

THE CATHERINE AND LADY GRACE JAMES
FOUNDATION

**GODS, GUIDES AND GURUS:
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS
ON TRAVELS WITH MY AUNT**

Sir David James Lecture 1998

by

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*For David Craig, colleague and friend,
in affection and admiration*

Foreword

I am very grateful to the Trustees of the Catherine and Lady Grace James Foundation for inviting me to deliver the Sir D.J. James lecture for 1998. These thanks extend to the Executive Secretary, Mr Richard Morgan, who has been most courteous and considerate in his dealings with me. The staff of the John Penri Press are charged with turning my typing into a published work, and have my gratitude for their endeavours.

This lecture should have been delivered in Welsh. I have an Englishman's modest gift for languages, so I am relieved both for myself and for my audience that I am graciously permitted to communicate in my mother tongue.

Since this is a spoken lecture, I have written in a colloquial rather than an academic style. However, the subject of religion and broadcasting, which this lecture touches on, is a crucially important one in our age of mass communication, so I have tried to say, in however popular a style, some important things.

Michaelmas Term 1997

Martin Forward

Gods, Guides and Gurus: Theological Reflections on Travels with my Aunt

The Aunt in question is the British Broadcasting Corporation. Auntie has been generous towards me over the last few years, and this lecture is one way in which I can discharge that debt. My repayment will take the form of describing and offering theological reflections on some of the work I have done for her. I must explain that labour. In the autumn of 1992, I spent eight weeks in the South Asian subcontinent making a series of radio programmes called 'Gods, Guides and Gurus' for the BBC World Service. The subject was the minority religions of the area. Islam and, especially, Hinduism are the great facts of life in much of South Asia, and many others have worked at that rich seam. My brief, instead, was to look at other faiths: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, the Parsee and Sikh faiths. So I travelled the length and breadth of the subcontinent: from Islamabad to Colombo, from Cochin to Dhaka; to cities, towns and villages. I interviewed: archbishops and patriarchs, monks and gurus, the disciples of living gods and dead intercessors, the rich and the poor, politicians and protestors, the wise and the learned (who are not always the same).

Four years later, I made another series of BBC World Service radio programmes. This time I interviewed 'The Missionaries' in different religions on three continents. My purpose was to examine how old and new religions renew themselves and adapt to new situations and circumstances, as well as to explore more traditional notions of missionary activity, the spreading of faith, by fair means and sometimes foul, to people who believe differently. This entailed a four-week journey to South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya and Egypt. Then, later in the year, I visited that home of many eccentric causes, the USA.

My constant partner in pilgrimage, except in Cairo and New York, was David Craig, then Executive Producer of the BBC

World Service's Religion Department. He is now head of the BBC's Multi-Faith Bureau. He and I devised these programmes. Lacking his help, cheery companionship, and his support and prompting, I could not have brought them to birth. Furthermore, his collegueship reminds me that any theological cogitation is a corporate exercise. We come to our deeper knowledge of transcendent reality through our relationships with others. I learned much by talking with him about our experiences of meeting and interviewing many and divers people.

Anyone who makes the sort of programmes I have done no doubt needs a range of communication skills, about which I am incompetent to expound. This is neither false modesty nor British reserve. I can point to some obvious and modest talents in this area. For example, I have an intuitive grasp of time, so can usually provide material that fills the necessary length of twenty-eight minutes; but in itself that merely promotes the principle of 'never mind the quality, feel the width'. Furthermore, some of my interviewees confessed to me that I have a seductive interviewing technique, as a result of which they told me things they hadn't meant to. What that technique is, I wish they would tell me! I have had little training in this area, and regard interviewing and programme-making as an arcane mystery (I was tempted to write, black art) which, if I understood it, would disempower and unskill me. So I will not trouble you with a list of things you must be and do in order to be hired by a representative of the BBC. I have no idea what the most important of them are.

From a rather different perspective, that of a student of Religious Studies, I can suggest two indispensable qualities: knowledge and empathy.

Without a certain amount of knowledge of other ways of believing and behaving, an interviewer asks the wrong questions, or misunderstands the answers. Of course, he or she (I shall use 'he' from now on, because I draw upon my own experience) can never know everything about another faith, and sometimes knows very little indeed. Yet he needs to know enough. Sometimes there is an interesting balance between his

knowledge and ignorance, which can lead to a very good interview. For example, I much admire Buddhism but find it difficult to understand existentially, rather than academically, some of its answers to the human predicament. So before I asked Lily de Silva, Professor of Buddhist and Pali Studies in the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, to explain the process of becoming enlightened, I could not quite grasp, in my guts rather than my head, what Buddhists mean by it. Her answer wonderfully helped me to see and understand: it is, she said, like the unfolding of a flower. What a remarkable simile! I learned something, and so, I trust, did my listeners. Yet I could only help her produce that unforgettable image by asking the right question: I needed to know something in order to help me and my listeners learn more.

The second indispensable quality is empathy for other ways than mine of describing and internalising transcendence. I do not understand empathy to mean the capacity to believe nothing, and so to be intrigued by everything. Nor do I take it to necessitate the opposite, indiscriminately giving credence to everything. Both would be hopeless for a programme-maker, who has to choose what is important and critical for his programmes and has not the time to include the trivial and the insignificant. I am a Methodist Christian, an Arminian evangelical, and I thank God for it. That is the rock from which I am hewn, the perspective from which I see. But just because I believe what I believe, does not mean that I cannot try to see through another's eyes, and interpret her ways of focussing faith and hope and love. People open up their hearts to you, and reveal their private dreams publicly, not when you pretend to convictions you do not share, but when you seem to understand their views, and be fair-minded in getting at them.

