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**The Man is the
Message: Civil
Religion in *Gandhi***

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UDC 2:316.3]:791(497.32)

<https://doi.org/10.32728/flux.2023.5.4>

Review article

The Man is the Message: Civil Religion in *Gandhi*

The eight-time Academy Award-winning film *Gandhi* (1982) aims to present the person Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi (1869–1948) as a “spokesman for the conscience of all mankind.” More than forty years later, the film still brings to light significant issues regarding the essence of broad moral and political aspirations, the formation and upholding of “civil religion,” and the potential of non-violent political and social actions to prevail in a troubled world. While primarily focusing on the portrayal of Gandhi, the film contrasts and reflects upon the differences and similarities between the markedly different—yet in crucial ways, alike—depictions of civil religion in the 1935 German Nazi propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*. Both films, as argued here, document uncertainty—*Gandhi* overtly showcasing it as a “soft” film of civil religious enactment, and *Triumph* covertly displaying it as a “hard” film of civil religious enactment. Whereas *Triumph* aimed to present a clear vision of a future devoid of doubt, *Gandhi* raises queries and leaves audiences uncertain about its message, except for the assertion that the man (Mahatma Gandhi) embodies the message itself.

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KEYWORDS:

Mahatma Gandhi, Gandhi (film), Triumph of the Will (film), civil religion, utopia, nonviolence, *satyagraha*, Indian independence, Ben Kingsley

On the chilly morning¹ of January 30, 1948, in New Delhi, Mohandas K. Gandhi walks amidst crowds of admirers and expectant onlookers on his way to his regular morning prayer gathering. However, this meeting won't happen: An assassin's bullets swiftly strike Gandhi, bringing down his frail body as he utters "O God!"² with his final breath. The scene shifts to Gandhi's funeral procession, attended by a silent multitude of four hundred thousand people, while a Western radio announcer delivers an ongoing tribute: "Mahatma Gandhi has become the spokesman for the conscience of all mankind... [he was] the man who made humility and simple truth more powerful than empires." This marks the start of the 188-minute, twenty-two million dollar biographical film, "Gandhi" (1982), which delves into the life of the man who transformed the title mahatma ("great soul") into a universally recognized term.

Sir Richard Attenborough's film certainly portrays Gandhi as a "spokesman for the conscience of all mankind." Tracking how this conscience is articulated by Gandhi in Attenborough's cinematic depiction offers a valuable perspective on the movie. As we witness scenes depicting the clash between colonial domination and the struggle for liberation, intertwined with violence and efforts to contain it in pre-independent India, Gandhi emerges as a saintly politician or political saint of larger-than-life stature. He embodies both the founding father of a nation and the creator of a civil religion—a creed of non-violence and tolerance—that has garnered admirers and followers well beyond India's borders. Gandhi's wit, charisma, and practical politics and sociology inspire us with his hopeful outlook. However, as the film unfolds, we encounter increasing challenges to Gandhi's optimism. Historical setbacks culminating in Gandhi's death leave us pondering the ultimate significance of his vision. Was Gandhi a utopian dreamer, a man guided by religious ideals, or a combination of both? As a cultural icon for both Indians and Westerners, does Gandhi's life, as portrayed in the film, effectively convey the message our representative would want us to comprehend?

These are some of the questions I wish to consider while examining the religious and utopian dimensions of the film *Gandhi*. I would suggest that the film indirectly reflects our persistent uncertainty about how a universally viable civil religion based on the "creed" of non-violence might prevail, as much as it represents our longing for it through an ongoing endeavor to "re-enact" in film events which celebrate an assurance of moral progress in society. This re-enactment of historical events centered on a person who is seen as the prime mover of those events becomes a ritual event of civil religion as well as a portrayal of the substance of that civil religion.³ In

¹ Historically, this event took place in the evening. Clark D. Moore and David Eldredge, eds, *India Yesterday and Today* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 226.

² Historical Gandhi's "He Ram" becomes "O God" in Ben Kingsley's mouth, playing the part of Gandhi in the film.

