

Gandhi and Hick on Religious Pluralism: Some Resonances

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In the present-day multicultural context, religious pluralism continues to be a contentious issue. This paper focuses on two eminent thinkers whose perspectives on religious pluralism have attracted much attention: Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948), known to the world for his nonviolent campaign against British rule, and John Hick (1922–), a renowned British theologian and philosopher of religion. These two important personalities have been studied apart but not, to my knowledge, together. No scholarly attention has been paid to the striking resonances in their approaches to religious pluralism. My primary aim is to identify and explore significant correspondences in their thinking on religious pluralism, rather than to engage with the contentious debate their positions on religious pluralism have ignited in Western Christian theological discourse. The debate has been well documented, and the intention is not to repeat it here. Situating them in their respective contexts, this paper attempts to draw attention to concurrences in their notion of religion, concept of Truth/Real, approach to conflicting truth-claims, and perspectives on Christianity.

Two Thinkers and their Starting Points

Although Gandhi and Hick are not contemporaries and their views have been shaped by different contextual factors and situations, there are nevertheless points of convergence in certain areas, especially in their approaches to religious pluralism. They were formulating their ideas on religion in different historical contexts and in response to different situa-

tions, yet we find some striking correspondences between their approaches to religious pluralism. Gandhi's views on religion and religious pluralism developed over a period of time and in varied settings, such as Kathiawar, London, South Africa and, more importantly, in the colonial-missionary context and the Indian independence struggle. Hick's views have gone through various phases, too, and his philosophy of religious pluralism emerged in the British postimperial context where diasporic communities from diverse religious traditions posed new theological questions. Gandhi was not engaged in an academic study of religions, but his entire life was devoted to the pursuit of truth. He was the focus of the world stage, and his every move was subject to public scrutiny. Gandhi's ideas on various subjects ranging from colonialism to religion to vegetarianism have become the subject of academic study. As a philosopher of religion, Hick holds a preeminent position in the academic domain and his ideas are not divorced from practical concerns. Hick himself has been profoundly influenced by Gandhi.¹ His theological journey sheds light on his ceaseless engagement with the philosophy of religious pluralism both in its theoretical and practical aspects. Both Gandhi and Hick are deeply interested in other religious traditions and draw insights from them and appropriate them in their own way.

Gandhi was born into and grew up in a religiously pluralistic environment, Kathiawar in Gujarat, a place sacred to Vaishnavites, Buddhists, Jains and others. His house was open to people of different religious persuasions (Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Parsees, and others) who came for discussion on religious matters. In Gandhi's own household there was a mingling of two traditions: his mother was brought up in the little-known Pranami tradition which combined Hindu and Islamic textual traditions, and his father belonged to the devotional Vallabhacharya tradition centered on Krishna. For Gandhi religious pluralism was not a problem, and he was engaged in dialogue not only with members of other faiths but also with his own. Although Hick was born into a predominantly Judeo-Christian milieu, in 1967 he moved to Birmingham—a multi-cultural and multifaith city—where he was H.G. Wood Professor of Theology of Religion at the University of Birmingham. He was involved with “race relations” and developed friendships with Afro-Caribbeans, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others and visited their places of worship. His encounter with people of various faiths and their distinctive forms of

worship led him to regard religious plurality as a blessing rather than a problem, and his life and work continue to draw attention to this fact. In other words, he was more than convinced that people of various faiths were relating to a higher divine reality in their own particular ways. Earlier, when Hick was a student at University College in Hull, he went through a conversion experience and “became a Christian of a strongly evangelical and indeed fundamentalist kind,”² but this stance did not last long. In 1973, some years after his move to Birmingham, Hick made a paradigm shift from a Christo-centric to a theo-centric position and eventually to a more nuanced pluralistic view of other faiths as constituting valid and genuine responses to the one ultimate Reality.

Gandhi, a lawyer by training (in England), was engaged in the quest for Truth since his childhood, and his entire life was one of experiments with Truth, as his autobiography makes amply clear. Hick, too, who began as a law student but eventually became a professional philosopher, was deeply aware of the presence of a higher reality. Both were drawn to Theosophy but did not embrace it for different reasons. Gandhi came to prefer the formulation “Truth is God” to “God is Truth,” while Hick’s spiritual quest led him to move from a Christo-centric/theo-centric view of the universe of faiths to a Transcendent/Real-centered one. He preferred to use the term “Real” or “Transcendent,” rather than the word “God” which in the Western monotheistic tradition is generally associated with the idea “of a limitless all-powerful divine Person.”³ Both Gandhi and Hick, in their distinctive ways, made the journey to a larger vision of Truth/Real. Neither denied the notion and experience of Truth as personal, but neither was equally keen to acknowledge the experience of it as nonpersonal, and did not confine Truth to either of these categories. Gandhi and Hick would have no difficulty in acknowledging that they are referring to the one single higher or transcendent Reality, for both see religions as varying responses to the one Truth/Real. Both take a pluralistic view in that they grant that each religious tradition is a way/path to the Real and has resources within it to effect the process of transformation or liberation each tradition has conceived. Both seek not to undermine the differences, but rather seek to point out that no one religious tradition can occupy, in Hickian terminology, the center of the universe of faiths.

Notion of Religion

There are some remarkable similarities in Gandhi's and Hick's understanding of religion. First, they see religion in terms of a personal religious experience of the Real or the Ultimate, rather than in terms of a rigid set of beliefs and practices. They distinguish between outer (institutional) and inner aspects of religion, and although both are interdependent, they see the inner dimension as primary. Second, they focus on the human awareness of the Real and point to human finitude in the perception of it. Third, they do not subscribe to a literal interpretation of scriptural texts. Fourth, they focus on "fruits" rather than belief in order to draw attention to the transformative efficacy of what appears to be incompatible religious beliefs. In other words, they see "fruits" as an appropriate criterion to demonstrate the liberative potential inherent within various religious traditions.

Gandhi's focus and emphasis is not so much on belief as on the way we live our lives. It is not so much the rightness or correctness of belief that is at issue, but the "fruits" or deeds that count. Gandhi's dialogue with Hindus and others had more to do with practical matters such as untouchability than with matters relating specifically to belief. He was concerned with Hindu-Muslim understanding and cooperation, and his untiring efforts in this direction are well known. Gandhi challenged his fellow Hindus by drawing attention to the gap between their belief in the presence of the divine in all beings and their attitude to and treatment of the untouchables. Gandhi's point was that if all share the divine essence in some form, how could one treat the other as less equal. Furthermore, he did not hesitate to point out to Hindus their hypocrisy when they complained about the oppressive nature of British colonial rule. Gandhi's point was that how could they legitimately fight for freedom from colonial rule when they themselves refused to acknowledge the right of untouchables to freedom from oppression from fellow Hindus.

The question of religious pluralism in Western theological discourse has much to do with what constitutes "right belief." Being a professional philosopher and theologian, Hick has been actively engaged with a Christian theological audience, many of whom find his pluralistic hypothesis problematic in that he puts Christianity on a par with other religious traditions. Hick argues that "people of other faiths are not on average

noticeably better human beings than Christians, but nor on the other hand are they on average noticeably worse human beings.”⁴ He calls for a move from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness: “This is a transcendence of the ego point of view and its replacement by devotion to or centred concentration upon some manifestation of the Real, response to which produces compassion/love towards other human beings or towards all life.”⁵ Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis does not suffer from being theoretical as it is also very much grounded in practical realities. Hick, like Gandhi, is more concerned with “fruits” than belief, and this can be seen in his own commitment to and active involvement with issues of peace, justice, race relations work, interfaith dialogue, particularly Jewish-Christian-Muslim and Buddhist-Christian, and such other matters.⁶

Gandhi’s Concept of “Truth” and Hick’s Concept of the “Real”

Gandhi uses the word “Truth” in a wide variety of senses, but my concern is with Gandhi’s notion of Truth in relation to religious pluralism, which has some resonances with Hick’s notion of the Real. While Gandhi’s view of religious pluralism is largely shaped by Indian philosophical traditions, especially Jain pluralistic metaphysic, Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis draws on aspects of Kantian thinking and applies it to the domain of the epistemology of religion. Both Gandhi and Hick are more concerned with human conceptions and experiences of Truth/Real, rather than with arguing about its nature. They are not indifferent to ontological questions, but are acutely conscious of human finitude when it comes to the nature of the Real. One can claim at the most to know the Real/Ultimate from a human point of view, not to claim to know what it is in itself.

