

# VIEWS OF MAHATMA GANDHI ON RELIGION AND POLITICS

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**Abstract:** Gandhi still held the view that he could not conceive politics as divorced from religion. Indeed, religion should pervade every one of our actions. Here religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. It is not less real because it is unseen. This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality. According to Gandhi, there is no politics without religion—not the religion of the superstitious and the blind, religion that hates and fights, but the universal Religion of Toleration. Politics without morality is a thing to be avoided.

**Keywords:** Religion, Politics, Truth, morality

## DEFINITION OF RELIGION

By religion, Gandhi did not mean formal religion, or customary religion, but that religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our Maker.<sup>1</sup> Religion should pervade every one of our actions. Here religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. It is not less This religion transcends real because it is unseen. Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality.<sup>2</sup> Gandhi had explained that it was not the Hindu religion which he certainly prizes 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 whichever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself.<sup>3</sup> No man can live without religion. There are some who in the egotism of their reason declare that they have nothing to do with religion. But it is like a man saying that he breathes but that he has no nose. Whether by reason or by instinct, or by superstition, man acknowledges some sort of relationship with the divine. The rankest agnostic or atheist does acknowledge the need of a moral principle, and associates something good with its observance and something bad with its non-observance. Bradlaugh, whose atheism is well known, always insisted on proclaiming his innermost conviction. He had to suffer a lot for thus speaking the truth, but he delighted in it and said that truth is its own reward. Not that he was quite insensible to the joy resulting

from the observance of truth. This joy however is not at all worldly, but springs out of communion with the divine. That is why Gandhi had said that even a man who disowns religion cannot and does not live without religion.<sup>4</sup>

### **THE CENTRAL PLACE OF MORALITY**

Gandhi rejected any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality. He tolerated unreasonable religious sentiment when it is not immoral.<sup>5</sup> As soon as we lose the moral basis, we cease to be religious. There is no such thing as religion overriding morality. Man, for instance, cannot be untruthful, cruel and incontinent and claim to have God on his side.<sup>6</sup> Religion which takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them, is no religion.<sup>7</sup> Every activity of a man of religion must be derived from his religion, because religion means being bound to God that is to say, God rules your every breath.<sup>8</sup>

### **RELIGION & POLITICS IN TERMS OF MORAL PROGRESS**

In Gandhi's opinion, political education is nothing worth, if it is not backed by a sound grounding in religion by which is not meant sectional or sectarian belief. Man without religion is man without roots. Therefore, religion is the basis on which all life structure has to be erected, if life is to be real.<sup>9</sup> Gandhi felt compelled to come into the political field because he found that he could not do even social work without touching politics. He felt that political work must be looked upon in terms of social and moral progress. In democracy, no part of life is untouched by politics. Under the British cannot escape politics in the good sense. It embraces the whole life. All who breathe must pay a tax, that is British rule in India. Take the Salt Tax for instance. It concerns everybody. The collector of revenue and the policeman are the only symbols by which millions in India's villages know British rule. One cannot sit still while the people are being ravaged.<sup>10</sup>

### **POWER POLITICS AND AHIMSA**

It is true that power politics exist everywhere; but people are very much mistaken if they imagine that true democracy obtains either in America or England. The voice of the people may be said to be God's voice, the voice of the Panchayat. But how can there be the voice of God where the people themselves are the exploiters as England and America are? They live on the coloured races by exploiting them. If the voice of the people is the voice of God, they will be above party. His scales will be ever evenly weighted with truth and non-violence. This statement embraced Gandhi's reply. His Ahimsa was neither maimed nor weak. It was all-powerful. Where there is Ahimsa, there is Truth and Truth is God. All Gandhi knew that God is all-pervading and where He is, all is well. There is, therefore, one law for all. Wherever in the world Truth and non-violence reign supreme, there is peace and bliss. That these exist nowhere shows that they are hidden from man for the time being. But they cannot disappear for ever. That faith must sustain the faithful.<sup>11</sup>

### **TO PROGRESS WE MUST MAKE NEW HISTORY**

Gandhi explained that, it is curious how we delude ourselves. We fancy that one can make the perishable body impregnable and we think it impossible to evoke the hidden powers of the

soul. Well, Gandhi was engaged in trying to show, if he had any of these powers, that he was as frail a mortal as any of us and that he never had anything extraordinary about him nor have any now. Gandhi claimed to be a simple individual liable like any other fellow-mortal. Gandhi owned, however, that he had humility enough in him to confess his errors and to retrace his steps. Gandhi owned that he had an immovable faith in God and his goodness and unconsumable passion for truth and love. If we are to make progress, we must not repeat history but make new history. We must add to the inheritance left by our ancestors. If we may make new discoveries and inventions in the phenomenal world, must we declare our bankruptcy in the spiritual domain? Is it impossible to multiply the exceptions so as to make them the rule? Must man always be brute first and man after, if at all?<sup>12</sup>

