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# Bicentenary Inaugural Address

11th November 1992

M.M. THOMAS

Let me first of all thank Master Rajaratnam, Principal Daniel, Bishop Gorai and other friends of the Serampore College Council for the kind invitation they extended to me to participate in the inauguration of the Bicentenary celebrations of William Carey's arrival in India and to speak in today's programme. I remember I was invited to deliver the Carey lectures in 1969 at Bangalore and for some years I have been a member of the Serampore College Council. So it is a pleasure to be back here to celebrate the arrival of Carey in India on 11th November 1792.

In preparation for this brief talk, I reread some of the lives of William Carey and some of the Carey lectures and a few other publications keeping in mind the question: What is the significance and relevance of the life and thought of William Carey for India today and to the understanding of the Mission of the Church in today's India? What struck me most was the fact that Carey had in him in an explicit form the seed of what we today consider as modern ecumenism. By modern ecumenism I mean the search for the universality of Jesus Christ in three dimensions — first Jesus Christ as Saviour of all humanity, second Jesus Christ as Lord and transformer of all areas of life including the world of science, society, culture and religion; and third, Jesus Christ as the Head of the universal Church calling all churches to unity in one body to fulfill Christ's mission.

Of course Carey's book: *Enquiry into the obligation of Christians to use means for the conversion of the Heathen*, his part in the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society and his travel to India as the Society's first missionary were the beginnings of organised modern missionary enterprise from the Anglo-Saxon World of Britain and USA anticipating John R. Mott's slogan of "Evangelisation of the World in this (i.e. their) Generation". And Carey in Serampore maintained close fellowship in thought and prayer with Henry Martyn, and others belonging to other Christian denominations and he was bold in proposing a world conference of missionaries of "all denominations of Christians from the four

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quarters of the world", first at the Cape of Good Hope "in 1810 or 1812 at furthest" and thereafter once every ten years, to share experiences and consider the global missionary task together. Fuller of the BMS ignored it as one of Carey's "pleasing dreams" but after a century Edinburgh 1910 realised his dream initiating the global Christian ecumenical movement, leading to the formation of the World Council of Churches. (J.B. Middlebrook: *William Carey* London 1961 p. 97)

However in this talk I would like to confine myself specifically to William Carey's vision of what C.E. Abraham calls Christ's mission to "claim the whole of life" and to "bring abundant life to the children of men" in all areas of life, especially in society and culture. (C.E. Abraham: *William Carey and the Indian Church*, 1964, p.7)

## II

Clearly the missionary movement Carey represented was closely related to the movement of western political and cultural expansion of the period, and considered the means of travel, communication and security provided by it as providentially ordered. This is implied in the reference of the "Use of Means" in the title of Carey's book. But unlike many other missionary pioneers, Carey was not unaware of or indifferent to the exploitative character of Western imperialism, but was openly critical of it in the name of Christ's righteousness. Even in the *Enquiry*, he spoke of the "accursed slave-trade in the coasts of Africa" (Middlebrook, p.82). Earlier, when he was in Leicester he "belonged to a radical group that was outspoken against slavery and resolved to give up using sugar because it was produced by slave-labour in the West-Indies" (Abraham, p. 12). And when in India, it was under his moral compulsion that Cunningham, a rich Britisher, traveled to "free the slaves on his newly inherited West-Indian estates" (Pearce Carey: *William Carey*, London, 1923, p. 210). In a letter Carey wrote from India in 1803, he deplored the Jamaican House Assembly's prohibition of education of the Negroes and their religious meetings as "a most lamentable decision" and added: "We must wrestle in prayer for their deliverance. Certainly God's hand will fall heavily on those (British) Isles whose trade is maintained by robbery and cruelty. When He maketh the inquisition for blood, He will not forget the sighing of the poor and the needy. Yet may their oppressors be rather converted than destroyed" (Pearce Carey, p.210). And in his later days, when he expressed his hope in the "fulfillment of all the prophecies and promises respecting the universal establishment of the Redeemer's Kingdom in the World" he

included the total abolition not only of idolatry, but also of "war, slavery and oppression in all its ramifications" (Pearce Beaver, *The Christian World Mission, 1957 p. v*). It is said that Carey was "never heard to pray during the whole of his life without heart-felt intercession" for the slaves and other victims of inhumanity to man by man (Middlebrook, p.82).

