A Critique of *Gandhi on Christianity*

Edited by Robert Ellsberg, copyrighted 1991, Orbis Books

Mahatma Gandhi was, of course, Hindu, but he had much contact with Christians, missionaries and others, and he sometimes even spoke of himself as a Christian in certain respects. In *Gandhi on Christianity* the editor is not concerned with Gandhi’s thoughts on Hinduism, but, as the title indicates, with Gandhi’s thoughts on Christianity. Therefore the book is of interest to those of us who are Christians. An examination of *Gandhi on Christianity* will demonstrate, however, that the difference between Gandhi’s beliefs (including his beliefs about Christianity) and Christianity is a fundamental one. It will also demonstrate that Gandhi’s real interest in Christianity was political, he hoped to find support for pacifism in it.

Let me begin by expressing agreement with Gandhi on a number of points.

**Points of agreement with Gandhi:**

- Conversion need not mean denationalization. p 39.

- Indians should not be asked to give up their simplicity to become Christians. p 40.

- There is a need for cultural sensitivity. p 43.

- Christian missionary methods have at times been bad. p 33, 45.

- We need to recognize each other as equal human beings. p 106.

Now, collecting related thoughts under major subject headings, I want to contrast Gandhi’s beliefs with Christianity, drawing from the book.

**Jesus Christ**

**Gandhi’s Beliefs**

Gandhi was "never interested in the historical Jesus", p 22; nor in the virgin birth, miracles, etc. p 24. He did not take as literally true that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, p 66; says the historic Jesus who only died once 2,000 years ago is
no help, p 42; did not believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, p 94. Gandhi said that Jesus was near perfect but not as perfect as God, p 26; that he had psychic powers and that his miracles were magic, p 27. Gandhi sees Jesus as an example, a rule of life, p 27. He says "Jesus represents not a person, but the principle of nonviolence", p 46. The central issue in Gandhi's criticism of Christianity is Christology as dogma; the resolution of Gandhi's criticism is through orthopraxis, or right action, p 98.

Christology can be seen from two points of view, descriptive and prescriptive. For Gandhi the descriptive aspect which takes the form of worship and dogma is subservient to the prescriptive aspect which consists of imitation of Christ, p 92.

The Christian Faith

The New Testament goes to great lengths to establish that Jesus Christ was an historical figure (Matt. 1:1-17), was the Son of God from eternity (John 17:5; John 1:18) and entered the world through Mary (John 1:14), a virgin (Luke 1:26-38); becoming also the Son of man (Heb. 2:14-17); he did miracles by the power of God (Matt. 12:22-28, John 5:36) the greatest of which was his physical resurrection from the dead (John 2:18-22; Rom. 1:4); he was perfect as his Father (Heb. 1:1-4 and 4:15), was not simply the principle of nonviolence (Mark 11:15-17). The final, and central, point is that Jesus was not primarily an example, a way-shower, but was our substitute, the way, our Savior, (John 1:29; 14:6; 2 Cor. 5:21). Gandhi's rejection of Christology as dogma is answered by Jesus in sober words, "I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins." Right belief is critical. Gandhi's beliefs represent a complete reinterpretation of the New Testament message and a redefinition of Christianity, and they mirror Gandhi's own biases. (I have given just a sampling of the many possible Bible references to establish each point.)

Sin

Gandhi's Beliefs

"Every one of us is a son of God and capable of doing what Jesus did, if we but endeavor to express the Divine in us." p 99: "I do not seek redemption from the consequences of my sin. I seek to be redeemed from sin itself, or rather from the very thought of sin. Until I have attained that end, I shall be content to be restless." (Gandhi's response after a presentation of the Christian Gospel), p 7. "Jesus atoned for the sins of those who accepted his teaching by being an infallible example to them. But the example was worth nothing to those who never troubled to change their lives", p 24. Not much more is said about sin in the
book, but the subject is very much related, of course, to the subject of salvation so my responses will overlap.

**The Christian Faith**

All persons, except Jesus Christ, are sinners from conception. (Psalm 51:5; Rom. 5:12); the penalty for sin is death, temporal and eternal. (Rom. 6:23); We are not made sinless in ourselves in this life; we are *reckoned* sinless on account of Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:1-8). One day, in heaven, we will be removed from the presence of sin in us and around us.

**Salvation**

**Gandhi's Beliefs**

"Purity of character and salvation depend on purity of heart." p 87; "We should, by living the life according to our lights share the best with one another, thus adding to the sum total of human effort to reach God." p 14; "The purer I try to become the nearer I feel to be to God." p 70; Gandhi believes in the perfectibility of human nature. "I have a theory of my own... we can attain perfection only after dissolution of the body." p 94. "Gandhi saw Jesus’ atonement, which (in his mind) should have been an example for imitation, flouted by many Christians in their understanding of it as substitution and wasted on those who did not change their lives... He said ‘I rebel against orthodox Christianity’", p 95. As stated above, the central issue in Gandhi’s criticism of Christianity is Christology as dogma, the resolution of Gandhi’s criticism is through orthopraxis, or right action, p 98. In other words, Gandhi saw salvation in terms of meritorious works.

