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Mahatma Gandhi's views on religion and its relevance in present society

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Abstract

The study entitled "Mahatma Gandhi's Views on Religion and Its Relevance in Present Society" explores Gandhi's understanding of religion as the foundation of moral, spiritual, and political life. The main objectives are to elucidate Gandhi's concept of religion, analyze the interrelationship between religion, morality, and politics, and assess the relevance of his ideas in the modern era. A descriptive research methodology was adopted, relying exclusively on secondary data collected from books, journals, and credible online resources.

The findings reveal that Gandhi regarded religion (Dharma) as eternal, grounded in truth (Satya) and moral law (Rita). He emphasized that all religions share a common spiritual essence and moral core, advocating universal tolerance and ethical conduct. Gandhi's philosophy integrated religion with morality through the principles of truth and non-violence, which he considered indispensable for individual and social harmony. He further asserted that politics divorced from religion degenerates into moral decay, envisioning political action as an expression of spiritual duty.

The study concludes that Gandhi's ideals retain immense relevance today, amid global moral decline, religious intolerance, and socio-political unrest. His emphasis on interfaith respect, non-violence, and service to humanity provides an enduring ethical framework for addressing contemporary crises such as terrorism, poverty, and environmental degradation.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, religion, morality, politics, non-violence, truth, relevance

Introduction

A religion is a set of beliefs that is held by a group of people. There are many different religions, each with a different set of beliefs. The beliefs are about the world and the people in it, about how they came into being and what their purpose in their beliefs are often linked to supernatural beings such as God, number of gods and spirits. They may also be linked to an idea such as a path that the spirit of each person should take towards goodness, truth and duty. Each religion has different ideas about these things. Each religion also has a moral code which is a set of beliefs about how human being should act. Gandhi considered religion to be important for everyone in all spheres of life as it is the source of his world view and his sense of loyalty i.e. judgement of good and bad. He took religion as a way inseparably related with life. No thinker on modern times has perhaps experienced so keen a struggle within himself regarding the momentous issues of religious faith as has Mahatma Gandhi. His whole life was one of unceasing quest for anchorage faith in a "Living Good".

Objectives

The following objectives have been set for the present study-

- Give a brief description of Gandhi's view on religion.
- To discuss how Mahatma Gandhi relates religion with morality and politics.
- To discuss the relevance of Gandhi's idea of religion in present time.

Methodology

Descriptive method is used for the present study. This study mainly based on secondary data. These are collected from books, journals, magazines, online resources etc.

Gandhi's Concept of Religion

Gandhi considered religion or Dharma to be eternal and believed that it existed since the beginning. It simply exists irrespective of men corresponding very much to the Vaidic view. He considered two things to be fundamental in religion. The first thing is Truth and the second thing is the law, the fundamental moral law governing the whole universe and humanity. Gandhi said, let me explain what I mean by religion, it is not the Hindu religion, which I clearly prize above all other religions but the religion which transcends Hinduism which changes our very nature, which kind one indissoluble to the truth with it and whichever purifies."

Gandhi argued that the soul of religion is one but it is encased in multitude of forms. The later will persists to the end of time. Wise men will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul living under variety of crust. He said that one's religion is like one's own mother, entitled to one's highest reverence. He also accepts that the moral and spiritual contents of all religions are equally valid for their respective followers. At the same time, he never hesitated to point out the errors which is to be removed from every religion with the help of shores and war in Islam that has entered into the religion during course of time and it must go.

Gandhi focused his attention on the necessity of living religiously. It was the religious motivation that made his life a compelling example and the centre of attention of people throughout the world. Since Gandhi was essentially a religious man, all his ideas and activities emanated from his religious outlook. Gandhi firmly believed that religion supplies a moral basis without which life is 'a mere sound and fury signifying nothing.' Again, to him religion is mainly concerned with the inner life of man either in the form of belief in truth, relation with God or belief in moral principles. The best way to learn religion is 'to practice it or to live a saintly life.' As a Karma Yogi Gandhi did not think that religion was to be practiced in a loneliness as in a mountain-top or a cave. It must manifest itself in all our activities. So, to him, religion was essentially as a man of religion or as a saint Gandhi could fight in his battlefield of politics.

Relation Between Religion and Morality

Gandhi goes the extent of mixing religion with morality. In his autobiography he wrote, "morality is the basis of things and truth is the substance of morality." Gandhi believed essentials of all religion is one. He showed that moral codes of various religions have striking similarities. All of them emphasize morality of a certain type, in fact this was the origin of his ethical religious beliefs which he presented in 1912 in a small book named "Neti Dharma", like a tree which has a single trunk but many branches and leaves so there is one, true and perfect religion, but it passes through the human medium and assumes different form. He went to the extent that the Dharma cannot be expressed in clear terms. Imperfect man tries to present them in language as they can comprehend and others equally imperfect interpret their words.

