

The Meeting Place of the World's Great Faiths

by

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Gerald Hibbert, in his Swarthmore Lecture, "The Inner Light and Modern Thought", delivered at London Yearly Meeting in 1924, had this to say about Quakerism and other world faiths:

Every religious system has its *Quakers* – those who turn from the outward and the legal and the institutional, and focus their attention on the Divine that is within. There is much fellowship between Friends and the Mystics of other religious systems. Let a Mohammedan or Hindu mystic teacher come to this country, and we realise at once how much we have in common with him. We believe we have something to give him, but we realise also he has something to give us. Our conception of God and of Christ is distinctly *westernised*, and to that extent partial and limited; we are increasingly coming to see that the East (with all its faults and failures) has its contribution to make to the full experience of God in Christ. The mystics of the world everywhere join hands. Their spirits leap together in a flash of joyful recognition; in the great deeps they find their unity and their abiding home.

I have quoted the whole of this passage, although I was tempted for two reasons to leave out the sentence about our conception of God and of Christ being too westernised, first because the unfortunate words in parenthesis almost suggest that only the East has faults and failures, but also because it seems to be dealing with a subject distinct from what goes before and what follows. The need for Christendom for a fresh, eastern interpretation of Christ is quite different from the insistence, before and after, that the mystics of all great faiths of the world find unity in the great deeps. It is possible to accept the one but to reject the other. Personally I accept both.

But what did Gerald Hibbert mean by *the mystics*? Was he thinking only of the rare souls who have ecstatic visions, and deep inexpressible experiences of union with the divine? It is in that sense that the word *mystic* is often used and understood. This is not the sense in which Gerald Hibbert was using it, as he himself indicates at an earlier point in his lecture. "Mysticism", he writes, "as opposed to Rationalism and (in the narrower sense) to Evangelicalism, may be defined as a firsthand knowledge of God and direct communion with Him. It takes many forms, and varies in degree, but in essence it is this."

For myself, I think I should like to go further still. Gerald Hibbert's definition of mystical experience covers every kind of direct experience of God. But he leaves us, perhaps, in some doubt of the content he would give to the word *God*. To my mind whenever a man surrenders to an inner prompting of kindness, of selfless service, of spontaneous generosity, whether it takes the form, as known among Quakers, of voicing some message that seems to be *given* in a silent Meeting for Worship, or of rescuing some child seen to be in danger, or giving a helping hand to an old woman crossing a street, or making the life of some refugees a little more tolerable – or indeed any one of a thousand other selfless deeds that are done often without thinking – then that man or woman is undergoing a mystical experience. The only criterion is that the action is done from a pure motive, an inner prompting to selfless goodness.

I am at some pains to stress this embracing definition, because Henry Cadbury, in whose honour this essay is written, has in his own Swarthmoor Lecture – 1957, declared in effect

that he is no mystic. He quotes there, with warm appreciation, from a pamphlet written by William Littleboy called "The Appeal of Quakerism to the Non-Mystic." "Does God," asks William Littleboy, "speak to *all* men, or are His direct appeals confined to a few saintly and sensitive souls? Can *I* who never consciously heard the inward voice, who am not of those to whom it is given to see visions and dream dreams – *dare* I believe that a real and intimate relationship exists between God and my own dull earth-clogged soul?" He answers, in effect, that most religious writers imply that it is only the *saintly and sensitive souls* who can have a first-hand knowledge of God. He prefers to believe what is surely the characteristic Quaker view. This is, that the seed of God is in every man, whether he recognises it or not, certainly whether or not he can claim ever to have had moments of mystical ecstasy. It is perhaps not being too personal to add that to one who, like myself, often listened to William Littleboy's ministry in Friends Meetings, it is incredible that those messages were not in some sense direct messages from the source of all truth. William Littleboy, conscious like most of us of a dull earth-clogged soul, refused to claim to be one of the mystics. And if in fact the mystic is one who can lay claim to special ecstatic revelations, presumably most Quakers, like ordinary mortals, would find themselves in William Littleboy's company. But perhaps it is not too late to rescue the word *mystic* from the narrow interpretation some religious writers have put upon it.

One of the central assertions of the Society of Friends is that God, the eternal and unchangeable goodness, is alive in the soul of every man, however badly clogged it may be in many of us by selfish cares of this world. In other words, Quakers say, every man is really a mystic, though each man may have a different experience of God from his neighbour. And this, as I understand him, is the use Gerald Hibbert was making of the word *mystic*, when he asserts that the mystics of all the world and of every faith are akin to one another. He is, in fact, saying something not unlike William Penn's famous saying: "The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the diverse liveries they wear here make them strangers."