Although Gandhi is not a philosopher in the conventional sense of the term, his concept of Truth is not without a philosophical basis. Drawing on insights from the Indian philosophical traditions, Gandhi uses the Sanskrit term *satya*, or Truth, to refer to God. He remarks: “The word *Satya* (Truth) is derived from *Sat*, which means ‘being.’ Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why *Sat* or Truth is perhaps the most appropriate name of God.”⁷ In 1931 he came to prefer the formulation “Truth is God” to “God is Truth.” He felt that there was no other

name appropriate for God than *satya* and that not all of us understand or mean the same thing by the word “God.” It is not easy to define or describe the nature of the divine Reality; one can at the most speak of it as *sat-chit-ananda*, truth, knowledge and bliss. Gandhi uses the term *satya* not as a substitute or an attribute of God, but as one that defies all descriptions and formulations. It is possible to deny the existence of God, but not of Truth. It was primarily Gandhi’s encounter with atheists that led to a decisive shift in emphasis in his formulation of Truth. The moral integrity of atheists such as Charles Bradlaugh convinced him that even those who did not hold religious beliefs could be earnest seekers after Truth, in the sense that they were striving to become better human beings and to make this world a more humane one.⁸ Gandhi was seeking Truth not only in religion, but also in other spheres of activity including politics. For Gandhi “*Sat* or the one reality, is the source of eternal and universal values like truth, righteousness and justice—truth in the realm of knowledge, righteousness in the domain of conduct and justice in the sphere of social relations.”⁹ Given his broad and open definition of Truth, Gandhi was not limiting the search for Truth only to religious believers. Hick would agree with Gandhi that nonbelievers need not be seen as morally less conscious than religious believers, for they too are concerned with the welfare of human beings and the world. Hick would also contend that it is possible that those with no belief could be open to the influence of the Real even if they are not conscious of it. This does not imply that Hick would dream of turning atheists or humanists into anonymous religious believers. To put it differently, both the believer and nonbeliever share the same world, but their experiences of it may vary in that it may not have for each the same meaning and significance. Hick explains:

For there is a sense in which the religious man and the atheist both live in the same world and another sense in which they live consciously in different worlds. They inhabit the same physical environment and are confronted by the same changes occurring within it. But in its actual concrete character in their respective “streams of consciousness” it has for each a different nature and quality, a different meaning and significance; for one does and the other does not experience life as a continual interaction with the transcendent God.¹⁰

Among other things, Gandhi was influenced by the Jain theory of *anekanta-vada*, or “many-sidedness of reality,” and the fragmentary nature of our perception of Truth. In Jain philosophical thinking, every substance has many attributes and can be seen from different standpoints and no one conception of truth can be taken as absolute and all-comprehensive. In other words, reality is too complex to be described in categorical terms. It can be perceived from many different perspectives which may appear to be contradictory. Gandhi remarks:

It has been my experience that I am always true from my point of view, and am often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we are both right from our respective points of view. And this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics....I very much like this doctrine of the manyness of reality. It is this doctrine that has taught me to judge a Musalman from his own standpoint and a Christian from his.¹¹

Gandhi's thesis is that Truth in itself is absolute, but we cannot, being imperfect ourselves, claim to have grasped Truth in its entirety. He remarks in the autobiography: “As long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler.”¹² Our differing accounts of the Truth or the Ultimate are based on glimpses which are partial. This does not mean that each one of us has seen only a part of the Absolute and that if we put all the parts together we get the complete Truth. First of all, it does not make sense to split the Absolute into parts and look upon different religions as different responses to different parts of the Infinite. His point is that our encounters with the divine Reality or Truth are to a great extent shaped by our *svabhava*, or human nature, and the context in which the encounter takes place. Therefore there are bound to be differences in our perceptions and experiences of Truth. Gandhi remarks: “In theory, since there is one God, there can be only one religion. But in practice, no two persons I have known have had the same identical conception of God. Therefore, there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to different temperaments and climatic conditions.”¹³ Although Gandhi now and then uses Advaitic language when he speaks of “the absolute

oneness of God and, therefore, of humanity,” of many bodies but one soul, he does not undermine the distinctiveness of different responses. He is not keen to obliterate the differences, but to show that they share a common source: “The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source.”¹⁴ As Margaret Chatterjee explains:

The idea of one soul is advaitic no doubt. But the image of the rays of the sun is pluralistic. To speak of a common source is not to speak of identity. In this statement, Jain and Advaitic themes seem to strive for predominance in Gandhi’s mind....Gandhi is advaitic only to the extent that he believes in the oneness of all that lives, and that this oneness has to be realised by man in the sense that he has to become *aware of it*....Unity for Gandhi, strictly speaking, is *shown* in the way we live rather than merely *known*.¹⁵

As with Gandhi, Hick emphasizes that any one view of the Truth is bound to be limited. He distinguishes the Real in itself and the Real as experienced by human beings. The Real in itself is something that one cannot claim to have grasped in its totality, but the human experience of it gives us some knowledge and insight into it. Hick remarks: “We are not directly aware of the divine reality as it is in itself, but only as experienced from our distinctively human point of view. This is inevitably a partial awareness, limited by our human finitude and imperfections.”¹⁶ Hick draws on the Kantian distinction “between the noumenal world, which exists independently of and outside man’s perception of it, and the phenomenal world, which is that world as it appears to our human consciousness.”¹⁷ In other words, the distinction is between the world as it is in itself and the world as it appears to us, and since we see and experience the world through our own finite conceptual lens, our vision of the world is bound to be partial, though not illusory. Similarly, human awareness/experience of the Real, while being true, can give only a limited view of it. What we know is Truth or the Real as experienced by humans, but Truth in itself will always remain a mystery, beyond human comprehension. In his view, the conception and experience of the Real as personal or nonpersonal belongs to the realm of human experience, rather than to the nature of the Real itself. In other words, Hick is not concerned with formulating a categorical description of the Real in terms

of personal or nonpersonal, rather he prefers to speak of the Real in “transcategorical” terms.

Both Gandhi and Hick draw attention to human finitude in the conception and experience of Truth. Being finite human beings, we cannot claim to possess an absolute knowledge of Truth. For Gandhi and Hick, personal religious experience rather than dogma is the starting point when talking about Truth/Real. The discussion centers not so much on the nature of the Real as on how we conceive or experience it. The focus is on the varied responses to the Real or the Ultimate, which although within reach, is at the same time beyond the scope of human speculation in the sense that it cannot be confined to human perceptions, experiences, and formulations.

Conflicting Truth-Claims

One of the issues that continues to be debated with intense fervor in current Western Christian theological discourse has to do with the question of truth-claims. Gandhi and Hick approach the prickly issue of truth-claims in a pragmatic manner. They do not brush aside what appears to be incompatible truth-claims, but deal with them in a realistic way by starting from the human rather than the ultimate end. In other words, they shift the focus to epistemological modes of knowing the Truth/Real. As already seen, both Gandhi and Hick view religion as a vast field of exploration into Truth, rather than simply as a system of beliefs and practices. There is no one correct or right belief to which one is called to subscribe, and if beliefs lead one to make exclusive claims for his or her conception of the Real, then something is fundamentally wrong with this way of assessing the value of a tradition. They concur in their emphasis on “fruits” rather than belief to address the thorny issue of truth-claims. For both, the hermeneutical key to the problem of incompatible truth-claims lies not so much in the sphere of beliefs (doctrinal formulations) as in that of “fruits.”

