



Miss Ruth M. Weil
University of Wisconsin, U.S.A.

THE NON-VIOLENCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI & GITA

The life of Mahatma Gandhi (1870-1948), the great architect of the contemporary social and political India, the saint, philosopher, politician and religious reformer, truly can be viewed as an expression of India's cultural heritage. Unlike many contemporary western philosophers, who are sidetracked by the concept of "historical relativism", Gandhi sought the eternal truths, a search which seems to have occupied Indian seers and philosophers throughout recorded history. Gandhi said: "I do not claim to have originated any new principle or doctrine. I have simply tried in my own way to apply the eternal truths to our daily life and problems".¹

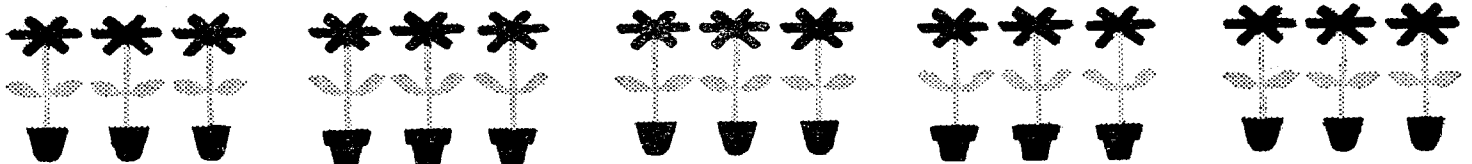
Of all the written sources which attempt to reflect these truths, Gandhi held the Bible, the Koran and the Bhagavadgita in highest esteem. Although he recited quotations from all three of these at his evening prayers, he was probably most deeply influenced by the Gita. There is no doubt that Gandhi interpreted the teachings of the Gita in his own way, trying to prove that its philosophy of life supported his creed of non-violence. But that the Gita served as his guide at hundreds of moments of doubt and difficulty is evidenced by such words as :

"I am a devotee of the Gita and a firm believer in the inexorable law of karma. Even the least little tripping or stumbling is not without its cause and I have wondered why one who has tried to follow the Gita in thought, word and deed should have any ailment.. The fact that any event or incident should disturb my mental equilibrium, in spite of my serious efforts, means not that the Gita ideal is defective but that my devotion to it is defective. The Gita ideal is true for all time..."²

It is evident that Gandhi made earnest efforts to follow the ideal of a sthitaprajna, as expressed in the Bhagavadgita. He was undisturbed in the midst of disturbed conditions, maintaining his balance of mind when others had lost it. When India was torn with communal riots and the hatred between Hindu and Muslim was causing the merciless massacre of hundreds of thousands of innocent people, Gandhi preached love and brotherhood, and underwent a fast unto death until peace was restored in the capital of India. Even when his assassin appeared at his evening prayers, Gandhi maintained the calm and composure of a sthitaprajna. Instead of attempting to escape or to retaliate, he folded his hands, uttered the name of God three times and smilingly embraced death.

The Gita says of the sthitaprajna :

"He whose mind is untroubled in the midst of sorrows and is free from eager desire amid pleasure, he from whom passion, fear and rage have passed away—he is called a sage of settled intelligence." (2 : 56)



“This is the divine state, O Partha; having attained thereto, one is not again bewildered; fixed in that state at the hour of death one can attain to the bliss of God.” (2 : 72)

Gandhi had an unshakable belief in God, a belief he held throughout his life. If we analyze his utterances about his theistic ideas, we reach the conclusion that his notion of, and faith in, God was partly borrowed from the Bhagavadgita, though his ethics based on this kind of metaphysics was his own interpretation. While defining God, Gandhi wrote :

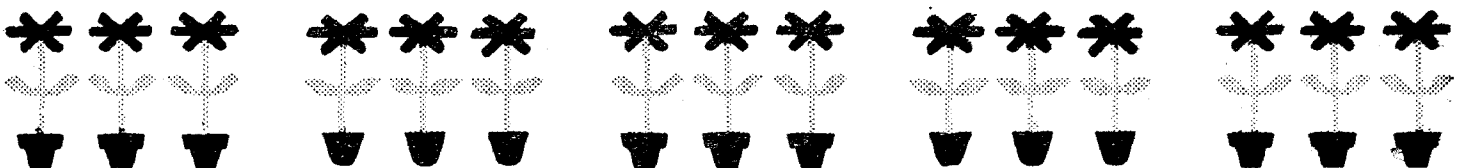
“To me God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist. For in His boundless love God permits the atheist to live. He is the searcher of hearts. He transcends speech and reason...He is a personal God to those who need His personal presence. He is embodied to those who need His touch. He is the purest essence. He simply is to those who have faith. He is all things to all men. He is in us and yet above and beyond us”.³

