

Western Values in M. K. Gandhi's Social Philosophy*

Elena Bitinayte

Peoples' Friendship University of Russia

3 Ordzhonikidze Str.

Moscow, Russia

E-mail: bihelenite@gmail.com

Abstract—The article deals with the Western values and ideas in M. K. Gandhi's thought. Although he rejects technical progress and other external manifestations of modernization, his views in a great extent are consistent with the moral foundation of Modernity. First, it is expressed in the fact that he pays special attention to the problem of personal existence in social world. He took this personalistic approach from the modern Western philosophy, where it arose as a result of reconsideration of Christian tradition. Furthermore, we can find many concrete evangelic values and ideas in his teaching of Satyagraha, as well as in his social and economic views.

Keywords—M. K. Gandhi; evangelic values; modernization; non-Western intellectuals

I. INTRODUCTION

The processes of social reflection began in history of Indian philosophy in 19th century [1]. The intellectuals of new type, who were formed on the joint of cultures of traditional society and of modern one, became subjects of these processes. Being influenced by different factors, their worldviews became synthetic, in which Western ideas and values take an important place. The thinkers review history and modern condition of Indian society and outline proper ways of its further development, using Western social theories. The following question is especially interesting: "how the Western values affect non-Western intellectuals' social conceptions?". It is significant that many of such values have deep Christian roots and arose in Western tradition as a result of rethinking evangelic precepts or as "modern worldly faces of biblical spiritual grounds of European culture" (phrase by Eugene B. Rashkovski) [2].

II. GANDHI AND WESTERN WORLD

Ideas and values, which originate from Western culture, take significant place in Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's (1869–1948) worldview. He was the person of dual cultural identity, which was formed on the joint of traditional and modern societies, likewise the thinkers and social reformers of previous period of Indian Renaissance and as his contemporaries – the politicians and fighters for

independence. The Indian thinker, having a vivid interest to different religions, studied Christianity, in which he gave priority to ethical aspect [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]. Attention to evangelic values and appeals to revive them in original form are also the features of modern Western and Russian thinkers, which influenced Gandhi (H. D. Thoreau, R. W. Emerson, J. Ruskin, E. Carpenter, J. Allen, L. N. Tolstoy, T. M. Bondarev) [8] [9]. Also, all these thinkers rejected negative effects of modernization: extreme forms of economic inequality; man's pragmatic relation to environment, caused by industrialization; growth of governmental participation in society's life, etc. Advocatory education, which Gandhi obtained in London, became another factor, which determined his partial attachment to modern Western culture and formed his sense of justice [10].

Diversity of factors, influenced Gandhi, as well as modernization and anticolonial struggle as the context of his life and activity determined thinker's interest to the problem of relationships between East and West. Distinction of two types of civilizations – 'true civilization' and 'modern civilization' – is the essence of his reasoning on this theme. Gandhi defines deliberate restriction of technical progress and concentration on spiritual and moral values as main features of 'true civilization' [11]. He sees the base of 'modern civilization' in aspiration to material comfort and to technical progress, which are repugnant to social morality and spirituality [12]. The thinker often identifies 'true civilization' with Eastern/Indian one, and by analogy – 'modern civilization' with Western/European one [13]. But in some texts he offers a wider – philosophical interpretation of these terms and emphasizes that they are not related to geographical objects [14]. That is why Gandhi's ideas on West are very polysemic and ambiguous, that makes research of this theme difficult. We can find anti-Western rhetoric in many of his texts (for example, identifying Western and 'modern' civilizations, he calls them 'satanic' and compares conditions of life there with pandemonium). Despite this fact, it wouldn't be correct to define him as a nationalist because the object of his critique was not West itself, but faults of modernization processes and European colonial politics. Blaming the West in spiritless and immorality, Gandhi presents it as a bearer of modern's 'essence'. However, the thinker also distinguishes in Western culture another stratum, which is close to his ideal

*The study is supported by the Russian Science Foundation grant "Indian Philosophy in the History of World Philosophy Context: The Meanings' Translation Problem", project no. 16–18–10427.

image of ‘true civilization’. Gandhi finds this stratum in pre-industrial period of European history and in contemporary philosophical trends, the members of which criticize changes, initiated by modernization, avoid achievements of technical progress and concentrate their attention mainly on the problem of human moral development. But it is a question: whether we could define Gandhi and Western thinkers of that period, with whom he was agree (H. D. Thoreau, R. W. Emerson, J. Ruskin, L. N. Tolstoy, etc.), as antagonists of modernization? I think not, because modernization is a complex and multiform process and it isn’t reduced to social problems, which it causes. Modernization also includes transition from customary to juridical law, which is based on the idea of general equality before the law; increase of people’s involvement in political process; appearance of civil society and intensification of social mobility. The idea, that every person is valuable regardless of his ancestry and social status is the philosophical essence of listed changes. This idea, which have roots in Christian worldview, brings together Gandhi’s philosophical views and theories of Western critics of industrialization with personalistic tendencies in modern social philosophy.

