

## Meeting Rivers Series - 2

# The Equality of Religions

By Siddhartha\*

Here is a Gandhian perspective on the equality and complementarity of all religions.

**The equality of all religions:** Gandhi propagated the notion of *Sarvadharmā Samabhava*, the equality of all religions. This is an important notion, particularly in a world where we are witnessing an increase in religious fundamentalism and religious conflict. Although it was clear to Gandhi that there was only one God, he was realistic enough to recognize that different religions would always exist. Gandhi stated that "belief in one God is the cornerstone of all religions. But I do not foresee a time when there would be only one religion on earth in practice. In theory, since there is one God, there can be only one religion. But in practice, no two persons I have known have had the same and identical conception of God. Therefore, there will, perhaps, always be different religions answering to different temperaments and climatic conditions." (Harijan, Feb.2, 1934)

Elsewhere he has used the metaphor of different leaves belonging to the same tree to underline the theme of unity in diversity. "Just as men have different names and faces, these religions also are different. But just as men are all human in spite of their different names and forms, just as leaves of a tree though different as leaves are the same as the leaves of the same tree, all religions though different are the same. We must treat all religions as equals. - Harijanbandhu, July 22, 1934.

**No religion is superior. They are all complementary to one another:** "Religions have been interwoven. One sees a special quality in every one of them. But no one religion is higher than another. All are complimentary to one another. Since this is my belief, the specialty of any one religion cannot run counter to another, cannot be at variance with universally accepted principles. - Harijanbandhu, March 19, 1933.

Gandhi was uncomfortable at the efforts of some missionaries to convert the adivasis (tribals) of India into Christians. He expressed his own feelings about adivasi beliefs when he said: "What have I to take to (them), except to go in my nakedness to them? Rather than ask them to join my prayer, I should join their prayer." Mahatma Gandhi, B.R.Nanda, Oxford University Press, p56. 1994.

**Mutual respect and unity in diversity:** Gandhi insisted that, "The need of the moment is not one religion but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees of different religions. We want to reach not the dead level but unity in diversity. Any attempt to root out traditions, effects of heredity, climate and other surroundings is not only bound to fail but is a sacrilege. The soul of religion is one but it is encased in a multitude of forms. The latter will persist to the end of time. Wise men will ignore the outward crust and see the same soul living under a variety of crusts." (Young India, Sept.25, 1925)

**The truth and error in religions:** Gandhi believed that all religions were 'true'. Yet all of them had some 'error' in them. Although God was perfect, He was experienced and interpreted by human beings who were not perfect. So no religion could claim to be perfect. Gandhi wrote: "I came to the conclusion long ago... that all religions were true and also that all had some error in them, and whilst I hold by my own, I should hold others as dear as Hinduism. ... But our innermost prayer should be a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, a Christian a better Christian." (Young India: January 1928)

Professor M.P.Mathai from Kerala, South India, believes that Gandhi had made a synthesis of the best in all major religions. When Gandhi was asked "would you say, then, that your religion is a synthesis of all religions?" he answered, "yes, if you will". He was quick to add that he would call that synthesis Hinduism, as far as he was concerned, and for a true Christian that synthesis would be Christianity, and for a Muslim that was Islam. (Harijan, March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1937)

Gandhi believed in a religion "where there is a room for the worship of all the prophets in the world." (Oxford University Press. B.R.Nanda. p 56)

Later in his life when he was asked whether he was a Hindu, he replied: "**Yes I am. I am also a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and a Jew.**" And he meant every word of what he said.

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