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Rammohan Roy and the Unitarians

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RAMMOHAN ROY AND THE UNITARIANS

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the interaction between renowned Hindu reformer Rammohun Roy, and Christian Unitarians, in the early 19th century. Roy, while predominately known as a Hindu theologian and social reformer, also demonstrated a strong interest in Unitarian Christianity, and maintained correspondence with many Unitarians throughout his lifetime. An examination of Roy's biography, paying special attention to his religious education, and his experiences in Calcutta, his religious writings, his interactions with Christian Unitarians, and his available correspondence will all be used to help explain why Roy was interested in Unitarian Christianity. Previous attempts to examine this issue, have focused primarily on theology, trying to link Roy's personal religious or theological influences with his interest in Unitarianism. However by examining Roy's life, particularly his published correspondence, along with his interaction with Unitarians, this paper will argue that it is ethical and practical concerns, not theological ones, that drove Roy's interest in Unitarianism, and help explain his reluctance to publicly discuss his personal beliefs about Unitarianism.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Scope of the Work

Rammohun Roy, often called the father of modern India, had a broad range of interests throughout his life, covering a wide range of political, social, and religious topics. One of the more interesting endeavors, especially considering his Hindu upbringing, and his founding of the Hindu reform movement the Brahmo Samaj, is his interest in Unitarian Christianity, which dominated a large portion of his adult life. By examining his contacts with British and American Unitarians, set in the context of his religious education and upbringing, and his theological tracts, we can begin to understand why he was so enamored with Unitarianism. While the question of whether Roy ever could rightly be called a Unitarian is debatable, it is clear that while his interest in Unitarianism fits with his universalist conception of religion, the primary reason for his interest was not theological. It was instead his admiration of Unitarian ethics, along with practical concerns Roy had in his own life and for his fellow Indians, and the potential social benefits his Unitarian contacts could provide, particularly in the field of education, that offer the best explanation for Roy's interest in Unitarianism.

To explore this further, I will begin with a short overview of the dominant theories that have emerged to help explain Roy's contacts with Unitarians. Then I will give a brief biography of his early religious experiences, highlighting in particular his early contacts with Muslims and Hindus. I will then give an overview of Roy's introduction to Christianity, and his interactions with Trinitarian and Unitarian Christians throughout his lifetime. Following that, I will examine a few of Roy's important works specifically focusing on Unitarian Christianity, focusing on his

Precepts of Jesus. After this, I will closely examine his published contact with Unitarians, as they offer clear evidence of some of Roy's motivations for interacting with Unitarians that are not fully reflected in the predominant theories explaining his interest in Unitarianism. I will then conclude by offering a critique of the most common theories examining Roy's interaction with Unitarianism, by highlighting how they almost universally show a bias towards trying to explain Roy's actions theologically.

Three Theories

In responding to these questions, there are three broader theories that are most commonly offered. The first theory is that Roy's work demonstrates a successive string of influences, beginning with his Arabic instruction, and ending with a turn away from western thought at the end of his life, when he founded the Brahmo Samaj. (Zastoupil 2010, 28) The other theory is that Roy's core theology never changed, that he was always either a Hindu, or at least remained primarily influenced by Vedantic theology, or a Deist or Theist, throughout his life. (Zastoupil 2010, 28) However, other scholars, particularly Demont Killingly, assert that he tailored each discussion to its intended audience, having a "chameleon like ability" to use Islamic philosophy while writing in Persian, Vedantic philosophy while writing in Sanskrit and Bengali, and Enlightenment philosophy while writing in English, a theory often referred to as "localization". (Zastoupil 2010, 28)

Successive Influences

The first theory relies heavily on a particular understanding of Roy's spiritual biography, and its effect on him. The assumption this theory makes is that he was initially heavily influenced by his Arabic education, and the most common piece of evidence offered to support

this is that Roy's first published work in Persian. His later writings are then seen as influenced more by his Sanskrit education; evidenced by his many translations of the Upanishads.

Sugirtharajah explains that under this theory (Sugirtharajah, 53).

Some scholars have also added Buddhist, and possible Jain influences in Roy's early life to this list. There are some biographical sources that suggest Roy might have traveled to Tibet, and might have been exposed to Jain theology while living in Rangpur. This would not be surprising, as R.S. Sugirtharajah notes that, "Rangpur at that time was a thriving mercantile center frequented by Muslims and Jains for commercial reasons. Roy came into contact with Jains and made an extensive study of their many texts." (Sugirtharajah, 10) After these early encounters, the next phase of Roy's intellectual life, according to this theory, was dominated by his western influences. After learning English and moving to Calcutta in 1815, Roy was particularly influenced by his reading of English Utilitarian thinkers, and his interactions with Christian Missionaries. (Sugirtharajah, 53) As he became more familiar with Western philosophy, Roy also began to show influence from more contemporary English philosophers. Sugirtharajah writes that, "The later works of Roy show his acquaintance with contemporary western thinkers such as Locke, Hume and Bentham." (Sugirtharajah, 53) Then later in life, possibly in connection to the founding of the Brahmo Samaj, Roy might have made a distinct turn away from western thought. Sumit Sarkar notes that, "the Hindu intelligentsia of nineteenth-century Bengal 'maybe Rammohun, too, to some extent ... after they had mastered English, turned their backs entirely on such traces of secularism, rationalism and non-conformity in the pre-British Muslim ruled India.'" (Sugirtharajah, 53)

There is, however, some variance with this timeline, as some suggest evidence of Roy being influenced by western thought prior to his stay in Calcutta. Killingley notes that, "There is

some difficulty in supposing that Western influence came as late as this, both because Digby describes Rammohun as absorbing Western culture in Rangpur, and because accounts as early as 1816 speak of his familiarity with it.” (Killingly, 43)

Roy as a Vedantin

Others, however, reject this characterization of Roy’s thought, and claim that Roy stayed under the influence of one primary theological school for most of his life. Some claim that he was a deist or theist, and others, like Bruce Robertson, claim that throughout his life and career Roy remained a devoted Hindu, at least in terms of his attachment to, and veneration of, Advaita theology. Robertson, has strongly criticized the focus other scholars have had on Roy’s non-Hindu theological influences. Robertson expresses deep concern that much of the scholarship surrounding Roy has been. He writes that, “scholars and biographical writers have been sidetracked by secondary and even tertiary questions," that primarily concern Roy’s English and Arabic influences. (Robertson, 166) The reason for this focus on Roy’s supposed external intellectual influences is, according to Robertson, based on an over reliance on Roy’s English works, and not enough attention being paid to his works in Bengali. According to Robinson, misreading such influences into Roy’s English works are not unsurprising, as he describes Roy’s writing as full of “eccentric use and misuse of contemporary English idiom," that could lead readers to erroneously conclude that he was strongly influenced by Western thought. (Robertson, 166)

However, according to Robertson if, Roy’s Bengali language writings are clearly analyzed, the scope of his Vedantic influence becomes clear. In looking at Roy’s Bengali translations and commentaries on the Upanishads, Robertson finds clear influences from Advaita theology, particularly that of Sankara. Robertson writes that his writings on Vedanta show clear

Hindu, not Western influence, as their reasoning appears to be founded in "specific passages in Sankara's commentaries upon the Brahmasutras and five Upanishads." (Robertson, 168) These Bengali translations even contain, at least according to Robertson, are directly excerpted from Sankara's own commentaries. (Robertson, 168) Overall, in examining these Bengali sources, Robertson claims to find little evidence of Western influence. (Robertson, 178)

According to Robertson, this understanding is not only problematic for scholars, but also was evidenced by many of Roy's contemporaries. Robertson claims that the interest that western intellectuals like the Christian Unitarians had in Roy was rooted not in common theological grounds, but a misreading of Roy's English compositions. Robertson comments that these misinterpretations, like those made by modern scholars were "largely due to the language of his own English writings. This language prompted the Unitarians to a great disservice in promoting Rammohan in India and in the West as their Indian convert." (Robertson, 177) In sum, according to scholars like Robertson, any appearance of dominant Western ideology in Roy's thinking is a product of misreading his English writings, and ignorance of his Bengali writings.

This theory is also used to specifically attack claims of Roy's universal theism. According to this view, Roy did not support a general, universal theism, his was specifically rooted in an Advaita theology that often specifically contradicted Judeo-Christian theology. For Robinson, this was particularly true for Roy's concept of God; according to Robinson, the Vedantic "god" presented in Roy's Bengali works, "can neither be morally admired, nor loved, nor served," putting it at a stark contrast with the Judeo-Christian concept of God. (Robertson, 179) Robertson also is very clear that any kernel of similarity between Judeo-Christian and Advaita theology is not an example of a shared common core, but something that was originally, and more perfectly, prefigured in the Vedas and Upanishads. According to Robinson, Roy's

view was that it was this Upanishadic Advaita theology, predating Islam and Christianity by a millennia, was the highest form of religion. (Robertson, 180)

Localization

The last theory, offered by Killingly, offers a very different approach from either of these two approaches. For Killingly the variety of approaches Roy takes, or appears to take, in his writings are due to neither a wrote succession of religious influences, nor a result of some misinterpretation of his writings. Killingly believes that Roy was aware of the differing intellectual and cultural backgrounds of his various audiences and tailored each composition, whether it be in Persian, Bengali, Sanskrit, or English, to that audience. (Killingly, 45) This means that Roy intentionally chose to draw on different sources, and rely on different forms of religious authority, depending what sources would be most effective for the group he was addressing. Killingly notes that through this process, Roy was able to argue and communicate effectively, across religious boundaries, because by tailoring his message to each group, he was “using the authorities which it was most likely to accept.” (Killingly, 45)

The effect of this was that each audience Roy addressed had the potential to feel a genuine connection with him, and resonance with his arguments, because he “appealed to each public using the texts which that public regarded as sacred and revelatory.” (Killingly, 59) This process had notable effects on his relationship with other religious groups; as noted above, his contacts with Hindus and Christians quickly ignited a debate as to whether Roy was a Hindu or a Christian. In addition to this, Roy was known to be mistaken for a Muslim when addressing Muslim audiences. As Killingly writes, “Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who saw him in Delhi before he sailed for England, reports that ‘people in Delhi were convinced that his personal beliefs were considerably inclined towards Islam.’” (Killingly, 43)

Conclusions

However, as will be discussed more fully in the remaining chapters, each of these theories is problematic. The first theory, arguing for successive influences, has two major flaws; one, which will be evidenced by an examination of his biography, particularly his ongoing interaction with Unitarians later in life, is that Roy's interactions with differing religious traditions did not happen on a strictly linear timeframe. Further complicating the first theory is that scholars, like Killingly, still see strong Sanskrit influences in Roy's later Bengali works. (Killingly, 45) The second theory is also highly problematic, because it puts too great a focus on theology, over privileges Roy's works in Bengali, and tends to explain away differences in Roy's English text as deficiencies in Roy's English. Killingly's theory of localization is particularly helpful, in that it helps answer many of the questions introduced by the first two theories; the lack of a clear succession of influence is not a problem for Killingly, as he accepts Roy had a shifting spheres of religious influence throughout his life, and differences between Roy's English and Bengali work offer good examples of Roy's dual use of Christian and Advaita rhetoric. However, as will be evidenced in the latter chapters of this paper, particularly those examining Roy's correspondence with Unitarians, Killingly does not broaden his overall argument to specifically encompass the on the ground, practical concerns that seem to dominate Roy's interactions with Unitarians.

CHAPTER TWO

ROY'S EARLY BIOGRAPHY

Source Material

In discussing the biography of Roy, the English standard has become the biography compiled by Sophia Dobson Collette, published in 1900, while the Bengali standard has become Nagendranath Chatterji's published in 1881. While aspects of both have come under criticism by modern historians, they still remain crucial sources for examining Roy's biography; according to Killingly, each "have deservedly become standard works, but each retains some of the errors of its sources." (Killingly, 16) While they will be discussed, it is also worth mentioning that many of the stories present in early biographies that conflict with each other, even the date of his birth. (Killingly, 5) What follows is the traditional biography of Roy, with notes, when needed, explaining possible discrepancies or inaccuracies.

Early Biography

Rammohun Roy was born in Radhangar, on May 22, in either 1772, or 1774; the exact year remains uncertain. (Collet, 1) Both of his parents were practicing Hindus; his father, Ram Kant Roy was a particularly devout Vaishnava, described by Collet as "a staunch believer in Vishnu as the Supreme God, and in Rama as the last incarnation but one of Vishnu," and his mother, Tarini, often referred to as Phulthakurani, was a Sakta. (Collet, 3-4) Roy's family was able to provide him with an excellent education, and Roy did quite well in school, learning Bengali, Persian, and Arabic. Collet writes that, "His father spared no expense in his education...after completing his school course of Bengali education, he took up the study of Persian...he was next sent to Patna to learn Arabic and (it is said by his mother's desire) to

Benares to learn Sanskrit.” (Collet, 5). His studies at Patna were particularly influential for Roy, as he was greatly inspired by the strict monotheism of the Qur'an. According to biographer S. Cromwell Crawford, “of greater impact was his study of the *Koran* in Arabic. Its unequivocal monotheism began a revolution in his mind, and he was awed by the character of the Prophet.” (Crawford, 6) He also began to develop an interest in Sufi writings while at Patna, particularly, “the mystic poetry and philosophy of the Persian Sufis, for which he retained an ardent attachment throughout his life.” (Collet, 5) These writings included works by Hafiz, Sadi and Shiraz, the former of which made such an impact on Roy that he ends his first extant work, *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin*, or *A Gift to the Monotheists* with a quote from Hafiz. (Crawford, 6)

After Roy's three years of study in Patna, he then went to Benares for an additional three years to study Sanskrit. Here he quickly mastered the language while studying classical Hindu texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Tantras and Puranas. (Crawford, 6) This education in Classical Sanskrit also introduced him to Vedanta theology, which offered a monotheistic interpretation of Hinduism, and helped kindle his desire to reform his religion. Spencer Lavan explains that in addition to his exposure to western scholars, “Rammohnun's sense that the religious Hindus needed to return to a 'Unitarian' monistic Vedantic system, as opposed to the prevalent polytheism, came alive in him...because of the Sanskrit pundits with whom he studied in his youth.” (Lavan, 32)

When he returned home after his studies in Patna and Benares, Roy was a changed man. His introduction to the monotheism of the Qur'an, Sufi texts, and Vedanta philosophy had left him theologically at odds with his family's religious practices. As Crawford explains, “in a radical sense, he could not go home again. The new knowledge of Sufi philosophy reinforced by the Vedanta, had alienated him from the popular Hinduism represented by his family's altar.”

(Crawford, 6) This is also evident of a developing sense of universalism for Roy; the monotheisms of the Qur'an and of Vedanta were complementary for Roy, both adding support for his growing distaste of his family's practice of popular Hinduism.

