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The Archbishop's 'Passage To India'?

COLIN CHAPMAN

Significant things seem to happen to people who go overseas—and especially when they go to India! When Mrs. Moore comes face to face with India in all its strangeness and diversity in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (the book, I mean, not the film), she loses her faith. Her experience in the cave is not simply a matter of hearing terrifying echoes, but is symbolic of a much deeper philosophical despair.

No, she did not wish to repeat that experience. The more she thought over it, the more disagreeable and frightening it became. She minded it much more now than at the time. The crush and the smells she could forget, but the echo began in some indescribable way to undermine her hold on life . . . Suddenly, at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from 'Let there be light' to 'It is finished' only amounted to 'bom'. Then she was terrified over an area larger than usual; the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect, offered no repose to her soul, and she realized that she didn't want to write to her children, didn't want to communicate with anyone, not even with God¹ . . .

Although Forster did not write as a Christian, he clearly understood traditional Christianity (at least in its western form) and Hinduism. *A Passage to India* was not simply about the British Raj, but, in his own words, 'about the universe embodied in the Indian earth and the Indian sky, about the horror lurking in the Marabar Caves, about the release symbolized by the birth of Krishna . . .' Therefore although the book was written in 1924 and does not reflect Hinduism as it is today, the significance of Forster for us in this context is that he lived long enough in India to see beyond the appearances and to wrestle with the many questions of culture, politics, philosophy and religion which come to the surface when West meets East.

And what impression did India make on the Archbishop during his visit in 1986? His Sir Francis Younghusband Memorial Lecture² delivered at Lambeth Palace some months later under the title *Christianity and World Religions* gives us some very significant clues. He admits that 'India can be a stunning experience . . . an experience which leaves one dazed and uncertain of one's bearings. Before there were the certainties of an encapsulated western Christianity. After, there are new ways of thinking about God, Christ and the world.' In his lecture, therefore, he wants to raise some 'disturbing questions'

concerning 'the encounter of Christianity and other religions', and indicate the kind of answers he now wants to give.

It is clear that these answers are very different from the traditional answers which Christians have given. Indeed throughout the lecture he is at pains to emphasize the contrast between Christian attitudes to other faiths in the past and 'a new attitude to world religions' which he wants to commend. Thus, for example, he says that relations between religions in the past have been characterized by divisiveness, rivalry and isolationism. And typical Christian attitudes to people of other faiths would need to be summed up with words like: superiority, indifference, ignorance, contempt, triumphalism and rejection.

The new attitude, 'this more enlightened approach', on the other hand, recognizes that the greatest need of the world today is to recover unity, to bring about reconciliation and overcome divisions. People of all faiths should therefore be motivated by 'a spirit of fellowship and a search for greater unity'. 'In our dialogue with other faiths we should be searching for greater truth and understanding'.

This is certainly a timely call for an attitude to people of other faiths which is more open, positive and loving. We should all welcome the emphasis on the need for encounter and dialogue at a personal level, for listening and rigorous reflection, for love and respect towards people of other faiths. The Archbishop reminds us that we have much to learn from other faiths (for example, about worship, contemplation, and simplicity), and that our faith can be deepened and enriched through such dialogue.

I cannot imagine that any Christian would want to disagree with the overall aim of the lecture. I do, however, feel uneasy about the theology which seems to undergird this encouragement to a more open attitude to other faiths. One way of explaining this unease is to suggest that four of the Archbishop's basic assumptions seem to me to be closer to a Hindu understanding of truth than to the traditional Christian understanding. For this reason I form the impression from the lecture that the Archbishop has made a 'Passage to India' in more senses than one.

1. The Harmony of all Religions

The assumption here is that behind all the differences that we see between the religions, there is a fundamental unity. We accept pluralism, therefore, because we believe that beyond all the diversity there is a fundamental unity:

The *idea* of the harmony of all religions beyond the diversity of practice is a prophetic vision which we find again and again in Christian thought.

From the perspective of *faith*, different world religions can be seen as different gifts of the spirit to humanity.

