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<b>Author</b>	Jason Emmett Collins
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## “I Will Throw All on the Altar”: Christianity, Hinduism, and “Human Rights” in *Jane Eyre*

Jason Emmett Collins  
University of Cambridge

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*Through an analysis of Charlotte Brontë’s novel Jane Eyre and her essay “Sacrifice of an Indian Widow”, this essay argues that Brontë positions Christianity as the necessary precursor for the development of secular human rights, and that in so doing she categorically excludes Hinduism from access to similar developmental possibilities. By ventriloquizing an Indian widow in Jane’s speaking voice, Brontë elides the difference of identity between them and posits Jane’s Christian emancipation as a putatively “universal” model for the emancipation of women. This sleight of hand strips the ventriloquized Indian widow of the religious and cultural particularity of her circumstances and precludes the possibility of enfranchisement within her own religious tradition. By tracing Brontë’s exclusion of Hinduism, this argument attempts to render visible the early influence of Christianity on the development of “human rights” discourse. In positing it, I hope to interrogate the Western tendency to treat “human rights” as a “universal” and therefore politically neutral discourse, ignoring the ways in which it has been conditioned by its emergence in a Western and Christian cultural context.*

Charlotte Brontë begins her 1842 essay ‘Sacrifice of an Indian Widow’ with a forceful description of India as ‘enslaved’. The narrative voice ponders, “What good are its diamonds or its gold, when it is in a state of submission to an arrogant and cruel hierarchy?” (“À quoi bon sont ses diamants et son or, tandis qu’elle est soumise au despotisme [sic] d’une Hiérarchie arrogante et cruelle?”; *my translation, The Belgian Essays* 3). The speaker goes on to explain that the occasion for this reflection is the putative witness of a *sati*. Notably, Brontë’s speaker is preoccupied with the fact that the widow’s participation in the ceremony is entirely voluntary: “The widow herself resisted all the efforts of those who wanted to save her life” (“La veuve elle-même résistait à toutes [sic] les instances de ceux qui voulaient lui sauver la vie”; *my translation, TBE* 3). The issue that Brontë presents here is not that the widow is being coerced into suicide by her patriarchal relatives—which would accord with the imperialist trope that Gayatri Spivak characterizes as “[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men” (Subaltern 50)—but rather that she freely chooses to be burned, despite the best efforts of “those who wanted to save her life”. Brontë’s emphasis on the widow’s unwavering

complicity in the ritual (TBE 5-7) reveals her conviction that Hinduism prevented women, in particular, from making decisions in their own rational self-interest. Crucially, as Brontë imagines it, the imposition of secular British legal authority has not been sufficient to break the “mind-forg’d manacles” (Blake 8) in which the widow is ensnared by virtue of her religious tradition: “Neither Lord Bentnick’s ordinance nor the efforts of the authorities were sufficient to stop the sacrifice” (“Ni l’ordonnance de Lord Bentnick, ni les efforts des autorités n’avaient suffi pour empêcher le sacrifice”; *my translation*, TBE 3). A force stronger than secular ordinances and ‘authorities’, it is implied, would be required to dissuade the widow from her self-destructive choice.

Several years after writing “Sacrifice of an Indian Widow”, Brontë takes up the subject of the rights of women in her own country and religious tradition with her debut novel, *Jane Eyre*. Staging the journey of an originally socially marginal woman to a position of greater power and enfranchisement, its ideological work is a fine example of what Joseph Slaughter designates as “mutually enabling fictions” of the “novel genre and liberal human rights discourse” (4). To the extent that Jane’s primary antagonists in this journey are clergymen, readers have often taken the novel as fundamentally critical of Christianity. Elizabeth Rigby was the first to assert, in 1848, that *Jane Eyre* was a “pre-eminently anti-Christian composition” (Critical Heritage 109). Countless others have followed suit. Whether they are praising or disparaging the novel, these critics agree that its subtext is fundamentally anti-Christian. In Alison Searle’s words, they understand the novel’s purpose to be the “substitut[ion] [of] faith in human love for a traditional Christian dependence upon God” (36).

