

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 19

Volume 19 • Number 4 • October 1995

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

traditional dress by covering the upper part of their bodies—in southern Travancore.¹⁰ A corollary of the missionaries' detestation of caste was their acceptance of the role of protagonists and patrons of the poor, virtually the only people of influence willing to risk schism in the churches or public disturbance for the sake of the depressed.¹¹

Those from the depressed castes were naturally attracted to the Protestant form of Christianity since it espoused the values of the dignity and equality of all. When the Nadars, Malas, Madigas, Sambavars and Chuhars embraced Protestant Christianity they also gained in esteem as the missionaries mixed freely with them and treated them with respect. There was also the real possibility of social uplift for them as converts. By contrast, Roman Catholics and Lutherans, because they were eager to maintain and Christianize existing structures of society, made conversion to their churches a less likely escape from a religious system of oppression. This was indeed the verdict of Bishop Caldwell who worked among the Nadars. He compared the Paravar fisherfolk converts to Catholicism very unfavourably with the Protestant converts when he stated that 'in intellect, habits and morals the Romanist Hindus do not differ from the heathens in the smallest degree.'¹² Caldwell's judgement may be too sweeping, but there is enough truth in it to explain why those who discouraged boundary crossing, and in effect, adopted and christianized existing structures, simply failed to attract mass movement converts.

In the last analysis, Bishop Wilson's approach to mission emphasizes what is at the core of the gospel of Jesus, the centrality of repentance and forgiveness, of love and acceptance of the marginalized, of justice and fairness in inter-human relationships. In particular, this gospel was acted out in Jesus' own attitudes and [p. 386](#) relationships as well as responses toward the 'poor': the women, tax collectors, Samaritans and other marginalized people. The church in turn is called to emulate the gospel, that is, Jesus' practice of boundary-breaking compassion. As our example has amply demonstrated, when the church embodies such a gospel, God will also give it growth, causing the church to grow in quality as well as quantity.

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Issues in the Hindu-Christian Debate During the Nineteenth Century Bengal Renaissance

¹⁰ Geoff A. Oddie, *Social Protest in India. British Protestant Missionaries and social Reforms 1850–1900* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1978), p. 70; Robert L. Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnad: The Political Culture of a Community in Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 55–70.

¹¹ Duncan Forrester, *Caste and Christianity. Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India* (London: Curzon Press, 1980), pp. 71–73.

¹² *Caste and Christianity*, p. 83.

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Printed with permission, being the preface of a Ph.D. thesis, University of Aberdeen

The nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance is a vast subject. This study is mainly concerned with some of the major issues in the Hindu-Christian debate during this period.¹ The scope of this study is narrowed by its special reference to St. Paul's teaching on the religions of the nations.

By 'St. Paul's teaching on the religions of the nations' this study refers particularly, though not exclusively, to [Acts 14](#), [17](#), [Romans 1](#) and [2](#). The linking up of the main issues in the debate with Paul's teaching on the religions of the nations is a natural one. First, the debate itself shows that some of the major issues raised in it—creation, the divine self-disclosure in nature, knowledge of God, reason, conscience, idolatry and immorality—are clearly within the confines of the apostle's teaching in these passages. Second, these passages have generally been regarded as *logi classici* for the discussion on those topics since the time of the early Christian apologists.² Third, inspire of the many problems involved in the exegesis of these passages, one thing remains sufficiently clear: that these passages are the products of real 'encounter-situations' between the Christian faith and the religions of the Graeco-Roman world at the beginning of the Christian era. The early Christian p. 388 apologists, such as Justin, Athenagoras, Tertullian and Tatian, who defended the Christian faith a century or so after Paul, found themselves in similar missionary situations, and used those passages quite considerably in their apologetics, although they had produced no substantial exegetical work on the apostle's teaching on those issues. Last but not least is the fact that the debate in nineteenth century Bengal was between renascent Hinduism and Christianity when the latter was beginning to assert itself as a formidable missionary religion in the British Indian Empire. Comparisons, however real or superficial, were not uncommonly drawn between the religious and moral states of the Graeco-Roman world in the early centuries of the Christian era and the conditions of the Indian Empire of the nineteenth century.³ Alexander Duff, for instance, saw in renascent Hinduism nothing but 'the struggles of an expiring Paganism ... of heathen Philosophy' which could be likened to what the Graeco-Roman religions and philosophies had gone through when confronted with the Christian gospel during the early Christian centuries.⁴ Nehemiah Goreh consciously took upon himself the role of a Christian apologist in the manner of the early Church fathers and apologists.⁵ Both

¹ One of the vital issues in the debate is christology. However, in view of the fact that the issue has already been given a very full treatment by scholars such as M. M. Thomas, it will not occupy a prominent place in this study. See M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the India Renaissance* (London, 1969).

