

Krishna Mohan Banerjea and Arian Witness to Christ: Jesus Christ the True Prajapati

T. V. PHILIP*

Krishna Mohan Banerjea (1813-1885) was the foremost Indian Christian apologist in the Nineteenth Century and was the chief exponent of the "fulfilment theory."

Born in a Kulin Brahmin family in Bengal and educated in Hindu College, he came under the influence of Derozio and thus belonged to the radical youth group known as "Young Bengal" which played a decisive role in the Bengal Renaissance. The "Young Bengal" of which Krishna Mohan was a leader, greatly fascinated by western culture and civilisation, was extremely critical of the then existing religious and social structures and wanted to reform them; and they thus represented the "historic conflict" between "the old and the new." The conflict with Hindu Orthodoxy resulted in Krishna Mohan's excommunication from his family.

At the age of 18, Krishna Mohan accepted Christian faith and joined the Anglican Church. In 1839, after his theological studies in Bishop's College, he was ordained and was the first Indian to become a priest in the Anglican Church in Bengal. He was in charge of Christ Church at Cornwallis Square for several years and then a professor at Bishop's College. After his retirement from Bishop's College, he was made honorary examining Chaplain to the Bishop of Calcutta and a domestic Chaplain to the Viceroy. He was also the first President of the Bengal Christian Association when it was organised in 1868.

Krishna Mohan was too great a person to be confined to Church circles. Very early in his life, he took an active part in movements and organisations which worked for the social and political transformation of Indian society and continued this interest throughout his life. The Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, The Bethune Society, The Calcutta Text Book Society, The Bengal Social Science Association, The Family Literary Club, The Asiatic Society of Bengal, Index Association, The Bible Society, Calcutta University, The Bengal British India Society, The British India Association, The

* Dr T. V. Philip is the Editor of *The Indian Journal of Theology*.

India League, and The Indian Association were some of the movements and organisations in the Nineteenth Century which contributed to the Bengal Renaissance and with which Krishna Mohan was intimately connected. He was a Senior Vice-President of the Bethune Society, President of the India League, and President of the Indian Association when it was organised in 1876 under the leadership of Surendranath Banerjea. He was so much respected by the Calcutta community that Arabinda Poddar later wrote, "In every literary assembly his was a prominent presence, in every public function eagerly sought for."¹ Susobhan Sarkar also stated that in later life Krishna Mohan was universally respected and "was the first choice as a president for a society or a meeting."²

The composite nature of the Bengal Renaissance is often summarised as historical discovery, linguistic and literary modernisation and socio-religious reformation. While William Jones represented historical discovery, Ram Mohan Roy, the socio-religious reformation, and William Carey, development of Bengali language, Krishna Mohan, to a lesser degree, was involved in all three aspects of the Renaissance. Though active in political movements of his day, Krishna Mohan was more of a social and religious reformer. He fought against caste and idolatry, opposed polygamy, kulinism and the sale of girls in marriage and sati rites, and advocated the education of women. He considered social upliftment of women to be a yardstick by which to measure the social progress of a country.

One of the important factors which helped the Bengal Renaissance was a knowledge of European history as well as a knowledge of India's past. At the time of Krishna Mohan, the study of history was greatly neglected in India. Krishna Mohan in his various writings and speeches stressed the value of historical studies and he himself undertook research into India's past history. Along with a knowledge of the history of European Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the Puritan struggle in England and the Italian, French and American Revolutions, a knowledge of the glorious periods in Indian history gave the educated Bengalis a sense of pride as well as courage to undertake reform activities.

Krishna Mohan's contribution to the literary renaissance in Bengal is greatly acknowledged by historians. He was neither an "Anglicist" nor an "Orientalist." He encouraged the study of Bengali and Sanskrit as well as English. He contributed much to the development of Bengali language. He wrote in the vernacular at a time when vernacular was a despised dialect, as he thought that the surest path to national greatness lay through the improvement of national literature. His Bengali works are numerous and are on varied subjects. His services to oriental literature and higher education were recognised when Calcutta University conferred on him the honorary

¹ Arabinda Poddar, *Renaissance in Bengal*, 1970, p. 53.

