

Religious Criticism, Public Reason and Affect in the Reformist Age: Early Arya Samaj and the Religious Controversies

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Abstract: Several movements for religious and social reform emerged among the religious communities in 19th century India as varied responses to the colonial ‘civilizing mission’. The work of reform among the Hindus and Muslims involved both the defence of their respective religious traditions and simultaneous critiques of established religious practices and institutions seen as corrupt or inauthentic. Both Hindus and Muslims inherited rich traditions of reason, reasoning and rational argumentation as well as of internal religious innovation and reforms. What is new about the 19th century reformist discourses, is the imbrication of these concepts with the Western conceptions of reason and science. The public sphere that emerged in this wake involved diverse forms of polemics and contests within religious traditions (i.e., between the orthodox and the reformers within a tradition) and between the religious traditions. The colonial state protected religious criticism, subject to public peace and order. However, public order frequently became a concern for the state as both these dimensions of religious controversies tended to generate affects—hurt feelings, passions, public enthusiasm—often leading to violence. A large number of court cases were also filed as a consequence. The public sphere of the religious controversies was also exposed to the global circulation of concepts, images and rhetorical figures. This article attempts to explore the rational and affective dimensions of the religious controversies in the early 20th century India by focusing on an important document related to the history of the reformist organisation Arya Samaj relevant for this theme.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most intractable problems that has emerged in the last century and half is concerned with the appropriate balance between the possibility of reasonable criticism of religious doctrines and practices and the proscription of offensive and hurtful speech. The 19th century religious and social reform

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movements provide an important historical site for a historical understanding of this problem. Faisal Devji has recently argued that the origins of the current global controversy involving the conflict between ‘free speech’ and ‘hurt religious sentiments’, involving the Muslim communities particularly, can be traced back to the religious controversies of late 19th century South Asia (Devji 2022 & 2021). A deeper historical analysis of this conflict will involve understanding the modes of public reasoning deployed in these religious controversies. Such an analysis may give us some clues as to why certain forms of public criticisms of religions gave rise to the kind of affects they did.

A strong emphasis on reason and reasoning was an important part in the self-representations of the modern reformist discourses that emerged in 19th century India—an emphasis shared across Hindu and Muslim reform movements. Although conceptions of reason and rational argumentation were present among both Hindu and Muslim traditions—theological, philosophical and scientific—what is new about the 19th century reformist discourses is the imbrication of these concepts with Western conceptions of reason, science and religious criticism (Prakash 2000; Ganeri 2012; Tripathi 2016). Several historical studies have shown how the glorification of Western reason was wielded as a weapon in the self-legitimizing colonial ideology of ‘civilizing mission’ (Prakash 2000; Mann & Fischer-Tiné 2004; Pernau et al. 2015). The Western conception of reason that accompanied the ideology of ‘civilizing mission’ was a capacious one. On the one hand, it included the notions of rational efficiency applicable in the fields of science and technology, law and administration and government—a concept that later came to be characterised as instrumental reason; on the other hand, it included a more substantive and teleological conception of reason that could be used for judging socio-religious customs and practices.

Such conceptions of reason—informing both the Christian missionary and the emergent liberal-utilitarian-secular worldviews of the early 19th century—were implicit in the critiques of prevalent Indian religious and social institutions and practices. In the early decades of the 19th century, the colonial government aggressively promoted reform through legal and pedagogic means. Sections of Hindus and Muslims—particularly those exposed to Western education—responded to these measures by inaugurating their own programmes of ‘self-civilisation’ through reformist efforts. The Hindu

and Muslim reformist discourses² that ensued elaborated their own conceptions of reason, reflexively but critically defending their own respective traditions, often ironically on the grounds and parameters of Western conceptions of science and reason (Prakash 2000). The defence of specific traditions and their authoritative texts on rational and scientific grounds became important. Despite the ethnocentric origins of modern Western reason, some of its constitutive features—emphasis on the value of empirical evidence in natural sciences and history-writing and the value of utility and individual autonomy in ethics—became attractive to the reform enthusiasts. Some of the reformist and revivalist organisations went as far as to claim the presence of science (i.e., modern science) in their own ancient scriptures (ibid.).

The reformist discourses—both colonial and Indian—centrally involved the category of religion, as their main target of critique and reform. As Timothy Fitzgerald has argued, the colonial discourse of religion was framed in terms of the binary of civility and barbarism wherein Christianity—particularly Protestant Christianity—was represented as the paradigmatic rational and civilised religion, while other religions, particularly Hinduism, were denounced as irrational and uncivilised or semi-civilised because irrational (Fitzgerald 2000). While Western notions of reason and rationality were deployed as criteria for judging and comparing religions, simultaneously, the colonial and missionary rhetoric of civilisation exposed many Hindu religious rituals and social institutions including family and caste as sites of shame and disgust. As a response, one of the strategies chalked out by some of the reformist movements like the Arya Samaj used a strong dose of revivalism in their reformist rhetoric, affirming pride in the ‘scientific’ ancient Vedic civilisation that was supposedly corrupted by later accretions like Puranic Hinduism.³

² On the question of the classification of various religious organisations of the 19th century, I agree with the arguments in recent historiography—for instance by Vasudha Dalmia, John Zavos, and Julian Strube—that question the earlier rigid classification in terms of reform versus revival or modernist versus traditional. As these scholars have shown, the organisations—mostly named *dharma sabha*—that sought to defend the *sanātana* (‘eternal’) *dharma* against the reformist critique, also promoted reformist agendas in their own ways, not only in the social domain but also in the religious one. On the other side, reformist organisations like Arya Samaj were able to combine their reformism with Hindu revivalism. (Dalmia 2000; Zavos 2001; Strube 2022).

³ Traditions of Hinduism grounded in the *Purāṇas*, post-Vedic Hindu sacred texts. The founder of Arya Samaj, Swami Dayanand considered *Purāṇas* to be the main sources of corruption of the Vedic tradition as they provided textual basis for polytheism and idol-worship in Hinduism.

