



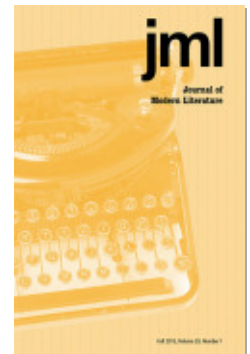
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E.M. Forster, the Clapham Sect, and the Secular Public Sphere

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*Critics have characterized E.M. Forster as an advocate of what Jürgen Habermas calls the “secular public sphere.” Yet Forster was critical of liberalism’s insistence that religious experiences should be translated into the language of secular rationality. The discussion of the Clapham Sect in “Henry Thornton” (1939) suggests that eighteenth-century evangelical Anglicanism set in motion a historical trajectory that led secular modern intellectuals to retreat into their own privacy, a position exemplified by Forster’s contemporaries in the Bloomsbury Group. One can thus look back to *A Passage to India* (1924) and understand how the novel’s spiritual themes articulate a politically relevant alternative both to Clapham’s rationalized religiosity and Bloomsbury’s secular insularity. Forster depicts the Hindu religious festival of Gokul Ashtami as promising an alternative form of social cohesion that resists translation into secular, rational language.*

Keywords: E.M. Forster / *A Passage to India* / Jürgen Habermas / secularism / Clapham Sect

Perhaps no twentieth-century author has been more closely identified with secular humanism than E.M. Forster. This tone was set early on by one of Forster’s first major critics, Wilfred Stone, who interpreted his novels as the continuation of a Victorian tradition attempting to recast Christian values into the agnostic context of liberalism. In Stone’s words, “[Forster’s] art, and his belief

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in art, are his religion. [. . .] The religion is a coming together, of the seen and the unseen, public affairs and private decencies. Another name for this religion is humanism" (5).¹

Forster's biography provides ample support for this interpretation. He gave up Christianity with, in his words, "comparatively little fuss" while a student at Cambridge at the turn of the century ("Prince's Tale" 313), and throughout his life he was involved with various secular humanist organizations in Britain. In one of his most popular and enduring essays, "What I Believe" (1938), Forster gives perhaps the most comprehensive expression of his secularism, just as it was about to be challenged by the Second World War. He states he "cannot believe that Christianity will ever cope with the present world-wide mess. [. . .] It was a spiritual force once, but the indwelling spirit will have to be restated if it is to calm the waters again, and probably restated in a non-Christian form" (75).

Forster's characterization of his secularism as a sort of linguistic translation, where Christianity's "indwelling spirit" must be "restated in a non-Christian form," seems to anticipate statements on religion made by Jürgen Habermas. Critics such as Paul Armstrong, Daniel Born, Brian May, Lauren M.E. Goodlad, and Stuart Christie have all found remarkable consonance between Forster and Habermas, who both defend certain core tenets of classical liberalism—personal freedom, individual autonomy, and the efficacy of public acts of communicative deliberation—against the challenges of modernity. According to Habermas, one of the defining qualities of the modern liberal-democratic public sphere is its use of the nonreligious and rational language appropriate to public political deliberation, and he uses rhetoric quite similar to Forster's to describe religion's role in this sphere. He asserts that the "moral intuitions" articulated by religious traditions make them "a serious candidate for possible truth contents," though those truths must "be translated from the vocabulary of a specific religious community to a generally accessible language" ("Religion" 10).

Yet I argue that, contrary to Habermas, Forster's writings were often critical of the imperative that belief should be either relegated entirely to the private realm or "translated" into secular public language. Despite his avowed commitments both to humanism and liberalism, Forster anticipates contemporary postcolonial critiques of secularism by criticizing the exclusively rationalist vision of modernity that relegates spirituality entirely to the private realm of individual experience. He regards such an imperative as effectively excluding those who speak a language other than that of secular rationality from affecting public discourse, forcing them to retreat entirely into the private sphere.

In an essay on his great-grandfather "Henry Thornton" (1939), Forster discusses the evangelical Anglicanism of the late eighteenth-century Clapham Sect. He suggests that their emphatically public version of religious belief helped to develop a form of secularism that would eventually lead modern intellectuals to retreat into the private sphere. This would include, most notably, their firmly secular descendants in the Bloomsbury Group. Members of the Clapham Sect, by articulating their spirituality in the language of public rationality, lost contact

with the mystical qualities of Christianity. In this way, the Sect demonstrates how the privatization of belief—not only spiritual belief, but also all beliefs that cannot be expressed in the rationalist language of the public sphere—is the inevitable consequence of a secularism that brings spirituality under the *aegis* of liberalism.

With this perspective in mind, one can look back to *A Passage to India* (1924) and understand the extent to which the novel's preoccupation with spiritual themes represents an attempt to articulate a politically relevant alternative both to Clapham's rational public religiosity and Bloomsbury's secular insularity. Here, Forster depicts the imperialist implications of the liberal imperative that private religious beliefs must be "translated" into the language of the public sphere. By contrast, he represents the Hindu festival of Gokul Ashtami as offering a form of social collectivity grounded in spiritually resonant experience, one that carries the potential for political transformation. Ultimately, the novel suggests that, insofar as spirituality is capable of providing an alternative model of social cohesion, it fundamentally resists translation into the rational language of the secular public sphere.

