

Negotiating Worlds, Re-Envisioning Modernity:
Swami Vivekananda and Colonial Discourse

by

Kristen Anne Hardy

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Religion
University of Manitoba
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THESIS ABSTRACT

Swami Vivekananda's talks and writings brought many Indian concepts to widespread public attention in the United States and Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and led to his recognition among Hindus as an articulate spokesperson for the *sanātana dharma* in the modern age.

Vivekananda's perspective, however, was profoundly shaped by the ideas, attitudes, and values transmitted through the apparatus of the colonial establishment. This influence penetrated beyond the swami's freely acknowledged admiration of Western science and material progress, and affected his thought and expression at more-fundamental levels as well.

Nevertheless, Vivekananda was not simply a passive recipient of imperial ideologies. This thesis considers some of the ways in which Vivekananda actively engaged religion, nation, race, caste, and gender—often in thoughtful and creative ways—as sites for the negotiation of colonial/Orientalist assumptions and themes, while seeking to position Hindus more advantageously within modernity's power-laden cultural hierarchies.

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In memory of

my father,

Edward Alan Hardy

(1942-2004),

and

my *guruji*,

Srimat Swami Pramathanandaji Maharaj

(1920-2003)

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In 1893 at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, a charismatic and eloquent young Indian *sādhū* caught the attention of the assembled audience and, subsequently, of the popular press as well, both in America and in his homeland. Swami Vivekananda's charming personality and engaging presentation of his own faith tradition—and its relation, as he perceived it, to those of others—brought the seemingly exotic 'Hindoo religion' to widespread public attention in the West. Subsequently, as word of his success spread across the sea, much of the Indian populace also came to embrace him as an articulate spokesperson for the *sanātana dharma* in the modern age.

In the more than one hundred years since his powerful speech at the Parliament, Vivekananda's influence has spread ubiquitously throughout Indian life, in contexts both religious and secular, popular and academic, as well as finding favour with Hindu diasporites and Indophiles around the world. Vivekananda has left an 'official' legacy, in the form of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, an India-based international religious association whose organisation he shaped and oversaw during his lifetime, and which accordingly grants him and his teachings a central place in its spiritual lineage. Other present-day Hindu teachers, leaders and movements frequently appeal to his speeches and writings, be it to support their own religio-philosophical teachings, to justify as 'spiritual

practice' their social service activities, or to advance their nationalist political agendas. Hindu-influenced new religious movements outside of India also commonly cite Vivekananda and his teachings as paradigmatic for an enlightened-yet-socially-engaged religious life.

While Vivekananda's life and work has long been the subject of much laudatory writing by his admirers, particularly those within the Ramakrishna Order of *sannyāsins*, he has only comparatively recently begun to attract serious critical study from members of the Western academic community. This growing attention on the part of scholars appears to be due both to the contemporary shift in focus towards modern figures and movements, as well as to the increased interest within many disciplines in those individuals who engaged the dynamic currents of thought that competed for allegiance within colonial-era societies. The characteristic approaches of postcolonial¹ theory and colonial discourse analysis have provided scholars with an evolving set of investigative tools and methods suited to such subject matter. In the case of Vivekananda, the study of the underlying imperialist themes, structures, and mindsets attended to by these approaches offers one way of finding a logic or coherence within a very diverse and wide-ranging body of writings and speeches.

Though thrust into a novel American religious and intellectual milieu rather abruptly at the Parliament of Religions, this Bengali *sādhu* was far from unacquainted with the prevailing currents of thought in Western societies. Indeed, hailing from the

¹ There is disagreement among scholars over whether to render the term in hyphenated form as 'post-colonial' (suggesting to some a distinct period which follows the 'colonial') or as 'postcolonial' (suggesting a unique entity altogether). I opt for the latter (except when a sense of chronological order *is* specifically meant) as I feel it more nearly approaches the nuanced, not-specifically chronological meaning

urban centre of colonial power in what was then one of Britain's most-prized colonial possessions, this product of a cosmopolitan middle-class Calcutta family and a Western-modelled educational system had been shaped by the mindsets, ideas, and values transmitted through the apparatus of the colonial establishment—and their impact remains detectable in his large body of preserved writings and speeches. This influence penetrated beyond Vivekananda's freely acknowledged admiration of Western science and material progress, and affected the swami's thought at more fundamental levels as well. In seeking to understand Vivekananda's ideas and perspectives in an insightful way, these factors rightly deserve critical consideration.

To admit the fact of this influence, however, is not to say that Vivekananda was a passive recipient of imperial ideology, duped by the colonial rulers' political agendas and the Orientalist constructions of foreign intellectuals. Rather, to a significant extent, Vivekananda carefully considered these ideas, and responded to them in ways which were often particularly thoughtful and nuanced—albeit inevitably shaped and constrained by considerations of time, place, and audience. In fact, with his relatively wide sphere of influence, he actually played a role in shaping the ways that some of these concepts—especially those concerning India and the Hindu 'religion'—came to be understood within the broader twentieth-century public consciousness, popular and academic, both in India and in the West.

Specifically, this thesis argues that many of the assumptions, ideas, and structures that characterised colonial/Orientalist discourse influenced Vivekananda's conceptions of such basic categories of personal and social identity as religion, nation, race, caste, and

of the term. For a brief explanation of the issue, see Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical*

gender. Further, it examines the ways in which he actively engaged many of these 'Western' notions in his own work, variously adopting, adapting, and rejecting aspects thereof in response to his own unique set of personal experiences, intellectual inquiries, cultural assumptions, religious ideals, and practical goals.

To these ends, I draw upon the insights and analytical techniques developed by an array of established 'postcolonial' critics, such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and others, as well as utilise relevant work by scholars of South Asia, to study these concepts as they are expressed in Vivekananda's extensive works. As well, the work of those who have critically reflected specifically on Vivekananda's life, ideas, and influence are among the secondary sources that I employ in this research. By undertaking a careful and critical reading of Vivekananda's work, my aim in this study is to elucidate the ways in which his understanding of these concepts reflect a profound degree of colonial/Orientalist influence, as well as indicate how these categories became sites for his own contestation of certain elements of these same discourses.

Colonialism and Orientalism: Paired Discourses

In order to understand the characteristics of colonialism and its various allied discourses (particularly, in this context, Orientalism), it is necessary to consider something of the historical, cultural and philosophical forces that led to its emergence and shaped its manifestations. In the global context, of course, contact between distant lands, military and political conquest of civilisations, and settlement of persons in far-off territories has a lengthy history. The situation that developed between the communities of post-Renaissance Europe and other regions of the world, however, was exceptional; not

only in terms of the sheer scope of the geographical coverage of this ‘colonial project’ and the diversity of the cultures and communities directly involved or indirectly implicated, but in the depth and degree of its influence, effecting not merely material changes, but deep-rooted ideological ones as well. It is not hyperbole to assert that modern European colonialism impacted, in profound ways, virtually ‘every corner of the globe’. (In fact, the incongruity of this rectilinear metaphor and the spherical reality it represents itself intimates the latent absurdities often involved in the pan-global imposition of Western conceptual terrain.) The extensive political and institutional transformations effected within Europe’s colonial possessions are only the most obvious of its consequences; more veiled are the far-reaching effects of its integral concepts, ideologies, power structures, and rhetoric, and the systems of knowledge and practice that they, in dialectic fashion, both result from and foster.

It is this ‘genealogical’ approach to understanding the phenomena of Europe’s—and, in particular, Britain’s—interaction with other communities, cultures and people groups over the span of approximately four centuries that has led to the now-prevalent practice of reading colonialism as a *discourse*. This analysis of the colonial project, which has its roots in Foucauldian thought but has emerged over a period of time through the agency of numerous scholars, has, in recent decades, become a critical concept across multiple disciplines within the academy. By examining colonialism’s ‘discursive’ dimension—that is, its character and function as a collection of thought, writing, and practice that is united by a common object, approach, or set of ideas and terms—scholars have fashioned a new interpretive framework for understanding seemingly disparate elements that persistently resurface in the study of widely varied colonial contexts. As

well, this approach has highlighted the impact (one might say complicity) of many fields of knowledge on the formulation and maintenance of colonial norms and assumptions. These commingling discursive entities include, as we shall see in the course of this thesis, Christian theology, European historiography, the social sciences (particularly ethnology and sociology), and comparative philology, among many others.

The study of 'India' (a concept with shifting boundaries of its own) during the nineteenth century was undertaken both by scholars within the ivy-covered (and ivory-coloured) setting of European universities, and by those with a more direct link to the machinery of empire. With respect to the former, much of the effort undertaken was subsumed under the broad umbrella of 'Oriental studies', in the scholastic language of the day. In actuality, as an academic discipline, Orientalism encompassed the study of a huge expanse of diverse geographic and cultural territory, and was comprised of researchers from many fields, with linguistics and philology assuming particularly prominent positions. Even a quick perusal, for example, of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, a vital forum for Orientalist researchers of the period, reveals the great range of materials which were brought together as components of the larger task of deciphering the 'Eastern' world—botanical studies of Chinese flora nestle in its pages next to explanations of Ceylonese Buddhist funeral rites; explanations of 'Hindoostani' phonetics might share a volume with the meticulous details of new archaeological finds in North Africa. This approach typifies what historical anthropologist Bernard S. Cohn

has aptly labelled “the Victorian encyclopaedic quest for total knowledge,”² characteristic of the post-Enlightenment ethos of power and control through comprehension.

A substantial portion of the ‘fieldwork’ upon which the academic Orientalists depended was carried out in India by British colonial administrators and those in their employ. For the British came to understand early on—well before the 1858 institution of the British Raj as such—that knowledge of India’s land, people, languages, and social, religious, economic, legal and political institutions and practices was necessary in order to successfully negotiate a foothold in this vast and diverse territory, defined and bounded though it was through their own efforts. As the British Crown assumed formal control from the East India Company, increased labours, driven by pragmatic considerations, were devoted to training an assemblage of ‘experts’, particularly in the areas of ancient and modern Indian languages, traditional law, ethnographical approaches, and surveying skills.³

These two approaches to the study and understanding of India unsurprisingly tended to coalesce at times; even the research of so prominent an academician as German scholar Friedrich (Max) Müller could not escape the ties of empire, his long and productive tenure at Oxford University heavily supported as it was by British colonial interests.⁴ While the specifics of the research that was produced by these scholars/administrators are important to our study, even more critical are the ideas that undergirded and permeated

² Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 8.

³ See Cohn, 3-15 passim.

the production of knowledge about India. In this regard, we must move beyond narrow institutional boundaries to consider a broader network of discourses—those which, acting together, form what Edward W. Said has famously christened ‘Orientalism’. Said’s book of the same title,⁵ when it first appeared in 1978, caused a stir (and, in certain quarters, practically an uproar) for its then-bold assertion that the European study of ‘Oriental’ societies and cultures was intrinsically—perhaps inextricably—linked with Europe’s political agenda.

Orientalism, in Said’s presentation, centres around the conviction that European study of, and writing about, ‘the Orient’—an imprecise entity implicitly defined as that which is *other* than ‘the West’—actually *constructed* its putative object by casting upon it those aspects which Europeans have collectively sought to disavow from their own socio-cultural self-concept.⁶ Thus, in Said’s view, not only did Orientalism ‘create’ the Orient (and in a larger sense, the ‘non-West’ as a whole), the Orient which was thus formed, “helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.”⁷ Embedded within this project, he asserts, is the pervasive European aspiration—ultimately fuelled by political and economic interests, and explained with an admixture of psychoanalytic theory as well—for “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”;⁸ in short, for controlling the ‘other’ through the power of knowledge and representation. This is not to say that Said approaches Orientalism as a sinister conspiracy driven by malicious intentions; but that he calls attention to the

⁴ For more details on the relationship between academic research on the Orient and the British government, see the discussion in Tony Ballantyne’s *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave, 2002), 18-55.

⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978; reprint, New York: Random House, 1994).

⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 1-9 passim.

network of power and the Western cultural presuppositions that permeate discourses on the Orient, factors that have profoundly shaped the way a substantial portion of the world has been—and continues to be—represented in Western thought, and, in turn, influenced the self-conceptions of those very societies which Oriental constructions purport to describe. Further, Said's presentation links the Western portrayals of the Oriental to those same societies' anxieties surrounding the marginal—and thus threatening—elements within their own national borders, including women, ethnic and religious minorities, and the impoverished and disenfranchised classes; in other words, Orientalism becomes a way for a culture to displace its own fears and angst onto a more distant 'other'.⁹

Although, he argues, the specifics of British, American, French, and German Orientalisms (to name the four most prominent varieties) do indeed differ, they have historically shared a common set of assumptions and priorities, constructed over the course of generations, regarding the nature of "the East" and its denizens.¹⁰

While Said devotes a large share of attention in *Orientalism*, as well as his later monographs, to the impact of this style of thinking, writing and speaking upon the 'Near East' and, particularly, its Muslim inhabitants, subsequent postcolonial scholarship has investigated his framework's applicability to various other regions/societies throughout the world. The relationship between India, its study and representation, and these power-laden discourses has been the focus of much attention in recent years, as Indologists and others have become increasingly conscious of the extent to which colonialism's often unarticulated assumptions have moulded thinking, writing, and discussion about India.

⁷ Ibid., 1-2.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Ibid., 207.

As 'the Jewel in the Crown' of the British Empire, India long figured among the principal 'others' of the imperial metropole, occupying ambiguous and ambivalent ground as, simultaneously, a coveted source of revenue, an important trading location, a strategic military stronghold, a venue of mystery and adventure, a site for testing British masculinity, a desired exotic object, a living historical research laboratory, a vast mission field, a degraded and subject land, a place of lawlessness and disorder, and a threatening embodiment of much-feared irrationality, sensuality, torpor, and emasculation—to name only some of the relevant conceptualisations. India clearly has long occupied a central position in the Europe's representation of, and interaction with, the rest of the world; the elucidation of this association, consequently, is a key component of the effort to deconstruct and analyse the workings of the colonial project. It should perhaps therefore not come as a surprise that a substantial number of persons of Indian background figure among the leading postcolonial scholars of the present day, and that India's complex association with the discursive manifestations of colonialism serves as a focal point for much of the current discussion regarding the nature and expression of colonial patterns of thought.

Interrogating Colonial Discourses: Foundational Theoretical Sources

Before investigating the relationship between Vivekananda and colonial discourse, it is necessary to comprehend the character of the latter, and the ways in which it has functioned to establish and perpetuate a particular constellation of ideas about the world. Indeed, we may take the foundation of 'postcolonial' inquiry to be this act of seeking out and interrogating the previously unsought and unquestioned relations between the

¹⁰ Ibid., 16-19.

culturally and historically specific themes of the West, the practices of empire-building (including political, economic, and military forms thereof, as well as widely varied modes of knowledge production), and the discourses that permitted, supported, legitimated, and transmitted the same.¹¹

Crucial to this understanding is the recognition of colonialism as a ‘discourse’, an idea that, as noted above, owes the conditions for its genesis to the work of Michel Foucault.¹² Though Foucault’s writings do not focus upon the colonial context per se, his poststructuralist work on the discursive formation and transmission of knowledge underlies all of the varied approaches of postcolonial scholars, and terminology that owes its origin and/or particular shade of meaning to him peppers the writings of the same. The full implications of ‘discourse’ as a concept are a subject of much discussion in postcolonial circles; however, rather than seek to interrogate the term, it will suffice to note here that, for scholars of colonialism, ‘discourse’ primarily refers to “a strongly bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known ... [in Foucault’s words, it is] the ‘complex of signs and practices which organizes social existence and social reproduction’.”¹³

The concept of discourse has become crucial to analysing the operations of colonialism and charting its genealogy, as it elucidates the coalescence of knowledge and

¹¹ For this understanding of postcolonialism, I owe a debt to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s explanations of postmodernism, which emphasise the centrality of interrogating modernity and its assumptions. For explanations of his position, see Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, trans. Don Barry and others (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1992.

¹² Lyotard has also contributed to the understanding of ‘discourse’ in contemporary academic usage, but his strong linguistic focus makes his work less directly relevant to postcolonial theory. For a comparison and contrast of the two perspectives, see Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, eds. *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2002), s.v. “Discourse.”

power at a very deep level, manifest in the often unarticulated pattern of ‘permissible’ and ‘excluded’ statements which can be enunciated within the colonial situs.¹⁴ In particular, Foucault’s approach draws attention to the intersections between *discursive formations* (experience systematised into ‘modes of knowledge’, a process both carried out and expressed through discourse)¹⁵ and their expression and transmission via educational institutions, political structures, legal systems, medical establishments, religious authorities, and the like. By so doing, Foucault helps to explicate the process by which power—redefined by him to suggest an all-pervasive force dispersed throughout the social body—becomes constitutive of personal and collective identities, as well as of relations between individuals, groups, and societies.¹⁶

Although Foucault’s work—and to a lesser extent, that of fellow critical/cultural theorists like Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan¹⁷—has been crucial to the emergence of a new understanding of colonialism and its impact, it is a network of scholars who have

¹³ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998), “Discourse,” citing Michel Foucault, “Orders of Discourse: Inaugural lecture delivered at the College de France,” *Social Science Information*, 10, no. 2 (1971): 7-30.

¹⁴ In addition to this technical usage, the term *discourse* shall also be seen to crop up within this thesis in a somewhat-more atavistic sense, to denote the articulation of ideas in general through multiple or unspecified modes or forms, particularly with respect to Vivekananda’s lectures/essays/books/letters/etc. Even in such cases, however, I have tried to ensure that the sense in which the term is used does not abrogate its primary ‘postcolonial’ usage, for Vivekananda’s expressed ideas may also be understood collectively as constitutive of a discourse in their own right, as they form a system of interconnected statements which express a particular site of intersecting streams of thought and practice.

¹⁵ Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, eds., *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts*, ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), s.v. “Discourse”.

¹⁶ Foucault’s understanding of power is famously set forth in his 1963 book, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and his subsequent work, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), in which he examines the institutions of the clinic/hospital and prison, respectively, as demonstrative of the interconstitutive nature of knowledge and power.

¹⁷ Beyond Foucault, the names of a number of other central figures from the realms of poststructuralist/postmodern thought—including Derrida, Lacan, and Kristeva—will be found conspicuous only by their virtual absence in this thesis. This is a reflection of my own particular methodological orientation towards colonial discourse analysis and applied postcolonial theory (which does, however, incorporate insights from these thinkers). This is certainly not to deny, however, the rich potential that may very well yet lie within their perspectives for illuminating the relationship between Vivekananda and colonial discourse. This remains an area for future research.

taken intellectual inspiration from the former that has been instrumental in guiding the formulation of ‘postcolonial studies’ as a recognised area of inquiry within the academy. However, like its allied ‘posts’, poststructuralism and postmodernism, the wide array of terrains and approaches encompassed by the postcolonial moniker has made the systematic description of the field in terms of methodology or subject matter a challenging venture. There are, nevertheless, an array of basic concepts and approaches—many of them closely linked to the work of particular scholars—that have become basic elements within the sphere of colonial discourse analysis; a number of these are of relevance to our consideration of Vivekananda.

Said, whose groundbreaking work can claim chronological primacy over that of most of postcolonial studies’ theoretical literature, is nevertheless predated by others who have lent inspiration to the field. One such figure, a writer whose work has, posthumously, become particularly important to the postcolonial study of racism and nationalism, is Martiniquan psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (1925-1961). Fanon’s works—the best-known of which are his 1952 monograph, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (published in English in 1967 as *Black Skin, White Masks*)¹⁸ and his last book, *Les damnés de la terre* (1961; English edition, *The Wretched of the Earth*, issued in 1965)¹⁹—are of enduring value for his integration of Marxist-influenced social theory with the conceptual ground of psychological analysis to investigate the phenomenon of colonial domination, emphasising the impact of colonial hegemony upon the formation of the colonised subject’s self-identity. His work was to become an important resource for anti-colonial liberation movements and ‘black consciousness’ efforts in the middle decades of the

¹⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

twentieth century.²⁰ Of more relevance in this context, though, a number of subsequent postcolonial writers have also taken Fanon as one of their theoretical starting points, transforming this psychological theme in unique ways; Ashis Nandy, for example, builds much of his analysis of Indian society in *The Intimate Enemy* (1983) around a reading of later European colonial history as an attempt to colonise not only land but minds and selves, a project which profoundly altered both the colonised and the coloniser.²¹

Yet, as already mentioned, it was not until Said's innovative engagement with a wide array of European source material in *Orientalism* that the deconstruction of colonialism and its discourses began to emerge as an area of scholarly inquiry in its own right, though awkwardly situated athwart the boundaries of a number of recognised disciplines. The contribution of *Orientalism* to the study of colonialism has been multifold. With respect to its specific argument and content, Said's holistic portrait—with, granted, an especial emphasis upon the role of literature, his own field—exposed both the subtlety and pervasiveness of Europe's efforts to control 'the East' via its representational strategies, in addition to its imposition of more tangible colonial institutions upon non-Western societies. Although many widely divergent discursive formations have been involved in the construction of the Orient, Said has demonstrated that the forms of knowledge expressed thereby have been remarkably congruent, consistently, if not necessarily always calculatedly, perpetuating a West/East hierarchy. More than a mere point of historical elucidation, these claims have compelled scholars in the post-*Orientalism* academy to interrogate the research and writing of their

¹⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Ferrington (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

²⁰ Ashcroft, et al, *Key Concepts*, s.v. "Fanonism."

predecessors, upon whose work they build, from the perspective of an ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (to invoke Paul Ricoeur’s phrase), to include the act of questioning their own complicity in the (neo)colonial project and thus stimulating the development of a new spirit of critical self-reflexivity within contemporary Asian studies and its component fields

Although Said’s work faced much resistance initially from those working within the disciplines it critiqued, a number of his insights are now, in accordance with the third phase of Einstein’s notable dictum, accepted as self-evident—albeit with a variety of contestations and qualifications. Some of the harsh early reactions to the book seem, in retrospect, to have stemmed partly from superficial readings of the text and misunderstandings of Said’s theory, as well as hostility towards his personal political orientations.²² More measured critiques, many of them now widely acknowledged as valid, have also issued forth from those scholars in the expanding field of postcolonial studies who have subsequently drawn upon his work.²³ The attribution of certain significant theoretical inconsistencies and ambiguities to Said’s approach,²⁴ as well as the oft-voiced assertion that he has actually created something of a singular “Orientalist metanarrative” that glosses over the distinctions between various Western societies and their particular methods of engaging the East,²⁵ are observations with some legitimacy

²¹ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

²² The nature and legitimacy of such criticisms of *Orientalism* have been discussed by Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia in *Edward Said: The Paradox of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 74-83.

²³ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

²⁴ One notable critique of Said’s use of Foucault is that expressed by Aijaz Ahmad in his monograph *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992).

²⁵ Philip A. Mellor, “Orientalism, Representation and Religion: The Reality Behind the Myth,” *Religion* 34 (2004): 104.

and import. Said's later publications²⁶ have attempted to clarify, expand, and apply some of his ideas in these respects, though none has matched the impact and influence of *Orientalism*.

As postcolonial scholarship has matured and developed beyond the colonial discourse analysis set forth in *Orientalism*, it has branched into many interwoven strands, each incorporating distinctive theoretical orientations and drawing upon a unique web of influences. One of these threads, which might best be characterised as the 'psychological' approach, has its roots in Fanon's observations as well as in the theoretical work of Lacan, and has grown to include a broad collection of concepts that draw attention to the mental/emotional dynamics involved in the colonial relationship. Scholars working out of this perspective tend to draw heavily upon psychoanalytic theory; in seeking to reveal the covert origins of the construction of the colonised as 'other', they explicate the ways in which such psychological mechanisms as displacement, transference, fetishisation, and paranoia function on a collective level in the context of the European encounter with the rest of the world.

One particularly significant postcolonial scholar whose work intersects with the broad outlines of this approach is Homi K. Bhabha. Bhabha, a professor of literature at Harvard University, has had a degree of influence within postcolonial studies far disproportionate to his relatively modest body of published work, with his important essays that were published throughout the 1980s finally brought out as a monograph in

²⁶ In particular, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) and *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993) figure prominently among Said's later works, for the significant ideas that they offer from a postcolonial-studies perspective.

1994, entitled *The Location of Culture*.²⁷ He is also the editor of *Nation and Narration*,²⁸ an influential collection of papers published in 1990, whose contributors consider the discursive construction of ‘the nation’. Though not all postcolonial theorists, by any means, adhere to his approach in full—Bhabha has been subject to criticism, for example, for his alleged lack of clarity with respect to the relationship between his abstract theorising and the actual events of colonial history²⁹—he has nevertheless contributed a number of valuable concepts to colonial discourse analysts’ common methodological toolbox.

Of particular importance are Bhabha’s interrelated ideas of *ambivalence*, *mimicry*, and *hybridity*. He asserts that *ambivalence*, a term which he borrows from Freud, is one of the characteristic elements of the colonial relationship, for the coloniser and the colonised are invariably bound together by fluctuating bonds of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, exploitation and sustenance, complicity and resistance. The result is a situation that is, Bhabha posits, inherently self-destablising, opening up a space for the disruption of its own power and authority.³⁰ One of the ways in which this disruption occurs, he asserts, is through *mimicry*, or the colonial system’s “desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.”³¹ In other words, the colonised subject is exhorted (directly or indirectly) to ‘mimic’ the coloniser in terms of values, beliefs, behaviour, even appearance; yet, as this very imitation becomes a threat to the established colonial order through its erasure of the

²⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, ed. *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁹ See Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), 143-4.

³⁰ See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 85-92.

hierarchy's substantiation—this, in Bhabha's terms, constitutes the 'menace' of mimicry—effort is also exerted to maintain an unbridgeable gulf between the imitator and the imitated.³² (One relevant example to which Bhabha appeals is “the difference between being English and being Anglicized.”)³³ *Hybridity* is a natural outcome of the ambivalent colonial relationship, as well as a potent agent of destabilisation; the mutual production of identities between the colonial metropole and the peripheral colony results in new hybrid cultural forms, which transgress boundaries and thereby interrogate the binary categories which underlie colonial discourse. While this process does not necessarily sabotage the material reality of colonial dominance, Bhabha maintains that it lends an inherent instability to the relationship, and provides an avenue through which subversive counter-discourses can emerge.³⁴ His work also emphasises the role of *liminality*, positing that cultural transformation and the production of hybridity occur in the liminal—marginal or 'in-between'—space that exists outside of various competing discourses within a colonial setting; this is particularly true, for Bhabha, with respect to the formation of the nation, a theme that he explores in his concluding essay in *Nation and Narration*, paronomastically titled “DissemiNation.”³⁵ Though his work has weathered criticism on account of the extent to which the ambiguity that characterises colonialism in his analysis obscures the stark reality of colonial power and persistence,³⁶

³¹ *Ibid.*, 86 (italics removed).

³² *Ibid.*, 88.

³³ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 36-9.

³⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation,” chap. in *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 291-322.

³⁶ See Benita Parry, “Signs of our Times: Discussion of Homi Bhabha’s *Location of Culture*,” *Third Text* 28/29 (Autumn/Winter 1994): 5-25. Parry asserts that Bhabha “represents colonialism as transactional rather than conflictual,” because of his focus on textuality over the social/historical; quoted and discussed

he has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the inclusion of useful psychoanalytic components within the 'mainstream' of postcolonial theory.

A somewhat different approach to the understanding of the colonial predicament has been articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a humanities professor at Columbia University who is among the best-known figures within the 'subaltern studies' movement, with a large body of publications spanning several decades to her credit. Drawing heavily upon a unique blend of Marxist thought, Derrida's 'deconstructionist' approach, and poststructuralist feminist theory, Spivak has established herself as an astute and sophisticated—if difficult-to-situate—critic of a wide range of currents in modern thought, with a focus on colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Among Spivak's most notable (or, at least, most noted) contributions to postcolonial studies and critical theory is her insightful critique of the application of Antonio Gramsci's concept of *subalterneity* to the study of subordination based upon gender, class, race, and other factors in colonial and decolonising societies. Although the term's meaning is somewhat fluid and undergoes shifts in the minutiae of its usage between various exponents, the concept is generally employed to counter the tendency in Area Studies, particularly in the South Asian historiographical context, to focus attention upon privileged or elite groups to the neglect of other disadvantaged and disenfranchised—or *subaltern*—communities. Spivak's complex conclusion to her self-formulated question, "Can the subaltern speak?"³⁷—a pithy phrase which simultaneously addresses issues of subjectivity, authority, mediation, and reception, among others—

in Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), 145.

emphasises what she understands to be the multiple forces which work to ‘silence’ subaltern voices, as well as the inability to identify and delimit the ‘subaltern’ as distinct from the ‘elite’ without encountering the spectre of essentialism. (Spivak has been subject to criticism particularly on this first point, often taken by interpreters as an outright rejection on her part of the possibility of subaltern agency; she has, however, responded thoughtfully to her critics on this point.)³⁸

In the context of the present study, one relevant question, then, concerns the possible applicability of ‘subaltern’ to Swami Vivekananda. He indeed is ‘disadvantaged’ to some extent in the colonial context, by virtue of his racial identity, caste status, and position as a colonial subject. However, even considering the plasticity of the term as Spivak and the other members of the Subaltern Studies Collective employ it, Vivekananda’s background as an educated member of Bengali *bhadralok* (roughly, ‘respectable’) society, his male gender, and the upper-class circles in which he dwelt during his overseas and domestic sojourns makes the blanket application of this term and its corollaries to him problematic. Further, Spivak herself has cautioned against conflating the experiences and subjectivities of all of the colonially afflicted, contrasting, for example, the experiences of the voluntary migrant with those of the ‘Third World’ postcolonial; the male with the female; the privileged class with the proletariat.³⁹ For this reason, I have avoided any simple assertion of Vivekananda’s subalterneity in this thesis,

³⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), 271-313.

³⁸ For a clarification of Spivak’s position in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” see “Subaltern Talk: Interview with the Editors” in *The Spivak Reader*, D. Landry and G. MacLean, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 287-308, in which Spivak addresses her oft-misinterpreted views on subaltern subjectivity.

³⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 58.

though the import of his race, caste, and colonial subjugation is addressed throughout the text, where relevant.⁴⁰

More obviously applicable in the context of our study is Spivak's development of several themes articulated previously by Said. Whereas *Orientalism* incorporates the idea of 'the Orient' as 'other', Spivak has elaborated upon the underlying process—terming it *Othering*—by which the discourse of the imperial centre constructs 'others' while simultaneously positioning itself as the object of those others' desire.⁴¹ (This 'Othering' process is closely linked with what Spivak identifies as *worlding*, or the creation of colonised space/place as a 'world' that is defined through the agency of the colonising power, thus embedding within its very conception the authority of the West.)⁴² In this regard, she has further called upon present-day scholars to self-reflexively consider their own positions with respect to their subjects, seeking a path out of "the current academic theatre of cultural imperialism,"⁴³ without necessitating the discarding of what she believes to be the valuable-though-privileged theoretical discourses developed within the Western academy.⁴⁴

Another pertinent concept for the subject at hand is Spivak's *strategic essentialism*, a phrase that frequently comes into play when analysing discursive resistance to colonialism. The term 'essentialism' itself is a much-used one in postcolonial studies, with varied (and often ambiguous) meanings; however, following Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, we may appeal to an understanding widely accepted by scholars of colonial

⁴⁰ Regarding Vivekananda's questionable 'subalterneity', see also the discussion of Partha Chatterjee's work, below.

⁴¹ The influence upon Spivak of Lacanian thought regarding psychoanalytic 'Otherness' is evident here.

⁴² Ashcroft, et al, *Key Concepts*, s.v. "Worlding."

⁴³ Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in Landry and MacLean, 232.

discourse, framing essentialism as “the assumption that groups, categories or classes of objects have one or several defining features exclusive to all members of that category.”⁴⁵

The interpellation of the colonial subject has traditionally been embedded within discourses that appeal to an essence-based understanding of cultural categories (i.e., the notion that there is some definite, static, and indispensable quality that makes one ‘English’ or ‘Indian’, ‘White’ or ‘Asiatic’, ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’, and so forth). Often, these ‘essential’ qualities are articulated in the form of mutually exclusive binary oppositions infused with value judgments: if one society is ‘rational’, its ‘other’ must be ‘irrational’; if one culture is ‘civilised’, that over which it asserts dominion is ‘barbaric’; if one race is imbued with ‘masculinity’, it must displace its ‘femininity’ (or, as it is more often conceptualised, its ‘effeminacy’) onto another. Scholars have been virtually unanimous in attributing a large share of the responsibility for the maintenance and transmission of imperial discourses’ hegemonic authority to colonialism’s essentialist constructions (be they of race, nation, gender, or the like), which tend to foster exclusion and exploitation.

While postcolonial scholars and writers often attempt to deconstruct these categories, and expose their tenuous assumptions, as a method of invalidating the purported authority of colonial representations, it is impossible to ignore the fact that many of the important figures and movements in colonised societies’ anti-colonial efforts have utilised ideas that are equally essentialist to those they seek to overturn (for example, the ‘reverse-ethnocentric’ assertion that Asians are ‘spiritually’ superior to ‘materialistic’ Westerners). It is to describe this practice, particularly when carried out

⁴⁴ See Childs and Williams, 170-2.

knowingly and willingly, that Spivak has employed the term ‘strategic essentialism’— in other words, the *use* of essentialism’s truth-claims to achieve a purpose, not necessarily entailing a complete *acceptance* of the same as fundamentally valid.⁴⁶ Spivak’s approach is therefore relatively sympathetic to the intentional deployment of essentialist constructs within the context of colonial resistance efforts and nationalist movements, encouraging scholars thereof to not simply view colonised peoples/societies as deceived victims unaware of the ‘colonised consciousness’ foisted upon them by Western discursive formations, but, rather, as active participants in a deliberate and sophisticated engagement and rebuttal of the “planned epistemic violence”⁴⁷ constituted by colonial knowledge.

Transforming Theory: Colonialism and Nineteenth-Century India

Beyond the Said-Bhabha-Spivak triad of central theorists, many other scholars have contributed to the development of techniques for the investigation of colonialism as a discursive phenomenon. A significant number of postcolonial academics in recent years have concentrated their research specifically upon India (or, less often, other regions of South Asia), combining existing and novel theoretical insights with the applied study of figures, events, institutions, and ideas in a specific local, regional, or national context. Among the best known in this regard are the other members of the Subaltern Studies group, including such notables as Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha, and, more recently, Gyan Prakash. Although this collection of scholars, predominantly historians, all partake

⁴⁵ Ashcroft, et al, *Key Concepts*, s.v. “Essentialism/Strategic Essentialism.”

⁴⁶ For a discussion of the place of her ‘strategic essentialism’ in the broader context of poststructuralist questions of ‘essence’/‘essentialism’, see Spivak, *Teaching Machine*, 1-8.

⁴⁷ Spivak, quoted in Childs and Williams, 165.

in a mandate to shift the focus of South Asian studies away from the traditional fixation on the elite and towards a greater consideration of the historical roles of subordinate persons and groups, their work contains many perspectives of broad applicability to the study of colonial figures, texts, and events. Guha's pioneering work,⁴⁸ for example, considers the relationship between the coercive rule of India by the British and the Indian elite's consequent quest to establish its own hegemony over the Indian masses. Prakash, in his most recent monograph, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (1999),⁴⁹ explores the complex ways in which the discourse of 'science' functioned in the colonial context both to bolster British rule and as an avenue through which the authority of the same could be challenged.

Chatterjee, one of the leading figures within this group, has made a number of notable contributions to the study of colonial dynamics in the Indian context, several of which are employed in this thesis. He has applied and developed a particularly valuable theoretical apparatus first articulated by Egyptian social philosopher Anouar Abdel-Malek in the 1960s,⁵⁰ through which the latter sought to understand the relationship between Orientalist assumptions and resultant representations by positing a distinction between the 'thematic' and the 'problematic' of Orientalist study. In his 1986 work, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*,⁵¹ Chatterjee transfers this framework to his own area of research, nationalism in the colonial and postcolonial setting, where he

⁴⁸ Guha's influential text, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), brings together and expands upon a number of his earlier individual 'Subaltern Studies' essays.

⁴⁹ Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵⁰ Anouar Abdel Malek, "Orientalism in Crisis," *Diogenes* 44 (Winter 1963): 107-8; quoted by Said, *Orientalism*, 97.

focuses on its application to colonialism and nationalist resistance in the Indian context. The *problematic*, in Chatterjee's usage, refers to the actual statements and claims advanced by a system of thought—descriptions of how people, cultures, countries, etc., are perceived to be, and expressing the nature of the relationships and historical interactions between them.⁵² The *thematic*, by contrast, denotes the less visible philosophical superstructure that provides justification for those statements through its grounding in a particular epistemology and ethical perspective.⁵³ (Chatterjee's reluctantly offered linguistic analogy—comparing the problematic to “particular utterances” which are governed by “the lexical and grammatical system” of the thematic⁵⁴—is actually, despite its limitations, perhaps the most lucid and succinct explanation.)

This framework is especially relevant to the study of colonial and Orientalist discourses, as it allows a distinction to be articulated between those elements that are explicitly and vociferously rejected, and often starkly inverted, by anti-colonial forces (such as refutations by a subjugated group of the collective inferiority ascribed to them by the colonial authority), and the underlying essentialist categories which more often remain unchallenged and unchanged (the continued acknowledgement by the resisting group, for example, of the validity of colonialism's racialised and gendered categorisations, and of its styles of typological ordering that presume fixed essences and a transcendent subject).⁵⁵ Specifically referencing nationalist discourses, Chatterjee asserts that this conflict between the professed rejection of colonial power structures and,

⁵¹ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1986; reprinted in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵² Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 38.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

simultaneously, the acceptance of the post-Enlightenment epistemology in which they are rooted (i.e., differing formulations of the problematic established in a common thematic) results in an “inherent contradictoriness in nationalist thinking.”⁵⁶ Yet, he cautions against a reading of nationalist texts as wholesale derivations of the colonial thematic, emphasising equally the active selectivity, innovation, and contestation involved in nationalist resistance, which thereby produces a new discourse that is more than simply the inversion of the problematic and the unconscious espousal of the same thematic assumptions.⁵⁷ When read in conjunction with Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism, this framework assists greatly in understanding the inconsistencies often evident within the utterances of counter-colonial forces.

Chatterjee’s work is notable in this context not only for his expansion of theoretical knowledge, but also for his engagement of nineteenth-century ‘neo-Vedānta’ figures and movements, including Vivekananda’s own guru. Chatterjee’s 1993 article, “A Religion of Urban Domesticity: Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Class,”⁵⁸ is particularly significant for its critical engagement of Ramakrishna from (to borrow Mrinalini Sinha’s pertinent phrase) a ‘densely historicised context’.⁵⁹ In this paper, Chatterjee gives detailed consideration to the ways in which the appeal of Ramakrishna’s teaching among members of an important sector of Bengali society—that from which Vivekananda himself hailed—was strengthened by the anxieties and aspirations fostered by the

⁵⁵ See *ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 41-2.

⁵⁸ Partha Chatterjee, “A Religion of Urban Domesticity: Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Class” in *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. P. Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40-68.

⁵⁹ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Studies in Imperialism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 7.

colonial predicament. (The same material, in modified form, appears as a chapter of Chatterjee's 1993 text, *The Nation and Its Fragments*.)⁶⁰ Chatterjee's notion of reading the educated Bengali middle-class position as one paradoxically characterised by "the subalternity of an elite"⁶¹ is a useful one for situating Vivekananda with respect to colonialism. Further, this work, originating from a leading postcolonial scholar, marks an important milestone in the recognition of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition as worthy of academic study from a perspective informed by a critical reading of colonial power dynamics.

Whereas the focus of Chatterjee's work is predominantly nationalism, a variety of scholars have applied the techniques of postcolonial theorists to other dimensions of Indian society and culture. By so doing, they have provided further insights into the complex interplay of forces and ideas within the late-nineteenth-century Indian environs (in which Vivekananda was born and raised, and lived most of his adult life), as well as in the British metropolis and, to a lesser extent, its cultural offshoot, the United States (where a large share of Vivekananda's travels, experiences, writings, and discourses took place). As we shall see throughout this thesis, valuable work has been done with respect to deconstructing imperial assertions regarding such phenomena as race, caste, and gender in the colonial Indian setting.

Interestingly, while postcolonial scholars on the whole have not given a particularly prominent place to religion in their studies, this situation is gradually changing as more scholars of religion, particularly those who specialise in religions of Indian origin,

⁶⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993; reprinted in *Chatterjee Omnibus*), chap. 3: "The Nationalist Elite," 35-75.

⁶¹ Chatterjee, "A Religion of Urban Domesticity," 42.

become conversant with postcolonial perspectives. To some extent, this delay may be a corollary of the particular disciplinary origins of this body of theory—researchers in literature, history, and gender studies have been, to employ a marketing analogy, among its ‘early adopters’, whereas religionists appear to figure among the ‘late majority’. Yet, the relative disregard for an important human phenomenon like religion by central postcolonial theorists like Said, Bhabha, and Spivak also prompts one to question whether this ‘post-’ approach to the study of human phenomena has not, ironically, carried forward something of the very same modernist *episteme* which has long contributed to the marginalisation of the study of religion within the ‘secular’ academy. Arguably, seeking a balance between a respect for sincerely held beliefs and a critical deconstructionist reading of the ubiquitous nature of power dynamics is one of the key challenges facing scholars of religion who seek to bring postcolonial methodologies to bear upon their subject matter.

Be this as it may, there is no doubt that, in recent years, the amount of material being published by those who identify themselves principally as scholars of religion but who employ methodologies which may be readily identified as postcolonial has increased dramatically (though still lagging behind many of religious studies’ sibling disciplines in the humanities). Researchers such as Ronald Inden,⁶² Charles Hallisey,⁶³ S. N. Balagangadhara, Peter van der Veer,⁶⁴ and Brian K. Pennington⁶⁵ have begun to carve a

⁶² Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

⁶³ Charles Hallisey, “Roads taken and not taken in the study of Theravada Buddhism,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, ed. Donald Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 31-62; discussed in Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘the Mystic East’* (London: Routledge, 1999), 148-50.

⁶⁴ Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

definite place for postcolonial scholarship with respect to the academic study of the religions of India.

One such individual—whose work provided the original impetus for this thesis—is Richard King, a religion scholar currently at Vanderbilt University, who specialises in the study of Indian religious and philosophical traditions. His recent work has increasingly engaged material from a perspective rooted in the critical study of colonial and Orientalist discourses. In particular, his lucid and thorough monograph, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* (1999), tackles at length the discursive representation of Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly within the context of the academic study of religion.⁶⁵ Though perhaps less pioneering than the preceding scholars in terms of unique theoretical contributions per se, King puts postcolonial methodologies to fruitful use in considering the ways that the interrelated constructs 'religion' and 'mysticism' have been shaped by a network of culturally bound discourses and vested interests, and have, in turn, influenced the modern forms and representations of Indian religions. King draws upon the work of an extensive collection of postcolonial theorists, as well as some Indologists and religionists—including several of those mentioned above—whose research in recent decades has increasingly brought into question long-established 'truths' about the religions of India, and interweaves their perspectives into a cogent narrative of the academic construction of these traditions. King's work is laudable for the consideration he gives to the role played by adherents of

⁶⁵ Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶⁶ Although the reaction of fellow scholars to King's book has been largely positive, King has responded to the points made by various critics in a detailed 2002 article. See Richard King, "Response to Reviews of *Orientalism and Religion*," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 14 (2002): 279-92.

these traditions in helping to shape and articulate their evolving forms, contributions which were themselves informed by the expectations and constraints of Orientalist constructions. As a result, *Orientalism and Religion* establishes that Indian religions in the modern era can only be properly understood when approached as the product of “a confluence of interests”⁶⁷ within the setting of an intercultural dialectical process.

In the course of *Orientalism and Religion*, King devotes some consideration specifically to the role of Vivekananda within the modern formulation of ‘Hinduism’, emphasising the importance of his teaching in the ‘Vedānticisation’ of Hindu traditions in the minds of both Western observers and Hindus themselves. In particular, King stresses that the presentation of Vedānta as a universalistic philosophy, by Vivekananda and other neo-Vedāntins of the same and later periods, constitutes something of a ‘reverse-colonialism’, in that it attempts to advance an Advaita-based essentialist reading of Hinduism and of other religions in place of the existing Eurocentric hierarchy.⁶⁸ King’s perspective, in this regard, elucidates Vivekananda’s discursive transformation of Hinduism, and suggests something of the extent and significance of the swami’s engagement of Orientalist ideas—a central component of this thesis.

The work of the above-mentioned scholars, taken together, has provided what I consider to be some of the basic theoretical and methodological outlines for the research presented herein. Though there is a large collection of other scholars whose work has had a significant influence upon the approach and/or conclusions of this thesis, most derive the basis of their own critical perspectives from some combination of the theorists

⁶⁷ King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 132.

⁶⁸ See King, *Orientalism and Religion*, chap. 6: “‘Mystic Hinduism’: Vedānta and the Politics of Representation,” 118-42.

discussed above. Further, the contributions of many are relatively specific to a particular subject area addressed within this composition, and thus it will be most appropriate to discuss these points in such places as they become relevant to the text.

Vivekananda's Life and Thought: Sources and Research

Although, as mentioned, Vivekananda (and/or his teacher, Ramakrishna) do find some mention in the work of a few of the major scholarly figures cited above, more extensive and focused research and writing on Vivekananda himself is of crucial importance to a scholar seeking to engage the swami's thought in a thorough and meaningful fashion.

In terms of resources relating specifically to Vivekananda, there are three principal areas that are of relevance to this study: (1) Vivekananda's own work; (2) biographical materials; and (3) other secondary literature, especially critical studies.

Vivekananda's Work

The 'primary texts' upon which this study is based are to be found in the body of Vivekananda's collected writings, speeches, letters, interviews and other miscellaneous documents. This material is both extensive and problematical, suffering from a number of weaknesses, at least as far as a scholar thereof is concerned. Firstly, not all of 'Vivekananda's' works, in their existent form, are fully Vivekananda's own. Many—perhaps most—are at least in part the product of other hands, shaped by stenographers, interviewers, editors, publishers, and others. The most extensive compilation of Vivekananda's work has been collected and published posthumously by the Ramakrishna

Mission, in the form of *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*.⁶⁹ Despite some shortcomings, this collection is by far the most inclusive collection of his work (though not, in the literal sense, ‘complete’), and the most basic source for any study of Vivekananda’s thought and ideas.

The *Complete Works*, in its most recent and expanded English-language edition, issued in 1997, totals nine volumes—close to five thousand pages—and contains all varieties of material produced by Vivekananda, including the text of his published books, transcribed lectures, extensive personal correspondence, and poetry. Also provided are accounts of published and unpublished interviews and personal discussions with Vivekananda, lengthy excerpts from the work of his disciple, Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble), and collections of American, European, and Indian newspaper reports on the swami, his lectures, and his activities.

Unfortunately, Vivekananda’s *Complete Works* presents difficulties to the researcher in several respects. As it has been published by the religious organisation that Vivekananda himself founded and which unequivocally acknowledges its allegiance to him and his teachings, it is legitimate that there be some concern about editorial objectivity (not that any work, of course, may be truly labelled ‘objective’). Indeed, there are some portions of Vivekananda’s ‘known’ works, particularly letters, which have been excluded from his *Complete Works* for unexplained reasons (though issues of Vivekananda’s public ‘respectability’ are hypothesised).⁷⁰ As well, many of the manuscripts of his written speeches, classes and conversations have been drafted by

⁶⁹ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Volumes I – VIII, Mayavati Memorial Edition (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1989); Volume IX (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1997).

other, sometimes anonymous, writers (usually his own lay disciples), often from their own notes. Even where the preserved material is more complete, because the original manuscripts of many of the lectures and other materials are not easily available, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which the texts may have been subject to subsequent editing. Further, the publisher has regrettably been quite lax in appending to the materials in the *Complete Works* essential information on the circumstances of each document's composition/presentation, even where this is now definitely known; in many cases, these data need to be gleaned from secondary research studies.

In contrast, one factor that makes Vivekananda's work relatively accessible to the non-Indian scholar is that the majority was originally produced in English. Most of his preserved discourses—not only the ones delivered in America and England, but also many of those given in South Asia, particularly in the southern regions where he lacked competence in the local languages—were delivered in Vivekananda's much-lauded, eloquent English; many of his writings were intended for an English-speaking readership or English-medium periodicals; and a large proportion of his letters were addressed to his disciples and friends in the West, or to non-Bengali-speaking persons in various parts of India.⁷¹ Certainly, the higher proportion of reliably recorded English lectures is due in large part to the work of Vivekananda's hired stenographer, as well as the classroom format of much of his instruction to his students in America and England, which facilitated note-taking. For his Bengali and Hindi lectures, there is no evidence of a

⁷⁰ Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya, *Swami Vivekananda in India: A Corrective Biography* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 225-7.

⁷¹ Four major Bengali works of varying length by Vivekananda have also been preserved; these, however, are unfortunately accessible to me only through the English translations (included in the *Complete Works*) and secondary interpretations thereof. They have been utilised in these forms for this work, where relevant.

recorder of comparable quality and knowledge, although some Indian newspaper articles offer what appear to be reasonable accounts, or at least summaries, of selected public discourses.⁷²

Among the most-dependable sources we have for Vivekananda's own perspectives are the books and other writings that he authored, especially those published during his own lifetime. Although these are, in most cases, originally based upon notes and transcripts of his public lectures and private classes, they have been substantially edited, usually by Vivekananda himself, with the aid of any of several close Western disciples.⁷³ His initial publications appeared in pamphlet form, brought out by the Vedanta Society of New York, based on selected public lectures that he had delivered in America. Some of his work was also published in the Indian journal that his followers in Madras had begun under his direction, the *Brahmavadin* (later to become the *Vedanta Kesari*). As the rising level of public interest seemed to warrant further material, more-substantial books—again based upon his American and British lectures as well as his personal dictation to his assistants—were published.⁷⁴ As Vivekananda himself gave his consent to the

⁷² Aside from the selections from many newspaper articles reprinted in the *Complete Works*, a valuable source is *Swami Vivekananda in Contemporary Indian News (1893-1902): With Sri Ramakrishna and the Mission*, vol. 1 (other volumes forthcoming), ed. Sankari Prasad Basu (Gol Park, Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1997).

⁷³ The details concerning the circumstances of these works' composition and editing have been gleaned from references throughout Burke's six volumes, described below.

⁷⁴ *Raja-Yoga* (New York: July 1895; London: July 1896); *Karma-Yoga* (New York: February 1896; a substantially enlarged version, New York, 1901); *Bhakti-Yoga* (two dissimilar editions; one published in London, mid-1896; another in Madras, September of the same year); and *Jnana-Yoga* (an early 'pamphlet' version was published in New York, 1896; variants came out in Madras, 1897, and Calcutta, 1902; another New York edition was issued in 1902, differing greatly from the first.) In 1907, the Vedanta Society of New York posthumously published *Jnana-Yoga – part II* (published in 1908 in Calcutta under the title *The Science and Philosophy of Religion*). Vivekananda had also helped Edward Sturdy considerably with the latter's book, *Narada Sutra, An Inquiry into Love*, a translation of and commentary on *Nārada's Bhaktisūtras*; published in London in April 1896. (This information has been compiled primarily from scattered mentions of the books and their publication throughout Burke.)

publication of most of these works, it seems safe to assume that he felt them to be in accord with his views, even if portions of the editing were done by other hands.

From December 1895 until the latter part of 1897, during which time a professional British-born stenographer, J. J. Goodwin, accompanied the swami as a personal assistant, even travelling with him to India, we have a number of reliable transcriptions of Vivekananda's public discourses. In other cases, particularly his private class sessions, there are collections of fragmentary notes taken by American and British devotees. Thankfully, in some instances these have been published in the *Complete Works* in their original 'disjointed' form, rather than reconstructed through guesswork into deceptively trustworthy accounts; in others, however, we are not so fortunate, and it is not always clear just how much interpolation has been incorporated into the final document. For these reasons, this study, while not completely excluding these reconstructed speeches, draws more heavily upon the more fully and professionally transcribed lectures where possible. (This also accounts in part for this thesis' moderate bias towards using materials composed for Western audiences.) Of course, this does not completely eliminate the problem of inaccuracies and misinterpretations, especially given the 'culture gap' between Vivekananda and most of his audiences in America and England, not excluding Goodwin; the possibility of such errors and distortions must always be borne in mind. In the case of this thesis, wherever feasible, multiple compositions within the *Complete Works* have been consulted to ascertain the accuracy of specific views and ideas, even where only single sources are cited in the notes.

Of more-variable reliability are the many preserved newspaper reports of Vivekananda's speeches, particularly during his early days in America and upon his first

return to India. Though technically second-hand sources, many purport to accurately present at least a summary of Vivekananda's own words. When comparing newspaper reports of lectures of which we also possess better-quality transcribed accounts, however, it becomes obvious that the former documents, particularly those published by North American and European papers, are frequently peppered with reporters' misunderstandings (again, often obviously the result of unfamiliarity with Indian religions, cultures, and languages), and sometimes contain outright factual errors. For this reason, except where deemed absolutely necessary, I have avoided relying upon these sources.

The sizeable collection of Vivekananda's preserved correspondence reveals much about his views. This is particularly true with respect to matters concerning 'sensitive' cultural or personal issues that he was loath to address publicly. However, as noted above, the letters that appear in his *Complete Works* have, in some cases, been edited by the publisher to remove certain portions. Other Vivekananda researchers, however, have gained access to some of these unpublished letters/portions, and included them in their analyses.⁷⁵ Though rarely a fruitful source of systematic philosophical expositions, material gleaned from Vivekananda's correspondence has been utilised for this study where the information contained therein is considered relevant, especially as an aid to distinguishing his frank personal views from his sometimes-tactical public positions.

The other material published within the *Complete Works*, including records of a number of interviews, transcribed recollections of personal conversations, and excerpts from others' work, are obviously of varying reliability, according to the circumstances of

⁷⁵ Both Burke and Chattopadhyaya have done so, in the sources mentioned in this chapter.

their collection, transcription, and, in some cases, translation. As in the case of fragmentary lecture notes, these have been utilised only when superior sources for a particular point are not forthcoming, or when the particular audience (e.g., a personal acquaintance in India, as opposed to a public group in the West) obviously contributed to the expression of a different set of ideas or views on Vivekananda's part.

Biographies

The biographical material available on Vivekananda—and there is a considerable body thereof—can be evaluated based upon a number of factors. For the sake of our study, it is the matters of accuracy, comprehensiveness, relevance of content, and position of the author with respect to the subject that most concern us.

There is no single, comprehensive source that could be described as firsthand in its account, meticulous in its attention to historical accuracy, and dispassionate in its author's approach or intent—though a number of works do, more or less, meet two of these three criteria. The earliest biographical material on Vivekananda is almost exclusively the work of those who openly identified themselves as 'followers' of the swami, in one sense or another. A reasonable concern with these sources is the extent to which the author's reverence and/or agenda may impinge upon the impartiality and reliability of his or her work's content. However, we must not forget that this is potentially true also of major biographical writings on other historical personages, be they religious figures or not, and should not be considered a bar to their scholarly use, but merely a recommendation to exercise a vigilance when assessing and utilising their contents.

Considering biographical sources devoted specifically to Vivekananda himself,⁷⁶ one of the earliest and most extensive is *The Life of Swami Vivekananda: By his Eastern and Western Disciples*.⁷⁷ First published in 1912 by the Ramakrishna Math's Advaita Ashrama, this important text has been repeatedly revised and expanded as new historical material has been made available through the agency of many researchers; an (updated) sixth edition was released in 1989. While still bearing the imprint of the authors' and publisher's fidelity and affection for their subject—the book's acclamatory language

⁷⁶ Of the available early sources devoted to biographising Vivekananda's guru, Ramakrishna, several do prove fruitful resources for the study of Vivekananda as well. The book that has become the central text of the Ramakrishna Movement, Mahendranath Gupta's multi-volume Bengali tome, *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Kathāmṛta*, known to English readers through Swami Nikhilananda's 'official' (i.e., Ramakrishna Math and Mission endorsed-and-distributed) English translation, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, is one source of information on the earlier part of Vivekananda's life. The material contains references to aspects of his character, his utterances, and various events involving Vivekananda—then bearing his pre-monastic name, Narendranath Datta—during the years he spent in contact with Ramakrishna. Although the information on the future Vivekananda contained therein is scattered and not extensive, it has been drawn upon by all later biographers of Vivekananda, as the text is regarded within the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition to be among the more reliable and authentic sources of material. The *Gospel* is also valuable for the insight it provides into Ramakrishna himself, one of Vivekananda's most-powerful influences. One drawback of the English translation, however, is that it excludes certain portions of the original text, supposedly for reasons of 'propriety'; the translation itself also tones down some of Ramakrishna's more-'ribald' statements. Jeffrey J. Kripal has examined some of these alternations in detail in his controversial monograph, *Kālī's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). More extensive biographical data on Vivekananda is to be found in a text composed by another of Ramakrishna's immediate disciples. Swami Saradananda's *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Lilāprasāṅga*, published in 1920, and known in English as *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master* (trans. by Swami Jagadananda), or, in its more-recent re-translation, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play* (trans. Swami Chetanananda, published by the Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2002). This lengthy treatise, which is the most-complete early source of biographical information on Ramakrishna, devotes several chapters specifically to incidents involving Vivekananda. In particular, the book focuses upon the time of Narendra's first meeting with Ramakrishna until the latter's demise, but with some references to events in Narendra's life predating this period as well. The highly devotional tone of the work, as well as the author's frequent use of unnamed sources, make the *Lilāprasāṅga* something other than a dispassionate academic tome; as well, the long transcriptions of dialogues, apparently reconstructed by the author from memory (as in the case of the *Kathāmṛta*), make the accuracy of many passages somewhat suspect. However, the intimate and long-standing relationship between the author and Vivekananda, Saradananda's first-hand experience with many of the events in the latter's life, and the writer's close and trustworthy acquaintance with many of the other individuals who contributed their recollections to the work, do mitigate these faults to some extent. The text reveals much about the impact of Ramakrishna upon the youthful Narendra's evolving spiritual ideas and ideals, granted, through the lens of Ramakrishna's followers. The book's contents have also formed one of the bases for many later studies of Vivekananda's life.

⁷⁷ *The Life of Swami Vivekananda: By His Eastern and Western Disciples*. 6th ed. 2 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1979).

reveals this clearly—the writing is nevertheless not completely hagiographical in tone; indeed, the expressed intent of its (anonymous) editor(s) is to “keep within the bounds of legitimate biographical treatment.”⁷⁸ The text is not, as the title might suggest, an anthology of discrete accounts, but rather is a synthesised presentation of material from a huge variety of sources in English, Bengali, and Hindi, out of which an extremely detailed chronological account of Vivekananda’s life, travels, and work has been crafted. While the book does incorporate a bibliography, the text is minimally footnoted and the original sources of included information are not always easy to ascertain. As well, the synthetic nature of the text means that contradictory views have, in many cases, surely been lost in the creation of a single, coherent narrative. Nevertheless, the two-volume work stands as one of the most substantial comprehensive biographical texts on Vivekananda, and employs a large collection of resources that are not easily available to researchers today.

Another important, but somewhat lesser-known text is the large, two-volume work by historian S. N. Dhar, *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda*, published in 1975-76.⁷⁹ This book brings together material from multiple biographical sources, has been written with a distinct consciousness of the conventions of academic historiography, and steers clear of excessively idealising its subject. Like the anonymous authors of *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, Dhar has utilised a wide range of sources, English and Bengali, and is much more thorough with respect to citations. Although his work and *The Life* both draw upon a similar body of biographical materials, Dhar has made substantial

⁷⁸ Ibid., vol. 1, Preface, ix.

⁷⁹ Sailendra Nath Dhar, *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda* (Madras: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, vol. 1, 1975; vol. 2, 1976).

use of this latter source himself, introducing an additional degree of separation between portions of the source-material and his readership. Despite this, Dhar's work is a competent, historically contextualised, and extremely detailed biographical text, and thus of great value to scholars. This book is among the central resources used for the construction of the biographical sketch that appears in this thesis.

These 'comprehensive' biographies aside, several more-delimited studies are among the 'essential' sources on Vivekananda's life. The enormous six-volume work *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (revised and expanded edition, 1992), now published by Advaita Ashrama,⁸⁰ is the product of extensive archival research by historian Marie Louise Burke, and contains an unparalleled body of details on Vivekananda's American and European travels, talks, and activities. The scholastic merit of Burke's work is widely acknowledged; her research has been extensively consulted by Dhar for his study, utilised in the most-recent revisions of *The Life*, and drawn upon by virtually all present-day writers on Vivekananda. This work has served as an important source of contextual data on the swami's 'Western' discourses and writings.⁸¹

Complementary to the above writings are two critical studies authored by Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya, *Swami Vivekananda in the West* (1994) and *Swami Vivekananda in*

⁸⁰ Burke's project began as a single book, *Swami Vivekananda in America: New Discoveries*, published in 1958, followed by a second, *Swami Vivekananda, His Second Visit to the West: New Discoveries*, published in 1973, both by the Vedanta Society of Northern California, where Burke lived a monastic life, under the *sannyāsa-nāma* Sister Gargi, as a follower of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition until her death in 2004. These books were subsequently revised by the author, combined with her later work, and published in a six-volume form in 1983. The most-recent edition, revised and enlarged by Burke, was published in 1992 by the Ramakrishna Math's Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta.

⁸¹ Some further details of Vivekananda's time in the United States have been filled in by Asim Chaudhuri, in his monograph, *Swami Vivekananda in Chicago: New Findings* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000).

India: A Corrective Biography (1999).⁸² As the title of the second discloses, Chattopadhyaya's work attempts a critical rereading of the available biographical writings, and also seeks the inclusion of source material neglected—or rejected—by Vivekananda's 'official' biographers. One of the few significant biographical works on Vivekananda not published under the auspices of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission or its affiliates,⁸³ the book takes a much more openly critical look at Vivekananda's life than do most other sources. Though the earlier of his two works forms something of a parallel to Burke's—in fact, he himself has critiqued Burke's work in detail, contesting the veracity of many factual statements therein⁸⁴—Chattopadhyaya's texts are oriented towards deconstructing hagiographic representations of his subject; he maintains, not without reason, that “the otherwise good, detailed biographies contain a lot of misinformation, tendentious statements, apologetics and plain lies.”⁸⁵ Chattopadhyaya focuses upon a number of the myths that have arisen around selected events in Vivekananda's life, and does not hesitate to examine Vivekananda's own active role in the construction of his public image. While not without its faults—Chattopadhyaya becomes, at times, somewhat overly speculative beyond the scope of his facts, and is regrettably given to sliding into disparaging language periodically—his work is well supported by scholarly apparatuses and provide a much-needed counterbalance to the

⁸² *Swami Vivekananda in the West* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 1994); *Swami Vivekananda in India: A Corrective Biography* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999).

⁸³ Though the publisher of Dhar's work, the Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, is also not formally affiliated with the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, its allegiance to Vivekananda is nevertheless clear.

⁸⁴ For an example, see Chattopadhyaya, *SV in India*, 326-31.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Preface, vii.

overtly reverent studies by many other Vivekananda biographers. I have therefore used Chattopadhyaya's critical assessments fairly extensively, though selectively.⁸⁶

Other Secondary Literature

The body of existent literature on Vivekananda, even excluding sources that are principally biographical, is extensive and wide-ranging, covering everything from reverential tributes to sophisticated academic critiques.⁸⁷

Of particular significance for this thesis is the critical academic literature that has begun to appear in recent years, as Vivekananda's relevance to the study of modern

⁸⁶ There are a significant number of other biographies of Vivekananda available, by authors both Indian and Western, but few that merit especial attention for our purposes. One of the best-known works, *Vivekananda: A Biography*, by Ramakrishna Order monk Swami Nikhilananda (first published in 1953; revised edition issued in 1984), is basically a condensation of other biographical works, written principally for Ramakrishna-Vivekananda devotees and casual inquirers. French author Romain Rolland's *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel* (1928; English trans. published 1931), is a highly verbose attempt to do likewise, specifically for a Western audience. Vivekananda's two brothers, Mahendranath and Bhupendranath Datta, also authored biographical works on their elder sibling; Mahendranath published several Bengali works, including *Svāmi Bibekānander Bālyajībanī* (1366 Bengali Era) and *Śrīmāt Bibekānanda Svāmijir Jībaner Ghaṭanābāli* (1367 B.E.); his brother, a social scientist, penned *Swami Vivekananda, Patriot Prophet: A Study* (1954). Mahendranath's works, unfortunately, are available only in their Bengali originals, and Bhupendranath's book is not highly regarded by most writers on Vivekananda, with the author's strong socialist agenda detracting from the contents (see Chattopadhyaya, *SV in India*, 319-22); all of these sources have been critically utilised by Dhar, however, as deemed appropriate. Except for scattered references to Vivekananda in works by a few other individuals who knew him first-hand, there is little other original material available, aside from the documents that have already been incorporated into the texts referred to above. (Margaret Noble's recollections, as mentioned, have been included within the most-recent edition of the *Complete Works* as "Excerpts from Sister Nivedita's Book: *Notes of Some Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda*," vol. 9, 334-96.) Another biographical resource is the multi-volume Bengali treatise, *Svāmi Bibekānanda O Samākalin Bhāratbarṣa*, by Shankari Prasad Basu (Calcutta: Mandal Book House; 6th ed. published in 1992). Unfortunately, a full translation of this material does not exist. A portion of Basu's source materials have been made available by the author in English (see S. P. Basu, *SV in Indian Newspapers*). However, the contents of the original volumes have been drawn upon by a number of writers and scholars conversant with the Bengali sources on Vivekananda; their work, in turn, has been utilised for the present study.

⁸⁷ A large number of works on Vivekananda, produced by the Ramakrishna Math and those working under its auspices, are widely available. Most of this writing is of minimal relevance to this study, generally being quite devotional/hagiographical in tone and content. Other writers, both Indian and Western, often working outside of a scholastic setting, have produced an array of studies on various aspects of Vivekananda's thought, including a number of works that might be termed 'quasi-academic' in their approach, written by authors who blend research with visible personal agendas. V. K. Arora's *The Social and Political Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda* (1968), Amiya Kumar Mazumdar's *Understanding Vivekananda*

Hinduism has become increasingly apparent. Oxford historian Tapan Raychaudhuri has devoted a lengthy chapter to Vivekananda's life and thought in his superb 1988 monograph *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal*,⁸⁸ positioning him alongside two other prominent Bengali thinkers, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. One of the earliest systematic studies of Vivekananda that seriously engages his relation to the colonial context, Raychaudhuri's work prefigures some more-recent literature, exploring Vivekananda's perspectives on European thought and practice, with attention to the dynamic ideological environment of nineteenth-century urban Calcutta. Focusing specifically upon the engagement and evaluation of Western concepts and ideas by Vivekananda, Raychaudhuri utilises oft-neglected Bengali-language sources to present his subject as the product of a powerful East-West encounter who yet remained an active agent in his own right. The author continues this line of discussion in his article, "Swami Vivekananda's Construction of Hinduism,"⁸⁹ the lead essay in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, a collection of papers edited by William Radice, which had its genesis in a 1993 seminar on Vivekananda held at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. This essay is significant for Raychaudhuri's identification and concise exposition of a number of central, unifying themes in Vivekananda's wide-ranging religious thought, but perhaps most importantly for the author's conclusion that, "the Hindu revival... was at best peripheral and for the most part

(1972), and S. C. Sen Gupta's *Swami Vivekananda and Indian Nationalism* (1984) are among the widely recognised texts of this latter genre. Of varying quality and tone, few are significant for our purposes.

⁸⁸ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

antagonistic to Vivekananda's concerns."⁹⁰ Vivekananda's long-dichotomised portrayal, bifurcated along geopolitical lines (in India, a fervent Hindu nationalist; in America/Europe, a messenger of India's 'age-old' spirituality), has led to differing emphases among various scholars. Raychaudhuri, for his part, critiques the popular Indian construction of Vivekananda as a 'neo-Hindu' nationalist reformer, arguing that the swami's education-based social-reform plans were rooted in his Vedānta-based universalist religious convictions that placed him at odds with the politicised attitudes and approaches of his revivalist contemporaries.⁹¹ Raychaudhuri's sympathetic-yet-critical perspective is undergirded by an understanding of Vivekananda as "a pragmatist inspired by a certain idealism,"⁹² a man whose religious convictions were not beholden to 'worldly' concerns, yet were not expressed in isolation from considerations of the same. Raychaudhuri's efforts to deconstruct the mythologised construction of Vivekananda as a fervent political nationalist are valuable, and his willingness to take seriously his subject's professed religiosity is praiseworthy; however, one of the few drawbacks to his work is that he appears to somewhat underrate the impact that Vivekananda's own middle-class origins and colonial education had upon his ideas, even if the swami at times vocally expressed a distaste towards what he perceived as the uncritical Anglophilia and pretentious behaviour of English-educated *bhadralok* society.

A different perspective may be encountered in Amiya P. Sen's blend of biography and critical study of Vivekananda's life and thought work, entitled, unassumingly, *Swami*

⁸⁹ Tapan Raychaudhuri, "Swami Vivekananda's Construction of Hinduism," in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice, SOAS Studies on South Asia (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1-16.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

Vivekananda (2000),⁹³ as well as his earlier text, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal 1872-1905* (1993),⁹⁴ which also grants some attention to the swami's position. Sen's work, though perhaps slightly less theoretically incisive than Raychaudhuri's (possibly due in part to the biographical nature of Sen's latter study), emphasises more the disjunctions between Vivekananda's expressed views in differing contexts, and strives to elucidate the wide array of influences that contributed to the ongoing permutations in his perspective throughout his adult life. One of the principal differences between Sen's work and that of Raychaudhuri, however, lies in the framing of Vivekananda by the former as a willing and active partaker in the Hindu reformist outlook, if not its specific campaigns per se;⁹⁵ while I believe that Raychaudhuri's contestation of this position is ultimately the more convincing of the two stances, neither should be read as wholly exclusive of the other, nor should we unproblematically accept Raychaudhuri's assessment of Sen as being uncritical of the Hindu nationalists' situation of Vivekananda as "one of their own."⁹⁶ Overall, Sen's work offers systematic and wide-ranging insight into Vivekananda's character and ideas, its biographical structure effectively emphasising the chronological evolution thereof.

As proficient as these two authors are in terms of bringing a consciousness of the colonial predicament to the examination of Vivekananda, their study is surpassed in depth of analysis and richness of contextualisation by one recently authored by Shamita

⁹² Ibid., 10.

⁹³ Amiya P. Sen, *Swami Vivekananda* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁹⁴ Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal 1872-1905: Some Essays in Interpretation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁹⁵ For Sen's perspective, see Sen, *Swami Vivekananda*, chap. 7, 93-103.

⁹⁶ Raychaudhuri, "SV's Construction of Hinduism," 1. Sen's perspective, however, does not appear fully in accordance with Raychaudhuri's assessment thereof, referenced in his review article on Shamita Basu's

Basu, a scholar of political science at Calcutta University. Her book, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal* (2002),⁹⁷ is the first critical academic monograph addressing Vivekananda's discourse at length from a decidedly postcolonial perspective. Her position as a scholar of political science and her intensive focus on nationalist themes perhaps predictably gives the work a different tone and scope than the studies authored by Raychaudhuri and Sen, but it would be simplistic to assert that her conclusions contradict theirs for these reasons, though each does stake out unique and incommensurate ground in this regard.

Crucially, rather than focus upon the question of Vivekananda's 'nationalist' intentions or lack thereof, Basu places her emphasis upon the role of Vivekananda's discourse in reconciling the growing division between conservative Hindus and their modernisation-minded compatriots, situating his neo-Vedāntic version of Hinduism as a site of unification between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. In this respect, her work bears similarities in approach to Chatterjee's study of Ramakrishna; in both cases, the authors have addressed the ability of these individuals' perspectives to speak to a particular cluster of needs fostered by the dynamics of nineteenth-century colonial Bengali society, yet have avoided treating the convictions of their subjects in a reductionistic manner. (However, Sen has criticised Basu's work for what he alleges is her insufficient expertise in the study of religion and, consequently, her failure to cognise a few finer, debatable

text; see Amiya P. Sen, review of *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse*, by Shamita Basu, in *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40 (no. 1, 2003): 122.

⁹⁷ Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

points of Hindu traditions⁹⁸—an evaluation which seems, in my view, to arise from an overly fastidious reading of Basu’s text.) By no means, however, does Basu attenuate her interrogation of the political significance embedded within Vivekananda’s views; indeed, she explicitly aligns her project with the deconstructionist notion of searching for the concealed text that, in Foucault’s words, “runs between and sometimes collides with” the articulated utterances of any discourse.⁹⁹ Meticulously researched, using an extensive collection of Bengali-language sources not widely known to present-day scholars, Basu’s study reaches beyond Raychaudhuri’s triadic contextualisation in *Europe Reconsidered* to provide an unparalleled exposition of Vivekananda’s ‘situatedness’ within a network of competing voices and discourses in a society facing the stress of rapid changes impelled by colonial pressures and intercultural encounters. Although her book grants little attention—by design—to Vivekananda’s work and aspirations in the United States and Britain, Basu’s *Religious Revivalism* is of fundamental importance to understanding the religious, historical, and political context of the swami’s efforts in India. Ideally, it should be read in concert with the work of Sen and Raychaudhuri to obtain a thoroughly holistic perspective on Vivekananda.

Engaging Vivekananda: Approach and Organisation

The foregoing discussion of sources should, hopefully, give the reader a general sense of the directions that research on Vivekananda has assumed in recent years. While less-theoretically sophisticated works—particularly studies aimed at a ‘popular’ audience—often try to pin down, in true post-Enlightenment fashion, the ‘essence’ of

⁹⁸ Sen, review of *Religious Revivalism*, 123-4.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Basu, 7.

Vivekananda, a few scholars have sought to tackle the complexities of Vivekananda's thought from a perspective informed by postcolonial insights, with generally fruitful results.

However, many aspects of Vivekananda's thought still invite critical engagement. As the differences of opinion between Raychaudhuri, Sen, and Basu suggest, the swami's huge corpus of work invites a plurality of responses regarding the proper location of Vivekananda with respect to the discourses of modernity, as well as his place relative to the efforts of his reformation-minded Hindu contemporaries. In particular, there remains a need to seek out and clarify the connections and affiliations between the various subject areas that he addressed in his wide-ranging talks and writings, to explore the role that colonial discourses played in formation and expression of his ideas, and to investigate the intersection of these discourses within a thematic characteristic of European modernity. It is with an aim towards achieving an improved understanding of these dimensions of Vivekananda's relationship with colonialism that I have undertaken the research presented in this thesis.

Admittedly, when any two selections of his work are evaluated in tandem, Vivekananda can seem almost capricious in his approach, even to the very same subject.¹⁰⁰ However, these disparities and disunities should not prompt a dismissal of his texts as 'inconsistent', but rather should invite us, as critical readers, to seek the underlying reasons for his compositions' variegated appearance. No doubt, the changes that occurred in his perspective through time and experience were, in certain cases at least, consequential (for example, as we shall encounter in Chapter Six, his views on

ideal feminine gender roles underwent a gradual-but-significant shift). More notably, though, was the effect that considerations of audience had on his choices of approach, content, and rhetorical strategy, particularly between public lectures in America/Britain and those he delivered in India. His presentations, often substantially and deftly modified to suit each audience, mark out what we might term ‘radical contextualisation’ as a favourite pedagogical tool of his.

The ‘inconsistencies’ often attributed to him become even more explicable when considered in the light of his Advaitic convictions of the ‘relativistic’ nature of mundane truths, and, more specifically, his professed adherence to his guru’s dictum *jato mat tato path*: ‘There are as many paths as there are faiths’. For Vivekananda, his own conclusions regarding the various innate temperaments of human beings were formulated into a fourfold schema corresponding with what he identifies as the four ‘Yogas’ of Hinduism, or the four approaches to religion, which, as we shall see in Chapter Three, he posits to be universal: *karma-yoga* (the path of work), *bhakti-yoga* (the path of devotion), *rāja-yoga* (the path of mysticism) and *jñāna-yoga* (the path of philosophical inquiry).¹⁰¹ Depending on the topic, the audience, and even his own disposition at a given time, he readily opts to situate himself as a representative of one or another of these psycho-spiritual orientations, and his work reflects the varied perspectives thereof. The enunciative conditions (spatiotemporally, culturally, politically, and otherwise) of Vivekananda’s individual writings and talks therefore need to be borne in mind when attempting a critical analysis.

¹⁰⁰ Sen is among those who observes this pattern in Vivekananda’s work; see Sen, *Swami Vivekananda*, 1-2; 101-3.

¹⁰¹ See “The Ideal of a Universal Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 375-96.

Having already outlined above some of the principal theoretical perspectives and existing studies upon which I draw for the research presented in this thesis, I wish to be a little more explicit in methodologically situating my own work. I approach this study, to borrow a concept from Edward Said, primarily as an *affiliative* project. That is to say, I shall not be focusing not upon Vivekananda's work in derivative relationship (filiation) to networks of Indian and Western texts per se—though some attention will be devoted to these sources where deemed especially relevant; rather, I am interested in approaching Vivekananda's expressed ideas from the perspective of their affiliations with a broad network of social forces and discourses on religion, culture, politics, society and other fields of knowledge, particularly to the extent that these are intertwined with colonial themes and their associated imperial formations. To this end, I further invoke Said's work for the useful concept of *contrapuntal reading*, a phrase he has coined to denote the method of approaching literature as a site of encounters with colonial themes, which can be unearthed through a critical and 'discursively aware' consideration of the text. In this case, however, it is not the works of the English literary canon (as Said explores), but those utterances produced by a colonially situated religious figure to which I aim to apply this analytic strategy, though the fundamentals remain much the same—in both cases, the efforts are predicated on the assumption that all writing (and, in this case, oratory as well) is shaped by the position of its author and the circumstances of its enunciation with respect to the broader cultural and political forces at work in the societal context(s) of the period. By approaching the subject in this manner, I do not wish in any way to diminish the importance and value of Vivekananda's work as *spiritual text*, its primary nature and function for the greater part of its popular readership. I have tried to maintain something

of a stance of *epoché* with respect to the validity of Vivekananda's religious positions as such, though recognising the illusory nature of any claim to complete objectivity.

However, the particular form and manner in which these convictions came to be articulated—the rhetoric employed, the choices of language and phrasing, and especially the appropriation, transformation and strategic deployment of the discourses of colonialism and Orientalist thought—are the real subjects of interest for the scholar attempting to understand and situate Vivekananda in the discursive context of empire.

