

Discussant Paper on Crawford Cromwell's Paper

THE LIBERATION PHILOSOPHY OF RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY--A CRITIQUE

by

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Professor Cromwell's cross-cultural analysis, "The Liberation Philosophy of Raja Ram Mohan Roy," is at once provocative and original, as well as instructive. Indeed, I have learned a great deal about liberation theology in the process of examination^{ing} of this paper.

In his article, Cromwell argues that a "liberation philosophy" can be ostensibly abstracted from liberation theology. Further, his claim is that "Christian theology is of broader interest" because it "is based on an impulse that is human" and "that by focusing on this common core of human experience, we can arrive at the lineaments of a global philosophy of liberation which includes, yet goes beyond, all confessional formulations."¹

For the sake of clarity I have divided my comments into three parts. In the first part, I shall examine the basic concepts of liberation theology. In the second part, I shall discuss the fundamental principles of Raja Rammohun Roy's synthetic philosophy. In the third part, I shall deal with the questionable areas of Professor Cromwell's understanding of liberation philosophy and the difficulties that arise given his assumptions.

I.

Liberation Theology has been defined as the "theological side of the experience encountered by Christian faith when it consciously elected to undertake the transformation of a dependent part of the world on the basis of the gospel message."² Theology is primarily spiritual wisdom and only secondarily ordered rational knowledge. It is based in human praxis and rooted in the actual human experience of commitment in a given historical situation, under the guidance of the spirit. A leading Latin American theologian explains the purpose and method of such a theological undertaking as follows:

The theology of liberation attempts to reflect on the experience and meaning of the faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active effective participation in the struggle which the exploited classes have undertaken against their oppressors. Liberation from every form of exploitation, the possibility of a more human and more dignified life, the creation of a new man--all pass through this struggle."³

Liberation theologians do not attempt to construct an overarching system of theology. The praxis of conscientization and organization of the poor and the oppressed is primary; theoretical and theological reflection is secondary. It is not merely reflection on the world, but action in the world--a process by which the world is transformed. That is critical.

Such an ideology of liberation, according to Gutiérrez, involves three levels which are interdependent, thereby comprising a single, complex process of transformation which finds its significance and meaning in the work of Jesus Christ:

- (1) The aspirations of oppressed and social classes to escape from the domination of wealthy nations and oppressive classes.
- (2) An understanding of history in which man assumes a conscious responsibility for his own destiny. Such an understanding provides a dynamic context for the desired social changes which in turn leads to the creation of a new man and a qualitatively different society.
- (3) Jesus Christ is the savior who liberates man from sin, which is the root of all the injustice and oppression.⁴

Thus, the ideology of liberation is transposed into a theological context providing the raison d'être for the basic communities. The Kingdom of God provides the universal framework within which the liberation of Christians and non-Christians takes place. The full meaning of liberation is recognized only in Christ and without such a reference, there could be no liberation theology.

II.

Raja Rammohun Roy was one of the most complex and fascinating Indians to have emerged during modern Indian history. The genesis of the Indian Renaissance has generally been traced

back to 1815, the year Rammohun settled in Calcutta.⁵ The famous historian, N.S. Bose, pays homage to Rammohun in the following words: "In the midst of darkness that prevailed all over the country, the first man who saw the vision of a new India was Raja Rammohun Roy. He is aptly called the inaugurator of the Modern Age in India."⁶

Rammohun was the first Indian whose ideas were profoundly influenced by the modern western culture and he was also the first Indian to take the fundamental beliefs of Christianity seriously. He rejected Christianity's doctrinal shell but welcomed its humanitarian message. He also focused his attention on those classical Hindu scriptures which affirmed a belief in monotheism. He carefully distinguished between English virtues and errors and defended Hinduism against the criticisms of missionaries as vigorously as he challenged orthodox Hindu to give up its excrescence. Thus, the religious outlook of Roy was shaped by a comparative study of various religions like Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism on the one hand and a creative perception of the scientific achievements of the West, on the other.

When Rammohun came to Calcutta in 1815 and published his translation of the Vedānta, he had already committed himself to a view of India tradition which he defended until his death in 1833. He devoted a great deal of time and energy to reinterpreting his own socio-religious tradition thereby offering his fellow Hindus a means of reforming their corrupt beliefs and

practices without losing self-respect. In reinterpreting these portions of Hindu scriptures which stress faith in one Supreme Being, Roy demonstrated that idol worship was an aberration from the authentic Indian tradition, and not an essential part of their heritage. He says:

My constant reflection on the inconvenient or, rather, injurious rites introduced by the peculiar practice of Hindoo idolatry, which, more than any other Pagan worship destroys the texture of society, together with compassion for my countrymen, have compelled me to use every possible effort to awaken them from their dream of error: and by making them acquainted with their scriptures, enable them to contemplate with true devotion, the unity and omnipresence of Nature's God.⁷

