

GANDHI'S DEVOTIONAL POLITICAL THOUGHT

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Abstract

The political thought of Mohandas K. Gandhi has been increasingly used as a paradigmatic example of hybrid political thought that developed out of a cross-cultural dialogue of eastern and western influences. With a novel unpacking of this hybridity, this article focuses on the conceptual influences that Gandhi explicitly stressed in his autobiography and other writings, particularly the works of Leo Tolstoy and the Bhagavad Gītā. This new tracing of influence in the development of Gandhi's thought alters the substantive thrust of Gandhi's thought away from more familiar quasi-liberal interpretations and towards a far more substantive *bhakti* or devotional understanding of politics. The analysis reveals a conception of politics that is not pragmatic in its use of non-violence, but instead points to a devotional focus on cultivating the self (*ātman*), ultimately dissolving the public/private distinction that many readings of Gandhi's thought depend upon.

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Major interpretations of Gandhi's philosophical and political thought claim that his conceptual framework developed through a dialogue between Hindu traditions and western political institutions, resulting in a distinctly hybrid framework.¹ While this idea of Gandhi as a hybrid thinker is promising, an exegetical analysis of his thought reveals his conceptual framework did not arise from pragmatic political interactions with western style institutions, but rather from a serious engagement with western and Hindu religious thought. While many acknowledge the hybrid aspect of Gandhi's thought, no comprehensive attempt has been made to unpack this hybridity in a systematic fashion. This article thoroughly investigates his hybridity to uncover Gandhi's coherent system of thought, which is best understood as *bhakti* or devotional.

Our unpacking of the development of Gandhi's political thought begins with Leo Tolstoy's peculiar Christianity, requiring an examination of the biographical and conceptual evidence of Tolstoy's powerful influence on Gandhi, especially on the latter's understandings of truth and *ahimsā* (non-violence). Following our analysis of Tolstoy, we explore the Hindu influences on Gandhi. While Tolstoy's thought heavily influences Gandhi's approach to and interpretation of the Bhagavad Gītā, Gandhi creatively fuses these influences with concepts found in the Gītā, which results in more sophisticated hybrid conceptions of the *ātman* (self), *satyāgraha* (non-violent resistance), *swarāj* (self-rule), and *Ramarajya* (the kingdom of God). These novel conceptualizations alter the substantive thrust of Gandhi's thought away from more familiar quasi-liberal formulations and towards a *bhakti* or devotional conception of politics.²

Gandhi: An Exemplary Case of Hybridity

A brief survey of notable positions regarding the cultural orientation of Gandhi's political thought can help to situate how Gandhi's political thought has been misread. Existing positions

can be parsed into three general categories: the first reads him predominantly as a western thinker, the second as an Indian-Hindu thinker, and the third as a cross-culturally hybrid thinker. A. L. Herman places Gandhi in the first category, arguing that he was a fundamentally non-Indian-Hindu thinker whose philosophy of *satyāgraha* was fundamentally western in origin and drawn entirely from his reading of Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* and Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*.³ In contrast, A. L. Basham argues that Gandhi's political thought is fully grounded in Hindu traditions: "the fundamental concept of Gandhi's philosophy [i.e. *satya*, or truth] owes nothing to Western sources."⁴

Both of these readings are deeply flawed. A more accurate reading of Gandhi is found in a third position that emphasizes cross-cultural aspects of his political thought.⁵ Anthony Parel and Bhikhu Parekh are well-known proponents of this position. On the one hand, Parekh reads Gandhi as a hybrid political thinker, arguing that "Gandhi's political theory cuts across several moral, religious and philosophical traditions and rests on an unusually broad philosophical foundation, showing . . . the rich harvest that can be garnered from . . . cross-cultural dialogue."⁶ Parekh's interpretation foreshadows ours by explaining that Gandhi's "biculturally grounded and bilingually articulated political theory shows one way in which a global political theory required by the increasing interdependent world might be constructed."⁷ On the other hand, Parekh claims that Gandhi "was one of the first non-Western thinkers of the modern age to develop a political theory grounded in the *unique experiences* and articulated in terms of the *indigenous philosophical vocabulary* of his country."⁸ While this interpretation may appear compelling at the outset, one could ask whether Parekh can have it both ways. Does developing a political theory "grounded in . . . unique experiences" that uses the "indigenous philosophical vocabulary" of one's country also mean that one is employing or relying upon indigenous philosophical

categories and concepts? Are we talking about mere vocabulary, or conceptual bedrock? Parekh does not appear to provide a clear answer to this question. We argue Gandhi's cross-culturally hybrid thought is deeply novel in its fusion of concepts from multiple traditions. It therefore cannot be fully appreciated so long as one remains within the scope of Parekh's interpretation.

Similarly, Anthony Parel provides two useful, though flawed, analytic frameworks with which to approach Gandhi's political thought.⁹ Parel sets the stage for his first frame in this way: "[the] Indian theory of the *purusharthas* (the aims of life) . . . opens the vast storehouse of Gandhian ideas [and] enables us to enter a truly Indian intellectual edifice."¹⁰ This analytic frame is the Indian theory of the *puruṣārthas*, also known as the four overarching goals of human life.¹¹ Building upon K. J. Shah,¹² Parel argues that Gandhi's political thought reconstituted and clarified the mutually harmonious relationship between the *puruṣārthas*, and did so in an innovative fashion.¹³ In subsequent work Parel better places Gandhi in the literature by situating Gandhi's canonical updates within the broader historical framework of ancient Indian political thought. Accordingly, Parel argues that an older canon of Indian political thought can be identified at least since the time of Kauṭilya's *Arthśāstra* (4th cent. BCE - 4th cent. CE) and that Gandhi "updated [this] old Indian canon and made the innovated version suitable for a recognizably Indian way of thinking about modern politics."¹⁴ More recently, he has invoked a second frame with a distinction between "Indian political thought and political thought in India."¹⁵ In this frame he argues that two distinct genres of political thought emerged in India between the middle of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, each with its own intellectual framework attended by its characteristic ideas and assumptions "about reality, the cosmos, and the place that humans occupy in it."¹⁶ The first genre, which he calls "political thought in India," entails an entirely western intellectual framework that had been adopted by two key groups:

radical Indian nationalists and Indian Marxists and Neo-Marxists.¹⁷ The second genre, which he calls “Indian political thought,” entails a distinctly Indian intellectual framework—albeit one that was updated by thinkers such as Gandhi.¹⁸ Thus Parel argues Gandhi’s thought developed primarily through a dialogue between particular Indian traditions and contemporary western-style thinkers in India.

Though Gandhi's hybridity is widely acknowledged, few have examined this relationship in significant depth. For example, Satish Sharma undertakes an examination of Leo Tolstoy as one of Gandhi’s teachers,¹⁹ but merely concludes that “Tolstoy’s *Kingdom* and thought had great impact on Gandhi,” without explaining the precise nature of this impact.²⁰ Martin Green also examines similarities and influences between Tolstoy and Gandhi, but limits himself to biographical investigations focused primarily on the historical context surrounding the two, without a conceptual analysis of Gandhi’s central political ideas.²¹ Thus we are left with the question about the exact nature and depth of this “impact” on central Gandhian concepts.

Tolstoy’s Influence on Gandhi

Gandhi’s biography provides strong reasons for suggesting a minimal significance of Hindu traditions for Gandhi’s early political and religious thought.²² As a youth, he recalls readings of the Bhagavad Gītā as “uninspiring,”²³ with his first serious exposure to the Gītā in English translation during his second year in England, around 1890.²⁴ He did not make it a subject of daily study for some time after that, and suggested his own understanding of Sanskrit was insufficient to read it in the original.²⁵ Gandhi made no real attempt to rectify this lack of knowledge over the next decade, recalling in 1902 that his “Sanskrit study was not much to speak of, and that . . . [his] . . . acquaintance with the translations [of the Gītā] was of the

slightest.”²⁶ It was not until 1918, after a near death experience, that Gandhi begins to “devote all . . . waking hours to listening to the Gītā.”²⁷ His first serious lectures on the Gītā did not appear until 1920.

