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Three Steps Backwards

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Any Christian who engages in serious discussion with a Hindu very quickly reaches a point of frustration. There are certain obvious points about which we disagree—rebirth, the equality of all religions, the uniqueness of Jesus—but these areas of disagreement seem to be of little significance compared with the mental fog which all too soon descends over the entire discussion. Indeed the real problem is that we cannot disagree, for disagreement assumes a common language of discourse and a set of common assumptions. When these are absent, any real meeting of minds, and thus both agreement and disagreement, are impossible.

The sense of frustration does not remain at the purely intellectual level, for the longer one knows one's Hindu friend, the more painful does one's inability to meet him become. It always hurts if one cannot truly meet a person whom one is beginning to love. The Christian may draw comfort from the fact that his experience reflects the pain of Christ himself, 'Do you still not understand? Are your minds closed?' (Mark 8:17, NEB). Lest such a comparison should tempt him to arrogance he has to remember that Christ spoke those words while his disciples were 'talking among themselves'. The Christ who is present at every conversation must often experience the same pain when his disciples talk among themselves or with others today. Nor let us forget the grief of the Hindu at his Christian friend's inability to grasp or to accept things which to him are simply self-evident.

All of this suggests that *the creation of a common language* is a pre-condition for any genuine dialogue with men of other faiths, and indeed with many of one's own faith, for this problem exists within religions and not just on the frontiers between them. It has a particular relevance in the field of theological education. To create such a common language would be a large step forwards, but before we can take it we must take three steps backwards, and it is with these that this article is concerned. The *first* step is this: we must recognise that in our conversations with others we are very often talking two different languages. The assumption that we are in fact talking the same language, that is, that a common language of discourse already exists and that we do not have to create it, leads only to confusion and misunderstanding. This step is comparatively simple. It is a common enough experience to realise that the other person has not realised what we are saying. The *second* step is much more difficult but belongs to the same realm of ideas: it is to '*translate*' what the other man has said from his 'language' into ours, so that it becomes intelligible and perhaps also credible.

The *third* step is of a very different kind and takes us into the area of the unconscious. For any partner in a conversation, no matter what his 'language' there are certain presuppositions which govern all his thinking. He speaks from them rather than about them. Precisely because they are unconscious he is prone to assume that what he says on their basis must be self-evidently true. It is only when he talks with someone whose presuppositions are different that he is able to recognise his own for what they are. Having reached this point he can begin to understand why his words are not self-evidently true to the other man. At a much deeper level than the first step, he has recognised that because the two of them speak from different pre-suppositions they are necessarily speaking two different languages.

It is only when these three steps have been taken by both partners in the conversation that a real dialogue, a real meeting of minds is possible, for only then do they have a common language of discourse. However it is possible, and indeed very often happens that one partner alone takes the steps, in which case he can make considerable progress in understanding the other—and himself. He may have a close, fruitful, and rewarding relationship with the other, but this is not and should not be called dialogue, though it may very well be the necessary preliminary to any dialogue in the future.

I now wish to illustrate this argument by means of four examples. The first is drawn from a book, the other three from my own personal experience.

1. The first example is taken from the book *Sundar Singh* by A. J. Appasamy (CLS 1966). Sundar Singh claimed to have met a Christian Maharishi of great age and described the encounter as follows:

I went from Tehri by way of Gangotri to the Kailash Mountain. You have already heard something in reference to the Christian Maharishi (great sage) whom I accidentally met here. I had not the slightest conception that anyone could live in so bleak a place.

Through slipping on the ice I fell down in front of a cave and was surprised to see a venerable man seated there with closed eyes. There was no cloth upon his body, his hair and nails had grown very long. At first on seeing him I was afraid, but when he opened his brilliant eyes and signed to me to be seated, my heart was comforted with the thought: He is not a man to be feared, but he is a true Rishi.

He said: 'My birth was in Alexandria (Egypt). When I was thirty years of age, Jarnos, the nephew of St Francis Xavier, baptised me . . . Up to my seventy-fifth year I preached in the whole world. I spoke twenty-one languages well. When I knew that I could no longer travel about, I gradually made my way to this place. I have been living here for two hundred and nine years' (pp. 48-49).

