

Chapter 10
Gandhi: The Great Contrarian
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Chapter Summary

Gandhi was a great contrarian, deeply rooted in both Indian and Western traditions of thought. Anyone who examines his writings looking for passages that deal with topics like education will soon encounter some very curious remarks that illustrate his contrarian spirit.

Against what might be expected, Gandhi particularly appreciated the works of the famous Anglo-Indian poet Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936). Significantly, whenever readers begin to think they have understood Gandhi, a few pages further he says something quite unexpected. He did not toe a party line or allow an overarching ideology to shape his ideas. Rather, he reacted to living situations in terms of his own understanding of the good and the true, permitting his ideas to develop over time. His commitment to the search for truth produced a consistency in his thinking.

A consideration of Kipling's once-popular poem "The White Man's Burden" affords the opportunity to note what is meant by describing Gandhi as a contrarian. Many contemporary students are shocked by Kipling's poem because they read it as the ultimate heresy, an expression of colonial prejudices that prove the evils of imperialism. Many see no place for such sentiments in the modern multicultural world.

It is somewhat surprising then to learn that Gandhi defended the poem, arguing that it had "been very much misunderstood" and insisting that Kipling was not a racist. Because Gandhi did not consider Kipling a racist he was able to look beyond understanding "White Man" as a racial category to interpret the phrase "White Man's burden" to mean "civilization's burden."

Using words echoed by the Ayatollah Khomeini regarding the United States in the late 1970s, Gandhi argued that the British Empire represented "Satanism," adding, "and they who love God can afford to have no love for Satan." As an empire, he said, it "certainly has been guilty of misdeeds" and "terrible atrocities," while the British government in India was best compared "to a robber."

Nevertheless, this empire, which Gandhi spent a large part of his life criticizing, was not beyond redemption. Its failure was the failure to be what it was destined to be, not the fact that it was an empire. He argued this position on the British Empire during a trial of Indian protesters in Johannesburg in 1908, insisting that the Transvaal Indians had to shoulder the burden of opposing the views of white settlers who sought to create a racist state, which, in Gandhi's view, was a change for the worse in British policy. Such people, Gandhi claimed, "represent a rather unworthy aspect of British policy and if they gain currency, they will herald the decline of the Empire. Therefore, the Indians' resistance tends to the good of the British Empire, too."

Gandhi maintained it was racist white colonists, not Gandhi himself or the Indian protesters, who were the real enemies of the British Empire. The Indians, Gandhi argued, were actually the true friends of the British Empire. Gandhi clearly was not opposed to the idea of empire as such, nor was he hostile to the British Empire as an empire. What he rejected was the illusion of empire, that is, when one group of people were allowed to lord it over all others because the empire was their

empire. Empire, for Gandhi, was not necessarily a bad thing, provided it was an inclusive empire that gave citizenship and equal rights to all.

What we find in the writings of Gandhi is a commitment to the idea of truth as opposed to any claim that he possessed the truth. As the title of his famous book *My Experiment with Truth* (1927) proclaimed, Gandhi was on a lifelong pilgrimage as a seeker of truth. Consequently, he could see the value in Kipling's poem and the British Empire, while rejecting racism and popular ideas that justified European arrogance.

Gandhi opposed empires that oppressed their subject peoples and failed to fulfill their promise of peace, security, and the betterment of all their peoples. Although Gandhi at times was resolutely critical of the British Empire, his criticism implied "the desire to improve the object criticized." For him, true civilization represented "good conduct" or a good way of life." Do we promote such or do we allow our material wealth to blind us to social reality by promoting illusions about the purpose of life itself?

Although for modern readers Kipling's poem sounds hypocritical, absurd, and totally meaningless, for Gandhi the idea that individuals would sacrifice themselves for the good of other people in an empire was an acceptable notion. Yes, Gandhi clashed with many colonial administrators and often pointed out unfairness and injustice in the British system. Yet, overall, he had great respect for imperial administrators both as individuals and as a class. He believed that many servants of the empire actually attempted to be fair and just.

Surprisingly, Gandhi's political views and his commitment to "plain speech" were largely based on Christian teachings and examples of Christian leaders. He found inspiration particularly in the lives and writings of Oliver Cromwell, John Wesley, and John Bunyan. He considered *The Pilgrim's Progress* "the most beautiful book in the English language."