



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2. Issue 3., 2015 (July-Sept.)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

INFLUENCE OF THE BIBLE ON GANDHI'S ETHICS

Dr SHEEBA HIMANI SHARMA

Department of English
St. Andrew's College, Gorakhpur



Dr SHEEBA HIMANI
SHARMA

ABSTRACT

It is worth noting that Christianity influenced Gandhi to an extent that he followed most of the teachings of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament but the conduct of the Christians was a hindrance in his acceptance of the same. Gandhi had a strong inclination towards the life and teachings of Jesus Christ yet he could never accept Christianity. He exhorts the Christians to be doers of the bible, not just followers.

Keywords: *Jesus Christ, Bible, Gandhi, Sermon on the Mount*

©KY PUBLICATIONS

During his studies in England, Mahatma Gandhi became interested in the Christian faith. He had been reading the Bible to keep a promise he had made to a friend. He had difficulties understanding the Old Testament because in it, "he found out so much that he could not reconcile with the bidding of returning good for evil." He was studying for the bar exams in London when he got the New Testament to read. This made a positive impression on him.

Gandhi told Millie Polak, the wife of one of his earliest disciples.

"I did once seriously think of embracing the Christian faith," "The gentle figure of Christ, so patient, so kind, so loving, so full of forgiveness that he taught his followers not to retaliate when abused or struck, but to turn the other cheek, I thought it was a beautiful example of the perfect man..."

Did Jesus influence Gandhi in any way? He was of the opinion: "I regard Jesus as a great teacher of humanity". The real attraction of Gandhi to Jesus' life and message is the aspect of Jesus' suffering. Suffering for others form one of the pillars of Gandhi's Message to the world. It is worth noting that Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence –*satyagraha* as already affirmed above has three principles: Truth-*Sat/Satya*, Nonviolence-*Ahimsa* and self-suffering-*Tapasya*. These are called the pillars of Satyagraha. Failure to grasp them is a handicap to the understanding of Gandhi's nonviolence. Gandhi saw all these principles in Jesus' life and the

one that really attracted him was the third aspect that is *Tapasya* – willingness to self-sacrifice or suffering.

Gandhi declares: “the example of Jesus’ suffering is a factor in the composition of my undying faith in nonviolence which rules all my actions, worldly and temporal.” He kept hanging in his little hut a black and white print of Christ with an imprint “he is our peace”. The picture of the crucified Christ wearing only a loin cloth such as millions of poor men wear in Indian villages, had touched Gandhi’s heart very deeply.

However, on another occasion, he said he could accept Jesus “as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born. His death on the Cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept.”

“The message of Jesus as I understand it,” said Gandhi, “is contained in the Sermon on the Mount unadulterated and taken as a whole... If then I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, ‘Oh, yes, I am a Christian.’ But negatively I can tell you that in my humble opinion, what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount... I am speaking of the Christian belief, of Christianity as the west understands it.

Gandhi believed that in every man there was an impulse for good and a compassion that is the spark of divinity that will one day burst into the full flower that is the hope of all mankind. An example of this flowering, he said, can be seen in the figure and in the life of Jesus. “I refuse to believe that there not exists or has ever existed a person that has not made use of his example to lessen his sins, even though he may have done so without realising it. The lives of all have, in some greater or lesser degree, has witnessed a drastic change by His presence, His actions and the words spoken by His divine voice... I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith or worship a God inherited from their ancestors.”

While in India, an American theologian named E. Stanley Jones became a close friend of Mahatma Gandhi and spent much time with Gandhi and the Nehru family. After Gandhi's murder Jones wrote a biography of Gandhi, a book which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. told Jones' daughter, Eunice Jones Mathews, that it was this biography that inspired him to “non-violence” in the Civil Rights Movement. It is said that Jones had a strong influence in preventing the spread of communism in India.