³ See N. J. Demerath III, "Civil Society and Civil Religion as Mutually Dependent," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michelle Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 348–58, for a general discussion of the notion "civil religion" and how it is important for the functioning of civil society. As Demerath explains, the term first appeared in 18th-century France and has been recently developed in sociological discourse by Robert Bellah. As the term suggests, civil religion comprehends a variety of public rituals, symbols, civic

examining these perspectives, it seems fitting to compare *Gandhi* with a film that presents a vastly different notion of civil religion—Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), depicting Hitler as the central figure, revered in a god-like manner in Nazi Germany. I propose that both films capture a sense of uncertainty—*Gandhi* more overtly, while *Triumph* does so in a concealed manner.⁴

Religious Vision and Utopian Vision

Before examining the film *Gandhi*, let us look briefly at the idea of utopia and its relation to religion since Gandhi’s vision seems very much to involve both. Gandhi is often credited with creating a vision of Indian national identity which embodied an understanding of India’s deeply traditional and religious life as well as modern ideals of social justice.⁵ His creative blend of the two as a vision of the possible, as an ultimate blueprint for future society, shows elements of utopian thinking. Yet built into Gandhi’s vision is what some would view as cultural nostalgia, a desire to stop time, a denial of the value of progress, and therefore an apparent antagonism to the (non-escapist) utopian ideal. How can these two features of the “Gandhian way” be reconciled?

In his article *Utopia and Cultural Renewal*, Frederik L. Polak suggests a relationship between religion and utopian vision based on future orientation: Because religion necessarily orients itself toward an anticipated perfect future, the dissatisfied imagination seeks to anticipate that future. In doing so, “a new inventiveness sprouts from this unremitting search,” and eventually an underlying “essence-optimism” gives way to an “influence-optimism.” Whereas the former evokes “eschatological images of the future” which “pertain mainly to the last things and the end of historical time,” the latter evokes “utopian images of the future, which are mainly concerned with social-humanitarian ideals for the good society and appeal to man specifically in relation to his fellow man.”⁶ Polak goes on to warn, “In reality this distinction often cannot be drawn so sharply, and the two types of images of the future may merge. Eschatological images may have utopian components, and utopian images may have been stimulated by eschatological images and bear their clear imprint.”

In *Gandhi*, what Polak would call essence-optimism and influence-optimism are both equally active in the person of Mohandas Gandhi. The one never really “gives way” to the other, but rather the two alternately surface and dive in the course of Gandhi’s actions. We see on one side the spiritually oriented character of Gandhi. We see images of a traditional, revered Hindu

related holidays, buildings, monuments (such as war memorials) and sacred places—all associated with a more or less clearly defined (or imagined) geographic territory, usually a nation.

⁴ The choice of *Triumph of the Will* for comparison with *Gandhi* may initially seem far-fetched; however, as I aim to show, their radical differences in persons and circumstances portrayed serve to highlight how film can be a powerful element of civil religion, both reflecting and creating attitudes of national identity.

⁵ Moore and Eldredge, eds., *India Yesterday and Today*, 161-83.

⁶ Frederik L. Polak, “Utopia and Cultural Renewal,” in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1965), 285-86.

guru enlightening all who will listen (often with Christian-inspired ethics); we see him in contrast to his pastor friend Charles Andrews as the better, more spirited and fearless preacher – as a more spunky Christian than this man-of-the cloth; we see him facing the evils of racial bigotry and communal hatred with cheerful willingness to sacrifice his life; and we see him practicing what he preaches in ordinary dealings with gestures of simple humility.

We also see Gandhi the politician – a man of action, the forceful speaker, the mover of men who uses an uncanny sense of timing to accelerate history's forward motion to precipitate the British retreat from India to a brisk conclusion. We see his fearless will to challenge and fight oppression with non-violent resistance – the active principle in his formula for social action combined with personal discipline which he coined *satyagraha*, or "firmness in the truth,"⁷ "truth-force," or "holding firmly to the truth." We see him as the humble and jovial egalitarian associating with "untouchables," doing his share of the menial work in his communal *ashram*.

