

GANDHIAN RELIGION

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Abstract

Though deeply religious, Gandhi cannot be categorized as belonging to any particular sect or creed. Like all great messiahs and masters, he rose above the practices of the day and brought out the essence from each faith, beautifully interweaving various religious traditions to create a mosaic of spirituality that was uniquely his own. Gandhi firmly believed that it is useless to preach something without practising it. To him, practice always came first. He lived a life where his mind, thoughts and actions were always in synergy with the principles he subscribed to, the ultimate goal of spirituality. During his 21 years in South Africa, Gandhi's way of thought and life completely changed. His thought and life were in complete synergy with each other, his actions were based on his thinking, were interwoven like lock and key. He was convinced that human actions sprang from both the head and the heart; and that individuals could not be shaken out of complacency on issues of vital importance by sermons and arguments alone. One had to touch their hearts and activate their conscience which can be done on the basis of religion.

Introduction

The magic of Mahatma Gandhi is that he defies categorization. Would one call him a saint, philosopher, social reformer, or politician? Actually, he was all of these and perhaps, much more than any of these. He was a deeply religious person, but there was not a single religion one could ascribe his beliefs to. He was greatly influenced by Vedanta, but was not really a traditional Vedantist. Vedantic thought tells us that the atman or self in each individual is essentially one, a part of the divine being or Brahman. While describing Brahman he said "In my opinion there is no such thing as inherited or acquired superiority. I believe in the rock-bottom doctrine of Advaita which excludes totally any idea of superiority at any stage whatsoever. For him Brahman meant Sat- Chit- Ananda, being eternal intelligence and bliss.

Though deeply religious, Gandhi cannot be categorized as belonging to any particular sect. or creed. Like all great messiahs and masters, he rose above the practices of the day and brought out essence from each faith, beautifully interweaving various religious traditions to create a mosaic of spirituality that was uniquely his own. Gandhi firmly believed that it is useless to preach something without practising it. To him, practice always came first. He lived a life where his mind, thoughts and actions were always in synergy with the principles he subscribed to, the ultimate goal of spirituality. During his 21 years in South Africa, Gandhi's way of thought and life completely changed. His thoughts and life were in complete synergy with each other, his actions were based on his thinking, were interwoven like lock and key. He was convinced that human actions sprang from both the head and the heart; and that individuals could not be shaken out of anxiety on issues of vital importance by giving sermons and arguments alone. One had to touch their hearts and activate their conscience which can be done on the basis of religion.

Gandhi's religion is not mechanical. His religion is not the religion of merely uttering the name of God or Allah. Religion, according to him, is not pride, pedantry or sophistry. Though the meaning of religion in the Hindu concept of Dharma is not without complexities, Gandhi tried to make it broad enough to lend it a universal character. His idea of religion was not totally obscure. He knew that every religion was connected with some belief system supported by rituals. He tried to get rid of the rituals as far as possible. To Gandhi religion was a human institution made by human ingenuity to solve practical affairs as well as spiritual matters. He was greatly influenced by Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism and Buddhism but his religious thought was infact different in itself, and though based on these religions his explanation of the same concepts was different.

For Gandhi, Truth or cosmic spirit was beyond all qualities including the moral. As he put it, 'Fundamentally God is indescribable in words'. The qualities we attribute to God with the purest of motives are true for us but fundamentally false. Gandhi articulated the nature of the cosmic spirit as follows. As one would expect in a man of action, he saw the cosmic spirit from the perspective of a life of action rather than meditation. First it was pure or spiritual consciousness. Secondly it acted in a rational and orderly manner and was never subjective or impulsive. Thirdly, it was active and represented infinite Shakti, force or energy. Fourthly, it pervaded, informed and structured the universe. Fifthly, it was compassionate. Since the cosmic spirit is supposed to be beyond good and evil, it is not entirely clear what Gandhi meant by calling it benevolent. He seems to have thought that although it was beyond

