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# Attitude towards the Scriptures of other Religions: A Gandhian Model

## Introduction

Holy Scriptures are the bedrock of all great religions. Religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam are rightly called 'religions of the Book.' Even those religions which do not have one specific book for their scriptures depend ultimately on some sacred texts considered authoritative. Now, often enough, the claims of one scripture conflict with those of another. This can give rise to a number of problems in a multi-religious context. How should one reconcile the claims of one's own religious scriptures with the counter-claims of other religious scriptures? What sort of attitude should one have towards the scriptures of other religions? Should one read them at all? If so, how should one interpret them? If not, is one to simply ignore them or/and undervalue them? For answering these and similar questions, it seems to me, Gandhi presents the most plausible model.

Every world religion enjoins its members to read its scriptures with reverence and follow them faithfully. That means, at least in practice, one should ignore the scriptures of other religions. A classic illustration of this attitude is manifested in the famous argument in favour of destroying all books except the Koran in the Alexandrian Library: either the books are in conformity with the Koran or they are not; if they are, they are superfluous; if not, they are pernicious; therefore they must all be destroyed. Most of the early Christian missionaries in India do not seem to have considered the Hindu

*Shāstras* as sacred scriptures at all.<sup>1</sup> Hindu intellectuals like Raja Rammohun Roy in turn pointed out in the Bible the same sort of difficulties for its acceptance as pointed out by the missionaries in the Hindu scriptures.<sup>2</sup> Some of the religious leaders in India went a step further. Swami Dayananda Saraswathi for instance, tried to show vehemently that the Vedas alone were the true scriptures, not the Bible, nor the Koran.<sup>3</sup> Even some philosophers have tried to establish the superiority of their own (Hindu) scriptures over other scriptures.<sup>4</sup> Great scholars<sup>5</sup> in the field of Comparative Religions in the West are no exception to this general trend.

Gandhi, however, is unique in this that he was never in favour of establishing the relative merits of different scriptures. A religious scripture was for him not meant primarily for the purpose of objective analysis and study, as a source of inspiration for a pure living. The scriptures of different religions are to be studied not with a view to establishing the superiority or inferiority of one over the other, but solely with a view to seeking guidance to follow a scrupulously religious life. Likewise religion, for Gandhi, was not so much a theoretical or a ritual enterprise as something that should affect one's living. Thus, the profound ideas of Gandhi, stated in simple words though, not only touch the basic issues of what religion essentially is, but also tackle the problems arising out of a religiously pluralistic situation, both theoretically and practically. This brings us to the great relevance of Gandhi for a multi-religious context like that of India.

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1. A classical example of such an approach may be seen in a long letter written by a missionary from Serampore, published in a Bengali Weekly *Samachar Darpan*, dated 14.6.1821, referred to and reproduced by Raja Rammohun Roy in his *Brahmanical Magazines*. Please see Kalidas Nag and Debatjyoti Burman, (Eds.), *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, (Calcutta : 1946), Vol. II. pp. 135-189. In that letter the missionary raises many questions concerning Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and the principal Shāstras of the six systems of Indian Philosophy. All of those question were meant to bring out the difficulties involved in those Shāstras and thereby to 'prove' that they were no sacred scriptures.
  2. Cf. the *Brahmanical Magazines* for illustrations, referred to in foot-note No. 1.
  3. Cf. *Satyartha Prakash, Light of Truth*, tr. by Chiranjiva Bharadwaja, (New Delhi : 1975), particularly chapters 13 & 14.
  4. S. Radhakrishnan may be a good example for the point made here.
  5. J. N. Farquhar, H. Kraemer, R. C. Zaehner may be mentioned as an examples of such a category of scholars.

The attempt in this article is nothing more than to formulate a 'system' of Gandhi's views regarding the problem under consideration: what sort of attitude one should have towards the scriptures of other religions. This explains the liberal use of Gandhi's own words in this article. The first part of the article consists in bringing out the personal attitude of Gandhi towards the religious scriptures other than his own. This is attempted mainly by explicating his fundamental understanding of religion, religions, and religious scriptures. Many objections could be raised against the personal attitude of Gandhi. A consideration of all these is necessary for formulating the 'system' of his thinking. Hence in the second part, an attempt is made to state the main objections and the way he answered them. Gandhi did not consider his attitude to be merely 'personal'. In fact, he proposed it as a duty to be followed by all. He even laid down many specifications for accomplishing that duty properly. Such specifications—given by Gandhi on different occasions and in different contexts—are collected and enumerated, in some order, as directive principles. That constitutes the third and final part.

