Carey’s Ark: Charting Sea-Lanes
From Enlightenment to Evangelicalism

“…lifting high the light of knowledge/
answering the clarion call…”


On June 13, 1793, a Baptist pastor from the English midlands named William Carey, his wife Dorothy, his children Peter, William, Felix and Jabez, his sister-in-law Kitty, and a surgeon set sail from Dover, England bound for Calcutta, India. Their mission was audacious if not foolhardy: to Christianize Hindu and Muslim India. Their ship, a Danish East Indiaman called the *Kron Princess Maria*, weighed 600 tons and was 130 feet long.

Its sails occupied three masts and its copper bottom promised enhanced speed. On its journey the *Kron Princess Maria*, which was careful to avoid dead zones of little or no wind, followed northeast trade winds past the Brazilian coast. It then rounded the Cape of Good Hope as the Portuguese sailor Vasco da Gama had done nearly three hundred years before. On November 11, after a five-month journey that would later take steam ships only thirty days, southeast trade winds and the southwest monsoon swept the *Kron Princess* into the Bay of Bengal and Calcutta, India. Once ashore, Carey’s party sought to earn a living and began a protracted round of language study, social reform and evangelization.

Why did Carey, a cobbler by trade, subject his family to a one-way journey into an alien culture where, in defiance of “the abominable East India Company monopoly,” he would be engaged in illegal activities? Those who celebrate Carey as the “Father of

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Modern Missions” treat Carey’s Enquiry of 1792 as evidence that he forecast his destiny in India. Accordingly, S. Pearce Carey’s 1923 biography gave the sea journey, the middle passage of Carey’s life, a short and unremarkable chapter. Timothy George’s Faithful Witness contrasts the human elements of “Five Months at Sea” with Carey’s devout preparation for his task amid dangers of surf and soul. Early nineteenth-century gazetteers of missions and modern studies of missiology treat the sea voyage merely as an intermission of sorts between a visionary British career and subsequent trials and missionary triumphs in India. According to these readings, the difficulties that Carey encountered became the raw materials of missionary heroism: when Carey faltered or was challenged, God delivered him; when Carey succeeded, God’s Providence reigned.

Mainstream historians have ignored Carey’s sea journey. Instead they have emphasized Carey’s role in stimulating a renaissance of the Bengali language and his colleagues’ disrespect for Hindu culture. Carey remains, in their view, a sub-cultural figure. His zeal, rigid doctrines, and cultural intolerance were marks of a reactive missionary movement that ran counter to the intellectual trends of the day. He, like many missionaries in their view, was something of a Don Quixote. His career, therefore, formed little more than a short-lived ornament of the British Empire in India.

Postcolonial and feminist scholars, meanwhile, have insisted that Carey was a half-

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4 William Carey’s Journal, June 13, 1793 in Carter, p. 3.
5 S. Pearce Carey, pp. 136-139.
7 Miron Winslow, A Sketch of Missions; or History of Attempts to Propagate Christianity among the Heathen (Andover, Massachusetts: Flagg and Gould, 1819).
8 Timothy George, Faithful Witness.
witting accomplice in the evils of imperialism. In their view, his wooden understandings of “Serampore Bengali” failed to move Indians he sought to reach. Despite their contradictory conclusions, mainstream historians and Carey scholars agree that Carey the cobbler was not reborn of water but formed his reputation from a slow harvest of conversions made on India’s wet and stormy ground. This lecture contests that proposition.

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Reconsideration of Carey’s sea journey enables us to place Carey in contexts afforded by two of the greatest themes of modern history, Enlightenment and Evangelicalism. Enlightenment was an intellectual and cultural movement of the eighteenth century. It reacted against seventeenth century wars of religion and alleged claims by the Pope and the French King to “Universal Monarchy.” It favored an alternative: civil society, a republic of states and letters based upon the dictates of reason. It touted as its ideal figure the skeptical Frenchman, Voltaire. In Carey’s own words, Voltaire made Christianity “the butt of his ridicule and sarcasm” while “the Encyclopaedists attacked Christianity in a more grave manner. Gibbon and Hume did likewise and a host of novelists and writers for the theatre and pamphleteers followed in the rear.”

