Gandhi's approach to Hindu-Muslim problem is deeply rooted in his religious outlook. Though he claimed to be a devout Hindu, his view of religion transcended Hinduism. He had a catholic approach to religion which is akin to the Vedantic religion as interpreted by Vivekananda. Even before his arrival at the Indian political scene, he said in 1909, "By religion, I do not mean formal religion, or customary religion, but that religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our Maker."  

In a similar vein he said in 1920, "Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism,

which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself."²

It is true that he was deeply influenced by Hindu religion. He inherited his devotion to Hinduism from his parents. He belonged to a Vaishnavite Hindu family that had leaning towards jainism. His mother was a devout woman. Above all, his nurse Rambha deeply impressed on him the power of 'The Ramnama'. He came to regard it as the panacea for all ills, spiritual and physical and what he learnt in his childhood became later in life, 'a huge thing' in his 'mental firmament'. "It is a sun," he added, "that has brightened my darkest hour."³

His utterances on religion reminds one of the many great reformers and saints in Hinduism. He looked upon the Bhagavadgītā as his spiritual dictionary and reiterated his faith in the teachings of the Upanishads. He even claimed that he was making a ceaseless endeavour

3. Harayan, 15 December 1896,
to mould his life in accordance with the basic principles of these scriptures. His deep faith in truth and non-violence, his longing for Moksha, fasting and prayer show his indebtedness to Hinduism. It evoked his admiration and the fact that it had withstood the upheavals through the ages strengthened his faith in its soundness.  

However, it is wrong to look upon Gandhi as an orthodox Hindu, for Hinduism yielded new meanings to him. It was identical with the religion of humanity that covered the best of all religions known to him. His religious outlook evolved out of his own spiritual experiences and his contacts with different religions. He had made an intensive study of the Bible and was deeply influenced by the New Testament which, according to him, gave him as much joy and comfort as he could drive from the Bhagavadgita. He came in contact with devout Mohammedans both in South Africa and India and was moved by the spirit underlying Islam.

Thus though he remained Hindu, his Hinduism bore the imprints of his own personality. He infused new meanings into the old traditions and ideals of Hinduism.

As observed by Joan V. Bondurant, "Gandhi used the traditional to promote the novel; he reinterpreted tradition in such a way that revolutionary ideals, clothed in familiar expression, were readily adopted and employed towards revolutionary ends. Gandhian developments are syncretic." 7 He reinterpreted Hindu ideals, institutions and scriptures with a view to adjusting them to his own view of religion. For instance, he denied the commonly held belief among the Hindus that salvation can be attained only through meditation. He rather believed that service to humanity was the true road to salvation. 8  

Similarly he had a very comprehensive view of truth. To him it is identical with God. It is infinite and multi-faceted. In terms of metaphysics search for truth leads to inquiry into ultimate reality. Once while discussing the nature of truth with an atheist friend, he said, "Truth means existence; the existence of that we know and of that we do not know. The sum total of all existence is absolute truth.

8. Gandhi defines Moksha as "... deliverance from having to assume an endless succession of various bodies, and from the resultant suffering (C.W., Vol.XII, p. 92). Moksha can be achieved by 'Parmartha' (Ibid., Vol.XIV, p. 516) by 'obiding by one's words' (Ibid., p. 357) and by 'renouncing love to body or by identifying oneself with the duties of Ashram(Ibid,p.499). To say that there can be no Moksha if there is no God is to fail to understand Moksha". (Ibid., Vol.XII, p. 92).
or the Truth," "The concepts of Truth", he added, "may differ but all admit and respect truth. That truth I call God." This outlook carried him closer to those who denied or doubted the existence of God. In this light his pursuit turned out to be an endeavour to find a common basis for a common quest in the company of atheists and agnostics as well as theists.