² See A. F. Walls, 'The First Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans and the Modern Missionary Movement', *Apostolic History of the Gospel*, ed. by W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin (Grand Rapids, 1970); H. H. Farmer, *Revelation and Religion* (London, 1954), chapter 1; H. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London, 1956), chapters 17 and 18; D. E. H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul* (Oxford, 1974), p. 58.

³ See e.g. Julius Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, Eng. tr. S. H. Moore (London, 1908), p. 249; M. A. Sherring, *The Sacred City of the Hindus* (London, 1868), p. 358; James Ross, 'The Missionary Character of Paul', *Indian Evangelical Review*, No. 1, July, 1873; Alexander Duff, *India and India Missions* (Edinburgh, 1839), pp. 31–34; and J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New York, 1915), p. 445.

⁴ *India and India Missions*, pp. 270–2.

⁵ *Theism and Christianity* (Calcutta, 1882), Part II, p. 45.

Krishna Mohan Banerjea and Nehemiah Goreh were regarded by the Christians of their days as having inaugurated an era of indigenous Christian apologetics.

Accordingly, the first part of the study is devoted to the historical setting of the debate. The word 'Bengal' is used instead of the more general and broader geographical term 'Indian', because it was in the province of Bengal of the former British Indian Empire that the renaissance of the country first began. Rammohan Roy, 'the father' of the Hindu renaissance, adopted the city of Calcutta, the East-West meeting place, as the centre of his reform movement. The Brahmo Samaj was basically a Bengali movement. Duff, the first missionary of the Church of Scotland to India, landed in Calcutta in 1830 to begin his work in that great city of the East. Banerjea, a convert of Duff, lived and witnessed in Calcutta during most of his lifetime. Even Goreh, a former pundit of Benares, addressed himself mainly to a religious movement, Brahmoism, which was of Bengali origin. All these, together with other possible considerations, clearly show that Bengal has a preferential claim over all the other provinces in the present study.

Although the political and social setting of the Bengal renaissance in the present study begins from 1773, the year of the very important Regulating Act of the East India Company, p.389 it is designed only to provide the study with a broader historical point of reference. In actual fact, the Hindu-Christian debate will be more narrowly confined to the period between the thirties and the eighties of the nineteenth century.

Of the various factors that contributed to the Bengal renaissance, two in particular, have been given places of prominence. These are: the British orientalist's discovery of India's cultural and religious heritage; and English education.

THE ORIENTALISTS' DISCOVERY OF INDIA

The orientalist's discovery of India's 'glorious' past is set against her being in a state of almost unprecedented stagnation and decadence both culturally and religiously, especially during the second half of the eighteenth century. Special attention is given to Warren Hastings' enlightened cultural policy and patronage which had provided the kind of incentive and encouragement for men like Wilkins, Halhed and Jones to pursue their research into the country's abundant sources. Most significant of all was perhaps Colebrooke's favourable account of the Vedic religion, for in it one begins to see the crystallization of the nineteenth century image of the 'golden age' of ancient India, an image which could justly be said to have provided the spiritual inspiration, national self-respect, confidence, and pride which were the most vital ingredients of the Bengal renaissance.