Is not the communion experienced in interfaith dialogue ultimately

about a new way of life, a new mode of being, where we no longer see each other as competitors but as partners and fellow pilgrims called to bear witness to the same spirit among all people?

A rich diversity of religious experiences and forms is one of God's greatest gifts to his world. But it requires from us the virtues of understanding and sympathy, humility and readiness to listen and to learn. Only then can we build a greater global unity in the spirit of faith, hope and love.

This means in practice that instead of seeking to make new Christians among people of other faiths, we should be concentrating on drawing on the resources of other faiths to enrich our own:

We need both courage and humility to recognize this work of the spirit among us in other faiths. It takes courage to acknowledge religious diversity as a rich spiritual resource, rather than a cause for competition and tension.

This kind of 'greater global unity', this 'wider global ecumenism', however, sounds remarkably similar to the kind of ecumenism which Hinduism has enjoyed for centuries:

The religious beliefs of different schools of Hindu thought vary and their religious practices also differ; there is in it monism, dualism, monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, and indeed Hinduism is a great storehouse of all kinds of religious experiments.³

If we are being asked to recognize the fundamental harmony of all religions, we are therefore in effect being asked to see world religions in the same way that Hindus have tended to think of the diverse traditions within Hinduism. One of the difficulties in this way of thinking, however, has been pointed out by R.C. Zaehner:

To maintain that all religions are paths leading to the same goal, as is so frequently done today, is to maintain something that is not true. Not only on the dogmatic, but also on the mystical plane, too, there is no agreement.

It is then only too true that the basic principles of Eastern and Western, which in practice means Indian and Semitic, thought are, I will not say irreconcilably opposed; they are simply not starting from the same premises. The only common ground is that the function of religion is to provide release; there is no agreement at all as to what it is that man must be released from. The great religions are talking at cross purposes.⁴

If this concept of the ultimate harmony of all religions does not quite fit the facts as Zaehner describes them, it is equally hard to see how it can be read out of, or into, the Scriptures. If the prophets had believed in anything of this kind when they were confronted by the

worship of Baal and all that went with it, they would have saved themselves a lot of trouble. If the early Christians had believed in the harmony of all religions, they would never have used such provocative terms as 'Jesus is Lord' to express their faith, and would not have found themselves facing death in the arena. If they had not made such exclusive claims about Jesus, no one in the Roman or Hellenistic world would ever have laid a finger on them.

When Jesus spoke in terms of unity and gathering all people together, it was a unity under his lordship and at the price of his suffering: 'Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd' (John 10:16 AV). 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me' (John 12:32).

2 The Inadequacy of Human Language

The assumption here is that since no words can communicate adequately what we mean by 'God' and what we believe about his activity in the world, we need to admit that the language that we use as Christians is as limited and inadequate as the language used by Hindus:

If we are honest, we must recognize that no words, no thoughts, no symbols can encompass the richness of this reality, nor the richness of its disclosure in different lives, communities and traditions. Signs of divine life and grace, of the outpouring of the spirit on earth can be seen in myriad forms in human history and consciousness.

It takes humility and sincerity to concede that there is a certain incompleteness in each of our traditions . . . We must also recognize that ultimately all religions possess a provisional, interim character as ways and signs to help us in our pilgrimage to Ultimate Truth and Perfection.

The Archbishop understands perfectly how Hindus think about the inadequacy of religious language:

Indian religious life presents us with an amazing variety of perspectives on the Divine Spirit as source of all life, whether this spirit is celebrated as utterly impersonal transcendence, worshipped as Lord of all beings, meditated upon as innermost centre of human person, or praised as a loving God of grace . . . For Hindus, the fulness of truth is reflected in myriads of facets and faces, all of which the unfathomable mystery of the Divine must encompass in ways which surpass our understanding.

The Archbishop does not make any distinction between *exhaustive* revelation and *adequate* revelation. And there is a strange (and deliberate?) ambiguity in the use of the word 'spirit'/'Spirit' throughout the lecture: is he thinking of the human spirit or the

Holy Spirit or the Hindu Brahman? But the biggest problem I have here is that the Archbishop seems to come perilously close to *agreeing* with this Hindu view of truth, and implying that Christians hold something very similar.

