Gandhianism in London: Bringing the past to bear on the present in discussion of the social work and spirituality of Muriel and Doris Lester

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**Introduction**

“The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.” (Hartley, 1953 p.1)

The first line of L.P. Hartley’s novel *The Go Between* strikes a plaintive note, as if the motivations and perspectives of the people of the past are inaccessible and beyond our understanding. This article will challenge that perspective. It will take a set of ideas associated with the spirituality of Gandhian social work that might be thought to be consigned to the past, illustrate them by reference to the lives of two particular and now long dead women, and demonstrate their relevance and utility for contemporary practice.

In recent years religion and spirituality have become a lively topic of debate in the social work academy, with particular focus on the different meanings of each. Put simply, spirituality may be broadly defined as: “what we do to give expression to our world view” (Moss, 2005, p.13) and Moss goes on to note that that world views may be religious or not. Religion is viewed usually in pragmatic terms (Furness and Gilligan, 2010, p.3) with religious people demonstrating their allegiance to a world faith through their behaviour. Henery (2003) discussed what he called the religion/spirituality binary (with religion associated with institutions and therefore seen as bad – and spirituality associated with the personal life and therefore seen as good). This position was critiqued by Wong and Vinsky (2009). However, these discussions and debates also lack at least two attributes - a sense of historical perspective and of individual and personal narratives. This article will take Gandhi’s conceptualisations of spirituality, some of which cross over or cross fertilize between different religious belief systems, and consider them in relation to two particular Christians. In the language of the debates that have preceded it then, the article is concerned with the personal or spirituality broadly rather than with particular religious beliefs or institutions.

In social work, academic debates are rarely informed by an understanding or appreciation of the profession from the past with some honourable exceptions such as Parton, 2008 and Webb, 2007. History generally fails to make it into social work text books, or at least fails to make it beyond the simplistic summaries of the first few pages (again with a few exceptions such as Pierson 2011, Payne, 2005). These summaries boil down to two main narratives or stories that are told about social work - in Britain at least – of the decline of philanthropy in the late 19th century and the rise of the welfare state from the mid 20th century (Younghusband, 1979, ). The extent to which religion and spirituality come up in these narratives is usually via the connection between philanthropy and Evangelical Christianity (Bowpitt, 1998) and between secularism and the rise of the state (Payne, 2005). This is, of course, far from the full picture. The first half of the 20th century is rather forgotten in these accounts. The welfare state stuttered and failed to start for almost 50 years but in this period several generations of social workers still came and went. It was a period marred by poverty and war and the times shaped any social work that was carried out. This article will seek to enhance contemporary discussions of social work and spirituality by drilling down into the lives of two social workers from this transitional period, taking a biographical approach to social work history.

In 1931 Mahatma Gandhi came to London to negotiate on behalf of the Indian Congress Party at the Roundtable conference on the future of India. During this visit he stayed with the his friend and colleague Muriel Lester and her sister Doris at a settlement or social work centre, Kingsley Hall, that they ran in Bow in the East End of London. Gandhi stayed in a room or cell at Kingsley Hall throughout this visit and his presence there can be seen as an endorsement of the work of the Lesters and as a conscious choice by Gandhi to associate himself with the poorest people in the city. The work of Kingsley Hall in London continues today and it maintains its connection with Gandhi and Gandhian ideals ([www.gandhian.foundation.com](http://www.gandhian.foundation.com)). Muriel Lester was by far the most renowned, indeed in some circles notorious of the two, and the article will focus on her; but Doris’s quiet work will also be shown to be entirely consistent with a Gandhian conception of social work.

This article will situate discussion within a brief literature review of Gandhian social work, and then move on to examine in more detail some of its central ideas - religious syncretism, pacifism and voluntary poverty amongst others. These ideas clearly originated in Gandhi’s fight against imperial rule in South Africa and in India. But the focus here is not on origins but on considering the transferability of Gandhi’s ideas to UK social work contexts, through historical examination of the work of the Lesters in London. Throughout, and in conclusion, the discussion will draw out meanings and suggest the significance of such Gandhian social work for contemporary practice, thereby connecting the past with the present.

**Gandhian social work**

Gandhi himself resisted definitions of his work and placed more emphasis on deeds. “I do not know myself who is a Gandhian. Gandhism is a meaningless word for me. An ism follows a propounder of a system. I am not one...” (Gandhi in Letter to Nehru 7th June 1946 in Brown ed. 2008, p 20.) In the same spirit, this paper resists starting with an a priori definition of Gandhian social work. Instead, through drawing on some key Gandhian ideas and tracing their enactment through the work of two key practitioners in London, it aims to arrive at a depiction of what Gandhian social work can mean in this context.

