# REVELATION IN HINDUISM AND THE RISE OF HERETICAL VIEWS ABOUT BIBLICAL INSPIRATION AMONG MID-VICTORIAN BROAD CHURCHMEN (PART I)

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Whereas in earlier centuries the Church had been accustomed to profess that "the Word of God is the Bible," a certain theological circle in the mid-Victorian Church of England known as the Broad Church began to expound quite a different formula, "the Word of God is in the Bible," the transition to which reflects a significant shift of emphasis in the logical structures governing theories of revelation then prevailing. How this fundamental change in the dogmatic structures of Christian thinking came about is not an issue here; rather, we are concerned with how nineteenth-century British theologians found - or presumed to find - confirmation of their approach to the Bible in the discovery, conveyed to them through the instrumentality of Christians who had engaged in interreligious dialogue, that religions of Indian origin, Hinduism in particular, also have scriptures believed to be - in various senses - inspired. If all that purports to be revelatory cannot indeed be such, so they reasoned, then the divine elements in them must be distinguished from the human by a processs of logical and moral analysis from which not even the Bible could be exempt. That certain leading Broad Churchmen even then were turning eastward is not now generally well known, and the present study is an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which the new theories concerning revelation, though arising chiefly as part of a dialectical process within Christianity itself, were nonetheless made by theologians to appear more credible by broadening the context in which documents alleged to be inspired are studied.

Before entering into a detailed study of particular eastward-turning Broad Church theologians and the intermediaries who conveyed information on dialogue in India to them, it is useful to note how the existing literature treats this subject. Owen Chadwick's Victorian Church (1970) and M. A. Crowther's Church Embattled (1970) both contain stimulating discussions of the processes by which modern biblical criticism, responsible for the revised revelation formula, gained credence among Anglican clergymen in the mid-Victorian Church at the expense of those who remained convinced of the more traditional inspiration equation. As specialists in ecclesiastical history, these authors pay special attention to the fissiparous debates on revelation between divinity professors and prelates, in general dealing with the topic as an intrareligious affair - which it was - and as an intellectual transition that occurred wholly apart from developments taking place within interreligious dialogue - which it was not. Both writers chart the course of the new revelation theory's development, from its Germanic inception and dissemination among Anglican clergy and laity to its eventual legal vindication, a step that shall be discussed in more detail later. In their view - and under the

circumstances justly so – the Broad Church reappraisal of revelation and the criticism it evoked from traditional quarters was an affair governed strictly by intrareligious factors rather than one oriented, even minimally, eastward.

Neither Chadwick nor Crowther can be faulted for thoroughness insofar as their sources allowed them to assess the Broad Churchmen and their innovations concerning inspiration. They have, however, overlooked scattered references in the publications of this theological circle that indicate its members were looking to events in India to assure themselves that they were progressing in the right direction; but without clues afforded by other sources, these references were passed over as too obscure. These clues recently surfaced while research was being done by the present writer on a series of Hindu-Christian dialogues conducted by one JOHN MUIR, a highly reliable informant on Indian dogmatics and a lay-theologian of repute who sympathized with the Broad Churchmen, informing them about his encounters with Hindu partners-in-dialogue. These dialogues were then reflected upon with conspicuous interest by the Broad Church and incorporated into its literature.2 Our investigations put the Broad Churchmen into the even broader context of interpretation that adequate appreciation of their approach to revelation requires. But before we introduce their connection with India, we must enquire into what the Broad Church stood for, theologically, that predisposed it to regard Hinduism with a degree of seriousness uncommon in an era notable for unshaken confidence in its religious and cultural self-sufficiency.

### The Broad Church on Revelation

Respect for and avid study of German philosophy, theology, and philology more than any other single factor distinguished Broad Churchmen from their more conservative contemporaries, who were inclined, according to Crow-THER, to put all Germans into the same category with DAVID FRIEDRICH STRAUSS (1808-1874), whose Leben Jesu (1835) treated the Gospel narratives not as historical reality but as myth.3 Few Broad Churchmen sympathized with STRAUSS and others like him, such as F. C. BAUR (1792-1860) of Tübingen, but they envied the freedom to engage in theological investigations along novel lines that the German states guaranteed their clergy and professors, in contrast to which the Church of England's rules concerning clerical subscription appeared tantamount to ecclesiastical tyranny. A usually defiant stance toward orthodoxy, rather more in the sense of casting off dogmas treasured merely for their antiquity than opposition to ecclesiastical structures (some Broad Churchmen were prelates), characterized this loose alliance of likeminded men who valued private over corporate judgment in matters of religion.4 Not that Broad Churchmen advocated abstractly and for its own sake the right to free enquiry that was exercised in the German Protestant churches, for they were subject themselves to ecclesiastical scrutiny because of their ideas on revelation, to which we now turn.