In his Second Defense of the Monotheistic System of the Veds, he outlined in detail religious errors of his time. He pointed out that common folks were intellectually and morally ignorant, and even Brahmins themselves were equally uninformed of the true content and import of the Vedas. For example, the scriptures nowhere authorize the immolation of widows and such a practice was a departure from authentic Indian tradition. Therefore, he launched an arduous campaign against the Hindu practice of sati by which widows were encouraged to burn themselves to death on their husband's funeral pyres. Furthermore, the Vedas prohibited the acceptance of money in the marriage of a daughter, the custom that was and still is, widely practiced in India, especially in Bengal where the Brahmins sold female children under the pretense of marriage. He vigorously attacked such practices.

In a similar fashion, he rejected the orthodox Christian belief that Christ is the only incarnation of God, and continued his attack on the doctrine of "vicarious sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross."⁸ Such a belief was contrary to his own that God is not limited to one way. He wanted to remove the barriers that exist among major world religions. He did not assert the superiority of Hinduism over any other religion nor did he accept a similar claim from any other religion. He emphasized the unity of all religions and to achieve his goal founded Brahma Samaj (society of God) in 1828.

Brahma Samaj, as conceived by Rammohun, brought into existence a common and universal platform of organized public worship which emphasized his belief that one God is the supreme element in all religions, though it manifests itself in various ways at different times and places. It was based on his vision that "all of us are children of One Father." It was his attempt, ^{on the one hand,} to purify Hinduism, ^{and on the other,} ~~on the one hand, and his attempt~~ to assimilate what was best in other traditions India was exposed ~~to~~ ^{to which} from without, ~~on the other.~~ In the words of one scholar:

This led him to a religious philosophy which combined the theism of the Vedas and the Upanishads with Christian theism in the form of British and American Unitarianism. It brought him to an ethical universalism consisting of the basic moral teachings of Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity. It yielded him a social philosophy grounded in a belief in the inherent dignity and worth of the individual and all it implies, a tenet he traced to both Indian and Western sources.

III.

In this part, I shall attempt to analyze Professor Cromwell's central thesis and the difficulties entailed, even allowing for some of his assumptions. The author concludes that the "object of this essay has been to find an ideology that makes room for all. We have made the case that the liberation philosophy of Ram Mohan Roy approximates this ideal."¹⁰ Essential to the success of his undertaking, is a clear explication of the notion of a liberation philosophy. Can one meaningfully talk about a liberation philosophy in the context of liberation theology?

The author nowhere clearly defines what he means by liberation philosophy. At the outset, we are told that the phenomenon of Christian theology is a subject of broader interest and that by focusing on an impulse which is human, one can arrive at the lineaments of a global philosophy of liberation which combines both poles of particularity and universality. One wonders: Is a liberation philosophy isomorphic to liberation theology, for example, or is one to infer a liberation philosophy from liberation theology in a sense analogous to Rammohun's derivation of a universal religious truth from particular sectarian dogmas? Furthermore, is a liberation philosophy somehow non-contextual or ideologically independent of any particular tradition or movement?

Liberation theology in the Christian context is a message of social redemption, renewal and reform in the here and now. It is religiously motivated praxis for social action, for combatting oppression and injustice. Praxis is primary. In the words of Gutiérrez:

To reflect on the basis of the historical praxis of liberation is to reflect in the light of the future which is believed in and hoped for. It is to reflect with a view to action which transforms the present. But it does not mean doing this from an armchair; rather it means sinking roots where the pulse of history is beating at this moment and illuminating history with the Word of the Lord of history, who irreversibly committed himself to the present moment of mankind to carry to its fulfillment.¹¹

It is critical reflection on praxis, as Professor Cromwell rightly states. But he does not fully analyze all the ramifications of this important concept. It means that action itself is the truth, which is at the level of history, not in the realm of ideas. Such a reflection on praxis can only be authentic when it is done from within. The way is the truth. The truth is discovered in praxis and not in scriptures like the Vedas and the Upaniṣads nor in the philosophical notions, e.g., a belief in the after-life, the reality of the soul, which Rammohun derived from the Upaniṣads. From the Upaniṣads he deduced the concept of a single deity, infinite in power and goodness, and the idea of the immortality of the soul. His goal was to inquire into the truth and falsehood of different religions and to make them familiar with their scriptures.

