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# **A Man for All Seasons: Gandhi and Nonviolent Action**

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## A Man for All Seasons: Gandhi and Nonviolent Action \*

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As the saying goes: the center does not hold. If one were to highlight a central feature of the modern age, one could plausibly point to its centrifugal momentum: its tendency toward fragmentation and radical dispersal. In the intellectual domain, the tendency is patently evident in the process of specialization, the relentless segregation of fields of knowledge. However, the trend exceeds the knowledge domain. Together with other thinkers of his time, the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel saw modernity marked by radical “diremptions” or divisions (*Entzweiungen*): divisions between knowledge and action, thinking and feeling, private self-interest and the common good—with prospects of reconciliation growing steadily dimmer. Since Hegel’s time, things have been falling further apart. Today, every kind of human pursuit has gained, and insists upon, absolute autonomy. The market economy has unleashed a scramble for private wealth which pushes out of sight all ethical or religious considerations. As a corollary of globalization, politics—equated with the sheer struggle for power—pursues vast planetary (and even galactic) ambitions. In the meantime, ordinary people—sidelined by both politics and economics—are left to the comforts of private self-indulgence and the endless acquisition of consumer goods. Ethics and religious faith are similarly sequestered or privatized—unless they are released from their ghetto for the sake of a forced synthesis (sometimes labeled “fundamentalism”).<sup>1</sup>

The diremptions of modernity have clear effects on personal life and (what is called) the “human condition.” In the realm of personal life, the effects surface in the form of internal splits, psychic pathologies, or personality disorders. Rare are the people who are able to develop as well as harmonize their different faculties—people whom Indian scriptures call stable, or “*sattva*,” because, by bringing “all their senses into harmony,” they maintain stable balance (see the *Bhagavad Gita* 2.61, 64). In recent history, one prominent individual illustrates the “*sattva*” quality in exemplary fashion: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi—statesman, erudite intellectual, man of letters, devotee of the arts, as

well as ethicist and person of faith. In order to profile more clearly, at least for Western readers, Gandhi's *sattva* character, I compare him in the following with an earlier figure well-known in European history, a figure who witnessed and endured the birthpangs of modern diremptions: Thomas More. Like Gandhi, More was a capable statesman, an intellectual and prolific writer, a man of affairs, a patron of the arts, and also a deeply ethical and religious person. In a famous stage play, Robert Bolt has celebrated More as "a man for all seasons." The same description also applies to his Indian counterpart. Not long ago, the distinguished political theorist Anthony J. Parel—well-known for his earlier writings on Gandhi and Machiavelli—has published a book which ascribes to Gandhi a similarly balanced disposition; its title: *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony* (2006). Following some remarks on More, I intend to reflect in some detail on this study of Gandhi's work. All I want to do at this point is to stress their common struggle and their common fate: both tried to preserve a certain balance between pursuits—especially the pursuits of politics and ethics—and both ultimately fell victim to the machinations of power released from ethics: More to the cabals of a ruthless king, and Gandhi to the zeal of a nationalist fanatic.

### **"A Man for All Seasons"**

In his stage play, Robert Bolt at one point has Thomas More speak these lines: "Some men think the Earth is round, others think it flat; it is a matter capable of question. But if it is flat, will the King's command make it round? And if it is round, will the King's command flatten it?" (1995: 83). In these lines, More shows himself flexibly tolerant in matters where opinions might reasonably differ, but staunchly opposed to the idea of allowing truth and falsity, right and wrong be settled by arbitrary sovereign fiat. Thus, More maintained and insisted on the distinction between rightness and power, between truth and governmental authority—but not in the sense of disparaging politics and government altogether. What he rejected was the usurpation of all domains of life by political power, that is, the king's attempt to extend a totalizing monopoly over ethics, law, and religious faith. Throughout his play, Bolt shows More anxious to preserve his loyalty to his country and government and not to appear as a reckless rebel willing to violate social bonds. In the end, his act of defiance was meant to safeguard the country's deeper constitutional order against royal arrogance. As Bolt's More states shortly after being sentenced to death: "This indictment is grounded in an Act of Parliament which is directly repugnant to the Law of God. The King in Parliament cannot bestow [on the King] the Supremacy of the Church because it is a Spiritual Supremacy"—especially since

the latter immunity is “promised both in Magna Carta and the King’s own Coronation Oath!” To which this final apology is added: “I am the King’s true subject, and pray for him and all the realm....I do none harm, I say none harm, I think none harm” (Bolt 1995: 101).

