# Religion and Politics: Gandhian Philosophy as a Model

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**Abstract**
*Over the years, the debate on whether or not there is a nexus between religion and politics has been a matter of considerable dispute among religious people, particularly among Christians. In response to such dispute, this paper argues that politics and religion are not only strongly connected, they are mutually compatible, both practically and theoretically. A working model to prove the workability of the compatibility of religion and politics in this paper will be Gandhism or better put – Gandhian philosophy. Some Indian-Hindu principles employed by Gandhi as roots of his philosophy (Gandhism) will be outlined and explained with reference to the Nigerian situation. Also, the employment of Gandhism as a working model will reveal that politics pervades all religions, and consequently, Gandhism embraces Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and other religious faiths and creeds provided that such a believer's love for mankind is unshakable. The conclusion will be that religion and politics are inseparable. But Religion and politics if not well managed and coordinated could be a curse and a source of worry for the society. Gandhi's linkage of religion and politics is also in tune with the present day enlightened securalism.*

**Keywords:** Gandhi; Religion; Philosophy; Politics

## Introduction

For me, politics bereft of religion is absolute dirt, ever to be shunned. Politics concerns nations and that which concerns the welfare of nations must be one of the concerns of a man who is religiously inclined; in other words, a seeker after God and Truth. For me God

and Truth are convertible terms, and if anyone told me that God was a God of untruth or a God of torture, I would decline to worship Him. Therefore, in politics also we have to establish the kingdom of Heaven (Gandhi, 1990:3).

The above quote captures what Gandhi did with religion and politics which were instruments to which he (Gandhi) achieved independence for India. This paper attempts to show that religion and politics are twin indices, that is, they are inseparable. Gandhi's view on religion and politics is used as a model to show and prove the claim that religion and politics go together.

The paper is in four sections, the first section is an attempt to conceptualize religion as the first key concept. The second section attempts to conceptualize politics which is the second key concept. The third section then establishes the proof of the interplay of religion and politics. Then Gandhian example was examined and analysed to show how the duo of politics and religion can go together successfully for a common goal without rivalry. In this section also, some Indian and Hindu principles are examined to show their political, religious and economic significance in the polity. These principles are applied to the Nigerian society. Hence, the conclusion and the summary and recommendation of the paper follows as the last section.

**The Man Mahatma Gandhi (1869 – 1948)**
Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi, was born on 2$^{nd}$ of October, 1869 in the town of Porbandar in the state of Gujarat in Western India. He was the third son and the youngest child of his parents. Putlibai, his mother was the fourth wife of his father, Karamchand Gandhi. His family religion was Hinduism. According to Gandhi in his *An Autobiography: The story of my Experiments with Truth,* the outstanding impression my mother has left on my memory is that of saintliness. She was deeply religious. She would not think of taking her meals without her daily prayers' (Gandhi, 1927: 2).

Generally, Gandhi may not be rightly called a political thinker or a social theorist in the accepted sense in which Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes,

Locke, Hegel etc are being called. This notwithstanding, he offers his ideas in social, economic and political themes which constitute his philosophy. He never proceeded from any specific ideology but he made great impact in the practical field of politics. He used nonviolence method to achieve independence for India. The uniqueness of Gandhi's philosophy lies in the fact that it was purely Indian. One of the greatest contributions made by Gandhi is how he employed religion and politics as inseparable devices at reducing social conflicts and tensions as well as providing clear moral goals for those who aspire to realise them. Gandhi lived out what he preached and died for what he believed. He was assassinated on 30th January 1948 by a Hindu who believed his nonviolent crusade campaign did more harm to India, particularly to Hindus, than any good.

**Conceptualizing Religion**
An academic or scholarly exercise aimed at getting a univocal or universally accepted definition of religion will most likely end up in futility. It may sound pessimistic but the truth remains that religion is such a diverse and complex phenomenon that scholars cannot but differ in their different conceptions of religion. Religion is one of those subjects in which everyone has an opinion. Yet everyone claims to be an expert in the field. Hence, any attempt at defining religion ends up being too narrow, too broad or prejudiced/biased.

