



PHILOSOPHY OF GANDHI: VIEWS ON RELIGION AND GOD

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Abstract

Religion, according to Gandhi, is more or less, a way of life, and as such is the personal concern of the individual who has to choose his way of life. Gandhi believes that different religions are the different ways of apprehending the Truth. The basic conviction of Gandhi is that there is one reality – that of God, which is nothing else but Truth. His religious ideas are also derived from that conviction. If Truth is God, sincere pursuit of Truth is religion. Religion is ordinarily defined as devotion to some higher power or principle, Gandhi is not against such a description of religion, he only qualifies it further by saying that higher principle being truth, devotion to Truth (or God) is religion.

Gandhi believes that true religion has to be practical. Therefore, he says that religion should pervade every aspect of our life. Religion is the belief that there is an ordered moral government of the universe, and this belief must have practical bearings for all aspects of life. According to Gandhi there is no difference between religious ideal and metaphysical or moral ideal, the religious way is also the way of truth – Sathyagraha. This paper discuss about Gandhi's ideas of God, religion, the way of religion and the religious harmony in the world.

Key words: religion, philosophy, truth, non-violence, God, knowledge, devotion.



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Introduction

It is true that Gandhi's thought has originality and freshness about it, but it carries on it the stamp of a number of influences. One of the earliest influences that provided to Gandhi's thought its backbone was that of ancient Hindu tradition. Tolstoy left his mark on the mind of Gandhi in various ways; especially his emphasis on the power and dignity of suffering gave to Gandhi an inspiration for developing his own notion of Sathyagraha. Likewise, the great American thinker Thoreau also influenced Gandhi a great deal. His idea of civil disobedience revealed to Gandhi the possibility of using non-violence as a technique for solving even the major problems of social and political life. Besides these he had also first-hand knowledge of Zoroastrianism and Islam and also the works of Ruskin and those of some of the theosophists

of the time. Gandhi carried on experiments after experiments on moral, religious and existential issues both in his inner life and in his outward existence; and his thought is nothing but a product of the series of experiments that he carried upon.

Religion in Gandhi

Religion, according to Gandhi, is more or less, a way of life, and as such is the personal concern of the individual who has to choose his way of life. The basic conviction of Gandhi is that there is one reality – that of God, which is nothing else but Truth. His religious ideas are also derived from that conviction. If truth is God, sincere pursuit of Truth is religion. Religion is ordinarily defined as devotion to some higher power or principle. Gandhi is not against such a description of religion, he only qualifies it further by saying that that higher principle being Truth, devotion to Truth (or God) is religion. He tries to give an outline of what he means by religion in the following lines. He says, *“Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion... but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one’s very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and whichever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the maker and itself.”* (Young India, 12-05-1920)

An explanation of the passage quoted above brings to light the salient features of Gandhi’s views on the nature of religion. *Firstly*, religion is the expression of the permanent nature of man. The animal and brutish aspect of man’s nature is not its permanent aspect, the permanent aspect is the aspect of Divinity – the element of essential goodness present in every man. *Secondly*, religion has the character of purifying and elevating one’s nature. Gandhi believes that true religious spirit has the capacity of changing one’s nature because it is the expression of the good elements present in man. *Thirdly*, religion has the power of arousing in man a sense of spiritual restlessness – a kind of thirst – which enables the individual to cultivate and develop a sense to the right and the good, and makes him a truly moral man. *Fourthly*, religious aspiration is based on a desire and a cognitive urge to know ‘the beyond’. It has somehow the feeling that the ultimate religious ideal is nothing but the realization of God. *Fifthly* and *finally*, religion involves a conscious and sincere love and striving for Truth. Without these all-other characters of religion would be ineffective. Therefore, Gandhi says that there is no religion higher than Truth and righteousness.

The way of religion

For Gandhi, religion is not just a theoretical concept that seeks to satisfy intellectual curiosity and urges, it is, for him the way of life, a practical necessity. In fact, he feels that a religion which takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them is no religion. He believes that true religion has to be practical. Therefore, he says that religion should pervade every aspect of our life. Religion is the belief that there is an ordered moral government of the universe; and as such, this belief must have practical bearings for all aspects of life.