good and evil in the conventional moral sense, and although its actions were not amenable to moral evaluation, the fact that the universe functioned in a stable and rational manner, was conducive to the well-being of all living beings, and offered the necessary conditions for the good life showed that it had a structural bias towards good and was regulated by a well-meaning spirit. Since the cosmic spirit was not a being or a person Gandhi sometimes referred to it as 'it' Gandhi's conception of cosmic power becomes clearer when compared with the better-known Christian view of God. In its standard and popular version, the Christian religion stresses its three features. First, God is an extra-cosmic being who pre-exists and is outside the universe. Second he creates and imposes laws on the universe and ensures its orderly existence. Third, he is not only infinitely loving but also infinitely powerful, for to create and impose laws on the sun and the stars and the seas is obviously a dazzling and awe-inspiring display of power. These three features are closely inter-related. As the creator of the universe, God is necessarily extra - cosmic and power is obviously one of its most striking characteristics. Gandhi viewed the cosmic spirit differently. Since the universe for him was eternal, the question was not one of creating but one of ordering and structuring it. His cosmic spirit was therefore not a creator but a principle of order, a supreme intelligence infusing and regulating the universe from within. Gandhi agreed to go beyond observation and reason to enter the field of faith, and saw nothing wrong in doing this. As he believed human beings went beyond reason in most areas of life and could not live without faith, be it a faith in themselves, their family and friends, their ability to achieve difficult goals, or the belief that the sun would rise and the world would not come to an end tomorrow. Gandhi often invoked four criteria to determine when faith was rational or justified. First, it should relate to matters falling outside the purview of observation and reason. Whether sun will always rise from the east and set in the west or not or it's raining outside or not is a matter of empirical verification and not a matter of faith Second, faith should not contradict observation and reason. Third, since faith involved going beyond what could be observed and demonstrated, one must show that it was called for by, and had a basis or warrant in, experience. Finally, faith was calculated gamble in situations where the available evidence was questionable and was justified if it had beneficial consequences.

Unlike many believers, Gandhi advocated a strong view that there was an omnipotent God who created and presided over the universe, but a much weaker one that there was 'some' spiritual power who informed and 'gently' guided the universe. For Gandhi religion represented the way human beings perceived and related to God. Since he suggests both impersonal and personal conceptions of God, he distinguished two different levels of religion. The 'formal', 'customary', 'organized', or 'historical' religions were based on distinct conception of God. Conception of God is reduced to the limited categories of the human mind and invested with anthropomorphic characteristics. They involved prayer, worship, rituals, asking God for favours, and so on and were all sectarian. For Gandhi popular Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and all other religious belonged to this category. The 'true', 'pure', or 'eternal' religion go beyond this. It dispensed with rituals, worship and dogmas, and involved nothing more than a belief in the cosmic spirit and the commitment to realize in all areas of one's life. Such a religion represented the purest form of spirituality and acknowledged that the divine was too complex to be fully accepted by any one religion. For Gandhi religion was concerned with how one lived, not what one believed it to be faith is not dogmas of the 'dead bones'. Gandhi recognized that religion can be an extremely effective tool for social transformation. It had nothing to do with theory, which over-intellectualized religion, reduced it to a set of dogmas, and honoured belief over conduct. For Gandhi not spirituality but morality was the core of religion, and the latter was to be judged not by the philosophical rationality, but by its ideals and the quality of life they inspired.

For Gandhi every major religion articulated a unique vision of God and emphasized his different attributes. Gandhi adopted the idea of God as loving father, universal love, forgiveness and uncomplaining suffering from Christianity. For Gandhi every religion had a distinct moral and spiritual values, none less than the other but not necessarily completely truthful as all of them had some element of fabrication. As each religion has its uniqueness, it is impossible to say what are their positive or negative points, then how can one say which one is better. For Gandhi religion was the basis of life and shaped one's activities. It could not be compartmentalized, reserved for special occasions or days of the weak, or viewed as a preparation for another world. To be religious was to live in the constant presence of the cosmic spirit and to translate that awareness in his actions.

We can say Gandhi brought down religion from the theoretical, all exclusive world of selected few (who had the knowledge of Sanskrit), considered themselves to be the master of knowing and following the religion, to the common man. Gandhi believed no man can live without religion. There are some who is the egotism of their reason declare that they have nothing to do with religion. But it is like a man saying that he breathes but he has no nose. Whether by reason, or by instinct, or by superstition, man acknowledges some sort of relationship with the divine. But he said "by religion, I don't mean formal religion or customary religion, but that religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our maker". Gandhi's religious faith dictated that good always triumphed over evil and that all violence dissolved in the presence of non-violence.

