

# LEAD, KINDLY LIGHT

*Gandhi on Christianity*

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## PREFACE TO THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

In 2019, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Gandhi's birth, an Indian publisher expressed interest in issuing a South Asian edition of *Gandhi on Christianity*, a book I first published in 1991. At the suggestion of Mohan Trivedi, the guiding hand behind this project, I agreed to add a new Appendix by William Emilsen, examining the influence on Gandhi of the famous hymn by (now St.) John Henry Newman, "Lead, Kindly Light." That inspired the new title for this edition. Though I wondered if Newman's hymn would mean much to Indians, Mohan told me that he, as a child growing up on a Gandhian ashram, had sung this hymn daily, and that it was well known in Hindi, Gujarati, and other translations.

In the Preface to the South Asian edition, I described in rather personal terms the background that originally inspired this volume—the culmination of a journey that began in 1969, with the centenary of Gandhi's birth. It was thrilling to me, fifty years later, that my own book should travel back to the land of Gandhi's birth; more thrilling still, that I was invited to India to celebrate its publication.

Over a period of two weeks, I visited numerous sites and institutions associated with Gandhi's life and his ongoing legacy. In preparing to speak on a number of panels, I had wondered whether this book—originally intended, in my mind, for Christian readers—would be of special interest to an Indian audience. I quickly discovered that Gandhi's writings on Christianity are extremely relevant to the present situation in India. At a time of resurgent Hindu nationalist ideology (propagated by the political heirs of Gandhi's assassins), the memory of Gandhi's commitment to interreligious dialogue and tolerance posed a radical and immediate challenge. In that light, the message underlying these writings transcended any specialized focus on Christianity. The message was clear to my audiences.

Now I am writing in yet another new context, that of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hundreds of millions of people around the globe, whether in the U.S.A, Europe, or India, are sharing a common situation of social and economic shut-down, isolation, and anxiety—all against the backdrop of pervasive suffering and death. The virus is no respecter of borders or boundaries, nor of distinctions based on class, race, or religious identity (though as always, it is the poor and marginalized who are especially vulnerable). Will this inspire a new spirit of global solidarity? Might it help us recover the bonds of our common humanity—much stronger than the differences that divide us? Gandhi staked his life on that possibility.

In this light, Newman’s hymn itself takes on new meaning for today: “Lead Kindly Light, amidst the encircling gloom / Lead Thou me on! / . . . Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see / The distant scene; one step enough for me.”

Robert Ellsberg  
August 2020

PREFACE TO THE  
SOUTH ASIAN EDITION

*Without Gandhi I Would Not  
Be a Christian*

Life holds many surprises. The publication of this South Asian edition of *Gandhi on Christianity* comes exactly fifty years after my first encounter with Gandhi's writings in October 1969. I was 13. I remember that date not only because it marked the centenary of Gandhi's birth in 1869, but because it was associated with a great turning point in my personal and family history.

My father, Daniel Ellsberg, was a defense analyst for the U.S. government, who had returned from two years in Vietnam as an ardent opponent of the war. That October, by chance, he attended a conference of the War Resisters International, where he met young men who were going to jail for their opposition to the war, as well as actual veterans of the Indian struggle for Independence. His introduction to Gandhi's writings, which he shared with me, and the example of these nonviolent resisters, made a tremendous impact. He asked himself, "What might I do to help end this war if I were willing to go to prison?" The answer came with his decision to copy a Top Secret history of the Vietnam War, later known as the Pentagon Papers, and to release it to the press. As a result, he was indeed arrested in 1971 and faced 115 years in prison on a variety of charges. (The charges were ultimately dismissed as a consequence of gross illegal misconduct by the government.) Nevertheless, this act of nonviolent "truth-telling" had a significant impact on ending the Vietnam War.

Meanwhile, the copies of Gandhi's writings he had shared with me were planting their own seeds. Though I had been raised as a Christian, I was becoming increasingly disenchanted with Christianity, at least as I had experienced it. Jesus seemed to have propounded a radical teaching of love, extended even to the love of one's enemies, and for this message he had been willing to lay down his life. But the Christianity I experienced seemed to have more to do with going to church on Sundays and believing various creedal doctrines. Gandhi, with his "experiments in Truth," seemed to have harnessed the true spirit of Jesus and discovered a force that could change the world.