But is this true? Is it true that men of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish or other religious background are essentially akin to Christians? Certainly (if we still follow Gerald Hibbert's distinctions), so long as we examine the outward forms, the legal and institutional systems, and even, let me add, perhaps most of all the orthodox theologies of these several faiths, far from discovering unity, we find sharp diversity and contradiction. It is true, however, as he claimed, that if we look for those who "focus their attention on the Divine that is within," we shall find, not necessarily full unity but at least deep harmony. Do the *Quakerlike* Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Parsees and others agree together that it is the *humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls* who best interpret God's truth to man? Or would they make different lists of the highest virtues? Let us take a few examples and see the result. But first let us be quite clear on one thing. The examples I venture to quote are not claimed as representative figures. All are in some degree, perhaps, unorthodox. But all are men of note and influence. They are not mere isolated voices. Let me begin with Islam. I have heard it stated by men from the West who have lived in the East that there is no such thing as Islamic Mysticism. But even if mysticism be interpreted in its narrowest sense, this is not true. Let anyone who has any doubt about this look for a little book by Gurdial Mallik entitled *Divine Dwellers of the Desert*. Here an Indian Quaker has given us a vivid picture of the life, teachings and rhapsodies of the Sufis who have lived recently in Sind, now a province of Western Pakistan.

One of Gurdial Mallik's own experiences may be given here.

It was Friday afternoon (the hour for Islamic prayer). When the prayer was over, the *maulvi* (minister) preached a sermon, in the course of which he quoted a couplet from Kabir, a famous Indian saint and mystic. The eyes of the congregation were aflame with anger and the worshippers whispered to one another, "What is the matter with the maulvi today? Has he gone mad? For he has cited the words of a kafir (unbeliever)" Next day the Chairman of the Council called upon the *maulvi* to explain to the congregation why he had departed from the beaten track and quoted the couplet of a *kafir* and that, too, in Hindi, which God evidently did not look upon with any degree of favour, else the *Koran* would not have written in Arabic.... The *maulvi* bowed to the congregation and in a voice, which betrayed firmness and fervour, said "O Beloved Ones of God, if your God knows only Arabic then He cannot be the God of the whole world, at least not my God." Saying this, he bowed again to the people there and walked out of the mosque.... The door was flung open that day and he walked forth into the light that illuminates the whole world.... He attracted to himself, during the years that followed, hundreds of admirers belonging to all communities and creeds and colours. He did not wear the ochre-coloured robe (in India the usual mark of a devotee), nor did he become a factory for manufacturing disciples. He went about in ordinary dress and earned a living by selling some Urdu books every day in one of the by-lanes of Bombay, where he had a small shop... He spent the nights alone in a small room in a big building. He would sit silent, while the rosary of remembrance was being told in his heart.

"Why did you engage in this mundane matter of making a living?" one of his admirers once said to him. "We shall be only too glad to keep you in comfort, so that you could spend your whole time in devotions."

"But this book selling is also a kind of devotional exercise. Work is worship; worship is work. Moreover, a seeker should also see to it that the fragrance of the rose-scent is hidden within a cotton plug, lest he might lapse into subtle self-deceit."

"Did you have any sorrows in your life? If so, how did you face them and yet attain to poise and peace of mind?"

"My refuge," he replied, "all along has been the name of Allah."

"Do you mean that you repeat His name and difficulties disappear? Such a prescription has at least never helped us to cure ourselves of our ills."

"Not repetition, but remembrance; not separation, but union; not duality, but unity," was his laconic answer.

"We do not understand you", they rejoined.

He remained silent for a moment and then remarked, "Whenever you have suffering or sorrow, sit in the open under the starry sky or by the seashore or on a hill, and you will receive sympathy from them."

From this unnamed Muslim saint of western India and Pakistan, it may be proper to turn to a figure in the modern political life of India. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a distinguished scholar and Islamic writer, colleague of Gandhi in the struggle for Indian freedom, first minister of education in the new India after 1947, and intimate friend of Nehru.

Since his death a volume of essays has been written in his honour. Professor Habib, of Aligarh University, a close friend of Maulana for many years, in an essay on "The Revolutionary Maulana," summarises his (Maulana Azad's) thesis about the unity of religion thus:

(1) Belief in the existence of God is found in all creeds; it is the common inheritance of mankind. "The worship of God is ingrained in the nature of man." (2) The differences between religious groups are, therefore, only found in three things: (a) varying insistence laid on the attributes of God; (b) differences in forms of worship; and (c) differences in religious

laws. These differences are due to differences in time, environment and circumstances as well as the stages of man's mental development. About the existence of God, no one has anything new to say; the messages of the prophets on this point are mere repetitions; also the nature of God is totally beyond human comprehension.

