

**“ ‘Unless a Wheat Grain Dies...’: A Shared Witness in the Commonwealth of Nations.”**

(The Ramsden Sermon delivered before the University of Cambridge, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011)

Julius Lipner

I was a bit surprised when the previous Vice Chancellor, Professor Alison Richard - at the prompting of the Select Preachers Syndicate no doubt - wrote inviting me to deliver the Ramsden Sermon today in this historic Church. I am a layman, and the Professor of Hinduism and the Comparative Study of Religion in the University – hardly a likely candidate, you may think, for so homiletic an enterprise, the more so when you consider some of the venerable preachers who have preceded me. But then Alison was capable of a mordant sense of humour at times, and after all I am a committed Christian who operates out of the Faculty of Divinity. What may also have persuaded the appointing committee is how unconscionably long I have been in my job. I have taught in the University since 1975. If I’m spared, as they say, till I retire, I will have taught continuously in the University for nearly 40 years – a very long time. Not quite as long as the 800 years or so of the University’s existence, it is true - though at times it’s felt like it - but long enough to have acquired a perspective on my Faculty and its outreach in the context of changing times. I expect this is a useful perspective to have if I am to speak “upon the subject of Church Extension overseas, especially within the Commonwealth of Nations”, as the University officially describes the purpose of the Sermon to be. I thank the Syndicate for this opportunity to share my thoughts with you.

“Church Extension overseas, especially within the Commonwealth of Nations”:

Notice that the name of the Church is not mentioned, so I feel free to speak about the

Christian Church in general, especially in these ecumenical times. And – “especially within the Commonwealth of Nations”: vague University-speak, you will observe, so I feel equally free to range as widely as I dare in pursuit of my task, though I expect by “overseas” is meant not so much parts of the world like Scandinavia and Iceland, but those distant lands east of Suez and further south from us towards the equator and even beyond. So, without overlooking countries closer to home, let me focus today on distant lands.

Church extension in the past, especially overseas and in colonial times, was not always a happy experience, at least for those on the receiving end. It was often accompanied by what is perceived to be exploitation of one sort or another at the hands of missionizing zeal. A statement by Bishop Desmond Tutu seems to sum it up. “When the foreigners came to our land”, he is reported to have said, “they had the Bible and we had the land. They said: let us bow down our heads and pray. When we finished praying and opened our eyes, we saw that we had the Bible and they had our land”. You can picture him saying this in his inimitable style.

The Gospel, we are told repeatedly, is a free gift. “You received without charge, give without charge”, says Matthew’s Gospel (10.8). But it has not always been so. The building of the Church in foreign lands has been accompanied by the sacrifice of blood, sweat, toil and tears – but in different senses of “sacrifice” for those who came to give and for those who received the Gospel. Do not misunderstand me. There has been much gratitude and appreciation among those who have received. In his Ramsden Sermon of 2009, the Archbishop of York, Dr. John Sentamu, began his address as follows: “When I left Uganda in 1974 to study Theology at Selwyn College, my parents said to me, ‘Sentamu, when you get an opportunity to speak to churches in Britain, thank them for sending missionaries who risked their lives to bring the Good News of God in Jesus

Christ to Uganda””. An immense amount of good has resulted from the bringing of the Gospel: the building of schools, the fostering of education, the nurturing of health, the awakening of a self-awareness that has led to different kinds of freedom and self-rule. But there has been a shadow side to these gains, the repercussions of which are making themselves felt more and more urgently - a sense of religious divisiveness among Christians themselves and between Christians and others; a loss of contact with grounding, indigenous practices; in many cases a sense of alienation from the body politic of the nation. The faith has been transplanted but not implanted in foreign soil, and today we understand that this does not bode particularly well for the extension of the Church overseas, especially among nations of the modern Commonwealth. The methods and objectives that may have worked after a fashion then, have little future now.

I was born and grew up in India, for the most part near and in the metropolis of Calcutta (or Kolkata as it is now called) – once the political and cultural hub of British rule, and I return to the country regularly for family reasons and to pursue research – and, all right, if you must know, also to enjoy the superb food. I continue to have close contact with Indians, especially in Bengal, by way of my marriage connections and professional interests, so I am able to speak from personal and informed experience. Projecting from the results of the 2001 national census in India (the current decadal census is now under way, though we await final figures), Christians would constitute a mere 3% or so of the total population, now running to a little over 1.2 billion. Yet Christianity has been around in India for nearly two millennia. Numerically, at least, there has not been much to show for this long presence. The statistical narrative in some other lands of the commonwealth of nations is better, but the problems of injecting rather than infusing the Gospel abroad have not gone away, and some of these,

especially the problems arising from a doctrinally tribal divisiveness among Christians themselves, are coming home to roost.