However, in response to the difficult nature of arriving at a comprehensively and universally accepted definition of religion, Schmidt noted that 'Definitions of religion are plentiful: nearly everyone has an opinion as what it is. An examination of two types of definitions- the functional and the substantive, can help clarify what religion is (Schmidt, 1980:12). With this observation, instead of compiling and analysing series of attempted definitions of religion the two broad categories – functional and substantive definitions will be of help such that all definitions can be subsumed under them. Functional definitions focus on the role that religion plays in serving human needs. They are predicated on the following kinds of inquiry:

> For what purpose is religion practised? What function
> does religion perform for the individual and the
> society? What is there in human experience that

triggers a religious response? Functional definitions are human centred, it stresses the ways in which religion serves our emotional, intellectual and social needs. Functionalists see religion as providing a system of commonly held beliefs and ritual practices that are a stabilizing force, especially in primitive societies. In binding people together, religion reaffirms group values and protects group life (Schmidt, 1980:12).

Functional definitions therefore seek to explain the meaning of religion from what man makes of religion. What role it plays for man as an individual and as a member of the society who exists among others. In the same vein, Bridgman noted that 'the true meaning of a term is to be found by observing what a man does with it, not what he says about it (Bridgman 1961:7). From this, it then follows that religion is a response to such enduring aspects of human community. (Bridgman 1961:12). And in this regard, Yinger's definition of religion' …. as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life. It is the refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart one's human associations' ( Yinger, 1957:9). Also, Marx's definition of religion as '…the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world, and the soul of the soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people' (quoted in Bottomore 1963:43-44). In Marxist's perspective, therefore, revolution is the only liberating weapon, while religion serves as a comforter to the oppressed and depressed people of the world by a promise of another or otherworld'. This was aptly noted by Schmidt 'that a Marxist revolution seeks to alleviate the real causes of oppression, whereas religion is content to comfort the alienated with promises of otherworldly rewards; as people are liberated from social and economic inequalities, the need for religion should gradually disappear (Schmidt, 1980:13). These are many more scholars that define religion from the functionalists' perspective, Bertrand Russell and Sigmund Freud inclusive.

Substantive definitions try to conceptualize religion from the essence of religion. That is, defining religion from what it is. This is concisely summarized by Schmidt this way:

> Substantive definitions attempt to delineate the essential nature of religion. Such definitions are not primarily concerned with how people act or even for what purpose they act the way they do. Functional approaches define religion in terms of what it does, while substantive definitions seek the essence of religion' (Schmidt, 1980:13)

Thus Paul Tillich's definition of religion 'as ultimate concern' (Paul Tillich, 1959:7-8) is a good example of substantive definition. Also Mircea Eliade belongs to this group. But a working definition for this essay will be adopted from Roger Schmidt's definition, which sees religion as 'seeking and responding to what is experienced as holy or ultimate' ( Schmidts, 1980:14 ). It is a substantive definition that avoids the narrowness in some definitions of religion and is flexible enough to embrace theistic and monotheistic senses of ultimacy. 'It acknowledges the significance-giving character of religion from other meaning-giving enterprises, such as science and history' ( Schmidt, 1980:13).

## Conceptualizing Politics

> Man is a social and political creature by his nature and necessity.' This simple dictum signifies that the pattern of collective life under some form of authority or control is as old as human life itself. Besides, as a rational and an intelligent being, man has always thought in terms of improving the pattern of his collective and regulated behaviour of life. Cooperation and competition, concord and conflict, war and peace have been the twin features of man's social and political existence. A study of such phenomena in their past, present and future perspectives has led to the evolution of various social sciences. Politics or political science – the 'marter science' as designated by Aristotle – is one of them that deals with the subject of man in relation to the

phenomenon of rule, control, authority, power. It covers man's ancillary issues like sovereignty, citizenship, obedience, obligation, punishment, resistance, revolution and the like. The task of a political scientist is to understand 'political reality' and then critically describe it so that the underlying 'principles of political behvariour' hinging on the basic issue of man versus state may be laid down (Johari, 2005:6) .