In fact, Gandhi's religious catholicism followed from his view of truth. As his friend and admirer Henry Polak put it, "Truth is like the fire at the heart of a many-faced jewel. Each angle shows a different aspect and a different colour." So men being imperfect, can see truth only in fragments. Thus no one can claim the monopoly of truth. Consequently, all religions are imperfect since they are conceived by men. However, they all constitute a revelation of some aspects of truth. They, therefore, are objects of our reverence. They all are equal and true because they attempt at revealing the multi-faceted truth. In Gandhi's own words, "Truth is the same in all religions though through refraction it appears for the time being variegated even as light does through a prism." Fundamentally, he added, "they

are all one, for they, all serve the spiritual need of mankind. They are the branches of the same majestic tree or different roads leading to the same goal. It follows that a religious man while accepting the best in his own religion should entertain equal regard for other religions and their followers. One can keep one's own religion pure by a sympathetic study of other religions, for one can learn many good things from other religions, too. However, he did not favour proselytisation since he believed that one could rise to the highest spiritual level through the medium of one's own religion. Moreover, there was hardly any logic for the change of religion if all religions are considered as true though equally imperfect. It follows that no religious purpose would be served by converting a Hindu to Christianity or Islam.

Accordingly, it follows that the key to the solution of the communal tangle "lies in everyone following the best in his own religion and entertaining equal regard for the other religions and their followers." 12 He, therefore, assured that his object had always been "to make Muslims better Muslims, Hindus better Hindus,

Christians better Christians." He never encouraged anybody to change his or her religion. This was the dominant note of reascent Hinduism as represented by Vivekananda and Swami Ram Tirath. It is conducive to the growth of a universal religion.

Similarly he gave a new interpretation of non-violence or Ahimsa. As early as 1915, while defining Ahimsa, he said, "Mere non-killing is not enough. The active part of non-violence is love. The law of love requires equal consideration for all life from the tiniest insect to the highest man. One who follows this law must not be angry even with the perpetrator of the greatest imaginable wrong, but must love him...." 14

However, his faith in non-violence does not involve submission to evil or any kind of injustice. On the other hand a devotee of non-violence is required to oppose evil "with all its might, and must patiently and without resentment suffer all the hardships to which the wrong doer may subject him in punishment for his opposition." 15 He made Ahimsa meaningful in the social and political spheres by developing and moulding it as a tool of non-violent action which could serve as a positive force in

15. Ibid.
his search for peaceful solution of social conflicts. To quote Gandhi, "I have applied it to every walk of life, domestic, institutional, economic and political. I know of no single case in which it has failed, where it has seemed sometimes to have failed, I have ascribed it to my imperfections." Similarly he gave new meanings to non-stealing, chastity, Varnashram, fearlessness and physical labour.

A passage of the Ishopanishad communicated him the doctrine of economic equality cherished by modern socialists and communists. As interpreted by him, it means "all this that we see in this great Universe is pervaded by God... renounce it and enjoy it or ... enjoy what He gives you.... Do not covet anybody's wealth or possession." "Everything good in all the scriptures", "is derived from this mantra. If it is universal brotherhood — not only brotherhood of all human beings, but of all living beings — I find it in this mantra. If it is unshakable faith in the Lord and Master — and all the adjectives you can think of — I find it in this mantra. If it is the idea of complete surrender to God and of the faith that he will supply all that I need, then again I say I find in this mantra. Since he pervades every fibre of my being and of all of

16. Harijan, 6 July 1940.
you, I derive from it the doctrine of equality of all creatures on earth ... and if my life and that of all who believe in this mantra has to be a life of perfect dedication, it follows that it will have to be a life of continual service of our fellow creatures. "17

Similarly he did not follow any scripture blindly. He was not ready to subordinate his reason to the authority of any scripture. For, reason, according to him, is the only instrument through which one can understand the message and meaning of a scripture, since any scripture, he observed, suffers from "a process of double distillation. Firstly they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly."18 This attitude enabled him to understand and appreciate the doctrines and experiences of other religions. "My religion", he wrote, enables me, obliges me, to imbibe all that is good in all the great religions of the earth."19 His appreciation of the religious achievements of Islam was in accord with this approach.

