



A Power to Translate the World: New Essays on Emerson and International Culture

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EMERSON, THE INDIAN BRAHMO SAMAJ, AND THE
AMERICAN RECEPTION OF GANDHI

I

EMERSON'S INITIAL REACTION TO the spiritual traditions of India was less than welcoming. Assigned the task of presenting a poem on "Indian Superstition" for the Harvard College exhibitions during his senior year, he delivered a work that Robert D. Richardson, Jr., unsparingly described as "a jejune, xenophobic, condescending, even racist overview of Indic mythology from the vantage point of European Christianity."¹ Richardson's description of the poem will not seem overly harsh to most modern readers, but the poem's real significance lies in the implicit suggestion of the assignment itself: Western religious traditions must somehow come to terms with the ancient religions of Asia. As Richardson noted, Emerson "would later come to admire" the Hinduism that he criticized in "Indian Superstition" (16).² This Emersonian affirmation of the place of Hinduism and other world religions in developing a post-Christian spirituality contributed to a transcultural reconception of religion in the nineteenth century, with important intellectual and political consequences. The "Emerson" of this chapter is, in this sense, not only the Concord essayist, but a marker for a strand of American religious thinkers, including Unitarians, transcendentalists, and Free Religionists, whose dialogue with Indian religions evoked a desire for religious syncretism to which important post-Hindu reformers associated with the Brahmo Samaj movement responded.³ This dialogue, which I hope to sketch in broad strokes here, eventually set the stage for the American reception of Mahatma Gandhi in the early twentieth century.

II

Interest in Indian religious culture had been alive in New England since the late eighteenth century, and as Alan D. Hodder has shown, it intensified dra-

matically when a crucial Hindu reform figure, Rammohun Roy, “founder of the Hindu Renaissance and the father of modern India,” began to seek a dialogue with liberal Christianity.⁴ Rammohun found affinities with William Ellery Channing’s tolerant and forward-thinking theology and was also impressed with the reform-centered ministry-at-large of Channing’s colleague Joseph Tuckerman. Could a meeting of the minds between Hindus and Christians evolve from the antidogmatic spiritualism of Channing’s sermons and Tuckerman’s early version of the social gospel? This would remain, as we will see, a recurring question in India and New England throughout the nineteenth century.

Rammohun’s intellectual foundation was monotheism, and his adherence to a God of unity was a crucial element in his vision of both social and religious reform. A conception of the one God also enabled his efforts to establish a productive dialogue with Christianity. In his *Precepts of Jesus* (1820), Rammohun assembled excerpts from the four Gospels, with translations into Bengali and Sanskrit, and an introductory essay presenting Jesus as a wise teacher of a “simple code of religion and morality” that was “admirably calculated to elevate men’s ideas to high and liberal notions of one God.”⁵ He distinguished the moral precepts of Jesus from other aspects of Christian theology, insisting that a canon of ethical principles could function usefully apart from any entanglements with doctrinal controversy. Refusing to enter the wilderness of Christian theological dispute, he argued that ethical principles are “beyond the reach of metaphysical perversion, and are intelligible alike to the learned and the unlearned.”⁶ He was disposed to embrace the moral principles of Jesus, but not the theology of Christianity.

Unitarians welcomed *The Precepts of Jesus* but were not wholly aware of its implications for Rammohun’s efforts to return what he considered a corrupted Hinduism to its originating God. Channing and Tuckerman had developed what he understood as a reformed Christianity, the principles of which he hoped to establish within Hinduism. Rammohun’s mastery of the English New Testament, and his use of it as a tool for both Hindu revival and for the defense of Hindu traditions against British rule, suggest the complexities of his “hybrid” subject position as a colonized intellectual. As Homi Bhabha’s incisive account of the Hindu reception of the English Bible in the nineteenth century has shown, iterations of colonial authority can both erase and enable strategies of resistant identity in the experience of the colonized.⁷ Rammohun’s use of a Unitarian Jesus to deepen cross-cultural religious dialogue, advance reform within Hinduism, and shield Indians against missionary pressure to convert, is a telling example of what Hodder has described as “opposition by assimilation,” a practice that his successors would creatively adapt.⁸ Developing from Rammohun’s work was a line-

age of cosmopolitan spirituality, grounded in Hinduism and tempered by the transmuted Christianity of Channing, Emerson, and Theodore Parker.⁹ This emerging religious identity, receptive to Western religious insight yet determinedly Indian, was institutionalized by Rammohun in the Brahma Samaj (Society of God). As a reform-oriented religious association, the Brahma Samaj had appeal to Indians in search of alternatives to Hinduism and Christianity. In a similar way, a post-Christian Emersonian spirituality, drawing on Hinduism and other world religions, bolstered slipping believers in Europe and America who were struggling for new religious footing during the Victorian crisis of faith.¹⁰

