

For M.A;Semester-2
Gandhian Philosophy(CC-07)

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Gandhiji's Views on Religion

“.....Belief in one God is the cornerstone of all religions. But I do not foresee a time when there would be only one religion on earth in practice.... I believe in the fundamental Truth of all great religions of the world. And I believe that if only we could, all of us, read the scriptures of the different Faiths from the stand-point of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at the bottom, all one and were all helpful to one another... The Allah of Islam is the same as the God of Christians and the Ishwara of Hindus. Even as there are numerous names of God in Hinduism, there are many names of God in Islam. The names do not indicate individuality but attributes, and little man has tried in his humble way to describe mighty God by giving Him attributes, though He is above all attributes, Indescribable, Immeasurable....” said Gandhiji. Religion comes from two words – ‘re’ and ‘ligare’ i.e. binding together; it is binding together of the finite with the infinite, that is man with the God. This ‘God’ usually is taken to be Creator-God with all metaphysical attributes like – omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscient, benevolent, Absolute, Eternal, Infinite and the only personality; and ethical qualities like ‘God is Good’, ‘God is Love’, etc.

Gandhi's concept of God and religion is quite oriental. For him the base of all religions remains same; while the superstructure of all religions varies. This superstructure is supported by various forms of worship and rituals. This diversity of rituals remains immaterial according to Gandhi. For him, it is the common belief in ‘God’ that lends support to universality to religions of the world. The esoteric and mystical rituals are not given core importance in his concept of ‘dharma’ (‘religion’ in Sanskrit). Gandhi never admitted one religion but the idea of ‘One’ God landed support to the universal platform for all religions of the world

Gandhi was primarily a man of religion. His religion was based on truth and love, and non-violence. It is his religion that became his philosophy of life, and it gave him strength. Gandhi expressed the opinion that religion can become a basis for friendship among all mankind. He strongly believed that religion does not teach mutual enmity.

Gandhi in consonance with his religious beliefs, considered that different religions as the different roads going towards the same destination. Gandhi out of his own experiences and readings came to the conclusion that all religions are based on the same principles, namely, truth and love. He claimed that religion is a binding force and not a dividing force. He was greatly perturbed by the fighting among people in the name of religion, and, in fact, laid his life for the sake of religious unity.

Gandhi believed in the concept of Sarvadharmā Samanātva, which means equal respect for all creeds and faiths. But he very clearly stated that equal regard does not mean that one should adopt other's religion. It only refers to understanding the opinions expressed by other religions while adhering to one's own views.

It means emphasizing on the point of agreements than on disagreements. By being a Hindu, Gandhi considered religion as being most tolerant and that it gives scope for worshipping all prophets of the world. Gandhi once quoted that Hinduism tells everyone to worship God according to his/her faith or dharma, and hence it lives at peace with all other religions. Hinduism, according to Gandhi, is not a mere religion, but a way of life, wherein there is a relentless pursuit of truth. Gandhi was successful in understanding the spirit of other religions, especially by virtue of being a Hindu.

According to Gandhi, the main aim of religion is to make a one-on-one interaction between God and humans. He believed God is identical with truth. He perceived God through the service of humanity, because God lives in the heart of every human being or for that matter in every one of his creations.

Gandhi supported two different notions of reality that helped in correctly judging the faiths of various religions. He had a balanced regional approach that led him to take the whole world in the embrace of his love. He believed in the twin doctrine

of Satya and Ahimsa. The term Satya means truth and Ahimsa means non-violence.

These two principles helped Gandhi in evolving a comprehensive view of religion that was far beyond the narrow sectarianism. For Gandhi there is no higher way of worshipping God than serving the poor and identifying God in them.

In India the word 'Dharma' is used to mean 'religion'. But it should be noted, that the word 'Dharma' in Hinduism has a much wider connotation than what we ordinarily mean by the word religion. The word 'Dharma' comes from the root 'Dhre' which means to 'sustain'. 'Dharma' is thus the greatest sustaining force or the binding force of the society. The goal of 'Dharma' is to create mental and spiritual fellowship among all men and to regulate its relation with all living entities. It thus tries to keep the world in perfect equilibrium. It is thus clear that the word 'Dharma' was not used in connection with any particular religion. Any religion, any custom, any creed could be brought under its fold and was thus out out secular. Gandhi's concept of religion, therefore, brought under its fold people belonging to different religions.

