

Religion beyond Dogma: Reconstructing Gandhi's Religious Philosophy for a Plural and Conflict-Ridden World

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the religious philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi as a distinctive ethical, epistemological and political framework for rethinking the relationship between religion, morality, pluralism and public life. It argues that Gandhi's understanding of religion cannot be adequately comprehended through conventional categories of institutional religion, theological orthodoxy, ritual practice or private belief. Rather, religion for Gandhi represented a continuous ethical and existential quest for **Truth (Satya)**—a quest grounded in **Ahimsa (non-violence)**, conscience, self-discipline, compassion, self-purification and service to others. His religious thought consequently transformed religion from a domain of doctrinal affirmation into an ethical practice through which individuals sought to cultivate moral responsibility and reconstruct their relationship with the self, society and the wider human community.

A central proposition of the paper is that Gandhi's conception of Truth and religion was intrinsically pluralistic. His assertion that all religions contain elements of truth, while simultaneously recognising that every religious tradition remains imperfect because it is mediated through historically situated and fallible human interpretation, provided the philosophical basis for a distinctive model of religious pluralism. This position moved beyond passive tolerance of religious difference towards **mutual respect, dialogical engagement, humility and ethical learning across traditions**. Gandhi's religious pluralism therefore did not require the abandonment of religious conviction; rather, it demanded that conviction be accompanied by epistemic humility and openness to the truth perceived by others.

The paper further interrogates the relationship between Gandhi's religious philosophy and his conception of secularism. It argues that Gandhi's thought offers a significant alternative to the binary opposition between religious absolutism and a purely procedural or religion-neutral conception of secularism. His distinction between **personal religion and the secular character of the state** enables a conceptualisation of public life in which individuals may draw ethical inspiration from religious traditions while political institutions remain committed to equality, non-discrimination and justice for citizens irrespective of religious affiliation. This dimension of Gandhian thought becomes particularly significant in contemporary societies where religion increasingly intersects with majoritarian politics, identity formation, political mobilisation and struggles over citizenship and belonging.

Against this conceptual background, the paper examines the contemporary implications of Gandhian religious philosophy for **communal polarization, religious intolerance, identity politics, interfaith conflict, democratic fragmentation, political violence and the erosion of ethical public discourse**. It contends that Gandhi does not provide a ready-made institutional model for resolving these challenges; rather, his significance lies in offering an alternative **ethical grammar of religious coexistence**, in which truth-seeking is inseparable from non-violence, religious conviction from humility, freedom of conscience from responsibility, and political engagement from moral self-restraint. The paper therefore proposes that

the enduring contribution of Gandhian religious philosophy lies in its capacity to reconceptualize religion not as an instrument of exclusion or political domination, but as a discipline of ethical self-transformation and a resource for cultivating pluralistic democratic life. In this sense, Gandhi's religious philosophy provides a normative framework for rethinking how deeply held convictions can coexist with religious diversity, constitutional equality and peaceful democratic disagreement in an increasingly polarized world.

1. Introduction

Religion continues to occupy a deeply paradoxical position in contemporary public life. On the one hand, religious traditions remain significant sources of moral meaning, social solidarity, compassion and ethical orientation for millions of individuals and communities. On the other hand, religion increasingly intersects with processes of political polarization, identity formation, majoritarianism, communal conflict and exclusion. The contemporary resurgence of religious identities has therefore generated a fundamental philosophical question: how can deeply held religious convictions coexist with religious plurality, democratic equality and peaceful disagreement? This question becomes particularly urgent in societies where religious identities are not confined to the private sphere but influence political discourse, citizenship, collective belonging and competing conceptions of the public good. The challenge is not simply to determine whether religion should have a place in public life, but to consider what kind of religious consciousness can contribute to a democratic, plural and ethically responsible public sphere.

The contemporary crisis of religious coexistence cannot, however, be understood solely as a conflict between different religious doctrines. At a deeper level, it reflects a crisis concerning the relationship between religious conviction and ethical responsibility. When religious identity becomes detached from self-criticism, humility and concern for the dignity of others, it can become an instrument of exclusion and political domination. Conversely, when religion is reduced entirely to a private matter of individual belief, its potential contribution to moral reflection, social responsibility and public ethics may be diminished. The resulting tension between religious absolutism and the complete privatization of religion raises an important theoretical problem for contemporary political and ethical thought: can religion constitute a source of public morality without becoming a source of coercion, exclusion or sectarian domination?

