



Truth, Identity and Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Society: Gandhian Response

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Abstract

This paper explores Gandhi's attitude towards diversity of religions and examines how he attempted to bring interfaith harmony. Religious diversity has been a topic of serious debate in the contemporary philosophical discourse on understanding religion. This paper presents a descriptive, exploratory and analytical study of Gandhi's attitude towards the diversity of religion. It also reflects on how the Anekantavada of Jainism influences and shapes Gandhi's thoughts on truth, identity and differences. The paper reiterates the relevance of Gandhi's attitude towards diversity of religion in contemporary society.

Keywords: religious pluralism, religious diversity, tolerance, truth and harmony

1. Introduction

Religious diversity has been a topic of serious debate in the contemporary philosophical discourse on understanding religion. Different religions seem to put forward different and incompatible interpretations about the nature of ultimate reality, about the

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modes of divine activity, and about the nature and destiny of the human race.

Gandhi is often regarded as a “pioneer of religious pluralism” and “a prophet of inter-faith harmony” (Rajmohon, 2007, p. X). Religious pluralism is one of the approaches that deal with the issues concerning the diversity of religions. Religious pluralism means that no single religion can make absolute claims about the nature of divine reality, its relation to man and to the world. All religions are considered different presentations of the eternal truth. Consequently, it admits that there are variations in religious traditions, diversity in the way of worship and plurality in the set of beliefs, dogmas, rites and rituals in the manner of human responses to the divine reality. Religious pluralism accepts the view that all religions are equally true, that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions, and correspondingly different responses to the divine reality, and that within each of them independently, the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to reality-centeredness is taking place (Hick, 1991, ch. 9).

Religious pluralism stands in direct opposition to exclusivism, inclusivism and also to fundamentalism by denying that any one religion is the sole possession of the whole truth. Diversities are common phenomena in the Indian sub-continent as elsewhere in the world. Religious diversity is a living reality in India and the general perception is that plurality in any form fosters contradictions, conflict, threat, distrust and violence. T.N. Madan pointed out three possible positions with respect to the meaning of religious pluralism (Madan, 1998, pp. 31-32) - i) Mutual exclusiveness or absolute difference, ii) Convergence of the fundamentals of different faiths, although variously defined, iii) Every religion requires the others, for no religion has a monopoly over the whole truth.

2. Gandhi’s View on Diversity of Religion

Gandhi supported religious pluralism and believed that any particular religion is “one mode of presentation of the same eternal truth” (GOI, 1958, Vol. 1, pp. 139). Gandhi’s orientation to the

diversity of religion is towards fostering unity, keeping in consideration the many-sidedness of truth. He wished to foster the spirit of brotherhood, togetherness amongst the diverse religions so as to bring *Lokasangraha* as inspired by the Gita's concept for a just social order, and a harmonious, conflict-free society. Gandhi's commendable response to the diversity of religion is something worth considering in the context of his conception of religion which is more than ritual observances or mere profession of beliefs on a set of doctrines. It also had an implicit message to the colonial power to respect the ontologically given diversity of the world. Promotion of "a composite Indian nationalism" (Parel, 2009, p. XLIII) and toleration of the differences "within the context of a deeper national identity" (Parel, 2009, p. XLIV) were Gandhi's main concern. In fact, the last two positions on religious pluralism stated by T.N. Madan were envisioned by Gandhi long before. To Gandhi, religions are like different roads converging to the same point. "They therefore have equal validity and deserve equal respect" (Parel, 2009, p. 51).

His understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Hinduism had a profound influence in moulding his response towards diversity of religion. His concept of Hinduism included Jainism and Buddhism, as he stated "I do not regard Jainism or Buddhism as separate from Hinduism" (*Young India*, 6/12/1928). He had deep appreciation of the non-exclusive nature of Hinduism and considered himself a *Sanatani* Hindu (Gandhi, 1987, p. 35). According to Gandhi, as far as the Hindu religious tradition is concerned, there is in principle no problem in worshipping any form of God and any other ways of truth, since the underlying essence is considered to be one and the same. He had faith in the essential oneness of Truth at the transcendental level underlying the plurality at the level of human expressions of the ultimate Truth. Truth is one, indescribable and transcendental while empirically, the one Truth is described in many ways. Diversities are part and parcel of the empirical world since God though indescribable is described in numerous ways and given many names.

