

GANDHI AND CHRISTIANITY: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GANDHI'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS CHRISTIANITY AND CONVERSION

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ABSTRACT

Gandhi was the most inspiring leader whose life and teachings transformed the life of every individual. Indian nationalism is a great venture which motivated the whole Indians to come together and fight for the freedom of their mother land India. The contribution of the Christians for the growth of nationalistic movement is remarkable. But in the later period the Indian Christians were suspected by some of the Indian national leaders for their religious faith and the proclamation of their faith. In his religious view he said “*to help the Hindu to be a better Hindu, a Mussalman to become a better Mussalman and a Christian a better Christian*”. Especially Gandhi was suspect of the Christians for their missionary involvement including preaching and humanitarian activities. He was a greater fighter of truth and love, but he never used any weapon. The greatest quality of Gandhi was his moral virtue. Gandhi was very critic of conversion especially conversion from the lower castes. As a born Hindu he never wished to change the hierarchy which existed in Indian society. Even though Gandhi was a lover of Christ and he appreciated its ethical teachings his critical approach to the Christian community was a disappointed one. In renunciation he was like Christ, in defense of Dharma he was like Lord Krishna, in love of Ahimsa he was like Buddha and in dauntless constancy like Mohammed. But he was followed a different attitudes towards Christianity and their conversion.

Introduction

After the First war of Indian independence in 1857, there arose a sentiment of nationalism among the Indian people especially among the educated Indians. Along with this, the 19th century Missionary Movement in India, their Educational Institutions and Conversion methods made the Indian minds to ponder. In order to counter this several reformists such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda, Dayanda Sarawathi, etc worked in order to arouse the religious and nationalistic sentiments among people. The formation of the Indian National Congress (1885) and Gandhi's entry into the Indian politics (1917) took a drastic change in the Indian Nationalism. Gandhi was the most inspiring leader whose life and teachings transformed the life of every individual. In renunciation he was like Christ, in defense of Dharma he was like Lord Krishna, in love of Ahimsa he was like Buddha and in dauntless constancy like Mohammed. But he was followed a different attitudes towards Christianity and their conversion. This presentation specifically deals with Gandhi's attitudes towards Christians and Christian conversion in India.

1 The origin and growth of Indian nationalism:

Nationalism came into existence in India as a binding ideology in opposing the colonial rule. During the British period nationalist movement had taken a religious tone. Prior to the revolt of 1857 the British treated India as one country and one nation because they believed that the entire sub-continent would alone

provide administrative and political unity which would be useful for their administration. But after the revolt in 1857 they changed their approach and introduced the divide and rule policy. This became necessary for them in order to discard the concept of one Indian nation. However, Indians had always felt that they belonged to one country and the Indian Muslims had also very much become part of India, politically and culturally. But the government deliberately divided the Hindus and Muslims which lead to communal differences. These factors contributed towards the formation of nationalism and then developed in the later part of the 19th century, giving way for Indian Independence''¹ Though the Indian Christians have been loyal to their motherland India they were always put under the shadow of suspension. Both the Indian Christian leaders as well as missionaries encouraged the Indian Christians to contribute to Nationalism. Arthur Jeyakumar quotes the words of the missionary E. Greaves that "would to God that Indian Christians might be found in the very forefront of the National Movement." ²

1.1 Gandhi and Indian Nationalism:

Gandhi was born on 2nd October, 1869 at Porbandar, Gujarat. He completed his degree in Law from Britain and went to South Africa in regard to a judicial case of a company. While he was there he experienced the humiliating condition of the Indians and also the natives which made him resist the Racial Policy of the Whites. He then developed the technique of Satyagraha based on truth and non-violence in fighting against the government which enabled him to overcome some of the worst evils of racialism. He returned to India in 1915 and in 1916 he founded the Sabarmathi Ashram at Ahamadabad. His *Satyagraha* policy worked in uniting the Hindus and Muslims, the emancipation of the depressed classes and women. Through this he viewed an independent India though his passive resistance of Satyagraha and disobedience to the unjust laws. So he entered to Indian politics with the technique of Satyagraha in Chambaram, in Bihar in 1917³.

