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## Response to Devadatta Dabholkar

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### Footnotes

- 1 In relation to quotations from his own writings Mahatma Gandhi said:

I would like to say to the diligent reader of my writings and to others who are interested in them that I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things. Old as I am in age, I have no feeling that I have ceased to grow inwardly or that my growth will stop at the dissolution of the flesh. What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment, and, therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two

on the same subject. Harijan, 29-4-1933, p.2.

- 2 "Hindu-Christian Dialogue: A Review" makes a brief reference to Gandhi. *Hindu-Christian Studies Bulletin*, Vol. 1, Autumn 1988, p. 3.
- 3 Quoted in: R.K. Prabhu and V.R. Rao, *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 99, 1967, Navjivan Trust Ahmedabad, Number of the Issue not given.
- 4 Report of the Meeting.
- 5 Harijan, April 13, 1940, p. 92. Quoted in M.K. Gandhi: *The Way to Communal Harmony*, p. 225, 1963, Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad.
- 6 Norman Cousins, *Profiles of Gandhi*, p. 207, 1969, Indian Book Company, Delhi.
- 7 Ibid. p. 209.
- 8 From *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, pp. 146-7.
- 9 This letter was written in May 1934. The recipient was Shri. G.N. Harshe. The original is with the recipient.

## Response to Devadatta Dabholkar

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I WANT TO begin my "response" — which is in actuality more of the nature of participating in a conversation — to Professor Dabholkar's observations by saying how much I appreciate his setting the tone of our interchange by stressing the centrality of the "inner dialogue" in Gandhiji's life. Certainly this is an essential element for an adequate understanding the incredible *mahatma*, or "great soul." Despite the obvious differences in faith nurtured by the Hindu and Christian religious traditions, Gandhiji, in his own peculiar manner, attempted to live out the Hindu and Christian modes of life. Gandhi, the Hindu, was suffused by what he himself spoke of as the "Christ-like spirit which uniquely expresses both the spirit and the will of God, and exists among us." Perhaps we can further our appreciation of this crucial constituent in Gandhiji's life by

probing a bit more deeply while remaining sensitive to the dynamic of the "inner dialogue," so rightly stressed by Professor Dabholkar.

One of the major themes which is normally stressed as a fundamental basis for inter-religious dialogue, is a shared common humanity. But it seems obvious that this common humanity remains an abstract idea and cannot carry concrete meaning unless some measure of it is expressed in some persons or groups of persons. Further, the degree of such common humanity can probably most adequately be gauged by the acceptability of such persons or groups of persons by all concerned. Judging by this criterion in the context of our current concern, one is hard pressed to think of others who represented the common humanity of both Hindus and Christians to a

greater degree than Gandhiji. The rich as well as the poor, the literate and the non-literate, the high and the low, Hindus, as well as Muslims, Christians and Parsis, had a high regard for the Mahatma. To be sure all did not agree with him in his ideas and methods; but even those who disagreed with him showed respect for Gandhiji in a way other persons seldom could command from their opponents. Indeed, not discounting the perceptions of Gandhi's critics, such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his followers, it does seem accurate to observe that to a remarkable degree Gandhiji became the symbol of the aspirations of Indians in an amazing manner. This was possible, in part due to his ability in transcending a number of the traditional, superficial, social, and religious barriers which separated various religious communities in the land. It was probably in this basic sense that Rabindranath Tagore spoke of Gandhi as "the great brother of all Indian people." In an uncommon manner the Mahatma was indeed the symbol of the representative Indian. In him people experienced the fusion of a person and a cause. The person was an Indian and the cause was human freedom.

Human values undergirded Gandhi's life and work. He valued the individual human being and the sacredness of human personality. He believed in the basic moral character and destiny of humanity, and all his efforts were directed towards the achievement of this human destiny. To be sure, his positive assessment of human beings, affirming them to be 'essentially good' would be questioned by many. Nevertheless, his penetrating insight into the dehumanising effects of economic systems, political structures, and religious institutions—in Indian as well as Western societies—was remarkable. Indeed, Christians cannot but be indebted to Gandhiji for his practical wisdom concerning the value of the truly human. In the flush of enthusiasm for the seemingly unlimited possibilities of modern science and technology, Gandhi was one of the very few Indians who saw the inherent weaknesses and dangers in these developments. He warned India that the way of the West is not the way of India. Nor, when one considers what the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are doing to India half a cen-