For Gandhi to believe in God was to be open to all the religious traditions. For him religion was a resource, a body of insights to be extracted, combined and interpreted in the way he thought proper. His approach to religion was not bounded by any traditions, beliefs, or rituals. He was greatly influenced by the *anantavada*, which means there are different sides of the reality, and *Syad-vada* which says that every statement only presents a partial view of reality, and that : all statements should be prefaced by 'shyad' 'maybe' or 'from one point of view' of Jain doctrine. This principle became the basis of Gandhi's religious pluralism.

Religion is a universal phenomenon, found in all human societies and communities. It is defined as a belief in an unseen and mysterious power which has control over the living and non-living and all that exists and man owes his obedience and reverence to it. He believed that the action or the manner in which the task is done is more important than any achievement of the individual. It was the moral quality of action he was interested in not the worldly belongings Gandhi could not find God apart from rest of the human activity. He made religion, the religion of service and he held that God could be realized only through service.

Gandhi gave utmost importance to the purity of means and ends in recognition of the significance of the moral law binding on man. Gandhi believed that religions are not for separating men from one to another, but they are meant to bind them with each other. Gandhi was for religion, but he was not in favour of a particular religion. His religion was the religion that binds man with truth and his politics was to make man help seek the truth and serve humanity. That is why he did not separate either politics from religion or religion from politics. Politics divorced from religion, has absolutely no meaning. '....those who says that religion has nothing to do with politics does not know what religion means'. Hence, when asked how his principles could be applied to something as complex as politics, his answer was, "I cannot isolate politics from the deepest things of my life, for the simple reason that my politics is not corrupt, it is inextricably bound up with non-violence and truth." Gandhi identified absolute Truth with God....."There was a time when I doubted the existence of God, but even at that time I did not doubt the existence of truth. This Truth is not a material qualityIt is God because it rules the whole universe."

In a fable from the Mahabharata, Guru Dronacharya went on a trip for about 10 days and asked his disciples to learn as many shlokas as they could during this time. When he came back, all his disciples except one narrated many shlokas, and he was pleased with them. The exception was Yudhishtira. He had learnt only one verse. The guru was furious and gave him a whacking. Yudhishtira stoically bore the punishment and did not utter a single word. When his anger subsided, the guru asked Yudhishtira how he could be so irresponsible. Yudhishtira answered, "The shloka I learnt asked one to control anger. It took me full 10 days to do so but finally, I succeeded. I am glad I have truly learnt this shloka." Dronacharya was ashamed at his own lack of restraint and realized that true learning is in the application of what one has learnt. This fable symbolizes the belief of Gandhi, who firmly believed that it is useless to preach something without practising it. To him, practice always came first.

Mahatma Gandhi took religion to a phenomenal level, applying it to his personal as well as political life. He lived a life where his mind, thoughts and actions were always in synergy with the principles he subscribed to, the ultimate goal of spirituality. "We have to be the change we wish to see in the world," he said. Firmly believing that through satyagraha and ahimsa, one could achieve anything. *Gandhi considered the terms passive resistance and civil disobedience inadequate for his purpose, and that is why used a new term for it that is satyagraha which was based on courage.* Gandhi used ahimsa as a sweeping parameter to gauge the ethicality of any project or situation. A method 'Satyagrah' on the principles of courage and non-violence was developed, which promoted non-violence and civil disobedience as the most appropriate methods for obtaining political and social goals. Gandhi believed that if we needed to fight an imperial power then, we need to fight the evils that have permeated our society. Gandhi said that the enemy within us can be overcome only through ahimsa and satyagraha. Religion was for him not just a vague ideological background and a routine of occasional rituals. Religion was a way of life that penetrated in all the aspects of individual's private, public, and political activity. Gandhi did not observe Hindu ceremonies or holidays. He rarely visited temples except sometimes through courtesy. Believing in fundamental moral values common to all the great religions of the world, he said age old concepts of 'Truth and Non-Violence' are the essence of all the religions. Truth is the end and non-violence is the means of achieving that end, Non-violence is selfless, suffering love which is impossible without purity of mind and body. For him, spirituality necessarily required self-conquest, mastery of the senses, and was incompatible with the pursuit of bodily activities and pleasures.

