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Systems of Religion and Morality in the Collections of the Royal Asiatic Society

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Systems of Religion and Morality in the Collections of the Royal Asiatic Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between the peculiar religious and intellectual background of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and the secular attitude towards religion adopted by the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, founded in 1823. It focuses in particular on the legacy of Sir William Jones (1746–1794), who — partly taking inspiration from the model of the Royal Society — founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, which was the progenitor of other Asiatic societies established in India and elsewhere. The religious concerns of Jones and other influential Orientalists have been highlighted by Thomas Trautmann, Urs App, and others, and they are considered here as a qualification upon narratives that emphasise colonialism as the shaping force in the intellectual milieu in which the RAS was founded. Meanwhile, the myriad ways in which Asian histories and cultural traditions inspired British authors and artists, of the Romantic period and earlier, to question theological, aesthetic, moral, and sociological assumptions, is considered as a second qualification upon post-colonial interpretations. After highlighting key moments in modern Europe's movement towards the secular study of religious and moral systems, and relating this process to the wider philosophical and intellectual culture, the paper selects a few key objects from the Society's collections to explore how the new attitudes found expression in its collecting policy. It concludes by suggesting what importance this inheritance might have in the context of a modern pluralist society.

Keywords: Religion; Morality; Orientalism; Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland; Sir William Jones.

* * *

This paper is intended as an aid to thinking about the Royal Asiatic Society's approach to the study of Asiatic religions in the years after it was founded in 1823.¹ To do this, it necessarily refers to the intellectual background of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and examines how the attitudes and outlook of key figures such as Sir William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrooke helped shape the Society's secular orientation. The second half of the paper addresses how this attitude found expression in the Society's collections, and briefly examines a few of the Society's treasures. It concludes with a short discussion of the place these collections have in the Society's vision today and the relevance of this vision in the context of wider British society.

In 1620, Sir Francis Bacon published his *Novum Organum*, which helped launch the scientific revolution and the development of the empirical method, with the use of experimentation to better observe and understand the natural world. While the pursuit of scientific knowledge is sometimes thought to be incompatible with religious faith, Bacon's project in fact had Christian underpinnings: in a fallen world, the human capacity for knowledge was strictly limited, but Bacon believed that communal labour and natural philosophy might restore the dominion over nature enjoyed by Adam before the Fall.² The Royal Society, the world's first learned society, was founded in 1660, and it invoked Bacon as a major influence; its motto "*Nullius in verba*" or "Take nobody's word for it" expressed the aspiration to test accepted wisdom against facts determined by experiment. Bacon's religious justifications for experimental science were shared by many founders of the Royal Society, and his method was understood as a means of re-establishing human power over the natural world.³ Around the same time, a Europe that had been ravaged by the experience of the Thirty Years War (and the Civil Wars in Great Britain and Ireland) witnessed the first beginnings of Biblical criticism. Attempts to

¹ This essay is based on a talk delivered at the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland on 6 June 2019, itself a revised version of a presentation delivered at the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies in October 2018. No institutional endorsement of the views and arguments expounded by the author should be inferred.

² Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*, 179.

³ Harrison, "Religion, the Royal Society, and the Rise of Science", 262. See also Spencer, *The Evolution of the West*, 103–104.

examine the Bible according to standards of historical evidence started to undermine the status of the Old Testament, and particularly its first five books, the Pentateuch, traditionally regarded as the world's oldest extant scripture, and attributed to Moses. In *Leviathan*, published in 1651, Thomas Hobbes (who had worked as a secretary for Bacon thirty years earlier) pointed out the absence of other sources to corroborate Moses's alleged authorship, while his contemporary, Isaac La Peyrere, went further and questioned whether Moses had written any of them at all.

In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, published in 1670, Baruch Spinoza rejected the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, arguing that the historicity of claims made in the Bible should not be exempt from the same standards of criticism that were applicable in other contexts. He tried to show that theology and philosophy, or faith and reason, were distinct, holding that religion was properly concerned with morality and ethics, rather than metaphysics, or knowledge of reality; thus, freedom of enquiry was no enemy of religion, and it would in fact help to elucidate religious truth. Moreover, he argued that attempts to suppress freedom of speech in the name of religion or social control did more harm than good:

It is far from possible to impose uniformity of speech, for the more rulers strive to curtail freedom of speech, the more obstinately are they resisted [...] Men, as generally constituted, are most prone to resent the branding as criminal of opinions which they believe to be true, and the proscription as wicked of that which inspires them with piety towards God and man [...] ⁴

Spinoza's ideas were hugely controversial in his day and even after his death were subject to attack from all quarters. But the idea that Biblical texts should be subjected to scrutiny based on historical evidence was an important milestone, because it meant that, while the Bible remained a sacred text for Christians, it eventually also became fit material for profane, or secular, examination.

⁴ Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 261–262.

