

How to Cite:

Kurup, T., Jagath, S. K., Krishnan, Y., & Indu, B. (2022). Meaning and concept of religion: An insight into the lives of Mahatma Gandhi and APJ Abdul Kalam. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 6(S5), 4588–4593. <https://doi.org/10.53730/ijhs.v6nS5.10085>

Meaning and concept of religion: An insight into the lives of Mahatma Gandhi and APJ Abdul Kalam

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Abstract---The term ‘religion’ has transcended centuries in the Indian History, and has been used for attainment of rights, justice, peace and harmony among people of different cultures. This term has been used to cause unrest, separation of sects, bloodshed resulting in communal violence. Its definition in simple terms refers to a belief or faith in a supernatural creation which can be different for different people. But the extent of belief in each case remains ambiguous as its impact can be a gateway for diversity, or can be a cause of having a deleterious scar towards progress of a nation. Waltor Houston Clark stated that “religion more than any other human function satisfies the need for meaning” (419) .This paper tries to look into the lives of Mahatma Gandhi and APJ Abdul Kalam and will analyse their religious background, their outlooks and stand points on different religions, and the exact meaning they want to convey through the idea of religion from their autobiography.

Keywords---untouchables, self realisation, ahimsa, cosmos.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi and APJ Abdul Kalam were both considered as the most powerful and genuine leaders Indian soil has ever produced. Both these leaders took the responsibility of carrying India towards a safer, secure and a developing nation. Though they were of different dimensions and their surroundings were quite different, both of them fought for a better India in their own way. Both of them had to tackle failure and disappointment, but their conviction and duty towards their work for the greater good of mankind made India, an independent country capable of inventions. The presence of these leaders and their leadership were crucial for the idea of 'New India'. The personalities and characteristics of Mahatma Gandhi and APJ Abdul Kalam were quite different from each other, yet they shared similar values regarding religious harmony and peace among different religious groups of people with equal respect, care and affection. Religion played a very important part in both their lives, moulding their character right from the childhood. Religious perspective of both these personalities does not limit to a particular religion which highlights the message they want to spread about the essence of what religion actually is.

Looking through the life of Mahatma Gandhi, his affection towards the lower caste and the so called "untouchables" during that time and advocating for their rights. This quality of him was stemmed from his childhood respecting other religions, cultures and tradition. He was born in a Vaishya Family, the second highest Hindu caste in India. Karamchand Gandhi, his father was the diwan of Porbander had little education but Mahatma Gandhi describes his father as a person with integrity even though he was short-tempered. Gandhi describes his father possessing religious cultures often visited temples and chanting Gita. His mother was also deeply religious and took vows. His mother had influenced him with her devotion towards the religion and sacrifice. "The outstanding impression my mother has left on my memory is that of saintliness" (Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* 3).

He is brought up in a religious family following all the cultural and religious traditions. In his schooldays, he was taught many things except religion. He coined the meaning religion as "self realisation or knowledge of self" (17). Although he was brought up in Vaishnava faith, Haveli did not appeal due to immoral practices. This was the time when he started to question instead of blind following. He was introduced to the concept of Ramanama by a nurse for his fear of ghosts and spirits. "I had more faith in her than in her remedy" (18). His faith in the nurse made him inculcate the seed of Ramanama. He was also acquainted with The Bhagavat Gita. Jain monks used to visit his father and have food without any discrimination. It is also seen that his father had Muslim and Parsi friends talking about their own faiths and he would respect them irrespective of their meat eating habits. This intermingling of people with other religions had induced with him the harmonious quality of toleration of all the religions. Gandhi's acquaintance with Manusmriti took a deep root in him about the power of truth and how it is the essence of all the morality. Although Gandhi was born in a family which upheld religion, his family was open to other religions and respected their values and culture. Gandhi describes his father's attitude towards other communities as "He had, besides, Musalman and Parsi friends, who would talk to him about their own

faiths, and he would listen to them always with respect, and often with interest”(18). There was no mention as to any superiority or the downgrading of any particular religion. Gandhi's idea of religion and the true meaning of what religion meant to him is also visible from these childhood instances. The ultimate aim of religion was the self knowledge which according to Gandhi could be obtained by absolute truth. The various religions were just a pathway which eventually lead to this realisation. Neither having any aversion towards any religion nor a mere following based on what was told to him was the policy for Gandhi. Instead, he tries to find out what exactly and to where do these holy scriptures point to. He arrived at a conclusion not based on what he read but what he interpreted.

