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Review of Lead, Kindly Light: Gandhi on Christianity

Charles R. DiSalvo
West Virginia University

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***Lead, Kindly Light: Gandhi on Christianity*. Robert Ellsberg (ed.). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021, 143 pp., paperback, \$24.00 US, ISBN 978-1-6269-8388-5.**

Charles R. DiSalvo¹
West Virginia University

Jesus “belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world, to all races and people.”

Mohandas K. Gandhi²

My hat’s off to Robert Ellsberg. Let me explain.

Ellsberg, the editor of *Lead, Kindly Light*³, uses the first half of his book to present the reader with a carefully selected and well-organized set of statements Mahatma Gandhi made articulating his views of, and describing his experiences with, Christianity. Ellsberg organizes these into four categories:

- Encounters with Christianity
- The Message of Jesus
- Mission and Missionaries
- All Religions Are True

Locating and then ordering these statements into these quite useful modules was no easy task. Developing an accurate and complete picture of what Gandhi thought about any particular question takes lots of patience and lots of time.

First, there is the enormous amount of material that must be searched. Gandhi was one of the most prolific writers of any public figure on the twentieth century stage. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* extends to 100 volumes, 97 of which contain Gandhi’s original work. The vastness of this material makes culling through his writing in search of his position on any particular question a massive, painstaking undertaking.

Second, Gandhi did not write definitive treatises. Rather, he expressed himself over the course of many years and in a variety of piecemeal ways – in private letters, in public petitions, in the columns of his newspapers, in speeches, and much more. As a result, Gandhi scholars are often forced to assemble mosaics from many disparate pieces, rather than paint with easy, broad brush strokes.

Third, Gandhi considered his entire life a series of “experiments in truth” – the consequence of which is that he was always in the process of changing his thinking based in large part upon his latest experiences.

Ellsberg has overcome these obstacles to put together a coherent and well-defined picture – in Gandhi’s own words – of Gandhi and his relationship with Christianity.⁴ He deftly orchestrates Gandhi’s statements to sound certain themes. One is Gandhi’s firmly-held view that all religions lead to God and are, therefore, of equal worth:

For me, the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches from the same majestic tree.

Therefore, they are equally true, though being received and interpreted through human instruments equally imperfect (p. 72).

A second theme that Ellsberg's selections highlight – Gandhi's express disdain for missionary work, particularly as he himself experienced it – is consistent with Gandhi's refusal to accept Christianity as a superior religion. Christianity, he held, had no efficacy in improving the lot of converts:

Years' experience of proselytizing both in South Africa and India has convinced me that it has not raised the general moral tone of the converts who have imbibed the superficialities of European civilization, and have missed the teaching of Jesus (p. 5).

Perhaps more important for Gandhi than its simple ineffectiveness, Christianity's missionary work was focused, he believed, on the wrong goal. Rather than work for the conversion of the other, Gandhi thought that missionaries ought to pray that "a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, and a Christian a better Christian" (p. 63).

How to do this? Rather than engage in proselytizing, Gandhi believed that Christians, as well as those of other faiths, ought to remain quiet and let their lives speak for them to others:

...the rose needs no speech but simply spreads its perfume. Even the blind who do not see the rose perceive its fragrance. That is the secret of the gospel of the rose. But the Gospel that Jesus preached is more subtle and fragrant than the gospel of the rose. If the rose needs no agent, much less does the Gospel of Christ need any agent (p. 60).

Ellsberg does a masterful job of making these themes come alive. But as important as they are in understanding Gandhi's relationship with Christianity, Ellsberg sets out a third – and for our time, a more important – theme, one that deals with life and death. For the twenty-first century readers of this edition of Ellsberg's book, living as we do in an age of widespread violence that ranges from international terrorism to local police brutality, Gandhi's views on Christianity and nonviolence have special significance.

Ellsberg makes it clear that Gandhi fervently believed that –

- the central message of Christianity is contained in the Sermon on the Mount;
- the central message of the Sermon on the Mount is one of nonviolence; and
- most Christians in their practice of Christianity ignore Christ's teaching on nonviolence.

Would the world be plagued with its current level of violence if Christians were, in fact,

Christian? If Christians were, in fact, nonviolent?

Ellsberg responds to this issue and to others Gandhi raises through the voices of five contributing writers whose essays he presents in the book's second half – Harvard Divinity School's Diana Eck; the late Indian Jesuit and author of *A Gandhian Theology of Liberation* Ignatius Jesudasan; James Douglass, author of *The Nonviolent Cross*; the progressive Bangladesh-based missionary, Bob McCahill; and the Australian author and academic, William Emilsen. Ellsberg offers a framework for reading this material that names four challenges from Gandhi that his contributors address – challenges to inter-religious dialogue, to Asian theology, to Christian mission, and, importantly, to Christian discipleship.

Multiple and quite different factors caused Gandhi to decline to adopt the Christian faith.