It should be noted, however, that the exact and dates and places of Roy's education in Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit are somewhat contested; what remains uncontested, however is that sometime during this period, he gained significant competence in all three. Killingly notes that modern biographers, "are skeptical about the story of his early education. However, his knowledge of Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit is well attested, even if we do not know when or where it was acquired." (Killingly, 9-10)

This transition to an emerging Universalism was not, however, immediate; for a while after returning home, Roy at least took up the appearance of a devout Vaishnavite. According to Collet, "it is said that his reverence for Vishnu was at one time so great that he would not even take a draught of water without first reciting a chapter of the Bhagavat Purana." (Collet, 5) He also had a desire to become a sannyasi, much to the displeasure of his mother. William Adam, a Scottish minister who would later work with Roy, noted that he "proposed to seclude himself from the world as a sannyasi, or devotee, at the age of fourteen, from which he was only dissuaded by the entreaties of his mother." (Collet, 5)

As time went on, however, he began to seriously question the religious practices of his family, which he more and more equated with idolatry, a position evidenced by the numerous theological debates Roy engaged with his father. As he would later expound upon in his early translations of Vedanta philosophy and several Upanishads, Roy thought that many of the practices prominent in popular Hindu worship, particularly devotion to personified deities, was highly irrational. As Lynn Zastoupil explains, "popular Hinduism was deeply flawed in

Rammohun's view. It attempted to give the Supreme Being form, attributes and personalities. It promoted irrational devotion in the form of ritualism and idolatry.” (Zastoupil 2010, 26-7) Also, this irrational form of idol worship was, to Roy, morally dangerous. Zastoupil writes that, “It also gave rise to immoral practices such as sati and female infanticide.” (Zastoupil 2010, 27) According to family friend Mr. Adam, the debates got so contentious that on one occasion Roy's father was heard remarking, “whatever argument I adduce you always have your counter-argument, your counter-conclusion to oppose me.” (Crawford, 6-7). Around this time, Roy produced a manuscript, now lost, that questioned the validity of his father's religious practices, which placed further strain on their relationship, which, ”produced a coolness' between Ram Mohan and his immediate kindred.” (Crawford, 7)

Problems with “Idolotry”

It is important to note that while Roy’s concerns about the devotional practices of his contemporary Hindus are traditionally framed as a campaign against “idolatry,” that term is highly problematic. For one, it is a largely western term; an import from English, and one that often has strong negative connotations, or misleading associations. Also, there are more appropriate, local terms for Roy’s specific complaints. As will be touched on later, Roy was specifically reacting against devotional practices done to or aimed at, physical representations of deities. This practice of rejecting devotion to physical objects is known in the Hindu tradition as *nirguna* (literally meaning without form) worship, which is set against *saguna* (literally meaning with form) worship which focused on devotion to physical objects or representations of deities. The specificity of the terms *saguna* and *nirguna* are therefore much more helpful when discussing Roy’s position.

Roy Leaves Home

By the age of fifteen, Roy had not found a satisfactory validation of his father's Hindu practices, so he decided to leave home in search of a religious path more acceptable to him. Dr. Lant Carpenter writes that, “without disputing the authority of his father, he often sought from him information as to the reasons of his faith; he obtained no satisfaction; and he at last determined at the age of 15, to leave the paternal home and sojourn for a time in Tibet.” (Collet, 7) The exact timing and location of this trip remains somewhat ambiguous, as other evidence points to Bhutan, which might not have been clearly distinguished from Tibet at this time. Killingly explains that, “He also went 'beyond the bounds of Hindoostan', namely to Bhutan in 1814. This is probably the source of Carpenter's statement that he spent two or three years in Tibet, since Bhutan was not always distinguished from Tibet in British sources of the period.” (Killingly, 19)

This excursion to Tibet, or Bhutan which likely lasted three to four years, did not, however, give Roy the answers he was looking for. He quickly took issue with what he perceived to be the Tibetan's veneration of the Lama, particularly with the idea that he could be both a man and an incarnation of God. Dr. Carpenter writes that, “he often excited the angers of the worshipers of the Lama by his rejection of their doctrine of this pretended deity.” (Collet, 7) His stance against *saguna* worship, fueled by his debates with his father, and his experiences with the Tibetan Lamas became solidified around this time, and he decided to move away from his family and settle in Benares. As William Adam explains, “Rammohan, after relinquishing idolatry, was obliged to reside for ten or twelve years at Benares, at a distance from all his friends and relatives, who lived on at the family estate in Burdwan.” (Collet, 8)

Roy further developed his stance against *saguna* worship following the death of his father in 1803. It was shortly thereafter that he Roy published his earliest extant theological work, “A Gift to the Monotheists,” in Persian. This work, according to Collet, was a “bold protest against the idolatrous elements in all established religions.” (Collet, 10) This manuscript, aside from its theological importance, bears evidence of the importance of Roy’s education at Patna, as it demonstrates an, “abstruse style,” and is “abounding with Arabic logical and philosophical terms.” (Collet, 11) In addition to this it is also strewn with quotes from the Qur'an as well as Sufi theologians. (Crawford, 14) The primary source for the tract, however, appears to be a Persian work composed in 1645, the *Dabistan mazahib*, or “School of Religions.” This was an tract on comparative religions that shared several major themes with Roy's work. (Crawford, 14)

The next step in Roy's life, in terms of his religious thought, was his move to Rungpur in 1809, where he served as a collector for the Civil service, where he remained until 1814. (Collet, 16) It was here in Rungpur that Roy began to expand the audience for his theological discussions, and was first able to gather his peers together to discuss his religious thought, and his campaign against *saguna* worship. Collet notes that, “from all accounts it was during his residence in Rungpur that Rammohun first began to assemble his friends together for evening discussion on religious subjects, especially on the untenableness and absurdities of idolatry.” (Collet, 17) It was also during this period that some of the first attacks against Roy's theology were leveled, as some Hindu scholars had taken exception to his views. As Crawford writes, in one instance, “he was opposed by a scholar learned in Sanskrit and Persian who challenged him in a Bengali work entitled *Jnananjana*... he tried to harass Ram Mohan by inciting crowds against him, but his tactics failed.” (Crawford, 17) Although, she was ultimately unsuccessful in the matter, Roy's mother tried to disinherit him in 1811, after the death of Roy's older brother.

She tried to accomplish this on the grounds that he had given up his Hindu identity, and therefore his right as manager of the family property as the oldest surviving son. Roy's friend and colleague William Adam noted that she attempted to "disinherit him as an apostate and infidel, which according to strict Hindu law, excludes...possession of any ancestral property." (Collet, 18) This episode is particularly important as it offers clear evidence that the public perception of Roy's personal religious beliefs had a strong effect on his social and economic well-being. As will be more fully explored later, episodes like this go a long way in explaining Roy's reluctance to publicly reject identifying as a Hindu; as in this case it would have interfered with any rights he could claim on family property.

Roy's Move to Calcutta

By 1814, Roy had moved to Calcutta, having earned enough money through the Civil Service to become a landowner. It is important to pause here, and briefly explain the socio-economic circumstances in Calcutta that directly affected Roy, and likely had some continuing impact in his religious writings. At this time, the high class Hindus in Calcutta were beginning to exploit their connections to the English, largely gained through colonial service, in an attempt to advance their social and economic positions. The effect of this was that the "Indian intelligentsia," "transformed itself into a westernized intellectual elite through colonial service." (Zastoupil 2002, 222) Roy in particular was well known for this, as he amassed much of his wealth through his connections with the British. Zastoupil comments that, "Rammohun joined some contemporaries in parlaying these European contacts into new economic activities, amassing a considerable fortune through loans to Europeans in Bengal and speculation in East India Company paper." (Zastoupil 2002, 223) Understanding this is crucial, as later examples from both his interactions with Unitarians, and his recorded thoughts on Unitarianism must be

read at least in part, in light of this social and economic environment. This period also sparked intense cooperation between the Indians and the British. This included not only cooperating as trading partners, but also collaborating on government projects such as the Hindu College, the Calcutta School-Book Society, the Calcutta School Society, and the Agricultural and Horticultural Society. (Killingly, 26)

In addition to solidifying his heightened social and economic status in Calcutta, Roy also continued his campaign against *saguna* worship. He even constructed a pulpit in front of his house which he prayed in front of daily, inscribed with the Hindu phrases *Om, Tat Sat,* and *Ekamevadvityam*, which supported his monotheist interpretation of Hindu texts. Collet writes that, “in front of this house he erected a *mancha* or pulpit, for the purpose of worship and engraved upon each of its sides three mottos from the Upanishads...Here he offered his prayers thrice a day.” (Collet, 22) It is here, we also get evidence of the further development of Roy's universalist thinking, for while the inscriptions on the pulpit were from Hindu texts, he seems not to have taken Hindu theology as the only appropriate religious path. It is said that, when in reference to that pulpit, his youngest wife asked which religion was best, Roy replied, “Cows are of different colors, but the color of the milk they give is the same. Different teachers have different opinions, but the essence of every religion is to adopt the true path.” (Collet, 22) This offers important insight into Roy's views on religion; this universalist stance helps to explain the lack of conflict between his interest in Persian Sufism, and his interests in Hinduism, and offer a potential explanation for his later interest in Unitarian Christianity.

While in Calcutta, Roy further developed both his understanding of Hindu thought, and his attacks on *saguna* worship. For this, he attempted to rely, as much as possible, on traditionally venerated Hindu texts as support for his campaign. Collet explains that, “by

appealing to the venerated authorities of the more ancient and spiritual scriptures, he endeavored to purify and elevate the minds of his countrymen.” (Collet, 25) For one his first projects, he chose the Vedanta Sutra, a work of Vedanta philosophy, which he translated in 1815. Collet notes that, “he selected some of the chief productions of the Vedantic system which...were of unquestionable authority in matters of Hindu theology.” (Collet, 25) He followed this up with translations of the Kena, and Isha Upanishads in 1816, and translations of the Katha, Manduk, and Manukya Upanishads in 1817. (Collet, 26) The fact that Roy seemed to specifically choose texts which he thought were held in high esteem by his countrymen offers strong support for Killingly’s localization theory, in that appears it may have been a conscious rhetorical choice by Roy to use these esteemed texts as support for his arguments.

In the introductions to these translations, Roy lays out his critiques of the popular practice of Hinduism. Primary among these critiques are that such practices, particularly the worship of physical representations of deities is both irrational and morally dangerous. First Roy states that he believes the Vedas and Upanishads clearly present a monotheistic system. In his introduction to the Kena Upanishad, Roy writes that his work hopes to state the, “real spirit of the Hindoo scriptures, which is but the declaration of the unity of God.” (Works, 35) Any mentions of physical properties, or manifestations are therefore, according to Roy, allegorical. In the same work he writes that any representations of deities as “earthly objects, animate or inanimate” are “allegorical representations of the attributes of the Supreme being.” (Works, 36) This recognition of earthly objects being imbued with, or being manifestations of, divinity, is something that is, for Roy, not only irrational but also immoral. In the introduction to his translation of the Isha Upanishad, Roy writes that, a Hindu's belief “in the independent existence of the objects of their idolatry as deities clothed with divine power,” is merely “a mode of

worship agreeable to the senses, though destructive of moral principles, and the fruitful parent of prejudice and superstition.” (Works, 66) Roy elaborates on this ethical position in a later work, *A Defense of Hindoo Theism*, by stating that too often, modes of worship to deities or idols, performed with the hope of granting the practitioner spiritual benefit, are themselves morally repugnant. Roy, in his descriptions of such acts, notes that for example, the worship of Krishna often involves “compelling a great number of married and unmarried women to stand before him denuded: his debauching them and several others” and that the worship of Kali “human sacrifices, the use of wine, ceremonial intercourse and licentious songs are included.” (Works, 99)

These works are important, among other reasons, for providing tangible evidence that Roy's position against *saguna* worship had evolved from being a personal one to expressing concern for the larger Hindu society. This form of worship was no longer something that merely bothered him personally, he now openly discusses it as a danger to Hindu society. Collet explains that, “to Rammohun's mind the root of evil of the whole wretched state of Hindu society was idolatry and to destroy this was his first object.” (Collet, 25) This is also notable, as this focus on ethics, instead of theology, would become a focus of his later Christian writings, and his interactions with Unitarians.

However, these tracts were not only written with practicing Hindus in mind. Roy was also interested in informing Europeans about the proper conception of Hindu theology, one based on the monotheist Vedanta rather than, what Roy viewed as the polytheist interpretations of the Puranas and of popular practices. Crawford notes that Roy “intended that his publications might assist European readers to understand Hindu theology...based on primary scriptures rather than 'Puranas, moral tales, or any other modern works,' or on 'superstitious rites and habits daily

fostered by their [Hindu] self-identity.” (Crawford, 43) This strategy was fairly successful as many English language publications gave glowing reviews to these tracts. For instance, *The Government Gazette*, published in February of 1816 called Roy’s *Translation of an Abridgment of the Vedanta* “a phenomenon in the literary world,” quoting that it “displays the deductions of a liberal and intrepid mind.” (Crawford, 43) These publications also brought Roy to the attention of Christian missionaries, who hoped that his stances against Hindu idolatry would support their cause. *The Missionary Register* wrote about Roy, in 1816, that “the rise of this new sect, the zeal and subtlety displayed by its founder, with its obvious tendency to undermine the fabric of Hindoo superstition, are objects of serious attention to the Christian mind.” (Crawford, 44) Eventually his fame made it to America, as by 1818, his works were being reviewed there. In 1818 the *Calcutta Journal* “reported receipt of an American review of the Raja's anti-idolatrous writings” (Crawford, 44)

Roy's stay in Calcutta also marked his first attempt at crafting an organization to discuss and propagate his religious ideology. Roy founded the Atmiya Sabha in 1815, a group that met weekly to worship in a way that Roy hoped would be an improvement over the Hindu idolatry that he viewed as so pervasive. The group met once a week, where they gathered together to recite Hindu texts, and chant hymns composed by Rammohun, as well as his friends. (Collet, 32) The Sabha attracted a broad collection of people, both native Bengali Hindus and British citizens, who were both drawn to the strict monotheism, and rejection of idol worship that Roy preached. One of the more devout British followers, David Hare, was particularly enamored by Roy's religious stances. According to Hare's biographer, “Hare found an intimate friend in Rammohun Roy. He had begun to spread Theism, denounce idolatry, was moving heaven and earth for the abolition of the Suttee rite and advocating the dissemination of English education

for enlightening his countrymen.” (Collet, 35) Here, in addition to expressing favor for Roy's religious reforms, Hare also mentions Roy's interest in English education for his fellow countrymen, a prominent theme in Roy's later contact with Christian Unitarianism, and his work with educational reform in Calcutta. This society also offers insight into Roy's universalism; the religious and philosophical views of the members of the society were just as diverse as their nationalities. (Crawford, 46) However, as evidenced by Roy's theological statements and writings, this universalism was bounded, for he had no tolerance for anything resembling *saguna* worship.. Crawford notes that, “ideology apart, all members were bound by certain rules, one of which was that no member should participate in idol worship.” (Crawford, 47)

CHAPTER THREE

ROY'S DISCOVERY OF UNITARIAN CHRISTIANITY

Brief History of Unitarianism in India

Before examining Roy's encounter with Unitarianism, a brief sketch of the key doctrines of the movement is necessary. Tracing the history of Unitarianism can be complex, because while there have been many Unitarian movements throughout history that have shared similar doctrines that reject the trinity, they usually do not have common roots. Earl Morse Wilbur explains, in his book, *A History of Unitarianism* regarding the development of Unitarianism across Poland, Transylvania, England, and America, that "in each of these four lands the movement, instead of having originated elsewhere, and had been translated only after attaining mature growth, appears to have sprung independently and directly from its own native roots." (Wilbur, 166). The primary difference between Unitarian and Trinitarian Christianity lies in the Unitarians rejection of the trinity, and a belief in a wholly unitary God. This position rests on the Unitarian's conception of the nature of Christ, which they viewed as distinctly separate from God. As British Unitarian Joseph Priestly, a contemporary of Roy's, explained, "the early Christian writers spoke of the Father as superior to the Son, and in general they [gave] him the title of God as distinguished from the Son." (Robinson, 22-23)

Whether or whether not Jesus was fully man or partially divine was, during the 19th century, contested, and Unitarians then held one of two positions on the matter. The Socinian view was that Christ was fully human, albeit the greatest human ever to have lived (Lavan, 16). The other view was the Arian one that held that Christ was divine, but not identical to God. Lavan explains that, "the Arian view held that Christ was 'of like substance,' with the father but

not 'of the same substance. Hence he was divine-human clearly superior to other men, but not to be understood as part of the godhead of a trinity.” (Lavan, 16) Broadly speaking the Socinian view was more popular in England, and the Arian view was more popular in America. (Lavan, 16) Also important, is the Unitarian’s rejection of vicarious salvation.