I shall proceed by describing a number of encounters, which caused me, like Mary the mother of Our Lord, to treasure up these things and ponder them in my heart.

Dalits: 'what karma cannot change, God can'

On my South Asian journey, one of the two most intriguing groups I interviewed was Dalits. These are the so-called

'scheduled castes'. The Hindu caste system locates them as out-castes, below the four-fold overarching structure of Brahmin priests, Kshatriya ruler-warriors, Vaishya merchants and farmers, and Shudra servants. They form about 20% of India's population, maybe 200 million souls. They have been called 'untouchables', whose touch or even shadow pollutes caste Hindus; therefore, they have been banned from many wells, villages and temples and have been assigned the most menial occupations.

Although the Dalits span many religions, because the caste system has affected many more religions than Hinduism, it is Dalit Christians who have worked most to ameliorate their own plight. The Church of South India Bishop Azariah of Madras was a silver-tongued orator. He graphically described how Dalits labour under the caste system. He saw it as a pyramid, with a base provided by the Dalits, who have no staircase to the top. So others crush them. He maintained that of the thirty million Christians in India, 65% are Dalits. The Hindu notion of karma, the belief that people's past lives continue to influence the present life, has often been used to justify the conviction that Dalits deserve the poverty and degradation in which they live. Yet, in his view, what karma cannot change, God can.

Yet God has to work against two millennia of transmitted prejudice. So what can be done to improve the social and economic lot of Dalits? Henry Thiagaraj, Director of the Dalit Liberation Education Trust based in Madras, told me that there is abundant evidence of the Dalits having a wounded psyche; with oppression comes depression. Many are depressed to the extent that they will not help themselves. They believe nothing has ever changed to improve their lot, and nothing ever will. He works to change that attitude, particularly among young people. He took David and me to a rural area, where there was a work camp for young Dalits in their teens and twenties. It was a remarkable and moving experience to see them talking together, laughing and dancing. One young man told me that he now had the confidence to believe in the future, because he had made friends with whom he could work to change the social, economic and religious oppression of centuries.

Because this religious oppression focuses upon the caste system, many Dalits particularly abhor Hinduism. Bishop Azariah bluntly affirmed that the Dalits have a more spiritual religion than the Hindus do. Henry Thiagaraj described this Dalit spirituality. It has little to do with the Sanskritic traditions of written Hinduism, associated with the Aryans who invaded the north of the subcontinent in the second millennium BCE, and pushed the darker pre-Aryans further south, and also to the bottom of the social hierarchy. Although that pre-Aryan, non-literate culture is suppressed, you can see it in rural areas where there is music and dancing. Dalits are sometimes regarded as pariahs, yet this disapproving word has honourable associations in the South Indian language of Tamil from which it comes. There, the original pariahs were the drummers who announced the coming of kings. Dalits tend not to worship Hindu gods and goddesses, but instead turn to more primal images to focus transcendent presence in the world: so, in a sacred place, they might worship a tree and the mother goddess who personifies the earth. I was given a bronze statue of such a goddess. She is dressed much more simply and skimpily than in the saris of most Indian women. Her facial features are characteristic of darker skinned Dalits than, usually, lighter skinned caste Hindus.

I asked Professor Kenneth Wilson, of the Department of Philosophy at Osmania University, Hyderabad, for an exact definition of who are the Dalits, but he would not be precise. He said it could refer to anyone who is oppressed, though it is usually used of those who are, quite literally, outcastes. He pointed out that the constitution of India regards the Dalits as an economically disadvantaged Hindu group, below the four accepted castes. Yet this will not do. Most Dalits do not feel themselves to be Hindus, whatever Hindus want to believe.

Dr Wilson told me that the great Dalit hero of pre-independence India was Dr Ambedkar, who chose to leave Hinduism and lead his followers into the Buddhist fold, where he hoped they would find more justice. This led Ambedkar into conflict with Mahatma Gandhi, the great icon of modern Hindu tolerance. Gandhi changed the name of the 'untouchables' into

'Harijans', literally, 'beloved of God'. Ambedkar thought this to be a piece of Hindu condescension, an agreeable name granted in default of any far-reaching social, economic and religious reformation that would really change the status of Dalits. Dr Wilson believed that Ambedkar had a point. He pointed out that Gandhi blocked Ambedkar's attempts to gain Dalits separate electorates in the political reforms of the 1930s, during the dying years of British India. He did so by threatening to fast to the death. However, these separate electorates were granted to Muslims, without Gandhi's intervention to prevent this. Nowadays, many Dalits feel that Gandhi betrayed their interests. Ambedkar is their abiding hero, but Gandhi almost a villain.

