THE BRAHMO SAMAJ SCHOOL

There has been a gradual, yet perceptible change of emphasis in the Brahmo Samaj since the time of Ram Mohan Roy. The central teaching of Ram Mohan Roy concerned the existence of one great God. He emphasized that the precepts of Jesus as given in the Sermon on the Mount were a guide to morality. Ethical and social righteousness he regarded as the way to life. To him this did not mean following Jesus Christ as a person, nor regarding him as a member of the Trinity. He accepted the Moslem idea of the unity of God. When he translated the Iskonani-shad on the Yajur Veda he referred in the title to it as "Establishing the Unity and Incomprehensibility of the Supreme Being, and that his worship alone can lead to Eternal Beatitude." He felt that the precepts of Jesus:

... contain not only the essence of all that is necessary to instruct mankind in their civil duties, but also the best and only means of obtaining the forgiveness of sins, the favour of God, and strength to overcome our passions and keep his commandments. (English Works of Baha Ram Mohan Roy, p. 552)

Though he retained many ideas taught by Hindus, he apparently rejected the thought of the eventual loss of identity of the individual as he returns to the great Source from which he sprung. He says in reply to Marshman's arguments for the deity of Jesus Christ that the unity of God and Christ was "as a subsisting concord of will and design" rather than an "identity of being." He rejected with Christians:

... the doctrine that the Supreme Being, the Son and the Apostles were to be absorbed mutually as drops of water into one whole; which is conformable to the doctrine of that sect of Hindu Metaphysics who maintain that in the end the human soul is absorbed into the God-head, but is quite inconsistent with the faith of all denominations of Christians.3

Ram Mohan Roy was a rigid believer in the absolute oneness of God. He was unable to accept the idea of an incarnation of God in Jesus Christ or any Hindu avatar. He could not accept the justice of salvation by the death of Christ for the sinner. The idea of an incarnation meant to him a step toward lowering the moral standard. He could not conceive of the almighty God humbling himself to become man. Ram Mohan Roy sought personal holiness and social righteousness. These goals he felt could be reached by following the precepts of Jesus, whom he regarded as God's special agent or messenger to man, but not the God-man.

When the leadership of the Brahmo Samaj was assumed by Debendranath Tagore, he stressed particularly the Vedas as the standard of faith, and nature and intuition as "the source of all religious knowledge." (L. B. Day, An Antidote to Brahmoism, p. 17)4

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This idea was vigorously opposed by Lal Bahari Day, who maintained that until the unapproachable God chose to reveal Himself and send a messenger to man to make known "The way to everlasting happiness", the world was unable from intuition, unaided reason, or nature to discover God or saving truth. To him "life and immortality are brought to light by the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). Because he held that the Brahma Samaj ideas of intuition left room for varying interpretation, and really had no divine authority as the basis for its teaching, he held it to be of no worth at all in the saving of the soul." (L. B. Day, An Antidote to Brahmoism, p. 46.5)

Nathaniel Goreh wrote extensively concerning the Brahma Samaj. He summarized its teachings in Theism and Christianity:

... Belief in one God, holy, almighty and most merciful God as creator of all, the ten commandments of morality, belief in personal immortality, punishment of sin and divine forgiveness, and everlasting life.6

Goreh refutes Ram Mohan Roy's thesis that the oneness of God was the invariable teaching of the Hindu sastras. To him, it was the impact of Christian Scripture and books that were the true source of the correct teachings of Ram Mohan Roy and other leaders of the Brahma Samaj. He discussed at length the idea that the major beliefs were the ideas taught in Vedic times and concluded that there may have been glimmerings of truth, but that these even in earliest times were mixed with error, and thus man can never arrive at correct religious truth except through contact with divine revelation. Thus he felt that the

6. Ibid., p. 44.
truths of the Brahmo-Samaj were derived from the Bible instead of the Vedas, since the Vedas never really taught these things.