"HENRY THORNTON": BLOOMSBURY, CLAPHAM, AND PRIVACY

In an unpublished set of notes from 1917 gathered under the title "Human Nature under War Conditions," Forster asserts that "an observer from another planet who watched not only the earth's war but its public institutions would never infer what sweetness and nobility there can be in intercourse between individuals. Gulf between private and public has in the least three years grown dizzying, and thanks to scientific organisation more and more of men's energy is diverted to the public side" ("God-State" 529).² One might assume that implicit in these notes is the message that that gap between public and private could be closed if the "institutions" that lack "sweetness and nobility" could incorporate such private sympathies into their public actions.

Yet in a letter written to Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson the same year, Forster attributes the problem not to the neglect of private decencies, but to the fact that worthy individuals are increasingly compelled to focus on private life at the expense of public responsibility. In a comparison between contemporary social conditions in Britain and the fall of Rome, Forster asserts

You know and I've been told (examples from Petronius to St. Augustine) how all that was first class or first hand went into private life while society, guarded by bewildered and inferior soldiers, went over a precipice. When I set a speech of Robertson or Derby beside a letter from any Cambridge friend there is a similar mental gap [. . .]. The world has again come to a point at which vitality retreats into the individual and refuses to nourish society. ("God-State" 529)

For Forster, the private realm is no longer a place where personal relations are to be protected from the harshness of the public world, a place where individual ethical sympathies can be cultivated before they can be "mirrored" by the public sphere.

Instead, the private realm has become a refuge for the “first class” of individuals who, he implies, no longer feel as if their qualities have relevance to public life, and have thus lost the inclination to “nourish society” with their intellectual abilities. Forster suggests that this retreat into privacy marks the turning point of cultural decline: without the contributions of intellectuals, society inevitably goes “over a precipice,” never to return to its former glory. Moreover, this decline primarily manifests itself through language. While the speeches of second-rate politicians have access to the public sphere, the thoughtful reflections of Forster’s Cambridge friend must remain in the private sphere of the individual letter.

For Forster, the deleterious effects of this turn into privacy and away from public address by the “first class” were nowhere more apparent than in the Bloomsbury Group. Forster has often been closely identified with Bloomsbury—David Mediale asserts that many critics have understood both Forster and Bloomsbury to be deeply influenced by the “firmly secular, this-earthly, and non-Idealist” philosophy of G.E. Moore (226, 34). Yet Mediale goes on to argue that Forster’s “relationship with Bloomsbury was not clear-cut and his work, the fiction in particular, is much more profitably read as an exploration, even a critique, of Bloomsbury values than as an exposition of them” (35). Joseph Bristow, moreover, argues, “Forster was never quite at home” with Bloomsbury, despite his frequent interactions with members of the Group beginning with his Cambridge years, due to what he saw to be its exclusivity and cliquishness (117). In his 1929 commonplace book, Forster says they are “unkind, despite irritable protests to the contrary” and have excessive “contempt for the outsider.” Once the circle admits someone new, “it welcomes and studies him, but the rest of humanity remains in the background as before.” Although he asserts that they are “the only genuine *movement* in English civilization [. . .] that civilization contains far better and more genuine individuals” and he “can’t go there for sympathy or comfort” (48–9).

It is evident from Forster’s comments that he remained aloof from Bloomsbury intellectuals because of their snobbish abnegation of direct public address in favor of an elitist exclusivity. Yet I maintain that he did not see Bloomsbury’s turn away from the public as evidence of a collective failure of moral will, as Gertrude Himmelfarb has argued. In “Henry Thornton,” an essay written to commemorate the opening of an exhibition dedicated to his great-grandfather and the legacy of the Clapham Sect, Forster suggests that Bloomsbury’s insularity is the result of a historical trajectory that reaches back to the Sect’s rationalistic, capitalist, this-worldly version of evangelical Anglicanism—in other words, its submission to the discourse and protocols of the secular public sphere. Although he never explicitly mentions the Bloomsbury Group in “Henry Thornton,” the Clapham/Bloomsbury connection could not have been far from his mind. It forms an essential background for understanding the essay’s complex, double-edged irony toward both Clapham’s rational religiosity and the modern, secular subject.

Until recently, critics have made little of what Vincent Pecora calls the forgotten “Clapham-to-Bloomsbury Road” of British modernism (193). This is despite the fact that the most prominent individuals associated with the Bloomsbury

Group—including Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, Lytton and James Strachey, and E.M. Forster himself—could trace their ancestry to members of the Sect. Although the Claphamites poured much of their considerable wealth into evangelical good works—including, most notably, the successful campaign for the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire—Mary Lago notes that many of their twentieth-century offspring rejected Clapham’s values as hypocritical mixtures of moral earnestness, imperialism, and middle-class propriety (122). Yet she also notes that Forster was more aware than his contemporaries that money from those evangelical ancestors made possible the privileged intellectual lifestyle of Bloomsbury. Rather than ignoring the debt to his relatives, Forster often made a point in his letters and miscellaneous writings to call attention to the existence of Clapham evangelicals in his family tree and to his dependence on the money provided by their financial acumen.³

Moreover, despite the dismissive attitude some members of Bloomsbury took toward their ancestors, comments made in the nineteenth century by James Stephen, Virginia Woolf’s great-grandfather and a latecomer to the Clapham milieu, suggest that the two groups shared a similar exclusivity and skepticism toward outsiders. “It is not permitted to any Coterie altogether to escape the spirit of Coterie,” writes Stephen, “Clapham Common, of course, thought itself the best of all commons. [. . .] A critical race, they drew many of their canons of criticism from books and talk of their own parentage; and for those on the outside of the pale, there might be, now and then, some failure of charity” (307–8). Despite the fact that the members of Clapham were more focused on effecting practical political reform than their Bloomsbury descendants, Stephen’s comments are not terribly different from those made by Forster nearly a century later.

