

GANDHI AND 'GOD'

By Krishnan Nandela

ABSTRACT

God is introduced to every human being in early childhood in all communities and societies all over the world. The understanding of the concept of 'God' by individuals becomes community specific. Communities are affiliated to religions. Religions are monotheistic (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and polytheistic (Hinduism, Taoism, Japanese Shinto etc). Although monotheistic religions profess the idea of one 'God', the different followers of the three monotheistic religions distinguish their Gods as different. The Muslim will not offer 'namaz' in a Church and the Christian will not offer prayer in a Mosque. This is because of the inadequate understanding of the words 'prayer' and 'namaz'. While both words mean the same, the followers understand them differently because these words come from different languages and different religions have been established in different languages. When religions cross their linguistic borders, they assume a variety of forms. Each form is influenced by the new geography, culture, language and practices peculiar to a given people or community. For example, the Onam festival in Kerala is celebrated by the followers of all the three major religions of Kerala i.e. Islam, Hinduism and Christianity and the followers of other minor religions too. Islam practiced in different parts of India assumes different forms leave alone the forms practiced in other parts of the world. So is the case with Christianity and Judaism. Geography, culture and language create a great amount of variety even within Monotheistic religions and therefore social boundaries find their place between various communities following a single religion. Hinduism in practice is a polytheistic religion. There are many Gods and Goddesses too. The main pantheon of Hindu Gods and Goddesses has specific functions to perform and therefore Hinduism has a functional classification of Gods and Goddesses. In addition to the main pantheon, there are numerous other Gods and Goddesses in different villages of the country.

Both monotheistic and polytheistic religions are divided into different sects around the world. The followers of religion and believers in 'God' are therefore circumscribed in numerous boundaries and limited understanding of religion and 'God'. These boundaries and limited understanding is the cause of religious discrimination and strife around the world and particularly in the countries of Middle East, Africa and Asia. It is in this context that I wanted to explore Mahatma Gandhi's idea of 'God'. Gandhi believed, propagated and practiced the idea of one God found in truth and said 'Truth is God'. I found Gandhi's idea of God to be functional to the human society as a whole for Gandhi's God is not only universal but also boundless or limitless. Believers need to have a proper and complete understanding of 'God' before reposing faith in God.

PROLOGUE

God is introduced to every human being in early childhood in all communities and societies all over the world. The understanding of the concept of 'God' by individuals becomes community specific. Communities are affiliated to religions. Religions are monotheistic (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and polytheistic (Hinduism, Taoism, Japanese Shinto etc). Although monotheistic religions profess the idea of one 'God', the different followers of the three monotheistic religions distinguish their Gods as different. The Muslim will not offer 'namaz' in a Church and the Christian will not offer prayer in a Mosque. This is because of the inadequate understanding of the words 'prayer' and 'namaz'. While both words mean the same, the followers understand them differently because these words come from different languages and different religions have been established in different languages. When religions cross their linguistic borders, they assume a variety of forms. Each form is influenced by the new geography, culture, language and practices peculiar to a given people or community. For example, the Onam festival in Kerala is celebrated by the followers of all the three major religions of Kerala i.e. Islam, Hinduism and Christianity and the followers of other minor religions too. Islam practiced in different parts of India assumes different forms leave alone the forms practiced in other parts of the world. So is the case with Christianity and Judaism. Geography, culture and language create a great amount of variety even within Monotheistic

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THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Gandhi believed that there is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything. This invisible power defies the demand for evidence and it transcends human sensibility. He tried to reason out the existence of God by making the following arguments:

1. In Mysore, Gandhi met a group of poor villagers whom he asked about the name of the ruler of Mysore. The villagers being unaware of the name answered, 'some God ruled it'. Gandhi felt that he was an incomparably tiny creature vis-à-vis the God. The Universe is orderly and is ruled by unalterable laws of nature. The law that governs life is God and there is only one law giver. Life becomes easy when you accept the existence of a higher law. The physical

nature around us keeps changing but the ruler who creates, dissolves and recreates remains unchanged. This invisible ruler or the spirit is the God. All that is perceived through our senses lasts only for so long but the persistence of the invisible ruler is everlasting. Gandhi felt that God is benevolent because destruction is followed by creation and life persists on earth both on account of destruction and creation. Amidst untruth, we see the persistence of truth, light persists in the midst of darkness and life persists in the midst of death. For Gandhi, God is truth, light and life. God is the embodiment of love and the supreme good.