It is not surprising that Sadhu Sundar Singh's account of his meeting with the Maharishi became a subject of great controversy. Some questioned his integrity while others thought he was deluded. Eventually four men set off with him to visit the cave and meet the Maharishi for themselves. After an arduous journey they had to abandon the attempt because snow blocked their path—at which point one of the four threw his baggage at Sundar Singh in rage and exasperation.¹

Is it possible that confusion of language was at the root of this controversy? If I as a man of the twentieth century claim to have met a Maharishi who is over 209 years old I will have to produce evidence which is empirically verifiable if I am to be taken seriously. Indeed in this area what is real for me is what is verifiable in this way, and nothing else. But was this true for Sundar Singh and the Maharishi? Did their understanding of what is real have a different foundation? A possible clue to this is to be found in the psychological theory of C. G. Jung. In an essay on the 18th Sura of the Qur'an (this Sura is entitled *The Cave*) he writes:

The cave is the place of rebirth, that secret cavity in which one is shut up in order to be incubated and renewed . . .

The legend (described in the 18th Sura) has the following meaning: Anyone who gets into that cave, that is to say into the cave which everyone has in himself, or into the darkness that lies behind consciousness, will find himself involved in an—at first—unconscious process of transformation. By penetrating into the unconscious he makes a connection with his unconscious contents. This may result in a momentous change in personality in the positive or negative sense. *The transformation is often interpreted as a prolongation of the natural span of life or as an earnest of immortality*.²

Is it possible that for Sundar Singh and the Maharishi what is real consisted of what could be said on the basis of that experience of transformation? It would be rash to claim that a few sentences from Jung could completely resolve a debate that took place more than half a century ago, and in any case much of his theory has now been challenged by his successors, yet what he says here does seem to offer a possibility of 'translating' the claims of Sundar Singh into the language of his critics.

The debate took place on the assumption that both parties were speaking the same language—that the statement 'I have seen a Maharishi of more than 200 years of age' could mean only one thing. If the two parties to the debate could have recognised that they were in fact speaking different languages, they might then have been able to find some means of translation from one into the other. They might have gone on from that point to take our third step and so have come to recognise the unconscious bases of their own thinking, the

¹ *op. cit.*, p. 81 (my italics).

² *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, second edition 1968), pp. 135-136.

presuppositions from which they could say: 'This is real.' Perhaps then the Sadhu's travelling companion would not have felt the urge to throw his baggage at him! Yet we must beware of adopting a patronising attitude towards the past, and in any case Jung's essay was only published in 1939.

2. In my conversations with others I frequently find myself taking these three backward steps, and the act of doing so often helps to clarify what would otherwise have remained obscure.

Take the example of astrology. This is a point where foreigners have eloquently criticised the superstition and credulity of the Hindu mind, yet anyone who talks regularly with Hindus very quickly realises what a large part astrology plays in their lives, and how their belief in it is perfectly genuine. Here again, confusion begins when I assume that I am speaking the same language as Hindus. For example when a Hindu says to me, 'One should not travel to the east on Monday or Saturday; to the west on Sunday or Friday; to the north on Tuesday or Wednesday; or to the south on Thursday. If one breaks these rules one will come under the evil influence of the planets and suffer accordingly', then my immediate reaction is to shake my head in bewilderment and disbelief. Only when I can take the first step and recognise that he is talking a different language can I begin to take him seriously instead of simply dismissing him as a superstitious crank.

I once asked a Hindu friend whether a man would normally go to an astrologer before undertaking some important task. He said that this was true, but that he would also go when he was in trouble, difficulty, or anxiety. A few days previously his own new-born son had died after a precarious week of existence. The child had been born deformed. Quite spontaneously he started talking about this experience: 'I went to an astrologer who looked at my horoscope, consulted his books, and then told me that I had come under the evil influence of the planet Rahu, who was responsible for the trouble. He gave me this ring (he pointed to it) to wear on the middle finger of my left hand. This is made out of seven different metals and because I wear it Rahu is pleased'. This was a paradoxical moment such as one had often experienced previously. On the one hand we were genuinely near each other and he was showing me part of himself. On the other hand I was completely unable to make any kind of sense of what he said.

Once again it was Jung who came to my rescue and offered a way of 'translating' this strange 'language':

Primitive man is not much interested in objective explanations of the obvious, but he has an imperative need—or rather, his unconscious psyche has an irresistible urge—to assimilate all outer experiences to inner, psychic events. . . All the mythologised processes of nature, such as summer and winter, the phases of the moon, the rainy seasons, and so forth, are. . . symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man's consciousness by way of projection — that is, mirrored in the events of nature. The projection is so fundamental that it has taken several

thousand years of civilisation to detach it in some measure from its outer object. In the case of astrology for instance, this age old 'scientia intuitiva' came to be branded as rank heresy because man had not yet succeeded in making the psychological description of character independent of the stars. Even to-day, people who still believe in astrology fall almost without exception for the old superstitious assumption of the influence of the stars.³