### 1. Gandhi's personal attitude towards the scriptures of other religions

Born a Hindu, Gandhi remained a Hindu till the end of his life. He firmly believed that the entire roots of his thinking and behaviour were to be found in the Hindu scriptures. He claimed he had read the Shastrās to his satisfaction, and endeavoured ever since his days as a youth to put into practice the fundamental precepts of the Shāstras.<sup>6</sup> That is why he used to say: "I call myself a Sanatani Hindu because I believe in the Vedas, Upanishads, the Puranas, and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures."<sup>7</sup> Gandhi's appreciation of the *Gita* was unique: He approved of it as the "quintessence of all the Shāstras and the Upanishads."<sup>8</sup> He even esteemed it to be his mother, filling the place of his earthly mother whom he lost very early. Whenever he was in difficulty or distress, he sought refuge in her bosom. And she, according to him, never turned him away. So, he rightly concludes: "A true votary of the *Gita* does not know

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6. *Harijan*, 12.1.1934, p. 3. (For easy reference, see V.B. Kher, (ed.) *In search of the Supreme*, vol. III, Navajivan Publishing House, 1962, p. 111. Hereafter this work will be indicated by the abbreviation, *VBK III*.)

7. *Young India*, 6.10.1921, p. 317. (See *VBK III*, p. 116).

8. *Harijan*, 24.8.1934, p. 221. (See *VBK III*, p. 210.)

what disappointment is. He ever dwells in perennial joy and peace that passeth understanding.”<sup>9</sup>

Such a deep appreciation of his own religious scriptures was not partial or exclusive: “I have no hesitation in regarding the Koran as revealed, as I have none in regarding the Bible, the Zend Aesta, the Granth Saheb and any other clean scriptures as revealed. Revelation is the exclusive property of no nation, no tribe.”<sup>10</sup> Even more clearly he stated: “I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas. I believe in the Bible, the Koran, and the Zend Aesta to be as much divinely inspired as the Vedas.”<sup>11</sup>

Gandhi’s regard for other scriptures than his own was not superficial. He demonstrated this by his acts and behaviour in life. There were many occasions when he did not know which way to turn. But he went to the Bible, particularly the New Testament and, he says, he always drew strength from its message.<sup>12</sup> This way of finding strength and joy in the New Testament was such a real experience for him that he could boldly say that the joy and comfort derived from it was just the same as from the *Gita* itself.<sup>13</sup> “Today supposing I was deprived of the *Gita* and forgot all its contents but had a copy of the Sermon (on the Mount), I should derive the same joy from it as I do from the *Gita*.”<sup>14</sup> He stated on another occasion that even as he derived the greatest consolation from his reading of Tulsidas’ *Rāmāyana*, he had derived the same solace and consolation from the New Testament and the Koran.<sup>15</sup>

Thus we see that the attitude of Gandhi towards the religious scriptures other than his own was such that even though he was committed to his own religious scriptures, he could show the same regard and reverence to the scriptures of other religions and derive the same

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9. *Ibid.* (See *VBK III*, p. 211.)

10. *Young India*, 25.8.1924. (See A.T. Hingorani, (ed.) *All Religions are True*, (Bombay: Pearl Publications, 1962), p. 25. Hereafter, this work will be indicated as *ATH*)

11. Same as foot-note no. 7.

12. A.T. Hingorani (ed.), *All Religions are True*, (Bombay: Pearl Publications, 1962), p. 18.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18

14. *Ibid.*, p.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 20

benefits from them as from his own. But one may wonder here: Is such a thing possible at all? Is it possible to be faithful to one's own religion (and its scriptures) and at the same time show a reverential attitude to the scriptures of other religions? This was not, however, a problem for Gandhi at all. For, his understanding of religions was that of complementarity rather than that of exclusiveness. It is in the light of this basic understanding of religions that he could develop the right attitude and approach towards the scriptures of other religions. So, an attempt must be made to have at least a glimpse of what his basic understanding of religion and religious plurality are.

