

Mahatma Gandhi's Views on Religion

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ABSTRACT

Religion is usually defined as a social-cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, morals, beliefs, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations, which generally relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, and spiritual elements; however, there is no scholarly consensus. Mahatma Gandhiji believed that all great religions were fundamentally equal and there should be innate respect for them, not just mutual tolerance. He felt a person wanting to convert should try to be a good follower of his own faith rather than seek goodness in change of faith. Gandhi wrote that he was a Hindu because he was born in Hinduism, because it is the most tolerant and inclusive of all religions and because non-violence has found the highest expression in Hinduism. He also mentioned that he did not think of Buddhism and Jainism as different from Hinduism. The present paper appraises the concept and views of Mahatma Gandhi on religions.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a privilege of man. It is a distinctively human activity. Man has an inherent religious element in him, he possesses a religious instinct. He has a spiritual constitution to apprehend his natural limitations and an urge to seek something beyond himself. Gandhi was thoroughly influenced by religion, to say all religions, but dominantly by Hinduism. According to Gandhi, religion is a very personal matter. Religion helps in accepting and realising God. Religion is also closely related to morality. This unit deals with Gandhi's concept of religion, his perception of different religious teachings and how he linked it up with every aspect of life. Religion is a matter of the heart. No physical inconvenience can warrant abandonment of one's own religion. Gentleness, self-sacrifice, and generosity are the exclusive possession of no one race or religion. The soul of religions is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms (**Harijan, 28-12-1936**).

Aims

1. Understand the concept of religion and God as viewed by Gandhi.
2. Understand the impact of different religions on Gandhi.
3. Examine the role of religion in his thoughts and actions

The Role of Religion in our life

As had already been mentioned, Gandhi was of the firm opinion that man cannot live without religion. Gandhi expressed the view that 'man without religion is man without roots. Therefore, religion is the basis on which all life structure has to be erected, if life is to be real'. According to him, the problems from national to international, political to moral are best solved by religion. D.K.Dutta says, 'Gandhi was of the opinion that religion is the root or key to all these problems. These can be solved in and through religion. It can be stressed that Gandhi breathed religion'. Religion was the basis,

inspiration and mainspring of all his activities. Further, his belief in God may be termed as the mainspring of his religious consciousness. Gandhi's insistence was more on the moralistic dimension since man, being inherently good and divine, needs to progress towards self-realisation, which is a much higher goal than that of industrialising society or pursuing material wealth and wants. The very existence of man is based on such ethical values that can be strengthened by his faith in God and religion that encompasses unity and harmony. The ethical values thus enhance the development of an individual and the absence of the same triggers dehumanisation. With the pursuit of materialism replacing ethical values, man stoops to much lower levels antithetic to the very purpose of his life and existence that has a spiritual goal. Further, materialistic pursuits weaken the rationality and wisdom in man, giving way to chaos and confusion, and finally leading to crisis and unrest.

Gandhi advocated faith in religion and God to prevent mankind to slip into the life of misery and treachery. Moreover, the so-called development of science and technology, which the scientists proclaim as an essential means to progress of man have failed in their promise of greater happiness to mankind. With the human mind becoming prey to prejudices, passions and aggression, the virtues of love, humanity and sympathy have been relegated to the background causing untold misery to mankind. Gandhi tried to interpret religion as the solution to such problems. Gandhi advocated that philosophy, religion and spirituality should go hand in hand with other aspects. Precisely, for this reason, he linked religion with politics and other activities. As he said, 'I must try to live in society and yet remain untouched by its pitfalls'.

Gandhi's religion was not a formal religion, not Hindu religion; not a mere uttering of the name of God; neither customary nor narrow and definitely not the practice of untouchability. Religion, as Gandhi viewed it, meant self-realisation, knowledge of self, where God rules every breath, that which prompts us to follow the path of truth and non-violence, that which deals with 'the science of soul' and that which is in consonance with the obedience to the Law of God. This is inherent in every individual and binds him closer to God. To him, truth and non-violence are eternal, equal to religion, equal to God. Religion, as Gandhi felt, expresses itself with the help of these two concepts. No doubt, Gandhi advocated strict adherence to these two virtues that are much crucial in taking man closer to God. Religion thus holds an impermeable place in our life.

