

INTER-RELIGIOUS HERMENEUTICS  
AS INTRA-RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE:  
HINDUS, CHRISTIANS, AND MUSLIMS  
READING EACH OTHER'S SCRIPTURES  
IN NINETEENTH CENTURY INDIA

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Indian identities during the nineteenth century came to be more and more sharply delineated in terms of three broad religious categories: Christian, Hindu, and Muslim. Consequently, interaction across these lines has been distinguished from interaction within these communities. This essay explores how certain forms of inter-religious interaction relate to forms of interaction that may be called intra-religious. It will focus on the practice of reading and commenting on scriptures across religious lines, and the role of this practice in internal disputes within religious communities. This form of religious interaction developed within certain social worlds, through a variety of established and emerging channels, in tandem with the increasing accessibility of scriptures to literate classes in translated and printed forms. The first and longest part of this essay will explore the contexts, methods, and purposes of this form of discourse, as represented by six leading figures, two from each religious tradition: Henry T. Colebrooke and William Muir; Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Saraswati; Rahmat Allah Kairanawi and Sayyid Ahmad Khan. The second part will offer some theoretical conclusions and methodological suggestions for the study of religious communities and their interactions.

## **MAPPING RELIGIOUS INTERACTION IN NINETEENTH CENTURY INDIA**

### **Mapping the communities and their interactions.**

A colonial administrator drawing a religious map of nineteenth century India would probably have started out by tracing the boundaries of three principal communities: Christian, Hindu, and Muslim, in that order. These were the main religious categories in terms of which the British thought and governed, and this was the order in which events were perceived to flow: from the initiative of the colonial power to the response of the native Hindus, and secondarily to the slower and more intransigent response of the previous foreign rulers, the Muslims. I will follow this division and this ordering in this essay, because whether or not it is fair, it shaped thinking in all three communities, and it reflects the disproportionate impact of British thought and life on the rest of India.

Although these three categories dominate thinking on nineteenth century India, some social groups, institutions, and modes of interaction cut across these religious lines. At the same time, deep differences divided the religious communities themselves. Since these trans-religious connections and intra-religious divisions are crucial to understanding the examples of inter-religious hermeneutics that will be examined here, I will start by mapping their outlines broadly.

Administrative tasks such as revenue collection and justice created new social classes within each religious community, and linked them across religious lines in a common administrative culture. Responses to this development differed between and within religious communities. On the whole Hindus participated more readily than Muslims in the new British administrative and financial networks. Within each religion different responses created new divisions. A new Hindu middle class emerged and replaced former financial powers, while Muslims debated whether to join in the new unbelieving system or to lament their lost revenue

and influence.<sup>1</sup> Rammohun Roy and Sayyid Ahmad Khan represent the small segments of their respective religious communities that became deeply involved in British colonial culture. Dayananda Saraswati and Rahmat Allah Kairanawi represent more resistant subcultures that nevertheless interacted with the emerging British culture. All of these figures moved within the higher literate classes of their communities, and it is in this environment that the discourses examined here took place. The large lower classes of the Hindu and Muslim populations are not represented in this essay.

Educational institutions and examinations were developed in order to standardize the British bureaucratic apparatus and culture. This contributed to a small layer of common culture, within which newspapers, small presses, and literary and scientific societies flourished. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, for example, founded a scientific society, ran his own private press, and promoted education on a British model for Muslims.<sup>2</sup> At the same time literate culture was maintained and cultivated in other Indian languages, to some extent even within the same circles that promoted the study of English. More traditional modes of education were defended by other segments of literate society, as among conservative Muslims such as Rahmat Allah Kairanawi.

Communities were also divided over more distinctly religious issues. Christians were divided between those who favored a business-only approach to the colonial presence in India, on the one hand, and missionaries and their evangelical supporters on the other. A partly coinciding division existed between Unitarians and various groups of Trinitarians, which included Baptist and Church of England missionaries. Henry Colebrooke represents the Unitarians. William Muir, though not himself a missionary, was supportive of their efforts, as were some other Trinitarian members of the colonial administration.

Rammohun Roy, founder of the Brahmo Samaj, and Dayananda Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj, represent some of the religious divisions within the Hindu community. Roy's Upanishadic, monistic ideals rejected the ritual practices and institutional establishments of Brahminical religion, as well as the Bhakti cults. His views were so congenial to Unitarian Christians that the Unitarian Society published an edition of his *Precepts of Jesus*. Dayananda, a wandering ascetic turned reformer, likewise promoted a monistic and aniconic form of Hinduism, but defended it on the basis of the Vedic Samhitas rather than the Upanishads, and argued for the retention of more Brahminical values and practices, such as caste and some rituals.

The divisions among Muslims that are most relevant for this study relate to the problematic issue of how to relate to the British. Revival movements promoting *jihâd* inspired British distrust; moderate traditionalists sought the preservation of Muslim identity under British rule; Sayyid Ahmad Khan campaigned for reconciliation and cooperation with the British after

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<sup>1</sup> Nuanced descriptions of the Hindu and Muslim communities and their relations with British culture may be found, respectively, in Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989), and David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). Sumanta Banerjee notes (pp. 39-40) that in the 1830s in Calcutta the mixing of social elites across ethnic and religious lines actually declined from its prior levels.

<sup>2</sup> See David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 77-81 and *passim*.

the 1857 revolt. Rahmat Allah Kairanawi, suspected of involvement in the revolt, went into exile in Arabia, where he wrote *Izhâr al-haqq* (Manifestation of the Truth) on the basis of his contribution to the 1854 public debate with Christian missionaries in Agra.

While the categories of Christian, Hindu, and Muslim define what we mean by “inter-religious” hermeneutics, the actual practice of inter-religious studies of scriptures was made possible through social worlds and discourses and modes of interaction that were shared across religious boundaries. Furthermore, this essay will show that the content of these studies was more significant as internal argument over issues that divided each author’s own religious community, than as substantive inter-religious engagement. I will therefore argue below that internal divisions such as the ones just mentioned, and the social worlds and practices and discourses that were shared across religious lines, are at least as important for understanding inter-religious hermeneutics as are the differences between the three religions themselves.

### **Mapping scriptures.**

The colonialist ventures of acquiring new lands through finance and force, and of mapping their peoples through projects such as the census, are mirrored in the orientalist project of acquiring and mapping new texts. When Henry Colebrooke, a quickly rising star in the ranks of the East India Company, desired to become acquainted with the religions of the people of India, he saw his task as consisting of first acquiring the text of the Vedas, and then getting a bird’s eye view of their content. His essay “On the Vedas, or Sacred Writings of the Hindus,” published in 1805 in a Calcutta journal entitled *Asiatic Researches*, opened with reflections on the legendary status the Vedas had held for Europeans until not long before:

In the early progress of researches into Indian literature, it was doubted whether the *Vedas* were extant; or, if portions of them were still preserved, whether any person, however learned in other respects, might be capable of understanding their obsolete dialect. It was believed too, that, if a *Brahmana* really possessed the Indian scriptures, his religious prejudices would nevertheless prevent his imparting the holy knowledge to any but a regenerate Hindu.<sup>3</sup>

Colebrooke could count on one hand those who had preceded him in actually laying hands on this mythical text, and throughout his essay he remained concerned with the issue of the completeness or fragmentary nature of the texts “in his possession.”