Side by side with this 'reconstructed' and 'romanticized' image of Vedic India⁶ was the gradual but steady process of the westernization of Bengal which was set in motion by its vital contact with the west through the British. In the Bengali context, westernization meant at the same time modernization, and this may be understood in terms of its inevitable social, economic, cultural and mental responses and readjustments to the stimulating forces from without. Special consideration is here given to the unique role played by English, the language of the rulers, and English education which was regarded by Rammohan Roy as being 'more liberal and enlightened' than the traditional Sanskrit training, a system of education held by the great reformer to have been in the captivity of

⁶ David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*, (University of California, 1969), p. 41.

the priestly order for centuries.⁷ It was to English education that the reformer believed that India could really 'look forward with pleasing hope to the dawn of knowledge'.⁸

There is perhaps hardly a better way of indicating the importance of English education than by simply pointing out the fact that virtually all the main participants in the Hindu-Christian debate during this period were well versed in English language and literature, even including Nehemiah Goreh who began his English training at a relatively late stage. Consequently, nearly all their works which are relevant to this p. 390 study were either written in English or had been translated into English. The Brahmo Samaj drew their main support from the English-educated to whom the Christian apologists from Duff to Goreh addressed themselves ceaselessly.

THE HINDUS' RESPONSE

Representing Bengal's early and most positive response to the challenge of western ideas and innovations was undoubtedly the group of educated Bengali under the leadership of Rammohan Roy.

While recognizing the influence that Islam and Hindu theology possibly had on the reformer during the early days of his youth, this study takes the view that it was from the newly reconstructed golden image of the ancient Vedic age and other western values and ideas that Rammohan Roy first received his real source of inspiration and impulse to begin the first reformation in modern India. However, two qualifications must be made with reference to this observation. First, although he readily accepted the image now created by the British orientalists, he evidently did not share their enthusiasm for classicism. This can best be illustrated by his campaign for English education as well as by his strong objection to the proposed founding of the Sanskrit College of Calcutta. It was Rammohan Roy's conviction that once the mind of the Hindus was 'enlightened' they could not fail to understand and appreciate 'the true meaning of our sacred books'. Again, like many of the enthusiasts for western education of his days, he did not see what devastating effects this system of education would eventually have on the youth of India, nor did he live quite long enough to see the kind of liberals, radicals, sceptics and atheists that an institution such as the Hindu College could produce. Second, it must be said that while the first impulse he received for his campaign against idolatry and other religious and social evils was basically western in origin, it was on the sacred scriptures of his ancestral religion, more particularly, the Upanishads, that he ultimately took his stand. From this point of view he was 'orthodox' and 'conservative', and he proudly identified himself with the main stream of Hinduism and categorically denied that he ever claimed to be an 'innovator'. It would be nearer to the truth to characterize his religion as a form of Vedantism than to regard it as 'Neo-Hinduism'. And it would certainly be an anachronism to call it a kind of 'natural religion' like later Brahmoism.

Duff deserves a place in this study for at least the following reasons. First, to a very considerable extent he represented the kind of nineteenth century British evangelicalism which was largely the product of the great evangelical revival that the country had experienced in the previous century. Second, his attitude towards Hinduism was an exceedingly negative one. And it was his *magnum opus*, *India and India Missions*, appearing in 1839, which aroused organized opposition on the part of the Hindu community in

⁷ A Letter on English Education, addressed to Lord Amherst, *The English Works of Raja Mohun Roy*, ed. by J. C. Ghose (Calcutta, 1885), vol. I. p. 473.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

Calcutta, represented by Debendranath Tagore and his party. Third, he was a firm believer in the ultimate conversion p. 391 of India by means of western education accompanied by Christian teaching. And he arrived in the country just in time to participate in the controversy over the matter of English education. Finally, he was the instrument for the conversion of the first high-caste Bengali intellectuals of the Hindu College, including Krishna Mohan Banerjea.

The Hindu protest against Duff's indictments of Hinduism found its indignant expression in the form of a Brahmo tract, 'Vedantic Doctrines Vindicated'. Although one may not agree with P. K. Sen that the work was 'calm and dignified in tone', it was clearly 'solid and substantial in its manner.'⁹ Apart from some of the substantial arguments that the tract had advanced for Hinduism, there was also in it the gradual emergence of the idea of modern Vedantism as a form of 'natural religion' which later characterized the creed of Brahmoism, although the 'vindicators' strongly-held that they were in no way trying to depart from the main line tradition of their ancestral religion. The other significant thing about the tract was that the main issues raised in it continued to be the most vital points of debate between the Brahmos and the Christians in the following decades.

