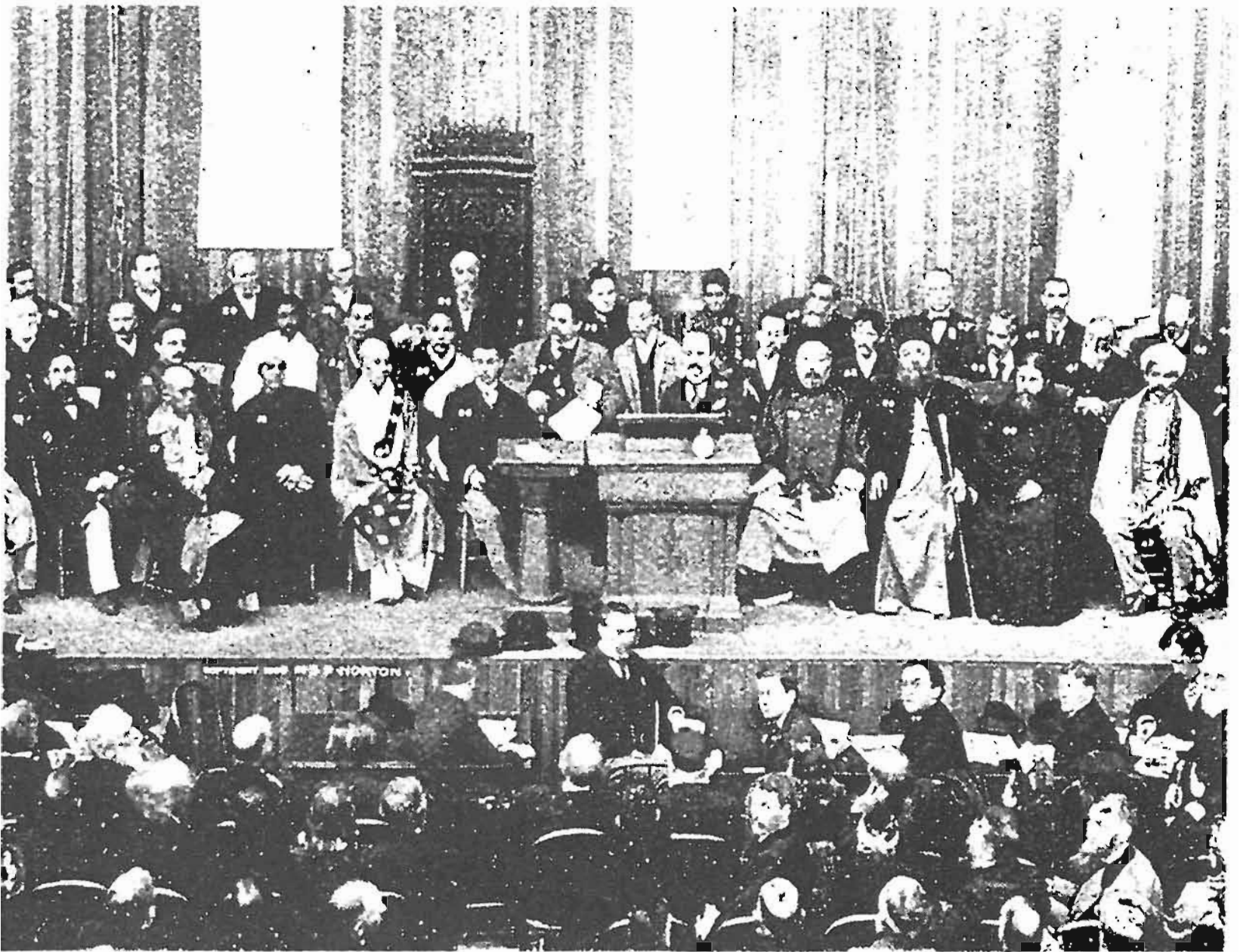


THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE 1993



INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING AND CO-OPERATION WHAT ARE WE AFRAID OF?

