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SOUTH CENTRAL ASIA: CONFRONTING ANCIENT CREEDS

The beginning of the Protestant missionary movement is conveniently dated as 1800. William Carey is the grand patriarch, and the setting is the subcontinent of India, where the world's oldest and most complex religions were born and where religious beliefs pervaded every facet of society. From a Western perspective—and in retrospect—this was an eventful moment in Christian missions. But in the eyes of the Indian people—the teeming millions who elbowed their way through the crowded marketplaces—nothing happened. If they had been aware of what was happening, they would have looked with scorn or indifference on those who would bring them a new religion. What could a “Western” religion offer them that Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism, or Jainism could not? And what appeal could there be in a religion whose proponents claimed that they alone possessed the truth? Hindus, with thousands of gods, prided themselves in their tolerance.

When Carey arrived in India, the vast country was going through a time of transition in its relation to the outside world. Nearly two hundred years earlier, Queen Elizabeth I had granted a charter to the East India Company. “No idea could be more erroneous,” writes Mary Drewery, “than to suppose that Britain set out deliberately to conquer India with a view to territorial aggrandisement.”¹ Trade was what the British were seeking. But other countries—particularly France—wanted that lucrative trade as well. Troops were needed to protect the trade, and with the India Act of 1784, the British government officially joined with the East India Company in its effort to wield control over the subcontinent.

The significance of Carey's ministry lies in its influence on Protestant missions more than on its influence on the Indian people, though he, unlike many missionaries before and since, was able to influence social and political reform. Christianity offered an alternative to the age-old caste system and release from the endless process of reincarnation—especially for the “untouchables.” In spite of the tremendous barriers, Christianity was planted in India and elsewhere in South Central Asia. Through the influence of William Carey, who (in retrospect) symbolically ushered in the “Great Century” of foreign missions, the evangelism of the world began to be viewed as a primary obligation of the Christian church. South Central Asia, however, would never be a fertile field for Christianity, for still today only a tiny minority of the population professes the Christian faith.

William Carey

The year was 1800. The setting was in Bengal in the northeast of India along the banks of India's most sacred river, the Ganges. Into that polluted river went a native Indian and an Englishman—a man who had taken seriously the words of Jesus: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel, *baptizing* them....” After seven long years, William Carey was

baptizing the first Hindu convert, Krishna Pal. What a momentous occasion it was—a moment to be remembered as a landmark in Christian missions—the “Father of Modern Missions” baptizing his first convert.

But this sublime scene is only part of the picture. Carey’s wife, who had gone to India against her will, was now deemed “wholly deranged,” and John Thomas, Carey’s partner who had delayed the mission due to his credit problems, had also gone mad. A missionary observer to this momentous occasion filled in the details that we would rather not include in our stories of missionary heroes: “When Carey led Krishna and his own son Felix down into the water of baptism, the ravings of Thomas in the schoolhouse on the one side, and of Mrs. Carey on the other, mingled with the strains of the Bengali hymn of praise.”²

William Carey, an impoverished English shoemaker, was an unlikely candidate to rise to the designation of “Father of Modern Missions.” Indeed, some in recent years have strongly argued that such a title is not fitting. There were others who made significant contributions to the missions cause during this era and before, and whatever greatness Carey achieved was the result of teamwork. According to Christopher Smith, “layers of popular mythology still remain to be cut through before the actual contours of his career as a pre-Victorian mission leader will be uncovered.”³

Yet whether based on popular mythology or not, Carey, more than any other missionary of this period, stirred the imagination of the Christian world and showed by his own humble example what could be done in a wide variety of ways to further the cause of world evangelism. Although he faced almost insurmountable trials during his forty-year missionary career, he demonstrated a dogged determination to succeed. His secret? “I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything.”⁴

Carey was born in 1761 near Northampton, England, the son of a weaver who worked on a loom in the family living quarters. Life was simple and uncomplicated. The Industrial Revolution had only begun to replace the cottage industries with grimy sweatshops and noisy textile mills. Carey’s childhood was routine except for persistent problems with allergies that prevented him from pursuing his dream of becoming a gardener. Instead, he was apprenticed, at the age of sixteen, to a shoemaker and continued in that vocation until he was twenty-eight. He was converted through the influence of another apprentice, and from that time forward he became actively associated with Baptist Dissenters, devoting his leisure time to Bible study and lay ministries.

