



Gandhi on Religion

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Abstract

The present study deals with the notion of religion developed by Gandhi. The environment of Gandhi's home plays a prominent role in developing his notion of religion. His notion of religion was very practical because he changed his views to meet the demands of time and place. However, he did not introduce any new religious sect. In discussing Gandhi's views on religion, we find that he developed a human-centred religion, which is over and above all the traditional religions, and it may be accepted by everyone regardless of caste, creed, and religion. Everybody may simultaneously follow the religion developed by Gandhi along with their own traditional religion without facing a religious identity crisis. Even the religion developed by Gandhi may not be the cause of any social difficulties for a person who follows it along with his or her own traditional religion. Actually, the religion developed by Gandhi was for mankind but not for any particular group of people.

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1. Introduction:

People of different faiths, such as Jain, Muslim, Parsi and so on, visited Gandhi's father and talked to him about their own religions. As Gandhi was the nurse of his father, he got the opportunity to be present at those discussions. It may be said that the environment in Gandhi's house plays an important role in developing his notion of religion. Moreover, Raychand (Raj Chandra Mehta) also played a prominent role in developing Gandhi's religious thought (Jordens, 1998, p. 14).

Before discussing Gandhi's views on religion, one thing we want to make clear is that the terms "religion", "God", "truth", and "Non-violence" are used interchangeably in this paper because Gandhi did not make any distinction among the said terms. Nehru also believed that Gandhi used the terms "truth" and "non-violence" almost interchangeably (Nehru, 1989, p. 14). Another remarkable point is that Gandhi did not give any theory on religion. We learn about his views on religion from his lectures, writings and letters.

He said, "For me morals, ethics and religion are convertible terms" (Gandhi, 1976, p. 341). It seems that he believed in the identity of ethics and religion. Although sometimes he claimed that ethics and religion are identical, he warned that one should not mix up ethics and religion (Gandhi, 1983, p. 1). It is not that he just warned people to abstain from mixing up religion and ethics. He also explained why he refrained from mixing up ethics and religion. According to him, as fundamental ethics is common to all religions, the teachings of fundamental ethics are undoubtedly a function of the state. It is true that Gandhi warned against mixing up ethics and religion, but he also said that religion must not be inconsistent with the fundamental truths of ethics and morality (Gandhi, 1969, p. 102). Even if Gandhi always said that religion and morality are synonymous, however, he gave more importance to morality than religion (Andrews, 1922, p. 633). He believed that if religion loses its moral basis, it can no longer be called religion.

In this regard, it should be mentioned that he sometimes identified religion with Hinduism. He stated, "For me, religion, truth and Hinduism are interchangeable terms" (Gandhi, 1976, p. 136). It seems that the religion developed by Gandhi is a replica of Hinduism, as he used the terms "Hinduism", "truth", and "religion" interchangeably and admitted that he did not introduce any new religion. He wrote a letter to Lalan Pandit on October 27, 1926, and clearly mentioned there that he was not going to introduce a new religion, but he desired to revive an old one. He declared that "I am not out to propagate a new religion. But I certainly wish to revive an old one" (Gandhi, 1969, p. 534). Later, he also wrote another letter addressing the

same issue to Vamanbuwa Brahmachari on January 18, 1933, and he assured him that “The idea of founding a new religion has never occurred to me even in a dream” (Gandhi, 1972, p. 87).

It may not be true that the religion developed by Gandhi is a replica of Hinduism because Gandhi did not blindly accept everything in Hinduism. There is a lot of evidence that proves that the religion developed by Gandhi is not a replica of Hinduism. He strongly criticised those rituals, customs and practices of Hinduism which are directly or indirectly related to violence, for example, animal killing in the name of religion, etc. Moreover, he wished to incorporate into his own religion those good things of other faiths that are missing in his own religion (Gandhi, 1973, p. 353). If the religion developed by him was a replica of Hinduism, neither did he criticise all the aforesaid practices and argue to leave them nor did he wish to include all those good things of other faiths which are missing in Hinduism. He boldly claimed that the religion developed by him was not the Hindu religion. He clearly said that

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 which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find 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 (Gandhi, 1973, pp. 807-8).

To discuss Gandhi's notion of religion, we first focus on what he thought about religion, consider what subsequent scholars think about his views, and critically examine their views. Furthermore, this paper also focuses on some important aspects of Gandhi's notion of religion.

