

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' (Ibid, p.36). Islam highlighted the virtue of prayer, fasting, alms-giving, 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.

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' (Young India, 23-3-1926). He advocated the equality of all religions, tolerance and sympathy for all.

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.

Jainism and Buddhism

Jainism and Buddhism, as Gandhi viewed them, were 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.

As regarding Buddhism, Gandhi was attracted 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 (Tiwari, p.31). 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.

8.4 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' (D.M. Datta, pp.46-47). 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' (Young India, 6-10-1921). 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. 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' (Tiwari, p.15). 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 (Harijan, 26-12-1936). 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).

Gandhi as Sanatani Hindu

Gandhi called himself as a Sanatani Hindu for the reasons that are given below. It is apt to describe it in his own words:

1. "I believe in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas and all that goes by the name of Hindu Scriptures, and therefore in Avatars and rebirth;
2. I believe in the vamashrama dharma in a sense, in my opinion, strictly Vedic but not in its present popular and crude sense;
3. I believe in the protection of the cow in its much larger sense than the popular;
4. I do not believe in idol-worship".

Gandhi was assertive when he declared his non-belief in the exclusive divinity of Vedas and to follow any Hindu Scriptures with blind faith, oblivious to its demerits. Gandhi had firm faith only in the unchangeable and easily understood fundamental truths of Hinduism, though he was aware of its limitations. Gandhi likens Hinduism to the river Ganga that is

pure and unsullied at its source but which takes along the impurities in its way. He advocated the purity of the votaries if the purity of Hinduism is to be retained. The Vedas, Shastras and Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas and Itihasas have grown at different times and in different contexts and appear to be contradicting each other. Nevertheless, Gandhi did not approve of any practice associated with Hinduism that instigated social evils like animal sacrifice, meat-eating, cruelty to human beings, polyandry, child marriages and outcastes (Young India, 8-4-1926). In his quest for self-realisation, Gandhi followed virtuous principles in everyday life and became an eternal symbol of hope and faith. To him, truth was the highest form of God and religion. He clearly stated it in his own words thus: 'What I want to achieve, what I have been striving and pinning to achieve is self-realisation, to see God face to face, to attain moksha. Man's ultimate goal is to attain salvation'. Gandhi prescribes service to all as the most effective way to attain salvation. Gandhi abhorred stagnation, sectarian belief and exclusivity of religion.

8.5 GANDHI'S INTERPRETATION OF *THE GITA*

The *Bhagavad Gita* or *the Gita* was the most influential source of Gandhi's religious thought. He was greatly influenced by its teachings in every walk of life. Gandhi's first reading of The Gita was a translated version, 'The Song Celestial' by Edwin Arnold, in 1890. He later took the translated version and it was his spiritual dictionary and infallible guide to conduct (B. R. Nanda, p.55). Gandhi quoted thus regarding *The Gita*: 'when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the Bhagavad Gita and find a verse to comfort me. I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of external tragedies and if they have not left visible and individual effects on me, I owe it to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita'. Gandhi was much impressed by the principle of 'equality' of mind under the joyous and adverse circumstances alike; to remain unaffected by 'pleasure or pain, victory or defeat, without hankering after the fruit of action' was a trait Gandhi tried to imbibe and implement all through his life. He often found solace in the reading of The Gita, and considered it as a source of solution to all the problems he faced from time to time. In later years, Gandhi himself interpreted Gita, which was meant for everyone and published it in Gujarati in March, 1930. He named it as 'Anasakti Yoga', a result of prayerful study and experience (Young India, 12 November, 1925).

Margaret Chatterjee, a prolific writer on Gandhi's religious thought, interprets Gandhi's understanding of The Gita in the following words: 'The new things claimed by Gandhi are these: that the Mahabharatha and Gita are allegorical; that the Gita teaches Ahimsa (for renunciation is impossible without observance of ahimsa) and so the attitude of Anasakti (the spirit of renunciation or selflessness) is the basis of Karma (action). The Avatar idea indicates man's wish to become like God rather than indicates God's descent to man. It is possible for every human being to become perfect, as God is, and it is necessary for us to aspire towards it. As for the 'gospel' element in the Gita it is Bhakti or devotion, the gospel of Jnana or knowledge. Life should be a harmonious whole of these three. But the key to all of these is the doctrine of anasakti (selflessness)' (Margaret Chatterjee, pp.35-36). Liberation from further bondage of action and renunciation as the best form of Ahimsa appealed to Gandhi with much fervour. Gandhi's explanation of The Gita stresses more on the ahimsa and ethos of work and service. Swadharma (the inner destiny) enables the man to pursue the path of self-discovery and selfless service, which would determine one's capacity to attain Moksha. Gandhi thus insisted service to mankind

with detached and selfless approach, which he thought, is the essence of the Gita, a timeless guide to man's approach to life.

