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“THE DAY-STAR OF  
APPROACHING MORN”**

**Phillip Medhurst**

**THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE 1992**



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## THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE 1992

# RAMMOHUN ROY AND "THE DAY-STAR OF APPROACHING MORN"

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### I

In 1817 English versions of some Hindu Scriptures were published in London.<sup>1</sup> These translations had, in fact, first appeared in Calcutta during the previous year from the pen of a Hindu of independent means called Rammohun Roy. The reprint had been edited by one John Digby while on leave from his duties with the Bengal civil service. In it he prefixes an account of the translator:

"Rammohun Roy...is by birth a Brahmin of very respectable origin, in the province of Bengal, about forty-three years of age. His acquirements are considerable: to a thorough knowledge of the Sanscrit (the language of the Brahminical Scriptures) he has added Persian and Arabic; and possessing an acute understanding, he early conceived a contempt for the religious prejudices and absurd superstitions of his caste...He was afterwards employed as a Dewan, or principal native officer, in the collection of revenues, in the district of which I was for five years Collector, in the East India Company's Civil Service. By perusing all my public correspondence with diligence and attention as well as by corresponding and conversing with European gentlemen, he acquired so correct a knowledge of the English language to be enabled to write and speak it with considerable accuracy."<sup>2</sup>

The particular reasons for the Unitarian interest in Rammohun were early indicated (in 1817) by Thomas Belsham, the minister of the

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1. the "Kena Upanishad" and the "Abridgement of the Vedanta"

2. Quoted in Sophia Dobson Collet: "The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy". 1900. pp.23-24

Essex Street Chapel in London.<sup>3</sup> The first was to do with Rammohun's social status and education:

"Rammohun Roy, a learned, eloquent, and opulent Brahmin, having by the proper exercise of his own understanding, discovered the folly and absurdity of the Hindoo mythology and of idol-worship...has entered his protest against their impious, barbarous and idolatrous rites. Such doctrine from a person of such exalted rank, at first excited great astonishment, and gave infinite offence. But by degrees, the courage, eloquence, and perseverance of this extraordinary man prevailed over all the opposition; and it is said that many hundreds of the native Hindoos, and especially of the young people, have embraced his doctrine."

So far, Christianity had only made any headway with the poor of India. Furthermore, Rammohun's rank and education overcame any reservations which might have been entertained about the moral and intellectual calibre of his race. Such concerns seem uppermost in an anonymous poetic obituary that was later to appear in a Bristol newspaper:

*"'Twas thine to see, to feel the shame.  
Alas, what millions are blind!  
Insensible they bear the name,  
But "Man" is not their grade or kind:  
Dark, vicious, cruel, mean, and base,  
A grov'ling, vile, and abject race.'*<sup>4</sup>

The second aspect of Rammohun's significance as outlined by Belsham's early notice is more important:

"He told a worthy clergyman at Calcutta about a year ago, that he preferred Christianity to all other religions, and would certainly embrace it, if it were not for the doctrine of the Trinity. This was an insurmountable obstacle. At the beginning of this year, in January 1817, he informed the same respectable clergyman, that he was now in the way of ascertaining whether the doctrine of the Trinity is or is not the doctrine of the New Testament...The result of this enquiry has not yet reached England."

Within three years of Belsham's account there had been an ironic turn in events. The correspondent quotes in full a letter written by Rammohun in English dated Sept. 5, 1820. In his own words it explains why Rammohun had become the subject of attention from Christians of somewhat different views:

"...I regret...that the followers of Jesus, in general, should have paid much greater attention to inquiries after his nature than to the observance of his commandments...On this consideration I have compiled several passages of the New Testament which I thought essential to Christianity, and published them under the designation of Precepts of Jesus, at which the Missionaries at Serampur have expressed great displeasure, and called me, in their review of the tract, an injurer of the cause of truth. I was, therefore, under the necessity of defending myself in an Appeal to the Christian Public."<sup>5</sup>

The immediate fruit of Rammohun's enquiry into the doctrine of the Trinity had been his four pages of mild and inoffensive preface to "The Precepts of Jesus" (1820). But criticism first evoked an "Appeal in Defence" (1820) of 20 pages, then a "Second Appeal" (1821) of 150 pages, and culminated in a "Third and Final Appeal" (1823) of 256 pages.

The Baptist missionaries Carey, Marshman and Ward had founded a College at Serampore in 1818. They were the first Protestant missionaries from England to establish work in India. Rammohun assisted them with a translation of the Bible and to this end learned both Hebrew and Greek. "The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness" was printed at the Baptist Mission Press in 1820. It was mainly a compilation of the ethical sayings of Jesus, taken primarily from the first three Gospels, but without the historical or mythological framework. Thus Jesus's birth, death and resurrection, as well as the miracles, were all left out. The emphasis was on the authoritative teaching of Jesus. Rammohun explained that he wished to avoid controversy, and whether he believed them or not miraculous events were liable to arouse doubts among anti-Christians and would carry little weight among Hindus. After all, Hindu mythology contained tales of an even more wonderful nature.