In the Gita Truth and fearlessness are inseparable—the very purpose of the Gita was to shatter Arjuna’s illusions about the nature of reality and thus enable him to act righteously, without doubt or fear. God in the Gita is clearly the source of life (3:10; 10:20) and yet transcends life as we know it—the realm of Prakriti, in which multiplicity and tension among the gunas prevail. Of God ‘the searcher of hearts’ and ‘the source of Light’, Krishna, speaking as the Cosmic Person, says : ‘I, O Arjuna, am the self seated in the hearts of all creatures.. of the lights (I am) the radiant sun; of the stars I am the moon”. (10:20-21)

As the disagreement among scholars testifies, the God of the Gita can be all things to all men. The Gita ultimately accords no essential difference, or superiority in status, between the indescribable, eternal, unitive Brahman, and the Lord who takes a human form to guide all that exists in the realm of differentiation. From a purely scholastic point of view, the concept of a personal God is incompatible with the second sophisticated metaphysics. Similarly, the scholar cannot reconcile the role allotted to the ritualistic and liturgical Vedas (though indeed it is a small role), or the presence of three “separate” paths to God in the Gita. But the iconoclastic spirit is foreign to Hinduism, for the sage knows that if the God search is sincere, no expression of this search is without some value and no guideposts without some function. In addition, the reality of the Divine does not lend itself to direct verbal communication. For these reasons Krishna says : “Let no one who knows the whole unsettle the minds of the ignorant who know only a part.” (3:29)⁴

Though the metaphysics of the Gita is not pure Monism, it certainly holds the unchanging, unitive Self to be the source of all existence. It is noteworthy that Gandhi made an attempt to define God in his own way by adhering to a more pluralistic view of reality, saying : “I talk of God as I believe Him to be, creative as well as non-creative. This is the result of my acceptance of the doctrine of the manyness of reality...He is one and yet many.”⁵ Of the immanence of God he would say :

“There is an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen Power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses... I dimly perceive that while everything around me is ever changing, ever dying, there is



underlying all that change a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates. That informing power or spirit is God".⁶

But Gandhi was never willing to define the whole in terms of its parts. The transcendence of God was just as clear as His immanence to Gandhi, as we shall see when we discuss the relation of Gandhi's ethics to the Bhagavadgita.

The final point to note regarding the relationship between the Gita and Gandhi's theistic views is that he accepted the theory of *avatara*, or the periodic self-incarnation of God, as expressed in the Gita (15:7), and used the Gita's words, "Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and a rise of unrighteousness...I create myself incarnate" (4:7), to support his optimistic view about the vindication of truth.⁷

In the ultimate analysis of Gandhi's theistic views, we find an optimism born of intuition and firm conviction, an optimism which prompted him to say of the 'informing power or spirit' which is God :

"I see it is purely benevolent. For I can see that in the midst of death life persists, in the midst of untruth truth persists, in the midst of darkness light persists. Hence I gather that God is Life, Truth, Light. He is Love. He is the Supreme Good"⁸

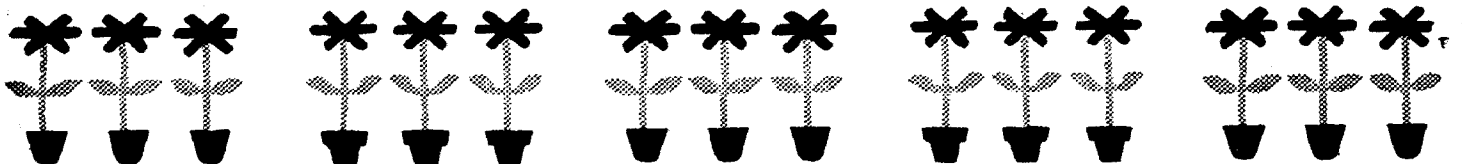
Gandhi's philosophy of life rested greatly upon the Bhagavadgita, which he interpreted allegorically :