Rev. Marcus Braybrooke

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I

A naive person might be forgiven for assuming that all religious people would be in favour of understanding and co-operation. The organizers of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions soon discovered this was not the case. Henry Barrows, the Chairman of the Committee for the Parliament, met opposition in his own church. In 1892, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the USA passed a resolution expressing strong disapproval.¹ The Archbishop of Canterbury E W Benson, objected to other religions being treated as on a par with Christianity.² The Sultan of Turkey opposed the project.³ Afterwards, there was criticism of those Roman Catholics who participated. In 1895 Pope Leo XIII in a letter to the Apostolic Delegate to the USA officially censured Catholic participation in 'any future promiscuous conventions!'⁴ Even in the 1950's, Catholics had to withdraw from the Council of Christians and Jews because of fears of 'religious indifferentism'.⁵

In fact, of course, history has been full of religious conflict, prejudice and persecution. 'Sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendant, fanaticism have long poisoned this beautiful earth', as Swami Vivekananda said at Chicago, one hundred years ago.⁶ The same, sadly, is true today. There are divisions within many religious groups as well as conflict, in parts of the world, between members of different religions. Yet the hope kindled at the World's Parliament of Religions that religious people could overcome their fears and

1. See Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope*, SCM Press 1992, p.12

2. Ibid

3. Ibid

4. Ibid, p.29

5. See Marcus Braybrooke, *Children of One God*, Vallentine Mitchell 1991, pp.33-41.

6. *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1957, p.2.

suspicious of each other and work together for peace and human welfare have continued to flicker despite the cruelties of this century.

Yet even now amongst many believers there are hesitations and fears similar to those voiced a century ago. Whilst not opposing understanding and co-operation there is an organized group in the Church of England who are vocal in their opposition to praying with those who are not Christian. In several faiths, there are those who have been reluctant to participate in events arranged as part of the Year of Inter-religious Understanding and Co-operation. Many are hesitant to have any open discussion with members of 'new religions'.

It is easy for those of us whose lives have been enriched by contact and growing friendship with people of faith other than our own to be insensitive to the fears of those to whom 'the interfaith movement' is strange and rather alarming.

Fear of the Unfamiliar

Recently a Christian woman telephoned me. She asked, 'I want to meet some people of other faith. How do I set about it?' It reminded me that for many people any real conversation with a person of another religion is still an unfamiliar experience. I sometimes ask audiences 'How many of you have visited a synagogue or a mosque?' It is seldom as many as one third of the audience.

For many reasons, people are fearful. There is a natural anxiety when we are in unfamiliar surroundings. How long can you sit crossed-legged on the floor? Will you be given unfamiliar food? If you are going to be asked to take off your shoes, have you remembered to make sure there are no holes in your socks? And, as the Church of England's report on 'Multi-Faith Worship?' warns, 'Places of worship of all faiths are often ill-equipped with toilets.'⁷ Will you be asked to say or do something about which you feel uncomfortable? Will you be expected to bow to an idol or eat *prasad*?⁸

Fear of the unfamiliar is common. This is why so much of the work of interfaith organizations has been devoted to encouraging people to meet. Dr Pauline Webb has said, 'The pot of tea shared in a multiracial fellowship meeting may seem a small enough gesture, but it can be a foretaste of the Kingdom of God'.⁹ The regular visits to each other's places of worship, arranged by local interfaith groups

7. *Multi-Faith Worship*2, Church House Publishing 1992, p.36.

8. *Ibid*, p.35.

9. Pauline Webb, *Candles for Advent*, Collins Fount, 1989.

are a vital means of education. If the Year of Inter-religious Understanding and Co-operation merely achieves far more people of one faith meeting those of another it will not have been in vain.

Hidden Fears

But the meeting raises questions—perhaps exposing hidden fears or exposing painful memories or questioning long-held prejudices. When I was working for the Council of Christians and Jews, I hoped to arrange some conferences for Jewish and Christian young people—and such events do now take place—but there was resistance from some Jews lest these conferences might lead to young Jews falling in love with Gentiles and 'marrying out'. This is a real fear, because the Jewish community is declining in numbers. I recall too helping to arrange for a premiere of a Jewish musical work to take place in a Church. It was suggested that the narrator would speak from the pulpit, but on the pulpit was a large crucifix. To many Jews, the crucifix is not a symbol of love, but a reminder of centuries of persecution and oppression. The Church authorities felt that they would be accused of 'selling Christianity short' if they removed the crucifix. In the event a large vase of flowers was placed in front of the pulpit. Progress means acknowledging and sharing these fears. At the Hamburg Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom, it was healthy when some from overseas could share with the German hosts their continuing memories of past German aggression and the Germans could acknowledge these feelings in their guests. In Latin America and Australia, Christians need to acknowledge the suffering that their ancestors caused to the indigenous people.