Having procured a significant collection of Vedic texts, Colebrooke’s next task, and the main purpose of his essay, was to map the contours of what he had acquired. His vocabulary expressed the mapping task in terms of counting (“counting,” “numbering,” and “enumerating”), ordering (“order,” “arrangement,” “distribution,” “compilation,” “collation”), and classifying (“naming,” “specifying,” and “distinguishing;” also tracing “divisions,” “subdivisions,” “branches,” and “correspondences.”) Colebrooke proceeded systematically through his texts, setting forth the names of the various schools and the modes of their divisions of the text, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Thomas Colebrooke, “On the Védas, Or Sacred Writings of the Hindus,” *Asiatick Researches*, vol. viii (Calcutta, 1805), reprinted in H. T. Colebrooke, *Essays on the Religion and Philosophy of the Hindus*, new ed. (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus; London: Williams and Norgate, 1858; reprinted Delhi: Indological Book House, 1972), 1.

number of sections and subsections in each. This project of counting, ordering, and classifying was not foreign to the materials Colebrooke was examining; on the contrary, his information was apparently derived from a Hindu tradition of dividing and sub-dividing the Vedas into smaller and smaller units, even down to syllables, and recording numbers of units and descriptions of the larger units.<sup>4</sup> It appears, however, that none of the Hindu sources he used sought to give the kind of detailed structural map of the entire Vedic corpus that Colebrooke was attempting. The idea of the Veda as a single text, that must be collected and mapped and studied as one unit, appears to have been Colebrooke's own assumption, born perhaps out of a mind-set that thought of the Bible as a single document, and consequently assumed that other religions were to be discovered through the study of a single scripture.

Acquiring absent scriptures was a prerogative of the powerful. William Muir, who studied the Qur'ân and Hadîth in order to recast them in the form of a biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, expressed his appreciation for the orientalist Sprenger, who had found manuscripts of early biographies by Ibn Sa'd and al-Ṭabarî, and appropriated them on behalf of the British.<sup>5</sup> It is indicative of this situation that Sayyid Ahmad Khan, when he wanted to write a refutation of Muir's critical biography of Muhammad, had to travel to London to get the works he needed.<sup>6</sup>

Despite their situation of relative power, however, the British were not the only ones engaged in mapping and redefining the scriptures and religious traditions with which they came into contact. Leaders of each community debated among themselves how to define the other religions, especially the dominant Christian minority. Not long after the time of Colebrooke, scriptures had become so widely accessible that literate persons in any tradition could read and reconfigure them. Christian missionaries, convinced that scripture was the soul of religion, translated the Bible into various vernacular languages, and introduced printing for the sake of distributing it, as well as for the production of tracts. This identification of religion with scripture, as well as the technology of printing, were developed particularly quickly within the Hindu community. Rammohun Roy promoted his reform efforts by translating select Sanskrit scriptures (certain Upanishads in particular) into Hindi and Bengali, and printing them at his own expense. Dayananda Saraswati sought to make the Vedas accessible to a wider literate public by commenting on them in Hindi. If Dayananda could also write a criticism of the Qur'ân, this was because Muslims had translated it into Urdu and Hindi.<sup>7</sup> Sayyid Ahmad Khan and other Muslims took to writing and printing religious works in Urdu instead of Persian or Arabic. Thus scriptures themselves, as well as commentaries and polemics written about them, were made increasingly public by the rapid spread of printing and by the increasing use of vernacular

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<sup>4</sup> See Colebrooke, "On the Vedas," 4, 8, 19, 43 and 45. Colebrooke valued this Hindu practice for its role in preserving the original text; see pp. 59-60.

<sup>5</sup> Sir William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet from Original Sources*, new edition (abridged from the first edition in four volumes) (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1877), 609-611.

<sup>6</sup> Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 105-7.

<sup>7</sup> Dayananda Saraswati refers to such translations in *Light of Truth: Or an English Translation of the Satyarth Prakash*, trans. Chiranjiva Bharadwaja, 4th ed. (New Delhi: Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, 1991), 649.

languages in religious writings. Because scriptures became available to all communities, and because they served as symbols identified with the three main religious traditions, members of each religion could interpret and remap the others' scriptures as a way of redefining the other in their own terms, as a means of defining their own relationship to those other traditions, and as an indirect method of arguing with their own co-religionists.

Several of the specific issues that were discussed through the medium of inter-religious hermeneutics will be examined below. Here I wish only to point out that "mapping" the text of scripture was an important aspect of interpretation. We have seen that Colebrooke mapped the Vedas as an explorer would map previously unknown territory. Muir dramatically restructured Muslim scriptures by reconfiguring the Qur'ân, which he felt had "no intelligible arrangement whatever,"<sup>8</sup> as well as disconnected Hadîth reports, into a single continuous narrative arranged in chronological order. His historical interest and his European historical-critical approach led him to transgress the boundaries of the Muslim canon, rejecting as unhistorical many reports in the canonical Hadîth collections, and including in his work sources that carried little weight with Indian Muslims, such as the biographical Hadîth collections of Ibn Sa'd and al-Tabarî. Muir's redefinition of Muslim scriptures as biographical sources can be understood as an attempt to shift the ongoing Muslim-Christian debate away from the issue of the textual authenticity of scripture, which had become a major focus of Muslim criticisms of the Bible, and toward the character of the religion's founder. In this area Christians had a tactical advantage, because Muslims could not question the character of Jesus (whom they recognized as a prophet) the way Christians and Hindus could attack the personality of Muhammad. A remapping of the boundaries and internal organization of Muslim scriptures thus served a polemical purpose.

Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Saraswati both utilized calculated selection from the canon of scripture, rather than its reorganization, as their principal mapping technique. With regard to Hindu scriptures, Roy translated and published Upanishads as a way to promote his monotheistic and anti-ritual values, while Dayananda limited his canon to the Vedic Samhitas, thus excluding the Puranic and Tantric literature whose influence he was fighting. When the two men turned to the scriptures of other religions, they made selections along diametrically opposite lines, each according to his own goals. For his *Precepts of Jesus*, a compilation of passages from the Gospels, Roy selected those verses that he considered "admirably calculated to elevate men's ideas to high and liberal notions of one God" and "well fitted to regulate the conduct of the human race," while he excluded passages of a historical or doctrinal nature, especially miracle accounts, because he felt such matters tended to evoke only disbelief or strife.<sup>9</sup> I will examine his actual principles of selection more closely below, but for now I will just contrast his approach with that of Dayananda Saraswati, whose aim was to discredit the morality of God or other figures in both the Bible and the Qur'ân. Whereas Roy found the sayings of Jesus an unmatched repository of elevated moral values, Dayananda criticized the Bible for its moral weakness, completely skipping over the morally challenging prophets of the Old Testament, and bringing

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<sup>8</sup> Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, 553.

<sup>9</sup> Rammohun Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happiness, Extracted From the Books of the New Testament Ascribed to the Four Evangelists. To Which Are Added, the First and Second Appeal to the Christian Public, In Reply to the Observations of Dr. Marshman, of Serampore*, from the London Edition (New York: B. Bates, 1825), xviii-xix.

out aspects of Jesus' teachings he found less laudable. Unlike Roy, who avoided miracle accounts, Dayananda delighted to comment on accounts that sounded incredible. The selection of texts was the key to advancing different arguments through inter-religious hermeneutics.

Muslim concepts of revelation likewise led to reconfigurations of the Christian canon. Since the Qur'ân enjoins belief in the revelations given to all the prophets who preceded Muhammad, Muslims asked how the present contents of the Bible related to these past revelations. Rahmat Allah Kairanawi drew on recent Biblical scholarship, especially text criticism and canon criticism, to show that the boundaries of what a Muslim may consider reliably transmitted genuine revelation do not match the present boundaries of the Christian canon. Sayyid Ahmad Khan likewise deconstructed the boundaries of the Christian canon, though in a less antagonistic spirit. On the one hand he extended the range of texts that Muslims could possibly consider pre-Qur'ânic revelation by compiling categorized lists, from the works of European scholars, of non-canonical books attributed to various prophets. On the other hand, he constricted the range of Biblical texts that could be considered revelation, by distinguishing between that which was actually revealed to and spoken by prophets (such as the teachings of Jesus), and other kinds of reports written by the prophets' followers (such as the narratives in the Gospels, and the New Testament Epistles), which could not be considered revealed.<sup>10</sup> This selective principle was similar to that of Rammohun Roy in that it focused attention on the teachings of Christ to the exclusion of narrative and apostolic teaching, but it was motivated by different aims.