Likewise, other non-Western thinkers, who were influenced by Western philosophy, Gandhi overcomes some conceptions of traditional Hindu social doctrine: belief in dependence of person’s social status from his karma; idea of correlation between human dignity and person’s position in society, etc. Attention to a person is a main value, which was taken by the Indian thinker from Western philosophy. Other Western values in Gandhi’s thought are different manifestations of his personalistic approach to understanding of social processes.

III. SATYAGRAHA AND EVANGELIC VALUES

First, we can find evangelic values in Gandhi’s tactic of Satyagraha. These are values of love to an enemy and forgiveness. The theme of lenience to an enemy is also presented in traditional Hinduism, where it is related with two fundamental ideas. 1) If we take into consideration the law of karma, we will see that an enemy is an instrument of penance for one’s past sins. 2) If we concentrate as theorists of Advaita Vedanta on the idea of identity of every individual soul to Brahman, or Absolute, we will see that the term ‘enemy’, which is recognized as single subject or as an Other is absurd [15]. The idea of hostility loses the sense due to philosophical arguments in both cases. But being a Hindu, Gandhi nevertheless, proposing the proper model of relationships with an enemy, concentrates on ethical aspect. He calls Satyagraha ‘Love force’ and preaches forgiveness, which he understands as a moral value and ability to practice which he defines as “a quality of the soul” [16]. Gandhi was influenced by Advaita, and the idea of universal spiritual unity takes an important place in his philosophy. However, an extreme form of this idea – refusal from perception other person as separate subject contradicts to philosophy of Satyagraha. The essences of Satyagraha as the teaching about improvement of two opposite subjects (Satyagrahi – a person, who practices Satyagraha, and his opponent) are dialogue and morality. This fact makes Satyagraha

comparable with Christianity. Gandhi preaches love to an enemy just as to an Other, as to a person, who needs moral and spiritual support. He writes: “To forgive is not to forget. There is no merit in loving an enemy when you forget him for a friend. The merit lies in loving in spite of the vivid knowledge that the one that must be loved is not a friend” [17]. This statement echoes the following evangelic phrase: “But I say unto you, Love your enemies... For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye?” (Matt. 5: 44, 46). There are two components in the base of mentioned norm of relation to an enemy: the ideal of everyone’s equality before God and the idea of unconditional respect to an Other’s dignity, which expresses understanding that his nature has Divine Principle.

IV. GENERAL EQUALITY BEFORE GOD AND BEFORE THE LAW

Being religious thinker Gandhi agrees with the statement, that all people are equal in the eyes of God. He remembers his acquaintance with Christianity when he was a student: “It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God... If God could have sons, all of us were His sons. If Jesus was like God, or God Himself, then all men were like God and could be God Himself” [18]. Also, being advocate, Gandhi took the secular form of this idea, which has roots in European egalitarian thought – the assurance that everyone is equal in the eyes of Law [19]. He began his social activity in South Africa, where he fought against racism. In that period, he organized movements for protection Indian commune’s rights, appealing to British constitution, which was formal common for all empire and which consisted the statement about everyone’s equality before the law [20].

The theme of respect to human dignity is pivotal for the teaching of Satyagraha, as well as for the whole Gandhi’s social philosophy. The person’s dignity in traditional Hindu social doctrine was considered in relation with his social status. So, the dignity of persons with low social status (members of the lowest castes, adherents of different faith, untouchables) was recognized partly or wasn’t recognized at all. Gandhi as thinker, influenced by modern Western social philosophy, rejects the traditional social doctrine of Hinduism and agrees with ontological interpretation of the term ‘human dignity’, according to which everyone is valuable regardless of his social status [21]. This interpretation was created by I. Kant and theorists of philosophy of law, who reconsidered Christian idea of Divine Principle, which is inherent to every person and which gives him unconditional worth. From the ethical point of view to keep one’s dignity is to recognize spiritual essence of his human nature and to restrain one’s brute principle [22]. Gandhi interprets this term similarly: “The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law – to the strength of the spirit” [23]. Gandhi offers high moral norm of behavior for a person, who practices Satyagraha. In particular, the thinker emphasizes that violence contradicts to human dignity [24]. When Satyagrahi coordinates his behavior with ethical norms, he subdues his brute passions to spirit’s power and keeps his dignity. At the same time, recognizing spiritual

principle in Other, a Satyagrahi respects his dignity and helps to an opponent to begin moral improvement.

