CHAPTER V

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE
A. The concept of sarva-dharma-samabhva

Gandhi's comparative study of religions led him to the appreciation of the best in every tradition and to the formulation of the concept of sarva-dharma-samabhva; the expression implies looking on all religions with an equal eye. Dharma is what helps the evolution of the soul to a higher level of life; adharma is what obstructs its progress. Every religion, in essence, is dharma, since it aims to take human beings to a higher level of life. Dharma is derived from the Sanskrit root dhr, which means "to hold together"; it is the innermost constitution of a thing, the law of its inner being. It is an ethical concept which includes a moral code and the whole range of man's duties and responsibilities. This dharma is a part of rta, the fundamental moral law governing the whole universe, and humanity is to act in harmony with this moral order.

Gandhi maintained that one's religion is like one's own mother, entitled to one's highest reverence. He also accepted the moral and spiritual contents of all the great religions as equally valid for their respective followers. He accepted the religious experiences of the prophets of the world's religions as genuine. He saw no inconsistency in declaring that he "could, without in any way whatsoever impairing the dignity of Hinduism, pay equal respect to the best of Islam,"
Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism.\footnote{Harijan, 30-11-1947.} According to Gandhi, "reverence for dharma" expresses the ideal attitude towards the faiths of other men and their followers.

Different religious traditions do not admit of invidious comparisons since they emanate from different historical and cultural backgrounds. Hence, "reverence for dharma" does not mean that all religions are of equal value to all men; nor does it connote indifference to all of them; but it cherishes religiousness as expressed in each tradition. Just as all men are, in spite of their individual differences, equal before the law, so all the great religions are equal before God. He is concerned with every person, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Zoroastrian, or Muslim. Answering a question on this point, Gandhi once explained to Reverend Keithan, "All men are born equal and free, but one is much stronger or weaker than another physically and mentally. Therefore superficially there is no equality between the two. But there is an essential equality. In our nakedness, God is not going to think of me as Gandhi and you as Keithan. And what are we in this mighty universe? We are less than atoms, and as between atoms there is no use asking which is smaller and which is bigger; inherently we are equal. The differences of race and skin, of mind and body, and of climate and nature are transitory. In the same way, essentially all religions are equal. If you read the Bible, you must read it with the eye of a Christian, if you read the Gita, you must read it with the eye of a Hindu. ...The tree of religion is the same, though
there is not that physical equality between the branches. They are all
growing, and the person who belongs to the growing branch must not
gloat over it and say, 'Mine is the superior one.' None is superior and
none is inferior to the other." Just as one's own country is best for
oneself, similarly each religion is very often adequate or the best for its
respective adherents. There is one God who is working in the midst of
all His people. We are all striving to know Him and His will. In that
fundamental sense, all religions converge towards the same goal.
Elsewhere Gandhi writes, "For me, all the principal religions are equal
in the sense that they are all true. They are supplying a felt want in
the spiritual progress of humanity."3

"Reverence for dharma" does not imply only co-existence with or
toleration of other religions. Religious fanaticism of a virulent type
may be slowly tending to disappear in the world. But that is not
enough. Leaving other religions alone will not do; there should not be
any tinge of malice or hypocrisy in one's attitude towards any other
religion or its followers. According to Gandhi, tolerance "does not
mean indifference towards one's own faith, but a more intelligent and
purer love of 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 and faith.
Cultivation of tolerance for other faiths will impart to us a truer
understanding of our own."4 The term as Gandhi used it has nothing

1 Harian, 13-3-1937.
2 Harian, 6-4-1939.
to do with mere "toleration." Gandhi gave a deeper and wider meaning to the world "tolerance". He drew it out of his *ahimsa*, non-violence. His attitude was not only intellectually catholic, but also intensely passionate. The literal meaning of the word "tolerance" falls short of the significance he attached to it. It signified to him neither "sufferance" nor "condescension"; but it sprang from his concern for truth. Tolerance should express a positive recognition of all the great religions of the world. In Sanskrit, *samabhava* means equal outlook. But in Gujarati, *samabhava* means "sympathy". Gandhi evidently uses the world in the latter sense though the former is not excluded from it. It encourages harmony and cooperation for common ends between the different religions. It is also a necessary social virtue. It implies unreserved freedom of thought and worship, and most of all it expresses a will to live in friendship with the whole wide world of humanity. Gandhi goes a step further: "I have, of course, always believed in the principle of religious tolerance. But I have even gone further. I have advanced from tolerance to equal respect of all religions."5

For Gandhi, toleration welcomed the enlightenment that many come from listening to a man with an alternative point of view. It implied a creative search for truth and value wherever it may be found. In one of his letters from the Yervada Central Prison, Gandhi wrote, "I do not like the word tolerance, but could not think of a better word. Tolerance may imply a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority

5 *Harijan*, 12-1-1947.
of other faiths to one's own, whereas *ahimsa* 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, would have 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 not realized religion in its perfection, even as we have not realized God. Religion or our conception, being thus imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and reinterpretation. 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 also, yet 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 blend into our faith every acceptable feature of other faiths."