In this essay I will interrogate this prevalent assumption. I argue that Brontë positions Christianity as the essential prerequisite for the formation of the morally autonomous “individual personality” which acts as an “instance of a universal human personality” that is the basis for the discourse of human rights (Slaughter 20). In so doing the text not only constructs an essential relationship between Christianity and human rights, but also structurally excludes the possibility of arriving at this model through any other religious tradition, most notably Hinduism. Throughout the novel the emergence of this privileged status for Christianity is inextricable from its contrast with Hinduism, and its exclusion of Hinduism from the category of a belief system that may enable the development of a sense of human dignity. Beginning with an analysis of the key moment through which Brontë forms Hinduism’s exclusion from human rights discourse in relation to Christianity, I will then move on to an analysis of the genealogical relationship that she posits between Christianity and human rights,

which prohibits Hinduism from following a similar trajectory. Finally, I will conclude with reflections on the implications of this exclusion and suggest directions for further research.

While the majority of the novel is naturally preoccupied with the trajectory of Jane's relationship with Rochester, perhaps the greatest difficulty that she faces is not his proposal of bigamous marriage, but her cousin St John Rivers' invitation to join him as a missionary in India. Throughout St. John's attempts to persuade Jane to accompany him as a missionary, as Deirdre David and Jenny Sharpe have both identified, the proposition at hand is persistently characterized with figurative reference to the *sati*, in which Jane is positioned as the widow to be burned to death in sacrificial submission to St. John (David 87, Sharpe 53). Importantly, Brontë uses the first-person narrative form to represent the process of Jane's own contemplation of turning herself into a figurative *sati* rather than leaving it to third-person speculation. Jane's reflection on the subject is narrated in quotation marks to reproduce, in the present tense, the experience of her thoughts as the adult Jane tells us they occurred in the moment. Her thinking reveals genuine consideration of St. John's offer, even as she recognizes that it means accepting her own premature death. Jane's reflection "is not the occupation he now offers me truly the most glorious man can adopt or God assign?" reveals the merit that she perceives in the option in spite of her reluctance to accept it. She also thinks to herself, "If I do go with him—if I do make the sacrifice he urges, I will make it absolutely: I will throw all on the altar—heart, vitals, the entire victim" (466). In this extraordinary quotation, we hear Jane—the same woman who at a different point defiantly shouts at Rochester that she will speak to him "as if [they] stood at God's feet, equal—as [they] are!" (252)—speaking in her own voice as she seriously considers offering herself up for a figurative sacrificial death through dismemberment. With this sleight of hand, Brontë makes her critique of the *sati* personal, highlighting its terror through the affective first-person voice of one who is contemplating submission to it.

In this deployment of what Andrew Miller calls the novelistic "display of deliberation" (92), Brontë uses Jane's narrative subjectivity to reprise the third-person condemnation of *sati* that she stages in her earlier essay "Sacrifice of an Indian Widow." Whereas in the essay she takes on the third-person perspective of an observer, in *Jane Eyre* she uses her protagonist's voice to enter into first-person representation of what she imagines to be the dilemmas of a woman contemplating such self-sacrifice. In other words, Brontë ventriloquizes the subject position of the Indian widow. In so doing, she briefly grants the widow a narrating subjectivity, but does so by yoking it in a fundamental capacity to Jane's own narrating subjectivity. This

strategy elides the difference between them and asserts a fundamental equivalence of identity between Jane and the widow through their shared womanhood and their shared experience of coercion into death. Jenny Sharpe has argued that “[t]he autobiographical form” itself “encodes [the widow’s] silence” as “the speaking subject” of *Jane Eyre* takes shape in categorical contradistinction to her (33). This reading, while compelling, does not attend to the fact that Brontë accomplishes her criticism of *sati* in the novel by incarnating the dilemmas of the widow directly in the first-person speaking voice of her own protagonist. Causing the Indian widow to speak in Jane’s voice does not precisely “silence” this subject position, but rather conflates it with that of a European, Christian woman. In this way, it posits the adaptation of Jane’s own cultural position as the single solution to the problems that both discrete female subject positions face, in turn effacing the possibility of addressing the *sati* from a Hindu perspective.