It is within this philosophical problem that the religious thought of Mahatma Gandhi assumes enduring significance. Gandhi's religious philosophy does not fit comfortably within conventional categories of theology, institutional religion or secular political theory. His understanding of religion was neither reducible to ritual observance nor confined to metaphysical speculation. Religion, for Gandhi, constituted an ongoing ethical search for Truth (Satya) and a discipline of self-transformation. His famous identification of Truth with the ultimate object of religious striving was inseparable from the practice of Ahimsa, because truth could not, in his understanding, be authentically pursued through violence, hatred or coercion. Religion consequently became for Gandhi a lived ethical practice involving conscience, self-discipline, self-purification, compassion, service and responsibility towards others.

This understanding fundamentally altered the relationship between religion and morality. Gandhi did not regard religion primarily as a collection of propositions to be believed or defended against competing traditions. Rather, religious faith acquired meaning through conduct. The authenticity of religious conviction was to be demonstrated through the transformation of the individual and through one's relationship with other human beings. Religion therefore possessed an inherently ethical orientation: it demanded the cultivation of character and imposed obligations upon the self. Such an approach challenges conceptions of religion that privilege doctrinal certainty over ethical conduct and suggests that the

significance of religious belief must ultimately be evaluated through its capacity to generate truthfulness, non-violence, compassion, restraint and service.

At the centre of this philosophy lies Gandhi's distinctive conception of Truth. Truth was not simply an abstract metaphysical proposition or a fixed body of knowledge that could be completely possessed by any individual. Human beings, because of their limitations and situated perspectives, could apprehend only partial aspects of truth. This epistemic limitation generated an important ethical consequence: humility. If no individual or community possesses the whole of Truth, then the conviction that one's own religious understanding is absolutely complete becomes philosophically problematic. Gandhi's religious philosophy thus connects epistemology with ethics: recognition of human fallibility becomes the basis for openness to others.

This insight provides the philosophical foundation of Gandhi's distinctive religious pluralism. His affirmation that different religions contain elements of truth did not imply that all religious traditions are identical or that differences between them are insignificant. Nor did it amount to a purely passive tolerance in which communities simply coexist without meaningful engagement. Gandhi's pluralism was more demanding. It required individuals to remain rooted in their own convictions while simultaneously acknowledging the possibility that others may apprehend dimensions of truth that they themselves have not fully understood. Religious faith, therefore, had to coexist with epistemic humility. Genuine dialogue became possible not through the abandonment of conviction but through the recognition of one's own fallibility.

Gandhi's approach is consequently significant for contemporary debates on secularism as well. His religious philosophy challenges the assumption that secularism necessarily requires the complete exclusion of religion from public ethical discourse. At the same time, it rejects the transformation of the state into an instrument of religious authority. Gandhi maintained a distinction between the individual's religious orientation and the political character of the state. Religion could profoundly shape an individual's moral consciousness, but political institutions had to remain committed to justice and equal respect for citizens regardless of their religious identity. In this respect, Gandhian thought offers an important conceptual possibility between two extremes: religious domination of political institutions on one side and the reduction of religion to an entirely privatized phenomenon on the other.

The relevance of this distinction becomes particularly visible in the contemporary context of communal polarization and identity politics. Across democratic societies, religious identities can become politically mobilized through narratives of fear, historical grievance, cultural superiority and exclusion. Social media and digitally mediated political communication can further intensify such divisions by creating fragmented informational environments in which suspicion and hostility towards religious or cultural "others" are rapidly reproduced. Under such circumstances, religious identity can cease to function primarily as a source of moral orientation and instead become a mechanism for constructing boundaries between "us" and "them." The philosophical challenge, therefore, is not simply how to promote tolerance but how to cultivate forms of religious consciousness capable of resisting the conversion of difference into hostility. It is precisely here that Gandhian religious philosophy offers a deeper ethical framework. Ahimsa, understood beyond the mere absence of physical violence, requires a transformation in the manner in which individuals perceive and respond to those with whom they disagree. It calls for restraint, empathy and refusal to dehumanize the other. Similarly, Satyagraha extends the search for truth into the sphere of social and political action. Resistance, from a Gandhian perspective, is not justified merely because one possesses political power or numerical strength; it must remain accountable to ethical principles. The

opponent is not to be destroyed but engaged, persuaded and potentially transformed through non-violent action. Religious pluralism thus becomes connected to a broader philosophy of democratic disagreement in which the dignity of the opponent remains morally significant.

