



GANDHI'S MORALITY AND RELIGION – AN OVERVIEW

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

According to Gandhi, morality and religion are closely associated with each other. Both are interconnected with each other. We cannot conceive one without the other. According to Gandhi mere emphasis on morality without the religion or religion without morality are both one sided views. Both groups of people who claim in the possibility of religion without morality or morality without religion possess wrong approaches. According to Gandhi human society “is not divided into water tight compartments, called social, political and religious.” (Young India 2.3.1922, p.131). Thus, morality and religion are united and should be so united. So long as the seed of morality is not watered by religion it cannot sprout. Thus, it can be said without religion. Thus, conversely morality should be observed as a religion. Gandhi thus combined intelligence/ logic with faith i.e. mind with heart. Morality is the foundation of religion and morality attains its completeness through religion. Therefore, Gandhi's religion is regarded as an ethical religion. Thus, Gandhi stresses on the humanistic approaches or ethical aspects of the great religions of the world. Thus, Gandhi talks about a universal religion i.e. the common ethical basis of all the living religions. Gandhi explains this universal and ethical nature of all the living religions of the world as follows....

“It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which 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 Marker and appreciated its true correspondence between the Marker and itself”.

Keywords: *Universal Morality, Ethical Religion, Hinduism, Cardinal Virtues*

Introduction

Ethics is the branch of philosophy to discuss about the voluntary human actions. Actions which are performed voluntarily but not mechanically come under the scope of morality. According to Gandhi acting in accordance to our thought, will, rational intelligence or the power of discrimination is a necessary condition to regard an act as moral. We should keep in mind the distinction between acting mechanically and acting intentionally, while judging an act as moral. There is no content of morality in the mechanical actions. Letting oneself to be swift along like a log of wood by a current can never be regarded as an act of morality. Thus, when the king pardons a criminal then it can be regarded as act of morality but the act of the messenger of bearing the king's order to pardon cannot be regarded as an act of morality. But if the messenger were to bear the king's order, considering it to be his duty, his action would be regarded as moral.

There was hardly any person in the history of mankind to practice the principles of ethics in every spheres of life after Gandhi. Gandhi practiced his most important ethical principle of non-violence in formulating every kinds of ideas i.e. in formulating his ideas about politics, religion, society, economics, states, education etc. The following quote of Gandhi clarifies it, “Some friends have told me that truth and non-violence have no place in politics and worldly affairs. I do not agree. I have no use for them as a means of individual salvation. Their introduction and application in everyday life has been my experiment all along.” (The Amrita Bazar Patrika, 30.6.44, in Nirmal Kr. Bose, Selections from Gandhi, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1957, 131, p.31). Gandhi's ideas about morality has been influenced and formed from various sources like from the traditional Hinduism and from the Christianity also.

Background of Gandhi's Moral and Religious Mental Make Up

Gandhi was not a philosophical system-builder; he had no moral philosophy to offer, if by “moral philosophy” we mean a systematic construction of ethical problems and their solutions from a particular standpoint. Dr. Radhakrishnan aptly said, “His message is not a matter for academic debate in intellectual circles.”¹. But in and through his numerous lectures, articles, essays,

editorials, and above all his political actions and personal life-style, Gandhi has communicated the main thrust of the foundational principles of moral life as he intuited and contemplated them. These writings reveals his moral intentions, prescriptions and direction for the well-being of all, help to decipher a deeply felt religious-morality that dominated the very 'being of Gandhi'. He has his own answer to the question 'why should I be moral?' He has projected a future ideal society, a Ramrajya based on Ahimsa or love for others and an uninterrupted faith in God's goodness and help that often comes from his inner voice.