If astrology is indeed 'the symbolic expression of the inner unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible by way of projection' then one can begin to make sense of it. Certainly my friend's remarks suggest that astrology was of very real help to him in coming to terms with the turmoil of his one mind. Here too what Jung says is not a magic key to unlock all locks—and there may be other ways of translation besides his—but he does enable one to understand a little better why astrology has such a powerful attraction for the Hindu mind. One can thus begin to listen to Hindus when they speak on this subject without inwardly rejecting what they are saying. One must recognise that Jung's translation would not be accepted, not perhaps even understood, by the man to whom the world of astrology is still real, for this is the world he lives from, he cannot step outside it and discuss it. In other words he cannot take our second two steps.

3. The third example is more general and concerns the inner crisis through which contemporary Hinduism is passing. For most Hindus it is myths rather than philosophy which provide the springs of their inner life, but they are finding it increasingly difficult to go on believing in the myths. At this point the pressures of secularism pose a far more formidable threat than Christianity has ever done, for secularism is all-pervasive; it cannot be identified with a particular body of men or with a particular kind of literature. I once called on two different Hindu friends who were discussing a particular point in mythology. One of them said: 'The thunderbolt of Indra is said in the myths to be hard. Yet lightning is an energy, not a substance. How can it be hard?' At this point I joined in the conversation: 'I think you are confusing two different languages, the language of myth and the language of science. These must be kept separate. The myths have their own language and all of us now are being compelled to look for the inner meaning of the language. We Christians face the same issue in the early chapters of Genesis.' (My last sentence was of course a gross over simplification of the issue.) I am not sure how far my suggestion was acceptable for the conversation quickly moved on to something else. A few days later however I described this conversation to a young *sannyasi* who is also a student of Sanskrit. He rejected my suggestion at once: 'Many people these days try to disprove the Vedas, but there is nothing in them which is contrary to science. I have studied science as well as Sanskrit so I do know what I am talking about.'

³ *op. cit.*, p. 6.

Now it is only possible to claim that science and the Vedas do not contradict each other if they both in fact speak the same language, and here we come to the dilemma which faces many modern Hindus. If there is only one valid language then he has only three courses open to him. First, he may reject the myths and all that they stand for. One sees this rejection very clearly in the Hindi novels of Yashpal. All his religious characters are elderly, the young have no time for religion which they see as intellectually incredible, communally divisive, and socially retrogressive. Many people to-day are in sympathy with Yashpal, without necessarily wanting to go quite so far. Second, a Hindu may re-affirm the myths in the face of the secularist challenge, and this is what my *sannyasi* friend is doing. He believes that what he is doing is to defend the past against the present, but in fact this is not so. In answering the secularists' questions he uses their language, which he thus unconsciously accepts as the true language of the myths. This is a trap into which the fundamentalists of all religions fall. For example a Christian sceptic may say of Genesis chapter 1: 'I do not believe that God created the world in six days'. The fundamentalist replies in the language of the question. The days are to be understood as long periods of time; the order of events described in Genesis 1 is scientifically accurate, the light which appeared before the creation of the sun is really spiritual and inward illumination, and so on. The fundamentalist believes that in saying these things he is defending the verbal inerrancy of God's Word. What in fact he is doing is to allow the sceptic to dictate the terms on which that Word is to be understood. While still holding to the words of Genesis 1 he now understands them as secular language, and their real meaning is lost. He has failed to realise that the language of Genesis 1 and the language of the secularist are not the same but different. (One can make a useful distinction between the fundamentalist and the conservative. The conservative still genuinely lives in the old world—like my friend to whom the astrologer gave the ring. The fundamentalist thinks he is still living in the old world, but, without his being aware of the fact, it is the secularist who dictates to him the terms on which he lives there.) The third possible course is to divide one's mind into separate and unrelated compartments, and this is another phenomenon to be found in all religions.⁴

It seems that in the state of Uttar Pradesh at any rate a process of polarisation is going on: conservatives are on the way to becoming either secularists or fundamentalists. Because they are only aware of one language, Hindus are for the most part unable to appreciate the real nature of their apologetic task, which must surely be to translate the myths into language acceptable to twentieth century men. For however emancipated the secularists may imagine themselves to be the fact remains that men need myths and the symbols, rituals and ceremonies which go with them for their souls' health. They cannot

⁴ Any conservative evangelical reading this paragraph would justly claim that it is a caricature—or worse—of his real views. This is readily admitted. All I would claim is that many ordinary uninstructed Christians do think in this way.

survive in a spiritual waste-land and still remain truly human beings. If this is so then the Christian concerns for both religion and society are not mutually exclusive but intimately connected. And lest we are tempted to assume an attitude of superiority towards our Hindu brothers let us remember that very similar situation within our own household of faith.