Gandhi continues: "The question then arises: why should there be so many different faiths? The soul is one, but the bodies which she animates are many. We cannot reduce the number of bodies: yet we recognize the unity of the Soul. Even as a tree has a single trunk, but
many branches and leaves, so is there one true and perfect Religion, but it becomes many as it passes through the human medium. The one Religion is beyond all speech. Imperfect men put in such language as they can command, and their words are interpreted by other men equally imperfect. Whose interpretation is to be held to be the right one? Everybody is right from his own standpoint, but it is not impossible that everybody is wrong. Hence the necessity for tolerance... Tolerance obviously does not disturb the distinction between right and wrong, or good and evil. The reference here throughout is naturally to the principal faiths of the world. They are all based on common fundamentals. They have also produced great saints."

Every religious tradition is orthodox to itself, though to some outsiders it may seem erroneous or heretical. There is no judge on earth who can judge between religions regarding the truth of their doctrines or the purity of their worship. A controversy that arises between religions over such matters is on both sides equal, and the only decision possible must come from the Supreme Judge of all men. Gandhi holds with modern Hinduism in general that "different religions express different facets of Truth; they are all true; but are tainted by the imperfect handling of imperfect men." He pleads that no religion or religious group may judge another religion, lest it may be similarly judged; otherwise, unending charges and countercharges

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7 Young India, 20-2-1920.
may ultimately lead to the denial of religion itself and consequently of
the God head. "It is a travesty of true religion to consider one's own
religion as superior and others' as inferior. All religions enjoin the
worship of one God who is all-pervasive. He is present even in a
droplet of water or in a tiny speck of dust. Even those who worship
idols, worship not the stone of which it is made; they try to see God
who resides in it. Various religions are like the leaves of a tree. No two
leaves are alike, yet there is no antagonism between them or between
the branches on which they grow. Even so there is an underlying
unity in the variety which we see in God's creation."

Gandhi maintained that a reverential study of the different
religious traditions is a necessary part of a liberal education. "I hold
that it is the duty of every cultured man and woman to read
sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others'
religions as we would have them to respect our own a friendly study of
the world's religions is a sacred duty. We need not dread, upon our
grown-up children, the influences of scriptures other than our own.
We liberalize their outlook upon life by encouraging them to study
freely all that is clean. Fear there would be when someone reads his
own scriptures to young people with the intention, secretly or openly
of converting them. He must then be biased in favour of his own
scriptures. For myself, I regard my own study of and reverence for the
Bible, the Koran, and other scriptures to be wholly consistent with my
claim to be a staunch sanatani or orthodox Hindu. He is no sanatani

*Harijan, 25-5-1946.
Hindu who is narrow, bigoted, and considers evil to be good if it has the sanction of antiquity and is to be found supported in any Sanskrit book. I claim to be a staunch sanatani Hindu because, though I reject all that offends my moral sense, I find the Hindu scriptures satisfy the needs of the soul. My respectful study of other religions has not abated my reverence for or my faith in the Hindu scriptures. They have indeed left their deep mark on my understanding of the Hindu scriptures. They have broadened my view of life. They have enabled me to understand more clearly many an obscure passage in Hindu scriptures.9

B. Reverence for dharma

"Reverence for dharma" is a consequence of the recognition of the spiritual values and insights embedded in every religion. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that different religions emphasize different facets of Truth, according to the genius of the respective peoples and the requirements of society. It is an expression of the belief that every religion is conducive to the spiritual advancement of its followers. It maintains that religions are not hostile to one another; it does not advocate displacement of any religion by any other religion. It rather persuades men to rise higher in the scale of spiritual development by following the true tenets of their own respective religious traditions and thus try to become better Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and so forth. One may, as a matter of fact, have preference for the particular framework within which one has chosen

9 Young India, 2-9-1926.
to live and act. Such a preference need not imply that one looks down upon all those who do not follow that particular framework.

