



Religion in history: conflict, conversion and co-existence

The Bengal Renaissance

John Wolffe

In the following discussion we're going to consider Ram Mohan Roy and Vivekananda not in Britain but in Bengal and the city of Calcutta where both lived for different parts of their lives. There they created movements for which they are remembered during a period in which it has been claimed India experienced a renaissance. I shall be talking with William Radice, Senior Lecturer in Bengali at the School of Oriental African Studies, University of London. In the following section, Dr Radice uses Bengali pronunciation.

John Wolffe

How do you think a British administrator or missionary travelling to Calcutta in the 19th century might have anticipated what they would find when they got there?

William Radice

You mean in the early period? Well, of course great wealth was built up in the 18th century because of the activities of the East India company and there were Bengalis who were able to build up great wealth too because of all the trading activity which led to the growth of Calcutta as a great city, but I think administrators going out to work, say for the East India company, they would have been aware that this was an environment with extraordinary social contrasts and they would have been aware that amidst all this wealth in the city of Palaces, as so called, there would be great squalor and great poverty and particularly if they had progressive ideals or if they had evangelical religious convictions, they would've been aware that there would be a lot of social iniquities and abuses, religious practices, that they would regard it as barbaric and so on.

John Wolffe

Would Europeans have mixed fairly freely with the indigenous population?

William Radice

Yes, I mean, one thing that always strikes me whenever I do any reading on Calcutta in the first half of the 19th century is how progressive minded Bengalis and liberal or progressive minded Englishmen are engaged in a joint project in many ways. As the so-called Bengal renaissance gets going and you get the development of English education, the founding of important institutions like Hindu college in 1817 and campaigns such as Ram Mohan Roy's campaign against Sutte, widow burning, you find that Englishmen and Bengalis are working together. The watershed in this whole 19th century period is 1857, which is of course the year of the so-called Indian mutiny and it's also a year in which Calcutta University is established and a whole system of education run by the new imperial government is put in place, I mean, the starting of the British Raj proper, so it's a watershed in that sense too.

But also you have, partly because of the disaster, as it was really, of the mutiny and suspicion that many English people would have had of Indians after that event; fear of something like that happening again, you have the souring of relations between Bengalis and English.

John Wolffe

Of course, there was immense religious diversity in Bengal wasn't there, before the British arrived? How was that reflected in Calcutta itself?

William Radice

Well, particularly in recent years, scholars have given great stress to the tradition of religious synthesis in Bengal, and something in many ways to be valued very highly. Of course, much

later, at the end of the 19th century, early 20th century, you get Muslim reform movements who fight against that and say, you know, that whole tradition of Hindu/Muslim synthesis, which was part of the medieval Bengali heritage, is something that devout Muslims should try and move away from. However, I would say that those traditions or synthesis which are very fascinating and we haven't really time to go into them at the moment, I don't see them as having much to do with Calcutta as it develops in the late 18th, early 19th century.

I mean, this is really a new culture that is forming in Calcutta and although you'll find representatives of different religious traditions like say Vaishnavism and presumably also various different Islamic traditions as well. You'll no doubt find that in Calcutta but no, I don't actually feel very much connection. Culturally, linguistically of course, there is more in the sense that the British took on a system which had already been established by the Moghuls, and Persian as an official language and so on. And so there were plenty of people around at the beginning of the 19th century; educated Bengalis who know Persian, and the British policy at that time was the so-called Orientalist one of training East India company officials in Oriental languages which is why Fort William College was founded in 1800 and the Baptist missionaries, Serampore, particularly the famous William Carey, they assisted with that policy as they were employed as teachers at Fort William College.

So, the inherited Persian culture and education is around but of course it starts to get eroded because there's a growing realisation that English is actually the language of the future and if we're talking about the so called Bengal renaissance in general terms then, among the various elements in it, English education is of course a very, very important one, and not one that is imposed on Bengalis through some kind of imperial design because, at this stage anyway, we haven't actually got a British Empire, we've got the East India company, but no, not an imposition. You get the Bengali elite class, the so-called 'gentlemen class' that starts to gather strength as the 19th century progresses themselves asking for English education and sometimes actively campaigning against attempts by the East India company government to maintain the Orientalist approach.

John Wolffe

Even in the early period, would it be fair to say in fact it was the Hindus who really interacted more systematically, more intensively with the British?

