
UNIT 2 METAPHYSICAL TEACHINGS OF GANDHI

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

Gandhi considered himself to be a religious man and that it was his study of religions that led him from piety to ethics and from ethics to metaphysics. Gandhi imbibed a passion for truth and belief in God from the religious atmosphere of his family. At the early stages of his spiritual evolution his passion for truth was only an insistence on telling the truth and his belief in God was only theistic in nature. From theistic position where God is personal, Gandhi's attitude developed into a metaphysical position where God is 'The Eternal Principle' and 'the Universal Law'. His world-view is rooted in the fundamental metaphysical ideas. God (Truth), World and Man constitute his basic ontological principles. The Unit aims to understand Gandhi's world-view and the underlying metaphysical principles that shaped his out-look. Thus by the end of the Unit you should be able

- to know Gandhi's understanding of metaphysics;
- to understand the uniqueness of his multi-textured metaphysical concepts.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Gandhi's philosophy, which he called "an experiment with truth," was not a philosophy in which he merely interpreted or analyzed things for himself. It was an experience, or experiment, in which he changed himself and his environment. In the process, Gandhi re-oriented many traditional ideas practice. He said: "I do not claim to have originated any new principle. I have simply tried in my own way to apply eternal truths to our daily life and problem." He was an ordinary man who became a mahatma, a man of great soul. Gandhi said the eternal truths could be applied to daily life and problems. He said they were everywhere in history. He found that life persists amidst death and that there is compassion and friendliness amidst bitterness and hatred and persecution and war. Devotion to truth was the one characteristic of Gandhi. It was his greatest quality. Love of truth led him to all kinds of disciplines and experiments. He always began with smaller problems and applied the success he achieved to greater problems. "One step is enough for me" was his motto and he progressed from one step to another.

The non-violent non-co-operation movement which won India's freedom was the outcome of the smaller success of his *satyagraha* or "passive resistance" in South Africa. India's freedom was, for him, a means to the larger problem of world peace. *Satyagraha* is a moral or spiritual struggle against political and economic domination which implies denial of truth. The reason is the colonial power in order to rule India takes the means of falsehood and manipulation. The struggle for freedom thus does not mean only to attain political and economic freedom but more importantly it is an upliftment of human conscience that lends to the nonviolent battle for the victory of truth. The concept of truth in Gandhi bears multiple meanings in view of the rich theoretical and practical dimensions. For Gandhi, truth is not only a metaphysical category but also a moral and spiritual concept signifying the importance of truth in life. We will look into the notion of truth and theoretically explicate some of the connections it has with associated concepts like non-violence.

2.2 GANDHI'S NOTION OF TRUTH

While *ahimsa* by definition denotes activity and action, it is the way Gandhi develops his philosophy of temporal action, namely through an examination of truth, which makes his philosophical contribution decisive. As a result, our discussion becomes an exploration of Gandhi's truth and its role in both the spiritual and temporal world. Studying Gandhi's emphasis on worldly existence is significant insofar as his philosophy is one that engages action. It is through the practice of *ahimsa* – the practice of Truth - that one realizes Truth.

Gandhi most often places truth and non-violence on the same level and claims that truth and non-violence are the two sides of the same coin. He is of the opinion that a truthful man is bound to be non-violent and vice versa. That is why it is supposed that truth and non-violence cannot be kept apart. However, one can see the difference between the two principles in morality. While truth is the bed-rock principle, non-violence follows as a corollary. All forms of non-violent behaviour follow from the one adhering to truth as a deep moral commitment. A *satyagrahi* is necessarily nonviolent because he contradicts himself if he is not so. This necessary relation between truth and non-violence need not commit Gandhi to the identity of the two. A non-violent person is in better position to realize truth as the supreme value.

Truth qualifies to be a moral law in view of the fact that it shows how moral values are possible at all. The presupposition of truth as the fundamental moral principle makes it into a moral law in the sense that truth prevails as the principle of good life in the world. Truth has the character of the Kantian categorical imperative because it demands absolute obligation from the truth-seeker. Truth acts as the moral law which is absolutely imposed on the truth-seeker by moral reason or the "inner voice".

