

THE RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS IN E.M. FORSTER'S NOVELS

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We all know that Forster's pursuit of happiness and friendship between people regardless of their color, religion, political opinion and social class could be traced through all his works, fiction or nonfiction. His motto is «only connect». It is this aspiration that any reader may observe in his novels and short stories. In my study I shall try to attempt to demonstrate the social problems, particularly the religious controversies and conflicts between different communities, namely the English, the Indian (Hindu or Moslem) and the Italian. But I will prefer to confine myself to **A Passage to India** where these conflicts are more obvious. In the meantime, I will take some quotations from his other works where necessary.

Religion is one of the most important social problems in Forster's novels. The disputes and conflicts between the individuals or communities from several races and nations and their attitudes to religion and clergymen are the primary problems with which he seems to be concerned.

I think it would be worthwhile to dwell briefly upon the conception of religion of the society in which Forster was brought up and the religious scale of values he inherited from both his family and the intellectual media in his time.

Forster found himself in an intellectual aristocratic media which had played an important part in the social life of the 19th century England. Clapham Sect comprised of Evangelical Reformers of which Forster's great father was a member. This was a group of highly practical, intelligent and wealthy reformers flourished bet-

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ween 1790-1835. The followers of this society felt themselves responsible for abolishing of the slave trade, the emancipation of the slaves in the colonies, founding of missionary society to sponsor Christian teaching in Africa and the East. They also printed and published some books of religious and moral content and formed an association to support the King's effort against vice and immorality. Although the followers of this sect had a limitless sense of tolerance, they did their best to «love the Quaker, to be kind to the Presbyterian and to pity the atheist and to endure even the Roman Catholics». Among the members of this sect were some of the greatest figures of England's intellectual aristocracy centering in the four families of Trevelyan, Macaulay, Huxley and Arnold. Most of the followers of the sect who were called «saints» were also members of the Parliament and belonged to upper-middle class families. The activities of this group continued through all the years of French Revolution.

The Bloomsbury Group, which could be regarded as an extension of Clapham Sect in the 20th Century and constituted by some famous writers, artists and critics had a very considerable place in Forster's life. Most of the members of this group did not believe in religion and moral deeds and refused the conventional sense of values in art, literature and morals. Although Forster had many friends and colleagues among them he was on the edge rather than at the heart of this circle.

The most striking difference between Clapham and Bloomsbury is that the former favoured religion while the latter did not believe in religious or moral values and conventions. The members of the Clapham regarded spiritual matters as the simple and common-place matters of daily life : Here are Forster's words about his ancestors :

«For three generations it was a problem to religious Englishmen whether breakfast dishes should come in before prayers and so get cold, or should come in after, which meant a wait, and an unpleasant sense of hanging in a void between two worlds.» (1)

Though Forster was descended from a Christian family and was brought up in a Christian country and had continuously been exposed to the effects of Christian traditions throughout his life, he never believed in religion : He says

«I do not believe in Belief. But this is an age of Faith, and there are so many militant creeds that, in self-defence, one has to formulate a creed of one's own.» (2)

Among his fictional characters it was Fielding in **A Passage to India** who was believed to be the representative of the author himself with his tolerance, humanistic point of view and liberal attitudes. His thoughts remind us of Forster's own ideas on religion derived from a dialogue in the novel.

«Well, I don't believe in Providence.
But how can you believe in God?
I don't believe in God.» (3)

Forster's remarks about the other world, the life after death and the hell-and-heaven in his novels are also worth noting :

«Because the dead don't live again.
I fear not.
So do I.» (4)

The following quotation will clarify his opinion about religion. To put it in his own words we are left with the impression that he is a humanist :

«How indeed do I define myself? If I say I am an atheist the obvious retort is 'That sound rather crude'; if I say I am an agnostic the retort is «That sounds rather feeble»; if I say I am a liberal the answer is 'You can't be; On the whole humanist is the best word, though.» (5)

He seems to have reached a compromise with religion as long as it remains powerless. He likes or tolerates most religions so long as they are weak, and dreads them all, without exception, as soon as they become powerful. To Forster, Christianity, at least when it is in a position of power suggest aggressiveness, intolerance and asceticism to which he opposes the pagan elements in Alexandria culture. The object of Forster's attack is ostensibly the church of the first five centuries after Christ, but the reader is meant to make contemporary inferences and connections, to recognize in Christianity another form of self-assured and false pretension to order the truth.

