

GANDHIAN CONCEPT OF NON-VIOLENCE AND RELIGION: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi is the father of nation and he was believed that non-violence and religion are the two key aspects that can be changed the entire human life towards good. The concept of religion and non-violence are two important concepts in Gandhian philosophy. Even though religion and non-violence are two distinct concepts altogether, but Gandhi amalgamates them and called them the religion of non-violence. Non-violence is a great virtue and religion is needed for humanism. The saner principles of humanism are truth, love, and goodness. They safeguard humanity against violence, ill-feelings, and ill-wills. The spirit of non-violence is not a mere principle, but an article of faith that incorporates the essence of the religion of love, truth, and goodness. Non-violence to the height of devotion is an inseparable part of religion. Non-violence serves as the most potent factor of religion, a soul force that proclaims the message of love instead of war. Non-violence as a doctrine of the true religion of man in idealizing love is significant. To be christened with Truth as an equivalent to non-violence is as Gandhi thinks, to be christened with the true spirit of religion. It is undoubtedly strenuous and painstaking but Truth as an inseparable part of non-violence does demand an undertaking and experience that builds a strong foundation of true religion. Religion helps one to eliminate all misconceptions between truth and non-violence, and in turn, admits the limitations that a human being cannot avert in course of pursuit of non-violence. Moreover, the sense of tolerance which is a fundamental component of non-violence also serves as a great component to realize religion in principle and practice. It is manifested to complete tolerance that nurses the religion of love and non-violence. The horizon of love and non-violence as an abiding and endearing form of religion clarifying the concept of man. Non-violence in the form of love allows one to one and all. The main strategy of this paper is to show in what sense Gandhi settles down religion and non-violence as ‘the religion of non-violence’.

Keywords: religion, non-violence, humanism, truth, love.

INTRODUCTION:

Mahatma Gandhi was the seeker of Truth. He then equates Truth with Religion and God. Again Truth necessarily takes us his views on the nature of non-violence. Gandhi in this regard says, “I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and Non-violence are as old as the hills....In fact it was in the course of my pursuit of truth that I discovered non-violence.”ⁱ Thus, he conceives the *truth as non-violence*. He says, “*Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc. ...*Ahimsa* is the means; Truth is the end.”ⁱⁱ As Truth is Religion, therefore, Religion is the end and *ahimsa* is the means. This is how Religion and *Ahimha* (Non -violence) are entwined with each other. What then is non-violence according to Gandhi? The usual meaning of non-violence is *non-killing*. Non-violence then is conceived as non-injury. Here *Ahimsa* or non-violence is conceived as the

opposite of *himsa*. Gandhi accepts this and adds much more to its content. He also accepts that *himsa* means causing pain or killing any life out of anger, or from a selfish purpose, or with the intention of injuring it. Thus, refraining from doing all this is *Ahimsa*. In this regard, Gandhi was influenced by Jainism which recommends the practice of non-violence in *thought, speech, and action*. According to Jainism, even thinking ill of others is *himsa*. Jainism demands that one should not only commit *himsa* himself, he should not cause *himsa* to take place. Gandhi, however, is slightly liberal than Jainism. Gandhi is aware that it is not possible to observe non-violence in the strict and stringent sense like Jainism does. In certain cases, *himsa* is unavoidable, e.g., in the process of eating, drinking, walking, breathing, etc. According to Gandhi, it is almost impossible to sustain one's body without injuring other bodies to some extent. *Gandhi openly recommends killing under certain circumstances.*