The case of APJ Abdul Kalam was no different. Born and brought up in Rameshwaram in a Muslim family, one of India's best scientists had a childhood grasping goodness from all the religions. APJ Abdul Kalam's father although a boat owner, was found to possess a great wisdom and was very generous person. He had a good friendship with Lakshmana Sashty belonging to a Brahmin community. The environment around was very communal in nature with daily interaction of people from Hindu and Muslim communities. Kalam talks about the Shiva temple situated very near to his house. Kalam describes his father taking him everyday for prayers and people of different religions waiting outside carrying a bowl for his father to dip his fingertips. It was a belief that it would cure people. Abdul Kalam's questions the relevance of prayer to which his father replies “When you pray, you transcend your body and become a part of the cosmos, which knows no division of wealth, age, caste, creed”(Kalam, *The Wings of Fire* 1). His father found religion as a connection of human souls with the universe. His idea of a divine being is a medium of hope for hopeless and a vision to “seek the enemy of fulfillment within ourselves”(2). His exposure to the culture of Rameshwaram, its pilgrims, the spiritual discussions with Jallaluddin, the knowledge of Shiva temple, were influential factors in developing a sort of compassion towards other religions. He had also faced inequality in his schooldays due to the social ranking prevalent in the mindset of some people. However, he found solace with the acquaintance of some broad-minded personalities in his life and helped him to attain the love and care he deserved. Abdul Kalam's knowledge of religion was through a spiritual angle and the existence of oneself which was ignited in him through his father and his worldly wisdom.

The upbringing of both Mahatma Gandhi and APJ Abdul Kalam can be seen as different sides of the same coin. Both of them were exposed to people of different cultures, traditions and religions from childhood. Both of them belonged to different religions and followed different traditions, yet they were brought up in a family which had secular values in terms of the mindset and attitude. Even though the concept of religion seems different for both personalities where one seeks for god for truth and other seeks for existence of spirit among the universe, yet religious compassion was visible from childhood itself. The friendship seen by Gandhi's father with people of other religions could be similar to Kalam's father having a sort of both of bond with Lakshmana Sashty. Their meaning and concept of god from their childhood is to be something from coming from the inside of the soul. Gandhi's meaning of god is the actually self realisation and the path attained can be through the absolute truth which he believes can be superior to all the moralities. He found this meaning through reading of different scriptures.

He found this meaning without any external guidance. His understanding of religion and faith was all because of his questioning power. It is however, different in case of Abdul Kalam, he interpreted God to help the soul seek its existence in the cosmos. Both these personalities throughout their lives went beyond the limits of the man-made boundaries by having a strong and true sense of understanding religion which helped them share peace, harmony with people of other religions. These personalities are not known for their religion but for the work they have done to improve the conditions of mankind. "Religion are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter if we take different roads, so that we reach the same goal? In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals"(Gandhi, Indian Home Rule 36). This quote comes from the experience of intermingling with different people having different cultures and religions. Even during his time in South Africa and England, he respected Christianity and even read *The Book of Genesis* to acquaint himself with Christian Religion. He tried to find out the purpose of religion as a whole rather than blindly following the customs. His enlightenment had reflected his word for the harmony of mankind. In case of APJ Abdul Kalam, he induced the verses of different religions in his character, inspiring him to move forward. This can be evident after he failed to qualify for the Air Force and subsequently meeting Swami Sivananda. Swami Sivananda's advice on accepting his destiny and moving on with life provided the much needed guidance for Kalam to become a symbol of hard work and perseverance. Both these characters used religion to understand themselves. Kalam's view of God as a powerful source of energy could be felt inside. Kalam's view of religion is a tool used to make friends as well as being the cause of destruction.(Kalam, Ignited Minds 46) .Both these characters used religion to understand themselves.

