



Storytelling, Subversive Questions and Christian Mission: William Sleeman and the Thugs of India

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This paper is about two disciplines that are vital for Christian mission and Christian education: storytelling and asking subversive questions.

Let us begin by telling a story:

William Sleeman and the Thugs of India

William Henry Sleeman (1788-1856) was an amazing Cornishman who served God as a detective. He was one of the most accomplished and innovative detectives ever to have lived.

Sleeman was born in 1788 in Stratton, Cornwall. From a young age William wished to serve abroad in the army of the East India Company. He had studied both Arabic and Hindustani for three years in England before reaching the minimum age for direct entry and so was already quite fluent in two difficult Oriental languages when he arrived in Calcutta in October 1809.

Sleeman was unusual because he avoided heavy drinking. A typical British officer living in Calcutta at this time would 'put back' something like three bottles of claret every night. This boozy lifestyle was more or less obligatory. Any officer who left the table before his fellow officers had finished their drinking would be mocked and insulted. Inebriated, cigar-smoking fellows would cry out – "Cock tail", "Milk sop" or "Shabby fellow". Sleeman was different. He was a sober, responsive and responsible detective.

In the 1820's Sleeman began hearing stories about 'Thuggee'. The 'Thugs' (yes, the origin of the English word 'thug') were professional hit-men who plied their trade on the dusty roads of India. These ruthless, cold-hearted killers were worshippers of the Hindu goddess of destruction, Kali. Ritual murder was their calling card. According to the *Guinness Book of Records* the Thuggee cult was responsible for approximately two million deaths.

The cult featured in the Hollywood film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and in the Bollywood film *Sangharsh* (1968). *Sangharsh* was based on a story by Jnanpith Award winner, Mahasweta Devi, and presented a fictionalised account of vendetta within a Thuggee cult in the holy Indian town of Varanasi.

Thugs wandered the Indian sub-continent in groups numbering anywhere from a few men to several hundred posing as innocent, good-natured pilgrims. Offering

protection or company, they would befriend fellow travelers and slowly gain their confidence along the road. When the time was right, often while their targets were encamped and at their most relaxed, a signal would be given — reportedly “Bring the tobacco” — and the dastardly Thugs would pounce.

Each Thug had a well-honed task; some distracted their victims, some made music to mask any cries, while others guarded the campsite from intruders and escapees. Thugs of the highest rank performed the actual murders. The usual method was strangulation with a silk handkerchief, or a turban.

The Thugs plundered and then hid the corpses, often by burying them or by throwing them in wells. One infamous Thug, Behram, confessed to having strangled 931 innocent people with his turban.

Thuggee rites included sugar sacrifices and axe-worshipping ceremonies in honour of Kali. Thugs were incredibly superstitious. They were obsessed by an intricate array of omens which guided them on their outings. If any thug was heard to break wind during an expedition it was believed to be very inauspicious. Five blows of a shoe inflicted upon the head of the offending party would mitigate the offense to the goddess Kali. Perhaps the worst portent of all was the cry of a baby owl. This would signal impending disaster. Everyone would pack up and return home.

Captured Thugs often claimed that their crimes were simply a matter of fate; they were destined to commit them. They were merely ‘irresponsible’ agents, no more liable to be held accountable for their brutal crimes than were the tigers to whom they often compared themselves. ‘How many men have you strangled?’ one notorious Thug was asked. ‘I have killed none,’ came the incensed reply. ‘Is it not the hand of God that kills him?’

Sleeman was a committed Christian and his sober and upright character was soon bearing fruit in the detection and elimination of the Thuggee cult. Sleeman revolutionized police techniques. He had a real love for ordinary Indian people and he spent many hours listening to the stories of mothers and fathers who reported that their beloved spouses and children had vanished while visiting friends in other cities. Sleeman was the first detective in history to employ informers as a key weapon against the criminal gangs. He transformed Indian policing from an almost entirely local affair, dependent on officers with few resources and working, in effect, alone, into a recognizably modern operation, one in which the careful accumulation of intelligence held sway, and accurate record-keeping was obligatory. His files – which were among the most detailed and comprehensive ever assembled by any police force – became an invaluable resource in tracking down the deadly assassins. Sleeman’s men, rather than passively waiting for their opponents to strike, actively pursued them. In doing this, they created a new template for detective work. He was a culture-transforming Christian and he (almost) singlehandedly solved the mystery, arrested the serial killers and got the T-shirt.

On one occasion a Thug was hiding behind a curtain in Sleeman’s house. Sleeman had a premonition of evil, drew aside the curtain and there was a caddish fellow brandishing a huge dagger. Sleeman was unperturbed and pointing a finger at the

man he said, "You, sir, are a Thug." The fellow promptly dropped the dagger and surrendered.

Many Hindus were so deeply appreciative of Sleeman's success in destroying Thuggee that a village to the north-east of Jabalpur (then called Jubbulpore), in Madhya Pradesh, was renamed Sleemanabad.

Thug carnage became increasingly rare after 1835 when Sleeman was delighted to discover that not a single sepoy (Indian soldier) had vanished without trace between his home and his barracks while on leave. Between 1831 and 1837 Sleeman captured and tried a total of 3,266 Thugs, while several hundred more were in prison awaiting trial. Many had been executed while many more were serving life sentences. By no means had all Thugs been brought to justice. Yet Sleeman had effectively destroyed Thuggee by developing such a successful system of getting Thugs to identify other Thugs that those who were captured were completely demoralized.

