CHAPTER FOUR:

Gandhi on Fundamental Ethics Of Christianity

Like Hinduism and Buddhism Christianity also accepts ethical perfection to be the meaning of life. The Bible says, "You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect". It tells us to "to seek first of all His kingdom and His righteousness". Although man cannot be omnipotent or omnigood like god, man can be ethically perfect like god. Surely seeking his kingdom His righteousness essentially involve making constant effort to progress towards ethical perfection through selfless ethical service to world to the best of one's ability through some work required for the general good. In both Christianity and Buddhism, the ideal model of ethics takes the most important role in all aspects of religious morality. The focus of all teachings of ethics, in both religions, concentrates directly on the life and personality of Jesus Christ and the Buddha, respectively since their living embodiments are fraught with noble virtues and great loves which, by nature, go far beyond all capacities of human intellects and logical rationalism.

Gandhi regards Jesus Christ as one of the greatest teachers of Mankind. He holds that he does not need either the prophecies or the miracles to establish Jesus’ greatness as a teacher. For him, Jesus represents not a person, but the

1 The Holy Bible, new international version, International Bible society, 1987, Matthew 5.48
2 Ibid, 6.31-6.33.
principle of Non-violence and Love. Sermon on the Mount, for Gandhi is essence of whole of Christianity. He began to understand Christian teaching through New Testament and Sermon on the Mount. This teaching was non-retaliation, or non- resistance to evil. The teaching of the Sermon was meant for each and every one of us. In the concept of Satyagraha, Gandhi was deeply influenced by the teachings of Jesus particularly the sacrifice Jesus had to undergo during crucification for a noble cause. The teachings of the New Testament specially the sermon: "You have heard that it had been said: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you not to resist evil; but if one strikes thee on thy right cheek, turn to him thy other also" impressed Gandhi very much. Satyagraha, in the hands of Gandhi had been a weapon of conquering evil by good. Gandhi said that he had the same liking for the sermon as he had for the Gita. To use Gandhi’s words, “today supposing I was deprived of the Gita and forgot all its contents but had a copy of the sermon, I would derive the same joy from it as I do from the Gita.”

Gandhi loved Christianity because of its absolute emphasis on love as the most fundamental ethical virtue. But Gandhi disliked the claims of Christianity as superior over all other religions of the world. But though Gandhi had a deep respect for the different religions he was against modern method of

3 M.K Gandhi, In search of the supreme.vol-III, Navajivan publishing house, 1961,pp-313. See also the Holy bible, new international verson,Matthew 5:38-39)
proselytisation. This refer to the general tendency and not to brilliant exceptions. He feels that great educational and curative institutions of Christian missions has been established not for their own sakes, but as an aid to proselytizing. He dislike this attitude of the Christians. He believed that there is no such thing as conversion from one faith to another in the accepted sense of the term. It is a personal matter for the individual and his God. For he regard all the great religions of the world as true just as his religion is true for him. He holds that Christian missions will render true service to India if they devote their activities to humanitarian service without the ulterior motive of conversion.\(^4\) Proselytizing, in his view, has done more harm than good to mankind. There are thousands of man and women in the world who do not know the Bible or the name of Jesus but who are far more God fearing than many a Christian who knows the Bible, offers prayers regularly and believes sincerely that he follows all the Ten Commandments. As it is mentioned in the New Testament in the gospel of Matthew that; “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord’, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’\(^5\). Therefore, Gandhi advises that let one work be the silent

\(^4\) M.K Gandhi, , About ‘Conversion”, Harijan, 1935,pp-261

testimony of one’s worth. He was against certain forms of missionary activities specially those relating to conversion. But Gandhi was not opposed to conversion if it was based on one’s will but he was against any use of force or propaganda in the matter of conversion, as has already been pointed out in the above chapters that for him “Religion and force are incompatible”\(^6\). As he remarked, “A rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon. The fragrance of religion and spiritual life is much subtler than that of a rose.” From the comparative study of religions, Gandhi was convinced that a mere doctrinaire approach in the field of religion does not help to create inter religious fellowship.

