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Keshab Chandra Sen and Hindu Image Worship

Edward T. Ulrich*

P R E C I S

Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–84) was a prominent social and religious reformer in Kolkata. In 1857, he joined the Brahmo Samaj, which was known for its emphasis on the scriptural texts, the Upaniṣads, and the concomitant rejection of popular expressions of Hinduism, such as image worship. An aim of the Samaj was to focus on a core common to all religions, lying beyond rituals and doctrines. With time, Sen and other young members broke with the Brahmo Samaj over issues of authority and ideology. In 1866, they formed a new institution, the Brahmo Samaj of India. Sen articulated an agenda for this new organization, that being the harmonization of religions by integrating their different aspects. Contrary to the aims of the original Samaj, this led to an increasing focus on religious particularities, first with saints and prophets, and later coming to include aspects of image worship. In fact, in 1881, Sen performed a hybridized set of rituals that partially drew upon the latter. This was an ironic change, given that a defining characteristic of the original Samaj was the rejection of all forms of image worship, and given that Sen's opposition to it was initially even stronger than that of the majority membership. A need for concreteness in religious devotion was one of the motivating forces behind this fifteen-year development.



*I am grateful to the many people who offered feedback, especially Peter Heehs, Brian Hatcher, Julius Lipner, John Stevens, and an anonymous Brahmo. I thank David Kopf for his warm friendship and our many conversations. Further, I am grateful to the librarians, Lindsey Taveren and Gary Hausman, who found various obscure materials for me.

Introduction

Given the increasing contact between members of different religions in today's world, the question of participation in worship across religious boundaries has assumed special poignancy for some people. In fact, the issue has generated much discussion and writing. A recent book, *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof, offers an array of perspectives. For instance, the well-known Baptist theologian Mark Heim describes with delight his participation in Hindu worship: "When I actively waft toward my face the light of the flame that has been offered before the image of the deity, I am not a polite guest going through motions that mean nothing to me subjectively. . . . My subjective intention is to do as others do, to receive *darshan*. The god whose *darshan* I receive is the one God whose presence is unimaginably varied."¹ In contrast, the prominent Jewish scholar Ruth Langer describes her discomfort when her private tour guide in China lit incense before a statue of the Buddha. She described her discomfort even in praying the Psalms with Christians, despite their being shared scriptural texts.²

This essay will explore the issue of interreligious participation by turning to late-nineteenth-century Kolkata and the example of Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–84). As the center of British power in India in the nineteenth century, Kolkata was a mixing bowl of a wide variety of influences. Sen tried to transcend this mix by finding some sort of universality. Over the years, he attempted that in different ways. In one of his final years, he performed a series of hybridized rituals drawn from various religious traditions, including Hindu image worship.

Sen's attention to image worship in his final years was ironic. As a young man, his first decisive spiritual or religious decision was to join the Brahmo Samaj. This reforming institution eschewed worship with images. To the founder of the Samaj, Rammohan Roy, image worship was emblematic of those aspects of Indian society that he found immoral and cruel. Later, when Sen joined the Samaj, he established the Sangat Sabha. This consisted of young members who were puritanical in their morality and much stricter than older members in eschewing image worship. The Sabha

¹Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof, eds., *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions, and Innovations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 31.

²Ibid., pp. 210 and 212.

later broke from the Brahma Samaj to become the Brahma Samaj of India. Eventually, under Sen's leadership, the latter organization compromised on the issue of image worship.

Over the decades, much has been written about Sen. He was a major player in the "Bengal Renaissance," conceived as a period of artistic and intellectual flourishing that was stimulated by contact between Indian and British civilizations. In addition, although he never became a Christian, he wrote about Christian themes, and he has been studied as an example of Hindu-Christian encounter.³ Although many aspects of his life and thought have been well researched, his changing views on image worship have not received much attention. It is a relevant issue because, in today's multireligious world, some Christians participate in worship across religious boundaries. Further, there is Sen's story of personal transformation toward an increasing openness to religious practices that the original Samaj eschewed. An openness to other religious traditions often involves a story of personal transformation, as in the cases of Diana Eck, Murray and Mary Rogers, and Henri Le Saux (Swami Abhishiktananda).⁴ What was Sen's story?

I. Sen and the Brahma Samaj

The Brahma Samaj was one of several prominent religious or spiritual organizations founded in the nineteenth century, with a move away from popular forms of Hindu worship to an emphasis on the ancient scriptural texts, the Upaniṣads. The original founder, Rammohan Roy, was a prominent

³Early studies of Sen include David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); and M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1970), pp. 58–84. Kopf's study was foundational, and Thomas examined Sen's views on Jesus. More recent studies on or involving Sen are Brian A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Timothy Dobe, *Hindu Christian Faqir: Modern Monks, Global Christianity, and Indian Sainthood* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2015); and John A. Stevens, *Keshab: Bengal's Forgotten Prophet* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003), pp. 1–21; Mary V. T. Cattán, *Pilgrimage of Awakening: The Extraordinary Lives of Murray and Mary Rogers* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), pp. 26–68; and James Stuart, ed., *Swāmi Abhishiktānanda: His Life Told through His Letters* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1989), pp. 31–37.

landowner, scholar, and statesperson. He laid out what became his lifelong concerns in his first work, the *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin*, “A Present to the Believers in One God,” which he “published in 1803–4.”⁵ Roy argued that there is only one God, whose existence can be known through nature, and that it is natural for all humans to turn to that one God.⁶ The *Tuhfat* was a call for all people to set aside “priestcraft,” such as rituals and image worship, to focus on the worship of one God.⁷

Roy considered the classic texts, the Upaniṣads, to be monotheistic and considered the legends of the deities found in them to be allegories that describe the attributes of the one God.⁸ He established the Brahma Samaj in 1828 as a society through which Hindus could engage in monotheistic worship based on the Upaniṣads.⁹ Although Hindu-based, Roy did not want the worship of the Samaj to be sectarian. He wrote that its building should be “a place of public meeting of all sorts and descriptions of people without distinction . . . for the worship and adoration of the Eternal Unsearchable and Immutable Being . . . but not under or by any other name designation or title peculiarly used for and applied to any particular Being or Beings by any man or set of men whatsoever.”¹⁰

Ten years after the death of Roy, Debendranath Tagore assumed leadership of the Samaj in 1894 and reorganized it. Debendranath was the son of Roy’s friend, Dwarakanath Tagore and would later father the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore. He brought about a wide variety of changes to the Samaj, including expanding its membership, instituting a formalized initiation into it, bringing more uniformity to belief and practice, and finding ways to resist incursions by Christian missionaries into

⁵ Dermot Killingley, *Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Tradition: The Teape Lectures 1990* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Grevatt & Grevatt, 1990), p. 46.