Interestingly, the history of Unitarianism in India does not begin with Roy. That honor goes to, the Tamil Hindu, Moodelliar Vellazha, known by his Christian name, William Roberts. (Lavan, 24) Roberts was born a Hindu in 1780, converted to Islam in 1789, but soon after converted to Christianity. (Lavan, 24) He, like Roy would later, found the presentation of the Trinity in Christian doctrine to be contrary to his sense of reason. Roberts writes that,

“Whenever I had leisure the Bible was in my hands. The first thing that struck me and I stumbled at, was the Creed of St. Athanasius in the Common Prayer Book. The persons of the same power and attributes, yet separately God and Lord, yet altogether no more than One God, was a thing too hard for me to make anything of. . . The more I considered the harder it seemed to my reasoning power.”
(Lavan, 24)

Roberts continued this line of thought and eventually was able to discover Joseph Priestley’s writings while visiting England under the employ of a ship captain. (Lavan, 25) Roberts was able to convene a small Unitarian place of worship in Madras in 1813, whose membership consisted of primarily low caste individuals, and was highly dependent on aid from English and American Unitarians. (Lavan, 25-6) As Roberts continued his studies, he eventually became well known in Unitarian circles as an accomplished scholar. Lavan notes that, “Roberts must have amazed the English Unitarians as a budding scholar of the New Testament. His letter of June 1818 with its report of two newly published tracts had also showed him to be something of a comparativist.” (Lavan, 28) Interestingly later in life, Roberts even published commentaries on Roy’s work including the *Precepts* and other writings on Unitarianism. While Roberts never achieved the fame that Roy did, his congregation still survives in Madras, and he serves as an

important footnote in the history of Unitarianism in India. According to Lavan, “Roberts was a minor character. He and his little community set the stage, however, for the religious liberals such as Rammohun Roy and William Adam.” (Lavan, 31)

Christianity in Calcutta

However, it was in Calcutta that Roy had his first direct contact with Christians. This is not surprising as Calcutta was a focus of some of the earliest British missionary activity in India. A sect known as the Particular Baptists were leaders in evangelical and missionary work in nineteenth century Bengal; they founded a missionary society in Northamptonshire in 1792, and sent missionaries to Calcutta, including William Carey, the next year. (Killingly, 107) Carey, along with Joshua Marshman and William Ward, would go on to found the Serampore mission in 1800, which Roy later became involved with. (Killingly, 107) In addition to this, by 1817 a separate mission was founded in Calcutta, which was occasionally at odds with the mission in Serampore. (Killingly, 107)

These early missionary groups had a tenuous relationship with local religious traditions; they wanted to challenge local Hindu practices, but initially preferred to do so through indirect means like education, and committed very little effort to understand the local traditions themselves. As Killingly explains that these missionaries, “wished to discredit brahmanical learning, but for practical reasons they did not oppose it with Christian doctrine so much as with secular knowledge, particularly elementary geography and physical sciences, which they expected would undermine faith in the teachings of the pandits,” and therefore, “tended to ignore the indigenous tradition, or assume that it had nothing of value on which they could build.” (Killingly, 108) In the early years, their primary focus was education. Killingly notes that the Baptists, “believed that by providing a general elementary education they would produce a

population capable of resisting the fraudulent claims of the Brahmins, and eventually of receiving the Gospel.” (Killingly, 108)

Roy’s First Interactions with Christians in Calcutta

When Roy arrived in Calcutta, he quickly came to the attention of the Baptists in both of the missions. (Killingly, 110) His relationship with them, at least in the beginning, appears to have been cordial and productive. Crawford explains that, “for his part Ram Mohan enjoyed the company of the missionaries, engaged them in discussions, joined in worship, and offered aid to their education schemes.” (Crawford, 49) While he is not mentioned by name, there are reports from this time that seem to indicate Roy was visiting missionaries and expressing interest in deism. In 1814 Bishop Middleton wrote “of a visit from a Hindu who 'has quitted the faith of his fathers as untenable, and is committed to the wide ocean of Deism'. The visitor spoke of morality, religion, and education, and said that 'your people mistake our religion'; he is not identified, but the description fits Rammohun far more readily than anyone else.” (Killingly, 111) It is interesting that even in his earliest meetings with the missionaries, morality and education were two of the subjects they specifically remembered discussing with him, and also interesting that the topic of theology was not.

It is not until 1816 that there is a specific mention of Roy in Calcutta by missionaries. In August of that year, Yates, a Calcutta Baptist Missionary, describes his interactions with Roy, writing, “when I first saw him he would talk only on metaphysical subjects such as the eternity of matter, the nature and qualities of evidence, but he has lately become much more humble, and disposed to converse about the Gospel.” (Killingly, 111) At this time, William Carey and Joshua Marshman, Baptist missionaries stationed in Calcutta, also took notice of Roy. In 1816 Carey

described Roy as, “a very rich Rarhee Brahmun of Calcutta” who “has published in Bengalee one or two philosophical works from the Sanskrit which he hopes may be useful in leading his countrymen to renounce idolatry.” (Killingly, 111) Following this, we begin to see more direct evidence of his interest in the Bible. The September 1816 edition of the Anglican *Missionary Register*, gives two different explanations for Roy’s interest in the bible; either his is a new Christian convert, or merely Deist.” (Killingly, 111) At this point, he also began studying Greek and Hebrew, in attempt to better understand these scriptures. According to Collet, “With his habitual thoroughness he took the trouble to acquire the Greek and Hebrew languages...that he might gain a full understanding of both the Old and the New Testaments.” (Collet, 56-7) However, the extent of Roy’s knowledge of Greek or Latin remains a fairly contentious; as some of his contemporaries, including William Adam, claimed his command of those languages was poor at best. According to Lavan, “Adam has insisted that Rammohun knew no Greek or Latin, where many Bengali writers have suggested he did, and that he had studied Hebrew for perhaps only six months.” (Lavan, 44)

Conflicts quickly began to emerge with the missionaries, as Roy’s published works about Hinduism began to lead some of his associates at the Baptist mission that he was a Deist insomuch as he seemed to advocate for the balancing of reason and revelation in theological matters. For example, in the introduction to his translation of the Kena Upanishad, he comments on the tension between reason and revelation, writing that

“The best method perhaps is, neither to give ourselves up exclusively to the guidance of the one or the other; but by a proper use of the lights furnished by both, endeavor to improve our intellectual and moral faculties, relying on the goodness of the Almighty Power, which alone enables us to attain that which we earnestly and diligently seek for.” (Works, 37)

While statements like this do not reject the need for revealed scripture, the importance it places on reason, and made the missionaries claim him as a Deist. Killingly explains that, “Evangelicals found the word a useful way of summing up their doctrinal objections to Rammohun: that he believed in a revelation independent of the Bible, and in the possibility of salvation without the mediation of Christ.” (Killingly, 113)

Also unsettling for the missionaries was the fact that Roy treated the Vedas and the Upanishads as religious texts capable of delivering revelation. Killingly comments that, “Missionaries were alarmed by Rammohun's claim that a true notion of God could be derived from the Vedas and Vedanta; but they believed that such a notion could not be complete without a knowledge of Jesus as revealed in the Bible.” (Killingly, 117) The publication of the *Precepts of Jesus* in 1820, which will be discussed in the next chapter, further drove a wedge between Roy and many of his acquaintances at the Calcutta and Serampore missions.

The concerns of the missionaries appear to be somewhat well founded, as Roy was beginning to view the ethical, not theological teachings of Christianity as more important. According to Crawford, “the conviction dawned on him that the natural 'law which teaches that man should do unto others as he would be done by' although partially taught 'in every system of religion' is 'principally inculcated by Christianity.’” (Crawford, 49) The ethical superiority of Christianity is a sentiment that Roy held strongly, and often noted in his later correspondences. For example In a letter to John Digby, an English correspondent of his, whom he had sent several of his translations of Hindu scriptures, Roy writes that, “the consequence of my long and uninterrupted researches into religious truth has been that I have found the doctrines of Christ more conductive to moral principles and more adapted for the use of rational beings than any other which have come to my knowledge.” (Collet, 56)

Failed Bible Translation

However, there were a few missionaries who, even after the publications of the *Precepts*, still associated with Roy; William Yates, and William Adam, who would later become one of Roy's most important Christian contacts. Lavan explains that, "His interest in Christianity kept him in close touch with several others, two of whom, the Reverend William Adam and the Reverend William Yates, both 'well reputed for their Oriental and classical acquirements.'" (Lavan, 41) In 1821 the three even began working on new translation of the New Testament into Bengali, a project spearheaded by Roy. (Lavan, 41) However, Roy's evolving theological views presented problems for the project, particularly his shifting view on the nature of Jesus. In particular, Roy, and eventually Adam became reluctant to translate passages in a way that seemed to promote Trinitarianism. As Lavan notes, while working on the project, Roy and Adam "decided that there was indeed no proof of the Trinity in the New Testament." (Lavan, 41)

The project stalled when the trio got to John 1:3; Roy preferred the translation, "all things were made through him" while Yates preferred using the preposition "by," emphasizing the connection between Jesus and God. Lavan explains that, "At first the group agreed that the Greek preposition *dia* could be translated "through" and all were willing to render the phrase, "All things were made through Him." However, Yates soon feared that if *dia* was not translated "by," the heresy of Arianism might be implied." (Lavan, 41) Translating the word "through" would have left the verse open to Unitarian interpretations, something favored by Roy and Adam, but a sticking point for Yates, which caused him to "quickly withdraw" from the project. (Lavan, 41)

However even as the translation project fell apart, Adams became convinced of Roy's Unitarian views, and became his first Unitarian, "convert." (Lavan, 41) This was a risky move

for Adams, as he risked not only alienating his fellow missionaries, but also likely, his job as a missionary. Lavan notes that, by accepting Unitarianism, “he was cutting himself off from the Baptists who had educated him and brought him to India as a missionary,” and by aligning himself with Roy, he, “he was choosing to befriend and support a man whose reform attempts in Hinduism and whose writings on Christianity had made him an enemy of both Brahmins and Englishmen. Conversion by a ‘heathen’ was more than enough to bring sharp derision on the former Baptist now dubbed by his evangelical friends as ‘the second fallen Adam.’” (Lavan 41) The pressure on Adam got so great that he eventually resigned his post as a Baptist missionary. Roy must have been aware of the troubles that Adam faced when he made his allegiance to Unitarian Christianity public, and this may very well have been a factor in Roy’s reluctance to do so himself, later in life.

In 1821 Adams wrote a letter to the Baptist Committee in Calcutta explaining his decision, but also defending himself as a Christian, claiming among all Christian dogma, the only two points he disagreed with were the divinity of Christ, and separate existence of the Holy Spirit, were the only ones he disagreed with. Adam writes, “I beg to assure you that the supreme, underived, independent deity of Jesus Christ, and the distinct personality of the Holy Spirit, are the only doctrines belonging to my former system of belief which I feel compelled to reject.” (Lavan, 42) While this decision cut him off from most of his contacts in Calcutta, he was still able to thrive, and work closely with Roy for the next several years. Lavan notes that, “Adam appears to have been somewhat foolhardy to make such a commitment to ideology, cutting himself off from friends and family in a distant land,” but “he seems to have had the courage of his convictions...working with Rammohun during the next five years and

corresponding with English and American Unitarians to gain support for his mission dream.”
(Lavan, 44)

Roy’s Introduction to Unitarian Thought

While it is clear that it was Roy who introduced Adam to Unitarian thought, the original source of Roy’s original introduction to Unitarian thought, is however unknown. While the Unitarian leaning of the failed translation project offers clear evidence that Roy had some conception of Unitarian theology at the time of the translation project, little is known about who first introduced Roy to Unitarian Christianity. As Lynn Zastoupil explains, “it is not known who precisely who introduced Rammohun to their doctrines in Calcutta.” (Zastoupil 2010, 29) The only extant evidence for who introduced Unitarianism to him is a cryptic reference to a Scottish friend of Roy that he mentions in an 1824 letter. He writes that, “I however was so fortunate to become acquainted with a Scotch gentleman, who kindly proposed to me to read the Bible with him and to examine whether it was more comfortable to another system of Christianity called Unitarianism.” (Zastoupil 2010, 29)

Roy quickly became enamored with Unitarianism, as it combined his fondness for Christian ethics, with his strong stance against anything resembling polytheism. In his work, *Answer of a Hindoo to the question “Why do you Frequent a Unitarian Place of Worship”*, Roy lauds Unitarian Christianity, “Because Unitarians reject polytheism and idolatry under every sophistical modification, and thereby discountenance all the evil consequences resulting from therein,” and “Because Unitarians believe, profess and inculcate the doctrine of divine unity- a doctrine which I find firmly maintained both by the Christian scriptures and by our most ancient writings, most commonly called the Vedas.” (Works, 202-203)

Calcutta Unitarian Committee

Roy and Adam's next project was comparatively more successful, though also short lived. In 1821, Roy and Adam, along with some Hindu colleagues of Roy; Dwarknath and Prusunnu C Tagore, along with Radhaprusad Roy, founded the Calcutta Unitarian Committee. (Lavan, 57) Initially, it was largely an educational venture, whose primary mission was to be a source of Unitarian scholarship in Calcutta, and a source for education on 'the evidences, the duties, and the doctrines of the religion of Christ.'" (Lavan, 58) While the organization started with limited resources, by 1822 Adam had rented a building where weekly services could be held. (Lavan, 58) Over the next few years, the holdings of Calcutta Unitarian Committee continued to increase, adding a press and a library, along with holding regular worship services with Adam as minister, and plans for a permanent chapel. (Zastoupil 2002, 234)

Eventually, news of the new Unitarian Committee in Calcutta reached the west, where it was received with great interest in the west, particularly with American Christians. Zastoupil comments that, "News of the Calcutta committee and its activities electrified Anglo-American Unitarians. From 1822 onward, many of them began exchanging letters and publications with Rammohun." (Zastoupil 2002, 234) Among these was the minister Henry Ware, who sent both Roy and Adam a letter asking for more information about the Unitarian Committee. (Lavan, 59) However, Roy and Adam's differing responses to these queries, which will be discussed later, highlight a growing fault between the two.

