

God and Religion: Gandhi's Views

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ABSTRACT

Gandhi viewed religion as self –realization, knowledge of self which brings man closer to God. He was deeply influenced by the stories of Shravana and Harishchandra which changed the entire course of his life and action. He supported the views of Swami Vivekananda and realized the possibility of God to achieve the truth. According to Gandhi, truth and non-violence are eternal , equal to religion , equal to God. He believed that element of essential goodness is present in everyman and true religious spirit has the capacity of changing one's nature. Religion , he viewed a conscious and sincere love and striving for truth. The present paper is an attempt to focus on the religious unity for a relentless pursuit of truth and Gandhi's views on religion which becomes a basis for friendship among all mankind.

Keywords: Gandhi, God , Truth and Religion

INTRODUCTION

“Is there one God for the Mussalmans and another for the Hindus, Parsis and Christians ? No, there is only one omnipresent God. He is named variously and we remember him by the name which is most familiar to us.”

----- M. K. Gandhi

A true believer of truth and non-violence Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi expressed a sense of unity both in the life of an individual and in social life. He believed on the aspect of essential goodness present in everyman and reality of one Supreme God. God is the beginning of the world and also its end. He was thoroughly influenced by all religions but his concept of religion transcends service to humanity especially the down trodden. He viewed religion as self –realization, knowledge of self which brings man closer to God. He believed in the concept of Sarvadharmasammanvaya and called himself a Hindu. He was essentially a religious man in quest of Moksha-redemption and emancipation of the soul from the clutches of Maya. He believed that true religion has to be practical. . He supported the views of Swami Vivekananda and realized the possibility of God to achieve the truth. The present paper is an attempt to focus on the religious unity for a relentless pursuit of truth and Gandhi's views on religion which becomes a basis for friendship among all mankind.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are –

- To know about Gandhi's concept of religion and the realization of Truth or God
- To understand Gandhi's special emphasis on some of the virtues of life
- To know about the assimilation of different religions and their impact on Gandhi

METHODOLOGY

The method of the present study is analytical and descriptive in nature. Datas are collected from secondary sources such as books , journals, internet etc. to get a greater source of information.

Gandhi: Champion of Peace

Popularly known as Bapu among the masses Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born at Porbandar in Gujarat on the 2nd of October 1869. A major political and spiritual leader of India and a saint of Sabarmati , he made an important contribution to the Independence of India by following the path of truth and non-violence. Son of orthodox Vaisnavas , Gandhi was given modern education by his parents. His father Karamchand Gandhi was prime minister in the court of Rajkot and also in Vankaner for some time. His mother Putlibai was a devout woman. His wife Kasturbai Gandhi supported her husband in all his endeavours throughout his life. He lost his father in his early educational career and taking a vow in the presence of

his mother he set out his journey to London for higher studies . He was deeply influenced by the stories of Shravana and Harishchandra which changed the entire course of his life and action. He went to London in 1888 and studied law. In London he joined a vegetarian society and was introduced to Bhagavad Gita. He came to acquaint himself with the great and good things of the west. After qualifying as a barrister-at-law he returned to India in 1891. In May 1893 he went to Africa to work as a lawyer.

The bitter experiences of racial discrimination by white people in South Africa gave him moral experiments to conquer evil by love. He became a leader of the Indian community in South Africa and founded the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) on 22 May 1894. With all his experiences he returned to India in 1915 and joined himself as an active member of the Indian National Congress (INC). He organized the Champaran and Kheda agitations of Bihar and Gujarat in 1918 with sincere determination for the masses of the country. To protest against the British Rule he led Non-Cooperation Movement , Civil Disobedience Movement , Swaraj and Quit India Movement only to gain Independence for the country. He applied the technique of Satyagraha to remove the social evil and social disparity prevalent in the society and took a bold step to work for the social reform of India. He dedicated his whole life to convey the message of Non-violence , peace, Satyagraha and to achieve equal rights for the people.

Religion: A Sincere Pursuit of Truth

“Let me explain what I mean by religion . It is not the Hindu religion But the religion which transcends Hinduism , which changes one’s very nature , which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and whichever purifies . It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself , known its maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself.”

It is seen that every religion contains good precepts and noble teachings. Gandhi followed the Karma marga as preached in the Gita. According to him, true religion implied an emphasis on the moral values of man as spirit. For Gandhi the religious ideal is the realization of truth or God. He believed that God is essential unity of everything. He was of the view that higher principle being truth , devotion to truth (or God) is religion. His belief in God may be termed as the mainspring of his religious consciousness. This is inherent in every individual and shows a right path to achieve the best ways in life.

