
Secularism in India

A “Gandhian” Approach

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M. K. Gandhi is sometimes thought of as the “spiritual father” of Indian secularism, despite the fact that he is clearly not a secularist in the common Western sense of the term.¹ This contradiction arises from what appears to be ambivalence in Gandhi’s thought toward the notion of secularism. On the one hand, he insists that politics must be infused with religion or spirituality (terms he uses interchangeably). At other times, he expresses a strong sentiment that religion and the state should remain separate, and that the state should never interfere with matters of religion. How might this apparent contradiction be explained? I argue that this requires distinguishing between the different senses in which Gandhi used the term “religion.” Gandhi uses the term idiosyncratically: religion understood in one particular way is to be brought to bear on politics, while understood in another way, religion is a pernicious force in political life. His multifaceted understanding of religion challenges the conceptual distinction between “public” and “private” as understood within Western discourses on secularism. In so doing, he both offered an idiosyncratic understanding of religious “freedom,” and challenged traditional Western secularist understandings of the relationship between individuals and communities.

This chapter also traces the dynamic and contested trajectory of “secularism” in post-Independence India, demonstrating that while many contemporary Indian thinkers have attempted to engage Gandhian understandings of secularism, few have recognized precisely how prophetic his opposition was to Westcentric secularism. I identify a continuum along which thinkers are more or less inclined to see Western liberal secularism as appropriate for the Indian context, with those most critical of secularism’s applicability in India closest to Gandhi. Although these

critics do not always explicitly offer a distinctly Gandhian approach to Indian secularism, reading their critiques in conjunction with my interpretation of Gandhi explains some contradictions of contemporary Indian secularism in ways that also illuminate Gandhi's own concerns.

THE CHALLENGE: AN APORETIC GANDHI

"For me," Gandhi observes, "every . . . activity is governed by what I consider my religion."² "I cannot conceive of politics as divorced from religion," he says. "[R]eligion should pervade every one of our actions."³ Gandhi made no distinction between the spiritual and the moral,⁴ and considered each of these realms as synonymous with truth-seeking. Thus, when he claims that "politics are not divorced from morality, from spirituality, from religion,"⁵ he means simply that politics is to be guided by the quest for truth, which to him is synonymous with *dharma* (duty or moral order) or spirituality.⁶ For those who understand secularism as strict separation of religion from politics, Gandhi's views thus seem anti-secular.

Yet at other times Gandhi expresses a deep, abiding commitment to what he calls secularism. "If I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate," he asserts. "I swear by my religion, I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state would look after your secular welfare . . . but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern!"⁷ Elsewhere he claims that the state "should undoubtedly be secular. Everyone in it should be entitled to profess his religion without . . . hindrance."⁸ In what sense, then, can we speak of Gandhian "secularism" or "religious freedom," given his apparent desire for politics and religion to be complementary, rather than separate? Of course, one possible explanation is that Gandhi conceived of politics quite apart from the state, as occurring in the realm of daily personal interaction, not simply in the impersonal and bureaucratic sphere of statecraft. But I suggest that there is more to the story. A deeper exploration of Gandhi's idiosyncratic usage of the term "religion" will reveal a foresighted critique of modern liberal notions of secularism, one which coincides remarkably with contemporary critiques of secularism in India.

In what follows, I offer a reading of Gandhi's position on religion, religious freedom and secularism that is syncretic, rather than strictly exegetical. That is, it deliberately constructs an interpretive view through reliance on a combination of textual material and interpretations by other scholars. Gandhi's writings are deeply aporetic: he rarely offers analytically unambiguous conclusions following from clearly stated assumptions. His political thinking is often scattered across treatises, pamphlets, newspaper articles, editorials, letters, and speeches, and characterized by ambiguity and nuance. The interpretive challenge this presents is compounded by the fact that many of his works were written in English, while many others (such as the seminal *Hind Swaraj*) were written in Gujarati, and subsequently translated

either by himself or by close associates. Linguistic nuances have often intervened to introduce interpretive plurality into the meaning of a concept or category, and even his own retranslation of his work multiplies rather than limits the possible meanings of his statements.

Gandhi's writings have long been the subject of multiple, conflicting interpretations, and extrapolating his views requires engaging creatively with this polyvocality.⁹ Arriving at a single, ostensibly “accurate” or “authentic” interpretation of Gandhi belies this understanding of the interpretive process as necessarily polyvocal, and so is deeply problematic. Nevertheless, polyvocality should not lead to impressionistic or relativistic interpretations that float free of a rigorous connection to the texts, ideas, or life-worlds they are intended to illuminate. All interpretations are appropriations of a sort; yet we can distinguish between those that are respectful, careful, and credible, and those that are disrespectful, ungenerous, or epistemically violent.¹⁰ My reading here seeks to reconstruct a Gandhian understanding of religious freedom and secularism, excavating his understanding of the relationship between the state and religious groups (commonly called “church-state relations” in the West), and among various religious groups, in a multireligious polity.

RELIGION 1: “PRIVATE” TRUTH-SEEKING

Religion 1 (hereafter R₁) is my term for Gandhi's conception of religion as a “private” activity of truth-seeking. When he calls religion one's “private” or “personal” affair, he has a very specific meaning of “private” in mind. Understanding this requires a brief detour through Gandhi's metaphysical views, including the crucial distinction between Absolute and relative truth that is foundational to the entirety of his political thinking. Having been deeply influenced in his early life by the Jain tradition in his home state of Gujarat, Gandhi always acknowledged the debt of his metaphysical position to the Jain doctrine of *anekantavāda*, or “many-sidedness.”¹¹ Like some of the Vedic texts from which it stems (but from which it ultimately departs), Jain doctrine holds that reality manifests itself within a plurality of material forms and phenomena, many of which may conflict with one another. Truth and reality are perceived differently from diverse points of view, and no single point of view is the complete truth.¹² Human beings are only capable of partial knowledge; consequently, no single, specific, human view can claim to represent absolute truth. Apparent contradictions in the earthly world of human ideas are thus an indication of the flexibility, fluidity, and plurality of ultimate reality.¹³ On this view, to hold any particular viewpoint as final is to hold a limited picture of reality. Rather than relying on establishing the validity of any given proposition, solutions to moral problems become concerned with investigating the multiplicity of truths and working through them in a nondichotomous fashion.

