

The Mahatma and the Missionary: Gandhi's conflicting accounts of his first encounter with Christianity

Leah Renold
Texas State University

Abstract

Biographies of Mahatma Gandhi often begin with an examination of Gandhi's childhood and adolescence. Most coverage of the early life of Gandhi includes at least a mention of his first encounter with a Christian missionary in India and the negative effect that it had on Gandhi's perceptions of Christianity. In biographies and other studies of Gandhi, Gandhi's autobiography is the sole source of information on most of the events in his early life, including his initial encounter with Christianity. However, another generally neglected source on Gandhi's early life, Joseph Doke's *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian patriot in South Africa*, presents a different narrative of Gandhi's first encounter with Christianity that contrasts drastically with that in the autobiography. The paper explores the context of Gandhi's two contrasting descriptions of a missionary in Rajkot, the exchange of letters between Gandhi and Rev. Hugh Robert Scott, the missionary of whom Gandhi wrote, the controversy that ensued regarding Gandhi's description of Scott in his autobiography, and the writings and work of Scott. The disparity between Gandhi's two accounts of the missionary calls into question the reliance on Gandhi's narratives of his own life as an entirely accurate source of historical information.

*In a celebrated passage of his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi recalls how during his school days, "Christian missionaries used to stand on a corner near the high school and hold forth pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods."*¹

The mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century was the century of Christian missions in India.² The Charter Act of 1813 opened the door for missionaries to operate

in British East India Company–controlled areas. Even then, British administrators alert to the possibility of antagonism provoked by missionaries regulated missionary activity. The disparagement of Hindu or Muslim practices as “devilish” or “heathen” could result in missionaries being expelled from India.³ Nevertheless, after the uprising of 1857, the rise of street-preaching occasioned offense to Hindu religious sensibilities.⁴ The area of Gujarat, in which Mahatma Gandhi spent his childhood and youth, was subject to missionary activity, including street-preaching.⁵

Most biographical coverage of the early life of Gandhi includes at least a mention of his first encounter with a Christian missionary in India and the negative effect that it had on Gandhi’s perceptions of Christianity. In biographies and other studies of Gandhi, Gandhi’s autobiography is the sole source of information on most of the events in his early life, including his initial encounter with Christianity. However, another generally neglected source on Gandhi’s early life presents a narrative of Gandhi’s first encounter with the missionary that contrasts drastically with that in Gandhi’s autobiography. The disparity between the conflicting accounts has largely gone unnoticed but calls into question the reliance on Gandhi’s autobiography as an entirely accurate source of historical information.

It was during Gandhi’s years as a political activist in South Africa that he told his first version of his early life, including the story of the Christian missionary working in Rajkot. In 1908, Gandhi narrated an account of his early life to Joseph J. Doke, a Baptist missionary in South Africa.⁶ A wealthy Indian jewelry merchant and supporter of Gandhi, Pranjivan Mehta, paid to have the book published.⁷ One of Gandhi’s early promotion campaigns was the purchasing and distributing of all the copies of the first edition of Doke’s resulting biography, *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian patriot in South Africa*, published in 1909.⁸ Gandhi gifted copies of his biography to various Europeans, including Tolstoy.⁹ In Doke’s biography, which is the first published account of Gandhi’s early life, there is a section on Gandhi’s first encounter with Christianity. Doke asked Gandhi when he first learned of Christianity and Christian doctrines. Gandhi told him that it was not in Porbandhar, but in Rajkot that he first heard of Christianity:

In Rajkot rumours of Christianity found their way into the school, and so into the home, but they were vague, and by no means attractive. The Presbyterians had a Mission in Rajkot, and at one time our school was deeply stirred by the authentic report that a well-known Hindu had become a Christian. The idea among us of what becoming a Christian meant was not complimentary to Christianity. The boys held the firm conviction that conversion meant eating meat and drinking alcohol. These acts, which were abhorrent to Hindus, were for them the symbols of Christianity, beyond that they knew nothing.¹⁰

While Gandhi was saying that the rumor about a well-known Hindu converting was true, he seemed only to be reporting the boys' belief about converts eating meat and drinking alcohol.

Doke's biography went on to report that it was in Rajkot that Gandhi saw a Christian missionary for the first time:

Sometimes, on our way to school, we could catch a glimpse of Mr. Scott preaching or hear his voice in the distance; occasionally we heard rumours of his ill-treatment by the people, but I, at least, never went near him then. Later, I got to know him and to admire him.¹¹

The biography explains that Rev. Scott was from the Presbyterian Mission in Rajkot. Gandhi related this episode of his life to his biographer some twenty years after the event, remarkably remembering this first encounter with a Christian so well as to recall the name of the particular missionary, as well as the missionary's Protestant denomination.

Gandhi does not give any details of Rev. Scott's preaching and explains that he only saw and heard Scott's voice from a distance. Gandhi reported that there were rumors that the missionary was not treated well.¹² He does not go into detail on how he later came to know Rev. Scott or why he came to admire him. Years later, though, after returning to India and becoming a major public figure, Gandhi gave an entirely different description of his encounter with the missionary in Rajkot.

The story about the missionary in Rajkot appeared in a chapter of Gandhi's autobiography, which he began publishing in 1925 in a series of installments in his weekly periodicals *Navajivan* and *Young India*. In 1927, Gandhi published the first volume of the compiled chapters in *An Autobiography: The story of my experiments with truth*, which quickly became and remains an often-cited source on Gandhi's life up to 1920 or his fifty-first year.¹³ The chapter containing Gandhi's account of his experience with the missionary is Chapter X, "Glimpses of Religion," so named as it covers Gandhi's telling of his first brief introduction to religions other than his own. In the chapter, Gandhi explained that although as a youth he had developed tolerance for other religions, the one exception was Christianity, for which he had developed a disliking due to negative experiences with missionaries during his high school years.