Though Gandhi was enormously influenced by the Hindu tradition and deeply rooted in this tradition, he maintained a non-dogmatic,

critical, rational and open-minded attitude towards his own religious tradition. Being born and nurtured by this tradition, he felt it was his right to examine the religion in a rational way so as to purify the defects or faults that arise in the way of its practice. He even considered himself a scavenger in the spiritual quest to reform some of the practices associated with his tradition. Such practices hinder the spiritual development and do not conform to reason or to the universal principles of truth, equality, justice, etc. as is the practice of untouchability. The aim here, is to focus on social justice, equality, peace, harmony and social solidarity. This shows his liberal and humanistic outlook. For him, religion should appeal to our reason and it should be in conformity with man's spiritual development and social well-being. There should be no room for oppression, discrimination, inequality, injustice, or exploitation in the name of religion, in the quest for Truth and determination of self-identity.

As Margaret Chatterjee observes, Gandhi took up a great task "to make Hinduism the focus of radical hermeneutics" (Chatterjee, 2013, pp. 35-36) - reinterpreting Hinduism so as to make it more accommodative, liberal and humanitarian (Chatterjee, 2013, pp. 35-36). He did not conceive the Hindu tradition in terms of "a repository of inviolable norms and values" (Chatterjee, 2013, pp. 35-36) but that which opens to accommodate criticism, change, and development (Chatterjee, 2013, pp. 35-36). He was critical of his own tradition with respect to certain practices, yet he remained firmly rooted to its core principles, on its centrality of truth and non-violence. The ethical aspects of religions were given more importance. He encouraged people to make religion the basis of life, their existence, and all their activities. He re-emphasized the assimilative character and the attitude of tolerance inherent in Hindu religion in his response to the diversity of religion in particular, and in his conception of religion and morality in general. For Gandhi, this approach does not amount to the criticism of any religion, rather it re-emphasises a perspective that, at their inner core all religions have a common ethical orientation on good life - whether that be the Ten Commandments of Christianity, the Koranic emphasis on self-surrender, the Upanishadic focus on generosity, compassion and self-control. Gandhi did not intend to formulate one universal religion. What he wished for was to make

people realize the unity underlying the diversity, and thereby bridge the gap amongst mankind. There would be no violence and no conflict in the name of religion, in the search for truth, and the determination of one's identity. He wished to strengthen the common ethical elements found in religions, to inculcate the spirit of brotherhood and work together for the well-being of all.

Religion comprises of beliefs and practices. In the context of the diversity of religion, two important things may be taken into account. They are the doctrinal differences and ethical practices of different religions. As far as the religious doctrines are concerned, there are not only differences, but also contradictory and conflicting views that may be real or apparent. Beliefs are put forward in the form of doctrines and dogmas. One religious belief may appear to be contradictory to another set of beliefs. These beliefs are expressions of man's relation to the divine. These expressions are man's responses to the divine. They cannot be judged to be true or false by the human mind. One question that arises is as to how and what is to be done in the face of such diverse and conflicting situations. Gandhi's response is that the doctrinal differences must be kept aside and the moral elements in human relationships must be given greater importance for the moral well-being and spiritual progress of the individual.

Gandhi being acquainted with the insights of the Anekantavada, considered all the different claims of the Truth as partially true, representing the fragmentary view of the Truth. According to Gandhi, all sets of doctrines and dogmas are not infallible and they have relative values in governing man's belief, his relation to the divine and his fellow beings and also in regulating man's life, his conduct, and in determining the ethical course of action. The ethical aspect in the pursuit of truth which religion in the true spirit stands for is to bring individual spiritual development, social stability and progress.

