



Gandhi's Concept of Religion: a Philosophical Introspection

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Date of Submission: 22-07-2022

Date of Acceptance: 05-08-2022

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), popularly known as 'the Mahatma' (the Great Soul), 'a man without religion is life without principles, and life without principles, is like a ship without a rudder.' Gandhi gave immense importance to role of religion in one's life. According to K. L. Seshagiri Rao, "Gandhi believed that education without the study of religions is incomplete. Religion, in its varied forms, is not only a legitimate intellectual pursuit but a vital aspect of human culture and civilization..... The study of religions, for Gandhi, was not a purely theoretical or academic matter; it was also a practical and existential necessity. He was, therefore, interested in living religions, not dead ones."¹ Living religions interested Gandhi and that is apt approach as in contemporary times it is desperately needed. Gandhi was quite sad that he was unable to gain knowledge of religions of the world in his childhood. His deliberate attempt to arrive at the Truth of all religions made him say, "I believe in the fundamental Truth of all great religions of the world. And I believe that if only we could, all of us, read the scriptures of the different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at the bottom, all one and were all helpful to one another."² Religion comes from two words – 're' and 'ligare' i.e. binding together; it is binding together of the finite with the infinite, that is man with the God. This 'God' usually is taken to be Creator-God with all metaphysical attributes like – omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscient, benevolent, Absolute, Eternal, Infinite and the only personality; and ethical qualities like 'God is Good', 'God is Love', etc. Gandhi's concept of God and religion is quite oriental. For him the base of all religions remains same; while the superstructure of all religions varies. This superstructure is supported by various forms of worship and rituals. This diversity of rituals remains immaterial according to Gandhi. For him, it is the common belief in 'God' that lends support to universality to religions of the world. The

esoteric and mystical rituals are not given core importance in his concept of 'dharma' ('religion' in Sanskrit). Gandhi never admitted one religion but the idea of 'One' God landed support to the universal platform for all religions of the world. According to British philosopher R. B. Braithwaite (1900-1990), all religions imbibe ethical practices, moral principles, values and norms. These moral injunctions are same in every religion. Then the question arises – if the The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona, Spain The West East Institute 12 major world religions speak of the same moral principles, how one religion is different from the other religion? His answer is – they are different in two ways – 1. Relating to the differences of rituals. 2. Relating to the differences in sets of stories or myths. 3. According to Braithwaite differences of rituals are unimportant, but the differences of stories are significant since these stories are associated with adherence to their way of life. People follow stories in their life; in critical situations of life these stories work as elixir to solve the problems of life. At this juncture Gandhi's views become very important. Since stories are also associated with rituals, people crib about differences of stories and the lengthy rituals that are associated with it. For example – the extreme test of Ibrahim's faith on Lord Allah is demonstrated by the story of Ibrahim being commanded by Allah to sacrifice his son Isaac; when he is about to sever his son's head, Allah turned him to a goat. To commemorate this religious occasion the festival of Bakr-id is celebrated by sacrificing a goat. This particular episode of Islam will not go down well with Jainism or Buddhism, the two atheistic religions that do not believe in the popular concept of God as Creator-God. (But they do believe in divinity in every individual). On this Gandhi had to say, "The one religion is beyond all speech. Imperfect men put it into such language as they can command, and their words are interpreted by other men equally imperfect. Hence the necessity for tolerance, which does not mean indifference towards one's own faith, but a more intelligent and



pure love for it.”³ Tolerance as mentioned above is not tolerating injustices, and living with compromises. But tolerance has full of positive meaning. It means patience coloured with understanding and inward participation in the philosophical and ethical aspect of others’ religion. In contemporary times the debate is not about ‘God’; the debate and hard-core discourse is on ‘religion’. The topic of discussion has shifted from ‘God’ to the topic of ‘religion’, as God remains uncontroversial and non-conflicting concept. Religions with popular concept of God or religions like Jainism and Buddhism without the popular concept of God –do not discard this divinity. This divinity lends support to religion making it universalistic in character. “To Gandhi religion was a human institution made by human ingenuity to solve practical affairs as well as spiritual matters.”⁴