I am mindful of the objections voiced within some quarters to the application of so-called 'Western theory'—that is, the body of theoretical approaches, especially post-structural and/or feminist varieties, developed by those working within American/European academia—to 'non-Western' societies, cultures, and literatures. Spivak, for her part, has critiqued this objection, and admonished those who would advocate the application of a mere 'information-retrieval' approach to these sources, in lieu of theoretically informed analysis.¹⁰² She maintains that the judicious use of critical theory with respect to 'Third World' (con-)texts will, in turn, gradually reshape and expand the boundaries of these methodologies themselves—a position which I share. I further follow Spivak's lead in identifying myself as a *bricoleur*, employing the available tools as I find them appropriate and useful, with less emphasis upon—though not ignorance of—methodological consistency.¹⁰³ I take seriously her advice and cautions for the academic interpreter of colonial and postcolonial texts, and seek to adhere to a median ground between reductionistic readings of culturally 'other' texts (as purely informed by nationalistic and ethnical dynamics, for example), and, on the other hand, an

¹⁰² Spivak's perspectives on the role and duties of the scholar are discussed in Childs and Williams, 167.

extreme interpretive position that regards all compositions in isolation, as purely the product of individual motives and goals.

I have attempted to structure this thesis in such a way that its subdivisions address a broad selection—though by no means all, or even most—of the important themes of colonial discourse as they have come into play specifically within the Indian context and with especial attention to the subjects addressed by Vivekananda himself. For this reason, a few of the selections—particularly, the choice to structure a chapter around caste, rather than the more-usual sociological category, of class—diverge somewhat from what might be expected from a study seeking to interrogate colonial discourse in a holistic fashion. I believe that the result of such selections has been to bring to the fore a collection of particularly useful, context-sensitive ‘lenses’ through which to approach Vivekananda’s work.

Chapter Two of this thesis provides a short outline of the socio-historical circumstances into which Vivekananda was born, as well as a relatively detailed biographical sketch. I am strongly of the conviction that in order to understand a person’s ideas in a meaningful way, it is necessary to know something of the environs and experiences in and through which they were fostered. This is all the more true, I maintain, when approaching a subject like this one, as colonial discourses interpellate the colonised subject from the very outset, pervasively acting upon the construction of the individual’s self-consciousness long before any awareness of the process can be cognised.¹⁰⁴ In considering Vivekananda’s early life, particular attention is given to his encounters with

¹⁰³ See *ibid.*, 157.

¹⁰⁴ This fact was famously observed by Louis Althusser in his writings on subject-formation. See L. Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984).

those persons, institutions, cultural/literary works, and philosophies that were active agents in the conveyance and promotion of colonial ideology in the Indian setting. With respect to the years following his initial journey to America, the emphasis is upon some of the significant figures and events of his travels, and the contributions that these persons and experiences made towards Vivekananda's engagement of the colonial mentality. Material for this chapter has been critically gleaned primarily from the writings discussed in the 'Biographies' section, above.

Chapter Three seeks to elucidate Vivekananda's engagement of 'religion' as a concept and those religious categories—particularly 'Hinduism' and 'Vedānta'—with which he aligns his teachings. I have, however, integrated into this portion of the text discussions of a number of themes and ideas—including the rhetoric of rationality, notions of cultural degeneration, and conceptions of time—relevant not only to comprehending the colonial representation of religion but to the elucidation of colonial discourse as a whole (hence, this chapter's exceptional length). At the outset, I explore the ways in which Western discourses have participated in the construction of 'religion' and related concepts, and how their deployment privileges established European worldviews, be they religious or secular, over those of the exotified 'other'. Further, I introduce the idea that resistance was often offered to these representations by Hindus themselves, especially via the appropriation and strategic use thereof to contest the authority asserted by the West. To these ends, I draw upon a growing body of critical literature on the construction of religion and the particular manifestation of its allied discourses within nineteenth-century India; King's research, mentioned above, along with a number of other excellent studies by scholars of religion, are among these sources. The

second part of the chapter considers Vivekananda's response to these discourses, addressing, among other topics, his views on religion's nature, origins and development; his construction of a unified and 'Vedānticised' Hinduism that sought accordance with 'science' and 'reason'; his reworking of Western ethical hierarchies; and his contention that Advaita Vedānta can serve as a superior site of inter-religious reconciliation. In each case, careful consideration is given to the ways in which Vivekananda accepts, challenges, or modifies Orientalist/colonial themes within then-prevalent discourses, and the consequences for his presentation of Hinduism and his situation of himself as a hermeneutic authority.

The fourth chapter addresses the paired themes of 'nation' and nationalism in nineteenth-century Indian discourses generally and, specifically, in Vivekananda's writings and lectures (with a special emphasis upon those composed/delivered in India following his return from the West). Looking at the ways in which essentialist constructions have been utilised in India to foster the widespread perception of a unified, self-sufficient, pre-colonially existent Indian nation gives us some context for understanding Vivekananda's own drive to nurture a sense of 'nationhood' among Indians (primarily, but not exclusively, among Hindus). As in the preceding chapter, questions of definition, essentialism, inclusion/exclusion, power, and authority all need to be addressed; the theoretical and applied studies of Bhabha, Chatterjee, and Basu are among the sources particularly relevant to these questions in the context of this section's subject matter. I consider Vivekananda's ostensible 'nationalism' from multiple perspectives, including the representation of the nation as a historical, symbolic, and

political entity, and Vivekananda's appeal to religious themes in his constructions of India.

The next chapter takes up the consideration of another significant construct in nineteenth-century discourses, that of 'race'. Looking at the imperial employment of racial rhetoric, particularly with respect to the concept of Aryanism and its acquired value and authority within the Indian context, I consider Vivekananda's engagement of the same, examining the aspects of prevailing Western theories that he accepts, those he rejects, and the adaptations he makes to existing Eurocentric perspectives to recast the Indian subject's position within the colonial racial hierarchy. By problematising the relation between inherited and acquired qualities, as well as blurring the line between racial and cultural categories, the swami seeks to create a site that combines the discursive power of race with his own set of religious and nationalistic views. Tony Ballantyne's work on the genesis and role of racial constructions, with his emphasis on the interconnections between Britain's colonial efforts and Indologists' Aryan-invasion theories, is particularly instructive in this respect, as is Thomas R. Metcalf's study of the ideological underpinnings of imperial practice in India.

In Chapter Six, the focus is shifted to the notion of 'caste' and its use by both Orientalist scholars and colonial administrators as a method of ordering the diverse social reality that was encountered in the Indian setting. An imperative concern for Vivekananda's contemporaries, perhaps no other issue so much as the 'caste question' challenged Vivekananda's ability to negotiate between differing factions within the then-shifting Indian social milieu. Further, it was a topic that called into question the swami's own authority as an interpreter of Hinduism and thus was necessarily a matter of

judicious treatment by Vivekananda. In addition to relevant pieces of research by Ballantyne, Metcalf, and Inden on caste in the colonial setting, Susan Bayly has undertaken a focused study on the engagement of caste-discourses by nineteenth-century Hindu thinkers (including Vivekananda), and Amitabha Mukherjee has specifically addressed some dimensions of the role of caste in the swami's thought; together, these sources offer a basis for a constructive and contextualised critique of Vivekananda and his perspectives on caste.

The seventh chapter brings into the discussion the role of gender in Vivekananda's discourse. To this end, I draw upon Mrinalini Sinha's writing on the colonial construction of Bengali male 'effeminacy', Anne McClintock's important work on the mutually constitutive nature of race and gender, and the research of a variety of other feminist/womanist scholars, including Sangeeta Ray, Bharati Ray, and Revathi Krishnaswamy, who interrogate the imperial dimension of gendered discourses in the Indian context. I consider how representations of men and women have been complicit with colonial endeavours, including the implications of the same for Western imperial objectives and their importance in Indian counter-colonial discourses. The themes of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality all play significant parts in Vivekananda's discourse, and the swami's texts are laden with both implicit and explicit 'gendered' perspectives not merely with respect to the regulation of sex roles and sexuality per se, but also on matters of religion, nation, and ethnicity. In particular, his divergent portrayals of American and Indian women, as well as his use of sex-specific language with respect to India itself, provide glimpses into the imbrication of gender and nation in turn-of-the-century Indian discourses.

The final chapter offers some concluding thoughts, and addresses the relevance of the preceding topical discussions for situating Vivekananda with respect to colonial and Orientalist discourses in a holistic fashion.

Some Problematical Terms

There are a number of pieces of terminology not yet discussed that require some pre-emptive clarification. A particularly important set of terms employed throughout this thesis is the pairing *East/West*—or, in Saidian phrasing, *Orient/Occident*. These are problematical terms, on account of their long history as reificatory signifiers within the sphere of Orientalist discourse, and, for the same reason, are indispensable elements of a critique thereof. As their capitalisation suggests, their terrain is not so much geographic, but ideological.¹⁰⁵ As Said and those who have followed his lines of inquiry have emphasised, both ‘the Orient’ (or ‘the East’) and ‘the Occident’ (or ‘the West’) are constructs that seek to divide and essentialise the globe and its denizens so as to make the ‘other’ more amenable to management and control. In a somewhat-imprecise way, these terms act as markers for conceptual sites and invoke the particular set of discursive traditions that have shaped them—a constellation of meanings which I try to communicate through my own critical inclusion of them in this paper. For example, in referring to late-nineteenth-century scientific conceptualisations of race, I label them ‘Western’, even when employed in an Indian geographical context, inasmuch as they are rooted in a European tradition of thought and praxis. The precision implied by a strictly

¹⁰⁵ Todd Kontje has articulated this distinction especially well: “Because Orientalism has more to do with Western ideology than Eastern geography, the actual location of ‘the Orient’ matters less than the consistency of a certain Orientalizing discourse.” Todd Kontje, *German Orientalisms* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 12.

geographical or national label would be, in such a case, misleading, as a variety of ‘Western hemispheric’ (most often Western European and/or non-indigenous North American) discursive traditions have contributed to their formulation. (In instances where specificity is acceptable or necessary, I have used ‘British’, ‘American’, ‘German’, etc., as appropriate.) It is important to be aware, however, that the application of the term ‘Western’ (or ‘Occidental’) to a particular set of ideas is not to suggest an absence of involvement by extra-European agents in the development thereof; certainly, as will be evident, the concepts around which the chapters of this thesis are structured—religion, nation, race, caste, and gender—have all been shaped through interactions between multiple societies, particularly imperial powers and their colonial possessions.

The terms ‘East’/‘Eastern’ are employed more sparingly, at least in their capacity as geo-cultural identifiers, given that the subject’s context generally makes more-specific references—to (British) India, to (pre-partition) Bengal, or to (urban) Calcutta—practicable. I have utilised ‘Eastern’ principally when the discourse under study also does so; that is, as a rough equivalent for ‘Oriental’, inclusive of the multiple layers of signification embodied by that term—the explication of which is among the principal tasks of colonial discourse analysis.

Another term which is unavoidable when discussing the interplay of discourses within a colonial setting is *tradition*. All too often left unproblematised, ‘tradition’ is a thorny word, for its usage is frequently highly politicised and intentionally vague. The observations of anthropologist Emma Tarlo are instructive in this respect:

The process by which we categorise things as ‘traditional’ and ‘old-fashioned’ is the process by which the ‘stuff of the past’ is divided into the categories of relevant and irrelevant. The ‘traditional’ is that stuff of the past (real or imagined) that we consider

relevant to our present and our future, while the ‘old-fashioned’ is that stuff of the past which we dismiss as irrelevant to our contemporary life. Thus while the term ‘old-fashioned’ is used to invalidate the relevance of things of the past to the present, the term ‘traditional’ is often used to legitimise things of the present by reference to the past. Designating things as ‘traditional’ is therefore a means of implying their authenticity and justifying their continued existence.¹⁰⁶

Further complicating matters, ‘tradition’, within the context of colonial/Orientalist discourses and their characteristic pattern of binary opposition, often carries an implicit negative connotation, positioned as the inferior-opposite of ‘modernity’, and therefore associated with primitiveness, irrationality, and stagnation. For this reason, I have avoided employing ‘tradition’ as a blanket term for conventions of past eras, using it only to denote specific lines of thought/praxis (e.g., “the Advaitic traditions”).

With respect to other important conceptual constructs, such as religion, nation, race, and caste, I have striven to clarify these in the contexts in which they occur. In the case of ‘gender’, I am following the conventions of feminist/gender studies, in which the term is explicitly applied to matters of socio-cultural identity, rather than biological sex differences, with a particular stress on the construction of related concepts (such as masculinity and femininity).

In all of these cases, of course, there is a certain obfuscatory dimension of language that is never fully avoidable. As we shall see, however, Vivekananda himself was often able to use this very semantic ambiguity to his advantage.

A Note on Language, Spelling, and Transliteration

For the spelling of Sanskrit terms throughout this paper, I adhere to the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST), the widely acknowledged

¹⁰⁶ Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (London: Hurst & Co., 1996), 317.

academic standard for transliteration. Words of Indian origin, excluding proper names and certain pieces of terminology, have been italicised throughout the text.

Acknowledging that there is some disagreement among scholars as to whether the spelling of Indian words, when used in the context of Bengali speakers, should be Sanskritised (e.g., ‘Vedānta’) or given an alternate rendering which reflects the distinctive Bengali pronunciation thereof (‘Bedānto’), I have generally opted for the former, out of convention as well as for the sake of simplicity, familiarity, and consistency. (Exceptions are to be found with respect to several specifically *bāṅglā* words and expressions, whose spellings more closely approximate conventional Bengali pronunciation.) Proper names of nineteenth-century figures have been rendered without diacritical marks, for similar reasons, and in the forms and spellings most frequently encountered in academic literature. I have maintained authors’ original spellings and capitalisation within quoted passages; however, the reader should be aware that the editors of Vivekananda’s *Complete Works* will have, in some cases, made their own changes to the spellings used in the earlier/original publications of the swami’s writings and talks.

CHAPTER TWO

VIVEKANANDA: HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Vivekananda's India

The India of Narendranath Datta's birth, in 1863, was a land into which colonialism, both as a political fact and an ideological perspective, had already penetrated deeply. It was more than a century after British interests had first begun their guileful quest for control over the subcontinent. What had begun as an attempt to earn revenue for magnates in the metropole, also possessed, from the outset, a profoundly political agenda. Indeed, as Britain's economic acquisition from India was thought to directly depend upon the political stability of India, definite colonial interests soon intervened, seeking to implement a programme of development, especially with respect to transportation, communications, and education, which would be conducive to British priorities and governance.

With the establishment of the Raj, the dominion of the British over the greater part of India (with boundaries now defined by foreign interests), and the rightness and lawfulness of their claim, were firmly entrenched, at least so far as the denizens of Europe were concerned. The 1858 Government of India Act made official the transfer of the British East India Company's powers, rights and responsibilities to the Crown; this included full control over India's government, finances, military and courts, and

manifested itself through a complex bureaucracy at the national, regional, and local levels which, while it engaged a great many Indians in posts of 'government service', nevertheless barred the indigenous population from positions of real power.

The details of the political situation, however, are of lesser concern for our study of Vivekananda than is the profound impact that Western concepts and ideas—especially those that acted as vehicles for imperialistic themes and rhetoric—had upon Indians, and the Bengali intelligentsia in particular. (It need hardly be mentioned that the Indians referred to here were, with few exceptions, male. Though the impact of colonial power relations upon Indian women was significant, their active participation in the public sphere and engagement with its discourses was much more limited.) Despite the official British policy of non-interference with social, cultural and (especially) religious practices—a move calculated to reduce indigenous resistance to foreign rule¹—it would be naïve to disavow the desire of the rulers to inculcate new values and ideas in the ruled in a variety of ways and for a variety of ends. Indeed, postcolonial scholars today universally hold that the intention of colonial powers has inevitably been the domination of the terrain of the 'other' in spheres extending far beyond the geo-political. In this case, the Indian socio-cultural territory into which Britain's imperial hands reached was extensive; there was nary an aspect of India's life which remained truly untouched, be that contact directly through British control and regulation, or indirectly via the pervasive institutions whose influence far transcended their apparent boundaries. Even without taking into consideration direct physical coercion per se (upon which the Raj certainly

¹Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 21-22.

did depend), colonial India was heavily impacted by pervasive, subtler forms of epistemic violence.

Among the most important institutions for the instillation of colonial values was the British-managed educational system, aimed at the cultivation of, in Governor-General William Bentinck's words, "a middle class of native gentlemen,"² who would act in complicity with the metropole's aims, making India an obedient and profitable satellite in the British Empire. This was, at least in the beginning, an effective tool for inculcating Protestant Christian values, Western patterns of thinking, and colonial hierarchies into the (thereby-produced) 'cultured' native elite. Ranajit Guha has described the situation:

Did [colonial Indian] education have nothing other than intellectual exertion and advancement of knowledge for its content? ... Although colonialism and the many-sided thrust of liberal politics made it out to be so, there was more to education than that. It stood not only for enlightenment but also authority—a fact which it has been the function of ideology in all its forms, including historiography, to hide from the educators and the educated alike.³

This hegemony was exercised through the education of Indians in (sanitised) Western history, politics, religion and philosophy. In colonial historiography, for example, the British were portrayed as an emancipatory agent liberating Indians from despotic Islamic rule—"a lesson in power," states Guha, "meant to educate the colonized to interpret the past not in terms of their own interests, but those of the colonizers... a servant's education."⁴ Postcolonial scholar Gauri Viswanathan has examined how the British-instituted curriculum of English literary studies was calculated to instil in its pupils the lofty ideals of Western civilisation, while obscuring the oppressive, racist, sexist and

² Quoted in P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914* (London: Longman, 1993), 326.

³ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 166.

exploitative practices that characterised its colonialist stratagems, holding up the Englishman as the paradigm of Enlightened and progressive humanity.⁵ (This approach also allowed the British to strategically convey their 'English morals' without transgressing their own official position of religious non-interference.) 'The West', for the nineteenth-century urban middle-class educated Indian, was thus largely textual—a world constructed and known through books—to nearly the same extent, in fact, that 'the East', for the European of the day, was an entity to be found and experienced on paper rather than in actuality.

From the Indian side, the introduction of European cultural forms and ideas provoked a variety of responses. Some Indians—particularly in Calcutta, as well as in other major colonial urban centres—embraced the newly introduced perspectives with unbridled enthusiasm, and set about trying to transform themselves upon these lines. The privileged position which these so-called *bābūs* (roughly, 'gentlemen', but often imbued with strongly derisive overtones, as its common English spelling, 'baboo', intimates) were granted in the 'new' Indian society by its colonial administrators, combined with their exposure to, and assimilation of, European ideas and habits (in everything from language and dress to philosophy and literature), gave them something of an elite status in a society in which the majority of the population had little more than the most-rudimentary traditional-style education, if that. Members of this comprador class were the much-desired 'anglicised natives', contented and loyal to the British rulers and their aims—or at least so the colonisers hoped. This indigenous intelligentsia was, however,

⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵ See G. Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

equally subject to ridicule, and even fear, from English quarters, for its constituents' 'mimicry' of British habits, manners, and dress transgressed the fragile psychological boundaries between Indian and Briton.⁶

More common than a wholesale conversion to the ways of the West, especially towards the end of the nineteenth century, was the approach of those Indians, particularly in Bengal, who found their admiration of Western culture tempered by a deep respect for their own cultural traditions as well as varying degrees of concern over the foreign governance of India. Within this group was to be found a wide spectrum of positions towards the culture of the colonisers. Some, including 'reformers' like Rammohan Roy, sided with the British government's attempts to alter Indian social customs along the lines of Western practice, by, for example, prohibiting the performance of *satī* and eliminating 'child-marriage'. Others, often labelled by scholars as 'revivalists',⁷ resented these attempts by the Raj to interfere with long-established Indian practices, and raised defences on Hindu religio-cultural grounds.⁸ From these latter quarters came often-scathing criticisms of the Bengali *bābūs* and their westernised manners and aspirations, which were deemed inferior and even vile.⁹ Even more extreme—but very popular—were those, such as Krishnabihari Sen, who steadfastly maintained that Indian culture and

⁶ Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (London: Hurst & Co., 1996), 49-51.

⁷ The ascription of particular Indian figures to the categories of 'reformers' and 'revivalists' is often disputed by scholars; see, for example, Raychaudhuri's assertion of the inappropriateness of the label 'revivalist' for Vivekananda (Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered* [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988], 8-9).

⁸ It should be noted here that, although Muslims actually held a numerical edge over Hindus in Bengal during this period, it was Hindus who played many of the most prominent roles in the 'Bengal Renaissance', and whose influence is most relevant to our study of Vivekananda.

⁹ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Studies in Imperialism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 17-18.

religion held the key to all true knowledge, including advanced scientific discoveries, and that the West was, by contrast, a savage and inferior culture.¹⁰

In the religious sphere, Christian missionaries' attempts at converting Hindus, particularly those of the higher castes, were almost universally loathed; much more appealing to the majority of English-educated Hindus were the perspectives of European secular enlightenment philosophy.¹¹ The challenges imposed by the pervasive and persistent Christian presence, however, prompted Hindus to search within their own heritage, as well as the wellspring of newly encountered Western ideas, for self-confidence and intellectually satisfying responses to Christian criticisms. From these efforts came such reform movements as the Brahmo Samāj. However, this is not to say that these responses to Western critiques always overturned the evaluators' *criteria* of judgement. For this reason, Indian reformers were vehement in "affirm[ing] the truly monotheistic character of Hinduism and the symbolic nature of image worship"¹²—asserting, in effect, that they 'measured up' well to liberal, Western, Christian standards. In addition, the Theosophical movement, which valorised traditional Indian culture (such as Theosophy's European founders perceived it, at least) and located the source of all true spirituality in India, attracted great accolades from many Hindu circles.¹³ (Raychaudhari's thesis, that it was the pervasive sense of inadequacy among Hindus that accounted for this enthusiasm for any Western admiration of Indian religion and

¹⁰ See Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 9-10.

¹¹ van der Veer has explored the ways in which Indian anti-Christian sentiments, combined with an interest in Western rationalism, helped to bolster public interest in Vivekananda's form of 'spirituality'; see van der Veer, 72-4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 235.

¹³ See van der Veer, chap. 3: "The Spirits of the Age: Spiritualism and Political Radicalism," in *Imperial Encounters*, 55-82.

culture,¹⁴ seems plausible, given the systematic attempts by imperialist forces to instil in Hindus an attitude of shame in their traditions, and the disempowerment of Indians to real power under the colonial system.)

However, in the midst of all of this challenge and critique, long-established patterns of Hindu religiosity yet persisted in Bengal. Raychaudhuri notes that, even in the lives of the most-‘Europeanised’ Indians, “the cycle of rituals, worship of and reverence for the deities, belief in reincarnation and the miraculous, etc. remained an important part of domestic and religious life.”¹⁵ This is not to say, however, that the average middle-class Bengali of the day was well-read in the so-called ‘classical’ Hindu texts, such as the *Upaniṣads* or *Bhagavadgītā*—most likely, he or she was familiar with portions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Purāṇas*, and/or vernacular devotional writings, and knew something of the Christian Bible (as a result of the missionary-run schools), but would be unlikely to turn to the brāhmaṇical Sanskrit scriptures for spiritual solace. In particular, the Śākta traditions, with their emphasis on devotion to God in the form of ‘Mother’, especially as embodied in the figures of Durgā and Kālī, continued to be a central theme of Bengali Hindu religiosity. The influx of Victorian values, however, had made many ‘respectable’ Hindus question and shun elements of the Tāntric ideas and practices which had long maintained a subdued yet notable presence in Bengali religious life.¹⁶ All of these elements contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of dynamic tension between loyalty to the deeply rooted ‘traditional’ practices and the rejection of many of the same by the ‘neo-Hindu’ reformers. Many, especially the young educated elite, were left wondering

¹⁴ Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 234-5.

where to turn for genuine and meaningful religious succour. It was this environment that fostered the emergence and success of numerous new religious movements, spanning the spectrum from conservative to radical.

Although it was obvious to many Indians that the colonial government's approach to ruling their land imposed sometimes-insurmountable barriers to social, economic and political opportunities for 'natives', rarely prior to the final decades of the nineteenth century did 'nationalist' feelings in India actually take the form of advocating Indian independence, or even full Indian cultural hegemony. When they did, however, Hindu identity was often made the central rallying point, and Muslims, rather than the British, commonly became the target of the nationalists' historical distortions—attacking the prevailing colonial authority would be a politically ill-advised act. Comprehension, at least to some degree, of the oppressive effects of colonial rule, and admiration of the achievements of the Empire were not necessarily incompatible for many Indians during the first half of the nineteenth century, though the depth of the discrepancy became increasingly apparent with the passage of time. As Raychaudhuri indicates, the predominant approach among educated colonial subjects of the day was a *selective* adoption of elements from both the East and the West, according to the changing values and priorities of the various groups involved, in interaction with the specific and dynamic historical conditions.¹⁷ However, the elements adopted inevitably carried with them something of the values of their originators, and European cultural stereotypes embedded with assumptions of Western superiority were a part of the package. While particular

¹⁶ Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse: Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 139.

¹⁷ Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 4.

cultural preferences are not necessarily a direct product of power relationships, they are certainly informed by them, if not directly, then via the more-subtle psychological influence of colonial institutions and the dynamics of social dis/opportunity that they institute. (We shall consider the various manifestations of colonial power later in this thesis, as they become pertinent to the subject at hand.)

Thus, in mid-to-late nineteenth-century Bengal, we find a productive site of encounters between Indian traditions and colonial institutions, practices, ideas, and values. The characteristic themes of colonial discourse—the colonised as inferior, irrational, stagnant, restricted ‘other’, against which the coloniser’s self-representation as superior, rational, progressive, and autonomous gains all the more weight—were an often-unacknowledged yet ubiquitous presence in these sites of cultural interaction. It was into this world, in the capital of colonial rule in India, suffused with both overt and subtle British influences, that the future Swami Vivekananda was born.

*Vivekananda: A Biographical Sketch*¹⁸

Narendranath Datta was born on January 12, 1863, in the Simla district of Calcutta (now Kolkata), West Bengal. His family was relatively wealthy, cosmopolitan, and securely *bhadralok* in status; his father, Vishwanath, was an attorney¹⁹ with a successful law practice. Vishwanath Datta himself serves as an example of the Anglo-influenced

¹⁸ The biographical sources used have been discussed in the previous chapter. Where attribution of general information is not provided in footnotes, it has been gleaned from *The Life of Vivekananda: By His Eastern and Western Disciples*, 6th ed (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1986) and/or *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda* (Madras: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, 1975), by S. N. Dhar. The strengths and weaknesses of these particular sources have already been noted in Chapter One; wherever possible, additional sources have been used to verify material from these works.

¹⁹ Vishwanath worked as an articled clerk in the office of a British attorney for several years prior to passing the law examination in 1866, and eventually came to start his own firm. See Rajagopal

professional class resident in what was then the capital of British rule in India.

Belonging to the *kāyastha jāti* (whose position in the Hindu caste-hierarchy is disputed, as will be discussed later on), the Datta family was among those for whom ‘white-collar’ and professional work in close contact with the British administration had become practically an ancestral occupation.²⁰ Though strongly identifying with his Bengali culture and Hindu faith (his own father, Durgaprasad, after some years of marriage, had become a wandering *sādhu*), Vishwanath, like many other of his class, was also quite ‘at home’ in British Indian colonial society. His education and occupation brought him into intimate contact with persons and ideas of the European community in India, as well as members of many faiths, castes and classes. As a result, he was quite liberal in his views on social and religious matters. In particular, the time he spent working in Muslim areas of north-western India gave him a familiarity with, and appreciation for, Islamic culture. Consequently, he was well read in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu literature, in addition to his knowledge of Bengali, Hindi, Sanskrit, and English.²¹ Thus, as Raychaudhuri puts it, the home environment that Viswanath created could be characterised as “a mixture of Indo-Muslim and the new Indo-Anglican mores.”²²

Narendra’s mother, Bhuvaneshwari, who outlived her most-eminent son by nine years, seems to have lived much as did many other women of her class during that period. Her domestic life centred around managing the affairs of a large extended household—she herself gave birth to ten children—with little direct contact with the world outside of

Chattopadhyaya, *Swami Vivekananda in India: A Corrective Biography* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 10.

²⁰ Narendra’s great-grandfather, Rammohan, had been a managing clerk under an English attorney (Chattopadhyaya, 8).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

this realm. (The custom of *pardā*, or seclusion of women from public gaze and activities, though introduced into Indian society via the Muslim presence, had by this time long been an established part of upper-class Hindu society in Bengal.) The traditional biographical sources on Vivekananda paint Bhuvaneshwari as an especially pious woman—though, in all fairness, it should be noted that Indian texts rarely attribute anything but a highly devout nature to the mother of great personages. She is said to have spent much of her spare time, as did many women of her circumstances, performing her personal *pūjā*, keeping *vratas*, and studying popular traditional Hindu texts such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. Though not highly educated in the formal sense, she was considered very intelligent on account of her uncommon ability to memorise lengthy portions of devotional texts, a skill much valued within Indian society, and one which her son seems to have inherited.²³ She had also learnt English from a Christian missionary acquaintance, and thus it was from his own mother that Narendra received his earliest education in the language.²⁴

Narendra's family setting was therefore a stimulating blend of those very worlds which he would later move between and negotiate in his own life and work—the devotion-based religious and cultural life of Bengali Hindus and the ideological and social norms of Western civilisation, at least insomuch as the latter was selectively represented in colonial India. His early years saw him exposed to religious tales and teachings from not only his mother, but also his maternal grandmother and great-

²² Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 223.

²³ An incident has been related as follows: in later life, Vivekananda's disciple Sharatchandra Chakravarti posed him detailed questions on material from the first ten volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which Vivekananda claimed to have read. The Swami "display[ed] a vast amount of even technical knowledge, but in many instances he quoted the very language of the books!" (*Life of SV*, vol. 2, 634).

grandmother. (In fact, as an adult he expressed a great indebtedness to his mother for both his religious knowledge and his moral convictions.)²⁵ It is unlikely that he had much daily personal contact with his father during this period, given Vishwanath's extensive and frequent business travels (though his father did take care to see to his education in classical Indian music, one of the marks of a 'cultured' person in *bhadralok* society).²⁶ However, other members of the extended family as well as their educated associates had a great influence on the young Narendra, looking after his education in such matters as Bengali, Sanskrit, and the Hindu scriptures.

His formal schooling began with a brief stint in a traditional-style local *pāṭhaśālā* school; however, his family, alarmed with what they considered the unfavourable influence of some of his new classmates, quickly removed him and instead appointed a private tutor in their home for Narendra and some other boys of their family and close associates. From the preserved recollections of his family members, we are presented with a picture of a young child with a remarkable intellect, a prodigious memory, an innate sense of leadership—and also an intense restlessness, fearlessness, and spirit of independent thought which prompted him to challenge peers and elders alike.

At the age of eight, Narendra was enrolled in the prestigious Metropolitan Institution, the school founded by the eminent Bengali educator Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. Here he received a solid education in the English language, which became the medium for most of his public teaching in later years. He grew increasingly intellectual in his later childhood, and formally cultivated his skills in argumentation and

²⁴ Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 224.

²⁵ "The Women of India," *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (CW)*, vol. 9, 202-3.

²⁶ *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 21.

debate. He was privy to the scholarly conversations of his father and the latter's educated friends and associates, and is said to have impressed them with his own sharp reasoning. At sixteen, he joined the Presidency College, a government-run institution, of which most of the instructors were of British extraction.²⁷ After a period of malaria kept him from his studies, he joined the General Assembly's Institution (later Scottish Church College), where, under the tutelage of European professors, he obtained his Bachelor of Arts, becoming well versed in the disciplines of History, English, and Western Philosophy. There is little doubt that the education he received in these schools was thoroughly in accord with the colonial mindset that pervaded British-run schools in India. In particular, the use of English literary works (such as Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth) and European history texts (including Gibbon, ostensibly one of Narendra's personal favourites)²⁸ did much to subtly inculcate Western concepts and values, as well as colonial perspectives, in young Indian pupils.

In addition to his formal education, Narendra's curious mind prompted him to devote much time to independent study, especially of Western history and philosophy, though he also read extensively in Bengali literature and Indian civilisation (the latter often as seen through the lens of Western historians, however).²⁹ Philosopher Brajendranath Seal, a fellow student and close acquaintance of Narendra during this period, has chronicled the evolution of the latter's philosophical interests.³⁰ Narendra was deeply impacted by many of the central figures of Western philosophy—Plato, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Mill, and Spencer were among those whose writings he read and

²⁷ Chattopadhyaya, 29.

²⁸ Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 226.

²⁹ Vivekananda was especially a fan of James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1820) (see *ibid.*).

studied, by choice as well as by curriculum.³¹ He was especially interested, according to Seal, in theistic philosophy, for, while he was in many ways a staunch sceptic, he never seems to have actually declared himself an atheist. Seal's conclusion, based on his extended conversations with Narendra during that phase of his life, is that the latter seemed frustrated that even the best-reasoned arguments of the theistic Western philosophers lacked an experiential dimension and a concrete manifestation of the Reality they proposed.³²

In general, however, Narendra was fascinated by much of the thought that he encountered in European sources, be they philosophical, historical, literary, or scientific. Raychaudhuri asserts that his "profound delight" in Western ideas "was not diminished by the fact of subjection and the consequent psychological need to find faults,"³³ and this appears a credible position, certainly with respect to Narendra's adolescent attitudes. Indeed, until the end of his life, he retained an interest in European and American writings on a wide array of subjects, even where his views evolved in such a way as to differ from conventional Western positions. By any standards, Narendra, even in his youth, was a remarkably learned, inquisitive, and cosmopolitan person.

As his spiritual search intensified during his college years, and, in search of a variety of faith that accorded with his critical mind, he joined the Sādhāraṇ Brahmo Samāj. This organisation, an offshoot of the original Brahmo Samāj founded by Rammohan Roy, was known for its Christian-influenced Hindu monotheism, and its adherents argued for significant religio-social changes in Indian society, including the

³⁰ See *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 107-11, for a substantial extract from Seal's writing on Vivekananda.

³¹ See Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 229.

³² *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 107-11.

abolition of image worship and the caste system, the promotion of women's education, and the elimination of child marriage. In the Samāj, Narendra found a group of like-minded religious intellectuals, as well as a venue to express his musical talent through devotional singing at their gatherings. However, though at the time he expressed agreement with the Brahmo belief in a formless, personal God, and with the group's social-reform mandate, he seems to have been ultimately unsatisfied with the Samāj's religious dimension.³⁴ Vivekananda biographer Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya is of the opinion that Narendra's personal engagement with the religious doctrines of the Brahmo Samāj was not particularly strong, though he nevertheless admits, "there is no doubt that some of the more liberal ideas of Narendranath that went into the synthesis of Swami Vivekananda were acquired as a result of his association with the Samāj in his college days."³⁵

During the latter part of his youth, Narendra was also exposed to evangelical forms of Christianity, through his colleges and European professors, as well as via the vocal presence of Christian missionaries (and Indian converts) in Calcutta society at large. It is unlikely that his experiences, especially with respect to his personal encounters with members of the latter groups, were inclined to foster within him positive views of that faith. Narendra's brother, Mahendranath Datta, has related an incident in which Narendra's "heated discussion" with some Bengali Christian 'roadside preachers' who were abusing Hindu traditions turned into something of a melee.³⁶ While he was quick to defend Hinduism against the sort of wholesale criticism voiced by such evangelists,

³³ Raychaudhuri, 228.

³⁴ *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 60.

³⁵ Chattopadhyaya, 32.

however, there is little evidence concerning the views of Christianity itself that were held by Narendra during his youth, or to what extent he was aware of Western religious diversity, Christian *intra*-religious conflicts, or secular-religious clashes within European and American society.

It was also during his college years that Narendra encountered the individual who was to profoundly change the direction of his life, a man known as Ramakrishna, who lived on the grounds of a temple-complex in Dakshineswar, on the outskirts of Calcutta. In late 1881 or early 1882, Narendra joined some friends on a day-trip to the locale, to see for himself this person whom some of his associates (including his great-uncle, Ramchandra Datta, who was to become a close devotee of Ramakrishna) had begun to visit regularly.³⁷ In Ramakrishna, Narendra encountered aspects of Hinduism with which he had hitherto had little contact or experience. Unlike his mother's traditional and socially respectable forms of private devotion, or the reform-minded rational faith of his Brahmo companions, Ramakrishna practiced a religious path that was unique. Rooted in the oral traditions of his village upbringing, and moulded through his intense association with religious teachers and practitioners from many Hindu (as well as Muslim and Christian) sects, Ramakrishna's faith was at once conventional and radical. A pious *Śākta*

³⁶ Dhar, vol. 1, 64.

³⁷ Chattopadhyaya, 42. There is a story, much quoted by Vivekananda's biographers, that Narendra's first knowledge of his future *guru* reached him when the President of his college, Prof. William Hastie, mentioned in a class lecture that he had personally witnessed an example of the high state of mind referred to in Wordsworth's *Excursion* when he had visited Ramakrishna. This incident is not directly referred to by Vivekananda himself anywhere in the extant literature, however, and Hastie's influence is only indirectly and vaguely alluded to in a second-hand account by one of his Western disciples (Sister Nivedita, "Notes of Some Wanderings With the Swami Vivekananda: Chapter III: Morning Talks at Almora," *CW*, vol. 9, 350). Chattopadhyaya notes that the story may have come from Haramohan Mitra, a classmate of Narendra's, and implies, convincingly, that the authenticity is questionable (see Chattopadhyaya, 42).

devoted to God in the form of Kālī Bhavatāriṇī, the ‘Divine Mother’³⁸ of the Dakshineswar temple where he resided, he was also radically pluralistic in his approach to other faiths. Though he followed many of the vows of a Hindu monastic, including chastity (*brahmacharya*), he was married, and he dressed as a householder (albeit in simple ‘village’ style). Further, he rejected religious intellectualism and social reformation, preaching instead intense personal pursuit of God-realisation, and experimenting with Christian and Islamic spiritualities, as well as a wide range of Hindu paths. His frequent and sudden bouts of religious ecstasy, disregard for social propriety, and sometimes-risqué parables made him something of a curiosity to many of those in mainstream Bengali *bhadralok* culture. Nevertheless, Raychaudhuri sides with the view that the transitional character of Bengali society during that time, in which national sentiments were beginning to overshadow optimism towards British rule, led many to find “some solace in the mystical teachings of the saint and their implied message restoring confidence in the inherited system of religious belief,”³⁹ though he denies that this thesis would explain the full extent of Ramakrishna’s appeal.⁴⁰ Rather, he asserts, the “anguished spiritual yearning” experienced by many disenchanted youths of the day, combined with the traditional Hindu reverence for ‘holy men’, was an intense motive force in establishing Ramakrishna and some other contemporary idiosyncratic Hindu religious figures as authoritative and influential teachers.⁴¹

³⁸ More literally, ‘She of black hue, who saves (her devotees) from the realm of rebirth’. The English rendering ‘Divine Mother’ was used frequently by Vivekananda, to refer to any feminine form of the Deity.

³⁹ Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 231. See Swami Saradananda’s view that God incarnated himself as Ramakrishna to draw Western-influenced Indians back to the Hindu fold. (Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: the Great Master*, 5th ed., vol. 1 [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1978], chap. 1.)

⁴⁰ Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 236-8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 237. Partha Chatterjee argues that Ramakrishna’s religious discourse and its codification in the *Kathamrta* reveals much about the concerns and political situation of the Bengali middle class. See

Narendra himself, on their first meeting, was quite baffled by some of Ramakrishna's actions, particularly when he drew Narendra aside, and reportedly told the young man, while sobbing with joy: "I know, my lord, you are that ancient *Ṛṣi* Nara, a part of *Nārāyaṇa*, who has incarnated himself this time, to remove the miseries and sufferings of humanity."⁴² Nevertheless, Narendra was impressed by the unusual mystic, particularly by his confident affirmative answer to Narendra's query, "Have you seen God, sir?"⁴³ On subsequent visits, according to Vivekananda's own later accounts, Ramakrishna introduced Narendra to new spiritual experiences, and thereby challenged the latter's belief in some of the Brahmo tenets, such as the dispensability of a personal guru (he soon grew to regard Ramakrishna as his own religious teacher), the rejection of image worship (Ramakrishna himself was an ardent worshipper of *Kālī* in the form of the *Dakshineswar pratimā*), and the disavowal of the reality of divine *avatāras* (a status which Narendra eventually came to attribute to Ramakrishna himself). Even more significantly, Ramakrishna's experiential religion was a radical departure from the speculative European philosophers that Narendra had so searchingly studied.

While they differ on some of the details of the meetings between Narendra and Ramakrishna, Vivekananda's biographers are agreed that the latter's influence on shaping the spiritual perspective of his young disciple was unparalleled by other events in Vivekananda's life, before or after. In particular, Vivekananda later highlighted Ramakrishna's single-minded spiritual quest, religious broadmindedness, chastity, renunciation, and love for others as aspects of his personality that left a lasting impact

Chatterjee, "A Religion of Urban Domesticity: Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Class," in *Subaltern Studies VII*, ed. P. Chatterjee and G. Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40-68.

⁴² Saradananda, vol 2, 825. Saradananda asserts that this account was given to him by Narendra himself.

upon him.⁴⁴ In the midst of his college studies at the time of their first encounter, Narendra seems to have initially undergone a dramatic inner struggle between the ‘rational’ convictions instilled in him by his colonial education and the profound challenges that his guru, for whom he had the greatest love and respect, posed to these beliefs. Through Ramakrishna, he encountered many of the ideas and practices described in the Hindu brāhmaṇical and *tāntrika* texts in a living form, as it were—something that was novel in comparison to his previously ‘book-learned’ philosophical perspectives. Raychaudhuri is of the opinion that, in so doing, Narendra was really re-encountering and consciously accepting the faith and values of the more-conventional Hinduism that he had imbibed from his family during his early childhood.⁴⁵ Certainly, Ramakrishna’s own theistic devotional expression was more akin to the popular Hindu faith of Narendra’s early environs than it was to the more-Advaitic perspective that he came to articulate in later life.

An additional challenge for Narendra arose when his father passed away suddenly in early 1884, leaving behind Narendra’s mother and his several siblings, as well as substantial debts and a pending lawsuit that threw the family into a state of dire poverty. At the time, Narendra was studying law (which he had taken up at the behest of his father) while becoming more and more inwardly dedicated to a life of spiritual practice along the lines of Ramakrishna’s model; but he was now faced with the obligation of finding some means of support for his large and literally starving family. Narendra could find little more than intermittent teaching and office work, and was driven to despair. It

⁴³ *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 77.

⁴⁴ See “My Master”, *CW*, vol. 4, 154-87.

⁴⁵ Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 238.

was just at this time that he experienced, according to Swami Saradananda's

recollection of Narendra's own account, a profound revelation of sorts:

I suddenly felt as if within my mind many screens were raised one after another by some providential power, and I saw in the innermost recesses of my heart the solutions of the problems which so long had baffled my intellect and distracted my mind—problems such as 'Why are there malignant forces in the creation of a benign God?' and 'Where is the harmony between the stern justice and the infinite mercy of God'. I was beside myself with joy.⁴⁶

Not long after this, while on a visit to Ramakrishna, Narendra had another faith-changing experience. Having gone to the Kālī temple (at Ramakrishna's request—for Narendra was still an idol-rejecting Brahma Samājist of sorts) with the intention of praying for financial relief, he found himself instead lost in a state of religious ecstasy; Narendra came away with a profound conviction in the reality of God-as-Mother and in Her ability to manifest through an image.⁴⁷ This experience seems to have broken one of the few remaining barriers between Narendra's sceptical nature and Ramakrishna's unreserved faith in his beloved 'Divine Mother'.

Another conviction, which was to become a driving force behind Vivekananda's social-service agenda, is said to have been inspired by a comment made by Ramakrishna while in a state of *samādhi*, regarding serving persons as manifestations of God ("Śiva *jñāne jīva sevā*").⁴⁸ According to Saradananda's account, Narendra subsequently declared:

Ah, what a wonderful light have I got today from the Master's words! What a new and attractive Gospel have we received today through those words of his, wherein a synthesis has been effected of sweet devotion to the Lord with Vedantic knowledge,

⁴⁶ Saradananda, vol. 2, 926. The length of the passage that is attributed to Narendra suggests that Saradananda is paraphrasing based on memory, and so the accuracy of the details of the account are reasonably open to question.

⁴⁷ Dhar, vol. 1, 160-65.

⁴⁸ See Saradananda, vol. 2, 939.

which is generally regarded as dry, austere and lacking in sympathy with the sufferings of others.... But from what the Master in ecstasy said today, it is gathered that the Vedanta of the forest can be brought to human habitation, and that it can be applied in practice to the work-a-day world.... Thus serving the Jivas as Siva, he will have his heart purified and be convinced in a short time that he himself is also a part of God, the Bliss Absolute, the eternally pure, wakeful and free Being.... If the divine Lord ever grants me an opportunity, I'll proclaim everywhere in the world this wonderful truth I have heard today.⁴⁹

Chattopadhyaya has pointed out that this famous phrase, *Śiva jñāne jīva sevā*, does not appear anywhere in the voluminous *Kathāmṛta*, and sceptically posits that this attribution “was part of the effort [by Vivekananda and later disciples] to project the idea that Swami Vivekananda’s idea did originate in his Guru and was not his own innovation.”⁵⁰ (To be fair, however, as the *Kathāmṛta* contains only those dialogues heard directly by its author, Mahendranath Gupta, it is indeed possible that he may simply have not been present when these words were spoken by Ramakrishna. Saradananda’s account of Narendra’s reaction, apparently gleaned second-hand,⁵¹ does seem almost too anticipatory to be a fully faithful retelling of the young man’s original utterance, however.)

A new development for Narendra and Ramakrishna’s other close disciples came in 1885, when Ramakrishna became severely ill with a throat ailment, subsequently diagnosed as cancer. Narendra and some of the others performed the role of personal attendants up until Ramakrishna’s death in August 1886.⁵² The force of Narendra’s convictions, coupled with his innate sense of leadership and his other charismatic

⁴⁹ Ibid., 940.

⁵⁰ Chattopadhyaya, 69.

⁵¹ Saradananda, in his characteristic reluctance to acknowledge sources by name (many of whom were still living at the time of the book’s composition), refers to the incident being witnessed by “a friend of ours [who] came to Dakshineswar” (Saradananda, vol. 2, 939).

qualities, led him to become something of an unofficial head of the group of disciples during the final months of Ramakrishna's life. After Ramakrishna's passing, Narendra appears to have spearheaded efforts to keep the 'inner circle' of the young world-renouncing disciples together. Abandoning his law studies, he and some of the other young men banded together into an informal monastic community, dwelling in an old house situated in the Baranagar area, near Calcutta. Here Narendra and the others, taking a collective vow of *sannyāsa* and living in extreme poverty, devoted their time to meditation, religious austerities and worship. Narendra led them in the study and discussion of scriptures and philosophies, both Indian and Western.⁵³ This marked the emergence of Narendra's persona as a religious teacher, an identity that would characterise his later role in America and Europe.

During his time at Baranagar, Narendra began to travel on pilgrimages to various holy sites in northern and eastern India, as he felt befit a traditional 'wandering' Hindu monk. During the days of Ramakrishna's illness, he had already made a short pilgrimage to the Buddhist shrines at Bodh Gaya, and reports having been deeply impressed and moved by this experience.⁵⁴ On his subsequent travels, during which he assumed several different monastic names and subsisted on the generosity of donors in the manner of an itinerant *sādhu* (though often taking advantage of modern conveniences like the railway),⁵⁵ he met many religious teachers—renowned and obscure; Hindu, Muslim and Jain; great scholars and illiterate mystics. In particular, he spent much time in the

⁵² Chattopadhyaya interprets a reference in Abhedananda's account of the last days of Ramakrishna to suggest that Narendra's contribution to Ramakrishna's nursing was minimal, as he was still continuing his law studies during this period. See Chattopadhyaya, 71.

⁵³ *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 205-6.

⁵⁴ Dhar, vol. 1, 182-4.

company of Pavhari Baba, a renowned ascetic living in Ghazipur, with whom he studied Pātañjala-yoga.⁵⁶ Narendra was also presented with opportunities to preach to people from various walks of life regarding Hindu teachings and philosophy, and it appears that he garnered great respect and accolades for his skilful expositions and extensive knowledge and integration of Western and Eastern ideas, as well as his impressive command of English.⁵⁷

In July 1890, he made the decision to leave the Baranagar *math* to travel to the Himalayas, the great mythic land of spirituality in the Indian imagination, vowing not to return until he had gained full God-realisation—a plan which was soon thwarted due to illness.⁵⁸ For some months, he travelled with various brother-disciples, and then is reported to have made the resolution to live the life of a solitary monk.⁵⁹ His ‘solitariness’, however, was more ideal than fact. Although he often travelled alone, he spent much time in Rajasthan, not uncommonly among liberal-minded, socially prominent Hindus and Muslims, where he continued his religious and philosophical discussions and attracted a number of ‘disciples’ of sorts. Despite his own love for the study of Western ideas, his acquaintances at the time claim that he was becoming increasingly disenchanted with the disregard displayed by many Indians who had received an ‘English education’ for what he perceived to be the strengths of ‘tradition’.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ See Chattopadhyaya, 109-15, where the author has reconstructed in detail Narendra’s use of the railways during his pan-Indian ‘wanderings’.

⁵⁶ *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 228-36.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, chapters 14-19 *passim*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 258-9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁶⁰ For example, see *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 271-2. At the same time, however, the swami reportedly expressed much admiration of the technological advances overseas—especially modern methods of agriculture—which he perceived as having the capacity to assist India’s development (see *ibid.*, 274-5). The ‘nationalist’

Travelling throughout the Gujarat and Maharashtra regions, he found himself the guest of Indian *rājas*. (He allegedly claimed that by influencing a prince, who held sway over great masses, one could achieve greater results than by preaching directly to thousands of poor people⁶¹—a position which would indeed tally with his later nationalistic speeches, delivered most often before crowds composed principally of India's upper-class males.) He also kept up his personal studies of Sanskrit grammar and religious texts (though Chattopadhyaya is of the opinion that Narendra's early competence in Sanskrit has been overestimated by his other biographers).⁶² He became known for his broad-minded outlook, frankness, and general disregard for the conventions of caste, as well as his knowledge of Western science and pride in Indian moral and religious ideals (the "science of the Rishis,"⁶³ as he termed the latter). His seeming ability to discourse on literally any subject, from the Vedas, the Qur'an, or the teaching of the Buddha, to Western literature, music, art, history, and scientific theories, appears to have endeared him to even the most-learned persons he encountered, and this meant that he rarely lacked financial support for his journeys. He travelled through Goa, where he was struck by the widespread education among Goan Christians, in contrast to the disproportionate illiteracy of Indian Hindus.⁶⁴ He again spent much time as the honoured guest of royalty whilst in the areas now designated as Karnataka, Kerala, and

tone of the rhetoric attributed to him in this account, however, is somewhat suspect, for it seems at odds with the overall tone of his expressed and preserved thought during this period.

⁶¹ See Dhar, vol. 1, 320.

⁶² Chattopadhyaya, 90-1.

⁶³ Quoted in *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 364-5.

⁶⁴ Chattopadhyaya, 94.

Tamil Nadu. By December 1892, he reached the very southern tip of India, Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin).⁶⁵

The motivation behind Narendra's travels across India was likely manifold, though he was no doubt heavily influenced by something of an innate love of wandering and discovery. In addition, the responsibilities of overseeing his natal family and his fellow monks, as well as the financial deprivation in which his mother, siblings and co-disciples lived, no doubt made these trips 'away from home' even more attractive to Narendra. The biographers' assertions that, during his journeys, he was struck by the poverty and desperation of the masses, particularly the position of women and the lower castes, seems a fair one, though he had no doubt encountered this in Calcutta as well. Narendra, who by this time was most-often known by the moniker 'Swami Vivekananda', later related that it was during a period of meditation at Kanyakumari that he formulated his ideal of service in aid of the suffering as a form of spiritual practice.⁶⁶

However, as Chattopadhyaya observes, the romantic picture painted by Vivekananda's biographers of an unfettered *parivrājaka*, dwelling under trees and taking shelter with untouchables, is not entirely accurate. Much of the time during his Indian travels, he was the honoured guest of the wealthy and learned, and undertook the majority of his pilgrimage trips via train and horse-drawn carriage.⁶⁷ Regardless of his desire to

⁶⁵ See Chattopadhyaya's efforts to dispel the widely held myth that Vivekananda 'swam to the rock' off the Kanyakumari coast, convincingly arguing that this legend arose from a misinterpretation of a passage in Vivekananda's own account (Chattopadhyaya, 100-1).

⁶⁶ "Letters," *Complete Works*, vol. 6, 254.

⁶⁷ Chattopadhyaya has made an interesting study of Vivekananda's photos, where he observes that the original '*parivrājaka*' photo was taken in a studio, with a naturalistic background added latter by the publisher, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission (120-2). He asserts that Vivekananda, of his own initiative, "went to some studios since he *wanted* to preserve his wandering years through these portraits" (Chattopadhyaya, 121). Incidentally, these intentional pictorial representations of his own *parivrājaka* persona can be read as an interesting parallel text to the contemporaneous practice, on the part of young

emulate the wandering Hindu monks of yore, his frequently poor health limited the amount and degree of ‘austerities’ that his body could withstand, and most of his experiments with this lifestyle ended in acute bouts of illness, often serious. Although Vivekananda himself has made references to his spartan existence during his travels, Chattopadhyaya concludes that even then, his habits were, on the whole, more “epicurean” than ascetic.⁶⁸ (His own desire to portray his Indian travels in this prototypical fashion, however, speaks to the power and authority embodied in Hindu discourses of the world-renouncing ascetic, even in the modern colonial period.)

During his time in southern India, Vivekananda began to express a desire to visit “the West,”⁶⁹ though whether he had a particular location in mind at first is not clear. He seems, from the outset, to have had two somewhat-indistinct aims—firstly, to procure financial means and/or other material resources for his plans to uplift the Indian masses, and secondly, to bring his own exposition of Indian thought to the Western world, in order that false ideas about Indian culture and religion might be abolished and Euro-American civilisation might be improved through the influx of Indian wisdom.⁷⁰ Several knowledgeable persons had mentioned to him that Chicago was soon to host a ‘Parliament of Religions’, at which representatives of the world’s faith-traditions would come together in a public venue, and the young monk seems to have viewed this as an opportunity to pursue both of his goals simultaneously. As he began to make his intention known, he was offered money for his passage to America by some of his wealthy

British men, of submitting photos of themselves to ‘physical culture’ magazines in order to illustrate their fulfillment of the socio-cultural norms of imperial masculinity.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 124.

⁶⁹ For examples, see *ibid.*, 103, 106.

admirers (his self-proclaimed disciples also solicited money on his behalf),⁷¹ who arranged first-class steamer tickets for Vivekananda from Bombay (now Mumbai) to Japan, and Japan to Vancouver, Canada.

During the sea-journey, upon the ship's stops in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Singapore, China, and Japan, Vivekananda (he had now definitively settled upon this moniker) took the opportunity to explore a little of the religion and culture of these lands. In his writings, he emphasises with pride what he perceived to be the indebtedness of these cultures to Indian influences.⁷² However, he also contrasts the "industrious" Japanese with the Indian people, derisively branding the latter "a race of dotards... sitting down these hundreds of years with an ever-increasing load of crystallised superstition on [their] heads."⁷³

After a chilly journey across the Pacific, Vivekananda landed in Vancouver on July 25, 1893, and travelled by train across Canada to Winnipeg, and from there southward to Chicago.⁷⁴ Alone in a foreign land, he understandably seems to have been bewildered and overwhelmed at first. After a few days in Chicago, where he found, to his dismay, that he lacked the credentials necessary to attend the Parliament of Religions, he travelled to Boston for a less-expensive stay while he regrouped and reassessed his plans. Fortunately, on the train he met a prominent American 'society woman', author Kate Sanborn, who gave him lodging and his first introduction to upscale American society; through her connections he obtained letters of introduction to the Parliament organisers

⁷⁰ In different contexts during this time, Vivekananda purportedly expressed, variously, one or the other of these ideas. See *Life of SV*, vol. 1, chap. 20 passim.

⁷¹ *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 384.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 395-8.

⁷³ "Letters," *CW*, vol. 5, 10.

from an American professor, resulting in his acceptance as a delegate-speaker.⁷⁵

During Vivekananda's stay with the Sanborn family, it seems the latter made the most of the public attention that this 'exotic' guest attracted; as Marie Louise Burke writes, "Miss Sanborn delighted in showing off her 'Rajah', and, as Swamiji wrote resignedly, 'all this must be borne'."⁷⁶

As the Parliament's date approached, Sanborn provided Vivekananda with train-fare back to Chicago. However, upon arriving, he lost the address of the Parliament office, and spent a day and night without shelter, before he chanced to meet another woman, Mary Hale, who recognised by his unusual attire that he was a delegate of the Parliament.⁷⁷ She ensured that he found his way and was taken care of by the Parliament's organisers. (That Vivekananda's first positive experiences in the United States were a result of the concern and compassion of American women no doubt contributed to the glowing descriptions of them that he related to his Indian comrades through his correspondence.)⁷⁸

The Parliament of Religions, a novel undertaking for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, was intended by its organisers to showcase both the commonality and diversity of the world's faiths, as well as to "indicate the impregnable foundations of Theism" against the challenge of "materialistic philosophy."⁷⁹ Vivekananda joined dozens of other

⁷⁴ Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, vol. 1 (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1992), 16.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷⁸ For example, see the swami's 1893 letter to Haripada Mitra, *CW*, vol. 5, 25-7.

⁷⁹ Chattopadhyaya, 134-5.

delegates (including nineteen other South Asians)⁸⁰ in facing an audience of thousands, together with many great religious figures and some prominent members of American society. On the afternoon of September 11, the first day of the Parliament, the swami overcame his stage-fright (for, in all his travels in India, Vivekananda had always refused to give ‘public lectures’ as such) to deliver a short introductory speech on the universal spirit of Hinduism.⁸¹ The lecture created a lasting impression, and Vivekananda quickly became a recognised religious figure in local circles. However, as Chattopadhyaya’s research into reports and media stories on the Parliament demonstrates, several of the other Indian participants, including at least two Brahmo Samājists, appear to have initially received more attention and praise in both the American and Indian press than did Vivekananda.⁸² Vivekananda’s own self-laudatory descriptions of his reception, and his statement that, “The next day all the papers announced my speech was the hit of the day,”⁸³ would seem to contain some degree of hyperbole. In his interviews with the media, it appears that Vivekananda himself did much to embellish the ‘sensation’ his early talks had created.⁸⁴

The swami’s subsequent addresses during the Parliament did intensify the public’s interest, and his expositions of Hinduism, as well as his assertion of the essential unity of

⁸⁰ Ibid., 135. Among these, Buddhist representative Anagarika Dharmapala was also to become a particularly well-known figure in the West.

⁸¹ “Response to Welcome,” *CW*, vol. 1, 3-4.

⁸² Chattopadhyaya, 135-6.

⁸³ From a letter written to Alasinga, *CW*, vol. 5, 21.

⁸⁴ See Chattopadhyaya, 144-5. Even Merwin-Marie Snell, President of the Parliament’s Scientific Section, seems to have written his oft-repeated glowing praise of Vivekananda (“beyond question the most popular and influential man in the Parliament”) for the media at the latter’s express request (see Chattopadhyaya, 158-61).

all faiths, struck a note with the liberal-minded crowd attracted by the event.⁸⁵ Before the seventeen-day Parliament had concluded, Vivekananda had already become quite popular, and had begun delivering lectures to all manner of local organisations. The newspaper reports of the time, painstakingly researched by Burke, present a generally very positive picture of the impression left by Vivekananda, effusively describing his “brilliant oratory and wonderful exposition of Hindu philosophy.”⁸⁶

In the coming months, extracts of reports (many apparently selected and forwarded by Vivekananda himself)⁸⁷ also reached the major newspapers of India, whereupon his success at the Parliament came to be interpreted as a ‘grand victory’ for Hinduism and, in fact, for India itself. Indian editorials declared that “the Swami’s mission to America is an epoch in the religious history of India,” and “the Swami has done high service to his country by forging one more link in the golden chain that binds India to the white races.”⁸⁸ As some in India granted him the status of a respected Hindu spokesperson, however, words of condemnation issued forth from other Indian quarters, particularly the Brahmo Samāj’s adherents (who did not wish to see their own delegates’ message upstaged) and some very ‘orthodox’ Hindus (who disapproved of the swami’s unconventionalities and of his travels to a foreign land).⁸⁹ As well, it took several months after the Parliament for some of his closest Indian associates—most notably, his brother-

⁸⁵ In fact, some Christian ‘conservatives’ boycotted the Parliament—among them, the Archbishop of Canterbury—because of the interreligious character of the event (see Burke, vol. 1, 70-1).

⁸⁶ Published in the *Evenston Index*; quoted in Burke, vol. 1, 111.

⁸⁷ See Chattopadhyaya, chap. 7, 134-95 passim.

⁸⁸ Editorial, *The Hindu*, quoted in S. P. Basu, *Swami Vivekananda in Contemporary Indian News (1893-1902)*, vol. 1 (Gol Park, Calcutta: RMIC, 1997), 18-19.

⁸⁹ *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 485-6.

disciple Swami Premananda—to forgive him for his failure to use the opportunity to draw the American public's attention to their beloved guru, Ramakrishna.⁹⁰

In the months following the Parliament, Vivekananda capitalised on his success and travelled around the United States—first to the eastern and mid-western states, then, as his fame spread, the southern and western regions—delivering lectures (organised by a national lecture bureau, as was then the fashion) to various groups and organisations, ranging in nature from small fireside meetings of special-interest clubs to huge cosmopolitan crowds in the auditoriums of major metropolitan centres. The interest in things 'Eastern' that had already been stirred in American society by the Theosophists and the Transcendentalists provided for Vivekananda a receptive climate for his ideas. He kept quiet his intentions of obtaining financial help for India, instead dedicating whatever portion he could from the meagre earnings reaped from his lectures for this purpose.⁹¹ As in India, his natural charisma and vast knowledge brought him easily and comfortably into contact with members of 'high society', and he had the opportunity to meet many influential figures; John D. Rockefeller and Robert Ingersoll, as well as many religious leaders and noted scholars were among those with whom he held one-on-one discussions.

Vivekananda also experienced elements of the darker side of American life, particularly its deep-seated racism, of which he himself was not infrequently a victim, especially during his travels in the 'deep south'. Even more biting were the diatribes thrust at him by conservative Christians; they heaped upon him the expected invectives:

⁹⁰ Chattopadhyaya, 156-7.

⁹¹ Burke, vol. 1, 430-44.

heathen, benighted, idolater.⁹² Protestant missionary leaders in particular suggested Vivekananda must be a liar when he denied the existence (or, at least, the extent) of the very same ‘degenerate’ Hindu practices that Christian evangelists in India reported.⁹³ Vivekananda, however, never shrank from defending his faith and pointing out the weaknesses and hypocrisy of his adversaries—as well as what he claimed was the lack of success their missionaries experienced in making converts among the Indian people.⁹⁴ He was often to fall back upon his argument that modern-day Christians had actually drifted far from Christ’s teachings, and that, as “Jesus was an Oriental... It is therefore natural that we Orientals should understand Him truly and readily.”⁹⁵ He denied that his lecturing and teaching efforts constituted “missionary work” on behalf of Hinduism, stating in an interview that “many [Americans] come to us, but we do not struggle for them.”⁹⁶

Harsher yet were the assertions by his critics that Vivekananda himself was a fraud and a charlatan. Even in India, certain persons, particularly from within the ranks of the Brahma Samāj, joined in the task of character defamation—going so far as to level against him the accusation of unchastity (his familiar interactions with American women had indeed shocked many of his Indian compatriots),⁹⁷ a stinging criticism for a man who held *brahmacarya* to be among the great religious ideals of India. Unfortunately for the swami, the American newspapers, and more especially the Christian missionary

⁹² What would have been his only lecture engagement in Canada, at an 1895 Toronto ‘Parliament of Religions’, was cancelled by those who had invited him because, wrote Vivekananda, the Canadian Christian clergy “objected to a heathen” (quoted in *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 22).

⁹³ For example, see *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 12.

⁹⁴ Some missionary societies attributed their annual decrease in revenue to Vivekananda’s success—how accurate this theory was, however, we do not know. Privately, Vivekananda himself had admitted and worried about the success of Christian missions in India (see *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 525).

⁹⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 462.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Dhar, vol. 1, 552.

⁹⁷ *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 482.

publications, were not loathe to reprint articles from the Indian media criticising his work and character, and his Indian foes often seemed much more active in their campaigns than were his compatriot supporters, at least to the extent that these reports reached him in America.⁹⁸

However, Vivekananda tried to keep the focus of his public responses away from himself (he claimed to maintain a “uniform silence”⁹⁹ towards his personal detractors, though in practice this was not invariably the case) and instead concentrated on refuting his critics’ views of Hinduism. For example, in April of 1895, he delivered a lecture in Brooklyn, specifically targeted at the condemnations of his portrayal of Hindu ‘ideals of womanhood’, voiced by American supporters of the strident Indian Christian convert, Pandita Ramabai.¹⁰⁰ However, fearful that his personal critics, especially his own countrymen, might unravel his success in “defending Hinduism,” he appealed to some of his old associates in India to organise public meetings in Madras (now Chennai) and Calcutta, celebrating his success at the Parliament, as well as encouraging them to wage a letter-writing campaign to the Indian and American media. Vivekananda cautioned them that “the Brahmo Samaj fellows here are trying to talk all sorts of nonsense. We must stop their mouths as fast as we can.”¹⁰¹ These plans, however, were slow in coming to fruition, and, in the meantime, Vivekananda himself resorted to forwarding letters and

⁹⁸ Ibid., 485.

⁹⁹ “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 5, 46.

¹⁰⁰ For the history and events of the conflict between Vivekananda and the supporters of Ramabai, see Burke, vol. 2, 277-89.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 32.

articles in support of his own character and mission to some of his important American and Indian supporters.¹⁰²

By early 1894, having left the lecture bureau after discovering he was being cheated out of his rightful earnings, Vivekananda continued to lecture independently, riding his now-established reputation as an outstanding public speaker. He increasingly pulled no punches in his talks, criticising what he considered the money-idolising ways of the West, the Americans' social 'casteism' not so recognised, the subtle degradation of women in Western culture, and the 'un-Christlike' behaviour of many Christians. He likewise was continually pressed by his audiences to answer to the Christian missionaries' criticisms and unflattering representations of Hindu practices, which he unflaggingly countered with an idealistic vision of India's emphasis upon renunciation, universalism, and divine Motherhood.

Meanwhile, by mid-1894, Vivekananda's hoped-for Indian public meetings and other planks of his public-relations campaign had begun to materialise, with support being voiced by prominent Hindus and others (including some foreign Buddhist representatives, who shared Vivekananda's goal of countering Christian missionary propaganda against non-Christian religions).¹⁰³ By the close of 1894, the Indian papers were sprinkled with positive responses to Vivekananda and the rhetorical framing of his American lectures as a 'mission to the West' had begun in earnest.

Despite his efforts in the course of his talks to publicly bring to the fore what he saw as the cultural and religious virtues of the East, Vivekananda's private correspondence with his Indian associates during his time in America reveals his deep

¹⁰² Chattopadhyaya, 134-95 passim.

and growing concern about what he considered to be India's failings. For example, in a letter of November 1893 to his south Indian friend and supporter M. C. Alasinga Perumal, he writes scathingly of India's caste-observance:

In spite of all the ravings of the [Hindu] priests, caste is simply a crystallised social institution, which after doing its service is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench.... Every man born here [in America] knows that he is a *man*. Every man born in India knows that he is a slave of society.¹⁰⁴

Likewise, with respect to women's character and social position, he wrote in December of the same year:

How pure and chaste [American women] are here! Few women are married before twenty or twenty-five, and they are as free as the birds in the air. They go to market, school and college, earn money, and do all kinds of work.... And what are we doing [in India]? We are very regular in marrying our girls at eleven years of age lest they should become corrupt and immoral.¹⁰⁵

He wrote admiringly of a women's reformatory which he visited in Massachusetts, and contrasted its ideals of rehabilitation and upliftment with what he called the 'slavery' of the downtrodden in India: "The poor, the low, the sinner in India have no friends, no help—they cannot rise, try however they may. They sink lower and lower every day, they feel the blows showered upon them by a cruel society, and they do not know whence the blow comes."¹⁰⁶ Such criticisms he voiced with the hope that his Indian followers might be stirred into action to remedy them; through his letters, he had already begun to offer guidance for the implementation of what his admirers came to militaristically label his "plan of campaign"¹⁰⁷ for the welfare of the Indian people. However, he strategically kept

¹⁰³ *Life of SV*, vol. 1, 496-8.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 26.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁰⁷ This title, given to one of his first lectures delivered upon his return to India in 1897, seems to have been appended thereto by his admirers, not by Vivekananda himself, as the talk itself nowhere contains this

these criticisms to himself when addressing Western audiences, and turned the spotlight instead on the *ideals* which, he claimed, India had espoused from ancient times, whatever might be its failings in practice.

During the summer of 1894, Vivekananda had embarked on a new type of project in America. He took part in the Greenacre Conferences in Maine, a liberal religious symposium, where, for the first time, he taught small classes of dedicated students, guiding them through Hindu scriptures and philosophy in depth. These were the first of many classes that he was to hold after coming to America, and marked an important change in the nature of his interaction with American audiences (though he nevertheless continued his public lecturing, at least partly out of financial necessity). In the beginning of 1895, Vivekananda settled down in rented quarters in New York where he began giving regular classes, free of charge; this project—which he was at first reluctant to term an ‘organisation’, for fear of the faults heir to such entities¹⁰⁸—was to develop into the first of the ‘Vedanta Societies’ founded by Vivekananda.¹⁰⁹ The swami’s classes, held in a variety of venues, were generally successful, in terms of both the attendance numbers and the dedication of his students, and he wrote to his acquaintance, the Raja of Khetri, in July, with perhaps a touch of exaggeration, that, “I have got a few hundred followers.”¹¹⁰ This marked the beginning of his role in the West as a guru, and he soon gathered about him a small group of committed disciples, in addition to maintaining his role as a charismatic public lecturer. The Indian type of guru-disciple relationship had, at this time,

phrase; nor, arguably, does the nature of its content—‘nationalistic’ as its tone may be in places—justify this ‘martial’ label (see Chattopadhyaya, 210).

¹⁰⁸ *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 18.

little established precedent in America, but, by employing the more-familiar model of formal, scheduled classes delivered to a regular group of students, Vivekananda's efforts flourished. Throughout the spring of that year, many of those persons who would, in the years to come, be numbered among his closest, most-prominent disciples—including Josephine MacLeod, Francis Leggett, and Sara Bull—first met Vivekananda and committed themselves to religious study and practice under his guidance.

During the summer of 1895, he began another of his undertakings at a cottage owned by one of his students at Thousand Island Park. Exhausted from his unbroken round of classes and lecturing engagements, Vivekananda joined a dozen of his most-dedicated followers at the secluded house for an extended spiritual retreat, with classes, lectures,¹¹¹ and meditation sessions. During this time, he formally accepted all of these students as disciples, and bestowed upon two of them—an American man, Leon Landsberg (Swami Kripananda), and a French woman, Marie Louise (Swami Abhayananda)—the vows of *sannyāsa*.¹¹² The choice of these two persons as suitable candidates for Hindu monastics puzzled many of the swami's other followers; this was particularly true of Abhayananda, given her 'political' interests and what was perceived to be an arrogant and critical nature.¹¹³ As Burke has noted, neither Kripananda nor Abhayananda was able to attract a notable group of followers, or to maintain

¹⁰⁹ In fact, the formation of the first 'Vedanta Societies' predated his establishment of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the Indian umbrella organisation under which the 'official' Vedanta Societies outside of India today operate.

¹¹⁰ "Letters," *CW*, vol. 5, 91.

¹¹¹ These lectures were later published as Vivekananda's *Inspired Talks* (See *CW*, vol. 7, 1-104).

¹¹² Burke, vol. 3, 126-8.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 125-9.

Vivekananda's previous level of success in the work with which he entrusted them, and Vivekananda later decided to leave his Western projects in the hands of Indian monks.¹¹⁴

In the fall of 1895, Vivekananda set out for England, on the invitation of two theosophically minded sympathisers. After a brief stop in Paris, he reached London in September. If he arrived with some trepidation, it would be understandable, given the nature of the colonial relationship between India and England, as well as the legendary conservatism of British society. To his own professed surprise,¹¹⁵ however, Vivekananda met with considerable success in his two-and-a-half months of lecturing and teaching in England, and he wrote to his fellow monks in India asking them to send another of Ramakrishna's disciples to minister to his new-found English followers upon his own return to America. He found the attitude of the British people towards his religion, ethnicity, and culture to be less narrow than that which he had encountered among the Americans, and he was forced to admit that, as a result, "I have very much toned down my [negative] ideas about the English race."¹¹⁶ It was during this time that Vivekananda won the allegiance of Margaret Noble, an Irish-born educationist who was to later become Sister Nivedita, one of his most prominent disciples, remembered especially for her championing of Indian culture, her educational work in Bengal, and her participation in the Indian nationalist movement.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Ibid., vol. 6, 255.

¹¹⁵ "Epistles," *CW*, vol. 8, 368-9.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 368.

¹¹⁷ It was the last of these that, ultimately, led the (officially) apolitical Ramakrishna Mission to withdraw its public ties with her following Vivekananda's death.

Chattopadhyaya has observed that most Calcutta newspapers during this period carried relatively few reports about the swami's work and success in England; the lion's share of what was published appeared in *The Indian Mirror*, the paper to which Chattopadhyaya hypothesises Vivekananda himself was supplying material.¹¹⁸ No doubt some of the initial glow of success had worn off Vivekananda's name in the two years since the Parliament of Religions. But also worth consideration is the fact that effusive gloating over Vivekananda's 'missionary success' in the powerful metropolitan centre might have been somewhat ill-advised, politically speaking, during this period, all the more so because many Indians still believed the fate of their country to be inextricably tied to the power and stability of the Empire.

Reaching the United States again in December, the swami resumed his classes and lectures—he even gave a series of talks at Madison Square Garden—now with an added boon: his American followers engaged a professional stenographer, J. J. Goodwin, to record Vivekananda's talks for publication and posterity. Goodwin soon became a close friend, assistant, and disciple. Among Vivekananda's circle of associates and admirers he counted an increasing number of prominent Western intellectuals (William James and Nicola Tesla were recent additions).¹¹⁹ Collections of his lectures were edited and published as his first two books, *Karma-Yoga* and *Raja-Yoga*, and the Vedanta Society of New York was established as a formal organisation, responsibility for which he entrusted to an Executive Committee composed of his close American followers.

¹¹⁸ See Chattopadhyaya, 180-3.

¹¹⁹ Despite his association with a number of prominent intellectuals, and his public lectures at major educational institutions, there is no reliable record that, as is often claimed, Vivekananda was offered (and declined) the Chair of Sanskrit at Columbia University (Burke, vol. 4, 104).

By this time, the strain of continuous work was telling upon his health, and, following a very popular series of lectures delivered in Detroit, Boston (including a public reception at Harvard University), and Chicago, he sailed again to London in April 1896, for a respite; in fact, however, he continued to give lectures and classes throughout his visit, and his talks on 'Bhakti-Yoga' had just been published as his third book. His fellow disciple, Swami Saradananda, arrived in England at Vivekananda's request, and set about to continue the work that the latter had begun. Saradananda was assisted by a collection of Vivekananda's committed lay followers, including Edward Sturdy, and some newly acquired devotees, Captain James Sevier and his wife, Charlotte Sevier. Vivekananda felt that it was necessary to establish a permanent Vedanta centre in London, it being "the hub of the world," as well as "the heart of India,"¹²⁰ as he expressed it in his private correspondence.¹²¹ One of the highlights of his England stay was the time he spent with Max Müller, for whom Vivekananda had perhaps as much respect as did Müller for the swami's own guru, on whom the renowned scholar shortly thereafter published a book.¹²² (Vivekananda later told the *Madras Times* that "Prof. Max Muller is a perfect Vedantist,"¹²³ though he had previously acknowledged to American friends that Müller, "in all his writings on the Hindu religion adds in the last a derogatory remark.")¹²⁴

Vivekananda sent Saradananda ahead to America in June of 1896 to look after his efforts there, while Vivekananda himself took a summer vacation, in the form of a

¹²⁰ "Letters," *CW*, vol. 6, 364.

¹²¹ His group of London followers, however, actually remained an 'unofficial' organisation until many years after his death; a formal 'Vedanta Centre' was established in London in 1948 by Swami Ghanananda.

¹²² Max Müller, ed., *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings* (London: Longmans Green, 1898).

¹²³ Quoted in Dhar, vol. 2, 810.

European tour with some of his western companions, visiting Switzerland, France, Germany and Holland. He spent much quiet time meditating in the Alps, and explored the modern cities of Europe and their scientific and cultural attractions with his characteristic inquisitiveness and meticulousness. By invitation he spent a day in Kiel with the noted Orientalist scholar Paul Deussen, who was acquainted with Vivekananda's writings and desired to meet him. According to accounts, between their discussions of fine points of Sanskrit hermeneutics and Hindu philosophy, Deussen expressed his conviction that India was in future to become the world's spiritual epicentre and that Vedānta was among the moral and religious pinnacles of human thought.¹²⁵ Vivekananda, for his part, later praised Deussen's boldness and uncompromising Advaita in an article written for the *Udbodhan* journal, despite the enduring differences between the two men on certain philosophical points of Vedānta.¹²⁶

Vivekananda returned to London in September, where he spent three months continuing his work, in the company of Swami Abhedananda, another of his fellow disciples whom he had called to assist him in the West. Deussen, who was spending time in London as well, was a very frequent visitor to Vivekananda's residence during this time, and the swami also kept up a steady correspondence with Müller, considering the two academics to both be great allies in his efforts to spread Vedānta among educated Westerners.¹²⁷ His teaching and lecturing continued, and his audience grew, with some prominent Britons—including Unitarian, non-conformist, and liberal Anglican clergy—

¹²⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 811.

¹²⁵ See Charlotte Sevier's account, quoted in *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 124.

¹²⁶ These differences are discussed by E. T. Sturdy, and quoted in Dhar, vol. 2, 824-5. Dhar is of the opinion that Deussen's failure to write or speak much about his association with Vivekananda was likely

numbered among the diverse persons his talks attracted.¹²⁸ His lectures, combined with his published works and the reports contained in British newspapers, had made Vivekananda a recognised public figure, and some attributed to him a good share of the British populace's growing interest in Eastern philosophies.¹²⁹

Despite his success in the Western hemisphere and his acquired liking for the British people,¹³⁰ Vivekananda had been confiding to friends for sometime that he was concerned about his plans for his projects in India. It was perhaps unknown to a large share of his American and British followers that, all throughout his strenuous programme of activities abroad, he was also closely involved, via written correspondence and financial contributions, in a number of Indian undertakings. He was occupied with organising and directing the activities of the monastery run by his brother monks (now referred to as the Alambazar *math*, as it had been moved to that location, near Dakshineswar, in 1892). He had begun two English-language periodical publications, the *Brahmavadin* and *Prabuddha Bharata (Awakened India)*, and was encouraging the commencement of further journals in local Indian languages. He had formulated ideas for an 'Advaita Ashrama' situated in the Himalayas and dedicated to the practice of 'non-dualistic' religion, as well as for a *math* for women, which would be run along parallel lines to the men's Alambazar monastery, but be fully independent thereof. Further, he

due to the former's concern over possible repercussions from India's colonial rulers, upon whose favour Deussen's academic career depended (see *ibid.*, 826).

