles she linked to those in contemporary India, but in the communal context she found herself viewed with suspicion and wished to 'be able to move freely, as a disciple of Jesus, among people of every religion'.⁴⁵⁴ Therefore she moved on to Santiniketan, through Quaker contacts there.

Like Gandhi she sought the heart of the religions, above outward form, wherein she found unity with her friends of all faiths. Yet, unlike some contemporary thinkers she sticks to the word "religion", rather than "spirituality", in spite of some of its sectarian

⁴⁵⁴ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p48

connotations, insisting that in its true meaning, 'that which binds', it is a unifying force, and a word which should be redeemed.⁴⁵⁵

She draws parallels between Gandhian and Quaker thought in her book on Gandhi as well as *What are the Quakers*. Both are rooted in the belief that there is the 'seed' of God in all people, making transformation as in *satyagraha* possible⁴⁵⁶ and

'In Gandhi's view the distinguishing mark of *human* nature is precisely this power to transcend immediate self-interest for the sake of a greater good. *Human* nature carries within itself a seed of the divine.'⁴⁵⁷

She also speaks of openness to the 'Inner Voice' or 'Inner Light', and the unity of everyday life and religious practise.⁴⁵⁸

Gandhi's own spiritual authority was exercised in his daily intercourse with all sorts and conditions of men and women. He would seek patiently and hopefully to nurture the light in each, to strengthen their own hope, their own compassion, their own vision of Truth.⁴⁵⁹

This commitment to follow one's own conscience and leadings, the inner light, with a trust in the reality of the power of love and Truth found in Gandhi and in Quaker faith

⁴⁵⁵ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p69

⁴⁵⁶ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p50

⁴⁵⁷ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p202

⁴⁵⁸ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* pp.49-50

⁴⁵⁹ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* p207

and practice, formed a solid foundation with freedom and common values for the blossoming of this interfaith friendship.

Conclusions

These case studies of friendships between Gandhi and British Quakers demonstrate how shared values and personal friendship cut across barriers of culture, nation and religion, to form enriching inter-religious relations. Relationships in which each supported the other, though with such a prominent figure as Gandhi, one expects him to be more influencing than influenced, there is mutuality. Gandhi was influenced by Horace to incorporate and value silent worship more fully, and Marjorie led the programme of basic education at Sevagram. Whilst shared values do underpin the relationship there is room for differences within the context of friendship.⁴⁶⁰

In friendship people are not treated as representatives of their faith, but their own situations, experiences, views and so forth have room for growth, change and expression. Thus we see how different, based on the individual and circumstances, these two friendships were. Marjorie was a friend and co-worker in India seeking the transformation of India into a self-sufficient, non-violent society. Gandhi and Marjorie's conversations surround and reflect these ideas and they learn from and place trust in one another as friends working toward the same goal. With both living in India they had a closer proximity, both on account of distance to visit and of mutual friends and organisations. Horace was a friend seeking to support Gandhi through making his views

⁴⁶⁰ James L. Fredericks 'Inter-religious Friendship: a new theological virtue' in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* Vol. 35 no. 2 Spring 1998 pp.159-174 esp. p165

and movement understandable to other Britons. Both were working for a dignified settlement between their countries and were deeply committed to international peace and fostering the conditions for this. Living distantly, much of their correspondence is preserved, and having worked in a semi-formal capacity, archives relating to the ICG give insight into their relationship, alongside the writings of Horace which recall the friendship shared. The individual and changing circumstances and interests reflect the nature of the friendship which grew up. Think for instance how different the friendship Horace offered was once the British agreed to withdraw. He shifted from mediation between UK and India to a concern for peace between the religions and between India and Pakistan in the wake of partition. International relations were still prime, but in a very different way and religious harmony and understanding received renewed interest.

Marjorie Sykes displays an interfaith theology, she draws on her experiences and conversations with friends belonging to the numerous religions of India to inform her own spiritual life, and better understand and expand her religious horizons. She also studied the lives of religious leaders, traditions, stories and religious texts, but it is evident that it was through the cultivation of friendships, especially with Tagore and Gandhi, that her religious life was most enriched. As such, her 'biography' a joint project with another interfaith friend and follower of Gandhi, the Parsi Jehangir Patel, is not intended to be a 'life of Gandhi', but 'The book is a fruit of this friendship and is essentially a record of Gandhi's impact on our own lives.'⁴⁶¹ Her life was deeply shaped by

⁴⁶¹ Patel and Sykes *His Gift* pxi

this friendship, but she also re-interpreted Gandhi's ideas and values to fit new circumstances.

For Horace Alexander too it is in meeting individual people that other religions come to life. Interfaith friendships form the bedrock for understanding, fellowship and enrichment across religious cultures. The Fellowship of Friends of Truth expressed this clearly, there is a desire for an organic, un-organised growth of friendship and fellowship, and the acknowledgment that friendships, across faiths should be sought out and nurtured. The article 'Gandhiji and Reverence for All Faiths' begins with a reflection from Noakhali, on the possibility to live as neighbours, without ever really becoming friends. It moves on to show friendship as the supreme means to know other faiths. Horace recalls that he got little from reading the Qur'an, without the friendship of Muslims living by it, and came to know the Gita after his friendship with Gandhi, as the source of strength and inspiration for Gandhi. Horace was enacting Gandhi's insight that we should read the scriptures through the eyes of a believer.

...once we know them [scriptures] through the minds of those who have lived by them and in them, we shall begin to discern their hidden splendour.

Therefore, for our own better understanding of the spiritual heritage of the race, for our own enrichment and strength to fight life's battles, we do well to cultivate the friendship of good men of all faiths.⁴⁶²

⁴⁶² Alexander 'Gandhiji and Reverence for All Faiths' *FFT Quarterly*, Vol.4, No. 3, 1957 p102

CHAPTER SEVEN

GANDHI'S VIEW OF THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF INTER-RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE - FROM OPPOSITION TO MULTI-RELIGIOUS FAMILIES

In later life, Gandhi specifically asked 'Do we not look upon all religions as equal?' suggesting that inter-religious marriages should be openly encouraged along with inter-caste and inter-provincial marriages,⁴⁶³ by deliberately linking the question of equality of religions and marriages between people with different religions. In these two chapters, I interrogate Mahatma Gandhi's attitude to inter-religious marriage to develop a deeper understanding of Gandhi's ideas regarding how and in what ways religions should relate to one another. Inter-religious marriage is a highly important source contributing to a contentious and persistent issue in inter-religious relations. It is not merely a philosophical question, which Gandhi himself disliked, but a practical matter. On the whole, inter-religious marriage was not a preoccupation of Gandhi's; in his lifetime it was uncommon.⁴⁶⁴ Yet this is why Gandhi's few statements on inter-religious marriage are so significant. I contend that, by undertaking a critical study with awareness of the contexts, there is enough information to assemble a substantial analysis of Gandhi's views of the matter, and to construct a Gandhian vision.

⁴⁶³ CWMG vol.80 p78

⁴⁶⁴ On meeting Ramamurthy who had known Gandhi personally and married an English Quaker (at the time an inter-religious marriage, though now both are Quakers) I enquired about Gandhi's reaction to Ramamurthy's marriage. Ram's response was that he did not really know Gandhi's opinion and did not think mixed faith marriage had been an issue, given Gandhi's highly practical bent and the rarity of interfaith marriage. Personal conversation, London, 16th May 2009

I was prompted to pursue this line of enquiry by a letter from Gandhi to his son Manilal, written in 1926. In this letter Gandhi strongly opposes his son's wish to marry Fatima Gool, a Muslim woman, on account of their different religions.

Chi. Manilal,

I read your letter to Ramdas; also Fatima's. And of course I had anticipated this; Jalbhai did give a hint. You are a free man; so I cannot force you to do anything. But I write to you as a friend.

What you desire is contrary to dharma. If you stick to Hinduism and Fatima to Islam it will be like putting two swords in one sheath; or you may both lose your faith. And then what should be your children's faith? Whose influence are they to grow under? It is not dharma, but, only *adharma*, if Fatima agrees to conversion just for marrying you. Faith is not a thing like a garment which can be changed to suit our convenience. For the sake of dharma a person shall forgo matrimony, forsake his home, why, even lay down his life; but for nothing may faith be given up. May not Fatima have meat at her father's? If she does not, she has as good as changed her religion.

Nor is it in the interests of our society to form this relationship. Your marriage will have a powerful impact on the Hindu-Muslim question. Intercommunal marriages are no solution to this problem. You cannot forget nor will society forget that you are my son.

If you enter into this relationship you may not be able to render any service. I fear you may no more be the right person to run *Indian Opinion*.

It will be impossible for you, I think, after this to come and settle in India. I cannot ask for Ba's permission. She will not give it. Her life will be embittered for ever.

In proposing this marriage you have thought only of momentary pleasure. You have not at all considered your ultimate happiness.

Pure love is as between brother and sister. Whereas here the main urge is carnal pleasure.

I want you to get out of your infatuation. As far as I understand, Ramdas and Devadas also have arrived independently at the same conclusion, as mine.

I could not embolden myself to discuss this with Ba.

May God show you the right path.

Blessings from

Bapu ⁴⁶⁵

This struck me as inconsistent and unexpected. Gandhi spent a lot of energy working for Hindu-Muslim unity, affirming that all religions are true, equal and sufficient for their adherents. He had close Muslim allies and friends, even initiating *satyagraha* campaigns in South Africa from a mosque. ⁴⁶⁶ He lived with Muslims in his *ashrams*, establishing patterns of joint worship, joint kitchens and modes of life, joining with them to fast during Ramadan. ⁴⁶⁷ Reflecting on Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi recalls

I do not remember that there ever was a quarrel, much less a split, between the Hindu and the Musalman boys on the score of religion. On the other hand I know that although staunch in their own beliefs, they all treated one another with respect and assisted one another in their respective religious observances. ⁴⁶⁸

How and why then was this advocate of harmony and unity between religions opposing his son's wish to marry a Muslim, declaring that it would be like 'putting two swords in one sheath'?

⁴⁶⁵ CWMG Vol. 30 pp.229-30

⁴⁶⁶ Sheila McDonough *Gandhi's responses to Islam* provides a thorough and interesting study of Gandhi's friendships with Muslims, the influence of Islam on him and the changing nature of his relationships with Indian Muslims.

⁴⁶⁷ Chatterjee *Gandhi's Religious Thought* p180; MK Gandhi, *Ashram Observances in Action*, tr. Valji Govindji Desai, Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1955 especially pp. vi, 7-18 and 69

⁴⁶⁸ M K Gandhi *Satyagraha in South Africa*, tr. Valji Govindji Desai, Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 2nd edition 1950 pp.225-6

The issues shall be explored in two parts. This chapter deals with the religious and theological issues raised, the following chapter deals with the social/contextual issues. Although the two are intertwined in the context of Gandhi's thought, and an Indian context more generally, this separation is held in order to make the structure intelligible and enable sufficient depth to do justice to the complexity of the Indian social situation, communalism between Hindus and Muslims in particular. This division follows the schema adopted in previous chapters, focussing on religious and philosophical issues in Gandhi's thinking in one part and how people relate to one another in practice in the other. The case study of his son, Manilal, and Fatima Gool forms a central component of the study, and brings together Gandhi's thought and practice.

This chapter first outlines traditional Hindu and Islamic attitudes to inter-religious marriage. It then identifies and considers the change Gandhi underwent in his attitude to inter-religious marriage and shows how *brahmacharya* informed his approach to marriage. It then looks at Gandhi's response to contentious issues in interfaith marriage, conversion and dietary difference. This is followed by an exploration of the ways in which inter-religious couples deal with religious difference in an intimate inter-religious dialogue.

To situate our discussion within the realities of inter-religious marriage I draw on the findings of sociological studies of inter-religious marriage. The major sources are Kannan's study of inter-caste and inter-religious marriages in Bombay, Bamabawale's study of inter-religious marriages in Pune, and Chopra and Punwani's study of inter-

religious marriages in Greater Bombay.⁴⁶⁹ These surveys cover different time periods the first published in 1963 and the only up-to-date study in 2005. In each of these, conclusions are drawn from 50 inter-religious couples who were interviewed by the researchers and additional interviews with close family members. All were conducted in the same province, Maharashtra, although many of the participants came from different provinces. In spite of these limitations, they demonstrate persistent and meaningful themes. By drawing on these studies Gandhi's ideas can be considered in relation to the actual experiences of inter-religious couples. Although more up to date studies of inter-religious marriage may be found, these are in diasporic contexts or unavailable to an English researcher. I judge the differences between the diasporic and Indian contexts to be so great that the findings of studies in diaspora are not readily transferable, so rely on older research within India. Further, the dated nature proved advantageous. Covering research from the 60s and to the present reflects the changing social circumstances and shows how politics impinges on inter-religious couples. This has led to important findings regarding communal and riot situations.⁴⁷⁰

The thesis developed in these two chapters is that it is possible to hold to religious pluralism whilst opposing inter-religious marriages, however, this is a limited pluralism. It sets a definite boundary for how far individuals of different religions may relate to one

⁴⁶⁹ Chirayil T. Kannan *Intercaste and Inter-community Marriages in India* Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1963; Usha Bambawale *Inter-religious Marriages* Pune: Dastane Ramchandra, 1982; Rohit Chopra and Jyoti Punwani 'Discovering the other, discovering the self: inter-religious marriage among Muslims in the Greater Bombay area, India' in A. An-na'im (ed.), *Inter-religious Marriages Among Muslims: negotiating religious and social identity in family and community*, New Delhi: Global media publications, 2005 pp.47-162

⁴⁷⁰ See the following chapter for communalism and inter-religious marriage.

another and in what ways. Gandhi started from this limited point, yet his understanding of the implications of a true pluralism expanded to the point that he welcomed inter-religious marriages in cases where there is true love between the couple, each is able to continue in their own religion, and has equal regard for their partner's religion.

When considering religious matters Gandhi rarely refers to Hindu sources - whether of mythology and tradition, or textual sources - rather he draws on morality, *dharma* and universal religious attitudes. He refers to general attitudes and religious ideas, such as vegetarianism or *brahmacharya* not the prescriptions of religion. Nor does he explicitly draw on Islamic laws, yet these seem to be assumed in the case of Manilal and Fatima. Throughout this thesis we find Gandhi using his own practically based understanding of religion transcending and reforming tradition. This is once again seen in his attitude to inter-religious marriage.

A limitation to our evaluation is the one-sidedness of information. Whilst sources are available to see Gandhi's changing perspectives and statements in letters he wrote, his publications, and recorded speeches, we do not have the other side of the correspondence. For instance Manilal and Fatima's letters to which Gandhi is responding have not been preserved. One must therefore guess from Gandhi's response and limited alternative sources the perspectives of the couple concerned and the nature of their

relationship. Mesthrie-Dhupelia gives more background and context, yet she too was constrained by this one-sidedness.⁴⁷¹

Hindu and Islamic attitudes to inter-religious marriage – the Indian context

The three largest religious groups in India today are Hindus (80%), Muslims (14%) and Christians (3%) there are also substantial numbers of Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis, Jews, Baha'is and tribal religions.⁴⁷² In Gandhi's time, there would have been a considerably higher proportion of Muslims, because the Muslim-majority provinces which later became Pakistan and Bangladesh were a part of British India until 1947. At this time

More Muslims lived in the subcontinent than in any other part of the world. In 1921, they numbered 69 million, or one-fifth of British India's population. Their distribution ranged from 91 per cent in the North-West Frontier Province to less than 7 per cent in Madras.⁴⁷³

I shall focus on the Hindu and Muslim approaches, as these are the major religions numerically and most of Gandhi's statements are in response to Hindu and Muslim inter-marriage.

Arranged marriage is the norm in the Hindu context, usually within the same caste (*jati*), regional, linguistic and religious groups, but outside *gotra* (the specific kinship

⁴⁷¹ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Gandhi's Prisoner?: The life of Gandhi's son Manilal*, Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2004 pp. 174-177; In email correspondence (6th July 2009) Uma said she was unable to locate any letters from Manilal dealing with this issue.

⁴⁷² Ainslee T. Embree in Sumit Ganguly and Neil DeVotta (eds.) *Understanding Contemporary India* London: Lynne Rienner, 2003 p193

⁴⁷³ Mushirul Hasan *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885-1930* New Delhi: Manohar, 1994 p9

group). Marriage affects the whole family and their social standing, and is therefore an essentially family, rather than individual, affair. Hindu texts which talk about marriage give some indications of attitudes, and give certain specific ideas on choice of marriage partner.

The *Laws of Manu* with their specific prescriptions are a natural starting point – yet many scholars have drawn attention to the way in which the *dharmashastras* were elevated and used by colonialists, with their textual bent, to construct what they imagined to be the social situation and laws governing Hindus.⁴⁷⁴ Even in the *Laws of Manu* (3.21-35) we find recognition that unions may take place outside of the caste restrictions and in contradiction of convention. *Manu* identifies eight ‘marriage-rites’. These include the ‘ideal’ marriage, between members of the same caste at the invitation of the father. Then go on to include a man approaching the bride himself with gifts to her or her family and even, abduction of a woman as a ‘marriage-rite’. Although self-chosen unions outside the bounds of caste are acknowledged, they are very clearly disapproved with lists of the various evil effects accruing from the blameable marriages. In another chapter in *Manu* (9.90-1), however, there is a more positive attitude to choice in marriage

Three years let a damsel wait, though she be marriageable; but after that time let her choose for herself a bridegroom (of) equal (caste and rank). If, being not given

⁴⁷⁴ For instance Sharada Sugirtharajah, *Imagining Hinduism: a postcolonial perspective* London: Routledge, 2003 p2 and pp.22-31

in marriage, she herself seeks a husband, she incurs no guilt, nor (does) he whom she weds.⁴⁷⁵

In mythology there are also cases of wives and husbands choosing their own consorts, for instance Rukmini (an incarnation of Lakshmi, Krishna's consort). When a marriage is arranged for her to another prince, Rukmini calls on Krishna to kidnap her and claim her as his wife. Failing this she would commit suicide rather than submit to the marriage.⁴⁷⁶ Dayanand Saraswati recognized the value of self-chosen marriages. Europeans' marriage customs were one of the factors he cites in admiration of their advancement. Among a list of twelve other 'causes' he includes

1. The custom of child-marriage does not prevail among them.
2. They give their boys and girls sound training and education.
3. They *choose* their own life partners. Such marriages are called *Swyamvara*, (one's own choosing) because a maid chooses her own consort... It is the possession of such sterling qualities and the doing of such noble deeds that have contributed to the advancement of the European.⁴⁷⁷

Monier-Williams' Sanskrit dictionary notes that the word *swyamvara* is found in *Manu* and in the Mahabharata, *swyamvara* specifies a woman's own choosing, the

⁴⁷⁵ *The Laws of Manu*, translated by G. Buhler, in Max Muller (ed.) *The Sacred Books of the East* Vol. 25 (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 1886 p343

⁴⁷⁶ 'Rukmini' in Cush et al. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* London: Routledge 2008 p694-5

⁴⁷⁷ Theodore De Bary, Hay and Qureshi (Eds.) *Sources of Indian Tradition: Volume 2*, New York: Columbia Press, 1958 p634-5

corresponding word *swayamvarana* refers to the free-choice of a husband.⁴⁷⁸ There are therefore, sources within the Hindu tradition to support self-chosen marriages, even if it is not the norm. By the time of Gandhi, although child-marriage was still common, there had been increasing criticism of it and movements against it. Gandhi's own view opposed child-marriage and although supporting parental involvement in arranging marriages also ensured the input and approval of the bride and bridegroom.

Although religious difference is not specifically mentioned here, the Hindu view of other religions is on the one hand tolerant and pluralistic, but on the other hand the many ritual elements and concepts of purity and pollution may present religious grounds for opposing marriage to a non-Hindu. Ranjit Sau is perceptive of this in his critique of Gandhi's approach to inter-religious marriage

Gandhiji was a firm believer in the Hindu 'varna' system which is after all a social institution. Now, should a brahmin girl marry a Muslim youth, can the girl any longer 'follow her religion'? Will the Hindu varna codes ever accept her again as a Brahmin or even as a shudra Hindu, and let her 'follow her religion'? The answer is obvious, and the implication transparent. Everyone knows it. There is nothing more difficult than to find a subtler oxymoron than this one in the entire Gandhian literature.⁴⁷⁹

Although Sau's interpretation is not accurate in portraying Gandhi's view on the relationships between religions and inter-marriage, his concern is an important one. The

⁴⁷⁸ Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English dictionary, New Edition*, New Delhi; Chennai: Asian Educational Services, 2005

⁴⁷⁹ Ranjit Sau, 'Gandhi and Hindu-Muslim Marriages' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, (Letters to the Editor) Vol. 35, no. 3, 2000 p74

issue he raises regarding the impossibility of maintaining your own religion if marrying outside it is vital and will affect many people. When a person with a ritualistic and community based understanding of religion is no longer accepted by their community, 'as a Brahmin, or even as a shudra Hindu', they could not follow their religion as they understood it. Thus the ritual aspect and element of recognition by the community or caste group creates a bar to inter-religious marriage.