Misrepresentation

There are hidden fears, but there is also clear misrepresentation. Christians too often have pictured Judaism as a religion of works-righteousness. The picture of the Pharisees in the Gospels is widely recognized to be a caricature. Worse still, of course, was the age-old charge of deicide. Slowly there has been a relearning in the Churches, but mistaken prejudices linger in the wider public, whose only knowledge may be based on Sunday School Classes forty or more years ago.

There are many still who think of Hinduism as idolatrous and polytheistic, although Hindu writers through the centuries have

taught that the many gods are manifestations of the One Divine Spirit.

Buddhists again are accused of being indifferent to the suffering of the world. This, of course, is to ignore the Bodhisattva tradition, let alone the work for peace of Rev. Niwano or Vietnamese Buddhists in recent years.

Muslims, too, often complain that theirs is the most misunderstood religion. There seems almost to be a competition amongst believers in feeling that their religion is the most misrepresented. At least this emphasizes the point that education is vital.

Fear of being used

A further difficulty is the fear of being used by the other. Is there a hidden ideological presupposition? Will the Jews try to gain your support for Israel or the Muslims for the Palestinian cause? Will Buddhists assume you are a pacifist?

Perhaps the most notorious example was the Islamic-Christian Dialogue meeting held in Tripoli in 1976. The Christians were representatives of the Vatican. The Cardinal leading the group agreed the declaration before he went to bed, but when it was read out in the morning the declaration included an attack on Zionism as an 'aggressive racist movement' and included an affirmation of Palestinian rights.¹⁰

In Jewish-Christian dialogue it has taken time to work through the hidden agendas. Some Christians have felt that the Jewish interest was to make Christians repent of antisemitism and to win Christian sympathy for Israel. Christians, on the other hand, were absorbed by their own guilt or by wanting Jews to tell them about the Jewish background to the New Testament. Only gradually have Christians and Jews in dialogue come to be interested in the other as other.

May I give one more example. In India eighteen months ago, I was engaged in a dialogue meeting with high caste Hindus. Afterwards I received a strongly-worded letter from Dalits about our conniving with high-caste oppression of the lower castes. There are those too who fear that by meeting with members of new religions, such as the Unification Church, they give respectability to these bodies. There is a fear too amongst some minority groups that interfaith co-operation will absorb them into the majority culture and threaten their identity.

10. *Pilgrimage of Hope*, Marcus Braybrooke, SCM Press, p.223.

Does tolerance of the other allow him or her to be other, to be different, or should the other conform to the norms of British society?¹¹

The Question of Mission

Perhaps the greatest fear is of being manipulated—that dialogue is a polite form of mission. Islam and Buddhism as well as Christianity have a sense of mission, but this issue arises most acutely in the Christian context. It arises in two ways: in the fear of those of other faiths that Christian motivation is suspect and in the fear of many Christians that they are being disloyal to Jesus's command to preach the Gospel to all nations.

The suspicion of Christian motivation amongst members of other faith communities has been evident in the reaction to the Decade of Evangelism. The Archbishop of Canterbury and other leaders of the Church have gone some way to assure members of other faiths that the primary aim of the Decade is to recall lapsed Christians to their faith. Yet the very day that an article to this effect by the Archbishop appeared in the *Jewish Chronicle*, an article also appeared in the *Church Times* by an Anglican clergyman saying that the Decade should include attempts to convert Jews.

There are Christians who feel not to preach to Jews is antisemitic—an act of discrimination denying to Jews the good news of Jesus Christ. There are Jews who feel that efforts to convert them aim at the spiritual destruction of Judaism which would be even worse than Hitler's attempt to effect the physical destruction of Jewry.

If we believe something to be true or valuable, it is natural to want to share it. Some years ago Canon Max Warren noted the secular usage of 'mission'—indeed today everyone is writing 'mission statements'. It was at a time when launderettes were being introduced and Canon Warren referred to an article about the 'Gospel of Automation'.¹² Sharing, which is commendable, is easily felt as pressure. This occurs, I think, when one becomes concerned for the growth of an institution. God's word, if it is indeed God's word, has its own power, although in several religions there is the attempt to grapple with the question of why God's word is not evidently successful. Usually the answer is in terms of free will. God seems

11. See the discussion for example in *Belonging to Britain: Christian Perspectives on a Plural Society*, CCBI, n.d.

12. In an article in *Frontier*. I do not have the reference.

more willing to affirm human free will than religious institutions. Anyone who seeks to proclaim a religious message needs to examine very closely his or her own motivation. What is in it for him or her? Is it power, or money, or even hidden insecurity?

