Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History

Michael Bergunder*

There is strong textual evidence to suggest that M. K. Gandhi's notion of Hinduism, his specific view of Christianity, and his general belief that all religions refer to the same truth were shaped by esotericism, namely the Theosophical Society and the Esoteric Christian Union. The article presents the respective sources, discusses their plausibility, and puts these findings into perspective. This perspective is provided by a global history approach, which holds that the religious concepts in play since the nineteenth century were already products of global "entangled histories." Furthermore, it is argued that the impact of esotericism on global religious history, from the nineteenth century to early twentieth, needs to be investigated with more academic rigor.

WITHOUT DOUBT, one of the most remarkable political personalities of the twentieth century was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), better known under the name Mahatma Gandhi. He was the charismatic leader of the Indian independence struggle against British colonialism, and one of the founders of so-called nonviolent resistance. He is also widely known for his tolerant views on religion, though the intellectual sources of this tolerance are still a matter of debate. In order to provide a framework

*Michael Bergunder, Abt. Religionswissenschaft und Interkulturelle Theologie, Theologisches Seminar, Universitaet Heidelberg, Kisselgasse 1, 69117 Heidelberg, Germany. E-mail: michael.bergunder@wts.uni-heidelberg.de. Article translated by Kenneth Fleming. Sara Heinrich and Julian Strube provided critical and constructive comments.

for a systematic interpretation and contextualization of Gandhi's religious views, this article argues for a global history approach.

GANDHI'S RELIGIOUS VIEWS

Gandhi was born in what is now Gujarat, North India, in 1869. From 1888 to 1891, he studied law in London in order to train as a barrister. After a short Indian intermezzo, working as a lawyer in Bombay and Rajkot, he went to South Africa. He remained there from 1893 to 1914 and organized the civil rights struggle of the Indian minority. After returning to India in 1915, he became the leader of the national liberation movement against British colonial power, which succeeded in attaining Indian independence in 1947. He was assassinated in 1948.

To a great extent, Gandhi's political engagement was defined religiously. In his thought and action, political and religious ideas were inextricably intermingled (Fox 1989; van der Veer 1994: 86–99; Aloysius 1997: 107–213; Jordens 1970, 1998; Tidrick 2006; Lelyveld 2012: 170–196). Of particular note was his positive attitude toward other religions, especially Christianity (Chatterjee 1983; Ellsberg 1991; Moniz 1996). For one who described himself explicitly as a Hindu, his works and statements provide numerous affirmative references to Christian thinking, especially to Jesus Christ and the Sermon on the Mount. He insisted that all religions point toward the same truth.

The question concerning the historical roots of Gandhi's particular stance on religion has been raised repeatedly, but no conclusive answer has been given. A political or general historical interest has characterized the writing of most works on Gandhi, and these have failed to focus on his religious positions. In cases where religion has been referred to explicitly, two kinds of interpretation are evident. The first focuses on Gandhi's own stated view. He maintained that his tolerant attitude toward other religions could be traced to his "Hindu instinct" or, more generally, to the philosophical principles of Hinduism:

> My Hindu instinct tells me that all religions are more or less true. (Gandhi 1999: 28.56 [1924])

> The Hindu system of philosophy regards all religions as containing the elements of truth in them and enjoins an attitude of respect and reverence towards them all. (Gandhi 1999: 42.459 [1928])

His view found support in the indological debate about "Indian inclusivism," a debate that has continued until recently (Oberhammer 1983;

Halbfass 1990: 403–418). The notion of an Indian inclusivism was further reinforced by its reception in Christian theology. Friedrich Heiler described "boundless syncretism" and "worldwide tolerance" as the "fundamental features of the Hindu religion" (Heiler 1926: 40). He interpreted Gandhi's appreciation of Christianity and equating of religions as a typical characteristic of Hindu religiosity. Many other liberal Christians shared this perspective.

The second interpretation, of more recent origin, is based on a claim made by Kathryn Tidrick (2006) that views Gandhi as a representative of western esotericism. Gandhi's religious ideas, "though clothed in Hindu terminology, were not Hindu in origin. They owed their existence to Gandhi's precipitation in his youth into the atmosphere of experimentation with esoteric and occult forms of religion which flourished in the London of the 1880s" (Tidrick 2006: xi). Tidrick argues that Gandhi's religious views can be traced back to esotericism and, more specifically, to his encounters with the Theosophical Society and the Esoteric Christian Union (2006: 45–46). This assertion, though, has not been the subject of serious debate. She does not explain what the broader consequences of her findings would be for any assessment of Gandhi's view of religion.

These two ways of interpreting the emergence of Gandhi's religious views, then, are far apart in their appraisals. Gandhi is seen either as a tolerant Hindu inclusivist, dependent on his "Hindu instincts," or as a western esotericist, drawing on its particular concept of religious truth.

It is surprising, given that Gandhi is one of the most written-about historical figures, that the debate on the roots of his religious views remains inconclusive. The criteria required to assess the historical influence on his religious formation are not clearly worked out. A "Hindu instinct" cannot, from a historical perspective, be presumed as a given. It requires a proper historical grounding, which, in relation to Gandhi, has not been adequately provided. On the other hand, positing western esotericism as the unique and decisive source contradicts Gandhi's self-understanding and neglects other possible influences from India, and perhaps also from Europe and North America.

Current debates in religious studies could be helpful in formulating a comprehensive and balanced approach to overcome the impasse. Two insights from these debates are of particular importance and can be applied to Gandhi's case. First, the understanding that crucial concepts in his thinking, like "religion," "Christianity," and "Hinduism," are not essential and fixed ideas, but contingent and changing historical phenomena. They are products of the religious history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that was firmly shaped by the colonial enterprise, which witnessed a global and multidirectional flow of concepts. In light of this, the

narrative of Gandhi's religious views has to be re-centered away from a psychological–biographical perspective toward a more discursive approach, in which his intellectual genealogy is described in relation to the general global discourse on religion. Second, religious studies has shown that the modern notion of nineteenth-century esotericism as an arena of "cranks" and "comically vainglorious spiritualists" (Tidrick 2006: xiv, 33) can easily conceal the tremendous influence it had at the time.

In what follows, I elaborate on these two points to formulate criteria for establishing the genealogy of Gandhi's religious views. It will be shown how this can help to shed new light on the sources Gandhi used for his views on religion.

THE GLOBAL RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES

The study of the nineteenth century is being shaped, increasingly, by a global history approach (Bayly 2004). This approach has three aspects. First, it agrees with the central insight of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 1979), which claims that nineteenth-century colonialism forced "western" knowledge upon colonized cultures and societies. Said did not discuss the role of the colonized within a colonial power discourse, but this became the primary focus of postcolonial studies (Young 2001), which forms the second aspect of a global history approach. Though postcolonialism also assumes that the colonized subjects were subjugated to "western" knowledge, it shifts the emphasis to the concrete appropriation of this knowledge by the colonized. It shows that colonial discourses are anything but monolithic or uniform. They possess a considerable dynamic, a substantial potential for transformation, and they can, in their fragility, at the same time articulate opposition (Bhabha 1994; Spivak 1994). Hence, postcolonialism is interested in the full breadth of articulation of the colonized and their constant resignification of "western" knowledge. Third, because the process was multidirectional, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should be understood as consisting of "entangled histories," in which "the related entities are themselves in part a product of their entanglement" (Conrad and Randeria 2002: 17). Due to its entanglement with the colonies, Europe did not experience an autonomous history; rather, the formation of its identity was entangled with the colonized. The crucial point is that concepts like "religion" in the modern sense, and "Hinduism" and "Christianity" as representations of "religion," emerged as part of a global religious history in the nineteenth century. They were the products of multidirectional discourses and entangled relationships on a global scale (Bayly 2004; Beyer 2006; Osterhammel 2009). In this process, "East" and "West" became detached from their geographical

denotation and were used as metaphors that were invested with meanings well beyond the spatial. As a result, western knowledge, as a de-spatialized marker in regional identity formation, could be simultaneously propagated by the colonizer and received by the colonized as a "universal knowledge" (Chakrabarty 2000). There were, therefore, no prior, fixed European concepts that Gandhi related to. Gandhi's views were themselves part of a global and entangled process of negotiation that shaped these concepts.

