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## Gandhi's religious thoughts: Understanding with a sociological lens

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### Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to look into Gandhi's religious thoughts in the light of his experiences and experiments. All scholarly figures in the history of mankind had to undergo various criticism and were misinterpreted at times and so was Gandhi. He has been misinterpreted for his thoughts and ideology on various issues. This paper deals with his views on religion, spirituality and humanity, his approach to Hinduism, religious pluralism, his attempt to apply religion in day-to-day life and even in politics and law and his views regarding the synthesis of science and spirituality.

**Keywords:** Religion, ahimsa, religious pluralism, spirituality, humanity

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### Introduction

"If I could persuade myself that I should find Him in Himalayan cave. I would proceed there immediately, but I know that I cannot find Him apart humanity."

This thought of Gandhi indicates that for him spirituality meant humanity as the identification of God with humanity is based on the concept of spiritual unity of man. All life in its essence is one and Gandhi believed in absolute oneness of God and therefore of humanity.

But humanity has never before in world history faced such an acute crisis as it is facing today. The importance of Gandhian thoughts is being increasingly recognized as a significant source of light and hope in the contemporary world challenged and threatened by increasing globalization, erosion of human values and lack of spirituality. Excessive reliance on materialism, science, heavy industries, consumerism have posed enormous problems before mankind. All these problems whether environmental, political, economic, or social are spiritual in nature and require an integral approach to deal with. Gandhi was one man who was not afraid to see all these issues as spiritual ones, though his critics and even admirers missed the ethos of his religious thoughts. Some British critics described Gandhi as 'mystic, fanatic and anarchist', whereas others found his religious and moral views 'admirable but impractical in politics'. The modernists equated all religion with irrationalism and resented Gandhi's saintly idiom. The historians blamed him of contributing in communal polarization that culminated in the division of India. Therefore it is necessary to examine Gandhi's religious thoughts in the lights of contemporary development in different walks of life as well as in historical moorings of India.

In his lifetime Gandhi was variously labeled, an orthodox Hindu, a Buddhist, a Theosophist, a Christian and a Christian Muhammadan. He was actually all these and more. He believed in religious pluralism. Religion was central to Gandhi's life, thought and work and he regarded society and politics as applied religion. Gandhi had been impressed by the underlying unity of all religions. He emphasized the need for co-existence and tolerance between adherents of different faiths. Gandhi declared that today no one could claim his religion to be true and all others false. When some Hindus protested that he was relatively 'tender' when speaking to Christian and Muslim audiences, but unsparing in his criticism of the Hindus, Gandhi pleaded guilty to the charge. For one thing, he said he did not claim to know as much about Christianity and Islam as he knew about Hinduism. For another, he felt that Christians and Muslims were more likely to misunderstand him than Hindus.

Gandhi's advocacy of mutual toleration and respect between different religions originally arose from his study of comparative religion, but it had a practical aspect too. All his adult life he was leading struggle against racial, social and political injustice and his adherents in these struggles belonged to all the major religions.

Gandhi had a strongly rational streak which enabled him to fashion for himself a religious philosophy, which though grounded in Hinduism, acquired a deeply humanist and cosmopolitan complexion. Gandhi believed that every religion had to be subjected to the acid test of reason. Gandhi did not hesitate to apply the acid test to the Hinduism. He was ruthless in his criticism of evils that had crept into Hindu society. He was against animal sacrifices and excessive ritualism and social evils of Hindu society. He did not hesitate to reinterpret traditional beliefs and reject practices, which were repugnant to his reason or conscience. One cannot but admire Gandhi's revisionist strategy in his encounter with Hindu orthodoxy.

The book, which became Gandhi's strongest bone with Hinduism as well as the greatest influence on him, which he called his 'spiritual dictionary' was the *Bhagvad Gita*. He interpreted *Gita* in the light of reason, morality and

commonsense. He made it a common symbol between himself and the Hindus of his generation. For him *Moksha* was liberation from impure thoughts. *Ahimsa* was not merely a question of what to eat or not to eat, but the motive force for *Satyagraha*-Gandhi's non-violent technique of effecting social changes. Fasting was not merely a recipe for nature-cure or mortification of the flesh, but an ultimate weapon in the armoury of *Satyagraha*. *Brahmcharya* was not merely sexual restraint, but a way of life, demanding self-control in thought, words and deeds. Gandhi gave a new meaning to prayer also. For him prayer was simply a means of self-purification; it was to the heart and mind what a daily bath is to the body.