One of the reasons the Unitarians might have been interested in Roy, aside from their theological affinities, was a more personal connection; many Unitarians might have been particularly sympathetic to Roy's personal and private struggles. Many Unitarians at the time felt attacked on all sides, a situation that mirrored Roy's public struggles with the Baptist

missionaries, and his ongoing personal struggles surrounding a family property dispute. Zastoupil explains that, “Throughout the 1820s and 30s both private and public abuse continued to be heaped on Unitarians,” and because of this “Rammohun’s plight was thus all too familiar to Unitarians. His lengthy legal battles with his family over control of inherited property was but final proof.” (Zastoupil 2002, 229) Also, particularly with his publication of the *Precepts*, and his role in founding the Unitarian Committee in Calcutta, many Unitarians had begun to think of Roy as a specifically Christian thinker. Lavan notes that, “Boston Unitarians were primarily concerned with supporting Rammohun as a Christian rather than as a Hindu reformer.” (Lavan, 60)

Adam was particularly excited about the interest and was very hopeful it would lead to direct support of the Unitarian cause in India. In particular, Adam strongly advocated for Unitarian missionary work in India, and wrote a letter to the Unitarian fund in 1822 asking for support. He argued that they had a duty to try and help uplift the large number of poor and destitute living in a land governed by England. He wrote of the situation, that;

“Here is an immense population subject to the British Government, but ignorant of the Gospel, and unblessed with those elevated and purifying hopes which it conveys. You are possessed of the light of Christianity of which they are destitute; and you have free access to them for the purpose of communicating it if you will avail yourselves of that privilege.” (Lavan, 62)

Adam envisioned a fairly grandiose plan for missionary work; multiple missionaries in multiple large cities in India, as well as a generous supply of printing and educational materials. Lavan comments that, “In a grandiose plan, he suggested for a start that missionaries go at least to Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, and Colombo, and that each place have a staff of four men. In addition, Adam recommended sending a printer, a paper maker, a letter founder, and a school teacher to assist in the propagation. (Lavan, 62) Unfortunately for Adam, the English didn’t

share his enthusiasm, and the Unitarian Fund denied his request, suggesting a scaled back plan. (Lavan, 62)

However, fortunately for Adam, the American Unitarians shared Adam's interest in Unitarian missionary work in India. This is not surprising, as Unitarians, particularly from America, were just beginning to seriously devote time to missionary work. Lavan comments that, "throughout the nineteenth century the American Unitarian Association believed that, within the scope of its financial limits, it should propagate its form of Christianity among those not ordinarily able to hear it." (Lavan, 4) Because of this interest, the newly formed American Unitarian Association, began discussing its plans for the Calcutta Unitarians. (Lavan, 63)

Despite their strong interest in missionary work, they eventually, like the British Unitarians, decided to start with a fairly conservative approach, with a fairly small sum up dedicated to supporting missionary work in Calcutta. According to Lavan, the Unitarians began "Moving conservatively in its support of a missionary program for India, the Boston group finally voted in November 1826 a ten-year annual commitment of \$600 toward the salary and expenses of William Adam," and only making this commitment after the Unitarian Committee in Calcutta showed growth. (Lavan 64) Adam was very distressed by the lack of support from both the British and the Americans, as this was a significant blow to his hopes of a dedicated Unitarian missionary effort in Calcutta. Lavan comments that, "Such slight support from the two groups from whom he had expected much more all but dashed the hopes of William Adam who was convinced that much could be done to make the Unitarian ideals he so deeply held work in the Indian environment. This was one of the causes for the faltering of the movement in Calcutta." (Lavan, 64)

Conflicts over Missionary Work

However, Roy had a different attitude altogether about missionary prospects in India. While Adam responded overwhelmingly positively to queries about the possibilities of Unitarian missionary work in Calcutta, Roy was viewed these prospects negatively. While we will examine his responses to these queries in detail later, it should be noted that his responses showed a general lack of support for missionary work. As Lavan summarizes, “Nowhere in Rammohun's response was there talk of undertaking missionary work. His concern was for the enlightenment of Western education, social reform, and religious values which would demonstrate qualities of universalism.” (Lavan, 61)

Another issue complicating Adam’s plans to expand the Calcutta Unitarian Society, was Roy’s reluctance to publicly call himself a Christian. Interestingly this demonstrates that some concern with, or confusion about, the religious affiliation of Roy has been a primary concern for Westerners, ever since their introduction to him. Ever since he began his interactions with the Baptists in Calcutta and Serampore, many wondered whether Roy had, or was going to convert to Christianity. Killingly notes that, “Quite early in his residence in Calcutta, Rammohun had conversations with Christian missionaries. It was sometimes thought that he was about to become a Christian, or even that he already was one.” (Killingly, 10-11) This continued after the publication of the *Precepts* when many Unitarian thinkers openly questioned whether or whether not Roy was a Unitarian. Among these was the British Unitarian Robert Aspland who, as Zastoupil explains, “cited as evidence letters published in Calcutta newspapers, one testifying that Rammohun had come ‘to embrace Christianity according to the Unitarian scheme,’ and another indicating that he was ‘a searcher after the truths of Christianity.’” (Zastoupil 2002, 230)

This view was not universal, however, as there were many, particularly Trinitarian Christians, who denied that Roy was, or could be a Christian. For example, Joseph Ivimey wrote that he felt that Roy was still conclusively, “still a pagan.” (Zastoupil 2002, 229) Others were less certain, and noted that the *Precepts* and their responses leave the question open. Joseph Tuckeman, a contemporary of Roy, wrote an article in *The Christian Examiner*, “It was not, indeed, made certain by this publication, that Rammohun Roy was a believer in the divine authority of our Lord. But *it* was made most certain, that he esteemed the Christian precepts to be above all other precepts.” (Tuckerman, 363) This has also led some to think that Roy was struggling with his own identity. Lavan comments that, “That Rammohun had found and had been warmly received by allies in America and England was certainly evident. Up to 1826, Rammohun was certainly struggling with questions of Christian identity.” (Lavan, 66)

Roy’s Reluctance to Identify as a Unitarian

The interesting question here, however, is not whether or whether not Roy was a Christian, it is why Roy remains silent on the issue. One interesting answer, offered by some, is Roy’s own concern about his caste. This is not surprising, as even as his theology became more liberal, he continued to strictly follow caste rules. Lavan notes that even as a, “social reformer, certainly appalled by the bad effects of caste in India, Rammohun could never make a clear decision to act against caste restriction.” (Lavan, 66) One example that Roy followed throughout his adult life was his refusal to dine with Europeans. Zastoupil comments that, “Rammohun refused to dine with Europeans, for fear of breaking caste.” (Zastoupil 2002, 231)

Roy was also well aware of the social and economic consequences of converting, and therefore losing his Brahmin caste. For one, breaking caste would have cost Roy much of his social standing, and would identify him with the lower caste members of Hindu society. Lavan

explains that, “at no point... would he, or most of his friends, have wished to have been identified with low-caste converts.” (Lavan, 66) Also, breaking case at that point in Calcutta would have left Roy incredibly socially isolated. Lavan comments that, “since Unitarian Christians were such a small group in Calcutta, it would seem senseless for Rammohun to cut himself off from Hindus, Muslims, and orthodox Christian contacts by taking so controversial a step.” (Lavan, 66) Also, Roy risked being identified as a Trinitarian Catholic if he converted, as most Hindus who had converted and renounced their castes were Catholic. As Lavan notes, “actual conversion would have identified Rammohun with low-caste converts to Catholicism. This would have given Muslims, true Unitarians in their own right, the impression he was a Trinitarian thereby to misunderstand his purpose.” (Lavan, 66) As mentioned earlier, there were strong economic reasons for Roy to avoid publicly declaring himself a Christian, as that would threaten his claims on his family property, held under Hindu law.

Roy exhibited concerns about breaking caste in his own writing, where he commented both on the general fear of losing caste that Hindus face when considering conversion, along with the prevalence of lower castes among the newly converted. He wrote to the *Christian Examiner* in 1826 that, “though many of them may perhaps have objections to the honor of being called Christians, from aversion to a change in name, and especially looking to the outcaste converts at Serampor, who, among the natives for several years, have passed by that appellation.” (Lavan, 67)

Potential concerns about Roy losing his caste were also apparent to his contemporaries. Joseph Tuckerman, in an article in *The Christian Examiner*, remarks that Roy used his status as a Brahmin to help promote his writings on Christianity. Tuckerman writes that, “he is employing caste, property, influence, and all that he has, to promote, not a merely nominal, but an

enlightened belief of Christianity, and an extension of all its salutary influences among the natives of Hindoostan.” (Tuckerman, 368) The loss of caste for Roy, would not only eliminate whatever influence he held over the Hindus whom he hoped to uplift, but would also result in the loss of his property. Tuckerman continues, explaining, “Let it be considered, then, that the loss of caste would be to him the loss of all his property; and, what is more important, of all his influence over his countrymen. Without caste, he would neither be respected, nor heard by Hindoos.” (Tuckerman, 368) The final result, would be that Roy would be totally abandoned by his countrymen. Tuckerman notes that, “He would not only be a beggar, and, except by his few Unitarian friends, an unfriended, an unpitied, and even an abhorred beggar, to be shunned even as a leper, and tormented by all who are able to add anything to the sum of his sufferings.” (Tuckerman, 369) Interestingly, Tuckerman concludes by remarking that it is because that he so badly wants to aid the cause of Unitarian Christianity, that he would be loath to break caste and threaten his ability to help spread its message. Tucker writes that, “Unitarian Christianity is the nearest of all the concerns of this world to his soul; therefore he retains his Brahminal rights, and observes the rules of caste.” (Tuckerman, 369)

Here, we see that, it is likely that theological concerns were not the primary reason why Roy was reluctant to make a concrete statement about his religious identity. Whether or whether not Roy personally considered himself a Unitarian, it is these external factors; the fear of social and economic loss, and the fear of losing caste that were at least strong motivating factors behind Roy’s silence. Also interesting is that, while some of his contemporaries, like Tuckerman, acknowledged this, many others were caught up in the more abstract questions of whether Roy was or was not a Christian or a Unitarian.

This is where the traditional theories that explain Roy's interaction with Unitarianism begin to show their limitations; it is clear that purely theological influences; whether a result of a lifetime of successive religious influences, or the unyielding influence of Advaita thought, do not fully explain Roy's interest in, or public stance regarding Unitarianism at this time. And while Killingly's localization approach does address why he would communicate to different communities in different ways, it does not directly address the practical, on the ground social and economic conditions that weighed heavily in Roy's relationship with Unitarianism.

Decline of the Calcutta Unitarian Committee

Roy's combined disinterest in missionary work, and his reluctance to officially convert to Christianity began to take its toll on the Calcutta Unitarian Committee. Considering their markedly different approaches from the outset, with Adam heavily favoring missionary activity, and Roy being generally against it, it is unsurprising that their partnership began to deteriorate. As Killingly writes, "Rammohun and Adam were an ill-matched pair, and they knew it; their co-operation in the Calcutta Unitarian Committee was an alliance of expediency which eventually proved ineffective." (Killingly, 146) Attendance had become particularly unpredictable; while in the Autumn Adam was able to attract 60 or 80 people to attend the English services, that number began to rapidly dwindle in 1827. (Lavan, 68-9) Also, Adam had unsuccessfully lobbied the local Brahmins to conduct services in Bengali, who opposed it because of their belief that using vernacular languages would degrade the worship service, and failed to garner the respect that Sanskrit, Persian, or English would have. (Lavan, 68-9)

The larger problem, however, was an increasing divide between the long term goals of Adam and Roy. When the possibility renewed missionary interest arose with the formation of the British Indian Unitarian Association in 1828 Adam was surely excited. The minutes of the

inaugural meeting, “contained a grand program for religious worship, education, contact with Madras, and a library, as well as excerpts of letters of support from Unitarians in Boston and London and extensive excerpts from Henry Ware's Berry Street Lecture of 1826, which called upon the Unitarian clergy to support the Indian mission.” (Lavan, 69) However, this dramatic missionary expansion was, unsurprisingly, very unpopular with Roy, and several of his Hindu friends, and he quickly decided to withdraw his support from the Calcutta Unitarian Society. Only a few months after that, Rammohun, at the request of many of his close friends, abandoned the Calcutta Unitarian Committee to found the Brahmo Samaj. (Lavan, 69) The Calcutta Unitarian Committee did not survive Roy's departure; and by the time Roy left the subcontinent for England in 1830, Adam had resigned his position as Unitarian missionary, and the Unitarian Committee had officially ceased operations. (Lavan, 70)

There is a lingering question as to whether the closing of the Calcutta Unitarian Society, and the founding of the Brahmo Samaj marked the end of Roy's relationship with Unitarianism. Many, including Historian David Kopf, claims that this is the case. (Kopf, 15) Others cite his continued contacts with his Unitarian acquaintances in England and America as proof that his interest continues. Killingly comments that, “Rammohun never broke completely with the Unitarians, as witness his continued correspondence and his cordial relations with them in England. But the co-operation represented by the Calcutta Unitarian Committee failed.” (Killingly, 144) One piece of evidence to support this theory, which will be examined later in this paper, is Roy's 1831 letter to William Ellery Channing, expressing the hope that Roy might soon visit him in America.