Each party plotted the contours and internal organization of the others' scriptures in terms of its own categories and goals. In some respects the power to map and construct the other, through instruments such as the census, was monopolized by the British. Scriptures, however, once they entered the public domain through translation and printing, were a more level playing field where the literate classes of all three religious communities could engage in their own internal arguments and constructions of the other.

### **Mapping the arguments made through inter-religious hermeneutics.**

So far I have given only a very general picture of the religious communities of nineteenth century India, the issues dividing them internally, the lines of contact between them, and the ways in which mapping scripture allowed them to construct each other and make internal arguments. I now turn to the specific content of their main arguments. This can be conveniently broken down into four headings: monotheism, history, textual criticism, and science. Although each religion had its own forms of thought regarding these issues, a remarkable feature of the discourse is the great extent to which it was the British forms of discourse on these questions that seemed to initiate the debates and set their parameters. Most of the inter-religious hermeneutical discourse in fact took place along the Christian-non-Christian fault line, with much less attention being paid to the Muslim-Hindu confrontation in the elite discourse considered here. It might be possible to construct this essay around features of Hindu or Muslim thought, but the immense influence of the British on the literate classes of Indian society, and their forceful initiative in

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<sup>10</sup> Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *The Mohomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible: Tab'în al-kalâm fî tafsîr al-tawrât wa-l-injîl 'alâ millat al-islâm*, Part I (Ghazipur: By the author, 1862), 20-22.

such areas as evangelism, education, science, and technology, means that the inter-religious discourse is most easily presented as a response to British ideas.

### Monotheism.

Two related movements within British Christianity are important for understanding the inter-religious discourse on nineteenth century India. Unitarianism rejected the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation in favor of a more rationalist form of spirituality. Deism rejected all forms of God's involvement in history, including the incarnation, and emphasized the moral value of religion. Deism appears to have exerted its influence in India mostly through writings, but Unitarians were an active component of the British presence, and maintained a spirited opposition to the missionaries and other Trinitarians there. Acrimonious debates between Unitarians and Trinitarians were carried on, behind a thin facade of courtesy and good sentiment, in newspapers and through privately printed tracts, and spilled over into certain Hindu circles as well.<sup>11</sup>

Promoting a Unitarian position was part of Henry Colebrooke's agenda in his presentation and dating of the Vedas. Because he combined Unitarian views with the Romantic view that religion had deteriorated from an original natural spirituality through the accretion of institutions and rituals and superstitions, he argued that the oldest and most genuine parts of the Vedas presented a pure monotheism, though it was sometimes expressed in mythical language. The real doctrine of the whole Indian scripture is the unity of the deity, in whom the universe is comprehended; and the seeming polytheism which it exhibits, offers the elements, and the stars, and the planets, as gods. The three principal manifestations of the divinity, with other personified attributes and energies, and most of the other gods of Hindu mythology, are indeed mentioned, or at least indicated, in the Vedas. But the worship of deified heroes is no part of that system; nor are the incarnations of deities suggested in any other portion of the text, which I have yet seen; though such are sometimes hinted at by the commentators.<sup>12</sup>

This point was made in denial of the missionaries' charge that Hinduism was polytheistic and idolatrous. At the same time it implicitly presented the Christian doctrine of the incarnation as a degeneration of pure original religion. The notion of incarnation was present in Hinduism, Colebrooke argued, only in the "new forms of religious ceremonies" founded on the relatively modern Puranas and on "a worse source, the Tantras."<sup>13</sup> This observation was so important to Colebrooke that he actually used it, in a circular form of argument, to date portions of the Vedas. He was "inclined to doubt the genuineness" of several Upanishads, and to "suspect that they

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<sup>11</sup> A good illustration of such debates is a pamphlet printed in 1828 by Ram Doss, entitled *A Vindication of the Incarnation of the Deity: As the Common Basis of Hindooism and Christianity*. A copy of the pamphlet is in the Special Collections of the Pitts Theology Library of Emory University, 1828DOSS.

<sup>12</sup> Colebrooke, "On the Vedas," 68. See also pp. 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> Colebrooke, "On the Vedas," 68.



have been written in times, modern, when compared with the remainder of the Vedas,” *because* they related to the worship of incarnations of Vishnu.<sup>14</sup> He also emphasized the monistic Upanishads in his presentation, even though they were not as early as many other parts of the Vedas. Another characteristic feature of Unitarianism, a dislike for ritual, was also evident in Colebrooke’s explanation that the Asvamedha and Purushamedha were taught in the Veda as emblematic ceremonies, and that the actual performance of horse and human sacrifices was an example of “unjustifiable practices” introduced on the authority of the later Puranas and Tantras, due to a misunderstanding of the Vedas.<sup>15</sup> Colebrooke’s project of distinguishing between genuine, early, Vedic texts and spurious, late, non-Vedic texts was therefore not a purely historical inter-religious exploration. In addition to providing British readers with a substantial and scholarly introduction to a still little known text, Colebrooke’s article served as an argument in the Unitarian-Trinitarian controversy that divided Christian thought in early Colonial India.

Colebrooke’s strict monotheism, his dislike for rituals and religious institutions and superstitions, and his emphasis on the Upanishads, all reappeared in the figure of Rammohun Roy. Roy also shared the naturalism of the Deists, and their emphasis on the moral value of religion.<sup>16</sup> We have already noted that his *Precepts of Jesus* was so Unitarian in tone that it was published in England by the Unitarian Society. The stated principles that guided his selection of passages from the Gospels were that he included verses with a clear monotheistic or moral message, while he excluded passages of a historical or doctrinal nature, especially miracle accounts. In terms of the divisions within Christianity, this places Roy on the side of the Unitarians and Deists. The *Precepts* was in fact attacked by a Trinitarian Christian, Dr. Marshman, a missionary at Serampore, and by the Editor of the *Friend of India*, the paper in which the objections were published. Roy responded with his *First and Second Appeals to the Christian Public*, which the Unitarian Society later published along with the *Precepts*. Roy’s inter-religious study of scripture thus directly contributed to an internal Christian debate. His writing reveals that he moved with considerable ease in the English world of newspaper disputations and Christian theological controversies.

Yet Roy’s work must not be understood solely within this Christian context. He also intended the work to have an impact within his own community. This is why it was published in Bengali and Sanskrit as well as English. Roy intended it to promote an Upanishadic, monistic vision of Hinduism. He also apparently felt very keenly that Hinduism lacked the high degree of moral refinement that the colonizers’ religion possessed (at least in principle), and he viewed the *Precepts* as a way to promote elevated moral sentiment among his fellow Hindus.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Colebrooke, “On the Vedas,” 67-68.

<sup>15</sup> Colebrooke, “On the Vedas,” 35-36.

<sup>16</sup> Ajit Ray has suggested that Roy’s rationalism developed initially under the influence of Islam, and particularly of a Persian treatise on religions, the *Dabistan*, before he knew English well enough to read the Deists. See Ajit Kumar Ray, *The Religious Ideas of Rammohun Roy: A Survey of His Writings on Religion Particularly in Persian, Sanskrit and Bengali*, with a preface by A. L. Basham (New Delhi: Kanak Publications, 1976), 22-23 and 56-58.

<sup>17</sup> See Roy, *Precepts of Jesus*, xxv.

