

## **Gandhi and his Christian friends: legacy of the South African years 1893-1914**

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### *Abstract*

The year 2014 marks the centenary of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's departure from South Africa and his return to India. This article explores the history and historiography of Gandhi's relationships with those he called "my Christian friends" during his years in South Africa (1893-1914). James Hunt's *Gandhi and the British Religions*, published in 1986, is the major work on this topic, but this article seeks to explore aspects downplayed by Hunt and to offer a new synthesis, rather than original research. The article examines the influence of Christian contacts from a range of denominations and traditions on Gandhi's religious and political development, notably with reference to his understanding that religion and political commitment are profoundly interconnected, and specifically with reference to his philosophy of *satyagraha*. The second part of the article reviews Gandhi's influence within the Christian churches, and the controversial political legacies surrounding his relationship with the first ANC President, John Langalibelele Dube, who was a Congregational Church minister. This part of the article will also debate the use of nonviolence as a political strategy by ANC President Albert Luthuli, a Methodist lay preacher whose Christian faith shaped his political beliefs.

### **Introduction**

In his provocative book on Mahatma Gandhi, Joseph Lelyveld describes Gandhi as a "neo-Christian Hindu" (Lelyveld 2011:73), thus highlighting Gandhi's ecumenical spiritual vision and also defining the nature of his relationship with Christianity, which was not tied to the orthodox mainstream, but often linked with marginal and even experimental forms of the Christian faith. Karen Tidrick argues that Gandhi's religious ideas had "no fundamental coherence", and that the only way to understand his views is through a study of early religious encounters (Tidrick 2006:xiii-xiv), while

Judith Brown points out that religious journeys cannot be contained by a straightforward chronological analysis, but are complex processes of pilgrimage and discovery; thus she suggests that it is Gandhi's spiritual search that has enduring influence and appeal, while his political influence has been more transitory (Brown 1989:74).

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) was a key member of the Congress Party that led the struggle for Indian independence, finally achieved in 1947. Born in India, Gandhi trained for law in Britain and, in 1893, took up a legal case in South Africa, where he remained until his permanent return to India in 1914. Here, in the course of his campaigns for Indian rights on the Reef and in Natal, he developed *satyagraha*, his philosophy and strategy of nonviolent resistance, which he later applied in India (Gerhart & Karis 1977:30; Brain 1989:264-5).

This article does not set out to capture the complexity of Gandhi's religious or political thought, particularly Gandhi's deepening awareness of his Hindu heritage and its practical applications, nor does it attempt to trace the conscious and unconscious influences that shaped Gandhi's belief, but to examine the implications of his Christian contacts for Gandhi's spiritual quest, with particular reference to South Africa.

Scholars of Gandhi's religious development discern three decisive and geographically distinct formative stages: the India of his youth; England, where his personal exploration of Hinduism and his exposure to Christian and neo-Christian ideas began; and the crucible of the South African years. Brown notes that when Gandhi left England, he had "no real religious commitment, no vision to inspire his adult life", but that in South Africa he found "his true self" and realised "his vocation" (Brown 1989:26, 30). Lelyveld discerns no clear evidence of Gandhi's political thought before 1893 and argues that Gandhi's South African apprenticeship should be seen as "more than ... an extended footnote to the fully-fledged Mahatma" (Lelyveld 2011:3, xii). Writing decades later of his recognition of Hinduism as his own religious way, Gandhi remarked of his relationships with Christians whom he had met in South Africa in the early 1890s:

Though I took a path my Christian friends had not intended for me, I have remained for ever indebted to them for the religious quest that they awakened in me. I shall always cherish the memory of their contact. The years that followed had more, not less, of such sweet and sacred contacts in store for me (Gandhi 1949:115).

The aim of this article is to focus on the history and historiography of Gandhi's relationships with those he called "my Christian friends", particu-

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larly in South Africa; to examine the influence of Christian contacts on Gandhi's religious and political development; and to examine briefly responses, both Christian and political, to Gandhi today.

Key to understanding Gandhi is the link that he saw between religion and politics. Drawing on the work of Marxist theorists, historians have shown ties between imperial power and the arrogance of European missionaries: Gandhi himself acknowledged that until after the Amritsar massacre in India in 1918, he believed that imperialism was both beneficial and benevolent, and scholars view him as "compellingly loyal to the imperial economy" in South Africa (Stone 1990:723). He recorded the following in his autobiography:

Hardly ever have I known anybody to cherish such loyalty as I did to the British Constitution ... Not that I was unaware of the defects of British rule, but ... In those days I believed that British rule was on the whole beneficial to the ruled.

The colour prejudice that I saw in South Africa was, I thought, quite contrary to British traditions, and I believed that it was only temporary and local ... I learnt the tune of the National Anthem [i.e. 'God Save the Queen' until the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, thereafter 'God save the King'] and joined in the singing whenever it was sung (Gandhi 1949:142-3).

Moreover, although Gandhi often regarded missionaries as limited by cultural ignorance in their preaching of the gospel, he always took the claims of Christ seriously and regarded shortcomings in Christianity as the result of weakness in Christ's followers, rather than a flaw in the faith itself (Chatterjee 1983:43-55).

