

# Jyotirmaya Sharma A Restatement of Religion

Swami Vivekananda and the  
Making of Hindu Nationalism



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# A RESTATEMENT OF RELIGION

*Swami Vivekananda and the  
Making of Hindu Nationalism*

JYOTIRMAYA SHARMA

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For  
Meenakshi Mukherjee  
Papiya Ghosh  
Sabina Sehgal Saikia

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## Preface



The date is 21 February 1887. After the morning prayers, the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna are eating fruit and sweets for breakfast. Ramakrishna had died in August of the previous year. A monastic order in his name has been established and many of his disciples have renounced the world and assumed monastic names. On this February morning, Narendra, the future Swami Vivekananda, begins to playfully imitate Ramakrishna.<sup>1</sup> Putting a sweet in his mouth, with unblinking eyes, he stands still, enacting the state of going into *samadhi* or trance. A devotee pretends to hold his hand to prevent

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1. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, Translated into English with an Introduction by Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 2007 imprint, p. 979. This is a translation of Mahendranath Gupta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathāmrita*, originally published between 1897 and 1932 in five volumes in Bengali. Henceforth, all references to the English translation will be cited as *Gospel*.

him from falling down. Narendra closes his eyes for a few minutes. With the sweet still in his mouth, he then opens his eyes, and mimicking Ramakrishna's drawl says: 'I – am – all – right.'<sup>2</sup> Everyone present laughs loudly. Even during Ramakrishna's lifetime, Narendra always thought of his Master's trances as hallucinations, a figment of Ramakrishna's imagination.

Vivekananda's rejection of Ramakrishna's trances as hallucinations or a figment of his imagination is extremely significant. It marks a rupture that signifies two incompatible worlds, where the definitions of sanity and insanity are strikingly different. Ramakrishna's hallucinations are perfectly intelligible within the boundaries of Indian mysticism and would even be considered sane and normal.<sup>3</sup> Taking on feminine roles, enacting the part of Hanuman by tying a tail behind him, undergoing tantric spiritual practices, talking of ecstasy, longing, laughing, weeping, singing and dancing – all of these were part of Ramakrishna's mystical paths to attaining God. In a Tantra- and Bhakti-mediated universe, he could with effortless ease identify himself

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2. Ibid., p. 979.

3. G.N. Devy, 'Silence, Insanity and Language', in *The G.N. Devy Reader*, Orient BlackSwan, Hyderabad, 2009, p. 17; for a detailed discussion on this point within the Vaishnava bhakti tradition, see Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1983, p. 6.

with ‘the nature of a woman’ while likening Narendra’s temperament as ‘manly’.<sup>4</sup> Kali, who Ramakrishna loved and worshipped as mother, could be called a Santhal woman and a valiant fighter by Dr Mahendra Sarkar, and the remark would merely invoke laughter from Ramakrishna. After all, he was inspired by Ramprasad Sen, the eighteenth-century mystic-poet and tantrik, who, in his poems, had the temerity to address Kali as ‘crazy Kali’ and say to her: ‘Prasād says: find a half-wit/ And fool him if You want,/ But if You don’t save me/ I’m going to get Shiva to spank you.’<sup>5</sup> For Ramakrishna, nationalism was maya and love of all countries and people and religions was daya or compassion, born only out of love of God.<sup>6</sup> Even renunciation was not just dispassion for the world but also longing for God.<sup>7</sup>

After Ramakrishna’s death in 1886, Vivekananda shifted the devotional emphasis of the newly founded monastic order to the worship of the more masculine Shiva, and, quietly but decisively, exiled Kali into obscurity and insignificance. Ramakrishna’s devotees began to identify themselves as the dānās and daityas (ghosts and demons) of Shiva and began to regularly

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4. *Gospel*, p. 693.

5. Rāmprasād Sen, *Grace and Mercy in Her Wild Hair: Selected Poems to the Mother Goddess*, translated by Leonard Nathan and Clinton Seely, Hohm Press, Prescott, 1999, p. 24.

6. *Gospel*, p. 456.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 506.

read and recite the Bhagavadgita. In his quest to create a European society with India's religion,<sup>8</sup> the world Vivekananda embraced was rational, scientific, masculine, 'sane', 'normal', orthodox and nationalistic. Ramakrishna's longing ecstasy for God and his simulation of Radha's love for Krishna would be dismissed by him as the weeping and moaning excesses of the 'women friends' of the Lord.<sup>9</sup> Instead, he would recommend beef, biceps and the Bhagavadgita as the way out for what he perceived were India's problems. Vivekananda's 'scientific' Ramakrishna would have to share space not with Chaitanya and Ramprasad, but with Kant, Schopenhauer, Paul Deussen and Max Müller. In Vivekananda's hands, Ramakrishna's 'catholicity' became a mere instrumental ploy to exhibit Hinduism's superiority. His frequent rejection of any relation Hinduism might have to external forms such as temples is also a rhetorical device that could be conveniently reversed to serve the purposes of religious nationalism. Rejection of temples, bhakti and the idea of worship of

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8. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 4, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1932, p. 313 (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* will henceforth be referred to as CW).

9. *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*, translated from Bangla as *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master* by Swami Jagadananda. See, Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, Volume II, translated by Swami Jagadananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 2001 imprint, pp. 1241-2.

a Personal God had its own place, but the same rejection pragmatically turns into affirmation when rejoicing over the Hindu reappropriation of the Jagannath Temple in Puri, which he calls an old Buddhist temple. He goes a step further and lays forth the Hindu agenda: 'We took this and others over and re-Hinduised them. We shall have to do many things like that yet.'<sup>10</sup> His much-extolled idea of service too suffers from the flaw of proposing empathy without even a cosmetic pretence of altering either the orthodox social structure or the stranglehold of caste in society.

This book is the story of this rupture, of two worlds with a shared beginning which become increasingly incommensurable. It is also about the questions of Hindu identity seen through the prism of Hindu self-images. As part of what began as a trilogy and is now a quartet,<sup>11</sup> this volume affirms its objective of being more sceptical about our own tradition, questioning self-assumed identities and interrogating the voice and authority of traditionally privileged individuals, icons and texts. Following this objective, this volume looks

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10. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 3, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1932, p. 264.

11 The first two are *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2011, revised edition; *Terrifying Vision: M.S. Golwalkar, the RSS and India*, Penguin/Viking, February 2007. This volume is the third. The fourth will be an examination of Gandhi's restatement of Hinduism.

at the most definitive and influential restatement of Hinduism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by Vivekananda. Specifically, it examines his formulation of Hinduism as religion. In doing so, these essays critically examine the way Hindu self-images were sought to be created and justified as also the manner in which a Vedic-Vedantic primacy was sought to be privileged. Questions of caste, the primacy of the West in Vivekananda's vision for Hinduism and for India, and the systematic marginalization of other religions and heterodox religious thought in his formulation of 'India's religion' are central to understanding this restatement.<sup>12</sup> If Vivekananda's creation of Hinduism as India's religion is definitive, it also enforces the argument that forms the basis for this quartet: There is no distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva. If anything, Hindutva is the dominant expression of Hinduism in our times, though not the only way in which Hinduism articulates itself. Vivekananda's forceful and substantial articulation of

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12. D.R. Nagaraj formulated a dimension of Vivekananda's thought in his inimitable fashion by calling it 'the notion of cosmic love but with it a perfected system of apathy'. The title of this book is inspired out of this formulation. I do not agree with several parts of Nagaraj's substantive argument regarding Vivekananda, but have nevertheless learned much from his essay. D.R. Nagaraj, *Listening to the Loom: Essays on Literature, Politics and Violence*, edited and with an introduction by Prithvi Datta and Chandra Shobhi, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2012, p. 320.

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Hinduism as religion also makes him the father and preceptor of Hindutva. As an attempt to fabricate a longer and deeper genealogy of Hindu identity and its contemporary manifestation in the form of Hindutva, this volume rejects the claim that Hindu nationalists have appropriated Vivekananda's ideas to push their dark and diabolical political agenda. To paraphrase Vivekananda himself, the possibilities of a future tree are in the seed itself. The seed is what we today know by the composite term 'Hinduism' and Vivekananda's thought is just the tree at a certain stage of its growth.

If a critical study of Swami Vivekananda is written or read merely as a reason to intervene in the politics of Hindu nationalism, it is bound to have a very short breath. While correcting well-entrenched Hindu self-images is an important purpose of this book, challenging and questioning the atrophy of ideas connected with questions of Hindu identity is also an equally pre-eminent task. It is also reasonable to expect that the mystique and undeniable piety surrounding the figure of Vivekananda would always remain incommensurable, if not hostile, to any critical evaluation and reflection surrounding his ideas. Put differently, there is a tension between an entrenched nationalism that seeks to selectively deify individuals and the demands that an empirically rigorous and analytically unconventional interpretation makes. The only way to forge a dialogue between these two seemingly antagonistic positions



is to delineate themes, concepts and categories that require further interrogation. A few examples and their implications would suffice to illustrate this point.

One such critical theme is that of the use of concepts such as *artha*, *dharma*, *kama* and *moksha*, together known as the *purusharthas*. As we will see in Chapter 2, Vivekananda disapproves of the Hindu preoccupation with *moksha* and privileges the West's quest after *dharma*. He interprets the Western pursuit of *dharma* as akin to the Mimāmsa system's use of the term to mean a hankering after worldly happiness. It has an even narrower connotation than anything suggested by the authoritative commentaries in the Mimāmsaka tradition: in Vivekananda's gloss, *dharma* is the singular pursuit of work leading to worldly happiness. It would be reasonable to suggest that *artha* in this instance has been conflated with *dharma* or subsumed under the role *dharma* ought to perform as per Vivekananda's understanding of the Mimāmsaka scheme of things. In doing so, there is little attention paid to the overall coherence of a philosophical system and its nuances. The subtle differences within a system of philosophy, in this instance the Mimāmsa system, are arbitrarily brushed aside. Ultimately, the attempt here is to construct a largely political and nationalist argument with the help of a philosophical concept masquerading as a quasi-religious argument. This raises questions about the way in which Vivekananda would have to reconcile

a Mimāṃsa-inspired notion of dharma, including the implications of such a borrowing on the meaning of the other three purusharthas, with his chosen brand of Advaita Vedānta. It further leads to the speculation if his unique brand of Practical Vedānta was born out of the compulsions of such a confusion of categories and concepts.

A similar exercise in the understanding of qualities or *gunas* such as *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* is necessary. Ramakrishna uses *tamas* in ways that suggest a conflation of qualities normally associated with *rajas*. In contrast, Vivekananda glorifies the *rajasic* element disproportionately while simultaneously diminishing the importance of *sattva*. While the pre-eminence of *rajas* tallies with his project of making Hindus more manly, the re-evaluation and reinterpretation of these seem random, discontinuous with philosophical traditions and lacking methodological justification. This arbitrary use of concepts and categories can be defended by arguing that Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were not systematic philosophers. In the case of Ramakrishna, it is possible to justify such randomness by taking into account his status as a mystic. However, the only way to rationalize Vivekananda's idiosyncratic use of concepts and categories is to view such an act as necessary to the compulsions of religious nationalism. Despite such disclaimers, it is important to understand the implications of these reinterpretations.

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Firstly, the arbitrary use of concepts was entirely instrumental in nature and entailed no serious attempt at creating a heterodox system. In fact, creating a patchwork quilt of concepts only helped strengthen orthodoxy and reinstate an imagined Golden Age. Secondly, the incoherence built into an arbitrary reading of philosophical concepts led to an equally random selection of myths for proving a point and discarding them with alacrity if they failed to be in consonance with the dharmashastric tradition and its well-entrenched injunctions against myths in general and puranic myths in particular. Thirdly, philosophical schools and systems could be condemned as inferior or privileged as perfect without any systematic engagement with their arguments. Finally, an incoherence and arbitrariness in reading of concepts also affected the reading of texts. Devoid of context and historicity, texts could be read for fulfilling narrow political purposes<sup>13</sup> rather than for providing a fresh interpretation or for an imaginative leap into a new constellation of meanings.

Therefore, despite a conceptual continuity, the focus of the questions and the treatment of the theme in this volume do not overlap with an earlier essay

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13. See Sanjay Palshikar's forthcoming volume on the nationalist readings of the Bhagavadgita. Sanjay Palshikar, *Bhagavadgita, Evil and the Practice of Finitude*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2013 (forthcoming).

on Vivekananda.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the popularly known speech by Vivekananda at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 in Chicago has been left out and so has the Kshir Bhavani episode. Nor is the intention here to enter into a discussion on already existing Vivekananda scholarship, especially on the question of Practical Vedanta. Paul Hacker's criticism of Vivekananda's formulation of Practical Vedanta continues to be debated to this day, with invaluable contributions from Wilhelm Halbfass, Andrew O. Fort, Stuart Elkman, Glyn Richards, Jeffrey J. Kripal, Loriliai Biernacki, Vrinda Dalmiya and Andrew J. Nicholson, to mention only a few.<sup>15</sup> There

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14. Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2011, Second edition, pp. 73-126.

15. *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta*, edited by Wilhelm Halbfass, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1995; Wilhelm Halbfass, 'Practical Vedānta', in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, edited by Vasudha Dalmia, H Von Stietencron, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 211-23; Wilhelm Halbfass, 'Research and Reflection: Responses to my Respondents', in *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, Edited by Eli Franco, Karin Preesendanz, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2007, pp. 587-94; Andrew O. Fort, 'Jivanmukti and Social Service in Advaita and Neo-Vedanta', in *Beyond Orientalism*, op.cit., pp. 489-504; Stuart Elkman, 'Religious Plurality and Swami Vivekananda', in *Beyond Orientalism*, op.cit., pp. 505-11; Glyn Richards, 'Vivekananda and Essentialism', in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernisation of Hinduism*, edited by

is much to learn from each of these interventions, as there are points of agreement and disagreement with each of these interpretations. Apart from these texts, the works of David Shulman, Don Handelman, Sarah Caldwell, Vasudha Narayanan, John Stratton Hawley, and Nathaniel Roberts have been indispensable for a better understanding of questions regarding Hindu self-images and Hindu identity.<sup>16</sup> Several controversies

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- William Radice, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 213-23; Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kālī's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995; Jeffrey J. Kripal, 'Why the Tāntrika is a Hero: Kālī in the Psychoanalytic Tradition', in *Encountering Kālī: In the Margins, at the Centre, in the West*, edited by Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003, pp.196-222; Loriliai Biernacki, 'Towards a Tantric Nondualist Ethics through Abhinavagupta's Notion of Rasa', *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, 2011; 4: 258-73; Vrinda Dalmiya, 'The metaphysics of Ethical Love: Comparing Vedanta and Feminist Ethics', *SOPHIA* (2009) 48: 221-35; Andrew J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010.
16. David Shulman, *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2012; Don Handelman, 'The Guises of the Goddess and the Transformation of the Male: Gangamma's Visit to Tirupati, and the Continuum of Gender', in *Syllables of Sky: Studies in South Indian Civilization In Honour of Velcheru Narayana Rao*, edited by David Shulman, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, pp. 283-337; Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kālī*, Oxford

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pertaining to translation of texts from Bangla, especially those generated after the publication of Jeffrey J. Kripal's book, have also been left aside. Texts in Bangla crucial to the substantive argument have been closely studied. For the purposes of interpretation, the texts considered 'official' are good enough for building an argument. It does not matter, then, if Dr Mahendra Sarkar's calling Kali 'that santhal bitch' is either edited out of Swami Nikhilananda's translation or sanitized as 'that santhal hag'. Rather, reinstating Kali in a tantra- and bhakti-inspired tradition, inspired by the likes of Ramprasad Sen and Sri Ramakrishna is more significant, if only to delineate the manner in which Vivekananda sought to restate Hinduism as religion.



In writing this book, many invaluable debts were incurred. The University of Hyderabad, and the then vice-chancellor of the university, Professor S.E. Hasnain,

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University Press, New Delhi, 1999; Vasudha Narayanan, 'Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, December 2000, Vol. 68, No. 4, pp. 761-79; John Stratton Hawley, 'Who Speaks for Hinduism – and Who Against? *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, December 2000, Vol. 68, No. 4, pp. 711-20; Nathaniel Roberts, 'Meanings of Monotheism: Ethnographic evidence and the intolerance thesis', Draft paper made available by the kind permission of the author.

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granted me leave for a year and a half in order to take up various fellowships that were offered to me. I am very grateful for the university's decision to support my time away for research, a distinguishing mark of any good university. The current vice-chancellor, Professor Ramakrishna Ramaswamy, has been equally encouraging and supportive. I also thank all my colleagues in the Department of Political Science for supporting my absence away from teaching. I thank Professor I. Ramabrahmam, who as the then head of the department was very supportive. His successor, Professor Arun Patnaik, has been equally enthusiastic and encouraging.

This book was written during the Spring Semester I spent at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (SCAS) in Uppsala. I thank Björn Wittrock, the principal of the Collegium, for this opportunity. Apart from his personal generosity, warmth and support, I am indebted to him for having invited me to an incomparable institution and for creating an almost perfect ambience for research and meaningful conversations. Though the home page of the SCAS carries a quote that calls it a 'scholar's utopia', one has to live there to realize that it far exceeds the epithet in being a warm, welcoming and ideal place for reading, writing, discussions and reflecting. The staff at the SCAS makes sure that the utopia is translated into reality every single day and no extent of formal expression of gratitude is enough to

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pay back their various kindnesses. To Anna Svensson, Bjarne Graff, Kristina Lundgren, Maria Odengrund, Pia Hultgren, Linn Östman, Sandra Rekanovic, Ulrika Johansson and Martin Grentzelius – thank you for your magnificent generosity and all your help.

Professor Barbro Klien guided, encouraged and cheered me in ways only she can. I owe her an immense debt of gratitude for making my stay at SCAS memorable and fruitful. In Anders Hillborg, the composer-in-residence at SCAS, I found a warm and generous friend. Professor Mats Lundahl was equally generous with conversation, coffee and friendship. Professor Bernard Wasserstein was lavish with his inimitable banter, humour and deep wisdom. Dr Jyrki Ruohomäki, Dr Felicity Green and Dr Sanna Nyqvist were always a reassuring and warm presence. Professor Philippe Steiner brought great vivacity, intellectual energy and cheer for a month and his stay, though short, was memorable.

Professor Ali Ahmed made my stay at SCAS memorable for more reasons than I can recount. He not only strengthened my belief in the possibility of genuine friendship, but also laughed at all my jokes and shared my passion for Urdu poetry. His magnanimity, his large-heartedness and his lavish generosity will be difficult for me to repay. Neither do I have sufficiently appropriate words to express my gratitude. All I can say is that I am fortunate to have found a friend like Ali and hope that



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I will have the opportunity of thanking him over the years to come.

I thank Professor Michael Puett for reading several of the chapters in this book and for his critical comments. I thank Professor Probal Dasgupta, Dr Anindita Mukhopadhyay, Dr Debjani Bhattacharyya and Mrs Chandana Chakraborti for helping me with translations of Bangla texts.

The theme of this book formed the basis of many of the elective courses I taught at the University of Hyderabad from 2007 to 2011. I thank all my students for their intellectual curiosity and their comments and suggestions.

During my time away from Hyderabad, Dr K.T. Mahi ensured that all my small worries were his and made sure that I remained unaffected by them. To him and his friendship I owe a deep debt of gratitude. Jasmine and Anoop Rao cheered and encouraged long-distance and it meant a lot to me. Ravita and Satyajai Mayor kept me connected to 'home' and updated me with all the news and gossip, for which I am very thankful.

A special word for Barbara de Saran. She helped in more ways than I can list. As long as I could turn to 'Barbie Auntie', I was assured that all was well with the world and that every issue would have a solution and would be sorted to everyone's satisfaction. A big 'thank you' for your help, support, but most of all, your friendship.

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V.K. Karthika at HarperCollins proved once again that a book is ultimately a 'pact' between the publisher, the writer and the writer's friends. Her unstinting support, enthusiasm and faith in the book were gratifying and the source of immense encouragement. I owe her more than she may realize. I thank Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri for painstakingly editing the book and saving me from many errors and infelicities. Aditya Pratap Deo generously agreed to allow me the use of his photograph of a Kolkata street for the cover of the HarperCollins edition, for which I owe him great gratitude. Bipul Guha designed the cover, continuing an association and friendship that began fifteen years ago. I thank him for his magnificent kindness. I thank Shuka Jain for the overall cover design for the Indian edition and her painstaking attention to all design details.

Neelini Sarkar was instrumental in ensuring that the book reaches a bigger and wider audience for which I sincerely thank her. Jennifer Banks, senior editor at Yale University Press, showed tremendous enthusiasm for the book. The Yale University Press edition is a tribute to her faith in the worth of the book. I owe her a very genuine debt of gratitude for making this possible.

For me, any attempt to thank Professor Shalini Randeria will always remain incomplete and inadequate. Her support, encouragement, advice and generosity have been incomparable. I owe her innumerable debts that I could only falteringly and clumsily attempt to

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repay; these defy ordinary expressions of gratitude available to us. All I can say is that I will keep trying by working hard and writing better, which would perhaps be the best way to thank her.

This book is dedicated to three remarkable women and three irreplaceable friends. The deaths of all the three were unnecessary, premature, and in the case of two of them, cruel. All three taught me a great deal, gave their affection generously, and demonstrated the finest instances of true friendship in the time I knew them. This book, then, is for Meenakshi Mukherjee, Papiya Ghosh and Sabina Sehgal Saikia.

*A Restatement of Religion*

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# Ramakrishna's One-Fourth



In 1901, Swami Vivekananda narrates a very significant story about himself and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. The conversation, recorded in the diary<sup>1</sup> of his disciple, Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, takes place in Belur Math a year before Vivekananda's death. The disciple asks after Vivekananda's health, who, despite various illnesses, had been travelling extensively. Vivekananda tells the disciple that his body might last for a few days more but he was determined to work till the end and die in harness. 'It is She who takes me here and there and makes me work without letting me remain quiet or allowing me to look to my personal comforts,'<sup>2</sup> says the Swami. The 'She' alluded to here is Goddess Kali. He further reveals

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1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.7, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Fourteenth impression, 2002, pp. 206-7 (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* will henceforth be referred to as CW).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

that a few days before Ramakrishna's death, 'She whom he [Ramakrishna] used to call "Kali" [the Goddess Kali] entered this [Vivekananda's] body,'<sup>3</sup> and it was She who made him work relentlessly. Was this metaphorical, asks the disciple. No, replies Vivekananda and begins to tell the story of Ramakrishna and himself a few days before Ramakrishna left his body. Ramakrishna summoned Vivekananda and looked at him 'steadfastly', and, then, fell into a samadhi or trance. On seeing this, Vivekananda too felt 'a subtle force like an electric shock'<sup>4</sup> passing through his body and soon lost what he calls outward consciousness. On regaining consciousness of his own body, he saw Ramakrishna crying. On being asked why he was weeping, Ramakrishna said to him: 'Today, giving you my all, I have become a beggar. With this power you are to do many works for the world's good before you will return.'<sup>5</sup> It was this power, concludes Vivekananda, that constantly directed him to keep on working.

To say that the story of Kali entering Vivekananda's body, his trance, a weeping Ramakrishna's passing on his powers to him is dramatic would be a gross understatement. Coming directly from Vivekananda, it bears the unmistakable imprimatur of legitimacy. But it also serves to establish clearly the line of succession

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3. Ibid., p. 206.

4. Ibid., p. 207.

5. Ibid., p. 207.

from Master to chosen disciple. Words and phrases such as 'works' and 'world's good', crucially embedded in the story, also seek to establish the credibility of the future 'improvisation' of the Master's faith that Vivekananda would eventually undertake. For the devout and the faithful, this account stands beyond doubt and reproach. Swami Nikhilananda follows this path of devotion and fidelity to a fault. In the introduction to the English translation of Mahendranath Gupta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathāmrita*,<sup>6</sup> he reproduces Vivekananda's version of the story verbatim. Ironically, the volume for which he writes the introduction has a less dramatic account of the same story. The narrator of the story in this instance is also Vivekananda but the listener is Mahendranath Gupta himself, who not only records the conversation but also directly participates in it.

The date of the conversation between Vivekananda and Mahendranath is 9 April 1887. Ramakrishna had died in August the previous year. After dinner, the two men, sitting in the garden of the Baranagore Math, began to reminisce about Ramakrishna. At one point in the

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6. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, Translated into English with an Introduction by Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 2007 imprint, p. 72. This is a translation of Mahendranath Gupta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathāmrita*, originally published between 1897 and 1932 in five volumes in Bengali. Henceforth, all references to the English translation will be cited as *Gospel*.



conversation, Vivekananda says to Mahendranath that at Cossipore 'he [Ramakrishna] transmitted his power to me'.<sup>7</sup> His interlocutor is already aware of the story and indicates so. What follows in the course of the exchange between the two is crucial:

*Narendra:* Yes. One day, while meditating, I asked Kali to hold my hand. Kali said to me, 'When I touched your body I felt something like an electric shock coming to my body.'

But you must not tell this to anybody here. Give me your promise.

*M:* There is a special purpose in his transmission of power to you. He will accomplish much work through you. One day the Master wrote on a piece of paper, 'Naren will teach people.'

*Narendra:* But I said to him, 'I won't do any such thing.' Thereupon he said, 'Your very bones will do it.'<sup>8</sup>

Three elements stand out in this version of the story, a narrative separated from its 1901 telling by fourteen years. There is no mention, whatsoever, of Goddess Kali entering Vivekananda's body. The Kali in the story is Kaliprasad Chandra, later known as Swami

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7. Ibid., p. 985.

8. Ibid., p. 985.

Abhedananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna. Neither are any details of the actual transmission of Ramakrishna's powers offered. In an earlier conversation with Mahendranath on 25 March 1887, Vivekananda mentions Ramakrishna offering to exercise his occult powers through him and his refusal to accept any such thing.<sup>9</sup> Between the conversations on 25 March and 9 April, an instance of Vivekananda going into deep meditation and samadhi is mentioned, but in both instances no direct transmission of occult powers occurs between Master and the chosen disciple. In fact, the burden of the 9 April dialogue shifts primarily to questions of Vivekananda teaching people and doing work.

While Ramakrishna had contempt for the idea of 'work' in the sense Vivekananda later sought to define and convey, a more detailed analysis of this tension between the two regarding the worth of work appears in the next chapter. What is equally intriguing, however, is Ramakrishna's offer to exercise occult powers through Vivekananda. Ramakrishna consistently believed that people who sought siddhis or occult powers were small-minded people.<sup>10</sup> He held in disdain people who acquired powers that enabled them to cure illnesses, win court cases or walk on water. Neither did he approve of genuine devotees working towards such goals and

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9. Ibid., pp. 980-1.

10. Ibid., pp. 745, 459.

dreaded acquiring them even for his own self. Had he got for himself occult powers, Dakshineswar, he felt, would have been transformed into a hospital or a dispensary.<sup>11</sup> To possess occult powers was troublesome. Once Hriday, Ramakrishna's nephew, egged him on to pray to Kali for bestowing Ramakrishna some occult powers. In his childlike gullibility, Ramakrishna did exactly that. Here is his account of the consequences of the prayer:

The Divine Mother at once showed me a vision. A middle-aged prostitute, about forty years old, appeared and sat with her back to me. She had large hips and wore a black-bordered sārī. Soon she was covered with filth. The Mother showed me that occult powers are as abominable as the filth of that prostitute.<sup>12</sup>

Ramakrishna resolved to pray henceforth only for pure love, not occult powers, 'a love that does not seek any return'.<sup>13</sup>

Totapuri, the renunciate who had initiated Ramakrishna into sanyasa, taught him of the perils of possessing and holding siddhis through a couple of stories. A man in possession of occult powers was

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11 Ibid., p. 459.

12 Ibid., p. 745.

13 Ibid., p. 308.

sitting on the seashore watching a great storm rising in front of him. This caused him great discomfort and so he decided to use his powers to quell the storm. A ship going full sail before the wind sank as a consequence of the storm's abrupt end. All the passengers on the ship died and the sin of causing their death fell upon him, resulting in loss of his occult powers. In another instance, God disguised as a holy man comes to a sage who has occult powers. God first encourages the sadhu to kill an elephant and then asks him to bring the elephant back to life. The sadhu manages to do both with the help of his siddhis. At this point, God, still in disguise, asks the sadhu what this act of killing and reviving the elephant had done for him. Was he uplifted by it? Did the act manage to help him realize God?<sup>14</sup>

Having narrated these stories, Ramakrishna comes to the conclusion that occult powers lead to pride and pride makes an individual forget God. A true seeker prays only for pure love of God, just as Radha did and just as the gopis did. There is no motive or desire for possessing occult powers beyond pure love of God. In a subtle restatement of the idea of acquiring and possessing occult powers, Ramakrishna plays with the conventional meaning of the words 'siddhi' and 'siddha'. For him, siddhi was not one of the normally understood eight occult powers that one could acquire but attainment of

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14. Ibid., p. 547.

one's spiritual goal.<sup>15</sup> Following this, a siddha was one who has a firm conviction in the existence of God and in God being the sole instrument of all action. A higher category of siddha was one who had not merely seen God, but spoken intimately to God as Father, Son, or Beloved.<sup>16</sup> To underwrite his rejection of acquiring and possessing occult powers, Ramakrishna would often quote Krishna's words to Arjuna: 'Friend, if you want to realize Me, you will not succeed if you have even one of the eight occult powers'.<sup>17</sup>

If occult powers were instrumental in leading a true aspirant away from God and were comparable to the filth of a prostitute, it is incomprehensible why Ramakrishna would want to transfer his occult powers to Vivekananda. But the story of the transfer of Ramakrishna's powers to Vivekananda has acquired an indelible mystique in the popular imagination, especially so because the more familiar version of the story comes from Vivekananda himself. To quibble over its authenticity leads nowhere. But as a story, about Vivekananda and his Master, told directly to a disciple, and believed, absorbed and disseminated by other disciples and devotees, it remains a singularly important moment in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda corpus. And it is crucial in understanding the manner in which Vivekananda distanced himself from

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15. Ibid., p. 624.

16. Ibid., p. 624.

17. Ibid., p. 547.

the central core of Ramakrishna's teachings, remodelled Ramakrishna and then sought to build his model of Hinduism on the basis of his radical restatement of Ramakrishna.<sup>18</sup>



Every element that constituted Vivekananda's creation of Hinduism as religion lies embedded in this narrative and requires careful unscrambling. Firstly, there is the element of Vivekananda's tortured, ambiguous and fraught relationship with the figure of Kali. While Kali was central to Ramakrishna's conception of what constituted faith and his ideal of bhakti, Vivekananda's attitude towards her iconic status remained ambivalent. Next, there is the emphasis on 'work', and more

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18. In his extremely suggestive, brilliantly argued and indispensable essay titled, 'Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti: Ramakrishna and His Times', Sumit Sarkar calls the process of Vivekananda's remodelling of Ramakrishna's teachings as an 'inversion', though he warns the reader that it would be a mistake to reduce Vivekananda's project as 'a mere series of inversions of Ramakrishna'. See Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, Oxford University Press, 2009 imprint, pp. 282-357. Also see, Narasingha P. Sil, 'Vivekananda's Ramakrishna: An Untold Story of Mythmaking and Propaganda', *Numen*, Vol. 40 (1993), pp. 38-62; Walter G. Neevel, Jr., 'The Transformation of Śrī Rāmakrishna', in *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, edited by Bardwell L. Smith, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1976, pp. 53-97.

significantly, the importance of 'work' for a sanyasi. Here, the sanyasi must not 'remain quiet' and must not look to his 'personal comforts'. Vivekananda not only seeks to restate the ideal of renunciation, but also attempts to redefine the role of religion in relation to the world. Another significant element is Vivekananda's unquestioned acceptance of the instance of Kali entering his body. As someone who rejected the prophetic and revelatory traditions within other religions and heralded his reading of Ramakrishna's Hinduism as scientific, this ready acceptance of Kali's entry into his body is surprising. While it is no surprise that Ramakrishna looked at him 'steadfastly' and fell into a trance, Vivekananda losing outward consciousness is unusual; Vivekananda had little sympathy for Ramakrishna's trances and often termed them as hallucinations. Also, having stated that 'She' whom Ramakrishna used to call Kali entered his body, he does not actually directly acknowledge Kali entering his body but equates that experience to a subtle force like an electric shock. Equally puzzling is why Ramakrishna, who was a sanyasi, would feel like a 'beggar' after having given his 'all' to Vivekananda. And having given his 'all', would Ramakrishna exhort Vivekananda to 'do many works for the world's good', especially when he consistently rejected even the slightest suggestion that a spiritual seeker and a sanyasi ought to have any role in directly alleviating misery in the world? Some of these questions

require careful consideration for a better understanding of Vivekananda's definition of religion and his fashioning of Hinduism as religion.

Vivekananda was plagued to the end of his life by the question of Kali worship and its place in the religion that he sought to preach and disseminate. There was, indeed, an inherent tension between what Vivekananda preached and what he claimed to privately believe. Despite the fact that Kali had entered his body and was constantly pushing him to do good for the world, Kali's worship was not part of the religion that he preached to his disciples and audiences across the world. In a letter to Miss Mary Hale, dated 17 June 1900, Vivekananda is categorical in rejecting Kali worship as part of the religion he preached:

Kali worship is not a necessary step in any religion. The Upanishads teach us all there is to religion. Kali worship is my special *fad*; you never heard me preach it, or read of my preaching it in India. I only preach what is good for universal humanity. If there is any curious method which applies entirely to me, I keep it a secret and there it ends. I must not explain to you what Kali worship is, as I never taught it to anybody.<sup>19</sup>

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19. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 8, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Twelfth impression, 1999, pp. 522-3 (Emphasis in original).



Kali worship, then, is reduced to a personal fad, a curious method, and a secret that is not to be shared with anyone. Nor is any explanation for nursing this secret fad to be entertained. More significantly, neither is Kali worship a necessary step in any religion that he preached or part of one that could be taught universally, nor is it something that could be for the good of humanity. But before Kali became his fad and secret, Vivekananda's relationship with the goddess was deeply fraught.

'How I used to hate Kali',<sup>20</sup> Vivekananda recalls in a conversation with a disciple. He hated her and hated 'all her ways'. This was what he calls the 'ground of my six years' fight – that I would not accept Her'.<sup>21</sup> The fight was with Kali and with Ramakrishna; any reconciliation with Kali would also mean accepting Ramakrishna. With Ramakrishna, the 'fight' lasted all the years Vivekananda had known him, between 1881, when he first met his future Master, and 1886, the year Ramakrishna died. Before going into the reasons for his initial hatred and eventual 'acceptance' of Kali, a word needs to be said about the dynamics that come into play between a Great Master and his disciples.

Vivekananda deified Ramakrishna but was never obliged to follow either his guru's life or thoughts. Following the example of charismatic religious

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20. Ibid., p. 263.

21. Ibid., p. 263.

leaders in the past and their devotees, Vivekananda used his adoration of Ramakrishna to justify his own reformulation of religion and of what he believed to be Hinduism. He continued to claim that all he did and said was in the spirit of Ramakrishna's teachings and represented the Master's essential spirit. He gave Ramakrishna's faith a theological face and a preacher's energy, shedding all the intricate complexity and intense religious emotion that is the hallmark of Ramakrishna's pure devotionalism. When challenged by his brother monks about altering Ramakrishna's faith, he often got enraged and indulged in what can safely be called petulant and self-righteous outbursts:

What do you know? You are an ignorant man... Your study ended like that of Prahlada at seeing the first Bengali alphabet, Ka, for it reminded Prahlada of Krishna and he could not proceed further because of tears that came into his eyes... You are sentimental fools! What do you understand of religion? You are only good at praying with folded hands, 'O Lord! how beautiful is Your nose! How sweet are your eyes!' and all such nonsense... and you think your salvation is secured and Shri Ramakrishna will come at the final hour and take you by the hand to the highest heaven... Study, public preaching, and doing humanitarian works are, according to you, Maya, because he said to

someone, 'Seek and find God first; doing good in the world is a presumption!' ...As if God is such an easy thing to be achieved! As if He is such a fool as to make Himself a plaything in the hands of an imbecile!<sup>22</sup>

Bhakti and the primacy of attaining God as outlined by Ramakrishna are to be brushed aside. But Vivekananda also seems to know God's mind and even God's distaste for imbeciles. The outburst above is not merely one where Ramakrishna's idea of bhakti in its pure devotional form clashes with Vivekananda's credo of study, public preaching and doing humanitarian work; Vivekananda's religious nationalism appropriates and refashions Ramakrishna beyond recognition:

You think you have understood Shri Ramakrishna better than myself! You think Jnana is dry knowledge to be attained by a desert path, killing out the tenderest faculties of the heart! Your Bhakti is sentimental nonsense, which makes one impotent. You want to preach Ramakrishna as you have understood him, which is mighty little. Hands off! Who cares for your Ramakrishna? Who cares for your Bhakti and Mukti? Who cares what

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22. Romain Rolland, *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1975 impression, pp. 124-5.

your Scriptures say? I will go into a thousand hells cheerfully, if I can rouse my countrymen immersed in Tamas, to stand on their own feet and be *men* inspired with the spirit of Karma-Yoga...I am not a servant of Ramakrishna, or anyone, but of him only who serves and helps others, without caring for his own Bhakti or Mukti!<sup>23</sup>

Familiar themes of making Indians more manly, the significance of raising Indians from *tamas* and making them self-reliant are all present in this second outburst. What is more significant is also the outright rejection of any possible version of Ramakrishna other than Vivekananda's own. Romain Rolland cites witnesses to such frequent outbursts and says that after these fulminations, Vivekananda would go to meditate. After he emerges from the meditation, he tells his brother monks of his unfinished work for his motherland and his undelivered message to the world. In the same breath, he speaks of being a slave of Ramakrishna; he was someone who was doing Ramakrishna's work and Ramakrishna was tirelessly making him do his work. What was Ramakrishna's 'work'? Could Vivekananda really do Ramakrishna's work? Answers to these questions have been attempted below. Still crucial is the need to ask if the 'six years' fight' between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda

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23. Ibid., p. 125 (Emphasis in original).

ever resolved. Could any such reconciliation really happen without an acceptance of Kali?

## I

For Ramakrishna, Shakti alone constitutes the universe. The world was Mahamaya or the Great Illusion. Ramakrishna describes the Divine Mother variously as the Shakti or Primal Energy, the 'Cosmic Power Itself' and the 'Great Illusion'. God had manifested in the form of the Divine Mother and through her had initiated the cycles of creation, preservation and destruction. In certain ways of looking at the world, God is perceived as the Absolute. For instance, the Vedanta way of perceiving reality suggests that only Brahman is real. Ramakrishna accepts all these views but suggests that there cannot be Absolute without the Relative and vice versa.<sup>24</sup>

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24. *Gospel*, pp. 134-5. In Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, Maya-Shakti is part of the infinite energies of the Bhagavat and is one of the three aspects of the Lord. Maya-Shakti is the external or Bahiranga aspect of the Bhagavat's Shakti. This Maya-Shakti is real and not the power of illusion as suggested by Advaitins and in the Vaishnava tradition the cause of the world. See *Caitanya Caritamrita of Krishnadasa Kaviraja*, a translation and commentary by Edward C. Dimock, Jr, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999, p. 174 (henceforth cited as CC). Also see, Sushil Kumar De, *Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Bengal*, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1961 edition, pp. 277-9.

The refrain, 'He who is Brahman is also Śakti',<sup>25</sup> appears throughout the *Kathāmrita* with consistency and regularity and constitutes an important element in shaping Ramakrishna's faith. His inspiration is the poet Ramprasad Sen, a mystic-poet and Tantrik of the eighteenth century. Take, for instance, this poem of Ramprasad, one which was a particular favourite of Ramakrishna:

How are you trying, O my mind, to know the  
nature of God?

You are groping like a madman locked in a dark  
room.

He is grasped through ecstatic love; how can you  
fathom Him without it?

Only through affirmation, never negation, can you  
know Him;

Neither through Veda nor through Tantra nor the  
six darśanas.

It is in love's elixir only that He delights, O mind;  
He dwells in the body's inmost depths, in  
Everlasting Joy.

And, for that love, the mighty yogis practise yoga  
from age to age;

When love awakes, the Lord, like a magnet, draws  
to Him the soul.

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25. *Gospel*, p. 107.

He it is, says Rāmprasād, that I approach as  
Mother;  
But must I give away the secret, here in the market-  
place?  
From the hints I have given, O mind, guess what  
that Being is!<sup>26</sup>

Ramakrishna explains the meaning of the poem in the following way:

Rāmprasād asks the mind only to guess the nature of God. He wishes it to understand that what is called Brahman in the Vedas is addressed by him as the Mother. He who is attributeless also has attributes. He who is Brahman is also Śakti. When thought of as inactive, He is called Brahman, and when thought of as the Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer, He is called the Primordial Energy, Kāli. Brahman and Śakti are identical, like fire and its power to burn. When we talk of fire we automatically mean also its power to burn. Again, the fire's power to burn implies the fire itself. If you accept one you must accept the other.<sup>27</sup>

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26. Ibid., p. 107. For a short, but excellent, introduction to Ramprasād Sen's life and work, see *The Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature*, edited by Andrew Schelling, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 216-8.

27. Ibid., pp. 107-8.

God is not to be attained through the mind or by using dry, formal logic. Only ecstatic love can draw an individual closer to God. Books and scriptures are meaningless if there is absence of love for God. Loving engagement and surrender to God will help us know God's true nature. Once that is known, the realization that there is no distinction between Brahman and Kali will become clear. These are the very contours of Ramakrishna's thought and the building blocks of his faith.

In suggesting that Brahman and Kali are the same, Ramakrishna also comes to the conclusion that differences are only in name and form, whereas Reality is one and undifferentiated.<sup>28</sup> When water is still, says Ramakrishna, it stands for an illustration of Brahman, but the same water moving in waves can be compared to Kali. Kali is one who

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28. It has been suggested that Ramakrishna drew inspiration regarding his stance about God as both formless and with form from the Bengal School of Vaishnavism. In this version of Vaishnavism, it is called *Acintya-bhedābheda-vāda*, which translates as incomprehensible dualistic monism, indicating inconceivable existence of distinction and non-distinction. What follows is the idea that Bhagavata or the Lord is the perfect person, but he is not a formless entity but is an embodied substance in which infinite attributes and energies inhere. He is not unembodied, but possesses a blessed form, a Satchidananda-Vigraha. See Sushil Kumar De, *op.cit.*, p. 284. On Bhedābheda, see an excellent exposition in Andrew J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010.



communes with Maha-Kala, the Absolute. She is formless but she also has forms. She appears to be black because we only look at her from a distance. Greater proximity to Kali makes one realize that she has no colour. Again, to illustrate this point, Ramakrishna takes examples from daily life. For instance, the water in a lake might appear black from a distance, but take it in your hands and it is devoid of any colour. The water in the ocean might look blue from a distance but when held in one's hand it looks colourless. The important message here is to become intimate with God. The closer one comes to God, the greater the extent of lucidity that God has neither name nor form.<sup>29</sup> For a true devotee, it is important to meditate on Kali with firm conviction, coaxing Kali to reveal her true nature to him. For Ramakrishna, God is not a distant and intimidating figure. True devotion can impel God to come near a devotee and speak to him in ways that ordinary human beings talk to each other. But a few hurdles have to be crossed before such a conversation can actually take place.