Another issue internal to Hinduism that Roy was addressing in the *Precepts* can be inferred from an examination of his actual selection of Gospel passages, which does not entirely adhere to his stated principles. He did not consistently exclude all references to miracles and the supernatural, or all doctrinal passages. For example, he included Luke 13:14, in which a discussion of the Sabbath was opened with a reference to Jesus' healing on the Sabbath.<sup>18</sup> He also related a similar discussion from Matthew 7, in which Jesus' teaching was interwoven with the story of the healing of a man's withered hand on the Sabbath.<sup>19</sup> These miracles could not readily be edited out without obscuring Jesus' teaching, so the fact that Roy included these passages shows that he valued some aspect of Jesus' teaching more than the consistent exclusion of miracles. He also retained some teachings that were plainly doctrinal, such as the discussion of the resurrection in Luke 20:27-39,<sup>20</sup> and Jesus' discourse to Nicodemus on the new birth of the Spirit and on the sending of the Son of God in John 3.<sup>21</sup> What was it that led Roy to override his aversion to miracles and doctrine and include such passages? He seems to have included such material only when it showed Jesus' fierce rejection of the legal and ritual preoccupations of the religious establishment, in favor of a spiritual vision and an ethic of love for humanity. The miracles that took place on the Sabbath, for instance, were mentioned in the context of Jesus' debate over the observance of the Sabbath, which was important to Roy because it showed the clash between the strict ritual observance of the religious leaders and Jesus' emphasis on doing good to fellow humans. The discussion of the resurrection was likewise part of Jesus' controversy with religious leaders. The discourse to Nicodemus, himself a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, stressed that group's inability to understand Jesus' new spiritual vision, and implicitly accused them of preferring darkness to the revealing light of the Son of God, "because their deeds were evil."<sup>22</sup> From this emphasis on Jesus' confrontation with the religious establishment, at the expense of his other principles of selection, it can be inferred that one of Roy's purposes in the *Precepts* was to attack what he perceived to be the material orientation and ritual focus of Hinduism's "idolatrous" religious institutions, and the corruption of Hindu religious leaders who perpetuated these institutions for their own advantage. Roy's actual principles of selection therefore reveal not only his involvement in a Christian dispute, but also a conflict within his own tradition.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the roaming ascetic turned reformer who founded the Arya Samaj, was more conservative than Roy on many issues such as caste, but he used his study of Christian and Muslim scriptures to make a similar argument within Hinduism. Like Roy, he was dissatisfied with image worship and the priests who made their living from it, and argued that original Hinduism was monotheistic and aniconic. He based this claim not on the Upanishads, as Roy did, but on his interpretation of the Vedic Samhitas, which he considered the only revealed

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<sup>18</sup> Roy, *Precepts of Jesus*, 77.

<sup>19</sup> Roy, *Precepts of Jesus*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Roy, *Precepts of Jesus*, 92-93.

<sup>21</sup> Roy, *Precepts of Jesus*, 94-95.

<sup>22</sup> Roy, *Precepts of Jesus*, 95.

and infallible scriptures, and which he made more accessible to non-scholars by commenting and speaking on them in Hindi. He promoted his vision of authentic Hinduism in his manifesto *Light of Truth (Satyarth Prakash)*, which in its second edition included a critique not only of various sects related to Hinduism, but also of Christianity and Islam. His procedure was to quote and then ridicule verse after verse from the Bible and the Qur'ân. While he presented this as an attempt to lead Christians and Muslims to the truth, the types of arguments he made show that they were actually aimed at a Hindu audience, and were intended to further the same agenda for reform within Hinduism that was promoted in the rest of the book.

The critical categories Dayananda appealed to in his critique of the Bible and the Qur'ân included monotheism; a strict naturalism; certain metaphysical notions from Samkhya or a related system of philosophy, which Dayananda used to argue against a creation *ex nihilo*; an aversion to violence, the killing of animals, and the eating of meat; the value of sexual abstinence; and above all a strict doctrine of *karma*, which made the ideas of mercy and forgiveness appear immoral and unjust. These distinctly Hindu categories seem strange juxtaposed to Christian and Muslim scriptures. The effect of this juxtaposition was to make the texts themselves appear strange and even ridiculous, at least to a Hindu reader. Since Dayananda had engaged non-Hindus in live debate, we may safely assume that he knew well that Christians and Muslims would not be convinced by such arguments. He apparently had a Hindu audience in mind. Yet not all Hindus shared the views he appealed to; in fact many of them were at issue in his reform efforts, and were promoted elsewhere in his book. Naturalism and monotheism were central but contested parts of his creed. The value of sexual abstinence was contested by the Tantric Hindus that he so much despised, and the absoluteness of *karma* was questioned by the Bhakti movements he opposed. Metaphysical principles and the rejection of all violence were also historically contested issues within Hinduism. It appears therefore that Dayananda's critique of the Bible and Qur'ân represents more of an argument within Hinduism than a genuine inter-religious debate. He addressed Christians and Muslims not so much for their own sake, as for the sake of showing all Hindus the usefulness of his Vedic values for fending off the common enemies of Christianity and Islam. Ultimately the categories of Hindu, Christian and Muslim do not seem to have been primary for Dayananda; he was more concerned to categorize everything in the Indian environment as either authentically Vedic or anti-Vedic.

The issues at stake in the reforms of Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Saraswati had deep roots in Hindu thought and practice. The issue of monotheism in particular, however, seems to have been placed front and center through the influence of British Unitarianism. The same issue was also central to Muslim readings of Christian scriptures, but for different reasons. The doctrine of God's unity is perhaps the cardinal Muslim doctrine, and has historically been a major point of debate with Christians. The Muslims studied here came into contact primarily with missionaries and other evangelically minded Trinitarians, who now had to fight out the Unitarian controversy on a new front, this time an inter-religious one. In this case the debate over monotheism seems to be a genuinely inter-religious dispute, yet the nature of the interpretive arguments put forward suggests that Muslim interpretations of Christian scriptures on this point were directed in effect only at Muslims.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan undertook the highly unusual project of writing a Muslim commentary on the Bible, which he printed in Urdu and English at his private press. Although he completed only a lengthy preface and comment on eleven chapters of Genesis and five chapters of Matthew, his effort symbolized an appreciative stance toward the British and their religion, albeit on Muslim terms. His refutation of the doctrine of the Trinity in his commentary

on Genesis 1:1 set the tone for his approach to the Bible: it was to be interpreted strictly in terms of Muslim assumptions. He argued that the Trinitarian Christian claim that the plural noun ‘*elohim*’ indicates some plurality in the Godhead was unconvincing unless the doctrine of the Trinity was already assumed; but since Muslims held just the contrary, the argument carried no weight.<sup>23</sup> This transposition of the Bible into an explicitly Muslim interpretive frame of reference characterized Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s entire project. His work was not an attempt at inter-religious debate so much as an effort to help Muslims absorb the new threat of Christianity harmlessly into a Muslim view of the world and religions.

