



Nīr-Kṣīr Vīveka: Discerning the Truth of Spirituality in Gandhi's Thought and Actions

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Abstract In his work, Arvind Sharma daringly asserts the fundamental place of spirituality in Mohandas K. (“Mahatma”) Gandhi’s personal life and social and political activism. Sharma avoids any theoretical frameworks to elucidate Gandhi’s spirituality; but rather, he takes the reader through events in Gandhi’s life, his personal practices, and political actions that had synthesized the spiritual and political through living the apparent paradox of a saint-politician. Critiques of Gandhi’s spiritual practices attest to the fact that he remains a challenge to scholars as well as practitioners of nonviolence who seek to separate his political theories, nonviolent strategies, and social concerns from his spiritual commitments. Sharma claims that discerning the truth of his life—mixed as *nīr* (political, social, mundane) and *kṣīr* (spiritual, service, love, quest to see God)—mandates not ignoring his “Mahatma side” (*kṣīr*), the primary source of his fearlessness and strength (mental, physical, and public), notwithstanding many critiques that may render it as only an aberration.

Keywords Arvind Sharma · Mohandas K. (“Mahatma”) Gandhi · Spirituality · Mystic · Fearlessness · Inner voice · Transcendent reality · Truth · Goodness · *Viveka*

Spirituality is not a matter of knowing scriptures and engaging in philosophical discussions. It is a matter of heart-culture, of immeasurable strength. Fearlessness is the first requisite of spirituality (Gandhi 1921: 285–86).

In his copious writings and lectures, Arvind Sharma devotes measurably more attention to Mahatma Gandhi than he has given to any other recent historical figure.

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In his many works, including “Gandhi as a Charismatic Leader” (1987a), “Fearlessness (Abhaya) as a Fundamental Category in Gandhian Thought and Practice” (1987b), “Universal Religion in the Life and Thought of Mahatma Gandhi” (1998), “Mahatma Gandhi as a Mystic” (2001), *A New Curve in the Ganges: Mahatma Gandhi’s Interpretation of Hinduism* (2005), and *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography* (2013), Sharma highlights the “spiritual side” of Gandhi’s life and philosophy and the “Mahatma side” of his personality. In his spiritual biography of Gandhi, he pulls all the earlier threads together into a cohesive narrative confronting many critiques that create “the miasma of confusion” surrounding Gandhi’s combining spirituality with politics (Sharma 2005: 1).

Sharma uniquely contributes to Gandhi Studies by taking a firm stand (at times “disturbing” to some scholars) on the debated issue of the connection of Gandhi’s spiritual practices with his theories and practices of political and social action. Gandhi’s life, philosophy, and actions can only be fully understood by taking into account the spiritual side of his life, a stance that confronts the *prevailing voices* intent on bifurcating the political Gandhi from the spiritual Gandhi. In his speeches and writings, Gandhi advised his followers to cultivate *viveka* (thoughtful sifting of truth from untruth). He often referred to Sant Tulsīdās’ metaphorical image of *nīr-kṣīr viveka* (literally, “milk-water wisdom,” implying the ability to discriminate between truth and untruth), stating: “The wise man considers only the good and ignores the bad, even as the swan leaves the water and takes only the milk from a mixture of milk and water” (Gandhi 1924a: 28, citing from the *Rāmcaritmānas*). Going against the prevalent intellectual literature that has sought to not only dismiss—but at times deride—Gandhi’s acumen in synthesizing spirituality with all actions, Sharma himself follows Gandhi’s advice of *nīr-kṣīr viveka*, as it were. He shows that even though we see in Gandhi’s life and work an integral mix of *nīr* (political, mundane goals) and *kṣīr* (spiritual quest to see God), nevertheless, his own goal was to see God through service to humanity. Thus, even though political and spiritual are mixed as milk and water, Sharma focuses on the spiritual, which, he argues, has not received adequate attention.

Undoubtedly, Mahatma Gandhi’s combining of spirituality and politics irritated his detractors, and his spiritual practices caused discomfort to even some of his close associates. Winston Churchill’s historic comment that caricatured the “half naked” Gandhi as a “onetime Inner Temple lawyer, now [a] seditious fakir,” offers a classic snapshot of the confusion surrounding Gandhi’s spiritual practices and political aspirations (cited in Collins and Lapierre 1976: 70). Various Indian critiques of Gandhi arise from the classic Indian philosophical presupposition that bifurcates the domains of *pravṛtti* (worldly engagement) and *nivṛtti* (renunciation). For example, Gandhi’s contemporary, eminent politician, and philosopher, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, viewed the aspirations of a *sādhu* (holy man) and those of a politician as belonging in two separate spheres. In a letter dated January 18, 1920, Tilak wrote to Gandhi: “Politics is a game of worldly people and not of sadhus” (Gandhi 1920b: 491). However, Gandhi disagreed with Tilak with “deference” and argued that “it betrays mental laziness to think that world is not for sadhus” (491). He further defended the value of nonviolent methods in confronting the British

regime: "The text from the *Bhagavad Gita* shows to me how the principle of conquering hate by love, untruth by truth, can and must be applied" (490–91).