**Literature Review**

There is a dearth of recent research literature on Gandhi and social work. Canda (2005) predicted that Gandhian social work would be an important concept for the advance of spirituality in social work, but in fact little has been written as yet. There are few substantive articles on Gandhi to be found in the major social work journals, the most recent being Singh et. Al. (2011), Narayan (2000) and Walz and Ritchie (2000), along with Westoby and Ingamells (2012) where Gandhianism is discussed only in passing. This suggests that Gandhi and social work is not a popular topic in western academic social work circles. Even in India itself, there seems to be some debate about the popularity of Gandhi’s ideas. Singh et. al. write::

“One would be hard pressed to find the remaining few references to Gandhi in the current NGO world in India (Singh et. al., 2011, p.867)

In fact, however, there is some ongoing interest and some texts that have been published on Gandhian social work in recent years including Gangrade (2010) and Joshi (2009).

Narayan presents Gandhi as an educationalist and as a political figure and Walz and Ritchie focus on his thinking in relation to social work ethics. What both articles have in common, however, is that they use some of Gandhi’s key concepts such as *Ahimsa, Satyāgraha,* and *Swadesh.* Narayan (2000) provides simple translations of some of these terms. But in fact none of these expressions may be unproblematically translated, and one of the problems in applying Gandhian principles to social work, is that some of the language - sometimes in Sanskrit and sometimes words that Gandhi himself made up - can be rather impenetrable. They will repay further consideration here, with regard to social work and spirituality. In particular, their meaning and spiritual significance will be drawn out using concrete examples from the lives of the Lesters. The concepts are seen being operationalised in the work of the Lesters in London. The contribution of the article is it takes some of the ideas discussed by other social work authors and it considers how they were applied in other contexts and in other lives. This is what is meant by taking a biographical approach to history. This article draws both on Gandhi’s original writings (Brown, 2008) and on - Chatterjee (1983), recognised by Parekh (1997, p.133) to be the standard text on Gandhi’s religious thought. Recently, as a result of the ongoing work of Kingsley Hall, an online archive ([www.muriellester.com](http://www.muriellester.com)) has been made available to researchers. Material on the Lesters has been drawn both from that archive, and from the Muriel Lester Reader (Deats, 1991).

**Ahimsa**

*Ahimsa*, according to Narayan (2000, p.195), means ‘non-violence’. But this is not enough. As Parekh (1997) explains, Ahimsa is not a passive but a proactive, spiritually elevated expression of non-violence, of the sort enacted by both Gandhi and arguably by Lester, as fighters for peace. The non-violence of practitioners has not been explicitly considered, and neither has non-violence as a spiritual perspective. How does a social worker incorporate non-violence into their practice? How do they go about being non-violent as a social worker? Muriel Lester’s work, and her response to the wars of her time, provides one sort of exemplar, and it also sheds light on some of the complexity of what may be characterised as *Ahimsa*, with commonality as well as contrasts between Lester’s response to the war and that of Gandhi himself.

Gandhi arrived in London just after the start of the First World War and stayed just a few months. While there he recruited and formed a Volunteer Ambulance Corps. He had done this before in the Boer War and was decried in some quarters as a recruiting sergeant for the British. For those who know Gandhi as a great pacifist, it is somewhat strange to consider that at points in his life he was a tacit supporter of the British empire and their armed forces. Gandhi’s response was that one must love the Empire first and change it later and he certainly at this time saw it as politically astute to align himself with the British. There were however other more radical pacifist responses to the war, Muriel Lester’s notable amongst them.

Muriel Lester was the daughter of a rich industrialist. She and her sister were privately educated. Lester had the opportunity to go to university but chose instead to involve herself in social work in the East End of London. Her sister Doris did likewise. For a number of years though Lester led a strange double life –spending the summers in Bow and the winters with her privileged family on the French Riviera. It was not until she was 28 that she moved to Bow permanently. When their brother Kingsley died prematurely he left the sisters his wealth which they chose to spend on their work – hence Kingsley Hall. It was here that they forged a form of social work that closely connected to the community and the local population but also directly engaged in wider matters and in a time of war, this meant non-violent resistance.