William Radice

Oh yes, yes. It's often said that the Muslims generally in Bengal rather lost out on the Bengal renaissance, that they didn't seize the new educational opportunities and it was only much, much later, you know, at the end of the 19th century that, in a sense, they started to catch up but by then you have of course the beginnings of separatism and you get Muslim organisations fearful of being dominated in an independent India where Hindus would be in the majority and you'd get some Muslim groups really siding with the British because of that fear.

John Wolffe

So, when you refer to the Bengal renaissance, we'll come onto that in a moment, you're really talking about something, which is essentially Hindu, aren't you, in character?

William Radice

Yes, although I would be reluctant to call it a Hindu renaissance. I associate that term with a later period of Hindu revival at the end of the 19th century. I think you can then talk about a Hindu renaissance but I'd be reluctant to equate the two terms, Bengal renaissance with Hindu renaissance because although, yes, most of the important figures in 19th century Bengal are from a Hindu background, they're not all Orthodox Hindus by any means. I mean, you have of course reform movements, particularly the Brahmo Samaj and then you have very Anglicised people like the so-called young Bengal people from the 1830s and 40s some of whom reject Hinduism altogether, I mean, even to the extent of very publicly eating beef in order to provoke the Orthodox and so on. So, they wouldn't regard themselves as Hindus. And the founder of modern Bengali literature who I've done a lot of work on, Michael Madhusudan Datta, he converted to Christianity in 1843.

John Wolffe

I suppose that brings us to the link to Christianity that, as you said, I mean, many Christian missionaries learnt Bengali as a way to propagate the Gospel and I suppose similarly many Hindus would have learnt about Christianity primarily through learning the English language and studying European culture rather than necessarily expecting to embrace Christianity at the end of it.

William Radice

Yes, that's right. I mean even Madhusudan, although he converted to Christianity, he's never thought of as ever having been particularly devout but there's no doubt that he did absorb a lot of Christian tradition through studying Christian literature, I mean, the great European literary epics that he was steeped in and when he wrote his own masterpiece he was very much influenced by European literary epic from Homer, Virgil, on through to Dante and Milton and he certainly absorbed through the study of that literature a lot of Christianity, particularly I would say, a sense of sin.

Of course, the missionaries at that time, particularly if they were evangelical, they would be hammering on about sin and one of their charges against Hinduism was that Hindus had no sense of sin. Certainly Madhusudan has a strong sense of sin, partly because his personal life was a big mess. He left his first wife, who was Eurasian, he had four children, for the daughter of a colleague at the school in Madras where he was teaching, and he lived with her for the rest of his life. She was actually English. They never married and they had two children but there's a part of him that obviously regrets that all that happened and that the sense of his own sinfulness is there in his writing. And you find in the progressive Hindu reform movements, particularly the Brahmo Samaj, yes, a sense of sin is very much there and certainly you can attribute that partly to Christian influence.

John Wolffe

You were saying the notion of sin isn't really a very central, natural concept within Hinduism, traditionally speaking.

William Radice

Although, of course, the conception of Karma and the fruits of your actions, I mean, paying for your actions, everything you do has a moral consequence that you will reap what you sow, if not in this life, in some future life. That's certainly very much a part of the Hindu tradition, without a doubt.

John Wolffe

Do you think there are other factors, which would have discouraged Hindus from thinking seriously about converting to Christianity at this time? What would the cost have been of, say, converting to Christianity?

William Radice

Well, there were considerable social costs, yes. I mean, every time there was a high profile conversion, I mean among the better off or more educated classes, then there would be a big sort of social furor or hoo-har, and sometimes people would be persuaded to reconvert back to Hinduism, which would involve an elaborate ceremony of atonement. So, yes, in terms of potential, social ostracism there were often heavy costs to be paid.

Of course, the fact that the Brahmo Samaj was founded by Ram Mohan Roy and even if it didn't have vast numbers of adherence, it was nevertheless a very important and influential movement and showed that it was possible to have a reformed, progressive religion which drew on Hindu tradition, which put great classical texts, particularly the Upanishads at the centre of worship but cast out a lot of the superstition, the clutter that was associated with Orthodox Hinduism. I mean the fact that a movement like the Brahma Samaj got established was certainly one reason why people didn't convert to Christianity because they had an alternative and that was, of course, one reason why Ram Mohan Roy founded the Brahma Samaj .

