

Gandhi's Religion: A Few Thoughts

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More so than any other major political figure of modern times, Mohandas Gandhi was a man of religion – though perhaps not in the most ordinary sense of the term. No political figure of the last few hundred years brought religion, or more properly the religious sensibility, into the public domain as much as Gandhi. He concluded his autobiography, first published in 1927, with the observation that those who sought to disassociate politics and religion understood the meaning of neither politics nor religion. Indeed, the most pointed inference we can draw from Gandhi's life is the following: the only way to be religious at this juncture of human history is to engage in the political life, not politics in the debased sense of party affiliations, or the politics that one associates with being conservative or liberal, but politics in the sense of political awareness. After Gandhi, we must clearly understand, as did Arnold Toynbee and George Orwell, that the saint's religiosity can only be tested in the slums of life. And, yet, the criticism that Gandhi introduced religion into politics has persisted, displaying a tenacity that is oblivious to Gandhi's definition of religion. Replying to one of his critics in 1920, Gandhi wrote: "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 leaves the soul restless until it has found itself."ⁱ

In relation to the question of religion, Gandhi's life presents itself to us as a series of paradoxes. Let me offer a number of illustrations. He described himself as a devotee of Ram, and venerated the Ramacaritmanas of Tulsidas, but he unequivocally rejected passages in Tulsidas that he found offensive or degrading to women and the lower castes. Though he viewed himself as much of a Hindu as anyone else, Gandhi seldom visited temples and, it is safe to say, did not generally view worship in temples as intrinsic to Hinduism. One can, of course, find passages in his voluminous writings which are contrary to what I am suggesting. "Some form of common worship, and a common place of worship", he wrote in the early 1920s, "appear to be a human necessity."ⁱⁱ Much stronger is this passage, from an article he wrote in the early 1930s: "Just as human beings cannot think of the atman without the body, similarly they cannot think of religion without temples. The Hindu religion cannot survive without temples."ⁱⁱⁱ However, in the same article, he wrote in a rather matter-of-fact

tone: “I feel no need to go to temples; hence I do not visit them.”^{iv} But it is clear that Gandhi did not, as a consequence, place himself as above the masses, for he commenced the same article with the observation that “I do not consider it a mark of greatness that I do not visit temples.” Moreover, for someone who seldom experienced any need to go to a temple, Gandhi was an extraordinarily strong advocate of the right of others to worship at temples as his debate with Ambedkar over the issue of temple-entry by Dalits amply demonstrates. The same kind of paradox can be found in Gandhi’s views on caste. On more than one occasion Gandhi described himself as a believer in sanatan dharma, or the idea of Hinduism as an eternal faith, and he similarly often declared his belief in the institution of varnashrama, or the idea that a well-regulated society is to be understood as a collection of varnas or classes, each of which performs the duty for which it is best fitted. These views appear to place Gandhi firmly in the orthodox Hindu camp. Yet the indubitable fact remains that few public figures of his time in India endeavored as much as Gandhi did to lessen the impact of caste in Indian life and to erode the disabilities under which lower castes had labored for tens of generations. Gandhi made it known openly that the system of Untouchability, which condemned, and still condemns, millions of Hindus to a life of degradation, humiliation, exploitation, indeed servitude, was a blot of immense proportions on Hinduism and shamed every Hindu.

If space permitted, I would unravel these paradoxes; but, for the present, I shall suggest how everyone, particularly those aspiring to positions of leadership in Indian society, can learn from Gandhi’s religiosity and his practice of religion. In all religions one is witnessing a tendency to turn towards excessively literal and narrow readings of scriptural works. An exchange Gandhi had in 1925 with a prominent Muslim clergyman in the Punjab, in northwestern India, offers an entry point into this discussion. On February 26th of that year, Gandhi had written an article in his newspaper, *Young India*, where he had written of some stoning incidents at Kabul that “this particular form of penalty cannot be defended on the mere ground of its mention in the Koran.” Remarkably, for someone who was firmly of the view that modern education had greatly undervalued the heart, Gandhi also opined that “every formula of every religion has in this age of reason to submit to the acid test of reason and universal justice if it is to ask for universal assent.” Thereupon Maulana Zafar Ali Khan, while expressing his great admiration for Gandhi, wrote to him that “to hold that even if the Koran supported such form of penalty, it should be condemned outright as an

error, is a form of reasoning which cannot appeal to the Mussalmans [Muslims].” Writing again in *Young India* on 5 March 1925, Gandhi did not hesitate to declare that “even the teachings themselves of the Koran cannot be exempt from criticism. Every true scripture only gains by criticism. After all we have no other guide but our reason to tell us what may be regarded as revealed and what may not be.” Similarly, when some Hindus quoted the *Manusmriti* in support of orthodoxy, and the rigid separation of the castes, Gandhi unhesitatingly described a number of the verses as “apocryphal” and “meaningless”.^v Gandhi furnished a litmus test: if something in the scripture is contrary to one’s conscience, one must listen to one’s conscience rather than defer to scripture.