This was a significant moment in the process of elevating free enquiry itself to the status of a sacred principle.⁵

Other factors heaped pressure on the Biblical worldview in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the discovery of the Americas, the rediscovery of philosophical texts from ancient Greece and Rome, new information about ancient Asiatic religions brought by European missionaries, and advances in scientific knowledge. Scepticism about miracles and the literal truth of the Bible contributed, by the end of the seventeenth century, to the growth of the religion of Deism, culminating in England with Matthew Tindal's 1730 work *Christianity as Old as the Creation*. Widely associated by his critics with the ideas of Spinoza, Tindal further distanced Deism from conventional Christianity, and emphasised empirical evidence and human reason as the means by which to confirm divine revelation.⁶ Ten years later, the sceptical philosopher David Hume applied the methods of empirical observation to the study of human nature itself.⁷ In such a climate, religious partisans of all types — including Deists and the writers of Christian apologetics — were on the constant look-out for new sources. Not only Middle Eastern, but also non-Abrahamic texts from Egypt, India, and China were analysed in search of ancient religious truth and evidence of its transmission. Thus European religious controversies helped stimulate interest in the religions of China and India, in particular, as Europeans sought to find evidence in ancient Asian texts that might buttress their own propositions.⁸

Sir Isaac Newton, who served as President of the Royal Society between 1703 and 1727, is one of the most famous scientists of all time, but his religious preoccupations are only now becoming better known, thanks to initiatives such as the Newton Papers Project, based at the University of Oxford.⁹ Peter Harrison observes that Newton saw science as “a means of enlarging the bounds of moral philosophy,

⁵ “There is at least one principle which those the most devoted to the free examination of everything tend to place above discussion and to regard as untouchable, that is to say, as sacred: this is the very principle of free examination.” Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 213.

⁶ Colie, “Spinoza and the Early English Deists”, 35–36.

⁷ *A Treatise of Human Nature, Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (1739–40).

⁸ This process is comprehensively documented in App, *The Birth of Orientalism*.

⁹ See <http://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/>.

and of shedding light on the nature of the 'first cause' — God".¹⁰ Like Bacon, Newton was interested in alchemy, and in the ways whereby ancient wisdom stemming from an original divine revelation was encoded by symbols and transmitted through degenerate ages by a line of eminent men.¹¹ While seeking to root his views firmly in the Old Testament narrative, Newton thought that this initial revelation was the ultimate source of all religion, and that this tradition had been shared by all ancient peoples, just as all postdiluvial peoples originally shared the religion transmitted by Noah and his sons. While Newton's ancient theology was exclusively rooted in the Middle East and the Bible, others emphasised Indian and Chinese sources in the search for evidence of an original monotheism shared across the ancient world.

In 1784, the Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded by Sir William Jones, who had himself been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1772. Jones's father was a famous mathematician, who had been Vice-President of the Royal Society, and a friend of Newton;¹² and Jones cited the Royal Society model when founding the Asiatic Society.¹³ Jones was in India to serve as a judge for the East India Company at Fort William, Calcutta, but his fascination with Asian languages and cultures pre-dated his journey to India. His scholarly pursuits, far from being motivated merely by British imperial policy, were deeply bound up with his religious interests. Echoing Newton's, these reflected the paradigm shift that was underway in Britain during the eighteenth century, and the desire to reconcile existing beliefs and intuitions with the vast amount of new knowledge that was being generated across Enlightenment Europe. Just as new information about the natural world, resulting from the progress of the scientific and technological revolutions, had to be incorporated into the European understanding, so too did the growing awareness of ancient Asiatic religions; while the challenge of Spinozism, Deism, and scepticism helped create a religious market for evidence resulting from "objective" and secular study, which might help place religious intuitions on a firmer, empirical basis.

In his opening discourse at the founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Jones observed that Asia had long been esteemed as the:

¹⁰ Harrison, "Religion, the Royal Society, and the Rise of Science", 264.

¹¹ App, *The Birth of Orientalism*, 261.

¹² Franklin, *Orientalist Jones*, 43.

¹³ Jones, "Introduction", *Asiatick Researches*, Vol. 1, iv; "Discourse on the Institution of a Society [...]", *Asiatick Researches*, Vol. 1, x.

nurse of sciences, the inventress of delightful and useful arts, the scene of glorious actions, fertile in the productions of human genius, abounding in natural wonders, and infinitely diversified in the forms of religions and government, in the laws, manners, customs, and languages, as well as in the features and complexions of men.¹⁴

The Asiatic Society had a very broad remit, being concerned with the study of the history and antiquities, natural productions, arts, sciences, and literature of Asia, which was defined in the broadest geographic terms. Jones favoured the term “Asiatick” over Oriental, challenging Eurocentric assumptions by pointing out that the latter designation was “merely relative.”¹⁵ Insofar, Jones suggested, as human knowledge could be analysed according to the faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, the Society’s interests were to be in corresponding branches of knowledge — history, science, and art.¹⁶ This makes no specific mention of religion, but when enumerating the subjects of inquiry, Jones included Asia’s “various forms of government, with their institutions civil and religious”; “their systems of morality, grammar, rhetorick, and dialectick”; and he did not disdain the various branches of Asian science, mathematics, physics, medicine, chemistry, architecture, and so on.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Jones downplayed his own field of expertise, considering languages to be “mere instruments of real learning, and [I] think them improperly confounded with learning itself.”¹⁸

Jones is chiefly associated in the public mind with the idea of an Indo-European family of languages encompassing Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin; and in his Third Anniversary Discourse to the Asiatic Society (1786) he promoted the merits of Sanskrit as a language “of a wonderful structure; more

¹⁴ Jones, “Discourse on the Institution of a Society”, x.