Gandhi often applies term ‘dignity’ to persons with low social status – to women, to laborers and to untouchables [25]. The thinker not only recognizes that their dignity is equal to other persons’ dignity, but he emphasizes that they are more useful for society. Confirmations of foresaid are, for example, his term ‘harijan’ (Sanskrit. ‘God’s people’), created for appealing to untouchables; his idea that women have more moral strength than men; his argument that manual labor is more valuable than intellectual and his call for spreading the first one [26]. Gandhi writes: “And as I know that God is found more often in the lowliest” [27]. All these are comparable with the Christian idea of ‘blessedness’ of persons, who suffer in earthly life. E. B. Rashkovski writes: “A person with low social position, especially who can keep the royal status of a man even in external humility – is ‘blessed’; may be just he is crossed by the main paths of the Universe” [28].

V. LOVE FOR A NEIGHBOR AND SOCIAL SERVICE

The themes of service to neighbors, compassion and social justice, which are unusual for traditional Hinduism, are significant in Gandhi’s philosophy, because he pays attention to the problem of dignity of persons with low social status [29]. The theme of social service is one of the pivotal in his philosophy. He writes: “I am endeavoring to see God through service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor down below, but in everyone” [30]. Idea of Advaita that all in the Universe has one spiritual ground and evangelic values are interlaced in Gandhi’s reasoning on social service. This double influence on his thought is visible in his preaches of selflessness. Talking about the value of selflessness, Gandhi likewise theorists of Advaita writes about loss of individuality, about ‘solution’ of own ego in common for all souls Divine ground. Gandhi writes: “For me the road to salvation lies through incessant toil in the service of my country and therethrough of humanity. I want to identify myself with everything that lives (emphasis mine)” [31]. In Gandhi’s opinion social service is the method for a person to forget his psychological ‘I’ and to reveal his true spiritual ‘I’ – Atman, which is identical with Brahman – spiritual ground of the world. However, the Christian ideas are also presented in Gandhi’s preaches of selflessness. He says: “We must reduce ourselves to a cipher... Not until we have reduced ourselves to nothingness can we conquer the evil in us. God demands nothing less than complete self-surrender as the price for the only real freedom that is worth having. And when a man thus loses himself, he immediately finds himself in the service of all that lives (emphasis mine) ... He is a new man never weary of spending himself in the service of God’s creation” [32]. This quotation has something in common with the following evangelic statement: “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it” (Luke 17:33). With evangelic preaches of humility (“But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (Matt. 19:30), “For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11)) also are

comparable the final phrases of Gandhi’s autobiography: “So long as a man does not of his own free will put himself last among his fellow creatures, there is no salvation for him” [33].

Talking about social service, Gandhi emphasizes that man’s physical abilities are limited: “I am so constructed that I can only serve my immediate neighbors, but in my conceit, I pretend to have discovered that I must with my body serve every individual in the Universe” [34]. He expresses this idea in the context of the critique of modern technical progress; and we can interpret his words as a request to stop attempts to resolve social problems by means of development of technique. Talking about social service, the thinker bases on value of ‘love to neighbor’ as expression of vivid compassion to Other. Gandhi, like many Christian philosophers, for example – L. Tolstoy, rejects Utopian ethics of ‘love to distant’ – to descendants or to all humanity, the essence of which is endeavoring to change world radically by means of realization some ideals [35] [36].