### **Methodology**

This article is an empirical historical study that draws – necessarily selectively – on the enormous range of Gandhi scholarship, including general biographies, and has been undertaken with particular reference to works related to Southern Africa, with the emphasis particularly on studies that examine his political role, as well as works that focus on his religious development, as his understanding of religion came to be inseparable from his political mission.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hick and Hempel, in their 1989 study, *Gandhi's Significance for Today: The Elusive Legacy*, recorded that there were at that stage 400 biographical studies of Gandhi, mostly uncritical works repeating "ritualised and mythologised versions of familiar incidents"

A key work is James Hunt's *Gandhi and the Nonconformists: Encounters in South Africa* (1986), which is a detailed study of Gandhi's engagement with what Hunt calls "the British religions", which he lists as Theosophy, Judaism, the Ethical Society, the Church of England, Roman Catholicism, and Evangelical Nonconformist Protestantism. Importantly, the book provides a careful record of the various Christian contacts to which Gandhi was exposed, some of which were clearly more influential than others. Hunt focuses particularly on the impact of the South African General Mission and then goes on to argue (unconvincingly, as explained below) that the roots of Gandhi's passive resistance philosophy lie in a particular Protestant Nonconformist resistance campaign in England.

Gandhi's own writings are, of course, significant, with the usual caveats about subjectivity and hindsight. Oral interviews, especially relating to contemporary Christian visitors to the Phoenix settlement site, have been revealing. Exploration of church records, particularly papers of the Anglican Church in Natal and in the massive Anglican archive at the University of the Witwatersrand, has yielded a negative result, and this in itself is significant. Biographical studies of Christians engaged in the struggle for justice in South Africa, including Charles Freer Andrews, Michael Scott and Desmond Tutu, and notably Gandhi's contemporary, John L. Dube (1871-1946), and Chief Albert Luthuli (1898-1967), all of whom shared Gandhi's vision of the integral relationship between religion and politics, have provided not only an additional resource, but sometimes controversial perspectives.

## Results and discussion

### *First encounter: Christian missionaries in India*

Despite growing up in a household where religion was widely discussed, and despite his mother's piety, Gandhi left India to study law in England with what he described as a "meagre knowledge of my own religion" and certainly not a "living faith": what he imbibed from his home experience was a toleration of all faiths, with the exception of Christianity. Chatterjee (1983:41) notes with understanding that Christianity was linked with imperialism and a foreign way of life. There may have been hostility to Christianity from Gandhi's own family, although he ascribes his views to personal observation of aggressive public preaching that dismissed Hinduism as superstition and presented Christian conversion as little more than assumption of Western dress and dietary habits, particularly consumption of

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(1989: 61). This article pays particular attention to Brown (1989), Tidrick (2006) and Lelyveld (2011), but refer to other books and journal articles among the works consulted.

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meat and alcohol. Not surprisingly, he found he could not “endure” Christianity; in fact, he could hardly recognise it as a religion (Gandhi 1949:29).

### *Education in England*

While in London from 1888 to 1891, Gandhi conscientiously addressed his legal studies, but he was also introduced to a wide range of religious teaching and acquired a deeper religious experience. Gandhi’s stereotypes were challenged by friendships with devout Christians who were vegetarians and teetotallers and who did not try to convert him to their faith (Jordens 1998:10-11). One introduced Gandhi to the Bible, and although he found the Old Testament “martial and punitive”, he recorded that the Sermon on the Mount went “straight to my heart”, partly because it called for an active response (Eriksen 1969:151-2). This passage from Matthew’s Gospel remained a lifelong influence, an expression of the truth for Gandhi, irrespective of whether Jesus had lived or not (Chatterjee 1983:41-47). In London, Gandhi explored the offerings of various Christian churches, including a service in Westminster Abbey, and frequently attended the midday services for men held by the famous Congregationalist preacher Joseph Parker in the City Temple (Hunt 1986:17).

Gandhi’s interaction with the Theosophical Society in London, and with its leaders, Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant, who had both spent time in India, was probably more significant than the Christian influences he encountered, because – although Gandhi was not attracted by the occult element and did not join the society – the Theosophists took Hinduism seriously, and this encouraged Gandhi to explore his own religious roots more deeply (Erikson 1969:151).<sup>2</sup>

### *South Africa: encounters with Indian Christians*

Finding it difficult to establish himself as a barrister in India, in 1893 Gandhi accepted an offer of employment from Dada Abdulla, a Muslim merchant in Durban (Guha 2013:63). As Gandhi (1949:89) soon noticed, “the Indians were divided into different groups”. Of the first Indian immigrants to Natal, indentured workers who arrived in 1860, about 86% were Hindu, 12% Muslim and 2% were Christians, but in Natal, Christian missionary work

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<sup>2</sup> For more detail on the impact of theosophy and related organisations such as the Esoteric Christian Union on Gandhi, see Tidrick 2006:11-20, 32-50. Despite the word “Christian” in the title of the latter, it was essentially a theosophical rather than a Christian body and Gandhi wrote that he liked both organisations because “they seemed to support Hinduism” (quoted in Tidrick 2006:45).

