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**Hindu Iconoclasts:
Rammohun Roy, Dayananda Sarasvati, and Nineteenth-Century Polemics Against
Idolatry**

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February, 1999

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Hindu Iconoclasts: Rammohun Roy, Dayananda Sarasvati, and Nineteenth-Century Polemics Against Idolatry

Noel A. Salmond

This dissertation examines the attacks on “idolatry” by two prominent nineteenth-century Hindu reformers, Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati. Their iconoclastic fervour in the context of Hindu India appears (at face-value) as an anomaly because image-worship is widely perceived as such a prominent feature of that religion. Is their image-rejection to be explained as a borrowing of an Islamic or Protestant attitude? Both men have been referred to as the “Luther of India,” but is the label “Protestant” as also applied to their reformed Hinduism appropriate and what is suggested by this expression? The dissertation examines indigenous and foreign elements in the anti-idolatry polemics of both men and argues that explanation by *diffusion* from non-Indian sources is inadequate whereas explanation by *independent invention* is in need of nuancing. I explore the hypothesis that metaphysical arguments against images may be considered indigenous to India whereas moral arguments imply borrowing. I argue that although catalyzed by Western influence, nineteenth-century Hindu iconoclasm draws on Indian sources. The British presence in nineteenth-century India acts as the “stress” that triggers the particular diathesis (latent cultural predisposition) that manifests in the Hindu iconoclasm of these two reformers. The fact that the two men had very different backgrounds and degrees of integration with Islamic or British culture and yet both regarded image-worship as the central issue of reform suggests other grounds to explain their iconoclasm than borrowing or diffusion. I explore the formative events in their biographies that describe their individual disenchantment with images. Further, evidence is presented from their writings that indicates that a major concern for both men in the attack on “idolatry” was the disenchantment of religion and culture in the service of the development, unification, and modernization of Hindu India.

**Hindu Iconoclasts:
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Noel A. Salmond

Résumé

LES ICONOCLASTES HINDOUS: RAMMOHUN ROY, DAYANANDA SARASVATI ET LES POLÉMIQUES CONTRE L'IDOLÂTRIE AU XIX^e SIÈCLE

Noel A. Salmond

Cette thèse examine les attaques contre l'idolâtrie formulées par deux importants réformateurs hindous du XIX^e siècle, Rammohun Roy et Dayananda Sarasvati. Leur ferveur iconoclaste dans le contexte de l'hindouisme en Inde semblerait une anomalie au premier abord, car la vénération des images est généralement perçue comme étant une caractéristique fondamentale de cette religion. Est-ce que leur rejet des images peut être attribué à l'emprunt d'une attitude islamique ou protestante? Les deux hommes furent appelés "Luther de l'Inde", mais la désignation "protestant" utilisée pour décrire leur hindouisme réformé est-elle appropriée? Qu'est-ce que cette expression suggère? Cette thèse examine les éléments indigènes et les éléments importés du discours anti-idolâtre des deux réformateurs et propose l'argument qu'une explication par la diffusion provenant de sources non-indiennes est inadéquate tandis qu'une explication par l'invention indépendante doit être nuancée. Je propose de vérifier l'hypothèse que des arguments métaphysiques contre les images peuvent être considérés comme étant indigènes à l'Inde tandis que les arguments moraux impliquent un emprunt. Je soumets l'argument que l'iconoclasme hindou du XIX^e siècle, tout en étant catalysé par l'influence Occidentale, se fonde sur des sources indiennes. La présence britannique en Inde au XIX^e siècle constitue l'agent stresser qui va déclencher la diathèse, ou prédisposition latente culturelle qui se manifeste dans l'iconoclasme de ces deux réformateurs. Le fait que ces deux hommes qui provenaient de milieux très différents et qui avaient vécu des degrés différents d'intégration avec les cultures islamiques et britanniques ont tous deux considéré la vénération des images en tant que question centrale de leur réforme suggère que l'on doit invoquer des mécanismes autres que la diffusion ou l'invention indépendante pour expliquer leur iconoclasme. J'examine leurs biographies pour déterminer les événements-clef de leur désenchantement personnel des images. De plus, les écrits des deux hommes révèlent que le désenchantement de la religion et de la culture dans le service du développement, de l'unification et de la modernisation de l'Inde hindoue était un des principaux fondements de leurs attaques contre l'idolâtrie.

Dedication

In memory of my parents, Eric Salmond and Diana Nordheimer Salmond, who both died during the final phases of the preparation of this dissertation.

asato mā sad gamaya
tamaso mā jyotir gamaya
mṛtyor mā amṛtaṃ gamaya

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 1.3.28

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors, Professors Richard P. Hayes and Katherine K. Young of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University. I am indebted to Dr. Dermot Killingley of the University of Newcastle in England for suggestions and for sending me photocopied materials on Rammohun Roy. Dr. Jack Llewellyn of Southwest Missouri State University sent me Hindi and English materials related to Dayananda Sarasvati. Both these scholars were also kind enough to answer my e-mail queries. I hasten to add the usual caution that they are not at all responsible for the viewpoints expressed in the dissertation itself. I am grateful to my sister Wendy Quarry, for keeping me at it, to Laurence Nixon for insightful comments, and to Ariane who has been of invaluable assistance.

A Note on Transliteration

My transliteration of Sanskrit terms follows standard international usage. For the sake of simplicity I have omitted diacritical marks from the names of the two reformers; hence, Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati for Rāmamohana Rāya and Dayānanda Sarasvatī. Similarly, Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj are used rather than Brahmo Samāj and Ārya Samāj. I refer to Dayananda's major Hindi work as *Satyarth Prakash* rather than *Satyārth Prakāś* or Sanskrit, *Satyārtha Prakāśah*.

I use the construction "brahmin" rather than brahman for a *brāhmaṇa* or member of the priestly class. This avoids confusion with Brahman as the term for the ultimate reality. In quoting other authors I do not alter their spelling and I follow their use or non-use of diacritical marks.

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CHAPTER ONE**HINDU ICONOCLASTS: AN ANOMALY?****INTRODUCTION**

Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), founder of the Brahmo Samaj, and Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1883), founder of the Arya Samaj, have each been hailed as the “Martin Luther of India.” These reformers called for a purified religion in India, an authentic Hinduism or Arya Dharm stripped of perceived inauthentic accretions, a religion that would be firmly based in the original revelation, the authoritative texts of the Veda. The “protestant” features of this call are readily apparent: the appeal for a return to the authoritative original texts; the effort to make those texts widely available in the vernacular; the rejection of tradition; and the insistence that an original monotheism had been debased by Purāṇic myths and by priests who exploited for personal gain the cultus of a pantheon of deities. Above all, these reformers singled out the worship of images or “idolatry”¹ as the fount of all moral degradation and degeneracy. They were Hindu iconoclasts.

¹I discuss the concept of idolatry later in this chapter. The term is used by Rammohun Roy in his English writings to translate *pratimā-pūjā* as it is in the official translations of Swami Dayananda’s *Satyarth Prakash* to translate *mūrti-pūjā*. Here I wish only to point out that my usage of the term follows Rammohun and Dayananda and does not mean that I personally endorse the pejorative connotations of the word idolatry suggesting that all sacred images are signs of false or degenerate religion. In this dissertation I will use the more neutral terms “image” and “image-worship” for “idol” and “idolatry” except when quoting or paraphrasing the words of the reformers.

The Apparent Anomaly

Hindu iconoclasm appears, at first glance, as quite an anomaly in the history of religion in India. One is tempted to see it as simply one of the “protestant” features in the programs of Rammohun and Dayananda and then to regard it, literally, as the result of borrowing from Protestantism. Certainly, polemics against idolatry are generally associated with Judaic, Islamic, and Protestant Christian traditions rather than the religious traditions of India, which, on the contrary, are usually perceived as highly iconic. This dissertation is concerned with explanation for this apparent anomaly. Why would these Hindu authors preach an aniconic (image-refusing) religion in their revisioning of an authentic Hinduism?

That these Hindus should attack “idolatry” appears anomalous because it contravenes what could be called “Orientalist” generalizations (or perhaps caricatures) on India and Indian religion as seen in contradistinction with the West. I list here and comment briefly on a number of such assumptions:

1. India is highly iconic.²
The “West” (at least in its Jewish, Islamic and Protestant forms) is aniconic.³

²“To the outside world and even to non-Hindus in India, Hinduism is identified now with idolatry and temples.” Nirad Chaudhuri, *Hinduism* (Oxford: OUP, 1979), p. 90.

³The second commandment in the Decalogue can be seen as the root text in the “Western” problematizing of images. Judaism and Islam have followed the prohibition on making representations of the deity completely. Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, following the doctrine of the Incarnation, have legitimated sacred imagery. It should be noted though that the Orthodox tradition restricts sacred images to two-dimensional icons and does not utilize three-dimensional statues. The Calvinist stream in Protestant Christianity has rejected all such representations. For this dissertation, the forms of foreign or “Western” religion relevant to my discussion are Islam and Protestantism due to their connection with the political domination of India. I am aware of the problematic

The supposed antithetical nature of the “Semitic” religions and those of India has often been expressed. Barbara Holdrege identifies the proclivity for contrasting Judaism in particular with Hinduism:

Indeed, “Hinduism” and “Judaism” have been thought to have so little in common that few scholars have attempted substantive comparative analyses of these traditions. “Polytheistic,” iconocentric “Hinduism,” with its panoply of deities enshrined in images, is generally held to be antithetical to “monotheistic,” iconoclastic “Judaism,” with its emphasis on the unity and transcendence of God and abhorrence of image-making practices.⁴

The binary opposition of iconocentric versus iconoclastic, as Holdrege puts it, is often associated with another set of polarities between the religion of the “Hindu East” and that of the West; the former is typically perceived of as mystical, the latter ethical.

2. Indian religion focuses on mystical absorption and metaphysical abstractions. “Western” religion is “prophetic” and focuses on ethical probity.

Locating Judaism (the fount of the Western traditions) and Hinduism at opposite ends of this religious spectrum, as “ideal types” in a typology is well-illustrated in the following statements from R.C. Zaehner: “India produces sages, Israel prophets.” “Israel and India are the ‘types’ of all higher religion. Outside them we do find the mystical and prophetic types of religion represented, but nowhere else are they so clearly differentiated.”⁵ The prophetic here is synonymous with ethical but also with activist.

nature of referring to these traditions as “Western” religions and will sometimes substitute the expression “Semitic” religions.

⁴ Barbara Holdrege, *Veda and Torah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), p. 1.

⁵ R.C. Zaehner, *Comparative Religion*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp. 25-26.

3. India is other-worldly and quietistic in orientation.
The West is this-worldly and activistic and characterized by inner-worldly asceticism.

This sort of formulation finds classical expression with Albert Schweitzer: "Thus both in Indian and European thought world and life affirmation and world and life negation are found side by side: but in Indian thought the latter is the predominant principle and in European thought the former."⁶ Or we can see it in Max Weber: "The decisive historical difference between the predominantly oriental and Asiatic types of salvation religion and those found primarily in the Occident is that the former usually culminate in contemplation and the latter in asceticism."⁷ Of course, for Weber, the asceticism he associates with the Occident is "inner-worldly asceticism" (*innerweltliche Askese*) as part of his famous thesis of a "Protestant spirit" characterized by disciplined, self-restrained activity supporting rationally regulated activity *in* this world as opposed to asceticism oriented at flight *from* this world.⁸ Flight from the world Weber associates with the

⁶Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and its Development* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 6.

⁷Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth, Claus Wittich (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978), p. 551.

⁸Weber contrasts world-rejecting with inner-worldly asceticism: "Concentration upon the actual pursuit of salvation may entail a formal withdrawal from the 'world' from social and psychological ties with family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic, and erotic activities – in short, from all creaturely interests. One with such an attitude may regard any participation in these affairs as an acceptance of the world, leading to alienation from god. This is 'world-rejecting asceticism' (*weltablehnende Askese*).

On the other hand, the concentration of human behavior on activities leading to salvation may require the participation within the world (or more precisely: within the institutions of the world but in opposition to them) on the basis of the religious individual's piety and his qualifications as an elect instrument of god. This is 'inner-

contemplative mystic.⁹ (The link perceived, by Weber and others, between aniconism and a methodical, rationalized orientation to life in this world is something I discuss in my final chapter). The gamut of stereotypic perceptions could be expanded (and summarized) as follows:

India is iconic, polytheistic, quietistic, mystical, and mythologized whereas the West is aniconic, monotheist, activist, ethical, and rationalized.

Given these sets of popular perceptions of Hindu India in contradistinction to the West, and given that Rammohun and Dayananda are both iconoclastic, strictly monotheist, activist, non-mystical, ethical to the point of being moralistic, and intolerant of myth and ritual, one would be tempted to explain nineteenth-century Hindu iconoclasm as a case of borrowing, as the migration of an idea from one culture to another, in other words, a case of explanation by a theory of *diffusion*. One could ascribe it to the Muslim domination of Northern India since the eleventh century, the colonial context of British India and/or the influence of Protestantism which consistently attacked "idolatry," associating it with superstition and immorality.

Indian authors are themselves divided on the question of the extent to which external influence shaped the reforming programs of figures like Rammohun and Dayananda. To illustrate: in the case of Swami Dayananda, Lajpat Rai in his history of the Arya Samaj writes: "The Arya Samaj may quite logically be pronounced an outcome

worldly asceticism' (*innerweltliche Askese*). In this case the world is presented to the religious virtuoso as his responsibility." Ibid., p. 542.

⁹ Ibid., p. 545.

of the conditions imported into India by the West . . .”¹⁰ Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: “The Arya Samaj was a reaction to the influence of Islam and Christianity, especially the former.”¹¹ In contrast, Har Bilas Sarda remarks: “Western civilization had not the slightest influence in making him [Dayananda] what he was. He did not know English and was in no way influenced by European culture or European thought.”¹² Similarly, N. S. Sarma writes: “. . . far from borrowing any forms of worship from alien religions, he [Dayananda] was as fierce against Islam and Christianity as he was against what he considered corruption of the pure Āryan faith in his own country. . . . *as he knew no English, his inspiration was derived entirely from indigenous sources.*”¹³ (italics added)

¹⁰Lala Rajpat Rai, *A History of the Arya Samaj* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1967), p. 293.

¹¹Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New York: The John Day Co., 1946), p. 337. In a similar vein, Diane Apostolos-Cappadona writes, “The British occupation of India with its religious allegiance to Protestant Christianity inspired the modern iconoclasms of the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj which eventually led to the development of an esoteric form of Hinduism that advocated philosophical monism and denounced religious imagery as idolatrous.” Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, “Iconoclasm,” in *The Dictionary of Art*. London: Macmillan, 1996. Vol. 2, p. 78. This is incorrect on several counts: the Brahmo and Arya Samaj are not “esoteric” forms of religion and neither advocates a philosophical monism.

¹²Har Bilas Sarda, ed., *Dayanand Commemoration Volume* (Ajmer: Chandmal Chandak, 1933), p. xxxiv.

¹³N.S. Sarma, *The Renaissance of Hinduism* (Benares: Benares Hindu University, 1944), p. 165.

Possible Explanations

As these two attributions illustrate, the apparently anomalous iconoclasm of these Hindu figures could possibly be explained as either a) arrived at through Western (Islamic/Protestant) influence, or b) derived instead from the Indian tradition itself.¹⁴ A third possibility might be that it is c) derived from a conviction engendered by some sort of formative experience in the personal lives of the two reformers not dependent on either tradition. Of course some combination or another of these three alternatives is also conceivable, therefore I have expanded the original three possible explanatory positions into five. The image-rejection or iconoclasm of Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati could potentially be explained as:

1. *borrowed entirely from Muslim and/or Protestant sources*
2. *an autonomous expression of image-rejection invented independently in Hindu India drawing on the Indian tradition*
3. *arrived at autonomously by both individuals through formative childhood experiences*
4. *generated from a perception on the part of the two reformers of a link between image-rejection and the rationalization and modernization of society*
5. *catalyzed by exposure to Muslim and Protestant positions but drawing on authentic Indian precedents and resources*

I turn now to briefly commenting on each of these possibilities sequentially:

¹⁴Rammohun Roy was at the beginning and Dayananda Sarasvati near the midpoint of a period often referred to as the "Hindu Renaissance." The term "renaissance" would imply recovery of something authentically Hindu whereas to call these men "Protestant Hindus" in a "Hindu Reformation" might imply more of a borrowing.

1. *It [Hindu Renaissance iconoclasm] is borrowed entirely from Muslim or Protestant sources.*

I have already acknowledged that we usually associate image-rejection with the Semitic religions. Indeed, it is only in them that we find explicit prohibitions against making images.

However, anyone familiar with Hindu thought will recognize that there is a long tradition stemming back to the *Upaniṣads* of favouring negative expressions for ultimate reality. Brahman is *arūpa* (beyond form) and best spoken of by way of negation, *neti, neti*, not this, not that. The ineffable Brahman is *nirguṇa*, beyond attribution. Furthermore, if precedents for image-refusal can be seen in the history of Indian religions (especially prior to the advent of Islam in India) or if rationalist or materialist critiques of image practices are also found in India, then explanation by diffusion alone is called into question. I will present evidence for such precedents in my review of the history of image-worship and image-rejection in India given in Chapter 2.

2. *An autonomous expression of image-rejection invented independently in Hindu India.*

The presence of a “negative theology” in Hindu thought cautions us against attributing the iconoclastic stance of these reformers entirely to foreign influence, as being derivative of Islamic thought, or as “protestant” in the literal sense of deriving from Protestant ideation. Cognizant of the sorts of Orientalist generalizations expressed above and wanting to test their provisional validity, my initial working hypothesis became this: that while the expression of a *moral aniconism* (employing moral arguments against idolatry) in Rammohun and Dayananda might be seen as a product of Western influence, in other

words, of *diffusion*, that the presence of a long and pervasive tradition of *metaphysical aniconism* in India provided them with the legitimation of this idea and that this metaphysically grounded aniconism in India is an *independent invention* on Indian soil. However, as already suggested, another possible explanation for the image-rejection of the two reformers should be considered:

3. *It is arrived at autonomously by both individuals through formative childhood experiences.*

Here, the root of their iconoclastic stance might be located in childhood experiences of disillusionment with the image-worship practiced by their families (which, in fact, both figures report and which I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4). This disillusionment is grounded in the fundamental religious problem of images, namely, how can what the religions hold as the “sacred” or the “highest divinity” (that which is usually construed as infinite, absolute, and transcendent) be regarded as represented, much less embodied, in a finite, particular, and concrete object?¹⁵ Perhaps childhood crisis over this fundamental question and conflict with the family because of it (again reported in the autobiographies of both men) is sufficient explanation anterior to any need to invoke either foreign or Hindu traditions of ideation on image-worship or image-rejection.

Moreover, the adult personalities of both men exhibit an activistic and this-worldly orientation expressed in a call for the uplift and regeneration of India. This implies another possible explanation for their iconoclasm:

¹⁵This is not to say that a child necessarily formulates the problem in theological language. The disillusionment can result from something as non-verbal as sadly realizing that the nocturnal gift-bestower, Santa Claus, was really a parent and not in fact the driver of a celestial sleigh.

4. *It is generated from a perception of a link between image-rejection and the rationalization and modernization of society.*

From this perspective, the two reformers, each with a deep concern for the regeneration of Hindu India, perceive the overcoming of “idolatry” as prerequisite for not only the “moral” but also the social, scientific, and political advancement of the Hindu nation.

This generates the further questions: is there, in fact, such a link? If there is, did the two men arrive at perceiving it on their own or by the influence, not here of Islamic or Protestant religious ideation, but rather of European enlightenment rationalism?

5. *It is catalyzed by exposure to Muslim and Protestant positions but draws on authentic Indian precedents and resources.*

This last position rejects the blunt and antithetical explanations given as one and two above but arrives at a more nuanced expression of explanation by combining their elements. In fact I arrive at a position that synthesizes all of these positions in the following formulation: I suggest that the nineteenth-century expression of a Hindu iconoclasm articulated by both Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati *is catalyzed by exposure to Muslim, Protestant, and European rationalist models but draws on authentic Indian resources and precedents. It does so while dovetailing, for both men, with a stance arrived at through formative childhood experience and with their perception of image-refusal as consonant with, or even prerequisite for, national regeneration and modernization.*

I THE TERMINOLOGY OF IMAGES AND IMAGE-REJECTION

Before returning to the problem of explanation for the image-rejection of Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati it is incumbent on me to clarify my usage of terminology associated with image-rejection beginning with the expression from my title, "Hindu Iconoclasts."

Hindu Iconoclasm

The word iconoclasm means, literally from the Greek, the breaking of images.¹⁶ The word is used in both a strict sense, related to its etymology as the literal breaking of images, and in a much looser sense as zeal in overturning the established order and its accepted symbols of legitimation and sacrality. To call Rammohun and Dayananda iconoclasts is incorrect in the strict sense in that although both preached against image-worship neither directly engaged in the actual violent destruction of physical images. The second broader sense of attacking established orthodoxies is certainly apt for Rammohun and Dayananda especially in view of the fact that the primary target they selected from among the centrally established orthodoxies of contemporary Hinduism was literally the worship of images.

¹⁶The Greek word *eikon* means "image" and "likeness" and from it we get the English, "icon". Icon in its broad sense means image but in the history of religions usually refers not to just any image but to a sacred image invested with some (or all) of the sacrality of the sacral entity it is meant to represent (or even present). An icon can then represent a sacred being in the sense of being intended to depict that being, or, it can be intended to present that being in the sense of making that being present. To those who deny the possibility of the divine being present in an image, the *eikon* is rather an "idol."

The religious iconoclast attacks the worship of images because this practice is seen as constituting “idolatry.” The two Greek words, *eidolon*, “image,” and *latreia*, “adoration,” are the etymological roots of the English word “idolatry,” the worship or adoration of images.¹⁷ The term idol is still often used unselfconsciously in India by Hindu authors writing in English to refer to Hindu statues of deities in a manner that is difficult for a Western reader to fathom because of the pejorative nature of the word in the Western context. This pejorative connotation originates in the scriptures of ancient Israel.¹⁸ There, the biblical source for the concept of idolatry combines at least two components: one, the idol is a deviation of allegiance from the one true God to the many false gods; and two, it is a proscribed mode of worship because it illegitimately seeks to visually represent its object of worship. We find both these dimensions in the polemics of our two Hindu reformers: both stressed the unity of the one true God and both insisted this deity was beyond representation – the corollary being that all images of deity are fraudulent and that those who worship them engage in a fraudulent practice. Theologically, idolatry means the elevation of something that is finite and contingent to the status of the infinite and absolute. For Rammohun and Dayananda the consecrated images (*mūrtis*) of devotional Hinduism constituted such a confusion of categories.

¹⁷Julien Ries, “Idolatry,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), VII, 73.

¹⁸For a detailed discussion of the concept of idolatry see Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Idolatry in Comparative Perspective,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987), pp. 53-68.

Aniconic and Aniconism

In art history and the iconography of religions, the word iconic refers to “images with a likeness.” The entry on “Images and Iconoclasm” in the *Encyclopedia of World Art* states: “In the narrowest sense, the term ‘iconic’ refers only to portrait representation; and in this context, ‘portrait’ may mean either the generic or the specific effigy of a human being.”¹⁹ In contrast, “. . . the term ‘aniconic’ is understood to convey rejection of the human image, and a divinity represented as a cat or an oak tree or a house – or even one that simply lacks certain characteristic human features such as the face – is therefore considered aniconic.”²⁰ In the Indian context for example, the image of Śiva as Lord of the dance (Nāṭarāja) is an iconic form while the Śiva *linga* is an aniconic representation.²¹ In a broader sense, however, aniconic refers to the general avoidance or rejection of representational images of divinity. I will use the term “aniconism” in this dissertation sometimes interchangeably with iconoclasm to refer to a general attitude championing the avoidance of sacred imagery.

¹⁹Silvio Ferri, “Images and Iconoclasm,” *The Encyclopedia of World Art* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963) VII, p. 799.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 799.

²¹The use of images in Hindu India, in fact, exhibits a series of gradations along the iconic-aniconic continuum. Ananda Coomaraswamy writes: “. . . images in the round may be *avyakta*, non-manifest, like a *lingam*; or *vyaktāvyakta*, partially manifest, as in the case of a *mukha-lingam* [the Śiva lingam with a face]; or *vyakta*, fully manifest in ‘anthropomorphic’ or partly theriomorphic types.” Ananda Coomaraswamy, “The Origin and Use of Images in India,” in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1985), p. 136. This division of *avyakta*, *vyaktāvyakta*, and *vyakta*, is also discussed in Betina Bäumer, “Unmanifest and Manifest Forms According to the Śaivāgamas,” in *Shastric Traditions in Indian Arts*, ed. Anna Libera Dallapiccola (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989) p. 340 ff.

It must also be pointed out that there are other modes of representation than the construction of physical icons. Religions can construct detailed literary depictions of divine beings while eschewing material representation. For instance, the Vedic period (as I will discuss in Chapter 2) had anthropomorphic imagery for its gods expressed in its hymns (*saṃhitā*) even if not in material images or icons. It has often been pointed out by the defenders of material images that a mental image of a deity can be a more insidious “idol” than an image concretized in material form.

II THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Writing about religion can typically be placed under three rubrics: *descriptive*, *explanatory*, and *prescriptive*. In this dissertation Chapters 3 and 4 describe the writings on image-worship of Rammohun and Dayananda; Chapters 5 and 6 discuss explanatory positions on the origin of their ideas; and my concluding comments are prescriptive in so far as they offer a few suggestions as to how this study could contribute to a better understanding of image-refusing religion and in so far as they suggest future avenues of research. In what follows here my main concern is with explanation and the theoretical and methodological problems involved in attempting to arrive at explanation for the anti-idolatry polemics of the two Hindu figures. As stated in my opening discussion, the image-rejecting polemics of two nineteenth-century Hindu reformers present an apparent anomaly because vociferous image-rejection is not usually associated with the Indian religions. Thus the iconoclastic attitudes of Rammohun and Dayananda appear anomalous in the Indian context *because* they appear so *similar* to the polemics voiced on

this subject by ancient Hebrew prophets or sixteenth-century Protestant reformers. The question then becomes how do we explain this similarity? This leads beyond this particular instance to the wider issue concerning *how we explain any startling similarities across any traditions*. This is a fundamental question in the comparative study of religion. Drawing on the work of the historian Arnold Toynbee and the theorist of religion Robert A. Segal, I review the explanatory options offered under the rubrics of diffusion versus independent invention. I also report on a test case of the *diffusion* versus *independent invention* explanation by referring to an article by Michael Pye comparing Nakamoto Tominaga and Gotthold Lessing.

Comparisons in Religion: Explaining Similarities Across Traditions

In an article titled "What Does Comparative Religion Compare?" Robert Florida records the following anecdote from an academic conference:

At the 1985 CSSR meeting I heard a very fine paper by Winnie Tomm in which she demonstrated uncanny resemblances between some aspects of the thought of Baruch Spinoza, the 17-century Dutch philosopher, and Vasubandhu, the fourth-century Indian Mahayana sage. In the question period I asked "What do these resemblances mean?" My question was unskillfully put and Professor Tomm's reply restated the major arguments of the paper, which I had taken as proven. In a second try I made my point more clearly. I was interested in what might explain those remarkable similarities that she had discovered in comparing the two thinkers.

Professor Leon Hurwitz of UBC joked that perhaps Spinoza was the reincarnation of Vasubandhu and the discussion moved on to other matters. It is fun to generate such whimsical answers, but there still seems to be a problem. I am left at sea by studies which successfully compare religious phenomena from apparently unrelated sources and stop with the bare comparison. Do such parallel things necessarily illuminate one another? In the case of Vasubandhu and Spinoza it almost seems to be the

opposite. The remarkable congruency of the two writers is perhaps more mysterious than is each writer by himself.²²

Florida raises an important question regarding the meaning or significance of pointing out striking similarities across two highly divergent religious contexts. What are we to make of this? What is the point of simply juxtaposing disparate yet similar religious expressions without giving an explicit theoretical account of the similarity? Florida indicates that in the case above no explicit explanation of the similarity was provided. Is the similarity simply an interesting curiosity held up before us that we are invited to look at? Are we to come away from the example with the message that two thinkers in disparate cultures can arrive at a very similar position *independently*? This is the lesson suggested by Michael Pye in an article comparing the Japanese thinker Tominaga with the German Gotthold Lessing which unlike the example above, seeks to draw out the significant implications of the comparison.

Pye on Nakamoto Tominaga

Michael Pye's article "*Aufklärung* and Religion in Europe and Japan"²³ is very relevant to the question of the role of diffusion versus independent invention in explaining cross-cultural parallels. In the article he examines the writings of the Japanese

²²Robert Florida, "What Does Comparative Religion Compare?" *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 19/2 (1990):163-164.

²³Michael Pye, "*Aufklärung* and Religion in Europe and Japan," *Religious Studies* 9 (1973): 201-217.

thinker Nakamoto Tominaga (1715-1746).²⁴ Tominaga wrote on religion in Japan in a manner strikingly similar to the historical critical thought on religion generated in eighteenth century Europe. The “modernity” of his rationalist treatment of Japanese religion raises the immediate question as to whether this is the result of Western influence. Pye writes in this regard:

In all, there seems little room to argue that Tominaga’s ideas could possibly have been derived from western sources. Not only is there not a shred of positive evidence for it; but the whole general context of intellectual exchange between Europe and Japan was such that it seems as unlikely that Tominaga was influenced by the European Enlightenment as it is that the latter was influenced by him.²⁵

Tominaga wrote incisive critiques of the religions of his day but Pye argues that despite the daring quality of his thought that there were indeed other thinkers in eighteenth-century Japan with whom his work strikes resonances. Pye continues: “Indeed the modernity of his thought is perhaps only surprising to westerners because they are steeped in the view that modernity is something essentially western, dating perhaps, with respect to attitudes to religion, from the eighteenth century European Enlightenment.” He later adds, “. . . it appears that assumptions about this approach [the historical and critical view of human affairs] as a European phenomenon are in drastic need of revision.”²⁶

²⁴Pye has subsequently published a translation of Tominaga; in the introduction to the book he reiterates his commitment to the view that Tominaga’s writings are autonomous, independent of European influence and “organically related to Asian intellectual traditions.” *Emerging from Meditation*. By Tominaga Nakamoto. Translated with introduction by Michael Pye, (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1990).

²⁵Pye, “*Aufklärung* and Religion”, p. 216.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 202.

Pye's article focuses on comparing Tominaga with Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781). Curiously, both men wrote critiques of the three religions known to them (in Lessing's case Judaism, Christianity, Islam; in Tominaga's, Buddhism, Confucianism, Shinto) using the fiction of a wise old man; in Tominaga's case, the "Old Man," in Lessing's, "Nathan the Wise". This strange stylistic similarity was what first caught Pye's attention but the more important similarity on the level of content was that both men "threw the main weight of meaning into the ethical sphere, where the greatest degree of agreement seemed to be found among the different religions in question."²⁷ Pye sees the main similarity lying not primarily in a similarity between specific religious ideas from the two cultures that the two men examined but rather in the similarity of the "intellectual manoeuvres" the two men employed to re-value and re-vision the traditions:

What does matter is that the way in which people began to deal with the religious traditions which they inherited was fundamentally similar as between Europe and Japan. If this understanding of the basic intention of comparison be granted, it may be admitted that in some respects comparable intellectual manoeuvres may in fact lead to some comparable conclusions. For example, as will be seen, the historical relativism of Lessing and Tominaga and their manner of evaluating religious tradition is connected in each case to a central emphasis on moral perfection as a key characteristic of practical religion.

If the key modes of thought in question are often presumed to be the peculiar product of the western mind, this in turn sometimes leads to the exercise of undue compunction in the applicability of supposedly 'western categories' to oriental ways of thought. Such diffidence sometimes masks a superiority complex and sometimes may be a sincere prostration before the great oriental mystery. However that may be, it has also been reinforced by a philosophical trend which emphasises the difficulty or even the impossibility of transferring criteria of intelligibility from one context of discourse to another. For these reasons it would be a matter of not merely historical interest but perhaps of some intellectual

²⁷Ibid., p. 202.

importance for the present if there were serious comparability in the development of thought about religion in eighteenth-century Europe and eighteenth-century Japan.²⁸

At the end of the article, Pye concludes that the complete lack of evidence for a diffusionist explanation for Tominaga's rationalist views on religion, and, conversely, the strong evidence for indigenous conditions in eighteenth-century Japan for these ideas, together pose a very real challenge to the position that would automatically attribute any rational and ethical critiques of religion to contact with European enlightenment rationalism:

In all, the Tokugawa Period displays both enough consistent trends and a degree of persistent individual innovation for the emergence of a thinker such as Tominaga to be quite explicable in terms of the indigenous intellectual development. There may indeed be other ways in which the period as a whole may be considered parallel to seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe. However that may be, this initial comparison of Tominaga and Lessing seems to suggest that there has been in some sense a rationality of religion which is not merely a western construct. This is important for the comparative study of religion, and important for the relationships between peoples.²⁹

Is Pye flogging a dead horse here? Is it not obvious that there have been rationalist critiques of religion before the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment? One can think of myriad examples: the Hebrew prophets' derision of the idol-worshippers as bowing down to stocks and stones; Plato's critique of Homeric religion; Xenophanes' famous quip that if horses had gods they would look like horses; the Buddhist repudiation of Vedic sacrifice and priestly class; to name a few. At the same time, I think that Pye's

²⁸Ibid., pp. 203-204.

²⁹Ibid., p. 217.

point is that it is necessary to combat an almost instinctual habit in academic circles to see Western influence in any non-Western critical and rational appraisal of religion written in the last few centuries, in other words, to invoke the diffusion model of explanation.

Tominaga and Lessing are writing in the same century, if on different sides of the globe.

Vasubandhu and Spinoza, in the example cited by Florida above, are not only on different sides of the planet but separated by about 1300 years; obviously there is less temptation here to invoke explanation via diffusion. With the Vasubandhu/Spinoza comparison

alluded to by Florida above, the "Independent Invention" approach is the more obvious reaction to the alleged startling parallels. However, with Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati writing in the context of British-ruled India, the case for diffusion is far more plausible. It is also more plausible than in the case of Tominaga writing in Japan.

Sustained Muslim and British presence in India makes the question (or likelihood) of borrowing appear as quite probable. The "intellectual manoeuvres" employed by Rammohun and Dayananda, that is, the types of arguments they use in attacking image-worship, often look similar to those of Western figures such as the Hebrew Prophets, Tertullian or Jean Calvin, not to mention eighteenth-century European rationalists. As well, the fact that they often stress the moral consequences of idolatry accords with my initial hypothesis that in the moral or ethical sphere they are borrowing from Western sources. The Pye article, though, cautions us against immediately invoking diffusion to explain similarities when, as in Tominaga's case, independent invention is a very real possibility. I turn now to the discussion of these two basic explanatory modalities which

have occupied historians, anthropologists, and scholars of religion. I begin with the renowned historian Arnold Toynbee.

Arnold Toynbee on the “Diffusionists”

In an annex to the first volume of *A Study of History*, Toynbee offers an extensive discussion of the debate between diffusionist and independent inventionist theories.³⁰

Toynbee refers to the “Diffusionist School” of British anthropology and contrasts it with the “Uniformitarian School.” The rubrics here are diffusion versus uniformity, the former implying the migration of forms or ideas from one culture to another, the latter indicating independent invention in different cultures without borrowing or influence. For Toynbee, a classic illustration of the diffusionist persuasion was the claim made by several scholars³¹ for the priority of the Egyptian civilization as the source of all others; the claim that Egypt was the only culture that achieved the level of civilization independently.

Toynbee emphatically rejects this thesis of Egypt as the Ur-civilization which diffuses to the cultures of Africa, Europe, and Asia. He finds it especially preposterous in its claim that even Mayan culture and the cultures of the region of the Andes are the outcome of

³⁰Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: OUP, 1934).

³¹ Toynbee cites in a footnote two standard expositions of the “Egyptiac” Diffusionist view (or *doctrine* in his wording): G. Elliot Smith, *The Ancient Egyptians and the Origins of Civilisation* (1923) and W. H. Perry, *The Children of the Sun: A Study in the Early History of Civilisation* (1923). Another example of convinced Diffusionism was the Pan-Babylonian School discussed by Jonathan Z. Smith in *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) pp. 23-29.

Egyptian diffusion. On the other hand, while rejecting “Egyptiac” origins, Toynbee does allow for some merit in the diffusionist position:

No one, of course, who was not an equally dogmatic doctrinaire of ‘the Uniformitarian School’ would seek to deny the validity of Diffusion Theory *in toto*. The most cursory empirical survey of recorded history, from the history of Singer’s sewing-machines *retrorsum* to the history of the Alphabet, makes it manifest that Diffusion has been one of the means by which the techniques and aptitudes and institutions and ideas of human societies have actually been acquired. . . . Moreover, it is no doubt theoretically possible that the diffusion of the achievements of one single original civilization might account for the existence of all the representatives of the species that are known up to date. But this is clearly the limit of the Diffusion Theory’s legitimate application. For, *ex hypothesi*, the theory cannot be called upon to account for the original creation of the subsequently diffused hypothetical civilization, be it Egyptiac or any other. And then, when once it is conceded that one civilization has been acquired by one human society through an original act of creation (instead of through an imitative act of adoption) at least once upon a time, it becomes sheer arbitrary caprice to deny that the same thing may have happened a second time already in some instance recorded or unrecorded, or at least that it is capable of happening at some unpredictable date in the future.³²

Toynbee will argue that the diffusionists are too influenced by the very apparent reality of the twentieth-century spread of Western material goods and by the current

³²Toynbee, p. 425.

military and political hegemony of the Western nations.³³ This leads Western scholars into the error of overestimating the importance of diffusion.

There are, in fact, two fallacies in the assumption that the geneses of civilizations can be accounted for by the fact that certain techniques and aptitudes and institutions and ideas can be proved historically to have been acquired, by the majority of those who have eventually acquired them, through the process of Diffusion.

Diffusion does, of course, account for the present ubiquity of such modern Western manufactures as Singer's sewing-machines, Mauser rifles, and Manchester cotton goods. More than that, it accounts for the present ability, on the part of a certain number of non-Western communities, to manufacture rifles and cotton goods for themselves with a mastery of the Western processes. Diffusion accounts likewise for the ubiquity of the Syriac Alphabet, which has now killed out and superseded every other known script that has ever been invented by any other society except the Sinic. Diffusion accounts, again, for the ubiquity of the Far Eastern beverage tea, of the Arabic beverage coffee, of the Central American beverage cocoa, of the Amazonian material rubber, of the Central American practice of tobacco-smoking, of the Sumeric practice of duodecimal reckoning, and of the so-called 'Arabic numerals', which are perhaps originally a Hindu system of mathematical notation. But the fact that the rifle has attained its ubiquity through diffusion from a single place where it was once, and once only, invented is no proof that the bow-and-arrow attained its earlier ubiquity exclusively in this same manner. It remains equally possible, and indeed equally probable, that the bow-and-arrow has become ubiquitous not only through diffusion from one place but also through independent invention in others.³⁴

³³James M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York and London: Guilford Press, 1993) provides a recent discussion of diffusion theory which takes up on this point. As the subtitle suggests, Blaut argues that diffusionism is part of a Eurocentric conceit about "the European miracle" of world dominance. Diffusionists traced this dominance to inherent European sociocultural qualities instead of colonial expansion. Blaut will argue for colonial hegemony being the cause not byproduct of European dominance. He will also contest the model of modernization as non-European imitation of Western innovation. I return to the debate on modernization as Westernization in the last chapter.

³⁴Toynbee, p. 428.

Toynbee argues that the second fallacy (referred to at the top of the quotation above) is generated by the conflation of civilization with technology. He criticizes the assumption that the essence of civilization is constituted by material entities pointing out that the diffusion of technological inventions is not to be identified with civilization itself:

It is no accident that the outstanding triumphs of Diffusion are most trivial and external and few of them intimate or profound; for. . . the process of Radiation-and-Mimesis, through which Diffusion works in human affairs, is most vigorous and effective in inverse proportion to the value and importance of the social properties that are conveyed by it from the communicative party to the receptive party in this social commerce. The process works with the greatest rapidity and the longest range on the economic plane; less quickly and penetratingly on the political plane; and least potently of all on the cultural or spiritual plane. It is the easiest thing in the world for a Western manufacturer to export a sewing-machine to Bombay or Shanghai. It is infinitely harder for a Western man of science or a Western poet or a Western saint to kindle in non-Western souls the spiritual flame that is alight in his own. Thus the importance of Diffusion in human history will be vastly over-estimated if it is accepted at face value in quantitative terms; for the greater the volume of social commerce, the lower, as a rule, is the spiritual value of the social goods that are exchanged.³⁵

Robert Segal, a well-known essayist on method and theory in the study of religion, takes up elements of Toynbee's discussion and applies the rubrics of independent invention and diffusion to the discussion of cross-cultural comparison of myth. He does this in the context of a book offering a critical evaluation of the American popularizer of myth studies, Joseph Campbell.³⁶ Although he refers primarily to similarities between *myths*, I would argue that the analysis pertains equally well to doctrines, symbols or any other area of perceived similarity between religious cultures.

³⁵Ibid., p. 430.

³⁶Robert A. Segal, *Joseph Campbell: An Introduction* (New York: Mentor, 1990).

How do we explain similarities in religious ideation (in this case myth) across cultures? Segal writes: "There are only two possible explanations for them: independent invention and diffusion. Either every society on its own creates myth, or else a single one does, from which it spreads to others."³⁷ Segal nuances independent invention by suggesting that it can be further divided into two sub-categories: a) independent invention by experience and b) independent invention by heredity. It is the latter mode of parallel or independent invention that finds its most famous expression in Jung's notion of archetypes of a collective unconscious. The schema then looks like this:

1. *Diffusion*
2. *Independent Invention by:*
 - a) *experience*
 - b) *heredity*

Independent invention by experience would refer to a religious idea in culture y looking similar to an idea in culture x due to similar circumstances or environmental conditions eliciting a similar response. Independent invention by heredity, in contrast, holds that the similar motif can be seen as an expression of a universally inherited psychic anatomy. With regards to Rammohun and Dayananda and their iconoclastic stance, I suggest that it is primarily an independent invention generated by experience (the formative disillusionment experiences with images in their childhoods) but that this is then reinforced by image-rejecting precedents in the Indian tradition *and* by models of image-rejection *diffused* from Islamic or European sources. With regards to independent invention by heredity, I would like to explore the possibility that an iconoclastic attitude

³⁷Ibid., p. 202.

(expressed in a desire to sweep away images or rituals that are construed as accretions that clog access to the divine transcendence) is a basic modality of religious consciousness; one that can be contrasted with a sacramental attitude that seeks mediation of the divine immanence. I touch on this topic in Chapter 6.

William Paden and the Call for a New Comparativism

William Paden is a current voice who has defended the importance of comparison in the academic study of religion. However, Paden calls for what is a highly nuanced understanding of comparison. He argues for the recognition that comparison occurs not just between religions but within religions. Comparison in this light is not only comparing Śaṅkara with Aquinas but comparing Śaṅkara with Rāmānuja or even with another *advaitin*. He distinguishes “micro-thematic patterns” occurring inside specific traditions as “intra-cultural” with “macro-thematic patterns” that are cross-cultural:

Comparative analysis works a spectrum between macro-thematic patterns, which are trans-cultural, and micro-thematic patterns, which are intra-cultural. On the one hand, it necessarily engages in cross-cultural analysis which seeks out broad, inclusive generalizations about the structure and function of religious practice and world-building. On the other hand it may engage in intra-cultural analysis by assessing variants of a topic within a single environment. For example, at the macro-thematic level, in order to form a concept about the nature and function of annual religious festivals, the comparativist will have to take into view the practices of multiple cultures. But the micro-thematic study of diverse forms of Ramadan observance in Moroccan villages is also a comparative enterprise.

Micro-thematic comparison typically implicates categories derived from macro-thematic conceptualizations or assumptions – that is, generic

assumptions about religious patterns are usually present in the analysis of religion's local forms.³⁸

Paden then is suggesting that the dynamics of comparison involve a back and forth between local particulars and the general forms perceived by studies across cultures. As seen in the first line of the important quotation given below, he is going to defend this approach from the charge that it levels difference:

Bringing two or more objects into proximity of a common factor is the natural way to discern their differentiating elements more clearly. The colloquial use of the term "comparison" takes this for granted – that is, a buyer "comparing" two cars in the same price range will be keenly interested in the fine points of difference.³⁹

Paden's "new comparativism" thus emphasizes the recognition of the role comparison plays not only in investigating similarities but in highlighting differences.

This remark leads to a strategy of this dissertation which is to compare and contrast Rammohun with Dayananda. They exhibit different degrees of acculturation. Rammohun was a member of the Calcutta economic elite who had worked for the East India Company, collaborated on translations of the Gospels with Protestant missionaries,

³⁸William E. Paden, "Elements of a New Comparativism," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8-1 (1996): 8. The last point in this quotation from Paden is echoed in a recent article by Jeffrey Carter, ". . . any comparative study of religion is faced with a problematic contest between the concern for particularity (historical and cultural detail) and a desire for generality (similarity, relationship, and so on). More than merely fashioning lists or simply declaring superficial commonalities, a sound comparative study somehow negotiates this contest and accommodates both the general and the particular." p. 133 in Jeffrey R. Carter, "Description is not Explanation: A Methodology of Comparison," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 10 (1998): 133-148. It appears to me that the only thing worse than ignoring local particularities is being entirely ignorant of any equivalents in another culture or of any cross-cultural patterns.

³⁹Paden, "Elements", p. 9.

had become fluent in English and at ease in the English milieu. In contrast, Dayananda, born in Gujerat, was a Sanskrit-, Gujerati-, and Hindi-speaking *sannyāsin* or ascetic who did not utilize English and whose milieu would not suggest that his reformist conception of religion and in particular image-worshiping religion could stem entirely from external or foreign sources. In fact, Dayananda's autobiography emphasizes instead an incident in his youth that disillusioned him with image-worship and implanted doubts regarding the type of Purāṇic Hinduism in which he had been raised.⁴⁰ Although Dayananda does not represent a pure "pre-contact" instance of indigenous aniconism, nonetheless he does provide a foil to the experience of Rammohun and one that serves to problematize the *equation* of the articulation of an aniconic Hinduism with foreign influence.

The fact that Rammohun was much more closely linked with the British and Islamic world than Dayananda has another potential bearing on the problem of explaining the source for their iconoclasm. One would anticipate that if indeed moral arguments against images are Semitic or prophetic while metaphysical arguments are Indian, then the reformer closer to the foreign community would likely exhibit more moral and fewer metaphysical arguments than the reformer further from the foreign community and more embedded in the indigenous culture. From the examination of their writings given in Chapters 3 and 4, this does not appear to be the case. Both figures employ moral or even moralistic arguments.

⁴⁰In Chapter 4, this autobiographical report is defended from the suspicion that it might be Dayananda reading a *post facto* justification back into his past rather than a causal factor.

Beyond comparing Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati with each other, I am also comparing their aniconism with earlier instances of aniconism in the history of religion in India. There is a tradition of aniconism in the Indian religions that long predates contact with the Semitic traditions. It is expressed conceptually, for example, in the notion of *nirguṇa* Brahman in the *Upaniṣads* and materially, for example, in the reluctance of the early Buddhists to depict their founder in visible form. I am concerned therefore in the second chapter to trace the history of aniconism in India. If it can be demonstrated that an indigenous tradition of problematizing or prohibiting the visual depiction of deity exists in various phases of the Indian tradition then an alternative model for accounting for the aniconism of these Hindu reform movements is called for, one different from that of exclusive attribution to foreign sources.

My comparison of Rammohun and Dayananda with earlier instances of image-rejection in India has in fact revealed important differences. They both rely heavily on ethical arguments against image-worship and not simply on arguments based on a theology or metaphysics of divine transcendence. Does this imply a borrowing as would be suggested from the sort of East-West assumptions listed at the beginning of this chapter? My investigation (detailed in Chapter 2) on the history of images in India does not entirely support this conclusion as complaints against the unethical manipulation of image-worship exist in India prior to the Western presence. On the other hand, when Rammohun and Dayananda engage in what could be called *moralistic* arguments against images then we may genuinely suspect foreign sources. Also, if the indigenous Indian tradition emphasized metaphysical arguments connected with an apophatic mysticism,

then it would follow that if the two reformers were entirely indigenously aniconic, they would be apophatic mystics. In neither case is this so. Rather, to return to Weberian language, they are advocates, not of “other-worldly mysticism” but rather of “inner-worldly asceticism.”⁴¹

A final point concerning the theoretical considerations of this chapter: a discussion of comparison in religious studies is germane to this dissertation by virtue of the fact that both Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati often wrote in a comparative vein. They compared and contrasted their own version of authentic Hinduism (claimed to be based on the Veda) with what they regarded as the degraded state of current Hinduism and its Purāṇic accretions. They both also reflected on other religions. In the case of Dayananda, in Chapters 13 and 14 of his *Satyarth Prakash*, this was to attack the follies of Christianity and Islam. Rammohan would criticize Christian Trinitarian theology in favour of a Unitarian position but was in general far more irenic than Dayananda and has even been called (in India, by B.N. Seal) “the father of comparative religion.”⁴² Seal also

⁴¹I am using apophatic here to mean that stress on the *via negativa* approach to the divine which insists on the divine’s utter ineffability and unspeakable otherness beyond all name and form. By apophatic mystic I refer to a Weberian “type” who eschews all words and images in seeking union or absorption in the unnameable One. The flight of the alone to the Alone. Despite their refusal of images, this is definitely not the style of either Rammohun or Dayananda. I should add here that it is of course possible for a religious figure to have a “preference for the negative” in approaching God and yet still be active in this world – in, for instance, social reform.

⁴²Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 424. Seal is echoing the evaluation by Sir Monier-Williams who called Rammohun Roy “the first earnest-minded investigator of the science of comparative religion that the world has produced.” Monier Monier-Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India* (London, 1883), p. 479.

claimed that comparative linguistics and comparative mythology originated in India, but as Wilhelm Halbfass observes, "There is, indeed, a very rich and complex tradition of synopsis and classification of linguistic, religious, and philosophical phenomena in classical India, but it remains almost exclusively *within* the Indian sphere."⁴³ It is evident that the act of comparison is indigenous to India, but the form that it takes in Rammohun and Dayananda (making comparisons with non-Indian religions) is a new development, one prompted and propelled by the British presence in the India of their time. Thus the indigenous and external sources of their aniconism are paralleled by the indigenous and external nature of their comparativism.

III METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS – THE PROBLEM: INVESTIGATING AN APPARENT ANOMALY

The elimination of image-worship was *the central* plank in the polemical platform of the two reformers. Why would this have been so? This dissertation aims to deliver detailed explanations for this preoccupation. Given the sheer volume of scholarship that has been devoted to examining Rammohun Roy, Dayananda Sarasvati, and the Brahmo and Arya Samajs, it is surprising that no sustained attention has been paid to explaining why their first and central concern would be the repudiation of idolatry. To my knowledge, as well, no previous attempt has been made to compare these two figures on the idolatry question.

⁴³Halbfass, *India and Europe* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 431.

The core of this project is the analysis of the texts written by Rammohun and Dayananda attacking idolatry. I focus on the *English Works* of Rammohun Roy and the *Satyarth Prakash* of Dayananda. I refer also to the debates held by these two figures with orthodox Hindu pandits on the idolatry issue. I am also concerned, obviously, with the social determinants of these beliefs and seek to contextualize them in the conditions of nineteenth-century British India. This has entailed not only the study of Hindu tract literature on this topic but also a study of documents produced by British authorities and missionary organizations on the idolatry question.

I am not doing original research in the writings or on the lives of my two reformers, nor am I translating hitherto unavailable texts from Sanskrit, Bengali, or Hindi. Detailed textual studies have been produced on the writings of Rammohun Roy and the relationship between his English works and those he published in Bengali. I have relied here on the several important studies by Dermot Killingley and the recent monograph of Bruce C. Robertson. In the case of Dayananda, I have been informed by the work of J. E. Llewellyn and his analysis of Dayananda's mode of scriptural exegesis. The titles for these works are found in my bibliography. This dissertation, while drawing on the textual work of these authors, focuses on the single issue of image-worship and engages in the comparison of the two reformers. I seek also to situate the *micro-thematic* investigation of Rammohun and Dayananda's idolatry preoccupation in the context of what Paden calls *macro-thematic* assumptions and conceptualizations. I detailed three such assumptions concerning East-West polarities at the beginning of this chapter. By conceptualizations, I mean here the dynamics behind aniconism or iconoclasm in religion cross-culturally. One

such dynamic is the possible relation between image-rejection and the process of rationalization and modernization. I am thinking here of the connections between aniconism and demythologization, and the Weberian notions of rationalization, and the “disenchantment of the world” – factors connected with Rammohun and Dayananda’s concerns with the “progress” and “modernization” of India and with their own personal disenchantment with the myths and rituals of their tradition.

To me, what is interesting and important about the arguments against idol-worship from Rammohun and Dayananda are the foundations for these arguments (the *bona fide* theological grounds and the possibly socially determined bases of the arguments). What is also interesting and important is the question; “Is there something universal about image-rejection in religion, and if so, what is the basis for this universality?” More particularly, does the iconoclasm of Rammohun and Dayananda (and Indian aniconic precedents) point in the direction of aniconism being *more* than a Hebraic foible which has subsequently been “diffused” to other environments.⁴⁴

Central to the work of accounting for this apparently anomalous Hindu iconoclasm is the investigation of the variety of influences impinging on these figures which could account for their iconoclastic fervour.⁴⁵ The Islamic tradition present in India

⁴⁴The possible “more” I refer to could possibly be articulated in terms of some link with theological or philosophical profundities, or, it could possibly be connected with some sort of intrinsic link between aniconism in religion and advances in human rationality.

⁴⁵Perhaps one can never adequately untangle all the strands of influence impinging on the lives of these two reformers. One *can*, however, identify what the potential influences were and attempt the difficult task of evaluating their relative importance. In seeking to rank order these influences I am concentrating on the single issue of image-

is an obvious potential influence as is the colonial context with its world of ideas including not only Protestantism but also Deism and post-Enlightenment rationalism. There were also the Indian precedents for image-rejection. Undoubtedly, some Hindus sought a type of religion emulating that of the colonial power while not necessitating conversion. As well, the British appropriation of political institutions, caused in Barbara Metcalf's words: ". . . a kind of retreat to domestic and religious space as sites where cultural values could be reworked and renewed."⁴⁶ In this regard, one such contested space for nineteenth-century Hindus was that of image-worship denounced as idolatry.

To borrow the diathesis-stress⁴⁷ model from medicine, I suggest that an aniconic mode of religiosity which forms one of several strands in the Indian tradition needed the particular social and historical conditions of nineteenth-century India in order to be manifested in the full-blown iconoclastic polemics of these two famous Hindu reformers. I argue that Rammohun and Dayananda drew on aniconic tendencies sometimes manifest,

worship rather than on the full package of their reform agendas. At the same time, I seek to examine the relationship of the idolatry issue to the other items in their reform programs and with regard to the aspirations for India enunciated by both men.

⁴⁶Barbara Metcalf, "Imagining Community: Polemical Debates in Colonial India," in *Religious Controversy in British India*, ed. Kenneth W. Jones (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), p. 231.

⁴⁷The diathesis-stress theory of a disease like schizophrenia concerns the interaction of endowment and environment. A biological and genetic predisposition may remain dormant unless triggered by stressor agents in the environment. As G. Davison and J. Neale put it: "This paradigm focuses on the interaction between a predisposition toward disease – the diathesis – and environmental, or life, disturbances – the stress." *Abnormal Psychology* rev. 6th ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), p. 54. I am in no way implying here that I see the refusal of images as pathological much less as a form of psycho-pathology!

sometimes latent in the Indian tradition. I suggest that the Islamic and British Protestant influences be seen as *catalysts, not external causes* of their iconoclastic program.

However, while I am saying that these two men drew on a strong tradition of metaphysical aniconism in the Indian tradition, I am *not* saying that they did so because they were themselves apophatic mystics. Rather, I want to suggest, this occurred because Rammohun and Dayananda saw the rejection of image-worship as consonant with bringing India into the realm of nascent modernity. I have suggested that in Weberian terms, Rammohun and Dayananda, far from being other-worldly and apophatic mystics, were exemplars and advocates of the sort of "inner-worldly asceticism" that Weber associated with the rise of capitalist and industrial society in the West. I am thus also concerned to probe the links between image-rejection and the processes of economic and political rationalization and modernization. Is there a correlation here? If there is a correlation, as held by several important Western theorists of religion, is it fortuitous or is there a causal connection between aniconic religion and moral, economic, and political development?

IV CONCLUSION

I was led to the topic of my dissertation by interest provoked by the perceived anomaly presented by nineteenth-century Hindu iconoclasts. There appears to be something incongruous about Hindu iconoclasm, and as Jonathan Z. Smith writes: ". . . to play upon Paul Ricoeur's well-known phrase, it is the perception of incongruity that gives

rise to thought.”⁴⁸ Nineteenth-century Hindu iconoclasm seems an anomaly because it appears, at face value, as very different from the typical perception of Hinduism as highly iconic and, simultaneously, as so similar to the iconoclastic stance found in several non-Indian religions. Although I will not concentrate on comparing Rammohun and Dayananda with Hebraic or Islamic or Protestant repudiations of idolatry, I do compare Rammohun with Dayananda. This intra-cultural comparison (in Paden’s terms) is used as a device to get some measure of the degree of influence from “outside” as these two Hindus had different backgrounds and different degrees of contact or affiliation with both Islamic India and the British. I also do comparison along the lines of similarities and differences between their iconoclasm and anti-iconic or aniconic precedents in the history of the Indian tradition. To borrow Paden’s terminology once again, by doing the micro-thematic analysis of aniconism in Indian history I hope to shed light on the macro-thematic issue of aniconism in general. It was the macro-thematic observation of similarities between Rammohun and Dayananda’s idolatry polemics and such polemics voiced by Hebrew prophets and Protestant reformers that sparked my interest in the first place just as Michael Pye’s curiosity was sparked by noticing the similarity between the rhetorical devices used by Gotthold Lessing and Tominaga Nakamoto.

In probing the question of the origin of nineteenth-century Hindu iconoclasm, the standard conceptual framework of “diffusion” versus “independent invention” theory to explain cross-cultural parallels appears as fundamental. I investigate the hypothesis that

⁴⁸Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), p. 294.

the arguments against image-worship voiced by my reformers are authentically indigenous when couched in metaphysical terms but borrowed or “diffused” from European sources when based on moral grounds. Further, my thesis is that the European (and earlier Islamic) presence acted like a catalyst to activate attitudes Rammohun and Dayananda derived from childhood experience. In Indian history one finds moments of aniconism seen for instance in early Buddhist reluctance to portray the Buddha, or the image-rejection of the *nirguṇa bhaktas*, Vīraśaivas, Sants and Sikhs (this will be discussed in some detail in the next chapter). But before Rammohun you do not find vehement iconoclastic polemics. The shift from soft aniconism to full-blown, hard-core iconoclastic polemic, I hold, is the result of the Western catalyst. In medicine the diathesis-stress model holds that a predisposition to disease (diathesis) needs the action of a stressor to manifest in the disease process. I invoke this model, I repeat, with no insinuation of aniconism as pathology. What I am trying to exemplify is a possible process by which image-refusal, something that had always been there in the Indian tradition, if only as a periodically manifesting sub-tradition, comes to be the central focus of these two nineteenth-century reformers.

In the complex area of trying to unravel the strands of what comes from where in the make-up of religious ideation we have already been cautioned by Michael Pye’s discussion of Tominaga that affinities between the thought of a thinker in one culture with the thought of another culture do not necessarily come from borrowing. One should also be cautioned though in the opposite direction with regard to the possibility of the

following dynamic – that religious practitioners often see what is borrowed as being their own. George Foote Moore writing on early Judaism observes:

Borrowings in religion, however, at least in the field of ideas are usually in the nature of the appropriation of things in the possession of another which the borrower recognizes in all good faith as belonging to himself, ideas which, when once they become known to him, are seen to be the necessary implications or complements of his own . . .⁴⁹

In this thesis I am suggesting that aniconism in Rammohun and Dayananda is not so much a borrowing as something arrived at independently through formative childhood experience. In later life, this predisposition is catalyzed by encounter with the colonial conditions of nineteenth-century India, the British presence, and Protestant Christianity. As well, aniconism does have precedents and deep roots in the Indian tradition and, I will further suggest, it can be construed as a modality of religious consciousness that is cross-cultural not by diffusion but by its own internal logic.

Method and Structure of the Thesis

This introductory chapter has presented the problem: How to account for the apparent anomaly presented by these Hindu iconoclasts. Should this anomaly be explained by diffusion theory or by a theory of independent invention? I have reviewed above these two theoretical options. There are three stages in probing this question. The first is to seek for Indian precedents for aniconism, especially if these can be found prior to Indian contact with Islam or Christianity, this would problematize explanation by

⁴⁹George Foote Moore, *Judaism* Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962), p.394-395.

diffusion and support independent invention. Thus, in Chapter 2, I survey the history of image-worship and attitudes to it in Indian history.