2. Method and Materials:

Data are collected from both primary and secondary sources. Both analytical and critical methods are simultaneously used in this study. The analytical method is used to analyse and explain Gandhi's views on religion. The critical method is used to examine Gandhi's arguments and the views of subsequent scholars on Gandhi's notion of religion and related issues.

3. Discussion:

This section is divided into three parts:

- (a) what Gandhi meant by religion,
- (b) what Gandhi did not mean by religion and

(c) Some important aspects of Gandhi's notion of religion. Each of these parts is discussed below in sequence.

(a) What Gandhi meant by religion:

To explain what Gandhi meant by religion, he suggested different opinions at different times. We try to discuss here all of his views one by one. Gandhi, in his autobiography, mentioned in what sense he used the term "religion". He said, "The term 'Religion' I am using in its broadest sense, meaning thereby self-realisation or knowledge of self" (Gandhi, 1927, p. 80). Sometimes he said, "By religion, I do not mean formal religion, or customary religion, but that religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our Maker" (Doke, 1909, p. 10). It is important to note that Gandhi said religion is something which does not give any opportunity of taking rest to the soul until it gets to know itself (Andrews, 1922, p. 807).

Gandhi delivered a speech on 16 February, 1916, in the Y. M. C. A. Auditorium, Madras. He addressed there what he meant by religion at the beginning of his speech. He believed that religion is not an external thing, even though it cannot be acquired after reading all the famous scriptures of the world. It is already within us and not alien to us. Whenever we want, we can awaken our religious instinct by using external stimulus or by inward growth. It does not matter whether we evolved our religious instinct through external influence or by inward growth. He thought that we can awaken this religious instinct within ourselves. Gandhi always firmly claimed that the religion he was talking about was not grasped by the brain but by the heart (Andrews, 1922, p. 317).

In 1927, Gandhi wrote a letter to Gangabehn Jhaveri and told her that "In this age there is no greater religion than service. In my view it is the greatest religion in all ages" (Gandhi, 1994, p. 67). In this regard, it is important to note that although Gandhi considered service to be religion, he warned those who followed his path. He said those who have made service to his religion do not do so for the lust of their honour (Andrews, 1922, p. 223). If we serve others for lust of honour or fame, we are helping ourselves, not others, because we are serving others for our personal gain. Here it is not important to them how much the people benefited; what is important is how much they themselves benefited. Gandhi thought that if we did it, the services were probably not to be considered as religion. Gandhi believed that people must serve others without any attachment. It means the expectation of getting back the reward or something else for our services destroys the purity of services. It follows that Gandhi's notion of religion was deeply influenced by Nişkāma karma, and he said that the Nişkāma karma itself is religion (Gandhi, 1973, p. 125).

Gandhi thought that religion was very concerned with the inner self (Gandhi, 1973, p. 442). It is not just concerned with the inner self, but it also purifies the soul. After the purification of the soul, desires for the fruits of the deeds and selfishness are removed from the soul. He believed that “Religion is what purifies the soul, in which there is no hankering for fruits of action, which generates indomitable faith, and in which there is not an iota of selfishness. Only activities conforming to such religion can be said to be religious” (Gandhi, 1973, p. 125). It is not that religion just removes our desires for the fruit of deeds or removes selfishness from the soul; it leads us to religious progress and prepares us to sacrifice everything. According to him, “True religion is that which leads to spiritual progress and for which we are ready to sacrifice everything” (Gandhi, 1972, p. 425).

In 1928, a student of Gujarat Vidyapith asked Gandhi which concrete form of religious instruction the student of vidyapith would follow. In response to the question, Gandhi said: “To me religion means truth and ahimsa or rather truth alone, because truth includes ahimsa, ahimsa being the necessary and indispensable means for its discovery” (Gandhi, 1970, p. 254). Gandhi advised both students and teachers to practice the said virtues. We have just mentioned that Gandhi considered truth and ahimsa as religion, even if he sometimes suggested that ahimsa alone is true religion. He said on July 28, 1935, in Harijanbandhu (a Gujarati Newspaper) that “Non-violence alone is the true religion for all times” (Gandhi, 1975, p. 292). However, it is important to note that he delivered a speech on non-cooperation in Calcutta on December 13, 1920. He mentioned in his speech that he considered non-violence as a part of his religion. He said, “With me non-violence is part of my religion, a matter of creed” (Gandhi, 1966, p. 102). He thought that a person was to be considered as non-violent if that person was not directly or indirectly associated with violence (Gandhi, 1970, p. 385).