In 1781, before he reached his twentieth birthday, Carey married his master’s sister-in-law. Dorothy was more than five years older than he, and like many eighteenth-century English women of her background, she was illiterate. From the beginning it was a mismatched union, and as time passed and Carey’s horizons broadened, the chasm dividing them grew even wider. The earliest years of their marriage were filled with hardship and poverty. But despite the economic hard times, Carey did not turn aside from his study and lay preaching, serving as pastor of two very small Baptist churches while he continued making shoes. During these years in the pastorate, his philosophy of missions began to take shape, sparked first by his reading of *Captain Cook’s Voyages*. But as he developed a biblical perspective on the subject, he became convinced that missionary work was the central responsibility of the church.

Drawing on certain Reformation teachings, many eighteenth-century churchmen believed that the Great Commission was given only to the apostles and therefore converting the “heathen” was no concern of theirs, especially if it were not tied to colonialism. When Carey presented his ideas to a group of ministers, one of them is said to have exclaimed: “Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.”⁵ But Carey would not be silenced. In the spring of 1792 he

published an eighty-seven-page book that had far-reaching consequences in its influence on Christian missions.

The booklet, *An Enquirey Into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (and that being a shortened title), very ably presented a case for worldwide missions and sought to deflate the arguments dramatizing the impracticality of sending missionaries to faraway lands. Soon after, Carey spoke to a group of ministers at a Baptist Association meeting in Nottingham, where he challenged his audience from Isaiah 54:2–3 and uttered the words that are most often associated with him: “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” The following day the ministers organized a mission agency, which became known as the Baptist Missionary Society. The decision was not made lightly. Most of the Baptist Association ministers were, like Carey, living on very meager incomes, and involvement in foreign missions meant tremendous financial sacrifices from both them and their congregations.

Andrew Fuller, the most prominent minister in support of the new society, became the first home secretary; and the first missionary appointee was John Thomas, a Baptist layman who had gone to India as a doctor for the royal navy and stayed on after his term of service to minister as a freelance missionary doctor and evangelist. Carey immediately offered himself to the new society as a “suitable companion” to Thomas and was accepted.



William Carey, the “Father of Modern Missions.”

Although Carey had long been avidly interested in missions, the decision to offer himself for overseas missions was nothing less than rash. That his church was distressed at losing its pastor and his father judged him “mad” might be overlooked, but his wife was also strongly opposed. With three little ones and another on the way, it is no wonder Dorothy was adamantly opposed to leaving her homeland to embark on a hazardous five-month voyage (complicated by France’s very recent declaration of war against England) to spend the rest of her life in the deadly tropical climate of India. Other women had willingly made such sacrifices, and thousands more would in the future, but not she. If there is a “Mother of Modern Missions,” it was not Dorothy Carey. She refused to go.

However, if Dorothy thought her refusal to accompany her husband would change his mind, she was wrong. Carey was determined to go, even if it meant going without her. He went ahead with his plans, which included booking a passage for Felix, his eight-year-old son. In March of 1793, after months of deputation, Carey and Thomas were commissioned by the Society; and the following month they, along with Felix and Thomas's wife and daughter, boarded a ship on the Thames River that was to take them to India. But the trip to India ended abruptly at Portsmouth, England. Officials boarded the ship and refused to allow the party to leave the country until Thomas had satisfied his creditors.

The delay led to a dramatic change in plans. Dorothy, having delivered her baby three weeks before, grudgingly agreed to join the mission party with her little ones, provided that Kitty, her younger sister, could accompany her. Obtaining funds for the additional passengers was a difficult hurdle, but on June 13, 1793, they boarded a Danish vessel and set sail for India. The long and dangerous voyage around the Cape of Good Hope was at times terrifying, but on November 19 they arrived safely in India.

The time of their arrival was not favorable for establishing mission work. The East India Company was in virtual control of the country, and its hostility to mission work was soon made plain. The company feared anything that might interfere with its commercial ventures, and Carey was left with no doubts that he was very unwelcome. Fearing deportation, he moved with his family to the interior. Here, surrounded by malarial swamps, the Careys lived in dire circumstances. Dorothy and the two oldest boys became deathly ill, and family cares required his constant attention. She and Kitty were "continually exclaiming against"⁶ him and were resentful of the Thomas family, who were living in relative affluence in Calcutta. After some months their plight was alleviated by the kindness and generosity of Mr. Short, an East India Company official who took pity on them and welcomed them into his home. Soon, however, the family moved on to Malda, nearly three hundred miles north, where Carey worked as an indigo factory foreman.

The years in Malda were difficult ones. Although Carey was content in his new position and found the indigo factory to be a choice language school and field for evangelism, family troubles persisted. Kitty had stayed back to marry Mr. Short, and Dorothy's health and mental stability steadily declined. Then the tragic death of their five-year-old son Peter in 1794 pushed her into serious mental illness.