It has not been Hindus but Protestant Christians who have been at the forefront of working for social justice among the Dalits. The village in which Bishop Azariah grew up was a Dalit village; no one else lived there. He remembered what an impact was made in his life when, as a lad, he saw a caste-youngster refer to an elderly Dalit man as 'boy', and order him around insultingly. As he grew up, Bishop Azariah reflected from his Christian heritage upon this outrageous incident and its implications for so many of India's poorest and most oppressed people. His inspiration was the deliverance that Christ offers in Luke 4:16ff.: good news, freedom for prisoners, the recovery of sight for the blind, the release of the oppressed. The bishop said there is 'no nobody' in the dictionary of Christ; everybody is somebody. Dr Azariah has become a pioneer of Dalit theology, a Protestant theology of liberation for South Asia.

I interviewed many Jesuit priests, who were deeply impressive for being at the forefront of the struggle for justice in the subcontinent. Indeed, if I may obtrude my own opinion at this point, I would say that the Roman Church is, in many ways, the most vibrant of all ecclesial bodies in India, socially, liturgically, and theologically. Yet the Roman Catholic hierarchy is often socially more 'grand' and therefore more patronising than its Protestant and Orthodox counterparts, so priests doing splendid work on the ground do not always get the support they deserve from their superiors. One Roman Catholic

Archbishop, whom I will not name, told me that there is no Dalit theology worth the name. He pointed to the fact that there are now some Dalits in seminaries, who are becoming priests. In his opinion, they should be grateful to be there. It would take time for these people to influence the system but, he told me, Rome wasn't built in a day.

I have tried hard to describe the appalling plight but also the exciting hopes and dreams of Dalits to you, in a fair summary of their own words. A radio programme requires a continuous and coherent theme running through it, not random collections of people's sayings. Eventually, I made one and a half programmes on the Dalits. Therefore, in order to produce interesting and informative programmes, I had to stand back from the material, reflect upon it, and try to represent fairly the points of view I heard, even the non-Dalit archbishop's outlook.

As I played over the tapes, certain questions formed in my mind, of which I was only rudimentarily aware when I interviewed the Dalits. (As an important aside, I should mention that an interviewer does not usually have the luxury of interviewing Dalits, Sikhs, Christians and the rest in isolated batches, which would enable him to construct the big picture of each in his mind as he gathers in the individual snapshot material from individuals. He has to be nimble enough to collect material in one day for three or four different programmes and put it in the appropriate drawer in his imagination.) The questions I had included two major ones.

The first was: will the Protestant Christian Dalit theology of liberation promote or subvert the Christian faith among the poor and oppressed of India? Bishop Azariah's own religious, economic and social status has been immeasurably advanced by his Christian commitment, and quite right too. Yet this is not true of most Christian Dalits, who remain poor and despised. The views of the Roman Catholic Archbishop are widely held, not just among Catholics but among many Christians from a caste background.

As a result, although many Dalit laypeople to whom I spoke came from a Christian background, they obviously held not only Hinduism but also the Churches in considerable suspicion,

sometimes even disdain, for their failure to improve the role of Dalits. Furthermore, the emphasis by some Dalit Christian interviewees upon the contemporary existence of what was originally a pre-Aryan primal faith could undermine Christian claims about the central importance of revelation through Christ.

This ancestral faith also depreciates any strong links with the written, Sanskritic traditions of Hinduism. A number of commentators sympathetic to Dalit aspirations, including Dr Eric Lott, a Methodist missionary who spent thirty years in India, latterly teaching in the United Theological College in Bangalore, sounded a warning about this. In this view, the Sanskritic traditions are simply too important to be dismissed or sidelined as oppressive and irrelevant. Rather, Dalits must come to terms with all the Indian historical past, and redeem it.

The implication of much Dalit spirituality does, in fact, play down the claims of some Hindus and Christians. In the view of many Dalits, implicitly or explicitly held, the religious future for Dalits lies, not in any of the great world faiths, but in reclaiming their own spirituality, outside the boundaries of Hinduism, Christianity and other great systems of faith. As a Christian, I find that possibility uncomfortable. As a broadcaster, I find it fascinating, a legitimate deduction from the many conversations I had with Dalits, and a logical solution to their plight.

The second important question arising from my listening to the taped material was whether, in fact, there is a characteristic Dalit culture and spirituality. The parallel that came to mind was of Celtic Christianity, currently in fashion among some British Christians. It seems to me that much of so-called Celtic Spirituality has nothing to do with what the early British and Irish Churches were really like. It is, rather, the repository of the fantasies of contemporary middle-class churchgoers who are tired with the bureaucracy, pomposity, irrelevance and arid worship of much church life. As a result, they romanticise church life, belief and practice in our country's past and impose upon it their own hopes and dreams, rather than draw from that past what actually existed.

In like fashion, a question needs to be put against Dalit

spirituality. Clearly, there are millions of outcaste people in India, poor, and despised by others. Yet is Dalit religiosity actually an indigenous Indian theology? Rather, it may be an import from other parts of the world; a mixture of primal faith with its reverence for running water, stones, and local deities, combined with a Christian theology of liberation, derived from Latin America. One of the possibilities in the global village we now inhabit, with its inter-connected communications, is that we can select bits taken from here, there and everywhere among the world's spiritualities, and mistakenly read them as an authentic expression of our own history.

I am not claiming that Dalit theology definitely is a hotch-potch of bogus beliefs and practices, still less that its ardent proponents are deliberately engaged in perpetrating a hoax, either on themselves or on others. I am suggesting that these practitioners could be mistaken in interpreting their past; there could be an element of romanticising ancient times in order to make the present bearable and the future hopeful. More academic work needs to be done in this area.