Rahmat Allah Kairanawi, the traditional Muslim scholar who embarrassed the missionary Carl Gottlieb Pfander at a public debate in Agra in 1854 by quoting recent textual criticism of the Bible, urged a very different approach to dealing with the Christian threat. Rather than absorbing it on Islamic terms, as Sayyid Ahmad Khan proposed, he sought to discredit it entirely. Whereas Sayyid Ahmad Khan accepted that large portions of the Bible might constitute genuine revelation, Rahmat Allah cast doubt on it in its entirety by pointing to doubts about the textual accuracy of some parts of it. Despite this difference of approach, however, Rahmat Allah’s use of the Bible to refute the doctrine of the Trinity shows that he too was making a supposedly inter-religious argument from within an explicitly Islamic framework. He opens his section on the divine nature of Christ by quoting John 17:3: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”<sup>24</sup> The Arabic corresponding to the English ‘only’ is from the root for ‘one,’ which is also the root of *tawhîd* (‘making God one’), the cardinal Muslim doctrine to which the term *tathlîth* (‘making God three’) is diametrically opposed. Furthermore, the word ‘sent’ is closely related, in Arabic, to the word for prophet. This verse, read in an Arabic and Islamic framework, appears as a very straightforward declaration that God is one and Jesus is a prophet, which to a Muslim is the very opposite of his being a god, as Rahmat Allah points out. Thus while within a Christian Trinitarian frame of reference this verse may be interpreted in a way that does not contradict the doctrine of the Trinity, when it is transposed into an Arabic Muslim frame of reference it becomes a clear denial of that same doctrine. This illustrates the fact that Rahmat Allah Kairanawi was writing for a Muslim audience, though he kept in mind his experience of live debate with Christians. The primary purpose of his arguments seems to have been to boost the confidence of his own religious community, and to argue for a complete rejection of both the growing Christian evangelistic threat and the British authority with which it was connected. Like Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s work, the substance of Rahmat Allah’s arguments constitutes more of an internal argument about how to deal with an external challenge, than a genuinely inter-religious debate.

This discussion of the debates surrounding monotheism started with a controversy within Christianity. While this issue transcended religious boundaries, and was debated across religious lines, these discussions seem to have been oriented primarily toward arguments within each author’s own religious community.

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<sup>23</sup> Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Mohomedan Commentary* I, 43.

<sup>24</sup> Rahmat Allah Kairanawi, *Izhâr al-ḥaqq* (Beirut: Dar al-Jîl, 1988 A.D. / 1408 A.H.), II 5.

## History

A second development in European thought that had far-reaching implications within Christianity, and hence in India, was the growth of the discipline of history. Conflicting views of the evolution of religion emerged. Some envisioned a slow progress from magic to theism to Christianity, culminating either in world evangelization or in a rationalistic spiritualizing of Christianity. Such views may be contrasted with Colebrooke's more Romantic theory of the degeneration of religion from a pure original spirituality, through the development of institutions and superstitions. Because of this view Colebrooke placed great value on the original form of Hinduism, and considered the most ancient texts to be the most authentic. Similarly, Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Saraswati both framed their reform efforts in terms of a return to authentic Hinduism, which especially for Dayananda meant an emphasis on the earliest texts and the recovery of a primordial Hinduism that had once been universal but had become corrupted.

Another dimension of the growth of history in Europe was historical criticism. Biblical accounts that had long been taken as historical were both challenged and defended. While Roy avoided historical elements in the Gospels, perhaps out of a modern sense of their questionable credibility, Sayyid Ahmad Khan actively participated in this European dispute by defending the historical credibility of Biblical accounts against the arguments of critics such as John William Colenso, David Friedrich Strauss, and Ferdinand Christian Baur.<sup>25</sup> Muir applied European canons of historical criticism, which were then being applied to the Gospels in the search for the life of Jesus, to the Qur'ân and Hadîth, in order to produce a life of Muhammad. He distinguished between 'legend,' which is based solely on ideas; 'tradition,' which is a distorted account of supposedly real events, and 'history,' which is based on testimony contemporaneous with the events it describes. David Friedrich Strauss had made a very similar distinction in his *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835), though he labeled the first category myth and the second legend. Muir's project was thus shaped not only by his biographical interest, but also by developments in nineteenth century European Biblical scholarship.

Muir's work had far-reaching consequences for religious interaction in India, because it made the sacred temporal origin of Islam, the life of the Prophet Muhammad, a focus of inter-religious debate. From then on Muslims had to wage a defensive battle over the character of Muhammad. Sayyid Ahmad Khan traveled to London to find materials for a refutation of Muir. In the early twentieth century, as inter-religious tensions in India shifted from interaction with Christians to interaction between Muslims and Hindus, the issue of the character of Muhammad was picked up by some Hindu organizations. G. R. Thursby has shown how some Hindu writers penned caricatures of Muhammad that resembled Muir's biography particularly in their emphasis on the Prophet's sensual proclivities, but were cast in more popular Indian literary forms. One particularly biting instance was a poem entitled "the Rangali Rasul," or the 'merry prophet,' that pretended to be a devotional poem in the style of vernacular Hindu Bhakti poetry, in praise of an eroticized 'prophet.' The British, for whom inter-religious polemics by this time had become a worrisome problem, then found themselves censoring, in the interest of maintaining order,

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<sup>25</sup> See Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), 74, and Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *Mohomedan Commentary* on Genesis 10, for example.

publications whose germ had been given its scholarly foundation by their own William Muir.<sup>26</sup> The developing European concept of history thus had a significant impact on the course of religious interaction in India.

### Textual criticism

Along with the discipline of history came the science of textual criticism, which was to play a major role especially in Muslim-Christian interaction in India. The European Renaissance saw the emergence of the historical-critical study of texts, beginning most notoriously with the demonstration that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery. Colebrooke shared this dichotomy of authentic versus forged texts, and defended the genuineness of most of his Vedic texts in response to Pinkerton's claim that the Vedas were forgeries.<sup>27</sup> He also addressed the issue of whether the ascription of a work to someone other than its actual author constituted forgery, noting that this practice had been common in classical European literature.<sup>28</sup> This eventually became important in European discussions of canon as well, as the traditional authorship of the Gospels was called into question.

European textual criticism of the Bible entered Indian inter-religious discourse most dramatically in the work of Rahmat Allah Kairanawi, who, with the aid of his British-educated colleague Dr. Wazir Khan, turned the tide of an ongoing tradition of debates between Islamic scholars and Christian missionaries in Agra in 1854.<sup>29</sup> He caught Carl Gottlieb Pfander off guard by quoting recent Christian scholarship on manuscript variants of which the missionary was not aware. One key verse whose authenticity was questioned was a classic proof text for the Trinity. The missionaries' argument that Muslims are enjoined in the Qur'ân to accept the Bible was thus dramatically demolished, because the present text of the Bible was shown not to be established with the same certainty that could be claimed for the text of the Qur'ân.

In his *Izhâr al-haqq*, composed after the debate for the purpose of giving a complete account of his arguments, Rahmat Allah drew his attacks on the authenticity of the text of the Bible almost entirely from European scholarship, which he interpreted in terms of the Muslim categories of prophecy, transmission, certainty, and consensus. He thus used a Christian discourse for the purpose of inter-religious debate, but in order to make the Christian discourse serve his arguments, he transposed it into a Muslim framework. Seen from within this framework, Christian debates over the authorship of the Pentateuch cast doubt on whether it originated with a prophet, and therefore undermined its status as revelation. Debates over who wrote particular books of the Bible were interpreted by Rahmat Allah as indicating the lack of a

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<sup>26</sup> See G. R. Thursby, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in British India: A Study of Controversy, Conflict, and Communal Movements in Northern India 1923-1928*, Studies in the History of Religions, Supplements to *Numen*, no. 35 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975).

<sup>27</sup> Colebrooke, "On the Vedas," 59.

<sup>28</sup> Colebrooke, "On the Vedas," 62 and 64.

<sup>29</sup> See Avril A. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India*, London Studies on South Asia, no. 7 (Richmond, U.K.: Curzon Press, 1993), chapters 7 and 8.

continuous chain of transmission, a key Islamic criterion for certainty. Thus critical work that might have been welcomed by Christians, and that was praised by Sayyid Ahmad Khan for having established a reasonably accurate text, served to undermine the Bible's authority as scripture when it was viewed from within an Islamic conceptual framework. As was the case with Muslim arguments about the Trinity, so also in this case the use of Muslim categories made the argument ineffective as inter-religious polemic, but gave a great moral boost to the Muslim community in the face of an evangelistic movement backed by political power. This kind of interpretation served to defeat an enemy with his own weapons -- though the defeat was only effective when seen from within the Muslim tradition. That the weapons of textual criticism could be used in more than one way was shown by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who drew on the same Christian sources to arrive at the opposite conclusion. A division among Muslims as to how to deal with the Christian presence in India was thus reflected in two different way of dealing with the Bible. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who promoted cooperation with the British, used his *Commentary* to argue for an appreciative incorporation of the Christian scriptures on strictly Muslim terms. Rahmat Allah Kairanawi, on the other hand, used a Christian discourse transposed into Muslim terms, to argue that Christianity should be fought with its own weapons.