This way of inquiring into problems defies the absolutist logic employed by many normative frameworks in Western political thought. Gandhi repeatedly emphasized that his own understanding of various truths, even as he held steadfastly to them, was always provisional and contingent, until further examined and tested through the nonviolent encounter. He distinguished between “Absolute” and “relative” truths. Absolute Truth was “the Eternal Principle, that is God,” while relative truths are our own individual perceptions of the many-sided and pluralistic Absolute Truth.¹⁴ Absolute Truth is so pluralistic, many-sided, and fluid, that no single human mind can capture it entirely. Human life is most often a struggle to approximate a series of “relative” truths. Because human knowledge of this Absolute Truth is fallible, human beings are destined to see Truth only through the fragmented prism of their relative, everyday perceptions.¹⁵ This leads to an epistemic fallibility, a sense of contingency about one’s conclusions, and an ability to keep them open to correction at all times.¹⁶

It is important to emphasize that Gandhi privileges the *activity* or *process* of truth-seeking over *definitive knowledge* of truth. That is, he is mainly interested in arriving at less ambitious and provisional truths about the right action to be taken in a specific situation for a specific reason.¹⁷ While the goal of attaining Absolute Truth is always present, Gandhi reminds us of the danger of resting with the belief that we have in fact attained it, because it takes us away from the continued *activity* of seeking. Gandhi scholars have reminded us that there is a privileging in Gandhi of truth as experiential rather than cognitive.¹⁸ Truth is instantiated through everyday practices of truth-seeking, rather than in any formal, doctrinal, or final manner. It is not to be understood as an abstraction, but rather as something experienced through the everydayness of practice.¹⁹

To connect this back to R1: when Gandhi claims that religion should be a “private matter,” he is using religion to mean the *dharma* (duty) of truth-seeking as a private process, activity, or practice, rather than a steady state. Gandhi’s R1 conception of religion is private in a very particular way. The individual conscience is central for Gandhi in every endeavor of truth-seeking. The conscience, for Gandhi, is “the voice of God . . . of Truth.”²⁰ The “call of the individual conscience” is the main vehicle for accessing truth, and the practices of truth-seeking are to constitute a kind of systematic training of the individual will.²¹ Thus, when Gandhi calls religion a “private” and “personal affair,” he means this in an existential sense: it is between you and your God.²² R1 is a deeply experiential and interactive relationship with the deepest part of the self, the part which Gandhi believes has a special connection to the Truth that is God.²³

But crucially, this does not mean that those private practices of truth-seeking driven by the conscience cannot be brought to bear on collective, public life. In fact, the opposite is the case: Gandhi was particularly adept at taking “private” practices of truth-seeking—such as fasting or celibacy—and bringing them to bear on public

matters.²⁴ In so doing, he would exemplify his experience of a relative truth-claim rather than engage in dogmatic declarations of truth as principled commitment. When Gandhi says there can be no politics without religion, he is referring to R₁, characterized by private activities and experiences of truth-seeking.

Of course, there is also a communitarian sense in which Gandhi uses the term “religion,” as something shaped by the power of tradition and community. Yet, as many scholars have demonstrated, Gandhi was hardly univocal on the question of deference to traditional community guidance: time and time again, he ran afoul of Hindu religious authorities in reinterpreting traditional religious guidance in ways that were reformist, claiming to do so on the basis of individual epistemic authority legitimated by the call of conscience.²⁵ Religious communities for him function as a support or supplement to the truth-seeking of the conscience, “ancestral practices” that serve as “*action heuristics*, instructing the individual on how to become a better human being.”²⁶ Such supporting or supplementary guidance comes precisely in the form of everyday practice, rather than through the belief in Absolute Truth.²⁷ These guiding practices derive their truth from the fact that they have been handed down from generation to generation. Practice and experience continue to take precedence over doctrinal belief.²⁸

We are now in a position to understand why Gandhi may be thought of as an anti-secularist. He is keen that practices and experiences of truth-seeking be brought to bear on actions in the political realm, leading to a marriage between political life and truth-seeking.²⁹ Certainly, one’s relationship to Truth, God, the Inner Voice, is deeply private in the sense that it is subject to one’s own inner experience. At the same time, Gandhi would want R₁ and private truth-seeking to serve as the “repository or expression of moral values,” available for checking corruption, violence, and other ills of public life.³⁰ Moreover, when this form of private faith is brought to bear on public political matters, Gandhi insists that it be done in an experiential, exemplary, and action-oriented manner: that is, not through declaring principled commitment to doctrinal truths, but through practices that demonstrate through exemplary engagement the activity of truth-seeking. We can now make sense of Gandhi’s claim that politics cannot be divorced from spirituality or religion, when religion is understood in a very particular way as R₁.