The second stage is to examine the lives of the two reformers looking at the possible formative experiences on their development and then moving to an analysis of their writings on the image question. This is done sequentially: in Chapter 3, I examine the life of Rammohun Roy and his anti-idolatry writings and then Chapter 4 does the same for the case of Dayananda. In Chapter 5, I am concerned with comparing and contrasting the lives and idolatry writings of the two figures.⁵⁰ Their very different backgrounds and levels of exposure to and integration with the British presence in India might shed light on how much to attribute to diffusion.

The third stage is to probe whether or not there could be some intrinsic link between image-rejection and the rationalization of religion and society. I focus in my sixth chapter on a third category of argument against images which could be called rationalist. This category of grounds for image-rejection is present in my two reformers and I point to their conviction that destroying idolatry was essential for the development of India. I also examine theoretical positions on religion suggested by Freud and Weber that may illuminate this attitude.

⁵⁰If, as I have indicated above, general Western perception of Hinduism (perhaps “Orientalist” in nature) associates Hindu thought with metaphysical arguments or grounds for aniconism in contrast with a “Western” and “prophetic” denunciation of idolatry more on moral grounds then it would be logical to anticipate that the Indian reformer closer to the colonial culture would evince more ethical arguments against images and fewer metaphysical ones than the Indian reformer further (by way of background) from the foreign environment. In other words, that the man closer to the Protestants would be more protestant in style of argumentation.

The dissertation moves from first order examination of the writings on idolatry of the two Hindu reformers (in Chapters 3 and 4) to second order conceptualizing about these writings (in Chapters 5 and 6). Aniconic precedents in the history of Indian religion problematize interpretation of nineteenth-century Hindu renaissance iconoclasm as simply a product of borrowing or diffusion. On the other hand, the *form* this aniconism takes, its vociferous iconoclasm, its often moralistic tone, its terminology, its rationalist critique which sees idolatry as antithetical to national progress, these features suggest that it should be interpreted as something, if not caused, then catalyzed by contact with foreign religion and culture.

CHAPTER TWO**HISTORY OF IMAGE-WORSHIP IN INDIA****INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter I seek to give a brief overview of the history of images in India and attitudes to them. The initial discussion in section I begins with the Pre-Vedic period, but then focuses on the question “was there image-worship in the time of the Vedas?” The question is important because both Rammohun and Dayananda claimed that original Hinduism (which for them was Vedic) was purely aniconic. My overall concern in this dissertation is not so much with whether they were correct or justified in this claim but rather with investigating their reasons for making it. Nevertheless, I am interested in examining the history of Indian image practices and attitudes because this is clearly germane to the question as to whether or not aniconism or iconoclasm should be regarded as largely a foreign import. I review some of the literature on this question as well as the textual and archaeological evidence. Section II is taken up by a brief overview of the thought of two of the most famous Hindu theologians as it bears on the image question. In section III, I examine precedents of aniconism in the history of Indian religion. These historical instances of aniconism are important for my purposes as potentially being sources that influenced Rammohun and Dayananda and also for the bearing they have on the question as to whether or not a “problem with images” should be seen as primarily (or even solely) a Western (or Semitic) phenomenon or, conversely, a religious modality with a universal dimension.

I HISTORY OF IMAGES IN INDIA: PRE-VEDIC, VEDIC, AND POST-VEDIC

The Beginnings of Art in India: Pre-Vedic

This very brief introduction to the early history of art in India is prompted by the claim made by both Rammohun and Dayananda that true Indian religion had at its beginning been without images.

The history of images opens in the Indian subcontinent with stone age painting and sculpture. The paintings, done on the interior of cave walls, are difficult both to date and to interpret. Huntington indicates that there are over a thousand rock shelters with paintings dating to the Middle and Late Stone Ages within a 150-kilometer radius of Bhopal.¹ Images of cows and bulls exist as rock paintings in Madhya Pradesh dating possibly as early as 8000 B.C.E. As with the interpretation of the cave paintings of Europe, the question as to whether this is a religious art is debatable, as are the iconographic and iconological meaning of these images. Huntington writes:

The popularity of cows and bulls as subjects of early rock paintings . . . suggests that the later emphasis on bovine creatures in Indic culture had its beginning in the Stone Ages. However, it is difficult to determine if these paintings were meant simply to record life or if they served religious or magical purposes as well. Thus, while it may be suggested that the relationship between the early depictions and later emphasis on the subject is more than merely coincidental, the special significance of cows and bulls at an early date remains speculative.²

Terra-cotta figurines are found alongside painted pottery in sites in the northwest of the subcontinent. Some of the female figurines exhibit morphological similarities with the so-

¹Susan L. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India* (New York: Weatherhill, 1985), p. 3.

²*Ibid.*, p. 5.

called “mother-goddess” figures found in the Near East or Europe but again, to give them this label is based on speculation, not certainty.

Indus Valley Culture

The discovery of a prehistoric urban site near the village of Harappa, in what is now Pakistan, in 1856 and systematic excavations there and at Mohenjo-Daro in the 1920's revealed sculptures and intaglio seals from a quite sophisticated urban culture. Phallic emblems suggesting the *liṅga* of later Indian worship feature in the archaeological finds.³ Terra-cotta female figures also appear at Indus Valley sites but again the religious status of these representations remains uncertain. The script of the Indus Valley civilization remains undeciphered so that definite identifications of the significance of such images remains unavailable. The imagery of the intaglio seals has provoked much speculation that here we have in prototype many of the iconographic motifs of the later Indian religions. The best-known of these seals has come to be known as the “proto-Śiva” as it depicts a male figure seated in what might be a yogic pose and surrounded by animals, suggesting the much later image of Śiva-Pāśupati or Lord of the animals.⁴

³B.B. Lal writes: “It is . . . probable, though not quite proved, that *liṅga*-worship, yet another facet of Śaivism, may have been in vogue during Harappan times.” B.B. Lal, *The Earliest Civilization of South Asia* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 1997), p. 225.

⁴The conjectural identification of this seal as a “proto-Śiva” was first made by Sir John Marshall, *Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization*, vol. 1 (London: A. Probsthain, 1931), p. 52 ff. The proto-Śiva interpretation is accepted recently by B.B. Lal, *The Earliest Civilization of South Asia*, p. 225. Asko Parpola provisionally accepts the interpretation of the seal as showing a “Lord of Beasts” but suggests that the so-called “yogic pose” may, in fact, imitate the Proto-Elamite way of representing seated bulls. Asko Parpola, “New Correspondences between Harappan and Near Eastern Glyphic Art,” in *South Asian Archaeology 1981*, ed. F.R. Allchin (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984).

Another very well-known seal from Mohenjo-Daro portrays a figure standing in a tree before whom kneels a (votary?) figure who appears to propitiate the first figure as indicated by a kneeling supplicant pose with raised arms. The leaves of the tree resemble the pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), and their form recalls a motif seen even in pre-Harappan pottery. Later this tree and its leaves become associated with the Buddha, most likely because the earliest art in the service of Buddhism drew on an already ancient association between royal or divine personages and sacred trees. Parpola identifies a human head on a sacrificial altar beneath the tree and compares it with the much later human sacrifice connected with the cult of Durgā. At the lowest register of this seal are shown seven human figures, usually identified as female, and frequently compared with the seven “mothers” or *sapta-mārkā* who come to be associated with aspects of Durgā. Parpola summarizes his discussion of this image: “. . . the seal probably belonged to the high priest or priestess of a goddess, who was a predecessor of the later Durgā.”⁵

Some scholars have held that the Indus Valley civilization evidences not only the presence of religious images but that those images themselves depict image-worship. R.P. Chanda had argued: “The excavations at Harappa and Mohenjodaro have brought to light ample evidence to show that the worship of images of human and superhuman beings in *yoga* postures, both seated and standing, prevailed in the Indus Valley in the Chalcolithic period. This evidence consists of seals bearing figures in *yoga* posture attended by

⁵Asko Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), p. 261. The identification is, of course, debated. Walter Fairervis identified the whole scene as a wedding ceremony. Parpola generally seeks to demonstrate continuity between Indus forms and linguistic and iconographic manifestations of much later Hinduism. He holds that the language of the Indus peoples was a form of Dravidian.

votaries . . . ”⁶ Although not convinced that the seals actually depict image-worship, I believe it is practically incontrovertible that the seals themselves have religious content (however opaque the specific meaning of this content may be) and that therefore it is apparent that the Harappan or Indus Valley civilization was not aniconic.⁷ According to the generally accepted view of Western scholarship, the Indus civilization collapsed around 1500 B.C.E. and was succeeded by a period labeled Vedic, a term taken from the sacred literature of the people who called themselves *ārya* or “noble.”⁸

⁶Ramaprasad Chanda, *Medieval Indian Sculpture in the British Museum* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1936), p. 9.

⁷ As already acknowledged, the exact religious interpretation of artifacts from Indus Valley sites has long been contested. For example, see: Herbert P. Sullivan, “A Re-examination of the Religion of the Indus Civilization,” *History of Religions* 4, no. 1 (1964): 115-125; Doris Srinivasan, “The So-Called Proto-Śiva Seal from Mohenjo-Daro,” *Archives of Asian Art* 29 (1975-76): 47-58. Srinivasan returns to this theme again in “Unhinging Śiva from the Indus Civilization,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1 (1984): 77-89. E.C.L. Caspers sees “shamanic” survivals in the iconography of the Indus seals, “Rituals and Belief Systems in the Indus Valley Civilization,” in *Ritual, State and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J.C. Heesterman*, ed. A. Van Den Hoek, D. Kolff, M. Oort (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992).

⁸The generally accepted view of Western Indology can be called the “Aryan migration (or invasion) thesis” which holds that the people who designated themselves as Aryan, came into the subcontinent from outside, probably from the Caucasus, around the middle of the second millenium B.C.E. This view has been hotly contested in India in recent years. See, for example, N.R. Waradpande, *The Aryan Invasion: A Myth* (Nagpur: Baba Saheb Apte Smarak Samiti, 1989). Scholars in the West have also been reconsidering the linguistic and archaeological evidence for the migration theory. See, for example, J.G. Shaffer, “The Indo-Aryan Invasions: Cultural Myth and Archaeological Reality,” in *The People of South Asia: The Biological Anthropology of India, Pakistan, and Nepal*, ed. J.R. Lukacs (New York: Plenum Press, 1984) or the essays in *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language, Material Culture and Ethnicity*, ed. George Erdosy (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1995). This controversy is outside the scope of this dissertation.

The Vedic Period

The father of Vedic studies in the West, Max Müller, was emphatic about the absence of image-worship among the Vedic Aryans: "The religion of the Vedas knew no idols. The worship of idols in India is a secondary formation, a later degradation of the more primitive worship of ideal gods. . . ."⁹ Müller was echoing H.H. Wilson who wrote: "the worship of the Vedas is for the most part domestic worship, consisting of prayers and oblations offered, in their own houses, not in temples, by individuals for individual good and addressed to unreal presences, not to visible types. In a word, the religion of the Vedas was not idolatry."¹⁰ I cite these early Orientalists because their work was known to the two nineteenth-century reformers. Wilson was a personal acquaintance of Rammohun and later, Dayananda would come to know the work of Müller.

The conviction that the Vedic period was aniconic was shared by another Western pioneer of Vedic studies, A.A. Macdonell, who wrote ". . . no mention of either images or temples is found in the Ṛgveda."¹¹ An aniconic view of the Vedic period has also predominated in twentieth century Indology. Kane in his *History of Dharmaśāstra* endorses this position:

It is extremely doubtful whether images were generally worshiped in the ancient Vedic times. In the Ṛgveda and the other Vedas, there is worship of Agni, the Sun, Varuṇa and various other deities; but they were worshiped in the abstract, as powers and manifestations of the one Divine

⁹Cited in Banerjea, p. 43.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 43.

¹¹Ibid., p. 43.

Person or as separate deities or functions behind natural phenomena or cosmic processes.¹²

Kane adds later: "One can say without much fear of contradiction that the religious practices among the higher strata of the Vedic Aryans did not include the worship of images in the house or temple."¹³ This position is echoed by Dandekar who writes: "It is well known that the religion of Vedic Indians, as represented in the Vedic literature, is essentially uniconic [*sic*]."¹⁴ Jan Gonda has commented on the absence of images in Vedic religion in contrast with later Hinduism:

It is . . . completely correct to say that there is an enormous difference between the pūjā of the Hindu period and the Vedic yajña. The often extremely complicated Vedic 'sacrifice', the centre of the aniconic Aryan cult, involving the slaughter of animals and the participation of many (up to 16 or 17) specialized priests contrasts markedly with the basic rite of Hinduism, the so-called pūjā which generally consists of the worship of a god in the form of an icon, to which flowers, betel quids, water for washing the feet and other – as a rule vegetarian – presents are offered. The image in which the god is believed to have in some sense taken up his abode is honoured, fed, fanned and placed in a shrine or temple, erections and edifices which in the Vedic cult are conspicuous by their absence.¹⁵

¹² Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol. 2, Part 2 (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1968-75), p. 706.

¹³Ibid., p. 707.

¹⁴R.N. Dandekar, *Vedic Mythological Tracts* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1979), p. 245.

¹⁵Jan Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), p. 16. Gonda goes on, however, to critique those authors who, in his view, overemphasize the differences between "Vedism" and "Hinduism" at the cost of ignoring themes of continuity (p. 16 ff.).

Stephanie Jamison, a Vedic specialist, has also recently remarked on the aniconic nature of the religion of the period. She writes of the characteristics of Vedic religious practice:

First and foremost is the complete absence of temples or other buildings permanently devoted to religious performances. . . . Moreover, there is no evidence for icons or images representing gods or their attributes. There are, of course, physical objects used in the ritual, but these are of a practical and necessary sort: baskets, pots, cups, and so forth to contain and transport the substances to be offered, spoons and ladles for dipping out liquids, a spade for digging, a wooden sword for drawing lines on the ground, a post for tying up the animal victim, and similar objects. Though these are addressed and often propitiated in the course of the ritual, they do not in general have an independent divine status. Moreover, they are ordinarily newly made for each ritual, of homely materials, so that they do not acquire the status of ancient and hallowed objects on which precious materials are lavished. . . . Vedic religion is the ideally portable religion.¹⁶

That Vedic religion was image-less is a view that was contested by scholars such as Bollensen, Venkateswara and Battacharya. Bollensen, writing in Muir's *Original Sanskrit Texts*, argued that the anthropomorphic descriptions of deities in the Ṛgveda indicated the presence of a Vedic iconography. S.V. Venkateswara came to hold that certain Ṛgvedic verses referred to actual images. The verse most discussed in this context is Ṛgveda 4.24.10:

*ka imarṇ daśabhirmamendram krīṇāti dhenubhiḥ/
yadā vṛtrāṇi jaṃghanadathainam me pundardadat//*

¹⁶Stephanie W. Jamison, *The Ravenous Hyenas and the Wounded Sun: Myth and Ritual in Ancient India* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), pp. 16-17.

Who will buy this my Indra for ten cows? When he has
slain his foes, he may give him back to me?¹⁷

Venkateswara comments: "The context shows that there were permanent images of Indra made and hired for what was in probability an Indra festival, and there were apparently images of Vṛtra made for each occasion, whence the plural *Vṛtrāṇi* to be slain by Indra."¹⁸ (Vṛtra is the storm cloud demon defeated by Indra.) In a similar vein one could bring forward Ṛgveda 8.1.5 "O Indra! I shall not give thee for even a great price, not even for a hundred, a thousand or an *ayuta* (ten thousand)." Kane holds that these are more likely hyperbolic statements of devotion to Indra rather than references to actual Indra images. He suggests that although there are Ṛgvedic passages that describe the gods in anthropomorphic terms, these may be simply poetic or metaphoric.¹⁹ This position is taken also by Banerjea who writes: "After a critical consideration of all these data, it can be confidently observed that, even when some references to symbols or sensible representations are found in the Vedic and Brahmanic texts, this does not necessarily mean that they were the images proper of the respective deities."²⁰

¹⁷Ralph T. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Ṛgveda* (first published 1889; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973), p. 218, says this verse which speaks of the buying and selling of Indra refers to "the settlement of the fee to be paid to the priest for obtaining Indra's favour by sacrifice."

¹⁸Cited in Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, p. 45.

¹⁹Pandurang Vaman Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra* Vol. 2, Part 2, p. 706.

²⁰Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, p. 61. Krishna Kumar, "Idolatry in the Ṛgvedic Age: Some Literary and Archaeological Evidence," *Archiv Orientalni* 56 (1988): 110-113 offers the opposing view. He argues that the Copper Hoard Culture of proto-historic North India in which spear-heads, hatchets and rings have been found,

Banerjea²¹ points out that the word *pratimā*, which can mean an image, likeness, symbol or idol, is found in Ṛgveda 10.130.3 where it is used with reference to questions being asked about the nature of the sacrifice:

What was the original model, and what was the copy, and what was the connection between them? What was the butter, and what the enclosing wood? What was the metre, what was the invocation, and the chant, when the gods sacrificed the god? ²²

As Banerjea points out, there are no grounds for reading *pratimā* (“model” in the above) as a reference to images of the gods.

Far from finding evidence of image-worship in the Vedic *Samhitās*, many scholars have held that certain terms in the Ṛgveda were used by the Indo-Aryans as terms of derision for the aboriginal and conquered peoples of the subcontinent and their image-worship. Such scholars have taken the view that references in the Ṛg Veda (7.21.5 and 10.99.3) to *śiśnadevaḥ* refer to worshippers of the phallus, a pejorative term for the non-Ṛgvedic people and their practices. To take this view would be to read *śiśnadevaḥ* as *śiśna devaḥ yeṣāṃ te*, or “those who take the phallus as their god.” Kane, for one, questions this interpretation: even if persons under this rubric are condemned, it is

includes as well anthropomorph figures of beaten copper. Kumar is prepared to support the view that these copper “anthropomorphs” may be “reasonably identified with the Ṛgvedic images of god Indra” (p.112). Kumar concludes: “Thus on the basis of combined testimony of literary and archaeological evidence we arrive to the conclusion that some sort of symbol and crude idol worship was undoubtedly in vogue during the late Ṛgvedic age. In addition to the sun-symbols, images of Indra, Aditi or Pṛthivī and Vṛṣabha were also adored by the early Aryans” (p.112).

²¹Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, p. 39.

²²*The Rig Veda*, trans. Wendy O’Flaherty (London: Penguin, 1981).

possible that this word is also used in a metaphorical sense for those enslaved by sexual gratification. This is, in fact, the interpretation offered by the famous medieval commentator, Sāyaṇa.²³

Another term brought forward as a possible reference to idol-worship in the period of the Ṛgveda is *mūradeva*. This is found at Ṛgveda 7.104.24; 10.87.2; 10.87.14. The translation is uncertain. Sāyaṇa says it refers to a class of demons; Griffiths gives it as “the foolish gods’ adorers” and Wilson as “those who believe in vain gods.” The word *mūra* is listed by Apte²⁴ as meaning bewildered or foolish but by Monier Williams²⁵ as something firm and fixed. If we take it as derived from the verbal root *mūr* (to become rigid or solid) then it would have a shared derivation with the classical word for an image, *mūrti*. A.C. Das suggests this latter sense and writes that the word “may refer to persons who believed in and worshipped ‘images’ which were lifeless and senseless objects.”²⁶ Like the word *śiśnadevāḥ*, the meaning of *mūradeva* is ambiguous; whether these terms refer to the unchaste and the unwise or to those whose gods are phalli and “stocks and stones” is a matter that resists conclusive determination.²⁷

²³Banerjea offers an extensive discussion of the debate on this term in *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, p.64 ff.

²⁴V.S Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Revised and enlarged edition (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co., 1986).

²⁵Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. First published 1899 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988).

²⁶Cited in Banerjea, p. 65.

²⁷Writing in the spirit of current Hindutva revisionism, N.R. Waradpande states: “It is very often said that the ‘Aryas’ were sacrificers and opponents of idol-worship, and

With regards to the exact nature of religious practices in the Indus Valley civilization and in the Vedic Period, R.C. Majumdar offered the following rather paradoxical observation back in 1959. It remains relevant to current debates over Aryan migration and the nature of Indus and Vedic cultures. It should perhaps act as a caution to making definitive pronouncements on the presence or absence of image-worship in the periods:

Now there is one curious fact in regard to the beginnings of Indian history. For the Indus Valley Culture, we have abundant archaeological data, but no written evidence. For the early Vedic culture we have abundant written evidence, but no archaeological data. So our knowledge of both is bound to remain very incomplete.²⁸

Post-Vedic Developments²⁹

The ancient *vedāṅga* literature of the fifth century B.C.E. includes the Nirukta attributed to Yāska. This text examines the etymology and definition of words used in the

that they specifically hated phallus-worship, these phallus-worshippers were non-Aryan. There is not a letter to support the idea that the Rigveda abhors idol-worship." Waradpande like other Hindutva theorists, rejects the notion of "Aryan" colonizers attacking the practices of an indigenous non-Aryan substratum. He adds later: "So even if Shisndeva [*sic*] is translated as phallus-worshipper, and the hymn containing it is interpreted as displaying hatred of phallus-worship, no support for the Arya-non-Aryan conflict can be found. The cleavage was an internal cleavage within the Vedic fold." N.R. Waradpande, *The Aryan Invasion: A Myth*, pp. 129, 133.

²⁸R.C. Majumdar, "Rgvedic Civilization in the Light of Archaeology," *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* 15 (January-April 1959): 1-15. That we have no archaeological data for the Vedic period would of course be contested by some contemporary archaeologists.

²⁹My discussion in this section has been informed by Richard H. Davis' paper, "Indian Image-Worship and its Discontents" presented at a conference on "Iconoclasm: The Possibility of Representation in Religion" held in Heidelberg, Germany in 1997.

Vedas. An important passage discussing anthropomorphic descriptions of the Vedic gods is quoted by Banerjea:

Now follows discussion of the form of the gods (*ākāra-cintanam devatānām*). Some say, they resemble human beings in form (*puruṣavidhāḥ*), for their panegyrics and their appellations are like those of sentient beings; and their limbs are referred to in the hymns. . . . They are also associated (in their hymns of praise) with objects with which men are associated. . . . Moreover, they are associated with the sort of actions with which men are usually associated. Others say, the gods do not resemble human beings in form (*apuruṣa-vidhāḥ*), because those gods that are (actually) seen do not resemble human beings in form; as, for instance, Agni (fire-god), Vāyu (wind-god), Āditya (sun-god), Pṛthivī (earth-goddess), Candramas (moon-god), etc. As to the view that panegyrics of the gods are like those of sentient beings, (they reply) that inanimate objects, beginning from dice and ending with herbs, are likewise praised. As to the view that the human limbs of the gods are referred to in the hymns (they reply) that this (treatment) is accorded to inanimate objects As to the view (that in their hymns of praise the gods are associated) with objects with which men are associated, (they reply) that it is just the same (in the case of inanimate objects). . . . Or the gods may resemble human beings in form as well as may not resemble human beings in form. Or the gods who do not resemble human beings in form exist in the form of Karman (sacrifice); as for instance, the sacrifice performed by the Yajamāna (sacrificer); This is the opinion of those who know the legends.³⁰

The passage indicates that by the time of Yāska, that is, by at least the fifth century B.C.E., a discourse had arisen as to the nature of the gods and their representation, both literary and material.

One of the first firm pieces of textual evidence for images in India comes from the work of the great Sanskrit grammarian, Pāṇini, who is to be dated probably fourth century B.C.E. and no later than 300 B.C.E. The *sūtra* is 5.3.99: *jīvikārthe cāpaṇye*.

Heinrich von Stietencron writes:

³⁰Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, pp. 49-50.

The *sūtra* . . . is intended to regulate the formation of the names of divine images. To some of them the suffix *-ka* is added, to others it is not; and with the latter deals this *sūtra*. From the commentators we know that *Pāṇini*'s rule is based on a distinction between images which are meant for sale and others which were worshipped and cared for by custodians called *devalaka*. The rule applies to the latter. These images can be either fixed in a shrine (*acala*) or carried from place to place (*cala*). In both cases they are meant for worship (*pūjārtha*) and are a source of livelihood (*jīvikā*) to their custodians who receive the gifts of the devotees. The *devalakas* show the images and act as *pūjarīs*, but they do not sell them: their images are not for sale (*apaṇya*). Such images, according to *Pāṇini*, would be named as *Śiva* or *Skanda*, without the suffix *-ka*. Opposed to these are images which were displayed for sale. They too were a means of livelihood for their owners, but these owners kept them only for trade and not for the sake of worship (*pūjārtha*). Such images would be called *Śivaka* or *Skandaka*.³¹

Patañjali, commenting on this *sūtra* in his *Mahābhāṣya*, says that the Mauryan kings had images used for obtaining gold; he uses the word *ārca* here, a term to become very important in later Śrīvaiṣṇava Hinduism.³²

In the *Gr̥hyasūtras* we find many references to images of the gods. Banerjea remarks: "The characteristic terms . . . used in the *gr̥hyasūtras* . . . are *devagr̥ha*, *devāgāra*, *devakula*, *devāyatana* etc., which denote the shrines of the gods; but, by the time the latest section of the Vedic literature was composed, images and temples had already been accepted by the higher sections of the Vedic Indo-Aryans."³³ Kane states that

³¹Heinrich von Stietencron, "Orthodox Attitudes Towards Temple Service and Image Worship in Ancient India," *Central Asiatic Journal* 21 (1977): 126-138. It is significant too, as von Stietencron points out, that the names of the gods connected with the new temple worship (as listed in Panini) are Śiva, Vaiśrāvana, Skanda, Vasudeva – they are not Indra, Agni, Varuṇa or the Ādityas of the older Vedic pantheon. "The new mode of worship, therefore, was introduced with new gods." (p. 130)

³²Banerjea, p. 40.

³³Ibid., p. 55.

these terms occur in the Mānava, Baudhāyana and Śāṅkhyāyana *Gṛhyasūtras* and the *Dharmasūtras* of Gautama and Āpastamba to be dated no later than the fifth or fourth centuries B.C.E.³⁴ The archeological record shows the beginning of Indian sculpture (aside from the neolithic and Indus material) in the Mauryan Period (ca. 323 - 185 B.C.E.) and the Śuṅga Period (second century to first century B.C.E.). In the literary record, images are clearly referred to in the *Manu smṛti* composed probably just before the turn of the Common Era.³⁵ Manu states at 4.39 that a *brahmacārin* should circumambulate images encountered on a journey:

When he encounters a mound of earth, a cow, an image of a god, a priest, clarified butter, honey, a crossroads, or famous trees he should circumambulate them to the right, clockwise.³⁶

The Shift from *Yajña* to *Pūjā*

The shift from Vedic sacrifice to worship centred on temple or home images of deities is a major development in the history of Hinduism. As J.N. Farquhar notes, the gap between the two orientations is indicated by the shift in vocabulary:³⁷

³⁴Kane, p. 709.

³⁵The *Manu smṛti* or *Mānavadharmasāstra* is often estimated to have been composed between the second century B.C.E. and second century C.E. Doniger suggests “around the beginning of the Common Era or slightly earlier.” See following note.

³⁶*The Laws of Manu*, trans. Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (London: Penguin, 1991).

³⁷J.N. Farquhar, “Temple-and-Image Worship in Hinduism,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1928):15-23.

The Vedic cultWorship: *yajña*Priest: *hotṛ*The Temple cultWorship: *pūjā*Priest: *pūjārī*

Heinrich von Stietencron emphasizes that the shift in religious practice was not without its conflicts:

The process of change from the Vedic altar to the Hindu temple and from the moving celestials to the stationary images was accompanied by bitter feuds between traditionalists and innovators. Orthodox Vedic Brahmans were furiously opposed to the new popular trends in religion. They also fought relentlessly against the new type of priests who were in charge of the temples and their images, who organized processions of the deity through the village street and treated the deity in analogy to a human king. In a later period these priests became known as *sevakas*, the servants of god. But they had to struggle for centuries against the social discrimination which they experienced from the orthodox Brahmans.³⁸

Von Stietencron does not see this as a result of class conflict, with the brahmins trying to keep out a new group of ritual specialists originating in the lower classes. He sees it as an internecine struggle *between* brahmins over economic interests and over religious orientations. In the Vedic view, the god either came to the place of sacrifice on the invocation of the priests or he stayed in heaven and the sacrificial food was taken up to him by the flames of Agni. In the new orientation, the god now resides on earth in his image-form in his temple and it is the devotee who goes to the god rather than the god being summoned by the ritual specialist. Indeed, the very power and prestige of the brahmin was based on his alleged ability to invoke the deities and summon them for help. Von Stietencron argues that the Vedic priest's social status was threatened by the

³⁸Von Stietencron, "Orthodox Attitudes" p. 126.

democratizing of access to the divine implied in the deity being permanently present in the temple image. This caused a schism within the brahmin class – some brahmins deeming it prudent to integrate the new religious practices into the brahminic sphere and other brahmin purists denouncing their colleagues who did so by calling them *patita*, fallen from brahmin rank to that of *śūdra*.

The *Manu smṛti* reflects the orthodox view.³⁹ Here, the priests who earn their livelihood in carrying out the service of the image, who live on the proceeds offered to the gods, are subjected to reproach. In *Manu* 3.152 they are compared to doctors or shopkeepers who offer services for money. Such priests should not be used for making offerings to the *pitṛs* (ancestors):

cikitsakā devalakā māṃsavikrayiṇas tathā'

vipaṇena ca jīvanti varyyāḥ syur havyakavyayoḥ//

Doctors, priests who attend on idols, people who sell meat,

and people who support themselves by trade are to be

excluded from offerings to the gods and ancestors.⁴⁰

This passage indicates the lower status of the *devalaka brāhmaṇa* [brahmins] who depended upon the care of images. They are to be barred from the *śrāddha* rites. Von Stietencron sees this as an attempt by the traditionalist brahmins to keep the temple priests out of the *śrāddha* and *saṃskāra* rites. He cites Kullūka's commentary on *Manu* 3.152 which reads:

³⁹Tbid., p. 133.

⁴⁰*The Laws of Manu*, trans. Doniger/Smith, p. 59.

*devalakaḥ pratimāparicārakaḥ, vartanārthatvenaitat karma kurvato 'yam
niṣedho na tu dharmārtham/*

This suggests that the *devalaka* (referring to the priests who live on the god's treasures) serve the deities not out of religious zeal but for the sake of profit.⁴¹ They are like parasites and as Manu says in 11.26, in the next world they shall feed on carrion:

*devasvaṃ brāhmanasvaṃ vā lobhenopahinasti yaḥ/
sa pāpātmā pare loke grdhrocchiṣṭena jīvati//*

An evil-hearted man who greedily seizes what belongs to the gods or the priests lives in the next world on the leftovers of vultures.⁴²

Kane remarks on this period: "The institution of worship of images had not an hoary antiquity behind it in the time of Manu, as that of priests officiating at the śrauta or gṛhya sacrifices had in his day; besides such men must have neglected the principal duty of a brāhmaṇa (viz. Study of the Veda) and so they were looked down upon."⁴³

In all this it may be that we are encountering a sort of sour grapes attitude on the part of the traditionalist Vedic priests when they saw the money accruing to their temple-based colleagues.

The continued and bitter polemics against temple priests were partly rooted in a growing jealousy which was prompted by the rapid accumulation of wealth in those temples . . . with the rising popularity of temples and images there arose a completely new situation. Now the god himself, visibly manifest in his image, was actually residing in a terrestrial

⁴¹Von Stietencron, "Orthodox Attitudes" p. 134.

⁴²*The Laws of Manu*, trans. Doniger/Smith .

⁴³Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, p. 712.

abode. Now he himself could be the receiver of donations, he himself could be the owner and guardian of his treasures. The former awkward situation that greedy Brahmans had to be presented with gifts for their services was now to a large extent removed. . . . Consequently, more and richer donations of land, cattle or gold were made to the god in the temple than to any of the orthodox Brahmans. Moreover, the number of potential and actual donors had increased considerably, for now it included not only members of the three upper classes but the whole lowcaste population also, some of whom were well-to-do people by means of trade.⁴⁴

Evidence for the capacity of images to be used in a mercantile (or mercenary) manner is afforded by Patañjali's *bhāṣya* on Pāṇini 5.3.99:

*apanya ityucyate tatredam na sidhyati / Śivah Skandah Viśākha iti / kim
kāraṇam / Mauryairhiranyārthibhirarcāḥ prakalpitāḥ / bhavet tāsū na
syāt / yāstvetāḥ sampratipūjārthāstāsū bhaviṣyati //*

As Banerjea observes, this passage is significant not only in illustrating that the gods in worship had shifted from the Vedic pantheon to Śiva and Skanda, but importantly for our purpose here, in alluding to the Mauryan kings replenishing their treasuries by the selling of images – images which were clearly in some demand by that period.⁴⁵

The potential of temple-based image-worshipping religion as a source of revenue is also illustrated in a decidedly Machiavellian passage from Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, a text which probably dates back to Mauryan times (Kauṭilya was held to have been Chandragupta Maurya's minister). This is found in *Arthaśāstra* 5.2 "Replenishment of the Treasury." In this section the text suggests that the *devatā-dhyaksa* or Superintendent of Temples can raise money in a pinch by milking pilgrims at religious fairs and even faking

⁴⁴Von Stietencron, "Orthodox Attitudes" pp.126-138.

⁴⁵Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, p.85.

miracles associated with images. The passage is worth giving here at length not only because of its references to temple-wealth and to the use of images but also because it is a very early admission of the sort of fraud that Rammohun and Dayananda would come to rail against:

Spies under the guise of sorcerers, shall, under the pretence of ensuring safety, carry away the money, not only of the society of heretics and of temples, but also of a dead man and of a man whose house is burnt, provided that it is not enjoyable by Brāhmans.

The superintendent of religious institutions may collect in one place the various property of the gods of fortified cities and country parts, and carry away the property (to the king's treasury).

Or having on some night set up a god or an altar, or having opened a sacred place of ascetics, or having pointed out an evil omen, the king may collect subsistence under the pretence of holding processions and congregations (to avert calamities).

Or else he shall proclaim the arrival of gods, by pointing out to the people any of the sacred trees in the king's garden which has produced untimely flowers and fruits.

Or by causing a false panic owing to the arrival of an evil spirit on a tree in the city, wherein a man is hidden making all sorts of devilish noises, the king's spies, under the guise of ascetics, may collect money (with a view to propitiate the evil spirit and send it back).

Or spies may call upon spectators to see a serpent with numberless heads in a well connected with a subterranean passage, and collect fees from them for the sight. Or they may place in a bore-hole made in the body of an image of a serpent, or in a hole in the corner of a temple, or in the hollow of an ant-hill, a cobra, which is, by diet, rendered unconscious, and call upon credulous spectators to see it (on payment of a certain amount of fee). As to persons who are not by nature credulous, spies may sprinkle over, or give a drink of such sacred water as is mixed with anaesthetic ingredients, and attribute their insensibility to the curse of the gods.⁴⁶

Thus, we can see that by Mauryan times images were not only employed in ritual but were also a valuable commodity or, as in the passage above, a means of duping the

⁴⁶*Kautilya's Arthasastra*, trans. R. Shamasastri (Mysore: Mysore Printing and Publishing House, 1967).

credulous. We have also seen above the critique offered in Manu of unscrupulous usages of images. The retort of the temple priests to the attacks by the Vedic *hotṛs* was that the *darśan* [the auspicious sight] of the temple image was worth more than a hundred Vedic sacrifices. Emphasizing the ideal of non-injury (*ahimsā*), these priests inveighed against animal sacrifice. Citing the *Samba* and *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*, von Stietencron writes:

... statements comparing the results of visiting a temple with those of *aśvamedha* sacrifice recur frequently in the *Purāṇas* and in the *Mahābhārata* in connection with the praise of sacred places (*tīrtha*) and the propagation of *bhakti*. Even the Vedas, the *agnihotra* and sacrifices rich in fees are not worth a 16th part of the prostration with *bhakti* in front of the deity.⁴⁷

Explaining the Shift to Image-Worship

How are we to account for the shift from *Devayajña* to *Devapūjā*? Kane writes:

When Vedic sacrifices became less and less prevalent owing to various causes (particularly because of the doctrine of *ahimsā*, the various *upāsānas* and the philosophy of the Absolute set forth in the Upaniṣads), there arose the cult of the worship of images. Originally, it was not so universal or elaborate as it became in medieval and modern times.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Von Stietencron, "Orthodox Attitudes" p.132. To illustrate here one might choose *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 6.3.24: "Alas! The average learned man (well-versed in the scriptures) – whose judgement is completely bewildered by the all-powerful (divine) *Māyā* (deluding potency) and whose thought is focused on (the teachings of) the three Vedas, full of sweet and attractive encomiums (on the efficacy of rituals leading to heaven) – generally does not realize the aforesaid glory of the Divine Name, and remains engaged in grand sacrificial undertakings." *Srīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa* Part 1, C.L.Goswami, trans., (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1971).

⁴⁸Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra* Vol. 2, Part 2, p. 712.

Kane here alludes to three developments that contribute to the shift in religious praxis: the *ahimsā* doctrine, the rise of *bhakti*, and the speculations of the Vedānta.

Ahimsā

Ahimsā, the doctrine of non-injury or non-harming, is first attested to in Aśoka's inscriptions of the third century B.C.E.⁴⁹ Given the meat-eating and animal sacrifice indicated in the Vedas, conjecture has it that *ahimsā* is an extra-Vedic concept perhaps originating with the Jains. The ethos of not harming any sentient being or form of life could certainly interfere with animal sacrifice. It is interesting that image-worship appears at around the same time as *ahimsā*, and that both probably arise from non-Aryan, non-Vedic sources. We may also speculate that images filled the void left by the condemnation of animal sacrifice both as an alternative means of worship and, indeed, as in some forms of later Hindu and Buddhist ritual, as image or effigy substitutes for the sacrificial animal.

Bhakti

The rise of *bhakti* or devotional love as a religious path has also frequently been put forward as a factor in the advent of image-worship in both Hinduism and Buddhism (see below for a discussion of the Buddha image). A basic function of religious icons is to provide a focus or a target for religious affect.⁵⁰ *Bhakti*-oriented religion may have

⁴⁹I am indebted in the following discussion to G.R. Welbon's entry "*ahimsā*" in Keith Crim, ed. *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989).

⁵⁰It should not be thought though that images are the *sine qua non* of *bhakti* as the Indian tradition of *nirguṇa bhakti* (to be discussed below) makes evident.

survived as an underground current from the times of the Indus civilization through the Vedic period.

T.J. Hopkins suggests three historical factors underlying the opening of Vedic-dominated Indian culture to the rise of *bhakti*: a) by the second century B.C.E. the Aryan kingdoms were weakened; b) Alexander's conquests had opened the subcontinent up to foreign influence; and c) Aśoka had endorsed the Buddhist heterodoxy. I would suggest as well the earlier shift in economic conditions in the subcontinent around the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. in which the semi-nomadic cattle-driving culture of the original Ṛgvedic peoples had been replaced by a settled agricultural and nascent urban and mercantile economy by the time of the Buddha, Mahavir, and the Upaniṣadic sages. It is often suggested that these historical changes brought about a widespread dissatisfaction with the older Vedic religion. This could account for the change in religious forms towards devotion directed at images and away from sacrificial rituals. In the earliest Buddhist art of the Maurya and Śuṅga periods there is evidence of the cults of trees, *yakṣas*, *nāga* snakes and other elements of non-Vedic chthonic religion. The presence of these forms from the earliest extant post-Indus civilization art of India in both the Buddhist and Jain environments suggests a recovery of archaic non-Vedic motifs suppressed by Vedic orthodoxy. The fact that images of the gods appear on the coins of foreign rulers (the Bactrian Greeks in the northwest of the second and first centuries B.C.E.) also suggests the possibility that foreign influence played a part in the emergence of *bhakti*-motivated image practices. [I discuss this in more detail with regards to Buddhist images below]. Hopkins writes:

Late Vedic texts of the fifth to second centuries B.C. indicate also the growing importance of Vishnu and Shiva, but the context is not yet the popular religion. Vedic religion remained sacrificial and aniconic and was dominated by elitist priestly standards, while popular religion was devotional and iconic and open to participation even by foreigners. Only when the two were merged do we have Bhakti Hinduism.⁵¹

The great epic *Mahābhārata* endorses pilgrimage to *tīrthas* or sacred places. The Bhagavad Gītā, perhaps added to the epic some time around the turn of the Common Era,⁵² synthesizes theistic devotion with Upaniṣadic gnosis (*jñāna*) and Vedic ritual requirements. The true sacrifice is the offering given with love to the deity (Bhagavad Gītā 9.26). Gītā Chapter 12, traditionally titled “the yoga of devotion” (*bhakti yoga*), opens with a passage that refers to the greater ease of worshipping the personal god (Kṛṣṇa) than in revering the imperishable Unmanifest (*akṣaram avyaktam*). Eliot Deutsch renders 12:1-5 as follows:

Arjuna said:

Those devotees who are always disciplined and honor Thee, and those who worship the Imperishable and the Unmanifest — which of these are more learned in yoga?

The Blessed Lord said:

Those who, fixing their mind on Me, worship Me with complete discipline and with supreme faith, them I consider to be the most learned in yoga.

But those who worship the Imperishable, the Undefinable, the Unmanifested, the Omnipresent, the Unthinkable, the Immovable, the Unchanging, the Constant,

⁵¹T.J. Hopkins, “Bhakti Hinduism” in *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. Keith Crim (San Francisco: Harper, 1989), p. 99.

⁵²There is little scholarly consensus on the dating of the Bhagavad Gita. Some scholars argue for it being an addition to the *Mahābhārata* no earlier than the second century B.C.E., others argue for its being part of the epic’s earlier versions at least as far back as 400 B.C.E.

And have restrained their senses, and are equal-minded and rejoice in the welfare of all beings – they also obtain Me.

*The difficulty of those whose minds are fixed on the Unmanifested is much greater; the goal of the Unmanifested is hard for the embodied to obtain.*⁵³
(italics added)

If the Gītā offered the rationale for the merger of popular devotional Hinduism with brahminical (Vedic-based) Hinduism, the political support for this development came with the accession of the Gupta kings in the fourth century C.E. The Gupta period through the sixth century is often heralded as the golden age of Hinduism and saw the fruition of “the two most significant institutions of Bhakti Hinduism: the Purāṇic scriptures and the Hindu temple.”⁵⁴

Vedānta

I refer here to Vedānta as the final element in the Vedic corpus, the texts originating in the seventh to sixth centuries B.C.E. which offer conjectures on the inner meaning of the sacrifice and the beginnings of Indian philosophy. In these texts we find the speculation about Brahman as the ultimate reality behind the phenomenal world. The shift from a focus on the pantheon of Vedic deities such as Agni, Indra, Varuṇa etc. to Brahman as the one ultimate reality went with a down-playing of emphasis on the external sacrifice to these deities in favour of speculation about the nature of sacrifice

⁵³*The Bhagavad Gītā*, trans. and ed. Eliot Deutsch (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

⁵⁴Hopkins, “Bhakti Hinduism,” p. 100. The Gupta kings also promoted the iconography of Viṣṇu as they portrayed themselves as the counterparts of Viṣṇu on earth as world-protectors. See H. von Stietencron, “Political Aspects of Indian Religious Art,” in *Approaches to Iconology*, ed. H. Kippenberg, L. Bosch et al, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), pp.16-36.

itself. Now the down-playing of sacrifice does not in itself bring about a change towards the worship of images but it does act to create a vacuum, so to speak, in which new forms of religion could arise. It is not that the *Upaniṣads* explicitly endorse image-worship. In fact, Rammohun would mine them for proof texts to indicate quite the opposite.

Nevertheless, certain *Upaniṣads* do state that Brahman is both formless *and* formed, the latter suggesting the possibility of imaging the deity. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.3.1 reads:

*dve vāva brahmaṇo rūpe mūrtam caivāmūrtam ca /
martyam cāmrtam ca sthitam ca yac ca sac ca tyac ca //*

Verily, there are two forms of Brahman, the formed and the formless, the mortal and the immortal, the unmoving and the moving, the actual (existent) and the true (being).⁵⁵

If Rammohun was to emphasize the *Upaniṣadic* passages that concentrate on the formless Brahman, it must be remembered that some of the *Upaniṣads* were theistically oriented. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* is theistic in character and speaks of a personal lord as Īśvara. Indeed, in *Śvetāśvatara* 6.23 we find one of the first usages of the term *bhakti*. Banerjea observes: “The growth and development of monotheism, a direct result of the pantheistic conception of the earlier *Upaniṣads*, was the certain background on which *Bhakti* was to develop among the intellectual section of the composite population of India.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵*The Principal Upaniṣads*, trans. S. Radhakrishnan, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974).

⁵⁶Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, p.73.

An early article by J.N. Farquhar (cited earlier in note 37 above) articulates the widely held theory that image-worship percolates up into Indo-Aryan society from the habits of the indigenous peoples of the subcontinent originally conquered by the Aryan invaders. Farquhar notes that “*the Aryans of the Punjab*, from whom the religion of India with its priests, schools, laws, literature, and customs has come, *possessed no temples and used no images.*”⁵⁷ He observes that the sacrificial rites described in the *Vedas* remain to this day the only fully orthodox form of Hindu worship. The shift to temple and image-worship around 400 B.C.E. is marked in the literature by references to images and temple-priests in the *Adbhuta Brāhmaṇa*, the *Grhyasūtras* and the *Dharmasūtras* and in the early portion of the great epics. However, as Farquhar observes, “No authoritative pronouncement sanctioning the change is to be found in the literature nor does any law exist ordaining the practice.”⁵⁸ How then did the practice come to be? Farquhar admits that the classical literature is silent on this subject but he expresses a view also put forward by Radhakrishnan, Coomaraswamy and others that image-worship should be traced to “Dravidian” practices which the Aryans gradually adopted. Although Farquhar admits that to attribute the adoption of *sūdra* (which he identifies as Dravidian) practices by high class twice-born Aryans seems far-fetched, he puts forward reasons for the plausibility of this thesis:

- 1) the conspicuous absence of rules for image-worship in the Vedic corpus is made intelligible by seeing it as coming from non-Vedic sources;

⁵⁷J.N. Farquhar, “Temple-and-Image Worship in Hinduism,” p. 15.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 16.

- 2) the universal observation that temple-priests are afforded lower status than other brahmins would be explained if these temple *pūjaris* were historically of śūdra origins;
- 3) the fact that a part of the brahmin community had refused the cult of images and stuck with the ancient Vedic sacrifices (these were known as śrauta brahmins);
- 4) the suggestion that many of the thoughtful brahmins who adopted temple worship around the turn of the Common Era were probably turned against animal sacrifice by the doctrine of *ahimsā*; and
- 5) the observation of the low status afforded to artists in ancient India who were from low castes and who are never remembered by name.

Farquhar summarizes:

It thus seems to the writer that the five facts detailed above: (a) The non-Vedic origin of temple-ritual; (b) the universal low status of temple-ministrants to-day; (c) the Puritan attitude maintained towards image-worship by Śrauta Brāhmans for so many centuries; (d) the religious practices of the Smārtas since the Christian era; (e) the extremely low status of the fine arts in ancient India, taken together conclusively prove that the Indian tradition [Farquhar alludes to his discussion earlier of the opinion that image-worship grew up among Śūdras and was finally accepted by the higher castes] is trustworthy, and *therefore that temple-and-image worship grew up among Śūdras, that it was thrown open to the three Aryan castes about 400 B.C. and thereafter steadily climbed to its present supreme position.*⁵⁹

In answer to the objection: "How can we believe that, by 400 B.C., the rude despised Dasyus of the Ṛgveda had created a form of temple-worship so splendid as to

⁵⁹Ibid., p.21.

captivate the higher castes?” Farquhar, writing at a time when the Aryan invasion thesis was standard reconstruction, argues that the use of the word *śūdra* in *Rgveda* 10.90 (the famous *Puruṣa Sūkta*) is the name of a caste, not a race, and specifies a stratum of aboriginals (Dasya, Dasyu) who had been enlisted by the Aryans as serfs. “While all Śūdras were Dasyus, all Dasyus were not Śūdras.”⁶⁰ In other words, the śūdras were aboriginals (Dasyus) co-opted by the Aryans. Farquhar makes the interesting conjecture:

The writer is inclined to believe that, when preparing for the conquest of fresh territory, the leaders of the three castes came to the conclusion that, without the eager co-operation of their serfs, they could not undertake the war, and therefore decided to give them a new status, which would effectively set them far above all aborigines, whether in the Punjaub or in outside territory, and would bind them irrevocably to the Aryan people.⁶¹

In other words, the Aryans tolerated the religious orientation of the conquered people in order to enlist them in further conquests. [What is interesting in this suggestion is the similarity with the position of the British in their early domination of India – they tolerated (and even subsidized) Hindu temple worship because they recognized the necessity of not offending local sensibilities in this regard due to the sheer numerical superiority of the subjugated.]

Farquhar adumbrates a still very widely held view, that the shift from “Vedism” to “Hinduism” is to be partially explained as a synthesis resulting from Pre-Vedic elements (image-worship, mother-goddess cults, *bhakti* and so forth) percolating up into Vedic culture from the repressed culture of indigenous peoples. Many scholars would explain

⁶⁰Ibid., p.22.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 22.

even the shift from the Vedic pantheon to the great gods of classical Hinduism (Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, and especially Devī or the goddess) in these terms. Further, from this sort of perspective, the avatāras of Viṣṇu are perhaps in origin local tribal divinities who are incorporated into Brahmanical Hinduism and elevated (as in the case of Kṛṣṇa) to very high status. Jan Gonda, however, issues a note of caution with regard to earlier authors who over-emphasized the gulf between Vedic and later Hindu forms. Such scholarship he writes:

. . . failed to draw attention to a great variety of elements which though chronologically Vedic and incorporated in the corpora of Vedic literature preluded phenomena or institutions which are generally regarded as typically 'Hinduist' and disregarded what notwithstanding considerable differences points to unmistakable continuity. . . . Whereas the contrast between the Vedic yajña and the Hindu pūjā has, in the West, been often commented upon, the similarity and continuity of the ideas underlying both rituals have not rarely been disregarded.⁶²

Discussion

Rammohun and Dayananda were probably right in their belief that the earliest Vedic religion (the religion of those who called themselves Arya⁶³) was aniconic. This is

⁶²Jan Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, p. 17. See also in this regard L.A. Ravi Varma, "Rituals of Worship," *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol 4, (The Religions). ed. H. Bhattacharyya, (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1956).

⁶³Madhav Deshpande points out that the designation "Aryan" can have three different meanings: a) linguistic i.e., a person who speaks an Aryan language; b) cultural, i.e., a person who considers himself to belong to a cultural community; and c) ethnic, i.e., a person having biological markers of an Aryan group. See his "Vedic Aryans, Non-Vedic Aryans and Non-Aryans," in *The Indo-Aryans of Ancient South Asia: Language, Material Culture and Ethnicity*, ed. George Erdosy (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1995), p. 78. In the nineteenth century Max Müller hailed Rammohun's trip to Britain as

supported by the absence of textual and archaeological evidence for image-worship for the period: textual, in that the *Samhitās* very rarely mention anything that can be construed as an image for worship and the early authentic *Brāhmaṇas*, which describe the ritual in great detail, do not describe image-worship either; archaeological, in that no extant sculptures that can be definitely identified as Vedic icons have been discovered. Early Vedic religion centered on sacrifice, libation and recitation of mantras and did not have temples and image-worship. However, the reasons for this most probably lie in the originally nomadic nature of the Ṛgvedic peoples more than in any explicit metaphysical or moral problem with images – none is articulated in the *Vedas*. Vedic aniconism does not appear to be (as argued by Rammohun and Dayananda) a matter of principled monotheistic rejection of imaging the deity. Rammohun and Dayananda are probably right that image-worship is not sanctioned in the *Vedas*, but nor do the hymns of the *Vedas* prohibit image-worship.

On the other hand, the evidence that Vedic religion was aniconic combined with a reading of *śiśnadevaḥ* and *mūradevaḥ* as derogatory terms for non-Vedic peoples would suggest that the religious elite of the Vedic period was contemptuous of image practices. For Rammohun and Dayananda, Vedic religion is the *Ur* form of religion in India. It must

the re-uniting of the two long-separated wings of the Aryan race: “. . . we recognize in Rammohun Roy’s visit to England the meeting again of the two great branches of the Aryan race, after they had been separated so long that they had lost all recollection of their common origin, of their common language, of their common faith.” Max Müller, *Biographical Essays* (New York: Scribner’s, 1884), p. 12. Important studies of the idea of “Aryan” origins are found in Léon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth* (London: Chatto, Heinemann, 1974) and more recently Thomas Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997).

be observed, then, that if one accepts that the R̥gvedic people came to India after the Indus Civilization (with its evidence of religious images) had decayed and fallen, then, of course, the argument that the earliest form of religion in India was aniconic has to be denied. Neither Rammohun nor Dayananda would have been aware of the Indus Civilization, as this archeological discovery was made in the 1920's.⁶⁴

The fact that the only truly "orthodox" Hinduism is considered to be Vedic Hinduism, does suggest a certain unease (of very long duration) concerning image-worship which Rammohun and Dayananda could draw upon in their attacks on the practice. A caution articulated by Banerjea must, however, be noted: the Vedic literature represents the elite stratum of Indian society of its time and thus cannot be construed as accurately reflecting the practices of the rest of the population.

Von Stietencron has chronicled the contest between the Vedic priests who insisted on the original Vedic rites and their confrères who adapted to the practices of temple image-worship. The latter are vociferously condemned in many texts including the *Manu smṛti*. Here we see the specialists of Vedic ritual (the *pūrva mīmāṃsā*) castigating those

⁶⁴ Dayananda held that the first man was created in Tibet and that this was the original homeland of the Aryans. To the question "what was the name of this county [India] and who were its aboriginal inhabitants?" he replies: "It had no name, nor was it inhabited by any other people before the Aryas (settled in it) who sometime after the Creation came straight down here from Tibet and colonized the country." Dayananda categorically denies that the Aryans came from Persia and conquered aboriginal peoples of India, such ideas are "the imaginary tales of the foreigners." For him, idolatry does not originate in some aboriginal substratum of Indian culture but rather originates in the heterodoxy of the Jains. *Satyarth Prakash (Light of Truth)* trans. C. Bharadwaja (New Delhi: Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, 1984) pp. 264-266. Dayananda is at pains to refute the notion that outsiders brought an aniconic religion to an iconic indigenous population.

who went over to the practices of temple worship and image-worship and *bhakti*-oriented religion.⁶⁵ But if the traditionalist, orthodox Vedic brahmins attacked and denigrated the temple priests as self-seeking manipulators of image rites, it must also be remembered that the Indian tradition from the *Upaniṣads* through the Bhagavad Gītā offers a critique from the opposite perspective. Those who perform the elaborate rites of the Vedic sacrifices, but without either the salvific gnosis (*jñāna*) of Brahman or the salvific love (*bhakti*) for Īśvara, reap the reward of temporary heavens but do not achieve eternal emancipation or union with the god. There is an irony here because one of the roots of *bhakti* religion was a protest against the exclusive and priest-bound nature of the earlier religion.⁶⁶ Thus if we think of Rammohun and Dayananda condemning temple *bhakti* as the product of greedy brahmins manipulating the cult of images for personal gain, we should remember that *bhakti* religion was itself originally, in part, a protest against priestly domination and empty ritualism.⁶⁷ In this regard we should remember as well that

⁶⁵The authors of the Mīmāṃsā school were the staunchest defenders of the aniconic Vedic ritual. They claimed an inherent efficacy of the ritual independent of any gods who, they came to hold, exist only as *śabda*, the sounds of the mantras used to invoke them. See Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997), pp. 45, 46.

⁶⁶One of the appeals of *bhakti* was that it democratized access to the religious life and freed it from the hegemony of the priest-specialist. Earlier, the trope of the greedy brahmin was found throughout the Buddhist *Jātaka* literature. It may also lie behind *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 1.12.1-5, a passage that Radhakrishnan and R.E. Hume read as a satire on priestly ritual.

⁶⁷ "All Hindu protests in the past have occurred to undermine Brahminic ritual constraints on the individual pursuit of *mukti*. . . . protest sought to establish a direct man-god relationship through devotion, eliminating the need for any systematic Brahminic intervention." K.P. Gupta, "Religious Evolution and Social Change in India: A Study of the Ramakrishna Mission Movement," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (NS)

the image as an *object of bhakti in the home* is available to any householder directly and does not necessitate the intervention and mediation of Vedic priests. As well, the deity in image form ensconced in the temple is also gratuitously available for *darśan* (the bestowing of the auspicious sight) without the costly intervention of Vedic priestly ritualists. If the *hotṛ* castigated the *pūjārī* as engaging in exploitative practices it must be remembered that the criticism went in the reverse direction as well.

Both Rammohun and Dayananda argued for a return to the pristine past of the Vedic literature before the degeneration of idolatry had set in. However it was only Dayananda who advocated the performance of the *yajña* or *homa* of the Vedic *hotṛ* as the recovered form of authentic ritual practice. Rammohun's revisioned Hindu practice did not call for the return or revival of the fire-altar.

II THE GREAT MEDIEVAL THEOLOGIANS: ŚAṆKARA AND RĀMĀNUJA ON DEVOTION AND IMAGE-WORSHIP

Śaṅkara

Śaṅkara (c. 788-820 C.E.), the definitive exponent of Advaita, teaches that at the highest level Brahman is *nirguṇa*, without attributes, ineffable, unknowable by means of the subject-object scheme. The ultimate level of the Godhead is beyond description and must be referred to by a language of negation. Śaṅkara also teaches that Brahman is *ekamevādvitīyam*, one without a second, and that from an ultimate perspective,

paramāṛthika, the distinction between the individual and the Godhead is illusory. These two basic postulates of the Advaitic system: 1) that the highest Godhead is beyond attribution and 2) that the ultimate unity of ultimate reality precludes any real separation of the soul from God, raise obvious problems regarding the place of devotionism. In the first instance, if the Godhead is totally beyond attributes and description, how can it be represented and what image can provide a focus for devotion? In the second case, if there is no ultimate distinction between the individual and God, how then can there be a place for devotional practices? Such practices are predicated on the separation of devotee from object of devotion. Devotion is seen as a sort of current of love traversing the distance between the two poles of devotee and deity. The answer to both these questions lies in a two-truth and two-stage notion whereby devotion is legitimated, but only as a lower level of truth and spiritual realization. Thus, there are two levels of truth: conventional (*vyāvahārika*) and absolute (*paramāṛthika*); two levels of Brahman: with and without attributes; and by extension from these there are two ways of apprehending the divine: by devotion and by knowledge. In each set of pairs the second member of the pair is the superior entity.

Empirical existence is the realm of distinctions, and on this level *bhakti* or devotion is a legitimate activity which has as its object *saguṇa* Brahman as *Īśvara*, the Lord. However the true *jñāni* (knower) realizes that distinctions ultimately are false and realizes the truth of the formless *nirguṇa* Brahman with no reliance or need on the props of devotional images. The highest level may have no need of images, but images are useful as a means for generating *bhakti* which is *antaraṅga-sādhana* (proximate means)

on the way to intuitive knowledge of Brahman.⁶⁸ The notion that for Śaṅkara devotional practices directed at a personal God (*Īśvarapranidhāna*) were but preliminaries for the higher religious path of *jñāna* is summarized by David Lorenzen:

In his own philosophical works Śaṅkara asserts that the only real path to salvation is the path of wisdom leading to a deep realization of the identity of the individual soul (*ātman*) with the impersonal ground of being (*brahman*) and of the illusory nature of the multiplex physical world. For the ordinary man in the world devotion is a valuable propaedeutic to raising himself to a higher level but it cannot in itself produce liberation. A personal god (*Īśvara*) does exist, but only as an imperfect perception of *brahman* as equivalent to the physical universe or endowed with its qualities (*saguna-brahman*).⁶⁹

I have discussed Śaṅkara's "stage model" of devotion in which image-worship, although legitimate as a preliminary practice, must find itself on a lower rung of the ladder of ascent to ultimate reality.⁷⁰ Most authors alluding to Śaṅkara on this issue are content to let the matter rest here. However, the other passages of Śaṅkara's writings where he has a more directly positive view of image practices deserve our attention.

⁶⁸ See Srimati B. Sitamahalakshmi, "The Concept of Bhakti in Advaita," in *Sankara and Shanmata* (Madras: N. Ramaratnam, 1969), no pagination.

⁶⁹ David N. Lorenzen, "The Life of Śaṅkarācārya," in *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*, eds. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p. 91.

⁷⁰ A "stage model" similar to that of Advaita Vedānta is also reiterated in the *Mahā-nirvāṇa Tantra* and in *Tantra-sāra*: "First comes image worship; the middle way is repetition of the name and prayer; good is mental worship, realisation that I am he is best." Cited in S. Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma Sūtra: The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 174. As well, standard Vaiṣṇava thought delineates five levels of God with *para* as the highest and *arcā* as the lowest (see below, footnote 86).

One context where images are useful is in the support of meditation practices.

Śaṅkara discusses contemplation or meditation in commenting on Bhagavad Gītā 13:3.