In order to see how he treated this subject and his preoccupation with religious belief let us quote a few words from his non-fictional works. Such a glance will be sufficient for us to see how these ideas are reflected in his novels. I have selected the following as an example of his thoughts on religion :

My motto is «Lord, I disbelieve-help thou my unbelieve-
Elysian Field where even the immoral are admitted.
My motto is «Lord, I disbelieve-help thou my unbelieve-
lief.» (6).

The quotations we have already taken from his works reflect his ideas about religious belief in general. But, as we know, he came into contact and got familiar with other religions such as Islam, and Hinduism beside Christianity. It must be made clear what he meant by the word religion or whether he favoured any of them. So, we have to give further examples to illustrate his attitudes against Christianity, Islam and Hinduism respectively.

In one of his Italian novels, **Where Angels Fear to Tread**, Philip Herriton, a middleclass English gentleman attaches the high value to the architectural beauty of Italian church buildings. To him, Santa Deodata is one of the most beautiful churches in Italy. He finds more beauty and sincerity than there is in all the Back Kitchens of Europe. (The Back Kitchen was his nickname for St James's in Piccadilly.) On the other hand, Roman Catholics do not differ in this respect from the British. Gino, a young Italian is not in good terms with religion. He is a Catholic but he never goes to church. It is interesting to note that there is no difference between Gino's attitude and that of the British who go to church just to avoid the reproach of their fellow-citizens. They both regard religion as a series of habits rather than a system of thought or a way of life. Mrs. Moore, the middle-aged British Lady in India seems to be convinced that Christianity is poor and talkative. She knows that all its divine words such as «Let there be Light» only amount to nothing.

The most unsound and inefficient aspect of Christianity is that it does not embrace all beings but excludes many creatures. The ideal religion in Forster's mind is one where no one shall be turned away be black or white, who approaches with a loving heart.

His opinion about missionaries is quite positive. Being pious christians and well-bred people, they may be preferred to the British

officials in the colonies. On the other hand, they seemed to have failed in making converts in **A Passage to India**, although they distributed food during a famine, but they were left alone again. They were not able to unite people. His disgust for the suppressive and intolerant moral order of Christianity led him to portray the clergymen in his novels as foolish, shallow-minded and witless people. On one occasion, he was asked what he would wish be done as some kind of memorial ceremony when he died. He wanted no Christian burial, nor a concert in a Chapel. Because, «that would smell too much of religion and would be letting the humanist down.» (7)

Forster does not only disapprove the theology and clergy but he also criticizes the political power with which Christian nations applied in their colonial policy. Because this religion had not the potential power to settle down the clashes and hostilities in the world and the influence as it retains in society is due to money behind it rather than to its spiritual appeal. He holds that though Christianity may be true to preach its precepts in India it is to begin at the wrong end : physical improvement first, then intellectual, then spiritual; that seems the natural order of things. But, Ronny Heaslop, the City Magistrate in India, approves of religion as long as it confirms the National Anthem, but he objects when it attempts to influence his life. Because, he is there to protect the interests of his government so, he may be regarded as a typical representative of an official who abuses Christianity as a tool to conceal his political aim. In Forster's opinion, Christianity descended from the Heaven with a sword in his hand and divided the world into pieces.

As will be seen from the above examples that Christianity with its precepts and church and missionaries is far beyond a system of thought to make people happy or to promise a better future for mankind. We could scarcely see any hero or a character in any of his novels who attains happiness by establishing friendship owing to any religious creed or sect. Christianity is a poor religion, unable to satisfy the spiritual demands of people, nor is it a system of thought to make people of the same nation come together, let alone the individuals from different races. Regarded of the representative of dark ages it has been used in modern times as a means for political purposes and it tries to retain its power owing to the financial suport behind it.

«Adela sees no harm in Christianity, it was the shortest and easiest cut to the unseen. God who saves the King will surely support the police.» (8)

I shall now deal with Forster's treatment of Islam and the reflection of this views in the minds of the characters in his novels and then we shall try to see how Islam manifests itself as a handicap between people in their efforts to connect with each other.