¹²⁷ *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 129.

¹²⁸ See Burke, vol. 3, 264-82.

¹²⁹ For an example, see B. C. Pal's writing, quoted at length in *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 150-1.

¹³⁰ See the "Address of Welcome Presented at Calcutta and Reply," where Vivekananda declares, "No one ever landed on English soil with more hatred in his heart for a race than I did for the English... [But] there is none among you here present [in his Calcutta audience] ... who loves the English people more than I do now" (*CW*, vol. 3, 310).

was laying out plans for his followers to begin the task of bringing his message of “practical Vedanta,” as he termed it, to the masses of India.

Now that he had left his American projects in the hands of Saradananda and some of his trusted New World disciples, and had trained Abhedananda to assume leadership of his British devotees, he left for India, accompanied by the Seviere and Goodwin, in December of 1896. Before sailing from Naples, Vivekananda ensured that he was able to spend a period of time visiting Italy, and particularly Rome, as he had long desired; he is said to have greatly enjoyed visiting the cultural and religious monuments of that historic region, particularly the Vatican and the sites of early Christianity.¹³¹

When he landed in Ceylon (then part of British India) on January 15, 1897, Vivekananda was greeted by a rather-grand reception.¹³² Some of India’s major newspapers had carried mention that Vivekananda was returning, and committees had been formed among his admirers to ensure fitting receptions for the one who had been lauded in India as a heroic ‘defender of Hinduism’, having dared to cross the *kālāpānī*—the ‘black waters’—and directly confront Western audiences as a speaking subject. Substantial crowds thronged around Vivekananda and his Western guests in Colombo and the cities at which they subsequently halted; in many of these places, arrangements had been made for the swami to give speeches in response to welcome addresses offered by dignitaries. The tone and content of these talks¹³³ is substantially different than that of the lectures he delivered in the United States and England, most often emphasizing a

¹³¹ He was reportedly somewhat jarred, however, during his attendance of a Christmas Day High Mass at St. Peter’s, by the juxtaposition of the material grandeur of the Basilica and the utter poverty of Jesus’ life (quoted in *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 156).

¹³² Vivekananda had earlier, in fact, expressed to his stenographer-disciple in confidence a fear of anticipated *rejection* by his country-people (see *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 165).

forthcoming ‘awakening’ of India, as a result of which the Indian people would ostensibly gain (or, in the swami’s view, regain) their rightful power and glory. He further frequently exhorted the Indian people to eschew ‘imitation’ of the West, and to instead seek within their own heritage for cultural strength and values.

During the days which followed their arrival, Vivekananda and his party moved northward across the island, and were met by groups of well-wishers in the major cities (save for a tense encounter with a group of anti-Hindu Buddhists in Kandy).¹³⁴ While the gatherings were organised by members of India’s educated elite, the masses appear to have partaken to at least some extent in the enthusiasm for the man who was presented to them as a ‘national hero’—allowing that, politically speaking, his ‘nation’ did not yet exist. When he reached the southern coast of the subcontinent proper, Vivekananda once again spent time as the honoured guest of his old acquaintance, the *rāja* of Ramnad, before travelling to Madras, stopping in cities along the way where his admirers and other interested parties demanded impromptu public lectures. While, Chattopadhyaya notes, the oft-repeated claim that Vivekananda’s arrival enrapt the whole country is decided hyperbole,¹³⁵ it does appear to have constituted a significant event in most of the locales through which he travelled. In Madras, he spent a week speaking before large crowds and meeting individually with supporters—and critics as well.¹³⁶ During one of these lectures,¹³⁷ he took aim at those, particularly Theosophists, who, though they had criticised him in earlier days, were now claiming to have been his supporters from the

¹³³ The records of the talks which he delivered throughout the subcontinent upon his return are grouped together in *The Complete Works* as “Lectures from Colombo to Almora,” vol. 3, 104-461.

¹³⁴ *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 174.

¹³⁵ Chattopadhyaya, 213-15.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 215-17.

beginning. In general, his south Indian talks were dominated by fervent entreaties to his listeners to abandon ‘superstitions’ and return to the original, ‘true’ wisdom of Hinduism; by so doing, he maintained, India would rise on the world stage as a great spiritual power.¹³⁸ The swami was also not above calling attention to his own contribution towards this goal and emphasising (one is tempted to say exaggerating) his sacrificial sufferings for the good of Hinduism and of India.¹³⁹

As a result of his hectic schedule in the south, Vivekananda’s health began to suffer, and he decided to leave Madras for Bengal, with the intention of going to the Himalayas for some rest and recuperation. Arriving back in his home district, however, he faced more enthusiastic admirers, mostly middle-class Hindus,¹⁴⁰ awash with reports from America and England extolling the success of the self-declared “Calcutta boy.”¹⁴¹ In this, his hometown as well as the capital of the British Raj, Vivekananda continued his bold public declarations of India’s destined resurrection—and his certainty that “from the youth of Bengal will come the power which will raise India once more to her proper spiritual place.”¹⁴² There is little record of the reaction, if any, of the British government in India to Vivekananda’s presence and actions; it appears that he was perceived primarily as a religious threat by Christian missionaries, rather than as a political adversary by the British authorities. He spent much time in the company of his monastic brothers at their *math* (where he had to induce the reluctant swamis to associate

¹³⁷ “My Plan of Campaign,” *CW*, vol. 3, 207-27.

¹³⁸ For lucid examples of this sentiment, see “The Future of India,” *CW*, vol. 3, 285.

¹³⁹ See, for example, his accounts of his monastic austerities and of his sufferings at the hands of his Christian, Theosophist, and Brahmo opponents in “My Plan of Campaign,” *CW*, vol. 3, 207.

¹⁴⁰ See Chattopadhyaya, 222.

¹⁴¹ “Address of Welcome Presented at Calcutta and Reply,” *CW*, vol. 3, 309.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 320.

intimately with his ‘foreign’ companions)¹⁴³ and also visiting his old friends from amongst the circle of Ramakrishna’s householder devotees. He faced visits both from those who fervently esteemed his teachings as well as those who challenged his views on the basis of Hindu orthodoxy or various other religio-philosophical loyalties.¹⁴⁴ However, increasingly poor health—he had, by this point, developed diabetes¹⁴⁵—forced Vivekananda to extricate himself from additional Calcutta engagements in March, and to spend some time recuperating in Darjeeling.

He returned to Calcutta in May to participate in one of his most important undertakings—formally establishing the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the organisation through which he intended to carry out his twin goals of using monastic workers to carry out humanitarian service in India (the Mission’s responsibility) and of setting up centres for “the preaching of Vedanta” abroad (under the jurisdiction of the Math branch).¹⁴⁶ Although the organisation was, by design, expressly non-political, its ideas were perceived, even by some of his fellow Ramakrishna Order monks, as radical. Many felt they were not in keeping with the traditional Indian ideal of the world-renouncing *sannyāsin* and were ‘too Western’ in nature, and Vivekananda was directly accused by some of acting contrary to Ramakrishna’s own teachings.¹⁴⁷ He strenuously denied this, asserting, “Shri Ramakrishna is far greater than his disciples understand him

¹⁴³ *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 234.

¹⁴⁴ Besides orthodox Hindus, he had an ongoing conflict with an American missionary, J. H. Barrows, who criticised Vivekananda for his portrayal of American women, as well as for his claims that Hindu ideas were gaining ground in the West, which Barrows thought baseless. Although Vivekananda’s public writings were mostly polite and cordial with respect to Barrows when the latter visited India, in private letters he spoke out strongly against the preacher’s personal attacks and the “bigoted Christianity” that he espoused (*Life of SV*, vol. 2, 266).

¹⁴⁵ *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 238.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹⁴⁷ Chattopadhyaya, 234-5.

to be. He is the embodiment of infinite spiritual ideas capable of development in infinite ways,¹⁴⁸ and declared that he himself was only an instrument of Ramakrishna's will.¹⁴⁹ Vivekananda did not hesitate to present himself as *the* individual chosen by Ramakrishna to implement and spread the latter's faith in a new way and to new frontiers. Whatever might have been their misgivings in this respect, all of the 'original' monastic disciples of Ramakrishna chose to remain a part of this organisation in its new form (at least initially),¹⁵⁰ which had already attracted a number of additional young men bent on becoming *sannyāsins* along the lines which Vivekananda had set forth.

Resuming his respite in the north, this time at the hill station of Almora, the swami and his party (which included Goodwin, and another of Vivekananda's British followers, Henrietta Muller) spent some time in relatively relaxed circumstances. In June, Vivekananda drafted an address to Queen Victoria on behalf of the (ostensibly 'non-political') Ramakrishna Mission, lauding her protection of religious freedom in India and England as well as her support for Indian charitable efforts (though he specifically choose to eschew "nonsensical statements to the effect that she is God's representative and so forth, as is common with us, natives").¹⁵¹

Vivekananda soon was pulled away from his Almora retreat by invitations from the Punjab and Kashmir. Previously, he had not attracted as much notice there as elsewhere in India, which Chattopadhyaya attributes to the lack of English-medium education in

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 250.

¹⁴⁹ See *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 250.

¹⁵⁰ Swami Abhedananda, however, was later to form a separate organization of his own, the 'Ramakrishna Vedanta Math', in 1939.

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Chattopadhyaya, 238 (omitted from *The Complete Works*).

these regions.¹⁵² (Accordingly, Vivekananda often delivered his lectures in these regions in Hindi, though most of his other talks in India were given in English.) During the time Vivekananda spent travelling and lecturing in these regions, he was faced with a new set of religious conflicts, between the orthodox Hindus, the reformist Ārya Samāj movement, and the Muslim communities in the northern regions of India.¹⁵³ Although he differed with the adherents of each of these groups on various points and faced challenges from their vocal representatives, he stressed what he saw as the unifying spirit of Vedānta philosophy, and seems to have maintained generally cordial relations with each party.

He next travelled to Rajasthan, via Delhi, where he lectured and renewed old acquaintances, particularly with the *rāja* of Khetri. But, after some further travelling in the region, his health again broke down and he returned to Calcutta in January 1898, where he spent much time in quiet retreat guiding the monks of the Ramakrishna Math. Vivekananda also bought, with funds provided by Henrietta Muller,¹⁵⁴ a new plot of land for the monastery in the village of Belur, and set one of his fellow *sannyāsins*, a trained engineer, to work building a new monastery for the Order (the old site had been damaged by an earthquake, and the members were temporarily resident in a householder's garden house).¹⁵⁵ Sara Bull donated sufficient funds to cover the costs of the new shrine and provide an endowment for the centre in Belur, which was formally consecrated in December 1898.¹⁵⁶ Vivekananda also, with the aid of a donation by Josephine MacLeod,

¹⁵² Ibid., 243.

¹⁵³ Although the region is also home to a great many Sikhs, at this period of time they did not yet explicitly differentiate themselves from 'Hindus'.

¹⁵⁴ Muller, not long after, made a radical break with Vivekananda and his philosophy. In the winter of 1898, the Theosophist-turned-Vedāntist announced that she had become an evangelical Christian and declared that Vivekananda had deceived her with occult power (*Life of SV*, vol. 2, 414-15).

¹⁵⁵ *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 308-9.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

set in motion the publication of the *Udbodhan*, his long-awaited Bengali-language periodical, through which, he declared, “we must give the [Bengali] public only positive ideas.”¹⁵⁷ He entrusted the task of setting up his Advaita Ashrama in the Himalayan village of Mayavati to his disciples, the Seviars; the Ashrama was distinct from the other official Ramakrishna and Vedanta centres for its edict, set forth by Vivekananda, that no religious images (including that of Ramakrishna) or ceremonies (even the simplest of *pūjās*) would be permitted therein, and thus that it remain a place where he could “keep Advaita free from all superstitions and weakening contaminations.”¹⁵⁸

Beyond these activities, the swami spent much of 1898, while in Calcutta, Almora, and Kashmir, trying to recover his by-now abysmally poor health and readying for their tasks those of his American and British disciples, mostly women, who had come to India at his request. Margaret Noble, whom he christened Sister Nivedita, had just arrived from England with the intention, at Vivekananda’s urging, of founding and running a school to foster the education of Indian women. (For although Vivekananda professed that women themselves should take responsibility for their own upliftment, he claimed that India could “not yet produce great women,” and so required some “borrow[ed]... from other nations,”¹⁵⁹ to begin the project). He devoted inestimable time to trying to instil in Nivedita and the other disciples a knowledge of, and a love for, India and its people, culture, and religion, as well as to set before them in full his ideals of religious practice and social service; he also strove to, as he termed it, ‘Hinduise’ them as fully as

¹⁵⁷ *CW*, vol. 7, 170.

¹⁵⁸ “The Advaita Ashrams, Himalayas,” *CW*, vol. 5, 436.

¹⁵⁹ “Epistles,” *CW*, vol. 7, 511.

possible.¹⁶⁰ Nivedita has written extensively about Vivekananda's efforts to inculcate Indian patterns of thought and behaviour in her and the others, down to the smallest matters of custom and etiquette, so that they might "speak to all men in terms of their own orthodoxy."¹⁶¹ There were indeed significant cultural barriers to be overcome; for example, in 1898 Ramakrishna's birth-anniversary celebrations had to be held away from Dakshineswar's Kālī temple, as the orthodox Hindu trustees of the latter would not permit Vivekananda's Western disciples to attend.¹⁶² To Nivedita, Vivekananda also freely denounced—speaking much more frankly to her than he could to his public audiences in the West—what he considered to be superstitious, abusive, and degenerate practices found among his Hindu contemporaries.¹⁶³

The swami also took a hands-on approach to the guidance of his monastic brothers and disciples, not merely laying out a formal system of training and code of discipline, but spending much time instructing the novice monks himself. During his long illness-related absences from the Belur centre, he entrusted its operation to Swami Saradananda, who he had called back from the United States for the task, as the latter had by then acquired some knowledge of Western organisational techniques and principles, upon which Vivekananda had modelled the Ramakrishna Math and Mission.¹⁶⁴ Some of the other disciples he sent travelling elsewhere within the country to preach Vedānta or to undertake relief efforts, as the situation warranted. The Ramakrishna Mission inaugurated

¹⁶⁰ *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 323.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Chattopadhyaya, 252.

¹⁶³ Nivedita's recollection, quoted in *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 357.

¹⁶⁴ *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 418.

its social service activities, for which it would later become best known, by embarking upon sanitary work during the 1899 Calcutta plague epidemic.

By this time, the Indian public's interest in Vivekananda had cooled somewhat, and for some time the swami had been seriously thinking about returning to the West to continue his projects there. In the spring of 1899, his doctors were of the opinion that the voyage and change of climate might improve his impaired health, and so, in June, Vivekananda sailed for America, via England, with Nivedita and Swami Turiyananda, both of whom he intended to involve in his ongoing American efforts. Although he found that a few of his previously close disciples—particularly E. T. Sturdy—had since cut ties with him,¹⁶⁵ the centres that he had started were continuing to thrive, particularly the Vedanta Society of New York, now headed by Abhedananda. For the sake of his health, however, Vivekananda was advised to move to the west coast, and he reluctantly left New York soon after his arrival.

In California, not only did his health improve, but the swami quickly attracted a large following of persons who, already acquainted with his teachings through his books and articles, were anxious to meet him and to learn more. He spent much time giving lectures and classes in southern California during December and January, where he found an especially receptive audience among the adherents of the 'New Thought' movements of the time, who shared his iconoclastic spirit and emphasis on the quest to realise one's inner divinity. He founded Vedanta Societies in Los Angeles and Pasadena, before moving northward in February 1900, where he lectured, taught, and inaugurated the

¹⁶⁵ Sturdy later wrote "acrimonious letters to the Swami, bitterly denouncing his way of preaching and living." See *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 478-9. Dhar recounts that a major factor in the split was the perception by

Vedanta Society of San Francisco. Besides attracting large audiences to his lectures, he also added to his collection of close followers during his stay in California.

At the end of May 1900, Vivekananda left California for New York, from where he sailed to France, having been invited to lecture at the Congress of the History of Religions at the Paris Exposition that September. He sufficiently mastered the French language that he was able to participate competently in the gathering of scholars, where he was asked to speak on the evolution of Indian religious ideas.¹⁶⁶ In the course of his lectures, he did not hesitate to express his disagreement with leading European scholars over such matters as the date of the composition of the *Bhagavadgītā* and the origin of Hindu symbols like the *śivaliṅga* and the *śālagrāma*, and he took strong issue with the prevailing idea that classical Indian cultural forms had their roots in Greek precursors.¹⁶⁷

Vivekananda made some eminent friends in Paris intellectual society, including the controversial-but-popular former Carmelite priest and theologian, Père Hyacinthe; the metaphysically minded writer M. Jules Bois; and the brilliant sociological scholar Patrick Geddes; and, as was his wont, the swami spent much time in discussions with them about their respective fields. He also explored France's historical heritage (he was heard to remark at Napoleon's tomb, "A great man, a great force! Śiva! Śiva!").¹⁶⁸ Later that fall, Vivekananda travelled across the Continent, making stops in Vienna, Constantinople, and Athens, among other places—even venturing as far as Cairo—to pursue his pastime of

Sturdy that Vivekananda was living a comfortable life at the expense of his followers, enjoying unbecoming 'luxuries' such as smoking (Dhar, vol. 2, 1192).

¹⁶⁶ *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 538-42.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Burke, vol. 6, 327.

cultural exploration with his distinguished companions (who included, at this time, Hyacinthe, Bois, and the operatic *prima donna* Madame Calvé).

In November, Vivekananda made the sudden decision to return to India. For some time his views about the West's 'greatness' had been undergoing critical re-evaluation, and this may have been a factor in his decision to return to his homeland. It is reported that he expressed particular disenchantment with what he perceived as the power-driven greed and commercialism rampant in western societies.¹⁶⁹ Vivekananda reached Bombay in early December and immediately travelled back to the monastery at Belur. There, the swami learnt that James Sevier had just passed away at the Advaita Ashrama that he and his wife had founded at Vivekananda's behest. Vivekananda thus decided to make the difficult journey to snowbound Mayavati, where he spent several weeks in the company of the widowed Charlotte Sevier and a handful of his Indian monastic disciples.

Upon returning to the Belur centre in January, he officially turned over its governance to a board of trustees composed of Ramakrishna Order monks, and formally removed himself from its leadership. This step was undertaken partly for the practical reason that the municipal government was threatening to levy taxes on the 'privately owned' monastery property.¹⁷⁰ There is little doubt, however, that Vivekananda's declining health also made him anxious to extricate himself from these responsibilities.

In March, he, accompanied by his mother and other relatives, as well as some of his monastic disciples, went on a pilgrimage to East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and Assam, where he also lectured at the request of the local inhabitants. Vivekananda's health continued to deteriorate, however, and from May of 1901 onwards, he spent most of his

¹⁶⁹ Quoted in Chattopadhyaya, 270.

time at the *math* in Belur, engaged in teaching, correspondence, and personal religious activities. He kept in close touch with some of his Western devotees via letters, many of which are preserved in his *Complete Works*.¹⁷¹ Although he pondered continuing his travelling in India and abroad, his health did not permit this, and he seemed to fear the stress of being pressed into delivering more lectures by his admirers, as he rarely turned down requests when they were made. He did, however, venture out to make a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya and Varanasi with Josephine MacLeod, some friends, and two visiting Japanese Buddhists in January 1902, during which time he hypothesised much about the relationship, historical and philosophical, between Buddhism and Hinduism and held scriptural discussions with the Varanasi Hindu *paṇḍits*.¹⁷² Though his days in Varanasi were generally spent quietly, a Theosophist doctor who attended upon him there managed to provoke an expression of Vivekananda's wrath towards that particular religious movement, the swami railing against the "shame" of India's "import[ing] Gurus from abroad."¹⁷³ While there, he also formally established the Ramakrishna Sevashrama ('Home of Service', as it is known in English), then comprised of a small group of his followers who served poor pilgrims (but later to become a large, modern hospital run under the auspices of the Ramakrishna Mission).

From March of that year, Vivekananda's broken health kept him confined to the monks' Belur residence, where he continued his private religious practice. He passed away there, apparently of heart failure, on July 4, 1902, at the age of thirty-nine.

¹⁷⁰ *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 583.

¹⁷¹ These are scattered throughout several volumes of *The Complete Works*, under the headings "Letters" and "Epistles."

¹⁷² *Life of SV*, vol. 2, 624-7.

Over the course of the century following his death, Vivekananda has joined the ranks of those historical figures whose preserved bodies of work and degree of influence considerably outweigh their relatively brief span of life. The organisations that Vivekananda founded in the United States, Britain, and India, with the aid of his fellow Ramakrishna Order *sannyāsins* as well as his substantial number of lay followers, took upon themselves the responsibility for perpetuating his religious projects (primarily in the West) and his social service plans (in India). Historians and biographers, as is perhaps to be expected, are less than unanimous over the extent to which they believe Vivekananda's institutionally maintained legacy to be in accordance with his personal goals. While those writing from within the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and its affiliated Vedanta Societies—the latter now officially under the governance of the former, ensuring that ultimate control of the 'authorised' tradition remains in the hands of Indians—have generally maintained that the religious teachings, service activities, and publication efforts of these organisations in their present manifestations have been something of a divinely guided bequest to the world by the swami and his guru,¹⁷⁴ others have questioned the agreement between Vivekananda's expressed ideals and certain aspects and emphases of these associations.¹⁷⁵ Beyond the organisations that he personally established, or which have subsequently been set up under the auspices of these, there exists a large assortment of others that are unaffiliated with, or have since seceded from, the institution that has continued to represent itself as the authoritative

¹⁷³ From Mahendranath Datta's Bengali biography of Vivekananda (*Svāmi Bibekānander Bālyajībani*), quoted in Chattopadhyaya, 278.

¹⁷⁴ See, for example, Swami Jitatmananda, "The Prophet: A Living World Force After a Hundred Years," chap. in *Swami Vivekananda: Prophet and Pathfinder*, 4th rev. ed. (Rajkot: Shri Ramakrishna Ashrama, [2003]), 363-83.

embodiment of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda lineage. These various groups, 'official' and otherwise, as well as many 'independent' followers, admirers, researchers, and others, have all contributed towards the ongoing construction of Vivekananda as a crucial site of encounter and negotiation between Hinduism and modernity.

¹⁷⁵ Tapan Raychaudhuri, "Swami Vivekananda's Construction of Hinduism," in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15-16.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ESSENCE OF REALISATION: VIVEKANANDA AND DISCURSIVE RELIGION

Is religion to justify itself by the discoveries of reason, through which every other science justifies itself? Are the same methods of investigation, which we apply to sciences and knowledge outside, to be applied to the science of Religion? In my opinion this must be so, and I am also of the opinion that the sooner it is done the better. If a religion is destroyed by such investigations, it was then all the time useless, unworthy superstition; and the sooner it goes the better. I am thoroughly convinced that its destruction would be the best thing that could happen. All that is dross will be taken off, no doubt, but the essential parts of religion will emerge triumphant out of this investigation. 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.

—Vivekananda, “Reason and Religion,” delivered in England, 1896¹

In the course of our introductory discussions in Chapter One, we made reference to Brian K. Pennington’s view² that religion has tended to remain a marginalised aspect of the colonial encounter within the work of many postcolonial scholars. This places before us a challenge, for it is difficult to envision attempting to equitably understand Swami Vivekananda, be it from a perspective postcolonial in nature or otherwise, without giving earnest consideration to the religious elements within his life and thought.

¹ “Reason and Religion,” *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (CW)* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), vol. 1, 367.

² See Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

Of course, it is perfectly valid—and, indeed, highly advisable—to consciously avoid an ‘essentialised’ reading of Vivekananda that would reduce his personality and perspective wholly to the religious dimension, to the exclusion of other aspects of his various personal characteristics, contextual social roles, diverse interests, and multiple goals. Yet, it is difficult to quarrel with the conclusions of scholars like Raychaudhuri, Sen, and Basu,³ who, even after extensive and theoretically informed investigation, still maintain a central and pervasive role for religion in their explications of the swami and his work. Be it in his private or public expressions, it is clear that religious ideas did permeate Vivekananda’s thought on virtually every subject, and formed an important foundation upon which his views on many other matters—as we will explore in subsequent chapters—were built.

As is apparent from his writings, talks, and interviews, whatever relationship he may have had with other facets of Indian society and politics, Vivekananda opted to frame his own life’s mission in a decidedly ‘religious’ manner (bracketing off, for the moment, debates over the import of that term). The events of his life, as well as his own accounts thereof, do generally tally with the perception that he was a man driven by an inner quest for what he articulated as “realisation,” a pursuit that intensified and crystallised during the years that he spent with Ramakrishna and developed throughout his subsequent pan-India wanderings.⁴ Not long after, a missionary zeal of sorts arose in him, which was to propel him around the world as a public religious teacher, despite

³ See the discussions of their respective work in Chapter One.

⁴ As discussed in Chapter One, Tapan Raychaudhuri is foremost among those scholars who strongly endorse the reading of Vivekananda’s actions and perspectives as grounded and centred in his personal religious convictions; see Tapan Raychaudhuri, “Swami Vivekananda’s Construction of Hinduism,” in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1-16.

(especially in his later years) chronically poor health and his own frequently expressed desire for extended periods of isolated personal religious practice. Depending on the context, he spoke as an impassioned preacher of what he perceived to be the essence of the 'ancient wisdom' of India, exhorting his audiences to practice "spiritual discipline," or as a Hindu scholar, delivering proficient discourses on the nature, origins and development of religion. It is therefore to this broad area that we must first turn in attempting to understand Vivekananda's relationship with colonial discourse, chiefly, in this case, in its Orientalist manifestations.

Vivekananda's preserved writings and talks are saturated with treatments of 'God', 'realisation', 'spirituality', 'Hinduism', 'Vedānta', and many other allied concepts of recognisable relevance to questions of religion, regardless of how we opt to define the latter. It would be simplistic and incorrect to assert that Vivekananda simply 'borrowed' these ideas from existing Western discourses (and, in fact, the matter is further complexified by the fact that the West's ideas about religion have themselves been heavily influenced by European contact with India and other colonial territories). In addressing and utilising these constructs, however, Vivekananda was unavoidably situating himself and his ideas in a relationship with a plethora of discursive formations, and employing a conceptual repertoire infused with multiple layers of meaning, embodying complex networks of power, and produced by the interaction of a variety of historical and ideological forces.

Further, as might be supposed from the varied public roles he assumed, his lectures and writings more often than not transgress what the twenty-first century scholar of religion has come to consider sacrosanct (pun intended) boundaries between *teaching*

about religion and *teaching* religion. Vivekananda moves freely between the critical interest of the historian, the unfettered speculation of the philosopher, the doctrinal orientation of the theologian, and the unconventional wisdom of the mystic—sometimes all in the course of a single lecture or monograph. We must, therefore, keep in mind his multiple objectives and varied approaches when considering his engagement and expositions of religion, and understand that his work necessarily intersects with the prevailing views and discourses of many fields of knowledge and cognitive spheres.

While the topics that could be brought forth for discussion in this regard are legion, and will be expanded throughout the chapters that follow, in this portion of our study we will address in some detail several interrelated concepts which are central to Vivekananda's discourse, and which bear the imprint of the colonial milieu in which he was situated. Specifically, the focus will be upon the nature, origin and development of *religion*, *Hinduism*, and *Vedānta*, as these concepts were constructed and understood by the nineteenth-century world, and, in turn, as Vivekananda engaged them. In this context, some consideration of Vivekananda's engagement of questions regarding the relationship between science, reason and faith, socially engaged ethics, and religious universalism will also help us to more fully understand his perspectives.

'Religion' as a Discursive Site: Nineteenth-Century Conceptualisations

Tracing the genealogy of 'religion' has been a popular pursuit for scholars of the same in recent years, as the discipline of religious studies has increasingly undertaken self-reflexive efforts aimed at the critical evaluation of its own underlying assumptions. While this collective project is only just moving beyond its formative years in terms of its revolutionary import for the study of religion, it has already provided much insight into

the ways in which contemporary representations of religion owe a large debt to the wider currents of Western thought, particularly those arising from the European Enlightenment. Outside of religious studies, scholars in other disciplines—including history, political studies, philosophy, literary studies and women’s studies—have contributed many further insights into the roles played by imperial discourses and their characteristic understandings of the impact of a variety of social and political forces and currents on the formation of what we today conceptualise as ‘religion’.

One of the most relevant studies of the epistemic assumptions embedded within ‘religion’ and its allied concepts, specifically in the context of the academic study and representation of Indian traditions, is that authored by Richard King.⁵ King notes that modern understandings of the word’s Latin root, *religio*, favour the etymology⁶ of the Christian theologian Lactantius, taking its essence to be a covenantal ‘binding’ (*religare*) of human to Divine, rather than following the (pre-Christian) Roman understanding of *religio* to denote the ‘retracing’ of the traditions of one’s ancestors.⁷ Whereas the pagan interpretation permits a multiplicity of distinctive, co-existing, valid forms of ‘religion’, the later Christian definition implicitly suggests a singular object standing in a covenantal relationship with the subject. (Although Daniel Dubuisson is equally correct in pointing out that the Romans’ circumscribed civic concept of religion could not have acquired a

⁵ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘the Mystic East’* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁶ Daniel Dubuisson has criticised this common practice of commencing an academic work on religion by making reference to its antiquarian etymology, on the grounds that it allegedly “tends to minimize or cancel out the role of history (with its continuous modifications or shifts), while seeking to preserve an essential (timeless?) tie between the current, living acceptance of a word and its hypothetical first reception, raised to the status of original, founding datum.” (Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003; French edition published 1998], 22.) However, that the tracing of the etymology is an integral part of King’s self-described ‘genealogy’, which seeks to problematise this very myth of religion’s “eternal essence” (see *ibid.*), is little in doubt.

universal, transcultural meaning unaided; it was Christianity's appropriation and reinterpretation of the Latin term that laid the foundation for this phenomenon.)⁸ King asserts that "the concept of 'religion' is the product of the culturally specific discursive processes of Christian history in the West,"⁹ and that religion is a 'privileged category', which, to some extent, inherently assumes a theistic and dualistic Christian model as normative. Even today, as King notes, the academic and philosophical debates over the boundaries of 'religion' as a concept rarely actually problematise *the term itself*.¹⁰ Thus, religious traditions continue to be scrutinised from a perspective that often tacitly holds them up before a Christian model. Indeed, the profundity of this relationship has led some scholars to question the very existence of 'religions' in historical and cultural contexts not heavily influenced by Christian norms and assumptions.¹¹

In practice, in the theologically influenced Western context, religion has long implicitly been—to cite Dubuissen's pithy expression—"nostra religio in opposition to vestrae religiones, our religion versus your religions."¹² Dubuissen astutely observes that it was in fact those belonging to 'the religion' who bestowed upon the others the designation 'religion' itself, while simultaneously denying to them its lofty ascribed status as the embodiment of Truth.¹³ (While this theme may no longer be explicit in most modern scholarship—except that produced by some conservative Christian theologians—its shadow is present in Western academia's long-prevalent division of religious studies

⁷ King, 35-8.

⁸ Dubuissen, 23-4.

⁹ King, 40.

¹⁰ Ibid., Chap. 2: "Disciplining Religion," 35-61.

¹¹ See, for example, S. N. Balagangadhara, *The Heathen in His Blindness...: Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).

¹² Dubuissen, 25.

¹³ Ibid.

into the study of the Christian, or Judeo-Christian, tradition, and of the other 'world' religions.) With the term, as King and others have demonstrated, comes a whole host of historical and theological accretions as well, including a Protestant literary bias, a Eurocentric cultural orientation, a focus on doctrine and intellectual assent to a fixed set of propositions, the question of veracity (i.e., the notion that a religion may be true or false), and an equation of religious truth with the historicity of a tradition's mythology.

Another perspective, expressed most famously by Jonathan Z. Smith, is that religion is "an anthropological not a theological category,"¹⁴ at least as far as its contemporary usage is concerned. While Smith is no doubt correct in recognising the contribution of the human sciences to our modern understanding of religion, this does not erase the influence of Christian thinking on the same. The modern concept of religion, as mentioned earlier, is a site for the intersection, negotiation, and amalgamation of multiple strands of discourse from within varied spheres of thought.¹⁵ Also, we should not be lulled into the popular fallacy that scientific and religious ways of thinking and explaining the world are essentially disparate; as Balagangadhara reminds us, the 'modern sciences' actually owe a great debt to Western religion for many of their culturally-specific foundational ideas and assumptions, and thus the worldviews of both science and religion are fundamentally interrelated.¹⁶ While Said, for his part, has rightly been subject to criticism for oversimplifying the collusion of Western religious and

¹⁴ Johnathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" in *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269.

¹⁵ Dubuisson has summarised the resultant polyvalent dimension of religion in his introduction, in a passage that is worth recounting for its appealing and incisive description: "The evocative power of certain words is perhaps only the reverse of their capacity to summarize a prodigious quantity of information, to symbolize countless connections, to recapitulate centuries and centuries of history in a few sounds. What word condenses the fate and face of the West into three syllables better than 'religion'?" (Dubuisson, 1).

¹⁶ See Balagangadhara, 454-60.

secular discourses in the production of Orientalist representations,¹⁷ other scholars have revisited the issue in a more nuanced and insightful fashion. Dubuisson, in exploring the vast network of texts (the ‘hypertext’) which participate in the formation of ‘Western knowledge’, describes particularly well the interrelationship of these various currents:

The hypertext in which we navigate daily... is primarily made up of references that, in one way or other (or in several ways simultaneously), almost always have something to do with religion.

... This is why today’s individual, our contemporary, who believes him or herself to be definitely rid of all religious scruple, continues nonetheless to think of the world and the self by means of (fragments of) texts borrowed from this Western religious tradition or composed according to its canons. And many human sciences, starting with the history of religions, have unknowingly contracted the same constituent debt. When they think, they never do so but in a learned language that, far from having been conceived to do science, was in the main elaborated within the framework of controversies over questions of religion.¹⁸

This hypertext, however, is anything but homogenous or historically stable. The idea of religion underwent a radical transformation during the Enlightenment, when the idea arose that religious concepts could be studied apart from their theological ‘truth-value’—thus remaking religion as an ‘experience-distant’ concept.¹⁹ As a fundamentally *human* phenomenon, religion could be understood, it was thought, in terms of its illumination of so-called basic capacities of human nature, such as truth (philosophy), goodness (ethics), and beauty (aesthetics),²⁰ appropriated as authoritative categories by modern thinkers from among the variable lists of ‘transcendentals’ appealed to by medieval

¹⁷ See Philip A. Mellor, “Orientalism, Representation and Religion: The Reality Behind the Myth,” *Religion* 34 (2004): 99-112.

¹⁸ Dubuisson, 36.

¹⁹ Clifford Geertz coined this term to describe the change of approach towards religion that occurred during the seventeenth century in Europe. Cited in Torkel Brekke, *Makers of Modern Indian Religion in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 29.

Scholasticism. These categories themselves reveal that, while ostensibly eschewing concern with religious truth, Enlightenment thinkers were really imposing a distinctive set of Western/Christian essentialist and universalising assumptions. Western observers increasingly became able to 'see' religion everywhere, in radically dissimilar phenomena and diverse cultures.

Many 'scientific' European scholars of this time, in their efforts to classify and systematise the elements of the human world, were wont to identify a common group of 'great' or 'world' religions amid the plethora of varieties of human 'religious' phenomena (the designation and delineation thereof being their own, of course) to be found across the globe, in societies past and present. Among the common criteria employed to draw this 'great'-versus-'minor' distinction (the labels themselves are highly value-laden) were the antiquity and persistence of the religion, the existence of a body of systematic written texts, the tradition's numerical adherence, and/or its spread outside of 'racial' or 'ethnic' boundaries.²¹ The influence of culturally biased assumptions regarding what makes a 'great' (read: legitimate) religion is obvious in these choices of criteria—all take Christianity as an implicit prototype. Consider, for example, the far-reaching impact of the scriptocentric orientation of European scholarship. As University of Chicago theologian David Tracy explains, this notion continues to shape understandings of religion/s even today:

Many religious traditions in which writing does not play the central role are often, even in major scholarship, misinterpreted as 'archaic' or even 'primitive' when they

²⁰ For a discussion of Enlightenment themes and thinkers in relation to the development of modern conceptions of religion, see Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1-12.

²¹ As evidence of the persistence of these categories into the present-day study of religion, see the taxonomy presented in Frank Whaling, ed., *Theory and Method in Religious Studies: Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 25-7.

are merely different from religions in which writing (especially in the form of written texts) does function as the central material reality. Indeed, these other traditions have often been seriously misinterpreted and, even more seriously, marginalised as not among the ‘classic’ universal religious traditions or ways.²²

This pattern repeated itself with respect to the other elements, above, commonly attributed to the ‘great’ religions alone. That the resultant interpretations both of religion as an abstract idea and of individual ‘religions’ themselves have been deeply interwoven with Western/Christian notions thus hardly comes as a surprise.

Undeniably, then, ‘religion’ in the post-Enlightenment era has been simultaneously constructed by drawing elements from both Christian thought and the secularised world of the empirical (or, more accurately, ‘empiricistic’) natural-cum-social sciences. Because of this interweaving of philosophical threads, by the nineteenth century the concept was laden not only with particular Judeo-Christian²³ historical and cultural meanings, it also privileged the Western academic model (itself a product of the Enlightenment) and the conceptual frameworks of the scholars working therein. (It is not coincidental that the history of religions, as a proto-discipline of academia, also emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century.) In particular, European historicism, sociological and anthropological theory, and comparative philology, all bearing the distinctive imprint of the paradigm of modernity, contributed significantly to the formation both of the concept of ‘religion’ in the abstract—as a reified object capable of study—and of the customary representations of particular religious traditions, including those of India.

²² David Tracy, “Writing,” in Taylor, *Critical Terms*, 384.

²³ The fact that there really is no such entity as the ‘Judeo-Christian’ (these traditions possessing quite-disparate understandings of the world) is accepted and appreciated. However, given the prevalence of certain common elements (such as divine revelation, sacrifice, covenantal conceptions of the human-divine

As well, regardless of whether the subject was approached from a primarily scientific or theological perspective, it was long a given for European scholars of the modern period that any religion—indeed, that religion itself—must be possessed of some fundamental, defining ‘essence’, some element which categorised all of its ‘legitimate’ forms, and which delimited it from other entities. This aspect of the Enlightenment thematic is to be found underlying the work of many prominent philosophers and scholars during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who sought to discover the ‘core’ or ‘spirit’ of religion. They located the essence of religion in elements as varied as the feeling of ‘absolute dependence’ (Friedrich Schleiermacher), the quest for ‘spiritual dominion’ (Albrecht Ritschl), and the experience of the ‘numinous’ (Rudolf Otto).²⁴ The features with which European thinkers were familiar from their understandings (they being, naturally, constructions in their own right) of Western socio-religious phenomena—such as canonical bodies of sacred literature, fundamental doctrines, sets of binary dichotomies between God and human beings, priest and laity, male and female, and so forth—became the essentialist categories through which Indian religions have generally been approached.

Of equal importance, however, to what the concept of religion includes is that which it excludes. Much that has historically been of profound meaning in the lives of persons in non-Christian cultures is not encompassed by the standard modern uses of ‘religion’. Scholars have tended to demarcate between a people-group’s ‘religious’ beliefs/practices, and its ‘philosophy’, ‘law’, ‘social customs’, ‘dress’ (often ‘costume’,

relationship, etc.) within the worldview of each, it is still possible, I believe, to employ the term/concept, albeit cautiously, as a heuristic device.

emphasising its otherness), and manifold other cultural elements in ways that do not accurately reflect the interpenetration of these phenomena, but instead mirror modern European approaches to classifying human experience. This fact has had a significant impact on the ways in which these traditions have been—and continue to be—represented in and through Western discourses.

'Religion' and the Study of India

Regardless as to whether or not non-Christian 'religions' can rightly be said to have existed in pre-colonial, non-Western cultural environments, the term's application (by European *and* Indian thinkers) to historical Indian contexts was already a well-entrenched reality by the middle of the nineteenth century.²⁵ Translations of selected Indian 'religious' texts had achieved an established presence in some segments of the educated Western populace, no doubt, especially American Transcendentalist circles and among the adherents of the Theosophical Society; some serious philosophical thinkers, especially in Germany, also cultivated a knowledge of select Indian sources. Yet, outside of these spheres, acquaintance with Hindu texts, tenets, and practices, even via translations, was neither very deep nor, for the most part, very accurate in the perceptions fostered thereby. Several centuries of Indian travelogues by explorers and merchants,

²⁴ For an in-depth study of the perspectives of these and other seminal figure in the Western formulation of religion, see Capps, "The Essence of Religion," chap. in *Religious Studies*, 1-52.

²⁵ Interestingly enough, the written accounts that we possess from Europeans who visited the Indian subcontinent centuries before, as Balagangadhara shows, found these observers defending the existence of 'religion' in India. The seventeenth-century Dutch explorer and missionary Abrahamus Rogerius wrote of India, "None need think that these individuals are so much like beasts that they do not know of God or Religion (*Gods-dienst*).... There lives no people so beastly, deprived of all reason, that it does not know that there is a God; thus it also has a religion" (quoted in Balagangadhara, 65). Thus religion is approached as a defining quality of human beings, that which distinguishes humanity from "beasts". The fact that explorers to other regions of the world, particularly Africa and North America, did not find evidence of 'religion' (*ibid.*, 66) helps to explain the conclusions of many that the 'beings' encountered there were something

and, particularly, Christian missionary writings on the exotic ‘religion of the Hindoos’, had, by this time, made some awareness of Indian practices, almost invariably at least somewhat distorted, quite pervasive throughout popular European and North American culture. Comparisons between the features of ‘Indian religion’—for many early authors tended to speak of India’s various religio-philosophical traditions with little emphasis on their differentiation—and Christianity were a mainstay of the evangelical missionary genre, with the latter tradition inevitably granted the cardinal position. The literature thus produced became one of the early foundations of subsequent research on the ‘religions of the Orient’.

In Europe, even well before Vivekananda’s time, the formal study of Indian languages and literature had become a respected fixture in the leading universities, particularly in Germany, but also, to a certain extent, in France and England. Here, the focus of Indic scholars, largely philologists by training, was more upon the ideas expressed in the *Upaniṣads* and other so-labelled ‘classical’ Sanskrit texts—almost inevitably the products of India’s brāhmanical traditions. Generally—though not invariably—of a more sympathetic frame of mind than their missionary predecessors and contemporaries, these scholars designated these works to be India’s ‘philosophical’ literature, implicitly or explicitly contrasting them with the devotional (often vernacular) compositions of the popular ‘religious’ movements, which tended to be neglected and oftentimes disparaged. Consider, as a particularly blunt example, the 1810 tome by British Orientalist Edward Moor, *The Hindu Pantheon*, which opens with a critical distinction:

other than fully ‘human’—a claim which was rarely made of Indians, no matter how ‘degraded’ their

The religious doctrines of the Hindus may be divided, like those of most other people whose scriptures are in a hidden tongue, into *exoteric* and *esoteric*; the first is preached to the vulgar, the second known only to a select number: and while the Brahmans are admitted to possess a considerable portion of unadulterated physical, and moral truths, the exoteric religion of the Hindus, in general, consists in gross idolatry and irrational superstition.²⁶

Not content to divide Hinduism into ‘esoteric’ and ‘exoteric’ forms, Moor goes on to equate these, respectively, with religion and mythology²⁷—in other words, so far has modern Hindu religiosity fallen from the normative model of ‘religion’, that, properly speaking, it does not even merit the label. Of interest in this context is not so much the fact that denigration of certain strands of Indian thought and practice took place—disparagement of other traditions, faiths, or cultures is a common enough human phenomenon as to be unremarkable in and of itself—but, rather, the ways in which it exposes the assumptions that have permeated Western writing on India. While competition and contestation by Hindus themselves regarding the relative status and authority of various indigenous texts and traditions has long been a feature of Indian intellectual life, Orientalist scholarship introduced a much starker demarcation, as well as a culturally determined interpretative framework to explain the same. This classical/popular division reflected the strong European Enlightenment split between ‘rational’ forms of humanistic religion and philosophy, and what were deemed ‘irrational’ beliefs and ‘superstitious’ practices. The consequences of this reason-centred outlook for the Western understanding of India’s religious life—and, in fact, of all aspects of Indian culture—should not be underestimated. Partha Chatterjee, in *Nationalist*

humanity might be thought.

²⁶ Edward Moor, *The Hindu Pantheon* (London: J. Johnson, 1810; reprinted New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1999), 1 (some italics removed; remaining italics also in original).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Thought and the Colonial World, has explicated the connection between the modern West's construal of, and emphasis upon, rationality in the scientific sphere, and the hierarchical power relations embedded within the study of human phenomena:

The sciences of nature become the paradigm of all rational knowledge. And the principal characteristic of these sciences as they are now conceived is their relation to an entirely new idea of man's *control* over nature. ... The rational knowledge of human society comes to be organized around concepts such as wealth, productive efficiency, progress, etc. all of which are defined in terms of the promotion of some social 'interests'. Yet 'interests' in society are necessarily diverse; indeed, they are stratified in terms of the relations of power. Consequently, the subject-object relation between man and nature which is central to the new conception of the sciences of nature is now subtly transferred, through the 'rational' conception of society, to relations between man and man. Thus, the sciences of society become the knowledge of the Self and of the Other. Construed in terms of rationality, it necessarily also becomes a means to the power of the Self over the Other. In short, knowledge becomes the means to the domination of the world.²⁸

The construction of reason as a site of "epistemic privilege," Chatterjee posits, naturally leads to European claims of "moral privilege," in which rationality functions as an ethic, presenting its discursively allied values—progress, autonomy, liberalism, and so forth—as normative human ideals.²⁹ This pattern of thinking has impacted powerfully upon the Western evaluation of Indian sources—even in the work of those scholars most kindly disposed towards their subject, as the projections of the interpreters' own values and convictions naturally have influenced their understandings and translations of the materials.

In addition to the effect of this basic rational-irrational dichotomy, the marginalisation of oral and regional literatures further stemmed from, in King's words,

²⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1986; reprinted in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14-15.

²⁹ See *ibid.*, 16-17.

“Western presuppositions about the role of [written] sacred texts in ‘religion’.”³⁰ The belief that Indian religions, like the Judeo-Christian traditions, must be centred upon a definitive body of authoritative canonical literature led to the assembly of the same, as European scholars, building upon the substantial rhetorical authority already granted to the Vedic texts by many Indian sources, moved to create homogeneous ‘critical editions’ out of multiple recensions and often-divergent regional variations of a number of post-Vedic works as well, and then attributed to them a central and authoritative position with respect to Hinduism as a whole (a process for which Veena Das has coined the apt term *semitification*).³¹ Thus, a brahmin-authored and Western-fashioned textual authority was (re-)ascribed to Hinduism, yet asserted to be of its own making and valid across sectarian lines, and the existing religious beliefs and practices of the contemporary Indian people held up to these constructed standards.

Of particular importance to the ensuing evaluation of these sources and traditions are the paradoxically paired themes of ‘stagnation’ and ‘degeneration’, whose formulation and, rather absurdly, *simultaneous* attribution to Indian culture was in large part a result of the particular socio-political forces that interplayed within modern European societies, especially those nations involved as active agents in the colonial project. The progress-centred thematic of Western modernity—that is, of modernity as a *discourse*, rather than a chronological period per se—is intertwined with the rise of modern historicism, particularly inasmuch as the latter stresses a vision of time that properly follows a linear developmental course articulated as a march towards a teleological state of complete mastery by Man (*sic*) of the natural and social worlds, with

³⁰ King, 101.

a corresponding increase in collective liberty and personal autonomy.³² However, the locus of this progression was posited to lie within Western European culture, by virtue of its ostensible status as privileged heir to the Renaissance and, later, the Enlightenment. (Though the denizens of the nascent American nation were subsequently to ascribe to themselves the leading role in this societal advancement.) This is not to say that the non-Western world was excluded by European thinkers from this paradigm of progress-based change and stadial history; indeed, it was the very imposition of this framework and its associated criteria as purportedly universal, transcultural standards that often led to the perception of India's inadequacy (an attribution strengthened all the more by Europeans' desire to disavow their own growing uncertainty about the actual state of the West's power and progress). The yardsticks of 'progress' employed by the West—scientific knowledge based on empirical experimentation and embodied in classification and taxonomy; technological advancement reflected in increasing control over nature; social structures that embodied liberal principles and fostered personal autonomy; separation of government from religious authority—were generally not consciously encountered in Indian society by European observers. Even when actually present, their unique cultural manifestations were rarely recognised.

Taking it as a given that Indians—as well as many of the world's other major cultural groups—had somehow been excluded from this 'normative' pattern of human development, European thinkers formulated theoretical models of history and society that would account for these circumstances. To this end, the burgeoning disciplines of the

³¹ Cited in *ibid.*, 104.

³² See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998), s.v. "Modernity."

social sciences came into play, particularly during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, to try to account for India's contemporary social, political, and cultural situation. In particular, the increasingly Darwinian cast which these social-cum-biological ideas assumed as the decades passed helped to bolster the idea that India was 'stuck' in an earlier period of evolutionary history.³³ Attempts were thus made by scholars using comparative approaches to explain Indians' practices, beliefs and institutions in terms of their alleged similarity to early European ones. For example, Indian Vedic and Purāṇic accounts were often studied in relationship to the mythologies of Greece and Rome; the identification of common themes then was used as further support for the existing attribution of common developmental stages to human society and even psychology. To uncharitable critics, all were simply—to use Balagangadhara's phrase—various "expressions of heathendom,"³⁴ different manifestations of the same 'phase'.

A different perspective was proffered, however, by the more-idealistically minded Orientalist scholars, who, in the process of studying the ancient Sanskrit texts, encountered many religio-philosophical ideas by which they were greatly impressed, and yet which seemed very unlike the accounts of (supposed) present-day Indian religious realities conveyed to Europe by administrators, missionaries, and other travellers. To explain these glaring discrepancies between the Enlightenment expectation of universal human progress—particularly the great 'promise' which India had once seemed to hold, based upon its antediluvian scriptures—and the reality, in the West's perception, of India's contemporary 'backwardness', scholars of India formulated models that, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, utilised philological studies, anthropological

³³ King, 124.

constructions of race, and sociological theories of caste, among other tools, to ‘prove’ that India was a civilisation in decline, having suffered a ‘degeneration’ from earlier heights.³⁵ (The methodologies of these latter two disciplines in particular were to overtake linguistic techniques as the most-authoritative approaches to the study of India as the century progressed, concurrent with the increasing influence of discourses identified as ‘scientific’.)³⁶ This waning of India’s glory, it was maintained, manifested itself in religious life as a fall from the ascetical monistic philosophy of Advaita Vedānta to the ‘emotionalism’ of subsequent *bhakti* movements.³⁷ The vision of India as a ‘fallen civilisation’ coexisted uneasily beside that of the stagnation-espousing evolutionary model—a glaring example of the ambiguity inherent in colonial discourse—and yet both continued to deeply influence the interpretation of Indian religions (not only by others, but also by Indians themselves) throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, even into the present day.

The apparent validity of representations of India’s debility, be it conceived of as congenital or acquired, was augmented by the particular interpretations of Indian concepts of time advanced by European scholars of the period. This theme has been explored by historian Romila Thapar, most notably in her 1996 monograph *Time as a Metaphor of History*.³⁸ She observes that Western scholars, from their earliest encounters

³⁴ Balagangadhara, 100.

³⁵ Europeans themselves were much concerned about the possibility of such a ‘fall’ happening to their own civilisations; this anxiety manifested itself in a variety of ways, particularly through fears of racial degeneration, as will be explored in Chapter Five.

³⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the role of science and scientific discourses in the Indian colonial setting, see Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

³⁷ King, 135.

³⁸ Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996; reprinted in Romila Thapar, *History and Beyond*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

with Indian sources, concluded that Indians lacked a sense of history, as well as what they considered to be its necessary correlate, a consciousness of linear time.³⁹ In its place, these scholars posited that Indian texts uniformly advanced a vision of cyclic, ever-repeating (and thus, ultimately, changeless) 'mythological' time, which excluded a historical dialectic and thus was incompatible with a sense of progress as the West conceived of it. (Thapar has refuted the validity of this characterisation by demonstrating how Indologists based their conclusions on a narrow selection of texts that emphasised cyclical temporal patterns—a choice which, she suggests, was also encouraged by a desire "to define the otherness" of India, and of non-European societies in general.)⁴⁰ Due to this supposed lack of historical consciousness on the part of Indians, it was suggested by many colonial authorities that they thus lacked the impetus and capacity for 'modern' development along the lines of Europe's self-conceived program of collective progress, as well as its supposed benefits in the social, political, and personal spheres. Even in the eyes of more-sympathetic interpreters, India often became conceptualised as a land of eternal, unchanging religion—and religion was often itself marked as the culprit (by Hegel, among others) that kept India excluded from the dynamic historical forces driving change in the West.⁴¹ Thus, whether this temporal disparity was articulated in terms of religio-cultural stasis or active deterioration, Western observers located India securely exterior to the Enlightenment project.⁴²

³⁹ For a fuller version of the ideas that follow, see Thapar, 4-9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴¹ See Ronald Inden, "Hinduism: The Mind of India," chap. in *Imagining India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 85-130.

⁴² This position might seem to moot what Ashis Nandy has identified as several possible psychological and sociological 'benefits' of this cyclic-time concept on modern Indians. However, it does not if—as does Nandy—one regards its importance as lying in the ways that the cyclical theme has been appropriated and utilised by Indians along with other aspects of Orientalist knowledge adopted during colonial times. See

As Thapar's comment on the 'Othering' of India suggests, the profound impact that the political reality of European colonialism had upon discourses about India should not be overlooked. While this connection will be considered throughout the following chapters as well, the interpretation of India's religious traditions was undeniably impacted by Western imperial concerns. The need of Europeans, particularly the British, to justify their colonial domination of India helped to make these ideas of Oriental stagnation and/or decline attractive ones. More than this, as postcolonial scholars have emphasised, the influence of the priorities and strategies of colonialism permeates these discursive formations from their very conception. For, although Britain professed an official policy of 'non-interference' with regard to the religious life of India, the various ways in which Indians' religio-cultural traditions were constructed and portrayed, and the particular value-sets that these representations transmitted, had significant consequences for the Raj's ability to exercise hegemonic control of its colonial subjects.

One of the most-glaring examples of the imbrication of religious interpretation and colonial priorities is James Mill's three-volume 1818 tome, *The History of British India*,⁴³ which functioned for decades thereafter as an essential textbook for the training of civil servants. Mill's remarks regarding Hinduism seek to highlight the "rude mind" of the Hindus as revealed in their texts, beliefs, and practices, and he interlaces statements on the necessity of British intervention in the face of such ostensibly 'Hindoo' practices as forcible widow immolation and child sacrifice.⁴⁴ In fact, he goes so far as to encourage the rewriting of Hindu mythology by Westerners "to suit our own views" and, thereby, to

Ashis Nandy, *Time Warps: Silent and Evasive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002), 23-6.

“form out of it not only a sublime theology, but a sublime philosophy, or any thing we please,”⁴⁵ invoking the precedent of the Platonists’ own ‘refinement’ of Greek and Roman mythology.⁴⁶ That his agenda was to foster knowledge of the Hindu religion specifically in order to aid British agents of what was then the East India Company in carrying out economic, social and political interactions with Indians for the benefit of the former is made abundantly clear throughout his book’s preface.⁴⁷

Considering, however, that a substantial share of the academic research and writing concerning Indian religion during this period was undertaken by *German* scholars, it is understandable that the attribution of frankly ‘colonial’ priorities to Indological scholarship might at first glance appear somewhat doubtful. Even Said acknowledges that, during the better part of the nineteenth century, Germany lacked a “protracted, sustained *national* interest in the Orient.”⁴⁸ He observes: “There was nothing in Germany to correspond to the Anglo-French presence. ... [Thus] the German Orient was almost exclusively a scholarly, or at least a classical, Orient.”⁴⁹ As Todd Kontje, a scholar of German literature, has cautioned, however, we must be wary of discounting other considerations, for “if we define *national interest* more broadly as an intellectual effort to

⁴³ James Mill, *The History of British India* [1818]: *Abridged and With an Introduction by William Thomas*, ed. John Clive, Classics of British Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

⁴⁴ See Mill, “Religion of the Hindus,” chap. in *The History of British India*, 137-89.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, 3-26. Mill’s work is all-the-more remarkable for his claim that his lack of first-hand experience with India—like Müller, Mill had never visited the land about which he wrote—was itself among the reasons he was *particularly qualified* to undertake such a study, implying that the ‘knowledge’ one would acquire in India would be most unlike, and even opposed to, the systematised knowledge to be gathered through texts (the latter constituting the *real*, and useful, knowledge, it is implied). And *translated* texts at that, for Mill himself was not competent in any Indian language, ancient or modern (see *ibid.*, 10-19). This illustrates the extent to which the British conceived of knowledge, in its most objective, useful, and ‘true’ form, as a product exclusively of the West.

⁴⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 19 (italics in original).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

locate and preserve a sense of communal identity, then we can indeed speak of a German national interest in the East... [and] of a peculiarly German Orientalism."⁵⁰ Further, as Inden explains, the idealist view of Indian religions predominant within certain English and American circles owes, perhaps unexpectedly, much debt to German thinkers like Hegel; for the British

were quite happy to divert the German rationalizations of a world order and append them, piecemeal and often unknowingly, to their own Utilitarian or Christian views.... The endless stream of studies of myths and the myriad portrayals of a mysterious India that reveals layers of the psyche, all have their ancestry here.⁵¹

Beyond this indirect association between Germany and colonialism, there was also the reality of more-concrete links with the British Empire, as illustrated by the tenure of arguably the leading nineteenth-century German Indologist, Max Müller, at one of England's leading universities. In addition, as British management of India solidified and expanded throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain stepped up its focus on training its own 'experts' on Indian languages, texts, and cultures. In the end, whether it took the form of a direct colonial drive to increase political control, or the less-well-defined quest by some European thinkers to formulate their own collective cultural self-identity through the imposition of binary categories, Western representations of Indian religions bore the marks.

Had the impact of these constructions remained remote from India, confined within the libraries and classrooms of Europe, the situation would be much more straightforward. However, such a segregation of Orientalist knowledge from colonial

⁵⁰ Todd Kontje, *German Orientalisms* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 2. Its "peculiarity," explains Kontje, lies in its fluctuation between Germans' positioning of themselves with Europe, and consequently in opposition to the East, and identifying themselves with elements of the Orient, and therefore situating themselves against the West (*ibid.*, 2-3).

⁵¹ Inden, 96.

practice never existed, nor did Western representations and the texts that contained them remain secluded from the scrutiny of the Indian gaze. With respect to the marriage of colonial power and religious representation, Western knowledge of Indian religious life was deployed in the colonial setting in a variety of concrete ways. For example, as we shall see in Chapter Six, European observers tended to identify ‘caste’ as *the* defining category of Hinduism and used it to shape their interactions with Indians and their restructuring of Indian society—acts which, in some cases at least, were deliberately calculated to impede Hindus from achieving a consolidated identity and, consequently, a united front against colonial power.⁵² Scholars posited that the Vedic portrayal of a hierarchical fourfold partition of humanity was the fundamental archaic structure underlying modern caste divisions.⁵³ Representing this Vedic account—as well as those of subsequent brahmin-authored texts—as commanding universal adherence among modern Hindus of all castes, the result was a model of Hindu socio-religious structure that profoundly influenced Britain’s colonial practices, including the Raj’s choice of authorities on ‘traditional’ matters, construction of modern Indian legal codes, development of indigenous military contingents, and a vast array of other areas.

In the intellectual sphere, Indians were quick to embrace the study, if not always the implementation, of European ideas and theories. Via both the Western-modelled educational system in India and, particularly in Bengal, the thriving printing and publication industry, the theories advanced by Western thinkers soon reached an Indian audience eager to understand the broader ideas that underlay the practices, institutions,

⁵² Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, *The New Cambridge History of India*, ed. Gordon Johnson, vol. 3, no. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 137.

and technologies of their imperial rulers. The deep and widespread interest on the part of Indians about questions that the West identified as belonging to the realms of religion and philosophy were naturally reflected in the selection of European and American literature that was reprinted for an Indian readership, with the Christian missionary societies contributing substantially in this respect. Not only were European ideas and philosophies of interest to the Indian literati, but also the interpretations of Indian religion advanced by prominent Western scholars, particularly Müller, were investigated by Indians desirous of discovering what 'scientific' research had to say about their own texts and traditions, especially since the Orientalists, on the whole, appeared to be much more sympathetic towards Indian religious phenomena than were the missionaries. In the Bengali context, such notable thinkers as Rammohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore, and Keshabchandra Sen read very widely and were well acquainted with colonial-era interpretations of Indian religious life; innumerable lesser-known Indians, especially in the country's major European-controlled urban centres, also did likewise. Therefore, when academic, literary, religious and political writers in Europe set forth their understandings of India and Hinduism, they not only represented the Indian people and their traditions to a Western audience, but also *re-presented* them back to at least a segment of those very communities which they were purporting to decipher and explain. These discourses invariably impacted Hindus, particularly those from the urban middle classes, and prompted a variety of responses. Thus, European thinkers did not merely paint a portrait of Indian religion for the eyes of the Occidental, they in fact participated

⁵³ For example, see Max Müller's 1858 essay, "Caste," in *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), 295-353.

in the ongoing construction of those very traditions, via their influence on Indians themselves.

However, that the theological evaluations, the Enlightenment dichotomies, and the value-laden constructions of the social sciences remained embedded to some degree within ‘religion’ as it was increasingly appropriated as an interpretative category by modern-day Indians is only to be expected. This adoption was coupled with an attempt to find suitable ways of mediating the conceptual and linguistic barriers between Indian traditions and European models. One of the most common approaches, given voice to early on by Rammohan Roy,⁵⁴ but most-clearly articulated by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay in his *Dharmatattva* (1888),⁵⁵ was the equation of the term *dharma*—a word which itself already functioned in the Indian context as an intermediary between ancient Sanskrit expositions and modern vernacular discourses on Hindu tradition—with the English term ‘religion’. In the exposition, nuanced and well-argued, Bankimchandra concludes that although previously, “the people of our country did not perceive the independent existence of that object which is understood as religion,”⁵⁶ among his (presumably Bengali) contemporaries the term was in common usage as the equivalent of ‘religion’.⁵⁷ This is an important illustration of how, in a relatively short period of time, an indigenous term that had long functioned as a polyvalent signifier with a constellation of meanings (that, prior to the colonial encounter, differed substantially from those of ‘religion’) assumed a new—even primary—sense as a ‘translation’ of an important English concept.

⁵⁴ Brekke, 30.

⁵⁵ *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's Dharmatattva*: 1888 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁶ Quoted in Brekke, 31.

'Hinduism'

The modern notion of 'Hinduism' illustrates what is perhaps the most dramatic instance of 'outsider' participation in the construction of a major world religion. The appellation 'Hindu', as is well known, has distinctly etic origins, stemming originally from a Persian geographical label that identified as 'Hindus' those who lived in the Indus-river region.⁵⁸ Until the nineteenth century, in those instances that we encounter the word—'Hindoo', according to the favoured spelling of the day—in textual sources, the term possessed little in the way of specifically 'religious' meaning, either to those in the subcontinent or those outside of it.⁵⁹ A significant portion of the Christian world, for several centuries prior, was largely content to subsume the people of India under the ill-defined rubric 'heathen', simultaneously suggesting both spiritual benightedness and civilisational backwardness. In actual usage during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, 'Hindoo' might fairly be said to have designated in an all-inclusive manner the Indian people and their culture, resembling more an ethnic label than a moniker for those allied with any particular creed and/or praxis. Further, in the British metropole, it conveniently linked the theological contention of Christian superiority with the expansionist themes of empire, to foster a new conception of Christian selfhood with an emphasis upon religious and social missionary work.⁶⁰

The appearances of the significance-laden variant *Hinduism* in early-nineteenth-century Western academic literature was not a mere descriptive innovation, but a

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 2nd ed. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 30-1.

⁵⁹ King, 99.

⁶⁰ See Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 28-9.

performative speech act which reformulated elements of a variety of Indian traditions into a coherent entity along the lines of the Judeo-Christian prototype, capable of study, comparison and critique. It also illustrates the deep ambivalence long inherent within the West's representation of the East; while the East becomes the 'other'—different, ahistorical, irrational, requiring control—it yet must be formulated upon a European paradigm in order to become comprehensible and capable of comparison with the West. This process of 'Othering' the East—that is, of designating it (implicitly or explicitly) as 'not like the West'—has served as a means of constructing and knowing an Orient in a form which makes it controllable and governable, as well as of simultaneously 'creating' the West itself through attribution to this other of the elements that Europe's own populace wished to disavow.⁶¹ Ensuring the persistence of Europe's created representations, the manner and extent of the participation by the 'Oriental' in colonial knowledge-production was regulated, often through the simple fact of the West's control over the sites, means, and norms of that production. The Indian, for example, might be encouraged to act as a 'native informant' or even sometimes as an 'interpreter' in the context of European cultural production, but the particular credentials demanded and the level and extent of European language mastery required were among the barriers to indigenous 'usurpation' of the unique role of the Western scholar.⁶² The Europeans' position, as Ronald Inden writes, has traditionally been "privileged in relation to that of

⁶¹ Ashcroft, et al, *Key Concepts*, s.v. "Othering."

⁶² The traditional pattern of patronage involving brahmin Sanskrit *paṇḍits* began to decline during the eighteenth century; in its place came the employment of the same as translators and advisors by British-run Indian institutions, while foreign scholars increasingly usurped the role of Sanskrit hermeneuts and 'authoritative' commentators. See Dermot Killingley, "Modernity, Reform, and Revival" in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 511-12.

the Orientals... in a relationship of intellectual dominance over that of the Easterners”⁶³—and, as such, becomes the source of the final, authoritative statement (“the tyranny of the expert,”⁶⁴ as the phenomenon has been aptly labelled in postcolonial circles). The unfiltered ‘intrusion’ of the other—the object-become-subject—into the formation of Orientalist discourses during the period in question was often perceived (and rightly so) as having the potential to undermine representations which were inherently unstable due to their dependence on a network of shifting power relations and an often-tenuous connection to the reality of which they purported to describe.⁶⁵ While a very select few Indian scholars—such as acclaimed philologist Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar—did manage to penetrate the walls of Western academia to achieve recognition as Orientalists in their own right, they were a comparative rarity, particularly prior to the latter decades of the nineteenth century, and their work was not exempt from the expectations, in terms of both content and theory, advanced by Western Orientalists.

Whether ‘heathen’ or ‘Hindoo’, therefore, these concepts were as much a declaration by the Western speaker/writer of the ‘not-like-us-ness’ of those so identified as they were an attempt to describe and delimit them. The expression of this fundamental difference took many forms, but one of the most consequential, as explored in Inden’s work as well as a number of subsequent studies, was the systematic *feminisation* of Hinduism.⁶⁶ Often this took place via the deployment of organic, amorphous descriptive

⁶³ Inden, 38.

⁶⁴ Peter Childs and Patrick Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), 23.

⁶⁵ Bhabha has argued for the inevitable destabilising power of alternative interpretations and understandings advanced by colonised cultures. Arguably, the gradual deconstruction of Orientalist assumptions in academia and elsewhere of late is attributable in large part to the increased role of ‘native voices’ in the representation of these traditions.

⁶⁶ See Inden, 85-8.

metaphors, through which Hinduism was likened to such entities as a jungle or a sponge; this contrasted sharply with Europe's articulation of its own nature and workings in terms of masculine, mechanistic imagery.⁶⁷ By so doing, Hinduism was linked (not necessarily consciously or intentionally) with the ambivalent position of women and femininity that prevailed in nineteenth-century Britain, in the discourses of which woman often functioned as a trope signifying, on the one hand, submissive domesticity, and, on the other, temptation and ruination of men through the destruction of their empowering 'masculinity'.⁶⁸ In both instances, the notion of *irrationality* was strongly attributed to the female, a theme which was emphasised in the characterisation of Hinduism as a feminine entity (unlike the 'rational', masculine West).⁶⁹ In this way, the threats posed both by the colonised Oriental and by the female Briton—both increasingly dissatisfied with their places according to the status quo—were concurrently subject to discursive control.

Likewise, Protestant Europe found in Hinduism an outlet for its growing concern over the increasing power and influence of Catholicism, especially in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Given the privileged position granted to brāhmanical textual traditions by Orientalists, as well as the acceptance of a normative brahmin-centred hierarchy by colonial administrators, it was not difficult for the West to brand Hinduism, like Catholicism, a 'priest-ridden' entity, declaring its communities of followers had been barred from the expected attainment of an Enlightenment-style liberalistic social transformation by the religion's own corrupt, authoritarian structure.⁷⁰ Further imposing on India its experience with sharply divided religious communities within its own

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 88.

⁶⁹ See van der Veer, 26.

borders—a division publicly downplayed in favour of the united national front required for the colonial project—Britain came to view India as comprised of two fundamentally disparate religious communities, Hindus and Muslims.⁷¹ Thomas Metcalf has explored how Western representations counterpoised Hinduism against an ambivalent image of Islam, the latter simultaneously evoking condemnation for Muslims' alleged tyranny, and fascination on account of Islam's apparently confident faith (something Christian Europe was perceived as lacking) as well as the perception of Muslims as rugged, masculine warriors (an ideal towards which the British aspired).⁷² That these dichotomised representations intensified Hinduism's image as weak and effeminate should come as no surprise. In all of these cases, Hindus, largely denied a place as speaking subjects in the articulation of their own traditions within the Western discursive sphere, came to function as convenient and necessary others for the West's fears, anxieties, and desires.⁷³

We can thus well understand King's statement that "the notion of 'Hinduism' is itself a Western-inspired abstraction, which until the nineteenth century bore little or no resemblance to the diversity of India religious belief and practice."⁷⁴ It is not that the great variety of Hindu beliefs and practices were somehow overlooked by Western observers; rather, by using preconceived notions of what constituted 'religion' and 'Hinduism', many of these diverse practices became excluded from the normative models

⁷⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁷¹ Metcalf, 132.

⁷² See *ibid.*, 132-48.

⁷³ This is not, of course, to deny that many Hindus *did* offer interpretations of their traditions and texts aimed at an extra-India audience; however, their contributions were rarely granted an authority on par with those of Western Orientalists.

⁷⁴ King, 98.

of the same. Consider, for example, pioneering Sanskritist M. Monier-Williams' 1877 work *Hinduism*, in which he explains:

It is remarkable with all their diversities, the Hindu populations throughout India have a religious faith which, preserved as it is in one language and one literature [!], furnishes a good evidence of the original unity of the Indo-Aryan immigrants, while it faithfully reflects the present diversified character of the vast country in which it prevails. It is a creed based on an original, simple, pantheistic doctrine, but branching out into an endless variety of polytheistic superstitions. Like the sacred fig-tree of India, which from a single stem sends out numerous branches destined to send roots to the ground and become trees themselves, till the parent stock is lost in a dense forest of its own offshoots, so has this pantheistic creed rooted itself firmly in the Hindu mind, and spread its ramifications so luxuriantly that the simplicity of its root-dogma is lost in an exuberant outgrowth of monstrous mythology.⁷⁵

Here, the Hinduism-as-jungle metaphor is employed to distinguish between “original” Hinduism (identified by Monier-Williams as residing in the Upaniṣadic dictum *ekam eva advitīyam*, “There is but one Being, no second,” which he interprets in non-dualistic terms)⁷⁶ and what is implied to be the degenerate form of existing Hindu belief and praxis, which has obscured its own ‘real’ core—the recovery of which is the task of the (masculine) European Orientalist who penetrates the (feminine) forest of the irrational Hindu present.

Somewhat ironically, however, the ‘Hinduism’ that the West shaped, especially insofar as the British administration in India was involved, was what we might term a ‘fragmented totality’. That is, although Orientalist interpretations tended to construct a single ‘religion’ from amongst a huge variety of Indian traditions, it was a religion that was considered to be essentially fissured along lines of caste.⁷⁷ Monier-Williams articulates this one-yet-many representation of Hinduism when he writes, “Even in

⁷⁵ M. Monier-Williams, *Hinduism* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta Ltd, 1877; reprinted 1951), 7-8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁷ Metcalf, 132-4.

districts where the Hindus are called by one name, and make use of one speech, caste regulations have operated to break them up into an infinite number of independent communities, each priding itself on maintaining its individuality and exclusiveness."⁷⁸ Yet, his identification of these caste-based communities and their distinctive practices immediately and unproblematically prefaces his comments, cited above, on the *unity* of Hinduism. As we will explore further in Chapter Six, 'caste' meant different things to different interpreters, yet its status, in one form or another, as *the* fundamental taxonomic principle within Hinduism was almost universally agreed upon by observers outside of India. By the identification of this stratification as a means to (re)order this unwieldy entity, Hinduism was further made capable of study, comprehension, and manipulation by colonial interests. Thus, to a large extent, Hinduism was both discursively formed and re-divided by those external to it, consciously or unconsciously, according to their own ideas and objectives.

Regardless of its resemblance to reality or lack thereof, the term 'Hinduism' soon became entrenched in discourses, both European and Indian, on religion. We witness it make an early appearance in the writings of the Hindu reformer Rammohan Roy in the first part of the nineteenth century (in fact, it is possible that Roy's use of the term may even predate that of Western sources),⁷⁹ and thereafter gradually become increasingly widespread in Indian-penned English discourse.⁸⁰ (The term was not in common use by Indians until the latter part of the century, however, as is suggested by Monier-Williams'

⁷⁸ Monier-Williams, *ibid.*, 7.

⁷⁹ King, 100.

⁸⁰ Indeed, this broader sense endures to the present day in as consequential a site as modern Indian civil law, where 'Hindu' is invoked as an umbrella term that includes those groups identifying themselves as Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists. This usage, observes King, suggests the continuance of a negative practice of definition which equates 'Hindu' with the non-Christian and non-Muslim 'other'. See King, 99.

comment, in 1877, that the English monikers 'Hinduism' and 'Brahmanism' "are not names recognised by the natives."⁸¹ That the creation and widespread adoption of terminology influenced and, in turn, reflected, Hindus' thinking about their own religion (for they now had a 'religion') is certain; for, as Dubuisson notes, "our language is also our world... what exists for our language exists equally for us in one way or another."⁸² It is likely that the full range of implications embedded within this 'ism' was not uppermost in the consciousness of its early Indian adopters; indeed, the neologism was likely perceived as embodying something of the 'scientific spirit' of the West in its tidy classification. By Vivekananda's time, the use of the term by an Indian writing in English would not have been considered bold or unusual.

That the emergence of this 'Hinduism' in India was influenced by other colonial factors beyond Orientalist rhetorical formulations should not be overlooked. As Peter van der Veer has explored in his book *Imperial Encounters*, the role of religion in Europe during this period was undergoing a radical transformation, and this impacted upon the character of Hindu beliefs, practices, and self-conceptions in the Indian subcontinent in a very real way. As national identity came to overtake religious affiliation as the predominant factor in determining political loyalty in Europe during the nineteenth century, observes van der Veer, Britons' self-image was increasingly vested in their claimed role as the bearers of civilisation to the ignorant and savage peoples of the world, a position which they bolstered through an appeal to the growing racial ideology of the day.⁸³ To secure the peaceful governance of India, particularly following the 1857

⁸¹ M. Monier-Williams, 9.

⁸² Dubuisson, 31.

⁸³ van der Veer, 20-4.

rebellion, the British strategically adopted an officially ‘secular’ stance in their Indian colonial efforts (a position which also brought about less protest from the then-vibrant evangelical Protestant missionary societies than had the earlier involvement of the East India Company in the administration of Hindu temples).⁸⁴ If the professed aims of the Raj did not include religious conversion, this was not mirrored in the perception of Indians who, as van der Veer notes “did not conceive the colonial state as neutral and secular but rather as fundamentally Christian.”⁸⁵ This was an astute recognition, for, despite the British government’s efforts to proclaim its religious neutrality, the colonial project was, in retrospect, very obviously intertwined with Christian values. Partly in response to this perceived collusion of British imperial interests and Christianity, Hindus began to formulate movements and institutions which brought Hindu religion into the Indian public sphere—a sphere that was itself created, argues van der Veer, through the agency of religion and, consequently, fostered the emergence of Hinduism in a pan-Indian form.⁸⁶ (In this way, religion was also primed to become an important ground for Indian nationalism, a phenomenon we shall consider further in Chapter Four.)

As with ‘religion’, the adoption of this new label for an entity whose nature, contents and boundaries were only beginning to be debated and defined entailed the negotiation of a host of ideological baggage which accompanied the now-established term in Western discourse. The ‘Hinduism’ that Hindus practised became increasingly conceptualised in terms and paradigms borrowed from the West, and the reforms undertaken throughout the nineteenth century by prominent Indian thinkers frequently

⁸⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 22-4.

reflect attempts to apply European religious ideals and models to Hindu traditions. To a large extent, this movement was driven by a desire to create, in van der Veer's words, "a modern Hinduism that is respectable to the eyes of the world (monotheistic and text-based) and that can be the basis for a morality of acting in the world (secular)."⁸⁷ That the "world" whose approval was sought was that of the West—or, more exactly, the colonial metropole and its collective peripheries—can clearly be inferred from this statement. As well, the drive to undertake moral action in the so-called secular world (which was, in actuality, not really all-that-secular, even in Britain)⁸⁸ presumes a division of experience into the disparate realms of the public sphere and privatised religion, an Enlightenment legacy novel to the Indian context, and requiring new ways of structuring ideas about religion, along with the very concepts of public and private life.

This appropriation of Western discourses was not carried out in a wholesale or unreflective manner, however, and questions as to the appropriateness of various formulations remained—as they still do—a matter of much debate throughout nineteenth-century Hindu circles (and, as alluded to above, there was, by this point, a new type of public space in which these contestations could be carried out). For example, the monotheistic and iconoclastic Brahma Samāj, though influential on a number of fronts, never attained a trans-regional, mass following in India, for many of its tenets and practices were ultimately perceived by Hindus as too Western/Christian in nature. Hinduism, throughout the nineteenth century, was not merely a transplanted framework

⁸⁷ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁸ This has been discussed at length by van der Veer, who stresses the importance of the interaction between religion and public life during the nineteenth century. See *ibid.*, Chapters 1 and 2, 14-54.

dropped upon India's religious life by Western scholars, but a dynamic field of struggle and contestation. "In this manner," King observes,

Western-inspired Orientalist and nationalist discourses permeated indigenous self-awareness and were applied in anti-colonial discourses by Indians themselves. However, such indigenous discourses remain deeply indebted to Orientalist presuppositions and have generally failed to criticise the essentialist stereotypes embodied in such narratives.⁸⁹

In other words, while the form, characteristics, and delimitation of this 'Hindu religion' have been the subjects of an ongoing negotiary project by Indians, rarely have efforts gone to sufficient depths to extensively expose, critique, and, if necessary, refashion, the underlying discursive ground—Chatterjee's 'colonial thematic'—of the matter. Thus, whether Hinduism was viewed antagonistically or affirmatively, and whether the evaluator was European or Indian, nineteenth-century discourses (and well beyond) continued to be structured around a range of latent Orientalist and colonial assumptions.