The "Precepts" immediately came under attack from Joshua Marshman. He deplored this attempt by what he called a "heathen" to mis-

3. "Christian Reformer" Vol. IV. p.2. 1818

4. "The Bristol Mirror". 19 October 1833. p.4a

5. See Brajendra Nath Banerji: "English impressions of Rammohun Roy before his visit to England" in "The Modern Review" Calcutta. March 1932

represent Christianity. He argued that the precepts of Jesus in themselves could not be a guide to peace and happiness. Only belief in the deity of Christ and his atoning death could bring peace. Furthermore, in his sayings Jesus had claimed attributes of divinity for himself.

Rammohun was surprised at being attacked by a Christian rather than a Hindu, and was offended at being called a "heathen". Nevertheless, he took up the challenge in his three "Appeals". In these he showed that he was something more than a deist who, under the influence of Unitarianism, denied the divinity of Christ. Rammohun's attitude to Christianity sprang from a real concern for the uniqueness of Christ and his teaching. A modern Indian Christian has argued quite convincingly that Rammohun's was an early attempt to demythologise the Christian religion:

"He saw, what the missionaries could not see, that Jesus would simply be understood as another avatar if Christianity was presented in traditional western garb. A story about a saviour who was born under miraculous circumstances, who performed supernatural deeds, who was put to death, but cheated his enemies and came to life again - would fit in excellently with the Vishnu Puranas and would be well received on the level of popular Hinduism... at the cost of the unique message of Jesus which India needed."<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Lant Carpenter had been minister of Lewin's Mead Meeting in Bristol since 1817. It is unlikely that he or his household would have overlooked the notices which appeared in "The Monthly Repository"<sup>7</sup>, the chief organ of the Unitarian movement at that time. But we can imagine the impact which the following letter to Dr. Carpenter from Henry Taylor of Liverpool<sup>8</sup> would have had upon the minister's family as a whole:

"My Dear Sir,/ The accompanying copy of Rammohun Roy's Final Appeal is forwarded to you by desire of the author, as you will find expressed in a letter I have late-

ly received from him, and a copy of which I also transmit for your perusal. What an interesting man is this! Why do not our Unitarian Fund Committee commence a correspondence with him, for who so proper, or so well qualified to convert the heathen? Books should be sent him, and in short every means should be pursued to assist him in his noble though arduous undertaking."

The accompanying letter from Rammohun shows that he aimed to introduce himself to the leading British Unitarians of his day. Among these he numbered Lant Carpenter. It had an immediate effect. Dr. Carpenter wrote,

"His services in the cause of philanthropy and religion were, in a special manner brought forward to this congregation (i.e. Lewin's Mead); when an appeal was made to it, answered with more than its wonted liberality to assist in the establishment of Unitarian worship in the capital of British India."<sup>9</sup>

The significance of Rammohun for Dr. Carpenter did not reside solely in aspirations towards the spread of Christianity in India. The worthy Rajah's views on the Trinity were a vindication of struggles closer to home. Commenting on Rammohun's endeavours - "whose writings display a remarkable acquaintance with the great points at issue between the Unitarian and the Trinitarian" - he remarks:

"I have long been convinced that the unbelieving world will not be Christianised until the Christian world in general is Unitarianised; and the writings of the Hindoo Reformer add strength to this conviction."<sup>10</sup>

The cherished hope that Rammohun would be the means by which a Unitarian form of Christianity would be established in India persisted even after his untimely death. Harriet Martineau expressed it in a hymn written for an obituary service:

*"No faithless tears, O God! we shed  
For him...  
No faithless tears! Though many dream  
To see his face by Ganges' stream;*

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9. Lant Carpenter: "A Review of the Labours, Opinions and Character of Rajah Rammohun Roy". 1833. p.6

10. Introduction to the 3rd ed. of "Unitarianism and the Doctrine of the Gospel". 1823. Quoted in Sargent op. cit. p.11

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6. Dr. Kaj Baago: "Ram Mohun Roy's Christology - an Early Attempt at Demythologisation?" in "Bangalore Theological Forum". Vol.1, No.1. 1967. Quoted by Norman Carr Sargent: "Mary Carpenter in India". Bristol. 1987. p.14, which contains an excellent account of Rammohun's last days.

