

# Mahatma Gandhi's Conception of Religion: A Brief Study

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**Abstract:** Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1869 at Porbandar in Gujarat. His parents were Karamchand Gandhi and Putlibai. Gandhi founded the Natal Indian Congress into a homogenous political force and also evolved the nonviolent Satyagraha which later became a potent method in fighting for Indian Independence. Gandhi asked the people to wear Indian made Khadi cloth and not to buy any of the British goods and to boycott British educational institutions, law courts and to forsake British employment, title and honours and also organized the Dandi Salt march. He was shot dead on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1948 by Nathuram Godse.

Gandhi believes truth and non-violence as the creative force of religion in human history. True religion is the moral values of man as spirit. He says that higher principle being truth, devotion to Truth (or God) is religion. For him, Ram and Rahim were two names of the same Creator and both preached love, truth and brotherhood. He says, "To me God is Truth and Law; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist." Prayer is the only way of bringing about peace, harmony and order in our life.

**Key words:** introduction of Mahatma Gandhi, Gandhi's religious thought, religion and politics, religion and morality.



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## INTRODUCTION

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi also called as Mahatma Gandhi was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1869 at Porbandar in Gujarat. His parents were Karamchand Gandhi and Putlibai. He married Kasturbai Gandhi and had five children. Gandhi went to London and studied Law. He went to work in South Africa where he was thrown off the train in Pietermaritzburg even after possessing a valid first class ticket. This important incident and some other incidents which occurred in South Africa made Gandhi to start protesting the injustice against Indians in South Africa. Gandhi founded the Natal Indian Congress into a homogenous political force and also evolved the nonviolent Satyagraha which later became a potent method in fighting for Indian Independence.

In 1915, Gandhi returned to India and he organized Champaran agitation and Kheda Satyagraha to protest against increasing tax. Next he organized the Noncooperation Movement to protest against the British forces for Jallianwala Bag massacre. This gradually movement gathered momentum and Gandhi asked for Swaraj or Independence of India. Gandhi also asked the people to wear Indian made Khadi cloth and not to buy any of the British goods and to boycott British educational institutions, law courts and to forsake British employment, title and honours. He organized the Dandi Salt march which is also known as the Salt Satyagraha from Ahmedabad to Dandi in 12<sup>th</sup> March 1930 to 5<sup>th</sup> April 1930 (24<sup>th</sup> days). He then started the Quit India Movement to gain Independence.

India got Independence in 1947, but Gandhi was very unhappy about the partition of the nation into India and Pakistan. He went on fasting to prevent the Hindu Muslim communal violence. He was shot dead on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1948 by Nathuram Godse.

Thus Gandhi dedicated his whole life to convey the message of nonviolence and for the upliftment of Dalits whom he referred to as Harijans (Children of God). His Birthday has been declared as the International Day of Nonviolence by the United Nations General Assembly. The Autobiography titled My Experiments with Truth, and Satyagraha in South Africa are two important books written by Gandhi.<sup>1</sup>

### Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study are:

- (i) To attempt to reveal the introduction of Mahatma Gandhi.
- (ii) To trace the conception Gandhiji's religious thought.

### METHODOLOGY:

The method of the present study is analytical in nature which is based on the primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources contain books, journals, leaflet, and data collection from website documents published from research institutes. Books particularly reveal the works of Mahatma Gandhi especially on religion are supplied a greater source of information.

Primary data collected by the meeting of some social workers and also in interview with renowned persons helped fruitful analysis and authenticity of the topic. Secondary data are mainly applied in this topic.

### GANDHI'S CONCEPTION OF RELIGION:

Since Gandhi believed in truth and non-violence, he accepted the creative force of religion in human history. Religion signified, to him, belief in the ordered moral governance of the world. He hence, condemned the godlessness and violence associated with Bolshevism.<sup>2</sup> He called himself a Hindu but he was no narrow sectarian. Like Buddha and Ramakrishna he was above the bounds of creeds, cults, rituals and ceremonies. He accepted the spiritual and moral essence of Hinduism which according to him was the essence of all the great religions of mankind as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism. True religion, according to Gandhi, implied an emphasis on the moral values of man as spirit. "All religions are founded on the same moral laws. My ethical religion is made up of laws which bind men all over the world. "Religion provided the dynamic impetus to his actions and life. He said that he was essentially a religious man in quest of Moksha—redemption and emancipation of the soul from the clutches of Maya. But emancipation to Gandhi did not signify isolation. It did not mean the negation and repudiation of the claims of the society and the human kind.<sup>3</sup> Gandhi's philosophy of religion is based on the concept of Truth, that is, peace by means of 'Non-violence'. It is, thus, the path and the other is

