

Innovations

Philosophy, Religion and Ethics on Gandhian Perspective

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Abstract

Truth is the exclusive property of no single scripture. We may call ourselves Christians, Hindus or Mohammedans. Whatever we may be, beneath that diversity there is oneness which is unmistakable and underneath many religions there is also one religion.”He strongly came to believe that there is no religion higher than truth and true religion is nothing but truth. Theosophy was the foundation of Gandhi’s religious views. To Gandhi God is Truth and Truth is God. This belief motivated his Satyagraha campaigns and his use of the weapons of truth, love and nonviolence to win self-government for India. He strongly believed that no one is competent to offer Satyagraha unless he has a living faith in God. It was this quest for God that determined Gandhi’s every action. Religion is not an ‘ism’ and it is not merely intellectual knowledge or belief in any set of doctrines. It is an innate attribute of soul. It enables human beings to define human duties in life. Religion was basic to Gandhi’s life, thought and action. All his activities from spiritual to mundane including politics were governed by the spirit of religion. Gandhi revolutionized the very notion of religion.

Key Words: 1. Theosophy, 2. religion, 3. democratic, 4. communities, 5. discrimination

Introduction: Theosophy was the foundation of Gandhi’s religious views. To Gandhi God is Truth and Truth is God. This belief motivated his Satyagraha campaigns and his use of the weapons of truth, love and nonviolence to win self-government for India. He strongly

believed that no one is competent to offer Satyagraha unless he has a living faith in God. It was this quest for God that determined Gandhi's every action. Religion is not an 'ism' and it is not merely intellectual knowledge or belief in any set of doctrines. It is an innate attribute of soul. It enables human beings to define human duties in life. Religion was basic to Gandhi's life, thought and action. All his activities from spiritual to mundane including politics were governed by the spirit of religion. Gandhi revolutionized the very notion of religion. He underscored the ethical side of religion free from all kinds of creedal rites and rituals. Religion, morality and ethics, for him, are closely interwovenⁱⁱⁱ. Gandhi's approach to religion, reflected in his idea of Sarva Dharma Sambhava (Equal respect for all religions). This was one of the vows prescribed for every inmate of his ashram and this idea of religion is above and beyond secularism and multiculturalism. As pointed out by MrinalMiri, in his book Identity and the Moral life, the liberal position on the problem of secularism is essentially related to tolerance of different religions which virtually amounts to a kind of indifference. But Gandhi's Sarva Dharma Sambhava is based on the premise that the truth underlying all religions is one and the same though the pathways may be different. Therefore, Miri asserts, Gandhi's vision could lead to a state of international fellowship of all religions.

Mohandas Gandhi, affectionately known as Mahatma who led India's independence movement with stirring speeches and non-violent protests is named among the 20th century's most important figures. He is highly revered in India as the father of the nation. The spiritual and religious foundations in Gandhi's life were laid very early in his life. He was born into a Hindu family in 1869, and remained a devout Hindu throughout his life. Although raised in a Hindu family, he lived in a multicultural community. His initial religious influence came from his mother, who was very interested in Jainism. He was especially influenced by Jain religion's principle of total ahimsa, or nonviolence which shaped his political views later in life when fighting for Indian Independence.

When Gandhi traveled to England to study law, he met with Theosophical Society members, who encouraged him to look more closely at Hindu texts and especially the Bhagavad Gita, which he later described as a comfort to him. Gandhi himself said in the Story of My Experiments with Truth, "The verses in the second chapter made a deep impression on my mind, and they still ring in my ears. The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result of that I regard it today as the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth". He then developed a greater appreciation for Hinduism, and also began to look more closely at other religions, being particularly influenced by Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, and later by Leo Tolstoy.² After finishing his studies, Gandhi spent 20 years in South Africa working