"The Gita is not a historical discourse. A physical illustration is often needed to drive home a spiritual truth. It is the description not of war between cousins but between the two natures in us—the Good and the Evil. I regard Duryodhana and his party as the baser impulses in man, and Arjuna and his party as the higher impulses. The field of battle is our own body. An eternal battle is going on between the two camps, and the Poet-seer vividly describes it. Krishna is the Dweller within, every whispering to a pure heart."⁹

Being a fighter for the independence of his country and in the midst of the social and political life of India, Gandhi was bound to be influenced by the efficacy of the Karma Yoga, which enjoins every individual to act without desire for the fruit of the action performed. But Gandhi wisely added : "The renunciation of fruit in no way means indifference to the result. In regard to every action one must know the result that is expected to follow, and the means thereto, and the capacity for it. He, who being thus equipped is without desire for the result and yet wholly engrossed in the due fulfillment of the task before him is said to have renounced the fruits of his action."¹⁰

It sounds self contradictory to say that a man may be without desire for the result, and may yet be wholly engrossed in the due fulfillment of the task before him. Gandhi tries to explain it only theoretically, although he said that his own life was a practical experiment with truth. He was intensely concerned with the justification of the means to the end, and thus speaks of the 'renunciation of fruit' in this manner :

"He who is ever brooding over result often loses nerve in the performance of his duty. He becomes impatient and gives vent to anger and begins to do unworthy things; he jumps from action to action never remaining faithful to any. He who broods over results is like a man given to objects of senses; he is ever distracted, he says good bye to all



scruples, everything is right in his estimation and he therefore resorts to means fair and foul to attain his end.”¹¹

Gandhi was convinced that this path of unselfish, dedicated action commanded by the Gita teaches us to follow truth and *ahimsa* (non-violence). His entire ethic of non-violence, as the force of love, on which he based his political philosophy of *satyagraha*, or the protest of truth, was based on his understanding of the Gita, as well as on his optimistic view of the nature of God and the world. He freely admits that the Gita was not written to establish *ahimsa* but implies that the omission of the emphasis on *ahimsa* was due to the fact that *ahimsa* was “an accepted and primary duty even before the Gita age.”¹² In Gandhi’s words :

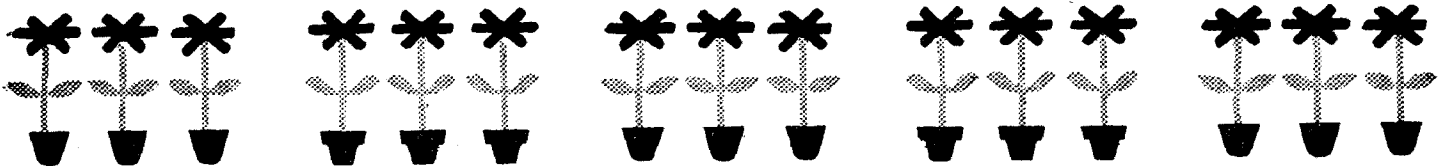
“The message of the Gita is to be found in the second chapter of the Gita where Krishna speaks of the balanced state of mind, of mental equipoise. In 19 verses at the close of the 2nd chapter of the Gita, Krishna explains how this state can be achieved. It can be achieved, he tells us, after killing all your passions. It is not possible to kill your brother after having killed all your passions. I should like to see that man dealing death—who has no passions, who is indifferent to pleasure and pain, who is undisturbed by the storms that trouble mortal man.”¹³

Though often convincing and eloquent, Gandhi’s defence of *ahimsa* in the Gita, nevertheless, met formidable criticism and opposition. Thus he qualified his defence of *ahimsa* in the Gita in this manner :

“When the Gita was written, although people believed in *ahimsa*, wars were not only not taboo, but nobody observed the contradiction between them and *ahimsa*...Let it be granted, that according to the letter of the Gita it is possible to say that warfare is consistent with renunciation of fruit. But after forty year’s unremitting endeavour fully to enforce the teaching of the Gita in my own life, I have, in all humility, felt that perfect renunciation is impossible without perfect observance of *ahimsa* in every shape and form.”