The 19th century Indian reformist movements, however, did not remain limited to critiques of their respective religious traditions. Since the initial challenge was thrown by the polemics of Christian missionaries and the liberal-utilitarians, Indian responses and counter-attacks constituted as much of the discourse as the defence of their own respective traditions. The grounds of comparison were broadly the ones established by the colonial discourse claiming Christianity to be the only ‘true’ and ‘rational’ religion. The public sphere of religious controversies that emerged in this context was animated by the comparative and competitive claims of superiority of the competing religious denominations. The interplay of the complex emotions of shame and pride in this historical context reveals both the outrage and vulnerability of the protagonists to being exposed to not just new—globally civilisational—criteria of judgement and criticism but also to a different conception of publicness, civility, and concomitantly of exposure.

The main objective of this article is to explore the interplay between reason and affect in this public sphere of religious controversies. I explore this interplay through a contextual reading of a book by two prominent Arya Samaj reformers of the time—Lala Munshi Ram (Swami Shraddhanand after 1917) and Rama Deva, *Arya Samaj and its detractors: A vindication*. (Jijyasu & Deva 1910) published in 1910. This text, written by two active participants in the religious controversies of their time, gives us a snapshot not only of some of the key controversial issues of the time but also of affects generated and the modes of reasoning, rationalisation and justifications used by different parties. In addition, since the text was primarily a defence of the Arya Samaj position in the wake of several legal cases against this organisation, it also gives us a view into some of the legal dimensions of the controversies. Finally, the text also offers insight into globally circulating concepts, rhetorical figures and images through the print media of the time.

The thematic explorations of this article are located at the intersection of several lines of historical research in recent decades. One of the most important of these developments is the current emphasis on the history of emotions and affect in South Asia (cf. Pernau 2019; Blom & Lama-Rewal 2020). Apart from underscoring the importance of studying the hitherto neglected aspect of human culture in the histories of modern South Asia, these studies show how colonial interaction affected the emotional world of different

sections of Indian society and which emotions were mobilised for and in response to the restructuring of social and religious life in the wake of the calls for reform and revival. They also demonstrate what role emotions played—and which emotions specifically—in religious and political mobilisations that ensued in the wake of religious and social reforms, during the revolt of 1857 and its suppression, and in religious controversies, communal conflicts and the anti-colonial movement. Equally important are questions concerning the continuities and breaks with the pre-colonial past in terms of the emotional management of private and public selves. Another field in the current historiography that intersects with the central concerns of this article is the focus on global interactions and entanglements of ideas in the histories of reason, science, religion, modes of civility and public spheres (Strube 2022; idem et. al. 2021; Pernau et. al. 2015). Finally, this article is also concerned with the relation between colonial law regarding religious freedom and the possibility of hurting ‘religious sentiment’ through public speech, writing or other modes of public representation, also an important focus area of South Asian history (Adcock 2016; Scott 2015; Nair 2015; Devji 2021). I engage with the latter two sets of literature in the contexts of the relevant discussions in the paper.

The article is divided into three sections. The detailed analysis of the relevant sections of *Arya Samaj and its detractors* is preceded by a brief discussion of the historical context of the religious controversies and the role of the Arya Samaj in these. The last section takes up the analysis of some of the basic features of the public sphere that emerged in the wake of the religious controversies.

ARYA SAMAJ, RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES, HURTFUL SPEECH

Emerging in the wake of the reformist and revivalist movements of the 19th century, ‘religious controversies’ involved diverse forms of polemics and contests within religious traditions and between different religious traditions. The colonial state protected religious criticism⁴ or the public use of reason in critiquing religions, subject to maintenance of public peace and order.

⁴ By the early decades of the 20th century however the colonial state began to dilute this protection of the rational critique of religion as Indian religions began to be construed purely as realms of emotions and sentiments, a colonial construct that stands discredited now (Adcock 2016).

However, public order frequently became a concern for the state as both these dimensions of religious controversies tended to generate affect—hurt feelings, passions, public enthusiasm—often leading to violence. A large number of court cases were also filed as a consequence. As Kenneth Jones' edited volume on religious controversies during this period shows, the multidirectional flow and circulation of affect that the controversies generated in the public sphere worked in interesting ways in the context of fluid and constantly shifting boundaries of communities and selves (Jones 1992). In her essay in the volume, Barbara Metcalf shows how a spectacular debate between Indian spokesmen and Christian missionaries had the effect of bringing the Indians of all backgrounds together in solidarity. At the same time, the public debates between the representatives of Indian communities led to the consolidation and rigidification of community boundaries.

At times, in situations that did not allow for an open articulation of political critique of the colonial regime, the controversies could also provide Indians a space for the expression of anti-colonial feelings, as Metcalf writes: 'A significant dimension of the appeal of these debates lay in the opportunity to encounter Europeans on open turf, to challenge those who, in their ever intensifying political control, could not be challenged elsewhere.' (Metcalf 1992: 236). The enthusiasm generated by the spectacle of a European held up to ridicule by an Indian debater irrespective of religious belonging, was a 'general enthusiasm' not specific to any community (ibid.: 229–40). This was in addition to the routine community-specific emotions and enthusiasm the controversies generated.

Another interesting aspect of the religious controversies, noted by several scholars, is the general lack of interest in mutual intelligibility except in rare cases. Metcalf notes that it was rare for the debaters to make a sincere effort to enter into the 'frame of reference' of their opponents (ibid.). Further, the controversialists were generally more interested in impressing their own specific addressee audience than reaching any 'mutual intelligibility'. In one case, Deobandi Muslim debaters claimed that their Arya Samaj opponent spoke Sanskrit ostensibly to impress the Hindus in the audience (ibid.: 236). Needless to say, most Hindus would only be *impressed* by the public use of Sanskrit rather than actually *understand* the content of the argument. As the goal invariably was to 'stand forth to champion one's own side and foster

communal self-esteem', each side invariably claimed victory, with partisan presses reporting conflicting views (Jones 1992; also Tareen 2012; Jordens 1978). All these instances demonstrate the role played by the affective in the public sphere of religious controversies.