While not in sympathy with a radical such as STRAUSS, Broad Churchmen

read and acknowledged the worth of moderate German Bible scholars, J. G. EICHORN (1752-1827), W. M. L. DE WETTE (1780-1849), G. H. A. EWALD (1803-1875) and others who applied to scriptural texts the principles that BARTHOLD GEORG NIEBUHR (1776–1831) first appplied to classical sources when preparing his history of Rome, principles of historical and philological accuracy that, when applied to the Bible as if it were to be treated as all books should be treated, tended to diminish confidence in its literal factuality and traditional interpretation. Whereas orthodox churchmen believed in plenary inspiration, which precluded error of any sort whatsoever in the scripture, Broad Churchmen alleged that, while the Bible's moral content was surely God-given, the context in which it was preserved might not be - in fact was not - wholly free from human error, either in the process of its transmission or at its original reception.5 In so thinking they separated themselves from the school of Evidential Apologetics (its foremost proponent being the Anglican divine William Paley, 1743-1805), which had insisted that the Bible's veracity can be demonstrated, contrary to DAVID HUME, by external proofs such as miracles, the integrity of eye-witnesses to incidents recorded in the Gospels, and the uninterruptedness of the literary tradition confirming them. Broad Churchmen instead relied upon so-called internal or moral evidences of the Bible as a revelation from God.

Here the influence from Germany flowed mainly from Kant, whose dual categories of "pure" and "practical" reason (pure reason being the capacity to draw logical conclusions based on sense-data and practical reason being the capacity to deduce abstract concepts from a priori knowledge) led to the idea that reason by itself could not establish the existence of God. The Broad Churchmen agreed with Kantian logic at this point, but, being theologians, believed that God had revealed himself to man, the proof of this being that human moral nature responds reflexively – echoing Kant's "categorical imperative" – to the divine moral nature encountered in the scripture. This they had learned from Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), one of the earliest Broad Churchmen, who had synthesized his own idea of man's spontaneous and direct communication with God and Kant's notion of practical reason.

These two assumptions, the one coming from Niebuhr and his disciples and the other indirectly from Kant, combined in such a way that Broad Churchmen were emboldened to dispense with traditional proofs on which Christianity had theretofore rested, miracles and prophesy in particular. In accordance with Coleride's syncretized Kantianism, they thought Christianity attracted men because it was in harmony with their a priori sense of justice and morality, this being demonstrable to anyone whose moral nature was properly attuned to itself. Miracles and prophesy no longer being indispensable adjuncts to faith, Broad Churchmen could therefore relate to them without fearing that Christianity would collapse were they undermined by science or other means.<sup>6</sup>

It was for assumptions such as these that Broad Churchmen came into conflict with ecclesiastical authorities upon the publication of Essays and

Reviews (first edition 1860) which, despite eventual vindication, aroused indignation and, for a time, even official censure of all that was alluded to above. The contributors to this volume included clerical educators, Henry Bristow Wilson (1803–1888), Frederick Temple (1821–1902), Rowland Williams (1817–1870), Baden Powell (1796–1860), Mark Pattison (1813–1884), and a layman, Benjamin Jowett (1817–1893) the classicist. Two threads of thought running through these essays are especially worth noting here: Christianity does not stand or fall depending on the fate to which secular judges consign its record of alleged historical events; and revelation is demonstrated to be such by the chord that it strikes in the minds of moral men.<sup>7</sup>