Common Source

What most find problematic with the pluralistic view is the reference to the one Reality as the common source underlying diverse religious traditions. The use of the phrase “common source” has no doubt caused

tremendous confusion because there has been no consensus over the nature of the source. Since different conceptions and experiences of the Real seem to contradict one another, it is held that different paths lead to different goals. First, it is important to note that Gandhi and Hick point to a “common source” that transcends all religious labels and expressions. In other words, Truth is more than Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Jewish or Sikh notions of it, or is, to use Hick’s terminology, “transcategorical.” Gandhi and Hick contend that the conceptions of the Real as personal and nonpersonal are no doubt different but not unrelated for these two refer to the same Reality. Their vision encompasses both of these perceptions but goes beyond them. Gandhi remarks: “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 is all things to all men. He is in us and yet above and beyond us.”¹⁸ As we have seen, Hick distinguishes between the Real as in itself and as experienced by humans. The experience of the Real or the Eternal as a personal, loving and gracious father, mother and friend, the experience of oneness with the Infinite self, or the experience of *nirvana* are all different but complementary experiences of the one and the same Reality.

Since both Gandhi and Hick begin with the premise that there is one transcendent Reality underlying all forms of life, they view differences in conceptions and experiences of Truth in a relational manner. Gandhi remarks: “The forms are many, but the informing spirit is one. How can there be room for distinctions of high and low where there is this all-embracing fundamental unity underlying the outward diversity.”¹⁹ If God has many names and forms and if there are countless definitions of God, it is because, says Gandhi, “His manifestations are innumerable”²⁰ and “the contents of the richest word—God—are not the same to every one of us. They will vary with the experience of each.”²¹ The use of various names for the invisible force indicates that one “can only conceive God within the limitations of [one’s] mind.”²² To the question of conflicting truth-claims Gandhi’s answer is “that what appear to be different truths are like countless and apparently different leaves of the same tree.”²³ The different faiths are like “so many branches of a tree, each *distinct* from the other though having the same source.”²⁴ In his dialogue with an American missionary on the equality of religions, Gandhi remarks that not all branches are equal but all are growing, and he cautions that

“the person who belongs to the growing branch must not gloat over it and say, ‘Mine is the superior one.’ None is superior, none is inferior, to the other.”²⁵ Gandhi does not find it odd that our descriptions of Truth should appear conflicting. His line of reasoning is that “we are all thinking of the Unthinkable, describing the Indescribable, seeking to know the Unknown, and that is why our speech falters, is inadequate, and even often contradictory.”²⁶

As with Gandhi, Hick too regards different religions as different human responses to the one transcendent Reality. He draws on diverse religious and mystical traditions to elucidate and support his pluralistic hypothesis: that the Real known by different names and forms is also beyond all names and forms. Hick offers a rich array of telling examples, and it is worth citing a couple of them. One is by the fifteenth-century mystic, Nicholas of Cusa, who declares that “the names which are attributed to God are taken from creatures, since he in himself is ineffable and beyond everything that can be named or spoken.”²⁷ The other one is by the Persian Sufi mystic, Rumi, who says: “The lamps are different, but the Light is the same; it comes from Beyond.”²⁸

Both Gandhi and Hick look upon all religions as being equally genuine and at the same time far from perfect. All religions are equally valid in the sense that each has a supreme value and purpose for its adherents. It does not mean that Krishna invokes the same feelings in a Christian or a Buddhist as he does in a Hindu. Each religion is a path to the Truth that we comprehend and experience only through our culturally conditioned lens. Gandhi’s concept of “equality of religions” is likely to be misunderstood if it is not seen in the light of his conception of the relation between *satya* and *ahimsa*. “It is only through...a reverential approach to faiths other than mine,” says Gandhi, “that I can realize the principle of equality of all religions.”²⁹ Although Gandhi initially used the word “tolerance,” he was not all that comfortable using it for it implied “a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one’s own, whereas *ahimsa* teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as we accord to our own, thus admitting the imperfection of the latter.”³⁰ This marked change was evident in his various correspondences and discussions since late 1930s.³¹ Gandhi himself testified to this change: “I have, of course, always believed in the principle of religious tolerance. But I have gone even further. I have advanced from tolerance to equal

respect for all religions.”³² As with many Hindus, Gandhi regarded Hinduism as the most all-embracing and tolerant of all religions. In fact, he saw Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as part of Hinduism, and this has not gone unchallenged.³³ Later in his life he gave up referring to Hinduism as being the most tolerant and inclusive of all religious traditions and started speaking in terms of “equality of religions.” If there are any inconsistencies in Gandhi’s views on religion and religious pluralism, it is largely because his entire life was one of experiments with truth, and he was ready to admit and rectify any errors.

As with Gandhi’s concept of “equality of religions,” Hick’s concept of pluralism is likely to be misconstrued if it is not seen in the light of his primary emphasis on “fruits.” Hick states: “Subject to the ‘fruits’ criterion, which rules out violent fanatical sects (including those within the world religions themselves), pluralism regards all the ‘great world faiths’ as equally authentic and salvific.”³⁴ In fact, Hick calls for a Copernican revolution in Christian approaches to other religions.³⁵ His pluralistic hypothesis requires that Christianity as well as other religions occupies the periphery. It is the Real or the Transcendent which is at the center, and all the religions revolve around it.³⁶ The Real he is referring to is one that transcends all human conceptions and experiences of it. For Hick the contradictory views about the nature of the Real have more to do with human experiences of it, rather than what the Real is in itself. There is no way one can verify in practice that the Ultimate/Truth is manifest in any one religious tradition in a fuller measure than in others. What one finds true at a personal level does not mean it is universally true for all. He remarks:

From a religious point of view, experience of the Transcendent is neither universal nor uniform. It is not universal, at any given time, because it is not forced, or does not force itself, upon anyone; and it is not uniform around the world because the human contribution to the forms of authentic religious experience varies with the different cultures and traditions of the earth.³⁷

Both Gandhi and Hick reject the notion of a single world religion. They do not aim at fusion, but a healthy coexistence of different religions. Gandhi remarks: “I do not expect the India of my dream to develop

one religion, i.e., to be wholly Hindu, or wholly Christian, or wholly Mussalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another.”³⁸ Hick, too, echoes a similar view:

The different religious traditions, with their complex internal differentiations, have developed to meet the needs of the range of mentalities expressed in the different human cultures. So long as mankind is gloriously various—which, let us hope, will be always—there will be different traditions of religious faith with their associated forms of worship and life-style....And in the new ecumenical age which we are now entering, the religious traditions will increasingly interact with one another and affect one another’s further development, enabling each to learn, we may hope, from others’ insights and benefit from the others’ virtues.³⁹

Contrary to what is often supposed, Gandhi and Hick do not minimize the differences between the varied faiths, but view each religion as a distinctive way of relating to the one Reality. In fact, their primary concern is with the plurality of human experiences of the Real. As has already been seen, they prefer to talk about Truth from the human rather than ontological point of view. They maintain that definitions and pictures of the Transcendent are human formulations of Truth, rather than Truth as it is in itself. Both look at the problem of truth-claims from a practical and cognitive standpoint. For Gandhi, if what is truth to one appears untruth to another, it is because “the human mind works through innumerable media and that the evolution of the human mind is not the same for all....”⁴⁰ Gandhi’s point is that each one perceives Truth according to his or her own light. This is in accord with Hickian thinking that “our awareness of something is the awareness that we are able to have, given our own particular nature and the particular character of our cognitive machinery.”⁴¹ To put it, as Hick does, in Thomas Aquinas’s words: “The thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower.”⁴² Neither Gandhi nor Hick imply that our beliefs are simply human projections or illusory. On the contrary, they are keen to establish that the human awareness of the transcendent is largely conditioned by our modes of thinking, cultural context, and other factors.

