

## Gandhi, Scripture and the Bible

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**Abstract:** Mohandas K. ("Mahatma") Gandhi considered it the duty of every cultured man and woman to sympathetically read the scriptures of the great world religions. Though not himself a biblical scholar, Gandhi's facility and familiarity with the Bible (especially the New Testament) has been insufficiently appreciated. This article explores the following questions: What principles of interpretation did Gandhi bring to the scriptures of the great world religions? What, in particular, was the extent and depth of his knowledge of the Christian scriptures? In essence, what was Gandhi's Bible?

IN 1926 GANDHI WITHDREW from the whirlpool of Indian politics and retired to his ashram at Sabarmati, near Ahmedabad. The next twelve months, he determined, would be a "year of silence", a year set aside for rest and attending to the requirements of the ashram.<sup>1</sup> During this period he vowed not to leave Ahmedabad. Much of his time was devoted to editing his two newspapers, *Young India* and *Navajivan*, teaching and attending to correspondence. Little did Gandhi know that, by August, he would find himself the object of criticism from Indian newspapers and private correspondents.<sup>2</sup> The reason for the storm of protest was that he had accepted an invitation to teach the Bible at the Gujarat National College in Ahmedabad.<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, his accusers declared, was "a Christian in secret". Gandhi, so the insinuation ran, was using the Bible to convert students to Christianity.

For Gandhi, the charge of being a secret Christian was not new. He good-humouredly accepted attempts to Christianise him as a back-handed compliment, a reluctant acknowledgment of his capacities to appreciate what he called, "the beauties of Christianity". More broadly,

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1. M. K. Gandhi, "Indulgence or Self-Denial", *Young India*, 7 January 1926, in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (100 vols.; Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958-1994 [hereafter C.W.]) 29. 380-1.

2. See Gandhi's letters in response to complaints: "Letter to Rameshwar", 7 August 1926, C.W., 31. 275; "Letter to Jugal Kishore Birla", 7 August 1926, C.W., 31. 276; "Crime of Reading Bible", *Young India*, 2 September 1926, C.W., 31. 350; "Letter to Jugal Kishore Birla", 7 September 1926, C.W., 31. 361.

3. M. K. Gandhi, "Crime of Reading Bible", *Young India*, 2 September 1926, 308. Gandhi taught the Bible every Saturday with some breaks until 20 November 1926. It should also be noted that Gandhi gave daily talks on the *Bhagavad Gita* within the ashram which were later published in book form.

in the article called "Crime of Reading Bible" published in *Young India*, Gandhi dismissed these criticisms as an indication of the intolerance then sweeping India.<sup>4</sup>

That Gandhi stood close to Christianity, and that he held the Christian scriptures in high esteem, was not new.<sup>5</sup> In Madras in 1925, the year before his "year's abstention",<sup>6</sup> he had addressed a meeting of Christians and identified himself as "a humble and impartial student of religion" with great leanings towards Christianity.<sup>7</sup> What was new in "Crime of Reading Bible" was not the propriety of teaching the Bible or the New Testament to students. Rather, it was his spirited defence of the duty of every religious person to read the scriptures of the great religions of the world:

I hold that it is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty.... I regard my study of and reverence for the Bible, the Quran, and the other scriptures to be wholly consistent with my claim to be a staunch *sanatani* Hindu... My respectful study of other religions has not abated my reverence for or my faith in the Hindu scriptures. They have indeed left their deep mark upon my understanding of the Hindu scriptures. They have broadened my view of life. They have enabled me to understand more clearly many an obscure passage in the Hindu scriptures.<sup>8</sup>

4. M. K. Gandhi, "Crime of Reading Bible", *Young India*, 2 September 1926, C.W., 31, 350.

5. See Joseph J. Doke, *M. K. Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1919, reprinted 1967) 106; W. W. Pearson, "Gandhi: An Indian Saint", in Charles Chatfield (ed.), *The Americanization of Gandhi: Images of the Mahatma* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976) 99; John Haynes Holmes, "Who is the Greatest Man in the World Today?" in Haridas T. Muzumdar (ed.), *The Enduring Greatness of Gandhi: An American Estimate, being the Sermons of Dr. John Haynes Holmes and Dr. Donald S. Harrington* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1982) 14, 25; Francis Watson, *The Trial of Mr Gandhi* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1969) 177; Romain Rolland, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One with the Universal Being* (London: Swarthmore Press, 1924) 7; Romain Rolland, *Romain Rolland and Gandhi Correspondence* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1976) 13, 28, 70, 180, 394; P. C. Roy Chaudhury, *Gandhi and His Contemporaries* (London: Oriental University Press, 1986) 180; Letter of T. Ruthnam, *Bombay Chronicle*, 24 December 1921, cited by Robert E. Speer, "Politics and Missions in India To-day", in Chatfield, *The Americanization of Gandhi* (see above) 366; E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1948) 39, 69–102.

6. Gandhi preferred to call it a "Year's Abstention"; see "Mahatmaji's reply "Not Retirement But Year's Abstention"", *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 9 September 1926, 5.

7. C. F. Andrews, *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1929) 74, 127.

8. M. K. Gandhi, "Crime of Reading Bible", *Young India*, 2 September 1926, 308. For a discussion of Gandhi's "friendly study" of the world's religions, see Diana L. Eck, "Gandhian Guidelines for a World of Religious Difference", in Robert Ellsberg (ed.), *Gandhi on Christianity* (New York: Orbis, 1991) 84–85.

