



January 1996

Reginald Heber and Hindu-Christian Dialogue

Geoffrey Cook

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cook, Geoffrey (1996) "Reginald Heber and Hindu-Christian Dialogue," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 9, Article 10.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1132>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Reginald Heber and Hindu-Christian Dialogue

Geoffrey Cook
Berkeley

HINDUISM AND CHRISTIANITY have lived closely together in parts of the Subcontinent since the Apostle Thomas's missionary visit in the first century of the Christian era.¹ But in the last five centuries of direct European and South Asian contact that relationship has gained a Subcontinent-wide propinquity, and has often been quite competitive, for the meeting between India and Europe was between tradition and modernity.²

Christianity and Hinduism both exerted influence over their Other.³ But before influence flowed over each Other, mental constructs had to be raised so each could understand their Other in terms that made cultural sense to itself. The 19th-century British empire in India depended upon a structure blue-printed by the Utilitarian philosophers in league with the Christian missionaries.⁴ Although the picture painted of Hinduism was grossly unfair,⁵ the missionary process opened up the possibility of dialogue.⁶

Reginald Heber, 1783-1826, the second Anglican bishop of Calcutta, has been called Britain's Chief Missionary to the East, and many of his decisions and policies were germinal in the extension of Christianity during the British Imperial period, and in the development of that religion in its relationship with the dominant religion of independent India.

Bishop Heber's life and work represent the high moral strand of the British imperial project in the East and, compared to previous political fathers of British paramountcy, a man of Heber's stature was

a breath of fresh air which began a new era of British policy toward India, which blunted the *realpolitik* of the political officers at the beginning of the 19th century.

To Heber England was entrusted to high action,⁷ with moral responsibilities,⁸ for him, wherever Christianity went, "civilization" went also.⁹ In fact it was the imperial duty to missionize;¹⁰ to bring light "to the tents of the Indians".¹¹

Edward Said has pointed out that the commitment to empire was often above profit - even a metaphysical obligation.¹² And we can perceive this in Bishop Heber's career.

Looking back from the end of our century, we have developed a cynical attitude to the missionary project of Heber's generation, and often relegate the emerging altruistic impulse to a secondary position - more from our own current historical prejudices - often down-playing its historical importance to the maintenance of the imperial project. For these altruistic models helped reform and thereby helped maintain the emerging international capitalist world order of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Strangely, it must be admitted that Heber's altruism, in terms of its historical models and rhythms (that have evolved into our own models and rhythms), which make it even possible for us to discuss the possibility of an Hindu-Christian dialogue, holds up well in spite of the imperial world view it grew out of.

These altruistic models were based often on religious and reform movements in

Western Europe and especially in England. And they challenged the indigenous Hinduism in India, and Hinduism met the challenge with a reform movement of its own, from which Neo-Hinduism derived. Bishop Reginald Heber was a chief Christian player in this process.

James Mill, the central early-19th-century British theoretician of the Indian empire, felt that "In India, the true test of the government, as affecting the interest of the English nation is found in its financial results..."¹³ but, in contrast, Heber is quoted as stating "Providence had opened up so wide a field of *usefulness* for the British nation".¹⁴ The difference between Mill's and Heber's attitude towards the Indian opportunity can best be described as using versus usefulness. To Mill, India is an object of profit while to Heber it is an object of altruistic endeavour. But, to the latter too, it is still an object without self-agency where the patient's interest is determined by the imperial agent.

Robert Southey expressed this trend of thought in his poem "On the Portrait of Reginald Heber" in memory of his friend:

Large England is the debt
Thou owest to Heathendom
To India most of all where Providence,
Giving thee thy dominion there in trust,
Upholds its baseless strength.

Thither our saintly Heber went,
In promise and in pledge
That England from her guilty torpor rous'd
Should zealously and wisely undertake
Her awful task assigned¹⁵

Although we as post-moderns tend to take a cynical position to an altruistic posture, we still must attest that religion applied to moral and ethical problems has often ameliorated the very worst situations of social and political oppression. This is a major factor in historically understanding the imperial project in India and it is one of the reasons why it succeeded for so long and why it was able to gain loyalty from indigenous power structures which were

potentially or actually in opposition to the British.

Heber deeply desired to do something for the people and, curiously, this was an issue for him in the writing of his classic of colonial discourse and travel literature, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India*.¹⁶ Primary to this is the education of the natives,¹⁷ but of course for the Bishop the end purpose of this was to make them into good Episcopalians and thereby loyal subjects to the king who was the Church's temporal head.

