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UNDERSTANDING SOME OTHER RELIGIONS

THE CHRISTIAN BRETHREN RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP

CONTENTS

Topic of the Issue

UNDERSTANDING SOME OTHER RELIGIONS

Preface

If God is God of all men, and is and has been concerned with all His creatures alike, then how do we account for the existence, continuance, and perennial vigour, of a multiplicity of different religions? The problem exists for the adherents of every belief: but the more especially for those who use the uncompromising words of the apostle Peter concerning the Lord Jesus Christ: 'There is salvation in no one else'. How do we understand and apply those words? No longer can we Christians, in this secluded island in what the Romans used to call 'the skirts of the world', avoid facing that question squarely, for it is thrust in our face in every large city of our land—and in many smaller towns and villages as well.

Mr. Irving Hexham, who is a graduate of Lancaster and at present a research scholar at Bristol, has collected together these invaluable papers on the major 'immigrant religions' to be encountered in the British Isles today. They are, however, of much more than insular interest: and of particular value is the article which Mr. Hexham has invited from Mr. Muhammad Iqbal, himself a practising Muslim; and which therefore takes us inside the ideals of Islam as they are seen by one born and reared in that obedience.

This issue does not answer the question posed here. But for those who are moved to face it, it provides important material—dare we suggest that it is indispensable material?

SOSTHENES

INTRODUCTION: A NEW PROBLEM FOR BRITISH CHRISTIANS

IRVING HEXHAM

Until fairly recently Hindus and Moslems were strange creatures who inhabited far away lands and needed missionaries to 'civilise' them. This, at least, is how many Britons viewed members of non-Christian religions. Of course not all Britons claimed to be Christian, but those who had rejected Christianity tended to regard it as the best of a number of corrupt and outdated religious systems. It was also safe to assume that the average British housewife would never, with the possible exception of the Jews, meet a member of a non-Christian religion in all her life. But since 1945 all this has changed.

Today there are flourishing Hindu and Moslem communities in most of our cities and a growing number of people are turning to forms of eastern meditation to find spiritual fulfilment. How is the local church to meet this new situation? This edition of the CBRF *Journal* attempts to contribute to a solution to this problem by attempting to understand the major non-Christian religions to be found in Britain. The articles presented have been selected with the intention of challenging members to face up to the claims of other Faiths.

Evangelical Christians often complain that their beliefs are misunderstood by non-believers and criticise the Press, Radio and TV for giving biased reports of their activities. Knowing how easily their own beliefs and actions are distorted, one would expect evangelicals to be willing to spend time attempting to understand the beliefs and practices of members of other religious groups. But, unfortunately, this expectation is often unfulfilled. Many evangelicals show a complete disregard for other people's feelings and dearly held beliefs. They have the *Truth* and everyone else is in error. Yet, this type of attitude, which is often presented as showing a great concern for the purity of the Gospel, can very easily lead to misunderstanding and to the preaching of a distorted Gospel.

Some may be thinking, by now, that this introduction is a plea to give up the exclusive claims of Christ: it is not. It is, however, a plea to take other religious beliefs seriously before trying to evangelise the people who hold them. Only when the Christian knows the real, and not imagined, need of others can he show them how Christ can meet that need.

This edition of the *Journal*, then, is written in the belief that understanding precedes evangelism. But what does this 'understanding' involve? It would seem that for an adequate appreciation of another religion the Christian must be able to do two things: he must feel the attraction which that religion holds for its members and not just dismiss it as blind superstition, and he must be able to begin to think in the way in which members of that religion think. In short, he must have some idea of what it means to be a member of that religion.

These requirements are very exacting but only when they are met can an adequate programme of evangelism be devised. Preaching the Gospel

in such a way that it is bound to be misunderstood is tantamount to preaching a false Gospel. It is therefore the duty of the Church to ensure that hearers understand the Gospel when it is proclaimed to them. The following articles have been compiled in the hope that such understanding may be made possible. It is also hoped that the problems which are raised by them may prompt assemblies, who have large non-Christian groups in their areas, to consider the possibility of creating specialist ministries to meet this need.

The first article, by Mr. H. L. Ellison, reminds us that the most entrenched non-Christian group in Britain is the Jews and that in the past Christians have very often shown a total lack of concern for them. He argues that Judaism is a religion in its own right and not just a stunted form of Christianity, and shows how popular Christian terminology can very easily confuse Jewish hearers.

The second article, by Professor Ninian Smart, explains something of the great complexity of the Hindu religion. After describing beliefs and practices which often confuse Christians he goes on to draw attention to some things which 'puzzle the Hindu' about Christianity. In conclusion, Professor Smart points to the difference in outlook between Hindus and Christians regarding the historicity of Christ's actions and His exclusive claims.

The third article, by Muhammad Iqbal, is unusual in being written by a practising Moslem. For such an article to appear in a Christian magazine may seem strange. But, if we are to understand what Islam means to an adherent, what better than to have a believer to explain it to us? This article is very stimulating, and questions many commonly held beliefs about the backwardness and social 'evils' of Islam. It presents a dynamic account of a dynamic religion which is one of the greatest rivals to Christianity. All members will agree that by breaking new ground in this way CBRF has done a great service to the Christian community and that Mr. Iqbal has given us a unique insight into Islam.

Finally Dr. Eric Sharpe writes a controversial article on the theology of mission. Not everyone will agree with his conclusions but he does present some interesting ideas not usually expressed by evangelical Christians.

In conclusion, a short bibliography of useful books is included to enable readers to follow up these articles and think further about the issues raised.

JUDAISM TODAY

H. L. ELLISON

There are certain ambiguities in the use of the term Judaism. It is best reserved for that system of religion that became dominant among Jews after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 and virtually undisputed after the failure of Bar Kochba's revolt in A.D. 135. It must be remembered, however, that this particular interpretation of the Old Testament revelation took its rise in the time of Ezra, if not earlier.

For the correct understanding of Judaism it must be grasped that it is less a theological system and more a manner of life. It is overwhelmingly concerned with what a man does, not with what he thinks, i.e. with orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. It is tacitly assumed that one who does the right things believes the correct doctrines.

Down to the French revolution, and even later in many countries, the best a Jew could normally hope for both in Christian and Muslim countries was that he should be treated as a second-class citizen. He was encouraged and often forced to live in a compact Jewish district (ghetto) of the town; this enabled the Jewish community to exercise an irresistible pressure for conformity. The only major schism, made possible by a period of more tolerant Muslim rule, was even more rigid in its interpretation of the demands of the Law than we associate with Orthodox Judaism.

Since a Jew could always become a Christian or a Muslim, according to where he lived, there had to be certain basic beliefs which kept a man a Jew, when family and national loyalty threatened to give way. One is that that there is one God and one only. This is expressed by the recitation of the *Shema*, the only binding creed that Judaism has ever known, 'Hear Israel, the LORD our God is *one* LORD' (Deut. 6: 4). This is interpreted in opposition to Christianity as an affirmation of God's absolute unity, and it separated him effectively from the Christian. The second is that this God chose Israel, i.e. the Jew, as His inalienable possession—this separated him from the Muslim. A corollary of this is that God gave Israel a binding and unchangeable *torah* at Mt. Sinai.

Though Torah has traditionally been translated Law even in the Septuagint, it means Instruction. Judaism affirms that not merely the 613 commandments, whether positive or negative, of the written Torah are binding, but also that all the deductions made by the rabbis from these basic commandments are equally so. While in theory these deductions are capable of being changed, in practice this is virtually impossible. They have been carried so far, that virtually every aspect of life, even the most private and intimate, are covered by them. Should changing social circumstances seem to free some areas of life from them, they are soon brought under rule by the same inexorable system of deduction and extension.

