

Gandhi as a Votary of the Cosmic Spirit and Sustainable Living

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ABSTRACT

This paper rethinks Mahatma Gandhi as a Votary of the Cosmic Spirit and Sustainable Living. Gandhi not only gave us freedom but he also gave the world and us a new thought on nonviolence and sustainable living. His teachings and experiments are more valid today than ever especially when we are trying to find solutions to worldwide violence and runaway consumptive life style which is going to put a very heavy burden on the world's resources. For Gandhi, Truth or cosmic spirit was beyond all qualities including the moral. As he put it, 'Fundamentally God is indescribable in words ... The qualities we attribute to God with the purest of motives are true for us but fundamentally false.' And again, 'beyond the personal God there is a Formless Essence which our reason cannot comprehend'. Although the cosmic power was without qualities including personality, Gandhi argued that human beings often found it difficult to avoid personalizing it. The human mind was so used to the world of senses that it felt deeply disoriented when required to think in non-qualitative terms. Furthermore, human beings were not only thinking but also feeling beings, and the 'head' and the 'heart' had different requirements. The quality-free cosmic power or pure intelligence satisfied the head but was too remote, abstract, and detached to satisfy the heart. The heart required a being with a heart, one who aroused the deepest feelings and to whom one could become emotionally bonded, and required a personal God.

Key words: cosmic spirit.

Mahatma Gandhi not only gave us freedom but he also gave the world and us a new thought on nonviolence and sustainable living. His teachings and experiments are more valid today than ever especially when we are trying to find solutions to worldwide violence and runaway consumptive life style which is going to put a very heavy burden on the world's resources.

Through ages India has occasionally given to the world a new thought. Thus Buddhism, Jainism, Yogic system, Sikhism are part of great spiritual thought given by India from time to time. Gandhiji's message of nonviolence and sustainable living is a continuation of that long tradition.

Gandhiji was energy conservator par excellence. He lived in his ashrams without electricity or any modern amenities. His insistence on use of self-human labor for majority of needs was legendary and was usually frowned upon by his closest colleagues who thought it was anti progress and pushing back India to stone ages. Nevertheless his own life was a shining example of how with frugal

living and with minimum energy needs he was capable of producing the highest quality of thought. Very few of us can live his exemplary life but Gandhiji showed that mental happiness and simple living could form the basis of sustainability. He believed that with simple living the resources of the planet earth can sustain us comfortably and his famous saying that earth provides us enough for our needs but not for our greed is extremely apt today.

Gandhiji was a highly evolved and spiritual human being. Politics came as a byproduct of spirituality and he considered it as his duty to help his countrymen and fellow beings. The spirit of *Bhagwadgita's* Karma Yoga guided him in this endeavor. There are many instances of people who saw his glowing skin, aura, and felt the presence of his personality whenever they met him.

Sometimes Gandhiji carried his energy conservation experiments too far. As a spiritual being and visionary Gandhiji was far ahead of his

times. One can surely say if he were alive today he would have felt that his dream village could have taken shape with the availability of internet connectivity, desktop manufacturing and small renewable energy power packs. His dream of giving employment and decent life to rural population may become possible with the availability of these energy efficient and high tech systems. Hence if we follow his maxim of simple living and high thinking then it is possible to have a decentralized high tech rural society and India can again show the world a new path in sustainable living.

Gandhi as a Thinker of the Cosmic Spirit

Gandhi was a deeply religious thinker. Although he was profoundly influenced by Hinduism, Christianity, and Jainism, his religious thought cut across all of them and was in a class by itself. Belief in God was obviously its basis. However, since Gandhi thought that the term 'God' implied a being or a person, he preferred to use such terms as eternal principle, supreme consciousness or intelligence, cosmic power, energy, spirit, or shakti. Later in life he preferred to speak of *satya* (ultimate reality or Truth), and regarded this as the 'only correct and fully significant' description of God. Following Indian philosophical traditions, he used the term *satya* to refer to the ultimate ground of being, to what alone persists unchanged in the midst of change and holds the universe together. For a long time he had said, 'God is Truth', implying both that Truth was one of God's many properties and that the concept of God was logically prior to that of Truth. In 1926 he reversed the proposition and said, 'Truth is God'. He regarded this as one of his most important discoveries and thought that it crystallized his years of reflection. For him the new proposition had several advantages over the old. It avoided anthropocentrism, and implied that the concept of Truth was prior to that of God and that calling it God did not add anything new to it. Since the sincere atheist too was in his own way seeking to unravel the mystery of the universe and search for truth, the new formulation provided the common basis for a dialogue between him and the believer. Gandhi knew many atheists with deep spiritual

and even mystical feelings, and was anxious not to put them outside the pale of religious discourse.