**The Christian Faith**

The human heart is wicked and rebellious (Jer. 17:9; Rom. 3:9-18) and cannot save itself (Rom. 8:3,4). The central element in the Christian faith is atonement; God sent his Son to save us by his substitutionary death (atonement) (John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:21). "Good" works add nothing to our salvation; we are saved through faith alone and even this faith is a gift from God. If we think our works contribute anything to our salvation we forfeit the gift, (Gal. 5:4). Works come as a fruit of salvation, not a cause of it. So many Scriptures could be cited here that it would require a whole Bible study, but I will cite just a few: Romans 3:21-4:8; Romans 10:1-4; 1 John 5:11-13 - note that the only condition is faith ("believe"); John 3:16; Eph. 2:1-10; Gal. 2:15,16,21.

Sadly, the central message of the Bible, the Gospel (I Cor. 15:1-4), is lost on Gandhi. He proposes the oldest counterfeit of all, self-salvation. Self salvation results from two misconceptions: an underestimation of God’s absolute holiness,
and an overestimation of mankind’s goodness. For those who trust in their own works, and reject God’s way of grace (unmerited favor), the substitutionary death of Jesus is abhorrent. This spurning of God’s only means of salvation, is very apparent in Gandhi.

**Proselytizing**

**Gandhi’s Beliefs**

Religion is a personal matter - no one else’s business, p 19. Western people should supply a "felt want"; if they have delivered only service they have delivered the message; they can evangelize but should not give vocal expression to it. p 52, 53. "In my opinion Christian missionaries have done good to us indirectly. Their direct contribution is probably more harmful than otherwise. I am against the modern method of proselytizing." p 40; I can "tell" American friends nothing about Hinduism... I do not believe in people telling others of their faith, especially with a view to conversion. Faith does not admit of telling. It has to be lived and then it becomes self-propagating." p 43.

**The Christian Faith**

Again, there is no doubt that some missionary methods have been insensitive. But Gandhi is opposed, in principle, to proselytizing. Christianity is inherently a missionary faith. Jesus’ last commission to his followers was that they go and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19,20; see also Rom. 10:14-18). Christianity originated in the East but it is a global message and Christians have been commanded to spread the Gospel (Good News). Here again, Gandhi has excised from Christianity what comes directly from its founder. Furthermore, Gandhi didn’t keep his own advice? On p 60,61 there is an account of a female missionary who became attracted to his ashram. He didn’t do as he said missionaries should do to prospective converts, encourage her to return to her fold and remain Christian? No. He encouraged her in Hindu thinking. "Come to the ashram not to lose your Christianity but to perfect it. If you do not feel the presence of God at the prayer meetings, then remember that the names Rama and Krishna signify the same as Jesus to you." This advice to the missionary was contradictory to all Biblical teaching and was a subtle, and dishonest, form of proselytizing.

**Pluralism**

**Gandhi’s Beliefs**
"God wills the salvation of all people in their respective faiths.; "There is only one God but many paths to him." p 12,116; "All the great religions are fundamentally equal." p 14; "All of us are sons of God." p 15; Oft repeated belief - "All religions are true." p 44,95; "I regard all the great religions of the world as true for the one professing them." p 48.

The Christian Faith

The Bible was written over a span of 1500 years by 40 different authors on 3 continents (Asia, Africa and Europe) in 3 different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek) on hundreds of subjects. And yet there is one consistent, non-contradictory theme that runs through it all: God’s redemption of mankind. The book claims to be the infallible Word of God, the only God there is; it lays exclusive claims to universal truth. It presents Jesus Christ as mankind’s only way of salvation. (Isaiah 43:10,11; 44:6,8; 45:6,21,22; 46:8,9; John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Subjectivism

Gandhi’s Beliefs

Gandhi listened to the inner voice (p 8-12), "When I began as a prayerful student to study the Christian literature ... I asked myself ‘Is this Christianity?’ and have always got the Vedic answer, ‘Neti, Neti’ (not this, not this), and the deepest in me tells me that I am right." p 20. "I came to the conclusion long ago, after prayerful search and study and discussion... that all religions were true.." p 57; Gandhi says (all) Scriptures must be interpreted in light of our experiences. p 40.

The Christian Faith

The Bible teaches that God has spoken, once and for all, and that all counterclaims must be weighed against the Bible (Jude 3); that subjective feelings, emotions, inner voices, mystic experiences, intuition, etc. are not reliable as a test of truth, (Proverbs 14:12); and that "prophets" must be tested by objective, external standards (Deut. 18:20-22). The Bible interprets our experiences, not vice versa. The Bible is an historic book, externally verifiable, and internally consistent, when subjected to standard rules of hermeneutics (interpretation). It is the Holy Spirit’s work to reveal and apply the truth of the Bible to us as we read.

Summary of Problems in Gandhi’s Belief System

(Or, some additional thoughts)
Gandhi redefines Christianity

Gandhi only accepts Sermon on Mount (thinking it supports his principle of non-violence); denies rest of Jesus' teachings and claims, p 32.