That More was not in principle opposed to politics and government is evident from his own illustrious career of public service. Born in 1478 and having studied law in London, More was admitted to the bar in 1501 and entered Parliament in 1504. His public career was briefly interrupted due to certain altercations with King Henry VII but regained momentum speedily during the reign of Henry VIII. In 1510 he was appointed undersheriff of London, and during the ensuing years he became one of the king’s trusted friends or companions. In 1518 he was chosen a member of the Privy Council and was knighted in 1521. A few years later he was elevated to the position of Speaker of the House of Commons and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The high point of his career came in 1529 when he was made Lord Chancellor—a position he held until his break with the king in 1532 (three years before his execution).<sup>2</sup> In all the positions he held More showed himself capable, industrious, fair-minded—and never servile or obsequious. His dispute with Henry VII arose over his unwillingness to approve excessive expenditures for the king’s military adventures. As undersheriff in London he gained a reputation for being fair and equitable and especially a caring protector of the poor. His concern for the underprivileged extended to foreigners—as was evident in his condemnation of anti-foreign riots in London in 1517. As Speaker of the House of Commons, More helped to establish the parliamentary privilege of free speech—a privilege which subsequently was subjected to severe tests. Shortly before his elevation to Lord Chancellor he refused to sanction the king’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon—just as a few years later he refused to endorse the king’s marriage to Anne Boleyn as well as to swear the “oath of supremacy” and to accept the Act of Succession, proceedings which, in his view, violated both religious faith and common law.

Although enjoying enormous prestige for several decades, More was never dazzled by public acclaim or the glitter of the court. As he once remarked to a friend: “I may tell you I have no cause to be proud thereof; for if my head would win [the king] a castle in France, it should not fail to go off” (cited in Warrington 1965: viii). In large measure, More’s resistance to being dazzled can be traced to his many other interests and endeavors—pursuits which helped him to keep all things in perspective. In addition to his political activities, he was also a learned intellectual and prominent writer enjoying the friendship of some of leading “humanists” of his time. As a youth, he was educated at some of the best schools in London where he avidly studied Greek and Latin literature. During that time he wrote some comedies in the revived classical style of the

Renaissance. Tellingly, one of his first publications was an English translation of a biography of the Italian humanist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. In later years, he became a close companion of the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus who repeatedly visited him in England. Together the two friends delighted in classical studies and, among other things, wrote Latin translations of the works of the satirist Lucian. One of Erasmus's own major works, the satirical *Encomium Moriae* (Praise of Folly, 1509), was dedicated to More; in turn, More's most famous literary work, *Utopia* (1516), was published under Erasmus's guidance and supervision in Louvain. Despite increasingly heavy political burdens, More's literary endeavors never ceased. Even at the most difficult time, when imprisoned in the Tower of London awaiting execution, he composed a text reminiscent of the best classical spirit of a Seneca: *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (1534). The desperate circumstances of the composition did not dim More's literary flair nor his serene wit—as demonstrated by the jocular multiculturalism of the text's subtitle: "Written by a Hungarian in Latin, and translated out of the Latin into French, and out of the French into English."<sup>3</sup>

Without doubt, *Utopia* is More's most well-known literary legacy; it is also intensely controverted and widely misunderstood. Following in the footsteps of Plato's *Republic* and later imitators, the book ostensibly seeks to offer a picture of an ideal political regime and a perfectly constituted society. This intent is confirmed by the book's original title: "Concerning the Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia." Yet, on almost every page, the high seriousness of the intent is undermined or held in check by witticisms or satirical gestures—as manifest already in this further passage on the title page: "A Truly Golden Handbook, no less Beneficial than Entertaining." Interpreters of the text have tended to place the accent either on its uplifting or its entertaining quality. For some readers, *Utopia* presents a blueprint or panacea for a totally perfect (perhaps totalitarian) society; for others, the book is sheer satire with no serious purpose at all. What both sides ignore is a third possibility: the critical exposure of both totalizing management and total fragmentation and corruption. Following the collapse of communism and "real-life" socialism, it has become widely fashionable to disparage all attempts at social and political improvement as dangerous "utopian" schemes—or else as mere "*jeux d'esprit*." However, does the collapse of false ideals justify by itself the status quo? Does the demise of an oppressive collectivism by itself sanction rampant individual greed and unrestrained lust for power? Seen in this light, *Utopia* can be read as neither a coercive blueprint, nor a merely entertaining joke, but as a text stimulating critical thought—by pointing to "utopia" seen as an arena of untapped possibilities. Robert M. Adams, one of the book's editors, pinpoints the book's critical thrust in this manner. The book, he writes,

propounds a set of riddles which every sincere man who enters public life is bound to ask himself, whether he is living in early-capitalist England, late-capitalist America, or any society dominated by the money-mad and the authority-intoxicated. He must think, What good can I do as an honorable man in a society of power-hungry individuals? What evil will I have to condone as the price of the good I accomplish? (Adams 1975: vii).

Surely these are questions for all times and all seasons.<sup>4</sup>

Another quality which allowed More to keep things in perspective was his deep religiosity or religious faith. His faith, to be sure, was never that of the mindless zealot or fanatic; but it was profound nonetheless. Together with Erasmus he was able to combine erudition and piety (*eruditio et pietas*)—in such a manner that both mutually nurtured and deepened each other. As a young man, at a time when he was intensely involved in classical studies, he underwent (what has been called) a “spiritual crisis.” Although interested in, and drawn to, many pursuits, he felt at the time that his true calling was perhaps in the priesthood or a monastery. Accordingly, he went into retreat and, without taking vows, spent some four years in seclusion, seeking (as one author says) “through prayer and penance to learn his true vocation.” In the end, he was persuaded by his confessor and other mentors that his proper course of action was in public life and as a married man. Nevertheless, even and especially during his busiest periods—during the years at the court and in the company of courtiers—he retained his yearning for spiritual retreat, for periods of solitary prayer and meditation. It was this persistent yearning—one can venture to say—which above all shielded him from the temptations of power and worldly ambition. Toward the very end of his life, while in the Tower, he is reported to have told his daughter: “I assure thee...that if it had not been for my wife and you, my children, whom I account the chief part of my charge, I would not have failed long before ere this to have closed myself in as strait a room as this, and straiter too.” More’s final words on the scaffold were these: “The king’s good servant, but God’s first.”<sup>5</sup>