Today's understanding of religion did not develop before the middle of the nineteenth century. According to current research, the period provided a new context for our modern understanding of religion, which came about through the challenges presented by the fast emerging natural sciences, the discovery of religious history, and globalization as a central aspect of colonialism. This newly articulated concept of religion was itself a product of global entanglement (Bergunder 2014).

Connected to the birth of modern "religion" were great changes within Christianity. The nineteenth century was not an easy time for Christian theology. A central challenge was presented by the idea of religious pluralism, which led to the historical relativization of Christianity (Kippenberg 2002). A result of this was the birth of a liberal Protestant theology that defined Christianity, first and foremost, as a "religion," which was a new and unorthodox notion (Wagner 1991).

The transformation was even more obvious in the case of Hinduism. India, in the nineteenth century, was comprehensively changed through British colonialism (Dirks 2001; van der Veer 2001; Masuzawa 2005; Pennington 2005). Colonial rule led to a fundamental reinterpretation of the Indian religious landscape. The modern concept of "Hinduism" as a coherent entity, and the self-understanding of Hinduism as a "religion," emerged as probably the most important result of the colonial period (Bloch et al. 2010). Central to this was the development of a conceptual antithesis between "West" and "East." "Hinduism" became a "mystical," "eastern" religion, with Advaita Vedanta as its central philosophy (King 1999) and the Bhagavad Gita as its most important scripture (Sharpe 1985; Bergunder 2006).

Any genealogy of Gandhi's religious views, then, cannot be based on a supposed dependency on fixed traditional concepts, be they European or Indian, but has to take into consideration the global discourse on religion that Gandhi was obviously a part of.

ESOTERICISM

A global history approach is also relevant for the conceptualizing of esotericism. Research on theosophy has long been neglected, but this has

slowly changed in recent decades and the academic study of "Western Esotericism" has become an established field of scholarly investigation (Hanegraaff 2012). It considers modern theosophy "the most influential esoteric movement of the nineteenth century . . . that created essential foundations for much of twentieth-century esotericism" (Hanegraaff 2013: 130–131). However, understanding modern theosophy as part of "Western Esotericism" is not without problems. The concept of "Western Esotericism" is highly controversial. Esoteric studies continue to struggle to provide a convincing theoretical justification of its subject matter, the reasons for which I have discussed elsewhere (Bergunder 2010). With regard to Gandhi and theosophy, it is the Eurocentric notion of "western" in "Western Esotericism" that calls for special attention. The adjective "western" was added to esotericism in order to avoid an essentialist understanding that could be universally and comparatively applied to all cultures and eras (von Stuckrad 2004; Faivre 2006). Limiting it to the West, a specific geographical region, was viewed as a successful retreat from essentialism, but it ignores the insights of a global history approach. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, the leading scholar in the field, characterizes esotericism "as an inherently Western domain of research" (2013: 15). In his opinion, esotericism refers to the "Renaissance narrative of ancient wisdom" and its many different receptions in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, which went into decline during the Enlightenment era of the eighteenth century but was rediscovered by "German romanticism" in the early nineteenth century and has persisted up to the present (Hanegraaff 2012, 2013). Hanegraaff considers the eighteenth century a watershed, but assumes a general continuity starting from the early nineteenth century onwards (2013: 5–10). He acknowledges an "expanding horizon of religion" in the nineteenth century, with the adoption and integration of "terms and concepts from Indian religions that had never been a part of Western esotericism before" (Hanegraaff 2013: 130). Yet he views this as the invention of a purely western "Orientalist imagination," in which "Western audiences defined their own identity with implicit or explicit reference to the 'Otherness' of the East" (Hanegraaff 2013: 130). His approach leaves no room for a global history understanding of esotericism from the nineteenth century on. Western Esotericism remains a profoundly "western" product, with an entirely "western" history and audience.

As a result, modern theosophy, understood as a constitutive part of "Western Esotericism," is studied as a purely western movement (Godwin 1994; Owen 2004; Hammer and Rothstein 2013; Lavoie 2013), with rare exceptions (van der Veer 2001). This approach needs to be reconsidered, because the historical evidence favors a more global perspective. The history of the Theosophical Society, the main contemporary exponent of

modern theosophy, makes this immediately clear. It was founded in 1875 in New York on the initiative of the German-Russian Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91) and the American Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907). The Theosophical Society directly addressed the challenges presented by the discourse on religion at the time. The Society called for the establishment of a universal, multireligious brotherhood of humanity, in which the comparative study of the "religions of the world" would be advanced. It was anticipated that this comparison of religions would lead to a disclosure of a primeval religion or "primeval wisdom"—with primeval wisdom understood in the sense of a hermetical *philosophia perennis.* As a consequence of this program, theosophy explicitly integrated Hindu and Buddhist ideas into its system. In 1882, as an outward expression of its interest in Hinduism and Buddhism, the Theosophical Society relocated its headquarters to Adyar, a locality of Madras (Chennai) in South India. Under Annie Besant (1847–1933), the successor of Blavatsky and Olcott, this commitment in India continued. Besant played an important role in the struggle for Indian independence during the first decades of the twentieth century (Bevir 1998). Theosophy became quite popular among certain educated classes in Europe, North America, India, and Ceylon. Around 1900, it was more than a fringe or marginalized movement, though its popularity at the time is frequently undervalued or ignored today. In colonial India, members of the new English-orientated, educated classes became theosophists, and theosophy had a deep impact on Hindu reform movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Likewise, it shaped Singhalese reform Buddhism (McMahan 2009). This Indian and Singhalese appropriation effected a change in the character of theosophy in Europe and North America. Theosophy, thus, provides an outstanding example of the complex entanglements of the global religious history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gandhi's involvement with theosophy has to be understood in this context.

GANDHI AND THEOSOPHY

As Gandhi turned eighteen years of age, he arrived in London and soon came into contact with theosophists. His relationship to the Theosophical Society has been referred to repeatedly in academic research. It is possible to reconstruct intensive contacts with the English theosophists and their writings (Hunt 1993: 28–36; Tidrick 2006). It is less well known that he continued these contacts, in various ways, during his time in South Africa (Hunt 1983, 1986: 4–8; Tidrick 2006). In 1907, he still had a picture of Annie Besant hanging in his lawyer's office (Doke 1956: 8). At some point between 1899 and 1911, however, Gandhi explicitly broke off from the Theosophical Society as an institution (Muthanna 1986: 95–96; Cyranka 2013). A major obstacle in determining the exact impact of theosophy on him is the limited sources available. He destroyed some of his correspondence with theosophists and, in later writings, consciously played down the role of theosophy in his early days (Cyranka 2013).

The extant sources are carefully reviewed in the works of Hunt (1983, 1986, 1993) and Tidrick (2006). What is lacking is a convincing narrative for their interpretation and for understanding their impact on Gandhi. The following discussion will focus on three central topics: Hinduism, Christianity, and religion. In each case, it will be asked if any direct influence from theosophy on Gandhi's views about these topics can be philologically traced. Then, it will be asked if these views could have been influenced by the Indian context. Were there influences from his early childhood and youth in Gujarat? What about his time in Bombay and Rajkot, between 1891 and 1893, when he was in close contact with Jain reformers? Did he know anything about other Hindu reform movements? Last, the issue of global "entanglement" will be raised in relation to the topics.

