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A QUIZ: WHO WAS WILLIAM CAREY?

IMAGINE A QUIZMASTER AT THE FINALS of the All India Universities competition. He asks the best-informed Indian students, "Who was William Carey?"

All hands go up simultaneously.

CHRISTIAN MISSIONARY AND BOTANIST

"William Carey was a Christian missionary," answers a science student. "And he was also the botanist after whom *Careya herbacea* is named. It is one of the three varieties of eucalyptus found only in India.

"Carey brought the English daisy to India and introduced the Linnaean system to gardening. He also published the first books on science and natural history in India, such as William Roxburgh's *Flora Indica*, because he believed the biblical view that, 'All Thy works praise Thee, O Lord.' Carey believed that nature is declared 'good' by its Creator; it is not *maya* (illusion), to be shunned, but a subject worthy of human study. He frequently lectured on science and tried to show that even lowly insects are not souls in bondage, but creatures worthy of our attention."

INDUSTRIALIST

"William Carey introduced the steam engine to India," pipes up a student of mechanical engineering. "And he was the first to make indigenous paper for our publishing industry. He encouraged Indian blacksmiths to make copies of his engine using local materials and skills."

ECONOMIST

"William Carey," announces an economics major, "introduced the idea of savings banks to India, to fight the all-pervasive social evil of usury. Carey believed that God, being righteous, hated usury, and that lending at interest rates of 36 to 72 percent made investment, industry, commerce, and economic development impossible.

"The moral dimensions of Carey's economic efforts," the student continues, "have assumed special importance in India, since the trustworthiness of the savings banks has become questionable due to the greed and corruption of the bankers and the nationalization of the banks in the name of socialism. The all-pervasive culture of bribery has, in many cases, pushed the interest rates up to as much as 100 percent and made credit unavailable to honest entrepreneurs, and has forced economists to rethink their separation of economics from morality.

"In order to attract European capital to India and to modernize Indian agriculture, economy, and industry, Carey also advocated the policy of allowing Europeans to own land and property in India.

Initially the British government was against such a policy because of its questionable results in the United States. But by the time of Carey's death, the same government had acknowledged the far-reaching economic wisdom of his stand—just as our Indian government today, after a half century of destructive xenophobia, has again opened the doors for Western capital and industry."

MEDICAL HUMANITARIAN

"William Carey," asserts a medical student, "was the first to campaign for the humane treatment for India's leprosy patients. Until his time they were sometimes buried or burned alive because of the belief that a violent end purified the body and ensured transmigration into a healthy new existence. Natural death by disease was believed to result in four successive births, followed by a fifth birth as a leper. Carey believed that Jesus' love touches leprosy patients, so they should be cared for."

MEDIA PIONEER

A student of print technology stands up next. "Dr. William Carey is the father of print technology in India. He brought us the modern science of printing and publishing, then taught and developed it. He built what was then the largest press in India. Most printers bought their fonts from his Mission Press at Serampore."

"William Carey," responds a student of mass communications, "established the first newspaper ever printed in any oriental language, because he believed that, 'Above all forms of truth and faith, Christianity seeks free discussion.' His English-language journal, *Friend of India*, was the force that gave birth to the social reform movement in India in the first half of the nineteenth century."

AGRICULTURIST

"William Carey founded India's Agri-Horticultural Society in the 1820s, thirty years before the Royal Agricultural Society was established in England," says a postgraduate student of agriculture. "Carey did a systematic survey of agriculture in India, campaigned for agriculture reform in the journal *Asiatic Researches*, and exposed the evils of the indigo cultivation system two generations before it collapsed."

"Carey did all this," adds the agriculturist, "not because he was hired to do it, but because he was horrified to see that three-fifths of one of the finest countries in the world, full of industrious inhabitants, had been allowed to become an uncultivated jungle abandoned to wild beasts and serpents."