In 1856 Sleeman decided to return to England. On the 10th February, off the coast of Sri Lanka, Sleeman died and was buried at sea.

Teaching the Story

This story can be compared to a parable. It is rich in meaning and significance. Let's marinate in the story for a few moments.

Sleeman served God as a detective and this is a superb illustration of the Biblical principle that all of life needs to be redeemed. Biblical salvation is not God's rescue of individual souls *from* the world, but God's rescue of the whole created world. Sleeman's life's work challenges dualistic forms of Christianity (that confine Christian life to church-related activities) and also that form of liberal theology which reduces everything to 'social action'. We could say that he integrated his Christian faith with his professional labours. He didn't accept the secular way of doing the job, which in its extreme sense was idle loafing, recovering from hangovers, accepting bribes and feathering nests. He unfolded detective work in the light of the Biblical drama.

Notice that he wasn't just being moral and honest. He developed detective work in radically new directions. He wasn't merely adding a bit of virtue and integrity to the secular cake. We could say that he was transforming the labour, the work of a detective in terms of the gospel of the kingdom. He was investing his talents and perspiration in bringing the rule of Jesus into his 'secular' work.

His deep love and compassion for the local Indian people was the central thrust of his life. His love for God and neighbour was incarnated in his 'secular' work.

Notice that this adventure story is filled with mad, eccentric features. Detail that shocks and startles. Three bottles of claret. 931 innocent victims. turbans. Young people love this. And it's often surprising how much they can remember. This is a key feature of our methodology. Wild, challenging dramatic stories that cannot be forgotten.

The drama of the story brings alive the drama of the biblical story. Many young Christians in England are unable to connect the Biblical story to the real world. Often the Bible is taught in a way that is hermetically sealed off from the real world of celebrities, television adverts, football groupies and serial killers like Behram.

The Sleeman story allows us to bring alive the biblical themes of creation, rebellion, idolatry, the Mosaic law, the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of God, loving your neighbour in practical, earthy ways and so much more. His story helps us to understand and visualise a Christian serving Jesus Christ in the 'secular' as well as the 'religious' sphere of life.

The story also allows us to go beyond the biblical drama and engage in meaningful, credible mission. It isn't only the Thugs who believe that some people are destined to kill.

Some secular intellectuals can also be very reductionist. A quote from Richard Dawkins: "We are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes." ¹ He also wrote– "But doesn't a truly scientific, mechanistic view of the nervous system make nonsense of the very idea of responsibility, whether diminished or not?" ²

Susan Blackmore, an evolutionary psychologist wrote. "You are nothing more than a creation of genes and memes in a unique environment." ³

And zoologist Eric Pianka once quipped that - "Humans are no better than bacteria" ⁴

It is fascinating that the worldviews of 'universal' Darwinists and the pagan Thugs have so much in common! The Thugs believed they were fated to kill: Kali was responsible for the deaths. Darwinian materialists believe we are just chemical machines whose every action is determined, not freely chosen.

We want to show how we can take this swashbuckling adventure story and ask subversive questions based around the drama, which challenge secular reductionism. ⁵

Tell people the story about Behram and his 931 victims and ask these subversive questions

- 1) Do you agree with the secular boffins who assert that Behram was neither good nor evil?
- 2) Are you happy with saying that Behram was a survival machine programmed to kill 931 innocent people?
- 3) Were the Thugs right when they argued that they were not responsible for their heinous deeds?

Mark did precisely this with his 'agnostic' aunty Muriel who comes from Watford and the conversation was amazing. She thought it was crazy to believe that Behram was

a programmed survival machine. Mark had a superb discussion about the Christian faith and encouraged her to read John's gospel.

His cousin Edward has a first class degree in Philosophy. He used to be a committed Roman Catholic and now he has become an atheist. In England there are many such conversions. A few months ago Mark asked him another subversive question.

"Do you agree with Dr. Pianka that human beings are no better than bacteria?" Mark explained the logic behind this assertion. Quite amazingly Edward didn't sneer at him or shower him with cold contempt. He smiled and said "That's a very good question. I haven't got a clue what to say." They then had a great discussion about what it means to be made in the image of God.

Summary of our methodology: tell a dramatic story, ask a subversive question, and talk about the Biblical drama.

There is a great challenge here. We want Christian young people to have great stories and great questions 'in the locker'. For us it is primarily a pastoral issue.

In England many young people lose their Christian faith when they go to college and university. Research by Dr. David Voas of Manchester University suggests that Christian belief in the UK is in serious decline. Christian parents are only 50% successful in passing on their religious convictions to their children. Parents with secular beliefs are almost completely successful in passing on their unbelief to their offspring.⁶

We must equip the next generation with a very practical 'worldview toolbox'. Yes we need to teach people about worldviews and Christian philosophy. We love philosophy but strongly recommend that dramatic stories and subversive questions are additional, vital components for the tool box. In this worldview toolbox there is bread not stones, eggs not scorpions, fish not snakes.

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