
ATTITUDE OF MAHATMA GANDHI ON EQUALITY AND UNITY OF RELIGIONS

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ABSTRACT

Gandhi believed in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. He believed that truth is all God - given, and they were necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed. Further Gandhi said that, if only we could all of us read the scriptures of different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at bottom all one and were all helpful to one another. He believed in the truth of all religions of the world and since his youth upward, it has been a humble but persistent effort on his part to understand the truth of all the religions of the world, and adopt and assimilate in his own thought, word, and deed all that he had found to be best in those religions. The faith that he professed not only permitted him to do so but rendered it obligatory for him to take the best from whatsoever source it may come.

Keywords: Religion, God, Truth

ALL RELIGIONS LEAD TO GOD

According to Gandhi, his Hindu instinct told that all religions are more or less true. All proceed from the same God, but all are imperfect because they have come down to us through imperfect human instrumentality.¹ 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? In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals.² 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. This admission will be readily made by a seeker of Truth, who follows the law of Love. If we had attained the full vision of Truth, we would no longer be mere seekers, but have become one with God, for Truth is God. But being only seekers, we prosecute our quest, and are conscious of our imperfection. And if we are imperfect ourselves, religion as conceived by us must also be imperfect. We have not realized religion in its perfection, even as we have not realized God. Religion of our conception, being thus imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and re-interpretation. Progress towards Truth, towards God, is possible only because of such evolution. And if all faiths outlined by men are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise. All faiths constitute a revelation of Truth, but all are imperfect, and liable to error. Reverence for other faiths need not blind us to their faults. We must be keenly alive to the defects of our own faith also, yet not leave it on that account, but try to overcome those defects. Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we would not only not hesitate, but would think it our duty, to blend into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths.

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. 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. Whose interpretation is to be held to be the right one? Everybody is right from his own

standpoint, but it is not impossible that everybody is wrong. Hence the necessity for tolerance, which does not mean indifference to one's own faith, but a more intelligent and purer love for it. Tolerance gives us spiritual insight, which is as far from fanaticism as the north pole from the south. True knowledge of religion breaks down the barriers between faith and faith .³

THE NATURE OF GOD

Gandhi did not regard God as a person. Truth for me is God, and God's Law and God are not different things or facts, in the sense that an earthly king and his law are different. Because God is an Idea, Law Himself. Therefore, it is impossible to conceive God as breaking the Law. He, therefore, does not rule our actions and withdraw Himself. When we say He rules our actions, we are simply using human language and we try to limit Him. Otherwise, He and His Law abide everywhere and govern everything. Therefore, I do not think that He answers in every detail every request of ours, but there is no doubt that He rules our actions, and I literally believe that not a blade of grass grows or moves without His will. The free will we enjoy is less than that of a passenger on a crowded deck.⁴ In a strictly scientific sense God is at the bottom of both good and evil. He directs the assassin's dagger no less than the surgeon's knife. But all that good and evil are, for human purposes, from each other distinct and incompatible, being symbolical of light and darkness, God and Satan.⁵ The laws of Nature are changeless, unchangeable, and there are no miracles in the sense of infringement or interruption of Nature's laws. But we, limited beings, fancy all kinds of things and impute our limitations to God.⁶

Gandhi feels that 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 and beyond all these. God For in is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist. His boundless love God permits the atheist to live. He is the searcher of hearts. He transcends speech and reason. He knows us and our hearts better than we do ourselves. He does not take us at our word for He knows that we often do not mean it, some knowingly and others un knowingly. He is a personal God to those who need His personal presence. He is embodied to those who need His touch. He is the purest essence. He simply is to those who have faith. He is all things to all men. He is in us and yet above and beyond us. One may banish the word 'God', but one has no power to banish the Thing itself. And surely conscience is but a poor and laborious paraphrase of the simple combination of three letters called God. He cannot cease to be because hideous immoralities or inhuman brutalities are committed in His name. He is long suffering. He is patient but He is also terrible. He is the most exacting personage in the world and the world to come. He metes out the same measure to us as we mete out to our neighbours - men and brutes. With Him Ignorance is no excuse. And withal He is ever forgiving for He always gives us the chance to repent. He is the greatest democrat the world knows, for He leaves us unfettered to make our own choice between evil and good. He is the greatest tyrant ever known, for He often dashes the cup from our lips and under cover of free will leaves us a margin so wholly inadequate as to provide only mirth for Himself at our expense. Therefore, it is that Hinduism calls it all His sport - Lila, or calls it all an illusion—Maya. We are not, He alone Is. And if we will be, we must eternally sing His praise and do His will. Let us dance to the tune of His bansi (flute), and all would be well .⁷

BEAUTIFUL FLOWERS FROM THE SAME GARDEN

For Gandhi the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree. Therefore, they are equally true, though being received and interpreted through human instruments equally imperfect. It is impossible for Gandhi to reconcile himself to the idea of conversion after the style that goes on in India and elsewhere today. It is an error which is perhaps the greatest impediment to the world's progress towards peace. 'Warring creeds' is a blasphemous expression. And it fitly describes the state of things in India, the mother as Gandhi believed her to be of religions. If she is

truly the mother, the motherhood is on trial. Why should a Christian want to convert a Hindu to Christianity and vice versa? Why should he not be satisfied if the Hindu is a good or godly man? If the morals of a man are a matter of no concern, the form of worship in a particular manner in a church, a mosque or a temple is an empty formula, it may even be a hindrance to individual or social growth, and insistence on a particular form or repetition of a credo may be a potent cause of violent quarrels leading to bloodshed and ending in utter disbelief in Religion, i.e., God Himself.⁸ Each religion has its own contribution to make to human evolution. Gandhi regarded the great faiths of the world as so many branches of a tree, each distinct from the other though having the same source.⁹