In terms of inter-religious marriage within Indic religions however, we do not find religion to be a major obstacle, thus marriage between Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab and Jains and Hindus in Gujarat is quite common and religion is not seen as an issue.⁴⁸⁰ In line with this, marriages among Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs are all covered in the Hindu Marriage Act. However, for marriage to a Christian and even more so a Muslim, religion presents a far larger problem (whether due to the religious differences themselves or to historical and community factors) and these are excluded from the Hindu Marriage Act, meaning these inter-religious marriages would need to be secular, conducted under the Special Marriage Act of 1954.⁴⁸¹

A limitation to this brief outline is the dependence on Brahminical sources for a 'religious' view, standards which may not apply across the wider Hindu community, although through the process of Sanskritisation they are aspired to by many non-Brahmins. This comes about due to the predominance of India-wide texts and sources being Brahminic. Other sources such as anthropology/sociology and studies of folk tales

⁴⁸⁰ Jonathan A. Romain, *Till Faith Do Us Part; couples who fall in love across the religious divide*, London: Fount, 1996 p44

⁴⁸¹ Amrita Nikore *Indian Marriages: Emerging Trends* New Delhi: Asian, 2006 p32

and songs can be used. However these may reflect social rather than religious ideals, and are varied regionally as well as amongst social classes and thus beyond the scope of this brief outline.

Identifying an Islamic approach to inter-religious marriage is easier than gleaning a Hindu approach, as this issue is dealt with in the Qur'an, which holds the central authority for Muslims. Sura 5:5 explicitly says

And [Lawful unto you are], in wedlock, women from among those who believe [in this divine writ], and, in wedlock, women from among those who have been vouchsafed revelation before your time – provided that you give them their dowers, taking them in honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as secret love-companions.⁴⁸²

It is notable that along with making marriage lawful, it is emphasised that it must be marriage, not to take a woman from another religion as a mistress or concubine - this implies respect and equality for non-Muslim wives.

In effect this means that a man can marry a Jewish or Christian woman. The marriage is considered valid, and the woman has the same rights and status as if she was a Muslim. The only restriction is that she will not inherit in the estate of her husband when he dies, as heirs have to be of the same religion as the deceased, although she can be given up to a third of the estate through a will. Her conversion is not necessary, although it is regarded as desirable.⁴⁸³

The 'People of the Book' refers to Jews and Christians, however in certain places and times this has been extended to include other religions with a Holy Book or

⁴⁸² *The Message of the Qur'an* translated and explained by Muhammad Asad, Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980

⁴⁸³ Jonathan A. Romain *Till Faith Do Us Part: couples who fall in love across the religious divide* London: Fount, 1996 p38

revelation. Significantly for our study this more liberal interpretation (though not widely accepted) opens the way for marriage between a Muslim man and Hindu woman within Islamic law.

This tolerance however is not shown for a Muslim woman, who may only marry a Muslim man. The translator and commentator of the Qur'anic passage quoted above, explains this in religious terms.

The reason [a woman may not marry a non-Muslim man] being that Islam enjoins reverence of *all* the prophets [of the the Abrahamic traditions], while followers of other religions reject some of them – e.g. the Prophet Muhammad or, as is the case with the Jews, both Muhammad and Jesus. Thus, whilst a non-Muslim woman who marries a Muslim can be sure that – despite all doctrinal differences – the prophets of her faith will be mentioned with utmost respect in her Muslim environment, a Muslim woman who would marry a non-Muslim would always be exposed to an abuse of him whom she regards as God's Apostle.⁴⁸⁴

It is implied in this that a woman adapts to her husband's environment, if this was not the case, then it would be as much the case that a Muslim husband would also 'be exposed to an abuse of him whom [he] regards as God's Apostle'. The religious coherence does not explain the gender discrepancy without this additional assumption. Yusuf Ali's translation and commentary on the same verse explains this gender difference.

Islam is not exclusive. Social intercourse, including inter-marriage, is permitted with the People of the Book. A Muslim man may marry a woman from their ranks on the same terms he would marry a Muslim woman, i.e., he must give her an economic and moral status, and must not be actuated merely by motives of lust or physical desire. A Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim man, because

⁴⁸⁴ Muhammad Asad *The message of the Qur'an* p142 note 15

her Muslim status would be affected: the wife ordinarily takes the nationality and status given by her husband's law.⁴⁸⁵

An'naim identifies this in notions of protection and guardianship – as man is guardian of woman and Muslim of non-Muslim, it would be unacceptable for a woman who is Muslim to be under the guardianship of a non-Muslim.⁴⁸⁶ It also has to do with patrilineal descent, a Muslim man's children are considered Muslim regardless of his wife's religion. It would however be unacceptable from an Islamic viewpoint for a Muslim woman's children to take on the father's non-Muslim faith. The repercussions of this are significant for women who do choose to marry out. They may be accused of apostasy and unable to continue in their religion, and more seriously face exclusion and even attack from family and community.

As Yusuf Ali states and the verses show, Islam is not exclusive and is tolerant within certain limits. However, he goes on to say

A non-Muslim woman marrying a Muslim husband would be expected eventually to accept Islam. Any man or woman, of any faith, may, on accepting Islam, freely marry any Muslim woman or man, provided it be from motives of purity and chastity and not of lewdness.⁴⁸⁷

This idea that although it is permitted for a non-Muslim to marry a Muslim husband, she would eventually be expected to convert, gives us a somewhat less open

⁴⁸⁵ *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* translated with commentary by 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, Mayland: Amana, 1996, Sura 5:5 note 700

⁴⁸⁶ A. An-na'im (ed.), *Inter-religious marriages among Muslims: negotiating religious and social identity in family and community*, New Delhi: Global media publications, 2005 p25

⁴⁸⁷ *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* translated with commentary by 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, Mayland: Amana, 1996, Sura 5:5 note 700

impression. It would appear to be tolerant - in the sense of putting up with, or accepting something one does not really approve of - rather than accepting and respecting a wife's non-Islamic religion. Still this is a considerably broader understanding than many religions offer to inter-religious marriage and conversion to Islam does open the way for any person to marry a Muslim man or woman.

It is interesting to compare this with the Hindu approach. The Hindu approach appears broader and more tolerant in terms of religion, not requiring conversion, yet more restrictive in terms of social convention (which is undergirded by religion) governing who may marry whom and with arranged marriage the norm. In this respect, therefore conversion does not open the way for marriage to a Hindu, and the choice of individuals is not affirmed the way it is in Islam. Perhaps one could say that whilst to marry a Hindu there may be more obstacles to face, once married to a Hindu there may be more tolerance (and even incorporation) of different religious practices and beliefs. On the other hand, Islam offers a way for any-one to marry a partner of their choice provided the partner converts (or is a woman from the People of the Book), yet it expects conversion and is thus less open in terms of religious practice and belief.

Examples do exist occasionally in history of inter-religious marriages being acceptable. For instance high ranking Rajput officials in Akbar's empire, offered their daughters in marriage to him, and notably he did not require their conversion, but allowed the introduction of their practices into his court.

Rajput thakurs [Hindus] who offered their daughters for marriage created a powerful bond between themselves and the Timurid [dynasty of the Mughal

rulers] house. The second primary unit of recognition for each Rajput was the brotherhood to which he gave daughters and from which he received wives.⁴⁸⁸

It is therefore clear that at times, such as in this example, other factors were more powerful than religion, in terms of arranging marriage. However, John Richards notes that this was 'not reciprocal, since no women came from the Mughal side'.⁴⁸⁹ Other Rajputs felt that giving noblewomen to the emperor and princes was disgraceful, yet this remains powerful evidence that although the norm is against inter-religious marriage, there is another side to the story. Similarly in modern times whilst inter-religious marriages are not the norm and are usually disapproved if not outright condemned, there are occasions where they do happen amicably. For instance bonds of caste and Biraderi may be more of an issue than religion.⁴⁹⁰ In recent times, case studies show that inter-religious marriages do happen – regardless of whether they are forbidden and disapproved by the religious authorities or not.

Many of the attitudes of the religions have persisted and been exacerbated by modern events. Thus although for Hindus the reasons against inter-religious marriage may not primarily be religious, and there is ample evidence of the emergence of syncretic traditions between Sufism and *bhakti* devotion in particular, the devastation of the Partition has made Hindu and Muslim primary categories of distinction and has left deep

⁴⁸⁸ John Richards, *The Mughal Empire [The New Cambridge History of India]*, Cambridge: CUP, 1993 p23

⁴⁸⁹ Richards, *Mughal Empire*, p23

⁴⁹⁰ Prem Chowdhry *Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples: Gender, caste and patriarchy in Northern India*, New Delhi: OUP, 2007 pp.165-8 Chowdhry's study based in Haryana found that for some couples who were both intercaste and Hindu-Muslim, caste was more of an issue than religion. A case study of a couple from the Mewat region demonstrates how only the media portrayed it as a communal affair, for locals it was a Dalit/non-Dalit controversy

scars in the psyche and histories of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.⁴⁹¹ It is likely that this event is behind Chopra and Punwani's finding that in Indian inter-religious marriages among Muslims, an anti-Muslim sentiment was particularly strong amongst all communities. In three of their cases we see this directly - one or both of the parents had directly experienced the bloody partition.⁴⁹² It is worth bearing in mind these attitudes of the main religions in India as we proceed to examine Gandhi's approach.

Outline of Gandhi's changing attitude to inter-religious marriage

Gandhi's hostility to inter-religious marriage was not an attitude he held consistently throughout his life. Gandhi underwent a dramatic change in his approach and by his death, welcomed them. Even so, certain themes and ideas persist, many remaining relevant and contentious today. His initial opposition as well as his later welcoming throw new light on his ideas about inter-religious relations. Gandhi's interpretation of religion, which emphasises internal aspects of spirituality and moral virtue over ritual observance and orthodox belief, and his well-established pluralism provide a framework for his understanding of inter-religious marriage. Difference in label between religions and ritual or group belonging is subsumed beneath the unity of all religions. As early as 1905 he encouraged the marriage of Henry (a Jew by birth) and Millie Polak (a Christian), saying

⁴⁹¹ Examples of syncretic tradition include Kabir from Northern India, Satya-pīr of Bengal, the Chishti Order and the Sant tradition in general. Peter van der Veer however, questions the assumption that syncretism leads to or is indicative of tolerance in his study of Sufi saint worship at which many Hindus seek Darshan. Peter van der Veer, 'Syncretism, multiculturalism and the discourse of tolerance' in Stewart and Shaw *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism; the politics of religious synthesis* London: Routledge, 1994 pp.196-211

⁴⁹² An-na'im p94

they shared the common religion of morality.⁴⁹³ Although his approach to his son betrays the opposite, it was in a different, Indian context, over-laid with the Hindu-Muslim communal situation.

One of Gandhi's earliest references to inter-religious marriage is his public response to a letter in 1925 asking why he repudiates marriage between the 'untouchable' and 'touchable'. Gandhi defends the restrictions placed on marriages, and in doing so mentions religion as a bar.

With me marriage is no necessary test of friendship even between husband and wife, let alone their respective clans. I cannot picture to myself a time when all mankind will have one religion. As a rule there will, therefore, be the religious bar. People will marry in their own religion. Similarly there will persist the territorial restriction. The caste restriction is an extension of the same principle.⁴⁹⁴

In this statement Gandhi takes marriage within one's own religion as a given. He does not consider whether this is as it should be; it is simply the accepted state of affairs.

The next instance is the most significant – that of his second eldest son Manilal, who wished to marry Fatima Gool. Gandhi's reaction as seen in his letter to Manilal, quoted above, is revealing. He opposes the idea *on the basis of their different religions*. A number of points are drawn up by him: conversion for the sake of marriage; practicalities

⁴⁹³ The couple were already engaged but had been delaying due to financial constraint. Henry, a close associate of Gandhi, was a vegetarian, Tolstoyan and Theosophist who met Millie at South Place Ethical Society, London and following their marriage the couple joined Gandhi's own household in South Africa. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p273; Chatterjee *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends* p42

⁴⁹⁴ CWMG Vol. 26 p284-6

and diet (it is note-worthy that Gandhi draws attention to meat-eating and child-rearing); and the Hindu-Muslim question, regarding which he categorically states, 'Intercommunal marriages are no solution to this problem.'

By 1931 we see a fundamental change in Gandhi's attitude. He has gone from saying in 1926 'Your desire is contrary to dharma. If you stick to Hinduism and Fatima follows Islam it will be like putting two swords in one sheath; or you may both lose your faith.'⁴⁹⁵ To 'Even here, so long as each is free to follow his or her religion, I can see no moral objection to such unions.'⁴⁹⁶ This article, *Caste and the Communal Question*, presents a considered and public response to inter-religious marriages. The first salient point is that for Gandhi 'Marriage outside one's community stands on a different footing' (to inter-caste and inter-provincial marriages). With caste Gandhi wishes to erode the differences and distinctions, whereas he has no wish to erode the different religions. Secondly, Gandhi now maintains inter-religious harmony and inter-religious marriage are two distinct questions. Inter-religious marriages will not promote peace although they may follow it. Indeed here he holds the view that they may aggravate the situation: 'I can see nothing but disaster following any attempt to advocate Hindu-Muslim unions so long as the relations between the two remain strained.' He supports this by drawing attention to the continuation of war and strife in Europe in spite of marriages between the countries of Europe. Significantly, at this point, he sees no moral objections and agrees that such marriages may take place and be happy in exceptional circumstances whilst remaining shy of general advocacy. This acceptance of inter-religious marriage, with its

⁴⁹⁵ CWMG Vol. 30 p229

⁴⁹⁶ CWMG Vol. 46 p302-4

implication of two religions co-existing in a family, is a milestone in Gandhi's development.

In 1932 a concrete instance comes to his attention, a marriage between a *Bhatia* girl and Muslim youth.⁴⁹⁷ His opinion remains similar to that above, finding no moral objection so long as each can follow their respective religion and their love is pure. Though he expresses caution that inter-religious marriage is a 'risky experiment' and difficulties are likely to arise. As with Manilal's case, food arises as a practical concern. This attitude is significantly different to the clear opposition to his son's proposed marriage. He retains a neutrality, neither advocating for nor agitating against such unions but referring to each individual's case, that is absent in his letter to Manilal.

By 1942 a case of specific individuals who *should* marry in spite of their religions came to his attention. Gandhi publicly supported Indira Nehru's engagement to Firoz Gandhi, one of India's most famous inter-religious marriages between a Hindu and Parsi. Given the closeness between Mahatma Gandhi and the Nehru family this is extremely significant. His article in *Harijan* gives details of this.⁴⁹⁸ He had spoken with both Firoz and Indira and he refers to the specifics of the case: Firoz Gandhi's long connection with the family; his acceptability to Jawaharlal Nehru; his help to Kamala Nehru, 'He was like a son to her'; and the natural intimacy which grew honourably between the couple ripening to mutual attraction. Gandhi 'received several angry and abusive letters', yet 'Not a single

⁴⁹⁷ CWMG Vol. 49 p478 *Bhatia* refers to the caste group from Northern India to which this girl belongs. It is one of the 'higher' castes and is common across Sikhism as well as Hinduism, although in this case the girl in question is a Hindu *Bhatia*.

⁴⁹⁸ M K Gandhi *Women and Social Injustice* [Fourth Edition] Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1954 pp.182-3. All the quotations on this engagement are taken from this article.

correspondent has anything against Firoz Gandhi as a man. His only crime in their estimation is that he happens to be a Parsi.'

As well as referring to the individual circumstance, Gandhi outlines general principles on inter-religious marriage. As always he opposes either party changing their religion, which is not 'a garment to be cast of at will', in this case he knew each intended to remain in their own faith. Following his argument he concludes

It would have been cruelty to refuse to consent to this engagement. As time advances such unions are bound to multiply with benefit to society. At present we have not even reached the stage of mutual toleration, but as toleration grows into mutual respect for religions, such unions will be welcomed.

He continues to enunciate his view of religion which embraces the teachings of all the great prophets. This religion which will survive is broad and has as its only test character, not title or wealth. Thus he connects his broad religious pluralism to support for inter-religious marriage in contrast to his earlier thought. His final sentence passes judgement on those opposing the marriage and seeks their change of heart.

I invite them to shed their wrath and bless the forthcoming marriage. Their letters betray ignorance, intolerance and prejudice – a species of untouchability, dangerous because not easily to be so classified.

This strong condemnation of opposition to interfaith marriage supports my thesis that Gandhi matured and developed in his conception of inter-religious relations from his earlier limited pluralism to this breadth of vision.

In May 1945 he reinforces this position. Writing to Parikh, regarding the latter's book, Gandhi writes, 'Where parents are wise there should be no difficulty even about marriages between persons of different religions. Do we not look upon all religions as equal?'⁴⁹⁹ I suggest that this demonstrates that Gandhi has gone beyond his reservations of 1932, that inter-religious marriage is a risky experiment. Now 'there should be no difficulty' and such things should be 'quite easy'. I think this has become a general principle for Gandhi, not only in reference to particular individuals who may be exceptional, such as Indira and Firoz, but one to be generally propounded. This is highly significant for understanding Gandhi's evolving religious pluralism. The rhetorical question 'do we not look upon all religions as equal?' brings in a theological dimension. This brings a challenge to his former view. There does however remain the condition of 'wise parents'.

This section has given a brief outline of the change Gandhi underwent and identified some persistent themes, in particular conversion, practicalities and the communal situation. Next I shall draw out the reasoning and implications of his opinions and factors behind his change, in the context of Gandhi's developing thought and their religious significance. The next chapter shall deal with social context.

⁴⁹⁹ CWMG Vol.80 p78

The meaning of marriage and restrictions through the eyes of a *Brahmachari*

In his earlier years, Gandhi wished to maintain all restrictions in choice of marriage partner. This makes him appear a traditionalist. Gandhi spells out his reasoning in terms of *brahmacharya*. In South Africa and continuing during the early period of his return to India he had a negative view of marriage, as a departure from the ideal of *brahmacharya*, refusing to celebrate marriages in his *ashram*.⁵⁰⁰ He thought marriage was a concession, an institution whose purpose was to engender restraint, limiting the sexual impulse to one person. Therefore all further restraints were viewed positively, as an aid in restraining one's sexual orientation and the field of available partners.

Later he reversed this initial support for restriction, actively encouraging the breaking of boundaries of caste and province. There appear to be two main motivations behind this change. First, the desire to create a unified and egalitarian society; breaking barriers and distinctions between communities through marriage supported this cause. This is considered in detail in chapter eight. The second motivation appears to be that Gandhi's opinion of marriage and interpretation of *brahmacharya* changed. He came to see marriage and the sexual urge as natural (whilst still holding to *brahmacharya* as the ideal) and supported marriage as a fine thing if it was for the purpose of procreation and rendering service to society. He responded in 1942 to a social worker who had wished to remain celibate in order to serve better and considered herself 'fallen' after marrying 'the mate of her dreams'.⁵⁰¹ Gandhi 'tried to rid her mind of this delusion' saying 'Marriage is

⁵⁰⁰ Jordens *Gandhi's Religion* p186

⁵⁰¹ Gandhi *Women and Social Injustice* p179-180

a natural thing in life, and to consider it derogatory in any sense is wholly wrong.’

Therefore one should ‘give it [marriage] its due place and make of it the sacrament it is.’

brahmacharya became re-interpreted as restraining all senses and desires rather than referring only to sexual urges, and even sex was permitted as not incongruous with *brahmacharya* if done for the sole purpose of begetting children. This new interpretation enabled a loosening of the restrictions and more positive view of marriage.⁵⁰² This gradual liberalisation toward marriage has a direct bearing on the changes Gandhi underwent regarding inter-religious marriages, it gives context to the views Gandhi held in the 1920s about sexual conduct which clearly impacted upon any question of inter-religious marriage. For instance our understanding of his opposition to Manilal’s desire to marry Fatima is augmented by the knowledge that at that time he upheld other social restrictions in marriage and had been advocating *brahmacharya* to his son.