Carey's reaction to the inhumanities like infanticide, Sati, and the social ill-treatment of leprosy patients in the traditional Indian Society was a continuation of the expression of his conviction that the Gospel of Christ involves civility and justice to human personhood in society. He did research in the Hindu classics and established that such shocking customs were "neither ancient nor obligatory"; and Carey and friends made representation to the Governor-General in 1805 for the abolition of Sati. But then the official policy was not to disturb the traditional customs of the Hindus. It took another twenty four years for Sati to be legally abolished. Carey received the order prohibiting Sati officially for translation on Sunday morning of 5th December 1829 while he was preparing to take the Service. He deputed someone else to take the Service and give the sermon, while he translated the Order, because he did not want to delay its notification for another hour in the name of his religion. Sabbath was made for the human being.

Carey had the vision of the Gospel as the new humanity created in Christ, the new Adam, and visualised it as a human community transcending religious, cultural, class, caste, and sexist barriers. Therefore he asked: "Would not the spread of the Gospel be the most effectual means of their (people's) civilisation" (Middlebrook, p. 54). So he saw the Church's Mission as that of providing the ferment of the gospel for the humanist transformation of India's traditional society and culture so that through Christ's renewing power, the "chain of caste" (p. 58) and other exploitative structures might be broken. The original statute of the Serampore College declared: "No caste, colour or country shall bar any man from admission to Serampore College" (p.81).

This universality of Carey's humanism transcending caste, colour and country was practised more fully in the Christian congregation that came to be formed in Serampore. Not only were Krishna Pal and Carey's son baptised and received into the congregation at the same time, but Krishna Pal, a Kayastha, Krishna Prasad, a Brahmin and another convert, a Sudra, participated in the Lord's Supper together, "receiving the cup directly from the hands and lips" of each other (Abraham,

p.28). They went further in social integration through intermarriage across caste.

As the nucleus of it all was Serampore Brotherhood, making the bold experiment in a new form of Christian fellowship. The five or six missionary families decided “to live on a corporate basis, even sharing a common table for meals, with no one engaged in private profit and all pooling their financial returns” (Middlebrook, p. 40). Though patterned after the Moravian settlements, the Serampore was different because it was founded without an official family head, but on a democratic set-up, “on equality for each, pre-eminence for none, rule by majority, submission to that rule, allocation of functions by collective vote, superintendence by each in monthly rotation.....” (Pearce Carey, p.186), and with weekly meetings to talk out misunderstandings and tensions. Pearce Carey remarks: “The bold stroke paid”. Carey himself wrote: “No private family even enjoyed a greater portion of happiness, even in the prosperous gale of worldly prosperity, than we have done since we resolved to have all things in common” (George Smith: *The life of William Carey*, London, p.95). His biographer comments: “We know nothing in the history of missions, monastic or evangelical, which at all approaches this in administrative perfection as well as Christ-like self-sacrifice” (Abraham, p.25).

### III

Carey’s approach to India’s economic and social development was a positive one. He advocated the adoption of western science and its technological application. His search was for a new but genuinely indigenous people’s culture expressed in the vernacular languages and synthesising the Indian and European humanistic values and technological development from becoming anti-people. Together this has to be recognized as perhaps the most unique contribution of Carey to India. In an India on the threshold of the 21st century, which has seen technological development becoming too exploitative of the masses and witnesses the absence of a cultural support for the struggles of the dignity of human personhood and of the weaker sections of the people for social justice, Carey’s vision of relating scientific progress to an indigenous humanising culture has tremendous immediate relevance.

There is no field of science or culture in which Carey did not participate in the Bengal of his time. His contribution to the Bengal Renaissance has been well recognised. The resolution passed on his death, by the Asiatic Society which he helped to form in Calcutta, speaks of Carey as “distinguished alike for his high

attainments in the Oriental languages, of his eminent service in opening the stores of Indian literature to the knowledge of Europe and of his extensive acquaintance with the science, the natural history and botany of this country” (George Smith, p. 239).

