

# GANDHI'S POLITICAL ETHICS

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The centenary this year of Gandhi's birth provides an occasion to reassess the significance of the Indian leader. His political ethics and supporting notions about man and the state seem to me especially important in his teachings and practices. They have their weaknesses, but they should not be overlooked in any effort to reassess the complex and at times baffling Mahatma. Because Gandhi's ideas about government and politics have been likened to those of Henry David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy, his unique contribution has often been obscured. Gandhi borrowed Thoreau's term "civil disobedience" which the New England individualist had coined to explain his kind of opposition to the Mexican war and slavery. Yet there is a considerable gap between Gandhi's metaphysics and Thoreau's. As to Tolstoy, Gandhi's premises resemble some of the convictions of the Russian writer after he became a Christian anarchist. But the Indian leader placed more trust in the perfectability of public institutions than Tolstoy did. Without denying the utility of the frequent and inevitable comparisons, Gandhi's synthetic political philosophy is best seen by itself.

Briefly sketched, Gandhi's vision of the state rested on his teaching that a *dharmic* responsibility to the pursuit of truth (*sat*) takes precedence over the granting or withholding of political loyalty. In particular, *dharma* requires selfless action performed without attachment to rewards (*anasktiyoga*), and courage — spiritual, physical and psychological — is the leading virtue to demonstrate selflessness. Nonviolence in all its inner and outward manifestations is the optimum form of courage because it is the nearest approximation to ultimate truth. Through these layers of belief the state appears as a concession to the inadequacies of temporal life. But it is present. The features of Gandhi's state include the legitimacy of state rule when law is grounded on moral consent; the devolution of power through governmental tiers stretching from the center to the most vital level, the local commune; the pervasive spirit of stewardship instead of party competition to keep state officials

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accountable; economic self-sufficiency based on cooperation and sharing instead of gain; the securing of the state's order and territory through minimal force; and the progressive reduction in adversary conditions at home and abroad.

Political obligation understood as the rationale for citizen *obedience* emerges in Gandhi's thought as a testimony to the supremacy of his interpretation of man's potentialities and limitations. Given this vision, state theory and a clear image of institutional arrangements are of small consequence. It is not enough to say that Gandhi's long preoccupation with anti-colonialism prevented him from developing more pronounced suggestions for the constitutional order. He had time but no inclination, leaving posterity with a legacy whereby political loyalty follows in the train of many other values. Today the legacy is instructive, for Gandhi would have understood the widespread search among youth for a social order that has rejected delegation, formalism, and materialism — and above all, the Leviathan, real or imagined. The quest in our day for an order that revolves around the ethos of the self-reliant, moral man can borrow from Gandhi's social and moral teachings. Whether many today would accept his metaphysics and their outcome in teachings about personal behavior and public life — chastity and nonviolent resistance—is highly problematical. Conceivably a turn, not only toward international peace, but toward Gandhi's personal and political ethics could take place after the exhaustion of present extremisms.

Understood as the grounds for *disobedience*, political obligation in Gandhi's thought has a developed character. In South Africa Gandhi answered the question "When or why should I disobey?" and subsequently elaborated his theory of resistance within *satyagraha*, his philosophy of reform. Civil disobedience is one limb of *satyagraha* and not its highest branch. Gandhi considered social reconstruction more vital than rule-breaking. Good faith negotiations with the opponent are to precede disobedience. There are five main guidelines for Gandhian rule-breaking. Right is earned, not presumed or seized. Suffering is a primary test of the earning of merit. *Ahimsa* or non-injury is the norm, not a mere technique. Submission to the consequences of rule-break-

ing is obligatory to prove the actor's creditability in moral, not state terms. No advantage should be taken of the opponent's temporary embarrassment, e.g., a great war. (Gandhi himself broke this criterion in his 1942 "Quit India" demand.)

