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Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony

Anthony Parel affords an entirely new perspective on the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. He explores how Gandhi connected the spiritual with the temporal. As Parel points out "being more things than one" is a good description of Gandhi, and with these words in mind, he shows how Gandhi, drawing on the time-honored Indian theory of the purusharthas or "the aims of life," fitted his ethical, political, aesthetic and religious ideas together. In this way Gandhi challenged the notion which prevailed in Indian society that a rift existed between the secular and the spiritual, the political and the contemplative life. Parel's revealing and insightful book shows how far-reaching were the effects of Gandhi's practical philosophy on Indian thought generally and how these have survived into the present.

ANTHONY J. PAREL is Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the University of Calgary. His previous publications include *Gandhi: "Hind Swaraj" and Other Writings* (ed., 1997) and *Gandhi, Freedom and Self-Rule* (ed., 2000).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo
Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press,
New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521867153

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First published 2006

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-86715-3 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-86715-0 hardback

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For Tara and Peter, Kamala and Evan, Aidan,
Asher, Caleb, Sasha, Aaron and Jacob.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
Part I The four aims of life	1
Introduction	3
1 Gandhi's reconstitution of the four aims	14
Part II Politics and economics	29
2 Civic nationalism	31
3 The state	52
4 The economy	68
Part III Dharma	85
5 Dharma as duty	87
6 Dharma as religion	99
7 Dharma as ethics	117
Part IV Pleasure	135
8 Celibacy and sexuality	137
9 Art and society	157

Cambridge University Press
0521867150 - Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony
Anthony J. Parel
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

viii Contents

Part V Spiritual liberation	175
10 The <i>Gita</i> and moksha	177
11 Conclusion: the political and the spiritual	195
<i>Bibliography</i>	206
<i>Glossary</i>	216
<i>Index</i>	219

Preface

As a thinker and a man of action, Mahatma Gandhi had always kept two great aims in view. All that he did for India and for the world are best understood when seen in the light of those two aims. The first was to demonstrate through his life and work that there was a basic harmony underlying all the fundamental human strivings – the strivings for wealth, power, pleasure, ethical goodness, beauty, and spiritual transcendence. In so far as they were grounded in the quest for truth and freedom, there was unity in their diversity. In an age that gives perhaps undue importance to the compartmentalization of life-issues, and to the resulting fragmentation of life-goals, Gandhi's approach was truly exemplary.

His second aim was to forge a moral link between the contemplative life and the modern secular life as it was lived in the fields of economics and politics. He sought to do this at a time in human history when modern economic and political theories, in concert with modern science, were presenting themselves as the master theories of human action, marginalizing spiritual values. Modern secularism seemed to be bent on making the same mistake that ancient spirituality had made. The mistake was to assume that the secular interests and spiritual aspirations could be pursued only at each other's expense.

Modern secularism seemed to him to place its complete faith in the assumed power of science, economics and politics to change people's lives and to move them forward to a better future. It seemed to ignore, perhaps even deny the need for a healthy spiritual life and for the public recognition of the sacred – to complement sound economics, wise legislation, free elections and fair adjudication. Hence its skepticism of, if not outright hostility towards, values that transcend science, economics, and politics. Gandhi's theory of the four purusharthas (the aims of life), with its focus on the need to bring a working harmony between the political, economic, ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual values, was meant to remedy what he saw as the malaise of modern secularism. He sought to end the historic hostility between material interests and spiritual aspirations. In today's world, he insisted, humanity could end this hostility only if people

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0521867150 - Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony

Anthony J. Parel

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x Preface

everywhere came to believe that science, politics and economics could solve some, but not all, of its problems.

And he had the right credentials to undertake this daunting task. Apart from the deep understanding that he had of his own traditions, he also had a sound grasp of the radically secular direction of much of modern thought. Rather than reject secularism, however, he sought to maintain a creative dialogue with it in the hope of arriving at a healthy common ground. In his view what the modern world needed most was a working harmony between secular pursuits and spiritual pursuits. Peace within the individual, and peace between states, between religions, and between civilizations depended, ultimately, on this harmony.

Indians, therefore, can and ought to learn from Gandhi the art of absorbing such modern economic and political values as they need without the fear of losing their identity and what is truly valuable in their cultural patrimony. They can also learn that bringing a balance between secularism and spirituality means, at the present time, the removal of the injustices under which the poor, especially the Dalits (the so-called Untouchables) suffer, the gender gap that still handicaps women, and the religious antagonism that still vitiates human relations. Gandhi's philosophy requires nothing short of the transformation of Indian society along these three lines.