Rammohun was the child of the late Enlightenment and had tremendous faith in the capacity of reason (1) to affirm certain basic religious truths, in the sense of belief in one God, brotherhood of all mankind, and (2) to clearly distinguish between that kernel of religious truth that is common to all major religious truths and the culturally-conditioned institutionalized expressions of these faiths, doctrines, and dogmas. The entire effort of Rammohun was to create a "new" religion on the basis of a rational interpretation of the scriptures and combine it with the demands and exigencies of modern times. He reiterated the value of a rational approach to religion. Liberation theology, on the other hand, is not a rational philosophy--it is not enlightenment philosophy. It is not top-down theology. The direction of thought flows not downward from people doing theology but upward and upward from the experience of action. Liberation theology in Latin America began with the Bible study groups. Small Christian groups in Brazil got together to study the Bible and discovered real parallels between what Jesus taught and experienced in poverty and the actual realities of their own lives. They also looked to Exodus as a paradigm for their own liberation. ← The oppression liberation theologians talk about is real, not philosophical, not indignity or degradation that Rammohun talks about, but real poverty. They seek to demonstrate the words of Luther that neither reading nor speculation, but living, dying,

and being condemned make a real theologian.¹³ Liberation theologians believe that Jesus spoke only to the poor and to follow Jesus you must be poor. They take it quite literally--you cannot understand Jesus unless you have the experience of being poor.

Thus, liberation theology is context-bound. The author has borrowed specifically defined terminology which is meaningful in certain contexts and has inappropriately used them in other contexts. For example, it is not clear what he means by "Christology". "Christology" in Christianity always means a radically different understanding of the nature of Jesus as a Messiah. It is a very technical term. If the author is using it to mean the religious doctrine regarding the nature of Jesus which will give rise to a new theology, he should make it absolutely clear. Another example is his use of the expression "liberation philosophy"--which is an inappropriate combination of words in the context of liberation theology. It emphasizes the intellect as the means to liberation. It speaks of human rationality as being able to conquer it all. Thus it is not surprising that the author talks of extracting or abstracting concepts from history. For liberation theologians, Jesus was in history, humans are in history--liberation is in history and not from history. Liberation theology is not interested in the individual salvation, but rather the redemption of the whole

society. Rammohun, on the other hand, speaks of individual moksa (salvation) within the reach of every human being.

Additionally, the very skill with which the author paraphrases his subject and offers us a succinct characterization of the main contours of his thought is itself a source of perplexity. At times it is not clear where the gloss of the text of the author leaves off and the interpretation of the author begins. For example, the author states: "Most religious leaders, seeking their private glory, appeal to supernaturalism in order to support their invented dogmas."¹⁴ He further states: "When people act religiously, they think they must turn off their critical faculties and let faith take over."¹⁵ Are these quotes an adequate characterization of what Rammohun himself says, or, perhaps an expression of a point of view that is inspired by the subject but really reflective of the present author's own point of view?

Finally, Rammohun was a universalist who sought the common denominator of all religious traditions. From one perspective it is a very rationalistic and erroneous exercise precisely because it leaves out what is distinct or unique in different religious traditions. It is difficult to determine what is left over and what is retained that is terribly important when one excludes what is particular in a religious tradition. Countless other examples could be adduced to illustrate projects similar to that of Rammohun's. One thinks immediately of Radhakrishnan, Tagore,

etc., all of whom sought to derive a universal faith and a set of propositional truths from the world's diverse and particular religions. The question immediately arises: what is unique or distinct about Rammohun's program that warrants an accolade as a proponent of liberation philosophy. Moreover, I do not understand what connection, if any, the author is implying between the search for the universal oneness of all religious faiths on the one hand and liberation theology or philosophy on the other.

In summary, despite the promise implicit in this cross-cultural comparison, the attempt suffered in terms of its implementation because the author never reconciled the liberation theology with liberation philosophy. However, I believe that this author should be complemented for his willingness to take a kind of intellectual risk that such a cross-cultural endeavor entails.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cromwell Crawford, "The Liberation Philosophy of Raja Ram Mohan Roy," p. 1.
2. Juan Carlos Scannone, "Theology, Popular Culture, and Discernment," in Rosino Gibellini (ed.) Frontiers of Theology in Latin America (N.Y.: Orbis, 1983), p. 215.
3. Gustavo Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, English translation by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 307.
4. Ibid., pp. 36-37.
5. N.S. Bose, The Indian Awakening and Bengal (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1960), pp. 12-13.
6. Ibid., p. 10.
7. William B. Stein, Two Brahman Sources of Emerson and Thoreau (Gainesville, Florida, Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967), p. 6.
8. R. Roy, Second Appeal in Defense of the Precepts of Jesus (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1821), pp. 156-57.
9. Donald Bishop, Thinkers of the Indian Renaissance (New Delhi: John Wiley and Sons, 1982), p. 24.
10. Cromwell, pp. 39-40.
11. Gutiérrez, p. 15.
12. Cromwell, p. 12.
13. Jose M. Bonino, Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. ix.
14. Cromwell, p. 5.
15. Ibid., p. 7.