

# Trans-Religious Spirituality of Gandhi

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**Abstract:** After tracing the life-style and history of Gandhi, the author shows that Gandhi's spirituality is all-comprehensive, resulting not only in personal peace but also societal and even the environmental peace. Often people belittle the significance of Gandhi's use of a non-violent revolution to achieve political liberation. The author believes that the problem of bringing peace to the world on a *super-national basis* will be solved only by employing Gandhi's method on a large scale. His work on behalf of India's Liberation is living testimony to the fact that man's will, sustained by indomitable conviction, is more powerful than material force that seems insurmountable.

**Keywords:** Truth, search, religions, peace, God, Gandhi.

## Introduction

There is in us the bodily component which we are able to see, touch, smell etc. We are also conscious of an invisible, intangible and immaterial principle which we call Spirit or Self. Thus it is obvious that there are two main principles operating in our life.

It is also clear to most of us that our life, in order to be noble and worth-living, we need to discipline the corporeal and material aspects of our self and control the bodily instincts and sensuous pleasures and make the body subservient to the spirit.

It has been customary to extend these two principles of 'body' and 'spirit' to the cosmic level too. Corresponding to the bodily principle in us, Matter has been postulated as a cosmic datum. Similarly, in correspondence to the spiritual dimension in us, the principle of the Spirit has been postulated as the Ultimate. As regards the postulation of the principle called Matter, people have

not found much problem, because it is visible, tangible and it is experimented upon. However, as regards Spirit, there has been a variety of opinions expressed. There are some people who conceive the Ultimate Spirit as a personal being, while there are others who see it only as an impersonal principle. Even among those who speak of a personal God, there is a wide spectrum of opinions. Some see that personal being as a male principle, others as a female principle, still others see both male and female principles in that being. Some would see God as one, others as triune God. Some would visualise God as a Father, others would see God as a strict Judge. Still others would see Him as simply a Governor or Co-ordinator. Maybe as a reaction to the scandalous diversity, there are some who shun themselves from accepting God, although they would not subscribe to a materialist worldview.

### **0.1. The Problem**

Depending upon the diversity of the conceptions of the Ultimate, there have evolved a variety of doctrinal systems to explain and justify their own conceptions. This in turn has created a diversity of life-style involving moral code and ritual practice. Thus there have evolved different religions too, often with conflicting truth-claims. Conflicts in truth-claims have often led to wars, confrontations and conquests, which is scandalous to many young minds, making them thereby disbelieve in religion and the principle of the spirit itself.

In this context of puzzling pluralism there arises a question of great relevance: Is there not a view-point that explains the diversity of religions and upholds the unity of spirituality? Is there not one view that transcends the diverse conceptions of the Spirit and yet is applicable to all of them, while at the same time emphasizing the noble way of life giving all importance to the Spirit, yet giving due importance to the body as well?

## **0.2. The Contention of the paper**

It is my contention that Gandhi's conception of Truth will provide us with a common framework, interweaving the different religious conceptions of the Spirit and validating the variety of their truth-claims. Gandhi's formulation of spirituality is such that it transcends the wide variety of views and yet comprehends them all in their essence. It goes beyond all the diverse systems of religious dogmas and practices and yet goes deeper into each one's religious faith. It is this that I call the Trans-religious spirituality of Gandhi.

To comprehend Gandhi's formulation of Trans-religious spirituality, it is necessary to understand Gandhi's spiritual journey which consists of a search for a persistent striving after Truth. So in Part I, an effort is made to outline briefly Gandhi's life as a search for Truth. Part II proceeds to present in a nut-shell the important conclusions of his life-search so as to project the vital aspects of Gandhi's conception of Truth. Part III draws out the implications of those conclusions so as to explain the trans-religious understanding of spirituality.

### **Part I. Life-Journey of Gandhi: A Search for Truth**

- 1.1. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the most ordinary man in his early period of life. The boy Gandhi was intellectually not bright. Psychologically he was indeed a weakling. He was not able to see in a dark room. Morally he succumbed to all sorts of vices of a teenager (stealing, lying, smoking, meat-eating in violation of the family customs, even happened to visit a brothel).
- 1.2. The one extra-ordinary quality of the man was his commitment to truth-telling. On seeing the street-play of Harishchandra, the boy was prone to ask a question within him: "Why should not all be truthful like Harishchandra?" As for himself, he resolved to play the role of Harishchandra always in life. Thus the boy set to himself the one ideal of following the way of truth and to go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through.