If religion is best explained and elucidated by Gandhi through his life-long untiring endeavor of truth-force which he also characterizes as soul force. It is this spirit of non-violence which brings about endless revolution both within and outside humanity. The divinity of man is undeniable makes him more devotional to the inner spirit of religion than mere fanaticism and fundamentalism in the name of religion which, in reality, is irreligion. Gandhi identifies religion with Truth which is God and where there is God there is no violence or *himsa*. The existence or presence of God ensures the existence of non-violence. This is how Gandhi sticks to the spirit of non-violence. He, however, makes an added endeavor to beautify non-violence with life. According to Gandhi, it does not only act as an agent of religion but permeates the soul within from every possible point of view of dedication. He makes a prominent point of departure in practicing non-violence as a practical force of religion. Religion is released from orthodoxy and merges in a radical approach to bring about desirable changes in human behavior. Non-violence has indeed an inherent moral and religious force which enkindles man to merge in divine love and respect for mankind. It is a path through which man identifies and adores man as an embodiment of God. It is called *Naranarayana* and such embodiment is made possible through the synchronization between non-violence and religion.

According to Gandhi, God as the beholder of religion is not residing in the clouds; rather God is unseen power residing within us and nearer to us than finger-nails to the flesh. Many powers are lying hidden within us and we discover them by constant struggle. One such power is the way of non-violence. It is necessary because it helps us to reveal God in every one of us. Therefore, we have to identify ourselves with every human being without exception. In popular language, it is called love. It binds us to one another and to God. Non-violence is love; they are the same thing. If we love one, we cannot violent them. Love and violence are contrary to each other. They cannot coexist in the real sense of the term. According to Gandhi, non-violence as an intrinsic force of religion is to awaken the true spirit of consciousness in everyone. The true spirit of consciousness elevates both the inflictor of violence and the inflicted by eliminating the wrath of violence. Instead, it emulates the spirit of love and peace which are the practical aspects of religion. Such a form of non-violence adorns peace everywhere. Gandhi says, "Non-violence is not an easy thing to understand, still less to practice, weak as we are. We must all act prayerfully and humbly and continually, asking God to open the eyes of our understanding being ever ready to act according to the light as we daily receive it. My task as a lover and promoter of peace, therefore, today consists of unflinching devotion to non-violence in the prosecution of the campaign for regarding our liberty. And if India succeeds in so regarding it, it will be the greatest contribution to the world peace."ⁱⁱⁱ

It thus seems to us that unlike other thinkers, Gandhi devotes himself wholeheartedly to non-violence as the indivisible part of Truth which he identifies as God. At the same breadth, he practices non-violence as an inseparable part of religion to bring home to this fact that mankind knows how to idealize or destroy the very concept of God. Gandhi also follows the principle of non-violence as a great religious force because it enables everyone to unfold the invaluable divinity in him in the best possible way. Gandhi attempts to entwine religion non-violence as a means to religion or Truth, as he thinks that non-violence implies complete purification that is needed for religion. Non-violence is without exception superior to violence. A non-violent person is always greater than he would have if he was violent. There is no such thing as defeat in non-violence. But the end of violence is the surest defeat. Alternatively, it can be said that the ultimate end of non-violence is the surest victory and in a reality where there is no sense of defeat, there is no sense of victory.

NON-VIOLENCE IS THE STRUGGLE FORCE OF RELIGION

Gandhi conceives non-violence as the struggle force of religion. The very nature of man is to engage with violence. It is said to be the struggle for existence. According to Satre, human life is a series of struggles. It is the struggle for existence. Where there is struggle there is violence. Therefore it is quite natural to assume that to be a religious person in proper, one has to overcome the struggle for existence. The struggle for existence ensures the freedom of will of the individual. One has to rationalize his freedom. As an individual he is free, but at the same time, he should be responsible as well. Freedom and responsibility are entwined with each other. Without responsibility, there is no value of freedom. Thus if we are morally committed, morally responsible people, then surely we can overcome violence and reveal the fruit of non-violence. It is a process of becoming, a process of enlightenment through which the individual self gradually expanded and widen and eventually be transformed into a greater self. Gandhi considers non-violence as a strategic force of religion that stimulates and guides human activities and human consciousness. According to Gandhi, non-violence essentially acts as a savior in the form of self-purification to remove the innumerable blemishes of human character. It safeguards the self from the violence that negates control of passion and possibilities or eradicating shortcomings of human sensibilities. Complete non-violence leads to the enlightenment of the finer visions of religion that indicates one's victory over self-exploitation and as such one's maintenance and exercise of one's soul in purity and perfection. Therefore, the primary condition of the practice of non-violence is to nourish and accelerate a living faith in recognition and respect of the eternal soul. In this regard, Gandhi says, " We have to make truth and non-violence, no matter for mere individual practice but practiced by groups and communities and nations. ...My faith helps me to discover new truth every day. *Ahimsa* is the attribute of the soul, and therefore, to be practiced by everybody in all the affairs of life. If it cannot be practiced in all departments, it has no practical value."^{iv} Elsewhere, Gandhi considers non-violence as 'recognition of the existence of the soul as apart from the body. This recognition must amount to a living faith and not a mere intellectual grasp.'^v