2. Gandhi believed that God cannot be understood by mere intellect because sensory perceptions are subjective and sometimes unreal for illusions may be construed as real. When one realizes God beyond the sensory perceptions, the realization becomes infallible and the conduct and character of the person who has realized God within transforms to be Godly.

Gandhi believed that the testimony or proof of the super-sensory experiences can be found in the prophets and sages of countries around the world and one cannot experience God without an unflinching faith in the existence of God. *It means a person who does not have faith in God cannot experience God. Dependence on the experiences of sages and prophets alone for understanding God is a contestable idea. However, absence of faith in God does not prevent a person from being Godly for Godliness refers to a set of benign qualities in a person that is functional to the human society. The Godly person is the benefactor and those who are influenced by the benefactor are the beneficiaries.* For Gandhi, truth and love were synonymous to God and anything that is contrary to truth and love should be rejected as ungodly. Gandhi felt that faith in God cannot be explained away by reasoning alone because faith is beyond reason. Without being evil, God permits evil on earth because God is patient and suffering with his creation. However, it is our duty to fight evil even at the cost of one's own life, Gandhi believed. (Young India, 15.11.28, p.380 and 'The Essence of Hinduism', ps. 38–42).

I believe that the concept of God is both functional and dysfunctional to the human society. Let us look at the functional aspects of God first. God is functional when He or She is understood as

a set of benign qualities that is beneficial to humanity as a whole. A person who has faith in God becomes faithful only if he or she has imbibed the benign qualities in God and has found God within his or her being. A person becomes faithful when Godliness is embodied in him or her and the proof of his or her Godliness lies in the benefits enjoyed by persons who are influenced by him or her. The benefits given by a Godly person may be abstract or spiritual and concrete or material. God, Allah and Ishwar are the abstract manifestations of God. Although no form is ascribed to God, Allah and Ishwar, any person who remembers God always remember Him in form that is undoubtedly human and always reflects upon his or her inward eye or the mind. The believer therefore should not distinguish between God in form and the formless God. A faith that rejects other faiths is no faith or a flawed faith. Allah is God and God is Ishwar and therefore Allah is Ishwar. If $a = b$, and $b = c$, then 'a' must be equal to 'c' ($a = c$). A believer who does not understand the universality and oneness of God known by his/her different names and forms is a flawed or incomplete believer and is dysfunctional to the human society to the extent of his or her flawed understanding of God. A flawed understanding of God is exemplified in personal and collective possession of God/s in form and no-form by individuals and communities.

Such a flawed understanding is also the cause of communal disharmony amongst the communities of the world and particularly in the countries of Asia, Middle East and Africa. For example, Khuda is God for the Persians and Allah is God for the Muslims. 'Khuda Hafiz' is the Persian equivalent for the English word 'Goodbye' meaning 'May God be with ye'. Muslim insistence on using 'Allah Hafiz' as a parting greeting and not 'Khuda Hafiz' or for that matter 'Goodbye' is an example of flawed understanding of the universality of God or a limited understanding of the expression of 'God' in different languages. Desecration and destruction of places of worship by believers is yet another example of the dysfunctional aspect of belief in God without an adequate understanding of 'God'. Inadequate understanding of 'God' is therefore dysfunctional to the community and the human society at large. Limited knowledge is dangerous and limited belief in 'God' is definitely dangerous to the society.

GOD IS TRUTH AND TRUTH IS GOD

Gandhi considered God to be truth and truth to be God in spite of the variety of names that God has both in Hinduism and Islam. The Sanskrit word for truth is 'Sat' or that which exists. According to the Hindu philosophy, God alone exist and nothing else and the same is found in the Koran. Love or Ahimsa is the only means to find 'Truth as God' and since 'means' and 'ends' are terms mutually substitutable, Gandhi says, 'God is love'. Truth is the inner voice and each one of has our own inner voice which tells us the truth. However, that makes truth to be subjective and hence there will be numerous truths on any one given aspect of life. To find the universal truth, according to Gandhi, the seeker must take five vows: the vow of Satya (truth), Brahmacharya (purity or celibacy), Ahimsa (non-violence), poverty and (Aparigraha) non-possession. Truth cannot be discovered in the absence of these vows. Gandhi believed that truth cannot be found by one and all. Only the disciplined and the one who is abundantly humble may find the truth. (Young India, 31.12.31, p.424 at p.427 & TEH, p. 45 – 48).

