Chapter 6

The Ultimate Presupposition of Conversion
(i) Introduction

In the previous chapter, we considered the missionaries' attempt at conversion on the basis of their presuppositions regarding (a) doctrinal superiority of their religion, and (b) the superiority of their religious practices over the Hindu practices. But these presuppositions themselves were ultimately based upon another fundamental presupposition namely that their religion alone was the Truth, and that other religions were false, or at best partially true. This ultimate presupposition was claimed to be founded on certain points of uniqueness, as well as the ultimate presupposition based upon it, have been disputed by Hindus. It is this controversy which we are going to consider in this chapter.

Many attempts, on the part of Christians, have been made to explicate their ultimate presupposition about religions in a systematic way, and in an academic fashion, particularly from the standpoint of Comparative Religion. A clear illustration of such an attempt may be found in H.Kraemer's book: Why Christianity of all Religions? We shall take his thesis in that book as representative of the Christian missionaries' position.
As against the position of the missionaries, there has been a counter-claim viz. that Truth in religion can have many forms of beliefs, practices, and yet each form of belief and practice can be adequate, so that all religions are equally true to their respective believers. This view has been strongly represented by Mahatma Gandhi.

Both Kraemer as well as Gandhi are deeply concerned with the problem of conversion, one leading to the advocacy of conversion, the other to the opposition of it. The presuppositions of both the persons are dealing with the fundamental issues of the nature of religion and religious differences. It is these two contrasting positions that we are going to consider in this chapter. Our concern here is only to present a clear, but brief account of the parties to the controversy, postponing our analysis of those positions to the next chapter. Our concern again is only with the logical issues behind such positions, not with the historical aspects of the controversy. In fact Kraemer and Gandhi might not even have met each other, leave alone held disputes with each other. We shall first present Kraemer's position, then Gandhi's position, also deriving the implications of the respective positions.

(ii) Kraemer's position

The problem that K. discusses in his book, referred to above, is "the position of Christianity vis-a-vis the
other religions," or "the standing of Christianity in relation to the other religions: the question of truth." He raises this problem from the side of Christianity. Because, the "encounter" of Christianity with the other religions, with their rival claims to being the truth, is shaking "faithful" Christians to question the very credentials of Christianity, they are forced to face up to the question: "What do we really mean when we so confidently and positively affirm that Christianity has the truth and is the truth?" After analysing a few possible answers K. attempts to give an answer. Just the outline of his answer may be given here, in respect of the points of uniqueness which he claims to be the grounds for conversion.

(a) The absolutely distinctive and unique element in Christianity is the 'fact' of Jesus Christ. He states this in opposition to the fact of Buddha, Mohammed and so on. Confucius for example, was only a teacher, who gave out a code for living within the moral and natural orders. Likewise Buddha was only a Pathfinder who discovered and promulgated a "way" of release from life, which consists essentially of suffering, change and impomanence. Mohammed is only a Messenger and a bearer of Revelation "sent down" to him. Whereas Jesus presents Himself as the Truth, the Way, and the Life. He does not give out certain principles deduced from Him. Nor is He just the mediator of a Revelation. He is Himself 'God Revealed', the tangible, visible Revelation
of God. And He demands of men to have faith in Him as such, and not in certain principles deduced from Him.

(b) Hence, a convinced Christian, as K. himself is, cannot but take up Christ Himself as the criterion of judgement and evaluation, while considering such a basic question as the relation of Christianity to the other religions, and truth in the religions. Such a criterion may look 'unscientific', from the standpoint of Comparative Religion, for it usually follows a 'neutral approach.' And, it is supposed to use a normative concept of religion, extrapolated from various religions. But K. contends that merely an attitude of detachment cannot get closer to the truth in religion. For, truth in religion is never a "knowing" from without, but involves a living, and it is only in the context of bearing witness one can develop one's reasonable argument. In fact it is the so-called neutral approach which he says, has led to a "blind spot", the inability to cope with the hard core of the philosophical problems. A further defence is that his criterion is after all not that subjective. Because, Jesus Christ is taken as the criterion from out of His givenness, His "depositedness", His "objectivity", the total witness of the Apostles and evangelists in the New Testament.
(c) The fundamental fact about man is the religious-cum-moral problem of his existence, i.e. the disruption of his relationship to God, (and so towards himself and his fellows), the sheer contrariety and utter mysteriousness of man, his wretchedness and his greatness, his half-way between ape and angel, the consciousness of bondage and the need to be released from it, a yearning and striving to get at a flawless state of being. In short, there is this basic fact about man, which the Bible calls 'sin'. Whereas the other religions, according to K., never give any real weight to this fundamental fact, nevertheless, they recognise it and call it often by different names. But it remains essentially secondary and incidental and is never treated as the central mystery demanding solution. In that far, these religions are bound to be "in error", because they do not fully and realistically envisage just how serious is the problem constituted by man.