The worldwide situation is immensely complex no doubt and it is virtually impossible to generalize, but using India as a test case let me concentrate on two reasons for what I believe is an increasing pressure being exerted on Christianity in distant lands. The first reason concerns a lack of indigenusness, that is, a failure to make of the faith a wholly integral part of the lives and culture of those who have received and continue to receive it. In general, both in the act of articulation and in the deed of transmission, the message of the Gospel has been too bound up in, as the theologian Raimundo Panikkar typically put it, its historical “Hebraic-Greco-Latino-Eurocentric” garb (if I may be allowed to paraphrase a bit). In spite of claims to its universality, the faith has come across as determinedly *foreign* not only to its enemies but also to its friends. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in India, the Brahmin convert Nehemiah (formerly Nilakantha) Goreh, who eventually joined the Anglo-Catholic Society of St. John the Evangelist and who was to the end a staunch defender of his Christian beliefs, could not help admitting, in reference to the alien nature of his faith, that he often felt “like a man who has taken poison”.

Theologically, Christians have responded to non-Christian faith in various ways. The posture adopted by the missionary Joshua Marshman, who lived in Serampore in Bengal in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, still represents the position of the more Evangelical. I do not mention his Christian denomination because it is largely irrelevant to the kind of approach I am describing.

“Nothing....can be more opposite”, he thundered, “than the Spirit of the Gospel and the spirit of Hinduism....That Gospel which is founded on the doctrine that ‘every imagination of man’s heart is evil, is *only* evil continually’....must be death to the spirit of Hinduism, to the pride of man in

every false religion...[for Christ] maketh intercession for none but those who renouncing all their righteous deeds....and counting them 'loss and dung' trust in his blood for the forgiveness of sins".

In short, the alienness of non-Christian faiths – their theological alienness for which their conceptual and cultural alienness is but the vehicle – is the very thing that damns them, and must be extirpated root and branch before the Gospel message can be planted anew. This approach is alive and well to a significant degree among some Churches in India. Hindu and Muslim holy places, festivals etc. have been fearlessly (if foolishly) dubbed by the followers of this approach “signs of the devil”, so that a great wrath and disgust, often expressed politically not only by fundamentalists in the target faiths but also by more moderate people, have been directed with indiscriminate force against followers of Christianity and its teachings.

The objection may be made that one must stand up fearlessly for the truth. No doubt. But there are ways and means of doing this appropriately, and foolish and arrogant condemnation is not one of them. Besides, how can Christians be so sure that they have the whole truth and nothing but the truth in the matter, when there is so much to learn and so much to discern in one's understanding of the faith? Christian history is so fraught with internal dissension and mutual condemnation amongst Christians themselves, that for a well-meaning observer it becomes hard if not impossible, to say the least, to know which Christian saving path to follow! For, all the Christian protagonists claim divine legitimacy for their particular set of beliefs, often on the basis of an impassioned but simple declaration of faith – though on occasion an attempt may be made to support such belief by somewhat tendentious argument. Faith, after all, though it may in some measure claim to be a kind of cognition, is not in that measure a

form of the veridical cognition on which we rest our everyday notions of truth. I shall have more to say about the role of religious truth later in this homily.

Then there is the “fulfillment approach” to non-Christian faiths, the preferred stance of the more liberal, and indeed the official position of the Roman Catholic Church. This stance can be summed up in the following statement made by the missionary, J.N.

Farquhar, in his well-known book, *The Crown of Hinduism*. Here Farquhar declared:

“In the philosophy and theistic theology of Hinduism there are many precious truths enshrined; but....the ancient Hindu system....effectually prevents them from leavening the people. This hard, unyielding system must fall into the ground and die, before the aspirations and the dreams of Hindu thinkers and ascetics can be set free to grow in health and strength....Hinduism must die in order to live. It must die into Christianity”.

