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## Religions in National Integration : A Gandhian Perspective

Can religion play any role in the process of National Integration? What is the testimony of history with regard to this? What has usually happened at the birth of any new religion? Is there any religion which has not caused division, dissension, discord and even bloodshed in society some time or the other? It appears that religion has always been a disintegrating factor in society. It continues to be so. And we do not see any reason why it to be any different in the future. Whether it should continue to be so in the future one does not know. Certainly it need not be so if religion is properly understood. But how is this possible? When there are conflicting elements in different religions, how can they bring about unity, harmony or integration?

Religions are meant to establish peace on earth. Hindu prayers (*mantras*) are often concluded with *Om Shānti*. Christian prayers often start with the exchange of greetings for peace; Islam means 'peace'. It is paradoxical, indeed, that they cannot co-exist in peace. What is wrong with them? The difficulty is not with the religions but with the religious or religionists or the so-called followers of religions. They lack proper understanding of their religion and hence nobody follows his religion properly. This will continue to be so in the present times as well as in the future unless the structure of the society is changed. In such a situation religion will not help in the process of integration; instead it will ever remain as an agent of disintegration.

What is the significance of religion? What are its various elements such as creed, cult and code meant for? The real significance of religion may be explained in terms of life and behaviour. Now do all religions prescribe the same type of behaviour? We know they do not. How can we force the same type of behaviour on all people? This is not possible and not necessary too. Still we know that all religions serve the same purpose. But what is this same purpose?

Does this mean a unity? Is the behaviour alone important? Certainly not. Each religion is different from others. Their beliefs/doctrines are different; form of worship is different and the code of conduct too. Then how can they be a unifying factor? If the behaviour unifies the other differences are unimportant and they will not cause any diversification. But this will lead only to uniformity and not to unity. For a variety of reasons, the structural pattern will be different. If they are different where is the desired unity? The principle that unites and controls our life and behaviour must be fundamentally the same. Then, the source of conflict will cease to be so. Such principles will have unity and can manifest themselves in diversity. Such a true understanding is difficult, if not impossible. Hence religion can only be a principle of disintegration. Therefore, it may be suggested that we do away with religion and turn to humanism or morality. Here again, what is the basis of morality?

It is here Gandhiji appears to be worth studying. His approach to religion seems quite feasible to any truly religious person. According to his understanding of religion, the differences will not divide mankind but will only enrich it. Hence if religions are to play any role in National Integration, we have to understand religions as Gandhiji understood them and gave expression through his life and thought.

India's cultural heritage is basically religious, and India is a country of religious pluralism. Due to lack of proper understanding of religion, there were a number of religious riots, dissensions and discord. Today, this has become a great threat to our national unity and integration. It seems Gandhiji, the Father of our Nation, has foreseen this and he tried his very best to wipe out this curse from our society. In fact, he sacrificed his life for this cause. He is perhaps the only Indian who approached this problem with an open mind and his approach appears to be the best solution to the problem.

One group of problems with which Gandhiji very seriously concerned himself arose from the differences in the religious practices and beliefs of the followers of different religions. These differences were sources of tension between different communities and manifested themselves in riots resulting in loss of life and property. It is possible to debate whether the real issues are political and social or religious. Whatever may be one's view on this, the religious differences are

certainly an important cause for the tension. Gandhiji treated these problems as religious problems. We shall now proceed to see who Gandhi is and what his specific contribution to our topic is.

### **Gandhi's Basic Vision of National Life**

Mahatma Gandhi, the unquestioned prime leader of the Indian freedom-struggle and hence called the Father of our Nation had a unique vision of life to offer to this Nation. On account of the massive and unprecedented advance of industrialisation, which makes the earth no longer habitable for man due to atmospheric pollution, the economists have begun to realize that 'small is beautiful' and to regard Gandhi as a great economist of prophetic vision. Seeing the irremediable corrupt practices prevalent in the liberal parliamentary democratic systems, our political scientists have already begun to look for an alternative system in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*. For them Gandhiji is a great political philosopher who foresaw the maladies of the Hobbesian democracy and suggested the alternative of *Rāma rājya* through village government (*panchayat rāj*) that is, Communitarian Democracy. In the wake of the great threat of the problem of unemployment, Gandhi is seen as a great educationist who rejected the British model of education for India and suggested basic education through a vocation. For the social workers too Gandhiji is the best model of selfless social service. But the most unfortunate thing is that almost all of us have conveniently overlooked (if not deliberately avoided) the very basis of all his philosophy, that is, religion.