NON-VIOLENCE AND SATYAGRAHA

Gandhi also brings the concept of Satyagraha while narrating his idea of religion. According to him, the religious idea of renunciation as outlined in non-violence in the form of Satyagraha applies as a strategic force of life has its foundation on the Indian philosophy of goodness, reverence, love, and truth. Renunciation, the highest form of religion as he strongly advocates is the greatest lesson of non-violence and it brings reconciliation between the oppressor and the oppressed. Religion makes inroads to inner awakening in the right spirit of

non-violence. Gandhi further inclines to say that non-violence is an antidote to cowardice that brings penury and suffering to humanity. Cowardice is averse to true religion that promotes poignance and enrichment of the soul. The force of active non-violence teaches the concept of religion as a soul force. Gandhi equates non-violence as a Truth force and believes that the cosmic forces are working through him in the form of non-violence. He then upholds religion as a practical force of the ascent of man. However, Gandhi frankly admits human limitations in practicing complete non-violence as guided by or as a true representative of the religion. He equally admits Swaraj as a means of non-violence being ably guided by religion. According to Gandhi, the way to complete non-violence is the only way to visualize the presence of God within everyone because it is the 'blessed and indescribable sinless state'. Gandhi's conception of non-violence impels him always to dissociate himself from almost every one of the activities he engaged in. According to Gandhi non-violence is a religious component of love and charity, the inner feeling of the mind. The positive concept of non-violence contains the great virtues of compassion for living beings, friendliness, and compassion. Bearing in mind that life is precious and everyone must cultivate the spirit of awe and reverence towards the inherent divinity in right earnest, Gandhi upholds non-violence as a great religious force for the regeneration of mankind. He even goes a step further in encountering the consequences of non-violence whatsoever because his deep and inseparable faith in the fusion of religion and non-violence does not allow futility as the endpoint of his endeavor. Thus his philosophy of non-violence is the philosophy of religion that teaches to honor the inherent divinity in every case. For Gandhi, man and his deed are two distinct things. Therefore, 'to slight a single human being is to slight those divine powers, and thus to harm not only that being but with him the whole world.'^{vi}

Thus Gandhi conceives that to stick to the principle of non-violence is to stick to the principle of religion. It is the religion of the beyonding of 'the greatest good of the greatest number'. It is the concept of goodness that enriches the human endeavor for inward excellence. It goes beyond the purview of utilitarianism and takes shelter in a deontological approach where everyone is ready for the greatest sacrifice. According to Gandhi, the votary of non-violence cannot subscribe to the utilitarian formula 'greatest good of the greatest number'. Gandhi strives for the greatest good of all and dies in the attempt to realize the ideal. He will therefore be willing to die, so that the others may live. He will serve himself with the rest, by himself dying. According to Gandhi, the greatest good of all inevitably includes the good of the greatest number. The utilitarian will never sacrifice himself. The absolutist will even sacrifice himself.^{vii} Gandhi always upholds that the religious concept of *tejas* (force) is an absolute ingredient in the fundamental concept of non-violence. Truth-force or soul-force truly explains his approach to non-violence. True non-violence always maintains this inward force to sustain and manifest even under trying circumstances. In this regard, Gandhi acknowledges his indebtedness to the Western and the Eastern religious principles of non-violence. Here he strives to follow the intrinsic religious value of non-violence as a progressive force for the reawakening of consciousness. He thus reveals the essence of religion in non-violence as a means to an end in itself. Thus we can say after Gandhi that in incorporating religion as a strategic principle of non-violence. He makes a fusion between non-violence and religion which turns out to be *summum bonum* of humanity. He sticks to religion in the principle and practice of non-violence because he makes no difference between Truth and non-violence which essentially stands for God.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