RELIGION 1 VERSUS RELIGION 2: PRIVATE TRUTH-SEEKING VERSUS DOCTRINAL TRUTH

Gandhi’s R₁ can now be explored through a contrast with what I call Religion 2 (hereafter R₂). In contrast to R₁ understood as private practices of truth-seeking, R₂ may be understood as principled commitment to absolute or doctrinal truth. I argue that Gandhi is deeply troubled by and suspicious of R₂. He is referring to this conception of religion when he says the state should be “secular,” or remain apart from religion. In describing R₂ as doctrinal truth or principled

commitment, I rely on analyses by scholars who have described the Semitic or Abrahamic concept of religious truth, in which religions are seen as a matter of mutually exclusive truth or falsity of doctrines, propositions, and beliefs.³¹ Each of these religions claims to be a unique revelation to humanity, and that its own doctrines are therefore the true self-disclosure of the divine.³² Other traditions are seen as false doctrines or rival claims to truth. This leads in turn to the obligation to proselytize, for if one believes in a universally valid truth, all others are necessarily false, and one is obliged to combat false doctrines. In contrast, the overall ethos of *anekantavāda* permeates most non-Abrahamic faiths of the subcontinent, even as its conceptual roots can be traced specifically to Jain theology and metaphysics. Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh traditions do not ascribe “exclusive” truth predicates to their doctrines or beliefs.³³ As we have seen, other traditions are viewed not as competing doctrines, but rather as the transmitted “ancestral practices” of communities.³⁴

Why might Gandhi be troubled by the intervention of this R2 conception of religion into political life? Gandhi repeatedly claims that “all faiths are true and divinely inspired, and all have suffered through the necessarily imperfect handling of men.”³⁵ There is, he states, “no such thing as one true religion, every other being false.”³⁶ Elsewhere he claims that “my Hindu instinct tells me that all religions are more or less true.”³⁷ Or: “Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal?”³⁸ Such statements are consistent with his understanding of *anekantavāda*: ultimate Truth cannot be completely grasped by finite human perception, and religious doctrine is a result of such finite perception. In such a world, all religious traditions are seen as parts in an ongoing human search for ultimate truth, containing portions of some truth and some error. Gandhi suggests therefore that it is best to follow one’s own, but hold others as dear and close.³⁹

In addition, let us recall that Gandhi’s commitment to *anekantavāda* involves an “epistemic humility” that leaves him skittish about claiming to have reached the Absolute Truth.⁴⁰ It is not simply that it is difficult to know the truth; one must come to know it through a lifetime of practice rather than belief. Thus, the notion that one “has reached” the truth leads to an emphasis on belief and doctrine over practice and experience. It takes us away from constant seeking, allowing us to rest in the certainty that we “have” the truth. Gandhi believes this R2 conception of religion as inflexible or principled commitment to be a destructive force in politics. He repeatedly warns us that the claim to infallibility, in having reached Absolute Truth, “would be a most dangerous claim to make.”⁴¹ Karuna Mantena has reminded us that Gandhi is sensitive to the danger that idealism and attachment to principle can facilitate ideological entrenchment in politics. “The worry is that when political disagreements are framed as arguments over fundamental principles, the potential for political progress may dissipate in an atmosphere of increasing hostility and polarization.”⁴²

There is yet another sense in which Gandhi fears the preponderance of R₂ over R₁. When Gandhi says religion is a “personal” or “private” affair, I read him as being deeply concerned that this private conception of religion (R₁) should not be subject to the doctrinal authority of institutionalized faiths (R₂) attempting to control the conscience.⁴³ If an R₂ conception of religion gains predominance over R₁, then the individualized, everyday, action-based understanding of religion as conscientious truth-seeking could be displaced by a doctrinal and absolutist one, privileging “truth professed” over “truth lived.” One way we can see this is by following the debates around Gandhi’s aversion to proselytizing, to which he was staunchly opposed. In his often tense communications with Christian missionaries, Gandhi insists that Christianity is simply one among many true religions (each of which also contain some measure of error). He repeatedly questions the missionary goal of obtaining the confession of cognitive belief in Christian principles, instead of simply practicing truth through exemplary action and encouraging others toward such action.⁴⁴

For Gandhi, when religions function as rival movements entitled to gather as many adherents as they can, this encourages the view of religion as “private” in the wrong sense. It turns the realm of belief into an ideological battlefield where doctrinal belief systems square off against each other by attempting to win the allegiance of individual consciences. The conscience, that delicate instrument of R₁, comes under pressure to pledge allegiance to doctrinal principles, rather than engaging in *practices* of truth-seeking. This conception of the “private” sphere is exactly the wrong one, if it means that the privacy of the individual’s struggle with her own conscience (R₁) becomes the object of appropriation by doctrinal religions attempting to win validity for their truth claims (R₂). This model of religious competition in the so-called “private” sphere is focused on pursuing commitments to abstract ideals more than on providing guidance regarding exemplary practices for living well. When the notion of “freedom of conscience” is reduced to competition among doctrinal truth systems, religion is no longer “private” in the sense that truly matters for Gandhi. Instead, the tendency is to reify doctrine, belief, and principle over practice and exemplary lived experience.

We are now in a position to understand how Gandhi envisioned the appropriate relationship between individuals and religions in a multireligious polity. When he claims that everyone should be allowed to profess their religion without hindrance, he means that each person should be left alone on their own private path to truth-seeking. Here, I do not use the phrase “left alone” in a literal sense: Gandhi clearly sees a role for traditional ancestral guidance. Rather, I use “left alone” in an existential sense, as individuals struggle to find truth for themselves through repeated practice and struggle. Gandhi envisions a truly individual, conscience-driven search for truth, instantiated through practice, with the occasional guidance of a community, to be accepted or rejected as conscience sees fit. When this traditional guidance in the *practice* of truth-seeking gets transformed

into a competition among the inflexible doctrinal truth *claims* of various religions, the relationship between individuals and religious communities starts to go awry. Individual consciences can come under pressure and be led away from the private activity of truth-seeking, rightly understood, as communities focus on ideological entrenchment grounded in the certainty of one's own truth and the falsity of others'. In contrast, Gandhi suggests that the individual activity of truth-seeking (R1) should not be subject to appropriation by the forces of religious doctrine (R2). Instead, individual truth-seeking must not only focus on habituation and practice, it must be brought to bear on public matters through exemplary actions, rather than through doctrinal belief. It is in this sense that Gandhi claims that there should be no separation between religion and politics. Let us now see what role the state might play in all of this.