Over the next several years I read as much as I could about Gandhi, as well as books by other students of his work. I also learned that there were in fact many Christians who had been inspired by Gandhi to recover the nonviolent message of Jesus—including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Thomas Merton, and Lanza del Vasto. Through such figures, I began to take a fresh look at my own Christian tradition.

In 1975 I read about Jayaprakash Narayan and his leadership of a movement for equality and social justice in India. This movement seemed to have taken up the unfinished work of the Gandhian revolution. I resolved to leave college and travel to India to study and observe this movement firsthand. But before I could leave, a State of Emergency was declared in June of that year. Narayan, as well as my sponsors from the Gandhi Peace Foundation, were all jailed and I wasn't able to obtain a visa for travel to India. Out of college, I decided instead to visit a number of communities inspired by Gandhian principles. The first of these was the Catholic Worker in New York City.

The Catholic Worker was founded in 1933 by Dorothy Day, a radical activist and journalist who had converted to Catholicism in the 1920s. For some years she had sought a way to combine her faith with her commitment to the poor and social justice. In 1933 she launched a new movement that combined voluntary poverty, service among the poor, and commitment to nonviolent social change. In her "house of hospitality" in New York City, she and her followers practiced the "works of mercy," feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless, while, in her newspaper, she challenged the social structures responsible for so much poverty and social injustice. Day's practice was based on Jesus' precept from the gospel: "I was hungry and you fed me, homeless and you sheltered me. . . . Insofar as you did this to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did this to me."

Day took this effort to see Christ in one's neighbors to its radical conclusion—the conviction that we must not kill our neighbors. She

maintained a commitment to nonviolence through every war: World War II, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. She was repeatedly arrested for acts of civil disobedience, including her refusal in the 1950s to take shelter during compulsory “civil defense” drills in New York City (which she believed were rehearsals for Doomsday). Day’s commitment to nonviolence put her in a very small minority within the Catholic Church, though her witness ultimately had a very deep influence. Recently she has been proposed as a Catholic saint, and Pope Francis, in visiting the United States in 2015, spoke of her, along with Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr., among the “great Americans” who show a new way of “seeing and interpreting reality.”

I arrived at the *Catholic Worker* in the fall of 1975 when I was 19. Learning about my background and interests, Day asked me to write an article for her newspaper about Gandhian philosophy. I chose to write about Gandhi’s approach to politics, particularly the broad meaning that he attached to *Swaraj*, or Self-Rule, and his understanding of *Sarvodaya*—the welfare of all. These principles stood in contrast to the typical political focus on merely achieving power. This led to a second, longer article, on Gandhian principles of economics. In that article I focused on Gandhi’s concept of *Swadeshi*, or self-reliance, the role of the spinning-wheel as an instrument of resistance, his commitment to decentralism, the dignity of labor, and the moral ends of economic development. Pleased with these articles, Day asked me to become the managing editor of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper. Although I had intended my visit to the *Catholic Worker* to last only a few months, I ended up remaining for five years—as it turned out, the last five years of Dorothy Day’s life before her death in 1980. By that time I had definitely embraced my Christian roots. In fact, I had become a Catholic. Nevertheless, I was pleased when Day once introduced me to a visitor and said, “He became a Christian by reading Gandhi.” What she said was true.

My path led me back to college and then to Latin America, where I made a further discovery—this time, of “liberation theology,” a new movement in the Latin American church, which read the Bible from the perspective of the poor, and in this light entered into the struggle for social justice. Christians in Latin America—including priests, sisters, lay people, and even bishops—were courageously challenging the structures of injustice. As a result, many faced prison, torture, and even death. This experience inspired me to return to the United States to pursue theological studies. Eventually, in 1987, that path led me to Orbis Books, the principal English publisher of liberation theology, and other works

from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. I have served as editor-in-chief and publisher at Orbis ever since.