The others, especially those from the West (from which Gandhi had absorbed so much) and from the world of Islam can also learn from him how to harmonize the secular and the spiritual in their own respective civilizations. He had little doubt that the gradual stifling of the yearning for the transcendent by modern Western civilization was a worse calamity for humanity than was the stifling of the secular interests by the ancient Eastern civilizations. The harmony that he was seeking to introduce was not only between the different civilizations of today, and between selected elements of the old and the new, but also between the secular and spiritual yearnings within the modern soul. Without seeking to resolve the spiritual crisis which individuals in all civilizations experience today, it was vain to attempt to resolve the outer crisis of "the clash of civilizations."

As this is a work heavily dependent on Indian philosophical vocabulary, I have used the following words without italicizing them: atman, artha, Dalit(s), dharma, kama, moksha, purusha, purushartha, satyagraha and swaraj. I have done this not without hesitation. However, I was greatly encouraged by the fact that the "Indian English Supplement" of the fifth edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (1996) had recognized all the above-listed words, except purushartha.

Cambridge University Press
0521867150 - Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony
Anthony J. Parel
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Preface

xi

How long it will take the last of these terms to be accepted as an English word is anyone's guess. Simon Winchester, the author of the delightful *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2003), has described for us the process by which foreign words eventually come to be accepted by the English language. I hope that the way I have used this word in this work will contribute in a humble way to its eventual acceptance by the OED. Should that happen, it would indeed be a fitting tribute to Gandhi.

Acknowledgments

In writing this book I had received over the years very valuable help from friends and colleagues, and it gives me great pleasure to acknowledge it here. It will be obvious to anyone who reads this book carefully how much it owes to other scholars who have cultivated the Gandhi field so fruitfully. I mention with pleasure and gratitude the names of my friends Judith Brown, Margaret Chatterjee, Antony Copley, Dennis Dalton, Ashis Nandy, Thomas Pantham, Bhikhu Parekh, and Ronald Terchek.

This book had its origin in a series of lectures that I gave in Cambridge University in the Lent term of 1995, under the auspices of the Hinduja Institute of Indic Research. I am very grateful to Julius Lipner, the then director of that Institute, for arranging for the lectures and for his interest in my Gandhi research. Its final version was presented as a series of seminars at the Liverpool Hope University College in October 2004. I thank very warmly Gerald Pillay, the Rector, and Terry Phillips, the Dean of that College, for inviting me to their wonderful institution. The Calgary Institute for the Humanities of the University of Calgary was very generous in offering me a Senior Fellowship for the academic year 1995–96. I hereby express my deep appreciation to Jane H. Kelly, its then director. The financial assistance to meet the publication costs given by Douglas Peers, Associate Dean of Social Sciences, and the indexing assistance given by Anita Singh, a political scientist, both of the University of Calgary, are very gratefully acknowledged. During the years 2000–2005, Fred Dallmayr of the University of Notre Dame, Farah Godrej of Georgetown University, and the Comparative Political Philosophy group active in the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association have been very supportive of my ventures into the field of Gandhi interpretation. I take this opportunity to thank each one of these friendly colleagues.

Christopher K. Chapple's doctoral thesis, "The Concept of Will (Paurusa) in *Yogavasishtha*," and his additional comments sent in writing were indispensable for my understanding of the philosophy of *Yogavasishtha*. I record my gratitude for his help and permission to cite

Cambridge University Press
0521867150 - Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony
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Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xiii

from his dissertation. Antony Copley of the University of Kent, John Sayer Martin of the University of Calgary, and Ronald Terchek of the University of Maryland went out of their way to find time to read an earlier version of this book. Their corrections, criticisms, queries, and suggestions helped greatly in the improvement of the text. The imperfections that remain are due entirely to my own limitations. To each of these friends I express my deep appreciation.

As always, Rolande has been very supportive of my seemingly endless preoccupation with Gandhi, for which I remain very thankful. Now that Gandhi belongs to the future generations, I dedicate this book to Tara and Kamala, my daughters, and their families – the generations nearest and dearest to me.

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A rare studio photograph of Gandhi taken in 1931 in London at the request of Lord Irwin, Earl of Halifax, and Viceroy, 1926–1931. Copyright Vitalbhai Jhaveril Gandhi Serve, Berlin.