"The history of Islam", according to him, "if it betrays aberrations from the moral height, has many a brilliant page... In its glorious days it was not intolerant. It commanded the admiration of the world..."20

18. Ibid., 12 December 1936.
19. Ibid., 28 October 1939.
Gandhi's view of Islam was shaped by Ameer Ali's 'Spirit of Islam' and Washington Irving's 'Life of the Prophet' both of which he studied in South Africa and recommended its study to all the readers of his 'Indian Opinion'. He planned to publish a translation of the 'Spirit of Islam' for which he received the permission of the author. He re-read it in his first imprisonment in Yeravada Jail and later on recommended its study to Mirabahn. Both these books appeared to him quite useful for promoting communal harmony since these laid emphasis on the contributions of Islam to human civilisation. Ameer Ali's interpretation of Islam as a tolerant religion appealed to him, though the picture of Islamic toleration was drawn by the author in the background of the ferocity of religious persecution that went on in Christendom for centuries. Muslims were tolerant in comparison with the Christian crusaders. "Islam grasped the sword", pleaded the author, "in self defence", while Christianity "grasped it in order to stifle freedom of thought and liberty of belief." It was certainly heartening to Gandhi to hear from the author that "proselytism by the sword was wholly contrary to the instincts of Mohammed and wrangling over creeds his abhorrence."  

24. Ibid., p.213.
Similarly Washington Irving's book about the life of the Prophet appeared to him as an excellent work depicting the high character of the Prophet of Islam. He, therefore, decided to serialize some of its chapters in the 'Indian Opinion', though the project had to be abandoned on account of the objections raised by some Muslim readers to certain passages in the book.

In the tranquility and solitude of the Yeravada jail he made a deeper study of Islam as well as of other religions of India. He read several books dealing with ethics, religion and history of Islam. These include 'The Koran' (writer not mentioned), 'Message of Mahomed' by Wadia, 'Saints of Islam' by Hassan, 'Life of Hasrat Umar', and 'Al-Kalam in Urdu by Maulana Shibli, 'USVA-e-Sahaba (giving accounts of Prophet's companions in Urdu) (writer not mentioned), 'Koran' by Dr.Mahomed Ali, 'Mystics of Islam' by Nicholson, 'History of Saracens' by Ameer Ali, 'Ethics of Islam' by Mirza.

Later on in a letter to Prembehn, he expressed a desire

26. F.N.Mahadev Desai in his diary states that the offending passages only dealt with the idol worship, superstitions and evil customs prevalent in Arabia before the Prophet was born.(Diary of Mahadeu Desai, Vol.I (Ahmedabad: Navjyoti Publishing House,1953), p.259. But Gandhi stated that the series had to be discontinued because some Muslims raised objections to the publication of the chapter dealing with the Prophet's marriage (C.W., Vol.VII,p.202).
to read as many biographies of the Prophet as possible and asked her to send him the two parts of 'Asva-e-Sheba' and 'Khula-e-Rashdin'. He even wrote to Hamid Ali to send him more books on Islam.

His sympathetic study of the history and the growth of Islam revealed to him that initially Islam had been a religion of toleration. "Nothing could have so deeply hurt the prophet", he argued, "as the intolerance of the people of Mecca during the early period of his ministry towards the new faith he was preaching. He could not possibly, therefore, at any time have been party to intolerance." Further, according to him, "Prophet's whole life is repudiation of compulsion in religion." Even "the holy book says", he added, "in the clearest language possible, there is no compulsion in religion." He endorsed justice Ameer Ali's view that "Islam in the days of Harun-al-Rashid and Maman was the most tolerant amongst the world's religions." But as a reaction against its liberalism, a new group, that had many learned, able and influential men, arose which very nearly overwhelmed the liberal and tolerant teachers and philosophers of Islam." He felt that the reaction was still

