

Theme 2F Religious life: - the concept of ahimsa

Key concepts

- In Jainism, ahimsa is seen as the most essential religious duty for everyone. Jains believe that the only way to save your own soul is to protect every other soul. The killing of animals is forbidden even for food. Every effort is made to avoid injuring plants and not to hurt even small insects. There is no difference between causing an injury deliberately and causing one through carelessness. Jains also recognise a hierarchy of life: the more senses a being has, the more they care about its protection. This is why humans are most strongly protected by Jain ahimsa.
- Ahimsa literally means 'without violence'. It also means showing compassion to all living beings, the practice of love, forgiveness and friendliness, and the support of peace. Ahimsa in Hinduism is a spiritual concept.
- The importance of the concept of ahimsa within Hinduism is debatable. In some Hindu scriptures, it is referred to as the highest duty while other texts set out the exceptions like war, hunting, law enforcement and capital punishment. However, most arguments in favour of ahimsa to animals focus on the serious karmic consequences of violence. Ahimsa on the other hand is described as necessary to obtain ultimate salvation.
- Gandhi gave the concept a new direction by being the first to use it in a political sense. In this context his interpretation of ahimsa was also influenced by Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi took this literally, believing that by practising the non-violence of ahimsa, pacifists not only held the moral high ground but could actually overcome their enemies. For Gandhi, ahimsa was not a passive concept, it was an active concept, requiring people to oppose and overthrow evil and injustice using non-violent means.
- Gandhi further developed the concept of ahimsa with his teaching of satyagraha. It is a more complex concept than ahimsa since it is based on the idea that truth itself has an inherent force. The followers of this teaching are called satyagrahis.
- Many believe that if people adopted the principles of ahimsa which include non-harm and compassion then conflict and violence would be curbed. However, many others believe it is an impractical concept in the 21st century.

Key quotes

"Non-violence is a power which can be wielded equally by all-children, young men and women or grown-up people, provided they have a living faith in the God of love and have therefore equal love for all mankind. When non-violence is accepted as the law of life, it must pervade the whole being and not be applied to isolated acts." (Gandhi, Harijan, 5 September 1936)

"The essence of non-violent technique is that it seeks to liquidate antagonisms but not the antagonists."

"My non-violence does not admit running away from danger and leaving dear ones unprotected. Between violence and cowardly flight, I can only prefer violence to cowardice. I can no more preach non-violence to a coward than I can tempt a blind man to enjoy healthy scenes." (Gandhi, Young India, 28 May 1924)

"Ahimsa is not merely a negative state of harmlessness, but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer. But it does not mean helping the evil-doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love - the active state of ahimsa - requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him, even though it may offend him or injure him physically." (Gandhi - 'The Selected Works - Vol 6 p 264)

Key words

Jainism	ahimsa	Gandhi	truth	satyagrahis
inherent force	political	non-harm	karmic	spiritual
pacifists	satyagraha	non-violence		

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Many Hindus would argue that its relevance depends on the interpretation of ahimsa. Other Hindus would argue that if the concept was relevant in Gandhi's time then it is still relevant today. However, some would argue that today's problems are not the same and that the world has moved on since Gandhi's time.

Key questions

Is ahimsa a relevant concept in today's world?
 Does truth have an inherent force?
 How did Gandhi develop the concept of ahimsa?