Gandhi wrote that his early dislike for Christianity was based on his encounters with missionaries while he was a student in Rajkot:

Only Christianity was at the time an exception [to Gandhi's toleration of other faiths]. I developed a sort of dislike for it. And for a reason. In those days Christian missionaries used to stand in a corner near the High School and hold forth, pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods. I could not stomach this.¹⁴ I must have stood there to hear them once only but that was enough to dissuade me from repeating the experiment. About the time, I heard of a well known Hindu having been converted to Christianity. It was the talk of the town that when he was baptized he had to eat beef and drink liquor, that he also had to change his clothes and that thenceforth he began to go about in European costume including a hat. These things got on my nerves. Surely, thought I, a religion that compelled one to eat beef, drink liquor, and change one's own clothes did not deserve the name. I also heard that the new convert had already begun abusing the religion of his ancestors, their customs and their country. All these things created in me a dislike for Christianity.¹⁵

At the time Gandhi published the chapter in *Young India*, he had already become an important figure in India, having initiated several acts of political resistance, particularly the Non-cooperation Movement of 1920–22 in which he called for a

boycott of all things British, from British manufactured cloth, to British colleges in India. Gandhi's publications were drawing public attention and were read by many, including Rev. Scott, the missionary who had worked in Rajkot while Gandhi was a student there.¹⁶

The Rev. Dr. Hugh Robert Scott (1859–1929), an Irish Presbyterian Missionary, had left Rajkot and was residing in Surat at the time he read Gandhi's chapter in *Young India*. After reading what Gandhi had written about the missionaries in Rajkot, Scott wrote Gandhi the following letter in response on 12 February 1926:¹⁷

Dear Mr. Gandhi,

I have been reading with much interest your "Story" in *Young India*—as I read with interest all that you write,—and I am specially interested in your account of those early days in Rajkot, because my first 14 years in India were spent in Kathiawar,—one year in Gogha and 13 years in Rajkot. I was the only missionary in Rajkot during those years (from 1883 to 1897), and what you say about Christian missionaries in Rajkot standing on the corner near the High School and pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods fills me with a painful wonder. I certainly never preached "at a corner near the High School": my regular preaching station was under a banyan tree in Para Bazaar; and I certainly never "poured abuse on Hindus and their gods." That would be a strange way to win a hearing from Hindus. Then you say that a "well known Hindu" was baptized at that time, and that "he had to eat beef and drink liquor, and to change his clothes and go about in European costume, including a hat." No wonder such a story got on your nerves, if you believed it. Well, I have been over 42 years in India, and I have never heard of such a thing happening; and indeed I know it to be quite contrary to what all missionaries with whom I am acquainted teach and believe and practice. During my time in Rajkot I baptized a number of Brahmans and Jain Sadhus. They certainly had not to 'eat beef and drink liquor', either at their baptism or any other time. I have eaten beef myself of course as a European, but I have never drunk liquor in my life. As far as I know none of the Brahmans and Jains who were baptized by me in Rajkot ever

ate beef or drank liquor. I know of course that this kind of story is told about converts to Christianity in Kathiawar and elsewhere in India. It is obviously the willful invention of people who wish to prevent the spread of Christianity in India and hope thereby to frighten your Hindus who show an inclination to learn the truth about Christianity, and no doubt it has had its result in deterring many opportunities since then of discovering that that particular libel is without foundation, and as a sincere lover of truth you cannot wish to lend the great weight of your authority to perpetuate such a willfully malicious misrepresentation of Christian missionaries.

Please forgive me for writing so strongly, and for troubling you at all in the matter, but as many of my Hindu friends who know that I was the missionary at Rajkot during the years 1883–1897 [in margin], might not unreasonably suppose that you refer to me. I am sure you will do what you can to make it clear that this is not.

With deep respect and all good wishes.

Yours very sincerely,

HRS

H.R. Scott was clearly telling Gandhi that his account of the missionaries in Rajkot could not be true as he was the only missionary working in Rajkot during that time and that he never did any of the things that Gandhi described. Scott indirectly accused Gandhi of libel in repeating false rumors about Christians in Rajkot and thereby implicating him. Scott asks Gandhi to clear up the matter, as he does not want the Hindus who know that he was the only missionary in Rajkot to think that he engaged in such vile behavior. Scott also sent Gandhi a copy of his own translations of Gujarati poetry.

Gandhi sent a remarkable response to Scott's letter on 16 February 1926 from Sabarmati Ashram.¹⁸

Dear Friend,

I have your letter. You will observe that I have simply relied on my memory of things which happened years ago. But my recollection is vivid. I am totally unable to say whether the thing related at the time in Rajkot was true or not, and I have said so in the Chapter. Have I not? The Preacher near the High School corner still stands vividly before me haranguing the school boys and belittling Hinduism. But it is impossible for me to recall the name of the preacher. I do not think I knew it even when I heard him.

Do you want me to publish your letter in “Young India”? I shall gladly do so if you so desire.

I wish to add that my later experience does not improve my first experience. I have met thousands of Christian Indians. Many of them, if not a majority, I have found to be drinking and eating meat and wearing European clothes. When I have discussed these things with them, they have at least defended their meat-eating and their European dress.

The attack upon Hinduism and its gods, I have heard since from many Missionaries and read worse things in publications of missionary institutions. At the same time it is a pleasure to me to be able to testify that there is now-a-days, and has been for some time, a tendency towards toleration of other faiths and a wish on the part of some missionaries for Christian Indians to return to their ancestral simplicity and not to despise everything India.

Yours sincerely,
MK Gandhi

In his response to Scott’s letter, Gandhi performs an adept act of double-speak by admitting that his account of the missionary might not be true, yet insisting that it is true since he vividly remembers it. Gandhi now claims that he unable to remember the name of the preacher and does not think he ever knew the preacher’s name. While Gandhi admits that he unable to say whether the events actually happened, he does not give any sort of apology to Hugh Scott for the discomfort caused him. Instead of admitting that he might possibly have been mistaken in his memories of the missionary,

Gandhi continues to justify his writing by arguing that he knew plenty of Christians who drank, ate meat and wore European clothes. Nevertheless, Gandhi did offer to publish Rev. Scott's letter, thereby allowing the preacher to publicly challenge him.