All the recorded episodes of More’s life, together with his ability to keep his endeavors in balance, amply support Bolt’s chosen title for his play: “A Man for All Seasons.” More’s own contemporaries and near-contemporaries, I believe, would have endorsed that choice. Dean Swift placed More in the company of Socrates, Epaminondas, and the younger Cato—a stellar group whom “all the ages of the world” could not surpass. Others praised his kindness, integrity, and courage. But perhaps the finest tribute stems from his friend Erasmus who, in a letter to Ulrich von Hutten, praised More not only for his statesmanship and literary talents, but for his conduct in everyday life, especially as a family man:

'There is not any man living so loving to his children than he, and he loveth his old wife as if she were a young maid, and such is the excellency of his temper, that whatsoever happeneth that could not be helped, he loveth it as if nothing could happen more happily...I should rather call his house a school or university of Christian religion, for there is none therein but readeth and studieth the liberal sciences; their special care is piety and virtue; there is no quarrelling or intemperate words heard, none seem idle[;]...everybody performeth his duty; yet is there always alacrity; neither is sober mirth anything wanting' (cited in Warrington 1965: vi).

What Erasmus was describing here, I believe, was a stable and balanced character—the kind of character which Indian scriptures called *sattva*, a disposition marked by equanimity and serene wisdom. Most revealing, perhaps, is the letter's reference to "sober mirth" indicating a happy and cheerful disposition which is as far removed from gloomy pedantry as from silly clowning. As one author comments (correctly, in my view): "Contrary to a strange but persistent belief, goodness is not synonymous with gloom; sanctity is rather the companion of 'sober mirth'." And as a corollary "a high order of intelligence is not incompatible with religious belief and a life consistent with that belief" (Warrington 1965: xi).

### **Gandhi and the "Goals of Life"**

Moving briskly across a few centuries and into a very different cultural setting, we come to a man whose character was equally marked by sobriety and mirth, by a combination of high intelligence and faith: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The literature devoted to Gandhi is daunting and nearly overwhelming, and the emphases vary greatly. Many (perhaps the majority) of studies devoted to him stress his political activities and public life; another large number of studies accentuate the aspect of nonviolence (*ahimsa*), civil disobedience, and transformative change relying on "soul-force" (*satyagraha*). What is not often explored in the literature, however, is the linkage between politics and public life, on the one hand, and nonviolence and "soul-force," on the other. The former clearly seems to involve an active intervention in the world or the affairs of this world, while the latter seems to presuppose almost a non-intervention and a kind of suffering rather than acting. How to reconcile these different orientations or pursuits? As it seems to me, the key to this riddle or the secret passageway linking these dimensions can be found in another classical Indian teaching: the teaching regarding the so-called "goals of life" or "*purusharthas*." In his recent book devoted to Gandhi, Anthony Parel focuses precisely on this doctrine of



*“purusharthas”*—which, in the Indian tradition, are four in number: comprising pleasure (*kama*), economic and political achievement (*artha*), ethical virtue (*dharma*), and salvation (*moksha*). What Parel’s book seeks to highlight, above all, is the balanced, or *sattva*, quality of Gandhi’s character and how his entire life, including his politics, was essentially a “quest for harmony” among the goals of life.

As Parel outlines in his “Preface,” Gandhi’s deepest striving was to foster a reconciliation or reintegration of the different dimensions of human life which in modernity are increasingly drifting apart or colliding with each other. What Gandhi sought to uncover or revive in all his endeavors, he writes, was “a basic harmony underlying all the fundamental human strivings—the strivings for wealth, power, pleasure, ethical goodness, beauty, and spiritual transcendence.” The fact that this quest was carried forward in the midst of modernity—an age marked by the growing “compartmentalization of life-issues”—renders Gandhi’s work “truly exemplary” for his own and subsequent generations. Part and parcel of this quest for harmony was the effort to come to terms with modern secularism. In Parel’s words, Gandhi sought to forge “a moral link” between the contemplative or spiritual life—deeply embedded in Indian culture and tradition—and “modern secular life” as manifest especially in economics and politics. Here again, he moved against the dominant current which, as a corollary of scientific advancement, seeks to emancipate politics and economics from ethical and spiritual constraints. For Gandhi, this current is lopsided and intrinsically deficient: by placing its trust entirely in scientific and economic progress and political power, the trend ignores and even denies “the need for a healthy spiritual life and for the public recognition of the sacred”—as supplements to “sound economics, wise legislation, free elections and fair adjudication.” Hence, relying on classical Indian scriptures and especially the theory of the four *purusharthas*, Gandhi aimed to establish a “working harmony” between the political, economic, ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual pursuits and thereby to remedy the “malaise of modern secularism.” This quest for balance, in turn, stood in the service of one of Gandhi’s most cherished goals: the promotion of peace through justice, fairness, and nonviolence. “Peace within the individual, and peace between states, between religions, and between civilizations,” Parel states, “depended, ultimately, on this harmony” (2006: ix–x).<sup>6</sup>

