

## M.K. Gandhi's Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Analysis

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### Abstract

Religion is an important phenomenon in our life. Like many issues, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi talks about religion. He is not only a famous politician, but also a great philosopher. In his all kinds of writings, we find religious fervour. He not only believes in religion, but accepts religious diversity. In his view, religion is nothing but the manifestation of man's permanent nature that is Divinity; religion has capacity of purifying and elevating man's nature; it can generate spiritual thirst in man; it intends to know the beyond and finally it contains love and truth. He firmly believes that no man can live without religion. We find religious tolerance and acceptance are two important features of his Philosophy of Religion. He does not believe in conversion also. In his philosophy of religion, man is in the centre and that's why his view about religion is known as spiritual humanism. This paper aims to analyse M.K. Gandhi's Philosophy of Religion critically.

**Keywords:** Gandhi, Ethical Religion, Necessity, Diversity, Humanism

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### Introduction

Religion is an old and persistent human endeavour. It is abstract, growing, dynamic and multifaceted and that is why it has no all agreed definition in the academic circle. We do not even know how religion came into existence. But though religion cannot be defined and though we have no idea about its origination, it plays important role in our life and society. It shapes a society and moulds the human psyche. It is responsible for both peace and violence since time immemorial. That's why analysis about religion is not only important, but is badly required. We find though in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, attempts have been made to banish religion from man's life, but no attempt has been successful rather importance is being given in cultivating religion specially philosophy of religion which is now becoming a flourishing industry. In fact, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophy of religion has undergone a vast transformation and we find that many great Indian and western thinkers talked about religion. For example, in India, great thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Md. Iqbal, Pandit Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan etc. have analysed religion critically. This paper attempts to analyse the philosophy of religion following M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948) critically in order to find whether it has any merit in present society.

### Methodology:

important and relevant data have been collected from M.K.Gandhi's writings and both descriptive and analytic methods have been followed in order to reach the goal of this article.

### **Gandhi's Analysis of Religion:**

Though Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a great Indian politician, but in his all kinds of writings be it politics or economics or other social issues there we find religious fervour. Though there is no unanimously accepted definition of the term religion, but generally institutionalized religions indicate religion as a set of beliefs and practices. But by the term religion Gandhiji, however, does not mean any institutionalized religion, but that religion which lies beneath in all religions and helps us to realize God. Because throughout his life he searched for Truth and this Truth is nothing but God and devotion to Truth or God is religion. In his many writings like Young India, Harijan, Autobiography, Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule etc. he concentrates on this search of Truth.

### **Necessity of Religion According to Gandhi:**

Like other great thinkers, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi too accepts religion as an important issue in our life. He believes in the necessity of religion and thinks religion should be the principle in our life. Without religion, man cannot even survive. He firmly believes that every man irrespective of atheist, agnostic and like this people believe in some kind of relationship with the divine at least in the form of 'moral principle.' Hence, he declares that "even a man who disowns religion cannot and does not live without religion"<sup>i</sup>. Religion has capacity of purifying and elevating man's nature; it can generate spiritual thirst in man; it intends to know the beyond and finally it contains love and truth. That's why he thinks that religion is essential in our life.

### **Mutual Tolerance and Respect: Two pillars for Peace and Harmony:**

In almost all institutionalized and major religions we find there are mainly two types of attitudes one is exclusivism and the other is inclusivism. Exclusivism claims that one's own religion is the best and it only can provide liberation. Other religions are inferior and thus not suitable for attaining salvation. Inclusivism, on the other hand, declares that one's own religion is best and other religions are partially true and they are included into one's own religion. In both cases the main goal is to establish one's own supremacy over others'. Both types of attitudes are lopsided and thus are sources of religious intolerance and disrespect towards other religions that fuels religious violence. On the contrary, Gandhi thinks that it is impossible to believe that there is only one religion on earth that is only true. In fact, there can be as many religions as individuals and therefore instead of showing one sided mentality we should find out a common factor and observe mutual tolerance. Thus, he advocates that our attitude towards other religions should be one of mutual tolerance and respect which are two important factors in peace and harmony. He believes that all religions have their essential truth which actually helps us. Thus, he believes in religious diversity which is essential for a civilised society. He emphasizes that all religions are true from their own perspective and this attitude we find in his following observation.

It has been my experience that I am always true from my point of view, but am often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we are both right from our respective points of view. And this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics. The seven blind men who gave seven different descriptions of the elephant were all right from their respective points of view, and wrong from the point of view of one another, and right and wrong from the point of view of the man who knew the elephant. I very much like this doctrine of the manyness of reality. It is this doctrine that has taught me to judge a Mussalman from his own standpoint and a Christian from his. Formerly I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see them and vice-versa<sup>ii</sup>.

M.K. Gandhi agrees with Swami Vivekananda that all religions are essentially same, they vary only outwardly and this aspect of religion consists of rituals and practices and is secondary matter. He did not give importance on ritual, but prayer with devotion according to him is the means of cleansing and purifying of one's own heart in order to achieve truth. Gandhi embraced all the virtues of great religions such as non-violence of Jainism and

Buddhism, *niskāmakarma* or detachment of Hinduism, forgiveness and love of Christianity. He respects all religions which made him understand his own religion better and in-depth. In his own words:

I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them to respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty. My respectful study of other religions has not abated my reverence for, or my faith in, the Hindu scriptures. They have indeed left their deep mark upon my understanding of the Hindu scriptures. They have broadened my view of life. They have enabled me to understand more clearly many an obscure passage in the Hindu scriptures<sup>iii</sup>.