In various scenes of the film, these two types of images are intertwined. At Gandhi's ashram, symbolizing his agrarian and egalitarian utopian vision, we witness Gandhi warmly tending to goats while addressing a group of young nationalist politicians. He states, 'Where there is injustice, I always believe in fighting. The question is, do you fight to change things or to punish? For myself, I find we are all such sinners that we should leave punishment to God.' Ben Kingsley, portraying Gandhi, accompanies this statement with an endearing chuckle. Gandhi's fusion of Christian and Hindu ethics resonates with us precisely because they embody a blend of essence- and influence optimism. It offers a sense of assurance that Gandhi's vision of a world free from violence might be achievable through reasonableness, without imposing extreme moral demands. It assures us that such a utopia would be grounded in enduring truths while acknowledging human imperfections. It doesn't expect fundamental changes in our character, just a heightened sense of goodwill even toward our adversaries.⁸ Optimism is evident as we witness Gandhi's encounters with British officials, his symbolic salt march with crowds dressed in white khadi, the warm reception from affectionate crowds at train stations, or his contentment while serving prison time, happily working at his charka (spinning wheel).

Yet in the same goat-feeding scene, there is a brief allusion to anticipated failure for in-the-world utopia: When Gandhi's wife Kasturbha calls from the porch to announce that tea is ready, Gandhi remarks as a humorous aside to his guests, "You see, even here [at this idyllic ashram] we live under tyranny [of the demands of family and sense pleasures]." Influence optimism – the anticipated perfection in this world – has its shortcomings.

⁷ Polak, "Utopia and Cultural Renewal," 133.

⁸ Gandhi in fact subscribed to and practiced severe self-discipline in his life, making his creed a "living sermon." The film, in portraying this self-discipline of Gandhi, never suggests that one consider adopting a similar way of life. Gandhi remains the different, unattainable one. Homer. A. Jack, ed., *The Gandhi Reader: A Sourcebook of His Life and Writings* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 315; Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 194.

Indeed, as the story unfolds, harsh events of history unfolding continually challenge this optimism. We see and hear Gandhi's non-violence program failing: Rioting in response to Gandhi's arrest led to the killing of English civilians, and we learn that India's "nonviolence" has become embarrassing news "all over the world." Gandhi expresses doubt in his program. "Maybe we are not ready yet." To the Amritsar massacre of hundreds of civilians by British soldiers the Indians react with fierce vengeance; Hindu-Muslim conflict and tension rise as the prospect of British withdrawal brings them to face each other in ever greater fear. When Gandhi proposes to Nehru and Jinnah that Jinnah (the Muslim nationalist leader) should be made the first prime minister of an independent India, Nehru presents a dystopian vision – the prospect of Hindus abandoning all self-control to massacre Muslims throughout the subcontinent. Gandhi, our hero of vision and action, faces a situation the very opposite of what he had hoped and worked for his entire life, caught and tied to a fate seemingly not of his making by the complexities and irrational forces of history. Where is that vision of an independent India uniting all religious faiths in a civil religion of non-violence and tolerance? It seems thoroughly shattered as the simultaneous independence and partition of India into India and Pakistan led to vicious bloodbaths when Muslims fled to Pakistan and Hindus fled to India by hundreds of thousands. Perhaps India is "not ready yet," or perhaps it is the wrong setting for such a vision.

But our hero Gandhi persists in seeking peace, and in our viewers' world of history on celluloid, we cheer him on. Just as he named his autobiography "The Story of My Experiments With Truth," he would involve the whole of India and the British Empire in his experiments. Gandhi's response to rioting is one he has used several times – a tenacious resort to fasting, a kind of public penance that is both his striving for purification and a loud and forceful plea for peace from one who by now symbolizes all that is sacred in Indian nationalism.⁹ With a wry smile, the emaciated Gandhi assures his friends that he will get people to stop fighting by fasting. And if that doesn't work, "If I die, perhaps they will stop." Gandhi, the greater-than-life saint, proposes that the sacrifice of his life is the possible road to salvation; again the mixing of essence- and influence-optimism is apparent, in which personal penance takes political dimensions. One man's force of will to refuse bodily nourishment can evoke emotions of reconciliation, a taming of tempers – however temporary – across the country.

As much as he is the mover of the masses through his "experiments," Gandhi is also the personal, Christ-like redeemer of the individual sinner. In an interlude of the final fasting scene, we see Gandhi, almost lifeless, on the rooftop of a Muslim's house where he has been encamped for his fast. Out of the surrounding conflagrations of hatred, a wild-looking low-class man, a kind of "sin personified," bursts in before Gandhi, coarsely throwing a piece of bread on his bed and insisting that he eat. As if confessing sins before

⁹ Fasting is counted as one of three forms of *satyagraha* along with non-cooperation and civil disobedience, and it is considered the most potent form, the last resort to make use of when non-cooperation and civil disobedience fail. Some writers mark fasting as Gandhi's specific contribution to the theory and practice of non-violence. Madhuri Wadhwa, *Gandhi: Between Tradition and Modernity* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1991), 99-100.