Although relying on classical Indian teachings, Gandhi’s endeavor was not simply nostalgic or antiquarian, but involved a serious rethinking of traditional concepts such as to render them relevant to modern times. In many ancient cultures, classical teachings were sometimes ambivalent and confusing and lent themselves to very different interpretations. This was particularly true of the doctrine of the *purusharthas*. According to Parel, the most important classical

texts preserved, and even insisted on, the harmonious pursuit of the goals of life; this was evident in the great Arthashastras and Dharmashastras. As A. K. Shah (1981) has convincingly shown in the case of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the four goals of life made sense only in their interrelation; when separated from each other, the pursuit of pleasure (*kama*) was bound to degenerate into lust, the striving for achievement (*artha*) into greed, just as virtue (*dharma*) could turn into mechanical ritual and salvation (*moksha*) into a form of escapism (see also 1996). It was only in later periods that this harmonious relation fell apart and gave way to conflict. Parel attributes this decay mainly to the so-called "renouncer" (*sramana*) movements which elevated *moksha* above all else and even made *dharma* less accessible. As he writes: "In Buddhism, as in ascetic Brahminism and Jainism, *artha* and *kama* came to be marginalized to the point of being treated as negative values"—adding: "The radical separation of *moksha* and *nirvana* from the other *purusharthas* had had disastrous consequences for Indian civilization taken as a whole." Against this background, Gandhi emerges as a major figure—perhaps *the* major figure—struggling against past decay and restoring harmony to the goals of life: "He belongs to the group of forward-looking thinkers who want to explore new ways in which the theory of the *purusharthas* might be made to work." Having overcome the older "*sramana*" ways, what comes into view is a "new Gandhian paradigm" postulating "the coordinated pursuit of all the *purusharthas*" (Parel 2006: 7, 13).<sup>7</sup>

Again, Gandhi's effort to restore harmony was not simply backward-looking, but contained several innovative features unknown to, or insufficiently developed by, the older tradition. Among these innovations were his opposition to gender biases; his critique of fatalism and fatalistically accepted caste-distinctions; and finally his resolute attempt to overcome the gulf between "this-worldly" and "other-worldly" pursuits or between saints and ordinary people. Regarding the first point, Gandhi saw the distinctive quality of human beings in their inner spirit or true self (*purusha* or *atman*)—a quality that is gender-neutral. As he observed at one point: "The word *purusha* should be interpreted in its etymological sense, and not merely to mean man. That which dwells in the *pura*, the body, is *purusha*. If we interpret the word *purushartha* in this sense, it can be used equally for men and women' " (1958–94, 44: 80, cited in Parel 2006: 22). A major obstacle to his restorative effort was the customary association of *karma* with fate, encouraging a fatalistic acceptance of one's condition in life. Here, a major reorientation was required. With divine help, Gandhi insisted, it was possible through struggle to turn bad consequences of actions (bad *karma*) into a healing and liberating direction. In Parel's words: "Purushartha could overcome caste-related disabilities too. If only the Dalits could activate their *purushartha*, nothing in the world, neither fate nor *karma* nor caste, could prevent them from

achieving their full potential." The attempt to overcome, or at least to narrow, the gulf between "this world" and *nirvana* proved to be the most difficult endeavor, because it involved deep metaphysical and quasi-theological quandaries. How, in effect, could the distinction between "appearance" (*maya*) and "reality" (*brahman*), between ignorance (*avidya*) and truth (*satya*) be maintained, if this gulf was called into question? Struggling against both "worldly" and "other-worldly" opponents, Gandhi stood his ground, arguing that "earnest seekers after moksha" could not possibly remain indifferent to the social ills around them. His point, Parel notes, was "that the old distinction between saints and worldly people had lost its meaning. Now it appeared that everyone had a calling to be saints, just as everyone had a calling to be citizens" (2006: 24–26).

The centerpiece of Parel's study is the discussion of the different goals of life and their interpretation or reconstruction by Gandhi. The discussion throughout is erudite and brimming over with instructive details. For present purposes, a few highlights of his presentation must suffice. In accord with Gandhi's own lifelong preoccupations, the discussion begins with the domain of *artha*, that is, political and economic activities. In the chapters devoted to *artha*, Gandhi is portrayed as a moderate constitutionalist, as a "civic nationalist" (or civic republican) who appreciated, within limits, the role of the modern nation-state and favored a limited form of social and economic equality. To the extent that Gandhi was a nationalist, Parel emphasizes, his was not the ethnic nationalism of the devotees of *hindutva*, nor the religious nationalism of Hindu or Muslim sectarians; rather, it involved a civic-constitutional framework that alone was able to "knit together the Dalits and non-Dalits, and people belonging to different religious, ethnic and language communities." With regard to the modern nation-state, Parel presents Gandhi as upholding—not indeed an absolutist Hobbesian Leviathan—but a "limited liberal" or rule-of-law state sustained by ethical legitimacy and dedicated to the preservation of "fundamental rights." What Gandhi basically added to the liberal conception was his insistence on supplementing the state with a flourishing "civil society," especially a network of non-governmental associations. "A good society," we read, "needs both the state (acting through coercive power) and a vibrant civil society (acting through non-violent power)." A further ingredient of a good society was a balanced and equitable economic system where property was regarded not so much as an exclusive private possession, but as a social or public "trust," and where individuals are expected "to cultivate the virtue of non-possessive individualism or *aparigraha*" (Parel 2006: 39, 50, 55, 63, 68–69).<sup>8</sup>

