

## CHRISTOLOGY OF RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY

It is always a matter of great honour to be asked to felicitate a scholar at attaining a mile's stone in life; in honoring him, we honour ourselves. Fr. Aleaz is such scholar that one may feel so. I am sure, if my father was alive, he would have blessed him at this juncture in life and would definitely have contributed an article. The onus has fallen upon me to offer my personal tribute to him as a scholar, teacher and exponent of advaitic interpretation of Christ-experience. In doing so, I am reflecting upon Christology of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a contemporary of Serampore Trio, and a frequent visitor to Serampore, a place of residence of his maternal uncle. This rudimentary article is in the process of my working towards a Christology of the reformers of the great Indian renaissance.

Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) is considered to be the Father of Modern Religious Movements in India as well as a prophet of Indian nationalism and the pioneer of liberal reforms in Hindu religion and society. A liberal to the core, he initiated relentless fight against the practice of Sati and child infanticide, supported English and modern education, advocated education for women and founded Brahmo Samaj to reform Hindu social and religious structures from within. He served as revenue officer in the East India Company and retired in 1814 to devote full time in his passion to reform his religion and society. In 1833, he was conferred the title of Raja by the titular Moghul Emperor and was appointed his envoy to England. He died soon after his arrival at Bristol in 1833.

He was a keen student of religions and sought to satisfy his thirst for truth in taking other religions seriously. At the young age of fifteen, he wandered off to different places within the country and went as far as Tibet. He studied Islam, along with learning Arabic and Persian languages, which had a great influence upon his life and works. His insistence upon the unity of God and the meaninglessness of idol worship can be traced to his studies of this great religious tradition of the Asian continent.

Dr. Robin Boyd who is the first serious scholar making us aware of Indian Christian Theology, considers Raja Ram Mohan Roy to be the first Indian to have written seriously and extensively on Christian theological themes.<sup>1</sup> Roy himself confessed and wrote: 'The consequence of long and interrupted researches into religious truth has been that I have found the doctrines of Christ more conducive to moral principles and more adapted for the use of rational beings than any other which have come to my knowledge'<sup>2</sup>. Like many other reformers of the nineteenth century, he was attracted towards the simple teachings of Christ as found in the Gospels, and not to the Christian doctrines and dogmas.

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<sup>1</sup> R.H.S.Boyd, An Introduction To Indian Christian Theology, Delhi: ISPCK, 1989, p.19

<sup>2</sup> J.N.Farquhar, Modern Religious movements in India, p. 32

### **Understanding Ram Mohan Roy**

We may do great injustice to the Father of Modern India, if we judge him from the standpoint of our 'theological circle' without understanding his own. He developed his own religious and theological circle out of his experience and studies of great religious traditions of his time in India, Hinduism and Islam, and tried to understand the new entrant, Christianity, as well. He was a learned and enlightened Bengali Brahmin, deeply rooted in his own tradition with a crusading spirit to reform his society in the light of the modern knowledge that was dawn upon it through the introduction of new education by the then emerging rulers from England. The 'other religious traditions' provided him a common theological ground in the form of 'unitary principle', which he zealously held and protected from the attacks of his adversaries from within and without.

Dr. M.M. Thomas<sup>3</sup> had noted three fundamental ideas in his theological thinking: first, a monistic faith in the unity of God inspired fundamentally perhaps by Islam, (and may I add, by Vedic and Upanishadic vision); secondly, the conviction that morality is the essence of true religion; and thirdly, rationalism demands that religion should hold only to beliefs which are reasonable, and that reason should serve to purify religion of superstition and unnecessary mysteries and miracles. He adhered to these ideas when he formed the 'Brahmo Samaj' and applied them to his religion as well.