Gandhi firmly believed in saying 'Truth is God' instead of saying 'God is Truth'. Truth can only be found through experience and of course with the vows stated earlier. God is truth and love, God is ethics and morality, God is fearlessness, God is the source of light and life and yet he is above and beyond all these aspects of life. God is that indefinable something which we all feel but which we do not know, says Gandhi. God is conscience and also the atheism of the atheist because in the boundless love of God, He permits the atheist to live. God is the seeker of hearts and transcends speech and reason. God is personal to those who need His personal presence. God is long suffering, patient and also terrible. He is the most exacting personage in the world. God is ever forgiving and always offers a chance to repent. God is the greatest democrat because He offers the freedom to make choice between evil and good. He is the greatest tyrant because He often dashes the cup from our lips. In Hinduism, it is known as God's sport or Lila or Maya or illusion. (Young India, 5.3.25, p.80 & TEH p.48 – 52).

WHO AND WHERE IS GOD?

Gandhi sought to locate God within human beings. One can locate God within oneself by following Brahmacharya or celibacy. Invoking Rama or Ramanama was the key according to Gandhi to find God within oneself. The rules of conduct are the means to reach the God and of all the rules, truth is the means and the end is God or Rama. The vice-versa is also true i.e. Ramanama is the means and Truth is the end. Gandhi believed that Brahmacharya can be achieved by chanting Ramanama (Harijan, 22-6-1947, p.200 and TEH, p.53). *One who seeks and pursues Truth is actually pursuing or seeking God. A person leading a truthful life is leading a Godly life. Truthfulness is akin to Godliness. One therefore need not be celibate and a lifetime bachelor to reach Godliness. It is enough to be truthful to achieve Godliness or find God within oneself. While it is true that the human being leads a compromised life in marriage and family, it is certainly not true that a much married human being cannot lead a truthful and Godly life. A life full of truthfulness is a difficult task to achieve for an ordinary human being but the grahasth-sanyasi or the one who has raised a family, leads a family life and yet practices renunciation is capable of leading a truthful life and discover God within oneself. Gandhi himself according to me was a 'grahasth sanyasi'.*

In a letter to Pandit Nehru written on 25th April 1925, Gandhi writes that religion is an individual matter and is also a matter of the heart. Something that which gives solace in the midst of agony is God. (A Bunch of Letters by Jawaharlal Nehru, p.42 & TEH, p.59). For Gandhi, God is beyond reasoning and *since reasoning is an individual affair there will be several reasons and un-reasons for the existence and otherwise of God.* God is a matter of faith and not reason and without faith one may not understand the idea of God. (Young India, 21-01-21, p.80 & TEH, p.60). *Gandhi becomes fatalistic in the matter of God and understanding the idea of God.* However, Gandhi is successful in making God a functional idea by saying God is Truth and Truth is God. A seeker of truth is therefore a believer in God. He is also quick to say that all believers are not Godly and that all atheists are not ungodly. God cannot be understood by arguments and reasoning but by following a Godly path. One who follows a Godly path has the

power to convert an atheist into a theist. Atheists cannot be converted to theists merely by arguments but by leading a Godly life than merely having a belief in God. (Harijan, 1-9-40, p.268/269 &TEH, p.62).

GOD IS IMPERISHABLE

Gandhi believed that “God is not a person. He is indescribable. He is the law and the law giver. Vedic authors described Him as *Neti, Neti* (not this, not this). For God, there is no beginning and no end. All creation must end. God alone is immortal and imperishable. (Harijan, 16-6-46, p.182 at p.183 and TEH, p.67). *However, if one begins with the faith that God is humanity’s creation, God will perish with the decimation of the humanity as a whole on earth even if other life forms continue to persist. Persistence of human life on earth assigns immortality and imperishability to God. When human life ceases to persist, God becomes mortal and perishable.*

WHERE IS THE LIVING GOD?