Kali, the Divine Mother, destroys and creates the universe. After a cycle of creation and destruction completes, the time to create the universe arrives. In creating the universe, Kali 'garners the seeds for the next creation...like the elderly mistress of the house, who has a hotchpotch-pot in which she keeps different articles

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29. *Gospel*, pp. 135, 271, 634.

for household use'.<sup>30</sup> Once the universe is created, the Primal Power dwells in the universe itself. In dwelling in the universe and pervading it, Kali is always 'playful and sportive', and the universe as a whole is 'Her play'.<sup>31</sup> Ramakrishna perceives Kali's play in the world in manifold ways and sees her manifest in a variety of forms. She is 'Mahā-Kālī, Nitya-Kālī, Śmaśāna-Kālī, Rakshā-Kālī and Śyāmā-Kālī'.<sup>32</sup> Of these forms, Mahā-Kālī and Nitya-Kālī are part of Tantra philosophy. As Mahā-Kālī, she is the formless one, existing in unison with the Mahā-Kāla, the Absolute. This is her state before the creation of the universe, before the beginning of the world as we know it. In an evocative phrase, Ramakrishna describes this moment as one 'when darkness was enveloped in darkness'. In other manifestations, she is the dispenser of boons and the dispeller of fear, and she protects in times of natural calamities. She is the embodiment of destruction as Śmaśāna-Kālī, residing in the cremation ground, surrounded by corpses, jackals and terrible female spirits, a stream of blood flowing from her mouth, a garland of human heads hanging around her neck and a girdle of human heads covering her waist.

Ramakrishna's Kali, 'my Divine Mother',<sup>33</sup> as he refers to her, is playful and sportive, but she is also 'self-willed

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30. Ibid., p. 135.

31. Ibid., p. 136.

32. Ibid., p. 135.

33. Ibid., p. 135.

and must always have Her own way'.<sup>34</sup> She creates bondage in the world and she liberates. To play with her creation is for her a game of hide-and-seek. In the game, the eyes of the participants are covered, while the leader, called the 'granny' in the Indian version of the game, hides herself. One who manages to find the 'granny' and touch her gets to remove the cover from his eyes and is released from the game. Just as one participant is released from the game of hide-and-seek, only one out of a hundred thousand is liberated from the bondage of the world. When a Brahmo devotee asks the reason for Kali not liberating everyone, Ramakrishna's reply is interesting: 'In a game of hide-and-seek the running about soon stops if in the beginning all the players touch the "granny". If all touch her, then how can the game go on? That displeases her. Her pleasure is in continuing the game.'<sup>35</sup> As Mahamaya, this primal energy blinds us with ignorance. It was part of God's play to bind humans to the chains of illusion, or as Ramakrishna puts it, God had 'created the world in play'.<sup>36</sup> The magic of creation, preservation and destruction was part of the play. To realize God, these chains had to be broken. One had to enter the 'inner' chamber in order to transcend the world of objects and this could be done through the grace of Shakti alone. The only way to do that was to submit to

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34. Ibid., p. 136.

35. Ibid., p. 136.

36. Ibid., p. 116.

the Divine Mother. Only when we get past the world of appearances do we encounter Eternal Being, described as Sachchidananda or the existence-knowledge-bliss idea of the absolute.

To go past the veil of ignorance and understand Mahamaya or the Great Illusion, it is important, suggests Ramakrishna, to come to grips with two aspects of Kali. These are vidya and avidya. Vidya or knowledge helps the devotee attain God through devotion, kindness, wisdom, and love. Avidya deludes, says Ramakrishna; it ensnares and casts a spell through 'kamini and kanchan', or 'woman and gold'.<sup>37</sup> In speaking about vidya and avidya, Ramakrishna is explicit in stating that Brahman is beyond vidya and avidya, both of which are 'the illusory duality of knowledge and ignorance' created by maya, which, in turn, is the illusion of duality.<sup>38</sup> But he is also categorical that the world is not illusory. He concedes to Narendra, the future Swami Vivekananda, that the whole world was a theatre where one sometimes saw the play of vidya and at other places the unfolding of avidya. Narendra contradicts him by suggesting that everything is the play of vidya alone. Ramakrishna does not entirely agree. For a man who has the knowledge of Brahman, he says, the world may be a play of vidya, but for those who follow the path of divine love both vidyamaya and

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37. Ibid., p. 116.

38. Ibid., pp. 101-2.

avidyamaya exist.<sup>39</sup> When Mahendranath Gupta tells him that the body alone was the cause of all mischief, Ramakrishna has this to say: 'Why should you say such a thing? This world may be a "framework of illusion", but it is also said that it is a "mansion of mirth". Let the body remain. One can also turn this world into a mansion of mirth.'<sup>40</sup>

The phrases 'framework of illusion' and 'mansion of mirth' are from Ramprasad,<sup>41</sup> and Ramakrishna would refer to these frequently, as we will see subsequently. In the present context, it is important to understand that the world becomes a 'mansion of mirth' for Ramakrishna when one begins to see God in the whole universe and perceive the whole universe as permeated by God. Another time, Mahendranath Gupta records Ramakrishna saying this to him:

Why should the universe be unreal? This is a speculation of the philosophers. After realizing God, one sees that it is God Himself who has become the universe and all living beings.

The Divine Mother revealed to me in the Kālī temple that it was She who had become everything.

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39. Ibid., pp. 704-5. The question of the path of knowledge and the path of divine love would be discussed in detail in the subsequent paragraphs.

40. Ibid., p. 298.

41. Ibid., p. 478.

She showed me that everything was full of Consciousness. The Image was Consciousness, the altar was Consciousness, the water-vessels were Consciousness, the door-sill was Consciousness, the marble floor was Consciousness – all was Consciousness.<sup>42</sup>

To reach this stage of consciousness, however, a barrier had to be crossed, a necessary leap was imperative.

In order to attempt this transition, it was crucial to understand the nature of *ananda* or joy. Ramakrishna suggests that *ananda* is of three kinds.<sup>43</sup> One is the joy of worldly pleasures, consisting of the joys of 'woman and gold'. This is the most common of all joys among people. Chanting the name of God and his glories is the second kind of joy. The 'joy of God-vision' or the joy of Brahman is the third category of joy and attaining this joy helped the sages of the past transcend all rules and conventions. Of these joys, the enjoyment of 'woman and gold' alone is *maya*.<sup>44</sup> While arguing that all women are the embodiments of Shakti, an appearance of the Primal Power in the form

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42. Ibid., p. 345.

43. Ibid., p. 478.

44. Ibid., p. 336. Within the framework of Bengal Vaishnavism, Ramakrishna's position would be closer to that of Chaitanya than later developments that welcomed women ascetics into the fold. See CC, op.cit., pp. 842-3. Here, Chaitanya says that he neither sees nor hears the name of a woman, and ordinary sexual desire is the illness of the heart.

of women is part of the play of Shakti as avidya. The first step to counter the spell of maya is to identify and name it. 'If māyā is once recognized,' says Ramakrishna, 'it feels ashamed of itself and takes to flight.'<sup>45</sup> This is more easily accomplished by practitioners of spiritual discipline than by householders. Householders seldom know whether their wives are vidyashakti or avidyashakti.<sup>46</sup> A wife embodying the characteristics of vidyashakti sleeps little, has no anger or lust, is affectionate, kind, devoted and modest. Such a woman pushes her husband away from herself and in the direction of God. She treats all men like her children. More than anything else, she spends little money, so that her husband doesn't have to work too hard and has all the leisure to aspire for the spiritual path. The traits of a woman who exemplifies avidyashakti are described by Ramakrishna as 'mannish', along with other bad traits as squint eyes, hollow eyes, catlike eyes, lantern jaw like a calf's jaw and pigeon breast.<sup>47</sup> It is remarkable that all the traits of wives who embody avidyashakti are physical unlike those who display the virtuous signs of vidyashakti.

For householders following the path of vidya or knowledge, enjoying conjugal happiness with their wives occasionally is part of satisfying a natural impulse,

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45. *Gospel*, p. 336.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 701-2.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 702.

a bit like enjoying 'a sweetmeat once in a while'.<sup>48</sup> But a householder also has to surmount impediments that lie in the way of practising spiritual discipline. Ramakrishna lists these as disease, grief, poverty, misunderstanding with one's wife, and disobedient, stupid, and stubborn children.<sup>49</sup> After producing one or two children, the ideal way forward for the husband and wife is to live like siblings. In doing so, they can continue to practise seven kinds of sexual intercourse.<sup>50</sup> Sitting with a woman, talking to a woman for a long time, listening and enjoying a conversation with a woman, to speak about a woman, to whisper to her privately, to keep something belonging to a woman, and enjoying it and touching a woman are the seven kinds of sexual intercourse Ramakrishna permits householders. The eighth kind is actual sexual intercourse resulting in coitus, which he recommends must stop after the birth of children.

In contrast, one is a sanyasi in the true sense only when he has renounced 'woman and gold' and does not regard women with the same gaze with which a worldly person would look at them. To know Brahman, it is important to be cautious about women. The company of young women can make a lustless man lusty – Ramakrishna likens this to staining one's body in a room filled with soot.<sup>51</sup>

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48. Ibid., p. 387.

49. Ibid., p. 326.

50. Ibid., p. 701.

51. Ibid., p. 387.



But it [satisfying one's sexual impulse] is extremely harmful for a sannyāsi. He must not look even at the portrait of a woman. A monk enjoying a woman is like a man swallowing the spittle he has already spat out. A sannyāsi must not sit near a woman and talk to her, even if she is intensely pious. No, he must not talk to a woman even though he may have controlled his passion.

A sannyāsi must renounce both 'woman' and 'gold'. As he must not look even at the portrait of a woman, as also he must not touch gold, that is to say, money. It is bad for him even to keep money near him, for it brings in its train calculation, worry, insolence, anger, and such evils.<sup>52</sup>

Ramakrishna is clear on the question of women: they are a part of the Divine Mother, but as far as men are concerned, especially if they happen to be sanyasis and spiritual practitioners, they must shun women. For Ramakrishna, part of the reason is personal.

I am very much afraid of women. When I look at one I feel as if a tigress were coming to devour me. Besides, I find that their bodies, their limbs, and even their pores are very large. This makes

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52. Ibid., p. 387. The phrase about a monk enjoying a woman being similar to licking one's own spittle after having spat it out once appears again on p. 701.

me look upon them as she-monsters. I used to be much more afraid of women than I am at present. I wouldn't allow one to come near me. Now I persuade my mind in various ways to look upon women as forms of the Blissful Mother.<sup>53</sup>

As a sanyasi, who also had a wife, the personal and the public easily get conflated in Ramakrishna in the form of the code of conduct desirable for a sanyasi. 'Don't let yourself touch the air near a woman's body,'<sup>54</sup> he advises, and counsels those engaged in spiritual practices to see women as a raging forest fire or a black cobra. It is only after one attains the state of perfection, which, in turn, comes only after attaining God-vision, that women appear as the Blissful Mother. The sanyasi must forgo 'woman and gold' in order to set an example for people wanting to practise renunciation as well as for his own good.

There were other reasons for Ramakrishna's injunctions against 'women and gold'. Three quarters of a man's mind is monopolized by a woman. After a child is born, the whole mind is 'frittered away' on the family and nothing or little is left for thinking about God. Some men shed the last drop of their blood in order to keep their wives out of mischief. Worldly men, concludes

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53. Ibid., p. 593.

54. Ibid., p. 595.

Ramakrishna, get up and sit down on the orders of women and invariably speak highly of their wives.<sup>55</sup> It is difficult for a man to escape being stained, even if slightly, by 'woman and gold' if he lives in the midst of these two snares created by avidya. One way was to acknowledge that every man has two metaphorical wives, Dispassion and Worldliness.<sup>56</sup> He must only take Dispassion on the journey towards the knowledge of God, or as Ramprasad puts it, 'go for a walk' to Kali. But the walk was not an easy one and the sincere aspirant will have to ask help from Discrimination, who is Dispassion's son, and he is the one who will guide the genuine seeker towards God. Neither Ramakrishna nor Ramprasad tells their readers and listeners anything about the patrimony of Discrimination. Another way of avoiding the stain was maintaining physical distance: '[K]eep yourself eight cubits, two cubits, or at least one cubit away from all women except your mother.'<sup>57</sup>

A sanyasi, then, must always look upon a woman as his mother. If he happens to be near a woman, he must offer her his worship. This was the pure way of worshipping Adyashakti, who manifests also as avidya and has to be propitiated. Ramakrishna invokes an unusual metaphor to explain the 'pure' way of perceiving women. Drawing upon the tradition of

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55. Ibid., p. 594.

56. Ibid., p. 327.

57. Ibid., p. 595.

observing a fast on ekadashi,<sup>58</sup> he lists the various ways in which the ekadashi fast could be observed. One was to eat only fruit and, perhaps, drink milk during the fast. Another way was to eat luchis and curries. His own way was to observe the fast without even drinking a drop of water, leave alone food: 'Looking on woman as mother is like fasting on the ekādaśī day without touching even a drop of water; in this attitude there is not the slightest trace of sensual enjoyment.'<sup>59</sup>

This was the way for the sanyasi to live. Enjoying what 'woman and gold' have to offer harms a sanyasi and also harms those who look up to him. Sanyasis ought not to sit with women devotees or even speak to them. Those who develop disinterest in the world from boyhood, reject the world of passion, and yearn for God are part of an 'unsullied aristocracy'.<sup>60</sup> To develop true renunciation, they keep themselves very far away from women and do not fall into the clutches of women. When a spiritual aspirant learns to meditate deeply, the objects of the senses do not any longer intrude but are left outside, just as looking at objects from the outside in a glass room. Having attained this exalted level of meditative depth, Ramakrishna saw 'the inside

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58. The eleventh lunar day of the bright and dark fortnight of every lunar month.

59. *Gospel*, p. 701.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 603.

and outside of the woman';<sup>61</sup> what he saw was 'entrails, blood, filth, worms, phlegm, and such things'.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the warnings to sanyasis regarding 'woman and gold', Ramakrishna was clear that it was Adyashakti who has assumed all female forms and had to be propitiated. While looking upon all women as mother was the pure way he had chosen, Ramakrishna was once a practitioner of another way of appeasing the avidya aspect of the Primal Energy, namely, Tantra. There are instances in the *Kathāmrita* when he rejects the efficacy of what he calls 'the path of the Vedas' in Kaliyuga for spiritual advancement and instead prescribes Tantra.<sup>63</sup> Admitting that the rites of Shakti worship are very difficult and that he had been initiated into performing these rites,<sup>64</sup> he also warns against the vamachara method prescribed in the Tantra. It was, he says, the 'dirty' method of spiritual discipline, a bit like 'entering a house through the back door by which the scavengers come'.<sup>65</sup> Vamachara inevitably led to a spiritual aspirant's downfall because of the proximity of 'an object of enjoyment', namely women.



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61. Ibid., p. 745.

62. Ibid., p. 745.

63. Ibid., p. 311.

64. Ibid., p. 116.

65. Ibid., p. 513.

In Tantra, then, a devotee can propitiate Shakti by assuming the attitude of a handmaid, or of a hero or of a child.<sup>66</sup> In the heroic attitude, the idea is to please Shakti in the same way as a man sexually pleases a woman, and in which instance a woman is seen to represent Shakti or Kali. Ramakrishna rejects the need for Tantric practices that involve the company of women. The *Kathāmrita* is generously interspersed with instances of Ramakrishna raising an eyebrow regarding certain sects, like the Ghoshpara, Kartabhaja and Panchanami,<sup>67</sup> and their enjoyment of sensuous pleasures in the name of conducting spiritual practices. In each of these instances, his objection is directed towards any man assuming the attitude of a 'hero', considering a woman as his mistress, in order to ritually appease Shakti. He recounts an instance when he was 'taken' to women of the Kartabhaja sect.<sup>68</sup> He addressed them as 'mother' and they, in turn, saw him as a beginner. In other words, he refused the posture of a hero and a lover and, instead, sought to perceive himself as a child.

But even in such cases, Ramakrishna stops short of

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66. Ibid., p. 116.

67. Ibid., pp. 337, 513-14, 603. These are sects that were obscure and peripheral, drawing followers mostly from the lower castes. They also had a pronounced affinity with Tantra.

68. Ibid., p. 337. Also see, Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kālī's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, second edition, pp. 123-4.

outright condemnation of these practices. Instead, he calls them 'the most difficult discipline'<sup>69</sup> and warns that this spiritual path may be one where maintaining the 'right attitude'<sup>70</sup> may not always be possible. But these were various paths leading to God, just as there were different roads to reach the Kali temple. For instance, in a conversation with Narendra, he rejects the 'hero' attitude without dismissing Tantra:

*Narendra:* Isn't it true that the Tantra prescribes spiritual discipline in the company of women?

*Master:* That is not desirable. It is a very difficult path and often causes the aspirant's downfall. There are three such kinds of discipline. One may regard woman as one's mistress or look on oneself as her handmaid or as her child. I look on woman as my mother. To look on oneself as her handmaid is also good; but it is extremely difficult to practise spiritual discipline looking on woman as one's mistress. To regard oneself as her child is a very pure attitude.<sup>71</sup>

When Achalananda, a tantrik, presses him to admit that the attitude of the 'hero' towards women was legitimate, especially so because it was so prescribed by Lord

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69. *Gospel*, p. 572.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 572.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Shiva himself, the author of the Tantra, Ramakrishna politely, but firmly, rejects it. 'But, my dear sir, I don't know. I don't like these ideas,' he says, appending his well-known position on the issue by saying, 'To me every woman is a mother'.<sup>72</sup> Elsewhere, he calls this his 'natural attitude';<sup>73</sup> it helped him regard 'the breasts of any woman as those of my own mother'<sup>74</sup> and impelled him to worship all parts of the body of the Shorashi, a sixteen-year-old, in a tantric ritual as that of his mother.<sup>75</sup> As noted already, Ramakrishna thought of women as 'she-monsters' and found their bodies, limbs and pores very large. He also wonders what happiness could there be in sexlife with a woman. Instead, in ecstatic love of God 'all the pores of the skin, even the roots of the hair, become like so many sexual organs, and in every pore the aspirant enjoys the happiness of communion with the Ātman.'<sup>76</sup> In a unique and distinctive gloss on

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72. Ibid., p. 284.

73. Ibid., p. 116.

74. Ibid., p. 116.

75. Ibid., p. 701. See also, p. 418.

76. Ibid., p. 346. A similar explanation given by Ramakrishna using the same expressions and the same phrases can be found in Swami Saradananda's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Lilaprasanga*, translated from Bangla as *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master* by Swami Jagadananda. See, Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, Volume I, translated by Swami Jagadananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras, 2001 imprint, p. 259. Henceforth referred in the text as *Lilaprasanga* and cited in footnotes as *Great Master*.



the purusha-prakriti dualism, Ramakrishna prescribes that spiritual aspirants cultivate 'the attitude of Prakriti in order to realize Purusha – the attitude of a friend, a handmaid, or a mother'.<sup>77</sup>

One way of conquering lust and sexual passion was to assume the guise and attitudes of a woman. Ramakrishna speaks of the time he spent as the handmaid of God.<sup>78</sup> He dressed in women's clothes, put on jewellery and covered the upper part of his body with a scarf. Explaining this by talking about the peacock feather in Lord Krishna's crest, he suggests that the feather bears the sign of the female sex. Its significance is that Krishna

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77. *Gospel*, p. 346. On page 271, Ramakrishna offers a more conventional interpretation of the purusha-prakriti dualism. A discussion on the historical evolution of interpretations of the purusha-prakriti relationship is in the introduction.

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 603-4. In the Bengal Vaishnava tradition, bhakti is classified as Samanya-bhakti, Sadhana-bhakti, Bhava-bhakti and Prema-bhakti. Sadhana-bhakti is further classified into Vaidhi-bhakti and Raganuga-bhakti. In Raganuga-bhakti, the aspirant attempts to meditate on the feelings of the people of Vraja towards Krishna and make efforts to live physically or mentally in the same state as the people of Vraja did for Krishna. They consider Krishna as the only male in Vraja and so their worship to him can only realize the ecstatic passion required to simulate the state of gopis in Vraja when they see themselves as females. This is further divided into perceiving Krishna as Kama-rupa, manifested as a desire for erotic-mystic enjoyment, and as Sambandha-rupa, where the devotee has a sense of relationship, that of father, mother or friend, with Krishna. See Sushil Kumar De, *op.cit.*, pp. 173-85.

sports the female principle, Prakriti, on his head. When dancing with the gopis, Krishna dresses up as a woman. What does it all suggest? Ramakrishna is categorical that as long as a man does not assume a feminine nature and attitude, he is not entitled to be with a woman and enjoy her company.<sup>79</sup> But this can happen only after one realizes God, when the stage comes of seeing the Divine Mother in all women. For the spiritually naive, it is best to keep away from women as far as possible. It would be a mistake, however, to perceive Ramakrishna's anxiety to overcome passion by assuming the attitudes of a woman as a way of coming to terms with one aspect of avidya alone. On the contrary, it offers an opportunity to look at three important strands in Ramakrishna's religious universe, one that Vivekananda would eventually reject or ignore. The first is to explore the ways by which an individual can conquer fear, shame and aversion. No spiritual gain was possible without transcending this triad of fear, shame and aversion. Equally significant, and this is the second strand, was to construct a vocabulary and a methodology of transgression. Neither

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79. *Gospel*, p. 604. 'Having abandoned his male body, he becomes *prakṛti-svarūpa*. Know therefore the *svarūpa* of Radha; it can be known within the heart. When one becomes *prakṛti* by union with *prakṛti* it is not by means of his masculine body. God is hidden, but if one is purified, one can be saved my brother.' See Edward C. Dimock, Jr for discussion of the Sahajiya influence on Vaishnavism, *op.cit.*, pp. 159-161.

of these elements could be attained without a careful and judicious restatement of Tantra and Bhakti, and this constitutes the third element in understanding Ramakrishna's faith.



The *Kathāmrita* records several instances of Ramakrishna reminiscing about what he called his period of 'divine madness',<sup>80</sup> a period in which he followed the rigours of several spiritual disciplines and paths. The preliminary aim of these spiritual exercises was to overcome fear, shame and aversion in order to achieve the ultimate aim of seeing and realizing God.<sup>81</sup> Most remarkable among the *Kathāmrita* narratives connected to the period of 'divine madness' is the effortless ease with which Ramakrishna travels between accounts of his 'visions' and 'actual' incidents that happened during that time. Take, for instance, the following examples. Ramakrishna once had the vision of the non-dual and indivisible state in which he saw various sorts of men and animals. There were aristocrats, Englishmen, Muslims, scavengers and dogs. A bearded Muslim among these men and creatures had an earthen tray of rice in his hands and began to

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80. *Gospel*, p. 491.

81. 'There are eight fetters. Shame, hatred, fear, caste, lineage, good conduct, grief and secretiveness – these are the eight fetters.' *Ibid.*, pp. 243-4.

put a few grains in everyone's mouth, including that of Ramakrishna.<sup>82</sup> Another time, he saw rice, vegetables, filth and dirt lying around. The reader of the *Kathāmrita* is not sure in this instance whether what he 'saw' was a vision or a literal sighting of these objects. But more significant is what happens after Ramakrishna sees these things lying around: 'Suddenly the soul came out of my body and, like a flame, touched everything. It was like a protruding tongue of fire and tasted everything once, even the excreta.'<sup>83</sup>

Those who had transcended difference and had conquered fear, aversion and shame had also realized that everything was the same Substance, the same Consciousness. Real sages who had the knowledge of Brahman, the purnajnanis, were 'mad', and they did not follow any social conventions.<sup>84</sup> One such madman did, indeed, visit Dakshineshwar soon after the temple there was built, and was not allowed to eat at the guest house by Haladhari, a priest and cousin of Ramakrishna. Paying no

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82. Ibid., p. 282. This is retold on page 746.

83. Ibid., p. 282. See Edward C. Dimock, Jr. on the Sahajiya idea of equality or sameness, op.cit., p. 108.

84. *Gospel*, p. 491. 'Following this advice, I take the name incessantly; and while taking the name, my mind becomes distracted. I am not able to hold myself in check; I become as mad: I laugh, I weep, I dance, I sing, as if drunk on wine. Then getting control of myself, I reflected in my mind, "My perception has become clouded by the name of Kṛṣṇa. I have become mad; I cannot hold my mind firm..." CC, op. cit., pp. 240-1.

heed to the slight, the madman started to push aside dogs rummaging in a rubbish heap eating crumbs and started to eat those crumbs from the leftovers in the leaf plates.<sup>85</sup> Before departing, the madman said: 'What else shall I say to you? When you no longer make any distinction between the water of this pool and the water of the Ganges, then you will know that you have Perfect Knowledge.'<sup>86</sup>

Ramakrishna categorizes spiritual discipline and its practise into three distinct categories: sattvic, rajasic and tamasic.<sup>87</sup> In the sattvic mode, the devotee does not seek any results but calls upon God with great longing and repeatedly. Many rituals are involved in the rajasic way of spiritual discipline. In the tamasic way, conventional purity is not observed and the devotee 'threatens' and 'coerces' the object of veneration to become visible and manifest. Which of these three categories did Ramakrishna himself follow? 'I vowed to the Divine Mother that I would kill myself if I did not see God. I said to Her: "O Mother, I am a fool. Please teach me what is contained in the Vedas, the Purāṇas, the Tantras, and the other scriptures"'.<sup>88</sup>

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85. In the *Kathāmrita*, recounting the same story another time, Ramakrishna says: 'Then he went up to a dog, held it by the ear, and ate some of its food. The dog didn't mind.' *Gospel*, p. 548.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 491.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 744.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 544.

Having been so 'coerced', the Divine Mother reveals to him that the essence of Vedanta shows the Brahman to be real and the world to be illusory. But she also explains to him that the Sachchidananda Brahman of the Vedas is the Sachchidananda Shiva of the Tantra and the Sachchidananda Krishna of the Puranas. The point that Ramakrishna repeatedly makes is that all his subsequent spiritual experiences, as detailed by the scriptures, were a consequence of his 'direct perception of God'.<sup>89</sup> It was God who made him pass through various spiritual paths,<sup>90</sup> and it was God who made him behave 'like a child, like a madman, like a ghoul, and like an inert thing'.<sup>91</sup> Ramakrishna likens the quick succession of experiences to being propelled in a husking machine ('no sooner is one end down than the other goes up').<sup>92</sup>

The period of the 'divine madness' was one where Ramakrishna sometimes behaved like a child and at other times as a madman. This period lasted between 1856 and 1867. During the span of intense spiritual practice and divine madness, Ramakrishna was initiated into Shakti worship, Tantra, Vaishnava bhakti, Vedanta, Islam and Christianity. Ending discrimination between the real and the unreal, eliminating the distinction between pure and impure, overcoming fear, shame and aversion were steps

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89. Ibid., p. 544.

90. Ibid., p. 543.

91. Ibid., p. 544.

92. Ibid., p. 544.

towards reaching the goal of seeing and knowing God. As part of these practices, Ramakrishna would place a handful of earth in one hand and a coin in the other and then throw it in the Ganga in order to show that both were equally devoid of value and that the 'love of gold' was worthless. He would clean excreta and toilets with his hands; placing excreta in one hand and sandal paste in another, he would come to the conclusion that both were equally part of the five elements. During this period of inflamed spiritual practice, he sometimes worshipped his own penis as a Shivalingam,<sup>93</sup> and while repeating Lord Rama's name, he got so 'God-intoxicated' that he assumed the role of Hanuman to experience the heightened level of devotion of a servant towards his master.<sup>94</sup> In the *Lilaprasanga*, this is how Ramakrishna narrates the experience of experiencing Hanuman's *dasya bhava*:

'At that time,' said the Master, 'I had to walk, take my food and do all other actions like Mahavir [Hanuman]. I did not do so of my own accord, but the actions so happened of themselves. I tied my cloth round my waist so that it might look like a tail and moved about jumping; I ate nothing but fruits and roots, which again I did not feel inclined to eat when skinned. I spent much of my time on

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93. Ibid., p. 491.

94. Ibid., pp. 543-4.

trees and always cried, 'Raghuvir, Raghuvir!' with a deep voice. Both my eyes assumed a restless expression like those of the animal of that species, and strange to say, the lower end of the backbone (coccyx) lengthened at that time nearly an inch.'<sup>95</sup>

The elongation ceased to be what it became after the bhava or mood elapsed.

During the period when he practised Tantra, Ramakrishna lost sense of difference between the tulsi plant, considered sacred, and other plants. He would also eat leftovers from a jackal's food that had been exposed to other animals and poisonous creatures all night. There were other times when he would ride a dog and feed it *luchis* and also eat part of it himself.<sup>96</sup> While the Vedas and the Puranas have codes of what is considered impure, suggests Ramakrishna, the Tantra extols those very things as good and desirable.<sup>97</sup> Thus, he ate the greens cooked by the wife of a 'low-caste' man, touched his head and lips with the leaf plates left by beggars, felt the desire to eat the boatman's food<sup>98</sup> and enjoyed 'inhaling the smell of burning corpses, carried by the wind from the other side of the Ganges'.<sup>99</sup>

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95. *Great Master*, pp. 182-3.

96. *Gospel*, p. 544.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 564.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 548.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 564.



When the Bhairavi<sup>100</sup> initiates Ramakrishna into systematic tantric practices as prescribed in the sixty-four primary Tantras, Ramakrishna meditates and performs tantric rites sitting on 'skull-seats' made of the skulls of five dead beings including that of a man. Another 'ordeal' was to sit on the lap of a young, beautiful woman and meditate. Apart from this, Ramakrishna eats fish cooked in the skull of a dead body and overcomes aversion by putting a piece of rotten human flesh in his mouth. Finally, he worships a female figure in the 'heroic' form of Tantra worship, considering her throughout as a child would perceive its mother. His period of divine madness and practice of spiritual disciplines was a state when God himself becomes the entire universe and all its living beings, and the distinction between the inner world of Samadhi and the outer world is lost.

Eating for the tantrik is no ordinary act performed in order to continue life. For Kali, all living beings, dead or alive, are her children and also her food. She spares no one, not even Shiva. Ramakrishna recounts an instance when Mahamaya swallowed Shiva. As a consequence, the six centres in her were awakened and Shiva emerged out of her thigh, going on, then, to create Tantra philosophy.<sup>101</sup> For Ramakrishna, eating assumes a different dimension altogether, a path shown by the redoubtable Ramprasad.

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100. *Great Master*, pp. 224-7. The Bhairavi has been sanitized as 'Brahmani' in the *Kathāmrita* and *Lilaprasanga* translations.

101. *Gospel*, p. 291.

To open one's mouth and eat, therefore, was symbolic of 'seizing' or 'eating' Kali, who had become the universe. In the *Kathāmrita*, Ramakrishna tells Narendra that the choice of what one eats depends on the aspirant's state of mind. A man who had attained the knowledge of Brahman does not himself eat but offers what is eaten to the Kundalini or the spiritual power coiled in each individual in the likeness of a snake.<sup>102</sup> There was a time, then, when Ramakrishna would open his mouth, 'touching, as it were, heaven and the nether world with my jaws, and utter the word "Mā"'.<sup>103</sup> Doing so, he would have the sense of seizing Kali just as a fisherman drags fish in his net. Once again, the inspiration for this symbolic act of 'eating' Kali is to be found in the songs and poems of Ramprasad. Ramakrishna recites one to illustrate his point:

This time I shall devour Thee utterly, Mother Kālī!  
 For I was born under an evil star,  
 And one so born becomes, they say, the eater of  
 his mother.  
 Thou must devour me first, or I myself shall eat  
 Thee up;  
 One or the other it must be.<sup>104</sup>

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102. Regarding food and various states of mind of the aspirant, Ramakrishna says to Narendra in the same conversation cited: 'The present state of my mind is such that I cannot eat any food unless it is first offered to God by a brāhmin priest.' *Gospel*, p. 564.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 564.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 564.

## A Restatement of Religion

This was not an empty threat. It was a way of claiming, against all odds, the exalted status of being Kālī's son:

O mother, I shall eat Thee up but not digest Thee;  
I shall install Thee in my heart  
And make Thee offerings with my mind.

You may say that by eating Kālī I shall embroil  
myself  
With Kāla, Her Husband, but I am not afraid;  
Braving His anger, I shall chant my Mother's name.  
To show the world that Rāmprasād is Kālī's  
rightful son,  
Come what may, I shall eat Thee up – Thee and  
Thy retinue –  
Or lose my life attempting it.<sup>105</sup>

For Ramakrishna, this was genuine longing for God. If this longing was firmly in place, an aspirant would be blessed even though he was to eat pork. Conversely, despite eating ritually approved pure food, a person whose mind was focused on 'woman and gold' would scarcely find deliverance.

Overcoming fear, aversion and shame was only one part of the story in an aspirant's quest for God. While practising certain spiritual exercises and initiation into

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105. Ibid., p. 565.

various spiritual disciplines could be a preliminary step in helping an aspirant inch closer to God, these were not enough for him to see, encounter and experience God and God's grace. Ramakrishna is categorical that in order to attain God one needed an 'intensely yearning heart'.<sup>106</sup> It required a heart that was capable of weeping for God, or as Ramakrishna puts it in his inimitable way, 'Cry to Him with a real cry'.<sup>107</sup> What was crucial, asserts Ramakrishna, was to seek and covet God with a 'longing heart'.<sup>108</sup> To love God with an intensely yearning heart had to have the combined force and an intensity that is akin to the love of a mother for her child, the love of a chaste wife for her husband and the love that a worldly man has for wealth.<sup>109</sup> The longing and love for God was no ordinary kind of love. The love that Sita had for Rama or the love that Parvati had for Shiva was on a different plane altogether: Ramakrishna calls it 'ecstatic love'.<sup>110</sup> It is a state when an individual becomes 'mad with love in order to realize God'.<sup>111</sup>

To develop ecstatic love for God demands complete surrender. In an evocative phrase, Ramakrishna calls upon the devotee who wants to cultivate an intensely

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106. Ibid., p. 83.

107. Ibid., p. 83.

108. Ibid., p. 83.

109. Ibid., p. 83.

110. Ibid., p. 346.

111. Ibid., p. 346.

yearning heart to 'give God the power of attorney'.<sup>112</sup> It is a call to resign oneself to God and do whatever God wishes. In such a state, Ramakrishna assures, God undertakes to look after the concerns, worries and interests of that devotee, including matters that concern his family and other worldly affairs. All that is expected is praying to the Divine Mother with a longing heart and persisting in one's demand to see God with a yearning heart. But the longing and the yearning has to 'force your demand on the Divine Mother',<sup>113</sup> and that can happen only if the devotee thinks of her as his own mother. The child, says Ramakrishna, begs his mother for money to buy a kite. The mother is busy gossiping with another lady and fends off the demand by saying that she will have to ask the child's father, who is likely to disapprove. Hearing this, the child begins to cry and remains persistent. The mother interrupts her conversation to pacify the child by giving the child some money to buy his kite. Using this example, Ramakrishna derives a principle regarding his faith in the centrality of a longing heart and the need for persistence on part of the devotee:

I know that I know nothing. Sometimes I think of God as good, and sometimes as bad. What can I

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112. Ibid., p. 628.

113. Ibid., p. 629.

know of Him?...Who can ever know God? I don't even try. I only call on Him as Mother. Let Mother do whatever She likes. I shall know Her if it is Her will; but I shall be happy to remain ignorant if She wills otherwise.<sup>114</sup>

In essence, no amount of reason and calculations can take a devotee nearer God. Ramakrishna wants true spiritual seekers wanting to develop a yearning for God to give up intellectual ideas like, for instance, karma being the cumulative result of one's actions.<sup>115</sup> Rather, the attitude of a child is the right one to emulate. The young child, explains Ramakrishna, only wants his mother. He doesn't know much about his mother, whether she is rich or poor. Neither does he know, nor does he want to know either. He is secure in the knowledge that he has a mother. 'My attitude, too, is that of a child,'<sup>116</sup> concludes Ramakrishna. Taking refuge in God, then, washes away the effects of karma.

Phrases like 'intensely yearning heart', 'ecstatic love', 'longing heart' and 'mad with love' were nothing but ways of expressing the nature of what Ramakrishna calls 'real bhakti'. Here is his expression of all the yearning, longing and madness for Kali, the Divine Mother:

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114. Ibid., p. 299.

115. Ibid., p. 817.

116. Ibid., p. 299.

Here, Mother, take Thy sin; here, take Thy virtue. I don't want either of these; give me only real bhakti. Here, Mother, take Thy good; here, take Thy bad. I don't want any of Thy good or bad; give me only real bhakti. Here, Mother, take Thy dharma; here, take Thy adharma. I don't want any of Thy dharma or adharma; give me only real bhakti. Here, Mother, take Thy knowledge; here, take Thy ignorance. I don't want any of Thy knowledge or ignorance; give me only real bhakti. Here, Mother, take Thy purity; here, take Thy impurity. Give me only real bhakti.<sup>117</sup>

Real bhakti, then, entails cultivating devotion and love for God. In turn, God bestows his grace on such an individual. The path to real bhakti is not through discussions and opinions, and it is not about 'knowing many things'.<sup>118</sup> A real devotee who knows real bhakti cultivates love for God, attains God, and then leaves matters of knowing and understanding to God's grace and will. One of the most striking examples for illustrating real bhakti that Ramakrishna offers throughout the *Kathāmrita* is that of the kitten in relation with the mother cat. Sumit Sarkar refers to Ramakrishna's preference for the bhakti of a kitten as a 'startling

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117. Ibid., p. 817.

118. Ibid., p. 506.

example'<sup>119</sup> and correctly traces it to the Sri Vaishnava Sampradaya in the city of Sri Rangam in the south of India. He also links it to the reception and assimilation of Vaishnava bhakti in Bengal, especially since the time of Chaitanya. On closer scrutiny, the example of the kitten and the mother cat constitutes the spiritual 'core' of Ramakrishna's faith and merits a more detailed explanation.

In the *Kathāmrita*, the kitten and mother cat example appears with striking regularity. It is used to portray the ideal relationship between the devotee and God but also distinguish between two distinct categories of spiritual aspirants:

There are two classes of devotees. One class has the nature of the kitten. The kitten depends completely on its mother. It accepts whatever its mother does for it. The kitten only cries, 'Mew, mew!' It doesn't know what to do or where to go. Sometimes the mother puts the kitten near the hearth, sometimes on the bed...There is another class of devotees. They have the nature of the young monkey. The young monkey clings to its mother with might and main. The devotees who behave like the young monkey have a slight idea of being the doer. They feel: 'We must go to the sacred places; we must

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119. Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., p. 316.



practise japa and austerity; we must perform worship with sixteen articles as prescribed by the śāstras. Only then shall we be able to realize God.' Such is their attitude.<sup>120</sup>

Ramakrishna considers both categories of aspirants as devotees of God, but clearly favours those who exhibit the attitude of the kitten. 'My nature is that of a kitten,' he emphatically declares. In making the distinction between the attitude of the kitten and the baby monkey, Ramakrishna not only presents his blueprint for real bhakti, but also harnesses the example in order to synthesize and reconcile various strands of his spiritual practices. For Ramakrishna, the model of the kitten and the baby monkey offers an invisible thread seamlessly connecting his private spiritual universe with seemingly public questions relating to religious tolerance, nationalism and philanthropy. A digression in order to understand the full implications of the kitten versus the baby monkey example, therefore, would be in order.

Nothing could better explain this than D. Dennis Hudson's remarkable essay titled 'By Monkey or by Cat? How is One Saved?'.<sup>121</sup> What follows is a summary of this essay. Sri Vaishnava thinkers and preceptors

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120. *Gospel*, p. 843; see also, pp. 83, 369, 628.

121. D. Dennis Hudson, *Krishna's Mandala: Bhagavata Religion and Beyond*, edited and introduced by John Stratton Hawley, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 275-84.

of Sri Rangam and Kanchipuram, who followed a tradition drawn from the *Bhagavata Purana*, introduced distinctions in discussing the question of grace that have a striking visual metaphor. Grace is the 'experience of a freely given and undeserved gift'.<sup>122</sup> The visual metaphor they sought to convey was the difference between a mother monkey and a mother cat in the way they respond and carry their young when endangered. Borrowing from Buddhism, Hudson calls this distinction one between 'self-power' and 'other-power'; in the case of the baby monkey, who uses 'self-power', and the kitten, who uses other power, lies the 'difference in nature of the one seeking salvation and in the nature of the saving "mother"'.<sup>123</sup> In other words, the distinction seeks to delineate ways in which a spiritual aspirant could relate to God.

For the Bhagavatas, the consciousness of a sadhaka contained processes that could be represented by the monkey and cat example. More specifically, the example helps to understand the transformation a devotee undergoes on being given diksha or being consecrated by an acharya or a teaching-priest. On arrival for the consecration, the devotee was considered a refugee (*prapanna*) and had to be purified of sin and pollution. This was done through the Man-lion consecration or the

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122. Ibid., p. 245.

123. Ibid., p. 276.

Narasimha-diksha. Once ritually purified, he had to be disciplined over several days and weeks and taught his rites and prayers, followed by several days of the diksha proper. All this culminated in the acharya imparting him a mantra and explaining to him its meaning. The *sadhaka* was now committed to a ritually pure and disciplined life of sadhana. Most Vaishnava devotees only underwent a single consecration that entitled them to the mantra worship of Narayana in a visible and material form. Called the Vibhava-diksha, it enabled them to perform a set of rites, rituals and devotions on their own and for themselves (*sva-artha-puja*). But highly evolved Bhagavata devotees could receive other consecrations for other purposes, such as the Vyuha-diksha and the Sukshma-diksha.

To understand the changes taking place within the devotee's consciousness and the significance of the various consecrations mentioned above, a deeper understanding of the monkey and cat example is imperative. In the South Asian literary tradition, the monkey who best illustrates 'self-power' is Hanuman. He is a model yogi, but with a difference. While yogis work on themselves in order to achieve specific goals, Hanuman is the supreme illustration of the manner in which 'self-power' ought to relate to 'other-power'.<sup>124</sup> In this instance, Rama represents 'other-power' for

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124. Ibid., p. 278.

Hanuman, who is ever ready to spring to action as a devoted servant of Rama. On the other hand, cats symbolize 'other-power' but are secretive and deceptive. They live in forests and mountains as tigers and lions and are invisible till they emerge to kill their prey.

In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Nrisimha or Narasimha, a lion in a man's form, embodies, cat-like, the 'other-power'. The Man-lion story is about the asura king, Hiranyakashipu, whose name literally means, clothed in gold. The demon king had mastered the Samkhya system of philosophy and had practised self-discipline prescribed in the Yoga system. As a consequence, he had acquired a golden body and had taken over the rule of the world. To attain the pinnacle of worldly success, Hiranyakashipu had 'integrated Samkhya's perceived distinction between pure Awareness (purusha) and Matter (prakriti) with Yoga's self-discipline of body and mind'.<sup>125</sup> Hudson sees him as the paradigm of consecrated 'self-power' existing in isolation from 'other-power'.

The demon king has a son. His name is Prahlada, which means Delight. While the father and son share their asura nature, their consciousness is remarkably different. Having mastered Samkhya-Yoga, Hiranyakashipu sees himself as the master of the world, whereas Prahlada sees God at the centre of all things and the world being

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125. Ibid., p. 279.

permeated by Vishnu. Prahlada, suggests Hudson, is not just 'delight' but 'Delight in Krishna' expressed through Bhakti-Yoga or the Yoga of devotion. In the Bhagavata tradition, Samkhya-Yoga gives birth to Bhakti-Yoga; the two are related as father and son. Despite this bond, they cannot live simultaneously in the consciousness of the same sadhaka or devotee, and so one has to be eliminated. The father, therefore, tries to kill the son. In the face of this threat, Prahlada relies on his passive faithfulness to the 'other-power' in the form of Vishnu to avert murderous assaults from his father. It is the same passive faithfulness that also prevents him from actively seeking to defend himself. The final solution lies in a cat-like act of deception, when the Man-lion emerges from a pillar and rips open the stomach of the asura father and kills him, providing Prahlada the same kind of protection that a mother cat provides her endangered kitten; the son watches as the Man-lion ends the life and rule of his demon father, who mastered Samkhya-Yoga and ruled the world.