Ideas such as these could hardly seem less than inimical to those who believed in the plenary inspiration of the scriptures, according to which theory miracles and prophesies must, a fortiori, be true because they are as much a part of the Bible as its moral content. To attempt to distinguish, however devoutly, between the moral and the immoral, the more moral from the less moral, was not just presumptuous to orthodox minds but also heretical; and although the ensuing legal battle was waged on other grounds as well, the issue of revelation was primarily at stake. Though other essayists avoided prosecution,8 WILLIAMS and WILSON were brought before the Court of Arches in 1861, indicted and found guilty on charges of having contradicted the Anglican articles of religion by teaching that the Bible was not inspired in all its parts. Upon an appeal of several years duration, both WILLIAMS and Wilson were cleared by Lords of the Privy Council (8 February 1864), after which time to hold Broad Church views, even those on inspiration, was not only acceptable but legal. Thus did Broad Churchmen actually succeed in broadening the Church according to their understanding of it.9 WILLIAMS and Wilson, the two most notorious Broad Church essayists, constitute our point of departure, for they were the ones who most avidly turned eastward. 10 But first we must elucudate more specifically what it was in these ideas that induced them to do so.

From the present-day standpoint, according to which a plurality of religions and even of revelations is taken by many to be granted, the Broad Churchmen cannot but seem naive when we realize that they were just then becoming aware that the great oriental religions have sacred literatures surpassing in scope and sophistication anything they had theretofore known, whether primitive or classical, except perhaps Islam, which was still largely misunderstood. It is important to understand that, within their context, this discovery was at once unsettling and liberating. For if, as orthodox opponents held, God is beyond the reach of the unaided human intellect, making a revelation from God necessary for salvific knowledge, then disbelievers may always insist upon proof that the Christian revelation, and none other, is the true one. And if Christians fall back upon Evidential Apologetics, citing miracles and allegedly fulfilled prophesies, this will hardly suffice to convince anyone but one who is already Christian: miracles were being undermined by scientific knowledge in the West and in the East were paralleled by similar accounts of preternatural occurrences. Better, then, to

dispense with external evidences altogether, concentrating instead upon Christianity's moral excellence. But, having traded one type of evidence for another, Broad Churchmen came up against a further problem, one which their loyalty as Christians constrained them from grappling with seriously: the question of whether the universal moral faculty that they talked about so much meant that Christianity was less than *sui generis*, that its preeminence would diminish in proportion to the degree that other religions are understood as reflexive responses of this sense to the divine, responses differing only in degree but not in kind. That Williams and Wilson were moving along these lines will now become clear.<sup>11</sup>

### Rowland Williams

A Welsh clergyman who served as vice-principal and professor of Hebrew at St. David's Theological College, Lampeter, and as a country parson near Salisbury before running afoul of the ecclesiastical courts in 1861, ROWLAND WILLIAMS evinced an early interest in oriental religions while tutoring in classics at King's College, Cambridge, where much of his early career was spent. A five-hundred pound reward having been offered by JOHN MUIR, the aforementioned Christian Orientalist, for the best exposition by a Cambridge scholar of the essential dogmas of Christianity vis-à-vis the Hindu systems of philosophy, 12 Williams submitted the winning essay in 1848, entitled Hinduism and Christianity. This was a time in which Indian studies were still in their nascence and so it is noteworthy that a theologian had exerted himself to the degree that this one did in acquiring knowledge that was then almost impossible to obtain without studying Sanskrit. The essay was expanded into a sizeable book and published in 1856, again due to Murk's beneficence, under a Sanskrit titele, Paramēswara-jnyāna-goshthī, subtitled in English: A Dialogue of the Knowledge of the Supreme Lord, in which are Compared the Claims of Christianity and Hinduism (Cambridge). 13 The book was read assiduously and praised by Broad Churchmen, including the Germans Baron Christian von BUNSEN (1791-1860) and EWALD; WILLIAMS himself considered it his most mature work, surpassing even the later publications that made him notorious and almost a martyr, Rational Godliness (1854) and Lampeter Theology (1856).14 Styled in the form of a Socratic dialogue between Anglican divines, brahmin pandits, and Buddhist cenobites, Paramēswara-jnyāna-göshthī became WILLI-AMS's pulpit for preaching Broad Church views on historical criticism of sacred texts, miracles, and the moral and immoral evidences of true and false religion in three sections: the first on the six Hindu philosophical systems and the chronology of Indian literature; the second on the early Christian Church and classical period; and the third on the principle dogmas of Christianity, as he understood them.

