Mahatma Gandhi
The Prophet of Tolerance

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Mahatma Gandhi was one of those rare human beings who was simultaneously a theoretician and practitioner of tolerance. Gandhi was possessed of an inner conviction that tolerance was not only one of the key words of his own century but of centuries still to come. It is in this sense that his ideas on non-violence and tolerance transcend the context of India itself, even though these ideas were initially conceived in relation to India's independence and future. Nevertheless, in spite of what may seem obvious, it is no mere truism to state that Gandhi would not have been Gandhi had he not been born Indian. We say this in order to underscore that Gandhi's concept of tolerance was rooted in Indian culture.

At the same time, even having developed – at an early stage – an acute awareness of the nature of Indian culture, of its strengths and of its weaknesses, Gandhi also sought support for his ideas of tolerance and non-violence in other cultures.

In all likelihood, it was Leo Tolstoy who exerted the greatest influence on the development of Gandhi's thought. The dialogue between the two men began from Gandhi's side, with a letter dated the first of October 1909, prompted by his reading of Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Their correspondence, the primary theme of which was the relationship between non-violence and love, continued until Tolstoy's death in November 1910. "In truth," Tolstoy wrote, "non-resistance is nothing other than the teaching of love, undistorted by false interpretations. The fact that love, i.e. the striving of human souls towards unity and the activity resulting from such striving, is the highest and only law of human life is felt and known by every person in the depth of his soul - as we see it most clearly in children – known and felt by

him until he is ensnared by the false teachings of the world. This law has been proclaimed by all the world's sages, Indian, Chinese, Greek and Roman. And I think it has been very clearly expressed by Christ when he says that ' it alone contains the Law and the prophets.'[1] "

Tolstoy's book served both to awaken Gandhi's conscience and provide him with a solid foundation for a reinterpretation of his readings of the Bhagavad-Gita and the Gospels (in particular, the Sermon on the Mount). In 1932 he wrote: "Tolstoy reinforced my faith in something that at the time I only had a vague understanding of ... I worked on the foundations laid down by Tolstoy. Like a good student, I added to what my teacher had left me."[2]

It was thus in this way that the idea of love, as one of the foundations of the religion of Christ and of Tolstoy's philosophy, became the crux of Gandhi's thinking on tolerance. It was an influence that helped Gandhi to more clearly formulate his idea of God-as-Truth. In an interview with Pierre Ceresole, held in Lausanne in January 1932, Gandhi says: "I agree with those who say that God is love. Within me he is love and truth."[3]

Love and truth are the two basic ideas underpinning Gandhi's thinking on tolerance. They are both different from, and complementary to, each other. Truth represents the aim of life. However, love provides the only means by which this truth can be reached and known. This is so because, "he who believes in non-violence and love is filled with hope; and hope gives rise to love, and love gives rise to courage and faith."[4]

Thus, for Gandhi, the experience of truth is revealed in acts of love and tolerance. These acts make no claim to absolute truth. Rather, from this point of view, truth is revealed to each of us in a different way. Truth cannot therefore be approached without a preliminary act of tolerance in regard to the other's truth. "The golden rule," Gandhi writes, "is mutual tolerance, because we never all have the same ideas and we will never see the Truth except in fragments and from different points of view."[5]

In other words, if the key to the spiritual life of all human beings is the search for the Truth, then each of us is free to choose his or her own way. What does it matter if we take different and separate paths, since all of them converge on the same point? The direct and

logical consequence of this reasoning is to view all religions as flowing from a single and unique source: they are therefore equivalent. "I believe," Gandhi writes, "that there is but one religion in the world, a single one, but that it is a powerful tree with many branches ... And just as all the branches derive their sap from a single source, so do all the world's religions find their essence in a single stream, which is its source. Naturally, if there is but one religion, there is only one God; and God, who is one and complete, can not have many branches. He remains indivisible and indefinable; consequently, it can literally be said that He has as many names as there are persons on earth. It is unimportant what we name Him, He is one and the same, and there is no second."[6]

