

Maharishi Dayananda and Christianity

Dayananda was deeply pained by the humiliations suffered by his people which were caused by the military government's repression and debased Christian harangues against Hinduism. His first priority was... to restore his people's pride in their country and their cultural heritage. Centuries of foreign invasions had sunk Hindu society into poverty, sloth and defeatism. He mounted a frontal attack on some Hindu sects and systems of thought which he held responsible for this state of affairs. Hindu orthodoxy reacted by branding him as a hireling of Christian missionaries. There were certain strains in his thought which sounded like those of the alien creed. The missionaries themselves watched him for some time, for it appeared as if he was making things easy for them.

It was a matter of principle with Maharishi Dayananda not to speak on a subject which he had not studied and understood in advance. So he listened patiently to the Christian missionaries whenever and wherever they met him. There were seven such meetings between 1866 and 1873. He met J. Robson at Ajmer in 1866. During his stay in U.P. he had talks with J. T. Scott who presented to him the Christian position on various themes as well as a copy of the New Testament. In 1870, he met Dr. Rudolf Hoernle at Varanasi. On his way to Calcutta in 1872, he met the well-known Hindu convert Lal Behari De at Mughal Sarai and exchanged notes with him on the nature of sin and salvation. He discussed the nature of God with some English and native clergymen while he was staying at Bhagalpur in the course of the same journey.

By the time he reached Calcutta, the Brahmo Samaj had split into two. A minority consisting of those who wanted to retain their Hindu identity had remained with the Adi Brahmo Samaj led by Debendra Nath Tagore and Rajnarayan Bose. The majority had walked away with Keshub Chunder Sen who had formed his Church of the New Dispensation (NababidhAna) and started dreaming of becoming the prophet of a new world religion. Dayananda saw with his own eyes how infatuation with Christ had reduced Keshub Chunder to a sanctimonious humbug and turned him into a rootless cosmopolitan. He also witnessed how Debendra Nath Tagore was finding it difficult to retrieve the ground lost when the Adi Brahmo Samaj had repudiated the fundamental tenets of Hinduism - the authority of the Vedas, VarNashrama-dharma, the doctrine of rebirth, etc. The only consolation he found in Calcutta was a lecture, The Superiority of Hinduism, which Rajnarayan Bose had delivered earlier and a copy of which was presented to him.

Dayananda wrote a critique of Brahmoism soon after he returned from Calcutta. It was incorporated in Chapter XI of his SatyArtha Prakasha which was first published from Varanasi in the beginning of 1875. The Brahmos, he wrote, have very little love of their own country left in them. Far from taking pride in their country and their ancestors, they find fault with both. They praise Christians and Englishmen in their public speeches while they do not even mention the rishis of old. They proclaim that since creation and till today, no wise man has been born outside the British fold. The people of Aryavarta have always been idiotic, according to them. They believe that Hindus have never made any progress. Far from honouring the Vedas, they never hesitate in denouncing those venerable Shastras. The book which describes the tenets of Brahmoism has place for Moses, Jesus and Muhammad who are praised as great saints, but it has no place for any ancient rishi, howsoever great. They denounce Hindu society for its division in castes, but they never notice the racial consciousness which runs deep in European society. They claim that their search is only for truth, whether it is found in the Bible or the Quran, but they manage to miss the truth which is in their own Vedic heritage. They are running after Jesus without knowing what their own rishis have bequeathed to them. They discard the sacred thread as if it were heavier than the foreign liveries they love to wear. In the process, they have become beggars in their own home and can do no good either to themselves or to those among whom they live.¹

The critique of Christianity which Dayananda had written at the same time and which formed Chapter XIII of the SatyArth PrakAsha was left out of the first edition by the publisher in Varanasi. He was a

deputy collector in the British administration and thought it prudent not to annoy the missionaries. He dropped Chapter XIV also because it was a critique of Islam and he had many friends among the Muslim gentry of United Provinces. Dayananda himself became heavily preoccupied from 1876 onwards, first in the Punjab and then in Rajasthan. The Arya Samaj he had founded in 1875 was being placed on a firm footing. He had also several other major books in hand. It was only in 1882 that he undertook a revision of the Satyarth Prakash for its second edition. The copy which was sent to the press in installments included the chapters on Christianity and Islam. He did not live to see the second edition which was published an year after his death in 1883. But by now the public at large had come to know his position vis-à-vis Christianity. His two dozen disputations with leading Christian missionaries, mostly in the Punjab, had left nobody in doubt that he had only contempt for the imported and criminal creed.

Dayananda did not know the English language, though he had tried to learn it at one time. He had to depend on Sanskrit and Hindi translations of the Bible done by some leading missionaries. Nor was he acquainted with the critique of Christianity which had, by his time, snowballed in the West. But his handling of the two Testaments shows that these were no disadvantages for him. His sense of logical consistency was quite strong. So was his humane and universal ethics derived from Vedic exegesis.