Instead, Gandhi’s first serious intellectual engagement involved the non-fiction essays of Tolstoy prior to his studies of the Gītā. During his time in England from 1888-1891, three decades prior to his Gītā lectures, a number of Christians attempted to convert Gandhi. Gandhi was presented with a copy of Tolstoy’s *Kingdom of God is Within You*, which “overwhelmed” him.²⁸ Over the following years, he went on to make “an intensive study of Tolstoy’s books,” which included *The Gospels in Brief* and *What to Do?*, and “other books,” likely including *What I Believe*, the precursor to *The Kingdom of God*.²⁹ Gandhi himself would repeatedly claim these readings made a “deep” and “abiding” impression on him, so much so that he would consistently include Tolstoy among the moderns who “left a deep impress on . . . [his] . . . life and captivated” him.³⁰ Gandhi’s engagement with Tolstoy did not stop with his books, as the two exchanged a number of letters late in Tolstoy’s life. Gandhi initiated these letters in an attempt to gain permission to reprint Tolstoy’s *Letter to a Hindu*, with some modifications, though Tolstoy himself resisted these changes.³¹

Of the various concepts that Gandhi inherits from Tolstoy, truth is the most significant. Contrary to Basham (and to a lesser extent, Parekh and Parel), Gandhi did not inherit his early conceptual framework from Hindu traditions, especially when it comes to his understanding of truth. In both *What I Believe* and the *Kingdom of God* Tolstoy identifies heavily with the concept of truth that Gandhi mirrors. While Tolstoy identifies Christianity as the religion of truth, it is important to note that this does not mean that he believes Christians are correct in their beliefs. Rather, the practice of Christianity, on Tolstoy’s account, is “the recognition of truth and

following it, in a greater and greater attainment of truth.”³² Truth is not understood as being discovered or revealed through reason or the proper divine text, but instead Tolstoy asserts truth is experienced. By experiencing a reduction in suffering in particular, Tolstoy believes an individual will experience the truth of the doctrine. To put this another way, if following a doctrine reduces suffering, then the doctrine must be true. The only way to know the truth of a doctrine is through experimentation and experience, not through abstract rational proofs.

Tolstoy does not limit this understanding to Christianity and argues that Hinduism also has true elements to it. Tolstoy places this line from Kṛṣṇa early on in the *Letter*: “Whenever thou feelest that thy feet are becoming entangled in the interlaced roots of life, know that thou has strayed from the path to which I beckon thee: for I have placed thee in broad, smooth paths, which are strewn with flowers. I have put a light before thee, which thou canst follow and thus run without stumbling.”³³ With this Tolstoy suggests the path towards truth is one that ought to be easy to walk, even if *finding* the path itself may be exceptionally difficult. This is not a new idea in Tolstoy’s thought and can be seen in *What I Believe*, where Tolstoy suggests that Christ has provided a view of the path that will lead away from misery, “even in the midst of those who do not” follow that same path.³⁴ Through experiencing a reduction in suffering by following true doctrine, whether it be Christian, Hindu, or otherwise, Tolstoy believes an individual will experience the truth of the doctrine. Tolstoy’s Kṛṣṇa, almost identical to Tolstoy's Christ, suggests if life becomes such that one’s feet become metaphorically entangled and make it harder to live, then one knows one is headed down the wrong path. This is known because it is experienced.

Gandhi largely accepts this formulation of truth from Tolstoy. In titling his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi indicates he understands truth as

attained through experimentation and not through rational thought or divine revelation. For Gandhi, truth “is the sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles,” including “non-violence, celibacy and other principles of conduct.”³⁵ Furthermore, “truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God.”³⁶ Quite similar to Tolstoy, Gandhi remarks, “In the march towards Truth, anger, selfishness, hatred, etc., naturally give way, for otherwise Truth would be impossible to attain,”³⁷ indicating that the path of truth is one that leads away from suffering generally. This Tolstoyan conception of truth takes center stage for Gandhi’s thought insofar as it provides the foundation for his formulation of *ahimsā*, and ultimately, for God.

Ahimsā, which is usually translated as universal non-violence, including non-violence to animals, is intimately connected to Gandhi’s Tolstoyan use of the concept of truth. For Gandhi, the way to attain—and experience—truth is through *ahimsā*. In his autobiography he remarks, “the only means for the realization of Truth is Ahimsa,”³⁸ but notes it “seems to me that I understand the ideal of truth better than that of Ahimsa, and my experience tells me that, if I let go my hold of truth, I shall never be able to solve the riddle of Ahimsa.”³⁹ Paradoxically, *ahimsā* leads Gandhi to the experience of truth, but truth seems necessary to make sense of *ahimsā*. This is, at the very least, as non-rational (or even anti-rational) as Tolstoy’s own accounts of truth.

For Tolstoy, the experienced truth of Christ and Kṛṣṇa is that God is love. Although he associates this with the God discussed by Christ, this God should not be mistaken as the God of the Old Testament. He remarks, “People who believe in a wicked and senseless God—who has cursed the human race and devoted his own Son to sacrifice, and a part of mankind to eternal torment—cannot believe in the God of love.”⁴⁰ In doing so, Tolstoy is suggesting that the God of

the Old Testament is not the God that Christ is discussing.⁴¹ For Tolstoy, this means that any religious or philosophical thinker who is discussing love, or gods associated with love, can be understood as talking about the true God. This should not be understood as an inherently Christian God.

Likewise for Gandhi, God is truth, and truth is intimately tied to universal love. In his autobiography he states, “My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth.”⁴² He further explains, “To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest creation as oneself.”⁴³ There is a strong reason to believe Gandhi found the linkage between truth, God, and love in Tolstoy when he remarks, “I made too an intensive study of Tolstoy’s books. The Gospels in Brief, What to Do? and other books made a deep impression on me. I began to realize more and more the infinite possibilities of universal love.”⁴⁴ As late as 1928, Gandhi continued to understand these terms as deeply linked, remarking, “To follow truth, the only right path in this world is that of non-violence. Non-violence means an ocean of love.”⁴⁵

This conception of truth is so central to Gandhi’s thought that he derives the Gujarati word for his non-violent movement, *satyāgraha*, from the word *sadagraha*, which Gandhi breaks down as *sat*=truth, *agraha*=firmness.⁴⁶ The term was the result of a contest that Gandhi ran through *Indian Opinion* in order to provide a more appropriate Indian word for passive resistance. Here we see, in explicit contrast to Basham,⁴⁷ Gandhi’s “truth” was not derived from a reading of Hindu traditions. Prior to the contest, Gandhi primarily used the English phrase “passive resistance,” which he eventually viewed to be “too narrowly construed.”⁴⁸ Therefore, truth, in a Tolstoyan understanding, takes center stage in his political thought and action. Gandhi’s original formulation of *satyāgraha* does not originate from a Hindu tradition or concept at all, but rather

from Tolstoy's reading of Christ. Gandhi goes so far as to say that the Hindu conception of *dharma* is insufficient when compared to a Tolstoyan conception of love. In 1928 he explains, "Such non-violence is not limited to refraining from killing disabled creatures. It may be *dharma* not to kill them, but love goes infinitely further than that."⁴⁹

However, as we will see below, one cannot simply reduce Gandhi to a restatement of Tolstoy. Extensive portions of Gandhi's thought cannot be traced back to Tolstoy, but instead to an entirely different tradition, best associated with Gandhi's studies of the *Gītā*. While *satyāgraha* is heavily (though not exclusively) indebted to Tolstoy's thought, it is more difficult to locate the origin of some of Gandhi's other major concepts within Western traditions, especially when we begin to talk of concepts such as *ātman*, *swarāj*, and *Ramarajya*. Ultimately, Gandhi's Tolstoyan influences affect his reading of the *Gītā*, and his reading of the *Gītā* refines and modifies his Tolstoyan concepts.

Hindu Influences on Gandhi and *Bhakti* Political Philosophy

Beginning in the mid-1920s Gandhi shows increasing interest in Hindu ideas and texts, and in particular, the Bhagavad *Gītā*.⁵⁰ This is apparent not only in Gandhi's increasingly detailed comments on the *Gītā* in *The Story of My Experiments With Truth* and as editor of journals such as *Navajivan*,⁵¹ but especially in his lectures on the *Gītā* given at the Satyagraha Ashram, Ahmedabad (India), in 1926. Between February and November of 1926, Gandhi withdrew from mass political activity and translated the *Gītā* from Sanskrit into his native Gujarati.⁵² While his orientation to the *Gītā* by this point in his life would be prefigured in many ways by his Tolstoyan influences, distinct Hindu ideas also begin to emerge in Gandhi's thought. For example, he was influenced by Gokhale, Rajchandra Ravjibhai Mehta, and the *Gītā*'s emphasis on *dharma* (law,

duty), and his position bears philosophical similarities to Rāmānuja’s (ca. 1017-1137) Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta (qualified non-dualist) position.⁵³

Most pertinent to our argument here, Gandhi’s interpretation of the Gītā shows distinct similarities to Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophical interpretation insofar as it emphasizes the importance of the category of devotion (*bhakti*) in relation to God (Kṛṣṇa). Both Rāmānuja and Gandhi understand the Gītā to privilege devotion to God as the final emancipatory path to *mokṣa*, or liberation. In addition, Gandhi’s interpretation coheres with both Śāṅkara’s (8-9th cent. CE) and Rāmānuja’s insofar as he understands an empirical plurality of transmigrating selves (*ātman*s).⁵⁴ We make these points to show that Gandhi’s interpretation of the Gītā, while unique in some respects, shows important similarities with those of traditional Hindu exegetes. In particular, Gandhi’s understanding of the self (*ātman*) and *bhakti* (devotion) were crucial in the development of his political thought.

