

Ephraim Meir

Gandhi and Jewish Philosophers

Trans-different Encounters

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Introduction

The vast body of Gandhi's writings and transcription of speeches comprises a variety of themes such as human nature, history, politics, economics, decolonization, civil disobedience, religion, liberation, environment, force, violence and nonviolence. Gandhi's life has been vividly and colorfully described in many books. His thoughts on war and peace, on oppression and civil disobedience are frequently discussed in contemporary debates. Gandhi is perceived as controversial, but also as greatly relevant for today. His challenging nonviolent lifestyle and ideas have influenced many, including in the twenty-first century.

Until now, Gandhi scholarship has not researched the topic of Gandhi and Jewish philosophers. A real and imagined dialogue between Gandhi and Jewish philosophers shows many parallels along with significant differences. They differ on Judaism and Zionism and on the way of coping with violence. Yet, in comparing them, there are also surprising parallels and similarities. Gandhi appears to be controversial and relevant at the same time. He is not a philosopher and is even critical of the philosophical tradition, but his thoughts have philosophical significance.

This book comprises five chapters, that could also be read separately. It brings Buber, Levinas and Heschel into contact with the Mahatma. It describes the reception of Gandhi's thoughts on Judaism and Zionism in Israel and depicts possible influences of Gandhi's nonviolence on Israelis and Palestinians.

A first chapter describes Gandhi's view on Judaism and Zionism and places it in the framework of an interreligious

theology. In such a theology, the notion of “trans-difference” appreciates the differences between cultures and religions with the aim of building bridges between them. It is argued that Gandhi’s understanding of Judaism was limited, mainly because he approached Judaism through Christian lenses. He reduced Judaism to a religion without considering its peoplehood dimension. This reduction, together with his political endeavors in favor of the Hindu-Muslim unity and his advice of *satyagraha* to the Jews in the 1930s determined his view on Zionism. Notwithstanding Gandhi’s problematic position on Judaism and Zionism, his *satyagraha* opens a wide-open window to possibilities and challenges in the Near East. In the spirit of an interreligious theology, bridges are built between Gandhi’s *satyagraha* and Jewish transformational dialogical thinking.

A second chapter deals with Buber and Gandhi. A virtual encounter between Buber and Gandhi articulates where they differ and where they touch upon common ground. They developed transformative thinking that opened up the individual and collective ego to others. Only recently have scholars paid full attention to Buber’s theo-political thinking. Gandhi’s article “The Jews” made his way of thinking irrelevant for many Zionists over the decades. The relative neglect of Buber’s political thought and of Gandhi’s contribution to conflict resolution in Israel/Palestine explains why studies systematically comparing Buber’s politicoreligious thinking with that of Gandhi are rare. The chapter seeks to fill this gap. Gandhi and Buber’s religiosity impacted upon spiritual, social, and political life. Their transformational perspectives shed new light on how to deal with violent conflict situations.

A third chapter discusses Mahatma Gandhi and Emmanuel Levinas, who have much in common. They interpret religion in a radical ethical way and develop an ethical hermeneutics of religious sources. Levinas’s thoughts on a holy history, not to be confused with history, are comparable with Gandhi’s *swaraj* as the spiritual

independence and self-transformation of India. Escaping war logics, they maintain a “beyond the state” in the state and insert ethics in politics. Yet, Gandhi’s ethico-politics works with radical interrelatedness, whereas Levinas differentiates more between the self and the other. Gandhi trusted that, in the end, the good would vanquish evil. Levinas, in turn, did not venture into the future: the present was under “eschatological judgment.” Gandhi’s love of the enemy and his attempt to soften the opponent’s heart are absent in Levinas’s metaphysics. In addition, Levinas does not radically deconstruct the term self-defense, although Gandhi notoriously made also exceptions to his *ahimsa*. A dialogue can be established between Levinas’s ethical metaphysics and Gandhi’s *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*. Both thinkers offer a radical critique of a peace based on rational contracts and equate peace with universal brother- and sisterhood. Without underestimating the many similarities between Levinas and Gandhi, I also highlight their dissimilarities. I argue that precisely the differences between both thinkers allow for a “trans-different” dialogue, which respects specificities and promotes communication, in a movement of hospitality and mutual learning.