Such scenarios further confirm that the actually existing public spheres in different parts of the world are far from conforming to the normative model of public sphere as public use of reason. Rather, a more promising point of departure is to understand public speech to be embodied and excitable from the very outset. Yet, all victories in such public debates were claimed in the name of reason: reason as embodied in the superior argumentative reasoning of the victor and the superior rationality of the defended position. Nonetheless, the work of missionaries and reformers would continue beyond the public debates into more private, individual and relatively much slower levels of persuasion and conversion (cf. Young 1981).

The form of public reasoning—both written and oral—used by the early Arya Samaj makes an interesting study in this context. Two dimensions of this public reasoning should be noted at the outset. In its self-representation and initial reformist enthusiasm, the early Arya Samaj put a premium on rational and scientific arguments—particularly emphasising the role of empirical evidence and utility—for arguing its case for religious and social reform and for converting people to its own denomination. Further, the Arya Samaj sought to appropriate modern scientific reason and project it on to the original and supposedly uncorrupted Vedic tradition—in this way, participating in the construction of what Gyan Prakash has called 'another reason' (Prakash 2000). At the same time, the Arya Samaj was frequently accused of indulging in offensive public speech since its foundation in the 1870s (Jones 1976). The founder of the Arya Samaj, Swami Dayanand Saraswati himself was an arch polemicist and a key participant in the religious controversies of the 19th century; a legacy that was enthusiastically taken forward by his early Arya Samaj disciples. Swami Dayanand was notorious for his 'sledge-hammer style of denunciation' in his public addresses as well as written works (Jordens 1978: 187). The founding text of the movement, *Satyarth Prakash* (The light of truth) authored by Swami Dayanand, frequently found itself in the midst of controversies owing to its content perceived offensive by different

religious communities at different times: Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains and *sanātani* Hindus⁵ (Cort 2019; Scott 2015).

The eminent Sanskrit scholar Radhavallabh Tripathi has recently published a book tracing the history of argumentation (*vāda*)⁶ in the Sanskrit intellectual tradition from the early Vedic times to the 20th century (Tripathi 2016). In this tradition of *vāda*, Tripathi shows that the *śāstrārtha*⁷ form of argumentation came into existence and became popular only in the 19th century (ibid.: 5). Tripathi shows that the traditional intellectual practice of argumentation included—along with established tools of logical reasoning (*tarka* or *yukti*) and use of perception-based empirical evidence—the uses of several tactics contrary to these prescribed forms, in order to achieve the goal of victory. Although overall normative emphasis was in favour of rigorous logical and evidence-based reasoning in the interest of arriving at truth, hurtful and violent speech was very much a part of the tradition and within the domain of acceptability (ibid.: 1–39). According to Tripathi, Swami Dayanand used several of such traditional tricks like wrangling and cavil quite regularly in his debates (ibid.: 321–3).

Although Swami Dayanand remained far more firmly grounded in the Sanskrit intellectual tradition—both in terms of the doctrinal contents under discussion and the forms of reasoning—than some of his Western educated disciples, he was also sufficiently exposed to the new, more global debates around the themes of religion, reason and science, particularly through his interaction with prominent theosophists of the time as well as well-known Christian theologians and Muslim reformers like Syed Ahmad Khan (Jordens 1978). On several occasions, like in the preface to his magnum opus *Satyarth Prakash* and frequently on public platforms, Dayanand emphasised the values of truth, impartiality and civility in public speech and writing (Dayanand 2010: ‘Preface’). It seems that the ‘sledge hammer’ did come in handy from

⁵ *Sanātani* refers to the followers of *sanātana* (‘eternal’) *dharma*. In the historical context discussed in this article, *sanātani* refers to the individuals and organisations that sought to defend what orthodox Hinduism against the reformist critique. For further clarification of the contextual usage of these terms refer to footnote 2.

⁶ The Sanskrit term *vāda* is polysemic. Its semantic range covers speech, logic, argumentation, reasoning and discourse.

⁷ The term *śāstrārtha* refers to a disputation over the meaning of scriptures.

time to time when he was set upon demolishing a particular doctrine or practice of opponents in his writings.

As mentioned above, one of the forms of controversies that was publicly witnessed was the *śāstrārtha* form, in which Swami Dayanand and early Arya Samaj reformers participated. The *śāstrārtha* was used mainly for debates between Arya Samaj and the *sanātani* Hindus and was initially conducted mainly in Sanskrit. These debates were widely reported in print. The print genres of tracts, pamphlets, and newspaper columns soon became the predominant media of religious controversies coexisting with publicly witnessed debates in the market square. The oral public debates and the arguments in print fed into each other (Singh 1903; Jones 1976; Jordens 1978). The early Arya Samaj, from 1880s onward produced its own missionaries in the form of *upadeśak* and *pračārak* as professional controversialists in defence of Vedic dharma and civilisation (Jones 1976; Adcock 2014).⁸

Another notable feature of the early Arya Samaj approach to religious controversies is its global-universalist orientation. For instance, Lala Munshi Ram frequently used in his writings the metaphor of battleground to describe the contemporary historical situation. In this rhetoric, Swami Dayanand is presented as the saviour not only of India but of the whole global humanity from general spiritual decline and the looming threat of nihilistic materialism emanating from the West (Shraddhanand 1987). The Gurukul faction, the faction of the Arya Samaj led by Munshi Ram, soon added another dimension to the 'battle' beyond the defence and propagation of Vedic dharma by starting its own activities of proselytising or *śuddhī*.⁹ The Gurukul faction also placed great emphasis on the subjectivity of *upadeśak* warriors by prescribing self-cultivation as the necessary foundation of individual and social reform (Adcock 2014: 54–5). A vegetarian diet and the practice of *brahmačarya* ('celibacy') along with a rigorous physical training regimen were prescribed for the discipline of self-cultivation of the Arya Samaj. According to the account of an early Arya Samaj activist, Tarachand, 'religious controversy was above all an occasion to display the virtues acquired through self-cultivation. Gurukul party tradition presented self-fashioning through *brahmacharya* as

⁸ The Hindi terms *upadeśak* and *pračārak* are used for 'preachers' or 'propagandists'.