Curiously, biographers and scholars tend to focus primarily on Gandhi's methods of social and political activism and dismiss his spiritual practices as "idiosyncratic" or "personal fads." In today's public discourse, a variety of attacks have been unleashed on Gandhi's moral character, specifically on his spiritual "experiments" in celibacy and the complete control of the senses, which he considered integral to his spiritual life and political methods of *ahimsā* and *satyāgraha*. Against this backdrop of prevalent suspicion of Gandhi's spirituality, Sharma penned the book *Gandhi: A Spiritual Biography* (2013), underscoring the neglect of Gandhi's spirituality by biographers, stating:

Although biographies and histories use the term Mahatma, most are really accounts of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, not Mahatma Gandhi, because most of them focus on the familial, religious, social, and political dimensions of his life. They do not overlook the spiritual dimension of his life, to be sure, but rather take account of it as impinging on these other dimensions; they do not focus on the spiritual dimension as such (2).

Sharma points to the core of the problem: Gandhi's spirituality poses an inconvenience to biographers because it interrupts the contours of their own conventional political and social theories and their perceptions of a political and social reformer.

Sharma's *A Spiritual Biography* and my own book, *Gandhi's Ascetic Activism: Renunciation and Social Action* (2013a), the latter focusing on the integral relationship between Gandhi's ascetic practices and his political actions, were published in the same year. While my book uniquely analyzes Gandhi's practice of celibacy and the connection he saw between his personal self-discipline and his political goals and methods of nonviolent action, Sharma's book shows the "Mahatma side of Gandhi's personality" (2013: 3). He brings attention to Gandhi's overall spirituality in his life and work, and he does so unapologetically. While Sharma's earlier works also engage with various aspects of Gandhi's spirituality, the biography places it front and center.

Notably, Sharma does not delineate the usage of the term "spirituality" in the biography but builds on the popular notion of the search for Truth or Spirit and the goal of self-realization. Recently, ample literature on spirituality has dissected its meaning and analyzed the category of spirituality and its purpose in our physical, social, psychological, and spiritual lives as well as its connection with achieving happiness, well-being, mental health, etc. The value of spirituality is being explored in various professions such as nursing, social work, and education. The case is being made for a mind-body-spirit balance and an insistence on not ignoring the life of the inner spirit.¹

¹ Heelas (2008) sets out to explore spirituality as meshed and interweaved in this life. McGhee (2000) explores the relationship between philosophy and reflection on experience, between one's life and one's reflection on life. He gives example of Gandhi's struggle with his own religion during the time of confusion in his young life (202). The *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality* (Pargament 2013) includes a variety of chapters that bring spirituality in conversation with various psychological dimensions of human experience. And Suhrud (2019) underscores Gandhi's nonviolence as "spiritual virtue."

Simultaneously, a cadre of popular thinkers, for example, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, seek to separate religion and God from spirituality (Bruinius 2019).² In the milieu of such plentiful literature on spirituality, perhaps Sharma perceived no need to offer any linguistic parsing of the term at the beginning of the book, nor a reason for explaining his choice of the term “spirituality” over “religion.” I wonder, nevertheless, what terminology Gandhi uses in Hindi/Gujarati/Sanskrit. In the last chapter, Sharma briefly engages with the difference between “spiritual” and “religious,” but without offering any theoretical analyses. Thus, he uses the unique trope of *showing* the reader what he means by “spirituality” through the stories of Gandhi’s life, his words, and his actions. Intriguingly, Sharma’s biography mimics Gandhi’s approach to providing theories, as he notes: “Gandhi is one of those rare figures of modern times whose praxis gave rise to theory, rather than vice versa” (2013: 156). To substantiate this point, Sharma refers to Albert Schweitzer’s observation, “Example is not the main thing. It is the only thing” (2013: 156), which applies to Gandhi, but also intriguingly, to Sharma’s biography of Gandhi.

At the end of the book, however, Sharma summarizes Gandhi’s spirituality in two central elements: “Goodness” and “God,” emphasizing the latter can “formally [be] refer[red] [to]...as morality and theism” (2013: 189). Sharma’s calling attention to the God element in Gandhi’s spirituality is contrary to the trends, as has been mentioned earlier, that seek to isolate spirituality from religion and theism. One obvious and popular example is Sam Harris’s book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion*, which claims that “separating spirituality from religion is a perfectly reasonable thing to do” (2014: 6). Sharma, without referring to any books or authors, confronts this so-called “perfectly reasonable” idea through his own reasoning of not rejecting God and religion, but reformulating both through Gandhi’s spiritual biography.

Furthermore, through the course of his spiritual biography of Gandhi and in his earlier work, Sharma daringly characterizes some of Gandhi’s decisions, arising out of intuitive experiences, as “mystical”—for example, Gandhi spoke of a “voice” that guided him in the times of great challenges (2013: 110). Sharma articulated the mystic side of Gandhi in his earlier essay, “Mahatma Gandhi as Mystic,” and he bemoaned the fact that “the mystical element present in some of his public activities” has been overlooked (2001: 46). Here too, Sharma does not clearly define what he means by a “mystic,” but alludes to some sort of supernatural experience that defies the ordinary. Clearly, Sharma’s Gandhi is pragmatic, political, a reformer, spiritual, and a mystic—a combination causing cognitive dissidence among scholars and laypeople who seek to confine him to one category.