While Judaism has always had its rabbis, i.e. experts to whom one can turn to discover what the Torah is in any given circumstances—orthodox rabbis are not ministers of religion in the Protestant sense and still less

Mr. H. L. Ellison, well known author and Biblical scholar, is a world authority on Jewish/Christian relationships.

priests—the study of Torah, in practice the study of the Pentateuch and of the Talmud, is the highest duty of the Jewish man. The Talmud consists of the Mishnah, a commentary on the legal portions of the Pentateuch, and of the Gemara, a commentary on the Mishnah. (The alleged Jewish predeliction for money-making is mainly the result of the position into which the Jew was repeatedly forced by the surrounding Gentile world.) This stress on the study of the Torah shows that something much higher than mere legalism is involved. The keeping of the Torah is conforming to God's highest will. The reward is that which such conformity must bring with it. It must be stressed that in Judaism all Jewish men stand equal. There is no priestly caste. It is only study of the Torah which in theory gives anyone a higher standing.

This system created a community where a very much higher level of morality, social righteousness and general humanity has normally been maintained over the centuries than can be claimed for any so-called Christian society. It has been only when the rabbinical system has been faced by the exceptional and unexpected that its results have been inhumane or grotesque. No orthodox Jew would subscribe to the popular view that Judaism has created a system of unmitigated and intolerable legalism.

In addition to the honour given to God's revelation there have been two other factors which have prevented this. On the one hand, on the basis of Lev. 18: 5, the rabbis insisted that since the commandments were given that a man should *live* by them, in case of a threat to life all but three, murder, idolatry and adultery, could be ignored. This principle has also operated against all extremer interpretations of the Law in ordinary life.

The other factor has been that of mysticism. In many different ways both the sage and the ordinary man have found themselves in living touch with God. Sometimes they have followed the classical roads of mysticism, sometimes lines of speculation in the Kabbalah* that have fascinated Christian thinkers. Perhaps mysticism's greatest contribution was in the mass movement of Hasidism, which began in the 18th century and gave a new vitality to Orthodox Judaism, when it was most expected to collapse in the modern world. In addition Judaism has always been a community religion. Even in its mysticism it has found no place for the individualism so often found in Protestantism.

We should never forget, when we consider Orthodox Judaism, that it has to a great extent been moulded by the unrelenting pressure of Christianity. This has shown itself especially in four directions. The unity and nature of God have been so exaggerated that most Jews can express them only by negatives, i.e. they can say only what God is not. The Torah has been magnified until the language used of it is comparable to the Christian's language about Christ. The tendency to underrate the reality and universality of sin has been greatly increased; one result is that there is very little desire for the reintroduction of sacrifice. Finally, probably the

*Kabbalah, i.e. Tradition, was the name given to the mystic doctrines and systems that grew up in the 12th and 13th centuries claiming to be based on much older mystic tradition. Since it remained standard for most later mystic thought, the term is used to represent traditional, 'main-line' Jewish mysticism. Its chief literary expression is the Zohar, *c.* A.D. 1300.

majority of the orthodox now look for a Messianic period rather than for a personal Messiah.

The critical test for Orthodox Judaism came with the freeing of the Jew from his ghettoes and the granting to him of full citizen rights. For some this began with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution; for others especially for some from parts of North Africa and the Yemen, it came only with their transportation to the State of Israel. In the vast majority of cases this meant that orthodox Jews had to face in the span of a single life the stresses and strains Christianity was able to adapt itself to through a number of centuries. The main modern enemy of Orthodoxy, however, has been persecution. The pogroms under the Czars, from 1880 onwards, uprooted well over a million Russian Jews to throw them into the American melting pot. The highest proportion of the victims in the Nazi extermination camps were orthodox Jews.

Orthodox Judaism still exists. It can be found in the Williamsburg district of New York, in a part of Detroit and a few other American cities, in the Stamford Hill area of London and Cheetham Hill in Manchester, and above all in Mea Shearim and surrounding districts of Jerusalem and in Bnei Braq in Greater Tel-Aviv as well as in the many yeshivas that have sprung up in Jerusalem. But even in Israel Orthodoxy persists mainly by withdrawing itself from the world of reality, by opting out from modern values.

Already very many of those who fled from Russia under the Czars to North America, Britain and Palestine had abandoned their orthodoxy, and, it may be, their religion, because they had found that it offered no answer to the material need and anguish through which they were passing. In exactly the same way the survivors of Hitler's concentration camps found for the most part that the God of tradition was meaningless in the setting of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. For at least ninety per cent of Israel's youth rabbinic rules and regulations seem irrelevant to the needs of the young state. It should not be forgotten that the official motivation for the maintenance by law of various traditional Jewish practices in Israel is merely that they are national customs.

That which commonly calls itself Orthodoxy today is essentially a compromise, which appears on two levels. In Britain the more rigid one is represented mainly by the Federation of Synagogues, mostly smaller and less fashionable, the laxer by the United Synagogue, which appoints the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, and embraces much of the wealth and prestige of the Jewish community. In the United States the distinction is made more explicit, for the name Orthodox is reserved for the former group, while the latter is called Conservative. The use of this latter term does in fact make it easier for those using it to go further in their compromise.

It is insufficiently realized that the corrosion of Orthodoxy has gone much further in the realm of the spirit than in that of practice. The true Orthodox may be compared with the extreme Christian Fundamentalists. They not only accept the literal truth of the Bible but also its traditional interpretation. They believe not only that the Law of Moses was given in its present form at Sinai, but also that its rabbinic interpretation, i.e. the

oral law, in essence at least, started there also.

The bitter controversy in the United Synagogue a few years ago that centred round Rabbi Louis Jacobs had nothing to do with his orthodoxy, so far as his practice was concerned. He accepted the rabbinic law as binding and carried it out in a way that gave scandal to none. But he maintained that not all the written Law and certainly most of the traditional interpretation of it did not go back to Moses. As a result of the controversy he became a rabbi of an independent synagogue, the orthodoxy of which cannot be impugned, yet he is regarded by the majority of his fellow rabbis as holding views subversive of true Judaism. For all that, his views are held by ninety per cent of educated orthodox Jews everywhere, even by a majority of the rabbis among them, though they will not acknowledge the fact. This is another way of saying that for most of the orthodox the Divine imperative in the Torah has been undermined. Instead it is becoming something which belongs to the essence of being a Jew.

This element of compromise created by the modern world has triumphed openly in the movement known normally as Liberal Judaism in Britain and as Reform Judaism in America. Here the Torah, though respected, has been replaced by the teaching of the Prophets. In other words the movement can legitimately be compared with Liberal Christianity. Like the latter it cannot easily be described and is capable of taking on a wide variety of expressions. Generally speaking any traditional observance to which no valid ethical meaning can be attached is abandoned, unless, indeed, it is retained as a national custom. Here the concept of a Messiah as a person yet to come has been completely dropped, while it has only been dimmed in the orthodox camp. Probably over half America's Jewry belongs to the Reform movement, though a number will attend more liberal Conservative synagogues as a matter of convenience. Indeed, the frontier between Reform and Conservative and Conservative and Orthodox is very blurred. In Britain the Liberal movement has made much less progress.

In Israel the Reform Synagogue is regarded as public enemy No. 1 by Orthodoxy. It knows that the small number of Hebrew Christians presents no great danger at the moment, but it realizes that Reform could conceivably capture the uncommitted majority of the people. The plain fact is that the majority there have no definable religious faith, as is also the case elsewhere.

The proportion of avowed Jewish atheists, Marxists, secularists and humanists is probably everywhere lower than in the comparable Gentile society. Even where there is no faith at all, a Jew is likely to be a synagogue member, for it serves as a form of club and is a help to maintaining his Jewish identity. In Israel, where these motives play no part, synagogue membership is very low. Religious faith has in fact been in large measure replaced by the sense of peoplehood. Especially since the Six-Day War of 1967 the State of Israel has become an emotional and almost mystical necessity for the majority of Jews living outside it. It would be only a minor exaggeration to suggest that the concept of peoplehood is the main feature of Judaism today. Certainly it is the only bond that links the hundred per cent observers of the Torah, its compromising adherents of all grades, and

the nationalists, humanists and Marxists that form the other fringe of Jewry.