In his examination of the Old Testament, Dayananda concentrated his attention on the character of Jehovah. He found that Jehovah was not only blood-thirsty, vindictive and unjust but also extremely whimsical. Jehovah alone, said Dayananda, could choose a monster like Moses as his prophet and reveal a barbarous book like the Pentateuch. Dayanand summed up the character of Jehovah in a Sanskrit Sloka which deserves to be quoted verbatim: kshaNe rushtaH kshaNe tushTaH, rushTatushTaH kshaNe kshaNe; avyavasthita chittasya prasAdopi bhayaNkaraH (He is displeased in this moment and pleased in the next. He takes no time in travelling from dissatisfaction to satisfaction. His mind is deranged. Even a favour from such a being is to be feared). Only a savage society, said Dayananda, can project and worship such a being. He is no better than a tribal leader who sides with his own gang even if it is unjust and cruel and who reserves his wrath for every other people even if they are just and compassionate. Such a being should not be sold as the father of all mankind. Nor can he be entrusted with presiding over the world.

Coming to Jesus, Dayananda found him wanting even as a man, not to speak of as the son of God. One of the ten commandments required him to serve his parents. But instead of doing so himself, he made others leave their parents in the lurch. It was quite fit that he called himself and his disciples the fishers of men. They did ensnare ignorant people in the net of a creed they had invented to serve their own purpose. Their poor victims also left their homes. Jesus claimed that he had come with a sword and that his mission was to separate the son from the father, the daughter from the mother, the brother from the brother, and so on. The missionaries today are only following the example set by Jesus himself. They too entice ignorant people and separate them from their near and dear ones. The fraud, said Dayananda, should be exposed and the innocent people saved.

Coming to the miracles of Jesus, Dayananda said that the missionaries should be sent to share the company of sorcerers if they really believe in those miracles. The least they could do is to stop decrying the far more wonderful miracles mentioned in other people's books. Those who denounce other people's faith as false and sell their own falsehoods as truths, deserve to be described as dolts.

The apostles of Jesus, said Dayananda, were no better. One of them sold his teacher for thirty pieces of silver, others ran away when the teacher was caught and hanged. Yet we are told that these apostles will sit with Jesus on the day of judgment! Who could expect justice from judges of this kind? The missionaries are revealing the Christian standard of justice when they say that those alone who believe in Jesus will be saved and the rest sent to hell to rot there for ever. We see the same standard of justice in the Christian administration of this country. If a white man kills a black native, the murderer goes free! Moreover, is it not a mockery of justice that those who died soon after creation will have to wait to be

judged in their graves for a long time while those who die close to the day of judgment will be judged very soon? All this proves that Christianity is the product of a primitive mind which lacks all sense of justice and fair play.

Jesus had said that the pieces of bread he was distributing were his body and the wine with which he was filling his disciples cups was his blood. Can a civilized man speak this language? No one except an uncouth savage would command his disciples to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Yet Christians applaud the practice as the Lord's Supper! Jesus was no lord. He was only a trickster. Had he had any spiritual powers, he would have saved himself from a shameful death. Nor was he a man of honor. Had he been one, he would have fought back and died a hero's death. Yet we are told that Jesus was the Only Son of God and that nobody can reach God except by his recommendation. God is thus reduced to the status of a servant of Jesus. The only conclusion we can draw from such statements of Jesus is that he was an impostor. He can be honored only in a savage society. Hindus have a saying that even a castor plant can pass as a tree in a land devoid of real trees. Jesus can pass as God only among people who have never known what constitutes Godhood.

Dayananda was thus fully equipped when he met the missionaries in a public debate at Moradabad in 1876. When the missionaries said that Christ was the only Saviour, the Swami retorted that Krishna and Shankaracharya were men of better caliber and that belief in salvation through the intercession of a man was worse than idolatry.² In March 1877, there was a three-cornered contest at Chandpur Mela between Dayananda on one side and Muslim Maulanas and Christian missionaries on the other. The theme was creation and salvation. Dayananda demonstrated how the literalistic methods which the missionaries employed in attacking Hindu Shastras and saints, could be used more effectively in dealing with the Bible and Jesus.

He had to rush to the Punjab in the same month as a wave of conversions in that province had made the missionaries feel triumphant and alarmed Hindu society. He met a missionary at his first stop in Ludhiana and silenced him immediately when he criticised Sri Krishna. A poor Brahmana had found employment in the missionary establishment and started feeling inclined towards Christianity. Dayananda demonstrated to him the errors of the alien creed and the merits of his own ancestral faith. The Brahmana was saved, though the missionaries sacked him.

During his prolonged tour of the Punjab, Dayananda faced the missionaries in no less than twenty public debates in different towns. Luminaries like E. M. Wherry, W. Hooper, W. C. Forman and Robert Clark were pitted against him, but he silenced them all. His performance in public debates not only stopped further conversions but also gave birth to a new movement - shuddhi (purification) of those who had been enticed away from Hindu society at one time or the other. It sent a wave of consternation through the missionary circles and restored Hindu confidence. In days to come, the missionaries became more and more reluctant to meet Dayananda in open forums.

The writings of Swami Dayananda and open debates with the Followers of Aryasamaj was the biggest opposition in the fields of India encountered by the Christian missionaries who were once dreaming to establish christian supremacy over the country as mere cake walk

Dayananda's work was continued after his death by the scholars of the Arya Samaj. They challenged the missionaries again and again to show the worth of Christianity as compared to the Vaidika Dharma. That is a long story which needs to be told in greater detail, and we reserve it for some other time. For the present, we would like to draw attention to a significant fact. Compared to the South, the progress of Christianity has been very, very slow in the North. The credit for reversing the trend in the North goes overwhelmingly to the lead given by Maharishi Dayananda and the Arya Samaj