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## UNIT 4 RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND RELIGIOUS HARMONY

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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Tolerance is willingness to accept or allow a thing which one may not agree with, or even disapproves of. It is ability to suffer or endure something without being harmed. As distinguished from 'toleration', the act of putting up with something that one may not agree with or disapproves of, 'tolerance' is an attitude of mind to bear or permit something which one does not approve of. This attitude is applicable only to the one who is in a position of disallowing it, but still refrains from doing it.

Religious tolerance is no more than the willingness of the adherents of a dominant religion to accept or allow other religions to exist, although they disagree with those religious beliefs and practices, look upon them with disapproval as inferior, mistaken or harmful. In the case of individuals, religious tolerance generally means bearing with other people's religious practices, although one may not approve of it. It does not imply that one need to believe that other religions are equally true. It only means that one puts up with the fact that others have the right to hold their beliefs and practice in the way they do. Within a nation or ethnic group, it is acceptance of the right for others to hold beliefs that differ from the dominant religion, worship freely according to these beliefs and even attempt to peacefully convince others to convert to that faith.

However, real religious harmony will be brought about in a nation only when people realize that 'Truth is One but the Paths are Many,' that the goal of all religions is essentially the same despite their differences in worship-forms, belief-systems, and lifestyles. Further, the people must realize that we can foster an attitude of open dialogue and mutual exchange of ideas, practices and patterns of lifestyles, rather than imposing one's beliefs on others by force.

Of these two kinds of attitudes, namely religious tolerance and religious harmony, it is harmony between faiths that Gandhi wanted to establish in India rather than simply religious tolerance. In this unit then you are expected to learn

- To have broad Sketch of the Religions in India
- To overview the religious tolerance of Indian religions
- To validate the grounds for religious harmony

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## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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Indian history as well as its social fabric is indeed unique in the world. This is only land, perhaps in the whole of world, whose history goes back to thousands of years before the Christ and yet has survived the onslaughts of time. While many of its contemporary civilizations like the Assyrian, Babylonian and Roman have died out in, the Indian culture has managed not only to survive the ravages of time but also to flourish. Another point of its uniqueness is the multi religious and multicultural ethos which has not only been tolerated but also maintained with a constitutional safeguarded.

Religion plays a major role in the Indian way of life. A wide variety of Indian religious customs and rituals are not only just performed in the country but also they constitute organization of the social life of the people in the country. Moreover, religion helps people to transmit their values from one generation to another, and influences the way they interact with the natural environment. It gives purpose and meaning to life, giving thereby the people of India a scope to prosper together. It is a matter of great importance to understand how despite the variety of religions, they are able to be active and vibrant in the day to day life of its adherents, forming the warp and woof the ordinary life of the people, and organizing their life peacefully and in harmony. It is significant to know that the national life of the Indian nation, even after the Partition, did not choose the religion of the majority as the national religion. It is not merely tolerance of religions but harmony between faiths that is visualized in the Constitution of India. And that vision, except for a few communal frenzy cropping up now and then, has been kept up by and large unimpaired till date.

The one who is greatly responsible for creating that vision of religious harmony is certainly Gandhi. Here it must be noted that Gandhi was not motivated by political expediency. But it was as a matter of policy, and a voluntary choice that Gandhi worked for establishing in India religious harmony rather than merely religious tolerance. It is that specific contribution by Gandhi that forms subject of inquiry in this Unit.

To understand and appreciate Gandhi's blueprint for such a religious harmony, it may be necessary for you first to have at least broad sketch of the variety of religions that exist in India. Next, it will be useful to have at least a historical overview of the interactions with one another during their long history of nearly five thousand years. In the light of these background-materials, then, you will be in a position to gauge the grounds Gandhi gives for validating the religious harmony, not merely religious tolerance.

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## 4.2 RELIGIONS IN INDIA

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There is probably no other land in the world which has more diversity of religious and sects than in India. Apart from having sheltered all the sematic religions, India was also the birthplace of four great religions (Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism) and has been an important home to one of oldest religions of the world (Zoroastrianism). Its unique merit lies not merely in accommodating these religions in its social fabric, but also in assimilating and absorbing many of the features and waving them all into a synthetic culture.