In calling attention to this discrepancy, I echo Gayatri Spivak’s disclaimer that “[o]bviously I am not advocating the killing of widows” (Subaltern 55), but it is nevertheless significant that the novel’s configuration precludes the possibility of the eradication of such a practice in Hinduism’s own religious terms. While Brontë is clearly cognizant of the possibilities of patriarchal abuse within Christianity, as I will demonstrate below, Jane still asserts her moral autonomy with its own hermeneutic tools and discourse, admitting the desirability of reform while maintaining a sense of its underlying value. Hinduism, by contrast, remains merely a form of ‘prejudice’, that must be ‘clear[ed]’ away (*JE* 521) and replaced with Christianity for meaningful moral autonomy to emerge.

At other points in the text where her character is formed in response to threats and coercion, Jane almost always resolves the situation with recourse to her personal capacity to discern the authority of God within an explicitly Christian discourse. It is against this background that the novel’s unfavorable representation of Hinduism emerges, and the means through which it is ultimately excluded from the possibility of the novel’s development of a proto-discourse of secular human rights.

In the novel’s earliest chapters, it is Jane’s education in Christianity that enables the development of a capacity for clear testimonial self-narration that is consubstantial with her formation into a rights-bearing citizen. Before she undergoes this transformation, Jane herself exists outside the pale of figures entitled to rights-bearing citizenship by virtue of their moral autonomy. Jenny Sharpe demonstrates this point in her analysis of Brontë’s use of “[t]he figure of the rebel slave” (42) to figuratively structure the state of unconscious rebellion in which Jane

lives as a mistreated child. Because this figure in Brontë's usage "lacks the cognition on which moral agency is based" (42), Jane must acquire this capacity for "moral agency" before she can become an intelligible, rights-bearing subject.

A figure whose influence has been interestingly overlooked in Jane's formation into a mature rights-bearing woman is the devout Helen Burns. Whilst Lamonaca notes her formative influence on Jane as a Christian, I contend that this Christian influence is often marked as separate from Jane's development into an assertive rights-bearing individual in earthly terms. Parama Roy, for example, argues that Helen's "self-mortifying" Christianity makes her effectively nothing more than an "apologist for Brocklehurst and for the status quo" (715); Jan-Melissa Schramm draws a categorical distinction between Helen, "the practitioner of saintly, supererogatory virtues", and Jane, who "seeks earthly justification and welcomes the opportunity to 'prove' her integrity" (175). I am not disputing that there is a definitive difference in character between Helen, the passive child-martyr, and Jane, the class-transgressing woman of the world. Instead, I propose that Helen's Christianity is more than what Jan-Melissa Schramm calls a "valid alterative templat[e] of the *imitatio Christi*" (178). Rather than simply positioning Helen as the symbol for a form of Christian life that Jane admires but chooses not to pursue, Brontë instead suggests that without Helen's formative Christian education, Jane would never have gained her capacity to securely attribute epistemological authority to her own subjectivity, and her correlative capacity for self-narration as a form of self-determination.