The mind is to be concentrated on an object of worship so as not to be distracted. The object is a support or prop (*ālambana*) for meditation (*upāsana*):

Contemplation (*upāsana*) consists in approaching the object of worship by way of meditating on it, in accordance with the Teaching (*Śāstra*), and dwelling steadily for a long time in the current of one single thought as continuous as a line of flowing oil: this is said to be *upāsana*.⁷¹

The notion of the need for a support for meditation is found also in Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 5.1.1:

As the Highest self Who is the eternal Ākāśa, is not the object of eyes and other sense-organs, so He is not perceivable to the mind without the help of some suitable symbol (*Ālambana*) to support it. For this reason, He is envisaged or imagined with faith and devotion, in His best symbol ie. Onkāra just as god Viṣṇu is envisaged by the people in His images made out of stone etc., having his limbs carved in them." ⁷²

Besides articulating the usefulness of images as supports for meditation purposes, Śaṅkara also upholds the possibility of the personification of the absolute. Śaṅkara while commenting on the *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.20 defends the possibility of God appearing in anthropomorphic form:

But now (concerning the objection) that the mention in *śruti* of form such as golden beardedness is not possible for the Highest Lord, we say to this that it may be so because of the free wish of the Highest Lord (that He takes) a form consisting of *māyā* for the sake of favouring his worshippers. Thus from the *smṛti* (we read): "O Nārada verily it is a device (*māyā*)

⁷¹ *Śrī Śaṅkara's Gita Bhashya*, trans. C.V. Ramachandra Aiyar (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1988), p. 385.

⁷² Cited in A.P. Mishra, *The Development and Place of Bhakti in Śaṅkara Vedānta* (Allahabad: Leader Press, 1967), p. 93.

emitted by me that you see me. You should not understand me as endowed with the qualities of all beings.” So, where the form of the Highest Lord, removed from all distinguishing characteristics is spoken of (*upadiśyate*), there is the *śāstra* verse beginning with: “Without sound, without touch, without form, imperishable.” But, because of being maker of all things, the Supreme Being is (also) declared to have some distinctions or modifying qualities as in the verse beginning with: “All works, all desires, all odours, all tastes.” *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.2]. In such a way there will be a description such as that beginning with “golden beardedness” and so on.⁷³

Śaṅkara also addresses the problem of particularity, that is, the problem of localizing that which is infinite and omnipresent in a particular limited place. In his *Brahma-sūtra Bhāṣya* I.2.7 he answers the complaints of those who contest the locating of the supreme Self in the heart:

While it is impossible from every point of view to assert all-pervasiveness for something that is spatially limited, it is possible in the case of the omnipresent One to speak of limited presence in some sense because of existence everywhere, just as a king ruling over the whole earth can be referred to as the king of Ayodhyā.⁷⁴

Just as space because it is all pervading can conventionally be described as being “contained” in a jar, so too a universal monarch like Rāma, who rules over the whole world, can be said also to be king of Ayodhyā. This notion is of immense importance to the question of image-worship in that part of the polemic of iconoclasts involves the “scandal of particularity” as the iconoclast demands: “How can you possibly say that the omnipresent, infinite Godhead is located in this particular lump of carved stone?”

⁷³ *Brahma-Sūtra Bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya* (1.1.20), my translation.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

The Brahma-sūtra commentary continues with a passage I will quote at length which elaborates on this theme and which also refers to the worship of God in concrete form:

Opponent: From what standpoint, again, is omnipresent God, spoken of as having a tiny abode and minuteness?

Vedāntin: We say that this is declared thus for the sake of being contemplated on. That God, possessed of a set of such qualities as subtleness, is taught to be meditated on there in the lotus of the heart, just as (the Lord) Hari is taught to be worshipped on a *Śālagrāma* (stone symbol). A certain state of the intellect, (brought about by the Upaniṣadic instruction), catches a glimpse of Him there. God, though omnipresent, becomes gracious when worshipped there. And this is to be understood on the analogy of space. Just as space though all pervasive, is referred to as having a limited habitation and minuteness from the point of view of its association with the eye of a needle, so also is the case with Brahman. Thus the limited habitation and subtleness being declared for the sake of meditation, these do not belong to Brahman in any real sense.⁷⁵

We have seen then that Śaṅkara in his commentarial writings does allow image-worship but puts it below knowledge (*jñāna*) as a means to higher realization. While acknowledging the presence of this stage model approach to images in Śaṅkara I have also tried to show that this is in no way a denigration or dismissal of images and that there are many passages which indicate a favorable attitude to images in his philosophical writings. This favorable attitude is radically accentuated in the devotional literature attributed to the great *ācārya*.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

Śaṅkara as devotionalist

In his *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (Crest-Jewel of Discrimination), Śaṅkara touches on the role of *bhakti* or devotion. He gives this term a decidedly Advaitic interpretation in verse 31:

Among the things conducive to liberation, devotion (*bhakti*) alone holds the supreme place. The seeking after one's real nature is designated as devotion.⁷⁶

However, such a sober definition is eclipsed by a fervent devotional poetry in the hymns attributed to Śaṅkara. He is said to have written many hymns (*stotras*) of a devotional quality. How many of the hymns ascribed to Śaṅkara are actually the work of the figure tentatively held to have lived from 788 to 820 C.E. is controversial but that at least *some* of these compositions are authentically by him is generally accepted.⁷⁷ In the *Śivānandalaharī* we find verses describing the image of Śiva and suggesting a sculptural form. For example, in verse 7:

O the Supreme Śiva. Let my mind stay at Thy lotus-feet; let my speech be engaged in uttering Thy praise; my hands in Thy worship; my sense of

⁷⁶ *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Madhavananda (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1974), p. 11.

⁷⁷ On this question see Robert Gussner, "A Stylometric Study of the Authorship of Seventeen Sanskrit Hymns Attributed to Śaṅkara," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96 2 (1976). Gussner concludes that two of the seventeen hymns he analyzed were authentically by Śaṅkara. A factor that complicates attribution is the fact that the "abbots" of the *matts* or monastic institutions founded by Śaṅkara have taken the title of Śaṅkarācārya down through the centuries. In order to avoid confusion, the original Śaṅkara is now often referred to as Ādi (original or primordial) Śaṅkara or Ādi Śaṅkarācārya.

hearing in listening to thy story; my intellect in meditation on Thee; and my eyes in looking on thy splendid form!⁷⁸

How is one to look on the form of Śiva? A subsequent verse (25) indicates that Śaṅkara has in mind the iconographical representation of the god in a concrete *mūrti* as Umāmaheśvara:

When shall I behold Thee, that hast a blue throat, three eyes and a body embraced by Uma, that holdest in thy hands a deer and a cutting axe, that art seated on the hump of the big bull that is lusty and handsome, as Brahmā and other gods sing Thy praise, as the ascetics cry out "Hail! Hail!", and as the divine attendants dance around.⁷⁹

Later (verse 30) Śaṅkara relates how the finite individual should emulate the gods in the ritual worship of Śiva:

O, the One who wearest the young moon as the crest-jewel! O Lord of souls! O Master! O Teacher of the three worlds! If there be in me the status of the sun with a thousand hands (rays) in the matter of dressing Thee in clothes, the status of Visnu in the matter of worshipping Thee with flowers, the status of Vāyu in the matter of applying sandal-paste (to Thy body), the status of Indra, the chief of Agni, in the matter of cooking food, and the status of Hiranyagarbha in the matter of making vessels, then may I render service to Thee!⁸⁰

In verse 62 the effects of Devotion on the devotee are compared to a mother's attentions to her child, but the services rendered are also equivalent to the lustration (*abhiṣeka*) and *pūjā* offered by the *pūjārīs* to the *mūrtis* of the gods in the temple:

O God! The mother, Devotion, protects the child, the devotee, by bathing (thrilling) him in (with) the waters (tears) of bliss, by dressing him in the clothes of purity, by feeding him with the ambrosia of Thy stories

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 90.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 106.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 111.

contained in the mouth of the conch, the speech, by girding his body with the amulets of Rudra-beads and sacred ash, and by putting him to sleep in the cradle of Thy contemplation.⁸¹

In another verse (61) Śaṅkara describes the fervour of devotional yearning for union with such similes as the tree and creeper, river and ocean and so forth, images which are ubiquitous in Indian poetry and painting:

Just as, here, the seeds of the *ankola* tree go to and attach themselves to the tree, the needle sticks to the magnet, the chaste woman to her lord, the creeper to the tree, and the river (runs) to the ocean, even so if the flow of the mind reaches the lotus-feet of the Lord of souls and remains there, this is called devotion.⁸²

Śaṅkara's devotional hymns are full of such metaphors. The theme of the soul yearning for God like a woman for her lover is well known to us in the ecstatic devotionism of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism.⁸³

Rāmānuja

Rāmānuja, the great twelfth-century philosopher of Viṣiṣṭādvaita and revered theologian of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas does not himself directly discuss the worship of God in the concrete form of *arcā* or *mūrti*. The image form of God however comes to play a central role in Śrīvaiṣṇava ritual and theology, legitimated as *arcāvatāra*, the image incarnation of God. Can we then find in Rāmānuja's works passages that could lend support to the

⁸¹ Ibid., p.140.

⁸² Ibid., p. 139.

⁸³ Hindu tradition developed an iconography of Śaṅkara himself with statues or *mūrtis* of the great *ācārya*. See Noel Salmond, "Advaita and Imagery: Śaṅkara on Devotional Objects, and as Himself an Object of Devotion," *Arc* 23 (1995): 89-105.

notion of the embodied form of God in an image? Rāmānuja's commentary on *Vedānta-sūtra* 1.1.21 in his *Śrī Bhaṣya* provides such a passage: it discusses the possibility of an anthropomorphic form of God and refers to God (*Brahman*) as possessing a non-material body.⁸⁴ I summarize here the differences between Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja on the

Vedānta-sūtra, antastaddharmopadeśāt:

1. For Rāmānuja, the bodily form of the Supreme Person is not just a temporary (and illusory) device assumed by *Brahman* to aid the devotee; rather it is an eternal attribute of the Divinity.
2. For Rāmānuja, this visible body of *Brahman* is a *real* body though a spiritual (non-*prakṛti*) body.
3. It is made from *māyā* but *māyā* is defined in the *bhaṣya* by Rāmānuja not in the sense of magical illusion but in the sense of knowledge.
4. For Śaṅkara, *Brahman* is ultimately *nirguṇa*, without or beyond qualities; for Rāmānuja, on the contrary, *Brahman* possesses “all auspicious qualities” including a supernal form.

The possession of all auspicious attributes paves the way for legitimation of the view that God can possess a body and that this body can be seen. Rāmānuja holds that God has a “supernal form” (*divyārūpa*). This divine form is anthropomorphic but it is not made of *prakṛti* and is thus not subject to *karma*. If God possesses a supernal form consisting of a

⁸⁴ If God possesses a “spiritual body” then this opens the way for representing this body in an image for worship. William Deadwyler writes: “The theology that establishes God as a person endowed with specific form, qualities, and attributes of a transcendental nature allows for the concrete representation of God's own image in the temple. By the service of this image, the server develops the purified, spiritual instruments - mind and senses - capable of apprehending the transcendental nature of God's form, qualities, and attributes, so that God is seen directly in his image, through God-saturated senses.” Deadwyler is a modern “*bhakta*” who offers an apologia for image-worship in his “The Devotee and the Deity: Living a Personalistic Theology,” in *Gods of Flesh/ Gods of Stone*, eds. J. Waghorne and N. Cutler, (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: Anima Books, 1985).

non-*prakṛtic* body, what then does this form look like? Consistent with devotional Vaiṣṇavism, Rāmānuja describes this form in his commentary on Bhagavad Gītā 9:34 where he advocates meditation on the Highest Lord whom he describes as saying, “be one whose mind is fixed on Me”:

(on Me) who have long, shining eyes like a lotus petal; who am like a transparent blue cloud; whose dazzling lustre is like that of a thousand suns risen at the same time; who am the great ocean of the nectar of beauty, who have four noble and strong arms; who am dressed in brilliant yellow (silk); who am adorned with a bright crown, ear-rings designed in the form of sea-monsters, necklaces, bracelets on the arms and bangles at the wrist; who am the ocean of boundless mercy, affability, beauty, sweetness, majesty, magnanimity and maternal solicitude; who am the refuge of all without exception and without regard to their particular qualities; who am the master of all.⁸⁵

Even if in his writings Rāmānuja does not himself explicitly refer to the *arcā* form of the deity as embodied in a temple image or idol it is clear that the thrust of Rāmānuja's thought lies in that direction.⁸⁶ The progression towards legitimating image-worship implicit in the thought of Rāmānuja can be summarized as follows:

⁸⁵ M.R. Sampatkumaran, *The Gitābhāṣya of Rāmānuja* (Madras: M. Rangacharya Memorial Trust, 1969), p.274.

⁸⁶ Later Śrīvaiṣṇava theology would refer to five different ways in which the *divyarūpa* or *divyavigraha* of God manifests itself: *para*, the eternal form of Viṣṇu seen only in heaven; *vyuha*, emanations or manifestations; *vibhava*, incarnated forms or *avatāras*; *antaryāmin* or *hārda*, God within the human heart; *arcā*, God present in the consecrated image. As well as these five manifestations, it is also Vaiṣṇava doctrine that the entire universe is the body of God and He is the inner soul of everything. See Vasudha Narayanan, "Arcāvātara: On Earth as He is in Heaven," in *Gods of Flesh/ Gods of Stone*, pp. 54 - 55. The relation of the world (including human souls and their vital breath) as “body” to God as their “soul” is explained by Rāmānuja: “To stand in the relation of a body to something else, means to abide in that other thing, to be dependent on it, and to subserve it in a subordinate capacity . . .” *Śrī Bhāṣya* 1.2.2, George Thibaut, *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary of Rāmānuja*. Sacred Books of the East (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896, reprint New York: Dover, 1962) p. 262.

1. Scripture repeatedly refers to anthropomorphic images of God such as “the one within the eye and the sun.” As scripture is the pre-eminent *pramāṇa* or source of knowledge about God for Rāmānuja then these visual images must be taken seriously and legitimated.
2. God does have supernal form based on a supernal body not made up of *prakṛti* and not subject to *karman*. This supernal form can be perceived. Not only can it be perceived it should be generated as an object of meditation (*upāsanā*).
3. *Bhakti* or devotion is defined as steady remembrance of the supernal form. Thus the employment of the image of the supernal form is central to religious practice.
4. Steps 1, 2, and 3 lead us by inference to the question: What better way to generate the mental image of the supernal form and to hold it before the mind than to use sculptural representations in the form of the *arcā*, in the *mūrtis* of the temple or on the altars of the household shrine?

What are the elements of the historical context in which Rāmānuja lived which might have led to this progression? In terms of the social determinants of belief, it must be remembered that brahmins in medieval India were in the process of adjusting to the fact that the ancient system of Vedic sacrifice (*yajña*) had lost its place of pre-eminence in the popular estimation of religious practice. As a result, brahmins needed a new source of occupation and income to offset the diminishing demand for their services as sacrificial ritualists. Temples rites were viewed by the brahmins as possessing a lower status, but this could be improved by linking the deities and the images in the temples with the Supreme Brahman of the *Upaniṣads*. This is of course precisely what Rāmānuja does.

It is interesting that neither Śaṅkara nor Rāmānuja directly discuss image-worship with explicit reference to *arcā*. At the same time the hagiographies (written several centuries later) of both *ācāryas* are replete with references to image practices. Śaṅkara is credited with establishing temples and setting up devotional images and we are told that

Rāmānuja was the temple manager at Śrīrangam. These are two indications of the pervasive presence of temple- and image-motifs in the lives of both figures. It is possible that many references to devotional practices in the accounts of the lives of these two *ācāryas* are spurious, that they are fictions resulting from a desire to appropriate the authority of the great *ācāryas* in later centuries for the legitimation of sectarian Hinduism. In the case of Śaṅkara this may be largely true. However, the philosophical foundations of Rāmānuja's thought are much more amenable to image-worship and so there is less cause to be sceptical about the presence of image motifs in his hagiography.⁸⁷ This leads us to the question as to why, if the legitimation of image-worship is a logical outcome of Rāmānuja's thought, do we not see Rāmānuja directly referring to the *arcā* or *mūrti*? (Note that of the 4 stages given above, steps 1 to 3 are found in Rāmānuja's writings, but step 4 is an inference). One possible answer to this question is that Rāmānuja can be seen as a sort of bridge figure between Vedic/Brahmanic orthodoxy with its Sanskritic learning, and the devotional, sectarian Vaiṣṇavism of South India with its tradition of Tamil religious poetry and emphasis on temple worship. He wants to bring these two traditions together but perhaps does not want to alienate the adherents of the former by too direct a discussion of temple practices. He thus gives a rationale for image practices without referring to them in an explicit manner. As Katherine Young remarks;

⁸⁷Śrīvaiṣṇava theology came to speak of God's easy accessibility (*saṁlabhya*) through his gracious condescension (*saṁśīlya*) by which he deigns to take form for his devotees to worship him. This contrasts with his transcendental nature (*paratva*). See John Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974) and Katherine K. Young, "Rāmānuja on Bhagavad Gītā 4:11: The Issue of Arcāvatāra," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 23, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 1988): 90-110.

“Rāmānuja has sectarian phraseology but not terminology.”⁸⁸ One might say that the phraseology provides the philosophical and theological rationale for the practice of worship of God in the images of the temple. It opens the way for the traditional specialists in *yajña* and *jñāna* to encompass the rites of *bhakti*.

III PRECEDENTS FOR ANICONISM IN INDIAN HISTORY

Buddhism

Neither Rammohun nor Dayananda discuss Buddhism in any detail in their writings. Buddhism was not a force in the India of their day. However, the topic of early Buddhist attitudes to images and the advent of Buddhist art is relevant to our topic. This is for two reasons: 1) it appears that Buddhism had an aniconic phase for several centuries after its founding (and this period obviously predates any probable contact with the Semitic religions), and 2) several important scholars at the beginning of this century argued that the first Buddha images (which correspond in date with the first Hindu images) were introduced into India by the Greeks. *This might suggest that aniconism was indigenous to India and that image-worship was diffused into India from Europe.* Both

⁸⁸ Young, “Beloved Places (*ukantarūḷinanilāṅkaḷ*): The Correlation of Topography and Theology in the Śrīvaiṣṇava Tradition of South India” (Ph.D diss., McGill University, 1978), p. 285. See also her “Rāmānuja on Bhagavad Gītā 4:11” pp. 90-110, where Young suggests that Rāmānuja, as a commentator on Gītā and *Upaniṣads*, may have been constrained by the texts themselves which do not explicitly refer to the image-form of god in either temples or homes. She writes: “Thus, Ramanuja must remain true to the text and yet create a hermeneutical bridge to the context of popular devotion to Vishnu”(p.106).

these suggestions would have immensely pleased Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati.

The archaeological record of extant early Buddhist art begins in the Mauryan Period some two centuries after the death of the Buddha. In the reign of the great king Aśoka (268-233 B.C.E.) inscription columns are erected with reference to the Buddha and with carved lion capitals but no attempt is made to visually portray the Buddha. In the subsequent Śuṅga period *stūpas* were decorated with sculptural programs. However, the Buddha himself does not appear among the figure groups carved in relief at the famous *stūpa* sites at Barhut (second century B.C.E.) and Sāñcī (late first century B.C.E.). This is the case even in figural relief programs that show scenes from his life. For instance, in the scene of the Great Departure, Siddhartha's horse is shown galloping from the palace but no rider is depicted on its back. This appears as a very deliberate and significant omission, one not due, obviously, to some technical "incapacity" of the Indian sculptors to deal with the Buddha's human form. What is also interesting is that the early Buddhist sculptors had no reticence about making iconic representations of the *past* lives of the Buddha when they depicted the Jātaka stories. The implication appears to be that there was an aniconic period in early Buddhism and that the early Buddhists felt that the enlightened Buddha represented a transcendent religious ideal that would in some way be profaned by attempts at representation.⁸⁹

⁸⁹The existence of an aniconic period (accepted for decades) has been challenged by the art historians John and Susan Huntington. The article by Susan Huntington, "Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism," *Art Journal* 49 no. 4 (1990): 401-408, elicited strong rejoinders including Vidya Dehejia's "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems," *Ars Orientalis* 22 (1992): 45-66. A detailed overview of this controversy is

Unfortunately the Buddhist texts are silent on this matter and do not give any explicit prohibition, no “Thou shalt not make a graven Buddha image” injunction.⁹⁰

Scholars have attempted instead to find implicit grounds for the avoidance of anthropomorphic (iconic) representations of the Buddha in the early period. David Snellgrove, for example, quotes from the *Suttanipata* (1069-76):

‘As flame is blown by the force of the wind goes out and is no longer reckoned,’ so said the Lord to Upasiva, ‘Even so the sage, released from name and form, goes out and is no longer reckoned.’

Snellgrove adds that the reluctance to show a human form of the Buddha must be based on the philosophically radical doctrine of the Buddha’s “true Nirvana essence, inconceivable in visual form and human shape” rather than in a “universally valid principle of aniconism” or a law prohibiting image-making.⁹¹

The apparent fact of an almost four-century gap between the death of the Buddha and the first extant Buddha images dating to the Kuṣāṇa Period (about the first century C.E.) led some Western scholars to suggest that India learned to make Buddha images (and by extension all stone-carved devotional images) from the Greeks. The Kuṣāṇas had

given by Rob Linrothe, “Inquiries into the Origin of the Buddha Image: A Review,” *East and West* 43, nos. 1-4 (1993).

⁹⁰An obscure exception to this may be found in the *vinaya* of the Sarvāstivādins (translated into Chinese in 404 C.E.). Anāthapindika asks the Buddha: “Lord of the World, since it is not permitted to make a likeness of the Buddha’s body, I pray that the Buddha will grant that I may make likenesses of his attendant Bodhisattvas.” This is cited in Arthur Waley “Did the Buddha Die of Eating Pork? With a Note on Buddha’s Image,” *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques* 1 (1931-32): 343-354.

⁹¹David Snellgrove, ed., *The Image of the Buddha* (Paris: UNESCO/Kodansha, 1978), p. 24.

one capital in the Gandhāra region (including what is now eastern Afghanistan, modern Pakistan and the western Punjab) and another capital at Mathura south of modern Delhi. The early Buddha images made in Gandhāra in the Kuṣāṇa Period show the stylistic influence of the Hellenistic sphere (Alexander had reached the area in 326 B.C.E. and the region was later involved in the silk trade with the Roman world). Alfred Foucher called the style “Greco-Buddhist” and argued for the Greek origin of the Buddha image.⁹² Foucher was vociferously opposed by Ananda Coomaraswamy who argued that there is no need to seek prototypes for the Buddha image extraneous to indigenous models already available in India.⁹³ The Kuṣāṇa Buddhas produced at the eastern capital at Mathura were indebted, Coomaraswamy argued, not to the Greeks but to earlier Indian depictions of the *Yakṣas*, semi-divine beings with their origins in Vedic texts.⁹⁴

To conclude this discussion: the evidence does support an aniconic period in early Buddhist art. Not aniconic because Indian sculptors did not know how to make an iconic Buddha and had to be taught by the Greeks, but because they deliberately avoided doing so for religious reasons. No one has suggested that this was because some vagrant Hebrew prophet wandered as far as North India and told them not to! The earliest extant

⁹²Alfred Foucher, *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, trans. L.A and F.W. Thomas (1917; reprint, Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1972).

⁹³Ananda Coomaraswamy, “The Origin of the Buddha Image,” *Art Bulletin* 9, no. 4 (1927): 438-54.

⁹⁴The historiography of research and debate about the origins of the Buddha image conducted in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is reviewed by Stanley K. Abe, “Inside the Wonder House: Buddhist Art and the West,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995) pp. 63-106.

sculptural icons of the Buddha date to the first century C.E. The Gandhāra sculptures do show Greco-Roman influence but this is not sufficient grounds for claiming that the advent of the Buddha image in India is a case of diffusion from the Greeks or Romans. It is interesting to juxtapose Alfred Foucher's contention that India got the Buddha image from Europe with the contention that the aniconism of Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati is also an import from European influence. In both instances agency is denied to the Indian but in opposite directions.

A final point: theories of the origin of the Buddha image in this century have tended to emphasize the growth of *bhakti* and the need for images by lay rather than monastic Buddhists. Gregory Schopen⁹⁵ has demonstrated that in fact the image cult was supported by monastics as well as the laity, and that the assumption that the advent of the Buddha image was a result of pressure from below by the "vulgar masses" is mistaken. Such an assumption results from the presupposition (widespread in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – including by Rammohun and Dayananda) that elite or sophisticated religion is intrinsically inimical to image-worship. The history of religions has shown this to be erroneous.

⁹⁵Gregory Schopen, "On Monks, Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism," *Artibus Asiae* 49 (1988/89):153-168; "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31 (1991):1-23.

The Jains

The first textual evidence for Jain image-worship is a first century B.C.E. inscription of Kharavela referring to an image of a *tīrthan̥kara* or fordmaker.⁹⁶ There is a shrine to a *tīrthan̥kara* at Mathura dating to the 2nd century B.C.E. Paul Dundas writes: “A necessary historical conclusion from this evidence, although insufficiently stressed, is that devotional worship of the fordmakers was from earliest times an important element of Jainism.”⁹⁷ Swami Dayananda had blamed the origin of image-worship in India on the Jains, and the antiquity of Jain images is indeed a reality, but no strong argument can be made for the priority of Jain images over Buddhist or “Hindu” ones. The origins of both Buddhist and Jain images (which arise at about the same time) seems to lie in the borrowing of the imagery of the indigenous tree-spirits (*Yakṣa*) of ancient India, and possible influence from the Hellenistic world mediated through Gandhāra in the Northwest of the subcontinent.

Although Jainism may or may not have had an early aniconic period as Buddhism appears to have done, Jainism did develop sects which rejected image-worship in the medieval period. These groups are the Sthānakavāsī and Terapanthi, both inspired by the fifteenth-century figure Lonka of whom Paul Dundas writes:

Little can be said about his life with any real confidence other than that he lived in Gujerat in the fifteenth century, and tradition is unanimous that an inspection of the Shvetambara scriptures led him to deny that image-worship could have any place in true Jainism. A standard picture of Lonka

⁹⁶Paul Dundas, *The Jains* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.174. The following discussion is heavily indebted to Dundas’ book.

⁹⁷Ibid., p.174

has emerged in the last century or so among the Sthanakvasis who would see him as a rich, mighty and learned layman, with powerful connections among the Moslem authorities in Ahmedabad, whose skill in calligraphy led to an invitation to copy the scriptures, as a result of the serious study of which he became convinced that the practice of Jainism he saw around him was without any textual basis and totally corrupt. Accepting the authority of only thirty-two of the scriptural texts and rejecting a great deal of ritual of all kinds, he took some sort of ascetic initiation and became a charismatic teacher who weaned away large numbers of Shvetambaras from their image-related practices.⁹⁸

Dundas goes on to discuss the dubious historiography of this account of Lonka's life, written as it is by Sthānakavāsī sectarians. He cites Pandit Dalsukh Malvania, a distinguished twentieth-century Sthānakavāsī layman, who suggests that Lonka's image rejection was influenced by Islam. Dundas responds to this view:

There is, however, no real need to invoke . . . Moslem influence to explain his aniconic tendencies. From a strictly doctrinal point of view, Lonka was in a sense correct both because image-worship is hardly an important theme in the scriptures and there are scriptural statements pointing to the destruction of life-forms entailed in the construction of any building. There is also some evidence that image-worship was regarded as controversial from fairly early in the medieval period. A frequent analogy used by Shvetambara writers, found as early as Haribhadra, which has the appearance of a rebuttal of anti-image tendencies, is that building a temple is like digging a well in that the violence of the action involved is far outweighed by the benefits, both spiritual and material, which ensue. Another piece of evidence is the story of an image of Mahavira supposedly carved during his lifetime and known as Jivantasvami, the 'Living Lord'. This is usually interpreted by Jain scholars as positive evidence for the existence of image-worship in Mahavira's day but, as the story does not seem to predate the fifth century CE, it is possible to read it as an attempt to provide image-worship with an authoritative pedigree in order to refute those critics of the practice who claimed it had no place in an authentic, textually based Jainism.⁹⁹

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 174.

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 213-214.

The question whether the Sthānakavāsī rejection of image-worship is the fruit of Muslim influence or has, instead, a much older pedigree internal to Jain history is relevant for my purposes for two reasons. Firstly, if image controversy in Jainism is far older than the Muslim conquest of India then it affords another example (beyond Buddhism) of aniconism as indigenous to India. Secondly, Swami Dayananda grew up in the Kathiawar region of Gujarat which was central to the Sthānakavāsī Jain sect, and Farquhar contended that the Sthānakavāsī could well be the source of his image-rejection.¹⁰⁰

An Eleventh-Century Incident of Iconoclasm

The *Rājatarangīnī*, or chronicles of the kings of Kashmir, written in the twelfth century by the poet Kalhaṇa, contains a report of an incident of iconoclasm occurring during the reign of king Harṣadeva (reigned 1089-1101 C.E.). Harṣadeva resorted to looting the temples of his domains to solve his financial woes. Temple images were melted down and only two Hindu and two Buddhist sites were spared. The chronicle relates that not only were the images melted down, they were first deliberately defiled by naked mendicants in the king's employ. The passage (7:1089-1099, as translated by Sir Aurel Stein) reads as follows:

As he [Harṣa] was addicted to extravagant expenditure upon various corps of his army, his thoughts . . . became in time firmly fixed upon the spoliation of temples. Then the greedy-minded [king] plundered from all the temples the wonderful treasures which former kings had bestowed there. In order to get hold of the statues of the gods, too, when the treasures [of the temples] had been carried off, he appointed *Udayarāja*

¹⁰⁰J.N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1977), first published 1914, p. 104.

‘prefect for the overthrow of divine images’ (*devotpātananāyaka*). In order to defile the statues of the gods he had excrements and urine poured over their faces by naked mendicants whose noses, feet and hands had rotted away. Divine images made of gold, silver, and other [materials] rolled about even on the roads, which were covered with night soil, as [if they were] logs of wood. Crippled naked mendicants and the like covered the images of the gods, which were dragged along by ropes round their ankles, with spittings instead of flowers. There was not one temple in a village, town or in the City which was not despoiled of its images by that *Turuṣka*, King Harṣa. Only two chief divine images were respected by him, the illustrious *Raṇasvāmin* in the City, and *Mārtānda* [among the images] in townships. Among colossal images, two statues of Buddha were saved through requests addressed by chance to the king at a time when he was free with his favours, namely the one at Parihāsapura by the singer Kanaka, who was born there, and the other in the City by the Śramaṇa Kuśalaśrī. Those who are anxious to amass fortunes do not stop from evil action, though in this world they may have reached riches which are a wonder for all. Thus the elephant, though he is the pleasure-seat of the [lotus-born goddess] Lakṣmī, yet somehow falls into the sin of destroying the lotus-tank [in his desire] to obtain lotus-flowers.¹⁰¹

A.L. Basham has written a short article on this unusual incident of iconoclasm carried out by a Hindu king.¹⁰² Basham observes that the defilement of the images indicates that the motivation for this iconoclasm evidently went beyond financial stringency and points to some sort of “heretical” motivation. Sir Aurel Stein had raised the suggestion that the epithet *Turuṣka* i.e. “Turk” or “Muhammadan,” applied to Harṣa by Kalhaṇa and the fact that Kalhaṇa says (7:1149) he had “*Turuṣka*” officers in his army would indicate Islamic

¹⁰¹M.A. Stein, trans., *Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅgiṇī: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr*, 2 vols. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979).

¹⁰²A.L. Basham, “Harṣa of Kashmir and the Iconoclast Ascetics,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*. Vol. 12, parts 3 and 4 (1948): 688-691. Basham includes a similar discussion in an appendix to his *History and Doctrine of the Ājīvikas*, (London: Luzac, 1951). To call this incident unusual may, of course, be a reflection of the unusualness of the chronicle itself. The *Rājatarāṅgiṇī* is a rare instance of Sanskrit historical writing.

leanings on the part of Harṣa.¹⁰³ Basham however argues that there is evidence that instead of being influenced by Islam, Harṣa had leanings towards the South of India. The naked ascetics who were used by the king to defile and remove the temple images are referred to as *nagnāṇa* which Basham argues is related to heretical mendicants. Basham goes on to suggest and endorse the possibility that the group in question was the Ājīvikas. I would suggest that *Arthaśāstra* 5.2 (cited and discussed above) gives a textual basis (not necessarily to say legitimization) which could go far in explaining this incident without appealing to Islamic influence nor necessarily the intervention of Ājīvika ascetics. The description of Harṣa looting the temples does not suggest that this was a “principled iconoclasm” with any theological motivation along Islamic lines. He wanted to loot and did so in a time when image-destruction had already been modeled by Muslims which might or might not have influenced him. I turn now to two traditions in medieval India which have been placed under the rubric of *nirguṇa bhakti*, the first from South India, the second from the North.

The Vīraśaivas or Liṅgāyats

Vīraśaivas were South Indian poet-saints of the early medieval period. The best known, Basavaṇṇa, lived circa 1106 - 1168 C.E. These figures wrote in the colloquial Kannada rather than Sanskrit. They were fierce monotheists and often derided the practice of image-worship in their verse. Basavaṇṇa writes:

¹⁰³M.A. Stein, *Kalhaṇa's Rājatarāṅgiṇī: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kaśmīr*, Vol 1, p. 113, vol. 1, p. 353, note.

The pot is god. The winnowing
fan is a god. The stone in the
street is a god. The comb is a
god. The bowstring is also a
god. The bushel is a god and the
spouted cup is a god.

Gods, gods, there are so many
there's no place left
for a foot.

There is only
one god. He is our Lord
of the Meeting Rivers.¹⁰⁴

These Śaivites, also known as līṅgāyats, worshiped Śiva as the supreme God, with an emphasis not on the mythology of Śiva but on Śiva as the ultimate divine principle. Orthodox līṅgāyats wore (and wear) a small amulet containing a tiny stone Śiva līṅgam around their necks. They belonged to every social stratum of society from brahmins to illiterate outcastes. A. K. Ramanujan emphasizes their nature as a "Protest or 'protestant' movement." He writes: "The Vīraśaiva movement was a social upheaval by and for the poor, the low-caste and the outcaste against the rich and the privileged; it was a rising of the unlettered against the literate pundit, flesh and blood against stone."¹⁰⁵ Ramanujan describes the Vīraśaiva movement as a religion of grace (*kṛpā*).

A mystical opportunist can only wait for it, be prepared to catch it as it passes. The grace of the Lord is nothing he can invoke or wheedle by prayer, rule, ritual, magical word or sacrificial offering. In *anubhāva* he

¹⁰⁴A.K Ramanujan, ed. and trans., *Speaking of Śiva* (New York: Penguin, 1973), p. 84. The expression "Lord of the meeting rivers" is an epithet of Śiva derived from a confluence of two rivers in North Karnatak where Basavaṇṇa had an experience of enlightenment (p.189).

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p.21.

needs nothing, he is Nothing; for to be someone, or something, is to be differentiated and separate from God. When he is one with him, he is the Nothing without names. Yet we must not forget that this fierce rebellion against petrification was a rebellion only against contemporary Hindu practice; the rebellion was a call to return to experience. Like European Protestants, the Vīraśaivas returned to what they felt was the original inspiration of the ancient traditions no different from true and present.¹⁰⁶

In addition to comparing the Vīraśaivas with European Protestants, Ramanujan notes that there has even been some speculation of early Christian influence on these *bhakti* saints.

Tara Chand suggested possible Islamic influence.¹⁰⁷

Ramanujan discusses the movement both in relation to other *bhakti* movements in India and in comparison with European Protestantism:

. . . some of the general characteristics of Vīraśaivism . . . also [describe] aspects of other *bhakti*-movements in India. The supreme importance of a guru, the celebration of a community of saints, worship as a personal relationship, the rejection of both great and little traditions (especially caste barriers), the wandering nature of the saint, the use of a common stock of religious ideas and symbols in the spoken language of the region, and the use of certain esoteric systems, these are only some of the shared characteristics.

. . . Furthermore, *bhakti* religions like Vīraśaivism are Indian analogues to European protestant movements. Here we suggest a few parallels: protest against mediators like priest, ritual, temples, social hierarchy, in the name of direct, individual, original experience; a religious movement of and for the underdog, including saints of all castes and trades (like Bunyan, the tinker), speaking the sub-standard dialogue of the region, producing often the first authentic regional expressions and translations of inaccessible Sanskritic texts (like the translators of the Bible in Europe); a religion of arbitrary grace, with a doctrine of the mystically chosen elect, replacing social hierarchy-by-birth with a mystical hierarchy-by-experience; doctrines of work as worship leading to a puritan ethic;

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p.33.

¹⁰⁷Tara Chand, *The Influence of Islam on Indian Culture* (Allahabad, 1936). Cited in Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World* (New York: Praeger, 1968) vol. 1, p .598.

monotheism and evangelism, a mixture of intolerance and humanism, harsh and tender.¹⁰⁸

I will reserve comment on this analysis of *bhakti* Hinduism and its relationship to the movements of Rammohun and Dayananda until after the discussion of the second example of an image-rejecting *bhakti* religion.

The Sants

The term Sant is used to refer to two *bhakti* groups. The first is the Maharashtrian Vaiṣṇava poet-saints, of the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries, who had a special devotion to the god Vitthala (identified with Kṛṣṇa) and his shrine at Pandharpur. The second group originated in the Hindi-speaking areas of north India. It is this group which is of potential significance in either providing another precedent for Indian aniconism or an actual influence on Rammohun and Dayananda. "Rejecting all concrete *saguṇa* ('qualified') manifestations or incarnations of the divine, and mystics as much as devotees of a personal god, the North Indian Sants defy classification within the usual categories of Hindu *bhakti*; it has become customary, however, to describe them as proponents of "*nirguṇa bhakti*."¹⁰⁹

The Sant lineage (*paramparā*) has claimed descent from the fourteenth-century Vaiṣṇava reformer Ramanand (claimed to be in direct line of descent from Rāmānuja). Ramanand broke with the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas over diet and caste restrictions and came to

¹⁰⁸Op cit., p. 52-54.

¹⁰⁹Karine Schomer, W.H. McLeod, eds., *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Berkeley, California: Berkeley Religious Studies Series, 1987) p. 3.

advocate Ram as the highest deity. A conservative wing of *bhakti* that upheld worship of *saguna* form, especially as Ram and Sita (as epitomized by Tulsi Das), traced its descent from Ramanand. Another school using the name Sants “completely rejected orthodox practices, and worshipped under the name “Ram” the transcendent and formless *nirguna* aspect of divinity.”¹¹⁰

The key figure in the Sant tradition is Kabir, whose approximate dates are 1440-1518. The son of a Muslim weaver from Benares, Kabir is famous for his poetry asserting that God is not confined to either mosque or temple. He castigates religion being used for fraudulent and exploitative purposes. For example, he writes:

It is but an image of stone
which they worship as ‘Creator’!
Those who put their trust in it
were drowned in a black torrent
Kabīr, they built a cell made of paper
with gates made out of ink
In the ground, they’ve sown stones
and the Pandits loot them all.¹¹¹

The most famous of the Sants influenced by Kabir was Nanak (1469-1539) who founded a *panth* (path or way) that culminated in the Sikh religion. Stressing devotion to God as the *satguru* (true teacher), these mystic poets turned against societal norms of pollution-purity, class (caste) distinctions, and ritualistic religion. They firmly rejected image-worship. How much of Sant aniconism or iconoclasm should be attributed to

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 5.

¹¹¹Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir* (Delhi: OUP, 1993) p. 205. The “stones,” Vaudeville writes in a note, “are the idols which yield no other crop than income for the Pandits.”

Islamic influence? W. H. McLeod comments on the commonly held view that Sikhism is an amalgam of Hindu and Islamic beliefs. He writes that if we substitute Sūfism for Islam this view appears to have much to support it. However he cautions:

The appearance is, however, misleading. Affinities certainly exist, but we cannot assume that they are necessarily the result of Sūfī influence. Other factors suggest that Sūfism was at most a marginal influence, encouraging certain developments but in no case providing the actual *source* of a significant element.¹¹² (*italics added*)

Here, we find McLeod suggesting the other acting as what I have called a “catalyst” for certain directions in Sikhism but not acting necessarily as the actual origin of those trends. Later he adds:

. . . we must observe that although there are certainly strong resemblances to Sūfī thought, almost all of the evident affinities can, with equal cogency, be traced back to native Indian sources. This is not to affirm that we must in all cases seek an Indian source; merely that an apparent affinity need not necessarily point to a Sūfī source.¹¹³

McLeod summarizes his position:

The conclusion to which we are led is that Islamic influence evidently operated upon the thought of Guru Nanak, but in no case can we accord this influence a fundamental significance. Sūfī and Qur’anic imagery certainly have made their impress, and there must have been encouragement of tendencies which accorded with Sūfī teaching, but no fundamental components can be traced with assurance to an Islamic source.¹¹⁴

¹¹²W.H. McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), p. 158.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 160. A position arguing, conversely, *for* strong Muslim influence is A.M. Khan, “The Impact of Islam on Sikhism,” in *Sikhism and Indian Society* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1967), pp. 219-229.

What the Sants can be seen as sharing with Rammohun and Dayananda were strong anti-brahminical sentiments. The Sants opposed image-worship and pilgrimage to *rīthas* (holy places). They castigated the brahminical notion of purity and caste. Like Rammohun and Dayananda came to do, the Sants used the vernacular. Rammohun and Dayananda, like the Sants, rejected the notion of avatar or incarnation.

How do the Sants differ from the nineteenth-century reformers? Unlike the Brahmo Samaj, which originated in the Bengali brahmin intelligentsia, the Sant saints were low-caste and appealed to a low- or even outcaste constituency.¹¹⁵ Unlike the Arya Samaj, they denied the authority of the Veda and tended to disparage book learning in general. Whereas the Sants derided external authority, Rammohun cites the *Upaniṣads* and *Manu* as proof texts for his reforms and Dayananda claims the inerrant authority of the *Samhitā* portion of the Vedas. A further distinction: the Sants tended, while downplaying the outer or external forms of religion, to locate authentic religious conviction in inner, personal experience of the divine. Neither Rammohun nor Dayananda lay any stress on immediate mystical experience; both are decidedly non-mystical in orientation. Nor do Rammohun or Dayananda emphasize intense personal devotion (*bhakti*); theirs is a cool Deism in contrast with the burning, intense emotional theism of the Sants.

¹¹⁵The poet Ravidās was a leather worker and would have been barred from temple worship because of this occupational status. "Those who were excluded from participating in temple worship anyway . . . mocked the cult of images and advocated other forms of devotion." Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, p. 45. Rammohun and Dayananda were, in contrast to many of the Sants, both brahmins.

Kabir claimed to be beyond either Hindu or Muslim identity, and castigated both groups. The universalism of Rammohun is somewhat akin to this as is his critique of all religions in his earliest published work, the *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin*, but Rammohun was also a Hindu apologist – even if his apologetics were very much for a “neo-Hinduism.” Dayananda claimed that “Arya” religion was the true, primordial religion of man but with this claim he did not advocate jettisoning all Hindu tradition so much as reforming it to its pristine Vedic origins. Lastly, the Sant tradition developed in some of its forms (for instance, the Radhasoami) the veneration of the guru as the living embodiment, the living icon, of the divine. Swami Dayananda vociferously rejected any attempts on the part of members of the Arya Samaj to make of him a divinised guru. Rammohun also never assumed the guru role or persona although this came to be attached to one of his successors in the Brahmo Samaj, Keshab Chandra Sen.

IV CONCLUSION

This discussion of the history of image practices in India relates to the topic of the anti-idolatry polemics of Rammohun and Dayananda in two areas. The first is in relation to the claim by these men that authentic religion in India was, both in origin and in essence, aniconic; the second is in relation to the view that the image-rejection of these men is, in fact, best seen as an import, a “Semiticising” of Hinduism having Muslim or Protestant origins. With regard to the first it appears that there would be three grounds for supporting the reformers’ claim: 1) religion of the early Vedic period (at least as articulated by its elite strata) when the *Samhitās* were written was indeed, most likely,

aniconic; 2) many verses in the *Upaniṣads* do suggest the ineffability and formlessness of the divine; and 3) there is evidence of brahmins of the older Vedic persuasion castigating the temple priests or *pūjārīs* as greedy exploiters who had fallen from the true calling of the higher brahmins.¹¹⁶

In support of the view that image-rejection is not indigenous to Indian religion the following arguments could be made: 1) The Indus Valley culture, which preceded the Vedic shows evidence of image practices. 2) With the exception of the apparent aniconism of the early Buddhists and the *hoṭṛ*'s critique of the *pūjārī*, all the instances of iconoclasm or image-rejection noted above date from after the Islamic presence in the subcontinent: the iconoclastic incident in the reign of Harṣa of Kashmir, the anti-image stance of the Jain Sthānakavāsīs, and the image-rejection of the Vīraśaivas, Sants, and Sikhs. This does raise the possibility that these latter instances were inspired by Islamic precedent. However, as I have tried to show above, Muslim influence is in most cases inconclusive. I have also argued that "influence" can be seen as "catalyst" rather than originating cause. In the next chapter I turn to the examination of Rammohun Roy, a

¹¹⁶I would add to these grounds two more which are not invoked by Rammohun or Dayananda but which could be used to argue for the priority (logical if not chronological) of the aniconic over the iconic in Hindu practice. I am thinking of the fact that the sanctums of Indian temples are dark and largely unadorned which suggests a sort of architectonic valorization of the aniconic at the heart of the religion, even in temple settings (See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, "The Interaction of *Saguṇa* and *Nirguṇa* Images of Deity," in *The Sants*, ed. K. Schomer, W.H. McLeod (Berkeley, 1987), p. 50 ff.). As well, the persistence of aniconic (non-figural or non-anthropomorphic) objects of worship such as the Śiva *liṅga*, the *śāligrāma*, the primitive lump- or log-like nature of many important objects of worship (even the Jagannāth *mūrti* at Puri) or the footprints (*pādukā*) that stand in for the image of Viṣṇu or even important saints or gurus could be taken as evidence for the greater sanctity of the formless because all these objects, although they have form, are closer to formlessness than the full-blown figural icons.

nineteenth-century figure who was exposed to Islamic learning (and who had extensive contact with British Protestantism) and yet who claimed to discard images in the name of Hindu orthodoxy.

CHAPTER THREE**RAMMOHUN ROY****INTRODUCTION**

The chapter is in three sections. I examine the life of Rammohun Roy in section I. In section II, the heart of the chapter, I examine his writings on the idolatry issue. In section III, I discuss briefly the legacy of Rammohun¹ as transmitted by his organization, the Brahmo Samaj, up to the time of the visit of Dayananda Sarasvati to Calcutta in December of 1872, thirty-nine years after the death of Rammohun in 1833.

I THE LIFE OF RAMMOHUN ROY**Overview**

Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) is well known as a campaigner against social abuses in India and as the founder of the Hindu reform movement known as the Brahmo Samaj. Rammohun was a monotheist and part of his theological agenda was the repudiation of “idolatry,” the worship of images of deities constructed in material form. For Rammohun, the issue of idolatry was not one simply of abstract doctrinal significance. Rather, he argued that the social abuses found in Hindu India, such as sati or widow burning, were part and parcel of idolatrous religion; they were in effect the fruit or outcome of idol-worship. For Rammohun the worship of God in material form was not compatible with

¹Rammohun Roy’s name finds a variety of spellings: Rammohan Roy, Ram Mohan Roy, Rāmamohana Rāya. Following Killingley, I use Rammohun or Rammohun Roy; Roy is an anglicization of the title Rāya and Bengali custom would not usually utilize this as a surname. Dermot Killingley, “Rammohun Roy’s Interpretation of Vedānta”, Ph. D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1978.

pure religion, with ethical religion, or with morality. This is a theme we see time and again in the history of the Semitic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – from the mouths of prophets or puritans. It is not something often associated with the Indian religions and so Rammohun's position on image-worship (construed as idolatry) is intriguing as it is an Asian formulation of a prophetic denunciation of "visible religion."

Rammohun attacked idol-worship as both a product and source of obscurantist superstition and moral depravity. His polemic against idolatry was based on several counts: 1) as being offensive to his theological sense of the transcendent unity of the Godhead (Brahman), 2) because of his distaste for the sensuality and emotionalism he associated with it, and, 3) because he felt it inimical to the foundation of a modern, rationally and scientifically oriented society. In these three areas of complaint against idolatry we can see affinities with at least three non-Indian traditions. The first may reflect a Muslim sensibility; the second, Puritan Christianity; the third, European Rationalism. Rammohun, who was born a Hindu, worked with these three influences on his character and claimed to find in the Vedānta their true origin. This he brought forward as purified authentic Hinduism. I turn now to tracing the life of this formative influence on modern India.

Biography

The earliest full biography of Rammohun Roy did not appear until 1881, forty-eight years after his death. Singh² refers to this Bengali work by N. N. Chatterjee as being as much an exercise in piety as one in biography. The first complete life in English was by Sophia Dobson Collet and appeared in 1900.³ An “autobiographical letter” was published by his former secretary, Sandford Arnot, in *The Athenaeum* (London) of Oct. 5, 1833, eight days after Rammohun’s death in Bristol, England. Arnot claimed, in a letter to *The Times* of London (November 23, 1833), to have drawn it up on Rammohun’s instructions. Collet regarded the autobiographical letter as spurious but Dermot Killingley, the pre-eminent modern Rammohun scholar, has defended its authenticity.⁴

Rammohun was born in Radhanagar, Burdwan district, Bengal, about one hundred miles from Calcutta probably in 1772 (but possibly later – the date given on

²Iqbal Singh, *Rammohun Roy: A Biographical Inquiry into the Making of Modern India*, Vol. 1. (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1987), p. 3.

³S.D. Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. D.K. Biswas and P.C. Ganguli (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1962). Collet (1822-1894) had completed only the early chapters at the time of her death and the work was completed by an anonymous friend (since found to have been F.H. Stead) who published the first edition in 1900. A major source of information on the early life of Rammohun Roy comes from the court proceedings launched against him by his nephew and mother. These materials only came to light in 1938 and so were unknown to the earlier European authors, including Collet. This material is found in R. Chanda and J.K. Majumdar, eds., *Selections from Official Letters and Documents Relating to the Life of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: Oriental Book Agency, 1938).

⁴Dermot Killingley, *Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Tradition*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Grevatt and Grevatt, 1993) p. 17 ff.

Rammohun's tombstone is 1774).⁵ The family moved to Langulpara in 1791-2. His parents were orthodox brahmins. His great grandfather, Krishna Chandra Banerji, had been a *sarcar* or functionary in the service of the nawab of Bengal and given the title of "Roy" or "Ray" (from the Sanskrit *Rājan*, "king"). His grandfather had been employed under the nawab at Murshidabad, the old Mughal capital of Bengal. His father, Ramkanta, was a Vaiṣṇava brahmin who had married a woman belonging to a Śākta family (Śākta referring to those who worship Śaktī – the goddess or Devī). In fact, Rammohun's mother's father had been a Śākta priest and his mother had converted to Vaiṣṇavism on entering the home of Rammohun's father.⁶ Rammohun, the second of three sons, is said to have been married by his father three times by the time he was 9 years old. The first wife died at a "very young" but unspecified age and the father then married him within a year to two more wives. The first was to be the mother of his children (she died in 1824) and the second survived him.⁷ Rammohun's family were Rarhi brahmins, of the highest lineage known as kulīn. The kulīn brahmins were polygamous and were paid a groom-price by lower-class families who wanted to enhance

⁵The uncertainties around the precise date of his birth caused controversy in 1972 when the birth bicentenary was celebrated in India. Killingley writes: "The evidence for 1772 is a statement reportedly made in 1858 by Rammohun's younger son Ramprasad, and published by Charles Dall in 1880 . . . It is confirmed, according to Collet (1962:1) by another descendant who gave 22nd May 1772. This date is generally accepted in the Brahmo Samaj, and evidence for it is the strongest, though not conclusive." Ibid., p. 1, note 2.

⁶I discuss Rammohun's mother, her character, and Ashis Nandy's view of her impact upon him in Chapter 5.

⁷Collet, *Life and Letters*, p. 4.

their status by having their daughters marry into a kulīn family. Rammohun's mother tongue was Bengali but he also learned Persian, as this language, a vestige of the Mughal heritage, was still the court language of the remaining Indian rulers. At a young age, according to the traditional biographies, he was sent for a thorough education in Persian and Arabic to Patna, where he is reputed to have read Aristotle and Euclid and the Qur'ān in Arabic.

The three or four years at Patna during which Rammohun read with avidity all that was available to him of Islamic literature were calculated to exercise an unsettling effect on his orthodox Hindu predilections. Ramkanta (his father) then sent his son, aged about twelve, to Benares for the study of Sanskrit. In a short time Rammohun became well-versed in the literature, law and philosophy of his people, specially the Upanisads and returned to Radhanagar. While this education made him an ardent admirer and advocate of the monotheistic religion inculcated in the Upanisads, it shook his faith in the popular Hindu religion of the day.⁸

Some of this account, including the claim that he studied Arabic translations of Aristotle and Euclid, may reflect what R.C. Majumdar has called the "Rammohun myth" or accounts of his life circulated by the Brahmo Samaj and Western admirers that have exaggerated his accomplishments.⁹ Around 1787 Rammohun is reported to have left home. The reasons for his departure are contested. In the "autobiographical letter" published in *The Athenaeum* of Oct. 5, 1833, Rammohun maintains that he left home over a disagreement brought about "when about the age of sixteen I composed a manuscript calling in question the validity of the idolatrous system of the Hindus." This manuscript is

⁸ P. K. Sen, *Biography of a New Faith*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Thacker Spink, 1950), p. 20.

⁹ R.C. Majumdar, *On Rammohan Roy* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1972).

not extant and the authenticity of the autobiographical letter is impugned by Collet though, as indicated above, accepted by Killingley.¹⁰ The version given by Rammohun's friend Dr. Lant Carpenter for his leaving is as follows: "Without disputing the authority of his father, he often sought from him information as to the reasons of his faith; he obtained no satisfaction; and he at last determined at the early age of fifteen, to leave the paternal home, and sojourn for a time in Thibet [*sic*], that he might see another form of religious faith."¹¹ The legend that he visited Tibet is unverified and probably fanciful. He is thought to have returned home after three to four years. According to William Adam he fell out with his father again shortly after returning and left again this time for Benares where he resided for about ten to twelve years. Rammohun maintained in his much later law-suit with the Maharajah of Burdwan that he had been disinherited by his father who died in 1803.

Rammohun's first son, Radhaprasad was born in 1800 and another son, Ramprasad in 1812.¹² Rammohun lived at Murshidabad, the old Mughal capital of Bengal and from there issued his first published work (in Persian with an Arabic preface), *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin* in 1803 or 1804. The treatise (to be discussed in section II below) stresses

¹⁰The letter is also accepted by Stephen N. Hay, "Western and Indigenous Elements in Modern Indian Thought" and by Biswas and Ganguli, the editors of Collet's biography. See Hay, p. 315.

¹¹Lant Carpenter, "Biographical Sketch," in *The Last Days in England of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. Mary Carpenter (London: Trubner, 1866), p. 2. Rev. Lant Carpenter, a Unitarian minister and friend of Rammohun, wrote the sketch in 1833 as an obituary for Rammohun after his death. It was first published in the *Bristol Gazette* and the *Bristol Mercury*.

¹²Bruce C. Robertson, *Raja Rammohan Ray* (Delhi: OUP, 1995), p. 14.

the unity of all religions in the belief in one Supreme Being while attacking the traditions and practices which have encrusted this central belief as irrational excrescences.

Collet says that the exact date when Rammohun began work with the British in the Civil Service is unknown but must have been shortly after the death of his father in 1803. John Digby, the Collector at Rangpur, wrote that he first met him in 1801. Rammohun worked as *dewan*, or principal native officer, under John Digby probably from about 1803. Digby, who later edited an edition of Rammohun's *Abridgement of the Vedānta* (published in London in 1817), says in a preface to this work that Rammohun commenced the study of English in 1796 but that five years later (in 1801) he had only a rudimentary speaking ability and could not write it with any facility. Rammohun established a friendship with his supervisor and this aided him in eventually perfecting his command of English, and he acquired an excellent ability through correspondence, conversation and reading English newspapers.

Rammohun amassed enough money during his ten years of government service and through being a zamindar (landowner) and a money lender, that in 1814 at the age of 42 he was able to retire in Calcutta and devote himself to publishing and religious controversy. In 1815 Rammohun founded the Atmiya Sabha or Friendly Association. It met weekly and consisted of readings from Hindu scriptures and the singing of theistic hymns composed by Rammohun or his associates. The Atmiya Sabha remained in operation until 1819.

Rammohun had commenced issuing his translations of the Vedāntic literature: a Bengali translation of the *Vedānta Sūtras* appeared in 1815 with a summary of the same

work into Bengali, Hindustani and English. His translation of the *Kena Upaniṣad* and *Īśopaniṣad* appeared in 1816, and translations of the *Katha*, *Muṇḍaka* and *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣads* in 1817. Rammohun's views elicited response from the more orthodox Hindu community. In December, 1816 the *Madras Courier* published a long letter written by Senkara Sastri, head English master at the Madras Government College, attacking Rammohun's position. Rammohun replied to this in *A Defence of Hindu Theism*. In 1817, Mr̥tyuñjay Vidyālaṅkāṛ, head pandit of the College of Fort William in Calcutta, issued a tract called *Vedāntacandrikā* which led Rammohun to reply with *A Second Defense of the Monotheistical System of the Veds* (1816).

Rammohun is well-known for his agitation against the custom of *sati*. Collet reports the story that on the death of his elder brother Jaganmohun in 1811, Rammohun actually witnessed the death by *sati* of his sister-in-law.¹³ Rammohun's first published tract on the subject of *sati* appeared in 1818. He issued this in Bengali followed by an English translation in November of the same year. A second tract on the subject was published in February, 1820. *Sati* was finally outlawed by the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck on December 4, 1829.

In 1820 Rammohun published a work which generated great controversy entitled *The Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happiness; extracted from the Books of the New Testament, ascribed to the Four Evangelists. With translations into Sanskrit and Bengali*. His endeavour here was to present the moral precepts of Jesus separated from both the miraculous and the doctrinal. This work was attacked by the Serampore

¹³Collet, *Life and Letters*, p. 15.

missionaries in their journal, *The Friend of India*. Rammohun responded in his *Appeal to the Christian Public in Defence of the 'Precepts of Jesus,' by a Friend to Truth* in which he took great umbrage at being referred to as a "heathen." Rammohun wrote subsequent tracts defending his writings on the gospels from missionaries who were upset that an Indian would have the gall to write on Christian subjects.¹⁴ He issued a *Second Appeal* in 1821. He had, in fact, been engaged with two Serampore Baptist missionaries on a translation of the gospels into Bengali. In 1819 he had met and befriended William Adam, a Baptist missionary. Rammohun had been studying Hebrew and Greek in order to look at biblical scripture in the original languages. Rammohun, Adam, and another missionary had embarked on translating the gospels into Bengali. In the course of this endeavour Rammohun convinced Adam of the superiority of the unitarian interpretation of the gospels and the latter made public his conversion from Trinitarianism to Unitarianism much to the horror of the missionary authorities.¹⁵ Adam later worked for the Calcutta Unitarian Committee which was formed in September, 1821 by both Indians

¹⁴ Rammohun could accept Jesus as the greatest of ethical teachers but not as the second person of a trinity. To Rammohun, the image of the Holy Ghost as a dove smacked of idolatrous polytheism: "If Christianity inculcated a doctrine which represents God as consisting of three persons, and appearing sometimes in human form, at other times in the form of a dove, no Hindoo, in my humble opinion, who searches after truth, can conscientiously profess it in preference to Hindooism; for that which renders the modern system of Hindooism absurd and detestable, is that it represents the divine nature, though one (Ekam Brahman), as consisting of many persons, capable of assuming different forms for the discharge of different duties." Cited in P. K. Sen, *Biography of a New Faith*, vol. 1, p. 104.

¹⁵ P. K. Sen writes: "This was sarcastically described by the scandalized critics of the day as the 'fall of the second Adam' ". Ibid., p. 28.

(prominently Rammohun Roy) and several Europeans.¹⁶ On January 30, 1822 Rammohun issued his *Final Appeal to the Christian Public*.

Rammohun championed the introduction of modern education. In 1823 he sent his well-known letter to Lord Amherst recommending English education for India over traditional Sanskrit. Here it is interesting to note that although he was himself a Sanskritist and apologist for the recovery of the ancient Indian sources, in the debate between the British "Orientalists" who favoured a Sanskrit and Persian educational system in India and the "Anglicists" who wanted to introduce the modern, Western system, Rammohun favoured the latter. This was because he felt that India needed the rational and quantitative emphasis of the Western system for her progress and reform. He considered the Western pattern of education necessary for a grounding in that rationalism which would uproot idolatry, superstition, and the persistence of irrational ritualism and unjust practices.

The Unitarian Committee had lapsed in its activity but was renewed in 1827 only to close again in 1828. On 20 August, 1828 Rammohun launched a new religious society, the Brahma Sabha (later Brahmo Samaj) or Society of God. This society was able to purchase a site and erect a building for its worship which was opened on January 23,

¹⁶Adam later became the minister of the Unitarian congregation in Toronto! See Sunrit Mullick, "Brahmo Samaj, Unitarians and Canada: A Forgotten Chapter in Indo-Canadian Religious History," *Studies in Religion/ Sciences Religieuses* 24, no. 3 (1995): 261-266.