Dorothy was apparently suffering from a delusional disorder that convinced her that her husband was unfaithful in their marriage. John Thomas wrote to Andrew Fuller about incidents that had occurred in 1795:

Mrs. Carey has given us much trouble and vexation.... She has taken it into her head that C(arey) is a great whoremonger, and her jealousy burns like fire unquenchable; and this horrible idea has night and day filled her heart for about 9 or 10 months past; so that if he goes out of his door by day or night, she follows him; and declares in the most solemn manner that she has caught him with his servants, with his friends, with Mrs. Thomas, and that he is guilty every day and every night.... She has even made some attempt on his life.⁷

Her mental delusions not only caused great personal turmoil for Carey but also created confusion and questions about his ministry and message. "He attempted to argue for the moral superiority of Christianity and how Christ could liberate Hindus and Moslems from the tragedies of paganism," writes James Beck. "But how could he evangelize with his wife following him through the streets accusing him in the vilest language of adultery?"⁸ It was a distressing situation, and she was later described by coworkers as being "wholly deranged."

The circumstances, not surprisingly, took a toll on Carey, as is evident in his journal entries through 1795: “This is indeed the Valley of the Shadow of Death to me.... O what a load is a barren heart.... Oh that this day could be consigned to oblivion.... Much to complain of, such another dead soul I think scarcely exists in the world.... Mine is a lonely life indeed.... My soul is overwhelmed with depression.”⁹

Despite his traumatic family situation and his continued factory work, Carey spent hours every day in Bible translation work and evangelism. By the end of 1795 a Baptist church had been established in Malda. It was a start, even though its entire membership equaled only four, and they were Englishmen. The services, however, drew curious onlookers among the Bengali people, and Carey asserted that “the name of Jesus Christ is no longer strange in this neighborhood.” But there was no fruit. After nearly seven years of toil in Bengal, Carey could not claim even one Indian convert.¹⁰

In spite of his lack of outward success, Carey was satisfied with his missionary work in Malda and was keenly disappointed to leave in 1800. New missionaries had arrived from England, and in order to avoid continual harassment from the East India Company, they settled near Calcutta in the Danish territory of Serampore. Carey’s help was urgently needed in setting up the new mission station to accommodate them, so he reluctantly set out for Serampore.

Serampore soon became the center of Baptist missionary activity in India, and it was there that Carey would spend the remaining thirty-four years of his life. Carey and his coworkers, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, referred to as the Serampore Trio, would become one of the most famous missionary teams in history. But “trio” is a misnomer. Hannah Marshman was as much a part of that team as were the men. The team is more correctly termed the Serampore quartet. “They were amazingly close-knit as a leadership team,” writes Christopher Smith. “Indeed, very few people in Britain ever realized how dependent Carey was on his partners for insight and a wide range of initiatives.”¹¹ The mission compound, which housed ten missionaries and their nine children, enjoyed a family atmosphere. The missionaries lived together and kept most things in common. On Saturday nights they met to pray and to air their grievances, “pledging themselves to love one another.” Responsibilities were divided according to abilities, and the work progressed smoothly.

The success of the Serampore Mission during the early years can be credited, in part, to Carey’s kindly disposition. His own willingness to sacrifice material wealth and to go beyond the call of duty was a continual example to the rest, and he easily overlooked the faults in others. Even in regard to Thomas, who mismanaged the mission funds—the man who had “set himself up in a fine house with 12 servants and a coach to carry him about the city”¹²—Carey could say, “I love him, and we live in the greatest harmony.” Describing his coworkers, Carey wrote: “Brother Ward is the very man we wanted.... He enters into the work with his whole soul. I have much pleasure in him.... Brother Marshman is a prodigy of diligence and prudence, as is also his wife.”¹³

The Serampore mission demonstrated effective teamwork, and there were results to show for it. Schools were organized, a large printing establishment was set up, and Carey’s translation work continued. During his years at Serampore, he translated the whole Bible in Bengali, Sanskrit, and Marathi; helped in other whole Bible translations; and translated the New Testament and portions of Scripture into many more languages and dialects. His quality, however, did not match his quantity. Home Secretary Andrew Fuller scolded him for inconsistent spelling and other problems in the copy he sent back to England for printing: “I never knew a person of so much knowledge as you profess of other languages, to write English so bad.... You huddle half a dozen periods into one.... If your Bengal N.T. shd be thus pointed I shd tremble for its fate.”¹⁴ Fuller’s fears were well-founded, and

Carey, to his bitter disappointment, found that some of his work was incomprehensible. But he did not give up. He reworked his translations until he was satisfied that they could be understood.

