

The Theistic Movement
In India.

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India has always been considered the land of subjective philosophy. And yet, even long before the Western mind awoke to the consciousness of the importance of Comparative Theology, we find the Mogul Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) practically carrying out a course of inquiry in this direction which for tolerance and breadth has not been surpassed by any of our Western thinkers, and has been approached only by very few Theological Schools of our own day.

Akbar had been brought up in Mahomedanism, but he had outgrown it. As will be the case with anyone who has learned to distinguish between the externals, the forms of any special religion,

and its inherent spirit, he saw in all the diversity of forms the unity of spirit. Henceforth he sought for the spirit of God in his manifestations. These manifestations he found in the expressions of religious life of all times and of all peoples. He invited fire-worshippers, Brahmans and Christian missionaries to his court and the outcome of their disputations was the Akbari religion, a rational, theistic religion.

Akbar's efforts were continued by his successor. And his great-grand-son Dara who lived about a hundred years later, was actuated by the same desire to penetrate through the shell, to the kernel of religious life. Under their influence the New Testament was translated into Persian, and so far as could be done, the sacred books of the Brahmans.

Subjective consciousness was thus made to

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derive strength and energy from the objective expressions
of the Universal manifestations of God. Consciously or
unconsciously - who can tell! - the thought grew
and was energized that religion is universal, and God's
Spirit working in all. Stronger and stronger
grew the conviction that God had not left without
light any of his children, but that he had revealed
his infinite nature, his all-comprising life to just that
extent, in just that manner, in just that measure
in which men were able to understand him.

To study the phases of such contact between the
Divine and the Human spirit would mean to extend
our knowledge of God and of religious life. In so
far as man makes his own the results of such
inquiries, his religion must, of course, be subjective.
There indeed lies not the weakness, but the power
of religion.

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It would lead us too far to follow historically the growth of the tendency we have hinted at. But from what has been said it is evident that we too, at this present time, have a vital interest in this Expression of soul-life as we find it developed in the Theistic Movement in India. Coming to it with an unprejudiced mind we too cannot but derive help and strength from a Consideration and Study of this aspect of religious life.

During the last 50 years an important religious movement has quietly but steadily been spreading in India which is certainly of more than local importance. This is the Theistic Movement generally known in this Country as the Brahmō Somaj.

The founder of the religious school of thought which afterwards assumed the name of Brahmō Somaj

{God-Society") and finally crystallized into a church organization was Raja Ram Mohun Roy born at Bardwan (Bengal) about 1774.

Besides important political work of no mean merit, besides social reforms of the highest importance, he was a prolific writer and his literary works will for ever secure him a prominent place in the hearts of his Countrymen.

A Christian in all but in name he was constantly employed in giving lectures on the Unity of the Godhead and Worship thus spreading his doctrines to a considerable extent. His immediate followers, to the number of about 500, formed a society, binding themselves by certain rules one of which was the renunciation of idolatry.

From the time of his death (1833) to the

year 1841 the New Society enjoyed a quiet existence under the protectorship of a rich Hindu, Dwarkanath Tagore of Calcutta who was followed by his worthy son Debendranath. And in this man we greet the first energetic organizer of the theistic church who was sufficiently a man of action to put into practice the reforms for which his predecessors had been preparing the way. He was, at the same time, a truly spiritual reformer and a deeply religious man. Under his influence societies were organized for the extension of religious truths, schools were founded in different places, journals and periodicals started which are still existing and exercising a very great and excellent influence. The church grew not only in the capital, but also throughout Bengal; it was a period of growth and prosperity.