<sup>1</sup> Great Indian Personalities, 2012 (June), Minerva Publications, Chennai-05, P.P. 65-66-67

<sup>2</sup> M.K.Gandhi, Non-Violence in Peace and War, Vol.I, P. 38

<sup>3</sup> Varma, V.P., Modern Indian Political Thought, 1991, Lakshmi NarainAgarwal Educational Publishers, Agra-03, P. 346

'Non-violence' and 'Satyagraha'. The ultimate aim is conquest of the heart and mind.

The basic conviction of Gandhi is that there is one reality—that of God, which is nothing else but truth. His religious ideas are also derived from that conviction. If truth is God, sincere pursuit of Truth is religion. Religion is ordinarily defined as devotion to some higher power or principle. Gandhi is not against such a description of religion, he only qualifies it further by saying that higher principle being truth, devotion to Truth (or God) is religion. Gandhi says, "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."<sup>4</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi had great faith in religious values because it promoted morals of the people. Without religion, life signifies nothing. He believed that basically it was wrong to separate religion from politics. Both must go hand in hand. In actual practice he applied religion to politics and said that politics subserves religion. He said that "Most religious men I have met are politicians in disguise; I however who wear the guise of a politician am at heart a religious man." Since individual life is one solid piece it cannot be divided into water tight-compartments and one aspect is bound to react on the other and as such politics must influence religion and vice-versa. According to him, true religion can make an otherwise dirty game of politics sublime and noble. He went to the extent of saying that those who wish to separate religion from politics in fact do not know what true religion is. Each politician must be religious minded, if he is a true politician.<sup>5</sup>

Gandhiji thinks that religions are different roads converging to the same point. To him, "Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so there is one true and perfect Religion, but it becomes many, as it passes through the human medium."<sup>6</sup>

Gandhiji had great love both for God and religion but his views in his regard are broader than what is generally understood by religion or God. For him, Ram and Rahim were two names of the same Creator and both preached love, truth and brotherhood.<sup>7</sup>

Gandhi identified God with truth and law and therefore synthesized religion and morality, religion and politics and politics and ethics. He said, "To me God is Truth and Law; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist."<sup>8</sup>

The salient features of Gandhi's views on the nature of religion. *Firstly*, religion is the expression of the permanent nature of man. The animal and brutish aspect of man's nature is not its permanent aspect, the permanent aspect is the aspect of Divinity—the element of essential goodness present in every man. *Secondly*, Religion has the character of purifying and elevating one's nature. Gandhi believes that true religious spirit has the capacity of changing one's nature because it is the expression of the good elements present in man. *Thirdly*, religion has the power of arousing in man a sense of spiritual restlessness—a kind of a thirst—which enables the individual to cultivate and develop a sense to the right and the good, and makes him a truly moral man. *Fourthly*, religious aspiration is based on a desire and a cognitive urge to know 'the beyond'. It has somehow the feeling that the ultimate religious ideal is nothing but the realization of God. *Fifthly* and *finally*, religion involves a conscious and sincere love and striving for Truth. Without this all other characters of religion would be ineffective. Therefore, Gandhi says that there is no religion higher than Truth and Righteousness.<sup>9</sup>

When Gandhiji visited Europe on the occasion of the second Round Table Conference and was staying in Switzerland with Pierre Ceresole, the founder of the international Voluntary Service for Peace, Pierre asked; "Tell us what qualities you think a leader for this age would need. 'Realization of God every minute of the twenty four hours', announced Mr. Gandhi. 'I tell you, if

<sup>4</sup> Young India, 12-5-20 ; Basant Kumar Lal, Contemporary Indian Philosophy, 1989, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi-07, P.126