raised this proportion to 8% of the working class population (Swan 1985:13). When their articles were complete, some of the indentured returned to India, but a higher proportion remained and established themselves as smallholders and farmers, fishermen, tradesmen, hawkers and traders. The second major group of immigrants, 'passenger' Indians who had paid the cost of travel to Natal themselves, were Muslim and Hindu merchants from Gujarat, many of them wealthy. By the time of Gandhi's arrival, another group was emerging: these were the South African-born children of the indentured, who were often well-educated and fluent in English and who formed an emerging professional class of lawyers, civil servants, teachers and interpreters (Swan 1985:10-19).<sup>3</sup> Because most schools were run by Christian missionaries, about 28% of this class were Christian and had well-established communities by the 1890s (Swan 1985:14; Bhana & Vahed 2005:141). His initial employment over, Gandhi was on the verge of departure from South Africa in 1894, just as Natal was about to gain responsible government which would give an all-white parliament power to legislate for the Indian population, but was asked to lead a campaign for Indian participation in the franchise. Local merchants did not trust colonial-educated Indian lawyers, who were perceived to be "under the thumb of the white clergymen, who in their turn are subject to the Government" (Gandhi 1949:116). The campaign failed in its immediate objective, but ensured that Gandhi remained in South Africa for another twenty years, and he regarded it as worthwhile because "the agitation had infused new life into the community and had brought home to them the conviction that the community was one and indivisible and that it was as much their duty to fight for its political rights as for its trading rights" (Gandhi 1949:118). However, Indian Christians did not shape Gandhi's religious beliefs.

#### *The South African General Mission*

Gandhi arrived in Durban on 23 May 1893, and set off by train to Johannesburg on behalf of his new employer on 31 May. Later that night he was evicted from the first-class compartment of the train, for which he had purchased a ticket, and spent the night at Pietermaritzburg station. His telegram of complaint to the railway authorities indicated a determination to defend his own rights and the roots of a resolution to combat discrimination on a more general scale. The lawyer acting for Dada Abdulla in Pretoria was A.W. Baker, a member of the South African General Mission, which was established in 1889 to preach Christianity to both whites and blacks, and

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<sup>3</sup> For a historical overview of the Indian community in Natal from 1860-1910, see Brain 1989: 249-265 and Guha 2013: 63-67.

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Baker set his sights on conversion of Gandhi to his own faith (Tidrick 2006:29). Ramchandra Guha's recent book, *Gandhi before India*, devotes scarcely a paragraph to this, unlike Tidrick, Lelyveld and, particularly, James Hunt, for whom this is one of the key encounters between Gandhi and the British Nonconformists (Hunt 1986:23-50). Gandhi's autobiography also deals with the contact with Baker and his circle in detail. He was invited into their homes, offered suitable books to read and participated in a short daily prayer meeting, which included a prayer for Gandhi himself, which he quotes as follows: "Lord, show the path to the new brother who has come amongst us. Give him, Lord, the peace that Thou hast given us. May the Lord Jesus who has saved us save him too. We ask all this in the name of Jesus" (Gandhi 1949:101-102). Baker also invited Gandhi to attend the Wellington Convention, an evangelistic revival meeting, which he hoped would persuade Gandhi to convert. Gandhi appreciated that Baker treated him as a brother and that he encountered personal hostility for travelling with an Indian person, and he was touched by the faith he witnessed. Although he told Baker that "nothing could prevent me from embracing Christianity, should I feel the call", adding that "I had no hesitation in giving him this assurance as I had long since taught myself to follow the inner voice", ultimately

it was impossible for me to believe that I could go to heaven or attain salvation only by becoming a Christian. When I frankly said so to some good Christian friends, they were shocked. But there was no help for it (Gandhi 1949:113).

When Gandhi visited India in 1901, his Christian friends in South Africa persuaded him to agree to meet Christians there to "acquaint himself with their condition"; they perhaps hoped that Gandhi would be converted to Christianity by this contact. Gandhi, however, felt misgivings at the tendency of Indian Christians he encountered to avoid Hindus and Muslims and nationalist politics, but eventually he met the Christian Babu Kalicharan Banerji, who was prominent in Congress. Gandhi reported that he "benefitted by the interview", but was clearly dissatisfied at his interlocutor's reluctance to consider the "way of devotion offered by the *Bhagavad Gita*" and by his insistence on surrender to Christ as the only salvation (Gandhi 1949:195-6).

Did Gandhi ever seriously contemplate becoming a Christian? A picture of Christ hung in a prominent position in his Johannesburg law office and he told a confidante that he was "tremendously attracted" to Christianity (Lelyveld 2011:7-8), but a personal saviour and membership of an institutional church did not draw him (Chatterjee 1983:42) and he almost invariably indicated that he had never considered any form of Christian commitment (Lelyveld 2011:8). Hick and Hempel point out that Gandhi

respected all religions, whereas evangelical Christianity regarded other faiths as inferior. Another obstacle was the association of Christianity and empire, and even their suggestion that inculturation might have persuaded Gandhi to convert seems unlikely (Hick & Hempel 1989:155-156). Believing that the heart could be broadened by a study of the teaching of other faiths, Gandhi's spiritual search in South Africa was essentially eclectic (Chatterjee 1983:131), including Hinduism, continued contacts with theosophy, a new interest in the Esoteric Christian Union (Hunt 1986:6-7) and various expressions of Christianity.

