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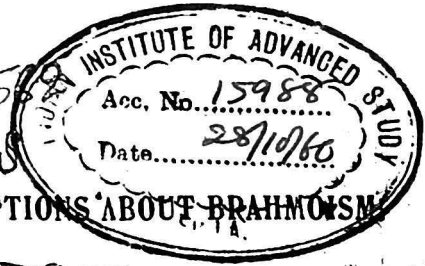
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## SOME POPULAR MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BRAHMOISM

I purpose to give an exposition of the leading doctrines of Brahmoism in a series of discourses later on. In the short space of an hour that you have kindly allotted to me, all I can do is to try to clear, as best as I can, certain misconceptions about our faith.

There is a good deal of misrepresentation about the religion of the Brahma Samaj. And for this, I confess, we ourselves are mainly responsible. As a matter of fact we have not yet made any persistent effort to propagate our faith. We have not more than half a dozen centres of Brahma activity in the whole of this province. Our number, though it has been steadily increasing in recent years, is still very small, and, with one or two exceptions, all our members are laymen mostly engaged in secular work and having but very little time to devote to the mission work of the Brahma Samaj. We have two or three fortnightly papers but their circulation is very limited. Not to speak of the masses of illiterate population, even the educated classes have a very imperfect knowledge of what Brahmoism really is. It is, therefore, a matter of little or no surprise, if those among our enlightened countrymen whose minds are unbiassed, and who bear no ill-will towards us, should form their own notions of Brahmoism on the basis of the very meagre information they possess about it.

There is, however, a well-known class of our critics, who are well acquainted with the religious literature of the Brahma Samaj, and who read our papers and attend our lectures and addresses, but would not deal fairly with us. They misinterpret and misrepresent our doctrines and vilify the best of our leaders, very often out of spite and sectarian bigotry and sometimes for the sake of mere fun. They are taking every available means to lower the Brahma Samaj in the estimation of the public, and, if possible, to demolish what they believe to be a serious obstacle in the way of their movement, acting on the principle that any institution which is not distinctly their own has no justification to exist. The wish is father to the thought and no wonder they often think as if the Brahma Samaj is actually dead. And out of pity or per-

haps as an act of piety, they never fail to perform the last sacred rites. The fact is that it is the ghost of the Brahmo Samaj, a phantom, a creature of their own fertile brains, that troubles them so often. To be serious, the Brahmo Samaj is a community of five thousand men, women and children, at the lowest estimate, of which each adult or elderly member, as a practical reformer in his own limited sphere, has the courage of his convictions and has borne the bitterest persecution, even ex-communication, for the sake of his faith at one time or other of his life.

I remember long ago they started the idea that Brahmoism meant simply the abolition of caste and that the Brahmo Samaj was virtually a new sect of *Chamars* and *Churas*. Not that they had any real faith in caste or that they themselves observed in practical life any of its false distinctions as the most orthodox Hindus did. But it was a most capital idea to make us unpopular. The caste rules in those days were rigidly enforced. And I can cite several instances in which they not only excited the orthodox Hindus against us, but actually took part in persecuting us in various ways and in spreading all sorts of evil reports about us, simply because we did what we thought to be absolutely right and which they themselves find so very convenient to do in these days, when practically little or no caste prejudice exists. I am often tempted to note down some day all those painful incidents. But I see no good in parading our little acts of sacrifice. The point I wish to emphasize is that this particular form of misrepresentation of the Brahmo Samaj of which we used to hear so much in former days, viz, that we Brahmos are mere caste breakers, is quite meaningless now-a-days, and for obvious reasons, does us little or no harm. Moreover, the game is not worth the candle, now that our friends have found out their mistake and circumstances have made it so very easy for them to admit into their brotherhood, though nominally, even that subsection of *Chamars*, the down trodden, out-caste Rahtias! Well, gentlemen, if Brahmos are *Chamars*, they are, thank God, in very good company, and since they are now in a safer boat, and the tide too is so favorable, they have absolutely no fear of being thrown overboard and lost.