We need not be surprised at this. Only the way that Christendom and Islam treated Jewry down the centuries has obscured from us that this sense of peoplehood has always been an essential element in Judaism. Because for so long the Jew was allowed to exist as Jew only on the basis of his religion, it was assumed that it was merely religion that made a Jew. In fact the election of Israel as a people has been at all times the basic fact in the religious self-consciousness of most Jews. When the Zionist movement began, it was attacked with equal bitterness by the Liberals and the Orthodox. The former rejected it, because it introduced nationalistic particularism into what they proclaimed as a purely spiritual religion. The latter would have nothing to do with it, because its leaders either rejected the demands of the Torah or let them sit very lightly on them. There were also those who insisted that a return to the Land of Israel depended on a Divine action through the Messiah. Today it is only a very small section on either wing that maintains its old antagonism.

The response of the Jewish masses to the call of Zionism has always been one of its most striking features. At the same time the reaction of the typical modern Jew to the call of Zionism has been, like his response to the claims of the Torah, ambivalent. He has been prepared to make very great sacrifices for the cause, but where he has not been driven to Israel by persecution, he has shrunk from the irrevocable step of settling in the land. His sense of peoplehood, of chosenness, has never conflicted with his knowledge of his essential oneness with his fellow men.

Judaism looks for a new earth in which righteousness will dwell. Hence, both at Qumran and among the Pharisees and the Zealots, and equally today with both Orthodox and Liberal, the person of the Messiah has always taken second place to the new age he was to introduce. This helps to explain why many of the Messianic pretenders were able to gain massive support. After the debacle of the last major Messianic claimant in the middle of the seventeenth century, Sabbatai Zvi, the average Jew has either grown dubious about the possibility of a personal Messiah or has grown indifferent to the whole subject. But that has not meant any diminution in the hope for a Messianic age, even where the term is not used.

At all times Judaism has seen man co-operating in the coming of this age; this is one of the marked features of the Qumran writings. Hence a man's keeping of the Law is never a purely individual matter. The large-scale benefactions by well-to-do Jews, not merely to Jewish but also to general charities and even to organisations like the Salvation Army, are made with the hope of raising the well-being of men in general. One of the great forces behind Zionism has been its vision of creating a new type of society spear-headed by the kibbutz, the communal colony. Though the kibbutz is primarily a child of Marxist theory, the fact that there is a small but growing number of Orthodox ones shows that it involves ideals that are entirely compatible with true religion. This preoccupation with a practical building up of the kingdom of God—perhaps Utopia is a better word, for religion need not feature in it—explains why the majority of Jews are on the left in politics, but very few support the Communist

regimes of today, even though many have been influenced by Marxism.

This cutting down of the stature of the Messiah, even where he is expected, and the stress on human activity help to explain why the concept of the resurrection of the dead plays little real role in Judaism. Though it finds its place in the daily services of the Synagogue and in Maimonides' Thirteen Articles of Faith, it plays a vital role only for a few—hence the impact of the gas-chambers on world Jewry has been the greater. Another reason for this is the lack of integrated theology in Jerusalem. The religious know that the Bible knows nothing of the immortal soul that fares very well when it is freed from the fetters of the body. At the same time that knowledge has been made virtually valueless by the general Jewish acceptance of Christian concepts of the soul, which the Church early accepted from Greek philosophy.*

From all that has been said it should be easy to recognize that Judaism in all its forms tends to put its stress quite otherwise than does New Testament Christianity. The difference becomes even more obvious when the comparison is made with traditional orthodox Church development, with its strong infusion of Greek thought. Hence it is not surprising that the traditional lines of Christian approach to the Jew have been far from effective, and where they have succeeded, it has been mainly among those Jews who had become more or less assimilated to their Gentile surroundings, or who, for one reason or another, had become dissatisfied with Judaism.

The almost intuitive expectation of the average Christian and church that the convert will simply assimilate completely and disappear in his new surroundings offends the strong feeling of peoplehood that dominates a majority of Jews. In many cases it renders him incapable of even listening intelligently to the would-be missionary.

The over-stress in conservative Protestantism on the individual and on individual salvation has a similar effect. The would-be convert expects to find a far more real community life in the church than he had in the synagogue, and its lack can have a seriously discouraging effect.

Our concept of Christendom, with the use of infant baptism just as the Jew practises circumcision, makes it very difficult for the Jew in non-Muslim lands not to equate Gentile and Christian. He is therefore strongly repelled by the wide spread of antisemitism, even among many church members, and by so many forms of racial discrimination, especially in South Africa and the United States. The same effect is also achieved by the attitude of many conservative Christians who consider that since the solution of the world's social problems must await the return of Christ, there is nothing they can or should do about them.

When it comes to Jewish worship or charity, normally all that matters

*Traditional Christian theology regards man as composed of body and soul, the latter being immortal and capable of adequate existence on its own. Whether it should be distinguished from spirit is a matter of controversy. The Old Testament doctrine is that man is *nephesh*, i.e. soul, which comes into being by the meeting of body and spirit ('the breath of life', Gen. 2: 7). When spirit and body separate at death, the soul, though apparently retaining its identity, becomes unable to function in any way, until a body is restored to it in resurrection. There is nothing in the New Testament which is a denial of the Old Testament concept, though the redeemed are conscious of Christ's presence.

is whether a man is a Jew or not. No further questions need be asked. Hence the bitter denominational differences between Christians form a major stumbling-block. The Jew's lack of theological interests makes it the harder for him to understand the underlying reasons. Very often a Jew has turned from the decisive step of committal to Christ, when he discovered that he was expected to make a denominational decision as well. It may be added that the frequently met idea that the Jew, once he has become interested in Jesus, is 'naturally' drawn to some particular theology and church system is not borne out by statistics.

The undeniably tritheistic, not trinitarian, language of much popular worship, hymnody and preaching is also a great obstacle, which many Jews have never been able to surmount. The accepted method of approaching a Jew with stress on the Messianic prophecies and the need for sacrifice for sins is normally fated to be abortive. Even if the hearer is interested in prophecy, and the normal Jew is not, the Messianic concept is for him something widely different; the concept of Jesus as Messiah appeals to him as little as it did to the majority of His contemporaries. As for the forgiveness of sins, the Synagogue has so played down the whole concept of sin over the centuries that only in rare cases does one find the soul longing to know that it can find complete forgiveness.

If the Church is to make a real impact on the Synagogue, the Christian on the Jew, there must be the willingness to recognise certain unpalatable truths. The Synagogue has sometimes had a truer understanding of the Biblical revelation than has the Gentile Church, especially in its more popular manifestations. The official Church has consistently libelled and calumniated the Jew and Judaism, and has then acted as though the calumnies were true. In its own life the Church has all too seldom demonstrated to the Jew what the life of the people of God should be. On the positive side the Jew must be faced with all the possibilities of the Holy Spirit's working through individuals and the local church. Nothing short of this will move the Jew to jealousy (Rom. 11: 11, 14).

Further information on the subject and bibliographies will be found in the articles on Judaism in The New Bible Dictionary and in Baker's Dictionary of Theology.

(See also Mr. Ellison's longer works on this subject: *Christian Approach to the Jew* (Utd. Socy. for Christian Literature or Lutterworth) and *Understanding a Jew* (Olive Press, 16 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2)—*Ed.*)

THE MEANING OF HINDUISM

NINIAN SMART

Basically, Hinduism is the major traditional religion of the Indian sub-continent. But it may be somewhat misleading to use the word 'religion' here in the singular: for Hinduism comprises such a variety of cults, beliefs and institutions that it can equally well be looked on as a network of interlocking religions, and not a single system. For example, many Hindus believe in a personal Creator and Lord; but others believe in an impersonal Absolute. Some worship God in the guise of Shiva, others in the guise of Vishnu. Some believe in the efficacy of sacrificial ritual, others do not. Some aspects of Hindu life are extremely ascetic, as witness the *sannyasin* or holy man who has given up all worldly ties; other aspects are world-affirming, even pleasure-seeking. Some Hindus believe in abstention from meat and alcohol; others do not. Some Hindus practice the veneration of trees and snakes; for others these cults are primitive. It is thus not surprising that many Westerners, conceiving of religion in terms of a unified set of beliefs and loyalties, have been rather baffled by Hinduism.

