Chapter 8

The Interpretation of Scriptures
(i) Introduction

Every great religion is ultimately based on one or more sacred texts considered as authoritative. Often enough, the claims of one's religious scriptures conflict with those of others. Naturally therefore, in the context of inter-religious contacts and co-existence, a meaningful and relevant interpretation of the different scriptures has become a more and more pressing problem. It is this problem that we propose to consider in this chapter. But we will take it up only in relation to the two problems we have so far considered in this thesis. We have considered so far the controversies regarding idolatry and conversion. The parties at conflict in both these problems have at various points used their own scriptures as well as those of others. In the process they have tried to interpret or re-interpret them. How far meaningfully they have done so or would have to do so, we shall consider in some detail in this chapter.

In the following four sections, we shall see how Hindus have tried to interpret their scriptures particularly in response to the Christians' challenge. This we shall see mainly with reference to the problem of idolatry. After very briefly stating the challenge of the Christians, we shall give an account of the responses of such leaders as RR, DS
and Gandhi. Gandhi's response being the best — in terms of a truly religious response — proved also the most effective type of response meeting the challenge. Thus Gandhi's response becomes in turn a great challenge to Christians' usual way of interpreting many texts of their scriptures, particularly the missionary texts of the New Testament. So in the fifth section, we shall try to show how this challenge can be faced, by suggesting a way of interpreting the missionary texts of the New Testament. Finally we shall conclude this chapter with a few remarks on the basis of our considerations in the whole chapter.

(ii) Christians' Challenge to the Hindu Scriptures

Christians of the West with very few exceptions, when brought into contact with Hinduism, became convinced that their religion was all in opposition to Hinduism, as 'truth to falsehood', or as 'light to darkness', and so on. Hinduism meant an utter idolatry. Not only were the popular manifestations of Hindu beliefs idolatrous, but even their shastrae seemed to lend support to idolatry. They wondered how could "the worship of God as possessing of various names, forms and localities be ordained for the benefit of mankind", in their sacred books? It surpassed their imagination that their scriptures could "enjoin the belief that such visible gods — although having women and children, although subject to the
On the basis of severe condemnation of idolatry, as well as monotheistic belief contained in their own scriptures, the missionaries saw a clear contrast of their scriptures with the Hindu scriptures. And they saw a ground for superiority of their religion over Hinduism. Naturally therefore, certain texts from the Bible, namely the salvation-texts like Acts 4.12, Col.1,20 began to be stressed most. Again, against such a background the missionary texts of the New Testament, particularly the texts containing Christ's 'great commission', were also interpreted literally. Particularly during a period when the nations of the world were being discovered one by one by their own powers, they became convinced that they were 'destined' not only to discover the new lands and bring them into their dominion but also to bring the Gospel into those lands, virtually disregarding the form of faith which they already held. It was their right and duty, they thought, to preach the Gospel to them, to introduce the true light into the 'land of heathens and idolaters'. and to convert them rather 'quickly' into the 'citadel of salvation', by putting out the 'life boats' from the 'ship'.

It is in this connection that all efforts were taken to translate the Bible in as many Indian languages as possible, print it and spread it as far as possible. It is again in
that connection, that the missionaries started publication of magazines, tracts, books etc. Through them, they hoped, they would be able to 'stimulate the spirit of inquiry' among the people about the many defective aspects of their sacred books, so that the educated people would realize how bad their religion was even in its 'sources', and, of themselves would feel the need of conversion to Christianity. Besides their tireless preaching of the Gospel in the street corners, or in any melas, kumbas, was also undertaken in a very zealous way so that they could make the illiterate people also realize the need of conversion. In all those occasions, they would not miss a chance to point out the simple falsehood, immorality, of the Hindu gods, often quoting freely from their Sacred Books.

All this indeed threw a veritable challenge to the Hindu leaders. It obliged them to study their own Scriptures more seriously, reflect on them, interpret them, re-interpret them, so as to meet the challenge. The most well known response from the educated Hindus was that of R3. He not only took pains to study his scriptures, translate them into English, as well as Bengali languages, but even picked up controversies with the missionaries showing to them that their interpretation of Hindu shestree was wrong. He even took greater pains to study the Bible in its originals, and tried
to show to the missionaries that the same or similar sort of mistakes they were trying to find from Hindu śāstras could be found in the Bible. To substantiate his stand he would very often quote from the Bible, but giving a very literal or narrower understanding to them.