The second life-goal treated in Parel's text is *dharma* or virtue—and appropriately so because the Gandhian conception of moderate constitutionalism has little or no chance of functioning without ethical banisters or moorings. It

was in this domain that Gandhi's reconstructive effort was perhaps most innovative and radical. In much of traditional Indian thought, the notion of *dharma* had been linked with different social castes (*varnas*) and different "stages of life" (*ashramas*), with the result that separate ethical rules applied to people at different social levels and different age groups. Gandhi completely broke with this tradition (the so-called *varna-ashrama-dharma*), denouncing it as a "hideous travesty" of the original meaning of *dharma* and of any viable ethics as such. As a corollary, "untouchability" of the lowest caste was for him an ethical monstrosity and the "greatest blot on Hinduism." In lieu of this flawed tradition, Gandhi upheld the notion of a general or universal ethics (*sadharana dharma*) which grants to all human beings "fundamental rights"—rights which are always linked with corresponding duties and need to be constantly reaffirmed through the practice of "soul-force" or "truth-force" (*satyagraha*). Another important way in which Gandhi innovated the tradition was through his stress on nonviolence (*ahimsa*) or nonviolent action—although in this respect he could rely on some Indian as well as Christian teachings. Nonviolence for Gandhi, Parel points out, was a "moral virtue" which habitually disposes individuals and groups "(a) to resist violence through non-violent means, and (b) to take active steps to resolve conflicts by peaceful techniques." Although firmly attached to this virtue, Gandhi—in Parel's view—did not rigidly adhere to it, preferring instead to distinguish between *ahimsa* as an absolute creed and as a practical policy: "Non-violence as a policy or civic non-violence is what he expects from the average citizen.... Satyagraha is concerned with civic non-violence rather than with the heroic [or absolute] variety, its aim being to secure the good of society rather than the private good of the citizen" (2006: 90–91, 94–95, 121–22).

The two remaining goals of life—*kama* and *moksha*—are less extensively treated; I limit myself to a few comments. In the domain of *kama*, an intriguing and somewhat unexpected dimension is Gandhi's relation to aesthetics and the arts (the latter being traditionally subsumed under the category of pleasure or the pleasurable). Readers here are informed about Gandhi's fondness of music, poetry, and hymn-singing; they are also told that he served, at one point, as president of both the Association of Gujarati Literature and the Association of Hindi Literature. A more problematic and less *kama*-friendly aspect was Gandhi's attitude toward sexuality, an arena where he practiced nearly lifelong abstinence or celibacy (*brahmacharya*). The practice clearly marginalized *kama* in favor of virtue; by insisting so rigorously on sublimation, Parel (2006: 135, 163) comments, Gandhi's attitude was somewhat "inconsistent" with the harmonious pursuit of the *purusharthas*. In the Indian tradition, *moksha* (salvation, liberation) was considered the highest goal promising complete fulfillment—an idea to which Gandhi subscribed implicitly throughout his life and explicitly in the

famous Introduction to his autobiography of 1927, where we find this statement: “What I want to achieve, —what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years, —is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*” (1993: xxvi). As Parel points out, Gandhi was not really concerned with the finer metaphysical or theological points of the concept, limiting himself to its practical application in his own life, the life of a *karmayogin*. In this respect, he could find ample support and inspiration in his favorite text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, on which he wrote several commentaries in an effort to chart his own innovative reconstruction. “In charting his own course in the interpretation of the *Gita*,” Parel states, “Gandhi wanted to avoid the Scylla of doctrinaire secularism and the Charybdis of traditional asceticism. He wanted a course that would affirm the values of the world and the *purusharthas* on the one hand and those of world-transcending spirituality open to every human being on the other” (2006: 177, 183).<sup>9</sup>

This balanced “middle” course is reaffirmed in the concluding chapter of the book, devoted specifically to the reconciliation of “the political and the spiritual.” For Parel, Gandhi was “almost alone among the great teachers of India” in striving for a reconnection between the political and the spiritual life. Departing from a long ascetic (*sramanic*) tradition, he restored *artha*, meaning politics and economics, to prominence among life’s goals—to be sure, circumscribed by the other *purusharthas*. As a mode of activity, *artha* for Gandhi meant a striving for power and wealth—but “within the bounds of ethics (dharma) and within the requirements of a healthy spiritual life (the pursuit of moksha).” Restating a point made earlier in his study, Parel finds the reconnection of politics and spirituality “possible only in a free society—a civic nation presided over by a secular constitutional state” and animated by an ethically sensitive “liberal politics.” As he realizes, combining *artha* with spirituality requires more than a preservation of the status quo; it involves or demands some ethical transformation. If lust for power and wealth is to make room for a saner and more just politics and economics, egotism has to be tamed and rechanneled. In the language of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna has to become “both a *sthitha-prajna* (a person of stable wisdom) and a *bhakta* (a devotee of God).” In like manner, the modern citizen is in the position of Arjuna, being called upon “to engage in political pursuits the way he did—through self-discipline and sound piety.” Piety, one should note, does not refer here to any religious dogmatism, but to a genuine commitment to the search for “truth” (*satya*) which is a synonym for the divine: “Life is a quest for truth, which in turn is a quest for harmony” (Parel 2006: 197–98, 205).