The essence of religion, for Gandhi, consists not so much in beliefs, doctrines, rituals or other practices—even though all these are necessary constituents in the making of a religion—as in the life produced by those constituents. How much importance he attached to the religious living can be seen from the type of definition he gave to his religion. “You must watch my life, how I live, eat, sit, talk, behave in general. The sum total of all those in me is my religion.”<sup>16</sup> The test of the religious goal, according to Gandhi, does not lie in an extraneous evidence like a theoretical or historical proof, but in the transformed conduct and character of those who have felt the real presence of God within.<sup>17</sup> Now such a testimony of transformed lives, Gandhi argues, is to be found in the experiences of an unbroken line of prophets and sages in all countries and climes.<sup>18</sup> That means, Gandhi concludes: “Revelation (Truth) is the exclusive property of no nation, no tribes.”<sup>19</sup> To sum of the whole argument of Gandhi, “Truth or Revelation is present in every religion because they all are based on common fundamentals, they all have produced great saints.”<sup>20</sup>

Gandhi's real greatness lies not only in his universalistic outlook—by which he accepts revelation in all religions—but also in his affirmation of complementarity among religions. The reasoning by which he comes to this conclusion may be described as follows:

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16. Harijan, 22.9.1946. p. 321. [See, Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Selections from Gandhi*, Navajivan Publishing House, 1948] p. 254. (Hereafter this work will be indicated as *Bose*).

17. *Young India*, 11.10.1928. p. 340. (cf. also *Bose*, p. 8).

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Young India*, 25.8.1924 (cf. *ATH*, p. 25).

20. *Young India*, 22.12.1927 (cf. *ATH*, p. 3).

The Truth or Revelation present in every religion is bound to be mixed with certain imperfections, owing to the human instrumentality. It suffers from a process of double distillation: it comes through a human prophet and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly.<sup>21</sup> That means, every religious scripture is a product of both Truth as well as imperfections. Hence it is that we must try to reduce the imperfections involved in our scriptures by learning from others' scriptures. To quote his own words: "As a matter of fact, while we adhere to our own faith, we have every right to adopt acceptable features from any other faith. It is a fanaticism to imagine that you cannot accept anything from other faiths."<sup>22</sup>

It is against the background of the theory of complementarity of religions that Gandhi developed the attitude of respect for the religious scriptures other than his own. He read the scriptures of other religions not mainly with a view to learning about their beliefs or doctrines, nor with the intention of establishing the relative merits of the different scriptures, but solely in order to learn from them about the 'transcendent' life. He also made efforts conscientiously to become more and more perfect in the light of every inspiration he could get from reading the scriptures. This in turn enabled him to understand the scriptures in an ever new light. Thus his understanding of religious scriptures was based more on his persistent attempts to lead a religious, that is, pure life, than an objective and analytic study of the scriptures. It is in this perspective that he developed the same attitude of reverence and respect towards the scriptures of other religions as the one he had for his own religious scriptures.

## 2. Objections against Gandhi's attitude

Against the personal attitude of Gandhi towards the scriptures of other religions, described in the preceding section, many objections could be raised. Indeed Gandhi was aware of these objections. It is worthwhile then to consider the way he reacted to them.

i) The first objection that may be raised against Gandhi's attitude may be stated thus: Is it consistent for some one to claim to follow a religion and at the same time show a reverential attitude towards the

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21. *Harijan*, 5.12.1936, (cf. *ATH*, pp. 20-21)

22. *ATH*, p. 3. Quoted from *The Diary of Mahadev Desai*.

scriptures of another religion? This objection was very pertinent in Gandhi's case because he was never tired of claiming to be a staunch Hindu faithfully following the Hindu scriptures.<sup>23</sup> How could he then show an equally respectful attitude towards other religious scriptures?

