CONCLUSION:

A critical dialogue between the fundamental ethics of the above four religions in the light of Gandhi's thought on the issue.

In the present period in every country most of the thoughtful persons have come to realize the importance of adopting a synthetic attitude towards religion. A synthetic approach to religion means nothing more than perceiving the fundamental unity that exist in all religions, maintaining an attitude of religious tolerance and benevolence, and realizing that each religion tries to achieve the same objective by a different route. All great religious figures from Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha, Mahavir, Nanak and Kabir to the modern day thinkers like Ramkrishna, Tagore and Gandhi have adopted a synthetic approach to religion. According to Tagore, all the religions of the world are only different forms of a basic human religion. It is this which has caused similarity in the teachings of the saints and deities of different religions. Each religion is a different way of attaining the highest reality.

Gandhi respected every religion of the world, and it was his considered opinion that the religiosity of an individual is known by the respect in which he holds religions other than his own, since the basis or essence of each religion is one, the difference lying merely in the viewpoint. People belonging to different religions quarrel because they fail to distinguish between what is of primary interest and what
of secondary importance. In the more superficial respects, we differ from each other but in respect of fundamentals, we are all one. Gandhi made it a practice to read the religious texts of different religions and respected their deities, but he persisted in calling himself a Hindu as he objected to conversion of religion. It was in this manner that Gandhiji gave expression to his own synthetic approach towards religion.

If we study the ethics of each religion, as we have seen in the above chapters, we would realize that all religions do have not only unity of thought about the value of ethical life for human life and the core of its means, but also about various fundamental ethical values. All religions consider that enlightened selfless ethical life of love constitutes the core of Truth, i.e. of the true ultimate goal of life, and pursuit of selfless ethical life of love, serving selflessly one’s society to the best of one’s ability through some work required for the general good and making constant effort to progress towards ethical perfection, constitutes the core of its means. They accept that enlightened unselfish ethical life of love is intrinsically blissful and that a liberated life is eternally the best form of life: the happiness which intrinsically involves in such a life is of the highest kind and everlasting. All religions consider it to be of no religious value to worship a religious symbol without understanding its meaning and considers it to be of great religious value to convert a non-spiritual person into a seeker of Truth.

All great religions accept universal non-violence, speaking truth, non-stealing, non-slavery to passions and senses, abstention from avarice, contentment, external and internal purity, abstention from intoxicants, non-adultery, study of
moral and spiritual texts, etc., to be eternal ethical principles. They accept that pursuit of wealth and pleasure within the limits of ethics is essential not only for the pursuit of the ultimate goal of life, but also for sustainable development and prosperity in society. They accept the natural systems which sustain healthy life to be sacred and invaluable. They tell us not to cooperate with immorality and fight fearlessly against it.

A synthetic approach to all religions is necessary today. This approach helps one to perceive and understand the fundamental unity that lies at the root of each religion. This unity can be discovered in the following respects:-

(1) Every theistic religion of the world accepts the existence of God.

(2) Each religion believes that religion is essential for man.

(3) Every great religion lays the stress on self-control, self-sacrifice, non-violence, truth, and the laws of purity.

(4) Despite differences of prayer, place of worship, mode of worship and religious texts, every religion holds the worshipper’s piety, truth, purity and devotion above every other quality.

(5) Every religion advocates that one should be tolerant towards every other religion.
(6) Saints of each religion have advocated the importance of love for human beings, service, self control, purity, high character, tolerance, self sacrifice, giving of alms, piety, prayer, and meditation on God, etc.

(7) Every theistic religion holds essential that its deities should be held true.

(8) All religions have imparted strength, courage and illumination to man.

(9) The object of every religion is to increase a feeling of brotherhood in order to have peace on earth and to bring on earth the kingdom of heaven.

(10) All religions have equally contributed to the unity, peace, hope and happiness of human society.

It is evident from the foregoing account that all religions exhibit a fundamental unity, a face which once understood helps human beings to adopt a more tolerant attitude towards religions other than their own. And it is this attitude which can form the basis of any peace in the world. This is the idea of universal religion as different from one religion for the whole mankind.

Love is the essence of all religion, for it is religion (not organised religion) that teaches ethics and compassion. The compassion and love of all humanity of the Buddha is well-known. Love is the parent of ahimsa or non-violence. It is love that shares, cares and gives. It is the foundation of dharma. In fact, the Qur'an starts by saying 'Bismillah-ir-Rehman-ir-Rahim' which means "In the name of God, the Compassionate". Compassion is the highest manifestation of love. When the great Teacher of Galilee, Jesus Christ, was crucified, it is said that Peter the Apostle reached for the sword, only to be reprimanded by his master - "Put
down thy sword, Peter, for he who raises the sword shall perish by it". In the Gita, Krishna says to Arjuna, "The first and foremost qualification of a religious person is Sarva bhuta hite ratah - he should have love and concern for all living beings in the universe". Sowing the seeds of love in our hearts is the only solution to the problems of the world. Great literature, sublime poetry, exquisite works of art have all been inspired by love and compassion. It is unselfish love for humanity which is the culmination and the highest point to which love can soar to. When that happens, one lives for the good of others. The highest evolutionary attainment is the experience of love for all as well as non-human beings. And if we claim to be religious and neglect this aspect we are religious only in name. Ramakrishna Paramahamsa felt so much love and compassion for others that he would experience excruciating pain whenever he felt another's sorrow. To love and serve those in sorrow and pain, he declared, was the best way to serve God. Change should begin with the individual. Once we sow the seeds of love in our hearts, they will sprout and yield the fruits of compassion not only for the individual concerned, but for all.