Gandhi's Hinduism had little to do with its forms or ceremonies and the institutions that it had created within itself. He rejected everything that was against reason and against humanity. Though he loved to call himself an orthodox Hindu, he did not subscribe to the malicious and cruel system of untouchability. The one aspect of Hindu ritual Gandhi positively looked upon as part of the Ramrajya of the future was the temple. But this was not like the massive buildings dotted all over the land, but it was the village temple, which with its school, dispensary, and guest house,

constituted the social and spiritual meeting place for all the inhabitants of the village. Gandhi's religious faith dictated that good always won over evil and that all violence dissolved when practised non-violence. Gandhi held that through work, done as sacrifice, without attachment, and without craving for desired results and with equanimity, one could get the optimal results, 'Salvation' as he often said in accordance with the best thought of Hinduisms, 'Self-realization'. According to Gandhi man's ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities, political social and religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. For him religion was a resource, a body of insights to be extracted, combined and interpreted in the way he thought proper. His approach to religion was purely humanitarian. "To me God is truth and love; God is ethics and morality. God is fearlessness. God is the source of light and life and yet above and beyond all these God is conscience." For Gandhi Religion and morality were the same. They were interchangeable terms. Gandhi did not believe that religious activity was separate from other activities of life, which kept society together. For him the basic principles of this morality were truth and non-violence. Since spirituality consisted in becoming one with the cosmic spirit and cultivating the love of all living beings, it necessarily entailed morality. For Gandhi, service to one's fellow human, 'Sevadharma', or wiping away every tear from every eye in a spirit of universal love, was the new yugadharma and the central goal of all human activities He saw morality as serving and becoming one with all living beings. Morality consisted in doing what was right because one believed it to be right and required unity in belief and conduct. According to Gandhi, 'To observe morality is to attain mastery over ones mind and passions'. According to Gandhi one had to seek one's perfection not outside but within himself, not away from but in the midst of struggles against injustices, inequalities, oppression and other evils. He considered fast to be the most appropriate way of doing so. To Gandhi, his fasting was, in his own words, "the same kind of coercion which Jesus exercised upon you from the cross".

Regarding Satyagrah he said: "I have discovered from experience that it is the only religion and the only Chintamani (The philosopher's stone that yields all desires), and it has, developed in me especially its aspect as dharma". It was in the context of the transformation of Satyagrah into a religious endeavour that the idea of soul-force emerged in Gandhi's mind. On the occasion of the 1909 New Year, he wrote a reflective piece in 'Indian Opinion' as follows: 'Swadeshi means a reliance on one own strength ... The strength of our body, our mind and our soul. From among these, on which should we depend? The soul is supreme, and: Soul-force is the foundation on which men should build. Passive resistance or Satyagraha is a mode of fighting which depends on such force. Gandhian religion advocated Satyagrah as its philosophy. Gandhian religion is based on Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, Asangraha, Sharirashrama, Aswada, Sarvatra-bhaya-Varjana, Sarvadharma - Samanatva, Swadeshi, Sparsha bhavana (non-violence, truth, non-stealing, chastity, non-possession, physical labour, control of the palate, fearlessness, equality of all religions, swadeshi, discarding of untouchability). The first five of these are the basic moral principles of Hinduism and Jainism. The six others are their derivatives suited to the requirements of the times. Infact the two principles of Truth and Non-violence were elaborated into eleven principles.

He frankly admits that existence of God cannot be proved by reason though it is not against reason. He believed in God but for him God was the moral law, dharma. He considered that all those who believed in the moral law were spiritual even though they were so-called atheists. For him "God is truth and love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet he is above and beyond all these".

Man has an unquenchable thirst for God. Consequently he feels the urge to realize God, through the means propagated by his religion. Gandhi says: "Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God and all his activities, social, political and religious, have been guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. To realize God is to see Him in all that lives, that is, to realize our oneness with all creation. "It is in the critical moments of one's life, we have a glimpse of God, a vision of Him who is guiding every step of our life. He himself testifies to the fact that as days pass I feel this living presence in every fibre of my veins. Without that feeling I should be demented., so many events happen that would, without the realization of that presence, shake me to the very foundation." Thus he felt the indwelling presence of God within himself.

He explicitly states the characteristics of a real seeker of God in the following words: "A real seeker of God should be purified by prayer and always be prepared to share the suffering of man whoever they may be. This noble idea will have no influence unless one is convinced of the existence of the soul distinct from body and permanent. This recognition must not just be intellectual idea; it must be a living faith.' Gandhi was a firm believer in God. He claims to have a living faith in the abiding presence of God. Since Gandhi was a theist, he could not accept the illogical arguments of an atheist. For him, God is an unseen power. This idea is clear in the following words of Gandhi: "An indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything; a living power that is underlying all change in an ever-changing, ever-dying world is itself changeless, that holds all together, creates, dissolves, and recreates. That power or spirit is God".