Navigating Sharma’s thesis that places spirituality at the center of Gandhi’s life and actions and engages with critics who construe such attention to spirituality as “disturbing” requires triangulation through various viewpoints on spirituality as well as an investigation of Gandhi’s phenomenological insights on his spiritual practices. First, I provide a brief survey of a widespread contempt for Gandhi’s

² See also Dennett (2006), who argues that religion must be examined scientifically like any other phenomenon. In addition, see Solomon (2002), who seeks to bring out a vision of a spiritual life devoid of supernatural elements such as God. Also see the anthology edited by Salazar and Nicholls (2018) for essays on the notion of secular spirituality as distinguished from religion.

spirituality and underscore the significance of Sharma's work in this inimical context. It becomes clear that it is not possible to detach the political Gandhi from the spiritual Gandhi, as scholars have tended to do. Second, for heuristic purposes, I analyze the category of "spirituality" in the context of Gandhi's life, nonviolent methods, and vision of a just and equitable society, focusing particularly on the works of Robert C. Solomon (2002) and John Hick (2013). I choose these figures because they approach spirituality differently: while Solomon argues for "naturalized" spirituality—detached from the supernatural—Hick explores the depths of spirituality, what he terms as "the fifth dimension." I aver that Sharma shows how Gandhi's spirituality mediates the two: he underscores the mundane, practical value of Gandhi's spirituality, while not overlooking the "transcategorical" dimension, using John Hick's phrase. Finally, I analyze how Sharma's definition of "Mahatma" as "a vehicle...[for] establish[ing] "new norms" (2013: 3) uniquely deals with the issue of Gandhi's stature as a Mahatma, a spiritual leader, which continues to be contested by some of his critics. Sharma offers insights into Gandhi's actions as a Mahatma in addressing various sociopolitical problems, specifically gender inequality and untouchability.

Gandhi's Spirituality: Confronting the Hermeneutic of Suspicion

Gandhi's synthesis of spirituality with politics has challenged scholars and laypeople alike. Political philosopher Charles Blattberg opens up his review of Sharma's work on the spiritual biography of Gandhi saying, "Here is an important, but disturbing, book about Gandhi." Blattberg differentiates this book from other works presenting Gandhi as "largely reasonable, sensible, interpretive—a theorist whose ideas can serve as a model for political practice" (2013).³ Among Blattberg's other concerns about Sharma's biography, I only focus on his misgivings in Sharma's emphasis on Gandhi's spirituality—a concern that has been expressed by many others. David Cortright, in his work *Gandhi and Beyond: Nonviolence for an Age of Terrorism*, analyzes the difficult question of the relevance of Gandhi's nonviolent method for confronting contemporary terrorism. He extols Gandhi's nonviolent contributions but admits, as other scholars have, the challenge of understanding Gandhi's complicated spiritual practices:

Every time I tried to approach Gandhi, I found myself intimidated and overwhelmed—not only by the enormity of his accomplishments but also by the austerity and eccentricities of his personality. Gandhi seemed almost inconceivable. How could one so spiritual and detached from the material world achieve so much in altering the course of history?...I found Gandhi's

³ Blattberg writes: "Here is an important, but disturbing, book about Gandhi. It is important because it offers an interpretation that runs against the grain of the 'domesticated' Gandhi that can be found in a tradition of books that includes Joan V. Bondurant's *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, Bhikhu Parekh's *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* and Ramin Jahanbegloo's recent *The Gandhian Moment*" (2013).

asceticism too extreme, his views on sexuality and women bizarre and offensive (Cortright 2006: 9).

Scholars describe Gandhi's spirituality using such terms as "disturbing," "overwhelming," and "intimidating," because it seems illogical in the life of a modern political leader.

Even Gandhi's contemporary, a freedom fighter and spiritual leader Śrī Aurobindo faults Gandhi for "trying to apply to ordinary life what belongs to spirituality," suggesting an incompatibility between spirituality and activism (Nirodharan 1966: 187, cited in O'Connor 1977: 62).⁴ Aurobindo was referring to Gandhi's unusual synthesis of the mundane with the spiritual, of political methods with moral practices, which are conventionally oriented toward attaining the goals of spiritual liberation and inner calm, not political freedom and communal harmony.

Such reactions are not limited to scholars and religious leaders; the popular media has caricatured and distorted Gandhi's spiritual practices. Over the last decade, Gandhi's spiritual practices, especially his celibacy, an essential element of his spiritual regimen and "experiments" (a term he often used when testing the potency of a certain practice), have created a public outcry. Gandhi has been called a "pedophile" on the basis of his last experiments in celibacy which have been condemned as exploitation of young women. Against the backdrop of a general *unease* about Gandhi's spirituality, a biography on Gandhi's spirituality was bound to generate controversy.

However, I ask: Is it possible to separate Gandhi's spiritual practices from his sociopolitical activism? Gandhi himself perceived an integral relationship between the two. According to Sharma, Gandhi considered the spiritual dimension "primary" (2013: 2). Although social scientists and political philosophers avoid the subject of spirituality when discussing Gandhi's uncanny ability to move the masses, Sharma uniquely traces the influence of his spirituality on followers and nonfollowers alike.⁵ Gandhi's own words and writings make it clear that he defies any confining categorizations: he challenges any normative paradigms that cast him as a "saint" or as a "politician," by conflating *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation) with *svarāj* (political freedom). Furthermore, even though Sharma concentrates on the spiritual side of Gandhi's life, he does not fall into the trap of writing a "hagiography." He points to stories, passages, and events in Gandhi's life that seek to "demythologize" him, a subject I will discuss later in the essay.