In “Henry Thornton,” Forster essentially picks up where Stephen leaves off, but places Clapham’s coterie mentality within the context of the larger structural changes taking place in British society from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. In this little-studied occasional piece, Forster is more generous than many of his Bloomsbury compatriots in his assertions that there was something worthwhile in Clapham’s cultivation of a community united by a shared sense of moral purpose.⁴ Yet the essay also makes clear that the rationalized version of Christianity espoused by the Sect, its combination of economic acquisitiveness and public concern, played a central role in creating the political conditions that would make inevitable the development of the privatized world of secular Bloomsbury, a world where intellectuals are effectively excluded from directly affecting public life.

The bulk of Forster’s essay discusses two works that he asserts are Thornton’s “claims on the notice of prosperity”: the economic theories in *An Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Paper Credit of Great Britain* (1802) and the religious meditations in the posthumously published *Family Prayers* (1834) (“Henry Thornton” 193). One already detects the note of irony in Forster’s use of the terms “claim” and “prosperity”: it is surely telling that Thornton’s two major legacies are a work on liberal economic theory and a devotional tome.⁵

The opening of Forster's essay explores Clapham's contradictions through an extended description of "a charming portrait" of Henry Thornton, one that represents a complex historical irony that begins in the smirking tone of a Bloomsbury satirist, yet ultimately condemns both the pious subject of the painting and its modern, secular viewers. Forster begins by wittily praising the painting as an excellent representation of his great-grandfather's "calmness, moderation, and restraint," focusing more on what the painter leaves out than what he puts in: Thornton's portrait has a "chin" that is "firm without ferocity," a "mouth ascetic without fanaticism," and a "forehead intelligent without fire" ("Henry Thornton" 192). Forster then suggests that it is precisely because the portrait is such an excellent likeness of its subject that it is completely uninteresting to a modern audience:

The restless modern mind, skimming over all these solidities, finds nothing to laugh at, nothing to condemn, and nothing to die for, and becomes unsympathetic, partly though envy. Here is neither a sinner, a mystic, nor an artist—types which the modern mind can comprehend, and in whose presence it does not feel rebuked. Here is only a successful banker, a devout Christian, and affectionate husband and a judicious father, a loyal friend, an upright citizen, an incorruptible M.P. [. . .] Sound: but not exciting; not even inspiring. ("Henry Thornton" 192)

Forster combines a parody of the eminently proto-Victorian industriousness of Thornton with a trenchant critique of the modern subject. The adjectives he attaches to his great-grandfather—"successful," "devout," "affectionate," "judicious," "loyal," "upright," "incorruptible"—all imply the individual's correlation of his actions to a predetermined and normative social standard ("success," "devoutness," "judiciousness," et cetera). Thornton is a man who simply "meets the mark" of his society by fulfilling its expectations, a man completely "sound" and therefore without any depth who presents to the world a completely transparent character, insofar as it is entirely defined by normative categories of moral approbation.

However, the "modern mind" in its "restlessness" lacks both the patience and the sympathy to identify with Thornton's prosaic nature, and identifies this easy comprehensibility with a negative ethical judgment. When the modern mind looks at Henry Thornton's "solidities," it emphatically sees "nothing," and thus feels a complete lack of emotional, intellectual, or ethical connection. When the modern mind confronts the outdated moral system Thornton represents, he sees nothing but the negative image of himself. Modern individuals see in Thornton's incomprehensibility nothing but a "rebuke" to their own way of thinking because he resolutely refuses to be exceptional in any way—because he refuses to be a "sinner," a "mystic," or an "artist." The final line of Forster's description is thus indeterminate: the assertion that Thornton is "Sound: but not exciting; not even inspiring," can be read as either a sincere critique of Clapham mores or an ironic condemnation of a "modern mind" that seeks only "excitement" and "inspiration."

In this way, Forster's essay modulates among a critique of the moral effects of the Clapham Sect's imperial acquisitiveness and religious zeal, an apology for

Clapham's ethical naiveté, and an implicit condemnation of the facile modern subject. In an interpretation of the effect of capitalist wealth on the Claphamites, Forster states:

Thanks to the economic conditions of the times, wealth rushed down these worthy people's throats from morn to eve, and not being psychologists they thought it would have no effect upon their souls if they purged themselves promptly. The devil is subtler than that. He, like Christ, understands the deceitfulness of riches: the deceitfulness which many a bitter example now brings to light. Wealth always fattens the person who swallows it, no matter how promptly he purges [. . .]. ("Henry Thornton" 194-5)

The implication is that Clapham evangelicals were victims of the machinations of history itself, not knowing what "we" know in the present day, when "many a bitter example now brings to light" the negative effects of wealth on religious piety. People like Henry Thornton could become inadvertent victims of historical circumstance, because when it comes to the world's progress, "[t]he evils in human nature, which he realised, and the evils in commercialism, which he could not realise, have combined to pull it down, and the religious remedies he proposed seem to-day formal and trifling," whereas the "modern mind" is now implicitly in the proper historical position to understand where Thornton went wrong ("Henry Thornton" 196). In this implicit response to the condemnations launched by Clapham's Bloomsbury descendants, Forster's apologia rhetorically shifts responsibility away from the Sect and onto a concept of history endowed with agential force.