⁶ Rammohan Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. Jogendra Chunder Ghose, 4 vols. (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1982), vol. 4, pp. 943, 948, and 957.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 945–946. For a defense of Hindu image worship against Roy’s criticisms, see Julius Lipner, *Hindu Images and Their Worship with Special Reference to Vaisnavism: A Philosophical-Theological Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 220–223.

⁸ Roy, *English Works*, vol. 1, pp. 4 and 35–36.

⁹ Killingley, *Rammohun Roy*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Roy, *English Works*, vol. 1, p. 216; see also Satyendranath Tagore, introduction to Devendranath Tagore, *The Auto-Biography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore*, tr. Satyendranath Tagore and Indira Devi (Calcutta: S. C. Sarkar, 1994), pp. xxii and xxiv.

Hindu society.¹¹ In making these changes to the Samaj, Tagore understood that he was establishing a religion: “Formerly there had existed the Brâhma Samâj only, now Brahma Dharma came into existence. . . . we embraced the Brahma religion, and thereby became Brâhmas.”¹² Tagore thought of this religion as a revival of an earlier age of religion in India, prior to the image worship found in the influential medieval Hindu texts, the Purâṇas.¹³

Although Debendranath Tagore was enamored with the Upaniṣads, he was later upset when he learned that much of the Vedas, the larger corpus of which the Upaniṣads are portions, are thoroughly involved with a variety of deities and the fire sacrifice. Yet, with time, he found passages in the Vedas that refer to the many gods as names and forms of one God. He used these passages as keys to interpret the whole and thus became enthusiastic about the R̥g Veda. Although thus in favor of the Vedas, he continued to regard the popular worship of his time, directed to the deities of the later texts, the Purâṇas, as idolatrous polytheism. This is similar to Roy’s approach, which considered the Vedic deities as allegorical figures.¹⁴

The Samaj had a rich history of different figures. Roy established the Samaj, in large part, out of his concern with social reform, believing that polytheistic mythology and the machinations of priests are responsible for societal ills.¹⁵ Tagore, in turn, hoped that, by reviving an earlier era in India’s religious history, India’s “valour and power would be revived.”¹⁶ Sen, who joined the Samaj after meeting Tagore in 857, was interested in realizing some sort of universality.¹⁷ Nineteenth-century Kolkata was a mixing bowl of influences and dualities: East and West, Hinduism and Christianity, nationalism and loyalism, tradition and modernity, religion and science, inner transformation and social reform, ascetical ideals and

¹¹ Tagore, *Auto-Biography*, pp. 12–30; see also Brian A. Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism, or the Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from Early Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 42–45, 54–56, and 87–89.

¹² Tagore, *Auto-Biography*, p. 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53.

¹⁵ Roy, *English Works*, vol. 4, pp. 94–96.

¹⁶ Tagore, *Auto-Biography*, p. 30.

¹⁷ Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, *The Life and Teachings of Keshub Chunder Sen* (Calcutta: J. W. Thomas, Baptist Mission Press, 1887), pp. 103–104.

worldliness. According to John Stevens, Sen aimed, over his life span, to incorporate these many opposing terms into his person.¹⁸

The first clear example in Sen's life of a conflict between some of the above pairs occurred when he a student at the Hindu College. In spite of the name, the school offered mainly a Western, secular education. Thus, Sen experienced a conflict between the Hindu piety with which he was raised and his modern education. The result was that his "faith in idolatry died, without effort on my part, a natural death."¹⁹

Given that his ancestral religion was no longer compelling, Sen turned to Christianity. He spent time with Christian missionaries and studied the Bible.²⁰ He was especially attracted to Unitarianism. It is likely that Sen, living in a Hindu culture, was attracted to it because of its more liberal approach concerning how people can be saved. Sen read the famous Unitarian radical, Theodore Parker, who believed that a direct experience of God is available through intuition. Furthermore, Parker believed that this intuitive experience is universally available, apart from the Bible and institutional religion.²¹

Although having spent time with Christian missionaries, Sen joined the Samaj in 1857, after having met Tagore.²² Roy and Tagore both believed that a common core lay behind all the religions.²³ This universalistic perspective was probably a major reason that Sen joined. In 1860, Sen began publishing essays to draw the Western-educated youths of Kolkata into the Samaj. A main aspect of these early writings was the idea of a direct experience of God through intuition: "Brahmaism is founded upon those principles of the mind which are above, anterior to and independent of reflection . . . Intuitive truth is directly cognizable; it is seen face to face."²⁴ Furthermore, Sen stressed that this intuition is available to all peoples: "If intuitive

¹⁸ Stevens, *Keshab*, pp. 152, 173–178, and 221–225.

¹⁹ Brahmananda Keshav, *Life and Works of Brahmananda Keshav* (Calcutta: Navavidhan Publication Committee, 1940), p. 199.

²⁰ David C. Scott, ed., *Keshub Chunder Sen: A Selection* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1979), p. 4.

²¹ Theodore Parker, *A Discourse of Matters pertaining to Religion* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), pp. 477–485; Spencer Lavan, *Unitarians and India: A Study in Encounter and Response* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1977), pp. 106–108.

²² Mozoomdar, *Life and Teachings*, pp. 103–104.

²³ Roy, *English Works*, vol. 4, pp. 943, 948, and 957; Tagore, *Auto-Biography*, p. 121.

²⁴ Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 16.

truths are facts of our nature, and are independent of our will, they are universal.”²⁵

Brian Hatcher characterized the stances of Roy, Tagore, and Sen as examples of “democratic eclecticism.”²⁶ Raimon Panikkar, in a study of the Greco-Roman world in ancient times, initiated this terminology. The “democratic eclectic” has “an almost democratic conviction that truth lies in the common agreement and in the elimination of all particular discrepancies, so that a universal consensus (even if relative) can be brought about by adopting these incontrovertible ideas which men hold.”²⁷ In contrast, the “aristocratic eclectic” combines aspects of different religions, picking “the best of each system so as to offer the cream, so to speak, of the different human experiences.”²⁸ In different ways, Roy, Tagore, and Sen all expressed the former position.²⁹

Sen was effective in drawing a large number of youths to the Samaj. In 1860, he organized them into a subgroup, the “Sangat Sabha.” As discussed earlier, Sen spent time with Christian missionaries; accordingly, the Sangat Sabha bore parallels to Baptist movements in the West. The members were puritanical in their morality, studied the Bible, and cultivated a sense of sin and dependence on God.³⁰ Some lines from their hymns are “O Thou great fountain of mercy, have mercy on this poor and sinful being. . . . Where else can I find one so sympathetic with my joy and sorrows? Thou alone knowest the inmost agonies of the spirit.”³¹ Furthermore, there was a strong emotional dimension to the Sangat Sabha. For instance, at its first meeting, “great enthusiasm seized every soul present, till at last they marched out in procession singing through the streets.”³² At later meetings, their “noble impulses . . . were fanned into a flame, week after week,”

²⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁶ Hatcher, *Eclecticism*, pp. 34, 97, and 115.