So the academic in me was stimulated by the information Dalits and a critic or two gave me about their convictions. The programme-maker in me tried to be fair, so that when I edited interviewees' long conversations down to a sentence or two, and then provided my own summaries, I did justice to what they said, and did not make them appear to say what I wished them to. I then had to ask my own questions as I narrated the programmes, in a sufficiently open-ended way to draw in the listener and make her interested and excited and empathetic.

This is self-evidently not a perfect process. It is easy to intrude too much into a group's evaluation of its own hopes and dreams, and so irritate the listener. It is just as facile to stand back and let people get away with self-justifying propaganda. It is very exciting and educative and humbling to get the balance as near fair as you can. Humbling may seem rather too self-effacing a word, but not so. Millions tune in to the BBC World Service. There is therefore a great onus to try and get your facts right, and your judgements principled and balanced.

Jews of India: 'we Jews have never experienced the bitterness of anti-Semitism'

The second intriguing religious group I interviewed on my South Asian journey was the Jews of Cochin and Bombay. Few people know that the oldest synagogue in the British Commonwealth of Nations is in Cochin, a town in the South Indian State of Kerala. The building is in an area called Jewtown, a name that might have racist connotations in Europe but is happily accepted by the Jews who live there. Its narrow streets and shops did in fact remind me of Jewish areas in certain European cities. The synagogue has some unusual features. Samuel Halegua, a retired businessman, pointed them out to me. It has two pulpits, a feature unique to the synagogues of Kerala, twelve windows for the twelve tribes of Israel, and two pillars named after the two pillars of the first temple in Jerusalem, destroyed by Babylonian invaders in 587BCE.

Nobody really knows who were the first Jews to arrive in India. It is possible that they were a group called the Bene Israel, whose story was told to me by Simha Khedourie, founder and Principal of a Jewish school in Bombay. (Ms Khedourie prefers to be known as Sophie Kelly.) She explained that there was active trading two thousand years ago between Israel and India. The story goes that a group of seven men and seven women was shipwrecked on the coast of Maharashtra, in north-western India. The group settled there and later generations continued to observe Jewish rites, though members borrowed local Hindu customs and intermarried with Hindus and Muslims. Both Sophie Kelly and Samuel Halegua are Orthodox Jews so it is not surprising that neither approves of the Bene Israel who, they say, have a lax attitude to Jewish religious practices and beliefs.

For the Jews of the Kerala coast, there is another point of rivalry. When Mr Halegua told me the story of the Bene Israel, he admitted that the Cochin Jews, descendants of a group that landed at the ancient port of Cranganore, maintain that they were the first Jews to settle in India. Some claim that the Cranganore Jews arrived on King Solomon's merchant fleet, almost three thousand years ago. Others suggest that Jews fled there after the destruction of the first Temple. Moses de Paiva, a

Dutch Jew who visited Cochin on November 21st 1686, wrote that 70,000 to 80,000 Jews had arrived in the area in 378CE from Majorca, where their ancestors had been taken after the destruction of the second Temple in 70CE. Ten thousand of them were graciously received by the local Hindu ruler and allowed to settle throughout the area, though most made their homes in Cranganore. Samuel Halegua showed me some copper plates kept in the Cochin synagogue. Their actual age is disputed but they are old enough to show that the Jewish community has been present for many centuries. The plates, written in an ancient language, granted rights to a Jewish leader to have his own palanquin and drums, a privilege that was usually given to minor rulers.

Wherever they settled, the Jews found South Asia to be a place of refuge from persecution. Samuel Halegua's own ancestors had fled there from the Christian inquisition in Spain. Like many Spanish Jews, they came late in the 16th century, through Aleppo in Syria. The Portuguese landed in Kerala in 1600 and an early zealot wrote to the King of Portugal informing him of the large number of Jews there and asking his permission to exterminate them one by one as he came across them. Fortunately, that request came to nothing.

Another wave of Jewish settlers came to India at the end of the 18th century. Their descendants call themselves Baghdadi Jews. One of them is Sophie Kelly, who explained how they arrived in Bombay from Iraq in the wake of persecution by Ottoman Turkish rulers. She told me that the Jewish ruler there, the Exilarch, was persecuted and, as a result, Sheikh Sassoon and his son David left Baghdad. After his father died, David, hearing of the benevolence of the British and the freedom of trade they gave to areas in their control, came to India. He became known as the Merchant Prince of India. He was in need of personnel to work in his mills and factories, so he imported Jews to the Bombay area. Sophie Kelly admitted, with regret, that much trade of his trade with China was in opium.

One common note struck by all the Jews I interviewed was gratitude to British tolerance but even more to Hindu open-mindedness and magnanimity. Sophie Kelly told me that

there was no question of Jews living in ghettos. Hindus, she averred, are the most tolerant of people. Mr Halegua told me that the Kerala Jews have been a pampered people. They were given preferential treatment in education and, as a result, have always considered themselves as Indian. Eve Aboody, an elderly Jew who lives in Bombay, summed it up thus: 'I can honestly say that India is the only country that I am aware of where we Jews have never experienced the bitterness of anti-Semitism'.

