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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Christians and Multi-Faith Services

BY RICHARD WOOTTON

ONE Saturday last summer a large crowd of people was gathered outside St. Martin's-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square, London, watching the arrival of official cars carrying the representatives of many Commonwealth countries. The stream of important people flowed into the church until it was full. Then there was a hush when a car carrying the Royal Standard was seen approaching; the Queen got out followed by the Duke of Edinburgh and went into the church. It was the annual Commonwealth Day service—Empire Day it used to be called; but this time it was a service with a difference. Instead of the formal pattern of modified Anglican worship in Westminster Abbey which had been the pattern in previous years, this time Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists participated on equal terms with Christians.

After trumpets and the National Anthem, the service began with a brief introduction by the Bishop of Kensington, explaining its purpose and pattern, and then the Vicar read the first of four affirmations, declaring "our common faith in the Eternal Being, the Creator of all things, beyond and within all things". Then followed a reading from the Bhagavad Gita, in English, but in part unintelligible to those not versed in Hinduism, for example, "I am . . . the Grandfather, the Purifier . . ., (the syllable) Om, and also, Rik, Saman and Yajus . . . Of the great Rishis, I am Bhrigu, . . . of Yajnas, I am the Yajna of Japa. . . ." But more important, it asserted a doctrine wholly opposed to God's once-for-all revelation in Christ, that of repeated avatars or incarnations: "For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of Dharma, I come into being in every age." Next came a careful selection of verses from Isaiah 40: vs. 12-17, 21-22, 28-31; followed by a Hindu hymn in Hindi. Then the second affirmation, of "faith that the lives of all men are in the hand of God, he is wherever men are". This was followed by a reading from the Quran about God's greatness, omniscience, and omnipresence, a passage, like many others in the Quran, fully in harmony with the Bible's teaching about God; then a reading of Psalm 139: 1-18. The third affirmation was of "faith in the supremacy of love in all human relationships", and was followed by a reading from a Buddhist scripture, entirely ethical, with no mention of God but including a reference to Nirvana, which of course was a denial of the Christian hope of everlasting life, and then by 1 Corinthians 13. After the singing of the Jubilate came John 15: 12-17, precious words of Jesus for his disciples alone, including a reference to his laying down his life, which of course Islam denies. Then a prayer for the Commonwealth was said, and Psalm 100 was sung in the familiar metrical form. Finally, the Vicar introduced the blessings, speaking of the "convergence of the Spirit in our diverse religions". The Buddhist blessing spoke of Buddhas and divine beings, not of God; the Hindu mentioned "the Gods" but not the one true God; the Christian blessings were four, given by a Roman

Catholic, an Orthodox, a Presbyterian, and an Anglican; two were in the name of the Holy Trinity, which is anathema to Muslims, and one mentioned the name of Jesus for the first and last time in the service.

What are we to make of this strange farrago? Clearly it was very carefully prepared, to give an appearance of harmony which some might regard as deceptive. It is of great interest to a student of "religion", and perhaps to many who know little or nothing of other faiths. As an international jamboree it was splendid, with at least six nations taking part, and many others present among the worshippers. But as the worship of Almighty God—one can only deplore it as a regrettable confusion of the adoration of the True and Living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, with the worship of other systems which, however lofty they may be in some respects, fall far short of the Truth and in some respects constitute a plain denial of it.

The Daily Telegraph was enthusiastic about it. A long column on a news page combined reporting with very favourable comment—"a service which may be regarded as a significant milestone in religious history. . . . A multi-racial 'affirmation of faith' inspired largely by the Queen herself. . . . It would not have been thought possible a few years ago". Special mention is made of the colourful scene, with people in national dress and the flags of twenty-three countries in the sanctuary, and of the Indian singers "crouching on the marble floor of the chancel" which "cast a spell with a mystical song of their own country sung in Hindi".