For Gandhi, Truth or cosmic spirit was beyond all qualities including the moral. He argued that human beings often found it difficult to avoid personalizing it. The human mind was so used to the world of senses that it felt deeply disoriented when required to think in non-qualitative terms. Furthermore, human beings were not only thinking but also feeling beings, and the 'head' and the 'heart' had different requirements. The quality-free cosmic power or pure intelligence satisfied the head but was too remote, abstract, and detached to satisfy the heart. The heart required a being with a heart, one who aroused the deepest feelings and to whom one could become emotionally bonded, and required a personal God.

He said that firstly, the cosmic spirit was 'pure' or disembodied consciousness, not the consciousness of some being, for the latter would then have to be other than consciousness, but rather consciousness simpliciter. Secondly, it acted in a rational and orderly manner and was never arbitrary or capricious. Thirdly, it was active and represented infinite shakti, force, or energy. Fourthly, it pervaded, informed, and structured the universe. Fifthly, it was benevolent. Since the cosmic spirit is supposed to be beyond good and evil, it is not entirely clear what Gandhi meant by calling it benevolent. He seems to have thought that although it was beyond good and evil in the conventional moral sense, and although its actions were not amenable to moral evaluation, the fact that the universe functioned in a stable and rational manner, was conducive to the well-being of all living beings, and offered the necessary conditions for the good life showed that it had a structural bias towards good and was regulated by a well-meaning spirit. When its actions appeared cruel in human terms, as in the case of natural and social calamities, they should not be hastily judged but accepted as part of an incomprehensible but basically benevolent design. Sixthly, the cosmic power was 'mysterious' in the sense that, although human beings could acquire some knowledge of its nature and mode of operation, their knowledge was necessarily

limited and tentative. Finally, although the cosmic power was omnipotent, it was subject to self-imposed limitations. Human freedom was one of them, and hence the cosmic power disposed but did not predetermine human beings to act in specific ways. Its omnipotence thus left space for human frailties, choices, and evil. For Gandhi evil was not an independent principle, but something 'permitted' or 'allowed' by the cosmic power.

Since the cosmic spirit was not a being or a person, Gandhi sometimes referred to it as 'it'. Since, however, it represented consciousness and intelligence, he also referred to it as 'He' (though never as 'She'). The distinctive nature of Gandhi's conception of cosmic power will become clearer if we compare it with the better-known Christian view of God. In its standard and popular version, the latter stresses his three features. First, God is an extra-cosmic being who pre-exists and is outside the universe. Second, he creates and imposes laws on the universe and ensures its orderly existence. Third, he is not only infinitely loving but also infinitely powerful, for to create and impose laws on the sun and the stars and the seas is obviously a dazzling and awe-inspiring display of power. The three features are closely related. As the creator of the universe, God is necessarily extra-cosmic, and power is obviously one of his most striking characteristics.

Since the universe for him was eternal, the question was not one of creating but one of ordering and structuring it. His cosmic spirit was therefore not a creator but a principle of order, a supreme intelligence infusing and regulating the universe from within. Unlike a supreme being who can and perhaps must be extra-cosmic, a principle of order cannot be. Like most Indian thinkers, Gandhi was puzzled not so much by the material world as by living beings, not by the rhythmic and orderly movement of the stars and the seas but by the baffling phenomenon of life with its 'mysterious' origins, diverse forms, and their ingenious and complex mechanisms. God's awe-inspiring powers and dazzling feats did not interest or even impress him; in fact he thought that to stress them was to detract from God's true nature and inspire fear and awe rather than love

and intimacy. Instead he stressed the cosmic spirit's intelligence, subtlety, skill, energy, and gentle and elusive manner of operation.

Gandhi agreed that the existence of the cosmic spirit was incapable of rational demonstration, but disagreed about the implications of this. By itself reason could not prove the existence of anything, not even chairs and tables; therefore, if it were to be the sole criterion of existence, we would have to deny the existence of the world itself. Furthermore, Gandhi could not see why only what satisfied reason should be deemed to exist. He rejected the view that it was the highest human faculty. If it was the highest because it said so, the argument was circular. As for the other faculties, they said no such thing. Reason was obviously an extremely important human faculty and should be assigned its due place in life, but it could not be made the sovereign arbiter of all others. Every belief must 'pass the test' of reason, but that did not mean that it could not transcend or go beyond it. Reason laid down the minimum not the maximum, and specified what we may not but not what we must believe.