⁹ The term *śuddhī* literally means 'purification'. In Arya Samaj discourse, it was used for the practice of reconversion back into Hinduism through 'purification' rituals.

the foundation for *śāstrārtha*, prerequisite for successful dissemination of Vedic knowledge and for attaining victory over opponents' (cited in *ibid.*: 56). The prevalence of such practices of the rigorous self-cultivation of the debaters again underscores the affective dimension of the religious controversies insofar as the public display of the embodied self of the controversialists was considered valuable in itself, beyond the content of the argument. On the darker side, the heat and passion generated by the controversies often led to the outbreak of violent clashes. Beginning in the 1890s, the number of incidents of violence started growing at an alarming rate.

DEFENDING RELIGIOUS CRITICISM: 1910, *ARYA SAMAJ AND ITS DETRACTORS*

The occasion for publication of the tract *Arya Samaj and its detractors* was a series of legal cases brought against the Arya Samaj after 1907, particularly in the wake of the arrest of Lala Lajpat Rai, a prominent Arya Samaj reformer of the 'College faction' and Congress politician active in the Swadeshi movement. His arrest brought the Arya Samaj under the cloud of governmental suspicion for seditious activities. Many of the Arya Samaj activists were being hounded and some victimised by government agencies. The book was written in response to the ongoing trial of Arya Samaj activists in a court in the Punjab town of Patiala. The ostensible purpose of the book was to publicly respond to two of the main charges brought against the Arya Samaj in the course of the trial. One was that the Arya Samaj was a 'political' organisation and its members were involved in seditious activities in the garb of 'religion'. The second charge was that the Arya Samaj—its founder, the founding text *Satyarth Prakash* and its activists—were repeatedly offending other religions with hurtful speech (Jijyasu & Deva 1910).

The general line of defence

Apart from a general defence of the necessity of religious criticism, the three sections of the chapter 'Swami Dayanand and Other Religions' defend the former's specific criticisms of Christianity, Islam and Puranic Hinduism one by one. The purpose of this defence was not merely to refute the arguments brought against Swami Dayanand in the court by the prosecution lawyer but also to address the larger public. As a matter of fact, this section of the book

does the work of further advancing the Arya Samaj critiques of these religious traditions.

The general defence gives the reader insight into the authors' idea of legitimate religious criticism. Implicit in the authors' general line of defence is that religious criticism is not only legitimate and ought to be protected in any civilised legal order but that, from time to time, it becomes necessary for the sake of truth and for the welfare of humanity (ibid.: 138–227).

The authors opened the beginning of this section with their main argument:

Those who have read the works of great world-reformers know full well that because they feel deeply, they express their sentiments in strong language. [...] Great men hate nobody. They love humanity at large, and if they sometimes use pungent and cutting language, and employ the sharp tool of incisive ridicule and bitter satire, it is because the sight of human suffering impels them to the adoption of remedies which to those whose angle of vision is different, appear cruel (ibid.: 138).

Thereafter, they compare the work of great reformers to that of a surgeon who may have to cause necessary pain in order to heal the sick body:

If a surgeon who boldly uses his lancet heedless of the momentary excruciating, poignant and agonizing pain which he is inflicting on his patient, or the physician who administers the bitter medicine to the refractory and contumacious child who lies pinioned before him is a benefactor and not a butcher, the reformer who wants to eradicate evils which are eating into the vials of society and effete superstitions which are dragging down humanity to the bottomless pit of eternal hell by performing an operation on the spirit and the intellect and manipulating the lancet of trenchant criticism is the greatest well-wisher of his kind. To this category of great men belonged Dayanand Saraswati. He attacked all unvedic faiths with unprecedented ardour and unparalleled vigour. The sectaries are yet smarting under the needle-pricks, although some of them have recovered. People who are recovering slowly charge him with intolerance (ibid.: 138–9).

In these rhetorical passages, the authors are implicitly working with an analytical distinction between the performative intention and the semantic

content of a speech-act. The metaphor of ‘needle-pricks’ is comparable to the ‘gadfly’ metaphor used for Socrates. Later in the text, Dayanand’s speech-act is explicitly compared to those of Socrates, Jesus Christ and Martin Luther. The second important distinction that is made is between judging the acts of ordinary humans and of the extraordinary or great personae in human history, such as prophets, founders of religions or great religious reformers. Needless to say, Swami Dayanand is placed in the league of such extraordinary personae: ‘A religious reformer burning with zeal for the eradication of evils which he considers have crept in a holy religious faith is *not to be judged by the standards of common humanity.*’ (ibid.: 147; emphasis added). In other words, the criticism the ‘extraordinary’ reformers level at the existing dogmas, doctrines and practices cannot derive its normativity from the same doctrines and dogmas they are denouncing. The normativity of such critiques is supposed to be grounded in the higher and extraordinary capacity of judging the crisis or critical condition a religious or social body is in at any given time.

The analogy between the work of the extraordinary individual as critic and that of the figure of the surgeon cited above is clearly of utmost rhetorical value. Yet, the surgeon metaphor is inadequate as the normativity and the acceptability of the work of a surgeon is internal to a community, whereas the ‘extraordinary’ reform-oriented critics’ supposedly superior and external normativity—on which their exceptional and sovereign status is based—depends on the performative success of their own enterprise. In the case of at least two historical parallels invoked, namely Socrates and Jesus, performative success materialised after prosecution and judgment by existing legal frameworks. In this text, the authors cite the offensive languages of Jesus and Paul, adding that the public prosecutor in the Patiala case would have charged Jesus Christ under ‘Section 153-A of the Indian Penal Code!’ (ibid.: 142). The authors however firmly place their hope in the current political establishment as ‘the British statesman is not a coward like Pilate!’ (ibid.: 227). They are also hopeful of the success of the Arya Samaj in its world-conquering mission as they write in the concluding pages of this section:

The giant has drunk the ambrosia of Vedic Truth. No power on earth can despatch it. The time will surely come and those that have the eye of faith can picture it to themselves, when the Vatican will resound with the

sound of Vedamantras, Vedic prayers will be recited in St. Paul's Cathedral, the air of Medina will be impregnated with the fragrant particles of Hom Samagri and students of history will wonder why once people, who boasted of living in an enlightened age, misunderstood the teachings of the World-Redeemer, the Jagat Guru, the True Christ – Dyananda [sic] the embodiment of mercy (Dya) and beatitude (ananda) (ibid.).