The Self

The metaphysics of the self in the Gītā will help us clarify Gandhi’s own understanding of this concept. The Gītā poses a distinction between the unmanifest and transcendent absolute (*brahman*) and primal matter or material nature (*prakṛti*). According to the evolutes or modes of *prakṛti*, the *ātman* must rule or have control over the *buddhi* (higher mind, intellect), which must then rule over the lower faculties such as the mind (*manas*) and sense faculties (*indriyas*) such as sight, hearing, and touch. The Gītā explains: “They say that the senses (*indriya*) are higher. The mind (*manas*) is higher than the senses. While the intellect (*buddhi*) is higher than the mind, he (the *dehin*, *ātman*, soul or self) is higher than the intellect.”⁵⁵ One thus finds a basic hierarchical relationship between the different aspects of the self, whereby the *ātman* should rule over the *buddhi*, *manas*, and *indriyas*. These concepts help elucidate the basic Hindu metaphysical

framework that influences Gandhi's religious thought, especially starting in the mid-1920s.

When examined in more detail, however, Gandhi poses a rather complex but coherent understanding of the individual self (*ātman*) in his writings, which he variously referred to as heart, soul, or spirit. According to Gandhi the *ātman* is unborn, indestructible, and most importantly, distinct yet connected to other beings within the broader world.⁵⁶ Gandhi explains, "The world is not separate from us or we from the world. All are connected with one another in their inmost essence."⁵⁷ The *ātman*'s compassionate and non-violent nature would partly stem from this underlying sense of connectedness.⁵⁸ At its most fundamental level, the soul is a metaphysical or spiritual entity and transcends the body.⁵⁹ In contrast to the *ātman*, the *jīva* is merely a deficient mode of the soul whereby individual creatures only see themselves as separate from other creatures and not interconnected through the universal soul, or God.⁶⁰ This point then raises Gandhi's distinction between a universal and individualized human *ātman*.⁶¹ The latter, he explains, transmigrates after death and does not die with the physical body's death.⁶² Nevertheless, it is generally asleep in us and needs to be reawakened.⁶³ When awoken, it is powerful and we have a responsibility to realize and cultivate its power.⁶⁴

An individualized *ātman* thus dwells in each one of us, and knowledge of God or truth can only be attained by better understanding and accessing our *ātman*. In turn, this is only possible through faith or devotion, which then leads to first-hand experience of our *ātman* and its relationship to the whole, in a way that is reminiscent of Tolstoy's experience of truth.⁶⁵ Accordingly, each of us also possesses a *svadharma* (one's own duty), which we are responsible for identifying and adhering to in a devoted fashion.⁶⁶ While these characteristics of the *ātman* are all spiritual in nature, Gandhi also explains that to access and realize the *ātman*'s reality and power, we must "forget the body" and "renounce the desire for hoarding."⁶⁷ This is because the

desire for material objects and attaching ourselves to the fruit of our actions pushes us to neglect the underlying reality that the body is not the ultimate “doer” of the actions.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Gandhi reminds us that the body does have great value because it is the house of the *ātman* and ultimately of God: “And thus, for the purity of the *atman*, purity of the body is also essential [because] ‘A pure *atman* can dwell only in a pure body.’”⁶⁹ Ultimately, the *ātman* serves as the underlying agent and basis for individual agency on both a personal and political level: “I do not deliver speeches merely for the pleasure of it. I do what the *atman* bids me to do.”⁷⁰

We can now examine how this understanding of the self relates to Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita conception of the self, including ideas found in the *Brahmasūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa. Gandhi believes the self is intimately connected to God and God’s creative capacity: “I believe God to be creative as well as non-creative. This too is the result of my acceptance of the doctrine of the manyness of reality. From the platform of the Jains I prove the non-creative aspect of God, and from that of Ramanuja the creative aspect.”⁷¹ Gandhi thus aligns himself with Rāmānuja, who allows for the reality of individual selves and maintains that these selves are individualized, creative manifestations, modes, or aspects of God—or of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, if we invoke Gandhi’s Hindu-devotional side. As Richard King explains, for Rāmānuja individual selves are real, not illusory, modes (*prakāra*) of *brahman* and “are effected by their own actions, intentions and desires and are reincarnated accordingly.”⁷² As explained above, Gandhi posits both a universal soul (God) and individualized human souls (*ātmans*). In a similar fashion, Rāmānuja explains that *brahman*—which is *īśvara*, Lord, and the creator—is the one supreme self, or *paramātman*. This one supreme, pure self (for it is untainted by *karma* and impurity) transforms itself into individual selves, or *jīvātman*s, through the creative process of *māyā*. Therefore, the creator is connected to all its creations or manifestations, and vice versa, which is the type of reciprocal

connectedness between God, human beings, and all living beings that Gandhi defends.⁷³ As Surendranath Dasgupta states, “So the one Brahman has transformed himself into the world, and the many souls, being particular states of Him, are at once one with Him and yet have a real existence as His parts or states.”⁷⁴ Gandhi invokes this sort of creative transformation process when he claims that God or *brahman* is the ultimate “doer” of things.⁷⁵ However, this conception of God and the individual self does not entail a lack of individual agency. Gandhi maintains that we can speak of “our” *ātman*s and *svadharmas*,⁷⁶ and thus individual duties or responsibilities to cultivate our true “soul-power.” This position will have significant political implications.

In addition, the *Brahmasūtra* puts forth the doctrine of the absolute as “difference-cum-non-difference,” or *bhedābheda-vāda*, which explains the relationship between an individual self (*ātman*) and the absolute (*brahman*).⁷⁷ Accordingly, each *ātman* is part (*aṁśa*) of *brahman*,⁷⁸ which is the *ātman*’s creative cause. As the *Brahmasūtra* explains, a distinction (*bheda*) thus remains between the plurality of individual *ātman*s and the unmanifest absolute (*brahman*). This understanding resembles Gandhi’s “drop in the ocean” metaphor insofar as one can distinguish the individual parts (drops of water) once they have manifestly emerged from an absolute source (the ocean) that possesses no such manifest distinctions.⁷⁹ As Gandhi suggests, the ocean (*brahman*) cannot exist in an individualized, manifest form except through the drops of water (*ātman*s). Their existence is fundamentally co-dependent. This “drop/ocean” conception thus resembles the doctrine found in the *Brahmasūtra*, whereby *brahman* (or God) is an essentially part-less whole, though not manifestly part-less, and dwells in each individual self as a sort of unaffected “cosmic soul.” Individual manifest selves or *ātman*s, on the other hand, are affected by *karma* and impurities, and thus responsible for working out their own “karmic residue.”⁸⁰ Here one can envision an individual drop of water working its way through the water cycle: first

becoming manifest through evaporation, falling as rain, and subsequently responsible for finding its way through the dirt and traveling back to the ocean by way of muddy streams and rivers. As King explains about Rāmānuja’s position on the *Brahmasūtra*, “The apparent imperfections and injustices (*vaiṣamya*) of the world . . . are not attributable to *brahman* since they are dependent upon the actions (*prayatna*) of individual selves.”⁸¹ Therefore, these individual selves are not absolutely identical with *brahman* and are responsible for their own actions and *svadharmas*—we might say “paths back to the ocean.”

While Gandhi has his *advaita* moments in his writings and clearly expresses belief in some sort of underlying oneness or non-dualism,⁸² he ultimately falls closer to the qualified non-dualist position of Rāmānuja, and thus on the Viśiṣṭādvaita side of the Vedānta spectrum. In addition, just as Rāmānuja interprets the Lord in the *Brahmasūtra* as *saguṇa brahman*, or *brahman* endowed with personal qualities and attributes, Gandhi’s conception of God is more personal and qualified in nature—one thinks of his constant references to Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā* and Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. This diverges from the non-dualist (*advaita*) idea that individual selves are ultimately non-different from *brahman*. Thus Gandhi does not posit absolute metaphysical unity and identity between individual *ātman*s and *brahman*, or God.

