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Jamir, Chongpongmeren

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# The Theological Quest of an Indian Woman: Dogma, Doubts, and Debates in Pandita Ramabai's Early Christian Life

Chongpongmeren Jamir

"I have not a faith which is called very often child-like,"<sup>1</sup> insisted Mary Rama, as she wrestled with doctrinal difficulties as a novice to the Christian faith. "I wish I had it, but you know I had to give up that which really was child-like—and which had come to me from my childhood, my old faith—entirely, and take a new one, which seemed more rational, purer and nobler."<sup>2</sup>

**Ramabai could not receive Christianity "merely as a historical revelation," but demanded philosophical evidence showing that "such and such things are metaphysical necessities."**

Rechristened Mary Rama, Ramabai Dongre Madhavi (popularly known as Pandita Ramabai) was a Brahmin woman from India. She was baptised into the Christian faith on September 29, 1883 at Wantage, England. (She was at the time residing at the convent of the Anglican Community of Saint Mary the Virgin, hereafter referred to as Wantage sisters.) Though she was convinced of "the truthfulness of Christ's religion,"<sup>3</sup> she struggled with the concepts of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, which to her seemed to indicate polytheism. Suggestions from her mentors to accept the historic Christian dogmas with childlike faith were not helpful. As a Hindu, she was ascribed the rare title of Pandita ("scholar") due to her mastery of the Hindu scripture. Though a beginner in the Christian faith, she studied the Bible with the critical eye of a religious scholar. Recognizing this tendency, Dorothy Beale (principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College, where Ramabai was enrolled for study) observed that Ramabai could not receive Christianity "merely as a historical revelation," but demanded philosophical evidence showing that "such and such things are metaphysical necessities."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Beale urged for patience in dealing with Ramabai, yet cautioned that if left unattended she could end up a heretic. The question on the orthodoxy of Ramabai's Christian faith alarmed her mentors in England. Sister Geraldine, her godmother in baptism, and Canon William Butler, who baptised her, were aggrieved by what they saw as a drifting away from the faith. The former accused Ramabai of betraying the faith she was baptised into by allowing "poisonous weeds of heresy" to influence her through her readings of "anti-Catholic" (that is, anti-Anglican) literature.<sup>5</sup> Butler issued her an ultimatum to either accept the church's teaching or return to her former faith.<sup>6</sup>

The frantic exchange of letters between Ramabai and her mentors informs us of the extent of her doubts and of the severity of their criticism. However, Ramabai's autobiography, published in 1907, makes no mention of these doctrinal problems. This is also the case

with her numerous biographies, which focus rather on her exploits as a saint or as a reformer, or on her conversion experience.<sup>7</sup> Keith White briefly touches on Ramabai's contention with the Anglican church, though choosing to focus on the question of authority.<sup>8</sup> Her "contention" with Anglican authority has been interpreted in existing literature as both political (a refusal to submit to colonial authority<sup>9</sup>) and social ("anti-institutionalism,"<sup>10</sup> "feminism"<sup>11</sup>). S. M. Adhav refers to the controversy in toned-down language: "religious fluctuation," which resulted from the "un-Christian influence of so-called Christians" or "swarms of Non-conformists who buzzed around her like mosquitos."<sup>12</sup> Maya Burger, in her analysis of Ramabai's autobiography, suggests that after undergoing what Ramabai called a "conversion experience" in 1891, there was "no more space to debate or to show her previous doubts."<sup>13</sup>

However, the lack of closure on Ramabai's doctrinal difficulties needs to be addressed. Existing literature tends to either overlook or circumvent the elephant in the room. Analysing the theological thought of someone of the caliber of Ramabai has the potential to provide vital insights into the promises and challenges of the encounter between Christianity and educated Hindus in present-day India.

## The Early Struggle with Christology

U. Chakravarti calls the "marginalization" of Ramabai from mainstream history in India "a suppression."<sup>14</sup> Though much biographical work on Ramabai is available, she is often overlooked in the general construction of Indian history. Similarly, White speaks of her marginalisation in the writings of Christian history.<sup>15</sup> More acute, however, is her marginalization among Indian Christian theologians, though she is one of the most learned Indian converts from Hinduism. White identifies Ramabai as a pioneer of a "radical form of theology," one that "was lived rather than written" (for which Sadhu Sunder Singh had received all the plaudits thus far), which is being adopted only recently by mainstream Asian theology.<sup>16</sup> The questions she asked on authority, Scripture, and dogma show the workings of a "cultured, sensitive, and compassionate mind" who was "not prepared to sacrifice its freedom of thought and expression for any price."<sup>17</sup>