¹⁵ Jones, “Discourse on the Institution of a Society”, xii.

¹⁶ Here is another echo of Bacon, who observed: “The *parts* of human learning have reference to the three parts of man’s understanding, which is the seat of learning: *history* to his *memory*, *poesy* to his *imagination*, and *philosophy* to his *reason*” (*Of the Advancement of Learning*, 69). Philosophy here included natural philosophy, ie, science.

¹⁷ Jones, “Discourse on the Institution of a Society”, xiii–xiv.

¹⁸ Jones, “Discourse on the Institution of a Society”, xiv.

perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either".¹⁹ But much of Jones's research after his arrival in India had a theological bent, which was connected to his interest in the origins of man and Mosaic ethnology. In his essay "On the Gods of Greece, Italy, and India", written in 1784, Jones laid out the similarities he observed between the objects of worship in the religions of these countries. Jones claimed that he had "no system of my own to maintain", and that "it is not the truth of our national religion, as such, that I have at heart; it is truth itself".²⁰ However, Jones also hinted at his desire to remove doubts about the authenticity of the "accounts, delivered by Moses, concerning the primitive world".²¹ Thomas Trautmann has pointed out that Jones's "entire project is one of forming a rational defense of the Bible out of the materials collected in Oriental scholarship, more specifically a defense of the Mosaic account of human history in its earliest times".²² This broadly fits within the genre of "Ancient Theology", or *prisca theologia*, and the wider tradition, going back to the Renaissance, of trying to use ancient Asiatic sources to shed light on antediluvian religion.²³ Jones alluded to this school of thought when he postulated "a general union or affinity between the most / distinguished inhabitants of the primitive world, at the time when they deviated, as they did too early deviate, from the rational adoration of the only true GOD".²⁴

Nevertheless, as Urs App points out, it is also true that the Asiatic Society's journal, *Asiatick Researches*, "stunned their European readership by their utterly secular and objective outlook on Asia and thus propagated a new kind of orientalism that was no more the hand-maiden of theology".²⁵ European Orientalists had been studying non-Abrahamic religions since the first contacts with Japanese Buddhism in the sixteenth century, but App identifies Jones's founding of the Asiatic Society

19 Jones, "The Third Anniversary Discourse", *Asiatick Researches*, Vol. 1, 422.

20 Jones, "On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India", *Asiatick Researches*, Vol. 1, 225.

21 Jones, "On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India", 225.

22 Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 42. This subject is explored in depth in App, "William Jones's Ancient Theology", *Sino-Platonic Papers*, 191 (July, 2009).

23 App, "William Jones's Ancient Theology", 9.

24 Jones, "On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India", 221–222.

25 App, "William Jones's Ancient Theology", 77.

as a “crucial turning point”, noting that the Society’s journal focussed on “the dispassionate, objective / study and presentation of data about Asia including Asian antiquities and religions.”²⁶

Indeed, it was not just Indian religion that Jones studied for this purpose. Jones, who was half-Welsh, was also inspired into “re-creational Celticism” by the research of his Anglesey relatives into early Welsh poetry, as he mined for evidence of the ancient spirit of religion in Welsh folklore.²⁷ Jones went so far as to found a Welsh folkloric society, the “Druids of Cardigan”, for which he served as Chief Bard. Michael Franklin has highlighted an Anglo-Welsh poem Jones wrote for the society, “Kneel to the Goddess Whom All Men Adore” (1780), as one that “reveals Jones’s enlightened Deism”. Addressed to Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Parsis, and pagan Greeks and Romans, the poem points out that they “all worship the same Goddess be she called Diana, Mary or Astarte”.²⁸ Phiroze Vasunia has noted the significance of Jones addressing not only Anglicans and Catholics, but casting his plea for toleration in much broader, global terms, reminding his fellow Britons “about the similarities that bind religions together”, while also alluding to “contemporary arguments that connected druids and brahman priests”.²⁹

The brand of Deism to which Jones subscribed was hugely influential in British literary culture in the second half of the eighteenth century, and the tradition is indebted to the defence of Tindal by the Anglican clergyman Conyers Middleton. Middleton shared the Spinozan belief in the utility of organised religion and, his Deist tendencies notwithstanding, did not want to disestablish the Church of England. As his thought is summarized by Hugh Trevor-Roper, Middleton believed such a course would be both irrational and immoral: “irrational because reason is proved by history to be inadequate, and indeed, by its inadequacy, is the cause of religion; immoral because the abolition of the established religion would destroy social discipline, the only practical guarantee of morality.”³⁰ Middleton believed that this was understood by such ancient authorities as Socrates and Cicero, who “saw the cheat and

²⁶ App, “William Jones’s Ancient Theology”, vii-viii.

²⁷ Franklin, *Orientalist Jones*, 104.

²⁸ Franklin, “Sir William Jones, the Celtic Revival and the Oriental Renaissance”, 30–31.

²⁹ Vasunia, “Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism: On the Gods of Greece, Italy and India”, 183.