William Muir, who followed with great interest the sequence of Muslim-Christian debates that culminated in 1854, applied European methods of textual and historical criticism across religious lines in his work on Muslim scriptures. Dismissing as irrelevant criticism of the chain of transmitters, by which Muslim scholars evaluated the authenticity of a Hadîth, Muir insisted on critical inquiry based on internal textual evidence, along the lines of Biblical criticism.<sup>30</sup> He enunciated a number of specific principles quite similar to major principles of text or tradition criticism in Biblical studies, such as multiple attestation, verbal agreement, preferring the harder reading, or the principle that something embarrassing to the tradition is likely not to have been fabricated.<sup>31</sup> He explicitly appealed to the "canon of Christian criticism, that any tradition whose origin is not strictly contemporary with the facts related, is worthless exactly in proportion to the particularity of detail."<sup>32</sup>

It is remarkable that despite his thorough criticism of the Hadîth, Muir did not question the textual or historical authenticity of the Qur'ân (though he did of course deny its revealed status.) There are several possible reasons for this. To some extent he may simply have been facing up to what appeared inevitable: there was far less evidence of textual variation for the Qur'ân than there was for the Bible. If Muir had chosen to focus on the little evidence of textual variation that was known, he would have been acknowledging the significance of the arguments that Muslims were making about the Bible. Instead he preferred to emphasize that the situations in which the two texts had been transmitted were not comparable, implying that textual transmission was not the grounds for a comparison between the two religions. Furthermore, he

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<sup>30</sup> Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, 575.

<sup>31</sup> Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, 597-600.

<sup>32</sup> Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, 582.

attributed the relative lack of Qur'anic textual variants to the brute force by which the recension of 'Uthmân was made to supplant other versions.<sup>33</sup>

Another possible reason for Muir's reluctance to question the text of the Qur'ân appears if we consider a tract written by Muir much later in his life, entitled *The Authorship of Deuteronomy*, in which he staked out his position within the debates of nineteenth century Biblical scholarship. German Biblical critics had been developing a detailed and radical critique of the traditional ascription of the Pentateuch to Moses, in the form of "documentary" or "fragmentary" hypotheses, which posited the post-exilic compilation of the Pentateuch from a number of traditions of greater or lesser antiquity. Muir objected in his tract that to ascribe the Pentateuch to a late redaction of traditions that for long periods had remained oral, was to completely undermine its reliability as a historical document.<sup>34</sup> This was demonstrated, he argued, by the case of Muslim Hadîth, which though transmitted under almost ideal circumstances, were nevertheless replete with patent fabrications. The Pentateuch, however, could be shown to be historically reliable on internal grounds: the account was vivid, natural, appropriate to its historical setting, and obviously free from myth and fancy.<sup>35</sup> This argument shows that Muir was concerned about the effects Biblical criticism could have on the Bible, and suggests that his reluctance to criticize the Qur'ân may have stemmed in part from his reluctance to question the early stages of a process of oral transmission. To question the present text of the Qur'ân would have meant being suspicious Muhammad's companions, since its transmission after their time leaves little room for doubt. But Muir was hesitant to question the trustworthiness of eyewitnesses to an event, perhaps because the Gospels were held to derive their authority from their close connection to the companions of Jesus who themselves witnessed the events recorded. Muir also held that the Pentateuch, which was obviously not written entirely by Moses since it described his death and burial, was nevertheless finalized by Moses' contemporaries.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, Muir insisted that his arguments about the unreliability of oral transmission applied only to transmission over several generations or more, while for the first generation or two oral tradition could be as good as history.<sup>37</sup> It is conceivable that the importance of the 'companions' of Moses and Jesus for a conservative view of the Bible was one factor that kept Muir from questioning the veracity of the 'companions' of Muhammad, and consequently kept him from challenging the authenticity of the Qur'ân.

Since Muir rejected the German critics' view that the materials of the Pentateuch were transmitted orally over many generations, he could freely criticize the Hadîth without casting doubt on the Bible. He stated that oral tradition over more than a couple of generations opened

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<sup>33</sup> Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, 558, n. 1.

<sup>34</sup> See William Muir, *The Authorship of Deuteronomy* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1894; New York: E. & J. B. Young & Co., 1894), 6.

<sup>35</sup> Muir, *Authorship of Deuteronomy*, 19-28.

<sup>36</sup> Muir, *Authorship of Deuteronomy*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Muir, *Authorship of Deuteronomy*, 6, 17-18.



wide “the floodgates of error, exaggeration, and fiction.”<sup>38</sup> This was a principle he largely took for granted in his *Life of Mahomet*, though in his *Authorship of Deuteronomy* he claimed to have established it through his study of Hadith.<sup>39</sup>

It thus appears that for William Muir as for the others studied here, the study of foreign scriptures was controlled by and ultimately oriented toward an issue internal to his own tradition. In Muir’s case this issue was the emerging discipline of Biblical criticism, which, like the Unitarian controversy and the study of history, had a far-reaching impact on inter-religious discourse in nineteenth century India.

### Science

One final aspect of the intellectual apparatus imported by the British, which provoked great debate in India, was science. Again the Muslims and Hindus had their own scientific traditions, but modern science differed from them dramatically in some of its assumptions as well as its conclusions, and this evoked a variety of responses.

A naturalistic explanation of the world raised the problem of miracle accounts in scripture. Such accounts were variously treated in Christian circles. Some rejected them as fictions, others sought to maintain the historical accuracy of the accounts by explaining the supposed miracles as natural phenomena, while yet others rejected the naturalist premise. Indian discourse reflected a similar variety of positions. William Muir rejected the miracles attributed to Muhammad in Muslim scriptures, though not because of he was in principle a naturalist (he accepted the miracles of Moses.) He argued that the Qur’ân denied that Muhammad performed miracles, and that the hadith accounts were written down too late and were too highly colored to be credible. Rammohun Roy omitted most miracle accounts from his *Precepts*, not, he said, because he disbelieved them, but because he thought others might find them incredible. Dayananda Saraswati upheld a notion of natural law, and ridiculed the impossibilities he found in the Bible and the Qur’ân.

The most sophisticated attempt to reconcile European science and scriptures, however, came from Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Early in his career he wrote a treatise defending an Aristotelian cosmology against the Copernican theory that had been newly introduced through British education. Later he reversed this position, calling natural law a binding covenant that God cannot break, and arguing that reason and empirical observation must govern the interpretation of scripture. He therefore had to argue that no miracles were narrated in the Qur’ân. The traditional Muslim view that the Qur’ân referred to a number of miracles was based on Jewish traditions about Biblical stories, he claimed, and had to be corrected by a reexamination of the language in which the events were narrated. For example, he argued that the Qur’ânic story of Jonah never states that he was actually swallowed by the fish, but only seized in its mouth.<sup>40</sup> His

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<sup>38</sup> Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, 578.

<sup>39</sup> Muir, *Authorship of Deuteronomy*, 3-7.