The submission guideline is challenging, especially today. To take only democractic societies, "principled" rule-breakers in Western Europe, India and the United States have resisted imprisonment following formal acts of civil disobedience. They have argued that they have prepaid society for any inconvenience by their courage to confront the "unjust" state, or they have said that to plead guilty is to testify to the falsehood of their vocation and to endorse unchecked sovereignty. The Gandhian answer is that the responsible disobedient is philosophically, indeed theologically, responsible for his actions, and if nothing else, he should show that he is no ordinary offender who wants immunity for his deeds. The Gandhian dispensation is antithetical to the conduct of rule-breakers who seek sanctuary and flee from prosecution.

Clearly, Gandhi's teachings on *civil* disobedience demand a rejection of that rule-breaking which flows from Marcusean persuasions. They also speak against schools that do not necessarily subscribe to the rejection of "pseudo-democracy" and "capitalist oligarchy," but that treat criteria for disobedience as no more than tactics within the situation. Additionally, Gandhi was an elitist on the question of who decides when obedience ends and resistance must begin. He insisted on every man deciding whether to follow him, but he kept for himself the authority — founded on his religious insight — to decide when to commence rule-breaking. How many who now protest will accept political saints?

A case for the efficacy of Gandhian disobedience will have to depend on something more than political ethics. Does his version of rule-breaking contribute to the accountability of power in the broadest sense of political obligation? I am unsure, chiefly because of the undernourished condition of the citizen who is both loyal to the system *and* a protestant in details. Gandhian ideas are highly subsidized with regard to social justice and the combination of action and ethics. Yet there is doubt as to what the great Indian leaves to present generations for a developed view of the good man who in Aristotelian perspective is *also* the good citizen.

Elsewhere in Gandhi's political ideas one can notice distinctive features that deserve comment. His understanding of social justice excluded economic determinism and class struggle, leaving neo-Marxists who have invoked his name with undiluted problems. Liberals who have appealed to Gandhi's name must

face his decided opposition to parliaments and parties which he found contrary to harmony and stability. On the assumption that Gandhi "lives" mainly through symbolic values and not through cultism or appropriation, I would suggest that these values stand for: justice as redemption instead of punishment; the separation of error from its agent; personal and social reliance; an end to poverty and racism; cultural federalism; and disciplined nationalism. One could go on, but at least these should be mentioned.

War and peace issues are omitted from my list. Why not cite Gandhi as a witness for disarmament and nonalignment, and against imperialism and power politics? Many have done so in the past and during this centennial period of stock-taking. I am troubled by the facility of the process. It is too easy, by-passing the fact that Gandhi had no great comprehension of international politics apart from his obvious contributions to changes in the British Empire. Gandhi, of course, advised *satyagraha* resistance against Hitler's forces. He urged his own country and others to rely on peace brigades instead of armies. But these typical examples suggest that his grasp of the contingencies and development of world politics was rudimentary compared with his more profound insights into social and moral issues. Although Gandhians argue that the insights penetrated international relations as well, I am skeptical that the Mahatma offers more than the faintest outline of how to make the community of states into an *ashram*.

Overall, Gandhi sought to humanize power. He had disappointments, among them the partition of India and its accompanying violence. But he never gave up his mission. The total commitment and energy which he brought to his mission gave him the quality of a prophet who stands in a tradition of other inspired men, East and West. Unlike many of them, he worked for political ends. His joining of religious and temporal interests caused Reinhold Niebuhr to criticize the mixture as unacceptable because it threatened to corrupt the former. Granting that Gandhi had moorings in a syncretic theism and employed Hindu idioms, I think that Niebuhr overlooked the non-dogmatic quality of Gandhi's "religion." Everyone will have to decide for himself whether Gandhi, the holy man in politics, is a viable witness. My suggestion for this question is borrowed from Karl Jasper — Gandhi speaks for values that transcend politics without disengaging the votary from politics. Stated differently, even as war is too important to be left to generals, Gandhi's legacy tells us that politics is too vital to be left to politicians. His message is a positive resource on which to draw as we survey the abundant evidence of the deficiencies of politics, everywhere.