Among the purely indigenous responses the most well known is that of DS. He met the challenge by not only reforming many practices of his faith, but giving it a solid support from the scriptures of his own faith, of course, interpreting them, re-interpreting them in his own way. Not only that, he has tried to establish the superiority of the truth of his scriptures, by comparing with them the truths of the other scriptures. And he did not mind interpreting other scriptures in the most literal, isolated, even mean ways, in order to establish the inferiority of other scriptures and the superiority of his own. Whereas Gandhi's response is quite different from both RR and DS. Not only did he give his own scriptures the best interpretation, and thereby faces the challenges of the Christian missionaries, but gives equal reverence to their scriptures, and interprets them in the best light possible, and points out to them that their usual understanding of the Bible was wrong. Thus he challenges them back in their own coin.
It would be really interesting to go into the details of the different ways the Hindus have understood their scriptures and those of others. It would enable us to give a comprehensive assessment of their responses to the Christians' challenge. However, we shall restrict our scope to estimate their understanding of their own Hindu scriptures only. Even with regard to the interpretation of their own scriptures, we restrict ourselves to considering only such of their interpretations which relate to the problem of idolatry.

(iii) RR's interpretation of Hindu shastras

We have already noticed (in the Chapter on Idolatry) that RR basically accepted the position of the Challengers that belief in one God was superior, and that idol worship was essentially idolatry to be condemned. He also agreed with their observation that idolatry was prevalent in India. However, he disagreed with their understanding that Hindu idolatry was supported by Hindu shastras. So he tried his best to show to the Westerners that the Hindu system of idolatry was all "in defiance of their sacred books," that "the real spirit of the Hindu scriptures is but the declaration of the unity of God," and that they all instruct men "in the pure mode of adoring Him in spirit." He seems even frantic about showing this to the Westerners, because, he
not only translated many of the Upanishads and other shastras in English as evidence of his contention, but he also explicitly stated it in the Introduction of many of his translations. Just one illustration will be sufficient to mention here: "The present is an endeavour to render an abridgement of the same into English, by which I expect to prove to my European friends that the superstitious practices (idolatry) which deform the Hindoo religion have nothing to do with the pure spirit of its dictates."  

No doubt, RS conceded, that the general characteristic of the primary chapters in each of the four Vedas seems polytheistic. For they represent the attributes of the Supreme Being by means of earthly objects, animate or inanimate, whose shapes or properties are analogous to the modes of their worship immediately or through the medium of fire. Nevertheless, he insisted that the subsequent chapters of each Veda inculcate the unity of the Supreme Being as the sole ruler of the universe and direct the mode of worshipping Him in spirit only. He maintained that the later chapters of each Veda not only controvert the doctrine of plurality of gods and goddesses laid down in the preceding chapters, but also they assign reasons for it. For instance, the worship of the sun and fire, together with the whole allegorical system, were only inculcated for the sake of those whose limited understandings rendered them incapable of comprehending and
adoring the invisible Supreme Being, so that such persons
might not remain in a brutified state, destitute of all
religious principle.14a

RR further maintained that this explanation was given
not only by the Vedas but also by the celebrated commentator
Vyasa. And RR thought that this was the only explanation
which could reconcile those passages which were seemingly at
variance with each other, as those that declared the unity
of the invisible Supreme Being, with others which described
a plurality of independent visible gods. Otherwise the whole
scripture would not only be stripped of its authority but
be looked upon as altogether unintelligible.

But what about the fact that Puranas represent God in
the form of a man and other animals and as possessed of all
senses and desires with which we are conversant? Does it
not follow from this that there are many gods, that they are
subject to sensual pleasures, and the omnipresence of God
cannot be maintained? This was exactly a question, raised
by a missionary, with a view to showing the unreasonableness
of the Hindu shaastree. To this RR replies by interpreting
them all as fictitious. Still, they are all spoken of in
the Puranas only with a view to engaging the minds of persons
of limited understanding.15 "This is only to prevent the
persons of feeble intellect, unable to comprehend God as not
subject to the senses and without form, should either pass their life without any religious duties whatsoever or should engage in evil work, and positively to enable them to have some regard to the Divine Being. Afterwards by diligent endeavours they become qualified for the true knowledge of God. 16

Further, RR says: "given the vast mass of Tantras and Puranas an excellent rule from the first has been this, that those Puranas and Tantras which have been commented upon or quoted by respectable authors are to be regarded as evidence. Again a commonly received rule for ascertaining the authority of any book is this, that whatever book opposes the Veda, is destitute of authority. 17 And he blames the missionary gentlemen of having translated those works which were opposed to the Vedas, which were not quoted by any respectable author and which have never been regarded as authority and of representing the Hindoo Religion as very base. 13

Moreover, taking many of the verses from the New Testament, regarding the Jesus Christ, and the appearances of the Holy Spirit etc., RR interprets the New Testament as representing God in the human form, dove form, etc., and also subject to senses, and discharging bodily functions. Thus, whatever allegations which the missionary wanted to raise about the Puranas and Tantras will be raised about the New
Testament. It will be even worse, KR thinks. Because, the Hindu Puranas are only taken as fictitious, whereas the missionary takes what is given in the Bible as real. Again, Puranas are accepted only in so far as they agree with Vedas; so they are not ultimate authority. Whereas the Bible is the ultimate authority for the missionaries. So the bodily forms and functions attributed to their God in the Bible will have to be considered as real. So it is their scripture that contains real error, even an excess of error, not the Hindu scripture.