What would be the way of the realization of the religious ideal? As for Gandhi there is no difference between religious ideal and metaphysical or moral ideal, the religious way is also the way of Truth – Satyagraha. The ideal is the ‘realization of God’. One is right on the way if he is following the path of Truth and Non-violence. Even so, Gandhi does make a mention of such exclusively religious practices as prayer, surrender to God’s will by subordinating one’s body and mind to the call of Truth, self-sacrifice, renunciation, love and tolerance etc.

He says, *“Prayer is the very soul and essence of religion, and therefore, prayer must be the very core of the life of the man, for no man can live without religion”* (Young India, 23-01-1930). “But, at this point a question may arise, which Gandhi has been able to anticipate. “But why pray at all? Does not God, if there be one, know that has happened? Does He stand in need of prayer to enable Him to do His duty? No, God needs no reminder. He is within everyone. Nothing happens without His permission. Our prayer is a heart search. It is a reminder to ourselves that we are helpless without His support. No effort is complete without prayer – without a definite recognition that the best human Endeavour is of no effect if it has not God’s blessing behind. Prayer is a call to humanity. It is call to self-purification to inward search” (Harijan, 08-06-1935). Prayer, thus, makes us purer and brings us nearer to God. Through prayer we are able to gain strength and prepare ourselves to share the sufferings of others.

Religion demands the awakening of the spiritual aspects of man, for that it is essential to subdue and to put a check on the bodily and the sensuous aspects of man. This requires a ruthless curtailing of all our selfish motives – an attempt to reduce ourselves to zero. This is a kind of self-sacrifice and renunciation. But this renunciation is not escape. Gandhi does not believe in flying away from the world. True renunciation means renouncing of the selfish and the personal for the good of others. Gandhi recommends that the religious man must practice renunciation by living in the midst of men.

That would mean that he will have to cultivate and develop a cold, indifferent and detached attitude towards worldly gains and losses. Gandhi, following his philosophy of means and end, recommends that a certain way of practicing this kind of renunciation is to do one's duty and work without caring for – or without thinking of – the fruits or consequences of his actions. Gandhi, in fact, is following the path of 'Nishkama Karma' as shown by the Gita. Gandhi calls the Gita his Guru and tries to follow the Kara-marga as preached in the Gita. Renunciation, therefore, means selfless action for the good of humanity. In fact, the religious recommendation is that the fruits of one's effort are to be left to God, they are his concern not ours.

Gandhi on God and truth

It is extremely difficult to reduce Gandhi's philosophy of God to any of the accepted philosophical models. But Gandhi's philosophy of God is strictly theistic in character. It is true that at times Gandhi, more or less like an *Advaitist*, talks of the nirguna character of the real. But that is so because he feels that the academic distinction between 'saguna' and 'nirguna' is irrelevant for the beliefs and practices of a true believer. In fact, he feels that God is needed not merely for the satisfaction of reason or intellectual curiosity, but also for providing strength and solace. A faith in God must enable an individual to be in peace with the world. He says, "...*He is no God who merely satisfies the intellect, if He ever does. God to be God, must rule the heart and transform it*" (Young India, 31-12-1931). This is possible only where an inter-personal relationship is possible, and when only God is conceived as a person. Gandhi was deeply impressed by the life and practices of the saints of the Bhakti-cult, and therefore, it was not difficult for him to arrive at the conception of a personal God. He was helped in arriving at this notion of God by his studies of the Bible and the Quran.