1.3. The boy's resolute approach to a truthful life taught him the value of Ahimsa too. The first episode after his resolve was the kettle incident. When the Inspector was giving a dictation to the whole class, Mohandas did not spell the simple word 'kettle' correctly. Although his teacher persuaded the boy to copy the correct spelling from his neighbour, the boy did not follow the persuasion of the teacher, because it was against truth. Gandhi's firm resolve to follow truth gave him the courage to make a confession of his vices to his father. He recalled his sins, wrote them on a chit of paper. In it, he pleaded guilty and was ready for an adequate punishment. Besides, he pledged never to steal again. But the sublime response of the father was a surprise to Gandhi: even as he read it through, pearl-drops trickled down his cheek and wetted the paper. For a moment he closed his eyes in thought and then tore up the chit, forgiving the boy completely. This was an object-lesson for Truth and Ahimsa. It was not merely a father's love for the boy but also an act of pure Ahimsa that transforms those it touches.

#### **1.4. Acquaintance with many religions**

Though belonging to Vaishnavite family, the parents of the boy used to visit a Shiva Temple. Jain monks used to visit his house frequently. Muslim and Parsi friends used to discuss religious matters with his father. Nursing his father as he was the boy was often present during those conversations. Thus he was acquainted with other religions already during his boyhood. Thanks to Theosophists' friendship in London, Mohandas was stimulated to read the Gita in original. Thus he came to know his own religion more deeply. He also came into contact with good Christians there and read the Bible fully. Moreover he became acquainted with the basics of Islam too.

#### **1.5. Deeper questions about Religions**

In South Africa, Gandhi's faith was challenged by some of his Christian friends. He was almost at the point of conversion.

Also deeply influenced by good Muslims, he was pondering whether he should be converted to Islam. This led him to study Islam too. However it was with regard to the Christians' claim that the spiritual seeker, Gandhi, was very much perturbed. Some of the deeper questions that he raised were:

“Was Jesus the only Son of God?”

“Do the lives of Christians give anything that the lives of other faiths had failed to give?”

From the point of view of sacrifice, do not Hindus greatly surpass the Christians?

At the same time, Gandhi was humble enough to understand and acknowledge the limitations of his own faith. He openly said: “If Christianity did not seem a perfect or the greatest religion, nor did Hinduism show itself such”. The defects of Hinduism, particularly untouchability, were pressingly visible to him.

Thus, encountered by the truth-claims as well as the shortcomings of the diverse religions, Gandhi began to worry himself with a more fundamental question: “Which religion was true?”

## **1.6. A painstaking effort to solve the fundamental question**

Gandhi's search was not merely a theoretical search. Religious truth is not a theoretical or abstract truth. It is a life-affecting truth. Unless it transforms one's life, it is not really a truth for that person. Hence, he sought help from a 'living witness' of the Hindu religion. Ramabai, a merchant from his native town, led Gandhi to a deeper study of different religions, including his own. In all his efforts to study religions, he concentrated upon putting the precepts into practice, a prayerful search: waiting silently upon God, seeking his guidance in choosing the true religion.

## **1.7. More than personal search**

Gandhi's search was not simply personal. Rather, it involved him into concrete struggles of liberation of suffering people.

Steeped in colour prejudices, the colonizers of South Africa subjected the Indian indentured labourers to many kinds of humiliations and discriminative legislation. Finding that the Indian community there mainly consisted of the poor and the illiterate, and that they had no leader to safeguard their rights, Gandhi plunged himself into politics in order to liberate them from the unjust treatment.

To the whole of his liberation-struggle, Gandhi applied the twin principles of Truth and Non-violence. First, he offered a truthful resistance, what he called *Satyagraha*. By obeying the unjust and immoral laws of the Whites, the Indian people over there could not maintain the 'truth' of their being human. Hence it was a requirement of their being truthful to themselves, to disobey the unjust laws and resist them. At the same time he applied the principle of conquering evil by love, by voluntarily suffering the consequences such as courting imprisonment and other kinds of suffering without retaliation, not even entertaining mental hatred or anger against the evildoer. This was a sort of moral appeal to the oppressor regarding the genuineness of the grievances of the oppressed and righteousness of their cause, thereby enkindling the 'divine spark' or the inner goodness of the oppressors and moving them to rectify the wrongs. The non-violent struggle was indeed a great success. After a prolonged struggle of 21 years, Gandhi was successful in getting the discriminative laws repealed in South Africa.