In fine, RR sums up his whole interpretation of his own scripture in these words: "In conformity with the precepts of our ancient religion, contained in the Holy Vedanta, we look up to One Being as the animating and regulating principle of the whole collective body of the universe, and as the origin of all individual souls which in a manner somewhat similar, vivify and govern their particular bodies; and we reject idolatry; in every form and under whatsoever veil of sophistry it may be practised, either in adoration of an artificial, a natural or an imaginary object..."

(iv) DS's interpretation of Hindu shastras

DS was also of the opinion that Hindu practice of idolatry was all wrong, and that the situation was in need of change. It appears that he was convinced that the needed
change could not be brought about unless its basis, (the plurality of gods, described in the Puranas and Tantras) was first removed. So he found an easy way out. He did not accept the Puranas and Tantras as shastra at all. Were not at least the 18 Puranas authoritative books whose author was no other than Vyasa himself? DS argued that Vyasa, as seen from his works, was very truthful and righteous man of vast learning and a great yogi. Had he been the author of the Puranas there would not have been so many stories in them. He could never have written such falsehood as are recorded in the Puranas. It is therefore, he said, the work of not Vyasa, but of the selfish, ignorant and malevolent men. The Puranas like Bhagavat, Shiva, etc., are in fact apocryphal, and of recent origin, replete with mythology and filthy stories.22

Again these Puranas, he said, were written by the sectarian priests. Because, in the Shiva Purana, Shiva is described as the Lord of all, while Vishnu, Brahma and others are spoken of as his servants. Whereas in the Vishnu Purana, Vishnu is made the Supreme Spirit and Shiva and other gods as his servants. Again in Devi Puranas, it is Devi who is made the Supreme. These are all self contradictory, he argued, because, if we were told that the first statement is true, then the second and other statements must be false. If we
are to hold that the second statement is true, then the first and the other statements must naturally be rejected as false. Now, such self-contradictions are not possible even in the writings of an ordinary man, leave alone a learned man. How could they, then, be written by Vyasa? So, DS concludes they must be works of the sectarian and selfish priests, in a later age.

In this fashion DS goes on rejecting Tantras, Mahabharata, Manusmriti, Upanishads and so on. Finally, he eliminates even the Brahmanas from the true scriptures for him. He argues: "In the Brahmanas, there are to be found biographies of various Rishis, and sages, kings and princes. But since biographies of persons can only be written after their birth, the Brahmanas that contain those biographies must have been written after the birth of those Rishis and Kings etc., and therefore cannot be eternal." So, ultimately the scriptures in Hinduism for DS meant only the Vedas, in the narrowest sense, viz., the Mantra Samhitas of Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. All the rest of the so called shastras are valid, he said, only in so far as they agree with what is said in Vedas. But they are all of only minor importance. Whereas the four Vedas in their restricted sense are of Divine origin, the only Word of God. This is the main contention on which depends his whole task of interpretation of scriptures.
As a proof of his contention he offers the following:

That only is a book of Divine Revelation "in which God is described as He is, viz. Holy, Omniscient, Pure in nature, character and attributes, Just, Merciful etc., and in which nothing is said that is opposed to the laws of nature, reason, the evidence of direct cognisance, etc., the teachings of the highly learned altruistic teachers of humanity (Ar'ptaas), and the intuition of pure souls, and in which the laws, nature, and properties of matter and souls, are propounded as they are to be inferred from the order of nature as fixed by God."

Now, according to De the Vedas alone fulfil all the above conditions. Hence they are the revealed books, and not books, like the Bible, Quran, etc.

Having thus given to Hinduism, one definite Scriptural Book, just as the Semitic religions had, De even tried to establish superiority to his, over the others'. Thus, maintaining that his alone was the total and the only real Revelation, De proceeded to refute whatever in the Hindu creed was either clearly antagonistic to the Vedas or did not find support in the Vedas. "The Vedas are the supreme authority and whatever is opposed to them is false." This is the first and foremost principle of his interpretation of scriptures and also of his reformation of Hinduism.
Applying the above mentioned principle to idolatry, DS says it has been positively prohibited in the Vedas. So it cannot be accepted. And he quotes a number of verses from Yajur Vedas.

After all, Vedas speak of Asvamedha and Gomedha yajna. Does this not indicate that people in the Vedic period were in the habit of offering sacrifices of horse or cow? If so, how could he object to idol worship? To this sort of objection, DS gives a reply by re-interpretation of Vedic texts. "Ashvamedha according to the Shatapatha Brahmana, Nirukta and so on," he says, "means the just and impartial treatment of his subjects by a king; while Gomedha means the cleaning of grain, the purifying of the five senses, the mind, and so forth." So they do not mean any sort of worship which could be connected with any sacrifice or with idol worship.

