

## **MAHATMA GANDHI : HINDU EVANGELICAL AND PURITAN ?**

Chandran Devanesen is moved to state that, as a young man, Gandhi had become a "Hindu evangelical and Puritan" ( Hunt 142). This rather startling statement --surprising in that it describes the 'Great Soul' of modern India, and an almost deified Hindu religious leader in seemingly Christian terms ---caught my eye, and occasioned the writing of this article.

In order to unpack Devanesen's short phrase, I had to define for myself what an 'evangelical' was, and what a 'puritan' was. To this end, I consulted the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings, and my various assertions as to what constitutes evangelicalism, evangelism, and puritanism, are from that source.

However odd it may seem to describe the Mahatma as a Puritan, the very word itself rings with Gandhian overtones of both self-purification of the social order in India. It was first applied to those Protestants who sought to further purify the Church in England under Elizabeth I ; and was extended to those "who attempted a greater sobriety of life than was customary " (Wood 507). Both of these aspects of Puritanism describe Gandhi's practises quite well: he sought to purify the Hinduism of his day from untouchability; and as to a puritan 'sobriety of life', he went so far as to condemn even the pleasure gained from eating: the food we eat is to sustain the body, never to satisfy the palate" (Fischer 243).

The "reproving of Drunkards and Swearers" (Wood 507), is a prototypical Puritan program, and this Gandhi did too, as he excoriated "the curse of intoxicating drinks and drugs" (Fischer 196), and called the "Trade in them ... demonstrably sinful" (Fischer 244). In same fashion, "Puritanism cut men off from wasteful

expenditure and worldly pleasure. Forms of indulgence which dissipated both wealth and energy were sternly denounced and repressed. Time and talents were not to be wasted" (Wood 514). Gandhi, I think, was an early master of time management --- he had to be, to accomplish all he did --- as S.K. George says, "There is no man on earth who can give a better account of his minutes and his seconds than Gandhi" (15).

Gandhi's lifelong campaign against untouchability finds a specific echo in Puritan efforts to reform the Church in England from superstitious practices and patronage. Hereditary parish ministry positions, the open selling of advowsons, and the very concept of hierarchical episcopal control of the church, resulted in the Puritans becoming the 'untouchables' of seventeenth-century England -- in many cases excommunicated, and commonly barred from communion in the traditional church. The dead hand of received religion had oppressed the pariahs of India in the same way for centuries --- the Hindu caste system had the backing of religious sanctions that rested on the bedrock of reincarnation, wherein blame was actually placed upon the pariahs themselves, for having performed bad actions in a previous life, thus landing themselves in their present fix. In much the same way, the Puritans had willfully separated themselves from the Church, and become outcast in the society of their time.

The Puritans also stood for education and the life of reason - even for the primacy of reason over emotion --- as seen in the importance attached to the teaching sermon in religious life. And what did Gandhi do for most of his public life, but travel the whole of India giving sermons; he used public platforms to inspire and educate the masses, to carry on his campaigns against Hindu/Muslim sectarianism, untouchability, and for spinning.

Also, compare the Puritan's "Idleness was a sure sign that one's standing in grace was doubtful. No one should be unemployed; even the man of leisure should find some occupation which would be of service to the commonweal" (Wood 514), with Gandhi's "Why should I, who have no need to work for food, spin? ... Because I am eating what does not belong to me. I am living on the spoilation

of my countrymen .... Swaraj has no meaning for the millions, if they do not know how to employ their enforced idleness" (Andrews 263).

Gandhi carried on his sermonizing and his efforts at reform in a true evangelical spirit. He spread the 'good news' of social and religious reform wherever he went in India. In fact, his proselytizing for a free India, for an end to untouchability, and for spinning, coupled with his religious tolerance for people of all faiths, bears a strong resemblance to the platform and the philosophy of the Evangelical Alliance movement.