Truth is God

Gandhi says, "*In my early youth I was taught to repeat what in Hindu scriptures are known as one thousand names of God. But these one thousand names of God were by no means exhaustive. We believe that God has as many names as there are creatures and therefore, we also say that God is nameless, and since God has many forms we also consider Him as formless, and since He speaks to us in many tongues, we consider Him to be speechless and so on...if it is possible for the human tongue to give the fullest description, I have come to the conclusion that for myself God is Truth*" (Young India, 11-10-1928). But later on, Gandhi, instead of asserting the previous statement 'God is Truth', came to assert the statement 'Truth

is God'. This shows that there is a very strong reason for bringing about this change. One reason for this change is that the word Truth is not as ambiguous as the word God. Nobody understands the exactly the same thing by the word 'God', God may be pantheistic, theistic, polytheistic, or even deistic. But, the word 'Truth' is always clear in its significance. Reason can raise arguments against the possibility of God's existence, but reason cannot reject Truth. In fact, Truth provides a common platform to both the theist and the atheist. Truth is the only factor which is completely universal and comprehensive. Blind religious notions about God have done immense of damage to mankind, and therefore, the emphasis has to shift from God to Truth.

What is Truth? In the logical sense of the word 'Truth', truth is considered to be a property of judgment, but, in the metaphysical context Truth is conceived differently – it is conceived as right knowledge, as knowledge that corresponds to reality. Gandhi explicitly asserts that the word 'Satya' is derived from 'Sat', and this leads him to identify Satya with reality. There are certain interesting implications of Gandhi's assertion that Truth is God. These implications have both a pragmatic value and a religious value. One very significant implication of this assertion is that the object of worship is not God but Truth. This can very well become a basis for a really universal religion because 'worship of Truth' is one thing that can bring persons of every caste, creed and nation together. Truth appeared to him as the only force that could unify even conflicting ideas and ideals.

Critics of Gandhi often point out that Gandhi does not give regard to 'reason' in formulating his ideas about God. Gandhi's *causal argument* for the existence of God makes its appearance in the form of Descartes' Cosmological proof. Gandhi argues in the following manner: we exist, our parents have also existed, and the parents of our parents have also existed. This question can be extended further and further, and thus, it can very legitimately be asked, 'who originates the whole of creation?' who is the parent of the whole universe? Gandhi feels that one can reasonably arrive at the concept of God in this way. God can be conceived as the 'parent' of the whole universe. This process of arriving at the concept of God very well resembles 'the causal proof', which starts with the universe, seeks for its cause and arrives at the concept of God.

One can find traces of, what is called, the Teleological proof for God's existence, in the following kind of references that Gandhi frequently gives. He says, 'I subscribe to the belief or the philosophy that all life in its essence is one. This belief requires a living faith in a

living God who is the ultimate arbiter of our fate.’ (N. K. Bose, *Selections from Gandhi*, p. 26)

But the proof that appears to be most convincing to Gandhi is the Moral proof. He seems to be convinced that the voice of conscience carries a dependable testimony for God's existence. Conscience, according to him, represents the Divine in man. It has an awareness of the good and bad. It sanctions the good and condemns the bad. The peculiarity about this inner voice is that whenever it speaks it speaks with an authority. For Gandhi, there seems to be no other explanation of this call of conscience except the fact that it is a representative of a Being who is at once the embodiment of Supreme Goodness. He clearly says, “I have no special revelation of God's will. My firm belief is that He reveals himself daily to every human being but we shut our eyes to the ‘still small voice.’” (N. K. Bose, *Selections from Gandhi*, p. 10)

Then, at times, a reference is made to a kind of proof that can be called ‘Pragmatic proof’. Gandhi believes that a belief in God's existence is necessary because God satisfies a very important aspect of our life. If survey our life we find that, over and above the wants and needs of everyday existence, we do have an urge of a different kind which cannot be satisfied with the usual materialistic fulfillments of life, and which demands a spiritualistic satisfaction. We become keenly conscious of such an urge in the movements of anxiety and crisis, when we feel forsaken by all the worldly and materialistic ways of life. Then we clearly realize that we are in need of a supreme object of love, having a faith in which, we can derive strength and happiness. This supreme object of love is nothing but God.

But the fact remains that, according to Gandhi, proofs cannot serve the function of producing a faith in the existence of God. Gandhi is aware that God can be felt through actual experience. He does not outline the condition or the nature of such an experience. At times, of course he does refer to moral sense and to moral experience. Thus, it is apparent that, according to Gandhi, God not only transcends senses, but also defies rational proofs. God is a matter of inner realization and faith.