When Gandhi defends his ethics of non-violence, the emphatic difference in his mind between the transcendent, omnipotent God, or even the *avatar*, the human Divinity, and the mortal man, becomes clearer. Speaking of Krishna, he says : “My Krishna is the Lord of the Universe, the creator, preserver and destroyer of us all. He may destroy, because He creates.”¹⁴ Of the *avatar*, Gandhi comments : “According to the verse [4:8 of the Gita] it is God the All-knowing who descends to the earth to punish the wicked. I may be pardoned if I refuse to regard every revolutionary as an all-knowing God or an *avatara*.”¹⁵ Commenting on the verse in the Gita which says: “He who is free from all sense of ‘I’, whose motive is untainted, slays not nor is bound, even though he slays all these worlds,” Gandhi emphatically states : “If we believe in Krishna to be God, we must impute to Him omniscience and omnipotence. Such an one can surely destroy. But we are puny mortals ever erring and ever revising our views and opinions. We may not without coming to grief, ape Krishna, the inspirer of the Gita.”¹⁶ And again he says ; “Truth excludes the use of violence, because man is not capable of knowing the Absolute Truth and therefore not competent to punish. God alone is competent.”¹⁷

Wherever it is possible, Gandhi draws upon the Gita in support of his ethic. While speaking



of the law of karma, or its equivalent—this verse, for example : “In whatever way men resort to Me, even so do I render to them.” (4:11)—he said :

“If it be true that God metes out the same measure to us that we mete out to others, it follows that, if we would escape condign punishment, we may not return anger for anger but gentleness against anger.”¹⁸

The *varnashrama dharma*, as found in the Gita, was an integral part of Gandhi’s socio-individual ethic. Though his insistence on the necessary role of *varna* was misinterpreted and misused by the social reactionary, it is true that his understanding of *varna* is the weakest spot of his whole philosophy.

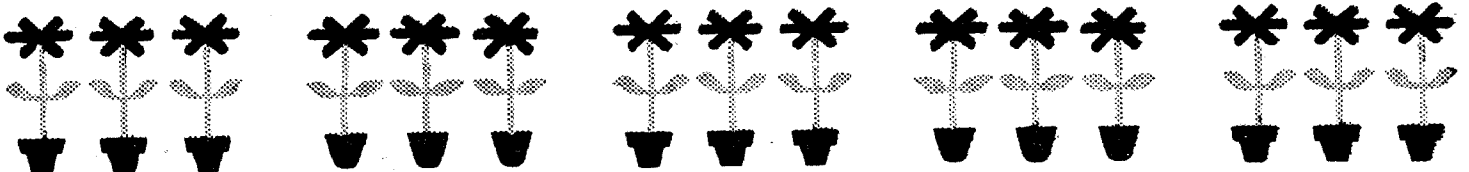
Gandhi’s life and words¹⁹ are proof that he believed implicitly that all men were born equal. His acceptance of the classical fourfold division of *varna* was based on a functional division for service and, in his eyes, unrelated to status. The basis of *varna* in the Gita, *gunas* and works, Gandhi interprets not solely as the character and ability with which one is born, but makes one’s *varna* synonymous with the *varna into* which one is born : “The law of *varna* is nothing, if not by birth.”²⁰ Thus Gandhi interpreted *varna* as “the following on the part of us all of the hereditary and traditional calling of our forefathers, in so far as the traditional calling is not inconsistent with fundamental ethics, and this only for the purpose of earning one’s livelihood.”²¹

Gandhi explained the importance of *varna* on the grounds that the humble acceptance of one’s father’s profession easily ensured one’s livelihood, and by thus minimizing the energies used to create material wealth *varna* maximized one’s energies for “spiritual pursuits”.²² Though admitting that qualities attached to *varna* can be acquired, he said : “We need not, ought not, to seek new avenues for gaining wealth. We should be satisfied with those we have inherited from our forefathers so long as they are pure.”²³

Gandhi’s interpretation of *varna*, in my humble opinion, does not correspond to that of the Gita, but rather reflects an unseemly obeisance to the bequest of the past. *Varna* in the Gita is not a tribal, but an occupational division, and one’s *varna* does not necessarily correspond to the *varna into* which one is born.²⁴

Gandhi’s emphasis on self-denial and the minimization of one’s material needs was undoubtedly partially generated by his mission to minimize the suffering of the people. The role Gandhi chose to play was a difficult one; the distinction between religious and political motives is not always clear.