² Susobhan Sarkar, *Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays*, 1970, p. 24.

degree of Doctor of Law in 1876. In recognition of his services to the nation, the British Government in 1885 conferred on him the rank of Companion of the Indian Empire.

One important element in East-West encounter that took place in the Nineteenth Century was that between Christianity and Hinduism. It was the occasion and context for the publication of a large number of Christian apologetic writings, both by western renaissance and by Indian Christians. The apologies thus produced by Indian Christians marked the beginning of indigenous theological thinking among Protestants in India. Krishna Mohan was the most outstanding of the apologists of this period.

In the Nineteenth Century the predominant attitude of western missionaries towards Indian religions, culture and philosophy was rather unfavourable. Missionaries shared the western imperial sentiment and belief in cultural superiority, agreeing with Charles Grant, the spokesman of the evangelicals in Britain, when he insisted that it was not only inborn weakness that made the Hindus degenerate but the nature of their religion. Alexander Duff could see in India only "the spiritual gloom of a gathering tempest, relieved only by the lightening glance of Almighty's indignation, around a waste and moral wilderness, where all life dies and death lives." The Christian task for him was to do everything possible to "demolish so gigantic a fabric of idolatory and superstition."

Missionary apologies of this period were polemical in character and meant to prove the superiority of Christianity over Indian religions. These apologies vehemently criticised Indian religions and philosophies and appeared "too much in the character of an Ishmaelite whose hand is against every man." Such a negative approach resulted in intense controversies and conflicts in the Nineteenth Century between Christian missionaries and Hindus and it only helped to alienate Hindus from Christianity.

In considering Krishna Mohan as an apologist, we need to distinguish his writings written before 1865 from those written after. In his earlier writings, his attempt, like that of the western missionaries, was to expose the errors and weaknesses of Hindu philosophy and doctrines and to set forth the Christian claims. For example, in his *Dialogues on Hindu Philosophy*, the most important of his earlier works, he refuted the arguments for the divine authority of the Vedas and repeatedly argued that the fundamental principles of Hindu philosophy are essentially the same as those of Buddhist philosophy and that Hindu philosophy in essence is atheistic. However, his later writings were meant to establish a positive relationship between Hinduism and Christianity, an Arian witness to Christ.

The most important of Krishna Mohan's later writings are: *The Arian Witness* (1875), *Two Essays as Supplements to the Arian Witness* (1880) and *The Relation Between Christianity and Hinduism* (1881). In these writings, he makes it clear that Hinduism is the religion of

the Vedas and that it is theistic and then expounds his theory, based on the ideas of sacrifice found in the Vedas and in the Bible, that Christianity is the fulfilment of Hinduism. He states two propositions. In the first place, he says "that the fundamental principles of Christian doctrine in relation to the salvation of the world, find a remarkable counterpart in the vedic principles of primitive Hinduism in relation to the doctrine of sin and the redemption of the sinner by the efficacy of sacrifice, itself a figure of Prajapati, the Lord and Saviour of the Creation, who had given himself up as an offering for that purpose." Secondly, he states "that the meaning of 'Prajapati,' an appellation, variously described as a Purusha begotten in the beginning, as Viswakarma the Creator of all, singularly coincides with the meaning of the name and offices of the historical reality Jesus Christ, and that no other person than Jesus of Nazareth has ever appeared in the world claiming the character and position of the self-sacrificing Prajapati at the same time both mortal and immortal."²

According to Krishna Mohan, the first and foremost rites in vedic religion, on which they firmly relied as the great cure for all evils of life and the secret of all success in the world, were the sacrificial rites. The high estimation in which the rites of sacrifice were held in the Vedas appears from the date and authorship assigned to their institution, the great virtue attributed to their performance, both spiritual and temporal, and the benefits they were said to have conferred on the gods themselves.

