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# 'I am the Living Bread': Ram Mohan Roy's Critique of the Doctrine of the Atonement

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A striking aspect of Vedantic Hindu and Christian devotional universes is the theme of the humanity of God. Jesus and Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa, the transcendental source of worldly reality, are also intensely human figures – they live with and amidst human beings, and they (seem to) suffer and, most intriguingly, even (seem to) undergo death. However, as one plumbs the doctrinal depths of these universes, various theological divergences begin to emerge, relating to the nature of the divine, the relation of the divine to the world, and the soteriological dynamics of the spiritual transformation of human beings. From a Christian perspective, somewhere near the heart of this constellation of metaphysical-theological themes lies the doctrine of the atonement, which tries to make sense of *how* some events, between 1 CE–34 CE, associated with a Jewish man called Jesus crucially configured the shape of salvation. A

survey of various theological attempts to explicate the dynamics of salvation indicates a wide range of 'models', such as the ransom, the moral exemplar, and the substitutionary. Thus, unlike the Nicene Creed (about the divinity of Christ) or the Chalcedonian Creed (about the incarnation of Christ), there is no dogmatic ecumenical creed about the redemptive work of Christ.

A survey of Hindu-Christian interreligious encounters over the last three hundred years or so indicates that the conceptual pivot of many of these debates is the affirmation or the rejection precisely of the notion of the atonement. The interpretations of the person and the work of Christ offered by figures ranging from Swami Vivekananda to Swami Nikhilananda to Gandhi to S. Radhakrishnan view Jesus primarily as a moral teacher, and unanimously reject the notion that his sufferings on the cross have a

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'sacrificial' quality and lead to the 'remission' or 'forgiveness' of the sins of human beings. Christ is variously viewed as an *avatāra*, *yogī*, and so on, but not as a saviour whose life, death, and resurrection is a 'substitutionary' atonement that reconciles sinful humanity with God. Some recent contributors to the field of Hindu-Christian dialogue such as C. Ram-Prasad and A. Rambachan have, in fact, queried precisely this hermeneutic manoeuvre of subsuming the figure of Christ into Hindu categories, concepts, and worldviews. Given that a central aspect of Christ's theological 'uniqueness' is understood in mainstream Christian doctrine in terms of his atoning death, an examination of the reasons for Hindu rejections of the notion that God was *in* Christ's reconciliatory work is vital to an understanding of Hindu-Christian interreligious dynamics (Malkovsky 2010). Around 1845, Nilakantha Goreh, then a Hindu, raised the following objection to the notion of the atonement – the vicarious punishment of Christ is unjust because it implies that the innocent suffer for the guilty, and is unnecessary in any case since what God requires is repentance and amendment on the part of the individual (Young 1981: 104). His contemporary, John Edmund Sharkey, a British missionary who arrived in South India in 1847, records that one *sannyāsin*, on being told about the atonement, remained convinced that his practices of renunciation and contemplation, and his various penances and pilgrimages, were sufficient for salvation (Copley 1997: 166).

As we will see, these notes – that the substitutionary atonement offends our moral intuitions and that it is unnecessary for salvation – are already present in the Vedantically-inflected theism of Ram Mohan Roy who offered what is probably the first

Biblically informed Hindu critique of the doctrine of the atonement. According to Roy, who published in 1820 his *Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace to Happiness*, the foundations of the Christian religion are these: we express our love of God and our love of fellow-beings, and God is one and undivided in person. Jesus proclaimed the moral truths of love of God and love of neighbour, and dogmas relating to the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, the vicarious atonement, and others are not indispensable for salvation. The *Precepts of Jesus* was reviewed negatively by the Baptist missionary, Reverend Joshua Marshman (referred to as the 'Reverend Editor') who rejected Roy's attempt to separate the moral teachings of Jesus from dogmas, mysteries, and creeds about the incarnation of Christ, his atoning death, and his miracles. Roy followed with the *An Appeal to the Christian Public* (1821) [henceforth AA], the *Second Appeal to the Christian Public* (1821) [henceforth SA] and the *Final Appeal to the Christian Public* (1823) [henceforth FA] to defend his views in the *Precepts of Jesus* against the critiques of Joshua Marshman (Killingley 1993: 138–43). While from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy, Roy was a Unitarian and not a Trinitarian, he did not hold that Jesus was merely a man – rather, Roy believed that God had exalted Jesus above all the creatures and all the prophets, and Jesus was the intercessor between God and humanity. However, and this is the crucial point, the intercessory work did not require, according to Roy, the vicarious atoning death of Jesus for the sins of humanity – we receive forgiveness from God *not* because Christ died in our place but because we have experienced sincere contrition for our moral and spiritual transgressions. That is, Jesus is our redeemer not because he died 'in our place' as a propitiation for our sins, but

because he taught us that through heartfelt repentance we receive forgiveness for our sins.