### **1.8. The secret of success was what he called a "life of truth."**

This implies a life of purity, which in their struggling context of liberation involved firmness in the cause of justice and readiness to sacrifice anything for its sake. Personally, Gandhi had to snip all family ties, observing the vow of brahmacharya. Further he took to a life of simplicity in dress and diet. He practised self-restraint through fasting, and prayer. He spent hours in *Namajapa*, and *bhajan*-singing.

Moreover, he felt that the success of the struggle required the personal transformation of not only the leader but of all his co-workers and even the rank and file followers who had been mobilized into the movement. For this purpose, Gandhi founded an *Ashram*. It was indeed an interreligious family with a common kitchen, common ownership, run by the labour of each one according to his/her capacity. The success of such an experiment at interreligious community-living was made possible greatly due to his trans-religious approach to life, succinctly put into two words: truth and non-violence, and trans-religious worship and practice.

### **1.9. On his return to India Mahatma Gandhi was accompanied by the collaborators of the Satyagraha movement in South Africa.**

He also wanted to test the applicability of the same Truth-based Non-violent method to India's situation of political liberation. Hence he founded the Satyagraha Ashram at Sabarmathi in 1915, which he shifted to Wardha in 1917. Invited by the peasants of Champaran and the industrial labourers at Ahmedabad, Gandhi applied his trans-religious method of truth and love successfully to the liberation of agriculturists and industrial labourers respectively. The success he got in these local Satyagrahas at Champaran and Ahmedabad emboldened him to employ the same method on the national level too. Even as he was travelling all over the country to study the specificity of the Indian situation, Gandhi decided to launch the *Constructive Programmes* on a concrete 18-point Programme of action, only as a true and non-violent means of *Purna Swaraj*- complete freedom.

Finally, as he launched a nation-wide agitation against political slavery, or a social problem like untouchability or economic disability etc., he did it all merely as a part of his search for God an attempt to see God face to face, to obtain *Moksha*, and attain his Realization of Self. However, he re-interpreted his search for God in a trans-religious way, as search for Truth. In the process, Gandhi had to also re-interpret the traditional concept of religion. And,

as a result of his search, he reformulated religious conception of God in a transreligious way. It is important to bear in mind the reformulations Gandhi gave (a) about religions, (b) about God and (c) his own formulation of Truth. This we will see in a separate section.

## **Part II. The out-come of Gandhi's Search**

As mentioned above, Gandhiji's spiritual search yielded three specific contributions to our understanding of trans-religious spirituality. They are in the following areas:

### **2.1. Religions**

1. "Religion" means primarily "Truth", "Truth of Living"-involving a life of morality and striving constantly after self-purification. Indeed a religion is born out of a Life of Attainment or Realised person and is meant to evoke attainment in ordinary people.
2. All great religions are true, because the "fact of saints" in all great religions testify to the validity of all religions.
3. All religions are basically one, in this, that all inculcate morality and self-purification. They all serve a fundamental need of society.
4. There is no one religion which is all true nor is there any religion that is all false. In each, are found both the best as well as the worst; 'peaks of morality' 'heights of attainment' as well as utter degenerations and imperfection.
5. There is no question of relative superiority/inferiority between religions.
6. Believers in every religion should attest to the truths of their religion by living them rather than by disputations and apologetics because truths of Religions are primarily truths of life.



7. Though no religions are equal to one another, yet, all religions are equally true, because every religion is valid to its own followers. Every religion is capable of becoming more and more perfect by its followers' life. And every religion has the obligation to go from imperfection to perfection, from less truth to greater truth.

## 2.2. God

1. Of all the predicates attributed to God by religions, Gandhi considered to state that "God is true," is the best. All other attributes can imply ambiguous meaning. Even the most commonly accepted description of God as Love can lead to ambiguous understanding. Whereas the term 'love can mean many things to many people, Truth (*Sat*) meaning, 'To be' can never lead to any ambiguity. Again Truth, as *Sat*, Being, not 'Becoming' means that "Only God is; nothing else is". Further, God does not exist outside us; He is in every one of us; (unitive existence) "If I exist, God exists", God's existence is unitive not only of humanity but also of Nature. All comprehensive; so, "God is Truth".
2. However, later his search widened through his contact with sincere non-believers, Gandhi accepted it as more valid to say, "Truth is God" rather than "God is truth". For, in any statement, subject is the key term that you know about which the predicate states something you do not know. Now, about God, nobody claim to "know" concretely, while all know about truth of life. Even the atheists who reject God cannot reject Truth. For Truth in its primary meaning of 'sat' cannot be rejected by anybody. Again, the term 'God' may imply a religious belief in a particular religion, but really the reality of God may be denied by that belief or by the untruthful life of the believers. But the "Truth of living" affirms the reality of God in a very real sense, even by the so-called atheists.