In the Vedas, the Lord of Creation is the author of sacrifice and its date is reckoned as coeval with creation. In the post-Diluvian world the first act of the surviving patriarch, whom the Indo-Aryans called Manu, was a sacrificial offering. The institution existed from time immemorial and the Vedas knew no time when the sacrifices were not practised. The world was called into being by virtue of sacrifice and it was considered a potent remedy for all evils. It was the good "ferrying boat" by which men escape sin. "O illustrious Varuna, thou quicken our understanding, while we are practising this ceremony, that we may embark on the good ferrying boat by which we may escape all sins" (R.V. xii. 42, 3). The animal offered by the worshipper was his own ransom. While offering the limb of the animal to the fire, the worshipper prayed, "Whatever sins we have committed by day or night, thou art the annulment thereof." The benefits of sacrifice were not confined to men. It was the way by which the Devas, who were at first mortals, were promoted to heaven. The same is still the way for mankind to receive the felicity of heaven.

For Krishna Mohan, the key to the understanding of the meaning of sacrifice was the self-sacrifice of Prajapati.

Now the secret of this extreme importance attached to sacrifice, and the key to the proper understanding of the whole subject was

² *The Relation between Christianity and Hinduism*, p. 1.

the self-sacrifice of Prajapati, the Lord or Supporter of Creation, "the Purusha begotten before the world, the Viswakarma, the Author of the Universe." The idea is found in all the three Vedas—Rek, Yajus and Saman—in Samhitas, Brahmanas, Ayanyakas, and Upanishads. The Divine Purusha who gave himself up as a sacrifice for the Devas, i.e., emancipated mortals, had, it is said, deserved and got a mortal body fit for the sacrifice, and himself became half mortal and half immortal. It is added that he made sacrifice a reflection of himself; that the equine body was found fit for sacrifice, and that whenever a horse-offering (asver-medā) was solemnized, it became no other than an offering of himself.⁴

Krishna Mohan refers to certain other passages where the sacrifice of Prajapati is spoken of as a sacrifice made for all. "Let me offer myself in all creatures and all creatures in myself" (Satapatha 13.7.1). He also emphasises the fact that the Lord of Creation who sacrificed himself was "half mortal and half immortal." Thus, for Krishna Mohan, the idea of the divine person—half mortal and half immortal—sacrificing himself for his creation is a prominent doctrine of the Vedas.

After discussing the meaning of sacrifice in the Vedas, Krishna Mohan points out that it is impossible to ignore the close approximation of the vedic sacrificial rites to some of the mysteries of the Christian faith.

"The first acts of Religion" consisted in the offering of Sacrifice. This is curiously coincident with the Biblical account of Abel's offering in the Ante-Diluvian World. Noa's offering in the Post-Diluvian World equally corresponds to the paka offering of Manu, the surviving man after the Flood in Vedic legends. In the whole description of the patriarchal dispensation, the Veda seems to follow the lines of the Bible—the only difference being in the greater clearness and still the greater firmness and certainty of decision with which monotheism is upheld in the Jewish Scriptures. Almost in all other respects, the Vedas represent with equal clearness the ideals of the patriarchal dispensation in the ages of Noa, of Abraham, of Melchisedec, of Job and of other similar characters noticed in the Bible—when religious devotion was manifested by sacrifices and offerings as types of the Divine Saviour, "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." Indeed they indicate a state of religious thought still closer to the Christian ideal in its maturity.⁵

Krishna Mohan explains that the idea that the Lord of Creation was half mortal and half immortal is a nearer approach to the ideal of "Our

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵ *Two Essays as Supplements to the Arian Witness*, pp. 69-70.

Lord Immanuel" and that the idea that the Lord of the Universe sacrificed all creatures to Himself and eventually sacrificed Himself for them fits in with St Paul's idea (though conversely expressed) that, "If Christ died for all, then all were dead." Krishna Mohan explains: "When therefore the Author of the Universe is said to have first sacrificed all creatures to himself and in the end sacrificed himself also, we may take the first for the sentence of condemnation on all creatures for sin, and the second as a self-offering of the divine sacrificer—for their redemption—Himself the just and the justifier of the sinners."⁶

Thus, for Krishna Mohan, the biblical doctrine of salvation by the sacrifice of Christ finds a remarkable counterpart in the vedic understanding of salvation by the self-sacrifice of Christ. There he discusses how Jesus and Jesus alone fulfils what Prajapati stood for in the vedic tradition and that Jesus is the true Prajapati.