## GANDHI AND SCRIPTURE

Gandhi, then, considered a sympathetic study of the world's scriptures to be a "sacred duty". From the age of nineteen, he had read the Bible and the *Gita*, and later, the Koran, the Adi Granth, the Avesta, as well as the various Hindu "scriptures", especially the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas, including "the Indian Epics", the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.<sup>9</sup> Though Gandhi had not studied these works in their original languages and, as such, did not consider himself a scholar of them,<sup>10</sup> he claimed "to know and feel the truths" of the essential teaching of the world's scriptures.<sup>11</sup> Thus, to Parsees he could say "I have read your scriptures in Gujarati and English, as many as I could get".<sup>12</sup> To Muslims he could confidently proclaim that he understood "enough of the Koran and the history of Islam to know that a multitude of [Muslim] interpreters have interpreted the Koran to suit their pre-conceived notions".<sup>13</sup> And to Christians, he could confess that he had read more books on the Bible than he had read on the Hindu scriptures. Buddhism was the exception. Gandhi had practically no acquaintance with Buddhism except twice reading Sir Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* (1879), a poetic and popular biography of Gautama, the founder of Buddhism.

Gandhi respected all scriptures.<sup>14</sup> He gave the Parsee scriptures the same reverence as the Vedas or the Upanishads or the *Gita*.<sup>15</sup> He revered the Koran and the Bible.<sup>16</sup> When missionaries sought his advice on their work in India, Gandhi regularly challenged them to read the scriptures of the local people with as much reverence as he read the Bible. It was not sufficient, he insisted, for Christian missionaries merely to read the Koran and the *Gita*; they should read the Koran with Islamic spectacles and the *Gita* with Hindu spectacles, just as they would expect him to read the Bible with Christian spectacles.<sup>17</sup> He frequently grounded what amounted to a principle of respect upon the Biblical

9. M. K. Gandhi, "Speech at Public Meeting, Nipani", 8 November 1920, C.W., 18. 451; M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to C. F. Andrews", 4 November 1932, C.W., 51. 345.

10. Gandhi considered Arnold's *Song Celestial* the best English translation and later gained enough Sanskrit to understand the original text. On the subject of Gandhi's selective reinterpretation of Sanskritic tradition, see Judith M. Brown, "Mahatmas as Reformers: Some Problems of Religious Authority in the Indian Nationalist Movement", *South Asia Research*, 6 (May 1986) 15–26.

11. M. K. Gandhi, "Hinduism", *Young India*, 6 October 1921, C.W., 21. 246.

12. M. K. Gandhi, "Speech at meeting in Navsari", 21 April 1921, C.W., 20. 26.

13. M. K. Gandhi, "My Crime", *Young India*, 5 March 1925, C.W., 26. 226.

14. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to C. F. Andrews", 4 November 1932, C.W., 52. 345; M. K. Gandhi, "For Christian Friends", *Harijan*, 18 April 1936, C.W., 62. 334.

15. M. K. Gandhi, "My Crime", *Young India*, 5 March 1925, C.W., 26. 226.

16. M. K. Gandhi, "To the Learned Narasinhrao", *Navajivan*, 29 December 1920, C.W., 19. 178; M. K. Gandhi, "Speech at meeting to Commemorate the Prophet's Death", 23 June 1934, C.W., 58. 98.

17. M. K. Gandhi, "Discussion with Pierre Ceresole and Christian Missionaries", [ca. 23 June 1936], C.W., 63. 92.

commandment to love one's neighbour: people were to respect the other's religion as they would have others respect their own (see Lev 19:18; Gal 5:14). During times of inter-communal tensions, Gandhi chastened Hindus disposed to "new-fangled" notions of reviling the Koran and the Prophet by reminding them that it was once the custom in India to speak of the Prophet with reverence and for Hindus to compose songs paying tribute to Islam.<sup>18</sup> For statements such as this the "almost Christian" earned the sobriquet "Mahommed Gandhi".

Yet, what about the competing claims of scriptures demanding equal respect? Gandhi, as we know from the subtitle of his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments With Truth* (1927), took a firm stand on truth, especially lived or embodied truth.<sup>19</sup> Immutable truth or revelation, in his estimation, was not the exclusive property of any single scripture, nation or religion.<sup>20</sup> Nothing should circumscribe the power of God.<sup>21</sup> Echoing Raychand (or Rajchandra) Mehta, the Jain sage, he argued that not even the Vedas were exclusively and divinely inspired.<sup>22</sup> The Bible, the Koran, and the Avesta were as divinely inspired as the Vedas.<sup>23</sup> Eternal truths were to be found in all scriptures.<sup>24</sup> Gandhi considered belief that God was revealed only in one particular scripture akin to Hindu idol-worship: innocent enough, and perhaps even devotionally beneficial.<sup>25</sup> He rightly perceived that the real threat to religious harmony lay not in the competing claims of the different scriptures but between the representatives thereof, and then, between those who did not, and those who did, reject the authority of the scriptures altogether.<sup>26</sup>

However, reverence for the authority of the world's scriptures did not mean that these scriptures should be exempt from criticism. Error could claim no exemption even if it were supported by all the scriptures of the world.<sup>27</sup> Nothing, Gandhi believed, should be accepted as the word of God unless it could stand the test of reason.<sup>28</sup> Reason was the

18. M. K. Gandhi, "God is One", 19 September 1924, C.W., 25. 178.

19. "Truth is embodied not in words but in persons and in their living." For a discussion of the Hindu personalist-humanist view of truth, see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 138, 305 n. 36.

20. M. K. Gandhi, "God is One", 19 September 1924, C.W., 25. 180.

21. M. K. Gandhi, "Discussion with a Roman Catholic Priest", *Harijan*, 13 March 1937, C.W., 64. 423.

22. On the Jain influences upon Gandhi, see Stephen N. Hay, "Jain Influences on Gandhi's Early Thought", in Sibnarayan Ray (ed.) *Gandhi, India and the World* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1970) 29–38.

23. M. K. Gandhi, "Speech at Findlay College, Mannargudi", 15 September 1927, C.W., 34. 550; "Gandhiji's Questions to Rajchandra and His Replies", Appendix I, C.W., 32. 596.

