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The Idea of Ethical Religion: M.K. Gandhi's Transformative Vision

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Abstract:*This paper undertakes a critical examination of the philosophical underpinnings of M.K. Gandhi's concept of "Ethical Religion," a paradigmatic vision that sought to reconcile the dialectical tensions between spirituality and morality within the context of colonial modernity. Through a nuanced analysis of Gandhi's engagements with diverse Western and Indian philosophical traditions, this research elucidates the ways in which he reconfigured the relationship between ethics and religion, positing a non-sectarian, non-hierarchical, and non-violent paradigm of spiritual practice that transcended the limitations of colonial epistemology. By interrogating Gandhi's key writings and public interventions, this study demonstrates how his idea of Ethical Religion subverted dominant discourses of religion, politics, and identity in colonial India, while also offering a prophetic vision for a more just, equitable, and inclusive world order.*

Keywords*:Ethical Religion, Colonial Modernity, Morality, Non-Violence, M.K.Gandhi etc.*

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Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, one of the leading proponents and figures of Indian Freedom Movement. He changed the course of Indian history by promoting the ideas if Non-Violence and *Satyagraha*, which lead the active participation of the Indian masses in the movements like Civil Disobedience, Non Co-operation and Quit India.

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Beside one of the most important political figures of 20th Century, he was also a leading philosopher, who viewed the political dynamics with the lens of philosophy, and as a result which reflected the ideas of seeking truth and justice among his followers.

Religion is an integration of different moral aspects of human life. Ethics is considered the science of ideals. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the leader of Indian nationalism in British-ruled India. He used non-violent civil disobedience, led India to independence, and inspired movements for civil rights and freedom around the world.

According to Ajai R. Singh and Shakuntala A. Singh the idea of "Religion of course is a matter of faith and we often tend to believe it is independent of reason or rational enquiry. Emotional defence and biased probing both reflect the lack of honesty in motives when religion becomes an object of study. We have ample display of both in most debates on religious issues when people of different faiths interact. For, when such debaters discuss, or even attempt to study each other, they are easily piqued or irked by the other's viewpoint. Then there cannot possibly be a reasoned debate. This is understandable because although religion can be debated, the hallmark of a genuine debate is objectivity and mutual respect, and religion (as faith in general) finds itself unable to encourage this in its debaters. But it is doubly unfortunate as well, for we must believe, firstly, in the worth of a reasoned enquiry in all aspects of human endeavour; and secondly, such an enquiry need not reduce the realistic vigour of faith. In fact, it must underscore our belief that no reasoned debate can hurt the legitimate interests of any worthwhile enterprise. Such an enquiry must only strengthen our worthwhile beliefs, help weed out the decrepit, and help us identify them in others as well. Therefore, then, there is reason to believe that even on religious matters, a reasoned debate is possible."[1]

Gandhi believed in judging people of other faiths from their point of view and not his own. He welcomed Hinduism's contact with other religions, especially Christian teachings, as he did not want to be prevented from doing good elsewhere. He believed that the respectful study of the religions of others was a sacred duty and did not diminish respect for one's own. He was looking for those universal principles that transcended religion as dogma. He expected religion to take practical life into account, he wanted it to appeal to reason and not contradict morality. He believed it was his right and duty to point out the shortcomings of his own religion, but to refrain from what concerned the beliefs of others. He refused to scold a man for his fanatical acts because he was trying to see them from the other person's point of view. He believed that Jesus expressed the will and the spirit of God, but could not accept Jesus as the incarnate only begotten Son of God. If Jesus was like God or God himself, then all human beings were like God or God himself. But he also could not accept the Vedas as the inspired Word of God, because if they were inspired, why not the Bible and the Koran too? He believed that all major religions are fundamentally equal and there should be an innate respect for them, not just mutual tolerance. He believed that those who wish to convert should try to be good believers in their own faith, rather than seeking the good by converting. His first impressions of Christianity were unfortunate and changed when he discovered the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount, whose ideal of renunciation seduced him. He believed that the Parliament of Religions or the International Fellowship of Religions could

only be founded on equal status, a common platform. A condescending attitude of tolerance goes against the spirit of the international community. He believed that all religions are more or less true but have flaws because they have come down to us through imperfect human resources. Religious symbols could not be fetishized to demonstrate the superiority of one religion over another.

In a multi-religious secular politics like that of India, Gandhi's ideas about religion and attitudes towards other religions could serve as a secular model for reflection and action. According to Gandhi, "Hypocrisy has nowadays increased in the world. Whatever a man's religion, he thinks of only of its outward form and fails in his real duty. In our crazy pursuit of wealth, we seldom think of the harm we cause, or are likely to cause, to others. Women in Europe do not hesitate in the least to wear soft [kid] gloves even though these are made by killing young and tender animals. It is known the world over now Mr. Rockefeller, said to be the richest man in the world, violated many rules of morality in amassing his fortune. It is because such conditions prevail around them that many people in Europe and America have turned against religion. They argue that, if any religion worth the name existed in the world, the inordinate wickedness that is rampant all round would not be there. This is a mistaken view. As it is common for a workman to quarrel with his tools and not try to look for his own faults, so, instead of thinking of the wickedness in themselves, men brand religion itself as humbug and go on acting and living as they please. A Society (The Society for Ethical Culture, Chicago) has been founded which has shown, after an investigation of all religions, that not only do all of them teach morality but they are based for the most part on ethical principles; that it is one's duty to obey the laws of ethics whether or not one professes a religion; and that men who would not obey them could do no good either to themselves or to others, in this world or the next. The object of these societies is to influence those who have been led to look down upon all religions because of the prevailing hypocrisy. They find out the fundamentals of all religions, discuss and write about the ethical principles common to them and live up to them. This creed they call Ethical Religion."[2]