Gandhi's ideas with the respect to nationalism were registered in two keys: 1. *Anti colonial or political mode*: which he viewed Indian nationalism as an all- India resistance to the colonial power. 2. *Ramarajya or ethical mode*- Gandhi exposed a vision of network of independent, autonomous or partially autonomous which means local political administrative structure which shaped by with its own policies and programs.⁴

1.2 Gandhi's view on Religion:

One of the attributes of Gandhi is his staunch faith in religion. Gandhi viewed that "all faiths constitute a revelation of truth, but all are imperfect and liable to error ...".⁵ Gandhi had a number of labels as a Saint, a politician, a political thinker, a philosopher, a social reformer etc. All these labels had a definite application to Gandhi. To be more specific he was a religious man⁶. Gandhi claimed himself to be a

¹ L.P. Sharma, *Indian National Movement*, (Agra: Lakmai Narain Agarwal Educational Publishers, 2007), 47-48.

² Arthur Jeykurnar, *History of Christianity in India- Selected themes*, (Madurai: T.T.S Press, 2007), 94.

³ L.P. Sharma, *Indian National Movment*, 114.

⁴ T.V. Satyamurthy, *Economic and Political Weekly*, A Sameeksha Trust Publication, Vol XXXII, No. 14, (April 5-11), 1997,p.715.

⁵ Franklin I. Balsundararn, "Gandhi's Attitude towards Christianity" *Indian Church History Review*. Vol. XXVIII, (January- June, 1994), 51.

⁶ K. N Tiwari, *World religions and Gandhi* (New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company. 1988), p.2

religious man apparently his political life was just an expression of his more pervasive religious life. But it is very clear that even though Gandhi had affection with the other religions such as Christianity, Islam etc. He affirmed that “believing as I do in the influence of heredity, being born in a Hindu family I have remained a Hindu”⁷ He thought that spiritual force is greater than physical force. Physical force creates fear. It compels others to obey, fearing the consequences. Moral force imposes no penalties, persuades the opponent; it makes the opponent realize that he is wrong. Like Buddha and Christ, Gandhi shows to the world how moral force can save the world from self destruction.

1.3 Christian Religion and Gandhi:

Gandhi had encountered Christianity in his school days. Though Gandhi did not have a planned and systematic study of Christianity, he had learned a lot about it through his genuine involvement with 'Christians. However he did not agree with claim of superiority of Christianity, such as 'it is only the true religion', 'the crown of religions' and 'final redemption was possible only through Christianity'. He argued that “there was nothing extraordinary in Christian principles from the point of Christianity. He never accepted that Christianity as unique among the religions, so for him in terms of 'Sacrifice' Hindus surpassed Christians. He recognized Christianity as a noble and a true religion but so were all the other religions of the world. So there is nothing special for him about Christianity from the religious point of view. He affirmed that if Christianity could provide great salvation to its people all the other religions could very well do the same, and so he totally rejected the claim of Christians that of their superiority of religion and advised not to regard other religions as false and insufficient but to be tolerant and sympathetic towards other religions.”⁸

2. Gandhi's Attitude towards Christianity

Though Gandhi was an Orthodox Hindu he was very much impressed and influenced by the teachings of Jesus, which made him base his concept of Satyagraha, which was basically known as 'conquer the evil by good' which is seen, in the Gospel of Matthew 5:38-48. Through the study of this particular passage, he called Jesus “the prince of Sathyagrahis”⁹. He studies the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3-13) and viewed it as the gift of Christianity. In his comparative study on the sermon on the mount with Bhagawat Gita he said “what the sermon describes in graphic manner the Bhagawat Gita reduces to a scientific formula ... today supposing I was deprived of the Gita and forgot all its contents but I had a copy of the sermon I should derive the same joy from it as I do from the Gita”¹⁰.