**Hinduism** is the most predominant of religion of India. It is not a single religion founded by one specific prophet or sage nor is it based upon a single book. It is actually a family of religions and cultures within whose umbrella numerous sects of religions began to flourish and are still flourishing with some common traits binding them into a cluster. The most common of such traits are

- belief in a single supreme Godhead that is present in everything,
- belief in other gods who are aspects of that supreme God,
- belief that the soul repeatedly goes through a cycle of rebirths,
- belief in Karma, a force that determines the quality of each birth, depending on how well one behaved in a past life.

Most of the Hindus worship at home and have a shrine there or a sacred corner in a small house. Though Hindu temples are the focus of religious life, yet there is not a strong tradition of congregational worship. Traditionally Hinduism was not known for seeking to convert people, although some modern Hindu sects now do seek converts.

**Jainism** was very ancient religion of India. It claims a lineage of 24 enlightened beings (*Thirthankaras*). Only the last two of them could be historically traced: Parsva (9th century BCE) and Mahavira (6th century BCE). Of these two, it is Mahavira about whom more reliable data are available and hence is said to be the founder of the religion as it is known today. Like Buddhism, Jainism also arose in opposition to the sacrificial Vedic religion, and the Brahmin domination. It does not advocate belief in God or gods to whom we need to pray. It does not accept role of priestly class in society. It empowers its followers to be spiritually self-reliant. Its key idea is 'everyone is maker of one's own destiny' and to be 'conqueror of self'. The word "Jaina" is derived from the root word *ji* meaning to conquer.

Jainism, along with Buddhism, spread throughout India during the period of the Magadha Empire. Jainism has declined since the 12th century in many regions, but continues to be an influential religion in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka. Though a miniscule minority who practice this faith, it remains a powerfully influential religion even today. Jainism is the most tolerant of religions. Its unique theory of *Anekantavada* emphasizing the many-sidedness of reality, is very conducive to tolerance of different points of views. Thus all prejudices are allowed to subside and attitude of accommodation is promoted even with people of conflicting points of views. This necessarily leads to pursuit of non-violence.

**Buddhism** is religio-philosophical tradition, founded by Gautama Buddha in the year around 500 before Christ. Buddha, before enlightenment was a prince called Siddharta. 'Buddha' means 'one who has woken up' and the one who awakens others to the knowledge of the world as it truly is. The misery or suffering is universally felt by the people because they live asleep, never knowing or seeing life as it really is. Once they are awakened to the real cause of suffering in one's desire or attachment, and walk in the eight fold path, they are sure to find release from suffering.

Buddhism is known for its concrete techniques of the release, non-dogmatic and rational approach, not concerned so much about the metaphysical realities like

God or soul, but emphasizing the present and giving opportunity for personal transformation. Still more is appealing is its teaching of universal compassion for the suffering of beings and for the benefit and welfare of all beings.

Buddhism does not actively look for converts, but it is thoroughly welcoming to those who do want to convert. Buddhism can coexist with other faiths.

### Sikhism

Sikhism is the youngest of the world's four great monotheistic religions. It began as a relatively neutral faith system that proposed to include the best practices of Hinduism and Islam. The formation of its specific character owes to Guru Nanak in the Punjab state in Northwest India, in the 15th Century and nine other Gurus who succeeded him, one after another. The word "Sikh" in Punjabi means "disciple". Sikhs are disciples of the Gurus. Guru Nanak, the first Guru, started the new tradition, though his devotion to almighty God. The last of the 10 Gurus, Guru Gobind Singh gave the final shape to the tradition, by instituting the khalsa, extolling the heroism of five men of excellent moral qualities, spiritual fervor and baptizing them and conferring guruship them as a community, along with the holy Guru Granth. Since then the Khalsa implies the collective, spiritually-directed will of the community guided by the Guru Granth Sahib.