Vedānta

The emergence of the so-called 'neo-Vedānta' movements are a particularly fruitful example of the interplay between Indian and Western thinkers, and one in which Vivekananda himself came to figure prominently.

⁸⁹ King, 116. Gyan Prakash makes reference to a particularly forthright example of this in his discussion of an 1895 dispute between the Ārya Samāj and orthodox Hindu *paṇḍits* over the legitimacy of the *śrāddha* ceremony, in which offerings are made to departed ancestors. Unable to resolve the disagreement, the parties made a written appeal to Max Müller for his learned opinion in an attempt to decide the matter. Müller defended *śrāddha* against its Ārya Samājist critics, much to the dismay of the latter, who had denounced it as un-Vedic 'superstition'. As Prakash indicates: "If the rationalist criticism of *śrāddha* enjoyed a long history [in indigenous Indian philosophy], the late-nineteenth-century context of its articulation was new. As the solicitation of Max Müller's opinion demonstrates, it had now to contend with the influence Western Orientalism exercised over the discourse of Hinduism; the rationality and authenticity of traditions had to be proven under the shadow of Western power." (Prakash, *Another Reason*, 88.)

As we have already mentioned, in the case of Hinduism the textual sources which were first translated into the principal languages of Europe and reached a Western audience were primarily from the Upaniṣadic literature and the subsequent philosophical commentarial traditions—especially Advaita Vedānta. (In a somewhat more ‘popular’ vein, the *Bhagavadgītā* did also attain some early fame and attention, but with more stress given to its attempts at philosophical synthesis than to its important role within a wide array of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* traditions.)⁹⁰ The significance which this ‘initial meeting’ of Europeans with Hinduism held for the formulation of Western responses cannot be overemphasised. As King indicates, the selection of (European-translated-and-edited) Indian texts which were placed before the gaze of the occidental world meant that “the initial reception of Vedānta in the West was framed by a perennialist agenda.”⁹¹ This perspective tended to identify Śaṅkarācārya’s Advaita as Hinduism’s *sine qua non*, despite the fact that Advaita was hardly the most historically influential, nor the most widely accepted, perspective within the vast majority of nineteenth-century Hindu communities.⁹²

This particular strand of Indian thought had avenues of appeal to a variety of Western audiences. For Orientalist scholars, it allowed the identification of a central motif around which frameworks and theories of Indian religion’s evolution could be constructed, as well as providing an implicit gauge for delimiting ‘original’ Hinduism from its later ‘corruptions’.⁹³ For those with a missionary interest in the subcontinent, the

⁹⁰ King, 120.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 128.

⁹³ For support regarding this point, and the many of those which follow, see King, “Mystic Hinduism’: Vedānta and the Politics of Representation,” chap. in *Orientalism and Religion*, 118-42.

“incipient monotheism” (as King has termed it)⁹⁴ which they perceived in the Vedāntic texts seemed to point to a path through which the Christian message could be introduced to the intellectual segments of Indian society. Participants in the debates which raged in Christian theological circles regarding that faith’s own marginalised ‘mystical’ elements looked to the (constructed) East to favourably compare and contrast—and thus defend—their own faith’s mystics as active, moral, and God-loving, against those (mistakenly-named) ‘Hindoo fakeers’—passive, amoral, and atheistic, as the latter were perceived to be. For the Romanticists and Theosophists, Advaita seemed to add support to the thesis that all religions possessed a universal, spiritual essence, which had only been concealed by later ecclesiastical accretions. (The idealist rhetoric of ‘innocence’ and ‘childhood’ reoccurs throughout the writings on Indian religion by these more-sympathetic thinkers, ironically impeding the accurate and balanced portrayal of the very traditions they admired.) Some of Europe’s most noted philosophers, including Hegel, Otto, and Schopenhauer, found support for elements of their respective philosophical theories in the doctrines of Vedānta (such as they were represented to them through Orientalist research and translations). And, for the imperial powers ruling India, Advaita conveniently identified the ‘heart’ of Indian culture and religion within what was perceived as an apolitical, imaginative, world-denying philosophy, that appeared to offer little threat of fuelling resistance or rebellion. The construction of Hinduism as essentially renunciatory also made the application of the concept of religion to the same deeply problematic; for, as Balagangadhara has pointed out, if religion implied *religare*, binding, how could a tradition that was portrayed by its Western interpreters as fostering the

⁹⁴ King, 122.

severance of all linkages “[both] with the world and with the Cosmos”⁹⁵ truly constitute a ‘proper’ religion, like its prototype, Christianity? Thus, the representations of Hinduism-as-Advaita often left Hindus in a disadvantaged position in the context of the implicit religious and cultural hierarchies of the West.

In India, some Hindus did in fact find the idea of an Advaita-based religion germane to their own views, however divergent this might be from the historical and contemporary realities of Indian communities’ professed and practiced faith-traditions. This was particularly true among some cosmopolitan, generally high-caste thinkers who were familiar not only with an array of Hindu literature, but also with texts and ideas from Islam, Christianity, and other religions. The paradigmatic figure in this regard was, again, Rammohan Roy, who found in Advaita Vedānta ideas that he believed could be hermeneutically applied to elucidate Jesus’ teachings and other traditions’ scriptures.⁹⁶ Also, in more pragmatic terms, the brahmin exponents of the Advaitic traditions of Hindu thought and practice found support for their own authority in the West’s identification of Hinduism with the Sāṅkarite Advaita philosophy, and many embraced the role of ‘official’ spokespersons of sorts, bolstering their own positions of self-asserted hermeneutical clout (claims which had, in fact, always been subject to challenge and critique from within Hindu society).⁹⁷ Yet, the vision of Vedāntic Hinduism which developed among Hindus from Roy onwards was actually quite ‘Protestant’ in its disregard for brāhmiṇical caste-based regulations regarding Vedic study, and its stress on the direct engagement of the texts by individuals, to the dicta of which they might apply

⁹⁵ Balagangadhara, 244.

reasoned judgement—a phenomenon dubbed the “laicization of Hinduism” by van der Veer.⁹⁸ This process was set in motion by the publication of Max Müller’s English edition of the *Ṛg Veda*, in six volumes, from 1849-73, followed soon after by translations of other Sanskrit scriptures by various Orientalist scholars. Naturally, these translations also acted as major vehicles for the transmission of the assumptions of academic Orientalism to the English-educated segments of the Hindu public, as well as functioning to identify certain texts as ‘essential’ and implicitly excluding others as not. This resulted in an unusual situation, for, given the growing interest during the late nineteenth century in identifying a Vedānta-based pan-Indian ‘Hinduism’, and the inability of the Hindu masses—including most of the English-speaking elite—to read the texts in the original Sanskrit, the Orientalists’ translations became one of the key avenues through which Hindus could ‘learn’ their ‘religion’. And the essence of that religion, in the eyes of a large share of its Western and Western-influenced interpreters, was Advaita Vedānta.

Regardless of the intentions of those who were involved in the construction and nurturance of these conceptions, all of these varied, but powerful, agents benefited in some way from the construction of Advaita Vedānta as the normative expression of ‘authentic’ Hinduism. King has suggested that the situation is best viewed as “a confluence of interests which allowed the ‘discovery’ of Vedānta to come to the fore and remain largely uncontested until well into the twentieth century.”⁹⁹ Despite the varied evaluations proffered at various times by Orientalists, Christian missionaries, Western

⁹⁶ For details of Roy’s position, see Cromwell Crawford’s essay, “Raja Ram Mohan Roy’s Attitude toward Christians and Christianity,” in *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 16-65.

⁹⁷ King, 128.

⁹⁸ van der Veer, 44.

⁹⁹ King, 132.

Indophiles, Hindu reformers and Indian nationalists, all have shared, for the most part, a conviction regarding a ‘spiritual’ or ‘mystic’ essence—most commonly given an Advaitic cast—as the fundamental axis of ‘Hinduism’. This identification of Śaṅkarācārya’s Vedānta as the embodiment of the essential themes of ‘true’ Hinduism meant that what had long existed as a collection of highly diverse human phenomena sharing a common geographic origin became fashioned into a unified, homogenous religion, which could be studied, critiqued and ‘known’ as a whole, as well as compared and contrasted with the religions of the West.

Strategic Orientalism?

Despite the significant advances in theory and interpretation made by the seminal scholars of colonial discourse, it is certainly possible to argue that much of the earlier work of postcolonial thinkers—Said is often singled out in this respect¹⁰⁰—presents a rather unilateral vision of the process of representation, emphasising Western hegemony over India through Orientalist discourse, but denying any active role to the subjugated Indian, beyond acting as an unwitting instrument in the subtle perpetuation of colonial domination. However, as King indicates: “Indians were not passive recipients of Western Orientalist discourses but in fact were actively involved in the discursive and non-discursive processes that led to the rise of ‘Hinduism’ as a dominant ideological and explanatory construct.”¹⁰¹ In taking issue with this image of the ‘duped’ Oriental, King claims that, through the appropriation and transformation of these representations, some Hindus were intentionally taking advantage of a powerful method of combating their

¹⁰⁰ King has discussed this criticism of Said’s work, and the responses of other postcolonial scholars, in *ibid.*, 86.

oppressors. (To 'Lyotardise' King's reading of the situation, the exploited were adopting a phrase-regime to negotiate the fundamental differend between coloniser and colonised.) In other words, by consciously recognising the inversion of stereotypes to be a useful tool (rather than an accurate portrayal of reality), some chose to adopt such an approach on rational grounds. This is a theme that shall be emphasised throughout this thesis: selective appropriation as strategic resistance. "The irony of the Orientalist emphasis upon the apparently quietistic and counterrevolutionary philosophy of Vedānta," King explains,

is that it further demonstrates the impossibility of controlling the polyvariant trajectories of Orientalist discourses once they have entered the public domain and become subject both to contestation and creative reinterpretation.... The colonial ruler is unable to control the meaning of the cultural symbolic that he constructs in interaction with the colonized subject.¹⁰²

Spivak, as we have seen in Chapter One, writes of the liberatory possibilities for colonial subjects through the adoption of this 'strategic essentialism', appreciating its potential value for those seeking to transform essentialist constructs into representations that instead favour the marginalised other in at least some respects. Other postcolonial scholars, such as Homi Bhabha, have also stressed the affirmative aspects of the appropriation of colonial discourses by the colonised, and explored the ways in which this may function as a form of resistance against colonial authority, given the inherent contradictions and instabilities of the latter.¹⁰³

This strategic use of Western constructions of Hinduism had certainly been employed by Indian colonial subjects prior to Vivekananda's time. Rammohan Roy is,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 159.

¹⁰² Ibid., 133.

once again, among the most notable early figures in this respect; for example, in his adoption of the belief in the existence of an essential, 'true' Hinduism that had been obscured by superstitious accruals, he marks out for Hindus a line of argument by which they could contest missionary denunciations of their traditions and practices.¹⁰⁴ Other Hindu reformers, including Vivekananda's early-contemporaries, Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83) and Keshabchandra Sen (1838-1884), sought, in often-disparate ways, to identify this 'essential' Hinduism and to utilise the same as a site upon which to reconfigure the religion according to their respective visions for a pure and powerful Hindu faith. For example, Basu observes that by appropriating the Orientalist focus on Advaita as the core of Hinduism, nineteenth-century Hindus were able to 'universalise' Hinduism, "in the sense that it not only paved the path for a practical unification of diverse social groups but at the same time provided for an excellent indigenous answer to the secular philosophy of Universalism at par with the mainstream European Enlightenment tradition."¹⁰⁵

As this latter point suggests, by appropriating the discourses of Orientalism, Indians simultaneously acquired a technique by which their perspectives on Hinduism could be made to carry an *authority* not otherwise available to them, both in speaking to 'native' audiences (segments of which, through Western-modelled education, had come to

¹⁰³ See, for example, Bhabha's essay, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 85-92.

¹⁰⁴ Amiya P. Sen has given some consideration to Roy's role as a precursor to Vivekananda in this regard. See Sen's *Swami Vivekananda* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), chap. 1, "Situating Swami Vivekananda," 1-9. Vivekananda himself appears to have openly acknowledged a debt to Roy; Nivedita, in her account of time spent with the swami, relates: It was here [in Nainital] too that we heard a long talk on Ram Mohan Roy in which he [Vivekananda] pointed out three things as the dominant notes of this teacher's message—his acceptance of the Vedanta, his preaching of patriotism, and the love that embraced the Mussulman [sic] equally with the Hindu. In all these things he [that is, Vivekananda] claimed himself to have taken up the task that the breadth and foresight of Ram Mohan Roy had mapped out." (*CW*, vol. 9, 341.)

consider these discursive formations as highly authentic sources of knowledge) and to those beyond, particularly in the colonial metropole. Indeed, it could be argued that the deployment of the discourses and rhetoric of Orientalism had, by the mid-to-late nineteenth century, become a *necessity* for Indians seeking a considered hearing from middle-class Hindu audiences, and, even more so, from persons abroad.

An interesting example of another variant of Hindu rhetorical appropriation can be seen in the example of ‘spirituality’, an idea popularised in the Indian context not by Christian missionaries but rather by Theosophy and other Euro-American spiritualist movements that entered India during the nineteenth century. Chatterjee has argued that ‘the spiritual’—the English terminology was widely employed, even in non-English contexts¹⁰⁶—was adopted into Hindu discourse as a signifier of a self-defined, inner, uncolonised space, as a site of religious and cultural identity for Indians (contrasted against the external, ‘material’ world, dominated by the British authorities), in which their own superiority could be confidently asserted and their own autonomy ensured.¹⁰⁷ Van der Veer has, however, expanded upon Chatterjee’s work, contending further that the discourses of these spiritualist movements actually emphasised rational thought and empirical investigation. Thus, beyond creating an ‘inner’ realm of ‘the spiritual’, they also provided Hindus with a means to negotiate within the ‘outer’ sphere of Western science by “showing that there are either earlier or alternative forms of science available in Hinduism,”¹⁰⁸ in addition to contesting Christian hegemonic discourses in the religious

¹⁰⁵ Basu, 75.

¹⁰⁶ van der Veer, 70.

¹⁰⁷ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993; reprinted in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46-51.

¹⁰⁸ van der Veer, 70.

and moral spheres. (In this effort, Hindus were aided by those Europeans, such as Theosophists and Anthroposophists, who shared an “antinomian radicalism against the state in Britain and the colonial state in India.”)¹⁰⁹ Thus, from this perspective, though it might appear to simply collude with Orientalist assumptions of Hinduism’s non-rational and otherworldly nature, the prominent role granted to ‘spirituality’ by nineteenth-century Hindu thinkers actually reflects an effort to participate in, and even to destabilise, colonial networks of knowledge and power.

Postcolonial historian Gyan Prakash, as noted in Chapter One, has undertaken an extensive study of the ways in which the discursive formations subsumed under the rubric of ‘science’ were utilised by British colonial forces to discipline and rule Indians, as well as the ways in which these same themes and rhetorical strategies were appropriated by the colonised as instruments by means of which resistance to colonialism could be effected and Indian authority and autonomy asserted. Profoundly intertwined with the privileging of ‘reason’ in both British and Indian discourse, science functioned as a signifier “for freedom and enlightenment, power and progress,”¹¹⁰ and, as such, was utilised by both sides in an attempt to substantiate their respective claims to intellectual and cultural authority. This fact is highly significant not merely in understanding the often-damning critiques of Hinduism advanced by a Western society that was actively seeking to distance itself from all that was deemed ‘irrational’ and ‘unscientific’ (thereby bolstering its own ‘Enlightened’ self-identity); it is also crucial to comprehending the particular ways by which late-nineteenth-century Hindus discursively (re)presented their own traditions, texts, and practices, and the choice of authorities to which they appealed

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 74

to establish the authenticity and value of the same. This 'scientific' emphasis resulted in interesting changes in hermeneutical strategies on the part of Hindus; for example, whereas pre-colonial Indian literature had tended to appeal to the *antiquity* of a particular source or idea as a primary criterion for establishing its legitimacy, educated nineteenth-century Indians frequently sought proof of legitimacy in the accordance of Hindu concepts with the viewpoints of the modern Western sciences.¹¹¹

Vivekananda's Religion: The Quest for a Rational Spirituality

As all this suggests, the religious world in which Vivekananda found himself in late-nineteenth-century urban Bengal was a highly dynamic one. This was true not only in terms of concrete alterations in the patterns of religious expression brought about among the Hindu populace by the material, social, economic and political exigencies of British rule, but even more so in the discursive sphere, where novel approaches to understanding, interpreting, and justifying long-established beliefs and practices became *de rigueur* for those impacted by the deep and far-reaching tendrils of European thought and colonial ideology.

Vivekananda's work is specifically cited by both King and van der Veer as exemplifying the process of appropriation and strategic transformation of various Western concepts in the realm of religion. "Vivekananda... placed particular emphasis upon the spirituality of Indian culture as a curative for the nihilism and materialism of modern Western culture,"¹¹² asserts King, maintaining that,

¹¹⁰ Prakash, *Another Reason*, 3.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 98-105.

¹¹² King, 93.

In Vivekananda's hands, Orientalist notions of India as 'other worldly' and 'mystical' were embraced and praised as India's special gift to humankind. The very discourse that succeeded in alienating, subordinating and controlling India was used by Vivekananda as a religious clarion call for the Indian people to unite under the banner of a universalistic and all-embracing Hinduism.¹¹³

Van der Veer, for his part, has argued: "Vivekananda's spirituality was not modest or meek; it was forceful, polemical, and proud"¹¹⁴—in contrast to the passive, feminising representations of Hinduism offered up by Orientalists. Yet, as will be discussed below, Vivekananda's position is actually more complex and ambiguous than van der Veer's statement might suggest. The swami's dichotomised construction of Hindu spirituality in opposition to Western materialism was to become a particularly important theme in later Hindu nationalist discourse, as will be examined in Chapter Four. His rhetorical emphasis on 'reason' and 'scientific religion' also reveals his debt to the power and sway of these appropriation-based strategies.

Though he shares much ideological territory with other Hindu thinkers, especially among the Bengali elite, Vivekananda distinguishes himself from his predecessors and contemporaries in that his ideas profoundly impacted not merely his fellow Hindus—Rammohan Roy, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, and Bhudev Mukhopadhyay could likewise claim widespread recognition and respect within similar socio-religious circles, particularly in middle-class, urban Calcutta—but also strongly influenced Western representations of Hinduism, and directly shaped the views of some of the major European and American figures involved in Orientalist writing and scholarship. (As we have seen, Vivekananda reached a worldwide audience that included many highly influential persons of his time in diverse fields of endeavour; in the field of Oriental

¹¹³ Ibid.

Studies, for example, he personally interacted with Max Müller and Paul Deussen, as well as numerous scholars at the 1900 History of Religions Congress in Paris.)¹¹⁵ Thus, he not only presented a reinterpretation of Hinduism to Hindus themselves, but also entered into the larger East-West dialogue through which Hinduism was (and continues to be) constructed. He, perhaps to a greater extent than any of his Hindu antecedents, was an influential participant in the process that Charles Hallisey, a scholar of Theravāda Buddhism, has termed *intercultural mimesis*, or the interchange between the Orientalist and the ‘native’, through which representations of the Orient are created.¹¹⁶

Vivekananda was very well acquainted with modern Western discourses on India, as well as European representations of much of the rest of the world—including Europe itself. As a sometime member of the Brahmo Samāj, he had spent much time during his youth in the midst of one of the most fecund sources of measured Indian responses to colonial-era religious discourse. His education in British-run institutions, his extensive self-study of European writings, and his personal encounters and discussions with scholars, missionaries and all manner of citizens in India, the United States, and Europe ensured that he was thoroughly aware of contemporary interpretations of religion and, in particular, Hinduism. His attendance at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and, later, at the Paris Congress, ensured his exposure to the predominant perspectives—both popular and scholastic—on religion in a comparative and cross-cultural context. There is no doubt that Vivekananda’s own understanding of religious matters was significantly influenced by these various factors, in addition to the impact of more-‘traditional’

¹¹⁴ van deer Veer, 73.

¹¹⁵ See the ‘Biographical Sketch’ presented in Chapter Two of this thesis for details.

¹¹⁶ See the discussion of Hallisey’s work and Buddhism, in King, 148.

cultural exposures and encounters, and, of course, Ramakrishna's unique and powerful personality and teachings.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that the nature, origin and development of 'religion' as a human phenomenon held a great deal of interest for Vivekananda. He focussed a number of his class lectures and public talks—primarily those delivered in America and England—specifically upon this topic, and touched upon these subjects in numerous other contexts as well.

The Essence of Religion

There are multiple layers of meaning embedded within Vivekananda's usage of the term 'religion', which, though they might appear to belong to different realms—the theological, the historical, the anthropological, and so on—actually impact and interpenetrate one another.

In explicitly defining religion, the swami frequently approaches the matter in a manner more akin to that of a preacher than a scholar, speaking in decidedly convictional terms. When directly broaching the subject of religion's 'essence', Vivekananda repeatedly offers the same pithy remark: "Religion is realisation."¹¹⁷ That is, as he declared to a London audience in 1896, "Religion is ever a practical science, and there never was nor will be any theological religion. It is practice first, and knowledge afterwards."¹¹⁸ This fundamentally empirical interpretation of religion is significant beyond the boundaries of Vivekananda's ministerial role, for it also colours his approach to more-academic questions regarding religion in ways which he does not always

¹¹⁷ For one example, see "The Ideal of a Universal Religion," *CW*, vol. 2, 396.

¹¹⁸ "Practical Vedanta: Part II," *CW*, vol. 2, 317.

explicitly foreground. We should take note of several things further in the above-quoted passage as well. Referring, as he does, to ‘religion’ in a general, unqualified sense, Vivekananda implicitly suggests that it may be approached unproblematically as a *universal* category (a thesis for which we find ample confirmation in his work as a whole). While both modern Western and historical Indian thinkers have commonly taken a similar ‘totalising’ approach, seeking to extend an identification of fundamental essences to all human phenomena, the pairing of this theme with the concept of *religion* inescapably entangles Vivekananda in the assumptions and values associated therewith in Western discourses.

We should also observe the swami’s references to the European categories of ‘science’ and ‘theology’, and the relationship of binary opposition in which he situates them, typical of the assumptions of Western post-Enlightenment thought, with its emphasis on empirical investigation and its suspicion of institutional religion. In particular, his utilisation of ‘science’ as a signifier for true and useful knowledge (against his suggestion of the speculative and abstract nature of ‘theological’ knowledge) depends upon a hierarchical evaluation of natural empirical knowledge versus supernatural revelation that was firmly established in secular European philosophical traditions by the nineteenth century. It is difficult to reconcile this particular dichotomy with pre-colonial Indian sources, which, while distinguishing between the roles of sense-perception (*pratyakṣa*) and the testimony of religious authorities (*śabda*) in the determination of valid spiritual knowledge, rarely approach the two as incompatibles.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ For an explanation of the role of the *pramāṇas* (means of authenticating knowledge) in Indian philosophical traditions, see J. N. Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), chap. 2, 11-40.

Although by downplaying the importance of belief and intellectual speculation in the religious context, Vivekananda seems intent on distinguishing his perspective from what he perceives as an over-emphasis on abstract considerations and creedal adherence on the part of Western Christianity, his experiential focus actually puts him very much in step with the evangelical movements which were then thriving in both Britain and the United States. Though naturally quite different in content, these movements also presented a hierarchical ordering of direct, personal faith experience over theological speculation and doctrinal confession, with evangelicals identifying the former as the 'essence' of the Christian faith. While it is unclear how much direct effect the growing presence of evangelicalism had upon Vivekananda's own teachings as such (beyond, of course, his ongoing feuds with certain of its adherents over salvific exclusionism and the moral propriety of missions and conversion), it no doubt helped to provide an environment which was receptive to novel, experientially focused approaches to religion, like those expounded by the swami. The question of the nature—theological versus experiential—of religion's essence was thus, in actuality, already an active site of contention and discursive struggle in the West.

Addressing an audience in Madras upon his return to India in 1897, Vivekananda further elaborates on the question of religion's essence, this time calling upon distinctively Indian imagery:

Religion is not going to church, or putting marks on the forehead, or dressing in a peculiar fashion; you may paint yourselves in all the colours of the rainbow, but if the heart has not been opened, if you have not realised God, it is all vain. If one has the colour of the heart, he does not want any external colour. That is the true religious realisation. We must not forget that colours and all these things are good so far as they help; so far they are all welcome. But they are apt to degenerate and instead of helping they retard, and a man identifies religion with externalities. Going to the temple becomes tantamount to spiritual life. Giving something to a priest becomes

tantamount to religious life. These are dangerous and pernicious, and should be at once checked. Our scriptures declare again and again that even the knowledge of the external senses is not religion. That is religion which makes us realise the Unchangable One, and that is the religion for every one. He who realises transcendental truth, he who realises the Atman in his own nature, he who comes face to face with God, sees God alone in everything, has become a Rishi. And there is no religious life for you until you have become a Rishi. Then alone religion begins for you, now is only the preparation. Then religion dawns upon you, now you are only undergoing intellectual gymnastics and physical tortures.¹²⁰

There are a number of dichotomies expressed in this passage which hint at the oppositional nature of Vivekananda's understanding of religion: inner/outer life; transcendent/sense-based knowledge; textual/priestly authority; accomplished/aspirant status; essential/extraneous practices; pure/degenerate religiosity; and, of course, the underlying assumption of true and false varieties or forms of religion (rather than true and false *religions per se*).

However, perhaps most consequential is the swami's development of the rhetoric of 'realisation'. Throughout Vivekananda's discourse, as in the quotations above, we continually encounter the term, often situated prominently in his arguments regarding the nature and practice of religion. To a significant extent, Vivekananda employs the word 'realisation' without gloss, particularly for his Indian audiences—with whom, we may speculate, he feels he can safely assume a shared understanding. (Ramakrishna, for his part, was even more specific, most-often using the Bengali phrase *īśbar-labh*—literally 'God-acquisition'—in contexts similar to those of Vivekananda's 'realisation'. Whether Vivekananda's decision to frequently leave 'God' out of the English phrase was due to his preference for Advaita with its less-theistic focus, or for reason of decoupling his ideas from existing Western/Christian religious presuppositions, or for some other

¹²⁰ "The Work Before Us," *CW*, vol. 3, 283-4.

retorical purpose altogether, is not clear.) For the benefit of his Western readers and listeners, however, he sometimes clarifies himself further. In a lecture delivered in London, titled simply “Realisation,” (and subsequently published as part of *Jnana-Yoga*), Vivekananda addresses the subject more directly and explicitly. Here, he speaks of realisation primarily in terms of what it is *not*—referring to it as something that must be distinguished from discussion about, or intellectual assent to, religious ideas.¹²¹ Though stopping short of a direct definition, he alludes to the need to “analyse our own souls and to find what is there,”¹²² and declares that, “only the man who has actually perceived God and soul has religion.”¹²³ Further, he explains in a lecture on “The Free Soul,” delivered in New York in 1896, that, for such a liberated person, “this illusion of the universe will break one day. The whole of this will vanish, melt away. This is realisation.”¹²⁴

In this explanation of realisation, and his identification of it as the pivot of religion, Vivekananda is in part allying himself with what we might fairly identify as mainstream Advaita Vedānta. The principal goal of religious practice, according to Śaṅkarācārya and his subsequent expositors, is *ātmabodha* or *ātmajñāna*,¹²⁵ variously translated in English sources as ‘Self-realisation’, ‘Self-knowledge’ or ‘Self-awakening’, and understood to mean the direct and liberating experience/perception that the *ātman*, or Self, is identical with *brahman*, the Absolute Reality. In his comments on the “illusion of the universe,”

¹²¹ See “Realisation,” *CW*, vol. 2, 162-4.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 163.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ “The Free Soul,” *CW*, vol. 3, 10.

¹²⁵ *Ātmabodha* is, of course, the title of one of the best-known treatises ascribed to Śaṅkarācārya; *ātmajñāna* is used by a number of post-Śaṅkara Advaitin sources as well. In an extra-Vedāntic tradition, Patañjali also uses *ātmadarśana* (literally, ‘Self-seeing’) in his *Yogasūtras* (verse II.41); Vivekananda translates this also as “realisation of the Self” (“Patañjali’s Yoga Aphorisms,” *CW*, vol. 1, 264).

above, Vivekananda effectively makes a central Advaitin theme—that of realisation as a conquest of ‘illusion’ (*māyā*)—foundational in his definition of religion.

However, again, by equating realisation, and thus these Advaitin aims, with the term *religion*, Vivekananda introduces into his exposition a characteristically Western element unknown to Śaṅkara, and is actually making an important statement about the applicability and position of this appropriated concept with respect to Hindu tradition as a whole. He does not, in this case, question the cross-cultural value of ‘religion’ as such. Significantly, however, he locates its essence not in Western anthropological, psychological, or historical categories, but associates it with the central tenets of the Advaita philosophy—which, as we have seen, was virtually synonymous with ‘true Hinduism’ in the eyes of many. Just as for some of his Western contemporaries, Christianity functioned as the paradigmatic religion against which other traditions were evaluated (though not necessarily explicitly), Vivekananda strongly suggests that *his* normative standard of the same is Advaita. In doing so, he does not challenge the existence of essentialist criteria of ‘religion’; in fact, he emphasises this very aspect. Yet, in identifying a different set of fundamental categories, he redefines religion in a way that challenges some of the assumptions and norms that have traditionally been used to devalue Indian traditions, while still maintaining the authoritative discursive approach of European interpretations of religion, with their tendency towards binary categories and identification of universal essences. In this respect, ‘religion’ may be considered to function in Vivekananda’s discourse as a marker for a particular approach to contesting colonial claims of Western superiority, asserting not merely the validity of Hinduism, but also affirming its trans-cultural authority.

Vivekananda's treatment of the concept of *dharma* is worthy of note here, as the term was, and continues to be, cited by many Hindus as the closest approximation to the concept of 'religion' in indigenous Indian thought. In a letter written to his American follower Mary Hale—seemingly in response to an unpreserved question of hers—he writes simply and without amplification, "The word 'Dharma' means religion."¹²⁶ This would seem to be in accord with Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's almost-contemporaneous analysis, referred to earlier, of the Indian usage of *dharma*. The rest of Vivekananda's preserved body of writings and lectures, however, does not lend much support to his conviction in this simple statement. On the relatively rare occasions that Vivekananda makes use of the term *dharma*, it is generally understood in a quite limited, even technical, sense, making reference to actions or duties pertaining to the 'mundane' (*laukika*) world(s). "Dharma is that which makes man seek for happiness in this world or the next,"¹²⁷ he states in his 1900 Bengali essay, "*Prācya O Pāścātya*" (published in English as "The East and the West"). In this work, he explains *dharma* in what he himself identifies as specifically *mīmāṃsaka* terms: "The good for him who desires Moksha is one, and the good for him who wants Dharma is another."¹²⁸ In this sense, he clearly distinguishes between one who seeks spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*)—in other words, realisation (and hence, 'real' religion)—and the one who seeks to fulfil expected duties, even if these may be perceived as 'religious' in nature. Vivekananda also uses the term in reference to the religio-ethical order expounded by the *Mahābhārata*, and, specifically,

¹²⁶ "Epistles," *CW*, vol. 8, 324.

¹²⁷ "The East and the West," *CW*, vol. 5, 446.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 450.

the *Bhagavadgītā*,¹²⁹ but in this he is following the texts' own usage, and offers little in the way of elaboration. It seems safe to conclude that *dharma*, for Vivekananda, is not a term that he found particularly useful in elucidating the concept of religion as such, particularly in expounding his views to English-speaking audiences (who would likely have been more familiar with the Theosophists' use of the term in reference to Buddhist teachings specifically), preferring instead to formulate his own set of definitions and explanations.

The Origins of Religion: Onward to Freedom

Like most other nineteenth-century thinkers, Vivekananda did not interrogate the thematic that posited a universal drive underlying the existence of religion; rather, he too sought to identify and explain what was almost unanimously perceived as a fundamental human inclination. For Vivekananda, religion's *sine qua non* is an all-pervasive, unquenchable urge for *freedom*, a desire which is present not only in human beings, but is a definitive quality of life itself, and that fuels the religious quest—and all manner of 'secular' pursuit also—in its widely varying manifestations.¹³⁰ The word 'freedom' appears frequently throughout his writings and lectures, sometimes as a translation of the Sanskrit *mukti*¹³¹ or *kaivalya*,¹³² other times used with less specificity (for example, identified simply with "the goal to be reached").¹³³

The notion of religion as motivated by a quest for freedom is not, of course, unique to Vivekananda's perspective. Karl Marx had, not long prior, famously posited that

¹²⁹ "The Mahabharata," *CW*, vol. 4, 95; "The East and the West," *CW*, vol. 5, 451.

¹³⁰ "What is Religion?" *CW*, vol. 1, 333-7.

¹³¹ "Inspired Talks," *CW*, vol. 7, 94.

¹³² "On Karma-Yoga," *CW*, vol. 5, 239.

¹³³ "The Essence of Religion," *CW*, vol. 8, 257.

religion constituted a protest—albeit, he believed, a misguided one—against a fundamental state of socio-economic oppression, and was really a manifestation of the search for emancipation from the tyranny of one’s fellow humans. But the bondage that Vivekananda identifies is one which he considers much more pervasive than mere material deprivation, social oppression, or economic power struggles. The swami again allies himself with conventional Indian religious thought in suggesting that the root of the human predicament is the ensnarement of all beings within *samsāra* and its ongoing rounds of rebirth, a situation that requires a decidedly supra-material solution.¹³⁴

Explaining to an audience of his students in New York, in 1900, how the drive for freedom underlies religious practice, he states:

If we were to examine the various sorts of worship all over the world, we would see that the rudest of mankind are worshipping ghosts, demons, and the spirits of their forefathers—serpent worship, worship of tribal gods, and worship of the departed ones. Why do they do this? Because they feel that in some unknown way these beings are greater, more powerful than themselves, and limit their freedom. They, therefore, seek to propitiate these beings in order to prevent them from molesting them, in other words, to get more freedom. They also seek to win favour from these superior beings, to get by gift of the gods what ought to be earned by personal effort.¹³⁵

Further, he states, “The embodiment of freedom, the Master of nature, is what we call God.”¹³⁶ Vivekananda’s evaluative stance is obvious from this passage’s characterisation of the forms of worship practiced by “the rudest of mankind” as an attempt to unjustly gain that which should be rightly achieved only by human exertion—a remarkably Protestant-esque interpretation of a range of religious practices both widespread and long-established in the Indian milieu. This is perhaps a hint that Vivekananda’s reading of the association between personal effort and human freedom owes more than a

¹³⁴ For example, see his comments on Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras*, *CW*, vol. 1, 213.

¹³⁵ “What is Religion?” *CW*, vol. 1, 333-4.

modicum of debt to the modern Christian emphasis upon labour as a moral imperative, which deeply suffused Euro-American discourses of the day. The rhetoric of freedom which he employs is an especially powerful theme in this particular enunciative context; not only were the ideas of personal autonomy and socio-political freedom central themes intertwined with the post-Enlightenment quest for mastery of the world, but the United States was little more than a century past its formal achievement of independence from Britain, and Americans continued, as they do still, to make 'freedom' a cornerstone of their national narratives.

This should not be read as a claim that Vivekananda's identification of freedom as a fundamental religious motive was prompted as such by a conscious decision to speak to the 'American spirit'. The idea of *mukti*, spiritual liberation, is undoubtedly a central one in a wide variety of Indian religious traditions. However, Vivekananda's transformation of the theme of spiritual freedom-seeking into a trans-cultural framework for explaining the psychology of human religious behaviour bears the imprint of the Enlightenment philosophers' *reductio* and *enumeratio*—the identification of the fundamental human basis of religion, and the reconciliation of particular religious phenomena with that basis, respectively. (In fact, in some ways, Vivekananda's perspective seems to echo that of his early contemporary, German thinker Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), who sought religion's indispensable element in what he regarded as the universal desire for spiritual dominion¹³⁷; however, the swami's perspective places greater stress on ahistorical, *inner* spiritual freedom and self-control, and Ritschl's on historical, outward manifestations of sovereignty.)

¹³⁶ Ibid., 336.

The relationship of Vivekananda's freedom-rhetoric to material realities is, in the final analysis, somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, Vivekananda ardently maintains that true freedom is not to be found anywhere in the 'mundane' realm:

To acquire freedom we have to get beyond the limitations of this universe; it cannot be found here. Perfect equilibrium, or what the Christians call the peace that passeth all understanding, cannot be had in this universe, nor in heaven, nor in any place where our mind and thoughts can go, where the senses can feel, or which the imagination can conceive. No such place can give us that freedom, because all such places would be within our universe, and it is limited by space, time, and causation.¹³⁸

Yet, we cannot overlook the multiple layers of signification embedded within the word, especially during the period in question. Although the search for liberation from *samsāra* is a long-established, critical component of Hindu thought, Prakash has argued that freedom as a comprehensive theme in Indian thought only became dominant with the British Raj's "institutionalis[ation of] the discourse of freedom as an aspect of imperial domination,"¹³⁹ a perspective which owed a large debt to Marx's assumptions of political/proletariat freedom as the natural human state. Keeping in mind the power and ubiquity of colonial discourse, we should not overlook the political import of an educated, articulate and influential thinker from a subject people-group proclaiming, before audiences comprised of citizens of the ruling power (in the case of England) or its allied cultural offshoot (the United States), that 'freedom' is the most fundamental human desire and the end goal of all forms of striving in life. If freedom is humanity's ultimate aim in all respects, then oppressive political regimes, like British colonial rule, are positioned in opposition to the fundamental stream of human progress (rather than being

¹³⁷ For an overview of Ritschl's thought, see Capps, 18-20.

¹³⁸ "Freedom," Karma-Yoga, *CW*, v. 1, 97.

¹³⁹ Gyan Prakash, "The Location of Scholarship," in *At Home in Diaspora: South Asian Scholars and the West*, ed. J. Assayag and V. Benei (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 115-26.

evidence of that progress), and, conversely, nationalist freedom-discourses, like those then emerging in India, are situated in an implicit position of moral authority.

Even if overt political intent is not attributed to the swami's message, however, Vivekananda's invocation of freedom nevertheless may still be viewed as having politically significant implications. By moving the focus of freedom-discourse from the outer world (in the form of nationalism-versus-colonialism) to the inner realm (*jñāna*-versus-*avidyā*), bondage and liberation become matters which are negotiable by Hindus on a personal, individualistic level, wholly upon the terrain of ostensibly 'traditional' Indian religious/yogic approaches, unhindered (at least, in theory) by the overwhelming clout of colonial domination and requiring no active participation in the same, nor in the alteration/compromise of cultural identity that this potentially entails. The spiritual quest for freedom takes place within a non-colonised cognitive site, a place of psychological freedom and control for those who were denied outward political/social power. From this perspective, the growing appeal of such 'neo-traditional' forms of religious practice for many Indians of Vivekananda's day can well be understood.

In a more-theological vein, for Vivekananda, God constitutes the ultimate manifestation of freedom, and all beings, according to the Advaitin perspective he professes, are ultimately identical with God in the form of *brahman*, the unconditioned Absolute. Thus, the swami is able to assert: "The conception of God, therefore, is as essential and as fundamental a part of mind as is the idea of bondage. Both are the outcome of the idea of freedom."¹⁴⁰ (That God should be part-and-parcel of human consciousness at the highest level might well be considered a given from an Advaitin

¹⁴⁰ "What is Religion?" *CW*, vol. 1, 335-6.

viewpoint that, in the final analysis, equates the two.)¹⁴¹ This particular reading might appear to mesh well with the essentialist ethos of modernity, at least insofar as Vivekananda's articulation thereof is concerned—asserting, as he does, universal essences in the human makeup. Yet Vivekananda's thought in this respect is also reflective of less-dichotomised (or, at the very least, *differently* dichotomised) Indian traditions of thought. For example, the rational-mind/material-body dualism of Cartesian-cum-Baconian thought is not reproduced in the swami's Sāṅkhya-based explanations; “this body and this mind which we see,” he states, “are only one part of the whole”¹⁴² (or, more evocatively, “this body is just the external crust of the mind”).¹⁴³ As such, *both* are subject to transcendence by the non-material Self, the *puruṣa*¹⁴⁴—the only aspect of one's being that is characterised by true freedom.

On a related note, with respect to human and non-human life, Vivekananda appears to part company from the anthropocentric orientation of the Enlightenment thinkers, to at least some degree; “there cannot be life,” he states, “even in the plant, without the idea of freedom.”¹⁴⁵ The ‘religious’ drive, in the broadest sense, is thus not only a human phenomenon, but one which Vivekananda perceives as *truly* universal—“Consciously or

¹⁴¹ This is an interesting point of divergence from the modern Christian tradition, which has tended to view this ‘fundamental’ human religious drive and its categories of expression as ‘gifts from God’ to facilitate human adoration of the Divine; Advaita goes much farther in asserting the intrinsic unity of God and the personal mind/consciousness.

¹⁴² “Freedom,” *Karma-Yoga, CW*, vol. I, 96.

¹⁴³ “Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms,” *CW*, vol. 1, 258.

¹⁴⁴ To be more accurate, Yoga, which appropriates many philosophical ideas from Sāṅkhya, subdivides what European philosophy vaguely terms ‘mind’ into a number of more-specific categories: *manas* (the ‘inner sense’ or ‘mind-organ’), *buddhi* (the ‘intellect’), and *ahaṅkāra* (the ‘sense of self’), all of which are regarded as component parts of an individual's mind or consciousness (*citta*), and considered manifestations of matter (*prakṛti*), not of *puruṣa*—though conventional human thinking is believed to confound these phenomena and thereby produce bondage.

¹⁴⁵ “What is Religion?” *CW*, vol. 1, 336.

unconsciously, we are all striving for perfection. Every being must attain to it.”¹⁴⁶

Though they might appear minor points at first glance, these are consequential differences between Vivekananda’s stance and that of Western modernity—the latter sharply stressing the division between rational Man (*sic*) and non-rational nature—for they impact the swami’s interpretation of many aspects of religion, from ethical questions to cosmological schemata. In this respect, we can understand Chatterjee’s position, referred to in Chapter One, that resistance to colonial thought need not necessarily simply invert the problematic while maintaining intact the underlying thematic; in the cases above, Vivekananda references an alternative, non-Western worldview, incorporating elements thereof into a reading of ‘religion’ that yet remains tethered to an essence-based understanding of the concept.

The Roots of Religion: Western Theory Meets Indigenous Critique

The evolutionary theories of religion that were current during the late nineteenth century were clearly of great interest to Vivekananda, and he discusses and analyses them in his talks and writings. In a discourse delivered in London in 1896, Vivekananda articulates his own perspective on the academic debates, explaining that, “two theories have gained some acceptance amongst modern scholars.... One party maintains that ancestor worship is the beginning of religious ideas; the other, that religion originates in the personification of the powers of nature.”¹⁴⁷ This dichotomy, which, naturally, oversimplifies (strategically, it appears) the range of positions on religious origins held by scholars of the period, does nevertheless suggest something of the then-predominant

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁴⁷ “The Necessity of Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 57.

anthropological and philological approaches to religious origins.¹⁴⁸ Conceding that each of these two standpoints could claim solid support from research, Vivekananda himself steps into the debates, suggesting that

these two views, though they seem to be contradictory, can be reconciled on a third basis, which, to my mind, is the real germ of religion, and that I propose to call the struggle to transcend the limitations of the senses. Either, man goes to seek for the spirits of his ancestors, the spirits of the dead, that is, he wants to get a glimpse of what there is after the body is dissolved, or, he desires to understand the power working behind the stupendous phenomena of nature. Whichever of these is the case, one thing is certain, that he tries to transcend the limitations of the senses.¹⁴⁹

The swami is indeed correct in linking his ‘synthetic’ view to those of his contemporaries, for it does not in fact differ so radically from, for example, Müller’s assertion that different religions represent various methods of striving after the infinite,¹⁵⁰ or E. B. Tylor’s conviction that a belief in a soul which transcends the limitations of the body is the common motive behind the formation of religious systems.¹⁵¹

Vivekananda’s position in this regard can be understood as one facet of his identification of the quest for freedom as the underlying drive of religiosity, as described above. Undoubtedly, Vivekananda draws this theme of sense-transcendence largely from the Indian yogic traditions, as well as from his own guru’s teachings. In the language of Patanjali’s *Yogasūtras*, this was expressed as *citta-vṛtti-nirodha*, the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind, to achieve a state of *kaivalya* (liberation), thus freeing the self (*puruṣa*) from the constraints and entanglements of matter (*prakṛti*) and its accompanying limited (i.e., mediated) sense-based forms of perception.¹⁵² According to the counsel of

¹⁴⁸ See Capps, chap. 2: “The Origins of Religion,” 53-104.

¹⁴⁹ “The Necessity of Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 59.

¹⁵⁰ See Capps, 68-71.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 78-83.

¹⁵² Vivekananda’s full translation of the *Yogasūtras*, with an extensive commentary based on a combination of the classical sources and his own perspectives, is to be found in his book, *Raja-Yoga*, contained in

the *Bhagavadgītā*, the ability to fully withdraw the sense-organs from their objects—likened to a tortoise pulling in its limbs—marks one’s attainment of a state of transcendental wisdom (*prajñā*).¹⁵³ Ramakrishna also followed the well-established Indian tradition of advocating a trans-sensual approach to spiritual practice, repeatedly exhorting his followers to renounce attachment to “woman and gold” (*kāminī-kañcan*), and to seek to God directly, “through an intuitive experience” (*bodhe bodh kare*).¹⁵⁴ While Vivekananda does observe, “We find the same truth [of the value of the super-sensuous approach] declared amongst both the Jews and the Christians,”¹⁵⁵ his selection of this element as the pivot of religious evolution clearly gives several important strands of Hindu practice very strong positions *vis-à-vis* mainstream Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. (And, indeed, Vivekananda does, in this context, explicitly cite the Vedic *ṛsis* as notable exemplars of this super-sensory approach to religion.)¹⁵⁶ However, it is his displacement of the concept from the context of particular Indian traditions of personal spiritual practice to that of a general explanatory framework for the origin and growth of all religious phenomena which is most significant here, for it serves as a counter-tactic to similar universalising efforts by Western thinkers with respect to their own religious concepts. (Consider, for example, turn-of-the-century Scottish author

Complete Works, vol. 1, 204-314; the original Sanskrit text is also included in some editions (e.g., the Mayavati Memorial edition).

¹⁵³ *Bhagavadgītā* (II.58): *yadā saṃharate cāyaṃ kūrmo ’ngānīva sarvaśaḥ || indriyāṅindriyārthebhyastasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā ||* “Drawing away his senses completely from sense-objects, just as the tortoise pulls in his limbs, the yogi becomes steadfast in wisdom” (translation mine).

¹⁵⁴ The Bengali passage appears in Mahendranath Gupta’s *Kathāmṛta* (Calcutta: Udbodhan, 1994), 952; the English rendering is to be found in Nikhilananda’s translation, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, n.d.), 781.

¹⁵⁵ “The Necessity of Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 60.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Andrew Lang's assertion that belief in a single Supreme Being was a cultural universal, even among the most 'primitive' communities.)¹⁵⁷

Specifically, Vivekananda identifies the persistence of mental activity during the dream-state to be the initial catalyst for transcendental theories, which are subsequently followed up by explorations of other, 'higher', super-sensory states of consciousness.¹⁵⁸ A similar idea is found in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, in which *svapna-sthāna* (dream-sleep) is identified as the first state that is both beyond 'ordinary consciousness' (*jāgarita-sthāna*) and yet still within the realm of experience of ordinary people, foreshadowing something of the higher states to be achieved through meditative practice. Yet, although he also shares common ground with other theorists—like Tylor, who included dreams as one of the sources of humanity's belief in souls—it is, again, not so much the details of the theories as the universalisation of particular Indian religious ideas into secularised academic explanatory models that reflects the influence of modernity on Vivekananda's thinking and suggests the counter-colonial intent behind the same. Hindu scholars of earlier times had tended to focus their efforts on negotiating the position of their respective sects in relation to the other manifold elements within Indian religious life, with minimal attention to the beliefs and activities of the *mlecchas* living across the *kālāpānī* (about whom little was reliably known to them before colonial times anyways). Even the theological systems of India's indigenous communities of Jews and Christians attracted little notice from the 'orthodox' (*śaḍdarśanika*) Hindu philosophers. Yet, just as colonialism had made it necessary for Europeans to attempt to account for and deal with (both discursively and concretely) the inhabitants of these other lands, it had impelled

¹⁵⁷ For a discussion of Lang's ideas, see Capps, 83-4.

Indians to do the same with respect to Europe and its peoples. For an Indian of Vivekananda's time and social class, religion had to be discussed—even within India—not merely in its local manifestations, but theorised on a global scale, and in the terms of Western scientific epistemology and historicism, in order for the position of the speaker or writer to be perceived as authoritative. This was even more true when speaking to Euro-American audiences, as in the case of the lecture cited above; Hindu ideas had to be moved from the realms of both Indophilic curios and Indophobic 'others' to become viable elements of Western worldviews, unrestricted by elements of Indian specificity. The most effective way for Vivekananda to accomplish this was to try to integrate these ideas in such a way that they would appear to be logical and natural fulfilments of existing Western theories, scientific or religious, and articulate them in language reminiscent of such modern thinkers as Spencer and Mill. We will, in fact, encounter this theme—and its intimation of an essentialism which was primarily strategic in nature—repeatedly throughout Vivekananda's work.

Yet, in taking this approach, Vivekananda again does more than simply substitute ideas into the Western thematic; he sometimes challenges and critiques parts of the basic structure of the existing perspectives. For example, though he often invokes the 'confident' spirit of the age to his own advantage, Vivekananda also critically evaluates the Enlightenment notion of unfettered progress that underlay nineteenth-century social-evolutionist theories of religion. In the introduction to his commentary on Patañjali's *Yogasūtras*, he offers his appraisal of this theme:

Another theory in modern times has been presented by several schools, that man's destiny is to go on always improving, always struggling towards, but never reaching

¹⁵⁸ "The Necessity of Religion," *CW*, vol. 2, 59-60.

the goal. This statement, though apparently very nice, is also absurd, because there is no such thing as motion in a straight line. Every motion is in a circle.... On other and practical grounds we see that the theory of eternal progression is untenable, for destruction is the goal of everything earthly. All our struggles and hopes and fears and joys, what will they lead to? We shall all end in death. Nothing is so certain as this. Where, then, is this motion in a straight line—this infinite progression? It is only going out to a distance, and coming back to the centre from which it started.¹⁵⁹

Appealing to the power and prestige of scientific discourse, Vivekananda then continues on to defend the validity of this perspective with an appeal to the natural laws of cosmology, biology and chemistry.¹⁶⁰

This argument has definite rhetorical implications for Vivekananda's efforts to bolster Hinduism against the diatribes of its detractors. Whereas critics—both Christians and 'secular' academics—tended to situate the allegedly primitive practices and doctrines of Hinduism on a low rung of the human evolutionary ladder, here Vivekananda takes a unique and insightful approach to the refutation of these evaluations. As mentioned previously, the simplistic identification of cyclic time with 'Eastern' cultures has long been an unquestioned feature of discourses on the Orient, used to emphasise a perceived lack of historicity and a resistance to progress and development—an 'otherness' contrasted with the 'linear' West. Vivekananda, however, does not merely reinscribe circularity-versus-linearity as an East-West distinction in the passage quoted above. He disputes the validity of a progressive, linear account as an accurate description of *any* society, let alone of world civilisation as a whole. By reading history from this geometrically reordered perspective, the modern, secular culture of European society appears not as the pinnacle of a continuous process of human betterment, but, rather, as a divergence or deviation from the spiritual truths of antiquity. As things stand,

¹⁵⁹ "Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms," *CW*, vol. 1, 195-6.

Vivekananda asserts, humanity has reached the nadir of its decline and is only beginning its collective ascent:

There is no religion today that does not teach that man is a degradation. We have been degraded down to the animal, and are now going up, to emerge out of this bondage. But we shall never be able entirely to manifest the Infinite here [in the 'worldly' (*laukika*) realm]. We shall struggle hard, but there will come a time when we shall find that it is impossible to be perfect here, while we are bound by the senses.¹⁶¹

His forthright assertion of the universality of degradation-based interpretations of history remains unsupported here, but functions to invoke an allegedly 'unified front' on the part of the world's religious traditions against the progressive secular ideologies of the West. By grouping humanity together in this ostensible decline to the state of the "animal," Vivekananda counters the common critique which dichotomises progress/degradation upon an Occident/Orient axis, and ascribes to India a profound condition of debasement. For Vivekananda, the *whole world* has become animalistic, that is, tied to sense-gratification. (In this respect his perspective also marks a departure from the focus on pleasure as a human good, a legacy of secular happiness-seeking eschatologies during the Enlightenment which had continued to persist in the ideas of Spencer and other nineteenth-century philosophers as a rival to the enjoyment-deferring moral approaches that dominated popular British and American forms of Christianity.) Intimated by the above statement is, once again, a suggestion of the indispensable nature of 'sense-transcendence' for humanity's growth. The direct, super-conscious insight (*prajñā*), capable of carrying the mind beyond the limits of intellect and reason,¹⁶² cultivated by the Upaniṣadic *ṛsis*, is not, for Vivekananda, a mythical or archaic human faculty, but rather,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 196.

¹⁶¹ "The Absolute and Manifestation," *CW*, vol. 2, 137.

is the point to which humanity as a whole is to return.¹⁶³ As this knowledge is claimed to be part of the heritage—a possession, as it were—of the Vedāntic tradition, his placement of it as the zenith of human progress positions Hinduism (at least as Vivekananda constructs it) as a harbinger of the future direction of human evolution.

This is not to say that his perspective is wholly one-sided, however. The Hindu faith, in Vivekananda's view, *has* undergone 'degenerations' in post-Vedic times, and indeed does stand in need of reform, as its Western critics posited. But, for Vivekananda, this condition is a *universal* one, affecting the world's peoples as a whole, and "there must come a time when [humanity] shoots upward again to complete the circle."¹⁶⁴ The stimulus to this inevitable revivification lies not (completely, at least) in the advances of Western civilisation, he suggests, but in a renewed understanding of "the science of religion" expounded by the ancient sages.¹⁶⁵ (Vivekananda's deployment of this neologism of Müller's to commingle the traditional teachings of Vedānta with the scholarly study of religion reveals much about the swami's apprehension of the power and value of Western academic rhetoric, in addition to his strategic discursive placement of Indian religious knowledge.) While again upholding the essentialist position, Vivekananda denies that Hinduism's Vedic roots and stress on eternal truths signify a stagnant and unchanging nature. Rather, as "the very fountain-head of our religion,"¹⁶⁶ the *Vedas* (both as texts and as less-clearly demarcated 'tradition') provide "eternal principles which stand upon their own foundations"¹⁶⁷ from which fresh insights and

¹⁶² "Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms," *CW*, vol. 1, 199.

¹⁶³ See *ibid.*, 197-9.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁶⁵ See, for example, *ibid.*, 197-9.

¹⁶⁶ "The Sages of India," *CW*, vol. 3, 249.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

conclusions can be drawn as circumstances necessitate. Hinduism, for Vivekananda, is thus neither a static archaeological artefact nor a degenerate shell of a once-great philosophy, but an intensely adaptable and living reality. Thus we see that, rather than simply attack the Eurocentric hierarchical evaluation of religion, Vivekananda deftly appropriates the evolutionary paradigm upon which it is based, substituting elements of what he would surely brand a ‘Vedāntic worldview’ for those of modernity, to create an alternative hierarchy that actually privileges Hinduism.

Vivekananda’s Hinduism: At the Parliament and Beyond

Hinduism, as the above example suggests, is a concept that features very prominently throughout Vivekananda’s writings, speeches, conversations and letters; in fact, it is probably fair to say that few, if any, of his Indian contemporaries utilised the term more often or situated it more prominently within their respective discourses. In part, this may be considered a consequence of the swami’s extensive communication with non-Indian audiences, which necessitated adopting a vocabulary and conceptual framework that was intelligible to his listeners and readers. As well, the designation ‘Hinduism’ was applied by the organisers of the Parliament of Religions to that religious entity of which Vivekananda was considered a representative.¹⁶⁸ His appearance at the Parliament, of course, sparked much of his initial popularity in the West and the talks that

¹⁶⁸ How Vivekananda came to be considered a representative of ‘Hinduism’ as a whole, rather than a particular sect/tradition thereof, is not altogether clear from the records. Vivekananda, no doubt, was familiar with representations of a unified ‘Hindu religion’ long before this time. There is some suggestion in the biographical literature that his earliest Indian benefactors donated to his travel fund in order that he might “represent Hinduism” in America (e.g., *Life of SV*, v. 1, 336; 372), a task to which Vivekananda seems to have agreed. (The retrospective nature of these recollections, to be sure, does raise some doubts about their accuracy.) It seems likely that, by the time Harvard professor John Henry Wright wrote to the organisers of the Parliament in mid-1893 requesting that the swami be accepted as a delegate, Vivekananda

he delivered during the event set the tone for much of his subsequent expository work.

Yet, his decision to adopt and continue to use the term—even in his later Indian discourses—rather than some alternate, more-indigenous concept or grouping, was one that had profound repercussions upon the understandings of Indian religious life with which he left both Westerners and Indians themselves.

That Vivekananda recognised, to at least some extent, the selective and constructed nature of his interpretation of Indian religion is obvious from a letter he penned from America to Alasinga Perumal in February 1896, in which he writes:

To put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy and intricate mythology and queer startling psychology, a religion which shall be easy, simple, popular, and at the same time meet the requirements of the highest minds—is a task only those can understand who have attempted it. The abstract Advaita must become living—poetic—in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; and out of bewildering Yogi-ism must come the most scientific and practical psychology—and all this must be put in a form so that a child may grasp it. That is my life's work.¹⁶⁹

This acknowledgement highlights his own cognisance of the strategic essentialism involved in his representation of Hinduism; we can gather from this passage that Vivekananda was well aware that the 'Hinduism' that he was presenting to his listeners and readers was something quite distinct from the diverse and multifaceted Indian reality. Of particular interest is his recognition that his discourse was performative, that is, that he was *creating* "a religion," and re-casting other 'traditional' elements along the normative patterns of Western discursive formations—psychology and ethics, for example—not merely translating or transplanting pre-established actualities from one linguistic/cultural context to another. In fact, the three fundamental categories of Enlightenment approaches

has already convinced Wright and his other influential new American acquaintances that he was capable and qualified to represent 'Hinduism'.

to religion are all alluded to in this paragraph: philosophy (even if “dry”), ethics (“moral forms”), and aesthetics (“poetic” Advaita). Although Vivekananda does not explicitly state it here, it is clear that the sources from which he is producing this ‘religion’ are in no small part textual; this is suggested, for example, by his description of “mak[ing] out of dry philosophy” a “popular” and “living” religion. (Interestingly enough, the depreciative language which he employs towards the elements of the tradition which he claims as his own—“dry,” “queer,” “bewildering”—would not be out of place in the writings of even his most ‘sympathetic’ Western contemporaries; consider, for example, Max Müller’s assertion that the hymns of the *Rg Veda* are “tedious,” “childish,” “foolish,” and “insipid”).¹⁷⁰

That Vivekananda is at once able to acknowledge the selective and synthetic nature of his ‘Hinduism’ and identify the same with the ‘religion’ of the bulk of the Indian people reveals much about the hermeneutical assumptions underlying his work. If ‘real’ Hinduism is not the same as historical Hinduism, textual Hinduism, or even ‘popular’ Hinduism, then it can safely be assumed that his central presuppositions in this case are not those of the historian, the philologist, or the anthropologist. His fundamental standpoint is perhaps best characterised as that of a disciple-cum-philosopher/theologian, approaching the ‘religious data’ with pre-existing criteria of ontological truth.

One of Vivekananda’s earliest ‘public’ responsibilities in the United States was to define and explain Hinduism to the audience attending the Parliament of Religions. As something of a self-appointed Hindu spokesperson, the interpretative choices he made in

¹⁶⁹ “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 5, 104-5.

¹⁷⁰ Max Müller, “Lecture on the Vedas or the Sacred Books of the Brahmans, Delivered at the Philosophical Institution, Leeds, March, 1865,” in *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. 1, 26, 37.

his efforts were highly significant and consequential. In his “Paper on Hinduism,” presented a week into the Parliament, he makes reference, firstly, to what he understands to be the great antiquity of Hinduism, classing it with what he terms the two other “prehistoric” religions, Judaism and Zoroastrianism.¹⁷¹ Its distinctiveness within this set comes from its resilience and persistence in its historical birthplace, a result, he asserts, of its fundamental inclusivity:

While Judaism failed to absorb Christianity and was driven out of its place of birth by its all-conquering daughter, and a handful of Parsees is all that remains to tell the tale of their grand religion, sect after sect arose in India and seemed to shake the religion of the Vedas to its very foundations, but like the waters of the seashore in a tremendous earthquake it receded only for a while, only to return in an all-absorbing flood, a thousand times more vigorous, and when the tumult of the rush was over, these sects were all sucked in, absorbed, and assimilated into the immense body of the mother faith.¹⁷²

This theme—Hinduism as all-embracing, assimilative, transcending particularities of creed and praxis—is singled out above, and elsewhere, by the swami as the religion’s definitive characteristic. Vivekananda’s simile—Hinduism as a “mother” who absorbs all it encounters—recalls the organic and feminising Orientalist tropes referred to above, which cast the Hindu religion as, among other entities, a sponge. The language which Vivekananda uses in this passage is, likely unintentionally, even more evocative of certain of the ‘negative’ aspects long associated with the feminine in European thought, those of the female as the destroyer and ‘de-masculiniser’ of the male. Hinduism is not merely a passive absorber, in Vivekananda’s account, but an active, vigorous “flood,” which ‘sucks in’ and ‘assimilates’ all it encounters into an amorphous, undifferentiated, feminised totality.

¹⁷¹ “Paper on Hinduism,” *CW*, vol. 1, 6.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

Why Vivekananda opts to essentialise Hinduism in this way for his American audience, and how conscious he actually was of its broader implications, are matters open to debate. Certainly, differences in cultural associations may well be a factor; for a Bengali Hindu, the gendered language used above would be most likely to invoke the terrific-yet-beloved images of Durgā and Kālī. It also, however, harmonises with Vivekananda's familiar tactic of adopting an existing derogatory representation and transforming it into a tool for the discursive elevation of Indian culture and, particularly, of Hindu religion. To claim that a religion which was seemingly threatened by the colonial onslaught of a foreign faith and culture has the proven capacity to triumph over competing influences by assimilating them is no inconsequential declaration, especially given the colonisers' dread of fluid or disintegrating boundaries and of being degraded and feminised through their contact with 'the native'—themes that we will explore further in our discussions of gender in Chapter Seven.

Vivekananda's reference in this passage to Hinduism as "the religion of the Vedas," should not be glossed over. 'Vedas' functions as something of an ambiguous signifier in Vivekananda's discourse. In the course of the "Paper," he ascribes to "the Vedas" a prominent position, describing them as the "revelation" through which "Hindus have received their religion."¹⁷³ Yet, according to his own definition, the phrase "the Vedas" does not denote a scriptural corpus *per se*, but rather, "the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times."¹⁷⁴ This hermeneutical approach is an interesting one, for it allows Vivekananda to simultaneously appropriate the discursive—if not always tangible—authority granted to the *Vedas* (as symbol) by

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Hindus and yet to free himself from the constraints of the actual contents (as text) of the same.

Notably, the swami's interpretation also seeks to negotiate the problematic binary—characteristic of the Enlightenment temper and enduring throughout the modern period—between *revealed* religion and *natural* religion, the evaluative standard for the former being the human experience of the supposedly universal principles of the latter.

Vivekananda here invokes a scientific parallel, the law of conservation of energy, as a paradigm,¹⁷⁵ following which he uncouples the *Vedas*' transcendental authority from Vedic revelation. Whether these “spiritual laws” (like physical laws) are discovered or remain unknown, are expressed or not, he asserts, they exist (universally, it is implied) and continue to govern “the moral, ethical, and spiritual relations between soul and soul and between individual spirits and the Father of all spirits.”¹⁷⁶ Thus, it is, in reality, not only an appeal to the long-established leverage of the *Vedas* within an Indian religious context, but also a linkage of Hinduism with the authority of the scientific model, with its rhetoric of ‘discovery’ and progressive unveiling of eternal, universal truths.

In the course of the “Paper,” Vivekananda moves quickly to pre-emptively defend, by logical reasoning, the validity and value of a number of what he claims to be central tenets of Hinduism, the points on which he declares that “all the Hindus are agreed.”¹⁷⁷ Among those he identifies are: the beginningless and endless nature of creation; rebirth and *karma*; the separateness of spirit and matter; and the way to liberation. Thus, by fashioning some basic common denominators for the Hindu faith, he has a basis upon

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

which to distinguish a shared ‘core’ of Hinduism from its multifarious forms and varieties. This subsequently becomes important in his efforts to present Hinduism—to Americans and Europeans, as well as to Indian Hindus themselves—as a united body, with shared convictions and goals.

The presentation of Hinduism that we encounter in the “Paper” is clearly, to some extent, an apologetic account shaped by Vivekananda’s desire to refute the unsympathetic representations of Hinduism by Christian missionaries and other less-charitable critics. “I may tell you that there is no *polytheism* in India,” he asserts.

In every temple, if one stands by and listens, one will find the worshippers applying all the attributes of God, including omnipresence, to the images. It is not polytheism, nor would the name henotheism [as coined by Max Müller] explain the situation.... Names are not explanations.¹⁷⁸

In contesting the conventional Western, ‘scientific’ categories according to which Indian religious phenomena were scrutinised (and showing, incidentally, that he was already familiar with the scholarship of Müller and other Orientalists during this early phase of his public career), Vivekananda opens up a novel space for Hinduism, positioning it as a unique manifestation of human religiosity, not simply a ‘type’ to be slotted into an existing analytical framework. At the same time, however, there is in this passage the suggestion that Hindu ‘idol worship’ is marked by an underlying monotheism comparable to that espoused by Christianity (“... applying all the attributes of God, including omnipresence, to the images”). Thus, Hinduism is at once ‘unknowable’—not capable of classification for the sake of colonial control—and yet is not really different from the standard against which other ‘religions’ are evaluated by the Western world. If

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 15 (*italics in original*).

‘idolatry’ does indeed exist in India, he states, “it does not mean anything horrible... [Rather] it is the attempt of undeveloped minds to grasp high spiritual truths.”¹⁷⁹ The worshiper of *mūrti*-as-God, he asserts, is not the normative model, and certainly not the exemplar, of Hindu religiosity, as had been portrayed in the vulgar missionary accounts. Nor, however, does the swami deny image-use a legitimate place within the faith (and, given his own guru’s devotion to the Dakshineswar Kālībārī’s *pratimā*, how could he?). The language used in this case suggests something of the hierarchical structure and evolutionary perspective that characterise Vivekananda’s view of religion as a universal human phenomenon, themes which will be explored in greater detail below.

Still following the “short sketch of the religious ideas of the Hindus” expressed in his “Paper,” Vivekananda attempts to relativise Western criticisms by forthrightly contrasting Hinduism’s ‘failings’ with what he perceives to be the greater evils of Christian exclusivism, intolerance and hypocrisy: “Superstition is a great enemy of man,” declares the swami,

but bigotry is worse. Why does a Christian go to church? Why is the cross holy?... My brethren, we can no more think about anything without a mental image than we can live without breathing. By the law of association, the material image calls up the mental idea and vice versa. This is why the Hindu uses an external symbol when he worships. He will tell you, it helps to keep his mind fixed on the Being to whom he prays. He knows as well as you do that the image is not God, is not omnipresent.¹⁸⁰

And he further states:

The Hindus have their faults, they sometimes have their exceptions; but mark this, they are always for punishing their own bodies, and never for cutting the throats of

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 17-18.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 15-16.

their neighbours. If the Hindu fanatic burns himself on the pyre, he never lights the fire of Inquisition.¹⁸¹

While, granted, not a particularly subtle or tactful approach to defending Hinduism against its distracters, this was no doubt a powerful one. As we shall see throughout this thesis, much discursive effort on the part of Europeans (and, with regard to their own minority populations, white Americans) was devoted to justifying the colonial project by claims of Western/Christian moral superiority. In this respect, the conjoint nature of Vivekananda's discussions of image-worship and of Hindus' and Christians' respective moral conditions is not coincidental. In the eyes of many of the swami's Christian contemporaries, 'idolatry' was not simply a factual mistake—an incorrect apprehension of the nature of God and the proper means of His worship—rather, it functioned as a trope for moral depravity.¹⁸² This perception had its roots in the Judeo-Christian reading of ethics as covenantal, in which a 'falling into' idolatry constituted a 'falling away' from God; the intensity of the modern opposition to the practice was, further, intertwined with deep-rooted Protestant-Catholic conflicts, in which charges of 'idolatry' served to vitiate the moral reputation of the latter.¹⁸³ (The power and prevalence of these morally charged discourses account for Vivekananda's explanation to the Parliament audience that, to Indians, "idolatry... is not the mother of harlots.")¹⁸⁴ Vivekananda's interpretation reverses the 'direction' of religious transformation signified by *mūrti-pūjā*; it is not a Pentateuch-esque decay of a people's monotheistic devotion (or even a "later degradation" of the Vedic worship of "ideal gods," to use Max Müller's loaded

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸² Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 62-4.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 67-9.

¹⁸⁴ "Paper on Hinduism," *CW*, vol. 1, 18.

phrasing).¹⁸⁵ Instead, it represents but one early stage of the human advancement *towards* the Divine. The invocation of image-worship as a site of ethical disputation Vivekananda believed to be a Christian ruse, as he found many of the historical acts carried out in the name of Christianity to be utterly indefensible by any moral standards, and surely recognised that many Christians concurred. Therefore, his appeal to a counter-trope like the Inquisition served well to destabilise morality as a claimed site of hegemonic power and authority for the ‘Christian West’. Regardless of whether or not most members of the primarily Christian audience present at the Parliament had a personal interest in understanding Hinduism, they could not have disregarded the import of Vivekananda’s pointed remarks about their own religio-cultural tradition. (It was this type of straightforward public contestation of Christian behaviour and Western morality that established Vivekananda’s reputation in America as a courageous challenger of accepted religious norms, and distinguished him from many of the other Parliament’s participants, who generally opted to steer clear of potentially controversial or divisive issues.)¹⁸⁶

Vivekananda’s moral critique in the “Paper” becomes rather more refined as he expands it to combine a refutation of certain Christian theological ideas, such as humanity’s fundamental sinfulness, with an advocacy of the Enlightenment themes of personal autonomy and the spirit of conquest through knowledge. In the words of his now-famous exhortation:

¹⁸⁵ Max Müller, “Lecture on the Vedas,” 37.

¹⁸⁶ The best example of this is to be found in Vivekananda’s shortest talk before the Parliament, delivered on September 20, 1893, in which he lambastes Christian missionaries in India for ignoring the material needs of the Indian people (“Religion Not the Crying Need of India,” *CW*, vol. 1, 20).

Allow me to call you, brethren, by that sweet name—heirs of immortal bliss—yea, the Hindu refuses to call you sinners. Ye are the Children of God, the sharers of immortal bliss, holy and perfect beings. Ye divinities on earth—sinners! It is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature. Come up, O lions, and shake off the delusion that you are sheep; you are souls immortal, spirits free, blest and eternal; ye are not matter, ye are not bodies; matter is your servant, not you the servant of matter.¹⁸⁷

By juxtaposing these themes, Vivekananda not-so-subtly implies that conventional Christian theology is at odds with the progress-oriented values of modernity. (This is a perspective which many Europeans and Americans had, by this time, also come to share—hence, the perceived need for such a Parliament in the first place. That this increasingly widespread conviction posed a dilemma for the then-active Christian foreign-missions movement, intertwined with the colonial expansionist project, goes without saying.) The suggestion here is that the ‘modern’ individual, bent on pursuing the mastery of the world as well as of him/herself, needs to discard certain customary doctrinal positions to fulfil these goals. Vivekananda renders arcane Vedāntic assertions about the non-material nature of the Self and its identity with the Absolute into a very public rhetoric invoking Cartesian dualism,¹⁸⁸ stressing the achievement of sovereignty the individual over the material world. Hinduism, he implies, possesses the key that ‘orthodox’ Christianity lacks—a philosophy-cum-ontology that is not merely compatible with the modern spirit, but which strengthens and extends it into the religious, supra-material realm.

To summarise, in the “Paper,” Vivekananda strives to paint a picture of Hinduism that accords with the image that the West has constructed of *itself*: enlightened,

¹⁸⁷ “Paper on Hinduism,” *CW*, vol. 1, 11.

¹⁸⁸ This position, which appears very different from his refutation of mental-physical dichotomies in the passage quoted earlier, is one example of his particularly difficult-to-reconcile stances, itself suggesting

humanistic, scientific, rational, progressive. What he offers is not principally an *explanation* of Hindu beliefs (though this element is certainly present) so much as a *defence* of the truth and value of Hindu tenets—a presentation more prescriptive than descriptive, in the final analysis. In so doing, Vivekananda presents a valourised image of Hinduism that puts him into an ambiguous relationship with the Orientalist paradigm. He cites ‘the Vedas’ often as the repository of the essential truths of Hinduism, but, in asserting that by this is meant not the Vedic texts proper, but rather, a (vaguely defined) collection of spiritual discoveries, Vivekananda leaves open the possibility of extricating himself to some extent from the modern, Orientalist reconstructions, homogenisations, and criticisms of the Hindu textual sources. However, by choosing—as he does throughout his broader body of work—such sources as Patanjali’s *Yogasūtras*, the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Bhagavadgītā* as central textual pillars around which to structure his explanations of Hinduism, Vivekananda still remains within the realm of the classical-textual Orientalist model of religion, as well as the historical tradition of brāhminical authority and its constructions of a normative ‘Hindu *dharma*’.

If creating a unified and standardised ‘Hinduism’ permitted the West to compare and critique it unfavourably, doing the same allows Vivekananda to defend and lionise it—Hinduism is not, in essence, he argues, the ‘primitive’ rituals and beliefs of the masses, but the fundamental ‘scientific’ and ‘humanistic’ ideals which underlie the human spiritual quest, and which are in perfect accord with the standards of modernity. The image Vivekananda creates is to some degree complicit with Romantic Orientalism in its stress on a Vedāntic essentialism which locates the heart of Hindu wisdom in the

that Vivekananda’s appeal to these aspects of the Western thematic is more planned strategy than personal

Upaniṣadic recognition of a non-material Self and the quest for union with the Absolute, yet diverges in its rejection of the assumption that this essential Hinduism is necessarily passive and world-denying. For the swami, Hindus are heir to an advanced tradition of religious science, guardians of a sophisticated body of knowledge that the rest of the world urgently requires.

Advaita and the Legitimation of Hinduism

Hinduism, as we have seen, finds its fullest human expression for Vivekananda in what he refers to as *Vedānta*. The term, when used by Vivekananda without other qualification, generally signifies—as Thomas Mannumel describes it—“a sort of synthesis of the three main branches of Indian speculation: the Dvaita, the Viśiṣṭādvaita and the Advaita—a synthesis which is anything but conventional Hinduism... [yet] one whose crown was undoubtedly the Advaita-Vāda.”¹⁸⁹ Vivekananda’s own words would seem to confirm Mannumel’s hierarchical assessment: “The Vedanta philosophy, as it is generally called at the present day,” he explained before Harvard University’s Graduate Philosophical Society in 1896, “really comprises all the various sects that now exist in India. Thus there have been various interpretations, and to my mind they have been progressive, beginning with the dualistic or Dvaita and ending with the non-dualistic or Advaita.”¹⁹⁰ Exactly what religious terrain is actually encompassed by Vivekananda’s statement, “all the various sects,” is not entirely clear from the text. In the course of this lecture he discusses only a selection of the *ṣaḍdarśanas*, or ‘classical’ philosophical

conviction.

¹⁸⁹ Thomas Mannumel, *The Advaita of Vivekananda: An Appraisal* (Madras: T. R. Publications, for Satya Nilayam Publications, 1991), 4.

¹⁹⁰ “The Vedanta Philosophy,” *CW*, vol. 1, 357.

schools, making no reference to, for example, the *bhakti* traditions (the development of which, of course, post-dates a large share of the core Advaita literature). Further, Vivekananda's understanding of these interpretations as a *progression* towards non-duality only makes sense if read either ahistorically, or as situated within a narrative of arched ascent and decline—for Śaṅkara antedates, and becomes an impetus for, the formulation of the other two major schools of Vedānta into their now-familiar incarnations, referred to above by Mannumel. (We should observe here that synthetic interpretations of Vedānta's streams are not themselves unknown in the pre-colonial Indian context; indeed, Karl H. Potter has observed that this reconciliatory perspective is one of the dominant trends of post-Śaṅkara Vedāntic texts, though these sources do not necessarily adopt a hierarchical viewpoint, opting instead to eschew conflict by tolerating ambiguity.)¹⁹¹

Appreciating the status and centrality that Vivekananda ascribes to Advaita is critical in understanding his interpretations of Vedānta, of Hinduism as a whole, and of religion in general. As Raychaudhuri points out, "Advaita, or non-duality as projected in Vedānta, is certainly a central theme in the brāhminical tradition. But in the perceptions of Vivekananda and his guru it transcended the limits of any particular religious or cultural tradition."¹⁹² Indeed, the swami, in a letter to a Muslim friend, describes his elevated opinion of the Advaita tradition, while yet admitting its historically restricted position:

¹⁹¹ See Karl H. Potter, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 181-2.

¹⁹² Raychaudhuri, "Swami Vivekananda's Construction of Hinduism," *In Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.

Whether we call it Vedantism or any ism, the truth is that Advaitism is the last word of religion and thought and the only position from which one can look upon all religions and sects with love. I believe it is the religion of the future enlightened humanity. The Hindus may get the credit of arriving at it earlier than other races, they being an older race than either the Hebrew or the Arab; yet practical Advaitism, which looks upon and behaves to all mankind as one's own soul, was never developed among the Hindus universally.¹⁹³

The statement that Advaita is “the *only* position” which permits a fair and sympathetic perspective on other religious traditions is a weighty one; in this reading, Vivekananda's reformulation of Advaita becomes something of a privileged panopticon, the only truly legitimate hermeneutical position, from which all views are subject to critique. (Or, to employ Bhabha's more-Foucauldian terms, “the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined, where the observer becomes the observed.”)¹⁹⁴ From the perspective of the early Advaitic literature, there is nothing particularly remarkable about this claim; yet, transplanted into the charged inter-religious landscape of the late-nineteenth-century ‘colonial global village’, it clearly problematises any straightforward interpretation of Vivekananda's so-called religious universalism, as his perspective attributes an exclusive advantage to non-dualistic religio-philosophical viewpoints, and, in effect, marginalises others. Perhaps even more importantly, it poses a direct challenge to the self-declared authority of the Western Orientalist, appropriating not merely the right to interpret Hinduism itself, but to turn a Hindu gaze upon the West and assume the privileged site of enunciation himself.