Rajchandra, Gandhi's religious mentor, used to say that the real test of spiritual progress was the extent to which one could translate one's beliefs in work-a-day life. For Gandhi also what cannot be followed in day-to-day practice cannot be called religion. As a lawyer, Gandhi did not consider it his professional obligation to defend a client if he was in the wrong. As he meditated on the *Gita*, the ideal of *Aparigraha* (non-possession). grew upon him, Gandhi began to reduce his needs and pay less and less attention to what passed for prestige in the middle class.

Gandhi's religious quest helped to mould not only his personality, but also the political technique with which he confronted racialism in South Africa and colonialism in India. In the evolution of *Satyagraha* as a mode of non-violent struggle, he acknowledged his debt not only to Tolstoy, but to the *Gita* also.

Those who blame Gandhi for mixing religion with politics do not know what he meant by religion. For him religion did not mean sectarianism. It meant a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. Gandhi's concept of religion had little in common with what generally passes for organized religion: dogmas, rituals, superstitions and bigotry. Gandhi did not and could not accept the commonly accepted view of politics, because *Satyagraha*, the mode of struggle he had evolved for fighting against social and political oppression, was rooted in morality.

In Gandhi's article, "Nonviolent Force: A Spiritual Dilemma" (1927/1999), he speaks about his "profession", which is practicing the comprehensive principle of "ahimsa." This concept of ahimsa (The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 2007) is defined as, ahimsa (əhīm`sä) [Sanskrit,= noninjury], ethical principle of non-injury to both men and animals, common to Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. Ahimsa became influential in India after 600 B.C., contributing to the spread of vegetarianism. In modern times, the implications of ahimsa were developed in the nonviolence movement of Mohandas Gandhi.

Gandhi offers additional defining characteristics of ahimsa:

A votary of ahimsa remains true to his faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of himsa...Underlying ahimsa is the unity of all life, the error of one cannot but affect all, and hence man cannot be wholly free from himsa. So long as he continues to be a social being, he cannot but participate in the himsa that the very existence of society involves. (Lemert, 1999, p. 262) <sup>[10]</sup>

As a core spiritual belief, ahimsa connotes honoring all life, appreciating the oneness of all things, and practicing non-violence. Conversely, the notion of "himsa" connotes violence, divisiveness, and destruction. With an understanding of these two principles, Gandhi recognizes that people are social beings who are constantly struggling between these two forces. His social theory emphasizes that individuals engaging in actions that emanate from himsa need to rise above it and practice ahimsa.

Since the principle of ahimsa condemns war, Gandhi acknowledges his own inner struggles when his country was at war. He expresses the difficulty of not supporting a war when your own country is involved:

"The very same line of argument that persuaded me to take part in the Boer War had weighed on me...It was quite clear to me that participation in war could never be consistent with ahimsa. But, it is not always given to one to be equally clear about one's duty."

Gandhi felt a duty to his country when he participated in the Boer War and did not apologize for his actions. However, in later years, he understood the intuitive wrongness of war and became opposed to killing for any reason.

Gandhi's social philosophy evolved from his Hindu beliefs, which he viewed as utilitarian principles. According to Mandelbaum, "As a youth Gandhi was duty bound to his father in word and deed. He followed this pattern faithfully and seems to have taken it even more seriously than most others did." He was deeply shaken by his lapses from a son's dutiful conduct. He wrote that when his father forgave him upon his confession of theft, he took it then as an expression of his father's love, "but today I know that it was pure *Ahimsa*." His own confession showed the power of truth; his father's response showed the power of ahimsa, non-violence.

Gandhi's guiding spiritual principles formed the foundations of his religious, social, and political experience. These principles formed the basis of his social philosophy and shaped his attitudes as a son, husband, friend, political leader, and spiritual leader.

He was proud of Hinduism but it did not prevent him from rejecting and criticising several institutions, ideas, and beliefs which Hindus would ordinarily regard as part of their religion. For instance, he not only rejected untouchability but fought against it all his life. The constitutional banning of untouchability and the subsequent legislation making its practice an offence owes a great deal to the public opinion he built up over the decade against it. Gandhi was also opposed to blood sacrifices to deities.

It is well-known that Ruskin, Tolstoy, Thoreau, and the Bible and *Gita* all influenced Gandhi profoundly. From Tolstoy, he derived his critical attitude to organize religion and from Ruskin the ideal of a simple life.

When he considered an idea good, he tried to put it into practice. But even here, however idealistic the idea, Gandhi did not give up his sense of social reality in practicing it. He read the Bible when he was a law student in England, and the life of Christ and the Sermon on the Mount went straight to his heart. The idea of returning love for hatred and good for evil captivated him, though he did not then comprehend it fully. The *Gita* also had a great impact on him, in particular the ideas of *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *samabhava* (equability). Gandhi gave up his considerable legal practice, and also renounced his other possessions.