Vedas themselves mention many gods. Do they not, then, lend support to idol worship, indirectly? To this sort of question also DS gives his ingenious re-interpretation. The devata mentioned in the Vedas, he says, do not mean gods, wrongly translated by the Europeans and the Pandits -- but "whosoever possesses useful and brilliant qualities is called devata as the earth for instance." Thus the thirty three entities (viz., the eight vasus (like the heated cosmic bodies, planets, sun, etc.) eleven rudras (the
ten pranas and the human spirit) and the twelve months] are called devata in the Vedas, as all of them are possessing useful properties and qualities. Being the lord of all and greater than all these, the Supreme Being is called the thirty fourth Devata who alone is to be worshipped. If this be recognized, he comments, people would not have fallen into the error of believing that there are more gods mentioned in the Vedas.  

In confirmation of his re-interpretation of the Vedas, in terms of strict monotheistic belief, DS cites many verses from Vedas themselves.

DS's attempt to establish the monotheistic interpretation of the Vedas has great significance. It was on that basis, he thought, he could, in principle, root out the evil of idolatry. Once the God of Hindus is accepted to be the all powerful, all knowing, all present, etc., true worship cannot be had except by stuti, (glorification), prarthana (prayer), and Upasana (communion), but never by an idol.

(v) Gandhi's approach to interpretation of Scriptures

From the foregoing it appears that RR and DS had assumed the truth of the position of challengers regarding idol worship, viz., that it is an inferior form of worship,
if not an outright turpitude. Consequently their whole concern was to interpret their scriptures in such a way as to show to the challengers that their scriptures also condemn the same. Further, they seemed to be impressed by the idea that monotheistic belief was the only right religious belief. So their whole preoccupation seemed to show to the Westerners that the same was really inculcated in their scriptures too.

As against such an approach of RR and DS, Gandhi proved essentially different in his interpretation of scriptures. For, first with regard to idol worship, he said, the practice could have an understanding which was not idolatrous. Hence, he was not interpreting the Hindu scriptures in such a way as to show that they had condemned the practice. Likewise, Gandhi never bothered about showing to others that their form of belief or theory (monotheism for instance,) was found in the Hindu scriptures. Because, his firm conviction was that only one form of belief or theory can never be a constitutive part of religion. So, Gandhi was never interested in proving the superiority of one belief or theory or practice over another theory or belief etc. But his concern was always with the essence of religion, namely the actual living, that is, endeavoring to achieve a sort of transcendence in this temporal life, striving after perfection in spite of the imperfect state.
of men. This essential part of religion according to Gandhi can be associated with different beliefs/theories/rituals/practices etc.

Therefore, when Gandhi tried to interpret scriptures, it was not to show whether one kind of theory/belief/practice etc., was found in them but only to see how best people can be enabled to 'live' their given faith, and live it truly religiously. Thus Gandhi's approach to the interpretation of scriptures was guided by 'what is essential in religion', (life), and not so much by the unessentials (one particular kind of theory or practice). But in the case of RR and DS, as well as in that of the missionaries, it appears that they did not make this distinction between what is essential and what is unessentials in religion. On the contrary, they seemed to make one kind of belief/practice the most important if not the essential, part of religion, so much so that their interpretation of scriptures consists only in trying to show to others that their own scriptures contained one kind of belief as against another, and that their own scriptures condemned one kind of practice as against another.

Their preoccupation with establishing one sort of belief or practice was so great that they used that itself as the criterion for judging the worth of a scripture. Thus whenever certain texts did not agree with their pre-conceived
ideas of one sort of belief as against another and one sort of practice as against another, they were prepared to judge them either as no scripture, or some portions of them as spurious, or as extrapolations or secondary or as meant for the ignorant. But Gandhi was never ready to condemn any scripture as no scripture. Nor was he prepared to distinguish scriptures between primary and secondary, what is meant for ignorant and for the wise etc. This does not mean that he accepts everything which went in the name of scriptures as scriptures. He did grant that in centuries old traditions, some addition, interpolation etc., would occur in a scripture. "The Smritis, for instance, contain much that can never be accepted as the word of God," he said. And he also gave a criterion to discern and discard such interpolations or extrapolations, from the genuine scriptures.

That criterion was in terms of the eternal principles that govern religious life. "The scriptures, properly so called, can only be concerned with eternal verities and must appeal to any conscience, i.e. any heart whose eyes of understanding are opened. Nothing can be accepted as word of God which cannot be tested by reason or capable of being spiritually experienced." His insistence upon the 'pure life' to be used as criterion becomes all the more clear as he adds further: "And, even when you have an expurgated
edition of the scriptures, you will need their interpretation. Who is the best interpreter? Not learned men, surely, Learning there must be. But religion does not live by it. It lives in the experiences of its saints and seers, in their lives and sayings. When all the most learned commentators of the scriptures are utterly forgotten, the accumulated experience of the sages and saints will abide and be an inspiration for ages to come.\textsuperscript{38}