1830 – a date which subsequently marked the yearly commemoration of the anniversary of the society.¹⁷

In November of 1830 Rammohun Roy sailed for England acting as the envoy of Akbar the Second, the titular “Emperor of Delhi” who had bestowed on Rammohun the title “Raja.” Rammohun was the first Indian intellectual to “cross the waters” to Europe. He was well received in England and was successful in contributing to the defense of the anti-*sati* legislation (against the appeals of the orthodox to reverse its having been made illegal) before the British parliament. He met with leading English Unitarians and also visited France. He died in September of 1833 in Bristol where he had gone to the home of English Unitarian admirers to try to rest and recover from an illness.

II THE WRITINGS OF RAMMOHUN ROY

Introduction

“The criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism”
Karl Marx, *Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*

Rammohun Roy's writings had the main aim of reform and the beginning of this reform was the attack on Hindu image-worship and idolatry. It must be emphasized that the idolatry question was seen by Rammohun as the sister if not the *source* of the other objects of his reformer's zeal. I discuss why this should be so in the fifth and sixth chapters of this dissertation.

¹⁷In the same year, Rammohun assisted the Scottish missionary, Alexander Duff, in the setting up of his school in the former meeting house of the Brahma Sabha on Chitpore Road. This is an indication of Rammohun's openness to the Christians despite his debates in print over Trinitarian theology.

It should be stressed that Rammohun Roy was a complex man with many strands of influence on his thinking. His early training in Persian and Arabic probably influenced him in the direction of the emphasis on monotheism and the rejection of image-worship.¹⁸ This would be reinforced later by his dialogues with the Christian missionaries at Serampore and his investigations of the biblical literature. However there was also a strong streak of rationalism in Rammohun which cannot be attributed directly to either of these sources. It appears in his first published work before his extensive contact with Europeans but was undoubtedly later reinforced by familiarity with Western intellectual trends such as Deism and post-enlightenment scientific rationalism. I turn now to Rammohun's earliest extant religious writing.

Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin

The *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin* (A Gift to the Deists, or Gift to the Monotheists) is Rammohun's first published work.¹⁹ It was first published in 1803-4 when Rammohun was about thirty, written in Persian with an Arabic introduction. Although mention is made of idolatry, it does not focus on this question. It does, however, show the seeds of Rammohun's rationalism, a rationalism that would be one of the primary grounds for his later attacks on image-worship written in Sanskrit, Bengali, and English.

¹⁸ Rammohun's Brahmo Samaj stressed the worship of God as *Ekamevādvityam*, a Sanskrit term from the *Upaniṣads* meaning "One only without a second". The term is reminiscent of the central Islamic notion of *Tawhīd*, the indivisible Unity of God.

¹⁹ I utilize the edition and translation by Moulavi Obaidullah el Obaide published in Dacca in 1883 and reprinted in Baboo Kissory Chand Mitter, *Rammohun Roy and Tuhfatul Muwahhidin* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1975).

The work is highly sceptical in tone and is an appeal for reason to distinguish basic truths from the accretions of human traditions, that is, to make the distinction between “habit and nature” in religion.²⁰ The appeal to natural truths in religion casts the essay in the mode of European enlightenment thought but the piece was written before Rammohun would have had access to European ideas. Attempts have been made to see the sources of his thought in Islamic rationalism derived from the Mu‘tazilite school. Another possible source is the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, a work on religion in North India written in 1645, in Persian, by an unknown author. Rammohun does not allude to this work but there is circumstantial evidence that he could have been familiar with it.

In the introduction Rammohun argues that belief in One Being, who is the source and governor of the creation, is universal and that differences arise among peoples not on this point but rather on the level of particular attributes of that Being and on what, for humans, is forbidden and what is legal. Turning to One Eternal Being is a natural tendency for all human beings whereas allegiance to a particular God or Gods is an excrescence. Rammohun then makes the rather remarkable (for the time) assertion that “. . . falsehood is common to all religions without distinction.”²¹

Rammohun engages in some psychology of religion: He says that an individual having heard the stories of his religion from a young age, “acquires such a firm belief in religious dogmas that he cannot renounce his adopted faith although most of its doctrines

²⁰One is reminded of the Sophist distinction between *nomos* and *physis*.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 1. The statement is an interesting contrast to the one made famous by Ramakrishna and his successors that “all religions are true.”

be obviously nonsensical and absurd.”²² He may even as an adult want to invent new arguments to bolster his faith. If anyone should come to question any principle of the faith the leaders of the religion will try to silence him either literally by killing him or socially by slander.

The state of influence of these leaders over their followers and their submission to them have reached such a degree that some people having a firm belief in the sayings of their leaders, think some stones and vegetables or animals to be the real object of their worship; and in opposing those who may attempt to destroy those objects of their worship or to insult them they think shedding the blood of others or sacrificing their own lives, an object of pride in this world, and a cause of salvation in the next.²³

Rammohun states that the two fundamental ideas of any religion – belief in a soul and belief in recompense in a next world – are the only two indispensable doctrines for social solidarity. Rammohun reveals here a functionalist view of religion that stresses the social utility of certain basic beliefs to which have been added a myriad of what he considers to be useless restrictions on eating and drinking and useless notions regarding purity and impurity, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness and so on.

Through witnessing the mysteries of nature anyone can infer that there exists a supreme Being “Who (with His wisdom) governs the whole universe.” This is an innate faculty in humanity.²⁴ However, particular cultures profess particular views of the divinity according to tradition and habit. Some persons:

²²Ibid., p. 5. Rammohun may have been speaking personally here.

²³Ibid., p. 6.

²⁴Ibid., p. 8.

Do not make any distinction between the habit and an absolute belief in the existence of the Source of Creation which is an indispensable characteristic in mankind, so that they, through the influence of habit and custom and blindness to the enquiry into the sequence between cause and effect, believe the bathing in a river and worshipping a tree or being a monk and purchasing forgiveness of their crime from the high priests, etc., (according to the peculiarities of different religions) to be the cause of salvation and the purification from sins of a whole life.²⁵

Towards the end of the tract Rammohun speaks of his own background:

. . . the Brahmins have a tradition from God to observe their ceremonies and hold forth their faith for ever. There are many injunctions about this from the Divine Authority in the Sanskrit language, and I, the humblest creature of God, having been born amongst them, have learnt the language and got those injunctions by heart, and this nation (the Brahmins) having confidence in such divine injunctions cannot give them up although they have been made subject to many troubles and persecutions and were threatened to be put to death by the followers of Islam.²⁶

Rammohun adds that the Muslims regard the brahmins as the grossest idolators and that they (the Muslims) “always being excited by religious zeal and having been desirous of carrying out the orders of God, have not failed to do their utmost to kill and persecute the polytheists and unbelievers in the Prophetic mission of the Seal of the Prophets . . . ”²⁷ He then pointedly asks the following question:

Now, are these contradictory precepts or orders consistent with the wisdom and mercy of the great, generous and disinterested Creator or are these the fabrications of the followers of religion? I think a sound mind will not hesitate to prefer the latter alternative.²⁸

²⁵Ibid., p. 9.

²⁶Ibid., p. 16.

²⁷Ibid., p. 17.

²⁸Ibid., p. 17.

Rammohun then is prepared to reject both the ritual idolatry of the Brahmins and the murderous impulse of the Muslims to destroy the idolators.

Finally, Rammohun alludes to something that would have been very close to his own experience, the conflict that arises over rejecting the religious traditions of one's own family:

Another argument produced by some of the doctors of religions, is that it is necessary that we should follow the ceremonies and creeds which were adopted by our forefathers, without any enquiry into the truth and falsehood of them, and to hate those ceremonies and creeds or deviate from them, leads to disgrace in the present world and to mischiefs in the next; and that such a conduct is in fact a contempt and insult of our forefathers. This fallacious argument of theirs, produces a great effect on the minds of the people who entertain a good opinion with reverence towards their ancestors, and consequently hinders them from any enquiry into the truth and adopting the righteous way.²⁹

Rammohun attacks this reasoning by showing that it could not apply to those persons who found new religions nor to those who seek radical reform (to "pull down the foundation of their ancestors' creed"). In fact, "conversion from one religion to another, is one of the habits of mankind." Rammohun then makes the plea that humans should exercise their God-given capacity for arriving at their own judgments.

. . . the fact of God's endowing each individual of mankind with intellectual faculties and senses, implies that he should not, like other animals, follow the examples of his fellow brethren of his race, but should exercise his own intellectual power with the help of acquired knowledge, to discern good from bad, so that this valuable divine gift should not be left useless.³⁰

²⁹Ibid., p. 19.

³⁰Ibid., p. 20.

The *Tuhfat* is of interest and importance in relation to the issue of Rammohun's thought being seen as a product of diffusion from Islamic or European sources. With regard to the latter, in that it was published in 1803 or 1804 before he had acquired proficiency in the English language and just at the time he began to work for the East India Company, the attribution seems unlikely. In that the *Tuhfat* was written in Persian with an Arabic preface, it goes without saying that it bears Islamic influences. It was written for an audience still educated in the Persian language, a language that would quickly go into eclipse in the early decades of the nineteenth century in Calcutta and Bengal. When we encounter the next corpus of Rammohun's writings on religion from 1815 on, the language has changed from Persian to Sanskrit, Bengali, and English. The mode has shifted also from one of critiquing religion in general to one of critiquing particular religions: Hinduism and Trinitarian Christianity. Rammohun's critique of Christianity was made in *defense* of Hinduism and it was his aim to critique his own tradition not as an attack intended to destroy but a polemic intended to reform and revision. The appeal is not to reason alone but reason *and* revelation – revelation that Rammohun is concerned to set forward in his translations of the *Vedas*.

Attacks on Idolatry in the Collected English Works

As described above, between 1803 or 1804 (the first publication of the *Tuhfat*) and 1815, Rammohun worked in various regions of Bengal with the British civil servants of the East India Company. He also managed his land holdings and engaged in money-lending. By 1815 he had amassed enough of a fortune from his land holdings and

financial dealings to settle in Calcutta and devote himself to the work of religious reform. His English works were published from 1816 on, until his death in 1833. He was the first Indian intellectual to write in a modern European language.³¹

A reformer seeks not to revolutionize or overthrow but to “reform” a tradition. To re-form is to attempt to re-instate what is purported to be an earlier model of purity that has become distorted over time. There is an appeal to a putative early period of purity, authenticity, and legitimacy. Luther and the Protestant reformers made the claim that they sought to return the Church to the “original purity” of the faith and worship of the early Christian community as imaged solely from the biblical sources. Rammohun Roy sought in the Hindu context to bring forward the teachings of the Veda³² (or Vedānta) as the pure standard from which subsequent Hindu tradition had disastrously deviated. Rammohun’s writings against idolatry are found in the introductions and prefaces that he wrote to his translations of the *Upaniṣads*. They are also found in his introduction to his translation of

³¹Dermot Killingley, *The Only True God* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Grevatt and Grevatt, 1982), p. 1. Killingley comments on the differences between Rammohun’s writings in English and Bengali, the difference is more than linguistic: “The English version often adds further arguments, while omitting some of the Sanskrit quotations adduced in support by the original version. In the Bengali as well as the Sanskrit works, Rammohun is addressing fellow-Hindus; indeed, most of his followers or opponents were fellow-Brahmins. In the English works, on the other hand, he is addressing a European readership. It was only later that English became what it was for Keshub Chunder Sen and Swāmi Vivekānanda, a means of addressing a Hindu audience . . . However, the English works proved the more influential and were more frequently reprinted; while Rammohun virtually admitted, at the beginning of the second preface to the Vedānta-grantha that the Bengali-reading public which he was trying to reach did not yet exist.” Killingley, “Rammohun’s Interpretation of Vedānta,” p. 141-2.

³² When Rammohun refers to the “Veda” he is really referring to the philosophically oriented passages from the *Upaniṣads* which comprise the Vedānta or “end” of the *Vedas*.

the *Brahma-sūtras* (Rammohun uses the title “Vedanta-sutras”), and in a series of rebuttals he wrote to attacks on his views written by orthodox pandits. In what follows below I quote and comment on passages from this literature. The discussion is organized under the various titles of these prefaces and tracts. At the end I summarize the types of arguments that are contained in them. The sequence follows the order of publication from 1816 to 1832.

Preface to the Translation of the *Īśopaniṣad* (1816)

Full title: *Translation of the Ishopanishad, one of the Chapters of the Yajur-Ved, According to the Commentary of the Celebrated Shankar-acharya: Establishing the Unity and Incomprehensibility of the Supreme Being; and that his Worship Alone can Lead to Eternal Beatitude*

The most learned Vyasa shows, in his work of the Vedanta, that all the texts of the Veda, with one consent, prove but the Divinity of that Being, who is out of reach of comprehension and beyond all description. . . . It is evident, from those authorities, that the sole regulator of the Universe is but one, who is omnipresent, far surpassing our powers of comprehension; above external sense; and whose worship is the chief duty of mankind and the sole cause of eternal beatitude; and that all that bear figure and appellation are but inventions.³³

In this brief passage we see a number of themes which would become standard for Rammohun in most of his subsequent religious writing. He appeals to the original authorities (the Veda and *Vedānta sūtras*); he maintains that they teach a pure monotheism. He emphasizes that the “Supreme Being” is ineffable, he is beyond name and form (*nāma-rūpa*) or, as Rammohun puts it here, “figure and appellation” are inventions. It is mankind’s *duty* to worship him; I place the accent on duty as there is little in Rammohun of *bhakti*, of enthusiastic, let alone ecstatic, devotion.

³³Published Calcutta, 1816. *The English Works of Rammohun Roy* Part 2, ed. K Nag and D. Burman (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1946).

Rammohun goes on to assert (and this is something he will repeat in many of his writings) that although the *Purāṇas* and *Tantras* which “are to be considered Sastra” do sometimes give directions to worship “figured gods and goddesses” that they do this only for those incompetent to elevate their minds to the invisible Supreme Being. These texts, he argues, recommend that “those who are competent for the worship of the invisible God, should disregard the worship of Idols.” He cites *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* Part I, ch. 2 and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.84.³⁴ This is a key element of Rammohun’s approach to the image-worship question and one he repeats frequently in his other writings. Images are tolerated but only as the resort of those truly incapable of contemplating the formless Supreme. Image-worship is given thus a provisional status, one much lower than worship of the God beyond form, but nonetheless located in a hierarchy. This is very much in keeping with the Hindu penchant for inclusivity; the older or inferior or lower notion is not excluded but located in a hierarchy on a subordinate level. It is a step (*krama*) in a regular arrangement toward the superior level. We will see in Chapter 4 that this attitude (which at least affords a grudging toleration of image-worship) would be utterly rejected by Swami Dayananda.

Rammohun then makes the argument that polytheism is only apparent in the Hindu texts and can be dissolved by a “figurative” reading:

From the foregoing. . . it is evident, that although the Vedas, Puranas, and Tantras, frequently assert the existence of the plurality of gods and goddesses, and prescribe the modes of their worship for men of

³⁴Unlike his fellow iconoclast, Dayananda Sarasvati, Rammohun will find and cite passages from the *Purāṇas* and *Tantras* that support his position on image-worship. Dayananda would not do this as he condemned practically all post-Vedic literature.

insufficient understanding, yet they have also declared in a hundred other places that these passages are to be taken merely in a figurative sense.³⁵

He also denies the suggestion that the worship of the formless Supreme is only for ascetics and renouncers while worship of the figured gods is for householders:

Neither can it be alleged that the Vedas, Puranas, etc., teach both the adoration of the Supreme Being and that of celestial gods and goddesses, but that the former is intended for Yatis or those that are bound by their profession to forsake all worldly considerations, and the latter for laymen; for, it is evident from the 48th Text of the 3rd Chapter of the Vedanta that a householder also is required to perform the worship of the Supreme Being.³⁶

This is a key issue in Rammohun's reformist thought. Rammohun will argue that the worship of the formless Supreme Being is *not* the exclusive province of a small coterie of religious virtuosi, the *sannyāsins*. Rammohun will argue in many places that far more people are able, qualified, and entitled to such worship than only the elite intellectuals or renouncers. Hindu tradition refers to the prerequisite or qualification or entitlement for some practice as *adhikāra*. Rammohun is arguing for a much enlarged view of the extent of the population who have the entitlement (*adhikāra*) for formless worship.

Rammohun goes on to cite passages from Manu suggesting that an inner attitude of seeking knowledge of God is more important than performing all the exterior rites: "Other Brahmans incessantly perform those sacrifices only, Seeing with the eye of divine learning, that the spiritual knowledge is the root of every ceremonial observance." He makes the assertion that many members of the highest class although aware of the

³⁵Ibid., p. 42. One might compare this with the Stoics who produced figurative or allegorical readings of Homeric myth and religion.

³⁶Ibid., p. 43.

absurdity of idolatry are so materially dependent on it that they promote it while simultaneously concealing knowledge of the scriptures from the people.

Many learned Brahmans are perfectly aware of the absurdity of idolatry, and are well informed of the nature of the purer mode of divine worship. But as in the rites, ceremonies and festivals of idolatry, they find the source of their comforts and fortune, they not only never fail to protect idol-worship from all attacks, but even advance and encourage it to the utmost of their power, by keeping the knowledge of their scriptures concealed from the rest of the people.³⁷

He goes on to deny the suggestion (made by some liberal-minded Europeans) that the idols of the Hindus are used by them simply as devices to elevate their minds to the contemplation of the divine attributes. In his inimitable style, he writes:

Some Europeans, indued with high principles of liberality, but unacquainted with the ritual part of Hindu idolatry, are disposed to palliate it by an interpretation which, though plausible, is by no means well founded. They are willing to imagine, that the idols which the Hindus worship, are not viewed by them in the light of gods or as real personifications of the divine attributes, but merely as instruments for raising their minds to the contemplation of those attributes which are respectively represented by different figures.³⁸

Rammohun notes that many Hindus who are conversant with English have adopted this apologetic for idol-worship. However, he maintains that the rank and file of Hindus have

³⁷Ibid., p. 44.

³⁸It is interesting here that Rammohun is ascribing foreign influence to the *defenders* of images while none at all to his own iconoclastic critique. One European Rammohun may have had in mind was Charles Stuart, a British military officer who had a house in Calcutta where he amassed an important collection of Hindu religious sculpture – a collection that now forms the backbone of the collection of Indian sculpture in the Department of Oriental Antiquities in the British Museum. Stuart's fondness for things Indian earned him the moniker "Hindoo Stuart." See Jörg Fisch, "A Solitary Vindicator of the Hindus: The Life and Writings of General Charles Stuart (1757/58-1828)." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1 (1985): 35-57.

no such notion of the gods nor of their images. Perhaps they should have (we saw above that Rammohun gives grudging recognition of the provisional validity of images for the intellectually impaired, and in other places he himself will argue for the allegorical interpretation of scriptural passages suggesting images and gods) but, in fact, they do not:

On the contrary, the slightest investigation will clearly satisfy every inquirer, that it makes a material part of their system to hold as articles of faith all those particular circumstances, which are essential to belief in the independent existence of the objects of their idolatry as deities clothed with divine power.³⁹

Rammohun goes on to say that indeed the devotees of Śiva really believe that he lives on Mt. Kailāsa with his wives and children even as the Vaiṣṇavas hold that Viṣṇu resides on the summit of heaven. This literal understanding of the materials of mythology is carried over to attitudes regarding the images of the gods:

Neither do they regard the images of those gods merely in the light of instruments for elevating the mind to the conception of those supposed beings; they are simply in themselves made objects of worship. For whatever Hindu purchases an idol in the market, or constructs one with his own hands, or has one made under his own superintendence, it is his invariable practice to perform certain ceremonies called Prana-Pratistha, or the endowment with animation, by which he believes that its nature is changed from that of the mere materials of which it is formed, and that it acquires not only life but supernatural powers. Shortly afterwards, if the idol be of the masculine gender, he marries it to a feminine one, with no less pomp and magnificence than he celebrates the nuptials of his own children.⁴⁰

He goes on to mention the practices of feeding, clothing, and fanning the deities. More is hinted at:

³⁹Ibid., p. 45.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 45.

But superstition does not find a limit here: the acts and speeches of the idols, and their assumption of various shapes and colours, are gravely related by Brahmans, and with all marks of veneration are firmly believed by their deluded followers. Other practices they have with regard to those idols which decency forbids me to explain. In thus endeavouring to remove a mistake, into which I have reason to believe many Europeans gentlemen have been led by a benevolent wish to find an excuse for the errors of my countrymen, it is a considerable gratification to me to find that the latter have begun to be so far sensible of the absurdity of their real belief and practices, as to find it convenient to shelter them under such a cloak, however flimsy and borrowed. The adoption of such a subterfuge encourages me greatly to hope, that they will in time abandon what they are sensible cannot be defended; and that, *forsaking the superstition of idolatry, they will embrace the rational worship of the God of Nature, as enjoined by the Vedas and confirmed by the dictates of common sense.*⁴¹

I have italicized the last statement above because it is a good summation of Rammohun's position. The stages indicated are as follows: 1) if we could get rid of the superstition of idolatry, then 2) Indians will turn to the rational practice of the worship of the Deistic deity, who is 3) none other than the God revealed in Nature, who is 4) lo and behold the same principle taught in the Veda and 5) by simple common sense!

Rammohun next addresses the argument that if the Vedānta holds that God is omnipresent then all creatures from men to vegetables should be looked upon as God. He replies that the Vedānta teaches the unity of God but that by saying "God is everywhere, and everything is in God," means that nothing is absent from God and nothing exists independently of him. This is not to say that he is the same as everything we see or feel. The latter position would be more absurd than that of the advocates of idolatry who recognize a few million gods and goddesses [330 million is an oft-used number] in that the real pantheist would admit the divinity of every living creature.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 46.

Rammohun cites *Vedānta Sūtra* 3.2.11 which he renders as: “That being, which is distinct from matter, and from those which are contained in matter, is not various, because he is declared by all the Vedas to be one beyond description.” To the argument, made by the defenders of images, that no-one can come to a desire for the knowledge of God without purifying the mind and that idol-worship acts to do so, Rammohun replies: “I must affirm with the Veda, that purity of mind is the consequence of divine worship, and not of any superstitious practices.”

Rammohun then turns to the last of the “principal arguments” in favour of idolatry. This is the ground that it is established by custom or tradition. In a very “protestant” vein Rammohun writes: “It is however evident to every one possessed of common sense, that custom or fashion is quite different from divine faith; the latter proceeding from spiritual authorities and correct reasoning, and the former being merely the fruit of vulgar caprice.”

The preface is followed by a short “Introduction” to the *Upaniṣad*. I select a passage in which Rammohun refers to his own identification with brahminical tradition and again returns to the theme that idolatry vitiates any genuine concern for morality:

. . . I (although born a Brahman, and instructed in my youth in all the principles of that sect), being thoroughly convinced of the lamentable errors of my countrymen, have been stimulated to employ every means in my power to improve their minds, and lead them to the knowledge of a purer system of morality. Living constantly amongst Hindoos of different sects and professions, I have had ample opportunity of observing the superstitious puerilities into which they have been thrown by their self-interested guides, who, in defiance of the law as well as of common sense, have succeeded but too well in conducting them to the temple of idolatry;

and while they hid from their view the true substance of morality, have infused into their hearts a weak attachment for its mere shadow.⁴²

Introduction to Translation of an Abridgement of the Vedant (1816)

Full title: *Translation of an Abridgement of the Vedant or the Resolution of all the Vedas; the Most Celebrated and Revered Work of Brahmunicipal Theology; Establishing the Unity of the Supreme Being; and that He Alone is the Object of Propitiation and Worship*

Rammohun titles his introduction to his abridgment of the *Vedānta Sūtras*, “To the Believers of the Only True God.” This work is Rammohun’s condensation of the *Brahma Sūtras*, a text which he underlines as one of the touchstones of theological orthodoxy.⁴³ As he puts it at the beginning of his abridgement:

This work he [Vyasa] termed *The Vedanta*, which, compounded of two Sanskrit words, signifies *The Resolution of all the Vedas*. It has continued to be most highly revered by all Hindoos, and in place of the more diffuse arguments of the Vedas, is always referred to as equal authority. But from its being concealed within the dark curtain of the Sanskrit language, and the Brahmans permitting themselves alone to interpret, or even to touch any book of the kind, the Vedanta, although perpetually quoted, is little known to the public; and the practice of few Hindoos indeed bears the least accordance with its precepts!⁴⁴

In his “abridgement” Rammohun also deals with the references to deities in the Vedas and to the pantheistic portions that would identify God with the phenomena of the world. He insists these passages are allegorical, they don’t really mean to say there are multiple gods, nor do they really mean that everything *is* God; rather, that everything is *dependent* on God.

⁴²Ibid., p. 51.

⁴³It is interesting to note that Rammohun appeals to two of the traditional three supports (*prasthānatraya*) of Vedānta; the *Upaniṣads* and *Brahma Sūtras*, but rarely makes any mention of the third, the Bhagavad Gītā.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 59.

The Veda has allegorically represented God in the figure of the Universe, viz., “Fire” is his head, the sun and moon are his “two eyes”, etc. And also the Veda calls God the void space of the heart, and declares him to be smaller than the grain of paddy and barley: but from the foregoing quotations neither any of the celestial gods, nor any existing creature, should be considered the Lord of the Universe, because the third chapter of the Vedānta explains the reason for these secondary assertions thus: “By these appellations of the Veda, which denote the “diffusive spirit of the Supreme Being equally over all creatures by means of extension, his omnipresence is established:” so the Veda says, “All that exists is indeed God.” i.e., nothing bears true existence excepting God, “and whatever we smell or taste is the Supreme Being,” i.e., the existence of whatever thing that appears to us, relies on the existence of God. *It is indisputably evident that none of these metaphorical representations, which arise from the elevated style in which all the Vedas are written, were designed to be viewed in any other light than mere allegory.*⁴⁵ (italics added)

Rammohun adds here: “Should individuals be acknowledged to be separate deities, there would be a necessity for acknowledging many independent creators of the world, which is directly contrary to common sense, and to the repeated authority of the Veda.” To support his views Rammohun again cites *Vedānta Sūtra* 3.2.11 as his proof-text: *na sthānatopi parasyobhayalingam sarvatra hi*. This, as we have already seen in his Preface to the *Īśopaniṣad*, he renders as “That Being which is distinct from matter, and from those which are contained in matter, is not various because he is declared by all the Vedas to be one beyond description.” This is a rather loose translation which draws on Śaṅkara’s commentary. He then cites *Vedānta sūtra* 3.2.14 *arūpavadeva hi tatpradhānatvāt*. He writes: “The fourteenth text of the second section of the third

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 66.

chapter of the the Vedanta declares, 'It being directly represented by the Veda, that the Supreme Being bears no figure nor form.'"⁴⁶

Rammohun continues by addressing how it is that the *Vedas* appear to talk about individual deities which demand worship: "Some celestial gods have, in different instances, declared themselves to be independent deities, and also the object of worship; but these declarations were owing to their thoughts being abstracted from themselves and their being entirely absorbed in divine reflection."⁴⁷ He suggests that beings, including humans, can get so absorbed in the divine that they consider themselves as God:

It is therefore optional with every one of the celestial gods, as well as with every individual, to consider himself as God, under this state of self-forgetfulness and unity with the Divine reflection, as the Veda says, "You are that true Being" (when you lose all self-consideration), and "O God, I am nothing but you." The sacred commentators have made the same observation, viz., "I am nothing but true Being, and am full Understanding, full of eternal happiness, and am by nature free from worldly effects." But in consequence of this reflection, none of them can be acknowledged to be the cause of the universe or the object of adoration.⁴⁸

This appears to be a rather tortuous line of reasoning. Rammohun then mentions the references to named gods:

The following texts of the Veda, viz., "Krishna (the god of preservation) is greater than all the celestial gods, to whom the mind should be applied." "We all worship Mahadeva (the god of destruction)." "We adore the sun."

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 67. Swami Gambhirananda renders this as "Brahman is only formless to be sure, for that is the dominant note (of the Upaniṣadic teaching)." Swami Gambhirananda, trans. *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1977).

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 67.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 67-68.

"I worship the most revered Varuna (the god of the sea.)" "Dost thou worship me," says the Air, "who am the eternal and universal life." "Intellectual power is God, which should be adored;" and Udgitha (or a certain part of the Veda) should be worshipped." These, as well as several other texts of the same nature are not real commands to worship the persons and things above-mentioned, but only direct those who are unfortunately incapable of adoring the invisible Supreme Being, to apply their minds to any visible thing rather than allow them to remain idle.⁴⁹

Rammohun later asserts (as he had done in the *Īśopaniṣad* preface) the view that the adoration of God (presumably the formless, absolute God) is not just for renouncers or ascetics but also for householders:

A pious householder is entitled to the adoration of God equally with an Yati; the Vedanta says, that "A householder may be allowed the performance of all the ceremonies attached to the (Brahmanical) religion, and also the fulfilling of the devotion of God . . ."⁵⁰

Rammohun then argues that all the rituals of the Veda are, in fact, optional. Here he is taking something originally applied to ascetics or renouncers (who are deemed to have transcended ritual obligations) and saying it also applies to householders: "It is optional to those who have faith in God alone, to observe and attend to the rules and rites prescribed by the Veda applicable to the different classes of Hindoos, and to their different religious orders respectively."⁵¹ He adds later on the same page:

The following texts of the Veda fully explain the subject, viz., "Janaka (one of the noted devotees) had performed Yajna (or the adoration of the celestial gods through fire) with the gift of a considerable sum of money, as a fee to the holy Brahmans, and many learned true believers never worshipped fire, nor any celestial god through fire."

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 68-69.

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 70-71.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 71.

Notwithstanding it is optional with those who have faith in the only God, to attend to the prescribed ceremonies or to neglect them entirely, the Vedanta prefers the former to the latter, because the Veda says that attendance to the religious ceremonies conduces to the attainment of the Supreme Being.

Having relativized the role of ritual, Rammohun, at the end of his "Abridgment of the Vedanta," states that geographical location is not a requisite for worship of the Supreme. He writes:

Devotion to the Supreme Being is not limited to any holy place or sacred country, as the Vedanta says, "In any place wherein the mind feels itself undisturbed, men should worship God; because no specific authority for the choice of any particular place of worship is found in the Veda," which declares, "In any place which renders the mind easy, man should adore God."⁵²

Thus Rammohun is seeking to undercut reliance on ritual and notions of sacred geography which impede this-worldly freedom and orientation. As well, he is articulating a vision of religion which is not localised but rather pushed in the direction of universalism.

Rammohun in Rebuttal

In the following pages I examine two of Rammohun's works that were not introductions or prefaces to his translations but rather works defending his views from the attack of orthodox pandits. Dermot Killingley points out that Rammohun published nine such works during his Calcutta years from 1815 to 1830.⁵³ Killingley suggests that the

⁵²Ibid., p. 72.

⁵³Dermot Killingley, "Rammohun Roy's Controversies with Hindu Opponents," in *Perspectives on Indian Religion: Papers in Honour of Karel Werner*, ed. P. Connolly

orthodox opponents fell into two categories. In the first were those who agreed with Rammohun that Brahman is One and formless but who simultaneously claimed that the rank and file of the population nevertheless needs the worship of personal gods and their image forms. Killingley says of this group of Rammonhun's opponents: "Such people objected not to the doctrine of one formless God but to Rammohun's attempt to make this doctrine widely known, and to make the worship of such a God the duty of all mankind rather than an enlightened and spiritually advanced elite."⁵⁴ The second category were those who themselves believed in a personal deity, one which could indeed be embodied in an image form. These opponents were Bengali Vaiṣṇavas who regard Kṛṣṇa as the manifestation of the Supreme Lord. Killingley makes an important sociological observation about both groups. The individuals in them, were, for the most part, professional pandits who depended for employment on the new wealth in Calcutta provided by the English government, or by missionaries, or from the new class of wealthy Hindu landowners and capitalists. In this light, it would be mistaken to see them simply as traditionalist obscurantists who had no contact with modernity.

A Defense of Hindu Theism (1817)

Full title: *A Defense of Hindu Theism in Reply to the Attack of an Advocate for Idolatry at Madras*

In 1816 the *Madras Courier* printed a long letter by Sankara Sastri of the Madras Government College, which attacked Rammohun's writings and defended traditional image-worship. Rammohun in 1817 issued his reply entitled "A Defence of Hindu

(Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1986) p. 145.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 148.

Theism.” Rammohun is adamant here that he has never claimed to discover authentic religion or even to reform (I suppose in the sense of make-over) authentic Hinduism. He writes:

In none of my writings, nor in any verbal discussion, have I ever pretended to reform or discover the doctrines of the unity of God, nor have I ever assumed the title of reformer or discover; so far from such an assumption, I have urged in every work that I have hitherto published, that the doctrines of the unity of God are real Hindooism, as that religion was practised by our ancestors, and as it is well-known even at the present age to many learned Brahmans.⁵⁵

Rammohun will again attack reliance on ritual in this work and reiterate his claim that the scriptural authority (the *Vedānta Sūtras*) makes ritual activity optional. He summarizes his opponent’s position:

The learned gentleman states, that “The first part of the Veda prescribes the mode of performing *yagam* or sacrifice, bestowing *danam* or alms; treats of penance, fasting, and of worshipping the incarnations, in which the Supreme Deity has appeared on the earth for divine purposes. The ceremonies performed according to these modes, forsaking their fruits, are affirmed by the Vedas to be mental exercises and mental purifications necessary to obtain knowledge of the divine nature.”⁵⁶

Rammohun writes in response here:

I, in common with the Vedas and the Vedanta, and Manu (the first and best of Hindoo lawgivers) as well as the celebrated Sankaracharya, deny these ceremonies being necessary to obtain the knowledge of the divine nature, as the Vedanta positively declares, in text 36, section 4th, chapter 3rd: “Man may acquire the true knowledge of God, even without observing the rules and rites prescribed by the Veda for each class: As it is found in the Veda that many persons who neglected the performance of the rites and ceremonies, owing to their perpetual attention to the adoration of the

⁵⁵“A Defense of Hindoo Theism,” *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part 2, p. 84.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

Supreme Being, acquired the true knowledge respecting the Supreme Spirit." The Veda says: "Many learned true believers never worshipped fire, or any celestial gods through fire." . . . Manu, as I have elsewhere quoted, thus declares on the same point, chapter 12th, text 92nd: "Thus must the chief of the twice-born, though he neglect the ceremonial rites mentioned in the Sastra, be diligent in attaining a knowledge of God, in controlling his organs of sense, and in repeating the Veda."⁵⁷

Rammohun will next address the question of the difficulty of coming to a knowledge of God. He asserts, in a strongly Deistic passage, that recognizing the hand of God in nature is far less of a stretch than contorting the mind by ascribing a divine presence to material idols:

The learned gentleman states, that "the difficulty of attaining a knowledge of the Invisible and Almighty Spirit is evident from the preceding verses." I agree with him in that point, that the attainment of perfect knowledge of the nature of the God-head is certainly difficult, or rather impossible; but to read the existence of the Almighty Being in his works of nature, is not, I will dare to say, so difficult to the mind of a man possessed of common sense, and unfettered by prejudice, as to conceive artificial images to be possessed, at once, of the opposite natures of human and divine beings, which idolators constantly ascribe to their idols, strangely believing that things so *constructed* can be converted by ceremonies into *constructors* of the universe.⁵⁸ (italics in original)

To the charge that he has invented the notion that the *Vedas* treat scientific subjects, Rammohun cites the *Mahānirvāṇa tantra* and then remarks:

I cannot of course be expected to be answerable for Brahmans neglecting entirely the study of the scientific parts of the Veda, and putting in practice, and promulgating to the utmost of their power, that part of them which, treating rites and festivals, is justly considered as the source of their worldly advantages and support of their alleged divinity.⁵⁹

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 87.

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 87- 88.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 88.

To the claim by his opponent that the *Vedas* prescribe image-worship as a way of mental exercises, Rammohun repeats his contention that images are only a concession to those so intellectually impaired as to be incapable of contemplating the invisible Supreme Being. As to image-worship being prescribed as necessary for the whole human race he retorts:

Permit me in this instance to ask, whether every Mussulman in Turkey and Arabia, from the highest to the lowest, every Protestant Christian at least of Europe, and many followers of Kabir and Nanak, do worship God without the assistance of consecrated objects? If so, how can we suppose that the human race is not capable of adoring the Supreme Being without the puerile practice of having recourse to visible objects?⁶⁰

The final thrust of the "Defense" is an attack on the immorality displayed by the Hindu gods as presented in the *Purāṇas*. Replying to this "advocate of idolatry at Madras" Rammohun indicates his attitude to the popular figures of Hindu mythology and devotion. This passage touches on many themes familiar to anyone conversant with Indian mythology and art.

But should the learned gentleman require some practical grounds for objecting to the idolatrous worship of the Hindoos, I can be at no loss to give him numberless instances, where the ceremonies that have been instituted under the pretext of honouring the all-perfect Author of Nature, are of a tendency utterly subversive of every moral principle.

I begin with Krishna as the most adored of the incarnations, the number of whose devotees is exceedingly great. His worship is made to consist in the institution of his image or picture, accompanied by one or more females, and in the contemplation of his history and behaviour, such as the perpetration of murder upon a female of the name of Putana; his compelling of a great number of married and unmarried women to stand before him denuded; his debauching them and several others, to the mortal affliction of their husbands and relations; his annoying them, by violation of the laws of cleanliness and other facts of the same nature. The grossness

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 89-90.

of his worship does not find a limit here. His devotees very often personify (in the same manner as European actors upon a stage do) him and his female companions, dancing with indecent gestures, and singing songs relative to his love and debaucheries. It is impossible to explain in language fit to meet the public eye, the mode in which Mahadeva, or the destroying attribute, is worshipped by the generality of the Hindoos: suffice it to say, that it is altogether congenial with the indecent nature of the image, under which he is most commonly adored.⁶¹

A Second Defence of the Monotheistical System of the Vedas (1817)

Full title: *A Second Defence of the Monotheistical System of the Vedas in Reply to an Apology for the Present State of Hindu Worship*

Mr̥tyuñjay Vidyālañkāṛ (1762-1820), head pandit at the College of Fort William at Calcutta, had published a tract called *Vedāntacandrikā* defending traditional image practices.⁶² Rammohun responded to this tract in 1817 with *A Second Defense*.

Rammohun writes that he agrees with the view expressed in the *Vedāntacandrikā* (and paraphrased by him) to the effect that, “faith in the Supreme Being, when united with moral works, leads men to eternal happiness.” But Rammohun goes on to contest any connection between “moral works” and image-worship. He seeks to distinguish “works” seen as connoting moral activity from “works” seen as ritual activity.

But the learned Brahman asserts. . . that the worship of a favoured deity and that of an image are also considered to be acts of morality. The absurdity of this assertion will be shown afterwards, in considering the

⁶¹ “A Defence of Hindu Theism” in *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part 2, p. 92.

⁶² *Mr̥tyuñjay Granthābalī* (Collected Works of Mr̥tyuñjay Vidyālañkāṛ) ed. Brajendranath Banerji (Calcutta: Ranjan Publishing House, 1939). The *Vedāntacandrikā* was first published in 1817. It appeared anonymously but a contemporary bibliography identifies Mr̥tyuñjay as the author (Killingley 1986, 149). It had an attached English translation “An Apology for the Present System of Hindoo Worship” generally thought to have been done by W.H. Macnaghten who was a British judge in Calcutta. Mr̥tyuñjay became a pandit for the Supreme Court after his tenure at Fort William College.

subject of idol-worship. To English readers, however, it may be proper to remark that the Sanskrit word which signifies *works*, is not to be understood in the same sense as that which it implies in Christian theology, when works are opposed to faith. Christians understand by works, actions of *moral merit*, whereas Hindus use the term in their theology only to denote religious rites and ceremonies prescribed by Hindu lawgivers, which are often irreconcilable with the commonly received maxims of moral duty; as, for instance, the crime of suicide prescribed to widows by Angira, and to pilgrims at holy places by the Narasimha and Kurma Puranas. I do not therefore, admit that works, taken, in the latter sense (that is, the different religious acts prescribed by the Sastra to the different classes of Hindus respectively) are necessary to attain divine faith, or that they are indispensable companions of holy knowledge. . .⁶³

Rammohun uses here as his proof-text *Vedānta Sūtra* 3.4.37. He then refers (without giving the passage) to *Manu* 4:22-24. This reads in the Doniger-Smith translation:

Some people, those who know the teachings about the sacrifices, effortlessly and perpetually offer these great sacrifices just with their sensory powers. Seeing that ceasing the actual performance of sacrifice and (sacrificing) in speech and breath is the incorruptible (sacrifice), some perpetually offer breath in speech, speech in breath. Other priests, who have seen with the eye of their own knowledge that these rites are rooted in knowledge, always perform these sacrifices using knowledge as the only offering.⁶⁴

Rammohun assumes a very belligerent tone in his attack. He quotes his opponent as saying: “Thus when the Sastras state that absorption ‘may be attained even though the sacrificial fires be neglected, the praise of that holy knowledge is intended, but *not* the depreciation of meritorious acts’ (Brahmanical rites).”⁶⁵ To this Rammohun retorts:

⁶³“A Second Defence of the Monotheistical System of the Vedas” in *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part 2, pp. 100-101.

⁶⁴*The Laws of Manu*, trans. W. Doniger, B. Smith, p. 76.

⁶⁵“A Second Defense” in *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part 2, p. 101.

Here he chooses to accuse his scripture, and ancient holy writers, of exaggerated and extravagant praise of holy knowledge, rather than that the least shock should be given by their authority to the structure of paganism and idolatry. From this instance, the public may perceive how zealous the learned Brahman and his brethren are, in respect to the preservation of their fertile estate of idolatry; when they are willing to sacrifice to it even their own scriptural authorities.⁶⁶

Rammohun then returns to his theme of the link between idolatry and moral corruption:

Idolatry, as now practised by our countrymen, and which the learned Brahman so zealously supports as conducive to morality, is not only rejected by the Sastras universally, but must also be looked upon with great horror by common sense, as leading to immorality and destructive of social comforts. For every Hindoo who devotes himself to this absurd worship, constructs for the purpose a couple of male and female idols, sometimes indecent in form, as representative of his favourite deities; he is taught and enjoined from his infancy to contemplate and repeat the history of these, as well as of their fellow-deities, though the actions ascribed to them be only a continued series of debauchery, sensuality, falsehood, ingratitude, breach of trust, and treachery to friends. There can be but one opinion respecting the moral conduct to be expected of a person, who has been brought up with sentiments of reverence to such beings, who refreshes his memory relative to them almost every day, and who has been persuaded to believe, that a repetition of the holy name of one of these deities, or a trifling present to his image or to his devotee, is sufficient, not only to purify and free him from all crimes whatsoever, but to procure to him future beatitude.⁶⁷

In his *Second Defense* Rammohun also addresses the question of God's relationship to matter. His opponent has said: "If you believe on the authority of the Scriptures, that there is a Supreme Being, can you not believe that he is united to matter?" Rammohun responds: "A belief in God is by no means connected with a belief of his being united to matter: for those that have faith in the existence of the Almighty, and are

⁶⁶Ibid., pp. 101-102.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 105-106.

endued with common sense, scruple not to confess their ignorance as to his nature or mode of existence, in regard to the point of his relation to matter, or to the properties of matter.”⁶⁸

Rammohun remarks on the comparison with the idol-worship of ancient Greece:

... though the idolatry practised by the Greeks and Romans was certainly just as impure, absurd, and puerile as that of the present Hindoos, yet the former was by no means so destructive of the comforts of life, or injurious to the texture of society, as the latter. The present Hindoo idolatry being made to consist in following certain modes and restraints of diet (which according to the authorities of the Mahabharata and other histories were never observed by their forefathers), has subjected its unfortunate votaries to entire separation from the rest of the world, and also from each other, and to constant inconveniences and distress.

A Hindoo, for instance, who affects particular purity, cannot even partake of food dressed by his own brother, when invited to his house, and if touched by him while eating, he must throw away the remaining part of his meal. In fact, owing to the observance of such peculiar idolatry, directly contrary to the authorities of their scripture, they hardly deserve the name of social beings.⁶⁹

Rammohun next enumerates five points “of the most important nature.” It should be noticed that in these five items, the first and foremost is idol-worship, implying that the other four follow from this source. Point one is given: “The adoration of the invisible Supreme Being, although exclusively prescribed by the Upanishads, or the principal parts of the Vedas, and also by the Vedanta, has been totally neglected, and even discountenanced, by the learned Brahman and his followers, the idol-worship, which those authorities permit only to the ignorant, having been substituted for that pure

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 107.

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 112-113.

worship.”⁷⁰ Point two is that although it is true past authorities allowed the voluntary act of *sati*, that modern brahmins coerce the widow. Third, that although accepting money for a daughter was prohibited by Manu and the *Vedas*, the sale of female children is now widespread in Bengal. Fourth, that although the law-giver Yājñavalkya had authorized marriage to a second wife under specific circumstances, many brahmins now marry far more wives. Fifth, whereas Manu (2.155) had said that the status of brahmins comes only in proportion to their knowledge, current practice elevates certain families such as kulīn brahmins with no regard to their knowledge and adherence to principles. Rammohun remarks: “. . . wherever respectability is confined to birth only, acquisition of knowledge, and the practice of morality, in that country, must rapidly decline.”⁷¹

Introduction to the Translation of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (1819)

Full title: *Translation of the Moonduk Opunishud of the Uthurvū-Ved According to the Gloss of the Celebrated Shunkuracharyu.*

The following passage from Rammohun’s introduction (to his translation of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*) makes clear the thrust of his position and intention. It is an oft-cited statement.

During the intervals between my controversial engagements with idolaters as well as with advocates of idolatry, I translated several of the ten Upanishads, of which the Vedānta or principal part of the Vedas consists. . . . An attentive perusal of . . . the Vedānta will, I trust convince every unprejudiced mind, that they with great consistency, inculcate the unity of God; instructing men, at the same time, in the pure mode of adoring him in spirit. It will also appear evident that the Vedas, although they tolerate idolatry as the last provision of those who are totally incapable of raising their minds to the contemplation of the invisible God of nature, yet

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 113.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 114.

repeatedly urge the relinquishment of the rites of idol-worship, and the adoption of a purer system of religion, on the express ground that the observance of idolatrous rites can never be productive of eternal beatitude. These are left to be practiced by such persons only as, notwithstanding the constant teaching of spiritual guides, cannot be brought to see perspicuously the majesty of God through the works of nature.⁷²

We see here once again the appeal to the *Vedas*, and more specifically the Vedānta, as the normative standard of the tradition. Rammohun, through his selective reading of the *Upaniṣads* argues for a standard of imageless worship as the highest norm. The Vedānta, in Rammohun's reading, teaches the Unity of God⁷³ and worship in "spirit."⁷⁴ He acknowledges that references to image-worship existed in the Vedic literature ["*Vedas*" here is used loosely as a blanket term for the scriptures] but only as the provisional concession to those who are religiously primitive and underdeveloped. Rammohun goes on to make again the direct connection between idol/image-worship and moral depravity:

The public will, I hope, be assured that nothing but the natural inclination of the ignorant towards the worship of objects resembling their own nature, and to the external forms of rites palpable to their grosser senses, joined to the self-interested motives of their pretended guides, has rendered the generality of the Hindoo community (in defiance of their sacred books) devoted to idol-worship, - the source of prejudice and superstition and the total destruction of moral principle, as countenancing criminal intercourse, suicide, female murder, and human sacrifice. Should my labours prove in any degree the means of diminishing the extent of those evils, I shall ever deem myself amply rewarded.⁷⁵

⁷²Introduction to translation of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, *English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part 2.

⁷³An Islamic expression

⁷⁴A Christian expression

⁷⁵Introduction to translation of the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad, *English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part 2.

Here we see once more the two themes which run through the corpus of Rammohun's religious works; 1) that idolatry is the product of brahminical tyranny, the "self-interested motives of their [the public's] pretended guides," and 2) that idolatry is the source and sister of immorality.

Preface to the Translation of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (1819)

Here Rammohun speaks of that most 'protestant' of endeavours – the making available of the scriptures, in the vernacular, to the masses.

In pursuance of my attempt to render a translation of the complete Vedānta, or the principal parts of the Vedas into the current languages of this country, I had some time ago the satisfaction of publishing a translation of the *Kaṭha-Upaniṣad* of the Yajur-veda into Bengalee; and of distributing copies of it as widely as my circumstances would allow, for the purposes of diffusing Hindoo scriptural knowledge among the adherents of that religion.⁷⁶

He goes on to indicate to his European audience that what he is offering here is the normative scripture as opposed to the Purāṇic myths and other more modern accretions:

The present publication is intended to assist the European community in forming their opinion respecting Hindoo Theology, rather from the matter found in the doctrinal scriptures, than from the Puranas, moral tales, or any other modern works, or from the superstitious rites and habits daily encouraged and fostered by their self-interested leaders.⁷⁷

Rammohun claims that the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* is vehemently monotheistic and teaches a transcendent rather than immanentist notion of God:

This work not only treats polytheism with contempt and disdain, but inculcates invariably the unity of God as the intellectual Principle, the

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 23.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 23.

sole Origin of individual intellect, entirely distinct from matter and its affections; and teaches also the mode of directing the mind to him.⁷⁸

Image-worship is puerile and leads to gross immorality but Providence may yet lead the Hindus to see evil as a matter of the heart instead of dwelling on diet and other ritual observances:

A great body of my countrymen, possessed of good understandings, and not much fettered with prejudices, being perfectly satisfied with the truth of the doctrines contained in this and in other works, already laid by me before them, and of the gross errors of the puerile system of idol-worship which they were led to follow, have altered their religious conduct in a manner becoming the dignity of human beings; while the advocates of idolatry and their misguided followers, over whose opinions prejudice and obstinacy prevail more than good sense and judgment, prefer custom and fashion to the authorities of their scriptures, and therefore continue, under the form of religious devotion, to practise a system which destroys, to the utmost degree, the natural texture of society, and prescribes crimes of the most heinous nature, which even the most savage nations would blush to commit, unless compelled by the most urgent necessity. I am, however, not without a sanguine hope that, through Divine Providence and human exertions, they will sooner or later avail themselves of that true system of religion which leads its observers to a knowledge and love of God, and to a friendly inclination towards their fellow-creature, impressing their hearts at the same time with humility and charity, accompanied by independence of mind and pure sincerity. Contrary to the code of idolatry, this system defines sins as evil thoughts proceeding from the heart, quite unconnected with observances as to diet and other matters of form.⁷⁹

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 23.

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 23-24.

Dialogue between a Theist and an Idolator (1822)

This is an anonymous tract that is almost universally agreed to come from the pen of Rammohun Roy.⁸⁰ In many places, as we have already seen, Rammohun links the practices of image-worship with immorality, obscenity, and licence. This argument occurs repeatedly in this tract:

. . . though one should even, under the pretence of religion, commit fornication, which is very contrary to the Sastras and to the universally prevailing principles of morality, yet idolators will by no means disesteem such a person. In the same manner, though one should even intoxicate himself under the pretence of religion - a practice this which has very pernicious consequences - and though in such a state of intoxication he should do a great deal of mischief, yet they will consider such a person as a holy man. The reason hereof is this, that idolators do not know the difference between moral and immoral actions.⁸¹

In a similar passage Rammohun clearly makes reference to the well known erotic art of Bengal and Orissa. This is consistent with his linking image practices with immorality.

Here he berates his opponents:

. . . you consider as gods, images of earth, which represent persons in variously shockingly obscene positions; and place in their temples, to which your women resort, all sorts of figures of men and women which are not fit to be looked upon. Proofs of this are to be found even in the

⁸⁰The tract was first published in 1820 under a pseudonym in Bengali and under his own name in English. "It was widely discussed and the Bengali version was reprinted several times up to the middle of the century. An abridged version was published by the Tattvabodhini Sabha in 1846, to be reprinted in 1866. The views propagated in the tract were thus to remain long in circulation." Vasudha Dalmia, "The Modernity of Tradition: Harishchandra of Banaras and the Defence of Hindu *Dharma*," in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernisation of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (Madras: OUP, 1998), p. 81, n. 4.

⁸¹ *Dialogue Between a Theist and an Idolator*, (An 1820 Tract Probably by Rammohun Roy) ed. Stephen N. Hay (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1963) p.165.

temple of Jagannath. There are also various figures unfit to meet the eye upon the cars of your gods, which are looked on by persons of all ages and sexes. And when you have made an image, you consider it as God, and sing to it various obscene and abominable songs in the hearing of persons of all descriptions; and you employ persons to represent your favourite god, and amuse yourselves thereby.⁸²

A continued thread, as we have seen, throughout Rammohun's polemics against image-worship is that this practice promoted the privilege and financial interests of the brahmin priests. We have also seen that the notion that imageless worship of the formless Godhead was only for renouncers met with his ire, as in this passage from the same tract:

. . . the command of worshipping the supreme God is for householders also. This is true, that all persons greedy of lucre are wont to affirm, that the command of worshipping the supreme God does not refer to householders. But it is manifest what the reason thereof is; viz. most householders are opulent people; accordingly these Pundits derive much profit from their worshipping images, whereas they receive none from the worship of the supreme God; for all the presents made unto the images, as jewels, clothes, etc. the offerings of food, the refreshments presented in the afternoon, the morning oblations, etc., all these things are for the profit of these men. Moreover on festival days peculiar presents must be made to the images, and a great expense must be incurred at the great festivals, and at the performance of the ceremonies. . . all this becomes the property of these covetous Pundits. Accordingly, the greater the number of images is to the worship of which householders are blindly given, the greater is the profit these men derive from them.⁸³

⁸² Ibid, p.137.

⁸³ *Dialogue Between a Theist and an Idolator*, p. 123. That worship of the supreme God (and, for him, worship of the Supreme God means necessarily, imageless worship) is *also* enjoined on householders is part of Rammohun's "democratization" of religion. It is incumbent on all, not restricted to ascetics or to a particular section of *varṇāśramadharmā*.

Image-worship was for Rammohun, to borrow Marxist terminology, a socially determined belief, an ideology promoting the class interest of the priests, pandits, and brahmin elites.

Introduction to the Translation of the *Kena Upaniṣad* (1823)

Full title: *Translation of the Kena Upanishad one of the Chapters of the Sama Veda; According to the Gloss of the Celebrated Shankaracharya: Establishing the Unity and the Sole Omnipotence of the Supreme Being and that He Alone is the Object of Worship*

Rammohun begins his introduction here by mentioning his translating of chapters of the *Vedas* into Bengali. He also connects his campaign against idolatry with his campaign against *sati*:

This work will, I trust, by explaining to my countrymen the real spirit of the Hindoo Scriptures, which is but the declaration of the unity of God, tend in a great degree to correct the erroneous conceptions, which have prevailed with regard to doctrines they inculcate. It will also, I hope, tend to discriminate those parts of the *Vedas* which are to be interpreted in an allegorical sense, and consequently to correct those exceptionable practices, which not only deprive Hindoos in general of the common comforts of society, but also lead them frequently to self-destruction, or to the sacrifice of the lives of their friends and relations.⁸⁴

Here Rammohun again underlines the contention that the *Vedas*' central message is the unity of the godhead, or monotheism. He also invokes again the device of allegory to account for seeming polytheistic passages. The next paragraph indicates his desire to communicate to a European audience, through translation, what is the true ethos of the *Vedas*. It contains in succession a series of themes that repeat through Rammohun's writings. These include: the appeal to persons of "respectability" or the literate class; the notion that "interested spiritual guides" have had vested interests in idolatrous religion;

⁸⁴*The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part 2, p. 13.

that in ancient times the unity of the godhead was known; that the elites back then employed allegory which the unsophisticated have since corrupted into literal reading with resulting corrupt idolatries:

It is with no ordinary feeling of satisfaction that I have already seen many respectable persons of my countrymen, to the great disappointment of their interested spiritual guides, rise superior to their original prejudices, and enquire into the truths of religion. As many European gentlemen, especially those who interest themselves in the improvement of their fellow-creatures, may be gratified with a view of the doctrines of the original work, it appeared to me that I might best contribute to that gratification, by translating a few chapters of the Veda into the English language. . . . Such benevolent people will, perhaps, rise from a perusal of them with a conviction, that in the most ancient times the inhabitants of this part of the globe (at least the more intelligent class) were not unacquainted with metaphysical subjects; that allegorical language or description was very frequently employed to represent the attributes of the Creator, which were sometimes designated as independent existences; and that, however suitable this method might be to the refined understandings of men of learning, it had the most mischievous effect when literature and philosophy decayed, producing all those absurdities and idolatrous notions which have checked, or rather destroyed, every mark of reason, and darkened every beam of understanding.⁸⁵

In the following passage, Rammohun expresses an idea that we have already encountered and which recurs frequently in his writings: that references to multiple gods (or their images) is a concession for the intellectually disadvantaged.

[The Vedas] also exhibit allegorical representations of the attributes of the Supreme Being, by means of earthly objects, animate or inanimate, whose shapes or properties are analogous to the nature of those attributes, and pointing out the modes of their worship immediately or through the medium of fire. In the subsequent chapters, the unity of the Supreme Being as the sole ruler of the universe is plainly inculcated, and the mode of worshipping him particularly directed. The doctrine of a plurality of gods and goddesses laid down in the preceding chapters is not only controverted, but reasons assigned for its introduction; for instance, that

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 13-14.

the worship of the sun and fire, together with the whole allegorical system, were only inculcated for the sake of those whose limited understandings rendered them incapable of comprehending and adoring the Supreme Being, so that such persons might not remain in a brutified state, destitute of all religious principle.⁸⁶

Finally, Rammohun in this introduction, changes his view on reason and revelation that had been expressed in the *Tuhfat*. In the *Kena Upaniṣad* introduction he does not insist on the sufficiency of reason:

When we look at the traditions of ancient nations, we often find them at variance with each other; and when, discouraged by this circumstance, we appeal to reason as a surer guide, we soon find how incompetent it is, alone, to conduct us to the object of our pursuit. We often find that, instead of facilitating our endeavours or clearing up our perplexities, it only serves to generate a universal doubt, incompatible with principle on which our comfort and happiness mainly depend. The best method perhaps is, neither to give ourselves up exclusively to the guidance of the one or the other . . .⁸⁷

Introduction to Translation of Several Principal Books, Passages, and Texts of the Veds (1832)

This introduction (half a page in length) accompanied a reprinting of several of Rammohun's translations and letters and was published in London in 1832, the year before his death.⁸⁸ Here Rammohun again highlights the problem of idolatry:

The Vedas (or properly speaking, the spiritual parts of them) uniformly declare, that man is prone by nature, or by habit, to reduce the object or objects of his veneration and worship (though admitted to be unknown) to tangible forms, ascribing such objects attributes, supposed excellent

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 14.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 15.

⁸⁸This introduction appears as an appendix to *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part 2, ed. K. Nag and D. Burman (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmno Samaj, 1946), p. 202.

according to his own notions: Whence idolatry, gross or refined, takes its origin, and perverts the true course of the intellect to vain fancies.⁸⁹

What follows is a rather remarkable statement that the *Vedas* instead teach humans to look at the outer world and not get lost in the inner world of the imagination:

These authorities, therefore, hold out precautions against framing a deity after human imagination, and recommend mankind to direct all researches towards surrounding objects, viewed either collectively or individually, bearing in mind their regular, wise and wonderful combinations and arrangements, since such researches cannot fail, they affirm, to lead an unbiased mind to a notion of a Supreme Existence, who so sublimely designs and disposes of them, as is everywhere traced through the universe.⁹⁰

Discussion

We can discern a cluster of arguments against idolatry that Rammohun makes in the passages above from his English Works:

1. The original texts at the source of the tradition (the *Vedas*) preach an aniconic doctrine. We must go back to the sources, “back to the *Vedas*.”
2. To do this there must be accessibility to the original texts provided by translations into the vernacular. This will break the hegemony of the “self-interested guides” or brahmin priests who profit from idolatry.
3. There is image-worship in the history of Hinduism but this is a matter of custom or tradition and should be abandoned in favour of the original normative texts.
4. If in the normative texts there is provisional sanction of some image-worship, this is only a concession to the feeble.
5. If the normative texts appear to speak of gods and goddesses (the objects of idolatry) this language is really allegorical.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 202.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 202.

6. The normative texts indicate the unity and ineffability of the Godhead, approach to this transcendent deity is not just for renouncers but is for householders.
7. To attack images is to attack the gods they represent. These gods are exemplars of immorality.
8. Most ritual is optional, not obligatory; excessive ritual inhibits the rational conduct of life.

That Rammohun saw it his task to make the scriptures (those which would indicate a purer worship of a single supreme God) available to the masses in the vernacular, perhaps makes the comparison with Martin Luther, another great translator into the vernacular and opponent of idolatrous religion, appear inevitable. The spiritual treasures of the true, ancient Hindu tradition were hidden, in Rammohun's words, "within the dark curtain of the Sanskrit language"⁹¹ to which only the brahmins had access. ⁹² Clearly, the struggle against idolatry was closely linked, in Rammohun's mind, to the democratization of access to the scriptural authorities by the dissemination of the Veda,

⁹¹ "Abridgement of the Vedant," in *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, Part 2, p. 59. The comparison with Luther is also tempting in that both men availed themselves of the newly introduced technology of printing. Rammohun operated the first printing press in India not controlled by a European.