## 2.3. Truth

Ordinarily by truth we mean ‘truth-telling’ (correspondence between what is uttered and what is really the case). This is “truth in words”. However, for Gandhi truth means more than this. It also means “truth in thought” and “truth in action”. “Truth in thought” according to Gandhi means that our ideas reflect reality as it is and that we do not allow our bias and prejudice to overtake them or even influence them. “Truth in action” means that I always act in conformity with what I think and what I say. Thus truth according to Gandhi means “truth of living” implying not only consistence and/or of my thoughts with reality, but also a consistency of my words with the reality of thoughts, words and actions.

It is perhaps impossible for us in this world to achieve a perfect harmony or consistency of this type. Imperfect as we are by nature, it is not possible for us to realize a perfect consistency here on earth. Moreover, given the wide variety of people and their subjective conditions, individual perception of Truth is bound to be different. Varied as it is thus, it is not possible to establish a common mean to gauge the ‘perfectness’ of the consistency among people. Here, Gandhi introduces a distinction between Relative Truth and Absolute Truth. *Absolute Truth* is the perfect consistency between thought, word and action. This is the Ideal of Perfection, Truth in fullness, cut apart from all imperfect conditions. That is what is identified as “God”. *Relative Truth* is the truth that is concretely found in relation to the subjective conditions, the geographic, historical and cultural factors of human beings.

## Part III. Implications

1. Acceptance of Relative Truth by Gandhi does not mean relativism as a norm of life. It only means acceptance of a variety of perceptions of the Absolute Truth as a fact of life. By Relative Truth, Gandhi never meant that “anything is all right for anybody”. On the contrary, he insisted that we must always be open to guidance by the “Inner Voice” and further

clarifications from the “Light Above,” that is, enlightening people from within. So, we must be ready to correct our position every moment that we go on getting new light. Thus, Gandhi set the Absolute Truth as the ideal, towards which every Relative Truth must approach closer and closer. Absolute Truth serves the function of Euclid’s point in Geometry. We must always try to go nearer to the Ideal.

2. This effort to reach the ideal of Absolute Truth is precisely what Gandhi calls the religious pursuit. “To be religious” does not mean merely holding a belief or professing a doctrine or observing a ritual but really translating the belief/doctrine or ritual into life and thereby transforming the imperfect life into Perfection, transitory life into Transcendence.
3. In this sense, then, ‘Religion’ is conceivable as a non-denominational, and a non-sectarian factor, as a universal principle of uplifting the imperfect human condition of living into Self-Realization and Self-Attainment. While any human condition is necessarily ambivalent, having the characteristics of both an ape and an angel, the animal instincts and a divine spark, a truly religious pursuit consists in uplifting it and transforming it into a state of Perfection and Transcendence. This essence of religions is identified by Gandhi as ‘Religion’ and is equated with the Truth Absolute, understood as God. So, Religion, Truth and God are all one and the same, which is interchangingly used by Gandhi.
4. All religions of the world are particulars of the Universal called ‘Religion’ or ‘Truth’. They are all attempts by a community of people to strive after perfection in their own way and according to their own context, climes, and cultures. All these religions have not only made demands on their followers to become perfect, but also they have actually helped their followers to realize the “divinity within” by prescribing various dos and don’ts (*yamas* and *niyamas*), enabling them to pursue the goals of human life (*purushartas*) in a disciplined

way and thus providing them with concrete ways of realizing the Absolute Truth already here and now.