After all there is nothing like leather, but the most wonderful thing is that this beautiful idea of entering into such close fellowship with the unfortunate "*Churas* and *Chamars*" struck them so late. Surely it does not reflect much credit on people

who, while proclaiming themselves religious and social reformers of the truest type, call Brahmos all sorts of names for initiating a reform at a time when it entailed a good deal of persecution, and take calmly and quietly to it when it is all smooth sailing. But the charge that we Brahmos are sweepers, "gentlemen of the broom fraternity" as they used to call us, seems to have some truth in it. The broom, you know, is one of the three great symbols of faith in that marvellously progressive land of the Rising Sun... We do not see any meaning in the worship of the broom, still the broom is a useful thing indeed. And in a certain sense we need it very badly. Just imagine the magnitude of India's social, moral and religious evils—a veritable Augean stable. Well, gentlemen, we have made a good use of the broom, and whether people give us any praise or not, the work itself that we have done is fairly satisfactory. We care for the work and not for the credit which it may bring. The Brahmo Samaj has done a good deal of its sweeping work in cleansing and purifying the extremely conservative Hindu Society of many of the evils that are eating into its vitals.

We sometimes hear people saying that Brahmoism is nothing in itself. It is a mere collection of certain truths borrowed from different religious books, a mere cutting and clipping of scriptural texts. Gentlemen, ours is, doubtless, an eclectic faith. But it is no patchwork, or an ill-assorted combination of moral or religious precepts, or any eclectic theory manipulated by Brahmo leaders. It is not a mere verbal acknowledgment or acceptance of the good points of the great religions of the world, though even an intellectual belief of this kind is by no means a thing to be despised or scoffed at, inasmuch as it is an assent given to truth and not to falsehood. To see good in every creed is a sign of open-mindedness. But the eclecticism of the Brahmo Samaj is not a matter of theological speculation. It goes deep into the heart and affects the entire life of a Brahmo. It is not simply mental recognition, but the realization of truth. It means the spiritual assimilation of the dominant ideas exemplified by the great religious leaders of humanity. Brahmoism is the conversion of the eclectic principle into life and character. Herein lies its great strength, but alas, its weakness too, if it fails to stand the crucial test. It is a charge preferred against the Brahmo Samaj over and over again, not by thoughtless critics, but by those who are in earnest sympathy with our aspirations, that our eclecticism, though broad, is

very shallow or superficial. A profuse admiration for the great religious teachers and their sublime teachings is certainly not sufficient to convince people of the catholicity of our faith. True liberal thought is something different from latitudinarianism. It does not mean the flight, in every possible direction, of the human intellect in the realms of imagination. The best way to refute the charge is to verify by experience the unity of truth, and thus to prove the depth of our catholicity in our personal conduct. "True eclecticism," says Keshub Chunder Sen, "assimilates, and not merely admires and approves. It means unity of character in which all the elements of truth and goodness as represented in different creeds and nationalities are blended together and harmonized. The great secret of pure eclecticism is the reduction of many types and schools of thought to one truth and apparent diversities of sentiment into harmony of character."

One principal reason why Brahmoism is greatly misunderstood is that it has a many-sided character, and people very often mistake a part for the whole. The eclectic faith of the Brahmo Samaj, for instance, is neither exclusively Hindu nor Christian. It is all-inclusive. Its great mission is to Christianize Hinduism and Hinduize Christianity, that is, to harmonize the truths of these two great systems of religion. The misfortune, however, is that when Brahmoism represents certain higher phases of the Christian faith, our Hindu brethren at once jump to the conclusion that it is only a liberal form of Christianity, and as such, it is like an exotic plant which will never take root in the religious soil of India. On the other hand, when our Christian friends see us sticking most tenaciously to the national or Hindu side of our universal religion, they feel greatly disappointed, and give it up in utter despair, thinking that it is one of those off-shoots of Hinduism that have sprung up in this country from time to time to purify or purge the ancient faith of superstitions, or erroneous religious beliefs, and that it will, in due course, share their fate, that is to say, it will either die out, or be completely absorbed into Hinduism.