(d) The fact of Jesus Christ, narrated in the Bible, is actually the fact of God-disclosed to man in order to meet man in his "strange impotence". Thus the gruesome fact of sin is actually overcome by the Revelation in the person of Christ, in the Bible, with its insistence on the centrality of forgiveness, propitiation, sanctification and redemption. Whereas the other religions fail to give any adequate account of the sheer contrariety, the utter mysteriousness of man.
Ultimately they are all religions of self-redemption, self-justification, self-sanctification, and therefore, they are bound to be erroneous in their ultimate and essential meaning and significance.\(^\text{17}\)

(e) Christianity \textit{in toto} is itself far from being a revelation of God. Rather it is like other religions, in so far as it is a concrete and historical phenomenon, and so it has the full share of human frailty, and trivialities, it commits blunders and deserves criticism it has the mixture of truth and error and so on. But in so far as it has Jesus Christ as its centre, and continues to bring out the Redemption which Jesus brought to this world, it is essentially different from the rest of religions.\(^\text{18}\)

(f) The implication of all the above stages of K's argument is not far to speak. In fact K. himself spells it out in unambiguous terms. The sum and substance of all the stages above is (a) that while all other religions are self-discoveries and self-realizations, Christianity arises out of the Revelation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ,\(^\text{19}\) and (b) that the Revelation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ is discontinuous even with what is normally held to be what is best in the other religions, and presents us with an entirely new world of facts and norms, such as never did rise within the heart of man and such as involves a total
uprooting. So, from this E. concludes: "That is why 'conversion' as the 'way in' to this holds such a central place in the Christian message and by the same token the call to be 'converted' needs to be heard as loudly and as often within the realms of Christianity as in those of the 'other' religions, because 'being converted' means not 'being converted' to Christianity but to Jesus Christ."^21

To sum up, the whole position of K, we may mention these points: (a) The unique fact of Jesus Christ, God-revealed. It becomes the criterion for deciding the truth of all the religions. (c) The Biblical description of sin is the unique depiction of the fundamental predicament of man. (d) Further, this predicament of man is uniquely overcome only in the Biblical delineation of the Redemption by Christ. Hence (e) although Christianity may have the same human imperfections as any human phenomenon, yet it is unique in this that it arises out of Christ and has Him as its centre. Finally therefore, (f) there is the need for conversion "into" Christianity.

(iii) Gandhi's position

It may be convenient to expound Gandhi's stand in correspondence to the different stages, outlined with reference to K's position, above.
(a) As against the basic point of K., viz., the uniqueness of the 'fact' of Christ, Gandhi observes that there is no point in comparing the 'fact' of Jesus with those of other founders of religions. "The simple reason is that we have no data. Historically, we have more data about Mohammed than anyone else because he was more recent in time. For Jesus, there is less data and still less for Buddha, Rama and Krishna; and when we know so little about them, is it not preposterous to say that one of them was more divine than another? In fact, even if there were a great deal of data available, no judge should shoulder the burden of sifting all the evidence, if only for this reason that it requires a highly spiritual person to gauge the degree of divinity of the subjects he examines. To say that Jesus was 99 per cent divine, and Mohammed 50 per cent, and Krishna 10 per cent, is to arrogate to oneself a function which really does not belong to me."22