The authors however blur an important distinction here. Swami Dayanand had grounded the authority of his claims in a definite source, the Vedas, with his own interpretation of what constituted the authoritative scriptures and what their true meaning was (Dayanand 2010 [1883]). From its inception, the Arya Samaj and its founder worked with an implicit distinction between Vedic religious traditions such as Puranic Hinduism and non-Vedic religions such as Christianity and Islam. This distinction operated in the religious controversies insofar as the Arya Samaj debates with Christian and Muslim denominations would be based on the parameters of truth, rationality, and science, widely circulating in the global discourse of religion, whereas those with the *sanātani* Hindus would, in addition to these parameters, involve the question of the correct interpretation of the Vedic scriptures.¹⁰ The general thrust of the authors' defence in the initial part is that ridicule or other such forms of linguistic expression—including the one targeted at other religious traditions—should be acceptable as a legitimate part of rhetoric in public debates. The underlying rational purpose of such rhetoric however was a fearless separation of universal truth from error. The question of the criteria of judging, critiquing and comparing religious figures, doctrines, and practices is important and will be taken up at appropriate places in the following two sections.

¹⁰ By the third decade of the 20th century, Arya Samaj intellectuals and politicians enlarged the ambit of the 'internal' by including non-Vedic Indic religious traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism into the larger Hindu fold even as the Arya Samaj begins to be included in the Hindu fold, something the Arya Samaj had resisted until the first decade of the 20th century (Shrad-dhanand 1926). It may be noted that Swami Dayanand, in his *Satyarth Prakash*, is as scathing in his attacks on Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism as Islam and Christianity (Dayanand 2010 [1883]). For the use of modern Protestant conceptions of 'religion' by Muslim controversialists, see Tareen 2012.

Religion Specific arguments

In the authors' defence of Swami Dayanand's use of scandalous language in his critical remarks on Christianity, Islam and prevalent forms of Hinduism, the strategy is to mainly deploy the argument that there was nothing new or unprecedented in the Swami's use of offensive language. For this purpose, the authors mobilise a large number of citations from globally circulating texts from different parts of the world. This is an unclassifiable set of mostly English language texts from Britain and the USA and a large number from the 18th and 19th centuries. For showing precedents in the use of scandalous language in the history of Christianity, the authors cite passages written by the Protestant reformers Luther and Calvin against the Catholic Church establishment. Luther's language was notoriously scandalous and abusive. They employ the same line of defence against Dayanand's scandalous language that Luther had used for the defence of his language. Luther had justified his decision to do so by arguing that the very existence of the Catholic Church was a scandal (Jijyasu & Deva 1910; for an analysis of Luther's use of scandalous language, see Szabari 2006: 55–71). Likewise, in Swami Dayanand's reformist critique, the existence of Puranic Hinduism itself was nothing short of a scandal that needed to be exposed as such.¹¹

The authors then compare Dayanand's attack on Christianity with Thomas Paine's, remarking that Mr. Grey—the public prosecutor in the court case against the Arya Samaj activists—would have prosecuted Paine as well. Dayanand's savage attack on 'Immaculate Conception' and the figure of 'Virgin Mary' is placed in parallel with Paine's equally savage ridicule of these conceptions (Jijyasu & Deva 1910: 144–5). That there was no shared ground of critique between the Protestant reformers and the Deist Paine, or the fact that Paine was critical of all organised churches, including the Protestant Church, did not become an issue for the authors. Similarly, Dayanand's ridiculing of the Quranic conception of paradise is compared with the similar account of it in Syed Ahmad Khan's work on the Quran, and justified on that count. Interestingly, the chapter on Islam in *Satyarth Prakash* also compares the Quranic conception with similar Puranic Hindu conceptions. While

¹¹ Dayanand considered Puranic Hinduism scandalous due to the prevalence of the practices of idol-worship and belief in polytheism. See footnote 3 also.

‘immaculate conception’ is equated with the story of Kunti in Mahabharat and the Quranic paradise is compared with the stories of Krishna and the Gopis of Vrindavan. Dayanand did not consider any other tradition more ‘corrupt’ and ‘disgusting’ than Puranic Hinduism (Swami Dayanand 2010 [1883]).

Over the next hundred pages of this book, several texts are cited as instances of the use of mixing criticism and ridicule by European and Indian writers as part of what the authors considered to be legitimate religious criticism. Their choice of texts is eclectic. For instance, anti-Christianity tracts include Tom Paine’s *The age of reason*, Thomas Gill’s *The papal drama*, Charles Beard’s *Martin Luther and the reformation*, W. R. Greg’s *The creed of Christendom*, Arthur B. Moss’ *Christianity and evolution*, Robert Ingersoll’s *Lectures and essays*, Joseph McCabe and Florence Dixie’s *The religion of woman* and Philip Sidney’s *The truth about Jesus of Nazareth*. A similarly eclectic choice of texts—for instance Washington Irving’s *Life of Mahomet* and William Muir’s *Mahomet and Islam*—is made for mobilising citations for anti-Islam polemics (Jijyasu & Deva 1910: 148–227).