Gandhi's insistence on the experience of the sages and saints to be taken as the criterion for deciding the authenticity of scriptures does not mean that he wants to leave it as a business of 'some' people only. Rather he equally stresses the need of every individual to realize this responsibility. With reference to himself he says: "I exercise my judgment about every scripture, including the Gita. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason."\textsuperscript{39}

And the same he expected of every individual, of course, with due preparation and training. That training is nothing but trying to live conscientiously, disciplining oneself constantly, and thus showing one's readiness to receive the Truth. "And, our Shastras tell us what discipline and study are necessary for opening out the heart for receiving the Truth."\textsuperscript{40} Once this sort of preparation is taken up by an individual, then "one's experience must be the final guide. The written word undoubtedly helps, but even that has to be
interpreted; and when there are conflicting interpretations, the seeker is the final arbiter." In short, then, Gandhi's criterion consists in 'life'. This is characteristically opposed to that of others, like the missionaries, RR and DS who used one sort of theory/practice as the criterion for judging the worth of scriptures.

There is yet another, fundamental point of differences between the approach of Gandhi and others'. That lies in their basic understanding of religions. The kind of understanding of Gandhi was such that exclusiveness was inimical to it. In this understanding, "Revelation is the exclusive property of no nation, no tribe," and "Truth is the exclusive property of no single scripture." All religions have the Truth because "they are all based on common fundamentals, they all have produced great saints." So naturally, all the principal scriptures have the Divine Inspiration. But then they suffer from a process of double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet; and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly.

Since thus every religious scripture is the product of both Divine Inspiration as well as human instrumentality, Gandhi suggests that we should reduce the imperfections involved in our scriptures, by learning from the others'
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It is in this context that he insists that we must develop the relation of complementarity between religions rather than that of exclusiveness. "As a matter of fact, while we adhere to our own faith, we have every right to adopt acceptable features from any other faith." And he adds that it is not only a right but even a duty we must discharge. It is fanaticism to imagine that you cannot accept anything from other faiths." And he makes it still more clearly by giving the reasons for it, when he says; "It is the duty of everyone to study the scriptures of religions other than his own. This enables people to keep their religion pure and rid it of blemishes." He further confirms it with his own testimony. "I can give my own humble testimony that, whilst such study has enabled me to give the same respect to them that I give to my own, it has enriched my own faith and broadened my vision." In addition to it, he says: "My respectful study of other religions has not abated my reverence for or my faith in the Hindu scriptures. They have, indeed, left their deep mark upon my understanding of the Hindu scriptures. They have broadened my view of life. They have enabled me to understand more clearly many an obscure passage in the Hindu scriptures." It is against this background of his own experience that Gandhi was encouraging people to develop the habit of reading the scriptures of other faiths. It is too well known
a fact to give any details that Gandhi was using the scriptures of different faiths in his prayer meetings. And whenever an opportunity arose, Gandhi asked the members of one faith to read the scriptures of another faith. Thus, for example, he exhorted the Hindus to study the teachings of Jesus, otherwise their lives will be incomplete, he said. And he did not hesitate to recommend to his Christian friends to a prayerful and sympathetic study of other scriptures of the world.

But how can one be benefited by the scriptures of other religions specially when some of the portions seem to depict some stories which are specifically immoral? This would be a question raised by a non-Hindu regarding many of the stories about Krishna, or Rama in the Hindu Puranas. To this, Gandhi would suggest that they should not take literally whatever is written about their alleged actions. Rather it is only the total effect of such books on the life of the people that has to be taken. To the sceptics who feel honest doubts in connection with the life of Rama for example, he would suggest that they should not accept anybody's interpretations mechanically. They should leave out such portions about which they feel doubtful. It would be sheer perversity to argue that because in our opinion Rama practised deception, we too may do likewise. The proper thing to do would be to believe that Rama was incapable of
practising deception. That is what a devotee would do. In the same fashion others also must give such noble interpretations, but never should interpret those passages negatively or derogatively.

Referring to his own example, again, he says: "There is one thing in me, and that is that I love to see the bright side of things and not the seamy side, and so I can derive comfort and inspiration from any great book of any great religion." And he adds the following too: "It is no business of mine to criticise the scriptures of other faiths, or to point out their defects. It is, and should be, however, my privilege to proclaim and practise the truths that there may be in them. I may not, therefore, criticise or condemn things in the Qur'an or the life of the Prophet that I cannot understand. But I welcome every opportunity to express my admiration for such aspects of his life as I have been able to appreciate and understand. As for things that present difficulties, I am content to see them through the eyes of devout Mussalman friends, while I try to understand them with the help of the writings of eminent Muslim expounders of Islam. But it is both my right and duty to point out the defects of Hinduism in order to purify it and keep it pure."