According to his biographer, Williams was for awhile plunged into doubt when writing this study in comparative theology, for he could not help but believe that the scholarly tests for determining historical accuracy that were applied to the chronology and authorship of Indian scriptures must also be

practised upon his own. 15 Were one to dismiss the Hindu's belief in his own scriptures' inspiration as merely a traditional assumption susceptible to doubt and scientific enquiry, on no grounds whatsoever, except blatant partiality, could one justify exempting one's own belief. If philology and literary criticism raised doubt about the authorship and chronology of the Vedas, did not the same scientific procedures raise doubt about biblical passages and even entire books, the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch for instance? As for miracles, how could anyone who believes that Jesus Christ fed great multitudes with a few loaves and fishes, defend this miracle and simultaneously insist that the account of Yudhiṣṭhira feeding 60,000 hungry brahmins with a magic vessel (akṣayabhājana) is the invention of childish imagination? To do so would surely be prejudicial. Yet for all his questioning, Williams did not cease to be a Christian, resolved his doubts, and committed himself to a soundly Broad Church theology.

The solution, Crowther says, "was not to reject Biblical miracles [or the essential integrity of the Judeo-Christian literary tradition], but, like Coleridge, to assert that they were not the true evidences of Christianity, which survived only because it was the most perfect moral guide for man." And each man, regardless of religious affiliation, can judge – there was of course no question of judging differently when properly informed – Christianity's unparalleled moral excellence; for each man is possessed of a "verifying faculty", meaning the capacity to discern that in a purported revelation which harmonizes with one's own moral nature – there was again no question that anyone's moral nature was essentially unlike William's – and that which did not. Applied to missionary endeavors, all this would imply that Hindus must simply be brought face to face with the moral qualities displayed in Jesus Christ, not forced through argument to concede to allegedly more miraculous miracles in Christianity.

Having resolved his doubts in this fashion, Williams went on to elaborate and defend his Broad Church ideas without relinquishing any position assumed while writing Paramēswara-jnyāna-gōshthī and without returning ever again to the subject of Hinduism either. Pondering his position on revelation vis-à-vis Hinduism did not lead him to new insights on the fruitlessness of apologetics as exercised by the Evidential School of Theology, for these he had previously derived from Germanic sources, Coleridge and others; but considering the ramifications of his insights, borrowed elsewhere, within an interreligious context, using brahmins and Buddhists as foils, served to confirm in an easily demonstrable way that British churchmen, as churchmen everywhere, were called upon to exercise their verifying faculties, to distinguish those parts of the Bible that were more authoritative – because more moral – from those which were less so, with the same open and critical mind that one would adopt toward the purported revelation in another religion.

It remains now to be seen just how WILLIAMS learned about Hinduism's theories of revelation, its miracle stories, and, most importantly, how he was able to know, without ever having engaged in dialogue with actual Hindus,

that pandits were not at all impressed with arguments based on external evidences, and countered the dogma of plenary inspiration with their own revelation dogmas.

## John Muir, the Intermediary

The Orientalist who counselled WILLIAMS and to whom he dedicated Paramēswara-jnyāna-gōshthī was John Muir (1810–1882), the son of a Glasgow merchant, who was gazetted by the East India Company as magistratecollector to a number of North Indian administrative centers (e. g., Farrukhabad, Gorakhpur, Delhi and Fatepur) between 1828 and retirement to Edingburgh in 1853. Mur began his tenure in India with evident sympathy for the type of evangelical Anglicanism associated with the Cambridge cleric CHARLES SIMEON (1759-1836), whose ally on the East India Company's board of directors, Charles Grant (1746–1823), had managed to appoint many of his own curates as chaplains to the very cities where Mur was posted, and whose foster-son, James Thomason (1804-1853), became Lieutenant Governor of the North Western Provinces (1843–1853) and was Mura's superior at the time. 18 Although Mur is now remembered only for his Indological studies, 19 his Indian career was notable throughout for its dedication to missions, in the service of which he drew upon his direct knowledge of Sanskrit literature and philosophy. While Mura's enthusiasm for the propagation of Christianity remained constant, his attachment to Evangelicalism did not. Upon departure from India in 1853, his theological convictions had shifted dramatically from what they were in 1828; because of India he was susceptible to Broad Church ideas. What happened to him there can be traced during two phases of intellectual growth: an evangelical phase (1828-1840) and, for want of better words, since he was not yet a Broad Churchman, a searching phase (1841 onwards in India).