One main secret of understanding Hinduism is to see it as the result of an interplay of diverse cultural groups, living together over a long period in the Indian sub-continent. In these latter days it is natural to look on the Republic of India as a single nation, and to remember the days of the Raj in which most of the sub-continent was brought together under a single rule. But however natural it may be to look on India as a political entity, in fact the sub-continent is much more like Europe than it is like (say) Britain. That is, just as Europe in the Middle Ages consisted of a variety of emerging nations of differing languages and customs, loosely knit together by the use of Latin as the language of the Church, so India has mainly been a network of regional and tribal groups, with differing languages, only loosely unified by the use of Sanskrit as a sacred and literary language, whose main exponents were the Brahmins. The latter's social prestige enabled a theory of a unified religion to be maintained: provided people recognised the authority of the Vedas as revelatory, they counted as orthodox, however varying their interpretations of the scriptures might be.

It is however only in the relatively recent past, in the 19th and 20th centuries, that Hindus have made a strong conscious attempt to present a unified ideology to the world. Indeed, the very word 'Hinduism', Western in form and tone, implies a conscious unity which is new—being a product of the interplay between Western culture and Christian missions on the one hand and the Hindu tradition on the other. The latter, faced with the challenge, responded by taking over some features of Christian methods and of Western assumptions. Thus in the last century and a half the attempt has been made to present a systematic scheme of Hindu belief, to which the label 'Hinduism' could attach. The predominant motif in this scheme has been as follows.

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First, Hinduism with its wide variety of cults and standpoints can serve as an example of unity in pluralism, namely the idea that behind religious differences there lies an essential unity. Modern Hinduism has tended to stress this, because of its perception that in a plural world of major faiths some judgment about them has to be made—and the judgment that they are all in some sense true is congenial to the Indian spirit. Thus an old Indian story tells of a number of blind men holding different parts of an elephant—one the trunk, another a hind leg and so on. The blind men give differing reports of what they are in contact with, but really it is a single thing. Likewise with religions.

Second, modern Hinduism has drawn heavily upon the influential teachings of Shankara (8th century A.D.), probably the greatest exegete and metaphysician of the Hindu tradition. It so happens that his exposition of the central meaning of the Vedic scriptures (above all the Upanishads) can fit into the scheme of unity in pluralism and that it chimed in also with the dominant philosophy of late 19th century Britain, available to India through the spread of English-style higher education on the sub-continent. Briefly, Shankara's position is that the eternal soul or Self within man is identical with Brahman, ultimate reality. Thus there is but one eternal Self, for there is but one ultimate reality. The realization of this in one's spiritual experience brings about liberation. It followed from Shankara's position that the world of ordinary experience, which we perceive as being plural, containing many things and persons, is an illusion screening us from the perception of the one Brahman. Likewise God, conceived as personal Creator of the world, shares in the essentially illusory character of the creation. Thus at a lower (the ordinary) level of experience men worship God as personal, but at the higher level of realization they pass beyond worship, and realize the identity of the Self (Atman) and Brahman. Naturally, such a brief account can scarcely do justice to the subtlety and power of Shankara's system. The idea of differing levels of truth has been taken up vigorously in modern Hinduism to resolve differences between religious attitudes. Some are at a lower level, ultimately to be transcended. It is on this basis that Hinduism tries to say that all religions which believe in a personal God or gods point beyond to the higher level of awareness of the Self.

Third, though modern Hinduism has incorporated much of Shankara's ideas it has tended to play down the idea of illusion (*maya*). Modern social concerns do not allow of such a world-negating idea, and *maya* is often interpreted to mean simply that this world, as ordinarily experienced, is impermanent: abiding, eternal satisfaction lies at the higher level. Thus existence as we ordinarily know it is not unreal so much as non-eternal.

But although modern Hinduism has stressed the impersonal, ultimate reality lying beyond the concept of a personal God, it is fair to say that a major portion of the Hindu tradition has emphasized the worship of a supreme Lord. Devotion to Him brings salvation, through His grace. Thus a major medieval Hindu school could debate as to whether salvation comes on the so-called cat-principle or on the so-called monkey-principle. The mother cat transports her kitten from A to B by the scruff of the neck. The kitten does nothing. Likewise salvation is totally wrought by God. On the

other hand, the little monkey has to *cling* to the mother's waist when being carried. Likewise, clinging to God is necessary for men's salvation—a kind of 'works', to put the matter into Christian terminology. The ideas of devotion (*bhakti*), grace, personal Creation and so forth are reminiscent of much in the Christian tradition.

However, in order not to mislead it is necessary for me to enter a qualification here. It must be remembered that the Lord is figured very differently—e.g. as Vishnu—in Hindu myth. And indeed there are usually thought to be a whole host of lesser deities who are, as it were, offshoots of the one divine Being. Thus the observer of the Indian scene is immediately struck by the variety of cults and gods and goddesses—Vishnu and his incarnations such as Rama and Krishna, his consort Lakshmi, Ganesha the elephant-headed god, Hanuman the monkey god, Kali the consort of Shiva, breathing destruction as well as creative power; and so on. India is a land not just of villages but also of temples, and there are many gods inhabiting the temples. Regional differences, the mixing of traditions, the weaving of myths—these are factors contributing to the galaxy of gods and spirits. Yet it would be misleading to look on India as polytheistic, even if it superficially seems so. For many Hindus, even the unsophisticated, the many gods are all somehow subsumed under the supreme Lord. Local cults are in this way unified and given a common ultimate focus. (There is here some analogy to the cult of saints in some Catholic countries, such as Mexico.)

A contributory cause of the complexity of Hindu cults is the caste system. This elaborate social framework has evolved over a very long period. It implies that different groups may have their own special cults—so that whom you worship depends to some extent on the social pigeonhole in which you were born. Crudely, caste has two marks: first that members of the same caste do not marry outside the caste (endogamy) and second that they do not eat with members of another caste (commensality). The situation is often more fluid than these two points suggest, and modern conditions have tended to modify caste, especially in relation to the second mark. The caste groups tend to be arranged for practical purposes in an elaborate hierarchy, and strong disadvantages can accrue to members of the lowest groups, especially to the 'untouchables' (whom Gandhi called Harijans or sons of God). However, class and caste do not always coincide: a government minister can be an untouchable, and Brahmins can have menial jobs. Much modern reform by Hindus, however, has endeavoured to raise the status of the lowest groups, e.g. by increased educational opportunity and by getting temples opened to Harijans.

The social framework of Hinduism has a remarkable tenacity, and despite its often manifest injustices, has served to integrate differing groups with varying customs into a cohesive pattern. Theoretically, the social framework has a religious basis—it is part of the 'order' or *dharma* to which men and gods conform and which is periodically restored by God for the welfare of all. Thus it is not easy to separate Hinduism from the fabric of Indian society. It is only recently that (say) Westerners could become Hindus in a sense (such men as Aldous Huxley): typically Hinduism is for Indians. Thus it scarcely exists outside the Indian sub-continent

except in places where there has been a heavy migration of Indians—for instance, Guyana, Kenya, Fiji, South Africa and so on.

All this has meant that there has been strong stress on the necessity of fulfilling one's particular social duties. Thus in the *Bhagavadgita* (the 'Song of the Lord'), the single most popular scripture in modern India, the hero Arjuna is exhorted by Krishna to do battle, for that is his metier as a warrior, even though Arjuna is wavering because the battle about to be joined is against his own kith and kin. The emphasis on social obligations should be remembered, as a corrective to the common picture of Hinduism as world-negating. However, there has also always been a recognized way of transcending social obligations, by becoming a *sannyasin*—one who leaves the world in search of spiritual truth. India has always had a tradition of holy men, often committed to considerable austerities in the quest for realization. An important aspect of the search has been the practice of meditation or contemplation, helped by the techniques of yoga. Very often this seeking for inner illumination, in which one realizes the eternal Self, contrasts with the other-directed character of *bhakti* or devotion, which conceives of the worshipper and the object of worship as essentially distinct. The tension was relieved in one way by Shankara, for the higher truth belongs to contemplation, and the lower truth to *bhakti*.