Truth is God

Gandhi equates truth with God keeping in view the primacy of truth as an ontological category. He says: truth is God, rather than God is truth. This formulation speaks of the fundamental change that has occurred in Gandhi's concept of God. That also speaks of his approach to religion and metaphysics. The ideas of truth-based religion and truth-based metaphysics dominate Gandhi's

philosophy. The following implications are entailed by the formulation “Truth is God”:

- 1) Truth has a spiritual dimension in addition to the moral dimension.
- 2) Truth is a metaphysical category as it characterizes the fundamental nature of reality.
- 3) Truth is the Absolute Reality which is the source of all existence.

Thus Gandhi makes it clear that truth has a transcendental significance in his metaphysical system in view of the all-comprehensive character of this concept. Truth does not have a partial presence because; if partial it amounts to a distortion of itself. Truth cannot be domain-specific, nor can it be confined to any particular discourse. Those who argue for the discourse dependence of truth do not understand the deeply absolute character of truth. Thus Gandhi emphasizes this point by showing that truth is God or the Absolute Reality.

The concept God signifies the Absolute Reality that cannot be subsumed under any other Reality. This leads to the idea that God is the ultimate ground of all existence. Gandhi makes his concept of God theology-free in order to get rid of the attempt to absorb it to any particular theological tradition. Gandhi’s God is free from the theological frameworks which relativise God to their particular conceptions. Gandhi writes: “The word *satya* comes from *sat*, which means ‘to be’, ‘to exist’. Only God is ever the same through all time. A thousand times honour to him who has succeeded, through love and devotion for *satya*, in opening out his heart permanently to its presence. I have been but striving to serve that truth”. Thus Gandhi gives absolute status to truth keeping in mind his predilection towards equating truth with God. This makes truth a metaphysical reality more than the moral law.

Gandhi uses the term truth in two ways, namely truth as Absolute Truth, and truth as relative truth. While the significance of Gandhi’s use of the term Truth reflects the importance of the term in many Indian philosophical and religious traditions, the distinction between Absolute Truth and relative truths is most succinctly described through the Buddhist paradigm of truth.

The Buddhist understanding of truth broadly differentiates between the Absolute Truth that is the transcendent truth, and the conditional truth that relies on the Absolute Truth. Both these forms of truth include factual and scientific truths. However, Gandhi understands and application of truth in formulating his philosophy is primarily concerned with morality and social relations.

Absolute Truth

Absolute Truth is characterized by its fixed and unalterable nature. For Gandhi, Absolute Truth (hereafter Truth) is the only fundamental truth. He uses the term interchangeably with God and maintains “beyond truths there is one absolute Truth which is total and all embracing. But it is indescribable because it is God. Or say, rather, God is Truth”. He later updated this idea, arguing “... it is more correct to say that Truth is God than to say that God is Truth”. ‘Truth’ understood as ‘God’ is in some ways a pragmatic word choice for Gandhi. This pragmatism comes from the need to effectively communicate in a language that is understood by the many. His faith and devotion to his religion, together with the religions he studied, informed his interpretation of Truth to an overwhelming degree.

Gandhi went so far to insist “I can live only by having faith in God. My definition of God must always be kept in mind. For me there is no other God than Truth; Truth is God”. As a term, then, God becomes an embodiment of the idea of Truth. If God is accepted as an external force or agent, with an omniscient role in the entire cosmos, the use of the title is effective. If, however, God is understood in a physical form or even as the divine creator of destinies, the descriptor does not capture that which Gandhi is attempting to illustrate.

Yet God is not the only characteristic Gandhi assigns to Truth. He also equates Love to Truth. That is to say, in describing Love, Gandhi combines the working definitions of love with the negative and positive elements of *ahimsa* insofar as integration of the responsibility of self and communal realisation is necessary for the realisation of Truth. Love for the self is as significant as love for the other and for the community as a whole. Indeed the realisation of Truth demands the realisation of all three entities. Gandhi’s choice of the term “love” is interesting because of its intensity. Rather than discussing, care or responsibility, which are open to interpretation of scope and passion, love denotes a very particular, albeit indefinite, depth and zeal that incorporates near extreme elements of care and responsibility.