Here lies the irony. The devotee in this case, the metaphorical Prahlada, 'Delight in Krishna', receives the cat-like protection only because he has employed 'self-power' in the form of highly ritualized worship of mandalas and mantras. In other words, like the baby monkey, he, in the initial stages of spiritual preparedness ritually clung onto God's power and readied himself for the Sukshma-diksha. It is this clinging that made the Man-lion act. For the devotee, the sound of the mantra at

the time of the Vibhava-diksha was the embodiment of Vishnu himself in a visible and material form. Now, as the Man-lion appears as the 'other-power', the devotee has been cleansed completely of all possible remnants of defilement and has direct perception of Vishnu/Narayana/Krishna.

The Bhagavata tradition that existed till the eighth century saw a devotee move from the sleep of ignorance to the wakefulness of knowledge. In this process, the 'other-power' and the 'self-power' alternated and complemented each other rather than being seen as antagonistically opposed to each other. In Hudson's words, 'the mother monkey and the mother cat acted together in the same forest of consciousness'.<sup>126</sup> But by the fourteenth century, the acharyas of the Vaishnava Sampradaya made the question of grace and the distinctions in the manner in which it is received an either/or matter. The disagreement between the *Vatakalai* (Northern Division), who believe that a devotee must actively cooperate in God granting salvation, and the *Tenkalai* (Southern Division), who believe in being in the kitten-like state for God as the mother cat to come and grant them salvation, continues to this day.

Ramakrishna confessed that he was partial to the kitten-like attitude in relation to God, grace and salvation. But, as noted above, he does not reject the

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126. Ibid., p. 280.

implications of the baby monkey example and the model of bhakti it represented. The frequency and enthusiasm with which Ramakrishna draws upon the kitten and mother cat example can mislead the reader of the *Kathāmṛita* into assuming that Ramakrishna was partial to the *Tenkalai* view. On the contrary, drawing upon Hudson's insights, it would be safe to assume that like the early Vaishnava acharyas, Ramakrishna too saw 'other-power' and 'self-power' as alternating and complementing each other in the course of a spiritual aspirant's journey. He had himself undertaken such a journey and continued to endorse many elements that constituted the years of his 'mad sadhana' as desirable and worth emulation. Hence, he could reject the path of the Vedas as inappropriate for Kaliyuga and consider the path of Tantra to be efficacious,<sup>127</sup> but at the same time also say that 'In the Kaliyuga the best way is bhaktiyoga... The path of devotion alone is the religion of this age.'<sup>128</sup> Meditating on mantras and mandalas was, therefore, part of the same bhakti continuum, a form of Vibhava-diksha, which over a period of time matured into direct perception of God, comparable to the Sukshma-diksha. For Ramakrishna, what was non-negotiable for spiritual aspirants at every step on the way to realizing God was the sense of longing, the ecstatic and mad love of God.

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127. *Gospel*, p. 311.

128 Ibid., p. 143; see also, p. 376.

There is, however, a set of ideas that complete, deepen, refine and add richness to our understanding of Ramakrishna's faith and these merit detailed and careful consideration. This is the distinction Ramakrishna makes between a *jnani* and a *vijnani*. In making this distinction, he is emphatic that the way of *jnana* or knowledge and the path of *vijnana* or *bhakti* are equally legitimate ways of attaining God. The difference between them lies elsewhere. Knowing and believing that God dwells in all beings is *jnana*, but knowing God intimately is *vijnana* or a form of richer knowledge.<sup>129</sup> In an aphoristic flourish, Ramakrishna constitutes the parameters through which this distinction becomes meaningful: 'To know many things is *ajnāna*, ignorance. To know only one thing is *jñāna*, Knowledge – the realization that God alone is real and that He dwells in all. And to talk to Him is *vijñāna*, a fuller Knowledge. To love God in different ways, after realizing Him, is *vijnāna*.'<sup>130</sup> In describing knowledge,

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129. Ibid., p. 899. The terms '*jñāna*' and '*vijñāna*' have been used in philosophical texts from the Upanishads onwards to mean various things ranging from consciousness as distinguished from specific forms of cognitions. *Vijñāna* has been employed to indicate, as Ramakrishna does, a unique form of knowledge. The Buddhists and the Naiyayikas have used other terms to describe both of these terms or have coined terms that conflate the two ideas into one term. For an excellent account of the history of the use of *jñāna* and *vijñāna*, see Bina Gupta, *Cit: Consciousness*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003.

130. *Gospel*, pp. 598-9.



Ramakrishna is categorical that neither reasoning, nor knowledge of the scriptures could take anyone close to realizing God. For him, God was beyond the scriptures, beyond the Vedas and their prescriptions. In one instance, recorded in the *Kathāmrita*, Ramakrishna rejects the idea that God can be attained by reading the Vedas and the Vedānta, and, saying so, turns to Narendranāth and says: 'Do you understand this? The Vedas give only a hint.'<sup>131</sup> The scriptures might record many things but they were all useless without devotion and direct realization of God. He likens the scriptures to the almanac that forecasts the rain, but squeezing the almanac cannot produce even a drop of water. Texts, scriptures, and the reasoning about their content have a place only till such time a devotee has not realized God.

The jnani gives up the attachment of worldly things and begins a process of discrimination and elimination. Ramakrishna often describes this process as akin to climbing a roof, step by step, leaving each step behind. In undertaking this process of discrimination, a jnani is guided by scriptural injunctions.<sup>132</sup> Giving up identification with objects of sight, hearing and touch, he rejects the world as illusory. He discovers God by asking the question of the identity and source of the ego, the 'I'. Can the 'I' be reducible to the flesh, bones, marrow, mind

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131. Ibid., p. 526.

132. Ibid., p. 476.

or intellect? Through the act of reasoning that results in saying 'Neti, neti' or 'Not this, not this' a jnani realizes that God or Brahman is his own inner consciousness, which is also his true identity. God for him is no longer a person, nor does he have the words to describe who or what God is. Why? Ramakrishna describes this state of speechlessness thus: 'And who will describe it? He who is to describe does not exist at all; he no longer finds his "I".'<sup>133</sup> Having attained such a state, God is experienced, not through the mind or the intelligence, but only as consciousness.<sup>134</sup>

Having experienced God-consciousness within himself, the jnani considers the universe illusory and thinks of it as a dream. Realizing Brahman, however, is not possible till an individual remains conscious of his ego, transcending the sense of 'I' and 'you' and of 'one' and 'many'. Once the knowledge of Brahman is attained, the ego is effaced and the devotee gets established in samadhi.<sup>135</sup> This is 'jada samadhi',<sup>136</sup> where the last trace of ego is erased. This is, of course, the ideal. In reality, there are only a few people who are able to shake off the 'I' by means of samadhi. 'You may indulge in thousands of reasonings,' says Ramakrishna, 'but still the "I" comes

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133. Ibid., p. 859.

134. Ibid., p. 859.

135. Ibid., p. 416.

136. Ibid., p. 478.

back.<sup>137</sup> Thus, having climbed the roof, an individual cannot stay there for long and has to come down. In the musical scale, one goes in the ascending order of the notes, sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni, but it is impossible to stay at ni for long.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, the ego has the tendency to reappear.

In the *Kathāmrita*, Ramakrishna uses the terms ‘reasoning’, ‘Vedanta’, ‘path of discrimination’, ‘path of knowledge’ and ‘jnana/jnanayoga’ interchangeably. While there is clear acknowledgement on his part that jnana is one way of reaching God, it is also unmistakably clear that it is neither his preferred way nor is it a path he endorses enthusiastically. The reasons for this indifference to the path of discrimination are varied, but, together, they clearly set the stage for Ramakrishna’s unreserved embracing of the way shown by vijñāna. One reason for his reticence regarding jnana was the constraints Kaliyuga puts on following the difficult path of knowledge. Life of an individual in Kaliyuga is driven by food and, therefore, it is almost impossible to get rid of the consciousness of the body and the ego. An individual’s claim of having attained the consciousness of Brahman, then, will sound hollow, especially when that individual cannot be above disease, grief, old age and death. ‘However you may reason and

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137. Ibid., p. 170.

138. Ibid., p. 104.

argue,' Ramakrishna asserts, 'the feeling that the body is identical with the soul will somehow crop up from an unexpected quarter.'<sup>139</sup> Ramakrishna goes a step further. He questions the Vedantin's utterance of 'I am He' or 'I am Brahman' in Kaliyuga, even after such an aspirant may have followed the path of knowledge and realized the non-dualistic nature of reality.

The feeling, 'I am He', is not wholesome. A man who entertains such an idea, while looking on his body as the Self, causes himself great harm. He cannot go forward in spiritual life; he drags himself down. He deceives himself as well as others. He cannot understand his own state of mind.<sup>140</sup>

Even here, some exceptions had to be admitted. All devotees are not of the same level. Jnanis exhibit certain physical and behavioural features that distinguish them from ordinary people. Narendra, for instance, had big protruding eyes.<sup>141</sup> Further, a jnani does not injure anyone, and though might appear to be angry and egotistical, in reality he is not so; his anger and ego are a mere appearance. Neither does a man of knowledge have any attachment to anything worldly.<sup>142</sup> There were individuals

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139. Ibid., p. 172. See also, p. 468.

140. Ibid., p. 172. See also, p. 103.

141. Ibid., p. 249.

142 Ibid., p. 417.

like Shankaracharya, Janaka, Narada, Hanuman, Sanaka, Sanatana, Sananda and Sanatkumara who had attained the knowledge of Brahman. In other words, they were Brahmajnanis. But they retained the 'ego of knowledge'<sup>143</sup> in order to do good to others and to teach others. They were unlike the sages of the old who attained knowledge for their own salvation and were timid.<sup>144</sup> The 'knowledge ego' retained after having attained Brahmajnana was the 'ripe' ego, unlike the man with an 'unripe' ego, who thinks that he is the doer rather than God who makes men do all things. Phrases like 'doing good to others' and 'teaching others', however, are not remotely connected to Swami Vivekananda's later formulation of Practical Vedanta. Neither are these in any manner of speaking the early intimation of what Vivekananda would formulate as Practical Vedanta. When Ramakrishna says that Shankaracharya retained the 'ego of knowledge' in order to teach and do good to others, he categorically means that the 'knowledge ego' was retained in order to teach spiritual life and nothing else.<sup>145</sup>

Leaving aside these exceptions, an individual who attains the knowledge and vision of Brahman goes silent. The process of reasoning and discrimination lasts only till he has not attained Brahman. Ramakrishna compares this state to butter sizzling on fire as long as the water

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143. Ibid., pp. 416-17, 480, 103.

144. Ibid., p. 480.

145. Ibid., p. 860.

in it does not dry up or the buzzing of the bee till such time that it does not sit on a flower and sips nectar. His favourite example, however, is that of the husband of a young girl who comes to visit his father-in-law. The husband is seated in the drawing-room with other young men. The girl and her friends are watching them from the window. The girl's friends want her to identify her husband from among the young men gathered there. They point to many young men, one by one, and ask the girl if any of them is her husband. In each case, the girl smiles and answers in the negative. Finally, when her friends manage to correctly point to her husband and identify him, the girl neither says yes nor no, but smiles and keeps quiet.<sup>146</sup> In other words, realizing the true nature of Brahman makes the aspirant go silent. Why does he go silent? This is because Brahman cannot be described in words. Like food, everything in the world had been defiled by the tongue, including the Vedas, the Puranas, and the Tantras; they have been spoken about and uttered by the tongues of men.<sup>147</sup> Only the Brahman, says Ramakrishna, remains undefiled by the tongue.

Ramakrishna found jnanis to be monotonous people.<sup>148</sup> He had no use of mere reasoning and dry logic. In one of the more dramatic moments recorded in the *Kathāmrita*, Ramakrishna makes his view of jnana and endless

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146. Ibid., p. 280.

147. Ibid., p. 900.

148. Ibid., p. 479.

reasoning amply clear: 'Mere dry reasoning – I spit on it! I have no use of it! (The Master spits on the ground.)'<sup>149</sup>

Instead, he wanted to be like the weaver woman who danced with both her hands held raised. Ramakrishna tells the story with great relish.<sup>150</sup> A weaver, who was spinning various kinds of silk thread, is visited by a woman friend. She is delighted to see her friend and goes inside the house to get her friend some refreshments. While she is away, her friend gets enticed by the different colours of the thread and steals one. She hides the bundle of thread under one arm. Returning after getting the refreshments, the weaver realizes that her friend has stolen a bundle of thread and decides upon a plan to get it back. She tells her friend that her happiness on seeing her was immense and she wanted to express that happiness by dancing with her. When the two began dancing, the weaver encouraged her friend to dance with both hands raised. She soon realized that her friend was dancing with only one hand raised, while pressing the other hand by her side. Despite much persuasion, the weaver failed to get her friend to dance with both hands raised. Her friend insisted that she only knew to dance with one hand raised and the other pressed by the side. Drawing from the story, Ramakrishna asserts that both his hands were free and he did not want to dance with one arm pressed to his side. In other words,

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149. Ibid., p. 272.

150. Ibid., pp. 479-80.

he wished to accept the Nitya or the Absolute as well as the Lila or the relative. That is what a vijñani did and that is the reason why vijñana was richer and superior.

It is important at this juncture to capture the richness of Ramakrishna's delineation of the vijñani state before looking at the implications of the jñani-vijñani distinction. As noted earlier, the defining feature of a vijñani is his intimate knowledge of God, which, in turn, is a richer knowledge. Because of this intimacy, the vijñani, who also climbs the roof, does so incrementally, climbing step by step. But unlike the jñani, who discriminates, eliminates and rejects the steps, the vijñani realizes that the steps too are made of the same material as the roof.<sup>151</sup> The vijñani realizes that Brahman has become the universe, all living beings, mind, intelligence, love, knowledge and renunciation. Instead of being illusory and unreal, the world was, indeed, a 'mansion of mirth'. The realization dawns on him that whether one calls it Truth, Reality, God or Brahman, it is both *saguna* or with attributes and *nirguna* or without attributes. In truth, God is beyond form and formlessness, and it is churlish on our part to limit the idea of God by circumscribing him as formless or with form.<sup>152</sup> The Brahman is beyond speech and form, but the same Brahman is born in flesh and blood and performs various activities. 'From the one

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151. Ibid., pp. 103-4.

152. Ibid., p. 192.



Om,' concludes Ramakrishna, 'have sprung "Om Śiva", "Om Kālī", and "Om Krishna".'<sup>153</sup> Endowed with this clarity, the vijñani discovers that there is no difference between Brahman and Bhagavan or the Personal God. Put differently, the vijñani is a bhakta and his ideal is a Personal God. For him, Brahman and Shakti are the same, like the gem and its lustre, where one cannot talk of one without speaking of the other. In other instances, he compares the oneness of Brahman and Shakti as fire and its power to burn, milk and its whiteness and water and its wetness. The vijñani, then, not just wants to know God, but he aspires to laugh, weep, dance, sing and sport in the ecstasy of God. 'In the Ocean of God-Consciousness,' says Ramakrishna, 'he sometimes swims, sometime goes down, and sometimes rises to the surface – like pieces of ice in the water.'<sup>154</sup> Bhakti also has a cooling influence on the Brahman and helps transform the Infinite into the finite and appear as God with form.<sup>155</sup>

Vijnana, then, is getting to know God in a 'special way',<sup>156</sup> though it is not the only way. A bhakta does not begin with the desire to attain the knowledge of Brahman.

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153. Ibid., p. 366.

154. Ibid., p. 277.

155. Ibid., p. 859. 'Therefore people compare bhakti, love of God, to the cooling light of the moon, and jñāna, knowledge, to the burning rays of the sun.' See also, p. 218: 'The heat of the sun of Knowledge melts the ice-like form of the Personal God.'

156. Ibid., p. 288.

Rather, he wants to attain the Personal God who has form and wants to talk to that God. If God so desires, he will grant the devotee the love of God as well as the knowledge of Brahman. In the world of bhakti, pleased with the devotee's longing and ecstatic love, God himself may say to him, 'You are the same as Myself.'<sup>157</sup> God runs after a devotee as a cow runs after the calf.<sup>158</sup> In another unique parable, Ramakrishna wants his interlocutors to imagine a king sitting on the throne in his court. If his cook were to enter and declare that he and the king were the same, it is certain that people would call the cook mad. On the contrary, if one day, pleased with the cook's services, the king were to ask him to come and sit next to him and tell the cook that there was no difference between them, no one will take this act of generosity coming from the king amiss.<sup>159</sup> Ramakrishna further simplifies the idea beautifully: The important thing was to reach Calcutta. Once there, one can see the maidan and the museum and many other places.<sup>160</sup> The awareness that fire exists

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157. Ibid., p. 248.

158. Ibid., p. 157. This idea too is likely a slight modification of lines from Ramprasad: 'But I know too that salvation/ Always follows worship around/ Like a slave...'. See, Rāmprasād Sen, *Grace and Mercy in Her Wild Hair: Selected Poems To The Mother Goddess*, translated by Leonard Nathan and Clinton Seely, Foreword by Andrew Schelling, Hohm Press, Prescott, Arizona, 1999, p. 57.

159. *Gospel*, p. 248.

160. Ibid., p. 468.

in wood is jnana, while to cook rice on it, eat it and be nourished by it is vijñana.<sup>161</sup> To only have heard of milk is ajñana or ignorance, but to have seen it is jnana. But to drink milk and be nourished by it is vijñana.<sup>162</sup> Simply stated, the vijñani wants to enjoy God as a child, friend, master and beloved.<sup>163</sup> He does not want to become sugar, but wants to eat it.<sup>164</sup> He does so because he has the lucidity that it is extremely difficult in Kaliyuga to get rid of the 'I', the ego. To speak of the world as a dream is impossible as long as God keeps intact the awareness of 'I' and so long as one is conscious of the body and of sense objects. The body is a pot, while the mind and the intelligence stand for the water. Rice, potatoes and other vegetables are the objects of the senses. The Brahman or the Infinite is the fire. The 'I-consciousness' constantly makes the contents of the pot, identified with the objects of the senses, jump about, as if saying, 'We are here,' 'We are jumping.'<sup>165</sup> Instead of claiming perfect identification with the Brahman, like the Vedantin, and saying, 'I am He', Ramakrishna's constant refrain, therefore, is: 'Since this "I" must remain, let the rascal be God's servant.'<sup>166</sup>

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161. Ibid., p. 288.

162. Ibid., p. 404.

163. Ibid., p. 288.

164. Ibid., p. 172. The phrase is from a poem by Ramprasad. The exact lines are: 'Sugar I love/But haven't the slightest desire/To merge with sugar.' See, Rāmprasād Sen, op. cit., p. 57.

165. *Gospel*, p. 243.

166. Ibid., p. 105.

Even after having attained samadhi, the bhakta retains the 'I-consciousness', but it takes the form of the 'servant ego' or the 'devotee ego'. Conversely, he opts for the attitude of the servant and the devotee and practises this kind of 'I-consciousness' in order to attain God. But the offer of Brahmajnana depends on the will and grace of God and the devotee does not actively seek it.<sup>167</sup> In his own case, Ramakrishna spoke of God changing the state of his mind from the Absolute to the Relative. In these changing states of mind, Ramakrishna realizes that the 'manifold has come from the One alone, the Relative from the Absolute'.<sup>168</sup> In other words, God as the non-dual, incomparable, unutterable One also becomes the creator, maya, the living beings and the universe. Ramakrishna describes the play between the absolute and the relative in terms of the two states of Shiva's mind. When he is satisfied in the Self and transfixed in samadhi, he is Atmarama. On descending from samadhi, he retains a trace of ego and dances and sings 'Rama, Rama' like a bhakta.<sup>169</sup> A devotee who has seen God retains his 'I-consciousness' only in name. That degree of 'I' is a mere appearance, like the mark left on a coconut tree by a fallen branch,<sup>170</sup> and through this 'I', the 'I' of

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167. Ibid., p. 171.

168. Ibid., p. 307.

169. Ibid., p. 345.

170. Ibid., p. 405.

the devotee, he enjoys the infinite play of God.<sup>171</sup>

The argument this far: the way of the jnani was a legitimate path to follow in getting to know God. But knowing God through dry reasoning was not enough. The Vedantin gets to know God in a state of samadhi, but that state does not last long. In the play between the absolute and the relative, the persistence of the 'I-consciousness' inevitably brings an individual in that state to the world of living beings and the universe. God is Brahman, but is also Shakti, the Primordial Energy. While nothing can be said about the attributeless Brahman, Shakti manifests as the Primal Power, Mahamaya, which covers Brahman.<sup>172</sup> The relation between Brahman and Shakti is like the snake and its wriggling motion: one cannot think of the snake without its wriggling motion and vice versa. As long as Brahman remains wrapped in Mahamaya, God ought to be seen as Mother. Repeating 'Neti, neti', is, therefore, a waste of time. To say, 'I am He' also is incorrect. It is perfectly alright to reach the roof, but, having once reached the top of the roof, a true devotee must make an all-important transition, take a crucial leap. He must affirm that after having realized Brahman, it is the same Brahman that has become all living beings, the universe and the twenty-four cosmic principles.<sup>173</sup> Stated differently, it

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171. Ibid., p. 479.

172. Ibid., p. 290.

173. Ibid., pp. 271-2.

is imperative to move to a stage beyond Brahmajnana, which is vijñana. To remove a thorn stuck in one's foot one needs another thorn. The first thorn is ajñana or ignorance and the second thorn that helps extract the first is jñana or knowledge. But to throw away both the thorns, that is, to go beyond knowledge and ignorance, vidya and avidya, is vijñana. After attaining the state of the vijñani, not only does the universe and all living beings appear as an extension of Brahman, but the meditation and the meditator as also bhakti and prema<sup>174</sup> appear to be part of the glory of that Absolute that the Vedantins call Brahman. In essence, the 'self power' of the baby monkey must travel the distance to make the transition to faith in the 'other-power' exemplified by the kitten and the mother cat.



In the context of Ramakrishna's faith, it is abundantly clear that an all-embracing conception of bhakti held pride of place. It allowed for the spiritual seeker to embark on this journey through diverse paths, be it Tantra or Vedanta, but enjoined him to ultimately reach the goal of mature or ripe bhakti and become a vijñani. But indiscriminate bhakti does not help a devotee attain God. For bhakti to be meaningful, one had to assume

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174. Ibid., p. 290.

the right bhava or attitude towards God. But the right attitude eludes an aspirant till such time he manages to acquire the right kind of bhakti. The equation for Ramakrishna is very straightforward: First one needs to inculcate and possess single-minded devotion to God, one in which one's mind and soul merge into God-consciousness.<sup>175</sup> It is the kind of devotion a wife feels for her husband. After bhakti matures, it becomes bhava.<sup>176</sup> Ramakrishna lists five such bhavas or attitudes:<sup>177</sup> the *shanta* (serene), *dasya* (of the servant towards the master), *sakhya* (friendship), *vatsalya* (of the mother towards her child), and, finally, and most important, the *madhura* (of the woman towards her lover). Radha had madhura-bhava for Krishna and so does a wife for her husband. For Ramakrishna, the madhura-bhava includes all the other four bhavas and is supreme. Assuming a bhava with the ordinary awareness of the physical body remaining intact is no great help in seeing God. The phrase 'seeing God' has a weight of its own where the word 'seeing' is not used unmindfully or casually. 'Better than reading is hearing,' maintains Ramakrishna, 'and better than hearing is seeing.'<sup>178</sup> If God, then, cannot be seen with physical eyes, something else would be needed for the devotee to see God. Ramakrishna calls this the

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175. Ibid., p. 315.

176. Ibid., p. 255.

177. Ibid., p. 115.

178. Ibid., p. 476.

'love body', which, in turn, is endowed with 'love eyes', 'love ears' and sexual organs made of love. The devotee's intense longing and love for God makes the 'love body' help the soul commune with God.<sup>179</sup>

After bhava, therefore, comes mahabhava or divine ecstasy. Ramakrishna describes his own experience of mahabhava<sup>180</sup> as the joy he experienced that equalled the pain he suffered before attaining that exalted state of bliss. The experience shakes the body and the mind to the core: it is like an elephant entering a small hut. The elephant's entry can either shake the foundations or even destroy the hut. Ramakrishna speaks of the burning pain he felt on being separated from God. It made him unconscious for three days, and he lay in one place till the Bhairavi took him for a bath. The earth that stuck to his body had got baked as a result of his burning pain. Leading him to the bathing spot, she had to cover him in a thick sheet because his skin could not bear her touch. He describes his state as one where he felt as if 'a ploughshare were passing through my backbone'.<sup>181</sup> People around him thought he was going mad and he himself thought that he was either going mad or had fallen ill. The Bhairavi assured him<sup>182</sup> that he was not going mad and it was beyond ordinary mortals to

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179. Ibid., p. 115.

180. Ibid., p. 747.

181. Ibid., p. 747.

182. *Great Master*, pp. 214-5.



recognize his state. She told him that his state was the same as that of Radha, Krishna's consort, and that of Chaitanya.<sup>183</sup> She identified his state to be one that a devotee experiences when he calls God with intense longing and earnestness.

The mahabhava is a state of samadhi, where an individual remains unconscious of the outer world, becomes speechless, a state in which his nerve currents and breath stop momentarily.<sup>184</sup> The stage after mahabhava is prema or ecstatic love, which is the prelude to attaining God. Again, it is rare for ordinary devotees to experience this state; Chaitanya jumped into the ocean thinking it was the River Jamuna when he was in this mood. With prema comes the detachment about one's own body, something that humans treasure above all else. To attain, realize and see God, ecstatic love and longing for God was the key. And the only way to inch towards that goal was prema-bhakti or raga-bhakti.<sup>185</sup> To some, raga-bhakti is innate. Others are not so lucky and they have to begin with japa or repeating God's name numerous times, fast, go on pilgrimages, make ritualistic

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183. 'The essence of *hlādinī* is *prema*; the essence of *prema* is *bhāva*; the highest *bhāva* is called *mahābhāva*. The true form of *mahābhāva* is Rādhā Thākuraṇī, the treasure-house of all qualities, the crest-jewel among all the lovers of Kṛṣṇa.' CC, op.cit., p. 193. Also note that Radha is identified with the Hlādinī-śakti of the Tantra philosophy.

184. *Gospel*, pp. 255, 315.

185. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-3.

offerings and perform sacrifices. This is Vaidhi-bhakti or formal devotion. Ramakrishna describes it as using a hand-held fan to produce a semblance of breeze. The moment natural breeze starts flowing, one has to set aside the hand-held fan. Similarly, the moment one develops a spontaneous love and longing for God, *japa*, fasting and austerities 'drop away'.<sup>186</sup> Vaidhi-bhakti is 'green' bhakti or 'unripe' bhakti. *Prema-bhakti* and *raga-bhakti* are 'ripe' bhakti because they are instances of love of God, manifested as the mother's love for the child, the child's love for the mother or that of the wife for the husband. Ramakrishna categorically states that 'ripe' bhakti alone is sufficient in order to attain and see God. Radha, Ramakrishna tells his listeners,<sup>187</sup> saw Krishna within and without. When her friends could not see anything and thought Radha was delirious, Radha asked them to paint their eyes with the collyrium of divine love to be able to see Krishna everywhere. This was, for him, the highest embodiment of mature or 'ripe' bhakti as well as ecstatic, impatient longing for God.

Even within ecstatic love of God, Ramakrishna introduces a subtle distinction: 'I-ness' and 'my-ness'.<sup>188</sup> While positing them as distinctions, Ramakrishna suggests that the 'I-ness' flows into the 'my-ness' effortlessly, tied

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186. *Ibid.*, p. 173. See also, p. 659.

187. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

188. *Ibid.*, pp. 360, 229, 449.

by a common thread, namely, that the devotee does not look upon his object of adoration, the Personal God, as God. Yashoda, Krishna's mother, represents the passage from 'I-ness' aspect of love to the 'my-ness' attitude with effortless ease. Ramakrishna dramatizes this transition from 'I-ness' to 'my-ness' to show the remarkable quality that inheres in prema-bhakti and raga-bhakti:

Yaśodā used to think: 'Who would look after Gopāla if *I* did not? He will fall ill if *I* do not serve Him.' She did not look on Krishna as God. The other element is 'my-ness'. It means to look on God as one's own — '*my* Gopāla'. Uddhava said to Yaśodā: 'Mother, your Krishna is God Himself. He is the Lord of the Universe and not a common human being.' 'Oh!' exclaimed Yaśodā. 'I am not asking you about your Lord of the Universe. I want to know how my Gopāla fares. Not the Lord of the Universe, but *my* Gopāla.'<sup>189</sup>

Yashoda, Radha and the gopis, continues Ramakrishna, had a single-minded devotion to Krishna. A yearning for Krishna that would produce divine madness in them at the sight of a black tree or make them place their subtle bodies under his feet to prevent the soles of his feet from getting hurt.<sup>190</sup> Krishna was their beloved, their

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189. Ibid., p. 229.

190. Ibid., pp. 449, 361.

sweetheart and not their God. Radha's fire of anguish at being separated from Krishna would turn her tears into steam.<sup>191</sup> And even though Krishna was enshrined in her heart, she wanted 'to sport with Him in human form'.<sup>192</sup> Radha possessed one hundred and twenty-five per cent of the yearning and ecstatic love for Krishna, whereas very few possess even a 'particle of such prema'.<sup>193</sup> Attaining prema, concludes Ramakrishna, gives the devotee the rope to tie God.<sup>194</sup> Having attained prema-bhakti or raga-bhakti, a devotee becomes one of God's sincere devotees. It makes God responsible for them, just as a registered patient is never discharged by the doctor till he is fully cured.<sup>195</sup>

Prema-bhakti and raga-bhakti infused with madhura-bhava was for Ramakrishna not merely a way of seeing God, but, like Tantra, was a model for transgression leading to transcendence. The love that Radha and the gopis had for Krishna made them renounce 'husbands, children, family and propriety of conduct, honour and dishonour, shame and aversion, fear of public opinion and of society'.<sup>196</sup> But Radha's madhura-bhava cannot be understood just by reasoning. Rather, a devotee

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191. Ibid., p. 449.

192. Ibid., p. 506.

193. Ibid., p. 449.

194. Ibid., p. 588.

195. Ibid., p. 659.

196. *Great Master*, p. 259.

had to lose himself completely in that mood, and as Ramakrishna puts it, 'become Radha'.<sup>197</sup> In the days of his 'divine madness', which was also the period of his intense spiritual practice, Ramakrishna sought to directly experience madhura-bhava. He elaborately dressed as a woman, including wearing a wig and gold ornaments. Losing complete consciousness of his body, he began to think, speak, smile, glance, gesture and move like one of Krishna's gopis. He remained in the guise of a woman for six months. During this period, he prayed for union with Krishna in the way that the gopis of Vrindavan did and expressed a heightened degree of sense of separation from Krishna. He soon realized that in order to attain Krishna, he had to please, pray and supplicate Radha. Having done so, soon he saw a vision of Radha, who disappeared into his own body. After that, Ramakrishna in moods of deep ecstasy began to feel as if he was Radha and his longing ended with the establishment of a relation of husband and wife between Krishna and himself.<sup>198</sup> Even in later life, any instance of a song being sung that would speak of the separation of Radha from Krishna would send Ramakrishna into a deep trance. The *Kathāmrita* records an instance in 1884, two years before his death, when Ramakrishna, hearing such a song, assumed the mood

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197. Ibid., p. 259.

198. Ibid., pp. 273-5.

of Radha and in a voice full of sorrow began singing. 'O friend,' he sang, 'either bring my beloved Krishna here or take me to Him.'<sup>199</sup>

## II

If there is one phrase in the popular consciousness that effortlessly invokes the name and memory of Ramakrishna, it is 'Ramakrishna's catholicity'. Vivekananda, more than anyone else, helped construct the elements that constituted this carefully edited, censored and wilfully misleading version of his master's 'catholicity'. He used it to mean what he thought was Ramakrishna's tolerance, generosity and inclusiveness in relation to other faiths while carefully glossing over the sources and influences that produced this 'catholicity'. The continued use of the term has had a longevity independent of Vivekananda's remoulding of Ramakrishna from a 'religious ecstatic to a religious eclectic',<sup>200</sup> and continues to be used even to this day by perceptive and critical readers of the Ramakrishna-

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199. *Gospel*, p. 445. Ramakrishna visited Vrindavan, where an old woman, who lived alone in a hut, would look at his spiritual ecstasy and call him the very embodiment of Radha and began to address him as 'Dulaali'. See p. 129.

200. Narasingha P. Sil, 'Vivekānanda's Rāmakrishna: An Untold Story of Mythmaking and Propaganda', *Numen*, Vol. 40 (1993), p. 38.

Vivekananda story.<sup>201</sup> In speaking of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda refers to his 'highest catholicity'.<sup>202</sup> In a letter to Shivananda in 1894, Vivekananda calls Ramakrishna 'the latest and the most perfect'<sup>203</sup> among the incarnations of God. He was, argues Vivekananda, 'the concentrated embodiment of knowledge, love, renunciation, catholicity, and the desire to serve mankind'.<sup>204</sup> This is what the English translation offers. The term used in the Bangla original is *udarata*, which would normally translate as generosity or liberality or openness, but has been translated as catholicity in the official English translation.<sup>205</sup> The use of 'catholicity' fits better in Vivekananda's subsequent portrayal of Ramakrishna as the harbinger of a version of Vedantic universalism or as someone who attempted a synthesis of various sects and faiths. Ramakrishna, as we will see, had no such aim or intention. The other

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201. For instance, Sumit Sarkar writes that 'Ramakrishna's catholicity was made into an argument for the essential superiority of an aggressive and muscular Hinduism'. See Sarkar, *Op.cit.*, p. 291.

202. *CW*, Vol.7, pp. 412-3. See also, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.1, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Twenty-third impression, 2000, p. 19, for Vivekananda's use of the term in a speech in 1893 at the Parliament of Religions, where he talks about the 'catholicity' of the religious ideas of the Hindus.

203. *Ibid.*, p. 483.

204. *Ibid.*, p. 483.

205. I am indebted to Probal Dasgupta, Debjani Bhattacharyya, Chandana Chakraborti and Anindita Mukhopadhyaya for a better understanding of the Bangla original of this letter.

suggestion that Ramakrishna preached the idea of service to mankind will be taken up in the next chapter. However, it is crucial to understand Ramakrishna's attitude towards other sects and faiths, especially in order to map the breaks and departures in Vivekananda from his master's legacy.

Ramakrishna believed that God had created various forms of worship to suit men endowed with different stages of knowledge. To illustrate this point, he offers the example of a mother who cooks different kinds of food to suit the palates and digestive capacities of her various children.<sup>206</sup> He asks Mahendranath Gupta to imagine that the mother has five children and has fish as the main ingredient by which all the five have to be fed different things. She will, then, go ahead and make five different dishes to suit the needs of each of her children. This example is offered frequently throughout the *Kathāmrita*, though not always in the same context. But what ties all the various contexts together is Ramakrishna's assertion that despite different capacities of digestion, the mother loves all her children equally.<sup>207</sup> In this specific instance, Mahendranath has an argument with Ramakrishna about the suitability of worshipping a clay image. An exasperated Ramakrishna tells him to give up the habit of lecturing and teaching and stop to 'consider how to get the light himself'.<sup>208</sup> It is God whose job it is to teach

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206. *Gospel*, p. 81.

207. *Ibid.*, p. 559.

208. *Ibid.*, p. 80.



everyone, says Ramakrishna, and it is God who will teach people the ways in which God himself wishes to be worshipped. All forms of worship, then, are devised by God, who also understands the need and rationale for them. All that was needed was to cultivate the love of God, surrender oneself and be open to the will of the 'other-power' powerfully illustrated by the relationship the kitten has with the mother cat.

All religions, then, were paths and forms devised by God. Ramakrishna attests<sup>209</sup> to having followed each of these faiths, which were different paths, and mentions Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. In the same breath, he also mentions the paths followed by the Shaktas, Vaishnavas and the Vedantists. All these paths led to one God despite their seeming differences. The Hindus call water 'jal', the Muslims call it 'paani' and the English call it 'water'. But it is the same water from various ends of the same lake. Note that Ramakrishna underlines the differences between the Hindus, Muslims and the English in terms of linguistic usage and not faith. The differences were, therefore, not of faith or belief but of the same Reality being called Allah, God, Brahman, Kali, Rama, Jesus, Durga and Hari.<sup>210</sup> In other words, difference lies in name and form, not in the nature of Reality. These differences do not exist because of greater

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209. Ibid., p. 129.

210. Ibid., p. 135.

superiority or being more evolved. They exist because of differences in climate, temperament and language.

I see people who talk about religion constantly quarrelling with one another. Hindus, Mussalmāns, Brāhmos, Śāktas, Vaishnavas, Śaivas, all quarrelling with one another. They haven't the intelligence to understand that He who is called Krishna is also Śiva and the Primal Śakti, and that it is He, again, who is called Jesus and Āllāh.<sup>211</sup>

Not only does Ramakrishna list all faiths without privileging any, but he also conflates the faiths and sects without singling any one out for special mention. He does the same with scriptures, when he lists the Vedas, the Puranas and the Tantra as instruments for seeking God and nothing more. After all, for him, the 'Satchidānanda Brahman in the Vedas is called Satchidānanda Śiva in the Tantra',<sup>212</sup> and, therefore, there was no inherent hierarchy that informed either faiths, or paths or even scriptures.

One of the sources of Ramakrishna's inclusiveness and universality lies in refusing to claim superiority for either a sect or school of thought or way of perception within the entity we know today as Hinduism. Neither did he entertain a defined, exclusive and sharply

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211. Ibid., p. 423.

212. Ibid., p. 423. See also, p. 265.

delineated sense of Hindu identity. For him the Shaktas, the Vaishnavas and the Vedantins were all the same, each following a different path towards the same goal. God for him was described similarly in the Vedas, the Puranas and the Tantras, and could be formless or with form.<sup>213</sup> Ramakrishna recognized that it was in the nature of sects and faiths to magnify their views and claim superiority for them, but this was not to be his way. His bewilderment and anguish at people killing and shedding blood in the name of religion is beautifully captured in his citing an anonymous quote: 'The attributeless Brahman is my Father. God with attributes is my Mother. Whom shall I blame? Whom shall I praise? The two pans of the scales are equally heavy.'<sup>214</sup> For him, Shaktas, Vaishnavas and Vedantins harbouring malice against each other and quarrelling signified a lack of wisdom.<sup>215</sup>

Just as the mother who cooks different dishes for her children to suit their tastes and physical constitution and does so with love, all that faiths and sects require is sincere longing and an earnest yearning for God. Again, it is this element of longing, yearning and love that makes Ramakrishna's inclusiveness and universality stand apart from the 'empirical' and 'scientific' caricature of

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213. Ibid., pp. 489-90.

214. Ibid., p. 490.

215. Ibid., p. 222.

it that Vivekananda sought to portray. Take, for instance, an example of a moment captured in the *Kathāmrita*. Ramakrishna is talking to Kali, his Divine Mother. He says:

Mother, everyone says, 'My watch alone is right.' The Christians, the Brāhmos, the Hindus, the Mussalmāns, all say, 'My religion alone is true.' But Mother, the fact is that nobody's watch is right. Who can truly understand Thee? But if a man prays to Thee with a yearning heart, he can reach Thee, through Thy grace, by any path. Mother, show me some time how the Christians pray to Thee in their churches. But Mother, what will people say if I go in? Suppose they make a fuss! Suppose they don't allow me to enter the Kālī temple again! Well then, show me the Christian worship from the door of the Church.<sup>216</sup>

The yearning heart, however, is not a wandering and fickle heart. Having transcended name and form, having rejected the artificial distinction between the formless God and God with form, the sincere longing and the yearning heart must have an anchor. Ramakrishna calls this 'nishthaa', single-minded devotion, as contrasted with promiscuous devotion, which he likens to a tree

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216. Ibid., pp. 93-94.

with five branches.<sup>217</sup> For Ramakrishna, his nishthaa to Kali opens for him the possibility of praying in a church. But he prays to Kali in the church, not any other form of God, and has no regrets if on account of entering the church, he is disallowed from entering the Kali temple again. For him, God manifests as Kali, and as a believer in the idea of a Personal God, his nishthaa is directed towards Kali. Hanuman and the gopis of Vrindavan were for him examples of nishthaa. When the gopis saw Krishna in the attire of a king in Mathura, they refused to recognize him till he would appear to them with a peacock feather in his crest wearing yellow clothes. In another epoch, Hanuman refused to acknowledge Krishna till Krishna appeared to him as Rama.<sup>218</sup> Liberal-minded devotees, argues Ramakrishna, accept all forms of God but at the same time direct their longing and yearning towards their chosen Personal God. Following one path with nishthaa tenaciously allows one to recognize the validity and truth of all other paths.<sup>219</sup>

Not only is it not desirable to characterize one's own faith as true and brand all others false, it is also entirely undesirable to point out flaws in one's own faith or in the faith of others. Ramakrishna, in suggesting this, goes far beyond any predictable model of tolerance, acceptance and fellow feeling among faiths. It is hubris, he suggests,

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217. Ibid., p. 222.

218. Ibid., p. 307.

219. Ibid., p. 374.

that makes human beings think they can correct flaws in their own faith or in the faith of others.<sup>220</sup> Religions or systems of belief are just paths created by God, but are not remotely, in themselves, God.

Faith is a creation and gift of God and it is beyond the jurisdiction of humans to tamper with it: 'Suppose there are errors in the religion that one has accepted; if one is sincere and earnest, then God Himself will correct these errors...If there are errors in other religions, that is none of our business. God, to whom the world belongs, takes care of that.'<sup>221</sup> Ramakrishna does not stop at this, but goes further to warn against the triumphalism that sets in when individuals or faiths arbitrarily decide that they are right and all others are wrong. They think of faith in terms of winning and losing, where, invariably, they perceive that they and their faith alone have won and all others have lost. 'But a person who has gone forward may be detained by some slight obstacle,' warns Ramakrishna, 'and someone who has been lagging behind may then steal a march on him.'<sup>222</sup> God's ways are mysterious, and triumph and defeat too are in his hands.

If these are the foundations upon which Ramakrishna's inclusiveness, universality and doctrinal generosity rested, it is also true that there was a complete absence in the *Kathāmrita* of a clearly articulated Hindu identity.

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220. Ibid., p. 559.

221. Ibid., p. 559.

222. Ibid., p. 578.

Even less so was the idea of a threatening, antagonistic 'Other' in the form of Islam or Christianity. Sumit Sarkar is right when he says that in Ramakrishna and in the pages of the *Kathāmrita* 'there is no developed sense of a sharply distinct "Hindu" identity – let alone any political use of it.'<sup>223</sup> There is, however, one exception within the *Kathāmrita* that causes a mild dissonance in our total and categorical rejection of the presence of a cohesive Hindu identity in Ramakrishna. It must also be said that this exception is vastly outweighed by the overwhelming evidence that points towards Ramakrishna's radical rejection of differences, hierarchies and claims of superiority among sects and faiths.

The exception can be traced to 20 October 1884.<sup>224</sup> Ramakrishna visits the Marwaris of Burrabazar, who are celebrating the Annakuta festival. While returning from the festival, Ramakrishna speaks admiringly of the devotion of the Marwaris, especially the joy with which they carried the image and lifted the throne of the deity on their shoulders. He calls this the 'real Hindu ideal' and also terms it 'Sanatana Dharma'. For Ramakrishna to be excited about expressions of bhakti is not unusual, and so the expression 'real Hindu ideal' can be understood in this context. What is more difficult to explain is the use of a politically charged neologism like 'Sanatana

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223. Sumit Sarkar, op.cit., p. 324.