The above quote from Johari's preface to his highly comprehensive and well-researched book *Principles of Modern Political Science* captures the scope of the business to which politics concerns itself. Politics concerns man and his existence with other citizens as well as in relation to the state. There is no doubt that some contemporary writers, tend to use the two terms 'politics' and 'political science' interchangeably but whether such move is right or wrong is not the business of this essay. What then is politics? Politics is known by several names such as 'Political Science' 'Science of State', this is why Jellinek points out that 'politics as a subject lacks a precise nomenclature.' (Jellinek, 1904:2). But the word 'politics' originates from the Greek word 'polis' meaning 'city-state'. This was noted by Johari that 'in simple terms, … the English word 'politics' originates from three Greek words like *polis* (city state), polity (government) and *politeia* (constitution). As such, politics in the original Greek sense, is a study of the city-state and its administration in practical as well as philosophical terms' (Johari, 2005:2). The point therefore is that politics involves the administration and governance of the state and its citizens.

However, to Karl Deutsch, 'politics in one sense, is the making of decisions by public means in contrast to the making of personal decisions privately by individuals and the making of economic decisions in response to such impersonal forces as money, market conditions, and resource scarcities (Deutsch, 1974:3). This therefore further emphasizes the role of politics in decision-making process. It becomes important to study or talk about politics because it deals with public decision which affects everyone in the society as opposed to individual decision.

Also, in emphasising the encompassing and imperative nature of politics, Deutsch went further to assert that 'our cities are webs of politics. The water we drink, the air we breathe, the safety of our streets, the dignity of our poor, the health of our old, the education of our young, and the hope for our minority groups – all these are bound up with the political decisions made at city hall, in the state capital …'(Deutsch, 1974:3). From this, we can infer that every human activity is involved in politics. This goes a long way to establish the all-pervading nature of politics as a phenomenon. It is because of the above that Deutsch went further to maintain that 'Because politics is the making of decisions by public means, it is primarily concerned with government that is with the direction and self-direction of large communities of people. The word 'politics' stresses the process of decision-making about public actions or goods – about what is done and who gets what. The word 'government' stresses the results of this process in terms of the control and self-control of the community – be it city, state, or nation. Any community larger than the family contains an element of politics. In fact, 'politics: derives from the Greek word '*polis*' meaning city-state, and to the Greek, the '*polis*' was the most meaningful community above the family level… (Deutsch, 1974:3). Politics therefore involves the process of public decision-making but under the control of government.

However, there are several conceptions of politics which for now do not capture our attention. However, it is pertinent to mention that the Marxists conceive politics as an essential manifestation of class relations which should be traced in its revolutionary character. Politics therefore is the study of class relations and class struggles in the society. Many other conceptions abound, but one factor common to all is that politics involves power and its proper usage in the administration of state affairs. What then is the connecting link or interplay between religion and politics?

**The Interplay between Religion and Politics: The Gandhian Example**
The debate on whether or not there is a link/cleavage between religion and politics has been a matter of considerable dispute among religious people particularly among Christians. This is why Okwoeze Odey is of the view that 'there are two schools of thought among Christians who see politics as something to be jettisoned. On one hand, religion is said

to be a private affairs. As a result, it deals with the soul, the sacred and the other-worldly. On the other hand, politics is generally regarded as a dirty game, and anyone who takes his/her religion seriously is expected to keep his/her distance from politics. This type of attitude has given rise to two main ways by which many good religious people view politics. They either shun it completely in order to escape from its stain or enter into it with their minds made up that it is a game in which moral precedence gives room to a moral expedience. In this case, such people seem to forget that even though Jesus was not a politician, he could not escape being charged of political agitation by those who felt that he threatened their position because among other things, he took sides with the oppressed ( Okwoeze 1996:228 ). One can therefore infer from this that Jesus Christ may not be a politician, he, however, took part in and also organized political activities. This is why Gandhi, in describing Jesus, maintained that:

> Jesus, in my humble opinion, was a prince among politicians. He did render unto Caesar that which was Caesar's. He gave the devil his due. He never shunned him and is reported never once to have yielded to his incantations. The politics of his time consisted in securing the welfare of the people by teaching them not to be seduced by the trinkets of the priests and the Pharisees. The latter then controlled and moulded the life of the people ( Gandhi, 1959:18-19).

Gandhi's conclusion therefore is that 'his involvement in political activities, though non-violent, was simply an attempt to follow the footsteps of Jesus who attacked the ills of his society' (Odey, 1996: 228). In this regard, Gandhi just like Jesus Christ could be rightly described as political agitator or emancipator, hence combining religion and politics.