<sup>5</sup> Srivastava, L.N.; H.R.Mukhi, Political Science Theory, 1993, SBD Publishers' Distributors, Delhi-06, P.492

<sup>6</sup> Mahatma Gandhi: from Yeravda Mandir, P.55

<sup>7</sup> Mukhi, H.R., Political Thought, 2001, SB D Publishers' Distributors, Delhi-06, P. 429

<sup>8</sup> Andrews, C.F., Mahatma Gandhi's Idea, P. 43.; Ram Nath Sharma, Social Philosophy, Kedar Nath Ram Nath, Delhi- 02, P.302

<sup>9</sup> Basant Kumar Lal, Ibid. P. p. 126-127

the entire world denied God, I should be His sole witness. It is a continual miracle to me."<sup>10</sup>

Gandhi believes that every religion contains good precepts and noble teachings; he also finds that some of the interpretations and commentaries have degraded religion and distorted it. He also finds that almost every religion has given rise to some fanatic and unreasonable practices. Therefore, his conviction is that all religions are good as well as bad, basically good—good in conceiving its ideal, but bad in giving rise to hatred, crusades and fanaticism. The experience of communal riots in India strengthened his belief. Therefore, he suggests that religions—historical religions—must not be allowed to cross the limits of reason of '*sober reason*', as he calls it. He is convinced that this element of '*rationality*' will be able to bring about, what can be called, '*a fellowship of all religions*' or, '*the kingdom of God*'—a Christian expression which he also approvingly uses on various occasions.<sup>11</sup>

Gandhi, through his religious views does not seek to make subscription to dogmas or conformity to rituals. For him, religion is an abiding faith in the absolute values of truth, love and justice and a persistent endeavour to realize them on earth. He says that we cannot conceive of religion apart from morality, "Truth religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. Religion is to morality what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil."<sup>12</sup> Gandhi rejects all such religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality. As Ravindra Kumar observes, "Along with continuous development, pleasure, prosperity and peace constitute the essence of human life."<sup>13</sup> Religion in the sense of philanthropy, forbearance, justice, fraternity, peace and all-embracing love can alone be the basis of the existence of the world. Hence, Gandhi said, "To try to root out religion itself from society is a wild-goose chase. And were such an attempt to succeed, it would mean the destruction of society."<sup>14</sup>

According to Gandhi, religion is not just a theoretical concept that seeks to satisfy intellectual curiosity and urges, it is, for him, the way of life, a

practical necessity. In fact, he feels that a religion which takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them is no religion. He believes that true religion has to be practical. Therefore, he says that religion should pervade every aspect of our life—even political life.<sup>15</sup>

It was Mahatma Gandhi's firm conviction that all religions are true; that all are equally valid; and all are imperfect. To quote his own words, "Every nation's religion is as good as any other. Certainly India's religions are adequate for her people. We need no converting spiritually'. "The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of different religions."<sup>16</sup>

Gandhiji, however, had a different concept about religion. For him, his religion is neither that of the Hindus nor that of the Muslims nor any other community but on the other hand, he meant from religion a universal religion which sought truth and pleaded for help to the helpless. It was a religion which was based on social justice and promoted brotherhood, truth and happiness. It should be a religion which should stand for equality of all religions and should be broad based enough to adjust itself to all good qualities of all religions and thus should not be narrow in outlook but above all narrow concepts. He himself said, "My religion is based on truth and non-violence is the means of realizing Him."<sup>17</sup>

Prayer, in particular, appears to have a very great importance and value for him. Specially, in hours of crisis Gandhi used to retire in silent meditation and prayer, and invariably after such an experience he used to come out with renewed vigour, strength and conviction. Prayer, according to Gandhi, is not asking, it is a longing of the soul. Prayer is the only way of bringing about peace, harmony and order in our life. He says, "Prayer is the very soul and essence of religion, and therefore, prayer must be the very core of life of man, for no man can live without religion."<sup>18</sup> But, at this point a question may arise, which Gandhi has been able to anticipate. "But why pray at all? Does not God, if there be one, know what has happened? Does He stand in need of prayer to enable Him to do His duty? No,