### Exploring Christianity

A particular feature of Hunt's argument is that Gandhi's significant contacts with Christianity in South Africa were predominantly with British Nonconformists (Hunt 1986:32), that is, non-Anglicans. The reason for this argument is not altogether clear, nor particularly convincing, and seems unduly narrow.

While Gandhi had no contact with Orthodoxy in South Africa, he was in sympathetic communication with the great Russian novelist, the heterodox Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). By 1912, Swami Shankeranand considered Gandhi more under the influence of Tolstoy than was compatible with any claim to be an "absolute Hindu" (Bhana & Vahed 2005:68). The affinity between the two is not hard to comprehend. Tolstoy's religious quest led him to give up property and live simply, to undertake manual labour and to advocate the cause of the poor and persecuted. Tolstoy's criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church, combined with his non-acceptance of the divinity of Christ, led to his excommunication in 1901, and left him on the margins of Christianity, like many of Gandhi's Christian friends. During his correspondence with Gandhi, Tolstoy's religious views focussed on the Sermon on the Mount, from which he discerned new commandments, including "the suppression of anger, even righteous indignation, and living in peace with all men; the complete exclusion of sex relationships outside marriage ... non-resistance to evil ... unreserved love of one's enemies" (Cross & Livingstone 1978:1384).

In South Africa, while carrying on this correspondence, Gandhi visited a wide range of churches. For a short time, he attended Methodist services:

... The church did not make a favourable impression on me. The sermons seemed to me uninspiring. The congregation did not strike me as being particularly religious. They were not an assembly of devout souls; they appeared rather to be worldly-minded people, going to church for recreation and in

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conformity to custom. Here, at times, I would involuntarily doze ... [and] soon gave up attending (Gandhi 1949).

Gandhi's closest Christian friend in Natal in the early years was probably the Anglican Dr Lancelot Parker Booth, who had been district surgeon for the Natal Indian Immigration Department until 1883, when he offered himself to the Anglican Church for voluntary work as a medical missionary among indentured Indians.<sup>4</sup> Gandhi assisted in the small hospital run by Booth: he felt "strongly inclined to serve as a nurse", but combined medical service with his legal practice by spending two hours in the dispensary every day:

This work brought me some peace. It consisted in ascertaining the patient's complaints, laying the facts before the doctor and dispensing the prescription. It brought me in close touch with suffering Indians, most of them indentured Tamil, Telugu or North India men (Gandhi 1949:179).

Gandhi has been described as "a devout and faithful member of Booth's congregation" (Wrinch-Schulz nd:8), and as Gandhi's concept of nonviolence deepened, he shared with Booth his objections to some of the words of "God Save the Queen", particularly "*scatter her enemies and make them fall; confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks*". The sympathy between the two men is indicated by Booth's agreement that the only appropriate prayer was for justice, and so, in Gandhi's words, "composed a new anthem for his congregation", although probably an adaptation of the original rather than entirely new words. Gandhi still retained his faith in the British Empire, and to persuade colonial authorities of the loyalty of Natal's Indian population to the imperial ideal, Gandhi recruited an Indian ambulance corps, which included many Christian Indians, for service in the 1899-1902 South African War. According to Gandhi, "my personal sympathies were all with the Boers", but "my loyalty to the British rule drove me to participation with the British in that war" (Gandhi 1949:180). The colonial authorities were not keen, but through Booth, Gandhi met the Bishop of Natal, who was "delighted with my proposal and promised to help in getting our services accepted" (Gandhi 1949:180). Gandhi also saw the formation of the Indian

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<sup>4</sup> Lancelot Parker Booth (1850-1925) studied medicine at Edinburgh University and came to Natal as a medical officer with the Indian Immigration Department. He resigned in 1883 and offered himself to the Anglican Church as a medical missionary among the Indian population, and was ordained as a priest in 1885. Booth opened a dispensary in 1883. In 1900 he left Durban to become Dean of Umtata and in 1912, went to Cape Town. Aged 64 when the First World War broke out, he served overseas as chaplain with the South African Native Labour Contingent (Govinden 2002:31-39, 111-2).

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ambulance corps as an opportunity to break down barriers within the Indian community:

I got into closer touch with the indentured Indians. There came a greater awakening amongst them, and the feeling that Hindus, Musalmans, Christians, Tamilians, Gujaratis and Sindhis were all Indians and children of the same motherland took deep root amongst them (Gandhi 1949:180).

Booth trained the corps and served with them in the field. When he left Durban in 1900, he was presented with a memorial recognising his work for the poor among the Indian community, with Gandhi among the 837 signatories (Govinden 2002:39).