The sense of a glorious past echoes through the words of South Asian Jews, but their numbers are now in steep decline. When the State of Israel was founded in 1948, it offered Jewish nationality to any Jew who settled there. Seized by the vision of a new homeland, many Orthodox Jews from Kerala and Bombay emigrated there. India itself had gained independence from British rule just a year before and some Indian Jews felt that Israel needed them more than the land of their birth. In the wake of widespread emigration to Israel, other young South Asian Jews went to Canada, the USA, Great Britain and other countries.

A great sense of nostalgia pervades elderly Jews in South Asia. Eve Aboody told David Craig that there had been a thriving Jewish community in the Bombay of her youth. But it dwindled away, so that when she went to her son's wedding in Israel in 1982, the contrast between Jews there and at home struck her forcibly. She said that the last Jewish wedding in Bombay had been two years before, and was between a widower of 65 and a woman of a similar age. There are now no young Jews in Bombay.

She remembered that in the 1940s there were about 15,000 Jews in India, but now the Babylonian Jews find it difficult to make up a minyan - the ten men necessary for a religious service. To perform this and other religious duties they have to call on the help of the Bene Israel; rather reluctantly, since they regard them as unorthodox. The Jewish community seems to contemplate its own imminent demise in Bombay with a certain stoicism. In Kerala too there has been a spectacular decline in the number of Jews. Samuel Halegua told me that in the 1940s

there were about 2,500 Jews in eight congregations. Now there are only a few Jews left.

Of all the communities David and I researched, interviewed, and made programmes about, the Jews of South Asia formed the most poignant. Mrs Aboody was, in her own old age, learning to make shrouds for the few remaining members of her community so that they could be properly buried. Who would make hers, she wondered? If the Dalits provided good broadcasting material because they confront the future hopefully despite a bleak past, the Jews were fascinating because they face their fate bleakly out of a hopeful history.

How painfully incongruous it is that the days of Jewish settlement in South Asia seem to be numbered. There is a certain irony in the fact that Jews may disappear from the one land that has always welcomed them; not because of the government's policy but because of the Jews' own actions in response to the creation of the State of Israel. What would they hope to be remembered for? Sophie Kelly suggested it would be for 'an unwritten, unpreached religious vibration of monotheism'.

What do I make of that as a Christian theologian? I could reflect that the monotheistic tradition is secure in India, because of the Muslim and Christian traditions there. However, that would be a graceless observation, when one considers how Christian teaching has been used this century to justify the extermination of millions of Jews in Europe. In summing up the contribution of Jews of India to their land of adoption, Sophie Kelly was making the best of a difficult situation, but she said what, in good conscience, I shouldn't. Samuel Halegua told me that some Jewish emigrants were returning to India, but that it was probably too few, too late.

Most religions flower, then wither and perish as leaves on a tree. No religion has the right to exist forever, not even the Christian faith: declining congregations in the Western churches should alert us to this point. Moreover, Judaism survives and even flourishes elsewhere. But neither as a Christian theologian nor as a witness to the pain and fortitude of a community in decline do I draw any satisfaction from the plight of the Jews of South Asia.

Baba Virsa Singh:

'The difference between you and me is that I have faith'

What has been fascinating in my programme-making peregrinations has been observing and experiencing the diversity of religions. The Jews are members of a mainstream religion. The Dalits are rather different and more difficult to pin down: a socio-religious group, outcastes from Hinduism and often converts to other faiths or simply searching for their own roots. When I went to Gobind Sadan, a farm just outside Delhi, I found another aspect of South Asia's myriad reflections of the faiths of humankind: devotion to a god-man; in this case, Baba Virsa Singh.

My friend, Mary Pat Fisher, introduced me to Gobind Sadan. She is an American, whose earliest experiences of religious commitment had been in a Methodist Church. That outer form of religion provided her with no inner connection to God, which then she found in nature not faith. Over twenty years ago, she survived a close encounter with death. In her hospital room, she discovered a great Presence, Light and Power, unconditional Love, to whom she offered the rest of her life. She became the publisher of a small book company producing spiritual works. Indeed, she wrote a good textbook called *Living Religions*, based on her encounters with Christianity, Buddhism, Sufism, Judaism, Taoism, Hinduism and nature religions.

Then came the most fateful day of her life, July 23rd 1990. She was invited to interview Baba Virsa Singh for her global radio programme 'Earthcare'. She was very impressed by him, and accepted his invitation to an interfaith seminar on meditation, held at Gobind Sadan. There, the evident love on people's faces and their devotion to God and to Baba Virsa Singh captivated her. Gobind Sadan is one a number of farms that Baba Virsa Singh has reclaimed from barren lands with the aid of his own intuitive wisdom, and the hard work of his followers. No outside money is ever taken. People who come are welcome at the communal kitchen. I am one of many who has been put up for a few nights at no charge, and fed a simple sustaining vegetarian diet.

Baba Virsa Singh is known affectionately as Babaji ('respected father') or Maharaj ji ('King of kings'). In this life (for he believes that he, like us all, lives many), he is illiterate, a Punjabi farmer. He was born a Sikh, and Sikh spirituality colours his daily life and the devotions of his followers. Many recite the Jaap Sahib, a prayer of the tenth Sikh guru, seven times a day; each recitation takes about twenty minutes. At Gobind Sadan, devotions take place several times a day, beginning at 2am.