7. See "The Monthly Repository" Vol. XVIII pp.433-42,575-78

8. Preserved in manuscript in the library of Manchester College, Oxford



*Though thousands wait on many a shore,  
The voice that shall be heard no more.”<sup>11</sup>*

Miss Acland, in the same anthology<sup>12</sup>, even gave expression to a pious fantasy that Rammohun's grave would become a place of pilgrimage for his converted compatriots:

*“Perchance when o'er thy loved paternal bower,  
The Sun of Righteousness shall healing rise,  
When India's children feel his noon-day power,  
And mingle all in Christian sympathies,  
Hither their pilgrim footsteps duly bound,  
With fervent zeal, these hallowed haunts shall trace,  
And sweetly solemn tears bedew the ground  
Where sleeps the friend and prophet of their race!”*

Rammohun had arrived in England in 1831. He himself explained that his reasons were political:

*“...the discussions of the East India Company's Charter was expected to come, by which the treatment of the natives of India and its future government, would be determined for many years to come, and an appeal to the King in Council, against the abolition of the practice of burning widows, was to be heard before the Privy Council.”<sup>13</sup>*

Dr. Carpenter's eldest daughter Mary was by this time an accomplished young woman of 24. Her father had conducted a school for boys, and Mary took her place in the classes, helped her mother in the domestic side, and at an early age assumed duties as a teacher. When, because of health problems, Dr. Carpenter had to give up the school, Mrs. Carpenter in 1829 opened a boarding school for young ladies in which Mary did most of the teaching. Mary was no doubt fully in her father's confidence and shared his hopes and aspirations for the dawn of enlightenment signalled by Rammohun's endeavours.

Soon after Rammohun's arrival in April Dr. Carpenter and he met and the reformer was conducted to a meeting of the Unitarian Association in Essex Street which expressed solidarity with his arduous and philanthropic labours and delight at his presence among them. It was no doubt at about this time that Mary was inspired or called upon by her father to exercise her literary skills and express the signifi-

cance of the Rammohun-phenomenon in poetic form. The result was a sonnet preserved in manuscript in Manchester College library:

*“When from afar we saw thy burning light  
Rise gloriously o'er darkened India's shore  
In spirit we rejoiced, and yet still more  
Arose our admiration and delight  
When, steadfast to pursue thy course aright,  
We saw thee brave fierce persecution's power.  
As yet we knew thee not, but that blest hour  
Which first revealed thee to our longing sight  
Awakened for thee deepest Christian love,  
And told us thou hadst sat at Jesus' feet.  
But now a glowing halo from above  
Circles our thought of thee when to the Seat  
Of Mercy, rapt in ardent prayer, we come.  
Our Father, lead Thy wandering children home!”<sup>14</sup>*

What has been played down is Rammohun's attempts to return to the pure monotheism of the Hindu Scriptures. It is evident from his writings that Rammohun believed that all religions stemmed from a common monotheistic root apprehended by reason. But in the eyes of Mary Carpenter Rammohun has discovered revealed Truth. Having “sat at Jesus' feet” he is ready to assist in the leading of the “wandering children” of India home to their foredestined place in the fold of Unitarian Christianity. Hopes were high.

They were soon to be cruelly dashed. A month or so after arriving at Bristol as the guest of the Carpenters Rammohun died. There is no record of the discussions which took place among the Unitarians of Bristol during the three weeks between this sad event and the Rajah's interment at Stapleton Grove. Despite the apparent affinity of principle between the Hindu reformer and his mentors, it was difficult for those arranging the funeral to decide on the appropriate rites. In the event, the actual committal took place in silence. The wisdom and reverence of this decision in the face of some very pressing polemical considerations was well explained in poetic tribute to the Rajah's memory by a certain Miss Dale:

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14. The sonnet was published in Mary Carpenter *ibid.* p.159. A manuscript in Manchester College library indicates that when Rammohun died Mary tried adapt the poem into a more explicit obituary by changing the last lines to: “But now a glowing halo from above  
Circles thy memory, for a heavenly seat  
Is opened to receive thee; - years shall roll  
Yet ever shall thou dwell within our soul.”  
Evidently, on later publication she changed her mind.

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11. Mary Carpenter: “Last Days in England of the Rajah Rammohun Roy”. 1866. 2nd ed. London 1875. pp.158-9  
12. Mary Carpenter *ibid.* p.158  
13. Mary Carpenter *ibid.* p.16

*"No voice, no whisper broke the deep repose  
 When to the earth that sacred dust was given;  
 All silently the sacrifice arose  
 From kindling hearts, in one pure flame, to heaven.  
 Pure from the Sun of Righteousness it came  
 Upon those hearts. Language, to common thought  
 Interpreter, had dimmed that holy flame  
 Or, with the prism's power, to sight had brought  
 The varying hues which human frailty throws  
 O'er things divine. Oh! never more misplaced,  
 Than at that grave where narrow bounds inclose  
 Him, whose diffusive love had all mankind em-  
 braced."*<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, in the face of providing valedictory rites on this most solemn of occasions, their confidence in the Christian convictions of the deceased had wavered. But it soon became apparent that Rammohun's sympathies had to be spelled out.