The fourth chapter explores how Gandhi and Heschel developed a liberation theology that was rooted in their religious praxis, which implied an active, non-violent struggle for the rights of the oppressed. A first section discusses what separates the two spiritual giants. A second section describes the affinities between them. The third, main section describes how they formulated a non-violent liberation theology that aims at the liberation of all.

Reading and interpreting the vast body of Gandhi’s writings, I was much inspired by the Gandhian philosopher and peace and justice activist Douglas Allen whose book *Gandhi After 9/11: Creative Nonviolence and Sustainability* provided me with a philosophical method how to read Gandhi’s texts in their historical context in view of a rereading of these texts in radically different

contexts.¹ Allen's selective, creative, perspectival and sympathetic rereading of Gandhi allowed me to fully appreciate the great value of Gandhi's nonviolence for today. Many of Gandhi's utterances are significant and telling. Others are less meaningful and even problematic. Reexamining his thoughts and reevaluating them from a present-day perspective may become helpful in keeping open the channels of communication, in realizing our dependence on others and in developing an attitude of trust. A Gandhi-informed approach to reality may draw our attention to the significance of servant leadership, of active resistance and of self-discipline in view of a flourishing and peaceful society. For Allen, Gandhi is a challenge for today's world, a qualitative paradigm shift. In a world of divisiveness, war, intolerance, exploitation, inequality, racism and xenophobia, Gandhi exemplified that what unites us is more essential than what separates us. Ethics, interconnection, compassion and service responding to the needs of others are more essential than greed and hatred. Allen's reading of Gandhi beyond deification or vilification showed me the way to Gandhi's relevance for our times.

Another scholar whom I owe a lot is Anantanand Rambachan, whose Advaita theology of liberation aims at the liberation of his people from poverty, powerlessness and injustice.² Firmly enrooted in his Hindu tradition, Anant is at the same time informed by his dialogue with other traditions and with liberation theologies in these traditions. His combination of Advaita and justice sets an example for those who look for liberating elements, for equality and justice in their own traditions.

My interest in the study of religions and in interreligious theology is longstanding. It was intensified during the years

1 Douglas Allen, *Culture and Self. Philosophical and Religious Perspectives, East and West*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1997.

2 Anantanand Rambachan, *A Hindu Theology of Liberation: Not-Two Is Not One*. SUNY Series in Religious Studies. Albany: SUNY Press, 2014.

2009-2017, when I was the Levinas guest Professor for Jewish Dialogue Studies and Interreligious Theology at the Academy of World Religions, University of Hamburg. From August until December 2018, I researched the theme of religion and violence as a fellow at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton. There I met Wolfgang Palaver, Ed Noort and Louise du Toit. As a team, we decided to engage in a study of Gandhi at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study, South Africa, where I stayed for a few months in 2021 and 2022. We had many meetings, discussed a lot, developed different views and shared our insights on Gandhi's nonviolent way.

The majority of the material in this volume have previously been published online. I reviewed, reworked and updated these publications in view of this book. My thanks to the online review *Religions* which allowed me to reuse these materials for the present publication.³

- 3 Ephraim Meir, "Gandhi's View on Judaism and Zionism in Light of an Interreligious Theology." Published online in *Religions* 2021, 12: 489; doi.org/10.3390/rel12070489; "Gandhi and Buber on Individual and Collective Transformation." Published online in *Religions* 13:600 doi.org/10.3390/rel13070600; "A Virtual Dialogue Between Gandhi and Levinas." Published online, *Religions* 2021, 12(6), 422; doi.org/10.3390/rel12060422; "The Non-Violent Liberation Theologies of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mahatma Gandhi." Published online, *Religions* 2021, 12: 855; doi.org/10.3390/rel12100855); "Oneness and Mending the World in Arthur Green's Neo-Hasidism." Published online, *Religions* 2023, 14(7), 863; doi.org/10.3390/rel14070863.