Gandhi's encounters with Roman Catholics were not extensive, but he understood the catholic use of devotional statues in prayer (Hunt 1986:16), which was anathema to Anglicans and other protestant groups. During his visit to the monastery at Mariannhill near Pinetown in the mid-1890s, Gandhi was struck by the combination of stillness and commitment to manual work, which may have influenced him when he was establishing the Phoenix community and Tolstoy farm, although he was chiefly influenced by the writings of Tolstoy and Ruskin (Hunt 1986:16; Brain 1989:264; Guha 2013:87).

#### **John Langalibele Dube at Ohlange and Gandhi at the Phoenix settlement**

After his ordination in the Congregational Church, John Dube (1871-1946) established the Ohlange Institute in Natal, along the lines of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee. In 1903 he started *Ilanga*, the first African newspaper in Natal, and was elected as first president of the ANC in 1912 (Gerhart & Karis 1977:24-5). In 1904 Gandhi established the Phoenix settlement on a farm near Ohlange (Hughes 2011:109). In more recent times, when racial reconciliation was being sought in post-apartheid South Africa, Jacob Zuma made a speech referring to the solidarity between Gandhi and John Langalibelele Dube, "between Indians and Africans that came into being at Inanda". Of this supposed sympathy, Lelyveld remarks: "Sanctification of their imagined alliance rests on little more than the political alliance of the moment and a wispy oral tradition", an oral tradition resting partly on the friendship and neighbourliness recalled by Dube's daughter, who was born in 1930, sixteen years after Gandhi left South Africa (Lelyveld 2011:65). Heather Hughes, in her recent biography of Dube, *First President*, displays similar historical caution (2011:107). Lelyveld points out that Gandhi was sensitive to use of the pejorative "coolie" to refer to people of

Indian origin, but was not sensitised to the offensive connotations of the words used in colonial society to refer to Africans. There are also indications that in his early years in South Africa, he suggested that the elite among the Indian population receive particular consideration (Stone 1996:728). Gandhi objected to sharing prison cells with Africans, and expressed views on the importance of racial purity consonant with European views on the subject, also implying that Africans were on a level with untouchables in the caste system (Lelyveld 2011:53-58). Stone argues that Gandhi's reputation as mahatma, or great soul, developed within "a hagiographical discursive formation which privileges the ethical and spiritual genius ... while systematically censoring and suppressing those aspects ... which threaten that desired artefact" (Stone 1996:737), and insists that throughout his years in South Africa, Gandhi "reproduced and perpetuated the racialism embedded in the discourses of his oppressors while suppressing his own collusion with hegemonic power" (Stone 1996:726).

Other scholars, Swan and Lelyveld among them, have suggested that after 1906, Gandhi's views began to shift from an emphasis on the rights of 'passenger' Indians towards a broader recognition of human rights (Stone 1996:731; Lelyveld 2011:59). Hughes suggests that the political interests of Dube and Gandhi required different trajectories, which can be understood in the context of their time, pointing out that while Gandhi "might object to social contact, he also spoke out against what he saw as the demeaning treatment of Africans" (Hughes 2011:110). There is no suggestion that faith was a component of any encounter between them. Gandhi and Dube were introduced by the Natal politician Marshall Campbell in 1905 (Hughes 2011:111), after which Gandhi acknowledged the important leadership of Dube in *Indian Opinion*.<sup>5</sup> There were major conflicts of interest between Indians and Africans, which were articulated in Dube's newspaper, *Ilanga*, but continued publication of the paper rested on the support of Indian backers and advertisers, and although contacts with Ohlange improved when Gandhi's son Manilal was at Phoenix, it was some years before the two struggles "transcended their founding limitations and merged into a powerful and insistent movement for freedom" (Hughes 2011:111).

Scholars differ about the impact on Gandhi of the 1906 Bambatha uprising against the poll tax levied by the Natal government on all male Africans.<sup>6</sup> Recognising the precarious political position of Indians in Natal, Gandhi once again organised an Indian ambulance corps: according to Guha, Gandhi was satisfied with the cordiality of white attitudes towards the corps

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<sup>5</sup> They probably met again in 1912 when the Indian nationalist leader Gopal Gokhale came from India to investigate the circumstances of Indians in South Africa and visited Ohlange, as Gandhi accompanied him throughout the visit (Hughes 2011:172).

<sup>6</sup> See Guy 2005:15-27.

and hoped that prejudice against Indians might eventually fade completely (Guha 2013:194). Lelyveld acknowledges that Gandhi had an ulterior political motive in forming the ambulance corps, but argues that he was profoundly shocked by British brutality and the suffering of Zulu villagers who were flogged into submission and whose wounds were treated by the Indian medics (Lelyveld 2011:69). Lelyveld quotes Gandhi as saying “my heart was with the Zulus” (Lelyveld 2011:70) and argues that the horror he witnessed and remorse at his own decision to side with the whites led to a shift in his outlook, including a vow of celibacy and a move away from the strategies of letter writing, petitions and action through the court authorities towards nonviolence and civil disobedience. At the same time, Lelyveld acknowledges that Gandhi’s changed perspectives did not lead to a better understanding of the circumstances of Africans, nor did he envisage closer co-operation between the two communities (Lelyveld 2011:70). Nevertheless, there was a shift in Gandhi’s activities after 1908, as he began to engage in direct political action and to extend his concerns and his praxis to include members of the working class, culminating in the 1913 *satyagraha* campaign directed against the £3 poll tax imposed on former indentured workers, which included Indians of all castes, classes, languages and places of origin, in the interests of the poorest members of the community, and involved strikes and a march from Natal into the Transvaal (Guha 2013:536). Although in South Africa the Indians were a subordinate minority, Gandhi was developing the strategy for his mass campaigns in India.