Because the notion of spirituality has already been analyzed by the significant literature, Sharma does not undertake any theoretical analysis of spirituality in

⁴ O'Connor reports that in 1939, in a conversation with his biographer Purani, "regarding the inherent limitations of Gandhi's tactics, Aurobindo faults Gandhi for 'trying to apply to ordinary life what belongs to spirituality,' suggesting that 'ordinary life' and 'spirituality' are two quite different orders and that consistency between them should not be expected" (1977: 62).

⁵ Rudolf and Rudolf analyze Gandhi's charisma in this regard: "Their analysis puts the potency of Gandhi's sexual control (defined by them in terms of semen retention) and the Freudian theory of sublimation on the same plane: 'Asceticism was also thought to bring with it a higher potency, an implication arising out of a theory of sexual hydrostatics reminiscent of Freudian sublimation theory'" (Howard 2013a: 14, citing Rudolf and Rudolf 1967: 248).

Gandhi's context. However, what he means by spirituality becomes clear through his stories and accounts. It appears that Gandhi's spirituality is inclusive, rational, mystical, pragmatic, and *not godless*, defying any single label. For heuristic purposes, I bring in conversation two theorists, Solomon and Hick, who can help us clarify Sharma's notion of Gandhi's spirituality.

Discerning Gandhi's Spirituality: "Mystical," "Naturalized," or "Practical"?

Sharma offers clues to the connotations of his use of the term "spirituality" when he proclaims: "For Gandhi, however, morality and religion were synonymous, so a spiritual biography of Gandhi contains a remarkably strong moral component, strongly colored by theism, but still moral" (2013: 3). He presents Gandhi as "moral" but not without "theism." Indeed, through his experiences and dialectical reasoning, Gandhi formulates his vision of spirituality through the broadest and most inclusive definitions of God and religion.

Gandhi articulates the notion of God in terms of "Truth," as nondogmatic and beyond human conception. Sharma emphasizes Gandhi's faith in both God and goodness (morality) and brings attention to Gandhi's nuanced, moralistic understanding of God: "It is as if the 'impersonal' aspect of God could be approached through *truth* and the personal aspect through *love*" (2013: 161; emphasis in the original). Sharma is referring to Gandhi's succinct proclamation: "To me, Truth is God and there is no way to find truth except the way of Non-violence" (1926b: 441). Nonviolence is an expression of love, a care for all life, and Gandhi transformed nonviolence into a tool in his fight to restore the dignity of humanity. Gandhi as a "saint-politician" defies any neat categories of spirituality, that is, "naturalistic" or "mystical," and negotiates the two in his search for God through public service organized in a moral framework: "I am endeavouring to see God through service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor down below, but in everyone" (*Young India*, August 4, 1927; Gandhi 1967: 52). Through such articulation, Gandhi disrupts the divide between his desire to see God and his commitment to public service, which included fighting for India's political freedom and social reform.

Gandhi's spirituality can be termed *hybrid* containing mystical, naturalistic, and practical elements. In his earlier essay, "Mahatma Gandhi as Mystic," Sharma laments that the nature of Gandhi's mystical experiences has been neglected in part because he "has been considered largely as a political figure sometimes to the point of ludicrousness" (2001: 44). The political/ethical binary views on Gandhi, he thinks, "are by no means inappropriate, [but] they have obscured the mystical dimension of Gandhi's life" (44). Sharma offers instances in Gandhi's life, such as listening to the "inner voice," that he refers to as an "incommunicable" mystical experience. Hick interprets such mystical revelations as being "opened" to the experience of the "divine presence" or "Transcendent" (2013: 118). Sharma stands firm against the widespread scholarship that avoids any such claims and obfuscates

the truth of Gandhi's political and social actions, which he saw as intractably connected with the mystical side.

Gandhi clings to his faith in a transcendent reality and religion, which for him represents *spirituality* and *morality*, bereft of narrow dogma. Going against the grain of existing biographies, Sharma describes Gandhi's "inner voice" as "mystical," which has been derided as "old superstitious belief" by scholars and by the popular press, thus leading to claims that Gandhi was irrational (Michaud 2011).⁶ Gandhi spoke of the inner voice that inspired him to take certain actions. Sharma offers the following example of Gandhi's encounter in his sleep, which might be characterized as mystical. On the night of April 28, 1933, Gandhi heard a voice that directed him to fast for the Harijan cause:

I had gone to sleep the night before without the slightest idea of having to declare a fast next morning. At about twelve o'clock in the night something wakes me up suddenly, and some voice—within or without, I cannot say—whispers, "Thou must go on a fast." "How many days?" I ask. The voice again says, "Twenty-one days." "When does it begin?" I ask. It says, "You begin tomorrow." I went off to sleep after making the decision. I did not tell anything to my companions until after the morning prayers (cited in Sharma 2013: 110).⁷

Gandhi accepted the guidance and spoke of himself as "one who had heard the authentic voice of God," writes Sharma (2013: 110). Any suspicion in his conviction in the voice of God, did not shake Gandhi's own firm belief. In *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*, Hick (who was also a close friend of Sharma) affirms that the reports of mystics concerning a transcategorical, ineffable experience approach something real. He writes: "the transcendent reality in itself is beyond all these forms, even personality and impersonality. It is transcategorical (ineffable), not describable in our human terms" (Hick 2013: 260). Hence, it is not merely in their head nor is it a hallucination but represents a contact with something not easily or commonly available to ordinary sense perception. He sees such experiences, narrated by mystics of various religions, as legitimate responses to "the fifth dimension," which he also calls "the Real" or "the Transcendent." Here I refer to Hick's "the Transcendent," simply to bring attention to what Sharma calls, "impersonal," while acknowledging that Gandhi's "the Real" was available to direct human experience, although incapable of being communicated through words. Sharada Sugitharaja notes the agreement of views between Gandhi and Hick: "Both Gandhi and Hick are more concerned with human conceptions and experiences of Truth/Real than with speculating about its nature. For both, personal religious experience is the starting point when talking about the Real" (2012: 123).