“Fruits” Criterion: Moral and Spiritual Transformation

The most striking aspect of Gandhi’s and Hick’s pluralistic approach is that it adopts a criterion of “fruits,” rather than beliefs. Both men are primarily concerned with the moral and spiritual transformation that occurs in people, rather than the content of belief. They look to “fruits” to demonstrate the transformative value inherent in diverse religious traditions. They show that what appears conflicting at one level need not be so at another. It is not so much a matter of reconciling incompatible beliefs as looking at their transformative efficacy. Gandhi points to *ahimsa* (nonviolence) as the means to test our conceptions of Truth. *Ahimsa* is one of cardinal principles in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, and Gandhi’s use and application of the term has its own distinctive stamp. *Ahimsa*, for Gandhi, has far deeper implications than the word suggested by noninjury or nonkilling. “In its positive form,” says Gandhi, “*Ahimsa* means the largest love, the greatest charity.”⁴³ For Gandhi “*Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin....Nevertheless *ahimsa* is the means; Truth is the end.”⁴⁴ What is implied here is that Truth which is the ontological reality cannot be separated from *ahimsa*, for it is an essential component of Truth itself. Gandhi believes that the application of *ahimsa* will enable the adherents of different faiths to see their errors and rectify them. For Gandhi, the means and the end are inseparable for “the means to the goal becomes also the test of progress and is essentially inseparable from the goal, partaking of its very nature.”⁴⁵ If we disagree about our goals, it is because we absolutize our conceptions and make exclusive claims for them. Truth in itself is absolute and perfect, but human perception of it is relative. The imposition of truth speaks our failure to see others as fellow seekers in the quest for Truth. As Raghavan N. Iyer puts it: “The attainment of truth is the ultimate end of all men, but the practice of non-violence is the immediate test, the universally available means to the pursuit of truth. Men may legitimately disagree about the truth while they are still engaged in this endless quest, but they must agree at all times about the need for non-violence.”⁴⁶

Hick would go along with Gandhi’s emphasis on and application of *ahimsa* in our pursuit of Truth, in that he too draws attention to the moral and spiritual change from “a voluntary renunciation of ego-centeredness and a self-giving to, or self-losing in, the Real—a self-giving which brings

acceptance, compassion, love for all humankind, or even for all life.”⁴⁷ Without disregarding the ontological disagreements about differing pictures of Truth, Hick points to a more fruitful and constructive way of looking at the problem: “If every Christian and Muslim, every Hindu and Buddhist, fully incarnated their respective ideals, they would live in a basic acceptance and love of all their fellow human beings. For they would have turned away from the self-centeredness which is the source of acquisitiveness, dishonesty, injustice and exploitation.”⁴⁸ While there will always be incompatible religious beliefs about the origin of the universe, the nature of the Real, modes of liberation and after life, there is nevertheless a common liberative structure in that they offer “a transition from a radically unsatisfactory state to a limitlessly better one” which comes about when there is a move from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.⁴⁹ Hick’s focus is on the transformative efficacy of beliefs, and he explains this further:

The way of life, in so far as it is actually realised, is appropriate to the vision of reality. If one believes that God is gracious and merciful, one may thereby be released from self-centered anxiety and enabled to imitate the divine love and compassion. If one believes that one is, in one’s deepest being, identical with the infinite and eternal Brahman, one will seek to negate the present false ego and its distorting vision in order to attain that which both transcends and underlies it. If one believes that ultimate reality is the Buddha-nature, and that the aim of living is to become a Buddha, one will seek to enter into the egoless openness and infinite compassion of the Buddha. And so with other pictures of reality; each, when deeply accepted, renders appropriate a style of life, a way of being human, which is also a Way to the ultimate end of the Kingdom of God, Heaven, eternal life, Nirvana, Buddhahood, Moksha....⁵⁰

Clearly Hick is not homogenizing these various ways, but drawing attention to distinctive ways of being human or religious and of bringing about moral and spiritual transformation in the individual and world at large.

Assessing Religions

Gandhi and Hick draw attention to the difficulty of assessing the com-

parative value of religions. First of all, the idea of a perfect human being or religion has no place in their thinking. Although the inspiration behind religions may have to do with spiritual experience, religions are essentially human constructs, and in the course of their histories they have developed into powerful institutions and have a good share of both positive and negative aspects. Even a cursory glance at the histories of religions will show that they have promoted both war and peace at different times and justified their actions by seeking scriptural warrant. Given this complex scenario, no one tradition can claim to have a superior or unblemished record.

Gandhi held that it was not only “impossible to estimate the merits of the various religions of the world,” but also “harmful even to attempt it.” He saw each one of them embodying “a common motivating force: the desire to uplift man’s life and give it a purpose.”⁵¹ To the question of whether he would consider Jesus the most divine, Gandhi’s reply was that it would be ridiculous to conclude on the basis of insufficient data that one religious figure was more divine than another. Then he went on to say:

In fact even if there were a great deal of data available, no judge should shoulder the burden of sifting all the evidence, if only for this reason that it requires a highly spiritual person to gauge the degree of divinity of the subjects he examines. To say that Jesus was 99 per cent divine, and Mahomed 50 per cent, and Krishna 10 per cent, is to arrogate to oneself a function which really does not belong to man.⁵²

Gandhi’s point was that each one of them is distinctive and “their achievements differed, because they lived in different times and under different circumstances.”⁵³

If Gandhi is not enthusiastic about assessing the comparative value of religions, it is because he holds that “we are imperfect ourselves” and therefore “religion as conceived by us must also be imperfect.”⁵⁴ He states: “Religion of our conception, being thus imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and re-interpretation....And if all faiths outlined by men are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise. All faiths constitute a revelation of Truth, but all are imperfect, and liable to error.”⁵⁵ But this does not mean that Gandhi is insensitive to the question of criteria. On the contrary, it is his awareness and recognition of finitude

that makes him sensitive to the question of truth and conflicting truth-claims. Being finite human beings, we cannot claim to have grasped Truth in its totality. Our perceptions of it are at the most only approximations to the absolute Truth: "If we had attained the full vision of Truth, we would no longer be mere seekers, but would have become one with God, for Truth is God. But being only seekers, we prosecute our quest, and are conscious of our imperfection."⁵⁶ Though Gandhi sees the Absolute Truth as the goal, he does not minimize the value of particular versions of Truth. He realizes the need to follow Truth as he has conceived it to be able to arrive at the absolute Truth. Being a seeker after Truth, Gandhi believes in the freedom to experiment with Truth in all areas of life. As Iyer points out: "The significance of Gandhi's distinction between absolute truth and relative truth lies in the acceptance of the need for a corrective process of experimentation with our own experience, and this presupposes our readiness to admit openly our errors and to learn from them."⁵⁷

Hick, too, is keen to draw attention to human finitude in perception and experience of the Real. He warns that the idea of grading the varied spiritual experiences and visions of Reality is fraught with difficulty in that such an undertaking cannot be attained by any intellectual scrutiny. "The test," in Hick's view, "is whether these visions lead to the better, and ultimately the limitlessly better, quality of existence which they promise."⁵⁸ This is not to say that one cannot apply the tool of reason to examine and compare the great theological and philosophical systems of Aquinas or Shankara for their internal consistency and coherence and such aspects. But Hick doubts that they "can realistically be graded in respect of their intellectual quality."⁵⁹ The point is to focus on the transformation of human existence that these speculative philosophies have affected, rather than merely on their philosophical excellence. As with Gandhi, Hick looks for the criterion in "fruits," rather than in persuasive philosophical arguments.

Hick's point is that we need to recognize that "around these basic visions of reality subsequent generations constructed intellectual systems—theologies and religious philosophies—which interpret the meaning of the vision in terms of the concepts and styles of thinking available within their own cultural situations."⁶⁰ The problem as Hick sees it is that the different pictures of the Real are generally graded in terms of one's own

narrow vision of Truth. What he is pointing out is that one normally assumes that one's own tradition contains the whole truth and therefore considers oneself qualified to assess other visions of truth in terms of it. But we need to be aware that our own vision can be the starting but not the crowning point. Hick is alerting us to the basic fact that we happen to be Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, or Sikhs to a large extent because we are born into families that belong to these respective traditions (barring individual conversions). Hick signals the most crucial point, which is, that our criteria for grading other visions of truths to a great extent emerges from and is shaped by factors such as accidents of birth, historical, geographical, and personal orientation. In other words, Truth that we have come to see through our inherited beliefs and practices tend to become normative. We need to address this initial conditioning of birth, upbringing in a particular religious tradition, and other factors. Each one thinks his or her religion is the only way to Truth or offers a more compelling vision of Truth. In other words, there is already an implicit criterion at work here. Religious diversity is found across and within any given tradition. Hick reminds that "these different ways of being human have involved different ways of being religious. One should not exaggerate the differences; for it is noteworthy that, as each major tradition has developed, it has become internally pluralistic and has produced within itself all main forms of religious existence."⁶¹

Gandhi and Hick on Christianity

Both Gandhi and Hick take a pluralistic view of religion, including Christianity. There are clear concurrences between Gandhi's and Hick's perspectives on Christianity, although their views emerged in diverse historical contexts and in response to varied situations. Gandhi's initial perception of Christianity can be traced back to his very early encounter as a young boy with a particular brand of aggressive evangelical Christian street-corner preaching in his home town, which he found offensive as it denigrated Hinduism, but his subsequent encounters changed his attitude to Christianity. It was in London that he came across the Bible, which marked the beginning of his appreciation of Christianity. But he made a distinction between the teachings of Christ and institutional Christianity. His views on Christianity were formulated in the colonial-missionary

context and mostly through his encounters and dialogue with Christians from diverse theological backgrounds ranging from extreme evangelical to liberal Christians, and he found affinity particularly with Quakers. His responses to questions posed by Christian missionaries and others were articulated in various historical and geographical locations—India, England, and South Africa. From Kathiawar, a city of multiple religious traditions where he grew up, he went to study law in England, the land of his colonizers, and then to South Africa where he started his *satyagraha* campaign, and returning eventually to India where he was deeply involved in the Indian freedom struggle.