<sup>40</sup> Sayyid Ahmad Khan, “Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khân’s Principles of Exegesis: Translated from His *Tahrîr fî Uṣûl al-Tafsîr*,” trans. by Muḥammad Daud Rahbar, *The Muslim World* 46 (1956): 329.

most radical theory was that the language of the Qur’ân could always be reconciled to scientific observation, no matter what stage of intellectual and scientific development it was viewed from.<sup>41</sup> For example, verses that had traditionally been interpreted as indicating that the sun moves around the earth, could now be understood as indicating, from the perspective of the human experience of the sun, the fact that the earth rotates around its axis. The text was not wrong, nor was it an allegory expressed in terms of bad science. It was our earlier interpretation of the text that was faulty, because of our inadequate knowledge.

Although Sayyid Ahmad Khan developed these naturalistic principles for Qur’ânic interpretation, he took a similar approach in his *Mohomedan Commentary* on the Bible. For example, he defended the account of the flood against the charge that science had proven a world-wide flood impossible, by reinterpreting the text as indicating only a partial flood. Sayyid Ahmad Khan therefore followed those Christian authors who argued that the “word of God” cannot contradict the “work of God,” and embraced European science as an incomplete but certain form of knowledge. This approach was disputed by his fellow Muslims, but he argued that if traditions were not allowed to get in the way, true Islam could adapt itself to absorb and contain all the developments of science. This was the same argument he made with respect to the Muslim stance toward British rule, and toward the Christian scriptures: Islam was flexible and powerful enough to integrate them into a world-view that remained genuinely Islamic even as it changed to deal with its environment. The exegetical principles he applied to the Qur’ân as well as to the Bible were an argument not with the British Christians and their science, but with his fellow Muslims, over how to relate to India’s powerful newcomers and their religious and intellectual imports.

### **Conclusions.**

The first part of this essay has attempted to map the social worlds, modes of interaction, and topics of discourse that defined the practice of reading scriptures across religious lines in nineteenth century India. It has shown how six prominent figures remapped, reinterpreted, or revalued aspects of each other’s scriptures in terms of categories drawn from their own traditions. Each of them used his reading of another religion’s scriptures to promote his own positions on certain pressing questions that were dividing his own religious community at the time. This observation suggests a number of theoretical and methodological conclusions of general interest for the study of religious interaction, which are the subject of the concluding part of this essay.

### **RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES AND SACRED TEXTS: THE INTRA-RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF INTER-RELIGIOUS HERMENEUTICS**

This essay began with three religious categories, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim, that were and are used to map the religious landscape of nineteenth century India. It has deconstructed these divisions in two ways. On the one hand it has shown that among some social classes

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<sup>41</sup> Sayyid Ahmad Khan, “Principles of Exegesis,” 331, and *Mohomedan Commentary* II, 33-34.

certain shared institutions and practices and technologies created lines of interaction between these religious groups. On the other hand, it has also shown that such interaction was often less meaningful as a form of interaction between these groups than it was as a form of debate between subgroups within each religion. To conclude this essay I would like to offer some general theoretical reflections about the three religious categories, the lines of interaction between them, and the divisions within them, in that order.

### **The three religious categories.**

We have seen repeated examples of arguments made about another religion's scripture that are so couched in terms of the categories and assumptions and values of the interpreter's own tradition that they are all but meaningless for members of the religion whose scripture is being examined. This was especially evident with the overtly polemical criticisms of Dayananda Saraswati and Rahmat Allah Kairanawi: pointing out that a scripture refers to eating meat, or lacks a continuous chain of transmission, does not have the same meaning for a Christian that it might for a Hindu or Muslim, respectively. Horizons of interpretation appear to be so strongly community-specific that one may well ask whether meaningful communication through the inter-religious interpretation of scriptures is possible. In this respect the three religious categories of Christian, Hindu, and Muslim appear to represent such genuine fundamental divisions that interaction between them can have at most only the outward form of communication. This problem has been sensed especially keenly by advocates of inter-religious dialogue, who lament that participants in dialogue often only seem to "talk past each other."

### **Lines of interaction between categories.**

At same time, this essay has pointed to some common social realms, institutions, practices, and technologies that made it possible for interaction to take place across religious lines. British education of Muslims and Hindus attempted to nurture a common (and very British) culture of manners, taste, scientific viewpoint, and administrative practice. The teaching of English likewise opened up a common world of literature, which introduced European sciences and Biblical criticism into the domain of discourses available for use in inter-religious discussion. The British administrative enterprise joined Christians and Hindus and Muslims in common business and social circles, within which interaction was carried on not only in private parlors but also through the new mechanisms of newspapers and printed tracts. For the form of interaction highlighted in this essay, printing itself may have opened up the most important new lines of religious interaction: the distribution of translated scriptures, and the publication of large scale works of inter-religious interpretation. These lines of interaction did not allow direct interaction between all segments of the three religious groups, but only between their elite or at least literate classes. Yet the elite discourse that they made possible had the potential to indirectly shape perceptions of other religions at all social levels.

The initiative behind these social realms, institutions, practices, and technologies was largely British. The issues debated through these lines of interaction had roots in each tradition, but were sparked by issues in British thought and life. This is why this essay could be organized around the British Christian debates over Unitarianism, history, Biblical criticism, and science. One exception to this general trend was the revival by Muslims of a tradition of court sponsored

religious debates, in response to the missionaries' tracts and evangelistic preaching.<sup>42</sup> This formalized mode of interaction proved effective for the Muslims in that despite some early failures, it eventually produced such embarrassment for the missionaries that their star debater, Carl Gottlieb Pfander, was relocated by his sending agency. We have seen that the content of the debate may not have been convincing across religious lines, but its institutional form was sufficiently recognized that it could have a concrete effect on the inter-religious scene.

While many different lines of interaction have been illustrated in this essay, it is worth giving special consideration to the principal form of interaction discussed here: inter-religious hermeneutics, or the practice of interpreting scriptures across religious lines. Why was this mode especially seized upon from all sides in nineteenth century India? And what was its relation to other modes of religious interaction?

Perhaps the greatest factors behind the importance of scriptures as a site for religious interaction in this context stemmed from the presence of Protestant missionaries. The Protestant identification of scripture as the soul of religion is very likely what led Henry Colebrooke to search for a complete single text that he could identify as the scripture of Hinduism. This emphasis also resulted in translations of the Bible into the vernacular, whose widespread distribution was made possible by the introduction of printing. Both translating and printing were taken up by Hindus and Muslims as well. Like Christian Protestants and Muslim modernists, Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Saraswati based their internal reform efforts on making scriptures more directly accessible to their communities. This was not motivated solely by the Protestant example. Dayananda's emphasis on scripture, for example, may have been due in part to his guru Virjananda, who emphasized the distinction between the books of *rishis* and those of non-*rishis*.<sup>43</sup> As for Muslims, they had a long history of emphasizing their sacred text. But the missionaries certainly stimulated the focus on scriptures, and launched the process of making them accessible across religious lines.

If missionaries, translations, and printing were circumstances that made scriptures available, the motivation to make use of them as a site for interaction was provided by the need for symbols of communal religious identity. As Indians came more and more to be identified in terms of generic religious categories, symbols were needed that could claim the allegiance of all adherents of the tradition while distinguishing them from other religions. If they were not so already, scriptures came to be identified so strongly with the community that they could stand for the community, in internal matters as well as in interaction with members of other traditions.

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<sup>42</sup> The Muslim tradition of debating is highlighted by Avril Powell as background to the Muslim-Christian debates of the nineteenth century. Avril A. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India*, London Studies on South Asia, No. 7 (Richmond, U. K.: Curzon Press, 1993), 1-2 and chapter 1.

<sup>43</sup> J. T. F. Jordens, *Dayânanda Sarasvatî: His Life and Ideas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), 37-38. John Llewellyn stresses that it may also have been due partly to his contacts with Protestant Christians and Muslims. John E. Llewellyn, "From Interpretation to Reform: Dayânand's Reading of the Vedas," in *Authority, Anxiety, and Canon: Essays in Vedic Interpretation*, ed. Laurie L. Patton, SUNY Series in Hindu Studies, ed. Wendy Doniger (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 246.