The metaphor of the seed needing to die to yield a rich harvest is taken from Christ’s teaching in the Gospel of John (12.24). How ironic that this prominent Christian is so ready to apply his Master’s words of radical transformation to the faith of others, without first contemplating the possibility of similarly revising his own. The end product of such fulfillment approaches to other faiths tends to be the same – the vaunted triumph of the Christian stance. And the consequence of such triumphalism tends once again to have a negative effect on the non-Christian other: the bitter feeling of inferiority and a sense of impoverishment concerning the religious faith that is sought to be assimilated. This is the second reason then for the expression of deep-felt objections to the extension of the Church in traditionally non-Christian lands: a lack of respect for and understanding of other faiths in the richness of their otherness.

It is not that some Christian theologians are not sensitive to the problems I have outlined. In recent times there have been valiant attempts by both Catholic and Protestant thinkers both in the older and newer Churches of Christendom to formulate

what may be called *theologies of co-existence* rather than of *displacement* with respect to non-Christian faiths, but - to use a favourite expression of my grandmother's - these have been few and far between like the raisins in Manor House pudding. These need not be relativist stances, eviscerating the core of Christian belief in order to conform to some levelling, pluralist paradigm a la John Hick. Some of these views continue to valorize the distinctiveness of Christian faith in their endeavour to grant theological validity to non-Christian faiths as pathways to salvation in their own right. I need not go into details, for what we should note here is that such theologies have not been discussed in the wider academy with the seriousness they deserve because they have lacked official endorsement or the courageous and informed leadership that the nurturing of such thinking requires, and so the general trend of Christian systematic theology among the older and dominant Churches of the West has continued - a trend marked by a preoccupation with traditional Eurocentric concerns and an inward-looking dissemination of ideas.

I am pleased to say, however, that my own Faculty of Divinity in this University has been taking important steps academically to counter this narrow way of thinking. When I arrived in the Faculty all those years ago, I was the first full-time lecturer appointed to teach religious traditions other than the Christian in the history of the Faculty. I was received personally and academically with a warm welcome. Today, nearly 40 years on, whilst the philosophy of religion, Christian theology and the history of the Christian Church as well as the study of the Old and New Testaments continue to enjoy, rightly, a central place in teaching for the Faculty's undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, we have included teaching expertise not only in Hinduism and Buddhism, but also, thanks to admirable initiatives by colleagues in the Faculty, in Jewish Studies and Islam, and also in the sociology of religion and in the relationship between religion and science.

The Divinity Faculty, as an integral part of a University that is funded at taxpayers' expense in a democratic state whose avowed aim is the development of an egalitarian, religiously plural society, cannot either endorse or propagate a particular religious faith. This would be a betrayal of both trust and proper academic purpose. In this sense, the Faculty must maintain a secular stance. But I use the word "secular" here not in the sense in which it tends to be used in the West, that is, as "opposed or hostile to religious faith", but as analogous to the distinctive sense in which it occurs in the Indian Constitution to describe the religious stance of the state, viz. as religiously neutral itself, but as allowing at the same time for the expression of free speech and religious and other commitment among its citizens, provided that the civic and human rights of those citizens are not violated in the process. It is in this sense that the Divinity Faculty must encourage the study of the different religious traditions falling within its purview to the highest level of academic excellence that is commensurate with the various strata of teaching and research.

University Divinity or Theology or Religion faculties or departments (designations vary) play a crucial role not only in the academy but also in wider society. For they scrutinize as impartially as possible in its various ramifications what is of central concern to our societies in an increasingly globalizing world: the presence and role of religion. I remember being invited, when I was Chair of our Faculty Board not so long ago, to attend regular meetings with my counterparts from other Faculties to share views about various issues facing the University. On one such occasion, during the course of a particular discussion that had been peppered with comments by the odd hardboiled scientist or two, I felt moved to say in explanation of what we do in the Faculty: "Ladies and Gentlemen, some of you may not believe in the power of God, but by God all of you must believe in the power of religion in the world!" There was no need to labour the

point, and I can tell you that this comment went down very well in the assembly, not least among said hardboiled scientists. For that is what we do: study painstakingly and objectively in the “secular” sense distinguished earlier, the power for good or ill of the ideas and practices of religious faith in the world. What could be more consequential than that?

If it is for faculties such as ours to disseminate by study and learning, understanding of the multifaceted depths of religion in the world, it will be for other forums and contexts to take this further by unlocking the treasures of wisdom buried in those depths as a resource for reaching across barriers and dispelling ignorance and prejudice. But it is the study in the first place that will help show what is distinctive in the practice and teachings of each faith.