Conscious reverence towards one's own religion and those of others is not possible unless one understands one's own religion at its highest and deepest and tries to understand other religions also in a similar way. As Gandhi observed, "In trying to explore the hidden treasures of ancient culture, I have come upon this inestimable boon, that all that is permanent in ancient Hindu culture is also to be found in the teachings of Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, and Zoroaster." Ignorance of one's own religion coupled with fanaticism often leads to perverse views about other religions. But he who understands and lives his religion in depth is truly filled with humble reverence to his own religion and similarly has the highest respect for every other religion.

To understand the point of view of a man of another faith requires broadmindedness, sympathy, humility, and willingness to recognize Truth, wherever it is. Only when equipped with these can a person appreciate alien traditions and conventions, beliefs, and ways of life. The prophets and seers of different religious traditions have brought mankind to a consciousness of the unity underlying the whole universe, a consciousness of the brotherhood of man and of the moral government of the world. These are some of the most important contributions of religious prophets to humanity, and none of them can be denied without loss to the spiritual worth of man. If the scriptures

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of others' traditions were to be read with mental reservations or ulterior motives, then the very purpose may be defeated and truth may suffer.

Gandhi wrote, "When I was turning over the pages of the sacred books of different faiths for my own satisfaction, I became sufficiently familiar for my own purpose with Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Hinduism. In reading these texts, I can say I was equiminded towards all these faiths, although perhaps I was not then conscious of it. Refreshing memory of those days, I do not find I ever had the slightest desire to criticize any of these religions merely because they were not my own, but read each sacred book in a spirit of reverence and found the same fundamental morality in each. Some things I did not understand then, and do not understand even now, but experience has taught me that it is a mistake hastily to imagine that anything that we cannot understand is necessarily wrong. Some things which I did not understand first have since become as clear as daylight. Equimindedness helps us to solve many difficulties and even when we criticize anything, we express ourselves with a humility and courtesy which have no sting behind them."\(^{11}\)

"Reverence for dharma" pleads that the task of reformation of religion must better be left to the followers of the religion concerned. Gandhi held that everyone should remain firm in his own faith and try to reform it from within; only then will their efforts be effective. However, he did not condone the lapses in his own religious tradition.

He thought that by remaining a Hindu he could reform Hinduism better. He had realized that external criticism of the practices and popular beliefs of other's religions would not help. Destructive criticism from outside more often stiffened the practices and attitudes than remove them. His own mind in early life had revolted against Christianity because the Christian missionaries poured abuses on Hinduism. It had done more harm than good. It made it difficult for him to appreciate Christianity. Christian preachers stood in the way of his understanding Christianity. It is only after he came into contact with good and godly Christians and studied the New Testament that he could overcome the effects of the earlier distaste given by the missionaries. It was impossible for him to think that any religion could pull down or offend any other religion. He wrote, "No propaganda can be allowed which reviles other religions." A person outside a particular religious group may point out the merits and excellences of another religion, may imbibe and assimilate into his own what is best in other religions, and may even offer helpful suggestions. But he may not condemn his neighbour's religion. For one thing, he has no right to do so. Only when one has befriended others does he earn the title to criticize. We must earn the title to criticize by showing reverence to the good elements in the faith of other men and by our friendly disposition towards them. The best that we can do is to seek understanding of another's faith or practice

12 Young India, 29-5-1924.
from the best interpreters of the religions concerned. The task of
reformation should be left to the votaries of the religions themselves.

C. Self-purification and self-analysis

Pointing to some iniquitous injunctions and corruptions present
in Islam, when a Muslim friend questioned Gandhi why he did not
denounce them, Gandhi answered, "I have nowhere said that I believe
literally in every word of the Koran, or, for the matter of that of any
scripture in the world, but it is no business of mine to criticize the
scriptures of other faiths or to point out their defects. It is and should
be, however, my privilege to proclaim and practice the truths that
there may be in them. I may not, therefore, criticize or condemn
things in the Koran or the life of the Prophet that I cannot
understand. But I welcome every opportunity to express my
admiration for such aspects of his life as I have been able to
appreciate and understand. As for things that present difficulties, I
am content to see them through the eyes of devout Muslim friends,
while I try to understand them with the help of writings of eminent
Muslim expounders of Islam. It is only through such a reverential
approach to faiths other than mine that I can realize the principle of
equality of religions. But it is both my right and duty to point out the
defects in Hinduism in order to purify it and keep it pure. But where
non-Hindu critics set about criticizing Hinduism and cataloguing its
faults, they blazon their own ignorance of Hinduism and their
incapacity to regard it from the Hindu point of view. It distorts their
vision and vitiates their judgment. Thus my own experience of the
non-Hindu a critic of Hinduism brings home to me my limitations and teaches me to be wary of launching on a criticism of Islam or Christianity and their founder's.\textsuperscript{13}