tury after Gandhi, have we outlived the cogent relevance of his warnings. People's humanity has to be preserved and promoted against the onslaughts of the values consequent on machine mentality driven by an overweening profit motive. In Gandhi's view human beings had to remain the masters and the deciding centre in society. Freedom and growth of the individual in a democratic society were key values in Gandhi's life and work. In his view, any political and legal system, any economic order, any social structure which impeded the freedom of the human spirit and the unfettered growth of the individual had to be opposed and transformed with the power of love. In all of this the Mahatma put great emphasis on the authenticity of the "inner voice" as the final court of appeal in validating what is authentically human. It was Gandhiji who introduced this norm of self-criticism in India, which remains essential for creative Hindu-Christian relations in the future.

A further need in this regard, and one which Gandhiji valued immensely, is a secular India. No doubt his religious motives in proposing a secular state—a state which affirms the religious aspirations of people without favouring any one religious community—can be interpreted in a variety of ways. One has a right to disagree with Gandhi at this point; but one must honour him for promoting the value of a secular state in independent India, while remaining an ardent Hindu. He never identified the Indian nation with the Hindu religious community. In fact, the Mahatma's firm stand for a secular India, and his vision of complete religious tolerance in India were so radically opposed to the interests of orthodox Hindus that it cost him his life. His farsightedness and recognition of the human rights of religious minorities speak of his greatness as a political and religious leader of modern India. While Christians have often 'argued' with him over his understanding of tolerance as the basis of relations between religious traditions, they have not been able to ignore the fact that only a secular India could provide the possibility of creative relations between Hindus and Christians. Only in a secular context can Hindus and Christians join together in common pursuit of human concerns.

But undergirding these values and convictions of Gandhiji, which make him a living embodiment of Hindu-Christian dialogue, is the Mahatma's vision of the fundamental structure of reality. This vision, which is founded on *satya* or truth/reality, *ahimsa* or non-violent love, and *swadeshi* or loyalty to one's immediate environment, is at one and the same time both intriguing and fascinating for a Christian. *Ahimsa* as the nature of reality is basically a positive element which has some of the following dimensions. It means the conscious suffering involved in resisting evil with one's whole being. *Ahimsa* is unconditional goodwill towards all life. It is forgiveness, a quality of the brave and fearless. In a basic and real way *ahimsa* is similar to the vision of the suffering love which is supremely manifested in the life and death of Jesus. The cross of the Christ as a fundamental fact and symbol, reflecting the nature of God in the Christian vision, is quite similar to Gandhiji's understanding of *ahimsa* as the nature of *satya* or truth/reality. There does, however, seem to be one basic difference between them. Whereas the Christian vision of the nature of suffering love also involves an element of judgement along with grace, this dimension of the nature of God seems to be lacking from Gandhi's vision. Perhaps the reason for this is Gandhi's very positive assessment of humanity as being essentially good. Moreover, the Christian vision is of God who possesses a centre of will, as it were, from which the outgoing love moves and meets the contingent being in the works of judgement and grace. This means that in the ultimate sense, God cannot be identified with the ordered law of nature of the moral law in human beings. In the Christian understanding of things, God is not the ordered moral universe. God is the ordainer of the universe and works through it as the agent and lord of all.

In the Gandhian vision of reality there seems little if any indication of the 'movement' of *satya* towards the world of change. *Satya* is detached from it; only *ahimsa* is related to the dynamic movement of the world of experience. Such a transcendent/static vision of *satya* is not an uncommon Hindu description of ultimate reality. *Satya* must remain *satya*, it cannot be

other than what it is. To become other than what it is, would be the dissolution of *satya's* being and hence destruction of existence itself. The human being needs to be changed into *satya* by the power of *ahimsa*. The Christian vision is based on the recognition of the nature of reality made known in Jesus, the Christ. It is rooted in the vision that God in Jesus, the Christ, is outgoing *satya* through the medium of *ahimsa*. Indeed, Jesus' life and death was recognised, even by Gandhiji, as the prime example of *satyagraha*, that discipline and process of self-purification of which voluntary suffering love is the key. It was *satyagraha* that led Jesus to the cross, which is the supreme manifestation of *ahimsa*. The highest degree of the practice of *ahimsa* by Jesus corresponded to the absolute manifestation of *satya* on the cross. But this is not the final end of God's movement towards the world, according to the Christian vision of reality. Even absolute *ahimsa* is not a guarantee of the triumph of *satya*. But by its very nature, *satya* cannot be limited to the cross, and according to the Christian vision, the event of the resurrection is the token of the continuity of the power of *satya*, ever moving out of the centre of God's own being to the world of becoming, the guarantee of the ultimate triumph of *satya*.