Characteristics of God

Gandhi never misses an opportunity of trying to describe the characteristics of God. The characters mentioned by him are generally theistic, but they bear the mark of Gandhi's basic conviction, namely that ‘Truth is God.’

Gandhi conceives God as all-pervasive. God is the reality in which everything lives and moves. In conceiving God in this manner Gandhi is almost identifying the metaphysical

reality with the theistic God, and in the process, he is also identifying character of all-pervasiveness with that of omnipresence. He says' "There is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen power that makes itself felt and yet defies proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses." (Young India, October 11, 1928)

God is also, at times, described as Law. Although this description creates the impression that God is an impersonal principle, Gandhi rises above such an impression when he says that God's Law and God are not different from each other. God himself is the Law.

Gandhi very often calls God 'Love'. The full implication of this description of God will be clear only when Gandhi's conception of Love and Ahimsa is fully grasped, but one thing seems to be fairly evident that there can be no other way of apprehending God than the way of Love. God is present in every one of us by a gradual process of extending Love we can love everybody and there by God himself. This kind of love demands a kind of self-sacrifice – a sacrifice of the egoistic and selfish ways for the love and the good of others. Gandhi says, "I have but shadowed forth my intense longing to lose myself in the external and to become merely a lump of clay in the Potter's divine hands so that my service may become more certain because uninterrupted by the baser self in me." (Young India, November 17, 1921)

Religion and Morality

In a philosophical account of the thoughts and believes of a particular thinker 'religion' and 'morality' ought to be dealt with separately because, philosophically speaking, the two concepts are basically different. Moral values are essentially this-worldly, they are concerned with life as it is lived. Religious values have a reference to the 'beyond'. It is quite possible for the two to co-exist, but conceptually they are different. In Gandhi's thought they almost overlap. Gandhi believes that true religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. He would unhesitatingly reject any religious doctrine that conflicts with morality. He would be prepared to accept even unreasonable religious sentiment if it is not immoral. He says, "As soon as we lose the moral basis, we cease to be religious. There is no such thing as religion over-riding morality. Man for instance cannot be untruthful, cruel and incontinent and claim to have God in his side." (Young India, November 24, 1921)

It has been said earlier that morality represents the core – the essence of religion. According to Gandhi, true religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. Religion

is to morality what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil. Just as water causes the seed to sprout and grow, so religion causes moral sense to grow and develop.

There is a very logical reason for this. For Gandhi, the religious ideal is the realization of Truth or God. God is the essential unity of everything. Now if this unity is to be realized, one must go beyond oneself-beyond one's selfish consideration and love others. This act of self-transcendence is nothing but morality. God can be discovered by trying to find Him in His creation, and that would be possible only by loving all and by serving all. This is morality. Therefore, D.M. Datta observes, "The path to the realization of the True self or God, therefore, lies through the love of others and the performance of duties towards others as love demands. Morality thus becomes the essence of religion."

What is Morality?

Ethical philosophers have analyzed the concept of morality and have been able to see that the question of morality can be raised only with respect to such actions which have the quality of being called either good or bad. Instinctive actions or reflex actions which are more or less automatic fall beyond the scope of morality. That is why it is said that only voluntary actions can be called moral. Voluntary actions are voluntary, that is to say, they are the results of the free decision of the doer. Therefore, they can be either good or bad.

One would be amazed to find that Gandhi's description of moral actions is quite close to the academic description of it. He clearly says that no action which is not voluntary can be called moral. So long as we act like machines, there cannot arise any question of morality. If we call an action moral, it means that it has been done consciously and as a matter of duty. Any action that is dictated by fear or by coercion of any kind ceases to be moral. It also follows that all good deeds that are prompted by hope of happiness in the next world ceases to be moral.

In another sense, Gandhi's description of 'morality' is not so close to its academic description. Academically even actions that can be described as 'bad' are moral because they are voluntary, but according to Gandhi, moral actions would include only good actions. In ethical philosophies of the academic type the opposite of 'moral' is 'non-moral', but in Gandhian philosophy the opposite of 'moral' is 'unmoral'. Whatever is good and virtuous is moral, a sense to the good and the bad is the moral sense, and trying to live in accordance with the dictates of the moral sense is Morality.

