



Ontological Absolute and Epistemic Pluralism: Reconstructing M.K. Gandhi's Moral Hermeneutic of Religion

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Abstract

This paper investigates the philosophical architecture of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's philosophy of religion, examining how he reconciles an absolute metaphysical commitment to Truth (*Satya*) with an anti-absolutist, pluralistic engagement with historically contingent faiths (*Sarva Dharma Sambhava*). Using a text-critical and philosophical hermeneutic approach, the study examines Gandhi's epistemological transition from the proposition "God is Truth" to "Truth is God," demonstrating how this inversion de-dogmatizes theology into moral praxis. The paper examines the organic synthesis of prayer (*prarthana*) as an inward epistemic discipline, the non-negotiable primacy of ethics over traditional scriptural authority, and the dialectical tension between Gandhi's deeply rooted Vaishnava heritage and his radical socio-moral reformism. By positioning Gandhi's theology of religions within contemporary discourses on interreligious dialogue, this inquiry demonstrates that Gandhi's conception of religion is neither a syncretic homogenization nor a naive relativism, but a rigorous, transformative humanism grounded in epistemic humility and ethical striving.

Keywords: M.K. Gandhi; Truth is God; *Satya*; *Ahimsa*; Religious Pluralism; *Sarva Dharma Sambhava*; Moral Hermeneutics

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1. Introduction: The Gandhian Problematic of Religion

Religion throughout modern philosophical discourse has often oscillated between two irreconcilable poles: rationalist reductionism that strips faith of its experiential transcendence, and dogmatic sectarianism that insulates revelation from ethical critique. Within contemporary Indian philosophical thought, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) intervenes in this dichotomy by formulating a comprehensive moral hermeneutic of religion. For Gandhi, religion is neither a static repository of canonical dogmas nor an institutional apparatus demanding passive adherence. Rather, it constitutes an irreducible, dynamic impulse embedded within human consciousness—a continuous striving toward self-realization and moral perfection.

The central problem of Gandhi's philosophy of religion lies in his reconciliation of two seemingly contradictory commitments:

- An uncompromising metaphysical absolutism that posits Truth (*Satya*) as the single ontological reality.
- A radical epistemological modesty that insists all human conceptualizations of that reality are inherently partial, historically contingent, and vulnerable to systemic error.

This philosophical tension invalidates all forms of religious exclusivism, providing an ethical architecture wherein genuine interreligious fellowship does not require doctrinal assimilation.

This study critically analyzes the internal consistency and philosophical mechanics of Gandhi's conceptualization of religion. It investigates:

1. The ontological shift from "God is Truth" to "Truth is God".
2. The epistemic role of prayer and inward purification (*atma-shuddhi*).

3. The moral subordination of theological doctrines to universal ethics.
4. The implications of this framework for interfaith dialogue and the critical internal reform of inherited traditions.

2. Methodological and Hermeneutical Framework

This study utilizes a philosophical-hermeneutic and critical-analytical methodology. Rather than treating Gandhi's writings as uncontextualized political aphorisms, this inquiry examines his corpus—predominantly documented across *Young India*, *Harijan*, and *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*—as a coherent system of practical philosophy.

Content-analytical procedures are applied across primary thematic texts to trace the conceptual development of Gandhi's theological formulations. This internal textual critique is synthesized with comparative philosophical categories, specifically drawing upon:

- **Ontological realism:** Positing an ultimate reality independent of subjective distortion.
- **Moral non-cognitivist critique:** Subordinating metaphysical claims to immediate ethical duties (*dharma*).
- **Perspectivism (*Anekantavada*):** The Jaina-influenced epistemological stance that reality is multifaceted and inexhaustible by any single human perspective.

3. Ontological Foundations: From "God is Truth" to "Truth is God"

At the apex of Gandhi's philosophy lies his definition of the Ultimate Reality. While traditional theological paradigms define truth as an attribute of an anthropomorphic or metaphysical deity ("God is Truth"), Gandhi fundamentally inverted this formulation in 1929, asserting conversely that "**Truth is God**". This inversion marks a radical philosophical transition from a closed theological ontology to an open, experiential axiological ontology:

Sectarian Theism: God → Attribute: Truth

Gandhian Realism: Truth (*Satya*) ≡ The Divine Reality (*Sat*)

By anchoring his metaphysics in the Sanskrit root *Sat* (meaning "being" or "existence"), Gandhi maintains that nothing exists in absolute reality except *Satya*. This structural shift carries decisive philosophical consequences:

- **Inclusivity of the Skeptic:** An atheist may reject an ontological personal God without logical contradiction, but no rational conscious agent can deny the reality of Truth without presupposing the validity of the very truth-claim they assert.
- **The Transcendent Ground of Immanent Faith:** Religion, in this reformulated framework, ceases to mean institutional Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity. Instead, it denotes:

"The religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and whichever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find out full expression..."

Consequently, Gandhi decouples authentic religious life from sectarian dogmatism, defining it as an existential imperative toward truth-seeking.

4. Epistemic Humility, Prayer, and Moral Praxis

If Truth in its absolute dimension (*Satya*) is the ultimate ground of reality, human cognition, bounded by corporeal existence and cognitive limitations, can grasp only **relative truth** (*satyagraha* as holding on to truth as perceived). This foundational gap between the Absolute and human finitude dictates the necessity of moral praxis and epistemic humility.