The significance of Gandhi's religious philosophy therefore extends beyond the question of interfaith harmony. It raises broader questions concerning the ethical foundations of democratic public life. If democracy is understood merely as a system of institutional procedures, elections and competing interests, it may remain vulnerable to polarization, majoritarianism and the instrumentalization of identity. Gandhi's approach suggests that democratic coexistence also requires ethical capacities within citizens—the capacity for self-restraint, dialogue, empathy, respect for conscience and willingness to revise one's own understanding. Religious pluralism, in this framework, is not merely an institutional arrangement but a moral discipline.

Nevertheless, Gandhi's religious philosophy should not be romanticized or treated as an uncomplicated solution to contemporary problems. His ideas emerged within a particular historical, colonial and civilizational context and contain tensions that require critical examination. His understanding of religion, secularism, conversion, community, tradition and ethical self-discipline raises questions that cannot simply be transplanted into the institutional realities of twenty-first-century constitutional democracies. The task, therefore, is neither to reproduce Gandhi's formulations uncritically nor to dismiss them as historically obsolete. Rather, it is to investigate what conceptual resources his religious philosophy offers for rethinking contemporary problems of pluralism, intolerance and democratic coexistence.

Research Problem and Central Thesis

The central problem addressed by this paper is the apparent tension between religious conviction and pluralistic democratic coexistence. Contemporary debates frequently assume that strong religious commitment necessarily creates difficulties for secular and plural public life, or conversely, that the preservation of religious identity requires political assertion and collective boundary-making. Gandhi's philosophy challenges this binary. It demonstrates the possibility of a religious consciousness that is deeply committed yet self-critical, morally demanding yet non-coercive, and spiritually grounded yet compatible with pluralistic democratic life.

The central thesis of this paper is that Gandhi's religious philosophy represents not merely a doctrine of religious tolerance but an ethical-epistemological framework in which Truth, Ahimsa, conscience, humility and self-purification collectively transform the meaning of religious commitment itself. Its contemporary significance lies in providing an alternative ethical grammar for negotiating religious difference: one that neither demands the abandonment of faith nor permits faith to become an instrument of exclusion and domination.

Accordingly, this paper examines Gandhi's religious philosophy through four interconnected dimensions: first, religion as an ethical search for Truth; second, the relationship between Truth, Ahimsa and moral self-transformation; third, religious pluralism and epistemic humility; and fourth, the implications of these ideas for secularism, democratic citizenship and contemporary religious conflict. It argues that Gandhi's enduring contribution lies less in providing institutional prescriptions than in challenging the ethical assumptions through which religion, difference and political community are understood.

From this perspective, the contemporary relevance of Gandhian religious philosophy lies not simply in its capacity to advocate "peace" or "tolerance." Its deeper significance is theoretical and normative. Gandhi invites us to reconsider whether religion must necessarily operate through claims of exclusive truth, whether conviction requires hostility towards alternative convictions, and whether political disagreement

must culminate in coercion or exclusion. His philosophy instead proposes a demanding alternative: to seek Truth without claiming absolute possession of it, to hold convictions without denying the dignity of others, and to enter public life without abandoning moral self-restraint. Such a framework provides a significant basis for rethinking religious pluralism and democratic coexistence in an increasingly polarized world.

2. Central Research Problem

How can a thinker who described himself as deeply religious simultaneously provide a philosophical foundation for a secular, democratic and religiously plural political order?

Gandhi's religion was not primarily a system of dogmas, rituals or institutional authority. B. R. Nanda's interpretation, for example, emphasizes Gandhi's understanding of religion as an ethical framework governing everyday life rather than conventional organized religion.