How did her training as a Pandita and her identity as an Indian woman influence her thoughts? How did it shape her appropriation and practice of the Christian faith? Cultural history has shown that practices are performed within a cultural web of significance, whereby the meaning of an act can be derived by retrieving the "particular cultural codes underlying the acts."<sup>18</sup> Informed by cultural history, the focus of this inquiry will be on the practice of

theologizing rather than dissecting dogma. What was Ramabai's self-perception in her practice of theologizing? Taking Ramabai's correspondence with Geraldine and Beale on her doctrinal difficulties in 1885 as the departure point, this article shows how Ramabai's engagement with the Christian faith was an Indian theological quest. More specifically, it was an appropriation of Christianity through the cultural lens of an Indian woman.

"Nothing would induce me to embrace Christianity," declared Ramabai before leaving India for England.<sup>19</sup> However, five months after her arrival, she was baptised into the Anglican church. Rather than experiencing a sense of fulfilment often expressed by new converts of religions, Ramabai struggled with doubts.<sup>20</sup> She found in the new faith a plethora of "sects," "each one giving the authority of the Bible for holding a special doctrine and differing from other sects." She found this comparable to the different sects of Brahmanical Hinduism. This left her "labouring under great intellectual difficulties" and longing for "something better."<sup>21</sup> Geraldine remembers that Ramabai had "difficulties about the Trinity" even before her baptism.<sup>22</sup> Beale suggests that the root of Ramabai's struggle with Christian dogma was the continuing influence of the teachings of Brahmo Samaj (of which she was briefly a part).<sup>23</sup> Adhav asks rhetorically whether Ramabai's struggle with Christian dogma was because she was baptised prematurely.<sup>24</sup> Ramabai wondered, Does one receive baptism only when cleared of all doubts?<sup>25</sup>

Ramabai realised that the standard parameters with which Christological passages were interpreted in the Anglican church were the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed. Though she had a fair share of problems with the former,<sup>26</sup> it was with the latter that she picked a bone of contention. Contesting the Athanasian declaration that "the Son is God," she argued that deity cannot be attributed to Christ, and so, Christ cannot be worshiped as God. She wrote, "To give the title and worship which belong only to the God of gods to a man, a created being, is to my understanding nothing but idolatry."<sup>27</sup> She also made a distinction between "those whom we regard as creatures, and the Eternal Son."<sup>28</sup> The difference between Christ and the rest of humanity is that the former "never ceases to be conscious of God's presence in him, which made him so utterly one with God in will that his human will almost disappear[ed] in the Divine, and his soul was absorbed as it were in the Divine Spirit." Thus, "Christ was one with the Father—one in will and design—because he knew the Father. We are not and cannot be one with the Father as long as our sinful nature is alive in us."<sup>29</sup>

Ramabai's doctrinal position alarmed her mentors. Geraldine accused Ramabai of harbouring a dislike for the Church of England, whose people supported her coming and staying in England. She appealed to Ramabai to swallow her "pride" and accept the teachings of the Church and the clergy with humility and childlike faith.<sup>30</sup> Butler demanded that Ramabai adopt an attitude "to be taught." Ramabai felt that Butler wanted her to feel an obligation to the "Church people" to accept the Christian doctrine taught in the Church. "God forbid that I should ever do so," wrote Ramabai.<sup>31</sup> "A faith professed only for gaining [the] other's confidence or love or for any other worldly gain is no faith at all. My acceptance of Christianity is altogether voluntary..."<sup>32</sup> Thus, authoritarian attempts to rein her did not go well. While Geraldine and Butler wanted Ramabai to accept the

Christian doctrines taught by the Church without question, Ramabai was not prepared to accept any unless she was convinced of their scriptural validity. To her mentors, Ramabai came across as rebellious and deliberately stubborn.

