

READING SCRIPTURES ACROSS RELIGIOUS LINES IN COLONIAL INDIA:
INTERRELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND RECONCILIATION,
AND THE INTRARELIGIOUS CONTESTATION OF IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Scriptures emerged as primary symbols of religious identity in colonial India. As sacred texts became accessible across religious lines, analyzing other peoples' scriptures became an important mode of religious conflict and reconciliation. This essay studies this practice in the works of two Christians, two Hindus, and two Muslims. It concludes that while the form and tone of such works made them acts of interreligious conflict or reconciliation, dependent upon discourses and practices that were shared across religious boundaries, the content of these works often rested heavily on concepts specific to the religious traditions of their authors, and the force of their arguments was directed primarily toward intrareligious debates over identity:

- Henry Colebrooke promoted a Unitarian vision of Christianity by finding it in the primitive human religiosity of the Vedas.
- Rammohun Roy drew on the Gospels to critique Hindu image worship and the religious leaders who profited from it.
- Dayananda Saraswati promoted his version of Hindu identity by demonstrating its usefulness for refuting Christianity and Islam.
- Rahmat Allah Kairanawi used a Christian discourse, reinterpreted in Muslim terms, to demonstrate to other Muslims that traditional Islam could withstand the British threat.
- Sayyid Ahmad Khan commented on the Bible to show his fellow Muslims that a modernized Muslim identity could absorb the new foreign challenge of Christianity.
- William Muir used his work on Hadith to defend his own scriptures against German source criticism.

In terms of the broader concerns of this conference, this essay first reiterates the commonplace observation that parties to religious conflict and dialogue often seem to talk past each other. It then goes on to show, however, that such seemingly sterile interaction can contribute significantly to the parties' internal debates over their own religious identities. This construction of identities is, in turn, of no small consequence for religious interaction.

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INTRODUCTION

Sacred texts became key symbols of religious identity in colonial India, during the nineteenth century. Christian missionaries, convinced that scripture was the soul of religion, translated the Bible into a number of vernacular languages, and introduced printing in order to distribute it widely. Orientalists, who likewise assumed that scripture was the soul of religion, devoted themselves to the study of the Vedas, the Qur'an, and Hadith. Muslim and Hindu intellectuals, who of course had their own longstanding traditions of venerating sacred texts, quickly took up the tasks of translating and printing themselves, so that by the end of the nineteenth century the Bible, the Qur'an, and important parts of the Vedas had become widely available, even across religious lines. Because they were fixed and publicly accessible targets symbolizing the several religious communities, scriptures frequently became the focal points of interreligious conflicts or attempts at reconciliation.

I want to present to you today two Christians, two Hindus, and two Muslims who undertook either appreciative or polemical studies of one another's scriptures. I will conclude that the content of each of these works was less meaningful as an act of conflict or reconciliation between religious communities, than as an argument in an internal debate within the author's own community over its own religious identity.

HENRY COLEBROOKE

Henry Colebrooke set out to seek his fortune as a colonial administrator in the British East India Company. He rose quickly in its ranks, and distinguished himself especially by his pioneering orientalist studies of the Vedas, on which he published a landmark essay in 1805. Few Europeans had yet gained access to these almost mythical texts, and like a colonial explorer Colebrooke set out to find, possess, and chart this vast textual territory.

Colebrooke's classification of the contents of the Vedas naturally reflected a Christian, and more specifically a Unitarian understanding of religion. He classified some passages as prayers, hymns, or precepts, dealing with theology, sacraments, or even penance,¹ while others he labelled imprecations or incantations,² thus distinguishing between those parts of the Vedas that reflected the pure spiritual ideals of Unitarianism, and those that smacked of superstition, ritual and magic.

Unitarians and Trinitarians carried on a bitter debate in colonial India, behind a thin facade of courtesy and good sentiment, through newspapers and privately printed tracts. Colebrooke's essay was part of this debate. It did not simply reflect his Unitarian views; it actively championed them through its dating of Vedic texts. The chronology of the Vedas that Colebrooke proposed, combined with the Romantic view that religion had deteriorated over the

¹ See for example Colebrooke, "On the Vedas," 32, 34.