Of these, a chief reason that is addressed in *Lead, Kindly Light* under Ellsberg's category of "challenge to Christian discipleship" is the failure of Christianity to live up to its own truth – including, notably, the truth of nonviolence.⁵ What Gandhi knew about Christ's teachings and life differed substantially from what he saw Christians doing. "...[M]uch of what passes for Christianity", he said, "is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount" (p 22). Ignatius Jesudasan writes:

It was Gandhi's conviction that the root of the evil of violence was the want of a living faith in a living God. He considered it a tragedy that peoples of the earth who claimed to believe in the message of Jesus, whom they described as the Prince of Peace, showed little of that belief in actual practice.

...

Gandhi's feeling was that most Christians tended to reject the moral substance of Christ's teaching for the metaphysical symbols embodied in dogmas or creedal formulas. Rejecting such Christianity for the true message of Christ, he stated: "I rebel against orthodox Christianity, as I am convinced that it has distorted the message of Jesus (p. 107)

What is "the true message of Christ" that Christianity has effectively rejected? James Douglass answers this question in an excerpt from *The Nonviolent Cross* that Ellsberg includes here. The message, says Douglass, is that "salvation comes through suffering (p. 116)." The believer must embrace self-suffering as an expression of love for the other; this dynamic has importance not simply for the believer but also for the society of which the believer is a part, says Douglas:

...the purpose of nonviolence [is] to move human beings by suffering love to a recognition of their common humanity.....[H]ere is the ultimate self-disclosure of God in humanity, in the action of suffering love unto death (p. 119).

Though Gandhi did not claim to be a Christian, the example of Jesus' suffering was at the root of his faith in nonviolence (p. 117).

From the potential violence of nuclear weapons that threaten our very existence, to the systemic violence visited upon people of color, and on to the individual violence Americans steeped in a

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gun culture inflict upon each other on a daily basis, violence always has center stage in American life. Yet much of Christendom does not embrace nonviolence. The implicit message of *Lead, Kindly Light* is that now is the time for Christians to understand that their own faith calls for nonviolence.

Allow me to end with a story.

Gandhi develops his philosophy and practice of nonviolence in South Africa where he leads the Indian community's resistance to government oppression. His nonviolence nearly cost him his life on one occasion when he is attacked over a difference in strategy by his own supporters. He does not resist and is severely beaten to the point of unconsciousness. Joseph Doke, a Christian cleric, takes the severely injured Gandhi in. As Gandhi lays in bed, now conscious but unable to speak, he jots a note to his host. Would the cleric's young daughter, Olive, sing Gandhi's "favorite English hymn," *Lead, Kindly Light*, to Gandhi that he might center himself? She sings:

Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling
gloom Lead thou me on
The night is dark, and I am far from home
Lead thou me on
Keep thou my feet, I do not ask to see The
distant scene, one step enough for me

Robert Ellsberg's book is not simply an academic exercise.

Like Gandhi's life, it is an invitation to defy the darkness of violence and hatred and embrace the light of self-suffering and love.

Endnotes

¹ Author of *M.K. Gandhi, Attorney at Law: The Man Before the Mahatma* and Woodrow A. Potesta Professor of Law at West Virginia University College of Law.

² *The Modern Review*, October 1941, p. 406.

³ The title is taken from the hymn of the same name. The full lyrics of the hymn, composed by John Henry Newman, can be found in Vincent Sheean's 1949 biography of Gandhi, *Lead, Kindly Light*, pp. 363-4.

⁴ *Lead, Kindly Light: Gandhi on Christianity* has a history. It was first published in 1991 as *Gandhi on Christianity* by Orbis Books under the editorship of Robert Ellsberg. An Indian edition, with a new title – *Lead, Kindly Light* – and a special preface by editor Ellsberg was published in 2020 to commemorate the recently celebrated 150th anniversary of Gandhi's birth. Now this thirteenth anniversary edition of the original American version, still under the editorship of Robert Ellsberg, appears with a second unique preface to mark the occasion.

Lead, Kindly Light also has predecessors of a different sort. When James Douglass wrote his influential book, *The Non-Violent Cross: A Theology of Revolution and Peace*, in 1966, he led the way with a chapter entitled "From Gandhi to Christ: God as Suffering Love." Professor Margaret Chatterjee, a well-regarded scholar who wrote from her post at the University of Delhi, published *Gandhi's Religious Thought*, with a foreword by the distinguished philosopher of religion John Hick, in 1983. Terrence Rynne's *Gandhi and Jesus: The Saving Power of Nonviolence*, is a particularly detailed, comprehensive, and thoughtful treatment of the intertwined contributions of Christ and the Mahatma to nonviolence theory and practice that was published in 2008. James Douglass returned to Gandhi and the cross in a section of *Gandhi and the Unspeakable: His Final Experiment with Truth* in 2012.

What distinguishes *Lead, Kindly Light* from these works is that editor Ellsberg lets Gandhi speak at length in his own voice.

⁵ James Douglass describes "a phenomenon which provides a significant contrast to Gandhi's experiments in truth and which will suggest why Gandhi is so important today for an understanding of the Christian Gospel: the scandal of Western Christianity's denial of its own truth" (p. 113).

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