VI. THE BIBLICAL GROUNDS OF THE GANDHI’S ECONOMICAL VIEWS

Gandhi preaches compassion to the poor and at the same time, he denies importance of beneficence [37]. Two Western ideas – of social equality and compulsory manual labor for everybody – are pivotal in his economic views. Both ideas contradict to traditional Hindu social doctrine, because caste system is hierarchical, and it makes the manual labor compulsory only for persons with low social status. Being reformer of Hinduism Gandhi strived for reconstruction of Indian society: for abolition of untouchability, destruction of jati system and revival of varna system, if four varnas were equal. The statement that all social estates must serve the society in equal measure is the foundation of his egalitarian social ideal. Gandhi doesn’t recognize intellectual work as a way to earn, though he estimates it highly. He thinks that handicraft and agriculture are duties for everyone [38]. In Gandhi’s opinion, a remedy to resolve the problem of social inequality is to accustom the economic elite and intellectuals to manual labor. He writes: “...More than nine-tenths of humanity lives by tilling the soil. How much happier, healthier and more peaceful would the world become if the remaining tenth followed the example of the overwhelming majority at least to the extent of laboring enough for their food” [39]. Gandhi confesses that he took the idea of ‘bread labor’ from L. Tolstoy, T. M. Bondarev and J. Ruskin – the thinkers, who created their economic theories on the base of Christian values [40] [41] [42]. It is significantly that Gandhi like them refers to Bible, preaching spreading of manual labor. He repeats the words of Paul the apostle (2 Thes. 3:10) and quotes the Old Testament (Gen. 3:19): “How can a man who does not do body labor have the right to eat? ‘In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat thy bread’, says the Bible” [43].

Gandhi’s interest for idea of spreading agriculture and handicraft leads him to the cult of simplicity, which implies underestimate of science and fine arts. There were several thinkers, who influenced Gandhi, who preached and practiced simplicity: H. D. Thoreau, E. Carpenter, J. Allen

and L. Tolstoy. Semyon L. Frank wrote about Russian intelligentsia: “In her soul love for the poor turns into love for poverty” [44]. His words are applicable to Gandhi. The Indian thinker treats for poverty ambivalently: on the one hand, he considers forced poverty as a problem; on the other hand, he regards voluntary poverty as an ethical value. He constructs the model of ideal society, in which extreme forms of poverty are overcome, but all people live in modest circumstances or even in moderate poverty [45]. The value of economic equality takes an important place in this model. Gandhi declares that specialists of different professions should take the same wages [46]. Also, he preaches equal distribution of wealth, by means of voluntary giving part of rich’s property to the poor. Gandhi defines himself as a socialist, but he opposes his ‘true socialism’, based on the idea of non-violence, to radical courses in socialism, which theorists insist upon forced distribution of wealth [47].

Being religious thinker, Gandhi appeals to focus upon spiritual goals and to entrust to God, who would care about our daily bread. The idea of devotion to God and trust in His help is presented both in the Vaishnavism, which Gandhi confessed, and in Christianity. But talking about God’s care for man’s worldly welfare, Gandhi applies evangelic values, because this theme is not typical for Vaishnavism. Applying evangelic image (Matt. 6: 25–34), he writes: “Perfect fulfillment of the ideal of non-possession requires that man should, like the birds, have no roof over his head, no clothing and no stock of food for the morrow. He will indeed need his daily bread, but it will be God’s business, and not his, to provide it” [48].

VII. CONCLUSION

Gandhi was influenced by Western culture, because he was formed in the circumstances of Indian modernization. Firstly, it is expressed in the fact that he took Christian values directly from the Bible, as well as due to the contacts with Christians and reading books by Western social philosophers, who also used Bible’s ideas. Gandhi’s advocatory education, what defines his adherence to the idea of everyone’s equality before the law, was also significant. Although the thinker distances from technical progress as external attribute of modern society, he repeats in his philosophy the essence of modernization process, namely he overcomes the traditional statement that a whole society is worthier, than a single person. The ideas of social equality, justice, compassion to the poor, everyone’s unconditional human dignity, which arose in Western philosophy due to reconsideration of evangelic values, are also significant for Gandhi’s philosophy. He chooses personalistic approach for understanding social reality and this choice caused his interest for the theme of dialogue with Other. In my opinion, Satyagraha as teaching about mutual development of two equally worth subjects and as teaching which absorbed evangelic values of love to neighbor, forgiveness and compassion couldn’t arise without Western influences on Gandhi.