John Wolffe

So, if we're thinking about this early period when you said there was a fair degree of contact between the different communities in Calcutta, if Hindus, for example, were not expecting to take seriously the prospect of conversion of Christianity, what were they looking for from this contact with particularly the British as representatives of European culture and religion at the time in Calcutta?

William Radice

Well, unless they were actually involved in trading and, of course, many of them were, and some of them became very rich, for example, Dwarkanath Tagore, the grandfather of the poet Rabindranath Tagore, he was a very successful entrepreneur. He really benefited in commercial terms from the British presence there, so there were people like that but for those who were not involved in trading commerce, I think education was the central thing and people recognised early on that Christians did have a lot to offer in terms of education, establishing schools, working as teachers, and this was respected, and people were prepared to send their sons, and later their daughters, to schools that were run by Christians because they could see the value of that education and, on the whole, the people who ran those schools managed to dispel the fear that they would convert all their pupils to Christianity. I mean, even the more proselytising or evangelical Christians like Alexander Duff from the Church of Scotland, I mean, he founded his very important school, the General Assemblies Institution in 1830, which, it would be interesting to look at the enrolments, you know, the actual numbers of people who passed through that institution as opposed to Hindu College.

John Wolffe

Was the value of this English language education appreciated by a wider range of groups than simply those you'd label progressives?

William Radice

Yes, I think so. There are figures like say the Raja Radhakanta Deb who is remembered as being conservative and disagreeing with Ram Mohan Roy on a number of issues and clashing with the Brahmo Samaj. He's thought of as being Orthodox but, I mean, he was a modern person, I mean, he wasn't Orthodox like a sort of Brahmin priest or Pundit in the villages would have been Orthodox. He was an educated person and when you read about the various educational institutions and debating clubs, newspapers, journals that are founded in this period, you get a list of people who are involved in the founding and it's always interesting to see both English names and Bengali names in those lists, and you'll find that Radhakanta Deb is often there in those lists so...

John Wolffe

...even though often regarded as being on the more conservative wing of Hinduism?

William Radice

Yes, that's right and Tagore's father, Debendranath Tagore, he revived the Brahmo Samaj. After Ram Mohan Roy died, it went into a period of decline and then Debendranath; he was converted to Brahmanism. Well, first of all he founded his own organisation, the Tattwabodhini Sabha and then he realised there wasn't much to separate the Tattwabodhini Sabha from the Brahmo Samaj and he actually merged these two and he took over the running of the Brahmo Samaj and Debendranath theologically, yes, he kept on moving forward, I mean, he eventually abandoned the idea that the Vedas, the classical scriptures of India, were infallible.

I mean, at first the Brahmas had tried to claim that so that they had something equivalent to the bible or the Koran, you know, they said, one of the problems we as Hindus have is that we don't have one holy book so we better say that the Vedas are infallible in that way. And Debendranath Tagore, working with his assistant, Okoy Kormaed Docteel Datta, he eventually abandoned the idea that the Vedas were infallible, and that was a considerable step to take and then he published books that were his own sort of selections from the Upanishads with his own interpretations. So, he was progressive in that sense but in other respects he was quite conservative. He went on wearing the Brahman sacred thread.

John Wolffe

The notion of conversion is central to our course and I notice when you refer to Debendranath a little while ago, you talked about him converting to the Brahmo Samaj . What do you understand by using the term conversion in that way? What sense does it have for a Hindu to convert within the framework of Hinduism, or are you implying that Brahmo Samaj is outside of Hinduism in some way?

William Radice

Yes, well, this has always been an issue in trying to understand the role of the Brahmo Samaj is whether it remained Hindu or not but Debendranath always insisted that he was still Hindu but he was a reformed Hindu so it wasn't a case of rejecting Hinduism altogether. It was a matter as he saw it, and I think this is the case with other progressive Bengalis in the 19th century who weren't necessarily Brahmos, I mean, they were trying to reconcile the Indian heritage with a modern outlook, with a modern sense of history, science, progressive education and then, of course, as nationalist politics develop in the late 19th century with political organisation it is all a case of trying to balance the two and I think one of the main reasons why Ram Mohan Roy is revered so much as a founding father, not just for the Bengal renaissance but for the whole unfolding of modern India, is that he was engaged in that project of trying to extract what was good and valuable and true from the Indian religious and social heritage but cast out what was bad, what was superstitious, what was cruel.

John Wolffe

Was Ram Mohan Roy a very controversial figure at the time? I mean this notion of him being the founder, the father of modern India. That's a more recent, I suppose, appreciation of his importance isn't it?