He is to lead his life according to the Guru's teaching and is to respect but not practise or participate in non-Sikh religious rites or ceremonies, especially abandoning the caste system. All Sikhs were taught to treat all in the community as equals; no distinction was to be made between the different professions or station in life. Sikh men are particularly easy to identify because the Five Ks: 1. *Kesh* (full beard and uncut hair) 2. *Kanga* ( a small comb) 3. *Kaccha* – warrior short trousers, denoting chastity. 4. *Kara* ( steel bangle as a sign of restraint and bondage to the Guru). 5. *Kirpan* ( a sword as a symbol of dignity, power and courage).

The Sikhs attend a religious service once a week at a Gurdwara (temple) place of worship. Sikhism does not have priests, but most gurdwaras will have a Granthi, or a learned man who is skilled in reading the scriptures. The Adi Granth, the Sikh scripture is considered to be the present day embodiment of the Sikh Guru, and so is called the Guru Granth Sahib is treated with the same respect and devotion as would have been given to a human Guru. Sikhism does not actively look for converts, but it welcomes those who want to get converted to it.

### Judaism

There had been different Jewish communities arriving in India at different times. The Bene Israel community which lived in the villages of west Maharashtra and Cochin Jews of Kerela were the first to arrive in India probably shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in the eighth century BCE. Then Bne Menashe Jews who settled themselves in East India, in Calcutta seem to have arrived from China and Myanmar (Burma). The 'Baghdadi Jews' was a collective name given to those Jews who had come from Arab countries and Iran in the late 18th century, and those who came from Iraq and Syria in the 19th century because of persecution over there. They had enriched the Indian culture with their own traits. The Synagogue of Cochini Jews is there to see in Mattenchery in Kerala even today.

### **Zoroasterianism**

The descendants of the disciples of an Iranian Prophet Zoroaster (1400 BCE) left Iran and sought a new land of religious freedom and settled in North West India around the tenth century during the Muslim persecution. And they were known as Parsis (Persians). Their main centre in India today is Mumbai . The Parsis believe in a good God Ahura Mazda, who is opposed to and will ultimately defeat evil, Angra Mainyu. They are fire worshipers. The essential feature of their religion is physical and moral purity. They are known as have been commercially the most enterprising people and the most highly educated, industrious and prosperous They are known for their accommodative and peace loving nature.

### **Islam**

Islam has been present in South India and Sind, through the settlement of Muslim Arab traders, much before the invasions that came from other Muslim countries via the more warlike north-western routes, Even with regard to the Northern Islam, it is wrong to think that it has always indulged in forced conversions. As regards the many conversions that took place through force also, Islam never interfered with India's multi-religious spectrum. Even when the Muslim rule was reigning supreme in the major portion of the Subcontinent for nearly six centuries, the local communities of various religions were not interfered. They all were allowed to retain their identity as it is evident from the survival of the different calendars that are respectively associated with Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism as well as Islam.

From around the fourteenth century there arose an altogether new trend, thanks to Hindu Bhakti and Muslim Sufi traditions. The theme of interreligious tolerance was a persistent theme in the poetry of Kabir, Dadu, Raidasa, Sena, Mira Bai and others, a circle of preacher-poets in whose name many sects were founded later all in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

With Akbar the Great the spirit of interreligious harmony got royal sponsorship from the state. In the late sixteenth century he arranged for meetings between adherents of different faiths, including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Jains, Jews and even atheists. Thereby Akbar made interreligious dialogue a respectable thing, central to participatory governance. He even made it a rule that 'the pursuit of reason' rather than 'reliance on faith-tradition' would be followed as the criterion to address difficult problems of social harmony. His pluralist commitment is clear from the fact that he filled his court with non-Muslim intellectuals and artists. Not only did Akbar personally championed the pluralist ideals of religions, but he also made state-tolerance of religious differences a top priority of his reign. He implemented the policy of religious neutrality that 'no one would be legally interfered with on account of religion'. Further by enunciating that 'anyone would be free to go over to a religion that pleases him'

Now, the Muslim population is about 9%, the second largest population. Though there may be a fundamentalist trends among a few Muslims as in any other religion and there is no reason why their patriotism must be suspected. Even when the option was there to move and have their living to Pakistan, the Indian Muslims have made an option to be in India secularist nation. And this itself is to be taken as a proof of their patriotism and their readiness to accommodate with pluralist ethos of India

Christianity

Christian faith is said to have come to India already by the fourth century. But in the 16th century a huge number of Christian settlements was created by the Portuguese rule in Goa. The British, in the beginning their rule, were opposed to the missionaries’ entry to India. However after a prolonged debate for years in the English Parliament, a missionary clause was passed in the Charter Act of 1813, after which India witnessed an influx of missionaries. In the name of reform they encouraged conversion from local religion to Christianity. Thus in 19th century many mass conversion movements took place. Even then the growth of Christianity has been minimal amounting to 2.3 % of Indian population now.