He advocates mutual tolerance and respect strongly for other religions because he believes that tolerance gives us spiritual insight. It provides us a better understanding of our own religion. In his own words:

... mine is a broad faith which does not oppose Christians ... not even the most fanatical Mussalman ... I refuse to abuse a man for his fanatical deeds, because I try to see them from his point of view. It is that broad faith that sustains me. It is a somewhat embarrassing position I know - but to others, not to me<sup>iv</sup>.

He repeatedly expresses his respect for other religions in the following way.

After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion 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 one as one's own close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith; therefore no thought of conversion is possible<sup>v</sup>.

We find that forced religious conversion is a common phenomenon in all religions. Sometimes followers of one religion force the followers of other religions to accept their religion even by using sword and gun which is dangerous for a society because variety is a natural phenomenon and is required for the greater interest as well as development of mankind. Gandhi was against of such conversion which we find in his saying:

I was delighted at their faith. I saw that they were praying for me ... I could understand and appreciate the devoutness of those who attended it. But I saw no reason for changing my belief – my religion<sup>vi</sup>.

Sometimes Gandhi places equal respect over and above mutual tolerance which we find when he declares:

If a person wants to believe in the Bible let him say so, but why should he discard his own religion? This proselytization will mean no peace in the world ... My position is that all the great religions are fundamentally equal. We must have innate respect for other religions as we have for our own. Mind you, not mutual tolerance, but equal respect<sup>vii</sup>.

He discourages conversion in the following way:

I would say that if a non-Christian (say a Hindu) came to a Christian ..., he should ask him to become a good Hindu rather than find goodness in change of faith<sup>viii</sup>.

Likewise, according to Gandhi each one should stick to one's own religion and enrich himself or herself with the goodness of one's own religion. He said:

Supposing a Christian came to me and said he was captivated by a reading of the Bhagwat and so wanted to declare himself a Hindu, I should say to him, 'No. What the Bhagwat offers the Bible also offers. You have not yet made the attempt to find it out. Make the attempt and be a good Christian<sup>ix</sup>.

We find religion is so important for him, he prefers religious renaissance rather than economic prosperity and political reformation but Gandhi did not intend to give a new religion.

### **Practicality of Religion:**

He believes religion has capacity to solve practical as well as spiritual crises and thinks that religion which has no business with practical affairs is actually no religion. So, he believes in practicality and thinks religion is a way of

life, a practical necessity. He said: “Religion which takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them, is no religion<sup>x</sup>”.

### **Morality and Reason: Two Bases of Religion:**

Gandhi thinks that reason and morality are two important and essential bases of religion. He did not believe in those religions which do not have reason and morality as their foundation. To quote him: “I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality. I tolerate unreasonable religious sentiment when it is not immoral.”<sup>xi</sup>. He also believes that religion supplies moral basis to all our activities and morality without religion is empty because both are inseparably tied up. He puts so much emphasis on reason as the basis of religion that he firmly declares that: “I exercise my judgement about every scripture, including the Gita. I cannot let a scriptural text supercede my reason.....<sup>xii</sup>”. To show the importance of reason in religion he prescribes:

... even as faithfulness to one's wife does not presuppose blindness to her shortcomings, so does not faithfulness to one's religion presuppose blindness to the shortcomings of that religion. Indeed, faithfulness, not blind adherence, demands a keener perception of shortcomings and therefore a livelier sense of the proper remedy for their removal<sup>xiii</sup>.

### **Universality in religions:**

He believes that though there is religious plurality, but one underlying religion connects them all and brings harmony among all religions. 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 never spoken that one religion can be given the position of ‘universal religion. And his search for, “that religion which underlines all religions”, made him look for that which “transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supercede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality<sup>xiv</sup>.” In *Young India* he declared,

Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and whichever purifies<sup>xv</sup>.

### **Conclusion:**

From the above discussion we find that Gandhi's concept of religion can be termed as Ethical Religion, because he analyses religion through morality. He believes that all religions are more or less founded on morality without which they cannot exist. So, both religion and morality are survived by each other. Even he thinks that morality should be treated as religion. In his philosophy of religion one sees that the internal and essential part of religion is morality and we know that without morality, no good and noble deed can be materialized. As Gandhi emphasizes on the inner aspect of religion i.e., nothing other than values and highlights on practice and service, thus he can be considered as a pragmatic and humanistic philosopher. We find in his Philosophy of Religion, man is in the centre and the main concern of each and every religion according to him should be the betterment and upliftment of mankind. Gandhi's view on religion can also be considered as spiritual humanism because he thinks that service to poor is service to God as he strongly believes that God exists in his own creation.

Finally, we find that Gandhi's analysis of religion is free from all elements like the concepts of superiority-inferiority, hell-heaven, forced conversion etc. that are responsible for violence and disharmony. Herein lies the importance of the philosophy of religion of mahatma Gandhi who emphasises on the transformation of our consciousness to realize the essence of all religions which is essential in maintaining peace and harmony.

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