24. M. K. Gandhi, "Dr. Ambedkar's Indictment-II", *Harijan*, 18 July 1936, C.W., 63. 153.

25. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to F. Mary Barr", 30 November 1932, C.W., 52. 96.

26. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Fatah-Ulla-Khan", 20 May 1936, C.W., 62. 423.

27. M. K. Gandhi, "Notes", 28 February 1925, C.W., 26. 202.

28. M. K. Gandhi, "Dr. Ambedkar's Indictment-II", *Harijan*, 18 July 1936, C.W., 63. 153. Reason, for Gandhi, enabled him to determine principles of order within the world

best guide to what might be regarded as revealed and what might not.<sup>29</sup> Thus, interpretations repugnant to reason should be firmly rejected,<sup>30</sup> while scriptural practices and modes of conduct offensive to reason should be either changed or abandoned. In this way, Gandhi had no hesitation in rejecting scriptural authority that supported principles relating to conditions at a particular place and time. In his endless debates on untouchability, Gandhi repeatedly asserted that any scripture, including the Manu-sastra ("the law of Manu") that said it was a sin to touch a Bhangi (outcaste), was no scripture at all. Scripture can never be beyond the power of reason.<sup>31</sup> Every formula of every religion had to submit to the acid test of reason if it were to command universal assent.

Reason by itself, however, had its shortcomings. It could be abused and distorted. Just as matter misplaced became dirt, or plants in the wrong place became weeds, so reason misused became lunacy.<sup>32</sup> Various experiences had taught Gandhi the specific limitations of reason. He had found that mere appeals to reason were futile in the face of age-long prejudice. He was also acutely aware that some Muslims justified stoning on the authority of the Koran and some Christians justified war and capital punishment on the authority of the Bible.<sup>33</sup>

Alongside the appeal to reason, therefore, Gandhi adopted a second principle of interpretation – the appeal to the heart, morality or conscience. Never accept anything as God's word, cautioned Gandhi, that was repugnant to one's moral sense.<sup>34</sup> That which conflicts with non-violence is opposed to the moral sense, he reiterated, and should be rejected.<sup>35</sup> As an example of non-violence revealing the true meaning of scripture, he cited a couplet from his beloved Tulsidas' *Ramayana*: "The drum, the fool, the Sudra, the animal and the woman – all these need beating." Not even Gandhi's love for Tulsidas could blunt his guiding principle of non-violence; either, Gandhi concluded, the couplet was an interpolation, or, if it was Tulsidas', he must have written it without much reflection, following the tradition of his time. "We must fight against the impression that every Sanskrit saying is a scriptural precept and pluck out from its very root the general habit of regarding women as inferior beings."<sup>36</sup>

Every scripture, then, Gandhi insisted, should be tested by the twin principles of reason and non-violence: "the anvil of truth with the

29. M. K. Gandhi, "My Crime", *Young India*, 5 March 1925, C.W., 26. 226.

30. M. K. Gandhi, "Hinduism", *Young India*, 6 October 1921, C.W., 21. 246.

31. M. K. Gandhi, "Speech at Meeting in Godhra", 18 April 1921, C.W., 20. 7.

32. M. K. Gandhi "Tyranny of Words", *Young India*, 14 October 1926, C.W., 31. 497.

33. M. K. Gandhi, "Discourses on the 'Gita'", 26 September 1926, C.W., 32. 314.

34. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to S. S. Mutgi", 10 September 1926, C.W., 31. 392.

35. M. K. Gandhi, "Interview to Dr Crane", [25 February 1937], C.W., 64. 398.

36. M. K. Gandhi, "Speech at Second Gujarat Educational Conference", 20 October 1917, C.W., 14. 32.

hammer of compassion".<sup>37</sup> Any passage or text that was inconsistent with this "infallible canon of interpretation" should be rejected. Likewise, that which was consistent with it should be appropriated.<sup>38</sup> Even then, and in spite of the canon of truth and non-violence, difficulties of interpretation might arise. They, in Gandhi's view, had to be solved on the authority of the "inner voice" (inner experience or light), patience and a living faith in God.<sup>39</sup>

The scripture that Gandhi had least difficulty with was the *Bhagavad Gita*. As already mentioned Gandhi derived great consolation from reading Tulsidas' *Ramayana*. He also derived much solace from the New Testament and the Koran. But it was the *Gita* above all else that represented "pure religious discourse without any embellishment".<sup>40</sup> It was the *Bhagavad Gita* that increasingly became Gandhi's infallible guide, his dictionary of reference, and his consolation in times of sorrow, trouble, and conflict.<sup>41</sup> It was the one book that, in his view, could be to Hindus what the Bible was to Christians or the Koran to Muslims. The *Gita*, as he observed later in his life, was "not only my Bible or my Koran; it is more than that – it is my mother".<sup>42</sup>

#### GANDHI AND THE BIBLE

The Bible never claimed quite the same affection for Gandhi as the *Gita*, yet parts of it approached that status. Certainly the Sermon on the Mount did – particularly so, in Gandhi's earlier years. In 1916, not long after he returned to India from South Africa, Gandhi told a conference of missionaries in Madras that the Sermon on the Mount competed almost with the *Bhagavad Gita* for the domination of his heart.<sup>43</sup> Even during the 1920s, when he turned his back upon Western civilisation, Gandhi spoke of the Bible in the same way as he spoke of the *Gita*. His rejection of Western civilisation, he admitted, did not mean shunning everything English or hating the British. He continued to revere the Bible and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount meant as much to him then as it did when he first read it as a law student in London.<sup>44</sup>

37. M. K. Gandhi, "Accept Defeat", *Navajivan*, 29 June 1924, C.W., 24. 320.

38. M. K. Gandhi, "Mr. Andrews' Difficulty", *Young India*, 21 July 1920, C.W., 18.73.

39. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Sonja Schlesin", 22 May 1927, C.W., 33. 355; "My Notes", *Navajivan*, 10 November 1921, C.W., 21. 419.