The correspondence between Gandhi and Scott continued with a second exchange of letters. From his Sabarmati Ashram, Gandhi wrote in a second letter to Scott that if Scott agreed to the publication of his letter in *Young India*, then Gandhi would also include his response to Scott's letter in the periodical. He also thanked Scott for sending his translation of Gujarati poetry and told him that he liked them very much.¹⁹ Scott replied to Gandhi, explaining that he had not written to Gandhi to be published, but to address an injustice:

I did not write my first letter to you with a view to publication, but because I felt that your article did less than justice to Christian missionaries in general, and to me in particular, for it seems to me that the missionary whom your heard preach that day in Rajkot could be no other than myself.²⁰

Scott wrote that he was the only European missionary in Rajkot during the years of 1884 to 1897. He explained to Gandhi that he made it a rule to never bring up Hindu gods in his preaching and when questioned about them, he only related what the Hindu scriptures themselves say about the gods. Scott made a point of the fact that Gandhi had not addressed the question of the veracity of his statement that a convert to Christianity in Rajkot had been forced to eat meat and drink alcohol at his baptism. Scott argued that Gandhi's defense of his statement by pointing out that thousands of Christians in India eat beef and drink alcohol was not addressing the question. Scott told Gandhi that everyone knew that many Christian converts ate beef and drank alcohol, but that Gandhi knew that many of them had done so before conversion, and that they received no encouragement from the missionaries who were abstainers themselves. Scott told Gandhi that he must know many Christians that did not drink alcohol. He pointed out to Gandhi that many Hindus drank alcohol and ate beef, and that not all of them were low-caste, and neither were they put out of their caste for doing so. Scott also explained that he did not encourage and even prefer Indian converts to wear European clothes, but many of them did, as did many Hindus, in order to get better

appointments. Scott ended his letter with agreeing to have his letter, along with Gandhi's response, published.²¹

Gandhi did not respond with a personal letter to Scott, but published Scott's initial letter to him (dated 12 February 1926), along with his response in the 4 March 1926 edition of *Young India*. At the end of Scott's letter, Gandhi responded with the following:

Though the preaching took place over forty years ago the painful memory of it is still vivid before me. What I have heard and read since has but confirmed that first impression.... About beef-eating and wine-drinking at baptism I have merely stated what I heard and I have said as much in my writing. And whilst I accept Mr. Scott's repudiation I must say that though I have mixed freely among thousands of Christian Indians, I know very few who have scruples about eating beef or other flesh meats and drinking intoxicating liquors.²²

The title of the article that Gandhi published in *Young India*, "A Repudiation," which included Scott's letter and Gandhi's response, can be understood as having a double meaning as Gandhi writes that he accepts Scott's repudiation, while at the same time defending what he had written about the missionary. Gandhi does not actually address the points made in Scott's denial of the truth of Gandhi's claim that 1) Scott (as the only missionary in Rajkot) had poured abuse on Hindus and their gods, and 2) that a well-known Hindu in Rajkot had been forced to eat meat and drink alcohol at his baptism. While Gandhi admitted that he accepted Scott's repudiation, but offered no public apology to Scott, writing instead that the "painful memory" was still vivid in his mind after forty years and then shifting his response to making the case that Indian Christians eat meat and drink alcohol.

The issue between Gandhi and Rev. Scott was reported in the *Times of India*. A writer for the *Times* who had read Gandhi's "A Repudiation" in *Young India* and had recognized Gandhi's way of avoiding a direct response to Scott's challenging of his accounts of the events in Rajkot, published a short piece on the exchange between Scott and Gandhi, concluding with a satirical note that "Mr. Gandhi neither justified nor withdraws his statement and the question is whether his experiments with Truth are at

an end, or are still proceeding.”²³ This was not the only irate reactions to Gandhi’s response to Scott.

Rev. Scott received two supportive letters from Hindus who had read the exchange in *Young India*. Motiram S. Advani, a regular reader of Gandhi’s *Navajivan* (the Gujarati edition of *Young India*), who had read the exchange between Gandhi and Scott, wrote to Scott from Hyderabad, Sind, after reading a piece of the controversy in the *Times of India*:²⁴

My dear Scott, I give you my 3 jolly cheers from this corner of the world.... I have known the best missionaries in my life from 1881. Even now, some dear souls whom I have not met, carry on loving correspondence with me and we exchange views on religion. I always take it as a compliment to receive such communications in my crippled state of body and being a Hindu. Well, I can honestly tell you that during my [word?] long experience from 1881, I know of no convert being asked to take beef, take liquor and put on European clothes, after his conversion. It is quite true that some of the converts go wrong when they get into bad society. Even the Christian missionaries from England who have always lived on beef do not like it in India. I really wonder where Gandhi got his idea about this incident—and immortalizes your name in the book he is bringing out—chapter by chapter in the “Navajivan.” The Irish Presbyterian Church Missionaries are extremely careful about the feelings of the Indians in whose midst they live and preach their gospel. I think it but right, on every part—that I should tell you what—I honestly believe to be the truth, though. I am not experimenting with the truth like the Great Mahatma, in the last stage of my life.²⁵

In a similar response, Pandit Lalana of Santa Cruz, Bombay, wrote that Scott had “greatly repudiated Gandhi” in saying that what Gandhi claimed was contrary to what all missionaries with whom Scott was acquainted teach.²⁶ Pandit Lalana went on to say, though, that there were different sorts of missionaries and that some may not be missionaries of the Christianity of Christ, but of “lavish intellectualities” which repudiate any other aspect of God other than that which their church dictates them to

believe and to teach. He says that these missionaries do rain down abuses on Hindus and their gods because they are born not of spirit, but of flesh, and cannot see the divine [in Hinduism].²⁷

Rev. Scott, in his response to the letter from Pandit Lalana, expressed what he felt about Gandhi's response:

You must have noticed that Mr. Gandhi did not say that he knew the story to be true. He only says that he was told it. What I have said in my reply is that such a story was obviously a willful invention, and Mr. Gandhi must know quite well that there is not a grain of truth in it. Mr. Gandhi in the note that he appends to my letter avoids the point of my protest. It is no reply to say that thousands of Christians eat flesh and drink liquor.