On the basis of his unique interpretation and application of the Sermon on the Mount, Gandhi claimed to be a Christian, p 96.

"His view of Christ does not reinforce Christian dogma ... Upon his first reading of Bible he was repelled by the literal meaning of many biblical texts and refused to take that as the word of God." p 93

Gandhi says, "God did not bear the cross only 1900 years ago but he bears it today. He dies and is resurrected from day to day." p 108. (The book of Hebrews emphasizes the fact that Jesus died "once for all.")

The Gospel of Christ needs no agent. p 54. (The Bible says otherwise; God himself used words; prophets and apostles, who wrote his messages down, used words; 2 Cor. 5:20 says Christians are ambassadors for Christ, who use words.)

Gandhi sets himself up as the standard for truth

"For myself Truth is God" p 71. (But it is Gandhi, apparently, who decides what constitutes truth. In fact, his statement makes God impersonal.)

Tolerance is subject: A lady wrote him that unless he embraced Christianity all his works would be worth nothing. Gandhi's comment: "And of course that Christianity must mean what she understands as such! Well, all I can say is that it is a wrong attitude." p 42.... (The lady's statement is supported biblically; Gandhi's statement is supported by himself, "I can say.")

Truth is not a non-negotiable dogma with which one begins but a goal which he seeks experimentally p 82. (Truth is non-negotiable, given by God in the Bible. Since Gandhi speaks so authoritatively he clearly believes himself to be in possession of truth or, at the least, to be well along on that way, experimentally.)

P 94: Gandhi applied 3 criteria by which to discriminate among all Scripture: 1. the superiority of truth over everything that conflicted with it; 2. rejection of everything that conflicted with nonviolence, and 3. on things that could be reasoned out, rejection of everything that conflicted with reason. (Here again Gandhi decides what is the truth by which everything else must be measured. He is the one who decides that non-violence is the supreme principle. Also, to the question, whose reason is the standard?, the answer would likely be, Gandhi's reason.)
"The references here throughout is naturally to the principal faiths of the world," p 63. (Why is this "naturally" limited to the "principal" faiths? Because Gandhi says it is.)

"Similarly that which is in conflict with nonviolence should be rejected," p 66. "The plumbline for judgment of religions is non-violence," p 83. (The only absolute in Gandhi's belief system is his principle of non-violence, because Gandhi says it is so.)

"All that I can, in true humility, present to you is that truth is not to be found by anybody who has not got an abundant sense of humility," p 73. (Gandhi seems to present himself as a humble truth seeker, yet he proceeds to make himself judge of truth, judging even the words of Jesus. Given his absolute statements throughout the book one has to conclude that Gandhi was not the humble man he held himself to be, and others held him to be.)

**Gandhi's beliefs are illogical**

"I regard all the great religions of the world as true, at any rate for the people professing them, as mine is true for me," p 48 (This would mean that an outright lie would be true if I professed it as true. It is a meaningless proposition. The great religions stand in serious contradiction to each other on major points and each one claims to be true. Christianity claims to be true universally; and the Muslim faith does too; where does that leave us? The only way to test them is by the evidence. Christianity rests ultimately on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, historically verified.)

"'But,' asked Dr. Crane, 'when you say that all religions are true, what do you do when there are conflicting counsels?' 'I have no difficulty,' said Gandhi, 'in hitting upon the truth, because I go by certain fundamental maxims. Truth is superior to everything, and I reject what conflicts with it. Similarly that which is in conflict with non-violence should be rejected. And on matters which can be reasoned out that which conflicts with Reason must also be rejected.'" p 66. (This is circular reasoning. His premises, what he calls 'fundamental maxims,' are unsupported and stand only on Gandhi's opinions.)

"I came to the conclusion long ago, after prayerful search and study and discussion... that all religions were true... that I should hold others as dear as Hinduism; from which it logically follows...." p 57 (It may logically follow from his premise, but his premise is unsupported so it doesn't follow; again, this is circular reasoning. Others have prayed and studied and discussed and come to different conclusions; what evidence do we have that Gandhi's opinion is right?)

"What may be truth for one may not be truth for another." p 72. (This is Eastern relativism, which has made an inroad in the West, but which is illogical. While it is logical that what may seem to be true for one may not seem to be true for
another, but to say that two opposites are both true is an illogical statement, an untrue statement.)

"The deepest spiritual truths are unutterable." p 44; (He just contradicted himself by uttering it.) p 53: "Language is always an obstacle to the full expression of thought... If you are humble enough, you will say you cannot adequately represent your religion by speech or pen." (So why did he write books and articles, why did he lecture and debate?! Gandhi’s idea is rooted in the Eastern, and New Age, denial of the mind.)

There is an interesting statement on p 44. In response to the Christian claim that God sometimes spoke through prophets using words, Gandhi admits that "I am up against a solid wall of Christian opinion". How true, how true. God spoke; he spoke in human terms which we can understand. And finally, he spoke through his Son, Jesus Christ, who took on human flesh and blood that he might live and die in our place. And that, is the essence of the Christian message, the Good News. Gandhi’s way of self-salvation is as old as mankind. But it is a way that leads to eternal death, Prov. 14:12.

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