Gandhi was a persistent practitioner of the creed he believed in and the Gita's Karma-yoga greatly influenced him. 'Gandhi's annotation of the Gita in the light of ahimsa has stressed the intimate relation between the truth of philosophy and the daily life and thought of the people as he tried to mould them with equal significance' (R.N.Bose, *Our Gandhian Heritage*, Tagore Research Institute, Calcutta, 1970, p.50). Gandhi views the Gita as not an aphoristic work but a great religious poem; he advised all to study the deeper meaning in it as one derives richer meaning and was meant for all ages, people and teachings. It is upto the seeker to judge the depth of it and extract from it the greatest treasure of life.

8.6 INNER PURIFICATION

Without inner purification, Gandhi stressed, there would neither be ahimsa nor the satya. Keeping in mind the unity of all existence, Gandhi emphasised that 'identification with everything that lives is impossible without self-purification; without self-purification, the observance of the law of Ahimsa must remain an empty dream, God can never be realized by one who is not pure of heart' (Autobiography, pp.614-16).

Self-purification encompasses purification in all walks of life. Only when one attains self-purification, one would be in a position to instill in others to do so, thus leading to the purification of one's surrounding. The path to self-purification is laid down by innumerable sufferings and tests, which would examine one's capability to achieve the goal. 'The path is steep and hard', Gandhi wrote emphasising that if one has to attain perfect purity, 'one has to become absolutely passion-free in thought, speech and action, to rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion' (Ibid). In order to attain this stage, man has to consider and put himself last among his fellow creatures, and strive continuously to attain salvation. Ahimsa is the best means, according to Gandhi, to attain this state.

Ahimsa, a much comprehensive principle, has a much deeper meaning in man's life and he cannot live without a conscious and unconscious tilt towards committing Himsa. Therefore ahimsa requires him to remain true to his faith and also remain a firm votary of truth if he has to develop compassion and self-restraint. Similarly also with firm adherence to truth, man should keep himself open to correcting his wayward behaviour and upon realising the mistake of committing wrong, should not only confess but also atone for it. Self-purification, if it has to be interpreted at a higher level, is the means that not only connects man to God but also helps in the enhanced enlightened consciousness that is complementary in nature to the former. Thus a religious life is a life of self-purification, a dedicated life to God as well as man (M. Chatterjee, p.94). Gandhi's experiments in letter and spirit were acts of attaining self-purification. Three most important ways of Gandhian self-purification include fasting, prayer and celibacy.

Gandhi undertook fasting as a means for paying for sin or violent streaks that surfaced in humankind from time to time. For example, he undertook fast following the violent incidents during the civil disobedience movement. To him, fasting was a spiritual effort, striving, penance and self-purification. The appeal to God, in whatever form, to rid the mankind from hatred and violence and inculcate in them a constant force of brotherhood marked the essence of Gandhi's prayer meetings.

Celibacy helps in the physical self-restraint and bestows mental freedom on man and is one of the best methods of achieving self-purification that has an abundant energy that is needed in a Satyagrahi. Gandhi also prescribed vegetarianism as one of the methods of purification wherein eating is an essential component, that has a direct effect upon man's mental faculties and which prevents him from becoming slave to animal instincts. Gandhi's methods have much religious significance as one scripture or other has prescribed these methods as effective tools to tame one's mind and make it subservient to the one and only supreme force, i.e. God.