5. The objective criterion for testing whether these religions have actually been beneficial to humankind for attaining the truth of living, is “the fact of saints”. Therefore, in a religion there are people who have concretely worked out a way of living, such that a perfect consistency is established in their thought, word and action on the one hand and between their thought and word with reality on the other. If a religion has produced these heights of human life through its own means and within its boundary, then it is a valid expression of the Absolute Truth and a real means to approximate our Relative Truth with the Absolute Truth.
6. The fact of saints does not happen in a vacuum. Any saintly life emerges only in a life-context which is invariably varied. It depends upon subjective conditions like taste, temperament and training, mental capacity for sophistication and upon the differences in geographic and climatic conditions as well as historical, cultural and political backgrounds. So, plurality of religions is a necessity of human race and each great religion is a valid expression of the Absolute Truth in its own context.
7. Though every religion contains the Absolute Truth (as it is proved by the fact of saints) yet it is also mixed with imperfections. The imperfections are bound to arise from the very human instrumentality involved in receiving the Truth and also in explaining it to others, and further in interpreting it by the disciples, and still more by the commentaries given by the later intellectuals.
8. Effort must be made, therefore, in every religion to reduce the gap between the Absolute Truth and the Relative Truth by constantly referring to the ‘peaks of holiness’, ‘heights of spirituality’ within its own religious boundary, and re-capturing the original experience of the Founder or Seers or Saints, and re-applying it to the present day context.

This need of removing one's imperfections and moving towards perfection through a constant effort to *effulgate* the Absolute Truth more and more is, according to Gandhi, the essence of religion. This is indeed spirituality. And in fact, this may be taken to be the universal component of all the particular religions.

## Concluding Remarks

1. If we are justified in explicating the implications of Gandhi's concept of Truth, as the truth of living, then it is obvious
  - (i) that any process of spirituality should help the individual to realize the truth about one's self and be involved constantly in striving after it to protect self-respect.
  - (ii) that non-violence is the core of Gandhian spirituality. Practice of non-violence is not a matter of expediency or pragmatism but a corollary of the Gandhian concept of Truth. In other words, acceptance of Relative Truth implies that one cannot forcibly impose one's perception of truth on another.
2. If Gandhi is right in distinguishing between the Absolute Truth and the Relative Truth and in identifying spirituality as a process of approximating the Absolute Truth in our concrete, actual life, then it is obvious that Gandhi's definition of spirituality is so universal that it transcends every religious specification and yet is applicable to any model of spirituality couched by the diverse religions. In this way, then, Gandhi's conception of spirituality is the most suitable to interreligious dialogue and co-operation.
3. Protection of Self-respect (the divine dimension of humanity) implies recognition of the Self not only in oneself but also in others' self, including the oppressed and the exploited. Even in opposing the oppressor and resisting the injustice and exploitation wrought by the other, we must acknowledge the presence of divinity in him and hence our method must be such as to enkindle the dormant 'Divine Self' in the other rather than use brutal force and thereby stimulate bru-

ality in the other. Hence, Gandhi's spirituality emphasises the use of non-violent methods in any liberation struggle. In fact he says that non-violence is the law of the human race and is infinitely greater and superior to brute force, which is the law of the jungle. In this perspective, Gandhian spirituality is the most fruitful technique to achieve **Societal Justice**. Non-violence is a power which can be wielded equally by all – children, young men and women or grown-up people, provided that they have a living faith in the God of love.

4. Acceptance of non-violence as the law of life, implies also that it must pervade the whole being of the practitioner and not be applied to isolated acts. Moreover, it should be applied to life in its infinite forms. Nature as a whole exists as one organic unity. The human species is just a fragile part of it. The part should feel reverence for the whole, atonement (at-one-ment) with the whole. For the divine dimension is found not only in humanity but also in the whole of creation. Hence self-realization can be total only if the **protection of the environment** is also made part of one's pursuit of spirituality.
5. In one word then, Gandhi's spirituality is all-comprehensive, resulting not only in personal peace but also societal and even environmental peace. Often people belittle the significance of Gandhi's use of a non-violent revolution to achieve political liberation. It is even remarked that it is historically important but not universally applicable. However, if it is placed and perceived in the context of the all-comprehensive nature of Gandhian spirituality, then one will see the relevance of it even today. Great minds like Einstein have a correct understanding; "Revolution without the use of violence was the method by which Gandhi brought liberation to India. It is my firm belief that the problem of bringing peace to the world on a **super-national basis** will be solved only by employing Gandhi's method on a large scale. His work on behalf of India's Liberation is living testimony to the fact

that man's will, sustained by indomitable conviction, is more powerful than material force that seems insurmountable". Why should not religions acknowledge the relevance of Gandhi's spirituality today?

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