III

Struggling with dangerously poor health and wavering about his vocational destiny as a minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson received a letter from his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson on May 24, 1822, which celebrated the conversion of a “learned Hindu” to “Christianity from his own researches.” “He studied much in the Vades,” she explained, and “found that in ancient times his religion was purer & better than now.” He eventually became “a fixed Unitarian, and an enthusiastic admirer of the high toned philosophy and morals of our blessed Master!”¹¹ Mistaken though she may have been about Rammohun’s conversion, her reaction was typical of many New England Unitarians, who felt that the narrative strengthened their position against their Calvinist adversaries. She parlayed the news, as Phyllis Cole has noted, into a lesson on metaphysics that anticipated her nephew’s full embrace of monistic idealism in the 1830s.¹² “At bottom of the histories and incarnations [in Hinduism],” she explained, “is often the doctrine of the universal presence & agency of One God.” A month later she sent him “a sweet morsel of Hindu poetry,” a partial transcription of Sir William Jones’s “A Hymn to Narayana,” which centers on the idea of the oneness of the all-encompassing spirit and the mind that apprehends it: “One only Being knows.”¹³ This philosophy held that all things were ultimately spirit, and materiality an illusion. “Their philosophy is as it respects matter the same as Berkeleyism you know,” she noted (*MMEL* 157). Mary Moody Emerson’s understanding of Hinduism as an iteration of ancient idealist and monistic traditions thus explained Rammohun’s reformist opposition to polytheistic versions of Hinduism and connected his thought with the absolute idealism of George Berkeley. This philosophy, she believed, would protect her nephew from the suffocating materialism of Locke. Working through these ideas himself, Emerson would eventually concur with her.

Emerson did not begin to absorb the connection between Hindu mythol-

ogy and idealism for another decade, when he encountered, in Richardson's words, "[Victor] Cousin's brilliant short treatment of the argument between Arjuna and Krishna" in his *Cours de l'histoire de la philosophie* (114-15). What burned hottest in this text for Emerson was Krishna's declaration that "a perpetual and eternal energy has created all which you see and renews it without cessation."¹⁴ This avowal captured the paradox of the eternal unity and the ceaseless energy and productivity of the cosmos, principles that he would strive to reconcile throughout his career. In "Self-Reliance" he made it clear that the autonomous "self" he championed was in fact enabled by a larger energy, and that "the ultimate fact" was "the resolution of all into the ever blessed ONE" (CW 2:40). While his Aunt Mary had hoped that idealism would protect him from Locke, she did not anticipate that his pursuit of it would lead him into the post-Christian spirituality of transcendentalism. His brilliantly evocative and notoriously slippery term, the "Over-soul," a concept with Neoplatonic roots, best encapsulated his qualified theism and preserved the ultimate monism of his philosophy. Emerson did not wholly exclude a concept of "God" but limited it to a depersonalized and disembodied source of energy. "The soul knows no persons" (CW 1:82), he declared in "The Divinity School Address." This gradual comprehension of the interwoven concepts of monistic idealism and incessant transition is the essential narrative of Emerson's intellectual development in the 1830s. "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism," he would later declare, "Idealism as it appears in 1842" (CW 1:206). As his transcendentalism became clearer, he also became more captivated by its affinities with Hinduism.¹⁵

Emerson recognized that his new approach to religion emerged in an era in which the foundations of Christianity seemed to give way. "We live in a transition period," he wrote in 1860, "when the old faiths which comforted nations, and not only so, but made nations, seem to have spent their force" (CW 6:110). The exploration of Hinduism and other Asian religions by the transcendentalists thus had a significant cultural impact in the later nineteenth century, as Asian religious concepts, symbols, and forms of worship offered an alternative spirituality in modern American culture.¹⁶ Disaffected Unitarians of the 1870s and 1880s formulated the loose confederation of "Free Religion" and established *The Radical* and *The Index* as venues for their new theology.¹⁷ "Radical" though they may have been in some respects, these new religious ideas were closely tied to the study and assimilation of the world's ancient religions, which both undermined the assumption of Christian exceptionalism and authorized conceptualizations of a shared human quest for the divine. Samuel Johnson, the Free Religionist who studied the Asian religions most deeply, initiated his three-volume

series of *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion* with a study of India. That volume carried an epigraph from Emerson.¹⁸ Working against the deeply ingrained prejudice that non-Christian religions were heathen and unenlightened, Johnson described his research as “a contribution to the Natural History of Religion” that would illuminate “the Universality of Religious Ideas, as illustrated by the Ancient Faiths of the East.” In all religions, he wrote, “the one spiritual nature, that makes possible the intercourse of ideas and times and tribes, must have found utterance in some eternally valid form of thought and conduct.”¹⁹

IV

There was a simultaneous advance of kindred religious theories in India after the death of Rammohun in 1833. Fading during the later 1830s, the Brahmo Samaj was revitalized by Debendranath Tagore, who saw Rammohun’s Hindu-grounded monotheism and emphasis on ethical culture as a solution to his own crisis of religious identity and as a way forward for colonized India. He reestablished the association as an influential cultural institution in a modern India struggling to emerge from British colonial rule.²⁰ His successor, Keshub Chandra Sen, championed a sweeping theory of religious unity that melded the figure of Jesus with the originating spiritual authenticity of Hindu revelation. Rabindranath Tagore, the 1913 Nobel laureate in literature, became the most widely recognized spokesman in the West for the imaginative power of the Brahmo tradition. As David Kopf has argued, the Brahmos “played a crucial role in the genesis and development of every major religious, social, and political movement in India from 1820 to 1930” and “were the pioneers of liberal political consciousness and Indian nationalism.”²¹