The question, however, that cannot be evaded is whether I think my religion is 'better' or 'truer' than other people's. In a sense, I do—otherwise I suppose I would have changed my religion or denomination. But am I objectively claiming greater truth for my sort of Anglicanism than for other forms of Christianity—let alone other religions—or am I really saying that this is where I feel at home? Indeed many people stay in the religion in which they were brought up. Love of one's religion, like the love of one's country, is a proper sentiment: but need that love be coloured by some disdain for the faiths or countries of other people?

The Validity of the Other's Experience

Increasingly I recognize that all truth has a subjective element. Indeed it has been said that theology makes no sense, detached from biography.¹³ If we do believe that God's concern is for every person—then the insight and the experience of each person is valuable. One may in discussion suggest that a person's views, whilst true to their experience, do not do justice to some experiences of other people. One may suggest that others have drawn wrong conclusions from their experience. But the dramatic change is from thinking we have the truth which is to be proclaimed and defended to recognizing that each person's insight is of value.

This perhaps is what Swami Vivekananda meant when at the 1893 Parliament, he quoted from the Gita: 'Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths, which in the end lead to Me'.¹⁴ Later he said of the Vedas that they are 'without beginning and without end. But by the Vedas no books are meant. They mean the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times'.¹⁵ Each person has a contribution to make to the spiritual wisdom of the whole.

The Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Unit has indicated what a wealth of religious experience there is to draw on.¹⁶ I believe if we are willing to listen, we shall discover how many

people have a treasured insight to share. Indeed in my understanding the Bible is the attempt of those who were met by God to share that experience so that others could make it their own.¹⁷ Too often, Christians have appeared to communicate truth *about* God, but as William Temple said, revelation does not offer truth concerning God, but the Living God Himself.¹⁸

To accept another's claims to have been met by God as genuine is a major advance. It is this that Rabbi Tony Bayfield does in *Dialogue with a Difference*, a book arising from a Christian–Jewish dialogue group, when he says 'What is it then, that I feel compelled to say? It is this. I believe that many Christians find in the life and death of Jesus as described in the New Testament and in the tradition which flows from those events the fullest disclosure of the nature of God and God's will for them. Such faith involves no necessary error or illusion'.¹⁹ The experience of the other that one accepts as genuine may not be the same as one's own experience. One may question the conclusions the other draws from his or her experience. Yet its genuineness is acknowledged.

The Other's Experience is Religiously Significant to me

Beyond that, however, may come the recognition not only that the experience of the other is genuine, but that it is religiously significant to me. Some time ago, the World Congress of Faiths arranged a small conference at which Bishop Kenneth Cragg, a Christian scholar of Islam, was asked to lead a course about Islam—but not just a descriptive course, but one which helped Christians to see the significance of Islam for their own religious life.

Let me give another example from Raimundo Panikkar's Introduction to his *The Vedic Experience*. Acknowledging that the Vedas are linked forever to the particular religious sources from which they historically spring, he suggests the Vedas are a monument of universal religious—and thus deeply human—significance. This anthology invites the reader to appropriate the basic experience of Vedic Man, 'not because it is interesting or ancient, but because it is human and thus belongs to us all'.²⁰

16. See for example Edward Robinson, *The Original Vision*, Religious Experience Research Unit, Oxford, 1977.

17. See 'Is the Bible True?' in my *Wide Embracing Love*, 1990.

18. William Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, 1935, p.322.

19. Tony Bayfield in *Dialogue with a Difference*. Ed. Tony Bayfield and Marcus Braybrooke, SCM Press, 1992, p.21

13. James William McClendon, Jr. in *Biography as Theology*, Abingdon Press, Nashville and New York, 1974.

14. Vivekananda, p.2.

15. Ibid, p.5

When Swami Vivekananda—an active reformer of Hinduism—said ‘we accept all religions as true’, I doubt whether he meant that they are equally true, although critics have understood him in this sense.²¹ Rather I think he was accepting that each person's experience was a genuine experience of God, however inadequate or misunderstood. This, I believe, gives a religious significance to our dialogue. As we learn of the experiences of others, our own knowledge of the Divine is increased. As Rabindranath Tagore said, ‘To reject any part of humanity's religious experience is to reject truth’.²² Fr. Bede Griffiths, has also written ‘All the great revelations are as it were messages from that transcendent world’.²³ This too is the basis for the hope that religions are convergent—that our dialogue helps us grow in understanding of God.

