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Nicholas Lash

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PART I

A meeting-place for truth

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CHAPTER I

*The beginning and the
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THE FIELD OF GOD'S WHISPERING

Every Teape Lecturer is invited to reflect upon 'The Upanishads in the Catholic Church', but the field, or context of reflection, varies, as do the individual lecturers who seek, upon that field, to find their way, to gain some knowledge (to take the thirteenth chapter of the Gita as an allegory).¹

I shall, in these three lectures, have something to say about religion at the ending of the 'modern' world; about prophecy, and peace, and justice; and about the mystery of God, the mystery that is reality, and wisdom, and delight. Before setting out upon the journey, however, I want briefly to identify the speaker and the background against which he speaks.

First, the background, which (in my judgement) is the need to keep continually in mind the way in which this world of ours, however it arose,² has now become, to an extent that was unimaginable even a few decades ago, one single complex fact, one seamless web of cause and consequence. This oneness of our world is, moreover, increasingly the oneness of an *artefact*: an expression of human energy, and ingenuity, and greed. Pollution of the air and sea, deforestation, annihilation of innumerable species, exhaustion of non-renewable resources: all these are things that human beings do. It is increasingly the

¹ The chapter in which Krishna teaches Arjuna to discriminate between *prakṛti* and *purusa*, between the field and the knower of the field.

² See *Rig Veda*, 10.129.6, 7. All references to the Veda are to Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda. An Anthology* (London: Penguin Books, 1981).

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case that famine and disease and destitution are disasters no more 'natural' than is the collapse of a dwelling which the landlord had neglected to repair.³

Hence, in no small measure, the crisis of our time: the extent to which our ingenuity has outstripped our wisdom. We have made the world a single, swift and dangerous chariot, but there is little wisdom in the charioteer.⁴ Nor is there much time left. It is 'evening in the forest' and, when we think we hear the sound of someone crying, we are right to be afraid, but it is ourselves we have to fear.⁵

This is the background. What about the speaker? On what grounds did I accept, with gratitude, the invitation from the Teape Committee to give these lectures? I certainly cannot claim to be an expert in the field. I know little of Indian history and culture and, in spite of the best efforts of an excellent teacher forty years ago, I do not read Sanskrit. (That teacher was Father Hubert Olympius Mascarenhas, Principal of St Sebastian Goan High School in Bombay, whose remarkable little book, *The Quintessence of Hinduism*, was published in the spring of 1951, while I was living for a few months with my uncle, Bill Lash, who was then Bishop of Bombay.)⁶

But all my roots were grown in Indian soil. I was born in Lansdowne, in what was then the United Provinces. My father, a soldier, was born in Calcutta, where his father was port chaplain for the Missions to Seamen. My grandfather, incidentally (who himself was born in what is now Palayankottai in Tamil Nadu, where his father was a CMS priest),⁷ published, in 1923,

³ See Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God. A Reading of the Apostles' Creed* (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp. 114–15.

⁴ See *Katha Upanishad*, 3.3. Unless otherwise indicated, references to the Upanishads are to Juan Mascaro, *The Upanishads* (London: Penguin Books, 1965).

⁵ See *Rig Veda*, 10.146.4.

⁶ See H. O. Mascarenhas, *The Quintessence of Hinduism. The Key to Indian Culture and Philosophy* (Bombay: St Sebastian Goan High School, 1951). William Quinlan Lash was Bishop of Bombay from 1947 until 1962.

⁷ In 1858 'the training school for women teachers opened on a permanent basis at Palamcottah, and was called the Sarah Tucker Institution after the sister of John Tucker. The work of this institution took a great step forward from the beginning of 1867, when A. H. Lash arrived with his wife to take charge' (M. E. Gibbs, *The Anglican Church in India, 1600–1970* (Delhi: SPCK, 1972), p. 251).

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an excellent small guide to the caves at Elephanta for the use of English merchant seamen visiting Bombay.⁸ My mother was born in Bangalore, where her father was serving in the ICS. Her mother's grandfather, Thomas Lumisden Strange, was a High Court judge in Madras, of which city his father, Sir Thomas Andrew Strange, had been appointed first Chief Justice in December 1800. (You will hear more from some of these characters as we go along.)

It is, therefore, as a kind of traveller, a pilgrim, that I give these lectures. Every Christian, and hence every Christian theologian, is called to journey in the direction of deeper knowledge of the things of God, and the journey is a home-coming, for God is our end as well as our beginning. These lectures have, for me, the poignancy of being a home-coming not only in parable but in fact (though which the fact and which the parable I leave to the philosophers to decide!).

