



Gandhiji's Contribution to Interfaith Harmony

Dr. B. Nagapadmavathi, Vice Principal, SG Lecturer in History, S.K.S.D.
Mahila Kalasala UG&PG (A), Tanuku

Dr. Ch. Uttama Durga Devi, Reader in Commerce, Ch.S.D.St. Theresa's
College for Women (A), Tanuku

Abstract: The theory and practice of non-violence was undoubtedly Gandhi's greatest contribution to public affairs. But there were other contributions too. One such was to the theory and practice of inter-faith harmony. Gandhi once said "We shall respect each other's religion and religious feelings and shall not stand in the way of our respective religious practices. We shall always refrain from violence to each other in the name of religion. An attempt has been made in this paper Gandhi's contribution to interfaith harmony. The theory and practice of non-violence was undoubtedly Gandhi's greatest contribution to public affairs. But there were other contributions too. One such was to the theory and practice of inter-faith harmony.

Key words: Harmony, spirituality, violence

Introduction

Gandhi was born in 1869, a decade after the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. This was a time of widespread skepticism among the educated classes in Europe, a sentiment captured in the title of Thomas Hardy's poem, 'God's Funeral'. Outside the Europe, this was also a time of increased missionary activity. In their new colonies in Africa and Asia.

For his part, Gandhi rejected both the atheism of the intellectuals as well as the arrogance of the missionaries. He did not think science had all the answers to the mysteries of the universe. Faith answered to a deep human need. Yet Gandhi did not think that there was one privileged path to God either. He believed that every religious tradition was an unstable mixture of truth and error. He encouraged inter-religious dialogue, so

that individuals could see their faith in the critical reflections of another.

Gandhi once said of his own faith that he had 'broaden my Hinduism by loving other religions as my own'. He invented the inter-faith prayer meeting, where texts of different religions were read and sung to a mixed audience. At an International Fellowship of Religions, held at his ashram in Sabarmati in January 1928, he said that 'we can only pray, if we are Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu, or if we are Mussalmans, not that a Hindu or a Christian should become a Mussalman, nor should we even secretly pray that anyone should be converted to our faith, but our inmost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim and a Christian a better Christian. That is the fundamental truth of fellowship.'



What does it mean to be a better Hindu, or Muslim, or Christian? The sacred texts of all religions have contradictory trends and impulses; sanctioning one thing, but also its opposite. Gandhi asked that we affirm those trends that oppose violence and discrimination or which promote non-violence and justice. The high priests of Hinduism claimed that the practice of Untouchability was sanctioned by the scriptures; Gandhi answered that in that case the scriptures did not represent the true traditions of the faith.

There was, in Gandhi's life and work, an inseparable bond between non-violence and religious pluralism. When, in the late 1930s, violent conflicts erupted between Jewish settlers and Palestinian peasants, with both sides claiming to act in the name of their faith, Gandhi remarked that 'a religious act cannot be performed with the aid of the bayonet or the bomb'. A decade later, aged seventy-seven, Gandhi walked through the riot-torn districts of eastern Bengal and Delhi, healing the wounds. When independence came to India the following August, Gandhi refused to celebrate, for political freedom had come on the back of sectarian violence. When the violence would not abate, Gandhi began a fast-unto-death in Calcutta. These were the fasts at Calcutta and Delhi just after the partition of India. In both places as Stanley Jones says 'he wrought' miracles. In Calcutta the fast changed the hearts of the embittered people overnight. Peace crept into the minds of the people. Lord Mountbatten's words in relation to the miracle that

had happened at Calcutta are relevant here. He said, "What 50,000 well-equipped soldiers could not do, the Mahatma has done. He has brought peace. He is a one-man boundary force". The battle of Delhi was greater. The tensions were great. Delhi was a cesspool of hate. Gandhiji drew up eight points on which Hindus and Moslems must come to agreement or he would fast unto death. All the eight points were in favor of the Moslems. Gandhiji staked his life on their fulfillment. It was a gamble for peace. But it worked. It was a miraculous achievement. What was his approach here? It was moral and spiritual. It was an appeal to reason. It was an appeal to man's conscience. It was an appeal to man's higher nature, his spiritual nature. It worked Gandhiji knew that if a right appeal is made to the spirituality of man it could work and Gandhiji had no occasion to regret about his method. He knew that if the aim and the method are right then one need not bother about the consequences.

An old, frail, man, had, by the force of moral example, helped bring peace to two very large cities. He now wished to proceed to the Punjab, where the rioting had been especially fierce. Before he could go, he was murdered by a religious fanatic. But his examples, and achievements, lie before us. For, we live now in a time marked by arrogant atheism on the one side and religious bigotry on the other. Bookshops are awash with titles proclaiming that God does not exist; the streets are muddied and bloodied by wars between competing fundamentalisms. Gandhi's faith may be of vital assistance here, in promoting peace and harmony between people who worship different Gods or



no God at all.

Back in 1919, while seeking to forge an entente cordiale between India's two major religious groupings, Gandhi asked them to collectively take this vow: 'With God as witness we Hindus and Mahomedans declare that we shall behave towards one another as children of the same parents, that we shall have no differences, that the sorrows of each will be the sorrows of the other and that each shall help the other in removing them. We shall respect each other's religion and religious feelings and shall not stand in the way of our respective religious practices. We shall always refrain from violence to each other in the name of religion'.

What Gandhi asked of Hindus and Muslims in India in 1919 should be asked again of them today, asked also of Jews and Arabs in Palestine and of Christians and Muslims in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Africa, all the warring religious groups anywhere in the world.

References:

1. The Story of My Experiments with Truth, M.K. Gandhi
2. www.mkgandhi.org/
3. Young India
4. Harijan