Some of his statements proved that, as far as possible, he always tried to strictly follow the path of ahimsa in his life. He said “My religion forbids me to bear any ill will towards you. I would not raise my hand against you even if I had the power” (Gandhi, 1965, p. 374). He also declared that his religion did not allow him to harm the enemy either. According to him, “My personal religion, however, enables me to serve my countrymen without hurting Englishmen or, for that matter, anybody else. What I am not prepared to do to my blood brother I would not do to an Englishman. I would not injure him to gain a kingdom” (Andrews, 1922, p. 510). Gandhi neither hurt others nor allowed others to be hurt (Gandhi, 1965, 620). Although he always tried to follow the path of ahimsa, he realised that we could not completely give up himsa (violence) from our daily life. He said, “I believe that there is no religion greater than ahimsa, and yet I

cannot escape the himsa which is inevitably involved in the processes of eating and drinking” (Gandhi, 1967, p. 548). It means he allowed violence to a certain extent in everyday life.

Living faith in the supreme unseen force was admitted by Gandhi as religion. He stated that “Religion to me is a living faith in the Supreme Unseen Force. That Force has confounded mankind before, and it is bound to confound us again” (Gandhi, 1967, p. 86). Sometimes he identified the religion with the supreme reality of the universe. He said “. . . there is no religion other than Truth. Truth is Rama, Narayana, Ishwara, Khuda, Allah, God” (Gandhi, 1967, p. 548). It is not only that he just identified religion with God, but faith in God was also admitted by him as religion. He sometimes suggested that “True religion is not narrow dogma. It is not external observance. It is faith in God . . .” (Gandhi, 1970, p. 193). Moreover, he said “. . . religion means being bound to God . . .” (Gandhi, 1974, p. 199).

Gandhi also suggested that “Religion is service of the helpless” (Gandhi, 1967, p. 547). It is worth keeping in mind that Gandhi did not just consider service a religion, but he himself strictly practised it. He also praised others for practising it, and some people responded to him. Anasuya Bajaj was one of them who was influenced by Gandhi, and she sent her silver to Gandhi to use for the welfare of the public (Gandhi, 1975, p. 196). Perhaps Gandhi thought service was the highest religion of religions. This is why he said that “There is no religion like the service of others, and O brother, there is no sin like doing evil to others” (Gandhi, 1971, p. 412).

It is not that Gandhi just considered truth, non-violence, etc. as religion; he sometimes accepted that life is religion as well. He argued that as religion is not separate from life, life should be regarded as religion. He believed “Religion is not something apart from life. Life itself should be regarded as religion. Life divorced from religion is not human life, it is animal life” (Gandhi, 1980, p. 429).

Gandhi was deeply influenced by the Jaina doctrine of *anekantavada* (Jordens, 1998 p. 108). According to this doctrine, all things possess innumerable characteristics (positive and negative) (Sharma, 1962, p. 38). Perhaps Gandhi thought that the same is true for religion and expressed different views on religion at different times. However, he was very aware of this issue. In most of the cases, the definition of religion that Gandhi proposed was determined by the place and time. When he thought it was the right time to consider the truth as religion, he considered it; when he thought it was the right time to identify God with religion, he did it, etc. So, his answers to the question (what he meant by religion) may be considered as spatiotemporal. It would be

clear from the following two different references: he wrote a letter to Gangabehn in 1927 and advised her that “In this age there is no greater religion than service. In my view it is the greatest religion in all ages” (Gandhi, 1994, p. 67). He delivered a speech on April 17, 1930, at Vejalpur. He mentioned in his speech that “I hope Gujarat has well understood the lesson of non-violence, which is our religion at the present moment (Gandhi, 1971, p. 279). However, it is important to note that he delivered a speech on non-co-operation in Calcutta on December 13, 1920. He mentioned in his speech that he considered non-violence as a part of his religion (Gandhi, 1966, p. 102).

Gandhi was criticised for changing his views on religion from time to time. Those who criticised him for changing his views on religion, he warned them. Srinivas (1995) mentions, “He (Gandhi) warned his critics that his views on religion were subject to change, thus retaining his freedom to jettison ideas which he thought wrong or outdated, and to espouse new ones which he considered desirable if not necessary” (p. 1489). Whatever is good for the nation, society, or the individual, Gandhi considered it religion. Perhaps this is why he did not consider what he had said earlier about religion when he attempted to present a new perspective about it.