It was in South Africa that evangelical Christians who were trying to convince Gandhi that salvation was possible only through Jesus Christ challenged his pluralistic outlook and his Hindu faith was shaken momentarily. He was on the brink of conversion to Christianity. Gandhi at this time had only a nodding acquaintance with his own and other religious traditions and quickly realized that it was not possible “to understand Christianity in its proper perspective” without first studying his own tradition thoroughly and that he should not think of converting to another religion before he had completely understood his own tradition.⁶²

As seen earlier, Hick’s views on Christianity went through various phases beginning with his conversion to an evangelical version of Christianity and then followed by a drastic change in his approach to Christianity. It was in Birmingham, the multicultural and multifaith city which eventually became his home, that Hick’s view of Christianity began to take a radical shape. His edited volume, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), caused an enormous stir, as did another later equally challenging book entitled *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (2005a [1993]) illustrate his new formation. Although there are similarities between Gandhi’s and Hick’s views on Christianity, their journeys have been different in that Gandhi started off with a pluralistic view of religion while Hick came to it in the middle stage of his life.

Metaphorical Readings

Gandhi and Hick do not subscribe to a literal interpretation of scriptures, nor do they regard them as infallible. If anything in the scripture goes against reason or moral sense, both are prepared to reject it. They are more concerned with the spirit rather than the letter of the law.

It is interesting to note that Hick was still in his evangelical mode of thinking when Gandhi was already articulating in metaphorical terms his views on virgin birth and Jesus' life, death and bodily resurrection. Whether it be Hinduism or Christianity, Gandhi comes up with his own interpretation which did not always appeal to Christians and Hindus. For instance, he interprets the war in the *Mahabharata* in allegorical terms, as the war between good and evil that goes on within oneself. Similarly, he interprets the story of the biblical account of the Immaculate Conception in a figurative way:

I should find it hard to believe in the literal meaning of the verses relating to the Immaculate Conception of Jesus. Nor would it deepen my regard for Jesus, if I gave those verses their literal meaning. This does not mean that the writers of the Gospels were untruthful persons. They wrote in a mood of exaltation. From my youth upward, I learned the art of estimating the value of scriptures on the basis of their ethical teaching. Miracles, therefore, had no interest for me.⁶³

Hick, too, challenges conventional interpretations of the biblical virgin birth by pointing out that neither St. Paul nor St. Mark were familiar with this idea and that "it grew up more than two generations after the supposed event, and is pretty clearly mythological."⁶⁴ Gandhi's emphasis on the ethical teaching contained in the Sermon on Mount as the essence of Christianity did not go down well with Christians who felt that Gandhi was diluting the uniqueness of Christianity. As with Gandhi, Hick is also more concerned with the moral teaching contained in the Sermon on the Mount than with the official doctrines concerning incarnation, and his approach continues to pose problems for many Christian theologians.

Gandhi's and Hick's perspectives on Jesus are remarkably similar in that both look upon Jesus as an extraordinary human being who lived in direct relationship with God and exemplified selfless love through his life. Gandhi views Jesus as a human who was profoundly conscious of a higher reality. That Jesus was the only begotten son of God did not appeal to Gandhi who offered his own interpretation: "Metaphorically we are all begotten sons of God, but for each of us there may be different begotten sons of God in a special sense."⁶⁵ Gandhi finds it difficult to "believe that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God, and that only he who believed

in Him would have everlasting life. If God could have sons, all of us were His sons.”⁶⁶ He interprets the phrase “begotten son” in terms of “spiritual birth.”⁶⁷ In Gandhi’s view, Jesus is no doubt an exceptional human being in many respects and “Jesus’ own life is the key of His nearness to God; that He expressed, as no other could, the spirit and the will of God. It is in this sense that I see Him and recognize Him as the son of God.”⁶⁸ He regards “Jesus as martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born.”⁶⁹ That Jesus by his death redeemed the sins of the world did not make much sense to Gandhi. He remarks: “Metaphorically there might be some truth in it...His death on the Cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it” he could not agree.⁷⁰ For Gandhi, the significance of Jesus or what he considers miraculous has more to do with his three years of ministry than his miracles.⁷¹ Like Gandhi, Hick does not subscribe to the idea of a perfect saint or human being. His intention, however, is not to underestimate the greatness of religious figures, but to show that their fallibility does not make them less significant.⁷²

Gandhi looks upon both the Christian concept of incarnation and the Hindu notion of *avatar* in figurative terms. He regards the *avatar* not so much in terms of the divine becoming human as humans aspiring to be god-like or perfect, embodying qualities such as love, compassion, non-violence, and so forth. Gandhi remarks:

God is not a person. To affirm that He descends to earth every now and again in the form of a human being is a partial truth which merely signifies that such a person lives near to God. Inasmuch as God is omnipresent, He dwells within every human being and all may, therefore, be said to be incarnations of Him. But this leads us nowhere. Rama, Krishna, etc. are called incarnations of God because we attribute divine qualities to them.⁷³

Incarnation has not been a thorny issue in the Hindu tradition, although there is little room for it in monistic thought. It is mainly Hindu theists (Vaishnavites) who speak of incarnation in terms of the divine taking human and other forms. Hindu nontheists speak in terms of humans aspiring to become one with the divine. The notion of *avatar* (which

includes animal, semihuman, and fully human forms of Vishnu) is closely linked to the concept of *dharma*. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, whenever there is a decline of *dharma*, or moral righteousness, the Divine will take a form to bring about peace and harmony. Although the human forms of Rama and Krishna are not entirely mythical, the emphasis has not been on their historicity (although the notion of historicity is being asserted by some), but how they impact on human consciousness. In modern Hindu understanding, the term *avatar* is applied to human beings who embody love and compassion for humanity to an extraordinary degree. It is worth citing Gandhi here: “In Hinduism, incarnation is ascribed to one who has performed some extraordinary service of mankind. All embodied life is in reality an incarnation of God, but it is not usual to consider every living being as an incarnation.”⁷⁴

As with Gandhi, Hick has problems with the view that Jesus was God incarnate or with the idea of bodily resurrection. Jesus did not make any claims to be God-incarnate, but called himself the son of man. Hick reiterates Gandhi’s views on divine sonship and explains that the concept of divinity was far more fluid in the ancient world. Moreover, “in the Roman world of the New Testament period ‘divine’ and ‘son of God’ and even ‘God’ was used more or less interchangeably.”⁷⁵ The title “Son of God” was used in many different ways. In the Jewish tradition, it

was a very familiar metaphor. The messiah was a son of God in the Jewish sense of someone specially chosen by God for a particular role....So Jesus was a son of God in the metaphorical sense that was familiar to the Jews of his time, a sense that carried no implication of divinity. But St Paul, within his stream of the church going out beyond the Jewish world, led the elevation of Jesus to a divine status, which is expressed near the end of the century in John’s Gospel. Here Jesus is consciously divine, indeed he is God incarnate (1:1, 18; 20:28).⁷⁶

In brief, the concept of divine sonship was alien to Jewish thinking, and “if the medium in which Christian theology developed had been Hebrew and not Greek, it would not have produced an incarnation doctrine as this is traditionally understood.”⁷⁷ Hick explains this succinctly:

It is a way of saying that Jesus is our living contact with the trans-

cent God. In his presence we find that we are brought into the presence of God. We believe that he is so truly God's servant that in living as his disciples we are living according to the divine purpose. And as our sufficient and saving point of contact with God there is for us something absolute about him which justifies the absolute language which Christianity has developed. Thus reality is being expressed mythologically when we say that Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate, the Logos made flesh.⁷⁸

Hick departs from the traditional Chalcedonian thinking on Jesus as being both divine and human at the same time. That Jesus manifested divine-like qualities/divine love is not at issue but that he was God-incarnate in the literal sense of the term. In Hick's reckoning, it would be more meaningful to look at "the idea of divine incarnation in the life of Jesus Christ mythologically, as indicating an extraordinary openness to the divine presence in virtue of which Jesus' life and teachings have mediated the reality and the love of God to millions of people in successive centuries."⁷⁹ Given that most Hindus believe that we share the divine essence, they would have no problems in seeing Jesus as an *avatar*, both divine and human at the same time, but would find it problematic that the Divine's manifestation is channeled exclusively through one person. Whether one speaks in terms of the descent of the divine or ascent of humans to divinity, each one has the potential to become a realized being.