Debendranath’s recovery of Rammohun’s monotheistic legacy is clearly evident in his *Brahmo Dharma* (1850), a compilation of the religious tenets and moral principles of the Brahmo Samaj loosely drawn from the *Upanishads*. It opens with an avowal of one God, universally available to humans of all places and times. “The divine fire of the knowledge of God is hid in the hearts of all human beings. The consciousness of the infinite goodness of God is written in ineffaceable letters in the souls of all men.”²² In the early-twentieth-century translation of this text, God is called “Brahman, the Reality, the Lord of us all” (2), the “Almighty Supreme God” (2), the “one Eternal God” (2), and “the supreme Soul” (6), terms that emphasize the unitary, undivided nature of God. He is also called “infinite, all-pervading, indwelling” and “the Bliss” (3), emphasizing his permeating spiritual presence in the material world—a God who is “unseen, unembodied, unspeakable, uncon-

tained" (7). The Brahma God clearly has a close affinity with what Emerson speaks of as "that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other" (CW 2:160). For Debendranath and his adherents, this unified but "indwelling" God was empowering in two quite different ways. The unity of God was a rejection of Hindu polytheism but also a reclamation of the Hindu religious roots that challenged Christian missionary attempts to "convert" Hindus. "Is your God this God?" the *Brahmo Dharma* seems to say to those who would bring a new gospel.

Within a decade of Debendranath's enunciation of these principles, the Brahma Samaj was infused with the new intellectual and organizational energy of his protégé and eventual successor, Keshub Chandra Sen, an astute and eloquent apostle of religious syncretism, whom Kopf has termed "probably the most innovative, charismatic, and influential religious reformer in nineteenth-century India."²³ More Westernized than Debendranath, Keshub and his protégé Protap Chandra Majumdar were influenced by Charles A. Dall's 1855 revival of earlier American Unitarian missionary efforts in India.²⁴ Keshub developed a powerful religious discourse on Hindu-Christian exchange, cooperation, and tolerance. He later launched the "New Dispensation" movement, which aspired to bring about a fusion of the world's religions.²⁵

Keshub's linguistic fluency and his grasp of both Hindu tradition and Christian theology enabled him to develop a nuanced perspective on a central division between the two faiths, Christology. He revered and proclaimed Jesus, but did so on terms that were clearly Indian. Describing the many sectarian efforts to win him over during his 1870 lecture tour of Great Britain, he wryly compared that nation to "a vast market" in which "every sect is like a small shop where a peculiar kind of Christianity is for sale." He responded with his own question: "Think you that I have no Christ within me?" He resisted the presumption that Christ was "always their Christ," and would not accept what was not theirs to give.²⁶ He claimed instead an Asian Christ, whose origins and principles spoke directly to India. In his 1866 lecture "Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia," a pivotal text in the religious history of colonized India, he reconfigured the religious message of the West, making his Asian Christ a foundation for a merging of European and Asian religious civilizations.²⁷ "I am a Brahma," Keshub declared, and "I cherish the profoundest reverence for the character of Jesus, and the lofty ideal of truth which he taught and lived" (3). While he attested to the "supernatural moral heroism" (18) of Jesus, he reminded his audience that "my convictions" differ from "the orthodox opinions of popular Christianity."

The religious and political strands of the lecture converged on a vision

of a reborn India, newly empowered by its embodiment of the moral power symbolized in his Asian Christ. "I rejoice, yea, I am proud, that I am an Asiatic," he declared. "And was not Jesus Christ an Asiatic?" (33). This is the moment in which Keshub seized the most sacred element of British authority for India itself. "Christianity was founded and developed by Asiatics, and in Asia. When I reflect on this, my love for Jesus becomes a hundredfold intensified," he proclaimed. "I feel him nearer my heart, and deeper in my national sympathies" (33). In linking Jesus to Indian "national sympathies" Keshub turned the address into a rallying cry for national pride, solidarity, and above all, determination to persist in a long and difficult work of national recovery. He located the strength for this struggle in the "supernatural moral heroism" (18) of Jesus, who exhibited a "grandeur of which Asiatic nature is susceptible" (34). His "meekness" was the source of his power, "that deep serenity of soul, that extraordinary self-possession, which is never ruffled by provocation and insult, and is above resentment" (39). Keshub's Asiatic Jesus prefigured in a remarkable way the nonresistance principles of India's eventual liberator, Gandhi: "Surely, if a Native could learn charity from brutal violence, and meet provocation with forgiveness instead of anger, his victory would be complete, while his oppressor would lie vanquished amid shame and ignominy and public execration" (40). Such powerful meekness, Keshub urged, must confront "those who delight in vengeance, and boast of their muscular Christianity," which is "unworthy of the Christian name" (41).

Keshub thus skillfully entwined theological issues with the political circumstances of India in ways that both protested British oppression and searched for a nonconfrontational and nonviolent way forward. He called attention to the abuses of the British missionaries and directly condemned the racist hostility of elements of "the European community in India . . . who not only hate the Natives with their whole heart, but seem to take a pleasure in doing so" (22). Even so, Keshub reflected "with grateful interest on the day when the British nation first planted their feet on the plains of India" and provided "deliverance from oppression and misrule, from darkness and distress, from ignorance and superstition" (20).

Keshub's delicate balance of accommodation and resistance make the lecture a revelatory example of hybrid discourse in the postcolonial sense, particularly in its suggestion of the ways that European actions and attitudes often generated an uncertainty that undermined their presumed colonial authority. "The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority," Homi Bhabha observed, "enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention."²⁸ Keshub's presentation of a recognizably Hindu

Jesus morally disarmed the British, turning their own source of authority against them. Keshub was not, however, an overtly revolutionary figure. In fact, four years after the delivery of "Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia," he made a celebrated lecture tour of England and was even introduced to Queen Victoria. The Asian Christ that he preached was, he believed, a figure of reconciliation, a man who was the vehicle of an all-embracing faith capable of unifying Hinduism and Christianity.