Devotion

Having clarified Gandhi’s conception of the self and individual agency, its relation to God, and its similarity to Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta position, we can now examine the concept of *bhakti*, or devotion. The concept of devotion, or faith, also played a significant role in the development of Gandhi’s normative political thought. Beginning with his reading of the *Gītā*, Gandhi believes the most important path leading to *mokṣa* (liberation) from *saṃsāra* (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth) is *bhakti-yoga*, or the path of devotion to god, which entails engaging in

devotional practices and honoring God (or Kṛṣṇa in the Gītā's case).⁸³ Again, Gandhi concurs with Rāmānuja that the paths of knowledge (*jñānayoga*) and action (*karmayoga*) find fulfillment in the path of devotion to the Lord (*bhaktiyoga*) as the best means of achieving liberation (*mokṣa*), as we see in the Gītā.⁸⁴ In 1925, Gandhi explains: “[I]nstead of talking about *mukti* all the time we should spend our time in *bhakti*. Without *bhakti* there can be no deliverance. Only he, therefore, wins deliverance who is devoted to duty and fills his heart with love of God.”⁸⁵ Gandhi also distinguishes between faith and reason or logic, claiming that each belongs to a different sphere and that faith alone “helps us to cultivate inner knowledge, self-knowledge, and thus leads to inner purity.”⁸⁶ He clearly privileges the “inner world,” where faith and devotion provide the correct path to understanding and purifying that world. This is the world of the *ātman*, which then points toward and allows us to glimpse God and truth. Here Gandhi claims that “the pursuit of Truth is true *bhakti*, devotion. . . . It is the path that leads to God.”⁸⁷ God and truth, much like for Tolstoy, are intimately connected for Gandhi: “Hence we know God as *Sat-chit-ananda*, one who combines in Himself Truth, knowledge and bliss. Devotion to this Truth is the sole justification for our existence. All our activities should be centered in truth.”⁸⁸ Devotion thus leads to the very center of what is most important in Gandhi's thought: the soul, truth, and God. Theistic Hinduism and religion are fundamentally intertwined with Gandhi's political activism, as he further explains: “[H]e alone can offer *satyagraha* who has true faith in religion But anyone who has true religion and faith in him can offer *satyagraha*.”⁸⁹ To be a *satyagrahi* one must first pursue truth and have faith in truth.⁹⁰

Within this inner world whose sole inroad is faith and devotion, Gandhi also posits a duality between good and evil, and this is where his devotion to Rāma clearly surfaces. Gandhi associates goodness, truth, and sovereignty in the heart with Rāma, whom he claims is always

battling with Rāvaṇa:

Rama . . . dwells in our heart and is its sovereign master. The Rama dwelling within us is continuously waging war against the Ravana. Ravana too is the terrible form given to the base desires which dwell within us. Rama is the very embodiment of compassion. . . .

Rama the eternal is a form of *Brahman*, the image of truth and non-violence.⁹¹

Elsewhere Gandhi also equates Truth to God, *brahman*, and Rāma.⁹² In this statement above we can glean a few important points. First, the most important action takes place in the heart or inner world, which Gandhi is most concerned about, even when it comes to politics. The proper “soul-order” must precede “state-order” for Gandhi, as the state of our politics will ultimately reflect the state and order of our souls. Second, Rama is associated with hierarchical sovereignty while Ravana is associated with “base desires,” and this hierarchical relationship will be intimately tied to his understanding of ruling. Third, we see further evidence of Tolstoy’s influence regarding the importance of truth, love and compassion. Finally, we can identify another central facet of Gandhi’s devotional thought: embodiment.

The claim that the eternal Rāma is a form or embodiment of *brahman* exposes yet another similarity between Gandhi and Rāmānuja along theistic Hindu lines. In Vaiṣṇava theology, lord Viṣṇu manifests himself in various *avatāras*, or divine incarnations. Accordingly, the Supreme Self becomes embodied in its *avatāras*, with Rāma and Kṛṣṇa being two of the most famous embodiments. As King points out, under the influence of Pañcarātra theology, one way in which Rāmānuja interprets the *paramātmān* (supreme Self, or Lord) is by using an analogy of the “body-embodied relationship” (*śarītra-śarīri-bhāva*).⁹³ As Viṣṇu ensouls the embodied Rāma, so *brahman* ensouls the various *ātmans* and individual *ātmans* ensoul individual bodies. This coheres with Gandhi’s claim that Rāma is an embodied form of *brahman*, with the latter being

the creative wellspring of the individual *ātman*s discussed above that serve as the basis for individual agency. This devotional-theological point also coheres with the fact that Gandhi consistently mentions Rāma and Kṛṣṇa as important objects of devotion for himself and other Hindus in India.

Bhakti Political Philosophy

This analysis of Gandhi's hybridity, along with his understanding of the self and devotion, leads us to a new understanding of his political thought along devotional lines and what we call a *bhakti* political philosophy. This philosophy contains three major conceptual components: universal equality, responsibility, and interconnectedness. All human beings are fundamentally equal predicated on a belief in *ātman*-equality. Individuals, being equal and distinct, are also responsible for acknowledging and working through their own paths (*svadharmas*) towards liberation and salvation. That is, each of us is responsible for accepting who we are and who we have been (*svadharmas*, karmic residue), ruling ourselves in the proper manner (*ātman* ruling over *buddhi*, *manas*, and *indriyas*), and ultimately comprehending our true relationship to God. As we saw above, this can only be fully achieved through devotion. Even though this responsibility presumes a rather robust degree of agency and individuality, Gandhi believes all people are fundamentally connected with one another, other living beings, and the natural environment. As we also saw above, because the entire manifest world is a creation of God, we are connected to one another in being aspects of the same eternal, absolute source. Gandhi believes this interconnectedness should mitigate the violence we express towards one another, adding a deeply communal dimension to his political thought that helps prevent atomistic forms of individualism serving as a basis for politics. The self is thus deeply socio-relational in nature. Below we will show how these components inform and support his political concepts of *satyāgraha* (non-violent

resistance), *swarāj* (self-rule), and *Ramarajya* (lit, “the rule of Rāma,” his ideal government, the kingdom of God on earth).

The first political concept we will examine is *satyāgraha*. To begin, we can see how Tolstoy’s ideas about love, non-violent resistance, and experimentation influenced Gandhi’s early understanding of the proper methods of political activism when he explains in 1909: “Tolstoy’s life has been devoted to replacing the method of violence for removing tyranny or securing reform by the method of non-resistance to evil. He would meet hatred expressed in violence by love expressed in self-suffering. He admits of no exception to whittle down this great and divine law of Love.”⁹⁴ Later, in 1919, Gandhi states: “Hence it is that I have considered satyagraha in social and political matters a new experiment. The late Tolstoy was the first to draw my attention, in a letter of his to me, to its being such.”⁹⁵ Nonetheless, Gandhi increasingly finds support for such resistance and non-cooperation in the *Gītā*, creatively fusing his Tolstoyan influences with the *Gītā*’s teaching of renouncing the fruit of action. He states: “I have felt that in trying to enforce in one’s life the central teaching of the *Gītā*, one is bound to follow Truth and *ahimsa* [nonviolence]. When there is no desire for fruit, there is no temptation for untruth or *himsa* [harm, violence].”⁹⁶ According to Gandhi, the *Gītā*’s teaching of renouncing attachment to the fruit of one’s actions should prevent the temptation for committing harm. In the public sphere this principle thus informs the practice of non-violent resistance that follows from one’s devotion and duty to pursue truth. But one could ask, *satyāgraha* towards what end? Gandhi believed that non-violent resistance should be aimed in part at achieving political equality, which, for example, could be embodied in the new Indian constitution: “Of course, we should guarantee equality of treatment of all religions as also of the so-called untouchables.”⁹⁷