The comment column "London Day by Day" also had something to say about the service. Under the heading "Why wait a year?" it stressed the Queen's initiative, and called it an "inter-racial" service, saying that some people were asking why it had not been held before. Astonishingly it reported the Bishop of Kensington as saying, "We shall in this corporate act signify our belief in *all* fundamental truths", but this was corrected later by a letter from the Bishop to "*four* fundamental truths". It concluded: "Plans are already being discussed to make it an annual event, but there is a substantial opinion that a year is too long to wait. The readings by Hindu, Muhammedan, Buddhist and Greek Orthodox representatives certainly suggested that whatever may be happening to the Commonwealth's natural links the supernatural links are strong."

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No doubt many "men of good will" must have felt the same as the writers in *The Daily Telegraph*. It seemed a kind of breakthrough—an imaginative act breaking down some of the barriers which so sadly divide people, a clear demonstration that "religion" does not always sunder mankind but can be a force for unity. But not all were of the same opinion. "Talk of the Week" in the next issue of *The Church of England Newspaper* was short and to the point: "I am not very happy about the multi-faith service. . . . There is every reason to try to understand our fellow-men whatever their religious opinions, but to attempt to combine all the great religions in an act of worship taking place in a Christian Church is inviting syncretism." In the same issue a letter from that noted protester the Rev. Christopher Wansley bore the headline, "The Christian faith betrayed". It

emphasized the complete contradiction between the Christian creed and the creed of Islam and added, "Fear of offending the Commonwealth is not sufficient reason for making nonsense of your faith and making a fool of God. . . . The Church must see that this betrayal of the Christian faith is not repeated, at Westminster Abbey or anywhere else."

The *Church Times* of the same week had a section in its comment column headed "None Other Gods", in which the writer doubted whether Christians would be as uniformly enthusiastic as the press accounts on this occasion. He continued, "Christians do not deny that the Spirit of God has spoken through others outside the Church. . . . The whole of the Bible insists from end to end on the utterly distinct nature of revelation given by the one true God. . . . It is impossible to reconcile with the Bible any attempt at religious indifferentism, any neglect of the Christian affirmation that salvation is through Christ alone."

Hostile comment in the church press continued for several weeks. One letter rejoiced in Mr. Wansey's protest and expressed sorrow at the Queen's part and at the impression given to the man-in-the-street that all roads lead to God. One writer, a former C.M.S. missionary, whose letter appeared in both the leading church papers, approached the question from the missionary's angle; he welcomed the new attitude to other faiths, "which, rejecting sterile controversy and an attitude of superiority, seeks to see and appreciate all that is good and noble in them and to enter into dialogue where possible, for no religion is wholly without 'the light that lightens every man', and some show it in a marked degree"; but he also affirmed as a basic principle "that, while the Christian may witness the worship of other religions, he may in no circumstances take part in it or engage in any joint act of worship with their adherents". In the last part of the letter he referred to the plan for a similar service in December in Westminster Abbey and asked: "Will the cross still stand upon its altars, to remind Muslims of a dogma which to them is near blasphemy? And what of my friends who have abandoned their old faiths at great personal sacrifice, and sometimes at the risk of their lives, to join the servants of the Crucified? Will they feel that perhaps it was a mistake after all? And if we can all worship together in the Abbey, is all the prayer and sacrifice, all the effort and devotion which goes into missionary work wasted?" Another writer, formerly an S.P.G. missionary, expressed the view that a common affirmation of Christians and others about their faith in the dignity and value of human life is not in itself objectionable, but its taking place in a Christian church is plainly wrong, for "it at once compromises the worshipper in his loyalty to Christ alone." Someone else expressed astonishment that the Bishop of London or the Archbishop of Canterbury had not vetoed the service, and declared that the Church was abdicating its mission to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and of repentance. Only one correspondent, a vicar's wife, expressed support for the service—she applauded the courage of the organizer and placed the inspiration of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim on the same level of inspiration with the Old Testament, quoting the hymn, "Where'er men seek thee, thou art

found, And every place is holy ground," and concluding, "I rejoice that Christians are being encouraged to open their minds to these spiritual influences from the East in order to grow in spiritual understanding of the creator of the whole world whom Christ proclaimed."