By the time of the First World War Lester had read Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You* which converted her to an absolutist form of pacifism from which she never wavered. This pacifism also moulded her social work activities in great part. Lester spent the First World War fighting to end the Royal Navy blockade of Northern Europe so that children could be fed, supporting ethnic German families living in London who were subject to persecution (such as happened after the U-boat sinking of the ship *The Lusitania*) and visiting conscientious objectors in prison. Lester was also, in December 1914, the co-founder of the Fellowship of Reconciliation with the German clergyman Friedrich Schultze which worked to maintain fellowship between British and German Christians, usually pacifists, despite the conflict. Lester was a particularly belligerent, combative type of pacifist. She went out of her way to make trouble if it would help her cause. She also had a sense, like Gandhi, of what might stir people up or might light the blue touch paper of debate. In wartime, for example, she campaigned against the use of the Lord’s Prayer. For so many people this prayer is part of a common linguistic experience of faith and so provides reassurance. Lester objected to praying with the phrase “Our Father” if that amounted to a claim that God was ours and not theirs (the enemy’s). Similarly, in the Second World War when so many former pacifists had come to the view that so evil an enemy as Nazism must be opposed with force, Lester held the Gandhian and arguably Christian view that a response to violence was to do with oneself and did not depend on the morality of the enemy. She encapsulated this position in the slogan “*No moratorium on the Sermon on the Mount*”[[1]](#endnote-1). For taking this stand she was interned and subsequently spent some months in Royal Holloway prison.

The term *Ahimsa* has sometimes been incorrectly associated in Gandhian thinking with the idea of passive resistance but as has been made clear it is not a word that indicates passivity and likewise there was clearly nothing passive about Lester’s resistance to injustice. In terms of the consequences of such thinking for contemporary practice it is important to see the possible link between activism and social work practice and to see that pacifist ideology need not be vague or weak.

**Satyāgraha**

One of the most difficult of Gandhian terms to grasp is the term *Satyāgraha.* Its complexity means that I will cover some aspects of the nature of it in this discussion. It iscommonly interpreted as ‘soul-force’ (Parekh, 1997, p. 119)). Parekh usefully expands on this definition using the language of religious syncretism. He claims that *Satyāgraha* brings together:

*“…*Hindu and Christian traditions but has never been a part of either. It is basically composed of three important ideas, namely the spiritual nature of human beings, the power of suffering love, and the skilful use of the latter to reach out and to activate the moral energies of others. The first metaphysical belief is common to both Hinduism and Christianity and indeed to all other religions; the ontology of suffering love is unique to Christianity and Gandhi himself said he borrowed it from the latter: the idea that the soul is energy, that two souls can communicate by non lingual means, and that they can influence and activate each other is an important part of Hindu epistemology…Since by and large Christianity lacks the third, and Hinduism the second element, one needed to be deeply familiar with both traditions in order to arrive at anything resembling the Gandhian concept of Satyāgraha” (Parekh, 1997, p.119)

Gandhi’s religious syncretism can be traced back to his first time in London as a young law student in the late 1880s. It was here that he was introduced to the Hindu scripture the *Bhagavad Gita* by members of the London Theosophical Society. As Chatterjee explains:

“In London, Gandhi was exposed to many influences which left their mark on him in later life, vegetarianism, free-thinking (the two were often conjoined), and a homespun brand of genuine piety …At the same time, he encountered the teaching of the Lord Buddha and found much in common between the spirit of renunciation and compassion expressed in the lives of both Lord Buddha and Christ.” (1983, p. 41)

In Lester’s case, by contrast, there was no suggestion of religious syncretism. She spent some considerable time in India but there was no possibility of her converting to another faith; her Christianity was straightforward and unflinching. Nevertheless it is possible to trace an outworking of an idea such as *Satyāgraha* in the detail of her political and social work. As Chairman of Maternity and Child Welfare Committee for the borough of Poplar, between 1921 and 1924, she combated sewage flooding, rat infestations and most notably fought the government over their proposed cuts to free milk to children. She describes appearing before a government committee:

“Can you tell us why” inquired the suave voice “when every other local authority throughout the country has accepted the unfortunate necessity of curtailing expenditure on maternity and child welfare, you alone have refused?” “I think I can,” I answered in mild tones. “It’s because ours is the only Maternity and Child Welfare committee composed wholly of people who live in the same streets and alleys as the children. We can see them every day. We should have to watch them growing pale and thin and weak if the milk grant were to be lowered.” (Deats, 1991 p. 82)