William Radice

Yes, yes.

John Wolffe

Was he regarded as someone in fact who was betraying or diluting or selling out Hinduism during this time?

William Radice

Some people would have regarded him as that, yes, and sometimes he clearly was quite isolated in his campaigns and was having to seek support from progressive minded Englishmen, you know, rather than Indians.

John Wolffe

And I suppose he was another Hindu who at the time was thought to be a little bit too close to maybe converting to Christianity or adopting some sort of tactic form of Christianity?

William Radice

Yes, some people might have thought that although I think most scholars of Ram Mohan Roy would say that his monotheism derived as much from Islam as from Christianity because he was of that generation that still had that inherited local culture, and he knew Persian. He wrote in Persian as well as in Bengali and English.

John Wolffe

In a sense he was an embodiment of what you referred to earlier as the 'hybrid' culture of Calcutta?

William Radice

Yes, that's right, and trying to seek this balance and trying to keep what was good in the Indian heritage, tradition, going right back to classical religious texts, but cast out what was bad and you find this right the way through the period, that that's what people are trying to do.

John Wolffe

And I suppose really, he's probably thought of primarily as a social reformer rather than a religious thinker or do you think that's an artificial distinction to make?

William Radice

I think probably that's artificial and he was concerned with both.

John Wolffe

I suppose Ram Mohan Roy is distinguished from other members of the sort of Hindu elite of the time because of his very close exchange with Joshua Marshman, the Baptist missionary, about the substance of the Sermon on the Mount and his desire to try to almost look for a purified form of Christianity, a Christianity free of supernatural elements which just emphasised a universal ethical teaching. Does that tell us anything about Ram Mohan Roy's fundamental concerns when it came to religion?

William Radice

Yes, well, it shows his Universalist outlook, which was picked up by, well particularly Debendranath Tagore. I mean, I think the... although Ram Mohan Roy was undoubtedly a great man, but the way in which he was very much established, you know, in the pantheon of great figures of the 19th century of Bengal, I think we have to attribute that to a large extent to Rabindranath Tagore who defended his legacy and his reputation against some rather disparaging remarks that Gandhi once made about him.

And of course, Tagore had a universalist, religious outlook, as indeed did Vivekananda, you know, trying to find some way of expressing essential religious truths, which all people of good will could accept which could be reconciled with all traditions and Tagore found that aspiration in Ram Mohan Roy, and that I think is the main reason why he admired him so deeply and wrote very important essays in Bengali about Ram Mohan Roy and also wrote about him in English.

I mean, that kind of debate that he referred to, it's interesting to compare it with something much later in the century when Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the great Bengali novelist who is a Hindu revivalist in many ways although... but not an obscurantist way, I mean Bankim was very much a rationalist too and was influenced by French positivist thinkers, Comte particularly, but he engaged in a famous public controversy with the Reverend William Hasty who was Principal of the General Assembly Institution that I referred to earlier; the school that had been founded by Alexander Duff, and that was a much more vicious sort of clash between an ardent, rather evangelical Protestant Christian Reverend William Hasty arguing against Hindu superstition and idolatry and really no meeting of minds.

Whereas in the kind of debate that Ram Mohan Roy would engage in there was an attempt to try and reach out to common ground and I think the fact that with this later debate, and those letters between the Reverend Hasty and Bankim were published by Hasty himself but there is no common ground. There is no meeting of minds and that shows the way relations between Bengalis and Englishmen are becoming much tenser, much more difficult in the late mid 19th century.

John Wolffe

Yes, it's very striking that so many of these Bengali Hindu thinkers were sympathetic to notions of universalism. Is that something which we can trace back into the Hindu tradition they inherited or is that part of their encounter with European thinking?

William Radice

I think it's probably quite difficult to really trace it back in objective historical terms. It think it was the gloss that progressive minded people in the 19th century put on the Hindu heritage but I don't think Hindus before this modern period would have thought of Hinduism in that way.

John Wolffe

So this is part of a recasting of Hinduism?

William Radice

Yes, it's a reconstruction of Hinduism, yes. And it's very fascinating that it can come even from a figure like Ramakrishna who was Vivekananda's guru, and Ramakrishna was not an educated man, I mean, he wasn't a product of the elite class at all. He came from a humble, rural background and yet he was able to come up with these universalist ideas and he went through various religious phases himself, you know, exploring different traditions within Hinduism, Tantra, Saivism, Vaishnavism, but even Islam and Christianity, and to come up with a religious idea which was very universalist and which of course was picked up and further developed by the Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna mission but I don't think that outlook, no, I don't think it really has anything to do with Hinduism as it was in the pre-modern period.

