It has already been noted that Gandhi’s first impressions of Christianity were shaped by the aggressive evangelical style of missionaries of a bygone era in his home town. Several decades were to pass before this style was replaced by something more kindly, less arrogantly self-righteous. During his student days in London, Gandhi studied the New Testament and met a number of fine people among Quakers and others and began to make a distinction in his mind between Christianity, Christians and Christ. The impact of the Sermon on the Mount on his mind was to remain with him all his life. The extent to which Hindus and Muslims of Gandhi’s generation associated Christianity with the imperial connection and an alien pattern of life (including food and dress) in pre-Independence days needs to be appreciated by the sympathetic reader today. First impressions take some getting over. In London, Gandhi was exposed to many influences which left their mark on him in later life, vegetarianism, free-thinking (the two were often conjoined), and a homespun brand of genuine piety which was less aggressive than what he had previously encountered simply because it was on home ground and dissociated from the flag. The friends he made in London were fired with a moral earnestness which he could understand and appreciate. About the same time, he encountered the teaching of Lord Buddha and found much in common between the spirit of renunciation and compassion expressed in the lives of both Lord Buddha and Christ. His questing spirit was awakened on religious matters and, student as he was, new ideas fell on fertile ground. He was not greatly troubled by theological problems at this stage in his career.

His experience in South Africa brought him into close touch with, once more, the evangelical brands of Christianity and there were plenty of friends to take him along to prayer meetings, and, from the best of motives no doubt, try to ‘save’ his soul. His correspondence
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from South Africa with Raychandbhai, his Jain mentor, includes questions about the nature of God which are rather strange questions to put to a Jain. The questions seem to reflect thinking on some of the matters he would have heard his friends speak about at their services and prayer meetings. While he could respect their sincerity of belief and was a close friend of men like the Rev. Joseph Doke who showed him great personal kindness, he was put off by dogmatic theological stances and confirmed in his earlier conviction that each man must work out his own salvation in the tradition in which he was rooted. Hinduism is non-credal in character and Gandhi failed to see why a man's salvation should depend on 'accepting Christ as one's "personal Saviour",' formal 'communicant' membership of a Christian church and so forth. His mind and heart could not be contained in any kind of formal straight-jacket, and as has been noticed, his attitude to his own tradition also bears the stamp of a man whose dwelling place has all its windows and doors open. In a tropical climate, to press the metaphor, in a multi-religious society, this makes good sense. Gandhi had not been a member of a family where men of many faiths were frequent visitors, for nothing.

It may be useful now to see what Gandhi's theological difficulties were, for some of these are not unlike the difficulties which many who live in the west have today. These stumbling blocks did not arise in his mind all at once, but over a period of time, and there is evidence of them in conversations recorded by others and in printed statements. To take them all together will give us a picture of a man who has reflected in depth on religious matters and adopts a very definitely rational approach in spite of being alive to the fact that religious stances in the last analysis depend on faith. I shall present the difficulties in the form in which they appeared to Gandhi and, as it were, from his point of view.

Christians (the evangelical ones he came across) speak of 'being saved' as if this is a once for all event, as if it were something highly personal. Now liberation for the Hindu is not from sin, but from the cycle of births and deaths. Gandhi's position was not identical with the orthodox one, but it was certainly a matter of continual striving, not a 'crisis' experience of a Kierkegaardian kind, still less an emotional conversion at the penitential bench. Just as the Christian awareness of the sinfulness of man goes beyond an insight into the contingency of reason, Gandhi's understanding of human imperfection goes beyond an insight into the extent of human ignorance. For