Soon after commencing the study of Bengali and Sanskrit at Calcutta's College of Fort William under the tireless and erudite William Carey (1767–1837), the Baptist missionary stationed at nearby Serampore, Murk began to write poetry full of visionary predictions of India soon forsaking its ancient dogmas ("vain fictions of a trembling mind"<sup>20</sup>) and turning en masse to evangelical Christianity. Surely naive yet scholarly, Murk wanted to hasten India's conversion by acquisition of its learned language, Sanskrit, by means of which he could converse with brahmins, the guardians of Bharata's spiritual traditions. What Murk intended to tell them – and did tell them in tract after tract – was what evangelicals everywhere profess: that the creator God is personal and became incarnate in Jesus Christ; that men are sinful and lost without faith in God's Son; and that the Bible alone is the key to these salvific truths.<sup>21</sup> No hint of Broad Church ideas here nor, oddly enough, much ability to anticipate the counterarguments that his brahmin audience would raise, despite his wide reading in their religio-philosophical systems.

(to be continued)

<sup>1</sup> For details on these processes, consult Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church, 2 (An Ecclesiastical History of England, 5), London 1970, 75–111, and M. A.* Crowther, *Church Embattled: Religious Controversy in Mid-Victorian England,* Hamden, Conn. 1970, which deals comprehensively with Broad Church figures in chapters two through five. Despite my attempt to supplement the research of Chadwick and Crowther, I am deeply indebted to both of them, except for material directly bearing on the India connection.

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough study of these dialogues, see RICHARD F. YOUNG, Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India (De Nobili

Research Library Series, 8), Vienna 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Crowther, op. cit., 40ff. It should be noted that Broad Churchmen were attracted to the works of August and Friedrich Schlegel, noted early Indologists whose researches led them into a mystical theology. Less acceptable but still read were Hegel's traetises, including Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion, which discussed Hinduism. For details on the Schlegels' and Hegel's understanding of this religion, consult W. Halbfass, Indien und Europa: Perspektiven ihrer geistigen Begegnung, Basel 1981, 100–116.

(See book review p. 252).

<sup>4</sup> The Broad Church is sometimes misleadingly mentioned alongside of the Low and High Church parties as if it constituted a third division within the Church of England organized for the purpose of reconciling Low and High Churchmen with each other. Such was not the case, for the Broad Church was never a faction among other Anglican factions, but rather a loosely allied set of individual thinkers. Broad Churchmen managed to agree with one another on only one basic point, that authority in matters of religion lay in private judgment rather than in scripture alone, as Low Churchmen held, or in scripture as the Church interpreted it, as High Churchmen believed. Broad Churchmen were "broad" not in terms of membership but in the sense of "broadminded," in that they placed the highest value on the individual conscience and were therefore willing, at least in theory, to tolerate new interpretations of the Bible even though they might conflict with treasured dogmas of the established Church (Crow-THER, op. cit., 29-30). The Broad Church movement might now be subsumed under the contemporary appelation "liberal Anglicanism", a term which is avoided here because of its political overtones and because it was not in use during the nineteenth century. We would obscure the shades of contrast between the various theologians known as Broad Churchmen were we to name them here without describing their peculiar emphases individually. A list of the two generations into which they fall can be found in Crowther, op, cit., 30-31. We shall limit our discussion to the Broad Churchmen who contributed to Essays and Reviews (see infra).

<sup>5</sup> Crowther, op. cit., 32.

<sup>6</sup> While conspicuously embarassed by the whole subject of miracles and inclined to emphasize the possible moral lessons in them, Broad Churchmen abstained from directly addressing the question whether or not Jesus Christ actually had worked miracles (Crowther, op. cit., 77).

<sup>7</sup> Following the synopsis of Essays and Reviews given in Chadwick, op. cit., 77.

Due to death, lay-status, or the comparative innocuousness of their ideas.