Absolute Truth (*Satya*) ▲

| [Mediated by Ahimsa / Moral Purification]



Relative Truth (Human Epistemic Limitation)

Prayer as Cognitive and Existential Alignment

Within this epistemological matrix, prayer (*prarthana*) is neither petitionary supplication nor transactional ritualism. Rather, it operates as an instrument of epistemic clarification and inward purification (*atma-shuddhi*). In response to the rationalist critique concerning whether the Transcendent requires praise, Gandhi argued that God needs no reminder; rather, prayer is an existential "heart search" and an ethical self-reckoning. It serves as a psychological and spiritual discipline that tempers the ego, rendering the agent receptive to ethical duty and inward illumination.

The Inseparability of Religion and Morality

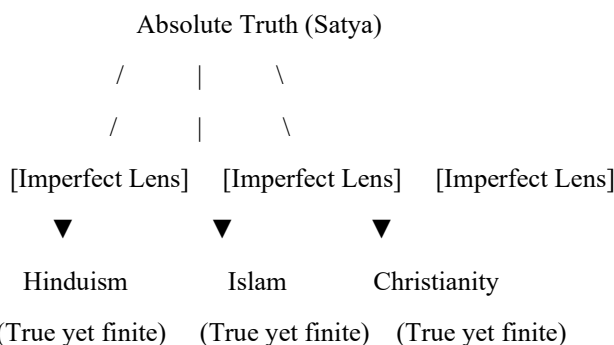
A foundational axiom of Gandhi's thought is that ethics and religion are functionally coextensive:

- The ontological validity of an individual's religious claim is judged exclusively by their ethical conduct.
- There is no theological dispensation that overrides fundamental morality: *"As soon as we lose the moral basis, we cease to be religious. There is no such thing as religion overriding morality"*.
- Untruthfulness, structural violence, and physical or psychological cruelty categorically invalidate any profession of faith, regardless of canonical lineage.

5. Pluralism and *Sarva Dharma Sambhava*: Equality of All Faiths

Gandhi's recognition of human fallibility serves as the basis of his theology of religions, encapsulated in the doctrine of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (equal reverence for all religions). In 1921, Gandhi synthesized this pluralism into a tripartite formulation:

1. **Universal Truth-Content:** All major religions are divinely inspired and reveal genuine facets of Absolute Truth.
2. **Universal Fallibility:** All religions, having been filtered through imperfect human language, historical mediation, and institutional interpretation, necessarily harbor error, distortion, and moral limitations.
3. **Universal Reverence Without Conversion:** Because each tradition contains both divine revelation and human imperfection, the appropriate interfaith stance is not proselytization or religious conversion, but dialogical enrichment.



Gandhi vigorously opposed conversion (*shuddhi* or Christian proselytism), arguing that conversion proceeds from the erroneous assumption that one tradition maintains an exclusive monopoly on divine grace. The telos of interreligious dialogue is not ideological homogenization, but assisting each adherent in realizing the deepest ethical imperatives of their inherited tradition: helping a Hindu become a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, and a Christian a better Christian.

6. Critical Internalism: Traditionalism and the Imperative of Radical Reform

Gandhi's deep reverence for Hinduism—comparable, in his famous metaphor, to the indissoluble, affectionate, yet clear-eyed bond with his wife—never degenerated into uncritical traditionalism or apologetics. He recognized that unexamined scriptural veneration frequently provided cover for systemic injustice.

The Primacy of Reason and Conscience Over Scriptural Authority

Gandhi enacted an uncompromising hermeneutic: if an ancient text or scriptural interpretation violated fundamental human decency, justice, or non-violence, it had to be rejected as an unauthentic accretion:

- He ruthlessly condemned institutionalized social hierarchies, describing the practice of **untouchability** (*Asprashyata*) as an unmitigated moral crime, a perversion of religion, and a cancer upon Hinduism.
- He vociferously denounced ritual animal sacrifice (*bali*), female subjugation, and child marriage, irrespective of textual citations offered by orthodox theologians (*sanatanists*).

The Philosophical Paradox of Varna

A persistent debate in Gandhi's social philosophy involves his distinction between *Varnasrama Dharma* and the historical caste system (*jati*). Gandhi defended an idealized, non-hierarchical conception of *Varna* as a divinely ordered division of labor intended to suppress competitive acquisitiveness and ensure societal harmony. However, his defense was purely functional and non-stratified; he continuously asserted that the operational *jati* system, characterized by gradations of pollution and privilege, was a fundamental perversion of the original egalitarian spirit. While contemporary critics argue that retaining the category of *Varna* sustained structural ambiguities, Gandhi's hermeneutical trajectory was consistently aimed at dismantling inherited institutional caste privilege in the service of fundamental human dignity.

7. Conclusion: The Gandhian Contribution to Modern Philosophy of Religion

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi formulated a sophisticated moral and epistemological framework that anticipates contemporary developments in the global theology of religions. By redefining God as Truth (*Satya*) and establishing Non-violence (*Ahimsa*) as the sole valid heuristic for its discovery, Gandhi dismantled theological sectarianism while retaining the radical existential depth of lived spirituality.

His philosophical legacy resolves the contemporary crisis of religious pluralism not through indifferent secularism or syncretic erasure, but through **epistemic modesty, rigorous self-critique, and ethical universalism**. In Gandhi's thought, religion ceases to be an ideological boundary demarcating social communities; it becomes a universal human imperative to transform the self and society in alignment with absolute moral integrity.

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