Following the long line of Indian sages he argued that the existence of God was a matter of experiential certainty. Like many profound experiences in life, the experience of feeling God's presence did not come naturally to all. One needed to go through a long spiritual training and become a pure soul in order to qualify for the experience, and those who had done so had invariably spoken of 'feeling', 'seeing', or 'hearing' God. Gandhi claimed that his own life had borne out the truth of this. Since the existence of God could not by its very nature be rationally demonstrated, all that a believer could ask the sceptic to do was to undergo the required training and find things out for himself.

Gandhi agreed that to go beyond observation and reason was to enter the realm of faith, but saw nothing wrong in this. Human beings went beyond reason in most areas of life and could not live without faith, be it a faith in themselves, their family and friends, their ability to achieve difficult goals, or the belief that the sun would rise and the world would not come to an end tomorrow. Even

hard-headed scientists relied on the faith that the universe was governed by laws, had a rational structure, and was amenable to human understanding. Although their faith was fully justified, it was none the less an act of faith and not a matter of rational demonstration. The important and the only legitimate question therefore was not whether but when faith was 'justified', and how to separate 'rational' from 'blind' faith.

Although Gandhi nowhere stated them clearly, he often invoked the following four criteria to determine when faith was rational or justified. First, it should relate to matters falling outside the purview of observation and reason. Whether or not elephants could fly or there was a cat in the next room was amenable to empirical verification and not a matter of faith. Second, faith should not contradict observation and reason. Third, since faith involved going beyond what could be observed and demonstrated, one must show that it was called for by, and had a basis or warrant in, experience. Finally, faith was a calculated gamble in situations where the available evidence was inconclusive, and was justified if it had beneficial consequences.

Gandhi contended that faith in the existence of the cosmic spirit satisfied all four criteria. The cosmic spirit lay outside the world of observation and rational demonstration, and belief in it not only did not contradict but was intimated and called for by human experience. The order and regularity of the universe could not be explained in terms of natural laws alone, for there was no obvious reason why the universe should be governed by laws at all and not be in perpetual chaos, or why it should be governed by laws that were stable and hospitable to life. Matter by itself could not create life, nor could its laws explain the sophisticated ways in which even the minutest living beings adjusted to their often hostile environment. Gandhi also found it mysterious that life persisted in the midst of destruction. Such destructive forces as earthquakes, floods, and storms could easily have snuffed it out a long time ago. Yet life had continued to persist, flourish, and throw up increasingly higher forms. Again, although both good and evil existed in the

universe, good not only survived but also triumphed in the long run. In the short run and in individual cases, it might not, but 'if we take a long view, we shall see that it is not wickedness but goodness which rules the world'. Indeed, evil itself could not last unless sustained by good. Gangs of murderers might go about killing everyone in sight, but they must at least trust and help one another. Good was self-sufficient whereas evil was parasitic, and it was basic to life in a way that evil was not. The fact that the universe had a structural bias towards good and was not amoral could not be explained without postulating a cosmic spirit, Gandhi argued.

Turning now to the fourth criterion of rational faith, Gandhi contended that faith in the existence of the cosmic spirit was a better guide to life than its opposite. It made the tragedies of life easier to bear, encouraged human beings to care for and love one another, and guarded them against the cynicism provoked by the ingratitude and meanness of their fellows. It also helped them resist the temptation to bend moral rules to suit their narrow personal interests, inspired them to great acts of sacrifice, and gave them the strength to undertake actions and take risks they otherwise would not. Even if one did not feel absolutely certain of the existence of the cosmic spirit, belief in it had beneficial consequences and was a 'better hypothesis' than its opposite.

Unlike many believers, Gandhi advanced not the familiar strong thesis that there was an omnipotent God who created and presided over the universe, but a much weaker one that there was 'some' spiritual power who informed and 'gently' guided the universe. Even this weaker thesis, however attractive it might otherwise appear, is not without its difficulties. While claiming to take full account of reason, Gandhi assigned it a limited place and defined it in extremely narrow terms. So long as a belief was not patently absurd, it was deemed to be consistent with or permitted by reason. In this view there is no effective check on what beliefs one may hold, and even belief in ghosts and witches cannot be ruled out. On a more rigorous view of reason one might reach a different conclusion from Gandhi's. If one defined it in

terms of the available body of scientific knowledge about the nature of the universe, belief in the existence of the cosmic spirit would appear problematic and certainly not as self-evident as Gandhi maintained. The order and regularity in the universe and the emergence of life can be explained without postulating the cosmic spirit, the alleged victory of good over evil in the natural and human world has only a limited basis in fact, and the pervasive violence of the natural and social world which Gandhi bemoaned is not easy to reconcile with a benevolent spirit. As for Gandhi's appeal to experiential certainty, it has a point but is not free of difficulties. The Buddha did all that Gandhi asks for, and evidently found nothing. What is more, one generally finds what one earnestly looks for and, if one does not, one could always be accused of not being pure or rigorous enough or of following a wrong regime of training.