The most straightforward way in which Helen imparts moral autonomy to Jane is through her use of Christian scripture to teach Jane to keep her outbursts of anger in check. As Sharpe points out, "[e]ven though her childish explosions of anger are liberating, in retrospect, the adult Jane comments on these instances as improper conduct for a child...Unchecked rebellion is particularly identified as the savage response of uncivilized nations" (42). Notably, it is Helen's intervention specifically that teaches Jane to hold this distinction between "unchecked rebellion" and "civilisation": "Heathens and savage tribes hold that doctrine [of retribution]; but Christians and civilised nations disown it...Read the New Testament, and observe what Christ says, and how He acts; make His words your rule, and His conduct your example" (*JE* 69). By specifying the New Testament as the text Jane should read to understand both Christianity and so-called "civilisation", Helen equates the two, suggesting that Jane cannot be a citizen of a "civilised nation" until she learns to follow the example of Christ.

More importantly, however, it is Helen's Christianity that teaches Jane to recognise the epistemological authority and indeed God-given nature of her subjectivity as such. After Brocklehurst denounces her as a liar before the entirety of Lowood, Jane is convinced that everyone believes him, and feels that her identity has been obliterated. She thinks, "Now I lay again crushed and trodden on; and could I ever rise more? 'Never,' I thought; and ardently I wished to die" (*JE* 81). Fervently, she tells Helen: "Look here; to gain some real affection from you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest" (82). Both of these passages make it clear that Jane locates the existence of her identity outside of her own mind and body. She devalues her bodily integrity in relation to the good opinions of others, and equates the perception of being without such reassurance as a state of total despair equivalent to annihilation. In other words, she attributes no epistemological authority to her own subjectivity as a means of accessing the real. It does not matter that she herself knows that Brocklehurst's accusation emerges from Mrs. Reed's false "misreading" of her as a liar—she perceives this mistaken narrative as entirely overwriting her own, and thus depriving her of any significant social or embodied existence.

Hearing this outpouring of despair, Helen responds, "Hush, Jane! you think too much of the love of human beings...the sovereign Hand that created your frame, and put life into it, has provided you with other resources than your feeble self, or than creatures feeble as you...angels see our tortures, [and] recognise our innocence" (82-83). If Helen here seems to displace Jane's obsession with earthly matters onto "God's love in the next world" (Lamonaca 253), it is important to note that she also places emphasis on Jane's embodied connection with the Divine and the particular capacities, or "resources", that it provides her with while still in the earthly realm. She not only reassures Jane that there are beings—God's angels—who see her for who she is, but also that it is through her particular embodied form, or divinely "created...frame", through which she can know and understand these beings and their authority. Helen's characterization of Jane as a conduit for divinely received "resources" reflects what Stephen Prickett has called a "*distinctively* Christian...sense of self as a philosophical and moral foundation" (original emphasis), in which religious "legalism" is eschewed in favor of "a process of self-examination in the light of the scriptures" (236). By encouraging Jane to ignore Brocklehurst—a clergyman—and trust instead that God and his angels concur with her own understanding of herself, Helen encourages Jane to invest trust in her own subjectivity as an authoritative source of insight into God's judgment.

The significance of both forms of Christian education for Jane's formation into an intelligible citizen becomes clear in the juxtaposition between her first recounting of Mrs. Reed's tyranny and her later testimony of her innocence against Brocklehurst's accusations. When Helen invites Jane to describe Mrs. Reed's abuse, Jane says: 'I proceeded forthwith to pour out, in my own way, the tale of my sufferings and resentments... Bitter and truculent when excited, I spoke as I felt, without reserve or softening' (*JE* 69). In her anger and desperation for Helen's confirmation of her perspective, Jane undercuts the credibility of her own narrative: Helen's response to the story makes it clear that she has observed the 'bittner[ness] and trucul[ence]' of Jane's manner of speaking more than she has noticed Mrs. Reed's cruelty (69). Later, however, in the 'courtroom' scene with Miss Temple, Jane has learned to be circumspect, and as such her testimony against Brocklehurst is more effective:

Exhausted by emotion, my language was more subdued than it generally was when it developed that sad theme; and *mindful of Helen's warnings against the indulgence of resentment*, I infused into the narrative far less gall and wormwood than ordinary. *Thus restrained and simplified, it sounded more credible*: I felt as I went on that Miss Temple fully believed me' (84, emphasis mine).

