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PLURALISM AND NURTURING OF NATIONHOOD: THE RELIGIOUS VIEWS OF GANDHI AND VIVEKANANDA

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Abstract

In Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth (1925)*, he wrote, "What I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain moksha". To encounter God face to face was to surrender in the service of humanity and more importantly, to see god in everyone. Humanity and God were not separate for him.

Similarly, for Swami Vivekananda in his speeches and writings reiterated that all living beings are a personification of the divine. Service to God was to serve mankind. He worked tirelessly for the upliftment of the underprivileged spiritually, economically and culturally.

This paper seeks to understand the plurality of thought that both Gandhi and Vivekananda fostered and addressed. In understanding the religious views of both these philosophers, this paper examines these viewpoints in today's context of radical, divisive and intolerant religious preaching. Contemporary hate based tolerance and the complete elimination of plurality has become the norm. Gandhi and Vivekananda's views on religion propound the idea of oneness and unity. This oneness or inclusivity is not based on excluding another religion or sect but understanding that God, or Allah, or Buddha or Jesus are all equally present in each of us and each of us signify dignity.

Keywords: Pluralism. Mahatma Gandhi. Vivekananda. Religious Harmony. Indoctrination.

Review of Literature

Religious Pluralism has been a topic of vast research and analysis. For the purposes of this paper, three fundamental books have been referred to- *Hind Swaraj*, *My Experiments with Truth* and *Sisters and Brothers of America: Speech at World's Parliament of Religions*. The first book, *Hind Swaraj* is a seminal book written by Mohan das Karamchand Gandhi and deftly articulates Gandhi's views on religious pluralism as the backbone of India. The second pivotal book written by Gandhi is his autobiography that describes his experiments with different religions both in India and in England. In this autobiography, he argues that God is truth and religions tell that truth through varied lenses but all are one.

The third and final book that has been used as a review in this paper is, "*Sisters and Brothers of America: Speech at World's Parliament of Religions.*" This is a collection of speeches of Vivekananda during his Chicago address in 1893. In these speeches, Vivekananda clearly makes us understand the true meaning of Hinduism and tolerant living. It is a foundational treatise to understanding *Sanatan Dharma*, Hinduism and the Indian way of life.

These three books have been reviewed with the purposes of understanding religious pluralism and inclusive monotheism.

Methodology

This paper begins by understanding religion as understood in ancient India and also briefly tries to understand the modern outlook towards religion. The paper, then briefly introduces the interpretations of Gandhi and Vivekananda on religion. The next two sections separately examine Gandhi and Vivekananda's religious experiences as well as experiments respectively. The next two sections offer a critique of Gandhi's view on religion by understanding secular religion equally dangerous as conservatism. In this section, we delve further into the dichotomy that Gandhi writes or propounds when he talks about religion in everything and everyone.

The last two sections build the argument that both Gandhi and Vivekananda, despite them belonging to Hindu affluent families, spoke for a universal religion as an inclusive way of accepting and serving others rather than a divisive way of hating and hurting others. These two sections also link this universal approach to religion with the contemporary political climate in India.

Purpose of the Paper

This paper explores the religious beliefs of Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda. Gandhi's attitude towards religion was, in essence, similar to Vivekananda's as they both believed that religious pluralism and linguistic pluralism were central to nurturing the self and the nation. Gandhi's prayer meetings were a symbol of religious harmony as they included recitations from all religious texts including the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Parsi, and Buddhist texts. Similarly, for Vivekananda religion was not to be caged inside doctrines and temples but a personal realisation.

This paper explores the religious views of Gandhi and Vivekananda as a personal matter and not just an indoctrination. These religious concepts stressed the building of character and a spiritual transformation that could not be detected in books, churches and public worship. This paper examines the religious views of both the leaders in the context of contemporary political and religious life. By discussing the contemporary relevance of the religious and the secular, this paper tries to understand religion as not just a signifier of a particular creed or sect but as a cultivation of a dignified life for ourselves and others.