Scriptures thus became fixed and widely accessible symbols of communities. This made them an ideal target for inter-religious polemic. A community and its practices are a moving target: what is true of one Hindu or Muslim or Christian may be denied by another in debate. But a scripture is stable, and cannot in principle be disowned by any member of the community. This is why Dayananda Saraswati liked to concentrate on scriptures in his debates, and came to insist on having the canon defined in advance. He had found, particularly in his arguments with Jains, that they were liable to renounce a passage of their scriptures if he used it in argument against them.<sup>44</sup>

What I am suggesting here is that scriptures, given their accessibility and symbolic value, had the capacity to serve as objectifications of communities for the purposes of religious interaction. Since religious interaction is, by definition, a form of human action, it is necessarily engaged in by communities and the individuals that compose them. But the interaction of human communities is difficult, not to say dangerous. Communities are complex and variable, and have many non-religious aspects. Hence their interaction is diffuse, unpredictable, and dependent on non-religious factors. Sacred texts, however, can function as a locus for simplified religious interaction, in which the variables that characterize human communities are controlled.

Thus the need for communal symbols, the Protestant identification of religion with scripture, and scriptures' accessibility to all parties, made interpreting other people's sacred texts an appealing form of religious interaction in nineteenth century India. Certainly other symbols could conceivably play this role as well, given suitable circumstances. Sacred spaces such as temples and mosques and churches, for example, have at times become symbols of identity and sites for argument. Ritual and sound played this role in the cow and music controversies between Hindus and Muslims in the early twentieth century. William Muir attempted, with some long-term success, to shift the focus of Muslim-Christian debates away from scripture and onto sacred origins, particularly the biography of Islam's founder. Scriptures were a hotly contested focus of religious interaction in nineteenth century India because of certain conditions, but they were by no means the only such site for interaction, then or now.

We have considered the role of scriptures as one of several possible sites for interaction between religious communities. Yet the arguments presented in the first part of the essay showed that this interaction was in many respects only shadow fighting; little of the communication that occurred had the potential to be convincing or even meaningful across religious lines, though the very form of the interaction could produce concrete results. We may therefore ask whether it is possible for scriptural interpretation to serve as a mode of substantive religious interaction?

It has been suggested that a literal hermeneutic forms an important common basis for interpreting scriptures across religious boundaries. Non-literal forms of interpretation may vary dramatically from tradition to tradition, being shaped by particular doctrinal or other factors, and thus may be unavailable as a common basis for interaction. Edward L. Greenstein has suggested that this is the case in medieval Muslim-Christian-Jewish polemic: "In the arena of debate and dispute concerning the true meaning of the biblical text, the rabbanite Jews, their Jewish sectarian opponents -- the Karaites -- the Muslims, and the Christians had to forsake the weapons of their own partisan interpretations, which the others would not accept, and take up the arsenal

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<sup>44</sup> See Llewellyn, "Dayānand's Reading of the Vedas," 241-243.

of *peshat* methodologies [a form of literal hermeneutics], which everyone could respect.”<sup>45</sup> Yet the debates studied in this essay reveal that a literal hermeneutic can have the opposite effect: literal interpretations of Biblical and Qur’anic passages by Dayananda, for example, rendered his criticisms meaningless to Christians and Muslims who interpreted the same passages figuratively or metaphorically or allegorically.

Is there a common form of hermeneutic that could make inter-religious hermeneutics a substantive form of religious interaction? It appears that the community-relative horizons of interpretation that have been noted in this essay significantly weaken the role of scripture as an objectification of a community for the purposes of religious interaction. Though sacred texts are stable and accessible symbols of communities, they can only be a site for interaction through the process of interpretation, which is highly variable from one religious community to the next. This brings us back to our observation that the three religious categories of Christian, Hindu, and Muslim appear to represent such fundamental divisions that interaction between them can have at most only the outward form of communication. Even scripture, a most promising line of connection between the three religions in nineteenth century India, seems inadequate as a site for substantive religious interaction.

### **Lines of division within categories.**

What, then, does inter-religious hermeneutics accomplish, if anything? We have seen that the formal mechanisms of such interaction, such as debate, may have concrete inter-religious effects. Beyond this, however, this essay shows that the content and substance of these interpretations of scripture can be meaningful. Its primary significance, however, must be looked for not at the inter-religious level, but at what we may call the intra-religious level of argument within each religious tradition.

This is illustrated by each of the figures studied here. Henry Colebrooke promoted a Unitarian vision by finding it in the primitive human religiosity of the Vedas. William Muir used his work on Hadith to refute German source criticism of the Old Testament. Rammohun Roy drew on the Gospels to critique Hindu image worship and corrupt religious institutions. Dayananda Saraswati promoted his Vedic values among Hindus by demonstrating their usefulness for refuting Christianity and Islam. Sayyid Ahmad Khan commented on the Bible to model the integrative approach his fellow Muslims should take toward the new foreign challenges of Christianity and science. Rahmat Allah Kairanawi used an internal Christian discourse, reinterpreted in Muslim terms, to boost his fellow Muslims’ confidence in their ability to take a more antagonistic stance toward the new threats.

The respectful and relatively appreciative inter-religious interpretations of Colebrooke, Roy, and Sayyid Ahmad Khan may appear dramatically different in tone from the overtly polemical works of Muir, Dayananda, and Rahmat Allah Kairanawi, when they are considered as instances of interaction between religions. Such differences are highly significant for relationships between religious communities, yet they must not be allowed to obscure the fact that at the intra-religious level, where these works perform their primary functions, they all operate in much the same way.

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<sup>45</sup> Edward L. Greenstein, “Medieval Bible Commentaries,” in Barry W. Holtz, ed., *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 223.

This is the single most important conclusion of this essay: inter-religious hermeneutics is primarily a form of intra-religious argument. We have already deconstructed somewhat the absoluteness of the three religious categories with which we started, Christian, Hindu, and Muslim, by showing that certain sites for interaction are shared across religious lines. Now we can further qualify the significance of these three categories by stating that divisions and subcategories within each religion are at least as important for understanding inter-religious hermeneutics as are the differences between the three generic categories. Generalizations about religious traditions are inadequate for understanding inter-religious hermeneutics, and also, we may venture to suggest, for understanding religious interaction generally. This study therefore shows that the field of “interaction studies” must look beyond the category of ‘religious tradition’ in two ways: it must attend to disputes and issues internal to each tradition, and it must seek to identify the shared sites and overarching discourses that make religious interaction possible. At the same time this study affirms the value of studying the points of interaction and contact between traditions as a general approach to the study of religion: because “interaction studies” demands and leads into the study of both micro-disputes and overarching discourses, it provides a powerful stimulus to detailed yet non-parochial research in the history of religions.

Finally, extrapolating from the conclusions of this study to the theory that religious interaction in general is significantly and perhaps primarily a form of intra-religious argument, would lead to two further methodological suggestions. First, for scholars interested in inter-religious dialogue, it suggests that dialogue in which the parties appear to be “talking past each other” can nevertheless perform a very significant function, if one is willing to look for its effects within each religious community rather than in the relationship between them. Second, scholars studying inter-communal violence and other inter-religious relationships in India and elsewhere might learn from the example of inter-religious hermeneutics that it is worth paying close attention to issues dividing each of the communities involved. Whether the site of an interaction is a sacred text, or a sacred space such as a temple or mosque, or some other commonly accessible symbol or shared site, arguments within each camp are likely to be just as important as overtly inter-religious factors for understanding the interaction between the communities involved.

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