CONVERSION FROM PREJUDICE

By PHILIP SHELDRAKE

BECAUSE PREJUDICE, while deeply rooted in the human condition, is too close to the jungle for comfort, it is always tempting to view it in the abstract; to keep it at a safe distance. The fundamental prejudice we have to overcome is that *we* are not prejudiced. It costs a great deal, particularly for people brought up in a liberal environment, to admit to such raw feelings. I make no excuses, therefore, for the fact that much of this article is anecdotal and is an attempt to reflect on my own experience.

Our response to the prejudice of others is very revealing. It often touches areas in our own lives that we have not looked at very carefully, do not want to examine deeply lest what we find undermines some of the cherished myths we have about ourselves. The cruder or more alien the prejudice, the better, for then we can more easily retreat into superiority which preserves our supposed integrity. In the midst of telling a group of friends and myself how British he now felt, a waiter, an Italian immigrant of the 1960s, asserted that what he most treasured about the British way of life was being undermined by 'all those blacks we let in nowadays'. We let the chance remark pass as the conversation moved on, silenced by a fear of making a scene in front of our overseas guest.

It is easy enough to feel righteous anger when faced with prejudice as blatant as that. When the prejudice is expressed more 'reasonably' and by someone similar to ourselves, it is more difficult. Hence I felt a deep discomfort when a liberal-minded acquaintance expressed shock that one of his children wanted to marry a coloured person. 'Of course it's their children I worry about . . .' It makes you realise how easy it is for the 'civilised views' we espouse to evaporate. Our 'conversion from prejudice' is never safe or complete.

The period I spent in India in 1980–81 was by far the most challenging and all-embracing experience of coming to terms with prejudice that I have had so far because it was my first head-on

confrontation with a completely different world. For the first time I knew what it was to be one of a minority, both as a European and as a Christian. Being consistently part of a dominant group makes you insensitive to minorities. A one-dimensional cultural and religious experience makes you less tolerant of differences. In a sense, the context within which I went (the final 'spiritual year' of my Jesuit formation) was an advantage for it emphasised receiving and learning rather than acting, ministering or changing things. The struggle, during a thirty-day retreat near the beginning of my stay, to be more passive, more accepting of what was rather than what should be, more able to receive God's gifts, became an important symbol of the whole experience.

However, I arrived in India with two disadvantages. Firstly, I was if anything over-prepared for the 'problems' that everyone had said I would meet: the poverty, the heat, lack of hygiene and health. I was nervous about exposure—would I, could I cope? One experience in the first week helped me considerably even if it did not immediately solve every problem. I was asked to assist a group of men from some of the worst slums in the city to transport and unload a truck full of concrete blocks that were to be used to build a school-room. There I experienced some of the worst poverty and disease that I was to see in India. But throughout the day I was introduced to people, chatting where I could and receiving their hospitality. They were individuals with names, not examples of deprivation. It was only afterwards that I was briefly aware of the shock to my system but that was not what remained with me. Rather it was the people's natural courtesy and friendliness to me, a total stranger stepping briefly into their world.

The second disadvantage was, I suppose, that I shared in a collective British vision of India associated with roughly three hundred and fifty years of presence in the sub-continent and which affects perceptions of the present. Like many children of my generation I had relatives who had served in India and my parents had close friends whose family had been there for several generations—a source of many fascinating stories. I fell in love with the *idea* of India at an early age and it cast a magic spell over my imagination. This early naive and romantic image was tempered later by a more realistic picture gained from absorbing serious history and current affairs but the original mysterious fascination of the place did not disappear entirely.

So I arrived with some unquestioned presuppositions about my own culture as well as that of India. I was aware, of course, that I would encounter many external differences. What I really did not anticipate (and how could I in the abstract?) was that the real challenge would be different ways of relating and of seeing the world as well as different values—expressed most graphically, perhaps, to a Westerner by an apparently casual attitude to time and our notions of efficiency.