for Indian civil rights. He also devoted himself to reading a variety of religious literature. During his initial years in South Africa, he read widely on spiritual subjects. Among his notable readings were Washington Irving's *Life of Mohammed and His Successors* and Carlyle's panegyric on the prophet. He also read *The Sayings of Zarathustra*. These studies stimulated his self-introspection. Leo Tolstoy's book *The Gospels in Brief, What to do?* It made a deep impression on him. He began to realize the infinite possibilities of universal love.^{iiiiv} When he returned to India, he established an ashram for his family and followers. This community did not follow any particular orthodoxy, but instead was based on mutual aid and the principle of nonviolence. He believed in a standard of conduct that was founded on dharma of truth and nonviolence. He successfully led nonviolent struggles against racial discrimination, colonial rule, economic and social exploitation and moral degradation. He is an iconic world figure who is considered as an apostle of peace and non-violence and followed by leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. who led Civil Rights movement in the United States of America. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Gandhi's religious views were shaped by the Theosophical Society. "It was through theosophy that Gandhi was induced to study his own heritage." Gandhi also wrote in his autobiography, "I recall having read, at the brothers' direction Madame Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy*. This book stimulated in me the desire to read books on Hinduism, and disabused me of the notion fostered by the missionaries that Hinduism was rife with superstition." He echoed the words and message of H.P. Blavatsky, when he said, "The soul of religions is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms. The latter will endure to the end of time. Wise men will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul living under a variety of crusts... Truth is the exclusive property of no single scripture. We may call ourselves Christians, Hindus or Mohammedans. Whatever we may be, beneath that diversity there is oneness which is unmistakable and underneath many religions there is also one religion." He strongly came to believe that there is no religion higher than truth and true religion is nothing but truth. In the contemporary India major portion of the human community is found to be dehumanized in various ways. The *hetuvaadi* people strongly argue in support of eradicating religions from the earth on the ground that the religions are responsible for such crisis or at least no way helpful for removing the crisis. Some significant intellectuals of the contemporary India, like Tagore, Vivekananda, Gandhi, etc. have become optimistic about the utility of religions by suggesting many reformations in the traditional understanding of the religions. .” Vivekananda has opted for universal religion and has prescribed two characteristics of universal religion. One is its ‘universality’ and the other is ‘acceptance’. And he also emphasized on the reasonable aspect of the religion. Tagore has emphasized on dharma instead of religion by saying that the former has moral base. It is true religion. Gandhi has

also suggested that a religion has to be there as 'a motivating force' to cultivate and promotes moral values. As it not possible to give up religion by all instead of suggesting to give up the religion if 'religious intolerance' can be substituted by 'acceptance' then the role of religion can be very constructive not only in India but in the entire globe.

The contemporary India is undergoing a period of value crisis where it becomes difficult to define 'man' in the traditional way by saying: "All men are rational." A major portion of the human community is found to be dehumanized in various ways. The section comprises people being rapists, terrorists, kidnappers, murderers, abusers, people involved in corruptions or cheatings, and sometimes unimaginable type of miscreants. In such alarming plight of Indian atmosphere it is important to examine the role of religion to see if those can come to the rescue in any manner or add fuel to the existing fire. It is obvious that the atheists would put emphasis on the non-utility aspect of the religions and for them whole episode is dogmatic and a threat to the peaceful atmosphere of the society. It is also seen that very often *hetuvaadi* people strongly argue in support of eradicating religions from the earth. They equally consider religious fundamentalism is responsible for communal riots and a hindrance to scientific developments. In this perspective it is important to examine the role of religions in the contemporary India. The aim and expectations of *hetuvaadis* and atheists is to see a religion-free world for the betterment of mankind and *hetuvaadis* are engaged themselves in this attempt of proving religions to be fully dogmatic and persuading common man to remain away from religions.

Sometimes the role of the religion comes to picture in the manner that man tries to refrain himself from becoming inhuman in fear of the divine punishment. It is because the fear for divine punishment normally develops with a religious bent of mind or from the faith on the supremacy of the divine power or the God. But this approach is not only considered to be dogmatic but also considered to be responsible for the growth of irrationality in man. But may be pointed out here the traditional view of religion and its role is not important or relevant in the present scenario of our country.