Thus, if the members of one religion, read the scriptures of another religion with respect and reverence,
never criticizing them nor pointing out the negative aspects
derogatively, but leaving the negative side of others' 
scriptures to their own votaries for re-interpretations, and 
always showing a readiness to learn from others' scriptures, 
and trying to enrich one's own faith with all the acceptable 
features of the other religion, then the inter-religious 
contacts and co-existence will reap truly religious benefits 
for the whole of humanity, adding to the sum total of the 
rich experience of humanity. Through such healthy contacts 
again a scripture of one faith will lend itself to emendations 
as the times may really require. Progressing with the times, 
then, it will live in the lives of people. The word is the 
same; but the spirit ever broadens intensively and expensi­
vely; and it might be that many things in the scriptures of 
each religion will have to be re-read and re-interpreted in 
the light of discoveries not of modern times but in the 
spiritual field in the shape of direct experiences common 
to all faiths.

(vi) Gandhi's challenge and Christians' re-interpretation 
of their scriptures

If Gandhi's approach to interpretation of scriptures 
is acceptable, as well as the underlying assumption regarding 
the nature of religions (i.e. if Revelation is not exclusive 
to any religion, and if all religions have also been mixed 
with certain imperfections which they can remove and get
purified more and more by enriching themselves with every acceptable feature of other religions), then the approach and assumption of the missionaries stand challenged very much. But then, the missionaries may not like to be challenged of their approach or assumption. For, they have their foundation and support from their scriptures, particularly the missionary texts of the New Testament, and more specifically the missionary texts of the New Testament, and more specifically the 'great commission' contained in Mt. 28, 19-20, Mk. 16, 16. So the question ultimately turns out to be: Should a Christian understand the texts, mentioned above, in the usual way, i.e. in the most straightforward understanding, and carry on the conventional assumption and approach regarding conversion, or could any re-interpretation be made of those texts. If our analysis of the problem of conversion in the earlier chapters, is accepted, then it would follow that the missionaries cannot carry on their assumption as well as their approach in the same way as some of them have done in the past. If this is so, then the only alternative is to see whether a re-interpretation of the missionary texts is possible. It is this possibility that is being worked out in this section. No claim is made to exhaustiveness, but only a direction is being suggested here.  

Taking inspiration from this remark of Gandhi, we shall try to analyse the content of Christ's message, as well
as his manner of preaching that message. Then we shall go over how the Apostles carried out the great commission, and from all these, finally we shall show a direction for re-interpreting it in today's context.

First, let us take up the content of Christ's teachings. What was the Good News that Christ preached? Evidently it was not a certain set of 'truths' or doctrines about God or morality, to be defended in opposition to some other doctrines. Nor was he campaigning for any of the 'values' of the Judaic religion in which he was born. As Fr. Legrand, a well known Biblical scholar in India, makes it clear; "He was no Sadducee upholding the Temple as the navel of the world, no Zealot fighting for the sacred land, no Essene withdrawing to the desert. He did not even stand for the sacredness of the Law in which Judaism had found its identity and which the prophets had taught to be the way to God's heart."59 What Jesus preached, then, was the Good News of the Kingdom of God. The word 'kingdom' in its original terminology means "a quality of existence rather than a territory that could be covered by a flag."60 It is a new world order, a new pattern of living, a life of liberation, from Evil and the evil forces. This new world order, preached by Him, was first and foremost characterized by a sense of repentance.61 Here again, the Biblical scholars say that the original word for 'repentance'
means not only a sense of sorrow and regret, but implies a new orientation of the whole being, a complete reversal of one's aspiration, judgements, scales of value, attitudes and actions, thinking and beliefs and so on and so forth.

In other words, the Good News of Christ meant a total change of one's whole life, a radical change of one's whole being, such that one will be able to live a life of poverty and simplicity and yet be radient with joy, even while one is in the state of mourning one is able to retain perfect peace and thereby show the reality of God's love. The life of the new order which Christ preached is such that one will be ready to take the first step to make peace with a brother who has done something against him, one will not even look at a woman with a desire to possess her, one will be straightforward in one's dealing, saying 'yes' for yes, 'no' for no, and never swearing on temples or head, one will be ready to suffer injustice rather than cherish the idea of retaliation and revenge. This new life will be a life of boundless love, such that one will be ready to love even one's enemies and pray for them, a life of selfless service, a life of simple and sincere prayers offered not in the public places, but in the secret, a life of greater detachment from the earthly riches, a greater trust in the providence of God, a life which does not judge others but
rather is mindful of one's own faults, and is careful to remove them, 73 a life of denying self even to the point of losing oneself, and thereby gaining the new life. 74

If we now consider the manner of his preaching this Good News (outlined above), we will clearly see that it was through his entire life-style, and never by words alone. All the time he was concerned about doing only the will of his Father. 75 He put himself under the protection and providence of the Father so completely that he did not have a place even to lay down his head. 76 His proclamation of his Good News in his life was so thorough that his life revealed itself as an absolutely free life, free from man-made-standards, e.g., from the restraining categorization of Scribes and Pharisees in understanding the Law and applying it. And yet he could claim that his whole life was only in obedience to the one who sent him. 77 His life was again a life of absolute meekness and humility, that he could ask his disciples to learn from him to be humble and meek. 78 He could also set himself as the model of total love and humble service and demanded the same of his disciples. 79

