

Relevance of Gandhi's Concept of Religion

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

Key words: Ahimsa, moral, politics, Truth, religion.

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is no question of doubt that Gandhi's concept of religion is an important concept for social uniformity and equality. There is an intimate relation between religion and morality. Unless he is moral, he cannot claim himself to be religious according to Gandhi. Religion is meaningless, unless there is morality. Thus, for Gandhi, religion and morality supplement one another and they are in no way opposed. Again, Gandhi insists on reason. Reason is associated with morality. Gandhi said, "Ethics and religion are convertible terms." [1] What man tends to overcome is immorality. Instead of immorality, morality and impartiality makes man truly religious man. Only truly religious man can attain Truth is God in Gandhi's language. It is religion that makes man possible to attain the truth via self-realization. Precisely speaking, if an individual followed the path of love, he is right in his way to achieve the Truth, otherwise not. Truth can be attained by means of *ahimsa* only. *Ahimsa* develops inner moral quality of man from within. Therefore, we should practice *ahimsa* (love) in each and every aspect of our life including politics.

II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The present paper is an attempt to show that the relevance of Gandhi's concept of religion in 21st century world. Instead of evil, Gandhi's concept of religion gives importance to social reform and international justice to the modern mind.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this paper we basically confined ourselves to develop a theoretical approach with a comparative outlook from East as well as western literature. Therefore, the methodology would be a Theoretical one, not a Field base one.

IV. DERIVATIVE MEANING OF RELIGION

It is impossible to give a precise definition of 'religion'. Even each and every definition limits its sense and scope. Though no perfect definition of the word 'religion' is possible, Philosophers, Sociologists, Psychologists, Theologians and others defined religion from their own perspectives. The word 'religion' derives from 'religare'. It means 'bind together' signifying performance of particular type of activities to show reverence and respect towards God. This is the reason why religion is essentially a principle of practical life. It is the expression of the everlasting and permanent metaphysical truth.

V. NECESSITY OF RELIGION

It would not be an exaggeration if we claim that man is religious by nature. However, it is impossible to give a conclusive definition of religion as just mentioned above. There are certain characteristics forms of human act and belief which are usually considered as religious such as worship, separation of sacred from the

profane, belief in the soul, belief in Allah or God and quest for liberation. Indeed, religion presupposes cosmic order. All religions agree that the soul of man strives for harmony with cosmic order. This order of principle is rationalized as "Reason or God or Being" [2]. Religion is a matter of life and experience. The necessity of religion is the inner necessity, which exists in and for itself as springing out of the inmost nature of man and God as spirit. God necessarily reveals Himself in and through other spirits and so produces a close relation between God and man. This is the reason why Gandhi insists on religion in his philosophy of life.

VI. RELIGION ACCORDING TO GANDHI

Gandhi gave a practical colour to the superior principle of religion in individual life and in the social and political plane. Gandhi's family belonged to **Vaishnavism**. Thus, from his family, especially from his mother, he learnt the truth, i.e., *mukti* is possible by *devotion to God and service to humanity*. Here Gandhi was influenced by the **Ramayana**, the **Gita**, the **Holy Qur'an**, the **Bible** etc. Gandhi referred to the **Gita** as his mother. In his own words, "Today the Gita is not only my **Bible**, or my **Koran** ...it is my mother." [3] Even Gandhi was influenced by Buddhism, Jainism, Tolstoy and Ruskin. Besides, as a seeker of truth Gandhi was influenced by Socrates and Thoreau. As a result, Gandhi transformed Thoreau's civil disobedience into civil resistance or non-violent resistance.

Gandhi means religion as *self-realization*. The basic conviction of Gandhi is that there is only one reality, i.e., God is Truth. If Truth is God then sincere pursuit of Truth is religion. Therefore, religion is ordinarily defined as devotion to some higher or absolute power. However, he was not against such a description of religion. He only qualifies it further by saying that the higher principle being Truth, devotion to truth is religion. He said that "What I mean by religion 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..."[4]

VII. FEATURES OF GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF RELIGION

Putting everything into perspectives, we would attempt to show the basic characteristics of Gandhi's concept of religion as under:

First, Dharma is the manifestation of an infinite or eternal truth of human.

Secondly, religion has the character of purifying and elevating one's nature.

Thirdly, religion has the power of arousing in man a sense of spiritual restlessness, i.e., a kind of thirst, which enables the individual to cultivate and develop a sense of 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' i.e., the Absolute.