Mary Pat identifies him as the living embodiment of the love, truth and power at the heart of the universe, which she had first encountered many years before, on her sickbed in hospital. Although he is a Sikh, Babaji points out to others the eternal verities embedded in their own traditions. Referring to his the Sikh scripture, he comments: 'When we fully understand Guru Granth Sahib, the walls of hatred will fall down at once, because God is not contained within any one religion'. Indeed, Babaji insists that all religions are human constructs. What is best in each of them points to and reveals God.

Many religious leaders of other faiths come to listen to and speak with Babaji. They include: Syed Ausuf Ali, a Muslim Sufi scholar who taught at Hamdard University; the late Paulos Mar Gregorios, Metropolitan of Delhi and the North in the Malankara Orthodox Church and a former President of the World Council of Churches; Dr Karan Singh, a distinguished Hindu and the last princely ruler of the State of Jammu and Kashmir; and many more. These are not simple, credulous people. They are eminent intellectuals and religious leaders yet, when I talked with them, each saw in Babaji a saint and a sage, one of those people who, throughout India's long religious history, bring people together through their extraordinary powers, including the persuasive and captivating force of love.

Politicians come to see him too. In an interview with David, the late Surendra Nath, then Governor of the Punjab, revealed how often he came to consult Babaji about his difficult job, controlling a State riven by faction and violence. He had long sought a guru, and when he met Baba Virsa Singh, it was love at first sight; he knew he had come home. This eminent politician and public servant found time to translate the Jaap

Sahib into English. He saw his guru as someone who can look into the past, present and the future. He testified to the number of people whom he knew had been cured of fatal illnesses by Babaji. Yet he maintained that the greatest miracle was the transformation of people into better human beings.

One of Babaji's earliest followers was Swaranjit Singh, an engineer and businessman. He explained how Babaji had chosen Gobind Sadan in 1969. This was a rocky and barren area, which everyone said was no good for farming. Yet Babaji located a spot and told people to dig, where they found water. With the aid of only three tractors, people laboured eighteen hours a day to turn it into fertile soil.

When Babaji is at Gobind Sadan, he holds a daily audience with people by a waterfall which he has had built. There he gives instruction to enquirers after truth. I met him there on one occasion. I talked afterward with a doctor and two dentists, as well as many non-professional people, some of whom had travelled long distances to see him. Later, I went to pray and meditate at Jesus' place, an area within Gobind Sadan where Jesus appeared to Babaji. On my way there, Baba Virsa Singh passed me with some other people. He turned and gave a smile of immense radiance, sweetness and charm. He often interprets words of the great religious leaders of humankind, including Jesus. One of his renditions is of a man who, impressed by Jesus' nature miracles, asked him who he was. Jesus replied, 'I am nothing. The difference between you and me is that I have faith. You think that you are doing things, but I know that everything is under my Father's command'.

To a broadcaster, Gobind Sadan is a remarkably interesting place. The permanent residents are about forty people, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, who share simple rooms and eat from a common kitchen. Their work, which is supported by income from large farms elsewhere, enables Babaji to exercise his ministry among the many people who stream to this place to meet and hear him. These visitors now include several Prime Ministers, great politicians and other religious people. They also number illiterate people, labourers, artisans and professional people; human beings from all walks of life. All come

expectantly, yearning for religious insight and revelation. Most seem to believe that they have received it.

Just as no interviewer should attempt to sneer at his subjects or impose his own alien view upon the words that he hears, neither should he interview on his knees. I interviewed out of neither of these desires, but out of curiosity. Clearly, however, here was a phenomenon, someone whom many genuinely believe to embody godliness and great goodness.

What do I make of this as a Christian theologian? I can certainly recognise a phenomenon alien to the religious West but common enough in India, the holy man with disciples. Of course, this is not far from a description of Jesus of Nazareth, an interesting reminder that he might be as acutely perceived from a farm outside Delhi as from a seminary in Cambridge. I myself am deeply impressed by Babaji and his achievements. At the very least, here is a man of deep intuitive skills, of penetrating wisdom, who has done immeasurable good. Why is it, I wonder, that Christians are so often reluctant to recognise the deeds of light when they see them worked by people whose religion is quite different.

Is one reason snobbishness? Babaji is illiterate, has no formal education, and speaks in Punjabi, not in English or some other respectable language. I have no vested interest in playing down the virtues either of formal education or of orthodox Christianity. Simple observation, however, has shown me that Baba Virsa Singh is an impressive and holy man.

Latter Day Saints: 'a family-centred church'

In making programmes on 'The Missionaries', it was important to look at interesting individuals, but David and I had another, more specific agenda. We now live in a world of global communications and of widespread emigration. So we wanted to ask how religions develop and survive when their adherents move to new places. It was fascinating, for example, to hear how Hinduism and Islam are flourishing in the USA, but also adapting and changing in significant ways from their character in their ancient heartland of South Asia and the Middle East.

It was also captivating to speak to groups of people who seem

to belong to more than one religion: I interviewed a Parsee Christian; and a Christian academic (married to a Confucianist) whose major interest is in 'Multiple Religious Participation', whereby people partake in the rites of more than one faith. A particular twist on this theme was provided by members of 'Jews for Jesus' who claim to be both Jews and Christians, though they would define Jewishness by race and Christianity by faith. This raises all sorts of questions about the appropriateness of mission. 'Jews for Jesus' work to convert mainstream Jews to belief in Jesus as the Messiah, and so want them to become Christians. Many others see this wondrous, divers world as offering the possibility of integrating more than one vision of reality into their lives, and so prefer co-existence and respect between the religions as preferable to a take-over bid by one of all the others.