"Reverence for dharma" recognizes that all organized religions are aids and guides for the development and enrichment of the inner life of man. Religion is not an end-in-itself, but a means of attaining the highest moral and spiritual development. Different religions nourish, cherish, and provide every opportunity, guidance, and encouragement to the cultivation of the spiritual life by their respective followers. Mere outward conformity to the externals of an organized religion is not going to save any human being. It is the nobility and sublimity of the inner life of the great prophets of the world that command deep reverence, admiration, and emulation from human beings all over the world. Organized religions should nourish and cherish their respective spiritual aspirants and should join hands with one another in the promotion of spiritual life. "Reverence for dharma" maintains the possibility of such a spiritual fellowship of religious "Reverence for dharma" does not abolish the distinction between religion and irreligion. Gandhi observed, "We do not propose to cultivate toleration for irreligion. That being so, some people might object that there would be no room left for equimindedness if everyone took his own decision as to what was religion and what was irreligion. If we follow the Law of Love, we shall not bear any hatred towards the irreligious brother. On the contrary, we shall love him and therefore

\textsuperscript{13} Harijan, 13-3-1937.
either we shall bring him to see the error or each will tolerate the other’s difference of opinion. If the other party does not observe the Law of Love, he may be violent to us. If, however, we cherish real love for him, it will overcome his bitterness in the end. All obstacles in our path will vanish, if only we observe the golden rule that we must not be impertinent with those whom we may consider to be in error, but must be prepared, if need be, to suffer in our own person.\textsuperscript{14}

Elsewhere Gandhi makes this point quite clear: “I should love all the men—not only in India but in the world—belonging to different faiths to become better people by contact with one another, and if that happens the world will be a much better place to live in than it is today. I plead for the broadest toleration and I am working to that end.”\textsuperscript{15}

Most of the adherents of the great religions are hardly aware of the authentic content of their own respective traditions. They are satisfied, ordinarily, by adhering to certain rites and ceremonies. That is why mankind has never been kind to truly religious souls. Some of the prophets have died martyrs at the hands of their own people. What the world needs is the practice of true religion and not mere profession of it. The world has suffered not from lack of knowledge of morality, but from lack of right practice. The transformation can come only from self-purification and self-analysis.

\textsuperscript{15} Young India, 22-12-1927.
Religions, in cooperation with one another, can do a great deal to rehabilitate mankind and give to life meaning, purpose, and value. They can also do much for the establishment of peace in the world. Where politicians have failed, religions may succeed, provided they cooperate and recognize their mutual worth and potentialities, and provided they pool together the tremendous resources of religions and channel them in the direction of world peace. The major world religions, in cooperation with one another, may bring out the latent treasures hidden in each religion and help humanity at a time when it is facing one of the most acute spiritual crisis in history.

The duty of all religions is to face up to the materialistic conception of the history of mankind. Human history is not animal history; it is not a mere fighting to satisfy hunger or to gain economic ends. It is the history of humanity’s great spirits, it is essentially spiritual history. The followers of different religious traditions have to take note of the fact that, “all (religions) have saved a number of souls, but none has yet been able to spiritualize mankind. For that, what is needed is not a cult or creed, but a sustained and all comprehending effort at spiritual self-evolution.”16 The great religions have to rise to the needs of the times and help to rehabilitate the human soul, which is being lost in sensuality and materialism. In short, “Man must come to realize that the tolerance with which Truth is pursued is not less important than Truth itself. If it be true that no divisions are so sharp as those caused by religion, it is equally true that no unity is so strong

as that following a recognition of identity in religious aim, which is the supreme aim in life."\textsuperscript{17}

Human civilization, reflecting the vicissitudes of a chequered history, all till today, marched indifferently, at times and advancing spiritual and moral values and at times depreciating and neglecting them. Most human progress is at best piecemeal, it does not exhibit any predetermined dialectic inevitability. Wherever there has been an advance in moral and spiritual values, it has resulted mostly from the driving force of a religious personality embodying a comprehensive and integrated way of life.

In the past, religions have seemed by no means an unmixed blessing. "On the one hand, they have contributed greatly toward peace and progress, building hospitals and charitable institutions, promoting art and literature, and conferring many other blessings on humanity; on the other hand, in the name of religion, people have waged wars, persecuted their fellow beings, and destroyed monuments of human culture."\textsuperscript{18} How is it that religions which preach love and human brotherhood and peace could have given rise to conflicts generating hatred in their relationship with other communities? That there have been such conflicts cannot be denied. Nevertheless, it is not the religions that are responsible for the hatred and cruelty, but it is human bigotry and narrowness.