In early defences of restriction Gandhi claims ‘With me marriage is no necessary test of friendship even between husband and wife, let alone their respective clans’.⁵⁰³ Yet as he matures he addresses himself more to questions of marriage, its meaning and choice of partners and even celebrates marriages in his *ashram*. His statements on the purpose of marriage always emphasise mutual friendship and love, with husband and wife as equal partners and help-mates. This may reflect his own marriage which was based on partnership and friendship - particularly in what Gandhi relates as the better days after his vow of *brahmacharya*, as opposed to his self-confessed initial lustful and controlling

⁵⁰² See Jordens chapter “*The potency of perfect chastity*”, pp. 185-198 for more on Gandhi’s interpretation of *brahmacharya*, which is well referenced to primary sources, giving particular attention to the chronology of his changing ideas.

⁵⁰³ CWMG, Vol. 26 pp.284-6

attitude toward Kasturba.⁵⁰⁴ In his later years, marriage is representative of friendship and respect.

The letters from Gandhi to his son, Manilal between 1909 and 1926, reveal his thinking on marriage. Gandhi had become celibate (within marriage) since 1909, though he had made unsuccessful attempts to observe it in previous years.⁵⁰⁵ He was convinced of the importance of *brahmacharya* and its necessity for the advancement of the soul, a common vow and ideal in the Hindu tradition and also exalted in other religions. He remained aware that *brahmacharya* was not for all, most people desired marriage, yet it was the ideal. In a letter from 1909 Gandhi encourages Manilal to adopt celibacy. Gandhi says he is against marriage to satisfy carnal desire, and encourages Manilal not to think of marriage even at the age of 25.⁵⁰⁶ Again in 1922, Gandhi writes to his son, at the instigation of Naidu and Ramdas, who believe Manilal 'deep down in [his] heart' desires marriage. Manilal had been under a vow of celibacy since being caught embracing a girl from the *ashram* and about to kiss her, in contravention of *ashram* rules. Gandhi writes that Manilal's promise is not binding. He alone can absolve himself, for it is only proper for a vow to be made to oneself. However he encourages Manilal to retain it. 'It is my opinion that whatever peace you get is because of your self-imposed binding.'⁵⁰⁷ He goes on to say the happiness he derives from marriage to *Ba* is due to their friendship,

⁵⁰⁴ Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p9 describes how his lustfulness and jealousy impacted his marriage as a child and youth.

⁵⁰⁵ Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, pp.179-186

⁵⁰⁶ CWMG Vol. 9 p352-3

⁵⁰⁷ CWMG Vol.23 p101

expounding the virtue of celibacy. However Gandhi emphasises Manilal is free to make his own decision; he writes as a friend to give counsel, not to command as a father.⁵⁰⁸

Gandhi encourages Manilal to remain celibate, and not to think of marriage, yet he is aware of his son's desire for marriage. To an extent, then, when in 1926 Manilal expresses his desire to marry Fatima his father views this potential inter-religious union through the prism of his ideas on marriage as a *Brahmachari*. Hence Gandhi writes:

In proposing this marriage you have thought only of momentary pleasure. You have not at all considered your ultimate happiness.

Pure love is as between brother and sister. Whereas here the main urge is carnal pleasure.

I want you to get out of your infatuation.⁵⁰⁹

Mahatma Gandhi was at this time in India, whilst Manilal had remained with the community in South Africa, therefore he was not present to see the relationship. In fact Manilal's son, Arun Gandhi, writes

The Fatima referred to is some-one I remember fondly from childhood, a close family friend, on best of terms with both my parents, whom I called Aunt Timmy.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁸ CWMG Vol. 23 p101-2

⁵⁰⁹ CWMG Vol. 30 p229-30

⁵¹⁰ Arun Gandhi *Daughter of Midnight; the child bride of Gandhi* London: Blake Publishing, 1998 p240

Clearly there was a strong bond to survive this disappointment in romance, yet continue in friendship with the whole family. There must have been more depth to Manilal and Fatima's relationship than lust and infatuation alone.

Although his approach to Manilal is informed by this assumption, shortly after this, rather than continuing to encourage celibacy, a marriage was arranged for Manilal to Sushila Mushrawala, the Hindu daughter of family friends, which took place the following year. Kasturba had more of a hand in this than her husband, she had wished to welcome daughters-in-law for many years, and Arun's account recalls with touching detail her pleasure in finally doing so.⁵¹¹ It would appear the proposal shook Gandhi, changing his response to his son and to his wife's wish to see her sons happily married. This suggests that more important than remaining celibate was not to marry across religions, his attitude to marriage as such changed and a marriage within the religion was arranged and welcomed.

Throughout his life Gandhi issues warnings against inter-religious marriage based on lust. This caveat remains in his later statements welcoming inter-religious marriages. When describing them as a risky experiment in the '30s he says 'I would not oppose it if their love is pure...'⁵¹² and in 1947, when 'an inter-religious marriage was a welcome event whenever it took place. His stipulation was that such a connection was not to be a product of lust.'⁵¹³ In the case of self-chosen marriage, and particularly one which does not fall in line with the usual social practice of marrying within one's religion, Gandhi's

⁵¹¹ Arun Gandhi *Daughter of Midnight* pp.240-2

⁵¹² CWMG, Vol. 49 p 478,

⁵¹³ CWMG (Gandhiserve) Vol. 94 p23, Harijan 16.3.1947

main concern is that it could be the result of desire. This stipulation is, therefore, no departure from his ideas regarding any marriage.

In summary, Gandhi's unusual attitude to marriage, as a *brahmachari*, meant for him restriction in marriage is encouraged and noble. Religion is far more important than marriage and conjugal love. The values of marriage and love held so strongly by most, take a relatively low importance in his life, yet he did truly love and value his wife's partnership, support and friendship and often uses marital love as an analogy for love of religion. Throughout the 30s and 40s, as his approach to marriage softened, we even find marriage becoming symbolic of the abolition of prejudice, forging bonds and friendship, and this unity in society takes precedence over controlling or limiting the sexual urge through restrictions in marriage.⁵¹⁴

Conversion and marriage – a new perspective on Gandhi's opposition to missionaries

Gandhi adamantly repudiates conversion for the sake of marriage – curiously, this is the opposite approach to that usually advocated. Where religions permit marriage to someone from another religion it is commonly on the condition (or at least with the hope) of conversion. Within his vastly changing perspective on inter-religious marriages this issue remains consistent. When opposing inter-religious marriage Gandhi ruled out conversion as a way to overcome the obstacle; and once accepting inter-religious marriage it was with the proviso that both partners were free to continue to practice their own religion.

⁵¹⁴ This social element of marriage across boundaries is taken up in detail in the following chapter.

The longest paragraph in his 1926 letter to Manilal is dedicated to conversion, which is an indication of his strength of feeling. He is concerned to see both his son and Fatima remain true to their respective religions.

It is not dharma, but only *adharma* if Fatima agrees to conversion just for marrying you. Faith is not a thing like a garment which can be changed to suit our convenience. For the sake of dharma a person shall forgo matrimony, forsake his home, why, even lay down his life; but for nothing may faith be given up.⁵¹⁵

Faith is the ultimate concern, for Gandhi, which can be changed or abandoned for nothing else.

Gandhi is consistently opposed to conversions of convenience. This is most evident in his critique of Christian missionaries. To assert that all faiths are equal meant in practice one must entirely give up the idea of conversion. If one retains the desire to convert it shows that one considers one's own faith to be superior.⁵¹⁶ He applies this equally to Fatima's possible conversion from Islam to his own faith, Hinduism. This testifies Gandhi's consistent commitment to maintaining one's own religion and regarding all religions as equal and sufficient for their adherents, and his impartiality for his own religion.

There is some ambiguity in interpreting his references to *dharma* and *adharma*. It is unclear whether he refers to *dharma* in the particular sense from within the Hindu tradition, the particular duties and rules which Manilal ought to be conforming to, or in

⁵¹⁵ CWMG Vol. 30 pp.229-30

⁵¹⁶ Young India, 22nd March 1928 in Ellsberg *Gandhi on Christianity* p60

the universal sense of morality and immorality. Given his later references to *dharma* and morality in relation to inter-religious marriages, it is my inclination to interpret it in the universal sense.

This opposition to conversion in practise demonstrates that he did not desire for all religions to become one or merge into one-another as critics of pluralism often fear. His pluralism maintains the distinctions and independent functioning of each religion. When he says all religions are one, there is no syncretic agenda.⁵¹⁷ His vision can be contrasted to Swami Vivekananda.⁵¹⁸ Vivekananda imagines a time when all distinctions between religions will be annihilated as all progress towards the one goal and discover their true unity and identity in *Advaita*. He thus accepted Western followers and converts, such as Sister Nivedita, to the Ramakrishna Mission.⁵¹⁹ Gandhi on the contrary did not see or desire a time when all religions would become one, 'When enthusiastic fellow-workers from overseas wanted to become Hindus he dissuaded them, urging them to root themselves more firmly in their own faith'.⁵²⁰ He discouraged his western disciple, Madelaine Slade from conversion to Hinduism, saying she should learn more about Christianity, though he continued to encourage her in learning and drawing inspiration from Hinduism and gave her the Indian name 'Mirabehn'.⁵²¹ His vision sees each religion recognising that all are one and thus living in harmony, co-operation and enriching the

⁵¹⁷ For illuminating discussion of the value-laden term 'syncretism' in religion see Stewart and Shaw *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism; the politics of religious synthesis* London: Routledge, 1994 especially 'Introduction: Problematizing syncretism' pp.1-26

⁵¹⁸ Chatterjee *Religious Diversity* pp.51 and 177

⁵¹⁹ P S Daniel *Hindu Response to Religious Pluralism* p151 offers a critique of this in an advocate of tolerance

⁵²⁰ Chatterjee *Gandhi's Religious Thought* p180

⁵²¹ Chatterjee *Gandhi's Religious Thought* provides the example of his translation and explanation of the Ashram Bhajanavali for her benefit p128

others, it does not envisage an elimination of the differences and distinctions between religions. A consequence of this is his opposition to conversion, particularly conversions for convenience.

However, Gandhi did recognise that in rare individual circumstances conversion could be acceptable. His condition is a 'heart conversion', a complete transformation of one's life, which may happen within one's own religion or come with an outward conversion. His response to his eldest son Harilal's conversion to Islam was to welcome it *if* it signified a true conversion and acceptance from his heart. To the Press he said 'If his acceptance was from the heart and free from any worldly considerations, I should have no quarrel. For I believe Islam to be as true a religion as my own.'⁵²²

Gandhi's insights into religion and the depth of his pluralism made conversion appear to him unnecessary as well as immoral. It is *unnecessary* as the great teachers, scriptures and insights of religions do not belong to one religion alone. His vision and practice was to incorporate all that is good within other religions without the need to change labels or communities. He was expert in learning from other religions, adopting their ideas, terminology and practice and incorporating these into his own religious life. He never felt that his admiration for Jesus or the life of the Prophet Muhammad necessitated a change of faith. The way he drew on other traditions to enrich his own life, without changing his

⁵²² CWMG vol. 69 (Gandhiserve) p76; this public attitude is corroborated in private correspondence: he writes to Mirabehn, 'if he had no selfish purpose behind, I should have nothing to say against the step', to Ramdas 'there could be no harm in his being converted to Islam with understanding and selfless motives...I shall be spared all the mental pain if I find my impression wrong and he turns a new leaf...we should indeed feel satisfied if he truly practises in his life what is best in Islam.'

own commitment to Hinduism has been well-documented by authors such as Margaret Chatterjee.⁵²³

The major source of information on Gandhi's attitude to conversion as *immoral* comes from his discourse with missionaries and the specific context and concerns expressed through this. An especially useful compilation is Ellsberg's *Gandhi on Christianity*, containing many discussions of conversion.⁵²⁴ Gandhi's opposition in the context of marriage offers a fresh angle to supplement this. A review of Gandhi's ideas of conversion shows strong criticism of conversions of convenience, conversions in name alone, for material benefit. The context for much of this was the material benefits held out, especially to 'lower caste' Hindus, upon conversion and better opportunities through colonial patronage. In conversion for marriage these colonial overtones are not present, yet his objections and rationale persist. To convert in order to marry someone is to convert for convenience, not from conviction. This is no conversion at all so far as Gandhi is concerned. The conversion Gandhi desires and supports is a change of attitude, of heart and a change in one's way of life, not switching from one religion to another, but one way of life to another, which can occur within one's original religion. For Gandhi the meaning of Religion in its highest sense is to live in accordance with religious insights and most importantly Truth. One must be authentic to be religious.⁵²⁵ A conversion of convenience in which one professes a different religion, not out of conviction but for another motive, be it hope of a better education and economic prospects in a mission

⁵²³ See Chatterjee, *Gandhi's religious thought and Religious Diversity*

⁵²⁴ Ellsberg *Gandhi on Christianity*

⁵²⁵ See Chapters two and three for Gandhi's ideas of Religion and Truth

school or to marry some-one from another religion, is the reverse of this. It shows a lack of sincerity, it lacks the virtue he held as the essence of religion, truth.

Whilst Gandhi's ideas on inter-religious marriage changed, this factor did not. He came to agree with marriages between people of different religions, but not of conversion for the sake of such alliances. Thus in 1932 he finds no moral objection, 'if the Bhatia girl can follow her religion and the Muslim youth his.'⁵²⁶ Gandhi infers that it would be immoral for either to convert or forsake their religion for the sake of marrying one another. In 1942 he supports Indira and Firoz Gandhi's marriage but would oppose either's conversion and in 1945 he envisages the couple retaining their own religions and giving the children a liberal education in each religion. For an Indian in the early-mid 20th century this is a radical position to espouse.⁵²⁷ For Gandhi such a marriage necessitates complete removal of the desire to convert. Religious pluralism therefore becomes a *pre-condition* for inter-religious marriage.

We see here that Gandhi's opposition to conversion for marriage is in line with his wider religious thinking. It is testimony to the sincerity of his religious pluralism, which values each religion in its particularity. It maintains the principle that true conversion is not from one religion to another, but conversion of the heart. It is revealing of his impartiality that he would regard Fatima's conversion to Hinduism *adharma*. This can be

⁵²⁶ CWMG Vol. 49 p478

⁵²⁷ Amrita Jaisinghani's short book *Inter-Communal Marriage* Karachi: Bharat Printing Press, 1931 addresses the numerous criticisms and objections put forward when the Akbar Ashram declared its support for inter-religious (specifically Hindu-Muslim) marriage. This book makes it obvious how contentious such a proposition was, even among those 'who stood for Hindu-Muslim co-operation in the days of the Non-Co-operation Movement' (p1)

contrasted to the way most religions official policy where permissive of inter-religious marriage seeks the conversion of the partner from a different faith.⁵²⁸

This impartiality lends credence to his criticisms of Christian mission. Jorden's has shown how Gandhi still upheld Hinduism as pre-eminent among religions, only coming to a position of equal consideration for all religions in 1930.⁵²⁹ Yet, in spite of his profession, at least in regard to the desire to convert, which is indicative of viewing one's own religion as superior, in practice Gandhi was displaying true pluralism, seeing the faith of each person as sufficient and fulfilling for them as early as 1926. This shows his objections to come not only from his context and the association of Christianity with colonialism but from deeper thought and values, which reject conversion in its totality. This is an important source for countering evaluations, such as Anandan's, which see a prejudice in Gandhi's attitude to Christianity, due to his silence on re-conversion to Hinduism of low-caste Christian converts.⁵³⁰

Following his view of conversion of the heart, we see the emphasis on practice over confession of beliefs. An interesting remark is made regarding Fatima's possible conversion. 'May not Fatima have meat at her father's? If she does not, she has as good as changed her religion.' Practice is the key here. If she has changed her practice and does not eat meat, even at her father's, she has converted in its essential. The question is not what religion she may profess, but practice. This focus on orthopraxy over orthodoxy

⁵²⁸ 'Man proposes, religion opposes' in Jonathan A. Romain, *Till Faith Do Us Part; couples who fall in love across the religious divide*, London: Fount, 1996 pp.19-47; Even Hindus, whose classical practise and theology does not support conversion often request it from non-Hindu spouses Bambawale pp.151-153 and p155

⁵²⁹ Jordens, *Gandhi's Religion* Chapter 8, 'Religious pluralism' pp.148-158

⁵³⁰ Anandan, *God for all, God for me* pp.68-9

is a significant difference between confessional faiths and Hindu religion. This is particularly evident in Gandhi although he gives it his own twist in focussing practice of religion in moral rather than ritual practice, and on *Dharma* as universal values over *dharma* as the duties associated with one's particular station in life. It is notable that meat-eating is the issue here. His moral sensibilities regarding vegetarianism were aroused in the 1890s in London as well as being intrinsic to practice of *ahimsa*.⁵³¹ He focuses on a moral praxis, not ritual aspects of pollution or purity.

In summary, in the context of marriage, we are shown the axiomatic importance of religious pluralism in terms of equal regard and respect for religions in Gandhi's thought and how Gandhi asserted that this cannot be dissociated from having regard for *people* of different religions. It has a practical and humanitarian base as well as being a theoretical stance. In the context of marriage to expect another person to convert for the sake of marrying you, is to disregard and disrespect their religious affiliation. Gandhi was astute and alert to the subtle attitudes reflected by such things.

From conversion as an objection to welcoming multi-religious homes

In his 1926 letter to Manilal, Gandhi is not contemplating an abstract idea of inter-religious marriage. One must bear in mind Manilal's Hindu and Fatima's Islamic religion. Hindu *dharma* maintains many restrictions upon who one may marry and at the time of Gandhi's opposition he upheld the restrictions of caste and province which he later rejected. In the India of Gandhi's time where arranged marriages were the norm, with

⁵³¹ Gandhi *An Autobiography* (Dover) pp. 43 and 50-52

new partners joining extended families, marriage is a question of family compatibility as much as individual compatibility. This adds another dimension to the question of conversion, the effect on the family. Even should an individual convert the respective families would be of different religions.

The Qur'an specifies that a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim man. Thus Gandhi's opposition to the marriage was probably formulated with the assumption that for the marriage to take place Fatima would have to give up her religious allegiance.⁵³² This assumption changes over time, as Gandhi comes to believe restrictions can be successfully overridden and society changed in a positive way, first with regard to inter-caste and inter-provincial marriages and finally with inter-religious ones. His opposition to conversion can be seen as a motive in his opposition to a marriage between Fatima and Manilal. Therefore once he has thrown out the notion that conversion would be required he is more open to inter-religious marriage.

Ranjit Sau picks up on Gandhi's objections to inter-religious marriage to argue that Gandhi 'envisaged India as a society of permanently discrete communities'⁵³³ which in spite of Gandhi's desire for inter-communal harmony 'perpetuates the sharp edges of demarcation and brings friction and bruises.'⁵³⁴ Sau was challenged on this view by a letter to the editor citing Gandhi's 1932 letter regarding the marriage of the *Bhatia* girl

⁵³² Although, Fatima in fact came from a progressive family, one of her sister's married out of the religion with no repercussions, and others were upset with Manilal for not marrying Fatima. Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie *Gandhi's prisoner* pp.175-177

⁵³³ Ranjit Sau 'From Sanskritisation to Hindi-isation and Hindu-isation: The 13th Lok Sabha' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, nos.42 and 43, 1999 <http://www.epw.in/commentary/sanskritisation-hindi-isation-and-hindu-isation.html> accessed 21st September 2012

⁵³⁴ Sau, *From Sanskritisation*

and Muslim youth, in which Gandhi says he would not object so long as their love is pure and both parties remain free to practice their respective religions. Sau responds that ‘...this condition is, everyone knows self-contradictory, for nobody can meet it in the prevailing situation.’⁵³⁵

I contend that Sau’s is a misreading of Gandhi, who was not using objection to conversion as a subtle ploy to maintain opposition to inter-religious marriage but rather maintained the objection from the basis of his deep antipathy to conversion. As we see in Gandhi’s later writings and encouragement of inter-religious marriage he believed, with time, that it was possible to have inter-religious marriages in which each maintained their own religion. Sau’s interpretation hinges on a selective reading; it takes Gandhi’s original conservatism as representative and overlooks how he changed. It also dismisses Gandhi’s idiosyncratic interpretation of Hinduism, thus picking out Gandhi’s preservation of *varna* without regarding how he redefined the concept. This leads Sau to the erroneous conclusion that for the couple to maintain their respective religions would be impossible and therefore Gandhi’s views were contradictory.

