

Jesus Plus: Plus Jesus

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In 1971–72 I lived in Kolkata (then Calcutta), India, studying the life and ideas of Rammohun Roy (1774–1833), a prominent Bengali businessman, scholar, social activist, and religious innovator. He has often been called the “Father of the Bengal Renaissance.” He had fascinated me since my second year at McMaster University when I first read about his efforts to create inter-religious worship and to foster inter-religious respect. I was intrigued by his deep appreciation for Jesus and the Bible, his willingness to attend church with many varieties of Christians, and his publication of a synopsis of the Gospels titled, *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness*.

But I was also puzzled. How could Rammohun be so familiar with Jesus, so moved by his life and teaching, and not become a Christian? At that stage of my life I thought that all people who respected Jesus became Christians. Those who spread the Gospel of Jesus were all Christians. Those who didn’t become Christians rejected Jesus. They did not see value and truth in Jesus.

Rammohun was in middle ground that was unfamiliar to me. It was complex middle ground. He helped the famous Serampore Baptist missionaries (including William Carey and William Ward) with some of their translation projects. He worked with missionaries and British civil servants to eradicate *sati*, the practice in which widows threw themselves (voluntarily or through coercion) on the burning funeral pyre of their dead husband and died as a sign of their devotion to him. But Rammohun also criticized missionaries and other Europeans for the disrespect they showed for much of Indian cultural life, and especially its religions. In return he mocked the Christian Trinity as a not very thinly veiled form of polytheism.

He was often in testy debates with his fellow Hindus. These debates were the focus of my research. Many of his Hindu contemporaries resented his close association with Christians and Muslims. They regarded it as a betrayal of his ancestral Hinduism. They challenged his strongly monotheistic and iconoclastic interpretation of the Hindu tradition. They argued that Rammohun was redefining Hinduism too much in terms of Christianity and Islam. Both of

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those religions were associated with the imperial colonizing powers that controlled most of India and showed great disdain for Hindu religious traditions.

While I was in Calcutta conducting this research I played basketball in a local league. One day after practice one of my teammates invited me to see where he lived. He worked for India's major automobile manufacturing company and had a room in a large residential complex on the factory grounds. He knew of my interest in religion and said that he thought I would be interested in some objects in his room. He opened the door and pointed. High up on the wall, running around the whole room, was a small ledge. On the ledge were dozens of pictures of gods, goddesses, and saints from several religious traditions. He described when, why, and how he offered devotion to many of them. Often he invoked them as he sought guidance in a decision he had to make. Sometimes he requested success for a new venture or journey. Occasionally he asked for healing for himself or someone else. On annual birth or death anniversary dates he honored the exemplary lives of various spiritual leaders.

"But there is only one I pray to every day," he said. He pointed up above our heads, above the doorway we had just entered. There, in one of the largest frames in the room, was Jesus. It was the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the depiction of Jesus with his heart glowing in his chest, expressing his divine love for the world.

My friend and I then talked about what Jesus meant to us. He said that every day when he awoke he prayed that he would feel and be filled with the all-encompassing love of Jesus. I told him I shared that hope and that since I wished to express the love of Jesus in my life I had asked Jesus to fill my life with his presence. We had a rich conversation about our gratitude for the love of Jesus. We encouraged each other to continue praying to Jesus.

In the years since then I have pondered the theological and pastoral implications of that encounter. My most frequent reflection involves the ambiguity I felt when I saw Jesus on that ledge in the company of other deities and spiritual exemplars. It was a personal encounter with what I now refer to as "Jesus Plus: Plus Jesus" spirituality. On the one hand, why should Jesus not be among the deities and saints that people respect and cherish? On what grounds should he be excluded? On the other hand, is Jesus not sufficient? Does his life and his embodiment of the divine not encompass and surpass all other expressions and make them unnecessary? Or, is it possible that some of these other expressions are glimpses or even grand visions of the same God that Christians know through Jesus and the Bible?

Should I have advised my friend to stop worshipping Jesus as long as he also expressed devotion to others? But on what basis was I the gatekeeper to the

heart of Jesus? Was it not better for my friend to continue loving and opening his life to Jesus? Should Rammohun have stopped circulating the *Precepts of Jesus* because he regarded Jesus as merely one of the world's greatest spiritual leaders and not as the only and final human manifestation of God? Certainly the Baptist missionaries thought he should stop.

Throughout my career I have taught courses and offered workshops on the theme of Christian faith and other faiths. I have read and reread the Bible and Christian history from this perspective and have had hundreds of conversations about this theme. There are plenty of biblical texts and mission encounters that emphasize “the God of Israel only” and “Jesus only.”

There are also texts that acknowledge the “Plus” motif. For example, the intriguing story of the healing of Naaman (2 Kings 5) includes his request for two mule-loads of earth from Israel to take back to his home to build an altar to the God who had healed him. That is followed by his request for pardon. Pardon, because when he returned home he would be required to accompany his master to the temple of Rimmon and bow down before that god. The prophet told him to go in peace. In the New Testament (Mark 9, Luke 9) the disciple John told Jesus that he and his friends saw someone casting out demons in the name of Jesus and told him to stop because he was not part of their group. Jesus said not to stop him. What happened to that anonymous exorcist? Did he become a member of the early Church? Did he start another “Jesus movement” that is lost in history?

Today we are frequently advised that most issues cannot be adequately understood in binary terms, as “either-or.” A “both-and” approach, we are told, is usually more fruitful. There is middle ground, there are hybrids, and there is change and development over time and place. Many contemporary Christians have undergone great shifts in their attitudes toward other denominations and religions as they have friends and family members from those traditions. Some Christians include devotional and meditation practices from other religions in their personal and corporate worship. “Jesus Plus: Plus Jesus” is rapidly becoming the default paradigm in our culture and in many churches. Anabaptist theology of religions and missiology need to engage and address this significant cultural and theological perspective.