In 1947 Bill the bishop published a little book entitled: *To High Kailas*.⁹ Seven men – a professor, a political activist, a clerk, a singer, a *sadhu*, a schoolmaster and the narrator (the last two being English, the others Indians) – meet in a rest-house in the foothills of the Himalayas. When six of them have told their stories, they turn to the *sadhu* and enquire: “What are we seeking, swamiji?” “You are seeking to escape from men”, came the answer. “What are you doing, swamiji?” “I am on my way to God”.’ The *sadhu* then turns to the narrator: “What do you do, brother?” “I return to men”, I answered.’ The reader is, I think, invited to understand that the narrator and the *sadhu* are going in the same direction.

There is one more preliminary remark that I would like to make. Of the many different ways in which theology has been distinguished from philosophy, I know none more fruitful than that proposed, more than nine hundred years ago, by Anselm of Canterbury. Philosophical discourse is soliloquy; in

⁸ It was entitled: *Elephanta. Written mostly for and dedicated entirely to, The Rovers under the Red Duster*. It was priced at four annas and published discreetly, the only indication of authorship being my grandfather's initials, N[icholas] A[lleyne] L[ash], at the end.

⁹ Will Quinlan, *To High Kailas* (Hind Kitabs, 1947).

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philosophical reflection, the only voice heard is that of the philosopher. The theologian, in contrast, is trying to say something sensible in the presence of God. Theological discourse is rooted in worship, in address to God. It is, says Anselm, not 'soliloquy' but 'allocution'.¹⁰ The theologian's speech is, therefore, uttered in response to the prior utterance of God's eternal Word. But it can only be so, and remain so, on condition that the theologian stays attentive to the stillness of God's speech. As Elijah learned, listening to the still small voice on Horeb; as Arjuna discovered from a conversation whispered against the battle's tumult: God does not shout.¹¹ Sometimes, as in Gethsemane, the stillness of God's speaking seems unbearable. God's utterance is everlasting but he does not shout and, if we shout, we shall neither hear each other nor the mystery which calls us and commands the way we are to go.

THOMAS LUMISDEN STRANGE

The path I want to travel in this first lecture will, at one point, take us as far afield as England in the seventeenth century. However, the best place to begin will be Madras, in 1827. In that year, my great-great-grandfather, Thomas Lumisden Strange, became a Writer in the East India Company's civil service. He rose through the ranks of the judiciary until, after a period on the bench of the High Court, he retired in 1863, at the age of fifty-five, and returned to England.

Having spent his youth, like 'most young men, in heedlessness and self-indulgence', he was a stranger to 'personal exercises in Bible reading' and to prayer until, in 1838, a German missionary 'lent [him] a pamphlet on the Destinies of the British Empire, by a Mr Thorpe, a well-known dissenting

¹⁰ Anselm draws the distinction at the end of the Preface to the *Proslogion*. See *St Anselm's Proslogion. With a Reply on Behalf of the Fool by Gaunilo and the Author's Reply to Gaunilo*, translated, with an introduction and philosophical commentary, by M. J. Charlesworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 104.

¹¹ See 1 Kings 19.12; *Bhagavad Gita*, 18.75. Unless otherwise indicated, references to the Gita are to Juan Mascaro (trans.), *The Bhagavad Gita* (London: Penguin Books, 1962).

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minister of Bristol'. Converted by Thorpe's prophecies of impending judgement on the Raj, Judge Strange became, for twenty years, a member of the Plymouth Brethren.¹² At the end of this period, his Christian faith, already eroded by consideration of the historical evidence, finally crumbled before the heroism with which a condemned man, a convert to Christianity, confessed on the gallows his faith in Rama. On the strength of this experience, Strange became convinced that 'the Christ idea' and 'the God idea' not only could, but should, be firmly separated¹³ and, in collaboration with the freethinker Thomas Scott (an exact contemporary who had cast off his Catholicism in 1856), he wrote, in retirement, a stream of pamphlets with titles such as: *How I Became and Ceased to be a Christian*, *What is Christianity?*, *The Supreme Power in the Universe*, and so on.

The theme of these writings is that 'the primitive faith imparted by the Most High to those in a condition to receive it', a faith 'of the simplest order',¹⁴ requiring 'no study, and . . . no passage of time, for its attainment', and consisting in the belief 'that the almighty being standing as the author and the ruler of all is our ever-present and unalterable friend',¹⁵ has, in every culture, been corrupted and obscured from view by human pride and curiosity.