On the other hand, many significant intellectuals of the contemporary India, like Tagore, Vivekananda, Gandhi, etc. have become optimistic about the utility of religions by suggesting many reformations in the traditional understanding of the religions. In fact some also think in this manner that man has reached in such a stage where total giving up religion is impossible. It is because by giving up one platform a new platform will come up for these non-religious people bearing some name. In a country like India where secularism has been adopted constitutionally no religion can be banned here. So let us see what the problems are linked with the religions.

While thinking about the role of religion in India two important questions concerning it, namely a factual and an ethical, are found to be relevant to be taken up which are as follows:

- How are the religions functioning in the contemporary India? and
- How religions should function in the contemporary India?

Before trying to find out answer for the questions it would be worth mentioning that it is man who is following some religion. Why should it be presumed that the religion of man controls his humanitarian or inhuman aspect? Rather, either the rational or inhuman nature of man is reflected in human activities. Again, why should it be presumed that the religions make man dogmatic? Rather it is the lack proper knowledge on religions that induces man to hold the dogmatic aspect of a religion. So religion does not appear to be responsible for being dogmatic. The lack of proper knowledge is rather responsible. So there is the necessity to enhance our knowledge about religions.

Coming to the first question raised above it can be said that the functioning of the religion is obviously conditional to our understanding about the religion. If we find any unwanted consequences for which we held religions to be responsible then it is due to the lack of proper understanding about the religion. In one of my previous article I have pointed out that unlike the western trained in India religion (dharma) does not primarily based on the Super-natural authority. It is rather based on a principle which is clear in the two following definitions of dharma. Dharma has been defined by Jaimini as *Chodanaalaksanathodharmah* where the emphasis is given on the observation of certain principles and rights. The usual definition of dharma is given as: *Dhaaranad dharma ityaahuh*. This definition also refers to the sustenance of certain principles. So the general understanding of dharma is seen as securing the material and the spiritual sustenance. But majority of the people limit their understanding to the levels of its ritual aspects only.

It may be pointed out that Swamy Vivekananda, Nobel laureate Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi have talked about our misgivings regarding the proper understanding of 'religion'. All the three stalwart thinkers have tried to reconstruct the understating of dharma in India. Vivekananda says "... the old religion said that he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is an atheist who does not believe in himself." He has made a completely new approach in respect of the religion from which we can very well imagine the necessity of religion. Both Tagore and Vivekananda have considered the existing religions to be institutional religions. For them institutional religion attach more emphasis on rituals than other aspects. In this context Vivekananda has made it clear that every institutional religion has three aspects,

namely, mythology, ritual and philosophy. So far as the mythology and rituals are concerned there are differences among religions. What is important about a religion is its ideology or philosophy. With minor ideological there is a single motto, which is to be realized and achieved. He considers that man always wants to proceed from error to truth and from lesser truth to higher truths. Since every religion aims at higher truth, there should not be any narrow approach. For him "Religion is realizations, not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories." He has opted for universal religion which is of course not a new religion. For him every religion can be universal religion. He has prescribed two characteristics of universal religion. One is its 'universality' and the other is 'acceptance'. If the religion keeps its gate open for all then it is universal. His concept of 'acceptance' is higher than 'tolerance'. The acceptance includes respect for other religions. Further the religion should be capable of giving comfort and satisfaction to the individuals of other religious sects. The religion should appear reasonable in order to be treated to be universal. If the concept of religion is understood and practiced in this sense then it can guide humanity in much better manner.

Tagore has also distinguished between the institutional religions and true religions. He seems to have taken attempt to bring a synthesis among religions taking the universality accept of the religions. Tagore says that the religion should be understood in the sense of dharma that can make a man *dharmika*. The religion that cannot make a man *dharmika* (a pious being) is not fit become a religion. A *dharmika* is he who cannot keep himself isolate when others around him are in sufferings. Showing concern for others makes a man pious. He considers that virtues like love, sacrifice, sincerity, innocence makes religious, not the offerings of the prayer and devotion.

In the equal footing Gandhiji has said, "If I could call myself, say, a Christian or a Mussalman, with my own interpretation of the Bible or the Koran, I should not hesitate to call myself either. I do believe that in the other world there are neither Hindus, nor Christians nor Mussalmans. There all are judged not according to their labels or professions but according to their actions, irrespective of their professions." For him a religion has to be there as 'a motivating force' to cultivate and promotes moral values.