To Gandhi, the diversity of religions was not an issue. He considered the differences as natural and as a fact of life as there are differences in human temperaments, in their mode of worship and conception of the ultimate truth or divine reality. According to him, doctrines, dogmas and rituals have secondary and practical values and doctrinal differences should not be allowed to act as a

stumbling block to peaceful relations between religious communities in man's quest for truth and the determination of one's identity. At the empirical level, diversity of religions cannot be denied. Religion, being a socio-culturally existing reality, has a distinct set of doctrines, code of conduct, belief systems and manner of worship. Fundamentally, all religions are equal since their essence is the same, and they have a common goal. For Gandhi, the main focus should be on the spirit or essence of religion which is primarily man's relation with truth. Gandhi drew a distinction between 'letter' and 'spirit' of religion. For Gandhi, it is the religious spirit that he was deeply concerned with – the spirit to be able to identify himself with others in suffering, with the poorest of the poor, with the untouchables. It included the attitude to be able to reduce himself to zero, free himself from the limitations of the ego, to serve mankind as to serve God, and his relentless effort in the quest for truth.

According to Gandhi, this religious spirit must have its expression in all outward activities – social, political, and economic spheres of life – to work tirelessly for the upliftment of mankind (*Sarvodaya*) from any kind of oppression and exploitation –whether it be in the fight against evil practices, like the practice of untouchability or from the domination of the British colonial rule. He sought the realization of truth by living in the midst of people and relentlessly working for the well-being of humanity, rather than withdrawing to a solitary place in the quest for *mukti*. His ethico-religious philosophy is not merely confined to individual *moksha*. Rather it is deeply concerned with social well-being as well. He gave primacy to the inner transformation than on mere observances of rituals and dogmas, as outward observances are an extension of the inner experience (*Sadhana*) only when the former is in the form of service and sacrifice directed to the well being of all. For Gandhi, religion is to be expressed in our practical lives, to be reflected in all our activities, to bring togetherness and to unite mankind.

Gandhi was not in favour of a formulation of a new religion. He emphasized the cultivation of a positive attitude towards the diverse ways of life, in a multi-religious society. He made an appeal for mutual transformation in our attitude to the differences by cultivating the spirit of acceptance of the differences and

appreciation of the commonness in human expression of the fragmentary views of Truth. Such a platform for a friendly, inter-religious (interfaith) dialogue may be provided to deepen and enrich one's religious outlook. "The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of the different religions" (GOI, 1958, Vol. 25, pp. 179-80). Gandhi had the view that doctrinal differences should not be justified on a scriptural basis. Rather these should be justified by the test of truth, by appeal to the heart. Reason and morality should be the guiding principles in accepting any doctrines and dogmas. When there are differences, there arise contradictions, conflicts and violence. For Gandhi, being guided by the Anekantavada, the differences need to be dealt in a democratic manner. Thus Gandhi emphasized that there was room for learning the diverse viewpoints and accepts the differences as differences in individual's conception of Truth. The differences are not to be a hindrance in bringing peace, harmony amongst different religious communities. Rather, they should supplement and be part of the whole truth to enrich the understanding of truth. This Gandhian response assumes huge significance in the context of contemporary challenges thrown up by multicultural and ethnic differences.

3. Gandhi's Response to Religious Pluralism

Gandhi believed in the commonness of humanity, in the essential oneness of mankind. In his journey for inner quest and aspirations, man is always consciously or unconsciously seeking after truth. These core religious values were key considerations in Gandhi's dealing with the diversity of religion. He was of the view that, religions are essentially identical as far as the objectives are concerned. The basic tenets of truth and morality are inherent in every religion and the question of superiority or inferiority of one religion over another religion does not arise. As Gandhi says, "I do regard Islam to be a religion of peace in the same sense as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism are. No doubt there are differences in degree but the object of these religions is peace" (*Young India*, 6/12/1928). He also gives importance to showing equal respect, acceptance, and receptiveness of the differences in understanding and appreciation in the matters of the diversity of

religions. These Gandhian perspectives also have significant contemporary relevance.

Gandhi, though deeply rooted in his Hindu religious traditions, always maintained an attitude of openness and eagerness to learn new insights from faiths other than that of his own. This helped him in deepening his understanding of his own religion and aroused in him a sense of reverence as far as the faith of others are concerned. He called himself a practical idealist and did his best to avoid any cause of conflict that act as obstacles in man's spiritual growth and in the country's freedom struggle. He employed religion as a language to communicate with the people, unite them, bring them together and bring solidarity among the masses. He believed that religion could promote social integration with the underlying message of service to humanity as a service to God through the cultivation of moral virtues like compassion, generosity, empathy, fellow feeling, friendliness, justice and others like them.