However, Gandhi's conviction was that his study of, and reverence for, other scriptures was wholly consistent with his claim to be a staunch Hindu.<sup>24</sup> For, he argued, "the Hindu system of philosophy regards all religions as containing the elements of Truth in them and enjoins an attitude of respect and reverence towards them all." This, therefore, presupposes regard for one's own religion. The study and appreciation of other religions need not cause a weakening of that regard. It should, on the other hand, mean extension of that regard to other religions. In this respect, religion stands on the same footing as culture. Just as preservation of one's own culture does not mean contempt for that of others, but requires assimilation of the best that may be in all the other cultures, even so should be the case with religion."<sup>25</sup>

This is the argument Gandhi used in talking about Hinduism, *vis-à-vis* other religions; and the same argument holds good to show that there is no inconsistency when a member of religion 'X' adopts a similar attitude towards scriptures of religion 'Y'. Thus, for instance, the 'love principle' of Christianity should make it possible for a Christian to show not a disparaging attitude towards others' scriptures, but rather a positively respectful attitude towards them. Such an attitude towards others' scriptures is therefore, not inconsistent with his fidelity to his own religion.

ii) Will not a reverential approach to other religious scriptures *weaken one's commitment* to one's own religion? This is another objection which can be raised against Gandhi's attitude. But Gandhi

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23. For example, "I call myself a Sanatani Hindu, because I believe in Vedas, Upanishads, the Puranas, and the writings left by the holy reformers" (*ATH.* p. 16); On another occasion he said: 'I claim to be a staunch Sanatani Hindu because . . .' (*VBK III.* p. 54). Also he said: "I call myself a Sanatani Hindu, because I believe in the Vedas, Upanishads, the Puranas, and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures . . ." (*VBK III* p. 116)

24. *Young India*, 2.9.1926, p. 308. (cf *VBK III*, p. 54)

25. *ATH.* pp. 22-23.

firmly denies such a possibility. "Let no one even for a moment entertain the fear that a reverent study of other religions is likely to weaken or shake one's faith in one's own."<sup>26</sup> On the contrary he claims that it only "enriches one's own faith and broadens one's own vision."<sup>27</sup> To support this, he quotes his own example: "My respectful study of other religions has not abated my reverence for my faith or my faith in the Hindu scriptures. They have indeed left their deep mark upon my understanding of the Hindu scriptures. They have broadened my view of life. They have enabled me to understand more clearly many an obscure passage in the Hindu scriptures."<sup>28</sup>

iii) Still another objection could be that the reading and interpretation of a scripture by one who does not profess that religion will be *his own wishful interpretation*, superimposing his own ideas. If, for instance, the Holy Koran is allowed to be read and interpreted by a non-Muslim, say a Hindu, it would permit a Muslim scripture to be converted into a source of non-Muslim ideas or ideals rather than an interpretation in the light of a Muslim tradition.<sup>29</sup>

Gandhi indeed admitted that it is quite possible for a non-Muslim when reading the Holy Koran to read his own meaning into that scripture. But then Gandhi added that "surely there is no harm in it if two conditions were fulfilled: (i) one should absolutely be faithful to the text, and (ii) one should approach his task with a prayerful and open mind."

iv) Will not one's reading of scriptures *offend the susceptibilities* of the followers of that religion to which that scripture belongs? Gandhi was not impervious to this sort of objection. He emphatically denied that the reading and interpretation of a scripture of a particular religion should be restricted only to the followers of that religion. The reasons Gandhi gave to support his stand were the following: It is quite possible that an interpretation of a life or a book handed down for generations may be erroneous. An error does not cease to be so simply because a number of years have elapsed. And it is not at all impossible that an interpretation of the non-followers of that religion

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26. *ATH*. p. 22.

27. *Harijan*. 13.1. 1940 (cf. *ATH*. pp. 123-124).