For Forster, members of the Sect were passive victims of history because their rationalist and worldly version of Christianity lacked commerce with "the unseen," and he implies that a sense of this mysticism can be captured by the "modern mind." Claphamites, like the Quakers, hoped that the desires "to get rich and to be good were harmonious," but this belief was held "with better reason" by the Quakers because "they had what the Claphamites lacked: a touch of mysticism, a sense of the unseen. [. . .] This indifference to the unseen seems to me the great defect of my great-grandfather's set. [. . .] Poetry, mystery, passion, ecstasy, music, don't count" ("Henry Thornton" 195). Clapham's determinedly workaday practicality, its focus on those discrete material objects that quite literally "count," is the major fault that undermined their religious aims. In other words, in order to influence the rationalistic capitalist public sphere, members of the Clapham Sect both articulated and understood their religious beliefs in the language of public rationality appropriate to that sphere, thereby losing contact with the mystical aspect of Christian spirituality.

Forster's description of the process through which the Clapham Sect created the social conditions that would lead to the modern world's privatized secularism is quite similar both to Habermas's well-known account of the historical development of the "public sphere" in the eighteenth century, and to Gauri Viswanathan's critique of the Habermasian model's relegation of religious belief entirely

to the private sphere. Habermas's argument, in broad outline, is that during the eighteenth century, the development of capitalist modes of production led to the development of "civil society," a private realm separate from the state that was the location of social institutions such as economics and family life. Eventually, around the middle of the eighteenth century, members of civil society began to express themselves in what he calls "the literary public sphere" (which developed from the private institution of the family) where individuals from bourgeois civil society publicly debated issues related to literature and the arts in spaces such as coffee houses and, perhaps most importantly, by means of the printed word. The most important element of the literary public sphere was its introduction of "the public use of reason in rational-critical debate" (Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 5). These debates eventually began to include political matters, which marks the moment when the "public sphere" comes into its own. Eventually, the public sphere's rational-critical debates were adapted into the process of governance itself, in the form of the nineteenth-century liberal constitutional state (Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 1–26).

Habermas identifies England as the first nation to develop a politically effective public sphere (*Structural Transformation* 57–67). And although the Clapham Sect was part of a dissenting tradition that never formally broke away from the established Church of England, as had other religious dissenters, Forster's emphasis on the role of "economic conditions" on the group render his representation of them a nearly paradigmatic example of the development of the move from civil society to the public sphere. The Clapham Sect was a major force for reform in British politics, particularly through the work of William Wilberforce and Henry Thornton, and their efforts led to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. As a group of bourgeois families involved in capitalist imperialism, Claphamites publicized their private religious concerns by publishing religious books such as Thornton's *Family Prayers*, the immensely influential works of Hannah More, the *Christian Observer* journal, and tracts distributed through societies such as the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Church Missionary Society, the Anti-Slavery League, the African Society, and the Society for the Conversion of the Jews. Through intervening in the public literary sphere, the Clapham Sect was able to harness public sentiment by means of their publications in order to change state policy, banning the slave trade in the British Empire with the passage of the Slave Trade Act in 1807, and emancipating British slaves with the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 ("Clapham's Child" 118).

Forster's description of Clapham's combination of religious devotion and public involvement thus represents not only the move from private to public, but also the necessary role that religion played in the development of the bourgeois public sphere. Indeed, Habermas has argued for the centrality of religion, and specifically Christianity, as a determining force in this development. He states that one should not view the development of modernity as the process by which Judeo-Christian morality becomes divorced from its specifically religious origins in order to attach itself to the secular state ("God and the World" 148–9). Instead,

Judeo-Christian ethics became institutionalized because religious belief itself motivated the public to include principles such as universal egalitarianism into the structure of the state, such as Clapham's ability as a dissenting Anglican sect to change state policy by mobilizing public religious sentiment to effect the abolition of slavery. One can extrapolate from Habermas's argument that he does not see the public sphere as a completely nonreligious location. Rather, groups like Clapham show that the development of the constitutional state, as it institutionalized civil society in the form of public opinion in the structure of the state, also took into itself the specific religious content of civil society.

However, while the early successes of Clapham evidence the vital relationship between religion and politics in late eighteenth-century Britain, Viswanathan shows how the alliance frayed in nineteenth-century British imperial politics. She argues that Victorian movements to emancipate religious minorities subordinated religious difference to an identification with the liberal state in the form of the religiously inclusive nationality denominated "Englishness," thus promoting a national cohesion conducive to the British state's imperial ascendance (7). In this way, she provides a reinterpretation of Habermas's history of the public sphere:

By the mid-nineteenth century [. . .] civil society emerged as the privatized domain onto which were displaced a variety of religious distinctions that had no place in political society, or in what came to be construed as the more transcendent plane of secularism. Secularization not only polarizes national and religious identity; it also privatizes belief and renders it subordinate to the claims of reason, logic, and evidence. Henceforth all these claims are identified with the rationality of the state and its institutions. (10)