Religion According to Gandhi

For Gandhi religion represented the way human beings conceived and related to God. Since he postulated both impersonal and personal conceptions of God, he distinguished two different levels of religion. The 'formal', 'customary', 'organized', or 'historical' religions were based on distinct conceptions of God whom they reduced to the limited categories of the human mind and invested with anthropomorphic attributes. They involved prayer, worship, rituals, asking God for favours, and so on and were all sectarian. For Gandhi popular Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and all other religions belonged to this category. The 'true', 'pure', or 'eternal' religion transcended them. It dispensed with rituals, worship, and dogmas, and involved nothing more than a belief in the cosmic spirit and the commitment to realize it in all areas of one's life. Such a religion represented the purest form of spirituality and acknowledged that the divine was too complex to be fully grasped by any one religion. It 'transcended' but did not 'supersede' organized religions, which were all legitimate though limited articulations of it, and constituted their common 'basis' and connecting 'link'.

For Gandhi every major religion articulated a unique vision of God and emphasized his different attributes. The idea of God as loving Father and the concomitant emphasis on universal love, forgiveness, and uncomplaining suffering was most fully and movingly developed by Christianity. 'I cannot say that it is singular, or that it is not to be found in other religions. But the presentation is unique.' Austere and rigorous monotheism, the rejection of intermediaries between human beings and God, and the spirit of equality were 'most beautifully' articulated in Islam. The clear distinction between the impersonal and personal conceptions of God, the emphasis on non-attachment to the world while remaining active within it, the principle of the unity of all life, and the doctrine of non-violence were unique to Hinduism. For Gandhi every religion had a distinct moral and spiritual ethos and represented a wonderful and irreplaceable 'spiritual composition'. There was truth in each of them but that did not mean that they were all true, for they also contained some falsehood. Since each was unique, 'it is impossible to estimate the merits of various religions', let alone establish a hierarchy among them, in just the same way that it was impossible to compare and grade different artistic and musical traditions or great literary works.

Since God was infinite, and since the limited human mind could grasp only a 'fragment' of him and that too inadequately, every religion was necessarily partial and limited. This was equally true of those religions claiming to be directly revealed by him, for they were revealed to fallible human beings and embodied in an inherently inadequate human language. Religions therefore had much to offer each other and benefited from a sympathetic dialogue. The proper attitude to other religions was not one of toleration or even respect but *sadbhava* (goodwill). Toleration implied that they were mistaken, though for various reasons one was willing to put up with them, and that one's own religion was 'true' and had nothing to learn from them; it thus smacked of 'spiritual arrogance' and 'condescension'. Respect was a more positive attitude, but it too implied both an unwillingness to learn from

others and a desire to keep them at a safe distance. By contrast *sadbha* implied 'spiritual humility', a 'feel for other religions', and a willingness to see them flourish and learn from them.

For Gandhi, religion was the basis of life and shaped all one's activities. It could not be compartmentalized, reserved for special occasions or days of the week, or viewed as a preparation for another world. To be religious was to live in the constant presence of the cosmic spirit and to translate that awareness in all one did. It affected the smallest as well as the most momentous activities of one's life, including how one sat, talked, ate, and conducted one's personal, professional, and public life, and was nothing more than their 'sum total'. Since one lived out one's religious beliefs in all areas of life including the political, 'those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.' This did not imply theocracy or rejection of the secular state, for religion was a matter of freely and sincerely held beliefs and ruled out all forms of coercion. Since the state was a coercive institution, it should be secular in the sense that it should not institutionalize, impose or favour a religion, or even support all religions equally. This did not, however, mean that political life should be secular and disallow religiously based appeals, arguments, or actions, as that would violate citizens' religious integrity and their freedom to express their religious identity.