SECULARISM IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

For most Western theorists, secularism means the strict disestablishment of religion from state, or the strict exclusion of religion from all state affairs for the sake of promoting the religious liberty and equal citizenship of all individuals.⁴⁵ Rather than conforming strictly to the Westcentric model of church-state separation, secularism has been defined in India, not as neutrality toward all religions, but as "equal respect" for all religions (*sarva dharma sambhava*). The precise meaning of this is rarely clear, but it has often manifested itself as equal tolerance toward, intervention in, and sometimes embrace of, myriad public and private expressions of faith. Meanwhile, the state's intervention in the majority religion (Hinduism) through the legal abolition of untouchability coexists uneasily with its reluctance to intervene in the gender-biased legal practices of Islam, a minority religion in India. Rather than requiring a strict distance and equal neutrality from all religions, the Indian state reserves the right to selectively intervene in and engage with religions and religious practices. The Indian Constitution, even as it implies the strict separation of state and religion, recognizes the rights of religious minorities, commits the state to give aid to educational institutions established and administered by religious communities, and permits religious education in institutions partially funded by the state.

Contemporary theorizing about secularism in India has long been divided around the question of whether the liberal-democratic institutions adopted in post-independence India were Western theoretical impositions alien to indigenous ideas and practices. This issue has become particularly salient since the emergence of a religious and caste-based politics of identity in India. The rise of an assertive political Hinduism has been accompanied by: instances of mass religious violence; the reemergence of a sociopolitical hegemony privileging the Hindu majority; a desire to reassert the rights of upper-caste Hindus; and subsequently, rising anxiety about the rights of minorities such as Muslims, Christians, and lower-caste

Hindus.⁴⁶ By the turn of the millennium, both the conceptual apparatus and practice of secularism in India were said to be in crisis.⁴⁷ Such anxiety has been heightened by the election as prime minister of Narendra Modi, a right-wing politician who is widely known to have incited religious riots involving the massacre of Muslims by Hindus.

One can identify several discernible strands along a continuum of contemporary Indian political thinking about the purpose and place of secularism in Indian political life.⁴⁸ On one end we have Nehruvians or liberal democrats committed to the secularist project in the accepted Western sense. Nehru’s concept of secularism was recognizably modern, rationalist, and rooted in European Enlightenment ideals.⁴⁹ It is well known that Gandhi’s religiousness was both puzzling and mildly annoying to Nehru, an agnostic who wished the state to observe neutrality with regard to all religions, considering most Indian forms of religious belief backward, superstitious, and antithetical to modernity. Nehruvian secularists insist that it is precisely because of India’s religious diversity that it requires something like the Western model of secularism, understood in terms of the religious neutrality of the liberal state. Moreover, “to people like Nehru, to conceive of the high ideals of rationality, secularism, or even socialism as ‘European’ was a mistake. These were intrinsically universalist ideals that were generated by early modern European debates.”⁵⁰ For proponents of this position, secularism represents progress, liberty, and the “operation of scientific temper and rationality.”⁵¹ The persistence of communalism represented the failure of Indians to modernize adequately and of religion to take its proper place in the private sphere.

In the middle of the spectrum, there are discourses that argue that some modification of the Westcentric secularist conception is required in order to apply it to the distinctiveness of the Indian situation, a “deliberate crafting of different rules to respond to a historically distinct situation.”⁵² Rajeev Bhargava argues, for instance, that Indian secularism can be redefined as “principled” distance, a doctrine through which the state can reserve the right to intervene in and engage with religions and religious practices for the purpose of promoting certain values constitutive of secularism (however these are defined).⁵³ Meanwhile, Partha Chatterjee proposes a criterion by which the long history of intricate involvement of the Indian state in the affairs of religious institutions can be justified as legitimate and fair. Nonintervention in the affairs of a religious community should be predicated on internal representativeness and democratic structures: those members of minority religious groups who demand noninterference from the state should also demand that their group publicly obtain from its members consent for those practices that have regulatory power over the lives of members.⁵⁴ Other thinkers in this range of the spectrum argue that secularism is in fact “an empty category devoid of any stable meaning,” which has meant different things in different circumstances of its contestation.⁵⁵ In her excellent history of Indian secularism, Shabnum Tejani lists a variety of Indian thinkers who have addressed the profound ambivalence

at the heart of the secularist project, arguing that secularism in India can only be understood when situated in the particularities of its historical context.⁵⁶

Finally, at the other end of the continuum, we have discourses that question the very viability of secularism within India, arguing that secularism is a Western transplant with almost no intelligibility in the Indian context. It is this set of discourses that allows us to best understand the relevance of Gandhi's thinking to contemporary debates about secularism. One of the earliest proponents of this position, T. N. Madan, called secularism "an alien cultural ideology, which lacks the strong support of the state [and] has failed to make the desired headway in India."⁵⁷ Madan claims that the creation of the secular state relies on the intellectual history of Christianity, and on a peculiarly Christian culture.⁵⁸ "The transferability of the idea of secularism to the countries of South Asia . . . should not be taken for granted," he writes.⁵⁹ "Neither India's indigenous religious traditions nor Islam recognize the sacred-secular dichotomy . . . therefore, the modern processes of secularization . . . proceed in India without the support of an ideology that people . . . may warm up to."⁶⁰