From the same volume I take another extract, from another Indian Muslim scholar who, though a younger man, might belong, shall we say, to the same vintage as Maulana Azad. This is Asaf Fyzee, whose essay in honour of Azad is appropriately called, "The Reinterpretation of Islam".

Here is Mr. Fyzee's declaration of faith:

I believe in God. I believe that the universe is created by God, and that there is order in the universe. The belief in God and the belief in the orderliness of the universe are the two fundamentals of my faith. I believe that Muhammad, blessed be his name, was a messenger of God, that he was neither greater nor lesser than the other great teachers of the world.

"We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered." (Quoted from the *Koran*, II, 136). I am profoundly moved by the teaching of the *Upanishads*, the Buddha, Moses and Jesus. I respect all religions and faiths. I revere the great doctors of Islam, but do not follow them blindly. My faith is my own, a faith fashioned by my own experience, my own intuition. I give to every Muslim, and indeed to every man, the right to fashion his own faith – "to you, your religion; to me, mine." I do not believe that the Gate of Interpretation is bolted and barred.

A brief comment on this confession of faith may not be out of place. Much of it, no doubt, would horrify an orthodox Muslim. But the writer, who feels himself to be in the roots of his being still a Muslim, still a part of the great tradition in which he has been reared, does his utmost, by quoting the *Koran* and using his Islamic phrases, to persuade his orthodox friends at least to give him a hearing. So much for the intellectual part of the argument. Naturally it will not satisfy an orthodox Christian, who will resent finding Jesus put in a list of the world's prophets, neither greater nor less than others. But surely the essence of the whole paragraph is in the noble climax at the end. "To you, your religion; to me, mine. I do not believe that the gate of Interpretation is bolted and barred."

Let me add, before passing on to Hindus, one simple utterance of a Pakistani taxi driver, who was taking me across country where a few years before Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims had been murdering one another in the name of religion.

"There is only one God," he said "and we all worship Him. Why should we fight one another?" And the souls of the dead seemed to echo, "Why, oh why?" And the answer came to my mind, only too surely, "Because the priests and the maulvis, those whom George Fox called the 'professors' had hounded the simple people on to kill one another, telling them that it was their duty to destroy infidels or false faiths."

Turning to Hinduism, let us look again at Gandhi. The three men from whom I have just quoted, reinterpreters of Islam, were in their various ways all influenced by Gandhi. Indeed, his influence has penetrated far and wide, even more perhaps among the simple and unlearned than among the educated of Asia.

Let this first be said of Gandhi. He was not in the ordinary line of mystics. I am sure he did not claim to have any special divine illuminations. It is true that he would spend times of each day in silent meditation, and he would listen to what he called the "inner voice" before

embarking on any special action. But if he were asked what he meant by the inner voice, he would no doubt have said “the voice of conscience”. Although he believed in God, and used expressions such as “laying his weary head on the lap of his maker,” he argued against the idea of a personal God; his reasons for rejecting the efforts of devout evangelical Christians in South Africa to convert him to Christianity are stated in terms of almost cold reason. In religion, as in all other matters, his whole approach was the approach of quiet reason. He remained a Hindu to the day of his death, not because he thought Hinduism the best religion, but because he had been born a Hindu, and therefore found it reasonable to remain one and to try to reform Hinduism from within, in so far as he found it in need of reform. His Hinduism was always qualified by the condition that if, in the Christian or Muslim or any other faith, he found qualities superior to Hinduism in his judgement, or qualities that were lacking in Hinduism, he would unhesitatingly adopt them. In other words the judgement of his own reason, lit by a sensitive conscience, must be final for him in religion as in everything else. Here are a few of the conclusions to which it led him.

The only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and to be one with it. This can only be done by service of all. I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity. My countrymen are my nearest neighbours. They have become so helpless, so resourceless, so inert that I must concentrate myself on serving them. If I could persuade myself that I should find Him in an Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity. (*Harijan*, August 28, 1936).

And as I know that God is found more often in the lowliest of his creatures than in the high and mighty, I am struggling to reach the status of these. I cannot do so without their service. Hence my passion for the service of the suppressed classes. And as I cannot render this service without entering politics, I find myself in them. (*Young India*, September 11, 1934).