The social structure and ideas of God or Absolute have to be placed in another context too if we are properly to understand the Hindu world. This other context consists in the belief in rebirth or reincarnation (or transmigration, to use another term again). Though not widely accepted in the earliest period of the Hindu scriptures, belief in rebirth has come to typify nearly all forms of Indian religion. The belief implies that on death one is reborn in another form, maybe animal or divine or in a purgatory. The world of living forms from the high heavens to infernal hellish regions beneath the earth is a continuum, and one can ascend and descend in the scale of life. The virtuous untouchable may be reborn in a high caste: the murderous Brahmin may be reborn in a purgatory. The angry man may be reborn as a fierce animal. And so on. Liberation or salvation is usually conceived as an exit from the cycle of existence, *samsara*—either through one's own actions in purifying oneself or through faith in a merciful Lord who brings the faithful into communion with Himself beyond the realm of *samsara*.

Belief in rebirth gives a very different perspective on life from that which has been most common in the West. Men and animals and other living creatures are not sharply separated, and man is not therefore seen as 'lord of creation'. The problem of life is not death, but rather life itself, for one goes on living in one form or another until one attains liberation. Morality is seen in the framework of *karma*—every deed attracts its reward in this life or the next. The class structure is modified by rebirth, for one is not, on this view, condemned forever to inferiority. And if some teachers say that liberation is hard, only for the few, the ordinary man can still reckon that he may be one of the elite in some future existence.

For those who believe in a single supreme Creator, *karma* is seen as an expression of his will. For those who do not, *karma* is seen as an independent force built into the workings of the world, and to this force the wise man conforms his conduct.

We can now sum up the typical features of Hinduism, as consisting in a particular social fabric (the caste system), determining one's religious and social duties, within the framework of the doctrines of rebirth and *karma*. Though the scriptures have traditionally been the preserve of the upper three classes of traditional Indian society, the so-called 'twice-born' (born twice because of initiation into society as a second birth), the orthodox Hindu recognizes their universal validity. This is one condition of being a Hindu. But as I have already pointed out there are varied interpretations of scripture, ranging from theism to atheism. Predominant, however, have been two theologies—non-dualistic Vedanta as expounded by Shankara and devotional theism.

In view of the complexities of Hinduism, is it possible to make a judgment abouts its relationship to the Christian tradition? Christians have certainly taken up a number of differing stances—some finding little but idolatry in Hinduism, others seeing profundity in much of India's religion. Leaving aside the ultimate question of truth, it is perhaps useful to see something of typical Hindu attitudes to Christianity, for these necessarily pose questions to us in the understanding of our own tradition.

Most Hindus I have talked to have a strong respect for Christ, and indeed are willing to accept his divinity (that is, within the Hindu understanding of that term). Two things about Christian faith in Christ tend to puzzle the Hindu—first, the claim that Christ is *uniquely* God incarnate (Ghandi once remarked that he would have become a Christian but for this claim—the Hindu is used to the idea of many incarnations); second, the doctrine of atonement: the Hindu sees our problems as less to do with sin than to do with spiritual ignorance clouding our perception of reality. Where Hindus stress faith in a personal God, they do not typically think that a mediator between God and man is needed.

Another question posed by the Hindu relates to the meaning of history. The Christian emphasis on the historical actions of Christ implies a particularity in God's dealings with men which does not accord too well with the Hindu picture of a world constantly being destroyed and re-created.

Also very strongly planted in the attitudes of modern Hindus is the belief that somehow differences between religions can be reconciled. In this respect they react strongly against the exclusive claims of Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity. I remember talking to a south Indian Brahmin who used to attend Christian missionary meetings, though he never stayed for the discussion. He told me that he did not want to get converted, and there was really no point in it, seeing that all faiths point to the same goal—all he wanted to hear was Christ's teachings.

These are some of the reactions of modern Hinduism. They may help to explain the way in which Hindus see their own great diversity as a merit, as a way pointing to the unity-in-plurality which they feel the world needs. How long their position can be sustained is a further question.

THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY: ISLAM FROM WITHIN

MUHAMMAD IQBAL

The massive movement of people of different nations, races, and religions to Europe has given rise to both economic and moral problems. 'Not least amongst these concerns is that which derives from the creation of substantial enclaves of Muslims in what were hitherto predominantly Christian societies. In most cases there is not only a difference of faith but there is, combined with it, a difference of race, often accompanied by colour', writes Edwin Barker.[1] This could be the reason that many and various studies on the religion of Islam and the Muslims are under way for better understanding of varying human experience. No matter where Muslims reside, the basic principles of Islam remain unchanged and the Muslim way of life soon becomes obvious. Here are some basic characteristics of the Muslim community, which may be of some use before embarking on a detailed study.

Faith and Principles

Belief. Islam[2] meaning literally 'submission to the Will of Allah' (the personal name for God) is, to Muslims[3] (the followers of Islam), the sum total of certain beliefs and duties. As to the beliefs the Prophet Muhammad[4] (may Allah bless him), the founder of Islam, himself explained to a questioner: 'Thou shalt believe in the one God,[5] in His angelic messengers, in His revealed Books,[6] in His Prophets,[7] in the Day of Judgment, and discrimination of good and evil by God'. Duties are of three kinds; duties towards (*a*) Allah, (*b*) Self, and (*c*) Others, and are explained in the very opening verses of the Holy Qur'an (the Muslim's religious Book—the collection of Allah's revelations upon the Prophet Muhammad). 'This is the Scripture where there is no doubt, it is a guide to those who ward off (evil), who believe in the unseen, and establish worship and spend of that we have bestowed upon them'.[8]

What are we to say of Allah Who created us and bestowed the blessings of the world upon us? It is commonly acknowledged that we feel obliged to people who show any gesture of goodwill. To the Creator we must show our incessant gratitude and love by worshipping Him.

Salat, Zakat, and Hajj. Salat (prayers) are made obligatory[9] for His remembrances[10] and peace of one's soul from indecencies and evil.[11] Sharing of one's wealth with the poor is essentially a practical demonstration of love for His creatures and takes the form of *Zakat*, 'poor tax'—another obligatory duty of a Muslim. Similar obligation is *Hajj*—the pilgrimage to the Holy Places in Saudi Arabia. This divests the man of money and fosters better human relations.

Saum. Another of the duties is *Saum*, fasting, for the full lunar month of Ramadhan whereby the piety of soul is reaped by physical weakening of one's body.[12]

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The Prophet Muhammad spoke of Islam thus: 'Islam is founded on five things: To bear witness that there is none worthy of worship but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; to establish prayer; to pay the prescribed Charity; to fast during Ramadhan; and to perform the Pilgrimage to the Ka'aba, the House of Allah in Mecca, if one has means of doing so'. The details regarding the discharging of the purely devotional and religious duties of a Muslim to Allah referred to as the fundamental principles of Islam have been discussed elsewhere.[13]

Duties and Doctrines

The details about the duties towards 'Self' and 'Others' are mutually dependent, contained in the Holy Qur'an and explained in the *Hadith*, the collection of the temporal sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. *Ijma* (agreement) of the Muslim community as the basis of the discharging of minute aspects of duties is the next guide to Islamic activities. Failing to find the direct example in the Qur'an or the Hadith, the Qiyas (analogy) is applied to solve all new problems.

Islamic Jurisprudence. The interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadith by different schools of thought culminated into Islamic Jurisprudence. Four teachings Hanifi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali named after the founder jurists are acceptable to all Muslims throughout the world (1/7 to 1/6 of the world population). The schools of law do differ from one another on certain issues but it is based purely on the degree of devotion to the Islamic doctrines. Naturally enough this has given rise to different sects in Islam. Basically they all believe in the unity of Godhead,[5] Allah the Rabb-al-Alameen[14] (the Nourisher of the worlds), finality of the Prophethood[15] on Muhammad and Allah's revelations[16] upon mankind.