Also evidence for this position is Roy's political activity while in England. At that time, Unitarians were becoming a powerful political force in England. Zastoupil explains that, “In the

decades leading up to 1828–32, Unitarians were active members of various religious and political campaigns.” (Zastoupil 2002, 235) The Unitarians also helped make Roy a minor celebrity in England, excited over what they saw as his “triumph over Hindu and Baptist orthodoxy.” (Zastoupil 2002, 237) Additionally, Roy and the Unitarians shared a lot of common ground on important political issues, particularly social reform and education. (Zastoupil 2002, 239) This culminated with Jeremy Bentham, who had definite Unitarian sympathies and John Bowring, a self-professed Unitarian suggesting in 1831 that Roy run for Parliament. (Zastoupil 2002, 236)

Interestingly, Roy’s political activity might offer additional evidence to explain his continued reticence to neither explicitly confirm nor deny his status as a Christian. To be a member of Parliament, an individual had to profess to be a Christian, and Roy was likely well aware of this. Zastoupil explains that, “Unless Rammohun was ignorant of the parliamentary oath (which is unlikely, given the Jewish campaign of 1830), or assumed he would never win an election and thus actually have to take such an oath (which is more plausible), it seems that Rammohun contemplated the possibility of publicly swearing to being a true Christian.” (Zastoupil 2002, 236-7) Given Roy’s well-rehearsed ability to think and converse within Christian and Unitarian modes of thinking, finding a rationalization for taking such an oath would not likely be a problem for Roy. Zastoupil notes that, “Given his profound familiarity with the Unitarian tradition and its definition of Christianity, and his ability to localize his religious views using Unitarian arguments and definitions, it is not improbable that uttering the words ‘upon the true faith of a Christian’ posed no particular problem to Rammohun.” (Zastoupil 2002, 236-7)

Conclusions

This speaks against the traditional theories about Roy's involvement with Unitarianism in several ways. First, there is a clear indication that his religious life did not reduce to a purely linear sequence of religious influences, for as the above evidence demonstrates, he seemed to keep in close contact with many English Unitarians up until his death. Also, we see once again that it is ethical and practical concerns, and not personal theology, that have a larger effect on Roy's relationship with Unitarianism. This helps explain the failure of the Calcutta Unitarian Committee as a conflict not of theology, but of deep seeded conflicts regarding the purpose and day to day operations of the committee. It also explains Roy's reluctance publicly identify himself as a Christian not in terms of his personal beliefs, but in terms of anxiety about his social and economic standing. Theories about Roy's interaction with Unitarianism that focus on his personal beliefs, or the varied rhetorical strategies he used to discuss religion publicly, fail to directly address such practical concerns.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRECEPTS OF JESUS

Purpose of the Precepts

Roy's first publication that directly addressed his growing interest with Christianity was his *Precepts of Jesus*, published in 1820. (Killingly, 120) The publication of the *Precepts* was not, however, a surprising move, as he was well known to the Baptists in Calcutta, and had not shied away from public debate in the past, as evidenced by his ongoing feuds with traditional Hindu Brahmins. R.S. Sugirtharajah notes that these forums, "gave him the platform to popularize his own views on religion and co enter into debate with both Baptist missionaries in Calcutta and his own Bengali pundit community." (Sugirtharajah, 11) Roy was also likely responding directly to the flood of missionary propaganda offered by Baptist missionaries. Sugirtharajah call's Roy's response, "an intentional counter-narrative to the gospel tracts the missionaries were circulating in Calcutta." (Sugirtharajah, 11) The counter-narrative attempted by Roy in the *Precepts* was one of Unitarianism, and the content and tone of the *Precepts*, particularly Roy's strong rejection of the divinity of Christ, show that he likely had knowledge of several core aspects of Unitarian theology at that time. Zastoupil comments that, "by the time he published *The Precepts of Jesus* in 1820, Rammohun's knowledge of European religious radicalism encompassed key features of Unitarianism." (Zastoupil 2002, 224)

The *Precepts* was Roy's attempt to separate the historical and miraculous events depicted in the four gospels, from the moral and ethical statements of Jesus. The work consists of the sayings of Jesus, given in the order of the Gospel accounts, excluding any miraculous events present in the Gospels. (Sugirtharajah, 12) Roy states in his introduction to the work, that his purpose in doing this is to clearly present to mankind the ethical duties the bible lays out for it.

Roy writes that his work is “a due estimation of that law which teaches that man should do unto others as he would wish to be done by, reconcile us to human nature, and tend to render our existence agreeable to ourselves and profitable to the rest of mankind.” (Works, 483) The particular sayings of Jesus that Roy selects, are ones, according to his responses in later defenses of the work, were the ones most essential to developing Christian morality. Roy writes that he included, “those Precepts of Jesus, the obedience to which he believed most peculiarly required of a Christian.” (Works, 559) It is the ethical, not the theological, that Roy claims is the heart of the Bible.

In addition to this, Roy appears to be aware of strong ideological divisions between Christians. In his introduction, Roy describes three kinds of Christians, those who hold that “that no one is justly entitled to the appellation of Christian who does not believe in the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Ghost, as well as in the divine nature of God, the Father of all created beings,” which Roy cites as the majority, while “many allow a much greater latitude to the term Christian, and consider it as comprehending all who acknowledge the Bible to contain the revealed will of God,” and finally, some “some require from him who claims the title of Christian, only an adherence to the doctrines of Christ, as taught by himself, without insisting on implicit confidence in those of the Apostles, as being, except when speaking from inspiration, like other men, liable to mistake and error.” (Works, 483-484) Some scholars have correlated these positions with Protestants, Catholics, and Unitarians; Protestants and Catholics adhering to the trinity, with the Catholics also using images for their worship, and the Unitarians, for whom Jesus was a teacher or messenger, not a divine figure. (Killingly, 123)

Omission of Dogma and Miracle Stories

It is the intellectually dubious nature of many points of Christian dogma that prompted Roy to largely exclude the historical and miraculous circumstances of Jesus' life from the *Precepts*. While not specifically mentioned by name in either Roy's introduction to the *Precepts*, or the work itself, the key doctrine that Roy takes aim at appears to be the Trinitarian view of Jesus, and instead focuses on his moral teachings. Zastoupil comments that, "the implied message of the *Precepts* was readily apparent to missionary critics: Jesus was a man sent by God, and his message, not his nature, was the vital issue." (Zastoupil 2009, 408) He excised the doctrinal passages for fear they would spark undue theological debate, and saw little point in replicating the miracle stories, as Roy saw them as just as potentially dangerous as the myths in other traditions. Crawford notes that, "the doctrinal passages are excised because of the questions they would raise in the mind of freethinkers." (Crawford, 50)

Also not included are the miracle stories, which would carry "little weight with Asians who were accustomed to narratives of an even more fantastic nature." (Crawford, 50) According to Roy, it is these historical and miraculous passages, particularly the Christological ones, that make the bible, and by extension Christianity, susceptible to rational critiques by a wide variety of individuals, chief among them, historical passage and miracle stories that equate Jesus to God. Roy writes that these passages are "liable to the doubts and disputes of free-thinkers and anti-Christians, especially miraculous relations, which are much less wonderful than the fabricated tales handed down to the native of Asia and consequently would be apt, at best, to carry little weight with them." (Works, 484) Roy's concern here goes beyond the theological or doctrinal; it is not just that these points of doctrine are incorrect, but Roy worries that free thinkers will find

them so offensive to their sense of reason, that they would disregard all of the ethical benefit the bible provides because of those questionable doctrines.

Therefore, Roy felt that without a clear presentation of these sayings of Jesus, all of the moral good brought by the bible might be lost. As Sugirtharajah notes, “In Roy's view, the presentation of Christianity by the Baptist missionaries in Bengal as a religion of divine incarnation, sacrificial Atonement, miracles and wonders resulted in the genuine message of Jesus being drowned out by the welter of these mythological claims.” (Sugirtharajah, 12) Roy's approach in the *Precepts*- claiming that doctrinal and ideological rigidity obscures the true moral insight of religion- is not a new move by Roy, and can be traced to his previously mentioned critiques of the Hindu tradition. Sugirtharajah comments that, “It was his disgust with the popular Hinduism of his time which prompted him and provided the background for his approach to Christianity.” (Sugirtharajah, 12) This project was particularly important for Roy because he saw the ethical commandments of Jesus as the most likely to produce direct benefits for his countrymen. Roy writes that the guidance laid out in his *Precepts* “will be more likely to produce the desirable effect of improving the hearts and minds of men of different persuasions and degrees of understanding,” a sentiment he echoes in later writings to Unitarians. (Works, 484)

Somewhat ironically, considering his ongoing conflicts with them, the *Precepts* was published out of the Baptists Press in Calcutta, and published free of Charge. (Sugirtharajah, 15) The project itself was not entirely alien to Christianity; both Trinitarian and Unitarian theologians had previously re-edited the Gospel narratives for various reasons. As Zastoupil explains, “prior to this Christians had long produced harmonies of the gospels, and such were still popular in Rammohun's day. One motive was determining the actual chronology and

duration of Jesus's mission. This was true of the Unitarian Joseph Priestley, who also indicated which among the parallel passages he preferred.” (Zastoupil 2009, 408) However, there were many aspects of Roy’s *Precepts* that made it a fairly unique example of the genre.

Contents of the Precepts

To begin, it contained roughly 1200 verse, and while it drew from all four Gospels, it heavily privileged Matthew and Luke, and only contained around 100 verses from Mark. (Sugirtharajah, 15) Of all the four gospels, John is relied on the least. Sugirtharajah notes that Roy used only 51 verses from John. (Sugirtharajah, 16) Roy’s text leaves most narratives fairly intact, only pausing to drop historical or miraculous verses when needed. Sugirtharajah explains this process as, “generally a stringing together of large blocks of the sayings of Jesus, occasionally dropping a few verses here and there.” (Sugirtharajah, 16) This means that the *Precepts* generally sticks to the narrative order of the four Gospels, albeit in a condensed form. (Sugirtharajah, 16) Also, Roy declines to comment on either parallels or discrepancies between the Gospels, or problematic issues of chronology. Zastoupil comments that, “There are neither critical notes nor any notice of parallel passages in the first three gospels, or what is now called the synoptic problem,” and that, “Rammohun seemed disinterested in chronological matters.” (Zastoupil 2009, 407-8)

Roy is also sparse with his notations, neglecting to include even verse numbers, giving the *Precepts* a stronger emphasis on narrative. Sugirtharajah comments that, “Roy simply indicates at the beginning of each segment of his selection which gospel it has been chosen from. His text runs through without any verse divisions, thus emphasizing the narrative potentiality of the gospels.” (Sugirtharajah, 16) Another possible explanation for this, however, was that Roy may have been primarily targeting his Hindu audience, and therefore modifying the structure of

the text accordingly. Sugirtharajah notes that, “Another possible reason for doing away with the numbering of verses could be that Rammohun was producing *The Precepts of Jesus* for Hindus, and Hindu Shastras at that time did not have such chapter and verse identification.”

(Sugirtharajah, 16-17)

Among the most prominent inclusions of Roy, was Matthew’s depiction of the Sermon on the Mount. Because of this, Roy includes Matthew’s narrative of it in almost its entirety, reproducing chapters five through seven almost entirely, with just a few minor deletions.

(Sugirtharajah, 17) This is because Roy viewed the Sermon on the Mount as the heart of Jesus’ ethical teachings. Roy writes that these passages, “include therefore every duty of man, and all that is necessary to salvation; and they expressly exclude mere profession or belief, from those circumstances which God graciously admits as giving a title to eternal happiness.” (Works, 555)

An additional benefit of these verses, for Roy, is that they are largely devoid of the kind of historical and miraculous events that he feels detract from the moral message of the Bible.

(Sugirtharajah, 17) This is clear evidence that it was the moral, not theological message of the Jesus that Roy held to be primary.

Notable Passages Absent from the Precepts

One of the more systemic deletions made by Roy, were those of his birth and death, along with much of Jesus’ experience of and with, Jewish ritual. Sugirtharajah explains that the birth narrative, the circumcision and baptism of Jesus, his temple visit and entry into Jerusalem, and his final days and death are all excluded from the precepts. (Sugirtharajah, 19) Also interesting, is the seeming reluctance of Roy to highlight female narratives within the bible. According to Sugirtharajah, in the *Precepts* “The strong female characters, such as the Syrophenician woman who irritates Jesus by voicing her views, are missing.” (Sugirtharajah.23). When women are

included, Roy focuses on episodes where their inclusion highlights a moral message offered by Jesus. One interesting example of this Roy's inclusion of John 8-11, the story of the woman caught in adultery, which ends with "And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee : go, and sin no more." (Works, 542) Another example of this is Roy's inclusion of the Widow's Mite story from both Mark and Luke, examining the true nature of generosity and ending with the commandment, "Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury; for all they did cast in of their abundance, but she of her want did cast in all that she had." (Works, 518) Both of these episodes fit the general pattern for Roy's *Precepts* where women who are included tend to be those who display moral values such as piety or generosity (Sugirtharajah, 23). Roy's treatment of women in the *Precepts* is very telling regarding his interest in Unitarianism, in that it was the ethics, and not theology of Unitarian readings of these texts that Roy seemed to find more important.

Gospel of John in the Precepts

Another notable deletion of Roy's *Precepts* is its removal of most of the Gospel of John. Out of the entire gospel, Roy uses only six passages, and places them all at the end of the *Precepts*. (Sugirtharajah, 26) The reason for this seems to be in line with his general purpose in emphasizing monotheism, and highlighting the moral precepts of Jesus. Sugirtharajah writes that, "a closer look at these texts will reveal that that they were all chosen because they endorse Roy's hermeneutical agenda: unity of God, purity of worship, and showing love and charity to fellow human beings." (Sugirtharajah, 24) Additionally, Roy himself, in his subsequent defenses of the *Precepts* offers a few specific reasons as to why he included so little of John. First Roy claims that John is the primary source from which the later tradition derives the dogma of the Trinity, a doctrine that Roy considered particularly illogical. Roy writes that, "the reason

why the passages extracted by the Compiler from the Gospel of St. John should be comparatively few,” is that, “It is from this source, that the most difficult to be comprehended of the dogmas of the Christian religion have been principally drawn,” namely, “the mysterious doctrine of three Gods in one Godhead, the origin of Muhammadanism, and the stumbling-block to the conversion of the more enlightened amongst the Hindoos.” (Works, 558)

Related to this, Roy also critiques John because the doctrines introduced in it are seen by Roy as creating barrier to the ethical teachings of Jesus. He writes that, “what benefit or peace of mind can we bestow upon a Musalman, who is an entire stranger to the Christian world, by communicating to him without preparatory instruction all the peculiar dogmas of Christianity?” (Works, 559-60) It is interesting that these critiques reflects more a concern about how the trinity prevents the spread of Jesus’ moral teachings, than the incorrectness of the doctrine itself. Also specifically highlighted among the deletions are the many Christological discourses contained in John. According to Sugirtharajah, Roy was, “ruthless in editing out two of John's distinctive Christological affirmations: the triumphalistic assertion that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, which makes him a unique gatekeeper of salvation ; and the divine status attributed to Jesus.” (Sugirtharajah, 26)

The selections that Roy include from John are equally telling. Roy begins his treatment of John with verses 3.1-21, highlighting the story of Nicodemus. Roy’s inclusion of this seems to be motivated by its rejection of temple worship, and his notion that true religion was “born 'from above'/again rather than on temple based rituals.” (Sugirtharajah, 25) Another is the inclusion of the verse, “But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth,” (Works, 541) which

seems to be another strike at temple worship, or at least worshipping God in a particular place in a way that mirrors his critique of Vedic Hinduism. As Sugirtharajah explains, “The attraction of the saying for Roy lay in its complementarity. It paralleled and matched the Vedic teaching that the Supreme Being may be worshipped anywhere with no special place of worship... and that the Vedic rituals are no substitute for worship of a monotheistic god.” (Sugirtharajah, 25)

The next selection from John is one that admonishes worldly pursuits: “Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed.” (Works, 541) One way to read this is by taking into account both the social ramifications of conversion, and Roy’s ambivalences around the caste system. Roy would have been all too aware of the economic and social benefit low caste individuals might incur by converting to Christianity, and could have included this verse to caution others not to embrace Christianity for material ends. Sugirtharajah explains that, “Roy always opposed and suspected the motives of converts from the lower castes, who changed their religion purely for monetary benefits and because of other inducements dangled before them by missionaries. He complained about the gift of five hundred rupees and a country-born Christian woman as a wife, which these converts received as compensation for the loss of cast.” (Sugirtharajah, 25-26)

Miracles in the Precepts

All this is not to say, however, that Roy totally exempted the miraculous from the *Precepts*. There are a few instances where miraculous episodes were included, but the ones chosen seem to have a particularly strong moral message, and the miraculous events themselves were downplayed when possible. (Sugirtharajah, 29-30) While his reluctance to include examples of the miraculous is unsurprising considering the general structure of the *Precepts*, his

comments specifically relating to the miraculous are worth considering. Roy seemed to be aware that one of the possible functions of the miraculous in the Bible was to heighten reader interest, and he believed that, due to comparatively lurid examples from Hindu mythology, the examples in the Bible would fail in this aspect. Roy writes that, “they (Christian miracles) would be apt at best to carry little weight with those whose imaginations had been accustomed to dwell on narrations much more wonderful and supported by testimony which they have been taught to regard with a reverence that they cannot be expected all at once to bestow on the Apostles.” (Works, 614-5)

Here we see a general pattern underlying both Roy’s inclusions and deletions in the *Precepts*. He consistently includes larger narratives, like the Sermon on the Mount that have primarily moral messages, and chooses to delete narratives, like the birth and death of Jesus, that are primarily theological. This is true for Roy’s treatment of women in the *Precepts* as he seems to only highlight them when they are themselves are examples of proper behavior, or when they are in a story that highlights the ethical teachings of Jesus. This pattern is particularly evident in John where, he only uses six passages. Here, almost all of John’s Christological message is deleted, and the reader is left with passages that reject temple worship, and proclaim the value of sincere faith. As just mentioned, when Roy does use the miraculous, he does it only in an effort to highlight moral messages delivered by Jesus.