## II

Even before Rammohun's interment a biographical notice appeared from the pen of his secretary Sandford Arnot. It made no mention of his Unitarian sympathies. There was evidently a pressing need to spell out the "true meaning" of Rammohun's life. This need was met by Dr. Carpenter in his "Review" of the Rajah's labours<sup>16</sup>, but something was needed to coincide with the funeral - something which could be used on the occasion and which would create the appropriate impression in the press. Mary's literary talents were prevailed upon. The result was a series of five sonnets.<sup>17</sup> As we shall now see, they tell us a great deal about the "mythology" of Unitarians at this time.

On his arrival in London Rammohun had been feted by fashionable society. He met the famous actress Fanny Kemble and visited the theatre with the Duke of Devonshire to see her play. Such jaunts and jollities no doubt played into the hands of the "Puritan" party. The Carpenters' first task was to counter any possible aspersions on their hero's character. Dr. Carpenter attempted to offset any possible

15. Mary Carpenter op. cit. p.156

16. Lant Carpenter op. cit. supra [9]

17. The sonnets were first printed in "The Bristol Mercury". Oct. 26. 1833. p.3f, then subsequently in "The Last Days..." op. cit.

rumours in his biography written immediately after Rammohun's death:

*"I had myself repeated opportunities of observing with earnest respect how he appreciated true delicacy in the female character and I learn that, while he always maintained his habitual politeness to the sex, and may have therefore misled the superficial observer, he manifested a very prompt and clear discrimination as to individuals, and that he commonly expressed strong dislike, and even disgust, where they seemed to him to depart from that true modesty which is essential to its excellence."*<sup>18</sup>

An anecdotal explanation for Rammohun's regard for the female sex recounted by Dr. Carpenter smacks a little of romantic legend, but there is no reason to doubt that the worthy divine obtained the information from Rammohun himself:

*"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 15, to leave the paternal home, and sojourn for a time in Tibet, that he might see another form of religious faith. He spent two or three years in that country, and often excited the angers of the worshippers of the Lama by his rejection of their doctrine that this pretended deity - a living man - was the creator and preserver of the world. In these circumstances he experienced the soothing kindness of the female part of the family; and his gentle, feeling heart lately dwelt with deep interest, at the distance of more than forty years, on the recollections of that period which, he said, had made him always feel respect and gratitude towards the female sex."*

Dr. Carpenter pointedly added,

*"This doubtless contributed to the unvarying and refined courtesy which marked his intercourse with them in this country."*<sup>19</sup>

But Rammohun's altruistic concern for the status of women in India was genuine, and probably inspired all of his reforming endeav-

18. Lant Carpenter op. cit. supra [9] pp.119n.

19. Lant Carpenter ibid. pp.101-102

ours. In 1811 Ram Mohan's brother, Jaganmohun, died and his widow committed "sati" on his funeral pyre. We do not know whether Rammohun witnessed this, but he was profoundly affected. Between 1814 and 1820 the main drive of his writings was to counter the alleged religious justification of this atrocious custom and then to actively promote the rights of women. During his researches in Sanskrit literature, he had been impressed by the purity of its monotheistic doctrines in contrast to the prevailing idolatry of his own days. He therefore translated the Vedanta into Bengali and made abridgements of this in English and Hindustani. Next, in 1816, he translated two of the Upanishads into Bengali and English and, in 1817, wrote a defence of Hindu theism in Bengali. In 1818 he published, in English, his first tract on "sati". In this he showed that the custom was not ordained by Hindu Scripture. In a second tract, published in 1820, he made an eloquent appeal in defence of the rights of women, showing that they were in no way inferior to men and were in some way superior to them.

All of this is skilfully woven into the most passionate of Mary's sonnets:

*"Exil'd from home e'en in thy earliest youth,  
The healing balm of woman's love was pour'd  
Into thy troubled breast, and thence were stor'd  
Deep springs of gratitude and pitying ruth  
To lead thy race to that primeval truth  
Which, bright and pure, on all alike bestow'd,  
Points heavenward; and to guide them on the road  
Of Christian faith was thine. But yet to soothe  
Neglected woman, to assert her right  
To drink of wells of everlasting life;  
To snatch her, trembling midst the dismal night  
Of pagan horrors, from the fiery strife  
Of dark-soul'd zealots - this must wake our love,  
This, fervent, raise our thanks for thee above."*

For all the historical veracity of what she has written, the central thesis of the sonnet - that Rammohun's vocation was to lead his race "on the road/ Of Christian faith" and to assert Indian woman's "right/ To drink of wells of everlasting life" - is lop-sided. The Unitarian movement's aspirations at this time have begun to affect their account of Rammohun's activities.