The first and the last word of Gandhi's religious-morality is God, his grace and goodness. He writes, "To me God is Truth and Love, God is ethics and morality, God is fearlessness, God is the source of light and life and He is above and beyond all these."² His moral views are expressed mostly in religious language and the moral criterion gets life-blood from religious undertone. He never dissociates himself from traditional moral values and his "Five Cardinal Virtues" (Ahimsa, Satya, Astaya, Aparigraha, and Bramhmacharya) represent the essence of the moral teachings of Vaisnavism, Jainism and Buddhism in a nut shell. However, Gandhi interprets these teachings in the course of his experiments with truth, his intuition is the pathfinder and avoids to follow the beaten track in a mechanical manner. He categorically declares, 'I do not hold that everything ancient is good because it is ancient. I do not advocate surrender of God-given reasoning faculty in the face of ancient tradition. Any tradition, however ancient, if inconsistent with morality, is fit to be banished from the land.'³ It shows that moral values are the best criterion of judging the past, present and future courses of actions.

Gandhi interlinked Truth with God, God with Love, and the positive side of Ahimsa with love. He equated them.

Ahimsa is the means, truth is the end, but means and the end are not two distinct things. 'There is no wall of separation between means and the end.' The means may likened to a seed, the end to a tree. Their position is interchangeable. If we take care of the means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later. By moral action, Gandhi means morally good action which is voluntarily performed, neither mechanically done nor done under duress. True morality consists in finding the true path for ourselves fearlessly and avoiding the beaten paths. All selfish desires are immoral, while the desire to improve ourselves for the sake of doing good to others is truly moral. There is clear distinction between body and soul in the makeup of an individual. Though God is the creator of all things, still the soul is the only abode. Body and bodily pleasures thwart the progress of the soul and leads to self-deception. Man's ego is the root of all self-deception which is the almost inescapable for him. On the one hand, we fail to understand our true identity, on the other hand, our ego remains blind to the reality of other persons. The path of Ahimsa or love leads us gradually to overcome the inflated ego and self-deception and to realize the Truth or God. Gandhi writes, "Thus, step by step we learn to make friends with all the world; we realize the greatness of God, or Truth. Our peace of mind increases in spite of suffering. We become braver and more enterprising; we understand more clearly the difference between what is ever lasting and what is not. Our worldly attachments diminish and so does the evil within us diminish from day to day."⁴ Moral obligation is due to God; it is a religious morality with puritan overtone.

Gandhi rejects the Utilitarian slogan 'the greatest good of the greatest number,' because it is ready to allow sufferings of 'some' for the pleasure of 'greatest number'. A votary of ahimsa will strive for the greatest good of all, her aim will be to raise all (sarvodaya) and will die to realize that ideal. According to Gandhi, the greatest good of all inevitably includes the good of the greatest number. Thus, all selfish desires are immoral, while the desire to improve ourselves for the sake of doing good to others is truly moral. Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all her activities, social, political, religious have to be guided by the longing for the vision of God. This goal can be achieved by practicing the five cardinal virtues.

At this point it may be asked by a citizen of Secular Democratic India, 'Can the moral philosophy of Gandhi as narrated above, accommodate secular morality?' Traditional religious ethics claims that ethics is meaningless without the umbrella of God, sine moral obligation are ultimately due to God and his judgement. By appealing to natural phenomena and the given social situations, a secular thinker tries to solve the problem of the morality of human behaviour. It may directly attack religious ethics as ill-advised or untrue, or it may simply ignore religious systems altogether in the sense that religion being a personal affair, its jurisdiction might be kept outside of such social situations which converse people of different faiths and unfaiths as found in a multi-cultural society. But the basic thing is that if a set of moral principles is such that it does not derive moral values from religion or belief in the supernatural, then it is considered as secular. To attack and resist a system is quite proper, according to Gandhi, but to attack and resist its author is tantamount to attacking oneself, since human beings are children of the same creator and as such, they hold the divine power within them. A secular moralist would oppose the same act of attacking the propagator of opponent opinions on the grounds of right to freedom of opinion, right to differ, right to life etc. So it is not just to accuse moral secularism by quoting Fyodor Dostoevsky's famous / notorious expression in despair "If God is dead, then everything is permitted."