Jesus in the Precepts

Roy’s editorial methodology also meant that *Precepts* gives a fairly distinctive portrait of Jesus. First, he omits any textual references that directly ascribe two different names to Jesus. The appellations that Roy chose to include in the *Precepts* are those that Roy views as expressly honorary, like “Redeemer,” “Mediator,” and “Intercessor with God.” (Sugirtharajah, 31) This

particular view became a thorn of contention for many who read his work, and he was forced to vigorously defend this position in subsequent responses to the *Precepts*. As Sugirtharajah explains, “In his appeals, Roy, too, consistently questioned Christological doctrines such as the incarnation, the virgin birth, atonement and resurrection, which were seen as central to the form of Christianity propagated by the Baptist missionaries.” (Sugirtharajah, 35)

In addition to Roy’s deletion of many specifically Christological passages, he also leaves out stories of the death and resurrection of Jesus. According to Sugirtharajah, “*Precepts* did not have any scenes which depicted the last days of Jesus in Jerusalem. The concluding words of *The Precepts* sum up Roy's rheological intention and motive: 'that ye love one another.' [quoted from John 15]” (Sugirtharajah, 37) In sum, the Jesus presented by Roy in the *Precepts* was an entirely human figure; exalted but neither a messiah, nor the son of God, to be remembered primarily for his nature, not his message, and that Roy “did not grant Jesus any authority except the power of his message.” (Sugirtharajah, 37) Sugirtharaja goes on to comment that, “those who are engaged in advocacy hermeneutics will find this Jesus disappointing. He was not a rebellious figure who was likely to turn the world upside-down but a robot programmed to utter moral platitudes.” (Sugirtharajah, 37) This puts Roy’s focus when portraying Christ squarely on morality rather than theology. Sugirtharajah comments that, for Roy, it was “the quality of life rather than the dogmas of various religious traditions,” that was truly important. (Sugirtharajah, 38) This is a viewpoint that becomes critical to understand Roy’s relationship with Christianity, and becomes a point of emphasis for Roy during his later contacts with Unitarians.

One of the most direct consequences of this entirely human Christ is a very different view on salvation than Trinitarian Christians. This view of Christ lead Roy to completely reject the doctrine of vicarious salvation through Jesus, and instead stress sincere repentance and good

works. In one of his works defending the *Precepts*, Roy explains that, “Numerous passages of the Old and the New Testament to the same effect, which might fill a volume, distinctly promise us that the forgiveness of God and the favor of his divine majesty may be obtained by sincere repentance, as required of sinners by the Redeemer.” (Works, 552) This position mirrors his approach to the Vedas; for in his *Second Defense of the Monotheistical System of the Veds*, “faith in the Supreme Being, when united with moral works, leads men to eternal happiness.” (Works, 106) Thus it was moral insight, not theological guidance that Roy hoped to inspire through his *Precepts*. Theological controversy was the last thing Roy hoped to spark with this guide. (Collet, 59)

Response to the Precepts

Unsurprisingly, the *Precepts* was met with an almost immediate backlash from the Baptists in Serampore, and the general Christian population in India, Europe, and America. After its publication, the *Precepts* quickly received strong backlash from the Baptists in Serampore, who “regarded the work as a misrepresentation of the Christian message.” (Killingly, 139) Interestingly, the quick negative response by the Baptists at Serampore might not have been solely motivated by theological concerns; the mission at Serampore had for a while occupied a rather precarious political position, and might have felt particularly compelled to defend Roy’s attacks against Christianity. As Zastoupil explains, the Baptists held a “marginal” position in Bengal, because they had been “harassed by the British colonial authorities, who were suspicious of missionaries in general,” that “the 1813 Charter Act also established an Anglican establishment in Bengal, headed by a bishop in Calcutta, which created additional problems for the Baptists, as Anglicans increasingly interfered in their missionary work,” and that, “these precarious circumstances help explain why the Baptists needed to respond to the *Precepts*.”

(Zastoupil 2002, 226) Additionally, because of the familiarity of the Serampore Baptists with Roy, there was the additional sting that, “a prized potential convert was slipping out of their hands.” (Zastoupil 2002, 226-7)

Other than of the Baptists at Serampore, The most vocal of his critics was Joshua Marshman, the editor of *The Friend of India*, a Christian newspaper, who published a series of attacks against Roy and the *Precepts*, which launched a series of replies and rebuttals between the two. Lavan comments that, “Rammohun was roundly attacked by the Reverend Joshua Marshman, editor of the evangelical publication, *The Friend of India*. This attack led Rammohun to compose three rebuttals or "Appeals" in addition to a series of other publications through which he attempted to clarify his views of Jesus.” (Lavan, 34) Marshman appeared to be particularly concerned with the *Precepts* reception in England, as he worried that it would spread the Unitarian idea that Jesus was not a divine figure, worthy of worship, but just another prophet. Marshman wrote in *The Friend of India* that,

“It is well known that in Britain and on the Continent there are many who, while they do not openly deny Him, earnestly wish to degrade the Redeemer of the world to a level with Confucius or Mahomet, and to contemplate him as the Teacher and Founder of a Sect, instead of adoring him as the Lord of all, the Redeemer of men, the Sovereign Judge of quick and dead.” (Zastoupil 2009, 409)

For Marshman, the Unitarian view of Christ presented in the *Precepts* also struck a particular nerve, because for him, denying the divinity of Jesus and denying the vicarious salvation through Christ meant denying the core doctrine of Christianity. As Marshman wrote, “That God views all sin as so abominable that the death of Jesus Christ alone can expiate its guilt; and that the human heart is so corrupt that it must be renewed by the Divine Spirit before a man can enter heaven... Without these two dogmas, what is the Gospel?” (Killingly, 40)

Roy's responses to the criticisms of Marshman soon became notable in their own right. Throughout the course of their debates, Roy composed, *An Appeal to the Christian Public in Defense of the Precepts of Jesus*, *The Second Appeal*, and *The Final Appeal*, each with increasing length, primarily in an attempt to refute the divinity of Jesus. (Killingly, 40) Roy's first response was published in 1820, where he vigorously defended both his own belief in God, and his editing of the *Precepts*. (Zastoupil 2002, 232-33) Roy's next two appeals, further responding to Marshman's criticism of the selections Roy chose for the *Precepts* were published in 1822 and 1823 respectively. (Zastoupil 2002, 233) These successive defenses of the *Precepts* were particularly notable as a demonstration of Roy's grasp of Unitarian exegetical strategies. It was in these that he most clearly defended his rejection of the Trinity, and the doctrine of the vicarious salvation through Christ.

As far as the trinity, Roy claims that Christ, while being a highly exalted creature, was still created. He writes in the *Second Appeal* that "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." (Works, 573) Roy defended his rejection of the vicarious salvation of Christ by saying instead that Christianity should be focused on following the preachings and commandments of Jesus. As Roy writes in the *First Appeal*, "those sayings, the obedience to which is so absolutely commanded as indispensable and all-sufficient to those who desire to inherit eternal life" are "not other than the blessed and benign moral doctrines taught in the Sermon on the Mount...which include therefore every duty of man, and all that is necessary to salvation." (Works, 555)

This approach may seem odd, considering Roy's almost complete disinterest in theology while composing the *Precepts*, but there is a possible explanation. While he highlighted the

ethical benefits of Unitarian Christianity to the general public in the *Precepts*, and did the same throughout his personal correspondence with sympathetic Unitarian Christians, he might have felt compelled to create such complex theological arguments in response to the Baptists to avoid being discredited. Because Marshman's challenge to the *Precepts* was primarily theological, Roy would have been compelled to demonstrate his mastery of Unitarian theology in response. This adds support for Killingly's approach, as it is only when he is presented with an opponent, in Marshman, whose critiques were primarily theological, that Roy responds theologically in turn.

The Second Appeal

Zastoupil remarks that these responses contain examples of "ever more sophisticated biblical exegeses of a profoundly Unitarian nature." (Zastoupil 2009, 408) The *Second Appeal* became particularly noteworthy as an example of Unitarian biblical interpretation. According to Zastoupil, the "*Second Appeal* was a masterpiece of Unitarian controversialist style. For one thing, it exhibited command of anti-Trinitarian exegetical strategies." (Zastoupil 2009, 431) Specifically, Roy increasingly relied on "close examination of relevant passages in the Bible, the use of Greek and Hebrew to remove confusion introduced by mistranslation, and rational skepticism at key points." (Zastoupil 2002, 233-4) It is worth noting here, that it is only with these *Appeals* that we see Roy get embroiled in an intense, highly theological debate. A possible explanation for this however, is his adversarial audience.

An example of this is Roy's response to Marshman's claim that John 3:11, "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man who is in heaven," Is proof of the Trinity, because, as this is a line spoken to Nicodemus by Jesus, the use of the present tense 'is', "declares his location both in heaven and on the earth at one time."

(Works, 585) Roy refutes this by criticizing the translation, stating that “is” in this sense does not necessarily mean the present tense. Roy writes that, “This argument might perhaps carry some weight with it, were not the frequent use of the present tense in a preterite or future sense observed in the sacred writings, and were not a great number of other passages to determine that the term "is," in this instance, must be understood in the past sense.” (Works, 585)

As a result, the passage offered by Marshman is not, in fact, support for the Divinity of Christ. Roy notes that, “After a diligent attention to the following passage, no one will, I presume, scruple to conclude that the Son was actually absent from heaven during his locality on the earth.” (Works, 586) In addition to this, Roy also, in the precepts as well as his subsequent defenses of it, relies very little on the Gospel of John, possibly because he believed many portions of it were later additions, a common viewpoint in German Biblical scholarship. (Zastoupil 2002, 234) One example of this, is when Roy challenges the authority of John5:7, “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one.” (Works, 40) Roy comments that this verse is likely a later addition, and does not reflect the true message of Jesus. Roy writes that this verse was “for a length of time, known only in oral circulation ; but was afterwards placed in the margin of some editions, and at last introduced into the text, most probably in the fifteenth century, as an original verse. From that time it has been the common practice to insert this verse amongst those which are collected in support of the Trinitarian doctrine.” (Works, 625-626)

Additionally, Roy’s *Second Appeal* also drew on Roy’s background in Hindu theology, as it linked the doctrine of the trinity to the beliefs of some Hindus regarding their Gods. In the *Second Appeal* Roy mentions several times how Hindus believe in a plurality of Gods that all compose a singular Godhead, and specifically links this to Christian Trinitarian views. In one

instance, Roy asks, “if we believe that the Spirit, in the form of a dove or in any other bodily shape, was really the third person of the Godhead, how can we justly charge with absurdity the Hindoo legends of the Divinity having the form of a fish or of any other animal ?” (Works, 620) This line of argumentation is particularly important, as it marks one of the first uses of Hindu theology for biblical criticism. Zastoupil writes that, “The *Second Appeal* also advanced a novel claim that some Trinitarian arguments—e.g., God is one, but three persons in substance—were parallel to ones used by orthodox Hindus to defend polytheism.” (Zastoupil 2009, 431)

Ram Doss Letters

This line of thinking also humorously carried out by Roy when writing the “Ram Doss” letters. These were a series of letters written by Roy under the pseudonym “Ram Doss,” in 1823, in response to Dr. R. Tyler’s critique of Roy. (Killingly, 123-4) Specifically, Tyler took aim at Roy’s Unitarian viewpoints. Tyler, writing to the *Bengal Hukaru*, a conservative English language newspaper, “this Unitarian, as he now professes himself, thinks proper to leave the subject of discussion, namely, a proposal to hold a " Religious Conference," and tells me flatly that my belief in the Divinity of the HOLY SAVIOUR is on a par with a Hindu's belief in his Thakoor,” and refers to Roy’s arguments as “vile imputations by arguments drawn from those Holy Scriptures to which this Unitarian himself appeals.” (Works, 891)

In response to this, Roy, writing as Ram Doss, states that Hindus and Trinitarians actually stand on the same theological ground, and asks that Hindus and Trinitarians rise up together to defeat Unitarianism. “Ram Doss,” replies to Tyler, first clarifying that Hindus and Trinitarians do in fact share a common theology, stating, “you must admit that the same omnipotence, which can make three ONE and one THREE, can equally reconcile the unity and plurality of three hundred and thirty millions, both being supported by a sublime mystery which far transcends all

human comprehension.” (Works, 893) Because of this, “Ram Doss,” then goes on to call for a unified front against Unitarianism, writing, “it must be evident to you that this deluded sect of Unitarianism can lay no stress on the human form and feelings of Jesus Christ as disproving his divinity,” and therefore should, “cordially join and go hand in hand, in opposing, and, if possible, extirpating the abominable notion of a single God, which strikes equally at the root of Hindooism and Christianity.” (Works, 893) The sarcastic tone of these writings is well evident, and it is apparent that Roy’s real intention in responding to Tyler was, “to place the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity under the same condemnation as Hinduism.” (Killingly, 124) as he had in his *Second Appeal*.