Christ, the man tells of having murdered a Muslim child as revenge for the death of his son at the hands of Muslims. Gandhi imparts absolution: "I know a way out of hell: Find a child whose mother and father have been killed, and raise him as your own, only be sure that he is a Muslim, and that you raise him as one." We are touched as the penitent sinner bows to the feet of Gandhi, crying in gratefulness. The process of penance prescribed is to be a socially positive act of "affirmative action." We are to understand that even the most horrendous of social sins can be absolved by enlightened social counter-action (and perhaps – especially for the Indian audience – that being raised as a Muslim or as a Hindu is but a matter of happenstance, not one's own choice or fault.)

Finally, the rioting has stopped, and Gandhi's friends all arrive to tell him the good news. As if allowing us to see through Gandhi's eyes, the camera pans from below the circle of friends' reassuring faces, from one affectionate face to the next, as they surround his bed and affirm that the rioting has stopped "once and for all," and therefore he should terminate his fast. It is as if by seeing Gandhi's penance we are purified vicariously, and our reward is the same reassurance and revived optimism.

Final Scene: "So what kind of warrior have you been?"

Throughout the film, we see the dramatized struggle between forces of uncontrolled violence and partially controlled non-violence, blind bigotry, conscious tolerance, oppressive fear, and awakened understanding. Gandhi has been the ringmaster, present in almost every scene, displaying his uncanny optimism even as utopian visions seem to fade. Finally, the fighting in Calcutta has stopped due to Gandhi's fasting. The American reporter Margaret Bourke-White is astonished that Gandhi has plans to go to Pakistan. The film's screenplay writer Jack Briley has Gandhi say, "I'm only going there to prove to Hindus here and Muslims there that the only devils anywhere are the ones running around in our hearts, and that is where all our battles ought to be fought." She asks, "So what kind of warrior have you been?" Gandhi: "Not a very good one, that is why I have so much tolerance for the other scoundrels of the world." As he walks away, toward the garden to meet his assassin, the reporter says "There is a sadness about him. He thinks he has failed."

As we are brought full circle to the beginning – which is indeed the end – with Gandhi's last words "O God" in the prayer garden, we grasp for the moral solace projected on the Ganges as the ashes of Gandhi are thrown into the water, (quoting Gandhi from an early episode in the film): "There have been tyrants...but in the end they always fall."

Gandhi's civil religion

In his book *India's Agony Over Religion*, Gerald J. Larson argues that with India's independence from British rule in 1947 a civil religion was born, with characteristics similar to the American civil religion which Robert Bellah identified in his now famous article "Civil Religion in America" in the journal *Daedalus* in 1967, but distinctively Indian in content. The founding prophets of India's civil religion are Gandhi and Nehru, the former identified by Larson

as the extraordinary creator of this new civil religion, the latter identified as the sustainer of it.¹⁰

The modern Indian civil religion, also often termed “neo-Hinduism,” was not the sole creation of Gandhi. Writers give significant credit to the British – with their rationalized commercial and legal systems and Christian missions – and to certain earlier Indian reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833). To some extent rightly so, Christian writers credit Christianity largely with shaping neo-Hinduism, as well. Leroy Rouner writes, “The story of neo-Hinduism is, in part, the story of the ‘Christianization’ of Hinduism, not in terms of theological convictions, but regarding ethical values and practices, based on a new sense of the dignity of the individual human being.”¹¹

Furthermore, in formulating his ideas Gandhi took inspiration from Leo Tolstoy as well as Ruskin and the biblical Sermon on the Mount.¹² The Indian sacred texts, especially the *Bhagavad-gita*, were also to play their part, as were the *ahimsa* practices of the Jains in Gandhi’s childhood hometown. But along with these teachings Gandhi nurtured national pride, consisting of a fierce conservatism combined with progressive hope:

I believe that the civilization India has evolved is not to be beaten in the world. Nothing can equal the seeds sown by our ancestors. Rome went, Greece shared the same fate; ... India is still, somehow or other, sound at the foundation ... India remains immovable and that is her glory ... What we have tested and found true on the anvil of experience, we dare not change. Many thrust their advice upon India, and she remains steady. This is her beauty: it is the sheet anchor of our hope.¹³

With such rousing words, Gandhi and others formulated notions of *swaraj*, or self-rule, from which Indian independence would eventually come and the film *Gandhi* is in part a celebration.