²⁷ Raimundo Panikkar, “Some Notes on Syncretism and Eclecticism related to the Growth of Human Consciousness,” in Birger A. Pearson, ed., *Religious Syncretism in Antiquity: Essays in Conversation with Geo Widengren* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), p. 51.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Roy, *English Works*, vol. 4, pp. 943, 948, and 957; Tagore, *Auto-Biography*, p. 121; Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 14.

³⁰ Sivanath Sastri, *History of the Brahma Samaj*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahma Samaj, 1974), pp. 81–83.

³¹ Ibid., p. 84.

³² Ibid., p. 81.

and they undertook philanthropic work and missionary work to spread the Samaj.³³

The Sangat Sabha was an irony, for it drew upon both Baptist and Unitarian spiritualities, and the two parties were bitterly divided. The Baptists, for instance, put absolute priority on the Bible, while Parker gave priority to intuition. The Baptists were exclusive in their views of who could be saved, while the Unitarians were broader. Although this conjunction of Baptist and Unitarian spiritualities is surprising, it is explicable. Sen was appealing to the Western youth of Kolkata who, in receiving a Western, secular education, had lost faith in God and religion. By arguing that the idea of intuition is in line with the best of Western philosophy, he was appealing to the intellectual tastes of these young Bengalis.³⁴ At the same time, by firing them with religious enthusiasm, he was appealing to their emotions.³⁵

Furthermore, Sen probably considered the differences between Calvinism and Unitarianism to be irrelevant to his project. Given his emphasis on universality, he had no patience with doctrinal disputes, stating, "Sectarianism limits and distorts man's views and sentiments."³⁶ Sectarianism is "a battle-field in which communities strenuously fight against each other, actuated by inveterate jealousy or the maddening spirit of fanaticism."³⁷ After all, if a single truth lie behind all religions, that same truth must lie behind both Unitarianism and Calvinism.

Although Sen believed that a single truth lay behind all religions, that truth did not lie behind image worship. Rather, he considered it a departure from true religion. In an 1865 essay on social reform, Sen expressed the position of Roy that image worship is a root of evil in society: "There can be no doubt that the root of all evils which afflict Hindu society, that which constitutes the chief cause of its degradation is idolatry."³⁸ Further, it was essentially in opposition to the intuitive experience of God, for the latter is a direct encounter, whereas image worship introduces a third party into

³³ Ibid., pp. 84–85.

³⁴ See Keshav, *Life and Works*, pp. 17 and 29–30.

³⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 6–7 and 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83; see also pp. 54, 62–63, and 146.

that experience. The Brahmo “stands before his Father face to face,” and “no consecrated object acts as a mediator between him and God.”³⁹

Furthermore, as described above, he and the other members of the Sangat Sabha were influenced by Baptist spirituality. Calvinism is known for its strict moral demands, its abhorrence of the use of any images in worship, and its history of iconoclasm in Europe. Accordingly, whereas elder members of the Samaj were somewhat passive in their rejection of image worship, members of the Sangat Sabha resolved “to accept no invitation to any idolatrous festival.”⁴⁰ In addition, Tagore had tolerated image worship in his home for the sake of his family, but under Sen’s influence he forbade it. He converted the “Durga Puja Hall in his home,” used for the celebration of this major Bengali festival, “into a domestic chapel.”⁴¹

II. Changes and Transformations

Originally, Sen was Tagore’s protégé and star in the Samaj, but eventually that situation fell apart. There were significant differences in ideology between the younger faction that looked to Sen and the older membership who looked to Tagore. Furthermore, disputes emerged over authority and leadership. Thus, in July, 1865, the two groups separated. In November, 1866, the split in the Samaj became formalized, with Sen’s group naming itself the “Brahmo Samaj of India” and Tagore’s renaming itself as the “Adi Brahmo Samaj.”⁴²

Following the 1865 split in the Samaj, Sen began moving in new directions. Changes are evident in a series of three speeches he gave from 1866 to 1869: “Jesus Christ,” “Great Men,” and “Future Church.” Over the course of these talks, Sen shifted from emphasizing a universally available intuition to stressing religious particularities. That, in turn, opened the door to a growing sympathy for image worship, which this essay will show below.

In the 1866 talk, “Jesus Christ,” Sen expressed his longstanding interest in Christianity by discussing Christ as a figure of great significance to

³⁹ Ibid., p. 19; see also pp. 24, 67, 86, and 108.

⁴⁰ Sastri, *Brahmo Samaj*, p. 83.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴² See Meredith Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen: A Search for Cultural Synthesis* (Calcutta: Minerva, 1977), pp. 38–60; and Keshav, *Life and Works*, pp. 80 and 117.

India by being a model of self-sacrifice to whom Indians should turn. Following this talk, there was controversy over what seemed to be an imminent conversion by Sen to Christianity. Later that year, he disabused people of that idea in “Great Men” by emphasizing saints and prophets of all religions: “Let denominational and geographical boundaries be forever [*sic*] forgotten, and let all nations unite in celebrating a universal festival in honour of all prophets, regarding them as the Elder Brothers of the human race.”⁴³

Sen explained the importance of honoring saints and prophets: “It is through these great men, these leaders of mankind, that God reveals Himself to us in history.”⁴⁴ Not only is God revealed through them, but they are, to some measure, divine: “Great men . . . [t]hough human, . . . are divine.”⁴⁵ He clarified this by explaining that although “every man is an incarnation. . . great men are pre-eminently [*sic*] so, for they exhibit a larger measure of the divine spirit.”⁴⁶ In articulating these positions, Sen was influenced by philosopher and historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881). He cited Carlyle’s influential idea that “The history of the world . . . is the biography of great men.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, Sen’s statement that great humans “exhibit a larger measure of the divine spirit” is similar to Carlyle’s that a hero comes “from the heart of the world . . . [a] portion of the primal reality of things.”⁴⁸

Considering some humans as divine was a sharp break with Tagore’s Samaj, which rejected the use of all images in worship. Even more, it was a break with Sen’s particular approach within the Samaj. He had emphasized a direct, “face to face” experience of God in which there is neither a “teacher” nor any other “meditator” between the Brahmo and God. Now, instead, he was emphasizing the revelation of God through human beings.⁴⁹ Whereas Sen had earlier sought universality through an intuition

⁴³ Keshav, *Life and Works*, pp. 115–116.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110; see also Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 13.

⁴⁸ Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 112; Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 40. Although Sen relied on Carlyle, the latter flatly denied that any human being can rightly be considered divine (see Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 37).

⁴⁹ See Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 19.

available to all, he now sought universality by honoring holy people from across the world.

Not surprisingly, just as his talk on Jesus Christ provoked controversy, so did his talk, “Great Men.” For instance, Tagore’s close associate, Rajnarain Bose, stated, “I am sick of the excessive glorification of great men. Brahma brethren! let us cease for a time from glorifying great men. Let us now only glorify the great God to our heart’s content.”⁵⁰ In addition, many contemporaries concluded that Sen was implying that he, himself, was a great man or prophet.⁵¹ Not surprisingly, about a month after the talk, the split in the Samaj was formalized.