Here we observe the glaring importance of equality. Social status does not equate to one’s

moral worth because the qualitative status of one's soul is predicated on one's devotion to God and truth, and human beings are equal in their capability for devotion and cultivating "soul power." Devotion is equally available to everyone and at all times. His conception of equality also operates at the metaphysical basis of the *ātman*. All individual *ātman*s are equal as *ātman*s, so regardless of their various karmic residues, a more fundamental qualitative distinction does not exist among them. In contrast to readings that claim Gandhi's is similar to a liberal conception, this understanding of the *ātman* supports a conception of political equality that does not rely on western liberal notions of autonomy. To revisit briefly Gandhi's "drop/ocean" metaphor, in a liberal conception it would be as if the individual drops emerged from nowhere and had no ocean to return to. His later understanding of equality can also be linked to his reading of the *Gītā*, whereby the nature of the *ātman* exposes an underlying metaphysical and ontological equality between all human beings and living things.⁹⁸ Because Gandhi's religious views condition his political views, a notion of equality grounded in the theology, metaphysics, and ontology of the *Gītā* supports his view that political activity should work towards realizing the truth of fundamental human equality. "Soul-force" then becomes the essence of non-violent resistance for Gandhi, whereby *satyāgraha* is a way of tapping into and activating "soul-force," putting it to work in the political sphere. Gandhi explains: "It is because we are ignorant of our strength that other weaknesses grow. We doubt the very existence of the *atman* in us, have no faith in its powers."⁹⁹ Discussing equality, non-violence, *ātman*, and their relation to politics, Gandhi states:

I am certain that non-violence is meant for all time. It is an attribute of the *atman* and is, therefore, universal since the *atman* belongs to all. Non-violence is meant for everybody and for all time and at all places. If it is really an attribute of the *atman* it should be inherent in us. Nowadays it is said that truth cannot help in trade and politics. Then where

can it be of help?¹⁰⁰

He thus explains how the *ātman* is an eternal force underlying all human beings and provides the ground for their being, which, in turn, supports both a fundamental equality among all human beings and points towards a better understanding of God. Therefore, while Tolstoy influenced Gandhi's initial turn to non-violent resistance as a desirable form of political activity and his understanding of the important role that love plays in such activity,¹⁰¹ Gandhi fuses his early Tolstoyan influences with various Hindu ideas that he increasingly extracts from the *Gītā* beginning in the 1920s. This discussion now brings us to our second major political concept, *swarāj*.

Gandhi's conception of self-rule or autonomy, *swarāj*, indicates perhaps his greatest divergence from Tolstoyan moorings. While Tolstoy's *Letter* influences Gandhi's early understanding of *swarāj*, the primary conceptual underpinnings are located in the *Gītā*.¹⁰² Noting that Gandhi's allegorical reading of the *Gītā* takes the field of *dharma* (duty) and Kurukṣetra (the battlefield of the *Gītā*) to be the human heart, we can begin to see how Gandhi develops his conceptualization of *swarāj*. Gandhi believes that if one takes Kṛṣṇa's (or God's) teaching seriously and devotedly follows the path of duty that points toward truth, one will be able to rule effectively over oneself, which will then render national politics and state-operated judicial mechanisms unnecessary.¹⁰³ For Gandhi, the concept of self-rule means precisely that: *self*-rule. Gandhi explains in *Hind Swaraj* that "Real home-rule is self-rule or self-control,"¹⁰⁴ and "It is *swaraj* when we learn to rule ourselves. . . . But such *swaraj* has to be experienced, by each one for himself."¹⁰⁵ If one recalls our earlier discussion of the metaphysics of the self, the *Gītā* provides a theological and ontological explanation of why one should rule over oneself before turning one's attention towards others. In 1931, after his increased engagement with the *Gītā* in

the mid-1920s, he explains: “In such a state [i.e., of ‘enlightened anarchy’] everyone is his own ruler. He rules himself in such a manner that he is never a hindrance to his neighbour. In the ideal state therefore there is not political power because there is no state.”¹⁰⁶ To achieve this condition, a well-ordered soul (*ātman*) must be arranged in the appropriate hierarchical fashion.

It is partly because his understanding of ruling begins with the individual and only moves outward after self-rule is achieved that Gandhi’s broader vision of self-rule, and a central aspect of his ideal political system, is the inverse of a top-heavy, state-centered system. A central aspect of Gandhi’s ideal is that it is village-centered, with power most authoritative at the small community level where *panchāyats* (small popularly elected bodies in charge of running village affairs) had legislative, executive, and judicial power, and weakest at the federal level.¹⁰⁷ Here we maintain that Gandhi’s reading of the *Gītā* strongly influences his understanding of proper rule. His belief that political power should be dispersed and hence strongest at the individual and communal level emanates from his understanding of the *ātman* and individual self-rule. That is, proper rule is not to be found in some distant institution or in the hands of only a few people, but rather in the closest “institution,” the self or *ātman*,¹⁰⁸ and exercised by everyone in close conjunction with one another within small, self-governing communities. As Gandhi puts it: “The key to *swaraj* is in our hands . . . It is in your pocket and mine.”¹⁰⁹ Therefore, we must be devoted to what is in our own “pockets” and accept responsibility for cultivating *swarāj*. Gandhi’s *swarāj* also distances him from Tolstoy insofar as his vision of decentralized, self-governing village communities is completely foreign to Tolstoy’s critiques of government.

This understanding of self-rule leads us to a core aspect of his ideal political system and devotional politics, namely *Ramarajya*. As we discussed earlier, the *ātman*, and by implication *swarāj*, point towards and bring us closer to God. We argue that this is what Gandhi means when

he speaks of *Ramarajya*. This is not some mythical divine kingdom he has in mind, but rather a spiritual or existential condition connected to his understanding of *swarāj*—a condition he believed could produce positive political reform and perhaps a “manifest” *Ramarajya*. For Gandhi the eternal Rāma is a form of God or *brahman*, and God has created all those *ātman*s that are the basis for our individuality and precondition for agency. Devotion, then, is the key path and mechanism with which one accesses and cultivates “soul-power.” When people can rule over themselves through faith and devotion they not only achieve Gandhi’s *swarāj* but are also taking the necessary steps towards *Ramarajya*. Because individual *ātman*s are modes of God, when they are finally able to become “ciphers” (in Gandhi’s terms) they achieve a state of being in which the higher and purer entity (God, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa) rules over the lower, impure aspects of oneself, such as the *manas* (mind) and *indriyas* (sense faculties).¹¹⁰ Accordingly, *swarāj* is achieved when the *ātman* and higher parts of the soul rule over the lower parts. This then leads towards *Ramarajya*, which is the highest form of ruling and Gandhi’s ultimate goal. Faith and devotion are the sole means of achieving this state of affairs, and we suggest that *swarāj* is ultimately subservient to and aims toward *Ramarajya*. Given the importance of Rāma as an object of Gandhi’s devotion, it makes sense that his political ideal would exhibit such devotion. Scholars who have focused solely on *swarāj* without relating it to the religiously loaded concept of *Ramarajya* have thus overlooked an essential devotional component of his political thought.

One may ask whether or not this reading squares with some of Gandhi’s central statements about *Ramarajya*. We have suggested that *Ramarajya* should be understood, first and foremost, as a more abstract, moral state of being as opposed to a particular external state of affairs and form of political organization. This appears to rub against Gandhi’s statement that *Ramarajya* is a “kingdom of God.”¹¹¹ The phrase “kingdom of God” reminds us of Tolstoy’s *The*

Kingdom of God is Within You, which is clearly not a reference to a social and political organization, but a way of organizing one's soul. Gandhi explains that *Ramarajya* entails "sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority."¹¹² It is a mistake to think that the first part of this statement concerns popular political sovereignty, as the second part stressing moral authority is of greater significance for Gandhi. By "pure moral authority," Gandhi is referring to the hierarchical type of ruling we have discussed above, whereby the higher parts of the self rule over the lower parts and God or Rāma ultimately rules over the whole. This form of authority and ruling are "pure" because only God is pure, untainted by *karma* and sin. Therefore, the rule of God would be "pure moral authority."

Gandhi also claims that this *Ramarajya* is "a type of *swaraj*."¹¹³ This squares with our argument above insofar as *Ramarajya* is an outgrowth of proper *swarāj*. Here we can also think of Gandhi's distinction between the universal Soul and individual, human souls. Accordingly, *Ramarajya* would be a type of *swarāj* whereby the universal Soul rules over individual human souls. Finally, as we explained above, these individual *ātman*s are fundamentally equal. Gandhi thus explains, "Today there is gross economic inequality. . . . There can be no *Ramarajya* in the present state of iniquitous inequalities in which a few roll in riches and the masses do not get enough to eat."¹¹⁴ A manifest form of *Ramarajya* can only be achieved when all people are recognized and treated as individually responsible yet interconnected equals, which is anchored in a particular ontological understanding of *ātman* that owes less to liberal notions of autonomy than it does to philosophical and theistic Hindu influences. We can thus summarize Gandhi's notion of *Ramarajya* in the following way: only when people take God and truth as their object of devotion will they be able to understand the true nature of the self, which points towards God and the harmonious, liberating rule of the higher over the lower parts of our souls.

