Contrary to the expectations and predictions of many, religion has staged a decisive resurgence in the 21st century. This resurgence has manifested itself as a rise in religious nationalism and also as a threatening rise in religious fundamentalism resulting in terrorism and the war on terrorism. It gave rise to the formulation of the theory of the clash of religiously defined civilizations. The encounter of religions or inter-religious relations has, thus, acquired a new significance in the current international scenario because it can prove fatal to human existence. So it is necessary to have a proper model for inter-religious relations. Gandhi had developed a model for such an encounter in his attempt to create a healthy way for the major religions of the world to encounter and relate to one another. Gandhi called this Sarvadharma Samabhava - equality of religions and equal respect for religions. This paper proposes to present this Gandhian concept as a desirable model for a creative encounter between religions.

Gandhi considered himself to be a religious person. He was born in a family with a strong tradition of religious devotion and, therefore, it may be said that he inherited his religiosity from his family. Gandhi’s house was a kind of rendezvous of religious people from different
religious traditions, as his father invited them to talk about the basic principles of their religions. Thus, Gandhi grew up in an atmosphere of inter-religious dialogue and encounter, which not only kindled his intellectual and spiritual curiosity but inculcated in him a deep sense of toleration and respect for all religions. Later in life he made religion the main subject of his study. He studied reverentially the scriptures of the major religions of the world—Christianity, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism and the Parsi faith along with those of his own religion, Hinduism. It must be mentioned here that Gandhi’s study of world religions was not academic but existential; his objective was not gaining an intellectual understanding of the principles of those religions; what he tried to do was to assimilate their moral and spiritual principles and synthesise them into his own religiosity.

Gandhi’s concept of religion was typically his own and therefore, a word about what Gandhi really meant by religion may be in order at this point.

- By religion Gandhi did not mean customary or sectarian religion, but what he termed as the Religion was that underlay all religions and which brought us face to face with our Maker. Gandhi wrote: “It means a belief in the ordered moral governance of the universe....... This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality.[1]

- For Gandhi, there was no religion higher than truth and righteousness[2] and he identified one’s religiosity or religious spirit as that “permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul
utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself”. [3]

• For Gandhi religion to be called religion should help one to solve the existential problems of life. So he said: “Religion which takes no count of practical affairs and doesn’t help solve them, is no religion”. [4]

• Gandhi also believed and stated repeatedly that as religion was an overarching influence on life, the spirit of one’s religion should pervade all her/his activities. He stated that all his activities were a practical application of his religious convictions and faith. He went to the extent of saying that even his politics were derived from his religion. He wrote: “politics bereft of religion are absolute dirt, ever to be shunned. Politics concern nations and that which concerns the welfare of nations must be one of the concerns of a man who is religiously inclined, in other words, a seeker after God and Truth…… Therefore, in politics also we have to establish the Kingdom of Heaven.” [5]

• Gandhi considered morality to be the essence of religions and stated that true religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. He wrote: “as soon as we lose our moral basis, we cease to be religious. There is no such thing as religion overriding morality. Man, for instance cannot be untruthful, cruel and incontinent and claim to have God on his side”. [6]

• Gandhi’s religion was a synthesis of the best in all major religions. To a question; “would you say, then, that your religion is a synthesis of all religions?” he answered, “yes, if you will”. But he hastened to add that he would call that synthesis his Hinduism, and for a true Christian, that
synthesis was Christianity and for a Muslim that was Islam. [7]

After a reverential study of the major world religions Gandhi came to the conclusion that all religions were fundamentally equal. [8] He understood that all religions arose as answers to the fundamental and perennial human quest for the meaning and purpose of existence. This is described in common religious parlance as: ‘they seek the same God and proceed from the same God’. For Gandhi, as religions sought the same Truth, there was truth in all of them. But as religions came down to us through the instrumentality of human beings, (notwithstanding the claim of some of the adherents that they were God-given) they shared the inevitable imperfections that go with human instruments. So, all religions have some error in them, argued Gandhi. He stated further that as all religions were true yet imperfect, the question of comparative merit or superiority did not arise. All religions were equal and therefore, there was no need or justification for changing one’s religion and getting converted to another. As the ultimate goal of all religions was to guide the believer or the faithful to his/her deliverance it was possible to attempt it through the religion into which one was born. So if what you seek is salvation or deliverance there is no need to change your religion, argued Gandhi. He rejected the claim of any religion to be superior to the others and also the practice of proselytisation as totally unjustified and unwarranted.

The question naturally comes up: If God is one, and belief in one God is the corner-stone of all religions why are there many religions instead of one religion- the Religion that Gandhi claimed to be his? Gandhi answered this question thus: “belief in one God is the corner-
As all religions owe their original inspiration to one and the same God, all religions were fundamentally equal, according to Gandhi. So he believed in the essential truths of all religions of the world and insisted that we respect others religions as we respect our own. He also pointed out that “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”. Therefore, Gandhi called upon every one of us to do ‘a reverential and sympathetic study’ of the scriptures of other religions. He said that it was the duty of every cultured man and woman to do so. Such a study, he believed, would certainly create an atmosphere of mutual understanding, tolerance and respect.

In this context Gandhi introduced another significant idea concerning inter-religious encounter. We know and admit that there are certain ideas, customs and practices in all religions that are not universally
acceptable. Some of them have been described as even repugnant to human reason and morality. Difference of opinion and even conflicts arise when such ideas and practices are brought to the fore and criticised as they are related to one’s religious sensitivity. It was in this context that Gandhi introduced an idea relating to the right of a person to point out and criticize such defects. Gandhi drew a fine but crucial distinction between one’s right to criticise one’s own religion and other religions. While it was the right and perhaps even the duty of a person to point out the defects in one’s own religion with a view to purify it and improve it, his duty in terms of other religions must be of unreserved reverence, insisted Gandhi. The responsibility of pointing out and correcting the defects in other religions must be left to the followers of those religions. One must try to set one’s own house in order rather than attempting to set the others’ right. Let charity begin at home. Gandhi wrote: “But it is no business of mine to criticise the scriptures of other faiths or point out their defects. It is and should be, however, my privilege to proclaim and practice the truths that may be in them. I may not, therefore, criticise or condemn the things in the Koran or the life of the Prophet that I cannot understand…..”[12] The advice of Gandhi is to do a reverential study of the scriptures of other faiths with a view to imbibing what is good in them so that we may improve ourselves as a true believer of our own faith and thus make it better and nobler.

*Sarvasharma Samabhava* was not merely a theoretical proposition for Gandhi. For him it was a vow, an observance and an act of faith. He practised it assiduously in his life and thus obliterated the demarcating line between religions. Gandhi showed us how to live a creative religious life which, in fact, was a translation of the spirit of
Sarvadharma Samabhava into demonstrable practice. The significance of this way of living one’s faith in the multi-religious context of the contemporary world cannot be overemphasized.

It may be appropriate to conclude by quoting another significant statement of Gandhi: “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”. [13]

An objective examination of this approach would convince one that it can provide a useful frame work for a healthy and mutually enriching relation between religions.
Sarvadharma Samabhava

[1]. Young India, March 17, 1927.
[3]. Young India, May 12, 1920.
[4]. Ibid., May 7, 1925.
[5]. Ibid., June 18, 1925.
[6]. Ibid., Nov.24, 1921.
[7]. Harijan, March 3, 1937.
[8]. Ibid., Nov.28, 1936.
[10]. Ibid.
[13]. Young India, Sept. 25, 1925.