In his introduction to the translation of Ishopanishad, his critical, analytical and rational mind is quite evident: 'I have never ceased to contemplate with the strongest feelings of regret the obstinate adherence of my countrymen to their fatal system of idolatry, inducing for the sake of propitiating their supposed Deities, the violation of every humane and social feeling, and to view in (this system) the moral debasement of a race... I pray that (Hindus may come to) a conviction of the rationality believing and adoring the Supreme only; together with a complete perception and practice of that grand and comprehensive moral principle: Do unto others as ye would be done by.'<sup>4</sup>

The sources of his theology and ethics were primarily derived from his own Religion and religious scriptures; he only wished to supplement them from other religions. He was a reformer with the concern for reforming Hindu religion and society from within, hence 'the appeal of Jesus Christ to him was primarily to his protestant Hindu soul'<sup>5</sup>. He was neither a Christian nor pretended to be a Christian theologian like Joshua Marshman of Serampore. Hence he was rather surprised by the attack and was forced to engage into a controversy of not his liking.<sup>6</sup> He can be classed as an ethicist or moralist, interested in the moral conduct of his society. He held the doctrine of Sufficiency of Law to justify, and sanctify, men as a criterion for his selection of Precepts of Jesus, and therefore left the historical and doctrinal passages of the Gospels. He

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<sup>3</sup> M.M.Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, Madras: C.L.S, 1977, p.3

<sup>4</sup> quoted from MMThomas, *ibid.* p.3-4

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p.8

<sup>6</sup> Three appeals consumed about 330 pages.

himself was not so sceptical about the miracle stories but found no spiritual and theological significance in them except as mythologies helpful to preserve the precepts of Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

His concern was for a religion, which answers the moral and spiritual problems of human than the incomprehensible theology and metaphysics. Hence he was a hesitant entrant into the controversy, which was forced upon him by one of the Serampore trio, Joshua Marshman: 'I regret only that the followers of Jesus, in general, should have paid much greater attention to enquiries after his nature than to the observance of his commandments, when we are well aware that no human acquirements can ever discover the nature even of the most common and visible things and moreover that such enquiries are not enjoined by the divine revelation'.<sup>8</sup>

### **Two Pillars of Human Life**

With his personal studies of major religions and involvement in the social and religious turmoil of his time, he came to the conclusion that the foundation of a noble human life rests on two pillars: love of God and love of one's fellow humankind. He found his religion not lacking in the first but devoid of the other. He found the second abounding in the teachings of Christ and acknowledged, as noted above, that fact.

The denominational Christianity, historical and dogmatic questions, he found, were the stumbling block in seeing the simplicity and beauty of the teachings of Christ, and he side tracked them to glean that beauty for the benefit of the true seekers. He selected some of the moral teachings of Christ from the New Testament and published them as a separate booklet entitled, 'The Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happiness'. With the publication of these precepts, and the heat it generated thereafter, the concept of seva, service, slowly gain acceptance in the Karma-dominated Indian society and the service to fellow humans almost became the creed of the reformers after Roy.

### **The person of Christ**

The personhood of Jesus Christ, as well as his teachings, as found in the Gospels often finds appreciation and acceptance to any reader; it is the theology that repulses the serious adherent of other faiths. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was not an exception. His attitude to Christ is one of reverence as due to a great teacher and messenger of God, but he could not accept the title 'Son of God' if it implies an attribute to divinity. He quotes many scriptural passages to prove the 'natural inferiority of the Son to the Father' and holds that Jesus is merely delegated with power from God; he did not possess this power intrinsically. The unity with Father implied in certain Johannine texts is merely 'a subsisting concord of will and design, such as existing among his apostles and not identity of being'. He, indeed, accepts the title 'Son of God' and other scriptural titles of Christ, but always in a qualified sense, implying that each one is special gift conferred by God, rather than his by right. Jesus, to him is 'the son of God, a term synonymous with that of

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<sup>7</sup> M.M. Thomas op. cit. p.9

<sup>8</sup> collect, op. cit., p. 41

messiah, the highest of all the prophets; and his life declares him to have been, as represented in the scriptures, pure as light, innocent as a lamb, necessary for eternal life as bread for temporal one, and great as the angels of God, or rather greater than they'.

It is not difficult for Roy to accept the doctrine of the Virgin birth, but he would not like the idea to associate it with the personality of the Holy Spirit. He will not deny the miracles of Jesus, including resurrection. Both these points are unimportant for the religious minds of the Indian people.