Gandhi loved Christianity because of its absolute emphasis on Love which he identified Love with God is not seen in other religions, and Christianity firmly says that 'God is Love' and in the New Testament is filled with the word 'Love'. The whole life of Jesus was an example of love and sacrifice for others. Jesus' death on the Cross, showed the courage in which he faced the evil, non-violently with love and kindness for even those who were responsible for his crucifixion. Jesus' prayer on the Cross was another example of the meeting of the evil with love and non violence. Gandhi viewed that the cross taught the overcoming of the evil and hatred by love and good will.¹¹

⁷ K. N Tiwari, *Ibid*, p.5.

⁸ K. N Tiwari, *Ibid*, p.40.

⁹ K N Tiwari, *world religions and Gandhi*, p. 37

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38

Though Gandhi was moved by these examples, at the same time he also disliked the Christian interpretation of the event of the Cross. So he did not like the Christianity which many Christians followed and observed. He accused the western pattern of Christianity and said they were not loyal to the true spirit of the teachings of Jesus. He said that “I cannot conceive Jesus if he was living in flesh in our midst approving of the modern Christian organizations, public worship and modern ministry”¹².

Gandhi in fact saw that Christian religion as one with the deepest love for the whole of humanity specifically for the poor, meek and the humble. The Christian religion had also a message of non violence and non aggression towards the enemy. But in Gandhi view all the points which is said above is completely alien to the western Christianity. Along with this he disagreed with the dogma of Christianity at Jesus was divine and that he was the only begotten Son of God. He said “if Jesus was like God or God himself, then all men were like God and could be God himself ... I could accept Jesus as a Martyr and embodiment of Sacrifice, and a divine teacher but not as the most perfect men even born”¹³. Jesus the only begotten Son of God did not take it as literally, Gandhi argued that God cannot be an exclusive father, and cannot ascribe exclusive divinity to Jesus. For him Jesus was as divine as Krishna, Rama or Mohammad or Zoroaster.

2.1 Gandhi's attitude towards Christian Missionaries:

As pointed out Gandhi had a wide contact with the Christian missionaries. At the outset we can make the point that it seems Gandhi had a thoroughly negative attitude towards Christian missionaries. In all his utterances about Christianity, his attack on missionaries forms the major portion.¹⁴ His negative attitude towards Christian missionaries seems to have sprung from the basis that they considered “Christianity as the true religion and that only they had something good to offer. Secondly, missionaries proselytizing, preach-to-convert-effects and their approach primary to the depressed classes, whom he thought cannot understand Christianity, were the other principal reasons which enabled him to develop possess and sustain a very strong negative attitude. Gandhi seems to have been a shrewd man and he had detected the ‘other-motive’ which the missionaries seemed to have exercised through their humanitarian works. Regarding the preaching characteristics of Christian missionaries Gandhi considered it as a Man's life to be a more effective testimony of the truth of his religion. In preaching the language circumscribes and limits the truth. So the man's life should succeed in influencing and converting others. Then that might be regarded as a true and valid form of evangelism. He had the view that missionaries were undermining the faith of the people. However though he criticized the missionaries in all possible ways he continued to have a cordial relationship with them.

2.2 Gandhi's attitude towards Indian Christian community

Gandhi had a message to the Indian Christians also. In this venture we can identify his critical attitude towards Indian Christians. He admonishes them for their views on Hinduism as erroneous and also challenged them to actively participate in the national construction, rooted in their Indian heritage and tradition. Gandhi was also critical of Indian Christians imitation of European ways in dressing, eating and even language. He advised that “do not be dazzled by the splendor that come to you, from the west. Do not be thrown off your feet by this passing show ... do not be drawn away from the simplicity of your

¹² *Ibid.*, 39,

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁴ Franklin J. Balsundaram, “Gandhi's Attitude towards Christianity” *Indian Church History Review*, 55.

ancestors”.¹⁵ By claiming himself as a friend of Indian Christians advises them that “brining up their children to speak only in English will be deplorable because it may cause or the complete drift from the nation in whose midst they have to live”.¹⁶ He urged the Indian Christian community to give up the western Christianity and to lead a true Christian life because for him in its practical working, western Christianity was a negation of Christ’s Christianity. He shares his fear in the words that “.... But my fear is that , though Christian friends now a days do not say or admit that Hindu religion is un true, they must harbour in their breasts the belief that Hinduism is an error and than that Christianity as they believe that it is he only true religion. But so far as one can understand the present effort, it is to uproot Hinduism from the very foundation and replace it by another faith”.¹⁷ His attitude towards Christianity both the to missionaries and the Indians was same that to prove themselves as true Christians and true nationalists they need to change their way of life as well as their approach to the Hindu religion and the other Indian people.