Now coming to the second question the answer is now very is to ascertain that the role of religion is less and the role of man is more. The religions should be value oriented and based on love. It is enough to guide the mankind. Man should realize the proper spirit of religion for his peaceful living. It would be unwise to think to give religion from the earth because it will be one fruitless attempt for the following reasons.

It has been presumed that the religious faith which has been built up in man and continuing for centuries having strong foot hold in human psyche can be removed

through an appeal to reason. But it may take several centuries to remove it and make man religion free through this attempt. If on any ground the religions are to be condemned then the most important one is religious intolerance. So instead of suggesting to giving up the religion if the 'religious intolerance' can be substituted by 'acceptance' (as suggested by Vivekananda) then the role of religion can be very constructive not only in India but in the entire globe.

Gandhi once said, "If I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate. I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it". Well versed in History, Gandhi was aware of religious battles that were fought in the name of religion in the pretext of unifying societies. History tells us how religious traits in politics have influenced rulers and governments to use faith as a weapon of subjugation, inequality, divisiveness and ultimately war. The evolution of governments from divine right kingship to modern day democracies didn't happen without bloodshed. It was not a peaceful transfer of power from one form government to the other. It took centuries of evolutionary process to give shape to modern day democracies. These democratic principles can only be preserved and upheld if faith is considered personal and not a tool for politics. According to Gandhi, religious tolerance gives us spiritual insight. True knowledge of religion breaks down barriers between Faiths and as a result between communities. The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of other religions. Gandhi's attitude towards religion was not of a patronizing toleration; rather it sought to develop the spirit of fellowship which helps a person to become a better human being. Sadly, we don't witness this tolerance in some population in the present day world across all religions which cause large scale violence and terrorism in the name of religion. Gandhi was an ardent advocate of religious freedom and strongly believed in '*Sarva Dharma Sambhava*' (equal respect for all religions). His notion of dharma is promulgated through the concept of oneness of all. 'Dharma' for him is one that is conducive to the integration of society. This notion binds people together. The scope of this article is to discuss Gandhi's views on religion, how his religious ideology is shaped, and its relevance to the present day world. Historical religious conflicts will be discussed as a backdrop for understanding the relevance of Gandhian views and the importance of religious harmony and peaceful coexistence.

Gandhi believed that the true knowledge of religions will break down barriers that existed between religious groups and would help us understand our own religion better. He encouraged his followers to undertake the study of scriptures of other religions apart from those of one's own. In the prayer meetings of the Ashram, Gandhi made it a practice to read a passage from scriptures from various religions to promote inter-religious

understanding. He used to read the New Testament of the Bible with the students of Gujarat Vidyapith. This stirred some public protest which prompted Gandhi to write in *Young India* an article titled "Crime of Reading Bible", which said, "I hold that it is the duty of every cultures man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religion is a sacred duty... I regard my study and reverence for Bible, the Koran and the other scriptures to be wholly consistent with my claim to be a staunch *sanatani* Hindu...

He declares his stand on religion in *Young India*, 1920, It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and whichever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself.

Although Gandhi was a devout Hindu; he was never in favor of theocratic government. He understood the danger of one religion dominating a country or world. He said in *Harijan*, if I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate. I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. It may be pertinent here to take a glimpse of the evolutionary process of human civilizations and how religion played a role in it. After the fall of the Roman Republic emerged the rise of the Roman Empire. Religion began to evolve in the Roman Empire and the spread of Christianity became a big part of Rome. Constantine I declared it the official supported religion of the state and any other form of worship would lead to persecution. 16th and 17th centuries' European history is also replete with religious wars which caused the demise of an entire continent. Religious conflicts, interlocking with economic and political disputes vastly intensified their destructiveness. Religion played a large part in the decisions we, as people, made and how we lived our lives. Whether it be something as simple as believing in a god or any god, obeying the laws of god, or the separation between church and state, religion had a huge impact on human civilizational history. This is not something that only began a few years ago it has been an ongoing belief and controversial topic since ancient history. Whether it be Monotheistic or Polytheistic believe in god or gods there are a few main religions that remained dominant in ancient history; Christianity, Islam, Hindu, Judaism, and Buddhism.