### **WHY I OPPOSE A THEOCRATIC STATE**

Freedom without equality for all irrespective of race or religion, was not worth having for the Congress. In other words, the Congress and any government representative of the Congress must remain a purely democratic, popular body leaving every individual to follow that form of religion which best appealed to him without any interference from the State. There was so much in common between man and man that it was a marvel that there could be any quarrel on the ground of religion. Any creed or dogma which coerced others into following one uniform practice was a religion only in name, for a religion worth the name did not admit of any coercion. Anything that was done under coercion had only a short lease of life. It was bound to die. It must be a matter of pride to them whether they were four anna Congress members or not that they had in their midst an institution without a rival which disdained to become a theocratic State and which always believed and lived up to the belief that the State of their conception must be a secular, democratic State having perfect harmony between the different units composing the State.<sup>13</sup>

### **STATE REGULATION OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION IN SCHOOLS**

Gandhi did not believe that the State can concern itself or cope with religious education. He believed that religious education must be the sole concern of religious associations. Do not mix up religion and ethics. He believed that fundamental ethics is common to all religions. Teaching of fundamental ethics is undoubtedly a function of the State. By religion Gandhi had not in mind fundamental ethics but what goes by the name of denominationalism. We have suffered enough from State-aided religion and a State Church. A society or a group, which depends partly or wholly on State aid for the existence of its religion, does not deserve or, better still, does not have any religion worth the name. Gandhi did not need to give any illustrations in support of this obvious truth as it was to him.<sup>14</sup>

Gandhi opined that he did not believe in State religion even though the whole community had one religion. The State interference would probably always be unwelcomed. Religion was purely a personal matter. There was in reality as many religions as minds. Each mind had a different conception of God from that of the other. He was also opposed to State aid partly or wholly to religious bodies. For he knew that an institution or group, which did not manage to finance its own religious teaching, was a stranger to true religion. This did not mean that the State schools would not give ethical teaching. The fundamental ethics were common to all religions.<sup>15</sup>

Gandhi did not agree that the Government should provide religious education. If there are some people who want to give religious education of the wrong type, you cannot prevent it. If you try to do so, the result can only be bad. Those who want to give religious education may do so on their own, so long as it is not subversive of law and order or morals. The Government can only teach ethics based on the main principles common to all religions and agreed to by all parties. In fact, ours is a secular State .<sup>16</sup>

## **RELIGION, A PERSONAL AFFAIR**

"If I were a dictator, religion and State would be separate. I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it, " remarked Gandhiji sometime back in answer to a question by a missionary friend who asked whether in Free India there would be complete religious freedom and whether religion would be separate from the State. " The State would look after your secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern. " He then went on to describe his conception of religion. " You must watch my life, how I live, eat, sit, talk, believe in general. The sum total of all those in me is my religion, " he said.<sup>17</sup>

Asked which movement, e.g., women's, political, scientific or religious would have had the most far - reaching influence in the world of tomorrow and would be considered 50 years hence as having had the greatest impact on world affairs as a whole and for the greatest good of mankind, he said, it was wrong to bracket religious movement with the rest. " It is religious movement that would dominate the future, " he added. " It would do so today but it does not, for religion has been reduced to a Saturday or a Sunday affair; it has to be lived every moment of one's life. Such religion, when it comes, will dominate the world. "<sup>18</sup>

## **HOW TO REFORM SOCIETY?**

The first step is to turn the search-light inward, to proclaim your failings to yourself and the world. There is nothing so debasing and demoralizing as to conceal your weakness and to profess to have strength which you do not possess. The second thing would be to set about boldly and fearlessly to purify public life. Unfortunately, a belief has today sprung up that one's private character has nothing to do with one's public activity. This superstition must go. Our public workers must set about the task of reforming society by reforming themselves first. This spiritual weapon of self-purification intangible as it seems is the most potent means for revolutionizing one's environment and for loosening external shackles.<sup>19</sup> It works subtly and invisibly; it is an intensive process and though it might often seem a weary and long-drawn-out process, it is the straightest way to liberation, the surest and the quickest, and no effort can be too great for it. What it requires is from nothing. faith an unshakable, mountain-like faith that flinches from nothing.

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