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PHD THESIS

ABSTRACT

*The Core Concepts of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's
Philosophical Thought*

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Key Concepts: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Mahatma, Great Soul, India, Pakistan, colonialism, satya, truth, ahimsa, non-violence, satyagraha, swaraj, independence, Hinduism, Christianity, Hindu nationalism, Muslim nationalism, British, Indian National Congress.

Abstract

The Core Concepts of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's Philosophical Thought

It has passed more than six decades since *Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi* suffered a violent death. It all happened on January 30, 1948: he was on his way to his usual place of worship, where he would say the prayers in front of large audiences, when a Hindu extreme nationalist, namely, Nathuram Vinayak Godse, got close to him and fired three gunshots, putting an end to Mahatma's life. Gandhi's last words bear witness to his life-style, philosophy, and strong belief: "Hey Ram", that is, "Oh, God" – these were the last words that left the lips of the great Indian freedom fighter, spiritual leader, political and religious philosopher.

Ghandi's death meant the end of a chapter in the history of modern India and the beginning of a new era in world history, at the same time. It may seem coincidental, but Mahatma's death marked the closing of probably the most significant period in the history of modern India. Hereby, I am considering the period hallmarked by the joy of attaining independence and shaking off the colonial status as well as bearing the burdensome consequences of separation. August 14 and 15, 1947 mark the moment of Pakistan's and India's official establishment as independent and separate states only to see the world shocked at Gandhi's ironic death shortly afterwards: "the apostle of non-violence" (Nanda 2004. 264) became the victim of violence; on the face of it, the dark forces of evil and hatred gained victory over the good and the righteous.

However, I tend to share the opinion that Gandhi's death turned over a new leaf in the book of world history. A process started then that has never stopped evolving up to this day, which we may define most appropriately as the processing, systematization, and interpretation of Gandhi's personality, life, and philosophy. At the same time, we could also witness another

process, pertaining strictly to the Gandhian philosophy and idea of life as several other sets of examples standing for the practice and adoption of non-violent resistance can be found outside the Indian borders, such as the movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. in behalf of the black people's equal rights in the United States of America, the South African anti-apartheid efforts, or the Solidarity's activity in Poland, who pursued a non-violent conflict resolution method in order to wind up the communist dictatorship (cf. Brown-Parel 241–244., Hardiman 2003. 253-293, Allen 2008. 243-245).

According to the central proposition of my thesis, the Indian nationalist movement characterized by Gandhi's personality could surpass any other previous nationalist movement and achieve most of the goals on its agenda, thus becoming highly effective, because, on the one hand, Gandhi considered politics as sort of practising religion on an everyday basis while, on the other hand, in perfect line with his previously mentioned conviction, he conferred a new, politically and socially comprehensible, additional meaning to the ancient, well-known and widely understood religious concepts. Consequently, he succeeded in forging the socially, religiously, linguistically, and culturally fragmented and heterogeneous Indian society into one nation for the time of the movements for independence. Furthermore, another ambition of my thesis is to answer whether the Gandhian ideas have their relevance in the 21st century, whether they have a message waiting to be decoded and put into practice, and whether the Great Soul's philosophy, propagations, and actions have any actual *raison d'être* in our ever globalizing world.

Besides formulating the hypothesis, the introductory part of my thesis touches upon several vital issues. This section is dedicated to the personal, subjective factors which motivated me in choosing the topic and are tightly connected to my study trips in India carried out in 1996 and 1998. In addition to this, the first part of my thesis discusses the methods adopted in preparing and compiling my paper, which rest upon text analysis and interpretation, on the one hand, and – in the case of the concepts central to the Gandhian philosophy – etymological, morphological, and semantic analysis, on the other. Immediately following the presentation of the applied methods, you can find a short summary of the research results obtained prior to writing my thesis.

The introductory part mentions in particular a brief presentation of the works I consider the most standard in terms of Gandhi's research history, which I classified into three categories based on Chakrabarty's typology: biographical works (biographies by Romain Roland, Louis

Fischer, Kathryn Tidrick, Joseph Lelyveld, and Jad Adams), standard works treating the socio-philosophical aspects of Gandhi's philosophy (Rhagavan Iyer, Joan Bondurant, Bhikhu Parekh, Bidyut Chakrabarty). As for the third category, it is made up of works that give us a historical reading of the topic in question, which, however, are not meant to be treated within the scope of my thesis since they cannot really provide any additional information on Mahatma to those already available to us through the biographical monographs.

My brief survey on the research on Gandhi touches in particular upon the fact that Romanian literature has almost no mention of Gandhi despite an explosive increase seen in the number of works published on Eastern religions and cultures in the dawn of the nineties. While there is a worldwide interest in Mahatma's personality and activities, there is an almost complete, baffling absence thereof in Romania.

Acknowledgements close the introductory section, where I express my gratitude to those who have contributed to my work either professionally or with their helping attitude.

The second part of my thesis is an attempt at presenting Gandhi, the man, without trying to provide with an overall picture. As a matter of fact, it is not my intention to give a biographical presentation of Mahatma, as we can find hundreds of such works written in the last few decades; instead, I would like to draw attention on the way he speaks about himself (this is the actual aim of the first subchapter: *Gandhi, in the Light of his Biography and Works*). Then again, the second subchapter (*Gandhi's image as Seen by Friends, Colleagues, Biographers, and Researchers*) tries to turn our attention to the many faces – present both in the west and the east – of one of the most eminent personalities of the 20th century, placing in the limelight the opinions of his contemporaries and those of various prominent personalities, members of the subsequent generations.