A succinct account of the proceedings is included in CHADWICK of cit. 75–9

<sup>9</sup> A succinct account of the proceedings is included in Chapwick, op. cit., 75–97.

<sup>10</sup> As incidental evidence of their eastward orientation, the fact should not be overlooked that the great German Sanskritist and editor of the Sacred Books of the East series, F. Max Müller (1823–1900), accepted an invitation to contribute to Essays and Reviews, but for unknown reasons failed to follow through. Again, in 1870 when Wilson and Jowett were planning a new but never realized publication by the same title, Müller's participation was requested. Müller paid dearly for his Broad Church

sympathies; because of them he was passed over for appointment to the Sanskrit chair at Oxford, which went instead to M. Monier-Williams, a good scholar indeed, but

equally important, an evangelical churchman (Crowther, op. cit., 64, 124).

It is well to note here that an early and prominent Broad Churchman, FREDERICK DENSION MAURICE (1805–1872), wrote one of the nineteenth century's most widely read guides to non-Christian religions, The Religions of the World in their Relations to Christianity (London 1840), in which revelation, even though partial and usually indecipherable, was assumed to be deposited: "I ask nothing more than the Hindoo system and the Hindoo life as evidence that there ist that in man which demands a Revelation – that there ist n o t that in him which makes the revelation" (quoted in E. SHARPE, Faith Meets Faith: Some Christian Attitudes to Hinduism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, London 1977, 14). MAURICE was a precursor of the fulfillment-theory popularized by J. N. FARQUHAR (1861–1929), both of whom posited a universal human moral need, however diversely reflected by cultures and religious systems, that only the Christian's Christ can satisfy, thereby bringing the legitimate aspirations of all religions to the peak of their innate development.

12 This is just one instance of Mura's philanthropic fostering of theological studies by Christian students of Hinduism. Through him prizes were awarded in 1840 by Oxford to J. B. Morris for An Essay toward the Conversion of Learned and Philosophical Hindus (London 1843) and in 1851 by the Archbishop of Canterbury to James R. Ballantyne for Christianity Contrasted with Hindu Philosophy (London and Benares 1859). Details on Mura's encouragement of works on comparative theology from a Christian perspective and analysis of them by an Indologist will be found in Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire, "De l'État actuel de la philosophie hindoue dans ses rapports avec le Christianisme," Journal des

Savants, 1864, 173-88.

13 Not as Crowther mistakes (op. cit., 84), under the original essay's title, Christianity and Hinduism, and in 1856 not 1857. The modern and correct Sanskrit transcription would be Parameśvara [supreme lord] jñāna [knowledge] goṣṭhī [conversation or discussion].

14 Art. Rowland Williams, in: Dictionary of National Biography, 21 [London 1917], 451.

15 E. WILLIAMS (ed.), Life and Letters of Rowland Williams, London 1874, 348–49.

<sup>16</sup> The account of this miracle is found in the Mahābhārata, 3.3.1–3.4.8.

<sup>17</sup> Crowther, op. cit., 84.

<sup>18</sup> Detailed analysis of the evangelical orientation of administrators in the North Western Provinces may be found in P. Penner, *The James Thomason School in Northern India, 1822–1853.* Ph. D. diss., McMaster University, a summary of which is included in

Young, op. cit., 51ff.

<sup>19</sup> Mura's monumental five-volume work, *Original Sanskrit Texts* (London [1st ed.] 1858–63, [2nd ed.] 1868–1873), was often reprinted and is still a standard sourcebook for Indic scholars. These volumes never betray that the author's original purpose was to furnish missionaries with the most accurate information possible on logical contradictions and chronological problems in Hindu literature.

<sup>20</sup> India's Resurrection, in: Calcutta Christian Observer 5 (1836), 360–61. Other specimens of Murk's youthful poetry, replete with missionary themes, were printed in a collection at his own expense, Passages, Ancient and Modern, from the Story of India (Calcutta 1833).

<sup>21</sup> The difficulties in conveying these doctrines in Sanskrit, the only terms available being those that had been associated with Hinduism for millenia, were of course immense. Analysis of how Muir adapted Sanskrit nomenclature is found in Young, op. cit., 60–69.