But a Christian might argue that the sacred writers of the Bible speak of Christ as the 'God-revealed', 'the only Son of God' and so on. Can they be wrong? Gandhi's reply is that what is said in the Bible need not be taken literally. He felt sorry that his Christian friends "gave literal meaning to every text of the Bible in spite of its clear statement that 'the letter killeth, the spirit giveth life'."23 Gandhi
also gives reasons for not taking the epithets about Christ literally. As regards the epithet first mentioned, i.e. Christ as 'God-revealed', Gandhi has this comment to make: The very fact that we say God is revealed or incarnated in this or that historical person, God, who alone is absolutely perfect, becomes subject to the limitation of matter, time and space." When he descends to earth, He, of His own accord, limits Himself. Jesus died on the Cross because He was limited by the flesh."24 As regards the other epithet, ('the only Son of God') also, Gandhi contends that a literal meaning cannot be given because, "God can't marry and beget children. The word 'son' there can only be used in a figurative sense (in a spiritual sense). In that sense everyone, who stands in the position of Jesus, is a begotten son of God. If a man is spiritually miles ahead of us, we may say that he is in a special sense, the son of God, though we are all children of God. We repudiate in our lives, whereas his life is a witness to that relationship."25

Thus according to Gandhi there is nothing unique in the Biblical statements about Christ as it was traditionally taken to be. But that does not mean he failed to recognise the significance of Jesus Christ. "The adjective 'begotten' has, for me," he said, "a deeper and possibly a grander meaning than its literal meaning. For me it implies spiritual birth. In his own times he was the nearest to God."26
(b) As regards K's taking up Christ as the criterion of his living, Gandhi will not dispute with him. He would only wish that the Christian also did not dispute with a Hindu having his own criterion of living. "The greatest trouble with the Christian missionary is not that he should rely on his own experience, but that he should dispute the evidence of a Hindu devotee's life. Just as he has his spiritual experience and the joy of communion, even so has a Hindu." He would further assert that another may take up something else as the criterion, and evaluate the religions in his own way. Thus for example referring to his own religion Gandhi said: "Hinduism with its message of Ahimsa, is to me the most glorious religion in the world -- as my wife to me is the most beautiful woman in the world -- but others may feel the same about their own religion." 

So he asked a Christian not to impose the same criterion for the whole world: "You cannot possibly say that what is best for you is best for all. Quinine may be the only means of saving life in your case, but a dangerous poison in the case of another." And he would remind the Christian of this fact that their belief in Christ as the fulfilment of God's revelation to mankind, was itself one that has been handed down to the believer from generation to generation, the truth of which thousands of Christians born, are never called upon
to test for themselves, and rightly so. Surely it is dangerous to present it to those who have been brought up in a different belief... It is highly likely that mine may be good for me and his for him. A thick woollen coat would be the best thing for one living in the cold regions of the earth, just as a piece of loincloth for another living near the equatorial regions.\(^30\) (III-65). Gandhi also brings another striking example to bear out this point: "Because you adore your mother, you cannot wish that all the rest were your mother's children (Just as that is a physical impossibility) this one is a spiritual impossibility. God has the whole humanity as His children. How can I limit God's grace by my little mind and say this is the only way?\(^31\)

But K. will insist that the criterion of Jesus is not that subjective as Gandhi tries to make it to be. Jesus is clearly described in the New Testament, as an objective fact of God's Revelation to man - as borne out by the total witness of the Apostles and evangelists. It is this fact, of Christ being God-revealed, that commands him to be the standard of evaluating all religions. As against this, Gandhi will bluntly say: "You don't know the Jesus of history. He exists in the pages of histories. Gibbon and Farrar have given their own records about him. Whom am I to believe? It is not Jesus of history who really rules over the lives of
Christians; it is the Jesus of their own imagination who
dies so. Similarly, with reference to his own faith Gandhi
says: "I know Krishna not as a historical figure, but as an
embodiment of perfection." He would further add: "The
God of my imagination rules my life, and not the God of your
imagination. A time comes when the whole thing transcends
reason. Krishna has transformed the lives of tens of thousands
of men, and many instances of this transformation can be
cited. The same is true of other teachers of mankind."