Gandhi described 'Ramayana' of Tulsidas as the greatest book in all devotional literature. He saw it as embodying the idea that truth is the foundation of all merit and virtue and Ramnam is a door of purification even for the illiterate. Rama seen as an ideal man, with heroic qualities is regarded as God. Though he uttered Ramanama but he made it clear that Rama of his conception was not the husband of Sita or the son of Dasharatha but 'He' who abides in the hearts of men, the 'Antaryami'. He believed in a formless and attributable God. He frankly admits that existence of God cannot be proved by reason though it is not against reason. Gandhi's personal image of God was 'Ram'. In his autobiography, he said that he recited Ramayana Mantra 'Ram nam' to overcome his fear of ghosts and spirits. This 'Ramnam' mantra is the unfailing panacea for all ills. When he explained what the India of his dreams would be like, he often used the image of 'Ram Rajya', where there would be 'rights alike of prime and pauper, Sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority, rule-over self, 'the kingdom of righteousness on earth'.

Believing in God, Gandhi had great faith in prayer. Every morning and evening there were prayers in the Ashram, which were attended by the people having different faiths, but he never tried to convert them. Gandhi said "I do not believe in people telling others of their faith, especially with a view to conversion. Faith does not admit of telling. It has to be lived and then it becomes self-propagating. For me every, the tiniest activity is governed by what I consider to be my religion". Though he did not believe in image/ idol worship for himself but he had no objection to it for those who needed such symbols. He says: 'I do not disbelieve in idol worship. An idol does not excite any feeling of reverence in me. I do not forbid the use of images in prayer. I only prefer the worship of the formless. This preference is perhaps improper. One thing suits one man, another thing will suit another man, and no comparison can fairly be made between the two. He believed Idol-worship was like investing one's ideal with a concrete shape and as such inherent in human nature. Hindus do not make one god into many, but realised that man can worship God in different ways, because God has so many different forms. This allows everyone to worship God in the form he likes best, his form may be an idol of stone or gold, but it is worshipped as a form of the divine and this divinity is specifically attributed to it. Thus it becomes an aid to genuine divine worship and a method of reaching moksha. Gandhi's theory of human nature was closely bound up with his views on God and it was complex, at places deeply ambiguous, and not entirely consistent. He thought that three fundamental facts characterized human beings. First, they were an integral part of the cosmos. Second, they were necessarily interdependent and developed and fell together. And third, they were four-dimensional beings made up of the body, the means. Four dimensions of human being as considered by Gandhi are Body, Mind, Atman and Moksha.

Gandhi said "I am proud to belong to that Hinduism which is all inclusive and which stands for tolerance. Aryan scholars swore by what they called the Vedic religion and Hindustan is otherwise known as Aryavarta. I have no such aspiration. The Hindustan of my conception is all-sufficing for me. It certainly includes the Vedas, but it includes also much more. I can detect no inconsistency in declaring that I can, without in any way whatsoever impairing the dignity of Hinduism, pay equal homage to the best of Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism. Such Hinduism will live as long as the sun shines."

As Gandhiji's life consisted in nothing but seeking to practise his religion to the best of his ability, Gandhian religion can be best explained in these words 'Satyanasti Paro Dharmah' i.e. there is no religion other than or higher than truth. 'Ahimsa Parmo Dharmah' meaning love, non-violence is the law of life, is the greatest religion is the only religion.

The Gandhian religion is not merely for Hindus, not merely for India, but for the whole world. It has become quite clear that at this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only hope for mankind is Gandhi's principle of non-violence. Ahimsa, peace and non-aggression are the hallmarks of Gandhian Doctrine. He believed that the true worship of God consisted not in visiting temples but nursing the sick, helping orphans and improving the conditions of the poor and the untouchables. For Gandhi spinning was a way of identifying with the poor which is 'the greatest prayer, the greatest worship'. For Gandhi, wearing beads and saffron robes is not being religious, or visiting the so-called holy rivers and towns but visiting the places where the poor and the untouchables lived, working and living among them in the spirit of a pilgrim was a true pilgrimage. Gandhi's life was a religion in itself and people from all sects of religions were his followers. His life was an example to be followed. It was his selfless devotion, practice and individuality which made him popular among the masses of India. His brand of religion advocated bearing sufferings himself for others.

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