

Gandhi on Tolerance:

1) Discussion on Fellowship

before 15 Jan 1928

Young India, 19-1-1928

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“In order to attain a perfect fellowship, every act of its members must be a religious act and an act of sacrifice. I came to the conclusion long ago, after prayerful search and study and discussion with as many people as I could meet, that all religions were true and also that all had some error in them, and that whilst I hold by my own, I should hold others as dear as Hinduism, from which it logically follows that we should hold all as dear as our nearest kith and kin and that we should make no distinction between them. So we can only pray, if we are Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu, or if we are Mussalmans, not that a Hindu or a Christian should become a Mussalman, nor should we even secretly pray that anyone should be converted, but our inmost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim and a Christian a better Christian. That is the fundamental truth of fellowship.”

„If however there is any suspicion in your minds that only one religion can be true and others false, you must reject the doctrine of fellowship placed before you. Then we would have a continuous process of exclusion and found our fellowship on an exclusive basis. Above all I plead for utter truthfulness. If we do not feel for other religions as we feel for our own, we had better disband ourselves, for we do not want a wishy-washy toleration. My doctrine of toleration does not include toleration of evil, though it does the toleration of the evil-minded. It does not therefore mean that you have to invite each and everyone who is evil-minded or tolerate a false faith. By a true faith I mean one the sum total of whose energy is for the good of its adherents, by a false I mean that which is predominantly false. If you, therefore, feel that the sum total of Hinduism has been bad for the Hindus and the world, you must reject it as a false faith.“

„But you must not forget that we have started with the fundamental principle that all religions are true. If there were different but good and true health laws for different communities, I should hesitate to preach some as true and some as false. I am positive that, with people not prepared to tolerate one another's religious belief, there can be no international fellowship.

Moreover, physical analogies when applied to spiritual matters are good only up to a certain point. When you take up an analogy from Nature, you can stretch it only to a certain point.

But I would take an illustration from the physical world and explain what I mean. If I want to hand a rose to you, there is definite movement. But if I want to transmit its scent, I do so without any movement. The rose transmits its own scent without a movement. Let us rise a step higher, and we can understand that spiritual experiences are self-acting. Therefore, the analogy of preaching sanitation, etc., does not hold good. If we have spiritual truth, it will transmit itself. You talk of the joy of a spiritual experience and say you cannot but share it. Well, if it is real joy, boundless joy, it will spread itself without the vehicle of speech. In spiritual matters we have merely to step out of the way. Let God work His way. If we interfere, we may do harm. Good is a self-acting force. Evil is not, because it is a negative force. It requires the cloak of virtue before it can march forward.“

2) Difficulties in our way

Young India, 10-11-1920

vol 18 pp 456-458

„It was a distinct departure from the creed of non-violent non-co-operation. It may easily result in physical violence.

Those who created the disturbance ought to realize its seriousness for the sacred cause they have at heart. It is the very worst training we can give ourselves in swaraj. Swaraj presupposes mutual toleration of views, no matter how distasteful they may be to us. If the non-co-operationists refuse to listen to the other party's views, they lay themselves open to the same charge as the Government, which they complain comes to decisions without considering their view-point. Non-co-operation against the Government is based on, and is possible with, co-operation among ourselves. We must bring about as far as possible and consistently with our creed, harmony among ourselves.“

„... disobedience is a virtue only when it is resorted to in response to a higher call and has not a trace of bitterness, hostility, or resentment in it. It is a positive vice when it becomes thoughtless, insolent and rowdy.“

„With the, for us, new method of *non-violent* non-co-operation, the old must go. The two cannot co-exist. If we are engaged in a duel between religion and irreligion, and if we truly represent the forces of religion, we shall have to give up even verbal violence and learn dignified ways of dealing with our opponents. It is through training in cool courage and self-sacrifice, discipline and faith in God, and therefore humility to the uttermost, that we shall conserve the honour of Islam and our country, and turn our opponents into admirers and fellow-workers.“

3) The key to success

31 Oct 1924

Hindi Navajivan, 2-11-1924

vol 25 pp 277-279

„By using violence to subjugate one another we are using violence against our own souls. Instead of the two communities doing their appointed tasks and trying to secure rights by doing their respective duties, they are insisting on the rights alone and have forgotten their duties.