Introduction

Temples and churches, books and forms, are simply the kindergarten of religion, to make the spiritual child strong enough to take the higher step. Religion is not in the doctrines or dogmas, nor intellectual argumentation. (Vivekananda 24)

Dharma or religion is derived from the Sanskrit root "Dhre" which translates into something that holds or sustains. Dharma is not just in the context of a particular religion but rather refers to a force that sustains society and its fellow beings. Dharma or religion is a way of life.

For Gandhi and Vivekananda, religion was as much a personal experience as a social phenomenon. It was a journey of cleansing that the individual undertook through love, compassion and service to his fellow beings. All religions, creeds and customs were part of this journey. Gandhi and his religious views were all-inclusive and brought together people belonging to different religions and regions. Vivekananda's religious views stressed more internal cleansing and through that becoming good so that he or she could believe in the goodness of others. However, Emile Durkheim along with other members of the French Sociological School maintained that religion cannot be just an individual experience as an individual is part of the society and cannot be cut off to undergo a religious or spiritual transformation. Therefore, Gandhi and Vivekananda both stressed the service of the poor as a true service to yourself and god. They recognised god in each being as each being was the creation of god. For them, it was not just the study of a particular religion like Hinduism but the study of all religions to assimilate their best principles of them for the betterment and advancement of people and society.

Mahatma Gandhi and Religion

Gandhi was born in a deeply religious family of Hindu Vaishnavites. Although he was born in a religious environment, Gandhi's growing up years were acquainted with different religious experiences as his parents were in close contact with Muslims, Parsis and Jains. His journey to England was a pivotal point as he experimented with various religions and undertook the study of various scriptures of different faiths. He experimented with various tenets of different religions including living in ashrams (Phoenix settlement and Tolstoy farm) and also took the vow of sexual abstinence. These experiments helped him understand religion not just as an external facet but as an internal cleansing through austerity and service. Gandhi's views on religion were progressive and hold extreme relevance in contemporary times. For him, God was Truth and Love. This very human way of looking at God within us and outside each of us was to define his religious thought throughout his life.

To me, God is Truth and Love. God is Ethics and Morality. God is Fearlessness. God is the essence of life and light and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheist of the atheist. For in his boundlessness, God permits the atheist to live. He is the searcher of hearts. He is a personal God to those who need his personal presence. He is embodied by those who need his touch. He is the purest essence.... He is all things to all men. He is in us and yet above and beyond us. (Gandhi, pp 340-341)

Religion was pivotal to Gandhi's life at home and in politics. He regarded politics as the field where religious tenets had to be fortuitously applied. However, Gandhi's views on religion changed throughout the course of his life and weren't static. He experimented with these views and those that he found outdated were discarded by him. For Gandhi Practicing religious belief in his daily life was more important than following a certain creed or sect. In a documented conversation between Gandhi and an American missionary in 1937, Gandhi expressed:

I do not take as literally true the text that Jesus is the only begotten son of God. God cannot be the exclusive father and I cannot ascribe exclusive divinity to Jesus. He is as divine as Krishna or Rama, Mohammad or Zarathustra. (M. K. Gandhi pp. 34)

Gandhi is religiously transgressive and does not view one religion as superior to the rest

rather he considered religion as a spiritual journey that took into account various facets of human life and politics, thereby trying to integrate all religions. Gandhi interpreted religion not only as an adherence to a particular creed or faith but as a way of life that was built on *sewa* or service. Religion, for Gandhi, is not a dogma or narrow doctrine that needs to be observed externally. For him, it is living with truth and ahimsa (nonviolence). It is a binding force and not a divisive force as it has become in contemporary times. He saw religion in everything including in politics. For him, the power of religion was in adhering to the truth and Truth was in service to humanity and his fellow beings. Service was foremost in achieving Truth and a vehicle to salvation or Moksha as he writes in his autobiography;

What I want to achieve,—what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years,—is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end. (K.M. Gandhi, pp. 4-5)

Vivekananda and Religion

Vivekananda or Narendranath Dutta was a contemporary of Gandhi. He was born in Calcutta in 1863 to Vishwanath Dutta who was an attorney at the High Court. Right from his childhood, Narendranath was allowed a liberal attitude filled with western knowledge, open-mindedness and a questioning spirit. Like Gandhi, Narendranath experienced a discussion on various religious matters while growing up and was in contact with people from different faiths. He was trained in both vocal and instrumental music by Ahmed Khan and Bani Gupta who were well known musicians of the time.

