

Religious Conflict Resolution: Inefficacy of Gandhian Methods

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The two key terms in 'religious conflict' are 'religion' and 'conflict'. Gandhi did not use the term conflict but of all the explanations of the term conflict the most appropriate in his context would be that it is "an active disagreement between people with opposing opinions or principles". Gandhi was aware of the difficulties in defining the term religion, therefore, he took pains to explain it in a number of his writings spanning over several years. He was aware that the term religion can be, and is, used in two senses. In the first sense it is used to refer to a sect or an organised religion; and in the second sense it is used to refer to an ethical or moral practice which is rooted in a specific metaphysics.

In fact he himself uses the term in both these senses. In *Hind Swaraj* [1] he says, "religion is dear to me . . . Here I am not thinking of the Hindu, the Mahomedan, or the Zoroastrian religion, but of that religion which underlies all religions." That Gandhi does not use the term religion to connote such individual religions or faiths is clear when he says, "By religion, I do not mean formal religion, or customary religion, but that religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our Maker".[2] Elaborating his use of the term 'religion' further he says "religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe"[3]. This religion, according to him is that "which transcends" the limits of any particular religion. It does not supersede individual religions like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. but "harmonises them and gives them reality"[4]. This kind of religion is one "which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is 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".[5]

That Gandhi does not regard religion or being religious or following of a religious order or creed as something external, some kind of a 'job' or 'profession' is abundantly clear when Gandhi categorically asserts that, "I do not conceive religion as one of the many activities of mankind". The main reason for this is that "the same activity may be governed by the spirit either of religion or of irreligion". On the contrary he regards being religious as something inherent to mankind. The term religion, as used by him pervades in all our activities. Therefore, he concludes, "For me every, tiniest, activity is governed by what I consider to be my religion".[6] He very explicitly admits this fact when he says, "This is the maxim of life which I have accepted, namely, that no work done by any man, no matter how great he is, will really prosper unless he has a religious backing"[7].

I would like to call the above metaphysical or the ideal sense of the notion of religion. If one takes religion in the above sense then there can be no conflict because it assumes that there is just one universal religion. The word religion would then be always used in singular and never in the plural. But the word religion admits of a plural. Gandhi himself uses the term in the plural. From his use of 'religions' instead of 'religion' it follows that he was not always using the term in the philosophical or metaphysical sense explicated above. In fact, Gandhi admits that "I do not see a time when there would be only one religion on earth in practice". Giving a rationale for there being multiplicity of religions he goes on to say, "In theory, since there is one God, there can only be one religion. But in practice, no two persons I have known have had the same identical conception of God". From this he concludes, "there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to different temperatures and climatic conditions"[8].

We can talk about consensus or conflict, harmony and discord among religions only if there is more than one of the kind. Since the conflict in religions and their followers is a fact of our existence, which was experienced by Gandhi so often, not just in the social but in the political life also, it would not be wrong to conclude that Gandhi defined 'religion' not just in the above metaphysical sense. That Gandhi did not do so is clear from the distinction that he made between the term religion, sect and faith. These terms because of the ambiguity in their use are very often used interchangeably. Gandhi quite often uses them synonymously. For example he says, "God has created different faiths just as He has the votaries thereof"[9]. Likewise, he says, "in reality there are as many religions as there are individuals"[10]. And that "great religions of the world are . . . all God-given". He believes in the necessity of all the religions at least for "the people to whom these religions were revealed"[11].