John Wolffe

Although today we tend to think of Hinduism above all I suppose as this Universalist, very outward looking, inclusivity religion.

William Radice

Well, yes, and this shows the profound influence that these figures from 19th century Bengal have had actually. You make a link between their ideas and modern new age movements and I think the link is very real and this is why I think people will go on going back to this period because it's a very important seabed, and I think this, as I already said, I mean, these people were trying to reconcile the ancient heritage with a modern outlook and, I mean, this is something that people are having to do with their religious traditions the world over and interestingly it seems that Hindus have found it easier to do that than people belonging to other traditions.

One of the things that Christian missionaries used to say in the 19th century, the early 19th century, was that 'Ah! We've got a religion which is based on historical facts, you know, that Jesus Christ was crucified and raised from the dead', and yes, at the time this seemed to rather put Hindus on the spot and, you know, some of them were bothered by the fact that their religion was apparently based on this vast mass of, you know, myths that weren't proper history, but actually now it seems that in many ways the fact that Hinduism doesn't depend on supposed historical facts, that many people actually find difficult to accept now, is one of its strengths and something that attracts new age movements to Hinduism because they haven't got to sign up to supposed historical events which they can't actually any more believe in.

John Wolffe

Perhaps we can turn now to Vivekananda, also the founder of a distinctive Hindu movement. How would you place Vivekananda within the same context of now late 19th century Calcutta in Bengal?

William Radice

Well, it's very interesting but it's also rather dismaying that Vivekananda is often identified with Hindu revivalism in the sense of Hindu nationalism or chauvinism with so called Hindutva, and when the BJP started to become very conspicuous in India, of course they've just now fallen from power but they have been ruling India for the last decade or so. Again, there's evidence that people of that persuasion were trying to kind of co-opt with Vivekananda and claimed that he stood for something that they also stand for but actually as those who are, you know, true scholars of Vivekananda and true champions of Vivekananda have been very concerned to stress he needs to be distinguished from that outlook because his outlook was much more universalist than that and he was very careful to stress that there were aspects of the Islamic heritage which were very important and which were part of India and should not be regarded as alien or foreign.

John Wolffe

So, we're back to the same notion of the hybrid nature of the culture that his father, again, was a Persian educated lawyer wasn't he?

William Radice

Yes, yes, and Vivekananda is a product of English education and he was briefly a member of the Brahma Samaj wasn't he?

John Wolffe

Yes, he was.

William Radice

Yes, that's right, and then he left and fell under the spell of Ramakrishna. Of course, Keshab Chandra Sen who led the breakaway movement, the new dispensation, he also fell under the spell of Ramakrishna.

William Radice

Vivekananda in the end actually created a movement referred to as a mission. Does that tell us anything again about his encounter with Christianity?

William Radice

Yes, I think it is very significant and it shows that the contribution that the missionaries had made right the way through the 19th century, to education, to progressive reform movements, campaigns against Suttee, in favour of widow remarriage and against polygamy and a very important role in founding and running schools was respected and so the word 'mission' was not some kind of bogey term. It was a word that people could respect.

And that may also reflect the fact that missionaries, pretty early on, recognised that it would be counter-productive if they went out too ardently to convert people and the educational tradition which survives in Calcutta to this day in a number of very famous schools that are still essentially run by missionary organisations, either the Jesuit, St Saviours schools, you know, colleges like Scottish Church College and so on, and the Oxford mission which has done very good work with the children from sons of Calcutta, that has a high Anglican tractarian background. There's been an acceptance for a long, long time that they're not really in the business of conversion. Conversions generally have come from the lower castes and poorer people and not from the educated classes and higher classes, and this has long been accepted.

John Wolffe

Do you think having a distinct organisation also seems to be the sign of a proper religion? Just with having scripture you had to have a clearly defined membership and a sense of organisation as in the Brahma Samaj.

William Radice

Maybe, maybe an expression of any kind of proper activity, I mean, in the sense that the 19th century in Bengal is an era of organisations and institutions and people are recognising that if anything is to be done and achieved you have to have an organisation.