According to Gandhi, the ultimate goal of human beings should be realization of Truth which is another name for God, and the means should be Ahimsa or Love. Love has an ontological basis, as we have noted above, on the consideration that all human beings are children of God. Truth is self-evident and makes its presence felt in the intuition of an individual. Gandhiji is aware that "what may be truth for one may be untruth for another."⁵

Unless you impose on yourself the five vows, you may not embark on the experiment at all. So, religion is ultimately the goal of morality.

Ahimsa is directed to achieve political truth as well as spiritual truth, through of course, they are interwoven. Gandhi's political movement was directed against the evils of British Imperialism with a view to establish Swaraj and to remove political, social and economic explorations. In that situation, observes J.N. Mohanty, "There could not be much doubt regarding the truth. But

political philosophy cannot formulate its principles by appealing to such uncontroversial cases.”⁶ In a political situation, even after all the facts are collected, two contesting parties might differ at the point of interpretation. It shows the need to draw a distinction between ‘true’ and ‘I believe to be true’. In that case what I strongly claim as true may in fact be my belief and not really something which everyone else is bound to accept as true. Can self-deception really end if I discover myself in the others and recognize their reality? An individual can overcome the boundaries of his belief only when we show equal respect to the opinions, values, and perspectives of others. It needs the help of reason and tolerance.

Many thinkers strongly believe that morality is grown on religion-if good is dead, everything is permitted. They one of the opinion that we fail to understand ethical obligations unless we admit existence of good as the moral-head who would judge the merits and demerits of our actions and reward and punish the moral agents accordingly. Some thinkers begin by identifying morality with a body of divine commands and conclude that if these were no god, there could be no moral rules or principles. To Kant, one of three essential moral postulates is the existence of God. So, morality and religion are clearly interwoven –they are two sides of the same coin.

But there is a different picture. The God-oriented moral view is challenged and opted by Thinkers called Secular moralists. We have a debate between two sides. In the words of J.L. Mackie, “That is, do human actions, dispositions, and soon have whatever moral qualities they do have independently of any divine commands or approves of them he is himself responding to the qualities he finds in them; or are these no moral distinctions independent of and antecedent of God’s will, so that his will constitutes whatever moral qualities there are, and to be good or rightly simply to be approved or of commanded by God”.

Even if it is true that Gandhi, in a sense, equated religion and morality, we must avoid misunderstanding his position. He says, “The principles of religion are one thing, and the practices based on them are another. The principles are absolute and irrespective of space and time. Practices change with space and time.”⁷ Hence, the identification is not between morality and any particular organized religion, like Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. According to him, religious leaders are pseudo-politicians, but he is a religious man under the cover of a politician. If religion is taken as God’s law for the good of all, and if morality is taken as overcoming of self-deception by assuming an attitude of love, then religion and morality can interchange their seats-this is religious morality of Gandhi.

Gandhi’s view in this context may be noted: as a modern political and constitutional principles involves two basic propositions. The first is that, people belonging to different faiths and society of sections are equal before the law, the government and constitutional policy. Another one is that, there can be no mixing up of religion and politics.

Gandhi was a keen of all religious faith. A part from his study of Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism he was an avid reader of Islamic and Christian scriptures as well. Gandhi was attracted all religion forms immensely, and through understanding of them he successfully arrived at a composite understanding of religion and God as whole.

This holistic understanding of man’s spiritual quest led Gandhi to adopt and preach a theory of tolerance and natural respect founded on truth and maintenance of non-violence. Gandhi was also painted by the cast-based social structure that India has religiously followed from time immemorial, and particularly the curse of untouchability, which to Gandhi was the greatest sin of all because it not only spelt discrimination but debased a particular section of mankind on an occupational basis. Gandhi felt Indian society to be weakened at its very core and embarked in a fight against it with his heart and soul.