⁶ In a 2011 *New Yorker* article, Michaud cites Mishra (2011) as follows: "Though (Gandhi) drew upon the language of modern anti-imperialism, he professed no faith in constitutional democracy, Communism, industrialization, or other forms of self-strengthening embraced by Indian and Asian anti-imperialists. He preferred, as his exasperated and articulate assassin put it, such 'old superstitious beliefs' as the 'power of the soul, the inner voice, the fast, the prayer and the purity of the mind'."

⁷ See Tendulkar 1992: 198–207 ("Call From Within").

Hick's pointed question, "Why should not a saint be highly competent in practical affairs?" (2013: 190) is addressed in Sharma's work. Unlike mystics of various religions who remained in the spiritual realm, Gandhi, like a scientist, subjected moral truths to experiments in the political field. However, his claim to hear an inner voice was questioned by his contemporaries. In 1932, Gandhi responded:

There is no question of hallucination. I have stated a simple scientific truth, thus to be tested by all who have the will and the patience to acquire the necessary qualifications which are again incredibly simple to understand and easy enough to acquire where there is determination (1932b: 10).

In a 1932 letter to his nephew, Narandas, Gandhi admitted that he had developed the ability to hear the "voice within," his inner voice, because of "nearly half a century of ceaseless effort to purify my mind" (1932a: 53).⁸

In this way, Gandhi's views seem to also parallel Solomon's notion of "naturalized spirituality," which is inspired by Nietzschean and Hegelian conceptions of spirit/spirituality, aiming "to get away from 'other worldly' religions and philosophies, and to reappraise or 'reenchant' everyday life" (2002: 5). This ability could be described as an acute awareness of a situation that maximized Gandhi's ability to yield results in service of the suffering common people of India, as in the case of his decision to launch the Salt March. Can Sharma's reading of Gandhi's spirituality be classified as "naturalized" in the sense that Gandhi's philosophy of life is imbued with "the thoughtful love of life," using Solomon's phrase? While Solomon struggles with the ideas of supernaturalism and mysticism, Sharma sees no conflict between spirituality and hints of the mystical in Gandhi's life and actions. As he articulates it: "God is a spiritual rather than a physical entity for Gandhi, and for him, a human being possesses a spirit apart from the body. When we deal with others, we are dealing with other spirits, he would say, and conscience is the voice of the spirit within us" (Sharma 2013: 158). Gandhi's spirituality cannot be explained fully in naturalistic terms because he maintains a transcendent dimension of the Reality. Although Sharma refrains from any theoretical analyses, in my view, he rightly presents Gandhi's spirituality, which I interpret as not entirely confinable to either framework. Gandhi uniquely *naturalizes* spiritual aspirations and situates them in the context of his practical concern for the people of India. In 1931, he responds to his critics:

You will be astonished to hear from me that, although to all appearances my mission is political, I would ask you to accept my assurance that its roots are—if I may use that term—spiritual. It is commonly known, though perhaps not believed, that I claim that at least my politics are not divorced from morality, from spirituality, from religion. I have claimed—and the claim is based upon extensive experience—that a man who is trying to discover and follow the will of God cannot possibly leave a single field of life untouched (Gandhi 1931a: 50).

⁸ Gandhi writes in a 1925 letter: "And when I listen to the still small voice within, I derive hope and smile in spite of the conflagration raging round me" (437–38).

Thus, he spiritualizes every undertaking, from fighting for Indians oppressed under colonial power to the cause of individuals subjugated by Hindu religious customs.

Gandhi considered his “inner voice” also a “voice of conscience” and “voice of truth,” which anyone can hear in the deep silence of the mind. In a 1933 article, Gandhi writes that he need not convince “sceptics” about his hearing an “inner voice,” because it “was “not an echo of my...imagination” (256). In *Spirituality for the Skeptic*, Solomon rejects “the notion that spirituality refers us to the supernatural...that which transcends scientific explanation and is inaccessible to ordinary experience” (2002: 17). Nevertheless, he does not “dismiss the real possibility of experiences that defy scientific explanation and transcend the ordinary” (17). Sharma also underscores Gandhi’s own conviction that the path of love and service—not of secluded meditation—was a superior way to reach ultimate spiritual liberation (Howard 2018).

Furthermore, “realization of God is infinitely more than mere belief. That can come only by constant practice. This is true of all science,” writes Gandhi (1946a: 67). He saw participation in civic life as a way to serve the needy and oppressed: “As I know that God is found more often in the lowliest of His creatures than in the high and mighty, I am struggling to reach the status of these. I cannot do so without their service. Hence my passion for the service of the suppressed classes....I cannot render this service without entering politics” (Gandhi 1924b: 117). Through systematic experimentation with yogic disciplines, Gandhi discovered that moral principles and practices generate a life force that can be transformed into moral methods—technology, as it were—to resolve mundane conflicts, and not something simply restricted to the field of the sacred. He thus proclaimed: “Spirituality is nothing if it is not eminently practical” (Gandhi 1920a: 482). In his work on Gandhi, Sharma coalesces Gandhi’s spirituality as a combination of *mystical*, *natural*, and *practical*, and attempts to “demythologize” Gandhi’s “Mahatmahood” aligning his spirituality and the spirit of service.