With the split thus formalized, Sen experimented not only with new ideas but also with new activities. In 1866 and 1867, he and his followers fanned out across north India on missionary trips.⁵² Around that time, they began a foray into a popular expression of Hindu worship, *kīrtan*. *Kīrtan* is an ecstatic form of devotional singing that has been especially popular in the worship of Kṛṣṇa, an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. Sen and his followers incorporated *kīrtan* into their missionary activities.⁵³ In 1868, he began his mission tour with a highly symbolic act: giving a talk on Chaitanya, one of the famous devotees of Kṛṣṇa, at the former’s birthplace in Shantipur.⁵⁴ Using *kīrtan* was an effective missionary strategy, for it attracted huge crowds and led to the establishment of many branches of the Samaj.⁵⁵

Just as “Great Men” was an ironic development, so was the use of *kīrtan*. To begin with, the Samaj was known for its reaction against popular Hindu worship and its emphasis on philosophical worship.⁵⁶ Further, Sen’s followers within the Samaj were known for their adoption of puritanical aspects of Calvinist spirituality. However, they did not drop one type of spirituality for the sake of the other. Rather, they combined Christian

⁵⁰ Prosanto Kumar Sen, *Biography of a New Faith* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1933), vol. 1, pp. 344–345. This quote is given without a source, but Borthwick attributed it to Rajnarain Bose (Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, p. 96, n. 19).

⁵¹ See Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, pp. 73–74; and Scott, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, pp. 17–18.

⁵² See Keshav, *Life and Works*, pp. 119–121.

⁵³ Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*, p. 223.

⁵⁴ See Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 141.

⁵⁵ Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*, pp. 225–227.

⁵⁶ Sastri, *Brahmo Samaj*, pp. 137 and 141–142.

themes with “Vaisnava expressions of devotion.”⁵⁷ In June, 1868, during Sen’s mission tour, the use of *kīrtan* took an even more ironic turn. At the “town of Monghyr in Bihar,” the crowds began to worship Sen as an *avatāra*.⁵⁸ He did nothing to stop this outpouring of worship, and he later stated that, although he did not believe himself to be an *avatāra* or to have intercessory power, he had “no right to interfere with the freedom of others.”⁵⁹

In January, 1869, in his talk “Future Church,” Sen gave a rationale for the pursuit of such seemingly different directions. The occasion was the opening of a new worship space for the Brahmo Samaj of India, the Brahmo Mandir. Therein, he noted the competition between different religions, stating that, “Each religious sect concludes that . . . all other creeds will ultimately yield to its power.”⁶⁰ Previously, he had hoped to transcend such religious wrangling through the direct, intuitive experience of God.⁶¹ His new approach was not to go beyond religious beliefs but to “harmonize, if possible, such conflicting opinions and hopes, . . . so that the hearts and minds of contending sects may be brought together.”⁶² For instance, he proposed that the “quiet contemplation” of the Hindu should be harmonized with the “constant excitement and active service” of the Muslim.⁶³ The Brahmo Mandir itself symbolized this new approach, for it combined Hindu, Christian, and Muslim architectural elements.⁶⁴

Sen’s switch from emphasizing intuition to attempting to combine concrete particularities of different religions constituted a shift from democratic to aristocratic eclecticism.⁶⁵ This, as will be seen in the following section of this essay, opened the door to an appreciation of image worship. What were the reasons that Sen went from emphasizing intuition

⁵⁷ Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, p. 87.

⁵⁸ Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*, p. 225; see also Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, pp. 86–87.

⁵⁹ Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 157.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁶¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 12–20.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁶⁴ Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, p. 93.

⁶⁵ The present essay argues that Sen’s aristocratic eclecticism began in 1869. However, Stevens noted that Sen continued to articulate his earlier stance, democratic eclecticism, in 1870. The occasion was his lectures in England (Stevens, *Keshab*, p. 177; for a more extensive discussion of Sen’s aristocratic eclecticism, see pp. 175–178).

to emphasizing holy people and religious particularities in general? An answer can be developed on the basis of Hatcher's analysis of Debendranath Tagore in "Remembering Rammohan" by applying his analysis to Sen.

Hatcher applied the sociological theories of Danièle Hervieu-Léger, regarding the emergence of new religious movements, to the Samaj and its leadership. Whereas many sociologists expected that the dawning of modernity would end religion, Hervieu-Léger observed that, in the wake of modernity, new "elective fraternities" or "voluntary groups" emerge. When traditional structures weaken and break down, these new groups give people a new source of identity. Furthermore, these groups may be transformed into religions. That happens when "the group" calls "upon a common spirit that transcends its individual members," gaining a new "collective identity."⁶⁶ This collective identity may be reinforced through a "lineage of belief."⁶⁷ Applying these ideas to Tagore's work in shaping the Samaj, Hatcher noted the adulation that Tagore and other members of the Samaj gave to Roy. He noted that they considered themselves to be carrying on Roy's work. Thus, they stood within what Hervieu-Léger called a "lineage of belief."⁶⁸

One can extend Hatcher's consideration of Tagore to Sen's situation. With the split in the Samaj, Sen needed to claim a different lineage—thus, his adulation of Jesus Christ in his 1866 speech on him. However, after being criticized for apparently being on the brink of conversion, Sen cast his net broadly by speaking of the great people of all times and places. To underscore their importance, he argued that they have a deeper communion with God than do others. Thus, he broke with the metaphysics of the Samaj, carrying the adulation of great men further than Tagore had carried his adulation of Roy.

It was a natural progression from "Great Men" to "Future Church." In the former talk, Sen no longer sought universality through the vague and general: intuition. Instead, he sought it through a particularity: great humans. In "Future Church," Sen expanded the range of particularities

⁶⁶ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp. 125 and 152.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁶⁸ Brian A. Hatcher, "Remembering Rammohan: An Essay on the (Re-)emergence of Modern Hinduism," *History of Religions* 46 (August, 2006): 55 and 74.

beyond great individuals to religious phenomena in general. In that expansion, He was undoubtedly encouraged by his joint involvement with two seemingly irreconcilable systems: Baptist and Vaiṣṇavite spiritualities. These developments, as will be shown below, opened the door to a certain appreciation of image worship.

III. A Dawning Appreciation

Sen's new approach in "Future Church" was the harmonization of religions. He undergirded that aim with a theology of fulfillment. In such a theology, an erring party is considered potentially to be thirsting for that which is right. Though thirsting for what is right, he or she pursues it through what is wrong or incomplete. When shown what is right and complete, the individual finds the fulfillment of his or her quest.