The *via negativa* has certainly been popular in certain circles within the Christian tradition. But such a loss of confidence in words seems a far cry from the Apostle Paul's confidence in the words he used to proclaim the gospel. He acknowledged that our present knowledge is imperfect in comparison with what we shall know in the next life ('Now we see but a poor reflection . . . Now I know in part . . .' 1 Cor 13:12). But in the same letter he claimed that the words he used to proclaim the gospel were 'taught by the Spirit' (1 Cor 2:13). He believed that the gospel was a mystery revealed, an open secret, and that his understanding of the gospel had been given to him 'by revelation' (Eph 3:1-13). He therefore asked fellow-Christians to pray 'that . . . words (*logos*) may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel . . .' (Eph 6:19-20).

Similarly, in words which no doubt have important implications for our thinking about other faiths, the writer to the Hebrews recognized the progressive and fragmentary nature of God's revelation through the prophets: 'When in former times God spoke to our forefathers, he spoke in fragmentary and varied fashion through the prophets.' He went on to say, however, that this process of revelation had come to its climax in the incarnation: 'But in this the final age he has spoken to us in the Son . . .' (Heb 1:1-2 New English Bible). Anything less like an 'interim' or 'provisional' statement about 'Ultimate Truth' is hard to imagine!

3. Putting Questions of Truth on One Side

Anyone who has talked with people of other faiths at any depth knows that conversations are seldom confined to questions of religious belief, and that there is no place for attitudes of superiority or complacency. It is no doubt lessons of this kind that the Archbishop is referring to in the following words:

Interfaith encounter and dialogue help us to avoid making crude choices between what is 'true' and what is 'false' in different religions. For whatever we say about religious experience it is clear that it is no respecter of credal differences. We have already begun, painfully, to emancipate ourselves from the isolationism which limits religion to the insights and errors of one stream of tradition.

We must acknowledge that the emphasis on religious *experience* is extremely important, and that choices between what is true and false have often been presented very crudely. But what if we remove the word 'crude'? Are we being forced into a position where there are *no* choices to be made between what is 'true' and 'false' in religions? Is

the Archbishop suggesting that *all* questions of truth must be put on one side?

Speaking about 'the uniqueness of God's revelation in Christ and the universal significance of His incarnation and redemption', he says:

I do not question these basic Christian affirmations, but an experience of other faiths insists that we reflect upon them more deeply.

When we have done some reflection, what do we have to say? Later, in speaking about the person of Christ as 'the primary source of knowledge and truth about God for Christians', he insists:

For the Christian, this is firm and fundamental—it is not negotiable. Nonetheless, Christians recognize that other faiths reveal other aspects of God which may enrich and enlarge our Christian understanding.

Is the Archbishop saying that while belief in the incarnation is *true for us* as Christians, we cannot claim that it is true in any objective or universal sense? When he says that these beliefs are not negotiable, he seems to be saying that *we* ourselves should not be willing to surrender them, but that we should not think that they are true *for all people*. So, for example, we should never try to convince a Buddhist about the existence of a personal God or about the incarnation, or a Muslim about the divine logic which allowed the crucifixion. We should be content to have our own faith deepened and enriched through understanding more of their faith. And when we bear witness to what we believe, we do it in the hope that people of other faiths will be enriched through insights from the Christian faith which they want to accept.

If this is what the Archbishop is saying, once again we have to recognize that this is where Hindus have been for centuries, as Wilfred Cantwell-Smith explains:

Hindus are so cheerfully diverse, so insistent that religious ways are many, that only vast and distorting oversimplification could predicate that their diversity and their ways is (I say 'ways is' to enforce my point) true or false. No Hindu has said anything that some other Hindu has not contradicted.