Gandhi regarded the *Gita* as his "mother's milk" but, strange as it may seem, he found in it support for nonviolence, a discovery which seems puzzling to say the least, in view of the strenuous efforts made by Krishna to persuade Arjuna to pick up the forsaken *Gandiva*, and go into battle against his cousins, the Kauravas.

Gandhi decided that loyalty to the *Gita* entitles him to amend it. He often refused to be bound by uncongenial texts, concepts, and situations. Gandhi discovered nonviolence not only in the *Gita* but also in the Bible and the Koran. According to Gandhi, in the Koran "nonviolence is enjoined as duty, violence is permitted as a necessity. Gandhi carried his freewheeling interpretations to other religions, besides Hinduism.

In 1937 Gandhi told an American missionary: "I do not take as literally true the text that Jesus is the only begotten son of God. God cannot be the exclusive father and I cannot ascribe exclusive divinity to Jesus. He is as divine as Krishna or Rama, Muhammad or Zarathustra. Similarly, I do not regard every word of the Vedas or the Koran as inspired. The sum-total of these books is certainly inspired, but I miss that inspiration in many of the things taken individually. The Bible is as much a book of religion with me as the *Gita* and the Koran." Gandhi's interpretation might seem sensible and rational to a Hindu or Buddhist but heretical to Christian and Muslim theologians. His study of the Bible and Koran led him to the conviction that there was an underlying unity in all religions. As far back as August 1905, he declared that "the time had passed when the followers of one religion could stand and say, 'ours is the only true religion and all others are false'." According to Gandhi, "God, Allah, Rama, Narayan, Ishwar, Khuda were descriptions of the same Being." And "God's grace and revelation were not the monopoly of any race or nation." It logically follows from this that no one religion can claim that it alone is true and that others are false. Gandhi rejected the idea of conversion from one religion to another. In Gandhi's view, religious practices, ideas and beliefs had to be subjected to the test of reason, and those which failed the test have to be rejected. He applied this test to all religions. But it was Gandhi's reason, and when his reason clashed with another's reason, he would "claim in all humility" that his view was right, and when it came to Hinduism, he had another potent weapon at his disposal. He held the view that he had "lived Hinduism" all his life, which implied that his adversaries had either not "lived Hinduism," or that their experience had to give way to his. One wonders whether so introspective a person as Gandhi was not aware that his attitude was arrogant even when it was prefixed by the formula "I claim in all humility."

B.R. Nanda, the distinguished biographer of Gandhi, has concluded from his study of Gandhi's religious ideas and practices that "Gandhi's concept of religion had little in common with what generally passes for organised religion: dogmas, rituals, superstition, and bigotry. Indeed, shorn of these accretions, Gandhian religion was simply an ethical framework for the conduct of daily life <sup>[10]</sup>."

Gandhi also believed in the synthesis of science and spirituality. He did not like to allow science to be so powerful to rule over man and become the vehicle of his exploitation. His support is for the science, if it is beneficial to man and such a kind of science will not be antagonistic to spirituality, but a good help to it. Science deals with matter and body and spirituality with soul and consciousness. The former seeks laws of external truth and the latter laws of inner truth. The whole of the truth must come both and that will be the synthesis of science and spirituality. He explained his action with the help of reason and experimentation. His non-violence is both science and spirituality by faith and intuition. All the constructive works, piloted by him, are the fine amalgam of science and spirituality. He spiritualized politics, economics, education and other aspects of science and empirical life. His attitude was universalistic and experimental.

Gandhi believed in the supremacy of the law and vestiges it with the God. One cannot think of the law without its giver. Gandhi believed that God is a living power and common father who treats all equal without any discrimination. Gandhi saw law as the part of spiritual reality that has its place in man's conscience. God resides in every man and he shines and speaks through his soul and conscience which can be called 'inner voice'. It formulates right, just fair and reasonable set of law. Gandhi held a firm view that this conscience or inner voice always guide a man in the right direction, if one undergoes the process of self-purification and purge all his passion and prejudices in order to do as per the will of the God.

In summary, Gandhi's contribution to understanding the role of religious thought in society was his ability to move his religious beliefs into social action and to inspire others to practice ahimsa. What we witness above all in the Gandhian philosophy of religion is that the function of religion as man's response to ultimate reality is to transform human existence from self-centeredness to reality centeredness. His life was a continuous growth in which he became increasingly dedicated to the service of the higher reality which he thought of as 'Truth of God'.

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