Debendranath had bound himself and others to a covenant of daily prayer and monotheistic worship, and true to his vow he forsook all

idolatrous rites, and when after diligent inquiry it was found that the infallibility of the Hindu Sacred Writings, the Vedas, could no longer be maintained, he rejected them publicly. This was undoubtedly the boldest blow the New Church had as yet hurled against the Old Faith. - But a reformer mightier even than Debendranath, Keshub Chunder Sen, now appeared on the scene. In 1857 he became a member of the Sonaj, in which he soon played a most prominent part. Naturally eloquent, full of devotion, zeal and ardour, he now became Debendranath's most welcome helper. But already at this time certain doctrines being emphasized by the one, passively ignored by the other of the two leaders, would seem to have foreshadowed a new development in the Theistic Faith from which they sprang. One of the first of these reforms was the demand on the part of Sen

for the abolition of Caste, pure and simple. Thousands of years of prejudice behind them, and of fanaticism and of legal rights, the Elder members, including Debendranath Tagore, were not yet prepared to go so far. Having left behind them thousands of years of prejudice and fanaticism and darkest wrongs, the young reformer would not wait. A schism ensued between the older portion and the younger of the Society a. 1865. The former being in the majority, remained in possession of the property of the Society, and assumed the name of 'Adi' i. e. 'Original' or Society. The younger party organized under the well known name of Brahmo Samaj of India. In 1878 a second separation took place, which left Keshub Chunder Sen with only about 10 churches. Deplorable as these schisms would seem to be at first sight,

it is certain that by their means the new faith gained both in intension and extension: Surrounded by inimical elements the timid found room for easy transitions, the progressive for new reforms.

The influence, however, of the two leaders spoken of, Tagore and Sen, was now being felt all over the vast Empire of India. Devoted earnest men went preaching over all India from place to place.

From the first attempts at reforms of laws and customs a missionary spirit was kindled in the hearts of the devoted faithful which would not let them rest, but inspired them to go forth and preach the truth to their fellowmen, to bring the new light to them of humanity, enlightenment, justice, charity, practical brotherhood of all men, their sonship to God.

The results have been most gratifying. From the one congregation organized in 1830 by

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Rajah Rammohun Roy at Calcutta, have sprung
about 300 societies in all parts of India.

There are now in existence in the Capital of Calcutta
3 Theistic Centres, called respectively, "The Original"
(Conservative), "The B. S. of India" (Progressive)
and the Universal (Liberal Progressive).

The Societies in the Province of Bengal are
either associated with one of these societies or
stand as yet isolated. — In the South a number
of societies forming the "Southern Brahma Samaj"
are also doing noble work. —

In the Presidency of Bombay with
its centre in the Capital there is an association
of societies called the "Puna Prarthana"
which is second only to the Calcutta Society.

Throughout India there are, moreover
leavening elements to be met with, as yet

Too thinly scattered for organization, but sure to crystallize into bodies as soon as and wherever sufficient numbers aggregate.

Regarding the internal work and work of the whole movement it may be said that in its negations it is peculiarly Indian, but in its affirmations it is universal. It is opposed to all the cruelties and superstitions of the Hindu faith and cultus; but it supports with all the power of its influence the Cause of Education, morality, temperance and humanity, of reforms philanthropic and political; it seeks a union of all religious bodies on earth in one common bond of faith in God; it advocates a personal, immediate, direct consecration to a religious life, and enjoins daily habits of devotion and prayer as leading to the Higher Life ⁱⁿ God.

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Such are the principles all the branches of the Indian Theistic Movement hold more or less consciously at this present time. Their devotion, their zeal, their earnestness has been acknowledged with unfeigned admiration by all who had the privilege of knowing them. Their philanthropic works which are neither few nor far between speak for themselves and might serve as an encouraging example to any Christian Church.

With such evidences of the soundness of the religious life, we cannot help feeling confident of the future of the movement, and seeing its grand principles resting on eternal truths we have no doubt the new faith will be a most powerful and lasting agency in the re-generation of this great Country of India. We even sincerely hope that the west will be

benefited by its spirit of solidarity which is manifest notwithstanding outward signs to the contrary. - If ever there was a period in the world's history that seemed favorable to the birth of such a movement, it is this present age of universal intercourse, of railroads and steamboats of telegraphs and telephones, of science and literature, of general culture and enlightenment.

May the day not be far ^{distantly} when passive tolerance will be turned into active search for religious truth, when self-sufficiency will learn to appreciate and appropriate all that can be found of Eternal Life in Nature, Man and God.)