India is like a bird whose wings are the Hindus and the Mussalmans. But the wings have become palsied and therefore disabled the bird from soaring high in the air and breathing the pure bracing air of freedom. Surely to leave us thus paralysed is not the essence of Hinduism nor of Islam. Is it the religion for the Hindus to weaken the Mussalmans and *vice versa* - for the one to refuse to help the other? Should religion be a destructive force destroying freedom and all that is best and noblest in man?“

„... to tell the Hindus and the Mussalmans that the only condition on which unity and freedom are possible is mutual toleration amongst all who call themselves Indians, be they Hindus, Mussalmans, Christians, Parsis, Jews or what not.“

„If we want the unity of the heart to be established we must emulate Prophet Mohammed in his forgiveness and tolerance.“

4) Speech at Advait Ashram, Alwaye

18 Mar 1925

vol 26 pp 323-325

Navajivan, 5-4-1925

„I can understand the principle of one God. In spite of our worshipping Him in a million different ways, our adoration finds its way to Him. However, I feel that so long as the human race continues, differences of creeds and religions will indeed exist, since there are many minds and not one. If we look at Nature, we shall find that it is full of diversities and it is through them that the one God becomes many. To expect that at any stage in the history of the human race the world will have a single religion and a single creed is, I think, as good as wishing that the laws of Nature should become topsy turvy.“

„Hence, diverse religions and diverse creeds seem to be inevitable.

Tolerance should be our aim. If all of us hold uniform views, where then is the scope for this generous virtue of tolerance? However, this search for uniformity is as futile as looking for flowers in the sky. Hence, the only possible alternative for us is to tolerate one another's views. According to my Muslim friends, I, a born idol-worshipper, a believer in incarnation and rebirth, must necessarily cultivate tolerance for Muslims who do not believe in idolworship, who do not believe in incarnation and perhaps in rebirth. I, a believer in incarnations, do not think that Christ alone was God, or that he alone was the son of God. Nevertheless, I should tolerate the fact that my Christian friends look upon Christ as God and, similarly, Muslims and Christians should tolerate the fact that I bow in reverence to Kanyakumari and Jagannath. I can see that the age of tolerance is dawning in my own lifetime, because tolerance is at the root of the dharma of ahimsa. That very same tolerance is also at the root of the dharma of truth. Truth, like God, has a thousand diverse aspects. I cannot therefore insist that my view about the nature of truth is the correct one, and those of others wrong. That is why I feel we are fast approaching the age of mutual tolerance and

mutual love.“

„We have to practise the dharma of ahimsa and love in another matter as well. We must free our country from the sin of keeping our own brothers away as untouchables.“

5) Speech at Women's Meeting, Belgaum

8 Nov 1920

vol 18, pp 453-455

Navajivan, 28-11-1920

„... I have learnt from Hinduism that one should not disrespect or despise the religion of anyone else. I have also realized that, till we have learnt to cherish love for people of all other religions and for all our neighbours, we shall not succeed in our efforts for the country's welfare. I have not come here to tell you that you should change and permit people to eat in the company of Muslims or marry among them, but I have certainly come to tell you that we should bear love to every human being. I pray that you teach your children to love members of other faiths.“

„So long as India has not become free, so long as the Muslims' wounds have not been healed, we need to live as fakirs. We should burn up our love of comfort and luxury in the fire of suffering. I entreat you, in the humblest words, to give up ways of comfort and practise severe *tapascharya*, to keep your heart and mind ever pure.“

6) Hindu-Mohammedan Unity

vol 17, pp 44-46

Young India, 25-2-1920

„And mutual toleration is a necessity for all time and for all races. We cannot live in peace if the Hindu will not tolerate the Mohammedan form of worship of God and his manners and customs or if the Mohammedans will be impatient of Hindu idolatry or cow-worship. It is not necessary for toleration that I must approve of what I tolerate. I heartily dislike drinking, meat-eating and smoking, but I tolerate all these in Hindus, Mohammedans and Christians even as I expect them to tolerate my abstinence from all these although they may dislike it. All the quarrels between the Hindus and the Mohammedans have arisen from each wanting to force the other to his view.“

7) Speech in reply to „Ezhavas“ Address, Varkalai (Sivagiri Hall)

13 Mar 1925

vol 26, pp 293-299

The Hindu, 16-3-1925

„So long as there are different human heads, so long will there be different religions, but the secret of a true religious life is to tolerate one another's religion. What may appear evil to us in certain religious practices is not necessarily evil to those who follow those practices. I cannot, I dare not, blind myself to existing differences. I cannot rub them off the slate, if I would, but knowing those differences, I must love even those who differ from me. You will find an exemplification of this law throughout the world. No two leaves of this very tree, under whose shadow we are sitting, are alike, though they spring from the same root, but, even as the leaves live together in perfect harmony and present to us a beautiful whole, so must we, divided humanity present to the outsider looking upon us a beautiful whole. That can be done when we begin to love each other and tolerate each other in spite of differences. So, although I see the deep ignorance, the black ignorance of blind orthodoxy, I refuse to be impatient with that orthodoxy, and hence I present to the world the law of nonviolence and I say that a man who wants to lead a religious life on this earth and a man who wants to realize himself on this earth in this incarnation must remain non-violent in every shape and form and in everyone of his actions.“

