**UNCONDITIONAL EQUALITY: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance. *By Ajay Skaria. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. xvi, 390 pp. US$30.00, paper. ISBN 978-0-8166-9866-0.***

*Unconditional Equality* is a challenging read, but it was arguably more challenging to write. The book is a deep engagement with M.K. Gandhi’s political thought by someone who claims to be uncomfortable with its religious character. The author, Ajay Skaria, is a well-known historian who contributed to the Subaltern Studies collective in its later years. Skaria’s intellectual world of postcolonial studies is wholly ensconced within modern secular European thought, whether of liberal, Marxist or postmodernist strains. To read Gandhi from such a vantage point is a challenge, as Skaria himself admits, because it is so far apart from Gandhi’s own ideas and politics.

The central claim of the book may be stated thus: against modern liberalism’s promise of formal equality that denies liberty to many, Gandhi proposes *satyagraha* or surrender to the mystical experience of Truth (*satya*) as an alternative based on the absolute equality of all beings, human and non-human. Gandhi’s political religion (*dharma*) is, strictly speaking, godless. The sovereignty of God (or gods), distant or personal, would demand subordination, and hence, make the quest for equality impossible. For Gandhi, by contrast, mystical experience enables individuals to seek themselves via immersion in an ocean of groundless faith in *satya*. Mysticism or the religion immanent in all religions, Skaria suggests, implies a kind of resistance to self and society because it does not subordinate individuals to God or its secular liberal avatar, the modern state. Mystical experience also produces what Skaria calls “unconditional equality” for all living beings to the extent that all partake of Truth and no seeker of *satya* can be ontologically superior or inferior to others. This is why *satya* enjoins it seekers to love their neighbors as themselves.

Gandhi himself, of course, never described his quest for Truth in these words. This book is Skaria’s attempt to think through the tensions in Gandhi’s writings, speeches, and acts without dismissing them as hopeless contradictions. But there are two problems here. Firstly, Gandhi as a mystical thinker or guru is not particularly impressive. Indeed, he is now a guru without any followers, and his political religion was sadly stillborn. Worse still, even during his lifetime, anyone could project their fears and fantasies onto him and *satyagraha* could mean, in Raj Chandavarkar’s words, all things to all people. Secondly, Gandhi’s *dharma* does not fare well as radical political thought either. As Skaria recognizes, ontological equality among all beings could coexist happily for Gandhi with the hierarchies of gender, caste, and race that define everyday life. Despite its radical rethinking of the relationship between religion and politics, Gandhi’s *dharma* is, in fact, resolutely conservative in its social outlook. Even as Skaria acknowledges this, he does not see that Gandhian *satyagraha* fails as a meaningful alternative to modern liberalism and its rivals because mystical surrender and social subordination are two sides of the same coin.

Political mysticism can, however, be a potent challenge to the social status quo. Gandhi’s critique of the modern state and Western liberalism can, for instance, be grounded in a radical politics rooted in religious mysticism. As Faisal Devji has shown, Gandhi’s mysticism may be linked inextricably to his fascination with violence, and it is the same relationship between religious mysticism and violence that has inspired Islamic radicals from Syed Maududi to Osama bin Laden. Political mysticism in postcolonial societies has, in other words, provoked a profound challenge to state and society alike. Skaria’s inability to recognize this challenge circumscribes the scope of his argument even as it leaves open possibilities for future scholarship.

More generally, however, we must ask what religion even means in a book so bereft of theological discourse. Does the author’s turn to religion simply emerge out of a queasiness with secular liberalism? After all, Skaria’s turn to contemporary Continental philosophers such as Derrida and Levinas is hardly what Gandhi had in mind when he wrote of mystical religious experience as the religion present in all religions. Contemporary Catholic theologians might have done just as well, if not better. Nonetheless, by positioning himself at the rear end of the behemoth of Western philosophy, the postcolonial critic in Skaria unfortunately cannot enter the terms of Gandhi’s world, shaped as it was by the Indic religious traditions that he grew up with and the esoteric forms of Christianity that attracted him abroad. The mystical quest for the self that Gandhi described was, ultimately, a kind of spiritual experience that placed him at odds with the organized religions of his day. The conceits of liberalism or Marxism were far from Gandhi’s concerns in pursuing *satyagraha*. Those concerns were deeply personal, and their only political manifestation was a kind of quietism. But the pursuit of a quietist politics in the maelstrom of late colonial India could only be, as Joseph Lelyveld’s recent biography shows, tragic.

In sum, if we set aside its inadequacies and its contorted prose, *Unconditional Equality* must be commended for paving the way for future scholars to examine Gandhi’s understanding of religion and politics more closely. It lays out clearly enough the pitfalls of postcolonial scholarship when it attempts to take Gandhi seriously. In the years to come, we may await a deeper engagement with the religious mysticism that undergirded his political thought.

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