⁹² Max Müller, *Biographical Essays* (New York: Scribner's, 1884) p. 18, says on this topic:

Although there existed Mss of the Veda, these Mss were religiously guarded. Even at a much later time, when Professor Wilson by accident put his hand on some Vedic Mss in a native library, he told me, the people rushed at him with threatening and ominous gestures. Of course, the Veda had never been printed or published, and it existed in fact, as it had for three thousand years, chiefly in the memory of the priests. We can hardly form an idea of the power wielded by these priests when they were the only repositories of Vedas or Bibles and when there was no possible appeal from what they laid down as the catholic faith.

or Vedānta, in the vernacular. The dissemination of the ancient texts in translation would break down the control of the brahminical obscurantists and their exploitative manipulation of idolatrous religion. Rammohun called not for the rejection of Hinduism but for a return to its “pure” form as expressed in the *Upaniṣads*:

The ground that I took in all my controversies was not that of opposition to Brahmanism but to a perversion of it; and I endeavoured to show that the idolatry of the Brahmins was contrary to the practice of their ancestors and the principles of the ancient books and authorities which they profess to revere and obey.⁹³

III THE LEGACY

Rammohun represented a new class of Indians in Bengal who were educated, wealthy, and dependent financially on interaction with the British. Many in this group wanted a religion which would not embarrass them in the eyes of the European. On the other hand most were not at all willing to convert to Christianity. Rammohun experimented with a sort of Indian Unitarianism but ended with Brahmoism; the genius of this faith was that it combined an Indian ethical monotheism with what might be called a sensibility of Victorian propriety. It was also “Vedic” and rational; something we might see as designed to satisfy Indian entrepreneurs and Europeanized officials caught between two worlds.

⁹³ Rammohun Roy, “Autobiographical Note”, cited in Sen, *Biography of a New Faith*, Vol.1, p. 357.

Rammohun inaugurated the “temple of catholic worship” of his religious movement, the Brahmo Samaj, in January 1830, only months before leaving on his voyage for England. In the Trust Deed for the Brahmo Samaj Rammohun decreed that the building was:

To be used . . . as a place of meeting of all sorts and descriptions of people without distinction as shall behave and conduct themselves in an orderly and sober manner for the worship and adoration of the Eternal, Unsearchable, and Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe but not under any other name or designation or title peculiarly used for and applied to any particular Being or Beings by any man or set of men whatsoever and *that no graven image, statue, or sculpture, carving, painting, picture, portrait, or the likeness of anything, shall be admitted within the said building . . . and that no sacrifice . . . shall ever be admitted therein and that no animal or living creature shall within or on the said premises be deprived of life . . . and that in conducting the said worship and adoration no object animate or inanimate that has been or is . . . recognized as an object of worship by any man or set of men shall be reviled or slightly or contemptuously spoken of . . . and that no sermon, preaching, discourse, prayer, or hymn be delivered or made use of in such worship but such as have a tendency to the promotion of the contemplation of the Author and Preserver of the Universe to the promotion of charity, morality, piety, benevolence, virtue, and the strengthening of the bonds of union between men of all religious persuasions and creeds.*⁹⁴ (italics added)

Services consisted of readings from the Vedānta, a sermon, and inspirational theistic hymns often composed by Rammohun himself.

A house of worship for the Brahmo Samaj was completed in 1849, sixteen years after Rammohun's death. A photograph of the interior of the worship hall shows a reading dais, singing platform, pulpit, and pews. It could almost be the interior of a New England Congregationalist church. Protestant Hinduism had arrived. Rammohun himself

⁹⁴Cited in Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, p. 35.

referred to worship in “spirit and truth,” the words of John 4:23 so often quoted by Calvin and the Protestant Reformers in their repudiation of “idolatrous” religion.⁹⁵

The reference may be to Protestant Christian sources but the tenor of Trust Deed is not so much Protestant as Deistic.⁹⁶ Its tone is one of cool rationality, indeed, the sort of worship intended by Rammohun was very subdued even by evangelical Protestant standards. It was even further removed from anything approaching the hot fervour of *bhakti* Hinduism. In his tract entitled, *The Universal Religion: Religious Instructions Founded on Sacred Authorities*, the following catechism of Questions and Answers gives an indication of the detached Deistic flavour of Rammohun’s notion of worship:

[Question] – What is meant by worship?

Answer. – Worship implies the act of one with a view to please another; but when applied to the Supreme Being, it signifies contemplation of his attributes.

[Question] – To whom is worship due?

A. – To the Author and Governor of the universe, which is incomprehensibly formed, and filled with an endless variety of men and things; in which, as shown by the zodiac, in a manner more wonderful than the machinery of a watch, the sun, the moon, the planets and stars perform their rapid courses; and which is fraught with animate and inanimate matter of various kinds, locomotive and immoveable, of which there is not one particle but has its functions to perform.

[Question] – What is he?

A. – We have already mentioned that he is to be worshipped, who is the Author and Governor of the universe; yet, neither the sacred writings nor logical argument, can define his nature.

⁹⁵In a footnote to a translation by Rammohun of a tract written by Sivaprasad Sarma, Rammohun states: “Under the Christian dispensation, worship through matter seems unauthorized; John ch: IV. v.21: ‘The hour now cometh when ye shall, neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father,’ etc. 23: ‘But the hour cometh and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in Spirit and truth.’” “Different Modes of Worship,” *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, p. 198.

⁹⁶Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, p. 37.

. . . [Question] – In what manner is this worship to be performed?

A. – By bearing in mind that the Author and Governor of this visible universe is the Supreme Being, and comparing this idea with the sacred writings and with reason. In this worship it is indispensably necessary to use exertions to subdue the senses, and to read such passages as direct attention to the Supreme Spirit. . . . The benefits which we continually receive from fire, from air, and from the sun, likewise are from the various productions of the earth, such as different kinds of grain, drugs, fruits and vegetables, are dependent on him: and by considering and reasoning on the terms expressive of such ideas, the meaning is itself firmly fixed in the mind. It is repeatedly said in the sacred writings, that theological knowledge is dependent upon truth; consequently, the attainment of truth will enable us to worship the Supreme Being, who is Truth itself.⁹⁷

With Rammohun's death in 1833, his movement, the Brahmo Samaj, fell into a period of inactivity. However, Rammohun's wealthy friend Dwarkanath Tagore was able to sustain the embers of the society through his patronage. Dwarkanath's son Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) in 1839 founded the Tattvabodhini Sabha (Truth-teaching Association) which in 1842 joined forces with the Brahmo Samaj. Debendranath introduced a Brahma Covenant in 1843 which had at the top of its list of vows the promise to abstain from idolatry. This covenant which detailed a rule of life for Brahmo members, in effect, carried the Brahmo Samaj in the direction of becoming a distinct sect.⁹⁸ While Debendranath shared Rammohun's opposition to idolatry, he did not share

⁹⁷*The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, Part 2, pp.129-131.

⁹⁸Killingley, *Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Thought*, p. 3. Killingley adds: "Rammohun's Samaj was not so much a sect as a meeting of like-minded people, or perhaps even a social clique which proclaimed allegiance to its leader's ideas as a matter of personal loyalty."

Rammohun's interest or reverence for the figure and teachings of Christ. As well, Debendranath was far less the Deist than Rammohun, being more oriented to the tradition of Hindu renunciation and contemplation. In 1850, the Brahmo Samaj under Debendranath dropped its commitment to the notion of the inerrancy of the *Vedas*. Although the *Vedas* were no longer to be regarded as the inerrant underpinning, the inspired scripture of the Brahmo Samaj, Debendranath produced a book, *Brahma Dharma*, based on his reading of the *Upaniṣads*, which was to act as the conceptual and liturgical basis for the Samaj.

The man destined to be the third leader of the Samaj, Keshab Chandra Sen (Keśavacandra Sena, 1838-1884) who was of the Vaidya or physician caste by birth, joined the organization in 1857. Keshab made an extended lecture tour in 1864; out of this tour a Veda (later, Brahma) Samaj was founded in Madras and, three years later, the Prārthanā Samaj in Bombay. In October of 1864 a cyclone damaged the Brahmo building in Calcutta with the result that services were moved to Debendranath's house. There, brahmins wearing their sacred threads were allowed to officiate despite the fact that years earlier the members of the Samaj, including Debendranath, had discarded their threads as a sign of their rejection of caste and the old Hindu rites. This led to protests by Keshab's followers and their secession in 1865. That year Keshab's party named itself the Brahmo Samaj of India. The original community under Debendranath was now called the Adi Brahmo Samaj. Keshab's Samaj evolved in two directions simultaneously: on the one hand, they studied and added elements from Christianity which took them outside the Hindu pale, while on the other hand they introduced devotional singing and an emotional

style of worship which brought them closer to traditional modes of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*.

Keshab visited England in 1870, meeting figures from John Stuart Mill to Queen Victoria. In India, around 1875, Keshab met and came under the influence of the mystic, Sri Ramakrishna, who lived at the Dakshinesvar temple near Calcutta. Tensions appeared when some of Keshab's followers perceived him as controlling his branch of the Brahmo Samaj in the style of an autocratic guru. Conflict also arose in 1878 when Keshab, who had long opposed child marriage, gave his 13-year-old daughter in marriage to the Hindu prince of Kuch Bihar. Apart from violating the Brahmo rejection of child-marriage, the wedding ceremony itself was considered idolatrous by many of Keshab's followers who split off to form the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. In 1881 Keshab proclaimed his group to be The Church of the New Dispensation (*Nava Vidhāna*).

This takes me further than I need go in terms of sketching the development of the Brahmo Samaj after Rammohun's death in 1833.⁹⁹ I need to back up slightly to a date of major significance for my purposes, December 16, 1872. This was the day an itinerant traditional ascetic by the name of Swami Dayananda Sarasvati arrived in Calcutta from the Doab on the invitation of leaders of the Adi Brahmo Samaj. Dayananda had already established something of a reputation as a radical opponent of idolatry and ritualism in debates conducted around Benares. It would be in Calcutta, as a result of talks with Debendranath Tagore, Keshab Sen, and other members of the Brahmo Samaj, that Dayananda would alter the language and style of his own campaign of reform in

⁹⁹I briefly discuss the subsequent impact of the Brahmo Samaj on modern Hindu India in my concluding chapter.

Hinduism. He was to emerge as the foremost opponent of image-worship in Hindu India since Rammohun Roy. In the next chapter I turn to Dayananda as the second of the great Hindu iconoclasts.

CHAPTER FOUR**DAYANANDA SARASVATI**

Like Chapter 3, this chapter is in four sections. Section I reviews the life of Dayananda and section II deals with his writings, concentrating on the second edition of his *Satyarth Prakash*. Section III focuses on Chapter 11 of the *Satyarth Prakash* where he deals most extensively with the question of image-worship. Section IV reviews the summary of Dayananda's beliefs presented in the final chapter of *Satyarth Prakash*.

I THE LIFE OF DAYANANDA SARASVATI**Overview**

Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1883) was a major figure in nineteenth-century India. Like Rammohun before him, he denounced image-worship with vehemence, in fact, with unbridled vehemence in that, unlike Rammohun, he was absolutely uncompromising on this issue. Of note here with regard to the sources of his iconoclasm is the fact that Dayananda grew up in Western India in a brahmin family that did not have the historical connection with Muslim rulers that Rammohun's did and that did not expose him to Persian language and learning. An ascetic from the age of 22, Dayananda also had neither the English language nor connections with British officials. Later in life he came to have interpreted conversations with Protestant missionaries but he had already come to his conviction regarding image-worship long before these encounters.

Biography

The man who came to be known as Dayananda Sarasvati was born in 1824, in the town of Tankara in the Kathiawar peninsula of Gujerat, north-west India. He was originally named Dayaram Mulshankar, or Mulji for short.¹ Morvi, the central Kathiawari state where he was born was a native state which at the time remained largely unaffected by the sorts of changes that had swept Bengal due to its much longer inclusion in British India.² Dayananda was raised in a household of orthodox Śaivite brahmins. His father was a rather wealthy landowner and tax-collector. He was taught the Devanagari script at the

¹My discussion of Swami Dayananda's life is highly indebted to the biography by J.T.F. Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī: His Life and Ideas* (Delhi: OUP, 1978). A pioneering critical study of Dayananda is J. Reid Graham, "The Arya Samaj as a Reformation in Hinduism with special reference to caste" (unpublished Ph.D diss., Yale University, 1942). I have also drawn on Har Bilas Sarda, *Life of Dayanand Saraswati*, (Ajmer: Paropkarini Sabha, 1968). Dayanand's own autobiographical writings appeared in the journal of the Theosophical Society, *The Theosophist*, in October 1879, December 1879, and November 1880. These installments were originally written in Hindi and were translated into English for *The Theosophist*. The biography of Dayananda by Lekhrām, *Maharshi Dayānanda Sarasvatī kā Jīvan Charitra* was published in Urdu in Lahore in 1897. Jordens says that this work is essentially a collation of documents and testimonies about Dayananda. It was Devendranath Mukhopadhyay who investigated the original birthplace of Dayananda in the early decades of this century; Swami Dayananda would never reveal his family identity or birthplace as this would violate his commitment as a *sannyāsin* and potentially embroil him in family affairs. Mukhopadhyay pieced together the identity of his home town and family from scraps of evidence in Dayananda's own autobiographical writings and from interviews with witnesses. He was unable to finish the work but his data was utilized by Ghāsīrām who combined it with the evidence of Lekhrām and published the standard Hindi biography, *Maharshi Dayānanda Sarasvatī kā Jīvan-Charit*, (2 vols., Ajmer: Paropkarini Sabha, 1957), first published 1933. Jordens expresses confidence in the accuracy of the geographical location and at least the plausibility if not probability of the familial identification. Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, pp.xiii-xiv, 3-4.

²The British political agent only took up residence in Kathiawar in 1820. Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, p. 17.

age of 5 and received the sacred thread at 8. He learned the Gāyatrī Mantra for the twice daily *Sandhyā* ritual, prayers to Śiva called the *Rudrādhyāya* and, more importantly, began the memorization of the *Yajur Veda* which he had largely completed by the age of 14. At the age of 10 he was inducted into the practice of the worship of the Śiva *lingam*: “As my family belonged to the Siva sect, their greatest aim was to get me initiated into its religious mysteries; and thus I was early taught to worship the uncouth piece of clay representing Siva's emblem, known as the *Parthiwa Lingam*.”³

Dayananda's autobiographical statements suggest that the pivotal moment in his rejection of image-worship occurred in his youth, at the age of 14, in 1838. This story becomes the standard explanation given in biographies (or hagiographies) of Dayananda circulated by the Arya Samaj for explaining his break with the image practices of the Hinduism of his day. Dayananda recalls in his autobiography attending the all-night vigil of *Śivarātri*. This was to be a decisive event in his life as it caused him to doubt the received ideas of his religious upbringing, particularly the worship of images:

When the great day of gloom and fasting – called Sivaratri – had arrived, this day following on the 13th day of Vadya of Magh, my father, regardless of the protest that my strength might fail, commanded me to fast, adding that I had to be initiated on that night into the sacred legend, and participate in that night's long vigil in the temple of Siva. Accordingly, I followed him, along with other young men, who accompanied their parents. This vigil is divided into four parts called *praharas*, consisting of three hours each. Having completed my task, namely, having sat up for the first two *praharas*, till the hour of midnight, I remarked that the *Pujaris*, or temple *desservants*, and some of the laymen devotees, after having left the inner temple, had fallen asleep outside. Having been taught for years that by sleeping on that particular night, the worshipper lost all the good effect of his devotion, I tried to refrain from drowsiness by bathing my eyes, now

³*The Theosophist*, vol.1 (October 1879) :10.

and then, with cold water. But my father was less fortunate. Unable to resist fatigue, he was the first to fall asleep, leaving me to watch alone. . . .

Thoughts upon thoughts crowded upon me, and one question arose after the other in my disturbed mind. Is it possible – I asked myself, – that this semblance of man, the idol of a personal God, that I see bestriding his bull before me, and who, according to all religious accounts, walks about, eats, sleeps, and drinks; who can hold a trident in his hand, beat upon his *dumroo* (drum), and pronounce curses upon men, – is it possible that he can be the Mahadeva, the great Deity? The same who is invoked as the Lord of Kailasa, the Supreme Being and the divine hero of all the stories we read of him in his Puranas (Scriptures)? Unable to resist such thoughts any longer, I awoke my father, abruptly asking him to enlighten me; to tell me whether this hideous emblem of Siva in the temple was identical with the Mahadeva (great god) of the Scriptures or something else. “Why do you ask?” said my father. “Because,” I answered, “I feel it impossible to reconcile the idea of an Omnipotent, living God, with this idol, which allows mice to run over his body and thus suffers his image to be polluted without the slightest protest.” Then my father tried to explain to me that this stone representation of the Mahadeva of Kailasa, having been consecrated by the holy Brahmans, became, in consequence *the* god himself; and is worshipped and regarded as such; adding that as Siva cannot be perceived personally in this Kali Yug – the age of mental darkness, – hence we have the idol in which the Mahadev of Kailasa is imagined by his votaries; this kind of worship pleasing the great Deity as much as if, instead of the emblem, he were there himself. But the explanation fell short of satisfying me. I could not, young as I was, help but suspecting misinterpretation and sophistry in all this. Feeling faint with hunger and fatigue, I begged to be allowed to go home.⁴

This then is the classic account of Dayananda's break with the orthodox Hinduism of his day.⁵

The story was recorded by Dayananda at the age of 50, 36 years after the event in question but, as J.T.F. Jordens argues in his biography of Dayananda, is probably reliable

⁴*The Theosophist*, vol.1 (October 1879):10.

⁵The festival of *Śivarātri* is now celebrated by the Arya Samaj in the transmogrified form of being a commemoration of the night of Swami Dayananda's Awakening; it is called *R̥ṣi Bodh Utsav*.

as an authentic account of an event that actually happened in Dayananda's youth.

Dayananda's information here and elsewhere in his autobiographical writing is all plausible and is not at all cast in the mould of hagiography. There is little need to see this account simply as an *a posteriori* justification of his adult iconoclasm. We can accept this as a truly pivotal event in Dayananda's life. Aspects of this story reflect characteristics of Dayananda's later personality. The fact that the boy exerts the will to stay awake when his father and the *pūjārīs* have fallen asleep is indicative of the sort of determination Dayananda exhibited later in life both as a sadhu and as a reformer. That the boy cannot accept the explanation given by his father with regard to the image being the device by which the deity "is imagined by his votaries" in this Kali Yuga, or dark age, is indicative of Dayananda's later refusal to accept figurative speech or symbolism in religion.⁶ The story as related above is probably an authentic and heartfelt portrayal of the moment of Dayananda's own disenchantment with the religion of his family. As a mature man he would work assiduously for the disenchantment of India.

Dayananda relates in his biographical fragments that he suffered the loss of two dear family members: when he was 18, one of his two younger sisters died suddenly of cholera at age 14; soon after, an uncle who had been very close to Dayananda also died. Dayananda records that he was left "... in a state of utter dejection, and with a still

⁶This statement should be qualified in that Dayananda *would* use an appeal to figurative speech to explain away the names of the gods in the Vedas. He appears (as we shall see) to be utterly unable, however, to consider anything but a strictly literalist reading of any other religion's texts or mythology.

profounder conviction settled in my mind that there was nothing stable in this world, nothing worth living for, or caring for, in a worldly life.”

At 22 he left home, fleeing an arranged marriage to take up the life of a renouncer. He led the life of the itinerant sadhu or *sannyāsin* from 1846 to 1860. He was initiated into the Dasnāmi order of ascetics in 1847 and given the name Dayānanda Sarasvatī. He practised yoga and absorbed Vedāntic teachings while travelling to the Himalayan regions and along the sacred rivers Gaṅgā and Narmadā. In the Himalayas Dayananda went seeking the authentic mountain sages or seers of Hindu folklore but never found them, nor could he find the guru of his aspirations. Dayananda records in his autobiographical sketches from *The Theosophist* an incident that occurred in 1855 or 1856 while he wandered along the banks of the Ganges in the Himalayas. The report is revealing both of his personality and of his attitude to religious texts:

Besides other religious works, I had with me the “Sibsanda,” “Hat-pradipika,” “Yog-Bij” and “Kebaranda Sangata,” which I used to study during my travels. Some of these books treated on the Narichakant, and Narichakars (nervous system) giving very exhaustive descriptions of the same, which I could never grasp, and which finally made me doubt as to the correctness of these works. I had been for some time trying to remove my doubts, but had as yet found no opportunity. One day, I chanced to meet a corpse floating down the river. There was the opportunity and it remained with me to satisfy myself as to the correctness of the statements contained in the books of anatomy and man’s inner organs. Ridding myself of the books which I laid near by, and, taking off my clothes, I resolutely entered the river and soon brought the dead body out and laid him on the shore. I then proceeded to cut him open with a large knife in the best manner I could. I took out and examined *kamal* (the heart) and cutting him from the navel to the ribs, and a portion of the head and neck, I carefully examined and compared him with the description in the books. Finding they did not tally at all, I tore the books to pieces and threw them in the river after the corpse. From that time I gradually came to the conclusion

that with the exception of the Vedas, Upanishads, Patanjali and Sankhya, all other works upon science and Yog were false.⁷

We may connect the report on this incident with the one offered above regarding Dayananda's disenchantment on the night of Śivarātri. As his failure to find the actual *nāḍīs* or channels of the subtle physiology of yoga in this dissection leads him to conclude that the texts are false, so too earlier, he had concluded that if mice can crawl on the statue of Śiva then the Śiva statue must be worthless and to be discarded as simply fraudulent religion.⁸

In 1860, at the age of 36, Dayananda came to Mathura and spent almost three years studying with a Punjabi ascetic and guru named Swami Virjananda Sarasvati (1779-1868) who taught Sanskrit grammar. Virjanand held that the *Samhitā* portion of the *Vedas* was the sole authority for authentic Hinduism and that the Veda taught a strict monotheism. The polytheistic practices of Hinduism (including idol-worship) were seen as degenerations from this pure source which had crept in from the time of the disastrous Great War described in the *Mahābhārata*. The three years with Swami Virjanand were

⁷Swami Dayanand Sarasvati, "The Autobiography of Dayanand Sarasvati, Swami" *The Theosophist*, November (1880): 25. It should be noted that Dayananda would later hold that only the *Samhitā* portion of the *Veda* was inerrant and unequivocally inspired as we will see in section II of this chapter.

⁸J. Llewellyn remarks on the dissection account: "It has been argued that hatha-yoga describes a subtle physiology, one which cannot be seen by the naked eye but which is manifest to the individual with spiritual vision. But if Dayanand was familiar with this argument he does not entertain it here. Rather he insists on operating on a more literal level. Either the body is as the texts describe it, or it is not. If it is not, then they are false." J.E. Llewellyn, *The Arya Samaj as a Fundamentalist Movement* (Delhi: Manohar, 1993), p. 158.

crucial in transforming Dayananda the solitary seeker after *mokṣa* into a reformer. His guru taught that the *Purāṇas* and *Tantras* and indeed all texts after the *Vedas* were corrupt. Virjanand had been blind since the age of 5 after contracting smallpox, and one wonders about the relation between his blindness and his efforts to propound a Hinduism based on the word rather than the image.

On leaving this teacher Dayananda vowed to work for the reform of Hinduism. In 1866 he attended the *Kumbha Mela*, a great gathering of ascetics and pilgrims at Hardwar, and engaged in debates with other ascetics. In 1868 he participated in a famous *śāstrārtha* with 21 orthodox pandits at Benares on the topic of idol-worship. As mentioned already at the end of Chapter 3, he visited Calcutta in 1873 and met with the reformers of the Brahmo Samaj, Keshab Chandra Sen and Debendranath Tagore. This meeting led him to change his style from that of the ascetic renouncer to the reformer in dress and methods. He abandoned the garb of the *sannyāsin* for contemporary dress, and, on the advice of the Brahmos, changed the articulation of his message to the *lingua franca* of north India, Hindi, rather than the classical Sanskrit known only to pandits. He toured most of north India and set up the Arya Samaj (Society of the Noble) in Bombay in 1875, the year he also brought out the first edition of his *Satyarth Prakash* (Light of Truth) which was to become the bible of the Arya Samaj movement. In 1877 he visited Lahore and established the Arya Samaj in the Punjab. In 1879 he met Col. Henry Olcott and Madam Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society who sought an alliance between their Society and the Arya Samaj. They also urged Dayananda to record his autobiography (hence the articles by him, quoted above, which appeared in the journal *The Theosophist*).

He split with them by 1882, the year he published the second, revised edition of his *Satyarth Prakash*. His last years were spent in the princely states of Rajasthan seeking to reform the *rājās*. He died in 1883, reportedly from poisoning. Dayananda could never countenance the role of guru for himself; he deliberately avoided taking on the role of president of the Arya Samaj, preferring to remain a member – although he was in fact its architect and leader. As well, he always avoided revealing his original name and the exact location of his home before he became a *sannyāsin*. This was to avoid getting swept back into family affairs but also, as J.T.F. Jordens suggests, from “fear of being considered a guru, a saint, and of being divinized and worshipped after death.”⁹ His will stipulated that he be cremated. On the suggestion that a memorial be erected to him after his death, he is reported to have replied, “Throw the ashes of my body in a field, thus they will be of some use to; but do not make a memorial, lest that be the start of some idolatry.”¹⁰

II THE WRITINGS OF DAYANANDA

Satyarth Prakash

In what follows I analyse Dayananda’s best known work, the second edition of the *Satyarth Prakash* (Hindi: *Satyārth Prakāś*) issued from Udaipur in Rajasthan in 1882.¹¹

⁹ Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Cited in Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, p. 3.

¹¹ I utilize the translation used by the Arya Samaj, *Light of Truth: An English Translation of the Satyarth Prakash*, trans. C. Bharadwaja, (New Delhi: Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, 1984). I have checked the translation against my copy of the Hindi

The opening invocation to Dayananda's introduction reads: "We repeatedly bow unto God who is a true personification of Existence, Consciousness, and Bliss." Dayananda will use this classical epithet (*Saccidānanda*) for Brahman but will reject the names of the gods of the Hindu pantheon. He says on p. iii "We have incorporated into this book whatever is true in all religions and in harmony with their highest teachings but have refuted whatever is false in them." He goes on to say that his critique of evil practices in religion will be extended both to the religions of India (*Āryavarta*) and to the foreign religions.

The first ten chapters of the *Satyarth Prakash* relate Dayananda's view of what is the authentic Vedic religion of India and his program for implementing (or rather re-implementing) such a religion. Chapter 11 offers a strong critique of the forms of religion prevailing in the India of his time and is the chapter in which he propounds his most trenchant attack on idolatry. Chapter 12 treats of the Carvāka, Buddhist, and Jain teachings. Chapter 13 deals with Christianity. Chapter 14 deals with Islam. Dayananda ends the book with "A Statement of My Beliefs," a summary of his views on "the teachings of the eternal Vedic religion which we profess." The chapter headings of the book are as follows:

Chapter 1, an exposition of "Om" and other names of God.

Chapter 2, on the up-bringing of children.

Chapter 3, on Brahmacharya, the duties and qualifications of scholars and teachers, good and bad books and the scheme of studies.

Chapter 4, on marriage and married life.

Chapter 5, Vanaprastha (the Order of Asceticism) and of Sannyas Ashrama (the Order of Renunciation).

original in as many instances as possible.

Chapter 6, Raj Dharma (Science of Government).

Chapter 7, Veda and God.

Chapter 9, knowledge and ignorance, emancipation and bondage.

Chapter 10, Conduct – desirable and undesirable, and of Diet – permissible and forbidden.

Chapter 11, An Examination of the different religions prevailing in Aryavarta (India).

Chapter 12, Exposition and refutation of the Charvaka, Buddhistic and Jain faiths all of which are atheistic.

Chapter 13, An examination of the doctrines of Christianity.

Chapter 14, Mohammedan religion.

Below, I briefly review major issues for Dayananda as contained in Chapters 1-10 and 12-14 of *Satyarth Prakash*. I reserve an entire section of this chapter of the dissertation to the examination of Dayananda's Chapter 11 which is his principal formulation of his polemic against idolatry.

On God

Dayananda in his opening chapter is at pains to indicate, as Rammohun had argued, that the *Vedas* teach monotheism:

It is clearly stated in the Veda and other true Shastras, that wherever they treat of God; all these names [Virat, Agni, Hiranyagarbha etc.] stand for Him. There are no gods. The multitude of names like Indra signify not different Divine beings but different aspects of one Absolute Existence.¹²

Dayananda quotes *Rg Veda* 1.164.46¹³ which has become an important proof text for modern Hinduism. "He is One, but the wise call Him by different names; such as Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, Divya – One who pervades all the luminous bodies, the source of

¹²Ibid., p. 2.

¹³The margin note gives it as *Rg Veda*, Mandal 1, 22, 164.

light . . .”¹⁴ Dayananda continues by claiming that this reading is supported by the great grammarians:

From the consideration of the meanings of these quotations it must become clear to the reader that AOM and such other names, as Agni, primarily signify God as evidenced by the expositions of the grammarians, philologists, etymologists, and with one of the primary, secondary and tertiary Brahmanas [sic], Sutrakas, and other great teachers, sages and seers. It, therefore, behoves us all to believe the same.¹⁵

Dayananda argues for a contextual understanding of names in the Vedas; when used with qualifiers that suggest power and infinitude they mean God, with qualifiers suggesting createdness or finitude they refer to material entities. The one thing he is adamant about is that they do not refer to gods.

. . . where things under discussion are mentioned as created, protected, or sustained, disintegrated or where qualifying words as finite, visible are used, they cannot be taken to signify God; because He is neither subject to such changes as evolution or dissolution, nor is He finite or visible. Therefore such names as Virat, Agni (as in the following quotations) signify material objects of the universe: – “Then was created Virat, etc.” “Thereafter was created Bhumi -- earth.” [*Yajur Veda* 31]

He adds:

Thus it is clear that these words ought to be understood to mean God where they have such qualifying words as Omniscient, etc.; but, where desires, passions, feelings of pleasure or pain, finite knowledge and activity are spoken of these words signify the soul; where such words, as created, dissolved material, dead, inert, are found, they mean material objects such as the sun, the earth.

Dayananda goes on to supply the etymology of one hundred names or epithets applied to God; for example, he says of Agni:

¹⁴*Light of Truth*, p. 5.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 6.

Agni (from the root anchu which signifies gati and worship. Gati means to know, to move or go, to realize) connotes God, because he is all-knowledge, Omniscient and worthy of adoration, fit subject to be known, sought after and realized.

In Chapter 7 Dayananda gives his understanding of God. God is transcendent and can never be reduced to a particular location or physical substance. In this dialogue, as in many other parts of this work, he employs the traditional device of an exchange with an opponent or interlocutor (*pūrvapakṣin*):

Q. – Is God All-pervading or does He reside in some particular locality?

A. – He is all-pervading. If He were localised to some particular place, He could never be Omniscient, Inward Regular (sic) of all, Universal Controller, Creator of all, Sustainer of all and the Cause of resolution of all things into their elements, as it is impossible for the doer to do anything in a place where he is not. (p. 208)

Q.-- Has God a form or is He formless?

A. – He is formless, because if He possesses a form He could never be Omnipresent, nor, therefore Omniscient, since a finite substance can possess only finite attributes, actions and nature. Besides, He could never be free from hunger and thirst, heat and cold, disease, imperfections and injuries. This proves, therefore, that God is formless. If He were to possess a body, another person would be required to make the different organs of His body, such as eyes, ears and the like, for He, who is the product of the combination of different parts, must have an intelligent formless maker. Here if it be urged that God Himself made His own body simply by willing it, this too goes to prove that He was formless before He made His body. It is clear, therefore, that God is never embodied. Being without a body He is able to make the visible universe out of invisible causes. (p. 208)

On p. 218 Dayananda maintains that God is the efficient but not the material cause of the universe. God cannot be connected with matter, not in a consecrated image (idol) and not in an incarnation:

O. – Does God incarnate or not?

A. – No; because it is said in the Yajur Veda. “He is unborn.” again “He overspreads all. He is pure, is never born and never takes human form.” It is clear from these quotations that God is never born.

O. – But Krishna says in the Gita, “Whenever there is decay of virtue, I take on a human form.” What is your answer to this?

A. – Being opposed to the Veda, it cannot be held to be an authority. Though it is possible that Krishna, being very virtuous and being extremely anxious to further the cause of righteousness, might have wished that he would like to be born again and again at different times to protect the good and punish the wicked. If such was the case, there is no harm in it; because ‘ whatever the good and the great possess – their wealth, their bodies, aye even their hearts – is at the service of humanity?’ In spite of all this Krishna could never be God. (p. 219)

On the next page Dayananda reiterates his rejection of *avatāra* or incarnation:

Nor can the incarnation of God be demonstrated by reason, just as the saying of a man, that space entered a womb or was put in a closed hand, can never be true, for space being Infinite and Omnipresent can neither go in, nor come out; similarly, God, being Infinite and All-pervading, it can never be predicated of him that He can go in or come out. Coming and going can be possible only if it be believed that there are places where He is not. Then was not God already present in the womb and was not He already present outside that He is said to have gone into and come out of it? Who but men devoid of intelligence, can believe in and say such things about God? Therefore, it should be understood that Christ and others were also not incarnations of the Deity. Being subject to passions, and desires, hunger and thirst, fear and grief, births and deaths, they were all men. (p. 220)

It should be understood that the rejection of the notion of incarnation of the deity is closely linked with the rejection of sacred images. This is so for multiple reasons: 1) On theological grounds Dayananda takes the position that God cannot be confined to a finite substance – if not in an incarnation then even less in a representation of that incarnation; 2) The opposition to the *avatāra* doctrine on Dayanada’s part can be seen as part of his opposition to polytheism and the proliferation of the pantheon is due, in part, to the

proliferation of avatars; 3) Dayananda's stance here can also be seen as part of his program of demythologization. Like Rammohun, he favours a deistic notion of the Godhead which removes it from the immediate and immanent and certainly from the personal, miraculous and magical. Dayananda's deity is a deity beyond form and hence what prior Hindu tradition would put under the rubric of *nirguṇa* Brahman. He has no use for *saguṇa* Brahman as *Īśvara*, a personal Lord imaged or manifested in the classical Hindu pantheon.

In fact, Dayananda reworks the classical distinction between Brahman as *saguṇa* (with attributes) and *nirguṇa* (without or beyond attributes) by limiting *saguṇa* to abstract qualities such as omniscience and highlighting invisibility for the category of *nirguṇa*:

God is positive (*saguṇa*) being possessed of certain natural attributes, such as Omniscience, Omnipresence, etc. He is also negative (*nirguṇa*) being free from the attribute of visibility and other properties of material objects, and from feelings of pleasure and pain, and other properties of the soul.
(p. 234)

With regard to this distinction and its relation to the notion of incarnation, Dayananda offers the following dialogue with his interlocutor or opponent:

O. – People generally speak of a thing as *Nirguna* (negative) when it is formless and as *Saguna* (positive) when it is possessed of a form. In other words, God is called *Saguna* (positive) when He incarnates, and *Nirguna* (negative) when He is not embodied. Is this view of the terms positive and negative right?

A. – No, it is a false conception entertained by ignorant minds that are destitute of true knowledge. The ignorant always make senseless noise like the lowing of cattle. Their utterances should be looked upon as valueless as the ravings of a man in delirium from high fever. (p. 234)

In other words, God as *saguna* refers to such attributes (given above) as omniscience and omnipotence but not possibly to the attribute of embodiment. If God cannot become embodied, incarnate as an avatar in the form of a man, how much less can he be dreamt of being incarnate or embodied in an idol or image?

Not only did Dayananda reject the gods of popular theistic Hinduism, but he also came to reject the philosophy of advaita Vedānta he had been taught during his early years as a *sannyāsin*. In *Satyarth Prakash*, Dayananda condemns any identification of God with the world:

Brahma is the Personification of true existence, consciousness and bliss, whilst the material universe is ephemeral, inanimate and devoid of bliss. Brahma is Uncreated, Invisible, whilst the material world is created, divisible and visible. Had the material objects, such as solids, been evolved out of Brahma He would possess the same attributes as the material objects. (p. 248)

In the final analysis, the immateriality of God means that he can never be imaged:

God being All-pervading and Formless it is impossible for him to have an image. (p. 276)

The Vedas

On page 237 Dayananda claims that Sanskrit belongs to no country and is the mother of all languages. Sanskrit being the oldest language is also the language of the divinely inspired authoritative scriptures, the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* are eternal (p. 241). The *Vedas* for Dayananda mean the *mantra* or *saṃhita*:

O. – Which books are called the Vedas?

A. – The book called the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda and the Atharva Veda – the Mantras Sanhitas [*sic*] only and no other. (p. 239)

Dayananda ends Chapter 1 with his criterion for establishing what is an authoritative Vedic text. Such texts begin with *Om* or *Atha* and not with invocations to a particular god:

In no case do the Vedas and Shastras begin with “I bow unto the god Ganesha,” etc. Wherever even Vedic scholars start with Hari Aom, they have contracted this pernicious habit from Pauraniks and the Taantriks. Nowhere in the Vedas and Shastras is the word ‘Hari’ written in the beginning. Hence a book ought to start with either *Atha* (Now) , or *AOM*. (p. 19)¹⁶

For Dayananda, the supreme textual authority is the *Samhita* portion of the Veda, which provides the standard by which all else is to be evaluated:

Out of the above mentioned books (we have recommended the student to study), – the Vedas, Angas, (Limbs), Upangas (sub-limbs), Brahmanas and Upvedas (sub-Vedas) – the Vedas alone are held to be Divine in origin, the rest were made by Rishis – seers of the Veda and Nature. Should anything be found even in their writings contrary to the teachings of the Vedas, it is to be rejected, for the Vedas alone, being Divine in origin, are free from error and aximatic (*Swatah Pramana*), in other words the Vedas are their own authority; while other books such as the Brahmanas are *Partahpramana*, i.e., dependent upon the Vedas for their authority. They stand or fall according to their conformity or conflict with the Vedas. (p. 74)

In Chapter 4 Dayananda will reiterate this position and state his view that most of texts post-dating the *samhita* portion of the Veda are fraudulent:

Nothing that is opposed to the Vedas ought to be believed in, no matter who has taught it. Moreover, these are not the words of Parashar. People write books in the name of eminent men like Brahma, Vasistha, Rama,

¹⁶This particular perspective on quick criteria for establishing normative texts is derived directly from Dayananda’s guru, Swami Virjanand.

Shiva, Vishnu and Devi so that these books, being stamped with the authority of universally esteemed great men and women, may be acceptable to the whole world, and the real authors (and their successors) may be pecuniarily benefitted to a great extent. It is for this reason that they write books replete with foolish and mythical stories. Among the Smrities, the Manu Smriti alone is authentic, the interpolated verses being excepted. (p. 142)

On Education

In Chapter 2, Dayananda quickly moves from his advice on conception and birth to the type of education children should receive. The following passage is a good illustration of Dayananda's support of education as part of his program to demythologize society:

When children attain the age of 5 years, they should be taught Sanskrit Alphabet, as well as that of foreign languages; thereafter the parents should make them understand and learn by rote such verses (Vedic), poetical pieces, aphorisms, prose passages, etc. as are full of good precepts, inculcate truth and virtue, love of knowledge and God; and give advice as to the general behaviour towards father, mother, sister and other relatives, friends, teachers and other learned men, guests, king, fellow-subjects and servants, so that they may not, as they grow up, be duped by any unprincipled person. They should counsel them against all things which lead to superstition, and are opposed to true religion and science. So that they may never give credence to such imaginary things as ghosts (Bhuts) and spirits (Preta).

Preta (in Sanskrit) really means a dead body, and *Bhuta* means who is deceased. (p. 23)

In Chapter 3, Dayananda continues his discussion of the upbringing and education of children. He reveals his ascetic (or Puritan) sensibility; the wearing of jewellery is condemned as leading to vanity. Students (*Brahmacārin*) should be schooled away from

their parents and guarded against any sexual excitement. In Dayananda's proposed

Gurukula system of education:

All the scholars should be treated alike in the matter of food, drink, dress, seats etc. Be they princes or princesses or the children of beggars, all should practice asceticism. (p. 32)

Education should be compulsory for all and both boys and girls should get the sacred thread at age 8 Dayananda discusses (p. 71) the curriculum of study for students: they should study the four *Vedas* with their four *Brahmanas* (such as in the *Āṣṭādhyāyī*), *Manu Smṛti*, *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, and they should also study grammar.

In the following passage Dayananda demonstrates the rigorist element in his program. The program is one of asceticism, but asceticism not directed at other-worldly goals but rather towards the "right" way of being in this world. Here Dayananda situates image-worship within a whole morass of unwholesomeness, undisciplined living, "loafing" and ignorance:

Both the teachers and their scholars should avoid all those things that act as hindrances in the way of the acquisition of knowledge, such as the company of the wicked and lascivious people, contraction of bad habits (such as the use of intoxicants), fornication, child-marriage, want of perfect Brahmacharya, want of love on the part of the rulers, parents and learned men for the dissemination of knowledge of the Veda and other Shastras, over-eating, keeping late hours, sloth in learning, teaching, examining or being examined, or performing duties with dishonesty, not regarding knowledge as the highest thing in the world, want of faith in Brahmacharya as the source of health, strength, intellect, courage, political power and wealth, leaving off the worship of one true God, and wasting time in going from place to place for the purpose of seeing and worshipping images made of stone, and other inanimate objects, absence of the worship of the five true living gods – father, mother, teacher, altruistic teachers of humanity (atithis) and other great men, – neglect in the performance of the duties of their Class and Order. And instead, wearing different marks of sectarian distinction on the forehead and other

parts of the body, chaplets and rosaries, etc., observance of fasting days as the 11th and 13th of each month, having faith in the forgiveness of sins by pilgrimage to such sacred places as Benares, and by constant recitation of the names of gods and goddesses such as Rama, Krishna, Naryana, Bhagwati and Ganesha, indifference towards the acquisition of knowledge through the wicked advice of hypocrites, belief in the attaining of salvation simply through hearing such books as Puranas (Bhagwat and the like) read, and thus neglecting the study of the true philosophies and sciences, the living of good and righteous lives, the practice of Yoga, and communion with God – which alone can lead to eternal bliss – want of love for knowledge through greed of gold, and loafing about, etc. (p. 77)

Like Rammohun, Dayananda will connect this ignorance with the manipulations of exploitative priests:

People (of India), at the present day, who are involved in the aforesaid practices, remain destitute of the advantages of Brahmacharya and education, are consequently sunk in ignorance, and afflicted with diverse diseases.

The sectarian and selfish Brahmans of the present time prevent other people, through their false teachings, from acquiring knowledge and associating with men of learning, en-snare them in their own nets and thus ruin them physically, mentally, and materially. They want to keep the Kshatriyas and other Classes illiterate, since they are afraid that if they acquired knowledge and become enlightened, they would expose their hypocrisy, get out of their selfish grip, and become disrespectful towards them. (p. 77)

On Ritual

In Chapter 3 Dayananda includes a discussion of ritual: children are to be taught the *Gāyatrīmantra* and should be instructed in the stages of divine worship or meditation to be practised twice daily as the *sandhyā* rites. The other obligatory rite, according to Dayananda, is *Deva yajña*. This is comprised of 1) *Agnihotra* or feeding the fire with butter and aromatic substances “for sanitary purposes” and 2) association with, and

serving of, devout and learned persons (p. 37). In an exchange with his hypothetical interlocutor, Dayananda explains the reasons for performing *Homa*; these have nothing to do with offering sacrifice or pleasing or manipulating the “gods”:

Q. – What is the good of doing Homa?

A. – It is a well known fact that impure air and impure water are productive of disease, which, in turn, causes so much pain and misery, whilst pure air and pure water are productive of health, and consequently of happiness.

Q. – I should think that it is would do more good to apply Sandal locally as a plaster. And to eat butter instead. Is it wise to waste these things by destroying them in fire?

A. – That only shows your ignorance of Physical Science, for it is one of its cardinal principles that nothing is really lost in this world. You must have noticed that, even when you are standing at some distance from the place where Homa is being performed, you can smell a sweet fragrant odour in the air. That alone proves that an odoriferous substance put into the fire is not destroyed, but, on the other hand, being rarified, fills the room, and is carried by the air to distant places where it rids the air of its foulness. (p. 38)

Dayananda advocates the *Homa* ritual thus on quasi-scientific grounds. To reinstate the Vedic ritual of fire will purify the country and bring it back to its former greatness as in the Vedic age:

In the ‘Golden Days’ of India, saints and seers, princes and princesses, kings and queens, and other people used to spend a large amount of time and money in performing and helping others to perform Homa; and so long as this system lasted, India was free from disease and its people were happy. It can become so again, if the same system were revised. (p. 39)

Clearly, Dayananda sees the maintenance (or revival) of the Vedic fire offering as very important, perhaps as an outward sign of commitment to the authenticity and purity he associates with the Vedic age, an age, in his view, prior to the corruption evidenced by

the introduction of idol-worship. At the same time, Dayananda is fundamentally antagonistic to myth *and* ritual. So the Vedic *yajña* or *Homa* is interpreted in terms of its physical (hygienic) benefits. As well, although Dayananda teaches the importance of *homa*, he will argue that ethical activity is true religion rather than ritual performance. Citing *Manu* 1, 108; *Yajur Veda* 16.15; *Atharva Veda* 11.15,17 and *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 7.11, he writes: “The practice of such virtues as veracity, and the doing of good works verily constitute the true conduct of life enjoined by the Veda and taught by the Smritis.” He then offers this re-interpretation of the true meaning of *devapūjā*:

“The service of father, mother, tutor and atithis, i.e., the altruistic teachers of humanity, is called devapuja or the worship of godly persons” (p. 314).

This can in fact be compared with *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 1.11.2:

Matṛ devo bhava, pitṛ devo bhava, ācārya devo bhava, atithi devo bhava

Radhakrishnan translates this as “Be one to whom mother is a god. Be one to whom the father is a god. Be one to whom the teacher is a god. Be one to whom the guest is a god.”¹⁷ This provides an interesting example of Dayananda’s approach to exegesis. He will cite a Sanskrit proof text but translate it to support his own interpretation. The *Upaniṣad* itself does not say *devapūjā* equals the worship of godly persons. This is Dayananda’s own amplification.

In Chapter 4, Dayananda gives his understanding of the real meaning of the Five Great Daily Duties (*Yajñas*):

¹⁷S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), p. 538.

1. *Brahmayajña*: causes advance in knowledge and righteousness
2. *Agnihotra*: purifies the air
3. *Pitr yajña*: service of parents
4. *Valivaishwadeva yajña*: purification of kitchen air; service to sick and needy; atonement for unintended pain on lower creatures
5. *Atithi yajña*: attendance on true *sannyāsins*

Dayananda is also concerned, as Rammohun had been, that notions of ritual purity not impede the material progress of society. For instance, Dayananda rejects the notion that crossing the seas results in pollution or loss of caste:

One is not polluted by going abroad. Mahabharata tells us that once the sage Vyasa lived in Patala (America) Krishna and Arjuna went to America in an Ashwatari vessel (One propelled by electricity). . . . The ancient Indians used to go abroad to all parts of the world for the purposes of trade, travel, or on political business. The present day bug-bear of loss of one's character and faith through travelling abroad is simply due to the false teachings of the ignorant people and the growth of dense ignorance. Those who do not hesitate to go abroad, and thereby associate with peoples of various foreign countries, study their customs and manners, increase their trade, augment their political power, become fearless and bold, and attain great power and prosperity by studiously imbibing the good qualities, and adopting the good customs and manners of the foreigners, and rejecting their faults and evil habits, and bad manners, O ye foolish people! (p. 315-316)

In general, Dayananda advocates the minimalization of ritual. He is concerned that superstitious notions will vitiate social progress. For instance he will argue (p. 158) that feeding the spirits of the dead in *Śrāddha* rites is the invention of selfish orthodox priests and is a ritual practice in conflict with teachings on rebirth.

On Householders and Renouncers

Dayananda was himself a *sannyāsin* but the general thrust of his position, as I have already stated, was not retreat from the world but active engagement within it. Citing *Manu* 3.79 Dayananda writes: “All the concerns of life are, therefore, dependent on the Order of householders. If this Order did not exist, the human species would not be propagated, and consequently the Orders of Brahmacharya, Vanaprasth and Sanyas could not be called into existence. Whosoever speaks ill of this Order is himself worthy of contempt, but whosoever speaks well of it deserves praise” (p. 143). Thus the life of the householder is legitimated as the basis of society.

The householder state requires marriage, and in his Chapter 4, Dayananda takes the position that the best form of marriage is by choice, not parental coercion.¹⁸ Marriage should be determined by the choice of the couple involved but in accordance with the division of Classes (*varṇa*), but these in turn “should be based on qualifications, accomplishments and character of the individuals” (p. 96). Class should be determined by behavior, not birth.¹⁹ It is possible to become a brahmin even if not born one:

¹⁸This liberal attitude to marriage practices may reflect European influence. It could also reflect Dayananda’s own experience of having to flee from an arranged marriage. Dayananda claims (p. 94) that *Swayamvara* (marriage by choice) was the most ancient form of marriage in India: child-marriage, like idolatry, is more recent and part of the picture of decline from former heights. Incidentally, his opinion is that the best age for marriage for males is 25 to 48, while for females, 16 to 24 with the optimum being marriage of a 48 year old male to a 24 year old female. Of course, this is a reaction to the child marriages of the time.

¹⁹Class determination should take place at age 25 for males, 16 for females (p. 100).

A man does not become a Brahman because his body was the product of the reproductive elements derived from the bodies of Brahman parents. Says Manu [Manu 2:28] "The study of the true sciences, the practice of Brahmacharya, the performance of Homa, the acceptance of truth and rejection of untruth, the dissemination of true knowledge leading a virtuous life as enjoined in the Veda, the performance of seasonal Homa, the reproduction of good children, faithful discharge of the Five Great Daily Duties, and doing such other good works as are productive of beneficial results to the community, such as developing technical arts, association with the good and learned, truthfulness in word, deed and thought, and devotion to public good and the like, all these things go to make a Brahman." (p. 96)

This position is defended against his fictional interlocutor, the *pūrvapakṣin*. Although the discussion of class or caste is not within the scope of this work, I will quote the passage because it demonstrates Dayananda's allegorical reading of Vedic texts: *Puruṣa* is really the formless absolute so it would be foolish to take references to his mouth or arms literally. The corollary is that it would be even more stupid to think that it would ever be possible to represent him in a plastic or visual form:

O. – The Yajur Veda [30.2] says "Brahmans were born of His – God's mouth, Kshatriyas, out of His arms, Vaishayas, out of his thighs, and Shudras, out of his feet." Now just as the mouth can never become an arm, nor can an arm become the mouth, so can never a Brahman become a Kshatriya, etc., nor, can the latter become the former.

A. – Your translation of the aforesaid mantra is wrong. The word His has reference to the word Purusha, the Formless All-pervading Being, in the preceding mantra. Being formless He could not have such organs as the mouth. Were He to possess these organs, He could never be omnipresent, nor therefore Omnipotent, nor could He then create and sustain this universe and resolve it into the elementary condition nor dispense justice to the souls according to their deeds good or bad, nor could He be Omniscient, Unborn, Immortal and the like. The true meaning, therefore, of this mantra is that in this universe created and sustained by the Omnipresent God, he who is the (mukh) head, leader among men, is called a Brahman, he in whom power and strength (Bahu) reside pre-eminently is a Kshatriya. He who travels about from place to place for the purposes of

trade, etc., and obtains all things (for the community) on the strength of his thighs (i.e., is the support of the community just as the thighs are that of the human body) is called a Vaishya, and lastly a Shudra is like feet, the lowermost part of the body, because he is ignorant. (p. 99)

Dayananda will not reject monasticism or the life of the *sannyāsin*, but he will insist that those who engage in this mode of life also actively work to promote the public good. No one is to be exempt from the cultivation of the civic virtues. He writes that it is possible to go from the student stage of life directly to the stage of the *sannyāsin* but this “Should be resorted to only if the man be one of perfect knowledge with his senses and mind under thorough control, free from all sensual desires and imbued with extreme desire for doing public good”(p. 147). The emphasis is always on doing good for the world as in the following exchange:

O. – Have Brahmans the exclusive right of entering into Sanyas or can other classes Kshatriyas and others also do the same?

A. – Brahmans alone have this privilege. He alone among all the four classes is called a Brahman whose knowledge is perfect, who is most virtuous, and who is bent on doing public good. To enter into Sanyasa, without the acquisition of perfect knowledge and firm faith in Truth and God, and without the renunciation of all earthly things, cannot be productive of any good in the world. (p. 154)

Dayananda has no tolerance of the renouncer who does not engage in benefitting society. His justification for the existence (p. 157) of *sannyāsins* is that they have the time available for study and teaching that is not afforded to householders. Since Dayananda had dethroned the images and substituted the authoritative texts, then it follows that the religious virtuosi (the renouncers) must be engaged in the active teaching of those texts and not in solitary mystical absorption:

O.- Sanyasis say that they have no duties to perform. They accept necessities of life as food, clothes, etc., from house-holders and enjoy the pleasures of this world. Why should they 'bother their heads' with this world of ignorance? They believe themselves to be Brahma (god) and are contented. If another person ask a question on the subject, they tell him the same thing, i.e., that he also is God, that sin and virtue cannot influence the soul . . . They teach these and similar other things, whilst you have taught differently on the duties of Sanyasis. Which of these shall we believe to true and which false?

A. – Is it not their duty to do even good deeds? Mark! What Manu says. "By doing virtuous deeds, ordained by the Vedas, Sanyasis enjoy Eternal Bliss." [no reference given] It is clear then that according to Manu, the Vedic deeds – the practice of righteous conduct – are indispensable even by Sanyasis. Can they do without food and clothing (and other such necessities of life)? If they cannot, why is it not a degrading and sinful act on their part to leave off the practice of virtuous deeds? They accept food and dress and other necessities of life from house-holders, while they do them no good in return. Are they not the greatest sinners then? Just as it is useless to have eyes and ears, if you cannot see or hear with them, likewise those sanyasis who do not preach the truth, nor study nor teach the Vedas and other Shastras are a mere burden to the community. Those who say and write, that they cannot be troubled by this world of ignorance, are themselves mendacious and ignorant. . . . They are the cause of the increase of sin and are, therefore, the greatest sinners. (p. 156)

In general, Dayananda is very much an exponent of a strenuous work ethic:

A man should act in accordance with what he prays for. For example, if he prays for the attainment of highest wisdom. Let him do his utmost to attain it. In other words, prayer should be addressed to God for the attainment of an object after one has strenuously endeavoured to attain it. . . . The greatest fools are they who, trusting in God in this wise [making foolish prayers], remain slothful and indolent; because whosoever will disobey God's commandment to work assiduously will never be happy. God commands thus: - "Let a man aspire to live by doing work for a hundred years, i.e., as long as he lives. Let him never be lazy." [*Yajur Veda* 40.2] (p. 214)

This activist orientation is even extended to God as in the following dialogue:

O. – What object had God in creating the world?

A. – What object could He have in not creating it?

O. – Had He not created it, He would have lived in happiness? Besides, souls would have remained free from pleasure and pain and the like.

A. – These are the ideas of the lazy and indolent, but not of men of energetic and active habits. What happiness could the soul enjoy during the period of Dissolution? If happiness and misery of this world were compared, it will be found that the happiness is many times greater than the misery. (p. 250)

Dayananda summarizes his notion of what leads to emancipation and what to bondage:

Virtuous acts, the worship of one true God and correct knowledge lead to Emancipation, whilst an immoral life, the worship of idols (or other things or persons in place of God), and false knowledge are the cause of Bondage of the soul. No man can ever, for a single moment be, free from actions, thoughts and knowledge. Performance of righteous acts, as truthfulness in speech, and the renunciation of sinful acts, as untruthfulness, alone are the means of Salvation. (p. 274)

Dayananda on Christianity

Dayanada's critique of Christianity takes up Chapter 13 of *Satyarth Prakash*. He follows here his strategy of concentrating his critique on the scripture, in this case the Bible. He indicates that his comments centre on Christianity as the dominant Bible-based religion but that in critiquing the Bible his comments apply as well to Judaism. He claims: "After going through this chapter all our readers will know what kind of book (the Bible) is, and what doctrines it teaches" (p. 587). Dayananda surveys the books of the Bible and tends to emphasize a literal reading of the most anthropomorphic depictions of

the biblical God.²⁰ The complaint is that this deity is localized and limited and thus far inferior to the All-pervading, Infinite, Conscious, and Blissful God of the Vedas (p. 590).

To the report in Genesis 6:6 that God repented that he had made humans on the earth, Dayananda observes:

The feelings of grief and repentance after doing something wrong can be only attributed to the Christian God since He is neither well-versed in learning nor a yogi with perfect control over his passions and feelings or He would have overcome His great grief and sorrow with the aid of mental equilibrium and wisdom.

To the text saying that Noah built an altar after the Flood, Dayananda comments: "The mention of an altar and the offering of burnt offerings on the altar clearly shows that there things have been borrowed by the Bible from the Vedas" (p. 598). One may assume that he means not that Noah performed an authentic Vedic *homa* but rather that the biblical writers borrowed and corrupted the earlier and genuine religious practice. Predictably, Dayananda will respond to the narrative in Genesis 28 of Jacob erecting a stone pillar as a demonstration of Christianity (and other Semitic religions) being idolatrous: "Now mark! Did they not act like savages in worshipping stones and causing others to do the same. Now this place is called Holy Bathel [*sic*] by the Mohammadans. Is that stone alone the

²⁰It is worth noting that while Dayananda will invoke allegory to explain apparent polytheism or anthropomorphism in the Veda he will not apply this to the texts of the other traditions. Writing on idolatry debates between pagans and early Christians, Halbertal and Margalit remark: "Interpretation . . . is policy, and in politics the use of double standards is routine. Indeed, in the controversy between the pagans and the Christians the most prominent characteristic of both camps was the blatant use of the double standard: the charity principle for their own stories and the 'meanness principle' for the rival interpretations: my stories are allegorical, but yours are literal; my stories are deep spiritual truths dressed up as simple tales that anyone can understand, but your stories are old wives' tales and a bunch of superstitions." Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1992), p. 89.

house of God and does He reside in that stone alone? Bravo Christians! You are indeed great idolators!” (p. 606). Dayananda will of course react strongly to all the passages involving blood sacrifice in the Old Testament. “How like a savage and a barbarian to think that the God Almighty accepts burnt offerings of oxen and sanctions the sprinkling of blood on the altar. . . . The Bible is simply full of such evil teachings. It is under their evil influence that the Christians try to bring the same sort of false charges against the Vedas, but there is absolutely no mention of animal sacrifice and the like practice in them” (p. 611).

We have seen that Dayananda utterly rejects the idea of *avatāra* or incarnation in Hinduism. He considers the New Testament notion of the Incarnation as much a transgression of the laws of common sense and the laws of nature as the *Pūrāṇas*:

If this story of the birth of the Christ were held to be true, any unmarried girl that happens to conceive could say that she was with child of the Holy Ghost. She could also falsely say that the angel of the Lord told her in a dream ‘that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost’! This story is as possible as that recorded in the puranas about Kunti being conceived of the Sun. Only those who have ‘more money than brains’ can believe in such things and fall an easy prey to superstition. It must have happened like this that Mary co-habited with someone and thereby became enceinte. (p. 618)

A few pages later, Dayananda observes: “Plenty of Christians have blind faith like children, otherwise why should they believe in such things as are opposed to reason and science” (p. 625).

As might be expected, Dayananda had a field-day with the Book of Revelation as a veritable treasure-trove of proof texts for the idolatrous nature of Christianity. He

responds to Revelation 5 with its imagery of the four-and-twenty elders before the throne of the Lamb:

We wonder when Christ was not in heaven whom did these four beasts and twenty-four elders, etc., worship by burning incense and lighting lamps and offering food (eatable) and performing *arati*. Now the Protestant Christians condemn idol-worship, whilst their heaven is the veritable home of idolatry. (p.638)

Perhaps Dayananda's literalist reading reaches its climax with reaction to Revelation 9:16 referring to an angelic army with two hundred million horsemen:

Now were does such a vast number of horses graze and stay in heaven? What a large amount of dung there would be and what an amount of foul gas it must give rise to? We Aryas say good-bye to such a heaven, such a God and such a religion. It will be a very good thing if the Christians will also, through the grace of Almighty God, be freed from the shackles (of the Christian religion) (p.641).

For Dayananda, the Bible is as full of absurdity as the *Purāṇas*, to illustrate he refers to the notion of bread and wine as Christ's body and blood. On the same page he will add, "to keep images of the Cross in the Church is nothing short of Idol-worship" (p. 641). To conclude, even the Christian heaven contains a temple with as much or more noise and ritual as those of popular Hinduism but "The All-pervading Supreme Spirit as described in the Vedas can have no temple . . ." (p. 642).

