

REVIEWS

GANDHI, AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. The Story of my Experiments with Truth. Translated from the Gujarati by Mahadev Desai. (Phoenix Press, 1949; 21s.)

This is the story of one of the greatest men of our time. Great, that is to say, in the Christian sense of the term, in humility.

'The seeker after truth', says Gandhi, 'should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him.'

Gandhi's family was of the *bania* or tradesmen's caste settled in the romantic Rajput state of Kathiawar where the exquisite little horses (not only in Rajput painting but still today) have ears pointing inwards and nearly meeting in an arch over their heads. Though he often went to the Vaishnava temple he was educated in a British Government school and seems to have received no doctrinal training in his own branch of Hinduism. His whole life therefore has been one long seeking after God through experiments with different religious theories and by the practice of extreme mortifications.

It is interesting to reflect that in the case of a great Catholic reformer, St Vincent de Paul, the Saint's social reforms were a by-product of his spirituality, whereas with Gandhi it was the other way about: he seems to have found his spiritual feet *through* his reforming work: 'I had made the religion of service my own, as I felt that God could be realised only through service'. After some 20 years of married life he became convinced that without the observance of *brahmacharya* (the way to God through chastity) service of the family would be inconsistent with service of the community. With *brahmacharya* they would be perfectly consistent. So he took the vow to observe chastity in the married state. He found the keeping of it no easy affair, aiming as he did at the perfection of *brahmacharya* which precludes even an impure thought. He realised that perfection or freedom from error comes only from grace: 'without an unreserved surrender to His grace, complete mastery over thought is impossible'.

The other Hindu doctrine which he considered essential for the realisation of God was that of *Ahimsa*—the non-violation of a fellow being by thought, word or deed: and by a fellow being a Hindu includes animals and plants; a Jain adds stones as well (this book should contain a glossary of Sanskrit terms, I am indebted to Professor Betty Heimann for the interpretations here given) and this, of course, led to his celebrated passive resistance movement known as *Satyagraha* (from *Sat*: truth, *Agraha*: firmness).

Gandhi believed in original sin, in grace, in the power of prayer: 'Prayer needs no speech. It is in itself independent of any sensuous effort. I have not the slightest doubt that prayer is an unailing

means of cleansing the heart of passions. But it must be combined with the utmost humility.' And this is what he has to say about (extra sacramental) confession: 'A clean confession, combined with a promise never to commit the sin again, when offered before one who has the right to receive it, is the purest type of repentance'.

Did he ever think of becoming a Christian? He assured a Protestant friend who took him to a three-day convention that nothing could prevent him from embracing Christianity *should he feel the call*. He does not mention any discussions with Catholics. But the call certainly did not come and the great obstacle in the way, as with all Hindus, was the Incarnation. It is very difficult for a Hindu to accept the idea of our blessed Lord being the only begotten son of God. 'If God could have sons', Gandhi argued, 'all of us were His sons. If Jesus was like God, or God Himself, then all men were like God and *could be God Himself*.' It is the old Vedanta idea of becoming one with God which differs from the Catholic idea of union in this: Shankara says it is simply a question of realising our primary and unbroken unity: we are according to Hindu theology consubstantial with God himself. To a Catholic this is unthinkable. We can share in the divine Nature, but we can never become of one substance with it: there must always remain a distinct gulf between the Creator and the creature.

In this autobiography Gandhi describes his life and work in South Africa and India as well as his student days in England. He describes his experiment in dietetics which he started for health but continued for religious reasons and speaks of the trials and disappointments he often suffered when he tried to help his fellow-countrymen: 'It is the reformer who is anxious for the reform and not society, from which he should expect nothing better than opposition, abhorrence and even mortal persecution'. 'The more they curse you, the more you must love them', said St Vincent to the newest little Sister of Charity at the end of the film *Monsieur Vincent*. And this is just what Mahatma Gandhi did throughout his life: he harboured no grudges against officials who insulted him, he bore no resentment when he came in contact with the colour bar, he fought on for the rights of the oppressed in spite of perpetual trials and frequent failures. Sometimes his family suffered from his steadfast adherence to his principles, especially when these were in the experimental stage, and his poor wife Kasturbai underwent many hardships and disappointments on his behalf. But those who read this frank and humble account of his experiments with truth will agree that Gandhi corresponded freely with the very great graces God gave him, and went far in the realisation of his ideal of charity to all living creatures.

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