



Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance (Cultural Critique Books)

By Ajay Skaria



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Unconditional Equality examines Mahatma Gandhi's critique of liberal ideas of freedom and equality and his own practice of a freedom and equality organized around religion. It reconceives satyagraha (passive resistance) as a politics that strives for the absolute equality of all beings. Liberal traditions usually affirm an abstract equality centered on some form of autonomy, the Kantian term for the everyday sovereignty that rational beings exercise by granting themselves universal law. But for Gandhi, such equality is an "equality of sword"—profoundly violent not only because it excludes those presumed to lack reason (such as animals or the colonized) but also because those included lose the power to love (which requires the surrender of autonomy or, more broadly, sovereignty).

Gandhi professes instead a politics organized around dharma, or religion. For him, there can be "no politics without religion." This religion involves self-surrender, a freely offered surrender of autonomy and everyday sovereignty. For Gandhi, the "religion that stays in all religions" is satyagraha—the *agraha* (insistence) on or of *satya* (being or truth).

Ajay Skaria argues that, conceptually, satyagraha insists on equality without exception of all humans, animals, and things. This cannot be understood in terms of sovereignty: it must be an equality of the minor.



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Editorial Review

Review

"The field of Gandhi-studies has taken off in refreshing ways in the last decade or so. Ajay Skaria's book offers the most important recent historico-critical reading of—and commentary on—Gandhi's major text, *Hind Swaraj*, and some other related writings by the Mahatma. He cleaves closely to Gandhi's words, comparing Gujarati originals with their English translations while engaging, simultaneously, several noted commentators on Gandhi as well as liberal, communitarian, and deconstructive traditions of thought. Not everybody will agree with every conclusion of Skaria's, but no one interested in the Mahatma will be able to ignore this book."—Dipesh Chakrabarty, University of Chicago

"*Unconditional Equality* spells out nothing short of a total revaluation of Gandhi's political thought, systematic, comprehensive, and authoritative. Ajay Skaria brings a depth of understanding to the material that will be hard to duplicate. This is a *tour de force*."—Mrinalini Sinha, University of Michigan

"Skillfully deconstructing the Gujarati and English versions of Gandhi's writings, Skaria argues that Gandhi's most original philosophical contribution lies not so much in his political views but a new conception of religion that disavows all claims to sovereignty, even over oneself. It is surrender without subordination, compassion without limit; there is only the unconditional equality of the pure gift and the pure example. This is a brilliantly original book, provocative and controversial, that engages not only with Gandhi's admirers and critics but with contemporary debates in moral philosophy."—Partha Chatterjee, Columbia University

"Divided neatly into two parts, this book delves into a familiar arena of concern with a multitude of interesting details, culled from the original Gujarati texts."—*The Review of Politics*

"For someone with a deep philosophical understanding, who is well read in the theoretical literature, for whom Derrida clarifies rather than confuses, this book may well be worth the effort of engagement."—*Satyagraha Foundation for Nonviolence Studies*

About the Author

Ajay Skaria is professor of history at the University of Minnesota. He is the author of *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers, and Wildness in Western India* and coeditor of *Subaltern Studies XII: Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History*.

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