

In those days [1870s] Christian missionaries used to stand in a corner near the high school and hold forth, pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods. I could not endure this. I must have stood there to hear them only once, but that was enough to dissuade me from repeating the experiment. About the same time, I heard of a well known Hindu having been converted to Christianity. It was the talk of the town that, when he was baptized, he had to eat beef and drink liquor, that he also had to change his clothes, and that thenceforth he began to go about in European costume including a hat. These things got on my nerves. Surely, thought I, a religion that compelled one to eat beef, drink liquor, and change one's own clothes did not deserve the name. I also heard that the new convert had already begun abusing the religion of his ancestors, their customs and their country. All these things created in me a dislike for Christianity.

- Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 33-34.

Mohandas K. Gandhi's story of his earliest experience with Christianity is in every sense a story of imperialism. Here Gandhi is describing his experience as a young schoolboy in Rajkot, Kathiawad, a province in western India. The encounter occurred in the midst of a growing British presence in Kathiawad, and the story itself is highly suggestive of an intimate connection between Christian missions and an aggressive brand of imperialism. In this context Christians are associated with an 'abuse of Hindus and their gods' at the hands of the missionary.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the Hindu who converted and adopted Christianity as religion was said to have been forced to abandon his Hindu customs and traditions, eventually coming to 'abuse the religion of his ancestors' in presumably the same way as the white missionary on the street corner had done. It is this type of degradation and

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rejection of traditional native culture on the part of the Protestant missionary that has led many historians to assert that an inevitable connection existed between Christian missions and ‘cultural imperialism.’<sup>2</sup>

Nearly every historical study dealing with Gandhi and Christianity begins with a discussion of his early experience in Rajkot. What often follows is a narrative that is limited to Gandhi’s story of his contact with Christians who tried to convert him, and the reasons why he ultimately decided not to convert to Christianity. Implied in these stories is the notion that the majority of Gandhi’s encounters with Christianity—prior to his relationship with Charles Freer Andrews—echoed his experience as a boy in Rajkot. A typical example is the article by Fatima Meer titled “The Making of the Mahatma: The South African Experience.” Meer devotes just one paragraph to Gandhi’s religious experience in South Africa prior to the turn of the twentieth century:

In Pretoria, he was confronted with Christian certitude. The young Hindu’s confession that he was not as yet committed to any particular religion, inspired his Christian associates to set about saving his soul, but Gandhi shied away from that. He rejected the notion that he could go to heaven only through Christianity, or that Jesus was the only incarnate son of God. He later identified these claims with the arrogance of imperialism. He questioned the claim of any religion to be the most perfect or the greatest.<sup>3</sup>

Meer’s narrative supports the notion that Gandhi’s decision not to convert to Christianity was—once again—the result of his contact with aggressive Christian imperialists whose beliefs sharply contrasted those of the young Hindu. My aim in writing this essay is to

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<sup>1</sup> James D. Hunt, *Gandhi and the Nonconformists: Encounters in South Africa* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co. Publishers, 1986), p. 1. According to Hunt, the missionary was an Irish Presbyterian minister.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Porter, “‘Cultural Imperialism’ and Protestant Missionary Enterprise,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 25, no. 3 (September 1997): 367.

<sup>3</sup> Fatima Meer, “The Making of the Mahatma: The South Africa Experience,” *Indian Horizons*, 43, no. 4 (1994): 43.

complicate this narrative, using Gandhi's experience in South Africa in 1893 as the focal point of discussion.

In so doing, I am following on the work of historian Andrew Porter, who has challenged the claim that Protestant missionaries were the prime agents of an intrusive 'cultural imperialism' throughout the British Empire. Porter asserts that the argument usually given to support the claim is quite simple:

There have been plenty of...historical analyses...suggesting that there was an intimate, inevitable connection between missions and 'cultural imperialism'. The essence of their argument is simple. Missions were the van of Europe's expansion. Once their bridgeheads were established, the presence and teaching of missionaries ridiculed indigenous beliefs, called customs into question, undermined self-confidence, eroded respect for traditional authorities, and consequently stimulated political or social conflict. Thus debilitated, indigenous societies gave way to the broader pressures of western expansion; internal collapse and irresistible cultural change opened the way to direct colonial rule. This was paralleled by the imposition of missionary categories of thought and belief, and associated with continuing missionary control of education and the churches. Missionaries were thus prime agents of an intrusive 'cultural imperialism'.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Judith Brown has developed this point in noting that the history of imperial encounter has often been portrayed in simplistic ways, and that the life of Mohandas Gandhi illustrates the subtlety and complexity of colonial encounters and interactions. Brown writes: "Gandhi experienced the British Empire in India, in Britain itself, in South Africa, and then after twenty years in a much-changed India. His exposure to different aspects and experiences of being an imperial subject and citizen was of the utmost importance to his sense of identity and his subsequent career."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Porter, "'Cultural Imperialism' and Protestant Missionary Enterprise," 367.

<sup>5</sup> Judith M. Brown, "Gandhi- A Victorian Gentleman: An Essay in Imperial Encounter," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 27, no. 2 (1999): 69.

My hope is that in examining Gandhi's encounter with Christianity in South Africa in 1893—in particular his experience at the South African Keswick Convention—I will reinforce the claim that the relationship between Protestant missionaries and imperial subjects was far more subtle and complex than most imagine. By considering not only Gandhi's own writing but writings of the Christians with whom Gandhi was in contact, as well the history of the Keswick Movement, I will argue that Gandhi's relationship with Christianity did not follow any sort of uniform pattern throughout his life. Gandhi was not merely the vulnerable target of Christian imperialists propagating a foreign, degrading rhetoric. Above all, Gandhi's experience in South Africa before the turn of the century tells us that his relationship with Christians was at times truly interactive. In his autobiography Gandhi reflects on this period in his life: "I have remained for ever indebted to my Christian friends for the religious quest that they awakened in me."<sup>6</sup> It is my goal in writing to discover the true meaning of this awakening and, in so doing, to afford greater historical nuance to the meaning of conversion.