The fervor for nonsectarian harmony and the concomitant political edge of Keshub's thinking would intensify in the 1870s and 1880s, leading to his New Dispensation movement, an attempt to institutionalize the process of religious fusion and propagate its message of religious concord among the world's people. Its claims were grand and its vision all-encompassing. "If the New Testament follows the Old in the line of logical sequence, the New Dispensation follows as necessarily as the Old Dispensations that have gone before it."²⁹ Through the principle of "Sympathy" these earlier dispensations would be surmounted, their differences absorbed into a larger comprehensive truth. Notably, this harmony would be the product of the Asian, specifically Indian, absorption of European Christianity. Keshub summoned "ancient India to come into modern India with all her *rishis* and saints" and instigate a "transfiguration" not only of India but of the world. "How by *yoga* one nation becomes another! How Asia eats the flesh and drinks the blood of Europe! How the Hindu absorbs the Christian; how the Christian assimilates the Hindu!" (25).³⁰ His language evoked the Christian rite of communion, but the image of India violently devouring colonizing England was a powerful political subtext that spoke volumes about the increasingly unquiet India of the 1880s. Keshub's command to his readers, ostensibly a plea for moral discipline grounded in the example of Christ, was also quite provocative: "India! absorb England. Asia! assimilate Christian Europe" (26).

Keshub died in 1884, before his New Dispensation movement could have a significant impact. But his bold refashioning of Christianity's central figure was further developed and more widely disseminated by his protégé Protap Chandra Majumdar in *The Oriental Christ* (1883), a detailed portrait of "the prophet of the East, the sweet Jesus of the Galilean lake, whom we still see in our hearts."³¹ An important link between American Unitarians and India after Keshub's death, Majumdar made his debt to his mentor clear in a lengthy introductory essay that traced the stages of Keshub's developing Christology. Majumdar's *Oriental Christ* possessed the same powerful "meekness" as Keshub's Asian Christ, a "voiceless uncomplaining calmness" (182) during his crucifixion that confirmed his "perfect self-control" and his "deep divine sympathy" (184). It was his sympathy, Majumdar wrote, that "was magical in its power of transforming" (185).

Majumdar's more detailed portrait of Keshub's Jesus emphasized his compassionate embrace of others. This deep empathy for his fellow men and women, Majumdar wrote, rendered him an image of "universal humanity" (33), who embodied less the divine than the ideal human. He was thus grounded in India's deeply rooted philosophical heritage, an expression of the monotheistic idealism at the heart of the Brahma Samaj theology. "Keshub speaks of Christ as the prince of idealists. And his religion is spoken of as extreme idealism. And it is in this idealism that India has a hold on the real nature of Christ and Christianity" (34). Published in Boston the year after the death of Emerson, *The Oriental Christ* secured for its American readers the connective strands between Indian Brahma religious universalism and Emersonian post-Christian spirituality. "The East has always been the home of idealism" (34), Majumdar wrote, confirming Emerson's conviction that transcendentalism was a new iteration of idealism and that "Europe has always owed to oriental genius, its divine impulses" (CW 1:80).

V

In 1895, when the prominent American Unitarian minister Jabez T. Sunderland visited India during his sabbatical travels, he met Majumdar and other Indian Brahmans. With that visit, the American view of colonized India began to change direction substantially.³² Sunderland considered himself "a radical of the Theodore Parker and Emerson type," and he came to India with relatively sympathetic views of differing religious systems, while still holding a belief in the exceptional authority of Christianity. He returned with memories of a Pauline conversion experience on the question of colonialism. He afterward became, in Alan Raucher's words, "the most persistent American propagandist for India."³³ Among his many experiences, he was most deeply moved by a conversation with a group of Indian university students who shared their ambitions and vocational struggles with him and emphasized the insuperable barriers they faced because of continuing British rule. Holder of a long pastorate in the university town of Ann Arbor, Michigan, Sunderland was sensitive to the plight of these "keen-minded, earnest fellows, all of them desirous of making something worth while of their lives, and all ambitious to serve their country."³⁴ To these young men, the only opportunities open to the educated Indian were "low positions—too low to be accepted by Englishmen." And they carried a stiff requirement: "all persons permitted to occupy these positions must give up their patriotism and their manhood, keep out of politics, be loyal to the alien Government, that is, must not criticize it nor advocate any reforms, be docile servants and satellites of their British lords" (189–90). Even though the signs of colonial

rule must have been apparent to Sunderland throughout his visit, he remembered this as the experience that caused the scales to fall from his eyes. "That afternoon," he recounted, "I realized as I had never done before how bitter, bitter a thing it is for educated young men, in whose breasts burn the fires of patriotism as true and holy as was ever felt by any Englishman or American, to know that they have no country." He saw with clarity men whose nation "has been taken by force, and is held in subjection by the sword of a foreigner!" (190).