For purposes of this analysis, this encounter might well be viewed as a *Satyāgraha* moment.One can almost perceive the transfer of energy between the individuals involved. Needless to say within a few days the local borough had their funding for milk restored. Though, having won this battle locally, Lester did not go on to take up the cause of “milk”[[2]](#endnote-2) or children’s rights more broadly as a national campaign, she did proceed with other national campaigns, discussed below. For present purposes, the idea of *Satyāgraha* is clearly an important one for social work, and one that has resonance for contemporary practice. It captures what goes on in interpersonal relationships in a way that has resonance with ideas more familiar from other disciplines – for example the flow of affect or emotion in psychodynamic practice. But, *Satyāgraha* has in addition a campaigning element to it that is found nowhere else. Moreover, the broad idea that religious or spiritual concepts can be combined for powerful effect in social work has not been recognised in contemporary discussions about what does or does not constitute spirituality or religion and which particular faith traditions may have influence in social work practice.

**Bramacharya**

The concept of the transfer of energy is also relevant to another Gandhian concept –*Bramacharya*, also perhaps germane to understanding the experience of contemporary social workers. One of the most controversial Gandhian ideas, *Bramacharya*, covers Gandhi’s views on cleanliness and sex. Gandhi at one point in his life chose not to engage in sexual activity and redirected his sexual/spiritual energy into his political and social campaigning*.* Lester similarly viewed sex as a problem (Deats, 1991 p.94) or as an outlet for energy that could better be used productively elsewhere. However it is the idea of restraint and the redirection of energy, rather than its direct application to sexuality, that is more broadly relevant for social work.. Social workers are those who must be in control, not least, of themselves. Both Gandhi and Lester would have approved of the elevation of the virtue of self-restraint in social work. But there are implications for the identity of others in such elevation. Such restrained individuals work with those who are, by implication and by comparison, profligate, lacking in restraint or self-control, or who suffer from living lives of excess. The modern day service user and carer movement would obviously object to such a crude characterisation. So it is worth simply pointing out that any emphasis on self-control in the social worker can lead on to problematic conceptions of social work.

**Material Simplicity**

“I came to believe in the necessity of voluntary poverty for any social worker or for any political workers who wanted to remain untouched by the hideous immorality and untruth that one smells today in ordinary politics.” (Gandhi, Speech at Guildhouse Church, London, 23rd September 1931 in Brown (ed.) 2008, p. 78)

That Gandhi lived in a “cell” when he came to stay with the Lesters at Kingsley Hall was a political statement on his part but it also gives some clue to the rigour and dedication of the lives of these people. In 1921 Muriel Lester was one of the founders of the *Brethren of the Common Table*, a small group committed to following the Bible verses:

“And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them all, as any had need.” (Acts, ch.2 v44-45, Revised Standard Version.)

Muriel Lester had a private income of £400 a year which she gave to the common purse and the group would meet once a month to go through their personal expenses. So when Gandhi came to stay at his “cell” at Kingsley Hall, he was living as were the others there already; there would have been little for him to teach them of material simplicity. The connection between this and spirituality in social work is that surplus possessions can be a barrier and work can be better done if there is not an obvious material disparity between the worker than those they are working with. There is, it is suggested, a more direct connection between people who are without material encumbrances.

**Swadesh**

*Swadesh* is defined by Narayan (2000, p. 202) as self sufficiency, particularly in regard to indigenously made goods. Gandhi used the symbol of the hand-held spinning wheel, or *takli*, to encapsulate this idea; he wanted the Indian flag to feature this symbol. Indeed, one of his campaigns was against English-made imported clothes - he wanted Indians to make Indian clothes. His own simple robes, made by himself, also symbolised this stance. Unsurprisingly perhaps, he is sometimes taken to have been anti- industrial and agrarian, even Luddite, in his views. Certainly he wanted work to be done and life to be lived as locally as possible and he saw this as a spiritual as well as a political position.

The same concept of *Swadesh* is embodied less perhaps in the work of Muriel, but profoundly in the work of Doris Lester. It is difficult to characterise Muriel Lester’s later career as that of a social worker or even of someone tied in any sense to a particular place. Rather she became a world campaigner for peace. She became International Travelling Secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation; she worked in India with and for Gandhi; she worked in Japan after the Second World War urging reconciliation; and in South Africa to confront the apartheid authorities there (see Oldfield, 2006 p.133-136). But all the while Doris stayed at Kingsley Hall, working with the local community in Bow. The Muriel Lester archive contains numerous annual reports giving details of the in depth the work of Kingsley Hall. This was Doris’s work, and throughout her writing Muriel conveys the sense that, for all her own high profile travels and her battles, she knew the real work was being done by her sister in Bow. Echoing this, oral histories of local people contained in the archive speak of the respect that they had for Muriel, but of their love for Doris. So arguably it is in Doris’s commitment to doing her work in one locale and for the benefit of that one community that the idea of *Swadesh* is best expressed. A modern day successor to Doris Lester’s social work demonstrated by their ongoing presence in one community would be Bob Holman and his work with *Fare* in Glasgow (see Cree, 2003). Interestingly, Holman is motivated by a similar kind of iconoclastic Christianity to that of the Lesters and from this position he argues strongly for such community-based activity continuing to be seen as one manifestation of social work.