<sup>10</sup> Muriel Lester, *Gandhi the world Citizen* (1945).P 27; Ram Nath Sharma, *Social Philosophy*, Kedar Nath Ram Nath, Delhi- 02, P.p. 302-303

<sup>11</sup> Basant Kumar Lal, *Ibid.*, P.129

<sup>12</sup> *Ethical religion*,P.49

<sup>13</sup> Kumar Ravindra, *Selected Essays Mostly on Buddhism and Gandhism*, 2007, P. 09

<sup>14</sup> Varma, V.P., *ibid.* P. 347

<sup>15</sup> Basant Kumar Lal, *Ibid.*, P.127

<sup>16</sup> Asirvatham Eddy, K.K. Misra ( Ed.), *Political Theory*, 1984, The Upper India Publishing House PVT. LTD, U.P-18, P. 703

<sup>17</sup> Mukhi, H.R., *Ibid.* P. 429

<sup>18</sup> *Young India*, 23-1-30

God needs no reminder. He is within everyone. Nothing happens without His permission. Our prayer is a heart search. It is a reminder to ourselves that we are helpless without His support. No effort is complete without prayer—without a definite recognition that the best human endeavour is of no effect if it has not God's blessing behind. Prayer is a call to humility. It is a call to self-purification to inward search." <sup>19</sup> Prayer, thus, makes us purer and brings us nearer to God. Through prayer we are able to gain strength and prepare ourselves to share the sufferings of others.

Gandhi called his God by the name of Ram because this world has a wide base among Indian masses. He called his ideal society Ram Raja. This has however, led to some confusion since so many people are critical of Ram and his rule. Gandhi has, however, made it clear at several places that his God is not a person but the Divine. In his own words, "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." <sup>20</sup> But the word Ram undoubtedly has been borrowed from Ram Charit Manas which, along with Bhagwad Gita, Gandhi considered the best works that Indian has produced.<sup>21</sup>

Gandhi says that true renunciation means renouncing of the selfish and the personal for the good of others. Gandhi recommends that the religious man must practice renunciation by living in the midst of men. That would mean that he will have to cultivate and develop a cold, indifferent and detached attitude towards worldly gains and losses. Gandhi, following his philosophy of means and end, recommends that a certain way of practising this kind of renunciation is to do one's duty and work without caring for—or without even thinking of—the fruits or consequences of his actions. Gandhi, in fact, is following the path of 'Niskama Karma' as shown by the *Gita*. Gandhi calls the *Gita* his guru and tries to follow the Karma-marga as preached in the *Gita*. Renunciation, therefore, means selfless action for the good of humanity. In fact, the religious recommendation is that the fruits of one's effort are to be left to God, they are his concern not ours.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Harijan, 8-6-35

<sup>20</sup> Gandhi M.K., Harijan, April 28, 1946

<sup>21</sup> Ram Nath Sharma, Ibid., P. 303

<sup>22</sup> Basant Kumar Lal, Ibid., P.128

## CONCLUSION:

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1869 at Porbandar in Gujarat and died on 30th January 1948. Gandhi was the founder of Natal Indian Congress into a homogenous political force and also evolved the nonviolent Satyagraha. Gandhi emphasized to wear Indian made Khadi cloth and not to buy and join any of the British goods and institutions.

Though Gandhi believed in truth and non-violence but he accepted the creative force of religion in human history. He accepted the spiritual and moral essence of Hinduism which according to him was the essence of all the great religions of mankind as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism. He said that True religion based on the moral values of man as spirit. We cannot conceive of religion apart from morality. Religion is to morality what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil. He had great faith in religious values and also great love both for God and religion. Gandhi said, "To me God is Truth and Law; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist." Gandhi thought that all religions are good as well as bad, basically good—good in conceiving its ideal, but bad in giving rise to hatred, crusades and fanaticism e.g. communal riots. Thus, he advised that religions—historical religions—must not be allowed to cross the limits of reason of 'sober reason', as he calls it. He believes that true religion has to be practical and it should pervade every aspect of our life—even political life. He says, Prayer is the very soul and essence of religion and it must be the very core of life of man, for no man can live without religion. Gandhi called his God by the name of Ram and followed the path of 'Niskama Karma' as shown by the *Gita*.

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