### **Imaging the Atonement**

Before sketching the argumentative threads between Roy and Marshman, we outline the key standpoints that have been developed in the history of Christian doctrine relating to the atoning death of Christ (Blair, 1963). The multiple imageries, models, and metaphors that have been elaborated under the rubric of 'the doctrine of the atonement' seek to answer the basic question of *how* the salvific 'work of Jesus', encompassing his life, death, and resurrection, heals the rupture between sinful human beings and their loving and just creator (Swinburne 1989). Had it not been for this offer of salvation, human beings would have remained in a state of bondage to sin, and thus unreconciled to God. As Christian theologians have attempted to articulate the nature and the efficacy of Jesus's saving work, they have developed certain theories which are often clustered around three major groups – the ransom, the moral exemplar, and the substitutionary. According to the ransom theory, often associated with figures such as Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and more recently Gustaf Aulén, human beings were in bondage to sin and death (the 'devil'), and Christ, our saviour, has paid a ransom to the devilish forces and liberated us. By living a sinless life, and yet dying like a common criminal, Christ has given God the right to set us free from the grasp of satanic powers. The moral exemplar theory, most famously associated with Peter Abelard, states that Christ, through his sinless life of loving his enemies even at the point of death, set us an example to follow on our path of spiritual reformation. By indwelling through our own lives the patterns of Christ's

selfless love, we respond to Christ's salvific offer of restoration of our broken relation with God. Finally, the substitutionary accounts – which have been developed in somewhat different ways by figures such as Anselm, Calvin, and others – state that human beings, who have committed serious offences against God, are themselves incapable of compensating God for these wrongs; however, Christ has graciously stepped in on our behalf, satisfied the demands of justice and effected our reconciliation with God. Since God is the God of justice, the punishment of death and separation from God that we have incurred through our sinfulness cannot be simply waived off; thus, the sinless Christ becomes our willing substitute and through his perfect self-sacrifice makes reparation on our behalf.

As this overview suggests, the theories relating to the atoning life and death of Christ are a dense meshing of 'objective' and 'subjective' dimensions. On the one hand, God 'objectively' brings out a transformation in the fabric of reality – for instance, God *is* incarnate in the Son, Christ offers his sinless life as a true exemplar for human beings, and so on. On the other hand, human beings have to 'subjectively' respond to and appropriate in faith this account of what God has wrought 'objectively' in and through the work of Christ (Jathanna 1981: 448). A crucial point here is the relative degree of emphasis that is placed on the 'objective' or the 'subjective' aspects of these theories. A one-sided emphasis on the 'objective' elements yields a theory that Christ's death and resurrection set in train a spiritual redemption for all humanity even though a significant proportion of human beings have not yet heard of, let alone responded to, Christ. If Christ's work is effective for reconciliation with God even

without knowledge of his life and death, it would seem that salvation becomes a semi-automatic business which is completed even without our response of faith. Pointing out that the atonement has often been regarded as a cosmic event that occurs above the heads of human beings, Colin Gunton has therefore argued that if 'we are to establish the case for an objective, past atonement, it cannot be at the cost of denying the subjective and exemplary implications' (Gunton, 1988: 157). On the other hand, an extreme emphasis on the 'subjective' aspect, which suggests that explicit knowledge of the work of Jesus is a precondition for salvation, would imply that large swathes of humanity, both before and after Jesus, have been excluded from the possibility of entering into a relationship with God. We then have to grapple with the delicate question of precisely how much (doctrinally-shaped) knowledge of God's saving action in and through Christ is required before individuals can move on the path of spiritual reformation (Anderson 1977: 99).