We have already seen how, in the eyes of Mary, to have published the precepts of Jesus was to have "sat at the feet" of the Saviour. For Mary, the words of the Nazarene are a divine revelation of salvific

power. John's Gospel provided the appropriate metaphor in the story of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well:

*"Jesus answered and said unto her,...Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." (John 4:10,13-15)*

While "primeval truth" is accessible to all - the kindnesses which Rammohun met from women in his youth become "Deep springs of gratitude and pitying truth" - there is no doubt in Mary's mind that it finds its consummation in the teaching of Jesus. The story of the Samaritan woman was an ideal example of the ministry of Jesus to those outside the authoritative Judaic revelation; the subject of womanhood allows Mary to introduce it, and she develops it in another sonnet in the series:

*"Thy Nation sat in darkness, for the night  
Of pagan gloom was o'er it. Thou wast born  
Midst superstition's ignorance forlorn.  
Yet in thy breast there glow'd a heavenly light  
Of purest truth and love, and to thy sight  
Appear'd the day-star of approaching morn.  
What ardent zeal did then thy life adorn,  
From deep degrading guilt to lead aright  
Thy fallen people, to direct their view  
To that bless'd Sun of Righteousness, whence beams  
Guidance to all that seek it - faithful, true -  
To call them to the Saviour's living streams!  
The cities of the East have heard thy voice:  
Nations behold your God! Rejoice! Rejoice!" (Isaiah 40:9)*

In a polemical vindication of Unitarianism<sup>20</sup> Lant Carpenter had written:

*"...those of us who have observed the enquiries of Rammohun Roy of Calcutta...cheer themselves with the conviction that the day-star of Unitarianism has arisen...in the East."*

The "day-star" of Mary's sonnet is a Unitarianism of a kind that will prepare the Indian sub-continent for the fuller revelation of Christ. Hand in hand with the certainty that the teaching of Jesus carried an

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20. Lant Carpenter: "On the Beneficial Tendency of Unitarianism". 1822. p.37



authoritative revelation went an eschatology that assured these Unitarian Christians that they were on the winning side. Once again, it was Scripture that provided the basis for their confidence. Mary recounts how her father read the fortieth chapter of Isaiah at the memorial service held a week or so after Rammohun's death.<sup>21</sup> A marginal note tells us that the last line of Mary's first sonnet refers to the same passage:

"O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings...say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand..."

This cheerful eschatology expressed itself in political as well as religious categories. The idea that humankind was progressing inevitably towards a new dawn in which an enlightened liberalism would triumph was very much part of the climate of ideas. The continuator of Sophia Collet's biography of Rammohun, writing at the turn of the century, describes it as

"a time of crucial transition in the political history of the United Kingdom. He (i.e. Rammohun) was an eager and sympathetic spectator of the stupendous revolution achieved by the first Reform Bill. The process began which has by successive extensions of the franchise transformed the government of this nation in fifty years from a close oligarchy to a democracy. While he was here, he saw the East India Company changed by statute from a trading concern into a political organisation...He saw the Act pass which abolished slavery throughout the British dominions. The period of his visit also covers the passing of the Factory Act. ...He was here, in a word, when the New England was being born out of the heart of Old England, - the New England of democracy, of social and industrial reform...and of Imperial policy tempered by Nonconformist Conscience."<sup>22</sup>

This same political eschatology is expressed in another of Mary's sonnets:

*"Far from thy native clime, a sea-girt land  
Sits thron'd among the nations. In the breasts  
Of all her sons immortal Freedom rests,*

*And of her patriots' many a holy hand  
Has sought to rouse the world from the command  
Of that debasing tyrant who detests  
The reign of Truth and Love. At their behests  
The slave is free, and Superstition's band  
Sinks powerless. Hitherward thy steps were bent  
To seek free commune with each kindred soul,  
Whose highest powers are ever willing lent  
To free their race from Folly's dark control.  
To our blest isle thou didst with transport come:  
Here thou hast found thy last, thy silent home."*

But Rammohun's own untimely death reminded all that the most ardent hope of salvation was in the afterlife. Having begun his journey to salvation in the bosom of Unitarian Christianity, Rammohun had every right to share the Christian hope of immortality:

*"Thy work thou didst fulfil while yet 'twas day,  
And still right onward towards thy beacon tend  
With faith and zeal. And now thy footsteps bend  
Where Christian friendship offers thee the stay  
Of sympathy and love. But who shall say  
What joy was ours, the eager ear to lend  
To all thy accents, and thy steps attend?  
The Angel of the Lord hath call'd away  
His faithful servant at the evening hour  
While glowing tints still gild the western sky.  
Yet though around our hearts dark sorrow lour,  
And tears of sad regret must dim the eye,  
We mourn not without hope. Thy race is run.  
Enter thy rest. Servant of God, well done!"*

Mary has no difficulty in speaking of Rammohun's death in explicitly Christian terms based on 2 Timothy 4:6-8:

"...the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course..."

There was in fact some justification for an assertion that Rammohun had embraced the Christian view of eternal life. At Dr. Carpenter's behest, a certain Dr. Jerrard, principal of the Baptist College at Bristol, wrote an account of the Rajah's views which he had elicited during a dinner party a month or so before his death:

"He (i.e. Rammohun) explicitly declared that he believed in the miracles of Christ generally, and particularly in his resurrection, which he said was the

21. Mary Carpenter op. cit. p.111

22. Rev. F. Herbert Stead, continuator of Sophia Dobson Collet's "The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy". 1900. pp.304-5

foundation of the Christian faith, and the great fact on which rested his own hopes of the resurrection."<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, Dr. Carpenter was deeply gratified by this testimony.