Sunderland's encounter was magnified in significance, as Paul E. Teed has noted, "because it took place in the midst of the 1895 meeting of the Indian National Congress," an organization that became a seedbed for Indian nationalism. These proceedings were "a revelation" for Sunderland (60-61). Through his Brahma Samaj contacts, Sunderland was invited to speak at one of the sessions, a rarity for a non-Indian, and "embraced congress politics," which were deeply distrusted by British authorities, "as a major force for progress" (60-61). His advocacy for Indian nationalism began on his return to the United States and reached a peak of public prominence with his 1908 *Atlantic Monthly* essay, "The New Nationalist Movement in India," a trenchant argument that Britain had, with great damage, exercised "irresponsible power" in India.³⁵ Disabusing his American readers of the idea that British rule in India was benign, as in Canada, Sunderland described "virtually a slave empire" (528), marked by the stark economic oppression of a desperately impoverished populace. The Indians faced a system of governance "that keeps the majority of the entire population on the very verge of starvation even in years of greatest plenty" (529-30). The British compounded this oppression with taxes "more than twice as heavy as [those paid by] the people of England and three times as heavy as those of Scotland" and with a salt tax that remained "well-nigh prohibitive to the poorer classes" (531). The enormous costs of the colonial governmental infrastructure and the control of commerce by British companies furthered the damage by maintaining the flow of "a vast stream of wealth" (533) from India to England.

Sunderland's essay was a significant contribution to a growing anti-imperialist discourse in America at the turn of the century, a period in which progressive organizations such as the Anti-Imperialist League, the American Union against Militarism, the National Civil Liberties Board (later the American Civil Liberties Union), and the India Home Rule League of America were springing up in response to American imperialistic adventures in the Philippines and elsewhere. Sunderland himself had a hand in the 1907 founding of the Society for the Advancement of India, and he later served in prominent roles in the Home Rule League of India.³⁶ Entering

the orbit of these progressive reform groups through his Indian nationalist activity, Sunderland gained a valuable ally in a fellow Unitarian minister, John Haynes Holmes, author of an influential work on pacifism, *New Wars for Old* (1916), that grew out of his opposition to the American entry into World War I. Holmes exemplified the development of the social gospel in the early twentieth century and played an important role in the founding of both the NAACP and the ACLU.³⁷ To Holmes, the war represented a moral crisis for Western civilization as a whole. In 1920, Holmes and Sunderland coauthored an essay in which they applied the principles of nonviolence to the crisis in India, arguing that British repression, rather than containing Indian unrest, was “driving India toward revolution, and violent revolution.” Britain’s self-defeating tactics thus had the disastrous effect of sanctioning and replicating violence. “Repression gives the example, sets the pace, for the use of violence,” they argued, invoking Emerson’s principle that “force can only bring us force, as hate brings hate.”³⁸

Holmes was pulled into Indian nationalist politics largely through Sunderland’s influence, but in 1918 he found a further bond with India in an essay by the British scholar and reformer Gilbert Murray.³⁹ Murray addressed the kind of postwar disillusion with world peace efforts that Holmes had experienced, but he cautioned that “we must not delude ourselves into believing that the path of the human soul or conscience when protesting against the world is a safe path, or a path that must in the end lead to victory.” Indeed, the “protesting soul” may experience “suffering and humiliation” and even “end in defeat” (196). The soul’s only course was to “carry its own corpse,” as Murray put it, to clear itself of the “entangling chains” of the body, and “get rid of desire and ambition, and hatred and even anger, and think of nothing but what it wills as right” (196). The idea of the “right” must take precedence over the material needs of the body, Murray argued, linking ascetic devotion to the practice of political activism. His example of such a self-liberated “protesting soul” was Gandhi, whose early leadership of the Indian community in South Africa he depicted as a victory won “by a policy of doing no wrong, committing no violence, but simply enduring all the punishment the other side could inflict until they became weary and ashamed of punishing” (201).

Murray’s words struck Holmes with a compelling impact, and he would look back on this revelation of Gandhi’s ideas and presence as life-changing. “In my extremity I turned to Gandhi, and he took me in his arms, and never let me go,” Holmes would recall in 1949. “Away across the globe he cared for me, and taught me, and reassured me.”⁴⁰ Holmes’s emotionally charged language drew from a deep tradition of Christian hymnody and conversion narratives, and clearly linked Gandhi with Jesus as a savior figure. Gandhi’s

authority was, for Holmes, beyond that of reason and proof. Indeed, he described this Gandhian revelation in Emersonian terms: "an intuition of the soul rather than any persuasion of the mind" (29).

The first fruit of this revelation was Holmes's influential proclamation of a new savior for the desperately lost Western world, delivered in a 1921 sermon titled "Who Is the Greatest Man in the World Today?"⁴¹ The sermon addressed the "vast experience of disillusionment" that resulted from the outbreak of the war, in which "a whole philosophy of life had collapsed as suddenly and disastrously as the international relations in which we had put our trust" (*My Gandhi*, 23). Holmes declared that the victors of the war were now "being tested by the challenge of peace—by the great problem as to how to use a victory after it had been won. And it is just here, in this most rigorous of all tests, that these leaders of the nations failed" ("Greatest Man," 151). The failure of moral leadership that had produced the war continued, Holmes felt, in the diplomacy that followed. Holmes accepted the fact that European civilization had failed and that some new alternative for moral leadership had to be found. "I turn away, therefore, from the storm of the Great War, and from the men who rode that storm to power and place," Holmes wrote, "and I look elsewhere for that man who impresses me as the greatest man who is living in the world today" ("Greatest Man," 151). Murray's Gandhi was that man, and he carried a striking resemblance to the Asian Christ of Keshub and Majumdar in his uncompromising dedication to "the doctrine of non-resistance, which he calls 'the root of Hinduism'" ("Greatest Man," 169). Through this principle, Gandhi gained the forbearance and the powerful meekness that made him a liberator to others. Despite imprisonment, being "set upon by raging mobs, beaten into insensibility, and left for dead, . . . nothing shook his courage, disturbed his equanimity, exhausted his patience, or poisoned his love and forgiveness for his foes" ("Greatest Man," 170).