Debendranath Tagore taught that repentance on the part of the sinner was all that was necessary for salvation. This act in itself atones for sin and a just God will not withhold pardon from man. Since the changes sin brings are in man and not God, we change ourselves from bad to good by repentance. God does not change. God allows troubles to man in order that man may realize his condition, come to his senses and repent. When he does this, nothing more is needed to satisfy God. God is not angry with sinners. He held that "the only aim of the divine government is the promotion of our happiness" and "the reformation of the criminal," and "that God punishes sinners for their good." (Yehemiah Goreh, The Brahmos: Their Idea of Sin)

Lal Behari Day, who refers to himself as formerly a Brahmo (in thought and reality, though not in name) replied to Tagore's statements at some length. He found in Christ the answer to the problem of human sinfulness, who as God-man took upon Himself the punishment due to man's sin, and by the Holy Spirit brings repentance to man and operates within man not only to bring penitence, but a purification of nature. Furthermore, man cannot repent by himself; the gift of repentance is by God's grace. (Lal Behari Day, An Antidote to Brahmoism, pp. 10, 142).

Pandita Ramabai also left the Prathanan Samaj (a more recent branch of the Brahmo Samaj) because she felt that it contained no revealed truth but only:

8. Ibid., pp. 47, 50.
what a man makes for himself. He chooses and gathers whatever seems good to him from all religions for his own use. The Brahmo religion has no other foundation than man's own natural light and the sense of right and wrong which he possesses with all mankind. (Pandita Ramabai, A Testimony, p. 18)9

Day, Ramabai, and especially Goreh predicted that eventually Brahmoism would either advance toward acceptance of Christianity or move toward Hindu Advaita Vedanta. In Keshub Chandra Sen it moved in the direction toward Christ; today it has become relatively insignificant with the resurgence of Advaita Vedanta philosophy which has largely controlled its later leaders.

The emphasis of the Brahmo-Samaj in the time of Keshub Chandra Sen was in Christ as the revelation of God in "divine humanity." Christ was so emptied of self that he became a transparent medium for the revelation of the God of holiness and truth through him. He thought of Christ as existing in God before He came to earth as an idea, a plan, a dispensation to-be-revealed. Christ was to him the final avatar, the final revelation of God to man. He became to man a perfect pattern for endless ages. He ascended to heaven and as spirit resides in the bosom of the eternal God. (P. C. Mazoomdar, Life and Teachings of Keshub Chandra Sen, pp. 113-115, 154-159.)10 It is interesting to note that P. C. Mazoomdar was led to an even closer contact with Christianity as, in his appreciation of Christ as the Messiah which he learned from Keshub Chandra Sen, he went on to full belief in the Christian faith. He was

10. Ibid., pp. 64, 65.
later followed by another former member of the Brahmo Samaj, Manilal Parekh, who also became a Christian. He was formerly a member of Keshub's New Dispensation Church.

While still a member of the Brahmo Samaj, Pratan Chandar Mazoomdar wrote that the Brahmo rejected some types of pantheism. He postulated that there is more than one type of pantheism, and he was opposed to one which destroyed divine or human personality. Thus he wrote:

Christ did not destroy his personality. Christ did not come to teach the miserable doctrine of absorption and annihilation. On the contrary, Christ has perpetuated and glorified his own personality and that of his followers by establishing between God and man the eternal relation of filial progress. Man's personality is then truly human and complete when it is not opposed to God, and being one with the Father is our genuine freedom.

The pantheism which he rejected was that which does not clearly distinguish between God and man, destroys the idea of the soul or does away with human personality. He denies:

That pantheism which identifies the universe with its Maker and man with God;... that pantheism which takes away the sinner's view of the painful spectacle of his own sins and leaves no field for repentance, progress, salvation, and a personal sense of God's grace; that pantheism which ignores the difference between man and God, the Brahmo Samaj repudiates. (P. C. Mazoomdar, The Oriental Christ, p. 40)
It was not that they rejected the idea of a spirit God that fills the universe. This spirit, however, was not an impersonal Being, but a "presiding providence." They could recognize in all nature the "glory and wisdom of the supreme spirit" and discern him in "the events of human life and history", and comprehend his "workings" in the life of prophets and saints.12