The contemporary world is in need of true witnesses and not just noisemakers or orators whose preachings do not reflect their practices. The Bible exhorts all Christians to translate what they hear into what they practice. “Be doers of the Word and not just mere hearers lest you deceive yourselves” (Jas 1:22). There is a popular saying, “actions speak louder than words”. All these imply that it is not just enough to say “I am a Christian”. “By our way of life, people should be able to say: “this is a follower of Christ”. Jesus himself insists that people will be known by their fruits (Mt 7: 15-20). The word Christian means follower of Christ or being like Christ. In other words, a Christian is one whose life is based on the teachings of Christ. With such a definition, any non-Christian who has read the life of Jesus Christ, especially as presented in the Gospels and other biblical references, will expect to see Christians living up to, if not nearer to, such principles, and Gandhi, a non Christian was no exception.

After reading the life of Christ as presented in the Bible and in the writings of some renowned Christian authors, Gandhi admired the Sermon on the Mount (which shaped his whole philosophy of life) and hoped to see Christians live up to its standards. While living with Christians in England, South Africa and India, Gandhi expected to experience qualities like unconditional love, forgiveness, willingness to sacrifice, meekness, etc. To his utmost dismay, Christians in his era never lived up to the standards preached by Christ.

The Christian missionary E. Stanley Jones asked him: “Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is it that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming his follower (Christian)?” The latter’s reply was clear: “*Oh, I don’t reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It is just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ*”. At this juncture, many questions arise: What led Gandhi to make such a statement which is at the same time a call for concern and an eye opener for any contemporary Christian? At this point it is noteworthy to study the criticisms and advice given by Gandhi on Christianity. I propose to evaluate the

importance of this affirmation to our contemporary Christians as well. The intention in the last part of this paragraph is to show that with the current situation of Christians in Africa and especially in Cameroon, the Gandhian affirmation remains a significant interpellation.

By the above mentioned we can see that Gandhi was greatly influenced by Jesus, and practiced His teachings to a great extent. But there were certain constrains regarding his adoption of the faith. His rejection grew out of an experience he had in South Africa. After reading the Bible and the life of Jesus, he was eager to exploring becoming a Christian. He decided thus to attend a church service. When he reached the door, the church elder asked “where do you think you are going, *kaffir*....There is no room for *kaffirs* in this church. Get out of here or I’ll have my assistants throw you down the steps”. This is one who was just from reading the life of Christ as an epitome of love, unity, etc. Gandhi did not hesitate to confront Christendom with the principles of Christ. What is the basis therefore of Gandhi’s hate for the Christians? They are unlike Christ, they do not put into practice their religious principles, they are more westernised. Gandhi does not end in criticisms.

For Gandhi, how we treat other tells the people more about what we believe. A better Christian follows Jesus in words and deeds. It is thus not just enough to distribute tracts or deliver sound sermons. Sometimes, Christians have fallen short of ideals that it fills an onlooker with embarrassment. In essence, Gandhi accepted Christianity but rejected “churchianity” in a very vocal manner. From his childhood, Christian missionaries stood on the corner of his grade school loudly deriding the gods and beliefs of Hinduism. Converts to Christianity were “denationalised”, “Britishised”. Christianity was “beef and brandy” (most Hindus are vegetarians). He was greatly disturbed when he heard Christians put aside the Sermon on the Mount as impractical or a dreamy idealism. He believes that, what is lived as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount. He criticised mostly Christianity as practiced by Europe and the rest of the West. He criticised Christianity’s cultural imperialism. He perceived this phenomenon to be a destroyer of the Indian culture with its aggressive missionary work. His plea was for Christians to become more Christian. For Gandhi, Christianity became disfigured when it went to the West. The frightful outrage that was going on in Europe during his time (*war, colonialism*) showed that “the message of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of peace has been little understood in Europe, and that light upon it may have to be shown from the East.”