\textsuperscript{17} Hiriyanna, M., Mission of Philosophy, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{18} Nikkilananda Swami, Hinduism: Its Meaning for the liberation of the spirit, Harper, p. 185.
As far as one can see, the human community will continue to be religiously pluralistic. But traditional theologies, developed in religious isolation, have already become inadequate if not obsolete. They do not permit members of the different religious traditions to live side by side in friendly cooperation. They raise walls of separation between large sections of human beings and militate against human unity. In an ever shrinking world, our religious attitudes have to come to terms with this fact, and avoid further pointless and tragic conflict.

About the middle of the present century, Arnold Toynbee predicted that a thousand years from now, when historians will look back on the twentieth century, they will be very little interested in the conflicts between Communism and Capitalism, but they will see it as a period in which Eastern and Western religions interpenetrated one another and took the first steps towards building a genuine world civilization. Each religious tradition, it seems, in as much as it has nourished certain valuable insights (although neglecting some others), will have a significant contribution to make toward the emerging global civilization.

Gandhi lived and died for vindicating moral and spiritual values against the forces of materialism, parochialism and violence. He believed that if man is to grow in peace and understanding, he must meet other human beings with fearlessness and friendliness irrespective of their religious or national affiliations. As he pointed out, dialogue is essential for progress. The different communities and their leaders need not only to communicate and cooperate to make the
world become a better place to live in, but they need also an open environment in which to pursue truth. Growth in spiritual life, he held, will develop in man the capacity for humanity, charity, and tolerance and enable him to build a new civilization based on justice and moral regeneration.

Gandhi was in the thick of religious dialogue from the early years of his life. Among his father's friends were a good many Muslims, Parsis (Zoroastrains), and Jains as well as Hindus: they gathered frequently in his house for religious discussions. And the young Gandhi eagerly listened to their conversation. This experience impressed on his mind the problem of religious diversity, and the need to forge unity among the followers of different religions.

His religious quest was further stimulated by his Christian friends in England and South Africa. In London, he spent a large part of his time in religious discussion. The literature of the Theosophists introduced him to the movement for the unity of religions. Sir Edwin Arnold's English version of the Bhagavadgita, *The Song Celestial*, stirred him so deeply that for the rest of his life it became his constant guide. He also read *The Light of Asia* and *The Sayings of Zarathushtra* with great interest. He was moved by the teachings of the New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount. The verses, "But I say unto you that ye resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right check, turn to him the other also" went straight to his heart. The personality of Jesus held a fascination for him all his life.
Gandhi also read Carlyle’s *Heroes and Heo-Worship*, and learned from it of Muhammad’s greatness, bravery, and austere living*. Washington Irving’s *Life of Mahomet and His Successors* raised the Prophet in his estimation. The Prophet’s austere life and profound teachings influenced him a great deal. C.F. Andrews observes: “Gandhi’s profound admiration for the character of Prophet Muhammad as a man of faith and action and also for his son-in-law Ali, as a man of tender love and suffering, deeply affected him. He was impressed to a remarkable degree by the nobility of the early Caliphate and the fervent faith of the first followers of the Prophet. The bare simplicity with which they lived, their chivalrous devotion to the poor, their intense belief in God’s overruling majesty, all these things had a great effect on him.”

The Mahatma pursued religious dialogue on two levels; theoretical and practical. At the theoretical level, his objective was sympathetic understanding of the living world religions. Ignorance about the faiths of other men, he realized gives rise to prejudices and misrepresentations resulting in a certain unwillingness to accept the integrity of the followers of other traditions. People quarrel about religion only when they lose sight of the human dimension of all religions. It is lack of sensitive understanding of others faith that has often led the practitioners of religions to mutual recrimination and bloodshed.

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Religious believers generally have insufficient opportunities for and interest in knowing about the values and insights of the various world religions; indeed there is a pervasive ignorance of the creative principles of all faiths, including one's own. Whatever the reason for such a state of affairs in the past, Gandhi felt that it could not be allowed to continue. Modern men and women need to expand their religious consciousness by understanding in depth the spiritual truths revealed in religions other than their own.