224. *Gospel*, pp. 641-2.

Dharma'. Not only does he mention the term, he, then, proceeds to explain it:

The Hindu religion alone is the Sanātana Dharma. The various creeds you hear of nowadays have come into existence through the will of God and will disappear again through His will. They will not last forever. Therefore I say, 'I bow down at the feet of even the modern devotees.' The Hindu religion has always existed and will always exist.<sup>225</sup>

The coming together of the terms 'Sanatana Dharma' and 'Hindu religion' not just militates against the tone, tenor and spirit of the *Kathāmrita*, but the speech itself does not sound like Ramakrishna. If it does sound like anyone, it is Vivekananda, who considered only Hinduism to be worthy of the epithet 'religion' and thought of Islam and Christianity to be merely sects. As noted above, this exception takes little away from what is popularly known as Ramakrishna's 'catholicity'; that his inclusiveness and doctrinal generosity is much more radical and exceptional has been explained above.

Vivekananda's interpretation of Ramakrishna is a simultaneous act of fidelity and distortion. In every instance, the skeleton of Ramakrishna's thought is kept intact but the flesh and blood imposed on the skeleton often

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225. Ibid., p. 642.



bear little resemblance to the original. Take, for instance, the moment when Vivekananda<sup>226</sup> is talking about the mistake Shankaracharya and other commentators made in thinking of the truth exemplified in the Vedas as having an overall coherence and unity. When faced with contradictions and conflicting voices within the Vedas, they tried to fit these contradictions forcefully within their own view and that of their philosophical system. As against this kind of attempt, contradictions do seem apparent between Vedic texts and between the doctrines they preach. Vivekananda suggests that Lord Krishna himself tried to partially harmonize these contradictions, and he himself had come in the form of Ramakrishna to show the right way in which to truly understand the Vedas and Vedanta. Ramakrishna, he suggests, had through his life and teachings made sense of the seeming contradictions in these scriptures. What did Ramakrishna do? Vivekananda concludes that Ramakrishna perceived the contradictions as indication that various texts and their teachings are 'meant for different grades of aspirants and are arranged in the order of evolution'.<sup>227</sup> We already know that Ramakrishna had little interest in scriptures, thought nothing of the Vedas, made little distinction between the Vedas and the Vedanta in a formal sense, and found such textual details boring and monotonous.

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226. *CW*, Vol. 7, pp. 412-3.

227. *Ibid.*, pp. 412-13.

Even the example of the mother cooking various dishes for her children with differing physical constitutions is an example of God offering various paths to his devotees, yet, like the mother, loving them all equally. Vivekananda imports the example from Ramakrishna and converts it into a hierarchy of aspirants and an evolutionary schema conspicuously absent in his master.

In July 1895, in a talk on Ramakrishna, Vivekananda paraphrases Ramakrishna and speaks of the way in which God, seen as the attributeless Brahman, manifests in the world covered under the spell of maya. The jnani, suggests Vivekananda, uncovers God by force, while the Dualist begs the Mother of the Universe to lend him the key that will help him uncover God.<sup>228</sup> Ramakrishna's view, as we have already seen, is the opposite. It is either the tamasic way, where a devotee forces and coerces God to reveal and become manifest, or it is the way of bhakti where Ramakrishna asks the devotee to 'force your demand on the Divine Mother'.<sup>229</sup> Note also the use of the word 'Dualist'. In the next chapter, it will become clear that for all practical purposes, the word is invariably used by Vivekananda in a pejorative sense. Further, Vivekananda celebrates Ramakrishna's tolerance and love of all sects. He mentions the fact that Ramakrishna had a place for all sects and he loved everyone, a fact

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228. Ibid., p. 23.

229. *Gospel*, p. 629.

that all sects reciprocated in equal measure. He was, suggests Vivekananda, 'free in love, not in "thunder"'.<sup>230</sup> He explains that the mild type creates and the thundering type spreads. In other words, the juxtaposing of 'love' and 'mild' not merely distances Ramakrishna from Vivekananda but also increases the chasm between them, when in the next sentence Vivekananda identifies himself with Paul the Apostle, the influential missionary, 'who was the thundering type to spread the light'. It also undermines the centrality of love and bhakti in Ramakrishna by identifying it with the 'mild type', who are left to beg for the key in order to realize God.



More astounding is Vivekananda's claim that Ramakrishna had to 'go afresh to Nature'.<sup>231</sup> In Nature, Ramakrishna asked for facts. Through these facts, he 'got scientific religion which never says "believe", but "see"; "I see, and you too can see"'.<sup>232</sup> Having done that, Ramakrishna taught the constructive religion of today and not the destructive religion of the past. As is evident, Ramakrishna neither believed in facts as Vivekananda chooses to define the term in the modern scientific idiom, nor did he make the distinction between

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230. CW, Vol. 7, p. 24.

231. Ibid., p. 24.

232. Ibid., p. 24.

believing and seeing. For Ramakrishna, to believe was to have a longing and yearning heart, and to see meant to see God, not just mentally, logically or even physically, but see God through the 'love eyes' which will be part of the 'love body'.<sup>233</sup> Instead, the 'seeing' in Ramakrishna is transformed by Vivekananda into an act of scientific verification and into an exercise of offering empirical proof for matters of belief that were based on facts. To call this an interpretation would be plainly incorrect; to call it an inversion would be excessively polite. It is, then, a distortion brought about to serve a purpose. In speaking of Ramakrishna's fashioning of a scientific religion, Vivekananda is quick to offer a disclaimer: 'Shri Ramakrishna's teachings are "the gist of Hinduism"; they were not peculiar to him.'"<sup>234</sup> In one deft stroke, Vivekananda manages to fabricate an equation that would admirably serve his notion of Hinduism and the politically charged Hindu identity that he sought to create. This is how the equation was to be spelt out: Nature is essentially scientific – Vivekananda offers no explanation whether he was speaking of an objective physical nature or one's inner nature. Ramakrishna believed in the constructive religion of today, one that is based on facts. Belief is superstition until it is tempered by seeing. The act of seeing is verifying. One can only verify facts and not beliefs. Ramakrishna got facts from

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233. *Gospel*, p. 115.

234. *CW*, Vol. 7, p. 24.

Nature in order to build a scientific religion. If we all use the scientific religion, we will all see the truth equally and this truth will be the same. Ramakrishna's religion was scientific. What Ramakrishna taught is the gist of Hinduism. If the religion Ramakrishna taught is scientific and is the gist of Hinduism, then Hinduism is scientific.

There is yet another instance where Vivekananda would need to refashion Ramakrishna as a scientist. Having acknowledged that Ramakrishna never taught Advaita and generally always taught dualism, Vivekananda claimed that Ramakrishna taught him Advaita. Why did he do so? That is because he was a scientist. He knew that different people needed different kinds of cures and treatment.<sup>235</sup> Again, the actual context from which this reference to Ramakrishna is taken is about three categories of physicians<sup>236</sup> corresponding to three types of religious teachers. In each of these categories, the superior physician as well as the superior religious teacher is one who shows signs of *tamas* and uses it to forcefully cure a patient or an unyielding student into good health or spiritual progress. *Tamas* in this context can hardly have the conventional import of inertia or dullness, but, rather, has the same connotation as Ramakrishna's term '*tāmasic bhakti*',<sup>237</sup> which is a burning faith equipped

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235. Ibid., p. 414.

236. *Gospel*, pp. 147-8.

237. Ibid., p. 147.

to extort boons from God in the manner of a robber grabbing an individual and divesting him of his money. Vivekananda knew well the tantric roots of this form of channelling *tamas*, and was contemptuous too of the excessive influence of Tantra in Vaishnavism. For him, Tantra as a practice was invariably *Vamachara*, which, in turn, he translated as 'immoral practices',<sup>238</sup> *bhakti* was frequently brushed aside as dualism, and modern Vaishnavism was condemned as 'the skeleton of the defunct Buddhism' saturated with *Vamachara*. Ignoring Tantra, giving *bhakti* a short shrift, and condemning Vaishnavism as it existed in Bengal during Ramakrishna's time effectively empties Ramakrishna's faith of meaning and relevance.

Instead of being the perfect synthesis of tantra and *bhakti*, Ramakrishna was transformed into the harbinger of modern India and of a Golden Age.<sup>239</sup> Ramakrishna's birth marked the beginning of the *Satyayuga*, argues Vivekananda, because he eliminated all distinctions, between man and woman, between the rich and the poor, between the literate and the illiterate and between the *Brahmanas* and the *Chandāla*, making everyone 'sharers in the Divine Love'.<sup>240</sup> He also brought about peace between Hindus and Muslims and between Hindus

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238. CW, Vol. 7, p. 174.

239. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 6, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Second edition, 1926, pp. 286-7.

240. *Ibid.*, pp. 302-3.

and Christians. What brought this about was 'the tidal wave of Sri Ramakrishna's Love'.<sup>241</sup> This overwhelming and all-embracing love manifests itself, emphasizes Vivekananda, through Ramakrishna's rectifying the degenerate Sanatana Dharma, retrieving spirituality, upgrading the intellect and putting centre-stage the eclipsed spiritual ideal. What was this spiritual ideal? It was the Vedanta, the 'true religion of the Aryan race'.<sup>242</sup> Through upholding the spiritual ideal, he was able to reconcile sects, doctrinal differences and historical misunderstandings, bringing about unity of the Hindu religion.<sup>243</sup> Terms such as 'unity of the Hindu religion', and 'true religion of the Aryan race' would have bewildered Ramakrishna. But his retort to this unfamiliar caricature of himself would have been equally emphatic and decisive: '[T]o love one's own countrymen is māya. But to love the people of all countries, to love the members of all religions, is dayā. Such a love comes from love of God, from dayā.'<sup>244</sup>



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241. Ibid., p. 303.

242. Ibid., p. 156.

243. Ibid., pp. 156-7.

244. *Gospel*, p. 456. Ramakrishna explains this clearly: 'Men like Śankarāchārya and Sukhadeva kept the "ego of knowledge". It is not for man to show compassion, but for God. One feels compassion as long as one has the "ego of knowledge". And it is God Himself who has become the "ego of knowledge".' See p. 460.

In 1896, Vivekananda gave two lectures in America and England on Ramakrishna.<sup>245</sup> At the outset, he confesses that he speaks on behalf of his Master, but the errors in interpreting the message are entirely his own. The bare bones of Ramakrishna's message are all there, beginning with renunciation, devotion, love and ending with Ramakrishna's love of all sects and religions. But the moment one unravels the details, a very carefully doctored picture emerges. The first thing that strikes any reader of these lectures is that they are placed entirely in the context of the glorious spiritual traditions of India as contrasted with the materialism of the West. Further, and, more importantly, they are placed within the context of the spiritual greatness of Hinduism. There are frequent references to Hinduism's capacity to withstand external shocks, including the coming of materialism in the guise of the West and the flashing of the Islamic sword. Despite all this, the national ideals remained intact because they were Hindu ideals. In turn, Hindu ideals are always painted as a deep quest for spirituality and the celebration of holiness.

Against this background, Ramakrishna's divine madness is explained away as the ordinary condition of things for people who have renounced the world. The Bhairavi, who is generally referred to as the Brahmani

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245. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 4, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1932, pp. 152-79.



in the hagiographic accounts of Ramakrishna, is called the Sanyasini by Vivekananda. Not a word is uttered about the Bhairavi teaching Ramakrishna Tantra or supervising his taking on some of the Vaishnava attitudes. Instead, she is held responsible for teaching Ramakrishna the forms of religions of India and different yogic practices. The only other instance of Ramakrishna's spiritual training that deserves a mention in the speech is Ramakrishna's initiation into the philosophy of the Vedas from Totapuri, who is referred to only as a learned, idealist philosopher and not by name. This constitutes the background for Vivekananda's explanation of Ramakrishna's 'catholicity'. Nothing is remotely mentioned about his tantric sadhana or his taking on various attitudes or bhavas, including living like a woman for almost six months.<sup>246</sup> Vivekananda tersely mentions that Ramakrishna was seized with the desire to find the truth of all religions.<sup>247</sup> He had only known his own religion till now. His listeners in 1896 and his readers today would, of course, understand Ramakrishna's religion to be Vivekananda's version

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246. Vivekananda does mention Ramakrishna dressing up as a woman in the same speech, but the context is changed entirely. It no longer is part of the madhura-bhava or prema/raga bhakti. It becomes an exercise in rooting out the sex idea, especially so because the soul has no sex and so to reach the spirit, one needs to eliminate the various distinctions of sex. Ibid., p. 171-2.

247. Ibid., pp. 169-70.

of Hinduism, something that it was not even in a generously extended sense. The desire to know the truth about various faiths led Ramakrishna to get to know each first-hand. As the 'scientist' par excellence, Ramakrishna learns about Islam and Christianity.<sup>248</sup> After following these two faiths, he came to realize that these faith led him to the same goal he had already attained. The differences were only in name and form. All this was accomplished, Vivekananda tells us, from actual experience.

This is what Vivekananda claims he learned from his Master. Just as after learning about Islam and Christianity, Vivekananda's Ramakrishna comes to the conclusion that these faiths led to the same goal that Ramakrishna had already reached. Similarly, Vivekananda learnt from his Master that all religions in the world were phases of one eternal religion. Notice the dexterity with which the word 'phases' has been added and introduced. What was the parity and equality of all faiths becomes 'phases' of one 'eternal religion' in the hands of Vivekananda. In the last part of the lecture, Vivekananda would claim that Ramakrishna did not want to disturb the faith of any individual, not even a sect like the Muslims whom 'we always regard as the most exclusive'.<sup>249</sup> Again, Muslims and Islam are

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248. By all accounts, Ramakrishna's sense of Islam and Christianity was slim and perfunctory. See Sumit Sarkar, *op.cit.*, p. 324.

249. *CW*, Vol.4, p. 179.

reduced to a sect and condemned as 'exclusive'. But more crucially, and perhaps ironically, the idea that without disturbing a man's faith, one needs to 'get hold of a man where he stands and give him a push upwards'<sup>250</sup> is attributed to Ramakrishna. It also requires no great leap of imagination to know that 'eternal religion' translates as 'Sanatana Dharma'. Indeed, in the subsequent part of his lecture, the inference drawn becomes abundantly clear when Vivekananda argues that India was the soil to preach religion and the Hindus accept religion with effortless ease. The conflating of India, its soil and Hindu religiosity is accomplished with a flourish, something that would become part and parcel of Vivekananda's politically charged conception of Hinduism.

### III

In the early years of knowing Ramakrishna, Vivekananda would taunt his Master about his devotion to Kali. As a follower of the Brahmo Samaj, he denied the idea that God could have form; to think of God with form would be to think of a mere idol. Ramakrishna would often talk about these taunts: 'He [Narendra] says further: "What? He [Ramakrishna] still goes to the Kālī temple!"'<sup>251</sup> The

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250. Ibid., p. 179.

251. Gospel, p. 225; see also, p. 288.

year of the remark was 1883 and Ramakrishna's favourite disciple was then just twenty years old. Ramakrishna returned the favour by calling the Brahmos the modern Brahmajnanis, who had not tasted the sweet bliss of Kali, whose eyes and faces were dry. They lacked ecstatic love and were unlikely to make any great spiritual progress. Was the comment that Ramakrishna still goes to the Kali temple a sincere complaint or was it rightful indignation? Ramakrishna reveals what it exactly was. He says to Mahendranath Gupta on 26 September 1883: 'Have you seen Narendralately? (With a smile) He said of me: "He still goes to the Kālī temple. But he will not when he truly understands"'.<sup>252</sup> Despite such insolence, Ramakrishna continued to call Narendral 'my own'.<sup>253</sup> He knew that his favourite disciple was wedded to the idea of a formless God and this did not deter Ramakrishna, at least in the initial years, to show his fondness for Narendral and call him 'perfect from his very birth'.<sup>254</sup> Despite signs of deep affection, Ramakrishna also showed signs of exasperation in relation to Narendral as will be evident from the following:

Those who are my own will come here even if I scold them. Look at Narendral's nature! At first he used to abuse my Mother Kālī very much. One

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252. Ibid., p. 296.

253. Ibid., p. 363.

254. Ibid., p. 364.

day I said to him sharply, 'Rascal! Don't come here any more.' He slowly left the room and prepared a smoke. He who is one's own will not be angry even if scolded. What do you say?<sup>255</sup>

A year later, in 1884, Ramakrishna is told the news of Vivekananda's involvement in a lawsuit. He responds by regretting the fact that Narendra refuses to believe in Shakti, the Divine Mother. As long as one has the human body, says Ramakrishna, one ought to recognize her. Pratap Hazra, a devotee, who has conveyed the news, then makes an astonishing claim on Narendra's behalf. He reports: 'Narendra says: "If I believed in Śakti, all would follow me. Therefore I cannot"' .<sup>256</sup> Ramakrishna does not directly respond to the statement, but merely says that Narendra ought not to go to the extreme to deny Shakti. Was this a sense of destiny on part of the twenty-four-year-old Narendra or just plain hubris?



In 1887, a year after Ramakrishna's death, Vivekananda confesses to Mahendranath Gupta that during the years of his association with Ramakrishna, he used to 'follow my own whims in everything I did'<sup>257</sup> and Ramakrishna

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255. Ibid., pp. 363-4.

256. Ibid., p. 505.

257. Ibid., p. 981.

never objected or interfered. Vivekananda also confesses to Mahendranath that in the beginning, he did not accept anything that Ramakrishna told him. His Master asked him, 'Then why do you come here?'<sup>258</sup> Vivekananda replied that he came to see Ramakrishna and not listen to him. Nevertheless, Ramakrishna continued to speak to him about Kali and the need for him to acknowledge Shakti. In 1885, after answering a question about Qualified Non-Dualism (Vishistadvaita of Ramanuja) posed by Narendra in the presence of other disciples, Ramakrishna turned to him and affectionately asked him about his health and personal welfare. Narendra's answer and Ramakrishna's response capture the full complexity of Vivekananda's attitude to Kali and to Ramakrishna:

*Narendra (to the Master):* Why, I have meditated on Kāli for three or four days, but nothing has come of it.

*Master:* All in good time, my child. Kāli is none other than Brahman. That which is called Brahman is really Kāli. She is the Primal Energy. When that Energy remains inactive, I call it Brahman, and when It creates, preserves, or destroys, I call it Śakti or Kāli. What you call Brahman I call Kāli.<sup>259</sup>

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258. Ibid., p. 984.

259. Ibid., p. 734.

Differences between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were not only about choosing between Brahman and Kali, but spilt into sometimes fundamental and at other times peripheral issues. Ramakrishna often showed impatience about Narendra's fondness for the Brahmo Samaj, contemptuously calling the organization's members 'modern Brahmajnanis'. His attempts to convince Narendra that God was beyond the scriptures, and could not be found with the help of the Vedas and the Vedanta was another perennial source of irritation between the two. Narendra's financial problems after his father's death and worries about providing for his mother and brothers were also a sticky issue. Ramakrishna feared that these problems were pushing his chosen disciple into worldliness, the realm of 'women and gold', and turning him away from God. The *Kathāmrita* records one such conversation<sup>260</sup> where Ramakrishna tries to reason with a worried Narendra by telling him to go beyond his momentary grief. The way to do this, says Ramakrishna, is to recognize that just as knowledge and ignorance go together, similarly happiness and misery too come in pairs. Only by going beyond duality, beyond the binaries of knowledge and ignorance and pleasure and pain, does a seeker attain God. But he was also firm in the conviction that it is God who places people in happiness and in misery by turns. He wanted Narendra to surrender to

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260. Ibid., p. 695.

God and not question God's inscrutable ways. Narendra was not prepared to do such a thing. He also expected Ramakrishna to help him, something Hazra clearly reports to Ramakrishna.<sup>261</sup> Ramakrishna, despite his deep and incomparable affection for Narendra, fails to comprehend the intellectual, spiritual and emotional turmoil of his twenty-one-year-old disciple. All he knows and does is to uphold the ideals of total, unquestioning submission to God and of complete renunciation of the world. Take, for instance, the following conversation between Ramakrishna and Mahendranath Gupta in Narendra's presence:

*Master (to M):* Well, I said to Keshab, 'One should be satisfied with what comes unsought.' The son of an aristocrat does not worry about his food and drink. He gets his monthly allowance. Narendra, too, belongs to a high plane. Then why is he in such straitened circumstances? God certainly provides everything for the man who totally surrenders himself to Him.

*M:* Narendra, too, will be provided for. It is not yet too late for him.

*Master:* But a man who feels intense renunciation within doesn't calculate that way. He doesn't say to himself, 'I shall first make an arrangement for

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261. Ibid., p. 505.



the family and then practise sādhanā.’ No, he doesn’t feel that way if he has developed intense dispassion.<sup>262</sup>

Having said this, Ramakrishna offers a parable to illustrate the point. It makes everyone laugh. ‘At these words Narendra felt as if stuck by an arrow,’ records M, ‘and lay down on the floor.’<sup>263</sup>

Notwithstanding encomiums heaped on Vivekananda, the Master and disciple constantly judged each other and openly discussed their differences. Ramakrishna often called Narendra a nityasiddha,<sup>264</sup> one who was exalted spiritually and eternally free, felt genuinely proud of his learning, and swore on more than one occasion about Narendra’s lack of interest in ‘woman and gold’. At the same time, as a devotee and a spiritual aspirant, Ramakrishna found his favourite disciple inadequate and incomplete. He believed that Narendra was among the ‘partial knower’ of God.<sup>265</sup> A partial knower limits God to one object and excludes all other possibilities of God’s existence. This followed his threefold classification of devotees. The lowest one points to God residing somewhere in the skies or in the heaven. The mediocre devotee shows God’s existence as an ‘Inner Controller’.

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262. Ibid., p. 896.

263. Ibid., p. 896.

264. Ibid., p. 279.

265. Ibid., p. 396.

The highest devotee sees God as having become the universe itself and all things, animate and inanimate, in the world. Having explained the nature of this classification, Ramakrishna says: 'Narendra used to make fun of me and say: "Yes, God has become all! Then a pot is God, a cup is God!"'<sup>266</sup> In another conversation, Vivekananda called the faith of those who believed that God has forms as blind faith. Ramakrishna's reaction is sharp and unambiguous:

Well, can you explain to me what you mean by 'blind faith'? All faith is indeed blind. But then has faith any eye at all? Speak either of 'faith' or of 'knowledge'. But no, you will speak of someone's faith as blind and of some other's as having eyes; how is that?<sup>267</sup>

Neither did Ramakrishna mince words when it came to judging the intensity and depth of Vivekananda's spiritual quest: 'Narendra's devotion and enthusiasm are extraordinary indeed, but compared with the urge that came here (pointing to himself) at the time of Sadhana, his is most ordinary. It is not even one fourth of that.'<sup>268</sup>

Vivekananda was initially attracted to Ramakrishna and he found in him 'a man who dared to say that he

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266. Ibid., p. 396.

267. *Great Master*, p. 431.

268. Ibid., p. 224.

saw God, that religion was a reality to be felt, to be sensed in an infinitely more intense way than we can sense the world'.<sup>269</sup> He began to go to Ramakrishna and came to the conclusion that 'religion could be given'.<sup>270</sup> It is evident that what Ramakrishna was offering was not what Vivekananda was looking for, and their self-understanding of terms like 'God', 'faith', 'devotion' and 'religion' was entirely founded on different premises.



In 1885, a year before his death, Ramakrishna encourages Girish Ghosh and Narendra to argue and engage in a verbal duel in English.<sup>271</sup> The two young men speak in Bangla instead but discuss the nature of God. Narendra says that God is Infinity and cannot be comprehended. More so, God dwells in every human being and does not manifest in just one person alone. Ramakrishna partially agrees with him, but adds that God's power is different in different beings, in some as avidyashakti and in some as vidyashakti. This makes all humans unequal, each manifesting in varying degrees the power of God. The conversation reverts again to the question of God assuming a human body. Narendra argues that this could not be the case because God was beyond words

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269. *CW*, Vol. 4, pp. 174-5.

270. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

271. *Gospel*, pp. 732-3.

or thought. Ramakrishna disagrees and says that God can be known through pure buddhi or the inner faculty of discrimination. When Narendra rejects a suggestion by Girish about God manifesting as teacher in a human incarnation and argues that God dwells in human hearts as an inner guide, Ramakrishna agrees. The discussion between Girish and Narendra becomes fraught, with references to Hamilton, Herbert Spencer, Tyndall and Huxley being thrown in for good measure. Ramakrishna puts an end to the debate saying that he did not enjoy such discussions, restating his position on God having become the universe and conveying to all present, including Narendra, that at the sight of his favourite disciple his mind loses itself in the consciousness of the Absolute.

Later, in the same year, a similar debate ensues.<sup>272</sup> Narendra demands proof that God incarnates as man, asks for proof of immortality of the gods, raises questions over the authenticity and legitimacy of the scriptures, points out contradictions within the Samkhya way of looking at various issues and expresses a sweeping scepticism about all questions relating to God, gods, scriptures and philosophy. Ramakrishna interjects now and again to offer examples of Narendra's doubts, disbelief and scepticism, something that created disbelief in his own mind. In the case of Ramakrishna, a conversation with Kali and, as a consequence of the

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272. Ibid., pp. 771-3.

conversation, a vision, dispelled the doubts. 'Thereupon I said to Narendra: "You rogue! You created unbelief in my mind. Don't come here any more",' he informs the gathering.<sup>273</sup> The discussion continues. A part of the discussion, if only to show the chasm between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, is worth reproducing in full.

*A Devotee:* The Gītā contains the words of God.

*Master:* Yes, the Gītā is the essence of all scriptures.

A sannyāsi may or may not keep with him another book, but he always carries a pocket Gītā.

*A Devotee:* The Gītā contains the words of Krishna.

*Narendra:* Yes, Krishna or any fellow for that matter!<sup>274</sup>

Mahendranath Gupta's remarks about the above exchange are equally revealing: 'Sri Ramakrishna was amazed at these words of Narendra.'<sup>275</sup> To this Ramakrishna himself only reiterates his firmly held and familiar position regarding not accepting anything till 'it agrees with the direct words of the Divine Mother'.<sup>276</sup>

In the last year of Ramakrishna's life, especially after he was diagnosed with cancer in July-August 1885, there

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273. Ibid., p. 772.

274. Ibid., p. 772.

275. Ibid., p. 772.

276. Ibid., p. 773.

are several conversations recorded in the *Kathāmrita* that could be held as evidence to show Vivekananda's acceptance of Ramakrishna's views. Such 'concessions' on issues of faith could range between acceptance of pantheism<sup>277</sup> to conceding Ramakrishna's status as a godlike man. But the burden of evidence in the *Kathāmrita* and in the *Lilaprasanga* would suggest otherwise. In the months leading to Ramakrishna's death, when directly confronted by his Master on issues where they had serious disagreements, Vivekananda would invariably agree in order not to cause the ailing Ramakrishna any grief. But once removed from Ramakrishna's presence, he would affirm his own position clearly. For instance, on 15 March 1886, Ramakrishna, who, by now, is very ill, tells Narendra and other devotees that 'all things – everything that exists – have come from this'.<sup>278</sup> He, then, asks them to explain what they had understood by this statement. Narendra tells Ramakrishna, 'All created objects have come from you.'<sup>279</sup> Ramakrishna's face lights up with joy on hearing this and he can hardly believe that his rebellious disciple could have affirmed his status as an incarnation. A day earlier, Ramakrishna had clearly declared himself as an incarnation: 'I am seeing many forms of God. Among them I find this one also [meaning

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277. Ibid. p. 966.

278. Ibid., p. 945.

279. Ibid., p. 945.

his own form].'<sup>280</sup> Just over a month later, on 21 April 1886, Narendra tells Mahendranath Gupta that there was no such thing as God.<sup>281</sup> Mahendranath was aware of Narendra's financial worries and the need to settle his family's affairs, and so, paraphrasing Ramakrishna, reassuringly tells him that scepticism would eventually lead him to realizing God. Narendra asks him if anyone he knows has seen God as clearly as he could see a tree at that point. Mahendranath replied that 'our Master has seen God that way'.<sup>282</sup> 'It may be his hallucination,' says Narendra. Alluding to 'a great argument'<sup>283</sup> with Ramakrishna himself, Narendra insists on knowing the truth; claims, proclamations and assertions were not even remote approximation of truth.

He said to me, 'Some people call me God.' I replied, 'Let a thousand people call you God, but I shall certainly not call you God as long as I do not know it to be true.' He said, 'Whatever many people say is indeed truth; that is dharma.' Thereupon I replied, 'Let others proclaim a thing as truth, but I shall certainly not listen to them unless I myself realize it as truth.'<sup>284</sup>

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280. Ibid., p. 941.

281. Ibid., p. 962.

282. Ibid., p. 962.

283. Ibid., p. 962.

284. Ibid., p. 962.

Ramakrishna and Vivekananda confronted the question of Ramakrishna being an incarnation even before Ramakrishna's illness. In March 1885, Narendra tells Ramakrishna that Girish Ghosh believed 'you to be an Incarnation of God'.<sup>285</sup> Having said this, he adds that 'I didn't say anything in answer to his remarks'.<sup>286</sup> On hearing this Ramakrishna wonders if Narendra did not notice Girish's great faith. The Master and disciple sit silently for a few minutes in front of each other after this exchange.

By November 1885, Ramakrishna's disciples had begun to worship him as Kali.<sup>287</sup> Narendra did not participate in this and little is known of what he thought of this iconic transformation of Ramakrishna into a deity. The farthest Narendra would go is to say that Ramakrishna was a 'godlike man'<sup>288</sup> and explain it in terms of 'a stage between the man-world and the God-world where it is extremely hard to say whether a person is a man or God'.<sup>289</sup> While Ramakrishna was alive, Vivekananda remained torn between his family problems and his spiritual quest. In a conversation with Mahendranath Gupta,<sup>290</sup> he talks about having gained

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285. Ibid., p. 711.

286. Ibid., p. 711.

287. Ibid., pp. 928-9.

288. Ibid., p. 904.

289. Ibid., p. 904.

290. Ibid., p. 936.



a human birth, the desire for liberation and refuge with a great soul, something that Shankaracharya suggested one gains out of great effort and good fortune. The two remain silent for a while. Vivekananda breaks the silence and says to Mahendrananth: 'You have found peace, but my soul is restless.'<sup>291</sup>

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291. Ibid., p. 936.

# Whose Society, What Religion?



## I

In a letter to a disciple from New York in 1894, Swami Vivekananda offers a blueprint for India's revival and ending its enslavement. The solution for him lies in unswerving fidelity to 'our religion'<sup>1</sup> and enhancing social freedom by removing priestcraft. Once this is achieved, the result will be the emergence of the best religion in the world. This was a step towards realizing the blueprint but was not the whole plan itself. Two sentences in the same letter, however, encapsulate the aim, purpose, mission and reasons for all that Vivekananda said and did in his life: 'Can you make a European

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1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 4, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1932, p. 313. The letter was to Alasingha Perumal dated 19 November 1894, written from New York (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* will henceforth be referred to as CW).

society with India's religion? I believe it is possible and must be.<sup>2</sup> Ambitious as it is, this plan required two very important components. The first was to have a clear conception of the elements that constitute Vivekananda's idea of 'European society', and, secondly, to have an unambiguous sense of what was entailed in the idea of 'India's religion'. The clue to the latter question lies in his demanding unwavering loyalty to 'our religion', in other words, Hinduism. But Vivekananda's Hinduism was not something even Sri Ramakrishna would have understood or approved. Ramakrishna never made the sharp and divisive distinction between the materialistic West and the spiritual East either. When a devotee suggested that the English, especially the intellectuals among the English people, no longer believed in the existence of God, Ramakrishna dismissed such atheism on their part as mere talk.<sup>3</sup> For him Christianity and Jesus were part of a saintly and spiritual world, represented by the picture of Jesus raising the drowning Peter hung amidst pictures of gods and saints in his own room. Pictures of rich men,

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2. Ibid., p. 313.

3. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, Translated into English with an Introduction by Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 2007 imprint, p. 457. This is a translation of Mahendranath Gupta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathāmrita*, originally published between 1897 and 1932 in five volumes in Bengali. Henceforth, all references to the English translation will be cited as *Gospel*.

kings and queens, and white men and women walking together were dismissed as 'English' pictures, hung on the walls of men with rajasic qualities rather than those who admired saints and holy men.<sup>4</sup> Vivekananda's project was very different. It was to create a society in India that resembled his conception of European society and to fabricate a religion for India that would be in harmony with this desirable model of society.

Given Vivekananda's predilection for contradicting himself and saying things that sound convincingly contrary to something he might himself have said elsewhere, it is important to chronicle these contradictions and make sense of them. If the above sets of interpretation are to hold, especially against the pietistical onslaught of the selectively chosen quote, such an exercise becomes inevitable. Take, for instance, Vivekananda's address at Ramnad on 25 January 1897.<sup>5</sup> He lists the old orthodoxy in India and the reception of the modern European civilization as the two inevitable fates from which a choice had to be made. He emphatically makes the choice in favour of the old orthodoxy for its manliness, faith, strength and self-reliance, despite its seeming ignorance and crudity. Contrasted with old orthodoxy is the modern European civilization, which, in the course of the speech is variously referred to as the Europeanized system, and

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4. Ibid., p. 606.

5. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 3, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1932, p. 151.

finally becomes an allusion to the Europeanized man. We finally know that Vivekananda is talking about the Europeanized man who has no backbone, who is a mass of heterogeneous ideas randomly picked, and that these ideas remain unassimilated, undigested and unharmonized. He, in other words, is the Indian reformer who, under European patronage, is prone to 'vehement vituperations against the evils of certain social customs...'.<sup>6</sup> In short, Vivekananda prefers the old Indian orthodoxy to the Europeanized reformer. He exhorts his listeners to subordinate their knowledge of European sciences, their wealth, position and name to spirituality and the purity of the race, elements that are inherent in every Hindu child. This for him also becomes the test of a true Hindu's character. It is not the place here to comment on such contentious notions as 'purity of the race' and 'true Hindu', but the confusion of categories and meanings in relation to Europe, European civilization, European system, European sciences and Europeanized reformers has to be carefully noted.

Subordination of European sciences to spirituality and to the purity of the race was important for Vivekananda because modern science and reason were akin to the existence of superstitions in the formative stages of religion.<sup>7</sup> While in the context of religion, such

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6. Ibid., p. 151.

7. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 2, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1932, p. 74.

superstitions eventually lead to birth of spirituality, modern science results in lust and greed; machines fulfilled desires by making desire keener. The foundation of European civilization, he argues, is the sword, while the Aryans built their idea of civilization on the basis of division of people on the basis of varnas. The varna system allowed people to 'rise higher and higher in proportion to one's learning and culture'.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the West believed in matter alone and was 'addicted to the aggrandisement of self by exploiting others' countries, others' wealth by force, trick and treachery'.<sup>9</sup> From the Indian point of view, the westerner is an asura, concludes Vivekananda. Not only are they asuras, they are also bound by their worship of Shakti, the female principle, reminiscent of the manner in which the Vamachari worships women during tantric practice: 'As the Tantric says: "On the left side the woman...on the right, the cup full of wine; in front, warm meat with ingredients...the Tāntrika religion is very mysterious, inscrutable even to the Yogis." It is this worship of Shakti that is openly and universally practised.'<sup>10</sup> Given Vivekananda's rejection of Tantra, which he always sought to conflate with Vamachara, this indictment of the West, at face value, seems searing, categorical and final.

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8. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 5, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1936, p. 439.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 345-6.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 407-8.

Swearing his love for India, holding afloat his patriotism and affirming his veneration for the ancients, Vivekananda also wants Indians to learn from other nations.<sup>11</sup> He wants them to show a willingness to sit at the feet of all and learn valuable lessons. What are these lessons, if any? He wants the Indian to become 'an occidental of occidentals in your spirit of equality, freedom, work and energy...'.<sup>12</sup> While doing so, he also wants them to remain Hindu to the core in religious matters. After reading the epic Ramayana, Vivekananda finds the East and the West sharply divided in terms of representing two diametrically opposed ideals. Despite his grave reservations about contemporary European civilization and European science, not to mention their relentless pursuit of Shakti, Vivekananda does not utter the final word regarding the East and the West as representing two incompatible ideals. He begins, in fact, to express doubts regarding the individual merits of these ideals. Having created, affirmed and restated the binary between the East and the West, he now has second thoughts regarding this stereotypical, and predictably nineteenth-century, typology of the East and the West:

The West says, 'Do. Show your power by doing.'  
India says, 'Show your power by suffering.' The

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11. CW, Vol. 3, p. 272.

12. CW, Vol. 5, p. 26.

West has solved the problem of how much a man can have: India has solved the problem of how little a man can have. The two extremes, you see... Who knows which is the truer ideal? The apparent power and strength, as held in the West, or the fortitude in suffering, of the East?<sup>13</sup>

Vivekananda's dilemma was acute. To accept the modern West and European science was to indirectly accept the legitimacy of British rule in India. Moreover, to accept modern European ideas was to concur with the project of the social reformers in Bengal. Despite these obstacles, the energy, effort, freedom and equality of European civilization were admirable and worth emulating, only if it was to be the model of inspiration to create a European society in India with one's own religion. Put differently, the West had to be accommodated in India, but it had to be an edition of the West which was not materialistic, self-aggrandizing, exploitative, treacherous and asuric. Once admitted, this version of the West had to learn to live with his version of Hindu spirituality and Hindu orthodoxy. In other words, Vivekananda's reading of certain elements within contemporary European society and select features within contemporary India were equally incommensurable with his mission of creating for his country a European society with India's religion.

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13. CW, Vol. 4, pp. 71-2.



Vivekananda surmounts this by drawing a parallel between the ancestors of modern Europe and of contemporary India. The history of ancient India, which was for Vivekananda the story of the Aryan civilization, was one of enormous energies, limitless spirit, a unique combination of forces of action and reaction, but, most of all, it manifested itself in 'the profound thoughtfulness of a godly race'.<sup>14</sup> Ancient India produced religious poetry, philosophies and scientific work, but the natural affinity of ancient India was for profound meditation, renunciation, quietness and a directing of all their energies inwards to knowledge of the Self. They looked for moksha or renunciation and cared little about the material world. While there are some in contemporary India still raring to claim the legacy of ancient India, 'the modern inhabitants of the land of Bharata are not the glory of the ancient Aryas'.<sup>15</sup> The latent embers of this glorious Aryan past had to be reignited and reclaimed. Vivekananda considers the elements from the past that could be recaptured but is bewildered by the diversity and complexity of customs and traditions existing in the country. Setting aside the question of retrieving the legacy of ancient India for the moment, Vivekananda is on surer ground when it comes to what he wants and what he approves.

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14. Ibid., p. 332.

15. Ibid., p. 335.

Unlike modern India, which had spurned and wasted the glorious legacy of the Aryans, contemporary Europe was in all respects 'the disciple of ancient Greece, and her proper inheritor...'.<sup>16</sup> The Yavanas or the Greeks in antiquity had charming appearance, were perfectly formed, and had strong muscles and great vigour. They possessed steadiness and perseverance and managed to create unrivalled earthly beauties. Their contribution to earthly sciences like society, politics, war and sculpture remains unmatched and unsurpassed. Along with these achievements in earthly beauties and sciences, they also were blessed with extraordinary practicality and intellect. All this found a natural outlet in their constant expression of power, in their indomitable spirit in undertaking dexterous activities and in their quest for political independence. In contrast to the Aryans, the ancient Greeks directed their energies outwards, to gaining the knowledge of the not-Self or that of the perishable creation. In far antiquity, the Aryans and the Greeks – Vivekananda calls them two gigantic rivers – occasionally came into contact and created intellectual and spiritual fervour, enhanced human societies, elevated the idea of civilization and gave birth to great nations and, eventually, to the European civilization itself. This occasional coming together of Indian philosophy and Greek energy in the distant and hoary past has made Europe and America

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16. Ibid., p. 334.

what they are, 'the advanced children of the Yavanas, a glory to their forefathers...'.<sup>17</sup>

For Vivekananda, modern Europe, the proud inheritors of the mantle of ancient Greece, had come in the form of the English. Their presence in India was nectar as well as poison. English laws in India were dismantling customs and traditions. At this juncture, Vivekananda makes two very significant observations. Firstly, he questions the desirability of some of the old customs in India being swept away by English rule, European technology and English laws and wonders if they were after all worth preserving. Secondly, he firmly believes that 'the power of stemming this tide is not in Hindu society'.<sup>18</sup> This powerlessness was a direct result of an excessive preoccupation with absolute purity of mind or the *sattva* *guna*. While *sattva* was not only desirable but the highest form of knowledge, it demanded a level of renunciation impossible among the multitude of people. *Sattva* and its glorification had led people to camouflage their laziness, stupidity and inactivity behind the so-called quest for transcendence and ultimate knowledge. The result was not an excess of *sattva*, but the country incrementally drowning in 'the ocean of *Tamas* or dark ignorance'.<sup>19</sup> Again, it is instructive to digress here in order to mark the discontinuity between Ramakrishna

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17. Ibid., p. 335.

18. Ibid., p. 340.

19. Ibid., p. 338.

and Vivekananda in their understanding of the gunas and their respective roles. Ramakrishna calls sattva, rajas and tamas as three brothers and as three robbers.<sup>20</sup> They act in tandem to control humans. Sattva calls upon rajas for help, and, in turn, rajas gets assistance from tamas. Tamas, Ramakrishna believed, kills a person, and rajas binds us. Sattva has the quality to release a person from bondage but is powerless to take him closer to God. While tamas had the quality to kill, the tamasic quality could also be turned towards a version of bhakti represented by strength of mind and a burning faith.<sup>21</sup>

Returning to Vivekananda, he believed that the only way out of the debilitating spiral of being caught in the vortex of excessive sattva and drowning in the ocean of tamas was to preserve one's 'own ancestral property'<sup>22</sup> but also open the country to new ideas and fresh currents. For Vivekananda, while what constitutes for Indians the 'wealth of our own home'<sup>23</sup> varied and did lend itself to contradictions, there was no confusion or ambiguity in his mind about the way forward for India. This deep and profound clarity emerged out of the absence of any urgent need impelling him to solve the vexed question of India's ancient past and the elements from that past which could have salience of some sort in the present:

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20. *Gospel*, p. 438.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 494. See also, p. 147.

22. *CW*, Vol. 4, p. 339.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

What we should have is, what we have not, perhaps what our forefathers even had not; – that which the Yavanas had; that, impelled by the life-vibration of which, is issuing forth in rapid succession from the great dynamo of Europe, the electric flow of that tremendous power, vivifying the whole world. We want that. We want that energy, that love of independence, that spirit of self-reliance, that immovable fortitude, that dexterity in action, that bond of unity of purpose, that thirst for improvement. Checking a little the constant looking back to the past, we want that expansive vision infinitely projected forward; and we want, – that intense spirit of activity (Rajas) which will flow through our every vein, from head to foot.<sup>24</sup>

The enterprise, energy, vitality and love of independence of the Greeks had to be emulated. The ancient Greeks embodied rajas and it was rajas that ought to lead the way towards attaining sattva. In a subtle, but significant, inversion, Vivekananda argues that a man had to pass through a stage of possessing rajas in order to eventually aspire for the perfect sattvica state.<sup>25</sup> Bhoga or enjoyment had to come before yoga or the ultimate union with God: ‘It is action with desire that leads to action without desire.

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24. Ibid., p. 337.