Although, as Habermas claims, state policies were initially motivated by religious ideals, for Viswanathan these notions actually became subsumed under the category of liberal "nationality." In fact, one must see in the very triumph of civil society and its institutionalization in state politics the very means by which a politically relevant public sphere disappears. When private life—in the form of civil society articulated through the public sphere—becomes allied with the state, the state gains ascendancy over civil society and juridical power over the private lives of individuals. Religion becomes subordinated to the language of "reason, logic, and evidence," which were once the domain of rational-political debate among private citizens in the public sphere, but becomes identified with the legal apparatus of the liberal state. The religious principles that were supposed to motivate the goals of that state are thus foisted back onto a civil society, which is now completely privatized. The state only recognizes the individual as a public person through the legal mediation that is an apparatus of the state itself. For Viswanathan, Habermas's ideal of "civil society" renders individual belief almost completely private, and hence politically disabled.

It is in this way that the Christianity characteristic of a group such as the Clapham Sect leads to the insularity of modern intellectuals, such as the Bloomsbury Group. The privatization of belief—not only spiritual belief, but also all

beliefs that are not articulated in the rationalist language of the public sphere — is the inevitable consequence when religion comes under the *aegis* of liberalism. The complex irony of Forster's "Henry Thornton," which takes as its object both the proto-Victorian piety of Clapham and the smirking superiority of the modern Bloomsbury satirist, depends upon just such a historical process of increasing privatization of belief and the abandonment of public concern, one that occurs in tandem with the process of secularization. Indeed, Forster's commentary on the negative consequences of the retreat from public life indicates that he saw the turn to privacy Viswanathan describes as one of the most destructive qualities of the modern era. "Henry Thornton" thus suggests that the process of secularization inaugurated by Clapham helped to create the very situation he describes in the letter to Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson cited above, where modern intellectuals have no way to articulate their beliefs in the public sphere and are compelled to retreat into their own privacy, abandoning their responsibility to society.

With this perspective in mind, one can look back to *A Passage to India* and understand the novel's preoccupation with spiritual themes represents as an attempt to articulate a politically relevant alternative both to Clapham's rational religiosity and Bloomsbury's secular insularity. Medale asserts that in this novel, the character of Adela Quested functions as a stand-in for the Group, one who is "clearly identified as a product of a Bloomsbury-type world — as a Bloomsbury ideologue, in fact — and seeks, in an environment which is conspicuously resistant to her designs, to implement her Bloomsbury values," yet even she recognizes the need for something to take religion's place as the foundation of social cohesion (34). "There will have to be something universal in this country," Adela tells Dr. Aziz, "I don't say religion, for I'm not religious, but something, or how else are barriers to be broken down?" (Forster, *Passage* 136).

A PASSAGE TO INDIA: SPIRITUALIZING THE NOVEL

Although *A Passage to India* demonstrates the detrimental effects of the imperial state's insistence that religious beliefs be restated in the language of secular rationality, it does not simply advocate for the inclusion of religious speech in the public sphere. Craig Bradshaw Woelfel has shown that critics arguing for the novel's endorsement of religiosity have a misguided "tendency to approach the religious and the secular as a question of either/or: either the novel is a skeptical critique of religion's false promises and human limitations, or it advocates the promises of mysticism *beyond* the skeptical humanism of the West and its practical means of measure" (31). Instead, Woelfel argues that the novel demonstrates how "religious and secular frames are not mutually exclusive strands [. . .] [n]ot only is a genuine but partial position possible, but various pressures that might fall on either side of the religious or secular divide can present themselves in varying strengths over time without being resolved altogether" (36).⁶

A Passage to India articulates a new mode of religious engagement that provides an alternative to both Clapham's rational religiosity and Bloomsbury's

insular secularism. Rather than being opposed to or supporting a broadly secular background of understanding, the novel's representation of spirituality is situated and must be understood within that background. Forster articulates a genuine but partial position that allows for the role of spiritual language in the secular public sphere. Rather than insisting that religious language be translated in the language of rationality, he describes the sense of a unifying spiritual force underlying daily life, the "touch of mysticism" and "sense of the unseen" he faults Clapham for lacking in "Henry Thornton." This spiritual sensibility can be publicly efficacious in the context of the modern, secular world because it is not identified with any religious tradition in particular. Instead, Forster identifies the sense of the unseen with a literary discourse that encourages an imaginative sympathy that provides the foundation for social cohesion.

Forster's novel explores the negative consequences of the colonial state's insistence that religious beliefs be restated in secular language. He does this primarily through the character of Mrs. Moore, whom Wilfred R. Koponen refers to as an exemplar of "Clapham-style Christianity" (39). The novel presents the pluralistic and humanist Christianity Mrs. Moore espouses in the early sections of the novel as an admirable yet ultimately inadequate response to the religious complexities of the colonial situation. Her struggle to maintain her religious beliefs in the colonial context takes place primarily on the level of language, and her faith founders whenever she attempts to commit a Habermasian "translation" of her spiritual experiences. According to Viswanathan, the normative language of rational public deliberation is a tool of colonial appropriation that the state commits, paradoxically, in the name of liberal religious pluralism and tolerance.⁷ For her, "[t]he inability of liberal discourse to address the colonial context explicitly suggests that colonialism has a much more active role than mere historical background for the evolution of liberal doctrine. [. . .] For British colonialism sets in motion a contingent disavowal of the liberal notion of individual subjectivity as belonging to the privatized realm of meaning" (xv).