Hinduism

In his autobiography, Gandhi used the word "Hinduism" for the first time when he portrayed how theosophy had stimulated him toward a deeper reflection on his own tradition. He wrote:

> I recall having read, at the brothers' [Bertram and Archibald Keightley] instance, Madame Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy*. This book stimulated in me the desire to read books on Hinduism, and disabused me of the notion fostered by the missionaries that Hinduism was rife with superstition. (1999: 44.143)

This suggests that Gandhi became aware of the concept of Hinduism and associated notions of inclusivism through theosophy. As late as 1946, in an interview with Louis Fischer, Gandhi said: "Theosophy is the teaching of Madame Blavatsky. It is Hinduism at its best" (Fischer 1990: 559).

In accordance with the orientalist notion, theosophy considered Advaita Vedanta to be the core and central philosophy of Hinduism. In the *Key to Theosophy*, Gandhi would have read that the "Aryan philosophy" is "fully represented only by the [Advaita] Vedantins, and the Buddhist system" (Blavatsky 1889: 43–44). In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky had already written about Advaita Vedanta as the pure philosophy, the *philosophia perennis* (Blavatsky 1979: I.55, I.522). Accordingly, Gandhi identified himself as a "follower of the Advaita doctrine" (1999: 60.126, see also

4.246, 29.408, 33.409, 40.121, 63.502), and claimed that "Advaita (oneness) was the fundamental principle of the Vedas" (1999: 63.212).

The theosophist influence is particularly evident in Gandhi's reception of the Bhagavad Gita. From Gandhi's own report, we know that his first acquaintance with the Bhagavad Gita came through theosophy. During his stay in London, he came to know two theosophists, Bertram and Archibald Keightley, who offered to read Edwin Arnold's popular English version of the Bhagavad Gita (1885) with him. Gandhi wrote in his autobiography:

> They were reading Sir Edwin Arnold's translation—The Song Celestial—and they invited me to read the original with them. I felt ashamed, as I had read the divine poem neither in *Samskrit* nor in Gujarati. I was constrained to tell them that I had not read the Gita, but that I would gladly read it with them. . . . 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 for the knowledge of Truth. (1999: 44.142)

When he began to study the Bhagavad Gita intensively, first in South Africa around 1903, it was with "Theosophist friends" (Gandhi 1999: 44.286–44.287). For the religious instruction of Indian youth in South Africa, he arranged for a reprint in 1905 of the theosophist translation of the Bhagavad Gita by Annie Besant, with her portrait on the title page (Muthanna 1986: 82–83; Gandhi 1999: 4.271–4.272, 4.275). When Besant protested against the reproduction of her portrait, Gandhi apologized, explaining that "it has arisen from excessive reverence for yourself" (Gandhi 1999: 4.271).

Gandhi's interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita closely paralleled the allegorical exegesis of theosophy. As in theosophy, Gandhi viewed the Bhagavad Gita as depicting the struggle between the high and debased self in people. In no sense did it justify the use of violence—the field of battle it described was human nature (Nagappa Gowda 2011: 168–198). Gandhi also saw the Bhagavad Gita as presenting an invitation to action: "He who gives up action falls. He who gives up only the reward rises" (1999: 46.172).

It can, thus, be established that Gandhi's view of Hinduism, with Advaita Vedanta as its core philosophy and the Bhagavad Gita as its central scripture, was decisively influenced by theosophy. Could it, though, also have been influenced from insights from Indian sources? In the period before he went to London, there are no sources to suggest that he was introduced into any comprehensive notion of Hinduism. In his autobiography, Gandhi described how he spent his childhood and youth in a Vaishnava family home shaped by the Vallabha tradition of his father (Gandhi 1999: 44.88 ff., see also 32.29). His mother was also an orthodox Vallabha practitioner: "Going to *Haveli*—the [Vallabha-]Vaishnava temple—was one of her daily duties" (Gandhi 1999: 44.94). He does not mention any special or profound religious instruction in his youth. It was, for a merchant family (Modh Vania) of the time, possibly not to be expected. He said that he did not have "any living faith in God" in his youth (Gandhi 1999: 44.117). His understanding of his own religion came primarily from the praxis of his family home, and was probably to a large extent unreflective.

A detail from Gandhi's descriptions of his school days is revealing. The school taught in English from the fourth year on, but offered Sanskrit and Persian as elective subjects. When Gandhi, for practical reasons, decided on Persian, the Sanskrit teacher took him to task: "How can you forget that you are the son of a Vaishnava father? Won't you learn the language of your own religion?" (Gandhi 1999: 44.104). Here the matter of religion centered on "Vaishnavism" rather than "Hinduism." In short, there is no textual evidence to suggest that Gandhi had any comprehensive notion of Hinduism before he was introduced to it by theosophy. It should also be pointed out that it was not without reason that Gandhi did not know the Bhagavad Gita before he came to London. Though Krishna is the central deity of the Vallabha community, its faith was based on the young Krishna of the Bhagavata Purana and not the mighty Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita. Admittedly, the founder, Vallabha (d. 1530), came from a Vedanta tradition and accepted the Bhagavad Gita as one of the foundational scriptures (*prasthana*), but the Bhagavad Gita had probably no impact at all in the traditional Vallabha community of Gandhi's time (von Glasenapp 1933/34: 278; Barz 1976), which explains why Gandhi knew little about it.

The crucial point is that Gandhi could easily keep his theosophist understanding of Hinduism even after he disavowed theosophy, because the theosophical notion was not unique at the time. Theosophy's access to Hinduism and Buddhism came from the reading of orientalist research and its popularized variants. Its idea of Hinduism, with Advaita Vedanta and the Bhagavad Gita at its core, concurred with general orientalist notions of India that were welcomed by English-speaking Hindu elites in the nineteenth century. Theosophy played a decisive role in the popularizing of this oriental knowledge in colonial India (Bevir 2000; Risseeuw 2000; van der Veer 2001), though this is still little acknowledged in present research. Theosophy was, for example, one of the most important promoters of the Bhagavad Gita, not only in Europe and North America but also in India (Bergunder 2006). Gandhi's case shows clearly how theosophy was a way for Indians to appropriate orientalist knowledge.

It is notable that there is no evidence to show that Gandhi tried, at any time, to reconnect to the Vallabha faith of his family. The community

had still a bad reputation among the educated public in India and Europe, due to the spectacular Maharaja Libel Case in the 1860s (Dalmia 1997: 362–365). The *Key to Theosophy* explicitly rejected the Vallabha community, declaring that "the [Vallabha] sect is despised by all the other Hindus" (Blavatsky 1889: 280). Gandhi mirrored this sentiment in his autobiography (1999: 44.115). There is no evidence to suggest that Gandhi knew of the Vallabha reformer, Hariscandra Bharatendu, or read any of his works.

When Gandhi returned to India in 1891, he would have met English educated Indians who shared many of his religious views, because they were also influenced by orientalist notions of India. The Bhagavad Gita only became popular in India in the 1880s (Bergunder 2006), but that was the case when Gandhi returned. The idea of a uniform Hinduism, with Advaita Vedanta as its central philosophy, had become increasingly popular among the English educated elites in India, especially through the so-called Bengal renaissance (Kopf 1979; King 1999).

