

GANDHIJI - THE MAN OF RELIGION¹

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NAPOLEON in his last sad days at St. Helena discovered a great truth. For, suffering clarifies the vision and helps us see things in their proper perspective. In a pensive mood, pondering over the evanescence of matter and the permanence of Spirit, he remarked, "Alexander, Charlemagne and I founded great empires. We founded them on force. Where are they today? Jesus Christ founded on love and today millions would die for him." Gandhiji was a true product of Indian culture and he did not want to gain an empire at the cost of the soul. To him Truth was God. If he stuck to the word God, it was because it had a long usage behind it, and he did not like to do violence to mankind's tradition. But the God of Gandhiji was nothing but Truth and Justice. He said, "I do dimly perceive that whilst everything around man is ever changing, ever dying, there is, underlying all that change, a Living Power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates. That informing Power or Spirit is God. And since nothing else I can merely see through the senses can or will persist, He alone is." So the sum-total of all the many mighty spiritual values which he stood for was God. Truth, non-violence, continence, austerity, non-possession, prayer, vows etc. were the main ingredients of the Gandhian personality. Like a true scientist he, both deductively and inductively, arrived at his own conclusions about God. He declared, "I see, in the midst of death Life persists, in the midst of untruth Truth persists, in the midst of darkness Light persists. Hence I gather that God is Life, Truth, Light. He is Love." "The core of Gandhiji's philosophy was a living and unshakable faith in God, and a ceaseless awareness of the supremacy of the Spirit. His impregnable faith in God was so very deep that he preferred death to a life without God. God was his constant guide and perpetual inspiration. He used to say, "Dark though the path appears, God will light and guide my steps, if I have faith in His guidance and humility enough to acknowledge my helplessness without that Infallible Guidance."

As a devout Hindu moulded from birth by the spiritual ideals and the religious discipline of the race, Gandhiji regarded salvation (*mukti*) as the

¹ Reproduced from the magazine Vedanta Kesari, 1969, October issue.

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ultimate goal of life. He clearly stated, "If I have any passionate desire, it is only to reach God, if possible, at a jump, and to merge myself in Him. Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities, political, social, religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. I have no desire for the perishable kingdom of earth. I am striving for the kingdom of Heaven, which is spiritual deliverance." To him life with all the various demands on it and with its many interests, was one, and its sole purpose was the realization of Truth through service. He did not believe in compartmentalising life into private and public, secular and spiritual. In regard to this his emphatic declaration was: "In my own humble opinion we needlessly divide life into watertight compartments, religious and other, whereas if a man has true religion in him it must show itself in the smallest details of life. To me sanitation in a community like ours is based on common spiritual effort. The slightest irregularity in sanitary, social and political life is a sign of spiritual poverty." Why unlike other men of religion Gandhiji plunged himself in active politics has often been the cause of wonder to many. He himself made his position clear: "If I seem to take part in politics it is only because politics today encircle us like the coils of a snake from which one cannot get out no matter how one tries. I wish to wrestle with the snake. I am trying to introduce religion into politics. By religion I do not mean formal religion, but that religion which underlies all religions and which brings us face to face with our Maker." To an audience in South India he said, "The whole of my life is saturated with the religious spirit. I could not for a single second live without religion. My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion. I go further and say that every activity of a man of religion must be derived from his religion."

Again he reiterated, "My patriotism is for me a stage on my journey to the land of eternal freedom and peace. Thus it will be seen that for me there are no politics devoid of religion. They subserve religion. Politics bereft of religion are a death trap, and will kill the soul." In fact he gave a new dimension to politics and freed politics from scheming diplomacy and underhand dealings. **His idea was that politics should be based on ethics.** He emulated Asoka in this regard.

Gandhiji's life was a striking demonstration of his profound faith in God and complete resignation to His will. He was a great *bhakta* and an ardent *karma yogi*. He averred, "It is for God to take our broken barge across the stream, but it is for us to put in our best effort. It is for us to plug a hole in its bottom. I would therefore say that man must make an endeavour, and for the result depend on God's grace." His robust optimism and his remarkable coolness in the face of crises were born of his deep-rooted faith in God. "Prayer has saved