Mahatma: “A Vehicle for Establishing New Norms of Human Conduct”

In the introduction to his spiritual biography, as has been mentioned earlier, Sharma emphasizes that the “book addresses the Mahatma side of Gandhi’s personality” (2013: 3). He makes an astute observation in saying, “Gandhi as Gandhi was a lawyer like so many others, but as Mahatma, his person became a vehicle through which he established new norms of human conduct” (3). He notes that Gandhi’s honorific title “Mahatma” (“great soul”) signifies the “extraordinary dimension” of his life, similar to that of the two figures with the titles, “Christ” and “Buddha.” On the one hand, Sharma reasons that as a Mahatma, Gandhi became the vehicle to decree a new world order and human comportment; on the other hand, he aims to “demythologize” the image of Mahatma. If we are to emphasize the humanly spiritual drive and dedication of Gandhi, which became the source of moral power to bring about social and political change, then the “mythos” of Mahatma detracts from his real struggles and failures. Sharma’s spiritual biography of Gandhi offers historical accounts and narratives to show Gandhi’s spiritual commitments as a

conduit for change—a transformation in societal structures including those based on race, caste, and gender.

Sharma notes that Gandhi seeks to demythologize himself. On numerous occasions, Gandhi shirks from the use of the Mahatma title, “I am not a Mahatma. I am a humble servant of the nation,” he told his followers (Gandhi 1927a: 469). In a 1946 speech, Gandhi admits his human failings and he seeks to cast off the halo of Mahatma:

I am not a Mahatma; I am an *alpatma* [lowly soul]. I am an ordinary mortal like you all and I am strenuously trying to practise ahimsa. Today I lost my temper and, therefore, I am not a perfect man. If an imperfect man like me can try to practise ahimsa, all of you also can do so. I have come here with the determination to put my ahimsa to test and in that process either succeed or perish (1946b: 239).

Gandhi presented himself as an ordinary human being who was dedicated to spiritual and moral toils as well as being prone to human error. According to Sharma, “Gandhi needs to be demythologized, and not just because he may have been mythologized—deliberately and falsely projected as something he was not—but also because it might be easy to get carried away at times by his larger-than-life achievements” (2013: 171). Sharma is referring to India’s cultural traditions in which *homo religiosus* reveres a *sādhu* or *sannyāsin* and perceives extraordinary abilities in holy men and women. In 1926, Gandhi responded to a letter from a “correspondent in America”:

Mahatmaji, you admit that the people of India have not followed your creed. You do not seem to realize the cause of it. The truth is that the average person is not a Mahatma. History proves this fact beyond doubt. There have been a few Mahatmas in India and elsewhere. These are exceptions. And the exceptions only prove the rule. You must not base your actions on the exceptions (1926a: 415).

Gandhi laments that his spiritual endeavors and actions are being considered “extraordinary” and beyond the reach of an “average person.” In his poignant response, consistent with Sharma’s thesis in the biography, Gandhi upholds his faith in “God” and “goodness.” He also describes his “unconsumable passion” for “truth and love” that moves his body, mind, and spirit to serve the masses through spiritual methods, which supports Sharma’s argument:

It is curious how we delude ourselves. We fancy that one can make the perishable body impregnable and we think it impossible to evoke the hidden powers of the soul. Well, I am engaged in trying to show, if I have any of these powers, that I am as frail a mortal as any of us and that I never had anything extraordinary about me nor have any now. I claim to be a simple individual liable to err like any other fellow mortal. I own, however, that I have humility enough in me to confess my errors and to retrace my steps. I own that I have an immovable faith in God and His goodness and unconsumable passion for

truth and love. But is that not what every person has latent in him? (1926a: 415).

Gandhi seems to bring naturalistic and mystical spirituality in unison, both in the service of humanity. On this point, Hick provides a balanced account of Gandhi's human and mystical side and admits that "the inner spiritual force...he had... maintained in his own way was entirely real and...powerful" (2013: 192). He recognizes Gandhi's saintliness in his unwavering efforts to eradicate the evil customs of untouchability and child marriage and deploying moral force to stop the tides of communal violence and hatred.⁹

Despite Gandhi's rejection of his "Mahatmahood," he mobilized the force of his moral methods to achieve political freedom for India and social reform in India and the people's imagination.¹⁰ The title of Mahatma was bestowed on Gandhi because of his *brahmacharya* vow, dedication to selfless service, trust in the moral methods of truth and nonviolence for confronting evildoers, and his spiritual and minimalistic lifestyle reminiscent of a *sannyāsin*. All of these required courage and fearlessness. In his article, "Fearlessness (Abhaya) as a Fundamental Category in Gandhian Thought and Practice, Sharma adds fearlessness to his essential moral tools for confronting untruth and violence. He identifies Gandhi's fearlessness as a virtue, celebrated in the ancient Hindu texts, but recognizes its essential place in Gandhi's thought. In Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist narratives, a spiritual person rises above fear. The Buddha confronted bandits with equanimity, Mahāvīra remained unafraid when facing vicious animals, and many celebrated Hindu *yogīs* rose above the emotion of fear and attachment. Gandhi considered courage as the essential component to practicing nonviolence, and he himself faced all kinds of challenges unafraid.