## I.

I believe it is first necessary to briefly consider Gandhi's religious experience prior to his arrival in South Africa in 1893. He was born in October of 1869 into a Vaishnava family, and was raised in a household rooted in Hindu traditions.<sup>7</sup> Gandhi's first mention of his mother in his autobiography is that she was deeply religious. "The outstanding impression my mother has left on my memory is that of saintliness...She would not

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<sup>6</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments With Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 138.

think of taking her meals without her daily prayers. Going to *Haveli*—the Vaishnava temple—was one of her daily duties.”<sup>8</sup> Gandhi recalls that his mother never missed the *Chaturmas*, a vow of fasting and semi-fasting during the four months of the rains in western India. “She would take the hardest vows and keep them without flinching. Illness was no excuse for relaxing them.”<sup>9</sup> Gandhi writes that although his father had very little religious training, he had a “kind of religious culture which frequent visits to temples and listening to religious discourses make available to many Hindus.” In the days just before his death, Gandhi’s father began reading the Gita, and would repeat aloud verses from the text every day at the time of worship.<sup>10</sup> Gandhi was exposed to a number of different religions throughout his childhood, and consequently developed a toleration for various faiths:

In Rajkot...I got an early grounding in toleration for all branches of Hinduism and sister religions. For my father and mother would visit the *Haveli* as also Shiva’s and Rama’s temples, and would take or send us youngsters there. Jain monks also would pay frequent visits to my father, and would even go out of their way to accept food from us—non-Jains. They would have talks with my father on subjects religious and mundane. He had, besides, Musalman and Parsi friends, who would talk to him about their own faiths, and he would listen to them always with respect, and often with interest. Being his nurse, I often had a chance to be present at these talks. These many things combined to inculcate in me a toleration for all faiths.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Margaret Chatterjee argues that this diversity of experience influenced Gandhi to believe that the supreme could be sought after in a great variety of ways.<sup>12</sup> Christianity, as I have noted, was at the time an exception for Gandhi because of the Irish Presbyterian

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi’s Religious Thought* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>12</sup> Chatterjee, *Gandhi’s Religious Thought*, 15.

missionary who preached on the street-corner near the high school. Chatterjee notes that the preacher's aggressive style—combined with rumors Gandhi had heard of drinking, beef-eating and ridicule of Hindu customs—sharply contrasted with Gandhi's sense of what the nature of religion should be. "The spirit of gentleness, allowing a man to pursue his *swadharma*, his own faith, respecting the faiths of others, was ingrained in young Gandhi."<sup>13</sup> It is understandable that such an encounter would leave a lasting impression on Gandhi, as the way in which Christianity was being propagated in his hometown fundamentally conflicted his sense of the true meaning of religious faith. It was not until Gandhi arrived in London years later that his relationship with Christianity began to change.

In 1887 Gandhi traveled to London to study law. Towards the end of his second year there he met two members of the London Theosophical Society. The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875, and is considered one of the first Western religious movements showing strong Hindu influence.<sup>14</sup> The two men were studying the Bhagavad Gita, the sacred Hindu poem, and hoped for help from an Indian in understanding it. Gandhi was ashamed to admit he had not read the poem in either Samskrit or Gujarati, but he unhesitatingly agreed to study the original text with the two men to compare it with Edwin Arnold's English translation. Gandhi recalls his experience: "The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today as the book *par excellence*

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Hunt, *Gandhi and the Nonconformists*, 5.

for the knowledge of Truth. It has afforded me invaluable help in my moments of gloom.”<sup>15</sup>

Around the same time Gandhi met a practicing Christian from Manchester in a vegetarian boarding house. The two talked about Christianity, and Gandhi described his experience as a young boy in Rajkot. “I narrated to him my Rajkot recollections. He was pained to hear them. He said, ‘I am a vegetarian. I do not drink. Many Christians are meat-eaters and drink, no doubt; but neither meat-eating nor drinking is enjoined by Scripture. Do please read the Bible.’”<sup>16</sup> Gandhi accepted his advice and began to read the Bible. He recalls that his reading of the Old Testament was slow, and that most chapters put him to sleep. The New Testament, on the other hand, had a profound effect on Gandhi:

The New Testament produced a different impression, especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart. I compared it with the *Gita*. The verses, ‘But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man take away thy coat let him have thy cloke too,’ delighted me beyond measure....My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the *Gita*, *The Light of Asia* and the Sermon on the Mount. That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly.<sup>17</sup>

This first encounter with the Sermon on the Mount was crucial to the development of Gandhi’s relationship with Christianity. He naturally compared the teachings of Jesus to the *Gita*, and his discovery of a fundamental unity between the two works strengthened his belief in the equality of different faiths and religious texts. In 1927, the year in which his autobiography was published, Gandhi wrote in the journal *Young India*:

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<sup>15</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

I have not been able to see any difference between the Sermon on the Mount and the Bhagavadgita. ...The New Testament gave me comfort and boundless joy, as it came after the repulsion that parts of the Old had given me. Today supposing I was deprived of the Gita and forgot all its contents but had a copy of the Sermon, I should derive the same joy from it as I do from the Gita.<sup>18</sup>

The basic teachings of Jesus, contained in the New Testament, rang true for Gandhi because of their intimate connection with what he had learned throughout his childhood. Gandhi writes that the notion of renunciation as the highest form of religion appealed to him greatly; one can see a parallel between Jesus' voluntary suffering and that of Gandhi's mother. Gandhi discussed this connection in 1931 while sailing back to India from London: "When I came to the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount, I began to understand the Christian teaching, and the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount echoed something I had learnt in childhood and something which seemed to be part of my being."<sup>19</sup> Gandhi continued, saying he was surprised at first to find out that such principles of nonviolence in the face of evil came from a Christian text, "For all I had then been given to understand was that to be a Christian was to have a brandy bottle in one hand and beef in the other."<sup>20</sup> Gandhi's reading of the New Testament, however, profoundly changed his view of Christianity. "As my contact with real Christians, i.e., men living in fear of God, increased, I saw that the Sermon on the Mount was the whole of Christinity for him who wanted to live a Christian life. It is that Sermon which has endeared Jesus to me."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Young India*, December 22, 1927, cited in Robert Ellsberg, ed., *Gandhi on Christianity* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 21.

<sup>19</sup> Gandhi, *Young India*, December 31, 1931, cited in Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

By the end of Gandhi's first stay in London, having encountered both the aggressive Protestant missionary in his hometown and the writings contained in the New Testament, the contradiction between the teachings of Jesus and the way in which Christianity was being propagated throughout the British Empire became evident to Gandhi. This fundamental contradiction became the subject of much of Gandhi's writing on Christianity. He touched on this subject in an address delivered in 1927:

The message of Jesus, as I understand it, is contained in His Sermon on the Mount....The message, to my mind, has suffered distortion in the West....In my humble opinion, much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount....If 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 I know that at the present moment if I said any such thing I would lay myself open to the gravest misinterpretation.<sup>22</sup>

Influenced by his stay in London, Gandhi arrived in South Africa in 1893 with a different perspective on religion than that which had accompanied him to England. I will turn now to my analysis of Gandhi's experience at the South African Keswick Convention. The experience, while crucial to an understanding of Gandhi's personal religious development, sheds light on both the complexity of the relationship between missions and imperialism and on the broader dialogue between East and West, a dialogue in which Gandhi played a unique role.