The primitive faith held 'by all the enlightened races with whom we stand allied in community of thought . . . is best expressed by the most ancient of these stocks in the most ancient of their records, namely the Hindus in their Vedas. The Vedic people . . . had no temples, no priesthood, no ceremonials, but each felt that he had open access to his Maker.' In time, however, there emerged 'an astute and interested priesthood' which, feeding the people 'with fresh

¹² Thomas Lumisden Strange, *How I Became and Ceased to be a Christian* (London: Trübner and Co., 1881), pp. 11, 12.

¹³ See Strange, *How I Became*, pp. 8, 15.

¹⁴ Thomas Lumisden Strange, *What is Christianity? An Historical Sketch; Illustrated with a Chart* (London: Trübner and Co., 1880), p. 6.

¹⁵ Thomas Lumisden Strange, *How I Became*, p. 5; *The Supreme Power in the Universe* (London: Thomas Scott, 1877), p. 23.

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delusions', led Hinduism, as it led Judaism and Christianity, into 'idolatry' and superstition.¹⁶ Fortunately, the 'deep truth of the primitive faith' still lurks 'in the bosoms of the better instructed, as it will be always avowed by educated Hindus when the appeal is made to them'. And, since the same is now true of educated Christians, there are grounds for hope in 'the recovery of the primitive faith as implanted in the human breast before man came in with his "inventions"'.¹⁷

Thomas Strange was not a particularly learned man, nor was he an original thinker. But it is precisely the extent to which he represents a widespread, influential, nineteenth-century mood, or view of things, that makes him interesting. How familiar he was with the work of Ram Mohan Roy, and whether directly or indirectly, I do not know. But there are evident affinities. And just as Ram Mohan, 'for all his avowed susceptibility to Muslim and Christian teaching . . . regarded himself as a Hindu seeking to reform Hinduism from within',¹⁸ so Thomas Strange, although awakened by India from the Christianity which he had previously espoused, had his heart set on what he himself called 'a further reformation of the Christian faith'.¹⁹

In illo tempore, in the 'beginning-time' of myth, a daylight time of simple speech and common goals and clear ideas, everyone had 'equal access to the One True God'.²⁰ And the dread disease which, blocking the sunlight of God's truth from view, disrupted social harmony and common understanding, was 'the canker of priestcraft'. Ram Mohan's account of Hinduism's decline is more or less identical to Thomas Strange's description of the fall of Christianity: 'Hinduism had become degenerate . . . because it had fallen into the grip

¹⁶ Strange, *What is Christianity?*, pp. 6–8, 64; cf. *How I Became*, p. 19.

¹⁷ Strange, *What is Christianity?*, pp. 8, 68.

¹⁸ Julius Lipner, *Hindus. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 66.

¹⁹ Strange, *What is Christianity?*, p. 68.

²⁰ The phrase is Lipner's, describing Ram Mohan's reforming vision. But, of course, what we hope for 'in the end' is close cousin to what we believe to have been the case 'in the beginning'. See Lipner, *Hindus*, p. 119.

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of self-seeking priests who played on the fears and superstitions of a people largely ignorant of their religion's original high standards of belief and practice.²¹

That diversity and change, time and discord and exhaustion, difference and decay, belong to the surface or appearance of reality, and not to its still heart and centre, is a conviction which finds endlessly various expression, from Advaitic Vedanta to Neoplatonism. Thus, for example, whatever the influence of an English education on Vivekananda, his vision of the inner unity of humankind beneath the 'outer differences of race, religion, sex and condition of life'²² had rich resources within Indian culture upon which to draw.

Nevertheless, two central features of the nineteenth-century reformers' vision have their roots not in India, but in seventeenth-century Europe. These are, on the one hand, the recasting of the distinction between outer appearance and inner reality into a narrative of primal purity corrupted and complicated in the course of time, and, on the other, the combination of a passion for plain speech and clear ideas with antipathy to ritual and 'priestcraft'. It is in early modern England, and especially in the University of Cambridge, that we shall find the workshop in which these elements of what was to become the dominant account of 'religion' and 'the religions' were first forged.