The teachings of Jesus Christ has an immense value for Gandhi, but he do not regard everything said in the Bible as the final word of God or exhaustive or even acceptable from the moral standpoint. He opines that the material interpretation is unacceptable. He feels that like us human beings, words have their evolution from stage to stage in the contents they hold. For instance, the contents of the word –God-are not the same to every one of us. They will vary with experience of each. The powers of God should not be limited by the limitations of our understanding. The fundamental verses of St.John do require to be re-read and re-interpretated. This does not mean that the writers of the Gospel were untruthful persons. He would not reconciled to any teaching that did not satisfy universal ethics. He regard Jesus Christ as one of the greatest teacher of mankind and humanity, to him Jesus is a great world teacher among others but he do not consider him to be the ‘only son of God’. Because Gandhi holds that he cannot ascribe exclusive divinity to Jesus. He believes that he is as divine as Krishna or __

Rama or Muhammad or zoroastor. He does not believe in the historical Jesus. He profess to believe in Christ as one of the many incarnations of God. According to him there is no difference between sermon on the mount and the Bhagavad Gita. He holds the teachings of Jesus, of Mahommed or the Upanishads, all these complementary of one another, and in no case exclusive. Their true meaning, their inter-dependence and inter-relation, has still to be revealed to us.  

According to Gandhi, Jesus Christ belongs to the whole world. Christ might be looked upon as belonging to Christians only but he really did not belong to any community but he belongs to the whole humanity. The teachings of the sermon on the mount is meant for everyone, irrespective of race, caste, creed, religions. For him the whole conception of Christianity is the teachings of the Sermon on the mount. It is that Sermon which has endeared Jesus to him. Before, basing on his childhood experience, Gandhi was given to understand of Christianity that to be a Christian, was to have a brandy bottle in one hand and beef in the other. This certainly was not his idea of Christianity. However, the Sermon on the mount falsified this impression. For him Christianity is where there is boundless love and no idea of retaliation, Christianity is that which lives, which passes all boundaries and book-teaching, it is not capable of being preached to men, not capable of being transmitted from mouth to mouth, but from heart to heart. But today Christianity is

not commonly understood in this way. Today the Christianity of Christ’s teaching (Sermon on the mount) and the lives of the Christian are not consistent. They are inconsistent with the life and teachings of Jesus. It is yet to be lived. Though Gandhi admires Christianity, he is unable to identify himself with orthodox Christianity. Therefore he ask Christian friends not to preach the God of history, but show Him as He lives today through you. It is better to allow our lives to speak for us than our words. According to Gandhi the more he thinks of fundamental religion, the more he sees that there is behind them the eternal truth, i.e., it consists in the living of life, never ceasing, ever progressing towards peace. Unless one wishes for peace for all life, one cannot wish for peace for oneself. In other words, one cannot have peace unless there is in one, an intense longing for peace all around.

Major source of ethical guidance for Christians is the New Testament which contains the Gospels. Additionally, the Ten Commandments, contained in the Old Testament, also known as the Decalogue are an important source of ethical

8 Ibid, pp-317
9 Ibid, pp-323
guidance for Christian. For the Christian concept of a moral life, love (agape) is the central notion implicit or explicit in the Christian Bible as well as in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. As already been pointed out, the sermon on the mount contains the very essence of all that Christ sought to teach. The most important statements of his faith are the following :-

“Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy”

“Blessed are the peace makers, for they shall be called the children of God”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled”

“you have heard that it was said, ‘you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy, But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you’”

“ And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

11 Ibid, Matthew 5: 43-44.
12 Ibid, Matthew 12:2
“Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honour giving preference to one another.”

“Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men”

“Live peacefully with all men”

“Therefore, If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head”

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”

One can understand from the foregoing account of the teachings of Christ that his religious thought emphasizes the need for non-violence, truth, love, pity, forgiveness, humility, purity, peace, sympathy, friendship and other qualities. Christian love is not simply an individual experience. It has a corporate dimension and has to be expressed through acceptance of responsibility for society. We have to take moral decisions in relation to social, economic and political implications.

