

**Talk (sermon) for First Unitarian Church, Hamilton, Jan. 30, 2010**

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## **Gandhi on Truth and Interfaith Dialogue**

At the beginning of January, the Hamilton mosque on Stonechurch Rd was firebombed—presumably because the perpetrator thought he would ‘get back’ at Muslims for the unsuccessful attempt by a Nigerian to blow up the plane flying into Detroit on Christmas Day. This isn’t the first occasion on which Hamilton’s seven mosques have been the target of hate crimes. Nor just mosques. As you recall, the Hindu temple was destroyed by Molotov cocktails on Sept. 15, 2001—the two bigots here unable to distinguish between a Hindu and Muslim place of worship. The Jewish community in Hamilton also continues to experience the effects of bigotry, for example in the desecration of their cemeteries.

Violence in the name of religion or violence targeted against people identified with particular religions continues to plague humanity into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Why is that?

My talk today will examine the purpose of religion, and consider why and how this purpose can be perverted. What can inter-faith dialogue do? And what lessons can Mahatma Gandhi offer us?

“Religion is outraged when outrage is committed in the name of religion”, Gandhi declared. He spent a good part of his life trying to prevent or stop outbreaks of inter-religious violence in India. Now Gandhi was a profoundly religious man who was proud to identify himself as a Hindu. He embraced this identification because for him the true purpose of religion is the education and promotion of the well-being of humankind. Religion has served throughout history as the ultimate authority in giving meaning to life. In reaching to the roots of motivation, religion has awakened in peoples the capacities to love, to forgive, to create, to dare greatly, to sacrifice for the common good, and to discipline the impulses of our baser instincts. It is a unique power in humanity’s collective life.<sup>1</sup>

But, this power, when twisted for their own ends by leaders, whether political or religious, can be a source of evil as much as it has been a source of good. In particular, when the banner of religion is used to foster rather than overcome prejudice, its effects can be devastating. Blind forces of sectarian dogmatism, claims to superiority, exclusivity and so forth, often fanned by religious leaders, have led to the promotion of harmful attitudes of hatred, prejudice and acts of extreme violence against those of other faiths.<sup>2</sup>

A case in point is an outbreak of violence in the name of religion in India in 2002. I was in India attending a conference organized by a Gandhian foundation to discuss with rural villagers and women peace workers how to promote local

democracy and the practice of nonviolence.<sup>3</sup> During that time in the state of Gujarat, a mob attacked a train stopped at a station carrying a large number of militant Hindu activists who had been visiting Ayodhya, an Indian pilgrimage town. The activists had been in Ayodhya in preparation for a plan to begin the rebuilding of a Hindu temple on the site of the 16<sup>th</sup> mosque that itself had been demolished in 1991 by Hindus. While it is difficult to be sure of the real facts, it appears that on the morning of February 27, three minutes after the train pulled out of the station at Godhra, some Muslims stopped the train and started throwing stones inside. Soon the train cars were set afire with rags soaked in gasoline. Fifty-eight Hindus were burned alive. The cry for revenge set in immediately, aided and abetted by Hindu police and politicians. By the end of it all, some 2000 people, mostly Muslims, had been killed, many in extremely barbaric ways. About 230 mosques and shrines were razed to the ground and close to 100,000 Muslims displaced into relief camps. Retaliatory attacks by Muslims across Gujarat left 10,000 Hindus homeless.

The brutality and planning of the killings remind one of other planned mass murders undertaken in the name of religion, or under the banner of some sort of religious identity: in Bosnia, Ireland, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Iraq and others. Among my own faith community, the 300,000 staunchly nonviolent Baha'is of Iran, the country's largest religious minority, are experiencing renewed levels of systematic persecution: Baha'i school children are mocked by teachers, Baha'i youth are not allowed to enter post-secondary education, Baha'i homes are ransacked and property stolen, and hundreds have been imprisoned, including the 5 men and 2 women who made up the informal leadership of this faith in Iran. Recently the Baha'is have been blamed by the government of Iran for the outbreak of anti-government violence in December. Soon these seven Baha'is are expected to be sentenced, possibly to death, on charges of espionage, propagandist activities against the Islamic order, cooperation with Israel, and "corruption on earth".

Though violence in the name of religion is certainly not a recent phenomenon (one can think of, for instance, Europe's terrible wars of religion between Christian sects in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries that cost that continent the lives of some 30% of its entire population), its persistence if not escalation in India, Iran and other parts of the world demands a strong response from those of us who are 'outraged, when outrage is committed in the name of religion'. Even while other forms of prejudice, such as racism and sexism, are gradually losing ground, religious prejudice continues to flourish.

