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RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND TRUTH IN THE GANDHIAN WAY

The decade of the seventies provides us with a fascinatingly rich panorama of religious faith and its importance in the geography of human behaviour. This decade could be characterized as the decade of religious emergence and, more importantly, as the decade of the religious leader. Unfortunately, the picture that emerges is fluid but flawed. Parts of the religious canvas are naive, fanatical, shallow and cruel; others are subtle, saintly, noble and ecumenical. On the one hand, religion is suffused with overpowering love which is melting down ancient hatreds, while on the other hand we are faced with a phenomenon that can only be qualified as a regression to a period of religious fanaticism and of religious wars. On the one hand, religion appears to be archaic and arcane to some, on the other hand, others are rushing to join the "new religions" which are blossoming all over.

The contemporary climate is such that Gandhi's spiritual legacy could shed light on the tangled and paradoxical re-emergence of religion as a major factor in human behaviour, especially since Gandhi spent a lifetime, as he tells us in his *Autobiography* and *From Yavda Mandir*, conducting experiments in non-violence and the "spiritual field" as well as studying the sacred scriptures of the major religions of the world. Further, he tells us in his *autobiography* that all the power he possessed derived from his religion. Precisely because of this, his writings and his life could become, as Einstein said, "a beacon for generations to come."¹

Gandhi's practice of non-violence as a technique to effect social and political change is well-known and it is not my intention to add to the immense literature on this subject. I propose to delineate Gandhi's theory of non-violence, to explore the relationship between

1. *Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. S. Radhakrishnan (London: Allen & Unwin, 1949), p. 80.

non violence and religious truth, and to assess his contributions in these areas to human endeavour.

1. Non-Violence

In the sense of non-injury, *ahimsa* has long been a part of the Hindu tradition, as old as the *Upanishads*. Every system of Hindu thought would accept the five restraints of Patanjali's *Yoga*, that is, "abstinence from injury, veracity, abstinence from theft, continence, and abstinence from avariciousness,"² as categorical imperatives. It is a recurrent theme in Buddhism and is stretched to its limits in Jainism. However, it was understood as a negative concept, abstinence from injury, an ascetic virtue inculcated for the purpose of attaining salvation. As Maitra has noted, "Hindu morality aimed at the autonomy of the individual, that is, at making him self-sufficient and self-dependent and free from external bonds, physical and social."³ A positive note of service to others is noticeably absent. Moreover, on the social and political levels, the necessity of violence was accepted and even extolled as in the *Mahābhārata*. Further, in the traditional account, non-violence was interpreted in subordination to caste and stages of life. War was a part of the warrior's duty. In the *Gita*, Krishna advises Arjuna, to fight for the restoration of their rights against the Kaurava usurpers.⁴

Gandhi reformulates this tradition in a *Three-fold way*. Firstly, Gandhi intimately relates non-violence to truth. If violence has the final way, truth is the loser. No search for truth is possible when one is forced to accept the opponent's viewpoint.

... without *ahimsa* it is not possible to seek and find truth. *Ahimsa* and truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin. . . . Nevertheless, *ahimsa* is the means; truth is the end.⁵

2. *The Yoga Sutra*, II. 29.

3. Mitra Susil Kumar, *The Ethics of the Hindus* (Calcutta University Press, 1963), p. 8.

4. *Bhagavad Gita*, II. 31-33.

5. *From Yeravda Mandir* in *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Shri-man Narayan (Ahmedabad: Natajivan, 1968), Vol. IV, p. 219. (Hereinafter the *Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* will be referred to as *SW*).

Secondly, after showing how the excesses of the caste-system are philosophically and religiously untenable, Gandhi establishes the dynamic and positive nature of non-violence as a method of bringing about social change without doing violence to one's opponents.

Ahimsa is not merely a negative state of harmlessness, but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer. But it does not mean helping the evil-doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love—the active state of *ahimsa* requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him, even though it may offend him or injure him physically.⁶

Thirdly, Gandhi shows how non-violence is fundamental to the human condition, "the law of the human race." It is important to understand what Gandhi means by this expression. Gandhi affirms that man's unique position in evolution as a creature endowed with "reason, discrimination and free-will" and "moral instincts and moral institutions" makes the transfer of laws from animal behaviour to man particularly hazardous. Man, according to Gandhi, knows from "his innermost convictions" that he can subdue "desires, anger, ignorance, malice and other passions" that lead to violence. Conquest of one's passions . . . is not super-human, but human."⁷ Gandhi points out one important aspect of violence! that violence is the out-growth of the passional side of man which can be checked and therefore violence is not instinctive.⁸ Again, man is, for Gandhi, both an individual reality and a communal-reality and it is love, not pressure or coercion that binds men into a community. Our newspapers constantly portray a grim tale of violence, but such violence for Gandhi is an aberration, for millions in fact live in peace and brotherhood.