Mrs. Moore experiences this contingent disavowal upon her arrival at the fictional colonial outpost of Chandrapore, where she confronts her son, city magistrate Ronny Heaslop, regarding the proper attitude the British administration should take toward the governing of India. She is shocked by the insularity and lack of sympathy on the part of Anglo-Indians and tells Ronny that the job of the English in India is

to be pleasant [. . .] because India is part of the Earth. And God has put us on the earth in order to be pleasant to each other. God . . . is . . . love. [. . .] The desire to behave pleasantly satisfies God The sincere if impotent desire wins His blessing. I think everyone fails, but there are so many kinds of failure. Good will and more good will and more good will. (*Passage* 53)

Mrs. Moore quotes from the famous comments on love in the first epistle of John to express an inclusive form of Christianity. Insofar as she understands the message of Christianity to be "God is love," that means faith does not entail belief in

a controlling, omniscient being, but consists of actions that display the “desire” to perform kind acts, regardless of their relative success or “failure.” Mrs. Moore believes that faith reaches its endpoint entirely within the individual subject, and, therefore, that the ruling class in India should consist of individuals striving toward realizing their desire to perform good works, regardless of their practical effect. Mrs. Moore comes across as the representative of a utopian concept of the relationship between the religious subject and the liberal state, where private beliefs and the demands of the state exist in mutually supportive relation to one another.

Ronny, however, holds a colonial City Magistrate’s juridical understanding of the non-relation between religious ethics and administrative policy that supports Viswanathan’s claim that the British imperial government insisted that personal beliefs be subordinated to the rationality of the state. As the narrator says, “Ronny approved of religion as long as it endorsed the National Anthem, but he objected when it attempted to influence his life. Then he would say in respectful yet decided tones, ‘I don’t think it does to talk about these things, every fellow has to work out his own religion,’ and any fellow who heard him muttered, ‘Hear!’” (*Passage* 54). The passage makes explicit the connection between religious pluralism and the hegemony of the imperial nation. Ronny asserts the private nature of religious belief, that “every fellow has to work out his own religion,” in the name of silencing public discussion of religious issues (“I don’t think it does to talk about these things”). He only approves of religious beliefs that subordinate themselves to “the National Anthem” and recognize the ultimate authority of the state.

While the novel mocks Ronny’s understanding of religion, Forster also shows Mrs. Moore’s humane yet private liberal Christianity to be ultimately untenable in the colonial context. The narrator informs us, “Mrs. Moore felt that she had made a mistake in mentioning God, but she found him increasingly difficult to avoid as she grew older, and he had been constantly in her thoughts since she entered India, though oddly enough he satisfied her less. She must needs pronounce his name frequently, as the greatest she knew, yet she had never found it less efficacious” (*Passage* 54). Mrs. Moore’s confrontation with the religious, social, and political difference in colonial India presents a serious challenge to a concept of God as a singular and benevolent being. Consequently, she invokes God as “the most powerful name she knew,” the only belief system that provides a motivation for “kindness” in the face of the failures of everyday life. But she finds that that system loses relevance when detached from the context of the metropolitan world from which it arises. Faced with this challenge, Mrs. Moore “pronounces the name” of God, calling attention to her deep respect for the power of religious language. Her belief in the ability of religious language to effect change in human behavior, her emphatic assertion that “God . . . is . . . love,” her repetition of the phrase “more good will,” and her constant invocation of the name of God give evidence of her reliance on the language of Christianity as a direct or privileged channel to the divine spirit or “the unseen” in a social and political context that poses a significant challenge to her concept of divinity.

Ultimately, however, Mrs. Moore's traumatic experience in the Marabar Caves demonstrates her inability to find a language that will translate her religious beliefs into the language of the secular public sphere: a language that will both articulate her private Christian faith and have relevance to the social and political circumstances of India. Mrs. Moore's experience in Marabar takes on new resonances when understood as a response to the linguistic politics of colonial secularization. The irreconcilability between spiritual and political language becomes clear when she enters one of the caves, a place Woelfel characterizes as "only accessible *as an experience*" and hence resistant to restatement in rational language ("Stopping at the Stone" 40): the narrator describes the caves as "unspeakable" and having a reputation that "does not depend on human speech" (*Passage* 136, 137).

In this passage, Mrs. Moore hears a mysterious echo, a "boum," that radically undermines her religious faith. Upon reflecting on her experience in the cave, she has the following realization:

At the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all of its divine words from "Let there be light" to "It is finished" only amounted to "boum." Then she was terrified over an area larger than usual; the universe, never comprehensible for her intellect, offered no repose to her soul, the mood of the last two months took definite form at last, and she realized that he didn't want to write to her children, didn't want to communicate with anyone, not even with God. (*Passage* 166)

What Mrs. Moore realizes in the cave is that "poor little talkative Christianity"—the faith that has motivated all of her actions in the novel, the foundation of her ethical worldview, and the only belief system that has ever had any claim on her sympathies—has no special relationship to the divine.⁸ While she had invested language itself with the power to translate between humanity and God, she now sees that language is no more than mere sound; it is devoid of any transcendental meaning ("boum").