He and Gandhi shared similar views on religion. Both of them propounded not a new religion but a completely different way of approaching religion. Swami Vivekananda, in his Chicago address in 1893, asked people to enjoin and give importance to all religions. He proposed the universality of all religions. This universal religion wasn't a new religion but relied on the essence of all religions having the same values i.e. to create kindness and compassion in men. At this address, he appealed that religion should be seen for its kindness and the goodness in each religion should be emphasised.

Like Gandhi, for Vivekananda religion was a process of self-realisation through becoming a better human being, one who was capable of doing and thinking good for others. He reiterated in his address, "Do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each man, which is spirituality, and the more this is developed in a man the more powerful is he for good. Earn that first, acquire that, and criticise no one. Show by your lives that religion does not mean words, or names, or sects, but that it means spiritual realization. (Vivekananda 27)

Vivekananda believed that temples, churches and rituals were just paraphernalia in religion. God resided in each of us and to see that divinity was the true objective of religion. Hinduism and its philosophy of Advaita Vedanta was not a ritualistic creed or an external observance but rather psychological. All religions represented the same truth as the Vedanta philosophy or Hinduism but from different angles and capacities. There was no contradiction among religions but unity in its very genesis.

Religion can heal as well as be cruel. Vivekananda believed that the cruelty stemmed not from religion but from the evil thoughts of people and thus, in realising so, man must work towards becoming a good person, in thought and in action. For this, man must keep/his own welfare in their mind and in doing so happiness and compassion can be manifested within each of us. He emphasised on spiritual growth and religion have no value if there is no inner growth. Inner growth happens through experience and these experiences could be attained through various practices of yoga and meditation.

Vivekananda was a Hindu but believed not in the dogma attached to this religion but in the tolerance, acceptability and spiritual growth that Hinduism offered. The manifestation of this spiritual growth was in the philosophy of Vedanta which believed in the self as part of the world and the world as part of the self. Religion and man were not separate from each other. They were the clay and the pot together which cannot be separated based on certain external observances and rituals. This sentiment is echoed in the Bhagwat Gita when Krishna says,

To but One Goal are marching everywhere.
All human beings, though they may seem to walk
On paths divergent; and that Goal is I,
The Universal Self, Self-Consciousness.
(Mukundananda 67)

Religion through Resistance

In his book, *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance*, Ajay Skaria, explores Gandhi's ideas on liberalism, freedom and religion. According to him, Gandhi's interpretation of religion is unsettling in today's divisive times. This is because for Gandhi politics and religion cannot be separate. (Skaria 3) He critiques Gandhi by entailing that his interpretation bordered on conservative politics and the former's assertions can be "downright dangerous" in today's atmosphere of liberal secularism and liberal traditions. This kind of religious secularism in politics resonated in Marx's earlier writings on the Christian state when he examines and concludes that the true secular state is a perfect Christian state. This according to Sakaria, doesn't mean that the state embodies Christian values but that the religion alienates man from his species by making man follow a certain dogma and doctrine. In doing so, the liberal secularist state perfects this alienation. Thus, for Marx and for Gandhi, liberal politics and liberal ideas aided man's alienation from his/her own kind. (Ahmad 1)

The main function of religion according to Karl Marx was to dull the pain of oppression that was meted out to the people by giving tenets to live by so that people would be "intoxicated" by them and not question hegemony and demand social change. "Religion is the opium of the masses" said Marx. These promises of religion according to Marx were as follows:

1. Afterlife symbolising eternal bliss which meant that religion offered people something to look forward to that will make their present easier.
2. Suffering is a virtue. The poor become divine and the rich become satanic. Self-suffering in every religion - abstinence, self-flagellation and extreme fasting are all illustrations of this.
3. Supernatural elements come to the rescue when there is a crisis or supernatural elements to justify people's social condition and state of crisis. (Marx et al. 23)