One person had read this correspondence with great interest and decided that further action was needed. This was the Rev. Eddie Stride, Vicar of St. Mary's, Dagenham, well known for his intimate understanding of the industrial worker, his down to earth approach to evangelism, his speeches in Convocation and Church Assembly, and his weekly column "View from the Ground Level" in the *Church of England Newspaper*. He decided that action should be taken at the autumn meeting of the Convocation of Canterbury, and several other clergy whom he consulted, including some leading Anglo-Catholics, gave him strong support. He therefore put down the motion, "That this house views with concern the holding of multi-religious services in Christian churches." In his speech proposing this he claimed to be no opponent of dialogue but stated that multi-religious services strengthened the common impression that all religions are much the same; the service at St Martin's involved evasion, for in the lesson which was read from Isaiah 40 some verses had to be omitted because of their denunciation of idolatry, since there were Hindus taking part in the service, and idolatry is at the heart of popular Hindu religion and is at least tolerated by the more sophisticated Hindu.

In answer Canon A. K. Cragg, Principal of St Augustine's College, Canterbury, and a world-famed Islamic scholar, stressed the growth of world unity and the need for religious institutions to be sensitive to this. He did not advocate the sentimental mingling of religious patterns of rite and devotion, but held that there were occasions when a religious expression should be given to an existing system of mutual tolerance like the multi-racial, multi-religious Commonwealth; this had been done at St Martin's in a reasonably competent way. Further, this inter-religious openness was needed for the recovery of natural theology against the assertive autonomy of the secularizers; religions needed each other and had somehow to draw together in that situation. At the same time there should be no improper compromise; believing in the uniqueness of our faith we could seek to possess together with others all those things which could be possessed together. Another speaker asked whether such services were objectionable only in churches or anywhere at all. The Rev. A. J. K. Goss supported Mr. Stride, but added that the cause of much of the concern felt was the lack of any authoritative explanation of what seemed a misleading event, an explanation which would correct any impression that all religions were equal and that salvation through Christ alone need no longer be preached. Mr. Stride was asked to withdraw the motion now that the matter had been aired, but he declined to do so; and when a vote was taken it was carried by an overwhelming majority.

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This official action of the lower house of Convocation did not deter the authorities of Westminster Abbey from going ahead with the plan for a multi-religious service already announced for Human Rights Day, December 10. It may, however, have affected its pattern, for

it was now declared to be a "service of silence". This time something of an explanation was put forward in a letter from the Dean, Dr. Abbott, to the church papers a week before. He linked it with the 900th anniversary year of the Abbey and its theme "One People". He insisted that inviting brethren of other faiths and "all men of good will" to come and share in silent meditation did not mean "that we have turned away from the 'scandal of particularity' which is inherent in the Gospel . . . that we have turned to a universalism which will gloss over all differences". The order of service, a New Testament reading followed by readings from Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist scriptures, was then explained, and the letter concluded: "Gathered together in the nave of the Abbey ('My house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* nations') we shall realize our common humanity and contemplate in prayer and resolution our common human predicament. As Christians we shall do this in the name of him who took our humanity upon him, in whom we believe as the Eternal Word and the Light that lighteneth every man".

This naturally aroused protests, and *The Church Times* led off with three paragraphs of comment, referring to the great respect held for the Dean of Westminster and to his unquestioned devotion to Christ, but deploring the decision not to heed the Convocation's resolution, and concluding: "The unhappy fact remains that by this decision, taken from the highest of motives, they may convey the impression to the world that one religion is as good as another, and that the Lord Christ's claim to an exclusive allegiance is no longer taken seriously in a great church built and maintained for the sole proclamation of His Word, His glory, and His grace." *The Church of England Newspaper* was equally outspoken: "It is misguided and dangerous in the extreme that such a prominent place of Church of England worship should accommodate a service in which Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists will read passages from their sacred scriptures to a mixed congregation. If salvation is found only in the name of Christ, what grounds are there for compromising the Christian Gospel in this way?" The problem of liturgical discipline was mentioned and it was said to be ironic "to find Westminster Abbey itself indulging in a mangle of religious worship like this".