That is not denied by me. Can he prove that any single convert was ever required by a missionary to eat flesh, drink liquor, or wear European clothes?²⁸

Scott, while not calling Gandhi a liar directly, implies that Gandhi has passed on a story to his readers that he knew was an untruth. Scott seems to have believed that Gandhi had not given an honest response to his letter and that Gandhi's description of conversion requirements was a complete fabrication, a "willful invention."²⁹ Scott's own published writing, which he had sent to Gandhi along with his first letter, provides evidence that Rev. Scott was one of those Christians missionaries who believed that the divine could be found in Hindu traditions, especially in poetry.

Scott was fluent in Gujarati and fond of Gujarati poetry. Scott was interested in the poetry as a way of increasing his knowledge of the language, but also as a means of learning about Gujarati culture and elements of Hindu tradition. In his writing Scott expressed a deep appreciation for many aspects of Hinduism expressed in the poetry. Scott translated the Gujarati poetry into English, and as mentioned earlier, he sent Gandhi a copy of his translations. Scott expressed his appreciation for some of the religious sentiments and ideas of classical Gujarati poetry in a paper, "Gujarati Poetry: Its value for missionaries," which he presented at a conference of missionaries.³⁰ In the

paper, Scott explains that during his second year in India, he was introduced to Dalpatram Dahyabhai's *Kavyadohana*, containing selections from Gujarati poetry, which sent him on a quest for more of the poetry. He explained that at the time some of his older missionary friends had told him that there was nothing in Gujarati poetry worth wasting time over. He told the missionaries at the conference, that as he was now a senior missionary, he was going to tell them just the opposite. Scott advised, "You should start the study of the poets as soon as you can, and keep up that study as long as you live. I promise that if you do so you will find abundant treasures and rich reward."

Scott continued to explain the value of studying the Gujarati poetry. In its usefulness for gaining knowledge of the language, Scott wrote that learning just one volume of the poetry would give a European enough command of Gujarati to hold his head up anywhere. The poetry would also help them learn Gujarati words for religious terms and ideas. Furthermore, Scott advised that poetry would help the missionaries learn about Hindu traditions, which were essential to helping the missionaries deliver their message. He wrote, "Their poems are the Bible of the common people, their Psalter and Prayer book too. It is through recitations of these poems that most of the people learn all they know of religion and mythology; of faith and hope and duty; of sin and guilt and punishment; of truth and righteousness and devotion."³¹ In so writing, Scott was saying that Hinduism contained elements of truth and righteousness. For instance, of learning about Hindu deities, Scott wrote, "Here you will find the names and virtues of the village gods and goddesses, and you will be surprised to find how much of the characters of the true God is ascribed to Ambaji and Bahuchar."³² While Scott explains that while the poetry does contain some superstitious material, he wrote that the poetry was most valuable in that it could be used against empty forms of religions of superstitions:

The poets, who were of various castes from the Brahmans NARSINHA MEHTA and PREMANANDA to the philosophical goldsmith AKHO, and included Sadhus of all kinds, and no doubt of all castes, are in Gujarat what the prophets were in old Israel. They have made a stand against the pretensions of the priests, and have advocated a living

spiritual religion instead of the lifeless formal religion of outward ceremony.³³

Scott expressed that there was both the worthy and the unworthy in Hindu traditions, but that the poets, like the Hebrew prophets, served as correctives in pointing people back to the truth.

In the paper, Scott went into great detail in relating stories from the Gujarati poets and the lessons taught therein. For example, the great poem of Haramal of Premananda contained the tale of Narsinha Mehta's devotion to Krishna and his defiance of the caste prejudices of his day by going to the Dheda (an untouchable caste) quarter to sing praises to Krishna with the Dhedas.³⁴ Scott explains that the poem, in its many variations, is one of the most well-known of the Gujarati poems, and that its most famous stanza, which describes the ideal Vaishnava, could also be used to describe a true Christian.³⁵ Scott gave his own translation of the lines:

He is a true Vaishnava who thinks of others' woes,
Who relieves the distresses of others, and harbours no thought of pride.
He speaks well of all before all, and abuses none,
He keeps in control of his words, his acts and his thoughts,
Blessed indeed is the mother who bore him!³⁶

Scott also described Bhojo Bhagat's "Whiplashes" as being as fine an example of the folly of trusting in riches as one could find outside of the Bible. Scott explained, "You will in reading Bhojo and others like him be often surprised at the close resemblance between his ideas and those of our Christian teaching."³⁷ Of the story of the Hundi, Scott felt that there was no better illustration of the faith that leaps over all obstacles. He quoted one of the lines of the poem, "He will not fail those who put their trust in him," and wrote, "Is not that what we Christians have learnt from Christ, and what we want to impress on our hearers?" Scott goes on for pages giving many examples of that which impressed him in Gujarati poetry. He concludes his essay by telling the missionaries that it would be worth their while to gather out all the gems of religious truth from the Gujarati poetry, which he wrote, show "evidences of faith like Abraham's, of self-sacrifice like Isaac's, of courage and martyr-like devotion like Stephen's, of impatience with outward forms, of disgust with hypocrisy."³⁸