The Jain reformer Virchand Gandhi (1864–1901) was one of Gandhi's closest colleagues in Bombay in 1892 (Hay 1970). Virchand Gandhi (unrelated) attended the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. As a graduate of Elphinstone College, he was well versed in orientalist knowledge and acquainted with the writings of contemporary Hindu reformers. He also seems to have had some liking for theosophy, as he translated Notovich's *Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* from French into English in 1894, which Gandhi became aware of in South Africa (Gandhi 1999: I.206). The contact with people like Virchand Gandhi must have confirmed Gandhi in his religious views. Perhaps the best example of this process of submersion in the general Indian discourse on Hinduism of the time was a reading circle, which Gandhi formed in South Africa in 1903. The participants were theosophists and they read two English books on Raja Yoga from like-minded Hindus (Gandhi 1999: 44.286). One book was from Vivekananda (1863–1902), the great Bengal Hindu reformer, who propagated an inclusive concept of Hinduism with Advaita Vedanta as its central philosophy, and had a special interest in the Bhagavad Gita. The other was from Manilal Nabhubhai Dvivedi (1858–1898), a famous Gujarati Sanskrit scholar of Advaita Vedanta and member of the Theosophical Society (Thaker 1983). The important point is not so much that Gandhi was leaning toward theosophy in his early years, but that theosophy was for Gandhi, as for many other Indians, the entry point into the orientalist discourse on Hinduism. The anticolonial stance of the Theosophical Society also provided a means for an anti-western resignification of Hinduism. During his intellectual development, Gandhi added more critical thinkers from the West to his list of

"authorities and testimonies by eminent men," such as Emerson, Ruskin, Thoreau, and Tolstoy (Gandhi 1999: 10.311). When he advanced his own political philosophy, Gandhi referred to a whole ensemble of "the 'other' West" (Rudolph and Rudolph 2006: ix, 17–20) to make his point.

Another Indian source of influence on Gandhi's view of Hinduism is worthy of consideration. During his Indian intermezzo, a friend of Gandhi's family introduced him to an illustrious relative, Raychandbhai Mehta (1867–1901), a diamond and pearl trader. Raychandbhai was not only a successful jeweler but also a Gujarati poet, who wrote about Jain teachings and the Jain path to salvation (*moksha*). He lacked a higher education and did not know English (Gandhi 1999: 36.469). When Gandhi felt challenged in his religious identity by evangelical missionaries in South Africa, he sent Raychandbhai a letter with twenty-seven questions on a whole variety of religious matters. Between the years 1894–96, Gandhi received three lengthy replies from Raychandbhai, written from a decisively Jain perspective and containing a very conservative social stance on caste observances (*varnashramadharma*). The contents of the letters hardly influenced Gandhi, since his notion of Hinduism, based on monistic Advaita Vedanta, was fundamentally different from Raychandbhai's dualist Jain teachings (Jordens 1998: 47–56). However, Raychandbhai was an open-minded person and, along with his letters, he sent Gandhi three Gujarati books on Hindu teachings: *Yoga-Vasishtha*, *Maniratnamala*, and *Panchikarana*. We know from Gandhi that he read *Maniratnamala* and *Panchikarana* fully and the first two chapters of *Yoga-Vasishtha* (Gandhi 1999: 36.477, 44.193, see also 11.426, 23.391–23.392, 29.250–29.251, 63.182; Jordens 1998: 57). All these books were written from the perspective of Advaita Vedanta (Jordens 1998: 56–60). It seems that Raychandbhai considered Advaita Vedanta to be the most important Hindu philosophy. In this way, he affirmed Gandhi's position on the significance of Advaita Vedanta for Hinduism. Moreover, Gandhi was able to connect his theosophical understanding with original Sanskrit sources in Gujarati translation. He wrote, "I felt reassured that Hinduism could give me what I needed" (Gandhi 1999: 36.467–36.468 [1926]). Gandhi's views on Hinduism evolved further later in his life (Jordens 1998: 81–147; Cyranka 2013), but that is a topic beyond the scope of this article.

Gandhi's views on Hinduism certainly came to have an influence on Europe and North America. He reinforced the orientalist notion of the Bhagavad Gita as the Bible of Hinduism (Jorden 1986; Bergunder 2006). The Gita is considered today, both in India and the rest of the world, as the most important and most popular scripture of Hinduism. Gandhi's views played an important role in this development. He is a good example of historical entanglement.

Christianity

There is also ample evidence to support the claim that Gandhi's particular view of Christianity was shaped by theosophy. In South Africa, Gandhi was in contact with the Esoteric Christian Union, which traced its teachings back to Anna Kingsford (1846–88), a prominent theosophist and strong proponent of vegetarianism (Oppenheim 1985: 185–190; Godwin 1994: 333–346; Dixon 2001: 29–30, 165–166; Owen 2004: 40–42). She practiced as a physician and was the second woman in England to graduate in medicine (MD). In contrast to Blavatsky and Olcott, she was particularly interested in an esoteric interpretation of Christianity. After her death, Edward Maitland (1824–97) founded the Esoteric Christian Union to propagate both their teachings, which he also changed significantly in the years that followed.[1] Maitland, with whom Gandhi in South Africa conducted an intensive correspondence until his death in 1897 (Pyarelal 1965: 326–327), sent Gandhi two books: *The Perfect Way* (third edition, 1890) by Kingsford, with Maitland as co-author and editor, and *The Story of the New Gospel of Interpretation* (1893) by Maitland.[2] In a letter from South Africa in 1894, to another founder of the Esoteric Christian Union, A. M. Lewis, Gandhi wrote: "During my stay here I intend to spread as much as possible information about theosophy" (Gandhi 1999: 1.176).[3]

In the same letter, he also asked if he could distribute the books of Kingsford and Maitland in South Africa, in the name of the organization on a sale or return basis. He then placed newspaper advertisements for the books, in which he affixed his signature as "M. K. Gandhi, Agent For The Esoteric Christian Union and The London Vegetarian Society" (Gandhi 1999: 1.184 [1894]).[4]

Gandhi had a detailed knowledge of the works of Kingsford and Maitland. In connection with this, he spoke for the first time, in his collected works, about the role of Christianity in comparison to other religions. He wrote the following lines to the editor of the South African newspaper *Natal Mercury*, explaining his desire to publicize the books of the Esoteric Christian Union:

[1]A critical biography of Kingsford and Maitland is forthcoming from Sara Heinrich (University of Heidelberg).

[2]See Gandhi (1999: 44.193) and Hunt (1993: 33). The correspondence with Maitland was destroyed by Gandhi. Gandhi gave the title of Maitland's book wrongly as "The New Interpretation of the Bible."

[3]Gandhi clearly viewed the Esoteric Christian Union as a part of the larger theosophist movement. He wrote: "To me there is little difference between Theosophy and Esoteric Christianity" (1999: 1.176).

[4]See also Gandhi (1999: 1.208–1.209), where a similar advert from 1895 is printed.

> The system of thought expounded by the books advertised is not, by any means, a new system but a recovery of the old, presented in a form acceptable to the modern mind. It is, moreover, a system of religion which teaches universality, and is based on eternal verities and not on phenomena or historical facts merely. In that system, there is no reviling Mahomed or Buddha in order to prove the superiority of Jesus. On the other hand, it reconciles the other religions with Christianity which, in the opinion of the authors, is nothing but one mode (among many) of presentation of the same eternal truth. (Gandhi 1999: 1.185 [1894])

It is hardly by chance that the many later statements of Gandhi about Christianity were in accordance with the basic beliefs of the Esoteric Christian Union (Tidrick 2006). He sharply criticized "orthodox" church teaching and practice of the time:

> It is my conviction that those who today call themselves Christians do not know the true message of Jesus. (Gandhi 1999: 74.388 [1939], see 39.65, 67.49, 70.139, 88.411)

> I rebel against orthodox Christianity, as I am convinced that it has distorted the message of Jesus. (Gandhi 1999: 68.425 [1936])

Central to Gandhi's view of Christianity was his rejection of Jesus as the unique Son of God or the "the most perfect man ever born" (Gandhi 1999: 44.192). Jesus is merely one of the "greatest teachers"[5] among many others, like Buddha or Krishna, who provide an example to people:

> My interpretation, in other words, is that in Jesus' own life is the key of His nearness to God; that He expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God. It is in this sense that I see Him and recognize Him as the Son of God. (Gandhi 1999: 81.261)

This is exactly the critique of Christianity voiced by Kingsford and Maitland. Like Gandhi, they assumed that all religions are equal and, as a consequence, Jesus Christ was to be taken as one of many teachers:

> Christianity has failed, that is, not because it was false, but because it has been falsified. And the falsification, generally, has consisted in removing the character described under the name of Jesus, from its true function as the portrait of that of which every man has in him the potentiality. (Kingsford and Maitland 1890: 224)

[5]See, for example, Gandhi (1999: 34.322, 36.321, 39.65, 40.466, 68.368, 71.132, 81.261).

