

Kathryn Tidrick
Gandhi: A Political and Spiritual Life
(London: I.B. Tauris, 2006, 379pp.)

“I do daily perceive that while everything around me is ever changing, ever dying, there is underlying all that change a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves, and re-creates. That informing power or spirit is God. I see it as purely benevolent, for I can see in the midst of death, life persists. In the midst of untruth, truth persists. In the midst of darkness, light persists. Hence I gather that God is life, God is light, God is love. God is the supreme good.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Mohandas K. Gandhi was born into a political family. His father was *diwan* of the small princely state of Porbandar. The *diwan* was the combination of prime minister and chief administrator — a function that was often passed on through the family. While Gandhi’s father died while he was finishing high school, the broader family saw the future of Mohandas as a political administrator, perhaps of an even larger princely state. As British control of India was growing, it was useful for a future political administrator to have an English law degree and to have seen English ways first hand. Thus in 1888 he was sent to England to get a law degree. He took his studies seriously and passed the examinations ranking high in his class. He acquired a taste for jurisprudence and for arguing in a legal manner. But as Kathryn Tidrick points out in this well-written biography, Gandhi understood that “a course of legal study was merely the gateway to a profession in which acumen, initiative and accumulation of experience would be factors deciding success.”

Gandhi had promised his mother to continue the family’s strict vegetarian diet and so he found vegetarian restaurants in London and made friends. He joined the editorial board of the newly-created *The Vegetarian* journal and started writing articles on Indian food. The journal editor, Josiah Oldfield, was a practicing barrister and social reformer. Through Oldfield, Gandhi met Edwin Arnold, author of a verse biography of the Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, and a verse translation of the Bhagavad Gita *The Song Celestial* and a verse life of Jesus *The Light of the World*. As Tidrick writes “The Jesus of *The Light of the World* was not a god come to earth but a man who achieved perfection through renunciation and selfless love and thus became divine...Sin is imperfection and disappears as man become perfect.”

Gandhi was also introduced to the Theosophical Society, meeting with Madame Blavatsky who was then living in London and Annie Besant, who he would again see in India after his work in South Africa. Gandhi was particularly friendly with Archibald and Bertram Keightley, uncle and nephew, who had edited Madame Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* for publication in 1888. Madame Blavatsky’s *The Voice of Silence* was published shortly after Gandhi met her, and the book was an influence in his work in South Africa. *The Voice of Silence* is a collection of aphorisms which “elaborated the doctrine of liberation through service to others, and introduced into theosophy the Buddhist concept of the bodhisattva — the enlightened being who postpones indefinitely his entry into nirvana, in order to serve others. The voice of the silence is the inner voice heard by the sufficiently pure, the voice of ‘thy inner God’, the ‘Higher Self’. It leads the hearer ‘unto the realm of *Sat*, the true.”

After a short stay in India, Gandhi was called to work on a civil suit concerning Indian merchants in South Africa. He left for South Africa, thinking of spending one year. He spent

21 years in South Africa and left with an international reputation which he was eager to put to work in India.

In South Africa, Gandhi was to work closely with people from a number of religious backgrounds. An advisor, Raychandbhai was a Jain, and his employer, Dada Abdullah Sheth, was a Muslim. Gandhi had close relations with South African Quakers. He also continued close written contact with Edward Maitland who had been vice-president of the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society and a founder of the Esoteric Christian Union. Gandhi became a representative for the Esoteric Christian Union in South Africa though as he wrote later “the man whose one aim in life is to attain moksha need not give exclusive devotion to a particular faith.”