### The Critical Thinker

Lamin Sanneh spoke of the "untenable contradiction" in which new converts often find themselves: on the one hand, they have been dislodged from their own cultural system, while on the other hand, "they [find] the missionaries tolerate no compromise and insisted converts immediately and totally sever all ties with the old way of life."<sup>33</sup> At some level, Ramabai found herself as a classic example of such a case, whereby she felt pressured to discard her Indian (cultural) appropriation of the Christian faith. Thus, she asked, "should [I] not have a voice of my own?"<sup>34</sup> From this vantage point, Ramabai's experience has been interpreted as anti-institutionalism.<sup>35</sup> Gauri Vishvanatha suggests that in refusing to submit to the Anglican leadership, Ramabai took a political stand, a refusal of the crown of England.<sup>36</sup> Burger posits that Ramabai felt "the paternal authority" of the male clergy "as a threat to her liberty." Thus, she "developed a very personal way of understanding religion, where institutions did not constitute the important part."<sup>37</sup>

An alternative to this anti-institutional narrative is to understand Ramabai's desire to have a mind of her own as that of a critical thinker. Ramabai took pains to explain that she was not rebelling against ecclesiastical leadership. She wrote to Geraldine: "Although I do not believe in the Athanasian Creed, my respect and love for the Superior and you is not a whit less than it was and I hope it shall not be less hereafter." She continued, "I tried hard to enter into your thoughts to realize your Trinitarian belief." However,

Having prayed again and again to God that your faith might take root in my heart, yet to this moment I am not able to believe it, on the contrary my faith in One Single person of God is more and more strengthened. I have now left off praying that belief in the Trinitarian faith may be given to me. I only pray for increasing light, knowledge of God's eternal truth and spiritual and bodily strength to follow it; and I am sure my voice, feeble as it is, it will be always heard by the all-merciful Father for Christ's sake.<sup>38</sup>

In making a genuine effort to enter into Geraldine's thoughts, Ramabai showed that her action was not open rebellion against ecclesiastical (or secular) authority. Rather, it was her commitment to the "eternal truth" that guided her. She made a distinction between "rules laid down by uninspired men" and obedience to the word of God.<sup>39</sup>

Ramabai's father, Anant Shastri Dongre, of whom she spoke fondly, had a major influence on her developing a critical mind. Dongre, a renowned Hindu pandit (a learned man) was an itinerant *puranika* (a "reader of Puranas"; these were "the popular and public teachers of religion among the Hindus"<sup>40</sup>). He was an "orthodox reformer" (in Ramabai's words),<sup>41</sup> acclaimed as the "Martin Luther" of modern Hinduism. He strived "to go to the root of all religious theories in order to compare them with what was practiced as the real Dharma."<sup>42</sup> In particular, he found no sanction in the

Hindu scriptures against teaching the Sanskrit language (other than the Vedas) to women and the (lowest) *shudra* caste.<sup>43</sup> So, he endeavoured to educate his wife, who in turn taught her daughter, Ramabai.<sup>44</sup> By the time Ramabai turned twenty,<sup>45</sup> she was already a Sanskrit scholar and was publicly honoured by the Shastris (religious elite) of Kolkata as a Pandita and a modern incarnation of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning.<sup>46</sup> While in Kolkata, she came in contact with Keshab Chandra Sen and the Brahmo Samaj. This led her to question her ancestral Hindu practices, including the teaching that “women are not fit to read the Vedas.” Subsequently, she “began to study the Upanishads, and then, the Vedanta and the Veda.”<sup>47</sup> These studies resulted in further dissatisfaction and losing “all faith in the religion of [her] ancestors.” Later she also found Brahmoism (of the Brahmo Samaj) unsatisfactory, “For it is nothing but what a man makes for himself,” whereby “[h]e chooses and gathers whatever seems good to him from all religions known to him and prepares a sort of religion for his own use.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, Ramabai came from a reformist culture where one would not shy away from questioning authority on scriptural grounds.

The peculiarity of Ramabai’s position as a scholar in her former faith gave her confidence as an interpreter of sacred writings. Her mastery of the sacred language (Sanskrit) and exposure to the reformist tradition of interpretation (particularly through her father and the Brahmo Samaj) fostered a habit of critical examination. She was a religious scholar, and on embracing Christianity she did not stop functioning as one. She learned Hebrew and Greek to do her own translation of the Bible. Later, she translated the whole Bible into Marathi, becoming the first woman to do so on her own in any Indian language. Her encounter with the Christian faith was characterised by a refusal to accept claims at face value. She wrote to Beale, “all that I want you to do is to prove the deity of Christ by reasonably explained words of the Bible, and then I shall be able to believe in it—if it be so—with the help of your philosophical explanation.”<sup>49</sup> Similar was the tone of her encounter with Nehemiah Gore—a fascinating meeting between two prominent Indian Christians. When the latter gave her a list of Bible “passages to establish the Deity of Jesus Christ,”<sup>50</sup> she took pains to dissect each passage to show where she could not agree with him.<sup>51</sup> Ramabai was unhappy with what she considered an uncritical proof-text approach to religion: “Argument in religious matter,” she wrote, “ought not to be like that of lawyers in courts of justice.” She was comfortable with unresolved tensions with regard to mysteries in religion: the “triumph” of religion, she wrote, “is not of this world.”<sup>52</sup>