Hearing Murray's and Holmes's descriptions of Gandhi in the light of the Asian Christ of Keshub and Majumdar, it may seem as if some prophecy had been made and fulfilled. But it is more germane to recognize that Murray, Holmes, Keshub, and Majumdar were all enunciating versions of the concept that spiritual law eventually overcomes material obstructions—an idea that Gandhi was applying to British colonial rule. Gandhi was, like Rammohun, Keshub, and Majumdar, a hybrid figure. Trained in British law and loyal to his colonial rulers during World War I, he nevertheless strategically turned the other cheek in his battle for justice by employing the political principle of noncooperation.⁴² He was receiving the English Bible and the English code of laws and putting them to unanticipated uses against English imperialism. Closely following Murray, Holmes argued that

Gandhi executed these principles and “won the victory” in South Africa, an “astonishing illustration of a battle won by doing no wrong, committing no violence, but simply enduring without resentment all the punishment an enemy can inflict” (“Greatest Man,” 170). Holmes’s pacifist hero was both a moral idealist and a successful tactician and leader, and his efforts against British colonial oppression were “a revolution different from any other of which history has knowledge.” While it was “a movement directed straight and hard against English rule in India,” it was remarkable in that “there is mingled no hatred against English people,” and, most important, it “has no place for force or violence of any kind” (“Greatest Man,” 171). Gandhi “is insistent, however, that non-resistance is not only right but expedient,” Holmes explained. “It is the one sure way of attaining a triumph that will endure,” because it arises from the unassailable strength of moral principle: “In advocating this policy of non-violence, Gandhi takes pains to emphasize that he is not doing this because Indians are weak. On the contrary, he commends non-violence just because India is so strong and thus so well able to meet the hazards involved” (“Greatest Man,” 171).

A recognizable incarnation of Keshub’s meek but powerful Jesus, Holmes’s Gandhi seemed to foretell the inevitably victorious work of justice. Holmes quotes Gandhi’s declarations that “India has a mission for the world” and that “my religion . . . has no geographical limits,” statements that prophetically underlined the potential influence of his ideas in Europe and America (“Greatest Man,” 172). Holmes’s advocacy of Gandhi helped keep him in the public mind in America as a moral alternative to the deeper failures of Western civilization.⁴³ Holmes made Gandhi the defender of an ideal, and the living presence to whom progressive thinkers might attach Emerson’s ever-renewing assurance that “there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power” (CW 3:49).

Notes

1. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 8–9. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

2. Other valuable accounts of the development of Emerson’s understanding and embrace of Indian religions include Lawrence Buell’s section on “The Asian Difference” in his *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 169–98; and Alan D. Hodder’s “The Best of the Brahmans’: India Reading Emerson Reading India,” in Barry Tharald, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Bicentenary Appraisals* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2006), 171–201. On early New England interest in Asia, see Kenneth Walter

Cameron, *Emerson's "Indian Superstition" with Studies in His Poetry, Bibliography, and Early Orientalism* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1977), 6–8.

3. On the origins of the Brahmo Samaj, and the impact of its founder Rammohun Roy on the New England Unitarians, see Spencer Lavan, *Unitarians and India: A Study in Encounter and Response* (Boston: Skinner House, 1977), 32–72; David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 3–41; Alan D. Hodder, “Emerson, Rammohan Roy, and the Unitarians,” in Joel Myerson, ed., *Studies in the American Renaissance 1988* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 133–48 (quotation from 134); and Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 37–44. I follow Kopf in the spelling of Rammohun Roy’s name and that of other Indian figures in this chapter.

4. Hodder, “Emerson, Rammohan Roy, and the Unitarians,” 134. Hodder shows the importance of Rammohun’s emergence in bringing Emerson to “initiate a gradual though thorough-going re-evaluation of Indian thought and culture” (135).

5. Rammohun Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus* (London: The Unitarian Society, 1824), xvi–xviii. This is a reprint of the 1820 Calcutta edition, with a preface by Thomas Rees, secretary to the British Unitarian Society, supplemented by Rammohun’s three *Appeals to the Christian Public*, which respond to Trinitarian critic Joshua Marshman’s attacks. Available on Google Books. For analysis of the impact of *The Precepts of Jesus*, see Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj*, 3–15; and Hodder, “Emerson, Rammohan Roy, and the Unitarians,” 137–38.

6. On Rammohun’s focus on moral principle as the key to religion, see James N. Pankratz, “Rammohun Roy,” in Robert D. Baird, ed., *Religion in Modern India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981), 172–73. Pankratz explains that “Rammohun’s rationalistic theism provided him with a hermeneutic by which to evaluate critically his own tradition and Christianity” (174).

7. Homi K. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817,” in *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 145–74. In Bhabha’s examples, the English Bibles distributed by British missionaries were accepted by Indians but rarely put to their intended use. By contrast, the scholar and linguist Rammohun read the Bible more deeply than the British cared to hear.