The excerpts cited in the tract show that these polemics are launched from diverse grounds with very different, even mutually incompatible, pre-suppositions. Martin Luther’s and Syed Ahmad Khan’s reformist critiques invoke the authority of the scriptures belonging to the traditions they critique. This method is broadly similar to Swami Dayanand’s, who also invoked the authority of the Vedas for his reformist critique. He and other early Arya Samaj reformers also invoked parallels with the Protestant Reformation frequently for the legitimation of their own reformist programme. The perspectives reflected in the selection include a wide range—Evangelical and Deist to agnostic, freethinkers’ and rationalists. The tract also offers the reader a valuable historical information about the nature of texts on religion circulating in the global public sphere at that time. Furthermore, it also gives the reader clues about reading and critical practices and how such practices may be engendering new sensibilities constituting religious public debates and subjectivities.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that in their prefacing of Paine’s ‘biblical criticism’, the authors go beyond the content of Paine’s polemics to include detailed comments on his prose style and method of reading: ‘Naturally Paine’s Biblical criticism doesn’t do all that generations of scholarly

research have done since. But it is still one of the best possible introductions, for *plain people*, to Biblical Criticism, because it supplies what so many of the “higher” critics do not give a strong lead to moral as well as to literary veracity’ (ibid.: 150; emphasis original). Further, they praise Paine’s and Burke’s writing style for their ‘clarity of expression’ and the ‘sincerity’ of their arguments (ibid.). Modern standards of judging myths and miracles in Paine’s and Ingersoll’s works using empiricism, ‘common sense’, and utility find strong approval. Similarly, passages using modern parameters of civilisation and civility with a marked emphasis on abhorrence towards cruelty and spectacular violence are italicised: ‘would a civilized God daub his altars with the blood of oxen, lambs, doves? Would he make all his priests butchers? Would he delight in the smell of burning flesh?’ (ibid.: 163).

Several of the textual excerpts cited in this section go beyond strictly theological and religious questions to include attacks on Christianity and Islam on secular and historical grounds. Thus, Christianity is shown to be anti-science generally and condemned for its historical involvement in colonialism and slavery. Such arguments were not per se illegitimate grounds of criticism, but not strictly necessary for the authors’ ostensible objective either. However, again, such citations give the reader valuable information regarding the methods, sensibilities and parameters for judging and critiquing religions prevailing in the public sphere. Equally importantly, they throw valuable light on the nature of the public sphere of the time generally and of the public forms of religious criticism particularly.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE OF RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSIES

The text analysed above gives us a perspectival snapshot of the key aspects of the public sphere of religious controversies in the first decade of the 20th century. It introduces the readers to the modes of public reasoning, rhetorical styles as well as the array of texts circulating in the print media accessible to the English educated public in India around this time. What is distinctly noticeable about this public sphere is that it is different from both the Kantian model of the ‘public use of reason’ and the Hindu practices of public reasoning, deployed particularly in theological and philosophical debates. Its difference from the Kantian model can be marked on several counts. First of all, in the public sphere discussed here, the scope of public criticism is limited

primarily to social and religious reform agendas. The colonial state is even less willing to tolerate political criticism than the Absolutist state that formed the historical horizon for Kant's conceptualisation of public reason, even though the latter sought to expand the scope of political criticism.¹²

The discourse of religion, far from being privatised, is central to this public sphere. Concomitantly, the conception of reason deployed in the religious controversies is significantly different. Whereas in the Kantian model, the conception of reason deployed in public criticism is transcendental and secular, in the historical situation under discussion, the different parties sought to ground their concepts of reason in their respective religious traditions.¹³ In the case of the Arya Samaj, the Vedas were repeatedly invoked as a repository and fountainhead of reason itself. The Arya Samaj founder as well as its leading early thinkers were emphatic in disparaging any conception of reason not subjugated to the authority of the scriptures. In this regard, Arya Samaj differentiated its position from that of the Brahmo Samaj as the latter was inclined towards Deistic concepts of reason and natural religion. Frequently, they would also raise the spectres of Western materialism and atheism as the necessary destiny of such contentions of the priority of reason over revelation.

In the Sanskrit practices of public debates (*vāda*), as discussed earlier, the public defence of one's philosophical or theological position was considered important. The translational equivalents of reasoning and logic—*yukti*, *tarka*, *hetu*, *viveka*, or *anvikṣikī*, terms that refer to the systematic use of empirical evidence and logical reasoning—were used as necessary intellectual tools for arriving at truth (Ganeri 2001; Halbfass 1992). However, at the same time, their status was primarily that of instruments to be used for interpreting and arriving at the truth already revealed in the Vedic scriptures. In other words, as Jonardon Ganeri has shown, the role of reason, independent of the revealed truth of the scriptures, was not to prescribe the ends (Ganeri 2001: 7–41). The uses of reason independent of revelation were seen as a threat to the ritual and ethical order established by dharma. Those who sought to lead

¹² A genealogy of political criticism in modern South Asia is indispensable for a more complete picture of the public sphere that emerged in the early 20th century, but it does not fall within the scope of this paper.

¹³ For a comparison of Kant's conception of public reason with public criticism in the Middle East, see Asad 1993: 200–36; for Kant's formulation, see Kant 1970 [1784].

their lives based on ‘reason alone’ were condemned as promoters of ‘immorality, hereticism and untruth’ (ibid.: 10).

Just like other instances, the public use of reason in the Hindu intellectual tradition had its own inherent limitations. Most important of these was the question of authority. The participants in the debates derived their authority from their status as being learned in the knowledge of scriptures and philosophical argumentation. These qualifications limited these debates to the class of people—primarily the Brahmin—with access to Sanskrit language and texts. The authority of the Brahmins due to their exclusive access to the sacred texts had faced challenge from ancient non-Vedic traditions like Buddhism and Jainism. During the medieval period, it faced further challenge from the Bhakti formations within the Vedic traditions that relied on the vernaculars for spreading their messages and establishing communities’ practices. In many ways, the public sphere of religious controversies discussed in this article can be seen as both continuous and discontinuous with the tendencies within Hindu practices of public reasoning. One of the main features of the discontinuity noted by scholars is the ‘relinquishing of systematicity as the goal in religious and philosophical thinking’ by modern Hindu thinkers and public intellectuals in favour of a ‘more free and individual style of reflection’ (Frazier 2011: 2). Ganeri calls this approach of the 19th and 20th century Hindu thinkers the ‘new attitude’, the origins of which could be traced to colonial educational policies. Ganeri’s main example of the figure exemplifying the ‘new attitude’ is Swami Vivekananda (Ganeri 2011: 44–51). As mentioned earlier, the main historical figure discussed here, Swami Dayanand, was firmly grounded in the traditional practices of public reasoning; his disciples, including one of the authors of the book *Arya Samaj and its detractors*, Lala Munshi Ram, however, seem to exhibit the ‘new attitude’ Ganeri mentions.