But I never ceased to remember my debt to Gandhi. One of the first books I personally edited was the present volume, *Gandhi on Christianity*, originally published in 1991. It was largely drawn from other Indian publications I had collected and read over the course of many years.

Originally, it was Gandhi's teachings on nonviolence that had attracted me. This had helped me see and appreciate the teachings of Jesus in a new light. But in the meantime, I had become interested in different aspects of Gandhi's reflections on Christianity. This guided me in the organization of these writings, as well as in the selection of several accompanying commentaries.

First of all there was the question that originally caught my interest: what Gandhi's teachings on nonviolence, and his appreciation of Jesus as a teacher and practitioner of nonviolence, might mean for Christians and their own practice of faith. As a teenager I had read James Douglass's *The Nonviolent Cross*, an early appreciation of Gandhi by a Christian theologian and peace activist. I decided to include a selection from his book. (Later, at Orbis, I was proud to publish several books by Douglass, including his important work on Gandhi's assassination, *Gandhi and the Unspeakable*.)

But I also wanted to explore the implications of Gandhi's teachings for other aspects of Christian thought and practice. There was, for instance, the question of Gandhi's wider contribution to the cause of interreligious dialogue. To address this topic, I turned to one of my former professors, Diana Eck, an expert on Indian religion, as well as a deeply experienced practitioner of interreligious dialogue. Then there was the question of Gandhi's particular challenge for non-Western, particularly Asian Christians. How to overcome the historical alliance between Christianity and Western culture? Here I turned to an Indian Jesuit, Ignatius Jesudasan, the author of an Orbis book, *A Gandhian Theology of Liberation*.

Finally, there was Gandhi's challenge to the Christian missionary enterprise. This particular question had a deep personal relevance for Orbis, since we are the publishing arm of Maryknoll, the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America. Here, I found the perfect contributor, a Maryknoll priest named Bob McCahill, who has consciously tried to live out a Gandhian model of mission in his work in Bangladesh. Gandhi spoke of the missionary strategy of the rose, which foregoes any outward proselytism but simply appeals to others through its fragrance. For over forty years, McCahill has followed that method, living in a series of small towns or villages, sharing the poverty of his Muslim neighbors, and serving people who are sick. At first his neighbors are suspicious.

Why is he doing this? He explains that he is simply following the way of his Brother Jesus, showing mercy. If his example encourages his neighbors to be better Muslims, he says, he is happy. By the time he is welcomed and accepted, he is ready to move to a new village.

For this South Asian edition, the publisher has suggested a new title: *Lead, Kindly Light: Gandhi on Christianity*. The title alludes to one of Gandhi's favorite hymns by the nineteenth-century English theologian, John Henry Newman. He particularly cherished the opening lines:

*Lead, Kindly Light, amidst 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.*

These lines spoke deeply to his own experiments with Truth, and his creative engagement with Christianity. In this light, I am happy that this edition includes, as an appendix, the fine essay by Dr. William Emilsen that traces Gandhi's relationship with Newman's hymn.

Perhaps there are still other themes suggested by Gandhi's writings and commentary on Christianity. I encourage readers to draw their own conclusions. Nevertheless, it is extremely meaningful to me that this book should find a new home in South Asia for the 150th anniversary of Gandhi's birth. Thus, a book that was born of my own questing journey finds its way to a new audience in Gandhi's homeland. I hope that Christian readers, in particular, will be challenged and inspired to renew their faith in light of Gandhi's wisdom. But whether it is read by Christians, Hindus, Muslims, or people of other faiths, I hope it will inspire everyone to a more faithful pursuit of Truth, and to loving service of their neighbors.

In a time when religion so often serves to divide and separate us from one another, Gandhi's message reminds us of our underlying unity as members of God's family. I know that I would not be a Christian were it not for Gandhi. But as Gandhi would observe, the real aspiration is not simply to call oneself a Christian—or a Hindu or Muslim—but to be a *better* Christian, Hindu, or Muslim. There, too, Gandhi's message continues to inspire.

Robert Ellsberg  
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