Again: Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so there is one true and perfect Religion, but it becomes many, as it passes through the human medium. The one Religion is beyond all speech. Imperfect men put it into such language as they can command, and their words are interpreted by other men equally imperfect. Whose interpretation is to be held to be the right one? Everybody is right from his own standpoint, but it is not impossible that everybody is wrong. Hence the necessity for tolerance, which does not mean indifference to one’s own faith, but a more intelligent and purer love for it. Tolerance gives us spiritual insight, which is as far from fanaticism as the north pole is from the south. True knowledge of religion breaks down the barriers between faith and faith. (From *Yeravda Mandir*, 1945).

I venture to add two quotations about Jesus, which will show two aspects of his mind. Here is the first:

Jesus expressed, as no other could, the spirit and will of God. It is in this sense that I see Him and recognise Him as the Son of God. And because the life of Jesus has the significance and the transcendency to which I have alluded, I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world, to all races and people. (*The Modern Review*, Calcutta, October 1941).

S. K. George, a distinguished South Indian Christian, in *Gandhi’s Challenge to Christianity*, first published in 1939, quotes from a reply given by Gandhi “over ten years ago”, to some questions put to him at a Christian Missionary Conference he had been invited to address in Calcutta. It is perhaps worthwhile to note that what follows is an earlier utterance than the last quotation, still more, perhaps, that it was addressed to Christian missionaries, whereas the earlier quotation is addressed to all readers of the *Modern Review*, most of whom would be non-Christians. In other words, when addressing non-Christian India he speaks of the

claims of Jesus to the devotion of all the world. But when Gandhi speaks to Christian missionaries, he shows why he cannot subscribe to their language about Jesus. These were his words:

I do not know what you mean by the Living Christ. If you mean the historic Jesus, then I do not feel his presence. But if you mean a spirit guiding me, a presence nearer to me than hands or feet, than the very breath in me, then I do feel such a presence. If it were not for the sense of that presence, the waters of the Ganges would long ere this have been my destination. Call it Christ or Krishna: that does not matter to me.

And it may be well to add S. K. George's comment:

That I believe is a crucial statement – a testimony to a living experience of spiritual experience of spiritual power, borne out by a life of heroic activity, but mediated apart from the Christian channels, and therefore testifying to a Source of Power beyond all labels, beyond and behind all historical manifestations of it in time and place.

Perhaps one more Gandhi quotation may be permitted. As early as 1926, he wrote in his weekly paper, *Young India*:

Let me own this. If I could call myself, say, a Christian, or a Mussulman, with my own interpretation of the Bible or the Koran, I should not hesitate to call myself either. For then Hindu, Christian and Mussulman would be synonymous terms. I do believe that in the other world there are neither Hindus, nor Christians nor Mussulmans. They are all judged not according to their labels or professions but according to their actions irrespective of their professions. During our earthly existence there will always be these labels. I therefore prefer to retain the labels of my forefathers so long as it does not cramp my growth and does not debar me from assimilating all that is good anywhere else.

I am tempted to add further quotations from C. F. Andrews' book, *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas*, especially from his chapter called "The Place of Jesus". But it may be better now to turn from Gandhi to his intimate Christian friend, C. F. Andrews himself.

Charlie Andrews, as he liked his friends to call him, grew up in a very narrow Christian sect, and even when, at Cambridge, he became a member of the Anglican Church, he was still an intolerant young man. A contemporary of him at Cambridge once told me how indignant young Andrews was at the very idea of participating with Nonconformists at the Holy Communion table, at the time of some Student Movement meetings.

Then he went to India as a missionary, and became a member of the teaching staff of St. Stephen's College, an Anglican mission college in Delhi. Within a few years revolutionary things had happened to him. He himself has told the story in his book, *What I owe to Christ*. India captured him, and not only Christian India, though his Christian colleague, Sushil Rudra, later principal of the college, was probably the first to open his mind to the spiritual glories of non-Christian India. Then he became intimate with a saintly Muslim, Zaka Ullah, whose life he later wrote about as a pious duty to one who had awakened a new spiritual sense in him. It was later that he became the intimate friend and associate of two of the greatest Hindus of the age, M. K. Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore.

For Andrews, a priest in the Church of England, the point of conscience came when he was conducting a service at the little Anglican church at Burdwan, close to Rabindranath Tagore's university centre at Santiniketan. One Sunday he was confronted with the Athanasian crowd, condemning to hellfire those who do not accept the Christian faith. How could he possibly publicly damn those among whom he had made his home, and who were his close friends and beloved and revered colleagues? He omitted the creed, and resigned his position as a priest. Unlike his close friend Samuel Stokes, however, he did not thereupon

cease to call himself a Christian. On the contrary, once he had ceased to be bound by man-made creeds, his Christian disciples meant more to him than ever. And it was in this later period of his life, when his closest friends in India were Hindus and Muslims that he wrote *What I owe to Christ* (which is a spiritual autobiography), *Christ and Labour*, *Christ and Prayer*, *Christ in Silence*.