I had absorbed a certain amount of post-imperial guilt and so was prepared to meet nationalism and, perhaps, some anti-British feeling. What I found was far more ambiguous and that itself was a problem. Apart from the natural courtesy of Indians to any stranger, I also experienced, for the liberal-minded Briton, an embarrassing amount of deference to the white Sahib. I could cope with sharp criticisms of the dominant influence of British multi-nationals as well as with comments such as 'Why are all British people racist?' (in reaction to some alarmist reports of the 1980 summer riots at home). I could come to terms with the rather tendentious presentation of British rule in India that I once observed in a museum dedicated to Gandhi because I had to admit that it was no more partial, after all, than the history I had been taught at school. What I found, paradoxically, more difficult to make sense of was the degree of openness to the good things of the British Raj—even, in some more extreme cases, a positive nostalgia.

Should I accept many Indians' belief that what held the country together, with its multitude of races and languages and faiths, was what the British had bequeathed: the political and legal system, the education system, the English language and of course the railways? Or should I feel that these things were an unnatural elitist superstructure imposed on a population who were largely untouched by the 'benefits'? It was easy, alternately, to laugh at or be horrified by the antics of middle-class city people in the hill-stations, aping British 'sporting' clothes and outdated modes of speech, and by the private schools on the British model. How do you react to university students who take you to a coffee bar and solemnly take you to task because 'the British so often do not match up to our high expectations'? Indian myths about us were almost more difficult to cope with than mine about them. Hardly surprising that I was confused.

Finally I shared partly in a common belief that the 'spirituality' of India contrasts with the materialism of the West. There is an element of truth in this perception. The vast empty spaces of the Indian interior free the spirit in a way that is overwhelming to someone brought up in the neat compactness of the English countryside. India is still naturally religious in a way that we have lost in Europe. There is a profound interpenetration of the sacred and secular in the lives of most Indians. Hills and rivers are sacred. Hermits and wandering holy men are normal sights. Hinduism, the dominant religious culture, has deep roots in the land rather like medieval popular Christianity. For most of its adherents it is a religion that is prior to words and articulation. I was made aware of how wordy and cerebral our faith has become and I discovered the need to recover other dimensions. I was challenged to see my own faith in a new way. I learned to appreciate something of the religious values of Hinduism (not least through the many conversations I had with a young Brahmin friend) and yet found that my sense of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and of the Christian way of relating to God deepened. However, some Western ideas about 'mystic India' are just naive. I had to accept that India was very much a country of the senses and not merely of the spirit. All the senses are invaded at once. There is little privacy in the vast crowds of humanity—indeed Indian life is essentially communal. The sunlight and the kaleidoscope of colours strain the eyes. The noise of people, rickshaw horns and canned music assaults the ears. And India is a total olfactory experience—the sweet, the sour, the subtle and explicit.

Because India is such a strong country it has a way of forcing itself on your attention. More than one writer about the place has suggested that 'India always wins'. Certainly its invasion is difficult to resist. From the first moment that I allowed myself to be exposed I was profoundly challenged. Inevitably there was a period of resistance, not merely to India but also to what the invasion seemed to be doing to me. 'Why can't they be like us? Why can't they do things right . . . more efficiently?' The emotional reactions at this stage of resistance are very powerful. There is anger and frustration and an almost frantic desire to get people to do things correctly, even though you realise that this is unreasonable and merely saps vital energy. You tend to typecast people, which is another way of saying that you make them 'manageable' and refuse to let them be themselves. Some foreigners develop a

paranoid suspicion so that even perfectly innocent gestures of friendly interest are misinterpreted. There is also the temptation to retreat as far as possible. This may mean screening out certain experiences so that they cannot touch you. Or it may mean a retreat into exaggerated 'otherness'. It is easy to become a caricature of the pukka Sahib, looking aloof and bossing the locals around.

Ultimately you have to choose. Either you continue to insist on your way of seeing things and behaving or you begin to adapt. I suspect that if you choose the first you will not be able to maintain the charade for long but will be forced to leave. But even if you begin to accept that there is another way of approaching life, there are still some pitfalls. You think that you now understand India and expect Indians to be true to your one-dimensional image of authenticity. The westernised Indian is despised as 'inauthentic'. The frequent mixture of British and Indian styles (Madras lawyers emerge from the High Court in shirt, black tie, jacket and academic gown above and dhoti and bare legs below the waist) appears merely ludicrous. Industrial cities and slick westernised shopping avenues seem so tasteless. The countryside, the 'real India', becomes romanticised.

