

## GANDHI ON CONVERSION

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In this paper, I wish to bring to light some of Gandhi's main theses about conversion, and then make a few observations concerning these.

1. There is a sense of conversion which Gandhi opposes, and one which he does not.

Gandhi opposes conversion in the sense in which it is normally understood, whether in that sense it is called *shuddhi* by Hindus, *tabligh* by Muslims, or proselytizing by Christians. He does not oppose it in the sense of internal change, which a person who is free and mature may undergo without force or fraud or material inducement (the kind of change which Saul is reported to have undergone before he became Paul). He points out that it is difficult to know, whether in the case of other people or in one's own case, whether an internal change has really taken place. According to him, God alone can know that. And that is why he calls conversion as internal change as a matter between an individual and his God. As he finds, conversion in the sense in which it is normally understood will not exclude people who are not free and mature, and not exclude the methods of force or fraud or material inducement.<sup>1</sup>

Here we may define conversion in the sense in which it is normally understood as formal or ritualistic affiliation of a person to a different faith by one means or another, say, by preaching merely, or even by force or fraud or material inducement.

Although Gandhi opposes conversion in the sense in which it is normally understood, he will not ban it legally. It should be obvious here

that, when Gandhi says this, it can only mean that he will not legally ban formal affiliation of a person to a different faith. It cannot mean that he will not legally ban this being brought about by any means whatsoever. Thus, for example, while he will not legally ban this being brought about by means of preaching, he will indeed legally ban this being brought about by means of force or fraud or material inducement. That means to say that, when Gandhi says that he will not legally ban conversion in the sense in which it is normally understood, it can only obviously mean that he will not legally ban formal affiliation of a person to a different faith and this being brought about by some of the means. It cannot mean that he will not legally ban this being brought about by some of the other means.

2. According to Gandhi, all the great religions of the world are equally true, thus deserving the same respect (and not just tolerance, because that "may imply a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one's own").<sup>2</sup> As a result, there is no need of conversion in the sense in which it is normally understood.

"For me the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree. Therefore, they are equally true, though being received and interpreted through human instruments equally imperfect. It is impossible for me to reconcile myself to the idea of conversion after the style that goes on in India and elsewhere today. It is an error which is perhaps the greatest impediment to the world's progress towards peace. 'Warring creeds' is a blasphemous expression. And it fitly describes the state of things in India, the mother as I believe her to be of Religion or religious. If she is truly the mother, the motherhood is on trial. Why should a Christian want to convert a Hindu to Christianity and vice versa? Why should he not be satisfied if the Hindu is a good or godly man?"<sup>3</sup>

"I believe that there is no such thing as conversion from one faith to another in the accepted sense of the term. It is a highly personal matter for the individual and his God. I may not have any design upon my neighbour as to his faith which I must honour even as I honour my own. For I regard all the great religions of the world as true at any rate for the people professing them as mine is true for me. Having reverently studied the scriptures of the world, I have no difficulty in perceiving the beauties in all of them. I could

no more think of asking a Christian or a Musalman or a Parsi or a Jew to change his faith than I would think of changing my own"<sup>4</sup>

Gandhi considers it a travesty of true religion to believe that one's own religion is the only true one.

According to him : given that all the great religions of the world are equally true, and none of them is the only true one; what is wanted is a friendly contact among their followers, rather than a clash when the followers of any of them are trying to show their own religion to be the only true one.

3. Gandhi maintains that missionaries should render their humanitarian service selflessly, without the ulterior motive of conversion. To do so with that motive is not really to render service, but to do bargaining or business. It also rouses suspicion and hostility among people.

"I hold that proselytizing under the cloak of humanitarian work is, to say the least, unhealthy. It is most certainly resented by the people here. Religion after all is a deeply personal matter, it touches the heart. Why should I change my religion because a doctor who professes Christianity as his religion has cured me of some disease or why should the doctor expect or suggest such a change whilst I am under his influence ? Is not medical relief its own reward and satisfaction? Or why should I, whilst I am in a missionary educational institution, have Cristian teaching thrust upon me ? In my opinion these practices are not uplifting and give rise to suspicion if not even secret hostility. The methods of conversion must be like Ceasar's wife above suspicion"<sup>5</sup>

"I have not had the time or desire to evangellize, " one of them (one of the missionary interlocutors)<sup>6</sup> said, "The Church at home would be happy if through our hospital more people would be led to Christian lives."

"But whilst you give medical help you expect the reward in the shape of your patients becoming Christian."

"Yes, the reward is expected. Otherwise there are many other places in the world which need our service. But instead of going there, we come here. "

"There is the kink. At the back of your mind there is not pure service for its sake, but the result of service in the shape of many people coming to Christian fold."