LEAVES ON A TREE

Gandhi explained that all prayer, in whatever language or from whatever religion it was, was prayer addressed to one and the same God and taught mankind that all be longed to one family and should bear love to one another. All religions enjoined worship of the one God who was all pervasive. He was present in a droplet of water or in a tiny speck of dust. Even those who worship idols, worship not the stone of which it is made; they try to see God who resides in it. Similarly, it was a libel to call the Parsis fire-worshippers or sun-worshippers. Various religions were like the leaves on a tree. No two leaves were alike, yet there was no antagonism between them or between the branches on which they grew. Even so, there is an underlying unity in the variety which we see in God's creation.¹⁰

NONE SUPERIOR, NONE INFERIOR

All men are born free and equal, but one is much stronger or weaker than another physically and mentally. Therefore, superficially there is no equality between the two. But there is an essential equality. In our nakedness God is not going to think of mine and thine. Gandhi questioned that what are we in this mighty universe? We are less than atoms, and as between atoms there is no use asking which is smaller and which is bigger. Inherently we are equal. The differences of race and skin and of mind and body and of climate and nation are transitory. In the same way essentially, all religions are equal. If we read the Koran, we must read it with the eye of the Muslim; if we read the Bible, we must read it with the eye of the Christian; if we read the Gita, we must read it with the eye of a Hindu.¹¹

All prophets are equal. It is a horizontal plane. Gandhi remarked that if we think in terms of Einstein's Relativity all are equal. But he could not happily express the equality. That is why he said they are equally true and equally imperfect. The finer the line we draw, the nearer it approaches Euclid's true straight line, but it never is the true straight line. The tree of Religion is the same, there is not that physical equality between the branches. They are all growing, and the person who belongs to the growing branch must not gloat over it and say, Mine is the superior one. None is superior, none is inferior, to the other.¹²

Just as a tree had a million leaves, similarly though God was one, there were as many religions as there were men and women though they were rooted in one God. They did not see this plain truth because they were followers of different prophets and claimed as many religions as there were prophets.¹³ Gandhi said that his Hinduism was not sectarian. It included all that he had known to be best in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism. He approached politics as everything else in only way of its realization. a religious spirit. Truth was his religion and Ahimsa was the only way of its realization.¹⁴

A REVERENTIAL APPROACH TO FAITHS

Gandhi was a believer in the truth of all the great religions of the world. There will be no lasting peace on earth unless we learn not merely to tolerate but even to respect the other faiths as our own. A reverent study of the sayings of such mutual respect. of different teachers of mankind is a step in the direction of such mutual respect. According to Gandhi, untouchability and the idea of high and low have no room in

Hinduism. There are the Varnas, but none of the Varnas is superior to the other. Varna does not connote superiority; it connotes different functions and different duties .¹⁵

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Gandhi believed in harmony between all religions. Belief in one God is the corner-stone of all religions. But he did not foresee a time when there would be only one religion on earth in practice. In theory, since there is one God, there can be only one religion. But in practice, no two persons he has known have had the same and identical conception of God. Therefore, there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to different temperaments and climatic conditions. But Gandhi could clearly see the time coming when people belonging to different faiths will have the same regard for other faiths that they have for their own. Gandhi thought that they had to find unity in diversity. We are all equal. children of one and the same God and, therefore, absolutely equal.¹⁶

It is the duty of everyone to study the scriptures of religions other than his own. This enables people to keep their religion pure and rid it of blemishes. Moreover, we have Christians, Muslims, Parsis and followers of other religions amongst us. It behoves the Hindus to study their religious books if they regard them as their brothers.¹⁷

THE DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION OF HINDUISM TO INDIAN LIFE

The most distinctive and the largest contribution of Hinduism to India's culture is the doctrine of Ahimsa. It has given a definite bias to the history of the country for the last three thousand years and over and it has not ceased to be a living force in the lives of India's millions even today. It is a growing doctrine; its message is still being delivered. Its teaching has so far permeated our people that an armed revolution has almost become an impossibility in India, not because as some would have it, we as a race are physically weak, for it does not require Auch physical strength so much, as a devilish will to press a trigger to shoot a person, but because the tradition of Ahimsa has struck deep root among the people.¹⁸

THE DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION OF ISLAM TO INDIAN LIFE

Referring to Islam Gandhi mentioned as its distinctive contribution to India's national culture, it's the oneness of God and a practical unadulterated belief application of the truth of the brotherhood of man for those who are nominally within its fold. For in Hinduism the spirit of brotherhood has become too much philosophized. Similarly, though philosophical Hinduism has no other god but God, it cannot be denied that practical Hinduism is not so emphatically uncompromising as Islam.¹⁹

THE DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIANITY TO INDIAN LIFE

It is not possible to consider the teaching of a religious teacher apart from the lives of his followers. Unfortunately, Christianity in India has been inextricably mixed up for the last one hundred and fifty years with the British rule. It appears to us as synonymous with materialistic civilization and imperialistic exploitation by the stronger white races of the weaker races of the world. Its contribution to India has been, therefore, largely of a negative character. It has done some good in spite of its professors. It has shocked us into setting our own house in order. Christian missionary literature has drawn pointed attention to some of our abuses and set us a thinking .²⁰

THE BETTER WAY

The propagation of truth and non-violence can be done less by books than by actually living those principles. Life truly lived is more than books. After long study and experience, Gandhi concluded that (1) all religions are true; (2) all religions have some error in them; (3) all religions are almost as dear to me as

my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to me as one's own close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith.

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