Forster got introduced with Islam by the help of a friend of his, Ross Mosood, a moslem student at Oxford. But it was during the Second World War that he got into close contact with it when he was a volunteer for the Red Cross in Alexandria. He says :

«I have passed suddenly from Hinduism to Islam, and the change is a relief.» (9)

His optimistic outlook is reflected in the following words he uttered when he was visiting Tac Mahal :

«I thought nothing could be more beautiful than a muezzin with a most glorious voice gave the evening call to prayer from a mosque. 'There is no god but God'. I do like Islam, though I have had to come through Hinduism to discover it.» (10)

On another occasion in 1922 he speaks of Islam as more than a religion. It is an attitude towards life which has produced durable and exquisite civilizations. It is surprising to find the following words in **A Passage to India** which may not be a compromise with his opinion about Islam :

«Those shallow arcades (of the mosque) provided but a limited asylum. 'There is no God but God' doesn't carry us far through the complexities of matter and spirit; it is only a game with words.» (11)

On the other hand, Aziz the chief moslem hero in **A Passage to India** goes into a mosque to find relief after having been insulted by an English woman. To him, Islam is an attitude towards life both exquisite and durable where his body and thoughts found their home.

These words remind one, of his own thoughts passed through his mind when he visited a mosque in Cairo. In that mosque, there

was nothing particular to look at—only old stones—but peace and happiness seemed to flow and fill him. Islam means peace.

In spite of the dignity and unity of Islam, Forster pointed out its deficiencies and imperfection. There are numerous references in **A Passage to India** which deserve our attention in this matter. For example, there are two Hindu shrines in Mau, which were worshipped by some Mohammedans who lived near. So, Aziz found that even Islam was idolatrous and in his opinion, Moslems must get rid of such superstitions or else India will never advance.

The Deputy Magistrate Das, who was of Hindu origin, wants Aziz to write a poem for a Hindu magazine which, he thinks, would contribute to a Hindu-Moslem entente. But Aziz hesitates in composing such a poem because, Islam itself, though true, throws cross-lights over the path to freedom. The song of future must transcend **creed**.

It is possible to deduce from his words that Aziz himself had not any hope in him, for the future of Islam as far friendship is concerned between people.

As for Hinduism, it is not difficult to grasp that the rituals of this creed are not treated properly in **A Passage to India**, that is he was not impressed by its ceremonies. Because Hindus did not sing even to the God who confronted them, but to a saint; they did not do one thing which the non-Hindu would feel correct. One could not know where the God was himself and in whose honor the congregation had gathered. One of the inscriptions hanging on the wall of the Hindu temple reads «God is Love». Forster finds it meaningless and asks «God is Love». Is this the final message of India?» He describes the Hindu rites in the Temple with a humorous voice. Hindu deity is such a strange being that he can play practical jokes upon himself, draw under himself, and steal his own shirt when he bathes. The representative of Hinduism in the novel, Professor Godbole, tries to explain the theology of his creed but he is not able to present even a broad picture of Hinduism. Because, this religion even if so solid from a distance, is divided into many sects and clans. Forster's Hindus, like his Italians, shun asceticism and rigidity, but they do not have the «natural order» of the Mediterranean people. The Hindus did not distinguish between the God and the Rajah in their minds both were too far above them⁽¹²⁾.

One can study it for years with the best teachers and when he raises his head, nothing they will tell you that matters. The most interesting features of Hinduism that attracts Forster is its emphasis on individual. Because it is Hinduism that allows the individual to be alone with God. Hinduism, unlike Islam and Christianity, is not a congregational religion. He says :

«A Hindu temple is not for community worship. It is for the individual. Buddhism and Christianity have congregations and monks and sermons, so they need large places to meet in. Hinduism doesn't. Today one hears of nothing but the community spirit.» ⁽¹³⁾

Organized religion, tending always to narrowness and exclusion, is exposed in many ways in Aziz's religious snobbery, in the reluctance of the Christian missionaries to extend salvation to all.