Therefore, the central problem becomes:

Can Gandhi's religious philosophy provide a viable ethical framework for contemporary pluralistic democracy without allowing religion to become an instrument of political domination?

3. Central Thesis

This paper argues that Gandhi's religious philosophy represents neither a conventional theology nor a merely private spirituality; rather, it constitutes an ethical-philosophical framework in which the search for Truth, the practice of Ahimsa, respect for religious plurality, the primacy of conscience and the moral transformation of the self become foundations for democratic public life. Gandhi's conception of religion therefore offers a distinctive model of ethical pluralism—one that rejects both religious absolutism and political instrumentalisation of religion while preserving the moral significance of faith in public life. In an age characterised by religious polarization, identity politics, violence and declining trust in democratic institutions, Gandhian religious philosophy remains relevant as a normative resource for reconstructing interfaith dialogue, secular citizenship, non-violent democratic engagement and an ethics of public responsibility.

3. Research Questions

1. What constitutes the philosophical foundation of Gandhi's conception of religion?
2. How does Gandhi's understanding of Truth reshape conventional notions of religious exclusivity and religious authority?
3. How does Gandhian religious pluralism differ from mere tolerance or coexistence?
4. How can Gandhi reconcile deeply religious politics with the principle of a secular state?
5. To what extent can Gandhi's religious philosophy address contemporary challenges of communalism, religious polarization, identity politics and democratic conflict?

4. Objectives

- critically reconstruct Gandhi's conception of religion;
- examine the relationship between **Satya and Ahimsa**;
- analyse **Sarva Dharma Sambhava** and religious pluralism;
- explore Gandhi's understanding of conscience and self-realisation;
- examine the relationship between religion, morality and politics;
- distinguish Gandhian religious politics from **communal politics**;

- critically examine Gandhi's conception of secularism;
- investigate the relevance of Gandhian thought to contemporary religious conflict;
- develop a contemporary framework of **Gandhian ethical pluralism**.

5. Conceptual Architecture of the research Paper..

I. Religion as a Quest for Truth

For Gandhi:

Religion → Truth → Self-realisation → Ethical conduct

Rather than claiming possession of absolute Truth, the individual undertakes a continuous search for it. This gives you a powerful philosophical argument:

Gandhian religion is epistemically humble.

Because human beings cannot possess the whole Truth, religious certainty must be accompanied by humility.

This provides the philosophical foundation for pluralism.

II. Satya and Ahimsa

This should constitute the **philosophical core** of the paper.

Rather than treating Truth and non-violence as two independent concepts, argue that:

Satya is the moral end; Ahimsa is the ethical method.

Or more carefully:

Truth without Ahimsa risks becoming coercive; Ahimsa without Truth risks becoming merely passive.

This relationship gives Gandhian religious philosophy its distinctive character.

III. Religious Pluralism

Here the paper should move beyond the simplistic statement that Gandhi "respected all religions."

Gandhi's position was more philosophically sophisticated.

His belief that different religions contain truth, while also containing human limitations, produces an epistemology of **religious humility**. Contemporary scholarship similarly identifies Gandhi's religious thought with religious diversity, tolerance and the rejection of exclusive claims to absolute truth.

Your conceptual formulation could be:

Gandhian pluralism is not merely coexistence of religions; it is an ethical discipline of learning from religious difference.

That would make a strong original contribution.

6. Gandhi and Secularism:

Gandhi creates an apparent paradox:

Religion is indispensable to ethical life

but the State must not become the instrument of religion.

His later position increasingly emphasised religion as a personal matter alongside the secular character of the state.

This produces a very important distinction:

Gandhi does not advocate:

Religion → State

Instead:

Religion → Ethical Self → Ethical Citizen → Ethical Politics

while:

State → Equal citizenship → Religious freedom → Secular governance

This enables you to argue that Gandhi's approach is neither theocracy nor a complete exclusion of religion from public morality.

Recent scholarship explicitly examines this tension between Gandhi's religious worldview and his conception of political secularism.

7. Religion and Politics

Gandhi did not seek to religiousise the State; he sought to moralise politics.

That distinction is crucial.