***Bhakti* Politics: Implications and Applications**

We argue that this new devotional interpretation changes our understanding of Gandhi as a historical thinker as well as the substantive thrust of his theoretical and conceptual framework. We are in agreement with existing claims in the literature that, “One cannot understand Gandhi’s various concerns, specific use of language, and diverse formulations without understanding the specific economic, political, cultural, and ethical contexts within which he lived, read texts, and struggled with opponents and alternative approaches.”¹¹⁵ We also agree with the claim that, “The fact is that individual themes in Gandhi’s philosophy make full sense only when they are seen in their relationship to one another and to the whole.”¹¹⁶ With these two claims in mind, we can consider how the unpacking of the development of Gandhi’s ideas, in light of his influence from Tolstoy and Hindu thought, develop into what would be better understood as *bhakti* or devotional politics.

Parel’s claim that Gandhi’s thought originates in Hinduism, as Indian political thought, is problematic given the amount that Gandhi borrows from Tolstoy in a way that Parel does not adequately acknowledge. After a very brief conversation of *The Kingdom of God is Within You* and *Letter to a Hindu*, Parel goes on to say, “Though Gandhi had gathered his ideas from different sources, it was Indian philosophy that gave them their unity and coherence.”¹¹⁷ Gandhi himself suggests otherwise. As we have argued, the initial formulation of his understanding of truth is heavily derived from Tolstoy’s own formulation, and furthermore, the attempt to render Hindu ideas consistent with this version of truth and non-violence was a project initiated by Tolstoy. This renders Parel’s argument for the originality of Gandhi as the first truly modern Indian thinker problematic.

Bhikhu Parekh's historical reading of Gandhi has similar issues. Much of the originality that Parekh highlights in *Gandhi's Political Philosophy* we have shown to be far more derivative from Tolstoy and more innovative with Hindu ideas than had been previously realized. When discussing Gandhi's philosophy of religion, Parekh attempts to dismiss the influence of Tolstoy by claiming that Gandhi had remained utterly "unpersuaded" by Christianity.¹¹⁸ It is absolutely true to claim that Gandhi was unpersuaded by Christianity, in the abstract, but Tolstoy's particular Christianity looks nothing at all like what Gandhi was referring to when he made that comment, and there is no indication in Gandhi's writing that he lumped Tolstoy's writings in with a general conception of Christianity.

Parekh's mistaken dismissal of Tolstoy's influence leads him to overemphasize the originality of Gandhi's thought when it comes to his discussion of *satyāgraha* and Gandhi's understanding of rationality.¹¹⁹ While Parekh claims that "*satyāgraha* . . . was an ingenious combination of reason, morality and politics,"¹²⁰ we have shown how this understanding is not nearly as novel as Parekh makes it out to be. While there are a number of innovative aspects to Gandhi's thought, *satyāgraha* is an advance on the original Tolstoyan formulation of experiential truth and non-violence, not an entirely new creation as Parekh asserts. Parekh goes to great length to claim Gandhi possesses a special critical position that is unavailable to western critics of modern civilization, and explicitly contends that Gandhi can see things that Tolstoy cannot.¹²¹ Our unpacking of Gandhi's debt to Tolstoy suggests that Parekh may have been too quick to pass over Gandhi's own conceptual teachers in an effort to stress Gandhi's originality.

Nevertheless, we do not wish to overstate our case here. Parel and Parekh both make an abstract claim about Gandhi's hybridity that is correct, even if they arrived there through a flawed understanding of the development of Gandhi's thought. It would be fair to say that we are also

arguing that Gandhi's thought developed out of a creative dialogue between western and Hindu systems. However, where Parel and Parekh claim that the hybrid nature of Gandhi's thought comes from exchanges between Hinduism and western liberalism, we argue that Gandhi's political thought developed primarily through his application of a peculiar western religious framework—Tolstoyanism—to philosophic and theistic Hindu ideas. The outcome may ultimately look similar, even if the process by which it developed differs rather dramatically. For those interested in the development of political ideas, this difference is significant even if it may be subtle at times.

We also believe our analysis of Gandhi's influences alters the substantive thrust of his political concepts. Since it is often assumed that Gandhi's thought developed as part of a pragmatic process, it is not uncommon to see political theorists attempting to decouple certain concepts in Gandhi's thought to make them more relevant to circumstances outside of Gandhi's specific metaphysical, religious, and devotional understanding. Often this takes the form of suggesting that Gandhi's spiritual (or private) project is not the same as his broader public project. This would make sense if Gandhi was trying to reconcile his own domestic beliefs with a western conception of liberalism, which depends on a public/private divide, especially on matters of religion. Our analysis suggests that this attempt to create any sort of public/private distinction in Gandhi's thought is a mistake.

Parel provides a good example of this misreading. Believing that Gandhi's political thought develops out of a constructive dialogue with liberal political actors in India, Parel claims there is a clear difference in Gandhi's thought between non-violence as creed and non-violence as policy.¹²² This distinction does not seem to come from any explicit reference in Gandhi's own writings, but seems to derive from Parel's broader understanding of Gandhi's project. Parel

claims, “Non-violence as policy or civic non-violence is what he [Gandhi] expects from the average citizen.”¹²³ Furthermore, Parel goes on to claim that this civic non-violence “permits the lawful use of violence for the sake of the public good, such as the maintenance of public order and the exercise of the right of self defense.”¹²⁴ This contrasts with non-violence as creed, which Parel calls heroic non-violence, as “an option available only to exceptional individuals.”¹²⁵ Given this entire discussion in *Gandhi’s Philosophy* lacks any references to Gandhi’s written or spoken word, it is difficult to see where Parel gets these claims. Most likely, Parel devises this civic/heroic split due to his understanding that Gandhi’s political thought developed in dialogue with existing liberal political institutions. That is to say, Parel believes that Gandhi was engaged in his own private spiritual journey, engaging in heroic acts of non-violence as an exceptional individual. At the same time, he was also engaged in a separate act of moderate reformation of the increasingly liberal democratic political institutions of India. Of these two, the latter provides a justification for a more limited conception of non-violence. The practical realities of politics would virtually demand this split if Gandhi had developed his thought primarily in dialogue with liberal political institutions.

Since Gandhi’s conceptual framework does not grow out of a political dialogue with liberals, but instead out of a critical reading and expansion of Tolstoy’s religious thought and Hindu ideas, there is much less reason to believe that Gandhi maintained a division between non-violence as creed and non-violence as policy. It is likely that Gandhi is not very optimistic in his expectations of individuals living up to the standards of truth he advances. This is not, however, an automatic division between higher and lower. Gandhi, like Tolstoy, believes that the attainment of truth is an almost impossibly difficult task, and ultimately, that all will fall short. However, this does not mean there are large groups that should never make the heroic effort;

Gandhi is not nearly as elitist as Parel makes him out to be. Gandhi's devotional politics is equally available to and practicable for everyone, and it is based upon a Hindu-inspired conception of the self, or *ātman*.

Contrary to our analysis, Parel claims that *satyāgraha* is a practical political activity and not the more robust, spiritual formulation of *satyāgraha* that we suggest Gandhi endorsed. Parel's formulation of *satyāgraha* as policy appears mistaken when the origins of the concept have been uncovered. We thus suggest Parel is incorrect when he states, "Satyagraha is concerned with civic non-violence rather than with the heroic variety, its aim being to secure the good of society rather than the private good of the citizen."¹²⁶ Rather, we argue that Gandhi's modified Tolstoyan conception of truth, which grounds the concept of *satyāgraha*, is far more expansive and transcends mere civic matters. This activity is fundamentally intertwined with the transformative inner politics of the soul and the corresponding potential change at the level of civic activity and political institutions.

As our analysis of Gandhi and the *Gītā* suggests, he was not merely attempting to reform liberal political institutions. At best, Gandhi may be understood as a friendly critic of liberal democracy, with the implication that he was not a supporter of those institutions. More likely, Gandhi's conceptions of *swarāj* and *Ramarajya*, as peculiar, evolving notions of self-rule that he derives from Hindu philosophic and theistic traditions, provide the basis for how Gandhi understood ideal political associations as well as his desires for everyday political thought and action. *Swarāj* and *Ramarajya* do not point to traditional liberal institutions, nor do they suggest more familiar western concepts such as the lawful use of violence. As we have shown, Gandhi's commitment to truth also leads him to emphasize *ahimsā* (universal non-violence). *Swarāj* and *Ramarajya* are compatible with these commitments, whereas liberal political institutions—with

their demand of a public/private split—are not. With this in mind, our exegesis of Gandhi’s particular influences suggests a rather important shift in how we interpret Gandhi’s normative thought.