In the film *Gandhi*, radio announcements, speeches, and the almost constant presence of Western reporters remind us that we are witnessing public history of international import. Cheering crowds calling for Gandhi, marchers in the Salt March, and non-cooperators offering their heads to British billy-club blows show the dedication to Gandhi’s cause, to the point of voluntary martyrdom. A bonfire of British cloth suggests the Vedic fire sacrifice now transformed into an act of national liberation; National Congress members of varying religions appear united in their concern for the fasting Gandhi; Gandhi listens as an old, dying farmer bemoans the effects of British economic tyranny in his village.

But beyond the textural scope of such imagery, what we want to see – and are plentifully supplied with – is the staging of the practice of *satyagraha* as Mr. Gandhi’s valiant challenge to all traditionally known forms of political power. This is the principle that lies very much at the center of his civil religion, which he claims to affirm the validity of all religions. More

¹⁰ Gerald James Larson, *India’s Agony over Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 201–02.

¹¹ Leroy S. Rouner, *To Be At Home: Christianity, Civil Religion, and World Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 90.

¹² Percival Spear, *A History of India*, vol. 2 (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 196–97.

¹³ Moore and Eldredge, eds., *India Yesterday and Today*, 178–79.

than simply a political strategy, Gandhi saw *satyagraha* as “a matter of faith or creed grounded in an integrated philosophy of the universe and life and concomitant ethical beliefs.”¹⁴ Madhuri Wadhwa elaborates:

According to Gandhi, truth and non-violence are not analytical concepts, but synthetic ones. For Gandhi, non-violence and truth are one whole, totality or Gestalt, and in his opinion, truth incarnates love, and love incarnates non-violence. Above all, Gandhi’s emphasis on truth and non-violence stemmed from his faith that they are essential for humanity. The Gandhian maxims of truth and non-violence had strong ethical overtones in the same manner, that the Gandhian structure of politics is founded on ethical norms. He adhered to the doctrine of the absolutism of ethical values. Ethical absolutism signifies that moral norms are absolute and hence objective and eternal.¹⁵

Energized by his sense of ethical absolutism, Gandhi’s civil religion became a form of mass mobilization of what is perceived as simple, sublime, and authentic in life, which is thought to empower all people to exercise the full potential of their lives by the synthesizing agency of “*satyagraha*.” This, again, is the utopian vision, typified by his hopes for a revived village culture. In the film, Gandhi sketches his program for Margaret Bourke-White while busy spinning cotton in prison:

...I know that happiness does not come from things... it can come from work and pride in what you do. India lives in her villages, and the terrible poverty there can only be removed if their local skills can be revived. ... a constructive program is the only non-violent solution to India’s agony. It will not necessarily be progress for India ... if she simply imports the unhappiness of the West.

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That the West has nothing to be proud of with its unhappiness one hardly feels like arguing against this gentle man of wisdom. One becomes disheartened thinking of the state of present-day Indian cities, with their ever-increasing westernization, or thinking of the proliferation of television in Indian villages. Hardly a dream come true, Gandhi’s formulations for dynamic village culture now seem little more than ideological curiosities. If the creed of non-violence is nurtured by a rejection of materialism, where can we hope now to find those nutrients? *Gandhi* does not supply an answer, except fond memories of one who seemed to supply those nutrients while he lived.

Civil Religion and *Triumph des Willens*

Seeing the film *Gandhi* as a portrayal of Indian civil religion invites us to contrast it with the Nazi propaganda film of German civil religion, *Triumph des Willens*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl. In Riefenstahl’s film, we are presented with the triumphal figure of Adolf Hitler as an androgynous, semi-divine, powerful yet beneficent demiurge surrounded by worshipful masses and boundless military might – the pleased observer of a grand display of perfect discipline mobilized – who dissolves all internal and external interference to the construction of a workers’ paradise in *das Vaterland*,

¹⁴ Wadhwa, *Gandhi: Between Tradition and Modernity*, 99.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 101.