Gandhiji also points out that religion can never be
based on history. If it is so based, faith would be under-
mind. Divine knowledge is not borrowed from books, It
has to be realized in oneself. Books are at best an aid,
often even hindrance. Truth has to be lived, if it is to
fructify. But if one insists that he will base his faith
on historical fact then Gandhi would point out to him that
"that would land one into the region of interpretation, which
he would not enter into it. He would merely suggest "that
God did not bear the Cross only 1900 years ago, but He bears
it today. It would be poor comfort to the world if it had
to depend upon a historical God who died 2,000 years ago. Do
not then preach the God of history, but show Him as He lives
today through you." Referring to a number of books — Pearson,
Parker and Butler — all giving their own interpretations,
Gandhi says that we should not bother ourselves with these
conflicting interpretations. It is better to allow our lives to speak for us than our words. 38

(c) As against K's claim that Bible alone has given a serious thought to the fundamental predicament of man, Gandhi contends that Hindu Scriptures also have given equal thought to this. This he substantiates particularly with reference to his interpretation of Gita. "Even when I first became acquainted with the Gita" he says, "I felt that it was not a historical work, but that under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring. 39 He further claims that this preliminary intuition became more confirmed on a closer study of religion and the Gita. And he also says that a study of the Mahabharata gave it additional confirmation. There is internal evidence, in support of this interpretation. He has sound reasons for his interpretation. 40 Without going into those reasons, we may just mention here his observations only.

Gandhi regards Gita as pre-eminently a description of the duel that goes on in our own hearts, 41 and not as a description of, or an exhortation to physical warfare. 42
Not even is it to be taken as a demonstration of war as a delusion and a folly. The fight is there, true, but the fight as it is going on within. The Pandavas and Kauravas are the forces of good and evil within. Duryodhana and his party as the baser impulses in man, and Arjuna and his party as the higher impulses. The field of battle is our own body. An eternal battle is going on between the two camps and the poet-seer has vividly described it. Krishna is the Dweller within, ever whispering in a pure heart. Like the watch, the heart needs the winding of purity or the Dweller ceases to speak. The war is the war between Jekyll and Hyde, God and Satan, going on in the hearts of man. "It deals with an eternal duel between good and evil. And who does not, like Arjuna, often quail when the dividing line between good and evil is thin and when the right choice is so difficult?"

"Why evil exists and what it is, are questions which appear to be beyond our limited reason. It should be enough to know that both good and evil exist. And as often we can distinguish between good and evil, we must choose the one and shun the other." It is in this context, according to Gandhi that the Divine author of the Gita has used a historical incident for inculcating the lesson of doing one's duty, even at the peril of one's life. It inculcates performance of
duty, irrespective of the consequences, it distinguishes between the powers of light and darkness and demonstrates their incompatibility. Even the whole of the Mahabharata is the spiritual history of man, considered as an immortal being, and has used with a magnifying lense a historical episode with a view to depicting for all time the eternal struggle that goes on daily between the forces of good and evil in the human breast and in which, though good is ever victorious, evil does put up a brave show and baffles even the keenest conscience. It shows also the only way to right action.

From the above it is clear the depiction of the fundamental predicament of man, according to Gandhi, is not unique to Bible, but it is there also in Gita.

(d) As regards the contention of K. that the true Redemption is offered by Christ alone, and that the other religions are merely self-redemptions, Gandhi's reaction is doublefold. On the one hand he tries to show that the so called Redemption by Christ is meaningless to man unless the individual tries to change his sinful life. And on the other, the so called self-justification cannot be done except through the Divine Grace. Now we may elaborate both the points in his own words.
First, as regards the Atonement of sins by Christ, Gandhi said that he could not accept the belief literally about that doctrine. And he positively resisted some such interpretation even given by some Christians themselves. Thus, for example, when the Plymouth Brother in South Africa, looking at Gandhi's scrupulous ways of trying to live a pure life, said these words: "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 the 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", etc., Gandhi said: "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." This did not mean that Gandhi disbelieved in the Redemption by Christ. He maintained that "Jesus atoned for the sins of those who accepted his teachings by being an infallible example to them. But the example was worth nothing to those who never troubled to change their lives."

Secondly, as against K's understanding of other religions as purer 'self-redemption' G. points out that it is not purely a self-attempt, but that it also involves Grace. This he
explains with reference to the goal that is described in \textit{Gita}. "My faith in the message of the \textit{Gita} is as bright as ever. Unwavered ceaseless effort is the price that must be paid for turning that faith into rich infallible experience. But the same \textit{Gita} says, without any equivocation, that the experience is not to be had without Divine Grace. We should develop swelled heads if Divinity had not made that ample reservation."^{52} This is particularly illustrated in his own life. For, on the one hand he claims to be making "ceaseless efforts to find Truth",^{53} "to strive after the unattainable ideal of becoming perfect,"^{54} to be bent upon finding it, counting no sacrifice too great for the sake of seeing God face to face^{55} etc. But on the other hand, he clearly acknowledges that his austerities, fastings and prayers etc. are of no value if he relied upon them for reforming himself and that they have value only in so far as they represent the yearnings of a soul striving to lay his weary head in the lap of his Maker,^{56} and that he must go with God as his guide,^{57} and that he was actually conscious of my weakness and try to fight them,—not in my own strength but \textit{in the strength of God}^{58}. Is that not enough or do you wish me to repeat parrot-like that Jesus had cleaned me from all sin?^{59}