Scott was a Christian missionary who could appreciate elements of Hinduism. In *Church History of Gujarat*, Robin Boyd reports that Scott was “a man with a great love and respect for Indian cultures and the Indian way of life.”³⁹ Scott made an ecumenical statement in his essay that the poetry reveals that Christianity and Hinduism had much in common:

It [the poetry] gives us insight into Hindu religious ideas, and shows that they have much in common with our own. A recent writer on Genesis says that “As a real expression of the living spirit of the nation a people’s myths are the mirror of its religious and moral ideals, aspirations and imagination,” and the religious and moral ideals, aspirations and imaginations of the Hindus of Gujarat and Kathiawar are clearly mirrored in the stories of their gods and heroes which form the chief topic of their poetry.... We know that God is everywhere present, so did these poets.⁴⁰

Scott expresses admiration for the profundities that he found in the Gujarati poetry. Even though the stories in the poetry revolved around Hindu deities, Scott was able to see that the stories expressed ideas and sentiments that were consistent with his Christian ideas. Scott certainly did not condemn and demonize Hinduism, but it did find certain aspects of the tradition that he described as “groveling superstition, confused thinking, doubtful morality, perhaps pure rubbish.”⁴¹ From what can be garnered about the man from his essay on Gujarati poetry, Scott would not be one to stand on a street corner berating Hindus and Hinduism.

The fact that the intended audience of Scott’s essay was other European Christian missionaries and not Hindus is also telling. He was not writing the essay to placate or manipulate anyone. He was expressing his sincere admiration for what he sees as the religious truth found in the Gujarati poetry. He may have found that not all of his fellow missionaries were as open to religious truths within Hinduism. Hugh Robert Scott was most likely not just “preaching to the choir,” so to speak, or to those who already agreed with him, when he wrote; he was instead giving an honest and balanced assessment of Gujarati poetry, based on his own perceptions.

Hugh Robert Scott's perceptions of Hindu traditions were most likely influenced by his close interactions with Indians, which some Christian missionaries, especially those newly arrived to India, might have lacked. Rev. Scott, on the other hand, worked side by side with non-Christian Indians on a regular basis and was fluent in the local language, Gujarati. H.R. Scott was a member of the Municipality Board, chairman of the School Board, secretary of the local public library, member of the Tennis and Golf Club, and president of the Western India Golf Club. In doing translation work, Scott enlisted the help of Hindus. He made many acquaintances and had close friends who were not Christian, including the nawab of Sachin, who held a banquet in Scott's honor upon his leaving Surat, and Mr. Derasari, a barrister-at-law, who travelled from Ahmadabad to Surat to bid his old friend farewell upon his departure from India. Scott's ability to speak Gujarati and his close contacts and friendships with non-Christians may well have influenced his openness to seeing something valuable in their religion. It was primarily though, his study of the Gujarati poets that gave him an appreciation for elements of Hindu tradition.

Scott could have never gained the depth of understanding of Gujarati poetry without an advanced knowledge of Gujarati that he developed over time. Scott, like Gandhi, published a Gujarati weekly, *Dawn of Truth*. His more well-known work was the revision of the Gujarati Bible. Scott worked on two revisions of the Gujarati Bible, the first carried out between 1883 and 1899 working with others, and the other between 1924 and 1927, completed by Scott, assisted by Shri Morar Dungarji and a Brahmin pandit.⁴² In his translation work, Scott found that there were words in the Gujarati language, which included Sanskrit and Persian terms, for anything that needed to be expressed by Europeans.⁴³ As an example of his level of understanding of Gujarati, Scott wrote that it was due to a lack of knowledge of the language and prejudices that Christians had used wrong terms in their translation of the Bible, thus weakening the translation and making it less understandable to Indian readers.⁴⁴ Of prejudices in translation, Scott wrote that two Gujarati words for "prophet," the meaning of which stressed the fact that the prophet's work was to arouse, admonish, and teach his hearers, corresponded to the Judeo-Christian understanding of the term prophet. Christian translators of the Bible, however, had chosen not to use the words for prophet, *nabi* and *pagambar*, which were used by Muslims to refer to both Jesus and Mohammad, and had selected a less appropriate Gujarati word that meant fortune-teller, solely due to the

fact that Indian Muslims used *pagambar* for both Mohammed and Jesus. More seriously, Scott wrote, instead of translating the Christian term “Lord” into the appropriate Gujarati term, *parameshwar*, Christians had created the word *yahowa*—to which Gujarati-speakers could not relate—because of the association of the Hindu god Shiva with *parameshwar*. Scott’s abilities in translation and appreciation for the sentiments expressed in Gujarati poetry were based on his thorough knowledge of Gujarati.

Scott’s knowledge of Gujarati also allowed him to write an assessment of Gandhi’s Gujarati version of his autobiography after the first various chapters were compiled and published as the first of three volumes in 1927. Scott begins with describing the cover of the book as having a “characteristic picture of Mr. Gandhi, naked except for a small cloth round his loins.”⁴⁵ Of the book, Scott had something positive to write:

The book is written in Mr. Gandhi’s clear and fascinating style. It is sure to have a great circulation, especially as it costs so little. It will certainly help the cause of social reform, and encourage liberty and independent thinking and acting among young readers.⁴⁶

Scott also wrote of Gandhi’s explanation for writing the book. Scott explains that Gandhi wrote that his experiments in politics were well known in India and in the rest of the civilized world, but that his spiritual experiences were on a different plane and that was what he wanted to share with others in the book.⁴⁷ Scott included one paragraph of the three-page review on Gandhi’s account of the missionary in Rajkot, which included the following:

When this article appeared in *Young India* I wrote to Mr. Gandhi telling him that I was then a missionary in Rajkot, that it was never my practice to abuse Hindu gods, and that the story of the convert being required to eat flesh etc. was without a grain of truth, and that he must have known that perfectly well when he wrote it. He gave an evasive reply; said that most Christians whom he has known were meat-eaters, and some missionaries have abused Hindu idolatry. He published my letter, however, and his evasive answer was neatly dealt with by the writer of “Current Topics” in the “Times of India” a few days later, who hoped

that Mr. Gandhi would now cease to “experiment” with truth in that way.⁴⁸

This rebuttal was the only critical part of Scott’s otherwise positive review of Gandhi’s book. Apparently, Scott believed that with the statement above, he had said enough about Gandhi’s commitment to truth.