This analysis thus leads us to what one may call a devotional or *bhakti* politics. Rather than thinking about Gandhi’s political thought in terms of a private/public distinction amenable to a liberal democratic politics and civic non-violence, devotional politics is self- or *ātman*-centered. He does not conceive this self-centered politics in a way that either presupposes a private/public distinction or emphasizes civic activity as such. Any positive civic effects of Gandhi’s *satyāgraha* and *swarāj* are felicitous consequences. That is, they are a result of devotion (*bhakti*) to truth-seeking and placing the self (*ātman*) first. If individuals do not accept the responsibility to start with themselves and devote themselves to *swarāj*, and ultimately something akin to *Ramarajya* (similar to what Tolstoy referred to as the kingdom of God within) then any subsequent political activity will be qualitatively diminished. Hence, there is a sort of paradoxical nature to Gandhi’s political thought: politics is not primordially a public or civic matter, but rather an activity that begins in the *ātman*, self, or soul. The most basic level of ruling exposes an “inner politics” that is constantly going on within each of us, that is, between the higher (*Rāma*, *ātman*, *buddhi*) and lower (*Rāvaṇa*, *manas*, *indriyas*) parts of ourselves. This is the first and most important level at which we must engage in politics. Moreover, his is not a liberal understanding of the self. As we explained earlier, individual selves point towards truth and God, which is the source and basis for a plurality of interconnected selves. Therefore, the substantive thrust of Gandhi’s political thought pushes us back to the level of our individual selves in a devoted, truth-seeking fashion. His political thought turns things inside out. In sum, ruling begins with a devotional turn inward and requires that the higher parts of our being rule over the lower

parts.

Gandhi's devotional politics thus suggests that politics begins with each and every one of us, in the strongest possible sense. As Gandhi puts it, *swarāj* "is in your pocket and mine."¹²⁷ Gandhi's politics asks each of us to navigate, with strength and humility, the treacherous waters inside ourselves. As the Gītā explains: "When the mind (*manas*) follows the roving senses, then it carries away one's understanding, like the wind carries away a ship on the water."¹²⁸ Gandhi's political thought helps highlight the potential in every citizen to effect change not by rushing outside themselves into the public sphere, but by starting within themselves to realize the true power of "soul-force." Ultimately, a devotional politics would dissolve the private/public and self/other binaries. Gandhi's hope is that this process would lead to an eventual dissolution of a top-heavy political system and result in a truly bottom up *swarāj*.

Our analysis began with the premise that Gandhi's political thought is cross-culturally hybrid, and our first move was to argue against those who wish to situate him neatly within either a western or Hindu conceptual framework. While we are not alone in making this move, those who have acknowledged his hybridity have failed to do so to a sufficient extent. Many begin with Gandhi as a muse and appeal to his political thought as a resource, considering the various lessons and applications we might derive from them. While these types of projects are perfectly valid and laudable in many respects, we have taken a different track and attempted to "get behind" Gandhi to better identify his oft-cited cross-cultural influences. In doing so, we find that Tolstoy and particular Hindu ideas played a central role in the development of his political thought.

This analysis also led us to reconsider the substantive thrust of Gandhi's political thought. Accordingly, we argue that Gandhi's political thought is a devotional one that is self-centered,

aiming at true *swarāj* and eventually *Ramarajya*. Gandhi thus suggests a rather counterintuitive set of moves: a prior devotional move to truth-seeking, an inner politics, and a proper ordering of our own selves. Such self-rule does not merely entail a people ruling over itself in some representative, democratic fashion. Instead of running directly into civic activity, Gandhi suggests we run into *ātman* (self-) activity. Once we do this Gandhi believes true self-rule becomes possible, first, at the individual level, and subsequently, at the public level. As Gandhi explains in 1925: “*Bhakti*, moreover, does not imply ineptitude in practical affairs. . . . A true devotee, though fully attentive to practical affairs, brings the spirit of *bhakti* into them. His conduct will always be in harmony with dharma.”¹²⁹ One implication of this re-interpretation is that Gandhi turns out to be, at best, a friendly critic of liberal democratic thought and institutions. Peeling back the layers of Gandhi’s political thought thus reveals a devotional substrate that has been sorely neglected.

Notes

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1 — See: F. Godrej, “Nonviolence and Gandhi’s Truth: A Method for Moral and Political

Arbitration,” *The Review of Politics* 68 (2) (2006): 288, and “Response to ‘What is Comparative Political Theory?’,” *The Review of Politics* 71 (4) (2009): 572-574; A. March, “What Is Comparative Political Theory?,” *The Review of Politics* 71 (4) (2009): 555; B. Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 3-4, 195; K. R. Rao, “Communication Against Communication: The Gandhian Critique of Modern Civilization in *Hind Swaraj*,” in *Political Discourse: Explorations in Indian and Western Political Thought*, ed. B. Parekh & T. Pantham (New Delhi: Sage, 1987), pp. 266-276; R. Terchek, *Gandhi: Struggling for Autonomy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), pp. 6-7.

2 — Other interpreters we argue against do not always or necessarily defend Gandhi as an explicitly liberal political thinker. Our main claim is that their interpretations suggest or imply that Gandhi’s thought is more or less compatible with liberalism, or at the very least reconcilable with liberal-democratic thinking on a broad level.

3 — A. L. Herman, “Satyagraha: A new Indian word for some old ways of Western thinking,” *Philosophy East and West* 19 (2) (1969): 123-142.

4 — A. L. Basham, “Traditional Influences on the Thought of Mahatma Gandhi,” in *Essays on Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919*, ed. R. Kumar (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 25.

5 — For acknowledgements that Gandhi is a thoroughly hybrid political thinker, see also Godrej, “Nonviolence and Gandhi’s Truth,” p. 288; Godrej, “Response to ‘What is Comparative Political Theory?’,” pp. 572-574; March, “What is Comparative Political Theory,” p. 555. For an interpretation of Gandhi as an Indian or Hindu-leaning hybrid, see Rao, “Communication Against

Communication,” pp. 266-276, and Tercek, *Gandhi: Struggling for Autonomy*, pp. 6-7.

6 — Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy*, p. 195.

7 — Ibid., p. 4.

8 — Ibid., p. 3, emphasis added.

9 — For example, see A. Parel, *Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); “Gandhi and the Emergence of the Modern Indian Political Canon,” *The Review of Politics* 70 (1) (2008): 40-63; “From Political Thought in India to Indian Political Thought,” in *Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia*, ed. T. Shogimen and C. J. Nederman (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

10 — Parel, *Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, p. 5.

11 — These four goals are: *kāma*, or sensual pleasure, including sexual and aesthetic experience; *artha*, or economic and political well-being, “encompassing notions of wealth and power”; *dharma*, or “the cosmic ordering principle that regulates every aspect of individual, social, and cosmic life, finding expression on the human plane in a comprehensive system of sociocultural norms and duties”; *mokṣa*, or “liberation from *saṃsāra*, the cycle of birth and death, which is the supreme goal of human existence” (B. Holdrege, “Dharma,” in *The Hindu World*, ed. S. Mittal and G. Thursby [New York: Routledge, 2004], pp. 237-238).

12 — See Shah, “*Purushartha* and Gandhi,” in *Gandhi and the Present Global Crisis*, ed. R. Roy (Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996), pp. 155-161, and “Of *Artha* and the *Arthasastra*,” in *Comparative Political Philosophy: Studies Under the Upas Tree*, 2nd ed., ed. A. J. Parel and R. C. Keith (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), p. 146.

13 — Parel, *Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, p. 9.

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- 14 — Parel, “Gandhi and the Emergence of the Modern Indian Political Canon,” p. 40.
- 15 — Parel, “From Political Thought in India to Indian Political Thought,” pp. 187-207.
- 16 — Ibid., p. 187.
- 17 — Ibid., pp. 188-189.
- 18 — Ibid., p. 194.
- 19 — S. Sharma, *Gandhi’s Teachers: Leo Tolstoy* (Ahmedabad: Gujarat Vidyapeeth, 2009).
- 20 — Ibid., p. 325.
- 21 — M. Green, *Tolstoy and Gandhi, Men of Peace: A Biography* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); *The Origins of Nonviolence: Tolstoy and Gandhi in their Historical Settings* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986).
- 22 — Although the early influence of Hinduism may be minimal, it is not completely non-existent. The claim here is not that Gandhi completely avoided all influence of his cultural context while growing up, just that such a context was not central to his early thought.
- 23 — M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, digital eBook (MobileReference, [1927-29] 2010), p. 31.
- 24 — Ibid., p. 57.
- 25 — Ibid.
- 26 — Ibid., p. 190.
- 27 — Ibid., p. 319.
- 28 — Ibid., p. 106.
- 29 — Ibid., p. 121.
- 30 — Ibid., p. 71.

