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INTRODUCTION :

A NEW PROBLEM FOR BRITISH CHRISTIANS

IRVING HEXHAM

Until fairly recently Hindus and Moslems were strange creatures who inhabited far away lands and needed missionaries to 'civilise' them. This, at least, is how many Britons viewed members of non-Christian religions. Of course not all Britons claimed to be Christian, but those who had rejected Christianity tended to regard it as the best of a number of corrupt and outdated religious systems. It was also safe to assume that the average British housewife would never, with the possible exception of the Jews, meet a member of a non-Christian religion in all her life. But since 1945 all this has changed.

Today there are flourishing Hindu and Moslem communities in most of our cities and a growing number of people are turning to forms of eastern meditation to find spiritual fulfilment. How is the local church to meet this new situation? This edition of the *CBRF Journal* attempts to contribute to a solution to this problem by attempting to understand the major non-Christian religions to be found in Britain. The articles presented have been selected with the intention of challenging members to face up to the claims of other Faiths.

Evangelical Christians often complain that their beliefs are misunderstood by non-believers and criticise the Press, Radio and TV for giving biased reports of their activities. Knowing how easily their own beliefs and actions are distorted, one would expect evangelicals to be willing to spend time attempting to understand the beliefs and practices of members of other religious groups. But, unfortunately, this expectation is often unfulfilled. Many evangelicals show a complete disregard for other people's feelings and dearly held beliefs. They have the *Truth* and everyone else is in error. Yet, this type of attitude, which is often presented as showing a great concern for the purity of the Gospel, can very easily lead to misunderstanding and to the preaching of a distorted Gospel.

Some may be thinking, by now, that this introduction is a plea to give up the exclusive claims of Christ: it is not. It is, however, a plea to take other religious beliefs seriously before trying to evangelise the people who hold them. Only when the Christian knows the real, and not imagined, need of others can he show them how Christ can meet that need.

This edition of the *Journal*, then, is written in the belief that understanding precedes evangelism. But what does this 'understanding' involve? It would seem that for an adequate appreciation of another religion the Christian must be able to do two things: he must feel the attraction which that religion holds for its members and not just dismiss it as blind superstition, and he must be able to begin to think in the way in which members of that religion think. In short, he must have some idea of what it means to be a member of that religion.

These requirements are very exacting but only when they are met can an adequate programme of evangelism be devised. Preaching the Gospel

in such a way that it is bound to be misunderstood is tantamount to preaching a false Gospel. It is therefore the duty of the Church to ensure that hearers understand the Gospel when it is proclaimed to them. The following articles have been compiled in the hope that such understanding may be made possible. It is also hoped that the problems which are raised by them may prompt assemblies, who have large non-Christian groups in their areas, to consider the possibility of creating specialist ministries to meet this need.

The first article, by Mr. H. L. Ellison, reminds us that the most entrenched non-Christian group in Britain is the Jews and that in the past Christians have very often shown a total lack of concern for them. He argues that Judaism is a religion in its own right and not just a stunted form of Christianity, and shows how popular Christian terminology can very easily confuse Jewish hearers.

The second article, by Professor Ninian Smart, explains something of the great complexity of the Hindu religion. After describing beliefs and practices which often confuse Christians he goes on to draw attention to some things which 'puzzle the Hindu' about Christianity. In conclusion, Professor Smart points to the difference in outlook between Hindus and Christians regarding the historicity of Christ's actions and His exclusive claims.

The third article, by Muhammad Iqbal, is unusual in being written by a practising Moslem. For such an article to appear in a Christian magazine may seem strange. But, if we are to understand what Islam means to an adherent, what better than to have a believer to explain it to us? This article is very stimulating, and questions many commonly held beliefs about the backwardness and social 'evils' of Islam. It presents a dynamic account of a dynamic religion which is one of the greatest rivals to Christianity. All members will agree that by breaking new ground in this way CBRF has done a great service to the Christian community and that Mr. Iqbal has given us a unique insight into Islam.

Finally Dr. Eric Sharpe writes a controversial article on the theology of mission. Not everyone will agree with his conclusions but he does present some interesting ideas not usually expressed by evangelical Christians.

In conclusion, a short bibliography of useful books is included to enable readers to follow up these articles and think further about the issues raised.