28. Same as foot-note 24 above.

29. *Harijan*, 29.9.1940, p. 297 (cf. *VBK III*, p. 51).



may be found to be right. No one holds the monopoly for truth. All truth represented by imperfect humans that we are is relative. We can each act according to our lights. God alone knows the reality. That being so, it behoves us all at least to be humble and tolerant. Fanaticism and intolerance cannot produce any good. So reading and interpreting of religious books are not to be confined only to those who wear particular religious labels. If such a restriction is imposed, it is intolerance of the first degree and it should be removed by all means. So his plea was that people should give the same credit to others for seeing truth as they claim for themselves.<sup>30</sup>

Besides thus defending his position against the various objections raised, Gandhi also enumerated the different benefits that can be derived from the sort of attitude he advocated concerning the scriptures of other religions. The reading of others' scriptures enables people to keep their own religion pure and remove all its blemishes.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, it enables one to understand some of the difficult passages in one's own religion, in the light of parallel passages in the scriptures of other religions.<sup>32</sup> Thirdly, it develops feelings of brotherhood among the followers of different religions who happen to live together either by chance or by choice.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Gandhi claimed that a lasting peace can be established if we learn not just to tolerate but to respect the other faiths as our own, and reverently study the sayings of different teachers of mankind.<sup>34</sup> This he proposed as part of one's duty to others.<sup>35</sup> He says: "I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty."<sup>36</sup>

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30. *Ibid.*

31. *Harijan*, 25.5.1947, p. 166. Also see, Shriman Narayan, (ed.) *The Voice of Truth*, Navajivan Publ. House, 1969, p. 266. (Hereafter this work will be indicated as *SN*).

32. *Young India*, 2.9.1926, p. 308 (cf. *VBK III*, p. 54).

33. Same as foot-note 31 above.

34. *Harijan*, 13.3.1937, p. 33. (cf. *VBK III*, p. 10).

35. For example, Gandhi states in *Harijan*: "It is the duty of everyone to study the scriptures or religions other than his own. This enables people to keep their religion pure and rid it of blemishes." (cf. *SN* p. 266).

36. Same as foot-note no. 24.

### 3. The Directive Principles

Gandhi was not merely satisfied with proposing his point of view to be pursued by all; he also laid down many specifications for accomplishing this duty properly. All those specifications indicated by him on various occasions have been collected and enumerated here as directive principles. They are arranged under three headings relating to (a) attitude (b) content and (c) text.

a) *With reference to attitude :*

i. Never critically

The first and foremost principle as regards the attitude one must have towards the scriptures of other religions is that one should never read it with a critical approach. "It is no business of mine," Gandhi says, "to criticise the scriptures of other faiths, or to point out their defects."<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, it should be regarded as one's privilege to proclaim and practise the truths that there may be in them. With specific reference to the Muslim scriptures he said: "I may not, therefore criticise or condemn things in the Koran or the life of the prophet that I cannot understand. But I welcome every opportunity to express my admiration for such aspects of his life as I have been able to appreciate and understand."<sup>38</sup>

ii. Sympathetically, and through the viewpoint of the votaries.

If one is not to approach the scriptures of other religions with a critical mind, what should one do with those passages which present difficulties? To this Gandhi says: "As for things that present difficulties (in the Koran), I am content to see them through the eyes of devout Mussalman friends, while I try to understand them with the help of the writings of eminent Muslim expounders of Islam."<sup>39</sup>

Likewise he expects the non-Hindus also to have a sympathetic understanding of the Hindu scriptures. "When non-Hindu critics set about criticizing Hinduism and cataloguing its faults they only blazon their own ignorance of Hinduism and the incapacity to regard it from

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37. *Harijan*, 13.3.1937, p. 33 (cf. *VBK III*, p. 11).

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

the Hindu viewpoint. It distorts their vision and vitiates their judgment.”<sup>40</sup>