### **Roy on the Atoning Death of Christ**

A vital theme that emerges from these contemporary discussions is whether the atoning death of Christ was *necessary* in some sense for the salvation of humanity (White 1991). As we will see, this point was actively disputed between Roy and Marshman. While Marshman charged that the moral precepts of Jesus were not sufficient for salvation unless these were 'accompanied with the important doctrines of the Godhead of Jesus and his atonement' (SA, 1), Roy responds that the numerous Biblical passages he had quoted in his *Precepts of Jesus* indicate that following the precepts to love God and neighbour are indeed

sufficient to lead human beings to peace and happiness. Pointing to John 14.15 ('If you love me, keep my commandments'), Roy argues that if the love of God with all our strength and the love of neighbour as ourselves were insufficient for eternal life, Christ would not have enjoined on humanity these commandments. Since Christ, in whom dwelt all truth, sought to guide human beings through his teachings and example, he would not have taught them precepts which are practically impossible for them to follow (SA, 4). Here lies the crux of the matter between Roy and Marshman: the former argues that by following Jesus's commandments to love, we are led to eternal life, while the latter charges that the 'most excellent precepts' compiled by Roy from scripture are insufficient for salvation unless these teachings lead people to the doctrine of the cross (SA, 4-5). After discussing several themes relating to the divinity of Jesus, which Roy rejects on the basis of his exegetical readings of the New Testament, he goes on in the fourth chapter of the *Second Appeal*, namely, 'Inquiry into the Doctrine of the Atonement', to critique the doctrine of the atoning death of the Son as a 'vicarious sacrifice' for the sins of humanity.

A major strand of Roy's responses in this fourth chapter is based on careful exegesis – it is a mark of his deep immersion in the textual detail of the New Testament that his arguments across 8 pages are interspersed with as many as around 40 Biblical quotations. Roy argues that the Biblical texts which are supposedly the foundation of the doctrine of the atonement should be given figurative readings. For instance, if we were to adopt a literal reading of Christ's statement that he was the living bread, and we receive eternal life by eating this bread, we would reduce this teaching to absurdity.

Rather, we should offer a figurative interpretation that 'Jesus was invested with a divine commission to deliver instructions leading to eternal beatitude ...' (SA, 31). Again, when Jesus said to God before the crucifixion, 'I have glorified thee on the earth, I have finished the work thou gavest me to do' (John 17.4), we learn from Jesus himself that the purpose of his divine mission was to impart teachings to humanity. If atonement effected through the cross were the object of his mission, Jesus would not have declared that he had finished God's work *before* his death.

Roy then moves into the deep waters of the theology of the incarnation. He asks whether Jesus, whom Marshman presents as God incarnate, suffered on the cross in the 'divine nature' or in his 'human capacity', and seeks to dismantle both horns of this dilemma. The former option is 'highly inconsistent' with the divine nature which, by definition, is not liable to death and agony: the criterion, after all, for distinguishing between God and what is not God is that the former has no termination while the latter is subject to mortality. The latter view is 'totally inconsistent' with divine justice and also the principles of human equity, for it is grossly unjust to inflict the sufferings of the cross on one human being who had never transgressed the divine will for the crimes committed by others (SA, 33). Roy writes that he is aware that in some countries people think that they are justified in detaining individuals who, having voluntarily undertaken to repay the debt of others, fail to discharge the debt. Even so, 'every just man among them would shudder at the idea of one's being put to death for a crime committed by another, even if the innocent man should willingly offer his life in behalf of that other' (SA, 34).

The argument proceeds to the vital question of the precise sense in which Jesus is the *saviour* of humanity. Marshman had asked whether Jesus is called the saviour because he gave human beings moral teachings, or because he died 'in their stead' so as to atone for their sins. If the former, Marshman had noted, one would have to regard figures such as Moses, Elijah and John the Baptist too as saviours. Roy's response shifts again into the exegetical key: he points out that Biblical passages such as Obadiah 21, Nehemiah 9.27, and II Kings 13.5 refer to some individuals who gave human beings teachings and protection from enemies as 'saviours', even though they did not die an atoning death for humanity. Roy remarks: 'How could, therefore, the Editor, a diligent student of the Bible, lay such a stress upon the application of the term "Saviour" to Jesus, as to adduce it as proof of the doctrine of atonement; especially when Jesus himself declares frequently, that he saved the people solely through the inculcation of the word of God?' (SA, 35) By quoting John 15.3, 5.24 and 6.63, Roy claims that Jesus represents himself in these texts as a 'saviour', or a 'distributor of eternal life', in the sense that he is a divine teacher for humanity (SA, 35).