The public declaration of the 'Vedantic Doctrines Vindicated' that 'the Vaidas and the Vaidas alone' were the sole foundation of modern Vedantism did not satisfy all members of the *Tattvabodhini Sabha*. Disagreements within the *Sabha* led to the formal consideration of the vital subject of the infallibility of the Vedas, from about 1846 to 1850. In 1850 came the modern Vedantists' rejection of the doctrine of Vedic infallibility under the leadership of Debendranath Tagore. It was resolved that henceforth

the Vedas, Upanishads, and other ancient writings were not to be accepted as infallible guides, that Reason and Conscience were to be the Supreme Authority, and the teachings of the Scriptures were to be accepted only in so far as they harmonized with the light within us.¹⁰

Although the belief in the infallibility of the Vedas had now been formally abandoned, the Upanishads continued to be greatly venerated by the Brahmos, or modern Vedantists. Upanishadic texts continued to be used in the divine services of the Brahmo Samaj and some were used in the composition of the *Brahmo Dharma*, or the 'Religion of Brahman', by Debendranath Tagore. On the other hand, the Brahmos never failed to lay claim on the 'volume of Nature' to be the new foundation of their 'natural religion'. The phrase 'volume of Nature' was often used interchangeably with other terms such as 'intuition' or 'natural reason', by the Brahmos.

In the next couple of decades following the dethronement of the Vedas a considerable amount of apologetic work was produced by the Brahmos to defend the new basis of their religion—'intuition' or 'natural reason'. There was also the belief amongst the leaders of the p. 392 Brahmo Samaj that for the 'purposes of self-vindication as well as of conviction' their controversy with the Christians would have to continue.¹¹ At the same time the Christians were equally convinced that with the appearance of Banerjea's *Dialogues on the Hindu Philosophy* in 1861, and Goreh's *A Rational Refutation of the Hindu Philosophical Systems* a year later, an era of Indian Christian apologetics had dawned.

⁹ P. K. Sen, *Biography of a New Faith* (Calcutta, 1950), vol. I. p. 183.

¹⁰ Satyendranath Tagore (ed.), *Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore* (Calcutta, 1909), pp. iii-iv.

¹¹ Raj Narain Bose, *Hints Showing the Feasibility of Constructing a Science of Religion* (Bengal, 1878), p. 25.

In the sixties a charismatic figure began to emerge in the Brahmo movement in the person of Keshub Chunder Sen. But very soon tensions between this progressive young leader and the more conservative 'old Brahmo' Debendranath Tagore began to show itself, and in 1865 came the great split within the Brahmo movement. A large number of the young Brahmos gave their allegiance to Keshub Chunder Sen while the majority of the older and more conservative members remained with Debendranath Tagore's old party, now called the 'Adi Brahmo Samaj', or 'the original Samaj'. And Keshub Chunder Sen's group claimed the title the 'Brahmo Samaj of India'.

From the sixties onwards the Adi Brahmo Samaj began to claim openly that 'Brahmoism is both Universal Religion and a form of Hindooism', which sought to 'preach the *catholic* sentiments of *Brahma Dharma* in a *national* form'.¹² However, the balance between 'catholicism' and 'nationalism' was difficult to maintain. In the end the stress was on the national, or Hindu side; and a strong affinity was maintained between the new creed and traditional Hinduism. On the other hand, Keshub Chunder Sen appeared to be more and more 'pro-Christian' in some of his public pronouncements about Jesus Christ. At the same time the former *bhakta* became very much preoccupied with the idea of the 'direct perception' of the Deity and considered his Brahmoism as a 'living religion'. Sen's thought found its ultimate expression in his 'New Dispensation' in 1880.

THE APOLOGETICS OF BANERJEA AND GOREH

The apologetic works of Banerjea and Goreh from the early sixties till the eighties are the main concern of the third part of the study: Banerjea in search of a meaningful dialogue with the Aryan religious tradition; while Goreh was mainly concerned with his critique of natural religion, or Theism, and sought to present Christianity as the revealed religion.

Some of the major issues in the debate are recapitulated in the last part of the study with special reference to St. Paul's teaching on the religions of the nations based on the exegesis of [Acts 14](#), [17](#), [Romans 1](#) and [2](#). The concluding chapter attempts to give a summary of the salient points of the study.

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Christian Missions and the Western Guilt Complex

Lamin Sanneh

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¹² *Brahmic Questions of the Day*, by An Old Brahmo (Calcutta, 1869), pp. 4, 8.