However the Christian influence on the overall reform of India as well as on nation building is uncontestable specially in fields of education, health services, and selfless and self-sacrificing service to the poor. Even today 90% of the beneficiaries in almost every educational institution are from other communities. Similarly it was the Missionaries’ social works that actually set the developmental trend first in Indian society.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Distinguish between ‘religious tolerance’ and ‘religious harmony’

2) What is the uniqueness of India in respect of religions? Indicate the contributions of Gandhi made in the contemporary times.

3) Mention a few common traits of the ancient Indian religions



4) State the contributions of those religions that were born elsewhere to the social fabric of India?

### 4.3 RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the case of India religious tolerance was almost an essential part of the cultural history in the vast Subcontinent. Most historians accept that the Indo Aryans who had gradually settled themselves in the North-West of the Subcontinent during a span of nearly a millennium (between 1500 BC and 800 BC ) developed a common cultural life with local variations of which the most advanced was based upon the teachings of Vedas. The Vedic culture which was simple and nature-bound began to grow into a complex structure of elaborate religious rites, philosophical faith, and intricate legal and social systems. It was dynamic enough to spread towards the East and to bring even the South under its sphere of influence.

The Vedic culture would have made a sway of the whole subcontinent, but for certain factors. The over-emphasis on the rites and ascetic practices by the Brhamans was too impractical. The philosophical approach of the Upanishads was too abstract to appeal to ordinary people, and its social structure was too rigorous and un-equal to be accepted by all the people with an equal appeal. The rise of Buddhism and Jainism that struck at the roots of the caste system, moderated the rigour of asceticism, ritualism proved to be more of a reaction to traditional Hindu culture became a corrective to Hindu excessiveness.

Perhaps thanks to their influence there arose a reconstructed Hinduism with the Bhagawad Gita as its spiritual and moral basis and the two Epics as the emotional and the Puranas as its imaginative, and the Dhrma Shastras of Manu as the legal bases and the six systems as the abstract and philosophic bases. The multi-pronged emphasis of the reconstructed Hinduism, with its demands for the minimum of common religious belief and practice, allowing complete cultural autonomy to the different local people in such things as dress, food, language, and mores and manners, could easily make a countrywide appeal to all sorts of people, races and language.

The Islamic contacts that started in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. through mainly trade were smooth with the South India and Sind. However the intrusion of Muslim rulers in the North West, towards the end of 9<sup>th</sup> century, posed politically many a hostile challenge between 1206 and 1526. However, at the secular level there resulted a synthetic Indian cultural renaissance, creating “Indo-Muslim” fusion of cultures, through lasting syncretic monuments in architecture, music, literature and clothing. It is surmised that the Urdu language (literally meaning “horde” or

mass in various Turkic dialects) was born during this period as a result of the intermingling of the local speakers of Sanskritic Prakrits with immigrants speaking Persian, Turkic and Arabic under the Muslim rulers. At the religious level, though there arose religious tolerance, mainly on account of the preaching of Hindu Bhakti movement as well as the Muslim Sufism. The political policy of the early Moghul Emperors, especially that of Akbar the Great was conducive to the emergence of religious tolerance. However the cultural fusion was limited to the urban centres, and did not penetrate into villages where the Indian populace had concentrated.

With the advent of the Europeans in general, and the British in particular, the modern western culture became a formidable challenge to the Indian culture(s). With their assumed superiority of their culture, they downgraded the 'natives' as racially, intellectually and culturally and religiously inferior to themselves. As a reaction to this onslaught of modern civilization, there arose several reformers from both Hindus and Muslims. The Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, and the Servants of Indian Society among the Hindus.