³⁰ Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment*, 83.

forgery" of established religion, but understood that it was not only a method of social control: it was also the preservative of freedom. Writing fifty years before the French Revolution, Middleton argued in proto-Burkean style that "'tis not the believers of religion but infidels and atheists who in every country have always been the severest persecutors and cruellest oppressors of all civil as well as religious liberty".³¹

Trevor-Roper has suggested that Middleton's views were identical with those of Jones's friend, the historian Edward Gibbon, whose singularly influential *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was published between 1776 and 1789.³² Like Jones, Gibbon was fascinated by the histories of the Persians, Ottomans, Arabs, and Chinese. Both men belonged to Samuel Johnson's exclusive Literary Club, which boasted among its members other luminaries including Edmund Burke, Joshua Reynolds, Oliver Goldsmith, and the Anglican Bishop Thomas Percy. Goldsmith and Percy were responsible for two of the most famous works on China in mid-eighteenth-century England, in the form of Goldsmith's satirical *Citizen of the World, or, Letters from a Chinese Philosopher* (1762), and Percy's translation of a Chinese novel into English a year earlier. Percy also published translations from Icelandic, but he is chiefly known for his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). Offering a significant moment in the development of English literary taste, this work helped launch a new vogue for taking inspiration from medieval domestic traditions (both real and imagined) and proved to be a major influence on several Romantic poets, notably William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Sir Walter Scott.³³ Indeed, Percy's dual approach of drawing on British folkloric traditions, as well as Norse and Asiatic sources, directly anticipated the work of men like Coleridge and Robert Southey, who integrated source material from a variety of European and Asian traditions into their poetry.

Coleridge was also closely interested in "Ancient Theology" and, in 1797, considered adding a line to his poem "Religious Musings" that described Christ as a *priscus theologus* or Newtonian "Renewer of the Ancient Truth!"³⁴ The literary scholar John Beer has situated Coleridge within a tradition of

³¹ Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment*, 83.

³² Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment*, 118.

³³ See for example Sutherland, "The Native Poet: The Influence of Percy's Minstrel from Beattie to Wordsworth", *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 132 (Nov., 1982), 414–433.

³⁴ Leadbetter, *Coleridge and the Daemonic Imagination*, 28.

“visionary religion” going back to the late seventeenth century and the Cambridge Platonists like Ralph Cudworth and Henry More, who, “concerned at the widening gulf between traditional religion and the new scientific outlook, had tried to build a bridge which should link the empiricism of Bacon and Descartes with Platonic speculation.” Despite the inroads of Spinozianism and scepticism, the prevailing worldview was one still largely shaped by the Bible, and there remained a “hope that all human knowledge might yet be harmonized into one universal pattern, which would be reconcilable with that laid down in the Bible and ancient classical authorities”.³⁵

The imperial historian John Mackenzie surveyed Asian influences on other fields of the British arts, and similarly found that artists sought opportunities for cultural contamination at every turn. The ready availability of travel writing meant they could easily incorporate material from Oriental sources, in the same way they did from folk and medieval sources and domestic regional cultures, in some cases creating new syncretic forms.³⁶ Moreover, Asiatic interests often coincided with radical political sympathies. Sir William Jones was something of a political radical, a supporter of the American Revolution whose 1783 work *The Principles of Government* was the subject of a trial for seditious libel; while the young Coleridge was a fervent promoter of the French Revolution and Jacobin ideals. Mackenzie concluded that “a fascination with Orientalism was as likely to be oppositional as consensual in relation to established power structures, a promoter of a ferment in ideas as in artistic innovation”.³⁷

This approach was also evidenced in the case of Thomas Manning, an acquaintance of Coleridge, who was inspired by Jones’s philological work and who followed in his footsteps to become one of the first Englishmen to study Chinese (he was also the Royal Asiatic Society’s Honorary Chinese Librarian). Manning hoped to conduct an empirical survey of Chinese manners and customs, which he believed might provide insights to help inform the improvement of social life in Great Britain itself.³⁸ Manning resided in Asia for some ten years between 1807 and 1817, befriending the Scottish Orientalist and polyglot John Leyden during a stay in Calcutta in 1810. Leyden was one of a whole generation of

³⁵ Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, 49–50.

³⁶ Mackenzie, *Orientalism*, 209.

³⁷ Mackenzie, *Orientalism*, 211.

³⁸ For more information on Manning, see Wong, “Thomas Manning (1772–1840) and Sino-British Relations in the Early Nineteenth Century”, and Weech, “Thomas Manning’s European Encounter, 1802–1805”.

Scottish Orientalists in India in the early 1800s who, educated at the University of Edinburgh and shaped by the Scottish Enlightenment, followed the example of David Hume and sought "to apply to the study of man and society methods of enquiry comparable to those of the natural sciences."³⁹ According to some proponents of this school, even the researches of the Asiatic Society were too limited and lacking in theoretical ambition. Leyden, for example, derided the young Henry Colebrooke as "the very Porson of Sanscrit literature";⁴⁰ which, by conjuring associations with stodgy textual criticism, managed to be unfair to both Colebrooke and the Grecian Richard Porson. Colebrooke in fact had an imaginative interest in Indian religion and philosophy, and played a vital role in promoting the scholarly and secular study of Sanskrit texts and Vedic religion in the European context.