## Harmony and Strife

Parel's book is a remarkable text, offering a wealth of insights for students of Gandhi, of India, and of contemporary politics East and West. Perhaps its most prominent feature is the portrayal of Gandhi as a "man for all seasons," as a person of "stable wisdom" managing to correlate worldly and other-worldly, political and spiritual pursuits. In a time of rampant ideological schisms—above all the schism between radical agnosticism and often fanatical religious revivals—Gandhi emerges as a piously "secular" person, a man whose own deep religiosity is at ease with religious pluralism and the differentiation of public institutions from official creeds. In terms of the Indian doctrine of the *purusharthas*, Parel presents Gandhi as both a traditionalist and a creatively innovative thinker, that is, as a man whose reverence for the past is held in balance with the pressing needs of the present and the requirements of the future. Small wonder that he was a target of critique among both nostalgic *pandits* and transcultural modernists and revolutionaries. Among other admirable features of the study one may lift up the discussions devoted to the *Bhagavad Gita*, to economic "trusteeship," and to literature and the arts. A further important aspect, not previously mentioned, is the distinction between Gandhian-style pluralism and a radical fragmentation bordering on relativism and incommensurable division—an outlook favored, among others, by Isaiah Berlin. Against the latter, Parel marshals the notion of "truth" (*satya*), not as a possession but as a shared orientation. "*Satyagraha* would not make sense," he writes, "if conflicts did not exist....But in his philosophy conflicts have a common reference point in truth....The purusha is open to truth, and each purushartha contains within itself a capacity for ultimate harmony with truth" (Parel 2006: 204–5).

It is precisely in this area—the relation between harmony and conflict or strife—that some afterthoughts may be introduced, not in the sense of critical reservations or objections, but of augmentations of the book's arguments. As it seems to me, the accent of the study is sometimes placed too heavily on harmony, at the expense of conflict and struggle. Looking at its dramatic unfolding, Gandhi's life-story—like that of Thomas More—was not marked by a great deal of harmony, but by intense antagonism and relentless struggle. Like More, Gandhi in his political life had to endure severe hardships and ordeals at the hands of the rulers of the day; while the former languished in the Tower before his death, Gandhi spent nearly a third of his life in various prisons—setting an example for some of his later followers like Nelson Mandela in South Africa (who was jailed for twenty-eight years). Not all the hardships and sufferings, to be sure, were imposed by the powerful; some were self-

inflicted. In an effort to promote social change or a change of heart, Gandhi, as we know, engaged in long periods of fasting—sometimes almost to the point of death. Parel’s book is relatively silent on these episodes; nor does it comment on the ordeal Gandhi imposed on himself during the riots in East Bengal and Bihar at the time of the partition (and shortly before his assassination). In a desperate effort to quench the flames of violence, Gandhi at that time traveled on foot to remote, riot-torn villages, ignoring the frailty of his body and the dangers to himself. In the words of Sheila McDonough: “From this time until his death by assassination in 1948, Gandhi lived his final years in the midst of a sort of hell on earth,” for there can scarcely be a worse fate than “outbursts of violence among the very persons one has given one’s life to serving” (1994: 83; cf. Dallmayr 2004).

The picture of an old man walking across rivers and half-collapsed bridges does not fit well with that of a pliant, law-abiding citizen. In Parel’s book, Gandhi appears mainly or predominantly as a civic nationalist, a defender of the nation-state and its constitutional order—not far removed from the model of liberal proceduralism. Even the practice of *satyagraha*—the struggle for social change through a change of hearts—is presented chiefly as a form of “constitutional agitation,” as an effort to restore the constitutional rule of law. “The goal of resistance to the state,” we read, “was the improved constitutional order, and not the replacement of the state by statelessness” (Parel 2006: 57, see also 94–95). Well enough; but the aim to improve the constitutional order sometimes conflicts with formal or legal constitutionalism. During Gandhi’s lifetime, India was part of the British Empire and hence part of the British legal and constitutional regime. His relentless campaigns for independence—including the Salt March and the later “Quit India” policy—were conducted in defiance of British law and could be, and were, considered seditious and unlawful (for which the punishment was imprisonment). A similar predicament can be found in the case of Nelson Mandela whose struggle against apartheid was launched during a time when apartheid was part and parcel of the legal system and “constitutional order” of South Africa. In the case of Thomas More, the Act of Succession and the Act of Supremacy (of king over church) were integral cornerstones of the English legal order at that time; because of his refusal to endorse these acts, he was charged with treason and executed. Hence, as one can see, the endeavor to “improve” an existing constitutional order involves more than a legal maneuver; it can be, and often is, a matter of life and death.