Among the Indian Muslims, there arose some great men who realized the need of Muslims acquiring education and scientific temper of modernity. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) pioneered modern education for the Muslim community in India by opening the Aligarh a school, which later became the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College, still later developed into the Aligarh Muslim University. The British rulers found it an opportunity to woo the Muslim elite and to stem the tide of the Indian National Congress. This institution played, much against the founder's views, a crucial role in the Partition of India. However, after the Partition, this university is known for its secular and scientific learning.

Likewise the reforms wrought by Badruddin Tyabji (Tyab Ali) the third President of the Indian National Congress, was the first to create a secular political consciousness. This he did without abating a jot of his zeal for the advancement of the backward Muslims; and it was most remarkable that he succeeded in obtaining widespread non-Muslim co-operation for it. Badruddin's all-pervasive intellectual and personal distinction enabled him to exert considerable influence for worthy causes on the more enlightened Englishmen, without loss of personal or national dignity. He was not only, as Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "a decisive factor in the deliberations of the Congress". It is through his influence that the Muslim participation in the freedom movement became large and nationally he was a pioneer in making it the Indian ideal, counteracting the Two-Nation theory.

The main aim of all these reformers was reformation of religious and social life of the natives, either falling back on the glorious past, and thereby affirming the superiority of the Indian ancient culture, or by injecting modern ideas into the mind of the people and reinterpreting the past in the light of the modern ideas. In this process their approach consisted in making a distinction between the religious and the secular on the one hand, and on the other hand they accused the religion of the rulers as equally in need of reform and even going to the extent of treating them as untouchables, so that there is nothing to learn from those religions, while however they were ready to take on the modern ideas and incorporate them into the socio, economic fabric of Indian culture, and political fields. There were some other sections of extremist approach who hated the English rulers both in their political and religious and were keen on liberating themselves from their bondage through violence and arson.



However it was to the credit of Gandhi to have worked for a basic unity in the diversity of cultural life as the foundation for a common nationhood. As opposed to all these different approaches that Gandhi tried to reconstruct the cultural life of India. At the political level Gandhi brought about a synthesis between the elitists' Congress and the teeming millions, by changing into it into a mass based organization. More importantly at the religio-cultural level Gandhi brought about a wonderful synthesis between the liberal modernists like Rammohun Roy, Mahadev Govind Ranade, and Gopala Krishna Gokhale and the Hindu extremist like Lokmanya Tilak and steered a mid-path. This contribution that Gandhi made at the religio-cultural level was very significant.

What Gandhi envisaged was a common culture as the basis of Indian nationhood in which people of all religions will be not only not in conflict with one another but also each religion will be respecting one another, and will be working for the common task of enriching humanity. The principal feature of the Indian nationhood will be secular in character, not in the western sense of putting aside the religious influences from the state, but imbuing politics with a spirit of deep religiousness, expressing itself in equal respect for each one of the religions, that are present in India. No one religion will be accepted as the official, state religion but all religions would be allowed to flourish freely in their own respective spheres. It implies that it is no more tolerance of religious but religious harmony that was aimed at by Gandhi.

To bring about religious harmony in India, Gandhi thought, the first and foremost requirement was Hindu-Muslim unity. That is why, in his Charter of Reforms (*Constructive Programmes*) he listed Communal Unity as the most basic one. It was indeed a crucial question how to find the common ground on which the two largest communities in the country, the Hindus and the Muslims, can meet in order to live fraternally together and work for the common good of the country which is identical with their common good. Once the Hindu Muslim unity was established, unity with all other communities could be further strengthened. Gandhi never found any serious differences between the Hindus and the other minority communities like the Christians, the Sikhs and the Parsis. That is why Gandhi turned to the question of Hindu-Muslim unity. Hindu –Muslim unity means not unity only between Hindus and Muslims but between all those who call India their homes no matter to what faith they belong.

Already in his South African stay he had realized that the two communities had strong prejudices against each other and there were hardly any relations between them. However, he realized that it was providential that he went to South Africa under a contract to work with Muslim friends of his brother. "I really served Hindus through Muslims whose employee I was. Hindu Muslim unity was part of my very being". On his return to India, when Gandhi involved himself Hindu-Muslim unity, he found it more difficult than in South Africa, because the prejudices between the two communities here had aggravated into a feeling of hostility.