John Wolffe

In trying to make sense of this very, very complex and fascinating cultural development in Calcutta, some scholars have referred to it using the term 'renaissance', either Bengal renaissance or Hindu or even Indian renaissance. How do you react to those terms? Do you think they're helpful or...?

William Radice

Well, the term renaissance in Europe is associated with perhaps three things off the top of my head: the revival of classical learning, a spirit of rationalism and humanism and the growth of vernacular languages and literatures. And of those three, it's a bit difficult to really connect the first one with the so called Bengal renaissance because we don't really have a revival of classical learning. It's more an attempt to look at the past and the heritage in a new way and extract what is actually valuable from that heritage either in religious terms or the literature too. The other two, a spirit of rationalism, humanism, yes I feel there's a real connection there.

I think this is something that almost all people that I can think of who are remembered from this period signed up to. And the third thing, the development of vernacular languages and literatures, yes, this is certainly very important. I mean, you have the growth of Bengali as a modern, literary vehicle and this happens with the other Indian languages too. So, in that respect, yes, I think it's a fair term to use.

John Wolffe

And many Hindus of that period would have felt they were on the threshold of a new awakening?

William Radice

Yes, I think so, yes.

John Wolffe

So, this isn't simply something we project back onto the period?

William Radice

No, no, I don't think so. I think that they knew there was an awful lot wrong with India. They knew that the whole Mogul system had declined, that India had declined, I mean, these Englishmen came along who had all sorts of accomplishments and skills, which the Indians didn't have and they knew that something needed to be done about this which is why so many progressive Bengalis were prepared to work with the British and were not anti-British in the early period and...

John Wolffe

If we take the notion of awakening as maybe more apposite than renaissance, when you spoke earlier you were also anxious to distinguish between the Bengal renaissance or the Bengal awakening and either a Hindu or even an Indian renaissance. How would you periodise those?

William Radice

Well, by Bengal renaissance I understand the whole 19th century period and really going into the 20th century as well, I mean, Tagore is the greatest product of that whole cultural development really. He died in 1941.

John Wolffe

But would you take Ram Mohan Roy as the first father figure?

William Radice

Yes, yes. I think it's from Ram Mohan Roy to Tagore really. That's the Bengal renaissance which of course covers far more than religion, I mean, I've been touching on lots of things, education, literature, reform movements and all that and haven't talked much about the politics because political organisation and development of nationalist activism, that comes later. India National Congress meets for the first time in 1885 I think. So, the Bengal renaissance, as I see it, and I think most Bengalis would see it in this way, stands for that whole period. Hindu renaissance is a term that I've never used much myself and instinctively I would associate it with a period of Hindu revivalism really in the late 19th century.

John Wolffe

So, would you place Vivekananda in both? Was he part of the tail end of the Bengal renaissance?

William Radice

Yes, I think I would. I would. Yes, yes, he's associated with the Hindu renaissance although not, as I was careful to say earlier, with Hindutva because his outlook was much more Universalist than that but he's also very much a product of the Bengal renaissance.

John Wolffe

You've now introduced two further terms to try to make sense of these individuals and their positions, namely reformer and revivalist. Again, do you think these are distinct categories or do they overlap?

William Radice

I'm sure they overlap because some of the so called revivalists, and if Vivekananda himself is a revivalist, he is also a reformer, but you get people who are associated with Hindu revivalism who are purely religious enthusiasts. They're not really concerned with social reform. In fact Ramakrishna himself doesn't seem to have been interested really in social reforms. It's something you've written about a lot and it's one of the problems that the Ramakrishna missionaries had in order... I mean, Ramakrishna, he is their founding father, pictures of him everywhere, the Ramakrishna missions are associated with social service and yet Ramakrishna himself, I think I'm right in saying, was not particularly interested in that.

John Wolffe

And yet that's his mission to the present day.

Just as when discussing the European renaissance it would be impossible to restrict ourselves solely to its religious aspects. William Radice has illustrated the ways in which cultural changes in 19th century Bengal were manifested in religion, literature, education and social thinking. He has noted the considerable change that had taken place in the quality of the relationship between the Bengali Hindu elite and the British in India by the latter part of the century. He argued that the Bengal renaissance should be distinguished from the Hindu renaissance, which he assigns to a later period when nationalist sentiment had begun to harden.

He too places considerable emphasis upon the hybrid and synthetic nature of the religious culture in Bengal which enabled the thinkers to respond as Hindus to the presence of Christianity in Bengal in the way in which they did.