This is where the scriptural reading we have heard today (Mt.25.31-46) becomes particularly relevant. In one respect, Farquhar was on the right track in the statement quoted earlier. There are indeed “many precious truths enshrined” in the different religious traditions of the world. Some of these are quite distinctive, others can be seen more easily to endorse or complement the insights of other faiths. It is for the comparativist to tease out the relationships in a plausible manner. But it seems to me that what lies at the core of the Christian message is encapsulated in the words of scripture we heard today, first stated so distinctively and with such power and authority by a Jewish Rabbi two thousand years ago. For it is by nourishing the hungry and the thirsty in body and mind, by welcoming the stranger of every race and creed, by clothing the naked, caring for those who are sick physically and psychologically, and freeing those imprisoned by bars and by prejudice - in short by loving our neighbour as Christ himself loved us, that the Christian message comes into its own, virtue is recognized, and discipleship of Christ signified. There is no mention of doctrine or

dogma, particular belief or unbelief, in the dread scene depicted in the scriptural reading.

The theologies that we weave will follow the Practice, as they are made to contextualize and interact with this code of discipleship as times and circumstances change. The concerns of the Church in general have been too bound up historically with the application of words, with formulations of doctrine and their protective enshrinement through the hurling of anathemas. Of course the careful articulation of belief is important; I do not deny that. But what appears to have been attended to insufficiently in such verbal scrutiny by the guardians of doctrinal orthodoxy is the fact that language evolves continually and that the meanings of words are time and context specific. This calls for a constant updating and re-formulation of belief through an ongoing, interactive dialogue with the voices of history on the one hand, and all authentic forms of human knowledge, the scientific included, on the other. No doubt, the use of particular words and language as tokens of group-identity, the religious included, has been an important means of affirming solidarity in poly-ethnic and pluralistic contexts, but, as we know, this is fraught with the ethos of divisiveness. May not religious leaders and theologians seek a more mature and responsible interpretation of such collective self-assertion in our day?

There are many privileged terms and concepts of this kind in Christian theology: “Trinity”, “the finality of Christ”, “the people of God”, and “election by grace” are but a few salient examples of the more fundamental and general. But all such notions need to be examined by theologians in the context of a new vision of potentially *shared witness* among Christians and people of other faiths, so as to be reformulated in such a way that Christians do not need to give the impression to others that they know it all or that only they have what really matters when it comes to questions of religious truth. As I have

hinted earlier, religious truth is not quite like our everyday notions of truth. We use the word “truth” conventionally to refer to conviction that meets the everyday criterion of publicly approved norms of testable evidence. By its very nature, “religious truth” cannot be quite like that, and the burning question then becomes how to define religious truth qua truth. For Christians to affirm, for example, that humans are created in the image of God requires a certain shared understanding about what is meant by “God”, “creation” and “human” in the wider context of other Christian teachings and evolving human social discourse in general. But this truth so-called cannot be “proved” in the ordinary sense of the word. It is part of the shaping of a certain outlook on life and the pursuit of an integrated code of practice that gives an increasingly self-validating *faith* in this vision the space to breathe. In this sense, it must remain both existential and prospective, awaiting confirmation only in the final analysis. It is a truth-in-waiting, if you like.

A further step would be to examine how the particular truths or insights of this outlook may be integrated with or complemented by – one can resort to a variety of terms here – the truths so-called of other faiths. Indeed, Christians must leave room for a *radical element of surprise* in the experience of this final event, in which the truths - both distinctive and more general - of other faiths can play a constitutive part. Do we not have clear intimation of this prospect in I Cor. 2.9, where it is said: “But it is as scripture says: ‘What no eye has seen and no ear has heard, what the mind of man cannot visualize: all that God has prepared for those who love him’” - and it is in the principal reading of this service that we have been told what the love of God really means. When it comes to the final consummation, either private or collective, who can second-guess God?

I believe that it is only when religious “truths” – without exception - are allowed to die periodically in the freshly turned soil of stringent analysis and revised understanding that they can germinate anew with the infusion of ever deeper and more relevant insights for the attainment of what we may call ultimate human fulfillment or salvation. This project does not apply only to Christianity, of course, but to all faiths of good will, and the more Christians allow for such transformation of belief to occur under the aegis of farsighted and courageous leadership in both Church and academy, the stronger will be our hope for the prospect of a joint, a shared witness, to the healing wisdom that lies buried in the great religions of our beleaguered planet. I can think of no better way for Church extension to occur in our commonwealth of nations, both overseas and closer to home.