Gandhi's religion was a federation of different religious creeds, theological schools and sectarian faiths that have survived in India from ancient times. People belonging to different religions would go to him for his advice and blessings on different matters. All through his life Gandhi devoted much time and energy for the promotion of Hindu Muslim unity and also fasted for his cause on many occasions. In the wake of the partition of the country, hundreds and thousands of Hindus and Muslims were killed in Punjab, Bengal and Bihar. Gandhi threw himself into a struggle to heal the breach between the two communities. Gandhi wanted communal harmony and peace not only between the Hindus and the Muslims but between all sections of the people who believe India to be their home, no matter to what faith they may belong. Gandhi had the good fortune to have as his colleague's people belonging to different religions. Two important examples are those C.F. Andrews and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. The Ashram prayers of Gandhi had passages from holy books like the Gita, the Bible and the Koran. This tradition still continues in India in most of the public meetings and prayers.

Gandhi also maintained that a reverential study of the different religious tradition is necessary. He felt that it is the duty of every cultured man and woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. To respect other religion, a study of their scriptures, is a sacred duty according to Gandhi. To understand the point of view of another faith requires tolerance, sympathy, broad mindedness, humility and willingness to recognize Truth wherever it is to be found. If we possess these qualities we can appreciate other's faith, traditions, customs, culture and way of life. The prophets and seers of different religions have brought to mankind the consciousness of the unity underlying the whole universe and a deep sense of brotherhood of man. Gandhi therefore felt a need of the comparative study of religions to pave the way for unity and brotherhood amongst the followers of different religions.

Mahatma Gandhi was a Sanatani Hindu. His love for Hinduism was not blind love. Gandhi spoke about the lofty ideals preached by Hinduism. Hinduism, according to him is the most tolerant and liberal religion. He was deeply impressed by the ethical and spiritual outlook of Hinduism. Gandhi said, "The chief value of Hinduism lies in holding the actual belief that all life is one i.e. all life coming from one universal source, call it Allah, God or Parameshwara." Gandhi was also very much impressed by the teachings of the Gita saying, "when one sees Me everywhere and everything in Me, I am never lost to him and he is never lost to Me."

But Gandhi at the same time was very radical in his approach and he did not hesitate in criticizing those aspects of Hinduism which did not appeal to his reason. For example he was very much against the caste system that was prevalent in Hinduism. To quote Gandhi, "My religion is Hinduism ... I can no more describe my feelings for Hinduism than for my wife ... Even so I feel about Hinduism with all its fault and limitations ... I know that the vice that is going on today in all the Hindu shrines ... My zeal never takes me to the rejection of any of the essential things in Hinduism." Hinduism according to Gandhi, did not have one central book for reference, no particular God of worship nor one particular way of God realization. Whether he is a theist or an atheist, he is a Hindu.

Whether he believes in one absolute or many Gods, he is a Hindu. Whether he believes in Vedas or not, he remains a Hindu. Gandhi was therefore liberal enough

to take idol worship as a part of human nature, though he did not believe in idol worship as such. Gandhi, was, however, deadly against untouchability, the greatest plague of the Hindu society according to Gandhi, which is the duty of every true Hindu to combat. Gandhi was also against animal sacrifice though prescribed in the Vedas as it went against his concept of non-violence. Instead he advocated the sacrifice of animality in us in the form of lust, greed, anger, hatred, ill-will etc.

Though deeply religious by nature, Gandhi did not believe in rituals, customs, traditions, dogmas and other formalities observed for the sake of religion. Like Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi's religion was not confined to Temples, Churches, books, rituals and other outer forms.

Thus Gandhi's concept of religion was not bound by any formalities. His God may be a personal God to those who needs his personal presence. He may be a law to those who concentrate their minds on the orderliness of the universe. He may be an embodied being to those who need his touch. According to Gandhi God may have a thousand names as Ishwara, Siva, Vishnu, Rama, Krsna, Jehovah, Christ, Allah etc. according to the traditions in which a man is brought up. In the words of Gandhi, "Is there one God for the Mussalmans and another for the Hindus, Parsis, and Christians? No, there is only one omnipresent God. He is named variously, and we remember him by the name which is most familiar to us."

Gandhi also advocated his views on Islam, another great world religion. Islam is a religion of strict monotheism and rigorous ethical discipline. Gandhi had a very high esteem for this religion and regarded it as a religion of peace, love, kindness and brotherhood of all men. It may be true that sometimes the followers of Islam often took to sword for the spread of their religion, but this was not in accordance with the teachings of Koran. As Gandhi himself said in this connection, "I do regard Islam to be a religion of peace in the same sense as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism are." The charges of fanaticism against Islam cannot be justified, according to Gandhi as there are several passages in the Koran which speak of religious toleration. Of course, there is a place for Jihad in Islam and this Jihad is generally interpreted as a holy war against those who are not the followers of Islam. But Gandhi justifies the true meaning of Jihad by saying that the conditions laid down for the Jihad are so strict that they are not capable of being fulfilled by everybody. To quote Gandhi, "where is the unerring general to order Jihad? Where

is the suffering and love and purification that much precede the very idea of drawing the sword? We are too imperfect and impure and selfish to resort to an armed conflict in the name of God."