Brahmoism is not a sectarian faith. The Brahmo Samaj is not a new Hindu, or Christian or any other religious sect or denomination. We are neither Hindus nor Christians in the popular sense of these terms. We do not believe in the Trinity of Gods, in the Divinity of Christ or in his miraculous birth or bodily resurrection, or in any other supernatural event recorded about him, if they constitute the fundamental articles of the Christian creed. No Brahmo has ever scouted

or will ever seek admission into the Christian fold on such terms. But if we do not believe in Christ as the very God and Creator of the Universe, a human incarnation of the Heavenly Father like any of the Hindu Avatars, as the Christians do, we have full faith in his exalted humanity, in his divine sonship. We take him not as Man-God, or one equal to God, but a God-man or godly man. We believe in "him crucified" and not in the deified Christ of Christianity. We look upon his Cross as the embodiment of divine love and sympathy, a most potent factor in the regeneration of mankind. And we want to have more and more of his spirit of great sacrifice and holy life. But while the Brahmo Samaj is fearless in acknowledging its great debt to Christ, it is most uncompromising in its attitude towards popular Christianity which exalts him to the position of the one true God. It protests in the strongest language against Christian man-worship. Without meaning any offence, but in vindication of our theistic faith, I will quote here the words of Keshub Chunder Sen in which he denounces Christolatry, while giving all honour to Christian missionaries for preaching Christ as the Son of God.

Speaking of Christ's mission he says :—"What did Christ come to teach? Did he come to preach the dogmas of a new theology or the principles of a new system of morality? No. Neither did he inculcate. He did not set his heart on creed making. He spurned the ambition of manufacturing new doctrines. His sole ambition was to make humanity divine. He sought in his brief career on earth, by words and example, to lead all mankind into Divinity. His only object on earth was to raise mankind upward, and make them share the light and glory of heaven. Yes, like so many birds he threw up the souls of men and women into the azure sky, there to bathe their wings in the translucent rays of heaven's sunbeams and mingle their joyous notes with seraph voices above. That was Christ's mission. He found the earth earthy, he wanted to make it heavenly. He found man human, he wanted to make him divine"

Keshub warns Christian missionaries of the danger of worshipping Christ as God, thus :—"India is sick of idolatry. Add not to the already overcrowded pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses a fresh divinity in the name of Jesus. Tell our people distinctly that Christ is not an incarnation like the myriad deities worshipped in this land. If you do not, you incur the tremendous risk of poisoning a whole nation with new forms of idolatry. Beware. Remember you accept a terrible responsibility in preaching to the Hindu people. Here is a nation

that has, for ages, believed that the Father Himself becomes man, and is incarnated in saints and prophets, and that the incarnation or Avatar is to be worshipped not as the son of God but as the Supreme Father Himself. If to this nation you offer Christ as a new Avatar, you plunge a country already darkened with superstition into an abyss of deeper darkness. England has saved the upper classes of our people from Hindu idolatry and superstition by giving them the benefits of English education, and will England hurl our educated young men into an enlightened and novel form of idolatry. God forbid. Here I stand a sworn defender of the banner of Christ in India. I will see, God help me, that the pure banner of the Son of God is not polluted by any form of idolatry, and that it does not fall into the hands of the enemy through any remissness on the part of those commissioned to guard it. Here I am, standing at the gate of India, with its key in my hand, and I say to all our enemies,—Away, India is locked up. Ye shall have no entrance by force or stratagem. So long as I live, I will guard my country's gate, with all the zeal of a patriotic soldier, against the emissaries of idolatry. I say to the missionaries of Christ in India—Do you bring unto us the Son? India gives you a hearty welcome. But if you conceal the truth that Christ is the Son, our divine brother, and present him to our people, as an incarnation of the Father, appearing on earth as the Father in human shape, like the Avatars of Hinduisim, we call upon you to quit the land forthwith, for ye are enemies of India, enemies of Christ and enemies of God. Let it be known throughout the length and breadth of the land that he who directly or indirectly preaches Christ as God the Father in human shape, preaches not Christ but anti-Christ and deserves, therefore, to be treated as our bitterest foe. Hail sweet Christ. Hail Son of God. Begone idolatry. Preachers of idol worship adieu.!"