Historians construe Evangelicalism, by contrast, as a nineteenth century romantic reaction against enlightened civility. Evangelicals, it is supposed, resisted the Enlightenment’s doubts about revealed religion as found in the Bible. Whereas proponents of Enlightenment preferred natural religion, which disclaimed miracles and

special dispensations of Christianity, Evangelicals quite literally “revived” revealed religion, the notion that God intervenes in history to reveal Himself to humankind. Despite its reactionary qualities, Evangelicalism constituted a religious revival that formed the foundation of respectability, duty and piety during the reign of Queen Victoria, which began three years after Carey’s death. Carey often falls between the two stools of Enlightenment and Evangelicalism. He was too devout for Enlightenment, too young and too old and, in India, certainly too remote for Evangelicalism. He is usually categorized, then, by that singular, yet lonely, title of “Father of Modern Missions.” This lecture will attempt to re-locate him according to categories that both Carey’s biographers and mainstream historians can recognize.

The sea held a place of crucial significance for Europeans poised to make the leap of Orientalist faith that Carey proposed. The notion of the sea as a connecting feature was important, but so was the notion of heightened peril. Unlike Bristol, a port town where Baptists supported a thriving academy, Carey’s home county of Northamptonshire was landlocked, an English version of Iowa. India, meanwhile, was a frontier where English adventurers sought to become wealthy nabobs (an eighteenth century term for overnight billionaires). Upon their return home, nabobs had their portraits painted as they bestrode English soil, with their country house, symbol of domestic power, in the background. In Carey’s sea-journey, by contrast, a desperate missionary urge and difficulties of sea-life complicated conventional notions of domesticity, of home. As a one-way trip, an exile or escape, Carey’s journey strained emotions and principles like the creaking of a storm-tossed ship. Merely to make the trip, Carey violated his Sabbatarian custom, traveling on

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Sunday to reach Dover. The *Kron Princess Maria* was, after all, an odd vessel for an English republican to choose. But Carey, like the American Revolutionaries, took refuge with an opposing monarchy, in this case the Danes. Carey’s associations raise questions, particularly in 1793, the year of Louis XVI’s guillotining, about his allegiance to the British Crown. The physical risk for Carey and his family compounded political risk. In a voyage two days short of five months, when they were “in Europe, Africa, South America, and Asia,” they never entered a harbor or took on a passenger or mail. They were, for that time, a self-contained society.

There was also some doubt as to who was in charge of the missionary journey. Unlike the inexperienced Carey, who continued to use land-based metaphors such as “field” and “vineyard” even on board ship, Carey’s colleague, the surgeon, John Thomas, was a veteran sea traveler and originally the senior member of the entourage. Earlier, Thomas’s surgeon’s post on board the HMS *Earl of Oxford* afforded him relief from the demands of land-bound creditors. Thomas, perhaps finding it easier to forgive his own debts than his own debtors, equated sojourns on land with his own godlessness: “I hardened in harbor into my old sins and forgot the God of my mercies.” As Thomas rushed aboard ship at Dover with luggage brought by boat at night to avoid pirates or bill-collectors, he wrote to London friends: “May the God of Jacob be ours and yours by sea

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14 S. Pearce Carey, p. 138.
17 Chute, p. 13.
and land, for time and eternity.” Carey’s wife Dorothy may have expected the trip to require an eternity. A reluctant passenger accompanied by small children and seasickness, Dorothy displayed an attitude that varied with the ship’s proximity to land. Before the Kron Princess rounded the Cape at the tip of South Africa, Dorothy looked back, Thomas wrote, like Lot’s wife. Afterwards, if her salty tears did not subside, she turned her hopes toward a life on the marshy ground of India.