Most biographers and scholars have taken Gandhi’s story of the missionary in his autobiography as a factual, historical account.⁴⁹ For those writers who address Scott’s response to Gandhi in *Young India*, there is a tendency to credit Gandhi as having “with scrupulous honesty published Scott’s letter to him” and to explain away incident in Gandhi’s favor.⁵⁰ For instance, Rajmohan Gandhi, Gandhi’s grandson, writes in his biography of his grandfather:

When the autobiography appeared, the Rev. H.R. Scott protested. Scott said he was the only Rajkot-missionary and had never slandered Hindus or their gods or persuaded converts to eat beef or drink liquor. Gandhi accepted the repudiation, but added that the painful memory was still vivid before me. Perhaps he heard a visiting missionary.⁵¹

Rajmohan Gandhi and others give credit to Gandhi for having “accepted the repudiation,” though Gandhi in response to Scott never admitted his error. To spare Gandhi from being wrong, the suggestion is given that perhaps a “visiting missionary” appeared.

Writers aware of Gandhi’s earlier, positive account of the missionary to Doko in South Africa, have ignored the problem of the two differing accounts or have excused them. The attitude seems to be that whether Gandhi was mistaken in his memory of the missionary in Rajkot or not, he was still speaking the truth:

Whether Gandhi was mistaken or (as it seems more likely) Scott was over presumptuous in imagining that he was the only missionary in Rajkot at that time does not really matter. Abuse of the kind Gandhi speaks about was common in missionary discourse and in mission writings of the colonial era.⁵²

In general, writers take Gandhi at his word and make an effort to explain away the problem of Scott's accusation. There is a confident insistence upon the "truth" of Gandhi and an easy dismissing of Scott's protest. The factual details of the story *do not really matter*; the "truth" of Gandhi matters. This, as Scott would argue, is missing the point entirely. The point is that truth matters and, as the old adage goes, "Truth is in the details."

There are numerous other discrepancies between Gandhi's accounts of his early life as he related them to Joseph Doke and those that he wrote in his autobiography. For instance, Gandhi wrote of his father, Karamchand "Kaba" Gandhi. In his account to Doke, his father is described as intensely religious man, who knew the whole of the *Bhagavadgita* by heart.⁵³ In his autobiography, Gandhi write of his father, "In his last days he began reading the Gita at the instance of a learned Brahman friend of the family, and he used to repeat aloud some verses every day at the time of worship."⁵⁴ In the autobiography Gandhi writes that his mother was Kaba Gandhi's fourth wife.⁵⁵ In Doke's biography, Gandhi's mother is described as Kaba's second wife.⁵⁶ Those are only two among other discrepancies between the two accounts of Gandhi's early life.⁵⁷ It should be remembered that Gandhi not only related the stories of his life directly to Doke, but that he also oversaw the publication of Doke's biography and personally gave copies of the biography as gifts. Gandhi obviously knew of and approved of the contents of the biography, which was also published in India after Gandhi returned from South Africa.

It is obvious that Gandhi's conflicting accounts of first encounter with Christianity were shaped by the contexts in which he narrated them. In 1908, when Gandhi related the account of his life to his first biographer, Joseph Doke, Gandhi was seeking respect from the British for himself and his class of Western-educated Indians. During this time, Gandhi was not hesitant to present a positive account of his first encounter with Christianity, which would have been welcomed by the English-readers of the biography to which Gandhi presented copies of the book. Years later, though, when Gandhi narrated the second and disparaging version of his encounter with the missionary in his autobiographical account, he had called for and led the Non-cooperation Movement of 1920–22, which called for a rejection of all things British. Though Gandhi writes later in his autobiography of his love for the "Sermon on the

Mount” and of the kindness of Christian friends, he makes sure to maintain a critical rejection of Christianity as an organized religion. His portrayal of the vile actions of the missionary in Rajkot during his youth, which set his teeth against the intolerance of Christianity, corresponds with his political strategies of the time and with his self-portrayal as a man standing up against Western civilization and imperialism.

Gandhi’s inclusion of comments about missionary activity in both of the narratives must be understood in the much wider context of missionary activity in India. There is no denying that missionary activity, in varying degrees, was based on the assumption that there was something lacking in Indian religious traditions. William Wilberforce, who led the effort in the British parliament in 1813 to allow mission activity in India, based in argument on the benefit to Indians that would be occasioned by proselytization and education:

Are we so little aware of the vast superiority even of Europeans laws and institutions, and far more of British institutions, over those of Asia as not to be prepared to predict with confidence, that the Indian community which should have exchanged its dark and bloody superstitions for the genial influence of Christian light and truth, would have experienced such an increase of civil order and security, of social pleasure and domestic comforts, as to be desirous of preserving the blessings it should have acquired, and can we doubt that it would be bound even by the ties of gratitude to those who have been the honoured instruments of communicating them.⁵⁸

The conversion to Christianity was considered part of the imperial strategy of the assimilation of Indians into British language, manners, customs, sentiments and religion.⁵⁹ Gandhi, from his time in South Africa, and particularly during the noncooperation movement of 1920-22, had been struggling to free Indians from the assimilation of all things British. In his autobiography, he is surely playing upon negative reactions to missionary endeavors, which were not always with received with gratitude. Street-preaching was the most common way for most missionaries to make contact with Indians. Sometimes the preaching attracted a friendly audience, but it was not unusual for the street-preachers to meet with hostility, including dirt and rock-throwing.⁶⁰ News of conversions to Christianity also antagonized local communities.