### Gandhi and other religions

Some years ago, the famous Catholic theologian Hans Küng said: "There can be no peace between the nations until there is peace between the religions. There can be no peace between the religions until there is dialogue between the religions;" a statement I believe Gandhi would have readily agreed with. The

good news is that the interfaith movement, as it is called, is growing by the day around the world; we are starting to move beyond mere calls for “tolerance.”

Now Gandhi characteristically led by example more than by grandiose speeches. To him words are nothing if they are not demonstrated by action. He actively sought out people of other faiths, even as they sought him out. After his initial encounter with Christians in England, he read the Bible; after meeting and working with Muslims in South Africa, he read the Qur’an. He tried to learn what he could about the teachings of other religions and always welcomed dialogue, as long as it was pursued in the spirit of a sincere, friendly and respectful interchange of ideas and knowledge.

There are several principles that governed Gandhi’s interaction with those of other religions and I’d like to now go over them:

The first principle is that God is truth, and Truth is God. Gandhi famously inverted the statement “God is truth” to say “Truth is God.” It “is very difficult to understand ‘God is love’,” he wrote, “because of the variety of meanings of love, but I never found a double meaning in connection with Truth”.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is more difficult to argue that truth does not exist than to argue that God does not exist. For Gandhi, commitment to truth had to be a core principle animating efforts towards the creation of a world based on nonviolence.

And so the second principle is the search for truth (which is also the search for God). For Gandhi this search, or the independent investigation of truth, was a lifelong passion. And he felt that it is an obligation of every human being. This is why we have the capacity to reason and to have a conscience. Truth must be weighed by reason and tested in practice.

The third principle is that every world religion has truth in it. A study of the world’s religious scriptures will show this to be the case as their teachings contain much that is in common. For example, all religions teach that we are essentially spiritual beings; that there is a divine intelligence at the heart of the universe to which we are intimately related; that love is the primary expression of spirituality (love of the divine, of oneself, of others). Further, all religions teach about ethics, how we should conduct ourselves, and they identify many of the same virtues, such as: humility, compassion, kindness, self-control, truthfulness, not taking what does not belong to oneself, and, Gandhi would wish to say, *ahimsa* (non-violence).

The fourth principle is that no one religion can legitimately claim to be the exclusive bearer of truth. In 1905 Gandhi declared that “the time had passed when the followers of one religion could stand and say, ‘ours is the only true religion and all others are false’.” He said, “God, Allah, Rama, Narayan, Ishwar, Khuda were descriptions of the same Being;” and in another place, “Gods’ grace and revelation were not the monopoly of any race or nation.” For Gandhi,

Truth is a reality larger than any one religion, but in which all are ultimately grounded.

At the same time, all religions are imperfect because they are transmitted, interpreted and practiced through imperfect vehicles. Thus, error enters into the religious beliefs and practices of all religions. “I came to the conclusion,” Gandhi wrote in 1927, “that all religions were right but everyone of them was imperfect, imperfect naturally and necessarily, because they were interpreted with our poor intellects, sometimes with our poor hearts, and more often misinterpreted.” And in another place he said: “We have not realized religion in its perfection, even as we have not realized God. Religion of 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... Reverence for other faiths does not blind us to their faults. We must be keenly alive to the defects of our own faiths also, yet not leave it on that account, but try to overcome those defects.”

Fifth, the study of other religions can deepen one’s own faith *and* lead to *sarva-dharma-samanvata*, or, “having equal regard for all faiths and creeds.” “I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world,” Gandhi said wrote in 1927. “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.” [Young India, Sept. 2, 1927]

“My position,” Gandhi wrote in the *Harijan* in 1936, “is that all the great religions are fundamentally equal. We must have the innate respect for other religions as we have for our own. Mind you, not mutual toleration, but equal respect” [Nov. 28, ‘36]. It is through the cultivation of such attitudes and practices, Gandhi seemed to say, that we would be freed to live and work together in greater peace and harmony for the well-being of all.

It is, in the end, a matter of attitude and perception. Do we fight over our little piece of truth, do we kill and maim and speak words of hatred to others who, as in the story of the blind men and the elephant, describe the elephant by its trunk when we wish to proclaim its leg? If we can see God or Truth as one, if we can see all members of the human race as members of our family, if we can see that there is truth in all religions, and remember that the purpose of all the great religions of the world is fundamentally to help us live lives that are more spiritually enriching and to build together a peaceful civilization—and that the one key way that this is done is through service to others, then... indeed violence in the name of religion is, as Gandhi said, “blasphemous” – it is insulting to God and to Truth.