The moment one admits the existence of several religions and the condition of its 'necessity' for each of these religion's followers, one has to agree to the implied fact that one has to concede the principle of singular religious adherence. This principle of adherence to just one and only one of the several religions either by birth or by choice (though one can not choose to be a Hindu; one can only be born as Hindu) is implicit in this conception of religion. In other words, it is not possible to be a follower of the religions of Judaism, Christianity or Islam, for instance, at the same time. This sense of exclusive belonging or singular adherence to a faith is a very important definitional marker of the concept of religion. This 'necessity' and exclusive adherence to one's religion is the cause of strife between the followers of one religion and the other. So much so that it is not just the cause of inter-religious conflicts but also intra-religious conflicts. In Hinduism they lead to the conflict between the Shaivites and Vaishnavites, between the Shaivas and the Shaktas and so on. These open and varied differences between one sect and the other led Alberuni to say that "there is not one thing that one Hindu says that is not denied by another!" Much more pronounced and violent are the conflicts between the Catholics and the Protestants; between the Shias and the Sunnis; between Orthodox and Conservative Judaism on the one hand and Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism on the other.

It is this 'necessity' which makes even a realised and noble soul like Gandhi to admit "I hold for my own religion"; "I hold my religion dearer than my country and that, therefore, I am a Hindu first and a nationalist after"[12]. This usage of 'my' and 'your' arouses in us a sense of difference and diffidence, even the sense of superiority and inferiority. For what is mine is much dearer to me than what is yours. I see non-existent good qualities in what is mine and am blind to

its defects and shortcomings. Likewise, I am likely to see non-existent defects in what is yours and turn a blind eye to what is good in it. This natural psychological commitment to, and love for that which is one's own and that which belongs to the other, not to speak of small men, leads even one like Gandhi to say, "I swear by my religion. I will die for it".[13] Gandhi himself traces the reason for this attachment with the religion in which one is born when he compares this attachment with and involvement in one's religion with the love and care for one's own wife. He says, "I can no more describe my feelings for Hinduism than for my own wife. She moves me as no other woman in the world can. Not that she has no faults; I daresay, she has many more than I see myself. But the feeling of an indissoluble bond is there. Even so I feel for and about Hinduism with all its faults and limitations".[14] This indissoluble bond between oneself and his religion is the cause of deep love for one's religion. As the Christian hymn declares:

"Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."

This love is the cause for one's taking pride in and considering one's religion as superior to other religions.

Just as Gandhi swears by his religion and is ready to die for it, so are those who belong to other religions. Just as Gandhi time and again justifies his actions by saying, "My religion teaches me . . ."[15], so are those belonging to other religions justified in taking refuge for their actions under the dictates of their religion. Like Gandhi, they may also invoke religious sanctions for justification of their deeds or even misdeeds. As long as the followers of different religions are confined like a Robinson Crusoe to their own religion and the practices dictated by it and remain within their personal, private and individual lives there may be no conflict. But the moment one enters the social arena one is bound to compare and contrast it with other religions, for the dictates of a religion are to be carried out by a group or a society which has entered into its folds, voluntarily or otherwise.

One of the most glaring religious conflicts that Gandhi faced in his life - and which to a large extent was the cause of division of India into two, and the consequent human misery - was in his interaction with Jinnah. Whereas, Gandhi's view of religion was purely metaphysical or idealist as discussed above, Jinnah's was purely empirical and down to earth. In response to a letter from Gandhi, in which, rejecting a separate nation for the Muslims, Gandhi very chauvinistically says: "I find no parallel in history for a body of converts and their descendants claiming to be a nation apart from the parent stock. If India was one nation before the advent of Islam, it must remain one in spite of the change of faith of a very large body of their children"[16], Jinnah argues:

We maintain that Muslims and Hindus (have) distinctive culture and civilisation, language and literature, art and architecture, names and nomenclature, sense of values and proportion, legal laws and moral codes, customs and calendar, history and traditions, aptitudes and ambitions: in short, we have our own distinctive outlook on life[17].

Jinnah, had maintained the same position in his address to the Muslim League session held in Lahore in March 1940 in which it was resolved to form a separate Muslim state by partitioning

India. First he denied that Hinduism and Islam are full fledged religions in the Western sense and said:

It is extremely difficult to appreciate why our Hindu friends fail to understand the real nature of Islam and of Hinduism. They are not religions in the strict sense of the word, but they are, in fact, different and distinct social orders and it is a dream that the Hindus and the Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality.