Even then he was fully involved in the issue not as a political expedient to win the freedom for India but a spiritual exercise for the realization of the supreme end of Truth through the unfailing means of Ahimsa. The problem of Hindu-Muslim unity in India was a challenge to his faith in Ahimsa ideal. He openly said: "It would be on the question of Hindu-Muslim unity that my Ahimsa would

be put to the severest test”. Thus it is clear that Gandhi’s earnest desire and ceaseless effort for Hindu-Muslim unity did not originally spring from a political motive but religious one. If it was merely political, he would have been quite content to bring about a patched-up truce, an *ad hoc* alliance between the two communities directed against the common enemy’s rule. But what Gandhi was aiming was nothing less than true and lasting friendship, a union of hearts. “It cannot be based upon mutual fear. It must be a partnership between equals each respecting the religion of others.”

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Delineate the accommodating nature of the ancient Indo Aryan culture and Examine the major obstacles for universal acceptance.

2) Was Muslim rule suppressive of the local culture?

3) What was the specific approach of earlier reformers?

4) In what way Gandhi proved different from other Modern Indian reformers

5) Why was Hindu-Muslim Unity important for establishing religious harmony in India?

4.4 RELIGIOUS HARMONY

Gandhi’s basic conviction about the nature of the religion is that every religion constituted a revelation of truth, in as much as it is supplying a felt-need in the spiritual progress of humanity. Each of them embodies a common motivating force, namely the desire to uplift the human life and give it purpose. This is illustrated the fact of saints in each religions, persons of Attainment, Realization and Perfection. He compared the basic unity of the different religions as the vital sap of the tree which maintains the different branches and the leaves.

At the same time Gandhi emphasized the diversity of religions, too. There is only one God, therefore in theory, there should be only one religion. However when God is revealed to human beings it would become necessarily many and different. Depending upon the different temperaments of human beings and climatic conditions, God will always be differently perceived. Again as the one unalloyed Truth, beyond all speech, passes through human medium, becomes conditioned, limited, and imperfect for no other reason than the human instrumentality involved in receiving and expressing Truth. What was grasped and expressed by the humans that are already imperfect, are interpreted by other humans who are equally imperfect. Thus no one can claim that one’s own expression or interpretation of the ultimate truth is the right one. Everybody is right from one’s own stand point. But it is impossible that everybody is wrong. In other words, “all religions are true, and equally imperfect too. They are more or less true.” Perfection is the exclusive attribute of God and whatever passes through the human touch becomes imperfect. That all religions have the Truth is proved by the fact of saints, the exemplars of Attainment and Perfection. That the religions are imperfect is proved by the fact of many accretions and the superstitions that have grown in each religion.

This basic position of Gandhi regarding the nature of religion and religions has many far reaching consequences. They may be listed out in the form of following principles. They will explain the Gandhi’s vision of Religious Harmony.

1) Tolerance

Granted that every religion has the Truth, no religion can claim superiority over any other. The one Truth is always seen in fragments, and different angles of vision. Therefore each one has to show an attitude of toleration of the view point of others, although one may not always understand other’s view point. Even among the most conscientious people, there will be enough room for honest differences of opinion in matters of religion, precisely

because they are concerned with the Ultimate Concern. The minimum of the expected rule of conduct in any civilized society is mutual tolerance.

Here, tolerance does not mean indifference towards one's own faith, but it gives us a spiritual insight which is far from fanaticism. Knowing the true nature of religion and religions, one breaks down the barriers between faith and faith. By cultivating tolerance for other faiths, one may get a truer understanding of one's own faith. Certainly tolerance does not mean tolerating evil, false or wrong faiths. In the context of the principal faiths of the world, it only means accepting common fundamentals found in all religions.