Hunt suggests that *satyagraha* had its origins in a passive resistance campaign organised by British Nonconformists against the imposition of the Education Act in England, which forced all children in state schools to accept the religious teaching of the established Church of England. Nonconformists chose to go to jail rather than submit to this policy, and Hunt argues that Gandhi drew his ideas from Nonconformist supporters, such as the Baptist Joseph Doke and others whom he met in Johannesburg (Hunt 1986; Guha 2013:262). According to B.R. Nanda’s biography, Gandhi himself acknowledged the Christian influence on *satyagraha*:

It was the New Testament which really awakened me to the rightness and value of Passive Resistance. When I read in the ‘Sermon on the Mount, such passages as ‘resist not him that is evil, but whatsoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek turn to him the other also’ and ‘love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you ...’ I was simply overjoyed and found my own opinion confirmed where I least expected it. The *Bhagavad Gita* deepened the impression and Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You* gave it permanent form (Nanda 1958:96).

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Guha points out that Gandhi himself never referred directly to the British Nonconformist campaign as his inspiration for *satyagraha*, although he took up the term “passive resistance” (Guha 2013:208). It seems possible that the connection Hunt makes between the two actually had its origin in the speech of a magistrate in Pretoria who assumed that Gandhi, appearing before him on charges of refusing to leave the Transvaal, had copied the English passive resisters (Guha 2013:261), and that, as Guha suggests, the Nonconformist ministers chose to support Gandhi because he had already adopted strategies with which, through their English colleagues, they were already familiar (Guha 2013:263). Guha argues that Gandhi’s development of *satyagraha* had its roots in the Indian practice of *hartal*, which meant refusal to recognise the structures of the state, and that he sought an alternative and indigenous term to describe “passive resistance” as he understood it, from a very early date (Guha 2013:262). When Gandhi left South Africa in 1914, Prime Minister Jan Smuts wrote: “The saint has left our shores – I sincerely hope for ever” (quoted in Guha 2013:529), an indication of the extent to which Gandhi had succeeded in finding a political expression for his religious commitment.

**Charles Freer Andrews**

Gandhi met his most significant Anglican friend, Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940), in Durban harbour on 2 January 1914, just weeks before he left South Africa for the last time. Charlie Andrews, a member of the Oxbridge elite that produced the colonial civil service, went to India as a missionary in 1904. The Anglican Church in India had been founded under the Charter Act of 1813, and in Andrews’s view, the church existed to “sanctify the spirit of imperialism” (O’Connor 2009:111). He belonged to the celibate Cambridge Brotherhood, whose commitment to “respectful engagement” with the religious traditions in India drew Andrews, as it meant separation from what he called “imperial Christianity” (O’Connor 2009:113). Deep awareness of the racism that pervaded imperial rule led Andrews to support the struggle for Indian independence, and he offered his services to Congress in this cause nearly a decade before he met Gandhi (O’Connor 2009:112). News of Gandhi’s 1913 *satyagraha* campaign in South Africa seemed to demand an immediate response from him, and of Gandhi he wrote:

I felt instinctively that there had come into the world not only a new religious personality of the highest order, moving the hearts of men and women to incredible sacrifice, but also a new religious truth, which yet was not new, but old as the stars and the everlasting hills (quoted in O’Connor 2009:115).

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He saw Gandhi as “presenting to the world almost literally the ideal of the Sermon on the Mount” (O’Connor 2009:117). Using his membership of the ruling class as leverage, Andrews asked the senior Anglican bishop in India to point out to the Archbishop of Cape Town that oppression of Indians in South Africa undermined and threatened the position of Christianity in India, but opposition from a minority of bishops blocked this appeal. Gokhale, then president of the Congress Party, asked Andrews to go to Natal. At the time, Andrews was profoundly questioning his own religious position and eventually decided to give up his formal missionary position:

The wrappings of mere ecclesiasticalism and conventional Christianity are falling off, one by one, and I am coming nearer to Christ himself than ever. And this has come about by me drawing nearer to Hindu India in all its ideals. I long to be set free from all the conventionalities of my present lot – to be able to follow with absolute freedom where Truth leads.