(e) As against the point that Christianity is superior to all other religions, Gandhi consistently argued with the
missionaries that it was a dangerous thing to feel spiritual superiority. It is not like many other things which we can perceive, analyse and prove through our senses. If it is there, one cannot be deprived of it by any power on earth, and it will have its effect in its own due time. But if in matters of medicine and other natural sciences, one feels one's superiority over others, a thing of which one may be legitimately conscious, and if he has love for his fellow-beings, he would naturally share his knowledge with them. But things of the spirit one should leave to God and thus keep the bond between fellow-beings and himself pure, correct and within limits. One should have no feeling that from the spiritual point of view one is necessarily superior to the so-called savage. 60

However, a Kraemerian might ask Gandhi "if, after examining the argument in favour of all religions, he found that his own religion was the only true religion, what harm is there in his judgement?" 61 For, it is only an expert in the field of Comparative Religion, after studying all the religious systems of the world, that he has come to his conclusion viz. that all religions except his own are self-redemptions. So, what is there to call a spade a spade? But then, Gandhi's answer would be that it was an intellectual examination, whereas a different scale is required to weigh
spiritual truths. He will ask: "Do you therefore say that other religions are untrue?" To this a true Christian will say that though people in those religions are ignorant of the 'true religion' and 'if this ignorance is invincible' and if they are convinced of their own religions being true, they would be saved by God. 62 But Gandhi will ask: "Therefore you will say that everyone would be saved even through untruth. For you say that, if a man really and sincerely believe in what is, as a matter of fact untruth, he is saved. Would you not also hold, therefore, that your own way may be untrue but that you are convinced that it is true and therefore you will be saved?" 65

Gandhi would further say: "Either we are all untrue, -- quite a logical position to take -- but since truth does not come out of untruth it is better to say that we all have truth but not the complete truth. For God reveals His Truth to instruments that are imperfect. 64 And if we are imperfect ourselves, religion as conceived by us must also be imperfect. And if all the faiths outlined by men are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise. All faiths constitute a revelation of Truth but all are imperfect and liable to error. 65 Hence Gandhi's submission is that a position like that of K. is arrogant. It lacks the humility which recognises human limitations. There will always be differences in the world; they have been there, and will be
there. If we search, we may find as many religions as there are men. Hundreds of men are merely striving to know the Truth. They will put the Truth in their own way. No two men will put it in identical terms. As we all imperfect media and as we are different also -- no two bodies are identically the same -- there is bound to be some difference. And also some imperfection is bound to be there. "The Divine Light having been vouchsafed to all religions through an imperfect medium of flesh, they must share in more or less degree the imperfection of the vehicles.

K's position, in the eyes of Gandhi, is arrogant also for another reason. It does not recognize the limitless powers of God. God has the whole of humanity as His children. How can we limit God's grace by our little mind and say this is the only way. God embraces not only this tiny globe of ours, but millions and billions of such globes. And we may each of us be putting our own interpretation on the word 'God'. How can we, little crawling creatures, so utterly helpless as He has made us, how can we measure His greatness, His boundless love, His infinite compassion such that He allows man insolently to deny Him, wrangle about Him, and cut the throat of his fellowman? God is not encased in a safe to be approached only through a little hole in it, but He is open to be approached through billions of openings by those who are humble and pure of heart. So, Gandhi would invite K. to
step down from his pinnacle, where he has left room for none but himself. 69