This Christian group's main principles are "to give expression to the substantial unity existing between Evangelical believers, and to cultivate brotherly love", and to "spread the principles of religious toleration.... disavowing all thought of interfering with the loyalty of members to their respective denominations" (Schaff 601). This is all very Gandhian: he is celebrated for his religious tolerance, and his words to the effect that 'I am a Muslim, a Hindu, a Christian' are a case in point; even the daily prayer services in Gandhi's own ashram normally included hymns, and readings from the Koran, as well as Hindu observances like readings from the Gita.

A case might be made for the influence of this group on Gandhi's thought, during an early period in his life when his religious and spiritual understandings were not yet fully formed. In 1890 Gandhi was in London, and that period corresponded with the height of influence of the Evangelical Alliance. The Congregationalist church was a member, and Gandhi is known to have enthusiastically attended their services under Joseph Parker--Gandhi is quoted as saying "It was his appeal to the thoughts of young men that laid hold of me, and I went again and again" (Hunt 17).

This was a formative period for the young Gandhi, and the evangelical principles of religious tolerance and a duty to spread the gospel would have sunk deeply into his consciousness. They would also have agreed nicely with the religious tolerance of Gandhi's upbringing in Porbandar, but I think that the proselytizing fervor of

evangelical Christianity is something that touched Gandhi here in London for the first time, and that it is a dynamic that influenced the rest of his life and his mission in a very important way.

He was constantly on the receiving end of Christian evangelism, and I think simply in the interest of conversational survival, he would have had to acquire some techniques of argument and challenge, if only in self defence. Remember it was at this period (1894), that the young Gandhi wrote home to India for spiritual advice, including a list of soul-searching questions like:

What is God? Is he the Creator of the Universe? If a claim is put forward that a particular religion is the best, may we not ask the claimant for proof? The Christians hold that the Bible is divinely inspired, and that Christ was an incarnation of God, being his Son. Was He? (Hunt 39)

The confrontational tactics of the evangelists were having an effect. And Gandhi would have noted and remembered the techniques, for use in all the public and private and contexts of his own proselytizing career. As Nehru says of Gandhi's committee work, "Very often his proposals seemed novel to our committee, and it did not approve of them. But almost always he argued his way to their acceptance" (Nehru 15).

The public commitment and the confrontational tactics of Christian evangelism may even be seen echoing in Gandhi's satyagraha campaigns. For the satyagrahi, like the active Christian missionary, puts his own self, his own body out there on the line-- he is his own witness, for love and for truth. "Gandhi's method makes its appeal in the sure confidence that the suffering of the innocent victim will convince the wrong-doer of the enormity of his wickedness, and will work a change in his heart" (George 16). That is the same change of heart that the Christian evangelist seeks to obtain. And the technique is similar: especially in foreign mission fields, the evangelist is placing his innocent self in the path of suffering --- defenceless against harm from the populace --- while he seeks to convince people of the enormity of the sin and ignorance

they labour under without the saving knowledge of Christ. People are delivered from wickedness in both cases, and active selfless intervention is also the technique in both.

I think that the case for Gandhi's evangelistic tendencies, and their probable Christian origins, cannot be too strongly made. Spiritual revival for instance, is characteristic of evangelism and 'Gandhiism' both. Gandhi sought to revive his country's Hinduism, in relation to its treatment of the untouchables and this entailed an examination of the roots of Hindu caste prejudice, and concomitantly the bases of Hinduism itself: is brotherly love a higher value than arid fatalism?; should Hindus oppress and exploit their own fellow men? And this did cause religious revival in India --- temples were opened to the Harijans (Fischer 280), and people were inspired to look upon one another differently, more lovingly.

Gandhi sought also to revive India's pride as a nation. He knew that an India that saw itself as free, proud, and strong, would in fact be worthy of Swaraj. It would have received its self-sufficiency and its capacity for self-rule, and he knew that his vision of the New Jerusalem of Indian society would at least be potentially real: "If India adopted the doctrine of love as an active part of her religion, and introduced it in her politics, Swaraj would descend upon India from heaven" (Fischer 119).