It is from religious philosophy that Gandhi evolved all his ideas in the social, economic, political, educational and other fields. "My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion,"<sup>1</sup> says Gandhiji himself. He was basically a man of God who lived an intensely religious inner life, from which his outward activities derived their strength and meaning. It was in religion that he found his true being.

### **His Religious Philosophy**

There is a distinctive character to Gandhiji's idea of religion. Every evening after the prayer meeting he used to discuss various

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1. *Harijan*, March 2, 1934, p. 23.

problems—political, economic, social as well as religious—with the members of the community. For him life was one whole and it cannot be divided into water-tight compartments such as political, religious etc. A true religious person has to be religious always and everywhere and he cannot put up with injustice anywhere. Thus his entire conception of religion has to be an integrated one. Religion is meant for the reformation of life. That is why Gandhiji said, “my religion is ethical religion.”<sup>2</sup>

This does not mean Gandhiji rejected the actual existing religions. Nor did he deny the essential elements of any religion, that is, creed, cult and code. He was ready to tolerate any religious doctrine, even if it uses unreasonable, provided it was not immoral! He was willing to fight tooth and nail those religious doctrines which were in conflict with morality. The same holds good regarding cult too. He did not object to any form of worship which was not immoral. Ultimately the creed and cult were meant to bring about a code of conduct. Hence if they did not serve this purpose of bettering life, they were not good for religion, thought Gandhi.

Since Gandhiji's religion was life-centred his theory of religion and morality were intimately related. They were inseparably bound to each other. He compared religion and morality to water and seed sown in the soil.<sup>3</sup> The essence of religion is morality, he observed. Often he considered them to be identical. When morality incarnates itself in a living man it becomes religion, because it binds, it holds, it sustains him, in the hour of his trials. To judge whether a doctrine is religious or not the criterion he used was morality. He did not consider a man religious, if he violated moral laws. As soon as one loses the moral basis he ceases to be religious, according to Gandhi.<sup>4</sup>

### **Religion and Prayer**

He considered prayer an integral part of religious life. He says that prayer is the very soul and essence of religion. He defined prayer as the intense longing of soul for greater purity. For him it

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2. M. K. Gandhi, *Ethical Religion*, (Ahmedabad : Nav. Pub.), p. 12.

3. *Harijan*, March 2, 1934, p. 23.

4. *Young India*, Nov. 24, 1921, p. 385.

was the most potent instrument and the greatest weapon for safeguarding spiritual life. He was convinced that prayer was more indispensable for the soul than food for the body. So if anybody does not pray, his life will be dull and empty and he will not have any inward peace. He was so devoted to prayer that he could well claim that no act of his was done without prayer.<sup>5</sup>

### Prayer and Action

We are born to serve our fellowmen, and we cannot do so properly unless we are wide awake. There is an eternal struggle raging in man's heart between the powers of darkness and of light and he who has not the sheet-anchor of prayer to rely upon, will be a victim to the powers of darkness. The man of prayer will be at peace with himself and with the whole; the man who goes about the affairs of the world without a prayerful heart, will be miserable and will make the world also miserable. Apart, therefore, from its bearing on man's condition after death, prayer has incalculable value for man in this world of the living. Prayer is the only means of bringing about orderliness and peace and repose in our daily activities.<sup>6</sup>

He exhorted his ashramites thus :

Begin, therefore, your day with prayer and make it so soulful that it may remain with you until the evening. Close the day with prayer so that you may have a peaceful night free from dreams and nightmares. Do not worry about the form of prayer. Let it be any form, it should be such as can put us into communion with the Divine. Whatever be the form, let not the spirit wander while the words of prayer run on out of your mouth.<sup>7</sup>

It is only after I have prayed here every day that I feel the bliss of having tasted the nectar (*amrita*) of knowledge. For that man who wishes to be a real human being, *dal* and *rotti* are not his food. They count but little for him. His real food is prayer.

Prayer is even more essential for the well-being of the soul than is food for the maintenance of the body. It becomes necessary

5. *Ibid.*, Sept. 25, 1924, p. 313.