Evangelism was also an important part of the work at Serampore, though it progressed slowly. By 1818, after twenty-five years of Baptist missions to India, there were some six hundred baptized converts and a few thousand more who attended classes and services.

Despite his busy schedule of translation and evangelistic work, Carey found time to do more. One of his greatest achievements was the founding of Serampore College in 1819 for the training of indigenous church planters and evangelists. The school opened with thirty-seven Indian students, more than half of whom were Christians. Another area of educational achievement involved his teaching at Fort William College in Calcutta, where he was invited to become the Professor of Oriental Languages. The position not only brought in much-needed income to the missionaries but also placed them in better standing with the East India Company and gave him an opportunity to improve his language skills while being challenged by his students.

As busy as he was, Carey neglected his children, failing to give them the parenting they so desperately needed. Even when he was with them, his easygoing nature stood in the way of firm discipline, a lack that was plainly exhibited in the boys' behavior. In speaking of this situation, Hannah Marshman wrote, "The good man saw and lamented the evil but was too mild to apply an effectual remedy."¹⁵ Had it not been for her stern reprimands and William Ward's fatherly concern, the Carey boys would have gone entirely their own way.

In 1807, at the age of fifty-one, Dorothy Carey died. She had long since ceased to be a useful member of the mission family. In fact, she was a hindrance to the work. John Marshman wrote how Carey often worked on his translations "while an insane wife, frequently wrought up to a state of most distressing excitement, was in the next room."¹⁶ Marshman himself suffered from mental illness—"terror and anguish"—which Carey described as "morbid depression."¹⁷

During his years at Serampore, Carey had developed a friendship with Lady Charlotte Rumohr, born into Danish royalty and living at Serampore, hoping the climate would improve her poor health. Though she came to Serampore as a skeptic, she attended services at the mission, was converted, and was baptized by Carey in 1803. After that she devoted her time and much of her money to the work of the mission. In 1808, only a few months after the death of Dorothy, Carey announced his engagement to Lady Charlotte, causing an upheaval in the usually tranquil mission family. So great was the opposition that a petition was circulated in an effort to prevent the marriage, but to no avail. The marriage, conducted by Marshman, took place in May, just six months after Dorothy had been laid to rest.

Carey's thirteen-year marriage to Charlotte was a happy one. Charlotte had a brilliant mind and a gift for linguistics, and she was a valuable assistant in his translation work. She also maintained close relationships with the boys and became the mother they had never had. When she died in 1821, Carey wrote, "We had as great a share of conjugal happiness as ever was enjoyed by mortals."¹⁸ Two years later, at the age of sixty-two, Carey married again, this time to Grace Hughes, a widow seventeen years younger than he. Though Grace was not as well-endowed intellectually as Charlotte had been, he praised her for her "constant and unremitting care and excellent nursing" during his frequent illnesses.¹⁸

One of the most devastating setbacks that Carey faced during his forty uninterrupted years in India was the loss of his priceless manuscripts in a warehouse fire in 1812. He was away at the time, but the news that his massive polyglot dictionary, two grammar books, and whole versions of the Bible had been destroyed devastated him. Had his temperament been different, he might never have recovered, but he accepted the tragedy as a judgment from the Lord and began all over again with even greater zeal.

Carey and his colleagues were conscious of communicating the gospel effectively in the Indian culture—though ever recognizing that their efforts were trifling in comparison to what native Indians themselves would be able to do. One of their means of cross-cultural communication was through music. “Hindu ballad singers were commonly seen on the streets and marketplaces of that day,” writes Timothy George. “Carey, Marshman, and Ward assumed this role for themselves. Standing at a busy intersection of four roads, they began to sing a ‘Christian ballad.’ People looked out of their houses, stopped their business activities, and gathered around in astonishment at the sight.” The ballad related the story of an Indian man who renounced various Hindu gods and put his faith in Christ. Printed copies were distributed to the curious bystanders.¹⁹

Carey’s first fifteen years at Serampore were years of cooperation and team-work. Except for occasional problems such as the one relating to his second marriage, the little Baptist community in India lived in harmony. But the peace did not last, and the fifteen years that followed were filled with turmoil. The spirit of unity was broken when new missionaries arrived who were unwilling to live in the communal fashion of the Serampore missionaries. One missionary demanded “a separate house, stable, and servants.” There were other differences too. The new missionaries found their seniors—particularly Joshua Marshman—dictatorial, assigning them duties and locations not to their liking. The senior workers were settled into their system, and they were not open to change. Bitter accusations were made against the senior missionaries, and the result was a split between the two groups. The junior missionaries formed the Calcutta Missionary Union and began working only miles away from their Baptist colleagues. “Indelicate” was the word William Ward used to describe the situation.²⁰