His attempts to revive the village economies of India, through proselytizing for the spinning wheel, are universally known. He thought that this revival movement would save millions of villagers from starvation (Fischer 160), and their humanity from the curse of idleness. He also sought to save the Indian economy as a whole, by staunching at its source the outflow of capital that went from India to England for the purchase of imported cloth.

Gandhi was even aware of the dangers of 'revivalism': in the late nineteenth-century in America, it had become clear that influences that conduced to crowd emotions, to mass hysteria, could actually manufacture religious conversions (Stalker 606). Gandhi was moved to instruct the crowds that came together to hear his messages against those very tendencies: a "pledge must not be

taken with a view to produce an effect on outsiders .... Everyone should fully realize his responsibility, then pledge himself only independently of others, and understand that he himself must be true to his pledge, even unto death, no matter what others do" (Fischer 95). Gandhi wanted no spiritual groupies, who would fall by the wayside in the face of opposition.

That Gandhi thought to 'save' all these multitudinous peoples, economies, and industries, is a direct reflection of Christian evangelical influences on his thought. It is the evangelicals whose very lifeblood is the active outreach among people; and it is from that source that Gandhi, very likely, gained the evangelizing purpose and structure that he filled and energized with his own great personhood throughout his whole life.

Evangelicals promoted their faith through personal testimony, and through corporate action in the world--as did Gandhi. Evangelicals--in both England and America ---led the crusade against the Slave Trade during the nineteenth century. One could draw a direct parallel between that and Gandhi's crusade against untouchability; untouchability is, in fact, a good analogue of America's slave trade, and Gandhi tried to be India's Lincoln, in respect of freeing the untouchables.

Evangelicals are noted for their sensitivity to the Holy Spirit of God, especially the Pentecostals. They are commonly thought to be imbued with the indwelling Spirit, and certainly seek to do His bidding in their lives, to follow His teachings. Gandhi too: "I do not know what you mean by the living Christ ..... But if you mean a spirit guiding me, a presence nearer to me than hands and feet, than the very breath in me, then I do feel such a presence" (George 8)

The evangelical is concerned to convert the unbeliever to a saving knowledge of Christ, and Gandhi was all his life similarly concerned to convert people to a saving knowledge of the place and power of love in human affairs. He engaged with the poorest villager, to convert him towards loving his Muslim brother, and towards self-sufficiency through spinning; and he engaged with the Viceroy of India to convert him to loving the whole of India and



granting its independence. He founded newspapers and magazines wherever he went, in order to propagandize for his ideas, and to convert the masses of the people towards his ideals of ahimsā, and satyāgraha, and Indian independence: "conversion of the opponent is the real intent of satyagraha" (Easwaran 163).

This is another parallel with Evangelical practice, since the Christian Evangelicals are famous for spreading the gospel through publications, as witness the very many Religious Tract societies of the nineteenth century, and the Bible Societies with their endless printings of pamphlets, books, sermons, magazines, and newspapers - all with the avowed purpose of converting the unbeliever. There even arose a new occupation to distribute all these new publications: that of colportage, in which the colporteur went door to door, and village to village, carrying all the latest tracts and sermons. In the same way, and for the same purposes (albeit the evangelism was also political), Gandhi founded newspapers and magazines wherever he went, *Indian Opinion* and *Harijan* being examples, although *Young India* was the most noteworthy and longlasting.

That Gandhi could so far raise himself out of this communal social background, as to stand alone as the leader of a new spiritual and political movement, may owe its *raison d'être* to his longterm intimacy with Christian evangelism too. There is in protestant puritanism an emphasis on the individual as both the final arbiter of his own fate, and as repository of ultimate value. It is for each of us individually that Christ died, and we make individual decisions for Christ, and perhaps most importantly, we each have only one life within which to be ourselves. This is in direct contrast to the communal nature of Indian social and religious life, where in individual is merged into the larger whole---he is a member, or unit of the family, village, caste, or occupation, because "Centuries of close communal life have caused the individual to be merged in the social environment" (Andrews 263).