Religions are commonly thought of as closed worlds, almost like sovereign states zealously guarding their territorial boundaries. Their adherents are not allowed to belong to more than one religion or to borrow the ideas and practices of another without feeling guilty or worrying about the dilution of their religious identity. Gandhi took a very different view. For him a religion was not an authoritative, exclusive, and monolithic structure of ideas and practices, but a resource from which one freely borrowed whatever one found persuasive. It was thus a collective human property and formed part of mankind's common heritage. Every person was born into and deeply shaped by a particular religious tradition, which as it were constituted

his original spiritual home, but other religions were not closed to him. Gandhi said that, as a Hindu, he was an heir to Hinduism's rich and ancient heritage. As an Indian he was a privileged inheritor of India's diverse religious and cultural traditions. As a human being, all great religions were his spiritual inheritance, to which he had as much right as their native adherents. While remaining firmly rooted in his own tradition, he therefore felt free to draw upon their moral and spiritual resources. To express the two central ideas of rootedness and openness, he often used the metaphor of living in a house with its windows wide open. The house was protected by walls and gave him a sense of security and rootedness, but its windows were wide open to allow cultural winds from different directions to blow into it and enrich the air he breathed. '*aa no bhadra kritavo yantu vishvataha*' (May noble thoughts from all over the world come to us) was one of his favourite classical maxims.

Gandhi took full advantage of his self-proclaimed intellectual freedom. He abstracted what he took to be the central values of Hinduism and set up a critical dialogue, even a confrontation, between them and those derived from other religious traditions. Thus he took over the concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence) from the Indian traditions, especially the Buddhist and the Jain. However, he found it negative and passive and reinterpreted it in the light of the activist and socially oriented Christian concept of *caritas*. He felt that the latter was too emotive, led to worldly attachments, and compromised the agent's self-sufficiency, and so he redefined it in the light of the Hindu concepts of *anasakti* (non-attachment) and *nishkam karma* (action without desire). His double conversion, his Christianization of an Indian concept after he had suitably Indianized the Christian concept, yielded the novel idea of an active and positive but detached and non-emotive love. Again, he took over the traditional Hindu practice of fasting as a penance, combined it with the Christian concepts of vicarious atonement and suffering love, interpreted each in the light of the other, and developed the novel idea of 'voluntary crucifixion of the flesh'. It involved fasting undertaken by the acknowledged leader of a community to atone for the evil deeds of his followers, awaken their sense

of shame and guilt, and mobilize their moral and spiritual energies for redemptive purposes.

Gandhi's dispute with his critics highlighted two very different approaches to religion and religious truth. For him religion was a resource, a body of insights to be extracted, combined, and interpreted in the way he thought proper. His approach to religion was therefore profoundly ahistorical, uninhibited, anti-traditionalist and liberal, and did not involve understanding religious traditions in their own terms. For his critics a religion was uniquely grounded in a particular historical event, possessed moral and spiritual authority, formed the basis of the relevant community, and required a careful and faithful study of its basic texts. Each approach had its merits and weaknesses. Gandhi's view placed the individual at the centre of the religious search, liberated religion from the stranglehold of traditionalism and literalism, encouraged fresh readings of scriptures, and made space for an inter-religious dialogue. However, it also violated the historical integrity of the religious tradition, de-institutionalized religion, and encouraged in less competent hands an attitude of shallow cosmopolitanism. His critics' approach had the opposite virtues and vices.

Truth: The Greatest Religion

For Gandhi, Truth was not a concept, but was a way of life. Mahatma Gandhi's life exemplifies the power and possibilities of practicing *Dharma* (living truthfully). Experiencing the injustice of racial prejudice, Gandhi saw that moral and political injustice were based on ignorance of the sacredness and unity of life. He became convinced that it is not enough for the individual merely to do good, but that we had a duty to actively face evil. A duty to practice the truth... that life is sacred. A duty to affirm the dignity of life and honor the sacred in all creation.

Gandhi taught by example. He dealt with all beings in a spirit of humility with the deepest respect for their Divinity. He insisted on seeing the Divine in his most ignorant adversaries. The Truth behind his action was a profound experience for everyone whose life was touched by this Knowledge.

He described his life as "my experiments with truth." As he matured in this experiment, he came to the realization that Truth is God. In the practice of his life he experienced that as he cared for the life around him in a "truthful," unselfish way, he experienced the sacredness of all life. As he cared for people and nature in a nonviolent (*Ahimsa*), unexploitive way that honored the divinity of all life, he experienced a life where every relationship was service to God. Through practicing *Dharma*, his every action was an experience of the sacred.

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Any change, even a change for the better, is always accompanied by drawbacks and discomforts.

~ Arnold Bennett