## II.

Gandhi arrived in Pretoria, South Africa in June of 1893 to do some clerical work in connection with a large lawsuit. The day after he arrived he was introduced to Albert

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<sup>22</sup> Gandhi, *Young India*, December 8, 1927, cited in Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity*, 25.

Weir Baker, the man who would eventually take him to the Keswick Convention in Wellington.

A.W. Baker was born in Pietermaritzburg in 1856, a second generation South African.<sup>23</sup> After working for a while as a carpenter he decided to become a lawyer, and moved to Pretoria in 1889. There he joined the Wesleyan Church and became involved in Gospel Temperance work that succeeded in “reclaiming many drunkards.”<sup>24</sup> Baker’s interest in missionary work for the natives of South Africa began while he was still living in Pietermaritzburg. There was a Presbyterian Mission Church near his house, and the Reverend John Bruce invited him to help with the prayer meetings. It was there, Baker writes, that “I began to make use of the few words of Zulu I had acquired.”<sup>25</sup> One day he received a letter from the wife of the principal of the Native College at Amanzimtoti, saying she was concerned about the spiritual welfare of the Zulu boys in the college; she invited Baker to hold special services for the boys on campus. Baker traveled to the campus and spoke at the early morning prayer:

They wished me to speak at the early morning prayer meeting the next day, but when I asked for an interpreter, the principal begged me to speak in Zulu. . . . It was an ordeal, but I stuck for two words, one of which was ‘conscience.’ Instantly the thought flashed into my mind, ‘each of you householders has a dog whose duty it is to watch outside the door and give the alarm of danger. If the dog barks and you pay no attention the responsibility is shifted from it to you. This thing I am talking about is God’s dog at the door of your heart.’ The Lord richly blessed the services and a number of people professed conversion. Shortly after I received a letter stating that. . . discipline in the school was in a better state than ever before.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> A.W. Baker, *Grace Triumphant* (London: Pickering & Inglis Ltd, 1939), 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

While working as a lawyer in Pretoria Baker was introduced to the Rev. Andrew Murray and Spencer Walton. Murray and Walton had led a Holiness Convention in Johannesburg in connection with the Cape General Mission;<sup>27</sup> after meeting Baker they decided to hold some meetings in Pretoria, eventually forming a Pretoria branch of the General Mission, of which Baker was named Honorary Superintendent. “Prior to this,” Baker recalled, “I had felt that God was calling me to abandon my legal profession and go out as a missionary to the natives.”<sup>28</sup>

Baker had been involved with the South African General Mission for a couple of years by the time he was introduced to Gandhi in 1893. In their first meeting Baker ascertained Gandhi’s religious views. Gandhi replied: “I am a Hindu by birth. And yet I do not know much of Hinduism, and I know less of other religions. In fact I do not know where I am, and what is and what should be my belief. I intend to make a careful study of my own religion and, as far as I can, of other religions as well.”<sup>29</sup> Baker was delighted to hear that the twenty-three year old Hindu was yet undecided as to what his religious belief should be. He invited Gandhi to attend daily prayer meetings with his Christian co-workers. Gandhi attended the prayer meeting the next day and was able to continue attending on a regular basis for a few months, as he had little work to do in connection with the law case. Baker’s aim in discussing religion with Gandhi was undoubtedly to convert the young Hindu to Christianity. Gandhi describes his experience at the first prayer meeting in his autobiography:

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<sup>27</sup> Murray and Walton first met in 1882 in a region of the Lakes District in England called Keswick. Murray had been visiting from South Africa and persuaded Walton to leave England and undertake missionary activity in South Africa. In 1889 the two established the Cape General Mission, which would later become the South Africa General Mission. I will later discuss the Mission in greater detail with respect to its role at the 1893 Convention in Wellington.

<sup>28</sup> Baker, *Grace Triumphant*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 120.

Everyone kneeled down to pray, and I followed suit. The prayers were supplications to God for various things, according to each person's desire....A prayer was now added for my welfare: '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.' There was no singing of hymns or other music at these meetings.<sup>30</sup>

One of Baker's friends to whom Gandhi was introduced was Michael H. Coates, a "frank-hearted staunch young man" who took Gandhi on walks and made regular attempts to convince him of the superiority of Christianity. Seeing the Vaishnava necklace around Gandhi's neck, Coates was sure that Gandhi was being deluded by Hindu superstition, and asked his permission to break the necklace. Gandhi refused, as the necklace was a sacred gift from his mother. He explained that he did not believe it held mysterious significance; it was simply a gift given to him out of love, and was one that must not be broken. Mr. Coates was not persuaded:

Mr. Coates could not appreciate my argument, as he had no regard for my religion. He was looking forward to delivering me from the abyss of ignorance. He wanted to convince me that, no matter whether there was some truth in other religions, salvation was impossible for me unless I accepted Christianity which represented *the* truth, and that my sins would not be washed away except by the intercession of Jesus, and that all good works were useless.<sup>31</sup>

Coates and Baker were each Protestant missionaries convinced of the inferiority of Hinduism. Their extensive contact with Gandhi upon his arrival in Pretoria has led many historians to believe that Gandhi had only one type of experience with Christianity in his first year in South Africa, and that this experience was of a highly imperialistic nature. In October of 1893 Baker took Gandhi to the Keswick Convention in Wellington.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

Gandhi recalls that Baker was getting anxious about his religious future, and hoped that the “atmosphere of religious exaltation at the Convention...would inevitably lead me to embrace Christianity.”<sup>32</sup> While the Convention may well have been the climax of the campaign for Gandhi’s soul, this was not the reason Baker traveled a thousand miles by rail to Wellington, and it was certainly not the reason why the Convention was being held in the first place. If one only looks at Gandhi’s recollection of the event, it is possible to assume these things to be true. An analysis of the history of the Keswick Movement—and specifically of the 1893 Convention in Wellington—supports the claim that there was no single type of imperial encounter, and that Gandhi’s relationship with the British Empire was far more interactive than most realize.