At the Fortieth Anniversary of the World Congress of Faiths, Bishop George Appleton spoke of our need to listen to the gospel or central affirmation of each faith and thereby of enlarging and deepening ‘our initial and basic faith by the experience and insights of people from other religions and cultures, without disloyalty to our own commitment’.²⁴ It is this valuing of the other's witness as also a channel of revelation that gives a dynamic to our dialogue.

Toward a Global Theology and Shared Spiritual Exploration

This leads both towards a Global Theology and to shared spiritual exploration. In 1981 Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote ‘Henceforth the data for theology must be the data of the history of religions. The material on the basis of which a theological interpretation shall be proffered, of the world, Man, the truth, and of salvation—of God and His dealings with His world—is to be the material that the study of the history of religion provides’.²⁵

Just as Christian theologians read the works of Christians of any denomination, so as we think about the great issues of life and death,

we draw upon the wealth of humankind's religious traditions. John Hick's book Death and Eternal Life, is an example of this. In it, he tries to discover the insight enshrined in the various religious traditions of the world and to see how these different insights illuminate each other.²⁶

In the book of the Jewish-Christian dialogue group, Dialogue with a Difference, to which I have referred, I wrote a paper on how we today affirm belief in a God of Love in the shadow of the Shoah. I draw upon both Jewish and Christian resources and there is a Jewish response to my article. To give another example, recently I shared a weekend retreat with a Hindu swami. The theme was ‘Our strength in sorrow’ and we both looked at the resources which we found in our traditions for grappling with suffering. Together we were seeking to address a major human concern.

This weekend involved not only intellectual study, but empathy and the willingness, as far as possible, to make our own another's life of prayer. This is why the World Congress of Faiths has regularly arranged retreats where people can begin to enter into the life of meditation or prayer or worship which is at the heart of another tradition. The deepest point of meeting is in ‘the cave of the heart’,²⁷ where we wait with the other as he or she waits on the Divine.

Thankful for my own faith, welcoming of others

Some Unitarians, I know, have cherished the hope of a universal religion. In part, I sympathize with this, but perhaps here as in other aspects of life, we have learned to value diversity. At the Bristol launch for 1993, someone wrote on a board for messages ‘Bio Diversity: Religious Diversity’. The harmony we seek is not one that denies the particularity of faith, but that welcomes the special insights that derive from others' particularity.

This is why I am grateful to be a disciple of Jesus Christ—my feelings about the Church are more ambiguous! I delight to share with others the good news of God's accepting love made known in Jesus Christ—and this is why I have not felt any dichotomy between my parochial ministry and my interfaith work (although it has meant juggling diaries!). But if Jesus Christ is indeed of God, I need fear no truth whatever its source. Such truth will not lessen the Lord Jesus, merely help to reduce my ignorance.

26. John Hick, Death and Eternal Life, Collins, 1976.

27. Bede Griffiths, p.296.

20. Raimundo Panikkar, The Vedic Experience, Darton Longman and Todd, 1977, p.4.

21. Vivekananda, p.1.

22. Rabindranath Tagore. The reference is in Ignatius Puthiadam 'Diversity of Religions in the Context of Pluralism and Indian Christian Life and Reflection' in Theologizing in India, Ed. M Amaladoss, T.K. Jon, and G. Gispert-Sauch, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore 560 055, 1981.

23. Bede Griffiths, A New Vision of Reality, Collins 1989, p.267.

24. George Appleton in World Faiths. No 101, Spring 1977, p.4f.

25. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Toward a World Theology, Macmillan 1981.

My Indian professor, under whom I first started to study Hinduism, wrote in the preface to my first book Together to the Truth, that 'I was no worshipper in a jealous shrine, although I made the relevance of Jesus Christ central'.²⁸ Each of us, I believe, can thankfully affirm the inheritance which is ours whilst gratefully receiving from the treasures of others. What are we afraid of? We do not have to bury our treasure in sacred vaults, but spend it in living exchange with all whom we encounter.

Is it fear of change? Yet, without change there is no growth. Is it the reluctance of our religious denomination, even of our interfaith organization, to die? Yet without death there is no resurrection to new life. Is it that we prefer to worship God in our own image rather than surrender ourselves to One whose mercy and goodness is always greater than our imagining.

'The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from thy throne
And worship only thee'²⁹

Maybe, in God's good purposes, the existence of several religions, is to stop us worshipping our religion so that we worship the One God, who is Lord of All.

28. Marcus Braybrooke, Together to the Truth, CLS Madras & SPCK, Delhi, 1971, p.ix.

29. William Cowper. A & M Revised No 326.



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