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## Gandhi on Christianity

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## Gandhi on Christianity

Edited by Robert Ellsberg

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991

xviii + 117 pp.

Sometimes Christians have as much—if not more!—to learn from non-Christians about Christianity as we do from Christians. This is part of the legacy that Mohandis K. Gandhi has given us. Along the way, several Christians have acknowledged this truth. Christian prophets and mystics like Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton saw in Gandhi the nonviolent face of Christ. Other Christians have befriended Gandhi, dialogued with him, supported his work towards an independent India, studied scripture, worshipped and prayed with him, as well as lived in his ashrams.

According to Robert Ellsberg, Gandhi challenges contemporary Christians in at least four ways: interreligious dialogue, Asian theology, Christian discipleship, and Christian mission. In Part One, Ellsberg cites excerpts of Gandhi's views on these four challenges, drawing from a wide variety of sources and contexts. Part Two contains Christian responses to Gandhi's challenges.

On interreligious dialogue, Gandhi rejected the stance that one religion—especially Christianity—is superior to all other religions. "My position is that all the great religions are fundamentally equal" (p. 14). Therefore, all faiths are ways to salvation leading us to the same destination, but travelling upon different roads. It is not possible that only one religion is true and all the others false. Thus for Gandhi, Krishna, Mohammed and Zoroaster are just as divine as Jesus. The sum total of all the scriptures of every faith are inspired, but not every word of every scripture. Hence, for Gandhi, there is no need to convert people from one religion to another. Rather, one learns truth from every faith and incorporates that truth into one's own faith.

On Asian theology, Gandhi believed that Jesus was a perfect exemplar of *ahimsa* (nonviolence; love) and *satyagraha* (clinging to Truth; nonviolent resistance). According to Gandhi, the Sermon on the Mount is the pinnacle of Christianity, which he exhorted Hindus to study and practice. Yet it merely complemented and affirmed the great truths of Hinduism.

On Christian discipleship, Gandhi appreciated people like Tolstoy—whose pacifism, solidarity with the poor, and ability to distinguish Jesus' message from the misguided orthodox doctrines and practices of Christianity were exemplary. Gandhi lamented the fact that far too many Christians were unwilling to follow Jesus in the way of the cross, suffering love, and humble servanthood.

On Christian mission, Gandhi was quite outspoken. Most of his comments are critical and negative. Gandhi criticized Western missionaries for their triumphalism, arrogance and feelings of superiority. He adamantly rejected Christian proselytizing because Christian truth is not the only

truth—God reveals truth to humankind in millions of different ways. What Christians really needed was a strong dose of humility and to continue their philanthropic work without converting non-Christians. According to Gandhi, this makes a Hindu a better Hindu; a Muslim a better Muslim; a Christian a better Christian.

Harvard professor, Diana Eck, opens Part Two, "Christian Response", by constructing an academic systematization of Gandhi's thought and life. According to Eck, Gandhi's dictum that all faiths are true and equal is currently instructive for all who live in pluralistic religious societies. Eck sees in Gandhi's ashrams model communities of inclusivity for today's religiously plural world. The ashrams include people from every faith, age, and walk of life.

For Indian Jesuit Ignatius Jesudasan, Gandhi's Hindu faith and practice may be described by employing Karl Rahner's term, "anonymous Christianity". Jesudasan suggests that Christology is either "descriptive", i.e., involving worship and dogma, or "prescriptive", i.e., involving the imitation of Christ "as manifesting the underlying truth of the spiritual unity of all humankind" (p. 92). Gandhi epitomized the latter.

For James W. Douglass, Jesus' voluntary suffering love unites the faithful of every religion. This is one explanation why Gandhi discovered so much meaning and inspiration in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Bob McCahill, a missionary in Bangladesh for many years, was convinced by Gandhi that non-Christians love and value their faith as much as he loves his Christian faith. He was most influenced by Gandhi's teaching and lifestyle of loving service. As a Christian, he attempts to do the same—without the motivation of converting Muslims and Hindus to Christianity.

Part One of this thin tome deserves to be read by a wide audience. Editor Robert Ellsberg has given us a veritable treasure-trove of Gandhian spirituality. Recommended reading for seminarians, professors, pastors and laity.

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### **Preaching In and Out of Season**

Thomas G. Long and Neely Dixon McCarter, Editors  
Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990  
129 pp.

The purpose of the book is to be helpful to preachers by providing background articles for sermons on special occasions.

The contention of the editors is that there are three calendars for the preacher. The first is the lectionary. The other two calendars are those