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How would Ghandhi argue against Modi, if he still would be alive

A contribution by Thomas Schirmacher and Richard Howell

(Bonn, 09.02.2026) The Indian government officially observes the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's death on January 30 as Martyrs' Day. It is also known in Hindi as Shaheed Diwas, marking the day in 1948 when Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Godse. It's ironic that Prime Minister Narendra Damodardas Modi celebrates this day while practicing in India exactly what Nathuram Godse, the assassin, stood for.

Government leaders, including the Prime Minister, gather at Raj Ghat or Gandhi Smriti in Delhi for tributes, wreath-laying, and a two-minute national silence at 11 AM. Events emphasize Gandhi's legacy of non-violence and national sacrifices, with exhibitions and prayers held nationwide. At the same

time, the actions of the police and other state offices are the opposite of what Gandhi stood for, with these evil practices taking place day by day.

Gandhi rejected the idea of an explicitly "Hindu state" and advocated for a secular India where all religions enjoy equal respect and coexist. He explicitly warned against turning India into a state "only for Hindus," seeing it as a threat to national unity and survival. Gandhi viewed India as a religiously diverse society and championed a state order that elevates no religion as the state religion. Instead of Western-style separation of religion and politics, he demanded a state that shows equal respect to all faiths.



Bishop Richard Howell from India and Thomas Schirmacher present Pope Francis with reports on the persecution of Christians in India from the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Evangelical Alliance © Osservatore Romano 242459_27062018

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Gandhi was deeply rooted in Hinduism personally and saw it as a core part of Indian culture. At the same time, he criticized movements that turned Hinduism into a nationalist ideology of superiority and opposed exclusively Hindu-oriented state definitions. He repeatedly emphasized that Hindus and Muslims are “like brothers” belonging to the same political community. For him, this meant a free India must be politically open to all religious communities and not defined as a “Hindu-Rashtra” (Hindu nation).

Gandhi would argue against today’s Hindutva under Prime Minister Modi by condemning it as a betrayal of true Hinduism, emphasizing non-violence, religious equality, and unity over supremacy and division. He criticized Hindutva-like ideologies during his life for fostering hatred and inequality, viewing them as antithetical to his vision of a pluralistic India where all faiths coexist as brothers. Gandhi rejected any notion of Hindu superiority, insisting Hinduism thrives through love and service to all, not domination over Muslims or minorities. He would decry Modi’s policies like the Citizenship Amendment Act as creating an “other” through exclusion, echoing his warnings against partitioning society by religion.

Non-violence (ahimsa) defined Gandhi’s politics; he would oppose Hindutva’s promotion of vigilantism, lynchings, and institutional bias against Muslims as cowardly and un-Hindu. Gandhi fasted against communal violence and urged Hindus to protect minorities, directly challenging RSS-BJP rhetoric that labels dissenters as threats.

Gandhi championed sarva dharma sambhava—equal respect for all religions—against Hindutva’s Hindu Rashtra, which he saw as insecure and destructive to national unity. He would criticize Modi’s temple inaugurations on mosque sites and textbook revisions as erasing diversity, arguing true Hinduism absorbs and uplifts, not assimilates by force.

To understand why Gandhi’s vision was naive and destined to fail in India, we must evaluate his philosophy and religious views within a broader context. This includes his complex relationship between Hinduism, Christianity, and Western human rights thinking.

Gandhi from a Christian Perspective

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (October 2, 1869–January 30, 1948), later known as Mahatma Gandhi, was politically and intellectually the most important leader in India during its battle for and ultimate achievement of independence. After studying law in England, Gandhi gained experience with nonviolent resistance tactics against the British as a lawyer in South Africa fighting for the rights of Indians. When he returned to India, he fought for India’s independence, for Hindu-Muslim unity, for the abolition of the caste system, and especially for the rehabilitation of the pariahs, the “untouchables” (casteless), whom Gandhi called “Harijans,” or children of God. Gandhi’s deployed a variety of nonviolent tools such as employee strikes, refusal to pay taxes, human blockades, and hunger strikes, which up to this day have had many imitators from a wide range of groups.

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Gandhi was and is regarded as a leading figure by generations of alternative thinkers. German Gandhi researcher Michael Blume, for example, sees Gandhi's program as the ideal basis "for non-violent opposition in Western industrialized countries and the global alternative movement, which sees itself as a peace movement, an ecological move-ment, a women's movement, a class struggle, or as a liberation movement in the Third World."