That Gandhi was not satisfied with legality and formal constitutionalism is also demonstrated by his harsh critique of the internal functioning of the British system—which was (and still is) considered by many to be the epitome of a good constitutional order. His early work *Hind Swaraj* (1909)—available now in a new edition by Anthony Parel—contains a long litany detailing the ills afflicting the

English parliamentary regime, ranging from partisan bickering and the venality of parliamentarians to the power lust of the political elite. If such was the character of the British system, Gandhi (1997: 28–33) did not want independent India to imitate it. His reservations and suspicions regarding formal constitutionalism remained with him for the rest of his life. It may be quite correct, as Parel affirms, that Gandhi was not an opponent of the modern state, including the structure of the Indian state after independence; however, his approval was somewhat half-hearted and entirely contingent on the fostering of a public ethos undergirding and circumscribing the role of state structures. As Bhikhu Parekh has shown, during the last years of his life when independent India was just emerging, Gandhi was engaged in an effort to supplement governmental structures with a civil-society based association or movement called Loka Sevak Sangh (Association for Service to People) entrusted with the task of promoting moral and political awakening and ethical transformation. In his conception, the two institutions of the state and the Sangh were to be neither entirely divorced, nor to be conflated, but to function in creative tension. In Parekh's words: While accepting the state as an "essentially *legal* institution," moral and spiritual authority—deriving from "the trust and confidence of the people"—belonged in Gandhi's view to civil-society associations, especially the Sangh (1989: 123; emphasis in original). Although acknowledging briefly the role of civil society in Gandhi's thought, Parel underestimates (in my view) his genuine suspicions regarding the modern state—dismissing Parekh and other writers focusing on these suspicions somewhat briskly as defenders of a "stateless society" (Parel 2006: 64–65).

What emerges into view here is the integral role of tension and struggle in any genuine quest for harmony. Clearly, the latter cannot simply mean adjustment or accommodation. If "truth" is the loadstar of the *purusharthas*—as Parel rightly claims—then cultivating them involves necessarily a struggle against untruth, injustice, and oppression. In terms of his study, the modern state for Gandhi was basically a "coercive state" or an instrument of coercion, whereas *satyagraha*, proceeding from civil society, involved resistance to unjust coercion. However, can one always harmoniously combine coercion and resistance to coercion? To take a historical example: Can harmony prevail between Henry VIII and Thomas More? But if the relation necessarily involves tension and strife, then *satyagraha*—although preferably relying on nonviolence—cannot always be law-abiding and has to take, at least occasionally, a "heroic" stance exceeding the "average" grumbling against the state (Parel 2006: 55–56, 64–65).<sup>10</sup> These comments seem to be particularly relevant for the contemporary period, a time when the bent toward fragmentation and diremptions (*Entzweiungen*) characterizing the modern age has reached full fruition. In this situation, any



quest for harmony has to start by acknowledging or taking cognizance of prevailing differentiations and dilemmas—without necessarily acquiescing in the status quo. What follows from this acknowledgment is the realization that steps toward “truth” are bound to be difficult and tension-ridden, requiring the truth-seeker to be on guard against the pitfalls of both despair and the lure of premature totalization or forced synthesis. Differently phrased: holistic unity under modern circumstances can only arise out of great multiplicity—just as, in contemporary art, harmony tends to arise out of dissonance (see Dallmayr 2002).

The aspect of tension or strife seems also to be hidden or slumbering in the traditional doctrine of the *purusharthas*—which is the cornerstone of Parel’s study. The term is usually translated as “goals of life.” But one may ask: Whose goals? Who stands behind the different strivings or pursuits—whether they be strivings for pleasure, success, virtue, or salvation? Is the individual self in the driver’s seat, and are the different goals simply modes of self-realization or ego-enhancement? In this case, is everything just a matter of human contrivance? As Parel points out, *moksha* in the Indian sense means either “realization of Brahman” (the divine) or realization of self as “*atman*”—but “*atman*” is not the same as the empirical ego. As he also emphasizes, the point of religion—especially for Gandhi—is to bring about a transformative change: namely, “from an ego-centered way of being to a ‘self’-oriented [*atman*-oriented] way of being” (Parel 2006: 177, 100).<sup>11</sup> Yet, the move from one way to the other is not smooth or harmonious, but involves a kind of rupture, a turning about or *periagoge* (never easily accomplished). Gandhi himself referred frequently to the need to “reduce himself to zero,” in order to be able of pursue his highest aim. From this perspective, the Buddhist emphasis on the need of self-emptying and self-denial (*sunyata*, *anatta*) appears intelligible and sensible and not entirely out of step with Gandhi’s own path.<sup>12</sup> Viewed against this background, maybe the warnings of Gandhi’s mentor Rajchandbhai and of the entire *sramanic* tradition against an easy compatibility of “worldly” and “trans-worldly” pursuits were not entirely misguided and need to be constantly pondered by politically inclined *karmayogins*. Perhaps one even has to consider that the translation “goals of life” does not quite capture the meaning of *purusharthas*: In some sense, at least on the level of *dharma* and *moksha*, it is not so much a matter of humans pursuing goals or targets as rather humans being targeted and challenged in their humanity.