Dayananda on Islam

In Chapter 14 of *Satyarth Prakash*, Dayananda turns to a consideration of Islamic tradition. As with other traditions his approach is hardly irenic. He will turn back the charge of Muslims that Hindus are idolators by arguing that they (Muslims) are even worse idolators. He follows his usual approach of aiming his attack on the scripture of the adversary, in this case the Qur'ān, read (as with the Bible) in a most literalistic fashion. A few illustrations of this hermeneutic: Dayananda responds to the expression that God's chair occupies all earth and space. "He must be localised indeed when He has got a chair, but such a Being can never be God as he is All-Pervading" (p. 668). He responds to the imagery of the Islamic paradise as gardens with rivers and women of stainless purity for God's servants: "Now is it a paradise or a brothel? Should we call such a Being (as described in the Qur'ān) God or a libertine? No enlightened man can ever believe such a book to be the Word of God" (p. 669). In short, "The Mohammadan God is proved to be (finite, unjust) and embodied, since He talked (with angels, etc.) just like a man. This is the reason that the educated people do not approve of the faith of Islam" (p. 677). The attack is not only along the lines of claiming that the Islamic deity is anthropomorphic and localised (and hence not God who is really "all-pervading") but also launched in terms of being "unscientific." "The Muslim God is entirely innocent of all knowledge of Physical Science. Were He conversant with Physical Science, He would not have talked of rearing heavens on pillars. If God dwells in a particular locality or in the heavens, He cannot be Almighty or All-Encompassing" (p. 686).

In the following exchange, Dayananda attacks the instructions in Qur'ān 2.139 to turn in the direction (the Qibla) of Mecca:

D – Now is this trivial idolatry? We should think, it is the crudest form of idolatry.

Mohammadan. – We Mohammadans are not image-worshippers but image-breakers, because we do not believe that Kibla is God.

D – They too, whom you call image-worshippers, do not regard the image as God. They profess to worship God behind the image. If you are image-breakers, why do you not break the image called Kibla (the sacred mosque.)

M. – Good! We have the authority of the Qoran in turning our faces towards the Kibla, while the image-worshippers have none in their Veda to worship images. We must obey God anyhow.

D – Just as you have the authority of the Qoran, the image-worshippers have that of the Puranas. As you believe the Qoran to be the Word of God, even do they believe the Puranas to be the Word of God's incarnation, Vyas. The difference between the Puranics and yourselves is this that you worship a big image, while they bow down before the smaller ones. Your case is just the same as that of a man who strains a gnat but swallows a camel. Your Mohammad expunged the worship of images from the Moslim faith, but introduced into it the worship of the sacred Mosque (at Mecca) which is as big as a hill. Is this idol worship on a small scale? You could free yourselves from image-worship and the like evil practices only by embracing the Vedic religion and not otherwise. Unless you give up the worship of your big image, you should feel ashamed of yourselves and abstain from condemning the worship of small images found in other faiths and purify your hearts by avoiding idolatry. (p. 664)

There are a number of interesting features to this polemic. Dayananda responds to the Muslim interlocutor's objection "we do not believe that Kibla is God" by saying that the Puranic Hindus (whom you have disparaged as image-worshippers) don't claim their images to be God either, but rather claim to worship the God *behind* their images to be God. If you won't let them use that defense of their focus of devotion (images) then don't

try to use its equivalent, that the Qibla (conflated with the mosque in Mecca) is not God but simply a focal point. If you would be consistent image-breakers, genuine iconoclasts, you would destroy that image (the mosque) as well. These passages provide about the closest Dayananda ever comes to any apology for Hindu image-worship – an apology (if one can call it that) which comes in a response to attack by outsiders. He acknowledges that the followers of the *Purāṇa*-based popular theism do indeed believe they have a divine mandate for images. Their images are at least small compared to the great Meccan mosque as focal point for Islamic prayer. In other words, my fellow Hindus may be benighted but you are even more so. Dayananda returns to this theme later in the chapter:

(The Mohammedan) God is like the gods and goddesses such as Bhairava (Indian Bacchus) and Durga which are worshipped in the temples (of the followers of the Puranas), because he accepts presents, commands people to circumambulate His house and to offer animal sacrifice; He is the originator of idol-worship in its most objectionable form, because the Mosque is a [more?] huge idol than the images of the gods. The Mohammedan God and His followers are, therefore, worse idol worshippers than the Pauranics and Jainees. (p. 693)

III CHAPTER 11 OF THE SATYARTH PRAKASH

In this chapter of the *Satyarth Prakash*, Dayananda criticizes the religions of India (*Āryavarta*) or more specifically Hinduism (although he does not use that word). It is also in this major segment of the book that he levels his most direct charge against idolatry. The decay of religion in India is the opening theme of the chapter. Dayananda makes the claim (p. 329) that from the beginning of the world until 5000 years ago the Aryas were the rulers of the whole earth. “All the knowledge that is extant in the world originated in

Aryavarta (India). Thence it spread to Egypt, thence to Greece, thence to the whole continent of Europe, thence to America and other countries” (p. 332). In this regard, Dayananda is very much a Diffusionist! The Aryas fell from this place of preeminence at the time of the Great War recorded in the *Mahābhārata*. Although Dayananda rejects the notion that the present period is the Kali Yuga, at least as that notion is used as a justification for current practices²¹ (p. 483), he does insist on maintaining that the plight and subjugation of India began from the disastrous calamity of the *Mahābhārata* war. The major symptom of the fall from the original greatness is the practice of idol-worship. Idolatry, Dayanada argues (p. 370), originated with the Jains.

Dayananda emphatically maintains that there is no sanction of idol-worship in the Vedas. To the claim of his “opponent” that there are Vedic mantras with reference to idol-worship he replies:

A. – You betray woeful ignorance when you make this assertion. Why do you not use your understanding a little? These texts are not found in the Vedas. They are to be found in the apocryphal Tantra books of the Vama Margis.

O. – Are the Tantras then mythical?

A. – Undoubtedly they are so. Just as there is not a single verse in the Vedas to sanction invocation of the Deity and vitalization of the idol, likewise there is nothing to indicate that it is right to invoke idols, to bathe them, to install them in temples and apply sandal paste to them. (p. 375)

²¹Note that Dayananda had rejected his father’s appeal to Kali Yuga as the legitimation for idol-worship when, as a boy, he had been thrown into doubt by the events of the night of Śivarātri.

In this chapter, Dayananda asserts again that the incarnation of God is an impossibility. In that the incarnation doctrine was used as grounds for representation in images, this is a key point in his attack on idolatry. The opponent is made to say:

O. - We too know that God is Formless but we believe that He incarnated as Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha, Surya and Devi, etc., and also appeared in flesh as Rama, Krishna, etc. That is why the images of deity are extant. Would you say that even this is wrong?

A. - Of course we would, for Veda declares God to be "Unborn Indivisible, Formless," etc., and, therefore, not subject to birth and death and the necessity of incarnation. The doctrine of the incarnation of God cannot even stand the test of reasoning, for He, who pervades the universe like ether, is Infinite, Invisible, and is not susceptible to pleasure and pain, cannot be contained in a drop of semen or in the uterus or in a bodily tenement.

Coming into and going out can only be predicated of a finite being. To say the Immobile Invisible God, Who pervades every particle of matter, can take flesh is as absurd as it would be to assert that the son of a barren woman was married and her grandson was seen. (p. 373)

Dayananda will also (p. 377-379) offer a refutation of the "stage model" or "stepping stone" apology for image-worship which can be found in Śaṅkara and also in Rammohun Roy. Again he uses the device of response to the position of the *pūrvapakṣin* or opponent:

O. - . . . When the knowledge and mental capacities of men suffered diminution, they found it hard to contemplate the Deity. Such men can of course fix their minds on idols only, hence idol worship is meant for the ignorant, even as a man can get to the top of a house only if he uses all the staircases in the house. Should he try to do without the staircases, he should never succeed in his object. Idol worship is therefore the first step. When after worshipping images for a length of time, the devotee will gain in (divine) knowledge and in purity of heart, he will then be fitted for divine meditation. . . .

A. - . . . Can God ever be contemplated through the worship of stalks and stones? Certainly not. Idol worship cannot be compared with a staircase. It

may more appropriately be looked upon as a deep ditch, whoever falls into it is hacked to pieces, can never come out and even dies there.

Undoubtedly the acquisition of true knowledge and cultivation of habits of truthfulness and the like virtues by association with pious and learned men of the ordinary stamps as well as with learned Yogis of the highest order constitute steps that lead to the realization of the Great God, even as a ladder takes one to the upper story of a house. No one has yet become a learned man through the worship of idols, on the contrary most of the idol worshippers have remained in ignorance and wasted their precious lives and died (in despair).

Dayananda lists 16 arguments against idol-worship (p. 379-380). Below, I quote each one verbatim and then offer a short commentary. The first comes as the response to the *pūrvapakṣin* who makes the objection that the mind needs to be concentrated on a material object as an immaterial one is too difficult:

1. No, the concentration of the mind on a material object is impossible, for it can grasp it at once and after mastering all the details wanders over fresh objects. On the other hand, in the case of Immaterial, Infinite God, do what it will, the mind will never be able to comprehend Him. God being indivisible the mind cannot wander, it contemplates his nature, attributes, characteristics and being beatified is perfectly focussed. Had it been possible to concentrate the mind on a material object, all the people of the world would have been able to concentrate their minds, because it remains engrossed in worldly objects such as other minds, one's wife, children and friends and wealth, but no one can concentrate his mind except on an abstract Being, because He is Indivisible. Hence idol worship is a sin.

Here, Dayananda contests the position that people need some kind of concrete object to focus their religious sentiments, either for the purposes of devotion or for meditation.²²

We saw above in Chapter 2 that Śaṅkara had endorsed objects of concentration in his *bhāṣya* to the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. We also saw above (Chapter 3) that Rammohun

²² "Another common name for the iconic image is *vigraha*, a word which means 'body.' As a noun, *vigraha* comes from a verbal root (*vi + grh*) which means 'to grasp, to catch hold of.' The *vigraha* is that form which enables the mind to grasp the nature of God." Diana Eck, *Darśan* (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: Anima Books, 1985), p. 38.

had denied the necessity of employing visible objects in “adoring the Supreme Being.” It is interesting though that Dayananda, although arguing the same position as Rammohun, approaches it from the opposite angle. Rammohun had said if Muslims, Sikhs and European Protestants can get by without images to worship then it is clearly not universally necessary. In contrast, Dayananda says, if focussing on material objects really acted to concentrate the mind then everyone around the world would have already done so.

2. Millions of rupees are spent on constructing temples for idol worship. This leads to poverty and indolence.

Dayananda takes umbrage at the perceived waste involved in spending money and effort on temples and images.²³

3. Free and promiscuous mixing of the sexes in the temples leads to adultery, internecine quarrels and the spread of disease.

This appears in keeping with Dayananda’s ascetic (or puritanical) bent and the fact that he continually emphasized the merits of *brahmacharya* or sexual continence. Relevant also here is the allusion to idolatry contributing to divisiveness in society.

4. The idol worshippers regard this mode of worship as the sole means of the practice of righteousness, the acquisition of wealth, the fulfilment of legitimate desires and the attainment of salvation. They, therefore, give up all active work and waste away their precious lives.

²³I am reminded of Bernard of Clairvaux’s well-known letter to the abbot of St. Thierry in which he attacks the costly ostentation of the latter’s churches with their sculptures and carving: “For God’s sake, if men are not ashamed of these follies, why at least do they not shrink from the expense?” Cited in Elizabeth G. Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*. Vol. 1 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1957) p. 21.

This is a crucial theme for Dayananda, that the worship of idols siphons off human energy from where it should really be applied. It substitutes ritual for ethics and superstition for active engagement in the world through work .

5. Since the people worship idols with different names, forms and characteristics, they have no unity of faith and their mutually antagonistic beliefs create bad blood in the country and lead to its ruin.

Again, Dayananda returns to the theme that idolatry (the worship of a plethora of figured gods) is connected with sectarianism and sectarianism leads to divisiveness in society which leads to loss of national unity which leads to national subjugation by outsiders.

6. They depend upon idols for the defeat of their enemies and the triumph of their arms, and, therefore, do not exert themselves. The result is that they are defeated and the government of the country, independence and wealth with its attendant pleasures, fall to the lot of their enemies . . . They are themselves robbed of independence and reduced to the condition of a subject race, suffer in a hundred different ways like the pony of an inn keeper and the donkey of the potter.

In this development of the previous point, idolatry is again construed as a sort of fatal substitute for genuinely efficacious action in the world. Idolators have lost their grip on reality and therefore fall prey to being as subjugated as beasts of burden.

7. If some one were to say to another person that he would put a stone in his name or place, he will feel angry and will most likely abuse him or hit him back. In like manner the ignorant people who take a stone to be the symbol of the Deity and worship idols in place of god will surely have the Divine wrath visited upon them.

Dayananda does not emphasize the divinity taking offense at (his?) representation in an image. This is as close as he gets to the Hebraic prophets' claim that a jealous God will visit punishment on his apostate people.

8. Labouring under mistaken notions, they peregrinate from temple to temple and from one country to another, endure untold misery, lay axe to the root of their

worldly and spiritual welfare, suffer at the hands of thieves and are duped by *thugs*.

Thus Dayananda rejects the notion of *tīrtha* and pilgrimage. To him, besides being dangerous, such an expenditure is an irrational waste of human energy.

9. Money is given away to wicked priests who spend it on debauchery and the gratification of the bestial appetites of the flesh and wine and in fomenting quarrels and in promoting litigation. Thereby the donor forfeits its happiness and is pained beyond measure.

Here again is the type of charge laid by Rammohun against the priestly class. To dethrone idolatry is simultaneously to dethrone the class of priestly exploiters who profit from it.

10. These people lay themselves open to the charge of ingratitude by not showing proper respect to their parents and other persons worthy of esteem and worshipping idols instead.

Idolatry is once more decried as energy misplaced. Esteem should be shown to parents and genuine religious teachers, not to inert matter.

11. When these idols are stolen by thieves or are dashed into pieces (by some iconoclast), they set up loud lamentations.

The care of the idols is not only a waste of time but it produces anxiety and despair when the idols are lost or destroyed. Perhaps Dayananda is referring to the angst and animosity produced by Islamic iconoclasm in India's medieval period.

12. The priestesses and priests are corrupted on account of illicit intercourse with other men and women and thus forfeit their connubial felicity.

This may refer to claims about the practice of sacred prostitution connected with temple *devadāsīs* or the reports of temple priests sleeping with barren women with the claim to make them fertile.

13. The servants do not properly obey their masters and they turn against each other and are thereby ruined.

I confess, I do not see here how this follows.

14. The soul by constant contemplation of dead and inert matter loses the power of sound judgment, because the material properties of the object contemplated (such as a stone) are transmitted to the soul through the *manas*.

Here Dayananda expresses the notion that what the eye looks at actually gets imprinted on the viewer. This was a notion also held in the medieval West.²⁴

15. God has created fragrant substances like the flowers to purify air and water and to prevent diseases. If the priests were not to pluck the flowers, the purificatory process would go on for an indefinitely long period, air and water would be purified and the flowers would continue shedding fragrance till the time of their natural decay. They cut off their useful career in the prime of their life. The flowers get mixed with mud, are decomposed and emit a stench instead of sweet odour. Has God created flowers and other odiferous substances for making and offering to idols?

We have seen that, for Dayananda, *homa* or Vedic *yajña* rituals are not seen as sacrifices but rather, are legitimated in terms of their ostensible value in purifying the air. Here he claims that temple *pūjā* is the reverse of this purifying function because decaying flowers, instead of acting for air purification, lend instead to its pollution.

16. Sandal wood, unhusked grain and the like offering get mixed with water and mud, and are then thrown into a drain or cistern where they rot and give off such offensive odours as issue from human excrement. Thousands of tiny creatures are constantly produced and die and cause it to stink still more.

²⁴ Dayananda writes the following dialogue on this point (p. 370):

O. - The Jainees contend that when one looks at an idol which is symbolical of deep meditation and peaceful repose, one's soul is illumined by these spiritual influences.

A. - The soul is possessed of consciousness, while the idol is dead and inert. Do you mean to say that the soul should also lose consciousness and become lifeless like the idol. Idol worship is a fraud.

This claim is similar to argument 15.

Dayananda's Protestant Idiom

Dayananda had a very traditional Hindu upbringing as a child, removed from contact with European culture. Later, as a young man, he was deeply embedded in the very traditional life of the Hindu *sannyāsin*. This supports the attribution of his anti-idolatry stance not to diffusion from another culture but rather to independent invention. However, there is no doubt that he borrowed the idiom of Protestantism in his attack on idolatry. In fact, the term of derision that he uses for temple priests or *pūjārīs* is “*popes*.” He writes: “The word *pope* originally meant father in Latin, but here this term is applied to a person who robs another through fraud and hypocrisy and achieves his selfish end” (p. 335). Dayananda states that the European popes told their people that they must deposit money with them in order to get property in heaven:

Upon hearing this, those ignorant men who had more money than brains and were anxious to enter Heaven would offer the stipulated money to the Pope who would then stand before an image of Jesus Christ or Mary and write down a draft in the following words: - “O Lord Christ! the bearer has deposited Rs. 100,000 to Thy credit with us in order to get admission into Heaven. When he comes there mayest Thou be pleased to give him in thy Father's Kingdom, houses, gardens, and parks worth Rs. 25,000, horses, carriages hounds and servants worth Rs. 25,000, foods, drinks and clothes, etc., worth Rs. 25,000 and get him the remaining Rs. 25,000 in cash so that he can entertain his friends, brothers and other relations etc.” (p. 336)

For Dayananda priestly fraud involving idolatry is cross-cultural; it existed in Europe and took a similar form in India. It thus has a universal dimension:

As in Europe, so in India the *popery* appeared in a thousand different forms, and cast its net of hypocrisy and fraud, in other words, the Indian

popes have kept the rulers and the ruled from acquiring learning and associating with the good. In fact they have always been misleading the people and have done nothing else. But let it be born in mind that it is only those who practice fraud and hypocrisy, and follow evil occupations that are called *popes*, whilst those, even the so called *Brahmans*, who live righteous lives, are truly learned and devoted to the public good, deserve to be called true *Brahmans* and holy men. Thus it is proper to designate the deceitful, the hypocritical and the selfish - i.e., those who serve selfish ends at the expense of the interests of others - alone as *popes*, while good and learned men as *Brahmans* and holymen (*Sadhus*); because had there been no such true *Brahmans* or *Sadhus* as escaped from the traps laid by the Jainees, Mohammedans and Christians, who would have helped to keep up love for the *Vedas*, and the *Shastras* in the minds and hearts of the *Aryan* people, and maintain the system of *Classes* and *Orders*? (p. 336)

The “*popes*” are then connected with tantrism:

... the *popes* got the laity to worship them and their feet, and began to say that in that alone consisted their (future) happiness. When the people were completely brought under subjection, the *popes* became entirely negligent of their duty, and extremely immersed in sensuality. As they were like shepherds, and the people like sheep - ignorant dupes, knowledge intellectual power, strength, courage, bravery and valour and all other good qualities were gradually lost. When they became licentious, they began to use meat and drink wine secretly. Then a sect sprang up among them whose followers wrote books called the *Tantras* in which various statements were introduced with the words *Shiva said*, *Parvati said*, *Bhairava said*. In these books such curious things are written as follow: (*Madya*) wine, (*Mamsa*) meat, (*Meena*) fish, (*Mudra*) cakes, (*Maithuna*) copulation, all these five starting with the letter M lead to salvation. (p. 338)

Dayananda is less than complimentary about the Jain and Buddhist traditions:

Seeing these evil, popish practices as well as others, such as feeding the priest in order to satisfy the spirits of the dead, a most dreadful religion, called Jainism or Buddhism [*sic*], that reviled the *Vedas* and the *Shastras*, sprang up into existence. (p. 344)

As noted above, Dayananda makes the claim that image-worship originated with the Jains.

The *Jains* being ignorant of the knowledge of the *Veda* attributed the *popish* practices (then current among the followers of the *Veda*) to the *Veda* . . . They also made huge images of their religious teachers, called *Tirthankaras* - from *Rishabhdeva* to *Mahavira* - and began to worship them. Thus the practice of worshipping idols originated with the *Jains* (in this country). The belief in god declined and the people took to idolatry instead. Thus, *Jainism* reigned supreme for about 300 years in India. The people during that time had become quite destitute of the knowledge of the *Veda*. This must have happened nearly 2,500 years ago. (p. 345)

In Dayananda's historiography, the *Jains* corrupted the *Hindus* whose self-seeking priests sought to emulate the *Jain* practices in order to prevent the loss of their constituency through conversion to *Jainism*. Note the sequence of odious phenomena attributed to *Jain* influence: incarnations, temples, images, mythological books.

In spite of the efforts of the *popes*, their disciples continued their visits to the temples of the *Jainis*, they even began to attend *Jain* meetings wherein passages from the *Jain* scriptures were recited. The *Jain popes* began to inveigh the followers of the *Puranic popes* into their nets. The *Puranic popes* then bethought of themselves unless they devised some means to stem the tide of conversion, their disciples would become *Jainis*. Upon this the *Puranic popes* by mutual consultation came to the conclusion that like the *Jainis* they should also have their incarnations, temples, images and mythological books. For instance they devised 24 incarnations in place of *Jain Tirthankaras* which likewise are 24 in number. The *Jainis* have *tantras* and sub-*tantras*. The *Puranic popes* wrote out 18 *Puranas* (and sub-*puranas*). (p. 362)

Even though Dayananda claims the *Jains* originated this sorry mess, he does not spare the *Hindu* sects in his condemnations:

. . . the *Vama Margis* and the *Shaivites* combined together and introduced the worship of the male and female reproductive organs which are termed *Jaladhari* and *Linga*. These unblushing wretches did not feel the slightest shame in following these idiotic practices. (p. 360)

Dayananda offers an interesting revisioning of the ritual practice of *pañcāyatana*, the invocation of a pentad of deities as usually practiced by *smārta* brahmins beginning with

Gaṇeśa and include Viṣṇu, Śiva, Durgā, and Sūrya. This is a prominent feature of popular Hinduism.²⁵ In the exchange below, Dayananda (p. 383) reinterprets worship of the five living gods *pañca yajña* as 1) worship of mother, 2) of father, 3) of teacher, 4) of the world teacher, 5) of the spouse:

O. – Is no form of idol worship permissible? What is then meant by the expression *worship of the five gods* which has been in common use since time immemorial? Does it not imply the worship of the five gods called *Shiva, Vishnu, Ambika, Ganesha* and *Surya*?

A. – No form of idol worship is permissible, but the worship of the five living gods is our duty. This expression Pancha Yajna or the worship of the five gods – has a very good meaning, but the ignorant fools have degraded it and construed it to mean something altogether different from what it was originally intended. The worship of Shiva and the like gods has already been condemned. But we shall now explain what is meant by worship of the five gods which is sanctioned in the Vedas. This may be termed worship of gods that are truly worthy of reverence. “The first object of reverence is the mother. It is the duty of her sons and daughters to serve this goddess with all their heart and all their soul and keep her happy. Let her never be treated harshly.” “The second object of worship is the father. This god should also be served like the mother.” “The third object of worship is the teacher who bestows knowledge (upon his pupils). This god shall also be served with utmost devotion.” “The fourth object of worship is the altruistic teacher of humanity who is learned, deeply religious, upright, well-wisher of all and goes from place to place preaching the truth and thereby making people happy.” “The fifth object of worship is the husband for the wife and wife for the husband.” These are the five living gods who bring a man into being and bring him up, and it is through them that he gains true knowledge, sound culture and is instructed into the righteous principles of conduct. It is the worship of these that leads one to God. Whoever does not worship them and worship idols instead is a transgressor of Vedic principles. (p. 383)

²⁵See Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World*, vol. 1 (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 395.

IV DAYANANDA'S SUMMARY OF HIS BELIEFS

Dayananda's beliefs are summarized in the final chapter of *Satyarth Prakash*. Dayananda opens this conclusion by claiming that what he teaches and strives for is universal in character. He denies that he has any idea of founding a new religion or sect. As well, he denies that he has championed any one of the religions prevailing in India. Instead, the claim is made that what he has articulated is the primordial religion of humanity:

I believe in a religion based on universal and all-embracing principles which have always been accepted as true by mankind, and will continue to command the allegiance of mankind in ages to come. Hence it is that the religion in question is called the primeval eternal religion, which means that it is above the hostility of all human creeds whatsoever. (p. 723)

Dayananda goes on to say that while he rejects what is bad in any religion (including the religion of India) he endorses whatever is good. He continues to express a "prophetic" calling when he writes that the thoughtful man:

... should always exert himself to his utmost to protect the righteous and advance their good, and conduct himself worthily towards them even though they be extremely poor and weak and destitute of material resources. On the other hand, he should constantly strive to destroy, humble, and oppose the wicked sovereign rulers of the whole earth and men of great influence though they be. (p. 724)

Dayananda's summation of his beliefs concludes the *Satyarth Prakash* and also his *Autobiographical Statement* from which the selections below are taken.²⁶ He offers fifty-one articles of belief. I have listed and will discuss those which are pertinent to the idolatry issue and those which illustrate Dayananda's activist stance on religion:

²⁶The translation used here is found in *Autobiography of Swami Dayanand Saraswati*, ed. K.C. Yadav (Delhi: Manohar, 1976).

1. There are many names of God, such as Brahma (the most High), Paramatma (the Supreme Spirit), etc., and He possesses the attributes of existence, consciousness, bliss, etc. His attributes, work and characteristics are pure. He is omniscient, formless, all-pervading, unborn, infinite, almighty, merciful, and just. He is the maker of the whole universe and is its sustainer and dissolver. He awards with absolute justice to all souls the fruits of their deeds as they deserve, and is possessed of the like attributes. Him alone I believe to be the Great God.

This reiterates the position that God is One although with many names. He may have many names but Dayananda will not accept that he has many forms. He is formless. The description given of God could fit European Deism except for the very Indian notion that God's role includes that of the "dissolver."

2. I hold that the four Vedas (the divine revealed knowledge and religious truth comprising the Samhita or Mantras) as infallible and as authority by their very nature. In other words, they are self-authoritative and do not stand in need of any other book to uphold their authority; just as the sun or a lamp by its light is self-luminous and illuminates the earth and other objects, even so are the Vedas. I hold the four Brahmanas of the four Vedas, the six angas, and Upangas, the four Up Vedas, and the eleven hundred and twenty seven Shakhas of the Vedas as books composed by Brahma and other rishis, as commentaries on the Vedas and having authority of a dependent character. In other words, they are authoritative in so far as they are in accord with the Vedas; whatever passages in these works are opposed to the Vedas, I hold them as unauthoritative.

This restates a clear commitment as to the very narrowly defined canon of authoritative texts.

5. God and the souls are distinct entities, being different in nature and characteristics: they are, however, inseparable being related as the pervader and the pervaded.

Dayananda came to reject the monism of Advaita Vedānta and the "great sayings" (*mahāvākya*) such as *Aham Brahmāsmi* or *Tat tvam asi*. He insists on the distinct nature

of God and human souls. On the other hand the intimacy of the relation is expressed as God as pervader to the souls as the pervaded.

11. Bondage (of the soul) has a cause. This is ignorance. All sinful acts such as worship of objects other than God result in suffering, which has to be borne though no one desires it. Hence it is called bondage.

The problematic condition for humanity is classically expressed as ignorance (*avidyā*) in the Indian religions. Note though that Dayananda illustrates sinful acts by idolatry, the worship of objects other than God. Dayananda's rather rigorist streak is also evidenced by his view that there is no such thing as the forgiveness of sin by God. People must work out their *karma*:

12. The emancipation of the soul from pain and suffering of every description and a subsequent career of freedom in the All-pervading God and His immense Creation for a fixed period of time and its resumption of earthly life after the expiration of that period constitutes salvation.

This is one place where Dayananda is decidedly innovative or unorthodox. He holds that *mokṣa* is not a permanent achievement but that the liberated souls will eventually cycle back into the material world. (Perhaps Dayananda the activist could not possibly envisage a permanent state of rest.)

16. I hold that the varna (caste or class order of an individual) is determined by his merits (qualifications) and action.

Dayananda (like Plato) advocates class divisions based on behaviour, not birth. This can again be connected with his activism; class or varna is not a passive possession but a consequence or reward for demonstrated achievement.

20. I hold that *devas* are those men who are wise and learned; *asuras* are those who are ignorant; *rakshasas* are those who are sinful; *pishachas* are those who are wicked in their acts.

This is a good illustration of Dayananda's allegorical reading of mythological material which he casts into an ethical framework.

21. *Devapuja* consists in showing honour to the wise and the learned, to one's father, mother and preceptor, to preachers of truth, to a just ruler, to righteous persons, to women who are devoted to their husbands, to men who are devoted to their wives. The opposite of this is *Adevapuja*. I hold that worship is due to these living persons and not to the inert images of stone etc.

I have discussed above Dayananda's reworking of the *pañcāyatana* or *pañcayajña*. Note that true *pūjā* is construed as being offered to the actively alive and living while false *pūjā* by contrast, is to inert and passive matter.

24. *Tirtha* is that by means of which the ocean of misery is crossed: In other words, I hold that *tirthas* are good works, such as speaking the truth, acquisition of knowledge, society of the wise and the good, practice of *yamas* and (other stages) of yoga, life of activity, spreading knowledge and similar other good works. No places or water of rivers are *tirthas*.

Despite (or because of) having been a great wanderer to the places of pilgrimage as a *sannyāsin*, Dayananda rejects completely the notion of a sacred geography with *tīrthas* as fords (which the word means literally) that is, as places of "crossing over" to the "further shore." There are no sacred waters or sacred sites in Dayananda's thoroughly disenchanted world.

27. *Sanskara* (ritual) is that which contributes to the physical, mental, and spiritual improvement of man. From conception to cremation there are sixteen such *sanskaras*. I hold their performances obligatory. Nothing should be done for the dead, after their remains have been cremated

In his *Sanskār Vidhi*, Dayananda reworked traditional Hindu rituals and rites of passage.

Although these are obligatory, they are legitimated on the grounds of tangible

improvements to the person. The rites for ancestors (*śrāddhā*) are rejected as sheer superstition.

28. I hold that the performance of *yajna* is most commendable. It consists in showing due respect to the wise and the learned, in the proper application of the principles of chemistry and of physical and mechanical sciences to the affairs of life, in the dissemination of knowledge and culture, in the performance of *Agnihotra* which, by contributing to the purification of the air and water, rain and vegetables, directly promotes the well-being of all sentient creatures.

Dayananda wanted to rid India of deity *pūjā*, to destroy the idolatrous rituals of the temple and household shrine, but he wanted to substitute the older Vedic rites. However, as we have repeatedly seen, these Vedic fire offerings are now legitimated by an appeal to “principles of chemistry.” Finally,

51. *Sagun Stuti* consists in praising God as possessed of specific attributes which are inherent in Him; while *Nirgun Stuti* consists in praising God as devoid of attributes which are foreign to His nature, *Sagun Prarthana* consists in praying to God for the attainment of virtuous qualities; while *Nirgun Prarthana* consists in imploring the Deity to rid us of all our faults.

This last article is interesting as Dayananda’s reworking of the classical distinction between *nirguṇa* and *saguna* Brahman. Clearly, for him, *saguna* Brahman cannot refer to God with form, as this is anathema. Thus, *prārthana* (prayer) under these rubrics is again posed in moral categories.

V CONCLUSION

Dayananda wanted a reformed Hinduism that was fully Indian. He criticized the Brahmo Samaj of Bengal and the Prarthana Samaj of Bombay for imitating foreigners. He wrote in the *Satyarth Prakash*:

If you wish to work for progress, then join the Arya Samaj and agree to act according to its ideals and aims, otherwise your efforts will be in vain. Because it is proper both for you and for me that we collaborate in love with all the resources of our body, mind and possessions for the uplift of that country, from whose substance our bodies were fashioned, and upon which they still feed and will keep depending.

To Dayananda the position of India under foreign rule was tied to the decline and corruption of true Vedic religion:

But now, due to the onset of misfortune and to the laziness, pride, and mutual hostility of the Aryans, far from being the rulers of other countries, there is in Aryavarta no more that undivided, free, independent, and peaceful rule of the Aryans. What little power they have, even that is trodden underfoot by foreigners: only a few kings are still self-governing. When such bad times come, then the people have to suffer great misfortune.

The Hindu reformers of the nineteenth century were confronted not only by the Christian missions but more importantly by the supremacy of European (British) might. This political supremacy was based on military and technological superiority derived from the application of reason and the scientific method. Dayananda regarded image-worship (which he could not see as anything other than the epitome of irrationality) as the root of Hindu enfeeblement. His program to cast out image-worship might be seen (by outsiders) as Dayananda's desire to emulate the conquerors – whether Muslim or British Christian. To Dayananda this was not emulation but the recovery of authentic Aryan, Vedic religion,

the primordial, non-idolatrous religion of all mankind. The recovery of power lay in the recovery of a strict monotheism and the adherence to a religion not of the sensuous image but of the inerrant book.

CHAPTER FIVE**RAMMOHUN AND DAYANANDA**

This chapter is in two sections. In section I, psychological factors that might be connected with the image-rejection of Rammohun and Dayananda are examined. In section II, I look at religious and cultural influences that may have shaped the two men on the image-worship question.

I POSSIBLE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS**Introduction**

One of the perennial questions in historiography is how much importance to ascribe to individual movers, geniuses, "Great Men" (*sic*) who propel historical change through the power of their personalities in relation to the impact of ground swells of social change which are little dependent on particular individuals or personalities. In other words, does the *zeitgeist* get shaped by the Great Men or are they, rather, simply expressions of the *zeitgeist*? The position that discounts the salience of exceptional human genius in historical development is *historicism*, the notion that history is determined by immutable laws or social forces and not by human agency.

A separate, but related, issue is that of the importance of individual psychology in the shaping of important historical figures.¹ How much should their lives and the

¹The literature on this question is extensive. Perhaps the best-known writer in the area is Erik Erikson, see his "On the Nature of Psycho-Historical Evidence: In Search of Gandhi," *Daedalus*, Summer (1968): 695-756, and his well-known monographs: *Young Man Luther* (New York: Norton, 1962) and *Gandhi's Truth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970). Examples of recent articles in this area include: F. Weinstein, "Psychohistory and

positions they advocate be seen as reflecting private and personal formative experiences in childhood? The position that puts tremendous stress on formative psychological experience in explaining the agendas or programs of important historical figures is *psychologism*. Surely the common sense approach to these issues is one which says that major historical figures are shaped by their immediate family environment *and* by the wider social environment, an environment which they *will in turn shape* through their later impact as leaders, thinkers, reformers and so on.

In the following discussion I examine possible formative psychological influences on Rammohun and Dayananda that could be connected with their later attacks on idolatry. I return here to the biographies of the two men and examine their childhood conflicts. In both instances, the case can be made that their repudiation of images was linked to repudiation of their families. Rammohun quarreled with his family when he returned from schooling in Patna over its image-based form of religion and later his mother tried to have him disinherited. Dayananda records strife between his parents over the degree of religious observance to which he, as a boy, should be subjected. In the end, rather than being disinherited, Dayananda takes an active role, and abandons his family for the life of the *sannyāsin*. The question behind this detailing of the formative years of the two reformers is this: To what extent can their iconoclasm can be attributed to the powerful stimulus of disillusionment at a young age with received religion coupled with family conflict? I begin with Rammohun Roy.

the Crisis of the Social Sciences," *History and Theory* 34 no. 4 (1995): 299-320; M. de Vries, R. Kaplan, "Leaders on the Couch," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 26 no. 4 (1990): 424-433.

Rammohun Roy and his Mother

Ashis Nandy in his essay “Sati: A Nineteenth-Century tale of Women” attempts to offer an explanation for facets of Rammohun Roy’s reform program in terms of the psychological forces impinging upon him. Nandy admits that “the impact of these forces on young Rammohun’s personality can only be guessed”² but this does not deter him from proffering a psychoanalytically oriented examination of the roots of Rammohun’s reformism. He begins by suggesting that the nuclear nature of Rammohun’s family (revenue records suggest that the family did not live together in the usual extended joint family configuration) heightened the importance of the mother-son relationship. Nandy writes: “Being necessarily the sole immediate source of power, nurturance and wrath in early childhood, it was the mother who became the ultimate source of authority as well as the ultimate target of defiance.”³ Certainly the record demonstrates that the relationship between Rammohun and his mother was very strained. Tarinidevi had been a member of

²Ashis Nandy, “Sati, A Nineteenth-Century tale of Women” in *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India*, ed. V.C. Joshi, (Delhi: Vikas, 1975), p. 183. Nandy writes that his essay “explores the dynamics of reform in nineteenth century India to illustrate how a man’s private conflicts with immediate authorities can get intertwined with aggregate responses to public issues, how older controls of transgression can become a threat and a challenge to the individual, and how the individual’s personal ethics and private symbols can become valid tools of social engineering” (p. 168). In other words, Nandy is concerned to link Rammohun’s reform platform with the dynamics of his personality – a personality shaped by the vicissitudes of his familial formation and life history.

³Ibid., p. 183. For an extensive psychoanalytically oriented discussion of the ambivalent aspects of the role of mothers in Hindu society see Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. (Delhi: OUP, 1981), ch. 3.

a devout Śakta family before her marriage; her father had been a Śakta priest. On marriage to Rammohun's father she became, as expected of a loyal wife, a follower of Vaiṣṇavism, the sect of her husband. Iqbal Singh describes the character of Rammohun's mother:

. . . Tarini Devi's notions of right and wrong, of good and evil, were so charged with ritualistic fervour, so involved in an intricate web of ceremony and form, and so dependent for their efficacy on an almost neurotic attention to every detail of worship and observance, that she could hardly help drawing everyone around her into her peculiar delirium of pieties. Not least her three children. Indeed, upon their receptive and impressionable sensibilities, all this was bound to stamp itself in deep and permanent hieroglyphics of reflex and memory, even though the future consequences of this intensive early conditioning were to prove, at least in the case of Rammohun, contrary to all her hopes and expectations.⁴

Nandy, speaking of Tarinidevi's having to adopt the religious forms of her husband's family, writes: ". . .by a number of accounts it was this overnight transformation which encouraged Tarinidevi to make intense overt conformity to the family denomination the keynote of her self-image."⁵ In other words, we could take from Nandy the suggestion that Rammohun's mother pursued Vaiṣṇava piety (including idol-worship) with all the zeal (obsessiveness) of the "convert." He continues, with references to Singh's account given above:

The symptoms of obsession-compulsion went even further than that. The "hard core of intractability verging on ruthlessness,"⁶ with which Tarinidevi sought and defended her ideological purity, was also reflected in her mothering. The children were not only drawn into her "intricate web

⁴Iqbal Singh, *Rammohun Roy*, p. 23.

⁵Nandy, "Sati", p.184.

⁶The quoted portions are from Iqbal Singh's life of Rammohun Roy.

of ceremony and form,” her “almost neurotic attention to every minute detail of worship and observance,” and her “delirium of pieties,” they had little protection in a culture where such traits were often considered aspects of feminine virtue.⁷

It is easy to imagine the tension and conflict that would have prevailed when (if the early biographies are accurate) at sixteen, Rammohun returned from his Persian and Arabic schooling in Patna and denounced the forms of popular Hinduism including idol-worship.

The mother also appears to have exercised considerable control not only over the religious observances of the family but over other aspects of its management. Collet writes: “. . . it is quite evident that Rammohun’s mother was the mistress of the household. . . . She was a woman of strong character, and of fine understanding, and appears to have had considerable influence over her husband.”⁸

Rammohun’s conflict with his mother extended all the way through his adult years. On the death of Rammohun’s father, Ramkanta, in 1803, the family property went to Rammohun’s elder brother, Jaganmohun, who died in 1811. It is not clear exactly how Rammohun came into possession of the family estate after the death of his brother. Collet suggests he may have bought it when it came on the market after his brother’s son’s failure to pay the taxes. At any rate, it appears that Rammohun’s mother managed the estate herself. Nanda Mohun Chatterji wrote in *Some Anecdotes from the Life of Raja Ram Mohun Roy*: “It is said that Phulthakurani [the mother] used to place before her all her numerous gods and goddesses while superintending the management of her landed

⁷Nandy, “Sati”, p.185.

⁸Collet, *Life and Letters*, p. 2.

property.”⁹ Thus it is evident that Rammohun would be in conflict with his mother not only over the forms of religion but simultaneously over the ownership and management of the estate. William Adam reported:

When the death of Rammohun Roy’s elder brother made him the head of the family, she [his mother] instituted suits against her son both in the King’s and Company’s Courts, with a view to disinherit him as an apostate and infidel. Which according to strict Hindu law, excludes from the present and disqualifies for the future, possession of any ancestral property, or even according to many authorities, of any property that is self-acquired.¹⁰

Collet discusses this case as follows:

In this attempt she was defeated; but for many years he had to suffer from her persecution. In his great grandson’s *Anecdotes* there is a story of his going to see her on her return from Rangpur, and being harshly repulsed from her embrace, when she is reported to have said, — “If you would touch me, you must first go and bow down before my Radha and Govinda”; whereupon, it is added, “Rammohun, who so loved his mother, submitted and went to the house of the gods and said ‘I bow before my mother’s god and goddess.’” If this be true, it can scarcely have been done so as to impose seriously on his mother, for he never relaxed in his public attitude towards idolatry.¹¹

The reference to Rammohun “so loving his mother” may be in the pietistic imagination of his early biographers. Another instance of the first biographers perhaps projecting their own piety onto the early life of Rammohun is discussed by Singh:

⁹Cited *ibid.*, p. 14. Collet says that Tarinidevi spent her last years at the Jagannatha temple at Puri, dying April 22, 1822. (*Life and Letters*, p. 50.)

¹⁰William Adam, *A Lecture on the Life and Labours of Rammohun Roy*, ed. Rakhal-Das Italdar (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1977), pp. 4-5. Adam’s lecture was presented in Boston in 1845 and first published in 1879.

¹¹Collet, *Life and Letters*, p. 14.

It is claimed that as a child he was so impressed and affected by the religious scruples of his parents, and especially his mother's conduct, that at one time "he would not take even a draught of water" without first reciting the appropriate formula from the Vaishnavite sacred text, the *Bhagavat Purana*, to sanctify the operation. There are other edifying stories illustrating and underlining the precocious pietistic bent of his mind. They may or may not be true. But there is nothing inherently improbable or surprising in the fact that a boy brought up in such an atmosphere of febrile religiosity, would have his emotions deeply stirred by it, develop abnormal and acute religious scruples, and begin by identifying himself uncritically and wholeheartedly with all the outward forms and rituals of religion against which he might later rebel. It is not only not improbable; it seems natural.¹²

The full evidence for the culmination of his conflict with his mother appears finally in the published questions he wrote which were to be put to her in the Calcutta High Court during the lawsuit she had instigated against him over his ownership of the family property which she wanted to go to her grandson, Rammohun's nephew. The questions Rammohun poses suggest that the real reason for the suit was *her rage* over his deviation from Hindu orthodoxy.¹³

. . . have you not instigated and prevailed on your Grandson the Complainant to institute the present suit against the said Defendant, as a measure of revenge; because the said defendant hath refused to practice the rites and ceremonies of the Hindu religion in the manner in which you wish the same to be practiced or performed? Have you not . . . estranged yourself . . . from all intercourse with the Defendant? . . . Have you not repeatedly declared . . . that there will not only be no sin but that it will be meritorious to effect the temporal ruin of the Defendant? . . . Have you not publicly declared that it will not be sinful to take away the life of a Hindoo

¹²Singh, p. 23

¹³Here Nandy departs from the interpretation of Iqbal Singh who cautions that the main reason for her rage was not really Rammohun's religious deviations but rather the fact that he failed to come to the assistance of his father and brother when they were imprisoned for failure to pay their debts to the Maharajah of Burdwan. Iqbal Singh, *Rammohun Roy*, pp. 55-56 and 59.

who forsakes the idolatry and ceremonies of worship? . . . declare solemnly on your oath, whether you do not know and believe that the present suit would not have been instituted if the Defendant had not acted in religious matters contrary to your wishes and entreaties and differently from the practices of his ancestors? Do you not in your conscience believe that you will be justified in your power to effect the ruin of the Defendant and to enable the Complainant to succeed in the present suit?¹⁴

The overt hostility between Rammohun and his mother, tied up with religious observance, is clear from the lawsuit. Rammohun's strong-willed mother was, according to Nandy:

perhaps destined to become the ultimate target as well as the model of rebellion for her son. Along one axis, she was likely to generate in him a sweeping hostility towards women, towards the cultural symbols associated with mothering, and a defensive rigidity towards the mother-worshippers of Bengal. *This hostility did not follow his exposure to Christian, Buddhist and Islamic theologies; it was merely endorsed by these alternative systems.*¹⁵ (italics added)

If the lawsuit demonstrates the mother's hostility towards the son, Nandy argues that this hostility in turn induced in Rammohun a latent rage against women in general and cites as evidence the following grounds: 1) the troubled relationship he had with his wives – he lived apart from his two orthodox wives and their children – and 2) the fact that he left for England in 1830 without even informing his youngest wife of his departure. However, for Nandy, the “other axis” of Rammohun's relationship to his mother was that she “was perhaps bound to generate in her son a sharp awareness of the power, individuality, capacities and rights of women.” Tarinidevi gave Rammohun as well a model of strong-willed resistance. He would use this “strong-willed resistance,” this

¹⁴Cited in Nandy, “Sati”, pp. 186-187.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 185.

determination, *both* in the campaign against the figured gods (including most prominently among them in Bengal, the goddess Kālī) *and* simultaneously in the fight to outlaw *sati*.

Nandy writes:

It was this combination of rage, guilt and admiration in him which established an inverse relationship with the authority images around which his community's faith was organised. Rammohun *had* to try to topple Bengal's transcendental symbols of motherliness; and it *had* to be for the sake of Bengal's suffering women.¹⁶

Nandy goes on to discuss Rammohun's father, Ramkanta whom he describes as the "mother's lack-lustre consort and the family's grandest failure." Ramkanta, according to one account, had been fired from the Nawab's court at Murshidabad and had difficulties adjusting to the new exigencies of being a landholder under the British regime. Collet reports that he "was so often disgusted with the treatment he received that he would neglect his affairs for a while, and retire to meditate and tell *Harinam* beads in a garden of *Tulsi* plants."¹⁷ Thus Rammohun's father appears as an ineffectual foil to his powerful wife. To Nandy, Rammohun's new religion had to purge both the projected images of the powerful mother and the image of the docile or dependant male.¹⁸ To do this, to replace Durgā and Cāmuṇḍā and Kālī, Rammohun tells Hindus that authentic Hinduism is to worship the supreme author and governor of the universe. This is the language of Deism, but the pronoun used to describe this largely impersonal deity is

¹⁶Nandy, "Sati", p. 188.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 188, citing Collet (*Life and Letters*, p. 3.)

¹⁸The story goes that as a boy Rammohun would weep when the play *Manbhanjan* was performed and the scene in which a weeping Kṛṣṇa grasps the feet of Rādhā was shown.

masculine. As Nandy quotes from Rammohun's *English Works*: "*He* by whom the birth, existence and annihilation of the world is regulated." Nandy writes:

... the concept of deity for the first time in a modern Hindu sect was sought to be made patriarchal. Apparently, what Ramkanta could not do for his son, the semeticised [*sic*] Brahmo concept of godhead could: it projected a paternal authority – firm, reliable, and convincing – that could be offset against the fearsome inner authority of his mother.¹⁹

At the end of his essay Nandy writes: "We, on this side of history, now have a better idea of which 'goddess' Roy was trying all along to overthrow and which 'god' he wanted to install in her place." But then, to deflect any charge of being simply a gross reductionist of the psychological variety he continues: "To say this is not to flaunt one's uncompromising psychologism. It is to recognise the fact that no reform is entirely a public event. By its very nature, it is also a private statement. Rammohun Roy too, in his reform, made such a statement."²⁰ Nandy thus argues that Rammohun's reformed religion (which is purged of devotional practices to the gods and especially goddesses), is partially to be explained as a result of Rammohun's own experience of conflict and rebellion with his parents.²¹ We will also see conflict in the account of Dayananda's early years.

¹⁹Ibid., p.192.

²⁰Ibid., p.194.

²¹B.C. Robertson also sees family conflict as a factor behind Rammohun's reformist program. He writes: "Much of the motivation for his vigorous campaigns against sati, kulinism (polygamy among kulin Brahmans), the dowry system (which he viewed as virtual slavery) and female infanticide may credibly be traced to his troubled home life, particularly his relationship with an attentive and domineering mother whose own personal status in the extended-family hierarchy was defined by the fact that she was subordinate wife of the youngest of five sons." *Raja Rammohan Ray: The Father of Modern India* (Delhi: OUP, 1995), p.14.

Dayananda: Childhood and Crisis

In the autobiographical accounts published in *The Theosophist*, Dayananda alludes to the tensions in his own family. In the passage below, which comes just before the famous account of his disillusionment on the vigil of *Śivarātrī* (given in Chapter 4 above), Dayananda records something of the strife between his parents over his religious upbringing leading up to his fourteenth year:

As my family belonged to the Siva sect, their greatest aim was to get me initiated into its religious mysteries; and thus I was early taught to worship the uncouth piece of clay representing Siva's emblem known as the Parthiwa Lingam. *But, as there is a good deal of fasting and various hardships connected with this worship, and I had the habit of taking early meals, my mother, fearing for my health, opposed my daily practicing it. But my father sternly insisted upon its necessity, and this question finally became a source of everlasting quarrels between them.* Meanwhile, I studied the Sanskrit grammar, learned the Vedas by heart, and accompanied my father to the shrines, temples, and places of Siva worship. His conversation ran invariably upon one topic: the highest devotion and reverence must be paid to Siva, his worship being the most divine of all religions. It went on thus till I had reached my fourteenth year, when, having learned by heart the whole of the Yajur Veda Sanhita, parts of the other Vedas, of the Shabḍa Rupavali and the grammar, my studies were completed.²² (italics added)

It appears then that observance of religious rituals (in particular fasting) pitted the father against the mother and her concerns for the health of the son. Dayananda hints at more of this at the end of his *Śivarātrī* account. He has heard his father's apologetic for idol-worship but, as we have seen, this fails to ring true with the boy:

But the explanation fell short of satisfying me. I could not, young as I was, help suspecting misinterpretation and sophistry in all this. Feeling faint

²²*The Theosophist*, vol. I (October 1879): 10.

with hunger and fatigue, I begged to be allowed to go home. My father consented to it, and sent me away with a sepoy, only reiterating once more his command that I should not eat. But when, once home, I had told my mother of my hunger, she fed me with sweetmeats, and I fell into a profound sleep.²³

The father, a stickler for religious observance, is opposed by the mother who sides with the son and feeds him against the father's wishes. Dayananda continues:

In the morning, when my father had returned and learned that I had broken my fast, he felt very angry. He tried to impress me with the enormity of my sin . . .

Not only is the father angry, he tries to make the boy feel both the external threat of his wrath and that wrath internalized as guilt over the "enormity of my sin." Dayananda continues by alluding to how this forced him into dissimulation:

. . . but do what he could, I could not bring myself to believe that idol and Mahadev were one and the same god, and, therefore could not comprehend why I should be made to fast for, or worship the former. I had, however, to conceal my lack of faith, and bring forward as an excuse for abstaining from regular worship, my ordinary study, which really left no time for anything else. In this *I was supported by my mother, and even my uncle*, who pleaded my cause so well that my father had to yield at last and allow me to devote myself to my studies. In consequence of this, I extended them to "Nighanta," "Nirukta," "Purvamimamsa," and other Shastras, as well as to "Karmakand" or the Ritual.²⁴ (italics added)

What is very interesting here is the allusion to not only his mother being pitted against the father but also his uncle. I think we may assume that this uncle was the same individual referred to in Dayananda's next paragraph as the person who was very dear to him and whose death, when Dayananda was nineteen, plunged him into shock and depression.

What is also very interesting is that the *renunciation of idols leads to the concentration*

²³Ibid., p.10.

²⁴Ibid., p. 10.

on books or study. This of course would later be a major part of Dayananda's platform, that reliance on images must be utterly rejected and replaced by knowledge of the *Vedas* as authoritative texts. As well, the move from the visual image to the abstract Word might be seen as a shift indicating what Freud calls an "instinctual renunciation" which has implications for compensatory development in the other spheres, a suggestion I will discuss in my final chapter.

Dayananda next details the extreme anguish and depression that came over him at eighteen when his fourteen-year-old sister suddenly died:²⁵

It was my first bereavement, and the shock my heart received was great. While friends and relatives were sobbing and lamenting around me, I stood like one petrified, and plunged in a profound revery. It resulted in a series of long and sad meditations upon the instability of human life. 'Not one of the beings that have ever lived in this world could escape the cold hand of death' – I thought; 'I, too, may be snatched away at any time, and die.' Whither then, shall I turn for an expedient to alleviate this human misery, connected with our death-bed; where shall I find the assurance of, and means of attaining Muktee, the final bliss . . . It was there and then that I came to the determination that I would find it, cost whatever it might, and thus save myself from the untold miseries of the dying moments of an unbeliever.²⁶

Dayananda immediately following this passage makes the statement: "The ultimate result of such meditations was to make me violently break, and forever, with mummeries of external mortification and penances, and the more to appreciate the inward efforts of the soul." I find this statement problematic given that his subsequent biography does indicate

²⁵Dayananda records that the abrupt news of his young sister being near death came to him when he was with his family at a friend's house watching a nautch (dancing-girl) performance. Is it accidental that Dayananda supplies this detail of the nautch, the sort of thing in later life his puritanical position would rail against?

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 10.

that later as a renouncer, he did, in fact, practice austerities and forms of yoga and lived an extremely ascetic life as a wandering sadhu. The passage though is significant as an allusion to an early discomfort with ritualism and “external religion.” The autobiography continues with the death, when Dayananda was nineteen, of his favourite uncle, “. . . leaving me in a state of utter dejection, and with a still profounder conviction settled in my mind that there was nothing stable in this world, nothing worth striving for, or caring for, in a worldly life.”²⁷ This depression turns the young Dayananda in the direction of renunciation of the world. He tells his friends that the very idea of marriage is “repulsive” to him. The parents get wind of this and immediately make plans for his marriage at age twenty. Dayananda now entreats his parents to be allowed to go to Benares to complete his Sanskrit studies. This time it is his mother who adamantly refuses. “This once, it was my mother who opposed herself violently to my desire.” The date for his marriage is then actually brought forward by the worried parents and the ceremony arranged. Before this ceremony could occur, Dayananda, at twenty-one, flees home for the life of the *sannyāsin*. He was to have one last encounter with his father. The young renouncer had been rather naive and inept in covering his tracks and the father was informed of his whereabouts. He came in pursuit with his sepoy to a *mela* (fair) at Siddhpore where the fledgling ascetic was in the company of pandits. Dayananda describes the final acrimonious exchange with his father:

His wrath was terrible to behold. He reproached me violently, accusing me of bringing an eternal disgrace upon my family. No sooner had I met his glance though, than knowing well there would be no use in trying to resist

²⁷Ibid., p. 11.

him, I suddenly made up my mind how to act. Falling at his feet with joined hands, and supplicating tones, I entreated him to appease his anger . . . Notwithstanding such humility, in a fit of rage he tore my yellow robe into shreds, snatched at my tumba, and wresting it violently from my hand flung it away; pouring on my head at the same time a volley of bitter reproaches, and going so far as to call me a matricide.²⁸

Dayananda is subsequently able to escape from his father's sepoy's at night and makes a second, and successful, bid for the life of the *sannyāsin*.

I have returned to these passages from Dayananda's autobiography to demonstrate his early life crises. The first, at age fourteen in the temple vigil, is preceded by conflict between the parents over the strictness of religious observance the boy is to follow. The aftermath of this incident is that Dayananda rejects his father's explanation for idol-worship as false consciousness. When his mother feeds him against the wishes of the father, we may legitimately assume that idol-worship is henceforth associated in his mind not only with false consciousness but with family strife. The next crises are the deaths of sister and uncle. By this point he has completely lost faith in his family tradition of devotion to Lord Śiva as represented by the *linga* and is thus utterly bereft of the "consolations of religion" in confronting the death of his loved ones. He would go forth as a renouncer with a permanent negative association connected with image ritual.

Crises Compared

Both Rammohun and Dayananda come into conflict with their parents. Rammohun at about age sixteen leaves home, because of, if the account is correct,

²⁸Ibid., p. 11.

disagreement caused by his questioning the validity of idol-worship. He returns in three or four years only to leave again. On the death of his father, his mother tries to have him disinherited. Dayananda also questions idol-worship, seeks solace with his mother and meets with the ire of his father. His loss of faith in the image-based religion of his parents makes him want to seek answers beyond the family sphere in the life of *sannyās*. This causes further conflict over the parents' desire to see him married. He leaves home at twenty-one. Both figures have a radical break with their parents and family, Rammohun by ostracism and disinheritance, Dayananda by flight into *sannyās*.²⁹

If Rammohun's conflict was primarily with his mother, Dayananda's was primarily with his father.³⁰ Dayananda's father appears fierce and determined, Rammohun's father appears weak and ineffectual. Rammohun's mother appears fierce and determined, Dayananda's mother appears soft and indulgent (except when she

²⁹Kakar, in his *The Inner World*, sees socialization of children in India often effected through threats of abandonment on the part of the mother. Thus the response of a sensitive child might be to say, in effect, "You can't fire me, I quit" or "You can't abandon me, I am going to abandon you (or at least your *mūrtis*)." Kakar also suggests that given that the Hindu woman's status is dependent on having children, especially a male child, so that she may fall into (unconsciously) regarding her son as a saviour. This burden of expectation can lead many sensitive youths to be tempted to take *sannyās*. For Kakar, this is a renunciation of male potency as a defence against the mother's sexuality. However, it could also be seen as a way to avoid the mother *and* fulfill her expectation of a saviour. Rammohun didn't take *sannyās* (instead he renounced his mother's images), but he did, in starting a new religious movement, work at becoming a saviour. (I am indebted to Laurence Nixon for these reflections on the applicability of Kakar's discussion of the "Bad Mother" to the biographies of Rammohun and Dayananda.

³⁰Of course Rammohun's conflict was also with his father. Collet reports that Rammohun told William Adam that his rupture with his father lasted up to the latter's final hours on his deathbed. S.D. Collett, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 10.

opposed herself “violently” to his desire to take *sannyās*). There is no symmetry then in the gendered nature of the conflict. Nandy suggests that Rammohun’s iconoclasm is connected with his inner need to unseat the fierce maternal imago. Such an incentive cannot be attributed to Dayananda’s iconoclasm. What is common to both reformers is that both exhibit the zeal and determination of one of their parents even if this determination is turned in a direction against that parent and ultimately the form of religion that the parent demanded. What is also common to both reformers is that both would doubtless carry in their psyche associations between family conflict and image-worship. Is it farfetched to suggest that in removing images from religion they were subconsciously hoping to remove the source (or the sign) of their earliest contact with disharmony and inner strife?

There is little doubt that iconoclasm is often a symbolic act. To destroy an image is not only to react against what that image represents but also against those who use and honour that image. To give an example of iconoclasm in the political sphere, to topple a statue of the Shah of Iran is not only an act of defiance of the Shah; more than that, it is an act of defiance of those in the ruling class who support the Shah and are legitimated by his authority. Clearly, to reject images is also to reject those who invest or endow those images with authority or sanctity. Given recognition of this dynamic, we might ask: is the disenchantment with image-worship that Rammohun and Dayananda experienced the *cause* of the conflict with their parents, or, is it in some measure the *result* of that conflict, or perhaps an *expression* of that conflict? Did conflict with their parents result in symbolically rejecting them by rejecting their religious symbols? I believe it would be the

height of psychologism to trace the origin of our reformers' iconoclasm simply to family conflict (Oedipal or other). On the other hand I do not believe that it is preposterous to see psychological dynamics as reinforcing or abetting or lining up with consciously held theological positions.

It is hard for late twentieth-century observers to understand how idol-worship could be such a serious reform issue for these men while it is transparent to us that caste discrimination, child marriage, *sati*, prohibition of widow remarriage and the other abuses they attacked are substantive issues. If this early family conflict around images is allowed to be seen as important, it also helps explain why idolatry should be near the start and near the centre of both reformers' agenda.

Both Rammohun and Dayananda are in conflict with a parent that they simultaneously resist and admire. Nandy says this above of Rammohun and his mother. Jordens suggests that Dayananda internalized the determination and religious scrupulosity of the father he had to flee.³¹ I would argue that as mature men, these reformers would need to honour the parents they so strenuously resisted by remaining religious. Even if the religion they would preach would need to express their distance, their separate identity from the powerful parent, it would nonetheless be religion, and not a foreign religion. It

³¹Jordens suggests that the autobiographical account indicates that Dayananda, inheriting the strictness and determination of his father, used this determination to resist the very figure who modeled determination to him. He resisted pressure to marry until he was twenty-one, older than most of his peers. He also resisted in the key area of religion. "He was fascinated by religion: his father's deep devotional nature had found an echo in his son that far exceeded his expectations, as it had engendered a search for the essence of religion beyond its outer practices." J.T.F. Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, p. 6.

would be, in their minds, the recovery of what they considered the primordial religion of India and indeed of all humankind.