Kingsford and Maitland held that anyone could become "a Christ" or "Christ-Jesus" (Kingsford and Maitland 1890: 111, 217, 245, 296–297).

Once, when Gandhi was explicitly asked about his attitude toward the teaching of Jesus Christ, he replied:

> They have an immense moral value for me, but I do not regard everything said in the Bible as the final word of God. . . . Many passages in the Bible are mystical. For me "the letter killeth, the spirit giveth life." (Gandhi 1999: 34.322 [1926], see 44.192)

Conspicuous here is the concept of the Bible's "mystical" meaning, because the word mystical was seldom used by Gandhi.[6] It is striking that the same notion is found in the views of Kingsford and Maitland, who strongly differentiated between a mystical and literal meaning of the Bible, and granted validity only to the former. Regarding the interpretation of biblical concepts, they commented in *The Perfect Way*:

> The letter, it is declared, killeth; the letter and the spirit together have and confer life. For, while interpreted in one sense—the sense of the spirit—they are divine truths; interpreted in another sense—the sense of the letter—they are idolatrous falsehoods . . . those interpretations are idolatrous which give to mystical doctrines physical applications. Now, all Scripture given by inspiration of God is mystical. (Kingsford and Maitland 1890: 176–177)

Gandhi professed repeatedly that the historical Jesus had no special meaning for him. He wrote:

> I may say that I have never been interested in a historical Jesus. I should not care if it was proved by someone that the man called Jesus never lived, and that what was narrated in the Gospels was a figment of the writer's imagination. (Gandhi 1999: 54.308)

> But whether the Jesus tradition is historically true or not I do not care. To me it is truer than history. (Gandhi 1999: 92.346 [1946])

Kingsford and Maitland argued in the same manner against the "fallacy involved in the conception of religion as a thing dependent on history" (1890: 29), "Christ Jesus, then, is no other than the hidden, and true man

[6]At another point, however, he does give a "mystical" interpretation (in contrast to a "literal" one) of the biblical story of the virgin birth of Jesus (see Gandhi 1999: 68.367).

of the Spirit, the Perfect Humanity, the Express Image of the Divine Glory" (Kingsford and Maitland 1890: 111).

The teachings of Kingsford and Maitland made it possible for Gandhi to build a bridge between Hinduism and Christianity in two prominent areas, reincarnation and vegetarianism. Gandhi understood the belief in reincarnation to be universal and scientifically proven. He expressly pointed out that "an increasing number of Christians now believe in the possibility of the soul getting another body" (Gandhi 1999: 55.327–55.328). From sources, it is clear that the esoteric Christianity of Kingsford and Maitland, which considered reincarnation to be a part of the original Christian teaching, had from the outset for Gandhi a special significance (Gandhi 1999: 1.206). Kingsford and Maitland wrote:

> Not only is the doctrine (of reincarnation) respectable for its antiquity, universality, and the quality and character of those who, on the strength of their own experience, have borne testimony to it; it is indispensable to any system of thought which postulates Justice as an essential element of Being. (1890: 24)

Gandhi was particularly attracted by the radical commitment to vegetarianism within the Esoteric Christian Union. He frequently cited Kingsford when discussing questions about the vegetarian diet (Gandhi 1999: 1.239, 1.308, 13.31, 32.246, 37.199, 38.282, 38.385), and he shared, at least in his early years, the opinion that Jesus was also a vegetarian (Gandhi 1999: 1.206, 1.310, 44.128, 54.308).

Are there, though, other possible early influences on Gandhi's view of Christianity? His childhood and youth provide no clues. On the contrary, in his autobiography, he said that he "developed a sort of dislike" for Christianity in his youth, due to the impression he received from Christian missionaries (Gandhi 1999: 44.116). In London, he started to read the Bible and was impressed by the New Testament (Gandhi 1999: 44.143), but there is no hint of any other readings in Christian theology. Nor was he exposed to forms of liberal Christian theology (e.g., Harnack, Clarke, Johnson, or Conway) where it might have been possible to find similar views to what were to become his own (Jackson 1970; Wagner 1991). It is also doubtful if he spent time thinking about Christianity during his Indian intermezzo. At least, there is no textual evidence to support it. However, in South Africa, shortly before he re-established his contacts with the Christian Esoteric Union in 1894, he had a close encounter with evangelical missionaries, who got him to read certain books on Christianity (Gandhi 1999: 182). In his autobiography, Gandhi wrote that he turned to Kingsford and Maitland in reaction to the

theological exclusivism of these evangelical missionaries and their writings. As with Hinduism, Gandhi could have found confirmation of his newly developed views on Christianity in other contemporary Hindu reform movements. Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–84) and Pratap Chandra Majumdar (1840–1905), from the Bengal Brahmo Samaj, held similar views on Christianity (Thomas 1969; Kopf 1979). When Gandhi visited Calcutta, in 1896 and 1901–02, he was in contact with members of the Brahmo Samaj (Gandhi 1999: 42.392–42.394, 44.267). He attended several lectures of Majumdar and read his book on Keshab Chandra Sen. However, he never mentions clearly if they had any impact on his understanding of Christianity (see, for example, Gandhi 1999: 4.246).

Gandhi's understanding of Christianity was widely welcomed among Christians in India and Europe. The famous Indian missionary C. F. Andrews was inspired by Gandhi to break with the "sectarian spirit" that had "become so ingrained in Western Christianity" (Tinker 1979: 73, see also 84–87; Tidrick 2006: 189–191). Gandhi's combination of a basic high regard for the Christian message with a sharp critique of the praxis of Christianity of the time was also taken up by liberal Christians in Europe and North America as a fundamental challenge to the established churches. For Friedrich Heiler, Gandhi, "who in his religious thought and life is Hindu from head to toe," was "a better Christian than millions of baptised Christians" (Heiler 1926: 40). Agnes Maude Royden wrote: "It is a strange thing that Christians should feel, as many of us do, that the best Christian in the world to-day is a Hindu" (Royden 1939: 256). And Joseph Doke stressed: "Mr. Gandhi is not a Christian in any orthodox sense. Perhaps orthodox Christianity has itself to blame for this" (Doke 1956: 146). The significant point of this Christian reception of Gandhi has been aptly formulated by Otto Wolff: "Gandhi becomes the true heathen Christian in opposition to the Christian heathens" (Wolff 1955: 136). The reception of Gandhi and his critique of Christianity were understood, in the liberal theological circles of Europe and North America, as an external Hindu confirmation of their own search for a tolerant and individualized Christianity. Here, again, is another clear example of historical entanglement.