This aspect also is important for the Gandhian mode of political action. In much of contemporary social and political theory, “action” means the pursuit of goals by an agent or “subject” deliberately targeting these goals. This model undergoes a profound change in the Gandhian context. First of all, action as an ethical practice always is responsive to the situation of others—and, in the case of

*satyagraha*, frequently involves the experience of self-suffering (rather than the infliction of agendas on others). Still more importantly, action for the *karmayogin* involves a responsive self-surrender to the divine, coupled with the renunciation of selfish rewards or benefits. As Parel remarks, Gandhi was firm in maintaining that sustained *moksha*-oriented action—especially his practice of *brahmacharya*—was impossible to succeed “‘by mere human effort’ ”; what was needed in addition to personal effort and a degree of self-reliance was “‘faith in God’ ” or a striving for “‘God realization’.” In Gandhi’s own words, in every genuine action, God’s grace (*prabhu prasad*) and an “‘unreserved surrender to His grace’ ” were ultimately crucial requisites (Parel 2006: 151, citing Gandhi 1958–94, 39: 171, 254). Hence, every genuine political action of the *karmayogin* has to be both creative and receptive or passive—better still: it has to be creative while simultaneously “emptying” the agent or refusing to foreground the agent’s particular will. Readers familiar with the Christian tradition will surely be reminded here of the longstanding debate among theologians whether salvation can be accomplished through human work or by “grace alone.”

For Gandhi—as Parel shows—the guiding inspiration on this score was always the *Bhagavad Gita*; and especially the concluding verses of Book 2: the “*mahavakya*” spelling out the condition of the “sage of stable wisdom.” There we read:

When a man surrenders all desires [goals, pursuits] that come to the heart and by the grace of God finds the joy of God, then his soul has indeed found peace [or harmony] (2.55).

To this passage may be joined these other verses:

Do thy work in the peace of Yoga and, free from selfish desires, be not moved in success or in failure....In this wisdom a man goes beyond what is well done and what is not well done. Go thou therefore to wisdom: Yoga is wisdom in work (2.48, 50).

As the *Bhagavad Gita* further adds, in verses that were dear to Gandhi throughout his life, unselfish or self-emptying action—consecrated through sacrifice—brings together this world and the next:

Great is the man who, free from attachments and with a mind ruling its powers in harmony, works on the path of Karma Yoga, the path of consecrated action....The world is in the bonds of action, unless action is consecration (3.7, 9).

## Notes

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1. With his talent for pithy formulations, Alasdair MacIntyre has singled out some dominant “stock characters” of the modern age: chiefly the “manager” in charge of anonymous rule systems, the “therapist” managing people’s inner lives, and the “aesthete” devoted to privatized consumption (see 1984: 11–12, 23–24, 34–35).

2. On More’s public career, see especially Wegemer (1996); see also Ackroyd (1998), Reynolds (1968).

3. For the text of the dialogue, see More (1951: 143–423). As Warrington points out in his “Introduction,” the tribulation mentioned in the text referred seemingly to an impending invasion by the Turks; however, the actual danger stemmed from a tyrannical king. As More himself stated: “There is no born Turk so cruel to Christian folk as is the false Christian that falleth from the faith” (p. x).

4. In Adams’ presentation, these questions dominate the first part of *Utopia*. But the second part offers a set of “no less disturbing questions. For example, Can a community be organized for the benefit of all, and not to satisfy the greed, lust, and appetite for domination of a few? How much repression is a good society justified in exercising in order to retain its goodness? And finally, When we give some persons power in our society (as we must), and appoint others to watch them (as we’d better), who is going to watch the watchers? Can we really stand a society in which everybody watches everybody?” (1975: vii).

5. For some parts of the above account, see Warrington (1965: v–vi, xii). Several famous sayings are recorded from the final moments of More’s life. Thus, in ascending the scaffold, he told the executioner: “Assist me up, and in coming down I will shift for myself.” And when his head was already on the block, he admonished the executioner: “Wait till I put my beard aside, for that has done no treason.”

6. Under the rubric of justice and fairness, Parel also mentions some of the urgent reforms needed in India today: Establishing “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” (2006: x).

7. Parel finds similar impulses for restoring harmony in a number of recent or contemporary Indian philosophers, such as Krishna (1991), Sharma (1982), Sundara Rajan (1979–80, 1988–89).

8. The reference in the last citation is to Macpherson (1962).

9. The chapter on *moksha*, or spiritual liberation, also contains helpful comments on Gandhi’s attempt to combine action with prayer and mediation (Parel 2006: 177–94); for Gandhi, “work was the sun, and contemplation and devotion wee its satellites” (191). The discussion should be read in conjunction with the book’s chapter on “religion” (treated as a dimension of *dharma*) which touches on such issues as Gandhi’s prayer life, his conception of “secularism,” and his support of religious pluralism (99–116).

10. For the distinction between “average” and “heroic” resistance, see Parel (2006: 122–23).

11. At another point, Parel comments somewhat ambivalently that, for Gandhi, “purushartha is the inner power by means of which humans overcome themselves” (2006: 23).

12. Parel’s repeated criticisms of Buddhism, including “engaged” and “Navayana” Buddhism, seem to me insofar off the mark. See Parel (2006: 78–79, 200–202).

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