These strands are brought together in the chapter on the atonement in the *Final Appeal* where Roy again charges that the doctrine of the atonement is morally repugnant; that the doctrine is nowhere explicitly taught by Jesus to his disciples; and that the atonement is, in any case, unnecessary for salvation. Firstly, he argues that it is more consistent with justice that a judge should have mercy on those who express repentance and forgive their crimes, than he should put an innocent man to death to atone for the guilt of the condemned culprits (FA, 11). The doctrine, in fact, amounts to the

view that God wanted the blood of his Son as the condition for forgiving the sins of humanity (FA, 16). Secondly, if the atonement is indeed the primary source of salvation, it is remarkable, Roy notes, that both during his life and after his resurrection Jesus did not explicitly teach this doctrine to his disciples, and instead left them to deduce it from the predictions of the prophets which are susceptible of divergent interpretations (FA, 35). Thirdly, we learn from the Bible that sins have been forgiven through the intercession of prophets, even though these prophets did not undergo an atoning death. Therefore, through the intercession of Jesus, whom God has exalted above all the prophets, we can receive pardon for our sins, without believing in his vicarious sacrifice on the cross (FA, 17). Roy reiterates his claim that our sincere repentance is sufficient to 'make atonement' with the supremely merciful God (FA, 31).

### **Revisiting Roy and the Doctrine of the Atonement**

Roy addressed three vital themes that continue to structure several strands of Christian theologizing on the doctrine of the atonement – first, the *morality* of the atoning death; second, the *necessity* of the atoning death; and third; the precise *relation* between the incarnation and the atoning death.

Roy presents Marshman as viewing the sufferings of Christ on the cross as the only means to satisfy the justice of God (FA, 27). He charges that according to this view God is capable of a 'palpable iniquity' – God inflicts the divine wrath on an innocent man for the purpose of 'sparing those who justly deserve the weight of its terrors' (FA, 28). The 'sacrifice' of Jesus should instead be understood, Roy argues, as a spiritual oblation, thus guarding

Christianity from being viewed as a religion based on the death of a human victim (FA, 20–21). Contemporary theologians such as P.K. Moser (2010: 143) have sought to respond to such moral anxieties by arguing that Christ's atonement should not be understood in 'juridical' terms as if he was punished by God for the sins of guilty human beings. Rather, Jesus willingly and obediently underwent suffering which God would 'deem adequate for dealing justly ... with our selfish rebellion against God', and Jesus 'pays the price on behalf of humans for righteous divine reconciliation of sinners...' God meets the standard of morally perfect love, which human beings could not, in Jesus who is the salvific mediator between God and humanity. Further, the atonement is necessary because just as a judge cannot let off the culprits who have been convicted of a murder simply because they are repentant, God cannot forgive human sin without imposing a penalty. Developing this Anselmian view, O.D. Crisp (2011: 118) argues that God could not refrain from punishing sin because God is essentially a just judge. God elects that Christ perform the act of atonement in place of human beings, and this act which has infinite value is at least sufficient to atone for their sin (2011: 119).

Roy would perhaps not have found the defences of Moser and Crisp persuasive, for their accounts retain the basic substitutionary element ('on behalf of') which he had rejected in his debates with Marshman. More specifically, he could have turned an Anselmian view such as Crisp's on its head by claiming: 'If it be urged, that it is inconsistent with common justice to pardon sin that requires the capital punishment of death without an atonement for it, it may be replied, that the perfection of divine justice, as well as the other attributes of God, should not be

measured by what are found in, and adopted by, the human race' (FA, 17). That is, if we were to argue, in an Anselmian fashion, that judges cannot let crimes go unpunished without the imposition of a severe penalty, Roy responds that we are confusing our human standards of justice with the perfection of divine justice. Perhaps sentencing certain individuals to death is the way in which human courts operate, but we should not conflate their juridical mechanisms with the inscrutable depths of divine judgement. Roy argues that it is, in fact, more consistent with divine justice that God has mercy on those who have tried to follow the divine laws, or showed contrition at their failure to love God, than that God 'should select for favour those whose claims rest on having acquired particular ideas of his nature and of the origin of his Son, and of what afflictions that Son may have suffered in behalf of his people' (AA, 64).