REFERENCES

- [1] T. G. Skorokhodova, *The Bengal Renaissance. Essays on History of Sociocultural Synthesis in Modern Indian Philosophical Thought*. Saint Petersburg: Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie, 2008, pp. 35–55. (in Russian).
- [2] E. B. Rashkovski, *Satyagraha: Revolution of Non-violence*. Put’ (Path), 1993, no. 4, p. 166. (in Russian).
- [3] E. B. Rashkovski, *Mahatma Gandhi: Satyagraha under the Sigh of the Bible. Deliberate Freedom: Materials on History and Culture of 18th–19th Centuries*. Moscow: New Chronograph, 2005, pp. 164–165. (In Russian).
- [4] M. Chatterjee, *Gandhi and Christianity, Gandhi’s Significance for Today: the Elusive Legacy*, J. Hick, L. C. Hempel, Eds. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1989, pp. 152–165.
- [5] D. Dabhokar, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Living Embodiment of Hindu-Christian Dialogue*, *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, 1992, vol. 5, pp. 23–25.
- [6] E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: an Interpretation*. New York: Abingdon – Cokesbury Press, 1948, pp. 51–77.
- [7] J. C. B. Webster, “Gandhi and the Christians: Dialogue in the Nationalist Era,” in: *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, H. Coward, Ed. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993, pp. 80–99.
- [8] G. Hendrick, *The Influence of Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ on Gandhi’s Satyagraha*, *The New England Quarterly*, 1956, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 462–471.
- [9] R. Srinivasan, *Western Influences on Gandhi*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1969, vol. 4, no. 20, pp. 847–849.
- [10] E. B. Rashkovski, *Satyagraha: Revolution of Non-violence*, pp. 166–167.
- [11] M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*. In 100 vols. New Delhi: Government of India. The Publications Division. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1958–1994, vol. 10, p. 37.
- [12] *Ibid.*, Vol. 10, pp. 20–21.
- [13] *Ibid.*, Vol. 8, p. 244, 374, vol. 9, p. 389, vol. 13, p. 261, vol. 14, p. 299.
- [14] *Ibid.* Vol. 9, p. 479.
- [15] A. Hunter, *Forgiveness: Hindu and Western Perspectives*. *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, 2007, vol. 20, pp. 37–38.
- [16] M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. 35, p. 454.
- [17] *Ibid.*, Vol. 19, p. 428.
- [18] *Ibid.*, Vol. 39, pp. 112–113.
- [19] E. B. Rashkovski, *Mahatma Gandhi: Satyagraha under the Sigh of the Bible*, pp. 164–165.
- [20] M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. 10, p. 78.
- [21] E. B. Rashkovski, *Satyagraha: Revolution of Non-violence*, p. 147.
- [22] V. S. Solovyov, *The Justification of the Good*. Moscow: Republic, 1996, p. 99. (in Russian).
- [23] Cit. ex: M. Prasad, *Social Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*. Gorachpur: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashan, 1958, p. 34.
- [24] M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. 15, p. 157, vol. 48, p. 8.
- [25] *Ibid.* Vol. 15, p. 144, vol. 25, p. 528, vol. 26, p. 7.
- [26] Datta, *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*. Moscow: Izdatelstvo Inostrannoy Literatury (Publishing House of Foreign Literature), 1959, p. 120. (In Russian).
- [27] Cit. ex: V. P. Varma *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvodaya*. Agra: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, 1959, p. 46.
- [28] E. B. Rashkovski, *Satyagraha: Revolution of Non-violence*, p. 169.
- [29] E. B. Rashkovski, *Mahatma Gandhi: Satyagraha under the Sigh of the Bible*, p. 164.
- [30] Cit. ex: J. B. Kripalani, *Gandhi. His Life and Thought*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1970, p. 338.
- [31] M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. 23, p. 349.

- [32] *Ibid.*, Vol. 38, p. 248.
- [33] *Ibid.*, Vol. 39, p. 402.
- [34] *Ibid.*, Vol. 10, p. 28.
- [35] L. N. Tolstoy, *Complete Works*. In 91 vols. Moscow: Terra, 1992, vol. 28, pp. 82–85.
- [36] S. L. Frank, *The Compositions*. Minsk, Moscow: Harvest, AST, 2000, pp. 9, 118.
- [37] R. Diwan, Mahatma Gandhi, Amartya Sen, and Poverty. *Gandhi Marg*, 1999, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 421–422.
- [38] M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. 28, p. 339, vol. 61, p. 212.
- [39] *Ibid.*, Vol. 44, p. 149.
- [40] *Ibid.*, Vol. 44, p. 149.
- [41] T. M. Bondarev, *The Triumph of the Farmer, or Industry and Parasitism*. L. N. Tolstoy, Preface, *Posrednik*, 1906, No. 597, pp. 6–64.
- [42] J. Ruskin, *Unto this Last: Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy*. London: G. Allen, 1903.
- [43] M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, Vol. 44, p. 149.
- [44] S. L. Frank, *The Compositions*, p. 132.
- [45] U. N. Dhebar, *Lectures on Gandhian Philosophy*. Annamalai University, 1963, p. 40.
- [46] M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. 87, p. 10.
- [47] *Ibid.*, Vol. 8, p. 241, vol. 85, p. 7.
- [48] *Ibid.*, Vol. 44, p. 103.