Developing of Umma. Besides the devotional teaching of Islam, the Qur'an has laid down in unambiguous terms that which is good and bad. Every human being is responsible for his or her actions alone.[17] A Muslim believes in predestination but he does not divorce his free will in his actions either. For to lead a successful pious life the guidelines are there preserved in their original form in the Qur'an—the guidelines which the followers of the previous Prophets expected constantly. And excluding the first four rightly guided Caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali who ruled the *Umma* (the Muslim Community) for thirty years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (632 A.D.) religiously, the Islamic traditions and brotherhood were looked after better by the Saints of Islam like Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali[18] (Iraq—*d.* 1111 A.D.), Syed Abdul Qadir Jilani (Persia—*d.* 561 A.D.), and Sheikh Ahmad Sarhindi (India—*d.* 1590 A.D.) than most of the political leaders. Haroon-al-Rashid (*d.* 809 A.D.), Umar-bin-Abdul Aziz (*d.* 720 A.D.), and Aurangzeb Alamgir (*d.* 1707 A.D.), and others were, of course, true Muslim rulers equipped with Islamic characteristics of courage, truthfulness, and kindness.

Social Teachings of Islam

As a multi-religious society such as that seen in the U.K. (1·5 million Muslims, C.O.I. 1968) it is useful to know about the Mosques, the Victorian terrace houses converted into institutes of worship where regular prayers

are said, but it is better still to find out more about Muslims as a social and cultural community. The upholding of the duties is obligatory. Failing to do so amounts to committing a sin which is forgiveable by Allah only if the offended individual concerned pardons the offender—such a great stress is laid on honest social intercourse in Islam.

Man and woman relations. Unless one is invalid, marriage is obligatory to all Muslim men and women. Poverty and celibacy[19, 20] are no excuse. A woman cannot marry a non-Muslim. A man may marry a Christian or Jew but no one else.[21] The careful selection of a would-be-wife is essential for further growth and building up of the character of the offspring.[22] Polygamy[23] is allowed but the terms are so difficult[24] to maintain fairly that the jurists recommend only monogamy.

Marriage is regarded as a social contract between a man and a woman. The latter is fully entitled to fix the terms of the marriage and above all the dowry[25] which remains her sole possession. Marriage may be annulled[26] at the request of either party although divorce is not encouraged.

The parents hold a unique and superior position in the family. They must be respected (unless they profess polytheism[27]—a sickness in Islam). The idea of birth control on grounds of poverty is denounced and much stress is laid on chastity. Free mixing[28] of men and women (except near relations) is not allowed, to lessen the risk of promiscuity. In ladies' dress habits they should disguise their bodies rather than emphasise them, and the same goes for the menfolk.

When death approaches, it is insisted that a will should be made in the presence of witnesses. Something must be bequeathed to parents and near relations.[29] Female children receive half the male's share, a fact which has received much criticism. Economic opportunities for women as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers are immense and social protections numerous. In the final analysis women are, in fact, better off financially than men. To maintain the family is the sole responsibility of the man. 'For women have rights over men similar to those of men over women', says the Qur'an.[30] Muslim women had the right to their own property ever since the birth of Islam.

Universal Brotherhood. Whatever the sociologist's definition of the term race may be, in very easy language it is taken to mean a group of individuals with the same blood, language, living in the same geographical conditions and inter related. Division into races as mentioned in the Qur'an[31] has been for no other reason than to reveal the diversified nature of God's creation and make us see that despite all our differences, in the eyes of God we are equal. Only in goodness, piety, and generosity may we rise in supremacy. Islam offers equal opportunity to acquire all these character traits without any regard for colour, race, sex or inheritance. The Prophet Muhammad's famous Farewell Address is still preserved as the best fourteen centuries old human rights code for modern man. In the Address it was mentioned that no Arab was superior to a non-Arab except on the grounds of piety, thus obliterating distinction on the basis of race.

The narrations on racial equality were not just words with little action. They were, in fact, often put into practice in the form of five fundamental principles of Islam. Muslims pray together in the Mosque five times a day,

gather in thousands at Mecca every year, utter the common formula, give away *Zakat*, and stop idle talk, slandering, and backbiting whilst fasting in order to maintain a common bondage to God and a brotherhood between people of all races.

Charity. Charity, other than the regular *Zakat*, i.e., almsgiving to the needy, poor, debtors, and wayfarers,[32] is considered to have the same status as the saying of prayers. Charities, however small, like the feeding of the hungry, or digging a well for the poor, if given generously and anonymously, can win the friendship of God. Charity not given freely or given in order to enhance one's own prestige may earn God's displeasure. 'Charity begins at home' is very applicable to Islamic principles but a Muslim does not forget that a needful neighbour may deserve more than close relatives. Borrowing and lending of money without interest is recommended in the Qur'an. Relaxation of the time limit on a debt owed by a poor debtor or even forgiveness[33] of debt is regarded with great affection by God. Contentment over whatever materials one has and cutting short of one's ambitions is common practice among devoted Muslims. Mutual business transactions must be conducted under officially witnessed contracts. Gambling[34] is strictly forbidden, as it is the art of getting something without having worked for it and often depriving those who legally possess it.

Salutations. A Muslim greets his friends with the words: Assalam-o-Alaikum (peace be on you) which brings the response Wa-Alaikum-Salam (and peace be on you) without exception. When paying a visit to someone's house one should knock at the door first. If the door is open a coughing noise should bring someone to the door. Invitations to meals from relations, friends, even Christians[35] and Jews are always to be accepted. But what is forbidden is idle gossip and staying too long after the meals. Visiting the sick, offering condolences to bereaved families, showing affection to orphans are actions which are highly rewarded. The duties we owe to orphans are discussed in the Qur'an at great length.

Attitude to the Holy Prophet. The Prophet Muhammed was a perfect example of human behaviour, an exalted standard of character of mercy,[36] kindness, forgiveness,[37] and love. The Qur'an lays down for us rules of behaviour[38] such as respect, obedience, blessing, and love in the remembrance of him. No Muslim will tolerate anybody uttering words of disgrace,[39] doubt, and ambiguity as to the character of the Prophet or his teaching. The stories about the Prophet's companions tell of their sacrifice and love for their illustrious leader. This he deserved for he had delivered the barbaric Arabs from their sinful lives and left the universal teachings of the Qur'an for future generations.

Crimes and Punishment. Just as in the Mosaic law life was to be taken for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and wounds equal for equal so also the Qur'an enacts. Recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto in degree. But whoever exceeds the limits shall be in great trouble, for God does not love transgressors nor does He love the unjust.[40] Moreover, God loves those who forgive and forgives those who repent of evil which was done in ignorance.

Murder is, in fact, the greatest heinous crime[41] and is subject to the law of equality. However, the brother of the murdered person may remit[42] the

murder providing reasonable compensation is made to the bereaved family. Killing by mistake demands compensation, but this is subject to the wishes of the family of the deceased who may freely forgive the offender. Theft, highway robbery, adultery, and slander[43] are controlled by grave punishment.

Jihad. Jihad, meaning contending,[44] and striving against Satanic forces whether within or without oneself, is a holy war to combat hypocrisy. Fighting the enemies of Islam in the battlefield is recommended only if Muslims feel they are oppressed[45] or their religious freedom[46] is endangered. Those who succumb to double dealing should also be treated as enemies. However, there is no compulsion to accept Islam after defeat.[47] Non-Muslims should be treated as friends. Judicious division of war booty, good treatment to prisoners of war, and respect for treaties are ordered.

Jihad also appertains when one fights against the bad habits of drinking and other admonitions such as the eating of pork,[48] uncleanliness, and hatred.

Islam insists on the leading of a practical well-balanced life showing no oppression to anyone and no cowardice when oppressed. The Prophet Muhammad took to the sword only when he and his followers had no other option but to fight to uphold their beliefs. This resulted in their great political achievements. When towards the end of his life Mecca was conquered, he broke the idols in the Kaaba but did not sack a single employee and forgave them all. Many a story of his humility and love for mankind are on record.