Ramabai did not find resolutions to her doubts, either at the altar of the Athanasian Creed or in the traditionalist interpretation of the Scripture by clergy (Butler and Gore). Furthermore, she was bemused at what she perceived to be an uncritical acceptance of traditions. She found the Wantage sisters “too sure of their ground” and not open to questioning lest they “sin against such and such commandment of God.”<sup>53</sup> Neither did she find a willing hearing from either Geraldine or Butler. Geraldine reprimanded her for her vanity.<sup>54</sup> Ramabai found Butler “impatient and unsympathetic,” someone “apt to be a second God,” commanding “Thou shalt believe and do what I say.”<sup>55</sup> She confided to Beale, “I have of late often been quite disappointed in some people from whom I hoped ever to learn, and who are objects of my honour, but in them, I do not find the persons who can see my difficulties.”<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, in

Beale, Ramabai found someone with whom she could discuss her doubts. Beale provided her the space to express herself, to define her “conception” about various elements of Christian teachings.<sup>57</sup> The articles of her faith are laid out in her letters to Beale. She proposed a five-point creed outlining the basis of her acceptance and rejection of certain Christian doctrines:

1. To believe in, and worship only one God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to love Him with all my mind, soul and strength;
2. To love my neighbour as myself;
3. To believe the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah who was appointed by “His God and our God”;
4. To openly bear witness unto Christ, and to show that I reject any other faith which is not of Christ;
5. To show my love to the Saviour for the perpetual remembrance of his death and for keeping up the brotherly spirit between my fellow Christians, I am bound to be partaker of one bread and one cup with all Christians.<sup>58</sup>

Ramabai’s strong commitment to monotheism made it difficult for her to reconcile with the idea of Christ as God. This unitarian tendency finds its parallel in Brahmoism, under whose influence she had developed a deep suspicion of polytheism. There is “only one God” (Creed 1) and Christ, a created being, was “the Messiah” appointed by “His God” (Creed 3).<sup>59</sup> Ramabai’s struggle with the divinity of Christ was rooted in an oriental sense of deep reverence for the divine which, in Ramabai’s words, cannot be “defiled or mixed with the lower nature of creatures.”<sup>60</sup> In doing so, Ramabai professed her inclination toward Arianism, the teaching associated with Arius of Alexandria who was condemned as heretical in the fourth century. Adolph Harnack has shown that Arius and his friends were motivated by “a genuine concern to defend monotheism.”<sup>61</sup> Ramabai’s belief that Christ’s “human will almost disappears in the Divine” is also similar to that of Eutyches of Constantinople in the fourth–fifth centuries, whose position was that the human nature of Christ was overcome by the divine.

### The Evangelist

The first two points in Ramabai’s creed reflect what Jesus called the greatest commandments (Matt 22:36–40): “to love Him with all my mind, soul and strength” (Creed 1) and “To love my neighbour as myself” (Creed 2). In her testimony of conversion, Ramabai emphatically stated that it was love exhibited by Christ and Christian people that drew her to the Christian faith. While on a visit to a home for “fallen women” at Fulham, England, run by the Wantage sisters, she witnessed an exhibition of the Christian teaching of “the love of Christ and compassion for suffering humanity.” This act of charity to a “class of women,” commanded by the “law of Hindu[ism]” to be “eaten by dogs” convinced her that she had found a religion that was “better than any other religion.”<sup>62</sup> Having grown disillusioned with the discriminatory nature of the Brahmanical religion of her time, which she had experienced in its severity as a woman,<sup>63</sup> the message of love instantly attracted her to the Christian faith.<sup>64</sup> However, she was disappointed by the chronic divide among Christians contrary to Christ’s teaching of maintaining a “brotherly spirit” among fellow Christians (Creed 5). She was especially aggrieved by the uncharitable attitude of her contemporaries toward Christian

denominations other than their own. The church is “Catholic,” she wrote, not because of certain “beliefs or customs.” Rather, “Anyone who believes in Christ and His God has a right to have these [that is, Catholicity].”<sup>65</sup> Here she was informed by the writings of Canon Westcott, a prominent Anglican theologian of the time, who had taught that “one church” means “all [of the] Christian body.”<sup>66</sup> White points out that like Ramabai, Westcott, who held an incarnational approach to theology, also saw the redemptive work of Christ at work in personal religion.<sup>67</sup>