History does not and cannot take note of this fact. History is really a record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love. . . . Soul-force, being natural, is not noted in history.⁹

6. *SW*, VI, pp. 153-154.

7. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: The Publications Division Government of India, 1958-1974), Vol. XXX, p. 573. (herein after referred to as *CW*).

8. See Mahatma K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 226-279 for Gandhi's experiments on the passional nature of man.

9. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* in *SW* IV, p. 171.

Further, Gandhi recognizes that frustration of human needs and aspirations as well as the powerful modern state are causes of violence. Much violence has to be explained in these terms rather than as a product of innate aggressiveness. As Gandhi proceeded with his non-violent campaigns, the economic restructuring of resources was uppermost in his mind; the basic needs of man have to be met and that is the truth of the human condition. "To a people famishing and idle," says Gandhi, "the only acceptable form in which God can dare appear is work and the promise of food and wages."¹⁰ In *Constructive Programme* Gandhi sets forth in considerable detail his scheme for the political, economic and educational reform of Indian Society. However, unlike those who believe that economic and social engineering will allow the innate goodness of man to shine forth, Gandhi rightly posited a more realistic and sounder image of man.

Man being by nature more passionate than the brute, the moment all restraint is withdrawn, the lava of unbridled passion would overspread the whole earth and destroy mankind. Man is superior to the brute inasmuch he is capable of self-restraint and sacrifice, of which the brute is incapable.¹¹

For Gandhi, it is within this positive capacity for self-restraint—that man's nobler aspirations are not at the mercy of his irrational tendencies—and in his ability to devise means to regulate his resources that man will find the basis and hope of non-violence.

We see that Gandhi is faced with an ambiguous tradition of non-violence. He retains the traditional term but drastically reforms the content of the term by giving it a philosophical base, making it dynamic and relating it to the truth of the human condition.

2. Truth

Satya (truth) is a complex concept in Indian thought. As an ethical category, it is in traditional Hinduism equivalent to *dharma*, the performance of duties common to all men, as well as those pertaining to one's *varna* (caste) and *ashrama* (stage of life). *The Laws of Manu* states the common law as follows:

10. Gandhi, *Young India, 1919-1922* (New York: Hubsch, 1923), p. 670.

11. *SW*, VI, p. 112.

Contentment, forgiveness, self-control, abstention from unrighteously appropriating anything, obedience to the rules of purification, coercion of organs, wisdom, knowledge of the Supreme Soul, truthfulness and abstention from anger form the tenfold law.¹²

Gandhi accepts the general *dharma* but considerably modifies the duties of caste especially as they refer to the untouchables. On the basis of his theory of "later interpolations" he tries to show that the Vedic prescription asked people to follow the traditional calling though without the present assumption of the superiority of one caste over the other. By the early thirties Gandhi affirms that caste is revealed through conduct. Further, on the basis of "morality" and "positive experience," Gandhi finds untouchability "a monstrous parody of the original" and a "curse" which poisons Hinduism as "a drop of arsenic poisons milk." "I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality," says Gandhi. "I tolerate unreasonable religious sentiment when it is not immoral."¹³ Moreover, the deterministic aspects of *varna* based on *karma* are implicitly rejected by Gandhi since the whole doctrine of *satyagraha* is based on the assumption that man can actively change his environment.

Truth is also an ontological category which stands for that which really exists, entity, existence, essence; reality, really existent truth; the Good; Brahman, the Holy Power, the Supreme Self. Gandhi accepted this definition but he wrestled with it for fifty years. He accepted God firstly, because of his personal experiences through prayer and meditation. "I cannot recall," says Gandhi, "a moment when I had a sense of desertion by God."¹⁴ Secondly, for Gandhi, "it is possible to reason out the existence of God to a limited extent" from the law and order in the universe. The "natural scenery," the "heavenly stars" speak a living language to the "greatness and glory of God."¹⁵ Thirdly, Gandhi recounts the "testimony to be found in the experiences of an unbroken line of prophets and sages in all countries and climes. "While some psychologists may be wary of this evidence, Gandhi came to the

12. *The Laws of Manu*, VI. 92.

