

Gandhian Religion : A Solace in the Strife-Ridden World

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Mahatma Gandhi, whom all Indians fondly call 'Bapuji' needs no introduction. Although he was not an academic philosopher, we find in his writings a different sort of philosophical thinking which cannot be matched with any other contemporary philosopher. In his philosophy a unique trend is reflected where he touched every aspect of human life including social, political, moral and religious. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse and evaluate the Gandhian concept of religion. The method applied here is descriptive and analytical.

Before analysing his concept of religion, we have to be clear about certain concepts related to religion. Generally dharma and religion are used as synonymous terms. But in the Indian context, there is a subtle distinction between these two concepts. Dharma is derived from the Sanskrit root 'dhri' meaning 'to hold together'. It may be regarded as the basic principle that governs the whole universe. On the other hand, religion is usually understood as having devotion to a higher power or principle. As Gandhi was well aware of this distinction, he tried to see religion in the light of dharma. Dharma is the way of life, the ideal of life. So, in a sense, it is more comprehensive than religion.

Again, in Gandhi's opinion, religion and morality are inter-connected concepts. Gandhi stated that morality is the essence of religion. He did not support any religious principle which is opposed to morality. For him, religion without morality is nothing. Religion is the moral foundation of a good life. A religious life consists in leading a virtuous life. The age old virtues accepted by traditional Indian philosophy were also accepted by Gandhi. However, he adds some more virtues and interprets them in the light of his own experience. These virtues are—Non-violence (Ahimsa), Truth (Satya), Non-stealing (Asteya), Non-acceptance (Aparigraha),

Celibacy (Brahmacharyya), Fearlessness (Abhaya) and Faith in God (Isvara-Viswasa). There is a special significance of practicing these in Gandhian philosophy. He stated that these virtues should not only be practiced outwardly, but also in thought, speech and action.

The concept of God eventually comes when we discuss about religion. Gandhi believed in a personal God of the Vaisnava type. Yet he held that God is indescribable, unknowable, one and eternal. This is because there was a leaning towards the Advaita concept in Gandhi's thought. Gandhi stated that God can be apprehended as the inner voice of man kind. It is the all pervading Reality, though known by a thousand names, it is same to all.

Gandhi gave several arguments for the existence of God, viz., the causal, the moral and the pragmatic. Out of these, however, the moral argument seems to be the best one for Gandhi. He said that conscience best represents the Divine in man. It is the inner voice that makes man aware of the good and the bad.

While giving the description of God, Gandhi first stated that 'God is Truth'. But later on, he reversed his position and stated that 'Truth is God'. The reason for this reversal was the realization reason could reject anything except Truth. Truth is the only force that could unify even conflicting ideas and ideals. The word Truth has no double meaning. But the word God is ambiguous. It may have different connotations for different people. It may be polytheistic, monotheistic or even dualistic. Thus, one of the major reasons of strife among people is religion. Gandhi very well understood that fact and so he tried to remain detached from the ritualistic aspect of religion. Due to this fact he rarely visited temples though himself being a man devoted to God. He realized that the conflict among people arises not due to the main beliefs of religion, as all religions preach the same principles. It is the religious practices or rituals that render people to fight with one another. So, Gandhi searched for such a principle that can unite people belonging to different religious faiths. This principle cannot be God, because though at first sight it seems that God can unite people, but in deeper level it is one of the causes of strife among people.

To remove these conflicts from the minds of people, Gandhi stressed on the principle of Truth. For him, Truth is God as well as it is Love. It is

Love for fellow-being, love for the poor and the weak, and at large it is love for mankind and love for the whole world. This love represents the divine element in man. This love has the power to remove the bad and the evil from this world. It can lead man towards the good or the Truth. Truth is that principle which can bring out the best in man.

If this Gandhian ideal of Truth can be followed, then there will be no conflicts, no discord, no strife among people. This Truth is a principle which can unite people following different sets of ideas and ideals. It has the power of binding people together. Thus, the Truth of Gandhi can pave the way for universal brotherhood. Then this world would be place to live peacefully with one another. There will be no conflict, no disorder, and no disobedience. There will be perfect equanimity among people in the entire world. It would be the Ramrajya of Gandhi's dream.

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