The Brahmic eclecticism is both universal and national. In its universal aspect, it is the intuitive religious instinct in man, the basis of all great faiths, the light of natural religion made brighter and more and more resplendent by the radiant rays of the Divine Light as it has shone forth in the great prophets and sages of the world. In its national aspect, it is essentially Hindu, and bears the distinctive marks of Hindu spirituality. I think it is a most superficial view of what I believe to be the real national side of Brahmoism if it is held to consist merely in certain forms, usages or modes of life peculiar to our country. These have their attractions, and their adoption will make our faith popular among our countrymen to a certain degree. But the Brahmo Samaj lays

the foundation of its national character, not on these external forms, but on the permanent and indestructible elements of the ideal Hindu life. We modern Hindus, trained on lines more Western than Hindu, know little and care much less of our ancient spirituality. As I stated elsewhere, I do not mean that the ancient Aryans were the possessors of all that was good and great. No, they had their defects but with those defects we are not at present concerned. The question is simply whether we educated Hindus of the present day show in our practical lives those peculiar traits which singled out the ancient Aryan race from other people. We are sorry we do not possess those qualities. The deterioration in our case is so great that it appears as if we are a different class of people. We are not unmindful of the rapid progress we are making under the influence of western education. We cannot possibly underrate the beneficial effects of English Schools and Colleges. All this is real gain. We hail every ray of light from whatever source it comes. We welcome every manner of education, be it physical or intellectual, moral or religious. English education has done us immense good. It has made us more active and energetic, painstaking and persevering than we were a hundred years ago. It has created in us public spirit. We are decidedly less selfish than we were before the advent of the British Government. We now feel more for our country than we did before. There is a marked increase of patriots, reformers and regenerators in the land. Idolatry, caste and many other evils are fast disappearing. But notwithstanding all this progress, Western education has failed to unfold the real character of the Hindu in us. It cares more for the body than for the spirit. No doubt, it sharpens the intellect, but it does not arouse the slumbering soul. English education tends to destroy false beliefs and superstitions. But it lacks the power to revive the real Hindu spirit. It is true that we have begun to resuscitate the old Aryan institutions. But what efforts are we making to revive the latent spirit that gave rise to those institutions? We would, if we chose, work day and night but we have very little patience to sit in a lonely place even for a few minutes to commune with Nature, with the singleness of purpose, characteristic of the primitive Aryans. In the midst of incessant work, we forget the very life and soul of our activities—the Supreme Worker.

The constitution of a typical Hindu mind is peculiar. It is pre-eminently contemplative. The Hindu is by nature more individualistic than social. He seeks isolation. He retires from the din and bustle of an active life. He shuns its cares and



anxieties. His one great ambition is to merge himself in the all-pervading presence of the Supreme Being. The sin which he hates most is worldliness. His great desire, the burning passion of his life, is to kill the very desire itself that leads him back to worldly-mindedness. He aspires to be above the world, to be other-worldly, and in the inmost recesses of his heart to meditate upon things divine, to see the Unseen with the eye of faith. His highest achievements are not in the world of matter, but in the illimitable regions of the spirit which he ceaselessly explores. He adores the God of joy, and aspires to live in communion with the Over Soul in a state of perpetual inebriation, in the inexpressible ecstasy of Yoga, the most pronounced type of Hindu spirituality in which more than in anything else is reflected and made visible the glory and greatness of our primitive forefathers; the world renowned Aryan Rishis, the whole-hearted chanters of the Vedic Mantras, the divine poets of nature, the saints and seers whose lives and teachings have inspired countless generations of Hindus and imbued them with the spirit of enthusiasm to know and see God. As one intensely thirsty panteth for water, so yearneth for the attainment of that blissful condition, the Hindu spirit in us, the same old spirit of our Aryan ancestors, whose offspring, however unworthy, we still claim to be, the bone of their bone and the flesh of their flesh, and whose very blood courseth in our veins and arteries. To be un-Hindu in spirit for me or for any other Brahma, is to be a traitor, an unbeliever, an infidel.

Worship is work is the sublime Hindu ideal of spirituality. Work is worship is the great ideal of Christian life. The eclectic faith of the Brahma Samaj is the uniting factor, the connecting link that binds the two apparently conflicting ideals into one undivided whole, and thus deepens the twofold relation of man with his Maker and man with his brother man. It is the spiritual bond that harmonizes the service rendered unto God in heartfelt devotions and loving worship, alone to the Alone, so characteristic of Higher Hinduism, with that form of divine service which is pre-eminently Christian, the cosmopolitan philanthropic work, the ceaseless service of humanity, the sacrifice of self, not for individual regeneration or personal salvation but for the reformation and redemption of all mankind, and the establishment of universal brotherhood, the kingdom of peace and good-will on earth, unto the everlasting glory of the Heavenly Father.