Gandhi believed that education without the study of the religions is incomplete. Religious study is not only a legitimate intellectual pursuit but a vital aspect of human culture and civilization. It relates to the wellsprings of individual and social life, and deals with the central questions of human life and destiny. One neglects the study of religions at the risk of failing to understand humanity and history. Reminiscing about his early life, Gandhi expressed much regret at the lack of facilities to study religion at his school. He discusses this predicament in his Autobiography (p. 120): "I am Hindu by faith, and yet I do not know much about Hinduism, and I know much less of other religions. In fact, I do not know what is and what should be may belief, I intend to make a careful study of my own religion, and as far as I can, of other religions as well." This he did later on, devoting a good measure of his time to the study of comparative religion, which exercised a profound influence on his life. He became convinced that the study of the different religions would contribute to a healthy religious pluralism.
Gandhi would not make invidious comparisons between religions qualitatively. Indeed he saw no use in such an endeavour. To him the main point of interest was not how palatable or unpalatable one religion was to the followers of another religion but the fact of its position of profound influence on its own followers. "As we wish the followers of other religions to appreciate us, so ought we to seek with all our hearts to appreciate them. Surely, this is the Golden Rule."20 Gandhi was humble and eager to learn from other traditions and their followers. He believed that there was good in every tradition, and went straight to their best, purest and noblest elements with a view to benefiting from them in his own life.

His study of the religions revealed to him that every religious tradition had its period of growth and decline and that no historical religion was perfect. He saw that each religious tradition has needed purging of old abuses at one time or another, and that each religion had its band of reformers and saints. He considered it misguided, therefore, for any tradition to fasten on itself or on others the crudities of a bygone age. Recognizing that each great religion contained numerous elements, tendencies and movements, he refused to characterize a religion on the basis of a single sect or movement.

Gandhi’s approach was rather to encourage the purification of religions than to seek their replacement. He believed that knowledge of other religions makes Hindus better Hindus, Muslims better Muslims, Christians better Christians, and all humans’ better

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members of the world community. Interreligious dialogue, he saw, offers help in the refining and developing neglected dimensions of each religious tradition. The insights of different religions belong to all peoples. The truths revealed to the Christians should become precious to the followers of other faiths, and vice-versa. Religious dialogue also sensitizes people of different backgrounds to one another. No religion should, therefore, bar its followers from studying other religions or supplementing their own spiritual knowledge and discipline.

Gandhi was generous in acknowledging his deep debt to other faiths. But he insisted that while we should throw open our windows for fresh breezes from different directions, we should refuse to be swept off our feet. He developed a capacity for assimilating insights of other traditions and thus enriching his own. In a revealing conversation, Gandhi told Mrs. Henry Polak in South Africa: “I did once seriously think of embracing the Christian faith. The gentle figure of Christ, so patient, so kind, so loving, so full of forgiveness that he taught his followers not to retaliate when abused or struck, but to turn the other cheek I thought it was beautiful example of a perfect man.” “But you did not embrace Christianity, did you?” she asked. “No”, replied Gandhi thoughtfully. “I studied your scriptures for some time and thought earnestly about them...but eventually I came to the conclusion that there was no need for me to join your creed to be a believer in the beauty of the teaching of Jesus or to try to follow his example.” And he added: “If a man reaches the heart of his own
religion, he has reached the heart of others too. There is only one God, but there are many paths to him.\textsuperscript{21}

Religious dialogue for Gandhi, was not just a theoretical or academic matter, it had an existential dimension. He put more emphasis on the practical aspects of religion and inward life than on beliefs and dogmas. Because of this he was able to cooperate with the adherents of other religions in realizing the higher ideals of life. As a result, members of different races and faiths worked and struggled together in his movements for freedom and justice on behalf of the oppressed sections of society in South Africa and in India. The Indian National Congress, which spearheaded the non-violent freedom struggle under the leadership of Gandhi, included Parsees (Zoroastrians) Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and followers of other religions. He did not think that any theological consensus was a prerequisite for working together for human justice and freedom. Participants in his movement were reminded, however that all religions emphasized man's responsibility for other human beings and were urged to follow the highest vision of their respective faiths.

Gandhi’s ashrams both in South Africa and in India were outstanding examples of this kind of harmonious cooperation. They were the "moral laboratories" where his experiments with truth and non-violence were conducted in the living of daily life; there were no dividing lines of class, nationality, or creed. The inmates of his ashrams belonged to different religions and races and lived a life of

voluntary poverty, simplicity, purity and service. In the community life of the *ashrams*, Gandhi gave first place to culture of the heart and training of the spirit. "To develop the spirit is to develop character and to enable one to work towards knowledge of God and self realization", he said.