2.4 Indian Christian Leaders and Gandhi:

Gandhi had many Christian friends in his national movement. Among them C.F. Andrews, S.K. George and J. C. Kumarappa were some of the important persons. From a Christian perspective they commented differently on Gandhi’s movement. C.F. Andrews commented on Gandhi’s aversion to the orthodox Christianity saying “the forceful and pervasive environment of British administration in India-many missionary stations showed very little outward sign in the mission work”.¹⁸ It has made a painful confusion about the essential meaning of the Christian religion among the Orthodox Hindus and Mohamadians. He affirmed that “worldly entanglement betrayed the essential meaning of the Christian religion and at the same time incapacitated many Christians from appreciating and accepting Gandhi’s struggle and its religious significance”.¹⁹

As a challenge S.K. George said “a true Christian in India must necessarily be a Gandhian because Gandhi through Satyagraha gave a practical demonstration of the applicability of the teaching of Jesus the master of modem problems”.²⁰J.C. Kumarappa identified himself with the Gandhi’s movement particularly with the promotion of the village industries. To him Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement was a simple interpretation and presentation of Jesus of the Gospels. In his contact with Gandhi his eyes were opened to the practicality of the teaching of Jesus in this century in our life on the earth”²¹

3. Gandhi’s General view on Conversion:

Gandhi expressed his profound admiration for the person and teaching of Jesus Christ. He acknowledged and made a considerable influence in his life. But at the same time in his writings and his addresses he repeatedly criticized Christian missionaries in India on converting Indians to Christianity. In his first address in Madras (1916) he expressed his opposition to ‘the missionary Goal of proselytizing in India in terms of Swadeshi which on to restricted one from his/her ancestral religion. Over ten year later he openly criticized Christian missionaries for undermining the faith of Indian people by seeking to convert

¹⁵ Franklyn .J. Balasundharam 62.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid., 63.

¹⁸ George Pattery, SJ, *Gandhi the Beliver;An Indian Christian perspective*, (New Delhi: ISPCCK, 1996) 107.

¹⁹ Ibid., 108.

²⁰ George Pattery, SJ, *Gandhi the Beliver;An Indian Christian perspective*, 109

²¹ Ibid., 110.

them from their faith. Following the years in several meetings with missionaries he told them “if they has refrained from telling an Indian about Christ and had merely lived the life enjoined upon them by the Sermon on the Mount India would not have suspected them, but would have appreciated their living in India and profited directly by their presence”.²²

For Gandhi conversion was illegitimate and he had very strong anti conversion attitude Gandhi became very critical of conversion attempts towards the end of 1930's and this, needs to be seen in the contest of depressed classes movement and Ambedkar's threat to quit Hindu fold. Gandhi was emphatic in his attack on conversion, particularly of Harijans. He says the missionaries must withdraw from the indecent competition to convert the Harijans. He was quick to point out that even among the converts the taint of untouchability persisted in spite of change of faith. He not only criticized conversion attempts but also condemned the whole process of conversion. In connection with the Harijan's conversion he viewed that they lived in unjust condition and the western missionaries have exploited such conditions. So he emphatically attacked the conversion of the Harijan's. Taking the issue of conversion as a serious matter Gandhi said ... “an increase in the process of multiplying Christians should only mean blood feuds”²³.