The Hindu is even in himself a kind of a member of a crowd, since believing in reincarnation, he sees himself as merely one temporary manifestation of his own continuing self--a long line of

past and possible selves. This viewpoint even further vitiates his sense of independent personhood, and makes it even more remarkable that Gandhi should stand so tall and so alone in his missionary efforts on behalf of India and all Indians. His bravely individual stature may be in part a tribute to all those early experiences of lone Christian ministers, up on the pulpit energizing their many parishoners.

It should be remembered that during Gandhi's years of young manhood, Christianity in England and South Africa was undergoing a series of revivals, and that contact with it would have been exciting and inspiring for the young Gandhi, whether he was able to accept some of the basic tenets, or not. As Gandhi himself said of his Christian friends in Pretoria, "I have remained forever indebted to them for the religious quest that they awakened in me" (Devanesen 262).

But the parallelism of individualities is distinct : just as evangelical Christianity demanded a personal experience of Christ, and an individual commitment to leading a Christian life, so too Gandhi demanded of his satyagrahi a personal vision of the truth and love implicit in his method, and an individual commitment to both Hind Swarāj and to personal purity of life.

So having come this far, was Gandhi in fact a kind of Christian missionary in a loincloth? Clearly not. He himself denied that he was a Christian on many occasions (Fischer 41), and indeed, as a born and practicing Hindu, Gandhi found it impossible to embrace Christianity fully, for at least three reasons. One stumbling block was the singular and unique divinity of Christ---even in his early years in London, when his religious understandings were tentative at best, he denied himself membership in the Congregationalist church he attended (Hunt 17), on the basis of this fundamental disagreement with Christian teachings. For the Hindu, Christ is acceptable as one of the divine avatars of the Godhead, but certainly not as the only one.

Similarly, the acceptance of Christ's once and for all sacrifice of Himself--the atonement that redeems us all from our sins, is unacceptable to the thinking Hindu. This is related to the third major



parting of the ways between Hinduism and Christianity, the belief in reincarnation and a concomitant gradual self-cleansing from sin.

For the Christian, man in his fallen earthly state is inescapably sinful--he needs Christ's intercession as the only possible means to redemption, in this one and only life. For the Hindu, on the contrary, perfection and freedom from sin are possible through his own efforts although it may take untold thousands of lifetimes, sin may be overcome, and the oneness of being *atman* and *Brahman* may be realized in the joy of *moksha* in life on earth. The two systems are mutually incompatible--- either you have reincarnation, or you have Christ; and Gandhi's understanding of the differences between the two faiths would have been heightened and illuminated by the many meetings and discussions he had with evangelical Christians of many persuasions over the years.

I think that ultimately, what evangelical puritan Christianity did to Gandhi was, in Devanesen's words, to convert him "into a vigorous Evangelical *Hindu*" (emphasis added) (258). This in itself, although unintended by Gandhi's Christian friends, was a great and glorious accomplishment. It gave to India, and to the world the Gandhiji that we know and love: the *Mahatma*.

The purifying of Gandhi's religious knowledge and practice that occurred in the fire of dialogue with his Christian friends found expression in his great life of renunciation and service; it formed a part of the motive force that has done so much to end untouchability in India, and to give India independence; and it shines as a beacon to all men who value love and truth in life. And perhaps even Gandhiji himself might not object to being called a follower of Christ, were it to be couched in Christ's own terms: "For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Matt. 12:50).

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## NOTES

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## ANNOUNCEMENT

No separate Students' Supplement will be issued with every number of the IPQ hereafter. However contributions are welcome from the Students and they will be included in the October Issue of every year hereafter in the form of a separate section.

- Chief Editor