25. Ibid., p. 338.

Is the renunciation of desire possible, if desire did not exist in the beginning? And what could it mean? Can light have any meaning if there is no darkness?'<sup>26</sup>

Vivekananda does create the usual binaries of the sattva-less West and the rajas-less India, arguing that nations that do not have sattva perish and ones that have sattva are immortal.<sup>27</sup> He also speaks of the judicious synthesis between the rajas of the West and the sattva of India. But the inevitability of importing the rajas as represented by ancient Greece and its heirs and inheritors was clear and categorical. Even English rule, which was described as a mixture of nectar and poison, was, after all, a great good for this very reason:

[T]he great good of the English conquest is this: England, nay the whole of Europe, has to thank Greece for its civilization. It is Greece that speaks through everything in Europe. Every building, every piece of furniture has the impress of Greece upon it; European science and art are nothing but Grecian. To-day the ancient Greek is meeting the ancient Hindu on the soil of India.<sup>28</sup>

The blueprint was clear: ancient Greece and ancient India were the epitome of civilization. While modern

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26. Ibid., pp. 424-5.

27. Ibid., p. 339.

28. CW, Vol. 3, p. 271.

Europe had inherited the mantle of ancient Greece, modern India had woefully failed to follow suit. Modern India's redemption lay in emulating ancient Greece, alive and palpable in modern Europe, and creating in India a European society with India's religion. What that religion would be and eventually resemble was something equally contentious, as we will see in the next chapter.

Incorporating the West within a blueprint for future India was not sufficient. Vivekananda had to convincingly articulate his celebration of ancient Greece and the continuity of its legacy in modern Europe in a language that was religious and recognizably 'Hindu'. The first step in this direction he takes is to identify and create a distinction between the core ideas in India and in the West: he called these the driving force and the operative impulses. In the case of India, he argues, the overwhelming desire is for *mukti* or liberation from the bondage of the world. But the West quests after *dharma*: 'Here the word "Dharma" is used in the sense of the *Mimāmsakas*. What is Dharma? Dharma is that which makes man seek for happiness in this world or the next. Dharma is established on work: Dharma is impelling man day and night to run after and work for happiness.'<sup>29</sup> Dharma, after all, had a meaning that resonated admirably with the Western idea of 'work'

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29. CW, Vol. 5, p. 349.

and the desire for happiness in this world and the next, a meaning that had its foundation within the six orthodox systems of Hindu philosophy, namely, the Purva Mimamsa. But to the vast masses of Hindus that Vivekananda hoped to awaken and save from the brutal embrace of *tamas*, an esoteric and involved philosophical discussion alone was not adequate. To build an argument where *dharma* and work would be understood in tandem, Vivekananda turns to myths in order to push forward his formulation. At other times, he may have called myths in the Puranas grotesque, irrational and unhistorical, but their momentary usefulness in order to legitimize the need for absorbing the rajasic West in India was beyond doubt and dispute:

You certainly know the story of the Devas and the Asuras. The Devas have faith in their soul, in God, and in the after-life, while the Asuras give importance to this life, and devote themselves to enjoying this world and trying to have bodily comforts in every possible way. We do not mean to discuss here whether the Devas are better than the Asuras, or the Asuras than the Devas, but, reading their description in the Purāṇas, the Asuras seem to be, truth to tell, more like MEN, and far more manly than the Devas; the Devas are inferior, without doubt, to the Asuras, in many respects. Now, to understand the East and the West, we



cannot do better than interpret the Hindus as the sons of the Devas and the Westerners as the sons of the Asuras.<sup>30</sup>

For Vivekananda, Hindu India was synonymous with the East, and Hindus synonymous with India. The West was, more often than not, a seamless, undifferentiated category. Perceived as asuras, the West was infinitely more manly; in fact, the West was the heir to 'the great hero Virochana',<sup>31</sup> the first king of the asuras. He also concedes that while India ought to, forever, remain teachers of the West in spiritual matters, 'they will remain our teachers in all material concerns'.<sup>32</sup> Despite the veneer of calmness and balance of the Sattvic state, people in India were inert, lazy and sensual like stock and stone, immersed in inactivity brought on by tamas. The West, in sharp contrast, was the very picture of enterprise, devotion to work, enthusiasm, a manifestation of rajas in every which way.<sup>33</sup>

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30. Ibid., p. 373. For a detailed discussion on the nineteenth-century use of the Deva-Asura distinction, see 'Digesting the "Other": Hindu Nationalism and the Muslims in India', Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2011, revised edition.

31. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 6, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Second edition, 1926, p. 403.

32. Ibid., p. 403.

33. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 7, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Fourteenth impression, 2002, pp. 181-3.

Vivekananda's analysis of the state of Hindu India, its people and their degradation was always lyrical, though his prescription to rectify this was always direct and uncomplicated:

[I]n your country, it is as if the blood has become congealed in the heart, so that it cannot circulate in the veins – as if paralysis has overtaken the body and it has become languid. So my idea is first to make people active by developing their *Rajas*, and thus make them fit for the struggle for existence...I will rouse them through the infallible power of Vedic Mantras...With the help of Western science set yourself to dig the earth and produce food-stuffs – not by means of mean servitude of others – but by discovering new avenues to production, by your own exertions aided by Western science... Throw aside your scriptures in the Ganga and teach the people first the means of procuring their food and clothing, and then you will find time to read to them the scriptures. If their material wants are not removed by the rousing of intense activity, none will listen to words of spirituality.<sup>34</sup>

In his espousal of Western science as a means of removing servitude and poverty, Vivekananda is far

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34. Ibid., pp. 181-3.

removed from any serious critique of the flip side of modern science and technology. As noted earlier, he does occasionally refer to the vicious cycle of desire and greed in the West, but subordinates it to an unequivocal approval of the activity, enterprise and the West's power to 'make the five elements play like puppets in their hands'.<sup>35</sup> This is a far cry from the same Vivekananda who after Ramakrishna's death was preaching the futility of worldliness and exhorting everyone else to give up women and gold.

As a religious nationalist, Vivekananda implicates the lack of attention to material civilization as the reason for all calamities and all misfortune for the Hindus. Conquest by Muslims is listed as one such calamity; so abject was the ignorance of material civilization that even the conquering Muslims managed to teach the Hindus to wear tailor-made clothes.<sup>36</sup> As we shall see, Vivekananda had one single model to measure material wealth and poverty, and that was America and Europe of his time. For him, this measure of affluence and poverty was absolute; it could be applied ahistorically to explain the fall of the Hindu civilization as he perceived it. Hence, the cultural particularity of not wearing tailor-made clothes could be seen as a shortcoming in his mind. In turn, this inadequacy could be conflated with

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35. *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 403.

36. *CW*, Vol. 4, p. 313.

ubiquitous hunger in nineteenth-century Bengal and held as a universally valid proposition for India's lack of a material civilization. Vivekananda's explanation as to what stunted the growth of material civilization is equally complex: 'Bread! Bread! I do not believe in a God who cannot give me bread here, giving me eternal bliss in heaven!'<sup>37</sup> Put differently, religion, as it had existed to his day, was the reason for hunger, poverty and a lack of material well-being. He calls it the tyranny of the sages, of the spiritual, of the wise and of the intellectual – a tyranny, he suggests, more powerful than the tyranny of the ignorant.<sup>38</sup> These categories of men had forced their fellow human beings into accepting a view that rejected the goods of life and the importance of making money. Also, excess of religion and no sense of political power had led to India's slavery and poverty.<sup>39</sup> The sudden interpolation of political power as an element in a discussion on material civilization was for Vivekananda part of the same glorious rajas story, something that the ancient Greeks had gifted to the world and something that the liberation-loving Hindus did not have.

The story, then, was one of excess and shortage: excess of sattva and of religion and lack of rajas and of material well-being. A first step in order to rectify this imbalance,

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37. Ibid., p. 313.

38. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 8, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Twelfth impression, 1999, p. 76.

39. Ibid., p. 74.

urges Vivekananda, was to make all vain gods disappear, only to be replaced by another god. He calls this god, the Virāt.<sup>40</sup> He urges that all Indians purify their hearts by worshipping the Virāt. Who, or, what is the Virāt?

This is the only God that is awake, our own race, everywhere His hands, everywhere His feet, everywhere His ears, He covers everything. All other Gods are sleeping. What vain Gods shall we go after and yet cannot worship the God that we see all round us, the Virāt?...These are all our Gods, — men and animals, and the first Gods we have to worship, instead of being jealous of each other and fighting each other.<sup>41</sup>

Vivekananda creates a timeless abstraction that to this day has the ability to sweep aside vain and not so vain gods. At his rhetorical best, he often failed to notice the contradictions generated by his own evocative pronouncements. He could, therefore, speak of the laziness, inertia and inactivity of a vast majority of

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40. The metaphor is taken from Krishna's revelation of his all-encompassing form, mentioned as the Vishvarupa in the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavadgita (see, for instance, verse 16). It is also called the virātrūpa, implying Krishna's vast and imposing form in which the entire universe could reside and manifest.

41. *CW*, Vol. 3, pp. 300-1.

Hindus, and, simultaneously speak of the people 'of our race' as the only god that was awake and worthy of worship. Did he really believe in the strength and the significance of his idea of the Virāt? In creating an enduring abstraction, Vivekananda added a dimension to it that lends a normative edge to the idea of the Virāt. The clue lies in the insistence on the word 'worship', a word not carelessly used in this context. 'Worship It', he insists, 'Worship is the exact equivalent of the Sanskrit word, and no other English word will do.'<sup>42</sup> The abstract idea of the Hindu masses had to be worshipped; Hindu masses alone because the Virāt is constituted by 'our own race'.

Except as an emotive abstraction, Vivekananda had little faith in the multitude of Indian masses, whether seen in purely racial terms, or conceived as the sum total of all people in India. Even the most humanitarian ideas in the hands of the multitude result in degradation, he argues.<sup>43</sup> The real custodians of religion and philosophy, perceived in their purest form, are the cultured, and it is learning and intellect that keep the intellectual and social capital of a community safe. Slavery over the centuries had accustomed Indians to covet power only to produce more slaves and not share one's liberty; freedom for the slave always translates into keeping some other people

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42. Ibid., p. 301.

43. CW, Vol. 6, p. 124.

subjugated.<sup>44</sup> Neither did the people of India have any sense of the principles of self-government. Historically, whether under Hindu, Buddhist or Mughal rule, they were ruled by a godlike paternalistic king and did little for the common good or for self-defence.<sup>45</sup> The Buddhist period, the ascendancy of the Rajputs and the eventual rise of the Mughal power had one thing in common: the decline of the priestly caste and that of the spiritual brilliance of the brahmins. Vivekananda had an idealized view of the priestly caste and of the brahmins and always held them as an ideal indispensable for India, a theme we will explore more fully in Section III.<sup>46</sup> All his diatribes against brahmins that are often quoted to argue that he was against the varna system are far off the mark in understanding his views on the subject. In fact, the converse is true: Vivekananda believed that the revival of the priestly power in India and the revival of India were inextricably linked.

As a votary of what he likened as the spiritual brilliance of the brahmins, Vivekananda strongly resented brahmins espousing more popular forms of religion, whether bhakti or Tantra. For him all non-Vedic and non-Vedantic forms of belief were to be condemned as dualism and branded as undesirable superstitions and rituals (as we will see in the next chapter). Attributing

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44. CW, Vol. 4, p. 313.

45. Ibid., p. 374.

46. Ibid., pp. 376-8.

intensions of wanting to control the masses, he linked popular and ritualistic forms of brahminical practices to one form or the other of predatory exploitation. Of course, historically speaking, the proliferation of sects that preferred bhakti as the ideal way to reach God, or saw in Tantra a way of understanding the mysteries of life and the universe, also regularly rejected the straitjacket of caste and its fourfold division. In ignoring popular manifestations of heterodox Hindu sects, and in idealizing caste as well as the brahmins, Vivekananda brought together the existence of spiritual power among certain individuals with the priestly functions of the brahmins. But what is more fraught and highly contentious in this instance is the unequivocal location of spirituality within the ambit of the priestly caste. Here is an example of Vivekananda creating a double caricature. The portrait of the Muslim is unflattering and devoid of nuances,<sup>47</sup> but the exaggerated stress on the spiritual role of the brahmins defies historical scrutiny and common understanding:

The Prophet Mahomet himself was dead against the priestly class in any shape, and tried his best for the total destruction of this power by formulating

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47. For a detailed discussion on Vivekananda's portrayal of Islam and the Muslims, see, Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2011, revised edition.



rules and injunctions to that effect. Under the Mussulman rule, the king himself was the supreme priest; he was the chief guide in religious matters; and, when he became the emperor, he cherished the hope of being the paramount leader in all matters, over the whole Mussulman world. To the Mussulman, the Jew or the Christian is not an object of extreme detestation; they are, at the worst, men of little faith. But not so the Hindu. According to him the Hindu is idolatrous, the hateful Kafir; hence, in this life he deserved to be butchered; and in the next, eternal hell is in store for him. The utmost the Mussulman kings could do as a favour to the priestly class, — the spiritual guides of these Kafirs, — was to allow them to somehow pass their life silently and wait for the last moment. This was again considered too much kindness! If the religious ardour of any king was a little more uncommon, they would immediately follow arrangements for a great Yajna, by way of Kafir-slaughter!<sup>48</sup>

Vivekananda regrets that after the waning of Mughal power, the Sikhs and the Marathas too did little to revive priestly power.<sup>49</sup>

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48. *CW*, Vol. 4, p. 379. See also, p. 318.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 380.

The brahmins, then, were the spiritual mentors of the Hindus. They were also the real custodians of learning and intellect. Having thus argued, Vivekananda goes a step further. He condemns all sectarian religions (in his list are included Islam, Christianity and all other forms of religion that believe in dualism) for believing in the essential equality of all human beings.<sup>50</sup> Not only is the proposition of equality of all humans untenable, it is also unscientific; differences in mind are greater than differences in bodies. People who preach doctrines that suggest God's descent on earth and the eventual equality of all humans are nothing more than sincere fanatics; he believed that fanatics among human beings are also the most sincere. Vivekananda squarely condemns any advocacy for the desirability of equality as just another millenarian idea; he does admit that equality could be a great motivation towards encouraging humans to put in greater effort and work in anticipation of a better tomorrow. Christianity grew, he argues, 'on the basis of the fascination of this fanaticism, and that is what made it so attractive to the Greek and the Roman slaves'.<sup>51</sup> Modern ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity also were modern versions of the same millenarian aspiration and reflected the same fanaticism. 'True equality has

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50. CW, Vol. 6, p. 75.

51. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 1, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Twenty-third impression, 2000, p. 113.

never been and never can be on earth,'<sup>52</sup> he emphasizes, and contrasts it with one of Hinduism's fundamental doctrines which believes that all men are different, only constituting a unity in variety. As we shall discover, the Aryan idea of caste embodied this notion of unity in variety.

If equality was a millenarian dream, was there an alternative in Vivekananda's view that was more desirable? Before considering the answer to this question, a word about Vivekananda's rejection of the modern idea of liberty is necessary. Since the words 'liberty' and 'freedom' appear in the Vivekananda corpus often, it is surprising that he rejects its modern variant. The precise reason for which he rejects the modern idea of liberty is its conjunction with equality and fraternity. Instead, the political liberty of the Greeks for him was worthy of emulation: in Vivekananda's reading of the political liberty of the Greeks,<sup>53</sup> which he erroneously identifies with social liberty, greater emphasis lay on protecting the nation, patriotism and primacy of the country. To return to the question of equality, Vivekananda believes that inequality is necessary for creation itself, that all the formative forces of nature manifest themselves through struggle, competition and conflict.<sup>54</sup> Equally, he believed that limiting inequality also entails a struggle.

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52. Ibid., p. 113.

53. CW, Vol. 6, p. 52.

54. CW, Vol. 1, pp. 114-5.

If Hindus believed in humans being different and unequal, the question that needed an urgent answer was whether India had the appetite for conflict, struggle and competition to create as well as limit inequality.

Vivekananda's analysis of nineteenth-century Indian life is familiar and quoted often.<sup>55</sup> It speaks of the lack of mental activity, lifelessness among people, and absence of hope; it paints a picture where people lack will, enthusiasm, and are incapable even of expressing emotions. In the fashion of European writers on India in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries,<sup>56</sup> Vivekananda compares Indian society to

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55. CW, Vol. 4, p. 422.

56. The early Indologists and orientalist contributed to a picture of India as despotic, stagnant and benighted. They all found Hinduism as it existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries inadequate and degrading. Positing a Hindu Golden Age, they tried to find justification for a Hinduism that in their view was monotheistic, equalitarian and non-idolatrous. The attitude of the Indologists and orientalist finds its most comprehensive articulation in G.W.F. Hegel's writings on what he called the religion of the Indians: 'But what lions and oxen could not do, men themselves have done; the Indians and Egyptians, for example, had in animals their consciousness of the divine. Moreover they have had this consciousness in the sun, the stars, and ultimately in something still more trifling (this is where the Indians are especially conspicuous), in the most grotesque and deplorable products of an eccentric and ill-starred imagination.' See, G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, translated by T.M. Knox and A.V. Miller, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987, p. 36. Also see,

lumps of clay, lifeless machines and heaped-up pebbles.<sup>57</sup> He prefers people to make mistakes and commit errors as long as they are driven by their free will and intelligence rather than ending up as a mine of stupidity. The result, he avers, was for all to see: 'It never even occurs to this mind if there is any better state than this; where it does, it cannot convince; in the event of conviction, effort is lacking; and even where there is effort, lack of enthusiasm kills it out.'<sup>58</sup> This grim picture of Indian life essentially is Vivekananda's unflattering caricature of the state of Hindus in India in his time. This becomes even more evident when he rues the fact that despite the Upanishads being 'our scriptures',<sup>59</sup> weakness of every sort was the lot of the Hindus. One-third of this weakness was mental. Apart from a significantly greater proportion of physical weakness, Hindus were lazy, selfish, incapable of working in a group, devoid of love of each other and superstitious. But more than anything else, the physical weakness on their part also had an impact on the brain, rendering it incapable of work and action. He wants the young to realize that they will be 'nearer to Heaven through football than through

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Bryan S. Turner, 'Asia in European Sociology', in *Handbook of Contemporary European Social Theory*, edited by Gerard Delanty, Routledge, London, 2006, pp. 395-404.

57. CW, Vol. 4, p. 423.

58. Ibid., p. 422.

59. CW, Vol. 3, p. 231.

the study of the Gita',<sup>60</sup> that they will understand the Gita better with biceps and muscles better developed. Inspired as he was from the model that ancient Greece presented to him, he wanted the young Hindus to relegate religion and concentrate on acquiring rajas. 'You will understand the Upanishads better and the glory of the Atman,' he says, 'when your body stands firm upon your feet, and you feel yourself as men.'<sup>61</sup>

Even the tremendous logical capacity of the Hindus had over a period of time degenerated into just an excess of logic without being accompanied by action, an effect that was felt in every sphere, from art to the sciences and even music.<sup>62</sup> Vivekananda calls India of his time the 'Kurukshetra (battle-field) of malady and misery, the huge cremation-ground, strewn with the dead bones of lost hope, activity, joy and courage...'.<sup>63</sup> This is what, he says, is visible to the European traveller visiting India. Though this dismal picture of India is presented from the perspective of the European traveller, it is as much Vivekananda's own view as it is of any outsider. For him, what compounds the malady and misery is the indifference of the yogin, 'sitting in august silence... absorbed in deep communion with the Spirit, with no

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60. Ibid., p. 242.

61. Ibid., p. 242.

62. Ibid., p. 270.

63. CW, Vol. 5, pp. 344-5.

other goal in life than Moksha...'.<sup>64</sup> Even the English official who comes for the first time is greeted by three hundred million people 'swarming on the body of India, like so many worms on a rotten, stinking carcass...'.<sup>65</sup> India and China had become mummified civilizations as a result of poverty, where gathering together daily necessities itself was too great an effort to allow people to think about anything else.<sup>66</sup> Poverty leads to dehumanization, which, in turn, leads to slavery.

The reasons for poverty, dehumanization and slavery, Vivekananda elaborates, have been attributed to Hindu religion by social reformers, who feel that the only way out of this pathetic state of affairs is to crush religion. But religion was not to be blamed. Vivekananda calls Hinduism the 'grandest religion of the world'<sup>67</sup> and believes that the way out of misery and subjugation was to follow 'the great teachings of the Hindu faith'.<sup>68</sup> Nothing was wrong with the Hindu faith itself, but the error lay in lack of application and sympathy. Buddhism, which to Vivekananda was the logical development of Hinduism, had taught sympathy, and the Buddha's empathy for the poor, the miserable and the sinner was part of that faith. But this had been lost and Hinduism

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64. Ibid., pp. 344-5.

65. Ibid., p. 345.

66. Ibid., p. 5.

67. Ibid., p. 11.

68. Ibid., p. 12.

had been reduced to a faith which, at once, preached the dignity of man on the one hand and also was a religion that, like no other faith, 'treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion...'.<sup>69</sup> In arguing for empathy and for alleviating India's predicament, Vivekananda came up with some sentences that have cemented and perpetuated his mystique even to this day:

I do not believe in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth. However sublime be the theories, however well-spun may be the philosophy - I do not call it religion so long as it is confined to books and dogmas.<sup>70</sup>

The problem lay precisely in Vivekananda's solution for Hindu India's woes in proposing an all-embracing idea of religion. It sometimes manifested in statements where he reduced and shrunk Hindu identity to an exclusively religious one: 'The Hindu man drinks religiously, sleeps religiously, walks religiously, marries religious, robs religiously.'<sup>71</sup> To wipe a widow's tears or to provide food for the orphan need not always be a religious act, nor does even Buddhism, understood properly, make a claim to performing or recommending

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69. Ibid., pp. 12-3.

70. Ibid., p. 39.

71. CW, Vol. 8, p. 74.



such practical activities. Further, organized religions are often beholden to books and dogmas, and Vivekananda himself would often name the Vedas and the Upanishads as the Hindu scriptures. But the rhetorical flourish was a necessary methodological component to constructing his distinctive brand of Hinduism as will be evident in the next chapter.

If Buddha taught sympathy, he also 'ruined us, so did Christ ruin Greece and Rome!' <sup>72</sup> Vivekananda squarely blames the Buddha and Christ for their preoccupation with moksha or salvation, without suggesting a middle course.<sup>73</sup> They promoted *tamas*, in fact, the lowest form of *tamas*, by nurturing the idea of not protesting even if one were kicked. Under the influence of the Jains and the Buddhists, the Hindus too had become a *tamasic* lot, good only at praying and having these prayers unanswered. God does not hear them, says Vivekananda, because the cries of a fool go unattended by man and God alike.<sup>74</sup> Europe was saved from what Christ did by the Protestant reformation, while Hindus were shown the way out by Kumarilla, Shankara and Ramanuja by showing, not the path of devotion, but of *karma* or action. These men restated 'the Eternal Vedic religion, harmonising and balancing in due proportions *Dharma*,

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72. CW, Vol. 5, p. 357.

73. Ibid., pp. 355-7.

74. Ibid., p. 356.

Artha, Kama, Moksha'.<sup>75</sup> All that the Hindus had to do in order to overcome *tamas* and emerge out of their inertia and servitude was to follow the path shown by the sages. The masses and the nation as a whole had lost their individuality, their progress vitiated in equal measure by Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Compounding this was jealousy among the Hindus. In fact, Hindus were not a nation like the British. Why was this so? It was because people in the villages had 'forgotten their manhood, their individuality'.<sup>76</sup> The inspiration for raising the masses and restoring to them their sense of individuality, however, must come from within. It must come, he emphatically states, from religion, and, especially from the orthodox Hindus.<sup>77</sup> Coming full circle, while Vivekananda argues for a synthesis of the East and the West, he is equally insistent that the energy, inspiration and motivation for any reform of old Hinduism can only come through Hinduism<sup>78</sup> and not currently fashionable reform movements. Similarly, old Hinduism is not to be confused with ancient Hinduism, but contemporary Hinduism that had gone decrepit and degenerate.

A major factor for the loss of masculinity, loss of individuality, lack of effort and absence of will was

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75. Ibid., p. 357.

76. CW, Vol. 8, pp. 306-7.

77. CW, Vol. 6, pp. 225-6.

78. CW, Vol. 8, p. 308.

Chaitanya and his ideal of Radha-prema.<sup>79</sup> In emulating Radha's love to Krishna, the whole nation had been made effeminate. Bengal and Orissa had been reduced to a land of cowards. Four hundred years of Chaitanya and Radha-prema had resulted in a complete loss of the sense of manliness among Hindus. Just as Radha wept and cried when estranged from Krishna, so have the Hindus made crying and weeping into a national trait. This had also influenced Bengali literature of the past four hundred years, which was nothing but a chronicle of moaning and crying, and gave birth to no heroic poetry. Vivekananda uses terms like 'effeminate' and links moaning and crying to a feminine temperament. His writings, conversations and speeches are replete with instances where 'women and eunuchs' is not only used as a term to express anger, loathing and disgust<sup>80</sup> against people who are inactive, inert, and not rajasic, but also contrast the state of being 'women and eunuchs' to the more coveted ideal of manliness. Yet, Vivekananda fails to grasp the contradiction when he bemoans the inequality between men and women in his time and glorifies women like Maitreyi and Gargi in ancient India. Is there a way to understand this inherent paradox in Vivekananda?

Vivekananda held the view that the Vedanta rejects distinction between men and women and perceives

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79. *CW*, Vol. 5, pp. 260-1.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

them to be participating in the same conscious Self. Women like Gargi and Maitreyi took the place of sages, read the Vedas and the Upanishads and were capable of discussing the mysteries and intricacies of the Brahman.<sup>81</sup> If they were accorded this privilege, so should the women of the present age. He does concede that historically the priests, in order to further their privileges, had prohibited lower castes and women from reading the Vedas, but that injunction was untenable. The equation for Vivekananda, then, is simple enough: women who read the Vedas and the Upanishads and discuss the complexities of the idea of Brahman were to be seen as equal to men. After all, the Vedas and the Upanishads were masculine, robust and activity-oriented texts, unlike bhakti-inspired texts which only encouraged limitless prayers, singing, dancing, weeping and moaning. Those men who were under the influence of the Bhakti texts and the ideas they promoted were like women. This model of femininity had to be despised and condemned.

In every district and village you may visit, you will find only the sound of the Khol and Kartāl! Are not drums made in the country? Are not trumpets and kettle-drums available in India? Make the boys hear the deep-toned sound of these

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81. CW, Vol. 7, pp. 214-5.

instruments. Hearing from boyhood the sound of these effeminate forms of music and listening to the kirtana, the country is well-nigh converted into a country of women. What more degradation can you expect?<sup>82</sup>

In idealizing women, Vivekananda was ready to respect them as living images of Shakti, and even accept what he considered as the uncontaminated Tantra view of worshipping women in the spirit of divinity.<sup>83</sup> At the same time he could write to Sister Nivedita that India was not yet ready to produce great women and so it must 'borrow them from other nations'.<sup>84</sup> What were the features he saw in Sister Nivedita that made her a great woman? Her education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination, and 'above all, the Celtic blood'<sup>85</sup> made her 'a real lioness',<sup>86</sup> suitable even more than men to work for India and Indian women. Never one to strike a balance between the ideal and the rhetorical, Vivekananda often lends himself to seeming contradictions. For instance, he condemns Hinduism for allowing girls to become mothers before attaining puberty and prescribing their marriage at a very young age. He castigates scriptures

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82. Ibid., p. 232.

83. Ibid., pp. 215-6.

84. Ibid., p. 511.

85. Ibid., p. 511.

86. Ibid., p. 511.

such as the Grihya Sutras, the Vedic Asvamedha sacrifice and even the Brāhmanas for sanctioning undesirable practices affecting women.<sup>87</sup> Having thus argued, he goes on to say that child marriage also has a positive side: it breeds chastity and 'chastity is the life of a nation'.<sup>88</sup>

## II

In order to create 'India's religion', isolating and privileging stray elements like caste, masculinity and the Vedas and the Upanishads was not sufficient. Vivekananda needed a skeleton that would act as the necessary scaffold to support all the details of his conception of 'our religion'. It was easy enough for him to reject popular forms of faiths and sects that existed during his time in favour of orthodox Hinduism. Doing so would, to an extent, explain the degeneration and slavery of India. A part of the blame could also be shared with other faiths like Jainism and Buddhism. The coming of the Muslims and Islam could substantially be held responsible for Hindu India's degeneration and Vivekananda does so regularly. Further, the English rule too could be held accountable. But Vivekananda

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87. CW, Vol. 6, pp. 286-7.

88. CW, Vol. 2, pp. 100-1.

knew that neither the picture of India's degeneration, with the exception of poverty and localized instances of starvation, nor his indictment of popular forms of worship could ever pass the test of historical scrutiny. The skeleton he needed to fabricate, therefore, had to be ahistorical, emotive and durable. What Vivekananda created in the end was a Hindu self-image that endures in its self-righteousness, revels in its ahistoricity, and remains smug in its designer victimhood. It informs and irrigates versions of Hindu identity, especially as a smokescreen to politically dominant and assertive manifestations of that identity. To investigate it is to invite scorn, invective and, more often than not, retributive violence.

For Ramakrishna, virtues such as kindness, empathy and mercy were not national, religious or racial traits but come from a love of God. Contrary to Ramakrishna's rejection of love for the nation or the race or of one's own countrymen as mere maya,<sup>89</sup> the first major component of this Hindu self-image Vivekananda puts in place is the idea of the Hindu as gentle, generous, mild, calm, introspective and spiritually inclined. For that reason alone, India, the land of the Hindus, was *Punya Bhumi*. Unlike Savarkar later, Vivekananda does not translate *Punya Bhumi* as holy land, but as the land of karma or action. Every soul inclined towards God and spirituality

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89. *Gospel*, p. 456.

ought to find in this land his 'last home'<sup>90</sup> and it was the land where one's actions would be judged and accounted for in the final analysis. The world owed much to the patient and mild Hindu and he was 'the blessed child of God'.<sup>91</sup> The mild, patient and calm Hindu never preached his spirituality through fire and sword; he preached and practised through toleration and sympathy. The maxim, 'That which exists is One; sages call It by various names', had seeped deep into the bloodstream of the Hindu nation and helped the Hindus welcome and nurture all other religions and sects into their fold. In constructing Hindu tolerance as the second bit of scaffolding on which Vivekananda's Hindu self-image rests, he remains unconcerned about obvious contradictions and easy caricatures. On other occasions he could effortlessly date the beginning of India's decline with the invention of the word 'mlechchha',<sup>92</sup> the ritual and geographical outsider; but in creating the picture of the tolerant Hindu, this was just another detail that could be glossed over. He often speaks of those faiths that consider their way to be the only way and their truth to be the only version of truth, contrasting it with the Hindu ideal of welcoming all faiths so long as the Hindu is allowed to follow his own way.<sup>93</sup> In fact, he proposes to travel the extra mile

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90. CW, Vol. 3, p. 105.

91. Ibid., p. 105.

92. CW, Vol. 5, p. 40.

93. CW, Vol. 3, p. 132.



by elevating the idea of tolerance, which could seem condescending and patronizing, to one of fellow feeling, mutual esteem and mutual respect.<sup>94</sup> Rhetoric apart, it is extremely significant to note the way in which he builds the idea of the religiously tolerant Hindu by drawing a negative comparison with other faiths.

It is here that Indians build temples for Mohammedans and Christians; nowhere else. If you go to other countries and ask Mohammedans, or people of other religions to build a temple for you, see how they will help. They will instead try to break down your temple and you too, if they can. The one great lesson therefore that the world wants most, that the world has yet to learn from India, is the idea, not only of toleration, but of sympathy.<sup>95</sup>

Indians in this instance are Hindus, as contrasted with Muslims and Christians. The meek, tolerant and generous Hindus construct mosques for Muslims and churches for Christians 'in spite of their [Muslim and Christian] hatred, in spite of their brutality, in spite of their tyranny, and in spite of the vile language they are given to uttering...'.<sup>96</sup> In other words, the gentle and the loving Hindu will, in course of time, conquer all hostile

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94. CW, Vol. 2, p. 68.

95. CW, Vol. 3, p. 114.

96. Ibid., pp. 187-8.

faiths through love. The world must, therefore, learn from the Hindus. A real lover of Shiva, for example, must forget the distinctions of name and form and see him as the 'one Lord of all, the one Soul of all souls'.<sup>97</sup> Such a keen devotee of Shiva acknowledges all 'knees bending towards the Kaaba, or kneeling in a Christian Church, or in a Buddhist Temple'<sup>98</sup> as prayers being offered to Shiva-seen-as-the-One. The Muslim or the Christian or the Buddhist may not even be aware of it or conscious of this fact. Is the reverse true? While Vivekananda is silent on this point, as we shall see in the next chapter, he believed that Hinduism had evolved into being the mother and teacher of all religions and other faiths were mere sects with inadequate notions of God.

A third element that forms a major component of the self-image is the theme of 'eternal India'. In warming up to this idea, Vivekananda momentarily discards the entire constellation of arguments that only a moment ago had condemned the inert, inactive and lifeless Hindus to lumps of clay and pebbles. Rather, the outward signs of passivity are misleading, he argues, for all activity among the Hindus takes place in the realm of religious activity.<sup>99</sup> This is the reason why India was imperishable and eternal. If Manu were to return, he would find the same laws, with thoughtful adjustments, and the

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97. Ibid., p. 115.

98. Ibid., p. 115.

99. Ibid., pp. 137-8.

same customs having survived thousands of years. No amount of misfortune has altered this eternal and constant character of Hindu India.<sup>100</sup> Eternal India for Vivekananda was religious India. It was also Hindu India. Also, since fostering self-images requires neither empirical evidence nor historical accuracy, he elaborates on the theme by asserting that there was always absolute religious freedom in India. There was no body of priests, he continues, that prevented people from telling the truth and allowed for the free expression of religious opinion. Such religious freedom was not a thing of the past, but something that flourished till the present times.

[I]n religion, we find atheists, materialists, and Buddhists, creeds, opinions, and speculations of every phase and variety, some of a most startling character, living side by side. Preachers of all sects go about teaching and getting adherents, and at the very gates of the temples of gods, the Brāhmanas – to their credit it be said – allow even the materialists to stand and give forth their opinions.<sup>101</sup>

If this seems bewildering and unreal, if not also exaggerated, it helped lay the foundation for a contrast

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100. Ibid., p. 107.

101. CW, Vol. 2, p. 114. See also, CW, Vol. 1, pp. 348-9.

between religious freedom in India as against the social freedom in the West. Vivekananda pits Hindu India's religious freedom against the freedom in social matters in Europe.<sup>102</sup> In social matters, India was cramped, strict, shackled and bound. Europe, in contrast, had imposed its religious beliefs through sword and fire, and, as a result, remained religiously and spiritually backward. In short, the dream of building future India as a judicious mix of European society and India's religion was well under way: India could borrow the European model of society and the West could do with a dose of religious freedom.

Eternal India's strength was also meekness. Vivekananda drives the point home with the zeal of a preacher, eager to convert a weak argument into a strong one. Struggle, conflict and competition, which were once recommended, were now to be dropped and made subservient to the idea of meekness. 'Dash, pluck, fight,' says Vivekananda, 'all these things are weakness.'<sup>103</sup> Neither football nor muscles are abandoned in favour of meekness but kept apart and suspended in order to provide the necessary filigree for the conception of eternal India. The word 'meekness', otherwise used pejoratively by Vivekananda, is employed in order to serve a set of other arguments: the idea that India never conquers by force, war or arms, and, flowing from this, it

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102. CW, Vol. 2., pp. 114-5.

103. CW, Vol. 5, p. 120.

usually conquers its conquerors through its spirituality. Predictably, the narrative offers a picture of perfect peace and amity, a spiritual idyll even for the heterodox Jains, who did not believe in a god, till the Muslims 'brought murder and slaughter in their train, but until their arrival peace prevailed.'<sup>104</sup> Having painted the Muslims as the villains who disrupted this peaceful equilibrium, Vivekananda turns to converting the fact of conquests and slavery to his advantage.

It was India's Karma, her fate, to be conquered, and in her turn, to conquer her conqueror. She has already done so with her Mohammedan visitors: Educated Mohammedans are Sufis, scarcely to be distinguished from Hindus. Hindu thought has permeated their civilisation; they assumed the position of learners. The great Akbar, the Moghul Emperor, was practically a Hindu. And England will be conquered in her turn. Today she has the sword, but it is worse than useless in the world of ideas.<sup>105</sup>

Hindu spirituality converts its conquerors as long as they become pupils and sit at the feet of the teacher. The idea that was Hindu India's gift to the world, one that

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104. Ibid., p. 120.

105. Ibid., p. 120.

it continues to distribute generously, was the ideal of a non-aggressive, non-threatening spirituality. The Hindu race, asserts Vivekananda, is not a race of dreamers and philosophers. Neither should its repeated conquests and enslavement be seen as a sign of passivity: rather, Hindu India continues to conquer the world in the spiritual realm.<sup>106</sup>

Having created the unlikely, but formidable, self-image of the Hindu as gentle, calm, generous, mild, introspective, meek and spiritually driven, Vivekananda adds another element to his long list of Hindu virtues. He speaks about the way in which Islam, Christianity and Buddhism spread by converting people, but asserts that Hindus do not convert. Yet, given the richness of the virtues offered, as Hinduism comes into contact with other faiths and races, they begin to adopt 'the manners and customs of the Hindus and falling in line with them'.<sup>107</sup> They begin to see the path shown by Hinduism and its rejection of such trivialities as the idea of an anthropomorphic god, ideas of heaven and earth, scriptures and doctrines; other faiths and sects see the light and start 'coming within Hinduism'.<sup>108</sup> In saying this, Vivekananda glides through ignoring caste hierarchy as one of the defining reasons for Hindus not converting, the deeply entrenched ideas of caste and ritual purity and the longevity of the

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106. CW, Vol. 1, p. 383; See also, CW, Vol. 4, pp. 152-3.

107. CW, Vol. 2, p. 360.

108. Ibid., p. 360.

term *mlechchha* to denote the outsider. For the sake of the argument, India was Hindu India and it had produced two great ideas: renunciation and spirituality. Of the two, Vivekananda marks spirituality as the national ideal.<sup>109</sup> As an ideal to be held afloat for the purposes of marking the difference between Europe and India, spirituality as the cumulative outcome of the mild, introspective and tolerant Hindu's unbroken legacy served its intended purpose. But for the purposes of furthering a distinctive brand of religious nationalism as also imparting the idea of 'our religion' greater content than could be offered by a fragile abstraction like spirituality, Vivekananda further had to arbitrarily push and alter conceptual boundaries.

If the European traveller and chronicler often found the staggering plurality of Indian religions, sects, rituals and customs understandably bewildering, Vivekananda saw in this complexity a source of conflict, chaos and absence of clarity. It also was an impediment in the way of fostering his political agenda of religious nationalism as the basis for national unity. In dealing with the intractable question of diversity, Vivekananda begins by acknowledging the diversity of races, languages, manners and customs that had the potential for creating 'more differences between two Indian races than between the European and the Eastern races'.<sup>110</sup> Amidst this diversity

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109. Ibid., p. 370.

110. CW, Vol. 3, p. 286.

and complexity, he identifies religion as the common ground around which national unity could be built. But a fragmented religion could hardly be the basis for national unity. The first step towards the future of India, says Vivekananda, was to ensure unity of religion, a conscious and deliberate 'recognition of one religion throughout the length and breadth of this land'.<sup>111</sup> He believed that, despite differences, enough common ground could be found between various sects and their own individual goals and narrowly defined ambitions; in its natural course, Hinduism entertained enough religious liberty and allowed for sufficient variations.

Therefore, the first plank in making of a future India, the first step that is to be hewn out of that rock of ages, is this unification of religion. All of us have to be taught that we are Hindus – Dualists, qualified Monists, or Monists, Shaivas, Vaishnavas, or Pashupatas, – to whatever denomination we may belong, have certain common ideas behind us, and that the time has come when for the well-being of our race, we must give up all our little quarrels and differences.<sup>112</sup>

Note that the idea of a unified Hinduism does not exist

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111. Ibid., p. 287.

112. Ibid., pp. 287-8.



at this point but has to be created in order to serve the putative idea of 'our religion'. Vivekananda, however, believed that there was something called the 'Indian mind'<sup>113</sup> and this unified, monolithic entity recognized nothing higher than religion. All difficulties of race, language, society, he concludes, 'melt away before this unifying power of religion'.<sup>114</sup> The way to unify religion, then, was to find a common ground acceptable to all sects and denominations. That Hinduism as a religion can be unified and that a common ground between sects and religious practices exists are borne by historical examples, according to Vivekananda. The examples offered follow a familiar trajectory of Hindu victimhood against the aggression of foreign conquerors, with Hindu resilience and religious fervour emerging triumphant after facing death, pillage, and desecration of temples.<sup>115</sup> When Vivekananda speaks of national unity and unity of religion, it means nothing more than the unity of the Hindu nation and the unity of Hinduism. From the vantage point of real and presumed victimhood, religion was the repository of this history of ruin and regeneration, especially in the face of barbarian onslaught, with 'barbarians bringing barbarous religions...'.<sup>116</sup> This instance of threat and religion's

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113. Ibid., p. 287.

114. Ibid., p. 287.

115. Ibid., p. 289.

116. Ibid., pp. 370-1.

tenaciousness to withstand various outrageous assaults constituted for Vivekananda the national mind and the national life-current. Nations are like individuals: every individual has specific characteristics and a destiny to fulfil. Similarly, the destiny of the Hindu nation and the Hindu race lies in the realm of religion. Religion was where the nation's centre lay, it was where the nationality of the nation was to be located, it was the core, and was where the vitality of the race rested.<sup>117</sup> The implications of this view of nationality defined purely in religious terms are far-reaching: no arena of human life would be left free from the stranglehold of religion. Neither was Vivekananda's definition of religion open-ended. He not only conflated the subtle, but significant, distinction between spirituality and religion, but also sought to demand allegiance to his idea of religious nationalism in categorical terms: 'If a Hindu is not spiritual I do not call him a Hindu...National union in India must be a gathering up of its scattered spiritual forces. A nation in India must be a union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune.'<sup>118</sup> For him, there was no room to choose between alternative modes of nationality or even reject his ideal of unified Hinduism. Religion, he declared, was the Hindu's second nature. Even more dramatically, he would announce that 'the

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117. *Ibid.*, pp. 369-1.

118. *Ibid.*, p. 371.

name of religion and Hindu have become one'.<sup>119</sup> To reject religion was to reject the nation itself.



Before filling in the details of Vivekananda's conception of unified Hinduism, let us return briefly to his idea of tolerance. In another of those rhetorical flourishes, Vivekananda calls the idea of tolerance blasphemous. He is appalled by the idea that someone could exist on the basis of someone else's sufferance and declares that he accepts all religions, worships every conception of God, and was ready to pray in all varieties of places of worship.<sup>120</sup> Toleration was the product of conceit and condescension; the need was to become many-sided, protean in character, and see ourselves as fellow-travellers of other faiths in the common quest after God.<sup>121</sup> Vivekananda raises the bar further: tolerance is conceit but fighting even in self-defence is wrong.<sup>122</sup> Though fighting in self-defence might be marginally superior to fighting out of aggression, such retaliatory violence ultimately takes place because of the inability to see the 'sameness in all things'.<sup>123</sup> Non-resistance, he argues, is a great

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119. *Ibid.*, pp. 370-1.

120. *CW*, Vol. 2, p. 372.

121. *CW*, Vol. 6, pp. 103-4.

122. *CW*, Vol. 7, p. 49.

123. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

strength; in meekness, mildness and suffering lie great strength. This is the ideal, he adds, the Hindu race has always upheld.<sup>124</sup> Vivekananda's mystique firmly rests on the selective dissemination of such sentences culled from his works. Again, the thin line that divides the ideal from the practical, the actual from the rhetorical is, indeed, very thin. Let us examine the evidence:

The Hindu scriptures say, 'No doubt, Moksha is far superior to Dharma; but Dharma should be finished first of all.' The Bauddhas were confounded just there and brought about all sorts of mischief. Non-injury is right. 'Resist not evil' is a great thing – these are indeed grand principles; but the Shāstras say, 'Thou art a householder; if anyone smites thee on thy cheek, and thou dost not return him an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, thou wilt verily be a sinner.' Manu says, 'When one has come to kill you, there is no sin in killing him, even though he is a Brāhmaṇa.' (Manu, VIII.350). This is very true, and this is a thing which should not be forgotten.<sup>125</sup>

Notice that there is little offered here in terms of an ethical debate on the question of non-injury versus retaliatory

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124. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 9, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Fourth impression, 2004, p. 255.

125. CW, Vol. 5, p. 351.

violence except quoting from scriptures, shastras and from Manu. He acknowledges that non-resistance and non-injury were part of the Buddha's teaching, but this method hides a 'dreadful weakness'.<sup>126</sup> The way of the Upanishads was better since the emphasis there is on strength: 'I do not think of punishing or escaping from a drop of sea-spray. It is nothing to me. Yet to the mosquito it would be serious. Now I would make all injury like that.'<sup>127</sup> Earlier, Vivekananda had argued that retaliation would be undesirable because the act failed to see the sameness in all things. The same idea now is employed to argue in favour of strength and fearlessness: 'My own ideal is that saint whom they killed in the Mutiny and who broke his silence, when stabbed to the heart, to say, "And thou also art He!"'<sup>128</sup> But non-injury and non-resistance are just that, a set of ideal. Those who hunger after righteousness and perfection are free to follow these ideals, but turning the other cheek is otherwise impossible and impracticable.<sup>129</sup>

Vivekananda's rejection of non-injury and non-resistance rests on the premise that resisting evil would be cowardice. Yet there is little attempt to discuss what constitutes evil. Is it possible to arbitrarily designate an individual or a group as evil on the basis of an ideology,

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126. CW, Vol. 8, p. 267.

127. Ibid., p. 267.

128. Ibid., p. 267.

129. CW, Vol. 6, p. 75.

a superstition or a misunderstanding? Vivekananda does not entertain this doubt and its ramifications. The idea of evil, by and large, remains a physical and material conception, manifest in the idea that 'the wicked would take possession of our properties and our lives, and do whatever they liked with us'.<sup>130</sup> Resistance too is reduced mostly to mere physical resistance. Vivekananda goes a step ahead and reduces all human actions to the act of ultimately resisting evil.<sup>131</sup> Not surprisingly, the inspiration for this conception of resisting evil comes from the Battle of Kurukshetra and the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. For Vivekananda, Krishna does not represent cunning but 'exemplified the idea that once you are in a thing, do not retreat'.<sup>132</sup> Retreating would be cowardice and in the normal order of things, a 'man's duty is to resist evil; let him work, let him fight, let him strike straight from the shoulder'.<sup>133</sup> The consideration that the idea of a just war in the Mahabharata could have been a pretext for justifying fratricidal violence as also a device for legitimating violence in order to maintain caste hierarchy has to wait for the revisionist accounts of Gandhi and Ambedkar; it certainly forms no part of Vivekananda's mental universe.

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130. CW, Vol. 1, p. 37.

131. Ibid., p. 40.

132. Ibid., p. 40.

133. Ibid., p. 39.

Even forgiveness, if weak and passive, is not true: fight is better. Forgive when you could bring legions of angels to victory. Krishna, the charioteer of Arjuna, hears him say, 'Let us forgive our enemies', and answers, 'You speak the words of a wise man, but you are not a wise man, but a coward.'<sup>134</sup>

Non-resistance and non-injury are not always about meekness and cowardice, but about the need to forget, the need to erase memories of the past in order not to end up settling scores. Vivekananda firmly rejects the idea that too great an emphasis on the memory of the past is undesirable. On the contrary, he feels that Hindu India's woes were compounded because of forgetting the past. Not only does he believe that the future has to be moulded from the past, but hopes that 'this past will become the future'.<sup>135</sup> In consonance with the nineteenth-century obsession with linear history, Vivekananda feels that a nation is nothing but its historical memory. It is the memory of a noble descent, and as long as this memory is kept intact, a nation does not sink low.<sup>136</sup> Hindu India had lost its historical memory and the degradation and degeneration were for all to witness.

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134. CW, Vol. 8, p. 227.

135. CW, Vol. 4, p. 270.

136. CW, Vol. 5, p. 281.

### III

If India's past had to become its future, especially if this past had anything to do with the 'centre' or 'core' of Hindu India's life, namely religion, the question of caste had to be confronted. Another pillar on which Vivekananda's mystique rests is his views on caste, especially his strong and vocal criticism of brahmins and of untouchability. But even the criticism is not always categorical. For instance, he speaks of the brahmins being good and moral, holding no property, but beset with one weakness.<sup>137</sup> This was their fondness for power. They perceive themselves as 'twice-born', the sons of God, and view themselves as above all law and punishment. If his views on the brahmins, at first sight, are ambiguous, even more perplexing are his pronouncements on the lower castes; he often calls them lower classes, thus, combining the ideas of caste and class. A conversation with a disciple in 1898 is signally representative of this strand in Vivekananda.<sup>138</sup>

He tells the disciple that the lower classes of India, the peasants, the shoemaker and the sweeper have a greater capacity for work, industry and a sense of self-reliance than the upper castes and classes. Uncomplaining, they have produced, over the centuries, the entire wealth

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137. CW, Vol. 7, p. 72.

138. Ibid., pp. 148-50.



of the nation. They are the backbone of the nation. The upper castes and classes have oppressed them and taken for granted their forbearance. But the situation was fast changing. These oppressed individuals had now begun to unite, ask for their legitimate dues, and were going to seek retribution. He warns that the upper classes will cease to get their food and clothing if the lower orders were to stop working. They had already started to go on strikes more frequently and a day would come when the upper classes will not be in a position to repress them. 'Gradually capital is drifting into their hands,' he warns, 'and they are not so much troubled with wants as you are.'<sup>139</sup>

Further, fashions and attitudes among the upper castes had changed and they lacked the inventive genius to create new wealth. Searching for employment was increasingly becoming the ultimate aim of the upper castes. The disciple doubts Vivekananda's analysis. He is sceptical of the lower classes acquiring power and culture to supplant the upper castes and classes, especially because the lower classes were 'guided by our intelligence'.<sup>140</sup> Vivekananda brands this view as one coming from someone who had read a few books and acquired a tailor-made civilization. Instead of flaunting their culture at the lower castes and classes, he

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139. Ibid., p. 148.

140. Ibid., p. 148.

wants the upper castes and classes to spread education among the lower orders and convince them that they are 'part and parcel of our bodies, and we love you and never hate you'.<sup>141</sup> Once the lower castes and classes receive this sympathy, 'their enthusiasm for work will be increased a hundredfold'.<sup>142</sup> The disciple interjects to wonder if after receiving education, the lower classes will become idle and inactive, exploiting, in turn, the classes below them, even though their minds may become fertile. Vivekananda's answer is, at once, naive as well as illustrative of his deeply entrenched faith in the idea of caste.

Why shall it be so? Even with the awakening of knowledge, the potter will remain a potter, the fisherman a fisherman, the peasant a peasant. Why should they leave their hereditary calling? 'सहजं कर्म कौन्तेय सदोषमपि न त्यजेत् — Don't give up the work to which you are born, even if it be attended with defects.' If they are taught in this way, why should they give up their respective callings? Rather they will apply their knowledge to the better performance of the work to which they have been born. A number of geniuses are sure to arise from among them in course of time.

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141. Ibid., p. 149.

142. Ibid., p. 149.

You (the higher classes) will take these into your fold. The Brahmins acknowledged the valiant King Vishvāmitra as a Brahmin, and think how grateful the whole Kshatriya race became to the Brahmins for this act! By such sympathy and co-operation even birds and beasts become one's own – not to speak of men!<sup>143</sup>

The lower castes must get an education in order to do what they have done as hereditary vocations better. All that needed to be given to them after education had supplemented and enhanced their traditional skills were sympathy, assurance, and, most importantly, the possibility of the few geniuses among them being accorded brahminical status. Vivekananda believed so and he could always quote the Gita, as he does above, in order to lend weight to his contention.

Brahmins, as long as they remained within the limits of orthodoxy, were to be looked upon as the spiritual mentors of the Hindus. Any trace of deviation from the path of the Vedas was immoral and unreasonable.<sup>144</sup> This is what the brahmins did: because of their greed for power and in order to keep their privileged positions intact, they introduced non-Vedic doctrines into Hinduism. Vivekananda detests Vamachara of the Tantra for this

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143. Ibid., pp. 149-50.

144. Ibid., pp. 173-4.

reason alone: it was against the spirit of the Vedas. His frequently quoted diatribe against brahmins is directed against those among them who deviated from the path of Vedic orthodoxy. Apart from the brahmins, Vivekananda also offers insights into what he thinks of other castes.<sup>145</sup> The rule of the kshatriyas is tyrannical and cruel, but also marked by a flourishing of arts and social culture. While the vaishyas are less exclusive than the kshatriyas, their ascendancy heralds a 'silent crushing and blood-sucking power'.<sup>146</sup> During the period of their prominence, culture begins to decay. The shudra rule introduces a marked equality in distribution of physical comforts and ordinary education, but it also signals the lowering of culture and fewer geniuses. Vivekananda's utopian state would keep intact the benefits of all essential caste characteristics while erasing their perceived disadvantages. But he admits that such an ideal state may be a dream, and, in the meantime the rule of the shudras had come to stay and their power would be irresistible.

Vivekananda finds efforts to designate caste as a religious institution deeply flawed. For him, all reformers from the Buddha to Ram Mohan Roy had committed this error and, as a consequence, tried to 'pull down religion and caste altogether, and failed'.<sup>147</sup> Having thus stated, he goes on to offer his views on caste that are often

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145. CW, Vol. 6, p. 343.

146. Ibid., p. 343.

147. CW, Vol. 5, p. 19.

mistakenly held as examples of Vivekananda's antipathy towards caste combined with his equally misunderstood liberality in wanting to do away with it: 'But in spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallised social institution, which after doing its service is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench, and it can only be removed by giving back to the people their lost social individuality.'<sup>148</sup>

The operative words and phrases here are 'crystallised', 'after doing its service', and 'lost social individuality', rather than 'stench' and 'removed'. A close reading of Vivekananda helps explain the meaning of these words and phrases, but also encourages a search for clues regarding the emerging contours of the unified version of 'our religion'. To begin with, Vivekananda's explanation of the idea of caste and its tried and tested virtues:

In Sanskrit, Jāti i.e., species, — now this is the first idea of creation. 'I am One, I become many' (various Vedas). Unity is before creation, diversity is creation. Now if this diversity stops, creation will be destroyed. So long as any species is vigorous and active it must throw-out varieties. When it ceases or is stopped from breeding varieties, it dies. Now the original idea of Jati was this freedom of the individual to express his nature, his Prakriti,

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148. Ibid., p. 19.

his Jati, his caste, and so it remained for thousands of years. Not even in the latest books is inter-dining prohibited; nor in any of the older books is inter-marriage forbidden. Then what was the cause of India's downfall? – the giving up of this idea of caste.<sup>149</sup>

Expressing one's caste was freedom; its loss is what is alluded to as the lost social individuality that caste had for centuries engendered. As an institution that helped an individual to express his Jati, in its current state that institution and that idea had got crystallized, failed to produce variations and had died. Its death was also for Vivekananda an explanation for India's downfall.

The present caste is not the real Jati, but a hindrance to its progress. It really has prevented the free action of Jati, i.e., caste or variation. Any crystallised custom or privilege or hereditary class in any shape really prevents caste (Jati) from having its full sway, and whenever any nation ceases to produce this immense variety, it must die. Therefore what I have to tell you, my countrymen, is this: — That India fell because you prevented and abolished caste. Every frozen aristocracy or privileged class is a blow to caste and is not-caste.

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149. CW, Vol. 4, p. 317.

Let Jati have its sway; break down every barrier in the way of caste and we shall rise.<sup>150</sup>

In practical terms, caste designated individuals to perform certain actions according to their natures, their prakriti. As long as they continued to perform those without locating their actions or varna-prescribed vocation in custom, privilege or heredity, caste functioned smoothly. So, the cobbler, the peasant and the sweeper, despite an education will continue to do their jobs and do them even better as long as they got the sympathy of the upper castes. This, in sum, is Vivekananda's argument till now.

India was a mad confluence of races. Vivekananda wants to find a way of bringing about a fusion between races and tribes, especially so because he finds them to be unequal in culture. Similarly, a profusion of languages ought to have a common link. In Sanskrit, 'a great sacred language of which all others would be considered as manifestations',<sup>151</sup> he located and found the most viable linguistic solution. The common rubric under which he attempts to club all the races and tribes was found in the term 'Arya'. Even the distinction between Aryan and Dravidian was casually brushed aside as merely a philological one and not of race and blood.<sup>152</sup> Once language and race were unified, the asymmetry between

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150. Ibid., p. 317.

151. Ibid., p. 255.

152. Ibid., pp. 244-5.

cultures had to be rectified: 'Just as Sanskrit has been the linguistic solution, so the Arya the racial solution. So the Brāhmanhood is the solution of the varying degrees of progress and culture as well as that of all social and political problems.'<sup>153</sup>

Once the supremacy and the primacy of the Aryan race were established, he could now readily pronounce brahminhood as 'the great ideal of India'.<sup>154</sup> It was true that the degradation of brahminhood and kshatriyahood was prophesied in the Puranas;<sup>155</sup> in the Kaliyuga, they claimed, there would only be non-brahmins. Vivekananda regrets that this was becoming increasingly true, though a few brahmins remained, and did so only in India. Any vision of bringing about order to the diversity of races and languages, then, can only be brought about by a superior culture. The Aryans, Vivekananda asserts, provided such a culture and this culture expressed itself through the caste system: 'It put, theoretically at least, the whole of India under the guidance – not of wealth, nor of the sword – but of intellect, – intellect chastened and controlled by spirituality. The leading caste in India is the highest Aryans – the Brāhmans.'<sup>156</sup>

References can be traced in Vivekananda's works where he speaks about brahmins and kshatriyas as

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153. Ibid., p. 255.

154. Ibid., p. 255.

155. Ibid., p. 256.

156. Ibid., p. 243.



ideals rather than fixed or designated castes: 'Whatever caste has the power of the sword, becomes Kshatriya; whatever learning, Brahman; whatever wealth, Vaishya.'<sup>157</sup> He also describes caste as a status achieved or acquired, where individuals having attained the status of learning, wealth or sword worked towards preserving the privileges of that caste. Was it then possible for a shudra to acquire learning and become a brahmin? Vivekananda's answer is emphatically in the negative: 'If you want to rise to a higher caste in India, you have to elevate all your caste first, and then there is nothing in your onward path to hold you back.'<sup>158</sup> The lower castes had to aspire, en masse, to rise to the level of a higher caste. It did not really matter whether caste was seen as an ideal or perceived as a social institution in operation. For Vivekananda, the rules to aspire for a higher status were already put in place by the Aryan and brahmin superior culture inaugurated in ancient India.

India's ancestors had the brahmins as their racial ideal. Vivekananda describes this ideal in terms of representing renunciation and spirituality.<sup>159</sup> If a country were to be governed by men of such selflessness and spiritual excellence, no police, laws or even government would be needed in any way. Following this Platonist ideal, he quotes the

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157. Ibid., p. 244.

158. Ibid., p. 244.

159. CW, Vol. 3, pp. 196-8.

Mahabharata to suggest that in the Satyayuga, there were only brahmins. Their eventual degeneration led to proliferation of other castes. It was a cycle and there would come a day when everyone would return to these brahminical origins.<sup>160</sup> The law of the ancestors has to be obeyed: all races and castes must aspire to become brahmins and attain the brahminical ideal. It was a law not only for Hindus and Indians but for the entire world: to attain the brahminical ideal of non-resistance, calmness, steadiness, worshipfulness, purity and introspection. Cursing and vilifying the brahmins are futile and fruitless, since bringing down what is already up is against the dictates of the Vedantic religion. Neither the brahmin nor caste as an institution ought to be condemned or be subjected to reform.

I have seen castes in almost every country in the world, but nowhere is their plan and purpose so glorious as here. If caste is thus unavoidable, I would rather have a caste of purity and culture and self-sacrifice, than a caste of dollars. Therefore utter no words of condemnation. Close your lips and let your hearts open.<sup>161</sup>

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160. Ibid., p,293.

161. Ibid., p. 199.

The brahminical ideal of purity, culture and self-sacrifice was, at once, the caste ideal, the race ideal and the national ideal. Whenever Vivekananda condemns caste, he has in mind the economic and social idea of class privilege and exclusivity. Questions of power and its arbitrary use by the upper castes are relegated to the whimsical and naive belief that all human beings will unquestioningly accept the brahmin ideal as the highest that Hinduism's ancestors in India and Vedantic religion could offer. His fondness for caste, however, is total and not entirely innocent. Neither can it be supported by arguing that in glorifying the brahmins and the caste, Vivekananda was only speaking of an ideal of spirituality and renunciation.

Caste is a natural order. I can perform one duty in social life, and you another; you can govern a country, and I can mend a pair of shoes, but that is no reason why you are greater than I, for can you mend my shoes? Can I govern the country? I am clever in mending shoes, you are clever in reading Vedas, but that is no reason why you should trample on my head; why if one commits murder should he be praised, and if another steals an apple why should he be hanged! This will have to go. Caste is good. That is the only natural way of solving life. Men must form themselves into groups, and you cannot get rid of that. Wherever

you go there will be caste. But that does not mean that there should be these privileges. They should be knocked on the head.<sup>162</sup>

Knocking privilege on the head sounded good and eminently desirable, but could not go hand in hand with differentiation and inequality that was deemed natural and desirable. The example of reading Vedas and mending shoes is equally disingenuous. Having privileged the Vedas, Vedanta and the brahmins, a comparison between reading the Vedas and mending shoes does not hold. Moreover, when it came to practical solutions for rectifying what Vivekananda perceived as privilege within the caste institutions, there was never a call for the brahmin to learn to mend shoes. Rather, the demand always is for the lower-castes to learn Sanskrit.

Thinkers and spiritual masters such as Ramanuja, Chaitanya and Kabir tried to raise the lower castes but failed. Vivekananda attributes this failure to their not spreading Sanskrit among the masses. This was not merely their error: it was a flaw they shared with the Buddha, 'when he stopped the Sanskrit language from being studied by the masses'.<sup>163</sup> Vivekananda wants the lower castes to desist from being critical of the higher castes; they must accept that all of India is nothing but

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162. Ibid., p. 245.

163. Ibid., pp. 290-1.

Aryan, the brahmins are the ideal and Sanskrit is the sacred language.

The only safety, I tell you men who belong to the lower castes, the only way to raise your condition is to study Sanskrit, and this fighting and writing and frothing against the higher castes is in vain, it does no good, and it creates fight and quarrel, and this race, unfortunately already divided, is going to be divided more and more.<sup>164</sup>

In other words, if the Hindus remain divided, the onus of such a division would lie with the lower castes and their refusal to accept the superior culture of the upper castes. 'The ideal at one end is the Brahman and the ideal at the other end is the Chandala,' states Vivekananda, 'and the whole work is to raise the Chandala up to the Brahman.'<sup>165</sup> The idea is not to bring down the higher, he elaborates, but to raise the lower to the level of the higher. The brahmins must work towards this goal in order to justify that name and epithet. It is the brahmins' refusal to share this superior culture with the lower castes that made the Muslim invasions possible.<sup>166</sup> Yet, because of caste, a semblance of Hindu intellectuality and learning remained for Europeans to study, something that in

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164. Ibid., p. 291.

165. Ibid., p. 295.

166. Ibid., p. 298.

the absence of caste would have been smashed by the Muslim invaders.<sup>167</sup> But the blame was not entirely that of the brahmins. Vivekananda, once again, chastises the lower castes for not looking up to the brahmins and spurning the superior culture embodied by the brahmins: 'Do not seize every opportunity of fighting the Brahman...Who told you to neglect spirituality and Sanskrit learning?...Why do you fret and fume because somebody else had more brains, more energy, more pluck and go, than you?'<sup>168</sup> The warning is clear and direct. Not even a trace of the Buddha's followers remains in India, he concludes, because the Buddha refused to recognize caste.<sup>169</sup> Caste was good; it was the plan Vivekananda wanted to follow for India's future. All it needed was an occasional readjustment.<sup>170</sup>

Vivekananda's plan of readjustment of caste was not mere expression of pious intention or a romantic dream. He wanted caste reinstated and strengthened. Regretting that the original fourfold division of castes, the *chaturvarnya*, was not to be found in India any longer, Vivekananda proposes that the entire Hindu population be redivided and grouped under the original

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167. CW, Vol. 5, p. 144.

168. CW, Vol. 3, p. 298.

169. CW, Vol. 7, p. 39. 'One sect wanted to destroy and they were thrown out of India: they were the Buddhists.' Volume 5, p. 147.

170. CW, Vol. 7, p. 145.

division of the castes.<sup>171</sup> All subdivisions of individual castes, say of the brahmins, had to be abolished and united under a single caste rubric. This was the Vedic ideal and also the concrete reality during the Vedic times and had to be restored. If Jati dharma, which was the very basis of Vedic religion and Vedic society, could be 'rightly and truly preserved,' the nation shall never fall.<sup>172</sup> At another time, Vivekananda wants the three upper castes alone to be 'produced' in future India; the 'Sudra caste will exist no longer – their work being done by machinery.'<sup>173</sup>

In 1898, Vivekananda was celebrating Ramakrishna's birthday. He wanted every brahmin to be given the sacred thread, even lapsed brahmins. He instructed non-brahmins to be given the Gayatri Mantra.<sup>174</sup> In the conversation recorded on that day by Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, a disciple, Vivekananda wanted all Hindus to be united, shun untouchability based on ritual purity and wanted all the people of the land lifted to the position of brahmins. Note that non-brahmins have not been given the sacred thread, but only the Gayatri Mantra. In the same set of conversations, he rejects Shankara's 'specious argument'<sup>175</sup> of the non-brahmins

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171. Ibid., p. 322.

172. Ibid., p. 359.

173. Ibid., p. 240.

174. Ibid., pp. 107-8.

175. Ibid., pp. 117-8

not being entitled to attain the supreme knowledge of the Brahman. Irritated by Shankara's illiberality and his brahminical pride, Vivekananda poses the question: 'The Vedas have entitled anyone belonging to the three upper castes to a study of the Vedas and the realisation of Brahman, haven't they? So Shankara had no need whatsoever of displaying this curious bit of pedantry on this subject, contrary to the Vedas.'<sup>176</sup> Denying non-brahmins the sacred thread, yet granting them the realization of the Brahman was not seen by Vivekananda as a contradiction that needed resolution.



Did Ramakrishna share Vivekananda's views on caste? Ramakrishna endorsed the Brahmo Samaj's sentiment regarding abolishing caste but felt that the only way to remove caste was by love of God: 'Lovers of God have no caste.'<sup>177</sup> Through love of God, he argues, the untouchable becomes pure and the outcaste no longer remains one. For him, the great example of how the love of God transcended caste was Chaitanya, who embraced one and all in his sect. Love of God is enough to achieve liberation. The Puranas clearly state that this path of loving devotion does not entail worship, sacrifice, tantric

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176. Ibid., pp. 117-8.

177. *Gospel*, pp. 157-8. See also, p. 591.



rituals or reciting mantras. Conversely, the way shown by the Vedas for human liberation required a more rigid adherence to caste: 'But the teachings of the Vedas are different. According to the Vedas none but a brāhmin can be liberated. Further, the worship is not accepted by the gods unless the mantras are recited correctly. One must perform sacrifice, worship, and so on, according to scriptural injunction.'<sup>178</sup>

Unlike Vivekananda, caste was not part of Ramakrishna's spiritual world. Neither were the Vedas helpful in achieving liberation; they were a positive impediment in the path towards realizing God. For him, ecstatic love of God and genuine bhakti mattered more than any significance that scriptures or tradition might attach to caste. Yet, despite his categorical denial of caste in matters of faith, Ramakrishna had a mild, ordinary and generalized sense of caste in personal matters. He would, for instance, sometimes not eat food from the hands of a *dome*<sup>179</sup> and would in later life insist that his food be cooked by a brahmin observing ritual purity. As a tantric practitioner, he had already gone beyond the binaries of purity and impurity mandated by caste. But the tantric period was designated by him as 'that mood'<sup>180</sup> and he no longer felt bound by it. But he would consistently reject outright the suggestion that liberation

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178. Ibid., p. 584.

179. Ibid., p. 597.

180. Ibid., p. 549.

was possible only for those born in a brahmin body.<sup>181</sup> Neither was any caste held as an ideal for the Hindus or for the future Indian nation.



Vivekananda's project was essentially one where nationalism, religion and politics are made to cohabit. These lines of demarcation in his case are often blurred and often defy neat conceptual categorization. Indeed, the thousands of books and pamphlets that depend on partial quotes from Vivekananda's writings, letters and speeches have painted a picture of him that does not remotely tally with a closer reading of his works. A few examples would suffice. While Vivekananda swears by the Vedas and the Upanishads, upholds the original varna classification, he also speaks of the 'eternal subjection of the individual to society and forced self-sacrifice by dint of institutions and discipline'.<sup>182</sup> He condemns the smothering of individual lives by the shastras, and yet wants to uphold the brahminical ideal of spirituality and renunciation as circumscribed by the shastras. Being someone who regularly condemned customs and rituals, he could vehemently argue that the shraddha ceremony 'appeases the departed beings'.<sup>183</sup> But a careful reading

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181. Ibid., p. 591.

182. CW, Vol. 4, pp. 421-2.

183. CW, Vol. 7, p. 132.

of his thought suggests coherence and integrity in his vision of future India, brilliantly captured by the phrase 'European society with India's religion'. Now that the scaffolding on which 'our religion' is to be created is in place, the next chapter will attempt to understand the complexity and deft manoeuvres that went into making of a modern religion, Hinduism.

# The Fly and the Syrup



## I

In December 1884, Ramakrishna meets Bankim Chandra Chatterji.<sup>1</sup> As soon as they have been introduced, Ramakrishna puns on Bankim's name which means 'bent' or 'twisted'. 'What has made you bent?' asks Ramakrishna, to which Bankim replies that the boots of the white masters had bent his body. Ramakrishna ignores the politically pregnant remark and begins to speak of the ecstatic love of Krishna for Radha that made his body

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1. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Originally recorded in Bengali by M., a disciple of the Master*, Translated into English with an Introduction by Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 2007 imprint, pp. 666-76. This is a translation of Mahendranath Gupta's *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathāmrita*, originally published between 1897 and 1932 in five volumes in Bengali. Henceforth, all references to the English translation will be cited as *Gospel*.

bend in three places. Soon the conversation veers towards matters of faith. At one point, Ramakrishna asks Bankim about the duties of an individual. Eating, sleeping and sex, replies Bankim. Ramakrishna calls him saucy and unforgivingly chastises him for possessing knowledge without discrimination and renunciation. The crow thinks he is a clever bird, says Ramakrishna, but the moment he wakes up, his mind turns to filling his stomach with other people's filth. The swan, in sharp contrast, leaves the water aside and drinks the milk. The crow struts about, but the swan walks straight in one direction. The difference between the crow and the swan is one between worldliness and love of God alone. Humans who are enmeshed in matters of the world are crow-like and those who think only of the love of God are like the swan.

Soon the conversation moves in the direction of Ramakrishna's familiar denunciation of 'woman and gold'. Bankim agrees with Ramakrishna that money is nothing but a lump of clay, but suggests that money sometimes can help the poor and do good to others. Ramakrishna is appalled by the suggestion. For him charity and the idea of doing good to others are sheer arrogance. It is a form of hubris born out of lack of faith in the idea that kindness belongs to God alone. Every form of charity and philanthropy, whether done by a sanyasi or a householder, is ultimately just doing good to oneself and not to others. Ramakrishna is familiar with the idea of serving and helping all beings without

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a trace of attachment, but even this form of karmayoga ultimately helps only the individual. Conceding that selfless and dispassionate service could be a way of attaining God, Ramakrishna rejects its suitability for Kaliyuga. Ramakrishna wants faith in God and God's will reinstated clearly; for him the ambiguity regarding the source of charity and mercy had to be removed. Put differently, for humans to claim merit for doing good to others was nothing but pride and misplaced selfishness.

Helping others, doing good to others – this is the work of God alone, who for men has created the sun and moon, father and mother, fruits, flowers, and corn. The love that you see in parents is God's love: He has given it to them to preserve His creation. The compassion that you see in the kind-hearted is God's compassion: He has given it to them to protect the helpless. Whether you are charitable or not, He will have His work done somehow or other. Nothing can stop His work.

What then is man's duty? What else can it be? It is just to take refuge in God and pray to Him with a yearning heart for His vision.<sup>2</sup>

Ramakrishna's insistence on God as the source of all kindness and compassion is not just the pronouncements

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2. *Gospel*, p. 671.

of a bhakta or the predictable outpourings of a sanyasi. Not only does his argument flow from the idea of the impermanence of the world and the ultimate reality only of God, it significantly introduces in modern Indian thought a theory of modesty. The contrast to his theory of modesty lay in the modern idea of first studying the world and its creatures through science and then attempting to understand God. Bankim subscribes to this view and Ramakrishna acknowledges that many of his devotees too are beholden to this view. Ramakrishna, instead, relentlessly asks the question, 'Which comes first, "science" or God?'<sup>3</sup>

In proposing the primacy of God before scientifically knowing the universe, Ramakrishna adds a subtle layer to his theory of modesty. As seen above, he begins by positing that God comes first and then the world. Merely acknowledging God was not enough but attaining God through ecstatic love was the next step. To this he adds a third element. After attaining God, one can know everything else 'if it is necessary'.<sup>4</sup> The worldly man thinks about the world all the time and reproduces the world, or in Ramakrishna's words, a man belches what he eats. To be worldly is to be calculating and deceitful. The argument this far is: God has to be privileged before the impermanent world. After attaining God, one can

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3. Ibid., p. 672.

4. Ibid., p. 672.

know the world if there be a compelling necessity to know it. The quest for knowing the world excessively arises from altering the order of what is to be known as a result of deceit and calculation, a direct consequence of human pride and arrogance. If there is still a residual longing to know the world after knowing God, one can do so only if such knowing becomes necessary. In other words, knowing the world before knowing God is a sign of immaturity; to want to know the world after attaining God may be a necessity. Two ideas consistently run through Ramakrishna's thought: first, a human individual cannot really help the world and second, that even an act done selflessly is an action that only does good to the doer.<sup>5</sup> To illustrate Ramakrishna's disdain for performing acts of charity and social service, his conversation with Sambu Mallick is often cited. Sambu Mallick wanted to establish hospitals, schools, dispensaries and make roads and dig reservoirs. Ramakrishna had advised him to limit the number of activities or he would otherwise be in danger of losing sight of God, like those who came to Kalighat and spent their entire time giving alms without bothering to have a glimpse of Kali in the temple.

Sambu Mallick's example is strewn all across the pages of the *Kathāmrita*, and is also cited by Ramakrishna in his conversation with Bankim to demystify the excessive

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5. Ibid., pp. 108, 452, 142-43, 378-9.



importance attached to doing good deeds. As a parable used to illustrate human arrogance and selfishness as also to correct the imbalance of priorities between attaining God and scientifically knowing the world, it works well. But Sambu Mallick's penchant for charity does not fully reflect the sharp distinction between the primacy of ecstatic love of God and the secondary importance attached to acts of charity and merit. To love God was to get deranged by the love of God and lose one's head. It was not a question of rationally choosing and calculating one's next action with respect to either one's own self or with respect to others.

Once I said to Narendra: 'Suppose there were a cup of syrup and you were a fly. Where would you sit to drink the syrup?' Narendra said, 'I would sit on the edge of the cup and stretch out my neck to drink it.' 'Why?' I asked. 'What's the harm of plunging into the middle of the cup and drinking the syrup?' Narendra answered, 'Then I should stick in the syrup and die.' 'My child,' I said to him, 'that isn't the nature of the Nectar of Satchidānanda. It is the Nectar of Immortality. Man does not die from diving into It. On the contrary he becomes immortal.'<sup>6</sup>

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6. Ibid., p. 675.

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Not only does the above quote reflect the deep schism between two contentious views about faith in its relation to the world, but it also portrays something more significant. Ramakrishna kept the realm of faith distant from the pulls and pressures of ordinary life, whereas Vivekananda sought to perceive the whole gamut of human activities through religious bifocals. Ramakrishna sought to protect faith from being contaminated by worldly things, while Vivekananda circumscribed every aspect of human life with his brand of religiosity. The Master plunged into the syrup, while his favourite disciple sat on the edge straining his neck to drink it. Vivekananda wanted religion to be a practical science and could quote Bishop Berkeley on the question of the existence of God.



One way of understanding Ramakrishna's rejection of work in general and his indifference to acts of charity and philanthropy is to acknowledge the considerable influence of Bengal Vaishnavism in his life and his thought. The *Caitanya Caritamrita* of Krishnadasa Kaviraja is full of instances where Chaitanya rejects jnana (knowledge), yoga (union of the individual with the Infinite), karma (action) and mukti (liberation) categorically in favour of prema-bhakti, the highest form of loving devotion to Krishna, and reciting Krishna's name (nama-samkirtana).

These form part of the *Caritamrita*'s list of the highest truths: Krishna, Krishna-bhakti, prema and nama-samkirtana. No scripture, it argues, was greater than this designated set of activities and there are specific injunctions that discourage pursuit of knowledge, action and liberation. Several verses in it point to the futility of jnana and karma in attaining the state of prema-bhakti.

- The abandonment of karma and the vilification of karma – this the śāstras attest; there is never any prema-bhakti of Kṛṣṇa from karma.<sup>7</sup>
- Those who follow karma and jñāna are both devoid of Bhakti...<sup>8</sup>

Work, then, is a prelude to faith and an unavoidable step before an individual becomes ready for renunciation. The *Bhagavata Purana* (11.20.9) makes this abundantly clear in saying: 'You shall work until a condition of renunciation arises, or until faith, in listening, etc., to my story, is born in the heart.'<sup>9</sup> Karma is not merely an impediment in attaining the highest form of devotion but is also a positive hindrance in the worship of Krishna.

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7. *Caitanya Caritamrita of Krishnadasa Kaviraja*, a translation and commentary by Edward C. Dimock, Jr., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999, p. 476, (henceforth cited as CC).

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 477-8.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 477.

To consider karma as the dharma was 'the darkness of ignorance of the solitary jīva'.<sup>10</sup> The status of jnana and yoga was no different: they were powerless without Krishna-bhakti.<sup>11</sup> The *Caritamrita* goes a step further. Quoting the *Bhagavata Purana*, it argues that even selfless and unattached action is meaningless if it is empty of emotion for God.<sup>12</sup> Neither can jnana alone help reach the goal of liberation without bhakti, but mukti without jnana is possible if there is sincere and loving devotion.

For Ramakrishna, the legacy of Chaitanya's distinctive brand of Vaishnavism was not merely a way of establishing the primacy of following the path of ecstatic love of God. It went beyond the demands of reciting Krishna's name and expressing love of Krishna. As the *Caritamrita* clearly delineates, the way of bhakti was also a ruse to become indifferent to the world and its socio-political realities. The first step in this process was to reject the classification of life based on the fourfold division of human beings into castes, namely, the varnashramadharma: 'Abandoning all this [association of unholy people and those who are restless in desire, especially desire of women] and the varṇāśramadharma, one should become indifferent to the world and take refuge only in Kṛṣṇa.'<sup>13</sup>

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10. Ibid., p. 163.

11. Ibid., p. 685.

12. Ibid., p. 686.

13. Ibid., p. 694.

Indifference to the world also implies rejecting the nature and consequences of actions and their intended effect on the established social hierarchy and political power structure: 'He who abandons the dharma of injunctions and worships the feet of Kṛṣṇa, there is never in his mind wrong or forbidden actions.'<sup>14</sup> Therefore, actions performed as part of the caste duty in order to keep intact the social and political order are circumspectly, but firmly, rejected by elevating the worship and love of Krishna. Indeed, the imperative of worshipping and loving Krishna robs all other activities of their sacredness and legitimacy. In a spectacular revision of the central thesis of the Bhagavadgita, which sanctifies and legitimizes the varnashramadharma, the *Caritamrita* quotes a familiar verse from the eighteenth chapter of the Bhagavadgita to argue in favour of its indifference to the world. The verse where Krishna asks Arjuna to 'Abandon all the Laws and instead seek shelter with me alone'<sup>15</sup> and Krishna's simultaneous assurance that he will set Arjuna

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14. Ibid., p. 701.

15. Ibid., p. 695. The translation of 18:66 from the Bhagavadgita is as per the *Caritamrita* and so the stress and inflections in the translation are of the *Caritamrita* and not of this author. For a similar treatment of the ways in which Chaitanya's legacy perceived the Bhagavadgita, see Joseph T. O'Connell, 'Caitanya's Followers and the *Bhagavad-gītā*: A Case Study in Bhakti and the Secular', in *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, edited by Bardwell L. Smith, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1976, pp. 33-52.

free from all evils is cited to strengthen the argument in favour of abandoning varna-inspired activity. Elsewhere in the *Caritamrita*, a conversation between Ramananda Raya, who calls himself a lowly Shudra,<sup>16</sup> and Chaitanya is cited. Here Chaitanya categorically rejects as superficial<sup>17</sup> the import of a verse from the *Vishnu Purana* that suggests following the varnashramadharma as the only way of attaining Vishnu. Following this rejection, Chaitanya also rejects the necessity of following one's ordinary caste duties and personal obligations,<sup>18</sup> svadharma, as superficial and not deep enough.



Far removed from this world of intense love of Krishna, Vivekananda discovers the ideal for creating his version of 'our religion' as the absolute monarch in the pages of the Upanishads. Tenets of religion, he argues, are not born from retiring into the forest nor from indifference to the world, but are crafted in the hands of those who were most involved in the world, namely, the kshatriya kings.<sup>19</sup>

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16. CC, pp. 432-3.

17. Ibid., pp. 434-5.

18. Ibid., p. 435.

19. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 2, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1932, pp. 289-90, 311 (*The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* will henceforth be referred to as CW).

His world is not Ramakrishna's mansion of mirth but an ideal from the past whose importance needs to be restated and its bygone glory restored. The story of Śvetaketu, his father and teacher Gautama and Pravāhaṇa Jaivali, the king, narrated in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, underscores the centrality of the kshatriya ideal for Vivekananda, a story which this essay will have an opportunity to revisit. In similar fashion, the Bhagavadgita's affirmation of the varna-oriented ideal of rectitude also constitutes an indispensable element in the composition of 'our religion'. Calling the Bhagavadgita the best commentary on Vedānta philosophy, Vivekananda extols the text's message of 'intense activity in the midst of calmness...the calmness that cannot be ruffled, the balance of mind which is never disturbed, whatever happens'.<sup>20</sup> Arguing that it is 'the calm, forgiving, equable, well-balanced mind that does the greatest amount of work',<sup>21</sup> Vivekananda's vision of 'India's religion' steadily undervalues and demotes emotions, feelings, imagination and passions. Like several of his contemporaries in the nineteenth century, Vivekananda's preoccupation with brahminical Hinduism and its carefully crafted world of order, discipline and control, with masculinity and kshatriyahood being simultaneously and unequivocally celebrated alongside, often led to condemning feelings, emotions, imagination

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20. Ibid., p. 290-91.

21. Ibid., p. 291.

and passions as feminine, unscientific or deviant. Among the likes of Vivekananda, operating from within the anachronistic framework of the Bhagavadgita's definition of dharma or right conduct, there is a singular absence of discovering valuable links between feelings, emotions, anger and passions to questions of justice, injustice, pain and freedom.

Take for instance the story of Jabālā and Satyakāma Jābāla from the *Chandogya Upanishad* that Vivekananda narrates on 12 November 1896 as part of the second lecture on Practical Vedanta. First, the brief outline of the story:<sup>22</sup> Satyakāma goes to his mother Jabālā and wants to know his lineage in order to become a vedic student. His mother tells him that when she was young, she worked as a maid and had many relationships, and, hence it was impossible for her to tell him his lineage. She says to him: 'But my name is Jabālā, and your name is Satyakāma. So you should simply say that you are Satyakāma Jābāla.'<sup>23</sup> Hearing this, Satyakāma goes to Hāridrumata Gautama and asks to be accepted as a vedic student. Hāridrumata asks Satyakāma his lineage. Satyakāma narrates his earlier conversation with his mother and accordingly identifies himself as Satyakāma Jābāla. On hearing this, Hāridrumata says to him: 'Who but a Brahmin could speak like that!

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22. This summary is based on Patrick Olivelle's translation. See *Upaniṣads, A new translation by Patrick Olivelle*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008 impression, pp. 130-31.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 130.



Fetch some firewood, son. I will perform your initiation. You have not strayed from the truth.<sup>24</sup> Vivekananda uses the story to illustrate a principle hidden in it but otherwise finds it ‘very crude’.<sup>25</sup> The principle that he teases out from it was that the Vedanta always reconciled the actual to the ideal. But other than this, he remains impervious to the layers of meaning inherent in it. The remarkable sexual freedom that Jabālā so nonchalantly speaks about and exhibits, the clear evidence of the Vedas being the exclusive privilege of the brahmins and those of correct lineage, the association of being a brahmin and fearlessly speaking the truth, and the rendering of truth as the almost exclusive preserve of the brahmins are entirely glossed over by Vivekananda. But more than anything else, while Hāridrumata neither comments on Jabālā’s numerous relationships nor is he censorious about them, it is safe to assume that Vivekananda’s selective misogyny led him to the conclusion that the story was very crude.

The first step, then, towards recreating Vivekananda’s version of a masculine, rational and scientific brahminical Hinduism as the core of the nation was to posit control, power, dominance and stability as the constitutive elements.<sup>26</sup> These elements were essential for any

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24. Ibid., p. 130.

25. CW, Vol. 2, p. 307.

26. See Sarah Caldwell’s brilliantly suggestive essay titled ‘Margins at the Center: Tracing Kālī through Time, Space, and Culture’, in *Encountering Kālī: In the Margins, at the Center, in*

conception of 'our religion' to synchronize with the proposed establishment of a European society in India. But to bring about the unlikely synthesis in India between a projected European society and an Indian religion, the non-Sanskritic, bhakti, tantric, tribal, folk, low-caste, vernacular and all other non-elite and politically marginal perspectives had to be sidelined and discredited. In redefining the centre/core and the marginal, Vivekananda was forsaking an idea of the 'centre' that existed in India which signified movement, ambiguity, doubt and transformation.<sup>27</sup> His arguments in favour of the centrality of the Upanishads and the unquestioned perfection of Vedanta were ways of surmounting European colonial censure against everything that did not conform to a non-threatening, but largely moribund, indigenous brahminical elite tradition. He hoped that his reading of the Upanishads and the Vedanta would effectively re-establish religious orthodoxy in India, inaugurating a version of faith and belief that would be in consonance with the rational and scientific ideals represented by ancient Greece and

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*the West*, edited by Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003.