Other scholars say that secularism is a Western transplant that migrated to India without its larger world view and conditions of intelligibility. It therefore has little meaning in the Indian context, partly because there is no equivalent understanding of the separation between religious and secular, or even an equivalent understanding of what religion is. In such a situation, using the language of secularism only exacerbates rather than ameliorates conflicts among religious groups.⁶¹ Ashis Nandy, a prominent neo-Gandhian, alleges that the statist model of secularism in India is itself responsible for much interreligious strife, because of its attempt to exorcise religion from public life.⁶² Secularism is linked to an unnecessary emphasis on modernization and rationality, understood as a loss of meaning, a desacralization and erasure of religion from public life, a neglect of religious community and sensibility, and a misplaced valorizing of statist intervention. If a religious way of life "cannot find normal play in public life, it finds distorted expression in fundamentalism, revivalism and xenophobia."⁶³ As Madan argues, "it is not religious zealots alone who contribute to fundamentalism . . . but also the secularists who deny the very legitimacy of religion in human life and . . . provoke a reaction."⁶⁴

Thinkers in this last group of discourses are also concerned with the question of the relationship *between* the state and various specific religions, and *among* the adherents of these different religions. S. N. Balagangadhara and Jakob de Roover argue convincingly that the problem of religious conflict in post-independence India has been exacerbated rather than ameliorated by the so-called neutrality of the state.⁶⁵ The position of liberal neutrality, according to which the state is to remain strictly neutral with respect to all religions in a multireligious state, has been considered the benchmark for a secular state. The framers of the Indian Constitution tried to transplant the theory of the Western liberal state into Indian soil. Its cognitive framework construed non-Semitic traditions like Hinduism as

the structural equivalents of Christianity, viewing them as embodiments of doctrinal truth claims. This continued the colonial mechanism that had compelled Indian religious traditions to refashion themselves according to the Semitic model of religion, gradually pushing what were once fluid and open-ended religious communities to transform into rigid bodies that required specific religious texts and doctrines as canonical for each community. Non-Semitic religious traditions like Hinduism were forced to “semiticize” by aggressively defending their own practices and demonstrating their foundations in terms of “religious doctrines” and “sacred texts.”⁶⁶ When the post-independence Indian state adopted this Semitic model of religions by allowing proselytization, it implicitly privileged the notion that religion was a matter of doctrinal truth and falsity.⁶⁷ This further transformed the relationship between its religious communities from one in which all religions were seen as equally legitimate paths to truth into a zero-sum conflict of competing doctrines, in which communities now saw other religions as rivals to truth claims.

Religious conflict was exacerbated as each tradition’s orthodox factions entrenched their attempts to establish their “doctrines” as the superior form of religion in Indian society. Balagangadhara and de Roover cite this as the most compelling explanation for the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and the consequent breakdown of cultural pluralism and interreligious harmony in contemporary India. Ashis Nandy claims that distorted or perverted versions of religion circulating in modern or semi-modern India owe their origins to the perception of the triumph of secularism.⁶⁸ Religious zealots looked longingly at more “monotheized” Western faiths and attempted to replicate their doctrinal power and authority.⁶⁹ As Ajay Skaria notes, religion for Gandhi only became undemocratic and intolerant when identified with the modern Western conception of it.⁷⁰

How might we connect all of this back to Gandhi’s seemingly idiosyncratic and contradictory understanding of “secularism”? The cited criticisms of secularism’s “transplanted” nature would seem to explain the contradictions of secularism in India in ways that converge most closely with Gandhi. His thought can be interpreted as a warning to Indians about the dangers of the modern secular state adopting the R2 conception of religious truth, moving us away from a conception of religion as activity and practice (R1), and toward religion as a set of doctrinal truth-claims (R2). These warnings are visible in contemporary critiques of secularism in which Gandhi’s R1 and R2 conceptions, and the primacy of *anekantavāda*, are reflected. These critiques point to the problems of ideological entrenchment stemming from a conception of religion as reified doctrinal truth rather than as exemplary individual practice based on truth-seeking by the conscience.

The Western secular liberal state is able to sustain its claim to neutrality with respect to the truth-value of religious claims—while extending the freedom of proselytization to all religions—*only* because it shares with Semitic religions their beliefs about what constitutes religion.⁷¹ In so doing, it has privileged a certain conception of religious truth. When the postcolonial Indian state adopted this

model of liberal secular neutrality after independence, making proselytization legally permissible as a condition of “religious freedom,” it implicitly took a position on the nature of religion, and adopted a Semitic theology that was hardly neutral, especially in comparison to *anekantavāda*. The ostensibly neutral, secular state has seemed all the more intrusive and violent in a society constituted mainly of non-Semitic faith traditions. The state’s commitment to a specific understanding of religious truth—and thus to a *non-neutral* metaphysical claim—is at odds with the non-Semitic one that has historically been predominant among its citizens.⁷² The Indian state encourages an understanding of religion as closer to R2 in Gandhi’s sense, and further away from R1 and *anekantavāda*, exerting a cultural, interpretive power over social understandings of religion.⁷³

Thus, Gandhi’s contention that proselytization should be impermissible is more than a seemingly odd and oppressive stance toward what is construed as religious “freedom” in the West. Instead, it can be understood as a decoding of, and a resistance to, the underlying Semitic metaphysical commitments of the liberal secular state. It can also be seen as a reenvisioning of the meaning of religious freedom as R1 rather than R2, a call to remain free from the imposition of an R2 conception. The fact that the modern secular state wishes to extrapolate politics away from truth-seeking is only one reason—albeit perhaps the most commonly cited one⁷⁴—that Gandhi finds such a state to be flawed. But on the reading I have offered, the modern state is intrusive and coercive for Gandhi because it has implicitly privileged an R2 (or Semitic) view of the relationship between religions. In turn, this leaves non-Semitic faiths at a disadvantage, subject to proselytizing by Semitic faiths, while their own notions of religion are ignored and pressured to change in favor of a Semitic one.