Gandhi made a comment on the West that although it professes Christianity, there is no Christianity or Christ in the West or there should have been no war. “I ask my Christian brethren...not to take their Christianity as it is interpreted in the West. There, we know, they fight with one another as never before. After all, Jesus was an Asiatic depicted as wearing the Arabian flowing robe. He was the essence of meekness. I hope that the Christians of India will express in their lives Jesus the crucified, of the Bible, and not as interpreted in the West with her blood-stained fingers. I have no desire to criticize the West. I know and value the many virtues of the West. But I am bound to point out that Jesus of Asia is misrepresented in the West except in individuals.”

It is worth noting that Gandhi influenced and keeps influencing Christians. It is not expected that the contemporary Christian becomes a Hindu like Gandhi before becoming “like Christ”. The ball has already been set rolling by Gandhi’s life and message. If a non Christian can honour and imitate Jesus in this way, what more of those who call themselves, and really are, Christians?

Gandhi’s relevance for the contemporary Christian can be shown from what happened at the Westminster Abbey in London on the 17th of February 1948. Just like John Paul II whose funeral mass saw united together around his remains political and religious leaders whom he had been trying to put together during his lifetime, the message of Gandhi to imitate Christ and to unite was well understood. The cathedral was full and in a festive mood. The rector of the cathedral took up the floor and said “today this service is in memory of Mahatma Gandhi who has just been assassinated. He intoned a hymn and the populace responded. Here is a paraphrased translation from the French version of what he said:

We give thanks to you O lord for the witnessing
Of Mahatma Gandhi to the Truth
Of the Sermon on the Mount
And for his life of service

And for his defence of the poor ...
 And for his action of peace
 And for his hatred of violence
 And for the witnessing which he has given
 That love and sacrifice
 Have a saving power.

In his address on January 1st 2005, the Holy Father exhorted us to abandon violence and embrace nonviolence, in order to build a society based on peace and common good. He puts it thus:

“To attain the good of peace, there must be a clear and conscious acknowledgement that violence is an unacceptable evil and that it never solves problems.... Fostering peace by overcoming evil with good requires careful reflection on the common good and on its social and political implications.”

Vincent Boi Nai a member of AECAWA highlighted the role played by great figures like Gandhi. He attests that: People like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela have taken history in a new direction. They have shown the power of nonviolence. Though they did not achieve their goals 100%, nevertheless, they showed a way that is worth following.

The above discourse can be summed up by the following quote:

"It is ironic, yet inescapably true that the greatest Christian of modern world was a man who never embraced Christianity." [Martin Luther King, Jr.]

END NOTES

M. K. Gandhi, *What Jesus means to me*, 14, in J. O. ODEY, *Racial Oppression in America*, 105.

M. K. Gandhi, "Discussion with a missionary" in *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.65. April 14 1937, 79-82.

M. K. Gandhi, *Harijan* 7-1-1939.

M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 31 December 1931. Quoted in S. K. George in *Gandhiji-his life and work*, 1944. Complete Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. 60, 323. Cf. Sermon of Pastor Mike Powel at University Bible Church titled "What is wrong with Christianity is Christians"

R. Parikh, *Mahatma Gandhi, Christian fundamentalism and politics of conversion*. October 29th 2006, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._Stanley_Jones

M. K. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* Vol. 13 , 6th June 1925, 220

http://www.mkgandhi.org/africanneedsgandhi/gandhi%27s_message_to_christians.htm

M. K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, 17-1-1946, 405.14. *Ibidem*,

<http://www.catholicnews.com/jpii/cardinals/0501855.htm>

E. Song, *The Challenges of Inculturating the Good News within the Church in Cameroon in the Light of Ecclesia in Africa Fifteen Years After*, Bamenda, 2010, 47. , .

<http://mclane65.tripod.com/thoreau.html>

Cf. Sermon of Pastor Mike Powel at University Bible Church titled "What is wrong with Christianity is Christians"

<http://www.pocatelloshops.com>.

Joseph Kenny O.P (ed.) *AECAWA Interreligious Dialogue Accra*, an AECAWA Publication, 2003, 46.