27. David Shulman's formulation cited in Don Handelman, 'The Guises of the Goddess and the Transformation of the Male: Gangamma's Visit to Tirupati, and the Continuum of Gender', in *Syllables of Sky: Studies in South Indian Civilization In Honour of Velcheru Narayana Rao*, edited by David Shulman, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, p. 286

contemporary Europe. Had not Schopenhauer, after all, taken recourse to reason alone and rationalized the Vedas?<sup>28</sup> For him, as we shall see, movement, ambiguity, transformation and doubt were signs of weakness, superstition and irrationality.

Vivekananda rejects every philosophical system and every strand of thought as unorthodox if they did not 'obey the Upanishads'.<sup>29</sup> The soil of India, he argues, had rejected Jainism and Buddhism for this very reason: they did not bear allegiance to the Upanishads. Despite his regular fulminations against books and scriptures, he singles out the Upanishads as 'our scriptures',<sup>30</sup> much in the way the Bible is for the Christians, the Qur'an is to the Muslims, the Tripitaka are for the Buddhists and the Zend Avesta for the Parsis. The laws of Manu, the Grihya and Shrauta Sutras, and all the Puranas had to agree with the authority and primacy of the Vedas and the Upanishads. When they did not conform, they had to be 'rejected without mercy'.<sup>31</sup> Contemptuous of popular Hinduism and any strand of heterodoxy, Vivekananda establishes the supreme authority of the Vedas and the Upanishads as the only criterion by

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28. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 7, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Fourteenth impression, 2002, p. 50-1.

29. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 3, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1932, p. 323.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 332-3.

which a Hindu ought to deserve the name. To deny the Vedas and the Upanishads would render such an individual in the category of a *nāstika* or non-believer.<sup>32</sup> Any form of religion that promoted 'conflictual models of divinity, immanent, embodied powers and a deep concern with death and sexuality'<sup>33</sup> had to be rejected or made subordinate to the authority of the Vedas and the Upanishads.

A petty village custom seems now the real authority and not the teachings of the Upanishads. A petty idea current in a wayside village in Bengal seems to have the authority of the Vedas, and even something better. And that word 'orthodox,' how wonderful its influence! To the villager, the following of every bit of the karma-kanda is the height of 'orthodoxy,' and one who does not do it is told, — 'Go away, you are no more a Hindu.'<sup>34</sup>

Petty village customs that did not bend before 'our scriptures' had to be mercilessly rejected and their influence purged. But Vivekananda's crusade for subservience to the Vedas and the Upanishads extends beyond the wayside villages of Bengal. He belittles the Christian, Muslim and Buddhist scriptures as mere

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32. Ibid., p. 333.

33. Sarah Caldwell, *op.cit.*, p. 258.

34. *CW*, Vol. 3, pp. 332-3

Puranas and not worthy of being called scriptures. A true scripture does not record historical detail, either of events or of individuals, and the Bible and the Qur'an fell short on this count. In contrast, the Vedas were never written and they never came into existence in a historical sense. He concedes that other scriptures may have moral teachings within their pages, but their acceptance or rejection must pass the test of being compatible with the Vedas. If they do not agree with the Vedas, they had to be rejected. Would they be accepted as scriptures if they more or less agreed with the Vedas and the Upanishads? While Vivekananda brushes aside such overwhelming compatibility as unlikely, he concedes that a greater level of agreement with the Hindu scriptures could make them eligible to 'have the authority of the Puranas, but no more'.<sup>35</sup> Having unremittingly argued with Ramakrishna about the historical veracity of the existence of Radha and Krishna in Vraj, Vivekananda now questions the soundness of a religion inspired by the lives of founders of that faith. Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are all called into question, and disputes regarding the historicity of their founders are shown as examples of their inherent weakness.<sup>36</sup> Hinduism, in contrast, is characterized as a universal religion and its tolerance explained in terms of its lack of reliance on historical

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35. Ibid., pp. 333-4.

36. Ibid., p. 249.

figures of sages, prophets and heroes. For any individual to be called a Hindu, affirming the supreme authority of the Vedas was enough. He goes on to claim that all Hindu sects, despite their differences, affirm the authority of the Vedas as their scriptures,<sup>37</sup> an assertion historically inaccurate and philosophically misleading.

The petty village custom that dares to supplant the supreme authority of the Vedas and the Upanishads does so because it is ensnared by the charms of Dualism. Vivekananda admits that Dualists constituted the largest number of people in India but the reason for these large numbers was self-evident: 'Dualism naturally appeals to less educated minds.'<sup>38</sup> If Vivekananda's Vedic-Vedantic Hinduism had an identifiable enemy, it was Dualism.<sup>39</sup> There was not one Dualistic religion, he argues, that is not exclusive. It was in their nature to fight and quarrel and they have been doing so since time immemorial. Their popularity is due to their insidious appeal to the vanity of the uneducated. The masses, who have been persecuted for ever, feel that the Dualist morality based on punishment is the only way to salvation. He considers teaching Dualism in India and everywhere else in the world as a tremendous mistake; he concedes that in many of its forms, he had no objection to Dualism, but a substantial part of Dualist teaching inculcated weakness

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37. Ibid., p. 228.

38. CW, Vol. 2, p. 141.

39. Ibid., p. 142.

of the mind. This weakness and its effects are dangerous because it 'makes one superstitious, makes one mope, makes one desire all sorts of wild impossibilities, mysteries, and superstitions'.<sup>40</sup> Put differently, anything that was not abstract, detached, rational and masculine was a result of weakness brought about by Dualism.

The vast mass of Indian people are Dualists. Human nature ordinarily cannot conceive of anything higher. We find that ninety per cent of the population of the earth who believe in any religion are Dualists. All the religions of Europe and Western Asia are dualistic; they have to be. The ordinary man cannot think of anything which is not concrete...This is the religion of the masses all over the world. They believe in a God who is entirely separate from them, a great king, a high, mighty monarch, as it were. At the same time they make Him purer than the monarchs of the earth; they give Him all good qualities and remove the evil qualities from Him.<sup>41</sup>

Dualists are also guilty of thinking that their way was the only way. Vivekananda brands the Vaishnavas, who are Dualists, as the most intolerant among Hindu sects.<sup>42</sup>

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40. Ibid., p. 201.

41. Ibid., p. 241.

42. CW, Vol. 7, pp. 27-8.

Among the Shaivas, he gives the example of a sect that refuses even to hear the name of Vishnu. He is appalled by Madhva's Dualist philosophy and his insistence that salvation can come only through worship of Vishnu.<sup>43</sup> Again, the reason for these instances of intolerance is explained by the allegiance of these sects to the Puranas rather than to the Vedas and the Upanishads. An almost categorical rejection of Dualism also amounts to Vivekananda's denial of everything that Ramakrishna's faith signified: the place of the divine in this world, the idea of ecstatic, sensual love of God, the primacy of emotions, especially prema-bhakti, and the centrality of the feminine in matters of faith. All these characteristic features of Ramakrishna's faith were derived in one way or the other from Dualism and not Vivekananda's ideal of Advaita Vedanta's transcendental abstraction.

Vivekananda's ire against Dualism was just that: it ignored ultimate principles.<sup>44</sup> He acknowledges that among the ultimate principles, their 'tremendous philosophical and logical propositions were alarming'<sup>45</sup> to the uneducated masses. But the consequence was a neglect of Advaita Vedanta, 'the fairest flower of philosophy and religion that any country in any age has produced, where human thought attains its highest expression, and even goes beyond the mystery which

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43. Ibid., p. 37.

44. CW, Vol. 2, p. 199.

45. Ibid., p. 199.



seems to be impenetrable'.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the Dualists, Advaita denies individuality because everybody and everything always changes. Neither body nor mind, not even thoughts remain the same. The only thing there is is the Atman, and there is perfect identity between Atman and Brahman. In fact, the Atman, argues Vivekananda, is the Brahman itself. Therefore, there is only one individual, and that is the Infinite or the Brahman: 'In plain words, we are rational beings, and we want to reason. And what is reason? More or less of classification, until you cannot go on any further. And the finite can only find its ultimate rest when it is classified into the Infinite.'<sup>47</sup>

Creating a universal model of an undifferentiated Hindu identity, Vivekananda speaks of the 'Hindu mind' rejecting the idea of a personal and external God; rather the Hindu worships the God within.<sup>48</sup> The perfect identity between the Atman and the Brahman makes this withdrawal into oneself possible. Hindu religious thought achieves this perfect harmony through accomplishing three steps. The first in this is the idea of a personal or extra-cosmic God. Then the idea moves to the internal cosmic body or the God immanent in the universe. Finally, the identification of the soul with that of God, firmly bound as one soul and a seamless union

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46. Ibid., p. 247.

47. CW, Vol. 3, p. 347.

48. CW, Vol. 2, pp. 29-30.

into one of all the manifestations in the universe.<sup>49</sup> The three steps are Dualism, qualified Monism and, finally, perfect Monism. The 'Hindu mind', claims Vivekananda, does not care for the particular but always hankers after the general and the universal.<sup>50</sup>

Religion, then, was not of this world. It was essentially 'heart-cleansing' and it is folly to privilege its effects on the world. The world was full of people like Ramakrishna who insisted on nishtha or single-minded devotion, a pure recipe in Vivekananda's eyes for fanaticism, superstition and intolerance. In Hinduism and in Islam, such people often came from the 'lower planes of Bhakti'.<sup>51</sup> Following Kant's idea of religion and his distinction between religion as cult versus religion as moral action,<sup>52</sup> Vivekananda sought to model 'our

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49. Ibid., pp. 252-3.

50. Ibid., p. 263.

51. CW, Vol. 3, p. 32.

52. In his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, makes a distinction between religion as cult (asking God for material benefits and other tangible good to those who sought favours through prayer) and religion as moral action (implores people to change their moral and ethical stance in order to live a better and more meaningful life, seen mostly in spiritual clarity and inner salvation and enlightenment). He further elaborates the idea of religion as moral action by elaborating the idea of 'reflecting faith', where inner faith, rather than religious dogma and its knowledge, led to salvation. See Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by

religion' on these very lines. Lower forms of Bhakti had to be supplanted with something that was higher and less in partaking of the details of this world.

That love of God grows and assumes a form which is called Para-Bhakti, or supreme devotion. Forms vanish, rituals fly away, books are superseded, images, temples, churches, religions and sects, countries and nationalities, all these little limitations and bondages fall off by their own nature from him who knows this love of God. Nothing remains to bind him or fetter his freedom.<sup>53</sup>

Among the many reasons for people not being able to attain to the exalted state of Para-Bhakti was the hold myths had on people. Vivekananda's stark vision of the faith that he was beginning to outline had no place for myths except for his own use as explanatory tools. In the austere world that he chose as his ideal and as the ideal for future India, myths were to be ridiculed and caricatured.

In our mythology it is said there are demons, who sometimes trouble the gods. In all mythologies, you read how these demons and the gods fought,

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Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1960 edition.

53. CW, Vol. 3, p. 72.

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and the demons sometimes conquered the gods, although many times, it seems, the demons did not do so many wicked things as the gods. In all mythologies, for instance, you find the Devas fond of women. So after their reward is finished, they fall down again, come through the clouds, through the rains, and thus get into some grain or plant and find their way into the human body, when the grain or plant is eaten by men. The father gives them the material out of which to get a fitting body. When the material suits them no longer, they have to manufacture other bodies. Now there are the very wicked fellows, who do all sorts of diabolical things; they are born again as animals, and if they are very bad, they are born as very low animals, or become plants, or stones.<sup>54</sup>

As we have already seen, Vivekananda conveniently uses the deva-asura typology elsewhere to portray the difference between the East and the West. Not only does his condemnation of myths betray a sneaking Victorian attitude reflected in his censure of the devas' fondness for women and fear of the power of feminine sexuality, but it also borrows heavily from the Lutheran-Protestant worldview of Kant in establishing the pre-eminence of

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54. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 1, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Twenty-third impression, 2000, p. 399.

a 'reflecting faith'. Given this aridity of imagination, Vivekananda expressed a personal disinterest in mythical stories; they remained for him a symbol of the tools used by Christian missionaries to ridicule Hinduism. He never saw in the stories the opportunity to creatively interpret them in order to create an alternative to the rational and linear narratives of the West or to use them in order to weaken the stranglehold of an entrenched Sanskritic-brahminical view: Krishna was a married man. There are thousands of books about him. They do not interest me much. The Hindus are great in telling stories, you see. '[If] Christian missionaries tell one story from their Bible, the Hindus will produce twenty stories.'<sup>55</sup> The Upanishads, Vivekananda contends, have little to do with the stories of any individual. Unlike other scriptures, the Vedas and the Upanishads deal almost entirely with philosophy. 'Religion without philosophy runs into superstition,' he concludes, 'philosophy without religion becomes dry atheism.'<sup>56</sup>

As a non-dualist and an idealist, Vivekananda argues that societies ought to be moulded upon truth rather than truth being made to adjust to the details and vagaries of societal diversity and plurality.<sup>57</sup> He wants the highest truth in society to be practical, but the determination of truth and its relevance to any society

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55. Ibid., p. 456.

56. CW, Vol. 7, p. 36.

57. CW, Vol. 2, pp. 84-5.

were not matters of debate or even doubt. He became increasingly convinced that Advaita was that system which preached principles rather than focusing on a person, though allowing both human and divine persons to have their full play.<sup>58</sup> Advaita's superiority lay in not disturbing even those faiths that were attached to what Vivekananda considers 'lower forms of worship'.<sup>59</sup> It was Advaita's business to raise everyone to a higher plane. All other world religions and all Dualist sects in India can never aspire to reach Advaita's lofty perfection for one reason alone: 'They are all parts equally struggling to attain to the whole.'<sup>60</sup> In such circumstances, they could not seek the epithet of being a universal religion. Not merely is Advaita not fragmentary but it also has the added advantage of including within itself all stages and degrees of religious development.

At this juncture, the trajectory of Vivekananda's thought needs careful mapping: he begins by establishing the unquestioned primacy of the Vedas and the Upanishads, followed by a denunciation of Dualism as errant, deviant and disruptive for not pledging uncompromising allegiance to the Vedas and the Upanishads. The natural corollary to this is to establish simultaneously the supremacy of Vedanta. After accomplishing this, the

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58. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 4, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1932, p. 257.

59. *CW*, Vol. 2, p. 141.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

fairest flower ever of religion and philosophy, namely, Advaita Vedanta, is brought in to counter the arguments of the Dualists. Soon enough, Advaita Vedanta is rendered as the finest expression of Vedanta. Put differently, Vedanta is reduced to Vivekananda's version of Advaita Vedanta: 'Monism or absolute oneness is the very soul of Vedanta.'<sup>61</sup> The idealist, privy to the mysteries of Advaita Vedanta, had transcended limitations of this world and could now soar to uncharted metaphysical heights.

The only explanation [of how the One becomes many] must come from beyond the sense-plane; we must rise to the superconscious, to a state entirely beyond sense-perception. That metaphysical power is the further instrument that the idealist alone can use. He can experience the Absolute; the man Vivekananda can resolve himself into the Absolute and then come back to the man again...Thus religion begins where philosophy ends. The 'good of the world' will be that what is now superconscious for us will in ages to come be the conscious for all. Religion is therefore the highest work the world has; and because man has unconsciously felt this, he has clung through all the ages to the idea of religion.<sup>62</sup>

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61. *CW*, Vol. 7, pp. 27-8.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

This is a significant passage. Once risen to the superconscious state, Vivekananda the man can become Vivekananda the Absolute and return to being Vivekananda the man again. It was, as he suggests, a question of going beyond sense-perception. This is, more or less, the non-dualist position. While there could be debate regarding the absolute unreality of the world as contrasted with the eventual or ultimate denial of the world of name and form,<sup>63</sup> most non-dualists would admit to a transient and conditional existence of the world where humans had to perform various duties and follow certain moral and ethical rules. This is captured by the distinction between vyavaharika or conventional truths and paramarthika or ultimate truths. At the vyavaharika level, the normative order Vivekananda creates is brahminical, Vedic, Vedantic, Advaitic, rational, male and Hindu. Despite ultimate fidelity to the principle of oneness, Vivekananda was explicit in his injunction that all individuals without fail ought to follow their svadharma. To jump the stages designated by the varnadharma and the ashramadharma was not only undesirable but was a form of mischief perpetrated by the Buddhists.<sup>64</sup> It is only by following the normative

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63. For an excellent summary of these debates, see, Andrew J. Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010.

64. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 5, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Fourth edition, 1936, p. 351.



code approved and established by Vivekananda that one could begin contemplating transcending the world of sense-perception and arrive at the superconscious state. Once an individual attains this superconscious stage, the imperatives of the vyavaharika normative code are no longer applicable; he has been able to reach this state, in fact, by scrupulously following the moral and ethical code designated as desirable. As the Absolute, however, the individual is neither bound by social mores nor ordinary moral and ethical codes. Is he to abandon performing any actions on reaching this stage? Is karma or ritual action superfluous on reaching this superconscious state? Was the only way out of this dilemma one where the Bhagavadgita's recommendation of performing actions without a thought about their consequence, even if performing karma might mean fratricidal violence and socially sanctioned murder, is accepted without a challenge? Vivekananda's rhetorical claim of his brand of absolute oneness being the soul of Vedanta had to be grounded in arguments that were more substantial; they had to be intelligible as 'India's religion' and also fulfil the test of universality.

## II

The primacy of the Vedanta for Vivekananda was not negotiable. It was also his notion of the Vedanta

that had to take precedence over all other historically valid interpretations of the Upanishadic legacy that constituted the Vedanta corpus. The Vedantic seers had seen the truth. It was not a relative truth but one that had existed from time immemorial and one that would continue to exist in times to come.<sup>65</sup> For Vivekananda, these were not merely truths that the sages had stumbled upon which they had not understood as was in the case of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>66</sup> These truths were religious laws as well as the grand truths of spirituality. Their status as eternal truths and laws rested on the absence of their not having either a beginning or an end. More so, their supremacy was further enforced because of their independence from texts and prophets.

The sublimity of the law propounded by Ramayana or Bharata does not depend upon the truth of any personality like Rama or Krishna, and one can even hold that such personages never lived, and at the same time take these writings as high authorities in respect of the grand ideas which they place before mankind. Our philosophy does not depend upon any personality for its truth. Thus Krishna did not teach anything new or original to the world, nor does Ramayana profess anything

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65. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 6, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati, Almora, Second edition, 1926, p. 7.

66. *CW*, Vol. 1, p. 184.

which is not contained in the Scriptures. It is to be noted that Christianity cannot stand without Christ, Mohammedenism without Mohammed, and Buddhism without Buddha, but Hinduism stands independent of any man...<sup>67</sup>

Calling it the impersonal nature of truth, Vivekananda goes on to argue that the 'Vedanta is the *rationale* of all religions,'<sup>68</sup> and, therefore, for instance, Christians could never understand the New Testament without understanding the Vedanta. Understanding and acknowledging Vedanta was what made any religion worthy of the nomenclature. Failing to do so rendered them to the status of mere superstitions. Establishing the superiority of the Vedanta and proclaiming its universal authenticity as the only true, eternal and tenable moral law was for Vivekananda only a first step. The debunking of the prophetic and revelatory traditions had to be taken to its logical conclusion.

Vivekananda no longer wanted prophets selected by society or by chance. Neither did he believe in prophets being anointed through acts of will or claims of superior intelligence. Instead, the truths of the Vedas and the Upanishads had to be realized and disseminated in society. This could be done only by training people to

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67. CW, Vol. 5, p. 137.

68. Ibid., p. 142.

become prophets. He proposes that to become religious was the act of becoming a prophet and no one could be called religious till he or she turned into a prophet. To study religion was to train people into becoming prophets; he proposes that schools and colleges ought to be training grounds for manufacturing prophets. In characteristic Vivekananda hyperbole, he proposes the universalizing and democratizing of the prophetic tradition: 'The whole universe must become prophets; and until a man becomes a prophet, religion is a mockery and a by-word unto him. We must see religion, feel it, realise it in a thousand times more intense a sense than that in which we see the wall.'<sup>69</sup>

For an unsuspecting moment, it might seem that Vivekananda seems to be proposing a return to the mystic intensity of Ramakrishna's faith in proposing a religion that is based on seeing, feeling and realizing God. But this is not remotely the case. For him, religion is a scientifically demonstrable entity. To be religious and to know religion is to use one's reason. Those who believe through non-rational ways are worthy of being compared to beasts. Mystical flights, ecstatic love, talking to Kali and hearing her talk back was just an individual attribute of being peculiar and having this special gift by chance. In the modern world, Vivekananda concludes, no one ought to believe in anything that is left to chance

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69. CW, Vol. 6, pp. 8-10.

and not mediated through modern scientific rationality.<sup>70</sup> The peculiar and the particular were characteristic features of Dualism: they ignored the principle. Religion for Vivekananda was destruction of peculiarity.

Having chipped away at the claims of the Dualists as well as those following the prophetic-revelatory traditions, Vivekananda introduces into the argument a note that seems to contradict all that he seems to have argued till this moment. It is, in fact, a celebration of a plurality of standpoints, religions, scriptures and prophets in the world. But this plurality on close examination is welcome only in order to apply to it the scientific method. At no point does Vivekananda ask questions regarding the correctness or viability of the scientific method. Nor does his entrenched belief in it go beyond demonstrable verification of things through what he called reasoning, which for him consisted of starting from the particular and moving towards a principle. The sense in which he uses reason is, however, purely instrumental: it helps him debunk everything else other than the Vedanta and his interpretation of Advaita Vedanta. He is conscious that he could argue for seeming plurality in the world of religious symbols and forms while simultaneously reducing these to insignificance by arguing in favour of the Vedantic idea of a unity that permeates and circumscribes the universe. Take

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70. Ibid., pp. 9-10.

for instance this passage: ‘The Mohammedans want to have the whole world Mohammedan; the Christians, Christian; the Buddhists, Buddhist; but the Vedanta says: “Let each person in the world be separate, if you will; the one principle, the unity will be behind”.’<sup>71</sup>

It is only when humans have name, form and histories that the question of any moral and ethical engagement with each other arises. Vivekananda pushes the idea of oneness as the core of Vedanta in order to forestall a debate regarding ethical questions: after all, the abstraction called the immortal soul as contrasted to the perishable body in the Bhagavadgita was a response to Arjuna’s ethical dilemma. Vivekananda takes the argument further. Nothing perishes but is just a single continuum. There is no diversity or plurality but everything is myself. If I am a leaf and I die, the life of the tree continues. If one tree dies, the idea of the tree continues because every tree is part of the whole called universe. Therefore, there is one mind, one body and one soul that really exist. Universal oneness and not universal brotherhood, then, was the central thought conveyed by the Upanishads.<sup>72</sup> Having stated his view of the Vedanta, Vivekananda gives short shrift to the question of human action and its consequences: ‘I am the same as any other man, as any animal - good, bad,

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71. Ibid., p. 14.

72. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 8, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, Twelfth impression, 1999, pp. 128-9.

anything.<sup>73</sup> Having recommended transformation of all humans into prophets, he now wants every living being metamorphosed into the divine: 'You are all Gods. One God is not sufficient. You are all Gods, says the Vedanta.'<sup>74</sup> While ethical dilemmas are hardly the stuff of prophets and gods, the question of action and its consequences is also neatly relegated to the recesses of the inner realm. The Vedanta, after all, teaches that one need not step out of oneself in order to discover the truth, which is within oneself.

The God of the Vedanta, Vivekananda emphasizes, is an impersonal principle and not a person. There is no Personal God, but 'You and I, the cat, rat, devil, and ghost, all these are Its persons – all are Personal Gods'.<sup>75</sup> The human body is the temple inside which resides this 'Lord of souls and the King of kings.'<sup>76</sup> The Hindus, laments Vivekananda, are wedded to the idea of God as the king of the earth rather than the king of souls. Vedanta for this reason cannot flourish in India. The concept of all living beings as prophets and gods, he elaborates, is a democratic idea and can flourish only in America.<sup>77</sup> Hindus, on the other hand, were busy building temples and seeking the truth elsewhere.

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73. Ibid., pp. 128-9.

74. Ibid., pp. 124-5.

75. Ibid., pp. 133-4.

76. Ibid., pp. 135-6.

77. Ibid., p. 126.

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We do not see that, so we make stone images of Him and build temples over them. Vedanta has been in India always, but India is full of these temples but also caves containing carved images. 'The fool, dwelling on the bank of the Gangā, digs a well for water!' Such are we! Living in the midst of God – we must go and make images. We project Him in the form of the image, while all the time He exists in the temple of our body. We are lunatics, and this is the great delusion.<sup>78</sup>

In other words, the Vedanta proposes that all living beings are prophets and personal gods. It also situates truth within the human body rather than as an object to be discovered externally. At no point in the argument does Vivekananda pause to consider if the truth of the Upanishads, which for him was also a rational and scientific truth, verifiable by moving from the particular to the principle, was also applicable to the rat and the cat. It is perfectly possible that this truth was merely a moment of realization and had little to do with human action. But even if specific actions had to be accounted for, it was impossible to do so if every rational individual was also simultaneously a prophet and a god. Neither was the truth that one was being goaded and impelled to discover within the temple of the body a disembodied and value-neutral entity: it was

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78. Ibid., pp. 135-6.



a reading of the Vedantic truth as embodied in the realm of brahminical Hinduism. Vivekananda takes recourse here to a reading of the Mahabharata and the character of Krishna in it. The question of action and its consequences is dexterously sidestepped: 'Krishna shows the way how to do this, — by being non-attached: do everything but do not get identified with anything. You are the Soul, the pure, the free, all the time; you are the Witness. Our misery comes, not from work, but by getting attached to something.'<sup>79</sup> The Hindus, he explains, had discovered the concept of the Atman or the universal soul. It was this discovery that was the basis of ethics for the Hindus.

Though all religions have taught ethical precepts, such as, 'Do not kill, do not injure; love thy neighbour as yourself,' etc., yet none of these has given the reason. Why should I not injure my neighbour? To this question there was no satisfactory or conclusive answer forthcoming, until it was evolved by the metaphysical speculations of the Hindus who could not rest satisfied with mere dogmas.<sup>80</sup>

Note carefully, first, the dismissal of Christian ethics as dogma. Next, the question of injuring one's neighbour,

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79. CW, Vol. 4, p. 92.

80. CW, Vol. 1, pp. 384-5.

assuming that the injury is physical, is resolved through the metaphysical speculations as they evolved among the Hindus.

So the Hindus say that this Atman is absolute and all-pervading, therefore infinite. There cannot be two infinities, for they would limit each other and would also become finite. Also each individual soul is a part and parcel of that Universal Soul, which is infinite. Therefore in injuring his neighbour, the individual actually injures himself. This is the basic metaphysical truth underlying all ethical codes.<sup>81</sup>

The injury is to the body most times, and at other times to the emotions, to one's self-esteem and to an individual's basic existence as one. Vivekananda's refusal to grant any legitimacy to the world of appearances, and the body as one such tangible object among many, is what a perceptive modern commentator has called 'the refusal of the body as a site of any experience, any tragedy, any remorse, and, above all, any politics'.<sup>82</sup> The emphasis, as we have seen earlier, on the superconscious state was to transcend the body, which could be a site of contestation, argument, and, above all, history: 'In all religions the superconscious state is identical. Hindus, Christians, Mohammedans,

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81. Ibid., pp. 384-5.

82. Aishwary Kumar, 'Ambedkar's Inheritances', *Modern Intellectual History*, 7,2,(2010), p. 397.

Buddhists, and even those of no creed, all have the very same experience when they transcend the body.<sup>83</sup> Injury to the neighbour is, then, not a real injury, but only something that is part of metaphysical speculation that can, at best, be understood and rationalized. All that it serves is the claim that the truth of the universal Atman enables the Hindus to understand the religious truth of all religions, from the lowest to the highest.

In establishing the sovereign authority of Vedanta, Vivekananda posits three stages in the spiritual growth of every individual. These three stages correspond to the evolution of all other faiths.<sup>84</sup> The Vedanta, he argues, contains and reflects all these three stages. It is a process of evolution, beginning with Dvaita or Dualism, Vishishtadvaita or qualified Monism and Advaita or absolute Monism. Vedanta had to be applied according to needs, locale and nationality, but it was also important to remember that there was no difference, whatsoever, between the idea of religion and Vedanta. The only religion in the universe was Vedanta and Vedanta was the only religion worthy of the name. In a passage that is self-assured as it is breathtakingly presumptuous, but also historically and philosophically inaccurate, Vivekananda dismisses Jainism and Buddhism as mere clones of Vedanta.

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83. *CW*, Vol. 7, p. 43.

84. *CW*, Vol. 5, p. 64.

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This is what I mean by the word Vedanta, that it covers the ground of Dualism, of Qualified Monism and Advaitism in India. Perhaps we may even take in parts of Buddhism, and of Jainism too, if they would come in, — for our hearts are sufficiently large. But it is they that will not come in; we are ready; for upon severe analysis you will always find that the essence of Buddhism was all borrowed from the same Upanishads; even the ethics, the so-called great and wonderful ethics of Buddhism, were there word for word, in some one or the other of the Upanishads, and so all the good doctrines of the Jains were there, minus their vagaries.<sup>85</sup>

It is worth noting the phrasing of the above quote: the essence of Buddhism was ‘all borrowed’ and it only had a ‘so-called’ great and wonderful ethics. Elsewhere, while maintaining that Vedanta was the foundation of Buddhism, Vivekananda does concede that ‘what we call Advaita philosophy of the modern school has a great many conclusions of the Buddhists’.<sup>86</sup> He also makes a distinction between the Northern Buddhists and the Southern Buddhists; his quarrel seems to be with the Southern Buddhists for their denial of a noumenal

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85. CW, Vol. 3, p. 230.

86. CW, Vol. 5, pp. 206-7.

world and their avowal of a phenomenal world.<sup>87</sup> For Vivekananda, there is just one world and it is the noumenal world.



Much of Vivekananda's mystique rests on his perceived liberality with respect to other faiths. There is a clear identification between Vivekananda and the view that religions might differ in word, ritual, doctrine and emphasis but all faiths are ultimately paths to the same God. In many of his public pronouncements, he explicitly seeks to convey that his message was one of peace and a united religion and not of antagonism.<sup>88</sup> Having studied comparative religions, he finds all faiths to have had the same foundations as his own faith. If there were differences, these were in the realm of the non-essential<sup>89</sup> elements within faiths. Going a step further, he wants a plurality of faiths in the world to suit a variety of contexts. In a world that constantly has to contend with religious strife and the violence that is the inevitable consequence of such conflict, such words and thoughts can be seductively reassuring. This is especially

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87. Ibid., p. 207. Kant makes the distinction between phenomenon and noumenon as indicating the difference between 'thing as appearance' and 'thing in itself'.

88. *CW*, Vol. 1, p. 317.

89. Ibid., p. 318.

so when quoted out of context, selectively and without attention to the fine print. An example would illustrate the point better. Here, Vivekananda is talking about the desirability of different faiths:

I do not deprecate the existence of sects in the world. Would to God there were twenty million more, for the more there are, there will be a greater field for selection. What I do object to is trying to fit one religion to every case. Though all religions are essentially the same, they must have the varieties of form produced by dissimilar circumstances among different nations.<sup>90</sup>

This sounds perfectly reasonable. It is worth marking that he calls them 'sects' and not religions. But the overall tone and tenor is one of remarkable liberality. Now read the last line of the quote: 'We must each have our own individual religion, individual *so far as the externals of it go*.'<sup>91</sup> The plurality of faiths, then, is limited to the externals. Remove the externals and what will emerge is a universal faith defined by Vivekananda, based entirely on his reading of the Vedanta. The Vedantic ideal of Oneness and the Universal Soul would ultimately prevail.

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90. Ibid., pp. 325-6.

91. Ibid., pp. 325-6 (author's emphasis).

## A Restatement of Religion

When we shall feel that oneness, we shall be immortal. We are physically immortal even, one with the universe. So long as there is one that breathes throughout the universe, I live in that one. I am not this limited little being, I am the universal. I am the life of all the sons of the past. I am the soul of Buddha, of Jesus, of Mohammed.<sup>92</sup>

When the argument for a single universal faith had to be made strenuously, Vivekananda abandons even the 'We must each have our own individual religion' rhetoric with alacrity: 'There never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion; there never existed many religions, there is only the one. One Infinite Religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this Religion is expressing itself in various countries, in various ways.'<sup>93</sup> What, then, about the argument that promised to accommodate even twenty million or more sects in the world, even if this acceptance of plurality was only based on the acknowledgement of a multitude of external forms of religion? The above quote ends with the following sentence: Therefore we must respect all religions and we must try to accept them all *as far as we can*.<sup>94</sup>

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92. Ibid., p. 341.

93. CW, Vol. 4, p. 176.

94. Ibid., p. 176 (author's emphasis).

The respect for other religions was, therefore, conditional. It depended on phrases like 'so far as the externals of it go' and 'as far as we can'.

The refrain of not judging others and not being contemptuous towards other faiths occurs regularly within the Vivekananda corpus. It is also always invariably accompanied by the argument that differences are only of a degree and that there are people who are not as developed as 'we' are.<sup>95</sup> Differences and variations were only the 'externals', they were part of the phenomenal world. Invoking biological and naturalistic metaphors, Vivekananda argues that Nature always represents unity in variety, that '...through all these variations of the phenomenal runs the Infinite, the Unchangeable, the Absolute Unity'.<sup>96</sup> What was true of Nature is also true for humans: '...the microcosm is but a miniature repetition of the macrocosm.'<sup>97</sup> This is the reason, affirms Vivekananda, why no man's faith ought to be disturbed. While this too sounds utterly reasonable, it also is part of the same trajectory where other faiths are limited and inadequate and require getting 'hold of a man where he stands and giving him a push upwards'.<sup>98</sup> Oneness, Absolute Unity and the necessary push upwards were possible, though, only

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95. CW, Vol. 2, p. 297.

96. CW, Vol. 4, p. 177.

97. Ibid., p. 177.

98. Ibid., p. 179.



if a set of preconditions were met and unambiguously affirmed.



Having pronounced his version of the Vedanta as the only religion in the world, Vivekananda wants every 'narrow, limited, fighting ideas of religion'<sup>99</sup> to be eliminated. Sects, tribes and nations have their own ideas of religion and of God and this caused them to quarrel over claims to superiority. Such ideas of a Personal God were the scourge brought about by Dualism, which was another name for superstition. To move to the future, this deadweight of the past had to be abandoned. Vivekananda says very little why other ideas of religion are narrow and limited except to offer Vedanta and its vision of oneness as the superior alternative. Indeed, grand abstractions were seemingly always preferable to disturbing historical details and philosophical nuances. The influence of German philosophy is starkly visible here, as is in the rest of his philosophical edifice. A few months before Ramakrishna's death in 1886, Vivekananda asks Mahendranath for a history of philosophy to read. Mahendranath offers one by Lewis. 'No, Überweg. I must read a German author,'<sup>100</sup> says

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99. *CW*, Vol. 2, p. 67.

100. *Gospel*, p. 963.

Vivekananda. While no reference to Überweg is recorded in subsequent conversations or in his writings, there is a marked influence of nineteenth-century German philosophical tradition on the structure as well as content of his thought. Hence, echoing Hegel, but more so Schopenhauer's principle of the sufficient reason of becoming, Vivekananda proceeds to define a religion that must leave behind all specificity; the German inspiration also synchronizes well with Krishna's advice of doing everything but not getting identified with anything.

Religion is not in doctrines, in dogmas, nor in intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming; it is realisation. We hear so many talking about God and the soul, and all the mysteries of the universe, but if you take them one by one, and ask them, 'Have you realised God? Have you seen your Soul?' how many can say they have. And yet they are all fighting with one another!<sup>101</sup>

Denying intellectual argumentation is ironical because during the years he had known his young pupil, Ramakrishna despaired of Vivekananda's relentless discussion and debate on matters that, for the Master, could only be resolved through sincere longing and ecstatic love. In his exposition of religion, Vivekananda stacks

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101. CW, Vol. 2, p. 43

‘doctrines’, ‘dogmas’ and ‘intellectual argumentation’ as the antagonistic opposites of ‘becoming’, realisation’, as well as of realizing God and seeing one’s soul. More importantly, he likens expressing oneself about God, the soul and the mysteries of the universe to ‘fighting’ and diminished as legitimate forms of human activity.



In order to explain his conception of universal religion, Vivekananda proposes yet another fourfold classification of humans.<sup>102</sup> The active man is the worker, the emotional man is the lover of the sublime and the beautiful, the mystic is one whose mind wants to analyse its own self, and finally the philosopher who weighs everything with the use of his intellect. Any religion attempting to claim universality ought to satisfy all these natures. Having arrived at this classification, Vivekananda claims that the plan of the universe exhibits unity in variety. What is this ultimate unity? It is God, he says. But the reality and existence of this ultimate unity do not mean that differences have to be obliterated. Neither does it mean that one set of doctrines should be believed by all mankind; just as all faces cannot be the same, so can there be no single set of doctrines that

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102. Ibid., pp. 383-4.

are shared by all humanity.<sup>103</sup> Variation, he elaborates, is a natural necessity just as unity is equally a natural necessity. To apologists of Vivekananda, this would be clinching evidence of his broad-mindedness, empathy and tolerance, especially towards other forms of belief and religious practices. Closely examined, Vivekananda's argument is clear and straightforward: Unity and variation are natural necessities. Translated in theological terms, this merely means that 'truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes'.<sup>104</sup> Put differently, while a thousand ways of expressing truth could be allowed, truth itself was what the Vedantic seers had propounded in the pages of the Upanishads. The liberality attributed to Vivekananda is only in name: it is, in fact, the space he creates for others to acknowledge the truth designated by him as ultimate and universal. As seen above, he argues that religion is Vedanta and Vedanta is religion. Hence, after arguing that there can be no single set of doctrines in the world, he offers a Vedanta-inspired definition of religion that neutralizes the concession granted to differences in favour of unity. The 'hundred thousand ways' of expressing truth are merely ways by which inadequate notions of religion attempt to approximate to the idea of the Vedantic truth.

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103. Ibid., pp. 379-80.

104. Ibid., pp. 380-1.

Equally compelling in the Vivekananda corpus are quotes like this: 'Religion is realisation; not talk, nor doctrine, nor theories, however beautiful they may be. It is being and becoming, not hearing or acknowledging; it is the whole soul becoming changed into what it believes. That is religion.'<sup>105</sup> In the *Kathāmrita*, Ramakrishna asks Narendra if he intended to continue with his studies. This is recorded on 4 January 1886, the year Ramakrishna died. To this query, Narendra's reply is significant. He says: 'I shall feel greatly relieved if I find a medicine that will make me forget all I have studied.'<sup>106</sup> In line with Vivekananda's argument that religion does not consist of theories, doctrines and dogmas, it does not seem unusual. But on 17 April 1886, Narendra is arguing with Mahendranath in Ramakrishna's presence regarding the question of the existence of God. He says: 'How can you say that God exists? It is you who have created this universe. Don't you know what Berkeley says about it?'<sup>107</sup> In May 1887, after Ramakrishna's death, one finds Vivekananda finding similarities between John Stuart Mill and the Vedas on the question of God's kindness.<sup>108</sup> Theories, then, were important as much as rhetorical denial of their usefulness. These examples do not include Vivekananda's considerable debt to the

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105. Ibid., p. 394.

106. *Gospel*, p. 935.

107. Ibid., p. 960.

108. Ibid., p. 999.

thought of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, not to mention such obvious influences as Paul Deussen and Max Müller. Vivekananda saw no apparent contradiction in this: after all, truth could be expressed in many ways as long as it conformed to the truth of the Upanishads as he perceived it.

### III

Any critical evaluation of Vivekananda has to contend with scattered islands of reasonableness periodically emerging in the vast ocean of a singular, uncompromising and stridently Vedic-Vedantic vision. One such question is the act of judging others. If a small selection of quotations from him about the ways in which we ought to judge, if judge we must, were to be reproduced, they would seem to show us the ideal way forward on this topic. Of course, by now we know something of Vivekananda's views on religion, on caste, and about his uncompromisingly unequivocal privileging of his version of the Vedanta. But it is still useful to see what he has to say on the critical issue of judging, if only to subsequently seek answers to two questions: First, did Vivekananda judge, and, second, if he did, to what end? In this context, let us examine the following quotes from Vivekananda:

## A Restatement of Religion

- The great lesson to learn is that I am not the standard by which the whole universe is to be judged; each man is to be judged by his own idea, each race by its own standard and ideal, each custom of each country by its own reasoning and conditions. American customs are the result of the environment in which Americans live, and Indian customs are the result of the environment in which the Indians are; and so of China, Japan, England and every other country.<sup>109</sup>
- We are always making this mistake in judging others; we are always inclined to think that our little mental universe is all that is; our ethics, our morality, our sense of duty, our sense of utility, are the only things that are worth having.<sup>110</sup>
- Everyone must be judged according to his own ideal, and not by that of anyone else. In our dealings with our fellow-beings we constantly labour under this mistake, and I am of opinion that the vast majority of our quarrels with one another arise simply from this one cause, that we are always trying to judge others' gods by our own, others' ideals by our own ideals, and others' motives by our own motives.<sup>111</sup>

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109. *CW*, Vol. 5, pp. 168-9.

110. *CW*, Vol. 2, p. 24.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

There is very little in the above quotes that seems explicitly unreasonable or objectionable. While unequivocally rejecting the right of anyone to judge the gods, customs, motives and ideals, he goes to the extent of suggesting that one earned the right to criticize individuals like the Buddha and Christ only if one could emulate the breadth and scope of their work and their suffering. Having stated his position on the thorny question of judgement, Vivekananda is quick to judge. A few examples will illustrate the point better. Did Vivekananda do enough and suffer enough to judge the Buddha? His judgements on the Buddha and on Buddhism are categorical and often seem contradictory. These contradictions, however, arise out of Vivekananda's familiar inability to distinguish between text, person, doctrine, practice and the historical evolution of a faith and any set of beliefs and practices. Following this trajectory, he faults the Buddha and Buddhism for their negative iconoclasm and their rejection of Sanskrit. This had serious consequences: it led to alienation of the Hindus from the Vedas and disturbed the ancient equilibrium between brahmins and kshatriyas.<sup>112</sup> Buddhism was nothing but a sect. The Buddha was selfless but he was also 'perfectly agnostic about metaphysics or theories about God'.<sup>113</sup> He clearly states that he differs with the Buddha on many issues

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112. CW, Vol. 4, pp. 272-3.

113. Ibid., p. 131.



but also aspires for a heart equal to that of the Buddha, not to mention his selflessness. But contrary to the Buddha's indifference to metaphysics, he wants a 'good deal of metaphysics'.<sup>114</sup> Was disinterest in metaphysics the Buddha's only flaw? Buddhism, contrary to popular perception, he imputes, did not destroy brahminical idolatry, but created both brahminism<sup>115</sup> and idolatry.

Vivekananda's judgement of Buddhism, then, falls into three distinct lines of argument. First is the acknowledgement of the Buddha's empathy, his courage, his sincerity and offering the world a comprehensive system of morality.<sup>116</sup> After acknowledging the Buddha as a person and, in a qualified sense, his original message, there comes a thorough indictment of 'the hideousness that came in the wake of Buddhism'.<sup>117</sup> Modern Hinduism had borrowed a great deal from this degraded Buddhism of hideous ceremonies, obscene books and bestial forms masquerading as religion: 'I am perfectly convinced that what they call modern Hinduism with all its ugliness is only stranded Buddhism. Let the Hindus understand this clearly, and then it would be easier for

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114. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

115. *Ibid.*, p. 264. See also, *CW*, Vol. 7, pp. 21-2. Brahminism is not to be confused with brahminhood. The latter is Vivekananda's ideal for future India whereas by brahminism he means ritualistic priestcraft. This has been explained in detail in the previous chapter.

116. *CW*, Vol. 7, pp. 40-1.