Carey had the leading role in the formation of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India. He had his own Botanical garden in Serampore; he made scientific research into the state of agriculture of Bengal and he was the first to advocate forestry (p.216). He spent most of his time and energy in the promotion of inter-penetration and synthesis of the cultural and spiritual values through translation of the Bible and inter-translation of English, Sanskrit and Bengali literature and printing and publishing them. Carey’s own report on a day of his activities is quite eloquent on his linguistic interest and his emphasis of the work of translation and publication. “I rose this morning at a quarter before six, read a chapter in the Hebrew Bible, and spent the time till seven in private addresses to God, and then attended family prayer with the servants in Bengali. While tea was getting ready, I read a little Persian with a Moonshie who was waiting when I left my bed-room; and also before breakfast a portion of the Scripture in Hindustani. The moment breakfast was over, I sat down to the translation of the Ramayana from Sanskrit with a Pundit, who was also waiting and continued this translation till 10 ‘o’ clock, at which time I went to College and attended the duties there till between one and two ‘o’ clock. When I returned home I examined a proof-sheet of the Bengali translation of Jeremiah which took till dinner time.... After dinner, with the assistance of the chief Pundit of the College, the greater part of the 8th chapter of Matthew was translated into Sanskrit. This employed me till 6 ‘o’ clock. After six, sat down with a Telugu Pundit to learn the language ... preached at half past seven... congregation gone by 9 ‘o’ clock. I then sat down and translated the eleventh chapter of Ezekiel into Bengali; and this lasted till near eleven; and now I sit down to write to you”. (Middlebrook, p.64)

It was as a continuation of this concern for science, languages and spiritual values that he took the job as Professor of Bengali, Sanskrit and Marathi at the Fort William College, and later as Professor of Divinity and Botany and Zoology in the Serampore College.

The goal envisaged by Carey in the foundation of the Serampore College was something quite unique. The College was for “the instruction of the Asiatic Christian and other youth in Eastern literature and European Sciences”. The College was conceived as “the apex of an educational system which had established a

whole net-work of Vernacular schools within a 20 miles radius of Serampore” (Middlebrook, p.77); and it was a further development of the Free School with teaching in the Vernacular opened in Serampore under Marshman (p. 73). But the Vernacular literature must assimilate and become the bearer of new values and insights developed in interaction between classical oriental languages and English literature and modern science, so that the people (the masses) might develop a new culture relating scientific development to human and spiritual values. For this purpose, Indian youth in general need to be educated in a setting where the classical Hindu, Islamic and Christian as well as scientific secular cultures can dialogue with each other producing an indigenous synthetic humanist culture. In that setting “manuals of science, philosophy and history should be prepared in the learned and vernacular languages of the East” and teachers should be trained; (George Smith, p.276) thus helping to enrich the renaissance of Indian language literature.

To crown it all, “a theological institute” would give Christian students who are seeking truths side by side with their enquiring fellow countrymen “a quite non-sectarian course of study in apologetics, exegesis and the Bible languages” (George Smith, p.276). “For a purely divinity College for Asiatic Christians he preferred a divinity faculty as part of an Arts and Science College” (p.288), because that alone would put future leaders of the Church in dialogue with the Indian and European cultures and develop a concern for the transformation of culture and equip them to communicate the gospel to the cultured i.e. to be “missionaries to the Brahmin classes”.

Carey’s biographer points out that Carey and colleagues of Serampore “were the Vernacularists in the famous controversy between the Orientalists and the Anglicists raised by Duff”. In that controversy, the Anglicists were advocating the displacement of Eastern culture by the Western through making English the medium of instruction for all subjects. But as Arthur Mayhew, Director of Public Instruction later, has pointed out in his book: *Education of India*, since no culture of a people can be displaced like that, it has only led to the come back of traditional cultures with a vengeance and therefore in very emotional and militant form, without the benefits of their interaction with scientific rationality or liberal social humanism. As Mayhew puts it, Anglicism missed the “rare opportunity of a constructive combination” of eastern and western cultures. “The eastern side remained essentially emotional and secluded. No healthy contact with the West was established”. That “failure on the part of the

western moderate to make himself culturally felt, and on the part of the Oriental extremist to make himself culturally progressive and useful" (p.188), and the isolation of vernacular languages and the popular cultures from both of them, have produced the cultural and spiritual crises of India in the twentieth century. India witnessed and continue to witness the emergence of religious fundamentalism and cultural communalism of our times. And in such a context, science and technology have moved within the framework of a mechanical materialistic world-view leading to the ignoring of the organic and spiritual dimensions of life in their development and therefore becoming extremely exploitative of the masses and destructive of the cells of human living in society. So we in today's India face the twin problem of an exploitative technological development and fundamentally oriented religions.

Isolated from interaction with the cultural and scientific dimensions of knowledge and society, the theological colleges also have only reinforced individualist piety, religious fundamentalism and communal Christianity, thus preventing the development of a genuinely Indian church with a mission of the redemption and the renewal of the World of technology and culture and therefore tragically failing in the effective communication of the gospel and the meaning of gospel for modern India.

I think we have to recapture some of the insights of Carey which seem to be so relevant to us Indian peoples and Indian churches today.