So, Gandhiji strongly felt that the missionaries have to alter their attitude. "Today they tell people that there is no salvation for them except through the Bible and through Christianity. It is customary to decry other religions and to offer their own as the only one that can bring deliverance. That attitude must be radically changed." He accused them of presenting a Christianity of their belief,—a misunderstanding of the message of Jesus. "The more I study their activities, the more sorry I become. There is such a gross misunderstanding of religion on the part of those who are intelligent, very far advanced, and whose motives need not be questioned. It is a tragedy that such a thing should happen in the human family." 71

Reminding them of Christ's own words, Gandhi said: "It is not he who says 'Lord, Lord' that is a Christian, but he who does the 'will of the Lord', that is a true Christian." And he asked them: "Cannot he, who has not heard the name of Christ Jesus, do the will of the Lord?" Further he warned them in these words: "If you interpret your texts in the way you seem to do, you straight away condemn a large part of humanity, unless it believes as you do. If Jesus came to earth again, he would disown many things that are being done in the name of Christianity." 72 Do not flatter yourselves with the belief that a mere recital of that celebrated verse in St. John 73
makes a man a Christian. If I have read the Bible correctly, I know many men who have never heard the name of Jesus Christ or have even rejected the official interpretation of Christianity will, probably, if Jesus came in our midst today in the flesh, be owned by him more than many of us. I, therefore, ask you to approach the problem before you with open-mindedness and humility."

"It is painful", he lamented, "to see that the Christian divines limiting the scope of Jesus' message to select individuals". As against that kind of attitude, Gandhi said "I have been taught from the childhood, and tested the truth by experience, that the primary virtues of mankind are possible of cultivation by the meanest of human species. It is this undoubted universal possibility that distinguishes the humans from the rest of God's creation". Further he attested that since his youth upward it had been a humble but persistent effort on his part to understand the truth of all the religions of the world, and adopt and assimilate in his own thought, word and deed all that he found to be best in those religions. Thus it is against a background of persistent search and prayerful study and discussion that he came to the conclusion that every religion constitutes a revelation of Truth. "They are all supplying a felt want in the spiritual progress of humanity". "Each one of them embodies a common
motivating force the desire to uplift man's life and give it purpose."\(^80\)

In so far as this is so, all principal religions are concerned with the Truth, the truth of living, Gandhi says: "I believe in the fundamental truth of all the great religions of the world; I believe that they are all God-given and I believe that they were necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed."\(^81\) Thus Gandhi recognized a fundamental unity in all the religions. Just as the leaves and branches are all maintained by the vital juice of the tree, so also the different religions are maintained by the one, true Religion, God, or also called Truth. This recognition of the unity of the religions did not blind Gandhi to see the variety as well. Since the belief in one God is the cornerstone of all religions and since there is only one God, in theory there can be only one religion, he said. Nevertheless, when the Truth is revealed to human beings, it will necessarily become many and different. No two persons will have the same and identical conception of God. Therefore there will, perhaps always be different religions answering to different temperaments, and climatic conditions.\(^32\) The need of the variety of religions was explained by Gandhi also in another way: "The Soul is one, but the bodies which She animates are many. We cannot reduce the number of bodies; yet we recognize the unity of the Soul. Even as the tree has a single
trunk but many branches and leaves, so is there one true and perfect Religion, but it becomes many as it passes through the human medium. The one Religion is beyond all speech. Imperfect men put it into such languages as they can command, and their words are interpreted by other men equally imperfect. Whose interpretation is to be held to be the right one? Everybody is right from his own standpoint, but it is impossible that everybody is wrong. 83

Thus then all the religions are "equally true" (inasmuch as they all derive their existence from that one Soul, God, and are sustained by the same Grace from above, the sap of the Tree), though being received and interpreted through human instruments "equally imperfect." 84 Again, "every religion while constituting a revelation of the Truth (inasmuch as it supplies a felt want in the spiritual progress of humanity, and embodying a common motivating force, the desire to uplift man's life and give it a purpose) is also alloyed with un-Truth, because both in asmuch as it has been grasped by imperfect men and is expressed in such languages as the imperfect men can command, it cannot but become imperfect. That is why Gandhi's statement becomes more significant: "All faiths constitute a revelation of Truth, but all are imperfect and liable to error." 85
From these considerations then Gandhi asserts that all the great religions of the world are more or less true. He says 'more' or 'less'; because, everything that the human hand touches, by reason of the very fact that the human hand touches it, by reason of the very fact human beings are imperfect, becomes imperfect. Perfection is the exclusive attribute of God, and it is indescribable, untranslatable." If this is so, then the question of any one religion being superior to another does not arise at all; the question of comparative merit does not arise. There is no such a thing as only one true religion and every other false. There is no religion that is absolutely perfect. All are equally imperfect, or more or less perfect." Hence, the conclusion that Christianity is as good and true as any other.  