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13 Ibid, Matthew 12:10
14 Ibid, Matthew 12:17
15 Ibid, Matthew 12:18
16 Ibid, Matthew 12:20
18 I Corinthians 13:7-8
Although we may not be able to do the right things always to perfection we should never cease to strive towards finding the means to attaining this perfection. We should never abandon keeping before us the ultimate goal. Love must reside in all our actions. Love is known to us through the forgiving love of God. The practice of justice in human relations is in response to the call to practise love. Therefore, true justice cannot be “tit for tat” justice or retributive justice. The ultimate goal in the practice of justice is the full realization of a community of persons who know themselves as the children of God living together as the family of God and growing towards the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ.

Three factors are important in order to understand Jesus' ethics. These are: repentance as the basis of ethical life, the radical nature of God's ethical demand on humanity, and the centrality of the love commandment. The 10 Commandments are a succinct summary of Christian ethics. They are used as a framework for the key principles of Christian ethics. The Ten Commandment are also called “Decalogue” or “Decalog”. It is derived from the latin word “Decalogus” which in turn originates from the greek “dekalogus”. “Deka” in greek means “ten”. The Ten Commandments are a listing of some of the most important behavioural rules in the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament). It is regarded as the foundational laws that all Christians are to conform to. There are two versions of the Decalogue, the priestly version (Exodus 20:2-17) and the prophetic or Deuteronomic version (Deut.5:6-21). The Ten commandments form a central core of morality, a major advance from other legal codes of the day. However the New
Testament reiterates all but the fourth commandment. These are some important rules of behaviour that God expects of humanity. The Decalogue or the Ten Commandment may be divided into two sections, the first consisting of the first four commandments, and the second the remaining six commandments. The first sections deals with duties to God and the second section with duties to fellow humans. It is a special feature of the Decalogue that it combines worship of God with social and personal morality. The ten commandments are:-

Section I

The first four commandments concerns with duties to God

**Commandment I**  you must have no other god, besides me. God is both creator and redeemer or liberator. God demands absolute and undivided loyalty to him. What is demanded in this commandment is absolute purity of worship and acknowledgement of Gods sovereignty.

**Commandment II.** You are not to make any carved image for yourself, nor the likeness of anything in the heaven above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. This is a commandment against any form of idolatry raising to the level of God anything in the created order. The absoluteness and the transcendence of God is such that nothing in the created world, visible or invisible is adequate to

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represent him. Often it is assumed that only people of other faiths are guilty of idolatry. We need to remember that no one is free from the danger of idolatry. Giving absolute loyalty to anything other than God, including even our formulation of faith or our ethical codes involves us in idolatry.

**Commandment III.** You must not make wrong use of the name of the lord your God. Committing perjury using God’s name is forbidden. It also mean Do not use obscene speech in the name of the deities of any religion. This is also a commandment against the wrong use of religion for human ends. Commercialising of religion, political use of religion, use of religion to exploit others well come under the judgment of this commandment. God’s name or religious faith are not to be used for any human ends, however good they may appear to be.

**Commandment IV.** Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. Two reason are given for this commandment. The first is from the priestly tradition in Exodus 20: 8-11. According to this the Sabbath commandment is based on the religious belief that God worked for six days to create all things and rest on the seventh day. Therefore, the human also should, following the example of God, observed the seventh day as a day of rest. The second is from the prophetic tradation of Deuteronomy 5:12-15. According to this, the reason for a day of rest is ethical and humanitarian. It is rooted in God’s concern for the well being of the humans as well as the rest of creation. The humans are asked to observed a day of rest every week not because God rested, but because the humans and the animals need rest. The Sabbath rest is for all, including the slaves or domestic helpers, the ox, the donkey, and the cattle residing among them. The commandment also protects the domestic staff from exploitation. Both the religious and the ethical and humanitarian
interpretations are important. The Sabbath observance symbolises the celebrations of the love of God and his concerns for the well being of his creatures. It is a call not only to experience what the love of God has provided for us, but also to be committed to practise what the love of God requires.

Section II

The next six commandments are concerned with social life and inter-human relationships.