30. Ibid., p.257.
31. Ibid., Vol.,XXII, p.259.
32. Ibid., Vol. XXI, p.217.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., Vol.XXV, p.179.
perpetuating in India. However, he was sure that "Islam has sufficient in itself to become purged of illiberalism and intolerance." Consequently, contrary to current Hindu opinion, he looked upon Islam as a religion of peace in the sense as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism... though varying in degrees. He was confident that Islam in its essence did not teach violence. If the "followers of Islam", he added, "are too free with sword... that is not due to the teachings of Koran... but to the environment in which Islam was born." So, according to Gandhi, "Non-violence has a predominant place in Koran, the thirteen hundred years of imperialistic expansion has made the Mussalmans fighters as a body." In support of it, he argued "the long line of Sufis whose veneration for the Koran cannot be questioned owe their illuminating philosophy of peace and love to the Koran." He repeatedly said that "Islam was not kept alive by sword." Rather it spread through "the power of love," through "truth austerity and courage." "It was the rigid simplicity, the utter self-effacement

35. Ibid.,
36. Ibid., Vol.XXXII, p.588.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., Vol.XXIV, p. 270.
39. Ibid., Vol., XXXIII, p.357.
40. Ibid., Vol.IX, p.49.
41. Ibid., Vol.XXI, p.551.
42. Ibid., Vol.XXV, p.240.
of the Prophet", he added, "...that won a place for Islam in those days." True, he said,"that Islam was defended through sword but it spread through Fakirs." Further he admired Islam for "its unadulterated belief in God and a practical application of the truth of the brotherhood of man for those who are nominally within its fold as a result of which, according to him, it had an edge over Hinduism since in the latter the "spirit of brotherhood has become too much philosophized." The absence of untouchability in Islam was another proof of its superiority to Hindu social system. However, he felt that it would add to the glory of Islam if it could extend its ideal of brotherhood to the whole of humanity.

The democratic conduct of the early Caliphs equally received his approbations. He was, therefore, ready to believe that several Hindus embraced Islam even before the advent of Muslim rule in India. This view was maintained by Congress committee on Kanpur Riots of March 1931, on the authority of Tara Chand's work on Influence of Islam on Indian Culture. Consequently,

43. Ibid., p.127
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., Vol.XL,p.58.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., Vol.IVIII,p.115.
48. Ibid., Vol. XXVI, p.204.
he told his co-religionists that a sympathetic study of Islam would enable them to find hundreds of passages acceptable to them and would reveal to them ideals worthy of emulation, for, after all, he argued, "many have crossed the ocean of life by meditating over Koran-i-Sharif." He was confident that Hindus would find in Koran the reiteration of the fundamental principle of their religion that God is the ultimate reality and He "alone is and nothing else exists". Gandhi felt that all religions were right but imperfect. Only Almighty God is perfect and the Koran, the Vedas or the Bible are the imperfect words of God. However, he admitted that in the Koran "like all other religious books including our own, there are certain passages which cause difficulty but the difficulties caused in reading the Koran are not greater than those caused by reading books of other faiths ... it is fruitless and undesirable effort to show that the Koran is a wicked book and that the followers of Koran are still more so." 

Explaining the reasons why we fail to touch the heart of any religion, he stated that "in the teachings of each prophet like Mohammed, Buddha or Jesus, there

51. Ibid., Vol.XIV, p.223.
52. Ibid., Vol.XLVIII, p.405.
53. Ibid., Vol. XXVII, p.436.
54. Ibid., Vol.XXXIV, p.550.
55. Ibid., Vol.XXXIII, p.358.
56. Ibid., Vol.XIX, p.394.
was a permanent portion and there was another which suited to the needs and requirements of the time. It is only because we try to keep up the permanent with the impermanent aspects of their teachings that there is so much distortion in religious practice today.\textsuperscript{56}

Otherwise all religions, according to him, are equally good though imperfect they are. Consequently he was not in favour of making comparisons between prophets of different religions in order to raise the superiority of one over the other. In a letter to Mirabehn he wrote, "Comparisons are odious. In my opinion all revolutionaries are reformers and all reformers are revolutionaries. Both (Jesus and Mohammed) were great teachers and each was in response to his age and its requirements. And each made a unique contribution to the advance of mankind."\textsuperscript{57}