TRANSLATOR AND EDUCATOR

"Carey," says a student of literature, "was the first to translate and publish in English great Indian religious classics such as the *Ramayana* and philosophical treatises such as *Samkhya*. Carey transformed Bengali, previously considered 'fit only for demons and women' into the foremost literary language of India. He wrote gospel ballads in Bengali to bring the Hindu love of musical recitations to the service of his Lord. He also wrote the first Sanskrit dictionary for scholars."

"Carey was a British cobbler," joins in a student of education, "who became a professor of Bengali, Sanskrit, and Marathi at Fort William College in Calcutta, where civil servants were trained. Carey began dozens of schools for Indian children of all castes, and launched the first college in Asia, at Serampore"

near Calcutta. He wanted to develop the Indian mind and liberate it from the darkness of superstition. For nearly three thousand years, India's religious culture had denied most Indians free access to knowledge; and the Hindu, Mughal, and British rulers had gone along with this high caste strategy of keeping the masses in the bondage of ignorance. Carey displayed enormous spiritual strength in standing against the priests, who had a vested, interest in depriving the masses of the freedom and power that come from knowledge of truth."

ASTRONOMER

"William Carey introduced the study of astronomy to the Subcontinent," declares a student of mathematics. "He was deeply concerned about the destructive cultural ramifications of astrology: fatalism, superstitious fear, and an inability to organize and manage time.

"Carey wanted to introduce India to the scientific culture of astronomy. He did not believe that the heavenly bodies were 'deities that governed our lives.' He knew that human beings are created to govern nature, and that the sun, moon, and planets are created to assist us in our task of governing. Carey thought that the heavenly bodies ought to be carefully studied, since the Creator had made them to be signs or markers. They help divide the monotony of space into directions—East, West, North, and South; and of time into days, years, and seasons. They make it possible for us to devise calendars; to study geography and history; to plan our lives, our work, and our social order. The culture of astronomy sets us free to be rulers, whereas the culture of astrology makes us subjects, our lives determined by our stars."

LIBRARY PIONEER

A postgraduate student of library science stands up next. "William Carey pioneered the idea of lending libraries in the Subcontinent. While the East India Company was importing shiploads of ammunition and soldiers to subdue India, Carey asked his friends in the Baptist Missionary Society to load educational books and seeds into those same ships. He believed that would facilitate his task of regenerating Indian soil and empowering Indian people to embrace ideas that would free their minds. Carey's objective was to create indigenous literature in the vernacular. But until such literature was available, Indians needed to receive knowledge and wisdom from around the world, to catch up quickly with other cultures. He wanted to make such knowledge available to Indians through lending libraries."

FOREST CONSERVATIONIST

"William Carey was an evangelist," begins a student from the Indian Forest Institute. "He thought that, 'If the Gospel flourishes in India, the wilderness will, in every respect, become a fruitful field.' He became the first person in India to write essays on forestry, almost fifty years before the government made its very first attempt at forest conservation, in Malabar. Carey both practiced and vigorously advocated the cultivation of timber, giving practical advice on how to plant trees for environmental, agricultural, and commercial purposes. His motivation came from his belief that God has made man responsible for the earth. It was in response to Carey's journal, *Friend of India*, that the government first appointed Dr. Brandis of Bonn to care for the forests of Burma, and arranged for the supervision of the forests of South India by Dr. Clegham."

CRUSADER FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

"William Carey," says a feminist social science scholar, "was the first man to stand against both the ruthless murders and the widespread oppression of women—virtually synonymous with Hinduism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The male in India was crushing the female through polygamy, female infanticide, child marriage, widow-burning, euthanasia, and forced female illiteracy—all sanctioned by religion. The British government timidly accepted these social evils as being an irreversible and intrinsic part of India's religious mores. Carey began to conduct systematic sociological and scriptural research on these issues. He published his reports in order to raise public opinion and protest both in Bengal and in England. He influenced a whole generation of civil servants—his students at Fort William College—to resist these evils. Carey opened schools for girls. When widows converted to Christianity, he arranged marriages for them. It was Carey's persistent, twenty-five-year battle against *sati*, widow-burning, which finally led to Lord Bentinck's famous Edict in 1829, banning one of the most abominable of all religious practices."