Evangelical religion is a Protestant movement that has existed in Britain since the 1730s.<sup>33</sup> It is not directly associated with any single Christian denomination; rather, the movement influenced the existing churches during the eighteenth century and has continued to do so throughout the twentieth century. Over time the word ‘Evangelical’ replaced others as the standard description of the doctrines or ministers of the revival movement.<sup>34</sup> A defining characteristic of the Evangelical movement is the belief that individual lives need to be changed, and that those people of a ‘converted character’ are totally different from all others. David Bebbington, in his *History of Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, explains that there are four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: “*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*,

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>33</sup> David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.<sup>35</sup>

Beginning in the 1870s Evangelicalism was deeply influenced by a new movement. Advocates of holiness teaching urged that Christians should aim for “a second decisive experience beyond conversion. Afterwards they would live on a more elevated plane.”<sup>36</sup> This ‘second blessing’ would free Christians of any feeling of wrongdoing, for they would have victory over sin. They would possess holiness, enjoying the ‘higher life.’<sup>37</sup> The first leaders of this new movement were Robert and Hannah Pearsall Smith, an American couple who addressed gatherings in Oxford in 1874 and Brighton in 1875. Also in 1875 was the first of the conventions held at Keswick, in the Lake District of England. These conventions, according to Bebbington, were to become the focal point of the new spirituality. In 1885 around 1,500 to 2,000 people attended the Keswick Convention; by 1907 there were between 5,000 and 6,000.<sup>38</sup> Andrew Porter explains that the Keswick Movement emerged in the context of widespread revival throughout Britain that re-emphasized in its teachings the importance of personal revelation and religious experience.<sup>39</sup> The importance of personal religious experience, of the deepening of one’s own Christian faith, is central to the Keswick message and was often the focus of the conventions. Porter quotes Charles Harford’s description of the Keswick movement, written thirty years after the first convention:

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Porter, “Cambridge, Keswick and late-nineteenth-century Attitudes to Africa,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 5, no. 1 (1976): 14.

The message of the Convention is addressed...to those who are the children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, and therefore taking the words of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews we would say 'let us cease to speak of the first principles of Christ, and press on unto perfection'....Too many are satisfied with being babes in Christ; they have rejoiced in the knowledge of sins forgiven, and the new life imparted through Christ, but like the Galatian Christians, having begun in the Spirit they are seeking to be made perfect by the flesh. To such the message of the Keswick Convention is addressed; it sets before them a life of faith and victory, of peace and rest as the rightful heritage of the child of God, into which he may step not by the laborious ascent of some "Scala Sancta", not by long prayers and laborious effort, but by a deliberate and decisive act of faith.<sup>40</sup>

The essence of the Keswick teaching is contained in this description. The Keswick Convention sought to convince its followers that the possibility of a higher life could be attained by any Christian through an act of personal faith beyond that of the initial conversion to the Christian religion. Christians must seek a second blessing, and should not be satisfied by the mere fact that they belong to the Church and profess faith in Christ.

The belief in the importance of this 'second blessing' came about because Keswick leaders were convinced that the ordinary lives of many Christians were highly unsatisfactory:

Although through an act of faith one might have become a member of the Church and, being justified by faith, have received 'release and deliverance from the penalty and future punishment of sins past', what one still needed was liberation from the psychological fact of sin, protection from recurring attacks of past sins, what at Keswick was thought of as 'deliverance from the power of besetting sin, the attainment of victory in the little conflicts of everyday life.'<sup>41</sup>

This sense of a psychological liberation from even the thought of sin is at the heart of the Keswick message, and is first step towards achieving the 'higher life'. David Bebbington

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

explains that the leaders of the Keswick Movement were influenced by the ideas of George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends. Fox believed if you “look down on sin, and corruption, and distraction, you are swallowed up in it; but looking at the light which discovers them, you will see over them. That will give victory; and you will find grace and strength: and there is the first step of peace.”<sup>42</sup> Bebbington notes that the message of victory over sin bringing peace was the keynote of the Keswick Convention.

E.H. Johnson also provides a useful perspective. A professor of systematic theology at Crozer Theological Seminary, Johnson published *The Highest Life* in 1901, a book that includes a ‘Friendly Analysis of the Keswick Movement.’ Johnson writes of the “self-forgetful aims of the Keswick Movement,” and he states that the Movement strives to inspire a “deepening of the spiritual life.”<sup>43</sup> Johnson draws from an appeal written by Rev. Dr. A. T. Pierson and thirty-two other Keswick speakers, who argue that there are seven steps which must be taken to achieve the higher life:

1. Immediate abandonment of every known sin and doubtful indulgence.
2. Surrender of the whole being to Jesus Christ as not only Savior, but Master and Lord.
3. Appropriation by faith of God’s promise and power for holy living.
4. Voluntary mortification of the self-life, that God may be all in all.
5. Gracious renewal or transformation of the inmost temper and disposition.
6. Separation unto God for sanctification and service.
7. Enduement with power and filling with the Holy Spirit.<sup>44</sup>

Johnson is quick to note, however, that the majority of Keswick leaders did not believe in a single prescribed process as a means to achieve the greatest spiritual good. He explains that although thousands of people attended the Keswick Conventions, it is a movement

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<sup>42</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 156.

<sup>43</sup> E.H. Johnson, *The Highest Life* (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1901), 45.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

that emphasizes personal religious experience. He quotes Dwight L. Moody, a Keswick speaker who led workshops each summer for his fellow Keswick leaders: “The one way...not to help another man is to tell him your religious experience...Your experience is your own and not another’s, because you are not another. Marked diversity exists and is desirable.”<sup>45</sup>

The Keswicks believed that personal commitment and service were the true expressions of holiness, and that the utmost attention should be given to the formation of the highest type of character in the Christian. As I will later discuss, this belief in the importance of service often led to the undertaking of missionary activity. However, in striving to develop personal character the Keswick Movement also did much to strengthen the temperance opinion. Robert Pearsall Smith, the founder of the Movement, was asked at the Brighton conference in 1875 if every Christian should abandon alcohol. “A thousand times, yes’, he answered.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, Bebbington notes that Keswick was seen as a landmark in the emancipation of women within the religious sphere. “Keswick definitely attracted women...At Keswick ladies were permitted to address female gatherings only, though at several subsidiary conventions the gender bar was abolished...Romantic sentiment dictated that purity and love should be staple themes of the convention, and according to stereotypes of the day, these were female qualities.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the Keswick Movement placed a significant emphasis on the importance of music to the convention. “There was large-scale hymn singing at the Brighton

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>46</sup> Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 176.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

conference and it became a valued feature of the Keswick conventions. . . . Music was given an unprecedented prominence.”<sup>48</sup>