Colebrooke arrived in India in June 1783, around the time of his eighteenth birthday, and his early interest was not languages, but astronomy and mathematics. Having studied the economic situation in the Company territories, he urged legal reform of the land system and criticized the revenue burden on the Indian population, who would "remember the yoke as the heaviest that ever conquerors put upon the necks of conquered nations".⁴¹ Colebrooke took up the study of Sanskrit in the early 1790s, joining the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1792, and after Jones's premature death he was assigned the task of completing Jones's unfinished translation of the *Digest of Hindu Laws*. He was made Honorary Professor of Hindu Law and Sanskrit at the College of Fort William in 1805, and in 1807 he was elected President of the Asiatic Society. Colebrooke was amazed by the sophistication of Indian philosophy, though he felt that the truths it contained were "couched in obscure allegory or puerile fable".⁴² He elucidated his views on Hindu philosophy and its relationship to the theology and metaphysics of the Vedas in a series of lectures delivered to the Royal Asiatic Society in 1823, which were subsequently published in the pages of its journal. Just as Jones had commented on the similarities between the Gods of Greece and India, so did Colebrooke remark upon similarities between Indian and Greek philosophy,

³⁹ Rendall, "Scottish Orientalism", 43.

⁴⁰ Rendall, "Scottish Orientalism", 48–49.

⁴¹ Rocher and Rocher, *The Making of Western Indology*, 19.

⁴² Rocher and Rocher, *The Making of Western Indology*, 23.

speculating on what ancient points of contact might lie behind them.⁴³

Having returned to England in 1815, Colebrooke played the central role in founding the Royal Asiatic Society, which was established in 1823 upon the model of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Colebrooke took the Chair at the Society's first meeting, and delivered a discourse in which he described the Society's purpose as "the advancement of knowledge in relation to Asia".⁴⁴ This was later (somewhat clumsily) elaborated in the Society's Royal Charter as being "for the investigation of subjects, connected with, and for the encouragement of Science, Literature, and the Arts, in relation to Asia".⁴⁵ Colebrooke believed that these researches promised to reveal new wisdom that would improve the state of knowledge and the arts in Great Britain itself.⁴⁶ The scope of the Society's Asiatic research would embrace "their ancient and modern history; their civil polity; their long-enduring institutions; their manners, and their customs; their languages, and their literature; their sciences, speculative and practical; in short, the progress of knowledge among them." Indeed, Colebrooke said:

It is the history of the human mind, which is most diligently to be investigated; the discoveries of the wise; the inventions of the ingenious; and the contrivances of the skilful. Nothing, which has much engaged the thoughts of man, is foreign to our inquiry, within the local limits, which we have prescribed to it.⁴⁷

The very first paper published in the Society's *Transactions* was not by Colebrooke, however, but by the twenty-seven-year-old John Francis Davis, later Governor of Hong Kong, who provided a "Memoir Concerning the Chinese". Davis appears to have been strongly influenced by the views of Jones, citing

⁴³ Rocher and Rocher, *The Making of Western Indology*, 169–173.

⁴⁴ Colebrooke, "A Discourse Read at a Meeting of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland on the 15th of March, 1823", *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 1, 1827, xvii.

⁴⁵ "Charter of Incorporation of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland", *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. I, 1827, xi.

⁴⁶ Colebrooke, "Discourse", xviii.

⁴⁷ Colebrooke, "Discourse", xix.

his observations in the *Institutes of Manu* with regard to the likely antiquity of the Chinese nation. Davis also followed Jones's views on the origins of the Han Chinese,⁴⁸ suggesting that Chinese civilization may have originated as an Indian colony, its distinctive character formed by mixing with native Chinese and Tartars.⁴⁹ Davis's link to Jones was more than an intellectual inheritance: there was a personal connection, and Davis donated to the Society a volume of letters that Jones had sent to his father. Davis was unflattering about the role played by Daoism and Buddhism in Chinese philosophy, but he reserved a special respect for Confucius, who "embodied in sententious maxims the first principles of morals and of government, and the purity and excellence of some of his precepts [...] will bear a comparison with even those of the gospel."⁵⁰

In his opening address, Colebrooke specified that the Society would provide a means to preserve manuscripts, books, and private archives. Bringing sources together and making them accessible would "lead to a more diligent examination of the treasures of Oriental literature", and also tend to "the increase in knowledge in Asia, by diffusion of European science". The overarching purpose of this two-way exchange was to "largely contribute to the augmented enjoyments of the innumerable people, subject to British sway abroad; and [...] conspicuously tend to British prosperity, as connected with Asia".⁵¹ The Society soon began to collect materials documenting a variety of Asiatic cultural traditions; examining the context of their acquisition and accession helps us understand the Society's early attitude to the study of religion and systems of morality.