Gandhi helped and encouraged the inmates of his *ashrams* to keep their respective religious observances. For example, he took care to see that the Muslim youngsters in the ashram community offered their *namaz* (prayer) and observed their *Ramadan* fast. He also encouraged the Hindu members to observe *pradosha* (fast until evening), and the Christians their Lent. The result of the experiment was that all the inmates became convinced of the value of fasting and the practice of self-denial. It led to a feeling of mutual relationships and support in the observance of their respective religious customs and festivals. It also demonstrated the unity of the *ashram* community despite the members' differences in beliefs and practices. When the South African courts, practicing religious discrimination, refused to recognize marriages performed according to non-Christian rites, the entire *ashram* community-Hindus, Christians, Parsis etc. took it as a serious affront to the sanctity of Indian married life and struggled non-violently, under Gandhi's leadership, until the South African government repealed the discriminatory religious treatment.

To his *ashram* in Ahmedabad, Gandhi invited an "untouchable" family. The acceptance of such a family caused a good deal of opposition. Many of his followers became disgruntled; they did not
want to live with the "untouchables" and some left. Even his wife objected at first. Monetary support to the ashram from the public stopped. But Gandhi would not give in, since it was a matter of religious principle with him. He was prepared to move into the untouchable quarters of the city and, like an untouchable, live by manual labour. An unknown person came up with help, and in a short period the opposition died down: even the orthodox changed their minds. And Gandhi adopted the daughter of an untouchable family. Lakshmi as his own daughter.

Gandhi was frankly a religious Hindu, and a sanatani or orthodox Hindu at that. He was relentless, however, in his criticism of the excrescences that had accumulated in Hinduism through the ages. He exposed the evils in the Hindu social and religious structure and discarded whatever offended his moral sense. He was equally active in campaigning publicly for their removal. He worked for the transformation of Hindu Society and for the setting of new moral standards, and this eventually changed the lives of millions of people. He worked for the redemption of the outcastes, the emancipation of women, basic education, cottage industries, prohibition, and like causes.

Gandhi's interreligious dialogue resulted in: (i) mutual learning; (ii) sensitive awareness of other religions; (iii) deepening of this awareness into respect; (iv) a progressive reinterpretation of his own life and traditions; and (v) mutual cooperation for the common objectives of truth and justice.
D. Search for Truth

The most remarkable aspect of Gandhi's life and work is his dedication to the search for Truth. "Truth became my sole objective", he said. "It began to grow in magnitude every day and my definition of it has been ever widening." 22 Even when Gandhi appeared to be engaged in struggles which were not purely religious in character or in movements connected with social reform and justice, his dominant motive was still religious, "Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities, social and religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all. Human beings become a necessary part of endavour, simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all. I am part and parcel of the whole and I cannot find Him a part from the rest of humanity.....If I could persuade myself that I could find Him in a Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately; but I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity." 23

Gandhi started with the conviction that God is Truth, later he declared that Truth is God. For him, Truth meant more than mere truthfulness; it signified eternal being. It included what is true in knowledge, what is right in conduct, and what is just and fair in human relations. Life is an experiment in which human beings ought to discover the ever more comprehensive truth. The different ways

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23 Harijan, 29-8-1936.
through which human beings pursued Truth interested him exceedingly. He did not stop at seeking and discovering Truth; he proceeded to establish it in terms of justice and fair play to all. He stressed, therefore, that the only means of attaining truth in life is *ahimsa*, non-violence, which is nothing less than the "liability to love the meanest of creation as oneself". It is in this unique way that Gandhi brought home to everyone the religious spirit—not in heavy theological language, but in the language of daily life and truthful living.

Gandhi's purpose in dialogue was not elimination of religious differences but appreciation of one another's faith and practice, leading to cooperation in the moral and social spheres. He sought to understand both the similarities and the differences. He was impressed by the fact that moral and spiritual values are stressed by all religions. The "Golden Rule" in one form or another and the injunction to transcend the ego is present in all of them. All preach that man's relation to man is more important than his relation to material things. All teach that service of the poor, the sick, the helpless, and the oppressed is service of God. In the eternal struggle of good and evil, all religious are called upon to take sides with the good and raise humanity to a higher moral level. In this sense, the success of any religion is the success of all religions. It is only natural to expect, therefore, that different religions should cooperate with one another in dealing with these problems.
Gandhi was aware, on the other hand, of the characteristic differences between the great religions arising from historical and cultural backgrounds. They do not all have the same beliefs and doctrines; nor do they prescribe the same rituals or prayers, or subscribe to the same kind of myths. He believed that any attempt to root out these differences not only is bound to fail but is a form of sacrilege. Since differences are important, and in some cases unbridgeable, he discouraged any sort of uncritical syncretism. Actually, he welcomed the enrichment that comes with religious diversity. He wanted people from all religions to maintain their special symbols of identity. The need was not a new religion, but respectful dialogue among the adherents of different religions.