Religions do have differences in the realm of metaphysics beyond science, and we are not in a position to know with the help of experiences and reason available to us which such metaphysical view is true: they belong to the domain of faith beyond reason. Unlike a metaphysical statement, a scientific statement is a universally testable empirically justified statement. Metaphysical problems of religion such as the problems of the existence of god, soul, life after death and immortality, etc are also beyond the scope of apriori knowledge. Hence it is not possible for us to know which of the rival religious metaphysical views is
true. It is worth noting if a religious metaphysical statement conflicts with science, it is possible to give an interpretation to it in which it does not conflict with science.

It is possible to convince people through critical religious ethics education that the ethics of various great religions are complementary to one another and fundamentally have the same core. Hence it is immoral and irrational to fight for religious metaphysical differences which lie in the domain of faith beyond reason. One should show reverence or at least tolerance to them. Critical study of the fundamental ethics of various great religions as an essential part of universal ethics education would be a major step in this direction. Gandhiji rightly believes that religious instruction must be the sole concern of religious associations, but teaching of the fundamental ethics is the function of the state. “I believe that religious instruction must be the sole concern of religious associations. Do not mix up religion and ethics. I believe that fundamental ethics is common to all religions. Teaching of fundamental ethics is undoubtedly a function of the state. By religion I have not in mind fundamental ethics but what goes by the name of denominationalism”.¹

According to Gandhi, it is the duty of everyone to study the scriptures of other than one’s religion. This enables people to keep their religion pure and rid it of blemishes.² Inter faith dialogue is very crucial to establish peaceful existence of all faiths.

¹ N.K Bose, selections from Gandhi, Navajivan publishing house, 1948, pp. 286-287
Interfaith dialogue refers to the cooperative and positive interactions between the people of different religious traditions. Interreligious Dialogue is concerned with the encounter between religious traditions with reference to their ethics, philosophy of life and world views. It welcomes all contributions which stimulate a deeper understanding of the systematic and practical issues concerning interreligious relations. It allows for discussion from the religious point of view of the various questions which are implicated in the modern situation of a pluralist culture. Gandhiji rightly says: “I am a believer in the truth of all the great religions of the world. There will be no lasting peace on earth unless we learn not merely to tolerate but even to respect the other faiths as our own. A reverent study of the sayings of the different teachers of mankind is a step in the direction of such mutual respect.”

Inter-faith dialogue has become an urgent necessity today. In this regard, what role can or should one play? Can we indeed play any role at all in this? Before discussing this issue, it is important to understand why inter-faith dialogue has become so necessary today.

Undoubtedly, in today’s world inter-community harmony is a major need and the lack of it has emerged as a major challenge. Inter-faith and inter-community harmony must be built on the foundations and concerns that different faith communities share in common. It must also seek to build bridges of understanding between these communities, and to remove mutual

3 Ibid, p.10
misunderstandings that are major source of inter-community conflict. In the
aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, Muslim religious groups in the West, for instance,
have increasingly realized the pressing need for inter-faith dialogue. They have
invited people of other faiths to visit mosques and the offices of Muslim
organizations so that they can observe what happens therein and can have their
questions and concerns about Islam and Muslims answered. This has had a positive
fall-out in terms of improving inter-community relations, which is itself something
that Muslims themselves require. Several Muslim countries are also developing
plans for promoting inter-faith dialogue. In June 2008 the Rabita al-Alami al-Islami
(‘World Muslim Council’) organized an international conference on inter-faith
dialogue. This was a very major initiative. At the conference it was decided that an
international institution would be established to further promote this sort of
dialogue. It was also decided to institute an award for inter-faith dialogue work.
Through these and similar initiatives, one hopes that Muslims will now play a major
role in promoting inter-faith understanding and peaceful dialogue.

The biggest challenge facing Muslims throughout the world today are
the negative and distorted images of Islam. This is a fact and we have to
acknowledge it. Even if one claims that this is a result of the machinations of anti-
Islamic forces, it does not diminish the danger of this challenge. This is why, as
followers of a religion that addresses itself to all of humankind, Muslims must
themselves make efforts to change the situation and seriously address this issue.