Our eclecticism, gentlemen, is not any exclusive form of Unitarianism be it Christian, or Hindu, for that would be

uniformity. As I said elsewhere, it is the unity in a variety of apparently irreconcilable types of truth. What an endless diversity in Nature. No two objects are alike in the universe of mind and matter. Man differs from man, each having his own personality, however insignificant, nevertheless a marked individuality peculiar to himself. Who can count the various species of the mineral, the vegetable and the animal kingdoms, their endless divisions and sub-divisions? And yet in the midst of all this variety, there is found prevailing throughout the law of unity to which science bears a positive testimony. And but for this unity, in the constant collision of the mighty forces of Nature, the whole machinery of the outward Universe would smash into pieces, and the irresistible fury and rage of their blind conflict would reduce it to chaos. Let us not, therefore, imagine that there is all dead uniformity and no living unity in the domain of religion. Say not that Truth has only one aspect and there is no harmony in its various phases and features. Our great God, the source of all truth, the fountain head of all goodness, has not one, but endless attributes. And yet all these, even the seemingly irreconcilable attributes of divine justice and mercy, blend together and form His grand and majestic Personality. Our eclectic faith claims to have discovered the law of unity that binds all dispensations. How eagerly does muscular Christianity seek the total annihilation of Hinduism. And if it were only possible, the Hindu revivalist, in his fanatical frenzy, would obliterate the very Christian name from the pages of history. Religious sectarianism has left no stone unturned to kill the Liberal Thought. But in spite of its crusades and *jahads*, not a tittle of the truth is lost to the world. Yea, the times are against it. The age has felt the invincible power of the great Spiritual Dispensation. Liberal-minded men are rising in Christendom, who now find, instead of wholesale falsehood in Hindu scriptures, many precious and bright gems of truth sparkling in them. In short, unless blinded by sectarian bigotry, we cannot love and admire the truths of any particular religion to the exclusion of all others. What matters it, if there is much error mixed with truth in the religious scriptures of the world. There is no rose without a thorn. But with all the perplexing and complex doctrines that divide one religion from another, there is found a close kinship between them.

But they say, all this eclectic thought is the outcome of reason—it is a human creed, a new school of comparative theology or philosophy founded by man. Gentlemen, it is

no such thing. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the first great Brahmo, but not the founder or originator of Brahmoism. Its author is God. Its origin is in the Divine Will. It is God's work, His own purpose and plan. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was indeed the sower, but that which he sowed and which has grown into what we see in the Theistic Church of India, emanated from God alone. Those who say Brahmoism is some form of Western deism, know little or nothing about it. Nowhere is the sense of sin deeper and the necessity for closer relationship with the Living Personal God, through prayer and penitence, more keenly felt than in the Brahmo Samaj. Brahmoism or Brahma Dharma, as its name implies, is God's Religion. It is a Divine Dispensation, and as such, it must be special and therefore new, else there would be absolutely no justification to give it a distinctive name, to found a new community and thus to aggravate the evil of sectarianism by adding one more sect to thousands of others already in existence. This does not mean that we Brahmos are above all party feelings, but the Theistic Dispensation is not sectional. Its chief object, I should say, its one great mission, is to put down sectarianism. We Brahmos are frail instruments in His hands, and if we fail, He will choose others better than ourselves. We have our mutual differences. But I assure you they are considerably narrowing down. And in spite of our personal discord, we Brahmos of all classes have come to believe that our theism is a mighty Dispensation, and we hope and trust that, as its spirit grows in us, the straining at little things, matters purely formal or nominal, will disappear.

Let us, on this auspicious occasion of the anniversary of our Church, pray to God that the waters of His grace so moisten the hardness of our hearts that the seed of the eclectic faith may take a deep root in the life of every one of us, unseen by the human eye, and that in the fulness of time, it may fructify and prove to the world that its great message of unity, the harmony of all scriptures and churches, is not an empty word but a real message from Heaven, a veritable *New Dispensation*.