In a sense both these stages are associated with static ideas of culture and preconceived value-judgements against which reality is measured. The latter, untidier than theory, inevitably fails to live up to such abstract notions. A further and most important stage therefore is to cease to resist reality as it is. Gradually I came to realise that India exists on its own terms. It is not a static reality any more than my culture is. It is not an ideal culture any more than mine. Acceptance is not total naivety. It involves the freedom to accept the ambiguities, to recognise that all ways of seeing, theirs as well as mine, are relative. It is not the substitution of one cultural perspective for another but rather an understanding that both are partial and complementary.

Realistically I have to say that I never totally transcended my 'otherness' in India. There were still some moments when I had to screen out some experiences in order to survive. I also had to accept that my thirty-five years of (relatively) pampered physical existence in Britain made it impossible to identify with the average Indian's life-style on a daily basis. The former British hill stations may be oases of unreality in comparison to the India of the plains but there were moments when they were a blessed relief.

When I returned to England I went through a period of reverse culture-shock. That, I suppose is some measure of the degree to which I had begun to identify with another culture. So, despite an initial struggle, my exposure to a different world did not drive me back into my prejudices. Undoubtedly this had a great deal to do with the fact that I was offered real and generous friendship by a number of Indians whom I came to respect and appreciate. Through them it was possible to begin to know and love their world. Relationships play an important part in conversion from prejudice but part of the problem in living in another culture is precisely that ways of relating are themselves different. In many ways this barrier is the hardest to overcome. It is on this level of interpersonal communication that one makes the most frequent errors. It takes patience to get behind the different ways of thinking and of seeing reality, the different expectations and perhaps most of all the different sense of humour. You are free to do this only once the initial period of resistance has been worked through.

I have not talked of 'race' or 'racism' in describing my own experience of prejudice. Clearly colour is an easily identifiable symbol of something much wider and deeper: the 'other', the different and therefore threatening, the unknown and therefore frightening. I am aware of this wider racism in my early resistance to the reality of India. It would be dishonest to say 'I didn't see brown or white, only people'. Part of 'seeing people' is not to reduce them to an amorphous mass without differentiation. Part of a conversion from prejudice is to be able to experience brown as beautiful as much as white.

Further reflection, however, led me to see that there was another reason why I had been changed. I arrived in India with presuppositions, but equally I was already open to the possibility of learning and to a movement of change in my life. I knew that I could be and had been prejudiced in small ways. Through previous experience I had learned that to change was ultimately not dangerous. This fact is important because new experiences in themselves may provoke a variety of different reactions. It is necessary to have a certain level of inner freedom and security for such experiences to be a catalyst for conversion. Perhaps it is true, as some people say, that only free people are safe to travel. For over a year after my return from India I had to reflect continuously about my experiences in order to make sense of them and, in the course of this reflection, I found myself thinking a great deal about the

nature of prejudice, where it comes from and how and why we are converted or not.

Prejudice is a judgement formed before due examination or consideration, hasty and premature. It is a bias, a preconceived opinion (whether favourable or unfavourable). And, vitally, prejudice is a *feeling,* prior to actual experience. Where, in practice, do such feelings come from? My experience is that the most deeply-rooted originate from 'parents', by which I mean individuals or groups whose presuppositions instinctively I do not question.

All of us have inherited or absorbed presuppositions about people (whether individuals or groups), about things, behaviour or events. Out of these we have constructed a particular world-view, a way of ordering our experiences, giving them meaning, establishing values and making choices. Prejudice may be either positive (in favour of all that reinforces that world-view) or negative (a rejection of anything that threatens, challenges, undermines or contradicts it). Because prejudices are precisely those presuppositions that intimately affect the way we order our world, they involve a *commitment* that goes far deeper than the level of reason. Prejudice is a feeling and so the common reaction to things that threaten this will also be feelings, whether of anger, fear, sorrow or general defensiveness.

A really hard question we have to face is whether and in what sense we need our 'prejudices'. A commitment that is immediately undermined by new facts or unpalatable events is hardly a real commitment. Certainly it should not be blind—we have to accept the limits of our perspectives and the provisionality of our judgements. And yet we need a world-view—we cannot live effectively in an unstructured context without values. Equally our capacity to love will demand that we make some committed relationships and that is a kind of 'prejudice' in favour of people, even when later we learn less palatable facts about them. Equally the scriptures may be said to describe a highly 'prejudiced' God who is revealed as the one who remains faithful despite the evidence of sin, failure and sheer human stubbornness.