The likely fate of Rammohun's heathen compatriots was more problematical. What biblical exemplar applied to their situation? The parable of Dives and Lazarus seemed to fit the bill.

"(Dives) said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him (Lazarus) to my father's house... Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent." (Luke 16:27-30)

Like Lazarus, Rammohun is in the bosom of Abraham. His compatriots have more than the equivalent of the witness provided by "Moses and the prophets" in the words of the Saviour conveyed to them by Rammohun. This was the key to Rammohun's continuing vocation beyond the grave, and the allusion to the parable is quite clear in the final lines of Mary's last sonnet:

*"Bright hopes of immortality were given  
To guide thy dubious footsteps and to cheer  
Thine earthly pilgrimage. How firm and clear  
Arose thy faith that, as the Lord hath risen,  
So all his followers shall meet in heaven!  
Thou art gone from us, but thy memory dear  
To all that knew thee fades not. Still we hear  
And see thee yet as with us. Ne'er are riven  
The bands of Christian love! Thy mortal frame  
With us is laid in holy silent rest;  
Thy spirit is immortal, and thy name  
Shall by thy countrymen be ever blest.  
Into their hearts with power thy words are sent  
As from the dead. Surely they must repent."*

The condemnatory tone carried over from the parable caused the poem to end on a somewhat gloomy note, a little out of keeping with the hope of imminent dawn. Before publication Mary revised the final couplet.<sup>24</sup> At the cost of suppressing the biblical allusion it retained the point about Rammohun's writings while striking a rather more optimistic note as regards India's prospects of everlasting life:

*"E'en from the tomb thy words with power shall rise,  
Shall touch their hearts, and bear them to the skies."*

### III

It comes as no small surprise to observe how "orthodox" Unitarianism is during this phase, and how firmly people like the Carpenters see themselves embedded in the mainstream of Protestant Christianity. Mary has no difficulty in finding paradigms of humanity seeking the full revelation in Jesus: the Old Testament poet-prophet, the Samaritan woman, the wealthy Jew. Similarly, she has no difficulty in finding authoritative images which articulate a divinely-sanctioned system of rewards and punishments in an afterlife which, on Biblical authority, is seen as an objective reality. It represents a kind of innocence which we have lost forever: no longer can we shelter in the groves of an Eden of authoritative myth construed as a literal reality.

What makes Mary Carpenter's response to the Rammohun phenomenon of abiding interest, however, is the fact that the Judaeo-Christian mythology has been stretched to its limit. That an encounter with the precepts of Jesus would lead the genuine enquirer into the path of truth was to be expected, but Rammohun was active in philanthropic endeavours before he encountered the Gospel. How was the pre-emptive activity of a "righteous pagan" without benefit of an evangelist's promptings to be explained?

Mary Carpenter was obliged to postulate in simple terms a

*"...primeval truth  
Which, bright and pure, on all alike bestow'd,  
Points heavenward..."*

Given that this "primeval truth" found expression in both will and intellect, it could be expressed in two great abstracts:

*"...in thy breast there glow'd a heavenly light  
Of purest truth and love..."*

Such was the reforming spirit of the age that these same two great absolutes could find expression in overtly political terms:

*"...of her (i.e. England's) patriots many a holy hand  
Has sought to rouse the world from the command  
Of that debasing tyrant who detests  
The reign of truth and love."*

The notion of a "primeval truth" was not a new idea. The challenges produced by the era of rapid colonial expansion has its analogies in the pluralism of the Roman empire amidst which Christianity

23. Mary Carpenter op. cit. p.110

24. Vide the MS. in Manchester College library.

was born. In response to this situation what came to be "orthodox" Christianity developed the Stoic idea of the "logos spermatikos" ("the seminal word") as a way of acknowledging deposits of truth scattered around the various religions and philosophies of the world, which needed only to be brought out, made manifest and fulfilled by a "Christus Consummator". The Church Fathers had argued by such a means that a place should be provided for the great Greek philosophers in the Christian scheme of things. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, felt that minds of the order of Plato and Aristotle could not possibly be entirely separate from the mind of Christ. Nevertheless, as Eric Sharpe points out,

"Clement would have been horrified at the thought that these philosophers could be thought as in any sense the equals of Christ. Certainly they have been given insights into the truth, and philosophy could even be called the clear image of truth, a divine gift to the Greeks. But it was only an image, and not the clear light of truth, and even the philosopher is a child until he has been made man by Christ. The philosophers, in short, were offering knowledge, and not salvation: insight into the nature of things, and not sacramental incorporation into a supernatural order of being."<sup>25</sup>

Her sonnets indicate that Mary's belief was essentially the same. Although salvation was to be apprehended in terms of a moral response to revealed truth, it was salvation nevertheless from perdition for eternal bliss. Unitarianism had been founded on the bed-rock of Scripture. It was the logical, ultimate development of Reformation principles. The doctrine of the Trinity was rejected precisely because it did not have scriptural warrant. But the Bible was not simply a doctrinal source-book: it provided a mythological framework which gave a convincing meaning to experience.