Gandhi had a firm conviction that religion and morality were inseparable. For him the basic principle of morality and truth were truth and non-violence. These two were elaborated into eleven principles and a verse containing them was recited every morning and evening in the prayers

at his Ashrama. They are Non-violence (Ahimsa), truth (Satya), non-stealing (Asteya), Chastity (Brahmacharya), Non-possession (Asangraha), Physical labour (Sarirasrama), equality of all religions (Sarva Dharma Samantva), and discarding of untouchability (Sparsa Bhavana). He discovered the truth that the fundamental moral values are common to all religions of the world and as such he had nothing new to give the world. According to him, truth and non-violence are as old as the hills. From the 'Gita' Gandhi derived the truth that all religions are different paths leading to the same goal. He said religions are different roads conversing to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as reach the same goal? In reality there are as many religions as individuals. So, he was tolerant towards all religions and accepted their basic teachings.

Relations Between Religion and Politics

Gandhiji was not prepared to separate religion from politics. To quote him, "Those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics, do not know what religion means." Again, "He does not know what patriotism or feeling for one's country is who does not know true duty or religion." Again, "if I take part in politics, it is only because politics today encircles us like coils of the snake from which one can not get out, no matter how one tries. I wish to wrestle with the snake.....I am trying to introduce religion into politics." For him, there are no politics devoid of religion. Politics without religion are a depth trap because they kill the soul. Religion was the very breath of Gandhiji's life. He was a seeker of truth and his God manifested himself in Truth and Love. Love and Ahimsa had the same meaning for him. Without Ahimsa, Truth could not be found. Gandhiji wanted to moralize man and society and he found it difficult to separate politics from religion. His contention was that there could not be two consciences of man, one individual and social and other political. The same code of morality had to be observed in all spheres of human activity. To quote him, "We have to make truth and non-violence matters not merely for individual practice, but for practice by groups, communities and nations. That at any rate is my dream." Again, "I do not believe that the spiritual law works in a field of its own. On the contrary, it expresses itself from the ordinary activities of life. It does affect the economic, social and political fields." It is clear from the above statements that Gandhi does not divorce religion from politics.

Relevance

Today we see politics having degenerated to a very sickening state where power hungry politicians fight it out for political power what we are witnessing today is ethical conduct. This is exactly what makes Gandhi's teaching more relevant.

From time immemorial, human being is practising some religion or other in their day-to-day life. Everyone considers his religion as the supreme and others religion as inferior. This feeling of superiority of one's own religion has manifested into a number of wars to prove one's own superiority and thus killing of innocent persons at the alter of religion is so dangerous that even now terrorism is vividly viewed from the angle of religion. Gandhi said, "All religions adhere to the fact that 'his God is the truth.' If it is so with one religion, it is truth with other religions also. Thus, Gandhi brings out the common point from all

religions and for him “Truth is God.” If this concept is accepted by all there shall be no war or ill will against any religion. If this is brought into practice religions of all will be respected by all.

While speaking on religion Gandhi wanted to develop certain qualities like fearlessness, non-possession and humanity in man. The main aim was to restructure man to suit to non-violent society. Gandhi’s repeated emphasis on service to human beings as the essence of religion is intervened his pluralistic understanding of humanity. In this pluralistic approach to the dialogue of cultures and faith, Gandhi was far ahead of his time. If he was alive today, he would ask people to accept that human beings are the same all over the world.

Today’s world is suffering from multi-dimensional crisis. Hunger, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, pollution of environment, deforestation, swelling number of migrants refugees, violence and terrorism, drug trafficking etc. All these problems constitute a grave danger to the peace and security of the world. On the other hand, the world today presents a paradisiacal contrast. There is poverty amidst plenty, overproduction vs undernourishment, explosion of knowledge as against vast masses of illiterates. These types of problems may be conceived as the impacts of our thoughts and deeds in a God-less world. The modern man who has tasted the tree of knowledge and witnessed the startling developments in science and technology know that God who ruled our forefathers are now dead. So, the modern man is not ruled by the constitutions given by our religious scriptures.

It is the contest of this emergent state of the world that Gandhi’s vision acquires meaning, significance, urgency and importance. Rooted in fundamentals of ethics spirituality, Gandhi’s transcendental vision embraced the entire human life in all its ramifications. Our today’s predicament is due mainly to the lack of adjustments of the spiritual dimension of humanity with its rational side. Here Gandhi’s ethic on-spiritual world view provides the direction that the world will have to adopt for its future guidance and development.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is clear that Gandhi believed that all human activities must be governed by spiritual and moral considerations. Without the moral basis supplied by religion, life would be meaningless. In fact, he followed the Vedic tradition of India. Rigveda explains Dharma as Satya and Rit i.e. truth and the eternal law, to be the basis of everything in this world. Dharma is the wider expressions and executes the truth perceived by men in action. Thus, in the Indian concept, dharma and truth are interchangeable and denotes the aspirations of men which is the pursuits of thought, world and deed. Men’s idea of justice or injustice is based upon the certain definite facts and opinions which may change with the change of attitude. This dynamism of Indian concept has helped to do away certain evils of history because of their failure on the ground of rationality. It has been observed by the Indian mind that the evils of ‘Karmakanda’, ‘Formalism’, superstitions, mechanical trial or deals etc. are not based on truth which can transcend through ages.

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