31 — M. K. Gandhi and L. Tolstoy, *Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy Letters*, ed. B. Srinivasa Murthy (Long Beach: Long Beach Publications, [1909-1910] 1987), p. 23.

32 — L. Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You: Christianity Not as a Mystic Religion But as a New Theory of Life*, digital eBook, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/pg4602.epub> (accessed May 24, 2010) (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg, [1894] 2003), p. 48.

33 — L. Tolstoy, *A Letter to a Hindu: The Subjection of India – It’s Cause and Curse*, digital eBook, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/pg7176.epub> (accessed May 24, 2010) (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg, [1908] 2004), I.

34 — L. Tolstoy, *What I Believe* (William S. Gottsberger, 1886), p. 134. The use of the word “Christ” in this essay is utilized here exclusively to maintain consistency with Tolstoy’s own word choice.

35 — Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, p. 6.

36 — Ibid.

37 — Ibid., p. 247.

38 — Ibid., p. 355.

39 — Ibid., p. 321.

40 — Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, p. 67.

41 — In the *Kingdom of God is Within You*, he remarks, “The Sermon on the Mount, or the Creed. One cannot believe in both. And Churchmen have chosen the latter” (ibid.), suggesting that most Christians are actually worshipping a false God.

42 — Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, p. 355.

43 — Ibid., p. 356.

44 — Ibid., p. 121.

45 — M. K. Gandhi, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. R. Iyer. (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1986), vol. 1: 122.

46 — Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, 229.

47 — Basham, “Traditional Influences on the Thought of Mahatma Gandhi.”

48 — Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, 228.

49 — Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 122.

50 — The Gītā was the most important Hindu influence on Gandhi’s political thought—more important, for example, than G. P. Gokhale or the theory of the *puruṣārthas* (contra Parel 2006; 2008). We grant that Gokhale, whom Gandhi labeled his “political guru” (Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol 1, p. 115), did influence Gandhi’s political thought regarding the importance of duty, or political service to one’s country. However, we tend to depart from Parel (*Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, and “Gandhi and the Emergence of the Modern Indian Political Canon”) in suggesting that the most distinct and significant Hindu aspects of Gandhi’s political thought are based primarily upon his understanding of the Gītā’s central teaching as opposed to a theory of the *puruṣārthas* (four goals of human life). While it is easier for scholars to read a harmonization of the *puruṣārthas* into Gandhi (Parel, *Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*), it is more difficult to read such a theory out of Gandhi. Gandhi’s primary knowledge and interpretation of the *puruṣārthas* came from his reading of the Gītā, as Parel himself acknowledges (ibid., p. 21). However, Gandhi is quite clear about what he takes the central teaching of the Gītā to be (see M. K. Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*, ed. and transl. by J. Strohmeyer [Berkeley: Berkeley Hills Books, 2000]), and it did not

center around the *puruṣārthas*. While Gandhi may have discussed the *puruṣārthas* in some of his writings, we hope to show how the core Hindu influences of Gandhi's hybrid political thought have more to do with other concepts found in the Gītā and their relationship to *satyāgraha*, *swarāj*, and *Ramarajya*.

51 — For example, see Gandhi, “Meaning of the Gita,” in *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, pp. 77-83.

52 — Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 10.

53 — See Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, pp. 21-23, 373-374, 147-152.

54 — A. Sharma, *The Hindu Gītā: Ancient and Classical Interpretations of the Bhagavadgītā* (London: Duckworth, 1986), p. 107.

55 — Bhagavad Gītā, 3.42. Translations from the Gītā are our own. Further evidence is found in the passage: “Having laid down all actions with the mind, the embodied one (*dehin, ātman*) sits happily as ruler in the city of nine gates (i.e., the body), neither acting nor causing action” (ibid., 5.13).

56 — Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 2, pp. 27, 174, 406.

57 — Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 174.

58 — Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 235.

59 — Ibid., Vol. 2, pp. 27, 339.

60 — Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 87-88.

61 — Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 21.

62 — Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 95; Vol. 3, p. 460.

63 — Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 122, 308-309.

64 — Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 308-309, 310.

65 — Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 588.

66 — Ibid., Vol. 2, pp. 81-82.

67 — Ibid., Vol. 2, pp. 80, 93.

68 — Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 174.

69 — Ibid., Vol. 2, pp. 553, 348.

70 — Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 402.

71 — Ibid., Vol 2, p. 23. See also S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), pp. 199-201.

72 — R. King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999), p. 227.

73 — For example, see Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 553.

74 — Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, p. 199.

75 — See Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 174. See also Bhagavad Gītā, 4.19-23, 5.12. According to the Gītā's metaphysics, the idea that a given human being is the actor and ultimately responsible for action in the material world is an illusion: it is ultimately God who acts (e.g., see 4.13, 5.8). For a general agreement with this metaphysical position, see Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 17.

76 — Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 588; Vol. 2, pp. 81-82.

77 — King, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 221.

78 — *Brahmasūtra*, 2.3.43.

79 — Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol 2, p. 27.

80 — King, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 228.

81 — Ibid. *Brahmasūtra*, 2.1.34; 2.3.42.

82 — For example, Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 451.

83 — In the Gītā, while Kṛṣṇa is Arjuna’s friend and charioteer, the former is actually an incarnation—an *avatāra* (avatar)—of Viṣṇu, or God. As such, Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Being and “highest *brahman*” (see Bhagavad Gītā, 10.12).

84 — For example, Bhagavad Gītā, 9.27-28.

85 — Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, pp. 22-23.

86 — Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 32; see also Vol. 2, p. 234.

87 — Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 163.

88 — Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 162.

89 — Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 38; see also Vol. 3, p. 48.

90 — Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 37.

91 — Ibid., Vol. 2, p. 318; see also Vol. 1, p. 118 and Vol. 2, p. 108.

92 — Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 160-161.

93 — King, *Indian Philosophy*, p. 226.

94 — Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 2, p. 288.

95 — Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 64.

96 — Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*, p. 22.

97 — Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 411.

98 — Gandhi cites a verse from the Gītā as evidence against untouchability and in favor of equanimity towards all: “The Gita says the same thing: ‘To the man who looks on all with an

equal eye, a *Brahmin*, a dog and an *Antyaja* [untouchable]—all are the same” (ibid., Vol. 1, p.

71). This verse from the *Gītā* (5.18) refers to the wise person who sees the same reality underlying every living thing—namely, *brahman*.

99 — Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 308-309.

100 — Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 430.

101 — The logic of *satyāgraha* relies on the concept of love. Beginning in his earlier writings, Gandhi explains how a non-violent resister is supposed to love his enemy and in so doing activate a moral sense, including love and compassion, in his enemy that could not otherwise be activated through violence. In *Hind Swaraj*, see Gandhi’s example of the robber in his discussion of brute-force (ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 242, 245).

102 — Here we again diverge from Parel (*Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*) in assigning more weight to concepts other than the *puruṣārthas* in assessing Gandhi’s conception of *swarāj*. Because the core idea of *swarāj* is that of ruling oneself, it makes more sense to turn to Gandhi’s conception of the self (*ātman*) and not necessarily to the theory of the *puruṣārthas*. In turn, to understand Gandhi’s later, more developed understanding of the self and related concepts such as God, we must turn to his interpretation of the *Gītā*, which he only begins to elaborate upon after writing *Hind Swaraj*.

103 — See Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, pp. 399-400 and Vol. 2, p. 121.

104 — Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 264.

105 — Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 234-235.

106 — Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 399.

107 — Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy*, pp. 110-141, 114, 238.

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- 108 — See Bhagavad Gītā, 5.13.
- 109 — Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 121.
- 110 — Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, pp. 87-88; Vol. 2, p. 80.
- 111 — Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 607.
- 112 — Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 370.
- 113 — Ibid.
- 114 — Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 586.
- 115 — D. Allen, “Mahatma Gandhi on Violence and Peace Education,” *Philosophy East and West* 57 (3) (2007): 291.
- 116 — Parel, *Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, p. 3.
- 117 — Ibid., p. 119.
- 118 — Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy*, p. 65.
- 119 — Ibid., p. 142.
- 120 — Ibid., p. 156.
- 121 — Ibid., p. 33.
- 122 — Parel, *Gandhi’s Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, p. 122.
- 123 — Ibid.
- 124 — Ibid.
- 125 — Ibid.
- 126 — Ibid.
- 127 — Gandhi, *Moral and Political Writings*, Vol. 1, p. 121.
- 128 — Bhagavad Gītā, 2.67.