Gandhi, Religion and Different Realms of Human Life:

Though Gandhi had his say in matter of politics, economics and social issues; underlying all these diversified issues there was this religious fervour to it. This was because of his quest for ‘truth’. His auto-biography – ‘The Stories of My Experiments with Truth - also concentrates on Gandhi’s struggle in search of Truth. For him this ‘truth’ is nothing but ‘God’; this unique understanding is ultimately associated with his extreme acceptance of ‘Ahimsa’ – ‘non-violence’. Therefore his famous ideology, ‘I am not against evil-doer but the evil itself.’ According to Socrates, ‘Virtue is Knowledge’; for Gandhi one can say ‘Virtue is Ahimsa (Non-violence)’. He arrived at this conclusion through dialectics and reason. That which does not confirm to his reason was out of his purview. He was highly influenced by the Sermon on the Mount and the principle of Ahimsa (non-violence) of Jainism; but the way his reason could accept Hinduism, nothing could appeal to him the most. If we are to talk about Gandhi’s most essential politico-social-economic ideologies – the first and the foremost – the ideology of Satyagraha (the idea of nonviolent resistance, fighting with peace holding to Truth, insistence on truth and leading a truthful life), his concept of Civil Disobedience and Non-cooperation, his ideal State concept – Rāmarājya (the State that is governed by the rules set by Lord Rāma who insisted on duty and priority among duties – as a king, son, husband, father and so on and so forth in the great Indian epic Rāmāyana) and Swaraj (i.e. Home-Rule) – the base for all these was religious philosophy, especially Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Christianity. The Bhagavad Gītā

concept of Nishkāmakarma (duty for duty’s sake, renunciation in action), Jainism’s emphasis on non-violence, Buddhism’s core ideology of non-violence and compassion and Christianity’s concept of forgive and forget principle by Jesus Christ highly impressed him. These principles furnished all his political, social and economic reforms. The concept of trusteeship found in Judo-Christian and Islamic philosophy was implemented by Gandhi in his philosophy of ‘nature’ and economic policies. On Satyagraha and Non-violence having co-relation to Hinduism, Gandhi’s views is well put by M. V. Nadkarni, “Though the Gandhian view of Hinduism put primacy on personal conduct and ethics, it did not eschew faith in God. But truth was God for him, and seeking truth was religion. Hinduism for him was a process of search after truth. As such, rituals found no place in his religion, though he did not object to others following rituals of worship, provided it was non-violent. Non-violence was basic means of search for truth. It needed no ritual. But bhajans or prayers with bhakti (devotion to God) without any sectarian bias were encouraged by him as the means of purifying mind, and strengthening one’s resolve to pursue truth.”⁵ The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona, Spain The West East Institute 13 Gandhi’s belief in Swadeshi that is ‘self-sufficiency’ or ‘economic independence’ also was religious as ‘on the ground that it originally meant the soul’s final emancipation and freedom from earthly bonds.’ Sarvodaya is one such principle accepted by Gandhi that also has a religious back-bone. Sarvodaya is ‘universal uplift through world solidarity’ or ‘world solidarity through social welfare’. According to him, “God is Truth, Love, ethics and morality.”⁶ “So in other words, Sarvodaya requires adherence to moral principles and moral ways of life.”⁷ Gandhi, like Jesus Christ, never intended to give a new religion. As said by him, “I do not claim to have originated any new principle. I have simply tried in my own way to apply the eternal truths of our daily life and problems.....Well, all my philosophy, if it may be called by that pretentious name, is contained in what I have said. You will not call it Gandhism. There is no ‘ism’ about it. And no elaborate literature or propaganda is needed about it.”⁸ Gandhi believed in practice first and precept later. But from the above statement by Gandhi, it seems that he only believed in practice and his practice was his precept. In this way Gandhi is a hard-core practitioner. Well explained by Manisha Barua, “Thus, Mahatma Gandhi cannot be regarded as originating any new system of philosophy or any new religion in the