40. M. K. Gandhi, "Discussion with Basil Mathews and Others", (24 November 1935), C.W. 64. 75.

41. M. K. Gandhi, "Hinduism", *Young India*, 6 October 1921, C.W., 21. 249.

42. M. K. Gandhi, "Speech at Benares Hindu University", 1 August 1934, *Harijan Sevak*, 10 August 1934, C.W., 58. 271.

43. M. K. Gandhi, "Speech at Missionary Conference, Madras", 14 February 1916, C.W., 13. 220.

44. M. K. Gandhi, "To the Learned Narasinhrao", *Navajivan*, 29 December 1920, C.W., 19. 178.

For those familiar only with Gandhi's autobiography, or the more popular biographies, the extent and depth of Gandhi's knowledge of the Bible may come as a surprise. In both autobiography and biographies, we are usually told that, as a law student in London in 1889, Gandhi promised a friend that he would read the Bible from cover to cover. Apparently, the story continues, he first plodded through the first few books of the Old Testament finding most of it exceedingly tedious. Then, he turned to the New Testament which made a more favourable impression upon him, especially the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>45</sup> What is not told is that this introduction to the Christian scriptures (supplemented by his knowledge of Victorian sermons and popular hymns of the period) was the beginning of a life-long study of the Bible which even Gandhi's later love for the *Gita* did not diminish.<sup>46</sup>

After Gandhi's introduction to the Bible in London, his first serious encounter with the Bible would come four years later in South Africa, largely through contact with three very different groups or persons. The first group to influence his understanding of the Bible was a London-based group called the Esoteric Christian Union. The Esoteric Christian Union, under the leadership of Edward Maitland and Anna Kingsford, had broken away from the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society in 1884. Recent feminist scholars such as Marla Selvidge of Central Missouri State University have been attracted to the work of Kingsford and Maitland as an example of feminist or proto-feminist interpretation of the Bible.<sup>47</sup> Gandhi's initial interest, however, lay more with Kingsford's views on vegetarianism rather than feminism or even Hinduism.<sup>48</sup> Later, he became an enthusiastic promoter of Kingsford's and Maitland's "mystical" brand of Christianity and, as their self-appointed book agent in South Africa, regularly advertised the Esoteric Christian Union and Kingsford's and Maitland's writings in the *Natal Mercury*.<sup>49</sup> Two of their books, in particular, had a profound influence upon Gandhi: *The Perfect Way, or the Finding of Christ* (1882) and *The New Gospel of Interpretation* (1892).<sup>50</sup> Both books offered esoteric or mystical interpretations of Christianity. In them he saw a clear sign of:

45 M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 68.

46. See Chandran D. S. Devanesen, *The Making of the Mahatma* (New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 1969) 195.

47. Marla J. Selvidge, *Notorious Voices: Feminist Biblical Interpretation 1500-1920* (London: SCM, 1996) 187-188.

48. Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 48.

49. M. K. Gandhi, "Books for Sale", [Before 26 November 1894], C.W., 1. 168; M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to *The Natal Mercury*", 26 November 1894, C.W., 1. 170; M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Mrs. A. M. Lewis", 4 August 1894, C. W., 1. 160-61.

50. Anna (Bonus) Kingsford and Edward Maitland, *The Perfect Way; or, The Finding of Christ* (London: John M. Watkins) 1909.

a return from the materialistic tendencies, which have made us so cruelly selfish, to the unadulterated esoteric teachings of not only Jesus Christ, but also of Buddha, Zoroaster and Mahomed, who are no longer so generally denounced by the civilized world as false prophets, but whose and Jesus's teachings are beginning to be acknowledged to be complementary of one another.<sup>51</sup>

Besides their strong stand against materialism and religious absolutism, Kingsford's and Maitland's mystical interpretation of the Bible would make a permanent impression upon Gandhi. In *The Perfect Way* especially, there is a foreshadowing of Gandhi's understanding of Christ as representing the perfection open to all persons. We see his view of revelation as constituting the core and substance of all sacred scripture, the world's religions being in turn designed to be vehicles for it and modes of its expression. We see his appreciation of the value of studying other religions for an understanding of one's own. We see the twin test of truth and non-violence. We also see an incipient Marcionism, a Gandhian challenge to sacerdotal authority, history and personalities, a reverence for the world's scriptures, and a belief that the Bible should be interpreted as a "book of the Soul".<sup>52</sup> The influence of the Esoteric Christian Union upon Gandhi, until now greatly neglected, remains a fruitful source for further study.<sup>53</sup>

The second influence shaping Gandhi's understanding of the Bible came from evangelical Nonconformist Protestants – Wesleyans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers and Congregationalists – who were staunch supporters of Gandhi's first attempts at passive resistance. The influence of Protestant clergy and laypeople upon Gandhi's ideas of social reform has been well documented by James Hunt in his fine book *Gandhi and the Nonconformists*.<sup>54</sup> These Protestants awakened the "religious quest" within Gandhi and taught him to value the disciplined study of the Christian scriptures. He read the Bible thoroughly and studied Joseph Parker's massive twenty-five volume commentary, *The People's Bible: discourses upon the Holy Scriptures* (1889). He gained from these Nonconformists a confidence and a facility with the Christian scriptures equal to that which he would later gain with the *Gita* and the *Ramayana*.<sup>55</sup>

A third influence was the Russian writer, Leo Tolstōi. Gandhi admired Tolstōi's biblical studies,<sup>56</sup> acknowledged him as one of his

51. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to *The Natal Advertiser*", 21 January 1895, C.W., 1. 190.