History, Myth and Truth

Gandhi and Hick are comfortable using mythological language, and it is one which they constantly use to convey meaning. Myths may not be literally true, but they are not without meaning or morals. As a young boy of seven years, Gandhi was drawn to the story of Harischandra's steadfast devotion to truth and believed the story to be literally true. Later when he realized that Harischandra could not have been an historical character, Gandhi declared that if he were to see the play of Harischandra today, Harischandra would not cease to be a living reality for him.⁸⁰

For Gandhi, the historicity of Krishna, or for that matter Jesus, mattered little, what was of more importance was how these religious

figures impact on humans. Gandhi declared: “Thousands of people look doubtless upon Rama and Krishna as historical figures and literally believe that God came down in person on earth in the form of Rama, the son of Dasharatha, and by worshipping him one can attain salvation.... History, imagination and truth have got so inextricably mixed up. It is next to impossible to disentangle them.”⁸¹ The same was true of his response to the Sermon on the Mount, which he remarked would be still true to him even if the man called Jesus had never lived. “I may say that I have never been interested in a historical Jesus. I should not care if it was proved by someone that the man called Jesus never lived, and that what was narrated in the Gospels was a figment of the writer’s imagination. For the Sermon on the Mount would still be true for me.”⁸² Whenever he spoke of Jesus, Gandhi drew a distinction between the historical Jesus and the eternal Jesus. To the missionaries in Calcutta he said: “I do not experience spiritual consciousness in my life through that Jesus [the historical Jesus]. But if by Jesus you mean the eternal Jesus, if by Jesus you understand the religion of universal love that dwells in the heart, then that Jesus lives in my heart—to the same extent that Krishna lives, that Rama lives.”⁸³ For Gandhi and most Hindus what matters is not so much the historicity of Christ or Krishna, but the birth of Christhood or Krishnahood in us. For Gandhi the birth of Christ and the Cross are symbols of “ever-recurring” events: “God did not bear the Cross only 1,900 years ago, but He bears it today, and He dies and is resurrected from day to day. It would be poor comfort to the whole world if it had to depend upon a historical God who died 2,000 years ago.”⁸⁴ The point is that the Sermon on the Mount evokes in Gandhi feelings of love and compassion, and this is not necessarily dependent on establishing the historicity of Jesus. Similarly, Krishna evokes in him deep feelings of devotion, or *bhakti*, but his faith has little to do with the historical Krishna.

Hick would have no problems with Gandhi’s way of thinking about Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount.⁸⁵ In fact, Hick would find in Gandhi a very convincing and compelling example to elucidate his point. For Hick, too, recognizes the value of myths and their power to effect moral and spiritual transformation. He draws attention to the practical value of myth whether it takes the form of a story or theological construct/representation. The truth or falsity “of mythological stories, images and conceptions does not consist in their literal adequacy to the nature of the

real *an sich*...but in their capacity to evoke appropriate or inappropriate dispositional responses to the Real.”⁸⁶ Hick’s point is that myths as stories or theological constructs “which are not literally true of, or do not literally apply to, the divine Reality in itself but which may nevertheless be truthful in the sense that the dispositional responses which they tend to evoke are appropriate to our existence in relation to the Real.”⁸⁷ This does not imply that human perceptions of the Real or Truth are illusory or the product of imagination; on the contrary, they indicate that it is humanly not possible to know the Real in all its fullness. In fact, the title of two of his most controversial books makes explicit reference to “myth” and “metaphor”: *The Myth of God Incarnate* and *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, the first one causing quite a stir more than the second one. These two books would have received positive appreciation from Gandhi. For both Gandhi and Hick, faith is not dependent upon the historicity of Krishna or Jesus. Both put Jesus on a par with other great religious figures, and this in their reckoning would not undermine the particular significance of any one of them. To phrase it differently, the uniqueness of Jesus or of Gautama does not suffer diminution if both are seen as offering a way to liberation. What is called into question is that liberation is the prerogative of any one tradition. It is “a basic moral insight which Christians have received from Christian teachings, Hindus from Hindu teachings, Buddhists from Buddhist teachings, and so on. And within the terms of the pluralistic hypothesis this criterion represents the basic moral consensus of all the great faiths.”⁸⁸

Concluding Reflections

Religious Pluralism in Indian Context

Although there were Hindu-Christian encounters in the precolonial era, Hindu responses to religious pluralism have mainly come from nineteenth-century thinkers of what has come to be called the “Hindu Renaissance.” Hindu movements, such as the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission, began redefining Hinduism in response to colonial and missionary critique of Hinduism. Thinkers such as Gandhi, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo Ghose took up the process of self-definition, and it is a process which continues to this day in India and various diasporic locations.

There is no standard Hindu approach to religious plurality, rather there are different approaches which overlap with one another. Generally speaking, Hindu approaches to plurality have been seen in terms of the conceptual framework of Advaita Vedanta. In other words, the Advaitic approach to religious plurality is often taken as more representative of Hindu approaches to religious pluralism. Gandhi's approach is significantly different from such thinkers as Swami Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan who both take a hierarchical view of religion—all religious aspirations are seen as eventually finding fulfillment in the formless absolute of the Advaita Vedanta. The followers of Advaita Vedanta often make claims for its all-inclusive approach to religious plurality, sometimes losing sight of the fact that Advaita Vedanta, as one of the systems of Hindu philosophy, can at the most claim to partake of religious plurality, rather than supervise it. It is not just *nirguna brahman* which, on account of its being formless, can lend itself most easily to an all-inclusive approach to religious plurality. This applies to *saguna brahman* as well, which, on account of its plethora of attributes, can also be seen as being conducive to the Hindu acceptance to religious plurality.⁸⁹

Gandhi's approach to religious pluralism is not a matter of theory. As noted earlier, it has roots in his own personal religious experience and study of his own and other traditions. Gandhi's stance differs from other Hindu attitudes in that he saw the application of *ahimsa* as vital in inter-religious and any other form of dialogue. The distinctiveness of Gandhi's approach to religious pluralism lies in his emphasis on *ahimsa* as the means to Truth. Unlike most theologians and philosophers, Gandhi is not preoccupied with the "end" (though that is important), but with the "means."

Gandhi's thinking evolved over a period of time and needs to be seen in relation to the context in which he was making certain statements. Gandhi himself was aware of the inconsistencies, but pointed the reader to his later statements in order to know his stance on a particular issue. Gandhi at times, especially when talking about Indian religious traditions, appeared as an inclusivist, rather than a pluralist. As pointed out earlier, Gandhi looked upon Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as part of Hinduism, thus not taking the differences seriously. Gandhi was articulating his views on religion and religious pluralism at a time when forging a national unity, for him, seemed paramount. Some Sikhs were disappointed that Gandhi

did not pay serious attention to the emerging Sikh political and religious identity.⁹⁰ Gandhi's use of Hindu vocabulary in public discourse did not go down well with some Muslims who saw it as an attempt to promote Hindu nationalism and create a Hindu India. Indian Muslim critiques of Gandhi ranged from the mild to the severe.⁹¹ Although Gandhi's views clashed with those of some Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, he was not for a Hindu India, an India that looked upon Christianity and Islam as alien. He was keen to break down walls, rather than erect them.