The third chapter of my dissertation, bearing the title *The Historical and Social Context of Gandhi's Work in India*, is dedicated to help the reader see the events that took place in India at the end of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century, and place them into a historical and social context in order to gain a better insight into the Gandhian oeuvre. First and foremost, the correct understanding of Gandhi's life-work presupposes the reader to form the right picture of the characteristics and relevant events pertaining to the historical period under discussion. The first subchapter (*Gandhi's Years Spent in England and South Africa*) treats Gandhi's time spent in England and South Africa since both his three years spent in England and those two decades

spent in South Africa significantly determined the career and philosophy of the Great Soul. The second subchapter (*Historical and Political Situation in India in Gandhi's Time*) deals with the Hindu and Muslim origins of the Indian national awakening. Distinct attention is paid to the role and impact of the Hindu religious reform movements (Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, and Ramakrishna Mission), as well as, the presentation of the objectives set by the moderate and radical Hindu nationalist movements that developed in the bosom of Hinduism. A separate subchapter is dedicated to treat the appearance of Muslim Nationalism and its most relevant representatives. Two subchapters cover the Indian National Congress: while the initial part touches upon the circumstances of its establishment, its original objectives, and the adopted methods, the second part gives a presentation of the Congress found under the leadership and influence of Gandhi.

The fourth chapter of my PhD thesis (*Key Concepts in Gandhi's Philosophy*), which represents the actual core of my paper, has its ambition to make an analysis of the categories central both to the Gandhian philosophy and one of the most extensive socio-political awakenings in the 20th century, bringing about a wave of national revivals that would spread across an entire continent. I discuss the etymology of the categories of *satya*¹, *ahimsa*², and that of *satyagraha*³, which rests upon the previous two; I look into their original meaning embedded in the religious tradition and present the changes and developments in content and meaning that complement the above-mentioned categories of religious origins inside the Gandhian philosophy.

Within the scope of the very same chapter, I give a brief introduction of the religious and philosophical influences that played the greatest part in shaping the Gandhian philosophy. Hereby, I consider certain deep and decisive spiritual influences with stimulative effects on Gandhi, such as Hinduism, Christianity, or Lev Tolstoy. Furthermore, besides presenting the basic principles, chapter 4 guides us through the stages of development in the Gandhian philosophy by investigating the statements: "God is Truth" and "Truth is God".

These analyses are based upon the primary bibliography, especially, the writings published by Gandhi himself and the various analyses of the Gandhian oeuvre. To a great extent,

¹ It means truth: it is one of the oldest principles in the Indian religions.

² It is a term meaning non-violence, the avoidance of violence: an ancient principle propagated by Indian religions, especially by Jainism that emphasizes turning away from all types of violence.

³ The term originally refers to insisting on truth above all. The focal point of the type of resistance Gandhi developed in South Africa, which rests upon this insistence on truth and the respect thereof, is that people and groups of people, or even a whole nation refuses to comply with such laws that prove to be unjust.

the sources of texts attached to Mahatma's name are made up of his biography published in English as well as in Hungarian (Gandhi 1997, Gándhí 2009), a work of translation published under my editorial care, entitled *Hind Szvaráds, avagy az indiai önkormányzat* (Gándhí 2010) [*Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Gandhi 2010)], and the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, a collection of texts⁴ published in the form of 98 volumes of electronic books and internet databases.

At the same time, my analyses of the Gandhian life-work and categories rely in a large measure on the most relevant researchers' (Ajay Shanker Rai, Bal Ram Nanda, Bhikhu Parekh, Bidyut Chakrabarthy, Douglas Allen, David Hardiman, Edward Thompson, Glyn Richards, Joan V. Bondurant, Kathryn Tidrick, Raghavan N. Iyer, Ravindra Varma, Terrence J. Rynne, etc.) viewpoints and theories.

Chapter 5 (*The Relevance of Gandhian Principles in the 21st Century*) is founded on the hypothesis that the Gandhian oeuvre, as well as, the principles and teachings formulated therein have their own message and relevance both for the individuals and the societies existent in the 21st century. It is my strong belief that Gandhi's life and philosophy, as well as, the warnings it gives voices to and the consequences deducible therefrom can provide an answer to the problems our presently globalizing world suffers from, such as religious fanaticism, worldwide terrorism, economic crisis originating from the moral crisis of the individual and the society, the ever extending ecological footprint, etc. I am convinced that Gandhi's message has a concrete and actual relevance, with the only question remaining as to whether we are / will be able to decode this message as both individuals and societies, and apply it on an individual and societal level. In other words, with full knowledge of the present problems and future challenges, we may pose the question whether we, as (groups of) individuals and societies, will be able to achieve a certain level of mental development that would enable us to properly understand and adopt the Gandhian principles on an everyday basis.

The last chapter of my thesis sums up the final conclusions.

In the light of the above, it can be said that the issues discussed in the present research are at the crossroads between history and the history of religion, as well as, between the philosophy of religion and political philosophy. The subject itself gives room for this sort of categorization as it makes use of a historical framework to analyse the Great Soul's philosophical dimensions and

⁴ The digital version of the work can found at: <http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html>

visualizes the socio-political processes that may be considered the direct consequences of his life-work and the tightly related activities. Certain concepts that appear in the thesis – truth, god, love, non-violence, etc. – belong to the domain of philosophy while others – non-violent resistance, independence, local government, etc. – fall within the thesaurus of political philosophy and political science. At the same time, it also needs mentioning that Gandhi’s case does not allow of such a surgical scientific separation between these concepts since his own interpretation does not distinguish religion from politics at all; in his view, religion is politics itself, as our belief in God and Truth, the continuous search for them has to determine every single moment of the human life. Therefore, it becomes impossible to draw a fine line between religion, philosophy, and politics in Mahatma’s case.

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