8.7 ON GOD AND UNIVERSAL RELIGION

'There is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that 'I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses'.... a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and re-creates. That informing power or spirit is God' (Young India, 11-10-1928). Gandhi's concept of God cannot be defined as a typical or characteristically similar to Hindu conception of God, though Gandhi himself time and again proclaimed his staunch Hindu affiliation. Nevertheless, the impact of Hinduism was evident on this concept. God is not only formless, characterised by the law of love and dharma; God is truth, eternal, immeasurable and a power beyond human grasp. Gandhi characterised God as both personal and impersonal. This can be seen in the distinct *Advaitic* perspective distinguishing between the lower and higher levels of reality. Gandhi believed in the absolute oneness of God. Though he never termed Hinduism as polytheistic, he acknowledged the way Hindus would worship different Gods and Goddesses, but all leading to the one formless God.

Gandhi also characterised God as truth and also as a living faith. God, to him, is love, truth, ethics, fearlessness and a source of light, life and beyond and ultimately the 'conscience' (Young India, 5-3-1925). Gandhi's relentless search for truth made him realise that the law of love, in the form of non-violence and not as a passion, had few followers or believers. Even the so-called atheists who professed their non-faith in God were votaries of truth. He reminded that the concepts of truth as in the Hindu philosophy and also in Islam clearly stated the universality of God as the Supreme power, and it is the truth, via a spiritual realm, that takes us near to God. He reiterated this in the following words. 'I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found him, but I am seeking after him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. Even if the sacrifice demanded to be my very life, I hope I may be prepared to give it. But as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative Truth as I have conceived it' (My Religion, p.42).

'Satya or sat is that abiding, all-comprehensive, all-inclusive ground which holds and sustains everything' (Tiwari, p.61). Various forms and different names are attributed to God in order to enable man to establish his eternal relationship with the Supreme power and see God in all living and non-living beings. As Gandhi remarked, 'when I admire the wonder of a sunset or the beauty of the moon, my soul expands in worship of the creator. I try to see him and his mercies in all these creations' (Young India, 13-11-1924).

Universal Religion

By religion, Gandhi did not mean any conventional religion but 'that religion which is at

the root of all religion and that this fundamental religion harmonises the historical religions and makes them valid' (My Religion, p.3). He explained further that 'just as a tree has one trunk but many branches and leaves, so there is one true and perfect religion, although it is divided into many as it appears through a human intermediary' (From Yervada Mandir, p.39). Gandhi reiterated that 'God is Truth and 'Truth is God'. It was interpreted that he did this not only because of his experience in his search for God and adherence to truth but also to unite all Indians as difference of religions posed a major obstacle towards achieving Independence (Tahtinen, p.21). This was meant to be a psychological appeal to all, including atheists, so as not to divide on the basis of ideology. Gandhi's firm conviction that all religions lead to one God is based on his findings of all good and virtuous traits, almost similar in nature, in different religions. Further, Gandhi attributed the 'personal' dimension to religion for personal faith enables one to achieve perfection in the practice of one's own religion. Secondly, Gandhi did not attach any ritualistic importance to religion so as to suit different individuals in their approach to attaining God. Individuals should also enrich themselves by reading scriptures of others' faith and religion in order to foster unity and understanding among all. But without ethical and truthful angles, religion, however perfect a man may try to follow, serves no purpose in his self-realisation. For it blinds the man to any moral aspect which is not only essential for one's own spiritual progress but also in the service to others. All religions, their scriptures and values are of equal importance, to segregate them on the claims of superiority, Gandhi said, is not only deceitful but also deplorable. As he said, 'In God's house there are many mansions and they are equally holy' (My Religion, p.29).

The Concept of universal religion as propounded by Gandhi is best summarised in the words of Tahtinen: 'Gandhi's religiousness does not exclude or reject the criticism of religion, since the recognition of the fundamental equality of all religions does not destroy the distinction between religion and irreligion. We must not tolerate irreligion. Sanctifying a cruel custom is not religion, but irreligion. Religion which does not take the practical things of life into account and does not try to explain them is not true religion.' (Tahtinen, p.23).

8.8 SUMMARY

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' (Young India, 25-9-1925).

8.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by Gandhi's concept of religion?
2. Discuss Gandhi's views on different religions.
3. 'Hinduism is the basis of Gandhi's religious thought'. Discuss at length.
4. Write short notes on the following:
 - a) Inner / Self-purification
 - b) Gandhi's concept of God.
5. How important was 'The Gita' to Gandhi as a source of spiritual strength?

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