Then there are people who break away from the mainstream of a religion to found their own. Usually they don't mean to, just as Christianity was a reforming group within Jewish faith before it was a separate religion. So I spoke to Bahais, who had separated from Islam in the 19th century, and to members of the Unification Church who see the Reverend Moon as the new Messiah. (Incidentally, I was present at the meeting of academics in Seoul in July 1992 when the Reverend Moon first publicly claimed to be the Messiah).

One of the most interesting groups, to which I spoke, which has broken away from the mainstream, was the Latter Day Saints. They are often incorrectly called Mormons after the Book of Mormon which, with the King James Bible, is their authoritative scripture. The headquarters of the Latter Day Saints are at Salt Lake City in Utah, the so-called 'Zion in the Mountains' where, after much persecution and the death of their founder, Joseph Smith, the early pioneers arrived in the 1848.

Outsiders know three things about Latter Day Saints: they practise polygamy; they baptise the dead; and they send young people to convert others. Mike Otterson, Director of Area Relations in the Public Service Department, told me that although plural marriage was introduced by special revelation in

1843, it was rescinded in 1890 and is practised today only by a few Saints.

The reason why baptism is performed on behalf of the dead is because of the central importance of the family to the Latter Day Saints. They believe that the extended family is linked through time and eternity and so baptism is a rite performed for those family members who, in their lifetimes, were not able to or did not choose to become Saints. Richard Turley Jr., who is the Managing Director of the Family History Department in Utah, told me that the baptism on behalf of the dead is handled in ways that are very sensitive to feelings of people of other faiths. Rites on behalf of the dead are conducted in the Temple in Utah. A living individual stands in place of the ancestor or ancestors. This ceremony is done in faithfulness to the commandment of Jesus that 'All must be born again'. The effectiveness of the sacrament is dependent upon the willingness of the dead person to accept it and to obey God's rules.

The theological justification for baptising the dead is based on 1 Peter 3:18ff.; Mr Otterson claimed that the Saints' unique doctrine of these verses show that they take this scripture passage more seriously than other Christians have. Christ talked of preaching to the spirits in prison. They need to hear the gospel and will do so in the next life, where they will retain the choice of responding or not.

As early as 1894, the Saints kept records of family members and now they are computerised. Anyone is welcome to go and trace their ancestry, so it is not just Saints who turn up, hoping to find ancestors to baptise. Others use the facility to create their family tree. Mr Turley offered to show me how to trace my own ancestors, but since I do not have any knowledge of my family further back than one generation, I could not take advantage of his suggestion.

Most of the Church's missionaries are young men and women between the ages of 19 and 23. Mike Otterson told me that nearly 50,000 Saints are now serving missions in 98 countries. The Book of Mormon is available in over 80 translations. All missionaries go out two by two, and rely on their own savings or family support for their mission period of 18 months to 2

years. They apply to headquarters and are directed to a destination. Richard Turley went to Japan for 22 months, after two months' language preparation in Hawaii. He said that lots of Saints pick up languages very easily, and put it down to their commitment to the cause.

I spoke to two young missionaries, Sisters Nelson and Madson, from Alberta, Canada, and from Texas respectively, who worked on Temple Square in Utah. It was mid-December, way below freezing, but they smiled and told me how excited they had been when they had their letter from headquarters telling them where they would serve the cause. They explained how supportive their families were, financially and prayerfully. The day starts for them at 6.30am, and includes prayers and administrative work as well as witnessing on Temple Square. When I asked Sister Nelson if it wasn't all a bit of a chore, she said: 'Absolutely not. In my life, when I have given the Lord a crust, he gives us a loaf'.

Mike Otterson told me that about three-quarters of the missionaries come from the USA, but things are changing. Although he was not quite sure how many young Saints apply to become missionaries, he thought it must be significantly more than half of those who are members of the church at that age.

The enormous verve of every Latter Day Saint to whom I spoke was extraordinary. The early Methodists were accused of being enthusiasts, but I could not hold a candle to their ardour: rarely have I been so conscious of my English reserve! This ebullience made recording them fun and a relatively easy task.

Theologically, Christians have often dealt with Latter Day Saints, as they have with members of the Unification Church and other eccentric Christian groups, by using dismissive language. So the institutions are called sects or cults, and individuals are termed 'Mormons' (just as Unificationists become 'Moonies'), a designation which they have not chosen for themselves; just as the word 'Christian' was bestowed, all unasked for, upon members of a Jewish 'sect' or, less judgmentally, 'interpretative sub-group'. As an interviewer, I was most interested in hearing people speak for themselves and describe their own convictions.

It is clear that Latter Day Saints add the Book of Mormon to the Bible as revelation, and interpret the Bible rather differently than do many Christian groups. Mainstream Christians, they are not. But surely the churches should not ignore them. After all, they are growing very fast indeed, especially in Africa and the Pacific. In 1947, the Church had one million members and in 1963, two million. Now, there are nine million Saints. There is an even stronger reason why mainstream Christians should meet and talk with Latter Day Saints, that of (to quote a book by Kenneth Cracknell) promoting 'justice, courtesy and love'. It ill-behoves us to act dishonourably and dismissively towards others.