India, the safe harbor at the conclusion of this first and only missionary journey, was a forbidding place. Hospitable to a fault, Indians had their good graces challenged by British commercial expansion that had occurred since the British victory at Plassey in 1757. The conclusive British victory at Seringapatam lay six years in the future when Carey’s party traveled, but it was already evident that commercial conquest was imminent. Indian tea, pepper, precious metals, textiles and indigo formed staple items of British imperial profit. Indian labor was proverbially cheap and abundant and designed to stay that way. On the social side, languages, smells, tigers, snakes militated against a vision of India as a promising settler colony for English missionaries of humble status. They journeyed into the unknown totality of alien cultures and beliefs. Carey recognized as much when, tired of observing flying fish and experiencing storm-tossed rolls of the ship, he reveled in the mere glimpse of some Hindu boatmen prior to their embarkation at Calcutta.

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19 Drewery? Carter?
Sea travel carried dangers of intrusions from enemies without and extra precautions had to be taken. A frigate escorted Carey’s ship to repel French privateers.\textsuperscript{22} The world was at war over the French Revolution. Three passengers died on board. They were an African woman and her child, who were ill at departure, and a carpenter, who died of pleurisy only six months before the ship reached Calcutta.\textsuperscript{23}

Nor was the trouble merely the threat posed by storms, diseases, pirates and dead zones. Uneasy social mingling occurred on shipboard. Ship passage did not quite replicate the state of nature that Enlightenment philosophers opposed to the Christian account of Eden. But it certainly raised questions about the construction of civil society in ways that must have given pause of Carey, a republican who applauded the French Revolution as an opportunity for evangelism. The Revolution was, Carey wrote, “God’s answer to the recent concerted praying of his people.” Through it, “a glorious door opened, and likely to be opened wider, for the gospel, by the spread of civil and religious liberty, and by the diminution of Papal power.”\textsuperscript{24}

Despite attempts at segregation, people were thrown together on shipboard with scant regard for age, gender, social station, religious preference or disposition. Carey immediately had occasion to be aware of his marginal social status. John Thomas was convinced that other passengers were “very sensible” that they were of a “better rank,” having paid much more for their voyage. The Carey party, he claimed, had “expected to be treated accordingly, and determined to endure it.”\textsuperscript{25}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{22} Ibid.
\bibitem{23} Beck, p. 89.
\bibitem{25} Eustace Carey, \textit{Memoir of William Carey, D. D.: Late Missionary to Bengal, Professor of Oriental Languages in the College of Fort William, Calcutta} (Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1836), p. 66.
\end{thebibliography}
his first taste of social dislodgement that would culminate in his uncompromising Indian encounter with widow burning and the caste system.

On land, entrenched hierarchy based upon ownership of real estate was a nuisance to men of energy, faith, intelligence and disadvantages of birth. On a ship, imperiled hierarchy became instead a refuge from storms and social intrusions. The primary comforter on board ship was the captain. Carey the anti-monarchist had always been captivated by captaincy. As a youth he was playfully called “Columbus”—although one trusts that Carey’s shoe-leather globe was more accurate than Columbus’s calculations regarding Asian geography!26 In later life it is difficult to disentangle Carey’s missionary urge from that of the explorer. Carey paid close attention to the published writings of Captain James Cook.27 Fortunately, amid strife and squalor aboard ship, Carey found the “well-bred”28 captain of the Kron Princess Maria to be “a wide reader, and one of the most polite and accomplished gentlemen that ever bore the name of a sea-captain.”29 The captain in this case was an English-born naturalized Dane. Born “J. Smith,” he took the name of Captain Christmas, though he seems to have, as Ebenezer Scrooge admonished in Dickens’ Christmas Carol, kept Christmas in his own way. One of Carey’s biographers describes Captain Christmas as “uninterested in religion.”30 Yet Carey seems to have respected Christmas for his propriety and civility. Captain Christmas owned his own ship and was, as half-brother to Lady Langham of Cottesbrook, socially connected. Carey’s journey to India was Christmas’s maiden voyage as captain and, upon the recommendation of his brother, who lived in London, Christmas welcomed Carey’s party