All these promises made by religion are perfected in a society of liberalism where capitalism and rampant self-indulgence are given as counter-products to religion. With secularism, religion has died. Gandhi and Vivekananda's writings and beliefs emerge after "the death of God"

Both Gandhi and Vivekananda confront the world after religion is dead and what is emerging as an extreme reaction to religion in the form of industrialism and capitalism. They both return to the central concept of religion in order to reframe the definition of religion by understanding the compassion and the freedom that religion entails. Jacques Derrida writes of religion: "it is always a response that is prescribed, not chosen freely... There is no doubt that it implies freedom, will and responsibility, but let us try to think this: will and freedom without autonomy." (Ahmad 2)

Religion and Pluralism in Contemporary Times

Gandhi and Vivekananda both stress the freedom that religion encapsulates. The freedom to live a life of dignity and provide a life of dignity for others. It is not prescribed by an authority but is autonomous of a theological god and the god that resides within us. Both these thinkers, provoke us to think of the latter and work on being aware of the latter. Their writings and speeches border on mysticism which means a "belief that union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender." (Vedder 34)

They echo the beliefs of Heidegger and Nietzsche when they say that "god is dead". This death symbolises not the death of religion but of the so-called supernatural sensory god that is imbibed into many traditions and cultures. (Vedder 41) What remains is the true and real world in which humanism is the only assertion and the higher values that a certain "god" embodies transfer within us and vilifies the "egotistic man" and makes it a more humanist man - a more *human* human. This kind of religious universalism is echoed by Vivekananda in his address in Chicago on September 11th, 1893. He stressed inter-faith tolerance, universal brotherhood and humanity. He believed that service to mankind is the most effective kind of worship and every man and woman must strive to worship the god within each of us.

The Upanishads, for example, say: "Cows are of many different colours, but The milk of all is of one colour, white; So the proclaimers who proclaim the Truth Use many varying forms to put it in, But yet the Truth enclosed in all is One". (Easwaran 54)

Vivekananda's interpretation of religion can be divided into two spheres. First, it was a psychological experience attuned to the capacities and the attitudes of every individual and secondly, it was to preserve this psychological experience along with assimilating the spirit of other religions.

At the final session of the parliament of religions, he reiterated that the goal of religions shouldn't be to convert but each to co-exist in harmony and in the spirit of service to humanity and mankind.

Upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: 'Help and not Fight', 'Assimilation and not Destruction, 'Harmony and Peace and not Dissension.

(Sisters and Brothers of America: Speech at World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893
54)

Conclusion

Both Gandhi and Vivekananda, as can be seen by the aforementioned examination of religion as a way of life through doing well to others. ("Gandhi's Contemporary Relevance") believed that spirituality, charity, morality, market, economics and politics were inseparable from each other. Religion is based on ethics, love, responsibility and duty. Religion is not exclusive but inclusive. This doesn't mean that one religion is antagonistic to the presence of other but accepts the goodness in the other and strives to exist in harmony with it. In the context of India in contemporary times, we see the occurrence of divisive politics as one majority religion tries to become dominant and spread hatred. We see occurrences of brutal rape and murder being undertaken in the name of religion and protection of religion. The Babri Masjid case, the rebuilding of the Ayodhya Temple and the Gyanvapi controversy are all instances of how one religion feels wronged by the other and in feeling so, excludes the other by becoming intolerant to its people. Morality, spirituality, compassion and justice - the core tenets of all religions are being black masked in the name of preserving these very religions. Violence and falsity which are the complete opposite of what Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Christianity or Buddhism teach are being used as weapons of "protecting religion".

Gandhi and Vivekananda believed and spoke furiously about the unity and similarity in all religions that it spoke about - purity of character, innocence in action and service to mankind. Their ideas, speeches and books signify practicality to religion that is free of an external dogma of an authoritarian god. Their life symbolises peace, brotherhood and respect- the tenets of any religion and surely, the tenets of nation-building and nationalism.

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