**Materiality and Sacramentality**

One further concept is also key to examining the significance of Gandhian spirituality for social work; this is Gandhi’s view of the material world.

One strand of contemporary spirituality in social work is so-called ‘*New Age’* spirituality. As Houtman and Aupers (2010, p.211) note, this form of spirituality can be traced back to ancient Gnostic ideas. In Gnosticism the material world was evil and the spiritual realm separate and therefore pure. Such thinking would be entirely anathema, both for Gandhi and for Muriel Lester. For them the material is the spiritual. As Chatterjee explains (1983, p.5), in Indian society there is no clear distinction between the sacred and the profane, expanding:

Gandhi’s “spiritual exercises” are a strange medley of practice which include cleaning latrines, giving enemas to sick children, listening to the woes of endless streams of visitors, spending time on voluminous correspondence with all manners of people, quacks, genuine seekers, indignant objectors, friends on the same wavelength as himself, and those whom he describes as ‘the tallest in the land’” (1983, p.13).

The description is powerful because it takes the normally elevated phrase “spiritual exercises” and shows how Gandhi placed them in the ordinary and the everyday. Lester, with her frequent visits to India, may well have imbibed some of this spirit. She was a follower or a disciple of Gandhi in part because she too saw the spiritual in practical activities. This aspect of her approach can perhaps best be seen in a campaign that she ran for the ordination of women to the Christian priesthood. She not only wrote an influential pamphlet on the subject, but also lived out her ideas – becoming, in the eyes of her own community, a priest:

“Very soon I found I had to christen my neighbours’ babies, for it was irrefutably true that they and I were wholly at one in our interest and our reverence for child life….I could not withstand the simple logic of their appeal, “Can you christen the baby next Sunday? I could not refuse.” (Deats, 1991, p.62)

Lester’s brave stand here, against the male dominance in leadership of the churches of the time, should not be underestimated, and once again in relations to Baptism, a sacrament in church, she met the matter head on. Stanley Hauerwas, a contemporary Christian theologian, refers to the sacraments as the social work of the church (2005, p.384). Lester would have concurred. But in true Gandhian tradition, she would have argued more strongly for the opposite: that social work itself is sacramental, and that the mundanity of social work makes it no less, perhaps even more, a sacred activity.

**Conclusion**

This article has used biography to illuminate and reinvigorate contemporary discussions on social work. The forgotten but still important value of the past to the present is a key message of this article. It has shown that contemporary discussions of spirituality in social work can be enriched by narratives that bring out how the complicated relationship between faith and practice has been worked out across the generations.

What were the ways in which the Lesters were Gandhian social workers and how can a contemporary practitioner seek to follow their example? They lived simple lives in the midst of the people they were working with and tried to work on a local level (*Swadesh*). Doris in particular did this. The social worker who chooses not to live in the community in which they work should at least face up to why they have made that choice. The Lesters lived lives of restraint *(*linked to *Bramacharya)* and the contemporary practitioner will understand the link between their own lifestyle and their work. The Lesters sought to combine activism with political campaigning and social work. They were much less successful than Gandhi in this regard but their aspirations, in terms of holding a moral mirror up to authority (*Satyāgraha*) were the same. The contemporary social worker who wishes to follow Muriel Lester will have to choose which battles to fight (*Ahimsa)* but they will also know that for them the fighting will be an expression of their spirituality.

Notes

1. Jesus’ pacifist sermon (Matthew chapter 5 -8) in which he urges his followers to “turn the other cheek” and walk the “extra mile” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gandhi also knew that the symbolic power of simple commodities could be used to encapsulate inequality. He based his campaign in the 1930s against the power of the Raj on “salt”. In this he was, of course, far more ambitious than Lester.

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   [www.gandhian.foundation.com](http://www.gandhian.foundation.com)

   www.muriellester.com [↑](#endnote-ref-2)