It is interesting to note from the available evidence that although Forster had been in pursuence of close and friendly relations between individuals, he now dislikes congregations and communities. He sometimes falls in contradictions such as this, since it would be impossible for individuals to establish relations without gathering together. It seems that Forster is concerned more with the philosophy of Hinduism rather than its forms and rituals. Because, in his opinion it looks like a philosophy rather than a religion and believes in a God with a humane character.

It can be argued from the quotations I have already taken that in the novel neither Moslems nor Christians understand Hinduism and in turn, Hindus do not make any attempt to get closer to the other religions and the religious conflicts remain to be one of the main factors that prevents people to unite. Hinduism takes its place at the core of the novel just as it lies at the heart of India. In the State Mau where Western influence is waning, the cultivators, officials, tradesmen courtiers, and the nobles are united in common worship. This expresses a total outlook and way of life for them. Their religion is for them is a living force. Although Hinduism is the central factor in India, the Moslem too have been integrated into a communal Oriental civilization in which all Indians share and from which the West is excluded. Aziz and Godbole personify the divisions within India, they also represent its unity. As we have already seen that Forster never seems to take sides between any

of the religious creeds treated in his novels. Keeping this in mind, now we can go further to see the controversies between the people of different creeds in his novels.

It is not difficult to recognize the evidences of religious discrimination between the British and the Italian in **Where Angels Fear to Tread**. The members of the Herriton family of upper middle-class feel contempt for the lower class Italians, just because they are Catholics. Lilia Herriton, who is married to an Italian, has no religion in her, but she is seized with a vulgar fear that she was not married properly and her social position in the next world might be as obscure as it was in this. During a fiesta she runs across some Italian children who are blowing whistles night and day. «Oh, What a religion» is her reaction. Gino does not like his wife to get acquainted with his friends from the Italian church because Catholic priests are doomed to remain bachelors all their life. This seems strange to Lilia. Although Gino himself is not a good catholic and very seldom goes to Church, he thinks that it was a pity for her not to be a Catholic.

It should be noted here that the both parties are not to blame for the discrimination. But it is the Christian religion itself that prevents them from making friends. Because the poor, talkative Christianity cannot provide them with an opportunity to unite them. The most striking conflict is the one between Hindus and the Moslems in **A Passage to India**. Aziz and Godbole, who appear to be the representatives of their creed are good friends, but they will never be able to get rid of the prejudices for each other. When Aziz embraces the Hindu Magistrate he says «I wish they did not remind me of cow-dung.» On the other hand, Das thinks that some moslems are very violent. Furthermore, Aziz complains of Hindus as slack people. Because they have no idea of society. When Godbole was ill and was attended by another Hindu doctor, it turns out to be an incident to make Aziz say «Oh, yes, both Hindus! They hang together like flies.» (14)

The pure, plain and unsophisticated order of Islam, represented by the figure of mosque, is contrasted with the complexity and obscurity of Hindu temple. This contrast constitutes to a symbol, implying the disputes and controversies between Hindus and Moslems.

Religious inconsistency manifests itself not only among the native people of India but also between the rulers and the ruled, particularly the British and the Moslem. Having been told that his mother had a talk with a moslem, Ronny, was so surprised that he could not help but say «No, a Mohammedan?» And Aziz, when asked whether he had one wife or more than one, thinks «Damn the English, even at their best.» (15)

In the novel, someone proposes to hold a 'bridge' party in order to restore the relations between the British rulers and the natives. During the party, which was a failure, when Mrs. Turton saw Moslem ladies with veils on their faces. «Oh, these purdah women, I never thought any would come» she murmures. In Nawab Bahadur's opinion, the English ladies with no veil on their faces, are quite mysterious creatures. Mr. Hak, an Anglo-Indian, thinks that all diseases are caused by Hindus. Their ceremonies and prayers are boring and disgusting for both a moslem and a christian. There are recurring references to the difficulties of the entente between Hindus and Moslems, yet it is clear that they share more with each other than with the West. One of the subtlest achievements of the novel is the author's success in conveying to the reader a sense of the unbridgable gap between Moslems, Hindus and the English. Now I think it will be worthwhile to refer to some of the commentaries and arguments made by some critics will be worthwhile to refer to some of the commentaries and arguments made by some critics who studied Forster's works and came up with new elucidations.