Education in Islam. Amidst the Muslim community one's educational fulfilment, it is believed, means the merging of one's will, with the Divine Will. Religion is very much an intrinsic part of the Muslim approach to life. The impact of industry is already helping to change some of their attitudes but Muslim educationists believe that religious ideals must still be sought. Children must, therefore, be equipped with the rudiments of religion for spiritual contentment and the reconciliation of inner conflict between material, political and moral values. This, in fact, is being done in the Mosque and at home. With regard to religious or cultural education in State schools Professor Kenneth Little of Edinburgh University says, 'There should be taught something about other peoples and the way they live but it would be dangerous to show them only the bizarre and the picturesque aspect of other cultures. These more obvious aspects of other cultures must be related to the total culture, and this cannot be done except with students of 5th and 6th form level'.

It is already a fact that many Muslim children in British State schools, especially girls, have been known to ask for exclusion from the Christianity-centred assembly, hesitate to change for P.E., and are reluctant to take part in swimming and music and movement. They pay regular visits to the Mosque, abstain from eating pork, and unritually killed meat, and absent themselves from school when they celebrate their festive days (Eid-al-Fitr which marks the end of the month of Ramadhan and Eid-al-Dha which remembers the near sacrifice of Ishmael). English children are quite unaware of these events.

Such are the traditions founded by the Prophet Muhammad and upheld

by his followers throughout the ages, which have characterised uniformity of the Muslim Community. Islamic brotherhood between people of different races developed a uniform Muslim culture. The serious view of life which follows from strict religious practices and the ideals of moral and physical courage is another characteristic of the Muslim community. These characteristics make the Muslim community distinct from all other communities. The effective assimilation of the surrounding culture by the community will take place only gradually and in the light of Islamic observances.

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NOTES

(Except where noted, all references are to the *Qur'an*, translated by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthal—Allen and Unwin.)

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12. 2: 183.
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15. 5:3.
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19. 24: 32.
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23. 4: 3.
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28. 24: 31.
29. 2: 180.
30. 2: 228.
31. 49: 13.
32. 2: 215.
33. 2: 280.
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37. 9: 80.
38. 3: 159.
39. 2: 104 and 4: 46.
40. 42: 40.
41. 6: 151 and 27: 33.
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TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF INTER-RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

ERIC J. SHARPE

(The substance of this paper was delivered as part of a series of lectures on 'Comparative Religion and the Communication of the Gospel' at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, in February, 1969.)

Some months ago I was talking to some research students in the United Theological College in Bangalore, India, and one of them (a German) asked me whether I thought that it was possible for one and the same person to be both a theologian and a close student of 'comparative religion', particularly within the framework of Evangelical commitment. He could see that a liberal (using that much-abused word in its widest sense) would find no difficulty in holding both positions simultaneously; but he was not so sure about the Evangelical—the term he used was post-Barthian, but his meaning was clear.

Perhaps without realising it, he had put his finger on one of the sorest spots in present-day Evangelical theology: the problem of how the Evangelical Christian is to interpret his fundamental faith in Christ in the context of other religions, other answers to those basic problems of human nature to which we claim that Christ has provided the all-sufficient answer. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to claim that the last truly magisterial work on this subject written by an Evangelical was Hendrik Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, and that book appeared over thirty years ago, in 1938.

My answer to the student's question, incidentally, was that I believed that such a combination of theology and sound study of world religions was entirely possible. To pass judgment on anything is always possible, provided that one nails one's colours to the mast and makes it entirely clear exactly what is the basis of one's judgment, and exactly what one's criteria are. It is perhaps unfortunate that in this case almost all scholars are, as one humorist put it, apt to nail their colours to the fence, conscientiously refusing to take sides or to say anything with which another scholar might conceivably disagree. The days of the great missionary scholars are now, it seems, past and gone; few missionaries have the time or the leisure to write the comprehensive studies that were so typical of former generations, not least in India. Of course, in the case of the Christian missionary, neutrality in these matters is neither desirable nor ultimately possible. If, in the sincerity of his desire to be all things to all men, he is prepared for the time being to suspend judgment, at least until he is able to feel firm ground beneath his feet, all well and good; but unwillingness to witness to the faith that is in him, in the mistaken belief that he is thereby forwarding some obscure process of dialogue, is not only mistaken: it smells of common dishonesty.

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But at the same time there are a good many Christians in the world today who are seriously and sincerely puzzled as to the attitude that they ought to adopt towards people confessing a faith other than their own. Once the problem was noticeable only when the Christian travelled to a non-Christian country; but today, the rapidity of communications which all take so much for granted, and the increasingly mobile character of the population of the world, are bringing all of us into contact with non-Christians—Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs and all the others—on a scale which would have been unthinkable only a couple of decades ago. The problem is a global one. And to the Christian who takes seriously that dimension of his faith which involves the proclamation of the Gospel to all men everywhere, it is a problem which simply cannot be solved merely by a precipitate retreat into obscurantism. There are cultural and racial factors involved, as well as religious factors; there is national and community pride, political aspiration, often a passionate rejection of what tends to be interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as a century of Western imperialism; the problem, in short, involves the whole of man in a vast multitude of separate human situations. We cannot go on pretending that it does not exist.

The need to evangelize the world has never been greater. The problems that face the evangelist have never been greater, either. The need for qualified guidance—and I stress the word 'qualified'—into the problems attending the communication of the Gospel to the non-Christian and post-Christian world has never been more pressing. But who is to provide that guidance? Who is to tell the Christian in the situation of encounter whether what he is saying makes sense? Who is to stop him charging blindly into a morass of misunderstanding when he attempts to proclaim the Gospel?

What is needed is, I believe, an entirely new effort on the part of Evangelicals to formulate a theology of encounter. Research students need to be directed more and more into this vital area of theological study. To be sure, all those thousands of dissertations produced each session on various aspects of Biblical studies and church history are valuable (or at least many of them are), at least for the student whose time has been spent preparing them; but for the Christian missionary effort as a whole, it would be far more valuable to have intensive work directed towards the area of encounter between the Gospel and the religions of the world. This is no easy option. Sound theology must be allied to close and detailed study of at least one, and preferably more, of the world religions, great and small. Such a student must be a man (or woman) of many parts: widely read, sensitive and experienced, committed and sympathetic. Here, too, the historian may play his part. You are perhaps not aware of those great treasure-stores of information which the missionary societies have hidden away in their basements: the mission archives, in which the experience of decades, and in some cases, centuries, has been gathered up and stored away, waiting for the right person to come and unlock them. It is impossible to stress too highly the service which enlightened historical research into the history of the Christian missionary enterprise can render the Church—not merely from the point of view of dispersing the mists

which have gathered around seminal figures of the past, but also from the point of view of helping to clear the ground for a correct estimate of the present situation. We can move ahead far more confidently if we can see where we have been.

While I am on the subject of research projects, it may be as well to put on record that we still do not have, as far as I am aware, the exhaustive study of the Biblical attitudes to other religions that we all so much need. Again it is a matter of the laying of solid foundations on which others may build.

I have spoken of an Evangelical theology of encounter, and I must give some closer indication of the lines on which I think such a theology might be constructed. But first I should like to outline the reasons why I think that this is a necessity.