In his study, Mannumel has given careful consideration to the points of philosophical agreement and divergence between Vivekananda and Śāṅkarācārya. He concludes that, with a few exceptions, Vivekananda's presentation of Advaita is largely

¹⁹³ “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 6, 415.

in accord with that attributed to Śaṅkara, albeit presented in a ‘popular’ form far more accessible to the masses. One of the important points, however, on which Vivekananda and Śaṅkara part company, Mannumel believes, concerns the role of *faith* in spiritual life:

Śaṅkara was clearly a theologian in his starting point. He like the other Vedantists of old considered *Śruti* as absolutely infallible and its authority supreme.... Thus he took on faith the existence of God and His nature as declared to him by the Vedas. He used reason only as an instrument in the service of faith.... Vivekananda’s starting point was not so clearly fideistic. The rationalistic and empirical spirit which characterised the close of the last [i.e., nineteenth] century was so strong in him that he appeared to take a different course when he declared: ‘I believe in thinking independently. I believe in becoming entirely free from the holy teachers.... You have to *become* the Bible and not follow it’ [*CW*, v. 3, 45]. On another occasion he said, ‘Personally, I take as much of the Vedas as agree with reason’ [*CW*, v. 8, 255].¹⁹⁵

In identifying the strong influence of modern positivistic thinking on Vivekananda’s views of traditional authority, Mannumel has actually pointed to one of the factors which makes the swami’s line of interpretation often challenging to follow—despite his own claims to the contrary,¹⁹⁶ Vivekananda, in practice, tends to accept scriptural sources only so far he can reconcile their dicta with the conclusions of rational thought. His bold declaration to one of his London classes in 1896 brings out this theme strongly:

Is it not tremendously blasphemous to believe against reason? What right have we not to use the greatest gift that God has given to us? I am sure God will pardon a man who will use his reason and cannot believe, rather than a man who believes blindly instead of using the faculties He has given him. He simply degrades his nature and goes down to the level of the beasts—degrades his senses and dies. We must reason; and when reason proves to us the truth of these prophets and great men about whom the ancient books speak in every country, we shall believe in them.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 89.

¹⁹⁵ Mannumel, 157.

¹⁹⁶ It is true that Vivekananda has elsewhere asserted that the Vedas actually and rightly encompass even ignorance and superstition, permitting a “proper place for everything” (“The Gita [part] I,” *CW*, vol. 1, 457). However, in explaining and defending religious phenomena and ideas in his talks and writings, it is consistently *reason* to which he appeals, and he frequently makes disparaging comments about what he perceives to be the bondage of both the Indian people and the West to superstitious, irrational beliefs and practices (albeit in different forms), speaking optimistically about the need for rational evaluation of religious ideas.

¹⁹⁷ “The Methods and Purpose of Religion,” *CW*, vol. 6, 12-13.

In these statements we see how strong was the need, in Vivekananda's perception, to present a vision of a Vedānticised Hinduism that was in accordance with the verisimilitudes of the modern age, and which countered many of the negative qualities—authoritarianism, idolatry, immorality, irrationality—which had been projected onto the tableau of the Orient. One of his principal strategies in this regard, as we have already seen, was the self-conscious framing of Hinduism in the rhetorical tradition of modernity. In speaking of Vivekananda's epistemology, for example, Mannumel aptly articulates Vivekananda's pattern of discursive appropriation:

Even if Vivekananda derived his thought from the Vedānta and not from Kant there is little doubt that he clothed it in the West with expressions, which it would seem, made it acceptable to a Western world that had long since accepted Kant's analysis as the last word on human knowledge and his idealistic trend as the reasonable attitude worthy of any cultured and critical mind.¹⁹⁸

In fact, it would seem safe to extend Mannumel's conclusion beyond Vivekananda's dissemination of his ideas "in the West," for similar themes appear throughout his talks to Indian audiences as well. We must remember that even in addressing the latter, particularly India's newly emerging Western-educated classes, Vivekananda was speaking to a society whose apprehension of the world had been profoundly impacted by colonial ways of knowing the world and by the values that accompanied them. And, hailing from a similar background himself, he was certainly acutely aware of the characteristic outlook of the modern *bhadralok* Hindu. While Hinduism is presented in his talks and writings—as it was in the work of many Western scholars and other Indophiles of the day—as a unified entity with essentialist foundations in Advaitin insights, it is not, for Vivekananda, some mystical, unchanging, esoteric

entity, but a dynamic force, more equipped than other religions to meet the rational and scientific challenges of the day, but yet transcending these realms of knowledge and experience.

Scientific Spirituality and Rational Religion

Nevertheless, as Shamita Basu has observed, Vivekananda's "humanization or secularization of the religious world-view" was accompanied by a parallel process of "spiritualization of the rational world, [of articulating] the hidden religiosity of all scientific and rational world-views."¹⁹⁹ For example, in his British lecture "Reason and Religion," this theme is manifest distinctly:

To my mind, if modern science is proving anything again and again, it is this, that we are one—mentally, spiritually, and physically.... The matter that is in my body may have been in yours a few years ago, or in the sun, or may have been the matter in a plant, and so on, in a continuous state of flux. What is meant by your body and my body? It is the oneness of the body. So with thought. It is an ocean of thought, one infinite mass, in which your mind and my mind are like whirlpools. Are you not seeing the effect now, how my thoughts are entering into yours, and yours into mine? The whole of our lives is one; we are one, even in thought. Coming to a still further generalisation, the essence of matter and thought is their potentiality of spirit; this is the unity from which all have come, and that must essentially be one. We are absolutely one; we are physically one, we are mentally one, and as spirit, it goes without saying, that we are one, if we believe in spirit at all. This oneness is the one fact that is being proved every day by modern science. ... That is exactly the teaching of the Advaita, about which I am lecturing to you. The Self is the essence of this universe, the essence of all souls; He is the essence of your own life, nay, 'Thou are That'. You are one with this universe.²⁰⁰

It is notable how much Vivekananda's language in this passage mirrors the sentiments of some of his Western contemporaries, particularly Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919), a prominent German zoologist and philosopher whose 'Monist' system of thought posited a

¹⁹⁸ Mannumel, 31.

¹⁹⁹ Basu, 78.

²⁰⁰ "Reason and Religion," *CW*, vol. 1, 373-4.

unity of matter and spirit, and who often articulated his ideas in terms more scientific than conventionally religious. Yet, by approaching Advaita as a scientifically compatible worldview that nevertheless transcends conventional empirical and rational boundaries, Vivekananda asserts that it is the discursive ground of Vedānta, rather than of Western science and modernity, which actually commands the dominant position. While this might appear to be incongruous with his comments, above, regarding the elevation of reason above belief, there is ground for reconciliation in Vivekananda's appeal to what we might somewhat-oxymoronically brand a 'transcendent empiricism'—the application of the experimental approach to the verification of those religious truths considered to be inaccessible to the senses. In his introduction to the *Yogasūtras*, Vivekananda explains:

It is clear that all the religions of the world have been built upon that one universal and adamant foundation of all our knowledge—direct experience. The teachers all saw God; they all saw their own souls, they saw their future, they saw their eternity, and what they saw they preached. ... If there has been one experience in this world in any particular branch of knowledge, it absolutely follows that that experience has been possible millions of times before, and will be repeated eternally. Uniformity is the rigorous law of nature; what once happened can happen always.

The teachers of the science of Yoga, therefore, declare that religion is not only based upon the experience of ancient times, but that no man can be religious until he has the same perceptions himself. Yoga is the science which teaches us how to get these perceptions.²⁰¹

As van der Veer observes, in Vivekananda's writings and speeches, "Yoga was now made into the unifying sign of the Indian nation... [and] legitimized as a scientific tradition in terms of rational criteria."²⁰² The above-quoted passage is typical of Vivekananda's invocation of science to portray ancient Indian religious theories as compatible with the epistemologies of modernity, a theme that is very prominent throughout his discourse and vital to his rhetorical strategy.

²⁰¹ "Raja-Yoga: Introductory," *CW*, vol. 1, 126-7.

Repeatedly and emphatically throughout his work, Vivekananda makes reference to the ways in which he understands Hinduism to be in accord with scientific thinking and the ideas arrived at thereby. In his "Paper on Hinduism," for example, he seems to harbour no doubts about the compatibility of the two: "Manifestation, and not creation, is the word of science today, and the Hindu is only glad that what he has been cherishing in his bosom for ages is going to be taught in more forcible language, and with further light from the latest conclusions of science."²⁰³ This unreserved declaration of the concordance of Hinduism and science is significant, for the question of the relationship between modern scientific discoveries and traditional Christian doctrines was among the most important and contentious issues within the Western intellectual milieu of Vivekananda's day, with many Christians fearing that widespread loss of religious faith was to be an inevitable consequence of the 'scientific age'.

Speaking before Western audiences (and even sectors of the educated and 'secularised' Indian public), Vivekananda, aware of the ambiguity surrounding the position and status of religion in modern society, does not merely explain his perspective on the nature and origin of religion, but seeks to defend the very need for religion in the first place. 'The Necessity of Religion', as he entitled one of his 1896 public lectures in London, could not anymore be considered a given in the educated and cosmopolitan circles of nineteenth-century European society, Britain included. With modern thinkers further pushing the Kantian legacy of religion's confinement to increasingly restricted spheres of life and thought, Western post-Enlightenment societies were placing increasing emphasis on the betterment of humanity through science and reason, and were

²⁰² van der Veer, 73-4.

further defining themselves against the images of the superstitious and irrational Orient which they had constructed.

That an ‘Oriental’, and a ‘Hindoo mystic’ at that, would endorse the value of religion would likely come as a surprise to no one among his Western audiences; after all, ‘the East’ was popularly understood to be a place in which hoary, little-changed ‘tradition’ had held sway from time immemorial.²⁰⁴ However, Vivekananda employs the same analytical criteria of science and reasoning that was commonly used to discount the role of religion by the ‘moderns’ to not only uphold religion’s value, but to situate Advaita Vedānta as the model of a religion that “can satisfy the demands of the scientific world.”²⁰⁵

In brief, his line of argumentation runs thusly²⁰⁶: The modern world and its spirit of reason and science make belief purely on the basis of texts or ecclesiastical authority no longer tenable. Any religion that survives investigation through the methods of science and reason will be strengthened; any that does not, has no value. Reason—which is defined by Vivekananda as the effort “to apply the discoveries of secular knowledge to religion”²⁰⁷—should employ two principles: (1) that the particular should be explainable by the general, and, ultimately, the universal, and (2), that the explanation must come from within the phenomenon, not from external sources, and, further, that this latter principle is most manifest in an evolutionary pattern of development, as evolution

²⁰³ “Paper on Hinduism,” *CW*, vol. 1, 15.

²⁰⁴ See Inden, 131-4.

²⁰⁵ “Reason and Religion,” *CW*, vol. 1, 374.

²⁰⁶ See *ibid.*, 366-82.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 369.

presumes that “every effect is a reproduction of a preceding cause,”²⁰⁸ without appeal to outside agents.

Taking these principles as criteria by which religion can be evaluated, Advaita “can stand the test of modern reasoning,”²⁰⁹ according to Vivekananda. This is because, in the first place, the essence of the Advaitin view of the universal Reality is not a Personal God—subject to ephemeral, relative, anthropogenic notions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’—but the unchangeable Absolute (which can yet encompass a Personal God, for the benefit of human limitations), that brings strength to the worshipper through the conviction of his or her own oneness with all.²¹⁰ Further, he asserts, Advaita Vedānta satisfies the second principle also, in that the all-encompassing *brahman* serves to unify all causes and effects into a single unit, without requiring (or, indeed, even acknowledging) a reality outside of Itself to account for any given phenomena.²¹¹

Especially interesting here is Vivekananda’s understanding and application of the concept of ‘reason’ itself, which we have briefly touched upon above. Jitendra Nath Mohanty, a noted scholar of Indian philosophy, has argued that there is no Sanskrit synonym for reason as it has been historically understood in the West,²¹² while other authors have pointed out that there is much within Indian philosophy, especially *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* sources, that approximates or overlaps Western concepts of rationality.²¹³ Regardless, as Vivekananda’s perceived need to offer a definition of the term intimates,

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 372.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 376.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 377.

²¹¹ Ibid., 374.

²¹² Jitendra Nath Mohanty, *Reason and Thought in Indian Tradition: An Essay on the Nature of Indian Philosophical Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 269.

'reason' has never possessed a single, clear, universally agreed-upon meaning, even though it has resided at the heart of Western epistemology since the Enlightenment.²¹⁴

This flexibility allows Vivekananda to appropriate the term on grounds that concur with his needs and priorities. While his contextually specific definition of reason would not itself be likely to raise protest from many quarters, his pair of (implicitly universal) principles are themselves particularly suited to establishing the supremacy of Advaita, as he subsequently demonstrates. This is not, of course, to say that these principles are fabrications that have no grounding in established discourses on reason and rationality, nor that they do not accord with contemporary scientific paradigms. However, his selection of these out of a host of competing constructions of rationality firmly situates reason as an aid to his missionary project.

In explaining his positive evaluation of reason before a London audience in 1896, Vivekananda declares:

It is better that mankind should become atheist by following reason than blindly believe in two hundred millions of gods on the authority of anybody. What we want is progress, development, realisation.... The glory of man is that he is a thinking being. It is the nature of man to think and therein he differs from animals. I believe in reason and follow reason having seen enough of the evils of authority, for I was born in a country where they have gone to the extreme of authority.²¹⁵

To a significant extent, Vivekananda's perspective, as expressed in this statement, seems to support the Western evaluation of India as authoritarian, irrational, superstitious and

²¹³ For a discussion of the nature of reason in classical Indian philosophy, see Jonardon Ganeri, "Hinduism and the Proper Work of Reason," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gerald Flood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 411-43.

²¹⁴ A discussion of reason and rationality in historical perspective, with especial reference to the study of religion, has been authored by anthropologist Paul Stoller; see Stoller's article, "Rationality," in *Critical Terms*, ed. Taylor, 239-55.

²¹⁵ "Practical Vedanta: Part III," *CW*, vol. 2, 336.

unprogressive. But, yet, as has been suggested, if he viewed India as the site of the greatest irrationality, it was also, in his mind, the source of its antithesis:

The monistic theory [*Advaitavāda*] has this merit that it is the most rational of all the religious theories that we can conceive of. Every other theory, every conception of God which is partial and little and personal is not rational. And yet monism has this grandeur that it embraces all these partial conceptions of God as being necessary for many. Some people say that this personal explanation is irrational. But it is consoling; they 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.²¹⁶

In making these statements, Vivekananda is actually doing several significant things. He clearly expresses some degree of agreement with the established Orientalist dichotomy between the ‘great’ monistic philosophical school and the ‘little’ polytheistic traditions of the masses, echoing the familiar binary evaluations: reason/authority; progress/stagnation; human/animal(-istic). Yet, by advancing a perspective that identifies the epitome of rational thought with Advaita,²¹⁷ Vivekananda salvages at least part of the Hindu tradition (the penultimate part, in his view) from the Western representation of Hinduism as irrational, and appropriates something of the ‘epistemic privilege’ associated with reason in modern European discursive traditions. In fact, his articulation of Advaita’s rationality actually interrogates the presumed supremacy of European science and secular philosophy—for he suggests that it responds most fully and satisfactorily to the fundamental drive of the rational subject to discover universal, internal explanatory principles for phenomena. Further, Vivekananda is also making a thinly veiled criticism of traditional Christian theological conceptions of God, which, historically, have been predominantly personal, not monistic. To say that Advaita possesses the key to the “clear

²¹⁶ Ibid., 337.

²¹⁷ The lecture which follows, “Practical Vedānta IV,” clarifies that Vivekananda is indeed equating what he describes here as “the monistic theory” with Advaita Vedānta; see *CW*, vol. 2, 341-58.

light of truth,” while implying that upholding a personal deity as the Supreme is the mark of “a consoling religion,” is a weighty jab at Hinduism’s Christian critics.²¹⁸

If reason is essential for religion, however, it is nevertheless limited in some significant ways, Vivekananda maintains. Commenting on a passage from Patañjali’s *Yogasūtras*²¹⁹ in *Raja-Yoga*, he explains:

I cannot see God with my eyes, nor can I touch Him with my hands, and we also know that neither can we reason beyond the senses. Reason leaves us at a point quite indecisive; we may reason all our lives, as the world has been doing for thousands of years, and the result is that we find we are incompetent to prove or disprove the facts of religion. What we perceive directly we take as the basis, and upon that basis we reason. So it is obvious that reasoning has to run within these bounds of perception. It can never go beyond. The whole scope of realisation, therefore, is beyond sense-perception. The Yogis say that man can go beyond his direct sense-perception, and beyond his reason also.... By the practice of Yoga that power is aroused, and then man transcends the ordinary limits of reason, and directly perceives things which are beyond all reason.²²⁰

The notion that reason—here he is equating it with Patañjala-Yoga’s *anumāna*, ‘inference’, implying that reason as the West understands it has a long-established history of its own in Indian philosophy—is constrained by the limits of perception is not a novel criticism of the Cartesian paradigm, even within Western thought. But Vivekananda’s identification of the methods of ‘Yoga’ as the key to transcending these limitations introduces a distinctly Indian perspective into the debate, one which continues his exaltation of selected Hindu traditions as exemplars of the West’s own professed intellectual values. For, if colonial and Orientalist discourses exalt Western concepts of

²¹⁸ The fact that such a position would seem to also disparage the devotional orientation of his own guru’s faith, which Vivekananda undoubtedly respected, suggests that the intensity of the rhetoric which he employs here is, again, somewhat ‘strategic’ in aim and intent.

²¹⁹ *Yogasūtras*, I.49-50: *śrutānumānaprajñābhyāmanyaviṣayā viṣeṣārthatvāt | tajaḥ saṃskāro ’nyasaṃkārapratibandhī* | Vivekananda’s translation reads, “The knowledge that is gained from testimony and inference is about common objects. That from the Samadhi just mentioned [in the preceding verses] is of a much higher order, being able to penetrate where inference and testimony cannot go.” (*CW*, vol. 1, 231.)

rationality as supreme, Vivekananda asserts that Indian wisdom, in the form of ‘Yoga’, can lead the mind one step above—continuing the theme of ever-onward progress that the modern West has espoused. The existing hierarchy of reason over authority is maintained, yet an additional level, which is in the possession of Hindu hands, is made the pinnacle.

The comments above also come closer to synchronising Vivekananda’s and Ramakrishna’s perspectives on reason than do the explanations of the former which were cited earlier. In the *Kathāmṛta*, Ramakrishna is frequently recorded as advising certain of his disciples, “Don’t reason [*vicāra*, literally, ‘debate’] anymore,”²²¹ apparently fearing it would retard or divert their spiritual progress. Though Vivekananda rarely spoke specifically in his public discourses of Ramakrishna’s expressed views on the limits and hazards of reasoning, there is a reference to this reason/faith conflict among Ramakrishna’s disciples in a recollected conversation between Vivekananda and Sharatchandra Chakravarty in 1897.²²² In this case, Vivekananda reportedly accounts for the discrepancy by describing both views as different-yet-valid standpoints, one referring to “mode of spiritual life in which one has to realise the Truth through the pursuit of scriptural learning”²²³ and the other to “a [higher] stage of spiritual life where all reasonings are hushed.”²²⁴ As few persons are, the swami believes, of this latter spiritual echelon, one should hesitate to discard study and reasoning, as, for most persons, it is “by constant reflection [that] the intellect will become clear, and then only can Brahman be

²²⁰ “Patanjali’s Yoga Aphorisms,” *CW*, vol. 1, 232-3.

²²¹ *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madra: Sri Ramakrishna Math, n.d.), 377.

²²² “Conversations and Dialogues (From the Diary of a Disciple),” dialogue IX, *CW*, vol. 6, 495-503.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 502.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 501.

reflected therein.”²²⁵ (This perspective was also not far removed from that of his Theosophist contemporaries, who laid great stress upon study and reflection, as well as ethical living, as keys to spiritual advancement.)

Vivekananda, then, does not seek to bolster the positions and status of religion by contesting the importance of science and/or reason as such, or by questioning their applicability to the Indian context (as did, for example, the early twentieth-century French philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who posited that a ‘prelogical’ or ‘mystical’ mentality, distinct from European rationality, was predominant in non-Western societies).²²⁶ Instead, he takes a universalistic approach to rationality, accepting the validity of the yardsticks set by the modern discourses of science and reason, even for the realm of spiritual matters, up to a point. Beyond the traditional limits of reason, however, he creates a site in which Indian religious traditions are represented as functioning as supplementary investigative strategies along the lines of Western scientific and philosophical inquiry. This median position also helps Vivekananda to negotiate what Chatterjee has identified as the ambivalent view of reason held by many Bengalis, particularly the urban middle class, during the nineteenth century, in which the “invariable implication it carried of the historical necessity of colonial rule and its condemnation of indigenous culture as the storehouse of unreason ... made the discourse of Reason oppressive.”²²⁷ Specifically, Vivekananda’s elevation of an Indian-rooted epistemology (‘Yoga’) above that which was regarded as characteristically and inextricably ‘Western’ (‘Reason’)—and, yet, the integration of both into a single,

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ See Paul Stoller, “Rationality,” in *Critical Terms*, ed. Taylor, 241.

²²⁷ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 55.

coherent worldview—provided some confidence to Indians faced with what increasingly appeared to be the inevitable victory of this latter ‘foreign’ element over indigenous epistemologies, and assuaged their fears concerning that which was perceived to be, simultaneously, an agent of liberation and subordination.

Granted, Vivekananda’s approach—stressing certain, primarily brāhminical, strands of Hindu tradition, while discounting others—does not fully acknowledge the plurality of Hindu religio-philosophical positions on the ultimate nature of God or the absoluteness of moral principles. The significance of this with respect to the consideration of popular Indian religiosity should not be discounted; Vivekananda constructs a clear hierarchy, which assigns theistic Hinduism an unfavourable position, though still claiming to embrace it within the ‘lower’, dualistic Vedānta traditions. Vivekananda does, however, make strategic use of his interpretation of indigenous Indian worldviews to reassess Western assumptions of superiority, and privileges the former above the latter in his implicit, reordered hierarchy. For although Vivekananda upholds the value of these European discourses as instruments, it is the Orient, normally the object of the Occident’s critique, that now becomes the subject in possession of the unique lens—the *Advaitavāda* and its allied ‘Yogic’ methods—required to evaluate phenomena fully and correctly. The Advaitic approach further opens up the possibility of multiple, valid realities (relatively speaking, at least) within the spheres of religion, ethics, and culture, something which the binary structures imposed by colonial discourses generally do not. Therefore, while Vivekananda’s perspective maintains the façade established by these Enlightenment patterns of thought, he is, in fact, altering it from within. This seems a particularly clever move, when one considers that outright dismissal of a framework then uncritically

accepted as normative would probably not easily win over his Western audiences. His perspective would more likely have been viewed as an exotic peculiarity rather than a legitimate intellectual proposal, had it not offered some firm bond with the existing cognitive assumptions that characterised the Western thematic. The concepts of science and reason, and the authority with which they had already been imbued by modernist discourses, thus become tools for Vivekananda's attribution of an authoritative and critical voice to Hinduism.

An Advaita for the Masses: Vedāntic Ethics and Social Action

Science and reason were not, however, the only grounds upon which nineteenth-century Hindus perceived themselves as challenged—even assailed—by the West's discourses and activities. Ethics and morality were a significant site of contestation and critique, with both Christian and secular thinkers often characterising Indian religions as negligent of moral reformation of the individual as well as lacking in fraternal concern for the 'downtrodden'.²²⁸ (Indeed, Hinduism's dicta and practices were often saddled with the blame for these very problems, accused of adding, in Rev. William Ward's vivid language, "an overwhelming force to the evil influences to which men are exposed, and rais[ing] into a horrid flame all the impure and diabolical passions which rage in the human heart.")²²⁹ The contemporary Protestant 'Social Gospel' movement had instilled in many a conviction that reformation of reprobates and betterment of the socially disadvantaged were divine mandates for Christians, and the perception that—as far as

²²⁸ Pennington has dealt with this Western/Christian apprehension throughout *Was Hinduism Invented?*; see especially chap. 3: 'Scarcely Less Bloody than Lascivious', 59-100.

²²⁹ William Ward, *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology of the Hindoos* [1822], vol. 1 (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1970), 296.

could be judged from missionary accounts—this impulse was utterly lacking in Hindu society only strengthened the belief that Christian evangelism was sorely needed in India.²³⁰ Further, colonial authorities were fond of appealing to the supposed lack of moral consciousness, and consequent ‘lawlessness’, among Hindu Indians (a quality commonly interpreted as a racial characteristic, as we shall see in subsequent chapters) to justify their continued rule over the subcontinent and its peoples.²³¹

Vivekananda had surely encountered such criticisms himself even relatively early in life, not only through his acquaintance with Christian literature and missionaries, but via the debates within the Indian movements—particularly the Brahmo Samāj—which had arisen partly in response to such challenges. The Samāj’s strong social-action mandate seems to have sat uneasily for some time in Vivekananda’s mind, contrasted against Ramakrishna’s admonitions that personal spiritual realisation, and not “charity and doing good to others,”²³² should be the chief aim of a religious aspirant’s life. Ultimately, Vivekananda developed a perspective that, though rooted in Advaita Vedānta, sought to reconcile and synthesise both world-focused and inward-looking approaches; yet, so doing necessitated the negotiation of ‘tradition’ and modernity in creative ways.

Vivekananda’s construction of Vedānta as a ‘mass philosophy’ that could be utilised not merely for personal transformation but also employed as a catalyst for social

²³⁰ This thirst for evangelisation among certain sections of the British Christian public was the cause of much ongoing discord within the East India Company and, subsequently, the fledgling British government in India, both of which maintained official policies of ‘religious non-interference’ for pragmatic reasons.

²³¹ William Ward, in the Preface to his famous early nineteenth-century, three-volume tome on the Hindus, commences thusly: “It must have been to accomplish some very important moral changes in the Eastern world, that so vast an empire as is comprized [sic] in British India, containing nearly One Hundred Millions of people, should have been placed under the dominion of one of the smallest portions of the civilized world, and that at the other extremity of the globe.... Great Britain is the only country upon earth, from which the intellectual and moral improvement of India could have been expected.” (Ward, vol. 1, xvii.)

²³² *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 615.

change meant the introduction of another distinction between his own approach and that espoused by the mainstream historical Advaita sources. One need only consider Śaṅkara's own careful confinement of non-dualistic knowledge to selected advanced, male, brahmin pupils, to understand just how notable an act Vivekananda's transglobal 'publicisation' of Advaita actually was. Further, his advocacy of this form of Vedānta as an instrument for morally oriented action in the world constituted a significant philosophical reorientation that has since become a characteristic feature of most modern 'neo-Vedānta' movements.

Yet, in attempting to understand the genesis of Vivekananda's perspective in this regard, we must be wary of limiting and stereotyping Advaita based upon the Orientalist infatuation with Śaṅkara's variety thereof and its subsequent brāhminical textual expressions. The unconventionality of Vivekananda's Advaita may in part be explained, as Basu has suggested, by approaching it not from the perspective of Śaṅkara's lineage (from which Vivekananda was technically excluded on account of his non-brahmin origins), but from that of Ramakrishna's tantrically oriented non-dualism.²³³ Walter Neeval, in his incisive study of Ramakrishna's religiosity, argues that Vivekananda's approach to Vedānta philosophy is more strongly rooted in Ramakrishna's teachings than is generally acknowledged by scholars, and that he was deeply indebted to his guru as an "extra-Śaṅkarite but traditionally Hindu source of a monist understanding that was dynamic and life-affirming."²³⁴ Through an increased emphasis upon approaching all phenomena as *brahman*, rather than focusing more starkly on representations of the world as *māyā*, Vivekananda creates a space in which social action becomes, by its very

²³³ Basu, 76.

nature, religious performance. Situating the swami's 'worldly Advaita' in a context that acknowledges and incorporates the egalitarian spirit of the *bhakti* traditions, we can perhaps better understand his coalescence of these unlikely partners into a system which appealed to Śaṅkara's prestige and authority, and yet changed the emphasis to "views that in varying degrees divinize man and the world and set forth a monistic basis for ethical action."²³⁵

It is clear from Vivekananda's work that his ethical thought, though not presented in the systematic manner of a moral philosopher, is deeply intertwined with his conviction that all beings are parts of the same ontological Reality, a fact which finds repeated expression in his discourse through the rhetoric of "universal brotherhood."²³⁶ (Though a convenient and appealing phrase, Vivekananda himself admits its limitations, preferring the non-dualistic accuracy of "universal oneness.")²³⁷ As Indian philosopher Tirthanath Bandyopadhyay has indicated, from the standpoint of Vivekananda's Advaita, this brotherhood "is a reality not to be achieved but to be grasped"²³⁸—i.e., it is an already-existent truth, requiring realisation and, subsequently, concrete expression. Vivekananda's own comments lend credence to Bandyopadhyay's assessment; the swami himself explains that "all that we call ethics and morality and doing good to others is also but the *manifestation* of this oneness" (italics added).²³⁹ This perspective imparts to the rhetoric of 'brotherhood' a somewhat different meaning than it had acquired in the

²³⁴ Neeval, quoted in *ibid.*

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ For example, "The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion," *CW*, vol. 2, 367; "The Problem of Modern India and Its Solution," *CW*, vol. 4, 401.

²³⁷ "Is Vedanta the Future Religion?" *CW*, vol. 8, 129.

²³⁸ Tirthanath Bandyopadhyay, "Vivekananda's Notion of Morality: A Reconstruction," In *19th Century Thought in Bengal*, ed. Kalyan Sengupta and Tirthanath Bandyopadhyay (Allied Publishers & Jadavpur University, 1998), 77.

various orthodox Christian ethical discourses of the day, the latter principally associating it with a perception of unity with (only) one's fellow believers ("one in Christ"), or, more ambitiously, of the association of all (but only) human beings under the paternal 'Fatherhood of God'.²⁴⁰ Vivekananda asserts, though, that it is the Vedānta philosophy that has exposed the true, deeper basis of ethics:

Taoists, Confucianists, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Mohammedans, Christians, and Zoroastrians, all preached the golden rule and in almost the same words; but only the Hindus have given the rationale, because they saw the reason: Man must love others because those others are himself. There is but One.²⁴¹

Vivekananda here chalks out for Hinduism—in its Advaitin form—a site of hermeneutical privilege because of what he asserts is its ability to explicate the connection between what he posits is a universal moral principle and the fundamental condition of reality in which that principle is rooted (even if unrecognised). Thus morality, for Vivekananda, stems inextricably from a condition of Reality, be that directly perceived (as by *jīvanmuktas*), explicitly acknowledged (by Advaitins), or merely intuitively sensed (by non-Hindus, he suggests).

As we have already mentioned, the power embedded within Western discourses of personal and social improvement, and their deployment by both Christian critics and colonial authorities as a means of discrediting Hinduism as a sound moral agent and a viable socio-political force, were important sources of motivation for the construction of

²³⁹ "The Spirit and Influence of Vedanta," *CW*, vol. 1, 389.

²⁴⁰ The language of nineteenth-century Christian tracts aimed at Hindus definitely suggests a strongly 'dualistic' understanding of the human-God relationship. For example: "A child should love, honour, and obey his earthly father; a subject should respect his rightful king, render to him his just service, and obey his laws. God stands to us in both relations.... He is the rightful Lord of the universe which He has created. His laws are holy, just, and good. To worship any other than Himself, is rebellion. To ascribe to Him human vices, is to be guilty of blasphemy" (Caldwell, and others, *Christianity Explained to a Hindu, or, Christianity and Hinduism Compared* [Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1893], 24-5).

²⁴¹ "Inspired Talks," *CW*, vol. 7, 96.

a Hindu ‘Social Gospel’ by Indian thinkers of Vivekananda’s time. Certainly, religiously motivated social welfare activities were not by any means unknown in Indian history—for instance, the construction of *dharmasālās* for pilgrims by Hindu benefactors, Buddhists’ establishment of hospitals for humans and animals, the creation of *langars* (community kitchens) by Sikh groups, and the offering of food, clothing, and other charitable gifts (*dāna*) by householders to religious mendicants of all faiths and sects. However, the marrying of a candidly Advaitin perspective with a strong social-improvement mandate seems to have little precedent in pre-modern Hindu thought. As Karl Potter has argued, pre-colonial Vedāntic sources do not stress personal or social altruism specifically as a counter to *ahankāra*; the often-used English translation ‘egoism’ gives the term a Westernised psychological meaning—and thus an implicit philanthropic remedy—not generally found in the term’s earlier metaphysical interpretations.²⁴² Importantly, by structuring his socially oriented ethics around an Advaitic core, Vivekananda is able, concurrently, to align himself with an authoritative and fertile indigenous religious tradition and to counter Orientalism’s construction of Hinduism as essentially ‘world-denying’ and amoral in its approach to life. (It is worth observing here that, given the binary structure that characterised conventional Western ethical discourses, the label *amoral* was really little more than a rhetorical artifice, which generally amounted to *immoral*.)

The method by which Vivekananda went about constructing a positive Vedāntic ethic can be better understood through considering his contestations of less-favourable representations of Hindu morality. As mentioned, in the sphere of ethical theory—itself a

²⁴² Karl H. Potter, *Presuppositions of India’s Philosophies* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 254.

Western division of human culture which was subsequently discursively universalised—Hindu beliefs have often been subject to etic criticism on account of their supposed moral relativity, as well as their so-labelled ‘negative’ approach to ethical action (contrasted against a normative model of Judeo-Christian socially oriented moral imperatives, of course). Frequently, these condemnations have centred upon claims of the superiority and uniqueness of Jesus as a moral exemplar and teacher. Consider, for example, the Madras Christian Literature Society’s 1893 publication entitled *Christianity Explained to a Hindu, or, Christianity and Hinduism Compared*, in which the authors contrast one of their preferred targets, Kṛṣṇa, with Christ:

Krishna’s life on earth, as given in the Bhagavata Purana, cannot be said to have been for the ‘establishment of piety’; it was rather for the encouragement of vice. Very different was the conduct of the Christian Incarnation. He came also—not for the destruction of sinners—but to save them.²⁴³

Elsewhere, Bishop Robert Caldwell, a turn-of-the-century missionary to south India, bluntly declares, “The stories related of Krishna’s life do more than anything else to destroy the morals and corrupt the imagination of the Hindu youth.”²⁴⁴

From a Hindu perspective, two obvious avenues of contestation of these arguments were: (1) to criticise the exalted views of Christians regarding Christ, or (2) to claim for the *avatāras* a moral status akin to that of Jesus. Although some nineteenth-century Hindu thinkers opted for the first approach,²⁴⁵ Vivekananda—who often proclaimed his

²⁴³ Bishop Caldwell and others, *Christianity Explained to a Hindu: Or, Christianity and Hinduism Compared*, 2nd ed. (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1893), 33.

²⁴⁴ Quoted in John A. Sharrock, *Hinduism: Ancient and Modern: Viewed in the Light of the Incarnation* (Aberdeen: the University Press, 1913), 198.

²⁴⁵ One such person was a Maratha, Narayan Rao, who, in the early nineteenth century, composed a treatise, *Svadeśadharmābhimāni*, in which he claims the New Testament portrays Jesus as a powerless figure, who is responsible for the mass-murder of infants by Herod, and thus cannot “be either the Son of God, or bear any relation to God whatever.” Quoted in Sita Ram Goel, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1989), 46.

great esteem for Christ—chose the second, making claims for the ethically paradigmatic nature of the behaviour of Kṛṣṇa, as well as Rāma, Buddha, and other divine figures from Indian history.

Yet, the perceived need, on the part of Vivekananda and others, to defend the *avatāras* as paralleling (or even surpassing) Jesus as a moral model required a refashioning of traditional understandings of the nature and role of divine incarnations in relation to Hindu ethics. In particular, the assumption of the missionaries that an incarnation need be fitting not only of worship but also of *emulation* is not necessarily borne out by pre-colonial indigenous Indian hermeneutics. Arguably, many of the acts attributed to the deities in the ‘Epics’, the *Purāṇas*, and even the more-recent devotional texts would indeed be considered anything but morally acceptable if judged according to formal Hindu codes of conduct such as those expressed in the śāstric literature.²⁴⁶ However, the conventional Hindu allotment of different—even disparate—*svadharmas*, or patterns of prescribed behaviour, to persons according to *varṇa*, gender, community, occupation, and stage of life, has generally comfortably acknowledged unique and incomparable roles for divine manifestations as well, which need not coincide with human ones. One of the clearest and authoritative mandates for this view is found in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, where the legendary sage Śukadeva defends Kṛṣṇa’s amorous acts with the *gopīs*, but also offers a stern warning: “One who is not the Lord (*īśvāra*) should never, even in thought, perform such deeds; if, out of folly, he behaves in this way, he will be destroyed, just as would a person who drinks deadly poison, if he is other than

²⁴⁶ Indeed, texts such as the *Manusmṛti* are oftentimes quite strict and exacting in their declination of permissible behaviour and of suitable reprimand for infractions.

Śiva.²⁴⁷ In addition to this standpoint, the *bhakti* traditions can also lay claim to a long-standing, sophisticated tradition of *symbolic* interpretation of avatāric deeds (for example, the stress placed by the Gauḍīyā Vaiṣṇava tradition upon the erotic dalliance of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa as a metaphor for the relationship between the human soul and God); thus, even for the most ‘orthodox’ of Hindus, the events of ascribed to the divine *līlā* need not be understood literally.

Vivekananda, however, does appear to propound the view that *avatāras* may—even should—be approached as religio-ethical models: “Every one of these Incarnations came as a living illustration of what they came to preach. Krishna, the preacher of the Gita, was all his life the embodiment of the Song Celestial; he was the great illustration of non-attachment.”²⁴⁸ At the same time, though, he acknowledges that the lives of all great spiritual personages (including Jesus) have undergone at least some degree of modification and mythologisation. Speaking again of Kṛṣṇa, Vivekananda (recorded in fragmented notes) states:

Some believe that (the worship of Krishna grew out of) the old sun worship. There seem to be several Krishnas: one was mentioned in the Upanishads, another was king, another a general. All have been lumped into one Krishna. It does not matter much. The fact is, some individual comes who is unique in spirituality. Then all sorts of legends are invented around him. But, all the Bibles and stories which come to be cast upon this one person have to be recast in (the mould of) his character. All the stories of the New Testament have to be modelled upon the accepted life (and) character of Christ.... In all of the Indian stories about Buddha the one central note of that whole life is kept up—sacrifice for others.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ *naitatsamācarejjātu manasā’pi hyanīśvaraḥ* ||

vinaśyatyācaranmauḍhyādyathā rudrobdhijaṃ viṣam || (*Śrīmadbhāgavatamahāpurāṇam* [Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1987], *skandha* 10, chap. 33, verse 31 [vol. 3, page 109].)

²⁴⁸ “The Sages of India,” *CW*, vol. 3, 256.

²⁴⁹ “Krishna,” *CW*, vol. 1, 438-9. It is worth remarking here upon Vivekananda’s essentialised reading of Indian religious figures in this instance. In likening Kṛṣṇa and Buddha to Christ in the above regard, he paints a homogenised picture (“into *one* Krishna”; “*all...* stories about Buddha”) that neglects or occludes localised narrative traditions, regional variations in representation, and sectarian interpretations of their lives and import (not to mention his very ‘Christ-like’ portrayal of the Buddha as the model of self-

Though asserting that such ‘supplementary’ tales generally follow the figure’s ‘essential’ character as such has come to be widely accepted, Vivekananda’s comments on the formation of divine mythology do clearly give leeway for the dismissal—as legendary accretions—of aspects of these characters which do not accord with accepted, modern conceptions of ethical conduct. “There may be many historical discrepancies, there may be interpolations in the life of Krishna,” he acknowledges; “all these things may be true; but, at the same time, there must have been a basis, a foundation for this new and tremendous departure [from prior religious teachings].”²⁵⁰

Yet for all the inspiration which an aspirant may derive from such figures, Vivekananda maintains that morality must ultimately transcend anthropical manifestations and other limited conceptions. During the course of an 1896 lecture in London, Vivekananda appeals to familiar Western philosophical territory, yet with a Vedāntic twist. He explains, alluding to Platonic conjecture:

None of us have yet seen an ‘Ideal Human Being’, and yet we are told to believe in it. None of us have yet seen an ideally perfect man, and yet without that ideal we cannot progress. Thus, this one fact stands out from all these different religions, that there is an Ideal Unit Abstraction, which is put before us, either in the form of a Person or an Impersonal Being, or a Law, or a Presence, or an Essence. We are always struggling to raise ourselves up to that ideal.... To manifest the Infinite through the finite is impossible, and sooner or later, man learns to give up the attempt to express the Infinite through the finite. This giving up, this renunciation of the attempt, is the background of ethics. Renunciation is the very basis upon which ethics stands. There never was an ethical code preached which had not renunciation for its basis.²⁵¹

Thus, for Vivekananda, ethics—though they may be linked with a prototypical deity, or human sage, or even non-anthropomorphic embodiment or representation of universal

sacrifice). Note, too, that in this passage, Vivekananda rejects the first-mentioned position—that Hindu deities like Kṛṣṇa are entirely human creations.

²⁵⁰ “The Sages of India,” *CW*, vol. 3, 259.

principles—are ultimately grounded not in manifested forms, but in the act of transcending the limitations of “the finite.” The swami is not reticent about asserting that this does ultimately mean—as Hinduism’s critics often alleged—transcendence the good-versus-evil distinction:

Both good and evil are different aspects, or manifestations of the same thing ... both good and evil belong to the relative world, to phenomena.... The Impersonal God we propose is not a relative God; therefore it cannot be said that It is either good or bad, but that It is something beyond, because It is neither good nor evil.²⁵²

Yet, at the same time, he dispenses with the criticism that the rejection of this binary opposition equals a state of ethical confusion; rather, he avows that this transcendence alone is capable of sustaining true moral strength and conviction:

Worship of the Impersonal God is through truth. And what is truth? That I am He. ... I am one with the air that surrounds me, one with heat, one with light, eternally one with the whole Universal Being, who is called this universe, who is mistaken for the universe, for it is He and nothing else, the eternal subject in the heart who says, ‘I am’, in every heart—the deathless one, the sleepless one, ever awake, the immortal, whose glory never dies, whose powers never fail. I am one with That.

This is all the worship of the Impersonal, and what is the result? The whole life of man will be changed. Strength, strength it is that we want so much in this life, for what we call sin and sorrow have all one cause, and that is our weakness. With weakness comes ignorance, and with ignorance comes misery. It will make us strong. Then miseries will be laughed at, then the violence of the vile will be smiled at, and the ferocious tiger will reveal, behind its tiger’s nature, my own Self. That will be the result. That soul is strong that has become one with the Lord; none else is strong.²⁵³

This position is very much in contrast to the usual understandings of Christian morality espoused by the evangelical missionaries of Vivekananda’s day. According to the latter, not only are ethical precepts God-given absolutes, but personal acceptance of Christ’s historical reality and soteriological role plays a crucial part in an ethic that is not subject to ‘transcendence’—that an individual ‘without Christ’ could live a truly moral life was

²⁵¹ “The Necessity of Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 62.

²⁵² “Reason and Religion,” *CW*, vol. 1, 376-7.

deemed an outright impossibility, Jesus' sacrificial act being regarded as the key to re-establishing humanity's primordial righteousness.²⁵⁴ However, it is unlikely that many who attended Vivekananda's talks in the West ascribed to these highly conservative religious views; indeed, even 'mainstream' liberal humanist thinkers of the period were often highly critical of such missionaries and their interpretations of Christianity, not to mention Vivekananda's many theosophical and transcendentalist admirers.²⁵⁵ In the lectures quoted above, the swami cleverly draws his British and American audiences from ideas which would be familiar and broadly acceptable to them—incarnation as moral prototype; modern theories regarding the origins of mythology; the Platonic quest to attain unseen ideals—towards positions which not only accommodate but privilege more-traditional Vedāntic perspectives, stressing the necessity of transcending and relinquishing the limitations of finite forms and ideals.

Rather than phrasing moral aims in terms of the Christian ideal of *agapé* (against which Western critics of Hinduism so often implicitly measured all non-Christian ethical systems), it is the very aspect of his own tradition which commonly bore the harshest disparagement from critics, *renunciation*, that Vivekananda upholds as universally foundational to ethics: "Ethics always says: 'Not I, but thou.' Its motto is 'Not self, but non-self.' ... The senses say, 'Myself first.' Ethics says, 'I must hold myself last.' Thus, all codes of ethics are based upon this renunciation.... Perfect self-annihilation is the ideal of ethics."²⁵⁶ As this passage suggests, however, the crux of renunciation, for Vivekananda,

²⁵³ Ibid., 380-1.

²⁵⁴ For an example of the then-prevalent evangelical Christian perspective in Indian context, see Caldwell and others, 32-40.

²⁵⁵ Consider, for example, Charles Dickens' famous declaration that "Missionaries are perfect nuisances and leave every place worse than they found it" (quoted in Goel, vi).

²⁵⁶ "The Necessity of Religion," *CW*, vol. 2, 62-3.

lies not in the giving up of outward objects and attachment thereto, but of ego and (false) individuality. Such an understanding is certainly in accordance with conventional Advaita Vedānta (as well as some more-modern systems of thought, especially Theosophy);²⁵⁷ but Vivekananda claims universal applicability for this view—even if some (in Western societies, it is implied) who endorse ethical ideals may be “startled if they are asked not to think of their individualities.”²⁵⁸ As he has done elsewhere with respect to Advaita philosophy, Vivekananda appropriates for himself a site of epistemic privilege, not refuting or deriding Judeo-Christian values as such, but instead claiming that they are made intelligible, and their underlying ‘universal’ nature demonstrated, only from the panoptic perspective of his own tradition.

It was not only the relationship between his Vedāntic views and those of Christianity’s ‘vocal’ representatives which required negotiation by Vivekananda, but also the secular philosophies that had come to prevail among more-liberal thinkers, especially in the Western nations. In particular, he takes direct aim at the Utilitarian view that was so widespread, especially in Britain, during the nineteenth century, which advanced the ‘Enlightened’ notion of persons as self-determining and self-interested agents.²⁵⁹ While ‘secular’ colonial discourses presumed the natural superiority of the rational thinker (who could justify behaviour through an appeal to reason and the good of human society) over the benighted native (forever under the sway of tradition and superstition), Vivekananda refutes the idea that the superhuman element is dispensable in

²⁵⁷ Consider, for instance, this verse (VIII.4) from the classic post-Śaṅkara Advaitic treatise, *Aṣṭāvakra Saṃhitā*: *yadā nāhaṃ tadā mokṣo yadāhaṃ bandhanaṃ tadā | matveti helayā kiñcit mā gṛhāṇa vimūñca mā ||* “When there is no ‘I’ (*aham*), then there is liberation; when there is ‘I’, then there is bondage. Thinking in this way, one should easily stop both grasping and loathing” (translation mine).

²⁵⁸ “The Necessity of Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 63.

²⁵⁹ See van der Veer, 16-20.

moral reckoning, for without metaphysical underpinnings, morality appears devoid of rationale. “The Utilitarian... asks us to take up ethics and do good to society,” he observes. “Why should we do good? Doing good is a secondary consideration. We must have an ideal. Ethics itself is not the end, but the means to the end. If the end is not there, why should we be ethical?”²⁶⁰ Although Utilitarianism argues for a merely pragmatic basis for morality, Vivekananda finds this insufficient for the construction of an enduring ethic:

All the current social forms and methods are derived from society as it exists, but what right has the Utilitarian to assume that society is eternal? Society did not exist ages ago, possibly will not exist ages hence. Most probably it is one of the passing stages through which we are going towards a higher evolution, and any law that is derived from society alone cannot be eternal, cannot cover the whole ground of man’s nature. At best, therefore, Utilitarian theories can only work under present social conditions. Beyond that, they have no value. But a morality, an ethical code, derived from religion and spirituality, has the whole of infinite man for its scope.²⁶¹

Here we witness an interesting adaptation and (re-)application of the modern notion of the ever-progressive society. It is true that this reading of ethics depends heavily upon an acceptance of a persistent essence underlying the changing manifestations of human social organisation, evident both in the swami’s assertion that a proper ethic ought to encompass “the whole of *man’s nature*” and in his assumption that moral dicta *should* be “eternal,” rather than shifting and circumstantial. This position is, of course, in accordance with conventional pre-colonial Hindu perspectives, according to which ethics are considered rooted in comprehensive ontic structures and realities that are thought to be essentially fixed,²⁶² and are not simply a matter of interpersonal contracts and

²⁶⁰ “The Necessity of Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 63.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁶² Interpretations of ethics, of course, have changed substantially between texts and movements throughout Hindu history. Nevertheless, in theory, the underlying order of Reality (*ṛta*) remains a constant.

consequence-based choices. What is of interest here, however, is Vivekananda's espousal of these essentialist positions while articulating them in such a way as to sidestep Orientalist constructions of Hinduism. While the West, employing its own version of essentialism, faults the 'eternal Orient' on account of its allegedly unchanging and stagnant nature, Vivekananda here re-inscribes 'eternal' to suggest not 'existence without change' but, instead, 'capable of encompassing all future possibilities.' Thus, a society that depends upon a transcendent marker for its ethics is not, in this view, retarded in its scope for growth and change but rather is best equipped for it. And implicit here is the claim that a faith-based, 'traditional' society—like his own—is able to claim the fullest knowledge of that "infinite" point of reference, in contrast to the temporal (and, thus, temporary), socially constructed reference points of the modern West. By so arguing, Vivekananda rhetorically resists the constructed authority of the imperial (= modern) centre over its Indian (= traditional) periphery. Yet, in these passages, he also remains at least partially within the West's paradigm of modernity by upholding the theme of progressive human improvement ("we are going towards a higher evolution")—although, as we have considered earlier, this 'progress', for Vivekananda, is but one segment of a larger cycle of growth and decay. His Advaita-inspired ethic, while remaining faithful to many of the core metaphysical ideas of that tradition (and, thus, characterised by some of the same features for which Hinduism was often disparaged) is presented as a trans-cultural entity which can respond critically-yet-thoughtfully to the modern age, as well as function as something of a meta-ethic, integrating particular religio-ethical systems into a coherent, holistic philosophy.

The Formulation of a 'Universal Religion'

Vivekananda, while not the first Hindu interpreter to attempt to rework Vedāntic themes into a contemporary, socially relevant form, distinguished himself from many of his predecessors and contemporaries by his extremely active efforts to transplant these ideas into a Western context. The Vedanta Societies which he founded in America came to expound a perspective invoking an Advaita philosophy stripped of many of its cultural and religious accoutrements (a largely de-ritualised, idealistic, and text-centred Vedānta), and which, simultaneously, could act as a vehicle for planting the 'essentials' of Hinduism in the soil of Western consciousness. Vivekananda's project was therefore more than merely a Vedānticisation of Hinduism, but also, in turn, a universalising of Advaita Vedānta.

It is this so-called 'universalism' for which Vivekananda is perhaps best known today, at least in the West, where he delivered the greater part of his lectures on the subject.²⁶³ In articulating this "universal religion," as he terms it, Vivekananda draws heavily upon concepts from the Vedāntic textual corpora, intermixed with modern ideas about the nature of religion. There seems no reason to doubt that Vivekananda's convictions in this regard were genuine and deeply held, the product of a combination of his personal religious experiences, Ramakrishna's teachings regarding the interrelationship of various sects and faith-traditions, and careful and critical study of a wide array of literature, ancient and modern. Yet, the particular approach to the articulation of these ideas, and especially his invocation of discursive elements

²⁶³ In present-day India, by contrast, his so-called 'nationalism' is equally, if not more, likely to be the focus of attention and esteem.

characteristic of modernity, place these aspects of his thought in a significant relationship with colonial/Orientalist themes and rhetoric.

Vivekananda's perspective on inter-religious matters is dominated—as in the case of ethics—by a confident-yet-inclusive non-dualism. The crucial point, in Vivekananda's view, is that all religions share a common essence, in that they all seek the same goal, though their approaches to and conceptualisations of this target are manifold. In his discourse, "The Ideal of a Universal Religion," delivered in New York in 1896, as well as in another, "The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion," delivered in Pasadena, California in 1900, he sets out what are perhaps the clearest expositions of his perspective on the nature of the relationship between religions. In the former, Vivekananda identifies the locus of religious union using his characteristic theistic-cum-Advaitic language:

That universal existence is God, the ultimate Unity in the universe. In Him we are all one. At the same time, in manifestation, the differences must always remain.... It is this difference, this differentiation, this losing of the balance between us, which is the very soul of our progress, the soul of all our thought.²⁶⁴

That all religions, and all human beings, have the same ultimate goal, is taken as a given by Vivekananda, as we have seen in our earlier discussion of his freedom-rhetoric; acceptance of this point becomes a necessary starting point for acquiescence to the rest of his argument. This understanding is a logical consequence of his Advaitin convictions, undergirded by the idea that no other reality (and, thus, no other aim) besides God (as *brahman*) even exists. (This worldview accounts for the radical difference between Vivekananda's assumptions and those of his 'dualistic' evangelical Christian contemporaries; while the latter spoke of Hindus' "false gods" and "devil worship,"

²⁶⁴ "The Ideal of a Universal Religion," *CW*, vol. 2, 381.

could *anything*, in the final analysis, be other than “the one true God” from the perspective of a staunch Advaitin?)

In discussing this purportedly universal human quest, Vivekananda situates it within an evolutionary framework: “Thus it has been throughout the ages, in all countries. Man has wanted to look beyond, wanted to expand himself; and all that we call progress, evolution, has been always measured by that one search, the search for human destiny, the search for God.”²⁶⁵ To the ears of his Western audiences, this assertion would certainly not have sounded radical. The idea that human beings were situated within a stream of progress towards ever-greater manifestations of God was a central theme of Enlightenment Deism; it had subsequently been incorporated into the more-liberal Christian discourses of Vivekananda’s day,²⁶⁶ as well as, in a more-veiled fashion, those of Theosophy, as van der Veer has explored.²⁶⁷ While the conceptualisation of some form of ‘realisation’ as a personal teleology is indeed a long-established theme in many streams of Hindu thought, framing the same in the language of collective human ‘progress’ and ‘evolution’—towards a Being that is itself named here in English terminology, with the particular religio-cultural features that the word ‘God’ inevitably evokes—is a consequential reinterpretation informed by central themes within modern, Western civilisation.

²⁶⁵ “The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 359.

²⁶⁶ The aim towards greater sovereignty over the material world and increased freedom and order in society were not conceived of by the Enlightenment thinkers as being at odds with the quest for personal betterment; rather they were inseparably linked by Divine design. To quote the famous *Essay on Man* by Alexander Pope (1688-1744), an eloquent spokesperson for the contemporary ethos: “Thus God and Nature linked the general frame; And bade Self-Love and Social be the same.”

²⁶⁷ van de Veer, “The Spirits of the Age: Spiritualism and Political Radicalism,” chap. in *Imperial Encounters*, 55-82.

Yet, while seeking to reconcile Hindu religious goals with the modernist paradigm in this way, Vivekananda's approach simultaneously offers a challenge to nineteenth-century power relations by its identification of the 'spiritual quest' as the pivot of human evolution. This is in marked contrast to what had become, by Vivekananda's time, increasingly secularised, materialist, and 'scientific' hierarchical schemata of human development, which Europeans were not loath to employ as justification for their colonial ventures: the technologically advanced West ruling over the primitive, tradition-bound East out of paternal(-istic) responsibility.²⁶⁸ As we have already seen, however, Vivekananda argues in favour of the view that India has historically been—and remains in essence—particularly proficient in religious achievements; thus, we may identify a subtext in his 'spiritualising of evolution' which implicitly claims an evolutionary lead for Indian society over the Western world, on account of the former's orientation towards the true goal of "human destiny."²⁶⁹ (We will return to this theme again in subsequent chapters.)

Taking an explicitly historical perspective on religious universalism, Vivekananda, in a lecture to one of his British classes, asserts that all 'great religions' (an oft-used phrase of his, which we shall consider further below) have participated in this evolutionary process, through the regular emergence of "universal thoughtwaves" which seem to recur every five hundred years, when invariably the great wave typifies and swallows up the others. It is this which constitutes a prophet. He focuses in his own mind the thought of the age in which he is living and gives it back to mankind in

²⁶⁸ See, for example, Thomas Metcalf's discussion of the West's self-conception as a civilised saviour of non-Western peoples from the spectre of 'Oriental Despotism' (Metcalf, 2-15).

²⁶⁹ In the case of the Theosophists, especially under the leadership of Annie Besant, this privileging of India over the West in terms of human evolution took on a decidedly political cast, with strong Theosophist opposition voiced with respect to British colonial governance; see van der Veer, 65.

concrete form. Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Mohammed, and Luther may be instanced as the great waves that stood up above their fellows.²⁷⁰

(It appears, incidentally, that Luther's inclusion in this list is due to his profound influence on European history at the 'expected' five-hundred-year interval, not because of any particular admiration on Vivekananda's part, as he elsewhere blames Luther for "[driving] a nail into religion when he took away renunciation and gave us morality instead.")²⁷¹ This theory of Vivekananda's clearly presumes some form of divine agency or order, according to the design of which the world is structured into definite historical epochs, each marked not by a technological innovation or a development in the realm of secular philosophy—ideas which would be more germane to many of his European contemporaries—but by the appearance of a religious figure who arrives with a temporally appropriate message for humanity. One cannot overlook the resemblance between Vivekananda's 'prophets', as expressed here, and the Hindu concept of *avatāras*, especially as epitomised in the Bhagavadgītā's oft-quoted passage regarding God's manifestation in every age (*yuga*).²⁷² Yet, it is not the Purāṇic accounts of the escapades of the *devas* and *devīs* in *bhāratavarṣa*, or the *daśa-avatāra* scheme of the Vaiṣṇavas, but a worldwide *dharma-kṣetra* of sorts that Vivekananda proposes, in which the Occident and Orient are linked together in a collective human spiritual evolution. This type of globalised spiritual thinking was a relatively new paradigm for nineteenth-century Hindus,²⁷³ a product of the heightened consciousness of the world beyond the

²⁷⁰ "Lessons on Raja-Yoga," *CW*, vol. 6, 134.

²⁷¹ "Inspired Talks," *CW*, vol. 7, 80.

²⁷² *Bhagavadgītā* (IV.8): *paritrāṇāya sādhanāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtāṃ | dharmasaṃsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge* || "I manifest myself in every age for the protection of the righteous, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the re-establishment of *dharma*" (translation mine).

²⁷³ This is not to diminish the importance of cosmological schemata in pre-colonial Hindu thought, which did indeed take a 'broad' view of the world, but only to contrast this emerging perspective with that of the

subcontinent brought about by European colonialism, as well as of the perceived need to integrate the cultures of the colonisers and the colonised into a coherent conceptual whole—much as nineteenth-century race-theory did for Vivekananda's European contemporaries.

Vivekananda's socio-religious 'punctuated evolution' schema as presented here obviously assigns a special role to India (no Africans, East Asians, or indigenous North Americans, for example, figure in his above list of prophets), and emphasises that Indian religious culture partakes in the process of historical evolution in an important and meaningful way. It could be argued, of course, that his sequence of 'prophets' (Indian→Middle Eastern→European) merely colludes with the visions of Western thinkers like Hegel, who, though he also ascribed to India an essential role in humanity's development, placed it in the sphere of imagination (*Vorstellung*, 'representation'), the ideal of a past time, in contrast to that of Europe, which was coming to dominate the modern world through the agency of reason (*Verstand*, 'understanding').²⁷⁴ Yet, given Luther's nearly five-century antecedence to Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda's unshakable conviction in his guru's *avatāra*-hood²⁷⁵ (and particularly, in the latter's role as a reconciler of inter-religious discord),²⁷⁶ the locus of this 'Hegelian synthesis' is, for Vivekananda, evidently on Indian terrain, both geographical and conceptual. To claim that the prophet-representative of the present-day "universal thoughtwave" was a poor, rural, unschooled Hindu *Kālī-bhakta*, then barely known outside of his small circle of

so-called 'orthodox' Hindu views, which were largely content to class *en masse* those persons outside of the Indian-Sanskritic tradition as *mlecchas*.

²⁷⁴ Inden has discussed the role of Hegel's views in the Orientalist construction of India; see Inden, 93-7.

²⁷⁵ This theme is a frequently reoccurring one, primarily in Vivekananda's Indian talks and writings, and also in his private correspondence. For one particularly effusive example, see Vivekananda's short piece, "Hinduism and Shri Ramakrishna," *CW*, vol. 6, 181-6.

Indian disciples, significantly contests both Christian and colonial assumptions, frameworks and hierarchies, even if it does harmonise with the modern West's enthusiasm for systematising the world's disparate societies and their respective histories into comprehensive master narratives. Even more significantly, Vivekananda's account coalesces two disparate approaches to understanding the temporal world into a single narrative: on the one hand, an *itihāsa*-type perspective from which human events are viewed as fundamentally intertwined with cosmic order, sacred figures, and divine will; on the other, an invocation of the modern European knowledge-form of historicism, which he deploys to frame these occurrences as natural stages within a dialectic of globalised evolution. In this instance, we witness a striking example of Vivekananda's negotiation of the intersection of conventional Indian conceptualisations of past and present with the ways of understanding history that were characteristic of modern Western thought—these being the subject of great interest and debate within Bengali intellectual circles during the latter part of the nineteenth century.²⁷⁷

In enunciating his vision of a 'universal religion', Vivekananda forthrightly refutes the idea that all humanity should share "any one universal philosophy, or any one universal mythology, or any one universal ritual."²⁷⁸ Vivekananda strongly and consistently endorses the persistence of the multiplicity of religious traditions in his writings and discourses. He declares that not only is this arrangement beneficial ("every sect has a meaning, a great idea, imbedded within itself, and, therefore it is necessary for

²⁷⁶ For Vivekananda's attribution of this latter role to Ramakrishna, see "My Master," *CW*, vol. 4, 154-87.

²⁷⁷ See historian Dipesh Chakrabarty's discussion of colonial and post-colonial Indian approaches to the concept of 'history' in "Globalisation, Democratisation and the Evacuation of History?" in *At Home in Diaspora: South Asian Scholars and the West*, ed. Jackie Assayag and Veronique Benei (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 127-47.

²⁷⁸ "The Ideal of a Universal Religion," *CW*, vol. 2, 382.

the good of the world”),²⁷⁹ but also maintains that this is a divinely ordained state of affairs (“unity in variety is the plan of the universe”).²⁸⁰ This suggests that a Spencerian-style progression from homogeneity to heterogeneity was perceived by him as being a natural evolutionary pattern among religions as far as their social manifestations are concerned, even if the philosophical ideal is a unitive state of consciousness. This view certainly accords with—and legitimates—the historical and present existence of the many diverse component-traditions of ‘Hinduism’; it also speaks in a not-so-subtle manner to the conversion-minded Christians with whom Vivekananda frequently clashed, and in this sense may be construed as an apologia. (Evangelical Christian thinkers at the turn of the century were themselves known to employ the rhetoric of ‘universal religion’ to advocate a global turn towards their own faith, claiming that other religions—not least of all Hinduism—lacked “that element of universality which is Christianity’s distinctive glory.”)²⁸¹

Thus, despite the implications of the phrase “a universal religion,” rather than advocating collective acceptance of a single religion as such, Vivekananda’s universalism took the form of a profession of acceptance of the veracity and validity of many faiths, or, at least, of aspects thereof. In all fairness, however, the unqualified phrase that Vivekananda uses in his first speech before the Parliament of Religions—“We accept all religions as true”²⁸²—somewhat obscures the subtleties of his position. Further, his ascription of this position to Hindus as a whole (the “we” on whose collective behalf he

²⁷⁹ “The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 360.

²⁸⁰ “The Ideal of a Universal Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 381.

²⁸¹ T. E. Slater, *The Higher Hinduism in Relation to Christianity*, 2nd ed (London: Elliot Stock, 1903), 283.

²⁸² “Response to Welcome,” *CW*, vol. 1, 3.

boldly claims to be speaking) is, as he himself was aware, more ideal than real.²⁸³ Yet, his representation of Hinduism as all-embracing and all-absorbing was an important element in his repositioning of the same as a privileged site of reconciliatory hermeneutics.

Throughout his body of work, Vivekananda often refers to what he calls the ‘great religions’—though nowhere does he explicitly set out the criteria according to which a particular religion merits or does not merit, in his view, the appellation ‘great’. One can garner from an analysis of the various contexts in which he uses the phrase, however, that the category of ‘great religions’ encompasses Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and Zoroastrianism;²⁸⁴ it is usually to these ‘great religions’ that he actually refers when speaking of the commonalities among “all religions.” Vivekananda notes that, except for Zoroastrianism, “all the great religions are living, spreading, and increasing”,²⁸⁵ that “all the great religions of the world are very ancient”,²⁸⁶ and that “every religion of the world owes its origin to the country between the Ganga and the Euphrates; not one great religion has arisen in Europe, not one in America, not one; every religion is of Asiatic origin and belongs to that part of the world.”²⁸⁷ Elsewhere, he

²⁸³ Consider, for example, his words regarding ‘orthodox’ Hindus to a California audience in 1900: “What do Hindus do? If one of your [Christian] missionaries chance to touch the food of an orthodox person, he would throw it away. Notwithstanding our grand philosophy, you note our weakness in practice” (“The Great Teachers of the World,” *CW*, vol. 4, 134); and, again, his discourse on ‘Buddhism and Vedanta’: “What we call the Advaita philosophy of the modern school has a great many conclusions of the Buddhists. Of course, the Hindus will not admit that—that is the orthodox Hindus, because to them the Buddhists are heretics” (“Buddhism and Vedanta,” *CW*, vol. 5, 279). It is also unlikely that Vivekananda was unaware of missionaries’ complaints regarding Hindus’ disregard (or, at least, unappreciation) for the Christian faith—manifest by, for example, the widespread use of the leaves of donated Indian-language Bibles as wrapping or waste paper (Childs and Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, 133).

²⁸⁴ For the basis of including these last two faiths, which Vivekananda labels ‘racial’ religions, in this list, see “Buddhistic India,” *CW*, vol. 3, 511.

²⁸⁵ “The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 361.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 362.

²⁸⁷ “The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 361.

indicates that all of the ‘great religions’ have originated from the Hindu and Jewish ‘races’.²⁸⁸ Thus, the ‘great religions’, for Vivekananda, appear to be those which have endured for a significant temporal span and which share a common region of origin. (His inclusion of Zoroastrianism suggests that continued numerical and geographical expansion are not essential qualities of ‘great’ traditions, but merely common ones.)

In drawing a distinction between ‘great’ religions and others, Vivekananda is well in accordance with the practices of Western scholars of his time. In general, the lists of ‘great religions’ that they formulated were similar to Vivekananda’s, with the inclusion or exclusion of the ‘ethnic’ religions of Judaism and Zoroastrianism (and, occasionally, Hinduism) being the primary variable elements.²⁸⁹ It seems probable that in formulating his standards for a ‘great religion’, Vivekananda was influenced by these customary classifications—especially likely given his considerable acquaintance with the Western academic study of religion. For example, Vivekananda’s comment on the connection between scriptures and the endurance of religious traditions reveals much common ground between his own conception of the nature and value of a textual canon, and those ideas of the same which were advanced by European scholars:

One fact stands out prominently—that only those religions which had one or many scriptures of their own as their basis advanced by leaps and bounds and survive to the present day notwithstanding all the persecution and repression hurled against them. The Greek religion, with all its beauty, died out in the absence of any scripture to support it; but the religion of the Jews stands undiminished in its power, being based upon the authority of the Old Testament. The same is the case with the Hindu religion, with its scripture, the Vedas, the oldest in the world.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁸ “Vedanta as a Factor in Civilisation,” *CW*, vol. 1, 383.

²⁸⁹ See Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious” in *Critical Terms*, ed. Taylor, 269-84.

²⁹⁰ “The Religion We Are Born In,” *CW*, vol. 3, 455.

In this respect, Vivekananda retraces the pattern set by his *Religionswissenschaft* predecessors and contemporaries, whose text-centred categorisation informed their perspectives on other religio-cultural phenomena. Vivekananda's adoption of this intrinsically biased great-versus-other Western taxonomy in his approach to inter-religious questions manifested its consequences in his choices regarding the religions which require/deserve serious consideration in the context of constructing his 'universal religion'. Indigenous varieties of 'religion', be they Indian, American, Australian, African, or otherwise—though the subject of much anthropological study during this period—are strikingly absent from Vivekananda's affirmative discussions of religious commonalities, granted mention only as the practices and beliefs of "primitive men" and rendered in stark contrast to the elevated tenets of the "superior religions."²⁹¹

It is also significant that, in his discussion of 'great religions' quoted above, Vivekananda appropriates the prevailing, long-established European geographical-ideological divisions of the world into 'Asia' and—it is implied—'the West' (here, comprised of Europe and America). Although the grouping together of India and the 'Middle East' into a single 'Asiatic' unity was hardly a topographical, cultural, religious or linguistic given (nor, of course, was the demarcation of 'India' itself); nevertheless, during Vivekananda's time this 'Orient' remained a virtually unquestioned, if contradiction-riddled, discursive entity. In this case, however, Vivekananda utilises the same homogenising construct (which had been employed by Europe for its own ends) to present the Orient as a united entity that, in contrast with the West, has a special role as the geographical and cultural birthplace of the world's major religions—including

²⁹¹ "The Soul and God," *CW*, vol. 1, 491.

Christianity, that grand possession of the 'civilised' world. This idea sets the stage for Vivekananda's assertion that "the Nazarene himself was an Oriental of Orientals,"²⁹² whose thoughts and ideas reflected the unique nature of "the oriental mind," which, he claims, stresses renunciation and the inner quest for realisation.²⁹³ He contrasts this with what he perceives to be the West's Greek-influenced extroversion and cultural chauvinism,²⁹⁴ on account of which "the most profound and noble ideas of Christianity were never understood in Europe."²⁹⁵ He further explains that

the oriental mind looks with contempt upon the things of this world and naturally wants to see something that changeth not, something which dieth not, something which in the midst of this world of misery and death is eternal, blissful, undying. An oriental Prophet never tires of insisting upon these ideals; and, as for Prophets, you may also remember that without one exception, all the Messengers were Orientals.²⁹⁶

The passage accords well with van der Veer's assertion that Vivekananda was among those nineteenth-century thinkers who utilised the concept of 'spirituality' as a vehicle to contest established Western discursive authority through an appeal to alternative forms of 'scientific knowledge'.²⁹⁷ From the standpoint of the above quotation, for example, the same essential differences that Orientalist thinking and colonial race theories posited to exist between the 'Eastern' and 'Western' mentalities (introverted/extroverted; renunciant/worldly; stagnant/dynamic) are maintained, and yet are transformed from ideologies of oppression into qualities which privilege Hindus as interpreters of Jesus (their 'Oriental' sibling) and his teachings. As we shall see in the following chapters, the

²⁹² "Christ the Messenger," *CW*, vol. 4, 142.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 142-4.

²⁹⁵ "Soul, God and Religion," *CW*, vol. 1, 321. Vivekananda does claim that, to Europe's credit, during the Middle Ages, "an order of Christian soldiers of Italy and other countries, corresponding to our Nagas, began to learn philosophy; and one of their sects, the Knights Templars, became confirmed Advaita Vedantists, and ended by holding Christianity up to ridicule." ("The East and the West," *CW*, vol. 5, 530.)

²⁹⁶ "Christ the Messenger," *CW*, vol. 4, 144.

constructive reinterpretation of this alleged East-West distinction is a theme running throughout Vivekananda's discourse on a variety of subjects.

Despite these underlying power-relationships, Vivekananda openly criticised those who, in their desire to reconcile the various belief systems of the world, sought to construct an explicit hierarchy of faiths. As he explains, the idea that all religions are 'true'

is not [merely] a theory, it has to be recognised, but not in that patronising way which we see with some people. 'Oh, yes, there are some very good things in it. These are what we call the ethnical religions. These ethnical religions have some good in them.' Some even have the most wonderfully liberal idea that other religions are all little bits of a prehistoric evolution, but 'ours is the fulfilment of things.' One man says because his is the oldest religion it is the best; another makes the same claim because his is the latest.²⁹⁸

This cutting remark is obviously targeted at the Christian theological perspectives on other religions, including Hinduism, which prevailed among more-liberal religious circles in Vivekananda's day. Aware of the typologies used by scholars to distinguish between 'ethnic' or 'race' religions, in contrast to the so-called 'high', 'universal', or 'world' religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, Vivekananda was also cognisant of the deprecatory implications thereof. However, the fact that Vivekananda himself, as we have seen, sometimes employs such labels and classifications introduces some ambiguity into the view expressed above. In this case, his professed refutation of hierarchy does not fully accord with his actual treatment of other faiths. This is at least partly attributable to the very structure of the modern Western discourses which inform his inter-religious considerations; as Chatterjee has indicated, "there is a relation of power involved in the

²⁹⁷ See van der Veer, chap. 3: "The Spirits of the Age," in *Imperial Encounters*, 55-82.

²⁹⁸ "My Master," *CW*, vol. 4, 182.

very conception of the autonomy of cultures,²⁹⁹ depending as it does upon the subject/object (Self/other) dichotomy, a site of inherent disparity and hierarchy.

Although he generally avoided speaking directly or extensively about his own religious teacher, Ramakrishna, in his Western public discourses, the swami did attribute the origins of his 'universalism' to his guru, declaring this idea to be the *raison d'être* of Ramakrishna's incarnation.³⁰⁰ Van der veer has noted the highly problematic nature of this ascription, however, arguing that

there was no way [Vivekananda] could even begin to translate the beliefs and practices of Ramakrishna into a Hindu universalism. The Goddess Kālī [around whom Ramakrishna's devotion centred], with her protruding tongue and her necklace of skulls dancing on the corpse of Śiva, stood perhaps for everything a Victorian Britisher would find abhorrent in Hinduism.³⁰¹

Thus, despite the transcendental authority on inter-religious questions that Vivekananda found in Ramakrishna, the latter's approach required radical transformation and sanitisation, a process which necessarily involved a significant re-contextualisation of the latter's inclusivist religious ideas within the framework of a hybrid modern-brāhminical Hindu tradition.

Beyond this, however, Raychaudhuri observes that the very belief in Ramakrishna as a divine incarnation "locates Vivekananda in a curious relationship to the Hindu tradition. The very acceptance of a notion [the *avatāra* concept] peculiar to that tradition is mobilized to transcend all allegiance to any particular creed."³⁰² Indeed, not only the idea of *avatāras*, but also certain other characteristically Hindu concepts—such as *samsāra* (rebirth) and *mokṣa* (liberation)—are elements regarding which Vivekananda

²⁹⁹ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 17.

³⁰⁰ See "My Master," *CW*, vol. 4, 187.

³⁰¹ van der Veer, 72.

seems unwilling to compromise, despite the fact that they fail to garner much assent from adherents of some of his so-labelled ‘great religions’. He attempts to negotiate these difficulties by a combination of historical claims, reasoned arguments, and appeals to ‘authoritative’ sources, in an effort to convince his Western audiences of the validity of these phenomena. For instance, in his article, “Reincarnation,” which he submitted to the New-York-based *Metaphysical Magazine* in 1895, he asserts that, firstly, all ideas of an immortal soul originate from the ‘Aryan’ peoples, subsequently spreading from Indians to the Egyptians, Greeks, and others; secondly, that certain notable Western thinkers—among them, Hume and Schopenhauer—seem to endorse ‘palingenesis’ (a favourite term of the Theosophists); and thirdly, that logic favours the idea that the inborn tendencies associated with beings/souls have their origin in conscious efforts undertaken in a past life.³⁰³ Beyond these points, Vivekananda is not above an appeal to pure numerical strength: “the greater portion of the human race, having organised religion, believe in [reincarnation].”³⁰⁴ In the course of a lecture delivered in Hartford, Connecticut that same year, Vivekananda also advances a claim that the ancient Hebrews, including Jesus, held to the idea of rebirth as well.³⁰⁵ As such explanations intimate, Vivekananda situated his ‘universal religion’ on an ontic basis that was, in some important ways, fundamentally Hindu. In this instance, certainly, the ground of interfaith reconciliation that he advocates is one which places a substantial burden of doctrinal elasticity upon religions of extra-

³⁰² Raychadhuri, “SV’s Construction of Hinduism,” in Radice, 4.

³⁰³ See “Reincarnation,” *CW*, vol. 4, 257-71. His debt to Western scholarship for this material is acknowledged in the lecture itself; also, in a letter written a month prior to this lecture to his acquaintance, Harvard professor John H. Wright, he requests information and books on the concept of ‘soul’ among the ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Babylonians, and Jews. (“Letters (fifth series),” *CW*, vol. 9, 52-3.)

³⁰⁴ “Reincarnation,” *CW*, vol. 4, 258.

³⁰⁵ “Soul, God and Religion,” *CW*, vol. 1, 321.

Indian origin, particularly the ‘three monotheisms’, while simultaneously reinforcing a perception that acceptance of reincarnation is the cross-cultural, pan-historical norm.

As a thematic basis for his synthetic perspective on a variety of religious traditions, the swami appeals to an Advaitic reading of the relativity of truth-claims, telling his Pasadena audience: “Man never progresses from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lesser truth to higher truth.”³⁰⁶ The Vedāntic notion of the qualified nature of phenomenal reality allows Vivekananda an avenue from which to approach the question of religions’ ‘validity’ from a perspective outside of that offered by the binary structure imposed by many prevailing Western discourses (though he was not, in fact, so far from the spirit of Hegel’s less-oppositional, but still-hierarchical, divisions of *Vorstellung* and *Verstand*). “We are all looking at truth from different standpoints,” continues Vivekananda,

which vary according to our birth, education, surroundings, and so on. We are viewing truth, getting as much of it as these circumstances will permit, colouring the truth with our own heart, understanding it with our own intellect, and grasping it with our own mind. We can only know as much of truth as is related to us, as much of it as we are able to receive.³⁰⁷

While Vivekananda’s assessment of the “colouring [of] the truth” by surroundings and circumstances accords well with Śāṅkara’s philosophy,³⁰⁸ his stress on higher and lower degrees of ‘truth’ appears to owe more to Ramakrishna’s inclusivist interpretation of Advaita than to Śāṅkara’s more-sharply delineated *vidyā-versus-avidyā* explanation.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁶ “The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 365.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 366.

³⁰⁸ See, for example, Śāṅkara’s *Ātmabodha*, verse 14: *pañcakosādiyogena tattanmaya iva sthitaḥ | śuddhātmā nīlavastrādiyogena sphaṭiko yathā* || “The pure *ātman* assumes the guise of the five sheaths (*kośas*), etc., because of its association with them, just as a clear crystal appears blue when near a blue cloth or other blue object” (translation mine).