Sen's theology of fulfillment was bound with a discussion of the worship of human beings and of images. To begin, he stated in "Future Church" that "no religious system . . . is wholly false. . . . We must not, therefore, pronounce indiscriminate condemnation upon any creed."⁶⁹ Accordingly, he explained that, behind idolatry, is the truth that God manifests in nature; behind pantheism, the truth that God manifests through the human soul; and behind the worship of great people, the truth that God manifests through "moral greatness."⁷⁰ Further, he stated that, in the ideal church of the future, the grounds of which he was preparing through the Brahma Samaj of India, the image worshiper, the pantheist, and the worshiper of humans would all find what they were seeking. They would find in this church the honoring of manifestations of God in nature, the soul, and human virtue.⁷¹ "The idolater, the pantheist, and the Prophet-worshiper will there find what they actually want; . . . all their normal cravings for spiritual aid, will be duly satisfied."⁷²

Sen had moved from Tagore's Brahma stance to honoring the divine within great individuals and from there to admitting some validity in image worship. The first change was probably the sharpest, since it was a break with Brahma metaphysics. The second change may have been a

⁶⁹ Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 165.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

natural extension of the first, for it would have required no further essential change in metaphysical perspective. Also, his speech on “Great Men” probably opened the door to the incident in which Sen was worshiped at Monghyr. A theology of fulfillment, in turn, could have helped to justify that incident.

As seen above, Carlyle was a guide to Sen in the topic of “great men.” Likewise, he was also a guide to Sen as he proposed a theology of fulfillment.⁷³ Carlyle was born in 1795 into a Calvinist family, and in 1809 he was studying at Edinburgh University to enter the ministry. However, in 1817, after reading Edward Gibbon (1737–94), he came to doubt the Bible. Yet, just as he was dissatisfied with Christianity, he was also dissatisfied with the Enlightenment, of which Gibbon was a representative. Carlyle believed, as did the Romantics, that modern science robs the human mind of its basic sense of wonder. Furthermore, it does not explain the root of things: “We call that fire of the black thunder-cloud ‘electricity,’ and lecture learnedly about it.” However, that still explains little: “[W]hat is it? What made it? . . . This world, after all our science and sciences, is still a miracle; wonderful, inscrutable, *magical* and more.”⁷⁴

Rejecting both Christianity and the Enlightenment, Carlyle turned, as did many Romantics, to Europe’s pre-Christian past. He believed that ancient religions had a deep sense of awe for nature. Thus, Odin was the topic of the first chapter of *On Heroes*. Therein, Carlyle defended the non-Christian world, especially Europe’s pre-Christian past. Both Enlightenment thinkers and traditional Christian thinkers might criticize the former as “quackery, priestcraft, and dupery.”⁷⁵ However, Carlyle responded that ancient religions “all had a truth in them. . . . quackery was never the originating influence in such things.”⁷⁶ For instance, whereas “Grand Lamaism” might be mainly superstition, there is truth behind it. That truth is that

⁷³ In developing a theology of fulfillment, Sen might also have been influenced by Parker. In a statement that was highly unusual for a nineteenth-century Westerner, but which anticipated the direction that twentieth-century Unitarianism would take, Parker wrote, “He that worships truly, by whatever form, worships the Only God. He hears the prayer, whether called Brahma, Jehovah, Pan, or Lord. . . . many a Grecian peasant, who did homage to Phœbus-Apollo . . . , shall come from the East and the West, and sit down in the Kingdom of God, with Moses and Zoroaster, with Socrates and Jesus” (Parker, *Discourse*, pp. 110–111).

⁷⁴ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 9; emphases in original.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

“there is a *Greatest Man*; that *he* is discoverable; that, once discovered, we ought to treat him with an obedience which knows no bounds!”⁷⁷

The parallels between Carlyle and Sen are evident. Carlyle was raised as a Calvinist and was later influenced by the Enlightenment. Likewise, Sen was involved with both Calvinist expressions of spirituality and Brahmo rationalism. Later, Carlyle reached past both Calvinism and the Enlightenment to Europe’s ancient, pre-Christian religions, believing that they expressed a sense of awe that was lacking in the modern world. Likewise, Sen reached beyond both Calvinism and Brahmo rationalism to Vaiṣṇava devotionalism. Carlyle argued against blanket condemnations of religions and argued that there is truth, for instance, behind the Tibetan Buddhist worship of lamas. Likewise, Sen argued against blanket condemnations and argued that there is truth behind the worship of images and people.

IV. The Example of Ramakrishna⁷⁸

Sen’s two main objections against image worship in his early years were that it introduced a third party into a direct relationship with God and that it was a source of immorality.⁷⁹ The prior two sections of this essay show how Sen’s perspective on the first objection changed in the period 1866–69. Later, his experiences challenged his second objection in conjunction with his meeting, in 1875, of the now-famous priest of Kālī, Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Sen and Ramakrishna belonged to very different worlds. Sen’s close friend P. C. Mozoomdar, in an often-cited essay, highlighted the contrast between them. The Brahmos thought of themselves as sophisticated, Western-educated elites, whereas Ramakrishna seemed to be a “poor, illiterate, shrunken, unpolished, diseased, half-dressed, half-idolatrous, friendless Hindu devotee.”⁸⁰

In 1875, Ramakrishna, who at that time was relatively unknown, visited Sen, who was well known. Although the two men belonged to very different

⁷⁷ Ibid., emphases in original.

⁷⁸ For an excellent summary of Sen’s life during the years considered in this section, see Stevens, *Keshab*, pp. 115–155.

⁷⁹ See Keshav, *Life and Works*, pp. 19, 24, 54, 62–63, 67, 83, 86, 108, and 146.

⁸⁰ Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, “The Hindu Saint,” in Nanda Mookerjee, ed., *Sri Ramakrishna in the Eyes of Brahma and Christian Admirers* (Kolkata: Firma KLM, 1976), p. 3.

worlds, there was much to draw them together. Sen wanted to harmonize different aspects of different religions, and Ramakrishna had experimented with Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism, concluding that all have the same end. Furthermore, Sen yearned for the direct experience of God and was involved with emotional expressions of religion, and Ramakrishna was an ecstatic visionary.⁸¹ Also significant was that Ramakrishna reconciled the different deities of Hinduism with oneness by interpreting “each of” them as “a force, an incarnated principle tending to reveal the supreme relation of the soul to that eternal and formless Being.”⁸²

Most importantly for the topic at hand, Sen was impressed with Ramakrishna’s moral qualities. Sen reported being unimpressed with the majority of Hindus, including the holy people or *sādhus*. However, he distinguished Ramakrishna from other *sādhus* by writing that he and other Brahmos were “charmed by the depth, penetration and simplicity of his spirit. . . . being as gentle, tender, and contemplative.” He added, “Hinduism must have in it still a deep source of beauty, truth, and goodness to inspire such men as these.”⁸³ That quote was from the first of many articles on Ramakrishna that would appear in Brahmo periodicals. These articles contributed to Ramakrishna’s growing reputation among the intelligentsia of Kolkata,⁸⁴ and he subsequently came to have an impact on the development of twentieth-century Hinduism.