13. *Young India*, 21-7-'20, p. 4.

14. *Harijan*, 24-12-'38, p. 395.

15. *Young India*, 26-9-'29 p. 320.

conclusion that the "transformed conduct" and "character of those who have felt the real presence of God" does not allow us to dismiss this testimony as lunacy or a delusion.¹⁶

But given Gandhi's acceptance of God, we are still confronted with the issue of many beliefs as regards the nature of the God and the relationship between God and man. Is God personal or impersonal? Should we uphold monism or theism? What about atheism? On this issue, Gandhi is heavily influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita*. Very much like the *Gita*—especially chapters 10 and 11—Gandhi concludes that this "mysterious Power" will always defy definition because of our "human limitations, cultural backgrounds and spiritual developments" and remain:

... That indefinable something which we all feel but which we do not know... To me God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness, God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above all and beyond these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist... He transcends speech and reason... He is personal to those who need his personal presence. He is embodied to those who need his touch... He simply is to those who have faith.¹⁷

Given the diversity of religious beliefs and non-belief and given the reasons which engender this diversity, Gandhi came to the conclusion that the moral thing to do is to commit oneself to the "Truth" as one sees it and this can be done only through goodwill and non-violence. Truth for Gandhi is not given, it is a process and the process demands, from believer and non-believer alike as persons, fidelity to understanding and to love. In freeing the notion of non-violence from its traditional roots in man's caste and duties and thus universalizing it and further, in including in the definition of Truth practical methodological considerations, that is the practice of non-violence as delineated in Sec. 1 of this article, as intrinsic to this definition, Gandhi is considerably reformulating the traditional definition of Truth. In a key passage, Gandhi summarizes for us "his continuous and relentless search for Truth which began nearly fifty years ago," as follows:

16. *Young India*, 11-10-'28, pp. 340-341.

17. *Young India*, 5-3-'25, pp. 80-81.

If it is possible for the human tongue to give the fullest description, of God, I have come to the conclusion that for myself God is Truth. But two years ago, I went a step further and said Truth is God... And when you want to find Truth as God the only inevitable means is Love that is, non-violence.¹⁸

According to Gandhi, there will always be non-belief as there will always be different faiths as universal options. Gandhi is not a typical Indian thinker who believes that in the moment of mystical exaltation, everything is reduced to ONE. Gandhi does not underestimate the doctrinal differences between religions as his correspondence with Tolstoy reveals. However, his usual approach is to pile up metaphors which while philosophically insufficient are nevertheless useful.

Even as a Tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so there is one true and perfect religion, but it becomes many, as it passes through the human medium.¹⁹

For me the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree.²⁰

I regard the great faiths of the world as so many branches of a tree, each distinct from the other though having the same source.²¹

The Soul of religions is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms.²² Wherein does Gandhi find this "oneness" in religion? He finds it in the fact that some version of the Golden Rule appears in all the major religions of the world; the "same fundamental morality" is a golden thread uniting all the religions of mankind.²³ He also found that "renunciation" of man's self-centredness, which is the source of all man's troubles, is a common theme in all the religions of the world.²⁴

18. *Young India*, 31-12-'31, pp. 427-428.

19. *From Yeravda Mandir* in *SW*, IV, p. 241.

20. *Harijan*, 30-1-'37, p. 407.

21. *Harijan*, 28-1-'39, p. 448.

22. *Young India*, 25-9-'24, p. 318; Refer to *SW* V, Sec. 1 and *Autobiography*, pp. 135-138 for Gandhi's views on the differences between Hinduism and Christianity.

23. *Harijan*, 26-1-'34, p. 7.

24. Gandhi, *Autobiography*, p. 19.

3. The Legacy of Gandhi

Every person, to some extent, is a "prisoner" of his tradition; we inherit the structure of our society, but we can make a contribution to change it. Gandhi no doubt inherits a certain ambivalent tradition of non-violence and Truth and it may be instructive to focus on tradition and transcendence of tradition in Gandhi.