Germany. As a propaganda film, *Triumph des Willens* presents its viewers with a two-dimensional reality: there are the re-awakened masses — *das Volk* — of Germany, who have been redeemed from obscurity; and there is Hitler, the redeemer — *der Führer* — as the savior of Germany. There is an enemy — anyone who does not accept the vision of Hitler and therefore of Germany (“Hitler ist Deutschland; Deutschland ist Hitler!”) and we are to expect the enemy to be roundly crushed by invincible German military might. One need simply believe in the national glory of Germany and vow total obedience to *der Führer*.

Triumph des Willens portrays perfectly tuned national faith and optimism: Marching bands, flags, speeches, and fireworks are the continuous (and tiringly repetitive) things of the film. We are treated to dramatic lighting; panning of cameras (thirty of which were on sight for the filming)¹⁶ over, along, and behind a myriad of perfectly disciplined soldiers; and repeated framings of *der Übermensch* (Hitler) smiling, approving, shaking hands, and preaching his “eternal truths.” Every sequence underscores the message: “We are now the great and glorious winners. By joining us, you Germans who have been the miserable losers will become the happy winners.” In tune with the Nurnberg events filmed, *Triumph des Willens* celebrates military strength — and therefore the preparation for violence — as the outward expression of a conviction of moral as well as racial superiority.

Might one find anything but the sharpest of contrasts between this 1935 propaganda film of Nazi Germany and the 1982 dual-country production of Gandhi’s biography?¹⁷ There are points of similarity, slight or superficial though they may seem.

As Hitler is the worshipable deity of the nation in *Triumph des Willens*, Gandhi is somewhat deified in this cinematic portrayal of him, despite Nehru’s request to Attenborough that he refrain from making him so.¹⁸ Like the Hitler of *Triumph des Willens*, Gandhi’s character in *Gandhi* has been simplified. While such matters as Gandhi’s struggle to overcome what he perceived to be his shortcomings are touched upon, there remains a strong element of “packaging,” a streamlining of the man to make him more accessible to a Western audience.¹⁹ Politically, Gandhi’s position is also simplified. Although he appears to have the full support of his countrymen for most of his political actions this was not the case. As early as 1930 his triumphal Salt March to the sea was boycotted by the Muslims expressing fear that Hindu dominance was replacing British dominance. His ideology, including his “utopian” program of agrarian and village reform, symbolized by what Rabindranath Tagore called the “Cult of the Charka (spinning wheel),”²⁰ was severely criticized by some Indian leaders.

¹⁶ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 101.

¹⁷ Hameeduddin Mahmood, “Oscar Awards,” *Indian and Foreign Review* 20, no. 13, April 15-30, 1983: 18. *Gandhi* was an Indo-British coproduction.

¹⁸ “Whatever you do, don’t deify him. He was too great a man for that.” Andrew Robinson, “Bapu,” *Sight and Sound: International Film Quarterly* 52, no. 1, Winter 82/83: 64-65.

¹⁹ Chakravarty, *National Identity*, 192.

²⁰ In an essay entitled “The Call of Truth” Tagore wrote: “The *charka* in its proper place can do no harm, but will rather do much good. But where, by reason of failure to acknowledge

Like Hitler, Gandhi delivers powerful speeches that arouse his audiences within the film to religiously dedicated action and inspire Indian audiences of the film to feel renewed pride in being Indian;²¹ like Hitler, Gandhi wears a “uniform” (he requested all his followers to wear India-made cotton traditional dress).

These similarities, tangential as they may seem, call to awareness that both films under question present a ritual dimension as celebrations of civil religion. Here we enter into the realm of film as a “dream factory,” of which Mircea Eliade spoke,²² where the viewing of a film is a public ritual event – an enactment or re-enactment (*re-creation*) of experiences, memories, anticipations, or apprehensions. When the content of such “dreams” are themselves public events, real or imagined, with which the audience readily identifies, we may well be dealing with an enactment of a civil religious ritual. And when there is a strong quality of anticipation in the “dream,” we may well be dealing with a utopian vision as the content of the ritual. Touching on this point, Sumita Chakravarty quotes Richard Dyer in her thorough study of Indian film, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947 - 1987*:

Entertainment offers the image of ‘something better’ to escape to, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized.²³