Religion

Gandhi assumed that all religions refer to the same "truth," which implies that "religion" is for him a basic comparative category and that there exists a "truth" that can be found in all religions. This is also the basic tenet of theosophy. Theosophy saw itself as standing above the historical religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. It was committed to the "one truth which finds expression in all the various religions" (Blavatsky 1889: 45). The theosophical scriptures claimed to prove the

"identity of fundamental doctrine in the old religions" (Blavatsky 1972: II.99), because they all stem from one original source. The Theosophical Society called on their members, therefore, not to give up their affiliation to the historical religions.

This commonality between Gandhi and theosophy is, in itself, of little instruction, but it becomes significant when similarity is found in their conceptual forms and phrasings. In 1925, Gandhi had his autobiography published under the motto *My Experiments with Truth*, since truth was one of the central categories in his thinking. Against the widespread view that Gandhi's idea of truth (*satya*) is almost exclusively rooted in Indian traditions (Basham 1971: 22–28; Chatterjee 1983: 58–74; Tidrick 2006: 83), it can be argued that it depended, in part, on theosophist language and ran conceptually parallel to theosophist beliefs. In his speeches, Gandhi occasionally characterized the Sanskrit saying *Satyannasti paro dharmah* as the central teaching of Hinduism, which he translated as "no religion other than or higher than truth" (Gandhi 1999: 30.376 [1925]).[7] His prominent use of this phrase is striking, because it is the central maxim of the Theosophical Society: "No Religion Higher Than Truth." According to theosophist statements, this phrase was originally the motto of an early Indian supporter, the Raja of Benares.[8] In 1881, with his permission, they took it over as the Society's motto. The phrase came originally from the Mahabharata (Ransom 1938: 150–151; Blavatsky 1979: I, xlii). Von Glasenapp has commented that the English translation is not a convincing one; it should be "there is no higher duty [*dharma*] than truthfulness" (1960: 196). The authoritative English translation of the Mahabharata, at Gandhi's time, also interpreted the verse in similar fashion to von Glasenapp.[9] The verse in this form was even cited by Gandhi himself in a compilation of quotations from the Indian tradition on the theme of truth (Gandhi 1999: 4.228 [1905])! It can be argued, therefore, from the extant evidence that Gandhi's interpretation of *Satyannasti paro dharmah* is dependent on the unconventional and less-than-obvious theosophist translation.[10]

---

[7]See the similarities in Gandhi (1999: 16.109, 40.103, and 68.260).

[8]This probably refers to Ishwari Narayan Singh, who ruled from 1835 to 1889 (see Dalmia 1997: 79). To date, I have found no independent confirmation of this motto.

[9]See Ganguli (1970: III.353): "There is no duty which is higher than Truth, and no sin more heinous than untruth" (Santi Parva, Section 162).

[10]Gandhi was apparently aware of the problem of translation when he wrote: "For me here was no *dharma* higher than truth and no *dharma* higher than the supreme duty of non-violence. The word *dharma* in my opinion has different connotations as used in the two statements. In other words it means that there cannot be an ideal higher than truth and there cannot be any duty higher than nonviolence" (1999: 68.260).

Gandhi reported that he was already fascinated by the special theosophical emphasis on truth whilst in London. He recalled a speech of Annie Besant that he attended in 1889, which made an impression on him:

> She said . . . that she would be quite satisfied to have the epitaph written on her tomb that she lived for truth and she died for truth. I had from my childhood an instinctive fascination for truth. The utter sincerity with which, I felt, she spoke these words captivated me. (Gandhi 1999: 19.11 [1919])

Truth for Gandhi, as for theosophy, was a constitutive and comparative category employed to compare the worth of religions: "Truth is superior to everything and I reject what conflicts with it" (Gandhi 1999: 71.2 [1937]). Blavatsky wrote: "There is, and can be, but one absolute truth in Kosmos . . . we still know, that if it is absolute it must also be omnipresent and universal; and that in such case it must be underlying every world-religion" (Blavatsky 1950–91: IX.8 [1888]). Other statements on truth by Gandhi also display a conspicuous parallel to theosophy. He often said that "Truth alone is God" (Gandhi 1999: 58.76 [1932], see also 55.255–55.256). Likewise, Blavatsky said that the one God, whom the Theosophists worship, is the "truth" (1950–91: VIII.58 ["Le seul Dieu qu'ils adorent est la *Vérité*," 1887]).

It is noticeable that Gandhi changed the way he related "Hinduism" to "religion" during his life (Jordens 1998: 148–158). Initially, he claimed that Hinduism was the best expression of truth and true religion: "What of substance is contained in any other religion is always to be contained in Hinduism. And what is not contained in it is insubstantial or unnecessary" (Gandhi 1999: 32.419 [1926]). From around 1930 onwards, he gave up this implicit claim of Hinduism's superiority and emphasized the basic equality of all religions: "For me all the principal religions are equal in the sense that they are all true" (Gandhi 1999: 63.354 [1934]). What remained unchanged was his concept of truth.

Again, the question has to be asked if there could be other early sources for this understanding of truth. When Gandhi stayed in London, theosophists were not the only ones who favored a comparative and relativizing approach to religion. Max Müller, the famous orientalist and one of the founders of religious studies, in an early phase believed that an original religion could be elicited and studied from the oldest religious sources. Later on, he represented the view that the various religions expressed the revelation of God through their different languages. In historical development, the religions diverged in their actual teachings, but he hoped that "the ancient religion . . . in all its purity and brightness" would once again show itself in the future (Müller 1893: 50). Müller held that the academic study of religions at the universities would help to recover the former glory of the religions. No appeal is made by him to the occult or esoteric traditions. Theosophy was aware, though, of their own similarity to Müller's standpoint, which was emphasized by Blavatsky, who wanted theosophy to be understood and known for a comparative and scientific approach to the study of religions (Blavatsky 1950–91: XIII.300; Blavatsky 1979: I.xxx, I.xli). There is, nevertheless, no evidence to suggest that Gandhi read Max Müller's works or those of other orientalists when he was in London. Nowhere in his collected writings does Gandhi refer to their ideas on comparative religion.

In his autobiography, Gandhi did write that he experienced an atmosphere of religious tolerance and pluralism in his youth in Gujarat. Though staunch members of the Vallabha community, his parents would also visit temples of Shiva and Rama, and they had contacts with Jains, Muslims, and Parsis. In Gandhi's assessment, "these many things combined to inculcate in me a toleration for all faiths" (Gandhi 1999: 44.116). He does not, though, mention any specific Indian concept or textual tradition; he highlights an unspecific, prereflexive atmosphere of religious tolerance. However, his biographer and long-time associate, Pyarelal, wrote that the parents of his mother "belonged to a sect known as Pranami or Satpranami" (Pyarelal 1965: 213; Hardiman 2003: 157; Toffin 2011: 16 n. 30). He quoted from reminiscences that Gandhi shared with him personally:

> After my marriage, my mother took me to this [Pranami-] temple also. It was the only temple of its kind in Porbandur . . . there were no idols or images in it; and on the walls there was writing that looked very much like texts from the *Koran*. The dress that the priests wore was unlike what Hindu priests in temples generally wear and their way of praying resembled somewhat that of the Muslims. . . . At one time, they were even looked upon as crypto-Muslims. (Pyarelal 1965: 214)