This time a demonstration also was planned to take place outside the Abbey just before the service, sponsored by six leading evangelical and two Anglo-Catholic clergymen. One of the sponsors explained that there was no hostility towards people of other faiths, but that the Church was not in the same position as others regarding the "human predicament" to which the Dean's letter had referred: it was dishonouring to Christ to pretend that Christianity had no answer. The demonstration itself was attended by some fifty people—probably others stayed away, remembering a previous demonstration at the same place during the year and feeling that this was bound to be misunderstood as discourtesy or even hostility to the Abbey's non-Christian guests. The Dean came out and greeted the demonstrators with "God bless you", and tried to show that the purpose of the service had been misunderstood.

The service itself was attended by some two hundred people, not

very many to represent five great religions in the spacious nave of the Abbey. It began with a word from the Dean, who then read the Great Assize passage (Mt. 25: 31-45)—did many listeners realize that this proclaimed Christ as the universal judge? This was followed by the Hymn on Love (1 Cor. 13). Then after silence a rabbi read Micah 6: 8, Isaiah 58: 6-8 (the true fast), Lev. 19: 18 (love for the neighbour), and Deut. 6: 4-9 (love for the One God). Next a Muslim "imam" (leader in worship) spoke briefly on the essential unity and equality of man under God, quoting the Quran and the Traditions. Then a distinguished Buddhist read an ethical passage on peace and all-embracing love from a Buddhist scripture, followed by a Hindu Swami who read from Hindu scriptures and modern writers thirteen short passages, some of them prayers, others ethical and mystical meditations. The last passage was 1 Jn. 2: 7-11 (on love and light), and the service concluded with a mutual greeting of peace.

Clearly this is on a quite different footing from the St Martin's service. There is no declaration of faith in God, no prayers or blessings, nothing in fact which really marks it out as an act of religious worship. The person who defended it in a church paper by saying that after all it was not really a service at all was quite right, except that it was called a service, there was a reference to praying in the silence on the order sheet, and it took place in the nave of the Abbey—no doubt a concert or a religious drama might also be held there, but it was obviously neither of these. Man and his relations with his fellow men were the theme of all the lessons but one, the great passage from Deut. 6 which is read in every service in the synagogue. True, some of the Hindu verses are in the form of prayer or are words of Krishna to his disciples, enjoining devotion to himself, but the emphasis is on the disciple's progress towards perfection. If it were not for the use of the word "service" in a context clearly implying religious worship, one might consider this a kind of symposium on the "human predicament", with contributions made from different angles, a symposium in which a reading from *Das Kapital* would also have been appropriate. Only in that case one would like to have seen those New Testament passages included which gave God's remedy for that predicament, John 3: 1-16 and Eph. 2 for instance.

A number of letters again appeared in the church press, three out of ten supporting it. A clergyman saw the service as "a wonderful opportunity for fellowship in love and for sharing together our common heritage as God's children". A woman urged the national character of the Abbey and the duty of the Dean and Chapter not to "exclude those who while belonging to our nation do not belong to our faith" and the value of "being enriched by the writings of other faiths". Another defender wrote, after quoting some words from the Hindu and Buddhist readings: "Since these universal words lifted us all a little nearer God, their impact was to strengthen and confirm each one of us in his own particular faith." Of the hostile letters one drew attention to the moral failings of Hindu deities and the fact that Buddhism is basically atheistic; another claimed that the article of Justification by Faith is clearly not merely misunderstood but completely forgotten by many in the Church of England. Mr Stride reported that many

had expressed warm support of his views and saw the glory and honour of the Lord Jesus Christ cast into the shade by such services.