27 S. Pearce Carey, pp. 5, 13, 39, 44, 53, 73, 82, 95.
28 John Thomas to _______, October 26, 1793, Eustace Carey, Memoir, p. 66.
to his table, checked on their needs twice a day, and gave them better cabins than their tickets allowed. His recommendation that they lodge at Danish-controlled Serampore anticipated Carey’s providential sense by six years.

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But all was not lordly hospitality on board. Carey found a great deal of time to study Bengali for his translation project. But the voyage was less stimulating to him than he made Paul’s missionary journeys seem in the *Enquiry*. Carey confided to his journal that his sea voyage afforded several opportunities for him to debate a “French deist” named Barnard. Deists acknowledged the existence of God upon the testimony of reason but rejected revealed religion as contained, say, in the Bible. For them, all religions were equally useful and equally speculative, if not false. The first debate between Carey and Barnard took place on “the Lord’s Day,” June 16, three days after setting sail. Carey called Barnard “the Old Deist… one of the most presumptuous wretches that ever I heard.” Carey associated Barnard’s attitudes with the moral turbulence of sea travel. He noted, contrastingly, that his family met “with innumerable civilities from every body on board, but have most awful proof of the Awful effects of human depravity when heightened by bad principles.” On July 1 Carey had a “long conversation” with Barnard and reported that he “never found a man so hardened and determined to turn

29 S. Pearce Carey, p. 136.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
Scripture to ridicule as him—Oh how dreadfully depraved is human nature.  

Carey coupled religious concerns with hopefulness regarding civility.

Carey could be at sea when he was on land. He inferred that Mr. Charles Short who was his host at a Debhatta bungalow was a “deist” even though Short was not “hardy enough” to avow deism himself. Carey praised Short’s hospitality and gentlemanly manners but tellingly noted that he “is a Stranger to Religion and I cannot, therefore, enjoy that freedom which I could at home.” That statement alerts us to look beyond Carey’s journal entries on deists to his personal associations. His encounters with deists are best seen as negotiation. His approach offers evidence that he saw deism as a pose for the depraved and not a true specimen of Enlightenment. Nevertheless, he was convinced that deists might be engaged. His sister-in-law Kitty agreed. She not only was engaged to Short but married him, apparently with Carey’s approval.

As the sea was a venue for enlightenment, so it was a conduit for commerce that exported civility. As such, it offered a medium for news, goods, social change and cultural interchange. Adam Smith thought that the “discovery” of America and of a sea passage to India were of surpassing historical importance, but noted that “the commercial benefits which can have resulted from these events have been sunk and lost in the dreadful misfortunes which they have occasioned.”

Carey also treated the sea variously. It could be a metaphor for all that was shifting and uncertain. Of his missionary colleague John Thomas, Carey wrote “he is much more fitted to spend his life at sea than upon land—he certainly is not an economist and his absence of mind is so extraordinary

35 William Carey’s Journal, July 1, 1793 in Carter, p. 5.
as to appear often like inattention. When pursuing anything, let it be of ever so trivial a nature, he is so completely absorbed in it as to disregard everything else tho ever so important or necessary. And if he once forms a low opinion of anyone his prejudices run so high as to suspect everything that is done or said by that person. Using a metaphor unavailable perhaps to John Bunyan, Carey regarded the sea as a prevalent metaphor for his own Christian pilgrimage. “So in the Xn life,” he wrote, “we often have to work against Wind & Current, but we must do it if we ever expect to make our Port.”