According to Gandhi, truth and non-violence are eternal , equal to religion , equal to God. He believed that element of essential goodness is present in everyman and true religious spirit has the capacity of changing one’s nature. Religion , he viewed a conscious and sincere love and striving for truth . God is nothing else but truth. There is no religion higher than truth. Religion is a belief and it helps in accepting and realizing God. Religious aspiration is based on a desire and prayer makes everyone purer and brings nearer to God.

“I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found him, but I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. Even if the sacrifice demanded to be my very life, I hope I may be prepared to give it. But as long as I have not realized this Absolute truth , so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it”

Gandhi felt that religion is an abiding faith which develops pleasure, prosperity and peace in human life and appears to have a great importance for the existence of the world. It is an expression and an endeavour to realize all good qualities and an urge for the practical necessity in the way of life. He felt that God is needed for providing strength and solace and also for the satisfaction of reason or intellectual curiosity. It enables an individual to be in peace with the world. Gandhi believed that God’s existence is necessary which demands a spiritual satisfaction . Every individual is in need of a supreme object which is nothing but God. He felt that God can be felt through actual experience.

God: An Intense Longing

“There is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything . I feel it , though I do not see it . It is this unseen power that makes itself felt and yet defies proof , because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses.”

Gandhi was in view that God is the perfect and the ultimate ideal of everything. He believed in the reality of one Supreme God . God is a matter of inner realization and faith. It is an impersonal principle that gives to the world a reality. The belief and realization enables man to face the life with strength and in a dignified manner. Belief becomes a condition for a pious , moral and noble living. Gandhi thought that realization would create a sense of responsibility in man and belief opens up new vistas and new possibilities. A sincere faith in God provides an opportunity to each individual to realize that all human

beings are fellow beings and essentially one. Gandhi viewed that faith in God and love of God become the result of the unity of mankind.

According to Gandhi, truth represents the will and the ways of God. He believed a deep sincerity and a vigorous love for truth. Truth is all pervasive and all comprehending. The religious belief shows that behind everything and being, there is one God who resides in each individual self.

This is the basis of love and man contains divinity within himself. Gandhi knew that man has a strength of character and a resoluteness of will. The absence of this character gives rise of differences and less of coordination of thoughts and deeds of the person concerned. Gandhi, in this regard illuminates by showing that there is a great difference in the nature of a work while adopting a particular means in realizing good ends. There is an ordered moral government of the Universe and religion is that kind of belief which seeks practical bearings to experience self purification for an inward search in each and every aspects of life.

For Gandhi realization of God means love for every being. He believed on the cultivation of moral purity and courage and the practices of virtues. He was aware of the superiority of truth over falsehood and the intrinsic power of goodness. He viewed that truthfulness is an art that has to be practiced. Gandhi repeatedly asserted that there must be a faith in the ultimate goodness of God for a moral and virtuous life.

Hinduism: His Faith on Truth

“My Ram, the Ram of our prayers is not the historical Ram, the son of Dasharath the king of Ayodhya. He is the eternal, the unborn, the one without the second. Him alone I worship.”

Gandhi had a special liking for Hinduism. He accepted the spiritual and moral essence of Hinduism. He believed on the different ways of apprehending the truth of different religions. He viewed Hinduism a way of life. There is a relentless pursuit of truth in Hinduism. He strongly believed that God is identical with truth. He also believed in the purity and sanctity of Hinduism. But he was against some practices on untouchability and caste system. He followed virtuous principles in everyday life which becomes effective way to attain salvation. He perceived God through the service of humanity. His religious ideas were influenced by Hinduism.

“There is room for the worship of all prophets of the world in it. It is not a missionary religion. Hinduism tells everyone to worship God according to faith or dharma and so lives at peace with all religions.”

Gandhi defined Hinduism as a tolerant religion. He believed that non-violence or ahimsa was the glorious aspect of Hinduism. The roots of Hinduism are one and inseparable. According to Gandhi, custom and rituals do not constitute religion. As Hinduism is a dynamic religion the pursuit of truth is to be based on faith and devotion. A Sanatani Hindu he believed to be faithful to one's own religion and believe the goodness in other religions and act to remove the limitations. Gandhi's God was one and his belief in the Vedas, Upanishads, the Puranas and the writings of holy reformers make him a Hindu who pursued truth through non violent means.

Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism: Religions of Peace & Love

Gandhi viewed unity, simplicity and humanity in all religions and accorded equal respect on essential teachings. He observed Islam a religion of peace. He was highly encouraged on the spiritual upliftment of all human beings. He became aware of the simplicity and purity of the religion which has impressed him most. The virtue of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, hospitality and code of personal conduct has been highlighted in Islam. This had a profound impact on Gandhi which were close to his heart. He had deep faith on the holy book “Koran” as many of the passages speak of religious tolerance and peace and the unqualified submission to God in Islam. Some principles and virtues are highly emphasized in Islam and Gandhi was attracted and impressed with the universalistic tenets of Islam.