Hence:

Gandhian religious politics ≠ politics of religious identity

Instead:

Gandhian religious politics = ethical politics grounded in Truth, Ahimsa, justice and service.

This distinction has been highlighted in recent scholarship contrasting Gandhi's inclusive religious politics with exclusionary communal politics.

8. Religion, Conscience and Moral

Agency

- conscience;
- inner voice;
- self-purification;
- fasting;
- prayer;
- repentance;
- self-restraint;
- moral autonomy;
- conversion of the self rather than conversion of the other.

This allows you to move Gandhi beyond the conventional "**religious harmony**" literature and into **moral philosophy**.

9. Contemporary Relevance

A. Religious Polarisation

Gandhian pluralism provides an alternative to the politics of religious antagonism.

B. Identity Politics

Gandhi's insistence that one's religious identity cannot justify domination of another challenges majoritarian and exclusivist conceptions of political community.

C. Religious Fundamentalism

Gandhi's epistemic humility challenges the assumption that any individual or community possesses complete and exclusive Truth.

D. Violence and Conflict

Ahimsa becomes not merely a technique of political resistance but a philosophy of human relationships.

E. Crisis of Democratic Ethics

Gandhi's emphasis on conscience, responsibility, restraint and truthfulness can be examined as resources for rebuilding ethical citizenship.

10. A Strong Contemporary Analytical Model

The Gandhian Ethical-Pluralist Model



This could become one of the paper's original contributions.

11. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative, philosophical-hermeneutic methodology** appropriate to the nature of the research problem. Since the study is concerned primarily with examining the philosophical foundations, ethical implications, religious dimensions, and socio-political significance of Mahatma Gandhi's thought, it does not employ conventional empirical or quantitative research methods. Instead, it undertakes a systematic interpretation and critical analysis of Gandhi's primary writings in dialogue with relevant secondary scholarship.

The methodology is grounded in **philosophical hermeneutics**, with particular emphasis on textual interpretation, conceptual analysis, contextualisation, and critical comparison. Gandhi's writings are examined not as isolated statements but as an interconnected body of philosophical reflection situated within the historical, religious, ethical, and political circumstances in which they were produced. Particular attention is given to the evolution of key Gandhian concepts and to the relationships among **Truth (Satya)**, **Non-violence (Ahimsa)**, **Satyagraha**, **Swaraj**, **religion**, **self-discipline**, **prayer**, **communal harmony**, and **constructive work**.

12.1 Primary Sources

The primary corpus consists principally of Gandhi's published writings, speeches, correspondence, and reflective works. The major primary sources include:

- *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*

- *Hind Swaraj*
- *Young India*
- *Harijan*
- *From Yeravda Mandir*
- *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*
- Gandhi's writings and speeches concerning religion, prayer, morality, interfaith relations, and communal harmony
- *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*

These texts are selected because they provide sustained and varied accounts of Gandhi's philosophical and ethical ideas across different periods of his intellectual and political development. The study also considers the chronological and contextual differences among these writings in order to identify both **continuities and developments** in Gandhi's thought.

12.2 Secondary Sources

The primary texts are interpreted in conversation with established scholarship on Gandhi and Gandhian philosophy. Particular attention is given to the works of scholars including **B. R. Nanda, Raghavan Iyer, Bhikhu Parekh, Anthony J. Parel, Judith M. Brown, Dennis Dalton, Uday S. Mehta, Akeel Bilgrami, Arvind Sharma, and Sushmita Nath**. These scholars represent diverse approaches to Gandhi's political philosophy, ethics, religion, nationalism, modernity, and social thought.

Secondary literature is used not merely for background information but also to identify major scholarly debates, interpretive disagreements, conceptual tensions, and competing understandings of Gandhi's philosophy. Where appropriate, divergent scholarly interpretations are critically compared rather than assuming a single authoritative reading of Gandhi.

Conclusion

preceding analysis has sought to reconstruct Gandhi's religious philosophy not as a conventional theology, a defence of institutional religion, or a merely private spirituality, but as an ethical and epistemological framework for negotiating the relationship between religious conviction, moral responsibility and democratic plurality. The central question of this paper was how a thinker who described himself as profoundly religious could nevertheless provide philosophical resources for a secular, democratic and religiously plural political order. The argument developed here suggests that the apparent contradiction dissolves once Gandhi's conception of religion is distinguished from religion understood primarily as dogma, institutional authority or political identity. For Gandhi, religion was fundamentally a quest for Truth and a discipline of ethical self-transformation. Its validity was therefore inseparable from the moral quality of the life through which it was expressed.