In this regard, the 19th century religious controversies were an important factor in shaping the nature of public reasoning. Lala Munshi Ram reflects on the experience of his initial participation in religious controversies in his Hindi autobiography published in 1924. Even for a reformist organisation like the Arya Samaj that had challenged the mediation of Brahmin priests for religious rituals, it was necessary to be from the Brahmin caste with the ability to speak Sanskrit, particularly in debates with orthodox Hindus. The scene described in Munshi Ram’s autobiography is from 1886. Munshi Ram, who

was not a Brahmin, had newly converted to the Arya Samaj and was in charge of the organisation in Jalandhar city. Once, when the Jalandhar branch of the Arya Samaj was openly challenged by a *sanātanī* pandit for a public debate on the themes of idol-worship and divine incarnation, Munshi Ram, with great difficulty, managed to find a young Brahmin Sanskrit scholar and briefed him on the Arya Samaj positions on these themes and the relevant scriptural sources. As the debate started, it was the *sanātanī* pandit himself who broke the rule by lecturing in Hindustani, apparently in order to impress the local people. As soon as the rule was broken, Munshi Ram himself decided to debate with the pandit in the vernacular. Munshi Ram recounts that this event had important consequences not just for himself but for the Arya Samaj movement in Punjab. The most significant consequence was that non-Brahmin Arya Samaj activists started to participate in the controversies in the vernaculars and also started to learn Sanskrit and read the Vedic scriptures directly (Shraddhanand 1924: 129–31).

It should be remarked here that following the lead of Swami Dayanand, the early Arya Samaj scholars developed their own rigorous method of reading the Vedic scriptures. The general thrust of that method—as practiced by the early Arya Samaj Sanskrit scholar Gurudutt Vidyarthi—was to challenge the mythology-centred polytheistic interpretation of the Vedas (Dodson 2007). Yet, the general tendency towards democratisation of the public sphere was not seriously impaired by more scholarly arguments. With the removal of barriers of caste, language, and technical expertise in scriptural knowledge, the sphere of public religious debates was widening in its social reach. At the same time, and equally consequently, it was also becoming open to the influence of globally circulating texts, particularly English texts, either through direct reading or through translation. The darker side of the democratisation, however, was that the lofty motives and goals used for rationalisation and justification of Swami Dayanand’s harsh and offensive speech—even if the contemporary readers were to be persuaded by Munshi Ram and Rama Deva’s arguments—such might not always be the motives inspiring other participants. One of Munshi Ram’s colleagues from Punjab Arya Samaj, Pandit Lekh Ram, murdered in 1897, was one of the early victims of the passions generated by the religious controversies (Jones 1976: 148–53).

Pandit Lekh Ram was a passionate Arya Samaj preacher active in the 1880s and 1890s. Lekh Ram actively sought controversies by challenging opponents to open debate. He published a number of tracts and pamphlets in Urdu attacking other religious denominations and became notorious for locking horns with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya, a newly emergent Islamic sect established in 1879 (ibid.). Some of these tracts were later translated into Hindi as well. The language of the tracts attacking Islam is particularly aggressive. Apart from recycling all the critical points made against Islam in Swami Dayanand's *Satyarth Prakash*, he adds further attacks, needless to say rehashing some of the material already circulating in the public sphere, probably including those cited in the tract by Munshi Ram and Rama Deva and their translations.

While Swami Dayanand had limited himself primarily to scriptural exegesis and theological content in *Satyarth Prakash*, avoiding mention of historical-factual issues, the parameters of criticism seemed to shift around this time in the South Asian religious controversies, particularly in print and in verbal debates from 1890s onwards. The important question in this context is: to what extent can Swami Dayanand's and other contemporary reformers' endeavours involving critiques of their respective religious traditions be taken as being in continuity with precolonial South Asian practices and to what extent did they seek to make a break with them? The *sant* poets associated with the various branches of Bhakti were good exemplars of that practice, as discussed in Eleanor Zelliott's analysis of the 16th century Bhakti poet Eknath's *Hindu-Turk Samvad*. Her analysis shows the prevalence and public acceptability of the mutual criticism and ridicule of each other's religious doctrines and social practices such as caste among Hindus and Muslims during medieval South Asia (Zelliott 2003: 64–79). Another prominent Bhakti poet known for his no-hold-barred method of exposing the hypocrisies of Hindu and Muslim religious establishments was the 15th century poet Kabir. Connections to the Bhakti legacy among the 19th century reform movements differ from region to region. While Hindu reform movements in Maharashtra region sought to appropriate and integrate the Bhakti legacy into their own programmes of reform the same is not true about North Indian reformism. As Swami Dayanand denounced Bhakti figures like Kabir and Nanak vehemently, the Arya Samaj sought to

make a break, not just with the Bhakti legacy, but with the Indo-Islamic culture of cultural argumentation and exchange.

It is interesting to note that Munshi Ram and Rama Deva decided not to cite even one figure from South Asian history despite the fact that there is no dearth of such figures—Kabir for instance—who engaged in public religious criticism and whose speech may be construed as ‘offensive’. This may be partially explained by the fact that the text was written in English, with the colonial authorities, European intelligentsia and the English reading Indian public in mind as its primary addressees. The language of the address is not irrelevant for the terminological, conceptual and rhetorical articulation of arguments in this historical context. In many ways, the English reading Indian intellectuals and political leaders were continuously involved in the work of translation. However, the text also gives ample evidence of the larger global public discourse of religion that the authors were not only part of but actively wished to be part of (Strube 2022).