Fifthly and lastly, religion involves a conscious and sincere love and striving for truth. For Gandhi, there is no religion over and above the truth. Religion has to be practical in that it pervades **social, political and moral or ethical** aspects of human life.

VIII. RELIGION AND MORALITY

According to Gandhi, belief in one God is the main theme of all religions. However, this does not mean that there are no differences among the religions of the world. Despite the differences among religions, there is an underlying unity among all religions and it is necessary to discover the underlying unity among all religions. To do this a master key is needed. This master key is nothing, but Truth and non-violence. Gandhi claimed that Truth is God and *ahimsa* is the way of realizing Truth or God. For him, the aim of human life is to realize this Truth which is the attainment of salvation. Life is a unity. It cannot be divided into parts like social, political and religious and so on. The spiritual law expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. So, service to man is service to God. For him, religion is the law of life and God is the living power. Religion provides a moral basis to all our activities. Thus, his mission was to humanize *dharma* and to moralize it. Because true dharma and true morality are always together. It is impossible to separate them from one another. Thus, Gandhi refuses any religious doctrine which is not associated with morality. For Gandhi 'God is Truth and love, ethics and morality'[5]. Here it is important to observe that no one can realize God with an impure heart. That is why nobody can evade the utility of ethical life. Moral life is necessary for spiritual purification. Here is the relevance of Gandhi's concept of religion is not contrary to morality.

The nuclear element in Gandhi's thought is his idea of God. God gives us reason. Man can distinguish between what is right or good or consistent and inconsistent or incorrect or bad via reason. Reason makes man moral or what is morally good as reason is God-given. In this sense, if any tradition is inconsistent with morality then it should be thrown out. This is the reason why Gandhi will be remembered both as a saint and as a religious reformer. He said that no religion is false. Here it is worthy to note that in 1928 he acknowledged that every religion is true. Alternatively, it is wrong to harbor the feeling of superiority of one's faith in comparison to that of one's neighbor. Thus, Gandhi likened different religions to different roads covering to the same point.[6] If

we read carefully the scriptures of the different faiths from the standpoint of a sympathetic reader, we can find their essential unity. "They were at bottom all one and were all helpful to one another." [7]

IX. UNIVERSAL CHARACTER OF RELIGION

Gandhi believed in one God. Belief in one or single God is the subject matter of all religions. However, we cannot predict a time when there would be only one religion on earth. Even it is true to say that there is one single God according to theory. As a matter of fact there can be one religion without a second. But in practice it is totally different from one individual person to another individual person. Now the question arises: how is it possible? At this juncture it can be said that there may always be possibility of different religions for different conceptions of God. For example, the tree has a single trunk and a number branches and leaves. In the same vein of tree, there is one and only one kind of religion. For him, the one real religion is beyond all speech and imperfect men describe and interpret it differently. Gandhi ruthlessly tries to find out a universal character of religion. Thus, he developed the concept of *Sarva Dharma Samabhava*. His conception of *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* is very near to Swami Vivekananda's religion and Tagore's religion of man.

Gandhi's love for Hinduism is unique. However, it is not Hindu religion which he certainly prized above all other religions, but he was never shy of calling himself a Hindu, a *sanatani* Hindu. His feeling for Hinduism is of its own kind. To quote that "I can no more describe my feeling for Hinduism than for my wife, an indissoluble bond is there- even so I feel about Hinduism with all its faults and limitation... I am a reformer through and through..." [8] He further says, "Hinduism is like the Ganges, pure and unsullied ..." [9] It is the Hindu system of philosophy which has taught Gandhi "to regard all religions as containing the element of truth and enjoin an attitude of respect and reverence towards them all." [10] Though Gandhi does not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas, yet such a liberal belief is the result of Hindu tradition. Hinduism provided Gandhi with strong moral and spiritual base and abundant openness and rational outlook.

X. MEANS AND END

Gandhi's view of religion is pragmatic. Religion in the sense of spiritual realization along with social advancement and freedom is the end and morality is the means. Means and ends are convertible terms in Gandhi's philosophy of life. Men can have control over the means, but not over the end. Impure means must result in an impure end. Here it important to note that Gandhi believed in the law of karma and Gita's view of *Niskama Karma* regarding the means. Gandhi was convinced that if one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself. *Ahimsa* is the supreme virtue. Non-violence is the means for attaining Truth which another name for God.