my life," he affirmed, "and without it I should have been a lunatic long ago. I had my share of the bitterest public and private experiences. They threw me into temporary despair. If I was able to get rid of that despair, it was because of prayer. It has not been a part of life as truth has been. It came out of sheer necessity, as I found myself in a plight where I could not possibly be happy without it. And as time went on and my faith in God increased, the more irresistible became the yearning for prayer. I started with disbelief in God and in prayer, and until at a late state in life I did not feel like anything like a void in life. At that stage I felt that as food was indispensable to the body, so was prayer indispensable to the soul. In fact food for the body is not so necessary as prayer for the soul." He also used to say that in spite of despair staring him in the face on the political horizon he never lost his peace and that that was because of prayer. He declared with a candour that was arresting, "I am not a man of learning, but I humbly claim to be a man of prayer. I am indifferent as to the form." His non-conformism was not superficiality, but a sure sign of his grasp of the essential. Prayer, to him, was that which came spontaneously from the soul, from its inmost depths. Prayer was not, according to him, to be judged by the ritual accompanying it. His prayers were no petitions to Providence. They were praises of God, expressed yearnings of the soul. Worldly concerns never entered into them and corrupted them. His nationalism was but an offshoot of his living faith in God. The habit of daily prayer in the midst of urgent and exacting activities has been hailed by Toynbee as the greatest gift of Gandhiji to the civilization of the world.

No image or symbol was used by him during prayer. But if he never took to image worship, his catholicity was such that he never objected to the performance of such worship by those who needed symbols. His position was explained by him in this way: "I do not believe in idol-worship. An idol does not excite any feelings of veneration in me. But I think that idol-worship is part of human nature. I do not forbid the use of images in prayer. I only prefer the worship of the formless. One suits one man, another thing may suit another man, and no comparison can fairly be made between the two."

His humility was such that he never assumed all-knowingness and never claimed infallibility. He was a ceaseless experimenter with Truth and Right Understanding. He confessed, "I know what an inadequate follower I am of myself, for I cannot live up to the conviction I stand for." His strength of soul always kept him at heights where he feared not danger and was not afraid of pain. His life was a long and continuing saga of endeavour in which he added bit by bit and piece by piece to the stature of his personality. When we study the splendid mosaic of his thoughts and deeds, what strikes us most is his

steadfast reliance on Truth and its benevolent power. Truth was the foundation of and the background to, his religious life. His elaboration of the concept of Righteousness in political struggles and national problems made him one of the greatest interpreters of Hindu Dharma. The purity of his methods never got vitiated by the desire for quick results or by the hunger for success at any cost. His imagination was totally free from crookedness of any kind. He was an untiring and relentless exponent of moral force. This moral force was to him not a vague indeterminate something, but a very real and a very immediate and compelling condition. He taught that non-violence ought to be the law of the human species even as violence, aggression and assault were the law of the brute, and that the dignity of man required his unquestioning and utter obedience to higher values of the Spirit.

In the case of many, religion is a lifeless mockery. Most people follow some ritual, custom and ceremony in a dull routine way and call this religion. Religion has become a word to swear by rather than a living ideal to live by. But sincerity of conviction and purity of motive characterised all the activities of Gandhiji. He taught that civilisation should express man's Dharma and not merely his cleverness, power and possession, and that love, truth and unselfishness were not merely figures of speech. He wanted men to strive for the purifying of urges, the ennobling of motives and the socialising of energies. According to him Truth alone could illumine reason, inspire wisdom, stimulate love, and purify service. History is replete with examples of superhuman egotism and violence, but rare is the noble superhuman personality dedicated to truth, purity, austerity, unselfishness and love for God; Gandhiji was indeed that rare example. Gandhiji respected the spirit of religion in all earnestness, not the letter of it. By his ideas, by his ideals, by his noble character, by his way of life, by the magnificent powers of his soul, he brought a moral reawakening among the people. In the life of Gandhiji, the world has the unique privilege to witness the fascinating drama of a spiritual struggle to perfect character. His pre-eminence is due to his grim struggle to live a life of spirit in the midst of a hectic political life. It is his "soul force" which has given a halo to his leadership. That religion and morality are no meaningless words, and that idealism has a place in life have been amply proved by him.

Gandhiji's life was verily a demonstration of the triumph of the human spirit over the overwhelming odds of the unrighteous and the amoral. He made his life a laboratory of the soul, in which a rediscovery of the supremacy of spiritual principles was made and proclaimed. Gandhiji was yet another of the galaxy of brilliant propounders and illustrators of the primacy of Dharma in life and labour.