But, if the good consists in doing good to others, it would involve sacrificing one's personal motives for the good of others. That means that Self-transcendence or Love constitutes the essence of morality. Love, according to Gandhi, is Divine; it makes performance of duty not only a convenience, but also a duty. But, Love at times, tends to be blind. This may lead to dogmatism and even to barbarism and fanaticism. Therefore, Gandhi says that morality does not consist in loving blindly; it loves with the full consciousness and knowledge of love. Love in ignorance tends to become sensuous and narrow; knowledge will break its bonds and barriers. A good action requires and is based on knowledge of its factors, conditions, motives etc. Knowledge, therefore, is an essential aspect of morality.

Morality thus is obeying the voice of the conscience with the fully knowledge of the conditions that make this call imperative or obligatory. In fact, morality, according to Gandhi, is nothing but Satyagraha. The requirements of morality are nothing but the requirements that a true Satyagrahi has to meet.

Attitude towards living Religions

Religion, according to Gandhi, is more or less, a way of life, and as such is the personal concern of the individual who has to choose his way of life. But, if an individual has the freedom to take to the religious way of his own liking, he must also have a tolerance and a respect for the points of view that others might have chosen for themselves. Therefore, he recommends that the attitude towards different religions must be one of tolerance and respect. In his case it is much more than that. Although sometimes an impression is created that he has a special liking for Hinduism, his attitude towards other religions is one of reverence. He was born in a Hindu family and so the way and the atmosphere in which he grew and developed implanted in his mind the elements and tenets of Hinduism. Naturally, the Gita and the Ramayana became his two invariable companions.

But he made a study of many great religious scriptures- of the Bible and the Quran- and he came under the influence of a number of saints and religious teachers. All these led him to believe that different religions are the different ways of apprehending the Truth.

Gandhi believes that every religion contains good precepts and noble teachings; he also finds that some of the interpretations and commentaries have degraded religion and distorted it. He also finds that almost every religion has given rise to some fanatic and unreasonable practices. Therefore, his conviction is that all religions are good as well as bad, basically good- good in conceiving its ideal, but bad in giving rise to hatred, crusades and fanaticism.

The experience of communal riots in India strengthened his belief. Therefore, he suggests that religions- historical religions-must not be allowed to cross the limits of reason of 'sober reason', as he calls it. He is convinced that this element or 'rationality' will be able to bring about, what can be called, 'a fellowship of all religions' or, 'the kingdom of God'- a Christian expression which he also approvingly uses on various occasions.

His attitude towards all historical religions can be summed up in his own words. Describing his attitude on the matter as early as in 1921, he says, "After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that (1) all religions are true, (2) all religions have some error in them, (3) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, inasmuch as all human beings should be as dear to one as one's own close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faiths; therefore, no thought of conversion is possible. The aim of fellowship should be to help a Hindu to become a better Hindu, a Musalman to become a better Musalman, and a Christian a better Christian. Our prayer for others must be NOT "God, give him the light thou hast given me," BUT "Give him all the light and truth he needs for his development". Pray merely that your friends may become better men, whatever their form of religion."

This shows that in spite of the fact that he does not attach much importance to historical religious institutions, he has profound respect and reverence for all religions. How he hopes to combine rationality with religion can be well illustrated by the manner in which he remembers Christ-the Savior. He says, "God did not bear the cross only 1,900 years ago, but He bears it today, and He dies and is resurrected from day to day. It would be poor comfort to the world if it had to depend upon a historical God who died 2,000 years ago. Do not then preach the God of history, but show Him as He lives today through you."

Attitude towards Hinduism

In trying to determine Gandhi's attitude towards Institutional religions, it is essential to make a mention of his attitude towards Hinduism in particular. He himself describes his attitude in this way, "I can no more describe my feeling for Hinduism than for my wife. She moves me as no other woman in the world can. Not that she has no faults. I dare say she has many more than I see myself. But the feeling of an indissoluble bond is there. Even so I feel about Hinduism with all its faults and limitations. Nothing elates me so much as the music of the Gita or the Ramayana of Tulasidasa, the only two books in Hinduism I may be said to know." On account of such an attitude towards Hinduism Gandhi is at times accused of being

partisan to Hinduism. But Gandhi tries to make it clear that his love for Hinduism is not a 'bias' for Hinduism.