There is so much diversity and clash, so much chaos, in the Christian Church today that the old ideal of a unified or systematic Christian truth has gone. For this, the ecumenical movement is too late. What has happened . . . is that the Christian world has moved into that situation where the Hindu has long been: of open variety, of optional alternatives. It would seem no longer possible for anyone to be told, or even to imagine that he can be told, what it means or should mean, formally and generically, to be a Christian. He must decide for himself—and only for himself.⁵

If I am told that I am simply imprisoned in 'an encapsulated Western Christianity', I call our friend E.M. Forster back as a witness. Knowing both West and East as well as he did, he understood that while our western tradition owes much to the Greeks, when it comes to the question of truth in religion, it owes most of all to the Jewish-Christian tradition. In his *Alexandria, A History and A Guide*, in which he traces the development of the city through each period of its history, this is what he says about how Christian claims were understood in this Hellenistic city:

The idea that one religion is false and another true is essentially Christian, and had not occurred to the Egyptians and Greeks who were living together at Alexandria. Each worshipped his own gods, just as he spoke his own language, but he never thought that the gods of his neighbour had no existence, and he was willing to believe that they might be his own gods under another name . . .⁵

Is the Archbishop asking us to return to this way of thinking about truth in religion?

4. Mission is Sharing

There does not seem to be any place for mission in the old sense of being sent 'into the world' and being commissioned 'to make disciples of all nations':

Without losing our respective identities and the precious heritage and roots of our own faith, we can learn to see in a new way the message and insights of our faith in the light of that of others. By relating our respective visions of the Divine to each other, we can discover a still greater splendour of divine life and grace.

Things are changing. Whilst in the past the goal of Christian mission has mainly been the awakening of faith, the founding of churches, the growth and maintenance of Christian life, we now perceive more clearly—as I perceived in Calcutta—another goal as that of giving witness to the spirit of love and hope, of promoting justice and peace, of sharing responsibility with others for the development of a caring society, especially where people are in need. Interfaith dialogue can help to remove barriers between us by creating conditions for greater community and fellowship.

Since missionaries of the traditional kind like William Carey and Amy Carmichael did their fair share of caring for people in need (even if it was limited by their cultural perspective), I wonder if it is fair to suggest that practical and loving service is a special characteristic of those who hold radically new views of mission?

One of the most significant things, however, in this new understanding of mission is that there seems to be little or no place for proclamation. We are called instead to 'mutual witness' and 'mutual

sharing'. For since we are now 'globally interdependent in spiritual matters', people of all faiths must learn to 'share the sustaining insights and transforming treasures of their faith.' And the goal of this 'wider global ecumenism' is 'to build a greater global unity in the spirit of faith, hope and love'.

The Archbishop seems to be saying that because 'we have reached a new historical moment', our situation today is so radically different from any situation in which the church has found itself in the past that the traditional idea of mission must be completely transformed. It was fine for Paul in the first century to try to persuade Agrippa and to say, 'I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.' We can be grateful that St. Augustine in the sixth century was sent by the Pope and crossed the Channel to preach to our pagan ancestors and build churches in this country. But because we at the end of the twentieth century live in such a completely different kind of world, where our greatest and most fundamental need is 'greater global unity', we must learn to accept the faiths of other people exactly as they are, and be content with 'mutual sharing'.

If this is *not* what the Archbishop means, I hope I can be forgiven for thinking that this seems to be the direction in which his lecture is pointing.

But if this is anything like what he *does* mean, the lecture suggests that Toynbee's 'great interpenetration of eastern religions and Christianity', which the Archbishop refers to, is nearer than we might have thought. In this case the lecture describes a 'Passage to India' which some have already made, and demonstrates the truth of Cantwell-Smith's observation that 'The Christian world has moved into that situation where the Hindu has long been . . .'

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NOTES

- 1 E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, Penguin, London 1965 edition, p. 146.
- 2 Published by World Congress of Faiths, 28 Powis Gardens, London W11 1JG.
- 3 K.M. Sen, *Hinduism*, Penguin, London 1982, p. 37.
- 4 R.C. Zaehner, *Foolishness to the Greeks* in H.D. Lewis and R.L. Slater, *The Study of Religions*, Penguin, London 1969, p. 145.
- 5 W. Cantwell-Smith, *Questions of Religious Truth*, p. 74.
- 6 E.M. Forster, *Alexandria, A History and A Guide*, with Introduction by Lawrence Durrell, Michael Haag, London 1982, p. 20.