“In my work there is no ulterior motive. I care for people. I alleviate pain, because I cannot do otherwise. The source of this is my loyalty to Jesus who ministered to suffering humanity. At the back of my mind there is, I admit, the desire that people may find the same joy in Jesus that I find. Where is the kink?”

The kink is in the Church thinking that there are people in whom certain things are lacking and that you must supply them whether they want them or not. If you simply say to your patients, ‘you have taken the medicine I gave you. Thank god. He has healed you. Don’t come again, you have done your duty. But if you also say, ‘how nice it would be if you had the same faith in Christianity as I have,’ you do not make of your medicine a free gift.’<sup>7</sup>

4. According to Gandhi, if a person lives his faith, rather than preach it, there will be no need of conversion in the sense in which it is normally understood. Then this faith will spread its aroma like a rose spreads its scent. And there will also not be any distrust, suspicion, jealousy, or dissensions.

“Life is its own expression. I take the simile of the rose I used years ago. The rose does not need to write a book or deliver a sermon on the scent it sheds all round, nor on the beauty which everyone who has eyes can see. Well, spiritual life is infinitely superior to the beautiful and fragrant rose, and I make bold to say that the moment there is a spiritual expression in life, the surroundings will readily respond. There are passages in the Bible, the Gita, the *Bhagvata*, the Koran, which eloquently show this. “Wherever”, we read, “Krishna appeared, people acted like those possessed.” The same thing about Jesus.”<sup>8</sup>

“I say that we do not need to proselytize or do *shuddhi* or *tabligh* through our speech or writing. We can only do it really with our lives. Let them be open books for all to study. Would that I could persuade the missionary friends to take this view of their mission. Then there will be no distrust, no suspicion, no jealousy and no dissensions.”<sup>9</sup>

“I have ventured at several missionary meetings to tell English and American missionaries that if they could have refrained from ‘telling’ India about Christ and had merely lived the life enjoined upon them by the

sermon on the Mount, India, instead of suspecting them, would have appreciated their living in the midst of her children and directly profited by their presence, Holding this view, I can 'tell' American friends nothing about 'Hinduism' by way of 'return'. I do not believe in telling others of their faith, especially with a view to conversion. Faith does not admit of telling. It has to be lived and then it becomes selfpropagating. <sup>10</sup>

5. Gandhi maintains that one should not prevent a person from leaving his religion, even if he does so for the wrong reason. And one should not keep him from his doing so, by material inducement. What one should rather do is to remedy the cause for which he is leaving his religion.

"Ever since Dr. Ambedkar has thrown his bombshell in the midst of Hindu society in the shape of threatened conversion, frantic efforts have been made to wean him from the proposed step. Dr. Ambedkar's threat has had its repercussions on Harijans too, who are at all literate and are able to read newspapers. They have begun to approach Hindu institutions or reformers with a demand for posts, scholarships, or the like, accompanying it with the statement that the writer might, in the event of refusal, be obliged to change to another faith, aid having been offered on behalf of the representatives of that faith.

"Without a doubt these threats are a portent and a matter of grave concern to those who care at all for the religion of their forefathers. But it will not be served by coming to terms with those who have lost faith in Hinduism or for that matter in any religion. Religion is not matter of barter. It is a matter for every individual to decide for himself to which faith he will belong. It does not lend itself to purchase in any shape or form. Or if such an expression can be used in connection with things of the spirit, religion, can only be purchased with one's own blood. If, therefore, any Harijan wants to give up Hinduism, he should be entirely free to do so.

"There must be a searching of heart for the reformer. Has his practice or that of his neighbour's caused the defection? If it has and it is found to be improper, it must be changed."

Further, Gandhi maintains that there is a need to reconvert a person who has gone over to some other religion, who now repents his having done so. He comes to belong to his original faith by that very act of

repentance.

“I would... unhesitatingly readmit to the Hindu fold all such repentants without ado, certainly without any *shuddhi*. *Shuddhi* is not applicable to such cases. And, as I believe in the equality of all the great religions of the earth, I regard no man as polluted because he has forsaken the branch on which he was sitting and gone over to another of the same tree. If he comes back to the original branch, he deserves to be welcomed and not told that he has committed a sin by reason of his having forsaken the family to which he belonged. In so far as he may be deemed to have erred, he has sufficiently purged himself of it when he repents of the error and retraces his step.”<sup>12</sup>

6. I would now like to make some observations relating to the various things which Gandhi says about conversion. These observations correspond, in their order, to these various things.

(1) One would like to think that conversion really means internal change. If this is so, then conversion in the sense in which it is normally understood. i.e., as formal affiliation of a person to a different faith brought about by one means or another, will be no more than adding a number to the members belonging to that faith. It will obviously not mean somebody coming to belong to that faith in the real sense of that term.