Above all, it is in his death on the Cross that Jesus' proclamation of the Good News becomes the most effective. Apparently his freedom is in trial. He is bearing on the cross the 'form of a slave' tossed about by the events and
the power game of Herod, Pilate, the Council of Jewish
priests, and the Roman authorities. For all practical purposes
the glory and power of God seem to lie hidden in the distress
and the weakness of that victim, all along the story of his
execution. But really, that victim is not at all helpless.
Seeing the will of the Father, the Son has submitted himself,
to all the atrocious events of which he is the victim. Yet,
he is not overwhelmed by any of those events. He dominates
the circumstances, silently facing the trial of irresponsible
Pilate, *turning in love towards the lamenting women of
Jerusalem, forgiving his executioners, and promising the
good thief a seat in Paradise.* Showing, thus, the freedom
and courage of the Son of God, he confronts the political as
well as the religious authorities with the challenge of God's
Kingdom and its new standards, boldly, yet silently. That
was indeed the most effective message that can ever be preached
to the world about the Kingdom of God.

From the above it is apparent that the Good News
Jesus proclaimed was indeed realised in his own living, first
and foremost. If he also orally preached about it, it was
only to explicate what was implied in his own life, rather
than to expound certain doctrinal or logical truths about
the Kingdom of God. In fact his preaching was endowed with
authority, it was precisely because his preaching was
just preaching, disconnected from his being. It was "absolutely genuine: there was no make-believe, no mask, no show in Jesus but the authenticity of one who carried the message in his very being. This is why the passivity of the Cross was his most effective work and silence of Calvary his most eloquent proclamation." 86

The effectiveness of this silent, but real proclamation is confirmed by the ratification which the Father made in his Resurrection. "In it God testified that his authority and power inhabit the words, deeds and the very person of Jesus and revealed him fully as "the Christ", the Wisdom of God and the Power of God." 87 Again it was in the Resurrection that the Apostles experienced the authentification of Jesus' teachings, activities, style of life and above all his style of death. Hence it is this Resurrection-event that became the source of the formal mission of the Apostles to preach the Good News to the whole world. It is significant that all the four Gospels concluded with a unique mission-apparition of the Risen Lord, sending the Eleven on a solemn and formal mission. This convergence is impressive, according to the opinion of the Biblical scholars. For, such a structural convergence implies that, in all the traditions underlying the different accounts of the mission-apparitions, it was understood that the ultimate significance of the Resurrection was to be found in the apostolic mission. 88 It was not that
people saw the Risen Christ first, and then reflecting on the consequences of what they had seen, concluded that they had to preach the Gospel. But their seeing and the missionary charge were one and the same from the outset. That is, the missionary texts were not theological conclusions added to faith in the Resurrection of Jesus. Rather it was the Resurrection itself which was perceived as mission. The Resurrection meant such a powerful authentification of the new order of living which Jesus preached in his own living that they felt a compulsion and urge to realize the same way of living both in themselves and in others in the far ends of the worlds.

The great commission, therefore, meant not that they should carry out a theoretical teaching about Christ, his teachings and example, nor even an argumentative apologetics about the fact of the Resurrection of their Master, but that they should give evidence to the transformation-movement which God has set a move in the world through their Liberated Lord. Therefore, their own life was in turn reflecting the actual liberation, patterned after the principles of living enunciated by their Master. That they really brought about it in their corporate life, as well as in their own personal lives, is clear from the Acts, where it is stated that the whole community of the Apostles and their followers led such a life of love and fellowship, with a total trust in God's
providence, that they could sell their possessions and goods and distribute them to all as any had a need. It was in this context of, and substantiated by this kind of actual liberated life, that they gave out also the oral testimony to the fact of the Liberated Lord. That is why their preaching also bore abundant fruit, many more turned to that new living, and the new community of believers began to swell in numbers. It is not insignificantly that St. Luke ends his account on the life-style of the very early church with this concluding remark that "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." The implication is that the living witness of the believers was a compelling factor in the conversion of many into their fold.

Even for St. Paul who is often taken to be the most passionate preacher and a missionary of first order, to preach the Gospel meant not to give a series of propositions about Christ, but to bring about the new-living-pattern in and through Christ's-model. He himself says that his preaching was "not with eloquent wisdom, lest it should be emptied of its power", but to be crucified with Christ and living a life of his own, but the life of Christ. That is why he attests that he was hardening his body with blows and bringing it under complete control, lest after preaching to others, he himself should be disqualified.
We have seen so far that the content of the preaching of Jesus Christ was a new-living. And the manner of his preaching was through his own living. If all oral preaching was there, it was against the background of his living only. So too in the case of the apostles. They saw the authentification of Christ's new-living-pattern in His Resurrection. Which itself compelled them to live after that pattern, and also to make others live that new-living-pattern. And that is what is understood as the commission of Christ in Mt. 28, 19-20. But again it must be noted that their preaching was also done only in and through their personal realization in lived experience of what they preached in their words.