This scene marks the dawn of Jane's capacity to effectively render her subjective experience into a compelling narrative. Having learned through an education in the Gospels to be "mindful of...the indulgence of resentment", and to trust her own authority enough to speak without anxiety in a "restrained and simplified" manner, she can "[conform] to the evidentiary standards of the courtroom", and in so doing "enfranchise herself within the public sphere" (Schramm 176). For this reason, Jane's education in Christianity under Helen's influence is the key factor in the development of her ability to tell her own story and, in what amounts to an identical proposition, to subsist as a rights-bearing citizen of the "civilisation" of which her boarding school is a microcosm. Ultimately, then, Jane's capacity to effectively assert an autobiographical existence for herself, which we experience in the act of reading the mature Jane's testimony in the form of the novel itself, has an essential genealogical relationship with Christianity. Jane's narrative assertion of her earthly "human rights" does not happen in spite of, but is rather enabled by, the meekly divine Helen's Christian education.

It is clear, then, that Brontë constructs Jane's education in Christianity as a factor that enables, rather than complicates, her self-assertion as a worldly, rights-bearing individual. To the extent that Brontë draws Hinduism as well as Christianity into her mapping of the



relationship between religion and morally autonomous individuality, she posits this Christian hermeneutic as a universal model through which women may acquire morally autonomous personhood. Effacing the distinction between the testimonial subjectivities of Jane and the Indian widow in this process obscures the cultural and religious particularity of the widow's subject position and encodes Christianity as the sole possible precursor for the development of such a capacity. While Christian discernment becomes the model of emancipation for a putatively "universal" womanhood, Hinduism remains intelligible only as a form of credal "prejudice", to be "hew[n] down" through St John's missionary work (JE 521). In this way the novel goes beyond defining self-determination as a "religious...good" (Schramm 168) and posits Christianity as a key genealogical component in the evolution of worldly human moral autonomy and its constellation of political correlatives. By the same token, in excluding Hinduism from the possibility of forming the genealogical basis for a discourse of secular human rights, Brontë's novel reduces its multidimensionality. To the extent that she posits Christianity as the only solution to a practice that she has identified as violent and abusive, Brontë ignores Hinduism's potential emancipatory potentialities, such as what Vina Mazumdar has identified as the "multidimensional, all-powerful female deities" from which there is a rich tradition of Hindu women "draw[ing] their strength to endure and overcome whatever life had in store for them" (272).

This privileging of Christianity to the categorical exclusion of Hinduism as a genealogical origin for the discourse of secular human rights challenges a tendency in the historiography of human rights as a concept to assume an inherent tension with Christianity, especially in the earliest days of its development as a concept. Even work that attempts to qualify this idea has maintained its structuring tenets. Samuel Moyn, for example, has argued for the centrality of Christian thought to the formation of twentieth-century human rights discourse, but maintains that this was a latter-day "reorientation", before which "'human rights' had always been identified with the French Revolution and its promise of secular emancipation" (Moyn 11, 20). However, the presence of such a clear understanding of a genealogical relationship between Christianity and secular human rights in a novel published so long before the beginning of the era that Moyn hypothesizes opens up interesting avenues for further speculation and possible revision of the general perception of a necessary historical tension between Christianity and human rights. Further work in this vein may, for example, provide discursive insight into the phenomenon that Talal Asad identifies: "[h]uman rights are often declared to be a 'universal ideal' in opposition to 'cultural relativism'", which tends to render transparent the aspects of

human rights discourse that are themselves conditioned by their cultural origins in the Western world (Asad 148). Reconsideration of the formative influence of Christianity in the genesis of human rights may provide a more precise account of the conditions of its emergence, and in so doing provide insight into the particular ways in which it continues to shape global politics today.

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