A final observation: if importance is attached to family dynamics and psychological processes then this undercuts the need (if any) to appeal to *diffusion* as explanation for this Indian iconoclasm. As Nandy is quoted above: "*This hostility did not follow his exposure to Christian, Buddhist and Islamic theologies; it was merely endorsed by these alternative systems.*" (italics added). The personal experience of disillusionment with images and conflict with the parental proprietors of those images is highlighted, the subsequent contact with Muslim or Protestant thought is only a reinforcer. If we emphasize the importance of the intense childhood experience of Rammohun or Dayananda then we are appealing to explanation under the rubric (discussed above in Chapter 1) of *independent invention by experience*.

I began this section with the broad issue in historiography: How much should we see important historical figures as the product of the conditions of their times, the *zeitgeist*, the social and political forces imposing on them, the new currents of thought suddenly available and so on versus how much we should attribute to individual genius or the volatile combination of individual psyche and its immediate psychological environment? I hold that it is not reductionist psychologism to suggest that private and personal formative experiences can act as one powerful motivating force for the adult reform program of these two figures. This is *not* to suggest that it provides the total causal explanation for their reform agenda, an agenda which, in both cases, had image-repudiation as a central issue.

II POTENTIAL INFLUENCES ON RAMMOHUN ROY AND DAYANANDA SARASVATI

Rammohun and his Milieu

Introduction

Killingley discusses the three distinct literary traditions that Rammohun was formed by:

- 1) the Sanskrit
- 2) the Islamic embodied in Arabic and Persian
- 3) the European tradition including Christian and rationalist, classical and biblical (from about the age of 30 on)³²

However, Killingley cautions against assessing influences through the examination of affinities: “. . . such a procedure, unless supported by biographical knowledge as well as detailed textual examination, can lead to ill-founded conclusions based on similarities which may be accidental.”³³ This is a fundamental methodological point, namely, that resemblance does not prove provenance, or as is often repeated in the social sciences, “correlation is not causation.”

Rajat K. Ray also suggests three major influences on Rammohun but, interestingly, has a different order than that suggested by Killingley above. Ray writes: “The three main influences in Rammohun’s thought – Persian, Vedantic and occidental – were imbibed by him successively, strictly in that chronological order, a fact that cannot

³²Killingley, “Rammohun’s Interpretation of the Vedānta.” p. 93.

³³Ibid., p. 93.

be too often emphasized.”³⁴ Ray thus places the “Persian” sphere in first place and the Sanskrit second. The order of the arrangement of influence of course hangs on the reliability of the biographical details of Rammohun’s early life. Ray himself admits, “Serious doubt has been thrown by the painstaking research of Brajendranth Seal on the stories of Rammohun Roy’s early education at Patna and Benares.”³⁵ We should recall that the stories of his acquiring a Persian and Arabic education at Patna are from the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century biographies and may be more part of a “Rammohun myth” than solid fact. What is certain is that he was born in a Vaiṣṇava brahmin family which would suggest that his earliest formation would be Hindu and in the Bengali language. Admittedly, he may not have learned Vedāntic philosophy and serious Sanskrit at a very young age but surely the Vaiṣṇavism of his family home must be counted as the first important influence. I do not see on what grounds Ray places Persian or Perso-Arabic influence in the first position. That the family belonged to the elite economic and political strata meant that at some point he learned Persian and some

³⁴Rajat K. Ray, “Introduction,” in V.C. Joshi, ed., *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India* (Delhi: Vikas, 1975), p.7. Immediately above this statement Ray writes: “In his essay on the religion of Rammohun Roy, A.K. Majumdar traces the Muslim, Hindu and Christian influences on Rammohun’s thought without adequately bringing out the chronological aspect of the intellectual influences imbibed by him and the relative importance of the different sets of religious doctrines with which he became acquainted in successive stages. It would be more on the mark to redefine these intellectual influences as Perso-Arabic (which included, besides Islamic theology, secular Aristotelian and other non-Islamic influences), Vedantic (as Majumdar points out, Vedantic monism of the Sankara school as opposed to Vaishnavism) and Occidental (which included, besides missionary and unitarian doctrines, a whole range of secular thought).”

³⁵ Ray “Introduction” p. 7.

Arabic, as is clearly demonstrated in his first published work the *Tuhfat* of 1803-4, but this does not suggest that Persian culture was the first or primary or formative influence. Having taken Hindu influence as primary, I turn now to the investigation of Islamic (Persian or Perso-Arabic, in Ray's terms) influence.

Influence of Islam

The most obvious thing to be noted here is the long association of Rammohun's ancestors with the Muslim rulers of Bengal. Rammohun's family, although high-caste brahmins, had, for three generations, served as revenue officials of the Mughals. Rammohun's great-grandfather had been given the title *Raya Rayan* when employed by the Nawab of Bengal under the Emperor Aurangzeb. Rammohun would himself accept the title of *raja* from Akbar II (the titular and second-to-last Mughal ruler of Delhi) whose case for increased pension he took to London in 1830. This explains Rammohun's facility in Persian which was still the language of the elite at the time of his childhood.³⁶ Persian remained the official language of government until 1837.³⁷ As noted, Rammohun's first published work, the *Tuhfat* was written in Persian with an Arabic preface. Even if the early biographers who report that Rammohun learnt Persian and Arabic "at a young age" are not thoroughly reliable, it remains that he had somehow acquired sufficient

³⁶The fact that Rammohun's ancestors were among those brahmins who left strictly orthodox priestly duties to serve foreign rulers may also be connected with Rammohun's program to demote the status of such priestly duties. Of course for some Hindus in the growing metropolis of Calcutta, the *bhadralok*, this went the other way: they tried to compensate for having abandoned more traditional Hindu lifestyles by ostentatious displays of ritual orthodoxy and the patronage of temples.

³⁷Stephen N. Hay, "Western and Indigenous Elements in Modern Indian Thought", p. 314.

proficiency in these languages to write this tract. Rammohun, in an autobiographical passage says of himself: “. . . who, although he was born a Brahmun, not only renounced idolatry at a very early period of his life, but published at that time a treatise in Arabic and Persian against that system.”³⁸ What does Rammohun mean by “at a young age” and what treatise is he referring to? Stephen Hay has suggested that this may refer to the *Tuhfat* and is possibly an indication that it was written much earlier than its publication date of 1803-1804.³⁹ Hay adds in his note: “This earlier dating is significant in corroborating what is already evident in the content and wording of the *Tuhfat* itself: namely, that Rammohun arrived at his rationalist position independently of European enlightenment influences on his thinking.”⁴⁰ Killingley responds to this suggestion with the caution, “This argument for an earlier date is weakened by the fact that Rammohun tended to lower the age at which the events in his earlier life had taken place.”⁴¹ However, even if the date for the composition of the *Tuhfat* is retained at 1803 or 1804, this is still prior to Rammohun

³⁸In his “An Appeal to the Christian Public in Defence of the Precepts of Jesus” of 1820 (*English Works* Part 5 Kalidas and Burman, 1948)

³⁹ Stephen N. Hay, “Western and Indigenous Elements in Modern Indian Thought”, p. 316, n.8.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 316, n 8. The first edition of the *Tuhfat* is not extant and the evidence for the 1803-1804 date is not absolutely clear, although it is generally accepted.

⁴¹Killingley, “Rammohun Roy’s Interpretation of the Vedānta,” p. 356. Killingley continues: “but even if we accept the traditional date, the *Tuhfat* provides support for Hay’s view that ‘even before modern Western impacts could have affected his thinking he had shown a keen interest in religious reform, and a strong reliance on reason as a guide to such reform.’”

having attained proficiency in the English language. The rationalist content of the *Tuhfat*, if it does not come from European sources, has been investigated for Islamic precedents.

Ajit Kumar Ray in his *Religious Ideas of Rammohun Roy*, argues that the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* of the mid-seventeenth century, written by a Persian on the religions of North India, was a probable source for the ideas in Rammohun's *Tuhfat*. Ray suggests in particular the chapter on the Din Ilahi faith of the Mughal Emperor Akbar as a likely source. The evidence for Rammohun knowing this work is that one of its translators, Anthony Troyer, knew Rammohun from the College of Fort William. The *Dabistān* had been translated in part by Francis Gladwin and published in Calcutta in 1789 in the *New Asiatic Miscellany*. It was known to Sir William Jones who read it in 1787.⁴²

The supposition that the *Dabistān* is the source or model for Rammohun's *Tuhfat* is rejected by B.C. Robertson who suggests that if Rammohun had indeed known this work he would probably have cited it as it supports so many of his own positions. Robertson also points out that Rammohun does not mention Akbar's religion or even provide evidence for even knowing about it.⁴³ I find this argument questionable in that Rammohun may well have preferred not to indicate sources for his discussion of what he holds as the fundamentals of religion. He might not have wanted his ideas on these fundamentals to be viewed as derivative.⁴⁴

⁴²Killingley, *Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Tradition*, p. 49.

⁴³Bruce Carlisle Robertson, *Raja Rammohun Ray: The Father of Modern India* (Delhi: OUP, 1995) p. 25 and note.

⁴⁴Robertson also suggests that given that the *Dabistān* translation was begun by David Shea but not completed by Anthony Troyer until 1843 (ten years after

Other commentators have seen in the rationalism of the *Tuhfat* the Mu'tazila school of Islamic thought. The *Dabistān* has a very brief section on the Mu'tazilites and Rammohun could have learned of their position indirectly through this source as suggested by Rajat K. Ray.⁴⁵ The connection is rather remote as the Mu'tazila movement had flourished in the ninth century and was little known in India. Regardless of the provenance of the ideas in the *Tuhfat*, it is clear that the mature Rammohun had competency in Persian and contact with learned Muslims in Calcutta. He was known at the presidency civil court, the Sadr Dīwanī Adālat, and to the *munshis* (language teachers of Persian) at Fort William College.⁴⁶

An Englishman in Calcutta, Sir Edward Hyde East, described brahmin antipathy towards Rammohun:

They particularly disliked (and this I believe is at the bottom of the resentment) his associating himself so much as he does with Mussulmans, not with this or that Mussulman, as a personal friend, but being continually surrounded by them, and suspected to partake of meals with them.⁴⁷

Rammohun's death) would not make it a likely source. The fact that the publication date of the English translation is later than Rammohun's death does not in itself rule out that Rammohun could have had access to the Persian much earlier.

⁴⁵Rajat K. Ray, "Introduction", p. 10.

⁴⁶Killingley, *Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Tradition*, p. 49.

⁴⁷Cited in Killingley, "Rammohun Roy's Interpretation of Vedānta," p. 357.

Killingley⁴⁸ also cites a remark by Sayyid Ahmad Khan who said: "The author saw him at court on numerous occasions, and people in Delhi were convinced that his personal beliefs were considerably inclined towards Islam."

It is clear then, both from his earliest extant work in Persian and from the reports of some of his contemporaries that Rammohun was knowledgeable about, and partial to, aspects of the Islamic tradition. However, this should not be taken as a total causal explanation for his image-rejection.

Some writers have attributed Rammohun's rejection of image-worship directly to the Persian and Islamic elements in his early education. Brajendranath Banerji wrote: "As regards the aggressiveness of his monotheistic beliefs, it is certainly traceable to his Muhammadan training through which he had imbibed something of the intolerant monotheism of the Semitic peoples."⁴⁹

Dermot Killingley takes A.K. Majumdar to task for writing: "He refused to countenance image-worship in any shape or form, and we have to ascribe this stern attitude towards idolatry to the influence of Islam at a tender and impressionable age."⁵⁰ Killingley remarks:

We have seen, however, that Rammohun's attitude to idolatry was not one of absolute condemnation; in a manner more Hindu than Islamic, he

⁴⁸Killingley, "Rammohun Roy's Interpretation of Vedānta," p. 357.

⁴⁹Brajendranath Banerji, "Rammohun Roy," *The Calcutta Review New Series*, 50(1934):71. Cited in Killingley *Rammohun Roy and the Christian Tradition*, p. 76.

⁵⁰A. K. Majumdar in Joshi ed., *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India*, p. 73.

regarded it as an inferior form of worship which was wrongly foisted on those who were capable of something better.⁵¹

Thus, Killingley reminds us that Rammohun, although a fervent opponent of idolatry, was not total in his censure of image-worship as the Islamic tradition has always been. As we have seen, he instead situated image-worship as a lower form of religious knowledge or practice without absolutely excluding it. Killingley's measured evaluation of Islamic influence is summed up as follows:

It is quite likely that the position of Islam in Mughal India enhanced the prestige of monotheism and of forms of worship which did not use images. Indirect Islamic influence of this kind would be felt particularly by people of Rammohun's class, whose families had been associated with the Muslim ascendancy and who often followed Muslim fashions in dress and luxuries.⁵²

Christianity

We will recall from Chapter 3 that Rammohun had been engaged in collaboration with Baptist missionaries in Calcutta from as early as 1819. It is clear that Christian influence is an obvious possibility from as early as Rammohun's association with John Digby and the East India Company around 1805, or considerably earlier, if Digby's contention that Rammohun first tried to learn English in 1796 is correct. I refer below to Rammohun's own statement on his first links with the Christian world and another autobiographical statement he is reported to have made that indicates his interest in the Protestant Reformation as a model for possible developments in India.

⁵¹Killingley, "Rammohun Roy's Interpretation of Vedānta". p.357.

⁵²Ibid., p. 357.

In his “An Appeal to the Christian Public in Defence of the Precepts of Jesus” of 1820,⁵³ Rammohun responds to an attack on his “Precepts of Jesus” written by a Christian missionary in the journal *The Friend of India*. He is highly offended (as we noted in Chapter 3) at having been referred to as a “heathen” by the editor of the journal and states that this is contradicted by the “Precepts” article itself that shows him a believer in One God, “a supreme, superintending Power, the Author and Preserver of the harmonious system, who has organized and who regulates such an infinity of celestial and terrestrial objects . . .” Rammohun adds the following autobiographical statement (he is referring to himself as indeed the author of the anonymous tract):

. . . who, although he was born a Brahmun, not only renounced idolatry at a very early period of his life, but published at that time a treatise in Arabic and Persian against that system; and no sooner acquired a tolerable knowledge of English, than he made his desertion of idol worship known to the Christian world by his English publication – a renunciation that, I am sorry to say, brought severe difficulties upon him, by exciting the displeasure of his parents, and subjecting him to the dislike of his near, as well as distant relations, and to the hatred of nearly all his countrymen for several years.⁵⁴

As alluded to above, we can suspect that Rammohun is exaggerating when he says “at a very early period of his life” with regard to the Persian treatise and the precise time period of his “acquiring a tolerable knowledge of English” is also left very vague. What is not in any doubt is Rammohun’s educated and sophisticated grasp of Christian history and doctrine in his last years.

⁵³*English Works* Part 5, Kalidas and Burman, 1948.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 58.

Collet reports that in a conversation with the Scottish missionary Alexander Duff, Rammohun made a comparison between the India of his time and Europe in the period of the Reformation:

“As a youth,” he said to Mr. Duff, “I acquired some knowledge of the English language. Having read about the rise and progress of Christianity in apostolic times, and its corruption in succeeding ages, and then of the Christian Reformation which shook off these corruptions and restored it to its primitive purity, I began to think that something similar might have taken place in India, and similar results might follow here from a reformation of the popular idolatry.”⁵⁵

Influence of Western Indology

David Kopf in *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* argues that Rammohun was influenced by his association with British Orientalist scholars in Calcutta.⁵⁶ Kopf writes:

There is some truth to the belief that Rammohun was an original thinker and that his early associations, which led ultimately to the formation of the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, were without precedent in Indian history. On the other hand, Rammohun owed far more to his British Orientalist contacts and to the ideas of other Bengalis than is generally acknowledged.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Cited in Collet, *Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 280; also Sumit Sarkar, “Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past,” in *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India*, ed. Joshi, p. 56.

⁵⁶Kopf also states that it is “reasonably certain” that Rammohun was in Calcutta between 1797 and 1802 engaged in “loaning money to civil servants and speculating in Company paper.” p. 196 and note.

⁵⁷Kopf, David, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969), p. 197.

Kopf sees H.T. Colebrooke as the primary British Orientalist scholarly influence upon Rammohun.⁵⁸ Colebrooke in his essay "On the Vedas or the Sacred Writings of the Hindus," *Asiatic Researches* (1805) reprinted in *Miscellaneous Essays*, anticipates many of Rammohun's fundamental ideas. Colebrooke had written of changes in the history of Hinduism and the eclipse of the Vedas:

Most of what is there taught, is now obsolete; and in its stead new orders of religious devotees have been instituted; and new forms of religious ceremonies have been established. Rituals founded on the Puranas and observances borrowed from a *worse* source, the Tantras, have in great measure . . . [replaced] the Vedas.⁵⁹

Another statement appears so strikingly similar to Rammohun's position (as expressed in the writings of his mature Calcutta years) as to seem to confirm Colebrooke's influence.

Colebrooke writes:

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.⁶⁰

David Kopf takes the position that the British Orientalists are crucial to the development of ideas within the Hindu Renaissance:

The Jones-Colebrooke portrayal of the Vedic age to which a Müller would add the finishing touches, and which today is widely accepted, depicted a people believed to have behaved very differently from present-day Hindus. It was the first reconstructed golden age of the Indian renaissance. The

⁵⁸Kopf, *British Orientalism*, p. 198. S.N. Mukherjee saw William Jones as the source of Rammohun's monotheistic interpretation of the Vedānta. S.N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones*, p. 141. Killingley, "Rammohun Roy's Interpretation of Vedānta," p. 21.

⁵⁹Cited in Kopf, *British Orientalism*, p. 41.

⁶⁰Killingley, "Rammohun Roy's Interpretation of Vedānta", p. 362.

new view romanticized the virtues of the Aryan inhabitants of north India in the second millennium B.C. Instead of being introspective and other-worldly, the Aryans were thought to have been outgoing and nonmystical. They were pictured as a robust, beef-eating, socially equalitarian society. Instead of Oriental despotism, scholars discerned tribal republics. There were apparently no laws or customs to compel a widow to commit *sati*. There were no temples, and there was not the slightest evidence to suggest that Aryans concretized idolatrous images of their gods. And to round out the picture, also absent were the fertility goddesses, the evil personification of Kali, and the rites and rituals of later Tantrism.⁶¹

Did Rammohun derive his ideas from British Indology as found in the work of Orientalists like Jones and Colebrooke? Rammohun acknowledges the British Indologists in a number of places. For example in a note to his preface to the *Īśopaniṣad* he says he is indebted to Dr. H.H. Wilson's Sanskrit Dictionary. In his preface to "Essay on the Rights of Hindoos over Ancestral Property according to the Law of Bengal," he cites H.T. Colebrooke's translation of the *Dayabhaga* and Sir William Jones' *Ordinances of Menu*.⁶² It should be noted though that these are both works of the mature Rammohun being published in 1816 and 1832 respectively. It is one thing to acknowledge that Rammohun knew the work (and knew personally) the British Orientalists, it is another thing to claim that they were the source or formation of his ideas.

However, it is by no means necessary to invoke Colebrooke as the source of the notion of Vedic monotheism. The Hindu tradition, from the *tad ekam* of *Rg Veda* 10.129 to the notion of *Īśvara* or *Paramātmān* being beyond the gods in *Śaṅkara*, to name only two examples, provides the precedent for such a position. Rammohun could find this

⁶¹Kopf, *British Orientalism*, p. 412.

⁶²Robertson, *Rammohun Roy*, p. 64.

internal to the tradition and there is no justification for seeing it as derived externally from the Orientalists . It may be added though, that the Orientalists no doubt reinforced or encouraged this perspective on Rammohun's part. As we have seen, the question of influence hinges in large part on the question of Rammohun's access to the English language and the date at which he acquired English proficiency. The evidence here is ambiguous. Killingley states that the first known contact between Rammohun and the British is a loan he made to Andrew Ramsay in 1797.⁶³ John Digby (the Company official Rammohun was to work for) says that Rammohun had no proficiency in English in 1801 and only acquired it after beginning employment with him by about 1805. This contradicts Rammohun's autobiographical letter (of 1833, the year he died) where he wrote:

When I reached the age of twenty, my father recalled me, and restored me to favour; after which I first saw and began to associate with Europeans, and soon made myself tolerably acquainted with their laws and customs.⁶⁴

Killingley accepts the authenticity of the letter but not its veracity, as he believes (as I have already indicated above) that Rammohun tended to push back the events in his life to an earlier age than seems warranted. He suggests⁶⁵ that Rammohun acquired a knowledge of the European tradition from about the age of 30, this would thus be approximately 1803. The weight of the evidence thus suggests the possibility of Rammohun being influenced by the nascent British Orientalism in the formation of his

⁶³Killingley, "Rammohun Roy's Interpretation of Vedānta," p. 69.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, cited p. 68.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 93.

thought on religion. But influence is not necessarily origin, influence can mean reinforcement of ideas that Rammohun was formulating independently which are then buttressed by the outside stimulus. As Killingley reminds us, we must guard against leaping to the conclusion that affinities indicate borrowings without the detailed biographical and textual analysis to support this supposition. Even when it is evident that an idea held by Rammohun had indeed been published earlier by a British Orientalist we must also guard against the *post hoc propter hoc* fallacy and the error that something demonstrated to come after is *necessarily* a product of what came before.

Someone wishing to deny agency to Rammohun Roy in the formation of his religious thought can find a legion of potential influences to explain that thought, particularly his rejection of image-worship. There is the Persian language schooling; although we do not know exactly how early he acquired the language, we know that he was fluent at least by 1803 when he had written the *Tuhfat* with an Arabic preface. There is his knowledge of Christianity both in the evangelical form of the Baptist missionaries with whom he collaborated and in the Unitarian form that he came to favour. There is the thought of Deism with which he was also familiar and from which he borrowed terms and idioms in his *English Works* on Vedānta. There also the contact he had with the English Orientalists including H.H. Wilson at the College of Fort William. All of these connections are easily documented. The methodological question however remains: is the fact that he knew these scholars, missionaries and intellectual and religious traditions and sometimes used their languages, terms and expressions an indication that his thought is

simply derivative of these non-Indian sources? I suggest that there can be diffusion of idiom which is not the same thing as diffusion of idea. Stephen Hay observes:

Even though much of what Rammohun thought and did would have taken a very different form if Western influences had never impinged on his life, it seems clear nonetheless that the historian depicting his ideas and actions only as responses to Western impacts would be drawing the merest caricature of what really happened. As we have seen, even before modern Western ideas could have affected his thinking he had shown a keen interest in religious reform, and a strong reliance on reason as a guide to such reform.⁶⁶

Dayananda and his Milieu

Introduction

What is especially interesting about the other great Hindu iconoclast of the nineteenth century, Swami Dayananda, is that he came from a very traditional Hindu background and maintained the lifestyle of the *sannyāsin* ascetic into his mature years. Unlike the great reformers of Bengal such as Rammohun, he had no knowledge of English and no Western education. He spoke Gujarati, Sanskrit, and later, Hindi. It is for this reason that Dayananda provides an interesting foil to Rammohun in that while both were fervent repudiators of images, their backgrounds were so different in terms of the apparent potential for foreign influence or impact on their ideas. I turn now to a discussion of the potential influences on Dayananda which could help explain his rejection of images. Two of the potential influences I will discuss, the Sthānakavāsī Jains and the Sādhs, represent indigenous image-rejecting traditions in India that Dayananda

⁶⁶Stephen N. Hay, "Western and Indigenous Elements in Modern Indian Thought," p. 323.

would have known about. In the case of the Sthānakavāsī Jains, how much he knew about them and how early is controversial. It is clear that in later life he was intimately aware of the Sādh community. In either case, however, to say that he would have known about them or even to say that they could present to him models of image-rejecting religious communities is not to suggest that they are the *source* of his image-rejection, only, perhaps, its partial confirmation.

Kathiawar, the Region of Dayananda's Birth

J.T.F. Jordens emphasizes cultural characteristics of the Kathiawar peninsula as factors in the formation of Dayananda as a religious thinker. Relevant to the question of assessing the amount of foreign influence in Dayananda's early environment is the fact that this region of Gujerat was placed under British influence and control far later than the Bengal of Rammohun Roy. The Kathiawar of the early nineteenth century was characterized by the rule of Rajput princes and their courts and, up until 1807, the repeated incursions of Maratha armies. This was a politically fragmented and chaotic environment that only began to be stabilized by the extension of British power after the political agent took up residence in Kathiawar in 1820.⁶⁷

Jordens indicates that Vaiṣṇavas constituted about fifty percent of the Hindu population of the Kathiawar peninsula in Dayananda's day while Śaivites constituted about one-tenth. Dayananda's own family, as described in Chapter 3, were quite well-to-do Śaivite brahmins. The town of Tankara where they lived was ruled by Seth Gopal Medel Narayana of Baroda who promoted Śaivism. Almost all brahmins were

⁶⁷Jordens, *Dayānanda Saraswatī*, p. 17.

Śaivite; the few brahmins who were Vaiṣṇava were regarded as “fallen” brahmins. The brahmins of Kathiawar were not only different from the masses in being Śaivite, they also were different in preserving the Vedic rites as opposed to the Purāṇic rites of the lower classes.

The mass of the largely non-brahmin Vaiṣṇava population was splintered into ten main groups characterized by sectarian rivalry. Jordens remarks: “The Puranic ritual of the Vaishnavites was profuse and full of pomp and ceremony, and contrasted with the simplicity and solemnity of Shaivite worship.”⁶⁸ If as a boy Dayananda had been revulsed by Śaiva ritual, how much more so would he be by the ritual extravagances of Vaiṣṇava practice. In his maturity, Dayananda would particularly attack the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the central text of the two most important Vaiṣṇava sects in his natal region, the Vallabhācāryas and the Swāmīnārāyanas. The Śaiva tradition was much older in Kathiawar than the Vaiṣṇava which had only begun to see major growth since the sixteenth century from the expansion of the *bhakti* movement and from the time when the Vallabhācārya sect came to dominate the merchant community.⁶⁹ Dayananda, who would search for the earliest authentic roots of Hinduism, would also associate particularly Vaiṣṇavism with Hinduism’s later devolution. He would attack Vaiṣṇavism and its texts as idolatrous and sectarian (the two things being linked in his mind) and only in his real maturity come to also abandon his own Śaivite affiliation.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 11.

⁶⁹Ibid., p.10.

Jordens refers to a reform movement in Kathiawar begun in 1824 by Madhavgar of Nadiad who was an advaita Vedāntin who rejected the avatars of Viṣṇu and who condemned idol-worship.⁷⁰ He also condemned the performance of the Śrāddha rites for the dead. Jordens surmises that the young Dayananda may have met one of the teachers of this reform movement but admits that the similarity between its reform agenda and the one later espoused by Dayananda may be coincidental.⁷¹

The ruins of the famous Somnāth temple stood in Kathiawar. This was a renowned shrine to Śiva, well-known from the second century C.E., which had been destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni in the eleventh century. Surely the young Dayananda would have known of the Muslim destruction of this shrine and the Muslim attitude to images from a fairly early age.⁷² Of course, knowing that the greatest monument to the

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 10. *The Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* of 1884 (p. 546) says of Madhavgar: "He became a recluse and lived in Kathiavad, when he preached his dogmas based on the Vedanta school. According to his tenets, God has neither form nor attributes and has no incarnations. Contemplation of one Supreme Brahma is all that he preaches. He condemns the worship of idols, deified persons, animals, trees, rivers, and other objects, which are only creations of the Supreme Being, the supreme or universal soul being the same as the individual or lower soul *jīvatma*. He deprecates the observance of fasts or the infliction of pain by austerities on the physical frame, which he considers is but a receptacle of *jīvatma*. Shedding of animal blood is also strictly prohibited. There is no pollution by touch, not even of a woman in her periods, or of a mourner, or at eclipses. Brahmans are not fed on the twelfth day after a death nor *shraddhas* performed in September. Food and almsgiving are prescribed only for the old and the decrepit."

⁷¹Ibid., p. 10.

⁷²The trauma sustained by Hindu culture from the destruction of Somnāth and the saliency of this shrine in subsequent Hindu imagination and history are described by Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997), pp. 186-221. For the general Indian response see also Phyllis Granoff, "Tales of Broken Limbs and Bleeding Wounds: Responses to Muslim Iconoclasm in Medieval India," *East and West* 41, Nos. 1-4 (1991): 189-203.

faith of his ancestors, the brahmins of Kathiawar, had been destroyed by foreigners might lead one to think that instead of endorsing their antipathy to idols he would refute it and defend images. Instead, his strategy was to claim that the *really* ancestral faith did not need temples or images. As well, he would argue that the Muslims themselves were great idolators and that therefore their attack on Hindu idolatry was unjustified.

Jainism

Jordens reports that in the northern Kathiawar peninsula, the area of Dayananda's birthplace, there was about one Jain to every ten Hindus.⁷³ The region's importance as a Jain centre is indicated by the fact that many of the first modern Jain reformers originated from there.⁷⁴ Most Jain groups were closely integrated with Vaiṣṇava Hinduism to the point that there were Hindu images in several Jain temples. However, there was one exceptional Jain sect, that of the Sthānakavāsī or Dhūndhiyā, which originated in the fifteenth century. This Jain sect (described in Chapter 2) rejected image-worship. Jordens suggests that the same Muslim iconoclastic onslaught that drove most Jains closer to the Hindu fold had actually pushed this particular group to rethink its position on idolatry. He writes, "They were probably the very first non-idolatrous sectarians the future iconoclast Dayananda ever saw."⁷⁵ The fact that this sect was particularly active in Dayananda's natal state of Morvi, led J. N. Farquhar to suggest in 1917 that they may have given Dayananda the idea for his future iconoclastic program. They rejected idols, pilgrimage,

⁷³Ibid., p. 10.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 11.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 13

temple worship and were strict moralists. At the end of quoting Dayananda's Śivarātrī account, Farquhar discusses the possibility of a Sthānakavāsī origin for Dayananda's aniconism:

Every one will feel the beat of conviction in this fine passage; and the results of it are visible in the crusade of the Ārya Samāj against idolatry to this day. But every one who knows India will also agree that what happened is scarcely comprehensible in a Hindu boy of fourteen years of age, unless he had already heard idolatry condemned. Brooding over the problem, I wrote my friend, Mrs. Sinclair of Rajkot, Kathiawar, and asked her whether Sthānakavāsī influence could be traced in or about the boy's birthplace at that time. The Sthānakavāsīs are a group of Jains who gave up idolatry and broke away from the main Śvetāmbara sect in the fifteenth century. Mrs. Sinclair writes:

Taṅkāṛā [Dayananda's birthplace] is fourteen miles south of Morvi, and about twenty three miles north of Rajkot. In the thirties, the father of the present Thakur Saheb of Morvi was ruling. He was very devoted to a certain Sthānakavāsī monk, and the Prime Minister was also a Sthānakavāsī; so that the sect was very influential in the Morvi state. All monks and nuns, travelling from the town of Morvi to Rajkot (another Sthānakavāsī stronghold), passed through Taṅkāṛā, where Ambā Śaṅkara [Dayananda's father] and his son lived.⁷⁶

It is significant here that Farquhar explicitly excludes the possibility of the boy arriving at his image-rejection unaided and from direct personal experience. Thus, history (at least in India, according to Farquhar) is driven by diffusion of influence, not by individual genius arriving at something by independent invention. This view, understandably, is contested by Arya Samaj authors. K.C. Yadav writes:

J.N. Farquhar feels that this unusual behaviour of a Hindu boy of 14 is scarcely understandable unless he had already heard idolatry condemned. . . Farquhar's guess, however, is not confirmed by available facts. A careful perusal of Dayananda's autobiography shows that he takes

⁷⁶J.N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, p.104.

particular care to acknowledge the influence and impact of others on him. The fact that he makes no mention of Jaina influence whatsoever in his autobiography rules out the possibility of any such influence. Secondly, Dayananda . . . received his schooling at home and never moved out of his house unless accompanied by his father who occasionally took him to the shrines, temples and other places where Shiva was worshipped. In the third place, Farquhar ought to have known that Dayananda at fourteen was something more than merely a Hindu boy of fourteen. Like John Stuart Mill, he was full of knowledge even at that young age, and he was quite capable of taking action, . . . quite independently.⁷⁷

I think that Yadav rightly expresses pique at Farquhar's arrogant dismissal of originality in a "Hindu boy." I cannot, though, go along with the suggestion that Dayananda led such a sheltered life that he would have had to be unaware of the Sthānakavāsīs. Whether or not they were a conscious boyhood influence may be impossible to establish conclusively.

At least in the *Satyarth Prakash* Dayananda indicates a knowledge (even if off with his dates) of image-rejecting Jains. In Chapter 12 he writes:

. . . in the year 1033 Vikram (976 A.D.) the Dhundias, a sect of the Shwetambar sprang up. In the same year Terapanthis (a sect of the Dhundias) came into being. They have no faith in the worship of stone-idols and they always keep a piece of cloth tied to their mouths.⁷⁸

Jordens suggests several more probable Jain influences on Dayananda. One was the fact that the Kathiawar Jains did not practice the ceremonies of Śrāddha, the rites commemorating the dead which were very costly and often led to debt and impoverishment among Hindus in nineteenth-century Gujarat. This was a practice that Dayananda would reject in his *Satyarth Prakash*. Jordens also suggests that Kathiawar

⁷⁷K.C. Yadav, editor, *Autobiography of Swami Dayanand Sarasvati*. (Delhi: Manohar, 1976), p. 15.

⁷⁸Dayananda, *Satyarth Prakash*, p. 570.

Jainism modeled the notion of *ahimsā* or non-violence to Dayananda. He was to become a strong advocate of vegetarianism and cow-protection. Lastly, Jordens suggests that the Kathiawar peninsula had a particularly high percentage of renouncers of various sorts and that the ubiquitous Jain monk modeled a very rigorous standard of asceticism that no aspiring *sannyāsin* could ignore.⁷⁹

I think an obvious issue here is that of whether or not influence can operate subliminally. Yadav's argument, that had Dayananda been influenced by the Jains he would have said so, is rather naive. Dayananda does not discuss Islamic aniconism as an influence on him either, but he must have known from an early age Islamic attitudes in this area. With Jainism, Dayananda follows the same strategy in his *Satyarth Prakash* that he employs with Islam and Christianity: he mounts a very aggressive attack claiming that the followers of these religions are as bad or worse idolators than the Purāṇic Hindus. If the image-rejecting Sthānakavāsī Jains were a source of inspiration for his aniconism (no matter how indirect) this is something he would be very unlikely to acknowledge. We must remember that instead, in his *Satyarth Prakash*, he lays the blame for the very origin of idolatry in India on Jainism.

Hinduism

In Chapter 4 I discussed the Śaivite home environment in which Dayananda grew up. Here I will mention a few of the encounters he had with aspects of Hindu tradition from the time he made his "Great Departure" for the life of the sadhu. Soon after leaving

⁷⁹Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, p. 16.

home, Dayananda had traveled to Baroda and was instructed in advaita Vedānta at the Chetan Math. He says in his autobiographical notes:

They convinced me of the axiom “I am brahman”, or “brahman and the jiva are identical”; I had already absorbed a little of that belief from my first reading of Vedānta, but here it became my firmly established conviction that I was identical with brahman.

Dayananda would come to reject the monism of advaita Vedānta in later life. At the age of twenty-three he was initiated into the Sarasvatī Dandī order of the Dasnāmī ascetics on the banks of the Narmadā river. The Sarasvatī Dandīs also were oriented to advaita Vedānta. At his initiation, in rites strongly Vedic in character, he would have performed sacrifices emancipating him from all obligations to the gods.⁸⁰ Thus one element in Dayananda’s later attacks on idol-worship could well be his own identification, from this point on, with a type of religion (that of the *sannyāsin*) which is largely beyond the use of images and beyond the use of set rituals and, in one sense, beyond sectarianism. Thus, while it must be acknowledged that there are initiatory rituals for *sannyāsins* and that *sannyāsins* do belong to various orders, it is also true to say the life of the *sannyāsin* is, on one level, very clearly a critique of ritualism and sectarian allegiance in that the renouncer identifies his quest as something beyond these forms. While Dayananda would come to defend the *gṛhastha āśrama* in his *Satyarth Prakash* as part of the “this-worldly” orientation his thinking was to take, it is clear that aspects of the *sannyāsin* ideal – the rigor and the ascetic discipline – would be retained but turned in the direction of “inner-

⁸⁰Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, p. 21.

worldly” asceticism. The ascetic rejection of sensuality is evident, and Dayananda will link idolatry with sensual depravity.

The Sarasvatī Dandīs were also known for their concern with yoga. Dayananda would spend years practising this particular discipline. In 1855 he attended the Kumbha Mela at Hardwar⁸¹ and spent that year in the mountains northeast of Hardwar. At Tihari, east of Rishikesh, Dayananda was given Tantric texts by a pandit and records in his autobiography that he was horrified:

No sooner had I opened them, than my eye fell upon such an amount of incredible obscenities, mistranslations, misinterpretations of text and absurdity, that I felt perfectly horrified, In this Ritual I found that incest was permitted with mothers, daughters, and sisters (of the Shoemaker’s caste), as well as among the Pariah or the outcastes, – and worship was performed in a perfectly nude state.⁸²

Dayananda’s adverse reaction to exposure to tantra is reflected in a dream that he had a few years later which he recorded in his autobiography. Having returned to the Gangetic plain, he stayed at a Śiva temple just south of Benares. He confesses that for a brief period he took up (“unfortunately” he says), the habit of using hashish. He reports that he fell asleep once while under the influence of *bhāṅg* and had the following dream:

I saw Mahadeva and his consort, Parvati. They were conversing and the subject of their conversation was myself. Parvati was telling Mahadeva that I ought to get married, but the god did not agree with her – and

⁸¹Ibid., p. 24.

⁸²“The Autobiography of Dayanund Saraswati, Swami,” *The Theosophist*, December 1879, p. 66.

pointed out my indulgence in taking bhang. When I woke up, the dream annoyed me a great deal.⁸³

Dayananda soon rejected the use of bhang and also became an implacable opponent of tantra.

Soon after the incident in which he perused tantric texts at Tihari, Dayananda visited Kedarnath where the Śiva temple was in the charge of Jangam Gosains of the Liṅgāyat sect.⁸⁴ Certain of this group of Śaivite sectarians repudiated caste, image-worship and pilgrimage. In his autobiography Dayananda says, "I closely watched their ceremonies and observances, and observed all that was going on with a determined object of learning all about these sects." The Liṅgāyat or Vīraśaiva sect provides an example of

⁸³*Autobiography of Dayanand Sarasvati*, ed K.C. Yadav, p. 39. J.T.F. Jordens says on this: "It would be a risky venture to try and give a psychological explanation of this dream. There are, however, some very obvious elements in it that give some clues about Dayananda's state of mind. The two actors in the dream are the tantric couple par excellence, Shiva and Pārvaṭī, his shakti. The goddess is saying that Dayananda should get married, or in other words should link his life with a shakti. But Shiva disagrees because of the Swami's use of the drug. All the elements of the dream have a direct tantric reference, and in a way indicate that tantra did really influence and disturb the sannyasi. But the dream also indicates that Shiva did not agree with Pārvaṭī. Thus the dream is about an option, a choice that now has to be made by Dayananda: to follow Pārvaṭī's direction, or to cut himself completely loose from tantra, and to heed Shiva's hint. We do not know when exactly Dayananda took his final option, but we know that he took it, never to be revoked, there and then or soon afterwards." Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, pp. 30-31.

⁸⁴As indicated in Chapter 2, the Liṅgāyat also known as Vīraśaivas, have roots in the ninth century but were reformed in the twelfth by Basava, a South Indian brahmin. The Liṅgāyat repudiated iconic images, advocated abolition of caste distinctions, gave equality to women, repudiated child marriage, and rejected most forms of brahminical worship. We see many things later advocated by Dayananda with the glaring exception of their advocacy of *liṅga* worship and the wearing of a *liṅga* amulet. See Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World*, vol. 1, pp. 597-598. See also A.K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*.

an indigenous model for the problematizing of idol-worship (except of course for the *linga*) but although he had alluded to them here in his autobiography, Dayananda does not discuss them as such a model in his *Satyarth Prakash*.

With Virjanand at Mathura

Having failed to find any great yogic guru⁸⁵ in the Himalaya or Vindhya mountains, Dayananda came to Mathura in November of 1860 at age thirty-six to study Sanskrit grammar. Perhaps he felt that the liberating secret he sought lay in the sacred texts and could be unlocked only with the key of advanced linguistic proficiency.⁸⁶ Jordens argues persuasively for the importance of the almost three years he spent in Mathura; he would be greatly influenced by his guru, the teacher of Sanskrit grammar, Swami Virjanand, but also, Jordens suggests, by the very atmosphere of this pilgrimage city. The latter would be a negative influence in the sense that the popular expression of Hinduism in Mathura represented the antithesis of his own Śaivite and ascetic sensibility. The florid expression of Purāṇic Hinduism in this city would push him further in his rejection of popular Hinduism. Mathura had become important from the seventeenth century when Vallabha, founder of the Vallabhācāryas, had stayed there.⁸⁷ Mathura was famous as the birthplace of Kṛṣṇa whose cultus was at the heart of the city. Dayananda

⁸⁵Dayananda remarks in his autobiography that after staying at Kedarnath, "I had a strong desire to visit the surrounding mountains, with their eternal ice and glaciers, in quest of those true ascetics I have heard of but as yet had never met."

⁸⁶J.T.F. Jordens makes this suggestion and titles his discussion of this phase of Dayananda's life: "The Search for *Moksha* Leads to Grammar".

⁸⁷Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, p. 32.

took up lodging in a cell of the Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa temple at Viśhrant Ghat, right in the thick of the flamboyant theism of Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* and the endless traffic of pilgrims.

Dayananda derides Mathura in his *Satyarth Prakash* as afflicted with rapacious tortoises, monkeys, and Chaube brahmins.

Dayananda's studies in Mathura with Swami Virjanand were utterly removed from the general popular religion. Swami Virjanand by this time in his career focused his teaching on the great *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Patañjali. It was Virjanand who taught what Dayananda would later include in his own teaching as the three criteria for establishing what books are *ārṣa*, that is written by the true seers (*ṛsis*) of ancient India and what are *anārṣa* composed by later authors and often fraudulent: 1) The books of the *ṛsis* always begin with either *Om* or *Atha* while the *anārṣa* works begin with an invocation to a particular deity. 2) The true books are universalist in nature while the *anārṣa* ones promote sectarian animosity. 3) The authentic *ārṣa* works have had *bhaṣya* written on them by the great commentators such as Śaṅkara and Patañjali.

Virjanand, born in Panjab, blind since age five, initiated as a Sarasvatī Dandī, a master of grammar who was for a time the teacher of the Maharaja of Alwar, had been in Mathura since 1845. He had sought at one point the aid of the British commissioner at Mathura in promoting the true *ārṣa* books. He had also sought the assistance of the Indian princes at the grand Agra Durbar of Lord Canning in 1859 and had sent letters to the rulers of Kashmir and Gwalior and even to Queen Victoria. Virjanand had proposed to the Indian princes the convocation of a *Sarvabhauma Sabha* or universal council of Hinduism to attempt to prevent the growth of further sectarian splintering by the teaching

of the authentic books of the *rshis* and the teaching of language to make these texts accessible.⁸⁸ Jordens writes:

The key idea [of Virjanand] is the judgment that the degeneration of Hinduism is fundamentally connected with the proliferation and influence of 'spurious' works of a sectarian nature giving rise to numerous sects, accompanied by a parallel neglect of the real sources of Hinduism, the books of the *rishis*. The implication is that regeneration of Hinduism can come only through a renewal of the study of those books and the elimination of sectarian works and groups. This key idea was also an expression of deep concern, a new concern to Dayananda: the concern for Hinduism and for Hindus, as distinct from the narrow individualistic concern for personal *moksha*. This concern which his *guru* communicated to him was constantly being reinforced by his close experience of real Hinduism in the heart of Mathura.⁸⁹

Dayananda became disillusioned early on in life with popular theistic Hinduism. As a sadhu searching the high Himalayas and the Vindhyas he tried and failed to find a guru who was a true adept. He doesn't report the sort of enlightenment experience one might hope for through imbibing advaita Vedānta or the intensive practice of yoga. He also tried and gave up on bhang. Next he comes to Mathura and turns to grammar, perhaps as the way to unlock the secret of religion which lies in the scriptural texts.⁹⁰ His

⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 37-38.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 38.

⁹⁰Constantin Regamey attempts to connect Dayananda's this-worldly activism with his grammatical studies under Virjanand. Regamey argues for an implied ontology in Indian grammar: "according to this grammatical doctrine all nouns are derived from verbs and in ontological perspective the Nairuktās regard action as primary and maintain that activity is the essential truth of the world and that every other aspect of reality is a form which activity assumes." Regamey, "The Origin of the Activistic Trends in the Doctrine of Svāmī Dayānand Sarasvatī," *Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth International Congress of Orientalists* vol. 3, pt. 1 (Poona, 1969), p. 453. Even if this assertion is a bit forced, Regamey makes an important observation, namely, that the *Samhitā* texts of the Veda, stressed by Dayananda, are much more this-worldly in orientation than the *Upaniṣads* or

pilgrimage now was not to the sources of the holy rivers, Gaṅgā and Narmadā, but to the sources of the Hindu scriptures through the intensive study of Sanskrit language and grammar. After Mathura he emerges as the activist for the reform of Hinduism and is no longer concerned with the search for his own enlightenment.

The Sādhs

In the years following his grammatical apprenticeship with Swami Virjanand, Dayananda spent considerable time in the city of Farrukhabad on the Ganges. This was a centre of the Sādhs, a sect with roots in the Sant tradition of Kabir and the *nirguṇa bhakti* of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Jordens observes that this group in the late nineteenth century numbered, according to the 1891 census, about 1,866 individuals in the Farrukhabad district. They rejected caste, were strict monotheists, and rejected all idol-worship and most of the forms of Hindu ritual including Śrāddha. Lekhram and Ghasiram indicate that Dayananda had a close relationship with this community, and as Jordens observes, their beliefs and practices were very similar to everything Dayananda espoused. W. Crooke writing in 1896 states: "They will salute no one but the Divine principle, which they term Sat or 'The Truth'. . . They detest idolatry and all outward forms of religious belief."⁹¹ The Sādhs would have modeled to Dayananda a non-idolatrous religious community consonant with his insistence on a formless God.

much of later Hindu religious or philosophical writing.

⁹¹W. Crooke, *Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, (Calcutta, 1896) iv. 245, cited in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 11, s.v. "Sādhs." See also W.L. Allison, *The Sādhs*, (London: O.U.P., 1935).

However, as Jordens suggests,⁹² they remained a sect closed off from the wider society and Dayananda had his sights set on the regeneration of the whole of Hindu society, not merely on the creation of a sect. Despite the obvious affinities between Dayananda and the Sādhs, it remains that their roots in *bhakti* protest against Brahminical Hinduism would include the critique not just of the brahmins but of all their texts and rituals. Dayananda, in contrast, would seek to regenerate India, “Aryavarta” precisely through a return to the Vedas and his particular, “purified” version of Vedic ritual.

The Brahmo Samaj

Dayananda arrived in Calcutta in December of 1872 at the invitation of the Adi Brahmo Samaj. He had already met Debendranath Tagore at the Kumbha Mela at Allahabad in 1870. One of the influential Brahmos he met in Calcutta was Rajnarayan Bose who had founded the “Society for the Promotion of National Feeling” which aimed at establishing schools of Hindu culture with the view of protecting Indian culture from the assault of Western domination. Rajnarayan Bose gave a lecture in 1872 titled “The Superiority of Hinduism” which was read to Dayananda who was also given a copy.

Jordens writes:

Admittedly, Rajnarayan’s concept of the scope of Hinduism was much broader than Dayananda could accept; it included the Puranic and Tantric developments. However, the two basic ideas of the all-comprehensiveness and the non-human pre-historical origin of Hinduism were adopted by the Swami. But he transferred these qualities to the Vedas and they became for him the cardinal proof of the superiority of the Vedic religion over all others.⁹³

⁹²Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, p. 74.

⁹³Ibid., p. 78.

Dayananda also met important Calcutta educators and historians. Jordens states that it was these meetings which propelled Dayananda to think about Hinduism for the first time in national terms and in terms of its comparison with other religions. Debendranath Tagore had written his *Brahmo Dharma*, a book offering loose translations or interpretations of primarily the *Upaniṣads*, but which also drew on the *Manu smṛti*, *Mahābhārata*, and *Mahānirvana Tantra*. Jordens argues that the correlation between the verses used by Debendranath in this work and the verses employed by Dayananda in his later *Satyarth Prakash* is too high to avoid seeing Debendranath's book as Dayananda's model. Debendranath's book also gave a model for a book intended as a complete guide to life for a reformed religious movement.

Dayananda also spent time with Keshab Chandra Sen. Keshab once remarked that it was a pity Dayananda knew no English, otherwise he could accompany him to England on his next trip; Dayananda retorted that it was a pity Keshab knew no Sanskrit and spoke a language most people in India could not understand. Despite this jousting, it was Keshab who persuaded Dayananda to make the important move to Hindi as the linguistic medium of speeches and writings. Above all, Keshab's Brahmo Samaj of India and the Adi Brahmo Samaj demonstrated to Dayananda the advantages of organized societies in the propagation of religious reform and the usefulness of printed publications to reach a wide audience. I have found no indication that Dayananda ever directly read the works of Rammohun Roy but there is little doubt that his mature thought, as expressed especially in the final edition of the *Satyarth Prakash*, was shaped by the legacy of Rammohun as transmitted by Debendranath and Keshab Chandra Sen.

Christian Missionaries

The Rev. John Robson reports that he met Dayananda at Ajmer in 1866. Robson reported on his conversations with Dayananda both in the *United Presbyterian Record* of 1866 and in his book, *Hinduism and its Relation to Christianity* (new edition), published in 1893. Robson's report is striking in its claim that he showed to Dayananda the first copy of the *Rg Veda* he had ever seen. I quote at some length from this account:

I saw him when he visited Ajmer in the beginning of 1866. He was a tall, well-made, fine-looking man, with no covering but a saffron cloth tied about his loins and another thrown loosely over his body. He impressed me as a man of keen intellect and commanding personality; and I could understand the fascination he exercised over his followers. At that time he had not broken with orthodox Hinduism, nor did he seem to doubt his pantheistic creed, though theistic instincts seemed to trouble him and embarrass him in discussion. He declared he was in search of truth, and would follow it wherever he found it; but he pointed out to me that the word he used was *sat*, not *sach*. The former may be translated reality, the latter, veracity. To the latter he did not seem to attach much importance, for the former he seemed to be always searching. He still believed in caste as laid down in the laws of Manu, and when confronted with some of these laws he maintained they were divine, but with the impatience of a man who felt himself in a false position. In the same way he acknowledged some of the legends in the Saiva Puranas to be immoral, and when pressed changed the subject as quickly as possible. He was an uncompromising iconoclast, and was quite willing to unite with the Christians to move the government to destroy all the idols of India. He had an unwavering faith in the Vedas, though he knew only the Yajur Veda, and believed he would find in them the authority for those principles which he seemed instinctively to have grasped. He said: 'I do not believe that there is a single error in any of the Vedas, and if you will show me one I maintain that it is the interpolation of a clever scoundrel.' As a consistent pantheist, he denied that he ever committed sin, and was greatly astonished that I should allow I had done so.

Two circumstances helped forward his religious and philosophical development at this time – he first became acquainted with the Christian scriptures, and he first became acquainted with the original Hindu Scriptures. The first copy of the Rig Veda which he saw was in my

possession, that edited by Max Muller. Both of these he procured for himself, getting the Bible in Hindi.⁹⁴

Robson in a footnote adds the following material from the article he had written in the *United Presbyterian Record* of 1866.

Though he had affirmed very confidently that there were no errors in the Rig Veda, I felt pretty sure that he had never read it; and, to test him I made the pundit copy out some objectionable passages without the commentary. The language of the Rig Veda is very old Sanskrit, and without this aid no pundit can make it out for the first time . . . I handed to him before all the people the list of texts I had chosen. He took them, read them over, tried to make them out, then at last confessed that he could not, saying that I should have brought the commentary also. I replied that as he had so strenuously denied all errors in the Rig Veda, I had taken for granted that he had read it, and would recognise the passages I had quoted. He very candidly admitted that he had not read the Rig Veda, and that he had no right to speak so confidently of a book which he had not read.⁹⁵

In early 1867 Dayananda was back at the Hardwar Kumbha Mela. He set up a camp about six miles from Hardwar on the road to Rishikesh with a banner that read: *Pakhand Khandini*, [Heresy Refuted]. He distributed his small Sanskrit tract attacking the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Dayananda decided shortly after the 1867 Kumbha Mela to give away all his possessions and wandered down the Gaṅgā as far as Farrukhabad. Jordens writes: "The basic critique of Hinduism which Dayananda presented at Hardwar does not seem to have changed much in these years. He primarily attacked idol-worship, sectarianism, and the many superstitious beliefs and practices."⁹⁶ His desire to study made him acquire

⁹⁴Rev. John Robson, *Hinduism and its Relation to Christianity* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1893), pp. 217-218.

⁹⁵Ibid., note p. 218.

⁹⁶Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, p. 51.

books again, he was given a copy of the Gospels by the Rev. Scott and even ordered books from Germany.⁹⁷ It was in this period that Dayananda came to reject all the Purāṇas as religiously authoritative and also came to uphold the four Vedas without their respective Brāhmaṇas. Dayananda stayed at Farrukhabad 1868-9. Ghasiram reports that he “employed a Bengali to teach him English and to read to him from Max Müller’s translation of the Veda.” Dayananda, however, realized that he did not have time to learn English and so had someone translate from Müller’s work for him.⁹⁸ He met Rev. R.C. Mather of the London Missionary Society who asked him why he did not write a commentary on the Vedas. Dr. Rudolph Hoernle, principal of the Banaras Sanskrit College reports on having talked with Dayananda and attests to his competence, by this point in his life, in the Vedas. “He is well versed in the Vedas, except the fourth or Atharva Veda, which he read only in fragments, and which he saw for the first time in full when I lent him my own complete MS copy.”⁹⁹ It is interesting that this is the second claim by a Protestant Christian to have first supplied Dayananda with a copy of one of the Vedas.

About 1869 he had spent days in conversation (through an interpreter) with Rev. T.J. Scott, the missionary of the American Methodist Episcopal Church in India who had given him a copy of the Gospels when Dayananda had been preaching along the Gaṅgā.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 51.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 56 and 157.

⁹⁹Cited *ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 187.

At this stage in his career Jordens holds that “any influence on Dayananda on the part of the missionaries was minimal.”¹⁰¹ However, by the time of Dayananda’s second edition of the *Satyarth Prakash*, he is adamant about the inerrant authority of the Vedic texts. Jordens suggests that this privileging of the inspired book may well be the fruit of interaction with the Protestant missionaries:

That dogma was new in the history of Hinduism, which had never been strictly a religion of the book. Dayananda’s conviction that it was, did not stem from the Hindu tradition. He evolved that dogma over many years, and the decisive influence in its emergence cannot have been any other than that of the Christian missionaries, and, to a much lesser degree, of Muslim theologians. One should remember that most of the missionaries with whom Dayananda came into contact belonged to Protestant churches: their religion was primarily a religion of the book, and the Bible occupied the centre of their theology. Their propaganda concentrated on two fronts: they showed on the one hand the absurdity and immorality of the Hindu scriptures, and, on the other, they tried to prove the absolute and definitive truth of biblical revelation. That was exactly the approach Dayananda applied in reverse: he wanted to prove that Christianity fell with the Bible, and that the truth of Vedic religion was demonstrated by the absolute veracity of the Vedas. In other words, Dayananda accepted the Protestant premise that God had revealed himself in a book, and that the very content of that book proves its authenticity. The Swami, however, went even further than the Christians in his claim that the Vedas contained the totality of truth, both theological and scientific. *Thus Dayananda accomplished in his Vedic theory what he did in other fields: he took an ancient Hindu tradition and gave it a new direction all of his own.*¹⁰² (italics added)

I believe Jordens’ last statement here is illuminating. Dayananda, like Rammohun, takes something indigenous to Indian culture (“an ancient Hindu tradition of the authority of the Vedas”) and pushes it in a new way (“a new direction all of his own”) under the

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 273.

influence of the foreign stimulus. I believe this is the dynamic behind the articulated rejection of image-worship as well.

To privilege the Book, Dayananda demoted the image, or, to invert this formulation, having demoted the image, he replaced it with the authority of the Book. One can find in Hindu tradition both the idea of Vedic authority and the idea that God is formless. Dayananda will stress the latter and simultaneously stress the former to the point of advocating the Veda as the inerrant Book. We can see Protestantism as a catalyst for these moves, for these emphases, but not as a source for the two ideas themselves.

It is not necessary to see the hand of Protestant missions behind the repudiation of the image. We have seen that the Sādhs, with whom Dayananda spent much time at Farrukahabad, provide at least one Indian model for image-less religion with roots centuries earlier than the Protestant missions. This is not to deny that the Protestant attitude to idolatry which Dayananda would have known about would not have reinforced his own attitude, this is indeed likely.

Even if we acknowledge or accept that Dayananda is influenced by Protestant missionaries in emphasizing the Book and replacing image by Book, it must be pointed out that (again like Rammohun) he is very selective in what he will accept or appropriate from Protestantism. For example, he differs very much from the missionaries on the question of salvation. Dayananda's rejection of image-worship is not replaced by a doctrine of salvation by grace; in fact, Dayananda repeatedly denies the possibility of the forgiveness of sin in the *Satyarth Prakash*. Salvation is by one's own rational and moral efforts. There is no suspension of the law of karma which would allow the forgiveness of

sin. Karma is often associated in Western observation of India with fatalism leading to passivity; with Dayananda, commitment to the karma doctrine is connected with his uncompromising activism.

III COMPARISON

In section I of this chapter, I have examined the formative childhood experiences of the two reformers with the suggestion that explanation for the iconoclasm of their mature years may lie here. Their commitment to image-less religion as expressed in the writings and campaigns of their adult years may indeed have roots in their childhood conflicts and crises. The childhood rejection of images by Rammohun may well have been prompted by his exposure to Islamic perspectives during his schooling just as there is the possibility that the Sthānakavāsī Jains may have provided the model or idea of image-rejection to the young Dayananda. On the other hand, I suggest that, while not ruling out these potential sources, to immediately invoke these influences as explanation is likely over-determining the situation. A more parsimonious view would accept that both adolescents could arrive independently at the rejection of the religious forms of their respective families.

I suggested the possibility that family conflict may have not only been the consequence of their image-rejection but could also be a source of that image-rejection. It is possible that the rebellion against the family takes the form of rebellion against the family gods. However, if we stay with the autobiographical reports of the two reformers then it is adolescent disillusionment with the religion of one's family and immediate

environment (in this case disillusionment centred on the image-worship issue) that produces the conflict. Such disillusionment and conflict can well be envisaged to arise without any absolute need for the stimuli of exterior influences. There is no need to automatically assume the presence (at this early age) of foreign religious stimuli. If this is so, then we have undercut any need to invoke diffusion from non-indigenous, non-Hindu sources to explain the iconoclasm of Rammohun and Dayananda, at least in its origins.

In section II, I examined the potential influences on the two men both from within their own Hindu tradition and from outside it through contacts with other traditions. It must be immediately acknowledged that both men had extensive contact with non-Hindu cultures and their representatives. Rammohun was able to do this directly through his mastery of the Persian and English languages. Dayananda could not get this immediate access, but it is patently clear that despite this difference, Dayananda (at least in his later years) had ample exposure to non-Hindu ideas.

My understanding is this: 1) both men had adolescent crises of disillusionment with the Hindu practice of their immediate families. 2) both men came to see their personal and private crisis over idol-worship as being the master-key to the crisis of Hindu society in general, that is, idol-worship is the symbolic touchstone for all that ails Hindu civilization. The personal crisis is the microcosm of the macrocosmic societal crisis.¹⁰³ 3) Both men sought to find within their own Hindu tradition the indigenous

¹⁰³I could phrase this another way: 1. The societal crisis is colonization. 2. Colonization is connected to Hindu weakness which is symbolized by Hindu idolatry. 3. The religions of the colonizers (Muslim and Protestant) condemn idolatry – that's partly why they are so powerful. 4. How can we condemn idolatry, *from within our own tradition*? 5. Can we restore Hindu pride by promoting our Hindu Book? 6. Can we find

resources for the critique of idolatry, they both claimed to find them in aspects of the Vedas. 4) The foreign contact – with Muslims or Protestant Christians – reinforces or further stimulates their personal commitment to overthrowing idolatry but does not account for the commitment in the first place. 5) Personal antipathy towards image-worship gets connected with the view that such idolatry has weakened Hindu India and opened the way to conquest. Seeing Muslims and Protestants as successively being the ruling powers in India leads them to want to emulate features of the religions of these powers, particularly the absence of idols in these religions. However this is not construed or acknowledged by them as emulation because Muslim or Protestant aniconism is perfectly consonant with their own personal viewpoints. 6) They seek, and find, in the Indian tradition itself an aniconic tradition – be it the image-less conditions of the early Vedic period of the *saṃhitās* or the apophatic passages of the late Vedic period in the *Vedānta* or *Upaniṣads*. Moreover, they turn the tables on the Muslims and Christians by pointing to idolatrous practices found within those religions. 7) Image-less religion is connected by both figures with the progress and modernization of India – I turn to the grounds for this assertion in the final chapter.

and attack idolatrous features in the religions of the colonizers?