From the above, one can see that the central message of Christ is the renewal of life according to the principles of the Kingdom of God, the new order of living according to the Sermon on the Mount, all of which may be summed up in the Great Commandment of love. It is in this context then that the great commission of Christ in Mt. 28, 19-20, has to be taken. Only then it can be meaningful and relevant. For, once Christ's disciples are so renewed in their life and thought, that they become living witnesses to that central message of Christ, then the proclamation of it becomes meaningful in its content, and its inherent power as the Word of God is let to be effective in its influence. As a result then,
those who are "called" to re-mould their life according to this pattern of re-orientation, will be spontaneously drawn by the Spirit. And those who are "destined" to live in their own boundaries, will re-live their religious convictions in such a way that the central message of their own religion will be renewed from the imperfections that might have accrued in the course of time.

So, the real issue is not whether a Christian should or should not take the great commission seriously, but whether he has put the great commission in the proper context. In other words whether the oral proclamation arises out of the real living as a spontaneous expression, or whether oral proclamation and the life-proclamation are so dichotomized that the oral proclamation becomes meaningless and even harmful. To put it in a still different way, the question is whether a disciple of Christ considers the great commission of Christ in isolation, or along with the specific commandment of Christ for action and life. It is only in the observance of this great commandment of 'his', that one can be known as his disciples. Again it is only by following that precept of love that one can show his love to Christ. That is the only way one can really serve the Master too. Now has the so-called Christian passed this test? Has he first earned the right to be his disciple? If he has not, how could he dare go about proclaiming His message in the
street corners, or through schools, or hospitals and so on and so forth?

That is why the re-interpretation of the great commission of Christ in Mt. 28, 19 -- which we have tried to outline above -- would insist to put the living of that message as the centre, rather than making the great commission itself as the centre. If the content of Christ's message was a new order of living, and if he could proclaim this message mainly in and through his own living, so too were his immediate disciples, then the Church cannot assume a different role from the one assumed by Christ and his Apostles. Of course, the Church may not have denied at any time the central role given to the living. However, it will not be far from truth, if it be said that at least at some phases of its history, a dichotomy has been felt between the 'preaching' and the 'living', between the centre and its periphery. It was only when a misplaced emphasis laid on preaching, dichotomized from the living, that problems have arisen about the missionary activities of the Church. People like Gandhi have thrown a challenge to the missionaries. But if the oral proclamation arises as a natural and spontaneous expression of the concrete living, then it will not present a problem at all. What is natural cannot be put an end to. And what is spontaneous cannot be avoided. So, it all depends upon where one lays the emphasis, whether the great commission is
going to be problem or not. If one is going to take the great commission in isolation, cut away from the centre and basis, viz., the lived-experience, then definitely it will not only present a problem, but even make the message itself meaningless and harmful. Whereas if one lays emphasis on the basic and central message of Christ, then, the great commission understood in that context, will not only be spontaneous and natural but also will fructify in the true religious sense of the term.

It is the attempt to remove the misplaced emphasis, and to bring back the original emphasis on living, and to understand the great commission of Christ' to go and preach' in the context of the living, that we call re-interpretation of the great commission. This we have tried to do with the help of the Christian Scriptures themselves.

(vii) Concluding remarks

In this chapter we have gone over the different understandings of one's own scriptures and considered the implications of these different understandings. We have taken the case of Hindus interpreting their scriptures in the context of the challenge thrown to them regarding the problem of idolatry. We have also taken the case of a Christian's interpretation of his scriptures in the context of Gandhi's challenge regarding the understanding the great commission
of 'go and preach all nations'. This we took, because of its obvious connection to the problem of conversion, which also we have dealt with in our thesis.

From what we have seen in relation to the controversy regarding idolatry and regarding conversion one thing becomes clear: Scriptures are understood differently by different people at the same time, or same people at different times, or different people at different times.

From this, again, it is clear how the different understanding is arrived at:

(a) Sometimes certain texts are accepted, or certain other texts are ignored.
(b) Sometimes there is change of emphasis with regard to the texts accepted.
(c) Sometimes the mode of understanding is altered, from literal to metaphorical, or symbolical or allegorical etc.

The one conclusion that follows from the above is that no religion is too ready to accept that some other religion is better. On the contrary, as we have observed, there is enough flexibility within the scriptures themselves to accommodate one's scripture to many changes, either of circumstances, theory etc.
And it is possible for a religion to make good its deficiencies etc. In so far as this is so, it is not easy to say that one religion is intrinsically better than another.

If this is conceded, then neither scriptures nor a particular practice, nor a particular belief — can be easily made a ground for any religious superiority of one over the other. And if rightly or wrongly a religion claims temporary superiority over another, it can again hardly be a ground for intrinsic superiority.