The Pranami belong to the Sant-tradition, which flourished as a popular bhakti movement in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries. Combining different traditions, like Nath-Yoga and Sufism, they taught the veneration of a formless God beyond all modes of institutionalized worship, be it Brahmanical ritualism or Hanafi Islam (Toffin 2011). They clearly had a comparative agenda that claimed knowledge of God beyond existing religious traditions (Bergunder 2013). There are, here, some similarities to Gandhi's approach. Yet, on closer inspection, it seems unlikely that Gandhi received any conceptual input from the Pranami tradition. First, he obviously did not know it well. He even "had forgotten the exact

details of the temple building" when he told Pyarelal about the temple visit (Pyarelal 1965: 214). Second, Pyarelal confirmed, as Gandhi wrote in his autobiography, that his mother, Putaliba, "rigidly conformed to orthodox practices" (1965: 214) of the Vallabha community. She is nowhere characterized as a member of the Pranami community or as someone who knows their doctrines. This is important because, at that time, the Pranami teachings were kept secret from outsiders (Toffin 2011: 17), and Gandhi could have only known them if his mother was initiated. Third, even Pyarelal does not explicitly say that Gandhi was in any way influenced by Pranami thought. Fourth, there is no textual evidence in which Gandhi expresses his thoughts using the framework of the Sant tradition. When he did speak about the Sant tradition, he was rather critical. His *Lectures on Religion*, given at the invitation of the Theosophical Society in Johannesburg in 1905, are an early reference to the Sant tradition. He wrote a summary of the lectures for a South African newspaper, where he also referred to Kabir and Nanak:

> Kabir . . . attempted to bring about a synthesis between Hinduism and Islam; but it did not have much effect, and his became no more than a distinct sect, and it exists even to-day. Some years later, Guru Nanak . . . accepted the reasoning of Kabir and made a similar attempt to fuse the two religions. (Gandhi 1999: 4.245, see also 4.209)

Gandhi based his comparative approach on the modern concept of religion, and he considered Hinduism a religion, but he saw the Sant tradition differently. In a later statement, he pointed out the difference:

> I hope that nobody will bring up here the history of the attempts by Guru Nanak and Kabir to unite Hindus and Muslims; for the effort today is not for uniting the religions, but for uniting hearts, despite the differences of religion. (Gandhi 1999: 22.289 [1921])

Gandhi appreciated Sant poetry and quoted from it (e.g., Gandhi 1999: 4.231, 6.270), but only as part of the broad stream of Hindu traditions. At times he paralleled Hindu and Muslim concepts—Khuda/Ishwar (Gandhi 1999: 423, 459), Kaaba/Kashi (Gandhi 1999: 29:469), or Rama/Rahim (Gandhi 47:41)—in a way characteristic of the Sant tradition. Yet he never explained its usage or related it explicitly to the Sant tradition. In short, there is no evidence that Gandhi's comparative notion of religion was inspired by Pramani teachings.

Gandhi sometimes attributed his theory of truth to the Jain principle of *anekantavada*, concerning the multiplicity and relativity of views

(Gandhi 1999: 26.288, 33.410, 59.496, 60.131; see also Hay 1970). This points toward his Indian intermezzo and to Virchand Gandhi, who interpreted the Jain tradition in the context of "religion." At the closing of the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Virchand Gandhi cited the parable of the blind men and the elephant, the traditional Jain metaphor illustrating *anekantavada* (Barrows 1893: I.171). However, Gandhi never acknowledged any direct influence from Virchand Gandhi. The matter is more complex with Raychandbhai, Gandhi's other early Jain contact. Raychandbhai did not mention *anekantavada* in the three letters he sent to South Africa during 1894–96, and he does not elaborate on it in his writings (Jordens 1998: 149). If at all, Raychandbhai's poetry only alludes to the concept "in a practical, simple, and pithy fashion" (Jordens 1998: 150). When Gandhi wrote an introduction to an edition of Raychandbhai's letters and writings, he explicitly highlighted Raychandbhai's tolerant attitude toward other religions, but did not refer to the concept of *anekantavada*: "Raychandbhai used to say that the different faiths were like so many walled enclosures in which men and women were confined. He whose aim in life is to attain *moksha* need not give exclusive devotion to a particular faith" (Gandhi 1999: 36.477). Curiously, Gandhi concluded the introduction to Raychandhai with some words that clearly refer to the concept of *anekantavada*, but these represent his own opinion rather than that of Raychandbhai:

> My own belief is that every religion is perfect from the point of view of its followers and imperfect from that of the followers of other faiths. Examined from an independent point of view, every religion is both perfect and imperfect. (Gandhi 1999: 36.477)

Gandhi, then, does not credit Raychandbhai as having taught him *anekantavada*. In the few places where Gandhi refers to this concept, he hardly goes beyond quoting the parable of the elephant and the blind men, and he never mentions any specific philosophical aspect. He suggested, instead, that his adoption of *anekantavada* was distilled through Advaita Vedanta: "[*Anekantavada*] is the most important thing that I have learnt from Jain philosophy. It is implicit in Vedanta philosophy, while in Jain philosophy it is explicitly stated" (Gandhi 1999: 26.289 [1922]). He also made clear: "I have . . . no objection being called an *anekantavadi* or a *syadvadi*. But my *syadvada* is not the *syadvada* of the learned, it is peculiarly my own. I cannot engage in a debate with them" (Gandhi 1999: 33.410 [1926]). This all leads to the conclusion that Gandhi's use of *anekantavada* was rather loose, and the potential Jain influence on his concept of religion should not be overstated.

Gandhi's notion of religion also came to influence debates in Europe and North America. His religious universalism played an important legitimizing role in the "theology of religions" (Chatterjee 1983; Hall 1989; Sugirtharajah 2012). John Hick explicitly refers to Gandhi as an authentic "non-Westerner" who "believed that religious pluralism was not only true but was a necessary basis for peace. . . . And behind Gandhi there stands a very ancient pluralistic religious outlook in India" (1995: 34–35). In such a way, Gandhi's theosophical understanding of religious truth was turned into a traditional, "non-western" Hindu source for a "western" theology of religion.

CONCLUSION

There is, then, strong textual evidence to suggest that Gandhi's notion of Hinduism, his specific view of Christianity, and his general belief that all religions refer to the same truth were shaped by esotericism. The crucial task, however, is putting these findings into perspective. It needs to be acknowledged that esotericism played an important role in the global religious history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the current academic paradigm of a purely "Western Esotericism" requires revision. For Indians like Gandhi, esotericism was an entry point into orientalist discourse and, at the same time, it provided opportunities for a critical resignification of its contents, which in turn impacted on orientalist notions.

A global history approach has been shown to provide a practical methodology for focusing on three closely interrelated points. First, the impact of esotericism, as part of orientalist discourse, has been established. Second, close attention was given to Gandhi's concrete appropriation of esotericism, and the question as to the influence of Indian traditions was also addressed. Third, it was possible to ask how Gandhi came to inform religious views in Europe and North America with his appropriated notions. The concepts in play are all understood as products of global "entangled histories." In a more general sense, this article has shown how a global history approach can help to investigate discourses on religion in a more comprehensive manner.

REFERENCES

Aloysius, G. 1997 — *Nationalism without a Nation in India.* Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.

Barrows, John Henry, ed. 1893 — *The World's Parliament of Religions.* Chicago, IL: Parliament Publishing Company.

Barz, Richard 1976 — *The Bhakti Sect of Vallabhācārya.* Faridabad, India: Thomson Press.

Basham, A. L. 1971 — "Traditional Influences on the Thought of Mahatma Gandhi." In *Essays on Gandhian Politics*, ed. R. Kumar, 17–42. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.

Bayly, Christopher A. 2004 — *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Bergunder, Michael 2006 — "Die Bhagavadgita im 19. Jahrhundert." In *Westliche Formen des Hinduismus in Deutschland*, ed. Michael Bergunder, 187–216. Halle, Germany: Franckesche Stiftungen.

2010 — "What Is Esotericism?" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22/1:9–36.

2013 — "Religionsvergleich in der nordindischen Nirguna-Bhakti des 15. bis 17. Jahrhunderts?" In *Religion in Asien?*, ed. Peter Schalk et al., 43–80. Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala Universitet.