52. See Samuel Hopgood Hart's Preface to the Fourth Edition of *The Perfect Way*.

53. A short study is to be found in J. T. F. Jordens' *Gandhi's Religion: A Homespun Shawl* (London: Macmillan, 1998) 60–62.

54. James D. Hunt, *Gandhi and the Nonconformists. Encounters in South Africa* (New Delhi: Promilla, 1981) 16–17.

55. James D. Hunt, *Gandhi and the Nonconformists*, 138.

56. M. K. Gandhi, "Count Tolstoy", *Indian Opinion*, 2 September 1905, C.W., 5. 56.

teachers, and called himself a “humble follower” of the Russian count. Gandhi read Tolstōi’s *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1893) for the first time in April 1894. The book overwhelmed him. He received it like a tonic. It greatly strengthened Gandhi’s confidence in non-violence and, together with other religious works of Tolstōi’s, especially the *Translation and Harmony of the Gospels* (1880–81), *Christianity and Patriotism* (1894), *The Gospel in Brief* (ca. 1881) and *What to do?* (1887), encouraged him to gain a deeper understanding of the New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>57</sup>

South Africa not only provided Gandhi with mentors like Kingsford, Maitland, Tolstōi and the Nonconformist clergy; President Kruger of the Transvaal and later General Smuts of the newly formed Republic also provided the great “doer” with plenty of free time to indulge his newly-discovered taste for reading. The Bible was to become a staple diet during those times of incarceration. Gandhi was in prison three times in South Africa. During the first period of imprisonment, he read the *Gita* in the mornings and the Koran in the afternoons. In the evenings, he explained the Bible to a Chinese Christian who wanted to learn English.<sup>58</sup> During his second period of imprisonment, he again read portions of the Bible, along with the works of Ruskin, Lord Bacon, and the *Bhagavad Gita*.<sup>59</sup> During the three months of his third time in gaol, he read some thirty books in all, most notable of these in English were religious books by Tolstōi and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Bible.<sup>60</sup>

Later, in India, Gandhi experienced much longer periods of imprisonment. His Yeravda “Jail Diary” for 1922 and 1923 meticulously records some 150 books that he read, six hours a day, for over almost two years – mostly on religion, literature, social and natural sciences. In *Young India* Gandhi recorded detailed comments on some of these books and on the time it took him to read them. Among them were numerous Christian books such as Jakob Boehme’s *Supersensual Life* (1781, repr. 1908), Lyman Abbott’s *What Christianity Means to Me* (1921), Benjamin Kidd’s *Social Evolution* (1894), William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), also the Bible, which he read from cover to cover within six months.<sup>61</sup>

57. Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi’s Religious Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1983) 51. On Tolstōi’s influence upon Gandhi, see Kalidas Nag, *Tolstoy and Gandhi* (Patna: Pustak Bhandar, 1950); Guy Vogelweith, “Les Sources Chrétiennes de la Non-Violence Gandhienne” in *Revue D’Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse* 63 (1983) 303–10; Martin Green, *Tolstoy and Gandhi, Men of Peace: A Biography* (2nd ed.; New York: Harper Collins, 1999).

58. M. K. Gandhi, “My Experience in Gaol–IV”, 28 March 1908, C.W., 8. 159.

59. M. K. Gandhi, “My Second Experience in Gaol–V”, *Indian Opinion*, 30 January 1909, C.W., 9. 182.

60. M. K. Gandhi, “My Third Experience in Gaol–VI”, *Indian Opinion*, 5 June 1909, C.W., 9. 241.

61. M. K. Gandhi, “Jail Diary, 1923”, C.W., 23. 178–188; M. K. Gandhi, “Letter to Hakina Ajmalkhan”, 14 April 1922, C.W., 23. 133–134. See also, Raghavan Iyer (ed.), *The Moral and*

The extent of Gandhi's facility with the Bible has been insufficiently appreciated.<sup>62</sup> Even major studies that have examined Christian influence on Gandhi have overlooked his gifts as a biblical expositor. There is very little doubt that by 1926, when Gandhi taught the New Testament to students at the Gujarat National College, he was well-versed in the Bible (including the King James Authorised, the Weymouth, and the Moffat versions). As Margaret Chatterjee rightly acknowledges, "His study of the New Testament and of the *Gita* went on simultaneously, not only in London, but in South Africa and throughout his life."<sup>63</sup> The evidence does not support Otto Wolff's polemical assessment that the New Testament did not play a major role in Gandhi's development.<sup>64</sup> Gandhi was not a biblical scholar but he certainly read the Bible often and selectively studied it. He frequently meditated upon and memorised parts of it. He often referred to the Bible and quoted from it in public debate and in private discussion when it was appropriate to do so. Though he refused several Christian pleas to write a commentary on the New Testament, he frequently expounded particular passages from the New and Old Testament.

#### GANDHI AS BIBLICAL INTERPRETER

In Gandhi's opinion the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament did not compare with the New Testament. The Old Testament may contain some very deep truths and inspirational stories, but there was a fundamental difference between the two. The Old Testament was full of "blood and thunder".<sup>65</sup> It espoused Moses' doctrine of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". It was the book that the Boers read with devotion and whose descriptions of bloody battles they learnt by heart. It was the book that President Kruger drew upon to bolster entrenched racism. So, while Gandhi considered the Old Testament to contain many deep truths, he could not pay it the same honour as he did to the New Testament. In many respects he regarded the latter as an extension of the teaching of the Old Testament, and, in some matters a rejection of it. Certainly, he held that there was a vast difference between the God of the Hebrews and the God of Jesus Christ, and he had always a

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*Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 3 vols, *Civilization, Politics and Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) 1. 157–177.