So Great a Mystery

I have been very grateful for the opportunities that broadcasting has given me to encounter the diversity of religion. I have been midwife at many births of faith, hope and love. The programme-maker in me has benefited from such meetings, which have evoked my curiosity, wonder, and empathy. What about the theologian I claim to be; has he profited also? Well, curiosity, wonder, empathy and allowing others to interpret themselves are rather good virtues in theologians, too; though, in my judgement, rather too many are gripped by graceless and rather commonplace and confined certainties, inadequate and inappropriate for a plural world.

Theologians deal with the question of truth. Broadly speaking, there are two attitudes towards the issue of religious truth, both of which are age-old and found in many if not all religions. I point to one such encounter between these divergent responses, from the late fourth century CE. The pagan Symmachus asserted that:

The mighty secret of mysterious truth
By many ways and different paths is sought.
A hundred roads and varied ways must trace
That course which searches out the hidden God.

The Christian champion, Ambrose, disputed these sentiments and resolutely responded:

The truth is far from that: the following
Of many paths holds only wandering doubts
And straying more confused. Only the single way
Avoids such error: no turning of the steps
Into diverted ways, no hesitation
Before a multitude of different paths.

The Buddha, centuries before Jesus, came close to articulating a position similar to that of Ambrose, but that earlier contention was rather better nuanced: it provoked adherents of pluralism into asking, how can we *know* that there are many ways? To use a commonplace modern analogy: who has seen the top of that mountain which is the summit of all paths, and why was a vision granted her whilst the rest of us are left in swirling mist?

If, rather, we hold to the view that there is only one correct path to the divine or from transcendent reality to us, how can we know that *our* way alone is correct?

Sometimes, the two positions are, ironically, rather close, in the claims they make to a private, revealed knowledge. A Christian points to Jesus as the only way (by alluding to rather too free a translation of John 14:6) and a Vedanta Hindu believes that many and varied are the paths to truth. Both justify their different convictions by claiming that they are revealed to them by transcendent reality. How can we know that our revealed truth is superior to another's?

So the terms of the controversy between Symmachus and Ambrose, which have resonated over many centuries, in different cultures and between different religions, may be inappropriately skewed. We need to share our deepest hopes and dreams in a form more suited to the diverse world in which we live. That very diversity may imply that transcendent reality has not utterly set its face against variety and even innovation. This is not to maintain that all points of view are valid, but it is to claim that monolithic views of truth fly in the face of reality. As I get older I find that arrogant certainties convince me less and less: whether they are of the 'I am right, you are wrong' sort; or, indeed come in the guise of 'We are all right, but my superior tolerance makes me more right than you'. Some of my interviewees have been certain that their way of faith alone,

whether generous or intolerant towards others, is correct; I have enjoyed their passionate commitment more than their indestructible certainties.

Yet, of course, people do set great store by what they believe and live by and, to that extent, prefer that way to different routes. Sometimes they explain their way to others. Often, as my series on 'The Missionaries' proved to me, they are prepared to risk many things, even life itself, not only to interpret their convictions about the ultimate mystery of living and dying but also to offer them to all who will hear and may convert.

Sometimes the life that they risk is their own; occasionally, it is that of the recipient of their wisdom. For example, I spoke to Suesanne Abraham, who is the Arabic Broadcast Ministry co-ordinator of the 'Back to God' hour, a radio ministry of the Reformed Church which broadcasts all over the world from just outside Chicago. She told me of people who write to her from North Africa and Arabia, telling her that they have converted to Christianity because of the radio ministry they have heard. Such people can be disowned, beaten up or even killed, by their neighbours or even by family members. Ms Abraham is mindful of the consequences of her work, and often encourages people to be secret Christians. But martyrdom has always been a Christian vocation for some, even today. They think it worth risking for the sake of the truth they have received.

I know that such putting to death of members of one religion by another happens; in this case, by Muslims of Christians. I also know that many millions of Muslims are goodly and godly people. I have talked with many, and love some. My radio work has taken me to Cairo where I interviewed the Sheikh al-Azhar, the 'pope' of Sunni Islam. I found him a canny and impressive figure, and a force for moderation.

Not all people of faith are moderate. Indeed, 'moderation' seems rather a lukewarm word to describe a phenomenon like religion. Religion gives life but also deals death. A religious person like me believes that he practises his faith when he talks with and interprets the faith of others; in my laid-back, courteous, questioning, rather 'English' style. Different people

of faith die for what they believe, so some Christians would regard my work as the work of the devil or, more generously, as selling the pass. In their view, you should stand up for what you believe and defend it, not give a platform for others to spread their erroneous and vain opinions.

In the last section of this lecture, I have tried to offer some of my own convictions about living faithfully in a plural world. They are not of much value. I am a better midwife than mother: I have a modest talent to bring out the views of others, rather than to give birth to my own.

Yet here is a summary of where I stand, shaped by reflecting upon the opportunities that Auntie has given me. It is so great a mystery before which humans stand, which I worship as Trinity, and others in different ways. The Apostle Paul wrote that 'now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). That comes from a passage about divine love, which grasps us even as we wholly respond from our partial perspective. My journeys with Auntie have brought me into contact with people who have given themselves whole-heartedly to transcendent reality as they conceive of it and as it embraces them. In their view, nothing less will do. I agree with them.

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