In the late 19th century, there were several other factors introducing new elements to the practices of religious criticism. Due to the presence of novel factors such as the colonial legal and governmental apparatus and the exposure to the global discourse of religion, substantially new forms of religious criticism began to take shape. Several scholars have emphasised the role of colonial law in shaping the culture of religious criticism and of the complaints about ‘hurt religious sentiments’ in 19th century South Asia. The colonial legal framework protecting the right to religious propagation and the tolerance of free-speech provided not just the background condition for the exercise of the right to free public speech—both verbal and written—at times, it also, as scholars have shown, acted as an incentive for taking to the street and appealing to the government for action (Adcock 2016; Viswanath 2016; Scott 2015). Adding to this argument, Faisal Devji has also argued that modern Muslim complaints about ‘hurt religious sentiment’ due to the perceived offensive comments on the Prophet Mohammad are not grounded in Islamic theological concepts. Such complaints originated in the late 19th century South Asian context wherein the protesters took recourse to the possibility of protection that was legally equivalent to liberal legal concepts such as libel or defamation rather than any Islamic theological concept of blasphemy. In addition, the resulting protests and violence were also addressed to an

‘anonymous’ or ‘generic’ public through mass circulation via the print media (Devji 2022 & 2021).

It seems that these factors worked in tandem to shape the culture of late 19th and early 20th century religious criticism and of the protests against hurt sentiments in a way that made these practices substantially different from pre-colonial cultures of mutual criticism and ridicule practiced by religious communities in South Asia. The eclectic, indiscriminate and even opportunistic practices of citation from the global market of opinions, images and rhetorical figures had become legitimate among educated Indians, as shown in the case of our authors’ citations in defence of their case. Furthermore, the distinct emphasis on the authority of the factual truth based on empirical evidence and ‘authentic’ historical and biographical sources, rather than theological reasoning alone became another important feature of the new culture. In this regard, the orientalist William Muir’s biography of Muhammad, *The life of Mahomet*, one of the texts in global circulation since its publication in the middle of the 19th century, is interesting. In this biography and in the *The Mohammedan controversy* published in 1897, Muir puts great emphasis on the importance of factual truth based on ‘contemporary records of undoubted authenticity’ in religious controversies (Muir 1992: xiii & 2022). The subtitle of his biography of Mohammad says ‘From original sources’ (idem 1992).

The emphasis on the factual truth clearly has to do with the rising prestige and authority of the parallel but intertwined discourse of modern historiography. Yet, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in *The calling of history*, the acceptance of the absolute authority of the factual truth in history writing did not deter the discourses of history from being entangled in the partisan identitarian politics of regional, caste and religious communities in early 20th century India (Chakrabarty 2015: 151–66). In this regard, it should not be astonishing that Munshi Ram and Rama Deva were marshalling all the ‘evidence’ and ‘facts’ circulating in the global print media in defence of their creed and its founder.

Many of their contemporary Arya Samaj activists were much better versed in the global debates on the religious question. They were also more open to using parameters of comparison and judgement based on modern Western concepts of utility and civilisation. Like other global participants in the religious controversies of the times, early Arya Samaj activists like Pandit

Lekh Ram also responded with equal rhetorical vehemence and aggression. In one of his most notorious tracts, *Risāla-e-Jihād: Yāni Dīn-e-Muhammadī kī Bunyād* ('A treatise on holy war, or the basis of the Muhammadan religion') he paints a picture of Islam as fundamentally violent from its inception and the main protagonists in history are characterised as mainly driven by the evils of bloodthirst and lust (Jones 1976: 148–53). The Hindi edition of this tract that appeared in 1920s translates the title simply as *Jihād: Kurān va Islāmī khūṃkhvārī* ('Jihad: Quran or Islamic bloodthirst'). One of the well-known legal consequences of these pamphlet wars was the insertion of the Article 295 (A) to the Indian Penal Code in 1927, in the wake of the notorious *Rangila Rasool* controversy, that added stricter legal proscription of the freedom of speech in relation to religious matters than was the case previously (Nair 2013; Stephens 2013; Adcock 2016).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The article has analysed the forms of public reasoning deployed in the context of the religious controversies that emerged in the wake of the 19th century reformist movements in colonial South Asia. In addition, it has tried to show how these forms of public reasoning and criticism got embroiled in the generation of a range of affects in the public sphere. It is interesting to note that the two sets of arguments used in one important tract, analysed here, to defend the aggressive speech used by the founder of Arya Samaj are clearly incompatible. In the first set of arguments, the authors retroactively elevate his status to a prophetic or mythic subjecthood, as a point of absolute origin of the speech by claiming extraordinary or exceptional status for their teacher. Through the use of the surgeon metaphor, they argue in favour of tolerance of pain on the consequentialist ground of the eventual benefit of the sick social body in need of surgery. However, this consequentialist argument is in further need of grounding in the faith in performative intentions behind the offensive speech. The missionary activists of the Arya Samaj, defending his speech have the right to such a faith in their teacher and his teachings. For the rest, it depends on the performative success of their persuasive power.

At the same time, in the second set of arguments, unwittingly as it were, the authors seek to prove that there was nothing new or unprecedented in

what Swami Dayanand was saying about Christianity or Islam. In the detailed analysis of the global print sources they marshal at their disposal, they also reveal the situatedness of both the Swami's as well as their own discourse somewhere in the midst of the global circulation of affects. As Kenneth Jones has shown, religious controversies were an important factor in shaping and consolidating the borders and boundaries of communities (Jones 1992). John Cort's recent work offers further evidence that demonstrates how controversial statement about Jains in *Satyarth Prakash* became instrumental in the modern construction of the Jain community (Cort 2019). Texts like those by Lekh Ram and similar texts published by other parties circulating in the public sphere led to the continuous 'accumulation of affect.' In Lekh Ram's *Jihad*, Islam is produced as nothing short of an 'abject' object, an object of strong aversion and repulsion. As Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed have shown in their respective analyses of hateful and injurious speech, while legal and political apparatuses strive to locate the originary accountability in the definite intentions of a subject, affect works through reiteration and repetition of stock phrases, images and other forms of representations (Butler 1997: 43–70; Ahmed 2014 & 2005: 95–111). Furthermore, Ahmed's works foreground how certain representations tend to 'stick', available for a relatively longer duration for further reiteration and repetition (Ahmed 2014: 42–61). Finally, the article has argued that the law was also the main protagonist in the theatre that formed the background for the tract *Arya Samaj and its detractors* and of the theatre enacted inside the text.

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