This was certainly a rational approach to the study of the rise and growth of any religion in the world, for it enables a person to study any religion in a proper perspective and appreciate its contribution to human civilisation. Moreover, this outlook carries a person closer to the followers of other religions and raises him above religious denominations by making him conscious of the universal aspects of all religions. In this light

\textsuperscript{56} C W., Vol. LIX, pp. 319-20.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., Vol. LI, pp. 335-6.
any distinction between a Hindu, a Mussalman or a Christian becomes futile. "I should not hesitate to call myself either", said Gandhi, "for then Hindu, Christian and Mussalman would be synonymous term."

In other words there were neither Christians nor Mussalmans. "They are all judged not according to their labels of professions," he added, "but according to their actions irrespective of their professions."

No doubt, Gandhi did not attempt any scholarly and systematic study of Islam. Some of his conclusions were based on the picture of Islam drawn by noted Muslim writers who were making conscious efforts to raise the image of their religion in the contemporary world and reformulate Islamic doctrines in terms of western thought. He hardly had any desire to make an objective assessment of the statements and conclusions of the authors of the books read by him. He was even oblivious of the fact that certain conclusions about Islam drawn by some of the writers such as Ameer Ali would be interpreted to nurse political ideals against which he had to fight throughout his life. For, Ameer Ali's study of Islam led him to believe that Islam was not merely a sect or a religious community. It was a distinct social system which had fundamental differences with that of the Hindus.

59. Ibid.
and any attempt to fuse the two communities into one united nation through some electoral device was bound to fail.⁶⁰

However, it was not Gandhi's purpose to make a scholarly analysis of Islam, though his scholarship, as evident from the works on Islam he read, cannot be doubted. His was a sympathetic study of a religion other than that of his own which had transformed the lives of millions of people in the world and had carried them towards nobler ideals and missions. He was in search of such elements in Islam as could unite its followers with the rest of humanity ignoring all that came to be associated with it as a result of the political and worldly ambitions of its crusaders. His object was to dispel from the minds of his co-religionists certain misunderstanding about Islam that stood in the way of closer relations between the two major communities of India.

However, his liberal approach to Islam did not receive the approval of the orthodox Mohammedans who discovered in his interpretation of the scriptures of Islam principles and criteria foreign to the spirit and traditions of their religion. They were not ready to endorse his view that "every formula of every religion has in this age of reason to submit to the acid test.

⁶⁰ Supra, Ch. I, p. 12.
of reason and universal justice." Nor were they ready to admit that even the teachings of Koran cannot be exempt from criticism, since every scripture, he believed, "gains by criticism." 62

Thus Moulana Zafar Ali Khan, President of the Punjab Khilafat Committee, who had been his staunch supporter since the days of Khilafat and Non-co-operation movements, wrote to him in March 1925, that his reflections on the injunctions of the Koran about punishment to a renegade had alienated some of his Muslim admirers. He wrote, "I have always paid unstinted homage to your greatness and have all along looked upon you as one of the few men who are making modern history; but I would be failing in my duty as a Mussalman if I refrained from pointing out to you that by challenging the right of the Koran to regulate the life of its followers in its own way you have shaken the belief of millions of your Muslim admirers in your capacity to lead them."

Continuing, he observed, "You are at perfect liberty to express your opinion one way or the other as to whether renegades can be stoned to death under the law of Islam. But to hold that even if the Koran

62. Ibid.
supported such form of penalty, it should be condemned out right as an error, is a form of reasoning which cannot appeal to the Mussalmans."

"Error", he argued, "is after all a relative term and Mussalmans have their own way of interpreting it. To them the Koran is an unalterable law which transcends the everchanging policies and expediencies of puny humanity. Would to God that to your multi-farious activities as leaders of India you had not added the rather delicate task of adversely criticizing the teaching of the Holy Koran." 63