To Mazoomdar the divine Spirit was all-important, for the eternal God exists in spirit form and it is by that spirit that man is to reach his destiny. All the universe reflects the glory of him. All its beauty, love, purity, wisdom, and power is from him. In all nature he is revealed. The spirit becomes incarnate within man as man gradually draws nearer to him in response to "continually higher, clearer, nearer revelations through all things," and finally allows him to preside over body, mind and soul. "The best among men are most like him." Christ is given as an example of one in whom the spirit became most incarnate. (P. C. Mazoomdar, The Spirit of God, p. 28)13

The spirit of God works in nature by the three great forces that have created all:

The first is the force whereby God holds his own being and gives being to others; the second is the force by which he has intelligence and gives intelligence to others; the third is the force whereby he has love and joy and confers love and joy upon others.14

13. Ibid., p. 88.
14. Ibid., p. 49.
Because the spirit inspired all great poets, writers, prophets, religious leaders and scientists, whose writings and discoveries are shared by all men, he gives unity to mankind. He is one to all nations.

As Mozoomdar followed the thought and light of the spirit he came to love and accept Jesus Christ. He felt that the Brahmo Samaj had as its special task, the work of declaring the "Dispensation of the Spirit," which had gradually been developing down through the ages until today when the spirit has chosen to reveal himself. The goal of man is union with him, sharing his immortality. Through his incarnation in Jesus Christ we can be led into that unity. God cannot be approached as a man. But God can be known in Christ to some degree by man, for God was revealed in Christ in "nature and soul." We can become like him by receiving his spiritual gifts. These enable us to know "as much of the Infinite as he can be known on earth." As Christ was a son of the eternal, by following him we become sons. Yet all the while God remains supremely transcendent, unlike man, in being and glory far beyond our comprehension. By his spirit he enables man to be like him in character and thus, as Christ, become sons of God. (P. C. Mozoomdar, The Oriental Christ, p. 95)\(^{15}\)

As sons of God, men are thus children of one Father; thus all are brothers and sisters, friends bound together by love to help in the uplifting of each other because of a common interest and oneness.

Mozoomdar emphasizes that obedience to moral law as Ram Mohan Roy taught is not attainable by man in his natural state, but when he attains sonship with the eternal spirit he will act morally by nature,

or as he expresses it, "not unnatural", but by "supernatural power", by "nature beyond nature." (P. C. Mozoomdar, The Spirit of God, p. 19)\(^{16}\)

This gives to man

The superhumanity of the Eternal gives us an accomplishment which in the highest sense is miraculous. It is thus that the humanity of man finds itself continually exalted to higher planes of trust and achievement. (P. C. Mozoomdar, The Spirit of God, p. 21)\(^{17}\)

This divine humanity or true sonship was revealed in Jesus Christ. A test as to whether men possess that humanity, whether he is under the spirit's control is unity, and revealing the moral fruits of the spirit.\(^{18}\)

The indwelling spirit of the Eternal is thus man's way to eternal life, according to Mozoomdar's interpretation of Brahmoism.

Bhawani Charan Banerji, once a vigorous proponent of Brahmoism, took the name "friend of God" (Brahmobandhav) upon becoming a Christian. He found in the Vedas the teaching of the one supreme Being, a personal God, father, friend, rewarder and punisher, and arbiter of destinies. He vigorously rejected, however, the ideas of pantheism and transmigration and

The doctrines that God is all and all is God; that God is subject to endless cycles of emancipation or evolution;

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 98.
that God is not the Creator, only the moulder; that man passes through a series of births and deaths to expiate his sins and to attain perfection. (From *Sonia*, June, 1894, p. 11. A weekly journal published by Brahmobandhay)".

He very much opposed the ideas of spiritual evolution set forth by Annie Besant in her Theosophy, and Vivekananda, as well as the idea of transmigration of the Arya Samaj, accepted by them even though not actually taught in the Vedas.