A.W. Baker and Gandhi set out for the Keswick Convention in Wellington, South Africa in October of 1893. Wellington is located in south-western South Africa, near Cape Town. The journey by rail from Pretoria was about a thousand miles each way, and probably took more than nine days.<sup>49</sup> Reverend Andrew Murray led the convention. It was held at the Huguenot Seminary in Wellington from Wednesday to Friday, October 25 to 27. Andrew Murray had founded the Huguenot Seminary in 1874, establishing it as an institution at which girls could study to qualify as teachers. After a few years Murray further developed the seminary, adding a theological department for the training of young men for the ministry.<sup>50</sup> As I discussed earlier, Murray and Spencer Walton had established the Cape General Mission in 1889. In *The Life of Andrew Murray of South Africa*, J. Du Plessis describes the Mission and the role that Holiness Conventions played:

The objects which the Mission aimed at were generally defined as three: *first*, to set before believers a more exalted standard of Christian life, and to encourage them to strive after its realization; *second*, to engage in evangelistic work among the neglected and lapsed classes in the larger towns; and *third*, to undertake directly foreign mission work among the natives in fields unentered or insufficiently occupied. . . . In pursuance of the first object mentioned above the Cape General Mission organized a number of ‘Holiness Conventions.’<sup>51</sup>

Murray himself wrote, “The object of the Convention is to ask the question, Are we living up to the privileges of our high calling?” In discussing the Convention at Wellington Murray spoke of Walton’s role as co-founder: “At the commencement it was

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>49</sup> Hunt, *Gandhi and the Nonconformists*, 32.

<sup>50</sup> J. Du Plessis, *The Life of Andrew Murray of South Africa* (London: Marshall Brothers, 1919), 284.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.

specially in conventions that he was used of God to help many Christians to see what a true life of consecration ought to be, and to understand how it could be received through simple faith with a whole-hearted consecration.”<sup>52</sup>

Murray delivered the opening address at the 1893 Convention in Wellington. Seventeen other speakers, including A.W. Baker, also preached to the crowd. One of the speakers, Reverend G. Ferguson, gave an address titled “Which? Christ-Centered or Self-Centered.” The address echoes the general aims and beliefs of the Keswick Movement. Ferguson claims too many Christians have been living self-centered instead of Christ-centered lives:

So long as the will, the I, the centre of the life, is not submitted to Christ, it is outside, it doesn't belong to Christ....But there are those in the world who have passed over the line; the centre of their life has not only come very near to Christ but they have come over the line; they have surrendered the will; the centre of their life is within Christ....Their will is given to Christ and they are received by Christ, born from above; they are in His keeping. They are living a real spiritual life, but not the old plan with the self at the center; it is on God's new plan with Christ at the centre.<sup>53</sup>

Ferguson also touches on the notion of the second blessing: “There is a great difference between this first coming into Christ and coming into Christ wholly, they are two very distinct steps in the spiritual life....There is a first contact when the soul first comes in contact with the line, and there is a second contact when the whole body of the flesh is within the line, is surrounded by Christ.”<sup>54</sup>

The history and characteristics of the Keswick Movement, as well as the statements made by Murray and Ferguson, illustrate the fact that Gandhi—a young

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

<sup>53</sup> George Reid Ferguson, *Which? Christ-Centred or Self-Centred: An Address Delivered at the South African Keswick Convention, Wellington* (Capetown: Townshend, Taylor, Sanshald Printers, 1894), 6-7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Hindu—was not a target in Wellington like he was as a boy in Rajkot, India. The Keswick message was not a degrading, imperialistic message. Whereas the Irish Presbyterian minister ‘poured abuses on Hindus and their gods’, the Keswick Movement did not seek to degrade Hinduism at all. This is the point I believe a number of historians have missed in attempting to explain Gandhi’s early relationship with Christianity in South Africa. Whereas the Protestant missionary on the street corner in Rajkot was heckling the native Indians in his attempts to convert them to Christianity, the writings of Murray and Ferguson show us that the Keswick Convention consisted of Christians heckling fellow Christians in hopes to inspire a deepening of one’s own personal faith. The convention was not held for Gandhi; in fact, he was probably one of the few non-Christians in attendance. Granted, the Keswick leaders were undoubtedly convinced of the superiority of Christianity as a religion. In the context of the late-nineteenth-century British Empire, it is safe to assume this to be the case. The Keswicks did, in fact, believe that salvation could only be achieved through faith in Christ. My aim is not to suggest that Keswick teaching made attempts to accommodate Hinduism or other religious faiths. Rather, my point is that it is incorrect to assume Gandhi encountered the same type of Christian beliefs in Wellington as he did as a boy in Rajkot, or that he responded in similar ways to each situation.

Judith Brown rightly asserts that “Gandhi’s experience suggests that there were ideals, priorities and anxieties which Indians shared with at least some British people, which could make them profoundly attractive to each other, and which made their encounter in the context of empire both complex and truly interactive.”<sup>55</sup> Brown’s argument is particularly relevant to Gandhi’s experience in 1893. On the way to the

Keswick Convention Baker had difficulty getting equal accommodations for Gandhi because of his skin color. Gandhi recalls that Baker “had to suffer inconveniences on many occasions entirely on account of me.”<sup>56</sup> One of the traveling days happened to be a Sunday, and they were forced to seek hotel accommodations because Baker and his Christian friends refused to travel on the Sabbath. Baker was able to persuade the hotel manager to accept Gandhi as a guest for the night, but the man absolutely refused to allow Gandhi in the dining room. Baker also fought to get Gandhi permission to ride in the same train compartment, and at the Convention the two shared a room. Baker recalls the experience in his autobiography: “I had great difficulty in getting leave for him to travel in the same compartment of the train with me to the Convention at Wellington, and could get no separate accommodation for him there. My host, who was a Dutch Salvationist, put a double-bedded room at our service, and I had the great distinction of sleeping in the same bed with the now so highly esteemed Indian philosopher.”<sup>57</sup> While Baker’s hope in bringing Gandhi to the Convention was that the young Hindu would embrace Christianity, this is obviously an entirely different type of encounter from what Gandhi had faced as a young boy in Rajkot.

In Gandhi’s *Autobiography* he describes his initial reaction to the atmosphere at the Convention. “This Convention was an assemblage of devout Christians. I was delighted at their faith. I met the Rev. Murray. I saw that many were praying for me. I liked some of their hymns, they were very sweet.”<sup>58</sup> Gandhi then describes the reasons why he did not embrace Christianity as religion at the Convention. I will later discuss

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<sup>55</sup> Brown, “An Essay in Imperial Encounter,” 70.

<sup>56</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 135.

<sup>57</sup> Baker, *Grace Triumphant*, 85-86.

<sup>58</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 136.

Gandhi's response to the Convention in greater detail; for now it is important to note that Gandhi did not encounter foreign, degrading rhetoric at Wellington in 1893. Judith Brown's assertion that there were priorities and ideals which Indians shared with some whites is particularly relevant in this case. The Keswick belief in the importance of alcohol temperance, the atmosphere of earnest religious devotion at the Convention, and the emphasis placed on music all appealed to Gandhi, and exposed a softer side of Christianity that he had rarely encountered.