In Porbandar, Gandhi's birthplace, the conversion in 1843 of Abdur Rahman, a learned Muslim, by the Irish Presbyterians (Scott's denomination) caused consternation among Muslims and Hindus alike:

The Hindu community of Porbandar, including the ruling Rana Saheb, joined hands with the Muslims to oppose the spread of the Christian faith, and wild and untrue rumours were circulated, probably similar to those which Gandhi heard many years later. The opposition increased so much that eventually it became virtually impossible to do any Christian work.⁶¹

Though this conversion occurred before Gandhi's birth, it should be noted that Gandhi claimed that both his father and his grandfather before him had been in the employment of the Rana Saheb of Porbandar. Gandhi quite plausibly, may have heard the story of the conversion and the associated rumors.

In Rajkot, where Gandhi encountered Rev. H.R. Scott, Pitamber Shamji, a Brahman schoolmaster, converted to Christianity about 1886.⁶² His conversion had happened after he heard Rev. Scott preaching in the bazaar, which had reawakened an earlier interest in Christianity.⁶³ The conversion resulted in much opposition, including an unsuccessful attempt to abduct the convert's wife. The conversion is most likely that to which Gandhi alluded, as it occurred near the end of Gandhi's time in high school in Rajkot. Though there were few converts in the area, the church record shows that all the converts in Rajkot at that time were baptized by Rev. H.R. Scott, which eliminates the possibility that a visiting missionary may have been the missionary of Gandhi's autobiographical account.⁶⁴ Of Gandhi's account of the offending missionary forcing converts to drink alcohol and eat beef, Robin Boyd writes that the Presbyterians of Gujarat would certainly not have forced converts to drink alcohol as they taught total abstinence from alcoholic drinks, and that although the missionaries were not vegetarians, they did not force converts to give up a vegetarian diet.⁶⁵ Boyd writes, in the conclusion of his coverage on the issue of Gandhi and H.R. Scott, "It is well for the record of the history of the Church in Gujarat that it should be made clear that the stories which Gandhiji heard in the bazaar were untrue."⁶⁶

The story of Gandhi's first negative encounter with the missionary in Rajkot has become entrenched in Gandhi lore and scholarship. Originally the chapters of Gandhi's articles were published separately as serials. Later, though, Gandhi oversaw the publication of the autobiography as a single volume. The *Story of My Experiments with Truth* attracted a wide audience of people interested in how the Mahatma's character and ideas were shaped by his life experiences. As Claude Markovits writes, Gandhi has been able to control his own legend with the autobiography:

Gandhi managed to establish his text as the main factual source for all his later biographies, as least for the period of his life before 1920 (the year in which the autobiography ends). Astonishingly even Gandhi's most improbable statements have been accepted uncritically by most of his biographers.⁶⁷

Gandhi chose to include the disparaging version of his encounter with the missionary. Robin Boyd writes that "by allowing the statement to be reprinted without correction in subsequent editions of the autobiography, despite Scott's repudiation, he [Gandhi] lent his authority to what in fact was only a commonly-circulated but unsubstantiated rumour."⁶⁸ Gandhi's tale of his early encounter with the missionary standing on the street corner near his school pouring abuse on Hinduism and of a Christian convert being forced to eat meat and drink alcohol has been passed down through the decades to millions of readers who also learn from Gandhi of his deep commitment to *satya* (truth) and *ahimsa* (non-harm or nonviolence).

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi basks in light of history as the Mahatma, a man deeply committed to the truth. When one reads Gandhi's autobiography, it is easy to assume that Gandhi's narratives are a true and accurate account of his life. The unquestioning belief in the historical accuracy of Gandhi's accounts of his life in his autobiography, though, is a dangerous exception to be made to any leader and especially to one who is regarded by many as having lived on a higher plane than most of the rest of humanity. It is certainly not the first time in history for infallibility to be imparted to an exceptional individual. The discrepancies between Gandhi's two conflicting accounts of Rev. Hugh Robert Scott should give historians and biographers pause. Gandhi obviously crafted the accounts of his life in an attempt to influence public perceptions. The Mahatma was an admirable man in many ways, but he was also a

consummate political strategist and his own self-publicist, who knew how to use the printed word to the best effect. He published the autobiography when he was still at the forefront of the struggle for Indian self-government. There is much to be learned about Gandhi's political genius through studying how he cut and shaped his narratives, how he used language, how he employed different stories for different audiences, what he revealed and what he hid. Gandhi's autobiography should not be approached as an entirely factual historical document on Gandhi's life, but should be read as a political leader's carefully constructed narrative. Gandhi's endearing and enduring reputation for being a saintly figure should not exempt his autobiography from the same skepticism and analytical distance that would be given to literary self-portrayals of any other modern political figure.

For correspondence: lr22@txstate.edu.

Notes

¹ Ferdando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, *Reading for This Place: Social location and biblical interpretation*, 124.

² Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From beginning to the present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 261.

³ Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, 270.

⁴ Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu and nineteenth-century Banaras* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 109–11.

⁵ See Robin Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1981).

⁶ For more on Gandhi's interactions with Joseph J. Doke, see Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi Before India* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2014).

⁷ Guha, *Gandhi Before India*, 341.

⁸ Joseph J. Doke, *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian patriot in South Africa* (Varanasi: Akhil Bharat Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1959). First published London: London Indian Chronicle, 1909.

⁹ Guha, *Gandhi Before India*, 340.

¹⁰ Doke, *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian patriot*, 30–31.

¹¹ Doke, *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian patriot*, 31.

¹² H.R. Scott confirmed the rumors of ill treatment in his *Report of the Irish Presbyterian Mission in Gujarat and Kattiawad 1888* and to the *Herald of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (1888), both cited in Stephen Hay's "Between Two Worlds: Gandhi's first impression of British culture," *Modern Asian Studies* 3/4, Gandhi Centenary Number (1969): 309.