Religious Pluralism in Western Context

In an age when postmodernism tends to dominate various discourses and grand narratives have come to an end, a pluralistic vision may seem to be imperialistic and reinforcing metanarratives such as “universal truths.” Neither Gandhi nor Hick are proclaiming a Hindu or a Christian universalism.⁹² On the contrary, they are seeing particular truths in relation to a single Reality that transcends all human formulations. This kind of universalism is different to the one espoused by some Western Orientalists/missionaries and certain Hindu thinkers during the height of the empire. While the former saw other religions through a biblical or an evolutionary lens, the latter saw it predominantly through the Vedantic lens—each one proclaiming implicitly or explicitly the universal character of their particular conception or experience of Truth. Hick's Copernican theology of religions challenges both these views which regard other religions as needing a Vedantic fulfillment or Christian enlightenment.

Neither Gandhi nor Hick claim any privileged position for their pluralistic view. In fact, Hick cautions that it is a mistake to assume that religious pluralism is a modern discovery. He remarks:

It is sometimes said that religious pluralism is a product of post-Enlightenment western liberalism. But this is a manifest error, since the basic pluralistic idea predates the 18th century European Enlightenment by many centuries. It was taught by such thinkers as Rumi and al-Arabi in the 13th century, and Kabir, Nanak, and many others in 15th century India. Indeed it occurs in the edicts of the Buddhist emperor Asoka in the 2nd century BCE. So far from its having originated in the modern west, the fact is that the modern west is only now catching up with the ancient east! Indeed even within Christianity itself there

were expressions of religious pluralism long before the 18th century Enlightenment.⁹³

Hick's approach to religious pluralism has generated a more heated discussion in Christian than in Hindu discourses. I do not intend to dwell on the oft-discussed Christian approaches to religious pluralism in terms of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.⁹⁴ However, despite its limitations, this paradigm has facilitated debate and dialogue on Christian attitudes to other religions and is one which could be applied to other religions as well. There are many variations in each of these theological positions, and they can be seen at work within any given religious tradition.

Hick's pluralism is a bold departure from the traditional Christian understanding of other religions. It has sparked off a vigorous debate within Christian theological discourse on the relation between Christianity and other religions. Even the titles of some of Hick's books—for instance, *God Has Many Names*—have a distinct pluralistic flavor and neatly overturn the exclusive claim that there can be only one valid path to the ultimate goal. In other words, the path that Krishna offers is as authentic as that one that Jesus offers. Hick goes beyond the Christian inclusive approaches to other religions which see Christ at work in all religions either implicitly or explicitly. As has been pointed out, Hick's theological journey has gone through many stages, from Christo-centrism to theo-centrism to pluralism, and this is indicative of the development of his thinking, rather than inconsistency.

Hick's pluralism has both defenders and critics whose positions have been extensively examined and therefore are not the main focus of this paper.⁹⁵ In brief, Hick's pluralistic stance is seen as reductionist and challenging of all that Christians consider fundamental to Christian belief. His pluralistic hypothesis is seen as undermining the uniqueness of the Christian revelation and watering down the doctrinal aspect of Christianity. His metaphorical interpretation of the incarnation is regarded as divesting Christianity of its unique character. Some see Hick's pluralism as leading to a relativism that would be acceptable only to Vedantic Hindus.⁹⁶ But unlike Vedantic Hindus, Hick does not take a hierarchical inclusivist approach which regards the personal and the nonpersonal in terms of lower and higher truths and the nonpersonal Absolute as the

ultimate goal of all religious aspirations. On the contrary, Hick regards both conceptions as equally valid human approaches to the One which transcends both.

Religious Pluralism and Postmodernism

When the current interfaith dialogue emerged in ecumenical circles in the 1960s (reflecting the dominant modernist view of the time), the emphasis was on commonalities between religious traditions. Now, reflecting the postmodern agenda, the emphasis is on particularities of religious traditions. It is now fashionable to affirm particular truths, particular stories, particular identities, and particular religious universes. There is some virtue in this kind of exercise in that it recognizes the validity of different forms or ways of religious life and the respective claims of each of these traditions. At the same time, however, the exercise is problematic in that it can only value other traditions by dismissing the notion of a transcendent reality or truth and affirming a particular truth as more authentic than other particular truths.

Postmodern critics will find Gandhi's and Hick's pluralistic view of religions acceptable up to the point where Gandhi and Hick do not overlook other truths. Such scholars, however, will not travel with Gandhi and Hick further to acknowledge the larger vision of one single transcendent Reality/Truth behind these particular versions of Truth. Postmodern theologians would prefer to speak of different religions as different responses to different realities than to one single transcendent Reality. They evaluate particular truths against other particular truths. Some posit the Christian truth as the only true ultimate end.⁹⁷ Unlike Gandhi and Hick who are proponents of unity in diversity, postmodern thinkers emphasize diversity but not unity. In other words, postmodernism is more concerned with particulars—relative or particular truths—than with universal truths.

Although the concern of this paper is not about whether Gandhi is a postmodern thinker, one cannot overlook the current portrayal of him as such. Scholars such as Lloyd and Suzanne Rudolph make a case for Gandhi as a postmodern thinker.⁹⁸ They draw attention to Gandhi's experiments with Truth and especially his emphasis on partial or relative truths which they see as anticipating "the postmodern turn to the contingent certainty of contextual or situational truth."⁹⁹ In brief, they see

postmodern hermeneutics at work in most aspects of Gandhi's thinking from religion to politics to gender to vegetarianism. It is true that Gandhi "depicted truth as a goal rather than as an archetype or a revelation and compared it to a diamond whose many facets exposed a variety of meanings,"¹⁰⁰ but simultaneously he referred to *satya*, or Truth, as the sovereign principle encompassing all other principles: "But for me, truth is the sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal principle that is God."¹⁰¹ The fact that Gandhi emphasized partial or relative truths does not imply that he was dismissive of the Absolute or transcendental Truth. As much as Gandhi believed in the relativity of Truth, it was not divorced from his belief in the oneness of humanity. Gandhi's own life and message was a testimony to his commitment to Truth as he understood it—he drew from various religious and nonreligious sources, but simultaneously went beyond all labels.

The notion of a transcendent reality or a common source seems to be problematic for postmodernists. There seems to be no room for the notion of Truth as being mysterious. When Gandhi and Hick speak of a common source, they are postulating a goal or end which does not privilege a particular conception, but one that embraces all.

Both Gandhi and Hick challenge classification of religions in a hierarchical way—no one religion can locate itself at the center and play host to others, although each is distinctive in its own way. They are involved in a decentering exercise, but without losing sight of the larger vision that transcends all particular visions. It is Truth that is beyond all human perceptions and experiences, which can occupy the center—all religions need to see themselves in relation to the center around which they revolve, rather than construct themselves as the center. The difference between Gandhi and other Hindu approaches to religious plurality is that Gandhi is not constructing a Hindu-centric universe of faiths. Nor is Hick postulating a particular Christian version of Truth as the center of the universe of faiths. On the contrary, both Gandhi and Hick postulate a Truth that transcends particular versions of Truth, and therefore no one view is privileged. Gandhi declares: "It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the

truth within and which ever purifies.”¹⁰² Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis calls for a paradigm shift from a Christianity-centered model to the Real-centered model of the universe of faiths: “And we have to realize that the universe of faiths centers upon *God* [the Real], and not upon Christianity or upon any other religion....”¹⁰³ Gandhi and Hick are not denying the validity of particular conceptions of the Real, rather pointing out that these offer only a limited view. In effect, what Gandhi and Hick are saying is that it not possible to offer an authentic picture of the Real as it is in itself, but rather as we perceive it—a perception which is no doubt colored and conditioned by cultural and other factors. They are not dismissive of the various religious paths; on the contrary, they are keen to acknowledge that they are equally valid and that no one path can be absolutized.