Gandhi’s wide and pluralist interpretation of religion would still recognize a Hindu as a Hindu and maintain their caste in spite of violating caste restrictions. He believed the prevailing idea of caste was a false mutation of the originally pure idea. Gandhi did not depend on the recognition of others, participation in rituals and maintaining purity to validate one’s religion. Conversion may seem preferable or necessary for the sake of

⁵³⁵ Ranjit Sau, ‘Gandhi and Hindu-Muslim Marriages’ in *Economic and Political Weekly*, (Letters to the Editor) Vol. 35, no. 3, 2000 p74 accessed via <http://epw.in.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/epw/user/curResult.jsp> 10th August 2011

marriage, from the commonly held definition of religion and belonging. However, from the mature Gandhian perspective, wherein religion is understood by its essence rather than such prescriptive, dogmatic or legalistic ideas, it *is* possible to follow one's own religions in a marriage providing there is mutual regard and respect from both parties for the other person and their religion. The mature Gandhian perspective with its emphasis on individual conscience in religion and following one's own truth, welcomes inter-religious marriage and offers an alternative to the common rejection from society faced by those in or contemplating inter-religious marriage.

Gandhi's repudiation of conversion for the sake of inter-religious marriage stands alone on the theological and pluralist basis from which he opposes all conversion. It is corroborated by the evidence from a sociological perspective. Bambawale found 'that conversion without any real love for the religion may not bring harmony in the family.'⁵³⁶ Kannan with similar findings adds it is 'a superficial act from the point of view of religious integrity.'⁵³⁷ The lack of family harmony seen in conversions for the sake of marriage without conviction, seem to result from the inability of the converted partner to adjust to the new religion and the revival of the old religion. This insincerity is observed by the other partner and may cause dissatisfaction and problems. In the five cases Kannan found where there was unsatisfactory adjustment to an inter-religious marriage, insincerity in religion, specifically the return of the original religion after conversion was identified as a

⁵³⁶ Bambawale *Inter-religious Marriages* p155

⁵³⁷ Kannan *Intercaste* p176

cause.⁵³⁸ Bambawale found that 'All the converts (100%) confessed that they chose conversion due to the spouse's insistence and now found that they were unable to adjust to the new faith.'⁵³⁹ She found conversion to an organised group may help alleviate this situation, by providing support and instruction in the new religion. Although all had trouble adjusting most (57% of female and 82% of male) converts did observe the rituals and rites of the adopted group. The resurgence of the old religion and lack of adjustment in the marriage resulting from insincere conversion suggests it is a myth to believe converting in itself will facilitate an inter-religious marriage; where conviction is lacking it may cause further problems. Conversion itself, whilst potentially a turning point in life and celebration may also prove traumatic, aside from the question of marriage, especially into an unfamiliar and culturally different tradition.⁵⁴⁰

Kannan identified that the 'most important reason for opposition [of the couples parents] in inter-religious marriages is fear that the child will be lost to them by conversion to another faith.'⁵⁴¹ This fear seems unsubstantiated by the desire of couples for reconciliation with the natal family. Yet often perceptions are more powerful than facts. If Gandhi's insistence that no conversion is permissible and each partner in an inter-religious marriage should remain in their own religion was accepted then a major reason for opposition to inter-religious marriages would be alleviated. Conversion remains a

⁵³⁸ Kannan *Intercaste* p178-9. These are a minority of cases and it is added that in four out of five of these cases there had not been reconciliation with the natal family, which may have exacerbated the situation.

⁵³⁹ Bambawale *Inter-religious Marriages* p157

⁵⁴⁰ See for instance Y. D. Tiwari's experience and recommendations for Indian Christianity, this is interesting in that he was a follower of Gandhi, receiving support from him when he was ostracised by other Hindus and received advice from C. F. Andrews on Christianity and the importance of maintaining contact and love for Hindus and his culture. Tiwari 'From Vedic Dharma to the Christian Faith' in R. S. Sugirtharajah and Cecil Hargreaves *Readings in Indian Christian Theology* London: SPCK, 1993 pp. 132-138

⁵⁴¹ Kannan *Inter-caste* p169

highly contentious issue in inter-religious marriages and Gandhi's opinions here against converting for marriage seem relevant and perceptive.

A few individuals in studies, however, were convinced of the new religion prior to marriage.⁵⁴² It is interesting to note that Gandhi's approach whilst alert to the problem of conversion, does not focus on the practicalities of converting: acceptance by society and adaptation to a new religion, including the challenge of bringing up children in an unfamiliar religion. His approach is based in his deep convictions about the nature of religion which excludes conversion on pluralist grounds and in particular conversions of convenience for any reason, including marriage. Religion is the primary concern. Conversions of convenience would be an act of insincerity, the very negation of Truth, the principle Gandhi held as the essence of religion.

The practicalities of dietary difference

In his objections to inter-religious marriage Gandhi draws upon practical issues, specifically diet. Although the reference to diet in his letter to Manilal is short it reflects his ideas on religion. Gandhi asks 'May not Fatima have meat at her father's? If she does not, she has as good as changed her religion.' In his phrase 'if she does not, she has as good as changed her religion' he shows his practical understanding of religion. The difference in religion is not just a question of belief, but how one lives. How are two people with contradictory diets and their associated religious/moral values to live

⁵⁴² Kannan *Intercaste* p176; A particular Hindu convert's attitudes are in many respects in line with Gandhi's ideas. He was convinced of Christ's teaching long before marriage, hence preferring to marry a Christian. According to him '...conversion is 'really a transformation of the heart' and these external symbols are only for recognition in the community. He further believes that one can remain in any religious faith in which he is born and yet practice Christianity.'

together? Diet receives another mention in the marriage of the *Bhatia* girl and Muslim youth. He says he would not oppose the marriage so long as their love is pure and their ideas about food are the same. Gandhi's commitment to vegetarianism was tenacious - he risked his own and his family members' lives rather than accept doctors' prescriptions of beef, eggs or chicken broth.⁵⁴³ Diet was one of Gandhi's expressions of religion. It is linked to spiritual endeavour, as most strikingly evidenced in his fasts and dietetic experiments. Meat-eating is the specific issue of concern in marriages between Hindus and Muslims. Vegetarianism has a moral and religious significance as well as the practical concerns.

In his Ashrams people from different religions were living together, and Gandhi often uses the analogy of a family to describe the *ashram*. At the inception of his *ashrams*, with communal living in South Africa, Gandhi had decided he could not ask Christian and Muslim *satyagrahis* accustomed to meat-eating to give it up in their adversity. This issue was pleasantly resolved by voluntary adoption of vegetarianism.⁵⁴⁴ Similarly during Ramadan Hindus joined with Muslims to fast.⁵⁴⁵ It is not an insoluble dilemma. It was one Gandhi himself encountered and overcame. Therefore, such practical concerns do not provide an adequate explanation of Gandhi's opposition to inter-religious marriage. Furthermore, Gandhi's acceptance of inter-religious marriage in later life came in spite of the fact of differing dietary norms and regulations.

⁵⁴³ Gandhi *An Autobiography* (Dover) pp.219-220 and 288

⁵⁴⁴ Gandhi *Satyagraha in SA* pp. 215-216

⁵⁴⁵ Gandhi *Satyagraha in SA* p225

When we compare Gandhi's attitude to other issues of differing dietary norms, we confirm that diet was not at the root of his opposition to inter-religious marriage. In encouraging marriages between different castes, provinces and among different sects, he was welcoming marriages between vegetarian and non-vegetarian Hindus with different practices. Yet he remained shy of encouraging inter-religious marriage for a significant time after this. When considering diet aside from marital concerns we find that as early as his South African days 'he berated as cowardly satyagrahi prisoners who would not eat food touched by untouchables'⁵⁴⁶ and as early as 1921 while still acknowledging the purpose of restrictions he decried the way 'today Hinduism seems to consist merely in eating and not-eating.'⁵⁴⁷ Although he would wish for all to choose to become vegetarian and considered it morally superior he was adamant that Hindus must not use it as a pretext for conflicts with Muslims.⁵⁴⁸

One should not over-emphasize the role of diet in explaining Gandhi's opposition to inter-religious marriages. These practicalities do not justify opposing inter-religious marriage. Gandhi changed his ideas. Diet and its attendant religious and moral attitudes are issues which are likely to arise and difficulties to be overcome in inter-religious marriages. They are persistent in many contexts, with many religions upholding differing food laws. For Muslims there is *halal* meat, for Jews, *kosher* and vegetarianism (to varying degrees, including restrictions on eggs, any stimulants and even root vegetables) among

⁵⁴⁶ Brown *Prisoner of Hope* p58

⁵⁴⁷ CWMG Vol. 21 pp.247-8

⁵⁴⁸ Gandhi *Way to Communal Harmony* pp.87-104

Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs and Hindus. Yet with love and friendship people adapt their habits to one another.

One may conclude that Gandhi's early objections to inter-religious marriage are founded on his restrictive ideas around marriage and an understanding of religion which did not permit inter-religious marriage. His use of diet as an objection is not valid, for as we see it does not stand that the objection is to a vegetarian and non-vegetarian marrying, for this could well be the case with a marriage between two Hindus.

Furthermore, when Gandhi came to accept inter-religious marriage the fact of different diets remains - only the attitude to it has changed. In his later life, as his view of inter-religious marriage becomes more positive, dietary difference is seen as an obstacle to overcome and something to consider before forming an alliance, not as a reason to oppose such marriages. To be aware of avoiding potential conflict and looking at long-term benefits and problems is important. The fact Gandhi underwent a change gives maturity to his later acceptance, for it comes with awareness of the obstacles and arguments against inter-religious marriage. The particular issue of diet he raises is a pertinent one for inter-religious marriage, and persistent. Concern for diet as pre-eminent is suggestive of the overarching importance of orthopraxy over orthodoxy in Gandhi's thought.

Inter-religious marriage as an intimate inter-religious dialogue

Marriage, representing two people joining together in a bond considered sacred by most religions, characterized by love, to form a family, makes inter-religious marriage

the most intimate form of inter-religious dialogue.⁵⁴⁹ The interviews of sociologists show the importance of the personal aspect and individual compatibility in creating harmony in inter-religious marriages. This supports one of the central arguments of my thesis, that friendship between people of different religions deserves more attention and promotion as a model of inter-religious dialogue which respects individuality and recognises that religion, and by implication inter-religious dialogue, encompasses the totality of life and personhood, it is not confined to explicitly religious contexts.

The fact of inter-religious marriage in the first place demonstrates a breaking of endogamous ideas regarding one's religion and opening in a radical way to other religions. The ways in which the couple and society then deal with the differences which exist between their religions and negotiate these reflects on the degree of pluralism, conservatism or loss of religion and its importance. To prevent abstracted discussion, I shall consider the ways in which couples in inter-religious marriages in India deal with these situations, as represented by the sociological studies. In doing this I shall pay special attention to issues of pluralism, such as the co-existence of two religions within the family and to the relevance of Gandhi's ideas.

In the majority of the inter-religious marriages studied, each partner maintained their own religion. This demonstrates that inter-religious marriage does not necessitate conversion or the loss of religion. In fact, in Chopra and Punwani's study it is observed

⁵⁴⁹ Buddhism is an exception where marriage is often seen as a secular contract. This has been identified and explored by Pieris as an area of potential difficulty in Buddhist-Christian marriage. Aloysius Pieris 'Doctrinal, Legal, and Cultural Factors in Buddhist-Christian Mixed Marriage' in *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988 pp. 83-109

that for many of the couples conversion was entirely out of the question.⁵⁵⁰ Bambawale explores the religious practices of couples in inter-religious marriages, and of their children, in relation to the social phenomena of secularisation and liberalisation and their implications for social change.⁵⁵¹ Although all respondents said they had no thought of bringing about social change when contemplating an inter-religious marriage they do affect society and give a reflection of it. Bambawale found that religious belief in its vital or core areas was held onto by respondents in respect of:

1. Belief in God;
2. Marriage is viewed as a sacred bond and not a mere contract. There was a preference to have a religious marriage;
3. Premium on character, as a moral-cum-religious virtue in spouse selection and reconciliation patterns;
4. Desire to retain religious identity was observed in relation to religious socialisation of the children; forms of worship, especially prayer; rites of passage; and the pattern of conversion and non-conversion;
5. Refusal to substitute religious festivals with secular ones.

However religion was found to be losing its hold in respect of:

⁵⁵⁰ Chopra and Punwani 'Discovering the Other' p97

⁵⁵¹ Bambawale *Inter-religious Marriages* pp.197-202

1. Life-cycle rituals;
2. Temple-visiting;
3. High numbers of working women and nuclear families meant women were not at home to impart religious training to the children.⁵⁵²

This shows that inter-religious marriages do not necessarily result in a loss of religion. The core features of religion are maintained. Furthermore, the areas in which religion appears to diminish may be the result of external factors. For instance, less acceptability in the religious community may decrease temple-going, and the situation of the family and women is reflective of social situation not a lack of concern for religion. Bamabawale suggests that internal features of religion such as belief in God, prayer and attitude to marriage as sacred are maintained. Kannan also found that where there were religious practices prior to marriage these were maintained after marriage with no bad adjustment reported; instead there was understanding and tolerance.⁵⁵³

For Gandhi it is the internal attitude and behaviour, not externals, which are important and constitute true religion. Whilst highly religious he was not a temple-goer, and we find prayer and morality emphasised as essential features of religion in his thought. He was not a Brahmin and therefore it is unsurprising that ritual takes a less important place in his religious thought. Gandhi's thoughts are relevant for those entering into inter-religious marriage who take a similar, more faith or spirituality

⁵⁵² Bamabawale *Inter-religious Marriages* pp.199-201

⁵⁵³ Kannan *Intercaste and Inter-community* pp.174-5

oriented, approach. However, he has less relevance when it comes to ritual than how to adapt and include different kinds of religious practice.

Furthermore Bamabawale found 'secularism as a counter-ideology of religion has not found acceptance among respondents. Instead they prefer co-existence and an attitude of equal reverence to all religions.'⁵⁵⁴ She comments that this is a typically Indian response. 'Equal reverence to all religions' is in fact enshrined by Gandhi in his *ashram* vows. Areas in which this is evidenced are the practice of day-to-day worship; celebration of festivals and *pujas*; and practice of rites and rituals that undergo marked mutual adjustment. The socialisation of children shows the same trend with the couple compromising and forming their own mutually acceptable pattern.

Chopra and Punwani also found couples show great capacity for mutual adjustment and happiness in inter-religious marriage. Only three couples regretted their decision to marry out of their religion. With all the others there are no significant problems regarding religion between the couples themselves. They identify three ways in which religious identity is successfully negotiated:

1. Couples granting each other space and autonomy in religion;
2. Mutual respect and participation in their partner's religion;
3. Individual compatibility.⁵⁵⁵

Among couples who spoke about children in the case of conversion, the children belonged to one faith. In the other thirteen relationships, nine brought their children up

⁵⁵⁴ Usha Bambawale *Inter-religious Marriages* p202

⁵⁵⁵ Chopra and Punwani 'Discovering the Other' p105

belonging to both faiths, though in some cases they were officially of the father's religion. In these cases they actively engaged with both religions attending mosques and temples, learning about the religions and celebrating the festivals of both faiths. Four brought their children up with no religion. In all these cases full freedom was granted to the children in choice of religion.⁵⁵⁶

These findings point to the vitality of religion and the co-existence of different religions in one family. It paints a positive picture of inter-religious marriages from the point of view of tolerance, mutual adaptation, peaceful, co-operative co-existence and pluralism. There is however one area which belies this. In spite of the marriage, stereotypes about the spouse's religious group persisted, as did avoidance of socialising with their religious group.⁵⁵⁷ This reflects negatively on the adoption of pluralism. Although stereotypes persisted, on the whole a significant number became more tolerant after marriage.

The facts affirm that within inter-religious marriages in India we find the development and maintenance of religious pluralism with religion retaining its vitality, whilst tolerating and, in many cases, supporting spouses in their religious practice. This testifies to the adaptability of people of different religions when coming together in marriage. A relationship with a particular person seemingly leads to sensitivity, respect and interest in their religious life. Studies show inter-religious harmony even in such a close environment as within one family and even when dealing with such vital questions

⁵⁵⁶ Chopra and Punwani 'Discovering the Other' pp.123-124

⁵⁵⁷ Bambawale *Inter-religious Marriages* p164-169

as child-rearing. In these examples, inter-religious marriages have not led to a loss of religion or irresolvable conflicts. Partners show a remarkable ability to adjust and adapt. The findings would seem to affirm the importance of tolerance and equal reverence for all religions and show that such marriages foster these values. The words of Chopra and Punwani sum up, in a remarkably encouraging way, how the couples relate to religious identity in inter-religious marriages:

For most couples, it has been a voyage of discovery, of self and the other. In addition to growing as a couple the experience, with regard to the question of religious identity, has led them to challenging their own stereotypes, empathy for the other community and a critical perspective towards their own community.⁵⁵⁸

Returning to Gandhi, these findings show his initial rejection of inter-religious marriage to have had a poor basis. In his letter to Manilal, he expressed fears about possible conversion, or worse that both he and Fatima may lose their religion. These are typical concerns to have, yet they are not borne out by research among inter-religious couples in India. His comment that should Manilal stick to Hinduism and Fatima to Islam it would be like 'putting two swords in one sheath' is particularly inappropriate - differences and difficulties arise which may not affect couples from within the same religion, however inter-religiously married couples develop a mutual regard for their partner's religion, and differences are resolved which maintain both marital harmony and religious integrity. The major reasons for parental opposition were fear that the child

⁵⁵⁸ Chopra and Punwani 'Discovering the Other' p140

would be lost to them through conversion. Gandhi expressed this fear, though his reasoning, as considered above, is more from a religious basis than fear of losing his son.

Another common reason for opposition was a general conservative attitude of the parents. Whilst Gandhi's ideas and attitudes are complex, at the time in his life when he opposed the proposal of his son to marry a Muslim it seems to be related to his conservative attitude to marriage in general. Without wishing to pigeon-hole a complex thinker, as far as inter-religious marriage was concerned, his opposition is best explained in terms of a conservative attitude. As he liberalizes regarding marriage, *brahmacharya* and inter-marriages within one religion, this opposition to inter-religious marriage recedes. One could seek reasons for his early opposition, such as factors of diet and child-rearing mentioned and inter-community conflict, yet this would be an exercise in justification. It does not do justice to the fact that his opinion did change to welcome inter-religious marriages in recognition of their role in the quest for harmony and religious pluralism. I suggest that Gandhi's acceptance of inter-religious marriage is made more significant by his previous opposition; it represents an advance in his ideas and shows the broadening of his pluralism.

The responses of inter-religious couples in the sociological studies have correlations with specific concerns Gandhi espoused in inter-religious relations, most notably equal regard for all religions. Gandhi consistently called on individuals to develop empathy and learn from other religions, always viewing the other sympathetically and

applying self-criticism to your own beliefs.⁵⁵⁹ Chopra and Punwani's summing up, show individuals did develop and practice these habits through inter-religious marriage, 'challenging their own stereotypes, developing empathy for the other community and a critical perspective towards their own community.'⁵⁶⁰

The central argument here is that inter-religious marriages are a positive and intimate form of inter-religious dialogue, which contribute to inter-religious efforts and are both indicative of increasingly tolerant attitudes and instrumental in developing this religious pluralism in a practical way. There is however another side to this debate - most religions have maintained endogamous practices, and prescribe (either through the authority of texts, legal or social customs) that believers' should marry within the faith. One of the criticisms levied against pluralists is that they "water-down" the religion, disregard fundamentals, and a major fear is that the religion will be lost in a syncretism or by assimilation. It may be maintained that one can be a pluralist, perhaps even a "better" pluralist, whilst continuing the restrictions in marriage. To respect, accept and even learn from another faith does not necessitate marrying them. Gandhi fell into this category of a pluralist, respecting, learning from and espousing a pluralist perspective at the time he opposed inter-religious marriage. This mark of restriction in marriage is however a clear limitation to the extent of one's acceptance of other groups. Two religions existing in one home, as found in inter-religious marriages, marks a definite boundary, there is a limit put on the intimacy of relations between the two groups. This sets out boundaries

⁵⁵⁹ For example in his ideal of religious education he enunciates that one should study other faiths through the material prepared by a devotee rather than a critic. CWMG Vol. 37 pp.254-5

⁵⁶⁰ Chopra and Punwani 'Discovering the Other' p140; For the importance of empathy in inter-religious dialogue see Cornille *Im-possibility* pp.137-176

between one's own group and others, perpetuating an in-group/out-group mentality.