Although Gandhi is considered a national saint in India, since his death his convictions have had relatively little influence in his home country. In contrast, Gandhi has had an astonishing impact in the Christian world. He is often mentioned in the same breath as Martin Luther King as a pioneer of Christian political ethics, as if he had been a Christian theologian as King was. Behind this commendation, however, there is usually limited study of Gandhi's extensive writings, such as his programmatic work *Sarvodaya* (Universal Uplift), but just a firmly established tradition of admiration reminiscent of the legends of saints.

It is difficult to understand how Gandhi could become a hero of the women's movement, for example, although he never applied his principles to his wife, and although women certainly had more rights among the English than among the Hindus or in his own family. The anti-racism movement also would seem to have chosen an inappropriate idol in Gandhi, as he was uninterested in the fate of black people in South Africa and never strongly opposed Hindu nationalism in India either.

Without in any way justifying the injustice of colonial rule and without wishing to de-value all of Gandhi's merits, I would propose that the often-praised successes of Gandhi deserve greater critical scrutiny.

1. India's independence was more a result of the Second World War and its global consequences for the colonial ruler of the United Kingdom than of the non-violent resistance led by Gandhi, especially as there were increasingly forces in India that were prepared to use violence.
2. Nonviolent resistance only worked because Gandhi faced an opponent who was still largely Christian. Gandhi beat the English Christians at their own game. Had the British been Muslims or Hindus, Gandhi's approach would have been unlikely to succeed.
3. Gandhi's proclaimed Hindu-Muslim unity failed completely. Independence ended in an enormous bloodbath of fleeing Muslims and Hindus, millions of deaths, and a division of the nation into two countries. The consequences of this division and the violent tensions between Hindus and Muslims have not been overcome to this day. When Gandhi himself was assassinated, he himself became a victim of the continuing violence between Hindus and Muslims.
4. Although the abolition of castes found its way into the Indian constitution, it did not become part of everyday life in India. India's constitution does not reflect Gandhi's thinking or Hindu political traditions. Rather, it reflects Christian, Anglo-Saxon and Dalit traditions.

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Some critical remarks regarding Gandhi's great impact in the Christian world are also warranted.

1. Gandhi first adopted many Hindu practices, such as vegetarianism, through the mediation of Europeans who, turning away from the Christian West, sought their salvation in the teachings of other religions. His faith was therefore an already partially Europeanized form of Indian tradition.

2. Gandhi was significantly influenced by European thinkers such as Rousseau, Ruskin, and Thoreau. He was also strongly influenced by the writings of Leo Tolstoy, including the Russian's rewritten and greatly amended life story of Jesus. He exchanged letters—later published—with Tolstoy, whose view that one should not oppose evil Gandhi understood in the Hindu sense of ahimsa (not being harmful to living beings) and asahayoga (non-cooperation with evil). Gandhi probably became acquainted with Christian ideas only in this roundabout way. Only after he was already a famous man did he become more familiar with actual Christianity itself.

3. Despite his Christian interlocutors and the many invitations he received to participate or speak at Christian conferences and major events, Gandhi was an energetic opponent of Christian mission and accepted as truth only those Christian views which corresponded to the inherited teachings of Indian Jainism that were deeply rooted in his thinking from early on. Thus, although he praised the Bible and the Koran (Collected Works XXI, p. 246; Collected Works XXVIII, p. 111), he rejected their traditional interpretation and substituted his own understanding of the texts for theirs.

4. Gandhi was not a follower of Hinduism as understood or practiced by the majority of Indians. Rather, he was significantly influenced by two Indian religions that developed from Hinduism, Jainism and Theravada Buddhism. This is the only way to understand how Gandhi could endorse the superiority of Indian culture and Hinduism's claim to universality (cf. his creed, Collected Works XXI, pp. 245–246) and at the same time reject the Hindu caste system and the Hindu struggle against the Muslims. For him, the ultimate goal in life was a state attained through several rebirths called moksha, i.e., "salvation" or "self-realization" in the Hindu sense, which Christians can understand only as self-dissolution.

Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirmacher is President of the International Institute for Religious Freedom and received two honorary doctorates from India 2006 and 2025 for four decades of involvement in education in India.

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