Ramabai sought to “openly bear witness unto Christ” and rejected “any other faith which is not of Christ” (Creed 4). Growing up in a family of *puranikas* (those who officially read the sacred texts), Ramabai knew the merit of reading and hearing sacred writings. The role of a witness is like that of a *puranika*, who reads the sacred text in public in a loud voice with the correct intonation, so as to attract passers-by. As people “come and go at their choice,” the *puranika* “continues to read, paying no attention to what the hearers do or say.”<sup>68</sup> There was a sense of liberty and latitude in the way the *puranika* approached the audience’s response to his message. Ramabai applied a similar approach to witnessing in the organisation she founded in 1889, Sharada Sadan, which later expanded into Mukti Mission. Rachel Bodley’s introduction to Ramabai’s *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* captures it well:

[Ramabai] seeks to reach Hindu women as Hindus, to give them liberty and latitude as regards religious convictions; she would make no condition as to reading the Bible or studying Christianity; but she designs to put within their reach in reading-books and on the shelves of the school library, side by side, the Bible and the Sacred Books of the East, and for the rest earnestly pray that God will guide them to His saving truth.<sup>69</sup>

Though Ramabai did not make it her primary purpose to proselytise the inmates of Sharada Sadan, the way she ordered her life as a Christian and the times of prayer she maintained with her daughter Manorama drew many to faith in Christ.<sup>70</sup>

In 1891, Ramabai had an evangelical conversion experience. She reported, “I have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Savior.”<sup>71</sup> Burger identifies the events in 1883 (her baptism) and 1891 as Ramabai’s “outer” and “inner” conversion experiences.<sup>72</sup> A third spiritual experience in Ramabai’s life is what she called “a glorious Holy Ghost revival” (1905).<sup>73</sup> These three experiences correspond to the three persons in the Trinity: embracing the “Father” as God (1883); accepting “Christ” as her personal saviour (1891); and the manifestation of the workings of the “Holy Spirit” (1905).

Nevertheless, due to a lack of closure in her writings on her doctrinal journey, it is difficult to conclude what Ramabai’s position was, in her later life, either on the Trinity or on the divinity of Christ. In general, in her writings she appears to refer to the Father as God and to Christ as Lord. Yet, this tension reflects Ramabai’s self-understanding: she neither claimed to have arrived, nor was she agreeable to all points of traditional Christian doctrine. She was on a quest. She held that one’s theological questions should not be swept under the rug because these had been discussed and resolved elsewhere. They ought, she believed, to be asked in the Indian context and resolved through an Indian lens.<sup>74</sup> She saw her experience as one of growing into the faith;

“obstacles” (including doubts) are part of that journey. In a letter written to Beale on September 3, 1885, she compared herself to “a baby stream,” which is yet to make its “way through the rocky part of life.” Presently, she was “stupefied by the immensity of difficulties before [her].” But she took heart in the reminder that the mighty Ganges grew into its immensity by starting as “a baby stream.” She believed her struggles were *en route* to her “growth” into “the Ganges.”<sup>75</sup> Just as the Ganges advances, so does one’s faith, she thought.

**Ramabai was a seeker of truth. She wrote,  
“I want to find out the truth about everything,  
including religion, by experiment.”**

### **The Indian Christian Theologian**

Adhav spoke of “Ramabai’s oriental mind,” its “complexity,” and its root in “the Pantheism of [the Hindu] creed.” He suggests that the culture of “receptivity and all-comprehensiveness” in the pantheism/Hinduism in which she was reared left her “faith upset and mind harassed and perplexed” as she heard the exclusive claims of various Christian groups.<sup>76</sup> Here, Adhav not only quoted Geraldine but also followed her closely in assessing Ramabai as rather “vain” and susceptible to external influence—a rather Victorian conception of a liberal woman, no less shown in Geraldine’s comparison of Ramabai with a libertine/radical “Anabaptist.”<sup>77</sup> Ramabai disagrees. What seems like a pantheist tendency was, in reality, her drive and openness to learn.<sup>78</sup> Ramabai was a seeker of truth. In her autobiography, she wrote, “I want to find out the truth about everything, including religion, by experiment.”<sup>79</sup> Writing in the *Cheltenham Ladies College Magazine* (1886), she was critical of those who study Indian religions (Hinduism) with the intention of catching out their “errors.” Such studies do not show “fairness, a real love for truth” and neither are they “ready to acknowledge what is good and true.”<sup>80</sup> This statement explains her commitment to the quest for truth in her engagement with both Hinduism and Christianity. She questioned the beliefs of both and rejected the former to embrace the latter. “Other people may call me an infidel if they like,” she wrote, “but I trust Him who alone is my God, Father and Guide, and will surely show me His ways.”<sup>81</sup> Perhaps she did have a child-like faith, one whose gaze and adoration were directed, not to “uninspired men” but toward her Heavenly Father. After reading Mark 8 during her morning devotion, she wrote, “I thought I was the blind man whom our saviour was leading out of the village. I am really blind, and resolve blindly to follow the master.”<sup>82</sup>