Gandhi's understanding of truth is metaphysical as he reveals the truth at par with God. In this way, he identified *Truth, God, and Religion as the same*. Again his idea of non-violence is crystallized in the vision of God that allows one to be a strict follower of Truth, *Goodness, and Beauty* that represent every religion. Here Gandhi advocates for that crystallized non-violence which allows efflorescence of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness in oneself as well as in others. The outcome of non-violence is self-esteem and self-discipline. This is the gift of non-violence. The importance of the ideals of non-violence through religion that paves avenues of self-control and self-discipline. Thus it seems to us that Gandhi characteristically analyses the viewpoint of self-discipline as one of the fundamental strategies of non-violence nursed in true religion. We think that Gandhi introduces non-violence to actualize love in action. It is so to speak is the actualization of divinity in the practice of purity and poignance and this is nothing but religion. It incorporates all the inner sensibilities of man that heighten humanity through self-control and self-discipline. Moreover, this is altogether new because religion rightly merges in non-violence for which Gandhi devoted him endlessly. Thus in a sense non-violence makes a newer adventure in the transcendence of man. It is an endless experiment on the undefinable whole which indeed is the goal of religion. According to Gandhi, it makes a new adventure into the formless core of life where science in the ordinary sense remains inactive. Non-violence then is an adoring partner to one's perfection in life by dint of making a continual endeavor in the pursuit of sage-knowledge in practice.

The question then is of course why does Gandhi give importance to the pursuit of sage-knowledge to maintain the religion of non-violence? Why does he want to give a reply to violence by non-violence? He answers that the religion of non-violence is the religion of forgiveness. It is more powerful than physical force. It is more effective in winning over the hearts of the enemies that replacing love. As a practical religion of man, non-violence uses forgiveness as one of the objectives of manifestation of the inner spirit of mankind. It is the spirit of excellence of mankind in the purity of thought and action. Thus, the religion of non-violence embraces one and all. The religion of non-violence is not meant merely for the rishis and saints. Rather it is meant for the common people. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law, to the strength of the spirit. Gandhi also realizes that non-violence is the life-blood of religion. It is the ingrained quality of consciousness that christens man in the faith of the law of the God of love. In this sense, the practice of non-violence is an indivisible form of religion. The essence of non-violence is indeed the essence of religion. Non-violence, Gandhi opines, affords the fullest protection to one's self-respect and sense of honor. Non-violence is a power which can be wielded equally by all, it is supposed to be the equal love for all mankind. When non-violence is accepted as the law of life it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts. Thus, we can conclude by saying that Gandhi sees the essence of religion in non-violence because the religion of non-violence is the religion of the true worth of mankind. The theory and practice of the true vision of man are inherent in the true vision of religion. Thus, religion cannot be isolated from non-violence just as religion is not isolated from man. Thus, the trio of religion, non-violence, and mankind ushers forth a new chapter of human civilization.

ⁱ Bose, N. K., *Selections from Gandhi*, p.13.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p.14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Prabhu, R. K., and U. R. Rao, *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, Oxford University Press, London, 1945, p.58.

^{iv} Gandhi, M. *Harijan*, March 2, 1920.

^v Gandhi, M., *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, G. A. Natesan &Co, Madras, 1934, p.168.

^{vi} Gandhi, M., *An Autobiography*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1948, p.615.

^{vii} Gandhi, M., *Young India*, December 9, 1926.