Gandhiji's Concept of Religion

Gandhi defined religion as that, which brings us face to face with our Maker (**M.K. Gandhi, My Religion, p.3**). Gandhi perceived religion as the one that pervades all of one action. It means, he said, 'a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality' (**Harijan, 10-2-1940, p.445**). Religion, as he understands it, is a 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. Gandhi firmly opined that man cannot live without religion (**Young India, 12-5-1920, p.2**).

Two factors are closely interrelated with Gandhi's concept of religion, morality and true service of mankind. Stressing on how important morality is to religion, Gandhi firmly rejected any religious doctrine that 'does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality'. Further, he held that 'there is no such thing as religion overriding morality. Man, for instance cannot be untruthful, cruel and incontinent

and claim to have God on his side'. Secondly, Gandhi's concept of religion transcends service to humanity. After a perusal of all religions, Gandhi carefully chose those principles that worked for the service of the mankind, especially the downtrodden.

As D.K.Dutta aptly summarises, 'religion, for Gandhiji, is to be searched out in the service of mankind. He dedicated and devoted his whole life to the service of the masses, which, in fact was the essence of his religion'. The religious influences in Gandhi's life were drawn from many a source. The foremost among them stands the family that had a Vaishnava tradition. His mother's religious beliefs and rituals made a positive impact on Gandhi; he was later initiated into "Ramanama" by his caretaker Rambha Tai, primarily to ward off the fear of ghosts and evil forces. His household was a meeting ground for Jains and Muslims, friends as well as visitors, which made Gandhi to understand the 'supreme' in various forms and ways. The rendering of the Holy Scriptures like 'Ramayana' and various hymns instilled in him a deep understanding of one's dharma. This may be interpreted as the ground work on which were based his lifelong principles of truth and non-violence (D.K.Dutta, p.137).

Besides Gandhi's friends, Muslims, Parsis, Jains and those from other faiths and their way of life made him realise the importance of faith and treat them with respect and interest. At the time of his journey to the foreign shores for higher studies, Gandhi knew very little of his own religion and that of others. Nesy quotes that, 'at the invitation of Theosophist friends to read the original Sanskrit of Bhagavad Gita, Gandhi recollected 'I was ashamed, as I had read the divine poem neither in Sanskrit nor in Gujarati.'. This marked the beginning of the unfolding of a man who, in future, turned out to be one of the proponents of a universal religion of love, truth and non-violence. The readings of Sir Edwin Arnold's translation of The Gita into 'Song Celestial' and 'The Light of Asia', 'The New Testament', Thomas Carlyles' essay on 'The Hero as Prophet' have all made a deep impact on his understanding of religion and how all the religions preached one language of love, morality and truthfulness was thoroughly understood by him. His interactions with Raychandbhai cleared many of his doubts in moments of spiritual crisis.

GANDHI VIEWS ON RELIGIONS

Gandhi accorded equal respect and interest for all the religions of the world. To him, all religions are more or less true, proceed from the same God and converge to the same point. He had some interesting interactions with people from other religions, following different faiths. Gandhi viewed in all religions a basic unity, simplicity and humanity, an essential teaching of all religions.

On Islam

Gandhi observed Islam 'to be a religion of peace', love and above all, that of brotherhood of man. He was very much impressed with its tenets of faith in only the God and its unqualified submission to God (K.N.Tiwari, **World Religions and Gandhi, p.33**). Gandhi was firmly convinced that the taking up of sword by some of its followers had nothing to do with, nor in accordance with the teaching of the holy book 'Koran'. He also decried the charges of fanaticism on Islam, as many of the passages in the Holy Book speak of religious tolerance and peace. Gandhi remarked that, 'my association with the noblest of Mussalmans has taught me to see that Islam has spread not by the power of the sword, but by the prayerful love of an unbroken line of its saints and fakirs' (Young India, 10-7-1924).