In a country like India, where, for a long time now, religion has been
cynically used as a tool for politics, the urgent need for inter-religious dialogue is
obvious. At the practical level, however, if this sort of inter-religious dialogue is
begun among the public and that they are spread out throughout the country, it
would enjoy greater public credibility and its impact would be wider and deeper.

In March 2003, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad organized a massive rally in Delhi. During the rally, copies of the Quran were distributed to those present. The VHP claimed that the Quran preaches hatred and even the indiscriminate killing of non-Muslims. This was a very opportune moment for the ulama and those related to the madrasas, which they should have used to initiate a dialogue on the actual meaning of the Quranic verses on jihad which the VHP claimed preached such things.

Unfortunately, even today the madrasas are not engaged in any serious or meaningful inter-faith dialogue work. Instead, they continue to follow the tradition of polemics which emerged in the medieval period. Polemics are still taught as a separate discipline in many madrasas. Much polemical literature has been produced over the years by the madrasas, but they are today of little practical use. The polemical approach is now almost wholly useless. It centres on verbal duels, and aims simply at defeating one’s opponent and seeking to claim victory for oneself. It does not lead to one’s opponent being inspired to introspect and review his or her stance. It also results in further widening the distance between the contending parties and building up high walls of hatred and prejudice.

In contrast to polemics, dialogue is a serious and, indeed, natural method of relating to people of other faiths. Through dialogue, each partner is able to present his or her own views without obstacle. This enables both parties to understand each other dispassionately. It can thus help dissolve misunderstandings and prejudices that give rise to hatred and conflict. Muslims believe in the universal truth of their
faith, and so it is their responsibility to seek to identify, analyse and then do away with the roots of inter-communal hatred. If these roots are allowed to grow unchecked, it will obviously have a seriously negative impact on Islamic mission.

Leaders of religious faith are the bastions of the faith. But they should not fortify themselves in their own world, cut off from the world around them. In order to carry out the work of inter-faith dialogue, it is imperative for the students, graduates, teachers and managers to actively engage and interact with others, including students of ‘modern’ schools and colleges. One way to do this is to encourage mixed activities, such as sports competitions, essay writing competitions, quizzes etc., in which students from ‘modern’ educational institutions can jointly participate. This can go a long way in helping to combat the many misunderstandings that they might have about other faiths.

For this purpose, educational institutions must introduce the teaching of comparative religions especially with reference to their ethics. The views of various great religions, great teachers and thinkers of mankind in various fundamental issues of ethics should be studied critically. Several books have been written on the subject by people of different religions, but most of them are centuries old. I do not deny the importance of these books but one has to keep in mind the fact that the world has undergone revolutionary social, political and intellectual changes in the last two hundred years. In the West, modern ideologies such as Communism, Capitalism, Secularism, Liberalism, Modernism, Post-Modernism and so on have assumed the form of virtual religions. For inter-faith dialogue initiatives to be more effective, these ideologies also need to be carefully studied. In India, too, some influential ‘ultra-secularists’ have adopted these
ideologies virtually as their religion. At the same time, the majority of Indians, including a large section of ‘modern’ educated people, still adhere to religion or at least claim to do so. Hence, dialogue work needs to be engaged in at both levels, and for this one need to have a deep understanding of other faiths as well as of the new Western ideologies that have also come to function as religions. Through critical dialogue with the ideologies of modern western civilisation, it would be possible to show that modern western civilisation is essentially an irreligious civilisation. In the beginning of the 20th century in his Hind Swaraj, Gandhiji argued that modern western civilisation is essentially an irreligious false civilisation in the sense that selfless ethical love, which constitutes the essence of religious life, has no place in it and what it considers to be the ultimate goal of life is essentially false. It fails to see not only the true value of spirituality, i.e. of selfless ethical love for human life but also the truth about many traditional ethical principles such as universal non-violence, abstention from avarice, contentment, purity, body labour, etc. Which all great religions accept to be eternal ethical principles. Gandhiji did not change his view about modern western civilisation till the end of his life.

The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and toleration of the devotees of the different religions. As Gandhi holds that there will be no lasting peace on earth unless we learn not merely to tolerate but even to respect the other faiths as our own. We have to find unity in diversity. The aim of the Fellowship, therefore, should be to help a Hindu to become a better Hindu, a Musalman to become a better Musalman, and a Christian a better a Christian and pursue the true ultimate meaning of life i.e. ethical perfection, which is the same for all religions.
In conclusion, I wish to reiterate that leaders of all religious faith must indeed take an active interest and role in inter-faith dialogue work. It will help them undermine the hostility that they presently face from some quarters. The leaders should take the initiative themselves, without expecting others to do so first. As the popular saying goes, ‘My message is love. Let it go wherever it can’. Dialogue is the best practical expression of this message. To combat communal hatred and promote inter-community harmony, people of different faiths must strive to promote a culture of dialogue. And in this leaders of different religious faith must play an important part.