academic sense of the term. He learned simply the principles or eternal truths from the greatest traditional philosophical and religious teachers of the world. But Gandhi's contribution lies in the fact that he tried to assimilate in his own way the teachings that appealed to him and to apply these not only in his personal life but also to social, political and economic problems. In this sense Gandhi could be called an applied philosopher.⁹ The designated status to Gandhi as an 'applied philosopher' is absolutely an apt one. As Gandhi was asked as to what is his main motive in life – is it to gain economic prosperity or political reformation or religious renaissance? His answer was – religious renaissance – as he intended to lead a religious life that was wholly connected to humanity; this can be achieved by remaining in the political realm. Thus says Unto Tähtinen, "Participation in political life was for him a means to the religious life. Politics is the application of religion. If we wish to understand Gandhi as a politician, it is important first to understand him as a religious personality."¹⁰ Once again we arrive to the point that Gandhi was a 'pragmatic philosopher.' This derivation is also because of his staunch belief in the theory of Karma (the theory of action) and his belief in the concept of Nishkāmakarma, i.e. performing actions without expecting fruits of the actions, that is duty for duty's sake. This made him participate in economic – political – social reformation as it is one's duty to do so. Religion for him was not a secluded path from our routine life. Though spiritual in nature religion has to wrap up whole of humanity and all walks of human life. So, one can say that he wanted to spiritualize the political realm also. Since Gandhi intended to spiritualize politics, it was not just politics, but all walks of human life. According to him there are different religions historically speaking, but they are all called 'religion' as one underlying religion connects them all. This fundamental religion is the base for all religions that brings about harmony and peace among all historical religions. Yes, he called himself a 'Hindu' but he had transcended those orthodoxal barriers and took the best from all religions. This common base of all historical religions he meant was a 'universal religion'. And no individual religion conflicted or collided with this universal notion of all religions. Every individual, from oriental religions' point of view, has to have a spiritual goal in life and that is self-realization leading to salvation (Moksha). In this according to Gandhi two sources are at work, one – the unseen force, and second – the human effort; which he meant Nishkāmakarma (renunciation in action). Like the Philosophy of the

Bhagavad Gītā – that rendered tremendous influence on Gandhi's life, for which he said, "I find solace in the Bhagavad Gītā that I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount. When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not a ray of light, I go back to the Bhagavad Gītā. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of over-whelming tragedies and my life has been full of external tragedies and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gītā."¹¹ The Bhagavad Gītā is a dialogue between Shri Krishna and his favourite friend and disciple Arjuna; when in the battlefield of Kurukshetra, Arjuna is despondent as he could not fight with his own people and he is against any blood-shed, at that time Shri Krishna reminds him of his duties as warrior; the whole narration is the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gītā. The Gītā believes that all the three paths are equally important in one's life – these three paths are karma-yoga (the path of action), Jñāna Yoga (the path of knowledge) and Bhakti yoga (the path of devotion). One cannot resolve only with one path. There is a complete synthesis and reconciliation of these three paths. In a same way Gandhi does not divide the various realms of human life – be it religious, political, economic or social. It is to spiritualize all these; they do not remain segregated paths. This continuum of spirituality in all major walks of human life – Gandhi was a strong advocate of it. The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona, Spain The West East Institute ¹⁴ Therefore Nishkāmakarma makes morality end in itself. Gandhi believed if one concentrates on the fruits of actions it is the end justifying the means. This is not only dangerous but devastating according to Gandhi. If end is important, the means can take any immoral form – say – force, violence, or terrorism. This cannot be afforded. Therefore the Gītā principle of Nishkāmakarma – renunciation in action is the best way leading to world solidarity i.e. Loksamgraha. This is his concept of Sarvodaya –that has been discussed earlier. So, was Gandhi only an adherent follower of Hinduism and therefore a true Hindu? Well explained by Ms. Barua, "In the formative period of his life he was exposed to all kinds of influences. In his childhood days he was influenced by the Vaishnava and Jaina ideas. He was also exposed to missionary work done by the Christians. During his stay in England and South Africa he was strongly influenced by the doctrines of Christianity. But these influences only helped him to take more interest in understanding his own religious tradition. Gandhi realized that in essence all religions are one