² See Colebrooke, "On the Vedas," 9 and 54.

course of human history, implicitly constituted an argument for Unitarianism. His chronology correlated Unitarianism with the oldest religious texts known to humanity, but linked the Trinitarian doctrine of the incarnation with a later degeneration of Vedic religion. He wrote:

The real doctrine of the whole Indian scripture is the unity of the deity 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.³

The notion of incarnation, Colebrooke argued, was present in Hinduism only in the “new forms of religious ceremonies” founded on the relatively late Puranas and on what he called “a worse source, the Tantras.”⁴

This degeneration of Hinduism was, in principle, demonstrated by Colebrooke’s dating, on internal grounds, of different parts of the Vedic corpus. In practice, however, his theory of the degeneration of Hinduism sometimes governed his dating of texts. For example, he wrote that he was “inclined to doubt the genuineness” of several Upanishads, and to “suspect that they have been written in times, modern, when compared with the remainder of the Vedas,” *because* they related to the worship of incarnations of Vishnu.⁵ This shows that Colebrooke’s work was not solely a sympathetic attempt to describe and date another religion’s scriptures. It was controlled by his desire to use the Vedas as an argument in the intrareligious debate between Unitarians and Trinitarians.

RAMMOHUN ROY

Rammohun Roy, the founder of the liberal Hindu reform movement known as the Brahma Samaj, shared many of the values of British Unitarians and Deists. He fought against what he, like Colebrooke, considered corruptions of Hinduism, especially the worship of images, and the Brahminical priesthood that controlled and profited from that worship. He promoted his cause by translating and publishing in vernacular languages certain Upanishads that supported his vision of Hinduism, and also his own selection of extracts from the Gospels (not unlike the Jefferson Bible), which he entitled *The Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happiness, etc.*

Whereas Colebrooke made his case by charting and dating the Vedas, Roy’s strategy in using someone else’s scripture was calculated selection. In his brief introduction to the *Precepts*, Roy explained the principles that governed his selection of passages: he aimed to include only the moral principles of Jesus, which he felt were “admirably calculated to elevate men’s ideas to high and liberal notions of one God” and were “well fitted to regulate the conduct of the human

³ Colebrooke, “On the Vedas,” 68. See also pp. 12-13.

⁴ Colebrooke, “On the Vedas,” 68.

⁵ Colebrooke, “On the Vedas,” 67-68.

race;” but he largely omitted historical passages, which were rendered incredible by the accounts of miracles they contained, and statements of doctrine, which were the cause of strife among Christians.⁶

In terms of the divisions within Christianity, these principles of selection placed Roy on the side of Unitarians and Deists. The Unitarian Society in London reprinted the *Precepts*, whereas Trinitarian Baptist missionaries in India attacked it in their newspapers. Roy’s interreligious study of scripture thus fuelled an internal Christian debate.

Yet Roy also intended the work to have an impact within his own community. That is why it was published in Bengali and Sanskrit as well as English. A careful examination of the *Precepts* will show that Roy’s stated principles of selection, which coincided so well with the views of Unitarians and Deists, were overridden at times by his involvement in an internal Hindu conflict. He did not consistently exclude all references to miracles and the supernatural, or all doctrinal passages. For example, he included Jesus’ healing of a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath,⁷ and the discourse to Nicodemus on the new birth of the Spirit and on the sending of the Son of God in John 3.⁸ What was it that led Roy to set aside his aversion to miracles and doctrine in such cases? 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 teaching and an ethic of love. The passage about the healing on the Sabbath, for instance, illustrated a clash between the strict Sabbath observance of the religious leaders, and Jesus’ emphasis on doing good to fellow humans. The discourse to Nicodemus, himself a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, stressed the inability of religious leaders to understand Jesus’ spiritual message, and implicitly accused them of preferring darkness to the revealing light of the Son of God, “because their deeds were evil.”⁹ I would suggest that Roy chose to violate his stated principles of selection, in order to emphasize Jesus’ confrontation with the religious establishment, because he wished to attack Hindu religious leaders who in his view were perpetuating an idolatrous ritual system for their own advantage.

Thus Roy’s interreligious use of scripture, viewed as a whole, constituted a profound act of reconciliation with at least the Unitarian side of the Christian colonial power, but his actual principles of selection reveal that the content of the *Precepts* was ultimately governed by an intrareligious conflict.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Roy, *Precepts of Jesus*, 14, from Matthew 12:9-13.

⁸ Roy, *Precepts of Jesus*, 94-95.

⁹ Roy, *Precepts of Jesus*, 95.