Perhaps the best example of the fact that Gandhi's experience at Wellington was truly interactive is the relationship he and a young Christian boy formed while at the Convention. The six or seven year old boy was the son of Mr. R. Shemeld, a friend of Baker's. In a letter written in May of 1894 Gandhi recalls the experience of the previous year:

Recently a grand convention of Keswick Christians was held in Wellington, under the presidency of Rev. Andrew Murray. I attended it in the company of some dear Christians; they have a boy six or seven years old. He came out with me for a walk one day during the time. I was simply talking to him about kindness to animals. During the talk we discussed Vegetarianism. Ever since that time, I am told, the boy has not taken meat. He did watch me, before the above conversation, taking only vegetables at the dinner table, and questioned me why I would not take meat. His parents, though not themselves Vegetarians, are believers in the virtue of Vegetarianism, and did not mind my talking to their boy about it. I write this to show how easily you can convince children of the grand truth, and induce them to avoid meat if their parents are not against the change. The boy and I are thick friends now. He seems to like me very much.<sup>59</sup>

This experience shows that there was a conversation—in the truest sense of the word—taking place at the Keswick Convention in 1893. There was a mutual exchange of ideas between Gandhi and his Christian contacts. In a sense, they were each searching to find

the best way to express their own spiritual devotion; they were each searching for truth.

At times, this exchange of ideas pointed to remarkable similarities between Gandhi and his Christian friends. Clearly, the story of the young vegetarian boy shows that Gandhi's relationship with Christianity was not at all one-sided; just as Gandhi's beliefs were influenced by Christians, the beliefs of a number of Christians were influenced by Gandhi. Joseph J. Doke, Gandhi's first biographer, states that Gandhi remembered the Convention quite fondly: "Speaking with appreciation of this experience, he said, with an amused smile: 'These people loved me so well, that if it would have influenced me to become a Christian, they would have become vegetarians themselves!'"<sup>60</sup>

An important component of Andrew Porter's claim that Protestant missionaries were not, in fact, agents of 'cultural imperialism' is his conviction that not enough attention has been paid to the fact that all Protestant missionaries did not share a single set of beliefs: "One might suppose...that British Protestant missionaries at least in particular periods would share a common evangelical 'discourse', particularly if they belonged to the same missionary society. However, such assumptions cannot be readily made."<sup>61</sup> Gandhi's experience with Christianity in 1893 supports Porter's argument. In Pretoria, prior to the Keswick Convention, Gandhi was introduced to a member of the Plymouth Brethren, a Protestant sect. The two discussed religion, and the man attempted to convince Gandhi of the superiority of Christianity. He criticized Gandhi for having not converted to Christianity, claiming that it is the only religion that brings a promise of eternal peace to its believers:

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<sup>59</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 1 (Delhi: The Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1960), 89.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph J. Doke, *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa* (Faridabad: Government of India Press, 1919), 46.

From what you say it appears that you must be brooding over your transgressions every moment of your life, always mending them and atoning for them. How can this ceaseless cycle of action bring you redemption? You can never have peace....Our attempts at improvement and atonement are futile. And yet redemption we must have. How can we bear the burden of sin? We can but throw it on Jesus....As we believe in the atonement of Jesus, our own sins do not bind us. Sin we must. It is impossible to live in this world sinless. And therefore Jesus suffered and atoned for all the sins of mankind. Only he who accepts His great redemption can have eternal peace. Think what a life of restlessness is yours, and what a promise of peace we have.<sup>62</sup>

Gandhi recalls that the argument utterly failed to convince him. "If this be the Christianity acknowledged by all Christians, I cannot accept it. I do not seek redemption from the consequences of my sin. I seek to be redeemed from sin itself, or rather from the very thought of sin. Until I have attained that end, I shall be content to be restless."<sup>63</sup>

Gandhi's response is particularly significant if one considers the fact that the encounter took place months before the Keswick Convention. As I noted earlier, the Keswick Movement was based on the belief that "the ordinary lives of most Christians were highly unsatisfactory."<sup>64</sup> Keswick teaching stressed this point to its followers:

Although through an act of faith one might have become a member of the Church and, being justified by faith, have received 'release and deliverance from the penalty and future punishment of sins past', what one still needed was liberation from the psychological fact of sin, protection from recurring attacks of past sins, what at Keswick was thought of as 'deliverance from the power of besetting sin, the attainment of victory in the little conflicts of everyday life.'<sup>65</sup>

E.H. Johnson's *The Highest Life* further supports the fact that although Keswick and Plymouth Brethren were each a part of Protestant Christianity, the two did not share a

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<sup>61</sup> Porter, "'Cultural Imperialism' and Protestant Missionary Enterprise," 376.

<sup>62</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 124.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-125.

<sup>64</sup> Porter, "Cambridge, Keswick, and late-nineteenth-century Attitudes to Africa," 15.

similar religious discourse. He discusses Robert Pearsall Smith's decision to establish the tradition of Holiness Meetings, saying "As a Plymouth Brother he might have been content with the holiness which comes with conversion; but as one who sought 'the blessing' at a holiness meeting, he virtually gave up a logical for an emotional assurance, a faith supposed to be founded on the Bible for a faith distinctly based on an interpretation of experience."<sup>66</sup> Johnson then describes the Plymouth Brethren doctrine as being "bold yet frigid" in comparison to the teachings of the Keswick Convention.<sup>67</sup> Andrew Porter argues that such theological disputes weakened the missionaries' ability to impose their beliefs on non-Christians: "Indigenous people, not surprisingly, were frequently well aware of the confusions and conflicts which existed...The periodic conflicts which divided evangelicals and their societies...demonstrate the existence of profound divisions about the nature of the culture at the heart of their work."<sup>68</sup> Porter concludes that "the culture supposedly sustaining the process of 'cultural imperialism' was itself essentially fragmented;...and it was understood in many different ways by both its propagators and those who encountered it...The evidence of this diversity, at least raises doubts about the concept itself."<sup>69</sup> It is clear that Gandhi encountered a variety of Protestant ideologies in 1893. As Porter has argued, this diversity of experience renders the claim—that Gandhi's experience was of a strictly imperialistic nature—quite problematic. Presumably, the Keswick belief that Christians must strive to become free of the very thought of sin rang true for Gandhi, as it echoed his own sense of what the nature of a religious faith should be.

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>66</sup> Johnson, *The Highest Life*, 40.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>68</sup> Porter, "'Cultural Imperialism' and Protestant Missionary Enterprise," 380.