The ordeal became even more critical when the Home Committee received the news and became involved. The original committee headed by Andrew Fuller no longer existed. That little committee of three had grown, and most of the members knew Carey only through his letters. Fuller and one of the other original members had died, leaving the home committee clearly stacked in favor of the junior members whom it had personally commissioned as missionaries. While Fuller had been at the helm, he had insisted for two reasons that Serampore be self-governing: “One is, we think them better able to govern themselves than we are to govern them. Another is, they are at too great a distance to wait for our direction.”²¹ But the reconstructed home committee strongly disagreed. The members believed that all the important affairs of the Serampore Mission should be under their direct control. Finally, in 1826, after years of wearying conflict, the Serampore Mission severed its relationship with the Baptist Missionary Society.

The final split between Serampore and the Baptist Missionary Society was a financial blow to the Serampore missionaries. Although the Serampore team had been financially self-sufficient during most of its history, receiving only a small percentage of its funds from England, times were changing. There were missionaries at more than a dozen outstations who needed support, and medical care was needed for others. No longer could the Serampore team support them all. Carey and Marshman (Ward having since died) had no choice but to swallow their pride and submit themselves and the mission to the authority of the Society. Soon after that a substantial sum of money and kind letters arrived from the home committee. The healing process had begun.

Carey died in 1834, leaving a legacy for other missionaries to follow. In addition to evangelism, education, and translation, he had focused his attention on social issues—particularly in his long struggle against widow burning and infanticide. But otherwise, he sought to leave the culture intact. Carey was ahead of his time in missionary methodology. He had respect for the Indian culture, and he never tried to import Western substitutes as so many missionaries who came after him would seek to do. His goal was to build an

indigenous church “by means of native preachers” and by providing the Scriptures in the native tongue, and to that end he dedicated his life.

But Carey’s influence was felt well beyond India. His work was being closely followed not only in England but also on the Continent and in America, where the inspiration derived from his daring example outweighed in importance all his accomplishments in India.

Adoniram and Ann Judson

While Carey and his colleagues were conducting mission work in India, the Judsons were initiating mission outreach in Burma. Their destination had been India, but like so many missionaries before them, they discovered the East India Company to be an unyielding barrier to missionary work. After months of complications and delays, they were forced to leave India. They painfully separated from Carey and the other missionaries and sailed to Burma. There they would spend the rest of their lives under extreme hardship and privation in an effort to bring the gospel to the people of that closed and uninviting land.

Even as layers of popular mythology surrounded Carey, so also with Ann and Adoniram Judson, who became the heroes of America’s first venture into overseas missions. As with many missionaries of this era, the biographical material is laudatory and limited by lack of original sources. According to his “official” biographer, Adoniram, due to “peculiar views of duty ... had caused to be destroyed” all of his early family letters and personal papers. And later on, during his imprisonment, Ann destroyed his more current correspondence—no doubt fearing the letters would fall into the hands of Burmese authorities.²²

Adoniram Judson was born in Massachusetts in 1788, the son of a Congregational minister. He was barely sixteen when he entered Brown University, and he graduated three years later as valedictorian of his class. During his student days, according to his biographers, he had grown close to a fellow student, Jacob Eames, who espoused deism, a denial of the personal God of the Bible. But Eames’s views made a strong impact on young Judson, who had grown dissatisfied with the biblical faith of his father. After graduation Judson returned home to teach school, but he was restless. Disregarding his parents’ pleas, he set out for New York City, hoping to become a playwright.

His stay in New York was short and unfulfilling. After a matter of weeks he was on his way back to New England, dejected and frustrated about his future. He stopped one night at an inn, during which time his sleep was interrupted by the groans of a sick man in the room next to his. In the morning, as the story goes, he inquired about the unfortunate traveler, only to be informed that the man—Jacob Eames—had died during the night. It was a terrible shock to the twenty-year-old Judson, a time for soul-searching as he slowly made his way home.

There was an air of excitement at the parsonage at Plymouth when Adoniram arrived home in September of 1808. His father was one of several ministers involved in establishing a new seminary at Andover that, unlike Harvard and the other New England divinity schools, would stand on the orthodox tenets of the faith. With the encouragement of his father and the other ministers, Adoniram agreed to enroll. He was admitted as a special student, making no profession of faith, but after only a few months he made a “solemn dedication” of himself to God.²³