Any other criticisms of Gandhi’s understanding of the Gita must center around his allegorical interpretation of the Gita. In my opinion the peculiar setting of the Gita defies mere allegorical interpretation. Unlike the Upanishads which are dialogues between a forest dweller and an aspirant, the Bhagavadgita’s message is occasioned by a moral, spiritual, intellectual, emotional and conative crisis in the life of a warrior, a man of action. The setting and resolution of the problem emphasizes the intersection of the timeless with time, and marks a distinct shift from Upanishadic speculative philosophy to practical religion. If the Kauravas are not solely the lower impulses in man, and the battlefield not merely man’s body, then we must conclude that the Gita accepts warfare, if the battle is a necessary one and demanded by a





clear violation of the laws of justice,²⁵ and that the duty of a soldier is to be considered divine, even though that duty involves killing.

Gandhi's arguments in support of his ethic, based on his understanding of the Gita, are very convincing. His life is a testament to the sincerity of this understanding of the Gita. The Gita's message is still a moot question, and the ethics of the Gita has been understood differently by different commentators. The diversity of interpretation is possible because the philosophy of the Gita is not a system, but rather there is "a wide, undulating, encircling movement of ideas which is the manifestation of a vast synthetic mind and a rich synthetic experience."²⁶

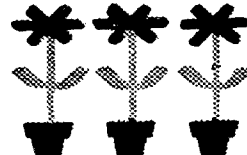
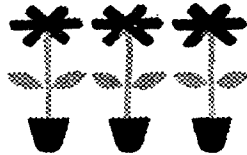
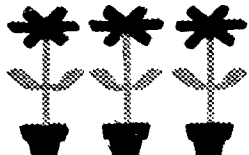
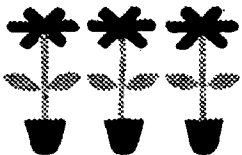
Though Gandhi's understanding of the Gita is simply another interpretation, it can be considered a legitimate one. There is no doubt that it is an appealing one.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "Bhagavadgita," *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, edited by Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, and Moore, Charles A., Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1957.
- Bhave, Vinoba, *Talks on the Gita*, Macmillan Company, New York, 1960.
- Desai, Mahadev, *The Gita According to Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1946.
- Fischer, Louis, *Gandhi, His, Life and Message for the World*, New York American Library (Signet Key Book), 1954.
- Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand, *Hindu Dharma*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1950.
- Jones, Marc Edmund, *Gandhi Lives*, David McKay Company, Philadelphia, 1948.
- Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, *The Hindu View of Life*, Macmillan Company, New York, 1962.
- Sarma, D. S., *The Gandhi Sutras : The Basic Teachings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Devin-Adair Company, New York, 1949.

REFERENCES

1. M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, p. 3.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
3. "Young India," 5-3-'25, quoted in M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, p. 61.
4. Radhakrishnan says so beautifully : "Those who have seen the radiant vision of the Divine protest against the exaggerated importance attached to outward forms. They speak a language which unites all worshippers as surely as the dogmas of the doctors divide. The true seer is gifted with a universality of outlook, and a certain sensitiveness to the impulses and emotions which dominate the rich and varied human nature. He whose consciousness is anchored in God cannot deny any expression of life as utterly erroneous. He is convinced of the inexhaustibility of the nature of God and the infinite number of its possible manifestations." *The Hindu View of Life*, p. 27.
5. M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, p. 63.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 64.



7. Cf. the Commentary by Gandhi on this verse, in *The Gita According to Gandhi*, by Mahadev Desai, p. 196.
8. M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, p. 65.
9. Mahadev Desai, *The Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 136.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
11. Mahadev Desai, *The Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 132.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
13. M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, p. 179.
14. Mahadev Desai, *The Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 196.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 369.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 369.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
19. Cf. M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, p. 360.
20. M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, p. 370.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 362.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 368.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 369. At this same site, the following conversation is recorded :
 Q. Do you not find a man exhibiting qualities opposed to his family character ?
 A. That is a difficult question. We do not know all our antecedents. But you and I do not need to go deeper into this question for understanding the law of varna as I have endeavoured to explain to you. If my father is a trader and I exhibit the qualities of a soldier, I may without reward serve my country as a soldier but must be content to earn my bread by trading.
24. Due to lack of space the conclusion I have reached after examining this question is stated without elaboration. However, this conclusion has been reached after an honest consideration of *varna* in the Gita, and could be substantiated if time permitted.
25. The historical circumstances, explained in the *Mahabharata*, leading to the battle clearly meet these qualifications.
26. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, (first series), p. 9.