As a last word, there is love. Gandhi said: “I found the nearest approach to truth is through love.” In another place he wrote: “When you want to find Truth as God

the only inevitable means is love, i.e., non-violence.” Well, the way to transform our attitudes is not through thought alone, but through the transformative power of love, a power that binds the universe together and which is exemplified in the practice of humility, truthfulness, service and non-violence.

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Some Further Comments on Gandhi and Truth:

Re. love: Gandhi said: “Scientists tell us that, without the presence of the cohesive force among the atoms that comprise this globe of ours, it would crumble and cease to exist; and even as there is cohesive force in blind matter, so must there be in all things animate, and the name for that cohesive force among animate beings is Love. We notice it between father and son, between brother and sister, friend and friend. But we have to learn to use that force among all that lives, and in the use of it consists our knowledge of God. Where there is love there is life; hatred leads to destruction” (quoted in Prabhu and Rao, eds. 1967. *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House. 416-17).<sup>5</sup>

Re. truth: Gandhi said: “Devotion to Truth is the sole justification for our existence. All our activities should be centred in Truth. Truth should be the very breath of our life. When once this stage in the pilgrim’s progress is reached, all other rules of correct living will come without effort and obedience to them will be instinctive. But without Truth it is impossible to observe any principles or rules in life” (quoted in Iyer, 162). Why? Because if we are not guided by the principle of truth, the foundation of all we do and who we are begins to erode. Think about your spouses, partners, and friendships. What is the surest thing to shake apart a friendship? It is when you discover that your friend has lied to you; or, when you have shown yourself to be untrustworthy to your friend. Love itself must rest or be secured on the foundation of truthfulness. What happens when those in authority lie? We lose trust, we lose confidence, we lose faith. When commitment to truth fades, as it did in the former Soviet Union when ideology became more important than truth and thousands died as a result of it (consider the world’s most terrible nuclear accident in Chernobyl), hope and trust start to crumble. Despair and corruption thrive. The lack of commitment to the principles of truth and trustworthiness (to say nothing of greed) precipitated the Enron and other more recent financial scandals and the results wreaked havoc on the lives of hundreds or thousands of individuals, to say nothing of the world’s economy.

Gandhi believed that each of us can at best only grasp parts of the Truth. Truth (with a capital “t”), transcends us all; it is certainly not the exclusive property of any one religion or philosophy. Does this mean that you have your truth and I have my truth and I can change my mind about it and you can too and so truth is whatever we think it is at any given time, since we can never know the whole truth? Yes and no. No because Gandhi would very firmly say that truth is ultimately one, it cannot contradict itself. Furthermore,

there are lots of ways of testing whether a proposition or a hypothesis is true or not. We can use the scientific method, employing objective criteria; we can use logic and our own experience as well. But “yes,” because truth is relative insofar as we (our minds, our science, our methodologies of acquiring knowledge) have limited capacity to grasp it. We are constrained by our physical bodies, by the limitations imposed by language and culture which allow us to “see” through particular lenses. Those of you who speak more than one language know that there are some concepts, some words that are not translatable into other languages because those languages haven’t identified the concept in the same way.

In short, our understanding of reality, of truth, is developmental, evolving, and so we as individuals and as a species can only ever hold to ‘partial’ truths, always in need of correction and adjustment, and thus we need always to exercise great humility, Gandhi said. “The seeker after truth should be humbler than the dust.” Arrogance and self-righteousness are sure signs of ignorance.

To summarize, for Gandhi: Truth is God; Truth is the foundation of existence; the search for truth is a uniquely human enterprise; it is also our obligation (independent investigation of truth/ reality); Truth is one, it is also many (partial truths; facets of one crystal); science can only take us so far (it is best at discovering truths about the material world; it is not very good at finding spiritual truths – ‘subjective’ truths; here, experience, and faith are significant); and sincerity and humility are necessary prerequisites to the search for truth.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> This and similar ideas about the role of religion in human history are expressed in the document “To the World’s Religious Leaders” by the Baha’i Universal House of Justice, April 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> This occasion was the inauguration of the Mahila Shanti Sena, or “Women’s Peace Brigade”, under the leadership of Acharya Ramamurti, in Vaishali, Bihar, India, Feb. 2002.

<sup>4</sup> In Raghavan Iyer, ed. 1986. *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*. Oxford: Oxford U. Press. 165

<sup>5</sup> Also consulted: Gandhimohan, M. V. 2000. *Mahatma Gandhi and the Bahá’is*. New Delhi: Bahá’i Publishing Trust.