One finds himself agree with Alan Wilde when he says that «Forster is interested in what the religion represents to a Western mind, and he is criticizing Christianity at least as much as he is affirming Hinduism.» Forster's interest, in fact, is in correcting the West, not in converting it to the East.

A somewhat extended unspoken therefore, embracing in love not only man but all created things, confronts us in **A Passage to India** an unspoken to which Christianity in its official capacity, is unable to subscribe adequately, but the Hindus' religion succeeds in another aspect where Anglo-Christianity fails. «God is Love». There is fun in heaven. This juxtaposition highlights in the Indian songs. The Hindus have included what Christianity has omitted : this is joy or merriment.

All spirit as well as all matter must participate in salvation, otherwise «the circle is incomplete. When religion is a living force it admits death but not sadness. Mrs. Moore died but her spirit survived her sorrow.

On the other hand, it may be said that Mrs. Moore is a link between Christianity and the atmosphere of barely understood Hinduism with which the book ends. She is a sacred memory of both to the Moslem, Aziz, and to Godbole, the Hindu. Here, Forster's goal is not probably looking for the solution of the problems, but is to talk about these subjects.

Another critic (Peter Ault) says that Mr. Forster is an agnostic in religion and an agnostic of the second generation, Eight years ago, this kind, of peaceful non belief was common. It is rarely met today. For the Victorian, agnostic was a christian agnostic: he assumed some form of protestant theology and found himself unable to accept it. In *A Room With a View*, Forster has displayed for us another, in character of old Mr. Emerson, a man whose abundant zest appears to other source except affection for his son and an intense dislike of priests. Again, there some other critics who think taht Forster is suggesting behind the Moslem God, and the Christian God, sits enthroned, the God of acceptance, who embraces all things, not because they are sensible, or admirable, or right or pitiable, or lovable, or in any way worthy, but simply because he is, and they are (16).

It is possible to deduce from the above descriptions and the quotations we have already taken from his novels that none of the characters have attained happiness of constructed friendly relations with each other. The British family lost their daughter and her baby. The young Italian was not able to make a good husband and lost his son. The moslems and the British people fell into trouble and were not able to turn their friendship into intimacy. Aziz is not a pious moslem, nor Godbole is a devoted Hindu, nor Mrs. Moore is a devout Christian.

Forster seems unsatisfied with the teaching of Christianity, nor he is able to know and understand the real spirit and the universal message of Islam. He never identified himself with Hinduism. He is dissapointed in attaining friendship through any religion, particularly Christianity. He also fails to see Islam as a way of life

and a social order, but only as a code of moral values. He has nothing to offer as a substitution for either of these religions.

When the boats collide in **A Passage to India** The Christians, The Hindus and the Moslems are in the water. From this symbolic wetting, English, Moslem and Hindu go their separate ways. The collision of boats is in fact the collision of cultures and beliefs.

To conclude, I should say that he is not able to come up with a solution for these problems and to eliminate these obstacles between people. So, his questions remain unanswered and his aspirations for universal connection and unity becomes, then, nothing but an utopic idea.

NOTES

- 1 — E. M. Forster, **Two Cheers for Democracy**, London, 1972, p : 186-187
- 2 — ———, *Ibid*, p : 65
- 3 — ———, **A Passage to India**, London, 1960, pg : 116
- 4 — ———, *Ibid*, p : 250
- 5 — ———, «A Letter», **Twentieth Century Literature**, Vol. 157, (Feb 1955) pg : 99
- 6 — ———, **Two Cheers for Democracy**, pg : 65
- 7 — Oliver Stallybrass (Ed), «Forster as a Humanist» in **Aspects of E. M. Forster**, London, 1969, p : 75-76
- 8 — E. M. Forster, **A Passage to India**, London, 1960
- 9 — ———, **Hill of Devi**, London, 1965, p : 152
- 10 — ———, *Ibid*, p : 124
- 11 — ———, **A Passage to India**, p : 287
- 12 — ———, «The Individual and his God» (December 3, 1945) p : 800
- 13 — ———, *Ibid*, p : 801-802
- 14 — ———, **A Passage to India**, p : 109
- 15 — ———, *Ibid*, p : 160
- 16 — Nancy Hale, «A Passage to Relationship» **Antioch Review**, **xxi**, (Spring 1960,) p : 19-30