CONCLUSIONS

My reading of Gandhi’s approach to secularism and religious freedom is not taken from a literal or strict exegetical approach to his textual *corpus*. Gandhi himself did not use the terms R1, R2, Semitic or non-Semitic religions, liberal neutrality, and so forth. Rather, I suggest he was responding to the categories that were invading India through the colonial process, providing a reception to epistemically loaded terms from Abrahamic traditions. Whether or not he directly engaged the framework from which these terms arose, he was able to anticipate the dangers with which their reception in India was fraught. It is this responsive reception that I have attempted to excavate here. Gandhi’s suspicion of an R2 conception of religion over an R1 one had to do with precisely the sorts of critiques that contemporary critics of Indian secularism raise: an emphasis on doctrinal truth claims over practice and action, and a lack of epistemic humility stemming from the inflexible or doctrinal commitments of religion understood as R2. I have also argued that Gandhi was concerned about the atmosphere of hostility and polarization that

results when religions are seen as competitors attempting to win validity for truth claims. Indeed, this appears to be precisely the scenario that contemporary India finds itself in, since the language of modern secularism has forced communities to conform to an alien understanding of religious truth, while introducing a steady stream of distortion into their self-understandings. Meanwhile, it destroys a historically stable, age-old model of interfaith harmony, in which adherents of various religions saw their respective practices as complementary, nonexclusive paths to truth, often involving fluid processes of intercultural borrowing and assimilation. The secular Indian state presents itself as a “neutral” power standing above competing claims to religious truth, while all along privileging the Semitic conception of religious truth.

What has resulted is exactly what Gandhi appeared to have feared: a competition among the inflexible, principled doctrinal truth *claims* of various religions (R2). Meanwhile, the individual conscience, rather than engaging in the activity of truth-seeking understood as “private” in Gandhi’s sense (R1), becomes engaged in the work of ideological entrenchment grounded in the certainty of knowledge about doctrinal truth, and the concomitant falsity of “other” truths (R2).

To say that Gandhi was resistant to the modern liberal language of secularism, and found it to be a “parochialism claiming universal provenance,”⁷⁵ is not news to us. But he prophetically reminds us that the language and operation of the liberal secular state violate the assumption of *anekantavāda* according to which all religions are equally “true” paths. When the state takes a position on what religion is, this leads to a competition among abstract doctrinal truth claims, while getting in the way of the truly private practice of religion in Gandhi’s sense. This allows us to understand Gandhi’s apparently contradictory claims—that “the state should undoubtedly be secular” and that he “cannot conceive of politics as divorced from religion”—in a way that relies on more than simply the semantic distinction between “the state” and “politics.” Gandhi’s understanding of secularism may be read as a warning about the violence inflicted by the secular state when culturally-specific notions of “religion” and “neutrality” are transplanted into non-Semitic contexts. While Gandhi’s usage of terms such as “religion,” “secularism,” “private,” and “public” was admittedly aporetic and idiosyncratic, I have offered here a knitting-together of meaning, suggesting that he refigures the private/public distinction in Westcentric discourse, and gives the “private” practice of religion a whole new meaning. He also offers an understanding of religious “freedom” predicated on an understanding of the relationship *between* individuals and communities, as well as *among* different religious communities. Above all, I have attempted to show that his fears about the encroachment of Westcentric conceptions of religion in the non-Western context were not entirely unfounded. Rather, they coincide with contemporary discourses about the distortions wrought by postcolonial secularism in India, resulting from the transplanting of secularism from the Abrahamic to the Indian cultural context.

NOTES

1. T.N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 235.
2. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publication Division, 1958–94), 55: 443.
3. *Ibid.*, 77: 292.
4. *Ibid.*, 81: 424.
5. *Ibid.*, 53: 396.
6. See *ibid.*, 96: 74: “Is not politics too a part of *dharma*!” See also *ibid.*, 18: 255: “I take part in politics because I feel that there is no department of life which can be divorced from religion.” For a fuller account of the relationship between spirituality and politics in Gandhi’s thought, see Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (Santa Barbara, CA: Concord Grove Press, 1983), chap. 3; Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), chap. 4; and Anthony Parel, “Introduction,” in *Gandhi, Freedom, and Self-Rule*, ed. Anthony J. Parel (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).
7. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 92: 190.
8. *Ibid.*, 96: 238.
9. Ashis Nandy, one of India’s preeminent scholars and interpreters of Gandhi, writes of the “distinct Gandhis” who have survived, asserting bluntly that the interpretive task is not motivated by “car[ing] who the real Gandhi was or is.” See Nandy, “Gandhi after Gandhi: The Fate of Dissent in Our Times,” *Little Magazine* 1, no. 1 (May 2000). Vinay Lal also points out that there is “no singular Gandhi,” and that many have “authored their own Gandhi.” See Lal, “The Gandhi Everyone Loves to Hate,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 4, 2008.
10. Farah Godrej, *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 94–97.
11. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 33: 410; 59: 496
12. See Tara Sethia, ed., *Ahimsa, Anekanta and Jainism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004); Acharya Mahaprajna, *The Quest for Truth in the Context of Anekanta* (Ladnun, India: Jain Vishva Bharati Institute, 2003); Y.J. Padmarajah, *A Comparative Study of the Jaina Theories of Reality and Knowledge* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963); Umrao Singh Bist, *Jaina Theories of Reality and Knowledge* (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 1984); Satkari Mookerjee, *The Jaina Philosophy of Non-Absolutism: A Critical Study of Anekantavada* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978); Bimal Krishna Matilal, *The Central Philosophy of Jainism (Anekanta-vada)* (Ahmedabad: L. D. Institute of Indology, 1981); and Nathmal Tatia, *Studies in Jaina Philosophy* (Banaras: Jain Cultural Research Society, 1951).
13. John M. Koller, “Why Is Anekantavada Important?” in “*Syadvada* as the Epistemological Key to the Jaina Middle Way Metaphysics of Anekantavada,” ed. Tara Sethia, *Philosophy East and West* 50, no. 3 (2000).
14. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), xxvii. See also Farah Godrej, “Nonviolence and Gandhi’s Truth: A Method for Moral and Political Arbitration,” *Review of Politics* 68, no. 2 (2006); *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Raghavan N. Iyer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 2, chap. 5: 1–15, 160–77, 188–90, 205, 539, 564–69.
15. Godrej, “Nonviolence and Gandhi’s Truth,” and Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, ed. Iyer, 2: 160. See also Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi’s Religious Thought* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 67.
16. “I am far from claiming any finality or infallibility about my conclusions,” Gandhi states in his autobiography. “For me they appear to be absolutely correct, and seem for the time being to be final . . . but at every step I have carried out the process of acceptance or rejection and acted accordingly” (Gandhi, *Autobiography*, xxvii). “I claim . . . nothing more than does a scientist who, though he conducts