One of the finest illustrated manuscripts owned by the Society is a *Gulistān* composed by the thirteenth-century Persian poet Sa'di, regarded as perhaps the most influential prose work in Persian literature. Sa'di's works were admired by several leading figures of the European Enlightenment, and selections appeared in English from the late eighteenth century. Jones advised students of Persian to

48 See Jones, "The Seventh Anniversary Discourse", 371.

49 Davis, "Memoir Concerning the Chinese", *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. I, 1827, 4.

50 Davis, "Memoir Concerning the Chinese", 5.

51 Colebrooke, "Discourse", xxiii.

pick an easy chapter of the *Gulistan* as their first translation exercise, and it became the main text of Persian instruction at Fort William College and Haileybury.⁵²

Sir John Malcolm — a founder and Vice-President of the RAS, and Governor of Bombay between 1827 and 1831 — remarked upon the popularity of tales and fables in his 1828 *Sketches of Persia*. He noted that while the common people learn “through allegories and apologues, to appreciate the merits of their / superiors, the latter are, in their turn, taught by the same means lessons of humanity, generosity and justice.”⁵³ Malcolm reported that the stories and maxims of Sa’di “which are known to all, from the king to the peasant, have fully as great an effect in restraining the arbitrary and unjust exercise of power as the laws of the Prophet.”⁵⁴ In defence of allegories and fables, Malcolm quoted Bacon himself: “Fiction gives to mankind what history denies, and in some measure satisfies the mind with shadows when it cannot enjoy the substance.”⁵⁵ Across the Atlantic, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the founder of the American Transcendentalist movement in the 1830s, was deeply engaged with Sa’di and his writings, which remain popular in the West to this day; some, famously, are displayed in the United Nations building in New York.

This *Gulistan* was bequeathed to the Society in 1841 by Neil Benjamin Edmonstone and copied in 1582 in Fatehpur Sikri. It is notable for the delightful paintings of birds and animals that decorate the pages of the text, and it also features an exquisite colophon portrait depicting the calligrapher Muhammad Husayn al-Kashmiri and the young artist Manohara, who later had an illustrious career at the court of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan. John Seyller has argued that the latter sections of the manuscript, including the colophon portrait, were in fact completed by Manohara’s father, the much more experienced artist Basavana.⁵⁶ The Mughal drawing that shows a bearded and turbaned teacher with a class of female students and attendants, attached to the recto of the first folio, was added at a later date; exactly when is unclear.

⁵² <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/golestan-e-sadi>. Accessed 20 May 2019.

⁵³ Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia*, 132–133.

⁵⁴ Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia*, 133.

⁵⁵ Malcolm, *Sketches of Persia*, 133.

⁵⁶ Seyller, “The Colophon Portrait of the Royal Asiatic Society Gulistan of Sa’di”, *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (2008), 333–342.

Edmonstone was a senior official of the East India Company, based in India from 1783 until 1817, becoming exceptionally influential as an architect of British colonial policy. The verdict of the later nineteenth century was that "among the many eminent public servants who helped to build up the great *Raj* of the Company, he had not a superior and scarcely an equal":⁵⁷ a reputation as likely to elicit praise in the annals of Victorian history as to bring opprobrium in our own. Edmonstone's bequest also included *Musladini Sadi Rosarium Politicum*, the 1654 Amsterdam edition of the *Gulistan* translated into Latin, with an inscription on the final leaf verso reading "The property of William Jones Esq. of University College Oxford". It contains Jones's annotations in Persian throughout.

We also have a book featuring translations by Edmonstone himself: *Official documents, relative to the negotiations carried on by Tippoo Suldaun, with the French nation, and other foreign states, for purposes hostile to the British nation: to which is added, proceedings of a Jacobin club, formed at Seringapatam, by the French soldiers in the corps commanded by M. Dompant, with a translation.* Edmonstone, who served in the campaign against Tipu Sultan in 1799 as Private Secretary to Richard Wellesley, was responsible for the translations from the Persian. The influence of French officers in the princely states was of great concern to the British, and the documents Edmonstone translated served to demonstrate this fact and justify the Company's fears in their own eyes.

Another major accession was the collection of James Tod. He arrived in India in 1799, serving in central and western India until 1822, where he acted as the East India Company's "Resident", or political representative to the Rajput courts, from 1818. In this capacity, while based in Udaipur, he travelled widely through the region as his political duties required. Tod began a detailed study of the history and mythology of the region and traced the genealogies of the major Rajput clans. In the course of this work he amassed a large collection of religious and historical manuscripts and miniature paintings, many of which were copies that he commissioned. For his knowledge of Rajput history, Tod relied on the assistance of native informants, such as the Jain cleric, Gyanchandra, who assisted Tod for ten years right up to Tod's return to England. At the end of his *Travels in Western India*, Tod reminisced about Gyanchandra:

⁵⁷ Kaye, *Lives of Indian Officers*, Vol. 1, 245.

[M]y friend and tutor, ‘the moon of intellect’ [...] who had been with me from my subaltern days, and who, during more than half the period of my sojourn in India, was one of the great comforts of my exile. [...] He enjoyed as much as I did these ramblings in search of the relics of past days, and to his great historical knowledge, and patience in deciphering inscriptions, I am indebted for my chief discoveries.⁵⁸

Tod also commissioned a topographical record of his expeditions around Rajasthan, in the form of watercolour paintings by his cousin, Patrick Waugh. These materials formed the basis for Tod’s major historical work, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, published in two volumes between 1829 and 1832. This seminal work was devoted to an area hitherto largely unknown to British audiences. Tod’s sympathies with the Rajputs were clear, the dedication of the second volume to William IV beseeching “that neither the love of conquest, nor false views of policy, may tempt us to subvert the independence of these States”.⁵⁹