Before turning there, however, consider this nice nest of paradoxes. In 1902, a Roman Catholic Bengali brahmin, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, lecturing in England, announced that, because Indians have 'been taught in various ways by English teachers that there is no life of God apart from nature' and that 'God and the world make up one organism', therefore 'English education stands as the first and foremost stumbling block' in the way of Christianity's reception in India.²³ Thus, while the Indian Catholic brahmin upbraids the English for their monism, the English ex-Christian Thomas Strange is provoked, by the devotion of a dying Indian, affectionately to

²¹ Lipner, *Hindus*, pp. 65, 64. ²² Lipner, *Hindus*, p. 67.

²³ Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, 'Christianity in India', *The Tablet*, 3 January 1903, 8.

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interpret Indian culture through spectacles originally designed (though this he did not know) in England.

(Incidentally, while lecturing in Cambridge, Upadhyay won the university's approval 'to establish a teaching post in Hindu philosophy provided a suitable Indian incumbent and Indian money could be found. Eventually, the proposal foundered on the Indian side.'²⁴ I am delighted to report that, ninety years later, thanks to generous Indian benefaction and through the good offices of Upadhyay's editor, Julius Lipner, this vision has recently been realised with the establishment, in Cambridge, of the Dharam Hinduja Institute of Indic Research.)

A SIMPLE STRATEGY FOR A COMPLEX WORLD

In modern parlance, it is customary to speak of many religions and therefore also of the 'Hindu religion'. Actually, according to Hindu doctrine, there is only one religion for all men, that, namely, which is constituted and defined by man's relation to the Infinite . . . each person is free to choose and adopt whatever style or manner of approach to the Infinite he finds is best suited to his temperament and natural disposition.²⁵

On this account, it makes no more sense to speak of 'the religions', in the plural, than it would (for instance) to speak about 'the humankind', though no two human beings are the same.

The view that Mascarenhas is contesting, according to which there are a number of different religions, related to each other as species of a common genus, was first invented in seventeenth-century England. It appears, at the beginning of the century, in Richard Hooker, and the distinction drawn by Edward Brerewood, in 1614, between 'four sorts of Sects of Religion' – Christianity, Mahometanism, Judaism and paganism – soon became standard.²⁶ Drawn in these terms,

²⁴ Julius Lipner and George Gispert-Sauch (eds.), *The Writings of Brahmabandhab Upadhyay*, 1 (Bangalore: United Theological College, 1992), p. xli.

²⁵ Mascarenhas, *Quintessence*, pp. 33–4.

²⁶ See Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 39. Harrison quotes the fifth

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this distinction would have puzzled Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa who spoke, in the fifteenth century, of that one religion, *una religio*, the 'unattainable truth about God . . . of which all existing belief systems are but shadowy reflections'.²⁷ And yet Cusa's Platonism does contain the seeds of subsequent developments. (The cardinal, incidentally, might have had quite an interesting conversation with Father Mascarenhas.)

The construction of the 'genus and species' model of relationships between 'the religions' was but one component in the project of 'enlightenment'. This project, suspecting all 'local' reasoning, all particular custom and convention, as arbitrary, divisive, insecure, sought, in its stead, 'to place reason upon a secure and universal foundation'.²⁸ To say that the modern world is ending is to acknowledge that this universalising project can now, in turn, be seen to be little more than the expression of one particular set of 'local' circumstances: the circumstances of seventeenth-century Europe.

It follows, however, that if the ending of the modern world is to be negotiated fruitfully – towards our common peace and truth and flourishing, and not towards our deepening destruction – we need to re-examine the circumstances which brought that world to birth. The two aspects on which I shall now briefly comment are: first, the way in which knowledge was then newly organised and, secondly, the impact of the quest for social harmony on the understanding of religion.

edition of Brerewood's *Enquiries Touching the Diversity of Language and Religion through the Chief Parts of the World* (London, 1674). In an essay published since these lectures were delivered, William T. Cavanaugh has summarised, with admirable lucidity and due reference made to Wilfred Cantwell Smith's seminal *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), the story of what he calls 'the creation of religion' in early modern Europe: see William T. Cavanaugh, "A fire strong enough to consume the house": the Wars of Religion and the rise of the State', *Modern Theology* (October 1995), 397–420.

²⁷ Harrison, 'Religion' and the Religions, p. 12. Harrison is paraphrasing passages from Nicholas Cusanus, *De pace fidei*, (ed.) Raymund Klibansky (London: Warburg Institute, 1956).

²⁸ John Milbank, 'The end of dialogue' in Gavin D'Costa (ed.), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 174.