It seems to me that an important element in our initially negative reactions to anything that challenges our world-view is that it also seems to attack our personal identity. This applies, without doubt, to my early reactions to India but I had already experienced some growth in this area in the context of my religious identity. Although in a sense I come from a plural religious background (my father

was an Anglican and so was my first school) I was nevertheless effectively brought up in the kind of Roman Catholic atmosphere and mentality that was typical of the era before Vatican II. To be a Roman Catholic in the British context was to know oneself to be part of a small minority, to possess something special and to be the true inheritor of the country's past (those great medieval cathedrals 'used to be ours'). We were marked out from the general crowd not merely by history but also by very different styles of worship, by devotions and practices such as 'fish on Fridays'. Catholics tended to build their social lives around relationships in the parish and in their schools. Our religion was a total affair that went far beyond worship into social and cultural identity. The ghetto, if at one time a necessary way of surviving, became a chosen way of existing. And there was always the collective memory of our particular history (peopled not infrequently by martyrs) to which we had to be faithful and which acted as a kind of collective conscience against any tendency to compromise.

I doubt that I consciously questioned any of this. Yet, it was in my school days that the seeds of something different were also sown. The Catholic independent school where I spent ten years drew its pupils not only from a range of Christian denominations but also from other faiths. As we reached our teens there was a certain friendly exchange of polemics and apologetics. Doubtless the word ecumenism was not part of our vocabulary in those days and yet mutual respect leading to appreciation and understanding took root beneath the surface of those exchanges. Whether we knew it or not, we were undergoing a practical education in plurality and tolerance which undoubtedly affected our developing religious perspectives. Later there were to be other important experiences and influences, but this was a vital starting point.

My ability to be open to further experiences had a great deal to do with the fact that this initial challenge to prejudice was in the context of friendship. It is often asserted that prejudice is ignorance. However, mere exposure to *facts* does not necessarily revise our prejudices. Indeed such exposure may simply reinforce them. I have known people who regularly witness the plight of the unemployed and the poverty and deprivation of an inner city and whose belief that the poor are simply lazy has not been changed at all, because the apathy and hopelessness that are part of the pathology of poverty simply confirm their prejudices. Prejudice is ignorance,

to them. The beginnings of my practical education in ecumenism were in human relationships that slowly enabled me to recognise the presence of Christ in the other, in the different. Without human commitment you merely type-cast people and caricature their values. If you allow people to get close to you and accept them as equals, it is difficult to keep at a distance important parts of what makes them who they are. Years later, in India an important element in 'conversion' was once again the experience of friendship.

Finally, my reflection on the experience of India made me realise that if, in the end, I had not felt the need to reject India's invasion of my consciousness, neither had I felt the need to reject my own culture in order to accommodate another. Through previous experiences, God had, not without some pain and confusion on my part, given me an assurance of his love and care and a realisation that this was more fundamental than the external structures of my life or individual elements of my world-view. Consequently the realisation of cultural diversity in India did not undermine the sense that there was the same loving God behind the diversity. I also discovered in the initial experience of confusion in India that I was not rootless. England, for all its limitations, made me what I was and to reject it would be to turn away from something essential about myself. There was, if you like, a 'prejudice' in favour of my own past and the validity of my own story. Many of the young Europeans I met in India appeared to be refugees, wandering from one culture to another in search of somewhere to be at home. To enter fruitfully into the unfamiliar you need in some sense to know where you belong. Thus the experience of India led, for me, to a realisation that the freedom to change ways of seeing must build on a security about what I already was.

In the end, I suppose, I came to see that I was not facing a dialectical choice: accept India and reject my own culture or vice-versa. Perhaps the presupposition behind all prejudice is that there can only be one way of seeing and doing. My conversion in India, incomplete though it undoubtedly was, consisted in learning how to accept both my own culture and another as equal in value. My previously simple world had been turned upside down and this could not be reversed. Too many values and assumptions had been questioned. Too many things that had once seemed so important, materially, socially and religiously were relativised.