More so, Louis Fischer in commenting on Gandhi's view of religion and politics maintains that 'Gandhi's politics are indistinguishable from his religion…In politics he cleaved to moral considerations, and as a saint he thought his place was not in a cave or cloister but in the hurly-burly of the popular struggle for rights and the right. Gandhi's religion made him political, and his politics were religious' (Fischer, 1954:35).

Gandhi never saw any distinction between religion and politics. This was why in an interview with *Bombay Chronicle* on February 18, 1922 Gandhi maintained:

> For me there is no distinction between politics and religion. Politics bereft of religion is a death-trap that kills the soul. Religion means firm faith in the existence of God and love for all mankind. One may be a Hindu, or a Muslim, or a Christian or of any faith or creed, but his faith in God and love for mankind should be unshakable. Hence, to try to root out religion itself from society is a wild goose chase. And were such attempt to succeed, it would mean the destruction of society (Johari, 2005:.827).

Gandhi's emphasis is that the religious faith one holds does not matter. One could be a Muslim, Christian, Hindu, or traditionalist, what matters is having faith in God, loving all human beings and holding on to the truth and non-violence philosophy. It is because of Gandhi's belief in truth and non-violence that made him to take politics as being inseparably linked with the force of religion. Gandhi's philosophy, therefore, takes all religions to be the same and identifies them with truth or God. One may have faith in any religion, but what is required is that such a person should not use it as an instrument of hatred, enmity, or ill-will. Gandhi frankly suggests that we should give all religious injunctions that create social ill-will or hatred by virtue of drawing sustenance from the misinterpretations of the meaning of a true religion. In this regard, therefore, Gandhi's approach to politics is in tune with the doctrine of enlightened secularism. Gandhi therefore is a religious secularist. To him, religion is identifiable with a pious force that should inform all human action. This is why Gandhi believed that true religion and genuine politics cannot rule out the following principles – *Ahimsa, swaraj – satyagraha, sevodaya* and many more. These are Indian and Hindu principles which Gandhi adopted, modified and drew his spiritual inspiration which helped him in his philosophical, political and religious thought. Some of them will be examined, briefly pointing out their philosophical, political, religious and economic importance and implications as well relating them to the Nigerian society.

*Ahimsa*

This means non-injury, non-violence, harmlessness, renunciation of the will to kill and of the intention to hurt, abstention from any hostile thought, word or action, non-coercion. It is positively the practice of love even under the most hostile of circumstances. One of the distinctive contributions of Gandhi to political and philosophical thought is that he gives a comprehensive meaning to the concept of Ahimsa (non-violence). With Gandhi's principle of non-violence, evil thoughts, sentiments of revenge, brutality, verbal pugnacity, accumulation of wealth unnecessarily, falsehood, trickery, intrigues, chicanery, deceitfulness, economic exploitation, stranglehold of others and destructive competition will be eliminated. They are examples of violence at the personal level as opposed to the goodwill/friendly nature of non-violence principle. 'Non-violence is not merely the negative act of refraining from doing offence or injury and harm to others, but it really represents the ancient law of positive self sacrifice and constructive suffering. It is vitally integrated with the truth of God. The social application of non-violence is postulated upon the acceptance of spiritual metaphysics and the implied necessity of the growth of social charity. The law of love and respect for life, if courageously practised is bound to lead to the elevation of the accent, quality and character of politics and civilization…Thus, the basis of the Gandhian philosophy of politics consists in stressing the persistent, over-powering and resolute power of love as a significant factor which can solve group and national tensions and antagonisms through non-constrained conversion.' (Varma,1994: 184). Non-violence could be a better option in Nigeria political system where violence and its correlates have eaten far deep into the fabric of our system. It will go a long way to restore love and peace which are eluding the Nigerian society presently.