117. *CW*, Vol. 3, pp. 264-5.

them to reject it without murmur.<sup>118</sup>

Vivekananda often describes the Buddha as a reformer of Hinduism, who denied the Vedas because of the Vedic sanction to various forms of violence. Did the Buddha do anything wrong in opposing the ritualistic violence supported by the Vedas? Vivekananda is categorical here: the Buddha had no authority to do so.<sup>119</sup> Worse still, the Buddha, says Vivekananda, compounded his error of opposing the Vedas by not understanding the idea of harmony of religions and by introducing sectarianism.<sup>120</sup> For wanting to destroy the Vedic religion, Buddhism paid the price and was thrown out of India. Finally, the only way to understand the Buddha and his teachings that would make them acceptable was to do so from a Hindu standpoint. Once the supremacy of the Hindu point of view was established, Vivekananda declares that the Buddha 'taught the gist of the philosophy of the Vedas to one and all and without distinction'<sup>121</sup> and was no longer the destroyer of the Vedic religion. In so doing, he imparted his great message of equality to the world. Vivekananda was no champion of equality as ordinarily understood. In interpreting the message of the Buddha in the Hindu way, he returns to the Upanishads and his version of oneness of the world:

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118. CW, Vol. 7, p. 505.

119. CW, Vol. 6, p. 86.

120. Ibid., p. 86.

121. CW, Vol. 8, pp. 97-8.

There is another way of looking at the truth we have been discussing: the Hindu way. We claim that Buddha's great doctrine of selflessness can be better understood if it is looked at in our way. In the Upanishads there is already the great doctrine of the Atman and the Brahman. The Atman, Self, is the same as Brahman, the Lord. This Self is all that is; It is the only reality. Māyā, delusion, makes us see It as different. There is one Self, not many. That one Self shines in various forms. Man is man's brother because all men are one. A man is not only my brother, say the Vedas, he is myself. I am the universe. It is a delusion that I think I am Mr. So-and-So – that is delusion.<sup>122</sup>

Vivekananda liked the Buddha's kindness, mercy and charity but not his doctrine.<sup>123</sup> If the doctrine had to be understood, it could be so done only in the Hindu way prescribed by Vivekananda. The gulf between Vivekananda's injunction not to judge and his willingness to do the opposite can hardly be overstated. In the case of Islam, this chasm is even more obvious and deeper. While this has been discussed in some detail elsewhere,<sup>124</sup> an example here would suffice.

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122. Ibid., pp. 100-1.

123. Ibid., p. 103.

124. Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2011 edition.

In a letter written on 10 June 1898 to Mohammed Sarfaraz Husain, a Muslim resident of Nainital, Vivekananda attempts one of the most complex and astonishingly perplexing definitions of religion. He begins with the assertion that Vedantism, and more specifically Advaitism, was the 'last word of religion and thought'.<sup>125</sup> He introduces no element of the variety of views and attitudes expressed in the Upanishads, nor does he entertain the differences between the *purva mimamsa* and *uttara mimamsa*. In conflating Vedantism and Advaitism, little is done to clarify distinctions between the two main streams of Vedantic interpretation.<sup>126</sup> Not only was Advaitism the last word in religion and thought but it was 'the only position from which one can look upon all religions and sects with love'.<sup>127</sup> The Hindus could get the credit of arriving at it earlier than the Jews and the Muslims, and Advaitism was the religion of the future enlightened humanity. But practical Advaitism was another matter altogether. It was that Advaitism that dared look upon and treat all humanity as one's own soul. The Hindus had not embraced this universally, whereas the only religion that approximated to this ideal of equality in any manner in

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125. CW, Vol. 6, p. 375.

126. G.C. Pande, *Foundations of Indian Culture: Spiritual Vision and Symbolic Forms in Ancient India*, Volume I, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2005 edition, pp. 141-2.

127. CW, Vol. 6, p. 375.

the realm of everyday life in a practical sense was Islam. Therefore, 'without the help of practical Islam, theories of Vedantism, however fine and wonderful they may be, are entirely valueless to the vast mass of mankind'.<sup>128</sup> The great religious texts, the Vedas, the Bible and the Qur'an would have to be harmonized and mankind will have to be taught that all faiths are manifestations of the only religion that taught oneness, something that the Hindus first arrived at and which manifests in the form of Advaita. Vivekananda's endorsement of Islam's practice of equality in ordinary life might seem fulsome and categorical, but it is not. He only grants Islam the primacy of action, but not of thought. Hence, the equality that practical Advaita preaches and Islam practices 'may be quite unconscious generally of the deeper meaning and the underlying principle of such conduct, which the Hindus, as a rule, so clearly perceive'.<sup>129</sup> The India of the future had to be founded, therefore, on the basis of a synthesis: 'Vedanta brain and Islam body'.<sup>130</sup> Yet, there are instances when Vivekananda argues that the body divides people and is the cause of separation among people, especially if there is no knowledge of the spirit.<sup>131</sup> Less than a year before the letter to Mohammed Sarfaraz Husain, in another letter dated 10 October 1897,

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128. Ibid., p. 376.

129. Ibid., p. 376.

130. Ibid., p. 376.

131. CW, Vol. 2, p. 84.

written to Akhandananda, Vivekananda enjoins him to accept Muslim boys in the newly formed sect, asks him not to tamper with their religion, but also advises that the 'only thing you will have to do is to make separate arrangements for their food, etc., and teach them so that they may be moral, manly, and devoted to doing good'.<sup>132</sup> While he is emphatic that Hindu, Muslim and Christian boys ought to be admitted, he is insistent that 'they get their food and drink a little separately'.<sup>133</sup>



Ramakrishna believed that God alone would rectify any errors that a faith might have and such correction was God's business alone. He did not also believe in the idea of faiths evolving at different speeds and paces. There is no place in Ramakrishna's thought for the idea of a perfected faith having first realized the truth, one that all other evolving faiths had perforce to emulate. Vivekananda rejected Ramakrishna's non-hierarchical view of other faiths and he had unconcealed contempt for the idea that it was longing, ecstatic faith in a Personal God that alone accounted for the equality of all faiths, belief systems and sects. Vivekananda's Ramakrishna was a 'scientist' who had rationalized all the scriptures,

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132. CW, Vol. 6, p. 371.

133. Ibid., p. 371.

especially the Vedas and the Upanishads, and all other seemingly contradictory doctrines to create a scientific Hinduism. In Vivekananda's hands, the faith that emerged had the following features:<sup>134</sup>

- The Vedas alone know and teach the idea of the real absolute God;
- The absolute, also called the Brahman, was alone true;
- All other ideas of God are nothing more than minimized and limited visions of the absolute truth;
- Different religions and sects in India and in the world represent different manifestations of the Brahman or the absolute God and so are true;
- Other sects and religions, however, exhibit various stages of being manifest in unprogressive and crystallized form;
- Therefore, other religions and sects are true as they are manifestations of Brahman, but some are higher than the others.
- There is only one perfect religion, the nameless, limitless and eternal Vedic religion. All the minimized, limited, unprogressive and crystallized forms of religion in the world were included in the Vedic religion.

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134. CW, Vol. 4, p. 289.

In the evolutionary schema that Vivekananda devises, humanity is a vast organism that slowly moves from darkness to light. In doing so the first tentative steps are through the help of matter and rituals.<sup>135</sup> In order to find light, which is God, every religion proceeds to worship, firstly, forms or symbols, names next, and finally, god-men. This also becomes the source of all religious strife and dissension. Each religion, then, claims that its forms, names and god-men are true to the exclusion of all others.

In itself, the evolutionary progression towards light suggests that other sects and faiths would one day transcend the preliminary stages of being beholden to forms, names and god-men and reach the perfection attained by the Vedic religion. At this stage of the argument, there is little indication whether having attained the perfection of the Vedic religion other faiths would retain their distinctiveness and individuality or merge into the idea of the real absolute God. But there are enough instances where Vivekananda seems to suggest that other faiths could progressively move towards the Vedic conception of absolute truth. He does, however, say that '...every religion, is true, as each is but a different stage in the journey, the aim of which is the perfect conception of the Vedas'<sup>136</sup> but also admits 'that all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest

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135. CW, Vol. 2, pp. 41-2.

136. CW, Vol. 1. pp. 331-2.



absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realise the infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association, and each of them marking a stage of progress'.<sup>137</sup> Here there is not even a scant allusion to the earlier formulation of other faiths being unprogressive and crystallized. There is relentless exhortation for others to recognize and affirm the perfection of the Vedic religion, but, at the same time, enough ambiguity to substantially doubt the capacity of other faiths to attain the absolute ideal. To continue to argue in this fashion was to make the evolutionary schema and its inherent hierarchy among faiths redundant. It would eventually also render superfluous the entire project of establishing the supremacy of the Vedic religion. Vivekananda ruthlessly thwarts even the momentary illusion that other faiths and sects might have harboured of ever attaining the real absolute God. This is accomplished by introducing the idea of involution as a necessary precondition for evolution in any manner of speaking to take place in the first instance.

All the possibilities of a future tree are in that seed; all the possibilities of a future man are in the little baby; all the possibilities of any future life are in the germ. What is this? The ancient philosophers of India called it involution. We find then, that every

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137. Ibid., pp. 331-2.

evolution presupposes an involution. Nothing can be evolved which is not already there.<sup>138</sup>

The message is clear and direct: Vedic religion has in its seed the intimations of future perfection. Other faiths could, indeed, be sincere efforts on the path of realizing God and truth, but would never attain the real absolute God; they would, for ever, remain hostage to only limited and minimized versions of the truth. Inevitably, this would raise questions about what was 'already there' in Vedic religion that paved the way for involution, evolution and perfection. Vivekananda dismisses even a remote semblance of scepticism about the perfect seed and the perfect future tree by identifying the one thing that makes Vedic religion perfect: the idea of the soul.



There were two ways to study religions, suggests Vivekananda, in order to understand the idea of involution. One is the Semitic idea of religion, where the idea of God comes prior to the idea of the human individual. In the Semitic group of religions, the idea of God emerges 'strangely enough, without any idea of soul'.<sup>139</sup> In sharp contrast, the Aryan idea of religion was

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138. CW, Vol. 2, p. 227.

139. CW, Vol. 6, p. 1.

to start with the human individual and progressively move towards the idea of God: 'All the knowledge they got of God was through the human soul; and, as such, the peculiar stamp that has been left upon their whole cycle of philosophy is that introspective search after Divinity. The Aryan man was always seeking Divinity inside his own self.'<sup>140</sup>

This introspective search, claims Vivekananda, led the Aryan man towards the ideal of unity and non-separateness. This was the foundation of all ethics and all morality and was also found in all religions and among all other prophets. What marked Aryans as distinctive and led to their perfection was the idea of the soul that was already interred in the seed in the first instance. Explaining it differently, Vivekananda singles out Vedanta as the only religion where the principles take precedence over the mythology. Without exception, in all other faiths, 'the principles are so interwoven with the mythology, that it is very hard to distinguish one from the other'.<sup>141</sup> The mythology swallows the principles and, over a period of time, the principles are lost altogether. Christianity cannot explain the principles of its faith as distinct from Christ and neither can Islam preach its principles independent of Prophet Muhammad.

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140. Ibid., p. 1.

141. Ibid., p. 5.

## The Fly and the Syrup

In Vedanta the chief advantage is that it was not the work of one single man; and therefore, naturally, unlike Buddhism, or Christianity, or Mohammedanism, the prophet or teacher did not entirely swallow up or overshadow the principles. The principles live, and the prophets, as it were, form a secondary group, unknown to Vedanta.<sup>142</sup>

Prophets were people who appealed to emotions and not to 'something higher, to our calm judgement'.<sup>143</sup> Emotions drag people to the level of animals;<sup>144</sup> emotions have a greater connection to the senses than the capacity to reason. When emotions rather than reason prevail, religion slides into fanaticism and sectarianism. Principles, rather than emotions, must triumph in the final analysis. In so arguing, Vivekananda forestalls the possibility of Vedanta ever degenerating into sectarianism and fanaticism. Nor could Vedanta ever have scope for emotions that were irrational. The seed, even before it had begun to evolve, was perfect. All other faiths, however sincere, were always in the danger of sliding to the level of animals.

Degeneration of religions to the level of beasts happens because principles often spill over into mythology. Vivekananda delineates mythologies as

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142. Ibid., p. 5.

143. Ibid., p. 5.

144. Ibid., pp. 5-6; see also, CW, Vol. 1, p. 460.

consisting of lives of saints or heroes, demigods, or gods, and divine beings, but all mythologies shared a common feature, namely, the expression of power. In the primitive category of mythologies, he elaborates, the emphasis is usually on portraying their heroes as strong and gigantic. After this stage has been crossed, the higher mythologies have great moral men as their heroes, men whose actual strength lies in becoming moral and pure. The final stage in the development of religions is even lower than creation of myths. He calls it the invention of symbolism. This manifests in the form of rituals and ceremonials. It is an expression of the lowest minds where symbolism works as the 'kindergarten of religion'.<sup>145</sup> Religions that rely excessively on myths and symbols discover that 'all that is left to them is but an empty shell, a contentless frame of words and sophistry'.<sup>146</sup> In his relentless and systematic demolition of all other faiths and sects, Vivekananda now adds another element. He wonders if the methods of modern science can at all be applied to the science of religion, and, unsurprisingly, answers in the affirmative: 'Not only will it be made scientific – as scientific, at least, as any of the conclusions of physics or chemistry – but will have greater strength, because physics or chemistry has no internal mandate to vouch for its truth, which religion has.'<sup>147</sup>

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145. CW, Vol. 6, p. 4.

146. CW, Vol. 3, p. 44.

147. CW, Vol. 1, p. 367.

Till this moment in the narrative, Vivekananda seems to propose that the Vedic religion was the only perfect religion, that the Vedas alone disseminate the idea of the real absolute God, and that the Aryan man alone was capable of an introspective search for divinity. There were various grades and levels of religion and other religions could evolve and chart their own course towards attaining God. If they evolved enough to recognize the perfection of the Vedic religion, they would sooner than later be in communion with the absolute truth. If they remained true to their name and form, they would evolve but eventually fail to attain the perfection of the Vedic religion because of the absence of involution. Face-to-face with the dazzling brilliance and perfection with which Vivekananda endows his version of the Vedic religion, clearly no other faith, sect, prophet or doctrine could remotely stand and be counted in comparison. The only sliver of hope now rested in seeking refuge in science. Having mentioned the possibility of applying methods of modern science to the science of religion, would Vivekananda relent and allow other faiths and sects to at least appropriate the methods of science and become scientific?

Characteristically, Vivekananda begins with an imaginary conversation between a Christian and a Muslim, both claiming the inherent superiority of their respective faiths. It quickly moves to the question of conversion in Islam, invoking well-known stereotypes as

the use of force, and the killing of infidels if conversion was resisted. At the conclusion of this conversation, Vivekananda lays the blame for this conflict on the Christian and Islamic preoccupation with sacred books, a conflict that the sacred books themselves cannot resolve. He then moves to elaborate the operative part of his argument: there ought to be an outside agency, something higher than all ethical codes to resolve such conflict. He demands something that is higher than the claims of every set of individual inspirations, an external agency that would arbitrate between 'inspiration and inspiration'.<sup>148</sup> Scientific reason, he concludes, was to be that external agency to arbitrate between rival claims made by different faiths. Scientific reason has this edge because, firstly, 'the particular is explained by the general, the general by the more general, until we come to the universal'.<sup>149</sup> But this was not enough. A second way of looking at the principles of reason was to seek the explanation of a thing from the inside and not the outside. 'In one word, what is meant by science,' he explains, 'is that the explanations of things are in their own nature, and that no external beings or existences are required to explain what is going on in the universe.'<sup>150</sup> For Vivekananda, the idea that the explanation of everything comes from inside the thing itself tallies

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148. Ibid., p. 369.

149. Ibid., p. 369.

150. Ibid., pp. 370-1.

with the modern law of evolution as well. Evolution is nothing but a thing reproducing its own nature, 'that the effect is nothing but the cause in another form, that all the potentialities of the effect were present in the cause, that the whole of creation is but an evolution and not a creation'.<sup>151</sup>

Having established the two principles upon which scientific reason was to arbitrate between claims of superiority put forth by various sects and religions, Vivekananda finds only one religion fulfilling the requirements of these principles:

Can there be a religion satisfying these two principles? I think there can be. In the first place we have seen that we have to satisfy the principle of generalisation. The generalisation principle ought to be satisfied along with the principle of evolution. We have to come to an ultimate generalisation, which not only will be the most universal of all generalisations, but out of which everything else must come. It will be of the same nature as the lowest effect; the cause, the highest, the ultimate, the primal cause, must be the same as the lowest and most distant of its effects, a series of evolutions. The Brahman of the Vedanta fulfils that condition, because Brahman is the last

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151. Ibid., pp. 371-2.



generalisation to which we can come. It has no attributes but is Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss – Absolute.<sup>152</sup>

Modern science, then, proves the Vedantic ideal of unity and oneness. The Brahman, the God of the Vedanta, is everything. There is nothing external to him. The only religion that can stand the test of modern reasoning is the Advaita Vedanta. All other faiths and sects entertain the idea of a Personal God, which is not a true generalization; the real absolute God is impersonal: 'The Self is the essence of this universe, the essence of all souls; He is the essence of your own life, nay, "Thou art That". You are one with this universe. He who says he is different from others, even by a hair's breadth, immediately becomes miserable.'<sup>153</sup>

The Impersonal God is, therefore, not a relative God. If he is so, he is beyond good and evil. Vivekananda was conscious of the pitfalls of his version of the Advaita Vedanta. Having painstakingly sketched the nature of this Impersonal God, one who is beyond attributes, and who transcends the ordinary realm of ethics, he concedes that 'Good, however, is a nearer manifestation of It than evil'.<sup>154</sup> The ethical implications of this view will be examined in Section IV of this essay. But it would suffice

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152. Ibid., p. 372.

153. Ibid., p. 374.

154. Ibid., p. 377.

to say here that the identification of the Brahman with principles of modern science completes Vivekananda's attempt to demote other faiths, sects and arguments in comparison with his perceived perfection of the Vedic religion.

Despite drawing upon science, among other things, to painstakingly create the idea of an impersonal God, Vivekananda would continue to wrestle with ethical questions regarding religion and its place in the world. There are instances when he says that all religions show a way out of this world and never aspire to reconcile the world and religion as an ideal.<sup>155</sup> It was also not sects and societies but the relation between the soul and God; it consisted in realization.<sup>156</sup> But there are equally compelling examples in Vivekananda where he explicitly hands over the mantle of helping humans to religion, not merely in liberating them from the illusions of the world but in concrete ways.<sup>157</sup> In one of the most frequently quoted passage from Vivekananda, the demands made on religion are not books, dogmas, philosophy or even God, but to 'to wipe the widow's tears or to bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth'.<sup>158</sup> But elsewhere he argues that 'religion has to do only with the soul and

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155. CW, Vol. 2, p. 124.

156. CW, Vol. 4, p. 175.

157. CW, Vol. 2, pp. 24-5.

158. CW, Vol. 5, p. 39.

has no business to interfere in social matters.<sup>159</sup> Also, far from wiping tears and giving bread, Vivekananda could also denounce the body and the pain it might feel as something grossly shameful and perceive it as a sign of slavery to the body.<sup>160</sup> In putting forth his ideas on Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda would insist on removing the 'fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world'.<sup>161</sup>

## IV

Despite emphatic assertions about not disturbing anyone's faith, Vivekananda rarely saw anything worthwhile in other religions. He was sceptical of the Islamic idea of universal brotherhood, a concept whose operation he saw as one that was inextricably linked to the actual fact of being a Muslim. If an individual did not conform to Islam, not only would he remain outside the pale of universal brotherhood, but 'he will more likely have his throat cut'.<sup>162</sup> The same conditions applied to being accepted as part of the Christian idea of universal brotherhood, and any deviation from the prescribed path could send an individual 'to that place where he will be

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159. CW, Vol. 4, p. 304.

160. CW, Vol. 1, p. 463.

161. CW, Vol. 2, p. 289.

162. Ibid., p. 378.

eternally barbecued'.<sup>163</sup> Islam and Christianity were, after all, primitive religions where there was first the idea of the universe created by a 'certain Being'.<sup>164</sup> Only much later did they develop an equally primitive idea of the soul encased in the body which was not the same as the body but distinct from it. The Christians also entertained ideas and doctrines like the world coming into existence because Adam ate an apple or escaping the wrath of an angry God, or even founding the basis of faith on the death of one man, in this instance, Jesus Christ.<sup>165</sup> For Vivekananda, there can be only one religion. The moment one names another religion with its own truth, it ceases to be a religion and becomes a sect. A religion has to be eternal, not the creation of a historically identifiable individual and unattached to any sacred book. Only the Vedas could ever satisfy all the three parameters.

More than damning other faiths and making them seem incomplete and inadequate, Vivekananda still had the task of fabricating 'our religion', 'India's religion', a faith that would happily resonate with the plan of establishing a European society in India. As religion, this entity had to permeate every aspect of human life, invade all arenas of thought, and, above all, be increasingly practical. Having identified Vedanta as the only religion in the world, a faith not only confined to India, but one whose

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163. Ibid., p. 378.

164. CW, Vol. 1, p. 393.

165. Ibid., p. 468.

salience ultimately transcended culture, geography and nationality, Vivekananda wanted Vedanta to be 'intensely practical'.<sup>166</sup> Any proposed model of religion had to have *Rajas* driving individuals and nations towards *sattva* and, hence, be imbued with the kind of energy and activity exemplified by the ancient Greeks, the modern Europeans and the *kshatriyas* in India. For Vivekananda, the tenets of such a faith could only come from such people who were actively involved in the world, the ruling monarchs from among the *kshatriyas*, and not from those who gave up the world to retire into the forest to contemplate. Practical Vedanta, as Vivekananda chose to call this 'new' religion,<sup>167</sup> had to learn from the inspired example of an exchange between Śvetaketu, a brahmin and Pravāhaṇa Jaivali, a king, cited in the Chandogya Upanishad.

The original story itself has a straightforward narrative structure.<sup>168</sup> Āruṇi's son and disciple, Śvetaketu, happens to be in the court of Pañcāla, where he is asked several questions by Pravāhaṇa Jaivali, the king, who is also one of the three men who had mastered the High Chant.<sup>169</sup> Despite being tutored by his father, Śvetaketu

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166. *CW*, Vol. 2, p. 289.

167. Vivekananda's own formulation in describing Practical Vedanta. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

168. The summary presented here is based on Patrick Olivelle's translation of the Upanishads. Patrick Olivelle, *op.cit.*, pp. 140-3.

169. Udgitha, the High Chant among the Sāmavedic chant in the Soma Sacrifice, called the Sāmāna. Patrick Olivelle, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

fails to answer these questions. The king questions the very fact of his being educated. Śvetaketu returns to his father and expresses his deep misgivings about the education he had received. He tells his father about the five questions 'That excuse for a prince'<sup>170</sup> had asked him. His father confesses that he did not know the answer to those questions, otherwise the question of withholding this knowledge from his son and pupil would not have arisen. Āruṇi, also mentioned in the text as Gautama, decides to go to the king's palace, where Pravāhaṇa Jaivali receives him with great courtesy and asks him to choose material gifts. Gautama rejects the offer of the material gifts and instead asks the king to tell him what he had asked Śvetaketu. The king gets worried hearing Gautama and orders him to stay a while longer in the court. The king, after a certain lapse of time, tells him: 'As to what you have asked me, Gautama, let me tell you that before you this knowledge had never reached the Brahmins. As a result in all the worlds government has belonged exclusively to royalty.'<sup>171</sup>

Pravāhaṇa Jaivali then answers Gautama's questions.

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170. Ibid., p. 140. The five questions were: 'Do you know where people go from here when they die?', 'Do you know how they return again?', 'Do you know how the two paths – the path to the gods and the path to the fathers – take different turns?', 'Do you know how that world up there is not filled up?', 'Do you know how at the fifth offering the water takes on a human voice?'

171. Ibid., p. 140.

He talks about five fires, various paths and states and their relation to humans. In short, a human is born out of a fire. Once born, he lives a certain allotted lifespan, and after he dies, he is taken to the fire from which he was born. People in the wilderness who practise austerities are led by a 'person who is not human' to Brahman after they die; this is the path that leads to the gods. Those following the path of the fathers return to earth after a certain period. There is a third category or state of people who follow neither of these two paths and are condemned to encircle the earth and endlessly be born only to die. Pravāhaṇa Jaivali comes to two very significant generalizations in the course of revealing the answers to the five questions he had asked Śvetaketu. The first is a certain privileging of individuals who know about the five fires (that correspond to the five questions and their answers), who, as a result of this knowledge, remain pure and untainted and attain a good world. The second is even more significant.

Now people here whose behaviour is pleasant can expect to enter a pleasant womb, like that of a woman of the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, or the Vaiśya class. But people of foul behaviour can expect to enter a foul womb, like that of a dog, a pig, or an outcaste woman.<sup>172</sup>

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172. Ibid., p. 142.

The social code of ethics that is sketched by the king is equally pertinent. Stealing gold, drinking liquor, killing a brahmin, fornicating with the wife of one's teacher, and keeping the company of those who do these acts will confine a man to the third state of encircling the earth in a ceaseless cycle of births and deaths. It is also equally important to note that the story of the exchange between Śvetaketu, Pravāhaṇa Jaivali and Gautama appears in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. The broad outline of the narrative is the same as the one in the Chandogya Upanishad, but differs in some significant details. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad gloss on the story, the king asks Gautama not to ask for a boon that is 'in the category of divine wishes', but asks him to make a wish that is 'of a human sort'.<sup>173</sup> Gautama's reply is even more significant: 'As you know, I have my share of gold, cows, horses, slave girls, blankets and clothes.'<sup>174</sup> Gautama wants the knowledge of the infinite and the boundless. Pravāhaṇa Jaivali wants Gautama to ask for this in the right manner and commands him to become his pupil. In the Brihadaranyaka version, the king only alludes to this knowledge not being in the possession of brahmins but no reference is made to it being the sole preserve of rulers. Jaivali's reasons for parting with the knowledge, despite Gautama having become his pupil, are also

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173. Ibid., p. 82.

174. Ibid., p. 82.



significantly different. Jaivali fears that if he does not admit Gautama to the knowledge of the infinite and the boundless, Gautama or his ancestors might cause him harm. Also, in describing the five fires, the two paths and the states, there is no direct reference to the Varna classification nor are the low outcastes listed along with dogs and pigs in describing the third state.

Vivekananda never cites the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad version of the story. In search of the kshatriya ideal of activity and practicality, his recounting of the story is always, inevitably, from the Chandogya Upanishad version. Neither does he seem to find the close affinities between privilege, power, wealth and the varna stratification in the narrative anachronistic and inappropriate. The existence of only two paths, the path of the gods and the path of the fathers, does not bother him, especially so because the one path is of renunciation and life in the forest and the other one was of ritual, both of which he often overtly seems to reject. The constant reference in the Upanishads to sacrifice and rituals is also conveniently ignored. The picture of Gautama as the rich brahmin, with slave girls as part of his wealth, did not fit the picture of brahminhood Vivekananda had sought to create; we know little of what King Pravāhaṇa Jaivali does of a practical nature other than expounding on the eternal and boundless mysteries, not to mention the recitation of the Samavedic High Chant. In truth, Vivekananda draws only two inferences from

the story:<sup>175</sup> that a certain kind of practical knowledge always lay with kings and not brahmins and this was the reason why the kshatriyas ruled the world, and that the human body was the highest symbolism for worship of God. The first of these inferences helps his argument that Vedanta could be intensely practical, the second inference is puzzling. All that the Chandogya Upanishad story says is this: 'Once he is born, he lives his allotted lifespan. When he has departed, when he has reached his appointed time – they take him to the very fire from which he came, from which he sprang.'<sup>176</sup> In other words, the human body as the symbolism for worship of God is Vivekananda's own inflection to the Chandogya Upanishad story.



For Vivekananda, the Upanishads were the guides to realizing the truth and the foundations upon which Practical Vedanta stood. In his reading of the truth of the Upanishads, the word 'Truth' is capitalized and stands for the absolute truth. Realizing truth was not a choice between good and bad, but knowing that everything emerges from the Self, which alone is everything.<sup>177</sup> It also means shunning and denying the Universe and

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175. CW, Vol. 2, pp. 289-90, 295, 311.

176. Patrick Olivelle, *op.cit.*, p. 141.

177. CW, Vol. 2, p. 316.

shutting one's eyes to it. More so, it means seeing the Lord or Brahman in life and in death. The Upanishads introduce the idea of a living God. This is an impersonal idea, always difficult for people to understand, but the idea of God here is that he is an angel, a man or an animal and yet he is something more. The Impersonal God is the sumtotal of everything in the universe; he is also more than this sumtotal.<sup>178</sup> Practical Vedanta was for Vivekananda the distilled essence of the Upanishads.

Therefore I will ask you to understand that Vedanta, though it is intensely practical, is always so in the sense of the ideal. It does not preach an impossible ideal, however high it be, and it is high enough for an ideal. In one word this ideal is that you are divine. 'Thou art that.' This is the essence of Vedanta; after all its ramifications and intellectual gymnastics you know the human soul to be pure and omniscient; you see that such superstitions as birth and death would be entirely nonsense when spoken in connection with the soul...All such ideas as we can do this, or cannot do this, are superstitions. We can do everything. The Vedanta teaches men to have faith in themselves first. As certain religions of the world say that a man who does not believe in a Personal God outside

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178. Ibid., p. 317.

of himself is an atheist, so the Vedanta says, a man who does not believe in himself is an atheist... There is neither man nor woman nor child, nor difference of race or sex, nor anything that stands as a bar to the realisation of the ideal, because Vedanta shows that it is realised already, it is already there.<sup>179</sup>

Reiterating the core idea in the Vedanta, Vivekananda emphasizes the uncompromising centrality of 'One Life, One World, One Existence, Everything is that One'.<sup>180</sup> To recognize the salience of the idea of oneness is not to condemn others but also recognize that there are people who are not as developed as the followers of the Vedanta.<sup>181</sup> No sooner does he explicitly make claims for the oneness of the universe, moral and ethical questions begin to demand answers. For instance, he condemns any idea of God who is partial to humans and cruel to beasts. Any religion where a god suggests that animals were there for human consumption is no God but a veritable demon.<sup>182</sup> This is in the context of the suggestion that Vedanta, unlike other creeds, does not make a distinction between humans and beasts.

The question of eating meat is an interesting one

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179. Ibid., pp. 292-3.

180. Ibid., p. 295.

181. Ibid., p. 297.

182. Ibid., pp. 295-6.

especially because it tests Vivekananda's claims of Vedantic oneness. There are several instances when Vivekananda argues that eating meat was far preferable to centuries of slavery.<sup>183</sup> His advice to young men in India to eat beef in order to develop muscles and get a rajasic temperament hardly merits repetition. In the context of a discussion on changing customs, he even explains the way in which in ancient India beef was central to the brahmin's way of life.<sup>184</sup> But even in a more contemporary context, he was unambiguous regarding the desirability of eating meat.

But he who has to steer the boat of his life with strenuous labour through the constant life-and-death struggles and the competition of this world must of necessity take meat. So long as there will be human society such a thing as the triumph of the strong over the weak, animal food is required, or some other suitable substitute for it has to be discovered; otherwise the weak will naturally be crushed under the feet of the strong.<sup>185</sup>

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183. *CW*, Vol. 4, p. 419.

184. 'There was a time in this very India when, without eating beef, no Brahman could remain a Brahman; you read in the Vedas how, when a Sannyasin, a king, or a great man came into a house, the best bullock was killed...'. *CW*, Vol. 3, p. 174.

185. *CW*, Vol. 5, p. 387.

## The Fly and the Syrup

Having elaborated the Practical Vedanta ideal and its radical restatement of oneness and unity of the entire universe, meat eating would require a defence that would serve two purposes. The first is to uphold the formulation of 'One Life, One World, One Existence, Everything is that One', but also, and this is the other requirement, uphold his condemnation of religions that justify killing animals for human consumption as part of religious sanction.

I myself may not be a very strict vegetarian, but I understand the ideal. When I eat meat I know it is wrong. Even if I am bound to eat it under certain circumstances, I know it is cruel. I must not drag my ideal down to the actual and apologise for my weak conduct in this way. The ideal is not to eat flesh, not to injure any being, for all animals are my brothers. If you can think of them as your brothers, you have made a little headway towards the brotherhood of all souls, not to speak of the brotherhood of man!<sup>186</sup>

Practical Vedanta was, then, to be perceived as just an ideal for an individual to aspire, emulate and realize. Practical Vedanta was meant to make humans free, not impel them to give up the world and go to the forest or live

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186. CW, Vol. 2, p. 296.

in a cave. It required those who understood its real import to be where they were and just 'understand the whole thing'.<sup>187</sup> Vivekananda calls this understanding freedom. Face-to-face with this notion of freedom, every human being will know what he or she really is and see himself as the manifested God. In doing so, he will also worship other humans as gods. To put it differently, Practical Vedanta was a way of attaining clarity and lucidity.

And this is the real, practical side of Vedanta. It does not destroy the world, but it explains it; it does not destroy the person, but explains him; it does not destroy the individuality but explains it, by showing the real individuality. It does not show that this world is vain, and does not exist, but it says, 'Understand what this world is, so that it may not hurt you...' The theme of the Vedanta is to see the Lord in everything, to see things in their real nature, not as they appear to be.<sup>188</sup>

In his formulation of Practical Vedanta, terms such as 'real nature' are not accidental. They serve a very important purpose in becoming the arbiter of all actions. Vivekananda is emphatic that all actions that constitute and exemplify oneness are good and all actions that

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187. Ibid., p. 323.

188. Ibid., p. 310.

lend themselves to diversity are not good.<sup>189</sup> The world as diversity is a sign of humans not understanding their 'real nature' and going against the grain of the ideal of oneness that Practical Vedanta offers.

If the question of eating meat lays bare the moral and ethical claims of Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda was acutely conscious of other similar inadequacies in his formulation. It would be pertinent to look at Vivekananda's formulation of one such question and also carefully follow his attempts to address it.

Everyone of us will think, 'I am God, and whatever I do or think must be good, for God can do no evil.' In the first place, even taking this danger of misinterpretation for granted, can it be proved that on the other side the same danger does not exist?<sup>190</sup>

Instead of providing an explanation of how the Impersonal idea would work better, Vivekananda's initial reaction is a predictable attack on the ideas of Dualism, Personal God and sectarianism 'deluging the world with blood and causing men to tear each other to pieces'.<sup>191</sup> But he ventures to confront the question more squarely after rhetorically invoking the inadequacies of the 'other side'.

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189. Ibid., pp. 302-3.

190. Ibid., p. 320.

191. Ibid., p. 320.



How can you expect morality to be developed through fear? It can never be. 'Where one sees another, where one hurts another, that is Maya. Where one does not see another, where one does not hurt another, when everything has become the Atman, who sees whom, who perceives whom?' It is all He, and all I, at the same time. The soul has become pure.<sup>192</sup>

Till this point, the argument is pitched at two distinct levels. At a high level of abstraction, Practical Vedanta is an ideal, it is the ultimate recognition of oneness and unity, it is self-purification, it is understanding, it is realization and it is also shunning the universe of name and form. Another level of explanation restores the place and role of the world, of individuality and personality as long as humans remain aware of oneness rather than diversity. In the latter explanation, the only requirement is to see the Lord in all things, shun appearances and discover our 'real nature'.

Borrowing concepts and categories from Kantian philosophy, Vivekananda likens the arguments proffered against Practical Vedanta's espousal of oneness to a fight between the phenomenon and the noumenon.<sup>193</sup> The phenomenal world, he explains, was the universe

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192. Ibid., p. 320.

193. Ibid., pp. 330-1.

of continuous change, and the noumenal world was something beyond the phenomenal world that does not change. There were people like the Dualists who in their folly believed that both these worlds were true and had a more or less independent existence. Vedanta alone, he asserts, gives a satisfactory answer to this division of reality into the phenomenal and the noumenal. Vedanta explains that there cannot be two worlds, one changing and the other unchanging. Rather, it clarifies that 'it is the one and the same thing which appears as changing, and which is in reality unchangeable'.<sup>194</sup> Other than Kantian philosophy, Vivekananda introduces several scientific metaphors to explain the reasons for radical oneness as the centrepiece of his Practical Vedanta ideal. Describing the relationship of the Impersonal to the Personal, or the phenomenal to the noumenal, he speaks of atoms in flux in relation to an unchangeable universe.

So the whole is the Absolute; but with It every particle is in a constant state of flux and change. It is unchangeable and changeable at the same time, Impersonal and personal in one. This is our conception of the universe, of motion and of God, and that is what is meant by 'Thou art That.'<sup>195</sup>

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194. Ibid., p. 330.

195. Ibid., p. 336.

Soon enough a biological metaphor is added to the armoury of explanations: 'The gigantic intellect, we know, lies coiled up in the protoplasmic cell, and why should not the infinite energy?...Each one of us has come out of one protoplasmic cell, and all the powers we possess were coiled up there.'<sup>196</sup>

The point Vivekananda tries to convey is clear: the Impersonal goes beyond the Personal and the relative and 'explains it [the personal and the relative] to the full satisfaction of our reason and heart'.<sup>197</sup> The phenomenal world, with its names and forms, is merely the Being, as he chooses to call it, perceived through the prism of our little minds and personalities. Once this narrow and restricted idea of identity is given up, 'we shall become one with It. That is what is meant by "Thou art That"'.<sup>198</sup> Using another scientific metaphor, he rejects the proposition that the substance could ever be separate from the qualities of that substance. In fact, the relation between substance and qualities is one where the unchangeable appears as the changeable. Following this argument, human feelings, perceptions and even the awareness of the body are nothing but the soul.



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196. Ibid., pp. 337-8.

197. Ibid., pp. 336-7.

198. Ibid., pp. 336-7.

## The Fly and the Syrup

If there is a clinching example of the ethical and moral vacuum at the heart of Vivekananda's formulation of Practical Vedanta, it is the story of the actor and the beggar that he himself offers. The picture that Vivekananda paints is one where the contrast is between an actor playing the part of a beggar and the life of a real beggar. It would be interesting to look at this example and carefully examine its implications.

The one enjoys his beggary while the other is suffering misery from it. And what makes this difference? The one is free and the other is bound. The actor knows his beggary is not true, but that he has assumed it, for play, while the real beggar thinks that it is his too familiar state and that he has to bear it whether he wills it or not. This is the law. So long as we have no knowledge of our real nature, we are beggars, jostled about by every force in nature, and made slaves of by everything in nature...<sup>199</sup>

The simple assumption that the actor enjoys playing the beggar's role and the real beggar finds only misery in begging is erroneous. As individuals with different motives and perspectives, this may not strictly be true. The actor may be free from the state of being a beggar,

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199. Ibid., pp. 321-2.

but may not be free in a larger sense. The beggar, on the contrary, could be a free and liberated soul, especially if he has rejected material attachments and begging for him is simply a way of keeping himself alive. If the beggar is, indeed, miserable, there is no guarantee that he does not want to get out of this state or does not have enough will to help himself out of his abject state. Vivekananda's suggestion that the beggar has to bear his misery, whether he wills it or not, because his state is a consequence of an unspecified, but inevitable, law renders Practical Vedanta into another meaningless abstraction.

Though Vivekananda repeatedly enjoins his interlocutors to approach the idea of oneness with the heart, wants their hearts to feel God in itself and in others,<sup>200</sup> he continues to hold on to the limiting, fixed and regressive idea of 'real nature'. Begging and feeling miserable is the law for the beggar and is inevitable. He cannot escape from it, just as in Vivekananda's scheme of things, the cobbler will continue to mend shoes despite learning Sanskrit. He is free, however, to realize his 'real nature', whether or not such a realization alters his condition or lessens his humiliation and misery, if he so suffers from these states in his present condition. Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta would, however, help him in one respect: he will, perhaps, cease to hope for

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200. Ibid., p. 305.

help from the outside. Vivekananda was contemptuous of Dualists and all believers in a Personal God for offering a religion that offered hope. Religion for him had to be moral and manly.

[T]hey want a consoling religion and we understand that it is necessary for them. The clear light of truth very few in this life can bear, much less live up to. It is necessary, therefore, that this comfortable religion should exist; it helps many souls to be a better one. Small minds whose circumference is very limited and which require little things to build them up, never venture to soar high in thought.<sup>201</sup>

Small minds directed their energies in the misguided deployment of love. This is Vivekananda's stark conclusion. A man murders another man for the love of his child, limiting his love only for his progeny, but excluding millions from that love.<sup>202</sup> Selfish and limited love is misdirected love: only evil comes out of such a misdirected love. A love that does not involve any sense of one's ego or corporeal existence is true renunciation, and hence, selfless and genuine love.



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201. Ibid., p. 335.

202. Ibid., p. 252.

After Ramakrishna's death, Narendra tells Mahendranath of an instance when the Master asked Annada Guha to help his favourite disciple financially. Narendra and his family were in deep financial difficulties and were starving. After Annada left, Narendra scolded the Master for having asked for help on his behalf. Tearful from the rebuke received from his disciple, Ramakrishna said: 'Alas! For your sake I could beg from door to door.'<sup>203</sup> Having narrated the incident, Narendra makes one of the most significant remarks to be found in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda corpus: 'He tamed us by his love. Don't you think so?'<sup>204</sup> Mahendranath's reaction to this is equally important: 'There is not the slightest doubt about it. His love was utterly unselfish.'<sup>205</sup> Narendra also recounts the number of times Ramakrishna prayed 'to the Divine Mother to give me money'.<sup>206</sup> There are several other occasions when Narendra would exclaim about Ramakrishna: 'He loved me so much!'<sup>207</sup> During this period, after Ramakrishna's passing away, a member of the monastery suggests that 'one person cannot give love to another person'.<sup>208</sup> Narendra immediately claims that the Master had, indeed, given him such love. The

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203. *Gospel*, p. 980.

204. *Ibid.*, p. 980.

205. *Ibid.*, p. 980.

206. *Ibid.*, p. 987.

207. *Ibid.*, p. 987.

208. *Ibid.*, p. 1007.

brother disciple expresses scepticism over Narendra's claim. Narendra's reaction is worth recounting: 'What can you understand about love? You belong to the servant class. All of you must serve me and massage my feet. Don't flatter yourself by thinking you have understood everything. Now go and prepare a smoke for me.'<sup>209</sup> Hearing this everyone laughed.

This anecdote nearly brings to a close the substantive part of Swami Nikhilananda's translation of Mahendranath Gupta's *Kathāmrita*. Having heard Vivekananda's response to the question of Ramakrishna's love, Mahendranath says something extremely significant to himself: 'Sri Ramakrishna has transmitted mettle to all the brothers of the math. It is no monopoly of Narendra's.'<sup>210</sup> This instance of expressing scepticism was, perhaps, a rare challenge to not merely Vivekananda's position as the 'inheritor' of Ramakrishna's mantle, but also offers the first methodological hint towards challenging Vivekananda's claims about Hinduism as religion. While his mystique endures, it survives in the absence of a self-reflective tradition that clings to his version of Hinduism in the form of pamphlets and in the guise of partially cited quotations from the corpus of his work. Any serious study of Vivekananda, then, is also a step towards delineating the themes crucial for

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209. Ibid., p. 1008.

210. Ibid., p. 1008.



creating a genealogy of Hindu identity and questioning Hindu self-images. Perhaps we do not know enough; perhaps we will never know enough. But it is time now to stop serving and massaging the feet of the version of Hinduism that he offered. The servant class must now question, challenge and disturb. In doing so lies hope for the survival of India's democracy.

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