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I have dwelt at some length on the services themselves and the reactions they have produced, for it is important to be quite clear just what we are talking about and what the issues are. The term "multi-religious services" could cover a number of things differing considerably from one another. As we have seen the two services held in London in 1966 show marked differences, and others could well be imagined (and probably have been held somewhere or other) which go much further along the road to syncretism, services for instance in which Christians and others together offer prayers to God in vague theistic terms, or in which people of different faiths pray in their own terms with Christians participating or some general statement implying the equality of religions is made.

Of course our conclusions regarding such services turns on our attitude as Christians to other faiths. This is a vast topic on which many tomes have been written, but it can be treated only briefly here.¹

There are at least three general attitudes which professing Christians have adopted to non-Christians faiths—Judaism of course stands apart and is not treated here. Traditionally the Church has been unwilling to see any good in them and has attributed them directly to satanic origin. The blindness of idolatry and the Christ-rejecting character of Islam have been exposed in the most glaring light. The adherents of other faiths have been denounced or pitied and consigned without distinction to everlasting torment. This attitude is seen in many missionary hymns and in the use of terms such as "heathen" and "infidel", and it lies behind a good deal of missionary literature. It draws support from Old Testament denunciations of idolatry, from St Paul's reference to the Greek gods as demons (1 Cor. 10: 20f.), and from similar passages. Such an outlook accords well with the exclusive claims of Christ and has proved a stimulus to missionary endeavour; yet I feel it is to be rejected for several reasons. (1) It has often presented a distorted picture of non-Christian faiths and the cultures associated with them; quite false statements have been made, such as the assertion that Muslims "worship a dead prophet", and many good features have been overlooked. (2) It has gone hand in hand with an attitude of national and cultural superiority and a kind of spiritual imperialism, which has been keen to win converts for a church rather than for the Truth Himself. (3) It has often proved quite ineffective as a missionary approach, for it has at once aroused the keenest antagonism and put people very strongly on the defensive. (4) It has often been characterized by lack of love; an unwillingness to love a person for what he is in himself, the object of God's love in Christ and of infinite value to Him.

In reaction to this attitude others have sought to show an affinity between Christianity and other faiths, so that these may be seen at least as a "preparation for the Gospel". This idea goes right back to Justin Martyr in the second century, who based it on a philosophic interpretation of the Logos doctrine of John 1; for him, as for Clement

of Alexandria and other Greek fathers, not only were Greek philosophers, especially Socrates and Plato, precursors of Christianity, but the Logos was at work in his non-Christian Stoic contemporaries. In a similar spirit many missionary scholars of our own century have been generous in appreciating the spiritual value of other faiths. In the heyday of theological liberalism this was a popular theme, and it was considered at length in the World Missionary Conferences at Jerusalem in 1928 and Tambaram in 1938. J. N. Farquhar saw Christianity as the "Crown of Hinduism"; others wished to replace the Old Testament by the sacred books of the people they sought to evangelize; and in the 1930s an American report entitled "Re-thinking Missions" went further by rejecting the idea of the displacement by Christianity of other faiths and suggesting that religions must co-exist without rivalry and enrich each other, till eventually unity is attained in the most complete religious truth. This outlook was denounced as entirely lacking in theological basis by H. Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World*, in which he argues an essential "discontinuity" between Christianity and other faiths. A distinguished missionary A. N. Hogg held that there is a true revelation of God in non-Christian religions, but that Christ alone reveals and removes the barrier of sin that divides man from God. Indian Christian scholars have contributed to this debate, which of course continues today. But there are few who are prepared to contradict Kraemer's main thesis that God's self-disclosure in Christ is something completely *sui generis* and in no way to be compared with "the best and highest" to be found in other faiths. Yet one wonders if the new movement of "Christian radicalism", with its tenuous hold on the historic faith, its ambiguous statements about the Incarnation and its "demythologizing" of the one sacrifice of Christ and His Resurrection, may not soon embark on the field of inter-religious relations, to weaken in new ways the Church's grasp of the absolute claims of Christ on man's allegiance.⁸