Nevertheless, Gandhi confessed his childhood fears and his own faults and ordinary humanness as an adult. They did not lessen the reverence in which he was held by his followers. Richard I. Cashman surmises: "The *Mahatma* concept underlined Gandhi's efforts to combine religion and politics, to bring morality into the sphere of politics. It also suggested his concern for non-violence, which was necessary to establish truly moral means to reach a spiritual end" (1975: 2). Gandhi used spiritual means with political and social aspirations: he sought to liberate spirituality from the charge of having no value in day-to-day life—a move proponents of "naturalized" and "atheistic" spirituality would not dispute. He categorically proclaimed, "I am endeavouring to extend the spiritual law to the political world" (Gandhi 1920a: 481).

⁹ "There are then these spiritually impressive twentieth-century figures.... They never think of themselves as saints, but when we encounter such people, most of us cannot help feeling that they are living in response to a higher level of reality than the purely natural" (Hick 2013: 185). In this spirit, Hick devotes a substantial section of his book to Gandhi and shows his spirituality as the source of his power.

¹⁰ Hick notes, citing Gandhi: " 'I myself do not feel [like] a saint in any shape or form' [Gandhi 1927b: 587]. In the earlier days his followers called him *Bhai* (brother), and as he grew older *Bapu* (father), and referred to him as Gandhiji—the *ji* being a common mark of respect. He was acutely, sometimes painfully, conscious of his own faults. He blamed himself for many misjudgements and mistakes, including the major one that he called his 'Himalayan blunder' [Gandhi 1968: 702]—his call to the people in 1919 to practise mass non-violent resistance before they were ready for it" (Hick 2013: 188).

Sharma has precisely this in mind when he writes and speaks about Gandhi's life and works. Gandhi experimented with spiritual laws in his personal life—by abandoning his lucrative law practice, undertaking the vow of celibacy, and advocating truth, nonpossession, and nonviolence for the political sphere. Gandhi's spiritual renunciation was serving God through serving the masses. Sharma, citing Louis Fischer (1983: 73), highlights the connection between Gandhi's life of celibacy and service: "The chaste life apparently reinforced his passion and determination to sacrifice for the common weal. Less carnal, he became less self-centered. He seemed suddenly lifted above the material....Storms continued to rage within, but now he could harness them for the generation of more power" (2013: 136). Gandhi committed himself to the vow because public service required the sacrifice of selfish desires. He puts forth his conviction: "In a word, I could not live both after the flesh and the spirit" (1925–29: 253).

In this context, anthropologists' observations can help illuminate Sharma's argument. Kirin Narayan states, "Ironically, the act of renunciation may in fact push an ascetic into more extensive social involvement than if he or she remained a layperson" (1989: 79). In India's cultural milieu, a renunciate who steps outside of society proper may even become a catalyst for social reform and a "dynamic center of religious development and change" (74). Louis Dumont emphasizes:

Is it really too adventurous to say that the agent of development in Indian religion and speculation, the "creator of values," has been the renouncer?... Not only the founding of sects and their maintenance, but the major ideas, the "inventions," are due to the renouncer whose unique position gave him a sort of monopoly for putting everything in question (1960: 275, cited in Howard 2013a: 134).

Sharma stresses that Gandhi, the Mahatma (as a traditional renouncer), like the Buddha, becomes "a vehicle...[for] establish[ing] "new norms" (2013: 3). Gandhi was deeply impressed by the Buddha, whose renunciation and fearlessness allowed him to rise against the hegemonic priesthood and the custom of animal sacrifice.

Sharma offers numerous instances that give a picture of Gandhi, the Mahatma, confronting old oppressive systems while adhering to traditional moral disciplines. Gandhi paves the way for a new world order by shaking archaic systems, including untouchability, gender inequality, bigotry, and the narrow interpretation of religion. Throughout Sharma's work, we can find a variety of examples of this, but I will concentrate on two specific causes—the restoration of women's dignity and equality and the removal of untouchability—that Mahatma Gandhi took upon himself as a part of his service to humanity, which illustrate his unconventional spiritual approach to addressing social ills.

First, throughout his life, Gandhi was committed to women's causes. He writes: "I took up, among several other things, woman's cause also when I began public life. And my love for that service" (Gandhi 1934: 170). He discussed the issues of their health, their meekness, their subjection to male domination and violence, and the custom of *purdāh* (veiling). He lamented that due to the shame of their bodies, the women of India refused to be examined by male doctors, and consequently

suffered pain. Gandhi used the moral authority of a Mahatma to address mundane issues that caused suffering (Howard 2013b).

He did not seek legislative measures to secure women's freedom but argued on moral and familial grounds. Sharma relates the following incident: "When fully veiled Muslim women crowded around him when he visited the shrine of a Sufi saint in Ajmer toward the end of his life, he said to them, 'Do you observe *pardah* (veiled seclusion) with your next of kin?' All of them removed their veils. He was kin" (2013: 200). Gandhi "achieved the desired outcome sans resentment," Sharma writes, "if anything, with mutual regard and even affection" (201). Gandhi helped women to realize their autonomy, but he never presented himself as their savior. He boldly called out male hegemony at a time when women were struggling to gain their rights all over the world: "The remedy is in the hands of women themselves. The struggle is difficult for them, and I do not blame them. I blame the men. Men have legislated against them. Man has regarded woman as his tool" (Gandhi 1936: 157). In Mahatma Gandhi's *āśrams*, both men and women were subjected to the same rules and tasks, irrespective of their gender differences. Unlike a traditional Mahatma, he defied renunciate conventions by actively involving women in politics, discoursing openly about their physical health, disclosing his private emotions, and involving himself in close associations with women of all ages. He aimed to disrupt age-old conventions of subjugation, segregation, and misogyny against half of humanity.