Pluralism can be maintained within this, but it is a limited pluralism.

Amrita Jaisinghani, of the Akbar Ashram, wrote an apologetic for inter-religious marriages from the stand point of Hindu-Muslim unity in 1931.⁵⁶¹ This provides an interesting comparison, as it is contemporaneous and written with an agenda of religious unity. The author is surprised by the way even people who are supportive of inter-religious harmony, holding to values of humanity and unity, remain reluctant and opposed to inter-religious marriages. This gives an indication of the general attitudes in Indian society at this time. Gandhi came into this category of people up to around 1930; supportive of religious pluralism and striving for unity between the religions in India, yet reluctant to support inter-religious marriage. This gives us a more contextualised understanding of Gandhi's attitude. At the same time, this book was written as a challenge to this view. It is addressed to those who, whilst trying to promote harmony, equality and unity between religions, oppose inter-religious marriages, which the author sees as a positive step towards this goal. By the end of his life, Gandhi is in tune with Jaisinghani, encouraging inter-religious marriage as a step towards religious unity and harmony. The experiences of couples in inter-religious marriages developing understanding and harmony support this view. Inter-religious marriages provide a motive and context for developing empathy and understanding of other religions through an intimate and lifelong inter-personal, inter-religious dialogue.

⁵⁶¹ Amrita Jaisinghani *Inter-Communal Marriage* Karachi: Bharat Printing Press, 1931

Conclusions

Gandhi saw inter-religious marriages through the prism of his own mindset and ideas about marriage, partly imbibed from his society and its norms, and partly based on his belief in *brahmacharya* as the ideal for both men and women. His attitude to restriction in marriage reversed, however, as he came to see the breaking of boundaries between groups as beneficial to society and unity. His context and ideas about marriage naturally interplay with his ideas about religion as he considers inter-religious marriages. As the focus of the thesis is the elucidation of Gandhi's ideas about inter-religious relations, the central questions developed here are: what do Gandhi's attitudes to inter-religious marriages show us about the ways he envisages the different religions relating to one another? And what do Gandhi's ideas and insights have to offer in dealing with the questions and challenges inter-religious marriages pose?

Gandhi's consistent opposition to conversions for the sake of marriage corroborate his antipathy to conversion, found in other sources, most notably his critique of Christian mission, but also *shuddhi* and *tabligh*.⁵⁶² His opposition in the case of marriage adds credence to his opposition to conversion on religious grounds. This opposition to conversion also shows the overarching importance of religion as the goal and purpose of a person's life, over temporal concerns such as marriage. Where many people are happy to sacrifice their religion for the sake of some-one they love, Gandhi holds religion to be

⁵⁶² Diana Eck 'Gandhian Guidelines for a World of Religious Difference' in Ellsberg pp.86-88

supremely important: 'For the sake of dharma a person shall forgo matrimony, forsake his home, why, even lay down his life; but for nothing may faith be given up.'⁵⁶³

His opposition was equally applied to the prospect of a Muslim converting to Hinduism, his own religion, as vice versa. This is evidence of equal regard for religions in that he does not seek converts to Hinduism. This opposition held throughout his life and was present even at a time when he occasionally spoke of Hinduism in a superior way, showing in practice his equal regard for other religions. It also shows a pluralist philosophy which upholds the individuality of each religion in contrast to envisaging a single universal religion.

However, his early opposition to inter-religious marriage shows a limited pluralism, setting up boundaries to interactions. In reality, inter-religious marriages form a distinctive and important kind of inter-religious engagement, based in love and friendship. They are a context in which religious pluralism is developed and displayed, and for which Gandhi's ideas have relevance. In particular his more individualised approach to religion as the way one lives provides an alternative view, which can help people find flexible solutions to remain faithful in a multi-religious home, and to keep a sense of marriage as sacred, even when between two different religions.

⁵⁶³ CWMG Vol. 30 pp. 229-30

CHAPTER EIGHT

SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF GANDHI'S APPROACH TO INTER-RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

This chapter looks at the social dimension of inter-religious marriage in a twentieth century Indian context. It explores how inter-religious marriage is affected by the social situation and also how this kind of interaction may affect society, in particular the establishment of unity in the midst of diversity. First we look at the social restrictions on marriage within Indian and Hindu society. I ask how far were Gandhi's ideas informed by, and how far did they challenge, the norms of marriage within caste and sub-caste, province and village, and as arranged between families. These issues of restriction shall be considered in the context of intra-religious inter-caste/inter-provincial marriage, as distinct from and forming a background to inter-religious marriage. Where the terms inter-caste and inter-provincial are used it is assumed they are within a single religion, unless otherwise stated. However, many inter-religious marriages are also inter-caste, inter-provincial, or all three – these are not exclusive, bounded categories.

Next, I turn to the gendered aspect of the social system, identifying the ways in which women undergo greater challenges, on the whole, in inter-religious marriage than do men - this links with Gandhi's view of women and reforms in traditional marriage practices, although he does not specifically address the challenges facing women in inter-religious marriages. Third, I address Gandhi's approach in the light of Partition violence, in particular forced marriages and conversions. Fourth, I turn to the implications of communal violence, looking at the place and role of inter-religious marriages in such

contexts. This section situates Gandhi's ideas about inter-religious relations and inter-religious marriage within a contemporary context, with the current concerns and urgent needs facing society and individuals.

Following this I shall consider the relevance of Gandhi's ideas for inter-religious marriage, constructing a Gandhian vision of inter-religious marriage. Finally I explore the relation between Gandhi's pluralism and his attitude to inter-religious marriage. In this context I question Gandhi's pluralism, pointing out his limitations in practice in his early years.

Inter-religious marriage and other social restrictions on marriage

Traditionally Indian marriage is within endogamous groups, of caste and sub-caste, province, village, and religious community. Thus although India is a diverse country the extent and nature of interaction between the groups is strictly proscribed. There have always been exceptions to these rules, where couples marry or have relationships against the social norms. Such marriages, from personal choice are known as love-marriages, and usually carry stigma. In modern societies with increased mobility, socially and geographically, some of the boundaries between groups have broken down. Where in a village situation one would know the various members of your own group and be able to recognize to which groups others belonged, with movements to the city, greater access to education, new professions and the greater emergence of women into public life, this is changed and the boundaries have become more fluid. In contemporary India, although

traditional views are still dominant they are challenged, making the question of boundaries very relevant today.

Traditional Indian marriage it is not merely an alliance between individuals, but the joining of two families and the context of the family remains paramount over the individual. In inter-religious marriage this is challenged. In studies of inter-religious marriage, all the participants interviewed had 'love-marriages'. The reaction of family evidently is important to respondents, yet inter-religious couples have frequently directly gone against their families. Fewer inter-religious couples join extended family homes, often living separately in their own nuclear families, though contact and ties with the larger family remain important.⁵⁶⁴ The extended family context therefore plays a reduced role. Situating Gandhi within this complex milieu of social restrictions on marriages gives a contextualised understanding of his attitude to inter-religious marriage.

Freedom of Choice

In inter-religious marriage we confront the question of how much freedom in marriage individuals have, where it ends and how choices should be made. Gandhi was more liberal and progressive than many of his contemporaries regarding choice of marriage partners, although from a modern or a Western perspective he looks traditional and conservative. He was vocally critical of many common practices in India relating to marriage and the concurrent suppression of women in particular as will be explored below.

⁵⁶⁴ Bambawale *Inter-religious Marriages* p95-99 esp. Table 4.12 p96; Kannan *Inter-caste* 1963 p173

Throughout his life, Gandhi support arranged marriages in the sense of parents/guardians making preliminary enquiries and choosing suitable potential partners, but he was not supportive of the kind of arranged marriage he himself had. He was married at 13 to a girl he had never met, without understanding the meaning of marriage or having his opinion sought.⁵⁶⁵ His ideas for arranged marriage are closer to the kind of arranged marriages common among middle class Indians today; in which the families make preliminary enquiries, before giving the couple in question the opportunity to meet and make their own decision whether to proceed. This is demonstrated in a letter to Krishnadas Jaju in 1934. Gandhi says that in courtship there is some mental unchastity, therefore parents should make preliminary enquiries and selection.

So far there has been no disadvantage in this method. Two sons of mine got married when they were around 30 [Manilal and Ramdas]. The brides of both were chosen by me in the first instance. And in the case of Devdas the initial choice was certainly his but as soon as the idea came to him he voluntarily confided in [me] and Rajagopalachari [his bride's father] and made proper and successful effort to satisfy us.⁵⁶⁶

This kind of arranged marriage maintains the individual as the final arbiter, seeking their input and choice within certain bounds. He also arranged marriages for young people in his *ashram*, consulting them about it, to Purushottam Gandhi he writes,

⁵⁶⁵ Gandhi *An Autobiography* p6

⁵⁶⁶ CWMG Vol. 58 p100

Jamna believes you wish to marry...Have you already chosen? If I am to choose for you, tell me whether you wish to respect the restrictions of caste and province? You know my own views in the matter. We wish to do away with such restrictions but in a matter like marriage I would certainly not insist on my own views being followed. The inclination of the person who wishes to marry must prevail.⁵⁶⁷

As we can see, Gandhi regarded it vital that a person should not be forced into marriage. He wished to limit choice within certain bounds of compatible partners and with regard to the feelings of society and family, though these considerations are variously interpreted and weighted in different pronouncements of his. A 1930 letter mentions Hindu-Muslim marriage saying:

It is not obligatory on anyone to marry a particular person and nobody else. If, however, a Hindu woman wishes to marry a Muslim for good and sufficient reasons, we should not believe that she would be committing a sin if she did so. How, then can we object to a woman marrying a so-called untouchable?⁵⁶⁸

There is recognition of individuals' freedom to choose and acceptance of Hindu-Muslim unions.

There are a number of possible influences for this acceptance of free choice. One is Gandhi's friendships with Europeans and immersion in their culture during his stay in London and with friends in South Africa. Another is his own marriage and the regret he felt over his early treatment of his wife and lack of understanding of the true meaning of

⁵⁶⁷ CWMG Vol. 47 p355

⁵⁶⁸ CWMG Vol. 44 p328

marriage. Still another, and I would suggest more important reason, it is contrary to the spirit of *satyagraha*. Gandhi's philosophy and the ideas of *satyagraha* preclude forcing a person's choice and actions. One may disapprove, attempt to dissuade, and prevent a person from taking a particular course of action, but never force. This means there is the option of inter-religious marriage, as individual choice may lead to this. Gandhi, whilst emphasising the good of society, never forgets that society and the State are not an abstract things but made up of individuals, who should not be sacrificed to the idea of society.⁵⁶⁹

We generally encounter Gandhi's views on marriage and inter-religious marriage in the context of individuals' marriage choices. As we saw in chapter seven, his ideas were actuated by situations and people, rather than being developed abstractly and in direct reference to his ideas about harmony and relations between the religions. This to some extent explains why Gandhi often refers to individuals rather than the family as might have been expected from an Indian context.

In line with the principle of freedom inherent in *satyagraha* Gandhi wrote to Manilal 'You are a free man; so I cannot force you to do anything. But I write to you as a friend.' The letter is clearly and strongly opposed to the proposed union, yet the opposition is not forced but argued. How far Manilal is free to make his own decision and proceed is questionable. As we come to the end of the letter, Gandhi spells out a number of "consequences": firstly, 'If you enter into this relationship you may not be able to render any service. I fear you may no more be the right person to run *Indian Opinion*.' Further, 'It

⁵⁶⁹ Bondurant *Conquest of Violence* pp.29-31

will be impossible for you, I think, after this to come and settle in India.’ Finally, stating categorically ‘I cannot ask for Ba’s permission. She will not give it. Her life will be embittered forever.’ This is an exceptional pronouncement regarding *Ba*, which does not even give her the opportunity to respond for herself. Indeed, Arun Gandhi doubts such a grave response, ‘considering her generous, outgoing nature’.⁵⁷⁰ Yet she was traditional in her observance of religious and social restrictions, including caste, so one would not imagine she would have welcomed the marriage of her son outside their religion. However, such interpretations remain speculative; the possibility of hearing her opinion has been denied to us by Gandhi’s reaction.

So, whilst Gandhi retains his commitment to the individual as the final arbiter his message, to his son, is strong and clear. The consequences of the marriage and his refusal to broach the question with Kasturba guarantee that should Manilal proceed it would be without approval. Manilal would risk having his role and position in the community in South Africa taken away from him and he would jeopardise his standing with his family and community in India.⁵⁷¹ I suggest that whilst Gandhi’s response outwardly declares freedom, in this case, it borders on coercion. It would benefit our study to know the response and reaction this letter elicited from Manilal, sadly it has not been preserved. All we know is he gave up the idea and married Sushila a year later.

⁵⁷⁰ Arun Gandhi *Daughter of Midnight* p240

⁵⁷¹ In my correspondence with Uma Mesthrie Dhupelia she agreed with this assessment writing – ‘You are correct about analysing what freedom means - you are free but if you don’t do this then the consequences are great. So effectively there was a limit to the freedom.’ Personal email correspondence 7th July 2009

Another of Gandhi's sons, Devadas, chose his own wife, Lakshmi. Breaking caste - Lakshmi was a Brahmin, and Devadas a Vaishya. Initially Gandhi and Lakshmi's father, Rajagopalachari, opposed the alliance. According to Rajagopalachari because they considered it unwise to cement their political association with a marriage, not, as commonly supposed, because of the caste difference.⁵⁷² The parents made Lakshmi and Devadas wait for five years before accepting their choice, having proven by the five year wait, that it was based on pure love rather than desire.

Gandhi was also aware of the need to consider family and society. In a 1937 article, Gandhi includes approval and consent of the respective families and concern for the social order as conditions for an ideal marriage.⁵⁷³ However, this professed concern for the social order comes after he was actively encouraging inter-provincial and inter-caste marriages and accepting inter-religious ones.⁵⁷⁴ This concern should be regarded with some scepticism as he came to see marriage as a tool for procuring social change. He congratulated a youth who married a Harijan in spite of his parents' objections stating plainly that it will not do to wait for the attitude of society to change; we must change it ourselves by breaking immoral and outmoded conventions.⁵⁷⁵ Although this attitude was taken to inter-caste and inter-provincial marriages he did not express it so readily with marriages which also crossed religion. Yet in his final years he did call inter-religious marriages 'welcome events' and supported mixed marriage of all kinds, including inter-

⁵⁷² Ved Mehta *Gandhi and His Apostles* p48

⁵⁷³ 'The Marriage Ideal' CWMG Vol. 65 pp.201-203

⁵⁷⁴ As outlined in the previous chapter.

⁵⁷⁵ CWMG Vol. 72 p179

religious marriage.⁵⁷⁶ Therefore, to summarise, his professed consideration for the social order does not necessarily mean obeying its restraints. In contravention of social norms Gandhi did not situate his discussions of marriage within a family context. He includes the family context, but primarily focuses on the individuals who are to marry. Whilst open to self-chosen marriages, assuming they satisfy certain conditions, he favoured arranged marriages which are considered the norm, but only when agreed by the individuals getting married.

Caste and Province

Gandhi's changing attitudes to inter-caste and inter-provincial marriages reflect his changing attitude to caste and his interpretation of *varnadharma*. In time, the need to overcome caste distinctions to cultivate fellow-feeling and unity between people became pre-eminent over tradition and restrictions, as his rejection of the caste system became more thorough-going and radical.⁵⁷⁷ He came to see inter-dining and inter-marriage favourably, promoting this much needed unity for overcoming abuse and prejudices. He did however always claim to be a *sanatani* Hindu and a follower of *varna* which he interpreted in his own specific way.⁵⁷⁸

At the time when Gandhi opposed Manilal's proposal, Gandhi was still encouraging marriages within *varna*. In the same month he had said 'I do not approve of marriages

⁵⁷⁶ CWMG Vol. 87 p5

⁵⁷⁷ See chapter on Gandhi's engagement with Gora and the ethical challenge of atheism focussing on caste for more detail on this.

⁵⁷⁸ For a good consideration of Gandhi and the caste system see 'Discourse on Untouchability' in Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, tradition and reform: An analysis of Gandhi's political discourse* [revised second edition] London: Sage Publications 1999 pp.228-271

outside Varnashrama. There can be only four castes.’⁵⁷⁹ Thus I contend that his opposition represents not only his attitude to a marriage between a Hindu and a Muslim, but a broader conservative attitude to marriage and respect for tradition. His conception of the restrictions was broader than many of his contemporaries, on account of his novel interpretation of *varna*. The qualifier, ‘there can be only four castes’ rejects sub-caste or *jati* and untouchability.

Later in life, Gandhi expressly says he wishes to do away with caste distinctions and inter-caste marriage became a part of this endeavour. We can see the extent to which Gandhi took it in congratulating a youth for marrying a Harijan girl, in spite of opposition from both his parents and encouraging others to do the same.⁵⁸⁰ It is surprising, given Gandhi’s background to hear him speak on marriage without situating it within the family context. The emphasis on individual choice, where one might expect family *dharma* to take precedence, is unusual and to many Indians may seem to miss the point, not addressing such a central concern.

He is not alone, however, in advocating this reform. Kannan’s study of inter-caste marriages found several couples had chosen to marry between castes on the principle of social change. They were influenced by reform movements and the writings of eminent teachers and spiritual leaders as well as personal experience.⁵⁸¹ For some, marriage is a means of social change, even a form of social activism. Again, Gandhi wishes to do away with provincial divisions to create a united India. Gandhi wrote in Harijan

⁵⁷⁹ CWMG Vol. 30 p358

⁵⁸⁰ CWMG Vol. 72 p179

⁵⁸¹ Kannan *Inter-caste* 1963 p57-8 and 149

There must be a breach in this double wall of caste and province if India is one and indivisible, surely there should be no artificial divisions creating innumerable little groups which would neither inter-dine nor inter-marry. There is no religion in this cruel custom. It would not do to plead that individuals cannot make the commencement and they must wait for society till the whole society is ripe for change. No reform has ever been brought about except through intrepid individuals breaking down inhuman customs or usages.⁵⁸²

Even when promoting inter-caste marriages Gandhi, however, maintains they are not necessary. He warns at that although most individuals at a Harijan Sevak Sangh meeting had given up caste restrictions to confuse the issues of inter-marriage and uplift of Harijans would hinder both.⁵⁸³ Gandhi shows ambivalence as to whether inter-caste marriages are a part of the anti-untouchability movement or not; this is aptly demonstrated by Gandhi's message at the wedding of Lakshmi and Maruti, in 1933. Here, he says that 'there can be no doubt that, if this marriage is successful, it will benefit both *Harijans* and Hinduism a great deal', but also says the marriage is not part of the anti-untouchability movement.⁵⁸⁴ On another occasion he makes marriage the test for lack of caste prejudice:

'Can the members of the Harijan Sevak Sangh truthfully claim to have eradicated the last trace of untouchability from their own hearts? Is their practice on a par

⁵⁸² CWMG Vol. 63 p172

⁵⁸³ CWMG Vol. 63 June 11 1936 pp.42-3

⁵⁸⁴ CWMG Vol. 54 pp.15-16

with their profession?' Gandhiji asked at a meeting of the Harijan Sevak Sangh after his release. A member asked in return:

'What is your criterion in this respect?'

Gandhiji: 'Are you married?'

'I happen to be.'