Her realization provokes a fundamental change in her personality and worldview. She "no longer has the desire to communicate," and no longer has sympathy for anyone or anything because she has lost her trust in language as the guarantor of the divine sanctioning of God's benevolence toward humankind. For the rest of the novel, Mrs. Moore's speech is bitter, sarcastic, halting, and cryptic, until she dies at sea en route back to England. The seemingly boundless sympathy and the "good will and pleasantness" she had advocated are irrevocably undermined by the limitations of the language through which she articulates her beliefs. Her attempts to translate the idiom of humanist Christian belief into the language of secular rationality are halted in India; she cannot adjust the articulation of meaning to the social and political context of the colonial state.

In contrast to the limitations of Mrs. Moore's Christianity is the Hindu religious ceremony of Gokul Ashtami. Foster opens the final section of the novel with this ceremony, which presents a vision of an inclusive and benevolent mysticism.

Gokul Ashtami presents an alternative to the secular public sphere's attempts to translate religious experience into the normative language of rationality. It does so by showing how social cohesion can be grounded in spirituality itself. He based this interlude on his own experience of the festival, which he witnessed on his journey to India in 1921.⁹ Forster experienced the re-enactment of the birth of Shri Krishna as an odd yet compelling mixture of sublimity and absurdity that ultimately blended these two modes of experience: he asserts that "[t]he frivolity, triviality goes on, and every now and then it cracks [. . .] and discloses depths" (*Hill of Devi* 73). Insofar as the festival contains a "mixture of fatuity and philosophy" (*Hill of Devi* 66), it fails to adhere to the Western standards of normative rationality that Habermas associates with the public sphere. Moreover, in *Passage to India*, Forster presents Gokul Ashtami as providing the spiritual foundations for a social cohesion that stands in stark contrast to the forms of public life characteristic of secular, liberal Britain: "The assembly was in a tender, happy state unknown to an English crowd," the narrator states, "it seethed like a beneficent potion" (318).

In this way, Forster's description of Gokul Ashtami strongly recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's well-known account of the "carnivaleque," a European cultural phenomenon that, by celebrating the "grotesque" and parodying the sacred, entails "the suspension of all hierarchical precedence" and the subsequent rebirth of "new, truly human relations" (10). Such a comparison might suggest Forster's representation is an attempt to arrogate the meaning of the festival to a fundamentally Western frame of reference. Indeed, Forster's somewhat idealized representation of Hindu spirituality undoubtedly partakes, to some extent, of the Orientalism that Sara Suleri Goodyear and Benita Perry both argue characterize the novel. Yet, as Woelfel points out, Forster himself experienced a series of Godbole-like spiritual visions early in his literary career, "each of which was linked to acts of writing" (29). By the time he writes *A Passage to India*, then, Hinduism had become "a space to work through the implications of that vague, transcendent reality behind appearances ubiquitous in his novels" (Woelfel 29).

It is my contention that Forster's representation of the festival reflects his respect for the religious ceremony on fundamentally humanist grounds. It both encourages creativity and provides the opportunity for sympathetic interpersonal connections that go beyond the limits of normative rationality. The joyful communal responsiveness to the specifically experiential quality of spirituality found at Gokul Ashtami provides an alternative to the social atomization that characterizes Mrs. Moore's encounter with the Marabar Caves. It is also, Forster suggests, the only meaningful response to the religious privatization that characterizes imperialist British secularism. Earlier in the novel, the narrator asserts that even the most liberal and inclusive Christian missionaries are forced to say that "We must exclude someone from our gathering, or we shall be left with nothing" (*Passage* 38). However, during the rebirth of Krishna at Gokul Ashtami, Hindus can say, "All sorrow [is] annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways, and the stars" (*Passage* 322–3).

Gokul Ashtami provides Forster with a model for an alternative religious idiom that, in its expansive inclusiveness, succeeds politically where Mrs. Moore's pluralist, humanist Christianity ultimately fails. He does so by emphasizing the irreducibly *linguistic* quality of spiritual experience, the element of religion that, contra Habermas, cannot be translated meaningfully into the language of secular rationality:

The inscription which the poets of the State had composed were hung where they could not be read, or had twitched their drawing-pins out of the stucco, and one of them (composed in English to indicate His universality) consisted, by an unfortunate slip of the draughtsman, of the words, "God si Love." God si Love. Is this the first message of India? (*Passage* 320)

While even the expansive Christian humanism of Mrs. Moore is annihilated when confronted with Indian difference, the inclusive Hinduism imagined by Forster can appropriate Christian ideas into its own set of religious practices, including linguistic errors and puns. In short, because it does not concern itself with strictly accurate translations, Forster's version of Hinduism can appropriate Christian language into its own religious vision, transforming "God is love" to "God si love" or "God if love" (if one is aware of the Latin pun)—a creative rewriting of Mrs. Moore's earlier statement that remains true to the inclusive spirit underlying it.