At the heart of these Hindu-Christian debates over the atonement lies the momentous question of how a series of events that took place 2,000 years ago can impart salvation today (Fiddes, 1989). Moser raises these questions pointedly: 'Exactly how do the life, the death, and the Resurrection of Jesus figure in (intended) divine-human atonement? Furthermore, how is such atonement to be appropriated by humans for salvation from sin?' (2010: 141). An emerging consensus in some Christian theological circles is an understanding of the reconciliation of humanity to God without some of the morally problematic 'legalistic' aspects of the notion of penal substitution (Murphy 2009). For an account of the atonement that avoids the notion that Christ was punished for us, we may turn to G. Graham who asks us to consider the analogy of one individual A who

has incurred a financial penalty which she cannot pay; however, another individual B freely pays it and removes A's criminal status. If A eventually pays back the amount, A's action renders just the original restoration effected by B. Graham proposes that we regard Christ as the individual who was able to pay the price of sin, and human beings can 'become' united with him by submerging their selves in him through baptism (Graham 2010: 134–35). According to these understandings of the atonement, through the gifts of the operation of the Holy Spirit, an individual 'subjectively' appropriates or realizes the 'objective' possibility of salvation that has been effected through the atoning death of Christ (McIntyre 1992: 96–97). Viewing God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in terms of the Trinitarian mystery, Christ's atoning death is therefore misconceived if it is characterised as the punishment inflicted on one individual who is 'substituted' for another individual – rather, since the being of Christ is the being of God, it is the Trinitarian God who is involved in the reconciliation of humanity to the divine in and through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, of Christ.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the arguments between Hindu figures such as Roy, on the one hand, and Christian theologians such as Moser, Graham, and others, on the other hand, relate to a matter of faith – *that* the Holy Spirit constitutes the 'link' between Christ's death on Calvary and our incorporation today into Christian patterns of regeneration, justification, and holiness is not a point to be rationally demonstrated but is a theological mystery to be existentially appropriated through the venture of faith. Thus,



P. Jensen remarks: 'I am compelled to conclude that, in a deeply mysterious way, at the cross God in Christ endured and exhausted the consequences of human sin' (Jensen 1993: 155). This theological appeal to mystery is precisely what Gandhi opposed while expressing his puzzlement regarding the supposed salvific power of Christ's death on the cross: 'His death on the Cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it my heart would not accept' (Gandhi, 1990: 224).

From the Hindu perspectives of figures such as Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi and others, it would seem difficult to readily incorporate into their worldviews the notion that Christ died 'for us' in a providential divine plan. While the notion that suffering has a redemptive value is not entirely alien to their thought – for according to the theory of *karma*, each individual makes progress towards the divine by working out one's *karmic* merits and demerits – they have usually rejected the notion of one individual 'bearing the sins' of another. The various metaphors that have been deployed in the Christian traditions to describe the salvation wrought by God in Christ, such as Christ paying a penalty to God, Christ reconciling humanity to God through his sacrificial death, Christ bearing upon himself the punishment that human beings deserve and so on, do not find a ready home in a theological-moral universe where an individual's estrangement from the divine, manifested in worldly suffering, has to be worked out through the operations of the *karmic* law (Reichenbach 1989). At the same time, it is important to highlight the point that the notion of God suffering *for* humanity is not unknown to the Hindu religious traditions – indeed, a leitmotif of various *bhakti* traditions is that the

divine reality becomes enslaved to the devotional love of human beings (for instance, *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* XI, 140–141). As Ram-Prasad (1999: 8) points out, 'those who are more situated in the tradition of devotion (*bhakti*) rather than intellection, have always countenanced the possibility of God being affected by emotion. For example, the force of the devotee's feeling is held to compel God into responding'. Thus, on the one hand, we have the view in some Vaiṣṇava circles that the Lord can assist finite selves without taking into account their *karmic* merits or demerits (Mumme 1987), while, on the other hand, the doctrine of *karma* denies that finite selves can undergo experiences which are not *karmic* fruits of their own actions (*akṛtābhyupagama*). Overall, given these historical and theological diversities, much of Hindu reflection on Jesus Christ is more congenial to 'functional' Christologies, according to which Jesus is an (or even *the*) exemplar of God's love than to 'ontological' Christologies which hold that in the incarnation it was the *being* of Godself that was identified with the finitude of the world. Therefore, the notion that the breach between the divine and the human has been restored through the 'sacrificial death' of one *avatāra*, a unique, non-repeatable event in the divine life, is difficult to translate into Vedantic Hindu vocabulary (Tsoukalas 2006: 238). While Roy himself does not refer to concepts such as *karma*, *avatāra*, and others in the essays we have examined, his rejection of the notion of the atonement sets the pattern for much of subsequent Hindu responses to the person and the work of Christ. His debates with Marshman represent one of the earliest and the most sophisticated Hindu investigations of some of the dilemmas, paradoxes, and mysteries that Christian

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theologians continue to grapple with as they seek to relate past event to present salvation in their soteriological accounts.

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