In his religious view he said “to help the Hindu to be a better Hindu, a Mussalman to become a better Mussalman and a Christian a better Christian”.²⁴ He wrote the following words to one of his correspondent advising him to save his soul by conversion to Christianity that “God is not enceased in a safe to be approached only through a little whole in it but he is open to be approached through billions of opening by those who are humble and pure heart”.²⁵

Gandhi opposed the conversion from one religion to the other. On contrary he defends saying “it is right to those who wished to change their religion to another and this change is a personal matter, between individual and his God. He did not question the right of conversion but he questioned the method which was employed to bring about conversion. He opposed dubious conversion methods employed by some missionaries. He approved their humanitarian works like the medical work the alleviation of the poor, and their work in field of education. But proselytizing under the humanitarianism was unbearable. He interpreted this method of conversion as a business of missionaries²⁶. In another point of view he argued that “all religions have elements of truth and error and that no particular religion can lay claim to a monopoly of truth and the scriptures of all faiths are equally inspired though none can be regarded as literary inspired”.²⁷ Tough he meant that all faiths are necessary for the people to whom they are revealed. So conversion to one to another is invalid, because what Bible teaches the Gita also offer.

As response to A.A. Paul's (Federation of International Fellowship) letter regarding conversion Gandhi strongly criticized his letter with a list of nine propositions. Taking each point in his consideration Gandhi answered “If conversion is the work of God, why should that work be taken away from him and

²² Elizabeth Susan Alexander, *The Attitude of British Protestant Missionaries towards The Nationalism in India with special reference to Madras Presidency 1919 -1927*, (Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1994), 86.

²³ Franklin J. Balsundaram, *Op.cit.*, 60.

²⁴ K.N. Tiwari, *World Religions and Gandhi*, 74.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 74

²⁶ Glyn Richards, *The Philosophy of Gandhi*, (Great Britain: TJ.Press Ltd. 1995),23

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

who is man to take away anything from God”.²⁸ To Gandhi man is a humble instrument in the hands of god and man should know little about him. Then how can he/she know about his neighbor and remote strangers who are different from him. In his young India regarding the Adhi Karnataka’s he warned the Christian missionaries and Muslim missionaries not to try wean these suppressed classes from Hinduism. If they wished to interfere to act that they may become better Hindu’s. Gandhi claimed that they are the strength of our strength and our aim should be to Hinduize them more and more for they belonged to Hindu community”.²⁹

In an interview with Bishop Moore at Kottayam, Gandhi condemned and challenged the extravagant statements of Christian leaders made that thousands included into the Christian fold not only from the depressed class but a large number of so called high class Hindus. He also met Christian leaders working in Andhra and asked them to make enquires into the truth of these extravagant statements”.³⁰ He also criticized the account of Dr. Pickett’s assessment of Christian mass movements in India.

“Gandhi says “seize to think that you want to convert the whole world to your interpretation of Christianity. At the end of reading the Bible, let me tell you, it did not leave on my mind the impression that Jesus ever meant Christians to do what the bulk of those to take his name do. The moment you adopt the attitude I suggest, the field of service becomes limitless. You limit your own capacity by thinking and saying that you must proselytize”.³¹

Conclusion

Indian nationalism is a great venture which motivated the whole Indians to come together and fight for the freedom of their mother land India. The contribution of the Christians for the growth of nationalistic movement is remarkable. But in the later period the Indian Christians were suspected by some of the Indian national leaders for their religious faith and the proclamation of their faith. Especially Gandhi was suspect of the Christians for their missionary involvement including preaching and humanitarian activities. He was a greater fighter of truth and love, but he never used any weapon. The greatest quality of Gandhi was his moral virtue. Gandhi was very critic of conversion especially conversion from the lower castes. As a born Hindu he never wished to change the hierarchy which existed in Indian society. Even though Gandhi was a lower of Christ and he appreciated its ethical teachings his critical approach to the Christian community was a disappointed one. So it is true that as Vincent Kumarados, a church historian rightly pointed out, “an uncompromisingly nationalist Indian Christianity was a tentative and uncertain development, a point that can be made for India as a whole”.³²

²⁸ M.K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions, their place in India* (Ahmadabad: Printed and published by Jivamji Dahyabhai Desai, 1960), 48.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 157

³² Gerald Studdert - Kennedy, *British christens Indian Nationalists and the Raj* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991) 124.

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