6. M. K. Gandhi, *Prayer*, (Ahmedabad : Nav. Pub.), 1977, p. 8-9.

7. *Ibid.*

to give up food on occasions in order to benefit the body which is perishable; then surely, it is our primary duty to provide food for the soul which is imperishable, and such sustenance is found in prayer. The real meaning of prayer is devoted worship.<sup>8</sup>

### **Divine Paternity and Human Fraternity**

Gandhiji firmly believed in the common fatherhood of God and brotherhood of men. Almost all religions accept this great doctrine. We come from God and we are marching towards Him. It is from this presupposition that he goes to affirm the fundamental unity of all religions. The need of the time is not one religion, but respect for each other of the devotees of different religions. We want to reach not the dead level of uniformity, but unity in diversity. Any attempt to root out traditions, effects of heredity, climate and other surroundings is not only bound to fail, but commits the blunder of not recognizing the fact that religion is expressed in a variety of forms. The various forms will persist to the end of time. Wise men will ignore this crust and see the soul beneath the crust.<sup>9</sup> God is one and identical with Truth. Truth is not the exclusive property of any single religion.

Gandhiji's struggle for the freedom of India was sometimes raised as an objection to the above stand. But he clarified it. His patriotism was not an exclusive thing. It was all-embracing and he rejected that patriotism which sought to build upon the distress or the exploitation of other nationalities. His patriotism was always consistent with the highest good of humanity at large.<sup>10</sup> He wanted to realize brotherhood or identity not merely with the beings that are human, but with all forms of life, even with such creatures which crawl on the earth, because we claim common descent from the same God. Thus he extended the brotherhood to all living beings:

We are all children of the same Father whom the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian know by different names. . . The *Allah* of the Islam is the same as the God of Christians and the *Ishwara* of Hindus. . . and little man has tried in his humble way to describe

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8. *Ibid.*

9. M. K. Gandhi, *Unity in Diversity*, (New Delhi: N.B.T.), 1969, p. 19.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Mighty God by giving Him attributes, though, He is above all attributes, Indescribable, Inconceivable, Immeasurable. Living faith in this God means acceptance of the brotherhood of mankind. It also means equal respect for all religions.<sup>11</sup>

### Unity of All Religions

We may call ourselves Christians, Hindus or Muslims. Whatever we may be, underlying the diversity there is oneness and underneath many religions there is *One Religion*. There are a number of points of contact among these religions, and the differences are indeed quite insignificant. Convinced as he was of this fact, Gandhiji had great reverence for all religions and admired their noble manifestations. All religions revealed God and showed man the path of liberation. Only the descriptions varied. If there was religious strife, men and not religions were responsible. He exhorted people to live the religion to which they belonged, in truth and in spirit. He said that this would bring about harmony of religions in the country.

The Mahatma clearly saw the need of the time : people belonging to different faiths must have the same regard for other faiths that they have for their own. This only means discovering unity in diversity. Just as in Nature there is a fundamental unity running through all the diversity, so also there is fundamental unity in religions. To discover this underlying unity Gandhiji has a master-key, namely, Truth and Non-Violence.<sup>12</sup> As he was a keen student of all principal religions, his study revealed to him their basic unity. This unity he not only preached but he lived in his own daily life. He believed that all men are equal, that they are brothers and members of one family. Differences in the colour of the skin and race and nation are only transitory and superficial.

Different religions, according to Gandhi, are but different flowers in the same garden, or branches of the same tree. Using the same simile he says:

Just as a tree has a million leaves, similarly, though God is one, there are as many religions as there are men and women

11. M. K. Gandhi, *All Religions are True*, (Bombay : Pearl Pub.), 1962, p. VII.

12. *Ibid.*

though they are rooted in one God. . . Each mind has a different conception of God from that of the other.<sup>13</sup>

However, he did not aim at any fusion of religions. He felt each religion has some special contribution to make.

### **All Religions are True**

As he believed in the fundamental unity of all religions, so also Gandhiji affirmed that all great religions of the world are true 'more or less'. 'More or Less', because religion as conceived by man can never be perfect, perfection being the exclusive attribute of God alone. "If all faiths outlined by man are imperfect, the question of comparative merits does not arise," says Gandhi. All faiths aim at a revelation of Truth. Truth is like the fire at the heart of a multi-faceted jewel. Each angle shows a different aspect and a different colour. Imperfect as we are we can see truth only in fragments and act according to our limited vision. The reality is known only to God. Hence, we must not be like the 'frog in the well' which imagines that the world extends only up to the walls of the well. We must not think that our religion alone is true and all others false.<sup>14</sup> A reverent study of other religions would show that they also are true like our own, though all are necessarily imperfect. Therefore we must extend the same respect to all faiths. When such an attitude becomes the law of life, the conflicts based on the differences of religion will disappear from the face of the earth.