Certainly, both these leaders did not limit their understanding of religion. The vast knowledge and understanding helped them with sharing their feeling of love as well as receiving the love they gave. Both of them never discriminated anyone based on their religion and tried to mould a sense of spirit through character. When looked through Mahatma Gandhi's point of view, he tried to persuade people and even Muslims to join the Swaraj movement with a spirit of attaining Independence. A sense of nationalism was invoked as a result of which religious supremacy was compromised. Abdul Kalam had tried to invoke a spirit of individuality and empowering the youths as well as citizens finding the true purpose of their life irrespective of the social or the cultural background. Definition of religion according to them was actually not based on the age old tradition and customs but gave an angle of morality which universalizes the concept. Towards the end of the freedom struggle, Mahatma Gandhi tried to unite the Hindu-Muslim community and supported the Khilafat movement to preserve the rights of the Muslim community. The Pre Independent India had witnessed riots among the Hindu-Muslim community, Mahatma Gandhi's stance on Hindus and Muslims uniting can be viewed as a path breaking moment when looked upon the history of Modern India. Maulana Azad had become closer to Gandhi due to his philosophy (Aquil). This proves the fact that his philosophy was much accepted by other religious groups as well. Abdul Kalam views science as a tool for seeking of truth which applies the same for spirituality (Kalam, Evolution of Enlightened Citizens). Infact, Kalam even adheres to Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of different religions being the message of mankind living in

prosperity(Ignited Minds 2). His connection with science and spirituality was also accepted. We can see that even though the idea of religion was different as Mahatma Gandhi sought God in truth and by adhering to morality whereas Kalam's view of finding similarity between science and spirituality as the ultimate objective in both of them is truth, were both accepted. It shows the progressive as well as the universality of spiritual thoughts of these eminent personalities and well as the shifting of age from a traditional and deep rooted attitude to a more scientific one. Religious violence was seen as a common ground of condemnation between both Mahatma Gandhi and APJ Abdul Kalam. Gandhi's non violence which was also known as '*ahimsa*' is a quality within a person following truth and religion, could not spread violence and hatred. He continuously tried to pacify the relationship between the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi's relationship with C.F Andrews and Khan Abdul Gaffer Khan aren't secrets. He had high regard for Islam and Prophet Mohammed and insisted on Islam never being the cause of destruction of places of worship.(Gandhi, Communal Unity 94). During his satyagraha, Gandhi was inspired by the teachings of Jesus that gives light to the broader outlook of his concept of his interpretation of religion. He opined that Gita taught him the use of violence for safeguarding truth and righteousness and bearing arms disinterestedly. Abdul Kalam understood this principle and stressed on the fact that the unity of different minds can solve many problems.

Looking at their roles in shaping the politics of India, there is a different outlook. Nicolo Machiavelli explained the realities of politics as "its lust for power, admiration for success, its carefreeness of means, its rejection of medieval bonds, its frank pragmatism, its conviction that national unity makes for national strength. Neither his cynicism, nor his praise of craftiness is sufficient to conceal the idealist in him"(Laski 36) . Machiavelli's view of politics exhibiting ego, wickedness and selfishness cannot accept Gandhi as well as Kalam as a politician. Religion and politics are considered to be separate entities as politics is regarded as medium for cherishing materialistic values and domination. But in case of Gandhi and Kalam, both of them entered politics with a humanitarian view of developing the society rather than fulfilling and satisfying their personal needs. This was because Gandhi considered religion not to be separate from politics as his political philosophy and moral principle was based on religion . Although he upheld religion, it must be stated that he did not preach religious dogmatism. Rather, he wanted a life to be a morally oriented activity. Kalam's idea is not for materialism but to bring peace and social stability and the idea of religion symbolizing unity. "

A borderless society with no division of caste and community can only arise from borderless minds. It has taken centuries for our society to evolve into a present structure of caste and community. Love, patience and good laws and fair justice are the best instruments for our society to transform into a borderless community where lands that serve are better than lips that pray (Kalam, The Spirit of India 29)

Their views of religion and God signify a deeper meaning with a message for the ever lasting society. Both of them, tried to implement the understanding of religion they acquired through their experience and works they did for the society.

Their view of religion as a constructive symbol for harmony and peace can be attributed to be a matured view to maintain tranquility although many may not agree with the definition of God according to these notable figures.

Bloodshed and Violence based on religion is something which has been for decades. These figures try to convey the futile nature of locking heads based on what one presumes to be right. Mahatma Gandhi may not be the voice of Modern India, but his preachings are essential for the present and coming generations. His words are a proof that the meaning of religion still remains to be ambiguous even in the 21st century resulting in terror caused by various religious, political groups and individuals trying to uphold the so-called rights of religious sects and disrupting the peace. Abdul Kalam used his power to preach the same thing about sharing religious harmony and not showing any distinction. Abdul Kalam's views on harmony resembles Gandhian ideology and a flowing of thought is reflected. It is indeed upon the people to understand the core moral values of every religion rather than fighting over supremacy.

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