Gandhi sometimes said that the religion developed by him was not sectarianism but a moral order, which transcends all the famous traditional religions of the world and harmonises them. It is said that

... religion should pervade everyone of our actions. Here religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in the ordered moral government of the universe. It is not less real because it is unseen. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonises them and gives them reality (Gandhi, 1978, p. 178).

If we very carefully concentrate on what Gandhi meant by religion, we notice that the religion developed by him was not custom- or ritual-centric. Even customs or rituals were not part of the religion. To comment on Gandhi’s notion of religion, Nehru (1989) mentioned the same thing in his book that “. . . his (Gandhi) conception of religion had nothing to do with any dogma or custom or ritual” (p. 14). Gandhi gave a justification for why he did not consider custom to be religion. He believed “Custom may change, but religion will remain unaltered” (Gandhi, 1968, p. 443). However, Gandhi praised the harmless customs. People think that religion consists of outward ceremony. They completely forget that religion is an ever-growing

inward response to the highest impulses (Gandhi, 1972, p. 61). Due to this misconception, people probably give more importance to ceremonies related to religion.

Gandhi thought that religion was a necessary element in our life (Gandhi, 1981, p. 441). If our life is guided by religion, we will be able to achieve the goal of our life. To convey the importance of religion in life, he compared life without religion to a rudderless ship (Andrews, 1922, p. 311). Gandhi believed that there are some scholars, such as Bradlaugh (an atheist), who think they have nothing to do with religion and can live without it. He ridiculed those people who thought that they had nothing to do with religion. He said “. . . no man can live without religion. There are some who in the egotism of their reason declare that they have nothing to do with religion. But it is like a man saying that he breathes but that he has no nose” (Gandhi, 1970, p. 411). Gandhi argued that even an atheist could not live without religion (Ibid).

He went to deliver a speech at a women's meeting in Benares on August 2, 1934. To talk about the religion of his time, Gandhi expressed his regret in this meeting that we forget what religion is. We are misled, and those things are considered as religion, which have neither direct connection with religion nor are morally good. He said, “It is a tragedy that religion for us means today nothing more than restriction on food and drink, nothing more than adherence to a sense of superiority and inferiority” (Gandhi, 1974, p. 277). He expressed his concern about today's religion because “Today, wickedness flourishes in the name of religion” (Gandhi, 1983, p. 197).

Some scholars like Hyslop (2011) think that the religion developed by Gandhi was largely Hindu in form. Hyslop (2011) says “Gandhi was in a sense developing his own religion, largely Hindu in form, but infused with Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Jain, secular-philosophical, and Theosophist ideas and texts” (Hyslop, P. 42). Perhaps, Hyslop's understanding is partly true because Gandhi admitted that he took the good things from formal religions. So, it may be said that the religion developed by Gandhi is infused with Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Jain, secular-philosophical ideas, etc.

But the point is that we may not claim that the religion developed by him was “largely Hindu in form” because Gandhi himself said that the religion developed by him was not the Hindu religion (Gandhi, 1973, p. 807). Moreover, Gandhi himself clearly mentioned that the religion developed by him was free from sectarianism (Gandhi 178). How do we claim the religion developed by him was largely Hindu in form? Doke (1909) raises questions against those who

categorised Gandhi. According to Doke, we cannot put Gandhi in a particular sect because he is over and above the formula of categorization. Doke says

Mr. Gandhi's religious views, and his place in the theological world, have naturally been a subject of much discussion here. A few days ago I was told that "he is a Buddhist." Not long since, a newspaper described him as "a Christian Mohammedan," an extraordinary mixture indeed. Others imagine that he worships idols . . . I question whether any system of religion can absolutely hold him. His views are too closely allied to Christianity to be entirely Hindu; and too deeply saturated with Hinduism to be called Christian, while his sympathies are so wide and catholic, that one would imagine "he has reached a point where the formula of sects are meaningless (Doke, P. 140).

(b) What Gandhi did not mean by religion:

It is important to note that Gandhi did not just discuss what he meant by religion. At the same time, he clearly explained what he did not mean by religion also. He said

. . . in my opinion religion is a much deeper thing than the questioner would allow. It is not a matter of convenience or of bettering one's social or material condition. People have been known to cling to their religion although they have had to face social ostracism, material ruin and much worse. One's religion keeps one true in the face of the greatest adversity. It is the sheet anchor of one's hope in this world and even after. It binds one to one's God, to Truth as to nothing else (Gandhi, 1973, p. 351).