In the year after having met Ramakrishna, Sen made an important statement in his 1876 anniversary address, “Our Faith and Our Experiences.” He contradicted his prior stance on image worship: “With a deity before the eye to see and adore, every good feeling of which man’s nature is capable has started into life and developed into full bloom. Holy fear, stern justice, warm gratitude, charity, patriotism, philanthropy, conjugal

⁸¹ Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, pp. 155–156.

⁸² Mozoomdar, “Hindu Saint,” p. 5.

⁸³ [Keshab Chandra Sen], editorial, *Indian Mirror*, Sunday edition, March 28, 1875, p. 1. This article can also be found in Mookerjee, *Sri Ramakrishna*, p. 2. A selection lies in Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 318. The editorial is anonymous, but Mookerjee attributed it to Sen.

⁸⁴ Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, p. 156. For these articles, see Ranganath Ramachandra Diwakar, *Paramahansa Sri Ramakrishna* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964), pp. 252–258; Mookerjee, *Ramakrishna*, pp. 2 and 119–135; and Ramakrishna, *His Words: The Preachings and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa*, ed. and tr. Amiya P. Sen (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), pp. 241–242 and 244.

love, ... have grown profusely on Indian soil in the days of idolatry.”⁸⁵ Rather than a source of immorality, image worship could play a role in the cultivation of virtue. In this matter, Ramakrishna’s example undoubtedly influenced Sen.

Two years later, in an editorial on the major festival the Dūrgā Pūjā, Sen further explored potentially morally elevating aspects of image worship. Dūrgā is a protective goddess, famous for slaying the buffalo demon, Maḥiṣāsura. In an editorial on the Dūrgā Pūjā, Sen explained how image worship can lead to the cultivation of morals. He explained that the story of Dūrgā is allegorical and that her triumph over the demon represents the “power of grace” acting with a lion’s might to destroy the “animal propensities of man.”⁸⁶ The deities who flank Dūrgā in the iconography also have meaning. Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Kārttikeya, and Gaṇeṣa represent the “wisdom, happiness, beauty, and welfare” that come with God’s grace.⁸⁷ Approximately seventeen years earlier, Sen had persuaded Tagore to convert the Dūrgā Pūjā hall in his home into a Brahma chapel. However, Sen stated in his editorial that, rather than cursing the celebration with “iconoclastic fury,” the Brahma “must humbly sit at the feet of the true Durga-worshipper and learn the truth and devotion which Durga Pujah inspires.”⁸⁸

Sen needed to reconcile his Brahma past with his experiences of Ramakrishna. The reconciliation he chose in his editorial on the Dūrgā Pūjā was allegory. In that approach, he was probably influenced by Roy and Tagore, who, we have seen, took allegorical and symbolic approaches to

⁸⁵ Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 322. A statement during Sen’s 1870 trip to England was a precursor of this stance. He advised a Unitarian audience against feelings of religious superiority, stating, “There are many men and women in my country who though steeped in idolatry and superstition, lead pious and pure lives, and whose exemplary character ought to be imitated by Christian men and women” (Keshav, *Life and Works*, pp. 242–243). Most likely, this statement was motivated by national pride while in a foreign country.

⁸⁶ [Keshab Chandra Sen], editorial, *Indian Mirror*, September 6, 1878, p. 2. This editorial is anonymous, but Frans L. Damen attributed it to Sen. See *Crisis and Religious Renewal in the Brahma Samaj (1860–1884): A Documentary Study of the Emergence of the “New Dispensation” under Keshab Chandra Sen* (Leuven: Department Oriëntalistiek, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1983), p. 225. (There is an error in Damen’s citation.)

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

the Vedas.⁸⁹ However, his more immediate guide, as in the past, was Carlyle's thought. Articulating an understanding of myth that has grown increasingly popular since his time, Carlyle wrote that myth is "a shadowing forth, in allegorical fable, in personification, and visual form, of what . . . poetic minds had known and felt of this Universe."⁹⁰ For instance, although the stories of Odin might not be literally true, they taught lessons to the Norse people. These were "the infinite importance of Valour" and that "this world is after all but a shew,—a phenomenon or appearance, no real thing."⁹¹ Thus, Odin was "a root of so many great things; the fruit of him is found growing, from deep thousands of years, over the whole field of Teutonic Life."⁹² This statement resonates strongly with Sen's 1876 statement, seen above, that through image worship, "Holy fear, stern justice, warm gratitude, charity, patriotism, philanthropy, conjugal love, . . . have grown profusely on Indian soil in the days of idolatry."⁹³

V. A Year of Rituals

It was not enough for Sen simply to theorize about positive aspects of popular Hindu worship. Around 1878, the year of his editorial on the Dūrgā Pūjā, he began using names of that goddess in the worship of the Samaj.⁹⁴ More striking, in 1881, he performed a series of rituals that drew upon aspects of image worship. The context for these rituals was a new institution, the Nava Vidhana or New Dispensation.

Prior to the formation of the New Dispensation, a group had splintered from the Brahmo Samaj of India in 1878 to form the Sadharana Brahmo Samaj.⁹⁵ There were various reasons for the split, including the fact that some of the younger members were not interested in Sen's religious

⁸⁹ In an 1880 editorial, Sen wrote that his allegorical approach was the result of the Samaj's studies of mythology ("The Philosophy of Idol-Worship," *Indian Mirror*, Sunday edition, August 1, 1880, p. 2). This editorial was anonymous, but Damen attributed it to Sen (Damen, *Crisis and Religious Renewal*, p. 228). For a discussion of the Samaj's work in comparative religion, see Stevens, *Keshab*, p. 179.

⁹⁰ Carlyle, *On Heroes*, p. 7.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29 and 32.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

⁹³ Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 322.

⁹⁴ Sastri, *History*, p. 197.

⁹⁵ For an excellent discussion of this phase of Sen's life, see Stevens, *Keshab*, pp. 154–225.

activities but, instead, in philanthropy and nationalism.⁹⁶ The specific issue that led to the split was the marriage of Sen's daughter to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. This was a public fiasco, for the young ages of the bride and bridegroom violated the limits of the Marriage Act, which Sen himself had worked to establish. In the wake of the split, in 1880, Sen reconstituted the Brahma Samaj of India as the Nava Vidhana.