Gandhi did not look upon eclecticism with favour either. He did not approve of the abdication of one's own religion and its heritage. On the contrary, he advocated firm adherence to one's own religion. The eclectic does not go deeply into any religious tradition, and therefore lacks depth, his approach is superficial and he fails to grasp the distinctive message of any religious tradition, even his own. According to him to call a person "eclectic" was to say that he had no faith. He advocated religious harmony, and not a blending of all religions into a uniformity of faith and practice.

Gandhi's focus in religious dialogue, therefore, was not myth, but the moral and spiritual resources of the different religious traditions. He was aware that religious practices often emphasized and developed sectarian trends and loyalties. He cautioned that it was
dangerous to mankind as a whole today to over emphasize the parochial. He urged all people to look at things from a larger context and from a human perspective. For if the universal elements are released from their narrow settings, religions would become progressive and unifying forces in the world.

In India, the problem of interreligious relations has engaged the attention of thinking persons for over three thousand years. In his own day, Gandhi was confronted with strained relations between Hindus and Muslims. Hatred and suspicion had poisoned the atmosphere. Bloody religious riots were frequent. The growing tension between the two communities distressed Gandhi a great deal. He deplored these riots, and believed that both Hindus and Muslims could and should live and work together for the common good. He pleaded and prayed and fasted for religious harmony. In fact, during the last decades of his life, his major preoccupation was harmony between Hindus and Muslims. He was a Hindu who advocated the rights of the Muslims. He pleaded with the Hindu majority to treat the minority with justice and fairness. He went from place to place, meeting Hindus and Muslims and proclaiming the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. He said to the people: "God is one. Allah and Rama are His names."

In the midst of pervasive darkness, Gandhi served as a beacon light. He sought to heal the wounds that people, in their religious frenzy, were inflicting upon themselves. He worked miracles. Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, described the situation in this
way: "While the 55,000-man Boundary Force in the Punjab was swamped by riots, the one-man Boundary force brought peace to Bengal."24 A fanatic Hindu, however, believing that Gandhi was disloyal to Hinduism, assassinated him. Even in his death he achieved something remarkable: his martyrdom shamed his people out of a hysteria of hatred and fratricide, and helped the country consolidate its constructive and democratic forces.

Gandhi wanted harmony and friendship to be established not merely between the Hindus and Muslims of India, but among the adherents of all the great religions of the world. "Hindu-Muslim unity means not only unity between Hindus and Muslims but between all those who believe India to be their home no matter to what faith they belong." The problem of the mutual relationship of religions is worldwide today. What is going on in Ireland, the Middle East, Cyprus, the Indian subcontinent, and elsewhere, in the name of religion is most distressing and depressing. The exaltation of terrorism in the name of religion is tragic. In the words of Gandhi, "To revile another's religion, to make reckless statements, utter untruth, to break the heads of innocent men, to desecrate temples or mosques is a denial of God."25

Gandhi's interreligious dialogue authentically represents the Indian attitude of respect for all religions. The idea that "Truth is one: sages call it by different names" has been alive in Hinduism since the

time of the Rgveda. Because of his great concern for Truth, Gandhi was inwardly receptive to the currents of truth coming from other religions. To ignore any of them meant to ignore God's infinite richness, and impoverish humanity spiritually. He wanted all religions to revive their pristine past and develop their traditions. "I ask no Hindu or Mussalman to surrender an iota of his religious principle. Only let him be sure that it is religion. But I do ask of every Hindu and Mussalman not to fight for an earthly gain."  

Gandhi advocated harmony among the world's religions instead of playing down the importance of any of them. The sciences, which study the natural world, do not claim "any monopoly of wisdom for their own particular branch of study nor quarrel about the superiority of one science over the others". In a similar way, Gandhi held, each religion must bring its individual contribution to humanity's understanding of the spiritual world and not quarrel about the superiority of one religion over another. For God's love embraces the whole world. He believed that all the world religions are God given and that they serve the people to whom they are revealed. They are allies engaged in the common cause of the moral and spiritual uplift of humanity. In the context of the emerging world community, all the great religions are useful, necessary, and complementary to one another as revealing different facets of the one truth.

The problems that threaten the world community are not merely political or economic; they arise as well from certain basic religious and spiritual attitudes. If the faith and integrity of other persons are not respected, genuine communication and consequent world community will be at best a dream. Arnold Toynbee, after surveying the history of the entire human race, has made the following significant observation: "At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is the Indian way—Emperor Ashoka's and Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence and Shri Ramakrishna's testimony to the harmony of all religions. Here we have an attitude and spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow into a single family—and, in the Atomic Age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves."28