Gandhi’s secular theories took on a special significance in the particular context of the Indian national movement. Indian society has been traditionally plagued by the evils of caste and creed based discrimination. The cast oriented stratification of the Indian society has hindered all chances of national unification from the early days of Indian society. The traditional rhetoric of the religious and the self-styled spiritual preachers fuelled these divisions more often than not. It was a great pain for Gandhi that Indian’s age old tradition of religious tolerance was not being maintained at a time when it was more needed.

This figure Gandhi wrote extensively on the need of Secularism in India, and made speeches to the same effect all over the country. No doubt it was not the easiest of tasks for Gandhi. Strictly the British were bent upon implementing the policy of divide and rule, and took its worst from after the declaration of separate elections for the different communities in the declaration of the Government of India Act in 1935. Gandhi means Indian national movement has been plagued by communal tensions, and haunted it till the very end.

Universal Morality

According to Gandhiji the moral law is the eternal and immutable law governing the whole of life and the universe. Gandhi has conceived morality or the moral laws as the universal one. Gandhi opines that the religious as the universal one. Gandhi opines that the religious views of different people may differ from each other but the moral principles underlying those religious are same. Thus, Gandhi says that the moral principles are universal. These are universal in the sense that these can be exercised or followed by every person under similar circumstance, irrespective of place and time. Thus, the Gandhian ethical principles would have values only when be applied in and thereby can control our practical lives. In Gandhi’s own words....

“Mere knowledge is not enough; it should be followed by appropriate action. An ethical idea is like an architect’s plan. The plan shows how the building should be constructed; but it becomes useless if the building is not raised accordingly. Similarly, an ethical idea is useless so long as it is not followed by suitable action.” (M.K. Gandhi, Ethical Religion, Tr. A. Ramaiyer, S. Ganesan, Madras, 1922, p.10)

Gandhi's monumental efforts bringing together the various communities in India were not fully realized the British policy of 'divide and rule' had its effects, and the demand for a separate Muslim nation was fast gaining ground. Gandhi was hurt, but he realized importance of secular policy and attitude in the sense that government policy that all religion have their say in the making of India and no religious group, majority or minority, can have total control over the running of the state. So, religion is ultimately the goal of morality.

Conclusion

The study in the moral philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi is relevant for the whole mankind in the present and future. In fact, research in the history of mankind will reveal that nobody made such an attempt to apply the moral elements in the politics, economics, religion, society and in every spheres of life. He also identified certain aspects of life as secular and has proposed state actions there, naturally we can propose that in the sphere of interpersonal and inter-social behaviour of people moral agreement can be arrived at without disturbing the religious differences, or non-beliefs of different sections, like agnostics, skeptics or atheists. Such moral advice as 'Not to kill innocent people', 'Not to break one's promises' etc are acceptable to all, of course with this or that reservations and social considerations. A good room to secular morality. Perhaps we have to go beyond Gandhi and certainly we have to carry forward the most human aspects of his teachings.

Though, Gandhi has talked about moral relatively on some cases, still he has framed prescriptions showing the moral duties and taboos for all sections of people, from students, politicians to businessmen, workers to peasants etc. In such prescriptions Hindu social moral are repeatedly expressed with reservations, suggestions and interpretations. Many such restrictions and suggestions are not acceptable to various cross-sections of citizens. We are living in a pluralistic society, with a multi faced culture, religious difference, linguistic peculiarities. We want to stay together. Naturally one may ask, can we derive from Gandhi's teachings a prescription for secular morality which would be able to encompass the moral thinking of all? In theoretical discussion we may offer hair splitting distinctions between religion and non-religionism, true and false religion etc., but in real life situation politics is being more and more religion depended for winning the hearts of God-fearing voters. Thus, in the conclusion it may be said so long social ills like inequality, injustice, evil, violence, torture, have and have not class, rape, suppression and oppression of the weaker class etc. Will exit in the society the Gandhian philosophy morality and religion will remain still relevant for human society.

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