Andrews’s opposition to institutional Christianity as a prop of white racism was confirmed in Durban when he was invited by the Revd FSK. Gregson to preach in his church, which Andrews called the “cathedral”, but which was probably St Thomas’s on the Berea, set in the midst of the homes of the affluent white colonial elite, and when Gandhi came to hear him preach, he was excluded from the church (Tinkler 1979:88).<sup>7</sup>

Hugh Tinkler, Andrews’s biographer, has argued that Andrews served Gandhi best in South Africa (Tinkler 1979:300), whereas James Hunt seems to underestimate the importance and influence of this friendship (Hunt 1986:12-13). Gandhi immediately accepted Andrews as his adviser in negotiations with Smuts, and at various critical points in subsequent years, such as in 1919 and 1925, when Andrews visited South Africa on Gandhi’s behalf: in 1919, Gandhi told a reluctant Andrews that the South African work was his “speciality” and that he “may not neglect it”; while in 1925, Gandhi wrote: “I expect a great deal from Mr Andrews’ presence in South Africa”, and he was not disappointed, for on that occasion Andrews was “almost indispensable” (Tinkler 1979:218). Andrews was closely identified with Gandhi, for Cosmo Gordon Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury (1928 to 1942), remarked that Gandhi was a “perverse and dangerous mixture of the mystic, the fanatic and the anarchist”, while Andrews “seemed to me as much in the clouds and as little possessed of political sense as his master” (Tinkler

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<sup>7</sup> Francis Stillwell Knight Gregson, graduate of Brasenose College, Oxford, was ordained as a priest in the Church of England and served in Gateshead and Leeds before coming to Natal. He was appointed as Rector of St Thomas’s in Durban in 1893 (*South African Provincial Church Directory* 1907:228).

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1979:244-5). Andrews eventually recovered his Christian faith and resumed his ministry as an Anglican priest, which delighted Gandhi (O'Connor 2009:119), illustrating Gandhi's acceptance that there was no single true faith. Andrews was more than a political intermediary or an ecumenical representative; he was a fellow seeker. As Gandhi said: "When we met in South Africa, we simply met as brothers and remained as such to the end" (Tinkler 1979:116).

This brief survey of various Christian interactions with Gandhi in South Africa is not intended to establish the ascendancy of one Christian body over another in terms of their influence on Gandhi, but to illustrate the many paths to God that he explored. As Gandhi's Baptist friend, Joseph Doke, remarked in his hagiographical biography of Gandhi:

I question whether any system of religion can absolutely hold him. His views are too closely allied to Christianity to be entirely Hindu; and too deeply saturated with Hinduism to be called Christian while his sympathies are so wide and catholic that one would imagine that he has reached a point where the formulae of sects are meaningless (quoted in Chatterjee 1983:50).

On the whole, Gandhi's religious faith required more political action than sat comfortably with most of the Christian bodies and heterodox organisations such as the Esoteric Christian Union, which influenced him (Tidrick 2006:50). His main friendships were not with mainstream leaders, but with those like Charles Freer Andrews, who found themselves on the margins.

### **Gandhi's legacy in South Africa**

There is evidence of Christianity, in the various forms in which he encountered it, shaping Gandhi's views (Hunt 1986:74), but little evidence of Gandhi's ideas having any impact on the mainline churches in South Africa today. There are cases where fundamentalist Christians fulminate against state money expended on the preservation of the Phoenix settlement as a heritage centre, a position based on both racial and religious prejudice.<sup>8</sup>

Gandhian philosophy has had an impact on individual Christian lives, including the life of Michael Scott, who campaigned tirelessly on behalf of the African people of Namibia when it fell under the South African mandate (Gerhart & Karis 1977:136-7). As a young priest in India, Scott had encountered the Anglican hierarchy's attitude to colonial oppression, which

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with S. Zietsman, 17 July 2012, Durban.

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was largely a product of class identification between Anglican clergy and the colonial population. Michael Scott never met Gandhi, but was close to Charlie Andrews and learnt from him of Gandhi's philosophy and strategy of nonviolence. In 1946 Scott left his Johannesburg pastoral charge to join the *satyagraha* campaign in Durban: the philosophy was "entirely congenial" to him, reflecting his Christian belief that evil could be overcome by love. The Bishop of Johannesburg, outraged at Scott's absence without leave and involvement in what the bishop regarded as lawless political work, dismissed him from the diocese. Scott, on the other hand, was convinced that passive resistance, with its message of self-sacrifice, reflected the message of the gospel and was the path for the whole church. However, as the title of Scott's biography indicates, his was "a lonely struggle" against the prevailing opinion that religion should not be dragged into politics (Yates & Chester 2006).