DAYANANDA SARASWATI

Swami Dayananda Saraswati was a wandering ascetic who founded the Hindu nationalist Arya Samaj movement. Like Rammohun Roy, he promoted a monotheistic and aniconic form of Hinduism, but he was more conservative than Roy on many issues such as ritual and caste. He promoted his vision of Hinduism by appealing to the Vedic Samhitas, which he published in Hindi along with his own commentary. In his manifesto *Light of Truth (Satyarth Prakash)*, Dayananda turned his attention to the Bible and the Qur'an, quoting and ridiculing verse after verse in a collage of passages that could hardly be more different from Rammohun Roy's *Precepts of Jesus*. Yet like Roy's *Precepts*, Dayananda's use of other peoples' scriptures seems to have been shaped primarily by intrareligious conflict over the identity of Hinduism.

Dayananda's way of making verses from the Bible and Qur'an appear ridiculous was to comment on them one by one in the light of certain distinctly Hindu values and assumptions. Dayananda had met non-Hindus in live debate, and I think it is safe to assume that he knew full well that Christians and Muslims would not be convinced on the basis of such assumptions, so I would suggest that his arguments were aimed rather at other Hindus. The assumptions that he appealed to were not in fact universally accepted Hindu principles, but were contested parts of Dayananda's own vision of Hinduism. For example:

He derided Jacob's setting up a stone at Bethel, as well as anthropomorphic references to God in the Qur'an, in light of his rejection of the worship of images, which was one of his principal points of disagreement with other Hindus.

He presented miracles in the Bible and the Qur'an as impossible violations of natural law. This naturalistic principle also implicitly condemned much of the mythology of the Puranas, a major component of Hinduism that Dayananda rejected.

He countered Biblical and Qur'anic descriptions of creation *ex nihilo* with the view that creation requires a material cause. This view was opposed to that of the advaita or non-dual school of Vedanta that was being promoted by some other reformers at the time.

He contrasted animal sacrifices in the Bible, and the Muslim practice of mentioning God's name when slaughtering an animal, with his own abhorrence of meat eating. This was not a universally accepted Hindu principle; Dayananda's own movement later split over the permissibility of eating meat.

Finally, he presented the Biblical and Qur'anic notions of mercy and forgiveness as immoral and unjust, because they reversed the law of *karma*. His absolute view of *karma* was one of the issues that divided him from the Bhakti movements that he opposed.

Since each of these principles, which he used to make passages from the Bible and Qur'an appear ridiculous, was a point on which Dayananda criticized one facet or another of contemporary Hinduism, I would suggest that his critique of the Bible and Qur'an represents more of an argument within Hinduism than a genuine interreligious debate. He addressed Christians and Muslims not to convince them, but in order to define Hinduism in opposition to them, and to show his fellow Hindus the usefulness of his own version of Hinduism for fending off the enemies of Christianity and Islam.

RAHMAT ALLAH KAIRANAWI

While Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Saraswati were pursuing their agendas for the reform of Hinduism, Muslim intellectuals were facing a crisis over how to respond to the presence of British administration, education, science, . . . and missions. Rahmat Allah

Kairanawi, a traditionally trained Muslim scholar from Delhi, argued that Muslims could beat the Christians at their own game. He is best known for his success in a public debate in 1854, in which he caught the missionary Carl Gottlieb Pfander off guard by citing recent European works of textual criticism to show that I John 5:7, the clearest proof text for the doctrine of the Trinity, was a late addition to the Biblical text. He later published all his arguments against Christianity in his *Manifestation of Truth*, which is still widely available.

Christian missionaries frequently argued that Muslims must accept arguments made on the basis of the Bible, because the Qur'an recognized the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel as genuine revelations. Kairanawi countered this argument by citing Christian Biblical critics to show that the contours and contents of the Biblical text were in doubt. In and of itself the appeal to Biblical criticism need not have been debilitating for the missionaries, although it did take some of them quite by surprise. Kairanawi, however, converted the findings of Biblical criticism into a total rejection of the Bible, by transplanting those findings into the framework of Muslim criteria for genuine revelation. Classical Islamic scholarship considered a revealed text to be the word of God spoken through a prophet and transmitted word for word by an unbroken and carefully recorded chain of trustworthy transmitters, confirmed by scholarly consensus and established with epistemological certainty. Given these assumptions, a Biblical scholar's argument that the prophet Moses could not have written certain parts of the Pentateuch, for example, did not just raise a question about authorship; it meant that the Pentateuch was not revelation. Debates among Christians concerning the authenticity and authorship of Biblical books constituted for Kairanawi a lack of scholarly consensus, and showed that these books did not have a continuous chain of transmission, and were only established with probability (*ẓann*), not certainty (*yaqîn*). All these categories were technical terms in the Muslim study of revelation, and were quite different from Christian criteria of canonicity or textual accuracy.