Gandhi's conception of religion is not defined by any socio-cultural, historical context. It is purely a personal matter, basically concerned with his relationship with the Maker. As he says, my religion is my relationship with the Maker. However, his notion of Truth is primarily in accordance with the ethico-religious philosophy of the Vedic tradition. His understanding of religion is not in any narrow sense of the term. It is inclusive of diverse faiths and at the same time, it transcends any specific set of belief systems, rites and rituals and "is superior to them all" (GOI, 1958, p. 191). He says that his conception of religion may be recognized with the name of truth which is "the living truth that pervades everything and will survive all destructions and all transformations" (GOI, 1958, p. 191). Thus, his conception of religion has a universal application. It is the religion of truth. This cannot be challenged by any sensible individual including the atheist. In spite of being a profound Hindu, a follower of Buddhist could see him as Buddhist, a Jaina as Jaina, and a Christian may see him more as a Christian than a Hindu (Nu, 1957, p. 346). This approach is non-dogmatic, rational, critical and open-minded. He considered himself a learner who is eager to incorporate the good things of other religions into his own. His understanding of religion

is dynamic and ever-evolving. For him, religion is not all about preaching and believing. It is all about practicing and living every moment of life in the constant pursuit of truth. And this religious attitude is reflected in all his activities. According to him, religion is to do with actual living, not to be confined to temples or mosque or for that matter any place of worship or religious congregation or any doctrinal underpinnings. In his view religions should be patient and gentle towards others and there is no room for partiality. Some people had the belief that religion was the greatest obstacle in the way of the country's progress. But Gandhi had a different view. He believed in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world and that it was all helpful to one another (GOI, 1958, p. 147). His understanding of religion was open and accommodative. He was eager to learn not only the scriptures of his own faith but also of other's faiths.

From his exposure to the scriptures of the principal religions of the world, he learned the primacy of the cultivation of moral values over profession of beliefs in a set of doctrines in pursuit of truth. There are religious doctrinal differences. These religious claims can neither be affirmed nor denied by appeal to human reason or experience. Gandhi, inspired by the Anekantavada, considered the varied religious claims as fragmentary or partial views of truth. According to him, the doctrinal differences should not be taken as a barrier in man's religious life. He believed that all the religious scriptures in essence, contain the same treasures which would guide us to see the truth, to discover the wisdom and radiance within ourselves, and to expand our horizon of understanding. He pleaded for open-mindedness and an accommodative attitude in order to foster unity, understanding and mutual respect amongst diverse religious communities. According to him this was necessary in the kind of society that we are living in, and it is also implied by Gandhi's concept of man. His concept of man is a non-violent man, a man who is committed to truth, love, compassion, justice, service and sacrifice, a well-balanced personality.

The focus should be on the cultivation of an empathetic and appreciative attitude towards the spirit of religion. This was visible in Gandhi's interaction with Christian friends in London. From them, he learned a deeper insight into Christianity. He even

attended religious gatherings. Yet, he maintained an impartial attitude and remained firmly grounded in his own religious traditions. Gandhi did not deny the diversity of religion as far as the outward expressions are concerned in the form of dogmas, rites and rituals. However, these differences may be bracketed out or suspended and the primacy be given to the true spirit of religion, in its moral values. Religion, viewed from this perspective rules out discrimination and any notion of superiority or inferiority. However, many of us fail to notice the humane and moral elements embedded in religion, the spiritual coherence, the inner yearning in human nature for truth realization.