From Gandhi's analysis of non-violence, wherein he argues for a moral discontinuum between man and animal, one would expect Gandhi to define violence in terms of a violation of the person. A person, of course, can be violated in many ways and Gandhi points out that "the principle of *ahimsa* is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody. It is also violated by holding on to what the world needs."²⁵ However, in the only place where he offers a definition of violence, he does so in the following way:

Himsa means causing pain to or killing any life out of anger, or from selfish purpose, or with the intention of injuring it. Refraining from so doing is *ahimsa*.²⁶

Gandhi, unmindful of his distinction between man and animal, defines non-violence through traditional Indian thought. Belief in reincarnation, no doubt, is a contributing factor in the definition of violence. This religious belief which is a fundamental assumption of the unity of all life, rather than an interconnectedness of the community of life, profoundly influences Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence. This traditional view forces Gandhi to reduce the ontological worth of the human body; to place unrealistic demands on the human being in order to carry out the spirit of non-violence. Reading the *Autobiography* and *From Yeravda Mandir* it becomes clear that Gandhi did not recognize that suppression of the legitimate joys of life may explode into violence at some future date. Gandhi's philosophical and religious models of man remain unreconciled.²⁷

25. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir* in *SW*, IV, p. 218.

26. *CW*, Vol. XXXI, p. 545.

27. See my article, "A Second Look at Aspects of Gandhi's Theory of Non-Violence" *Journal of Social Philosophy*, May 1978, pp. 11-14 for a fuller treatment of the tension between the philosophical and religious models of man in Gandhism.

The tension between tradition and reason, however, has its beneficial effects. It forces us to rethink the Eastern and Western views of the person. I am not suggesting that one of the models of man should be rejected in favour of the other. In fact, the usual definition of violence as "violation of a person" assumes uncritically a heritage that man alone is the only being of importance and that the rest of nature can be sacrificed for the welfare and pleasure of human beings; Gandhi's definition of violence as "causing harm to any life" assumes the univocal unity of life as a religious axiom and derives from it the doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence) as the prime ethical value. A fuller meaning of non-violence will involve a rethinking of both these positions in terms of the evidence of the interconnectedness of the community of life which comes particularly from the biological sciences. A philosophical view of non-violence would involve a respect for the integrity of man and a respect for the integrity of biotic systems.

Aside from this philosophical controversy, Gandhi's legacy of non-violence as a civilized way of settling social, political and especially religious issues demands further attention.

Religion is a force in the geography of human behaviour. We are faced with non-belief in religion and varieties of religion. How does a civilized person handle this human legacy? In Gandhi we find the principles which could serve as a clue for resolving a potentially explosive quarrel in the family of man. Religion for Gandhi supplies a "want in the spiritual progress of humanity," and the testimony from reason, experience and authority is sufficient to ground the religious dimension of man. But he realized that the evidence is such that it defies "all proof because it is so unlike all that I perceive through the senses. It transcends the senses."²⁸ Because of this, between sincere believers like Charles Bradlaugh who, Gandhi says, "delighted to call himself an atheist" and equally sincere believers like Gandhi there can be fruitful communion and interchange.²⁹ Morality for Gandhi is the basis of religion and morality irrespective of religion demands fidelity to the Golden Rule. At this level, true believers and true non-believers have always been united.

28. *Young India*, 11-10-28, p. 340.

29. *Young India*, 31-12-31, pp. 427-428.

But what about the relation between men of different faiths? Gandhi rightly believed that we have common grounds in the "rock bottom fundamental morality" which is present in all religions and in the fact that all religions demand that we remove the flaw of self-centredness. But man can be carried away by his passions, and ignorance though if that happens the fanatical believer and fanatical non-believer have temporarily won the day. Religion and Morality and Civilization are the losers. Monstrosities committed in the name of religion are irreligion; they are brute force which if victorious makes Truth the loser. Violence engenders violence and fanaticism is the death of dialogue which is a pre-requisite for the search for Truth.

Let Gandhi, who witnessed fanaticism and violence, have the last word. His parting advice, which will remain his legacy to humanity :

There will be no lasting peace on earth unless learn not merely to tolerate but even to respect the other faiths as our own. A reverent study of the sayings of different teachers of mankind is a step in the direction of mutual respect.³⁰

Belief in one God is the corner-stone of all religions. But I do not foresee a time when there will be only one religion in practice. In theory, since there is one God, there can be only one religion. But in practice no two persons I have known have had the same identical conception of God. Therefore, there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to different temperaments and climatic conditions. But I can clearly see the time coming when people belonging to different faiths will have the same regard for other faiths as they have for their own . . . We are all children of one and the same God and, therefore, absolutely equal.³¹

30. Gandhi, *In Search of the Supreme*, ed. V.B. Kher (Ahmedabad; Navajivan, 1963) Vol. III, p. 10.

31. *Harijan*, 2-2-'34, p. 8.