Thus a Christian discourse, when viewed from within an Islamic conceptual framework, served to undermine the Bible's authority as scripture. This argument was ostensibly directed at Christians, but it cannot have been as convincing for them as it was for Muslims. The public debate certainly caused a stir, and embarrassed the missionaries sufficiently that Pfander was eventually relocated by his mission agency, but I would suggest that its interreligious impact was due primarily to the recognized institutional form of the public debate. The convincing force of the arguments does not appear to have crossed religious lines. The Christians were faced with a new Christian discourse, and Muslims were given confidence in their ability to stand up to the Christian challenge, but there was no interreligious debate, except in the formal, institutional sense of a public meeting. The primary force of Kairanawi's argument, I would argue, was to demonstrate to his fellow Muslims that traditional Islamic thought had the conceptual capacity to defeat the Christian threat using European weapons, without its own identity being modified in the process.

SAYYID AHMAD KHAN

Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a Muslim modernist, took an opposite stance on the question of how to relate to the British. He actively campaigned for reconciliation and cooperation with the British after the revolt of 1857. In order to show his fellow Muslims that a modernized Muslim identity could absorb the new foreign challenge of Christianity, he undertook the highly unusual project of writing a Muslim commentary on the Bible, which he printed in Urdu and English at his own private press. He never got beyond the first eleven chapters of Genesis and the first five

chapters of Matthew, but his effort symbolized a fervent desire for reconciliation with the British, albeit on Muslim terms.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan argued that the Bible was on the whole authentic revelation, and that a few manuscript variants did not put the entire text in doubt. In order to take this position without succumbing to the arguments of Christian missionaries, he (1) redefined the boundaries of the Biblical canon in terms of a Muslim understanding of revelation, and (2) he interpreted problematic passages on the basis of explicitly Islamic assumptions.

Muslims regard revealed books as the very words of God, transmitted by a prophet. Sayyid Ahmad Khan therefore accepted as possibly genuine revelation not only canonical books of the Bible, but anything attributed to a prophet, including such texts as the Testament of Moses, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Gospel of Thomas. On the other hand, he constricted the range of Biblical texts that could be considered revealed, by distinguishing between what was actually revealed to and spoken by prophets, such as the teachings of Jesus, and other kinds of reports written by a prophets' followers, such as the narrative portions of the Gospels, and the New Testament Epistles, which could not be considered revealed because they were not spoken by prophets.¹⁰ This allowed him to accept the Bible while avoiding certain problems such as the high Christology of Colossians, for example.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan also made it quite clear that Islamic assumptions guided his interpretation of the Bible. For example, Trinitarian Christians had argued that the plural noun '*elohim*' indicated some plurality in the Godhead. In his commentary on Genesis 1:1, Sayyid Ahmad Khan cited some linguistic arguments against this, and then concluded that since Muslims assumed the strict unity of God, they must interpret the verse accordingly.¹¹ To explicitly assume a Muslim position as the basis for interpretation was certainly not calculated to convince Trinitarian Christians. The force of his argument, therefore, was not directed toward Christians, but toward his fellow Muslims, in an effort to convince them that Islam is not threatened by the Bible, but can accept it without compromising Islamic principles.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ingenuity was to offer his fellow Muslims an Islamic solution to the missionary challenge that incorporated and absorbed that challenge. The form and tone of his commentary constituted an attempt at reconciliation with the British, but the way he reconfigured and reinterpreted the Bible constituted an argument with his fellow Muslims about how they should define their identity in response to the Christian presence in India.

WILLIAM MUIR

In the wake of the Christian missionaries' embarrassment over Biblical criticism, William Muir, a colonial administrator and orientalist sympathetic to the missionaries, undertook his own study of Muslim scriptures. His work took the form of a biography of the Prophet Muhammad, which portrayed him as a violent and licentious man.

¹⁰ 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 and 39-57.

¹¹ Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Mohomedan Commentary II* 40-43.