Truth as Love underscores the all- embracing nature of Absolute Truth. Hence, Gandhi does not define Truth. The terms God and Love are too broad to be seen as “defining” terms. In part Gandhi uses these terms to ensure there are no boundaries to Truth. That is he does not consign limits to Truth, and therefore he does not claim to have discovered a universal absolute. As a result, Gandhi further argues that Truth can never be realized. At the same time, Gandhi has provided us with the qualities of Truth and, therefore, a path for its achievement. Given Gandhi’s belief in the Indian conception of *moksha*, the spiritual release as the supreme end of life, and in the relationship of Truth to God, the realisation of Truth is a significant piece of Gandhi’s puzzle. He supports the claim that Truth is unattainable partially through his religious beliefs. Because Gandhi insists that there cannot be a complete transcendence of desires and pleasures as long as we are in our physical form, it becomes impossible to understand Truth completely. The limitations of the physical form denote the importance of *moksha*. Gandhi insists that a person comes closer to Truth as s/he controls her/his passions. Yet the limitations of the physical form deny a person complete transcendence from violence. While confined to our physical form and living in the elements of existence it is impossible for us to know Truth fully. The implication of the unattainability of Truth is that *ahimsa* also becomes impossible to practice in its entirety, as complete transcendence of desires and pleasures is impossible.

Hence, Gandhi establishes Truth as a guiding principle in our existence as it provides principles to spiritual, emotional and active elements of “this-worldly” life. Truth’s all- embracing nature is best articulated through an understanding of the use of Truth in Indian languages. “The word *satya* (truth) comes from *sat* which means “to be” or “to exist.” To live through Truth is “to be” or “to exist” in wholeness.

Relative Truth

The unattainability of Truth does not diminish its importance. Instead, Gandhi stresses the need for the use of relative truths to strive for Truth. Relative truths are those definitive ideas that provide guidance to our thoughts and actions, yet

are not static. They change and morph to provide guidance in versatile situations. These truths maintain as their guiding principle the idea of Absolute Truth and, therefore, *ahimsa*.

Relative truths are describable and definable. It is the relationship of relative truth to Absolute Truth that is at the core of Gandhi's argument. Relative truth becomes the form of truth that is attainable in the human condition or the temporal world. Truth characterized by God, Love, and *ahimsa* must be manifested through action in order to attain *moksha*. "He... who understands truth follows nothing but truth in thought, speech, and action, comes to know God and gains the seers vision of the past, present, and future." Gandhi insists that there is no part of our lives that Truth cannot guide. The discussion of Absolute Truth and relative truth can also be seen as a discussion of means and ends insofar as relative truth is the means and Absolute Truth is the end.

This logic however, confronts yet another form of dichotomy whereby a mean cannot be an end in itself. Gandhi insists that this is not the case. The relationship of means and ends in Gandhi's thought is most apparent through his insistence on characterizing Absolute Truth rather than defining it. His characterization is a means to the achievement of the end and an end in itself.

Hence, to make reference to means and ends as two distinct entities is somewhat incorrect. Truth understood solely as a means or as an end leaves the breadth of Gandhi's *ahimsa* at the surface. The benefit of acting through *ahimsa* is retained for oneself. The existence of a better society and the realisation of *moksha* are not engaged. That is to say, one's social responsibility is denied if Truth is treated as a means only. Truth understood as a means and an end implies that Truth is the means to defining relative truths and is also the ultimate end. Using the end as a guide for the means without diminishing its role as the ultimate end is the truest expression of *ahimsa*. As a means and an end, Truth engages the individual and the community insofar as it defines the individual and the community as a whole: it is that which allows one to see her/his community as an extension of her/himself.

Gandhi's uses the term truth both as means and ends conterminously. *Ahimsa* is the means and Truth is the end. *Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that is practically impossible to disentangle them. Means and ends work together in Gandhi's paradigm for the realisation of Truth. This truth while it is ontologically absolute, it is also relative seen from the epistemic angle. This notion of relative is no concession to relativism. It is relative rather in relation to our ability to access it.