*Swadeshi*, according to Gandhi, implies the concrete dimension of reality and it means a spirit that takes the immediately given total environment, including religion, most seriously. In so far as *swadeshi* is a defining and differentiating principle in the world of beings and facts, it has a genuine function in the Gandhian scheme of things. In fact, it was the *swadeshi* emphasis which gave to the Indian mind and heart a true vision of the world of the Indian people, their nation, and their national wealth. Indeed, Gandhi's emphasis on the specificity, particularity, and the concreteness of a person, a people, a nation, and a religion is commendable. Such a vision of things ensured value and significance to concrete objects and persons or people immediately related to the subject. But when such a vision of reality is absolutised, and the *swadeshi* principle is applied to the realm of the spirit also, there is the distinct danger of its becoming "demonic," destructive of the very concrete person or

people it intends to affirm.<sup>1</sup> Pushed to its final limit and applied to the religious sphere, the *swadeshi* principle isolates and separates the subject from all other subjects and objects so completely that it destroys itself. Only within the context of relationships, with other subjects and objects, in the widest sense of the terms, can a subject realise its authentic existence. The *swadeshi* principle expressed in its extreme form closes the door on the free movement of the human spirit in response to *satya*. *Swadeshi*, so conceived, kills the conscience as a legitimate and authentic human response to the lure of *satya*, truth/reality, which is the ordainer and the Lord of the immediate environment of the subject. It limits the sharpness and critical stance of both reason and conscience, it leads the human spirit into bondage to the relative reality, be it nation, religion or people.

Creative Hindu-Christian dialogue would seem to demand a radical redefinition of Gandhi's understanding of the *swadeshi* principle and a suggestion for complementing it by a new idea drawn both from Indian cultural resources and from Christian insights. To serve a useful function *swadeshi* should remain a relative principle applicable only to the political, social, and economic realms of human life. It should not be extended to the sphere of religion. Indeed, the free movement of the human spirit cannot and should not be limited by anything except *satya* alone. Only thus can the "inner dialogue" be creatively fruitful in any of us.

Perhaps fruitful Hindu-Christian dialogue in India requires the principle of *satsang*, the fellowship of relatedness of [seekers after] *satya*, rooted in the power and function of *śakti*, the female principle in the universe which has the power to attract and unite. *Śakti*, as the necessary dimension of the structure of reality is the redeeming, reconciling power of *satya*. In Christian terms it is the *pavitratma*, the sanc-

tified or Holy Spirit, which is akin to the *ātman*, or human spirit, and *mahatma*, the great soul or spirit. Such a vision of *śakti* as the dimension of reality implies that it possesses a uniting, relating function involving historical events, individual persons and groups leading to that *satsang* which transcends all natural barriers between persons, groups, nations, and religious communities. The *śakti* dimension of *satya* can enable a person or group of persons to listen to the other's words. It can be the power to speak the language, think the thought, and comprehend the ideas of other people and persons. It has the capacity and resource to lead persons and people, in encounter with one another, into deeper experience of truth and can illuminate them to perceive new dimensions of reality so far unknown to them and thereby effect *satsang* among them. In the Hindu-Christian dialogue, the work of *śakti*, as understood here, must be assumed already present, both within each religious community separately and between them. The life of the Mahatma, and others, are tokens and signs of the work of *śakti* or *pavitratma* among Hindus and Christians in India. Christians and Hindus may try to quench the world of the Spirit in their self-defense and self-exaltation in relation to one another. But the power of the Spirit cannot be completely destroyed by the Christian or the Hindu. It is the very structure of *satya* or truth/reality which is beckoning them to experience *śakti* and to trust its leading in the Hindu-Christian dialogue. In this the "inner dialogue," which was so fundamental in the life of the Mahatma, is essential.

#### Footnote

- 1 I am indebted to M.M. Thomas for this insight, which he first articulated in 1953, cf. "Towards a Redefinition of Gandhianism," in M.M. Thomas, *Ideological Quest Within Christian Commitment: 1939-1954*. Bangalore, 1983. pp. 236-252.