## **2) Respect for Other Faiths**

Tolerance may imply a gratuitous assumption of the superiority of one's own position and the inferiority of the others'. On the contrary, if one accepted that each faith has the glimpse of the Truth, in its own way, supplying the felt need of the humanity, just in the same way as my religion has supplied the same to me, then I should be able to respect it even though it is not mine. It means, acceptance of the basic unity among religions, as outlined by Gandhi, namely that the sum total of a faith with its particular frame work of cult, creed and code is as good and helpful to its followers as the sum total of another faith to its own followers to attain perfection within its own frame work. It is not a stance of compromise in a multi religious society, but it is a fundamental verifiable truth about religions, through the great saints produced by all the principal faiths.

This is further reiterated by Gandhi through his own experience. When he read the sacred books of different faiths for his own satisfaction, with an attitude of equimindedness towards them all, he said he became sufficiently familiar with Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Hinduism. In reading these texts, he had the slightest desire to criticize any of those religions merely because they were not my own, but read each sacred book in a spirit of reverence, and found the same fundamental morality in each.

The acceptance of the doctrine of Equality of Religions does not abolish the distinction between religion and irreligion. We do not propose to cultivate toleration for irreligion. That being so, some people might object, that there would be no room left for equimindedness, if everyone took his own decision as to what was religion and what was irreligion. If we follow the law of Love, we shall not bear any hatred towards the irreligious brother. On the contrary, we shall love him, and therefore either we shall bring him to see the error of his ways, or he will point out our error, or each will tolerate the other's difference of opinion. If the other party does not observe the law of love, he may be violent to us. If however we cherish real love for him, it will overcome his bitterness in the end. All obstacles in our path will vanish, if only we observe the golden rule, that we must not be impatient with those whom we may consider to be in error, but must be prepared, if need be, to suffer in our own person

## **3) Equimindedness**

If one accepts that the attitude of respect, far beyond tolerance, it becomes a necessary requirement for true followers of religions to show equal respect

and reverence for the followers of other religions also. “We must have innate respect for other religions as we have for our own. Mind you not mutual toleration, but equal respect.” It is this attitude Gandhi, expresses it as equimindedness to all religions. “I believe in *sarva dharma sama bava*.” Gandhi does agree that there would be some things one does not understand. But he it is a mistake hastily to imagine, that anything that we cannot understand is necessarily wrong. Falling back upon his own experience, Gandhi says: “Some things which I did not understand first have since become as clear as daylight. Equimindedness helps us to solve many difficulties and even when we criticize anything, we express ourselves with a humility and a courtesy, which leave no sting behind them

#### 4) Diversity not Overlooked

Just because Gandhi emphasized the unity of religions, as a consequence of which the respect of religions and attitude of equimindedness, it does not mean that he ignored the actual diversity of religions. To have equal regard for religions did not mean for Gandhi to adopt other’s view as one’s own. It only means one tries to understand other’s view point, the light in which others look upon the religion. Further it means that we should not emphasis too much on the points of differences so as to instigate hatred among one another but it only means that we should emphasis the points of agreement rather than the diversity. But in no way Gandhi deluded the differences of religions. Here he was quite different from the common attitude of the Hindu populous that all religions are rivers going to the oceans. The popular way of understanding these statements may lead to the indifferentism of religions, in the sense that everything is considered as one and the same. As against such a popular view, Gandhi, while emphasizing the unity of religions, would equally emphasis the unique points of each religion. Therefore for him the diversity of religions are to be equally taken note of.

#### 5) Defects of Religions not Ignored

While Gandhi acknowledges the presence of truth in every great religion, he is equally conscious of the numerous defects and degradations of all religions. When he expects people to cultivate the attitude of respect for other religions, he does not imply that we should be blind to the faults of other religions. He only expects the followers of each religion to be alive to the defects of their own faith and make an attempt to overcome those defects first and foremost, at the instance of their encounter with other religions. “Seeing that it takes all my resources in trying to bring my practice to the level of my faith and in preaching the same to my co-religion is, I do not dream of preaching to the followers of other faiths.” Gandhi finds the maxim involved in such a conduct: judge not lest you be judged.