III.

According to Gandhi, it was at the Keswick Convention that he decided not to embrace Christianity as a religion. Prior to the Convention Baker had expressed his hope that the atmosphere of religious enthusiasm at Wellington would lead Gandhi to convert to Christianity. Gandhi recalls, "I listened to his discourse on the efficacy of prayer with unbiased attention, and assured him that nothing could prevent me from embracing Christianity, should I feel the call. I had no hesitation in giving him this assurance, as I had long since taught myself to follow the inner voice."<sup>70</sup> Thus, if Gandhi was truly open to the possibility of embracing Christianity prior to the Convention, and he then encountered beliefs at Wellington that were in many ways similar to his own, one wonders why did he not convert to Christianity right then and there? The answer to this question not only reveals fundamental truths about Gandhi's religious thought, but it points to the fact that Gandhi had a unique relationship with the British Empire long before he became the leader of India's fight for independence.

Gandhi's response to the Keswick Convention was to embark on a quest to discover the true nature of his own Hindu faith. Reflecting on the Convention, Gandhi recalls that although he could appreciate the devoutness of the Christians who attended, it was impossible for him to believe that he could attain salvation only by becoming a Christian. Gandhi could not believe that Jesus was "the only incarnate son of God, and that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life." He writes, "If God could have sons, all of us were His sons...I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>70</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 135.

sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born.”<sup>71</sup> These feelings, however, led Gandhi to an interesting conclusion: “Thus if I could not accept Christianity as a perfect, or the greatest religion, neither was I then convinced of Hinduism being such. Hindu defects were pressingly visible to me. If untouchability could be a part of Hinduism, it could but be a rotten part or an excrescence.”<sup>72</sup> Gandhi presented his religious difficulties in a letter to Raychandbhai, a Jain scholar who had become a religious guide and helper for Gandhi through their years of friendship. Gandhi posed several questions on religion and spirituality, such as “Who is the author of the Gita? Is God its author? Is there any evidence that He is?...If a claim is put forward that a particular religion is the best, may we not ask the claimant for proof? Do you know anything about Christianity? If so, what do you think of it?”<sup>73</sup> Gandhi says that Raychandbhai’s response was somewhat pacifying. “He asked me to be patient and to study Hinduism more deeply. One of his sentences was to this effect: ‘On a dispassionate view of the question I am convinced that no other religion has the subtle and profound thought of Hinduism, its vision of the soul, or its charity.’”<sup>74</sup> Gandhi followed Raychandbhai’s advice and began reading several books on Hinduism in hopes to better understand the nature of his own religion.

Gandhi’s religious quest continued throughout his stay in South Africa, as did his correspondence with Raychandbhai. Months after the Convention at Wellington Gandhi grew close with Spencer Walton, the man who had led the first of the Keswick Conventions in South Africa years earlier. The relationship with Walton influenced

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>73</sup> Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Volume 1, 90.

<sup>74</sup> Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 137.

Gandhi's religious thought, as the two were able to engage in genuine conversation in spite of their basic religious differences:

Mr. Walton had a manner all his own. I do not recollect his ever having invited me to embrace Christianity. But he placed his life as an open book before me, and let me watch all his movements....We knew the fundamental differences between us. Any amount of discussion could not efface them. Yet even differences prove helpful, where there are tolerance, charity and truth. I liked Mr. and Mrs. Walton's humility, perseverance and devotion to work, and we met very frequently. This relationship kept alive my interest in religion.<sup>75</sup>

In the midst of Gandhi's friendship with Walton, he continued to study Hindu texts recommended by Raychandbhai. Gandhi's reading of Max Muller's *India—What Can It Teach Us?* and a translation of the *Upanishads* published by the Theosophical Society deepened Gandhi's appreciation for his own Hindu faith: "All this enhanced my regard for Hinduism, and its beauties began to grow upon me. It did not, however, prejudice me against other religions....The study stimulated my self-introspection and fostered in me the habit of putting into practice whatever appealed to me in my studies....I began to realize more and more the infinite possibilities of universal love."<sup>76</sup>

Judith Brown summarizes Gandhi's encounter and response to Christianity in the early years of his stay in South Africa:

In Africa Gandhi met a wider range of devout Christians, including various sorts of Evangelicals and Quakers, than he would have done in India. Not only did this experience open his eyes to the less militant and more devotional aspects of Christianity and to a deeper understanding of Christian scripture. It also aroused his curiosity and sent him back on a path of discovery of his own Indian spiritual roots, both in the Hindu tradition and in Islam. Out of this questioning and ferment was born the eclectic, perhaps idiosyncratic, religious vision which was to become central to Gandhi's self perception, and the driving force behind his commitment to public

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

and political work. He had gone to Africa, he wrote, to make a livelihood; but he had found himself 'in search of God and striving for self-realization'.<sup>77</sup>

Essentially, what is unique about Gandhi's encounter in 1893 is that his return to Hinduism did not come as a reaction to any degrading, imperialistic elements of Christianity. Gandhi did not return to his own faith merely because Christianity was unattractive. Rather, he was able to see that the Christian religion could be both virtuous and problematic, and was thus convinced that the same must be true for Hinduism. As Brown has argued, Gandhi's experience in with Christianity in 1893 is significant because it sparked the religious quest that eventually led to the formation of Gandhi's unique religious vision.

Gandhi's later writings and discussions on religion reflect the feelings that were born at the Keswick Convention of 1893. Gandhi came to believe in the existence of a common humanity beyond the distinctions and barriers that organized religion imposed. This belief led to Gandhi's frequent criticism of the principle of religious conversion. He was deeply troubled by the notion that one religion could be the greatest, as he was convinced that truth could be sought after in a variety of ways. In discussing religion with Millie Polak<sup>78</sup> Gandhi explains why he ultimately decided not to embrace Christianity:

I was tremendously attracted to Christianity, but, eventually, I came to the conclusion that there was nothing really in your scripture that we had not got in ours, and that to be a good Hindu also meant that I would be a good Christian. There was no need for me to join your creed to be a believer in the beauty of the teachings of Jesus or to try to follow his example....If a man reaches the heart of his own religion, he has

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<sup>77</sup> Brown, "An Essay in Imperial Encounter," 76.