Gandhi's ideas on Truth allow people to interpret moral principles in a way that preserves the individual and embodies an understanding of the individual as a member of the community. Accepting this as Gandhi's understanding of the individual, Gandhi's Truth allows the individual to find the "best reasons" for acting in moral situations. As a result of Gandhi's understanding of the individual as embedded in community, autonomy is value-laden whereby both individuals and the community have the goal of realizing Truth. It is not merely individual autonomy. The concept of autonomy must incorporate idea of communal autonomy as it relates to individual autonomy when making moral judgments. This nuanced version of autonomy, which includes a characteristic of social

responsibility, is not the only way in which Gandhi incorporates autonomy as a way of making moral judgments. As outlined above, Gandhi also ensures that individuals have the right to interpret, and act upon moral principles as they see fit. Truth without definition leaves itself without boundaries, open to inquiry, and encourages personal assessment. Even though Gandhi puts forth a notion of Truth that is to guide moral judgments, he does not confine the notion to how we must make judgments. Instead his notion of Truth seeks to provide a method for allowing his conception of the individual in a community, rather than an individual that stands alone, for determining his moral judgments. Gandhi's method of philosophical inquiry, namely praxis, inadvertently incorporates moral judgments. In fact, for Gandhi it is through actions in the public sphere that moral judgments manifest themselves. The deduction of moral judgments rests with an individual who is defined through her or his membership in the community, and underscores the social responsibility Gandhi's praxis demands.

Glyn Richards in *The Philosophy of Gandhi* correctly emphasizes Gandhi's metaphysical concept of Truth as key to understanding the theoretical and practical dimensions of his philosophy. His concept of Truth (*satya*) provides a rationale and coherence to his political theory and practice. Truth is an exploration and an adventure of engagement with the spiritual and moral and the political seen as a unity, the oneness of these was never in doubt for Gandhi. He frequently expressed his view of reality and of political truth in terms of the formulation "Truth is God" in his reflections on Truth; Gandhi expressed a personal preference for the Hindu impersonal formulations of the non-dualistic *Advaita Vedanta* with its view of the all-encompassing, spiritual Self as *Atman* and its identification of *Atman* with the impersonal absolute *Brahman*. Gandhi was also extremely flexible in his formulations of Truth, frequently referring to God, Rama, and many other personal and impersonal terms.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Reflect on the complexity of Gandhi's notion of Truth.

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2) What are the implications of the formulation 'Truth is God' ?

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2.3 CONCEPT OF GOD

Gandhi is an apostle of ahimsa. The basic principle of life is based on Truth. He says, "I often describe my religion as religion of truth. We are sparks of Truth. The sum total of sparks is indescribable as-yet-unknown Truth, which is God." The bearing of this religion on social life is or has to be seen in one's daily social contact. To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of our life. Realization of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in an identification with this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me, there is no escape from social service, there is no happiness on earth beyond or apart from it. Social service must be taken to include every department of life. In this scheme there is nothing low, nothing high. For all is one though we seem to be many.

God was the central fact of Gandhi's life. God was not a mere intellectual conception to him. "God to be God," he said, "must rule the heart and transform it." Gandhi's aspiration was to see God face to face. "To me God is Truth and Love, God is Ethics and morality. God is fearlessness. He is even the atheism of the atheist. He is a personal God to those who need His touch." When Gandhi successfully came out of the ordeal of his fast unto death in protest against the British Cabinet's award of separate electorates for untouchables, he wrote a note to the late Rev. C. F. Andrews at Cambridge, England. It ran thus: "Dearest Charlie, God is both indulgent and exacting."

God and Truth are convertible terms to Gandhi. The progress of his spiritual experience was a transition from "God is Truth" to "Truth is God." Denial of God we have known; denial of Truth we have not known, he said. He saw that the atheist and the skeptic in their passion for truth denied God. His ashram or hermitage was an abode for atheists and sceptics too. He said nobody has denied truth or can deny it, for "Truth is God." "Truth is God," he said and added: "I am being daily led nearer to It by constant prayer." Gandhi's spiritual experience cannot be limited by a formula.