And, further, Heber insists that Christianity is *progressive*.¹⁸ But this "progressive" sense was tinged with paternalism¹⁹ and *noblesse oblige*.²⁰ This imperial Christian sense of service was expressed by Heber in a sermon preached twice in England and once in Madras: "... To die is the lot of all men, but let us so live to die may be our gain and our immortality".²¹

Stranger still, under the Indian environment, he became like a Hindu mystic in many ways, acutely aware of the value of the present moment.²² Important to our study is the fact that Reginald Heber had a Weberian type of charisma,²³ as the prelate's personal chaplain Thomas Robinson reports: "...the extraordinary fascination of the Bishop's character extended over every person who came within the sphere of his influence".²⁴ In short, Heber gained much in style from the indigenous Hindu holy men around him which helped him achieve spiritual stature in native eyes.

Altruism, as such, is often a political prerogative of class. As Sir Thomas Munro, the important president of the Madras Presidency aptly pointed out in an elegiac address on the late Bishop:

when these qualities are, as they were in him united to *taste*, to genius, to high station, and still higher intellectual attainments, they form a character such as he was, eminently calculated to excite our love and veneration.²⁵

In short, the values (altruism) of an archaic feudal aristocracy were applied in opposition to the values of the hegemonic mercantile British middle class to reshape Britain's relationship to its colony. It also greatly reshaped Protestant Christianity's relationship to the indigenous Hinduism around it. And we see in Dr Heber's writings, when compared to past constructs, a slight but important shift²⁶ in the perception of the Indian – from a morally vile subject to a decent person with a less than perfect religion.

It is a curious fact that Heber and Rammohan Roy, the father of Neo-Hinduism, were aware of each other,²⁷ and possibly met when they both resided in Calcutta. Heber, either personally or indirectly through the burgeoning missionary movement which His Lordship fostered, highly influenced Roy and his thinking, for Rammohan, whose work is basic to modern Hindu thought, saw the encounter with Christianity as a positive challenge to Hinduism, and Christianity encouraged Roy to set up a schema replacing monism with monotheism. Therefore, in a strange twist, by historically retracing the changes of habit, Heber was an important element to the European awakening which has since turned against itself,²⁸ and he is therefore one of the sources, retroactively, of a Hindu re-awakening, and is a vital historical ancestor to the Hindu-Christian dialogue.

Heber had an acute sense that he and the British period would be judged for the blessings they would leave behind.²⁹ Yet Heber was guilty of the most extreme imperialist hubris through the administration of his missionary project³⁰ which, with that of a myriad of lesser missionaries, has soured the Christian relationship with Hinduism and the other religions of India over the years and which, in order for a Hindu-Christian dialogue to succeed at all, now has to be transcended.

While on the one hand Heber had an extremely strong sense for the future course

of history, on the other he was incapable, as Edward Said has demonstrated for the great majority of Europeans during the imperial period,³¹ of interrupting the prevailing discourse, and admit the possibility of future independent agency for India's indigenous. Therefore, Heber's labours were very much part of the imperial project and essential to it. But to appreciate which of those labours are of value to us as post-moderns involved in the sincere process of inter-religious dialogue, we must separate the spiritual from the political and step aside to free ourselves from our contemporary cynicism over the missionary project in British India.

Basic and forward looking in the outlook of Reginald Heber was his qualified spirit of tolerance and respect for religious Others, which was ahead of his contemporaries: "...deceit is no more a justified method of conversion than violence".³² For he believed "...So closely united, indeed, and linked together are mankind both in their welfare and in their suffering".³³ He also instructed his missionaries to be "discrete"³⁴ so as not to ruffle the society in which they dwelled. His Lordship's work and what followed from it became crucial to the Christian cause in India and its relations to the Hindu world around it.

It would be impossible to separate Heber's spiritual legacy from the political patrimony that he was part of bequeathing before 1947. Politically, agency had to devolve from the imperial to the indigenous. Curiously, Heber himself became central to this very process. In one sense, it seems an unconscious process. But, in another, Bishop Heber became a spiritual vehicle only through the high moral qualities that he was able to cultivate from the gifts that were given to him and through his sincere and diligent performance of his duties. The Protestant Christian policies that the bishop influenced and directed and often changed helped bring Christianity and Hinduism into a dialogue which can now never be reversed.