Gandhi was against brutal customs because they promote violence. This is why he did not consider the brutal customs to be religion. He said that "It is irreligion, not religion, to give religious sanction to a brutal custom" (Gandhi, 1969, p. 329). Gandhi sometimes expressed his regret that "Irreligion, we have made our religion" (Gandhi, 1973, p. 248). Gandhi thought that if we found that there was a conflict between religion and economics, religion would not be considered as religion. Gandhi thought ". . . if a religion cuts at the very fundamentalsof economics it is not a true religion but only a delusion" (Gandhi, 1969, p. 392).

(c) Some important aspects of Gandhi's notion of religion:

We may suppose that Gandhi's notion of religion has some important aspects, and we try to focus on those aspects one by one. We first discuss the altruistic aspect. Gandhi's notion of religion was probably altruistic because the religion he developed always emphasised the welfare of others. He said, "There is no religion like the service of others, and O brother, there is no sin like doing evil to others" (Gandhi, 1971, p. 412). He encouraged people to help the

helpless (Gandhi, 1967, p. 547). People were influenced and responded to him. Anasuya Bajaj sent her silver to Gandhi to use for the welfare of the public (Gandhi, 1975, p. 196). Gandhi advised people to serve the Harijans for the betterment of Harijans at a public meeting in Amraoti on 16 November, 1933 and thought it was our religious duty (Gandhi, 1973, p. 239).

Gandhi was very serious about the protection of other creatures also. He was against the killing of animals in the name of religion (Andrews, 1922, p. 833). He expressed his regret that people are fighting for the protection of cows. But they are doing nothing to protect other animals. They do not even believe that it is their religious duty to protect them (Gandhi, 1969, p. 393). As the religion developed by Gandhi always advised working for the betterment of others, we may consider it altruistic.

The second one is the metaphysical aspect. Primarily, it seems that Gandhi's notion of religion has no metaphysical characteristics. But if we very carefully look into the matter, we find that actually Gandhi's notion of religion has some metaphysical characteristics. The first thing is that he identified religion with God, etc. (Gandhi, 1976, p. 341). It means whatever is true for God and Truth, the same is true for religion and vice versa. To express his thoughts on God, he suggested that,

. . . for me, truth is the sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God (Gandhi, 1927, p. 7).

Moreover, he thought "Religion is eternal, it will go on" (Gandhi, 1973, p. 134). Richards (1991) argues that Gandhi was involved in metaphysical speculation to define the truth (p. 1). Gandhi also said that everything is unreal other than God (Gandhi, 1927, p. 8).

4. Conclusion:

It may be concluded after discussing Gandhi's views on religion that he did not introduce any new religion. The religion developed by him was not custom- or ritual-centred but human-centred. In most of the cases, whatever is good for individuals as well as society, he treated that as religion. His conscience plays a prominent role in developing such a human-centred religion because his conscience tells him that untouchability always humiliates and abuses people, helpless people need help, do not hurt others, etc. He taught to love others, suggested serving the helpless and cordially tried to permanently uproot untouchability from our society. For this reason, he said that religion is grasped by the heart (Gandhi, 1970, p. 224). Actually, whatever

is considered as religion by him, other people also realised its necessity. But the interesting point is that those things are not considered as religion by others like Gandhi. Of course, other people realise that untouchability is a form of cruelty in their society, and they want its abolishment.

It would be wrong to say that Gandhi always encouraged people to follow the religion, because he did not. He probably followed the religion in every moment of his life. Otherwise, he never advised people to follow his way of life. Perhaps this is why he said, “You must watch my life; how I live, eat, sit, behave in general. The sum total of all these in me is my religion” (Bharathi, 1998, p. 86). He thought this was the easiest way to convey what he meant by religion.

Although Gandhi strongly claimed that he was a Hindu, his notion of religion did not promote Hinduism. He talked about the good things of all other religions. It proves that his notion of religion was probably free from sectarianism. Some of the scholars like Brown (2011) also think so. According to Brown (2011), “Although he had been brought up in the Hindu tradition, he had increasingly learnt about other great world religions, and began to understand religion as the search for God, or, as he put it, Truth, rather than adherence to a particular religious tradition” (p. 54). It may be proposed that Gandhi developed a religion for mankind, which may be practised by everyone irrespective of caste, creed, and religion, without leaving their own religion (formal religion) and facing any religious identity crisis. So, the religion developed by Gandhi may be considered a universal religion.

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