Gandhi said that he had a living faith in a living God. The ordinary people have a living faith in God. They do not argue. Gandhi questions, “If the scriptures of the world are old women’s tales of superstition? Should, we reject the testimony of the Rishis and the Prophets? Is the testimony of the Chaitanya, Ramakrishna, Paramahansa, Tukaram, Dnyandeva, Ramdas, Nanak, Kabir, Tulasidas of no value? What about Rammohan Roy, Devendranath Tagore and Vivekanand?” Gandhi says that belief in God must be based on faith and should be beyond reason. A living immovable faith is required to realize the fullest spiritual potential. God is within and not without and therefore there is no need for evidence. God is beyond the human senses. (Harijan, 13-6-36, p.140 & TEH, p.68 – 71).

Gandhi said that God cannot be found in temples or in idols, in places of worship or by abstinence. God can only be found through divine love as exemplified in Mirabai. (Harijan, 23-11-47, p.421 at p.425 & TEH, p.77). Gandhi saw God in the spinning wheel and sometimes in

communal harmony and in the eradication of untouchability. He saw God in serving the people. (TEH, p. 77 & 78).

Gandhi was an advaitist (non-dual) and yet he supported dvaitism or dualism. God is differently known as Paramatma, Ishwara, Shiva, Vishnu, Rama, Allah, Khuda, Dada Hormuzda, Jehova, God etc. Gandhi argued that if we believe that we exist, if our parents and their parents have existed, then it is proper to believe in the Parent of the whole creation. God is one and yet many. Reason is incapable of knowing Him. Gandhi did not see any contradiction in the Jain and Vedic views on God. The Vedic view of God is a doer and a non-doer at the same time. God is a doer because He pervades the universe and He is a non-doer because action does not affect him. The universe is not the consequence of God's action. God does not speak or do anything. The conversation between Krishna and Arjuna is imaginary and it is not wrong to imagine the idea of God. The Jains believe that there is no creator for the universe. The Jain proposition is logical whereas the Vedic proposition is poetic. Humanity cannot live on logic alone and hence the rationalist Jains felt the need for temples and images. Devotion or Bhakti is poetry. It is logical to say that whatever happens is the fruit of action but we do not know the cause of action. The ultimate cause remains unknown to this day. Hence, it makes sense to accept the will and grace of God. Gandhi explains, truth is God because truth is the only comprehensive attribute of God. Satya or truth is derived from the word 'sat' which means eternal. That which exists eternally is truth. Hence, truth is God. One can see the truth and understand God but it is difficult to see God and understand truth (THE, p.81 to 83).

EPILOGUE

Gandhi's faith in God is limitlessly evolved. Gandhi's God is not circumscribed in names, idols, regions, countries, religions, sects, practices and languages. Gandhi's God is invisible and spiritual. Gandhi's God is indescribable in words expressed by mortal beings and the seeker in Gandhi seems to have found the truth by spiritually dissolving his individual being into the eternal (*Sat*) or the invisible power. Gandhi's God has transcended all human made ideas of God so that the seeker is in a state of communion with God. In seeking the truth, Gandhi seeks to

seek the God. Words, ideas and languages are only instruments (means) which are used in the pursuit of seeking the Truth or God (end). Words assume common noun to describe God in monotheistic religions but between the monotheistic religions, the common nouns become proper nouns. Hence, Allah is God for the Muslims and Yahweh is God for the Jews and God is God for the Christians. When the Christians, Muslims and Jews come together, God assumes the status of a proper noun. Humanity as a whole is therefore yet to find a common noun for the eternal invisible being and hence God is divided amongst his followers and believers. Gandhi's God is universal in spirit but geographical in expression (*Ram*). However, geographical or linguistic expressions of God are an ignorant limitation imposed by people on themselves. The need therefore is to transcend the linguistic expressions of God and be in communion with the invisible and eternal power. Gandhi in his search for Truth and God was undoubtedly in communion with the eternal power. Following in the footsteps of Gandhi, let humanity find itself in communion with the eternal and invisible power of the unlimited universe.

REFERENCE

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