and it is better to practice sincerely one's own religion than follow the religion of a different tradition. Gandhi remained a staunch Hindu but kept an open mind. Enabling ideas from other religion to come he only reinforced his beliefs, and helped him to be a better Hindu."¹² This can be verified by his feelings for other religions (other than Hinduism). He was very clear in his ideologies of established religions of the world and never resisted to criticise any religion – be it Hinduism, Christianity, Islam or Judaism. Some of the practices that were adapted in Hindu portfolio were 'untouchability' which he believed was a curse on humanity. In fact he went to the extent of calling the dalits (the untouchables) as "Harijans" – "Men of God". He was averting to visit temples as the Harijans were not allowed to visit temples; he took off his holy thread as it meant to him nothing if it was not allowed to Harijans. 'Jihad' in Islam – he did not consider it to be a 'physical' holy war but a positive factor like his own staunch belief in 'Satyagraha', a non-violent struggle and a war within oneself between the forces of the 'good' and the 'evil'; (this holy war within oneself reminds of the Gītā concept of 'dharma-yudh', fighting within oneself, the fight between 'dharma' (duties) and 'adharmā' (immorality), where dharma has to win. Gandhi's religion incorporated 'prayer meetings', this was precisely to assimilate pluralism and bring about unity in diversity, especially of different religions. Gandhi never ever looked down upon any single religion. And at the same time Gandhi never ever upheld any one religion in a privileged position. Though he claimed always to be a Hindu, as seen earlier, the caste system or untouchability – if incorporated as part of Hindu system – he openly denounced it. Though he sought out universality in religions by saying that all religions have the common platform i.e. God on which all religions are based; he was never with the agreement to the idea that one religion can be granted a position of 'universal religion'. He went to the extent by saying that the religions with 'divine origin' in form of scriptures either through the sages or prophets like the Vedas, the Quran, the Ten Commandments or the Bible are not infallible; no doubt the Medium through which they are been revealed is not doubted but the media (i.e. human being themselves) through whom we have received these scriptures are doubted as humans are finite and can give us only a glimpse of the whole truth. So, any one religion in that matter cannot be a Universal Religion. Dialectics or reason can be used to extract the best from all religions and be accepted. Again, Gandhi's economic policy also had the base of religion. He never believed in a

pyramid structure of economic system, where one is on the apex and the others down below. Like pantheistic approach, where all is One and One is all, Gandhi believed in co-centric circles, one circle encourages other circles to come to forefront. This is why his policy of Swadeshi (self-sufficiency or produce in one's own country) and giving tremendous importance to Khadi (hand woven cotton clothes, which he himself used to wear) and 'cottage industry'. This idea seems to work in a country like India where people work at home; and gender equality can also be maintained as women too can participate in producing homemade products and handicraft work in their spare time. The concept of Loksamgraha (World Solidarity through Social Welfare) and Sthitaprajñā – the un-deviated and balanced person – is also associated with his philosophy of non-violence. As explained by N. V. Nadkarni, "Nonviolence (ahimsa) of Hinduism in Gandhian perspective was not just a negative concept of avoiding violence; in fact, it required its practitioner to be socially engaged, proactively kind and caring. An important aspect of Gandhian perspective thus is its emphasis on selfless social service. For Gandhiji, Truth or God was not distant mountain peak, but to be sought only through removing the sorrow of others, empowering them in the process."¹³ Mahatma Gandhi, a great mystic saint from Sabarmati, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India, realized the inadequacy of mere human effort, at its best, to approach any of the problems in the spirit of truth and non-violence; he was obliged to take God's help and succour. Thereby he was able to accomplish what has been hitherto considered as impossible. The 2015 WEI International Academic Conference Proceedings Barcelona, Spain The West East Institute 15 Through the various stages of his development and activity the spiritual factor of his being was gradually becoming more and more assertive, till it became the most dominant characteristic of his later achievements. Prayer and praise were associated with his political and social activities.