62. See, for example, Margaret Chatterjee, "Gandhi and Christianity", in John Hick and Lamont C. Hempel (eds.), *Gandhi's Significance for Today* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 152–165. For a discussion of Gandhi's exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount, see Heikki Räisänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma: Exegetical Perspectives on the Encounter of Cultures and Faiths* (London: SCM, 1997) 170–188.

63. Chatterjee, *Gandhi's Religious Thought*, 50.

64. O. Wolff, *Mahatma und Christus. Eine Charakterstudie Mahatma Gandhis und des modernen Hinduismus* (Berlin: Lettner, 1955). For a critique of Wolff, see Räisänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma*, 172.

65. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Deveshvar Siddhantalankar", 22 May 1927, C.W., 33. 358.

tendency to view the Old Testament through “Christian spectacles”.<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, he did not ignore the Old Testament completely. Later in life Gandhi came to enjoy the Prophets and Psalms. Some nine biblical books (Genesis, Exodus, I Kings, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Daniel and Jonah) are referred to in his writings, Daniel being the most prominent.

In the book of the prophet Daniel Gandhi found much consolation. Daniel, he declared, “was one of the greatest passive resisters that ever lived”.<sup>67</sup> He was particularly intrigued with chapter 6, the story of Daniel in the lion’s den, and with verses 10–11 especially:

Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God.

Gandhi interpreted these verses to mean that Daniel actually flung open the windows in a flagrant and public disregard of the decree of Darius against prayers to anyone but the Babylonian king. Gandhi observes: “When Daniel threw open his doors in defiance of the laws of the Medes and Persians which offended his conscience, [he] meekly suffered the punishment for his disobedience, he offered *satyagraha* in its purest form.”<sup>68</sup> In the context of his political campaigns, Gandhi identified the story of Daniel in the lion’s den as a story of active resistance. Yet, his reading of Daniel 6 has further significance than this. His observations have led one scholar to forge a new method of biblical interpretation called “cultural exegesis”. As Daniel Smith-Christopher observes, on the basis of Gandhi’s reading of the book of Daniel, a “culturally specific” reading of a text may give new insights into what the text historically meant as well as what it might mean for today.<sup>69</sup>

The bulk of Gandhi’s biblical commentary, however, is skewed heavily towards the New Testament. Fifteen of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament receive comment: the four gospels, Acts, Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, I Thessalonians, James, I John and Revelation. Of these, Matthew’s gospel is by far the

66. M. K. Gandhi, “Discussion with D. Ramaswami”, on or after 3 August 1944, C.W., 78. 6; M. K. Gandhi, “My Jail Experiences”, *Young India*, 4 September 1924, C.W., 25. 86.

67. M. K. Gandhi, “Speech at Farewell Meeting”, (London), 12 November 1909, *Indian Opinion*, 11 December 1909, C.W., 9. 541; M. K. Gandhi, “Speech at Farewell Meeting”, Durban, 8 July 1914, C.W., 12. 446; M. K. Gandhi, “Congress Report on the Punjab Disorders”, C.W., 17. 152; M. K. Gandhi, “Talk With Missionaries”, (Before 23 April 1946), *Harijan*, 26 April 1946, C.W., 84. 52.

68. M. K. Gandhi, “Congress Report on the Punjab Disorders”, C.W., 17. 152.

69. See Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “Gandhi on Daniel 6: Some Thoughts on a ‘Cultural Exegesis’ of the Bible”, *Biblical Interpretation*, 1 (1993) 321–338.

most prominent. This is not surprising, considering Gandhi's strong ethical commitment to a perfected humanity. A third of all Gandhi's reflections on the Bible relate to Matthew's gospel with its emphasis upon works and the doing of God's will. According to Matthew (16:24), the Son of Man will reward everyone according to "what he has done"; for Gandhi his mantra is "We shall do or die." For Matthew, a disciple is one who imitates the sufferings of Jesus; for Gandhi, a disciple is one who obeys the divine law of suffering. Both Matthew's gospel and Gandhi emphasise readiness to suffer, poverty, lowliness, renunciation of worldly honour and service; those who withstand the test and show themselves approved in these matters receive the promised reward in the Kingdom of God.

The passages in Matthew's gospel that receive the most attention by Gandhi are sayings from the Sermon on the Mount. It is typical that, on the several occasions when he was invited to address missionary meetings, Gandhi told British and American missionaries to refrain from "telling" India about Christ and, instead, to live the life enjoined upon them in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>70</sup> Gandhi challenged Indian Christians with the same message: simply cling to the Sermon on the Mount and they would not go wrong.<sup>71</sup> He would have unhesitatingly called himself a "Sermon-on-the-Mount Christian", if such an admission had not been open to misinterpretation.<sup>72</sup> The Sermon on the Mount echoed something in his very being, something that he had learnt in childhood from his Hindu heritage.<sup>73</sup> The Sermon was Jesus' message to a "groaning world". To date that world had adopted only a fragment of its "imperishable lofty precepts". "Until we take all Christ's principles to our hearts", Gandhi urged, war, hatred and violence would continue.<sup>74</sup>

Two passages from the Sermon on the Mount were particularly important to Gandhi. These were Matt 5: 37-40: "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil", and Matt 6:33: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness". With respect to the former, Gandhi

70. M. K. Gandhi, "Why I am a Hindu", *C.W.*, 35. 166.

71. M. K. Gandhi, "Notes", *Young India*, 22 September 1921, *C.W.*, 21. 169.

72. M. K. Gandhi, "The Sermon on the Mount", 15 November 1927, in Iyer (ed.), *Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1.498.