It may be helpful if we take a closer look at Jesus as understood by Raja Ram Mohan Roy:

### **i. The dependent Son**

Roy seriously read the Gospels and derived his Christology on the basis of his own readings and the reasons that satisfied his mind: 'Have we not his own express and often repeated avowal that all the powers he manifested were committed to him as the son by the father of the Universe? And does not reason force us to infer that a being who owes to another all his power and authority, however extensive and high, should be in reality considered inferior to that other? Surely therefore, those who believe God to be supreme, possessing the perfection of all attributes, independently of all other beings, must necessarily deny the identity of Christ with God'.<sup>9</sup>

And he takes the passages from the Gospel of St. John to substantiate his views. He quotes I Corinthians 15: 24-28 to indicate the dependency of the son to the Father. Jesus is the Messiah-yes; he is anointed Son of God- yes, he is God himself-NO.

### **ii. Unity of Will, not identity of Being**

There is no problem for Roy to accept the unity of God and Jesus, but he interprets this unity as the unity of will and design, and not an identity of being. Applying the hermeneutical principle of interpreting scriptures from the internal evidence, he reads 'I and my father are one' (John 10:30) in the light of 'that they may be one as we are one' (John 17:20-23), and concludes the unity of God and Jesus is of the same character as Jesus and his disciples and offers three choices:

'First as conveying the doctrine that the Supreme Being, the Son and the Apostles were to be absorbed mutually as drops of water into one whole; which is comfortable to the doctrine of that sect of Hindu metaphysics who maintain that in the end the human soul is absorbed into the Godhead, but is quite inconsistent with the faith of all denominations of Christians.

Secondly, as proving an identity of nature, with distinction of person, between the Father, the Son and the Apostles, a doctrine equally inconsistent with the belief of every Christian, as multiplying the number of persons of the Godhead far beyond what has ever been proposed by any sect.

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<sup>9</sup> quoted from MMThomas, op. cit., pg. 19

Thirdly, as expressing that unity which is said to exist wherever there are found perfect concord, harmony, love and obedience such as the Son evinced towards the Father, and taught the disciples in display towards the Divine will. That the language of the Saviour can be understood in this last sense solely, will I trust, be readily be acknowledged by every candid expounder of the sacred writing, as being the only one alike warranted by the common use of words, and capable of apprehension by human understanding.<sup>10</sup>

### iii. First Born of Creation

Roy, however, has no difficulty in accepting the pre-existence of Jesus with God and being the first born of creatures, and supreme above all creatures including the angels: The Scriptures indeed in several places declare that the Son was superior even to the angels in heaven living from the beginning of the world to eternity, and that the Father created all things by him and for him. At the same time, I must, in conformity to those very authorities, believe him as produced by the Supreme Deity among created Beings (John 5:26; Col.1:5).<sup>11</sup>

He will go as far as to accept Jesus as Messiah, in the sense of the supreme messenger of God, a creature but not Creator as he says: He like Adam lived with God before his coming into his world... and afterwards was sent to the world in the body of Jesus, for effecting humah salvation..... this does not preclude us from rejecting the idea of a two-fold nature of god and man.<sup>12</sup>

One can see here the traces of Pauline doctrine of 'unfallen Adam' incarnate to save the humankind. He is not willing to accept eternal generation, coexistence with the father. He has no difficulty in admitting that the Son of god is god in the same way as the son of man is a man, if it does not coupled with the assertion of the coeval existence of the son.

### The Work of Christ

Christ accomplished his saving act through his teaching and his death was simply the supreme illustration of those precepts whose communication was the sole object of his mission. Roy rejected the ideas of vicarious suffering and sacrificial death; God is impassable and is untouched by the misery and suffering, and if Jesus suffered in his divine nature this would be highly inconsistent with the nature of God. Death of God is the dogma, which cannot be accepted by Roy. Vicarious suffering of an innocent for the guilt of others, too does not find favour in his sight; it is inconsistent with the justice of God. He has no hesitation to accept the suffering of the innocent Jesus as a lamb, taking it just a 'symbol of innocent subjected to persecution', but he did not find scriptural support for the attempt 'to represent human blood, or that of God in human form, as an indispensable atonement for sin'.

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<sup>10</sup> English Works. Pp. 577f.