86 We hardly need to linger on the ritual dimension of *Triumph des Willens* as a viewing event for Nazi German audiences. Riefenstahl rejoiced in the potential of film to act in this capacity, as a means of arousing national fervor: “Where else in the world [than Germany] have the film’s inherent potentialities to act as the chronicler and interpreter of contemporary events be recognized in so far-sighted a manner? . . . the belief that a true and genuinely powerful national experience can be kindled through the medium of film, this belief originated in Germany.”²⁴ The film as anticipation of a perfect and proud German society did its job. Nazi German audiences received confirmation, or re-confirmation, that Hitler’s version of truth was the proper and only version. What we now see as a propaganda film of the first order was for them a “documentation” of the way things shall be for the next one thousand years. And yet, this anticipation betrays the

the differences in man’s temperament, it is in the wrong place, there thread can only be spun at the cost of a great deal of the mind itself. Mind is no less valuable than cotton thread,” Krishna Datta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (London: Bloomsbury Publishers, 1995), 240.

²¹ An Indian journalist, M. Bhaktavatsala, wrote in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*: “Yes, for many of us, and those of the older generation, Gandhi will be a memorable experience. For we will sit there not as critics but as Indians; the Indians of the Gandhian era, eager to identify with the Indianness of the man...the film is something to feel proud of,” Chakravarty, *National Identity*, 192.

²² Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 9.

²³ Chakravarty, *National Identity*, 102.

²⁴ Barnouw, *Documentary*, 103.

underlying uncertainty. The opaqueness of the vision works too hard to hide the inconsistencies of the dream as if the dreamer must be prevented from awakening. The re-enactment of Hitler's visit to Nurnberg on film is at once an overt celebration of confidence and a covert expression of anxiety. The goal is presumably peace and prosperity; the means for its achievement will be war and military discipline.

Triumph des Willens could be termed a *hard* film of civil religious enactment, where the promise of a bright German future is almost virtually pounded into the viewers, as an appeal to subliminal anxieties and longings. The repetition of images portraying the worshipped (Hitler) and his worshipers (soldiers, workers, citizens) as embodiments of one pointed determination, stripped of any complexity such as doubt or weakness, invites its viewers to abandon moral reflections or misgivings and to join in the mass celebration of Nurnberg. The film medium serves to assist viewers in the bypassing of intellect and reason for a hard, "quick sale" of German nationalism to the resentment-harboring German viewers of the 1930s and 1940s.

In contrast, *Gandhi* might be termed a *soft* film of civil religious enactment, where audiences (both Indian and Western) one generation after Gandhi's demise are to recall, not anticipate, the central iconic figure. For Indian audiences, the film might well be the re-enactment of a quickly fading memory of the Indian nation's gestation period and a fading hope that Gandhian ideals will prevail in a country ever more riven by communal divisions. While they may feel proud of Gandhi as the model Indian to place before the world, Indian audiences may experience uncertainty as to the force of his message to the world when his countrymen fail to heed that message. *Gandhi* softly resurrects Gandhi and conveys his message with his cinematically dramatized life. However, one fails to see what *content* of his message is made accessible to Indian audiences. The man is the message, and the message is vague: "We have the memory of Gandhi as symbol of our independence, our national identity, our neo-Hinduism." Perhaps this is enough for the Indian audience.

For Western audiences, *Gandhi* is more of an introduction to an unfamiliar history than a re-enactment of a familiar one. Yet as a symbol of non-violent political and social action, Gandhi's message resonates with Westerners who cherish vague hopes for universal peace and social equanimity. We relish his utopian optimism and feel uplifted by his moral stature, strengthened by Gandhi's reassurances that truth prevails. But at the same time, we are left with uncertainty. Does the moral progress of society depend on the personal presence of rare souls such as Gandhi? Or does the world finally "get the message" and realize a means by which all people shall embark on meaningful lives of "holding firmly to the truth?" This is not clear in *Gandhi*, and this ambiguity leaves us doubtful. At the beginning, and again at the end of the film, we are reminded in no uncertain terms that some people choose to make their feelings known with a gun. If Gandhi's life was his message, *Gandhi* troubles us with a further message in which Gandhi's message is contained: However, much we may want to hear, remember, and apply such a message to our lives and the world, someone insisted that his message was not to be heard.

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