¹³ Mahadev Desai, in the Translator's Preface to Gandhi's *Autobiography*, writes that the first volume was published in 1927, the second volume in 1929, and the compiled single volume in English in 1940 in M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The story of my experiments with truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), xxi.

¹⁴ When the compiled chapters were published in 1927 as the book *An Autobiography: The story of my experiments with truth*, the line "I could not stomach this" was changed to, "I could not endure this."

¹⁵ M.K. Gandhi, "The Story of My Experiments with Truth, Chapter X, Glimpses of Religion," *Young India: A Weekly Journal* 8/52 (11 Feb. 1926), in *Young India (Bombay, India)*, Vol. 8, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House: New Order Book Company, 1981), 56.

¹⁶ *Thacker's Indian Directory*, first published in 1885, confirms that Hugh Robert Scott was an Irish Presbyterian missionary in Rajkot.

¹⁷ Hugh Robert Scott to M.K. Gandhi, 12 Feb. 1926, Hugh Robert Scott Papers, IOR MSS EUR C 487, Asian and African Section, British Library, London (hereafter cited as "Scott Papers"). I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Richard Bingle, Senior Librarian of the British Library (retired) for telling me of the existence of the Scott papers.

¹⁸ Gandhi to Scott, 16 Feb. 1926, Scott Papers.

¹⁹ Gandhi to Scott, 23 Feb. 1926, Scott Papers.

²⁰ Scott to Gandhi, 24 Feb. 1926, Scott Papers.

²¹ Scott to Gandhi, 24 Feb. 1926, Scott Papers.

²² Scott and Gandhi, "A Repudiation," *Young India* (4 March 1926) in *Young India (Bombay, India)*, Vol. 8, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House: New Order Book Company, 1981), 82.

²³ "Current Topics: Experiments with truth," *Times of India* (Bombay), 8 March 1926, 8.

²⁴ Motilal S. Advani to H.R. Scott, 10 March 1926, Scott Papers.

- ²⁵ Motilal S. Advani to H.R. Scott, 10 March 1926, Scott Papers.
- ²⁶ Pandit Lalana to H. R. Scott, undated, Scott Papers.
- ²⁷ Pandit Lalana to H. R. Scott, undated, Scott Papers.
- ²⁸ Scott to Pandit Lalana, 8 March 1926, Scott Papers.
- ²⁹ Scott to Pandit Lalana, 8 March 1926, Scott Papers.
- ³⁰ Hugh Robert Scott, *Gujarati Poetry: Its Value for Missionaries* (Surat: Mission Press, 1911).
- ³¹ Scott, *Gujarati Poetry*, 8.
- ³² Scott, *Gujarati Poetry*, 7.
- ³³ Scott, *Gujarati Poetry*, 9.
- ³⁴ Scott, *Gujarati Poetry*, 18.
- ³⁵ Scott, *Gujarati Poetry*, 18.
- ³⁶ Scott, *Gujarati Poetry*, 18. Interestingly, Gandhi had this poem sung during prayers at Sabarmati Ashram and regarded the poem as an expression of his own idea of the ideal Vaishnava. Gandhi, “To ‘Vaishnavas’,” *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 19 (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1966), 72–73.
- ³⁷ Scott, *Gujarati Poetry*, 11.
- ³⁸ Scott, *Gujarati Poetry*, 25.
- ³⁹ Robin Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1981), 134.
- ⁴⁰ Scott, *Gujarati Poetry*, 14–15.
- ⁴¹ Scott, *Gujarait Poetry*, 25.
- ⁴² Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat*, 94.
- ⁴³ Scott to Boyd, 12 Jan. [no year given], Scott Papers.
- ⁴⁴ Scott to Boyd, 12 Jan. [no year given], Scott Papers.
- ⁴⁵ H.R. Scott to the Director of Public Instruction, Poona, “Review of the Book: Atmalatja (athwa Satyana Prayogo) i.e. Autobiography of Experiments in Truth. First Part,” Scott Papers.
- ⁴⁶ Scott to the Director of Public Instruction, Scott Papers, 3
- ⁴⁷ Scott to the Director of Public Instruction, Scott Papers, 1.
- ⁴⁸ Scott to the Director of Public Instruction, Scott Papers, 2.
- ⁴⁹ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 26; Guha, *Gandhi Before India*, 27; David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and*

Ours: The global legacy of his ideas (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 177; Ross Marlay and Clark D Neher, *Patriots and Tyrants: Ten asian leaders* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 273; Shompa Lahiri, *Indians in Britain: Anglo-Indian encounter, race, and identity, 1880–1939* (Delhi: Routledge, 2013), 42; Arvind Sharma, *Gandhi: A spiritual biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 18.

⁵⁰ Segovia and Tolbert, *Reading For This Place*, 124n61.

⁵¹ Rajmohan Gandhi, *The Good Boatman: A portrait of Gandhi*, (New York: Viking Press, 1995), 55.

⁵² Segovia and Tolbert, 124n61.

⁵³ Doke, *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian patriot*, 22–23.

⁵⁴ Gandhi, Chapter I, “Birth and Parentage,” *Autobiography*, 4.

⁵⁵ Gandhi, Chapter I, “Birth and Parentage,” *Autobiography*, 3.

⁵⁶ Doke, *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian patriot*, 5.

⁵⁷ A chapter on the discrepancies between the accounts will be included in a forthcoming book, tentatively titled, *Spinning: Gandhi’s experiments with truth*.

⁵⁸ Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 35.

⁵⁹ Stokes, *The English Utilitarians*, 35.

⁶⁰ Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat*, 92.

⁶¹ Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat*, 38.

⁶² Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat*, 92.

⁶³ Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat*, 92.

⁶⁴ Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat*, 134.

⁶⁵ Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat*, 134n11.

⁶⁶ Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat*, 134.

⁶⁷ Claude Markovits, *The Un-Gandhian Gandhi: The life and afterlife of the Mahatma* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 51.

⁶⁸ Boyd, *Church History of Gujarat*, 134.