Ramabai took pride in her Indian heritage. “I like to be called a Hindoo, for I am one,” wrote Ramabai. By “Hindoo,” she meant a cultural understanding of the term, as a synonym of “Indian.” In response to Geraldine’s condescending attitude toward Ramabai’s lifestyle, she wrote: “You may, if you like to, trace my pride in pies and puddings, butter and milk, water and rice, shoes and stockings, and even, in the enormous quantity of coals that I daily burn.... I like to.... keep all the customs of my forefathers as far as I can.”<sup>83</sup> She stood her ground and maintained her dignity. This was characteristic of Ramabai, who, in the face of all the challenges

she faced as a colonized subject, a woman, and a Christian convert, refused to be the victim. Instead, she embraced her identity as an Indian, a woman, and a Christian, and spoke her mind with dignity. In her interpretation of the Christian dogma, she often drew from the religious traditions of her ancestral faith. For instance, she appealed to the Hindu philosophical idea of *maya* (“illusion,” which allows that God can please himself to suffer without parting with his essence) to resolve confusion in the teaching of the *kenosis* (the self-emptying) of Christ.<sup>84</sup> She also resolved her Trinitarian puzzle by formulating a pantheistic explanation, whereby God “becomes either incarnate, or becomes One but into many persons”: “but as the air being one fills up different rooms, so the three persons being one fill three persons yet they are one.... at last these different vessels or bodies will be broken up and the whole essence of God will be again united.”<sup>85</sup> This formulation was admittedly drawn from “the Upamshadas” (or, the Upanishads, “the revelation of God to the Hindoos”), which teaches “that the Great Brahma which is in a minutest atom, yet is in His nature abounded, and most pure, dwelling in everything yet untouched by the lower nature, just as the lotus leaf though it grows in water, yet is not wetted by the water.”<sup>86</sup> That God is one and yet dwells in everything explains how the divine nature could be present in Christ.

Ramabai’s theology in her early writings was unorthodox, as rightly pointed out by her contemporaries. Her experiential theologizing (over against Catholicity) resulted in a deviation away from orthodox Christian Christology and the Trinity. Nevertheless, her experiences provide a glimpse into the workings of the mind of an educated and scholarly Indian Hindu convert to Christianity—the questions she had and the solutions she proposed. Appropriating a new faith involves rigorous contestations and resolutions with religious ideas inherited from the previous faith and what was new. The early writings of Ramabai, therefore, provide unique insights into the interface of Christianity and Hinduism in the mind of a new convert, the theological conundrums involved, the real danger of syncretism, and the promise of creative appropriation of the faith.

## Conclusion

Ramabai did not write a systematic exposition of her theology. Yet, her writings—letters and essays—are dense with theological insights. Throughout her life, she fought against the monopoly, by a selected few, over truth and power. As a woman, she especially had to fight for the right to speak her mind. She was a multi-layered personality—woman, Brahmin, widow, social reformer, scholar, Indian, freedom fighter—all of which contributed toward her exposition of the Christian faith. What Ramabai brings to the table as a theologian is, first, the rich wealth of knowledge from her experience as a sincere student of two religious traditions, Hinduism and Christianity, and secondly, an approach to theology as a quest for truth. Theology is not simply a repetition of tradition, but an exposition of the sacred Scripture in life situations. Ramabai demonstrated that it takes courage to ask hard questions and that it takes faith to believe that truth will withstand the test of critical scrutiny.

## Notes

1. Letters of Ramabai to Dorothy Beale, May 31, 1885 and June 30, 1885.
2. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, May 31, 1885.

3. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Sept 22, 1885. Elsewhere, in a letter written to Sister Geraldine, she wrote, “Since my baptism to this time I have not repented of my embracing Christianity....” Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Oct 15, 1885.
4. Letter of Dorothy Beale to Sister Geraldine, Apr 22, 1885.
5. Letter of Sister Geraldine to Ramabai, Oct 5, 1885. In an undated letter to Beale, Ramabai wrote “that the Childlike faith consists in not reading books what she [referring to Sister Geraldine] calls are against the teaching of the Catholic Church. And not reasoning with yourself or friends but simply to say yes, and I believe, when told to believe in the Athanasian Creed.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, undated (probably late 1885, since it complains about Sister Geraldine’s strong stand against Ramabai’s doctrinal position).
6. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885.
7. To name a few: Helen S. Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai: Her Vision, Her Mission and Triumph of Faith* (Pickering and Inglis, 1900); Nicol Macnicol, *Pandita Ramabai* (SCM, 1927); U. Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (Kali for Women, 1998); Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai: Life and Landmark Writings* (Routledge, 2016); Keith J. White, *Let the Earth Hear Her Voice! Pandita Ramabai, Her Life and Work, 1858–1922* (WTL, 2022).
8. White, *Let the Earth Hear Her Voice*, 169–76.
9. Gauri Vishvanatha, “Silencing Heresy,” in *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, ed. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (Permanent Black, 2007) 249–97.
10. A. B. Shah, ed., *Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai* (Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1977).
11. Maya Burger, “Transcultural Conversion: The Life of Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922),” *AS/EA LXVII* (Apr 2013) 1155–77.
12. S. M. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai: The Oriental Revolutionary Theologian” (paper presented at the Triennial General Conference of the Church History Association of India, Bombay, Oct 19–23, 1976) 3–4.
13. Burger, “Transcultural Conversion,” 1171.
14. Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*, vii.
15. Keith John White, *Pandita Ramabai, 1858–1922: A Re-evaluation of her Life and Work* (PhD diss., University of Wales, April 2003) 18.
16. White, *Let the Earth Hear Her Voice*, 10.
17. Shah, *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, 13.
18. Melissa Calaresu, Joan-Pau Rubies, and Filippo de Vivo, *Exploring Cultural History: Essays in Honour of Peter Burke* (Ashgate, 2010) 23.
19. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai,” 6.
20. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Oct 12, 1885; Pandita Ramabai, *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, 10th ed. (Ramabai Mukti Mission, 1977) 26.
21. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 26–27.
22. Letter of Sister Geraldine to Ramabai, Oct 6, 1885.
23. Letter of Beale to Sister Geraldine, May 24, 1885.
24. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai,” 5.
25. She wrote, “I wish I knew that your Church required of a person to be quite perfect in faith, doubting nothing in the Athanasian Creed, so that he had left nothing to be learnt and inquired into the Bible after his baptism. . . .” Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Oct 15, 1885.
26. She wrote that she believed in the Apostles’ Creed and was “baptised into” it. However, she had questions: How can Christ be “Conceived of the Holy Spirit” (which was a “repulsive expression to the mind which thinks of God in reverence”)? “[H]ow could Christ be called the offspring of David if he had not a human father”? “What is the difference between ‘flesh and bones’ and ‘flesh and blood’? What does it mean by “He descended into hell”? Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Nov 29, 1885.
27. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 1, 1885.
28. Letter of Beale to Ramabai, July 5, 1885.
29. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 1, 1885.