II. CONCLUSION

So, overall, we find that Gandhi concentrated on various social issues to bring about deliberate social reforms with the help of bhakti or devotion or spiritual path. To conclude, in his autobiography 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth', he says, "What I want to achieve – what I have been striving and pinning to achieve these thirty years – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha (Salvation). I live and move and have my being in pursuit to this goal. All that I



do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end. But as I have all along believed that what is possible for one is possible for all, my experiments have not been conducted in the closet, but in the open; and I do not think that this fact detracts from their spiritual value. There are some things which are known only to oneself and one's Maker. These are clearly incommunicable. The experiments I am about to relate are not such. But they are spiritual or rather moral; for the essence of religion is morality.¹⁴ Gandhi's family in childhood was frequented by different religious people – the Parsis (the Zoroastrians), the Jains, the Buddhists and the Muslims too. This was a visit to his father for political discussions. He says in his autobiography how his home was a centre for interfaith dialogue. Having read the Bhagavad Gītā, the book 'Key to Theosophy', the Bible (especially the New Testament) and 'The Light of Asia' by Sir Edwin Arnold, he was able to contemplate on inter-connectivity of different faiths. This made him experiment with different religions; and he was able to deduce that all religions have common universal notion of 'divinity'. From the above discussions on the Gandhi's ideas on Philosophy of Religion one thing that comes out strikingly is he was never bent to traditional or institutionalized religion. Though criticised of using terms like God, Soul, Self, Truth interchangeably and therefore his philosophical discourses on religion had conflicting ways of argumentations; he still maintained his stance that was morality or ethics being intrinsic to religion. So he doesn't seem of considering religion in an institutionalized form because every individual religion will have its fixed mould, which Gandhi could not accept. So for Truth and in that matter morality is his second name for religion. Therefore the criticism is not justified. According to Bhikhu Parekh, three important concerns are seen in the contemporary times – the need for intrareligious dialogue, the need for inter-religious dialogue and the need for dialogue on conflicts between religious groups having complex causes – say political or economic interests. These concerns need to be addressed. Very few have tried to address these concerns as they can otherwise lead to (and is leading to) hazardous consequences. Gandhi is one such person, though controversial in some matters, had tried it, initiate the dialogue and address these very fragile and intricate matters. As Bhikhu Parekh writes, "For Gandhi reason and experience are the most reliable source of knowledge and guides to human life. Not all areas of life, however, are equally within their reach, including those that

involve non-reproducible and untestable forms of experience. Gandhi argues that in these cases we have no choice but to go beyond reason and experience, and make a leap of faith. Since faith can easily open doors to all manner of dubious belief, it must be rational, not blind. While both types of faith go beyond reason and experience, the former, unlike the latter, does not 'contradict' or 'go against' them. It is 'allowed' or 'permitted' by them, goes beyond them only when they are silent, and continues to be guided by them. In Gandhi's view this is the case with the belief in God."¹⁵ This reminds of Soren Kierkegaard's 'the leap of faith'; and this approach by Gandhi makes an attempt for a possible dialogue and inter-faith tolerance. It is dubious when one tries to set a paradigm of one's own faith. But this paradigm shift from religion to God can probably solve many complex problems of present generation. Gandhi's religious philosophy tries to set this paradigm where conflicts are resolved and possible dialogue can take place. So Gandhi can be called a 'religious reformer'. He attempts to purify religion from anti-rational and unethical factors. He believes that the main aim of religion is to direct human beings to walk on spiritual path and a moral life. Taking the best from religions of the world, he intended to present a religion not purged with rigid ideas, but cleansing it of its orthodoxies and pulling moral strength from religions of the world. This can very well solve the present day crisis. Gandhi believed it is not only tolerating a religion that is important, it is equally important to respect other religions. In Young India, Gandhi says, "I came to the conclusion long ago.....that all religions were true and also that all had some error in them, and whilst I hold by my own, I should hold others as dear as Hinduism, not that a Christian should become a Hindu.....But our innermost prayer should be a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, a Christian a better Christian."¹

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