Muir's sources were the Qur'an and Hadith, but his methods were those of Biblical criticism. He distinguished between legend, tradition, and history. He formulated rules closely resembling the principles of multiple attestation, verbal agreement, preferring the harder reading, or the principle that something embarrassing to the tradition is likely not to have been fabricated.¹² And he cited as a "canon of Christian criticism" the principle that "any tradition whose origin is not strictly contemporary with the facts related, is worthless exactly in proportion to the particularity of detail."¹³ On the other hand, he dismissed the critical methods of Muslim scholars, which rested principally on the study of the chains of transmission of Hadith reports.¹⁴

What is striking about Muir's biography is that although he criticized Muhammad severely, and cast doubt on the genuineness of many Hadith, he never questioned the textual authenticity of the Qur'an. One possible reason for this is suggested by a pamphlet written by Muir later in his life, entitled *The Authorship of Deuteronomy*, in which he appealed to his studies of Hadith to refute Biblical critics who claimed that Deuteronomy was pieced together in part from traditions that had been transmitted orally for centuries. Muir objected that the Hadith, transmitted orally over several generations under ideal circumstances, were replete with contradictions and patent fabrications. The narrative of Deuteronomy, however, was natural, appropriate to its historical setting, and obviously free from myth and fancy, so it could not have been dependent on oral transmission over several generations, but must have been finalized by Moses' contemporaries.¹⁵

This helps to explain why Muir did not apply his critical methods to the Qur'an. To deny that the Qur'an had been accurately transmitted directly from the Prophet Muhammad would have meant questioning the reliability of its first generation of transmitters, who heard it from Muhammad himself, because its transmission after their time was not in doubt. But Muir's view of Deuteronomy (and probably of the Gospels as well) depended on the principle that tradition transmitted orally by one or two generations was as good as history, and that oral transmission became unreliable only after several generations, as in the case of the Hadith.¹⁶ Muir's reluctance to criticize the Qur'an, therefore, may have stemmed in part from his desire to defend the Bible, not from Muslim attacks, but from Christian Biblical critics.

It thus appears that for William Muir, as for the others we have considered, the study of another religion's scriptures was controlled by, and ultimately utilized in a debate internal to his own tradition.

¹² Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, 597-600.

¹³ Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, 582.

¹⁴ Muir, *Life of Mahomet*, 575.

¹⁵ Muir, *Authorship of Deuteronomy*, 19-28.

¹⁶ Muir, *Authorship of Deuteronomy*, 6, 17-18.

CONCLUSION

When I say that the interreligious analyses of scripture produced by these six men were meaningful primarily as arguments in intrareligious debates over identity, I am not, of course, denying that these works may have been intended as acts of interreligious conflict or reconciliation. I also am not claiming that these works had no interreligious significance or effect. Kairanawi's arguments had some effect on his opponents, if only that Pfander's mission agency reassigned him to a different region following the debate. Muir's biography of Muhammad prompted Sayyid Ahmad Khan to write a rebuttal. But what is striking about these examples is that these concrete responses seem to have been precipitated by the institutions and practices and symbols that these works made use of, rather than by their specific content. The old Muslim tradition of court sponsored religious debates; the new institutions of private printing and tract warfare; the cultural milieu established by British education; and the publicly accessible symbol of scripture -- these were the bridges between traditions that made it possible for the writing of one party to be received and understood by another as an act either of interreligious conflict or of reconciliation, depending on its form and tone. The *fact* of reading another's scripture, and the *way* it was done, could have concrete interreligious effects; but it not so clear that the *content* of these studies, or the force of their arguments, had much impact outside each author's own tradition.

Each of these authors reconfigured someone else's scriptures – mapping, selecting, reordering, even changing the boundaries of the canon – in accordance with concepts and concerns specific to his own religious context. Each interpreted the other's scriptures in terms of his own religious categories. We may well ask, if transposing a text from one set of assumptions, categories, and values into another changes its meaning, can the interreligious study of scripture ever be a form of substantive religious interaction? I do not deny that it can, but I want to suggest, on the basis of these six examples, that the first place to look for the significance of such interreligious studies is within the author's own religious community. What this essay has principally shown is that the content of these works was never meaningless, even if the authors seemed to be “talking past each other.” The content of each work, regardless of whether the work was polemical or conciliatory, constituted a significant intrareligious argument over a disputed aspect of the identity of the author's own religion.

This conclusion suggests that the study of religious conflict and reconciliation in general might fruitfully look beyond the categories of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, etc., in two ways: it must seek to identify the shared symbols, discourses, and institutions that make religious interaction possible, and it must attend to disputes and issues internal to each tradition. The web may take the place of printing; the media may take the place of public debates; land or churches or temples or mosques may take the place of scriptures; but some kind of shared symbols and institutional forms appear to be a condition of religious interaction. At the same time, identifying divisions within each religious tradition may be even more crucial for understanding the specific content of religious interaction. Wherever one finds that the parties to religious interaction appear to be speaking past each other, we might fruitfully investigate what intrareligious issues are at stake in that interaction, and how the seemingly ineffective content of the interaction may be shaping the identities of the participants. Surely the definition of these identities is itself of no small significance for the future of religious conflict and reconciliation.

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