Tod was a member of the Society and served as its first Librarian between 1823 and 1831. He was a generous patron during his lifetime, but the bulk of his collection came to the Society in 1851, sixteen years after his death. The Tod manuscript collection includes around 170 volumes in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and vernacular languages such as Hindi and Gujarati, collected or copied by Tod from different parts of Rajasthan, and comprising genealogies of ruling clans, religious texts, morality tales, astronomy, and grammar. The Prakrit manuscripts chiefly pertain to the Jain religion and include a copy of *Kalikacharya-Kathanaka*, dating from 1404 AD, with nine brightly coloured illustrations.⁶⁰ The process by which Europeans came to understand the non-Abrahamic religions of Asia was gradual and confused, with knowledge gleaned about Buddhism often being interwoven with elements taken from Hinduism and Jainism to form the singular notion of a pan-Asian “Oriental philosophy”. The distinct identity of the Jain tradition, in particular, was not properly understood in Europe until later in the nineteenth

⁵⁸ Tod, *Travels in Western India*, 444–445. Thanks to Norbert Peabody for this reference.

⁵⁹ Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, Vol. 2, [v].

⁶⁰ Hooja, “The Tod Collection of Indian manuscripts at the Royal Asiatic Society”, 71.

century. Perhaps the most notable Jain object in the Society's collection is an Aḍhāi-dvīpa, or cosmological map of the universe, which was donated in 1837.

The map was described in the Society's journal in 1916 by F.E. Pargiter, who also provided a description of one of the versions of Snakes and Ladders owned by the Society, which he titles "Heaven or Hell".⁶¹ The Society's collections include more than one example of this ancient Indian game. Andrew Topsfield described the game in its Hindu, Jain, and Muslim versions as a sort of "Pilgrim's Progress" in which the piece controlled by the player "ascends from the lower squares, inscribed with the names of hellish states and earthly vices, to the higher, representing more advanced spiritual states and heavenly realms, and thus ultimately to the winning square, the abode of the supreme Deity or final Liberation."⁶² The vertical representation of morality, with virtues in elevated positions and vices lower down, elegantly demonstrates how religious belief can shape our understanding of physical space; what Emile Durkheim described as its role in shaping "the framework of the intelligence".⁶³

The more ornate version of the game in the Society's collection was presented by Henry Dundas Robertson. It was designed by Trivenkatacharya, a noted chess master who published *Essays on Chess, Adapted to the European Method of Play*. Robertson gave a paper on the game, also titled "Heaven and Hell", which was summarized in the *Asiatic Journal*:

It appears to be founded on a careful examination of the metaphysical systems of the Hindus. The game is divided into a number of squares, of which a part represent the systems of the different philosophers. The plan of the game exhibits the most highly approved methods that have been laid down by Hindu theologians for gaining beatitude.

⁶¹ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1916, 537–542.

⁶² Topsfield, "The Indian Game of Snakes and Ladders", 203.

⁶³ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 9. David Hume explained the same phenomenon as a metaphysical consequence of gravity, due to the fact that human thoughts, like material bodies, have a greater "facility" in moving downwards than upwards. The perception of something noble, however, stirs the imagination, providing stimulus or energy which impels the mind in the contrary direction. Thus "everything, which invigorates and inlivens the soul, whether by touching the passions or imagination, naturally conveys to the fancy this inclination for ascent, and determines it to run against the natural stream of its thoughts and conceptions." Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, 482.

It contains two heavens and two hells. The “Great Heaven,” or *Muc’sha*, is in fact the Divine essence itself, at which the souls of the good arrive by two different roads [...] ⁶⁴

Another version of Snakes and Ladders was donated to the Society by Major-General John Staples Harriott. This is an Islamic version in which the player progresses through various states of existence, ultimately approaching the Throne of God. Here, the snakes, representing vices such as greed and bad company, are concentrated in the lower half of the board, with the exception of the two longest snakes: Pride, and, at the penultimate square, Satan, leading to Lust. Conversely, there are more ladders in the top half of the board, with virtues leading to spiritual rewards. Andrew Topsfield has observed the influence of Sufi doctrine on the board, and also points out that the ladders are much shorter than the snakes. ⁶⁵ This perhaps reflects something each of us knows intuitively: that there’s a stairway to heaven, but a highway to hell.

One of the Society’s most important South Asian collections is that of Brian Houghton Hodgson. Hodgson arrived in Calcutta in 1818 as an East India Company writer around the age of eighteen, serving in Nepal from 1820 until 1843, and as British Resident from 1833. Hodgson was a pioneer in the European study of Indian Buddhism and also had significant interests in natural history, linguistics, architecture, and the visual arts. All of these are reflected in the very substantial personal collections he developed over the course of his career. His collection was dispersed to a number of institutions in Great Britain and abroad, but a significant proportion of it is at the Royal Asiatic Society in London, including an extensive collection of Buddhist Sanskrit manuscripts, which he gifted in 1835 and 1836. The oldest manuscript in the Society’s possession is from the Hodgson Collection, *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, which dates from the twelfth or thirteenth century. First composed around the first century BC, this text is the earliest sutra of the Prajñāpāramitā, “the Perfection of (Transcendent) Wisdom”, of Mahāyāna Buddhism. This item is one of the few manuscripts in the Hodgson Collection composed on palm leaves, and it also boasts several colour illustrations.

In addition to his significance as a collector, Hodgson is known for his vocal opposition to the

⁶⁴ *Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 5, May-August 1831, 85

⁶⁵ Topsfield, “The Indian Game of Snakes and Ladders”, 209.

