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Book Review: Keshab: Bengal's Forgotten Prophet

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only for those with an interest in representations of death and what lies beyond, but also for those engaged in studying the intersection of the modern and the traditional. Although the material is not specifically comparative, there is much to be

gleaned from the volume's cross-cultural presentation.

Herman Tull
Lafayette College

***Keshab: Bengal's Forgotten Prophet.* By John A. Stevens. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 309 pages.**

KESHAB CHANDRA SEN (1838-1884) was the founder of the Brahma Samaj of India, a splinter group from the original Brahma Samaj initiated by Rammohan Roy in 1828. Roy's Samaj began as a reformed version of Hinduism, without image worship and drawing upon the Upanishads. It was later led by Debendranath Tagore. Today, Sen is somewhat of a forgotten figure, but in the 1860s, he was popular among the Western educated of Kolkata as a religious and social reformer. Later, given that some of his positions and actions were inconsistent and controversial, and given that Indian nationalism emerged as the new trend, he was reviled. A century later, in the 1970s, there was much research on Sen and related figures. In 1979, David Kopf published the foundational study, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Indian Mind*. John Stevens's new book sheds further light on Sen and shows that he continues to be a relevant focus of research.

Sen was raised in a Vaishnava family in Bengal. However, under the influence of a Western education, he dropped his religious background. He spent time with Christian missionaries, but instead of becoming Christian he joined Tagore's Brahma Samaj. Sen drew many young people into the Samaj. However, tensions grew between the younger and older generations, and Sen thus led a splinter group, the Brahma Samaj of India. No

longer under the tutelage and authority of Tagore, Sen explored a wide variety of interests with his splinter group. These included Vaishnava devotionalism, Advaitic notions of unity, Hindu stories and rituals, Sri Ramakrishna, Jesus Christ, Christian evangelicalism, Thomas Carlyle's philosophy, and English approaches to social reform. Given the many shifts in Sen's thought and actions, he came to be widely criticized and a third group, the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, splintered from his organization.

How does one make sense of this self-professedly eclectic figure? In his 1979 study, Kopf identified him as a "prophet of interreligious harmony." One would like more clarity on this issue: in what way was he a prophet? How, for instance, did his approach differ from the approaches of later figures like Swami Vivekananda and John Hick? Stevens offers a key: Sen's approach was performative. He tried to bridge religions by enacting aspects of them, "embodying them in his own person" in order to effect a unity "that did not exist in reality" (224). His best-known attempts, in that regard, were his theatrical celebrations in 1880 of various saints and wise men from across the world, and his performance, in 1881, of new, hybridized religious rituals.

Stevens's study also sheds light on the relationship between Sen and the newly

emerging Indian nationalism. Historiographers have noted a general shift, in the late nineteenth century, from social reform to nationalism. Writing during a time of rising nationalism, in the 1890s, Aurobindo Ghose criticized reformers like Sen for being shallow imitators of the West. However, according to Stevens, Sen was not a mere imitator, but was trying to embody both East and West. For instance, he kept an upper-class home but also experimented with *samnyasa*. Stevens believes that Sen was trying to bridge East and West by trying “to ‘perform’ the roles of both an Anglicised gentleman and a Hindu ascetic” (193).

What was the impact of this controversial and self-professedly eclectic figure? His organization, the Brahmo Samaj of India, later reconstituted as the “New Dispensation,” died out soon after his death. Further, his efforts at social reform, his theatrical celebrations of saints, and his hybridized religious rituals, left no lasting historical tradition. Yet, he was a creative man who experimented with different streams of thought. He articulated

ideas and insights that later appeared in the works of figures like Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghose. Likewise, he explored ideas that later nineteenth and twentieth century Indian Christian theologians developed more fully. Also, in *Hindu-Christian Faqir* (2015), Timothy Dobe shows Sen’s importance in the history of hybridized Hindu-Christian asceticism.

The main aim of Stevens’s study is to situate Sen in his historical context, showing how he negotiated the various transnational forces operating on him. This book is important for scholars exploring nineteenth and twentieth century intellectual encounters between India and the West. It should be a part of the libraries of scholars researching figures like Vivekananda and Brahmabandhab Upadhyay. It is especially important for those studying the nineteenth and twentieth century encounter between Hindu and Christian thought.

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***In the Bosom of the Father: The Collected Poems of Benedictine Mystic.* Translated by Jacob Riyeff. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018, 226 pages.**

SWAMI ABHISHIKTANANDA (Henri Le Saux, 1910-1973) was the well-known Roman Catholic priest and monk who immersed himself in Advaitic spirituality while retaining his identities as a priest and monk. He spent two decades exploring the tensions and issues that arose. Jacob Riyeff is a professor of English specializing, among other topics, in monastic and contemplative dimensions of medieval English poetry. At a retreat center, he came across Abhishiktananda’s books.

Intrigued, Riyeff explored more, and thus the current publication.

Abhishiktananda did not set out to be a poet nor is he known for his poetry. However, he wrote many free verse poems in his prose works, expressing his experiences, feelings, thoughts, and struggles. Riyeff gathered all these poems and organized the book into four sections. The first consists of poems from the manuscript, “Guhantara.” Abhishiktananda composed this work in the early 1950s, and it was one of his earliest attempts to wrestle,