Hence he makes a fervent appeal to people that they should try to understand the scriptures of other religions through the writings of known votaries of the respective religions, and try to understand them from their own viewpoint rather than through the critics’ viewpoint. For instance, “if one wants to study the *Bhāgavata*, one should do so not through a translation of it made by a hostile critic, but one prepared by a lover of the *Bhāgavata*. Similarly, to study the Bible, one should study it through the commentaries of devoted Christians.”<sup>41</sup>

iii. With equimindedness

A non-critical and a sympathetic approach should not be mistaken to imply a passive acceptance of everything that is said in the scriptures of other religions. For Gandhi clearly stated that we cannot simply accept things as they are said in a scripture but they must be put to the test of reason. (cf. [b], [iii] below) However, that should not be taken to mean that we can use it as an excuse for criticizing it any way we like or for minimizing its value. We should rather express our genuine criticism with humility and courtesy, without leaving anything behind. It is this which Gandhi calls equimindedness. Again equimindedness makes one realize that just because one does not understand certain things in reading those scriptures, he need not hastily conclude that it is wrong. Many things which are not understood at first may later become as clear as daylight.<sup>42</sup> That is why Gandhi emphasizes that everyone should possess equimindedness while reading the scriptures of other religions.

iv. With respect and reverence.

Even more than equimindedness, Gandhi wanted our attitude towards the scriptures of other religions, to be directed by the same respect and reverence which one would be willing to show to one’s own religious scriptures. To quote his own words: “I would advise the Hindus and the Sikhs to read the Koran as they read the Gita and

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40. *Ibid.*

41. *ATH.* p. 22.

42. *VBK III*, p. 31.

Granth Saheb. To the Muslims I would say that they should read the Gita and the Granth Saheb with the same reverence with which they read the Koran. They should understand the meaning of what they read and have equal regard for all religions.”<sup>43</sup>

*b) Concerning the content of the scriptures*

i. Distinguish chaff from wheat

Though every religious scripture, essentially contains Truth, it does not necessarily contain only the Truth. In the course of century-old traditions some interpolations as well as additions have occurred. True, they have recorded the experience of the highly realized lives of individuals and/or the ‘faith-experience’ of the community as a whole. But, a few impurities might have also crept into them. Gandhi’s firm conviction was that “any impurities that have crept in any of the scriptures are due to the fact that they were written many years later.”<sup>44</sup> Hence he categorically states: “Everything printed or even found handwritten is not scripture . . . they contain much that can never be accepted as the word of God.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, he concludes, there is need to distinguish the chaff from the grains, that is to distinguish the interpolations from the original.

ii. The test of Truth and Ahimsa

How should one distinguish the chaff from the grains? For this Gandhi gives two criteria. One is to some extent objective, the other is more subjective. The objective criterion is to see whether a given passage in a scripture corresponds with the eternal principles. For, Gandhi argues: “The scriptures properly so called can only be concerned with eternal verities.”<sup>46</sup> What are they? Quoting from Manu, Gandhi says that “steadfastness, forgiveness, restraint, non-stealing, purity, control of the senses, intelligence, learning, truth, freedom from anger, these are the touchstones of religion.”<sup>47</sup> However, Gandhi was of the opinion that they all could be subsumed under two basic ones: “Truth and Ahimsa,” which are “the true foundations of all

43. *ATH*. pp. 26-27.

44. *ATH*. p. 21

45. *Harijan*, 18.7.1936, p. 180. (cf. *VBK III*, p. 97).

46. *Ibid*.

47. *Harijan*, 25.2.1933, p. 4. (cf. *VBK* (ed.) *In Search of the Supreme*, Vol. I, (1961), p. 117). (Hereafter this work will be indicated as *VBK I*)

religions.”<sup>48</sup> So he suggests that the only safe rule is that one “should reject whatever is contrary to Truth and Ahimsa.”<sup>49</sup>

iii. The test of Reason or Morality

The moment the eternal principles of Truth and Ahimsa are allowed to enter into human affairs and govern them, Reason comes in. One may say that Reason is just the application of the eternal principles to the human activities. So, by way of specification of the objective criterion, mentioned above, Gandhi enunciates that the test of Reason or Ethics must be employed in order to judge the authenticity of a scriptural passage. He enjoins that one should not accept the ‘*ipse dixit*’ or the interpretations of *Pandits*. Rather, one must reject everything that goes against fundamental reason or morality.<sup>50</sup> In another place he says, “One cannot let a scriptural text supersede one’s reason. As scriptures do not come directly from God, but necessarily pass through the human instrumentality one cannot surrender one’s reason whilst he subscribes to Divine Revelation.<sup>51</sup> This is much more relevant to this age of reason: “Every formula of every religion has in this age of reason to submit to the acid test of reason and universal justice if it is to ask for universal assent.”<sup>52</sup>