To sum up Gandhi's understanding of religions: Every one of the great religions is equal with every other, the sum total of one faith's energy is good and helpful to its adherents just as the sum total of another faith's energy is good and helpful to its adherents to attain perfection, or salvation, or the Truth — which is confirmed by the fact that the principal faiths of the world have all produced the great saints. Yet, as we are imperfect ourselves, religion as conceived by us must be also imperfect. We have not realized religion in its perfection, even as we have not realized God. Religion of our conception, being thus
imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and re-interpretation. Progress towards Truth, towards God, is possible only because of such evolution. And if all faiths outlined by men are imperfect, the question of comparative merit does not arise. All faiths constitute a revelation of Truth, but all are imperfect, and liable to error.

(iii) Implications of Gandhi's position

The bearing of the above understanding of religions by Gandhi is far reaching, and varied too. We may try to enunciate a few of them in some logical order.

(1) If the equality of religions, in the sense specified above, (that is, if all religions are true as well as imperfect, and that they all are in need of growth towards the goal of Perfection) is recognized, then it will first result in a perfect tolerance for other religions. "Seeing that we will never all think alike and that we shall always see Truth in fragment and from different angles of vision", one develops a sense of toleration for the view-points other than one's own, even though one does not understand them all. Given that even amongst the most conscientious persons, there will be room enough for honest differences of opinion, the only possible rule of conduct in any civilized society is mutual toleration.
(2) This 'tolerance' does not mean toleration of evil, of false faith. If one feels that a particular faith is false he must reject it as a false faith. But before he judges it 'false', he must make it clear that the 'sum total of that faith is bad for its adherents and the world'. So if there is any suspicion in one's mind that only one religion can be true and others false, there cannot be proper fellowship of religions. There cannot be a wishy-washy toleration. So, Gandhi pleaded for utter truthfulness on the part of those who want to have fellowship of religions, and he clearly stated that if one is convinced about the 'falsehood' of a faith, then he should reject it. But given the understanding of religions, outlined above (i.e. that all principal religions are based on common fundamentals, and that they all have produced great saints) Gandhi advocated that one should cultivate respect to other faiths and the devotees of other faiths.

(3) In this connection Gandhi went a step further, and wanted to suggest positively that the use of word 'tolerance' must be given up. "I do not like the word tolerance, but could not think of a better one. Tolerance may imply a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one's own, whereas Ahimsa teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as we
accord to our own, thus admitting the imperfection of the latter. This admission will be readily made by a seeker of Truth, who follows the law of Love. So he said that an advance must be made from tolerance to equal respect to and reverence for all religions. That is what he tried to express in the term 'Sarvadharma-samastva' equimindedness to all religions. "I believe in sarvadharma-samastva — having equal regard for all faiths and creeds..."  

(4) Such an attitude of 'equimindedness', can be cultivated by a reverential study of others' scriptures. So he said: "I have not hesitated to recommend to my Christian friends a prayerful and sympathetic study of the other scriptures of the world." Likewise he also asked the Hindus to study the scriptures of Christianity. "I shall say to the Hindus that your lives will be incomplete unless you reverently study the teachings of Jesus."  

(5) Equal regard does not mean that you should adopt the other's view, as my equal respect for Islam or Christianity does not mean that I would adopt either of the two. My equal regard compels me to understand their view-point, to appreciate the light in which they look upon their religion. It means that we should emphasize points of agreement and not make much of the points of difference.
(6) Again equal respect to all religions does not imply that we must be blind to the faults or limitations of other religions. Honouring the other faiths as I honour my own, and perceiving the beauties in all of them should not make one any more oblivious of the limitations of the professors of those faiths, than it make him of the grave limitations of the professors of his own. But seeing that it takes all my resources in trying to bring practice to the level of my faith and in preaching the same to my co-religionists, I do not dream of preaching to the followers of other faiths. 'Judge not lest ye be judged' is a sound maxim for one's conduct. 78

Reverence for other faiths need not blind us to their faults. We must be keenly alive to the defects of our own faiths also, yet not leave it on that account, but try to overcome those defects. 99 Thus according to Gandhi at the instance of the encounter of other religions, one religion must be able to realize one's own shortcomings and imperfections and try to get overcome them.