Notes

1. Saint Thomas's mission is traditional, and may not have been historical. Suffice it to say, there has been an ancient Christian Church on the southwestern coast of India since the earliest centuries of the Christian era.
2. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: Essay in Understanding*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1988, pp.371 & 489.
3. Raymond Schwab, G. Patterson Black & V. Reinking (Transl.), *Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East*. New York: Columbia Univ. Pr., p. 7.
4. Ronald Inden, *Imaging India*. Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1990, p. 89.
5. Raymond Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*. pp.43-4.
6. Wilhelm Halbfass, pp. 43-4.
7. Archdeacon Thomas Robinson, *The Last Days of Bishop Heber*. London: Jennings & Chaplin, 1831 [3rd ed.], p. 60. [Entry for September 18th, 1825].
8. Reginald Heber, *Sermons Preached in England*. London: J. Murray, 1829, pp.203-4.
9. Reginald Heber, *Sermons Preached in England*. pp.202-3.
10. Reginald Heber, *Sermons Preached in India* London: J. Murray, 1829, pp. 209-10.
11. Reginald Heber, *Sermons Preached in England*. pp.184-5.
12. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: A. Knopf, 1993, p. 10.
13. Mill, James, *The History of British India*. IV H.H. Wilson (Ed.), London, 1844 [4th ed.], p.506.
14. Quoted in Derek Hughes's *Bishop Sahib: A Life of Reginald Heber*. Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1986. (Italics mine.)
15. Quoted in Amelia Shipley Heber's *The Life of Reginald Heber, D.D.: Lord Bishop of Calcutta*. Vol. II, London: J. Murray, 1830, p. 517.
16. Heber, Reginald, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India*. I, London, 1844, p. 153.
17. Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India*, I, p.169.
18. Reginald Heber, *Sermons Preached in India*. p. 185.
19. Reginald Heber, *Narrative through the Upper Provinces of India*. I, 1844, p. 293.
20. Reginald Heber, *Journey through the Upper Provinces of India*. I, p. 13.
21. See *Sermons Preached in England*. p. 334.
22. *Sermons Preached in India*, pp. 30-1.
23. See Sir Robert Comyn's statement quoted in Amelia Heber, *The Life of Reginald Heber, D.D.: Lord Bishop of Calcutta II*, P. 451.
24. Thomas Robinson Thomas, *The Last Days of Bishop Heber*. p. 331.
25. Thomas Robinson, *The Last Days of Bishop Heber*. p. 336. (Italics mine.)
26. Reginald Heber, *Narrative of a Journey to the Upper Provinces of India*. I, p. 156. "...Of the natural disposition of the Hindoo... they are constitutionally kind-hearted, industrious, sober, and peaceable at the same time that they show themselves, on proper occasions a manly and courageous people. All that is bad about them appears to arise either from the defective motives which their religion supplies, or their wicked actions which it records of their gods, or encourages in their own practice..." (Italics mine.)
27. George Smith, *Bishop Heber: Poet and Chief Missionary to the East: Second Lord Bishop of Calcutta*. London, 1895, p. 168. Heber describes Roy as an apostate Brahmin.
28. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: Essay in Understanding*. pp. 12-13 & 19.
29. George Smith, *Bishop Heber: Poet and Chief Missionary to the East: Second Lord Bishop of Calcutta*. p. 168 quotes Heber in an address to the Bombay Presidency, Mountstuart Elphinstone, during the spring of 1825: "...even if the sway of England, like other dynasties should pass away... we shall be chiefly remembered by the blessings which we have left behind."
30. Amelia Heber, *The Life of Reginald Heber, D.D.: Lord Bishop Calcutta II*, p. 425 quotes a prayer of the Bishop: "Bless likewise, Oh Lord, all the potentates and former rulers, all the subjects and people of this land; that the loss of earthly dominion may be repaid by a Heavenly, and that they may have cause to rejoice in that

dispensation of Thy Providence which hath made strangers to be Lords over them.”

31. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. 1993, p.xxi.
32. Reginald Heber, *The Personality and Office of the Christian Comforter Asserted and*

Explained in a Course of Sermons on John XVI:7. Oxford, 1816, p. 28.

33. Reginald Heber, *Sermons Preached in England*. 1829, p. 443.
34. Reginald Heber, *Sermons Preached in India*. p. 194.