Unitarian Reaction to the Precepts and Appeals

Unsurprisingly, the *Precepts*, and their subsequent appeals, caught the attention of many Unitarians in England and America. It was Roy's publication of the *Precepts*, and his subsequent defenses of it, that cemented the interest of many prominent Unitarians. (Zastoupil 2010, 41) They were particularly impressed with the quality of Roy’s work, and his eloquent defense of Unitarianism. Zastoupil comments that, “Many began openly welcoming Roy as a fellow Unitarian “British Unitarians began touting the Precepts and Rammohun's subsequent defenses of that work as soon as these reached the métropole.” (Zastoupil 2009, 426) J. Scott Porter, a Belfast minister, was particularly impressed, writing that Roy was “one of those great minds that dignify the profession of the Gospel,” and that of the *Precepts* that, “The experiment has been made. Its result has been such, as the friends of Unitarianism had long predicted. Rammohun Roy answers to all the conditions proposed.” (Zastoupil 2009, 428)

They even began to cast him in the same lot as other famous and prominent Unitarian thinkers of the time. Zastoupil explains that, “Beginning in the 1820s, they took great pleasure

in placing Rammohun in the company of other prominent figures, such as Locke, Newton, and Milton, who had embraced Unitarianism.” (Zastoupil 2009, 428) By the publication of his *Final Appeal*, Unitarians in England and America had become convinced that Roy was at least sympathetic to their cause, if not a Unitarian himself, and he became immensely popular with them. Zastoupil writes that, “These ideas situated Rammohun squarely in the Unitarian camp...The *Appeals* made explicit what the *Precepts* had suggested. As news of the controversy with Marshman- and of Rammohan's role in founding the Calcutta Unitarian Committee- cycled back to Britain, Unitarians rushed to establish contact.” (Zastoupil 2010 45)

Also of interest to British and American Unitarians were Roy's stances on popular humanitarian concerns, like sati, and his contributions to western understanding of Hindu thought. Lavan writes that the Unitarians admired Roy because of his “interest in translating basic Hindu religious texts and commenting upon them while reinterpreting them to meet the needs of the times” and that his “campaigns on such social questions such as sati had a natural appeal on ethical and humanitarian grounds.” (Lavan, 33)

Conclusions

Roy’s composition of the *Precepts*, and their subsequent defenses provide solid evidence to help explain Roy’s relationship with Unitarianism. Any theory that relies primary on theology; either in ascribing a succession of religious experiences leading to the publication of the *Precepts* during a “Christian” phase of Roy’s life, or one that describes an underlying Advaita or Deist theology pervading the *Precepts* fails to fully explain the work. Roy wrote the *Precepts* specifically to downplay theology; for him it was the moral message of Jesus contained in the Bible, not any specific underlying theology, that was the heart of the Bible. Roy’s distrust of the theological aspects of the Bible runs so deep that he even calls the theological messages

contained in it an active impediment to the moral messages. Clearly it was moral, not theological concerns that attracted Roy to Unitarianism, and compelled him to write the *Precepts*.

While, in contrast, the three *Appeals* are overtly theological, Killingly's localization theory helps explain this. Roy only utilized his understanding of Unitarian theology by writing those three, increasingly complex, replies when his hand was forced. The *Precepts* was roundly criticized by the Baptists, and most notably by Marshman, on expressly theological grounds, so Roy was then compelled to reply in turn. Facing the immediate audience of Marshman and the Baptists, Roy composed the three *Appeals* relying on the same kind of textual and theological authority that Marshman and the Baptists claimed, even though he personally likely saw little value those arguments it outside of that conversation.

CHAPTER FIVE

ROY'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH UNITARIANS

Background on the Published Correspondence

While Roy was known as a prolific writer, he also carried out extensive correspondence with friends and colleagues across the globe. Biswas, the editor of Roy's published, two-volume set of correspondence, comments that, "like most eminent nineteenth century personalities Rammohun was an indefatigable correspondent." (Correspondence, 1: v.) While his English correspondence is fairly well documented, little is known of his correspondence in Bengali, Hindustani, or Persian. This is largely due to the fact that while many of his English letters have been preserved in archives in India, England, and America, the letters he composed in Bengali, Hindustani, and Persian have largely disappeared. (Correspondence, 1: v.) Also presenting a challenge to examining Roy's correspondence is that letters written to him have largely not survived to the present day. A significant reason for this is that his personal papers were not preserved after his death, leaving very few letters written to Roy left to examine. (Correspondence, 1: v.)

A select few of Roy's letters had been published prior to the publication of Biswas' two volume set in 1992. Collet's biography, as well as Mary Carpenter's book, *The Last Days in England of the Rajah Rammohun Roy*, each contain a few letters selected by the authors for their importance. (Correspondence, 1: vi.) Later publications, including the compilation of Roy's English works, largely utilized the letters published by Collet and Carpenter, only occasionally publishing new letters. (Correspondence, 1: vi) To correct such a sparse record of Roy's correspondence, Biswas collected all of the available letters from archives in India, England, and America, and arranged them chronologically. (Correspondence, 1: vi.) This is important not

only because it now gives scholars the opportunity to research the entirety of Roy's available letters, but also because it published many of them for the first time. Several of the letters I have relied upon here, most notable those to Rev. Jared Sparks, and David Reed, were either totally unpublished, or only published in part, before this compilation. (Correspondence, 1: ix)

This may also have had an effect on the scholarship surrounding Roy's relationship with Unitarianism. Many of the works that directly address this question; were published before the complete set of Roy's correspondence was available, and, there is little scholarship studying the compilation as a whole. In an attempt to correct this, I have grouped together Roy's published correspondence to Unitarians from these volumes in an attempt to better understand his interest in Unitarianism.

Roy's Letters Concerning the Unitarian Society

Aside from his involvement in the Calcutta Unitarian Committee, Roy also had extensive correspondence with Unitarians from both America and England. While the letters covered a broad range of topics, a few key themes emerge; Roy's concern for his Unitarian Society in Calcutta, his critique of Trinitarian theology and Missionaries, his appreciation of Christian ethics, and his desire for educational reform in Calcutta. One of the more tangible concerns Roy had for corresponding with Unitarians was to build support for his Unitarian Society in Calcutta. Several of the letters he sent during the first few years of its existence lament the need for more money to fund a permanent chapel, for they were currently renting rooms at the offices of *Bengal Hurkaru*, a Bengali newspaper. Roy wrote to William Ward in 1824 that "we have not yet been able to build a chapel on account of the high price of the Ground which has at present risen to three times the former value of land at Calcutta." (Correspondence, 1: 314). He makes a similar statement to Dr. Thomas Rees, a London Unitarian, again in 1824. Roy writes that, "our

committee have not yet been able to purchase a suitable piece of ground for a chapel and school. They will, I hope soon succeed in their endeavors.” (Correspondence, 1: 318-9).

By 1827, Roy had made a little progress as land for the chapel had been purchased, news he passed on to J.B. Estlin, a Bristol Unitarian. Roy writes that, “I rejoice to learn that the friends of the cause of religious truth have exerted themselves in the promotion of the true system of religion in India, and have remitted about 1500 rupees to the care of Messrs. Alexander & Co. for religious purposes.” (Correspondence, 1: 387) The Unitarian Society, did not maintain much popularity, and finally shut down in the early months of 1828. (Correspondence, 1: 172)

Roy’s Critiques of Missionaries

Another concern of Roy's was Trinitarian theology, and the Trinitarian missionaries in India. Roy, to his Unitarian contacts, spoke very harshly of Trinitarian theology, often saying it was a corrupted form of Christianity, cloaked in idolatry and superstition. He wrote to the Rev. Jared Sparks, a prominent Baltimore Unitarian in 1822 that, “I have now every reason to hope that the truths of Christianity will not be much longer kept hidden under the veil of heathen doctrines and practices.” (Correspondence, 1: 66) He expressed similar statements in 1831 to William Alexander, a Norfolk Unitarian, while discussing his hopes for the continued success of Unitarian theology. In the letter, he expresses hope for the future of Unitarianism, stating that “truth must prevail over error, rational piety over bigotry and the light of reason must ultimately dispel the clouds of superstition” (Correspondence, 1: 673)

He even goes so far to compare Trinitarian Christianity, with polytheist Hindu practices, claiming the practical differences between the two is negligible. He wrote to an unknown addressee in 1824, regarding Trinitarianism, “my resolution increased to abandon it entirely,

finding the Christian doctrines resembling those of Hindoo's in substance, though they are different from each other in minute interpretations.” (Correspondence, 1: 350) This, in particular is dangerous for Roy, because it introduces the possibility of comparing the entirety of Christianity to polytheism. Roy wrote to an unknown addressee in 1824 that, “the doctrines which they teach men to ascribe to Christianity are calculated rather to expose it to ridicule and bring it to a level with heathenism.” (Correspondence, 1: 335) This, according to Roy, would be unfortunate, because it risks alienating rational Hindus and Muslims, the irrational Trinitarian theology of driving away those reasoned individuals who might otherwise be interested in Christianity. Roy wrote in a letter to Thomas Belsham in 1823 that, “the more they employ their ingenuity in support of the idea of a triune god they more they expose Christianity itself to the objections of the intelligent among both Hindus and Musslmans.” (Correspondence, 1: 175)

One of the roots of Roy's critique of Trinitarianism, was that it was not a view he thought was directly supported by biblical evidence. For instance, harking back to exegetical techniques he used while composing the *Precepts* and their associated replies, Roy explains to David Reed, the editor of the Christian Register of Boston, a Unitarian publication, that his belief in Unitarian theology is firmly rooted the proper understanding of allegory in Biblical literature. Roy wrote that, “upon an attentive study of the old and new testaments (as found arranged) have decided that these books treat the unity of God, and that the high and honorary terms applied to Jesus Christ and to the chiefs of Israel are comfortable to the usages of the Asiatic languages.” (Correspondence, 1: 270) Instead of being original to Biblical literature, and to the original followers of Jesus, Roy blamed later missionaries on the rise of Trinitarian Christianity. In a letter to Rev. Jared Sparks in 1822, Roy writes that, “the doctrines inculcated by Jesus and by his apostles are quite different from those human inventions which the Missionaries are persuaded to

profess and entirely consistent with reason and revelation delivered by Moses and the preceding prophets.” (Correspondence, 1: 66)

Thus, one of the reasons for Roy's admiration of Unitarianism, emerges; it's strong focus on rationality. As he wrote, in an 1824 letter to Henry Ware, a Unitarian professor at Harvard, “the Unitarian system is more comfortable to the human understanding than any other known creed.” (Correspondence, 1: 291) It is thus Roy's hope that this understanding of Christianity will ultimately win out. As Roy wrote to Jared Sparks in 1822, "we confidently hope that through these various means that period will be accelerated when the belief in the divine unity and the mission of Christ will universally prevail.” (Correspondence, 1: 72)

Roy and the Ethics of Jesus

Another key reason that Roy admired Christian Unitarianism, aside from his admiration of their monotheism, was the ethical stances taken due to its stance on the nature of Jesus. As mentioned earlier, in his earlier writings on Hinduism, Roy expressed a belief in the moral evil of devotion to material representations of divinity, a stance he repeats in the Precepts and its associated replies. Unitarian Christianity offers the solution to this; the humanity of Christ negates his vicarious salvation of humanity, so instead individuals must work to follow the ethical precepts of Jesus in this life. In a letter to Henry Ware in 1824, he extols the Unitarian rejection of Christ's divinity, writing that nothing can be a better tribute to the “Divine Majesty,” than “an attempt to root out the idea that the omnipresent Deity should be generated in the womb of a female, and live in a state of subjugation for several years, and lastly offer his blood to another person of the Godhead whose anger could not be appeased except by the sacrifice of a portion of himself in human form.” (Correspondence, 1: 281)

One result of this, is an ethical system founded not on proper devotion or worship to Jesus, but an active application of his ethical principals in this world. Roy writes in the same letter, that “no service can be more advantageous to mankind than an endeavor to withdraw them from the belief that an imaginary faith ritual observances or outward marks independently of good works can cleans men from the stain of past sins and secure their eternal salvation.” (Correspondence, 1: 282) This stance led Roy to exclaim that Christian ethics, at least using Unitarian interpretations of the nature of Jesus, were superior to any ethical system he had encountered. When writing Ware in 1824, he exclaims, “Christianity if properly inculcated has a greater tendency to improve the moral social and political state of mankind than any other known religious system.” (Correspondence, 1: 281)

Roy's admiration for Unitarian Christianity was profound enough that he often expressed a great desire to personally visit several of his contacts. Some of this was made possible for many of his British contacts, as Roy relocated to England in 1830. (Collet, 142) However, he never was able to make a trip to America. One of the figures he most wanted to meet in person was William Ellery Channing, whom he was a great admirer of. Roy wrote to Channing in 1832, less than a year before Roy died, expressing his desire to meet him. Roy writes to Channing that, “I expect the honor of making your acquaintance and to witness the progress of the truths of Christianity. I now conclude this with my best wishes of your success, and by assuring you that we are justly proud of having so eminent an advocate of that cause as yourself. I remain with the highest reverence and esteem.” (Correspondence, 2: 729) Even though they were never able to meet in person, the strong wording of this letter does suggest that Roy’s interest with Unitarianism did extend beyond the folding of the Calcutta Unitarian Committee.

Unitarian Missionaries

However, evangelism, even though Unitarian missionaries, remained a touchy subject for Roy. Roy already had a negative view towards Trinitarian missionaries, something he frequently mentioned to his Unitarian contacts. In a letter to Rev. Sparks in 1822, he criticized the missionary's reliance on doctrinal points of theology that Roy felt were overly oblique. He wrote that, "In the performance of their duties they always being with such obscure doctrines as are calculated to incite ridicule instead of respect towards the religion they wish to promulgate." (Correspondence, 1: 67)

Roy's opinions about the possibility of Unitarian missionaries was directly addressed in Roy's reply to a letter of Reed's that asked Roy about the possibility of Unitarian missionaries in India. Reed begins his line of questioning by asking how traditional Christian doctrine may be impeding the introduction of Christianity to India. He asks "how far the doctrines of trinity, native depravity, and other kindred doctrines of Calvinism, as held and taught by the present missionaries are obstacles to the introduction of Christianity among Hindoos?" (Correspondence, 1: 274) Roy replied, echoing his earlier remarks to Sparks, that Trinitarian missionaries risked exposing Christianity to further ridicule. He wrote that, "the inculcation of the doctrine of the trinity, by the missionary gentlemen, has not only rendered their labor unsuccessful, but has exposed the name of Christianity to ridicule among the enlightened Hindoos" (Correspondence, 1: 268) Reed next asks whether there are any doctrines or practices among Hindus that would serve as obstacles to their conversion. He writes "whether there appears to be any insuperable obstacle, in the manner, habit, or present belief of the native Hindoos, to the rational and simple doctrines of Christianity, as inculcated by Unitarians." (Correspondence, 1: 274)

Roy responds in two parts, expressing doubt as to the possibility of converting Hindus to Christianity in each occasion. He begins by stating that rational Hindus would find Trinitarian Christianity, particularly because of its insistence on a physically manifest God in Christ, reprehensible. Roy writes that for these “enlightened” Hindus, “the idea of a Triune god, a man God and also the idea of the appearance of God in the bodily shape of a dove, or that the blood of God seems entirely heathenish and absurd and consequently their sincere conversion to Christianity must be morally impossible.” (Correspondence, 1: 269) Roy, however, admitted the possibility that these rational Hindus might be receptive to Unitarian doctrine. Roy writes that, “they would not scruple to embrace or at least to encourage the Unitarian system.” (Correspondence, 1: 269) For the Hindus that Roy termed “ignorant,” conversion was equally unlikely, for they would be reluctant to abandon their caste, family deities, and customary religious practices. For these “ignorant” Hindus, Roy writes that they, “must be enemies to both the systems Christianity- Unitarianism and Trinitarianism- as they feel great reluctance in changing the deities worshiped by their fathers, for foreign gods, and in substituting the blood of God for the water of the Ganges.” (Correspondence, 1: 269)