It is significant, however, that the phrase is located in a place where the worshippers cannot read it. It is only the narrator's omniscient eye that can possibly see it, and he perhaps makes note of the incorrectly transcribed phrase because he and his assumed reader know Latin. Forster's emphasis on the linguistic quality of religious experience causes him to blur the boundaries between the language of the Gokul Ashtami festival and the language of the novelist himself. At the end of the chapter, the narrative voice enters into the mind of Professor Godbole, the Hindu Brahman in charge of the ceremony. The narrator relates that

Professor Godbole had once more developed the life of the spirit. He had, with increasing vividness, again seen Mrs. Moore, and round her faintly clinging forms of trouble. He was a Brahman, she Christian, but it made no difference, it made no difference whether she was a trick of his memory or a telepathic appeal. It was his duty, as it was his desire, to place himself in the position of the God and to love her, and to place himself in her position and to say to the God, "Come, come, come, come." This was all he could do. How inadequate! But each according to his own capacities, and he knew that his own were small. "One old Englishwoman and one little, little wasp," he thought, as he stepped out of the temple into the grey of a pouring wet morning. "It does not seem much, still it is more than I am myself." (*Passage* 326)

Forster's representation of Godbole's "life of the spirit" is also an accurate description of his own literary practice. The way that Godbole sees Mrs. Moore, with "faintly clinging forms of trouble" around her, is a vision of her as she exists within the structure of a narrative, an image that foreshadows the rest of her story.

The religious differences between them, and the distinction between the natural (memory) and the supernatural (telepathy) are erased by his “desire” to make a sympathetic connection by means of both “taking the position of the God and to love her” (the role of a benevolent omniscient narrator), and inhabiting the limited viewpoint of Mrs. Moore herself—that is to say, a position very similar to that of the narrator of the novel who can enter freely and indirectly into the thoughts and imagination of his characters.

Forster’s representation of Gokul Ashtami imitates, to some extent, spirituality’s power to create inclusive, non-hierarchical, and non-hegemonic forms of social bonding. Even though the narrative vision is ultimately “inadequate” to life’s complexities, this Godlike position of the novel’s omniscient narrator gives a vision of something “more than I am myself” through its representational practice. The spiritual event thus gives rise to a new, communal experience. And it is only through the linguistic expression of such spiritually inspired imaginative sympathy, Forster suggests, that one can cultivate an adequate response to the imperialist appropriations wrought by the Habermasian public sphere. Instead of imagining the public sphere to be defined by its use of the language of secular rationality, Forster describes an experience of collectivity grounded in religious experience. By doing so, he expresses the fundamental liberal-humanist values of interpersonal sympathy and creativity, representing spiritual experience in an emphatically non-rationalist idiom, one that partakes of aspects of both religious and secular language but is nevertheless irreducible to either.

Forster recognized that the social cohesion experienced during the Gokul Ashtami festival was of limited political efficacy in colonial India. The novel, after all, does not conclude with the sympathetic connection between Godbole and Mrs. Moore, but rather with the emphatic denial of the possibility of friendship between Dr. Aziz and Mr. Fielding (362). Yet his representation of the festival indicates his recognition that restating spiritual experience in the language of secular rationality is always incomplete and exclusionary; it often occurs to the detriment of the political ideals it is intended to support. The criticisms of the public sphere found in “Henry Thornton” and *A Passage to India* are thus situated firmly within the framework of Forster’s humanist beliefs, his dedication to a public life as broadly inclusive as possible. For him, an insistence on exclusive secularism represents a threat to public discourse—a betrayal of the values of “tolerance, good temper, and sympathy” that he believes are the true goals of the liberal-democratic project (“What I Believe” 76).

Notes

1. These accounts effectively insert Forster into what Vincent Pecora has identified as one of the most common narratives of secularization in the West—what he calls (following philosopher Claude Monod) the “worlding of Christianity,” i.e., the transfer of Western religious ethics and ideals into the discourses and institutions of secular modernity (5).

2. This and the following quote from Forster's unpublished papers appear in Donald Watt, "E.M. Forster's Quarrel with the God-State." Watt reads these quotes as evidence that Forster despaired over the wartime emphasis on public life over private decencies. Yet it seems evident that Forster was primarily concerned that private virtues were not, in fact, having any effect on public life.
3. Lago suggests that Forster wrote *Marianne Thornton* (1956), a biography of his great-aunt and the daughter of Henry Thornton, as a "gesture of gratitude" for the eight thousand pound bequest that "created the financial cushion that made it possible for Forster to go to Cambridge and then to become a self-employed writer" (119).
4. In this way, Forster's relationship to the Clapham Sect is quite similar to Virginia Woolf's. Pecora argues that Woolf's writings manage "to recuperate the underlying structure and moral seriousness of the Clapham fellowship while ridding it of its evangelically and imperially colonizing fervor" (170).
5. In "Henry Thornton," Forster notes that *Paper Credit* "has lately been re-edited, with an introduction by an eminent economist, Professor [Friedrich] Hayek," thereby placing Thornton's liberal financial imperialism in a genealogy leading directly to Hayek's theoretical justifications of neoliberal economics ("Henry Thornton" 195). For a discussion of Hayek's influence on neoliberal economic thought, see Mirowski and Plehwe.
6. Woelfel's account of Forster's secularism draws primarily from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*.
7. Viswanathan's analysis of the violence underlying the rhetoric of religious tolerance is indebted to Ashis Nandy's groundbreaking "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance."
8. Homi Bhabha reads the "ou-boum" as the silence that "turns imperial triumphalism into the testimony of colonial confusion and those who hear its echo lose their historic memories" (123). This reading, however, essentially brackets out the explicit religious context of this moment. It focuses exclusively on how India's colonial otherness is a linguistically disruptive force that deconstructs the truth claims of imperialist discourse.
9. Alternatively, Leland Monk reads Forster's reworking of his Indian experience in this section of the novel as reflecting his concern "with the idea and importance of chance" (393).

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