According to Gandhi the societies of ethical religion reflects on the principles of moral ideas and beliefs, as "They firmly believe that man ought to abide by the laws of morality and that if he does not, it will mean an end to all order in the world and ultimate destruction."[3]

The word ethics derives from the Greek word "ethos" which means "way of life". The judgment of right and wrong, what to do and what not to do, and how one should act forms ethics. It is a branch of philosophy that systematizes, defends and recommends the concepts of good and bad behaviour.

Morality is the set of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct of a particular philosophy, religion or culture. It can also stem from a standard that a person believes in. The word morality derives from the Latin word "mos" which means custom.

Many people use the words ethics and morality interchangeably. However, there is a difference between ethics and morality. To put it simply: ethics = morality + reasoning.

Gandhi's view of religion is different as it focuses on the doctrines of philosophy and spiritualism which further connected with the idea of nationalism. "For Gandhi, it was never enough that an individual merely avoided causing evil; they had to actively promote good and

actively prevent evils. The ideas and ideals of Gandhi emanated mainly from: (1) his inner religious convictions including ethical principles embedded in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity; (2) the exigencies of his struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the mass political movements during India's freedom struggle; and (3) the influence of Tolstoy, Carlyle and Thoreau etc. He was a moralist through and through and yet it is difficult to write philosophically about his ethics."[4]

In his Ethical Religion, published in 1912 on the basis of lectures he gave, Gandhi had simply stated that he alone cannot be said to be truly religious or moral, whose mind is not tainted with hatred and selfishness, and the one lives in absolute purity and selflessness. Services. Without mental purity or purification of motive, outward action cannot be carried out in a selfless spirit. Good does not consist in abstaining from evil, but in the desire to do evil; Evil must be avoided not out of fear but out of a sense of duty. Consistency was less important to Gandhi than moral seriousness, and rules were less useful than specific standards of human excellence and esteem. Politics is a generic term associated with the composition and functioning of the state structure and its relationship with other states. It is an activity centred on power and very often devoid of morals. With its power, its amoral Machiavellianism, and its emphasis on expediency over principle and positive results over conscientious means, politics is an uncompromising path to holiness. The incorporation of ethics into politics seemed contradictory to many contemporary political philosophers.

For Gandhi the ideal morality defines, "We ought to follow the path which we know to be true, whether it is familiar or unfamiliar to us. In other words, when we know a particular path to be the right one, we should set out on it without fear. We can progress only if we observe the laws of morality in this way. That is why true morality, true civilization and true progress are always to be found together. If we examine our desires, we shall see that we do not wish for what we have already. We always value more that which we do not have. But desires are of two kinds; one is the pursuit of mere self-interest. To attempt to fulfil this kind of desire is immoral. The other impels us constantly to improve ourselves and to do good to others. We should never become overweening with any amount of good that we may do. It is not for us to evaluate it, but rather should we have perpetual longing to become better and do more good. True morality consists in our efforts to realize such longing."[5]

What was the idea of God according to Gandhi? To answer this we need to quote his lines, where he describes the idea and nature of God, "God is omnipotent, He is perfect. There are no limits to His mercy, to His goodness and to His justice. If this is so, how can we, His bond slaves, stray at all from the moral path? It is no fault of the ethical principles if one following them should fail. However, those committing a breach of morality have only themselves to blame."[6] He further adds, "In the path of morality there is no such thing as reward for moral behaviour. If a man does some good deed, he does not do it to win applause, he does it because he must. For him doing good is but a higher kind of food, if one may compare food and goodness. And if someone should give him an opportunity to do a good deed, he would feel grateful just as a starving man would be grateful to the giver of food and bless him."[7]

Gandhi underlines the idea of God through the points of ethical religion as he mentions, "This ethical religion, of which we have spoken, does not mean the cultivation of gentlemanliness. It does mean that we should become a little more diligent, a little better educated, a little cleaner and neater, etc. All this is no doubt included in it, but it touches only the fringe of ethical religion. Many more things have to be done by man if he would walk along this path; and he has to do them as a matter of duty, knowing them to be a part of his nature, not for gaining any worldly benefit."[8]

Gandhi was born Hindu, but his interpretation of Hinduism was his own. While retaining her strong roots in ancient Hinduism, he welcomed contact with other religions, particularly Christian teachings. In doing so, he had no doubt that he would not wrong Hinduism or deviate from its essential teachings, for his belief remained that Hinduism could assimilate and synthesize any new elements it encountered.