8. Hodder, “The Best of the Brahmans,” 197. In considering the reception of Emerson in India, Hodder has reminded us “that at no point can this story be separated from the larger colonial situation” (179). On Rammohun’s resistance to Christian conversion efforts, see Lavan, *Unitarians and India*, 57–58. On the deep religious opposition to Rammohun’s work from within India, see Aravamudan, *Guru English*, 40–41.

9. As Kopf explains, Keshub Chandra Sen developed a close relationship with Charles Dall, an American Unitarian missionary in India, and “through Dall’s efforts, thousands of copies of the complete works of Channing, Emerson, and Parker were circulated

among the Brahmos" (*The Brahma Samaj*, 16). Dall also influenced Keshub's disciple Protap Chandra Majumdar.

10. As Buell notes, citing the example of Charles Eliot Norton, Emerson's unorthodox spirituality could also be corrosive to religious faith (*Emerson*, 185).

11. *The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson*, ed. Nancy Craig Simmons (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 152. Hereafter cited as *MMEEL*. See also Hodder, "Emerson, Rammohan Roy, and the Unitarians," 133-39, for a fuller explanation of the Unitarian interest in, and perception of, Rammohun.

12. Phyllis Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 169-70. Further quotations from this text will be cited parenthetically as *MME*.

13. Sir William Jones, *The Poems and Life of Sir William Jones* (London: Suttaby and Evance; and Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1818), 163-68. Available on Google Books. See Cameron, *Emerson's "Indian Superstition,"* 17, and Hodder, "Emerson, Rammohan Roy, and the Unitarians," 141-43, for a discussion of the perceived connections between idealism and Hinduism.

14. Victor Cousin, *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*, trans. Henning G. Lindberg (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little, and Wilkins, 1832), 72. Emerson first read Cousin in 1831 in the original French edition of 1827. But he became familiar with this English translation, which was influential in New England.

15. For the text of "The Over-Soul," see *CW* 2:157-75. On the origins and development of Emerson's Over-soul concept, and the three phases of Emerson's absorption of Hindu thought, see Hodder, "The Best of the Brahmins," 180-88. Buell notes that "only in the 1840s did Asian religion become a really serious interest" for Emerson (*Emerson*, 173).

16. Among the many studies of transcendentalism and Indian religions, see Arthur Christic, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932); Russell B. Goodman, "East-West Philosophy in Nineteenth-Century America: Emerson and Hinduism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51 (October-December 1990): 625-45; Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 174-217.

17. For the history of the Free Religion movement, see Stow Persons, *Free Religion: An American Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1947). For its impact on American religious culture, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005); and David M. Robinson, "The New Epoch of Belief: The Radical and Religious Transformation in Nineteenth-Century New England," *New England Quarterly* 79 (December 2006): 557-77.

18. See Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, 259-60. On Johnson's work on Asian religions, see Versluis, 248-69; and Carl T. Jackson, "The Orient in Post-Bellum American Thought: Three Pioneer Popularizers," *American Quarterly* 22

(Spring 1970): 67–81. Johnson drew his epigraph from Emerson's poem "The Problem": "Out from the heart of nature rolled / The burdens of the Bible old; / The litanies of nations came, / Like the volcano's tongue of flame, / Up from the burning core below, / The canticles of love and woe."

19. Samuel Johnson, *Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion: India*, 3rd ed. (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1873), 1, 4.

20. See Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj*, 188–93, on Debendranath's crisis of identity and early religious and intellectual development, and idem, 101–28, on his contributions, along with those of his successors Keshub Chandra Sen and Protap Chandra Majumdar, in cultivating "the Brahmo Puritan ethic" (114), and negotiating the complex task of embracing "progressive Western values" (101) while maintaining an Indian identity. Kopf argues that the Brahmos of the mid-nineteenth-century "became the forerunners of modern India" (102). On Debendranath's restoration of the Brahmo Samaj in Rammohun's image, see Brian A. Hatcher, "Remembering Rammohan: An Essay on the (Re-) Emergence of Modern Hinduism," *History of Religions* 46 (August 2006): 66–75.

21. Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj*, xiii.

22. [Debendranath Tagore], *Brahmo Dharma*, trans. Hemchandra Sarkar (1928; rpt., Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1992). Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number. As Sarkar explains in his introduction, "The entire contents of the first part of the Brahmo Dharma are from the Upanishads. But [Debendranath] has taken them from different places; and in the process he has frequently torn them away from their contexts and even sometimes distorted them and pieced them together to suit his purpose." This rewriting was wholly intentional, his object being "an original book" that was "one organic whole" (iii–iv, v).

23. David Kopf, "Neo-Hindu Views of Unitarian and Trinitarian Christianity in Nineteenth-Century Bengal: The Case of Keshub Chandra Sen," in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 106. For an insightful discussion of Keshub's development and career, see Aravamudan, *Guru English*, 44–53.

24. See Lavan, *Unitarians and India*, 81–130. Dall himself was a moderate Unitarian who strongly identified with Christianity and tried to win over both Keshub and Majumdar. But he also became, with Keshub's help, the first non-Indian Brahmo. He was a conduit for tracts and collected editions of Unitarian authors such as Channing, Emerson, and Parker.