³⁰⁹ Consider, for example, *Ātmabodha*, verse 6: *saṃsārah svapnatulyo hi rāgadveṣādīsaṅkulaḥ | svakāle satyavadbhāti prabodhe satyasadbhavet* || “*Saṃsāra*, filled with desires, aversions, and so forth, is like a

Regardless, for Vivekananda, these ‘relative’ individual and cultural limitations are not necessarily negative, unless they degenerate into bigotry and fanaticism.³¹⁰ They are, in his reading, simply realities of the human mind and constitution, and religions must, of necessity, cater to them. In response to this perceived need, he articulates a four-fold typology of human nature: the active individual, the emotional person, the mystic, and the philosopher.³¹¹ The goal of religion, ideally, is to cater simultaneously to both human diversity and existential oneness: “That plan alone is practical, which does not destroy the individuality of any man in religion and at the same time shows him a point of union with all others.”³¹²

In this respect, Vivekananda again returns to his argument that what he aspires to, however, is not a ‘new religion’ in the sense of an institution, set of beliefs, or system of practice, but a recognition and an acceptance of the commonality that he claims already underlies present-day religions. “Universal religion... already exists,”³¹³ Vivekananda asserts, or, at the very least, something approximating it is already to be found. The ideal ‘religion’ which he envisions, “will be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystic, and equally conducive to action,”³¹⁴ so that it might fully aid those of each inherent temperament. When one follows the argument set out before his Western audience in “The Ideal of a Universal Religion,” the value of ‘Hinduism’ as a construct

dream, appearing to be real so long as it continues; but, upon awakening, (only) the Real exists” (translation mine). Contrast this with Ramakrishna’s expressed perspective: “The Nitya [eternal] and the Līlā [God’s dynamic play in the world] belong to the same Reality. Therefore I accept everything, the Relative as well as the Absolute. I don’t explain away the world as māyā” (*Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 652). It is arguable that these views are not opposed per se, but merely constitute different approaches to the same perception that the only existent reality is *brahman*; nevertheless, the attitude towards the world resulting from each would likely be quite different.

³¹⁰ See “The Ideal of a Universal Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 377-82.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 388.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 384.

³¹³ “The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 367.

becomes clear. The paradigmatic example of such a ‘balanced’ religion, he suggests, is that amalgamation of multiple strands of belief and practice known as Hinduism—for the very reason that Hinduism incorporates a variety of approaches to realisation!³¹⁵ In the course of this lecture, he subsequently launches into detailed explanation as to how each of the four ‘Yogas’ that he identifies within Hindu tradition—*karma*, *bhakti*, *rāja*, and *jñāna*—meets the needs of the active, emotional, mystic, and philosophical temperament, respectively.³¹⁶

Here, we see an example of Vivekananda constructing a taxonomy of human nature which is actually based on his own four-fold division of Hindu tradition into coherent-but-not-exclusive paths. (Although he has undoubtedly drawn some degree of inspiration from the *Bhagavadgītā*’s articulation of spiritual practice in terms of various *yogas*, his divisions do not directly correspond to the latter’s more-elaborate typology.) In turn, he uses these categories to indirectly assert that these ‘Yogas’ make Hinduism the closest existent entity to a ‘universal religion’. In Vivekananda’s defence, this approach—defining human needs based on one’s own analysis thereof, and then claiming that that one’s own religion best fits those needs—is not very different from the strategy of many Christian apologists of the time, who, for example, were wont to criticise what they perceived to be Hinduism’s ‘impersonal’ conception of God for failing to satisfy what they posited was a basic human need for a personal Deity. Unlike the proselytising Christians he encountered, however, Vivekananda repeatedly denies that he desires religious conversion per se. In his concluding address at the Parliament of Religions, he

³¹⁴ “The Ideal of a Universal Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 387.

³¹⁵ See *ibid.*, 375-96.

³¹⁶ See *ibid.*

famously declared, "Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid."³¹⁷ His approach does, however, place Vivekananda and his construction of Hinduism in a position of power relative to other traditions, as he is really claiming his own faith as the ideal site of intersection for inter-religious conciliation. Again, the strategic adoption and deployment of a rhetorical tactic often used by his Western/Christian critics is utilised as a tool to bolster the swami's own subjugated religio-cultural tradition.

*Vivekananda's Religion and Colonial Considerations:
Some Concluding Thoughts*

From our discussions of Vivekananda's understanding of 'religion' as a concept, and his approaches to explicating the nature of that body of religious ideas, texts, beliefs, and practices he claims as his own (as well, to some extent, those of others), the impact of Orientalist perspectives and colonial power relations becomes evident, both in terms of influence upon his ideas about religion/s as such and in the shaping of his rhetorical techniques. The importance of understanding the relations between Vivekananda's religious discourse and the currents of colonial power, and the significance thereof, should be obvious. There is every indication that Vivekananda's incorporation of Orientalist scholarship, themes and frameworks within his discourse and, particularly, his methods of articulation, were, in at least some respects, based upon conscious, reasoned choices, and were often designed to respond strategically to his critics, real and imagined.

³¹⁷ "Address at the Final Session [of the Parliament]," *CW*, vol. 1, 24. The strength of his opposition to conversion can be seen in his oft-quoted comments to an Indian interviewer in 1899, in which he refers to Hindu converts to Christianity and Islam as "perverts" ("On the Bounds of Hinduism," *CW*, vol. 5, 233).

In Vivekananda's discourse, Hindus are no longer marginal figures whose 'otherness' is invoked to establish the centrality of the Christian and/or secular West, but are discursively re-centred as privileged interpreters of the essence behind the allegedly universal human phenomenon 'religion' (the understanding of which Vivekananda posits is key to true knowledge and power), as well as granted the role of advantaged viewers and critics of the coloniser's own religious and moral assertions. Vivekananda's astuteness in appropriating for himself shifting subject-positions as an interpreter, critic, and preacher of religion—at times assuming the mantle of a European-style scholar; at others that of an Eastern mystic—reveals something of the ingenuity and zeal which underlay his 'mission'. Like Bhabha's colonially produced 'mimic' (whose ambivalent and unsettling blend of similarity and difference with respect to the coloniser—pithily phrased by Bhabha as "not white/not quite"³¹⁸—may be intentional or not), Vivekananda's mastery and manipulation of Western discourses on religion inevitably interrogate some of the veiled assumptions about the source and nature of the West's authority over the East, and thereby expose before his American, British, and Indian audiences the tenuous character—in fact, the inauthenticity—of many Orientalist constructions.

Regardless of the degree of cognisance on Vivekananda's part, the effects of his efforts are undeniable. Basu, considering the Indian context, takes the view that Vivekananda's amalgamation of conventional and widely acknowledged Hindu ideas with the perspectives and discursive structure of modernity was of critical importance for ensuring the enshrinement and popular acceptance of the themes and thought-forms

³¹⁸ See "Bhabha's hybridity," in *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Childs and Williams, 130-7.

introduced by the modern West into colonial Indian society, especially in Bengal.³¹⁹

From the perspective of the world outside of India, especially Europe and North America, this same fusion ensured a reasonable and fair-minded hearing for Vivekananda's ideas from a large body of educated persons with an interest in religious, philosophical, or cultural matters. His appropriation of 'scientific' discourse as a vehicle to present Hindu ideas attracted the receptive consideration of a segment of that population—in India as well as in the West—which had become increasingly alienated from traditional forms of religion, and was seeking a more-concrete understanding of the world through the empirical sciences coupled with reason-based deliberation. In effect, Vivekananda's framing of his message in the rhetoric of modernity allowed him a level of incursion through the filter of the colonial/Orientalist machinery which was virtually unprecedented for a 'native'; for although many of his conclusions explicitly challenged the assertions of these powerful Western discourses, his ideas were presented in such a way that they superficially did not appear to threaten to destabilise the binary categories of thought—West and East, civilisation and primitivity, progress and stagnation, autonomy and authority—upon which these discourses depended. This fact paved the way for the willing acceptance by some prominent Orientalist figures (including, during his lifetime, Müller and Deussen) of some aspects of his construal of Hinduism. As Bhabha notes, the partial resemblance of 'the other' to the coloniser is often the real menace to the latter's power and authority,³²⁰ and Vivekananda demonstrates that, indeed, such resemblance

³¹⁹ See Basu, 1-11.

³²⁰ See Bhabha's essay, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *The Location of Culture*, 85-92.

may provide the former with otherwise-unavailable access to the formative ground of the very discourses to be contested.

None of the preceding is intended to suggest, however, that Vivekananda invariably lacks conviction in the representations he presents. Indeed, his energy and enthusiasm for communicating his religious ideas around the world bespeaks of an assurance in their veracity—or, at the very least, in their efficacy. Yet, the profound consequences of this synergistic approach upon Vivekananda's own views of so-called Hindu 'tradition'—and, in a broader sense, upon the modern interpretation of Hinduism in general—cannot be overlooked. For example, the modern, Western patterns of thought that Vivekananda incorporated into his discourse did not simply facilitate the transmission and popularisation of Advaitic ideas and brāhminical texts, but regulated and shaped the nature of the 'Hinduism' which emerged through his talks and writings. The historical Indian focus on distinctive regional and ancestral traditions, personal and private devotional acts, local deities, popular vernacular texts, and multiple religious communities structured by considerations of language, sect, *varṇa*, *jāti*, language, and the like, was problematised by Vivekananda's claims of a common, pan-Indian 'Hindu' identity, unified by Hindus' supposed acceptance of a shared textual corpus and an Advaita-based worldview. The combined influence of Vivekananda's ideas and those of other influential expositors—Hindus, as well as others, including Western academics, philosophers, and Theosophists—during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to the creation of a neo-Hinduism that proudly represented itself as a thoroughly 'modern' entity in its outlook, yet claimed to be merely a natural manifestation of timeless 'tradition'. (Had the influence of the more-orthodox Hindu

contenders prevailed among the Indian elite during the late colonial period, Hindus would have likely come to conceive of themselves, and their relationship with the contemporary world, in quite different ways.) In this sense, the conciliatory approach to Western modernity set forth by Vivekananda and other Hindus of his ilk was instrumental in creating a widespread perception, among both Hindus and sympathetic others, of Hinduism as an all-embracing, forward-thinking, unified religion-in-the-singular, that could claim to be structured around a collection of fundamental themes and ideas. As we will see in the following chapter, this hybrid conception of 'Hindu unity' was to become a key component of then-emerging conceptions of Indian nationhood.

CHAPTER FOUR

POLITICAL RELIGION: VIVEKANANDA'S NATION AND NATIONALISM

“But for English rule I could not be here now,” said the monk, “though your lowest free born American Negro holds higher position in India politically than is mine. Brahmin and coolie, we are all ‘natives’. But it is all right, in spite of the misunderstanding and oppression. England is the Tharma [sic] of India, attracted inevitably by some inherent weakness, past mistakes, but from her blood and fibre will come the new national hope for my countrymen. I am a loyal subject of the Empress of India!” and here the Swami salaamed before an imaginary potentate, bowing very low, perhaps too low for reverence.

—Vivekananda, excerpt from an American interview, 1890¹

It will, no doubt, be obvious by this point that, while Vivekananda was a man of deep personal devotion and conviction, his faith was shaped by a variety of concrete realities and ideological forces. Further, the ways in which he chose to articulate his perspectives were, likewise, profoundly impacted by a network of interpenetrative and interconstituent discourses which we may well label ‘political’ in the broadest sense—that is, in their embodiment of power dynamics as well as in their potential to effect changes (ideological and, ultimately, concrete as well) in the social/cultural/political order. “By resisting the type of representation that colonial discourse gives about the colonised people,” writes Lahcen E. Ezzaher, “and more important by writing a counter

¹ Interview from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Conversations and Interviews,” *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (CW)*, vol. 9, 326.

narrative in which the dignity and the voice of the oppressed/colonised is restored,” the critic of colonial discourses unavoidably “make[s] a serious political statement.”²

In the previous chapters, we have already considered some of these discursive forces; for example, the impact of the competing constructions of Hinduism advanced particularly by Orientalists and Christian missionaries during the late nineteenth century. It is, however, impossible to form a thorough and accurate picture of Vivekananda’s religious thought without considering several other important factors which extend beyond the boundaries of ‘religion’ as defined and delimited by modernity, and that also comprise essential ingredients of colonial ideologies and discourses. A critically aware reader cannot encounter Vivekananda’s work without being struck by the themes of nation, race, caste, and gender, as well as the semiotic depth of the language in which these concepts are articulated. Understanding the unique role of each of these coordinates of knowledge, as well as their profound interconnections as “articulated categories”³ within the colonial project is critical to comprehending the processes by which colonial discourses perform their acts of subjugation and the ways in which these discourses perpetuate themselves through time and space. These categories frequently come into play explicitly (as in the case of Vivekananda’s ‘nation’-focused speeches to the Indian public upon his return in 1897, or his California lecture on the “Women of India” in 1900) as well as implicitly (for instance, the impact of his own *jāti*’s disputed position in the Hindu caste hierarchy on his perceived authority, or his coalescence of spiritual

² Lahcen E. Ezzaher, *Writing and Cultural Influence: Studies in Rhetorical History, Orientalist Discourse, and Post-colonial Criticism* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), 12.

³ This phrase has been invoked by Anne McClintock to describe the interconstituent nature of the categories of race, gender and class. See McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

aspiration and notions drawn from Western discourses of masculinity). While Vivekananda may have framed 'true religion' in his public lectures as a rarefied entity beyond the reach of such 'mundane' forces, the reality is that, just as in the case of colonial and Orientalist constructions of Hinduism and Vedānta, the discursive formations of nationalism, race, caste, and gender impacted his engagement with religion, and forced him to make strategic choices in his presentation thereof. This chapter, and the ones that follow, will examine these themes in colonial-era discourses and in Vivekananda's work specifically, with attention also given to their points of intersection.

The Birth of the 'Nation'

It has become increasingly recognised by scholars that the idea of 'nation' is itself socially constructed and, in some sense, a relatively recent human phenomenon, despite the antiquity of the term. In studying the history or discourses of Vivekananda, it is important to distinguish between the history of nationalism and the histories that nations write for and of themselves. "History," observes Shamita Basu, "becomes a great discursive terrain of nationalism, because it is through the discourse on history that the nation is able to speak about the origin and authenticity of its collective self."⁴ As this suggests, 'nation' is a constructed unit, not a natural, cross-cultural entity; the genesis, growth and development of a 'national consciousness' among a particular people-group necessarily involves the creation and adoption of a complex assortment of ideology and rhetoric, upon which the acceptance and persistence of the psychological idea of 'nationhood' depends. Its "authenticity" is found not in objective historical truth (if such

⁴ Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism as National Discourse* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 41.

a thing could even be definitively identified), but formed through a process of discursive interpellation of its collective self-consciousness, and its narrativisation of its own past, present, and future.⁵

While politically united groups of the pre-modern age often identified themselves as republics, kingdoms, or empires, 'nation', in its present configuration, is considered to be a phenomenon of modernity.⁶ The term itself represents much more than simply a collection of persons united by a common territory and political authority, autonomous from other governments' control. While intimately connected to issues of political power and governance, the concept of 'nation' is not to be conflated with the modern 'nation-state' per se, though the two are profoundly interconnected. Rather, to postcolonial scholars, the term *nation* embodies a wide range of ideological implications. Partha Chatterjee has highlighted the fact that, in Western discourses, "nationalism goes hand-in-hand with reason, liberty and progress"⁷ (and, consequently, those historical cases of nationalism which do not exemplify these ideals are branded 'deviant').⁸ As Homi Bhabha has written, beyond the reference to an autonomous political community, *nation* suggests "something more ancient and nebulous—the '*natio*'—a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging."⁹ a legacy of the term's Latin meaning: a group

⁵ Benedict Anderson is generally credited with the popularisation of the idea of the nation as an 'imagined community', rather than as a sociologically determined product. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁶ This was recognised as early as the late nineteenth century, by French theorist Ernest Renan. See Renan, "What is a Nation?," In *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 8-22.

⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1986; reprinted in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-6.

⁹ Quoted in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 150.

rooted in consanguinity. It is this striving to identify—in reality, to create—a ‘condition of belonging’ among an often-diverse collection of persons and communities that underlies the quest for the formation of a nation.¹⁰ In one sense, the existence of a nation—that is, the recognition and acknowledgement (both by those ‘of’ the nation, and those ‘outside’ of it) of a unified identity—is a prerequisite to the formation of a nation-state. Even those ‘nationalists’ who have the latter as their express goal often tactically focus the greater part of their attention and efforts on the construction of the former, recognising the fundamental importance of the ‘myth of nationhood’—which includes common acknowledgement of ostensibly universal (within a given national community, that is) traditions, narratives, characteristics and goals.

Further, while nationalists may not always recognise or acknowledge it, the idea of ‘nation’ is one of the factors that has undergirded the practice of colonialism itself, and in turn, has been strengthened and extended cross-culturally by the imperial project. The development of the modern nation-state in Europe during the modern period was necessary to provide economic capital and expanded markets for colonial ventures, and, in turn, fostered the same. More importantly, a unified national identity helped to bolster ideas of intrinsic superiority among the various European people groups who were inherently bound to the imperial quest for power over colonised societies. For some nation-states, particularly Britain, the quest for expanded world dominion functioned as a ‘national narrative’ that provided cohesion for the diverse ethnic, social and class groups

¹⁰ This phenomenon will perhaps be most familiar to Canadians in the form of the recent self-identification of North American aboriginal peoples as members of the ‘First Nations’—a phrase that also obscures the modern construction of the concept.

within the boundaries of the British isles, and, in fact, for the Empire as a whole.¹¹ However, the colonial mission to 'civilise' by 'saming' the other to itself via the institutions and discourses of colonialism brought British authority into a position of destabilising self-conflict and ambivalence; as postcolonial scholars like Benita Parry have observed, by so doing, the coloniser became the source of the very apparatus (both structural and ideological) which might be used by the colonised to assert parity and, consequently, the right to self-governance and self-determination.¹² In many cases, this resistance and subversion was undertaken indirectly, through the use of various transformative approaches to the rhetorical strategies of the hegemonic discourses of colonialism.

As in the case of colonial resistance to other imperialist concepts, Spivak's 'strategic essentialism' comes into play in understanding the tactics of nationalist movements in subject societies. By adopting the nationalistic conceptual framework of the coloniser(s) and the ideological apparatus that accompanied it, many communities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were able to stimulate sufficient patriotic zeal among the masses as well as the elites to eventually achieve the creation of independent, self-governing countries. Even prior to the achievement of this end (or even without its accomplishment at all), the discourses that have accompanied the modern European manifestation of the nation were put to use as a tactic to claim 'authentic' nationhood, be it politically acknowledged or not. Chatterjee has argued that, in the

¹¹ For a more in-depth discussion of the linkages between imperial expansion and nationalism, see Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 1-7; 291-322 passim.

¹² See Benita Parry, 'Resistance Theory/Theorizing Resistance: Two Cheers for Nativism' in *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, ed. F. Barker, P. Hulme, and M. Iversen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).

emergent stage (or, as he terms it, the *moment of departure*) of nationalist thought in non-Western societies, the rhetorical maintenance of one particular Orientalist division has proved especially important: that of the 'material' West versus the 'spiritual' East.¹³ The assertion of the historical supremacy of 'Oriental' societies and cultures in the realm of spirituality is, he posits, an important aspect of these nationalists' simultaneous attempts to assert parity with, and yet difference from, Western nations, as well as to refashion 'modernity' in a way that synthesises material prosperity with spiritual achievement.¹⁴

Many of these emerging nations have framed their efforts in the language of revival, invoking a return to a distant past in which, it was claimed, a wholly indigenous 'nation' functioned according to enlightened and democratic principles until its conquest and destruction by colonial powers¹⁵ (thereby defying the Orientalist characterisation of the uncolonised East as a land of inevitable uncivilised despotism). Often, these anachronistic national myths asserted a cohesive religious identity as one of the fundamental unifying factors during the nation's purported past golden age. However, the newly created national communities were actually firmly rooted in the modern European model of the nation-state, and, in the case of those groups which attained political independence, the colonisers' governmental, legal, economic and other institutional forms were commonly appropriated virtually wholesale, substituting indigenous leadership without altering the power structures themselves. Along with these structures came their ideological baggage, which defined power in terms of the now-familiar binary

¹³ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, 9.

oppositions of colonial thought; this meant that, in order for the newly empowered to uphold their positions, someone had to be slotted into the place of the demonised other which they themselves had formerly occupied.¹⁶ Often, this resulted in the creation of new 'enemies' within the national boundaries, usually vulnerable minorities (such as an already-marginalised religious community, gender, or other socio-ethnic group) to whom were ascribed the same 'deficiencies' that the colonialists had previously attributed to the members of the subject society. (In some cases, these internal tensions were great enough to cause a splintering of a single colonial possession into multiple independent nations.) In effect, while the central political aims were often achieved by the nationalists, the existing model with its weaknesses was commonly retained. Even without the existence of a recognised political nationhood, however, the ideological correlates of the nation-idea have profoundly shaped and constrained communities' self-representations.

The Construction of Indian Nationhood

India's emergence from colonial rule as an independent nation-state in 1947 was preceded by many years of nationalist striving. The quest to form a 'nation' out of the extremely heterogeneous ethnic, cultural, religious and language groups which were subsumed under the moniker 'British India' was perhaps one of the most challenging nationalist projects yet undertaken in the modern world.¹⁷ Prior to the imposition of colonial rule by the British, all of the regions which comprise India as it is known today

¹⁶ Chatterjee has discussed this theme throughout his work; see especially "Histories and Nations," chap. in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 95-115.

¹⁷ A project which, to be fair, was never *completely* successful, in the sense that a number of religious, regional, and caste communities within what is today India have continued to call for independent, self-governing communities not beholden to the political and legal constraints of Indian governance (e.g., the efforts within some circles of the Sikh community to establish a separate nation-state, Khalistan, comprised of India's Punjabi-speaking areas).

had never been a single, unified territory by any criteria except perhaps roughly connected geography; certainly, true political, ethnic, linguistic or religious unity had never existed across the region. (While some previous South Asian empires had sought to politically unite large portions of the population of the subcontinent, the unsurpassed trans-cultural scope of this modern effort was distinctive. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the word used for 'nation' in modern Indian discourse—*rāṣṭra*—is a Sanskrit term historically used to denote 'kingdom', suggesting a perception among Indians of at least some degree of conceptual continuity between earlier Hindu governmental structures/roles and the modern 'secular' nation-state.) The delineation of India's borders and boundaries was principally a British undertaking, producing an 'India' in accord with the sites of Britain's own political and military successes, and the metropole's economic priorities.¹⁸

The arbitrariness of India's cartographical space and the multiplicity contained therein presented the region's nationalistically minded indigenous social elite with a dilemma. To accomplish the construction of a single nation-state out of most of this foreign-defined territory,¹⁹ the creation of a nation in the psycho-ideological sense was clearly necessary. The British played an important part in this process, through their characterisation of the region in monolithic descriptives—such as those advanced by 'authoritative' writings like Mills' *History of British India*—that helped to foster in Britain's Indian subjects a perception of themselves as a cohesive whole, with a common

¹⁸ This was, of course, merely part of a much more extensive colonial project, which saw the greater part of the globe divided and partitioned into territories, the 'possession' of which was negotiated by various European powers.

history, a shared culture, and a mutual physical, psychological and moral character (albeit most often articulated in depreciating, racial terms). This portrayal allowed the British to claim that their rule over Indian territory was merely the long-needed—even divinely mandated—control of a unified entity, all parts of which (including the ‘defiant’ princely states which resisted acquisition to British governance) were rightfully under the jurisdiction of the British Crown.²⁰ The theme of a historically united India came to be treated as a ‘natural’ object in Western discourse, and was almost universally utilised by scholars and writers, British or otherwise, in discussing ‘Indian’ religion, culture, and people, consequently shaping the knowledge produced thereby. Indians, too, adopted the concept of a ‘united India’ to invoke a unified front against foreign rule, and the idea came to be deployed as a central trope in nationalist discourse.

Thus, ‘India’ and its historical, cultural, social and religious narratives were constructed (not discovered, as the discourses themselves often posited) by both European and Indian nationalist thinkers. In the case of history especially, this process of nationalist representation was remarkable; for the very principles and presuppositions of Western historiography, as well as the authority which historical discourses carried—as the source of scientific and ‘objective’ forms of knowledge—were among the more-consequential appropriations from European thought on the part of the Indian intelligentsia.²¹ History was to become an important site upon which the struggle to identify the ‘true India’ was carried out by nationalists; however, though the debates

¹⁹ The boundaries of colonial India do not correspond completely to the modern Indian nation-state; for example, the areas now identified as Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Pakistan and Bangladesh (East Bengal) were under British control, but have since attained the status of separate nations.

²⁰ See Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, *The New Cambridge History of India*, III.4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 127.

often centred upon the contestation of Orientalist exegeses of Indian texts, the conceptual framework out of which these disputed interpretations arose was rarely deeply questioned. Similarly, 'science' also served as a site upon which competing parties sought to justify their claimed cultural authority, with both British and Indian factions striving to assert their superior mastery of this potent symbol of power, while often only minimally interrogating the legitimacy of the modern thematic in which this symbolic value was rooted.²²

In fact, even during much of the nineteenth century, when relatively few members of the Western-educated urban middle class were actively seeking, or even envisioning, a separate nation-state, there were many efforts by Indians (keeping in mind the vague nature of this moniker at the time, given the lack of a definitive 'India' per se)²³ to identify criteria by which a 'national spirit' might be fostered and India's people thereby 'improved'—be that improvement conceptualised in terms political, economic, religious or otherwise. In reality, it was not so much the construction of a sovereign Indian nation, but rather of 'Indianness' itself that was the subject of much of what we have retrospectively come to label 'nationalist discourse' in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. (We would do well here to invoke the observation of Sudipta Kaviraj that modern Indian nationalism had ancestors which were not themselves 'nationalistic' in the narrow sense,

²¹ See Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 58.

²² For a fuller discussion of the role of 'science' in colonial India, see Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

²³ As Dermot Killingley has pointed out, the widespread and, particularly, exclusive application of the term 'Indian' to the *indigenous* inhabitants of the region within the context of modern British discourse was itself largely a nineteenth-century innovation; prior to this period, 'Indian' had been primarily applied by the English to *British* citizens living in India (despite the term actually having an antecedence denoting India's 'natives' that stretched as far back as the Greeks). See Killingley, "Modernity, Reform, and Revival" in the *Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 509-25.

but were, in fact, “patriotism for something else”²⁴—e.g., for social/religious/inter-caste accord, rather than national independence.) Although the explicit focus of such nation-building discourses might well be upon the unity of the ‘Indian people’, their polemical character constitutes an inevitable subtext, as national identity must inexorably be defined at least partly in opposition to an/other.

From the side of the Indian nationalists, this quest for advancement was often couched in revivalist terms, as, for many nationalist thinkers during the period of British rule, it was a given that India had ‘fallen’ from the heights of an earlier period, one in which the people had been united spiritually, and had prospered materially as well. This idea of a past golden age of Indian civilisation, though it does have some foundation in ancient Purāṇic sources and their cosmological vision of a ‘world decline’ from an idyllic *satyayuga* to the present *kaliyuga*,²⁵ owes much of its authority and widespread acceptance to the early Orientalists, particularly Henry Thomas Colebrooke in the eighteenth century, and Max Müller in the nineteenth, who situated post-Vedic Indian history in a narrative of cultural degeneration.²⁶ In many cases, the first ‘disruption’ of this contentment was attributed to the Muslim invasions beginning at the close of the first millennium and the subsequent Moghal rule, events which not only upset the existing political and social order, but were narrativised by Hindu nationalists as the first major ‘foreign’ ruptures into the harmonious indigenous religious life of India, and thus ascribed much liability in upsetting the unity of the Indian proto-nation. (It is interesting

²⁴ Sudipta Kaviraj, “The Imaginary Institution of India,” in *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 8.

²⁵ For a brief outline of this cosmological process, see Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), 126-7.

to note that few Hindu historians have found such fault with the reign of the Buddhist emperor Aśoka, despite the profound transformations that were introduced into South Asian religion and society during his rule. His empire, considered by many Indians to have been an apex in the land's 'national history', is generally perceived to be a natural part of India's indigenous evolution, not a disruption of Hindu rule—a telling example of the strategic deployment of malleable cultural boundaries.) By 'classicising' modern Hindu-Indian culture—selectively designating as integral parts of modern Indians' cultural ancestry those aspects of South Asian history regarded as civilisational pinnacles (an evaluation influenced in part by Orientalism)—the nineteenth-century Indian elite constructed a past for their Indian nation. Beyond the impact of these various historical constructions themselves, the very act of doing so was highly significant; for, as anthropologist and historian Bernard S. Cohn has observed, "The power to define the nature of the past... [is] among the most significant instrumentalities of rulership."²⁷ Thus, for the Indian nationalist project to wield discursive authority, the *right* to historical self-definition needed to be appropriated from the colonisers by the colonised.

Defining the Indian

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, there was much ambiguity surrounding the relation between the quest for an Indian national identity in the broader sense, and the attitude adopted by Indians towards the legitimacy of the Raj. For many, particularly those of the new intelligentsia whose fluency in English and introduction to

²⁶ See Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave, 2002), 30-1.

²⁷ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 10.

the tenets of European-style rationalism were the products of a Western-style education, the colonial government was viewed largely in a positive light—as a basis of societal stability, a provider of legal and legislative discipline, and a source of liberal ideals, ‘enlightened’ thought, and modern technologies.²⁸ (Of course, the British put much effort into ensuring the persistence of this positive perception—belying, as it did, their frequently oppressive and illiberal treatment of their colonial subjects—as it was indispensable in ensuring Britain’s continued hegemonic authority over a populace which outnumbered its own by many-fold.) However, British rule, though conceptualised by many socially advantaged Indians as a revolution which brought with it many beneficial alterations in various aspects of national life, was simultaneously perceived as an incursion by those external to the boundaries of Indians’ own collective life-history. In order to restore what was felt to be the glory of India’s past, the Indian nation had to first be united under a common banner—some signifier of homogeneity that would identify what made Indians ‘Indian’ (and what made others ‘other’). Thus early nationalism, in this respect, was largely a project carried out rhetorically; as Kaviraj aptly puts it, “words were the terrain on which most politics were done.”²⁹ Importantly, this ‘rhetorical nationalism’ necessarily addressed multiple audiences simultaneously and self-consciously—the Indian intelligentsia (schooled in Western thought and wielding some degree of power, often in a comprador fashion); the Indian ‘masses’ (whose support was needed for concrete nationally oriented action); the local representatives of the British government (whose authority to impose harsh sanctions upon those suspected of sedition

²⁸ See Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 26. In fact, Chatterjee goes so far as to argue that, for nineteenth-century Indians, “sentiments of nationality flowed out of an unconcealed faith in the basic goodness of the colonial order and the progressive support of the colonial state” (ibid., 28).

needed to be minded); the metropolitan seat of power itself (where decisions affecting the periphery were made on the basis of British priorities); and the potentially vast readership of the increasingly globalised print media (both English and vernacular; in India as well as overseas). Consideration and circumspection with respect to these different parties were therefore necessary in the formation and framing of any variety of nationalist discourse.

The nature and scope of the sought-after 'national adhesive', so to speak, differed between various proponents. Their efforts were not centred upon a single fundamental social or political project, but were inspired by various perceived deficiencies in the existing conditions of Indian life, and they proposed a wide variety of remedies. Nevertheless, the majority of the prominent social reformers—themselves mostly of Hindu background—advanced some vision of the Indian nation which, to a greater or lesser extent, was intertwined with, and legitimised by, religious themes. In pragmatic terms, any reform movement seeking widespread acceptance had, of necessity, to defend its basis in Hindu sources, concepts and values, whether or not its genesis actually lay in the religious sphere (this fact accounts for the failure of the iconoclastic Bengali 'Derozian' movement—popularly known as 'Young Bengal'—to sustain a vigorous following into the latter decades of the nineteenth century). Nativist themes, invoking golden-age mythological narratives, and intermixed with 'progressive' ideas in complex and often-ambivalent ways, played a significant role in the rhetoric utilised by many of these reform-minded figures, and was one of the important avenues through which the

²⁹ Kaviraj, 10.

support of more-orthodox Hindus was secured.³⁰ (This bi-temporal character of Indian nation-thought recalls Tom Nairn's assertion that nationalism is inherently 'Janus-faced', simultaneously looking into the past and towards the future.)³¹

Examples of the invocation of religious themes, language and imagery are abundant in the thought and writing of otherwise widely divergent colonial-era Indian thinkers. Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), though not an advocate of nationalism in the narrow political sense, asserted that Indians of all faiths—Hindus, Muslims, and others—could find concord through the Upaniṣadic idea of *ekaṃ sat viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti* ('Truth is one; sages call it by various names'). While Roy himself had a particularly close affinity with Unitarian Christianity, he no doubt recognised that an indigenous theme would be the most-effective rallying point. Rather more forthright in his patriotism, religious leader Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83), founder of the Ārya Samāj, chose the *Vedas* (excluding the *Upaniṣads* and other post-*saṃhitā* texts) as his rallying point for Indian identity. While he asserted that these scriptures advanced a monotheistic perspective, he rejected all traditions not based on the Vedic texts (including Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam) as inauthentic, and focused his national aspirations on Hindus alone (he was, in fact, widely known to be a great admirer of the seventeenth-century Hindu ruler Śivajī, whose anti-Muslim sentiments are renowned). Bengali writer Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), on the other hand, was more forthcoming about the debt his nationalism owed to European thought. The revolutionary themes in his novels are intertwined with 'spiritual' themes, but particularly advance the concept of the

³⁰ For more background on the relationship between Hindu reformers, revivalist themes, and Hindu orthodoxy, see Amiya P. Sen, *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

motherland itself as a deity, Mother India, to whom Indians owe their first and most-fervent allegiance.³² Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), Vivekananda's contemporary, a fervent independence fighter in his earlier years, generally de-emphasised the role of religion in the nationalist struggle; however, he too advocated liberation of the 'spiritual geography' of Mother India, through violence if necessary, and upheld the *Bhagavadgītā* as a Hindu license for 'just war'.³³ Very different was Mohandas Gandhi's (1869-1948) spirituality-centred approach (the full elaboration of which postdates Vivekananda), which interpreted oppressive foreign rule of India as a moral evil, which could be overcome by non-violent resistance rooted in spiritual practice and *satyāgraha*, 'holding fast to Truth'. Gandhi's 'nation' crossed religious boundaries, and identified devotion to God as the common factor uniting India's Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. Placing less stress on the 'uniqueness' of India than did many other nationalists, Gandhi emphasised the inhumane nature of British governance and appealed to a 'universal' moral conscious and the inevitability of the victory of Truth (*satyam eva jayate*) to justify his support for *svarāj*, 'self-rule'.³⁴ Many more individuals could certainly be cited as important exponents of Indians' evolving consciousness of nationhood.

The great diversity of the views expressed by such reformers helps to illustrate what Bhabha has identified as the transitional and continuously shifting nature of the concept

³¹ William Gould, *Hindu Nationalism and the Language of Politics in Late Colonial India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 168, n. 31.

³² Bankimchandra was the author of the well-known nationalist hymn, "*Bande Mātaram*" ('Hail Mother'); the role of his work in the construction of Bhārat-Mātā is discussed by Sumanta Banerjee in *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002), 199-200.

³³ For more details on Aurobindo's perspectives on the *Bhagavadgītā*, including its nationalist implications, see Aurobindo [Ghose], *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1928).

³⁴ See Chatterjee's discussion of Gandhi and nationalism in Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, chap. 4: "The Moment of Manoeuvre: Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society," 85-130.

of the nation.³⁵ Though collectively subsumed under the 'nationalist' label and invoking religious themes in some fashion, the nation to which each above-noted individual aspired was, to some extent, a unique conceptual entity. For example, Roy's ambition for a scientifically minded, English-educated India under secure British governance contrasts markedly with Gandhi's vision of a village-centred politically independent nation economically reliant upon traditional small-scale industry. In general, those with nationalistic sentiments needed to carefully and strategically position themselves with respect to ever-shifting boundaries between 'protecting' Hindu religion and culture, and appropriating elements from Western discourses. Ironically, both the forward- *and* backward-looking movements—not that these constituted discrete, binary entities—were prefaced on the acceptance of the 'modern' tenets of rationality and liberalism; the Hindu nation envisioned by revivalist forces was actually a palimpsest, inevitably bearing the imprint of British imperialism and modern European discourses, in addition to the selected elements of India's imagined past.

As Chatterjee has noted, the inherent conflict between the thematic of modernity—emphasising freedom and advancement—and the reality of the Indian middle class's debarment from true socio-economic clout made the political status of Indian nationalism ambiguous; loyalty to British rule as an instrument of social stability coexisted with frustration over lack of autonomy and authority.³⁶ The result of this was that schemes for moral and social improvement often occupied the sites where agitation for political revolution might be expected.³⁷ Often these strivings after 'national upliftment',

³⁵ See Bhabha, "Introduction," *Nation and Narration*, 1-7 passim.

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 25-6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

particularly in urban Bengal, centred around discourses that were charged with power-laden racial and gender themes appropriated from Western ideology, advocating various methods for the improvement of the ‘Indian race’, and the acquisition of strength and courage via ‘physical culture’ and moral self-regulation to bolster the ‘masculinity’ of the subcontinent’s people. Through such methods, it was thought, Indians could achieve some degree of progress and advancement (as measured against the standards expounded by the *anīgrezī-lok*), and thereby share in the material prosperity of the West—yet without risking the feared turmoil of political independence. (That the British administrators were instrumental in fostering these improvement-minded schemes should come as no surprise; they stood to gain much from a colonial populace that was strong and self-disciplined yet politically apathetic.)

Another common rallying point for nationalists was language. The imposition of English—the foreign tongue of the colonisers—as the principal channel for education, communication and business in the latter part of the nineteenth century, following the Anglicist victory in colonial Indian educational policy in 1835, rankled for many Indians. Recognising, at some level, that language inevitably codes and transmits particular ideological concepts and values, and that English’s pervasive presence in India was part of the colonisers’ agenda of (delimited) assimilation,³⁸ many reformers encouraged the promotion of indigenous tongues; in resistance to the English-medium educational system, public lectures and debates on contemporary ideas and social issues were often carried out in the local language(s), in addition to a growing vernacular publishing

³⁸ See, for example, linguist E. Annamalai’s discussion of the relationship between language and colonialism in the Indian colonial setting, in “Indian Languages in the Modernization Discourse in

industry which made translations of European works cheaply available to the masses, or at least the literate portions thereof. These activities did much to spread 'Western' knowledge (though now appropriated into a community's own *mātr-bhāṣā* and, thus, to some extent, shaped by indigenous conceptual frameworks) in a manner that bypassed the institutional structures of the colonial education system, and allowed ideas to be disseminated in a manner that was less-intensely scrutinised by the British authorities. In the sphere of political nationalism, some favoured the adoption of a modern pan-Indian language (such as Hindi or Hindustani), while others advocated the revival of Sanskrit as the living national language of the (Hindu) Indian nation.³⁹

In contrast, others, including the bulk of the higher-class Indian population, stressed the practical benefits of English, and desired the appropriation of at least a share of the 'modern knowledge' (and the power and prestige attributed to the same) which it conveyed. Competence in English clearly permitted varieties of engagement with European ideas (as well as a large potential Western audience for one's views) that were simply not fully available to Indian thinkers without stepping into the linguistic realm of these concepts' origin. Doing so, however, meant that in order to deal with these ideas in a comparative fashion, Indians had to translate their own indigenous knowledge into a European idiom (introducing an implicit modern, Western, secular frame of reference), and this had consequences for the ways in which they conceived of and structured their own cultural realities. Because of this ambivalence surrounding language usage in the colonial context, there is no single 'reformist' position with respect to the contested roles

Colonial India," in *New Developments in Asian Studies*, ed. Paul van der Velde and Alex McKay (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998), 255-84.

of English and native languages in the emerging Indian nation, but rather, a variety of complex and interrelated perspectives.

Some important common foundations, however, underlie the nationalist perspectives set forth by a large share of the prominent Indian thinkers during the late nineteenth century. As most came from a background that was upper-caste (predominantly, though far from universally, brahmin) and upper-class (in Bengal, *bhadralok*), their perspectives reflected the concerns, priorities and traditions of these sectors of Indian society. This resulted in a situation in which the public bourgeoisie face of Indian nationalism was actually quite divorced from the concerns of the subaltern masses. Thus, in addressing issues such as women's rights or untouchability, the real interest of such reformers was not always the lived reality of the majority of Indian women or the condition of outcastes, so much as the significance which the representations of these groups held for the emergent elites' own fragile position in the coloniser-colonised hierarchy.⁴⁰

Also, among those nationalists who advocated the idea of a politically independent India—a goal which was not, at the time, the aspiration of the majority—their conception thereof tended to follow the lines of the modern Western model of the autonomous nation-state, with its characteristic identification of distinctive 'national' structures, modes of organisation, and symbolic markers. As Chatterjee's work suggests, such a nationalist project is fraught with problematic internal incongruity, especially for non-European societies, which have also long served as the 'other' for Western nationalism.

³⁹ Nationally minded Muslims in colonial India did not, by contrast, strongly advocate Arabic and/or Persian as a candidate for the position of a pan-Indian national or pedagogical tongue.

⁴⁰ See Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, chap. 3: "The Nationalist Elite," 35-75.

He elucidates the basic dilemma by explaining that “there is... an inherent contradictoriness in nationalist thinking, because it reasons within a framework of knowledge whose representational structure corresponds to the very structure of power nationalist thought seeks to repudiate.”⁴¹ It is these intrinsic ambiguities and anomalies embedded within the colonial/postcolonial nationalist project which result in the emergence of discourses that seek to subvert imperial epistemological and ethical frameworks through the application of the ideological tools of modernity, resulting in, in Chatterjee’s words, “a different discourse, yet one that is dominated by another.”⁴²

Lest Chatterjee’s somewhat-pessimistic thesis overshadow the consideration of anti-colonial nationalist efforts in their entirety, however, we should observe that, as in the case of religion and its (re-)appropriation by its marginalised subjects, the structures imposed by colonialism and its discourses do not completely determine the content of the response of the colonised. While they do profoundly shape the forms and, to a great extent, the substance of nationalistic rhetoric, some avenues yet remain open to creative acts of subversion, as has been mentioned above; for example, via mimicry, or the altered reproduction/representation of the coloniser by the colonised, the purported certainty of colonial discursive formations is challenged and destabilised. It is this potential for transformative engagement of the hegemonic narratives of colonialism that makes the examination of anti-colonial nationalistic discourses an intriguing venture.

⁴¹ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 38.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 42.

Vivekananda's Nationalist Texts

So prominent is the coupling, in the modern Indian consciousness, of Vivekananda with the idea of Indian nationhood that it would not be incorrect to assert that a large share of present-day Indians are familiar with Vivekananda's work primarily through a few choice quotations on 'India's greatness', bandied about by political figures and others bent upon bolstering the 'national spirit' for whatever cause is at hand. It is not an exaggeration to say that Vivekananda's ascribed nationalism is his principal acknowledged legacy in contemporary India. (The militant twentieth-century Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose, for example, boldly asserted: "Swami Vivekananda may be regarded as the spiritual father of the modern nationalist movement.")⁴³

In fact, Vivekananda's expressed perspectives on India and the nationalist movement are much more complex, and decidedly more critical, than these popular images would suggest. Further, his work illustrates the multiple levels of meaning embodied by the concepts of 'nation' and 'nationalism', and the complex interrelationship between these aspects.

As the quotation at the commencement of this chapter suggests, Vivekananda was well aware of the paradoxical situation of the colonial subject in India, and, in particular, of his own ambivalent relationship to empire. The implication of satirical irony in that statement, conveyed by the journalist's decoding of the 'text' of the swami's physical display (presuming the reporter's observation to be a faithful, not fanciful, one), complicates what would otherwise be read as a straightforward assertion of India's failings, acceptance of the necessity and inevitability of British rule, and profession of

loyalty to the Crown. Whether Vivekananda was aware that his somatic performance would be understood and included in the published interview is uncertain; had it not, of course, the message would have been inverted, and the (most likely intentional) ambivalence lost. As this example illustrates, Vivekananda's discourse on 'nation', like those engaging other subjects, encompasses ambiguities and anomalies, some of which are perhaps the result of the displacement and transmission of his statements from one spatial and temporal context to another, from deeply contextualised utterances to dislocated and disembodied records, from the conventions of orature to those of the written word, from particular sites of enunciation and reception to different ones, and sometimes from the conceptual framework of one language to that of another. Further complicating the deciphering process, he often speaks to different audiences simultaneously in a self-conscious and strategic fashion. (In this latter respect, he is very much the product of the emerging globalisation of public discourses in his day; a comment made to the American media, such as the one above, could—and likely would, were it deemed of political significance—soon be (re-)presented to a British audience, and even, in turn, an Indian one.) These factors need to be borne in mind to appreciate the complexities and contradictions of Vivekananda's nationalist discourse.

An Evolving National Consciousness

In all likelihood, Vivekananda first came in contact with nationalistic ideas during his childhood. Although his formal education in European-governed institutions is unlikely to have been a fertile source of encounters with ideas that challenged the

⁴³ Quoted in Sibransan Chatterjee, "Swami Vivekananda and Indian National Congress," in *The Congress Party in India*, edited by N. S. Gehlot (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publications, 1991), 195.

political status quo, it no doubt inculcated in him an acceptance of the conceptual framework of 'nationhood', embedded within the very discourses of colonialism. At the very least, he would have been familiar, though perhaps not consciously, with the modern assumption of the nation-state as the *natural* manifestation of the perception of a people-group's shared history, culture, and territory. However, his extensive personal reading, cosmopolitan family associates, and educated contacts through the Brahma Samāj were probably among his first avenues of exposure to current debates over colonial rule and potential Indian independence. Although outright nationalist sentiments had not yet reached the height of their popularity in Bengal during the time of his youth, the future Vivekananda would certainly have been aware of their growing permeation of Indian society, regardless of whether he felt any particular affinity with them during this early period in his life.

From the evidence of the texts, it seems that Vivekananda's conceptualisation of Indian 'nationhood' evolved gradually, an organic development out of his accrued experiences. During his initial travels through India from 1890 to 1893, he obtained first-hand experience with the diversity of the region's physical and human geography. The reputable biographical accounts, however, include scant mention of an interest in political affairs on his part during this time. To what extent Vivekananda had, by this time, begun to draw a connection between colonial rule and the abject poverty and subjugation of large sections of the Indian masses is unclear. A rare media report of his ideas during the latter part of this period—an English-language interview with a reporter from the *Indian Social Reformer* in January of 1893, preserved only in extracts subsequently published by the *Madura Mail*—does include a passage in which Vivekananda is claimed to have

asserted that “through the slavery of a thousand years, Hindus have at present degenerated,”⁴⁴ apparently a joint indictment of Moghal and European rule. Contrasting the sense of pride and importance instilled within British youth with the Hindu’s alleged perception that “he is born to slave,”⁴⁵ the swami is quoted in the article as stating that Hindus “can’t become *a great nation* unless we love our religion and try to respect ourselves, and respect our country men [*sic*] and society”⁴⁶ (italics added). However, a later letter of Vivekananda’s, written in 1894 to his fellow monk, Swami Ramakrishnananda—in which he claims that during his visit to Kanyakumari in December, 1892, he became overwhelmed by the poverty and desperation of India’s people, and there began to formulate his plan of social service—contains scant mention of the role of foreign rule in India’s suffering.⁴⁷ Rather, in this instance, Vivekananda seems to place the blame squarely on the backs of the indigenous elite who have kept the impoverished in ignorance, and he asserts that “*we* have for all ages been sucking their blood and trampling them underfoot” (italics added).⁴⁸ The remedy he posits is practical education, not political revolution.⁴⁹ It is notable that, in the same letter, he disavows the explanation that religion is to blame for India’s miseries; however, he claims that “the force to raise [the masses] must come from inside, that is, from the orthodox Hindus.”⁵⁰

⁴⁴ “A Bengali Sadhu,” *CW*, vol. 9, 526.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Vivekananda does write that the Indian masses have been “trampled... underfoot” by “the Hindu, the Mohammedan, [and] the Christian,” the last apparently alluding to the British; but otherwise he usually locates the source of India’s social problems in the people’s lack of education and lost ‘individuality’—only, at best, an indirect reference to English imperialism (see “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 6, 250-6).

⁴⁸ “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 6, 254.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 254-5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.

In this respect, Vivekananda clearly recognises the strategic importance of anchoring ideas regarding Indian development and liberation in ‘traditional’ religious authority.

All of this does provide some suggestion that Vivekananda had, prior to his overseas travels, already begun to conceptualise the Indian people as a nation in the broader, psychological sense as alluded to by Bhabha, above. Indeed, it is likely that, given his extensive reading in world history during his youth, he was already predisposed to think of his land in terms of Western models of nationhood, or at the very least, as something of a united entity with ‘national’ characteristics. As we have seen, by the time he spoke to the *Indian Social Reformer* in early 1893, Vivekananda was already describing Indians (more precisely, Hindu Indians), as a “nation,”⁵¹ or at least noting the potentiality for this condition. However, the remainder of the limited accounts by others who knew or met Vivekananda during his pre-America travels tend to stress his interest in discussing religion, philosophy, arts, and sciences—not nationalism.⁵² (Although during his early journeys he once chanced to meet the then-aging Bengali nationalist leader Rajnarain Bose, there is no record as to whether or not nationalism or politics figured in their brief discussions.)⁵³

Vivekananda’s subsequent exposure to the contrast between the people and lifestyles of America (and, subsequently, Britain and other parts of Europe) and those of India no doubt brought to his mind an increased consciousness of the nation-idea. The defences of Indian religion and customs to which he was goaded by missionaries and

⁵¹ “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 6, 255.

⁵² See *The Life of Swami Vivekananda: By His Eastern and Western Disciples*, vol. 1, chapters 13-20, for detailed descriptions of his Indian travels and activities.

⁵³ S. N. Dhar, *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 1 (Madras: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, 1975), 287.

other critics would naturally have encouraged him to think and to speak of India as a unity, in order to enhance the impact of his positive assertions and to shore up his own standing as a 'representative of his people'. (As we have seen, his sometimes-sweeping, idealistic assertions about the 'true' nature of Indian practices and beliefs often led to obfuscation of the less-savoury actualities.) Further, the strong emphasis that the American culture of the day put upon that country's own blossoming nationhood, and the affirmative values which were paired with this evolution—a spirit of progress, autonomy, and youthful vigour, for example—could not have failed to impact Vivekananda in this respect.

If India was indeed a nation, Vivekananda freely admitted in his correspondence with his Indian associates and, later, to his Indian audiences, that it was a nation facing great challenges. (As with other aspects of his discourse, Vivekananda's expression of nationalistic ideas was heavily shaped by the constraints and considerations of their particular enunciative circumstances.) Much of his discussion of India, particularly when directed towards Indians, continued the theme of locating liability for 'native' misery principally with Indians themselves. In an 1894 letter to some admirers in Calcutta, he explains:

To my mind, the one great cause of the downfall and the degeneration of India was the building of a wall of custom—whose foundation was hatred of others—round the nation, and the real aim of which in ancient times was to prevent the Hindus from coming in contact with the surrounding Buddhistic nations.

Whatever cloak ancient or modern sophistry may try to throw over it, the inevitable result—the vindication of the moral law that none can hate others without degenerating himself—is that the race that was foremost amongst the ancient races is now a byword, and a score among nations. We are object lessons of the violation of that law which our ancestors were the first to discover and disseminate.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ "Reply to the Calcutta Address," *CW*, vol. 4, 365.

This theme of collective self-improvement, rather than insurgency, as the proper strategy for national betterment is, as we have seen, typical of *bhadralok* discourses of the period. In Vivekananda's emphasis on *moral failings* as the root of India's problems, we also see foreshadowed the intimate association that he, in his later writings and discourses, would come to posit existed between the religious life of India and the people's national destiny. While placing the blame for India's problems upon Indians' own alleged weaknesses and faults might appear, on the surface, to be evidence of the extent to which the colonial attribution of negative qualities to Indians had become ingrained in Vivekananda's thought, we should also take notice that, by situating the source of the predicament in the Indian sphere, the swami also locates the *locus for change* within Indians themselves. In other words, the remedial capacity need not be seized (politically, militarily, ideologically, or otherwise) from the colonisers, but it already lies within the Indian grasp. This is consistent with Chatterjee's observation that, for the colonial Bengali middle class, "the domain of the inner was proclaimed a domain of autonomy,"⁵⁵ one in which sovereignty from British imperialism was thought possible, in contrast to the colonial control of the external sphere of Indian life. Vivekananda's analysis reiterates in sociological terms his Vedāntic vision of all spiritual potential as located within the microcosm of the individual.

If Vivekananda's first consciousness of the predicament of the Indian nation was not explicitly anti-colonial in nature, there is, nevertheless, evidence that, during the time he spent in America from 1893 to 1894, he had also begun to ascribe at least some blame to

⁵⁵ Partha Chatterjee, "A Religion of Urban Domesticity: Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Class," in *Subaltern Studies VII*, ed. P. Chatterjee and G. Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 67.

the British rulers for the ‘downfall’ of India. “India has been conquered again and again for years,”⁵⁶ he reportedly related to some American acquaintances in 1893,

and last and worst of all came the Englishman. You look about India, what has the Hindu left? Wonderful temples, everywhere. What has the Mohammedan left? Beautiful palaces. What has the Englishman left? Nothing but mounds of broken brandy bottles! ... [The English] have their heels on our necks, they have sucked the last drop of our blood for their own pleasures, they have carried away with them millions of our money, while our people have starved by villages and provinces. And now the Chinaman is the vengeance that will fall upon them; if the Chinese rose today and swept the English into the sea, as they well deserve, it would be no more than justice.⁵⁷

Elsewhere during this same conversation, Vivekananda allegedly stated that the English were “barely emerging from barbarism.”⁵⁸ As this conversation has been reconstructed, it appears, from memory by an American listener, we should perhaps be circumspect about the accuracy, especially given its fiery tenor. However, it is important to keep in mind that in Vivekananda’s private talks, he was apt to be much sharper in his tone and less constrained by standards of decorum than when delivering public lectures. While perhaps caught up in a moment of emotional excess, this conversation nevertheless strongly suggests that he consciously, if not always publicly, attributed to Britain a role in India’s ‘degeneration’.

At other times, in more-carefully considered expositions, the swami was more apt to identify the source of Britain’s success as a colonial power as lying in the collective character of that nation’s people. In his 1899 *Udbodhan* article “*Bartāman Bhārat*” (“Modern India”), he ridicules the British tactic of achieving loyalty to the Raj by

⁵⁶ “Vengeance of History,” *CW*, vol. 7, 279.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 279-80.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

attempting to convince Indians of “the mighty prestige and glory of the British nation.”⁵⁹ The real power upholding the British Empire, Vivekananda posits, is “that fortitude, that perseverance, and that intense national unity of purpose”⁶⁰ which characterises the collective character of the English. The waxing or waning of British power over India and its other colonies depends upon the maintenance of these qualities, he asserts, not its display of grandeur or the generation of a sense of shallow prestige among its subjects.⁶¹ His criticism reflects the particular hegemonic strategy that characterised European imperialism in India in the late nineteenth century, and demonstrates that the swami was well aware of the active campaign by the colonial rulers to inculcate loyalty in the Empire’s subjects through selective and sanguine self-representation of the metropolitan culture.

Hinduising the Nation

Upon his return to India in 1897, more fully developed and religiously linked nationalistic sentiments emerge in Vivekananda’s lectures. To be fair, the congratulatory welcomes he received throughout the land were themselves couched in discourses of nationalism, and framed Vivekananda’s accomplishments as victories for the cause of the Indian nation.⁶² That these prompted responses along the same lines should not therefore come as a surprise. Nevertheless, his talks in India collectively present a picture of a man able and willing to unite religious perspectives and nationalist exhortations. Further, by utilising the discursive power of history—which was represented by colonial thought as a

⁵⁹ “Modern India,” *CW*, vol. 4, 474.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 475.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

“privileged domain of knowledge... [claiming] an epistemological position that it was capable of making objective and truthful statements about social facts”⁶³—the swami bolstered his authority in speaking to Indians who were then seeking a collective self-representation which conformed to the patterns of Western historical discourse. And yet, as Basu points out, according to the conventions of what she terms Vivekananda’s “structural history,”⁶⁴ the value lies not in the details, but in their pattern and meaning: “Events are not really important in this narration because it is the structure that endows the events with significance.... Here ‘history’ only becomes a metonym for tradition.”⁶⁵ The crux of these historical narratives is the assumption of, in Gyan Prakash’s words, “the ontological being of India as a nation”⁶⁶—leading, in fact, to a circular line of reasoning which employed a history which was itself based on the idea of nationhood to prove the legitimacy of India’s status as a nation.

In particular, Vivekananda represents India as the symbolic and historical *axis mundi* of spirituality and virtue, as well as a soteriological force on the world stage. As he declared to a welcoming audience in Colombo in 1897:

If there is any land on this earth that can lay claim to be the blessed *Punya Bhumi* [land of spiritual merit], to be the land to which all souls on this earth must come to account for Karma, the land to which every soul that is wending its way Godward must come to attain its last home, the land where humanity has attained its highest towards gentleness, towards generosity, towards purity, towards calmness, above all, the land of introspection and of spirituality—it is India.... Here is the life-giving water with which must be quenched the burning fire of materialism which is burning

⁶² See, for example, the welcome given him upon his landing in Ceylon in January 1897 (“First Public Lecture in the East,” *CW*, vol. 3, 103-4).

⁶³ Basu, 48.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” in *Contemporary Studies in Society and History* 32 (April 1990): 390.

the core of the hearts of millions in other lands. Believe me, my friends, this is going to be.⁶⁷

If skirting the issue of Indian political autonomy, Vivekananda nevertheless sets forth a conception of India which is profoundly nationalistic, in that it seeks to unite India's people by constructing a discursive narrative which articulates India as a primordial entity possessed of (and defined by) a common history, shared values, and an overarching purpose in the global context. Like the visions of many of his nationalist contemporaries, it is profoundly religious in character, and Vivekananda explicitly includes historically important Hindu concepts (like *karma* and *punya*) as foundational ideas in his construction of Indian nationhood. Basu succinctly summarises the relationship between the swami's religion and his nationalism when she writes: "Nationalism, to Vivekananda, was an act of self-revelation, a going back to the origin of this Hindu self, and a Hinduism rising to self-consciousness."⁶⁸

A significant, if slightly tangential issue deserves mention in this respect—that the importance of *language* in fostering this national consciousness was clearly recognised by Vivekananda. In "The Future of India," he acknowledges the social power imputed to the Sanskrit language when he declares: "Sanskrit and prestige go together in India. As soon as you have that, none dares say anything against you. That is the one secret; take that up."⁶⁹ The ideological status of Sanskrit in the minds of many reformers of Vivekananda's time had less to do with the actual contemporary popularity of the language (indeed, enrolment in Sanskrit schools had declined sharply during the mid-

⁶⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁶⁸ Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 39.

⁶⁹ "The Future of India," *CW*, vol. 3, 299.

nineteenth century),⁷⁰ as it did with the prestige that Indians read into philological theories concerning Sanskrit's role as the parent-language of modern European tongues. According to one newspaper report, Vivekananda, on the basis of these theories, went so far as to claim in the course of an American lecture that "all European languages... are nothing but jargonised Sanskrit."⁷¹

Vivekananda, however, also did not deprecate the value of the English language as such. In his letters, he repeatedly advises his fellow *sannyāsins* to learn both Sanskrit *and* English to a competent standard, lest they be unable to teach and preach effectively throughout India and the West,⁷² and so that they might successfully counter Christian "missionary scholars" who would be impressed by a "display of eloquence."⁷³ (Vivekananda's own experience in this regard clearly influenced his evaluation of the importance of proficiency in English, as it was among his most-praised characteristics in Western media reports.)⁷⁴ However, he maintains that Sanskrit has an inestimable value for maintaining the vitality of Hinduism and generating national cohesion. This is not to say that Vivekananda put his support behind conservative Hindu efforts to institute Sanskrit as the spoken 'link language' of modern India, for he recognises that the complexity of Sanskrit would make the difficulty of such a project prohibitive.⁷⁵ "Therefore," he asserts, "the ideas [of Hindu spirituality] must be taught in the language of the people; at the same time, Sanskrit education must go on along with it, because the

⁷⁰ E. Annamalai, "Indian Languages in the Modernization Discourse in Colonial India," in *New Developments in Asian Studies: An Introduction*, ed. P. van der Velde and Alex McKay, (London: Kegan Paul Int., 1998), 260.

⁷¹ "India's Gift to the World," *CW*, vol. 2, 512.

⁷² See, for example, *CW*, vol. 6, 288, 321, 330; vol. 8, 352.

⁷³ "Letters," *CW*, vol. 6, 341.

⁷⁴ See, for example, *CW*, vol. 2, 484, 492, 498.

⁷⁵ "The Future of India," *CW*, vol. 3, 290.

very sound of Sanskrit words gives a prestige and a power and a strength to the race.”⁷⁶ He was also in favour of “recasting” the Bengali language, for he felt that it shared in the purported process of cultural degeneration, and had “become lifeless and monotonous in course of time,”⁷⁷ a deterioration which, he believed, mirrored what he perceived as the physical weakness of the Bengali people.⁷⁸ These statements illustrate Ranajit Guha’s assertion that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, Bengali “was beginning to be recognized by its educated middle-class speakers as an index of their identity.... A language-consciousness was allowed thus to stand in for self-consciousness.”⁷⁹ The linguistic reforms which Vivekananda advocated, however—particularly the reduction of the frequency of verb-usage—would seem to place him in the company of those of his contemporaries who sought to create a ‘high’ form of Bengali by adopting more-‘English’ structures.⁸⁰ The actual end results of the latter reform project, however, were a radical reduction of the previously existent linguistic diversity of eastern India and an increasingly stark hierarchical distinction between the speakers of ‘low’ dialects and those ‘cultured’ enough to use the elite, ‘normative’ language forms.⁸¹

Although he disavowed efforts to Sanskritise the structure of his mother tongue (he favoured, if anything, a ‘Pali-ising’ of it, due to that language’s perceived similarity with Bengali),⁸² Vivekananda advocates the translation of “technical terms” into Sanskrit words for Bengali-speaking audiences—coining new ones, if necessary, composed of

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ “From the Diary of a Disciple,” *CW*, vol. 7, 133.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 134.

⁷⁹ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 188.

⁸⁰ Kaviraj, 24.

Sanskrit elements, rather than adopting foreign words into the language.⁸³ (This was a position shared by other nationalist figures, particularly Rajnarain Bose, mentioned above, whose abhorrence of the adulteration of Bengali speech with English words reportedly resulted in an amusing incident during Bose's meeting with Vivekananda, in which a 'plus' sign had to be made with crossed fingers in lieu of an appropriate Bengali term for the idea.)⁸⁴ While such an effort to introduce Sanskrit terminology into Bengali would seem not to entail, to use Guha's phrase, "any progress from signality to semioticity,"⁸⁵ we may also approach it more positively as an opening up of the sphere of technical discourse as a liminal space, in which Sanskrit-Bengal hybridity could help to mediate the gap between the socially privileged language of brāhminical philosophy and the 'mundane' vernacular, perhaps providing an avenue of admission into the elite sphere of the former for marginalised speakers of the later (something which Vivekananda, in his plan for universal education in Sanskrit, seems to have aspired towards). On the practical side, Vivekananda's own experience as a translator of Sanskrit texts, and his oft-expressed frustration with his inability to convey the full meaning of essential Hindu concepts through the medium of English,⁸⁶ was no doubt also instrumental in generating a respect for the indispensability of the Sanskrit, and he praised the intricacy of the

⁸¹ See *ibid.*, 23-5.

⁸² "On Language," *CW*, vol. 5, 259.

⁸³ *Ibid.* The contention that Sanskrit is the most-suitable language from which to draw technical vocabulary would seem to distinguish Vivekananda's position from that of Shyamacharan Sarma Sarkar, who, in 1850, wrote: "The Bengali is a truly noble language, even in its present state, able to convey almost any idea with precision, force and elegance. Words may be compounded with such facility, and to so great an extent that any scientific or technical term of any language may be rendered by an exact equivalent—an advantage which, amongst the dead and living languages of Europe, is possessed by Greek and German" (quoted in Guha, 190). However, it is doubtful whether Sarkar's technical terminology would, in practice, constitute anything more than 'Bangla-ised' Sanskrit compounds.

⁸⁴ Dhar, vol. 1, 287.

⁸⁵ Guha, 174.

⁸⁶ See, for example, *CW*, vol. 1, 219; vol. 2, 245; vol. 3, 301.

language and its philology as a vehicle for philosophical discussion and debate.⁸⁷

Thus, the use of Sanskrit brought prestige, power, and precision to Indian discursive efforts, and its promotion was an integral part of the swami's vision of a strong and united nation.

Throughout the initial lectures he delivered upon returning to Asia from the West, we see an ideology set forth that is to underlie all of Vivekananda's subsequent discussions of India's nationhood—the portrayal of India as the fountainhead of all religion and spirituality, and thus the source of the (materialistic) West's redemption:

This is the theme of Indian life-work, the burden of her eternal songs, the *raison d'être* of her very existence—the spiritualisation of the human race. In this her life-course she has never deviated, whether the Tartar ruled or the Turk, whether the Mogul ruled or the English.⁸⁸

The fact that this collective spiritual identity is actually *modern*, however—a point that would destabilise its authority—is disguised by the conventions of the 'revivalist' nationalist discourse itself, which grounds itself in its appropriation of the imagined past. Vivekananda implies that India can legitimately lay claim to an ahistorical condition of spiritual virginity, the inalienable possession of a rarefied essence unsullied by the harsh reality of imperial subjugation, and beyond the power of colonial desecration. That the swami recognised the potential instrumentality of this idea is suggested by his comments in his Bengali essay "*Prācya O Pāścātya*" ("The East and the West") on India's ostensibly enduring veneration of "spiritual liberation": "Rob [the Hindu] of everything

⁸⁷ "Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life," *CW*, vol. 3, 233.

⁸⁸ "India's Message to the World," *CW*, vol. 4, 315.

he has, kick him, call him a ‘nigger’ or any such name, he does not care much; only keep that one gate of religion free and unmolested.”⁸⁹

Note the implication in these passages, however, that the primordial, undeviating India of which Vivekananda speaks is a *Hindu* India, subject at various periods to ‘foreign’ Muslim and Christian governance, but clinging tenaciously to its indigenous wisdom. We have already seen in the preceding chapters how Vivekananda positions Hinduism as a privileged site of religious hermeneutics. Here, in his more nationalistically oriented writings, we observe his application of these ideas to the Indian people themselves. It would appear that the extent to which adherents of other faith communities are regarded as full participants in this ideological ‘nation’, would depend largely upon their willingness to accept the centrality of Hindu spirituality to the national narrative, and to disavow, for example, an alternative Islam-based classicising of Indian history. As Basu⁹⁰ and Chatterjee⁹¹ have both observed, Vivekananda and many other nationalist thinkers reconciled the concept of a Hinduism-based nation with the reality of the Muslim presence in India by presenting Indian Muslims as a unique, ‘Hinduised’ community, who had absorbed and assimilated Hindu ideals. (The failure of this approach to engage Muslims in way that they themselves found meaningful is made evident in hindsight by the political reality of the Partition.) The resemblance between this rhetorical strategy—which lumps together significant religious and cultural differences into a single homogeneous entity, with an identity that can be objectified and discussed in totalising terms—and the reification that characterises traditional Western

⁸⁹ “The East and the West,” *CW*, vol. 5, 458-9.

⁹⁰ Basu, 126.

⁹¹ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought*, 73-4.

discourses about the Orient, should not be overlooked; in both cases, its effect is to bolster the hegemonic position of the interpreter, silence dissenting voices, and ‘commodify’ the discursive object in a way which permits its deliberate manipulation for a particular goal. For nineteenth-century Hindus, the construction of Muslims as the dissimilar other was a deeply rooted psychological and social reality, and one which was not easily overcome, especially as the entity which had the potential to displace Islam as the ‘new other’, the British Empire, was still too much an object of desired emulation to fulfil that role satisfactorily. In the end, it appears that Muslims are not really among the natural subjects, or intended recipients, of this national story; the “narrative contract,”⁹² in this case, implicitly exists between Vivekananda and his Hindu audience, and it is only with pragmatic but unconvincing effort that he seeks to draw non-Hindus within its boundaries.

The theme of India’s intrinsic ‘missionary’ role in the global context, which reoccurs throughout Vivekananda’s work, provides an interesting counter-discourse to the colonial expansionist and civilizing rhetoric. The profound interpenetration of Christian conceptions of the ‘evangelical imperative’ and the master narratives of imperialist territorial, political and cultural expansion resulted in a pervasive discursive force in Britain’s colonised peripheries, as well as a self-defining narrative of the metropolitan society itself.⁹³ (In America, these perceived prerogatives were formulated into a self-asserted ‘manifest destiny’ of the white, Christian settlers to expand, conquer,

⁹² For more background on this idea of a ‘narrative contract’ between the source and the recipient of national narratives, see Kaviraj, 33.

⁹³ Interestingly, Christian missionaries themselves often voiced complaint that the British government’s official policy of religious non-interference in India was akin to *supporting* Hinduism; see John Marriott, *The Other Empire: Metropolis, India and Progress in the Colonial Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester

and convert.) That Vivekananda's discourse, whether addressed to Western or Indian audiences, was shaped and constrained by these considerations, must be taken into account in understanding his own personified construction of India as a messianic figure. If the West, in its interactions with India, cast itself in the role of moral and material saviour of the benighted,⁹⁴ Vivekananda critically evaluated and appropriated elements of this rhetorical strategy. In an 1896 interview, given to a London reporter, the swami responds to a politically charged question, "Is India finally to conquer her conquerors?" "Yes, in the world of ideas,"⁹⁵ he replies, and draws an implicit analogy between the what he regards as Hindu India's ideological transformation, and cultural assimilation, of its earlier Muslim conquerors, and the like fate that he anticipates for India's present colonial rulers.⁹⁶ He observes with pride that already educated members of the British and Anglo-Indian populace have come to appreciate Indian philosophy.⁹⁷ Thus, an awareness of the vital role of spiritual (rather than *religious*, per se) conquest in Vivekananda's conception of the Indian nation is essential to understanding his reading of Indian history, as well as his vision for India's future relationship with the colonial metropole.

University Press, 2003), 196-7. Some even posited 'Divine wrath' over this failure to explicitly foster Christian proselytism to be the cause of the 1857 Rebellion (see Ballantyne, 45).

⁹⁴ See Michael Mann, "'Torchbearers Upon the Path of Progress': Britain's Ideology of a 'Moral and Material Progress' in India: An Introductory Essay," in *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India*, ed. Harold Fischer-Tine and Michael Mann (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 1-26 passim.

⁹⁵ "India and England," *CW*, vol. 5, 195.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 195-6.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

While, however, Vivekananda is not loath to grant Europe and America their claimed status as materially superior civilisations,⁹⁸ the assertions of moral ascendancy, which are embedded in colonial discourse and were crucial to the justification of foreign rule in India, fail to receive his acquiescence. The West, in Vivekananda's opinion, as we have discussed earlier, has long aimed only at the 'lower', ephemeral good of *dharma* (and its worldly ends), while India sought the higher, eternal goal of *mokṣa*, spiritual liberation.⁹⁹ A nation, he maintains, will direct the essential current of its collective energy to fulfilling its 'national purpose', and that this accounts for the differing areas of strength and development that characterise each society.¹⁰⁰ While England has historically been driven by a desire to acquire and maintain wealth, (Hindu) India seeks spiritual independence above all else, and thus their respective cultures reflect this. If he concedes that Indians can learn much from Western science and technology,¹⁰¹ and even certain 'social graces',¹⁰² it would seem that Europe has little grounds, in Vivekananda's view, for claiming moral supremacy. In "The East and the West," Vivekananda pulls no punches in his analysis of the much-extolled 'civilisation' and 'morality' of the West:

What is the meaning of the 'Progress of Civilisation' which the Europeans boast so much about? The meaning of it is the successful accomplishment of the desired object by the justification of wrong means, i.e. by making the end justify the means. It makes acts of theft, falsehood, and hanging appear proper under certain circumstances; it vindicated Stanley's whipping of the hungry Mohammedan guards who accompanied him, for stealing a few mouthfuls of bread; it guides and justifies the well-known European ethics which says, 'Get out from this place, I want to come in and possess it', the truth of which is borne out by the evidence of history, that

⁹⁸ "The East and the West," *CW*, vol. 5, 474-5.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 446-50.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 457.

¹⁰¹ "The Influence of Indian Spiritual Thought in England," *CW*, vol. 3, 443.

¹⁰² "The East and the West," *CW*, vol. 5, 473-4.

wherever the Europeans have gone, there has followed the extinction of the aboriginal races. In London, this 'progress of civilisation' regards unfaithfulness in conjugal life, and, in Paris, the running away of a man, leaving his wife and children helpless and committing suicide as a mistake and not a crime.¹⁰³

This passage gains significance when it is read not simply as a vehement commentary on Western morality (or the alleged lack thereof), but rather as a deconstruction of colonial discourse. Vivekananda's recognition and acknowledgement of the contradictions and ambivalence embedded in colonial moral rhetoric, and the underlying themes of conquest and exploitation, demonstrate his critical awareness of the ideological milieu in which his nationalistic ideas are articulated. Further, he undercuts the central discursive claims of morality that supported and justified the continuation of British rule in India; while material power gave England the means to rule the land and its people, moral discourses were needed to rationalise, validate and stabilise the colonial project, both in the metropole and in the colonies themselves, regardless of British attempts to inculcate in Indians consequentialist utilitarian rationales for their colonial activities.

Cross-cultural experience, however, led Vivekananda to conclude that these hegemony-sustaining discourses were flawed; as he boldly declares to an audience in the south Indian community of Kumbakonam:

Let me take this opportunity, my countrymen, of telling you that in comparing the different races and nations of the world I have been among, I have come to the conclusion that our people are on the whole the most moral and the most godly, and our institutions are, in their plan and purpose, best suited to make mankind happy.¹⁰⁴

This is not, by any means, to say that Vivekananda was satisfied with the condition of Indian society and its structures as they existed during his time; as we shall see in subsequent chapters, he did criticise such social problems as 'casteism' and the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 531-2.

disempowerment of women frequently, and on many points. However, he conscientiously divorces his own position from that of the ‘social reformers’, whose efforts he brands superficial, and characterises them as an elitist, upper-caste project unable to touch the masses of the Indian public, as they did not spring from the genuine collective will of an educated populace, but from a class with self-centred political interests.¹⁰⁵ True, enduring reform, he asserts, must have its fundamental roots in individual spiritual self-transformation, through which others are inevitably uplifted.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, his views garnered the most attention and interest, at least during his own lifetime, from precisely those of this very elite background.

It is also evident, especially from his Bengali writings, that Vivekananda well understood the duplicity and brutality that undergirded the colonial project, as well as the shifting Indian response thereto, and the potential for deploying diverse strategies of resistance. In the course of his Bengali monograph “*Paribrājak*” (“Memoirs of European Travel”), for instance, he addresses the restrictions instituted by the British government on travel abroad by ‘native’ passengers due to the Calcutta plague in 1898. His style recalls the mocking tenor of the 1900 San Francisco interview, but this time Vivekananda’s words are much more openly sardonic. He contrasts Britain’s earlier policy of discriminating between upper- and lower-class Indians in the matter of required travel documentation, declaring his joy that now *all* Indians are regarded as “natives”:

Maharajas, Rajas, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras—all belong to one and the same class—that of ‘natives’. The law, and the test which applies to coolies, is applicable to all ‘natives’ without distinction. Thanks to you, O English Government, through your grace, for a moment at least I feel myself one with the whole body of

¹⁰⁴ “The Mission of the Vedanta,” *CW*, vol. 3, 195.

¹⁰⁵ “My Plan of Campaign,” *CW*, vol. 3, 216.

¹⁰⁶ “Lessons on Raja-Yoga,” *CW*, vol. 6, 129.

'natives'... Blessings to you, O English Government! You have already become the favoured child of Fortune; may your prosperity increase ever more! We shall be happy once more to wear our loin-cloth and Dhoti—the native dress. Through your grace we shall continue to travel from one end of the country to the other, bare-headed, and barefooted, and heartily eat our habitual food of rice and Dal with our fingers, right in the Indian fashion. Bless the Lord! We had well-nigh been tempted by Anglo-indian fashions and been duped by its glamour. We heard it said that no sooner did we give up our native dress, native religion, and native manners and customs, than the English people would take us on their shoulders and lionise us. And we were about to do so, when smack came the whip of the Englishman and the thud of British boots—and immediately men were seized by a panic and turned away, bidding good-bye to English ways, eager to confess their 'native' birth.

'The English ways we'd copy with such pains,
The British boots did stamp out from our brains!'

Blessed be the English Government! May their throne be firm and their rule permanent.¹⁰⁷

As this passage illustrates, Vivekananda was frequently critical of what he regarded as "cowardly imitation"¹⁰⁸ of the West by Indians, in what he considered a misguided attempt to achieve social parity ("An ass in a lion's skin never makes a lion,"¹⁰⁹ he declared). He perceived the existence of the 'glass ceiling' that prevented Indian advancement under the colonial system, and, further, recognised the ambivalence that Bhabha has identified as inherent in colonialism. The desire on the part of the coloniser for subjects who imitate or mimic British culture, yet the discomfort produced by the very challenge this imitation poses to the difference and inequality that 'must' be maintained between them, is evident in the pithy couplet quoted by Vivekananda. Whereas, in much of his work, he encourages strategic mimicry of Western discourses, here Vivekananda assumes a different approach to colonial resistance. He circumvents, and thus subverts, the attempted colonial hegemony by refusing to 'play the game' of

¹⁰⁷ "Memoirs of European Travel," *CW*, vol. 7, 318-20.

¹⁰⁸ "The Common Bases of Hinduism," *CW*, vol. 3, 381.

colonial imitation altogether, and instead valorises the derogatory category ‘native’ as a marker of Indian solidarity. The inspiration for this form of resistance he somewhat satirically ascribes to the British authorities themselves, suggesting that it is their very imposition of oppressive legislation which is the impetus for this trans-class sense of national camaraderie (which, incidentally, collides with the unspoken ‘divide and conquer’ approach of colonial governance). Given that the text is written in Bengali, it is clear that Vivekananda’s intention in this passage is not to invoke in the colonisers fear of ‘native’ solidarity, but to highlight for his fellow countrypersons the deception implicit in colonial power, and to suggest, in spite of the recent intensification of British control over the movement of Indians, the continuing vulnerability of this authority to subversive destabilisation.