As far as the primary agenda of Gandhi's ideas are concerned we can see that, he talks about seven important sins which are acting as the hindrance for a being to achieve goal, as "Gandhi believed that "Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will." His seven social sins refer to behaviours that go against ethical code and thereby weaken society. When values are not strongly held, people respond weakly to crisis and difficulty. The seven sins are: (1) Wealth without work; (2) Pleasure without conscience; (3) Knowledge without character; (4) Commerce without morality; (5) Science without humanity; (6) Religion without sacrifice; and (7) politics without principle. Gandhi's Seven Sins are an integral part of Gandhian ethics."[9]

Gandhi's religion was more than the conventional religious thoughts and doctrines, he assessed the true concept of religion by keeping a firm hold on the concept of truth or *satya*. This idea of *satya* played an important role in terms of shaping the society. Which eventually became *Satyagraha*. *Satyagraha*, which became the weapon against colonialism, collectively empowered Indians to attain the idea of truth and justice. "According to the philosophy of *Satyagraha*, *Satyagrahis* (Practitioners of *Satyagraha*) achieve correct insight into the real nature of an evil situation by observing a non-violence of the mind, by seeking truth in a spirit of peace and love, and by undergoing a rigorous process of self-scrutiny. In so doing, the *satyagrahi* encounters truth in the absolute. By refusing to submit to the wrong or to cooperate with it, the *satyagrahi* must adhere to non-violence. They always warn their opponents of their intentions and forbid any tactic suggesting the use of secrecy to one's advantage. *Satyagraha* seeks to conquer through conversion: in the end, there is neither defeat nor victory but rather a new harmony. Gandhi's *Satyagraha* always highlighted moral principles. By giving the concept of *Satyagraha*, Gandhi showed mankind how to win over greed and fear by love."[10] What Gandhi firmly believed in the sense of religious doctrines, "Politics is as essential as religion, but if it is divorced from religion, it is like a corpse, fit only for burning. In the preface to his autobiography, Gandhi declared that his devotion of truth had drawn him into politics, that his power in the political field was derived from his spiritual experiments with himself, and those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means. Human life being an undivided whole, no line could be drawn between ethics and politics. It was impossible to separate the everyday life of man, he

emphasised, from his spiritual being. He said, “I feel that political work must be looked upon in terms of social and moral progress.” Gandhi is often called a saint among politicians. In an epoch of ‘globalisation of self-centredness’ there is a pressing necessity to comprehend and emulate the moralistic dimension of Gandhian thought and re-evaluate the concept of politics. The correlation between ends and means is the essence of Gandhi’s interpretation of society in terms of ethical value rather than empirical relations. For Gandhi, means and ends are intricately connected.”[11]

Gandhi’s philosophy is all about to achieve something and at the same point of time the goals and agendas reflect the ideals of Gandhi, in which purity and truth is the highest ideals. “His contention was, “For me it is enough to know the means. Means and ends are convertible terms in my philosophy.” Gandhi countered the assertion that ends vindicate means. If the means engaged are unjust there is no possibility of achieving satisfactory outcomes. He compared the means to a seed and the end to a tree. Gandhi stuck to this golden ideal through thick and thin, without worrying about the immediate results. He was convinced that our ultimate progress towards the goal would be in exact proportion to the purity of our means.”[12]

Conclusion

Gandhi’s ethical religion is very simple, it focuses on very simple idea of life and it encourages an individual to achieve his or her goals. What he believes is that, “The question of why one should act in a moral way has occupied much time in the history of philosophical inquiry. Gandhi’s answer to this is that happiness, religion and wealth depend upon sincerity to the self, an absence of malice towards others, exploitation of others, and always acting ‘with a pure mind.’ The ethical and moral standard Gandhi set for himself reveals his commitment and devotion to eternal principles and only someone like him who regulated his life and action in conformity with the universal vision of human brotherhood could say “My Life is My Message.”.”[13]

Gandhi’s idea reflected the various aspects of the society and individual, as talks about the notions of truth and to seek justice, moreover as far as the conventional religions are concerned he promoted the ideals of brotherhood and unity to fight against British Imperialism. He pointed out the religions do change the life of an individual and most importantly it directs the individual to achieve its primary goal on the basis of religious doctrines. “Finally he crystallized his views on religion by saying, “all religions are more or less true. All proceed from the same God, but all are imperfect because they have come down to us through imperfect human instrumentality”. “In reality there are as many religions as there are individuals”. “I do not share the belief that there can or will be on earth one religion”. “So long as there are different religions, everyone of them may need some outward distinctive symbol. But when the symbol is made into a fetish and an instrument of proving the superiority of one's religion over other, it is fit only to be discarded”. Also about proselytization he said, “(they) may change the lives of as many as they like but not their

religion. They can draw their attention to the best in their respective religions and change their lives by asking them to live according to them".”[14]

Finally he states, “After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that (1) all religions are true;(2)all religions have some errors in them; (3) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to me as one's own close relatives. My own veneration for other faiths is the same as that for my own faith".”[15] These fine works of Gandhi did created a way to become the Mahatma: The Great Saint, the symbol of unity, truth and justice.

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