Carey’s encounter with Enlightenment deism provoked anguish and optimism. He felt anguish that an array of infidels followed Hume in impeaching orthodox Christianity’s claims regarding miracles. But he reported their attitudes in the past tense. He denied them a sense of calm and peacefulness, claiming that even when calm appeared to manifest itself, as in the case of Thomas Paine, author of The Age of Reason, that the appearance was deceiving. But Carey’s nephew and biographer labels Carey, who shared a printer with Tom Paine, a “philosopher and scholar.” Carey also felt a sense of optimism that a movement had arisen that would surpass Enlightenment not by arguing with its ironic and often ridiculing skepticism. Rather Carey and others planned to fulfill the civilizing project of the Enlightenment by harnessing it to the commands of the Gospel. They would read it creatively and act upon that creative reading. In Carey’s case this prescription meant dishing Edward Gibbon’s skepticism regarding the causes of the Decline and Fall of Rome. Carey’s experimental evangelism had, as T. V. Tymms reported at the hundredth anniversary celebration of the BMS, taken “the wind out of

38 William Carey to John Ryland, December, 26, 1793, Carter, p. 115, punctuation revised.
41 Ibid.
Gibbon’s sails." Evangelicalism offered a practical antidote to the Enlightened assumption that Amerindians and Hindus would not be amenable to Christian conversion because their cultures were racked with comforting superstition. The metaphor of the sea, not merely as a place for privateers and adventurers but as a medium for the Gospel played a key role in this transformation. Here was an offshore state of nature whose speculations and connections did not end with the five months at sea. Here too was a gulf separating the young man from the old and the old man from the new. Carey, who watched his colleagues Joshua Marshman and William Ward journey to England, disclaimed any ambition to return himself. His sea journey had proved decisive.

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Recourse to the sea as an emblem of Carey’s mission alters our image of Carey. Current treatments of Carey compartmentalize his achievements. They dwell on his Calvinism, role in abolition of widow burning, reaction against Enlightenment,46 or turncoat witness against imperial evils. Yet, like the waves that brought ships from Britain to India, Carey connects Enlightenment with Evangelicalism. He was a product and proponent of both and must be situated within their historical confines. His experience, meanwhile, confirms that it is historically naïve to treat Enlightenment and Evangelicalism as a dichotomy. Instead, as postmodernist scholars have suggested, it is better to view such intellectual trends as accumulating layers of interpretation and experience. As Carey’s encounters with the deistic Barnard and Short suggest, he coupled civility and devotion,

42 Carter, p. 267.
43 Eustace Carey, Preface, p. iii.
44 1892
while recognizing that in a depraved world the two might not always be found in company of the same person. Enlightenment and Gospel, then, were not antitheses but complementary. This approach to Carey alerts us to the sequential rather than uniform character of Carey’s historical personality and place in history.

Fluid contingencies—not least among them the sea—shaped Carey’s experience. Carey has long been considered an immovable biographical object, a missionary impervious to resistance, a botanist comforted by the patterns of nature, a linguist determined to undertake by application a task that his age relegated to “geniuses” like Sir William Jones, the great student of Sanskrit. Carey’s supposed humility, an ingredient of Protestant sainthood, has obscured engagements that define his achievement. A Carey who navigated the historical tide but did not part the Indian Ocean of difference between the two cultures he occupied may lose certain elements of wonder. But that approach provides a more accurate treatment than Carey has received from well-meaning biographers and detached historical critics who have relegated him to the status of an isolated figure.

Perhaps it is best to conclude by returning to my epigraph. Carey’s achievement in conjoining Enlightenment and Evangelicalism recalls the words of Ruth Geiger in the William Carey College Alma Mater. As Carey was “lifting high the light of knowledge,” so too was he “answering the clarion call” of the Gospel. It is sobering to reflect that such a controversial proposition can only be proven to scholars and the missions community by a lifetime, maybe two lifetimes, of research. Bon Voyage!

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