Gandhi's idea of tolerance was formulated from his own understanding of Hinduism. He considered Hinduism as the most tolerant religion and admired the non-exclusive nature of Hinduism which provides room for the worship of all the prophets of the world (Gandhi, 1987, p. 35). In his opinion, the beauty of Hinduism lies in its all-embracing inclusiveness (Gandhi, 1987, p. 37) and its assimilative character. If we look at their aim, there is no difference amongst religions. Thus, he emphasized the positive appreciation on the metaphysical basis of the oneness of reality and on the idea of living with differences by cultivating the principle of tolerance. Gandhi considered the idea of tolerance as not only the essence of Hinduism but the root of the twin ethico-religious principles, Truth and Non-violence (GOI, 1958, p. 338). The word toleration was often used by Gandhi in dealing with the diversity of religion. His view was that all religions should tolerate each other's differences. All religions are like 'rivers that meet in the same ocean' (GOI, 1958, p. 338). Thus, according to him, there are no differences amongst the diverse religions as far as their goals are concerned. Therefore, no religion can perfectly manifest the divine as it is. "Differences of religious opinion will persist to the end of time; toleration is the only thing that will enable persons belonging to different religions to live as good neighbours and friends" (Gandhi, 2008, p. 41). It was in this context that Gandhi saw the ground for toleration.

Gandhi considered toleration as necessary for mutual co-existence and harmony in a multi-religious environment. However, tolerance does not mean that one should remain indifferent to the faults of a

religion, but it means that one should draw a distinction between religion and irreligion. Whatever does not appeal to reason and morality should be discarded. Truth and non-violence remain the master key to any religion. In his words, “live and let live or mutual forbearance and toleration is the law of life. That is the lesson I have learned from the Koran, the Bible, the Zend Avesta and the Gita” (GOI, 1958, p. 283).

Toleration was the word Gandhi often used in dealing with religious diversity. However, he felt that the idea of toleration did not fully convey what he thought to be the right meaning for the plurality of religion. He preferred the phrase, “equal respect for all religions” over the idea of tolerance. “I do not like the word tolerance, but could not think of a better one. Tolerance may imply a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one’s own, whereas Ahimsa teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as we accord to our own, thus admitting the imperfection of the latter” (NIS, 2015, p. 23). He emphasized the oneness of all religions – all religions are one and same in essence. All religions contain an element of truth, and he believed that different faiths are god’s creation and thereby “equally holy” (Bose, 1948, p. 259). This shows that the essence of all religions is the same, and there should be an “equal reverence for all religions” (Gandhi, 1987, p. 190). With regard to the diversity of religions, his position is very clearly stated as equal respect and not mutual toleration (GOI, 1958, p. 20).

4. Conclusion

Gandhi made an effort to reconcile reason with faith (GOI, 1958, p. xiv). One must accept the fundamental position that all religions are equal and that the good in other religions should be incorporated in one’s own religion so as to enrich one’s religious thought. Religion and morality are fundamental for human existence and in all life’s activities. In his own words, Gandhi was playing the “role of a scavenger both literally and spiritually so as to become a faithful interpreter of the truth” (GOI, 1958, p. 253). According to Gandhi, all religions are equal, for all have the same root and the same laws of growth (GOI, 1958, p. 203). He gave the metaphor of a tree to suggest equality in the essence of religion.

“Even as a tree has a single trunk but many branches and leaves, so is there one true and perfect religion, but it becomes many as it passes through the human medium” (GOI, 1958, p. 166). All religions are founded on truth and non-violence. All religions teach mutual co-existence and harmony. The quest for truth is the objective of all religions. Variations are at the level of man’s expressions in the formulation of that truth which the human mind attempts to describe but is in reality indescribable and inexpressible. There are imperfections at the level of expressions. Yet, this does not mean that religions are false. It only says that no religion can make the absolute claim of truth. All contain an element of truth.