Once Gandhi returned to India in 1915, in order to develop popular support, he had to find Indian, particularly Hindu, colourings for his ideas. But as Tidrick writes, “Gandhi’s renderings of traditional Hindu beliefs can be understood in the context of Esoteric Christianity (and theosophy, where the two systems overlap). Such unorthodoxies include Gandhi’s very positive notion of rebirth as an opportunity to strive for spiritual improvement; his version of the Hindu concept of *avatar*, which he expounded particularly in his writings on the *Gita*, as a mortal man who achieves perfection, rather than as a flawless incarnation of God; his polite but persistent refusal to find a *guru*, and insistence that each individual is responsible for his own spiritual development; his claim that he, who was not even a Brahmin, was entitled to interpret the Hindu scriptures with only his purified conscience for a guide, and treatment of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* as inspired allegory; his substitution (with varying emphasis at various times) of the notions of service, sympathetic suffering and renunciation for the traditional Hindu notion of *yajna* (sacrifice in the sense of an offering to God); his conflation of Indian ascetic practices (*tapascharya*) with an un-Indian aspiration to condition the body for spiritual effort...Gandhi regularly proclaimed his ambition to see God, preferably face to face in this life. His use of the term was Esoterically Christian. ‘Seeing God’ he wrote ‘means realization of the fact that God abides in one’s heart.’ The man ‘who sees God in the whole universe’ he also wrote ‘should be accepted as an incarnation of God.’ For Gandhi seeing God was both the critical experience on the way to becoming one with God, and also, in its final fullness, the end point of that journey, when God would take over for the time he remained on earth.”

While Gandhi was ‘Hinduizing’ his public persona and his manner of life with deep appeal for many ordinary Indians, his efforts at *satyagraha* ‘soul force’ – non-violent action-never attracted Hindu religious leaders. Gandhi’s close co-workers were non-religious like Jawaharlal Nehru, Muslims like the ‘Frontier Gandhi’ Abdul Ghaffar Khan and non-Indian Christians like Madeleine Slade and C.F. Andrews. Rich Hindus like G.D. Birla gave money to the cause of Indian independence and Gandhi’s leadership but were not close co-workers. There were no *gurus* on the frontlines of protests, and finally, it was a member of a militant Hindu movement, the RSS, Nathuran Godse, who killed Gandhi on 30 January 1948.

Kathryn Tidrick’s description of Gandhi’s political life in India follows chronological ground but is well told. The relations of Gandhi with other key figures of the political scene, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, father of Pakistan, Subhas Chandra Bose, one time President of the Congress Party who later joined the Japanese to fight against British power, Jayaprakash Narayan, the Indian socialist leader, and Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy are drawn in a lively way.

The 32 years of non-violent effort to liberate and reform India ended for Gandhi in the Hindu-Muslim violence which followed the partition of India and Pakistan, leaving 15 million uprooted refugees and half a million dead in inter-religious massacres. Tidrick's last chapter 'Gotterdammerung' captures well these last six months of Gandhi's life. As Tidrick writes "Gandhi and many others shared the blame for these horrors. Despite his unorthodoxy, despite his friendships and alliances with Muslims, he was a 'Hindu' politician, incessantly invoking Rama and publicly embracing the ascetic practices associated with Hindu holiness. The message he wanted India, as a nation, to broadcast to the world was a mixture of Hinduism and Christianity, philosophically alien to Islam. He never dissociated himself sufficiently from the Hindu communalist wing of Congress. He demurred at being treated as an *avatar* by the masses, but left no doubt that his spiritual aspirations might as well be so understood by the ignorant. In the early months of 1946, as communal hatred smouldered in India, he was touring the country holding vast prayer meetings, complete with mass chanting of the *Ramdhum*, which were now his preferred means of exposing himself to the crowd. He saw the chanting as a form of synchronized spiritual experience, evoking the power of silent thought and connecting the mob to God...When he began to include readings from the Koran, Fanatical Hindus turned up to heckle. Communal feeling, however high-mindedly invoked, was a tiger he could not ride."

As has been said before, there is no guarantee that non-violent action will succeed, no more than violence is always successful. Tidrick does well to stress both the spiritual and political life of Mahatma Gandhi. He saw them as united though many of the people he worked with saw them as separate. Most of the leaders in the movement for independence were concerned with the political dimension. Kathryn Tidrick does well in pointing out that for Gandhi the spiritual and the political means were interdependent and could not be separated.

Rene Wadlow



Drawing : Irene Collet