At the centre of this conception lies the relationship between **Satya (Truth) and Ahimsa (non-violence)**. Gandhi's religious philosophy cannot be adequately understood by treating these as independent ethical principles. Truth constitutes the object of the individual's moral and spiritual striving, while Ahimsa provides the discipline through which that striving must be pursued. The recognition that human beings are incapable of possessing Truth in its entirety imposes an epistemic limitation upon the individual and, consequently, an ethical obligation of humility. If one's apprehension of Truth is necessarily partial and fallible, then the conviction that one's own religious understanding is complete and universally authoritative becomes difficult to sustain. Gandhian epistemology therefore generates an ethics of

restraint: the pursuit of Truth requires openness to correction, dialogue with others and resistance to the temptation to impose one's understanding through coercion.

This relationship between epistemic humility and ethical responsibility provides the deeper philosophical basis of Gandhi's religious pluralism. His affirmation of the truth present in different religious traditions should not be reduced to the proposition that all religions are simply identical or equally valid in every respect. Nor does his position amount to a passive conception of tolerance in which religious communities merely refrain from interfering with one another. Rather, Gandhian pluralism demands a more substantive engagement with difference. It requires individuals to remain rooted in their own convictions while recognising that other traditions may contain insights capable of enlarging, correcting or deepening their own understanding. Religious plurality consequently becomes not merely a sociological fact to be tolerated but an ethical opportunity for self-examination and mutual learning.

This interpretation also enables a more nuanced understanding of Gandhi's relationship with secularism. Gandhi's religious orientation did not entail the establishment of a religious state or the privileging of one religious community within political institutions. His distinction between personal religion and the secular character of the state permits an important conceptual separation between **religion as a source of individual moral orientation and the state as an institution of equal citizenship**. Individuals may derive ethical commitments from religious traditions, while the political order must remain committed to equality, freedom of conscience and non-discrimination. Gandhi's position therefore occupies a distinctive space between two competing possibilities: the religious domination of political institutions and the complete exclusion of religiously grounded moral reasoning from public life.

This distinction is particularly important for understanding Gandhi's approach to politics. Gandhi did not seek to establish political authority through religious identity; rather, he sought to introduce ethical constraints into political action. In this sense, **Gandhian religious politics should be distinguished fundamentally from communal politics**. The former derives its political orientation from Truth, Ahimsa, justice, service and moral responsibility; the latter derives political mobilisation from collective religious identity, antagonism and boundary-making. Gandhi's invocation of religion was therefore not an attempt to transform political power into an instrument of religious domination. It was an attempt to subject political action—including one's own political action—to moral scrutiny.

The concept of **conscience** further strengthens this interpretation. Gandhi's emphasis on the inner voice, self-purification, repentance, prayer, fasting and self-restraint demonstrates that religious transformation begins with the self rather than with the coercive transformation of others. The moral agent is required first to examine his or her own motives, prejudices and attachments. This orientation is significant because it reverses a common tendency in political and religious conflict: the tendency to locate moral failure exclusively in the opposing community. Gandhian ethics instead demands self-interrogation before judgement of the other. Such an approach transforms religious pluralism from an institutional principle into a discipline of moral agency.

The contemporary significance of this framework becomes especially evident in contexts marked by religious polarisation, majoritarianism, identity politics, political violence and declining trust in democratic institutions. Contemporary conflicts are frequently intensified when religious identity becomes fused with political power and collective belonging is defined through opposition to an imagined or constructed "other." In such circumstances, Gandhi's insistence upon epistemic humility challenges the assumption that political or religious communities possess an exclusive monopoly over truth. His conception of Ahimsa similarly challenges the normalisation of dehumanising language, coercion and

violence as legitimate responses to disagreement. Satyagraha extends this ethical orientation into political life by proposing a form of resistance in which the opponent is not treated simply as an enemy to be destroyed but as another moral agent whose dignity remains significant.