XI. DOGMA FREE RELIGION

Gandhi refers to the charge against Hinduism that it is polytheistic in nature. According to Gandhi, "they do say there are many Gods, but they also declare...that there is one God, God of Gods ... I believe that though Hindu I do not believe in many Gods." [11] The world is a reality and God is its creator. According to Gandhi, self surrender to God is essential for spiritual realization. Like a staunch theist, Gandhi had an avowed faith in the efficacy of prayer. Gandhi has no anthropomorphic conception of God. He does not worship God as a human being as Gandhi claims that his Rama is not historical. Rama is undying, unborn and one according to Gandhi. Thus, like Vivekananda and Tagore, Gandhi had no sympathy for religions characterized by unintelligible rituals and dogmas. His religion is not confined to temples, books, churches, rituals and other outer forms. According to Gandhi, religion does not mean a set of dogmas nor does it mean conformity to rites and rituals.

XII. RELIGION AND DHARMA

Gandhi used both the term *religion* and *dhrama* in the one and same sense. The term *Dharma* comes from the Sanskrit origin, i.e., from the 'dhri' which means bind together. Dharma is, therefore, the sustaining force of the universe which binds and holds together. Religion, according to Gandhi, is the sustaining force which gives us the principle of brotherhood. In Gandhi's conception religion is also the law, the dharma which sustains the universe. But he was against that religion which was not supported by reason. He enjoins an attitude of respect and reverence towards all religions since they all contain an element of Truth. Gandhi was fortunate to have as his colleagues' persons belonging to different religions and creeds. Two striking examples are those of Abul Kalam Azad, a devout Muslim and Rev. C. R. Andrews who was a Christian Missionary. In India Gandhi dedicated his entire life to the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity.

XIII. REPUBLIC OF RELIGIONS

According to Gandhi, religion is indifferent from human activity. He has the feeling of something close to him, a spiritual presence. Gandhi conceives that God is like a mountain. Rational beings have to go up the mountain via different pathway, but that which we seek is the same. What it reflects that the **Allah** of Islam is the same as the **God** of Christians and the **Iswar** of Hindus. There are many names of God. However, these various names of the Absolute power do not hinge individuality. Rather, they hinge attributes. Human being explains God by giving attributes. But God is beyond all attributes. Religion is man's faith in God. Gandhi gives much more on faith. For Gandhi, belief or faith in eternal God means love for each and every religion. Since there is no other God than Truth, the only means for the realization of truth is **love** or **Ahimsa**. Love alone can hold together different elements in a beautiful artistic harmony. Accordingly, Gandhi entertained equal respect for all religions, and stressed the need for developing *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* in national life with a view to establishing **Secular Democracy** in India. This notion of secularism implies an attitude of accepting all religions rather than rejecting all religions. Radhakrishnan and Gandhi were two more eminent exponents of this view based on the principle of **unity in diversity** which alone has the quality of creativeness. According to Gandhi, secularism is described here as a technique of building a national political community in a situation of religious pluralism, and it also helps to grow new common social goals. Gandhi's movement for independence was a secular movement. In short, the Gandhian ideal about religions can be described as that of a **Republic of Religions**. Within the Kingdom of God the republic of religions alone is the right thing to have. This is the core of Gandhian secularism. Differences are only man-made, otherwise not. Those who hear the voice of God through their clear conscience have the duty to fight these out. This fight is, therefore, a fight for the truth is based on **Love** or **non-violence**.

XIV. CONCLUSION

In view of the above we may say that by religion Gandhi did not mean formal or customary or sectarian religion. By religion he means that religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our maker, which binds one indissoluble to the truth within. But it is a misfortune for us that we the people of the 21st century world understand religion no more than that of limits on food and drink and formal rites and rituals, not otherwise. Hence it has been discredited. According to Gandhi, religion is more relevant today than before. Sciences have given tremendous power in the hands of man but unless it joins its hands with religion, it will wipe out the human civilization. Science and spirituality must meet. Mere science of matter cannot give us real knowledge or real happiness. This makes the sense to say that Gandhi was the greatest experimenter with the spirit in man. There is an inner vacuum in our life and only faith in religious and spiritual values can save us from all round catastrophe. This is where the **relevance of Gandhi's concept of religion in the 21st century**. Gandhi's conception of religion is capable of standing the scrutiny of science and Reason on the one hand and guiding us to the new dimension of the spirit in man on the other. He has made religion revolutionary enough to meet the challenges both science and social change.

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