As a logical extension of the diversity of religion, Gandhi suggested a comparative study of religions. He recognized the differences in religions and showed the admiration and eagerness to learn the insights of different religions which are other than that of his own. He did not talk about a comparison of religions, since that was “uncalled for” (GOI, 1958, p. 127). For, comparison connotes a negative meaning in the sense of passing judgements that one religion is better or worse than another. He suggested a comparative study of religion where one is not to make any judgment but only try to understand religion and highlight the similarities and the differences. He wanted the similarities to be appreciated, and the differences accepted as this would enrich one’s understanding of religion. He believed that such an open and sincere study of religions other than one’s own would nourish one’s understanding of religion. He showed a commendable openness to the diversity of religions and emphasized the study of basic ethics and fundamental tenets of all religions. This openness will help in broadening one’s religious outlook particularly in the context of a multi-religious society. Such a study would facilitate resolution of any religion-related animosity. It would also help in the long run in creating a peaceful and harmonious environment. To cultivate a kind of reverence towards faith other than one’s own Gandhi encouraged a comparative study of religions. This means a philosophical study of religion. It neither amounts to the disrespecting of one’s own religion nor does it mean acceptance of other’s faith. It is neither a condemnation nor a propagation of any faith. Rather it is the broadening of one’s understanding of religion

(*Young India*, 6/12/1928). His method is a kind of self-critique, a rational process in understanding one's own religion better and deeper and it rules out an exclusivist, dogmatic and narrow fundamentalist totalitarian attitude towards religion. His approach to other religions is "never as a fault finding critic but as a devotee hoping to find the like beauties in the other religion and wishing to incorporate in my own the good I may find in them and miss in mine" (GOI, 1958, p. 353). Here no superiority or inferiority is attached to any religion.

All religions are treated with equal respect. This is something distinctive in Gandhi's religious thought. His contention is that reverent study of other's religions should be encouraged. Dr. Radhakrishnan, who also subscribed to this view, writes, "We cannot understand our own religion unless it be in relation to one or more of the other faiths. By an intelligent and respectful study of other religions, we gain a new understanding and appreciation of their traditions and our own. Anything which contributes to this growth of harmony of thought deserves to be encouraged. Comparative religion is one of the chief instruments by which the historic consciousness of the spiritual growth of mankind can be gained" (Radhakrishnan, 1967, p. 39).

Gandhi's religious conviction impelled him to bring unification of the differences prevailing in the society. As a national leader, fighting for India's independence from the British domination, he felt that it was necessary to bring about harmony, to put the house in order and reconcile the differences. While dealing with the diversity of religions, he concentrated more on the common ethical components rather than on the doctrinal differences. He stressed on strengthening the commonalities and respecting the differences. He advocated for showing equal respect to all faiths, and admiration and assimilation of whatever is good in other faiths to one's own understanding of religion. He made an attempt to reach out to the moral and spiritual elements in human nature, to create a world where one could live in peace and harmony with fellow beings. Regardless of the differences in religious affiliations, he made an appeal to the divine spark, the inner being in each man.

Gandhi supported religious pluralism which called for equal reverence for all religions. His approach demands truthfulness in

all endeavour of life with a commitment to non-violence not simply in the negative sense of not harming but also in the positive sense of compassion, love, justice, service and sacrifice for the good of humanity. All religions are essentially equal. The moral components of religion must be given primacy over other issues. The moral components should reflect in all our activities. For him, religion cannot be separated from our practical lives. Religion is not just to believe but also to live in the spirit of truth and non-violence. He had the conviction that all the principal religions of the world focussed on the moral dimensions of religions. The true spirit of religion is for the good of humanity, harmony and balance in the human world.

To conclude, Gandhi deeply internalized the religious and moral ideals of truth and non-violence with its outward manifested form to be in the service of mankind, in bringing about welfare of all, to be able to understand his own traditions more deeply and at the same time able to learn new insights from faiths other than his own. The beauty, of Gandhi's attitude to the diversity of religions, lies in his ability to discern himself in other's perspectives. With an open-minded attitude, he wished to bring people of diverse cultural background together and work for a common cause particularly, India's independence from British colonialism. He did his best to avoid any cause of conflict arising out of religious differences and sacrificed his own life for that cause.

What Gandhi sought to emphasize is that diversity of religion should not be projected as a barrier in man's quest for truth. It is not important what path one takes in the pursuit of truth as long as it is in conformity with truth and non-violence. Commitment to truth and non-violence would bring a transformation in man's religious outlook. Gandhi's pluralistic approach provides the ground for the development of his thought on secularism where the state should neither identify itself with any specific religion nor aim to promote any religion but where the state should show equal reverence to all religions – *Sarva Dharma Sambhava*.

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