25. As Kopf recounts, Debendranath recognized Keshub's eloquence and organizational energy, and made him a close inmate of the Tagore household for a period, but became uncomfortable with his willingness to engage Christianity. But in the mid-1860s, they parted ways, causing a schism in the Brahmo Samaj that left Keshub to take leadership in 1866 and remake it in his own direction (Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj*, 253–64). For details on Keshub's search for a universal religion, see Aravamudan, *Guru English*, 49–51.

26. *The Brahmo Somaj: Keshub Chunder Sen in England*, 3rd ed. (Calcutta: Brahmo Tract Society, 1897), 252–53. Quotations from this text will be cited parenthetically by page number.

27. Keshub Chandra Sen, "Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia," in *Keshub Chunder Sen's Lectures in India* (London: Cassell, 1901), 1-47. Available on Google Books. Quotations from this text will be cited parenthetically by page number.

28. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders," 160.

29. Keshub Chunder Sen, "We Apostles of the New Dispensation [A Lecture by Keshub Chandra Sen]" (Calcutta: Bidhau Press, 1881), 18. Available on Google Books. Located in the Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard University: Andover-Harv. Theol Pamph. BL 1265.S4 Z92. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically by page number. See Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj*, 264-86, for a detailed account of the history of Keshub's New Dispensation movement.

30. Keshub's use of the concept of yoga may reflect the influence of Ramakrishna, whose more mystical version of reformed Hinduism had enormous influence in late-nineteenth-century India—and through his pupil Swami Vivekananda, also had a powerful impact in Europe and the United States. See Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj*, 264-68, on the influence of Ramakrishna on Keshub.

31. P. C. Mozoomdar, *The Oriental Christ* (Boston: George H. Ellis, 1883), 45. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically by page number. See Buell, *Emerson*, 191-96, on Majumdar's important role in "the Indianization of Emerson" (196); and Hodder, "The Best of the Brahmans," 193-98, for a discussion of Majumdar's knowledge of Emerson's works and his use of Emerson in his defense of Asian religious traditions. Aravamudan analyzes Majumdar's success, and his inner struggles, in the role of "an Eastern guru for a Western audience" (*Guru English*, 52-53).

32. See Lavan, *Unitarians and India*, 143-45, on Sunderland's earlier ministry and theological positions. His visit to India is analyzed in Paul E. Teed, "Interfaith Encounter and Religious Pluralism: J. T. Sunderland's Mission to Brahmo Samajes of India, 1895-96," *American Studies* 50 (Spring-Summer 2009): 51-69.

33. Alan Raucher, "American Anti-Imperialists and the Pro-India Movement, 1900-1932," *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (February 1974): 86.

34. Jabez T. Sunderland, *India in Bondage*, rev. ed. (New York: Lewis Copeland, 1932), 189. Further quotations will be cited parenthetically by page number.

35. Jabez T. Sunderland, "The New Nationalist Movement in India," *Atlantic Monthly* 102 (October 1908): 528.

36. See Raucher, "American Anti-Imperialists," 85-89, on the Indian nationalist movement's connections with other anti-imperialist and progressive organizations. See Lavan, *Unitarians and India*, 171-76, on Sunderland's work for Indian nationalism, including his roles in the Society for the Advancement of India and the Home Rule League of India.

37. John Haynes Holmes, *New Wars for Old* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1916). For Holmes's roots in the social gospel movement and his ministerial career, see David M. Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 136-39 and 277-78.

38. John Haynes Holmes and J. T. Sunderland, "Repression—Road to Revolution," *Young India* 3 (July 1920): 160–62. The quotation is attributed to Emerson's "Politics," and while it is consistent with the argument of that 1844 essay, I have as yet been unable to locate the exact quotation in Emerson's writings.

39. Gilbert Murray, "The Soul as It Is, and How to Deal with It," *Hibbert Journal* 16 (January 1918): 191–205. Further quotations from this text will be cited parenthetically by page number. As Lavan noted (*Unitarians and India*, 174–75), both Holmes and Sunderland spoke at the 1918 meeting of the India Home Rule League, an event that represented Holmes's entry into the Indian nationalist movement.

40. John Haynes Holmes, *My Gandhi* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), 9. Further quotations from this text will be cited parenthetically by page number and title.

41. John Haynes Holmes, "Who Is the Greatest Man in the World Today? [part 1]," *Unity* 87, no. 10 (May 5, 1921): 151–53; and "Who Is the Greatest Man in the World Today? [part 2]," *Unity* 87, no. 11 (May 12, 1921): 169–72. Further quotations from Holmes's sermon will be cited parenthetically by page number as "Greatest Man."

42. For an enlightening discussion of Gandhi's practice and description of the doctrine of noncooperation, see Sean Scalmer's chapter "At War over Words" in his *Gandhi in the West: The Mahatma and the Rise of Radical Protest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 73–104. Scalmer focuses on the difficulties of translating Gandhi's term "satyagraha" as an expression of his political philosophy and tactics, and Gandhi's own effort to find a suitable English term for the principle underlying his efforts. For a description of Gandhi's impact on the American pacifist movement in the early twentieth century, see Leilah C. Danielson, "In My Extremity I Turned to Gandhi": American Pacifists, Christianity, and Gandhian Nonviolence, 1915–1941," *Church History* 72 (June 2003): 361–88.

43. For an excellent overview of the American reception of Gandhi, see Lloyd I. Rudolph, "Gandhi in the Mind of America," in Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph, eds., *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 92–139.