Sen articulated the purpose of the New Dispensation in a talk in January, 1880, "God-Vision in the Nineteenth Century." The purpose was the "synthesis" of all religions in the "Divine unity."⁹⁷ However, according to Stevens, Sen did not want simply to develop an intellectual or theological unification of East and West but to embody "them in his own person."⁹⁸ Thus, in 1880, Sen conducted a series of events known as the "Pilgrimages to the Saints," weeklong events involving lectures and meditations on different saints, including Moses, Socrates, Buddha, Muhammad, and Chaitanya. They also had a theatrical aspect, for Sen turned his home into a scene from the particular saint's locale and era, and someone would dress up as the saint to play the part.⁹⁹

In 1881, Sen conducted a parallel series of performances, but these were focused on Hindu deities, rather than on saints. It was the custom of the Brahma Samaj of India to hold anniversary celebrations in January, and the New Dispensation continued that tradition. The 1881 celebration was colorful and dramatic, and involved āratī, or the waving of lamps and two flag ceremonies, as occurs in the Hindu temples.¹⁰⁰ In March, Sen celebrated the Christian ritual of the eucharist with Indian cultural adaptations, such as using water and rice instead of wine and a communion host. Later that month, he performed a ceremony based on both the Hindu ritual of initiation into the renunciatory lifestyle and Christ's commissioning of the Apostles in the Gospels.¹⁰¹ In June, he performed a fire sacrifice that involved prayers to the god of fire, Agni. An attendee said that it was

⁹⁶ Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, pp. 193–195, and 198.

⁹⁷ Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 380.

⁹⁸ Stevens, *Keshab*, p. 224. Specifically, Stevens was referring to an attempt to synthesize "a spiritual 'East' and a material 'West.'"

⁹⁹ Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*, pp. 270–271; Damen, *Crisis and Religious Renewal*, pp. 260–281.

¹⁰⁰ See Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 394.

¹⁰¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 408–409.

surprising and “striking” to see the implements of a fire sacrifice before the pulpit in Sen’s Brahma chapel.¹⁰²

A few days after the fire sacrifice, Sen conducted a ceremony based on Christian baptism and involving prayers to the oceanic deity, Varuṇa.¹⁰³ Lastly, in November, he blessed a family storeroom with a traditional ritual invoking Lakṣmī.¹⁰⁴ Mozoomdar summarized these developments by writing that Sen “had cited years ago with warm approval the example of a Bombay bishop who, before he mounted the pulpit, tore a floral cross with which some of his congregation had decorated a part of the church. But now the Minister of the Brahma Somaj, entered with a singular enthusiasm into an endless succession of symbols, celebrations and ceremonies.”¹⁰⁵

Sen explained his intentions and rationales in two articles, “Philosophy of Idol-Worship” and “Our Dangers.” These were published in August, 1880, and November, 1881, respectively, before and after the series of rituals. In them, he applied principles from his 1869 speech, “Future Church,” to image worship. In “Idol-Worship,” he stated that there are positive features of polytheism and image worship. These include color and vibrancy, the illustration of different aspects of the divine, and the illustration of the divine in different aspects of life.¹⁰⁶ He stated that his intention was to synthesize these positive features with Brahma monotheism. A prayer for the fire sacrifice demonstrates this: “O Thou Blazing Agni. . . Thou art not God: we do not adore thee. But in thee dwells the Lord, the Eternal Inextinguishable Flame.”¹⁰⁷

Sen believed that both Brahmans and Hindus stood to gain from this. Monotheism can be “dull, lifeless and insipid,” but, by incorporating aspects of polytheism and image worship, the monotheistic worship of the Samaj can have “new delights, new life and new aspirations.”¹⁰⁸ Regarding

¹⁰² Sastri, *Brahma Samaj*, p. 242.

¹⁰³ See Keshav, *Life and Works*, pp. 412–413.

¹⁰⁴ See *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Mozoomdar, *Life and Teachings*, p. 396. These changes received attention in both India and England. There was much criticism and a general impression among Christians, Brahmans, and Hindus that Sen was returning to mainstream Hinduism (see Damen, *Crisis and Renewal*, pp. 226–228 and 287–289; Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, pp. 217–219; and Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 418).

¹⁰⁶ [Sen], “Philosophy of Idol-Worship,” p. 3; see also Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 399.

¹⁰⁷ Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 411.

¹⁰⁸ [Sen], “Philosophy of Idol-Worship,” p. 3.

the Hindu populace, “We help our Hindu countrymen to bring to the one Spirit-God all their ideas, sentiments and associations. . . . We simply transfer their homage from visible idols to the ideas they represent, thus spiritualizing the whole of their pantheon.”¹⁰⁹

Sen’s perspective in his 1869 speech, “Future Church,” was the result of a set of changes sparked by his break with the original Brahmo Samaj. Later, his perspective on image worship in his 1876 speech, “Our Faith,” was the result of his friendship with Ramakrishna. What, finally, sparked the transition into performance? At that point, Carlyle was no longer a guide to Sen, as the former had not actually practiced Norse religion. The transition to performance can be explained in terms of a particular aspect of Sen’s personality. He had a proclivity, evident in his childhood and stretching throughout his life, for drama. For instance, while growing up, he and his friends enacted scenes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and Shakespeare’s plays. Later, as a young man, he formed the “Goodwill Fraternity” in which he played the role of a fiery preacher.¹¹⁰ Thus, in Stevens’s words, Sen did not simply want to unify East and West “intellectually and theologically, but also through embodying them in his own person.”¹¹¹

There was another set of factors. In the 1870’s, Indian nationalistic feeling was growing. In that context, as Stevens explains, “a burgeoning sense of national identity expressed through a defence of ‘Hindu culture’ had led many to find the criticism of ritual unacceptable.”¹¹² Also, Sen had earlier relied on the popularity of *kīrtan* to draw people to the Brahmo Samaj of India. Likewise, later, he probably hoped that ritual would draw people in. As Stevens states, “In promoting the use of ritual in general, Keshab was continuing in his longstanding attempts to broaden the appeal of Brahmoism through ‘popular’ forms of worship,” responding to the growing Hindu revivalism.¹¹³

One might wonder what happened to Sen’s unique experiments. After his death, membership in the New Dispensation dwindled. Reasons that

¹⁰⁹ Keshav, *Life and Works*, p. 420.

¹¹⁰ See Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, pp. 12–13; and Mozoomdar, *Life and Teachings*, pp. 85–86 and 99–103.

¹¹¹ Stevens, *Keshab*, p. 224. Specifically, Stevens was referring to an attempt to synthesize “a spiritual ‘East’ and a material ‘West.’”

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

scholars identify include internal disputes, the Cooch Behar fiasco, and the attraction of youth to the Sadharana Brahma Samaj. Also, Borthwick states that Sen's "personality had been so important to the smooth functioning of the institution, and . . . he had been the guiding inspiration behind it," so that it could not function without him.¹¹⁴ Further, the Brahma movement as a whole dwindled, given that the young were attracted to nationalism and Hindu revivalism.

Conclusion

In his first years in the Samaj during the 1860's, Sen attempted universality by reaching behind the religions to a common core devoid of particularity. In the later 1860's, Sen attempted to attain universality by synthesizing particularities, rather than bypassing them. One can hypothesize that the notion of a generalized intuition was too vague and intangible to be a foundation for a movement or institution. Furthermore, in the wake of the split between the original Brahma Samaj and the Brahma Samaj of India, he needed a source of stability. That source of stability could be a lineage, so Sen turned his attention from intuition to "great men." He emphasized that there is more of God manifest in some people than in others. In so doing, he broke with the Brahma metaphysical system, opening the door to an appreciation of image worship. Moreover, in the mid-1870's, based on the example of Ramakrishna, Sen saw a positive role for image worship in the cultivation of moral values.¹¹⁵ Finally, in 1881, he conducted his experiments in ritual.