Gandhi asks us to respect the faith of others just as we do our own, because without such a spirit of openness there can be no search for the Truth. Moreover, as beings who are still at the stage of searching, we have not yet found the Truth in all its perfection and must therefore be conscious of the imperfections of our own faith. We must consequently respect the faith of others without being weak or indifferent to our own. Gandhi's tolerant attitude toward Christianity, Judaism, and Islam did not in any way affect his own loyalty to the doctrines of Hinduism. In an article dated 20 October, 1927, published in his newspaper *Young India*, Gandhi writes: " From my own experience I believe that Hinduism is the most tolerant of all religions ... Not being an exclusive religion, it offers to its believers not only the possibility of respecting other religions, but also of assimilating and admiring what is good about other faiths. Although non-violence is common to all religions, it finds its fullest expression and application in Hinduism."[7]

All the religions of the world are true, but they are also simultaneously imperfect, since perfection is an attribute exclusive to God. Yet Humanity, Gandhi tells us, can perfect its faith by cultivating tolerance for other faiths as part of its own religious practice. "Tolerance provides us with a power of spiritual penetration that is as far from fanaticism as is the North from the South Pole."[8] Here Gandhi makes use of the traditional Indian doctrine of tolerance, as expressed in its great spiritual texts, as for instance the Rig-Veda: " It is called Indra, Mitra, Varna, and also Gandhiarutman ... The real is one, even if it is known by different names."[9]

The Bhagavad-Gita is also quite clear on this point: "Even those who worship other gods worship me in their love for them ..."[10]

Gandhi's idea of tolerance thus aligns itself with a long tradition of Indian religious pluralism, beginning with Ashoka and continuing into the twentieth century with an important affirmation during the reign of the mogul emperor Akbar (1556-1605). It is therefore not a purely speculative tolerance but one that finds expression in secular experience. Gandhi himself lived this pluralist experience through the Jainist education he received in childhood. However, he came face to face with another problem, through his experiences in South Africa, that oriented him more and more towards the idea of tolerance as the only solution to uniting Hindus and Muslims. In an article dated the 26 August 1905 and published in *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi already mentions his desire for union: "It is a fact that greater tolerance between Muslims and Hindus is needed. Sometimes one is inclined to believe that there is a greater distance between these two communities than between East and West."[11]

In any event, Gandhi never had any illusions about the difficult nature of this problem. As a practicing Hindu he made a point of being seen as often as possible with Muslims; he even went so far as to ask other Hindus to learn Urdu in order to improve communication with India's Muslims. The central thrust of Gandhi's culture of tolerance thus found expression in his practice of non-violence, carried out in the midst of the murderous struggle between Hindus and Muslims.

Aware of the daunting nature of his task, Gandhi nevertheless practiced his technique of non-violence to the limit of his personal strength, engaging in open-ended fasts to put an end to the hostilities raging between the two communities. "My experiences in South Africa," he wrote, "convinced me that the question of unity between Hindus and Muslims would be the one to put my *ahisma* (principle of non-violence) most strongly to the test, and that this problem would also provide the greatest possible application of my experiences with *ahisma*."[12]

On 30 June, 1948, having just ended a period of fasting whose aim was to obtain better treatment of Muslims by Hindus, Gandhi was assassinated by a young Hindu fanatic who believed that the

Mahatma's discourse was dangerous to India's future. Before dying Gandhi had time to look at his assassin and to invoke the name of Ram, thereby introducing his assassin to the idea of tolerance. In this final act, the Mahatma expressed both his own truth and our own hope for a better tomorrow.

Notes

1. Quoted in: M. Semenoff, *Tolstoï et Gandhi*, Paris, 1958, pp. 42-3.
2. Quoted in: J. Herbert, *Ce que Gandhi a vraiment dit*, Marabout University, 1974, p. 73.
3. Quoted in: *Gandhi* (Collection Sup Philosophe), Paris, 1967, p. 24.
4. Ibid., p. 87.
5. Quoted in: J. Herbert (note 2 above), pp. 80-81.
6. Ibid., p. 51.
7. M. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Vol. XXXV, Navijivan Trust, 1994, pp. 166-67.
8. Quoted in: J. Herbert (note 2 above), p. 52.
9. Quoted in: R. Balasubramanian, *Tolerance in Indian Culture*, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1992, p. 17.
10. Ibid., p. 18.
11. M. Gandhi (note 7 above).
12. Quoted in: J. Herbert (note 2 above), p. 114.