30. Letter of Sister Geraldine to Ramabai, Oct 5, 1885.
31. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885.
32. Letter of Ramabai to Miss Nobie, July 6, 1886.
33. Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2008) 221.
34. Ramabai reports that Butler replied to this question, “Decidedly not!” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885.
35. Shah, ed., *Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, xxix–xxx.
36. Vishvanatha, “Silencing Heresy,” 272.
37. Burger’s description is similar to Ramabai’s view of the Brahmo Samaj (where one “chooses and gathers whatever seems good to him from all religions,” Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 23–24), which she rejected. Burger, “Transcultural Conversion,” 1173–4.
38. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Sept 22, 1885.
39. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Sept 22, 1885.
40. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 13.
41. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 10.
42. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai,” 3–4.
43. Traditionally, the privilege of access to the Veda was determined by birth (*jatibrahmana*) and gender (male). Thus, only males of the Brahmin caste were allowed to study the Veda. In recent years, influenced by the modern ideas of universalism and egalitarianism, the advocacy to allow non-Brahmins and women to study the Veda has gained traction in certain circles. However, not much progress has been made in implementation. For instance, a study of Hindu Brahmanical schools in Maharashtra (India) by Borayin Larios shows that only one of the twenty-five schools studied “theoretically” admit “non-brahmanas and women.” Moreover, the idea has been vehemently rejected in the “most orthodox circles.” Borayin Larios, *Embodying the Vedas: Traditional Vedic Schools of Contemporary Maharashtra* (Open Access Hinduism, 2017) 46–47.
44. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 10–12.
45. By then Ramabai had already lost both her parents and elder sister, and was left only with her elder brother, who also passed away in 1880.
46. Shah, ed., *Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, 10.
47. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 22. “Vedanta” means “the end of the Vedas.” Initially, it was used to refer to the Upanishads, a collection of philosophical-religious texts of Hinduism of the late Vedic period (1200–400 BC). It was later widened to include philosophical thoughts developed out of the Upanishads. Satishchandra Chatterjee and Dheerendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (University of Calcutta, 1948) 395.
48. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 23–24.
49. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 1, 1885.
50. The list of Bible passages were as follows: John 12: 41 (referred to Isa 6:1–6); John 20:28; Acts 20:28; Phil 2:5–8; Col 1:16–17; Rev 5:13.
51. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, undated.
52. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, “Summer vacation,” 1885.
53. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, “Summer vacation,” 1885.
54. Letter of Sister Geraldine to Ramabai, Oct 5, 1885.
55. Butler told Ramabai, “You ought humbly to accept the Church’s teaching, you are not cleverer than the Church, &c., &c.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885. Ramabai wrote to Beale, “To tell you the truth, I am rather afraid to speak to Canon Butler. And not only to him but to all those who think all that they advance is true, and that, if they could not make others agree with them, they are of course ready to think that they spoke to dishonest ‘hearts.’” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, “Summer vacation,” 1885.
56. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, June 21, 1885.
57. Beale wrote, “I want to get at your conception, as I have tried to make you see mine.” Letter of Beale to Ramabai, June 27, 1885. Again, “I should like you to define your thought of God—your conception.” Letter of Beale to Ramabai, July 5, 1885. Ramabai wrote, “I am not writing (whenever I write on religious matters) to the Lady Principal, and to her authority, but to Miss Beale, who if she thinks like myself she has not yet quite found the truth but is searching after truth, and is a fellow-labourer with me.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, “Summer vacation,” 1885.
58. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, June 21, 1885.
59. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Sept 22, 1885.
60. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 1, 1885.
61. Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. IV, trans. Neil Buchanan (Dover, 1900) 16.
62. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 25–26.
63. Ramabai’s *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Fleming H. Revell, 1901), first published in 1887, provides a vivid picture of an Indian woman’s struggle with Hinduism.
64. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 26.
65. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Sept 22, 1885.
66. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Nov 7, 1885.
67. White, *Pandita Ramabai*, 116.
68. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 13–14.
69. Quoted in Shah, ed., *Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, xxi.
70. Letter of Sister Eleanor to Sister Geraldine, Aug 19, 1889.
71. Ramabai reports, “I came to know after eight years from the time of my baptism that I had found the Christian religion, which was good enough for me: but I had not found Christ, Who is the Life of the religion, and ‘the Light of every man that cometh into the world.’” Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 27–28.
72. Burger, “Transcultural Conversion,” 1167.
73. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 42.
74. Ramabai also believed that as one called to be a missionary in India, she must ask the difficult questions else she will not be able to “answer [her] adversaries.” Therefore, she insisted, “I must be thoroughly instructed.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, undated.
75. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 3, 1885.
76. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai,” 4–5.
77. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai,” 5; Letter of Sister Geraldine to Ramabai, Oct 5, 1885.
78. The following statement reflects her determination to know the truth: “But this shall not stop me from studying the Bible and proving this doctrine of the deity of Christ, if it be true or untrue.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885. Again she wrote, “But I must ever continue to search the Scriptures and never stop until I find the lost piece of silver—either in this world or the next.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, May 31, 1885.
79. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 35.
80. Ramabai, “Indian Religion,” *Cheltenham Ladies College Magazine* XIII (Spring 1886) 108.
81. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885.
82. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 3, 1885.
83. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Oct 15, 1885.
84. She was addressing the question, how does one reconcile in Christ, “omniscience and ignorance, omnipotence and subjection,” which “are opposite to each other as the light and darkness are”? Letter of Ramabai to Beale, June 30, 1885.
85. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, June 30, 1885.
86. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 1, 1885.



**Chongpongmeren Jamir** is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Church History at the Inez and Julius Polin Institute, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland. He holds a PhD from Middlesex University through the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Oxford, UK. His research interest revolves around the cultural history of Christianity in modern India, with a particular focus on the interface of culture and religion and the semiotic value of rituals and artifacts in historiography.