### **All Religions are Equal**

Just as he believed in the truth and unity of all religions, Gandhiji also believed in the equality of all religions. When he says that all religions are true and equal, he does not necessarily mean to say that 'they are equally true' in religious terms or that they are absolutely true. Another man's religion is true for him, as much as mine is for me. So we cannot be the judge of his religion. We know no two bodies are identical. Nor two leaves of a tree. There is bound to be some difference. Each one prays to God according to the light he has received. How then can one pass judgement

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13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, p. v.



as to 'who prays better'. "If I am a seeker of Truth, it is sufficient for me," says Gandhi. <sup>15</sup>

Since there is only one God and there is identity in the essential moral principles of all religions, in theory there can be only one religion. But in fact there are many religions because men, who are imperfect by nature, interpret these moral principles according to their own temperament, environment and culture. "In theory, since there is only one God, there can be only one religion. But in practice, no two persons I have known have had the identical conception of God. Therefore, there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to different temperaments and climatic conditions." The duty towards self, and the relationship with one's neighbours are the same in all religions. And what distinguishes religions one from the other, is their external practice, their liturgy and their formulae of prayers. He compares different religions to different roads leading to the same God. "Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal?"<sup>16</sup> Thus Gandhi concludes that all religions are equal.

The acceptance of the doctrine of equality of religions does not do away with the distinction between religion and irreligion. He says that no man can live without religion. Some people may say that they are agnostics and atheists and that they have nothing to do with religion. He compares them to a man who breathes but has no nose.<sup>17</sup> According to him, man by nature is religious, and he has to follow some religion. That will lead him to God who rules his every breath.

### Respect for All Religions

Since all religions have a basic unity, and they share the same Truth and are equal, we must cultivate the same respect for all religions. This is possible only if we study all religions with equimindedness. We should have no desire to criticize any aspect of other religions simply because they are not ours. We must have the humility to confess that we cannot understand everything in a religion. Every religion has four elements those are mythical, mystical, ethical

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

16. A. K. Chirappanath, "Gandhiji's Views on Religion", *Indian Missiological Review* II, No. 4 (1980), pp. 353-54.

17. *Young India*, Jan. 23, 1930, p. 25.

and theological. It is natural that mythical and mystical elements often present difficulties in understanding them by means of reason.

Still, there are many things which one can learn from other religions. Therefore, Gandhiji exhorted the people of different religions as follows: "I would advise the Hindus and the Sikhs to read the *Quran* as they read the *Gita* and the *Granth Saheb*. To the Muslims, I would say they should read the *Gita* and the *Granth Saheb* with the same reverence with which they read the *Quran*. They should understand the meaning of what they read and have equal regard for all religions. This is my life-long practice and ideal."<sup>18</sup> On other occasion he advised the Hindus: "Leave the Christian alone for the moment. I shall say to the Hindus that your lives will be incomplete unless you reverently study the teachings of Jesus."<sup>19</sup> To the Missionaries he said: "You, the missionaries, come to India thinking that you come to a land of heathens, of idolaters, of men who do not know God . . . He (an Indian) is as much a seeker after Truth as you and I are, possibly more so . . . I tell you there are many poor huts belonging to the untouchables where you will certainly find God. They do not reason but they persist in their belief that God is. They depend upon God for His assistance and find it too . . . I place these facts before you in all humility for the simple reason that you may know this land better, the land to which you have come to serve."<sup>20</sup>

### **How to Approach the Conflicting Beliefs**

As early as 1909, in *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi dealt with the problem of conflicting beliefs. His imaginary reader asks: "How can India be one nation? Hindus and Muslims are old enemies. Muslims turn to the West for Worship, while Hindus to the East. Hindus respect the cow; Muslims kill her. Hindus believe in *ahimsa*. Muslims do not. . . How can India be one nation when there are all these differences?"<sup>21</sup>

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18. M. K. Gandhi, *All Religions are True*, p. 26.

19. A. K. Chirappanath, "Gandhiji's Great Challenges," *IMR*, I, No. 1 (1979), 47.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Collected Works of M. K. Gandhi*, Vol. X, (New Delhi) p. 28.

Gandhi approached the problem of conflicting beliefs in more than one way. One way of removing the conflict is to replace the worst interpretation of a religion by its best interpretation—the best interpretation being that which is accepted by a good follower of the religion. For example, according to him, to say that Hinduism regards cows as superior to man, or that it accepts distinctions of high and low is to caricature Hinduism. If interpretation in terms of the worst aspects of a religion is replaced by interpretation in terms of its best aspects, then it will be found that all great religions spring from the same source and the fundamentals are common to them all.