Some forty years after Mary's sonnets Martineau began to face the challenge presented by the new biblical criticism emerging in Germany, with its radical attempt to see the New Testament as a collection of documents produced by a movement subject to the same historical forces of conflict and compromise as other human groups.<sup>26</sup> His conceptual language is abstract and elegant, but the

simple core of the idea which he developed in response to the collapse of the absolute authority of Scripture is essentially the same as the seminal idea in Mary Carpenter's sonnets:

"There is in us...a range of free ideal life, whence we can look down upon the instincts of nature and up to the infinite Holiness, and which we know is in subjection to nothing inflexible. This is precisely what we mean by Spirit, - this liberty to move alternatively out of the thought and love of a reasonable mind; God is a Spirit, in so far as he is not locked up in the invariable order of the world: and there is a spirit in Man, in so far as he is not disposed of by his organism and his dwelling-place, but rises in thought and directs himself in affection to what is above them."<sup>27</sup>

So what has changed for us today? Something makes the essentially simple formulations of Martineau, and its latter-day expression in "religious humanism", no more tenable than Biblical fundamentalism.

What is untenable is the optimism. Already, even in the 19th century itself, the optimism evident in the writings of Channing had been criticised by Maurice:

"There was nothing in him from which a soul, struggling with life and death, could derive the least help. He was evidently meant for sunshine and gala days."<sup>28</sup>

In the Carpenters it is expressed in the eschatological language of the Bible: a new age is dawning, as foretold by the prophets of old. The rapid expansion of the known world during the 18th century must have raised apocalyptic expectations, the sense that a corner had been turned in the progress of God's unfolding plan. By the time Martineau (a former pupil of Carpenter's) had fully developed his theology, the ground for optimism had shifted imperceptibly to an idea of "progress". Just as our knowledge of the world was expanding, so was the accessibility of self-evident truth. Once that truth was laid before men, purged of the mystifying accretions of the ages, then humanity would find the "religion of the spirit" to be a natural growth, soon to blossom in an ever-expanding Unitarian version of truth evident to the heart and mind of mankind and revealed in the teaching of Jesus and the messianic prophecies.

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25. Eric J. Sharpe: "Faith Meets Faith". 1977. p.4

26. These views came to be expressed by him in a book published in 1890 - "The Seat of Authority in Religion" - but which he had begun to work on around 1872. See S.C. Carpenter: "Church and People 1789 -1889". 1933. p.502

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27. James Martineau: "Essays, Reviews and Addresses" IV. Academical: Religious. London. 1891. pp.579-580

28. F.D. Maurice: "The Kingdom of Christ". 1842. pp.8-9



We now have no greater faith in "progress" than we have faith in the divine inspiration of the Bible. This is largely because we now know that an association between moral progress and technical advance is a mirage. That things were different for Martineau is well illustrated by the analogies which he uses to describe the new age of Truth into which the Churches were converging:

"Whatever unity may yet arise in Christendom will be no less different from any thing we have yet known than the factory from the monastery, the locomotive from the packhorse, or The Times newspaper from the illuminated manuscript." 29

The "logos spermatikos" of old (as well as the newer idea of the "religion of spirit") represents an idea of a deferred revelation which will be made fully manifest in the near future. It is a revelation which is destined to absorb all other versions of the truth. But the world is much larger for us now. We can no longer easily cling to the notion of a European version of Christianity as the definitive and exclusive revelation of the will of the Supreme Being.

Is this an entirely new situation? If only as a salutary warning against temporal chauvinism and the spiritual pride which it can engender, it is good to find an alternative model in the remains of late antiquity. The discovery of papyri at Nag Hammadi, only recently made available in English<sup>30</sup>, shows the extent to which an "alternative" Christianity had developed before its exponents and their Scriptures were ruthlessly suppressed by the newly-established Church in the fourth century A.D.

Whatever its origins, Gnosticism was a cosmopolitan phenomenon: probably a response from new centres like Alexandria to the collapse of old certainties in the wake of Hellenistic cultural imperialism. A cluster of concepts was needed which gave some convincing account of the meaning of a multiplicity of mythologies and belief-systems.