Vivekananda, in his other writing and lectures, takes his argument another step beyond the insinuation that Europe is not morally fit to govern ‘the Orient’, and suggests that India’s rarefied moral and religious position obliges Hindus to assume the duty of spiritual emissaries to the West—a role in which he prominently situated himself. “We Hindus,” he declared to an assembled crowd in Pamban, Tamil Nadu, in 1897,

have now been placed, under God’s providence, in a very critical and responsible position. The nations of the West are coming to us for spiritual help. A great moral obligation rests on the sons of India to fully equip themselves for the work of enlightening the world on the problems of human existence.¹¹⁰

The particular phrasing of the above statement, with ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ transposed, is nearly identical to that used to articulate the basis of the so-called ‘white man’s burden’

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ “Reply to the Address of Welcome at Pamban,” *CW*, vol. 3, 139.

and to justify the civilising mission of the British Empire towards the non-West.¹¹¹

Thus, in these respects, Vivekananda does not attempt to break away from the Western paradigms of 'national destiny' and 'civilising imperative', but, rather, strategically inverts them.

Further, the swami himself acknowledges that, in this project, he is actually utilising the very structures instituted by imperialism. With respect to his second round of preaching efforts in England in 1896, he explained to a British journalist:

It is worth one's while to plant an idea in the heart of this great London, surely the greatest governing machine that has ever been set in motion. I often watch it working, the power and perfection with which the minutest vein is reached, its wonderful system of circulation and distribution. It helps one to realise how great is the Empire and how great its task. And with all the rest, it distributes thought. It would be worth a man's while to place some ideas in the heart of this great machine, so that they might circulate to the remotest part.¹¹²

This very act of speaking to the British press, in fact, may be characterised as an example of just such an infusion into the nucleus of the Empire—in so doing, Vivekananda permits his India-privileging interpretations of religion and civilisation to begin a process of dissemination via the mechanisms (media and communications, in this case) of the imperial 'machine', to a Western audience as well as to members of his own society and culture (where the message is undoubtedly received with an added prestige due to the privileged geo-political site of this enunciation). Recalling Bhabha's assertion of colonialism's inherent instability, we encounter here an incidence of the colonised subject utilising the structures of the colonial power (access to which, ironically, was made

¹¹¹ Consider, for example, the words of nineteenth-century Indian Viceroy, Lord Curzon: "Remember that the Almighty has placed your hand on the greatest of his ploughs... to feel that somewhere among these millions you have left a little justice or happiness or prosperity, a sense of manliness or moral dignity, a spring of patriotism, a dawn of intellectual enlightenment, or a stirring of duty, where it did not before

possible in part by the exotic appeal of his ‘otherness’ to the British public) to destabilise the same via the deployment of counter-imperial discourses.

Nationhood Without a Nation-State

The construction of a national narrative framing India as a civilisation of unwavering religious commitment and a repository of eternal spiritual truth, coupled with the articulation of India’s collective destiny as being that of a world-saviour, made Vivekananda’s nationalistic discourse a powerful and attractive one for Indians of his day. That he did not fully extrapolate these ideas into a call for open political resistance or an independent Indian nation-state should not be grounds for underestimating their appeal and impact on the formation of a ‘national’ consciousness. As has been mentioned earlier, the nationalist movement in India during most of Vivekananda’s lifetime was not yet strongly oriented towards political independence, but rather focussed on schemes for bolstering the country’s position and power via ‘improvement’ of the Indian populace. More importantly, Vivekananda repeatedly and frankly professes a distrust of politics and even goes so far as to assert that such efforts run contrary to the national spirit and purpose of India: “Let others talk of politics, of the glory of acquisition of immense wealth poured in by trade, of the power and spread of commercialism, of the glorious fountain of physical liberty,”¹¹³ he declared to an audience in Ramnad, Tamil Nadu. Continuing, he explains:

But these the Hindu mind does not understand and does not want to understand. Touch him on spirituality, on religion, on God, on the soul, on the Infinite, on

exist. That is enough, that is the Englishman’s justification in India” (quoted in Harold Fischer-Tine and Michael Mann, 25).

¹¹² “India and England,” *CW*, vol. 5, 200-1.

¹¹³ “Reply to the Address of Welcome at Ramnad”, *CW*, vol. 3, 148.

spiritual freedom, and I assure you, the lowest peasant in India is better informed on these subjects than many a so-called philosopher in other lands. I have said, gentlemen, that we have yet something to teach to the world. This is the very reason, the *raison d'être*, that this nation has lived on, in spite of hundreds of years of persecution, in spite of nearly a thousand years of foreign rule and foreign oppression. This nation still lives; the *raison d'être* is it still holds to God, to the treasure-house of religion and spirituality.¹¹⁴

Vivekananda himself was apparently aware that, in making such assertions, the values and priorities he ascribes to the Indian nation are the very same ones upon which modernist and colonial discourses laid the blame for India's 'backwardness'. In his Kumbakonam address, he makes it evident that he is consciously and intentionally 'inverting' Western assessments of India and of Hinduism:

Do you not know how for the last hundred or two hundred years you have been hearing again and again out of the lips of men who ought to have known better, from the mouths of those who pretend at least to know better, that all the arguments they produce against the Indian religion is this—that our religion does not conduce to well-being in this world, that it does not bring gold to us, that it does not make us robbers of nations, that it does not make the strong stand upon the bodies of the weak and feed themselves with the life-blood of the weak. Certainly our religion does not do that. It cannot send cohorts, under whose feet the earth trembles, for the purpose of destruction and pillage and the ruination of races. Therefore they say—what is there in this religion? It does not bring any grist to the grinding mill, any strength to the muscles; what is there is such a religion?

They little dream that that is the very argument with which we prove our religion, because it does not make for this world. Ours is the only true religion because, according to it, this little sense-world of three days' duration is not to be made the end and aim of all, is not to be our great goal.¹¹⁵

It is significant that Vivekananda does not refute the assessment of Indian culture as espousing religion above politics, but maintains that this very fact gives it a pre-eminence on the world stage—as the spiritual quest, for Vivekananda, is the *sine qua non* of human life. This technique of maintaining the essentialist binary typology (West = worldly; Orient = otherworldly) of his colonial critics, yet inverting its value on the basis of

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

traditional Indian ideals (as he perceives them), is one that we have already encountered in relation to other aspects of his discourse. Vivekananda's articulation of what he perceives as India's character and strengths—in which he closely intertwines national and religious themes, as did colonial critics of India and Hinduism—acts as a means for national self-assertion.

There is, however, a definite reluctance on his part to explicitly conflate political nationalistic efforts with religious aspiration, which would seem, from his perspective, to be an act of contaminating the latter with the former. Political matters, characterised by Vivekananda as the sphere of even the common man in the Western world, he holds as too base a preoccupation for Indians.¹¹⁶ It is this aspect of his perspective that makes Vivekananda's 'Hindu nationalism' an ambiguous matter when considered in concrete political terms. No doubt, his conception of the Indian nation was inextricably intertwined with a constructed narrative of the Hindu people and their religious traditions. However, it would be difficult to realistically identify Vivekananda as an explicit advocate of national Independence. This is not to say that he was necessarily a supporter of continuing British rule, merely that he generally maintained taciturn on the subject.¹¹⁷ When asked point-blank by an English interviewer about his views on the emerging Indian National Congress movement, the swami was somewhat reticent, replying, "My work is in another part of the field," though stating that he "wish[ed] it success."¹¹⁸ That

¹¹⁵ "The Mission of the Vedanta," *CW*, vol. 3, 179-80.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, Vivekananda's attribution of widespread political knowledge to the masses in America and Europe, versus religious concern to the Indian populace ("First Public Lecture in the East," *CW*, vol. 3, 107-8).

¹¹⁷ Many post-Independence Indian Hindus have been fond of pointing to Vivekananda's statement, in 1897, that India's only god for the next fifty years should be 'Mother India', to suggest that he had a presentiment of the end of British rule in 1947 (see "The Future of India," *CW*, vol. 3, 300).

¹¹⁸ "India and England," *CW*, vol. 5, 199.

he understood the current colonial political order to be inherently unstable, however, is quite certain. In a Marxist-style critique, he writes in “Modern India” that where

a republican form of government rules the conquered race, there a wide distance is created between the ruling and the ruled; and the most part of that power, which, if employed solely for the well-being of the ruled classes, might have done immense good to them within a short time, is wasted by the government in its attempts and applications to keep the subject race under its entire control.”¹¹⁹

Given his broad perspective on historical forces and the cyclical rise and fall of nations, Vivekananda may perhaps have felt that approaching political changes actually required little active effort on the part of Indians to be brought into being.

Alternatively, to what extent his virtual silence on Indian nationalist agitation may have been primarily a strategic choice is difficult to gauge. It is worth observing that Vivekananda was not subject to the British censure and even legal prosecution that some of his more-vocal nationalist contemporaries encountered, while still managing to help imbue the Indian people with the sense of nationhood which would later be instrumental in achieving an independent India. One the whole, however, we may categorise Vivekananda’s nationalism as a *cultural critique* rather than an outright political project in the narrow sense—a protest against humiliation at the hands of ‘foreigners’ and an assertion of a collective identity, strength and destiny for Indians which countered their pervasive, colonially inculcated sense of alienation and inferiority. At any rate, his appropriation and deployment of the authority to (re-)construct nationalistic discourses on behalf of the Indian people was an important step towards establishing a perception (most vitally, among his compatriots themselves) of Indians’ capacity and entitlement to understand and articulate their own history, ‘spirit’, and destiny.

¹¹⁹ “Modern India,” *CW*, vol. 4, 473-4.

CHAPTER FIVE

ŚYĀMĀ MĀ KI ĀMĀR KĀLO?: RACIAL THINKING AND VIVEKANANDA'S ARYANISM

Nowadays we hear it from the lips of people of all castes in India that they are all full-blooded Aryans—only there is some difference of opinion amongst them about the exact percentage of Aryan blood in their veins, some claiming to have the full measure of it, while others may have one ounce more or less than another—that is all... And it is also reported that they and the English race belong to the same stock—that they are cousins-german to each other, and that they are not “natives”. ... Their religion also is of the same pattern as that of the English! And their forefathers looked just like the English, only living under the tropical sun of India has turned them black! Now come forward with your pretensions, if you dare! “You are all natives,” the [British] Government says. Amongst that mass of black, a shade deeper or lighter cannot be distinguished. The Government says, “They are all natives.”

—Vivekananda, “Memoirs of European Travel,” 1899-1900¹

The concept of ‘race’ appears repeatedly throughout Vivekananda’s work, and is closely interlinked with his ideas of religion and nation, as well as with the themes which will be explored in the chapters that follow. In speaking and writing of ‘race’, the swami displays an extensive acquaintance with Western ethnological thought, and he utilises a number of its important race-based constructs. Given the historical, social and political contexts in which he lived, and the discourses that characterised them, Vivekananda’s inclusion of ‘scientific’ conceptualisations of race in his discussions of human nature,

Note: *Śyāmā Mā Ki Āmār Kālo?*: literally, “Is my Mother Śyāmā (Kālī) really black?”—the title of a famous Hindu devotional song by the Bengali poet Rāmprasād, and which was surely well-known to Vivekananda; Ramakrishna is recorded in the *Kathāmṛta* as singing it himself (*Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda [Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, n.d.], 136).

¹ “Memoirs of European Travel,” *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (CW)*, vol. 7, 318-19.

culture and society is not unusual. However, in his critical engagement of racial ideas, he also incorporates distinctly Hindu themes in ways that set his own work apart from that of Western anthropology and its allied disciplines.

Contemporary Race-Theory

The late nineteenth century found the discursive formation of 'race' at the height of its influence in colonial thought. "The major historical reason for the emergence of the concept of 'race'," as postcolonial scholar Marion O'Callaghan has noted, was to justify "the full onslaught of colonial rule."² Indeed, the invention of race, as Anne McClintock demonstrates in her influential work *Imperial Leather*, was a fundamental constituent of modern Western imperialism and modernity.³ This connection, in fact, has been recognised by scholars since the appearance of Frantz Fanon's pioneering work on the colonial construction of race, *Peau noir, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*) in the 1950s, which examined the social and political factors underlying the formulation and deployment of 'blackness' as a narrative trope.⁴ Race provided a convenient and ostensibly rational basis for the hierarchical classification of human beings and cultural groups, an act upon which the colonialist project depended. It also, just as importantly, provided a justification for the perception of white, middle-and-upper-class superiority in the metropole, and the exercise of domination and control of subaltern minority communities therein.

² Marion O'Callaghan, *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris: Unesco, 1980), 7.

³ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

The invention of the so-called 'science of race' was largely a product of the Enlightenment project, which sought to classify and control nature through human agency. In fact, the notion that humanity could be systematically classified into discrete sets based upon identifiable biological characteristics became a virtually unquestioned tenet in Western discourses—academic, popular and political—and was the subject of much scientific investigation and discussion, particularly throughout the nineteenth century.

As the work of Said, among others, has demonstrated, European racial theory was one of the primary bases upon which ideas of Oriental inadequacy were constructed (and, simultaneously, Anglo-Saxon superiority established).⁵ While earlier indigenous Indian typologies recognised variations in complexion and even character,⁶ race was a distinctively Western social construct, and one that had profound consequences for the way in which India and its inhabitants were conceptualised and dealt with by European powers. (The closest indigenous Indian conceptual equivalent would likely be *jāti*—'caste'—which, while suggesting human divisions based upon shared ancestry, does not possess the particular historical and cultural accretions associated with the term 'race' in European thought.) The prevailing Western racial theories posited not only a clear demarcation in physical qualities between the 'Oriental' and the 'Occidental', but distinctive, inherent, fixed collective mentalities.⁷ The language of contemporary European-authored texts was often blatant in its equation of societal ills with Indian racial features, a fact further highlighted by the ease with which the term 'race' flowed between

⁵ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 206-7.

⁶ See Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave, 2002), 172.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-8.

scientific and popular contexts, altering its intended scope and precision, but rarely its association of particular human populations (race in the broadest sense) with value-laden physical, psychological, and emotional characteristics.

The European conviction in the inextricability of the connection between race and collective cultural character was fed by a number of events during the mid-nineteenth century, particularly the 1857 Indian Rebellion and the 1965 black uprising in Jamaica's Morant Bay, both of which seemed to lend credence to claims that true reform of the minds and character of the 'non-white races' was impossible.⁸ Assertions like that of Scottish missionary William Campbell that "the whole [Indian] race is destitute of that spirit and firmness, and that courageous daring which distinguish their European conquerors,"⁹ were typical of the cavalier deployment of racial rhetoric in the service of maintaining the colonial status quo. The underlying theme of 'survival of the fittest', which characterised the Social Darwinian thought advanced by Spencer and his contemporaries, became transformed, in the colonial context, into 'conquest by the fittest', and is clearly evident such statements. The Oriental's alleged irrationality, otherworldliness, cunning, and other negative qualities were commonly ascribed a racial basis, which, it was claimed, made Asian populations, among others, constitutionally unfit to govern themselves.¹⁰ While this idea of Oriental cultural decline existed long before the advent of Victorian-era (pseudo-)scientific race theories, the attribution of this collective degeneration to racial factors was a more-recent innovation. The fundamental

⁸ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, The New Cambridge History of India, III.4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 52-3.

⁹ Quoted in John Marriott, *The Other Empire: Metropolis, India and Progress in the Colonial Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 187.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52-7.

inferiority of these ‘others’ was confirmed, for proponents of this view, by the anthropometric methods of European ethnographers, who placed great confidence in the association of somatic features with mental and emotional qualities.¹¹ From these conclusions, it was a simple step for colonial authorities to argue that “since the Oriental was a member of a subject race, he had to be subjected”¹²—a convenient justification for an already-existent political desire for territorial expansion, conquest, and control.¹³ (Bhabha pulls no punches in his own analysis of colonial discourse in this respect, forthrightly characterising it as impelled by the desire “to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.”)¹⁴ The racist values of imperialist discourses—particularly the ‘white man’s burden’ to ‘civilise’ the inferior peoples of the world, usually by placing them under colonial government and European control—were thus much in evidence in Britain’s approach to its colonies and their subjugated inhabitants.

As a correlate, the themes of interracial contact, miscegenation, and racial hybridity were fascinating and troubling ones for ethnologists of the period, and the source of much anxiety for many European populations in general. To understand the source and depth of

¹¹ Although Max Müller’s more-idealistic perspectives on Indian history and civilisation are usually not associated by later scholars with this anthropometric approach, generally regarded as the realm of empirical social science, Müller reveals something of his agreement with the same when he states, “The skull, as the shell of the brain, has by many students been supposed to betray something of the spiritual essence of man; and who can doubt that the general features of the skull, if taken in large averages, do correspond to the general features of human character?” (Cited in Inden, 61). This demonstrates the way in which quite-disparate streams of thought could easily coalesce within contemporary racial discourses.

¹² Said, 207.

¹³ Bhabha articulates the implicit circularity of these discourses well when he states: “By ‘knowing’ the native population in these [stereotypical] terms, discriminatory and authoritarian forms of political control are considered appropriate. The colonized population is then deemed to be both the cause and the effect of the system, imprisoned in the circle of interpretation.” See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

this concern, it is helpful to once again invoke Bhabha's notion of ambivalence and the destabilising power invoked through the transgression of boundaries and binaries. The psychological discomfort resulting from this 'unnatural' breach of what was regarded as the absolute difference between Europeans and the 'other',¹⁵ as well as the practical difficulties of situating mixed-race persons in the sharply dichotomised structure of colonial racial thought and practice, helped to make the regulation of interpersonal contact a pressing concern in British colonial thought. Western ethnology was eager to press racial ideology into service to condemn the effects of interracial procreation, asserting that it led to the 'contamination' of bloodlines and thus inevitably to collective racial degeneration. This theme was especially dominant in the context of British discourses on India, as close contact between Britons and 'natives' (even if most commonly occurring within the circumscribed roles of master and servant) raised the spectre of miscegenation in the European consciousness.¹⁶ In fact, even the extended residence of a white Briton within the Indian setting was feared to potentially result in a Lamarckian-type of acquired racial degeneration. (Lord Lytton mocked such 'de-

¹⁵ Consider, for instance, Max Müller's statement: "There is and always has been a mutual antipathy between the white and the black man.... The white man can never completely overcome the old feeling that seems to lurk in his very blood, and makes him recoil from the embrace of his darker neighbor. And even where there is no distinction of color, an analogous feeling, the feeling of race, asserts its influence, as if inherent in human nature" (Max Müller, "Caste," in *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. 2 [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890], 318). Müller attributed the prohibitions on interpersonal interaction between castes in part to this so-called inherent "feeling of race" (ibid).

¹⁶ See E. M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c. 1800-1947* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 181-5. The term 'Anglo-Indian', though originally referring to India-retained Britons, later came to denote the ethnically mixed offspring of (most often) British fathers and Indian mothers. Prior to the construction of the Suez Canal in the nineteenth century, few European women were willing or able to join the growing numbers of male settlers in India, and thus, marriages between British men and Indian women (often Muslims or low-caste Hindus) were tolerated, even encouraged, by the East India Company. As greater numbers of white women joined the male settlers mid-century, however, such mixed unions became increasingly unacceptable, particularly in light of the increasing concern regarding the supposed deleterious effects of miscegenation upon the 'British race'. With these changes, the position of the 'Eurasian' Anglo-Indians within both Hindu Indian and British Indian society experienced a high degree of fluxion, and was often marked by a degree of ambiguity.

Europeanised' persons as "white baboos," a term which conveniently assailed the offenders along racial, national, class, and gender lines simultaneously.)¹⁷ As a result, interactions between British and Indian persons were highly regulated through strict and complex social conventions, official and unofficial behavioural codes, and, in some cases, actual laws, all designed to guard against the European's "going native," as well as to prevent the Indian from overstepping crucial boundaries, the observance of which was incumbent upon the colonial subject.¹⁸

Aryanism: Shared Discourse, Disparate Purposes

Of particular relevance to the question of race in the colonial Indian context is the concept of 'Aryanism', advanced by some of the leading figures of European Orientalism—perhaps most notably, Vivekananda's acquaintance, Max Müller—during the decades leading up to the twentieth century. This theory came to undergird much thinking about India, both by Europeans and by Indians themselves, on topics ranging from focused questions of race and caste to broader issues of religion and nation. The importance of Aryanism to colonial discourses, however, involves not merely its ascription of a particular racial heritage and set of characteristics to Indians, but its instrumental role in providing justification for imperialism through the attribution of racial superiority to the white European. Through the discourse of Aryanism, "Indian was implicated with Britain, somewhat paradoxically, in a common origin, and yet was

¹⁷ H. Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson* (London: John Murray, 1886; reprint, 1903), 44; cited in Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (London: Hurst & Co., 1996), 36.

¹⁸ Bernard S. Cohn has produced an interesting study on the role of clothing in maintaining these distinctions within the colonial Indian context; see his essay, "Cloth, Clothes, and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century," in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 106-62.

fundamentally different.”¹⁹ A vivid illustration of Bhabha’s assertion that colonial representation is marked by an ambivalent vacillation between delight in that which is familiar and fear of that which is unknown,²⁰ ‘Aryan’ discourses were riddled with inherent anomalies and served as liminal sites upon which socio-political power was contested.

The production, dissemination, and deployment of this concept, and its intersections with Western discourses, have been treated in detail by historian Tony Ballantyne in his monograph *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire*. As Ballantyne demonstrates, the Vedic Sanskrit term *ārya* (originally a tribal self-appellation, the meaning of which was expanded and amplified in later Sanskrit usage to denote ‘noble’ or ‘honourable’) was recast by Western scholars as a racial designation, primarily upon the basis of comparative philological analysis of Indian and European languages.²¹ The Aryans were interpellated out of the early Vedic literature as a race of Sanskrit-speaking pastoral nomads who invaded the subcontinent from the northwest in ancient times, violently conquered the indigenous populace, and constituted the common ancestors of both modern Europeans and modern Indians (the latter to varying degrees, depending upon caste-status and/or other supposed racially distinguishing features).

For Europeans who were outside of the limited arena of sympathetic Orientalism, the importance of the establishment of the Aryan narrative in Indian history was not so much the acknowledgement of a shared origin with the Indian people, but rather, a new

¹⁹ Metcalf, 66.

²⁰ For a fuller exposition of this aspect of Bhabha’s theory, see “Bhabha’s hybridity,” in *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. by Peter Childs and Patrick Williams (London: Prentice Hall, 1997), 124-9.

²¹ See Ballantyne, 42-4; also 170-1. As Metcalf observes, William Jones, with whom the theory of a shared Indian-European linguistic heritage originated, was not himself responsible for its transformation into a race-based theory. It was through the work of later scholars, including Müller and others, that the linguistic ‘Aryan’ theory assumed an explicitly racial dimension (Metcalf, 82).

way in which to establish and explain Western superiority. Firstly, it reaffirmed Europe's image of its own denizens' descent from the much-admired ancient Greeks, conceptualising this relationship in terms not simply of cultural transmission, but of (superior) racial inheritance. Also, it gave Europeans intellectually legitimated grounds for drawing a hierarchical dichotomy between themselves and other non-European groups, particularly the 'Semitic' cultures, who, as Said has shown, took the brunt of Orientalist 'Othering', and, consequently, were instrumental figures in the West's construction of its own identity.²² Aryanism provided, as well, a historical precedent for the conquest of India by a 'racially superior' group and the imposition of their 'advanced' civilisation, reducing their vanquished opponents to the status of a subjugated servant-class; and the British, by this time, had little doubt concerning the applicability of this hierarchy to the relationship between themselves and their Indian contemporaries. Further, by asserting that non-European Aryan communities, particularly in India, had degenerated (due to miscegenation, climate, and/or other societal or geographical factors) from a past condition of grandeur, Europeans (who considered themselves the closest heirs of their 'pure' Aryan ancestors) found further justification for maintaining colonial control of India.

That Indians themselves also embraced these accounts of Aryanism with eagerness, however, should not be surprising. "The belief that the white masters were not very distant cousins of their brown Aryan subjects," writes Tapan Raychaudhuri, "provided a much needed salve to the wounded ego of the dependent elite."²³ In explaining the impact

²² See Said, *Orientalism*, 99.

²³ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8.

which this concept of shared ancestry had upon the Indian populace, Ballantyne quotes a Bengali correspondent in an 1874 newspaper article, addressing the reformulated relationship with Europeans: “[Before the Aryan theory] we were niggers.... We now become brethren.”²⁴ It was the hope of many Indians that, as their membership in the ‘Aryan race’ was increasingly recognised, they might come to be considered properly heir to the ‘positive’ racial qualities that Europeans attributed to themselves, while being conceived of as distinct from the other, ‘inferior’ racial groups of the Orient. Elements of the Aryan discourse were critically and selectively adopted by many reformers (most notably Dayananda Saraswati, who made the concept of Aryanism a cornerstone of his *Ārya Samāj* revivalist movement) and utilised in the service of defending Hinduism and fostering a sense of Indian nationhood. These affirmative Orientalist views gave Indians a ‘scientific’ tool of resistance, one which they could use to positively situate themselves with respect to the rest of the global community, and, particularly, their colonial rulers.

However, this idea, while it did provide an affirmative, scientifically sanctioned counterpoint to the existing racial denigration of the Oriental by the West, nevertheless remained within the larger framework of biologically based explanatory ethnographic theories. Thus, most discourses on Aryanism actually left untouched the fundamentally biased racial thinking embedded within the thematic from which the colonial project drew its strength.²⁵ The theory continued to bolster race-based thinking in the context of India, and, in particular, fostered the deepening of the division between those of northern India (who were thought to be primarily Aryan in racial heritage) and south Indians (regarded as of Dravidian—or, at least, of heavily intermixed Aryan-Dravidian—

²⁴ Ballantyne, 44.

²⁵ For a discussion of a selection of the aspects of the Aryan myth which follow, see Ballantyne, 44-55.

ancestry), with the latter considered racially inferior. (Recall that the 'mixing' of races was thought by ethnologists of the time to have a particularly baneful effect on the human constitution.) So, too, did it increase the demarcation and disenfranchisement of India's 'tribal' peoples, who were universally branded non-Aryan. Caste distinctions, particularly between brahmins and non-brahmins, which came to be conceptualised in racial terms, were also impacted by the popularity of the Aryan myth. As well, Aryanism fostered the creation and maintenance of discursive boundaries between indigenous 'Aryan' religio-cultural traditions (i.e., Hinduism and Hindu-offshoot faiths like Buddhism and Jainism) and foreign-birthered 'non-Aryan' ones (particularly Islam), leading to an increasing discursive marginalisation of certain religious communities in India. Further, since the ideology of decline and degeneration was embedded within the work of Müller and other Orientalist exponents of the Aryan theory, the privileging of the 'classical' Hindu tradition and consequent disparagement of 'popular' devotional strands of Hinduism (which included the forms of faith to which the vast majority of Hindu Indians subscribed) were interlinked with the same. The basis that Aryanism came to provide for the construction of a sense of unified Hindu nationhood was also deployed by the British to advance their own constructions of a collective narrative for the colony, which emphasised the supposedly beneficent role of colonialism in 'uplifting' the degenerate Aryan culture of India. India was, in a sense, conceived of as a living representation of Europe's feudal past, a community without change, devoid of history; would not then Europeans, who had themselves climbed out of this state to the heights of the Enlightenment and beyond, be ideal the rulers to guide Indians' own socio-cultural development and improvement? Also, as Metcalf underscores, the distinctions drawn by

the colonial government between ‘martial’ and ‘non-martial’ races, that reshaped the regional composition of India’s military forces (and, thus, altered India’s economic and social structures), were undergirded in part by Aryan/non-Aryan distinctions.²⁶ The resultant regional and caste-based ‘gendering’ of India’s people-groups, as we shall see in later chapters, had profound consequences.

As many of these examples suggest, the production of Aryanism, as with other Orientalist concepts, was dependent upon the simultaneous construction of an other to whom the negative (‘non-Aryan’) qualities could be attributed, and above whom the Aryan could be elevated. In the Indian context, this other was, variously, the south Indian, the indigenous tribal, the non-brahmin, the Muslim, the Hindu *bhakta*, the Bengali, and the ‘effeminate’ male. The contextually flexible nature of the Aryan-concept was thus mobilised to serve a wide range of purposes and agendas, both pro- and anti-colonial.

Vivekananda and Race

Vivekananda, well-read as he was in contemporary Western thought, was quite familiar with the intellectual discourses of the period on the subject of race—in addition to his first-hand experiences of the impact of these as a colonial subject—and he engaged them with the critical interest of a scholar,²⁷. In a number of his discourses and writings, Vivekananda directly addresses questions of racial typologies, as well as the matter of Aryanism specifically.

²⁶ Metcalf, 122-28 passim.

²⁷ See, for instance, Vivekananda’s explanation of the racial typologies of contemporary ethnology in his “Memoirs of European Travel,” *CW*, vol. 7, 364-66.

Vivekananda invokes the language of 'race' frequently, particularly when seeking to classify (or to distinguish between) the forms of culture or religion found among various people-groups. In doing so, he sometimes appears to accept certain racial divisions advanced by Europeans of his day; in other cases, he uses the term to denote what we would today label 'ethnic groups' or something more akin to religiously or linguistically defined communities. This variable usage of race-language was common in nineteenth-century discourse,²⁸ and reflects not only the imprecise and inconsistent nature of racial rhetoric, but illustrates the degree to which racialised thinking and language have uncritically penetrated multiple discursive spheres. We find references in his work, for instance, to the 'Semitic races'²⁹ and the 'Indian races'³⁰; the 'Jewish race'³¹ (or the 'Hebrew race'),³² the 'Hindu race'³³; and, perhaps somewhat tongue-in-cheek, the 'American race'³⁴ and the 'race of the Bengalees'³⁵ (though the last of these groupings is also found in colonial discursive contexts in which a distinction was sought between Bengal's inhabitants and other Indian communities on physiological/racial grounds).³⁶ The 'Aryan races' are likewise acknowledged, which includes, for Vivekananda as for many Orientalists, the 'ancient Germans' and the Scandinavians,³⁷ and, of course, the Indians. While it is true that during the late nineteenth century, 'race' possessed many

²⁸ Note here Jeffrey Cox's explanation that, at the time, "race was sometimes interchangeable with language; at other times it was an off-hand code word for what we would now refer to as 'national character'." See Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818-1940* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 95.

²⁹ "Soul, God and Religion," *CW*, vol. 1, 317.

³⁰ "The Future of India," *CW*, vol. 3, 297.

³¹ "Buddhistic India," *CW*, vol. 3, 512.

³² "The Soul and God," *CW*, vol. 1, 493.

³³ "The Women of India," *CW*, vol. 9, 193.

³⁴ "Address of Welcome Presented at Calcutta and Reply," *CW*, vol. 3, 310.

³⁵ "Letters," *CW*, vol. 6, 240.

³⁶ See Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) 14-16.

³⁷ "The Necessity of Religion," *CW*, vol. 2, 59.

shades of meaning beyond simply biological inheritance,³⁸ the ease with which Vivekananda equates societies and racial groups is illustrative of the ubiquitousness of racialisation as a taxonomic device during the period in question.

Regardless of the particulars of his classifications, the imperialistic idea that a religio-cultural group can be characterised in collective, homogenous, ranked generalities is very much in evidence in Vivekananda's work. Vivekananda often speaks of the growth or degeneration of a race *in toto*,³⁹ as well as of a shared racial nature or aspiration: "Each race... has a peculiar bent, each race has a peculiar *raison d'être*, each race has a peculiar mission to fulfil in the life of the world. Each race has to make its own result, to fulfil its own mission."⁴⁰ Vivekananda further claims that, while the sphere of success of the Occidental has hitherto been the external physical world, Orientals have historically excelled in their "researches of the internal,"⁴¹ i.e., of the spiritual or yogic realm. For example, in his introduction to *Raja-Yoga*, he describes this divergence: "Different races take to different processes of controlling nature. Just as in the same society some individuals want to control the external nature, and others the internal, so, among races, some want to control the external nature, and others the internal."⁴² We have already encountered Vivekananda positing similar distinctions between nations on the basis of collective material/spiritual aspirations; here we find the collusion of racial classifications with national ones, with the suggestion that these can be approached as

³⁸ See Vasant Kaiwar, "The Aryan Model of History: The Politics of Identity in an Age of Revolutions, Colonialism and Nationalism," In *Antinomies of Modernity: Essays on Race, Orient, Nation*, ed. K. Vasant and S. Mazumdar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.

³⁹ See, for example, "The Powers of the Mind," *CW*, vol. 2, 19; "Practical Vedanta: Part 4," *CW*, vol. 2, 352.

⁴⁰ "First Public Lecture in the East," *CW*, vol. 3, 108.

⁴¹ "Cosmology," *CW*, vol. 2, 432.

⁴² "Introductory" (*Raja-Yoga*), *CW*, vol. 1, 133.

trans-historical continuities. As Valsant Kaiwar observes in his essay, “The Aryan Model of History and the Oriental Renaissance,” the racial theories of the period depended upon the reading of history as “the biography of a people,” an approach which “personifies a civilisation, or a nation, and makes it legitimate to look for its beginnings.”⁴³ In this respect, Vivekananda’s human taxonomies clearly owe a debt to the norms of modern Western historiography. Further, as we have seen, Vivekananda’s comparative approach to religions, cultures and societies is permeated by an assumption of the superiority of spiritual concerns over material goals. Thus, in asserting that the sphere of dominance of the ‘Oriental race’ is the former, and the ‘Occidental race’ the latter, there is a clear hierarchy of racial groups implied, even if not explicitly stated. Thus, the purported racial differences between the East and the West are not, as such, refuted (even the colonial theme of the ‘otherworldly’ Orient and the ‘this-worldly’ Occident remains intact), but the evaluation of these groups’ respective collective ‘racial’ characteristics is transformed, and the East thus implicitly elevated. If Victorian-era racial discourses had served to “disqualif[y] the systems of knowledge of a whole race,”⁴⁴ then Vivekananda’s seek to ‘re-qualify’ and, in fact, privilege, the epistemological heritage of the putative ‘Hindu race’.

Racial Ambiguity

In asserting the existence of these types of racial differences, Vivekananda might appear to differ little from many mainstream European theorists of the time—excepting, of course, in his failure to denigrate the Oriental and extol the Occidental thereby.

⁴³ Kaiwar, 16.

⁴⁴ Lahcen E. Ezzaher, *Writing and Cultural Influence* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 11.

However, the perspectives that he expresses on questions of parity between different racial groups are actually riddled with apparent inconsistencies. In the essay “The Ideal of Karma Yoga,” delivered as a lecture in New York in December of 1895 and first published in February of 1896, Vivekananda does seem to adhere closely to the conventional racial ideology of the day. In explaining the motive power of inequality between human beings, he states:

What makes the difference between man and man? It is largely the difference in the brain. Nowadays no one but a lunatic will say that we are all born with the same brain power. We come into the world with unequal endowments; we come as greater men or as lesser men, and there is no getting away from that pre-natally determined condition. The American Indians were in this country for thousands of years, and a few handfuls of your ancestors came to their land. What difference they have caused in the appearance of the country! Why did not the Indians make improvements and build cities, if all were equal? With your ancestors a different sort of brain power came into the land, different bundles of past impressions came, and they worked out and manifested themselves.⁴⁵

Vivekananda’s mention of inherent discrepancies in ‘brain power’ between Euro-Americans and North American aboriginal peoples, it is worth noting here, is highly consistent with the ethnological conclusions of the period, and these statements vividly illustrate the Darwinian themes that permeated mainstream racial discourse.

However, in a London lecture on “Vedanta and Privilege,” likely delivered in late 1896,⁴⁶ the assumption that these collective differences are biologically rooted is critically assessed by Vivekananda—not so much from a scientific perspective, though, as from a religious-cum-empirical one:

The idea that one man is born superior to another has no meaning in the Vedanta; that between two nations one is superior and the other inferior has no meaning whatsoever. Put them in the same circumstances, and see whether the same

⁴⁵ “The Ideal of Karma-Yoga,” *CW*, vol. 1, 114.

⁴⁶ This date, not given in the *Complete Works*, has been posited by Marie Louise Burke; see *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, vol. 4 (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), 384.

intelligence comes out or not. Before that you have no right to say that one nation is superior to another.⁴⁷

This, in contrast to the previous passage, is a significant point of departure from prevailing Western perspectives, which, even when they were couched principally in terms cultural rather than racial, rarely failed to include suggestions of the biological inferiority of certain groups. Note that here Vivekananda does not assume a stance of complete cultural relativism; he does not assert that all societal forms and practices, as such, are morally or practically equivalent, but merely that, at some level, all human beings have an equal share of fundamental human potential. The swami's mention of 'circumstances' suggests an awareness of the crucial role of social, economic and political environments in shaping the 'racial' groups to which he elsewhere refers. This is a departure from the more-common analytic perspectives of the day, which, as we have seen, tended to attribute cultural forms and structures—even political power or subjugation—in large share to inborn racial attributes.

Obviously, the relatively minor differences in the temporal and spatial circumstances of the above-quoted lectures seems unlikely to account for the discrepancies in viewpoint, unless Vivekananda truly perceived such a wide divergence in the racial views of American and British audiences (which, though possible, seems improbable) and aimed to accommodate each respectively. Perhaps race, in Vivekananda's discourse, is best treated as a site of some degree of truly irreconcilable anomaly (assuming the accuracy of the lecture transcriptions, of course), and as an example of the way in which Vivekananda could occasionally shift theoretical and conceptual standpoints to suit his purposes—as was so often also the case with the

⁴⁷ "Vedanta and Privilege," *CW*, vol. 1, 423-4.

pragmatically driven incongruities embedded within the colonial discourses to which he was responding. It is worth noting also that in neither case above does Vivekananda's language acknowledge the limitedness or incompleteness of the perspectives expressed, but frames a hegemonic position ("no one but a lunatic will say..."; "you have no right to say that...") without space for contending voices. In this respect, he is actually (though perhaps unconsciously) appropriating the totalising rhetorical strategy of colonialism that, despite the internal contradictions in its assertions, fails to legitimate any avenues for critique of, or dissent from, its own authority.⁴⁸

As these passages suggest but do not directly express, Vivekananda, like many other Hindus, accepts the tenet of karmic inheritance and its influence on shaping the individual's capacity ("Our Karma determines what we deserve and what we can assimilate," he maintains),⁴⁹ and he adheres to a conventional Advaitic perspective in his assertion that these differences are a question of *degree of manifestation*, not truly inherent limitations—as the 'Self' of each being is ultimately identical with *brahman*.⁵⁰ In order to situate this aspect of his perspective with the above statements on human dis/parity, we would do well to recall Vivekananda's statements about the characteristic and unique destinies of races/nations, as well as his 'quality'-based (*gaunika*) typology of human nature. To say that human beings are *equal* is not to say that they are the *same* (except in the highest Advaitic reading); the fact that areas of personal, cultural, or racial competence may vary does not, for Vivekananda, itself negate the notion of ultimate

⁴⁸ Consider in this regard the observations of Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatabi who asserts that a thought not conscious of its own limitations "is always elaborated to dominate" and, more pointedly, "is a thought of ethnocide" (quoted in Ezzaher, 2).

⁴⁹ "Karma in its Effect on Character" (*Karma-Yoga*), *CW*, vol. 1, 31.

⁵⁰ See "Vedanta and Privilege," *CW*, vol. 1, 423-4.

spiritual equality, or even, necessarily, the complementarity of groups' relative strengths and weaknesses. As the swami asserts elsewhere, the "differences between beings" are, from the Advaitin standpoint, "fictions and monstrosities";⁵¹ i.e., they belong solely to the realm of *māyā*. While this understanding does not fully reconcile the perspectives expressed above (for, in both cases, Vivekananda is speaking of matters pertaining to existence in *samsāra*, the 'worldly realm', not to unconditioned Reality), it does demonstrate his conviction that human beings (indeed, all beings) are, in the final (Advaitic) analysis, not spirituality disparate, regardless of differences in culture or religion. That nineteenth-century imperial Europeans would be prepared to make the same assertion is decidedly less likely.

Miscegenation and Social Darwinism

In keeping with the concerns typical of the period, Vivekananda's views on the consequences of 'race-mixing' are a significant component of his racial perspective. In a lecture on "Buddhistic India," delivered in California in 1900, Vivekananda alleges that one of the causes of the downfall of the Indian people (a phenomenon whose authenticity is taken for granted in his nationalistic discourse, as we have seen) was the intermarriage between "unmixable races."⁵² Vivekananda, in the course of the above-cited lecture, is careful to refute the idea that, in claiming the ill-advised nature of racial mixing, he is suggesting inherent racial inequality;⁵³ however, he maintains that "we know that if

⁵¹ "What We Believe In," *CW*, vol. 4, 358.

⁵² "Buddhistic India," *CW*, vol. 3, 534.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

certain races mix up, they become degraded.”⁵⁴ It is likely that his American audience would have required little convincing on this point, given the tenets of prevailing racial discourses. Likely, he himself also took this as something of a proven fact on the basis of established ethnological research. But, interestingly, Vivekananda introduces a unique element into the discussion, in his assertion that the degradation that was thought to necessarily result from this type of interbreeding is but temporary, and “hundreds and hundreds years after, out of this mixture will come a gigantic race once more, stronger than ever.”⁵⁵ Exactly how this dialectic mechanism of the delayed fruition of racial synthesis would function is not clear; at any rate, it sets his perspective apart from the mainstream of European racial thought (though obviously appropriating the dialectical thematic from Hegelian historiography), which held long-distant miscegenation responsible for India’s present condition of ‘weakness’, through the dilution and pollution of its ‘Aryan’ heritage.

Interestingly, although this position seems to stand in stark opposition to the logic of prevailing European racial discourses, it does, in fact, expose a particularly vulnerable contradiction within popular Western theories of race. While the British were quick to condemn racial hybridity in the case of the ‘inferior’ peoples of its colonial possessions—especially any suggestion of admixture between these groups and the ‘pure-blooded’ Anglo-Saxon ‘Aryans’—as Metcalf has astutely noted, Britons simultaneously “took pride... in the mixture of racial strains from across northern Europe which were supposed

⁵⁴ Ibid. (Vivekananda here illustrates this principle with the example of white Americans interbreeding with “Negroes” and “American Indians.”)

⁵⁵ Ibid.

to have given the British themselves their exceptional vitality.”⁵⁶ Given

Vivekananda’s passionate and sustained interest in European history since his youth, we can feel fairly certain the swami was aware of British narratives of their own ethnic origins. If this was the case in the British experience, his claims can be read as implying, why should it not hold true universally?

Vivekananda’s perspective also ruptures in a more-general way the complicity between racial/ethnic ‘purity’ and cultural superiority characteristic of colonial discourse; according to his interpretation of human evolutionary history, those groups in whose heritage racial fusion figures prominently—such as Indians, according to the predominant Western view—correspondingly have the greatest potential for a phoenix-like emergence from a degenerate condition which is but temporary. Considering that, by the late nineteenth century, race had come to be construed as a central and fixed factor in the determination of a community’s (and an individual’s) culture, socio-political orientation, religiosity, and psychology, Vivekananda’s hope of a forthcoming cultural resurrection of India’s ‘debased’ Aryans provides an avenue of discursive resistance to the Victorian conviction in the inescapability of race. As we shall see, his interpretation also meshes very favourably with his views on Indian racial history and destiny.

Vivekananda displays a critical awareness of the competitive assumptions typical of Social Darwinism, part and parcel of nineteenth-century racial thinking. According to the swami, Western attempts to describe the advancement of human civilisation in terms of competition and ‘survival of the fittest’ seem at the least flawed and inadequate, if not an outright tool of human subjugation:

⁵⁶ Metcalf, 85.

Suppose human knowledge to have advanced so much as to eliminate competition, both from the function of acquiring physical sustenance and of acquiring a mate. Then, according to the moderns, human progress will stop and the race will die. The result of this theory is to furnish every oppressor with an argument to calm the qualms of conscience. Men are not lacking, who, posing as philosophers, want to kill out all wicked and incompetent persons (they are, of course, the only judges of competency) and thus preserve the human race!⁵⁷

In this case, Vivekananda's words indicate a very astute awareness of the eugenic associations and even genocidal potential of colonial racial discourse, and of its power-driven underpinnings.

Against this Darwinian theory, however, he juxtaposes another perspective, this one attributed to a Hindu source—"the great ancient evolutionist, Patañjali"⁵⁸—to whom he ascribes the view that "the true secret of evolution is the manifestation of the perfection which is already in every being.... These [civilisational] struggles and competitions are but the results of our ignorance, because we do not know the proper way to unlock the gate and let the water in."⁵⁹ This simple statement actually intimates a profound contention on Vivekananda's part—that the "struggles and competitions" undertaken by the Western nations (not the least those embarked upon under the banner of colonial expansionism) and upheld by the same as the mark of cultural advancement are entirely erroneous. Rather, it is the race of the "mild Hindu,"⁶⁰ adhering to the ancient 'Yogic' quest for spiritual realisation, who understands the real engine of societal evolution—the very same 'otherworldly Oriental' over whom the West sought dominion by means of material and martial power. This interpretation of the evolution of global civilisation is in harmony with his view, expressed elsewhere, that "the mainspring of the strength of

⁵⁷ "Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms," *CW*, vol. 1, 292.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ "First Public Lecture in the East," *CW*, vol. 3, 105.

every race lies in its spirituality, and the death of that race begins the day that spirituality wanes and materialism gains ground.”⁶¹ The ‘survival of the fittest’ perhaps—but in Vivekananda’s oppositional discourse, the criteria by which the ‘fittest’ is ascertained are not those of the modern colonial West, but of the ‘spiritual’ East.

Rereading Aryanism

We would expect Vivekananda to demonstrate a greater affinity for the popular (and, at least superficially, more-heartening) discourse of Aryanism, and indeed this seems to be the case, at least at first glance. Basu has noted, however, that Vivekananda’s interpretation of Aryanism differs in a number of ways from the prevailing views of both Hindu Indians and European Orientalists.⁶² The presence of the ‘Aryan race’ in India (in times both ancient and modern) is affirmed by Vivekananda, and the term ‘Aryan’ is utilised without gloss through much of his work to denote the Indian (more particularly, Hindu) people, particularly to emphasise their connection with an ancient racial and cultural heritage; he thus is fond of applying the phrase “children of the Aryans”⁶³ to contemporary Hindus. (Here, he, like other interpreters of the period, explicitly excludes India’s aboriginal peoples from the ‘Aryan’ designation.)⁶⁴

As he explained to a London class in 1896 in a lecture entitled “History of the Aryan Race,” the foundation of the Aryan-race theory was philological, and it remained a problematic entity, marred by some unresolved questions, especially with respect to the reconciliation of the differing physical features of the modern Indian and European

⁶¹ “The Necessity of Religion,” *CW*, vol. 2, 65.

⁶² See Basu, 111-17.

⁶³ “The Common Bases of Hinduism,” *CW*, vol. 3, 368; “The Vedanta,” *CW*, vol. 3, 428.

⁶⁴ “The Women of India,” *CW*, vol. 3, 507.

‘Aryans’.⁶⁵ (An article in the *Detroit Free Press*, covering one of his local public lectures in 1894, claims Vivekananda asserted that it required merely “five generations” of dwelling in the “scorching sun” to transform fair-complexioned Aryans into “the bronzed hue of the Hindu of India.”⁶⁶ Though some Victorian-era race-theorists did hold such Lamarckian views, the reliability of the paper’s account appears doubtful—unless the swami made this claim in a satirical vein, as he was often wont to do—seeming to contradict Vivekananda’s statements elsewhere which suggest he attributed differing complexions to racial admixture.)⁶⁷

However, Vivekananda was very conscious of the implications of internal racial division among Indians (northern versus southern, particularly) that conventional Western interpretations of the theory had fostered. He refutes the theory, advanced on linguistic and orthogenetic grounds, that the northern Indians were of Aryan ancestry, and southerners (excepting south Indian brahmins) of Dravidian stock. “The whole of India,” he declared before a Madras audience in 1897, “is Aryan, nothing else.”⁶⁸ This should not, however, be misread as an assertion that Vivekananda believed Indians to be “racially pure” in the Western ethnographic sense, for, as he explains in a 1901 article he penned for *Prabuddha Bharata* entitled “Aryans and Tamilians”: “This Aryan race [is] itself a mixture of two great races, Sanskrit-speaking and Tamil-speaking.”⁶⁹ This was

⁶⁵ “History of the Aryan Race,” *CW*, vol. 9, 251.

⁶⁶ “The Women of India,” *CW*, vol. 3, 507.

⁶⁷ “It is not a generally accepted theory in the West that a warm country produces dark complexion and a cold country white complexion. Many are of opinion that the existing shades between black and white have been the outcome of a fusion of races” (“Memoirs of European Travel,” *CW*, vol. 7, 366). The *Detroit Free Press* statement thus makes little sense, unless Vivekananda does not himself agree with the standard Western ethnological view which he expresses here, or if his view changed between the 1894 Detroit lecture and the composition of his “Memoirs” from 1899-1900.

⁶⁸ “The Future of India,” *CW*, vol. 3, 292.

⁶⁹ “Aryans and Tamilians,” *CW*, vol. 4, 301.

not an entirely novel theory, and Vivekananda openly acknowledges his debt to (or, at least, his partial agreement with) D. Savariroyan, a Hindu *paṇḍit* of the same era who, some time back, had published a paper on Indian racial theories; Savariroyan argued that the ancient Tamilians were of ‘Accado-Sumerian’ race, and had intermixed with the northern Aryan Sanskrit-speakers.⁷⁰ That these assertions were embedded within a highly politicised debate over Indian regional racial differences is evident, and that, in articulating them, Vivekananda was himself aware of their consequences for national unity, is quite certain from the strategic rhetoric that he deploys in this article.⁷¹

If the swami concurred with certain elements of the discourse of Aryanism, the brutality implicit within the widely accepted Aryan-invasion narrative was not among these. The *R̥g Veda*’s portrayal of embattled communities of *āryas* and *dasyus* (translated by Indologists into definitive racial groupings: Indo-European Aryans and indigenous Dravidians, respectively)⁷² was used as a basis for the Orientalist construction of Indian history as originating in an incursion and conquest of indigenous Indians by incoming Aryans (a model which conveniently provided a ‘pre-capitulation’ of British ‘Aryan’ subjugation of the modern-day Indian populace). Vivekananda, in “*Prācyā O Pāścātya*,” harshly condemns the prevailing view that Aryan peoples invaded the subcontinent and forcibly slaughtered and enslaved India’s indigenous peoples.⁷³ In doing so, he plainly interrogates and destabilises the imperialistic mindset which he perceives as underlying

⁷⁰ Ibid.; See also Basu, 114.

⁷¹ See Basu, 114-5.

⁷² Ballantyne, 170-72.

⁷³ “The East and the West,” *CW*, vol. 5, 534-36.

this theory: “Whenever the Europeans find an opportunity, they exterminate the aborigines and settle down in ease and comfort on their lands,”⁷⁴ states Vivekananda,

and therefore they think the Aryans must have done the same! The Westerners would be considered wretched vagabonds if they lived in their native homes depending wholly on their own internal resources, and so they have to run wildly about the world seeking how they can feed upon the fat of the land of others by spoliation and slaughter; and therefore they conclude the Aryans must have done the same! But where is your proof? Guess-work? Then keep your fanciful guesses to yourselves!⁷⁵

In arguing for an alternative perspective, he appeals to central Hindu textual sources, particularly the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as contradicting the *Veda*-based Orientalist interpretation.⁷⁶

The invasion-narrative of Western scholars clashed with Vivekananda’s (re)vision of India as a fundamentally peaceful, spiritual and inclusivist society, in which incoming religio-cultural groups (be they Aryans, Jews, Christians, Parsees, or Muslims) were incorporated into the existing ‘warp and woof’ of Indian society.⁷⁷ According to Vivekananda, the newly arrived Aryans’ approach to India’s aboriginal peoples was to integrate the latter into the *varṇāśrama* system, with the aim of “rais[ing them] all up to their own level.”⁷⁸ He frames the task that faced the ancient Indians as “a question of Aryanising the other types that were pressing for admission and thus, out of different elements, making a huge Aryan body”⁷⁹—a mission in which, he asserts, the early Buddhistic kingdoms were particularly successful, at least initially.⁸⁰ Interestingly, Vivekananda’s attribution to Aryan India the task of assimilating and homogenising

⁷⁴ Ibid., 535.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 535-6.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 536.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 537.

⁷⁹ “Historical Evolution of India,” *CW*, vol. 6, 164.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

diverse and 'less-developed' societies mirrors the expansionist and 'civilising' rhetoric of European colonialism.

We have alluded above to Vivekananda's conclusion that modern-day Indians (both northern and southern), though of mixed racial heritage, rightly bear the name 'Aryans'. In a broader sense, however, Vivekananda positions racial considerations as secondary in his application of the term. Throughout his work, 'Aryan' is utilised first and foremost as a religio-cultural designation, and he equates the true import of the term with the Sanskrit word *ārya*. This appellation—which, as he notes, may be rendered as 'noble' according to conventional Sanskrit usage⁸¹—he claims properly denotes "*only* the multitude we now call Hindus" (italics added),⁸² and, by inference, not the web of non-Indian ethnic and cultural communities (including Europeans) which Orientalists subsumed under the category Aryan. Vivekananda appeals to the antiquity of the usage of the term in Indian thought, and on this ground gives the conventional Sanskrit meaning, as he understands it, primacy:

Let the Pundits fight among themselves; it is the Hindus who have all along called themselves Aryas. Whether of pure or mixed blood, the Hindus are Aryas; there it rests. If the Europeans do not like us, Aryas, because we are dark, let them take another name for themselves—what is that to us?⁸³

Here, Arya(n) becomes a *cultural* marker for the Hindu-Indian people, rather than a racial designation per se, and one which actually excludes Europeans, supposedly the 'model' Aryans, from membership in the category altogether. (Where this strategy locates India's 'Hinduised' Muslims is not clear.) This act of semiotic reclamation by Vivekananda appears to express his deep frustration with the increasing repositioning of the

⁸¹ "Aryans and Tamilians," *CW*, vol. 4, 296.

⁸² *Ibid*, 301.

⁸³ "The East and the West," *CW*, vol. 5, 466.

hermeneutical locus for all things Indian in European hands. Most importantly, by reappropriating Aryan as a marker of cultural identity for Hindus, Vivekananda restores a coherent image of the collective national/religious self to the dislocated colonial Indian subject.

Beyond cultural signification, however, Vivekananda also invokes ‘Aryan’ as a sign that indicates an elevated, if somewhat imprecise, religio-ethical standard. An Aryan, as he explained to a Massachusetts audience in 1894, “is a man whose birth is through religion”,⁸⁴ that is to say, one who is the child of a mother who had made herself “pure and holy” through prayer and spiritual discipline.⁸⁵ Again, he stated before a crowd in Lahore in 1897 that a person “whose very conception and whose death is according to the rules of the Vedas, such is an Aryan.”⁸⁶ In support of his view, he offers his own reading of Manu’s dicta, contending on the basis of this ancient authority that “a child who is born of lust is not an Aryan.”⁸⁷ Vivekananda laments what he believes to be the ever-decreasing numbers of such morally upright persons in the present *kaliyuga*, and advises members of society to once again “take up the principle [of ‘Aryan’ living] and work it out better.... Work it out afresh and make a re-formed application.”⁸⁸ (Implicit within this statement is the assumption that modern society is capable of paralleling the imagined past, and thus that “history could act as a great counsellor in matters concerning the present.”)⁸⁹ Thus, in Vivekananda’s discourse, ‘Aryan’ is also assigned an ethical meaning—which, though perhaps not entirely confined by the boundaries of ethnic origin

⁸⁴ “The Women of India,” *CW*, vol. 9, 203.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ “The Vedanta,” *CW*, vol. 3, 409.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Basu, 53.

or sectarian adherence (with respect to the Lahore example, recall Vivekananda's flexible understanding of 'the Vedas', as discussed in Chapter Three), is inevitably interconnected with the Hindu-Indian cultural and religious heritage, and the brāhmaṇical textual tradition.

By thus shifting the explicit denotation of the discourse of Aryanism from the biological/racial to the religious/cultural/ethical, Vivekananda exempts himself from the bonds of European racial and philological theories, thereby freeing himself to assume a hermeneutical prerogative at least somewhat independent of the imperialist construction of the Aryan and, in a broader sense, of the constraints of biological determinism. This allows him to employ the term with a degree of ambiguity that appears to be intentional, permitting him to shift between European and Indian discourses as the circumstances warrant. As far as the question of assenting to any definitive ethnological interpretation is concerned, he appears to understand something of the complexity of the competing theories and their evidence, and perhaps even is intentionally reluctant to commit to a perspective whose veracity he realises to be vulnerable.⁹⁰ As well, by transferring the focus from race to cultural heritage and moral character, Vivekananda becomes able to make affirmative statements about, for example, the heart of Aryan religious life,⁹¹ the Aryan's peace-loving nature,⁹² or even the elegance of Aryan dress,⁹³ while remaining relatively unfettered by European correlations of race and socio-cultural forms. Yet, his appropriation of the discourse of Aryanism still permits him to use, to his advantage, the

⁹⁰ For example, Vivekananda himself notes that "Pandit Savariroyan is walking over rather insecure ground, [and] we differ from many of his sweeping explanations of Vedic names and races" ("Aryans and Tamilians," *CW*, vol. 4, 301).

⁹¹ "The Ramakrishna Home of Service Varanasi: An Appeal," *CW*, vol. 5, 437.

⁹² "The East and the West," *CW*, vol. 5, 534.

⁹³ "Conversations and Dialogues: IX [Shri Priya Nath Sinha]," *CW*, vol. 5, 374.

positive connotations of 'superiority' which the terminology had acquired through its use as a racial self-appellation in European circles. Western racial discourses were responsible for imbuing 'Aryan' with a privileged status; Vivekananda accepts this status as legitimate, but alters both its justification and its import to advocate a 'revival' of ostensibly ancient Hindu religious and cultural values, and, ultimately, to fortify the then-nascent sense of Indian nationhood.

CHAPTER SIX

CASTE: FROM RACIAL HIERARCHY TO SPIRITUAL TYPOGRAPHY

Once [in America] I was burning with hunger, and went into a restaurant, and asked for a particular thing, whereupon the man said, "We do not stock it." "Why, it is there." "Well, my good man, in plain language it means there is no place here for you to sit and take your meal." "And why?" "Because nobody will eat at the same table with you, for he will be outcasted." Then America began to look agreeable to me, somewhat like my own caste-ridden country.

—Vivekananda, "Memoirs of European Travel," 1899-1900¹

The ambiguous construct 'caste' stands as one of the crucial concepts within the history of identity formation in late-nineteenth-century India. This is not due, per se, to its centrality as a sociological entity in the historical Indian context; indeed, Robert Inden has posited convincingly that Orientalists' traditional identification of caste as "the defining institution of India" from Vedic times onward is historically inaccurate, politically stimulated, and hegemonic.² Rather, it owes its import more to the power, structures, and values embodied and transmitted by caste-discourses, both European and Indian, and to the term's widespread employment in nineteenth-century India as a trope—signifying, variously, religious identity, esteemed tradition, collective racial heritage, and cultural stagnation, among other shades of meaning. For India's colonial rulers, caste was much more than simply a curious phenomenon of academic interest

¹ "Memoirs of European Travel," *CW*, vol. 7, 320.

² Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 74.

existing in one of their peripheries. It was, in fact, a matter of the highest political concern, to the understanding and representation of which was devoted extensive effort and resources. As well, for many Western observers and, especially, a large share of Christian adherents (particularly missionaries), caste was conceptualised most often as a moral evil, and a barrier to the civilising and Christianising of India's 'heathens'.³ Thus, it was necessarily an important concept for those nineteenth-century Hindus, including Vivekananda, who were actively involved in the articulation of their own faith and traditions in the public sphere. These various intersecting discourses made caste an important and contested site of Indian identity during Vivekananda's time.

Theorising Caste in Colonial Terms

It was clear to the officials of the British Raj that considerations of 'caste'⁴—the term was often problematically used in colonial discourse to refer to *varṇa* and/or *jāti* in an indeterminate, and even undifferentiated, manner⁵—were of great significance in comprehending and regulating Indians and their patterns of religious, occupational, and interpersonal behaviour.⁶ (In fact, the very introduction of a vague foreign term like 'caste' as the site for discursive struggle over multiple systems of social stratification,

³ Though, as is well known, many Indian Christian communities long maintained quite-rigid caste distinctions in spite of foreign Christian objections thereto.

⁴ The term *caste* itself is, of course, not indigenous to India, but rather has its origins in a Portuguese label, *casta*.

⁵ Max Müller himself recognised this, stating that "[Indians] use, indeed, different words for what we promiscuously call caste," including not only *varṇa* and *jāti*, but also allied concepts like *kula* ('family') and *gotra* ('clan'). (See Müller, "Caste," In *Chips from a German Workshop*, vol. 2 [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890], 297.) Further, as John Marriott has indicated, in some circumstances "the term caste was used interchangeably with race, sect, tribe and even nation to denote a population seen to possess common traits." (Marriott, *The Other Empire: Metropolis, India and Progress in the Colonial Imagination* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003], 206.)

⁶ One early and interesting example of this was Sir William Jones' inability to find a brahmin *pandit* willing to teach Sanskrit to, and thus accept payment from, an 'unclean' *mleccha* like himself; he

thus conceptually displacing the debate from its indigenous milieu into a European space, demonstrates the way in which colonial authority utilised the ‘power to name’ as a strategy for control.) The purported evils ascribed at least in part to ‘casteism’, such as untouchability, pre-pubescent marriage, mistreatment of widows, *sati*, and brāhmanical privilege, were also matters of concern, as they appeared to thwart the Empire’s attempts to ‘civilise’ India and its inhabitants. In particular, the British authorities stationed in India, who were anxious about the possible threat to their power and hegemony posed by those Indians who “appeared by their nature to wander beyond the boundaries of settled civil society,”⁷ devoted much effort to developing methods of identifying and cataloguing what they termed “criminal tribes and castes.”⁸ Thus, they sought to utilise a knowledge of caste as one of the tools by which potential ‘anti-social’ (in actuality, often anti-colonial) elements could be distinguished amongst the fearfully inscrutable Indian masses, and placed under special surveillance as a safeguard against activities which might destabilise the mechanisms of British governance.

Although opinions differed on some particulars, most British authorities seemed to concur that the deeply rooted caste divisions in Indian society posed not merely an obstacle to the material improvement and legal discipline of Indian society (along modern Western lines, of course), but, more particularly, acted as a barrier to the colonisers’ ability to inculcate European patterns of thought and behaviour in their Indian subjects. However, as the British Crown had proclaimed in 1858 a guarantee of non-interference in

eventually settled for a *vaidya* (Ayurvedic physician) who was competent in the language. See Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire* (Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave, 2002), 23.

⁷ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

Indian religious life, they faced a quandary: Were caste-based divisions and practices really an integral part of the ‘Hindoo religion’? Or were they simply a social convention that could be ignored or dispensed with, through legal measures if necessary? (The very notion that it was indeed possible to draw clear lines of demarcation between ‘religious’ and ‘social’ practices in India itself speaks volumes about the secularisation of public life that characterised post-Enlightenment Europe.)

To determine the precise nature of the relationship between caste and religion, colonial authorities turned to their ‘Company Orientalists’, scholars in Indian culture, languages, customs, and law, trained under the auspices of the British government. In addition, they supported and utilised the work of many leading academic Indologists⁹—including, as discussed in previous chapters, Max Müller, one of the most influential figures in nineteenth-century Oriental studies. Although Müller’s work built upon a well-established tradition of scholarship on India, a significant share of the ideas which came to characterise ‘mainstream’ Orientalist discourse during the period—including those regarding caste, and its relation to race, religion, and nation—found their most comprehensive and authoritative exposition in his work, which was more widely disseminated (in Europe and America, and in India itself) than was that of most prior Indologists. Also, his scholarship is particularly important from the perspective of the history of ideas, on account of the fact that Müller straddled the vague and shifting boundary between scientific/empiricist and Romantic/idealist interpreters of India.¹⁰ Thus, his writings provide a valuable index of the central themes from both of these

⁹ Ballantyne has provided an excellent summary of the relationship between Orientalist scholarship and British colonial governance. See Ballantyne, 18-55 passim.

¹⁰ Inden, 67.

ideological camps in European discourses on *varṇa* and *jāti* during the period under consideration. In particular, his 1853 essay, “Caste,” to which we shall refer below, which was originally written primarily for the edification of members of the Indian Civil Service and allied India-resident British audiences, contains a systematic and influential elucidation of contemporary caste-theory.

The Racialisation of Caste

As has been intimated in our earlier discussions of race, caste, particularly in the sense of *varṇa*, was theorised by Western scholars (and, subsequently, by many Indian thinkers) to be principally a social reformulation of ancient racial distinctions. Drawing upon philologists’ interpretations of the dual meaning of the Sanskrit word *varṇa* (‘class’ and ‘colour’) as evidence, Orientalists posited that the fourfold *varṇa*-schemata depicted in the *R̥g Veda*’s *Puruṣa Sūkta*¹¹ actually had its origins in a derma-chromatic hierarchy.¹² With this interlinkage of caste and colour firmly established on the basis of Western philologists’ self-asserted hermeneutical authority, Orientalists did not hesitate to extrapolate one level further, drawing connections between skin tone and racial composition, thus coalescing the speculative Aryan-invasion theory (with its Aryans-versus-Dravidians martial narrative) with the reality of the societal divisions existent in the modern Indian context. Measurements of ‘cephalic indexes’ and other anthropometric

¹¹ According to this well-known Vedic account, the four *varṇas* had their origins in the sacrificial dismemberment of a primordial cosmic man (*puruṣa*), out of whose parts the various *varṇas* were created. This account, coming as it does from a brāhmanical text, naturally presents a strongly hierarchical view of caste origins, with *brāhmaṇas* springing from the mouth of the *puruṣa*, *kṣatriyas* from the arms, *vaiśyas* from the thighs, and *sūdras* from the feet.

¹² Müller, 320-21. We should note here that more recently, many scholars, such as German Indologist D. Bernstorff, have argued that the ‘colours’ referenced by *varṇa* are actually those that are traditionally coupled in Hindu thought with each of the four directions, and thus with the positions of ‘caste-members’

methods were widely employed by ethnologists during this period (and, in fact, well into the twentieth century) to determine so-called ‘racial affinities’ among and between various *jātis* and *varṇas*, which, combined with Orientalist research into the socio-religious customs and practices of each group, allowed for the construction of a supposedly definitive caste hierarchy.¹³ The British approach to caste, in fact, illustrates vividly the Victorian drive to understand and control the world through knowledge, in the form of probing investigation and meticulous classification. It was widely believed at the time that if these diverse features of the subcontinent’s human geography could be coherently and comprehensively systematised, India could be ‘known’ and managed.

In particular, the conflation of ‘brahmin’ (*brāhmaṇa*) *varṇa*-status and relatively ‘untainted’ Aryan racial-origins is encountered throughout nineteenth-century ethnological literature on India. Onto this basis was grafted the idea of a ‘natural’ threefold division of society—often theorised as transcultural—into (1) a ‘priestly’ class, (2) martial rulers, and (3) a plebeian majority who provide the economic base, thus accounting for the *brāhmaṇa-kṣatriya-vaiśya* divisions among the *dvija* (‘twice-born’) *varṇas*.¹⁴ The brahmins, while increasingly struggling throughout India’s history for privilege and influence, according to Müller, “never aspired to royal power,”¹⁵ leaving this to the *kṣatriyas*; instead the former sought (and gradually acquired) the position of religious authorities. Those ‘non-Aryan’ aboriginals who acquiesced to the claimed status

during Vedic ritual performances. (Cited by Klaus Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 2nd ed. [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994], 334.)

¹³ See, for example, G. S. Ghurye’s detailed discussions of the relationship between race and caste. (Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* [Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969].)

¹⁴ Müller, 318-9. We should note here that Müller ascribes *ārya* status to the brahmins, *kṣatriyas* and *vaiśyas*, but excludes the *sūdras* (315), appealing to the authority of the *Brāhmaṇa* texts (*ibid.*, 329-30), though these sources do not necessarily themselves conceptualise *āryas* in unambiguous racial terms.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 328.

of *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, and *vaiśyas*, Müller asserts, were subsumed into the fourth *varṇa* as *sūdras* ('servants'), while even Aryan persons who denied the validity of this hierarchy and its "brāhmaṇic discipline" were outcasted (the source of the so-called 'untouchables').¹⁶ Further, Müller ascribes the origin of *jātis* (endogamous 'castes' in the stricter sense) to the post-Vedic proliferation of "professional guilds"¹⁷ (thereby discursively 'saming' an Indian social structure to one with which Europeans were familiar). He attributes the ritual boundaries between *jātis* to the consequences of jealous guarding of social privileges following widespread *varṇa*-status confusion (posited to be a legacy of the Buddhist era) and the subsequent reconstruction of 'caste' groups along occupational lines.¹⁸

Keeping with the general trend of Orientalist treatment of Indian history, this theory of caste-transformation was articulated by Müller and others in terms of cultural degeneration, from the scripturally legitimated fourfold division of 'Aryan' society into the present-day heterogeneous and ambiguous convolution of *jātis*, along with the development of additional taxonomic schemas (such as *gotras*, usually rendered as 'clans'). These *jātis* were the subject of much study by ethnographers, who, picking up where academic Orientalist scholarship left off, comprehensively catalogued India's diverse 'castes' and quantified Indians' somatic features through extensive fieldwork in order to discern the 'true' interrelationship of these groups, so that British administrators

¹⁶ Ibid., 329.

¹⁷ Ibid., 341-44.

¹⁸ Ibid.

might have a reliable guide to use in assessing the role and capacity (mental and physical) of each group within the colonial society.¹⁹

Caste, Religion, and the Management of India

These constructs and narratives—like other reified concepts of Orientalist thought and colonial discourse—reflect the notion that the multifarious social realities of Indian life could be described (and circumscribed) in ways that would make them capable of being ‘grasped’—both intellectually and politically. The historical and contemporary actualities of *varṇa* and *jāti* typologies—their flexible and dynamic nature; their striking regional variations; the disputed character of their hierarchical structure and of brahmins’ claimed primacy—are obscured by discourses which conflate social realities with political desires. Thus, for the Orientalist and the colonial bureaucrat, the ‘truth’ about caste lay not in the apparently inconsistent and, more importantly, *unmanageable* cacophony of contemporary caste-categories and sub-divisions, but in the uncomplicated antiquarian *varṇa*-accounts of the *Vedas* and the orderly *jāti*-statistics of the Indian censuses. A dynamic and heterogeneous system of interconnected socio-religious institutions was thus reduced, when filtered through the lens of colonial discourse, to the oppressive and moribund entity of ‘caste’, criticised for fostering societal ills and capable of being encompassed, studied, and manipulated by imperial interests.

In addressing the issue of the relationship between religion and caste, Max Müller frames for his audience both the practical importance of the matter and the role of Orientalist authority in the debate:

¹⁹ See, for example, Ballantyne’s discussion of the British desire to identify India’s ‘martial races’ for the purpose of military recruitment (Ballantyne, 49-50).

[Hindus] have the promise [of the British Crown]... that their religion will never be broken, that their religion is not to be interfered with, except where it violates the laws of humanity.... If, therefore, caste is part of the Hindu religion, it will have to be respected as such by the [British] Government. If it is not, it may be treated in the same spirit as social prejudices are treated at home.

Now, if we ask the Hindus whether their laws of caste are part of their religion, some will answer that they are, others that they are not. Under these circumstances we must clearly decide the question for ourselves. Thanks to the exertions of Sir William Jones, Colebrook, Wilson, and others, we possess in this country [England] a nearly complete collection of the religious and legal works of the Brahmans. We are able to consult the very authorities to which the Hindus appeal, and we can form an opinion with greater impartiality than the Brahmans themselves.²⁰

As this passage reveals, the notion that Indians were too disunited and/or too biased (or, as Müller asserts later in this text, too incompetent in Vedic Sanskrit)²¹ to be accurate adjudicators of the *Vedas*’ perspective on the ‘caste question’ was well accepted as factual in Western circles.²² In contrast, the ‘objective’ Orientalists—who had collected (actually, to a great extent, *constructed*) the ‘authentic’ sources of Hindu law, and who were capable of properly understanding their contents (according to their reconstructions of Vedic Sanskrit grammar) and interrelationships (such as the primacy of Vedic authority over later Śāstric sources)²³—could be entrusted with the important task of analysing the data and making ‘impartial’ judgements on the genuine relationship of the caste system to Hindu religion. (Of course, this alleged objectivity of the Western

²⁰ Müller, 298-9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 301; 305.

²² As evidence of the pervasive distrust by Orientalists of traditional Indian authorities and their agendas, consider William Jones’ assertion that it was necessary for Europeans to learn Sanskrit themselves, so that “we should never perhaps be led astray by Pandits or Maulavis who would impose on us, when their impositions might be so easily detected.” (Quoted in *Ideologies of the Raj*, T. R. Metcalf [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 23.)

²³ Müller defends his reliance on the *Vedas* as an authority in matters of caste by appealing to their claimed status as *śruti* (‘heard’—i.e., revealed—texts) and to the importance which brāhmaṇical tradition grants to their dicta (see *ibid.*, 299-305). However, the simple equation between the Vedic presentation of the *cāturvarṇa* schema and the religious validity of modern caste structures is a gross oversimplification, and does not accord with the more-common Hindu perspective that the later *Dharmaśāstra* literature, such as the *Manusmṛiti* (with its more-elaborate conception and regulation of *varṇas*, *jātis* and inter-caste interactions), holds an authoritative place in its elaboration of Vedic ideas and injunctions.

scholar, versus his less-credible brahmin *paṇḍit* counterpart, conveniently overlooked the role of the British government's sponsorship of scholarship on India.) Ironically, the very scriptural sources from which Müller and others of his ilk gathered their textual data and upon which they bestowed such authority were almost invariably products of brāhmaṇical traditions; thus, their analyses in fact rested to a substantial degree on the hermeneutical efforts of brahmins, regardless of who 'decided' the questions of caste and religion through later study and interpretation of the texts. Paradoxically, then, a system much maligned for its sustenance of brāhmaṇical privilege was studied via a methodology that privileged brāhmaṇical philosophy, religion, and hermeneutics. Yet, the inevitable filtration of these ideas through the lens of Orientalist scholars ensured that the Hindu was not—to employ Bhabha's assonant phrase—"the active agent of articulation."²⁴

For the nineteenth-century Orientalist, as we have already seen, Hinduism, in its 'authentic' form, was most accurately revealed in texts, not (degenerate) praxis, and the more antediluvian the sources, the better. Given the undeniable presence of the *varṇa*-genesis narrative in the Vedic corpus, the conclusion which the scholars (and thus, the administrators) reached was something of a compromise. Caste, in the Vedic period, was concluded to have been, as described above, a race-based social division (as, in the prevailing Social Darwinian spirit, societal characteristics could almost inevitably be reduced to racial factors), which had some significance for Hindu religion, rather than a fundamentally religious division which had social consequences. Thus, particularly in its existing form, caste was not religious per se, nor was it legitimated by the *Vedas*, and

thus, by ‘authentic’—i.e., brāhmanical and textual—Hinduism.²⁵ In the final analysis, Müller pragmatically declares that “the government would be perfectly justified in declaring that it will no longer consider caste [that is, *jāti*] as part of the religious system of the Hindus,”²⁶ thus legitimately opening it to manipulation and even, in some circumstances, what would amount to partial eradication—precisely the conclusion that the British administrators desired. In fact, Müller, though an academic philologist, does not hesitate to lay out in particulars the ways in which colonial administrators should and should not attempt to alter existing caste practices.²⁷ Further, he optimistically posits that, if strategically utilised, “Caste, which has hitherto proved an impediment to the conversion of the Hindus [to Christianity], may in future become one of the most powerful engines for the conversion not merely of individuals, but of whole classes of Indian society.”²⁸ This latter idea must have seemed a great encouragement to the evangelically minded, for, as Thomas Metcalf has observed, by the middle of the nineteenth century, “missionary zeal was fast waning” in the face of the apparently hopeless prospect of Christianising Indians, given the Raj’s persistence resistance to the project.²⁹

The agendas that supported the colonial representations of *varṇa* and *jāti*, however, were not always so blatant. Utilising the insights of postcolonial scholarship, colonial constructions of caste may be read as a manifestation of the process of Othering, upon

²⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 31.

²⁵ See Müller, 305-6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 316.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 349-53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 353.

²⁹ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 47.

which Western selfhood depended.³⁰ Thus, at one level, discursive formulations of caste were not really about India, but about Europe. We have already established that a fundamental aspect of the West's vision of itself in the modern age was the notion that Europeans (and, subsequently, Americans) were responsible for upholding and advancing the humanistic values of individual freedom and autonomy on the world stage. To distance themselves from the unsavoury social realities of European life that impeded this vision,³¹ these aspects were projected outwards as the defining qualities of Western constructions of the Oriental other. In the sphere of caste, as in those of religion, nation, race (and, as we shall see in Chapter Seven, gender), India became one of the contested sites of Europe's disavowed aspects. If Europe was a land of social autonomy, India was authoritarian; if the former was structured according to the principles of enlightened rationality, the latter was governed by degenerate tyranny; if the West permitted, and even encouraged, social mobility, the East kept its denizens entrapped in rigid, iniquitous factions; if Occidental societies were advancing towards ever-greater liberty, Oriental ones had degenerated and perhaps were continuing to do so. Consider, for example, Müller's intimation that the narrative of social differentiation which he finds embodied by the Indian caste system is a universal one.³² (This essentialist vision of caste's expression of universal human structures was an important theme, especially among the Romantic Orientalists, in whose eyes caste became "the embodiment of a holist, organic

³⁰ Although in *Orientalism* Said does not directly address the issue of 'caste', the following analysis draws on his insights in a general way.

³¹ One need only consider, for example, the masses of impoverished and practically enslaved workers in lower-class Victorian England, or the disenfranchisement of women from real social, economic, and political power in most European societies, to realise that 'liberty' and 'self-determination', were more idealistic discursive constructions than concrete realities for vast numbers of those living in the 'modern' West.

³² See Müller, 318-320; 343; 347.

vision of human community,³³ albeit a highly anti-individualistic one.) If this is indeed the case, the discrepancy between the present forms of ‘castes’ in India and European societies can be accounted for, he asserts, by the ‘fact’ of the former society’s stagnation in the equivalent of Europe’s Middle Ages; whereas, “with the progress of civilization and true religion in Europe, all the barriers of caste became more and more levelled.”³⁴

Importantly, caste-membership was regarded as a social structure that, in Inden’s phrasing, “precluded or displaced citizenship”,³⁵ in other words, Hindus were considered to be incapable of constructing a nation (as the West conceived it) because caste, by its occupation of the socio-political, and even psychological, site of national formation, and its production of “perennial fragmentation,”³⁶ persistently negated the possibility. (While the etymological connection between the words *jāti* and ‘nation’—both terms suggesting a communal connection forged by birth—is mirrored in the ability of each, even into the present day, to command a significant degree of political allegiance, membership in one rarely has actually precluded participation in the other in the Indian context; in fact, caste concerns have often served as useful tools for generating political/national involvement.) The ambivalence embedded within Orientalist discourse is quite evident in this case; the East may resemble the West, sharing with it some basic elements and patterns of human civilisation (as discovered and articulated by Western scholars)—however, the fundamental difference, the essential inequity, must remain, lest the West’s own self-concept (and, therewith, its authority) be destabilised.