PUBLIC SERVANT

"William Carey," says a student of public administration, "initially was not allowed to enter British India because the East India Company was against the proselytizing of Hindus. Therefore, Carey worked in the Danish territory of Serampore. But because the Company could not find a suitable professor of Bengali for Fort William College, Carey was later invited to teach there. During his professorship, lasting thirty years, Carey transformed the ethos of the British administration from indifferent imperial exploitation to 'civil' service."

MORAL REFORMER

"William Carey," reflects a student of Indian philosophy, "revived the ancient idea that ethics and morality were inseparable from religion. This had been an important assumption underlying the *Vedic* religion. But the *Upanisadic* teachers separated ethics from spirituality. They thought that the human self (*Atman*) was the divine Self (*Brahma*). Therefore, our spirit cannot sin; our *Atman* only gets deluded and begins to imagine itself as distinct from God. What we require is not deliverance from sin but enlightenment, that is, a direct experience of our divinity. This denial of human sinfulness and emphasis on the mystical experience of our divinity made it possible for us in India to be intensely 'religious' yet at the same time unabashedly immoral.

"Carey began to affirm that human beings were sinners and needed both forgiveness for sin and deliverance from its power over them. He taught that it was not ignorance but sin that had separated us from God, and that it was impossible to please God without holiness. According to Carey, true spirituality began only when we repented of our sin. This teaching revolutionized the nineteenth century religious scene in India. For example, after Raja Ram Mohun Roy, one of the greatest Hindu scholars of the nineteenth century, came in contact with Carey and the other missionaries at Serampore, he began to question seriously the spirituality then prevalent in India. He summed up his conclusions thus:

The consequence of my long and uninterrupted researches into religious truth has been that I have found the doctrine of Christ more conducive to moral principles, and better adapted for the use of rational beings, than any other which has come to my knowledge.

CULTURAL TRANSFORMER

A student of history stands up last. "Dr. William Carey is the father of the Indian Renaissance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hindu India had reached its intellectual, artistic, architectural, and literary zenith by the eleventh century A.D. After the absolute monism of Adi Shankaracharya began to sweep the Indian subcontinent in the twelfth century, the creative springs of humanity dried up, and India's great decline began. The material environment, human rationality, and all that enriches human culture became suspect. Asceticism, untouchability, mysticism, the occult, superstition, idolatry, witchcraft, and other oppressive beliefs and practices became the hallmark of Indian culture. The invasion, exploitation, and resulting political dominance of foreign rulers made matters worse.

"Into this chaos Carey came and initiated the process of India's reform. He saw India not as a foreign country to be exploited, but as his heavenly Father's land to be loved and served, a society where truth, not ignorance, needed to rule. Carey's movement culminated in the birth of Indian nationalism and of India's subsequent independence. Carey believed that God's image was in man, not in idols; therefore, it was oppressed humanity—not idols—that ought to be served. He believed in understanding and controlling nature instead of fearing, appeasing, or worshiping it; in developing one's intellect instead of killing it, as mysticism taught. He emphasized enjoying literature and culture instead of shunning it as maya. His this-worldly spirituality, with as strong an emphasis on justice and love for one's fellows, as on love for God, marked the turning-point of Indian culture from a downward to an upward trend. The early Indian leaders of the Hindu Renaissance, such as Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen, and others, drew their inspiration from William Carey and the missionaries associated with him."

So, who was William Carey?

He was a pioneer of the modern Western Christian missionary movement, reaching out to all parts of the world; a pioneer of the Protestant church in India; and the translator and/or publisher of the Bible in forty different Indian languages. Carey was an evangelist who used every available medium to illumine every dark facet of Indian life with the light of truth. As such, he is the central character in the story of India's modernization.