Sen expressed the hope that his experiments in ritual would have transformative effects on Brahma and Hindu forms of worship. In addition, most likely, he also hoped that they would draw Hindus to his movement, as *kīrtan* had earlier. However, his experiments did not have a longstanding

¹¹⁴ Borthwick, *Keshub Chunder Sen*, p. 234.

¹¹⁵ Exposure to Hindu people had similar effects on certain twentieth-century Christians. For examples, see Eck, *Encountering God*, pp. 1–21; Stuart, *Swāmī Abhishiktānanda*, pp. 31–37; and Cattan, *Pilgrimage of Awakening*, pp. 28–68. There is a longstanding debate between Brahmans and members of the Ramakrishna Mission over whether Sen gained his later ideas from Ramakrishna, or whether they were his own. Even today, this debate carries a bitter sting. This study supports a middle ground, showing that the impact of Ramakrishna was decisive but that it was only one influence in a twenty-year history of diverse influences and original thinking.

effect on either Brahmoism or popular expressions of Hinduism, and membership in the New Dispensation dwindled. Sen's ideas and approach in the 1880's might have suffered from the same problem as had his initial ideas in the 1860's. Both the notion of pure intuition and that of drawing together different aspects of different traditions might have been too vague and general.

The issue can be seen more clearly through a brief comparison with the Ramakrishna Mission. The Mission's founder, Swami Vivekananda, was involved in the Samaj and borrowed many ideas from Sen. These included the complementarity of East and West, an emphasis on social reform, and a symbolic approach to image worship. Yet, whereas the basis of the New Dispensation was explicitly eclectic, the Ramakrishna Mission, though innovative and reforming, was rooted in the classic Hindu school of thought and spirituality, Advaita Vedānta. The New Dispensation died out, but the Ramakrishna Mission today continues as a thriving international organization. Most likely, its rootedness in Vedānta gave it a stability that the New Dispensation lacked.

There are further issues at play. Sallie King has cited the concern that interreligious borrowing and mixing can be "a form of egotism" because "it rejects external authorities and gives all power to the individual to choose and embrace those elements of religion that the individual finds pleasing."¹¹⁶ King's point is to argue that that is not always the case. However, Sen's experiments might be such a case. Sen's approach to mediating between East and West, especially in terms of his rituals, was largely his own creative production.¹¹⁷ There was no particular commitment, such as Advaita Vedānta, to give the New Dispensation a stable center. The result was the sort of exotic, interreligious "cocktail," mixed "according to my own taste," referred to by Panikkar.¹¹⁸

Regarding the crossing of religious boundaries, whether in minor or major ways, Rachel Reedijk, in *Ritual Participation*, made an important

¹¹⁶ Sallie B King, "Buddhism and Christianity in a Globalizing and Supplementing World," in Charles L. Cohen, Paul F. Knitter, and Ulrich Rosenhagen, eds., *The Future of Interreligious Dialogue: A Multireligious Conversation on Nostra Aetate* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), p. 279.

¹¹⁷ Sen, especially in his final years, was known for his autocratic style (see Stevens, *Keshab*, pp. 153, 165, and 169).

¹¹⁸ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. xviii.

point. Religious rituals involve matters that are deeply sacred to a group. In that regard, Reedijk referred to Mircea Eliade's definition of the sacred as something that is set apart from mundane realities.¹¹⁹ She pointed out, for instance, that in both the Temple of Solomon and Egyptian temples, the sacred reality was set deep within, surrounded by a numinous awe, and accessible to only a few. If those inside the religion need to keep their distance, those outside the religion must be even more distant, keeping a "hands-off" stance toward what is sacred to another.

Given these considerations, what route should one take? Is there a way forward between a strictly hands-off stance and Sen's unrestrained experimentation? Anantanand Rambachan's contribution to *Ritual Participation* points to a possible middle way. As in the Temple of Solomon and the Egyptian temples, in Hindu temples the deity dwells deep within, surrounded by awe. Further, to some degree, access is restricted. Yet, the point of dwelling in the temple and manifesting in a statue is to be near to human beings. Thus, Rambachan mentions the warm reception that outsiders often receive at Hindu temples. Without denying the uniqueness and distinctiveness of different religions, Rambachan invites members of all religions to accept the consecrated food offered by the priest, stating that the deity's "hospitality and blessings are available to all who come to the temple."¹²⁰

This study opens other questions in the area of the theology of religions. Carlyle's ideas about truth's existing in all religions is similar to twentieth-century expressions of inclusivism. Max Müller is considered one of the originators of the inclusivist position, yet he admired Carlyle and Sen, and Sen was influenced by Carlyle.¹²¹ To what extent was Müller's inclusivism, and thus twentieth-century inclusivism in general, influenced by Carlyle? Related to that, could Carlyle's efforts to demythologize Odin be compared fruitfully with the efforts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal theologians to demythologize Jesus? In addition, in 1996,

¹¹⁹ Rachel Reedijk, "Transgressing and Setting Ritual Boundaries: A Puzzling Paradox," in Moyaert and Geldhof, *Ritual Participation*, p. 183.

¹²⁰ Anantanand Rambachan, "Offering and Receiving Hospitality: The Meaning of Ritual Participation in a Hindu Temple," in Moyaert and Geldhof, *Ritual Participation*, p. 132; see also p. 136.

¹²¹ The relationship between Sen and Müller is well documented. Regarding Müller's admiration of Carlyle, see *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Müller*, ed. His Wife, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1902), vol. 2, pp. 99–100.

Gavin D'Costa published the article, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," in which he argued that a truly pluralistic position is impossible, for such a stance will always involve a significant exclusion.¹²² Sen's early ideas on intuition were an attempt to embrace both East and West, but they excluded religious particularities, especially image worship. Could Sen's early ideas be an example of D'Costa's point?

There are possible inquiries in the area of Bengali studies. Historians such as David Kopf used the Italian Renaissance as a model to understand the larger cultural and intellectual context to which Sen belonged. That context was the confluence of cultures known as the "Bengal Renaissance." If moments from European history are to be used to understand moments in Bengali history, could the Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment be used? Sen's criticisms of Brahma spirituality and his forays into ritual were parallel to that reaction. In fact, European Romanticism, through Carlyle, influenced Sen. Speaking more broadly, could the nineteenth-century fascination with Ramakrishna have been a "Romantic" reaction against the Hinduism common in Bengal at the time, which many claim was ossified by custom and tradition?

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¹²² See Gavin D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32 (June, 1996): 223–232.