The gospel of love and a spirit of sacrifice based on the tenets of Christianity brought a tremendous impact on the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi advocated the spirit of true love and non-violence and believed on the tolerance and sympathy shown by the people to other religions.

He was deeply convinced on his readings of the New Testament and the gospel of personal suffering to conquer evil as the true principles of Christianity. He was pleased to see the passionate spirit of love for each other and the spirit of brotherhood to which brings closer everyone and imbibe a positive feeling to understand other religions.

“Christianity’s particular contribution is that of active love. No other religion says so firmly that God is love.”

However he believed on the efforts to recognize other religions and the positive changes that a religion can bring to its followers. Gandhi was pleased to see the efforts made by some of the Christians to recognize and feel the merits of other religions. He also believed in fostering a spirit of brotherhood , equality of all religions , tolerance and sympathy for all.

Gandhi viewed Jainism a religion of peace and purity which strengthened his ideas of non-violence towards all beings. The ethical virtues related to Jainism had a direct impact on Gandhi. His concept of fasting becomes an important part of Jain’s tradition of “Vratas”. Early in his life , his father’s interactions with Jain monks made him fortunate enough to understand the dimensions of Jainism and helped him to develop the concepts related to Jainism.

Buddha preached and practiced Ahimsa and shared universalistic and humanistic message for everyone . Buddhism emphasizes self discipline and moral conduct and the influence of Buddhism bore the most visible impact on Gandhi. He was deeply committed to follow the essence of his teachings. Buddhism teaches humility and the masses approach God in all humility. Buddhism rightly insisted on internal purity.

Non-Violence or Ahimsa: A Gospel of Action

“Love never claims , it ever gives. Love ever suffers, never resents , never revenges it self.”

Gandhi makes no distinction between the self or Atman and truth or God. Non-violence is the inseparable quality of the human being. It is as indefinable as God. Gandhi has emphasized certain aspects of Ahimsa and considers it almost a virtue to take life under certain conditions. Gandhi believed Ahimsa one of the basic and essential qualities of mankind. Ahimsa demands a sincere effort to free mind from the violent conditions and creates a sense of oneness which is spiritually awakened and apparent in man’s true nature . Ahimsa is an act free from all hatred, unjust doings and stands for certain positive attitudes towards other living beings with the object of his love. Gandhi believed violence an expression of weakness and opined on the importance of supreme energy and strength to love . Ahimsa , he viewed cleanses one’s inner life and uplifts him with noble feelings.

He felt that self- sacrifice involves suffering and is an aspect of love. Ahimsa is conscious suffering and demands a sincerity of purpose and a purity of intentions. According to him , Ahimsa can be practiced universally. He believed on the extreme patience and in the goodness of the opponent and a love based on the realization by subjecting himself to suffering for the sake of truth. Gandhi was aware that through love, ahimsa and conscious suffering the forces of evil can be neutralized . Discipline helps in the cultivation of the power of self control. He believed on the importance of truthfulness and non-violence and their practice not only in actions but also in thought and speech . In fact to Gandhi non-violence appeared as a religious pursuit.

Non-violence demands selfless and sincere pursuit of truth. As non-violence is based on a feeling of love, the Satyagrahi remains positive and open minded and prepare himself, his attitude for the sake of truth and for the good of others. According to Gandhi, Satyagrahi is required to practice truthfulness and have a strength of character and a resoluteness of will. Gandhi asserts that a faith in God is the religious pre-requisite of the life of a satyagrahi . He accepts Satyagraha as a universal principle. It requires an inner strength to free oneself from all evils and to see or feel the real truth. Gandhi is aware of it and demonstrates the importance of virtues and complete purity to cloud his vision.

Gandhi believed that non-violence is an integral part of every religion. He tried to establish reality through non-violence and admitted himself in his teachings and deeds . However he was in belief of his own action and never permitted any violence in his life. He liked to read Gita and its teachings on non-violence. His concept of non-violence was as he established : “Non-violence is in Hinduism, it is in Christianity as well as in Islam. If non-violence disappears , Hindu Dharma disappears, Islam does not forbid its followers from following non-violence as a policy.”

CONCLUSION

In his Autobiography he wrote

“..... A perfect vision of Truth can only follow a complete realization of Ahimsa..... identification with everything that lives is impossible without self purification God can never be realized by one who is not pure of heart.”

Gandhi thought himself as a seeker of truth. He wanted ultimate forms of unity of mankind. For him, truth and non-violence enable one to achieve perfection in the practice of one's own religion . Gandhi firmly believed that all religions lead to one God and all religions, their scriptures and values are of equal importance.

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