Indian educational policy of Sir Charles Trevelyan and Thomas Macaulay. Macaulay sought to use English-language instruction to create an elite class that was "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect",⁶⁶ and which he hoped would convey European learning to the rest of Indian society. Macaulay's Anglicizing approach and disdain for Indian culture was complemented by the utilitarian worldview articulated in James Mill's *The History of British India* (1817), which expressed an extremely negative, essentialist perspective on the qualities of the peoples of India (as well as other Asian countries). Thomas Trautmann has described this as "the single most important source of British Indophobia and hostility to Orientalism", constituting "an all-out attack" upon the legacy of the British Sanskritists and, especially, Sir William Jones.⁶⁷ Horace Hayman Wilson, who succeeded Colebrooke as RAS Director, contributed a preface to the 1858 edition of Mill's book, excoriating its presentation of India which "almost outrages humanity" and deploring its "evil" consequences for relations between the two countries.⁶⁸

The changing intellectual climate was reflected in the Society's own publications. The Society's *Transactions* had been an irregular series, published in three volumes between 1827 and 1835, and it was superseded by the *Journal*, which launched in 1834. This was distinguished from the *Transactions* by its greater regularity, but also by its scope, which placed a much greater emphasis on scientific, economic, and commercial topics: "the deductions of philosophy may be compared with the results of experience, and the theories of the speculative produce schemes of practical utility."⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the materials that were donated to the Society in its early years speak to an ongoing interest in the religious and moral systems of South Asia, in particular. Drawing on sources of Oriental learning continued to serve as a means to enrich British culture. Although this may have been a more minor trend in the Victorian era than it was in the previous century, it did not disappear completely, and remained an ever-present theme in British cultural life up to modern times.

How, then, to relate the Society's original mission to the context of British society today? And

66 "Lord Macaulay's Minute", in Lees, *Indian Muslims*, 102.

67 Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*, 117.

68 In Mill, *The History of British India*, Vol. 1, xii.

69 *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 1 (1834), iii–iv.

what is the relationship of the Society's collections to that mission? The Society remains dedicated to promoting research, scholarly exchange, and public interest in the history and cultures of Asia, and realizes this mission through public lectures and academic publishing, and by providing free public access to its historic collections. It looks for ways to make its collections available to the widest possible audience, for research, inspiration, and enjoyment, both to communities across the UK and indeed the wider world. This is why, in 2018, the Society launched an online Digital Library.⁷⁰ Digitization is particularly relevant to the Society, considering that most of its collections originate from Asia and are of direct interest to people across Asia and elsewhere, who may never visit to see them in person. Making its treasures available online, for free, is an important service which helps the Society reach a much wider audience. In 2019, a major collaboration with the Internet Archive saw four hundred palm leaf manuscripts digitized and made available online.⁷¹ And in addition to showcasing important exhibits of Asian cultures, the RAS Digital Library helps show how British people, over the centuries, have learned about and been inspired by Asia and the wider world.

Indeed, it remains as important as ever to highlight the legacy of those British people who have displayed a positive interest in Asian cultures. People in the past encountered each other not in the ways we might choose, but in ways shaped by history. From the late eighteenth century onwards, British people tended to learn more about India, and other parts of Asia, as their country expanded in military and economic influence. As well as understanding the myriad ways in which knowledge creation was often bound up with, and facilitated, British overseas interests, we must also acknowledge those times when our ancestors engaged with Asian cultures in more positive ways. Our shared history includes much more co-operation than it does conflict — even if the present culture of repudiation chooses to emphasise the latter — and an awareness of this must be integrated into whatever collective sense of British history our society can cohere around today. The present time is like the 1820s in that increasing the understanding of Asian cultures is a vital and pressing task. But we also owe it to past, present, and future generations to renew our understanding of why British culture has been so open to learning about the outside world.

In a famous essay, Sir Isaiah Berlin defined pluralism as the understanding that there are “a

⁷⁰ See <https://royalasiaticcollections.org/>.

⁷¹ See <https://archive.org/details/royalasiaticsociety>.

plurality of values which men can and do seek, and that these values differ". He distinguished this from moral monism, or the idea that only one set of values is valid or true; and he traced some of the beneficial aspects of pluralism, including the appetite for variety, to the early Romantic period. It seems to me that this new open-mindedness about the multiplicity of human values was reflected in the founding of the Asiatic Society, and embodied in its collections. But Berlin also distinguished pluralism from cultural relativism: "I do not say 'I like my coffee with milk and you like it without; I am in favor of kindness and you prefer concentration camps'".⁷² The controversies of eighteenth-century England support the claim that the liberal, secular values, which are a precondition for pluralism, are not merely negative; and they make active moral demands upon us. These, in turn, have an important relationship with the substrate values of our religious inheritance: freedom of conscience, the basic moral equality of humans, and the individual as a moral agent with responsibility for his or her own actions.⁷³ In the words of Edmund Burke:

Nothing is more certain, than that our manners, our civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners and with civilization, have, in this European world of ours, depended for ages upon two principles; and were indeed the result of both combined; I mean the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion.⁷⁴

⁷² Berlin, "My Intellectual Path", *New York Review of Books*, 14 May 1998.

⁷³ Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, 361.

⁷⁴ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 67.

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