The distinctiveness of their approach lies in seeing the relation between the particular and the universal in a nonexclusive way. Gandhi and Hick would see themselves as advocates for religious pluralism—partakers rather than supervisors of it—offering an explanation, rather than privileging their own view. Neither is positing his own religious tradition as the only true one. Both recognize that truths are particular and context-specific, but do not stop there as postmodernists would do. The very fact Gandhi calls his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* is indicative of this. The distinguishing feature of Gandhi’s and Hick’s approaches to pluralism is that they start from the human rather than the metaphysical end. In emphasizing human finitude, they do not lose sight of the larger vision of Truth—Truth that is beyond all human and religious formulae. Although Hick is a trained philosopher-theologian, he, like Gandhi, is more concerned with “fruits” than sorting out the “Ultimate” which can mean many things to people. In other words, one can endlessly argue about the nature of Truth (personal or nonpersonal, or both, or whatever), without focusing on the means. Both Gandhi and Hick shift the emphasis from “belief” to “fruits.” Gandhi is an activist whose thinking is not without a philosophical basis, and Hick is a philosopher of religion whose thinking is not without a practical basis. Unlike postmodernists, Gandhi and Hick do not see particular truths as ends in themselves, but as a means to an end.

Since both Gandhi and Hick make clear that one cannot possibly know Truth in itself, they are suggesting a more dialogical way of looking at the

relationship between different religious traditions and different ways of being aware of the presence of the Real. Even if their pluralistic stance has its limitations, it does not suffer from the dogmatic absolutism that one finds in exclusivist approaches to religious plurality. Neither claims he is privy to the complete picture of Truth; rather, each points to a larger vision that is not restricted by particular views. This larger vision that they share is not arrived at a priori, but emerges from their personal encounters and experiences of differing faiths. Their pluralistic hypothesis requires all religions to reexamine their claims and shed any exclusive claims to uniqueness.

Notes

1. In a recent personal conversation John Hick said: “Had I been born in India, I would have been a follower of Gandhi” (April 13, 2008). See Hick, “The Significance of Mahatma Gandhi for Today” (1999). See also Hick, “Introduction to Part I” (1989b).
2. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (1982), p.14
3. Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (2006a), p.36.
4. Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths* (1995), p.13.
5. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (1989a), p.301.
6. Hick, *John Hick: An Autobiography* (2002), pp. 159–92.
7. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 4, p.213.
8. Gandhi, *Truth is God* (1955), pp. 14–15.
9. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (1978), p.151.
10. Hick, “Religious Faith as Experiencing-As” (1990), p.37.
11. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 6, pp. 107–8.
12. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1969a), p.xi.
13. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 6, p.268.
14. Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections* (2005), p.75.
15. Chatterjee, *Gandhi’s Religious Thought* (1985), p.105; emphasis in

original.

16. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (1982), p.67.
17. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (1982), p.105.
18. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 6, pp. 102–3.
19. Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections* (2005), p.66.
20. Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections* (2005), p.63.
21. Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections* (2005), p.73.
22. Gandhi, *In Search of the Supreme* (1961), p.18.
23. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 4, p.214.
24. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 6, p.265; emphasis added.
25. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 6, pp. 267–68.
26. Gandhi, *Truth is God* (1955), p.12.
27. Nicholas of Cusa, cited in Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (2006a), p.166.
28. Rumi, cited in Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (2006a), p.153.
29. Gandhi, *Truth is God* (1955), p.63.
30. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 4, p.240.
31. For a detailed account of Gandhi's change in attitude, see Jordens, "Gandhi and Religious Pluralism" (1987).
32. Gandhi, cited in Jordens, "Gandhi and Religious Pluralism" (1987), p.11.
33. For a critique of Gandhi's approach to Sikhism, see Singh, "The Mahatma and the Sikhs" (2003).
34. Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (2006a), p.153.
35. See Hick, "The Copernican Revolution in Theology" (1988).
36. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (1982), pp. 36–39.
37. Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (2006a), p.145.
38. Gandhi, *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi* (1967), p.67.
39. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (1982), p.21.

40. Gandhi, *In Search of the Supreme* (1961), p.12.
41. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (1982), p.49.
42. Thomas Aquinas, cited in Hick, *God Has Many Names* (1982), p.49.
43. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 6, p.154.
44. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 4, p.219.
45. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (1978), p.228.
46. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (1978), p.250.
47. Hick, "On Grading Religions" (1981), p.463.
48. Hick, "On Grading Religions" (1981), p.464.
49. Hick, "On Grading Religions" (1981), p.452.
50. Hick, "On Grading Religions" (1981), p.453–54.
51. Gandhi, *Gandhi on Christianity* (1991), p.28.
52. Gandhi, *What Jesus Means to Me* (1959), p.8.
53. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 5, pp. 343–44.
54. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 4, p.240.
55. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 4, pp. 240–41.
56. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 4, p.240.
57. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (1978), p.160.
58. Hick, "On Grading Religions" (1981), p.462.
59. Hick, "On Grading Religions" (1981), p.462.
60. Hick, "On Grading Religions" (1981), p.453.
61. Hick, "On Grading Religions" (1981), p.457.
62. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1969a), p.89.
63. Gandhi, *Gandhi on Christianity* (1991), p.24.
64. Hick, "Believable Christianity" (2006b), p.9.
65. Gandhi, *What Jesus Means to Me* (1959), p.6.
66. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1969a), p.101.
67. Gandhi, *What Jesus Means to Me* (1959), p.10.
68. Gandhi, *What Jesus Means to Me* (1959), p.10.

69. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1969a), p.101.
70. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1969a), pp. 101.
71. Gandhi, *Gandhi on Christianity* (1991), p.26.
72. Hick, “Believable Christianity” (2006b), p.7.
73. Gandhi, *In Search of the Supreme* (1961), p.16.
74. Gandhi, *Selections from Gandhi* (1972), p.262.
75. Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (2005a), pp. 40–41.
76. Hick, “Believable Christianity” (2006b), pp. 5–6.
77. Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (1983), p.72, cited in Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (2005a), p.43.
78. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (1982), pp. 74–75.
79. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (1989a), p.372.
80. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1969a), p.4.
81. Gandhi, *In Search of the Supreme* (1961), p.214.
82. Gandhi, *Gandhi on Christianity* (1991), p.22.
83. Desai, *Day-to-Day with Gandhi* (1972), p.135, cited in Chatterjee, *Gandhi’s Religious Thought* (1985), p.53.
84. Gandhi, *All Men are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections* (2005), p.57.
85. Hick, “Believable Christianity” (2006b), p.8.
86. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (1989a), pp. 352–53.
87. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (1989a), p.370.
88. Hick, “The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D’Costa” (1997), p.164.
89. Sharma, “Some Misunderstandings of the Hindu Approach to Religious Plurality” (1978), p.135.
90. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between Gandhi and Sikhs, see Singh, “The Mahatma and the Sikhs” (2003).
91. For a discussion of Indian Muslim appraisal of Gandhi, see Miller, “Indian Muslim Critiques of Gandhi” (2003).
92. For a detailed and succinct discussion of postmodern critique of religious pluralism, see Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths* (1995), pp. 31–56.

Hick challenges any form of religious absolutism and draws particular attention to the link between Christian superiority and Western imperialism. See Hick, “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity” (1987), pp. 17–20.

93. Hick, “Religious Pluralism and Islam” (2005b), p.15.

94. For a detailed treatment of exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist approaches to religious pluralism, see Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (1983), pp. 10–70.

95. For a critical appreciation and defense of Hick’s religious pluralism, see Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (1983), and Twiss, “The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism: A Critical Appraisal of Hick and His Critics” (1990). For critics of Hick’s religious pluralism, see Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (1991), and D’Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (1990).

96. For a critical appraisal of Hick’s religious pluralism, see Forrester, “Professor Hick and the Universe of Faiths” (1975), p.69.

97. For a detailed discussion of multiple religious ends and religious pluralism, see Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (2001).

98. For a detailed discussion of Gandhi as a postmodern thinker, see Rudolph and Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* (2006), pp. 3–59.

99. Rudolph and Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* (2006), p.7.

100. Rudolph and Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* (2006), p.viii.

101. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1969a), p.xi.

102. Gandhi, *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969b), volume 6, p.263.

103. Hick, *God Has Many Names* (1982), p.71; emphasis in original.

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