Secondly, Gandhi wielded his power as a Mahatma to eradicate the immoral custom of untouchability. Sharma's chapter "Touching the Untouchable," offers a poignant account of how Gandhi deployed moral methods to argue that the system is illegitimate according to their own philosophical traditions of the upper caste Hindus who upheld it, against which they had no defense. Sharma writes:

Karma was used to blame the victim in the case of the untouchables; now Gandhi argued that Indians became the victims of racial discrimination as the karmic consequence of victimizing the untouchables. Those who discriminated against people on the basis of birth-ascription were discriminated against in the same way. Gandhi thus offered a moral rather than a caste-related take on the doctrine of karma (2013: 186).

Gandhi sought to free Hindus from their dogmatic mindset in order to abolish the draconian custom of untouchability. Sharma notes: "He even declared at the Round Table Conference: 'I would far rather that Hinduism died than that untouchability lived' " (2013: 87, citing Gandhi 1931b: 298). Through this bold statement, Gandhi challenged the unjust customs that had made their place within Hinduism against the very nature of this religion that emphasized eternal unity of all creation.

Gandhi argued that caste-based inequality, even though sanctioned by some scriptures, could neither stand the test of reason nor Hindu spiritual laws (*dharma* codes of conduct, including nonviolence, compassion, etc.). He led campaigns to "eradicate untouchability" (Sharma 2013: 88). This mission represented one of the most difficult challenges of his life. He not only received pushback from caste Hindus but from Harijans as well, who preferred the term *dalit*, and looked for legislative solutions instead of moral ones. Sharma describes Gandhi's efforts:

He campaigned for temples to be opened to Harijans, the name by which they preferred to be called. Sometimes caste Hindus would protest his actions, even going on hunger strikes or engaging in a satyagraha against him. In one case, in later life, he had to face a satyagraha at the hands of the Harijans themselves (2013: 88).

Historically, the shaking of any old unjust system, such as slavery, women's inequality, or racist laws, requires efforts on many fronts. Gandhi sought to overturn untouchability by appealing to the moral conscience of Hindus. Ved Mehta recounts a conversation with a "Gandhian disciple" when he asked:

"What impressed you so much?"

"The crowd was chanting '*Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!*' but as soon as Bapu raised one finger they fell silent. He could control vast crowds, sometimes numbering millions, just by raising his finger. The magic of the man's finger was what affected me" (1993: 216, cited in Sharma 2013: 88).

Scholars and political scientists as well as Gandhi's critics and followers have debated the success of Gandhi's fasting and other forms of moral persuasion.¹¹ He spiritualized all occupations and all actions. In 1927, he pleaded to a crowd eager to have his *darśan* (literally, "seeing"): "Try, if you can, to see Him everywhere, in a poor man's hut as in a palace, in a latrine as well as in a temple" (Gandhi 1927c: 101). By placing a latrine and a temple on the same level, Gandhi sought to disrupt the superstitious customs that had created the divide between the upper castes (keepers of the temples) and lower castes (cleaners of latrines).

Sharma rightly notes: "Although vestiges of the system remain to be rooted out, what Gandhi did was to morally delegitimize the system. He tipped the scales in favor of abolition decisively, and it no longer enjoys the social and moral sanction it once had" (2013: 91). Notwithstanding various critiques, Gandhi showed a revolutionary solution to unjust systems: Removing the moral legitimacy was the key to change, a method now being used in nonviolent campaigns against various types of oppression all over the world.

Concluding Remarks

In his extensive work on Gandhi, Sharma privileges the spiritual side of Gandhi's life, philosophy, and actions. Gandhi himself asked his followers to exercise *viveka* (thoughtful sifting of truth and untruth) and devoted his life to the spiritual goal of realization of the Truth (*sat*) through public service. Sharma avoids any theoretical frameworks to elucidate Gandhi's spirituality; but rather, he takes the reader through Gandhi's biography that had synthesized the spiritual and political through living the apparent paradox of a saint-politician. Thus, Gandhi's spirituality does not

¹¹ B. R. Ambedkar (2014), a contemporary and critic of Gandhi, rejected Gandhi's views on caste and on other matters. See also King (2014), who evaluates shortcomings of Gandhi's methods and seeks to correct the misunderstandings surrounding Gandhi's Vaikom Satyagraha to end discrimination against untouchability.

fit into the categories of mystical or naturalized, yet circuitously claims both. Critiques of Gandhi's spiritual practices attest to the fact that he remains a challenge to scholars as well as practitioners of nonviolence who seek to separate his political theories, nonviolent strategies, and social concerns from his spiritual commitments. Through his works on Gandhi's life, Sharma claims that discerning the truth of his life—mixed as *nīr* (political, social, mundane) and *kṣīr* (spiritual, service, love, passion for life, quest to see God)—mandates not ignoring his “Mahatma side” (*kṣīr*), the primary source of his strength (mental, physical, and public), notwithstanding many critiques that may render it as only an aberration.

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