But later in the same speech admitting that the two are not only different and distinct religions but are diametrically opposed to one another, he continued:

The Hindus and the Muslims have two different religious philosophies, social customs and literatures. They neither intermarry, nor interdine together, and indeed they belong to two different civilisations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspects of life are different. It is quite clear that the Hindus and the Muslims derive inspiration from different sources of history. They have different episodes. Very often the hero of one is a foe of the other and, likewise their victories and defeats overlap[18].

Opposing Jinnah's interpretation of the opposition between Hinduism and Islam Gandhi said, "My whole soul rebels against the idea that Hinduism and Islam represent two antagonistic cultures and doctrines. To assent to such a doctrine is for me denial of God, for I believe with my whole soul that the God of the *Koran* is also the God of the *Bhagavad Gita* [19].

Gandhi did everything within his powers to resolve the conflict by persuasion – one of the most important components of his method of satyagraha. As we all know, even the other components of satyagraha namely, negotiations, self-purification, and direct action that Gandhi used to try to bring about a reconciliation between the two, failed, to bring about the desired results. But as is well known he failed miserably in making the opponent see his side of the argument and understand the fallacy of his own argument, let alone actually winning him over. This was because one was talking at the empirical, ground reality level, while the other was talking at the metaphysical, philosophical level. This failure in bringing about reconciliation between Jinnah's conception and his own conception of the two religions made Gandhi to admit his and his method's failure on this front. In another context he acknowledged his failure in bringing about a harmony between the followers of the two religions and expressed his anguish by saying, "Nothing evidently that I say or write can bring the two communities together"[20].

M.N. Roy assessing the work and achievements of Gandhi after the latter's martyrdom opines that "like the other religious prophets of morality, peace and human brotherhood, Gandhi was destined to fail in his mission of bringing about harmony among the followers of different religions". According to him Gandhi's attempts at bringing about a harmonious relationship between religions were doomed and his method of satyagraha and ahimsa which succeeded and were effective in conflict resolution in the political and other arenas were headed for a failure firstly because being primarily a religious man he "set before his followers high ideals which could not possibly be attained unless the human spirit broke out of the charmed circle of the religious mode of thought. Secondly, because "Communal harmony is not possible in the medieval atmosphere of religious orthodoxy and fanaticism"[21]. This is possibly why, to date,

religions of the world have failed to fulfil the hope reposed in them by Charles Bonney in his concluding lecture in the first Parliament of Religions held in Chicago more than a hundred years ago namely that, "Henceforth the religions of the world will make war, not on each other, but on the giant evils that afflict the mankind".

Endnotes

1. Anthony J. Parel, ed., *Hind Swaraj and Other Essays*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 42
2. Quoted in *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. R.K. Prabhu and U.R. Rao, Navjivan Publishing House, 1967. p. 64
3. *All Men are Brothers*, Navjivan Publishing House, 1960, p. 77
4. Ibid
5. Ibid., p.64
6. The Diary of Mahadev Desai, *Navjivan*, vol. I
7. *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, GA Natesan and Co., 1933, p. 377-8
8. *All Men Are Brothers*, op.Cit., p.79
9. *All Men Are Brothers*, op.cit. p. 78
10. *Hind Swaraj*, op. cit., p
11. Ibid., p. 79
12. *Young India*, 12.5.1920
13. *All Men are Brothers*, op.cit. p. 103
14. Ronald Duncan, ed , *The Writings of Gandhi*, Fontana/Collins, 1983, p.181
15. D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma, Volume II*, Vithalbhaik. Jhaveri & D.G. Tendulkar, 1951, p.196 and 203
16. Quoted in Yogesh Chandra, *Rediscovering Gandhi*, Century Books, 1997, p. 403
17. Ibid
18. Ibid., p.368

19. Ibid

20. Quoted in *Mahatma*, op. cit.,p.196

21. Ibid, p.31