His biographers, Benarsidas Chaturvedi and Marjorie Sykes, have given the best account of his religious outlook in these later years.

It does not appear that Andrews ever reformulated in intellectual terms those dogmas of the nature of God or the person of Jesus Christ which he had once felt compelled to discard. The centre of his religious experience was an intense personal devotion to a living, human Christ; his prayers were intimate talks with a Great Companion, vividly, warmly present at his side, the Jesus of the Gospels. His strong visual imagination had been centred from earliest childhood on this beloved Figure. Religion for him was not a system of speculative ideas; it was the source and counterpart of the affectionate devotion which he lavished on his friends on earth; it was *bhakti*, and he was content to let intellectual speculation rest.

“Christ has become for me in my moral and spiritual experience the living tangible expression of God. With regard to the infinitude of God that lies beyond this I seem able at this stage of existence to know nothing that can be defined. But the human in Christ, that is also divine, I can really know; and when I see the divine beauty, truth and love in others also, it is natural for me to relate it to Christ.” (Andrews wrote).

He came to accept and to use the historic creeds of his own church as the endeavour to put into human words a divine experience beyond the power of words to express. The Church of England was and remained his spiritual home. But his circle of religious fellowship included everyone, of any creed or none, who served with humility and brotherly love the living God of all.

I have not sufficient firsthand acquaintance with any modern Buddhist to add any Buddhist quotations to this patchwork. But I am confident that Buddhist and Jew, Taoist and Parsee, Sikh and others could be found to join the chorus of love to God through love to man which these fragments represent.

But lest any reader should take up the quotation from Maulana Azad, and suggest that after all the *varying insistence laid on the attributes of God* is so diverse that one religion in effect contradicts another (for one, God is a God of love: for another, he is a God of vengeance, and so on), let me give this quotation from Gandhi, on the Buddha’s idea of God:

I have heard it contended times without number and I have read it in books claiming to express the spirit of Buddhism that Buddha did not believe in God. In my humble opinion such a belief contradicts the very central fact of Buddha’s teaching... The confusion has arisen over his rejection of all the base things that passed in his generation under the name of God. He undoubtedly rejected the notion that a being called God was actuated by malice, could repent of his actions, and like the kings of the earth could possibly have favourites. His whole soul rose in mighty indignation against the belief that a being called God required for his satisfaction the living blood of animals in order that he be pleased – animals that were his own creation. He, therefore, reinstated God in the right place and dethroned the usurper who for the time being seemed to occupy that White Throne. He emphasized and redeclared the eternal and unalterable existence of the moral government of the universe. He unhesitatingly said that the Law was God Himself... (Similarly Nirvana is undoubtedly not utter extinction. So far as I have been able to understand the central fact of Buddha’s life, Nirvana is utter extinction of all that is base in us. Nirvana is not like that

black, dead piece of the grave, but the living peace, the living happiness of a soul which is conscious of itself, and conscious of having found its own abode in the heart of the Eternal.

When C. F. Andrews published his autobiography, *What I owe to Christ*, I remember that *Artifex* (Canon Peter Green) by no means an unorthodox Anglican, but above all a servant of the needy, wrote a review of it in the *Manchester Guardian*, which showed how deeply moved he had been by a story of this man who gradually opened up, flowering more and more, finding more and more spiritual communion, indeed of what he did not hesitate to call Christain living, among men who would never call themselves Christians, and whom Andrews would have been ashamed to have even wished to *convert*. *Artifex* was persuaded that this book must have a profound effect on Christian thinking. But he seems, in the short run at least, to have been proved wrong. On the contrary, under the influence of the new orthodoxy, Andrews is dismissed as sentimental and woolly, and even positively dangerous. This, of course, is what commonly happens to God's saints. Mid nineteenth century Quakers were disturbed because John Woolman's *Journal* had not enough theology in it. This can be learned at second hand from Henry Cadbury's Swarthmore lecture. Perhaps after all we need not be too disturbed about such criticisms. These are bound to exist. For, in all religious systems there are many timid souls, who take fright when they see a man launching out on uncharted seas. If he tells of magic islands he has found, they will stop their ears.

But the truth of God moves on, slowly, painfully but irresistibly. And every man who has struck out from a second hand, derivative faith, and has battled with the harsh and painful perplexities of life, till he has finally wrought a faith of his own, finds comrades among men and every name and clime on the hard road of truth and beauty and wonder.