iv. The test of spiritual experience

Gandhi was not content with the objective criterion alone. By applying it, one may succeed in removing all the interpolations and produce an expurgated edition of the scriptures. But even so you require an interpretation. But who is their interpreter? Gandhi says: “Not learned men surely. Learning there must be. But religion does not live by it. It lives in the experiences of its saints and seers, in their lives and sayings. When all the most learned commentators of the scriptures are utterly forgotten, the accumulated experience of the sages and saints will abide and be an inspiration for ages to come.”<sup>53</sup> That is why Gandhi emphasizes the subjective criterion, namely, that an authentic scriptural passage must be capable of being a spiritual

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48. *Harijan*, 6.4.1934. p. 60, (cf. *VBK I*, p. 118).

49. *Ibid.*

50. *ATH*, p. 16.

51. *ATH*, p. 21.

52. Cf. *VBK I*, p. 150.

53. Same as foot-note 45.

experience. To quote his own words: Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be capable of being a spiritual experience."<sup>54</sup>

(c) *Concerning the text of the scriptures:*

As regards interpretation of the text Gandhi enunciated one important principle, namely, that we should *never adhere to the literal meaning* of the scriptures *alone*.

Holy Scriptures of the different religions are indeed channels of Revelation. They preserve the experiences of 'transformation' in order to transmit and reproduce similar experiences in its followers. However, this does not mean that a mere reading of the words of the scripture can guarantee the same experience of transformation in the individual. For the words just by themselves are imperfect means of communicating an experience, and they are also most often misunderstood and misinterpreted. Hence, Gandhi insists that one should never cling to the literal meaning of words in the scriptures; rather, the spirit or the sum-total of a passage must be taken into consideration. To support his statement Gandhi quotes a verse from the Bible: "The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life."<sup>55</sup>

By way of illustration of this directive principle Gandhi gave many an example to show why one should not cling to the literal meaning of words. We may cite just a couple of them here. Referring to the passage in the Bible about the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, Gandhi remarked: "My very first reading of the Bible showed me that I would be repelled by many things in it, if I gave their literal meaning to many texts or even took every passage in it as the word of God . . . The story of the immaculate conception,<sup>56</sup> when I interpret it mystically, does not repel me. I should find it hard to believe in the literal meaning of the verses relating to the immaculate conception of Jesus. Nor would it deepen my regard for Jesus if I gave those verses their literal meaning. This does not mean that the writers of the Gospels were untruthful persons. They wrote in a mood of exaltation."<sup>57</sup>

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54. *Ibid.*

55. 2 Cor. 3, 6.

56. By the expression 'Immaculate conception' Gandhi actually means the Virgin birth of Jesus.

57. Cf. *ATH*, p. 19.

Likewise, referring to his own scriptural passage Gandhi said: "My belief in the Hindu scriptures does not require me to accept every word and every verse as divinely inspired. Nor do I claim to have any first-hand knowledge of these wonderful books. But I do claim to know and feel the truths of the essential teaching of the scriptures."<sup>58</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The attempt in this article is a very modest one: just to present in some systematic form Gandhi's ideas on the attitude one should develop towards the scriptures of other religions. But the importance of such an attempt lies in the fact that Gandhi's ideas are all expressed only in a fragmentary and scattered form, though they are very profound and very logical. It is hoped that it will bring out the utmost importance and relevance of Gandhi to a multi-religious context like the one in India. If one realizes the need of making Gandhi's attitude (of showing a reverential attitude towards the scriptures of other religions) a matter of duty for all cultured men, and if one accepts the directive principles of accomplishing this duty, it is certain that the face of the world would be quite different from the one the history has witnessed in the past. It will not be a battle-field where one religion vies with another, trying to establish its superiority over all the others. On the other hand, it will be a peaceful abode in which each religion, convinced of the Truth it possesses and realizing the imperfections in which this Truth is necessarily couched, will try to learn from others and thereby attempt to reduce its own imperfections in order to become more and more perfect.

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58. Cf. *ATH*. p. 17.