Gandhi was drawn to some of the most tolerant and universalistic tenets of Islam. Firstly, it speaks of the spiritual upliftment of all human beings and secondly, by assigning the role of messenger rather than attributing divinity to Prophet Mohammed; the religion has displayed its simplicity and purity, making it a pure monotheistic religion. The sufferings and humiliation on The Prophet, which were endured in graceful silence, impressed Gandhi. To him, suffering was an example of peaceful and non-violent approach, the prominent characteristic of a Satyagrahi. Gandhi was also attracted by the blending of politics and religion in the history of Islam, the principles he held close to his heart. Tiwari observes that ‘Gandhi found in the history of Islam, the blending of the political with the religious and this perhaps reassured him in his faith that politics could not be separated from religion and that the political struggle required long and patient suffering’. Islam highlighted the virtue of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, hospitality and code of personal conduct. This had a profound impact on Gandhi and found many of the injunctions of the discipline of Brahmacharya / Celibacy. Virtues like obedience to parents, avoidance of adultery, cheating and lying, refraining from theft, murder, etc. are also emphasised in Islam to which Gandhi too prescribed in the code of ethical virtues.

Gandhi’s Views on Christianity

Gandhi was much impressed and inspired by Christianity as it contained the gospel of love and a spirit of sacrifice. His Satyagraha which was a forceful non-violent means to conquer evil was based on some of the tenets of Christianity. The gospel of personal suffering to win over the enemy was a lesson that was learnt by his readings of The New Testament. He was deeply touched by the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, which he considered ‘as the gift of Christianity’ to the world. To him, it was almost akin to the reading of ‘The Gita’. He was convinced that the ‘Christianity’s particular contribution is that of active love. No other religion says so firmly that God is love’ (**Young India, 31-12-1931**).

Gandhi revered Jesus for his practice of true love and non-violence, whose life was a living example of love and sacrifice towards all. To Gandhi, ‘Jesus on the cross chose to meet evil unarmed and unafraid with love and good will for even those who were ready to kill him’ (**Tiwari, p.39**). It is this spirit of sacrifice that had a deep impact on Gandhi’s mind. Gandhi, at the same time, did not like that the true principles of Christianity were not adhered to by its followers. As he affirmed, the Western Christianity, ‘in its practical working, was a negation of Christ’s’ Christianity. I cannot conceive Jesus, if he was living in the flesh in our midst, approving of modern Christian Organisation, or public worship’. He advocated the equality of all religions, tolerance and sympathy for all (**Young India, 23-3-1926**).

Gandhi’s interactions with the Christian brethren during his stay in London and South Africa brought him closer to them in his effort to imbibe the teachings. But he requested those who were forthcoming to convert Indians to Christianity to refrain from conversion. To him, a man of any religion should be a better human being. At the same time, Gandhi was pleased to see some of the Christians change their views for the better, who made efforts to recognise the merits of other religions. Gandhi, through his correspondence with Tolstoy, endeavoured to deepen his understanding of The New Testament; Tolstoy’s ‘The Kingdom of God is within you’ awakened in him a passionate spirit of love and sacrifice. Gandhi’s interactions with C.F.Andrews and H.S.Polak further helped him in fostering a spirit of brotherhood and develop special kinship with them. Since all religions were equal to him, he venerated them without distinction.

Gandhi's Views on Jainism and Buddhism

Gandhi viewed Jainism and Buddhism very much similar to Hinduism and did not consider them as independent of each other. The influence of Jainism bore the most visible impact on Gandhi. His concepts of non-violence and fasting were mostly in consonance with its traditions. Gandhi had the fortune of being part of his father's interactions with Jain monks early in his life. The moral and spiritual dimension of the religion strengthened Gandhi's ideas of non-violence towards all beings. The other ethical virtues related to Jainism such as purity, chastity, celibacy, non-possession, compassion, truth, non-stealing, non-attachment have had a direct impact on Gandhi. Fasting too constitutes an important part of the Jains' tradition of 'Vratas'. They also require abstinence from any physical adornments and temptations to physical desires. Though Gandhi acknowledged these tenets to other religions too, his basic understanding of these concepts may be attributed to his earlier exposition to Jainism.