his experiments with the utmost accuracy, forethought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions, but keeps an open mind regarding them” (ibid.). A seeker after truth, Gandhi claims, “must always hold himself open to correction, and whenever he discovers himself to be wrong he must confess it at all costs” (ibid., 350). See also Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, ed. Iyer, 2: 167, 188–89.

17. See Godrej, “Nonviolence and Gandhi’s Truth.”

18. Ajay Skaria, “Gandhi’s Politics: Liberalism and the Question of the Ashram,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002); Akeel Bilgrami, “Gandhi the Philosopher,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 9 (2003); and Uday S. Mehta, “Gandhi on Democracy, Politics and the Ethics of Everyday Life,” *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 2 (2010).

19. As Bilgrami puts it, “it is only our moral experience which is capable of being true” (Bilgrami, “Gandhi the Philosopher,” 4164).

20. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 61: 219–20. The volume of references to conscience or “inner voice” in Gandhi’s corpus—e.g., ibid., 15: 273; 21: 112–13; 26: 260; 51: 308—is difficult to enumerate.

21. For the primacy of the individual conscience in truth-seeking, see both Godrej, “Nonviolence and Gandhi’s Truth,” and Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, ed. Iyer.

22. In other words, Gandhi “wished to be alone with himself and his God.” See Sudhir Chandra, *Continuing Dilemmas: Understanding Social Consciousness* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2002), 282.

23. For a compelling account supporting this view of Gandhi’s “private,” experiential and existential understanding of truth-seeking, see “An Unresolved Dilemma: Gandhi on Religious Conversion,” in Chandra, *Continuing Dilemmas*, 271–306.

24. For a fuller account of this, see Farah Godrej, “Ascetics, Warriors and a Gandhian Ecological Citizenship” *Political Theory* 40, no. 4 (2012): 437–65.

25. See Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi’s Political Discourse* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), and Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy*. See also Farah Godrej, “Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other,” *Polity* 41, no. 2 (2009): 135–65.

26. Sarah Claerhout characterizes Gandhi’s understanding of religion and religious belief as defined by ancestral practice, rather than by propositions about truth or falsity. “When Gandhi discusses [religious] ‘beliefs,’ he does not refer to propositions about the world that are either true or false, but rather intends to refer to the transmitted action heuristics or practical instructions handed down by a community.” See Sarah Claerhout, “Gandhi, Conversion, and the Equality of Religions: More Experiments with Truth,” *Numen—International Review for the History of Religions* 61, no. 1 (2014): 70–71.

27. “The role of such heuristics is to generate certain kinds of action . . . the best way to express such instructions for action is by *embodying* the kind of actions and attitudes they generate. The best way to learn such heuristics is not through verbal expression and reproduction but through mimesis of actions and attitudes” (ibid., 6).

28. This illustrates Akeel Bilgrami’s claim that truth for Gandhi is experiential rather than cognitive: “It is not propositions purporting to describe the world of which truth is predicated, it is only our own moral experience which is capable of being true.” See Bilgrami, “Gandhi the Philosopher,” 4164.

29. Ashis Nandy is certainly right to claim that if secularism means the evacuation of all religion understood as truth-seeking from politics, this is definitely not Gandhi’s conception of secularism. See Ashis Nandy, “An Anti-Secularist Manifesto,” *Seminar* 314 (1985), and Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 13, no. 2 (1988): 177–94.

30. Nandy, “Anti-Secularist Manifesto,” 17.

31. S.N. Balagangadhara and Jakob de Roover, “The Secular State and Religious Conflict: Liberal Neutrality and the Indian Case of Pluralism,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2007): 73–74. See also de Roover and Balagangadhara, “The Dark Hour of Secularism: Hindu Fundamentalism and Colonial Liberalism in India,” in *Making Sense of the Secular: Critical Perspectives from Europe to Asia*, ed. Ranjan Ghosh (New York: Routledge, 2013), 111–30.

32. Balagangadhara and de Roover, "Secular State and Religious Conflict," 73. See also de Roover and Balagangadhara, "Dark Hour of Secularism."

33. Balagangadhara and De Roover, "Secular State and Religious Conflict," 74–76. This is, of course, a large claim, and I do not intend to dismiss the complexity that lies at the heart of characterizing an entire group of religions in this fashion. This is not to argue that the question of religious "truth" does not occur in these religions, or that Hindus, Buddhists, or Sikhs do not speak in terms of "religion" and "truth." This complexity notwithstanding, however, it is not too contentious to argue that the discussion of truth in Indian languages and religious texts appears to be of a completely different kind from the doctrinal truth claimed by Semitic religions.

34. *Ibid.*, 76. While it is true that Islam, the largest minority religion in India, is in principle an Abrahamic faith, the practice of Indian Islam, through centuries of proximity to and fusion with its Indian non-Abrahamic counterparts, has tended to be far more fluid, flexible, open-ended, and syncretic. For more on Islam's syncretic nature in India, see J. J. Roy Burman, "Hindu-Muslim Syncretism in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 20 (1996): 1211–15.

35. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 48: 334.

36. *Ibid.*, 71: 1.

37. *Ibid.*, 25: 56.

38. *Ibid.*, 10: 271.

39. "I came to the conclusion long ago . . . that all religions were true and also that all had some error in them, and that whilst I hold by my own, I should [hold] others as dear as Hinduism, from which it logically follows that we should hold all as dear as our nearest kith and kin and that we should make no distinction between them" (*ibid.*, 41: 112).

40. Godrej, "Nonviolence and Gandhi's Truth."

41. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 38: 296.

42. Karuna Mantena, "Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (2012): 458.

43. Chandra, "Unresolved Dilemma," 282.

44. The depth of Gandhi's discomfort with proselytizing—and particularly its insistence on solidification of doctrinal commitment—is explored at length in Robert Ellsberg, ed., *Gandhi on Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), and Chandra, "Unresolved Dilemma."

45. This is hardly to suggest that the concept of secularism admits of no multiplicity or variation even in the West; on this point, see Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, chap. 1; Rajeev Bhargava, "Indian Secularism: An Alternative, Trans-cultural Ideal," in *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations*, ed. V. R. Mehta and Thomas Pantham (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006); and Andrew Davison, *Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: A Hermeneutic Reconsideration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

46. Sudipta Kaviraj, "Languages of Secularity," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 14, 2013.

47. See Rajeev Bhargava, *The Promise of India's Secular Democracy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010); Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, eds., *The Crisis of Secularism in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*; and T. N. Srinivasan, ed., *The Future of Secularism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).

48. In her excellent summary of secularism in India, Shabnum Tejani identified four positions on secularism in contemporary Indian debates. See Shabnum Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History, 1890–1950* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). While I am in broad agreement with her, I do differ slightly from her in how I understand the spectrum of positions, and how I categorize thinkers along such a spectrum. This characterization is in no way intended to diminish the richness, plurality, and complexity of Indian thinking about secularism, but rather to identify and group several kinds of discourses together.

49. See Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, 238–48; de Roover and Balagangadhara, "Dark Hour of Secularism," 20.

50. Kaviraj, “Languages of Secularity.”
51. H. S. Verma, “Secularism: Reflections on Meaning, Substance and Contemporary Practice,” in *Secularism and Indian Polity*, ed. Bidyut Chakrabarty (New Delhi: Segment Books, 1990), cited in Tejani, *Indian Secularism*, 8. See also P. C. Chatterji, *Secular Values for Secular India* (Delhi: South Asia Books, 1984); Asghar Ali Engineer, *Communal Challenge and Secular Response* (Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2003); Amartya Sen, “Secularism and Its Discontents,” in *Unravelling the Nation: Sectarian Conflict in India*, ed. Kaushik Basu and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Delhi: Penguin, 1996); Meera Nanda, *Prophets Facing Backward: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); and Meera Nanda, *Breaking the Spell of Dharma and Other Essays* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2003).
52. Kaviraj, “Languages of Secularity.”
53. See Bhargava, *Promise of India’s Secular Democracy*; Bhargava, “Indian Secularism.”
54. Partha Chatterjee, “Secularism and Tolerance,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 9 (July 1994); Chatterjee, “Religious Minorities and the Secular State: Reflections on an Indian Impasse” *Public Culture* 8 (1995).
55. Tejani, *Indian Secularism*, 11.
56. Neera Chandhoke, *Beyond Secularism: The Rights of Religious Minorities* (New Delhi: Oxford, 1999), and Aditya Nigam, *The Insurrection of Little Selves: The Crisis of Secular-Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).
57. T. N. Madan, “Secularism in Its Place,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 4 (1987): 757.
58. Kaviraj, “Languages of Secularity.”
59. Madan, “Secularism in Its Place,” 754
60. Madan, *Modern Myths*, 261.
61. See Jakob De Roover, Sarah Claerhout, and S. N. Balagangadhara, “Liberal Political Theory and the Cultural Migration of Ideas: The Case of Secularism in India,” *Political Theory* 39, no. 5 (2011): 571–99; see also Jakob de Roover, “The Vacuity of Secularism: On the Indian Debate and Its Western Origins,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 28, 2002.
62. Ashis Nandy, “The Twilight of Certitude: Secularism, Hindu Nationalism, and Other Masks of Deculturation,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 22 no. 2 (1997): 157–76; Nandy, “Politics of Secularism”; and Nandy, “Anti-Secularist Manifesto.”
63. Nandy, “Twilight of Certitude,” 167.
64. Madan, “Secularism in its Place,” 757
65. Balagangadhara and de Roover, “Secular State and Religious Conflict.”
66. *Ibid.*, 86; Nandy, “Politics of Secularism,” 187; and Nandy, “Twilight of Certitude,” 171.
67. Balagangadhara and de Roover, “Secular State and Religious Conflict.”
68. Nandy, “Twilight of Certitude,” 158.
69. Nandy, “Anti-Secularist Manifesto,” 22–23.
70. Skaria, “Gandhi’s Politics,” 959.
71. Balagangadhara and de Roover, “Secular State and Religious Conflict,” 82.
72. Jakob de Roover, “Is Secularism the Solution to Communal Conflict in India?” <http://indianrealist.wordpress.com/2010/05/16/is-secularism-the-solution-to-communal-conflict-in-india/>; page no longer available. But see Claerhout, “Gandhi, Conversion and the Equality of Religions,” 75.
73. Relatedly, although slightly differently, Nandy argues that secularism depends on coercive power of state. See Nandy, “Twilight of Certitude,” 164, 169.
74. Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy*, and Thomas Pantham, “Thinking with Mahatma Gandhi: Beyond Liberal Democracy,” *Political Theory* 11, no. 2 (1983).
75. Skaria, “Gandhi’s Politics,” 960.