Krishna Mohan points out that the doctrine of self-sacrifice, as a figure of Prajapati, did not long continue in its integrity in subsequent Hindu tradition: the practice of sacrifice indeed continued, but its origin and object as a figure or type of a self-sacrificing Saviour and its chief characteristic as "the good vessel which carries us over the waves of sin" had long vanished from the conceptions of Hindus. Moreover, not a single character in the Hindu pantheon, or in the pantheon of any other nation, has claimed the position of one who offered himself as a sacrifice for the benefit of humanity. "That doctrine has long become obsolete. The position of Prajapati, himself the priest and himself the victim, no member of that pantheon has dared to occupy. His throne is vacant, and his crown without an owner." Then he goes on to say that the only worthy successor of Prajapati is Jesus. "No one can claim that crown and that throne in the hearts of the Hindus, who are true to the original teaching of the Vedas, as rightfully as the historical Jesus, who in name and character, as we have seen, closely resembles our primitive Prajapati."⁷

For Krishna Mohan, Jesus Christ not only resembles the primitive Prajapati, but he is the true Prajapati. He likens truth in the Veda to truth revealed in Jesus as a fragment to the whole. "It was in fact a fragment of a great scheme of salvation, which was at first partially revealed and has since appeared in its integrity in the person of Jesus Christ the true Prajapati of the world, and in His Church—the true Ark of salvation, by which we may escape from the waves of this sinful world." For him, the doctrine of the Vedas testify or witness to the truth that Jesus is the true Prajapati.

Christ is the true Prajapati—the true Purusha begotten in the beginning before all worlds, and Himself both God and Man. The doctrines of saving sacrifice "The primary religious rites"

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷ *The Relation between Christianity and Hinduism*, p. 20.

of the Rig-Veda,—of the double character Priest and victim, variously called Prajapati, Purusha, and Viswakarma,—of the Ark by which we escape the waves of the sinful world—these doctrines I say which had appeared in the Vedas amid much rubbish, and things worse than rubbish, may be viewed as fragments of diamonds sparkling amid dust and muck, testifying to some invisible fabric of which they were component parts, and bearing witness like planets over a dark horizon to the absent sun of whom their refulgence was but a feeble reflection.⁸

Jesus is the true Prajapati, the diamond, the true Sun. The doctrines of the Vedas are only fragments of the diamond sparkling amidst dust, the planets reflecting, though feebly, the light of the Sun. Then, Krishna Mohan significantly states, “The Vedas fore-shew the Epiphany of Christ. The Vedas shed a peculiar light upon that dispensation of Providence which brought Eastern sages to worship Christ long before the Westerners even heard of him.”⁹

Thus Krishna Mohan was aware that his fellow Christians would not accept his ideas. He reminded them that they should not be surprised if they found germs of Christian mysteries in Hindu Vedas. “Instead of indulging in mere feelings of wonder, let us give glory to God, whose mercy and grace cannot be contracted within the narrow limits of our puny ideas.”

Krishna Mohan acknowledges a historical continuity between vedic Hinduism and Christianity in India. According to him, no person can be a true Hindu without being a true Christian. The relation between vedic doctrine and Christianity is indeed so intimate that “you can scarcely hold the one without being led to the other, much less can you hold the one while resisting the claims of the other.”¹⁰ Therefore, he makes an earnest appeal to his Hindu friends thus:

Do not think what I have said is my voice only. . . , it is the voice of your primitive ancestors calling upon you in the words of their Vedas . . . If it were possible for those hoary Rishis to reappear in the world, they themselves would exhort you, nay beseech you, implore you, perhaps also constrain you not to neglect so great a salvation, not to waver in your duty to acknowledge and embrace the true Prajapati . . . The appeal I am pressing is an appeal from those in whose history, in whose traditions, in whose language you take such just pride . . . Embracing Christ, you will find in Him a strength and comfort which your ancient Rishis would have regarded as a most valuable treasure had they lived in these days. You will find in him everything worthy of your lineage, worthy of your antiquity, worthy of your tradition, and at the same time just to your children and to your successor, in life.¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.