This new religious movement, whose origins are obscure, had no difficulty in assimilating the teaching of Jesus. The pressing question

for Gnostics was: how could the important revelation embodied by his sayings be commended to a sophisticated cosmopolitan civilisation, often morally degenerate, but nevertheless heir to an advanced and patently admirable philosophical legacy - like the India of Rammohun's time? Rammohun thought that the fables which formed the basis of "orthodox" Christology would cut little ice with educated Hindus. For the Gnostics, the problem was the Old Testament. Part of the problem for Rammohun was the extent to which he should accommodate some of the "mythological" material embedded in the New Testament. Gnostics solved the problem by regarding such mythological material as provisional - as so much grist to the mill of truth. In other words, the truth embodied by the teaching of Jesus was not dependent on any symbolic or mythological system - even that of the Books of Moses or of the Messianic kerygma of Peter. Already, we have moved beyond the position of Mary Carpenter.

The Christian Gnostics appeared to have an eschatology, but it was one of destruction rather than consummation. In other words, they did not entertain any idea of "progress". The spiritual principle in humankind was journeying through time and matter without its destiny necessarily being intertwined with them. In this way, they pre-empted the disillusion which we are heirs to and which is so difficult to come to terms with in the Judaeo-Christian tradition with its central notion of a benign Providence. Already, we have travelled beyond the position of Martineau.

The spiritual principle which I have mentioned, and which the Gnostics called "gnosis", seems at first sight to be identical to the "spirit" spoken of by Martineau. But Martineau, working within a framework which is essentially optimistic about human nature and the world, believes that this "spirit" is present in equal measure in all humankind. It is simply a matter of furnishing human beings with an authoritative statement of the truth accessible to reason, thereby eliciting an awareness of the spiritual principle within them as the necessary preamble to its needs and aspirations coming to expression in worship and philanthropic endeavour. (This is, indeed, the largely implicit assumption in Rammohun's programme of publishing "purified" Scripture from both the Hindu and Christian traditions.)

But the Gnostics did not believe that the "gnosis" - an inherent "knowledge" or "insight" into the true nature of the reality which transcends the cosmos - was present in all human beings. By an accident of nature which Gnostics were willing to express in one way or another in mythological terms - including re-workings of the Adam and Eve myth in "Genesis" - only a limited number of human beings

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29. Quoted by Alec R. Vidler in "The Church in an Age of Revolution". 1971. p.283

30. James M. Robinson (ed.): "The Nag Hammadi Library in English". Leiden. 1977.



shared the "gnosis". In other words, Gnostics were sustained by an elitism wholly foreign to the Unitarian tradition.

As is so often the case in our search for universal truth, we must dig down to basic perceptions and experiences if ready-made concepts are not serviceable.

When I look back, I sense a deep affinity with the likes of Rammohun Roy which transcends mere ideas or personality, and which I am loathe to leave hold of in the miasma of scientific relativities. I believe that this notion is well worth further exploration.

Something in the mind of the person is not only encountered, but recognised, and recognised as something valuable - a pearl of great price. This is not to be confused with an affinity of temperament. When I read, for example, the words of Jesus of Nazareth, provided that I can filter out the mythological framework that the evangelists placed them in, I do not encounter personality. What I encounter is "principle", and this transcends the common affinities of class, race or culture. There may be said to be an "affinity of principle" which, in the case of Jesus, has manifestly transcended the barriers of time.

The problem with Jesus as an example is that it has become very difficult, if not impossible, to separate the man from the myth. And yet I believe that the notion of an "affinity of principle" is absolutely central to religion and what is of enduring value in it once the merely human and relative phenomena of class, race and culture have been filtered out. Indeed, if such a concept has any correspondence with an objective Truth, it may hold the key to all our futures insofar as it embodies the triumph of universal altruism over tribal interest, and higher reason over animal instinct.

The "affinity of principle" enables me to describe Rammohun as "Christ-like". This is rather different to Mary Carpenter's position. For her, Rammohun is one who has "sat at the feet" of Jesus and has been well on the way to apprehending the authoritative and largely exclusive Divine Revelation represented by the Nazarene. What I am saying is that I see the same impulse at work in these two lives - a kind of "Christ principle" which transcends both of them. It is a phenomenon which we may witness in the lives of other men and women who are beacons to their age and which we have seen variously described as "logos", "gnosis", "spirit" or "affinity of principle".

But I feel that Rammohun and others like him are Christ-like in a more literal sense. This feeling stems from my belief that Jesus was as much a victim of the Apostles as their hero. The urgent message

of the Nazarene has been struggling to escape from the mythological shackles which Peter and his colleagues loaded it with ever since it was delivered. It has been the unique witness of Unitarians to assist in the liberation of the Truth as expressed by the Nazarene among others. But such is the nature of Truth that anyone who thinks they have found it has in fact lost it, and, as we have seen, our worthy forbears were no exception to this most mystifying of rules.

I empathise with Rammohun Roy not because he was a "Christian", either implicitly or explicitly, but because he was "Christ-like". Like Christ, he was a victim to some extent of well-meaning associates who were driven by forces largely beyond their own comprehension to try and imprison their hero in a mythological system to which they themselves were sincerely committed. And, looking back, we see something break free, and we recognise that we have an affinity with it in our hearts, our minds, our souls, or wherever we choose to locate the hidden sanctum of our imperishable being.

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