2014 — "What Is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26 (forthcoming).

Bevir, Mark 1998 — "In Opposition to the Raj." *History of Political Thought* 19:61–77.

2000 — "Theosophy as a Political Movement." In *Gurus and Their Followers*, ed. Antony Copley, 159–179. Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.

Beyer, Peter 2006 — *Religions in Global Society.* London, UK: Routledge.

Bhabha, Homi K. 1994 — *The Location of Culture.* London, UK: Routledge.

Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna 1889 — *The Key to Theosophy.* London, UK: Theosophical Publishing Company.

1950–91 — *Collected Writings.* 15 vols. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House.

1972 — *Isis Unveiled.* New ed. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House.

1979 *The Secret Doctrine*. 7th (Adyar) ed. Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House.

Bloch, Esther et al., ed. 2010 *Rethinking Religion in India*. London, UK: Routledge.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2000 *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chatterjee, Margaret 1983 *Gandhi's Religious Thought*. London, UK: Macmillan.

Conrad, Sebastian and Shalini Randeria, ed. 2002 *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus*. Frankfurt, Germany: Campus.

Cyranka, Daniel 2013 "'Hindu Instinct'? Gandhis Hinduismus und die Religionen." In *Gott—Götter—Götzen*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel, 750–767. Leipzig, Germany: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.

Dalmia, Vasudha 1997 *The Nationalisation of Hindu Traditions*. Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.

Dirks, Nicholas B. 2001 *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dixon, Joy 2001 *Divine Feminine*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Doke, Joseph J. 1956 *M. K. Gandhi: Indian Patriot in South Africa*. Varanasi, India: Khil Bharat Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan.

Ellsberg, Robert, ed. 1991 *Gandhi on Christianity*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Faivre, Antoine 2006 "Kocku von Stuckrad et la Notion D'Esotérisme." *Aries* 6:205–214.

Fischer, Louis 1990 *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World*. Bombay, India: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

Fox, Richard G. 1989 *Gandhian Utopia*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Gandhi, M. K. 1999 *The Life and Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. 100 vols. (CD-ROM), Government of India – Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. New Delhi, India: Icon Softec.

Ganguli, Kisari Mohan 1970 *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa. Translated into English Prose from the Original Sanskrit Text*. New Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal.

von Glasenapp, Helmuth 1933/1934 "Die Lehre Vallabhâcāryas." *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Iranistik* 9:268–330.

1960 *Das Indienbild deutscher Denker*. Stuttgart, Germany: Koehler.

Godwin, Joscelyn 1994 *The Theosophical Enlightenment*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Halbfass, Wilhelm 1990 *India and Europe*. Delhi, India: Motilal Barnarsidass.

Hall, Elton 1989 "Gandhi's Religious Universalism." In *Gandhi's Significance for Today*, ed. John Hick and Lamont C. Hempel, 166–181. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.

Hammer, Olav and Mikael Rothstein, ed. 2013 *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*. Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2012 *Esotericism and the Academy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

2013 *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Hardiman, David 2003 *Gandhi in His Times and Ours*. Delhi, India: Permanent Black.

Hay, Stephen N. 1970 "Jain Influences on Gandhi's Early Thought." In *Gandhi, India and the World*, ed. Sibnarayan Ray, 14–23. Bombay, India: Nachiketa Publications.

Heiler, Friedrich 1926 *Christlicher Glaube und Indisches Geistesleben*. München, Germany: Ernst Reinhardt.

Hick, John 1995 *A Christian Theology of Religions*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Hunt, James D. 1983 "Gandhi and the Theosophists." In *Studies on Gandhi*, ed. V. T. Patil, 163–176. New Delhi, India: Sterling.

1986 *Gandhi and the Nonconformists*. New Delhi, India: Promilla.

1993 *Gandhi in London*. New Delhi, India: Promilla.

Jackson, Carl T. 1970 "The Orient in Post-Bellum American Thought." *American Quarterly* 22:67–81.

Jordens, J. T. F. 1970 "Gandhi's Religion and Hindu Heritage." In *Gandhi, India and the World*, ed. Sibnarayan Ray, 24–41. Bombay, India: Nachiketa Publications.

1986 "Gandhi and the Bhagavadgita." In *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita*, ed. Robert N. Minor, 88–109. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

1998 *Gandhi's Religion*. London, UK: Macmillan.

King, Richard 1999 *Orientalism and Religion*. London, UK: Routledge.

Kingsford, Anna and Edward Maitland 1890 *The Perfect Way, or, the Finding of Christ*. 3rd ed. London, UK: Field and Tuer.

Kippenberg, Hans G. 2002 *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kopf, David 1979 *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lavoie, Jeffrey D. 2013 *The Theosophical Society*. Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press.

Lelyveld, Joseph 2012 *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*. New York, NY: Vintage.

Masuzawa, Tomoko 2005 *The Invention of World Religions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

McMahan, David L. 2009 *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Moniz, John 1996 *"Liberated Society"—Gandhian and Christian Vision: Comparative Study*. Rome, Italy: Pontificia Universitá Gregoriana.

Müller, Friedrich Max 1893 *Introduction to the Science of Religion*. New ed. London, UK: Longmans.

Muthanna, I. M. 1986 *Mother Besant and Mahatma Gandhi*. Vellore, India: Thenpulam Publishers.

Nagappa Gowda, K. 2011 *The Bhagavadgita in the Nationalist Discourse*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.

Oberhammer, Gerhard, ed. 1983 *Inklusivismus*. Wien, Austria: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien.

Oppenheim, Janet 1985 *The Other World*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Osterhammel, Jürgen 2009 *Die Verwandlung der Welt*. München, Germany: Beck.

Owen, Alex 2004 *The Place of Enchantment*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Pennington, Brian K. 2005 *Was Hinduism Invented?* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Pyarelal 1965 *Mahatma Gandhi, Volume I. The Early Phase*. Ahmadabad, India: Navajivan Publishing House.

Ransom, Josephine, ed. 1938 *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*. Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House.

Risseuw, Carla 2000 "Thinking Culture through Counter-culture." In *Gurus and Their Followers*, ed. Antony Copley, 180–205. Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.

Royden, Agnes Maude 1939 "An Englishwoman's Faith." In *Mahatma Gandhi*, ed. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, 256–261. London, UK: Allen and Unwin.

Rudolph, Lloyd I. and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph 2006 *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Said, Edward W. 1979 *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Vintage.

Sharpe, Eric J. 1985 — *The Universal Gita*. La Salle, IL: Open Court.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 1994 — "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, 66–111. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

von Stuckrad, Kocku 2004 — *Was Ist Esoterik?* München, Germany: Beck.

Sugirtharajah, Sharada 2012 — "The Mahatma and the Philosopher." In *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World*, ed. Sharada Sugirtharajah, 121–133. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.

Thaker, Dhirubhai 1983 — *Manilal Dvivedi*. New Delhi, India: Sahitya Academy.

Thomas, M. M. 1969 — *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*. London, UK: SCM Press.

Tidrick, Kathryn 2006 — *Gandhi: A Political and Spiritual Life*. London, UK: I. B. Tauris.

Tinker, Hugh 1979 — *The Ordeal of Love: C. F. Andrews and India*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.

Toffin, Gérard 2011 — "The Propagation of a Hindu Sect in India and Nepal." *South Asia* 34:1–30.

van der Veer, Peter 1994 — *Religious Nationalism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

2001 — *Imperial Encounters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Wagner, Falk 1991 — *Was Ist Religion?* 2nd ed. Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn.

Wolff, Otto 1955 — *Mahatma und Christus*. Berlin, Germany: Lettner-Verlag.

Young, Robert J. C. 2001 — *Postcolonialism*. London, UK: Blackwell.