73. M. K. Gandhi, "Talk on Board S.S. 'Pilsna'", 25 December 1931, *C.W.*, 48. 438. There is a temptation among Christian interpreters of Gandhi to attribute too quickly a Harnackian type of theological Liberalism or "essence of Christianity"-type of religion to Gandhi and to ignore his Hindu heritage. Though attracted to the idea of a "timeless" kernel in religion, Harnack's rigorous historical critical approach to the Bible was totally foreign to Gandhi. For the influence of Gandhi's Hindu heritage upon his religion, see J. T. F. Jordens, "Gandhi's Religion and the Hindu Heritage" and Stephen N. Hay, "Jain Influences on Gandhi's Early Thought", in Sibnarayan (ed.), *Gandhi, India and the World*, 29-38, 39-55, and A. L. Basham, "Traditional Influences on the Thought of Mahatma Gandhi", in R. Kumar (ed.), *Essays on Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 17-42.

74. M. K. Gandhi, "Interview to the Press", 21 March 1931, *C.W.*, 45. 319.

distinguished between “passive resistance” and “non-violent resistance” and argued that Europe mistook “the bold and brave resistance full of wisdom by Jesus of Nazareth for passive resistance”. He detected no passivity or weakness in Jesus.<sup>75</sup> The other passage, Matt 6:33, also seized Gandhi early in his reading of the Bible. He regularly used this passage in discussions with Christians over the place of Jesus in his own life: “I tell you that if you will understand, appreciate and act up to the spirit of this passage, you won’t even need to know what place Jesus or any other teacher occupies in your heart.”<sup>76</sup>

Gandhi had the highest regard for the teachings of Jesus and claimed on several occasions to have read devoutly every word ascribed to him in the New Testament.<sup>77</sup> Often he would comment upon key events in the life of Jesus bringing to them a distinctive Hindu insight not found in Christian writings. The following discussion of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness is an example:

When he (a man) conquers the first temptation (of hunger), he gains mastery over his senses. That endows him with strength. That strength itself is the second temptation....When a man thus gains mastery over strength, he becomes a master of *siddhis* (miracle-working powers). These *siddhis* are his third temptation.<sup>78</sup>

Some verses from the Sermon on the Mount are not mentioned at all. Räsänen lists two examples. The first is Matt 5: 34 “Do not swear at all”. Despite this verse being quite central to Tolstoy’s creed, Gandhi portrays Jesus as the supreme vow-keeper, providing tendentious support to the importance of vows in his own personal life and for his ashramites. The other example concerns Jesus’ injunction against making a show of public fasting (Matt: 6:16–18). Gandhi’s public fasts were legendary. “Here again”, observes Räsänen, “he clearly stands on Indian ground.”<sup>79</sup>

Given Gandhi’s general lack of sympathy with the writings of St Paul (especially Paul’s views on women),<sup>80</sup> it is interesting to find repeated reflections or quotations from Paul’s letters. 1 Corinthians 13 was one of Gandhi’s favourite texts. Shortly after he arrived in South Africa in 1893, he read a devotional essay based on 1 Corinthians 13. The essay, called *The Greatest Thing in the World*, was written by Henry Drummond

75. M. K. Gandhi, “Letter to Yvonne Privat”, 29 November 1947, C.W., 90. 129.

76. M. K. Gandhi, “Speech at Central College, Jaffna”, 2 December 1927, C.W., 35. 342–43.

77. M. K. Gandhi, “Letter to Rev. John M. Darlington”, 1 April 1926, C.W., 30. 215; M. K. Gandhi, “Letter to Esther Menon”, 17 September 1926, C.W., 31. 419; M. K. Gandhi, “A Student’s Questions”, C.W., 30. 47.

78. Cited in Mahadev Desai’s *Day to Day with Gandhi* (8 vols; Varanasi: Sarva Seva Sangh Publications, 1968) 7.135.

79. Räsänen, *Marcion, Muhammad and the Mahatma*, 175–76.

80. M. K. Gandhi, “Discussion with Basil Methews [sic] and Others”, 24 November 1936, C.W., 64. 75.

(1851–97), the Scottish theological writer, geologist, and visionary.<sup>81</sup> Gandhi considered Drummond's essay a "sacred work" and, when presented with a copy of the essay much later in June 1917 by Esther Faering, a Danish missionary, he read it again with even "greater appreciation".<sup>82</sup> Drummond's essay concludes with the example of a person whose life was transformed after reading 1 Corinthians 13 weekly for three months. Then, with an evangelist's directness, Drummond followed up the promise of transformation with a challenge to the reader:

Will you do it? It is for the greatest thing in the world. You might begin by reading it every day, especially the verses which describe the perfect character. "Love suffereth long, and is kind; love envieth not; love vaunteth not itself." Get these ingredients into your life. Then everything that you do is eternal. It is worth doing. It is worth giving time to. No man can become a saint in his sleep; and to fulfil the condition required demands a certain amount of prayer and meditation and time, just as improvement in any direction, bodily or mental requires preparation and care. Address yourself to that one thing; at any cost have this transcendent character exchanged for yours.<sup>83</sup>

Gandhi accepted the challenge and decided to follow Drummond's prescription to read the verses on love for three months.<sup>84</sup>

The experiment was partly prompted by Gandhi's perception of his inadequacies in expressing love. Expressing love, he often observed, was "like walking on the edge of a sword". After the experiment, Gandhi sent his nephew, Maganlal, a New Year's Day gift of a handwritten copy of 1 Corinthians 13. In offering the biblical text Gandhi acknowledged his own shortcomings:

I am trying to give you what you, I and many others lack. If one has that, one has everything. Only he who has it can give it. If that is the truth, what can I give? However, we may strive for it together... If we could but get hold of this dagger [of love] and get also the strength to stab ourselves with it, we could shake the world. The thing is there in me, and yet I feel its lack every moment.<sup>85</sup>

81. See Robin S. Barbour, "'The greatest thing in the world'—Henry Drummond on love", "A note about *The Greatest Thing in the World*" Appendix B, and "Still among 'the greatest'", Appendix C. in Thomas E. Corts (ed.), *Henry Drummond: A Perpetual Benediction* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999).

82. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Esther Faering", 11 June 1917, C.W., 13. 442.

83. Henry Drummond, *The Greatest Thing in the World* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, [n.d.]) 63-64. There are at least six English editions of this book currently in print.

84. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Esther Faering", 11 June 1917, C.W., 13. 442; M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Esther Faering", 8 July 1917, C.W., 13. 466.

85. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Maganlal Gandhi", 15 November 1917, C.W., 14. 91.

Soon after Gandhi began to encourage others to read 1 Corinthians 13 and arranged for copies of Drummond's book to be distributed to friends as far away as South Africa.<sup>86</sup>

Time and again Gandhi referred directly to 1 Corinthians 13. When he perceived traces of violence in the comments of his supporters, he counselled them to read what St Paul said about charity. 1 Corinthians 13, Gandhi believed, belonged to all religions.<sup>87</sup> It was particularly important in helping him to interpret *ahimsa* (active non-violence or non-violence in thought, word and deed) in terms of "love" to a Western audience. He also drew on the Apostle Paul's teachings to elevate "love" onto an equal plane with "truth": to treat love not only as a means to truth, to regard love and truth as "interchangeable terms".<sup>88</sup> Most especially, Gandhi drew on 1 Corinthians 13 when he sought to inspire his followers with courage: "Remember that love is never afraid, it has no secrets. You will therefore open your hearts to all and you will, I doubt not, find a response in every heart. Love will not be denied for it is ever patient and ever suffering. And love is service, it rejoices in service."<sup>89</sup>

Galatians 6:7 – "for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he reap" – was another favourite Pauline text. Gandhi often spoke of God as "the Law and the Law-giver". By this he meant that God did not intervene in human affairs.<sup>90</sup> The world, in Gandhi's view, operated according to immutable moral principles and Galatians 6:7, especially the maxim "reap as you sow", contained one of them.

Yet, Philippians 4:6 – "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication let your requests be made known unto God" – was the biblical text most often quoted by Gandhi, even more so than his much-loved Sermon on the Mount. From Gandhi's days in South Africa, when he began to seriously study the Bible, until the end of his life, this verse held a special place. "Be careful for nothing" virtually took possession of Gandhi.<sup>91</sup> He sought to follow its injunction in every aspect of his life.<sup>92</sup> He believed that had he not observed the wisdom of this text, he would have gone mad with worry.<sup>93</sup> "Be careful for nothing", Gandhi considered, was an excellent motto for a pilgrim. A "careful for nothing" attitude called for a radical discipleship, freedom from anxiety, and a true and living trust in God. Gandhi's image of God as a Caretaker in this regard is especially beautiful: "If God is, why need

86. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Esther Faering", 8 July 1917, C.W., 13. 466.

87. M. K. Gandhi, "Speech at Prayer Meeting", 25 December 1945, C.W., 86. 266–67.

88. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Esther Faering", 11 June 1917, C.W., 13. 442.

89. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Esther Faering", 23 October 1919, C.W., 16. 253.

90. M. K. Gandhi, "Note to Gope Gurbuxani", C.W., 79. 228.

91. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Anne Marie Petersen", 4 June 1932, C.W., 50. 15.

92. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to C. Rajagopalachari", 13 June 1945, C.W., 80. 313.

93. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to A.W. Baker", 18 March 1924, C.W., 23. 267.

I care? He is the Infallible Caretaker. He is a foolish man who fusses although he is well protected."<sup>94</sup>

"Look at the sparrows" Gandhi advised the English supporter, Madeleine Slade (Mirabehn), who joined him at Sabarmati *ashram*, "They do not know what they will do the next moment. Let us literally live from moment to moment."<sup>95</sup> Nor should the "careful for nothing" person worry about his or her next meal. Just as animals, large and small, do not fret about tomorrow, but simply wait on tomorrow for their daily sustenance, so should human beings.<sup>96</sup> Gandhi regularly quoted the Philippians passage to admonish his followers for worrying about the future.<sup>97</sup> To speculate about the future, to get bogged down with side issues, to ask abstract questions or to reach beyond the immediate, he considered, was not only futile but also self-defeating.<sup>98</sup> He also drew on the verse to counsel people from overworking and harming their health. Those who observed the wisdom in this verse, he urged, would work with complete detachment and utter freedom from anxiety. When we see ourselves as God's instruments, and when we work in an attitude of complete self-surrender, there can be no cause for anxiety or fretfulness whatever the result or however difficult the situation may be.<sup>99</sup>

Gandhi was not a wooden literalist, though he was a severe reductionist. He sought to understand the spirit of the Bible with the aid of his "infallible canon" of truth and *ahimsa* (non-violence). He experimented with biblical revelation in the same manner as he did with diet. In practical terms, his approach to the Bible and to Bible study may be summarised as follows: Read the Bible regularly. Study a little at a time, reflect upon it, and proceed only after due assimilation, never accepting as God's word anything that is repugnant to one's moral sense. Reject what is inconsistent with truth and non-violence, and appropriate all that is consistent with it. Avoid literalism. Try to understand the spirit of the Bible. Ponder over the elements of truth in what you read and reduce these to principles. Put these principles into action, for truth has to be lived if it is to be fruitful.

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94. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Anne Marie Petersen", 4 June 1932, C.W., 50.15.

95. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Mirabehn", 29 August 1947, C.W., 89. 107.

96. M. K. Gandhi, "Public Expenses", *Young India*, 21 May 1931, C.W., 46. 161.

97. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Verrier Elwin", 3 October 1932, C.W., 51. 178.

98. See my article "Gandhi and 'Lead, kindly Light'", *Pacifica*, 10/1 (1997) 84-92.

99. M. K. Gandhi, "Letter to Satis Chandra Das Gupta", 13 December 1928, C.W., 38. 215.