He says that every individual is born in a cultural environment, the traditions of which become important and significant for him. Birth may be an accident, but the traditions and heritage that birth brings with it are very significant. It is unnecessary –and perhaps futile too– to try to negate or ignore them. What is required is the proper development of the traditions. Gandhi feels that his initial education and the manner of his upbringing along with the religious traditions of his birth created such conditions that Hinduism suited him best. He feels that everybody is free to cling to the religion of his choice, and Gandhi's choice was for Hinduism.

Gandhi has definite views with regard to some of the important Hindu doctrines, some of which he openly condemns, some he likes and approves and some others influence and determine his own thought. For example, condemning Untouchability he says that Hinduism has sinned in giving sanction to untouchability. He goes on to say that the Hindu practice of untouchability degraded us to the extent that we have become pariahs. Again, speaking against animal sacrifice he says that such acts cannot be approved in spite of the fact that animal sacrifice finds a place in the Vedas, because they are against the fundamental principles of Truth and Non-Violence.

In spite of these references, it can safely be said that his religious ideas are influenced by Hinduism. In fact, even the attitude of tolerance that he recommends for other faiths is derived from Hinduism, especially from the Gita where the value of other ways and paths has also been recognized.

His idea of God itself is derived from some kind of Vaisnava Theism. The Hindu ideas of Incarnation, Idol Worship, importance of heredity etc. have all found explicit mention in the writings of Gandhi, with the difference that they have all been colored in the light of the personal convictions and experiences of Gandhi. One particular Hindu idea that has been approvingly mentioned time without number is the idea of Varna along with the Varnasrama Dharma. Gandhi regards Varnasrama as a healthy division of work based on birth. The present idea of caste, according to him, is a perversion of the original system. Varna, according to Gandhi, does not admit the superiority or the inferiority of any varna over any other, it is purely a question of duty. It simply means that one has to perform the duties that his forefathers had been performing. In fact, the original recommendation was based on the

consideration that man is born with some specific missions, obligations and duties. He must do his share of work for the preservation and growth of his species. One is not born for the purpose of amassing wealth, because there would be no limit to it and consequently man will forget the basic mission which he has to fulfill in life- namely, that of awakening his spiritual elements. Gandhi finds this system to be advantageous in many ways. It is advantageous economically, because it involves a division of labor. It ensures hereditary skill, and as such limits undesirable competition. It has all the advantages of trade-unions and above all it reduces the possibility of individual poverty or pauperism to the minimum. Socially speaking also this system succeeds in promoting social cohesion, if of course it is not abused. Even politically and religiously this system had worked well, because every community used to manage its internal affairs through its varna system. But somehow, the system disintegrated and gave rise to many castes. Gandhi feels that the present caste-system with the existing innumerable divisions and with the artificial divisions imposed upon it, is the very antithesis of Varnasrama. In fact, Gandhi tries to incorporate Varnasrama in his socio-political scheme.

Conclusion

Gandhi was essentially a man of religion. He was not religious in the ordinary sense in which religion is understood in India. It was religion based on truth and love or non violence. That is why religion for Gandhi became the basis of all his activities, it became his philosophy of life, it functioned as a source of strength in him. He made it clear that religion in its real sense could become the basis of friendship among all man-kind. He considered different religions as the different roads going towards the same distinction. On the basis of his own experience and study of different religions he came to the conclusion that all religions were true and based on the same principles of truth and love. he emphasized repeatedly that religions were not for separating men from one another but rather for binding them. According to Gandhi the aim of religion was to lead man face to face with God. He considered God as identical to Truth. To Gandhi the nearest approach to Truth or God was through love of mankind. As it has been earlier pointed out, he took love in the sense of non-violence. It was on this understanding that Gandhi tried to explain that differences in religions were only in their methods of approach to God.

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