More recently, however, a new line has been opened up by the attempt at dialogue with those of other faiths. This has been especially the case with Islam, the nearest to our own of the religions in question, and Canon A. K. Cragg is its leading exponent. The idea is to listen humbly to the Muslim so as to know his faith as it were from the inside and to find out what makes it so precious to him, and to seek points of contact by which to lead him to a real understanding of the Christian message. In introducing the new SCM "Christian Presence" series, Canon M. A. C. Warren, after welcoming the new situation in which "the Christian faith can everywhere be distinguished from its past historical association with Western political, economic, and cultural aggression", goes on to say that in approaching people of another faith (and animists are included in the series together with the great religions) we should not "forget that God was here before our arrival. We have then to ask what is the authentic religious content in the experience of the Hindu, the Muslim. . . . We may . . . still reach the conclusion that our brothers have started from a false premise and reached a faulty conclusion. But we must not arrive at our judgment from outside their religious situation. We have to try to sit where they sit, to enter sympathetically into the pains and

griefs and joys of their history." We may question some of the language here, and I would personally agree with the statement of the National Evangelical Anglican Congress (Keele 1967): "We reject as misleading the statement that Christ is already present in other faiths". But surely this more loving, more humble, and more understanding approach to non-Christian religion is wholly right.

But this is a very different thing from the liberal indifferentism of the 1930s, and it gives no warrant whatever for combined religious worship. The Christian may well wish on a suitable occasion to be present at the worship of another faith—else how can he understand it?—but he will take no step which will associate him with it in any way as a participant, he will not follow Naaman in "bowing down in the house of Rimmon", nor will he have any part in combined worship with those of other faiths. A Pakistani friend of mine, thirty years ago a Muslim and since then a Spirit-filled evangelist, was appalled to hear of these services—what would be their effect on a new convert to the faith?

One aspect of this unhappy business is the political side—the desire to strengthen the links between nations, which no doubt inspired the Queen's support of the St. Martin's service. The Church should certainly associate herself whole-heartedly in every possible way with others in bearing witness to the unity and solidarity of mankind as against all exclusive attitudes of nationality and race—and she does so constantly in her worship all over the world—but *this* way is not open to her in view of her allegiance to the one Saviour of all men.

Another aspect is the ecclesiastical. A suffragan bishop acts under the direction of his diocesan, so it must be assumed that the St. Martin's service had the sanction of the Bishop of London. When asked about it privately, another high dignitary stated that while such services could not take the place of Christian worship they were right and proper on special occasions. It is sad indeed that such a lead is given by our chief pastors who are pledged to "banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines contrary to God's Word."¹

What of the future? An inquiry at St. Martin's-in-the-Fields revealed that another such service is not being planned for this summer there. But it may be arranged elsewhere; and, if not, there is little doubt that before long we shall have to face this challenge again. May the resulting outcry be so strong and clear as to convince the world, not of the bigotry and narrowness of Christians, but of their unfailing loyalty to their great God and Saviour Jesus Christ. We have a wonderful Gospel for all men—Muslims, Hindus, animists, atheists, everyone—and it must not be undermined by well-meant but ill-considered actions such as London witnessed in 1966.

¹ Those wishing to study it further should read *Religion and the Christian Faith* by H. Kraemer.

² One may perhaps suspect the influence of this movement in the decision of a high level inter-church and international committee in 1966 that "the Church must entirely give up the idea of conversion" in dealing with the Muslim immigrant in Western Europe.

³ According to press reports, permission for the holding of another multi-faith service on Commonwealth Day this year has been withheld by the Bishop of London after consultation "at a high level". Ed.