The proposed **Gandhian Ethical-Pluralist Model** may therefore be understood as a conceptual sequence in which Truth generates epistemic humility; epistemic humility makes possible respect for religious difference; respect for difference creates conditions for non-violent dialogue; dialogue cultivates ethical citizenship; and ethical citizenship strengthens democratic pluralism. This model does not suggest that disagreement can or should be eliminated. Rather, it seeks to transform the *ethical conditions under which disagreement occurs*. The objective is not consensus at any cost but a form of democratic coexistence in which disagreement does not require dehumanisation, coercion or exclusion.

Such a reconstruction also demonstrates that Gandhi's contribution extends beyond the conventional literature on religious harmony. His significance lies not simply in his advocacy of peace between communities but in the philosophical connection he establishes between **epistemology, ethics, religion and politics**. The inability of human beings to possess complete Truth produces humility; humility creates openness to others; openness constrains the use of coercion; and non-coercive engagement becomes the basis for a more inclusive conception of political community. Religious pluralism, consequently, is not external to Gandhian moral philosophy but emerges organically from its understanding of human fallibility and ethical responsibility.

At the same time, a critical reconstruction must acknowledge the limitations and tensions within Gandhi's thought. His conception of religion emerged from a particular historical context shaped by colonialism, Indian civilisational traditions, anti-colonial nationalism and the communal conflicts of his time. Certain aspects of his thought—including his treatment of religious conversion, ascetic discipline, caste, community and the relationship between personal morality and political action—remain open to significant criticism. Moreover, the ethical demands of self-purification and non-violence cannot simply be translated into institutional mechanisms capable of resolving contemporary structural inequalities or complex forms of political violence. Gandhi therefore should not be interpreted as providing a complete institutional blueprint for the twenty-first-century democratic state.

His continuing relevance lies elsewhere. Gandhi provides a **normative vocabulary** through which the ethical foundations of plural democratic life can be reconsidered. His philosophy asks whether democratic citizenship can survive without moral restraint; whether religious conviction can coexist with the recognition of one's own fallibility; whether political resistance can remain non-dehumanising; and whether public disagreement can be conducted without converting opponents into enemies. These questions remain significant precisely because contemporary democratic crises cannot be resolved exclusively through institutional arrangements. Constitutional safeguards and legal protections are indispensable, but their effectiveness also depends upon the ethical dispositions of citizens and political actors.

The central argument of this paper can therefore be restated as follows: **Gandhi's religious philosophy neither requires the abandonment of religion for the sake of secularism nor permits religion to become an instrument of political domination. Instead, it seeks to transform religious commitment through Truth, Ahimsa, conscience, humility and self-discipline so that religious conviction becomes compatible with the dignity and freedom of others.** In this respect, Gandhian religious pluralism represents more than tolerance; it is an ethical practice of living with difference while remaining open to moral and epistemic transformation.

The enduring contribution of Gandhi, therefore, is not that he resolves the problem of religious plurality once and for all, but that he reframes the problem itself. The question is not simply how different religions can be made to coexist, but **what kind of moral subject is capable of living responsibly within religious difference**. Gandhi's answer is the self-critical, non-violent and truth-seeking individual who recognises the limits of his or her own understanding and refuses to convert conviction into coercion. Such an individual becomes the foundation of the ethical citizen; ethical citizenship, in turn, becomes a condition of meaningful democratic pluralism.

In an increasingly polarised world, where religious identity can be mobilised as a source of political exclusion and where disagreement is frequently transformed into hostility, this Gandhian insight retains considerable normative significance. **Religion beyond dogma**, in the Gandhian sense, does not mean religion without conviction. It means conviction disciplined by humility, faith constrained by conscience, politics restrained by non-violence, and the search for Truth conducted in the presence of others who may also possess a part of what one seeks. The contemporary value of Gandhi's religious philosophy consequently lies in its capacity to imagine a public ethic in which deep religious commitment and democratic plurality are not necessarily antagonistic. Rather, when mediated by Truth, Ahimsa and ethical self-restraint, religious conviction can become a resource for dialogue, responsibility and peaceful democratic coexistence rather than an instrument of exclusion and domination.

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