Here too I have found that to take the three steps backward enables me to appreciate better the dilemma of contemporary Hinduism.

4. A fourth area which these steps can illuminate is theological education. For three and a half years I was actively engaged in this field, being a teacher in a Hindi-medium college. Our syllabi and methods of teaching usually proceed on the assumption that teachers and taught speak the same language, and that therefore for example the modern critical approach to the Bible can be taught to a Christian student from a village background. This assumption needs to be questioned. I was once trying to teach the book of Daniel to a class of such students. We reached chapter 7 and verse 9:

I kept looking, and then thrones were set in place and one ancient in years took his seat, his robe was white as snow and the hair of his head like cleanest wool.

I tried to explain to the students that this verse does not mean that we should think of God as an old man with a beard, and that there are many other 'images of God' in the Old Testament which are different from this one, but at this point one of the students burst out: 'But he *is* like that. I know a Muslim woman who had a dream when she was ill. She saw God. He is an old man with a beard and the books were open in front of Him'. This was one of those tantalising moments which come to all teachers from time to time. Those few sentences raised a whole host of issues which we should have thrashed out together over several periods, but inevitably and tragically, the pressures of time and the demands of the syllabus simply did not allow for this.

This student did not introduce his statement as a point for discussion or debate. He simply affirmed, with no little passion and emphasis, that what he said was so. He could not take the third step. He spoke from his own unexamined assumption about what is real. He could not step outside these assumptions and so no real dialogue was possible. For the 'primitive' (a loaded word) mind dreams are as much part of reality as any external event, and this is true of the Bible as well. So when St. Matthew says: 'An angel of the Lord appeared to him (Joseph) in a dream' my student sees no problem, for this is as real as the experience of that Muslim woman. Yet I, as a twentieth century man have to say: 'Joseph dreamt that an angel of God appeared to him'. Is it possible—or even desirable—to graft the modern approach to the Bible on to the mind of a conservative student? Do we not need to take three steps backwards in theological education and pay far more attention than we have so far done to the minds of those whom we are trying to teach?

It is time to draw the threads of this somewhat discursive article together. If the examples I have quoted are genuine examples and

not just isolated cases then the common assumption that we already have a universal language of discourse is dangerously unrealistic. We have seen that real dialogue and the meeting of minds can only take place when both partners have taken the three steps backwards. Yet practical experience suggests that normally only one partner is willing or able to do so, indeed most of the people I have mentioned would not be capable of even understanding what these steps are and what they mean. With them there can be no real dialogue or discussion. This might seem to be an unduly negative and pessimistic conclusion, but it is not necessarily so. The word dialogue implies that I can somehow step outside my faith and talk about it, discuss it. This is what the three backward steps presupposed, and what the word theology itself suggests, *logos* about *theos*, talk about God. This requires a certain intellectual sophistication and those who have reached this point in any religion are few. In India they are not likely to be found outside those who are fluent in English. Such people are untypical of and usually somewhat detached from the great mass of the ordinary faithful. It is perhaps significant that of the conversations I have described only the one about the thunderbolt of Indra took place in English, and only this came anywhere near to being a genuine dialogue.

With the conservative and the fundamentalist dialogue is not possible, but much else is. For while some measure of intellectual sophistication may be necessary for the meeting of minds and for the discussion of doctrines and concepts, are these the only, or even the most important kinds of human encounter? The greatest secrets of life are hidden from the wise and prudent. There can be a meeting of hearts and of persons independently of the meeting of minds at the intellectual level. When there is genuine communion and trust there are no limits to the possibilities of communication, for all these things are the work of the Creator Spirit. In dialogue the area of what I can talk about may be greater, and groups of people can profitably meet for this kind of discussion. The other kind of encounter which I have been describing can normally only take place between two people. The area of what we can talk about is much less, but precisely because the other man thinks in such a different way from me, I am compelled to make a much more radical re-examination of my own presuppositions (the third step), including my presumed intellectual sophistication. This process is not unrelated to what the New Testament calls repentance.

Perhaps then, apart from the sophisticated few, we are much further from real dialogue than we commonly imagine, and perhaps we need to recognise and to explore different ways of meeting other people which are no less valid and no less rewarding. Perhaps—because the intention of this paper is not to prove a case but merely to raise some questions. The questions have all arisen out of actual encounter with other men. It is surely time that all our discussion of dialogue and what goes with it was firmly earthed at this point.