Secondly, Gandhi embraced the view that a true understanding and practice of one’s own religion requires an understanding of other faiths. At his daily evening prayer meetings, conducted not in temples but under the open sky, passages were read from the Koran, the New Testament, the Gita, the Upanishads, and even from modern Christian literature, such as Cardinal Newman’s “Lead, Kindly Light”. One would be perfectly justified in viewing this as a form of ecumenism, as an illustration of Gandhi’s tolerance and liberal mindedness, but Gandhi also engaged in such religious practice because he understood it to be the best way of being a better Hindu. Addressing a gathering of Buddhists in 1925 on the occasion of Buddha’s birth anniversary, Gandhi recalled that the Jains had often mistaken him for a Jain, the Christians for a Christian, and his Muslim friends for a Muslim. But, crucially, none of them had come to the recognition that his veneration for other faiths made him more, not less, of a Hindu.

Thirdly, as a corollary, Gandhi came to embrace a very particular position on the vexed question of conversion, a position that his won him few friends but which I believe to be the most humane and reasonable view that one can possibly hold. As someone who believed unequivocally in the right to freedom of religious expression and worship, Gandhi also supported one’s unimpeachable right to convert to another faith. Some of Gandhi’s contemporary Hindutva critics, who deplore his supposed appeasement of Muslims but applaud his courage in resisting Christian missionaries, have attempted to depict Gandhi as a firm foe of conversion. In an article he published on 23 April 1931, he stated that his position had been misrepresented, and he went on to affirm: “I am, then, not against conversion. But I am against the modern methods of it. Conversion nowadays has become a matter of business, like any other.”^{vi} In an interview he had in 1929 with the Rev. John

Mott, he took what appears to be a contrary position. “I disbelieve in the conversion of one person by another.” When, however, Gandhi was asked, “Will you under swaraj allow Christians to go on with their proselytizing activity without any hindrance?”, he replied: “No legal hindrance can be put in the way of any Christian or of anybody preaching for the acceptance of his doctrine.” Predictably, Gandhi then complicates his own argument with an observation that takes us to heart of his position: “My effort should never be to undermine another’s faith but to make him [or her] a better follower of his [or her] own faith.”^{vii} Gandhi’s philosophical opposition to conversion arose from the conviction that conversion presumes, at least on the part of those who proselytize, a hierarchy of faiths, just as it presumes, on the part of those who are candidates for conversion, an inadequate comprehension of the spiritual resources of their own faith. In sum, his views on conversion, and on religious practice, are best encapsulated in his idea of what constitutes the “fundamental truth of fellowship”: “So, we can only pray, if we are not Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu; or if we are Mussalmans, not that a Hindu, or a Christian should become a Mussalman; nor should we even secretly pray that anyone should be converted; but our inmost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, and a Christian a better Christian.”^{viii} Gandhi’s extraordinarily tempered, humane, and yet restrained view of conversion seems so promising an antidote to the blood that has been spilled in India in recent years on the question of conversion.

Last but not least, there is the consideration whether by religion Gandhi at all meant what we ordinarily understand to be religion. I have said that Gandhi was preeminently a man of religion, and religion seems so inextricably intertwined with every aspect of his life that without religion Gandhi’s life seems utterly inexplicable. Writing nearly towards the end of his life, on 21 July 1946, Gandhi affirmed that “man without religion is man without roots.”^{ix} However, in this matter as in all others, Gandhi gives no comfort to those who wish to see the world in black and white terms and who are unable to live with ambiguity. Gandhi even thought it possible to be a Hindu and not believe in God at all. A more complex view of this question can be entertained by the consideration that, in authoring the idea of satyagraha or nonviolent resistance, in tendering resistance not by physical force but rather through the force of truth, Gandhi had effected a fundamental transformation in his worldview. His own autobiography supplies the only guidance we need on this point: as he says, though his religious awareness commenced with the formulation, commonly

encountered in every religion, that ‘God is Truth’, he eventually came to the realization that ‘Truth is God’. There are many who cannot be persuaded about the existence of God; there are others who outright deny the existence of God. But is there anyone who can deny the existence of truth? Responding to a student’s query in 1928, Gandhi averred: “To me religion means truth and ahimsa [nonviolence] or rather truth alone, because truth includes ahimsa, ahimsa being the necessary and indispensable means for its recovery.”^x And, so, with this concluding thought, I return to the formulation with which I began, namely that nothing is more extraordinarily novel in Gandhi’s idea of religion than his unshakeable conviction that it is no longer possible to divorce religion from politics.

ⁱ *Young India*, 12 May 1920.

ⁱⁱ M. K. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 100 vols. (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 1960-), Vol. 28, p. 432 (hereafter abbreviated as CWMG). Also available online at www.gandhiserve.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ CWMG 54:128.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 127.

^v CWMG 14:73-77.

^{vi} *Young India*, 23 April 1931.

^{vii} Interview with Dr John Mott, *Young India*, 21 March 1929.

^{viii} Cited by Arvind Sharma, *Hinduism for Our Times* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1996), p. 3.

^{ix} “Question Box”, *Harijan*, 21 July 1946.

^x “Religious Education”, *Young India*, 6 December 1928.