Gandhi was also impressed by the personal and social codes of behavior that Islam prescribes. In the Koran there are rules and regulations for virtues like obedience to parents, avoidance of adultery, cheating and lying, refraining from theft, murder etc. The five pillars of Islam, which prescribes prayer, fasting, alms giving and hospitality are the duties that every Muslim has to perform. All these aspects of Islam influenced Gandhi, a great deal.

Amongst religions, other than Hinduism, no other religion inspired, impressed and influenced Gandhi as Christianity. In the concept of Satyagraha, Gandhi was deeply influenced by the teachings of Jesus particularly the sacrifice Jesus had to undergo during crucifixion for a noble cause. The teachings of the New Testament specially the Sermon: "You have heard that it hath been said: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you not to resist evil; but if one strikes thee on thy right cheek, turn to him thy other also" impressed Gandhi very much. Satyagraha, in the hands of Gandhi had been a weapon of conquering evil by good. Gandhi said that he had the same liking for the Sermon as he had for the Gita. To use Gandhi's words, "Today supposing I was deprived of the Gita and forgot all its contents but had a copy of the Sermon, I would deprive the same joy from it as I do from the Gita." "Gandhi loved Christianity because of its absolute emphasis on love as the most ethical virtue. But Gandhi disliked the claims of Christianity as superior over all other religions of the world. But though Gandhi had a deep respect for the different religions he was against proselytisation. He was against certain forms of missionary activities specially those relating to conversion. Gandhi was not opposed to conversion if it was based on one's will but he was against any use of force or propaganda in the matter of conversion." As he remarked, "A rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon. The fragrance of religion and spiritual life is much finer and much subtler than that of a rose."

From the comparative study of religions, Gandhi was convinced that a mere doctrinal approach in the field of religion does not help to create inter religious fellowship. Dogmatic religions do not help to promote creative dialogue. The

religious dogmas directly or indirectly breed an attitude of dislike towards other religions. Such an attitude does not help to provide any meeting grounds for religions.

The great religions of the world should strive, according to Gandhi, in promoting a life of self control, sacrifice, harmony, peace and understanding amongst its followers so as to create a heaven on earth. Gandhiji also supported the views of Swami Vivekananda, who was one of the greatest champion of peace and understanding of religions. Swami ji said: "If any one hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one religion and the destruction of the others, to him I say, 'Brother, yours is an impossible hope.' Do I wish that a Christian would become a Hindu ? God forbid. Do I wish that a Hindu or Buddhist would become a Christian ? God forbid ... The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth."

The world does not need a new religion. What it does need are the people who, discovering the eternal and universal truths in their own religion are bold enough to live in accordance with those truths. When it is done, the dry outer forms of religions, which divide the entire human race into several groups, will crumble before the radiance and power of the mighty human spirit. The power of the human soul, knows no bounds, no limits and if religion is its vehicle then that vehicle will surely participate in transforming the human society on its journey towards the Divine Being.

Gandhiji believed that True knowledge of religion breaks down the barriers between different Faiths. Cultivation of tolerance for other Faiths will impart to us a true understanding of our own. Tolerance obviously does not disturb the distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil. The golden rule of conduct ... is mutual toleration, seeing that we will never all think alike and we shall always see Truth in fragment and from different angles of vision. Even amongst the most conscientious persons, there will be room enough for honest differences of opinion. The only possible rule of conduct in any civilised society is, therefore, mutual toleration.

To sum up, Gandhi's concept of religion occupies an important place in socio-political philosophy in general and contemporary Indian philosophy in particular. His concept of religion introduces uniformity and equality. Gandhi thinks that there exists a close relationship between religion and morality. Religion which fails to work out the problems of man cannot be called a religion. His dream is to live at peace and harmony with companion and enemy or rival. His doctrine of ahimsa is a step on the flight of unending free will and calm. Even he equates politics with Dharma. For him man's intrinsic propensity is to triumph over evil to achieve Truth is God. Religion instructs man how he achieves the Truth. It is possible by the realization of God. One is correct on his way if he is following the path of love to attain the truth which is God.

THANKS