*Satyagraha*
This means insistence on truth. Like Ahimsa (non-violence), it has very comprehensive connotations. It is moral pressure for the sake of truth. If truth is the ultimate reality, then it is imperative for its votary to resist all encroachments on it. According to Gandhi, it is the imperative duty of civil register (satyagrahi*)* to make endless endeavours for the realisation of truth through non-violence. This is

also what *varma* noted as follows: '*satyagraha*' signifies a genuine, intense and sincere quest for truth which is God. It means an assertion of the power of the human soul against political and economic domination. It is the vindication of the glory of the human conscience. Conscience does not stand for abstract inwardness or withdrawal from the world. Conscience reinforces the battle for victory of the social good. Satyagraha is based on the inevitable belief in the ultimate triumph of divine justice and right.' (Varma, 1994:183). From this, *satyagraha* therefore denotes the operation of soul force against all forms of injustice and oppression. It is inconsistent with jealousy or hatred of the opponent for the opponent has to be converted, not coerced. This 'insistence on truth' is a befitting principle to a country that does not even care or know the truth. In the Nigerian society today, the concept of truth is almost not in existence. Virtually, nobody talks about truth, peace and equality, all of which have eluded our society for a long time now.

## Swaraj

This literally means 'self-rule'. In Gandhi's philosophy, it means national emancipation. To Gandhi, it means termination of external rule. The whole meaning of this concept is tied to the attainment of freedom by means of ahimsa and satyagraha. It also means political independence. In Gandhi's philosophy, the metaphysical implication of Swaraj is that 'it is the name of a hypothetical condition of human life in an ideal society in which everyone has the capacity to resist the abuse of authority' (Johari, 2005: 829). In Nigeria, most of our political and economic problems owe greatly to external rule as well as neo-colonialism. Nigeria as a state needs total emancipation and freedom in all ramifications.

## Servodaya

This literally means 'the uplift of all'. It is the most appropriate name for Ghandhian socialism. This stands not only for material upliftment but spiritual good. It is not a philosophy that regards the maximisation of material well-being as man's only measure of all, such that institutions and relationships should be fashioned on the twin principles of Truth and Non-violence. It believes that the only enduring cohesive forms that can weld men together in a society of the free and

109

equal are love, cooperation, non constraint and non-coercion' (Sampurnanand, 1905:2). Philosophically, *'servodaya'* aims at the spiritualization of politics. It stands for integrating the principles of religion with politics. It thoroughly rejects the way of crass materialism and, for that reason, repudiates the Marxian tenets of dialectical and historical materialism and class struggle' (Johari, 2005: 833). Also in the same vein Narayan asserts: 'I feel convinced therefore, that man must go beyond the material to find the incentive to goodness. As a corollary, I feel further that the task of social reconstruction cannot succeed under the inspiration of a materialist philosophy' (Narayan,1965:6). This principle is also needed in Nigeria's political system where the winner-takes-all attitude is the order of the day. With the *servodaya* principle, Nigerian leaders will begin to have a change of heart, realising that everybody's interest should be taken care of. Our political system should aim on how to lift every citizen up, how to carry all along. And depart from the rule of the few for the few without minding the masses. The target should even be at the upliftment of the majority as the principle of utility stipulates. *Servodaya* differs from utilitarian principle in the sense that while utilitarianism aims at achieving the greatest good for the greatest number, *servodaya* aims at achieving and establishing a social order that will take care of all and sundry.

Meanwhile, it is pertinent to point out that all these principles – ashimsa (non-voilence), *satyagraha* (insistence on truth), *swaraj* (self-rule), and *servodaya* (the uplift of all) have their weaknesses and shortcomings because there is no theory or principle without some weaknesses. But due to the length of this paper, they would not be discussed here.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the link between religion and politics. The paper argues that there is an inseparable link between the duo. In reinforcing this argument, Gandhian philosophy, which emphasises the link between religion and politics was used as a model. Also, some Hindu and Indian principles like *Swaraji, Servodaya* and *Ahimsa* which are sources of Gandhi's inspiration were examined thereby pointing their need and implication in the Nigerian polity. Therefore, with the adoption of these principles, there will be an attitudinal

change among our leaders which will enable them to realize that religion and politics are twin indices. If well coordinated, they are complementary which was epitomized in Gandhian philosophy and political struggle for India's independence. Also, the paper argues that any religion that aims at the truth and God will embrace the love of others as well as eschews violence, deprivation, oppression, hence facilitates political emancipation and stability.

Lastly, the paper is of the view that Gandhi's inseparability of religion from politics is in tune with enlightened secularism which implies that one can successfully be a religious secularist and a political leader at the same time.

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