<sup>11</sup> English works, pp. 583f

<sup>12</sup> ibid p.815

The plan of salvation for Roy is very simple: 'this do and thou shalt live' said Jesus, and following his precepts is the 'best and only means of obtaining the forgiveness of our sins, the favour of God, and strength to overcome our passions and to keep his commandments'. If we repent, we receive forgiveness and there is no need for an atoning death, though we are greatly helped by the supreme example of the Cross. If we fail to follow Jesus' teachings, the solution, for Roy, lies in repentance, which is the most acceptable atonement on our part to the All-merciful, when we have fallen short of that duty. This is the nearest, as Boyd notes, that Roy approaches to a doctrine of repentance, faith, grace and forgiveness.<sup>13</sup>

### **The God-head**

Jesus Christ has not been a problem for many religiously minded people in this continent, but he is with the intellectuals and theologians. Where to place him within their own 'theological and religious circle' is the serious quest of the religious intellectuals influenced by Jesus Christ and his teachings. Raja Ram Mohan Roy devoted much of his time to a polemic against Hindu polytheism and idolatry, and he was aware that inclusion of Christ, as well as Holy Spirit, in Godhead, would be a reversion, amounting to yielding to something primitive and polytheistic. He would stick to the unitary principle in holding God as the sole object of worship and adoration that he expressed it so succinctly in the trust deed of the Samaj's place of worship, as noted by Farquhar, that the building must be used : "for the worship and adoration of the Eternal Unsearchable and Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the universe but not under or by any other name, designation or title particularly used for and applied to any particular being or Beings by any man or set of men whatever"<sup>14</sup>.

From such a 'theological circle' drawn around him, Jesus cannot be placed within Godhead, so also the Holy Spirit as a Person within the Trinitarian formulation. Even then Roy's appreciation for Jesus did not diminish; he regarded Jesus as Son of God or Mediator, in a certain limited sense though, the messenger who communicates the will of God

### **An Evaluation**

One can agree with Keshub Chunder Sen that Roy's secular approach to religion made him incapable of appreciating mystic spirituality and bhakti cults in any religion. His deistic-Unitarian faith considered the idea of divine incarnation in any religion as a compromise of monotheism and as an inevitable source of personal and social demoralization. The later Brahmos, like Sen and Parekh, tried to correct the course.

This brings to another point to ponder, as M. M. Thomas queries: 'does it mean that a modern man imbibed with rational ethical secular temper like that of Ram Mohan Roy, cannot apprehend

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<sup>13</sup>Boyd, op cit., p. 24

<sup>14</sup> Farquhar, op. cit., p. 35

the truth and meaning of Jesus Christ unless they revert a religious-mystical experience or vision of reality?<sup>15</sup>

His 'theological circle' drawn by his philosophical categories of natural theology of monotheism and rational deism did not allow him to move beyond this circle, as that will mean the complete break down of that circle. If he would have come out of it and seen the source of morality of God in Love, this would have opened a way for him to perceive the centrality of cross of Jesus Christ, as symbol of God's self revelation to humankind.

His methodology of studying religious traditions is worth noting; he studied Hebrew and Greek to read and understand Christian precepts without any intervention of subjective Christian theological or doctrinal bias. He did the same in search of Islamic tradition, learning Arabic and Persian for the understanding Holy Quran and Sufi thoughts. He helped in the translation of Bible and had the linguistic competence in understanding the import of biblical teachings. He may have his own bias, but his intension and sincerity needs to be appreciated. He was perhaps the first Hindu scholar who studied Christian Scriptures in original languages and presented his own personal reflections.

His missionary zeal was directed for the moral and spiritual reform of the society in general, but Hindu in particular. His efforts were towards the moral and ethical regeneration of human kind, and he was willing to learn, use and absorb anything that is common in the religious traditions of his time for attaining his goal. It was unfortunate that he was misunderstood by the missionary zealots of his time, and they attacked him and his person, branding him an 'atheist' and 'idolater'. In their missionary zeal for the establishment of Christendom with the nomenclature 'Christians', some of the missionary failed to recognize the sincere, perhaps secret, seekers, sympathizers, followers and disciples of Christ. Most of their attack was on doctrinal and denominational lines in which these new admirers of Christ were not interest; their interest was only in the "raw fact of Christ". This continued trend has alienated many true followers of Christ and the Indian church has shut its door for many of them. A food for thought for many of us as we conclude this brief study

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<sup>15</sup> op. cit., p. 32