'Then, have you an unmarried son or a daughter? If you have one, get him or her a Harijan for a bride or a bridegroom, as the case may be, in the spirit of a sacrament and I shall send you a wire of congratulations at *my* expense!'⁵⁸⁵

The member in question, Gora from the Atheist Centre, did this, and Gandhi declared 'that thereafter his blessings would not be available to any wedding couple unless one of the parties was a Harijan!'⁵⁸⁶ For Gandhi, inter-caste marriage became a sign of prejudices being broken and unity forged. In several letters in the final years of his life Gandhi declines requests for blessings of marriages, because it is reserved for inter-marriages (whether between castes or provinces) only.⁵⁸⁷

We can see that these changes in Gandhi's thought were gradual; first he comes to consider inter-marriages permissible, though with some precautions, for instance for an inter-provincial marriage it is necessary to learn one another's languages. From this moderate stance he then moved to the extreme of only giving his blessing for inter-marriage. This change of attitude shows the inconsistency common in Gandhi's

⁵⁸⁵ Pyarelal *Last Phase* Vol. 1 p63

⁵⁸⁶ Pyarelal *Last Phase* Vol. 1 p63

⁵⁸⁷ See for instance letters to Raghuvir Sahay and Kamala Lele CWMG Vol. 80 pp.54 and 99

thought.⁵⁸⁸ For instance, in 1936 Gandhi says individuals must breach the barriers to bring reform which contradicts with a later article, which includes the condition of approval and consent of the respective families concerned and consideration of the interests of the social order to which one belongs.⁵⁸⁹

Although inter-religious marriage fits the general schema of liberalisation regarding inter-marriage, it has its own specific concerns. This is explicit when in 1931 he says 'Marriage outside one's religion stands on a different footing'.⁵⁹⁰ Whilst encouraging inter-caste and inter-provincial marriage for social change to develop harmony and unity, inter-religious marriages are not seen as a potential vehicle for the development of harmony between religions: 'I can see nothing but disaster following any attempt to advocate Hindu-Muslim unions so long as the relations between the two remain strained.'⁵⁹¹

Here Gandhi differentiates between inter-religious and inter-caste marriage. He did not at this stage in his life wish to advocate inter-religious marriages but was advocating inter-caste marriages. He does finally welcome inter-religious marriages, but even then he is aware of the communal issues and insists each should continue to follow their own religion.⁵⁹²

⁵⁸⁸ This inconsistency is emphasised by Dipankar Gupta, *Gandhi before Habermas: The democratic consequences of Ahimsa*, Complete text of the Rajiv Kapur memorial lecture delivered Aug 20, 2008, India International Centre, New Delhi, Received with thanks by personal correspondence.

⁵⁸⁹ 'The Marriage Ideal' CWMG Vol. 65 pp.201-3

⁵⁹⁰ 'Caste and the Communal Question' CWMG Vol. 46 pp.302-4

⁵⁹¹ See above.

⁵⁹² See Chapter 7 on conversion and maintaining religious belonging in inter-religious marriage.

Gender roles and inter-religious marriages

The position of women in Indian society raises issues for women in inter-religious marriage. Just as the experience of inter-religious marriage and the way it is viewed differs according to whether one comes from a Hindu, Muslim, Christian or other religious background, so gender too is a major factor affecting the experience of inter-religious marriage. As Gandhi worked for reforms in the place of women in society it is important to consider this facet of inter-religious marriage in his thought.

For women, on the whole, inter-religious marriage presents greater challenges. First, Indian women are expected to be absorbed into their husband's families upon marriage, therefore the major onus of adaptation to a new environment is on her. Women are considered the guardians of purity and community honour, through their sexuality, so they experience stronger social pressures. Finally, a woman's place in society and life is classically defined through family and marriage.

The [Hindu] classical tradition formulates two basic roles for women: daughter and wife. In contrast to male lives, in which the norms pertinent to the four stages of life are honoured more often in principle than in practice, women's lives and their two stages actually approximate the cultural ideals set forth in literature.⁵⁹³

The marginal role of the widow in the classical Hindu ideal of gender roles is stated powerfully by Harlan and Courtright: 'for women, ideally and practically, the end of life is

⁵⁹³ Lindsey Harlan and Paul B. Courtright (eds.) *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: essays on gender, religion and culture* Oxford: OUP 1995 p13

marriage, for men, ideally the end of life is renunciation of marriage.’⁵⁹⁴ In case studies of inter-religious marriage in India too, there is almost unanimously greater restriction placed on women. Concurrently more blame is attributed to a woman than a man for marrying against these. Whilst the greater restriction is explicit in Islam, it is detectable in the social attitudes of other religions. For instance, Bamabawale found that all the Hindu females in her study were afraid of some kind of trouble from religious fanatics, indeed from *within* their own religion, whereas none of the Hindu males were.⁵⁹⁵ Chopra and Punwani also found societal opposition ‘seems to be more acute in the case of women generally and women married to Muslims in particular.’⁵⁹⁶

Familial opposition is also greater for women than for men. In some extreme cases women are kidnapped, severely punished, threatened or driven out of their home for their marriage. This severe opposition of the females’ relatives was not always directed against the female; in the cases of two Parsi and one Jewish woman the families reacted so violently the husbands took precautionary measures to safeguard their lives.⁵⁹⁷ However, a gender discrepancy still exists.

The higher incidence of men as opposed to women facing no opposition is significant, as is the higher incidence of strong opposition from women’s parents across religious communities/backgrounds. This is significantly explained by the feudal concept of

⁵⁹⁴ Harlan and Courtright (eds.) *From the Margins* p14

⁵⁹⁵ Curiously however, Christian and Muslim males were more likely to be afraid than Christian and Muslim women. Bamabawale *Inter-religious Marriages* p219

⁵⁹⁶ Chopra and Punwani ‘Discovering the Other’ p132

⁵⁹⁷ Kannan *Inter-caste* p167

family honour being tied with female sexuality, which, even today, pervades attitudes to marriage across class and religious boundaries in India.⁵⁹⁸

As well as reflecting the patriarchy of Indian society and a lack of gender equality the greater difficulty of women in marrying outside their religion reflects their economic status in society. Traditionally, Indian women are dependent economically on their fathers, brothers and husbands and therefore have less freedom than men, even in their marriages. However, many inter-religious couples live as a nuclear family with women playing a less traditional role, and both partners working.⁵⁹⁹ To some extent, parental opposition to the daughter's inter-religious marriage stems from these gender roles in which a woman's primary sphere is conceived as domestic, in which she is required to become absorbed into her partner's family. Parents fear their daughter will not be able to fit in or will not be treated as well in a household of the other community. Patriarchy is commonly associated with subjugation of women's choice and feminists point out the importance of treating women as persons and recovering their autonomy. However, here we see that the opposition which may be a response to patriarchal hegemony may centre not on the subjugation of the woman, but in consideration of her welfare.

In line with women following their husband and his family's traditions women are more likely than men to convert to their partner's religion and adopt his diet. The father generally insists on the children following his religious identity, even though the mother is

⁵⁹⁸ Chopra and Punwani 'Discovering the Other' p92

⁵⁹⁹ Bambawale *Inter-religious Marriages* p209

responsible for their religious education.⁶⁰⁰ Even liberal minded couples tend to follow this patriarchal pattern for the sake of the child's social acceptance, although the defining of the child as of one religion may be only formal with the children actually participating in both.⁶⁰¹ On the whole, women are implicated more substantially by inter-religious marriage than men. Chopra and Punwani say 'it is a fair conclusion to say that women are both expected to adjust more than men and do, in fact, make more adjustments than men.'⁶⁰² In consequence, inter-religious marriages are an area of special concern for women, who experience disproportionate restriction, opposition and blame from society.

Gandhi worked towards reforms for women who he held as equal, although different from, men. In his treatment of inter-religious marriage we do not find any hint of the usual different standards for men and women. In the first case of an inter-religious marriage where he says there is no moral objection, in 1932, it is a girl of his own religion, Hinduism, marrying out; his response does not reflect the prejudices of society at large.

Gandhi fought for reforms in the treatment of women, including an end to child marriage, in particular the 'sale' of young girls to much older men; widow-remarriage; burning of widows as *sati*; reintegration of prostitutes; exposing and ending the *devadasi* system and ending dowry.⁶⁰³ In fact he encouraged struggling families to find partners outside their own sub-caste and later beyond other restrictions, in order to circumvent the problem of dowry. Earlier we saw that Gandhi encouraged a man in marrying a

⁶⁰⁰ Bambawale *Inter-religious Marriages* p189

⁶⁰¹ The exception to this is Christian females, who generally insisted on the children following their religion, often as a pre-condition of marriage.

⁶⁰² Chopra and Punwani 'Discovering the Other' 105

⁶⁰³ See Gandhi *Women and Social Injustice*

Harijan against his family's wishes. Once again we find Gandhi putting his regard for women and girls, ahead of family wishes in marriage. He advises a young man to

...refuse to be party to the double sin of marrying a child girl and of conforming to the evil practice of *sata*. [offering a girl from his own family in exchange] He must not mind how much domestic trouble he has to face as a result of his refusal. He should consider it a virtue to marry outside his sub-caste or to marry a widow...⁶⁰⁴

Gandhi's impartiality for men's desires is demonstrated in his confrontation with the social support for child marriage and girl widowhood. As Madhu Kishwar comments, despite his obsession with chastity he responded sharply to supporters of childhood marriage to preserve a girl's purity:

And why is there all this morbid anxiety about female purity? Have women any say in the matter of male purity? ...Why should men arrogate to themselves the right to regulate female purity?⁶⁰⁵

Still, in an important respect women have less freedom in his worldview, as he upholds traditional gender roles, including women joining their husbands' families. Gandhi's own daughters-in-law joined and adapted to *his* family (and *his ashram*).⁶⁰⁶ Gandhi often invoked traditional female role models that conformed to the ideal, devoted wife from Hindu tradition. Kishwar notes that one of his favourite characters is

⁶⁰⁴ Gandhi *Women and Social Injustice* p44

⁶⁰⁵ Quotation from *Young India*, 25 November 1925, in Madhu Kishwar 'Gandhi on Women' in A. Raghuramaraju, *Debating Gandhi: a reader*, Oxford: OUP, 2006 (pp.269-323) p274

⁶⁰⁶ Although, as he had no daughters it is possible to suppose he would have expected any sons-in-law to join the ashram and his movement too.

Sita, renowned for her devotion to Rama, Kishwar's perceptive critique points out that Gandhi's idealisation of self-sacrifice, and woman as the symbol of this, 'helps to strengthen prevailing oppressive stereotypes in the tradition of Sita'.⁶⁰⁷ However, he also admires Mirabai, the woman saint, who transgressed female roles in her pursuit of religion. Gandhi uses this unconventional woman as an example to challenge husbands who treat their wives as property and to justify women exercising their own will to the point of disobedience: 'Mirabai has shown the way.'⁶⁰⁸ In this vein, Gandhi attributes his discovery of *satyagraha* to his wife's refusal to obey his immoral impositions upon her freedom.⁶⁰⁹

Two of the central reforms Gandhi endeavoured to bring into marriages were curtailing the excessive wedding expenses and the exchange of money in the form of dowry. His simple, ritual-free, wedding ceremony without dowry or expensive display frees marriage to a degree from the sway of social displays and status symbols. This is emancipating for both men and women, but particularly women and their families, due to the elimination of dowry. As observed earlier, dowry could be crippling and can be a reason for women to opt for a marriage out of their own community. Traditions surrounding dowry differ between religious groups so this reform would ease that problem. Further, the simplicity rather than dominant ceremony make it more acceptable for a wedding between couples with very different marriage rituals arising from their

⁶⁰⁷ Madhu Kishwar 'Gandhi on Women' p317

⁶⁰⁸ 'The wife has a perfect right to take her own course and meekly brave the consequences when she knows herself to be in the right and when her resistance is for a nobler purpose.' Gandhi *Women and Social Injustice* p80

⁶⁰⁹ Madhu Kishwar 'Gandhi on Women' p304; *An Autobiography* p9

different religions. Gandhi's weddings keep marriage sacred, but do not confine this to a single tradition.

Inter-religious marriage in the context of Partition: sexual violence and forced marriage

A troubling dimension is brought in by looking at gender as a distinctive part of partition history. In the midst of communal violence, women were particularly targeted. Women's bodies became the site of battle between communities. Attacks upon women of the other community were used to break that community and force their defeat and migration. These narratives bring out the centrality of *izzat* and give unsettling information on the position of women in society at the time. Of significance to our study, many women were raped and abducted by members of the opposite community; some were forced into marriages and conversion, some kidnapped and sold. This prevailing atmosphere brings a difficult additional dimension to inter-religious marriages.

Gandhi was concerned to recover women abducted and not to recognise the validity of forced marriages between Hindu/Sikhs and Muslims in this situation. In 1947 Gandhi

was clear too that no conversion or marriage of a woman to a member of the opposite community could be recognized as valid on the plea of consent or free will. It was abuse of words to talk of free consent when terror reigned.⁶¹⁰

Shortly after Independence, India and Pakistan entered into an agreement to find and return abducted or missing Sikh and Hindu women in Pakistan to India and Muslim

⁶¹⁰ CWMG Vol. 90 pp.261-2

women in India to Pakistan. However, many women were not accepted back into their original communities and families, considered defiled and impure, rather than as victims to be cared for and welcomed home, they were often considered an embarrassment.⁶¹¹ Therefore, Gandhi's and Nehru's pleas to Indian people to accept back women and girls who had been abducted or raped were necessary and timely.⁶¹² Yet such statements by influential men are also problematic in the light of recent research into women's experiences and the double dislocation some women who were forced to return by the Central Recovery Operation had to endure:

...women [who resisted being recovered] represented a problem for the State: the law did not allow them to exercise the choice that, as individuals and citizens of two free countries, should have been their right. Both countries had agreed that after a certain date, neither forced conversions or marriages would be recognized. What was to be done if a woman claimed that the relationship she was in was voluntary?⁶¹³

Menon and Bhasin provide insightful and critical analysis of women's experience during and following partition. They deconstruct traditional narratives revealing the ways in which women were used in partition as the site over which borders and boundaries between communities and nations were constructed, delineated and fought.⁶¹⁴ A parallel may be drawn here with the prominence *sati* achieved during the colonial period.

⁶¹¹ Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 1998 p100

⁶¹² For samples of Gandhi's statements see Gandhi, *Women and Social Injustice* pp. 199-201

⁶¹³ Urvashi Butalia *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* London: Hurst, 2000 p142

⁶¹⁴ Menon and Bhasin *Borders and Boundaries*

Women are the site of contestation, yet the discourse displays a lack both of women's voices and genuine concern for women and their liberation.⁶¹⁵

In the partition period, the theme of recovery of missing women demonstrates this dual lack. For example, a Sikh or Hindu woman still living in her home village, but with a Muslim man, in what is now Pakistan, was treated as the property of India; thus she must be 'recovered' (literally, taken from her village and potentially her new family and children) and returned to a 'home' country where she has never lived – India. The same logic was used for a Muslim woman living with a Hindu or Sikh in India. In this situation women's centrality in the media and policy was not for their own sake but as the symbol of national honour. Butalia states: '...the woman as a *person* did not count.'⁶¹⁶ The now famous story of Zainab and Buta Singh, who apparently fell in love after her kidnap and sale, graphically demonstrates the complexity and the danger of applying a blanket policy of non-recognition to inter-religious marriages.⁶¹⁷

In my view, Gandhi's non-recognition of inter-religious marriage in 1947, the same year he issued a statement describing inter-religious marriages as welcome must be seen in its context. I suggest that he was not going back on his acceptance of inter-religious marriage, or displaying confused and contradictory opinions, but rather speaking on the

⁶¹⁵ '... although *sati* became an alibi for the colonial civilizing mission on the one hand, and on the other hand, a significant occasion for indigenous autocritique, the women who burned were neither subjects nor even the primary objects of concern in the debate on its prohibition.' Lata Mani *Contentious Traditions: the debate on sati in colonial India* London: University of California Press, 1998 p2

⁶¹⁶ '...her wishes were of little consequence, she had no right to resist, defy nor even to appeal, for the [Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration] Act denied even that basic freedom. Not only was she to be forcibly recovered, but if she disputed her recovery, she was (after 1954) allowed to put her case before a tribunal, but beyond that – if the tribunal's findings were seen as unjust – she had no recourse.' Butalia *The Other Side of Silence* p151

⁶¹⁷ Butalia *The Other Side of Silence* pp. 101-3

issues surrounding inter-religious marriage and conversion in a situation 'when terror reigned'.⁶¹⁸ He was addressing the issue of inter-communal violence and specifically the attendant violation of women during Partition. Focussing only on Gandhi's rejection of the plea of consent in inter-religious marriages during Partition reinforces the dangers in the Central Recovery Operation. Therefore it is important to keep in mind also his welcome of inter-religious marriages in 1947, alongside his efforts to counteract the violation of women.

Inter-religious marriage in communal contexts

The situation in India between Hindus and Muslims had a profound effect on Gandhi. How does the highly communalized situation of India especially in riot-prone cities or times affect inter-religious marriages and how do these marriages in turn affect society? When Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie considered Gandhi's refusal to support Manilal's marriage to Fatima, on account of their religions, she drew attention to the communal situation ensuing at the time, and identified this, and its potential effect on the Mahatma's position in India, as the primary cause for his opposition.⁶¹⁹ Gandhi's letter specifically mentions this:

Nor is it in the interests of our society to form this relationship. Your marriage will have a powerful impact on the Hindu-Muslim question. Intercommunal marriages

⁶¹⁸ CWMG Vol. 90 pp.261-2

⁶¹⁹ Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie *Gandhi's Prisoner* pp. 175-8

are no solution to this problem. You cannot forget nor will society forget that you are my son.⁶²⁰

There was an important social dimension and Gandhi, who always held his personal life public, felt it would be damaging for this Hindu-Muslim marriage to take place. I contend that this cautiousness and awareness of the social situation remains but grows more ambivalent with time. On the one hand, Gandhi states clearly that whilst inter-caste marriage is to be encouraged to break caste prejudice the religious situation is quite different:

I do not believe that these unions can bring peace. They may follow peace. I can see nothing but disaster following any attempt to advocate Hindu-Muslim unions so long as the relations between the two remain strained.⁶²¹

Later, when encouraging inter-religious marriage he says 'This happy event could take place when the communities shed mutual enmity and had regard for the religions of the world.'⁶²² Once again inter-religious marriage, whilst encouraged, is to follow peace, not a means to produce it. At the same time, Gandhi associated inter-religious marriage with unity and encourages a correspondent to speak clearly in favour of inter-marriages including between religions. Moreover, as we saw in Chapter Four, he did not criticise, and was impressed by the programme of Gora and the Atheist Centre which included supporting inter-religious marriages.

⁶²⁰ CWMG Vol. 30 p229

⁶²¹ CWMG Vol. 46 pp.302-4

⁶²² CWMG Vol. 87 p5

As Independence approached, India came increasingly under the sway of demands for permanent communal divides. Indeed, Jinnah used the fact the communities would neither inter-dine nor inter-marry to support his argument for a separate Muslim state.⁶²³ As this was happening, Gandhi came to *give up* the divides he had previously supported seeing inter-religious marriage as supporting unity.

However a degree of caution remains. In highly communalized situations, inter-religious marriages can be targets or excuses for violence. Hence Gandhi warned that he could only see disaster following any attempt to advocate inter-religious marriages whilst the relations remain tense. Brass looks beyond the immediate cause of riots, to identify an 'institutionalized riot network'.⁶²⁴ Whilst he would not attribute the cause of a riot to its immediate precipitant, he identifies events which are used as excuses for the deliberate production of riots. Inter-religious marriages and elopements are identified among these and thus individual choices and marriages are drawn into a communal discourse.⁶²⁵

Additionally, the couples in Chopra and Punwani's study had experienced living through the riots in Bombay and relate their fears; they observe the prevalence of threats to or attacks on Hindu women married to Muslim men in the 1992-3 Bombay riots and the 2002 Gujarat riots.⁶²⁶ Some of their interviewees personally experienced such violent

⁶²³ Mohammed Ali Jinnah 'Hindus and Muslims: Two separate nations' in Stephen Hay (ed.) *Sources of Indian Tradition: Volume Two*, Revised Second Edition, London: Penguin 1992 pp.228-231

⁶²⁴ Paul Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim violence in Contemporary India*, London: University of Washington Press, 2003

⁶²⁵ Paul Brass, *The Production of Hindu-Muslim violence in Contemporary India*, London: University of Washington Press, 2003 pp.345-6 and 260

⁶²⁶ Chopra and Punwani 'Discovering the Other' p92

threats. One woman recalls being told by her family, “If the time comes, we won’t mind even killing you” another was threatened by her father’s brothers that they would get the *Jan Sangh* to attack her Muslim partner.⁶²⁷

Forced conversions, forced marriages and rape also occur in some riots. These are by no means the inter-religious marriages we have thus far been commenting on. Yet in a situation where such events occur they are part of the communal discourse, and the discourse on inter-religious marriage may take its direction from these events, rather than freely chosen love-marriages. I do not wish to overlook these, although they are not the focus of this study. It is obvious that forced marriage, conversion and rape are forms of individual violence and abuse. When occurring in riots against members of the other community they may be communally motivated and intended as an attack not merely on the individuals but on the whole community, or may simply be opportunistic. Gandhi’s view is predictable - complete condemnation. Speaking at a prayer-meeting in Noakhali in 1946 he refuses to recognize the validity of forced marriages and conversions, in such situations he says ‘it is abuse of words to talk of free choice.’⁶²⁸ Such victimization is so effective precisely because of the refusal of one’s own community to take back women who have been forced into marriages or raped. This false sense of shame is problematic for the community at large as well as victims themselves. Gandhi recognising this, says communities must refuse to recognise the validity of such marriages or conversions,

⁶²⁷ Chopra and Punwani ‘Discovering the Other’ p92. The Jan Sangh are a right-wing political party associated with Hindutva ideology.