Reeds' next question to Roy directly asked about the possibility of Unitarian missionaries, and whether they would fare any better than Trinitarian missionaries. He asks “whether gentlemen who should inculcate the doctrine of the Divine Unity, and the most plain and simple doctrines of Christianity, would probably meet with success with Hindoos or Musslmans.” (Correspondence, 1: 274) Roy's response to this question is interesting, for instead of directly answering Reed's question, he instead sends a request for educational aid. Roy tells Reed that it would be beneficial to send a few a few men over who could assist in the education of the English language, western sciences, and Christian morality. Roy writes that, “it would be

advisable in my humble opinion that one, or two, if not more Gentlemen well qualified to teach English literature and sciences and noted for their moral conduct should be employed to understandings of the present ignorant generation,” stating that, “the above statement is a reply to the third query mentioned in your letter.” (Correspondence, 1: 269)

In other letters, Roy speaks more directly about the possibility of Unitarian missionaries, responding firmly in the negative. When asked in a letter by Henry Ware in 1824, about the possibility of converting Hindus to Christianity, Roy writes that, “no human possibility exists of converting the Hindoo to any sect of Christianity.” (Correspondence, 1: 285) Roy is even dismissive of the benefit of translating and publishing Christian scriptures into Bengali, as he thought that they would only increase their resistance to Christianity. When asked in the same letter by Ware about the benefit of translating scriptures, Roy replies that, “the translation of the Holy Scriptures circulated among them so far from conducing to this end, will, on the contrary, increase the prejudices of the natives against the Christian religion and prove, in many respects, detrimental to it.” (Correspondence, 1: 285) Even among those who Roy knew who converted, or claimed to have converted, Roy saw little benefit to their character. He writes to Ware that, “I have no personal knowledge of any native converts respectable for their understanding morals and condition in life.” (Correspondence, 1: 287)

Roy’s Desire for Educational Aid

In his letter to Ware he expresses sentiments similar to those he expressed in his letter to Reed, concerning the need for educational aid in India. In a response to Ware's question about what Unitarians can do to aid the development of Christianity in India, Roy replies with a request not for missionary aid, but for teachers skilled in European learning, western sciences, and Christian morality. Roy is also very clear that he does not believe the teaching of Christian

dogma will be of much aid. Roy responds, “should philanthropy induce to and your friends to send to Bengal as many serious and able teachers of European learning and science and Christian morality unmingled with religious doctrines.” (Correspondence, 1: 293) When Ware asks about the benefit of Unitarian missionary schools, Roy responds positively. Roy responds to Ware's inquiry about Unitarian missionary schools stating, “this would be certainly of great use.” However Roy's positive response is likely due the framing of Ware's question, which downplayed the role of Christian doctrine. Ware, in his letter to Roy asks, “whether it would be useful to establish Unitarian missionary schools for the instruction of children of natives in the rudiments of European education, in the English language, in Christian morality, mingling with it very little Christian Doctrine.” (Correspondence, 1: 294)

Roy and Educational Reform

This focus on education is not surprising, for improving the prospects of education for his fellow Indians in Calcutta was a project Roy devoted significant time and energy to. Roy was convinced that the introduction of western learning was crucial for the social uplift of his countrymen. Crawford writes that, “Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first Indian to realize that in order for India to be delivered from medieval darkness, and to take her place among the enlightened nations of the world she needed the same knowledge that made Europe great.” (Crawford, 117) Roy was a strident supporter of the Hindu College, founded in 1817, although did was not formally a member of its initial fund-raising committee, due to conflicts with local Brahmins. Crawford explains that, “A ranking Brahmin objected to Ram Mohan's participation in the committee because of his criticism of idolatry, whereupon Ram Mohan graciously bowed out.” (Crawford, 117)

Roy's support of the Hindu college was likely due to its commitment to European education. As David Kopf explains the “founders insisted that the college not teach Hindu theology and metaphysics but concern itself primarily with the 'cultivation of European literature, and European Science.” (Kopf, 181) Roy also had a few successful attempts at introducing western education on his own terms; he built a school in Calcutta in 1816, opened the Anglo-Indian School in 1822, to offer a free English education to Hindu boys. (Crawford, 121) This school, run by the Unitarian Committee, and headed by Rev. William Adam, had a strong focus on western science and mathematics. As B.N. Dasgupta explains, “Rammohun introduced, in the curriculum, Joyce's scientific dialogues on mechanics and astronomy, the first sixteen propositions of the first book of Euclid and translations into Bengali from English authors.” (Dasgupta, 201) However, He and Adam had strong disagreements over the operation of the school. Adams wanted it to be a mission school, and unsurprisingly Roy disagreed. Lavan explains that, “Adam and Rammohun had earlier run into conflict over the operation of Rammohun's Anglo-Hindu School. Adam wished it to be a mission school. He often disagreed with Rammohun about the style and manner of its management.” (Lavan, 69)

However, Roy opposed government-sponsored educational projects that focused more on traditional education than English and western sciences. In particular, he was a harsh and vocal critic of the government sponsored Sanskrit College, founded in 1824 by the Calcutta Book Society and the Calcutta School society, who had received grants from the government to set up a public school in Calcutta. (Marshall, 132) Roy's critiques of the Sanskrit college were due in large part to its curriculum, which focused on education in Sanskrit, and Hindu sacred literature. Crawford describes the educational philosophy of the Sanskrit College, writing, “the committee thought it pedagogically sound to start with an Oriental curriculum and gradually ease into the

Western area. Initial studies were therefore to be confined to the sacred literature of the Hindus taught in the Sanskrit language.” (Crawford, 123) Roy critiqued this approach as wasting time teaching Hindus about obscure points of theology that would not help them better their standing. He wrote to Lord Amherst, protesting the school’s founding, writing “nor will youths be fitted to be better members of society by the Vedantic doctrines, which teach them to believe that all visible things have no real existence.” and that education in Sanskrit “would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness.” (Crawford, 124) Instead, he advocated for the government funding of education in western sciences. As Roy writes in the same letter, “it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy, with other useful sciences.” (Crawford, 124)

Conclusions

While claiming the moral superiority of Christianity, and extolling the benefit of some form of Missionary education, Roy does not express a clear belief in the theological superiority of Christianity, even from a Unitarian standpoint. Instead, in his correspondence with Unitarians, he expresses a universalist standpoint, that accepts a broad variety of faiths, and a wide variety of worship styles as long as they share a strong ethical core and a devotion to a single god. When Ware asked, in his 1824 letter to Roy, “whether it be desirable that the inhabitants of India should be converted to Christianity”, Roy replies that, “I am led to believe, from reason, what is set forth in the scripture, that 'in every nation that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted with him in whatever form of worship he may have been taught to glorify god” (Correspondence, 1: 281) Within this standpoint, Roy hoped that all monotheists, regardless of personal faith, should be able to work and live together in harmony. In a letter to

Reed in 1824 that, “oneness in the object of worship and the sameness of practice should produce attachment between the worshipers.” (Correspondence, 1: 268)

This strong commitment to ethical concerns, both ideal and practical, coupled with Roy’s broad acceptance of a variety of theological positions, is the most helpful in explaining Roy’s relationship with Unitarianism, and is not represented well in the contemporary theories that seek to explore that issue. It should be clear from his published letters that he was not strongly motivated by a specific theology. These letters contain little evidence for either a specific theology that developed during the “Christian” phase of his career, or one that resulted from a deep-seeded Deist or Advaita position. What little theology is contained in this letters fits in line with the general sense of religious universalism that Roy exhibited throughout his career.

The primary concerns that do emerge in Roy’s correspondence with Unitarians are practical and ethical, not theological. His letters are dominated by practical, on the ground concerns such as the financial viability the Calcutta Unitarian Society, the possibility of missionary work, and Roy’s desire for educational aid in India, along with his hopes that Unitarian Christianity could spread a positive moral message throughout India. While Killingly’s approach is somewhat helpful here, at least in explaining the graciousness with which Roy habitually addressed his Unitarian contacts, it does not specifically address the importance of the kind of practical concerns that seem foremost in Roy’s mind.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

General Critiques

Given the evidence presented, each of the theories that were initially discussed has potential to help explain Roy's interaction with Christian Unitarians, but they almost all fall short of offering a full explanation of that relationship. The theories that ascribe a succession of theological influences on Roy, or that claim him he was and always remained a staunch Deist or Hindu, both suffer from the same fundamental problem, they both put too much focus on theology. Roy's interest in Christian Unitarianism is not wholly, or even, if the content and nature of his letters to Unitarians is to be taken seriously, primarily due to his admiration of Unitarian theology. Also the theory of a succession of influences has a particularly problematic timeline, as there appears to be strong connections between Roy's Hindu and Christian writings, and since Roy appeared to continue his interest and contacts with Unitarians until his death, there is no clear evidence of a fundamental shift in his religious thought later in life after the collapse of the Unitarian Society.

Theories Concerning Successive Influences, or that Roy Was a Hindu

The most consistent thread explaining Roy's interaction with the variety of religious communities he encountered during his lifetime, which is largely ignored by these two theories, is his privileging of ethics over theology. This is certainly apparent in his works on Hindu philosophy; for while he certainly railed against the irrational nature of Hindu polytheism, those discussions were often grounded in on the ground, ethical concerns for his fellow Hindus. We can also see this approach in his earliest explorations of Christianity. His first Christian

publication *The Precepts of Jesus* was published specifically to highlight the morality of Jesus, and downplay Christian theology and doctrine. This is even more apparent given a close analysis of what Roy choose to include and exclude from that work. When Roy and Adam founded the Calcutta Unitarian Committee, it was Roy's concerns about missionary work that eventually derailed the project. And when it came to his personal contacts with Unitarians he was equally dismissive of missionary work, and often downplayed Christian theology. Therefore, given Roy's consistent disinterest in theology, neither the theory of successive influences, or Robertson's theory that Roy remained a Hindu, are particularly helpful in explaining Roy's relationship with Unitarianism.

Killingly's Theory

Killingly's approach, however, focusing on Roy's knowledge of his intended audience, and being aware of how and why he was corresponding with them can shed more light on Roy's interest in Unitarians. For one, it offers a positive explanation for some of the few times Roy does get embroiled in theological debates. One of the most striking examples is the *Precepts of Jesus* and Roy's associated replies. The precepts itself fairly stripped of dogma and theology, and this can be easily explained by his readership. He had intended this tract for the general English-speaking public with whom he hoped to share the simple ethical examples of Jesus. It was only when he was forced to defend himself from the attacks of the Baptist missionaries when he resorted to complex Unitarian theology, in an attempt to convince them of the validity of his argument. This is a remarkable shift in style and tone compared to the personal correspondence between him and his Unitarian contacts. When he is talking to Christians as his friends, Roy shows himself as less of a theologian, and more of a reformer, particularly regarding educational reform in India. He was an ardent supporter of English education, and saw his

contacts with Unitarians as a potentially fruitful, if unrealized, source of teachers and funds for his educational endeavors.

Killingly's position also is particularly attractive because it offers solutions to some difficult problems with the other two theories. The succession of ideas theory would be promising, but there are notable issues with chronology. Roy's writing does not present a clear chronology of influence, and there are several instances where he composes texts that appear to be solely influenced by Advaita theology. Killingly explains that, "Rammohun's later works in Bengali continue to present a traditional view of the universe, and to base their arguments on Sanskrit texts." (Killingly, 45) Because of this, it is difficult, if not impossible to effectively rely on this theory, as it imposes too rigid of a chronological structure on Roy's writing. Killingly writes that, "the idea of a succession of influences does not fully account for Rammohun's thought as we find it in his writings." (Killingly, 43)

Killingly's theory also provides answers to some troubling issues with the theory that he remained staunchly an Advaitan theologian. Killingly specifically noted several texts where the English in Roy's translation does not appear idiomatic, and ripe for misinterpretation, but instead carefully constructed to appeal to his English audiences, in ways that often are starkly different from his presentation of the same material in his Bengali translations. Citing Roy's translations of the *Abridgment of the Vedant*, Killingly comments that, "here, the English version is not only much longer than the Bengali, but makes nididhyasana more of an intellectual process, in the manner of eighteenth century European rational theism, and less of a mystical search for direct intuition of God." (Killingly, 38) This reading is more useful, because it doesn't discount the English version as a corruption or a misinterpretation of Roy's supposed purely Advaita theology. This reading allows both texts to be engaged fully, with Roy's work adapting each text

to its own audience being taken into account. This is particularly important in terms of his interaction with other religious communities; Roy had different reasons for conversing with his audiences, and this approach also offers a window into examining those reasons. In looking at the English and Hindu audiences for Roy's translations of the Upanishads, Killingly is able to give telling insight into the reason Roy might have been translating for each community.

Killingly explains that, "the Bengali translations are intended to save Hindus from error, while the English translations are to give interested Europeans a correct view of the Hindu tradition." (Killingly, 35)

Critique of Killingly

However, there are issues with Killingly's theory as well. For one, while it does address why he might talk to each intended audience differently, it does not specifically address the effect of on the ground, practical concerns that Roy had in his own life, or had for the larger Hindu community. Aside from the general hope of spreading the benefit of Christian morality, Roy's contacts with Unitarians show that he also had very specific practical concerns in mind; most notably the need for financial support for his mission in Calcutta, and support for his educational endeavors.

Additionally, Roy had concerns in his own life that very likely colored his interactions with Unitarian Christianity. As mentioned earlier, Roy's personal and professional success were very much linked to his relationship with the British, and his social standing as a Brahmin. He had amassed a sizable fortune through his association with the British, and his ability to successfully promulgate his message was tied closely to both his middle class status, and his status as a Brahmin. This means that for Roy, his religious and secular lives were inexorably linked. As Brian Hatcher comments in his book *Bourgeois Hinduism*, many middle class Hindus

at that time were forced to, “attempt to find meaningful linkages between spiritual concerns and material aspirations.” (Hatcher, 9) This is very true for Roy, and very helpful in explaining his reluctance to publicly announce why he was or was not a Christian or a Unitarian. He likely could not have publicly converted due to his fear of losing caste and social standing, but he also could not publicly deny being a Christian without compromising his relationship to the British, or potentially damaging his political career. These are not concerns that are directly considered under Killingly’s theory.

Final Thoughts

Therefore, In terms of explaining his interest in Unitarianism, Roy was first and foremost a great admirer of the ethics of Unitarian Christianity, and saw it as a way to affect direct, positive, material change for his fellow Indian. The Unitarian focus on the ethical commandments of Jesus, and rejection of vicarious salvation through Jesus, offered Roy an answer to some of the most troubling ethical problems he saw in both Hinduism and Trinitarian Christianity. This concern is what is reflected in both Roy’s Unitarian writings, and his personal correspondences with Unitarians, and it is this ethical standpoint that, Roy hoped, would lead people away from seeking spiritual benefit from idols, and towards the morals and ethics of Jesus that could improve their lives. He also saw Unitarians as possible allies for affecting positive, on the ground changes in Calcutta, particularly through funding his Unitarian Committee in Calcutta, and offering educational aid. When Roy was vague, either intentionally or unintentionally, about his personal theological beliefs regarding Unitarianism, it was also on the ground concerns, strongly tied to his social and economic standings that are most helpful in explaining his silence on the issue. The hope Roy had for Unitarian Christianity was both as an

ethical system and a support system; one that could help reform and improve the morals, actions, and daily lives of his fellow Indians.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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