For Gandhi, all religions have the same truth, or elements of the same truth. He called the creation of the world God's play or *maya*, but did not dismiss the world as an illusion or appearance. He did not believe that the world "is hopeless and cannot be saved." God is, to Gandhi, the all-pervasive Reality, immanent in man and in the world (but also transcendent). If God's creation hides Him it is for man to reveal Him or discover Him by his actions, by ahimsa or non-injury. "To find Truth as God, the only means is ahimsa." God is not "was" but "is." He distinguished between "the God of history" and "the God of life" or "the living God." He said to the missionaries: "do not then preach the God of history, but show Him as He lives today through you." This would, of course, apply to everybody who goes by mere tradition or history. Gandhi called his religion the Religion of Truth. This is the same as ahimsa or non-violence. "The bearing of this religion," he said, "is, or has to be seen, in one's daily social contact. To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life."

Gandhi says, 'God is life, He is the Supreme Good. God is truth and love', God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life, and yet He is above and beyond all these. He is the most exciting personage in the world. Truth and

Harmlessness constitute the essence of God. “God is that indefinable something which we all feel but which we do not know.” “There is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen power that makes itself felt and yet defies proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends reason. But it is possible to reason out the existence of God to a limited extent.” “I do not regard God as a person. Truth for me is God and God’s Law and God are not different things. God is Law Himself. Therefore, it is impossible to conceive God as breaking the Law. He and His Law abide everywhere and govern everything.”

He declares, “I do perceive that, whilst everything around me is ever-changing and ever-dying, there is underlying all that change, a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and re-creates. That informing Power or Spirit is God.” God is Truth-Knowledge-Bliss (*sat-chit-ananda*). The word ‘*Satya*’ (truth) is derived from “*Sat*’ which means being. And nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. And where there is truth, there also is knowledge, pure knowledge. And where there is true knowledge, there is always bliss.

Gandhi looks upon God as an impersonal, omnipresent power or Spirit that pervades the Universe; and that is immanent in the human soul. He is Truth, Love and Bliss. He can neither be perceived nor grasped by the intellect., but He can be felt. He can be imperfectly grasped by the intuition which is direct realization. God is Truth and Love. He can be known only through love or non-violence. Means and ends are inseparable. They are convertible terms. God is the end. Therefore He can be known through truth and love or non-violence. “Truth is God. When you want to find Truth as God the only inevitable means Love, i.e., non-violence, and ultimately means and ends are convertible terms.” God-realization is the Supreme end according to Gandhi. He says, “I believe in absolute oneness of God and therefore of humanity. Though we have many bodies we have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction. But they have the same source.” “I believe in *Advaita*. I believe in the essential unity of a man and for that matter of all lives.” There is unity of life in all lives. There is unity of Spirit in all mankind. Man’s ultimate aim is the realization of God and all his activities, social, political, religious have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. Gandhi says, “The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavor, simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can be done by the service of all. I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from humanity. My creed is service of God and therefore of humanity.”

God-realization is the Highest Good. It can be attained through the realization of oneness of life or Spirit of all mankind and sentient creation. God can be realized through service of all mankind. Love and Ahimsa are the only means of God-realization. Purity is essential for realization of God. Gandhi says, “To see the universal and all pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. Identification with everything that lives is impossible without self-purification. God can never be realized by one who is not pure in heart.” Perfect self-control depends upon God’s grace. Absolute self-surrender to God is necessary for complete self-control including sex-restraint. Jesus Christ says, “Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. Thou shall love thy neighbour as thyself.”

2.4 CRITICAL VIEW

Gandhi is not an academic philosopher. So he has not evolved a system of metaphysics on the firm foundation of philosophical reflection. There are elements of intuitionism, rationalism or asceticism, and eudaemonism in his metaphysical doctrine, which are not reduced to a coherent unity. But still his voice is that of a prophet in this age of darkness. He is a great religious and moral reformer and political leader. He is a major contributor to the achievement of India's freedom from the British rule. He is fittingly called Father of the Indian nation. He is a great humanist. Gandhi holds that man has the freedom of the will. He can choose between right and wrong. God has given a man freedom. Conscience is the voice of God in man. It intuitively apprehends Rightness wrongness of particular actions. In complex situations God reveals the Truth to us through the intuition of conscience. This is the element of Intuitionism.