⁶²⁸ CWMG Vol. 90 pp.261-2

welcome back and support their women, likewise rape victims must not be shunned or excluded as defiled or impure, but welcomed back and supported.⁶²⁹

On a more optimistic note, although we have seen how inter-religious marriages may be implicated in riots and used as a form of provocation, they also present a challenge to and critique of communalization. To start with, those entering into inter-religious marriages refuse to buy into communal ideologies. Their marriage in itself is an act of defiance.⁶³⁰ In its social aspect, where there is reconciliation with the families (which is the majority of cases after a period of time⁶³¹) it brings exposure to the other religious community, extending beyond the individuals to their families and communities. This exposure can prevent the formation of highly discrete, segregated communities. Where two communities interact people have the opportunity to form relationships, find commonalities, form links and understand the differences from personal experience, rather than making prejudiced opinions on the basis of rhetoric and propaganda. Within the family itself, and particularly where there are children, the very identification of two distinct communities, on which communalisation is based, is called into question. One of the effects of widespread communal violence is the creation of a more sharply divided society between the communities and ghettoisation. This is worrying for those trying to promote harmony as this divide lends itself to the perpetuation of the divisions which in

⁶²⁹ Menon and Bhasin pp.99-100

⁶³⁰ See chapter seven.

⁶³¹ Bambawale for instance found 75% males and 71% females whose parents initially opposed were now reconciled, p105. The time ranges from several months to several years, although there is no standard pattern, reconciliation may occur with the birth of children or as a result of financial need in the natal family and assistance being received from the formerly ostracised member.

turn perpetuate violence.⁶³² This is significant in light of Varshney's findings that the extent of civic, everyday associations between communities is a key factor in maintaining peace in Hindu-Muslim relations in India.⁶³³ Where a couple have entered into an inter-religious marriage, a long-term bond between two members of different communities and their respective families is maintained. This may be incredibly difficult for the couple during periods of communal strife. Yet such bonds, in a limited way, prevent alienation from the other community. Unlike other forms of interaction, such as working together, friendships and daily interactions with neighbours, marriage is a long-standing commitment. It is therefore a potentially long lasting bond and bridge between communities.⁶³⁴

All the studies found people married inter-religiously out of love for the individual. It is for personal reasons not, as is sometimes the case with inter-caste marriages, for the sake of social change as a principle.⁶³⁵ This is the way Gandhi saw such marriages. Even when he began to encourage inter-religious marriages he never saw them as something people ought to enter into for the sake of promoting unity as he did with inter-caste marriage. Even Jaisinghani's polemic in favour of inter-religious marriage on the basis of unity says that marriage is sacred and 'subservient to no other ideal, - not even that of

⁶³² The re-establishment of interactions and trust between Hindus and Muslims is the key feature in the various groups working for reconciliation following the major riots of 2002 in Gujarat surveyed in Janet Powers, *Kites over the Mango Tree: Restoring Harmony between Hindus and Muslims in Gujarat* London: Praeger Security International 2009 p163ff. deals specifically with the phenomenon of ghettoisation, although the whole book and especially the case studies address projects to reverse of this trend.

⁶³³ See Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life; Hindus and Muslims in India*, London: Yale University Press, 2002. He particularly notes the success of the Bhiwandi experiment in transforming one of the most infamous towns for Hindu-Muslim riots through building Hindu-Muslim contacts, see p293ff.

⁶³⁴ It should be admitted that this is only on a small scale, given that inter-religious marriages are uncommon.

⁶³⁵ Kannan, *Intercaste* pp. 199-200, 209-210

Unity'.⁶³⁶ Theories of inter-religious dialogue can overlook individuality and personal relations as a motive for dialogue. In doing so, an important contribution to interfaith theology is overlooked. As I will argue in the final Conclusion, to move dialogue forward it is important to lay more stress on friendship as a model, recognising individuality and the value of interpersonal relations.

I have shown that although inter-religious couples' motivations for marriage are personal, they inevitably become part of a wider social and communal discourse. This is unavoidable, how one deals with this determines one's part in reform and social activism. Some couples will try to keep their heads low and avoid the conflicts and the opposition they face, even hiding their true identity or opting for nominal conversion. Others courageously refuse to hide their identity even in the face of danger and wish for people to know about them. These people challenge the opposition they face and promote a new vision for inter-religious relations.

A Gandhian Vision for Inter-religious Marriage

In the light of Gandhi's sayings on inter-religious relations, his few statements on inter-religious marriage in particular, and his guidelines on personal qualities and *satyagraha*, I contend that a Gandhian vision for inter-religious marriages as a mode of societal reform for harmony can be constructed.⁶³⁷

⁶³⁶ Jaisinghani p3-4

⁶³⁷ Before embarking on this, I would like to make a disclaimer, that whilst these guidelines show a way of conducting oneself in an inter-religious marriage and advocate certain options clearly over others, such as maintaining one's own religion over conversion, this is in no way intended as a disparagement of those couples who in the very difficult situations faced choose a different course.

The first principle, which Gandhi clearly states regarding inter-religious marriage, is that the individuals should maintain their own religions and not convert. He is especially critical of nominal conversion. Where couples do maintain their own religions, they may contribute to harmony; they show that it is possible for people of different religions to live not only side-by-side in harmony, but to support each other within a family. Inter-religious couples in practice display the Gandhian vision that religions are not in opposition and competition with one another; learning about other religions is not damaging or weakening to one's own faith, rather it enriches one's religious experience. Moreover I suggest that they are a grass-roots example of inter-religious relations, and a rich source from which to explore, promote and understand inter-religious relations. This is especially the case in identifying possible ways of compromising, understanding and overcoming the differences faced between different religions in day-to-day living.

A second principle, again directly stated by Gandhi, is that the children should be given a liberal education in the matter of religion and exposed to both faiths with freedom to choose their own faith. Many inter-religious couples do in fact choose this route, even when they nominally give the child one religion. When couples refuse to label their child (as is a requirement in much official documentation in India such as in schools) as belonging to one religion, they go even further in taking a stand on the issue and challenging the forces that label and divide. Their action effectively becomes social activism, which I take to be Gandhian in its promotion of a unified India.

A third principle is openly to admit one's religious identity, and not leave an area in which one is a minority, even in the face of physical danger. When individuals openly declare their identities as an inter-religious couple they challenge the status quo in a progressive way. As we have seen, some even wish for their identity as an inter-religious couple to be widely known, so people can see that such marriages work. This element of openness about one's identity is part of maintaining truth. As previously explored, the Gandhian concept branches far more widely than not-lying, but even in this limited dimension, he identifies allowing others to (falsely) believe something about oneself as a form of lying. In remaining as a minority in the other's community during conflict, though incredibly risky, one refuses to give way to violence. In Gandhi's view, by remaining in spite of danger one proves the power of non-violence and the principles of love and unity over division and violence. Gandhi famously stayed in Muslim areas and households during communal violence from 1946 until his assassination in 1948, travelling specifically to these areas and endangering his life to promote Hindu-Muslim unity.⁶³⁸ In the aftermath of Partition he called on minorities to remain in their homes, rather than fleeing or migrating. He held that it was necessary for violence to end, sanity to return and minorities to feel safe in their homes through a changed attitude rather than finding safety through flight and migration. This is *satyagraha* - holding firmly and non-violently to Truth, the Truth of unity, in the face of violence. As we have seen, this is a situation faced by inter-religious couples, when there are violent outbreaks, and the minority in the area may be threatened and unsafe. For Gandhi, to remain is to offer *satyagraha*. The

⁶³⁸ Brown *Gandhi* pp.374-384; Pyarelal *The Last Phase* Vol. 1 Book 1 pp.303ff. Book 2 Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1956 also Volume I2, 1958; Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi* pp. 139-167

wisdom of Gandhi's advice is questionable, in light of the degree of violence witnessed at Partition. His ability to restore harmony (in some remarkable situations) through fasts and to go unharmed is by no means applicable to ordinary individuals. Had people remained as he advised, rather than migrating, the death tolls surrounding Partition may, perhaps, have been larger. Yet such figures are not the basis for Gandhi's claims. *Satyagraha* requires a willingness to face danger and even death for the sake of Truth. The fact one is or may be killed in the pursuit of peace does not change this, or its importance in Gandhi's vision.

The final principle relates to people's day-to-day interactions, rather than communal situations and violence specifically, yet all inter-religious relations in the context of communalism have a bearing on it. These are Gandhi's guidelines for inter-religious relations, in general, which should be applied in inter-religious marriages. In his attempts to create harmony he participated with people from other religions in their religious endeavours - fasting during Ramadan with Muslims in his *ashram*, attending church for many years in South Africa, encouraging people to celebrate together in each other's festivals. Small day-to-day gestures characterized his interactions and awareness. He moreover encouraged day-to-day interaction between religions on mundane, secular matters of concern to all.⁶³⁹ Inter-religious couples are constantly together and interacting in mutual concerns which have no explicitly religious component. Gandhi often said one should learn from other religions and in judging religions view the other religions through the eyes of a believer, viewing others sympathetically and one's own

⁶³⁹ Gandhi *Way to Communal Harmony* p406

religion more critically.⁶⁴⁰ I suggest that this principle, applied in a marriage will help develop respect and understanding of one's partner's religion essential for family harmony. In inter-religious marriages, one's exposure to the other religion is mediated through a member of that religion. Punwani and Chopra observed that inter-religious couples develop greater understanding of the other community and learn more about themselves and develop a more critical attitude to their own community. Their title, 'Discovering the other, discovering the self', reflects this. I therefore argue that inter-religious marriages are a revealing form of inter-religious dialogue and show practical applications of Gandhi's inter-religious ideas.⁶⁴¹ Inter-religious couples can learn from Gandhi's advice on how one should relate to other religions. It is notable that Bamabawale found in contrast to an attitude of secularism and marginalisation of religion, inter-religious couples preferred the Gandhian formula, an attitude of equal reverence for all religions.⁶⁴²

Most importantly, in inter-religious marriages, we see a person-centred approach, emphasising friendship between individuals. Gandhi saw mutual love and friendship as the basis for marriage. Characteristic of Gandhi was his ability to form friendship and find a personal point of contact with others. We go beyond labels and groups in this, to touch the person. This is the ultimate concern in inter-religious marriages, which are essentially

⁶⁴⁰ Ellsberg *Gandhi on Christianity* p50; *Gandhi Truth is God* pp.59-60

⁶⁴¹ This is not to suggest that couples are self-consciously emulating and following Gandhi's advice, but that in fact their behaviour and developing understanding and participation in practise follow the guidelines and ideas he was propagating.

⁶⁴² Bamabawale *Inter-religious Marriages* p202

about the person and the ability of two people to relate to one another as people, as husband and wife, not as members of another group.

Inter-religious marriage and the deepening of Gandhi's pluralism

Gandhi's religious pluralism developed and expanded. He was throughout a pluralist, engaging with other religions, both in terms of people and traditions. For instance attending Christian church for years in South Africa, reading religious texts of the major World religions, learning from books about religion (inside and outside Hinduism), taking on different practices and revering prominent figures of all religions and forming very deep and lasting friendships with people from all religions.⁶⁴³ He was vocal and active in his support for inter-religious harmony throughout his life. There is a development that occurs in his theology as we have seen in previous chapters. From saying 'What of substance is contained in any other religion is always to be found in Hinduism. And what is not contained in it is insubstantial or unnecessary.'⁶⁴⁴ And 'Hinduism is the most tolerant of all religions. Its creed is all-embracing. But to claim that is to claim superiority for the Hindu creed over all the other creeds of the world.'⁶⁴⁵ He moved to equal reverence for all religions in 1930.⁶⁴⁶

The change from 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God' in 1931 in order to include all, even those who struggled with the concept of God, was another important development of his religious pluralism. When we compare this timing with his ideas on inter-religious

⁶⁴³ We need only think of his friendships with C.F. Andrews, Maulana Azad, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Polaks, Kallenbach, Rev. Doke to see this.

⁶⁴⁴ CWMG Vol. 28 p194

⁶⁴⁵ CWMG Vol. 23 p485

⁶⁴⁶ CWMG Vol. 50 p78 (Gandhiserve)

marriage, we see opposition to inter-religious marriage in 1926, but by 1930, whilst still expressing doubts Gandhi is clear that there is no moral objection. In a speech advocating inter-caste marriage he declares that if a Hindu woman wishes to marry a Muslim, 'for good and sufficient reason, we should not believe her to be committing a sin', in support of his argument for inter-caste marriage.⁶⁴⁷ In 1931, he again states so long as each is free to observe their religion there is no moral objection, and this is re-iterated in the concrete example arising in 1932 of the Bhatia Girl and Muslim youth.⁶⁴⁸ Whilst his references to inter-religious marriages are admittedly sparse, it is noteworthy that these instances between 1930 and 1932, in which inter-religious marriage were viewed as no moral problem, coincide with the deepening in his pluralism. I argue that his boundaries in practice, as well as ideology have shifted, and he now accepts religions living together within the family.

Whilst it takes significantly longer for Gandhi to come out in active support for inter-religious marriage, when he does so, he uses religious pluralism in his argument in support of, and as a condition for, such marriages. In the 1945 letter to Narahari Parikh he says

Where parents are wise, there should be no difficulty even about marriages between persons of different religions. Do we not look upon all religions as equal? It is with some purpose that we have accorded a place to other faiths in our prayer.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁷ CWMG Vol. 44 p328

⁶⁴⁸ CWMG Vol.46 p302-4 and Vol. 49 p478

⁶⁴⁹ CWMG Vol.80 p78

And on questioning after a prayer meeting in Noakhali,

Though he admitted he had not always held this view, he had come to the conclusion long ago that an inter-religious marriage was a welcome event whenever it took place...there must be mutual friendship, either party having equal respect for the religion of the other. 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.⁶⁵⁰

In both these instances, the link with equal regard for all religions is clear and strong. The rhetorical question in the former 'Do we not look upon all religions as equal?' could be seen as a challenge to those professing pluralism, yet falling short when it comes to marriage. Indeed, it can be applied as a critique of his earlier views, when he had not fully undertaken the implications of a world-view in which all religions are equal and people are valued for themselves. The reference to the practice of his prayer-meetings, which were available to all religions and drew from all traditions, is significant in suggesting that religions can exist together in practical terms. Religious practices and prayers of different traditions are not mutually exclusive and religious observance may include more than one religion. For Gandhi, this challenge also forms a pre-condition for marriage, parents must be wise and have the same reverence for the other's religion as

⁶⁵⁰ CWMG Vol. 87 p5; In many cases couples do in fact wish for a joint religious ceremony as Gandhi describes, but struggle to find priests willing to perform this. Jonathan Romain *Till Faith us do Part* is a book written by a priest in the UK involved in helping inter-religious couples with marriages, he gives advice and consideration of the ceremonial aspect and the benefit of approaching several religious leaders if encountering an initial negative reaction pp.99-104

their own; in the second case this is further applied to the change necessary in the communities to facilitate 'this happy event'. I contend that by this stage in Gandhi's thought inter-religious marriage has become a token of one's acceptance of other religions; it implies equal reverence to another religion, demonstrating mutual support and co-dependence of two religions in one home.

There is a two-directional movement in the relation between harmony between religions and inter-religious marriage each aiding the other. In one direction harmony between religions makes inter-religious marriage possible with inter-religious marriage further promoting pluralist values. In the other, it is due to events such as inter-religious marriage that it is necessary to develop harmony and espouse pluralism.⁶⁵¹ As religious people encounter and come into closer relations with one another the need to reflect and recognize the value and validity of others becomes imminent.

Conclusions

Gandhi was unusual in situating marriage in individual terms rather than with respect to the families, by contravening many of the traditional social restrictions, and by giving an equal degree of freedom and independence in marriage to women. This makes him seem to me fairly modern, and relevant to contemporary India. However, the communal situation of everyday life adds a complicated dimension. Communally motivated sexual violence and forced marriage across religious divides demanded Gandhi

⁶⁵¹ Martin Forward *A Short Introduction to Inter-religious Dialogue* Oxford: Oneworld 2001 identifies interfaith marriage among the new situations facing a globalised world which necessitate greater dialogue and understanding pp.123-5

attention in the late 1940s. His response, which refused to recognise marriages in this circumstance and called for rehabilitation, was timely. However it could be seen to reinforce policies which denied a woman's free choice and resulted in a double dislocation from a settled family life.

By Gandhi's final years, marriage, which he considered a sacred bond of mutual love and friendship, had become a symbol of unity across communities. He therefore welcomes inter-religious marriage as a sign of friendship and harmony between Hindus and Muslims, but was alert to the dangers and complexities, and never goes so far as to encourage inter-religious marriage as social activism. He has however moved from a limited pluralism, which, whilst affirming the equality of religions, set a limit to how closely they should interact, opposing inter-religious marriage, to a fuller pluralism. This fuller pluralism sees a practical implication of welcoming inter-religious homes as an expression of the harmonious ideal in the philosophy that all religions are expressions of Truth. He even advocates for others to welcome inter-religious marriage on the principle of the equality of all religions. Inter-religious marriages are motivated by love and affection for a particular person, yet they do present a challenge to communal ideologies and this inter-religious dialogue has implications for society and inter-religious relations more widely, which are yet to be fully explored and drawn upon by theologians of inter-religious dialogue and religious diversity. This aspect of Gandhi's thought therefore has considerable significance.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS

Where does Gandhi fit in the schema of Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism?

The concepts of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism form an important model and starting point for exploring how one views other traditions. However, they cannot be seen as water-tight definitions, they reflect typical attitudes, and an individual is likely to display elements of each in relation to particular aspects of his/her religious tradition or to vary depending on the particular religion encountered. A person may also change through the course of their lifetime, particularly in relation to the encounter with other traditions.

Gandhi is best described as a pluralist, with his religious ideas emphasising the equality of all religions as expressions of Truth. His pluralism is in many ways typical of a Hindu, the faith he consistently professed. He does not justify the other faiths in terms of a Hindu worldview, but as self-sufficient expressions or responses to Truth, and neither Hinduism, nor a particular school within it, is seen as having a full grasp of Truth, but like the other religions it is a human response, through which Gandhi understands and prays to God, which is beyond it. There are substantial overlaps between Gandhi's pluralism

and the standard example of pluralism in current scholarship, that of John Hick, who was inspired by Gandhi.⁶⁵²

Gandhi is certainly pluralist with regard to the theistic religions, but when it comes to atheistic ideas he shows certain traits of an inclusivist. Buddhism and Jainism are considered to be part of Hinduism, and although he gives room for non-theistic definitions of the transcendent, himself shifting between personal and impersonal conceptions, it is doubtful how fully he appreciates the differences in philosophy. When it comes to atheism in the Western sense he appears as an inclusivist resorting to an 'anonymous believer' position to understand and incorporate moral atheists. When he recognises truth in Gora's atheist convictions, it is in terms of his own concept of Truth which sees Gora as a 'godly man'. His effort to use 'Truth is God' to avoid alienating those who struggle with God is appreciated, but challenged by Gora, who saw in it a slippery slope back to theism. In the final instance Gandhi appears to accept the more radical distinction with an attitude of respect, rather than trying to incorporate Gora back into his worldview and convert him to a religious outlook.

This critique of how far Gandhi is able to reach in his religious pluralism is more a sign of the limits of religious pluralism than of Gandhi's equiminded approach to all people. His attempt to reach to atheists shows his desire not to exclude. Its failure to view them on their own terms, points to the fundamental incompatibility in the philosophies and the fact that religious pluralism is still religious, it is not just 'pluralism'.

⁶⁵² Sharada Sugirtharajah 'The Mahatma and the Philosopher: Mohandas Gandhi and John Hick and their search for Truth' in *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World: An ongoing engagement with John Hick* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 pp.121-133

It is a philosophy which makes sense of religious diversity in religious rather than secular terms and thus affirms the reality of some transcendent or religious principle, without pinning that down within a particular tradition but affirming the reality of all. Unless one adopts an approach of complete relativism and detachment, one will always perceive others through one's own worldview.