(2) I would not like to go here into the following contentions: Whether all religions are equally true; or whether some religions are true and some false; or whether some religions are more true than others. I would also not like to go here into the question about how, if at all, the truth of religion is to be established. Gandhi mentions three criteria for determining true religion, namely : (a) is it consistent with truth ?; (b) is it consistent with non-violence? ; and (c) is it consistent with reason, where reason is possible?<sup>13</sup> I would leave them undiscussed.

What I would like to do here is to make two remarks, which Gandhi himself makes and which enormous number of other people are bound to have made also. (i) The claim that one's own religion is the only true religion over reaches human capacity, i.e. it assumes that human beings have a degree of knowledge and infallibility which they are not actually found to have. (ii) It causes resistance amongst adherents of some other

religion or religions who may make the same or a similar claim, and generates conflict amongst the sides concerned. One can safely say that one cannot maintain that one's religion is one of peace and good will and brotherhood, and at the same time maintain that one's religion is the only true religion. One can also safely say that a good deal of conflict in this world is a result of religious dogmatism involved in the given claim.

(3) (i) If service is a selfless undertaking, i.e., if it is to selflessly work for the good of other people, and (ii) if business is to do one thing or another with a view to or in expectation of an extraneous reward, as Gandhi himself could be said to clearly imply in what he says; then he is evidently right in maintaining that the humanitarian service which the missionaries render, not selflessly but with the motive of conversion, is not service proper but business, whatever its other merits may be. He is also right in maintaining that this service as so rendered arouses suspicion and hostility among people.

(4) A person may belong to a certain faith. While doing so : (i) he may not live in accordance with this faith, (ii) he may live in accordance with the opposite of this faith; (iii) he may not live in accordance with this faith, or he may live in accordance with the opposite of this faith, but he may still preach it; or (iv) he may live in accordance with this faith. Now, as far as the first three alternatives are concerned, we may take it that this person would be an object of our moral censure, more or less. But we find that all these things need not stand in the way of his converting somebody to this faith in the sense in which conversion is normally understood, through fear or fraud or material inducement. Further, as far as the fourth alternative is concerned, we may take it that this person may inspire greater or less respect for him in some or many people. We may also take it that he may inspire some or many people to live like him to some extent. But it is difficult to say, as Gandhi does, that he will spread his aroma in that general kind of way in which a rose spreads its scent.

(5) It is a part of the freedom of an individual whether he belongs to some faith or leaves it, or whether he belongs to this faith or that faith; and he may do so for whatever reason. It would be a violation of this freedom to prevent him from doing so. Gandhi is opposed to conversion in the sense in which it is normally understood, say, by material inducement. There is just as well no wonder that he is opposed to keeping a person from

conversion in that sense by the same means. Gandhi is right in saying that people who would not like the members of their faith to leave it should remedy the cause for which they are leaving it, they should undertake an exercise in self-rectification. It is again a part of the freedom of an individual that he can come back to the faith which he had left. Gandhi's contention that a person comes back to his original faith as a result of his act of repentance and thus there is no need of reconversion, is beside the point.

### NOTES

1. Throughout the territories of the Mogul missionaries do much for the service of God by baptizing many infants (for in regard to grown persons that is an impossibility), and to be able to confer on infants this benefit it is necessary that they know the art of medicine. They must be able to cure ulcers and to bleed. They will then be in demand in many places; and when they see that the infants are at the point of death, they can sprinkle them with the water of baptism. In this way not a day would pass that they would not gain for heaven some soul or other." Niccolao Manucci's *Mogul India*, Low Price Publications, Volume III, Part III, p.187.
2. *From Yervada Mandir*, 1957, Chapters X and XI (M.K. Gandhi's *in Search of the Supreme*, Navajivan Publishing House, 1662), Volume III, p.29).
3. *Harijan*, 30.1.1937, p.406 (*In Search of the Supreme*, Volume III, p.4).
4. *Harijan*, 28.9.1935, p.260 (*In Search of the Supreme*, Volume III, p.66).
5. *Young India*, 23.4.1931, p.83. (*In Search of the Supreme*, Volume III, p.68).
6. Words within brackets my own.
7. *Harijan*, 18.7.1936, p.177 (*In Search of the Supreme*, Volume III, p.23).
8. *Harijan*, 12.12.1936, p.353 (*In Search of the Supreme*, Volume III, p.84).
9. *Young India*, 8.12.1927, p.413. (*In Search of the Supreme*, Volume III, p.85).
10. *Young India*, 20.10.1927, p.352. (*In Search of the Supreme*, Volume III, p.112).
11. *Harijan*, 21.3.1936, p.44 (*In Search of the Supreme*, Volume III, p.77).
12. *Harijan*, 25.9.1937, p.272 (*In Search of the Supreme*, Volume III, p.756).
13. *Harijan*, 6.3.1937, p.25 (*In Search of the Supreme*, Volume III, p.18).