Commandment V: Honour your father and your mother so that you may enjoy life in the land which the Lord your God is giving you. The commandment expresses a deeper principle about the key to stability of society. Honouring of the father and the mother implies the sacredness or the sanctity of family ties. Honouring of parents also implies the respect for the wisdom of the elders. It is good to note that the commandment is not “obey your father and mother”. Honour and respect need not be taken as unconditional obedience to the traditions of the past. In order to progress change may be necessary, but respectfully accepting and preserving the values of the past is important for the stability of any society.

Commandment VI: Do not commit Murder. This commandment affirms the fundamental right of every person to live and the sacredness of human life. Life is a gift from God and no one has the right to destroy it. Like we have seen earlier in both Hinduism and Buddhism, Christianity also respecting other’s live is also regarded as one of the most important duty of a man. In Jesus teachings, it is not
murder alone that is forbidden, but even a hateful thought (Matthew 5:21). Our thought should be pure. We should not commit sin through our sinful thoughts towards others. We should cultivate thoughts which will be peaceful existence with our fellow beings.

**Commandment VII**: Do not commit adultery. This is a commandment which affirms the sacredness of sex life and calls for purity in all sex relationships. What is mentioned as adultery is the sex relationship of a married man with another man’s wife, or of a married woman with another woman’s husband. The sanctity of the family is to be protected. The commandment condemns both the act of adultery and the lust which is the cause for adultery. Adultery is considered as a serious offence and the penalty prescribed for it is capital punishment (Lev.20:10-14).

**Commandment VIII**: Do not steal. This commandment protects the right of people to their property. It prohibits the stealing of the property of others. One should avoid taking anything unless one can be sure that is intended that it is for you. Any sort of thieving, even at the risk of one’s life was denounced by the Buddha,

**Commandment IX**: Do not give false evidence against your neighbour. This commandment is meant to safeguard justice when dispute arise. Concern for fairness and justice in the disposal of disputes is characteristic of the prophetic witness to the righteousness of God. False evidence will distort justice. Based on this commandment the people were also forbidden to spread baseless rumour or to assist the wicked by giving malicious evidence (Exodus 23:1). The commandment
also called for not siding with the majority to pervert justice, nor to show favouritism to the poor (Exodus 23:2).

**Commandment X**: Do not covet. What this commandment forbids is the desire to possess what others have. The commandment mentions several things, the neighbour’s wife, household, land, slave, ox or donkey, and sums up as “anything that belongs to him”. It is the inner disposition of a person yearning for what belongs to others that is forbidden. It is not just acquisitiveness but an evil desire for what other people have that constitutes covetousness which is sin and contrary to God’s will.

Thus these are the commandments which bring out our obligations to God and to one another, integrating religious life with our moral life. They combine personal piety and social righteousness.

Christ explicitly preached: the spiritual equality of men and women but not of violently overthrowing human practices that differentiate male and female roles. He preached a high degree of tolerance and non-judgment, as well as peace and contentment through faith in God's purpose for each soul. He revealed God gives us free will and then allows us to sin (err), and even exposes us to evil, the prescription for which is faith and acceptance of God's reign. Christ predicted that the Holy Spirit would inhabit those who willingly took up the cross, like him.

Other values include: forgiveness, love, being joyful and thankful, sacrifice of your desires for the needs of your neighbour, valuing the truth and being true to yourself (no hypocrisy), divine intercession through prayer and charity. Christianity is explicit about a one-man, one-woman marriage (it prohibits polygamy). The Bible
is not comprehensive to each situation but is an overall framework for morality and ethics.

It should be noted that the foundation of Christian love is the recognition that “God is Love” and that this “infinite and eternal love enables us to respond by giving all our love in return. It was out of love that He created the whole universe, and by his love he becomes present in human history. The love of God became visible, manifested fully and definitively in Jesus Christ. He thus came down to meet man and, while remaining God, took on our nature. He gave himself in order to restore full dignity to each person and to bring us salvation. Our calling and mission is to share freely with others the love which God lavishes upon us without any merit of our own.