(7) Gandhi also held that in the encounter of other religions should be able to learn from others and enrich oneself with all the acceptable features of other faiths: "Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we would not only hesitate, but would think it our duty, to blend into our
faith every acceptable feature of other faiths." Gandhi even viewed it as a duty to do so. "As a matter of fact, while we adhere to our own faith, we have every right to adopt acceptable features from any other faith. It is not only a right; it is a duty we must discharge. It is fanaticism to imagine that you cannot accept anything from other faiths." Thus then each faith would be complementary to the other, if only we could seriously live our religion and not be indifferent to our own. "The world and, therefore, we can no more do without the teaching of Jesus than we can without that of Mohammed or the Upanishads. I hold all these to be complementary of one another, in no case exclusive. Their true meaning, their inter-dependence and inter-relation, have still to be revealed to us. We are but indifferent representative faiths, which we believe more often than not." The bearing of the whole discussion on the issue of conversion is not far to seek. And this will be in reply to the final point (i.e. 'f' in the (i) Section of this chapter) of K. If, as seekers after Truth, we are all able to see as through a glass, darkly, so far as inward sight is concerned, then we are all in the same position as the blind men in the Indian parable who went to see an elephant. So, referring to the work of missionaries, Gandhi said: "It would therefore, be a sheer presumption on their part to 'convert' others to their own faith. God had as many ways of approaching Him as
there were human beings. If all the principal religions have the Truth, yet also mixed with imperfections, and if each religion, realizes the 'oneness' of all the religions, shows a tolerant and reverential attitude to every other, learns from the other, blends into one's own all the acceptable features of the other, grows into higher and higher states of Perfection, and thereby proves complementary to each other, then where is the need of the conversion from one to the other?

So, according to Gandhi, conversion in the sense of self-purification, self-realization is the crying need of the times and not in the sense of proselytization. Proselytization will mean no peace in the world, he said. "It is unthinkable that a man will become good or attain salvation only if he embraces a particular religion. Purity of character and salvation depend on the purity of heart."

"I am convinced, I know, that God will ask, asks us now, not what we label ourselves, but what we are, i.e. what we do. With Him deed is everything, belief without deed is nothing. With Him doing is believing."

Hence, Gandhi asked the missionaries not to be interested in finding out how many heads they count as Christians, but rather to work away silently among the people and let their work be the silent testimony of their worth. "What do you want
to convert them for? If your contact with them ennobles them, makes them forget untruth, all evil, and brings them a ray of light, is that not enough? Is that not its own reward? Or must you have a mechanical confession from him that he is a Christian? We see today a rivalry, a war going on among different religions as to the number of adherents each can boast. I feel deeply humiliated and feel that in every one of the feats we claim to have performed in converting people to our faith, we are denying our God and being untrue to ourselves. 

And he exhorted them saying: "We should, by living the life according to our lights, share the best with one another, thus adding to the sum-total of human effort to reach God." We have already accepted that no faith is perfect. All faiths are equally dear to their respective votaries. What is wanted, therefore, is living friendly contact among the followers of the great religions of the world, and not a clash among them in the fruitless attempt on the part of each community to show the superiority of its own over the rest. Through such friendly contact, it will be possible for us all to rid our respective faiths of shortcomings and excrescences.

In fine, we may derive just two points, from the whole account of Gandhi's discussion on his position:
(a) In respect of the personal life of the individuals in the different religions, they should endeavour to purify their lives, remaining in all normal circumstances in their own religion rather than simply wanting to get converted to another faith. Nor will they try to convert others, not even secretly pray for it. Rather, they should want and pray that Hindus become good Hindus, Muslims as good Muslims and so on.

(b) Correspondingly at the level of the great world religions, what is wanted is not a rivalry as to the number of adherents each can boast of, but rather a friendly contact among them, such that they can learn from others and ridding themselves of their shortcomings, they can incorporate the beauties of other religions and get enriched thereby. This will be setting a direction for all religions to become purer and purer, and to approach the 'centre' called differently God, Truth, etc. closer and closer.