<sup>78</sup> Millie Polak was the wife of Henry Polak, a Jewish vegetarian from England. The two lived with the Gandhis and several other families at Phoenix Farm, Gandhi's experimental community in Johannesburg.

reached the heart of others, too. There is only one God, but there are many paths to Him.<sup>79</sup>

This statement reveals Gandhi's fundamental belief that religion is a deeply personal matter, and that religious 'conversion' should consist of a deepening of one's own faith. In 1929 Gandhi wrote in the journal *Young India*: "I disbelieve in the conversion of one person by another. My effort should never be to undermine another's faith, but to make him a better follower of his own faith. This implies belief in the truth of all religions and, therefore, respect for them."<sup>80</sup> In a 1936 issue of the journal *Harijan* Gandhi refers to a conversation he had with Charles Freer Andrews in which Gandhi maintained that even if a Christian came to him saying he was captivated by a reading of the Bhagavat Gita and wanted to declare himself a Hindu, Gandhi would reply: "No. What the Bhagavat offers, the Bible also offers. You have not yet made the attempt to find out. Make the attempt and be a good Christian."<sup>81</sup>

In 1924 Gandhi wrote: "Our inmost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, and a Christian a better Christian. That is the fundamental truth of fellowship."<sup>82</sup> What I believe is most significant about Gandhi's experience at the 1893 Keswick Convention in Wellington is the fact that it was a crucial step in the development of Gandhi's belief that all religions contain similar elements of truth. The first step towards achieving this realization was Gandhi's earliest reading of the New Testament. Ashis Nandy, in his essay on 'The Psychology of Colonialism', argues that an accurate understanding of Gandhi's early encounters with Christianity is

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<sup>79</sup> Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity*, 12.

<sup>80</sup> Gandhi, *Young India*, March 21, 1929, cited in Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity*, 44.

<sup>81</sup> Gandhi, *Harijan*, November 28, 1936, cited in Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity*, 14.

crucial to an understanding of Gandhi's role as the leader of India's fight for independence from the British:

Gandhi's partiality for some of the Christian hymns and Biblical texts was more than the symbolic gesture of a Hindu towards a minority religion in India. It was also an affirmation that, at one plane, some of the recessive elements of Christianity were perfectly congruent with elements of Hindu and Buddhist world views and that the battle he was fighting for the minds of men was actually a universal battle to rediscover the softer side of human nature, the so-called non-masculine self of man relegated to the forgotten zones of the Western self-concept.<sup>83</sup>

Gandhi was fighting this universal battle as a struggling twenty-four year old lawyer in South Africa—long before he became the leader of India's freedom struggle—whether or not he was conscious of it at the time. By choosing to deepen his own Hindu faith in response to the Keswick Convention rather than convert to Christianity, Gandhi hoped to compel the British to focus solely on the devotional aspects of Christianity; to deepen *their* own faith rather than attempting to convert others. After all, the foremost aim of the Keswick Convention was to inspire renewed devotion to Christianity among Protestant Christians. "Albeit a non-Westerner," Nandy writes, "Gandhi always tried to be a living symbol of the other West....He implicitly defined his ultimate goal as the liberation of the British from the history and psychology of British colonialism."<sup>84</sup>

A number of Christians in South Africa seem to have understood and responded positively to Gandhi's message. In addition to the example of the young vegetarian boy and his parents, Gandhi recalled a conversation he had with a South African chaplain who, "after considerable questioning and cross-questioning, had told me that he would

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<sup>82</sup> Gandhi, *Young India*, May 29, 1924, cited in Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity*, 57.

<sup>83</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 49.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

not thenceforth want to convert me.” Writing about the experience in *Young India* Gandhi says he reminded the chaplain, “I am conscious of my weakness, and try to fight them—not in my own strength but in the strength of God. Is that enough or do you wish me to repeat parrot-like that Jesus has cleansed me from all sin?” He stopped me and said, ‘I understand what you mean.’”<sup>85</sup> F.W. Meyer, another Christian with whom Gandhi was in contact in South Africa, spoke with the young Hindu about his religious views. Following their discussion Gandhi recalls that “Meyer...asked the other Christian friends to let me alone. He said to them that I was as good as converted, and that I did not need any formal process of conversion.”<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, A.W. Baker was not significantly transformed by his encounter with Gandhi. He continued to believe in the importance of missionary work despite Gandhi’s assertions that the only religious duty of the Christian is to become a better Christian. In 1896, three years after the Keswick Convention, Baker established the South African Compounds Mission, as he was concerned that “something should be done for the heathen who were being demoralized by strong drink and card playing, and other vices of civilization.”<sup>87</sup> In 1940 Gandhi wrote in *Harijan*: “Old A.W. Baker, who must be much over eighty now, is still at me. He writes to remind me time and time again that, unless I accept Christ in his way, I cannot be saved.”<sup>88</sup> The point here is not to suggest that Baker’s missionary work was fundamentally at odds with the message of the Keswick Convention; many Keswick leaders and speakers were, in fact, missionaries. It is precisely this point, however, that makes Gandhi’s response to the encounter significant. In embarking on a quest to

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<sup>85</sup> Gandhi, *Young India*, June 18, 1925, cited in Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity*, 33.

<sup>86</sup> Gandhi, *Harijan*, August 4, 1940, cited in Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity*, 15.

<sup>87</sup> Baker, *Grace Triumphant*, 101.

<sup>88</sup> Gandhi, *Harijan*, August 4, 1940, cited in Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity*, 16.

discover his own Hindu roots, Gandhi experienced the message of the Keswick Convention in its most basic form, as his only religious priority became to deepen his own personal faith. Whether or not Gandhi knew it at the time, his actions served as a reminder to the Keswick Christians that, as a result of their involvement in missionary and conversion work, they were preventing themselves from realizing the potential for religious satisfaction that existed in a life devoted solely to one's own God.

Taking into consideration Gandhi's belief that one became a better Christian by becoming a better Hindu, the Keswick Convention of 1893 can be seen as the moment at which Gandhi did, in fact, convert to Christianity on his own terms. What I find most fascinating about Gandhi's experience in South Africa in 1893 is that early signs of the battle Gandhi would later fight for the emancipation of the Indian people can be seen at this point in history. As both Andrew Porter and Ashis Nandy note, Gandhi's fundamental goal was to erase the notions of 'self' and 'other' upon which British Colonialism depended for its existence.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps the most profound similarity between Gandhi and Martin Luther King—undoubtedly the most well-known follower of Gandhi in the West and a devout Christian himself—is that while they were each leaders of independence movements, both men knew they were not fighting only for the liberation of one side. King understood that the American white man suffers as much as the American black man on account of racism, just as Gandhi understood that the process of British colonization was damaging to Britain's own psychology as well as to India's. That each man recognized and sought to heal these wounds is remarkable. Perhaps this is a quality that is engrained in only a few leaders of a struggling people. Perhaps it is significant that each man regarded Jesus as one of the greatest teachers who ever lived.

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<sup>89</sup> Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy*, xvi.

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