Religion still plays an important role in our lives as human beings, as societies, as countries and ultimately in the world. Resurgence of religious movements in the present

day world seems alarming seeing the terrorist activities that are motivated by baseless religious beliefs. In the contemporary world of today we are witnessing that religion is connected to the transnational nature of terrorism. It is not unique to Islam as generally believed by people. Religious terrorism as violence or threat of violence motivated by religion to effect political change is in the rise across religions. Religious terrorism is a social virus that gnaws at the social fabric of a society and human dignity. If religion is seriously a celebration of life over death, then religious leaders should not allow their ideology to be co-opted into ideological excuses for the creation of violence. When this has occurred in the past then religion ceased to be a moral guideline and became nothing more than an ideological excuse for political murder. When religion inspires terrorism then it ceases to be religion. From songs such as Onward Christian Soldiers to bellicose forms of jihad, religious leaders who permit religion to inspire death have made a major leap backwards into the medieval period. The true knowledge of religion teaches humans how to tolerate other religious faiths by acknowledging them as equal to our own. It helps break down barriers between faiths that improve tolerance towards other religions. It is a clear and deeper understanding of one's own religion by having a clear understanding of other religions. This view brings us closer to Gandhian views of religion. Truth and Ahimsa demand a sincere effort to free our minds from feelings such as anger, malice, hatred, and revenge. These vices create obstacles in the ways of love and kindness. Love and tolerance according to Gandhi are the energy that power one's soul and uplifts the spirit.

Gandhian Principles held relevance in the 20th century and are still relevant in the 21st century. Gandhi reached far away corners of the world through his teachings that were founded on truth and non-violence. World leaders like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., Aung San Suu Kyi, Dalai Lama, and Barack Obama see Gandhi as their true inspiration. There is a great resemblance between Dandi March in India led by Mahatma Gandhi and Montgomery Bus Boycott in the United States. As Martin Luther King Jr. very aptly said, "If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable." As Tibetan Leader Dalai Lama once said, "Many ancient Indian masters have preached ahimsa, non-violence as a philosophy. That was mere philosophical understanding. But Mahatma Gandhi, in this twentieth century, produced a very sophisticated approach because he implemented that very noble philosophy of ahimsa in modern politics, and he succeeded. That is a great thing." At a time when religious extremism and hate crimes are on the rise, Gandhi's religious teachings are even more relevant. According to Bruce Hoffman, theological justification of terrorism makes god the primary constituent of the religious terrorist, rendering all of the terrorist's actions justified and ordained by god. Religious terrorism in particular has become an important national security issue, as many of the most

recognizable terrorist attacks in the past 15 years seem to have been motivated by religion and theology. Gandhi was averse to this kind of coercion religious beliefs that interpreted religious texts to justify violence. Gandhi's religious views were based on toleration, truth and non-violence. According to Gandhi, religious tolerance gives us spiritual insight. 'Dharma' for him is one that is conducive to the integration of society. This notion binds people together. His preaching of religion which is synonymous to truth and ahimsa is more relevant to the present day world if peaceful co-existence of world religions is to be established. My respectful study of other religions has not abated my reverence for and my faith in the Hindu scriptures. They have broadened my view of life. They have enabled me to understand more clearly many an obscure passage in the Hindu scriptures. To Gandhi different religions were like different flowers of the same garden. Although there are many religions practiced by human societies, they all meet at the same point. Gandhi never subscribed to the fanatic view that there must be one religion; rather he believed all religions in essence are one. Religions are just different roads that lead to the same destination.

Gandhi didn't believe in exclusive divinity of Vedas. He tried to understand the spirit of other religious scriptures and looked for unity among these scriptures. He was delighted to unify teachings of the Gita, Light of Asia, and The Sermon on the Mount. It is evident that from the very beginning of his public life he looked at religion from a multicultural perspective. Though he was true to the essential teachings of Hinduism, for him there was no religion higher than truth and righteousness.

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