The Christian missionary enters on his task because he is convinced that he is called by God to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ to those who have known neither the name of Christ nor the power of salvation. In some cases he may find that his message is easily understood, and that its reception is uncomplicated by what we might call non-theological factors. Still he must know what is the total attitude to reality which motivates those to whom he is sent. He must understand the meanings—all the possible meanings—of the words he uses, and all the unconscious as well as the conscious factors which affect the reception of the Gospel message, and the desire or lack of desire on the part of his people to take the decisive step of giving their allegiance to the King of kings and Lord of lords. In the case of the so-called higher religions, he has to reckon with a multitude of complicating factors, many of them not immediately recognizable as religious, which may hold up almost indefinitely the reception of the Gospel as good news. Common to all these situations is the fundamental need to know his people and to sympathize with them on the purely human level. But over and above all this is the need within him to give concrete expression to the faith which is in him, whether it be to the primitive and fear-ridden 'animist' or to the sophisticated and highly intellectual Hindu or Buddhist. He must have knowledge; he must have sympathy; he must be faithful to Christ. The first two of these requirements are directly affected by that scholarly discipline which we call 'comparative religion'. The connection may not be so clear in the case of the third; but remember that the Christian, whether missionary or not, must not be a divided personality, retaining a measure of scholarly concern and sympathy 'out of hours', and yet when it comes to thinking in theological terms, abruptly forgetting all this. If his knowledge and his sympathy are not a genuine part of his total Christian personality, then it would be better not to worry about them at all.

Theology for the Christian begins, not with the notion of man seeking God, but with a stance of faith: the conviction that God has been constantly seeking man, and that the absolutely decisive meeting between God and man took place in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ: 'He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory' (1 Tim. 3: 16, which Paul calls 'the mystery of our religion'). So if

I might be so bold as to offer a provisional definition of theology, it would be as follows: 'An attempt to say something intelligible about God, on the basis of the prior conviction, in faith, that God has said something intelligible about Himself'. Theology, in other words, is the systematization of the encounter of man and God, in which God speaks and man responds —or not, as the case may be.

It seems to me important to stress that the divine-human encounter does not, scripturally speaking, begin with the work of redemption. There are two prior stages involved: creation and fall, in both of which the whole of mankind is concerned. In creation, man as man is given the image of God; in the fall, that image is distorted—not, however, entirely obliterated. Before the coming of Christ, man might affirm the image of God in him, so the Old Testament tells us, by radical obedience to the Law. And even before the formulation of the Law, there were those in whom faith—as we know, a total attitude of radical trust and obedience—was operative.

Here I believe the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews is of great importance. Of the primacy of faith in the New Testament scheme of salvation there can be no doubt; but in Hebrews the scope of faith is widened to embrace all those 'holy pagans' of the past who have stood in a right relationship to God. Faith always involved a choice between the reality of the invisible world and the present order of things, and those who have faith have chosen God's world. Noah and Abraham are advanced as examples of those who have so chosen: Noah by recognizing that this present world is in the wrong, Abraham by abandoning home and country and accepting the lot of a homeless wanderer. Other examples are Isaac, Joseph, Moses and many more—all models of faith who were 'well attested by their faith' (11: 39).

But this chapter does not say that they, their faith notwithstanding, necessarily possessed the fullness of God. On the contrary, they 'did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect' (v. 39f.). Although they had so much: although within the framework of reality as they knew and understood it, they were able to show faith, they did not live to experience the breaking in of the new age which came with Christ—the eschatological reality in which God finally reconciled the world to Himself. It is Jesus who is 'the pioneer and perfector of our faith'—the consummator, the fulfiller, the one who takes what is incomplete (though good) and makes of it what in the providence of God it was intended to be. The Letter to the Hebrews does not claim that the Old Covenant was perfect of itself: indeed, 'the law made nothing perfect' (7: 19); '. . . . if that first covenant had been faultless, then there would have been no occasion for a second' (8: 7). But what it certainly does is to attest to the genuineness and provisional validity of the relationship to God which is entered into prior to the breaking in of the *eschaton*.

Now I think that it is possible to argue that the eschatological reality of Christ is known only when the Gospel message has been *both* proclaimed *and* understood. I emphasize both elements, because both together complete, as it were, the circuit of revelation as it applies to the concrete situation of individuals and communities. Until the message has been made

plain, and either accepted or rejected, there is no justification in speaking of Christ as being an option; the situation is in the fullest sense pre-Christian, and the judgment of Hebrews applies. Faith *is* possible in the pre-Christian situation, just as some degree of knowledge of God is possible. This is not to say that the possibility is always realized; only that it may be. The unknown God worshipped in the 'times of ignorance' (Acts 17: 30) is indeed 'the God who made the world and everything in it' (v. 24), the God who 'made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth' (v. 26).

Prior to the making explicit of the Christian message, there is in all men a hunger for God, implanted by God Himself in the human heart. I cannot think that this is an illegitimate quest, merely proof of man's overweening pride and sin, for in Acts 17 Paul speaks entirely positively of man's quest: 'that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him' (v. 27). Clearly this is not a vain quest. It is worth hoping for—and in the New Testament, 'hope' is never a negatively coloured word. But now the Christ has come, the 'times of ignorance' are over, and the quest is ended.

Obviously, then, there is every Biblical justification for looking upon the religious quest of mankind in a positive sense, as a quest for a God who is willing to be found. And were man perfect and unfallen, then the finding would be as full as the seeking is passionate. But this is not so: between the seeking and the finding there falls a shadow—a net of distorted communication, made up of pride, self-will and all the other ingredients that we know so well as belonging to human sin. Let us not be so foolish as to assert that God has deliberately hidden Himself from the greater part of mankind, even though there may be one or two places in the Old Testament which might seem to give that impression. It is not too much to claim that the quest is, however, in very many cases an unsuccessful one, not because of any inherent unwillingness on God's part to be found, but because of the terrible self-centredness of man, from which he cannot escape except by the grace of God.

A 'religion' is the name we give (perhaps not altogether happily) to the quest for God which man undertakes in the company of his fellow men or in solitude. Some of these we dignify as '-isms' and call 'religious systems'; others we cannot classify so easily, and so we generalize about them as though they were systems ('animism' is a case in point). The student knows that this quest for God, which is (or appears to be) a fundamental part of human nature, expresses itself differently in different parts of the world. Each so-called religion has its own proper doctrine of man, of God (or the gods) and of the world; and can only be understood on its own terms. It is equally true that each religion has its own dimensions of success and failure in what it sets out to do. In Hinduism, for instance, the quest of the Self is set up as a goal, and attained; the failure perhaps lies in the assumption that this can ever be an ultimate goal. Judaism sets up the goal of obedience to the Torah, and in some rare cases may achieve that obedience; but is it ultimate?

What I am trying to say is that while we might, on Biblical grounds, find adequate reasons for taking seriously the human preoccupation with

the beyond, and for abandoning the hoary condemnation of all non-Christian religions alike as 'heathen darkness', yet when we come to try and formulate a theology of confrontation, blanket judgments will not carry us very far. They may perhaps provide us with some measure of conceptual foundation on which to build, and this may be very necessary as a first step. But there comes a time when we have to get down to the concrete dimension of ambiguity, not in 'religion', but in the actual religious aspirations and quests and failures of real men and women.

The Christian faith is exclusive, in the sense of our Lord's words, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me' (Jn. 14: 6). It will not do, I am afraid, to look at the non-Christian religions and see in them evidences of anonymous Christianity, faith in an amorphous cosmic Christ—at least not if these words are understood as fully the equivalent of saving faith and incorporation into the body of Christ. Such attempts may be well meaning, but they betray a lack of acquaintance, not only with the message of the Bible, but also with the actual reality of the religions of the world. Saving faith is never divorced from repentance and incorporation into the fellowship of the Church. Belief implies belonging; and unless there is the desire to belong, one may question the validity of the faith.

But awareness of these issues—knowledge that there is a core of exclusiveness which the Christian may not relinquish—does not mean that the theologian should be harsh or unfeeling in his judgments. Once more we are referred back to the conditions of scholarship and sympathy, of knowledge as a prerequisite of love. If love is present, allied to a lively awareness of the grounds of the Christian's own faith, then the Christian as a missionary may with confidence rely on the Holy Spirit to supply the deficiencies in his own interpretation and attempts to communicate the Gospel. For the Holy Spirit builds bridges of understanding and communication, even out of unpromising materials and in unlikely situations. I am not saying that He will make a theology of confrontation for us, if we are too lazy to make one for ourselves; merely that when we have done all that we can do, He will take what is God's and declare it, not only to us, but to those to whom the message is directed (Jn. 16: 13f.).

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