Gandhi offers almost an ascetic doctrine of human life. Suppression of instincts and desires and living the life of pure reason constitute the moral life. Our wants should be reduced; our desires should be suppressed: pleasure should be shunned; perfect equanimity and stoical indifference to pleasure and pain should be cultivated. The life of fearless and uncompromising pursuit of Truth, regardless of consequences, is the highest ideal. Sex instinct should not be gratified except for procreation; it is an evil, and as such, should be eradicated. Violence or injury to others should be eschewed altogether. All these show that Gandhi's metaphysical doctrine contains elements of asceticism, rigourism, rationalism or moral purism, anti suffers from its defects.

Gandhi believes in the existence of God. God is the Supreme Good, Truth and Love. He is the moral governor. Finite spirits are sparks of infinite Truth or God. They can realize Truth of perfection by social service-by identifying themselves with the whole creation-mankind and sentient creation and realizing the oneness of life. Ahimsa or nonviolence in thought, word and deed, is the means to the realization of Truth. Ahimsa is love and good will and active service. The world is rational constituted. It is the sphere of spiritual and moral life, and not dead to values. This is the element of metaphysical eudaemonism in Gandhi's doctrine.

Truth and Ahimsa are the keystones of Gandhi's philosophy. Truth is God. Ahimsa is love. God is Love. Realization of Truth means realization of God. It is possible only through Ahimsa, non-violence or love. God can be realized through love and service of humanity. He makes too much of truth. He says, "God is Truth." But it is more correct to say, according to him, that "Truth is God". He does not clearly explain the meaning of the Infinite. Truth is the supreme good. His metaphysical doctrine is vague as to the nature and content of the Supreme Good. However, he should be credited for "de-theologizing" truth. This means the truth as Gandhi sees is not appropriable by any religious denomination. It can be pointed out here that if Gandhi were to say, as he did earlier, that God is truth, then truth becomes denominational. It would then be easy to see truth as associated with the Semitic or the *Vedantic* or whatever else we have view of God. Each believer can see truth as one with his God. The de-theologized view of God is of quite some significance in the age we are living when all types of fundamentalist fanaticism are playing havoc with the fate of human kind. In the context of India, this view of God is farthest from that of *Hindutva*, the Indian version of religious fascism. Therefore Gandhi can say that *Iswar*, *Allah* are thy names. This is no

figurative expression for Gandhi as most people seem to think. It can be suggested that there is deeper truth to it. The expression has an ontological status for Gandhi and therein lies its significance.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) In Gandhian framework, what are the salient features of God?

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2) What critical issues can be raised with regard to Gandhi’s Metaphysics?

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2.5 LET US SUM UP

Gandhi’s writings have an implicit theoretically well-grounded ontology, an ontology that is constituted by a conceptual structure of existence covering both the human and the cosmic. This in fact gives a clue to answer or understand everything Gandhi talks about; truth, reality, god, good, love, and so on. In the modern west, the affirmation of existence is always only cognitive and knowledge is also always rational. Given the prevalence of this view, anything that departs from this discursive norm tends to be treated as philosophically suspect. Much of philosophical knowledge arises in Gandhi through the immediacy of “experiment”, experience and vision, which may not be “rational” in the Cartesian sense, a notion of reason in the way of scientific procedures. In Gandhian world-view everything is seen as interconnected. The relation of human reality with the cosmic reality is where, for Gandhi, metaphysics enters. Metaphysics is in this sense an orienting of the self in a particular way to this reality. That is how God can be equated with Truth and Truth with goodness and the moral requirements flow from this.

2.6 KEY WORDS

- Truth** : is not just an epistemic or theoretical-semantic issue as it is for the dominant modern western tradition but a multi-dimensional concept;
- Truth is God** : it de-theologizes Truth from the grip of religion and includes atheists also.

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