CHAPTER SIX **DIMENSIONS?**

HINDU ICONOCLASM: CROSS-CULTURAL

. . . the dialectic of hierophanies, of the manifestation of the sacred in material things . . . remains the cardinal problem in any religion.¹

Since Rammohan's time, it has become increasingly obvious that the European, i.e., primarily British, presence in Indīa was not just another case of foreign invasion and domination, or of cross-cultural, interreligious "encounter." Instead, it was an encounter between tradition and modernity, i.e., an exposure to new forms of organization and administration, to unprecedented claims of universality and globalization, to rationalization, technology, and a comprehensive objectification of the world.²

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I wish to explore potentially cross-cultural or universal dimensions of image-rejection. I begin with some evidence from the history of religions and then briefly discuss the basic theological problem contained in what has been called the "problem of images." In section II of this chapter I turn to a possible link between image-refusal and modernization and rationalization as discussed by Freud and Weber. The refusal of images is part of what I would call a "protestant cluster" or "protestant package" – the sorts of items listed in the opening paragraph of this dissertation: anti-ritualism; the insistence on scriptural authority; the rejection of "tradition" and so forth. We need to ask

¹Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Meridian, 1966), p. 29.

²Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 217.

here if image-rejection is an intrinsic or merely adventitious part of the protestant package. Further, we need to ask (as Weber did) if there is a causal link between the Protestant Reformation in the West and modernity? If there is, does this imply that protestant features (like image-rejection) should be expected to appear in non-Christian religions to herald the advent of modernity in non-Western societies? Is the aniconism of Rammohun and Dayananda such an appearance or harbinger?

In section III of this chapter I address briefly the outcome or legacy of the image-refusal of the two reformers. I also touch on suggested directions for future research.

I UNIVERSAL ASPECTS OF THE REFUSAL OF IMAGES

Cross-cultural Expression

The question I wish to address in this section is this: "is there a cross-cultural or universal aspect to a refusal of images, in other words, is the refusal of images more than a Hebraic foible diffused to other cultures?" In answer to this question one can consider the evidence from the history of religions and ethnology. I have already outlined (in Chapter 2) something of the history of practices related to images in India and noted several examples of image-refusal there prior to contact with Islam or other Semitic "traditions of the Book." I offer here a highly abbreviated treatment of image practices in the history of religions beginning with evidence from non-literate societies.³

³ A thorough review of attitudes to religious imagery, aniconism, and iconoclasm in world cultures is clearly beyond the scope of this dissertation. I direct the reader to the entries under "Images and Iconoclasm" in the *Encyclopedia of World Art*, vol. 7 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963) and the entries under "Images" and "Idolatry" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan, 1987). Older accounts of image-

Looking at the data from existing non-literate or tribal societies the historian of religion, Wilhelm Schmidt, in his opus *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*, argued that there is a pattern of avoiding representation of a supreme being. Wilhelm Koppers, writing in the *Encyclopedia of World Art* summarizes as follows:

The conclusion of Schmidt is that, in general, the supreme being is conceived as invisible. As the reason for this, a disembodied nature or resemblance to the spirit, is often adduced; not infrequently, the deity is compared to the wind. Usually, even when the supreme being is believed to have lived at the beginning of time, he could (or should) not be seen, neither then nor subsequently. Very often he is imagined as dwelling in some part of the sky, from whence derives his traditional title of "Sky God" or "Sky Father." Less often, in Africa or Asia, a conception of the supreme being as appearing in dazzling light is encountered; in other, even rarer cases the rainbow is thought to be the border of his mantle. Neither these last mentioned visible characteristics nor the figure of the supreme being as such are the objects of graphic representation (a fact not uncommonly explained in the words "we do not know what he looks like"); and even the attempt to present the supreme being figurally may be a religious offense, as among the Masai of Kenya and, according to H. Baumann (1935), among the Balunda of Angola. In fact, the Balunda believe that whoever tries to represent the supreme being (Ndjambi-Kalunga) will surely perish.⁴

Koppers notes that the exceptions to this "rule" occur when the supreme being has been conflated with the primordial tribal ancestor. In Africa, he writes ". . . representations of the supreme being are rare; for example, as various experts have observed, none of the

worship in the history of religions are given in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* vol.7, "Images and Idols" (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1914). A magisterial review of attitudes in the classical world is provided by Edward Bevan, *Holy Images: An Inquiry into Idolatry and Image-Worship in Ancient Paganism and Christianity* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1940). A broad introductory survey is provided in Albert C. Moore, *Iconography of Religions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

⁴W. Koppers, "The Aniconic Concept of the Supreme Being in Primitive Religions," in *Encyclopedia of World Art*, vol. 7, pp. 802-803.

thousands of Congolese figurines preserved in Belgium . . . (Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale) can be considered as such."⁵ Similarly, the tribals studied by Fürer-Haimendorf in Assam do not represent their supreme deity, nor do the Maori in New Zealand nor did the Maya of Mesoamerica. Koppers concludes:

In recapitulation, it can be stated that primitive peoples do not in general represent their supreme being. Exceptions embrace the cases where fusion has occurred between the cult of a supreme being and that of another supernatural being. In North America and in parts of northern Asia, veneration of the "sacred pole," which functions as a symbolic representation of the supreme being, has developed. The herdsman tribes of Asia and Africa, and also more advanced tribal groups such as the Konyak Naga, the Manggarai, the Maori and the great civilizations of pre-Columbian America, share with the majority of the more primitive food-gatherer groups an aniconic conception of the supreme being.⁶

Given that there is widespread evidence that many groups of non-literate peoples in different parts of the globe have had reservations about iconically depicting their notions of the supreme divinity then this problematizes the view that aniconism is simply a biblical problem that spreads by diffusion from the biblical traditions. It is, rather, a religious stance that arises in various regions by independent invention. Evidence for privileging the aniconic exists also in ancient Greece and Rome. Plutarch gives the following account of the semi-legendary Roman king, Numa, who, he claims, complied with the thought of Pythagoras:

For that philosopher maintained that the first principle of being was beyond sense or feeling, was invisible and uncreated, and discernible only by the mind. And so Numa forbade the Romans to revere an image of God which had the form of man or beast. Nor was there among them in this

⁵Ibid., p. 804.

⁶Ibid., p. 805.

earlier time any painted or sculpted likeness of Deity, but while for the first hundred and seventy years they were continually building temples and establishing sacred shrines, they made no statues in bodily form for them, convinced that it was impious to liken higher things to lower. And that it was impossible to apprehend Deity except by the intellect.⁷

David Freedberg says of this passage that it “reflects two leitmotifs of early Greek thought that have pervaded the West ever since: first, the devaluation of the senses in favor of the intellect, which finds its greatest exponent in Plato; and second, the closely related notion that the deity cannot be represented in a material form, and certainly not anthropomorphically.”⁸ There is evidence then that beyond ancient Israel, in many non-literate cultures, as well as in ancient Greece and Rome there existed a “problem of images” and expressions of a preference for the aniconic.

Theological Problem

What would be the philosophical or religious grounds for such a problem? I have formulated the basic problem of images as follows: Most religious traditions hold that the sacred is beyond objectification in the sense that the sacred is not an object like other objects. In the philosophical articulation of this position we find such statements as the sacred is infinite rather than finite, absolute rather than contingent, pure Being rather than a being etc.; this state is called transcendence; the “sacred” or that which is called “deity” *transcends* ordinary objects. To construct and worship a cult statue, an “idol,” is, in

⁷Cited in David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989), p. 61.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 61.

Whitehead's term, a case of misplaced reification. How then can the sacred be represented in a finite object? The answer often given is that it can't and that the attempt to do so constitutes a transgression, a blasphemous diminution of the sacred.

On the other hand, religious humanity stands in need of concrete objects which represent the sacred both as generators of religious feeling and as targets towards which religious feeling is directed. Concrete *sacra*, be they iconic images or aniconic symbols, serve as foci of religious sentiment.⁹ It may be added here that sacred images can also function to "routinize," to use Weber's term, the charisma of deceased founders. The image acts not only as a reminder of an absent founder but attempts to render that absent founder as present.

These then are the two poles involved in the dialectic of the "problem of images." On the one extreme the insistence that the sacred is transcendent with the corollary that so-called sacred images are idolatrous — on the other, the view that the sacred can demonstrate its immanence through sacred objects, that the sacred object or image can be an instantiation or incarnation of the divine. Usage of sacred objects in the religions of the world falls, I argue, between the poles of this continuum.

The twentieth-century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich describes an "inescapable tension" in the human idea of God which is torn between recognition of transcendence and the need for immanence. The problem of images could be described as the problem

⁹They provide the targets for affect, and religion (if we follow theorists like Schleiermacher and Otto) has more to do with affect than abstract intellect.

of fulfilling the need for immanence at the expense of maintaining the divine transcendence:

The phrase "Being ultimately concerned" points to a tension in human experience. On the one hand, it is impossible to be concerned about something which cannot be encountered concretely, be it in the realm of reality or in the realm of imagination. . . . The more concrete a thing is, the more possible concern about it. The completely concrete being, the individual person, is the object of the most radical concern – the concern of love. On the other hand, ultimate concern must transcend every preliminary finite and concrete concern. It must transcend the whole realm of finitude in order to be the answer to the question implied in finitude. But, in transcending the finite, the religious concern loses the concreteness of a being-to-being relationship. It tends to become not only absolute but also abstract, provoking reactions from the concrete element. This is the inescapable inner tension in the idea of God.¹⁰

Christian theology has spoken of the apophatic and cataphatic approaches to the religious life and knowledge of God, approaches elsewhere called *via negativa* and *via affirmata*.

The aniconic and iconic attitude to visual images of the sacred align with these distinctions.¹¹ I believe we could refer the human desire for divine immanence as a "sacramental consciousness." By sacramental I mean the desire for material means of mediating the sacred into the human world. In contrast, "iconoclastic consciousness" is adamant and ruthless in preserving the divine transcendence, in refusing what Tillich calls preliminary and finite concrete concerns.¹² I would argue that the refusal of images to

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951), p. 211.

¹¹ See Mary Gerhart, "The Word Image Opposition: The Apophatic-Cataphatic and Iconic-Aniconic Tensions in Spirituality," in *Divine Representations: Postmodernism and Spirituality*, ed. Anne W. Astell (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).

¹² On sacramentality see Bernard J. Cooke, *The Distancing of God: The Ambiguity of Symbol in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). Cooke includes a

protect the divine transcendence is indeed something that has universal dimensions, finds a variety of expressions across religious cultures, and is expressed both in “primitive” and highly sophisticated forms. Silvio Ferri comments on this ubiquity of the refusal of iconic representation:

Suppression of the human image has been a recurrent phenomenon in the history of art; and since this phenomenon usually reflects a definite religious (or magico-religious) attitude, its incidence in widely scattered times and places should be an important element in any study of images. Although disavowal or avoidance of images is sometimes associated with primitivism in art and religion, it often represents – especially when it occurs in cultures having a highly developed artistic tradition – a thoroughly considered point of view that is consciously intellectual in character and polemical in intent.¹³

This is written by an art historian. The ubiquity of the problematizing of images has also been commented on by Mircea Eliade, perhaps the best known of twentieth-century historians of religion. Eliade uses the term “hierophany” to refer to a manifestation of what is deemed the sacred and situates the image or “idol” at the paradoxical union of sacred and profane:

chapter on the Greek fathers and the Iconoclastic Controversy where he makes the following observation: “. . . in religious faith and practice the symbolic role of sensible realities, whether natural or artistic is debatable. Because of their radical otherness from the divine, created manifestations seem to be unavoidably idolatrous – though Dionysius had the ingenious argument that their very “negativity” meant that one was not tempted to see them as positively reflective of the divine. Certainly, nothing visible or audible is capable of serving as an appropriate symbol of the divine, unless one moves quite consciously into the use of metaphor and recognizes that such use is rooted in analogy whose presupposition is that the negative moment in the process outweighs the positive. In other words, such sensible symbols might function in union with apophatic theology – which might help explain how the monks who espoused apophatic prayer, especially after Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius, could also be defenders of the icons.”(p. 105)

¹³ Silvio Ferri, “Images and Iconoclasm,” *Encyclopedia of World Art*, 7, p. 798.

... what is implied in the paradox of the idol (and of all other hierophanies too): [is] the *sacred* manifesting itself in something *profane*.

In fact this paradoxical coming-together of sacred and profane, being and non-being, absolute and relative, the eternal and the becoming, is what every hierophany, even the most elementary, reveals.¹⁴

Eliade comments: "... the history of religion is, from the scientific aspect, largely the history of the devaluations and the revaluations which make up the process of the expression of the sacred. Idolatry and its condemnation are thus attitudes that come quite naturally to a mind faced with the phenomenon of the hierophany; there is justification for both positions."¹⁵ Eliade goes even further than saying that the history of religion can be construed as fundamentally the devaluations and revaluations of the representation of the sacred; he will call the problem of such representation the central problem of religion:

... This coming-together of sacred and profane really produces a kind of breakthrough of the various levels of existence. It is implied in every hierophany whatever, for every hierophany shows, makes manifest, the coexistence of contradictory essences: sacred and profane, spirit and matter, eternal and non-eternal, and so on. That *the dialectic of hierophanies, of the manifestation of the sacred in material things, should be an object for even such complex theology as that of the Middle Ages serves to prove that it remains the cardinal problem of any religion.*¹⁶ (italics added)

What I have tried to show in the discussion above is that religious images and their worship represent a religious problem cross-culturally. There is a theological

¹⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Meridian Books, 1966), p. 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

problem connected with the representation of what various cultures construe as the divine. This is not simply or exclusively the concern of ancient Israel which is subsequently diffused elsewhere by ancient Israel's Christian or Islamic inheritors. In this regard, the aniconism of Rammohun and Dayananda should be seen not simply as a product of borrowing but as a particular expression of a position that has broad cross-cultural features.¹⁷ In other words, we must study its particular context and features but not at the price of ignoring its connection with macro-thematic patterns.

Is it useful to discuss Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati in the light of non-Indian debates on the role of images? I believe it is. Their refusal of images through appeal to the negative language regarding Brahman in the *Upaniṣads* could be compared with the apophatic privileging in the Christian mystical tradition. Mary Gerhart writes: "... systematic evaluations of mysticism generally privilege the apophatic over the cataphatic as the "higher" form of spirituality."¹⁸ Bernard Cooke, writing on the Christian mystical tradition, reports on the role of the imaginative in thinking about the transcendent: "... for the most part the imaginative moment tends to be limited to an early stage of contemplation. The imaginative is to be bypassed; and the "dark night of

¹⁷I see image-refusal versus image-affirmation as a pair of positions that will find exponents in various cultures without the need to invoke diffusion. Take another pair of positions: In the history of the Christian church there is a recurrent discussion of two ways of the religious life; the active and the contemplative. In India, *pravṛtti* or action in the world is contrasted with *nivṛtti* or the life of renunciation or abnegation. Would anyone suggest that the Indian distinction is derived or diffused from the West, or vice versa? These are cross-cultural modes of religious ideation and behaviour, as are, I suggest, image-worship and image-rejection.

¹⁸Gerhart, "The Word Image Opposition," p. 63.

the senses” described by some mystics would suggest that such a transcending of images is intrinsic to progress in monotheistic prayer.”¹⁹ This sounds similar to Śaṅkara’s (and to a limited extent, Rammohun’s) situating of imagination and images at a lower level in the ordered hierarchy (*krama*) of religious practice.²⁰

However, I have already suggested that my reading of both Rammohun and Dayandanda is that they are both decidedly non-mystical; although they will sometimes appeal to the negative theology of the *Upaniṣads*, this is not the core of their argument with idolatry. Instead, they are more concerned with a connection they hold to exist between image-worship and sensuality and irrationality, factors they saw as impeding the modernization of Hindu India. In the next section I wish to explore theoretical articulations of the grounds for such a connection.

II IMAGE-REJECTION, RELIGIOUS RATIONALIZATION, AND MODERNIZATION

Disenchancing the World

It appears that both Rammohun and Dayananda wanted a form of Hinduism that was abstract and rationalized, one which stressed the transcendence of the divine and the impossibility of its immanence in matter, in the consecrated images or *mūrtis* of the

¹⁹Bernard Cooke, *The Distancing of God*, p. 105.

²⁰I reiterate that it has not been my intention here to enter into a systematic comparison of Rammohun and Dayananda’s aniconism with that of the Christian West. That is another project. However, I have touched on the comparison in order to show that aniconism is a religious position that transcends geographical borders not necessarily by diffusion but because it is a mode of religious consciousness that arises independently across cultures.

temple or household shrine. To attack image-worship was to call for, in Weber's terms, the disenchantment of the world.²¹ A disenchanted world is one over which humans exercise rational controls, and, based on their observations of the British in India, these rational controls afford access to enormous power and material progress. I noted at the outset of Chapter 1 that Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati are both hailed as pioneers in the development of "modern" India. They have both also been hailed as the "Luther of India" and their respective reform movements compared with Protestantism or even categorized as Protestant Hinduism. To return to the questions posed at the outset of this chapter: if Max Weber (famous for his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) was at all right that there is a correlation (if not a causal relation) between Protestantism and modernization, and if image-rejection is an intrinsic and not merely adventitious element in Protestantism, it is worthwhile to ask if there is a relationship between image-rejection in religion and economic and political modernization. This then raises the question concerning the link, if any, between Rammohun and Dayananda's denunciation of image-worship and what is regarded as modernizing tendencies. In this regard, it is worth examining two of the patriarchs of twentieth-century Western theorizing about religion (one sociological, the other psychological) and their discussions of the connection between representation of deity and progress towards rationalism; rationalism being seen as both precondition and condition of modernity.

²¹An expression (*die Entzauberung der Welt*) Weber derived from Friedrich Schiller.

Max Weber

In his *The Sociology of Religion* (1922), Weber refers to images in the context of a discussion placed under the title "The Tensions Between Ethical Religion and Art."²²

Weber writes that just as ethical religion comes into tension with sexuality so does it with the sphere of art. Weber then examines this tension between ethical religion on the one hand and art and aesthetics (including music) on the other. It is of course important to distinguish between the rejection of art (and aesthetics) *per se* and the rejection, specifically, of divine representation in sacred images. It is the latter rejection which characterizes Rammohun and Dayananda. On the other hand, it is evident, at least in the case of Dayananda, that he had little or no concern for aesthetics. He was not what the Indian tradition would call a *rasika*. As J.T.F. Jordens observes, he was a humanist only in the sense that he had a concern for humanity in-this-world:

Dayananda was not a man of refinement, he was basic, direct, and even blunt; he was no aesthete, and in fact there is no indication that he had time or need for the appreciation of art and beauty in any form.²³

It is of interest that Weber links the devaluation of visual art with both the rise of scriptural, text-based religions and with the rise of rationalism:

The religious devaluation of art, which usually parallels the religious devaluation of magical, orgiastic, ecstatic, and ritualistic elements in favor of ascetic, spiritualistic, and mystical virtues, is intensified by the rational

²²Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, re-published in Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol.1, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, (Berkeley: University of California P, 1978), pp. 607-610.

²³Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī*, p. 294.

and literary character of both priestly and lay education in scriptural religions.²⁴

We have certainly seen that both Rammohun and Dayananda were vehemently against what they regard as superstitious practices which they claimed had infected Hinduism. Both were certainly also against “magical, orgiastic, ecstatic and ritualistic elements” in religion. They were also both strong advocates of making accessible the Vedic texts of Hinduism and both were engaged in the diffusion of those texts. In addition, both advocated a European-based scientific education.²⁵

Weber goes on to assess the notion that the ancient Hebraic “prohibition of images” in the Second Commandment has been instrumental in the development of Jewish (and by extension) Western rationalism:

It is perhaps going too far to assert that the second commandment of the Decalogue is the decisive foundation of actual Jewish rationalism, as some representatives of influential Jewish reform movements have assumed. But there can be no question at all that the systematic prohibition in devout Jewish and Puritan circles of uninhibited surrender to the form-producing values of art has effectively controlled the degree and scope of artistic productivity in those circles, and has tended to favor the development of intellectualist and rational controls over life.²⁶

²⁴Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, p. 609.

²⁵See Rammohun’s famous Letter on Education to Governor-General Amherst, in which he writes: “If it had been intended to keep the British nation in ignorance of real knowledge, the Baconian philosophy would not have been allowed to displace the system of the schoolmen which was the best calculated to perpetuate ignorance. In the same manner the Sanscrit system of education would be the best calculated to keep this country in darkness . . .” The letter is reprinted in W. de Bary, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition* vol. 2, (New York: Columbia UP, 1958), pp. 40-43. Of course Dayananda located the origin of science and technology in the *Vedas* but it is interesting to note that the name given to many Arya Samaj schools was “Anglo-Vedic.”

²⁶Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, p. 610.

Thus, even if he can't quite give wholehearted assent to the notion that the Hebraic prohibition of images is the fundamental foundation of Western rationalism, Weber does see the Jewish and Puritan inhibition of surrender to form as fostering "intellectualist and rational controls over life."

Sigmund Freud

If Weber gives qualified assent to the link between image-rejection and rationalism, Freud, another famous early twentieth-century theorist on religion, would express the relation quite unequivocally. In Part III of his *Moses and Monotheism* (1938), Freud discusses the "Mosaic prohibition" (of images) in the context of a section entitled "The Advance in Intellectuality."

Among the precepts of Moses religion there is one that is of greater importance than appears to begin with. This is the prohibition against making an image of God — the compulsion to worship a God whom one cannot see. . . . [Moses'] God would . . . have neither a name nor a countenance. Perhaps it was a fresh measure against magical abuses. But if this prohibition were accepted, it must have a profound effect. For it meant that a sensory perception was given a second place to what may be called an abstract idea — a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality or, strictly speaking, an instinctual renunciation, with all its psychological consequences.²⁷

Clearly, Freud, like Weber, sees the prohibition of images as an *inhibition* ("an instinctual renunciation") that will find compensatory outlet in heightened intellectuality.²⁸ Freud

²⁷Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* in Volume 13, The Pelican Freud Library, *The Origins of Religion*. (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 360.

²⁸The notion could be linked with what is sometimes referred to as the "hydraulic view" of the drives in psychoanalytic theory. What is suppressed in one sphere will invariably appear in a sublimated or compensatory or neurotic form in some other sphere.

goes on to connect this process with an earlier shift in the psychic life of humanity from “lower psychical activity which had direct perceptions by the sense-organs as its content” to a new realm of intellectuality involving ideas, memories, and inferences. Freud also links this with the development from a matriarchal to patriarchal social order.

. . . this turning from the mother to the father points in addition to a victory of intellectuality over sensuality — that is, an advance in civilization, since maternity is proved by the evidence of the senses while paternity is a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premise. Taking sides in this way with a thought-process in preference to sense perception has proved to be a momentous step.²⁹

Freud continues with his discussion of the prohibition of images by linking it with Jewish “self-esteem” and, importantly, the increased emphasis on textual traditions:

The Mosaic prohibition elevated God to a higher degree of intellectuality, and the way was opened to further alterations in the idea of God which we have still to describe. But we may first consider another effect of the prohibition. All such advances in intellectuality have as their consequence that the individual’s self-esteem is increased, that he is made proud — so that he feels superior to other people who have remained under the spell of sensuality. Moses, as we know, conveyed to the Jews an exalted sense of being the chosen people. The dematerialization of God brought a fresh and valuable contribution to their secret treasure. The Jews retained their inclination to intellectual interests. The nation’s political misfortune taught it to value at its true worth the one possession that remained to it — its literature. Immediately after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by Titus, the rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai asked permission to open the first Torah school in Jabneh. From that time on, the Holy Writ and intellectual concern with it were what held the scattered people together.

This much is generally known and accepted. *All I have wanted to do is to add that this characteristic development of the Jewish nature was introduced by the Mosaic prohibition against worshipping God in a visible form.*³⁰ (italics added)

²⁹Ibid., p. 361.

³⁰Ibid., p. 362.

Freud continues by next making explicit the link between the prohibition of the visual representation of the deity and the emphasis on ethics:

The religion which began with the prohibition against making an image of God develops more and more in the course of the centuries into a religion of instinctual renunciations. It is not that it would demand sexual *abstinence*; it is content with a marked restriction on sexual freedom. God, however, becomes entirely removed from sexuality and elevated into the ideal of ethical perfection. But ethics is a limitation of instinct. The Prophets are never tired of asseverating that God requires nothing other from his people than a just and virtuous conduct of life — that is, abstention from every instinctual satisfaction which is still condemned as vicious by our morality to-day as well.³¹

One can easily connect Freud's "instinctual renunciations" here with Weber's contention that a Puritan/Protestant work ethic lies at the root of the spirit of capitalism and industrialization/modernization. The passage from Freud above, is interesting in light of the repeated links made by both Rammohun and Dayananda between image-worship practices and sexual immorality. Both of them exhibit a puritanical disposition in this regard. Both of them attack any notion of God that is not, in Freud's words, "entirely removed from sexuality" and so they target deities like Kṛṣṇa of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. It is also interesting that for both of them, God is a highly abstract being (the Author of the Universe) who is at a great distance from the notion of personal deity (as expressed in myth and narrative) found in theistic Hinduism and popular *bhakti* cults. Rammohun and Dayananda use the masculine pronoun "He" in talking about "God" but this is more linguistic convention than a reference to a gendered deity.³² It is also a way to distance

³¹Ibid., p. 366.

³²Unless one follows Ashis Nandy who asserts (as described in Chapter 5 above) that Rammohun needed a patriarchal male deity to offset the fearful mother image of his

themselves from monism in favour of monotheism, but as I have repeatedly argued, their monotheism is more deistic than deeply devotional.

Were Rammohun and Dayananda in rejecting image-worship demanding what Freud calls “an instinctual renunciation” and pushing for what Freud calls “a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality” or what Weber calls “intellectualist and rational controls over life”? I suggest that is indeed the nature of an important aspect of their attacks on idolatry. Both men rail against what they perceive as the gross sensuality of popular or Purāṇic Hinduism and connect that sensuality with superstition. What is not apparent is their making the causal connection (as Freud does) between the sensuality and the superstition. For Freud and Weber, without the inhibition of the sensual domain, there will not be the concomitant advance of the intellectual domain, the advance of intellect to remove superstition.

Weber, the Protestant Ethic, and Modernization

Weber’s discussion of art is ultimately connected with his famous thesis linking Protestantism (or more particularly Puritanism) with the rise of modern capitalist economy. He writes:

Only ascetic Protestantism completely eliminated magic and the supernatural quest for salvation. . . . It alone created the religious motivations for seeking salvation primarily through immersion in one’s worldly vocation (*Beruf*). This Protestant stress upon the methodically rationalized fulfillment of one’s vocational responsibility was diametrically opposed to Hinduism’s strongly traditionalistic concept of

own personal experience and, simultaneously, the collective experience of Hindu Bengal.

vocations. *For the various popular religions in Asia, in contrast to ascetic Protestantism, the world remained a great enchanted garden, in which the practical way to orient oneself, or to find security in this world or the next, was to revere or coerce the spirits and seek salvation through ritualistic, idolatrous, or sacramental procedures.* No path led from the magical religiosity of the non-intellectual classes of Asia to a rational, methodical control of life.³³ (italics added)

I will leave aside here Weber's contention that "Hinduism's strongly traditionalistic concept of vocations" [he is referring here to caste and *sva-dharma*] is antithetical to "rationalized fulfilment of responsibility" – this has been contested by Milton Singer and others.³⁴ What I focus on in the quotation above is Weber's notion that traditional Asia constituted a vast "enchanted garden" riddled with "ritualistic, idolatrous, or sacramental procedures." I believe that Rammohun and Dayananda would concur with that statement. I suggest that their polemics against idolatry are indeed an effort to disenchant the Indian world. A disenchanted world is one where the divine immanence has been displaced; this is precisely the move of the Protestant Reformation. The sacramental economy of the Catholic church is thrown out. The divine is pushed back into a totally transcendent sphere, one utterly removed from the divine presence seen as immanent in the mass, in the relics of the saints, in the holy pictures and wonder-working images. Sixteenth-century Protestant iconoclasm disenchant the world. An aspect of the Weberian argument is that this move is a necessary precondition for the development of rationalized economies and the development and application of scientific controls over life.

³³Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, p. 630.

³⁴Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* (New York: Praeger, 1972), ch. 8 and elsewhere.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz summarizes Weber's notion of the shift towards rationalization in the major world religions:

In all of them, the sense of sacredness was gathered up, like so many rays of light brought to focus in a lens, from the countless tree spirits and garden spells through which it was vaguely diffused, and was concentrated in a nucleate (though not necessarily monotheistic) concept of the divine. The world was, in Weber's famous phrase, disenchanted: the locus of sacredness was removed from the rooftrees, graveyards, and road-crossings of everyday life and put, in some sense, into another realm where dwelt Jahweh, Logos, Tao, or Brahman.³⁵

We can see Rammohun and Dayananda's attack on image-worship as a condemnation of the localizing and particularizing of the sacred. They indeed turned to the notion of a transcendent deity referred to in *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads* as *tad ekam*, that One, or as *nirguṇa* Brahman, the Godhead beyond all attributes. Perhaps it is more correct to say that they called for a *return* to the worship of the formless, transcendent Brahman. Geertz continues his summation of the Weberian view:

With this tremendous increase in "distance," so to speak, between man and the sacred goes the necessity of sustaining ties between them in a much more deliberate and critical manner. As the divine can no longer be apprehended *en passant* through numberless concrete, almost reflexive gestures strategically interspersed throughout the general round of life, the establishment of a more general and comprehensive relationship to it becomes, unless one is to abandon concern with it altogether, imperative. Weber saw two ways in which this can be brought about. *One is through the construction of a consciously systematized, formal, legal-moral code consisting of ethical commands* conceived to have been given to man by the divine, through prophets, holy writings, miraculous indications, and so on. *The other is through direct, individual experiential contact with the divine via mysticism, insight, aesthetic intuition, etc., often with the*

³⁵Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 173-174.

assistance of various sorts of highly organized spiritual and intellectual disciplines, such as yoga.³⁶ (*italics added*)

I would argue that both Rammohun and Dayananda did want to disenchant the world and that they wanted to put in the place of the enchantment of images a transcendent monotheism coupled with a highly articulated ethical framework. Neither Rammohun nor Dayananda speak of union with the transcendent One through renunciation of the world and mystical gnosis. They clearly favoured the first of Weber's alternatives, given by Geertz above, and not the second. That this is so is particularly striking in Dayananda, given his decades of ascetic and yogic practices. Now it is interesting that Geertz goes on to say: "*The first approach is, of course, typically, though not exclusively, mid-Eastern; the second typically, though not exclusively, East Asian*"³⁷ (*italics added*). Here we have come full circle to the sorts of generalizations about "Western" versus "Eastern" religions that prompted this investigation of Hindu iconoclasm as an apparent anomaly in the first place. By "mid-Eastern" Geertz is referring to the Semitic religions originating in the Middle East. Under East Asian I presume he would include the Indian religions. The mid-Eastern or "Western" approach then is the "*construction of a consciously systematized, formal, legal-moral code consisting of ethical commands*."³⁸ The "East Asian" or "Indian" approach is generalized as "*direct, individual experiential contact with the*

³⁶Ibid., p. 174.

³⁷Ibid., p. 174.

³⁸Ibid., p. 174.

divine via mysticism, insight, aesthetic intuition."³⁹ If one accepts these generalizations (and Geertz acknowledges that they are "typical and not exclusive") then both Rammohun and Dayananda do indeed seem to fall in the "Western" camp. Although both Rammohun and Dayananda appealed to the traditional Vedic texts which stressed the transcendence of the divinity they were not at all apophatic mystics advocating a retreat from this world towards the ineffable One. On the contrary, they advocated, in Weber's terms, an inner-worldly asceticism that stressed social uplift and social engagement. This program was couched in the language of moral reform and "prophetic" denunciation of what for them was the degenerate state of Hindu religiosity. They are both monotheists and not monists, activists and not quietists.

What I am suggesting is that Rammohun and Dayananda do indeed appear "mid-Eastern," (Geertz) or "Western," or "Semitic," or "protestant" in their polemics against idolatry. At the same time, however, I am saying that the "distancing" that Weber talks about in the process of religious rationalization is not to be seen as a mid-Eastern import. Both reformers do draw on authentic sources from the Hindu scriptural tradition in their project to extricate the sacred from the material, to disenchant the world, to remove the locus of sacredness from "the road-crossings of everyday life." The metaphysical arguments against image-worship employed by these reformers are not derived from the West and should not be labeled as protestant Hinduism. I hope I have also shown that the rationalist critique of image-worship does not have to be seen as a Western import either; the attack on brahmins and the derision of priestcraft and ritualism have a long pedigree

³⁹Ibid., p. 174.

within the Indian tradition. I am not being so rash, however, as to deny influence from the “Semitic” traditions. That influence was undoubtedly there and clearly figures in the lives of Rammohun and Dayananda.

Clifford Geertz, again referring to Weber’s writings on religious rationalization says: “What is important is that the process of religious rationalization seems everywhere to have been provoked by a thorough shaking of the foundations of the social order.”⁴⁰ Certainly, the colonial domination of India by the British, not to mention the preceding conquest by the Muslims, shook the foundations of the Hindu social order. This is, so to speak, the negative influence, the shaking of the foundations. The positive sense is that non-Indian influences (Islamic, Protestant, European rationalist) catalyzed and reinforced commitments that, I believe, Rammohun and Dayananda arrived at independently.

I hope as well that I have demonstrated that an indigenous tradition of problematizing, even if not prohibiting, the visual depiction of deity exists in various phases of the Indian tradition. This being so, then a different model for accounting for the aniconism of these Hindu reform movements is called for, one different from that of exclusive attribution to foreign sources; one different from calling this “protestant Hinduism” and meaning by this a form of Hinduism derived from capital P Protestantism. Borrowing the diathesis-stress model from medicine, I have suggested that a mode of religiosity sometimes manifest, more often latent, in the Indian tradition needed the particular social and historical conditions of nineteenth-century India to manifest in the anti-idolatry polemics of these two famous Hindu reformers. If the diathesis was the

⁴⁰Geertz, p. 173.

indigenous aniconic streak in the Indian religious tradition expressed in the metaphysic of mystical transcendence, what was the stress? I suggest that it was the presence of British domination in India which propelled these men to ask themselves if features of the current state of their own religion could be responsible for Hindu civilization being dominated by a foreign power.⁴¹

Is this Argument Reductionist?

I have linked Rammohun and Dayananda's iconoclasm with their desire for the emancipation and modernization of India. Is claiming this connection simply an exercise in the "hermeneutics of suspicion"? Am I claiming that their religious attacks on idolatry are really a pretext for another agenda? Am I, in seeking to situate Rammohun and Dayananda in their historical contexts with an examination of all the potential forces of influence converging upon them, ignoring the actual *religious* motivation in their attack on images?

Moshe Barasch, writing on iconoclastic debates in the West from antiquity through the ninth century, remarks on the propensity of modern scholarship for bypassing

⁴¹This is not to say that they simply copied the pattern of the colonizers. Certainly the organizational forms of the movements they started are indebted to British models but the ideational underpinnings of the critique of image-worship are mobilized from Indian resources. I am persuaded by the perspective on modernization that emphasizes the potential for this development *within* tradition not in spite of it and which contests the Eurocentric diffusionist perspective which conflates Modernization with Westernization. See in this regard: Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1967); R. J. Werblowsky, *Beyond Tradition and Modernity: Changing Religions in a Changing World* (London: Athlone P, 1976); J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographic Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford P, 1993).

the theological issues themselves in favour of seeking to contextualize them in current historical and social processes:

Modern research on iconoclastic movements and conflicts in western history is indeed oriented mainly towards the “underlying” causes, the motives “behind” the slogans and doctrines that were explicitly proclaimed in the debates. Many scholars see the great iconoclastic crises in European history essentially as power struggles, and therefore they look for the “true” causes or reasons, to use some of the terms frequently employed. We need not go into methodological discussions (that is surely not our aim) in order to see the danger of approaching ideological attitudes – that is, what was explicitly said about icons – as if they were mere pretexts. That historical situations are a great deal more complex than would seem to follow from a simpleminded division between “true” reason, on the one hand, and “pretext” on the other, has of course not escaped scholarly attention. Some of the historians who are inclined to look for social causes behind ideological stances are well aware of the complexity prevailing in the turbulent processes and movements associated with the question of images.⁴²

Having cautioned against reading the arguments over images as mere “pretexts,” Barasch adds:

Now, no modern student will deny that the historians’ use of the literary records of the various Iconoclastic Debates primarily as “documents” is justified. He or she will agree that the texts that form these records, and that so strike us as remote or even abstruse, are more valuable for what they indirectly suggest, disclose, or betray than for what they openly proclaim.⁴³

Having said this, however, Barasch goes on to say that he will focus on the doctrine of images itself and not on its social determinants. Certainly, in my discussion of Rammohun and Dayananda, I do not want to suggest that their attacks on images were

⁴²Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York UP, 1992), p. 4.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 5.

simply a “pretext” for a psychological, social, or political agenda. I do believe that both men had genuine *religious* convictions about the illegitimacy of images. I also believe that the sincere religious conviction dovetailed or was congruent with their psychological conflicts and with their social and political aspirations. In this sense, I am not proposing simply a “reductionist” view of Rammohun or Dayananda that would explain away their iconoclasm as being “false consciousness” or motivated purely by non-religious factors. I do not doubt the sincerity of their religious motivation, and I would like to explore something of the religious dynamic involved briefly below.

If religion is the quest to make contact with reality (as the famous prayer from the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* [1.3.28] puts it, *asato mā sad gamaya*, “from the unreal lead me to the real”) then what happens when a religious figure comes to feel that the myths and symbols of the religious tradition to which he or she belongs are actually obstructing contact with reality? There is anger that the forms of “revealed religion” cloud or obstruct or block the reality of natural religion. In other words these forms are false, they are illusions, deceptions; they must be cleared away to let the light of reality shine through. Ironically, of course, this brush-clearing operation was done, in the case of both Rammohun and Dayandanda, through invoking the sanction of revealed religion (the Veda). The Veda (according to these reformers) teaches pure natural religion, a Deistic deity who is the creator and architect of this world. This, they hold, is original, pure, authentic Hindu religion; the Purāṇic myths, deities and visual symbols are corrupting

accretions. *Śruti* is invoked to disparage and discard *smṛti*.⁴⁴ But the religion, according to Rammohun and Dayananda, which is *revealed* in the *śruti* is what would be called in the West, *natural* religion. It is not a religion with a narrative; it is not a religion of intense, emotional devotion to a personal deity. It is not *bhakti* but if anything a cool *jñāna*, and not *jñāna* in the sense of intuitive gnosis derived from intense meditation but rather the recognition of the creator from seeing the order expressed in the creation. Or perhaps it is *karma marg*, but certainly not *karma yoga* in its sense of diligent exercise of ritual (although a form of ritual is included in both the Brahmo and Arya Samaj) but rather *karma marg* as the living of a sober and moral and useful life. If Rammohun and Dayananda can be seen as proponents of *karma marg*, as promoting active ethical participation in this world rather than flight from it,⁴⁵ is this emphasis also something diffused or borrowed? I now turn to a discussion of this question, albeit in light of the case of a slightly later Hindu Renaissance figure, Swami Vivekananda.

Diffusion versus Independent Invention Revisited

In the first chapter I discussed the question of explaining cross-cultural similarities through either diffusion or independent invention or some combination of the two. I referred to the study by Michael Pye which argued that the rationalist stance of the

⁴⁴I am exaggerating here. Rammohun and Dayananda will cite *Manu smṛti* but *smṛti* in the sense of Purāṇic materials is either evaluated (Rammohun) or rejected (Dayananda) in the name of *śruti*.

⁴⁵Both, as we saw in Chapters 3 and 4, champion the householder (*gṛhastha āśrama*) and deny that salvation or liberation has as its prerequisite (*adhikāra*) the life of the *sannyāsin*.

eighteenth-century Japanese Nakamoto Tominaga is not a case of diffusion from Western models and should be taken as a caution against immediately invoking explanation by Diffusion. I wish to return to that discussion here with another case study, one closer to the world of Rammohun and Dayananda. Gwilym Beckerlegge has written an insightful paper on Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) addressing the question as whether Vivekananda's advocacy of active social service (*sevā*) by the order he founded, the Ramakrishna Mission, should be seen as a borrowing of a Christian or European model for the revisioning of Hindu monasticism.

The fact that the first signs of this transformed delivery of service to humanity became apparent after Vivekananda had travelled to the United States points to what lies at the heart of this controversy; namely the question of the extent to which the growing attachment to offering service to humanity was primarily a result of Swami Vivekananda's capitulation to Western influence and not a legitimate outcome of a legacy passed on by either Ramakrishna or the wider Hindu tradition.⁴⁶

He states his position directly: "The argument set out in this paper . . . will challenge the view that Vivekananda's promotion of *sevā* may be satisfactorily explained in terms of a simple adoption by Vivekananda of Western and specifically Christian forms of philanthropic action."⁴⁷ Beckerlegge lists three modes of explanation for Vivekananda's activism and organised philanthropy. I quote:

⁴⁶Gwilym Beckerlegge, "Swami Vivekananda and *Sevā*: Taking 'Social Service' Seriously," in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (Delhi: OUP, 1998), pp. 160-161. He points out that after Vivekananda's death the term *sevā* was elaborated by the movement into the expression "the *sādhana* of social service."

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 158.

- (i) Explanations which stress the impact made upon Vivekananda's notion of service by his first visit to the West.
- (ii) Explanations which stress the importance of Vivekananda's exposure to Western influences in India prior to his departure for the West, whether directly through his education or indirectly through his acquaintance with Hindu groups and personalities whose concerns had been substantially shaped by Western influence.
- (iii) Explanations which treat Vivekananda's acceptance of Western paradigms more as confirmations rather than determinants of courses of action which his authentically Hindu world-view led him to adopt.⁴⁸

Beckerlegge will refer to the first explanation as the least satisfactory account. He will argue that nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western notions of philanthropy are not simply extensions "of earlier, established Christian charitable action," but that those notions underwent transformation in the West through the impact of the enlightenment and industrial revolution. He remarks: "Yet, it has been the assumption that a disposition towards an enhanced provision of disinterested philanthropy [in India] may be traced to a motivation present within Christianity, but absent from the Hindu tradition, which has provided the basis for arguments concerning India's need for a transfer of philanthropic ideals from the West."⁴⁹ Beckerlegge rejects this in favour of arguing that just as philanthropy in the West had undergone a transformation triggered by economic, political and social factors, so, also, Vivekananda's promotion of organized philanthropy can be seen as a comparable development in India – a transformation of indigenous notions of generosity (*dāna*) and compassion (*daya*) – although there triggered by different factors.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 166.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 177.

Thus it is the third of the three modes of explanation given above that Beckerlegge endorses. He echoes the view of K.P. Gupta, that the activism of the Ramakrishna Mission is "... an internally-consistent evolutionary manifestation of India's pre-modern religiosity and not merely ... a native response to some Western challenge."⁵⁰ Gupta rejects, like Beckerlegge, the view that borrowing provides adequate explanation: "The actual processes through which linkages are established in a reformer's mind between selective internalization of the West and a reformulated perception of his own tradition are always much more complex, and can be analyzed more appropriately in terms of elective affinities, rather than of imitation."⁵¹

I have referred at some length to this discussion of explanation for Vivekananda's emphasis on social service as I find it in many ways parallel to my own search for explanation for Rammohun and Dayananda's aniconism. In both cases an explanation by simple diffusion from the West is inadequate.

III THE IMPACT OF RAMMOHUN AND DAYANANDA'S ICONOCLASTIC CALL

What of the impact of Rammohun and Dayananda's position regarding idolatry on Hindu India? While many of the substantive matters of reform such as issues of widow remarriage, *sati*, child marriage, class (caste) discrimination, etc. which these reformers

⁵⁰K.P. Gupta, "Religious Evolution and Social Change in India: A Study of the Ramakrishna Mission Movement," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (NS) 8, (1974): 29.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 34.

agitated for have been met in the twentieth century with at least legislative endorsement, their repudiation of image-worship has had negligible impact on Hindu practice. While Hindu writers and historians have praised the greatness of these men as bearers of reform, the vast majority of Hindus have not at all heeded their iconoclastic call.⁵² Writing in 1972, the year of the bicentenary celebrations of the birth of Rammohun Roy, R.C. Majumdar makes the following reply to the poetic celebration of Rammohun by the great Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore. Majumdar states: "Rammohan's greatest religious reform or mission, to which he devoted his whole life and energy, was the crusade against belief in a multiplicity of gods and the worship of their images." Majumdar then asks of the extent of Rammohun's success in this regard, and answers his own question: "The reply is writ large in blazing letters upon the illuminated gates of two thousand Durga Puja pandals in Calcutta whose loud-speakers and *Dhāk* or trumpets proclaim in deafening noise, year after year, the failure of Rammohun Roy to make the slightest

⁵²Klaus Klostermaier cautions: "The sheer bulk of books in this area ['Hindu-Renaissance movements'] and the captivating attribute 'modern' has led many people in the West to believe that these modern Hindu reform movements are identical with contemporary Hinduism, except perhaps for a few remnants of 'unreformed Hinduism' that one needed not take seriously. Quite on the contrary, these modern Hindu movements, despite their appeal to Westerners and Westernized Hindus, represent only a small fraction of actual Hinduism, which is still more rooted in its ancient and mediaeval traditions than inclined toward modern movements.

The real Hindu Renaissance took place in traditional Hinduism: the traditional *saṃpradāyas* consolidated their influence; generous donations made it possible to restore hundreds of old temples and build thousands of new ones; grass-roots religious organizations gave new life to the religious observations and festivities. This cautionary remark seems necessary for gaining a correct perspective . . ." *A Survey of Hinduism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), p. 388.

impression from his point of view on 99.9 percent of the vast Hindu Samaj either in the 19th or in the 20th century.”⁵³

I think that Majumdar is engaging in some hyperbole here for rhetorical effect. His statement is exaggerated because Rammohun did have an effect on at least the elite of Bengal and from there, the transmission of Neo-Vedāntic thought by such figures as Vivekananda and later Radhakrishnan. I would suggest, too, that even if Rammohun’s Brahmo Samaj never became a mass movement but was confined to Bengali elites, that Dayananda’s Arya Samaj (which, as we have seen is indebted in part to Dayananda’s contact with the Brahmos in Calcutta) has been much more successful as a broad-based reform movement. The Arya Samaj became an aggressive and proselytizing movement and spread across North India and even to the countries of the Hindu diaspora. One important aspect of the wider impact of the Arya Samaj was the implementation of a means for the re-conversion to Hinduism of Muslim or Sikh or Christian populations. This process was called *śuddhi* (literally, purification) and was responsible for enlarging the Samaj – and also for engendering antagonism towards it in Muslim and Sikh communities. However, even if the Arya Samaj has spread far further than the Brahmo Samaj, it remains true that both these samajs and the thought of their founders (especially on the image question) remain peripheral to the mainstream of popular Hinduism in the twentieth century.⁵⁴

⁵³R.C. Majumdar, *On Rammohan Roy* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1972), p. 40.

⁵⁴Peter van der Veer offers the following assessment of the impact of the Arya Samaj: “It is important to see that Dayananda’s message combines the traditional

Major figures who came after Rammohun and Dayananda, including Vivekananda and Gandhi, defended image-worship. Gandhi even called Dayananda's insistence on the letter of the Veda as itself being idolatrous.⁵⁵ Neither Vivekananda nor Gandhi followed Rammohun and Dayananda in linking the rejection of image-worship with true progress and ethical reform.

Vivekananda's guru, the mystic saint Sri Ramakrishna, was a priest at the temple of Kālī at Dakshineswar in Calcutta. Ramakrishna's own spiritual life was intimately connected with the service of the *mūrtis* of theistic Hinduism and he defended these practices in the face of the queries and misgivings about image-worship voiced by those who came to see him. Of course, Ramakrishna could be called an other-worldly mystic rather than an inner-worldly ascetic and he did not exhibit the this-worldly activism of either Rammohun or Dayananda.⁵⁶ Rather, he voiced an empathy for the popular

reverence for Vedic authority with nineteenth-century orientalism. The emphasis on Vedic *texts*, reconstructed by historical research, the message of socioreligious reform, and the rejection of contemporary Hindu discourse and practice are all supported by orientalist knowledge. The very "foreignness" of this discourse, with its emphasis on textual purity rather than on the purity of the text's interpreters and its repudiation of practices such as image worship, greatly limited the appeal of the Arya Samaj. Owing to its fundamentalism and its emphasis on scripture, the Arya Samaj remained a marginal movement rather than becoming the Hindu answer to modern times. It is striking that its major appeal is limited to the Punjab, where the attack on image worship fell on fertile soil, prepared by centuries of Sikh traditions of imageless devotion." *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994), pp. 55-56.

⁵⁵*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 24 (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958), p. 145.

⁵⁶It is important to exercise caution in connecting toleration or endorsement of image-worship with particular orientations along other dimensions. Rammohun's opponent in Calcutta, Mrtyuñjay Vidyālaṅkāra, author of the *Vedāntacandrikā* who

religion of the common man or woman of India that has been expressed by other Hindu writers. N.S. Sarma, a sympathizer with Hindu reform movements and an important twentieth-century commentator on them, also expresses misgivings about the iconoclastic program. Sarma speaks of Brahmo religion in terms of a "new Theism" in contrast to the old Theism of traditional India:

The old Theism is a kindlier faith giving shelter to the children as well as the adults in spirit. It may not be as neat as the new Theism, but, being based on experience as well as thought, it is kindly, considerate and tolerant. The new Theism, on the other hand, being based more on thought than on experience, and moved more by considerations of national self-respect than of spiritual accommodation and having in view only the small educated section of the community and not the populace, imitates rather slavishly the fierce tirades of the Semitic religions against idolatry and borrows many of their forms of worship and thus betrays an inferiority complex.⁵⁷

defended image-worship was no hidebound, obscurantist traditionalist. Mr̥tyuñjay, when pandit for the Supreme Court in Calcutta, had written an opinion condemning *satī* in 1817, before Rammohun became well-known on this issue. One should also beware of attributing image practices only to a "popular" level of religion or to "the vulgar masses." Peter Brown has warned of the inapplicability of a "two-tiered model" positing a total dichotomy between "vulgar" and "elite" in early and medieval Christianity in his *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981) and the insight from this salutary caution has been applied fruitfully by Gregory Schopen to Buddhism in India, specifically with regard to the image question (see Schopen in bibliography). It must also be remembered that Hindu India has highly sophisticated theologies of the image advanced by the Śrī Vaiṣṇava, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva Siddhānta traditions. The articulation of these theologies is outside the scope of this dissertation but I mention them only to point out that to think of image-worship as only for the illiterate or "unenlightened," betrays either prejudice, or naïveté. See the essays in J. Waghorne and N. Cutler, eds., *Gods of Flesh, Gods of Stone: The Embodiment of Divinity in India* (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: Anima Books, 1985).

⁵⁷N.S. Sarma, *The Renaissance of Hinduism* (Benares: Benares Hindu University, 1944), p. 114.

Rammohun and Dayananda reject the sensual images of popular Hinduism. To them this cultus stands in the way of rational activity in the world. For them, this-worldly religion must eschew images. Is this not ironic given that some scholars see the rich panoply of image practices in India as a sign of popular religion with a “this-worldly” orientation a religion of “this shore” as opposed to religion as flight to some “other shore.”⁵⁸

Developments in the recent history of Hinduism in the second half of the twentieth-century show that the revisioning of Hinduism in the current Hindutva movement has little or no connection to Rammohun and Dayananda’s aniconism. This is despite the fact that Hindutva is indebted to other aspects of their reformed view of Hinduism and also to Orientalist reconstructions (or constructions) of Hindu tradition. But far from imitating “slavishly the fierce tirades of the Semitic religions against idolatry” we have instead a movement promoting Hindu consciousness and the national progress of India which sees no conflict between this and the use of Hindu imagery.⁵⁹ The

⁵⁸For instance, Diana Eck writes: “While Hindu spirituality is often portrayed in the West as interior, mystical, and other-worldly, one need only raise the head from the book to the image to see how mistakenly one-sided such a characterization is. The day to day life and ritual of Hindus is based not upon abstract interior truths, but upon the charged, concrete, and particular appearances of the divine in the substance of the material world.” *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima, 1985), p. 11.

⁵⁹If image-rejection is a “Semiticization” of Hinduism then the Hindutva movement has not followed this aspect of the Semitic religions. On the other hand, some observers do see a Semiticization in other aspects of the movement, see for example: Hans Bakker, “Ayodhyā: A Hindu Jerusalem,” *Numen* 38, vol.1 (1991): 80-109 where he remarks (p. 96) “This new utopic reign, the *Rāma rājya*, which will of course encompass

desire of groups like the Rastriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS) to see a national Hindu state, or *Hindū Rāṣṭra*, is not predicated on an insistence on a formless supreme deity. Quite to the contrary, Hindu militancy has utilized the imagery from the Epics and *Purāṇas* in promoting Hindu national consciousness. The cover of the magazine *India Today* for May 15, 1991 shows Lal Krishnan Advani, the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) holding a bow and arrow, a conscious attempt to conflate the BJP leader with the iconographic representation of the god Rāma.⁶⁰ Inverting Weber's famous expression, Richard Fox has called the current spate of Hindu images and rituals connected with the Hindutva movement, a case of "hyperenchantment."⁶¹

India in the post-colonial (and post-modern) era has not followed the image-rejection of Rammohun and Dayananda. Vasudha Dalmia, referring to the writings of the nineteenth-century apologist for traditional Hindu image-worship Harishchandra,

only the Hindu faithful, may be compared with the eschatological ideal of the *civitas dei* reified in the reconquered earthly Jerusalem." One might also call the actual physical demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya in December of 1992 a case of Hindu iconoclasm in the literal sense of the word – the literal breaking of images or act of destruction. This event might be seen as Semiticization (paradoxically) in that the act was in part a reprisal for the image and temple destruction wrought by one of the Semitic religions in earlier centuries. If twentieth-century Neo-Vedānta has inherited some of Rammohun's tolerance and religious universalism, militant Hindutva has inherited something of Swami Dayananda's aggressive championing of Hinduism for a Hindu state.

⁶⁰The photograph is also reproduced on the cover of Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994).

⁶¹ Richard G. Fox, "Communalism and Modernity," in David Ludden, ed., *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996). See also in the same volume, Richard H. Davis' study of the imagery used by Hindutva militants for the motorized "chariot" (*ratha*) used in the *yatra* from Somnath to Ayodhya in 1990, "The Iconography of Rama's Chariot."

observes that now even Arya Samajists participate in Hindutva efforts connected with images:

In some ways, the position – iconic, monotheistic, devotional – worked out by Harishchandra and his contemporaries could be seen as pointing in a most sinister fashion to the kind of climaxing – iconic, monotheistic, devotional, political – which we have witnessed in the recent *Rāmjanmabhūmi* (Rama’s birthplace) agitation, with the difference that today there seems to be no debate within Hindutva as to the validity of *mūrtipūjā*, and members of the Arya Samaj join in the effort to resurrect a temple and install a *mūrti*.⁶²

Although connected with authentic strands of Hindu aniconic ideation, the particular iconoclastic call of Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati may constitute only a moment, a moment in Hindu religious history connected with the conditions of India under colonialism. The question as to why “idolatry” as an issue largely died out in twentieth-century, post-colonial India is indicated for future research. R. Zwi

Werblowsky suggests the following possibility which should be followed up:

The modernizing role of traditional elements is, of course, no proof of their actual modernity or abiding relevance. Very often the mobilization of traditional resources in the modernization process is a phenomenon of transition, marking and assisting the passage from a pre-modern to a modern stage. To use a Buddhist parable: once it has reached the shore of modernity, a society may find that it need not remain attached to the ferry.⁶³

I intend also to examine the arguments of Hindu Renaissance figures like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Sivananda, and Gandhi who justified or tolerated image-worship. Another

⁶²Vasudha Dalmia, “The Modernity of Tradition: Harishchandra of Banaras and the Defence of Hindu *Dharma*,” in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (Delhi: OUP, 1998), p. 92.

⁶³R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Beyond Tradition and Modernity*, p. 91.

area to be explored is this: if Freud and Weber were correct in positing a connection between image-rejection in religion and “intellectualization and rationalization” (and so perhaps by extension — modernization and development) then one might ask why aniconic, Islamic Pakistan is not substantially different from India in terms of “development.” Clearly, if aniconism is pertinent here at all, it is so only in conjunction with a host of other variables.

IV CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to provide explanation for the apparent anomaly afforded by the expression of iconoclasm in nineteenth-century Hinduism. This iconoclasm is clearly multi-determined. I have shown that explanation by Diffusion is inadequate. I have rejected this explanation on the following grounds:

- 1) Indian aniconic precedents: There are Indian precedents for image-refusal. These I detailed in Chapter 2. Some of these precedents were known to Rammohun and Dayananda and referred to by them, others perhaps were not. But the existence of aniconic precedents in India (even if not known to these reformers) points to aniconism being a cross-cultural phenomenon.
- 2) Cross-cultural aniconism: The fact that image-refusal appears in ancient India and in a wide variety of ancient and non-literate cultures indicates that it is a modality of human religiosity that is not dependent on diffusion from Semitic sources.
- 3) The theological problem of images: Theological arguments against image-worship can be connected with the logic of divine transcendence and the problematic nature, therefore, of divine representation. The problem, and the arguments that articulate it, have an internal logic which I argue can certainly be arrived at independently without invoking borrowing or diffusion.
- 4) Biographical evidence: There is evidence (if not conclusive evidence) that Rammohun and Dayananda arrived at image-rejection before sustained exposure to non-Indian traditions. In Rammohun’s case the possible exception is early

exposure to Islamic learning. In both cases both men appear to have rejected image-worship prior to contact with the Protestantism of the colonial power.

Beyond all these grounds, I also suggested in Chapter 1 that there is a danger in leaping from notice of affinity to suggestion of causation. The thought of Tominaga may appear parallel to Lessing or Vivekananda's social service program may appear parallel to similar Christian programs but I have presented arguments from studies of both of these cases that refute a simple causal explanation wherein the Asian form is derived from the Western equivalent. I suggest that this is true also of the affinity between Rammohun and Dayananda's iconoclasm and Western equivalents.

However, I have indicated that I am not denying influence or borrowing or diffusion altogether. That would be preposterous. I have suggested that we need to be aware of the danger of confusing borrowing in the domain of idiom with borrowing in the area of ideation. We have seen that Rammohun in his English Works borrows the terminology of European Deism and that Dayananda borrows Protestant language, for instance, in deriding brahmin ritualists as "popes." I have argued, though, that this is not the same thing as their deriving the idea of image-rejection from these non-Indian sources.

The alternative to a model of diffusion or, conversely, a model of independent invention that I have brought forward is that of diathesis-stress. Here, the colonial context of the two men is the stressor which catalyzes the diathesis, the more or less latent tradition of aniconism indigenous to the Indian tradition and also indigenous to the personal experience and personal sensibility of the two reformers.

If I have stressed that Rammohun and Dayananda do follow and draw on indigenous sources of aniconism, I have further stressed that their aniconism is also different from those precedents. They (especially Rammohun) do utilize the negative theology of the *Upaniṣads* referring to the formless Brahman as ultimate reality behind all phenomena but neither of them are apophatic mystics teaching absorption or extinction in the formless One.⁶⁴ They are monotheists and not monists. At the same time they are not theists like their aniconic *nirguṇa bhakti* predecessors. Even if they criticize the manipulations and empty ritualism of priests as the *nirguṇa bhaktas* or Sants did, they do not exhibit the fervent devotionism of the *bhakti* saints. Nor is their reform a lower class revolt against a higher class as was that of the Vīraśaivas and the Sants. They are instead, I have argued, inner-worldly ascetics with a very pragmatic, this-worldly orientation. They were organizers and activists. This, I suggest, lies in the interaction of their own personality structures and the model provided by the British colonizers.

Both Rammohun and Dayananda in their writings include moral arguments against the worship of images; neither relies only on metaphysical arguments. Dayananda, indeed, appears to make more moral arguments against image-worship than Rammohun. Given that Dayananda was much further removed from Western culture than Rammohun, this does not substantiate the “Orientalist” view that would see moral or ethical or

⁶⁴ To Albert Schweitzer, Indian religion is about mystical absorption into the One as an expression of “world negation.” Rammohun and Dayananda see exclusive orientation to the formless One (though not absorption in it) as the prerequisite for world affirmation.

“prophetic” concerns as things that need to be imported into India. We saw in Chapter 2 that such concerns do have precedents in the history of Indian religions. What may be attributed to foreign influence, though, in both figures, is the *emphasis* given to moral arguments against image-worship.

I repeat the formulation offered in Chapter 1: Nineteenth-century expression of a Hindu iconoclasm articulated by both Rammohun Roy and Dayananda Sarasvati *is catalyzed by exposure to Muslim, Protestant, and European rationalist models but draws on authentic Indian resources and precedents. It does so while dovetailing, for both men, with a stance arrived at through formative childhood experience and with their perception of image-refusal as consonant with, or even prerequisite for, national regeneration and modernization.*

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