Like Mozoomdar he believed that pantheism and transmigration were errors which must be removed from the Indian mind, and then Theism could be taught based on the Vedas, and upon the foundation of Theism Christianity could be built. He accepted Vedanta, but rejected Maya. (*Sonia*, October, 1894, p. 15). He believed that the Visishtadvaita philosophy of Ramanuja "was peculiarly adapted as the expression of Christian faith." Even though he felt that it contained errors, he regarded it as perhaps the closest to the truth.

In his periodical, the *Twentieth Century*, which succeeded *Sonia*, he wrote an article called "A Brief Outline of Christianity" in which he stated that the purpose for which man exists is to "know God as He is: to behold Him face to face; to be like Him; to be united with Him." It is not enough to know him as the First Cause; man is meant "to know Him intuitively without any medium, as being a life above and beyond the cosmos." This is made possible only as man's nature is

elevated and sanctified by supernatural grace cooperating with and perfecting man's natural abilities and nature. He said that Christianity teaches that God has himself revealed to man the nature of his inner life, how he lives within the unlimited horizon of the infinite without condescending to be a cause, and that the contents of that revelation can be acknowledged in faith, and assimilated in hope and love only by those who have been elevated and sanctified by grace. It also teaches that by practice of virtues (sadhana) in accordance with the light of Divine revelation, man is fitted in the long run to behold the very essence of God abiding in the bliss of correspondence of self with Self.

This grace was originally possessed by man but lost as a result of sin. It can be regained, however, for:

God ... has provided a means through which he can recover his original grace, and when it is restored to man. The end is not reached at once. Man has to fight against the downward bias (sanskara) imposed upon his nature by his karma (deed).

Man is aided in this struggle by divinely ordered means of grace provided in Christ in the atonement. This divine act, revealed in the life and death of Christ for man, teaches how God did condescend to be united:

He discussed the relationship of God to man and the means by which man can reach the divine ideal. This is possible because of the nature of God as a triune being. Man cannot know God by himself because his nature is finite and God is infinite. The true knowledge of God which makes this possible proceeds from God. God does not need such intervention from outside to know himself because:

The Infinite is the all and includes all. What then is the note which distinguishes the subject from the object God? Revelation teaches that the differentiating note in Divine knowledge is the response of intelligence. God begets in thought His infinite self image and reposes on it with infinite delight while the begotten self acknowledges responsively His eternal thought generation. ... The Infinite, Eternal God, who recognizes His own self reproduced in thought is the Father; and the same God who is the

Begotten image of Divinity who acknowledges the Father in Reason is the Logos, the son. ... The eternal intellectual act of Divine generation and the correspondence which binds the Father and his Logos—Image in the spirit of love completes the life of God and makes it self-sufficient. (Twentieth Century, Vol. 1, January 1901, pp. 60-68)23

He explains the nature of man in relation to the accepted Hindu Vedanta teaching of the five Sheaths. These he regarded as in man presided over by the "super-consciousness" or supreme Reason. In Christ, whom he calls the "time-incarnate Divinity", the same five sheaths are presided over by the "person of the Logos Himself" and not any created personality. In Christ the Divine and human were thus united in one, the incarnation which he calls the "adipurusha" or first man of the spirit world produced "by the power of the spirit of God, and not by the usual process of procreation." Jesus Christ is said to be:

God by the necessity of His being, but He became man by His own free choice. It was compassion for us that made Him our brother like us in sorrow and suffering, but without sin. Jesus Christ is perfectly divine and perfectly human. He is the incarnate Logos.24

Because he regarded sin as "the bondage of karma", which is separation from God and impossible to remove by any punishment — since no punishment is sufficient to erase the magnitude of the violation of divine law, justice, and order, — another way of salvation is necessary. To him:

The only way then to salvation is to be one with God who compassionates us by superimposing upon Himself sorrow and suffering for our transgression. 25

25 Ibid. p. 131