„... I described myself as a scavenger – *Bhangi* - and *Bhangi* occupies the lowest rung of the ladder among suppressed classes. I am not ashamed to call myself a *Bhangi*, and I ask every *Bhangi* not to be ashamed of his calling. A *Bhangi*, if he is true to his salt, is a sanitarian. I described myself also as a weaver, spinner and farmer. The suppressed classes, the orthodox say, should remain suppressed because of the vices

which, they say, are inherent in them. It is for you and me to show that no vice is inherent in man. That which is inherent in man is his virtue. Immediately he realizes his own potentialities, man becomes almost divine, and I would like everyone of us to become what he should be, and not remain what we are.“

8) Religion of volunteers

vol 31 pp 441-442

Young India, 23-9-1926

„After showing that in this land of many religions, a volunteer is hard put to it to find a common denominator of conduct, a correspondent thus eloquently described the religion of a volunteer: 'Stripped of the eloquence, this religion of Truth again resolves itself into its component parts-Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. For Truth will appear to most sincere and conscientious Hindus, Mussalmans and Christians as Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, respectively, *as they believe them*.

The golden rule of conduct, therefore, is mutual toleration seeing that we will never all think alike and that we shall always see *Truth* in fragment and from different angles of vision.

Conscience is not the same thing for all. Whilst, therefore, it is a good guide for individual conduct, imposition of that conduct upon all will be an insufferable interference with everybody else's freedom of conscience. It is a much-abused term. Have all people a conscience? Has a cannibal a conscience? Must he be allowed to act according to the dictates of his conscience which tells him that it is his duty to kill and eat his fellows? Now the etymological meaning of conscience is 'true knowledge'. The dictionary meaning is 'faculty distinguishing between right and wrong and influencing conduct accordingly'. Possession of such a faculty is possible only for a trained person, that is, one who has undergone discipline and learnt to listen to the inner voice. But even amongst the most conscientious persons, there will be room enough for honest differences of opinion. The only possible rule of conduct in any civilized society is therefore mutual toleration. It can be inculcated among and practised by all irrespective of their status and training.“

9) Young India (Bulletin) 2 October 1930 (12/40), pp 2-3

Discourse on Tolerance

„I do not like this word, but could not think of a better one. Tolerance implies a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one's own, whereas Ahinsa teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as we accord to our own, thus admitting the -- imperfection of the latter. This admission will be readily made by a seeker of Truth who follows the law of love. If we had attained the full vision of Truth, we would no longer be mere seekers, but become one with God, for Truth is God. But being only seekers, we prosecute our quest and are --- conscious of our imperfection. And if we are imperfect ourselves, religion as conceived by us must also be imperfect. We have no realized religion in its perfection, even as we have not realised God. Religion of our conception, being thus imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and re-interpretation. Progress towards Truth, towards God is possible only because of such evolution. And if all faiths outlined by men are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise. All faiths constitute a revelation of Truth, but all are imperfect and liable to error. Reverence for other faiths need not blind us to their faults. We must be keenly alive to the --- defects of our own faith, and must not leave it on that account but try to overcome those defects. Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we would not only not hesitate but would think it our duty to adopt into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths.

The question then arises - Why should there be so many different faiths? We know that there are a large variety of them. The Soul is One, but the bodies which She animates are many. We can not reduce the number of bodies; yet we recognise the unity of the Soul. Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, there is one Religion, but any number of faiths. All faiths are a gift of God, but partake of human imperfection, as they pass through the medium of humanity. God-given religion is beyond all speech. Imperfect men put it into such language as they can command, & their words are interpreted by other men equally imperfect. Whose interpretation must be held to be the right one ? Every one is right from his own standpoint, but it is not impossible that every one is wrong. Hence the necessity for tolerance, which does not mean --- indifference towards one's own faith, but a more intelligent & purer

love for it. Tolerance gives us spiritual insight, which is as far from --- fanaticism as the north pole is from the south. True knowledge of religion breaks down the barriers between faith & faith & gives rise to tolerance. Cultivation of tolerance for other faiths will impart to us a truer understanding of our own.

Tolerance obviously does not disturb the distinction between right and wrong, or good & evil. The reference here throughout has been to the principal faiths of the world, which are all based on identical fundamental principles, & which can all point to saintly men & women who held them in the past & hold them now. In the case of good & evil, we have to cultivate charity for the wicked no less than for the good, the sinner no less than for the saint, all the while that we cherish inveterate hatred towards wickedness and sin.“