This is indeed a salutary piece of advice, very often forgotten in practice. Another way is to replace the misunderstanding of a belief by understanding. For example it is a misunderstanding to think that the Buddha did not believe in God. “In my humble opinion such a belief contradicts the very central fact of Buddha’s teaching. In my humble opinion the confusion has arisen over his rejection, and just rejection, of all base things that passed in his generation under the name of God.” In a similar way Gandhi reinterprets the belief that *Nirvāṇa* means complete extinction.

If Gandhi is right so far in his approach to the problem of overcoming differences Gandhi can well express his views in terms of a doctrine of the equality of religions—if any view of Gandhi could be called a doctrine. In one of his formulations he says: “We recognize that all these faiths are true and divinely inspired, and all have suffered through the necessarily imperfect handling of imperfect men.”<sup>22</sup>

### General Comments

The problem of credal differences among religions can be best overcome by appealing to the manner of life that goes with belief. Is there any religion higher than the Truth and any practice higher than love? Is not this a sufficient basis for mutual co-operation and reason to ignore the apparently conflicting elements?

The important point of Gandhiji’s religious philosophy is that not only does it say that all religions *are true*, but it also says that all religions *are false*. It is here that Gandhi’s view differs from

22. K. L. Seshagiri Rao, *Mahatma Gandhi and Comp. Religion*, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Pub., 1978), p. 145.

the traditional understanding of religion. Throughout the discussion of the various issues, Gandhi attempts to give a new understanding of religion. On account of his association with the political and social struggles in the country, it is possible to say that he holds these particular views about religion, precisely because of the needs of these struggles; and they do not, therefore, represent a theoretically visible view of religion. It is necessary, therefore, to say that the view of religion that Gandhiji puts forward is not without plausible theoretic support.<sup>23</sup>

If Gandhi's views are accepted, then we have a solution to a problem which often dogs our political and social life—the interference of religious beliefs in the solution of the political and social problems. It is generally believed that the only way of overcoming this difficulty is to accept a secular approach to these problems; and consequently, think of religion as a strictly personal matter. Gandhi's approach to the problem is quite different. For Gandhi religion is not restricted to some one aspect of life, but pervades all its aspects. And yet, Gandhi succeeds in solving the problem for which secularism is supposed to be the only answer because his conception of religion is quite different.

For him religion is not static and obscurantist beyond the reach of reason; it is dynamic and rational and progressive. It is something that grows with the times. If religion is to be all that Gandhi wants it to be, it is not necessary to cut it off from the political and social aspects of life. What is necessary is to cut off a rigid relationship between religion and particular social and political arrangements, but not from social and political arrangements in general. But is this not as good as cutting off religion from these issues? No, because even when the relationship allows flexibility religion performs a significant role. No longer does religion require the following of a particular code; but it requires of the human beings a constant moral quest. Insofar as Gandhi does so, his solution is qualitatively different from secularism; and it avoids the theoretical difficulty with which secularism is faced—what is the role of religion that is strictly personal? What is this business between a man and his maker which does not manifest in all aspects of a man's life?<sup>24</sup>

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23. K. J. Shah, *Religion and Secularism in India*, (Unpublished paper presented at Karnataka University, Dharwad).

24. *Ibid.*

There is no doubt that Gandhi took this solution very seriously. But I do not know if it has been taken seriously by any organization or group of people; if it has not been taken seriously, why not? Maybe due to the following reasons:

(i) Obviously, there are difficulties—real and imagined—in accepting this approach. One real difficulty is to arrive at a generally acceptable criterion of good and evil. As against this, I think, to associate this solution with the kind of social ideal that Gandhi had in mind, is an imagined difficulty. It is possible to accept the Gandhian view of the all-pervasive nature of religion and reject the ideal of society he had.

(ii) The intellectuals have not taken it seriously because it would involve them in a dialogue with those whom they have written off as obscuranists—people on whom reason will make no impact. Or they have not been able to take it seriously because they are no more free from obscurantism than the most superstitious ignoramus—and without any of the excuses of the ignoramus. They are themselves dependent on religious leaders in whom they have a faith unrelated to their way of life. They are impressed by at best an unregenerate mystical life, and at worst charlatanism masquerading as spirituality. This is a phenomenon which may have been noticed but of which we have very little understanding.

(iii) The religious leaders have not taken it seriously because, for many of them, it would mean loss of a position of power without responsibility.