Gandhi was attracted to Buddhism by its 'non-recognition of the caste distinctions'. Gandhi was impressed with 'the one thing that Buddha showed India was that God was not a God who can be appeased by the sacrifice of the innocent animals'. Those who do so were guilty of double sin, as he viewed it. Gandhi perceived dharma as 'God', who is not distinct from His own law. The law and law-maker are thus one and the same, the laws being eternal and unalterable just as its maker. Buddha preached and practised Ahimsa in true letter and spirit. Since anger begets anger and hatred begets hate, the source of all evil, it may be countered by Ahimsa through the right conduct as prescribed by Buddha. Buddhism also emphasises self-discipline and moral conduct, through its eight-fold path. The universalistic and humanistic message of Buddhism was deeply imbibed by Gandhi (Tiwari, p.31).

Gandhi's Views on Hinduism

Gandhi, writes D.M.Datta, 'believed that every individual is born with definite hereditary tendencies, in a cultural and physical environment and is therefore, capable of development in a particular way. It is futile and unnecessary to ignore the religious heritage with which an individual is born'. In spite of his extensive reading on different religions, his interactions with people from all faiths and his perception of the virtues associated with different religions, Gandhi acknowledged that Hinduism would suit him the best. Though this religion had its own crippling practices and pre-conceived notions, it is the essential ethical virtues and principles as cited in various texts like the Upanishads, Vedas and The Gita that pacified Gandhi the most. Datta further states that 'the presence of God in all beings, the love of all creatures, the ethics of self-discipline, and selfless service, leading to liberation' appealed to Gandhi (D.M.Datta, p.47).

Gandhi considered Hinduism as not an exclusive religion; he opined that 'there is room for the worship of all prophets of the world in it. It is not a missionary religion. Hinduism tells everyone to worship God according to faith or dharma, and so lives at peace with all religions'. He was deeply impressed by its assimilative characteristic and its profound stress on the unity of all beings, which is fundamentally moralistic and spiritualistic in essence. The absolute oneness of all beings and omnipresence of God, in animate and inanimate beings as well represents its universalistic nature. Its insistence on Ahimsa towards respect for all living beings, including animals, made a profound impact on Gandhi. At the same time, Gandhi was pained at the discrimination Hinduism allows in the form of caste system and the curse of untouchability. These not only negated its universalistic nature but also remained as severe drawbacks of the religion (Young India, 6-10-1921).

Gandhi was a religious reformer in the context of his utter dislike for untouchability, irrational ideas and superstitions. He felt that these features run contrary to Hinduism's universalistic appeal and cease to have moral basis. To him, 'the task of religion is to guide man in his spiritual and moral development' (**Unto Tahtinen, pp.20-21**). Gandhi had his own understanding and interpretation of religion which he consistently subscribed to. Gandhi imbibed the positive features from other religions and combined it with Hinduism. Hinduism speaks of attaining salvation through knowledge, action and devotion and absolves itself of any rigidity and giving way to liberal approach. It is this aspect of Hinduism to which Gandhi subscribed and termed it as accommodating: 'Hinduism is a grand evolutionary process and not a narrow creed. Hinduism is a living organism liable to growth and decay and subject to this law of Nature' (**Young India, 8-4-1926**).

According to him, 'to be a Hindu is to believe in God, the immortality of the soul, transmigration, the law of Karma, Moksha etc. and to try to practice truth and ahimsa in daily life'. As against the Western concept of religion, Hinduism rules out indulgence and multiplication of wants as these hamper one's growth to ultimate identity with the universal self. Gandhi believed in the purity and sanctity of Hinduism. He felt that 'it is not buried in its ample scriptures but is a living faith speaking like a mother to her aching child' (**Harijan, 3-10-1936**).

CONCLUSION

Gandhi's religion is essentially a universal religion, devoid of customs, superstitions and irrational givings. For him, truth and non-violence were the ultimate forms of unity of mankind. He denied being christened as 'saint', 'yogi' or 'ascetic' and described himself as a seeker of truth, the ultimate eternal truth. It had nothing to do with theology, as Bhikhu Parekh put it, which over-intellectualised religion. True or pure religion, to him, transcends but does not supersede organised religions, and constitutes their common basis and connecting link. In today's world of religious disharmony, it is apt to recollect Gandhi's words: 'the need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions. We want to reach not the dead level, but unity in diversity. Any attempt to root out traditions, effects of heredity, climate and other surroundings is not only bound to fail but is a sacrilege. The soul of religions is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms. The latter will persist to the end of time. Wise men will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul living under a variety of crusts'.

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