Relativity in regard to human comprehension and expression of truth is central to Gandhi's pluralism, allowing him to find room for truth to be expressed in different forms and to always consider one's own conception with humility rather than as a final truth. Yet, it would be incorrect to define Gandhi as a relativist, when his entire orientation is based upon the notion of Truth, his whole life a striving to realise *Sat*. Here Cornille's distinction between relativity and relativism is elucidating

While the notion of relativity implies recognition of the historical and cultural particularity of all expressions of truth, relativism entails a radical reduction of all truth to historical and cultural contexts. Whereas doctrinal humility [a condition for dialogue] requires some form of acknowledgement of the relativity of religious expressions, relativism is at odds with religious self-understanding.⁶⁵³

Gandhi is a deeply faith-full person, and to live in integrity with the religious convictions he held, to which he attributes his powerful life, necessarily means subscribing to a particular worldview and seeing others through that. It is this integrity to one's own life of faith and religious worldview which are the basis of inclusivism. Gandhi's

⁶⁵³ Cornille *Im-possibility* p36

pluralism is a part of his religious conviction, and stretches very broadly indeed, but we see its limit in his response to atheists.

The relation between religious pluralism and inter-religious harmony

Religious pluralism is a philosophical position in relation to other religions, thus a part of the theology of religions. The practical correlate is found in inter-religious discourse. In a sense the two are distinct: for instance a person may hold an exclusivist position yet engage fully in dialogue with religious others on the basis of tolerance or necessity, or a pluralist may consider all religions equal and true, but have little interest in dialogue due to a lack of exposure, curiosity and motivation to engage with other people. Usually, however there is some overlap between the theological position and the practical response to other traditions and their adherents. An exclusivist position reinforces the self-sufficiency of one's own tradition and community, making dialogue unnecessary, even dangerous. Pluralism on the other hand gives a motive for dialogue with others in a shared religious journey, and such engagement with others is likely to reinforce this pluralist conviction. Alan Race therefore describes theology and dialogue as 'twin tracks'.⁶⁵⁴

Bearing in mind this parallel and interlinked relation between religious pluralism and inter-faith relations, Gandhi's responses to interfaith marriage shed important light on his pluralism and practice. It asks the question how far and in what ways should religions engage with one another? Gandhi's early rejection of interfaith marriages, suggests a pluralist philosophy in which religions are self-sufficient, independently

⁶⁵⁴ Race *Interfaith Encounter: The twin tracks of theology and dialogue* London: SCM Press, 2001

functioning paths, which it is best not to mix too closely. Marriage forms a strict boundary as to how far people of different religions can and should interact. This is therefore a limited, restricted pluralism in its implications even if affirming in theory. However, whilst inter-religious marriage remains a complex issue in view of the political and social context, as well as the influence Gandhi's unusual philosophy of marriage and sexual relations brought, by the end of his life Gandhi was supportive of interfaith marriage. He even spells out the link between pluralism and interfaith marriage by drawing attention to the ashram vow of equality of religions and practice of multifaith worship. Gandhi's pluralist philosophy and experimentation in inter-religious living and leadership can provide a resource for couples seeking interfaith marriage and defending this against opposition. Moreover, and as I will expand on later, interfaith marriage fits into the model of interfaith relations which this research draws out in Gandhi's life: friendship and interpersonal harmony between people of different faiths.

Religious pluralism facilitated the relationship between Gandhi and Quakers. In this example we see the typical relation between theology and practice. A theology which affirms other religions undergirds and supports a welcoming attitude and engagement with other religions; whilst working with others leads to greater affirmation of religious pluralism. Experiencing Indian spirituality reaffirmed Horace and Marjorie's concerns with traditional forms of Christianity and the need to be open to new light and engage with people of other traditions.

The dialogue with atheists is more complex however. Gandhi's inclusivism led him to affirm socially engaged and ethically conscious atheists in his own worldview. Seeing what, in his view, was their response to Truth in ethical action he developed a friendship. This opened a philosophical dialogue between atheism and theism, in which Gandhi's views were challenged and changed. Both initially sort to convert the other, yet in spite of this a close friendship rooted in social transformation was developed. It is not always necessary to have a pluralist philosophy prior to dialogue - it may be the outcome of a dialogue where the practice is in advance of philosophy.

Commitment, individuality and engagement

If inter-religious dialogue is to move forward, some issues need to be given serious consideration. For example, commitment is generally seen in terms of adherence to a particular faith. Thus Catherine Cornille has argued 'Such commitment marks the difference between a genuinely inter-religious and a strictly interpersonal dialogue'.⁶⁵⁵ Where does this leave individuality in interpretation, the role of reformers and commitment or belonging to a tradition as a condition for dialogue. This thesis challenges such an assumption and proposes inter-religious friendship as a model of dialogue which meets these challenges.

As Cantwell Smith has dedicated much of his career to showing, religions are not things existing in themselves. Religions are fundamentally practised by individuals. So to distinguish abruptly between an interpersonal and inter-religious dialogue is to treat the

⁶⁵⁵ Cornille *Im-possibility* p60

individual not only, but merely as a representative of their tradition. It is to imagine that we can be in inter-religious dialogue at one moment, and then just interacting as people in the next, once the dialogue is over. It seems to perpetuate a sense of the distinction between the religious and the secular on the one hand and the need for labelling people on the other. Ironically this treatment of interpersonal dialogue as distinct from inter-religious dialogue propagates the secularist position – in which secularism is the normal standard human position, with religion as an optional extra, which can and indeed should (at least in public) be dropped, rather than an integral part of a person.⁶⁵⁶ It suggests that when we are not consciously and explicitly interacting as 'religious' people, that element of religious difference of inter-religious dialogue vanishes from our dialogue which becomes merely interpersonal.

Not only so, but Cornille seems to decide on her own criteria who belongs to a particular tradition, or community. She gives Gandhi as an example of someone reaching great spiritual and moral heights in an autonomous search for truth. She gives him a high regard, but places him outside of inter-religious dialogue.

His insights, as well as those of many others who have likewise embarked on a search for truth outside of any particular religious commitment, may certainly inspire those engaged in interreligious dialogue. Yet dialogue between religions ultimately requires some degree of identification with a particular religious tradition from which one engages the other.⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵⁶ See Cantwell Smith *Modern Culture* p75

⁶⁵⁷ Cornille *Im-possibility* pp.63-4

This is an inappropriate way to deal with Gandhi. He self-identified as a Hindu, is accepted as such by the majority of Hindus, and whilst engaging with and incorporating other religious practices into his journey, was deeply committed not only to the universal values he found in Hindu teachings, but also to its particularities - through his *ishtadeva*, Rama, daily recital of the Gita, the use of Sanskrit *shlokas* calling on particular divinities from the Hindu pantheon, and singing *bhajans* – speaking of this he defends the need for particularity in spite of its relativity as a means of connecting with the ultimate.⁶⁵⁸

Such a stress on belonging and tradition display a modern way of viewing the world which seeks to categorise people within their tradition. It misses the insights of Cantwell Smith into the nature and meaning of religion - even the inappropriateness of talking of 'religions' - which suggests distinguishing between the accumulated tradition and personal faith and piety.⁶⁵⁹ Thinking that faith must exist within a particular tradition, not only so, but that to be committed means accepting the truth-claims and authority of that tradition is a Christian way of looking at it. Hinduism is not asserting such authority, but deferring to individual choice, as well as the great variety of practices and philosophies within it, does not fit this idea and has even challenged the definition of a religion.

Commitment to a particular tradition or community can be very limiting, regarding who may engage in dialogue and the way in which they may engage. Religious

⁶⁵⁸ M. K. Gandhi *Ashram Observances in Action* pp.10-12

⁶⁵⁹ Cantwell Smith *The Meaning and End of Religion*, see also *Religious Diversity* pp.121ff. which seeks to understand being a Christian (or Muslim...) in terms of participating however critically, half-heartedly or untraditionally in the Christian process, and not in terms of any imposed definition.

commitment I propose should be considered in terms of commitment to a set of values, to a particular way of life. This is the way Gandhi himself saw it and the way Quakers practise, under this definition atheists may be included in their commitment to a particular philosophy and way of life.

Such an attitude, which is individually rather than communally defined is more acceptable for the inter-religiously married, who often remain religiously committed but rejected by their community. Inter-religious marriages give a very intimate context for interfaith harmony, and bring a challenge to communalism and to fixed notions of religious belonging. They refer to individuals' own conceptions of religion and faith and form flexible and adaptive strategies of accommodation. In inter-faith marriage respect for another tradition is usually developed through love and friendship with respect for individuality. Here Gandhi, in spite of certain limitations, is relevant for inter-religious marriages and suggesting a way forward which keeps religion central and marriage sacred, whilst accommodating multiple expressions of religion.

An inter-personal approach to dialogue, as opposed to a more institutional approach, is also able to include the deeper levels of inter-religious theology or interspirituality which may occur as a consequence of dialogue and engagement, whereby individuals have engaged so deeply they are no longer able to define themselves as clearly or solely belonging to one tradition.⁶⁶⁰ The dialogue influences their whole approach to religion. Even if one does prefer to think of the importance of religious

⁶⁶⁰ See Ursula King 'Interfaith Spirituality or Interspirituality? A new phenomenon in a postmodern world' in Sugirtharajah *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World* pp.107-120

definition in order to enter an explicitly inter-religious dialogue, the variance within religions themselves is so great that an approach which recognises individuality is more conducive for dialogue and more honest than one which sees the other as a representative for their tradition.

Implications for contemporary inter-faith dialogue: Developing friendship and ethical practice

My research suggests engaging in a long-term, holistic way to form interpersonal friendships across religious traditions and commitments as a way to develop and deepen interfaith understanding, harmony and one's own commitment and insight. This model deserves to be recognised as a valid form of interfaith dialogue and engagement. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's personalist approach to religion suggests this approach in dialogue. He has written widely and passionately on the need to move from viewing 'religions' as systems to seeking to understand the faith of persons: 'I suppose that my entire thesis can be summed up in the affirmation that the study of religion must be fundamentally a study of persons.'⁶⁶¹ To truly understand the nature of religion and faith, we need to recognise that religions are not static entities existing in some pure or essential form, but that they only exist in the lives of people, in ways which change across centuries and places, and in relation to individual circumstances. Nor he argues, did people used to believe in their religions, they were instead the pattern through which they saw and made sense of the world, thus the truth of a religion is not something to affirm or deny,

⁶⁶¹ Cantwell Smith *Religious Diversity* p75

rather we must ask how well a person's faith and orientation as informed by Islam or Hinduism or Shinto enables them to live in and relate to their world.⁶⁶²

Using friendship as our model recognises these insights and gives more space to the individuality and flexibility of people of faith, and recognises that faith affects the whole person, it is not one aspect of their life, but incorporates the whole of it.⁶⁶³ In allowing for individuality rather than commitment to a fixed religion, it opens the way to dialogue with those who do not fit, but with whom dialogue is important particularly in a postmodern world – for instance atheists, agnostics and followers of new age spiritualities. Interspirituality satisfies many of these concerns arising in the contemporary religious environment, but may contain the risk of becoming a highly personalised inward looking spirituality – focussed upon the individual's spiritual and mystical journey.⁶⁶⁴ Inter-religious friendship as a model for dialogue overcomes this risk. Whilst retaining a personalised response it is in essence relational, keeping the connection to others and need to engage in the world alive.

This model supplements the existing forms of dialogue – between representatives of traditions, through comparative theology and inter-textual studies, and in the institutional relations between religions. As Race says 'Dialogue operates in whatever sphere it is conducted – in academic discourse, in arranged encounters between religious

⁶⁶² Cantwell Smith *Towards a World Theology* pp.93-4

⁶⁶³ Cantwell Smith *Religious Diversity* p72

⁶⁶⁴ Ursula King 'Interfaith Spirituality' p118

institutions...or simply as part of a person's life praxis.'⁶⁶⁵ Dialogue and encounters may not always be intentional, as Cantwell Smith has said

...any local citizen who invites an Asian student at a Western university into his home, or fails to invite him or her, may thereby turn out to be playing some small role in the religious evolution of Asia. Human history, including its religious history, is an intimate and delicate web of human relationships.⁶⁶⁶

Gandhi's life exemplifies the importance of human relationships as the foundation of human history. He combines interpersonal friendship and affection with ethical engagement, or to use Knitter's phrase eco-human liberation. This kind of inter-religious dialogue operates as part of a person's life-praxis, suffusing through their life, rather than taking place in a consciously demarcated arena.

Gandhi's initial opposition to mixed marriage revealed a limitation to his pluralism. His initial attempt to convert Gora and dismissal of atheism also reflect negatively on his ideal of respect and equality for all. Through time, however, he came to respect the difference, though never going beyond a certain inclusivism which saw the moral atheist as an 'anonymous believer'. This is perhaps inevitable, one does not enter into dialogue with complete neutrality, but needs to find one's starting place in one's own belief. As Cornille is so keen to point out, ultimately one comes from within a tradition and works from a confessional concept of the transcendent.⁶⁶⁷ In spite of this, Gandhi's identification of religion in one's manner of life, which sought to go beyond

⁶⁶⁵ Race *Interfaith Encounter* p86

⁶⁶⁶ Cantwell Smith *Towards a World Theology* p42

⁶⁶⁷ Cornille *The Im-Possibility of Dialogue* p133

labels to the heart of Truth, proved a solid base for lasting friendships, which lived out the values and spiritual ideals he fought for.

Observing Gandhi's pluralism and relationships with atheists and Quakers, and the way in which inter-religious couples interact brings out the importance of friendship for interfaith relations. Friendships create living, dynamic bonds across traditions. Essentially religion is lived by people, as Cantwell Smith concisely put it: 'The locus of faith is persons'.⁶⁶⁸ Seeking interfaith harmony and understanding through friendship recognises individuals' own interpretations and personalities, and also the social nature of humanity. By freeing it from text, tradition or set beliefs orthodoxy loses its hegemony giving room for change and growth – in both the individual and the religious or philosophical tradition.

Shared values give a foundation for these relationships. They are a site for inter-religious action and living, where Gandhi and his friends found mutual inspiration and expression of their faith. The issues on which individuals engaged were personal; even though Marjorie and Horace were both Quakers, the issues they represent differ, but are informed by deepest convictions. Yet even here there is challenge and difference in ethics – for instance Horace's criticism of Gandhi's non-co-operation in war-time, or Gora's perception that Gandhi was too slow and needed a far greater radicalism in tackling caste.

⁶⁶⁸ Cantwell Smith *Towards a World Theology* p47

This sense of friendship allows for recognition of individuality and difference in how one relates to and interprets one's own traditions. It seeks to go beyond the limitation of a dialogue which insists on each member being firmly rooted and committed to an explicit and particular tradition, to include people who experience difficulties with the orthodox expressions of their own tradition, but have a sense of a religious life, and to include those who explicitly deny a religious stance in dialogue which can be mutually enriching.⁶⁶⁹ Treating people as individuals rather than simply representatives of a static faith is paramount. As Horace appreciates in Gandhi,

Every one of his innumerable friends was to him a single identifiable man or woman. He did not sit down to write the same letter to several people. Even if he was asking his friends to uphold him through a fast, he would still make each letter special for the friend he was addressing.⁶⁷⁰

Chatterjee identifies this in her statements: 'The language of "respecting religions" needs to be cashed in terms of respecting individuals to whom particular religious traditions are dear.'⁶⁷¹ And 'He [Gandhi] did not experience 'other religions', so much as 'other people' representing different traditions'.⁶⁷² It is in this way that couples in inter-religious marriages come to know one another, develop respect for the other

⁶⁶⁹ Cantwell Smith draws out attention to the important role of non-explicit forms of religion, the faith inside a person which may be not be expressed through traditional forms, but how it affects life and meaning in *Religious Diversity* pp.70-73 see also pp.121ff. on being a Muslim as participating in whatever way with the Islamic process, with freedom to do so half-heatedly, with criticism or piously, that to define the content of being a Muslim (or Christian) is to imprison it.

⁶⁷⁰ Alexander *Through Western Eyes* p189

⁶⁷¹ Chatterjee *Religious Diversity* p336

⁶⁷² Chatterjee *Religious Diversity* p19

religion, and apply a more critical eye to themselves, 'Marriage in his [Gandhi's] opinion was a sacred institution. Hence there must be mutual friendship, either party having equal respect for the religion of the other.'⁶⁷³ Practically we have seen that couples in inter-religious marriages do find flexible strategies to accommodate and support their partner's differing beliefs, whilst retaining their own religious faith. Such relationships form an important and underexplored area of inter-religious dialogue, which a theology with a strong emphasis on tradition or belonging to a community could easily overlook.

Friendship, as a process rather than something complete and defined, leaves room for change and development in each partner. It is also internal to dialogue; therefore dialogue is not dependent on something external to it. When a particular person is motive for dialogue it is freed from the need to justify dialogue within one's own tradition. There is no longer the need to predicate dialogue on an internally defined idea, for instance, to find the working of the Holy Spirit in non-Christians, with its difficulty for the non-Christian partner; or in an already shared pluralist philosophy. Through friendship, there is a motive for dialogue, based on empathy, for those whose theology does not provide motivation, perhaps even discourages it. The dialogue does not need to justify itself to the tradition – by simply embarking on friendship, the theoretics of dialogue are by-passed. Each person can enter with their own theology, rather than needing to agree on such beforehand.

Friendship and ethical challenge

⁶⁷³ CWMG Vol. 87 p5

This thesis has emphasised shared ethical actions, and these are an important motivation and space for engagement to base dialogue upon. However, there are two important criticisms of this. Dialogue may hold a position of utility in tackling an outside issue, rather than being valuable in its own right, the dialogue is dependent and potentially secondary to another issue. Secondly, we encounter the problem of ethical diversity; are we shifting the point of inclusion/exclusion from those who hold different beliefs to those who hold different ethical views.

Gandhi often spoke in terms of making the Christian a better Christian and the Muslim a better Muslim, an aspiration common in dialogue. However,

...the term “better” can be somewhat equivocal. Whether one realizes it or not, suggesting that the other might become a better member of their religion often implies a greater conformity to the ideals and goals of one’s own tradition, or at least realizing what is best about that tradition *as viewed from the perspective of one’s own*. It would indeed seem disingenuous to wish for the realization of ideals that diverge from or oppose one’s own.⁶⁷⁴

Gandhi’s interfaith friendships were strongly grounded in working together for a better world. They covered a vast range of issues of contemporary relevance – politics, education, respect for women, economics, drug abuse and of course, interfaith harmony and the proper expression of religion itself. It was because of Gora’s social work that Gandhi took him seriously in spite of his atheism, and ethics, especially the centrality of non-violence, form a primary bond between Quakers and Gandhi. This research and

⁶⁷⁴ Cornille *Im-possibility* p188

study of Gandhi wholeheartedly supports Knitters model and argument for inter-religious engagement in *One Earth, Many Religions*.

However, it would be doing the friendships a disservice to reduce them to this. In both the example of atheists and Quakers we find areas of substantial disagreement on politics and social ethics which the bonds of friendship allow to be voiced and moved forward upon. With the atheists we have seen how their radical critique of caste influenced Gandhi's more moderate stance, with Quakers the pain felt at the Quit India resolution in a time of Britain's need.

The method of *satyagraha* is intended to convert the opponent to one's own view – in matters of ethical import – through non-violence. Ideally this method is not only non-harming in terms of physical violence, but by seeking to convince rather than coerce also avoids humiliation and harming the relationship. This method is based upon viewing one's opponent with kindness and as a potential friend. Through holding friendship as a virtue in inter-religious relations, one gives room for difference. In regard to this question of ethics, it has been well said that there is room in interfaith friendship for apologetics 'in the presence of a real – not an imaginary - Other.'⁶⁷⁵

My research suggests thinking of friendship as both means and end in inter-religious relations. Alongside searching for an interfaith theology, which combines or makes sense of the variety of religious experiences and overcomes the conflicting truth-claims we should be seeking to simply develop true friendship with individuals across the

⁶⁷⁵ James Fredericks *Inter-religious Friendship: A new theological virtue* in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 35:2, Spring 1998 p169 (pp.159-174)

religious spectrum. And through interfaith friendships to live out our values, putting our religion or convictions (be that Reformed Hinduism, Quakerism, Islam or Positive Atheism) into action, and to be challenged by others to deepen, develop and change our viewpoint and convictions so that as individuals we come to live more fully in line with our deepest convictions and in harmony with individuals and the world around us.

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