#### 6) Irreligion not to be condoned

The acceptance of the doctrine of Equality of Religions does not abolish the distinction between religion and irreligion. We do not propose to cultivate toleration for irreligion. If so, it may be asked, where would be any room left for equimindedness, if everyone took his own decision as to what was religion and what was irreligion? To such an objection Gandhi says: “If we follow the law of Love, we shall not bear any hatred towards the irreligious brother. On the contrary, we shall love him, and therefore either we shall

bring him to see the error of his ways, or he will point out our error, or each will tolerate the other's difference of opinion. If the other party does not observe the law of love, he may be violent to us. If however we cherish real love for him, it will overcome his bitterness in the end. All obstacles in our path will vanish, if only we observe the golden rule, that we must not be impatient with those whom we may consider to be in error, but must be prepared, if need be, to suffer in our own person

**7) Every Religion to Grow:**

Granted that every religion is bound to be imperfect, it follows that every religion is always subjected to a process of growth. Since the truth or God, conceived by us, is bound to be imperfect and pluralistic, there is always a need to re-interpret, re-new and re-juvenate. In this respect, then every religion is bound to constantly grow from imperfection to perfection from less perfection to greater perfection, from untruth to truth and from periphery to the center. In this aspect also Gandhi's affirmation of equality of religions is different from the popular understanding of equality of religions expressed in such statements as 'all religions are paths to God or all are rivers flowing to the ocean.'

**8) Learning from one another:**

Gandhi, while emphasizing the need of every religion to grow from imperfection to perfection, he also suggested some means for such a growth. One of the principal suggestions is that when a religion encounters other religions, you should be ready to learn from the noble elements of other religions rather than criticizing other religions and condemning them. In fact it should enrich itself by blending into it all the acceptable features of other faiths. In fact such a thing is even a matter of duty, which each religion to discharge according to Gandhi. Otherwise it is fanaticism to imagine that you cannot accept anything from other faiths.

**9) Reverential Study of other Scriptures:**

One of the best ways to learn from other religions according to Gandhi is a reverential study of others' scriptures. Once he remarked: "I have recommended to my Christian friend a prayerful and sympathetic study of others' scriptures of the world." Likewise he also told the Hindus: "your lives will be incomplete unless you reverently study the teachings of Jesus." Giving his own example, Gandhi says: "When I was turning over the pages of the sacred books of different faiths for my own satisfaction, I became sufficiently familiar for my purpose with Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Hinduism...Refreshing my memory of those days, I do not find I ever had the slightest desire to criticize any of those religions merely because they were not my own, but read each sacred book in a spirit of reverence, and found the same fundamental morality in each.

**10) Complementarity of Religions**

Thus according to Gandhi, each faith would prove complementary to other, provided that the followers of each religion were not indifferent to their religion, but rather tried to live seriously their own faith commitment, while at the same time take seriously the truth value of other faiths as well. In fact



all the important faiths were held by Gandhi to be complementary to one another, in no case to be exclusive. We may not have fully understood the true meaning of the inter-dependence and inter-relation of different faiths, may be because we are too indifferent representatives of our own faiths. If only we became seriously genuine seekers of truth, by following our respective faiths, we would have already seen interdependence and interrelation of various faiths.

**Check Your Progress III**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) What are Gandhi’s views regarding nature of religion and religions?  
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- 2) Elucidate the meaning of “Equality of Religions”  
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- 3) How could religions grow and be complementary to one another  
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**4.5 LET US SUM UP**

In short then, a real interreligious harmony would emerge in a multi religious society when its members realize the basic unity of the various religions as well as the importance of the diversity and the need to promote a spirit of equimindedness to one another and the need to learn from one another and to be complementary to one another. What is unique of Gandhi is that establishes all these as part of his quest for Truth. Synthesizing two models of God – theistic God and impersonal Absolute – Gandhi speaks of God both as personal and as absolute Truth. It is with reference to that Absolute Truth that he validates all religions as equal paths to truth and calls for more positive love and respect towards all than just religious tolerance.

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## 4.6 KEY WORDS

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Toleration, Tolerance, Harmony, Karma, Thirthankaras, Anekantavada, Buddha, Sikh, AdiGranth, Gurudwara, Ahura Mazda, Angra Mainyu, Dharma Shahstras, Urdu, Constructive Programmes, Communal Unity, Unity of Religions, Plurality of Religions, Equality of Religions, Equimindedness, Complementarity of Religions

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