Desmond Tutu, perhaps South African's most prominent Christian, makes it clear that, unlike Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Tutu – the "rabble rouser for peace" – did not reject the use of force in principle: the complexity of the context had also to be considered, and this suggests some ambivalence towards Gandhi's legacy. As Tutu writes in a foreword to *Guns and Gandhi in Africa*:

When some of us, in the dark days of apartheid, proclaimed our belief that all violence was evil but not equal – that some violence was born of a horrible choice between continued oppression or a violent overthrow of the oppressive regime – there was much misunderstanding about that position. Were we adherents of Gandhi, whose notions of soul force ... were based on some concepts he learned in South Africa? Were we apologists for the guerrillas, who were of course labelled terrorists by the real terrorists of the world: those who promote injustice and structural violence and the militarism and repression that are necessary to maintaining it? (Sutherland & Meyer 2000:xii)

There is an interesting anecdote related to Gandhi's time in South Africa: Before the first democratic elections in 1994, Tutu was engaged in a surely Gandhian endeavour to persuade all parties to participate. While in Pietermaritzburg for the consecration of a new bishop and for the unveiling of Gandhi's statue, at the church service, Tutu was able to persuade Mangosuthu Buthelezi to meet Nelson Mandela for talks. At the unveiling of Gandhi's statue outside the station, at Tutu's request, Nelson Mandela also agreed to the meeting. No doubt the agreement was based on careful political

calculation, but the event of the unveiling of the statue of Gandhi provides a symbolically satisfying context (Allen 2006:335).

### **Gandhi's political legacy in South Africa**

Apart from the ahistorical and propagandist effort to link Dube and Gandhi referred to above, there is little sign that Gandhi's views have significantly shaped the politics of South Africa's post-apartheid leaders (Lelyveld 2011:75).

Nelson Mandela records that the model for 1950s mass action in South Africa was Gandhi's 1913 nonviolence campaign (Mandela 1994:98; Couper 2008:113), but after this, ANC leaders set greater store by Gandhi's struggle for Indian independence and expressions of solidarity from the subcontinent, than by following Gandhi's model in South Africa, where his strategies had been developed (Mandela 1994:107,119,146-7).

Scott Couper's biographical study of Albert Luthuli, which specifically examines Luthuli's stance on violence as a liberation strategy for South Africa, has led to fierce exchanges about Luthuli's position on the ANC's adoption of armed struggle in 1961, and although Gandhi is not the specific focus, his views remain a factor in current discourse through this debate. Couper quotes Luthuli's 1948 address to the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Society at Howard University, emphasising Luthuli's affirmation of the "dignity of man and the efficacy of non-violence as an instrument of struggle in seeking freedom for oppressed people" (Couper 2008:105). Luthuli also suggested on this occasion in 1948 that "no doubt [Gandhi's] efforts for his people inspired Dr Dube and others to concern themselves with seeking human rights for their people" (Couper 2008:105). There is no evidence that Dube was inspired by Gandhi in the first instance at all, and it seems possible at least that Luthuli was, to a certain extent, tailoring his speech to the audience and occasion, so that both Dube's supposed debt to Gandhi and even Luthuli's statement about nonviolence can be seen as a rhetorical device rather than an unchanging position. For Couper, however, the position taken up by Luthuli in 1948 remained a fixed mark in Luthuli's opposition to the use of violence when ANC leaders began to put the case for armed struggle. In Couper's analysis, the speech "establishes that Gandhi substantively influenced Luthuli" and he goes on to assert that "Luthuli admired and emulated Gandhi's utilisation of strict non-violence methods" (Couper 2008:176), even developing it further in "The Road to Freedom is via the Cross" (Gerhart and Karis 1977:61), Luthuli's 1952 statement on Christian commitment and nonviolence as the way to change in South Africa. The debate has been fierce and has included a 1969 article in *Sechaba*, which sets aside Gandhi's religious views to show that his political activities could be

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used to justify violence, in complete contradiction to Gandhi's insistence on the integration of religion and politics.<sup>9</sup> Couper's perspective is that Luthuli was unable to support the armed struggle when this policy was adopted by the ANC, whereas the ANC position is that Luthuli was part of the majority decision in spite of his stance that "non-violence was an inviolate principle, not a tactic to be changed as conditions warranted" (Mandela 1994:260-1).

### Conclusion

Has Gandhi any relevance for South Africa today? Undoubtedly, his thought and practice has a major influence in Hindu and interfaith communities. There is no reason to doubt that Gandhi's Christian contacts in South Africa contributed to his religious formation, and that the strategies he tested in South Africa laid foundations for the struggle for Indian independence, but as this article shows, during his South African years, Gandhi, although an opponent of imperialism, was no prophet of non-racialism. Should we simply dismiss his South African years and take note of his campaigns against untouchability in India and the solidarity of the Indian Congress Party with South Africa's black majority? Vinay Lal argues that Gandhi's important legacy was an ability to live with ambiguity. He also suggests that the importance of Gandhi's life lies beyond specific historical events such as those traced here, in openness to possibilities (Lal 2008:62). Lelyveld points out that "our various Gandhis tend to be replicas fenced off from our surroundings and his times", that we tend to create images of Gandhi in order to control him, but that the essence of Gandhi's life was to demand a response (Lelyveld 2011: xiv-xv). This is an important insight into the value of our study of the past as well as its limitations. With regard to Gandhi's particular concern for integration of religion and politics, it is also worth remembering his insistence that independent India should be a secular state: not only did British imperialism teach him the dangers of faith allied to government, but his life, for all its limitations, is a reminder of the calling for people of faith to identify with the world's poor and to speak truth to power.

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<sup>9</sup> For his analysis of the article in *Sechaba* 5 May 1969, see Couper 2008:177-8.

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