³³ Inden, 74.

³⁴ Ibid., 319-20.

³⁵ Inden, 65.

The Indian Engagement of Caste

During the late decades of the nineteenth century, caste emerged as a matter of widespread concern and contention within Indian society, especially among the growing Hindu middle class, in Bengal and elsewhere. The imposition of British rule and its accompanying formulations and evaluations of caste impacted Indians' 'caste consciousness' in novel and profound ways, as Basu indicates.³⁷ Social anthropologist Susan Bayly, in her article "Hindu Modernisers and the 'Public' Arena,"³⁸ gives attention to a commonly disregarded impetus to the Indian re-evaluation of caste and its relationship with Hinduism, that of the ideological and sociological restructuring which resulted from the (re-)constitution of 'Hindu client' kingdoms under the authority of the British Raj. As Bayly demonstrates, the public discussion and debate over pan-Hindu values, which arose during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a result of the changes in social and religious patterns stemming from "the ambivalent mixture of constraint and sponsorship emanating from the colonial state and its clients," substantially reshaped Hindus' conceptions of caste-membership and its significance as a bond of "moral affinities."³⁹ In particular, the ways in which the role of the Hindu *kṣatriya* rulers, as well as the religious patronage and "conspicuous piety"⁴⁰ thereof, were

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ For a fuller background on Indian formulations of caste preceding and contemporaneous with Vivekananda, see Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 95-110.

³⁸ Susan Bayly, "Hindu modernizers and the 'public arena: indigenous critiques of caste in colonial India," in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 93-137.

³⁹ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

reformulated and expressed acted as crucial determinants in the transformation of the religious terrain of India.

More directly, the growing Hindu concern with caste, and its increasing theorisation within public Indian discourse, was also heavily impacted both by popular Western/Christian criticisms and by widely disseminated European scholarship on the Aryan theory and its relationship to the *varṇa-jāti* complex. As well, the increasing production of sociological documentation of *jātis* and their relative statuses, suggests Basu, brought about among the Indian populace a “new mode of understanding [caste] generated by this enumerated form of knowledge,”⁴¹ and, in fact, an increasing degree of affinity with these divisions as markers of Hindu identity. This is not, of course, to assert that Hindu reconceptualisations of *jāti* and *varṇa* can be reduced to responses to Western discourses on caste, but merely that these were one crucial element in stimulating the debate, and that these discourses played a vital role in creating and delimiting the sites and boundaries of the discussion.

Hindus, in attempting to situate caste (itself, like ‘Hinduism’, a foreign and relatively novel term), disputed over the genesis, antiquity, historical flexibility, and socio-religious significance of *varṇa* and *jāti* categories. In particular, the question arose as to whether the institution of ‘caste’ (in either or both forms) should be maintained, radically transformed, or simply abolished in the ‘modern age’ into which India was viewed as entering. As many Orientalists and ethnologists of the time held the caste system itself responsible for ‘enervating’ and degrading the moral consciousness of Hindus (particularly Bengalis, in opposition to whom were branded the more ‘casteless’,

⁴¹ Basu, 99.

and thus, more 'manly', northern religions of India),⁴² as well as for preventing them from attaining national status,⁴³ this was a crucial pragmatic issue, not simply an abstract theoretical one. For a community that was in the process of conceptualising its own nationhood and beginning to formulate politically nationalistic aspirations, reconciling an institution which was widely characterised by Western observers (and an increasing number of Indians) as degenerate and dissolute with the ideological vision of a united and morally advanced nation was crucial to garnering widespread support. The intertwining of discourses on caste and race, particularly those of the 'Aryan' narrative, was of particular significance to this project, for the Orientalist assertions of shared Indo-European origins had, by this period, become a crucial element in much 'native' theorising of Indian nationhood. Most significantly, as Bayly notes (and as, to some extent, we have already seen), by the late nineteenth century, "the phenomenon of caste came to be regarded both by many Indian modernisers and by European theorists as a defining feature of Hindu ethnicity, morality and even biology."⁴⁴ Keeping in mind that 'Hindu' functioned as a polysemantic sign, overdetermined by religious, nationalistic, racial, gender and other discourses, one can hardly fail to see how the positing of caste as an essential aspect of 'Hindu-ness', twinned with the disparagement of the former, would not have profound and wide-reaching consequences upon Hindu self-identity across multiple spheres.

⁴² Marriott, 208.

⁴³ See Marriott, 207, and Bayly, 110. Even the more positive views of the caste system's historical and social value, expressed by a few Western interpreters, did little more than posit its role as an instrument to keep Indian society from falling to even greater depths of decrepitude and 'barbarism' (see Marriott, 205)—hardly an effective rallying point for an emerging nation.

⁴⁴ Bayly, 96.

Within the larger questions around the origins, history, and religious and moral ‘validity’ of caste, a number of more-specific issues were deemed significant to the debate. As already mentioned, concerns over the role of *varṇa* and/or *jāti* in the creation and perpetuation of matters such as untouchability, caste-privilege, and a host of matters related to the so-called ‘woman problem’ in India, were among those raised by foreign critics. These issues, which served as rhetorical tropes for larger questions of power, privilege, and control, were paired with concern for advancing national unity, and thus unavoidably served as embattled sites for Hindu thinkers and reformers. The situation was further complicated by the fact that there was much less uniformity of opinion among Hindus than among Europeans over the moral evaluation of these social questions themselves. To admittedly oversimplify the situation: for some ‘reformist’ Hindus, many of their own positions harmonised with those of Western critics; whereas for those Indians envisioning a more atavistic nation, certain of the ‘evils’ identified by non-Hindu observers were not necessarily considered to be so.⁴⁵ Nor did all Hindus uncritically agree with the prevailing Orientalist perspective that the authoritative sources for all questions of caste and religion were primarily (or exclusively) the Vedic texts.

Still other factors increased the ambiguity surrounding caste in the Indian perception. The presence of the British, as *mlecchas* (foreigners—more precisely, ‘barbarians’), was the cause of much ambivalence and uncertainty in even everyday circumstances; while social interaction with—and emulation of—the English brought increased social status in some quarters, it also resulted in religious impurity, especially for brahmins. Likewise, questions of the position of Indian Muslims in Hindu society,

and thus their role in the emerging nationalistic vision, were interlinked with representations of their location with respect to the caste system.

Therefore, when Vivekananda formulated and expressed views in an Indian context that touched upon questions of caste in any of its forms, he did so in an environment of competing social, political, scientific and religious discourses on the subject. This was equally true when he addressed the topic before American and British audiences, for whom India's 'casteism' was considered a mark of its backwardness, representing authoritarianism and cultural stagnation in the view of the self-described 'modern West'. The inevitable presence of such power dynamics within caste-discourses, a fact of which Vivekananda was certainly aware, naturally shaped the positions, in form and in content, which he articulated.

Recaste-ing India: Vivekananda's Critique

Although he publicly disavowed the fact,⁴⁶ caste was indeed a matter of unavoidable concern for Vivekananda, as it was for other Hindu reformers and Indian religious leaders of the period. As we have sketched out above, caste served as a contentious site of intersection between religious concerns, political agendas, and racial and gender constructs. The subject was repeatedly raised by both his Indian inquirers and his British and American ones, the former wishing to know where he situated himself with respect to the politically charged 'caste question', and the latter curious as to whether Orientalist writers' and/or Christian missionaries' unsympathetic accounts of the Indian social order were accurate. It was also a matter Vivekananda often took the

⁴⁵ For a much more in-depth exploration of contemporary Hindu positions on these questions and the correspondence of the same to the caste debates, see Bayly, 93-137.

initiative to address, interweaving it into discussions and arguments regarding manifold aspects of Indian religion and society.

Vivekananda as a Contested Site

Vivekananda's own disputed *varṇa* status should be borne in mind when situating his discursive position. The caste system in Bengal has long exhibited a structure unique in certain ways from its forms in other areas of India. In particular, the two 'middle' *varṇas*—*kṣatriya* and *vaiśya*—of the Vedic account have long been virtually non-existent in the region (a fact which highlights the problematic nature of accepting scriptural accounts of caste as ahistorical or transregional prototypes). The historical circumstances that led to this condition are thought to be complex,⁴⁷ though Purāṇic texts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries testify to the antiquity of this situation.⁴⁸ The practical consequence, however, is that the bulk of the Bengali Hindu population became identified either as *brāhmaṇas* (a minority in numerical terms) or *sūdras* (the preponderance).

The *kāyastha* caste, into which Vivekananda was born, is among those *jātis* whose position is marked by a long history of disputation, even before the incursion of the British. While generally regarded by Bengali Hindus as a 'high caste', with social status and privileges ranking just below the brahmins, the *smṛti* texts and Purāṇic literature classify *kāyasthas* as *sūdras*—albeit as *sat*, or '(ritually) clean', *sūdras*, in contrast to the *asat*, 'unclean', *sūdras*, whose interactions with upper-caste Hindus were much more

⁴⁶ See, for instance, "The Mission of the Vedanta," *CW*, vol. 3, 194.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Amitya P. Sen, *Swami Vivekananda* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 73.

⁴⁸ See Amitabha Mukherjee, "Swami Vivekananda and the Institution of Caste in Bengali Hindu Society," *Quarterly Review of Historical Studies* [Kolkata] 39 (Oct. 1999-Mar. 2000): 19.

restricted.⁴⁹ Thus, although Orientalist interpretations of Indian caste-literature would suggest that a wide rift *should* exist in practice between brahmins and *sūdras*, the reality in the Bengali context was that a division of at least as much (if not more) significance also existed between ‘lower-caste’ and ‘higher-caste’ *sūdras*, the latter’s rank being more akin, in terms of ritual purity, to the textually ascribed status of Bengal’s absent *ḷatriyas*. The ‘superior’ socio-religious position of the *kāyasthas* was perhaps due to the ‘clean’ (i.e., non-polluting) nature of their ‘official’ occupational sphere, that of writers or scribes; under Muslim rule, *kāyasthas* were often employed as court record-keepers or administrators, and, in colonial times, their literary skills commonly garnered them ‘service’ positions such as clerks or accountants in the Anglo-Indian bureaucracy. (This concern over professional purity/pollution may account for the widespread perception that *kāyasthas*’ position in the *jāti*-hierarchy lay above that of *vaidyas*—the latter described in the *Manusmṛti* as the offspring of mixed brahmin patrilineage and *vaiśya* matrilineage, and traditionally employed as physicians.)⁵⁰ Nevertheless, an atmosphere of ambivalence surrounded *kāyasthas*’ status in nineteenth-century Bengal, due to the incongruity and tension between the *jāti*’s ‘official’ (religious/textual) *sūdra*hood, and the reality of its members’ high social standing and growing power and influence under the British administration, which situated many *kāyastha* Hindus securely in the rank of the Bengali *bhadralok*. As this situation illustrates, ‘caste’ and ‘class’ in colonial India were two distinct, though interrelated, systems of social hierarchisation. The ambiguity which thus surrounded the caste-position of the *kāyasthas* gave them scope to participate in the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19-20.

⁵⁰ Note the ranking implicit in the account given by Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Nāmaśūdra of Bengal, 1872-1947* (Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 1997), 59.

mobility-seeking ‘Sanskritisation’ movements,⁵¹ asserting that their line of descent—and therefore their proper *varṇa*-status—was *ṣṭriya*, not *śūdra*.⁵²

According to widely (though not universally) held Hindu norms,⁵³ Vivekananda, upon taking the *sannyāsa-vrata* of a monk, abandoned his *varṇa* and *jāti* of birth; however, his self-positioning as a scholar and religious teacher who challenged points of Hindu orthodoxy still made his non-brahmin origins a vulnerable point in the eyes of many of his critics.⁵⁴ Indeed, that Vivekananda had a personal interest in the conceptual reconstruction of caste and that his own authority as an interpreter of Hinduism was affected by the same are not in doubt. As Amitya Sen has demonstrated, Vivekananda was not an anomaly, but part of a larger trend towards the inclusion of non-brahmins in the prominent roles of religious figures and leaders, a result of the destabilising influence of colonialism on existing Hindu institutions.⁵⁵ Vivekananda himself makes a rare reference to his own caste in his Bengali-language European travelogues, acknowledging that, “because this body of mine having come of a Kayastha family, I have become the

⁵¹ This process of ‘caste elevation’ (via the process of ‘Sanskritisation’) has been extensively discussed by the late Indian sociologist M.N. Srinivas. See M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

⁵² Sen, 74.

⁵³ This notion of renunciation as a form of ‘caste leveling’ was characteristic of the Indian *bhakti* movements to a much greater degree than in the case of the *jñāna*-based ascetical traditions. (Recall, by way of example, the refusal of Śaṅkarācārya to take low-caste persons under his tutelage, or even admit of the possibility of their attaining *mukti*).

⁵⁴ Sen, 74. Even today, some more-conservative Hindu *saṃpradāyas* refuse to recognise Ramakrishna Order *sannyāsins* as ‘legitimate’ Hindu monks, as the latter order is considered to have been founded by a *śūdra*. The Order itself traces its founding back to Ramakrishna himself, not Vivekananda, for reasons of both religious authority—foundation by a supposed *avatāra* being no small matter—and social acceptance, as Ramakrishna was himself both a brahmin and initiated by a member of a recognised *saṃpradāya*, the wandering monk Totapuri.

⁵⁵ Sen, 74.

target of attack of many sections.”⁵⁶ Vivekananda himself thus became a contested site of embattled caste conceptions.

In this respect, then, it should perhaps not be surprising that Vivekananda also became a participant in the reinterpretation of his own *jāti*'s *varṇa* status. In a Madras lecture in 1897, he made a public refutation of this ascribed *sūdra*hood, saying, “I trace my descent to one [Citragupta, the legendary progenitor of the *kāyasthas*] at whose feet every Brahmin lays flowers... and whose descendants are the purest of Kshatriyas.”⁵⁷ He also reportedly convinced Sister Nivedita of his certainty that the modern Bengali *kāyasthas* are the descendants of the pre-Mauryan *kṣatriyas*, though on precisely what grounds he made this argument is not known.⁵⁸ It seems that Vivekananda intentionally cultivated the identification of himself with the *kṣatriya* lineage, clearly a much more advantageous position, as far as pan-Hindu socio-religious authority is concerned, than that of a *sūdra*. In addition, his association with the *kṣatriya* heritage of royal, militaristic, and ‘masculine’ ideology and motifs countered the British charges—as we shall explore in the next chapter—of ‘effeminacy’, which continually situated Bengalis in a site of embattled gender constructions.⁵⁹ If Vivekananda could not, by virtue of his birth, lay claim to the position of a *brahmarṣi* (brahmin sage) he could at least try to align himself in the consciousness of his fellow Indians with that of the *rājarṣi*, the ancient ideal of the religiously-inclined ruler (exemplified by the legendary Hindu king, Janaka), who both

⁵⁶ “Memoirs of European Travel,” *CW*, vol. 7, 318.

⁵⁷ “My Plan of Campaign,” *CW*, Vol. 3, 211.

⁵⁸ Sister Nivedita, “Notes of Some Wandering With the Swami Vivekananda: Chapter III – Morning Talks at Almora,” *CW*, vol. 9, 347.

⁵⁹ Consider, for instance, his adoption of the *pagrī*, or turban, as part of his usual monastic dress. While certainly not unknown article of dress to Indian *sādhus*, it also functioned as a signifier, paired as it was/is in Indian tradition with the legacy of the *kṣatriya* rulers, and was one of the most-remarked upon features of

ensured material prosperity and security for his subjects and sought realisation with the dedication of a monastic.

An Equivocal Stance

Beyond his concern for his own caste-position, Vivekananda's discourse is peppered with numerous strongly worded, often apparently contradictory, assessments of the value of caste in the context of Indian society. (In his English-language discourses, he, in the manner of Western authors, generally uses the term 'caste' to signify, variously, *varṇa* or *jāti* or both simultaneously—and thus addressing Indian actualities from a foreign conceptual site.) On the one hand, at times the swami made quite positive statements about caste. For example, he sanguinely told a Boston audience in 1894: "Caste has kept us [Indians] alive as a nation, and while it has many defects, it has many more advantages."⁶⁰ While this position harmonises with that expressed by nineteenth-century colonial ethnographer H. H. Risley, that caste "forms the cement that holds together the myriad units of Indian society,"⁶¹ contrast this also with the conviction of many European scholars and colonial administrators, as discussed earlier, that caste made Indian nationhood an impossibility. (In fact, even Risley himself shared this view, asserting that, due to caste, "no nation or even nationality in the ordinary sense of these words"⁶² had ever emerged in India.) Vivekananda, in contrast, elaborates his more-positive perspective by comparing India favourably to America in terms of societal cohesion and progress:

his appearance by the media during his stays in America and Europe, where it was perceived as rather 'kingly'.

⁶⁰ "The Manners and Customs of India," *CW*, vol. 2, 489.

⁶¹ Quoted in Metcalf, 119.

Jealousy, hatred and avariciousness are born of money-getters. Here [in America] it is all work, hustle and bustle. Caste saves a man from all this. It makes it possible for a man to live with less money, and it brings work to all. The man of caste has time to think of his soul, and that is what we want in the society of India.⁶³

The incredulity among Western audiences that greeted even moderate challenges to the established discourses on caste is evident from the ambivalent statement of a press review of another of his American lectures, according to which Vivekananda “mildly defended the caste system of India which keeps three-fourths of the people in utter and humiliating subjection”⁶⁴—the author seemingly unwilling or unable to step outside of the paradigm of ‘true’ knowledge about caste, even in the act of framing Vivekananda’s divergent assessment.

While enunciative context should certainly be a consideration in this case, it seems that his positive sentiments cannot be reduced simply to concern for India’s ‘good publicity’ in the West, for Vivekananda made similar statements before his Indian audiences. In Madras in 1897, for instance, he told the assembled crowd: “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.”⁶⁵ He even went so far as to declare that “Indian caste [is] one of the greatest social institutions that the Lord gave to man.”⁶⁶ It seems evident that his appreciation of caste, in some respects at least, was quite genuine.

Despite these supportive words, however, Vivekananda’s preserved work brims with at least an equal quantity of denunciatory analyses of caste and what he asserts are

⁶² Quoted in *ibid.*, 122.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ “Hindu Civilisation,” *CW*, vol. 3, 480.

⁶⁵ “Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life,” *CW*, vol. 3, 245.

its ruinous consequences and its approaching fate. “Modern caste distinction,” he told a London interviewer in 1896, “is a barrier to India’s progress. It narrows, restricts, separates. It will crumble before the advance of ideas.”⁶⁷ Again, this was not just a performance for the expectations of the ‘modern’ West, for, in a private letter penned to his friend Pramada Das Mitra in 1897, Vivekananda presents a similar and perhaps more-considered view: “The conviction is daily gaining on my mind that the idea of caste is the greatest dividing factor and the root of Maya; all caste either on the principle of birth or of merit is bondage.”⁶⁸

As should be evident from the above passages, Vivekananda’s discourse on caste is characterised by a bifurcation into two chief strands of thought: a sympathetic one, which, as we shall see, was constructed around an idealistic vision of what caste once signified and into what it could yet be transformed; and a critical one, reflecting his frustration with both the historical and present state of affairs in India. Neither of these perspectives was unique to Vivekananda, of course. The idealist view of caste as a valuable social and national prop was not wholly unknown to modern Western analyses of India, though such themes tended to be rarer and more-restrained than the converse perspectives, as they collided with the hegemony of the dominant imperial discourse. However, the true base of support for these standpoints was to be found among a significant portion of prominent contemporary Indian reformers—for example, M. G. Ranade, Justice of the Bombay High Court, who argued that caste had, and could still, serve as a foundation for the promotion of shared morality, Hindu solidarity and national

⁶⁶ “Aryans and Tamilians,” *CW*, vol. 4, 299.

⁶⁷ “India and England,” *CW*, vol. 5, 198.

⁶⁸ “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 6, 394.

integration.⁶⁹ Such persons, asserts Bayly, “perceived *jāti* and *varṇa* affiliation as something analogous to a liberal political thinker’s definition of citizenship”⁷⁰—and therefore a suitable ground for religious and nationality unity.

Regarding Vivekananda’s more-critical commentaries, his position resembles that expressed by a large segment of his Western critics, as well as a number of ‘anti-caste’ Indian reformers and movements. He shared some (though not full) ideological ground with, for example, the members of India’s National Socialist Conference,⁷¹ who denounced the baneful influence of caste in all its forms, promoting the recognition of India’s noble shared heritage and even, in some cases, the ‘readmission’ of Indian Christian and Muslim converts—and their descendents—to the Hindu fold, an act that Vivekananda also explicitly endorsed.⁷² In the case of such reformers, the emphasis tended to be placed upon the identification (or creation) of ‘pan-Indian’ aspects of Hindu faith and society; according to this view, full participation in this collective Hindu faith-community was considered to be impeded by caste divisions.

In order to appreciate the reasoning behind these apparently contradictory positions, it is necessary to consider in more detail what meanings Vivekananda actually imputes to ‘caste’, and the various ways in which it functions as a rhetorical trope and a discursive phenomenon.

Caste as Constraint

Vivekananda was not reticent, especially in his Indian talks and Bengali writings, to condemn the present-day use of caste as a tool of brāhmanical ‘tyranny’. In this respect,

⁶⁹ See Bayly, 112-16.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, 97-101.

he shares a limited degree of ideological space with James Mill—whose writings were a standard part of the curriculum for students of colonial educational institutions, like those he himself attended. The latter saw in caste (such as he had come to understand it through the work of the Orientalists)⁷³ only oppressive despotism in the guise of religion. (Mill, however, unlike Vivekananda, posited no past ‘golden age’ of constructive caste divisions.) In particular, Vivekananda was disturbed by the contrast he encountered between the restrictions imposed by caste on social mobility and personal betterment in India, and the professed ideals of equality and freedom that he met with in the socio-political discourses of America and Europe, as well as through his personal experiences during his travels outside of South Asia. In a Bengali letter, penned from Chicago in 1893 to his friend Haripada Mitra, he laments: “If anybody is born of a low caste in our country, he is gone for ever, there is no hope for him. Why? What a tyranny it is!”⁷⁴ In the years following, his rhetoric on this dimension of caste became even more intense; in a talk delivered before a Pasadena, California audience in 1900, Vivekananda exclaimed: “As soon as a child is born [in India], he knows that he is born a slave: slave to his caste, first; slave to his nation, next. Slave, slave, slave.”⁷⁵ (His deployment of the rhetoric of slavery is particularly interesting, given the political context of this talk—in a country not far removed in time from its own battles over the enslavement of African-Americans in concrete practice.) The intensity of his statement is intriguing, speaking as he does from an ambivalent privileged/subaltern site: as a paradoxically advantaged

⁷² “On the Bounds of Hinduism,” *CW*, vol. 5, 233.

⁷³ Marriott notes that Mills’ most-important sources for information on the caste system and its features were the Orientalists’ research on Vedic religion, and, particularly, Sir William Jones’ rendering of the *Manusmṛiti* (Marriott, 206-7).

⁷⁴ “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 5, 26.

bhadralok śūdra, a ‘native’ colonial subject,⁷⁶ and a renowned religious leader. On a number of occasions, Vivekananda even forthrightly likens intra-India caste-based oppression to the subjugation and disenfranchisement of Indians by the colonial government.⁷⁷ In this respect, he, like many of his Bengali Hindu contemporaries, faced the difficult challenge of negotiating amongst the thematic of modernity, with its emphasis on personal autonomy; the emphasis of devotional Hindu movements on the de-accentuation of caste and other social distinctions (within a limited sphere, at least); and that of the particular vision of societal and cosmological order which underlay historical brāhmaṇical interpretations of caste, both as an abstract discourse and as a concrete institution.

Vivekananda’s frustration over what he perceived to be the internalised or psychologised form of social constraint and cultural stagnation imposed upon Indians by caste is equally evident throughout his work. Contrasting Hindu caste-concern with the ‘progressive’ social attitudes he encountered among the Japanese upon his first trip off Indian soil in 1893, for example, the swami, in a letter to several of his friends in the Madras Presidency, harshly condemns his countrypersons:

Sitting down these hundreds of years with an ever-increasing load of crystallised superstition on your heads, for hundreds of years spending all your energy upon discussing the touchableness or untouchableness of this food or that, with all humanity crushed out of you by the continuous social tyranny of ages—what are you?⁷⁸

⁷⁵ “Buddhistic India,” *CW*, vol. 3, 516.

⁷⁶ During Vivekananda’s second voyage from India in 1899, he himself—though one of the leading religious figures in India at the time—had to negotiate the bureaucratic hurdles which the British government had placed in the way of “natives” (and not white Britons) traveling abroad from Indian ports, as well as the refusal of several steamer companies to book *any* “native” passenger for fear, it was claimed, of the then-raging plague epidemic. (See “Memoirs of European Travel,” *CW*, vol. 7, 318.)

⁷⁷ See, for example, “Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life,” *CW*, vol. 3, 244; “Modern India,” *CW*, vol. 4, 474.

⁷⁸ “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 5, 10.

It is clear that, to at least some extent, Vivekananda concurs with the assessment, offered by his European contemporaries, of the present configuration of caste as an instrument of oppression. However, as this passage suggests, he conceptualises caste not merely in terms of the barriers to religious resources that it presents and the constraints upon interpersonal interactions that it enjoins, but also critiques its ability to inculcate a mentality of enslavement and its power to divert attention towards ‘trivialities’ like diet and social practices and away from sentiments of national unity and collective social aspirations.

In his statements on the association between caste and religion per se, however, we glimpse a greater consistency and a more moderate and judicious perspective. In articulating his thoughts regarding caste, Vivekananda draws an implicit distinction between religious *origin* and religious *sanction*. He refutes the idea, upheld by some contemporaneous orthodox Hindu defenders of caste, that the ‘caste system’ in its existent form has its legitimate basis in the Vedic scriptures. Caste is “continuously changing,”⁷⁹ he affirms, whereas the ‘eternal’ nature of the *Vedas*’ authority lies in their unchanging substance and principles.⁸⁰ “It is in the books written by priests,” he asserts to Pramada Das Mitra, “that madnesses like that of caste are to be found, and not in books revealed from God.”⁸¹ We might be tempted to theorise that the ‘caste’ of which Vivekananda here speaks critically is that of *jāti*, rather than *varṇa*, and the implied textual distinction that of sources such as the *Manusmṛiti* versus those of the Vedic corpus. However, bearing in mind Vivekananda’s idealist position on the *Vedas* as

⁷⁹ “The Abroad and the Problems at Home,” *CW*, vol. 5, 215.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

revealing universal laws, not specific religious realities (though just where he inscribes this boundary is not altogether certain), it is possible that even the textual account of the genesis of the *cāturvarṇa* system is implicated in this disavowal. Indeed, as we shall see below, while Vivekananda stops short of an outright refutation of the Vedic *varṇa*-schema, he radically reinterprets it, elucidating it via a symbolic, rather than a historical, hermeneutic.

Further, to make the interpretation of his views on the *jāti-varṇa* relationship even more difficult, in those cases where he speaks with open approval of the *jāti* system, he often appears to virtually elide *jāti* and *varṇa*, implicitly invoking other criteria as more fundamental areas of distinction. In “*Prācyā O Pāścātya*,” he speaks of the *jātidharma* (roughly, duties based upon one’s *jāti*, or birth-position) as “the path of welfare of all societies in every land, the ladder to ultimate freedom,”⁸² and asserts that it is the neglect of the same that has led to India’s downfall.⁸³ Yet, as his reference to *jātidharma*’s existence in “all societies in every land” suggests, Vivekananda has something other than the present Indian *jāti*-configuration in mind. While he does not articulate the meaning of *jātidharma* per se in forthright terms—perhaps he has a narrowly delimited meaning, such as occupational categories, in mind—he makes it clear that his criticisms that follow refer to the “hereditary caste system,” not one based upon “qualitative distinction,” or differences in *guṇas*, ‘natural qualities’.⁸⁴ (This demarcation is more explicit in some of his other work, and will be discussed in greater detail below.) He has harsh words for the “higher castes” who mistake “their own village customs as the eternal customs laid down

⁸¹ “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 6, 394.

⁸² “The East and the West,” *CW*, vol. 5, 455-6.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

by the Vedas,”⁸⁵ and exploit others for their own advantage. What lends even more ambiguity to Vivekananda’s position is his direct and repeated equation in this passage of *jātidharma* with *svadharmā* (literally, “one’s own duties”). While the term *jātidharma* has, obviously, historically been associated with duties based on one’s *jāti*, *svadharmā* is linked by authoritative Hindu sources—most notably, the *Bhagavadgītā*⁸⁶—with the responsibilities of one’s *varṇa*-status. (Indeed, in the same context, Vivekananda evokes the *Bhagavadgītā*’s notion of *varṇa-saṃkārya*, “*varṇa*-mixing,”⁸⁷ to explain India’s degeneration.)⁸⁸

We know that, given Vivekananda’s characteristically complex lines of argumentation, as well as the considered nature of the act of composing a written essay, this confusion is unlikely to be the result of chaotic thinking or careless expression on his part. Though the text certainly remains open to multiple readings, it becomes evident upon closer reflection that his line of demarcation between beneficial/detrimental forms of caste, to the extent that a somewhat-consistent one is discernable, does not follow a simplistic *varṇa*-versus-*jāti* binary, nor one of status acquired by birth contrasted with that achieved through effort. Rather, it appears that he is articulating a boundary of judgment located between *guṇa*-based caste (be that caste manifested in the form of *jāti* or of *varṇa*—though, again, the distinction is not fully elucidated in this context), and that status which is based solely upon the caste-identification of one’s ancestors and

⁸⁴ Ibid., 456.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ *Bhagavadgītā* 2.31: *svadharmamāpi cāveksya na vikampitumarhasi | dharmyāddhi yuddhācchreya ’nyatkṣatriyasya na vidyate* || —“You should not shrink from attending to your own *dharma* (*svadharmā*); for a *kṣatriya*, there exists no higher good than a righteous war” (translation mine).

⁸⁷ *Bhagavadgītā* I.41-43.

⁸⁸ “The East and the West,” *CW*, vol. 5, 456.

immediate family, irrespective of the individual's own qualities. By doing so, Vivekananda complicates the evaluative reading of caste, and distinguishes his perspective in subtle but consequential ways from the typology suggested by Orientalists like Müller (who, as we have seen, reads *varṇa* as religiously legitimated, but *jāti* as the product of cultural degeneration).

Divorcing Caste from Religion

As discussed in Chapter Three, Vivekananda, through his redefinition of 'religion', seeks to draw boundaries between 'ideal religion' and historical socio-religious practice in cases where the latter is decidedly less praiseworthy. In asserting, as he starkly does in an 1894 lecture given in Detroit, that "the caste system has nothing to do with religion,"⁸⁹ a sentiment repeated throughout his subsequent work,⁹⁰ it seems clear that Vivekananda is speaking with reference to his construction of 'true' religion, and not referring to the conventional linkage of Hindu religion and the *varṇa-jāti* complex. Vivekananda does not deny that, historically, there has been much complicity between the two; for example, in an 1894 letter from Chicago, addressed to an Indian admirer, Prof. Singaravelu Mudaliar,⁹¹ the swami writes: "Social laws were created by economic conditions under the sanction of religion. The terrible mistake of religion was to interfere in social matters."⁹² He is clear that condemnation of caste should not be equated with wholesale denunciation of Hinduism—as some of caste's harsher critics, particularly in Europe and America, were wont to do. "A man's occupation," he explained to his Michigan

⁸⁹ The same phrase is given verbatim in two different accounts of this lecture: *CW*, vol. 4, 200, and vol. 8, 205.

⁹⁰ For example: "Vedantism," *CW*, vol. 3, 132; "India: Her Religions and Customs," *CW*, vol. 3, 465.

⁹¹ Addressed in correspondence by Vivekananda by his nickname, 'Kidi'

audience, “is hereditary: a carpenter is born a carpenter; a goldsmith, a goldsmith; a workman, a workman; and a priest, a priest. But this is a comparatively modern social evil, since it has existed only about 1,000 years.”⁹³ In this respect, his views echo Müller’s reading of *jātis* and their social interdictions as rooted in the development of occupational groups and the efforts of the same to protect their respective privileges. (This is almost certainly not a coincidence, since, as we have discussed in previous chapters, Vivekananda gives the impression of being very well acquainted with, and also an admirer of, Müller’s work.)⁹⁴ The above statement of Vivekananda’s is notable not only for his Marxist-leaning interpretation of the caste-system’s origins as embedded in economic relations, but for his tacit assumption that the ‘religious’ can be separated from the ‘social’—a claim more aligned with the convictions of European modernity than with those of Hindu traditions, be the latter considered textually or otherwise. In fact, as mentioned earlier, the very question as to whether or not caste is ‘religious’ is profoundly rooted in Enlightenment categories, demonstrating the ways in which pervasive Western discourses influenced not simply the content of debates such as those over caste, but placed firm constraints upon the very questions that could be asked.

On a more-practical level, there is some indication that Vivekananda feared that the conflation of the caste system with Hindu religious convictions would result in the failure of any efforts to reform caste in beneficial ways.⁹⁵ Conversely, Vivekananda’s construction of boundaries around caste as ‘other than essentially Hindu’ can be

⁹² “What We Believe In,” *CW*, vol. 4, 358.

⁹³ “India,” *CW*, vol. 8, 205.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Vivekananda’s review of Müller’s book, *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings*, published in the *Udbodhan* in 1899, in which the swami speaks at length of Müller’s contributions to scholarship on India and effusively praises the same (*CW*, vol. 4, 409-21 *passim*).

approached as a strategy to protect Hinduism from a frequent and demoralising avenue of criticism. Of caste and religion, there can be little doubt that it was the vitality of the latter that was his principal concern; though Vivekananda had a great conviction in Hinduism's ability to endure in spite of assaults thereto, he could hardly wish to invite unnecessary or 'misguided' opposition to the same. He writes to Alasinga in 1893 that, in his view,

all the reformers in India made the serious mistake of holding religion accountable for all the horrors of priestcraft and degeneration and went forthwith to pull down the indestructible structure, and what was the result? Failure! Beginning from Buddha down to Ram Mohan Roy, everyone made the mistake of holding caste to be a religious institution and tried to pull down religion and caste all together, and failed.⁹⁶

The site of contestation, Vivekananda asserts, has traditionally been mis-/displaced; for caste, in his view, is not fundamentally embedded within religion, but only conventionally justified by it. (This perspective meshes with Müller's conclusion of caste's 'non-religious' nature, which Müller himself invoked to justify colonial and missionary intervention therein.)

While Vivekananda does in some ways seek to problematise caste, he does not wish to interrogate (and thus destabilise) Hinduism *en masse*, as many caste-critics of his day forthrightly did. However, he is quite willing to critically examine the historical processes and agendas behind caste. Far from being a timeless and unchanging entity established by divine agency, Vivekananda acknowledges the socially constructed nature of the caste system, and the flexible and conflicting nature of its hierarchy, when he makes reference in "The Future of India" to the successful efforts of many *jātis* to elevate their *varṇa*-

⁹⁵ In an 1893 letter to Alasinga, Vivekananda noted the rapid disappearance of caste that was accompanying "the introduction of modern competition" in India ("Letters," *CW*, vol. 5, 23).

⁹⁶ "Letters," *CW*, vol. 5, 22.

status through collective contention.⁹⁷ As has already been mentioned, Vivekananda himself partook in this endeavour via his 'kṣatriya-ising' of *kāyasthas*' heritage.

We get further intimation of Vivekananda's belief in the shifting and even transitory character of caste in his statement, excerpted from an 1897 lecture in Jaffna, Ceylon, that, "though our castes and our institutions are apparently linked with our religion, they are not so. These institutions have been necessary to protect us as a nation, and when this necessity for self-preservation will no more exist, they will die a natural death."⁹⁸ Yet, if he agrees with the decoupling of religion and caste suggested by Müller, he seems to have become consciously aware of the Enlightenment thematic of 'modernisation' out of which originated much of Western caste-critique, and on this account has rethought the nature of the problematic. In the course of the same lecture, he states:

There was a time when I used to think that many of these ['time-honoured' institutions] were useless and worthless; but the older I grow, the more I seem to feel a diffidence in cursing any one of them, for each of them is the embodiment of the experience of centuries. A child of but yesterday, destined to die the day after tomorrow, comes to me and asks me to change all my plans; and if I hear the advice of that baby and change all my surroundings according to his ideas, I myself should be a fool, and no one else. Much of the advice that is coming to us from different countries is similar to this. Tell these wiseacres: 'I will hear you when you have made a stable society yourselves. You cannot hold on to one idea for two days, you quarrel and fail; you are born like moths in the spring and die like them in five minutes. You come up like bubbles and burst like bubbles too. First form a stable society like ours. First make laws and institutions that remain undiminished in their power through scores of centuries. Then will be the time to talk on the subject with you, but till then, my friend, you are only a giddy child.'⁹⁹

Through these assertions, Vivekananda is actually constructing a complex counter-discourse which 'answers back' to that advanced by colonialism (while simultaneously

⁹⁷ "The Future of India," *CW*, vol. 3, 296.

⁹⁸ "Vedantism," *CW*, vol. 3, 132.

obfuscating India's own internal discord over these supposedly "stable" institutions). He maintains Orientalism's fundamental (and quite simplistic) opposition between the unchanging Orient and the dynamic West. Yet, his 'agreement'—as we have seen in the case of much of his religious and philosophical reinterpretation—may be read as fundamentally mimetic, for he repeats the coloniser's narrative with an evaluative shift. He refuses to affirm the metanarrative of progress embedded within the Orientalists' critiques; the Orient is not stagnant but stable, resisting not forward change but *ephemeral* change. In doing so, Vivekananda implicitly calls upon a Hindu historiography which approaches the chronicled human past not in Judeo-Christian units of centuries or, at the most, millennia, but in *lākhs* of years, over the course of which, as Indian *itihāsa* sources have suggested, the fundamental principles of *dharma* have endured.¹⁰⁰ From this perspective, Western 'modernity' appears a very short span indeed, and one whose constantly changing attributes seem in opposition to the 'eternal values' ascribed to Hindu tradition. The very advances which entitle the West to issue judgment upon caste and other aspects of India's 'ancient' traditions are invoked by Vivekananda as evidence of the instability of those same societies, and, consequently, of their epistemologies and values.

From Racial Relic to Universal Social Structure

Vivekananda further distinguishes and unyokes his perspective on caste from the predominant Orientalist ones through his refutation of the racial-derivation theories advanced by his European contemporaries. Rather than (pseudo-)biological origins—the

⁹⁹ Ibid., 132-3.

percentage of Aryan blood, as the predominant racial theories maintained—

Vivekananda links the *cāturvarṇa* typology with the *triguṇa* classification proposed by ancient Hindu philosophers, explaining that *varṇa* groupings are attributable to “the prevalence, in greater or lesser degree, of the three qualities of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas in man.”¹⁰¹ This idea is not unique to Vivekananda, but has its root in the orthodox Sāṃkhya literature; the theme is encountered in subsequent prominent Indian texts, such as the *Bhagavadgītā*, as well.¹⁰² What is most significant here about Vivekananda’s attribution of caste to the preponderance of *guṇas*, is that he uses it as a basis upon which to *universalise* the phenomenon of caste, at least in the sense of *varṇa* divisions. Because the typology upon which it is based corresponds, in his view, to fundamental qualities of human nature, he is able to posit with the Romantic Orientalists that *varṇa* is not a culturally specific feature of Hindu-Indian society, but a universal element of human civilisation. “There is no country in the world without caste,”¹⁰³ he asserts in an 1897 Madras interview; he further writes, in an article published in the *Udbodhan* in 1899, that *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *sūdras* “are everywhere present at all times, in all civilised societies.”¹⁰⁴ (The significance of the implication that caste is an essential characteristic of civilisation—versus the Western critique that it is precisely caste that establishes India’s *uncivilised* nature—should not be overlooked.) In this respect, he—along with certain other Indian contemporaries¹⁰⁵—moves beyond the typical perspective

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion of the ways the theme of *dharmā* was utilised by Hindus within counter-colonial discourses, see Guha, 34-9; 55-60.

¹⁰¹ “Modern India,” *CW*, vol. 4, 449.

¹⁰² See *Bhagavadgītā* 4.13: *cāturvarṇyaṃ mayā sṛṣṭaṃ guṇakarmavibhāgaśaḥ* | “By Me was the fourfold *varṇa* system created, through the differentiation of *guṇas* and *karma*” (translation mine).

¹⁰³ “The Abroad and the Problems at Home,” *CW*, vol. 5, 214.

¹⁰⁴ “Modern India,” *CW*, vol. 4, 449.

¹⁰⁵ See Basu, 95-110.

of European ethnologists and other colonial-minded thinkers, who tended to brand caste a characteristically Hindu feature, contrasting it unfavourably with the supposed 'egalitarian' spirit of the modern West.¹⁰⁶

If caste is conceived by Vivekananda as a cultural universal, however, its Indian manifestation differs in consequential ways. In the article, "Aryans and Tamilians," discussed previously with respect to the swami's views on race, Vivekananda sets out what he considers to be the "two points" of divergence:

The first is, in every other country the highest honour belongs to the Kshatriya—the man of the sword. The Pope of Rome will be glad to trace his descent to some robber baron on the banks of the Rhine. In India, the highest honour belongs to the man of peace—the Sharmān, the Brahmin, the man of God....

The second point is, the difference of unit. The law of caste in every other country takes the individual man or woman as the sufficient unit. Wealth, power, intellect, or beauty suffices for the individual to leave the status of birth and scramble up to anywhere he can.

Here, the unit is all the members of a caste community.¹⁰⁷

Although he couches these assertions in unassuming language about how caste, cross-culturally, "will not be found so very different,"¹⁰⁸ this would be true only in terms of the most basic structural analysis. Indeed, Vivekananda is constructing a significant dichotomy between Hindu society and "other nations," one which speaks back in a mimetic fashion to the assumptions of colonial discourse. As in the case of his comments on the endurance of caste-divisions versus the rapid societal changes in Europe, he explicitly appropriates two critical pillars of the Orientalist paradigm: that India is essentially 'spiritual' and otherworldly—whereas the "other nations" are oriented towards political and martial conquest—and that Indian society restrains individual

¹⁰⁶ Bayle, 96.

¹⁰⁷ "Aryans and Tamilians," *CW*, vol. 4, 297.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

autonomy in the name of collective order. Vivekananda restates these criticisms, but inverts them into praise for India. We have already seen much evidence of the pervasiveness of the material–spiritual hierarchy in Vivekananda’s discourses; here, he couples with it an implicit counter-critique of Western individualism:

In India, you cannot, on account of your wealth, power, or any other merit, leave your fellows behind and make common cause with your superiors; you cannot deprive those who helped in your acquiring the excellence of any benefit therefrom and give them in return only contempt. 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.¹⁰⁹

As this passage suggests, in comparing and contrasting caste with European and American social structures, it is the caste-class distinction upon which Vivekananda’s critique turns. If, as he is willing to admit, the existing Indian social order has failures and drawbacks, the prevailing economic-based class stratification which he identifies as dominating the Western nations seems no better and at least equally rigid in its hierarchical tyranny. “With all the criticism of the Westerners against our caste,” wrote Vivekananda from Chicago, to the Maharaja of Mysore, in 1894, “they have a worse one—that of money.”¹¹⁰ This unfavourable analogy between Indian caste and Euro-American class is deployed by the swami in his public talks as a strategy for ridiculing and refuting Western ‘India-bashing’. As he declared before a large audience in Boston:

You say we are heathens, we are uneducated, uncultivated, but we laugh in our sleeves at your want of refinement in telling us such things. With us, quality and birth make caste, not money. No amount of money can do anything for you in India. In caste the poorest is as good as the richest, and that is one of the most beautiful things about it.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 298.

¹¹⁰ “Our Duty to the Masses,” *CW*, vol. 4, 361.

¹¹¹ “The Manners and Customs of India,” *CW*, vol. 2, 489.

While, as Amiya Sen has pointed out, Vivekananda's decoupling of caste from class in the Indian context is rather "utopian" and inaccurately dismissive of the complex interrelationship between caste, ritual status, class, and social power,¹¹² it is also a crucial pivot for his destabilisation of the moral ground claimed by his Western critics, and thereby may be read as an attempt to silence the perpetual critical voice of the coloniser towards the colonised. In fact, he is sometimes even more explicit in his dismissal of the right of the West to speak about the matter of caste in India. Appropriating the language of Orientalist discourse, and couching his criticism in a tone quite condescending, he told the aforementioned San Francisco interviewer:

Caste in India is an institution hardly explicable or intelligible to the Occidental mind. It is acknowledged to be an imperfect institution, but we do not recognize a superior social result from your attempts at class distinction. India is the only country which has so far succeeded in imposing a permanent caste upon her people, and we doubt if an exchange for Western superstitions and evils would be for her advantage.¹¹³

The West's authority to speak on matters pertaining to India is sharply curtailed by the gap between the "Occidental mind" and the unique epistemological and sociological structures of 'the Orient' which are implied in this statement. This is precisely the reverse of the significance imputed to the alleged fundamental East-West difference by Orientalism, which, as we have seen in the case of Müller, adopts the same as a basis for privileging the West as an authorised speaker for all matters Indian. The enduring institutions of India, such as caste, are favourably juxtaposed by Vivekananda against the fluctuating social norms of Euro-American culture. The very resilience and persistence of the former are valorised; the shifting class-based hierarchies of the latter, reproached.

¹¹² Sen, 77.

¹¹³ "Conversations and Interviews," *CW*, vol. 9, 324.

The Reform Question and the Redefinition of Caste

In practical terms, Vivekananda was more reticent to directly address the various Indian propositions for 'caste reform'. He declared to his listeners in Kumbakonam: "I am no preacher of any momentary social reform. I am not trying to remedy evils... I only ask you to work to realise more and more the Vedantic ideal of the solidarity of man and his inborn divine nature."¹¹⁴ In fact, he ridicules the efforts of contemporary social reformers in India to eliminate caste in conjunction with their endeavours to advance other societal causes, such as widow remarriage. India's "ancient law-givers," he states,

also were breakers of caste, but they were not like our modern men. They did not mean by the breaking of caste that all the people in the city should sit down together to a dinner of beef-steak and champagne, nor that all fools and lunatics in the country should marry when, where, and whom they chose and reduce the country to a lunatic asylum, nor did they believe that the prosperity of a nation is to be gauged by the number of husbands its widows get. I have yet to see such a prosperous nation.¹¹⁵

An audience comprised of his Indian contemporaries would, no doubt, have readily recognised his allusion to the liberal Hindu organisations—most notably, the Prārthanā Samāj—that were prominent in India's major urban centres during the late nineteenth century, and which employed inter-caste banquet-style dinners as a means by which to publicly flout ritual dining taboos, as well as to garner support for their allied social causes.¹¹⁶ While these groups tended to be professedly religious, their Christian-influenced Hindu theism obviously struck Vivekananda as spiritually inadequate and (probably correctly) as secondary to their social agendas.

Vivekananda, for his part, opts for a less ostentatious and more psycho-spiritual approach to caste reform, one which he claims, in his lecture on "The Future of India," is

¹¹⁴ "The Mission of the Vedanta," *CW*, vol. 3, 196.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

not in opposition to, but rather, is built upon, traditional Hindu foundations. The crux of the solution, he posits, lay “not by bringing down the higher, but by raising the lower up to the level of the higher.”¹¹⁷ He defends this position as authentically Hindu by an appeal to the scriptures:

And that is the line of work that is found in all our books, in spite of what you may hear from some people whose knowledge of their own scriptures and whose capacity to understand the mighty plans of the ancients are only zero. They do not understand, but those do that have brains, that have the intellect to grasp the whole scope of the work. They stand aside and follow the wonderful procession of national life through the ages. They can trace it step by step through all the books, ancient and modern. What is the plan? The ideal at one end is the Brahmin and the ideal at the other end is the Chandala [Untouchable], and the whole work is to raise the Chandala up to the Brahmin. Slowly and slowly you find more and more privileges granted to them. There are [Hindu] books where you read such fierce words as these: ‘If the Shudra hears the Vedas, fill his ears with molten lead, and if he remembers a line, cut his tongue out. If he says to the Brahmin, ‘You Brahmin’, cut his tongue out.’ This is diabolical old barbarism no doubt; that goes without saying; but do not blame the law-givers, who simply record the customs of some section of the community.... Accordingly, you will find that later on, this tone is modified a little, as for instance, ‘Do not disturb the Shudras, but do not teach them higher things’. Then gradually we find in other Smritis, especially in those that have full power now, that if the Shudras imitate the manner and customs of the Brahmins they do well, they ought to be encouraged.... [W]e find that all the castes are to rise slowly and slowly. There are thousands of castes, and some are even getting admission into Brahminhood, for what prevents any caste from declaring they are Brahmins? Thus caste, with all its rigour, has been created in that manner.¹¹⁸

As is evident from these statements, Vivekananda’s affirmative perspectives really depend upon a reconstruction of the very meaning of ‘caste’. Basu, drawing on insights from Chatterjee, observes that by semantically transforming terms such as caste, Vivekananda and other Hindu nationalists found a strategy “to question the self-image of the West, making the degraded and discredited features of colonised society look at least

¹¹⁶ See Bayly, 107.

¹¹⁷ “The Future of India,” *CW*, vol. 3, 295.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 295-6.

like the residual features of the metropolitan centre.”¹¹⁹ As a result, imperial criticism of India’s caste system could be deflected back at the critics’ own societies as well, levelling the Occident-Orient hierarchy implicit in colonial discourse. Also, because of this semantic alteration, the ‘caste’ of which Vivekananda speaks and writes is not invariably the ‘caste’ targeted by critics, be they indigenous or foreign—though it remains, like theirs, an essentialised construct. Thus, an implied dichotomy is discernable in Vivekananda’s work between ‘good’ (flexible, practical, socially and personally uplifting) caste and ‘bad’ (stagnant, unjust, degrading) caste. ‘True’ caste, for Vivekananda, was not a petrified entity that justified social and religious discrimination (which, he admits with great distress, “is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench”).¹²⁰ Rather, caste, in its ‘original’ form, “was the most glorious social institution,”¹²¹ a system designed to group persons according to their personal qualities (into *varṇas*) and occupation skills (into *jātis*), and which thus provided a “set of duties prescribed for man according to his capacity and position.”¹²² It is this form of caste—meritocratic, rather than hereditary, and integrative, not oppressive—which Vivekananda maintains prevailed during India’s Vedic period, and which the Vedic texts endorse.¹²³

Although most of his talks and writings seem to uphold the conventional brāhmaṇical sequence of the four *varṇas* (*brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, *śūdra*), rather than any of the alternative non-brahmin-centred hierarchies, there are certain places in his discourse that he appears to exalt the historical role and importance of the *kṣatriya* above

¹¹⁹ Basu, 105.

¹²⁰ “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 5, 23.

¹²¹ “India and England,” *CW*, vol. 5, 198.

¹²² “The East and the West,” *CW*, vol. 5, 455.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

that of the brahmin (a counter-hegemonic position long maintained by many *kṣatriya* communities).¹²⁴ The swami ascribes the deterioration of caste's role largely to the subsequent splintering of the original four *varṇas* into a plethora of subcastes. He advises—though how this is to be accomplished is not clear—that the numerous subdivisions be re-divided and regrouped into the four *varṇas*, “as was the case in Vedic times,”¹²⁵ to reduce the inter-*jāti* squabbles which he saw as fracturing the ‘original’ unity of Hinduism. Thus, caste, rightly understood and utilised, becomes one of Vivekananda's tools for the amalgamation of Hindus across regional and sectarian divides into a united religion. However, he remains basically silent on the question of the place of non-Hindus—particularly Muslims—with respect to these reformulated castes.

Yet, Vivekananda goes a step beyond these ideas for caste-system reform, positing that the qualities that characterise each group within the *cāturvarṇa* may be abstracted from the same, and can stand on their own merits as beneficial and necessary for a balanced, harmonious society. On the societal level, the brahmin represents learning and education; the *kṣatriya*, strength, energy, and military power; the *vaiśya*, wealth; and the *śūdra*, service.¹²⁶ Each civilisation, he explains, though comprised of all four ‘castes’ in various forms, at any given time predominately manifests the characteristics of one of these universal *varṇas*. It follows that a society's process of evolution can be chronicled as a series of caste-changes. He outlines some of these in an 1899 Bengali article:

¹²⁴ See, for example, the talk that he delivered to a San Francisco audience in 1900 on the *Bhagavadgītā*: “The second is the caste of the kings. ... All the Upanishadic philosophy is from the brains of kings, not priests. There [runs] an economic struggle through every religious struggle. This animal called man has some religious influence, but he is guided by economy. Individuals are guided by something else, but the mass of mankind never made a move unless economy was [involved].” (“The Gita I,” *CW*, vol. 1, 454.)

¹²⁵ “Conversations and Dialogues: XV,” *CW*, vol. 5, 406.

¹²⁶ “Aryans and Tamilians,” *CW*, vol. 4, 298; “Modern India,” *CW*, vol. 4, 467.

Europe, once the land of Shudras enslaved by Rome, is now filled with Kshatriya valour. Even before our eyes, powerful China, with fast strides, is going down to Shudra-hood, while insignificant Japan, rising with the sudden start of a rocket, is throwing off her Shudra nature and is invading by degrees the rights of the higher castes. The attaining of modern Greece and Italy to Kshatriya-hood and the decline of Turkey, Spain, and other countries, also, deserve consideration here.¹²⁷

America and Europe, for their part, “have now attained to Kshatriyahood.”¹²⁸ India has historically maintained and manifested the ideal of brahminhood, he explains, but Indians, under British rule, are being shunted into the role of *śūdras*, subservient to the colonial rulers who have appropriated the roles and duties of the other three *varṇas*.¹²⁹ This is in accordance with Vivekananda’s broader construal of history as a cyclical process of growth and regression, as we have observed in previous chapters. Here too, the implication for a forthcoming end to Indians’ present “Sudra-hood,” and, by inference, a conclusion to Britain’s colonial control thereover, is clear.

Likewise, on the individual level, Vivekananda transforms caste into a label signifying personal qualities rather than hereditary decent. This was a common strategy by Hindu revivalists of the time who sought to reform caste without refuting the validity of the *Vedas*’ *varṇa*-scheme—as the latter act would imperil their acceptance by more-conservative Hindu quarters. In particular, the swami stresses the importance of “Brahmanya qualities,”¹³⁰ and maintains that a predominantly ‘*sāttvika*’ nature may be equated with brahminhood.¹³¹ (In this respect, Vivekananda concurs with his influential Gujarati predecessor, Dayananda Saraswati, who, in his influential work, *Satyārtha Prakāśa*—‘The Light of Truth’—advanced the notion of *varṇa vyavasthā*, the conviction

¹²⁷ “Modern India,” *CW*, vol. 4, 468.

¹²⁸ “Conversations and Dialogues: X [Shri Priya Nath Sinha],” *CW*, vol. 5, 377.

¹²⁹ “Modern India,” *CW*, vol. 4, 466-7.

¹³⁰ “Conversations and Dialogues: X [Shri Priya Nath Sinha],” *CW*, vol. 5, 377.

that *varṇa*-labels properly refer to the character and accomplishments of individual Hindus, not to a status determined arbitrarily through one's natal family.)¹³² Among these brāhmanical qualities, Vivekananda includes serenity and purity,¹³³ introspectiveness and illumination,¹³⁴ and development of spiritual culture and renunciation.¹³⁵ These qualities mirror the values espoused by the Sanskrit yogic texts, particularly Patañjali's *Yogasūtras* and associated commentaries. In "the original Vedantic conception,"¹³⁶ Vivekananda maintains, the brahmin is one who is filled with spiritual wisdom, devoid of worldliness, and free of selfishness.¹³⁷ Further, he extrapolates,

if a country is altogether inhabited by such Brahmins, by men and women who are spiritual and moral and good, is it strange to think of that country as being above and beyond all law? What police, what military are necessary to govern them? Why should any one govern them at all? Why should they live under a government?¹³⁸

The political significance of the ideas expressed in this passage is difficult to overlook. Vivekananda's portrayal of personal, moral self-mastery (*ātmavaśya* or *vidheyātma*) as the sufficient precondition for self-governability, in light of the persistent contention on the part of the British that Indians *required* colonial rule to ensure social stability, bespeaks of the possibility of resistance through collective moral reform (a 'brahminisation' of society, one might say), an approach seemingly allied to that which Gandhi would advocate several decades later in the context of his campaign for Indian *svarāj*, self-rule.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 255.

¹³³ "Narada Bhakti Sutras," *CW*, vol. 6, 153.

¹³⁴ "Inspired Talks," *CW*, vol. 7, 12.

¹³⁵ "The Mission of the Vedanta," *CW*, vol. 3, 197.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

On the basis of this culturally disembodied and ahistorical reading of brahminhood, Vivekananda posits that not only are brahmins not confined to Hindu society, but that they may be found throughout other nations (even among the so-called *mlecchas*), inasmuch as individuals possess these definitive characteristics. (In this regard, Vivekananda likens his own perspective to that of the Buddha, who employed *brāhmaṇa* in the sense of a spiritually accomplished person.)¹³⁹ Further, in Vivekananda's interpretation of the Hindu scriptures, spiritual brahminhood (and, to some extent, temporal brahminhood as well) is cyclical—beginning with the universal possession of brāhmaṇical qualities by all persons (as at the time of the *satyayuga*, the legendary 'golden age'), going through a period of decline, and currently in the process of once again turning towards this ideal.¹⁴⁰ In the 'spiritual' sense, his goal is thus the "raising [of] all humanity slowly and gently towards the realisation of that great ideal of the spiritual man who is non-resisting, calm, steady, worshipful, pure, and meditative"¹⁴¹; in the Indian context, this further means working in solidarity, without animosity, for the common good of all of the nation's people.¹⁴²

Despite his repudiation of any essential link between religion and caste, Vivekananda's representation and reconstruction of the *cāturvarṇa* system, as well as of the concept of 'caste' as such, are quite obviously significant components of his vision of Hindu unity, and also possess clear linkages with the ideals set forth in brāhmaṇical literature. The swami expresses an idealist vision that seeks to engage, yet subvert, the hegemonic discourses of caste that permeated existing Orientalist/colonial discourses. On

¹³⁹ "True Buddhism" [newspaper report], *CW*, vol. 2, 508.

¹⁴⁰ "The Mission of the Vedanta," *CW*, vol. 3, 197-8.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

the one hand, in so doing, Vivekananda re-inscribes caste as a defining feature of Indian life and thought, with a definite high-caste bias embedded in the particular formulation he accepts. Yet, we witness how 'caste', despite its strongly essentialised construction and frequent deployment by the colonial authorities for the sake of securing their own dominant position, was also thus capable of being strategically pressed into service by Vivekananda as an important tool to further his national, social, and religious goals.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 199.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BENGALI *BĀBŪS* AND BHĀRAT MĀTĀ: VIVEKANANDA'S GENDERED DISCOURSES

In each nation, man or woman represents an ideal consciously or unconsciously being worked out. The individual is the external expression of an ideal to be embodied. The collection of such individuals is the nation, which also represents a great ideal; towards that it is moving. And, therefore, it is rightly assumed that to understand a nation you must first understand its ideal, for each nation refuses to be judged by any other standard than its own.

—Vivekananda, “Women of India,” delivered in California, 1900¹

One of the most-significant manifestations of the power embedded within imperial discourses may be glimpsed through the examination of colonial concepts of gender. Gender-related constructs themselves are deeply interpenetrated by themes of nation, race, caste, and religion, and speak volumes about the ways in which colonial patterns of thought have sought to order the world and, in turn, make it manageable. This is certainly true in the case of Vivekananda's work, and, indeed, of almost all colonial-period discourses, both those created by the metropolitan culture and those constructed in response by Indians.

Masculinity, Gendered Bodies, and the Bengali Bābū

As in the case of other areas of thought, nineteenth-century Bengali society was a site of encounter between competing notions of masculinity and femininity. These

concepts did not arise *ex nihilo* in colonial Bengal, but, rather, were overdetermined by a host of factors in the respective cultural traditions and social practices of India and England. Further, Bengali and British constructions of gender did not operate in isolation from each other, but were integrally involved in a dynamic process of mutual formulation. As historian Mrinalini Sinha notes in her monograph, *Colonial Masculinity*, gender needs to be approached as not simply a field for the expression of colonial power dynamics, but as one of the axes along which power was actually constructed.²

During the middle to late decades of the nineteenth century, the British government faced the challenge of maintaining its control over India's huge and diverse body of persons, while avoiding a repeat of the 1857 upheaval that had brought an unwelcome awareness of the ease with which Britain's power and authority over its prized colony might be destabilised. Thus, to preserve its control, the imperial centre sought to employ more subtle strategies of power, frequently via the deployment of hegemonic discursive strategies laden with racialised and gendered rhetorical tropes. The awareness of the fragile hold that the British government had over its far-flung subjects was the source of much anxiety to the rulers in the metropole, and fears of racial degeneracy aroused concern to preserve and enhance the physical, mental, and moral strength of the imperial race in an attempt to ensure its continued status as an agent of global conquest and control.³

¹ "Women of India," *CW*, vol. 8, 55.

² Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 11.

³ Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, *The New Cambridge History of India*, III.4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 44-59.

This aim was a correlate of the then-prominent conviction that the human body was fundamentally dynamic and, thus, that individuals—and, by extension, collective racial and social entities—were subject to “a never-ending process of bodily decay and renewal.”⁴ To counteract the potentially deleterious effects of this process, care and attention had to be paid to conscientiously maintaining both racial and somatic superiority. In addition, the ever-present perceived threat of national destabilisation by the ‘othered’ minorities within British home territory (particularly the exploited English working class and the so-imagined ‘barbaric’ Irish), acted as a further impetus for the engineering of discourses that melded race and gender into powerful instruments for the assertion of a middle-class, white, Anglo-Saxon supremacy needed to bolster confidence in the persistence and stability of the Empire.⁵

In the Indian colony, there was growing concern among the colonial administrators that the English-educated Bengali *bhadralok* were becoming a source of undesirable competition as well as potential Indian nationalistic aspiration.⁶ In order to counter this threat, asserts Sinha, the promotion of a belief in the fundamental *effeminacy* of the Bengali people was undertaken with vigour by British writers in India and others involved in colonial knowledge production.⁷ This supposed effeminacy was constructed and ascribed to Bengalis by colonial discourses in a variety of ways, many of which have

⁴ Joyce L. Huff, “A ‘Horror of Corpulence’: Interrogating Bantingism and Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fat Phobia,” in *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. J. Braziel and K. LeBesco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 43.

⁵ This process is discussed in detail by Anne McClintock throughout her book, *Imperial Leather: Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁶ Sinha, 3-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14. Revathi Krishnaswamy has aptly branded the concept of ‘effeminism’ an *ideologeme* (a neologism ascribed to Fredric Jameson), for its ability to assume varied manifestations, including a concept, a value, a prejudice, or a ‘protonarrative’. See Krishnaswamy, *Effeminism: The Economy of Colonial Desire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 6.

been described in detail by Sinha.⁸ Terms like ‘feeble’, ‘enervated’, ‘languid’, ‘passive’, ‘soft’, and ‘delicate’ pepper the colonial representation of the Bengali *bābū*, and sit comfortably beside such qualities as untruthfulness, money-hunger, licentiousness, and cowardice, all attributed to the same.⁹ The *bābū*’s interest in the language and ideas of his colonial masters is consistently represented therein as merely a shallow, slavish imitation, an aping for the purpose of social and economic advancement;¹⁰ he is Bhabha’s ‘mimic man’ *par excellence*. This persistent criticism of Bengali character was also impregnated with Western assumptions about the interconnection between race, caste, and somatic type. The *bābū*, most commonly hailing from a particular *jāti*—the *kāyastha*, which was traditionally devoted to literary (and thus, sedentary) pursuits—was considered to be physically bred for a life of indolence, in contrast, for example, to the *ksatriya* ‘martial races’ of India’s northwestern provinces.¹¹ Through the creation of the stereotype of the effeminate Bengali, the Raj had an avenue by which to attack and ridicule “the grandiose pretensions and the economic importance of the potentially disloyal Anglicised or English-educated Indian in particular.”¹² In this way, the British could ‘defuse’ the threat by providing an ideological justification for the exclusion, via a rhetorical strategy founded upon systematic feminisation, of Bengalis

⁸ Sinha, 1-32, *passim*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See Joya Chatterji, “The Construction of Bhadrakol Communal Identity: Culture and Communalism in Bengal,” in *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 162-3.

¹¹ Sinha, 5-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 17-18.

from positions of real power, the latter represented as solely the proper domain of the ‘manly Englishman’.¹³

To accomplish this, a willing ally was found in the European sciences of ethnology and anthropometrics, which declared that the Bengali race’s ‘physical degeneracy’ was embedded in their biological composition, included their claimed ‘mixed Aryan’ blood, and further fostered by deficiencies of diet, climatological stress, premature marriage, early sexual activity and childbearing, sedentary lives, stifling social organization (i.e., caste), and perverted religiosity.¹⁴ (It is important to note here that the *bābū*-characterisation was almost exclusively applied to Bengali *Hindus*, and of these, principally to the clerical—‘*cākri*’—class, such as was typified by Vivekananda’s own *kāyastha jāti*.)¹⁵

These constructions were consistently contrasted with the self-representation of the ‘masculine’ Englishman, whose alleged superiority was attributed to both a superior (read: unadulterated) racial heritage, as well as environmental factors opposite to those invariably experienced by the Bengali: a ‘strengthening’ meat-based diet, an invigorating climate, restrained patterns of sexual expression and late reproduction, competitive games and other forms of athleticism, an egalitarianism which fostered healthy social competition, and the ‘muscular Christianity’ of Victorian Protestantism.¹⁶ These emphases were not simply the products of a desire to dominate colonised ‘others’, but

¹³ As Krishnaswamy explains, “The ultimate goal of authorizing a European claim to ownership through a feminization of India(n) was to establish the dominance of white men not over brown women but over brown men, who were seen as the legitimate owners of brown women and as the real objects of colonial rule” (Krishnaswamy, 3).

¹⁴ Sinha, 20-21.

¹⁵ For a discussion of *kāyastha* status in Bengal, see Amitabha Mukherjee, “Swami Vivekananda and the Institution of Caste in Bengali Hindu Society,” *Quarterly Review of Historical Studies* 39 (Oct. 1999-March 2000), 19-35.

were part of a broader Western attempt, as feminist scholar Joyce L. Huff explains, to fend off “the burdens of embodiment—the uncertainties, flux, and grotesqueries of embodied existence.... [whereas] a ‘well-managed’ body denies its own embodiment, assuming the role as ideal”¹⁷—an ideal which simultaneously emphasised and negated the role of the body in defining self and personhood. As well, a strong current of anti-intellectualism, which stressed the importance of the pursuit of physical prowess (at a time in history when, ironically, due to the Industrial Revolution, it had never been *less* necessary) and the degenerative bodily consequences of excessive bookish pursuits, helped to bolster British perceptions of their own cultural superiority and the corresponding inferiority of the ‘literary’ Bengali *bābū*.¹⁸ (In fact, the attribution of ‘degenerate’ and ‘effeminate’ qualities to the *bābū*—who served as a critical discursive other for Britons in India—soon became an essential buttress to the maintenance of a sense of colonial British masculinity.) That the ‘manly Englishman’ was entitled, and even morally obligated, to rule over an ‘effeminate race’ was generally accepted among the British as a natural fact, deemed part and parcel of the ‘white man’s burden’.¹⁹ In fact, nineteenth-century constructions of imperial masculinity are replete with the suggestion that, for the white middle-class male Briton, participation in the colonial project was

¹⁶ Sinha, 20-21.

¹⁷ Huff, 52.

¹⁸ This attitude is obvious in a quote by Sir George Campbell, Bengal’s lieutenant governor in the 1870s: “I spared nothing to make that college [the College of Engineering, Calcutta] complete, but the Bengalis seemed infinitely to prefer literature, law, and politics to anything that required some physical as well as mental exertion.” (Quoted by Paul Dimeo, “Sporting and the ‘Civilizing Mission’ in India,” in *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India*, ed. H. Fischer-Tine and Michael Mann. [London: Anthem Press, 2004], 168.)

¹⁹ Sinha, 14-16.

itself a vital aspect of developing his true manhood.²⁰ The act of testing one's physical prowess and mental agility in an 'untamed' land, amid a homosocial environment isolated from the domestic (feminine) realm—which threatened to weaken the fragile nascent masculinity of the young British male—became a trope deployed for the practical purpose of enlisting in overseas government service the substantial numbers of men needed to keep Britain's colonies running effectively. (This simultaneously minimised the share of power and authority that need be transferred to the native compradors, whose loyalty to the Empire was always somewhat suspect.)²¹

The British rulers' façade of inherent superiority over their Bengali underlings (perceived as their primary contenders for administrative power) was further bolstered by their (mis)application of precolonial Indian concepts of physical prowess, endurance, and martiality to various caste and 'racial' groupings within India itself. The identification and valourisation of certain groups as 'martial races' was, postcolonial scholars have noted, a projection of Victorian Britons' own aspirations to identify themselves with particular images of masculinity, and to disavow what were perceived as feminine/effeminate qualities.²² Thus, certain Indian people-groups, such as the *Jāts* and the *Gorkhās*, were fêted ostensibly for their admirable 'manly' qualities (but the approval they received was, in reality, dependent upon their loyalty and service to the British),

²⁰ John Beynon has provided some insightful and syncretic discussion of this theme in his essay "Masculinities and the Imperial Imaginary," chap. 2 of *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 26-52.

²¹ Sinha, 9; 17-18.

²² Metcalf, 127.

while Bengali *bābūs* were almost invariably situated at the bottom of the hierarchy—delegitimised, disempowered, and discursively castrated.²³

Effeminate Religiosity

Not merely Bengali men, but also Bengali religious forms themselves were frequently conceptualised by Europeans in terms of effeminacy. The dominance of goddess-based devotional movements, with what were considered to be their sensuality and generally degenerate character, was regarded as a particularly potent marker of the depth of the Bengali male's lack of masculinity. So too were the Vaiṣṇava counterparts to these traditions, which—though of decreasing influence in urban Bengal during the mid-to-late colonial period, partly as a result of the nationalism-fuelled growth of *devī* cults—were considered representative of a superficial emotionalism that pervaded the Bengali character.²⁴ Further, for the British, who were inordinately concerned with maintaining sharply defined male and female roles,²⁵ the Caitanya-influenced *bhakti* traditions embodied a disturbingly ambiguous and transgressive sense of gender identity, with male devotees sometimes donning female attire to better emulate the *gopīs* in their love for Kṛṣṇa. (In particular, the fear of homosexuality, the culmination of gender hybridity and sex-role transgression, loomed large in the British psyche.)²⁶ Metcalf has commented upon the self-perpetuating circularity of these arguments: “Hinduism was of necessity

²³ Some Bengalis themselves openly engaged this colonial effeminisation. See, for example, Partha Chatterjee's discussion of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's treatment of the theme of the Bengali *bābū*, in Chatterjee, “A Religion of Urban Domesticity: Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Class,” in *Subaltern Studies VII*, ed. P. Chatterjee and G. Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 61-4.

²⁴ Sumanta Banerjee, “The Ambiguities of Bharat Mata: A Bhadrakalok Goddess in Colonial Bengal,” in *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 20002), 210-11.

²⁵ Metcalf, 111.

²⁶ John Beynon, “Masculinities and the Imperial Imaginary,” chap. in *Masculinities and Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 49.

effeminate because it was degraded, and degraded because it was effeminate.²⁷

However, as in the case of other dimensions of colonial discourse, such incongruity was concealed in the interest of the more-pressing project of perpetuating the image of a feminised Orient.

Women and Empire: Intersections of Gender, Culture, and Race

All constructions of masculinity and 'manhood' are, of course, interwoven with the formation of the concepts of femininity and 'womanhood', and the situation in colonial India was no exception. Two groups of women were the especial objects of gender discourses in colonial Bengal—India's indigenous—'native'—women (primarily Hindus and Muslims) and women of British origin (almost wholly Christians, save for a few Theosophists and the like) resident in the colony, respectively. As Sinha demonstrates, the subjugation of Hindu women became a prominent theme in the British construction of the Hindu male's effeminacy (based upon the British postulation that 'real men' were chivalrous and protective towards women), and was commonly used to justify the continuing denial of power and authority to Indian males. In particular, the theme of the Indian woman as in need of continued protection by the 'gentleman' coloniser on account of the corruption, degeneracy and effeminacy ascribed to the 'native' male, functioned throughout the colonial period as a powerful reinforcement of Britons' perceived necessity for their own continued paternal presence and governance in India.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid., 101.

²⁸ This achieved a particularly notable and public manifestation in the late-nineteenth-century 'Age of Consent Act', which sought to legally establish the age of permissible consummation of marriage at twelve, in the interest of protecting 'child brides'. The intense opposition that this bill generated in many Indian circles—where it was regarded as a foreign transgression upon private domestic rights—was considered further evidence of Indian men's sexual debasement. See Sinha, chap. 4, 138-80.

(Postcolonial scholar Sangeeta Ray has argued that this “rhetoric of benevolence extended towards the subjugated ‘native’ woman by the British” was inherently fraught with paradoxical contradiction, because “the female ‘native’ body is the nonliminal site of otherness that makes possible the realization of the imagined [British Indian] community.”)²⁹ The Indian—and, particularly, Hindu—woman was generally represented in British colonial discourse as little more than a one-dimensional oppressed subject of male tyranny³⁰—a portrayal which prompted many Hindu reformers to counter these Western constructions with representations of their own. The ‘oppressed’ Indian woman became the ‘protected’ lady; the ‘child-bride forced into early childbearing’ became the exalted representation of divine Motherhood; the ‘slave of her husband’ became the model of saintly fortitude in all circumstances.³¹

In particular, the notion of ‘ideal womanhood’ loomed large on the screen upon which ideological and practical debates on gender, race, and nation played out in colonial India—or rather, to a significant extent, the ‘ideal woman’ was that screen itself. The concept of ‘ideal womanhood’ presupposes, of course, the existence of an ideal woman or women, to whom may be attributed the qualities desirable of emulation; it also simultaneously points to the presence of one who ascribes these qualities, and the motives out of which this is done. Femininity, for the Hindu woman in male reformers’ discourses, was largely constituted by her adherence to ‘tradition’—in particular, her

²⁹ Sangeeta Ray, *Engendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 8.

³⁰ See, for example, Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?: Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81.

³¹ See Judith E. Walsh, “What Women Learned: Rewriting Patriarchy, Writing the Nation and the Self,” chap. in *Domesticity in Colonial India: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 141-61 passim.

emulation of benign and beneficent mythical types (such as Sītā, Sāvitrī, and Draupadī),³² her perpetuation of the noble role of the faithful wife (*dharmapatnī*), and her manifestation of maternal dignity.³³ Even in instances in which these discourses lauded the growing power and independence of the middle-class educated Hindu woman, they tended to concurrently delimit this autonomy by stressing that women's primary duty remained in the domestic sphere, in fulfilling their responsibilities to their husbands, children, elder relatives, and homes.³⁴ In particular, this theme of woman as 'Mother' (*Mā* or *Mātāji*) was a dominant one in Śākta-dominated Hindu Bengal, where the image and power of *Mahādevī* loomed large. In many cases, the theme of 'ideal womanhood' was incorporated into the larger revivalist narrative of a return to a past 'golden age' of ideal Hindu society (which, naturally, served as a site for the deployment of such gender roles and rhetoric as well).

In reality, in much of the debate surrounding social reformation policies affecting women, such as widow remarriage and female education, the position of women served as a trope deployed to shore up embattled concepts of masculinity. The push for 'women's upliftment' among nineteenth-century Indian reformers, as Sumit Sarkar has pointed out, was driven by men—primarily those of the middle-class—and not by women themselves.³⁵ Indeed, the 'women' at the centre of these debates were often, by the West's standards, no more than children; Raychaudhuri has drawn attention to the fact that the widows whose 'right to remarriage' was sought by the Hindu reformers were

³² Prabhati Mukherjee has provided an informative, if largely uninterrogated, overview of the major 'ideal' figures from Hindu mythology which have been raised up as models for modern Hindu women in her monograph *Hindu Women: Normative Models* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1978).

³³ See Walsh, 141-61.

³⁴ Banerjee, "The Ambiguities of Bharat Mata," 205.

commonly pre-adolescent girls.³⁶ The advocacy by many *bhadralok* males, particularly among the Brahmo Samājists, of increased levels of female education—preferably tailored specifically to women’s ‘needs’, as men perceived them³⁷—was, no doubt, in part driven by concern regarding women’s potential contributions to society as a whole, and even, at times, their genuine well-being as individuals. However, another stimulus may be identified in the emerging pressure within urban middle-class public (i.e., male) society to remake women, especially wives, according to the models espoused (even if not always practiced) by British culture, stressing their role as ‘companions’, rather than simply domestic supports and sources of offspring.³⁸ As a result, middle-class Hindu men, who were usually older and better educated than their wives, were encouraged to assume the role of teachers, and educate their spouses with the help of domestic guidebooks and manuals—what Judith E. Walsh terms “advice literature”—written specifically for this purpose.³⁹ Yet, here too, the reformers’ ‘ideal woman’ tended to be based upon unidimensional and constraining stereotypes, imposed by males and crafted to meet their needs, not necessarily those of the women concerned.⁴⁰ Much of the anxiety over the lack of education of a family’s female members, for example, was actually driven by a perceived need to demonstrate the ‘modern’ outlook of the *men* in question, permitting males to prove their own ‘advancement’ by *allowing* the women over whom they had domestic authority to move freely outside the home, acquire literacy

³⁵ Sumit Sarkar, “The Controlled Emancipation of Wives,” in *Social and Religious Reform: The Hindus of British India*, ed. by Amiya P. Sen (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 162-9.

³⁶ Tapan Raychaudhuri, “Love in a Colonial Climate: Marriage, Sex and Romance in Nineteenth-Century Bengal,” *Modern Asian Studies* 34 (no. 2, 2000): 352.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 370.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 369.

³⁹ See Walsh; also, Raychaudhuri, “Love in a Colonial Climate,” 369-70.

⁴⁰ See Basu, 158-9.

skills, and even, occasionally, become schooled in specialised knowledge.⁴¹ Thus, the real aim of much of the nationalist reformers' discourse on gender, asserts Krishnaswamy, "was to reclaim the lost manhood of Indian men, [while its] material effect [was] to recontain women within a reconstituted patriarchy."⁴² In effect, the discourse remained a phallogocentric one even when ostensibly centred upon women.

The British (and, to a lesser extent, American) woman's position in colonial discourses during this period was quite different from that of her Hindu sister, something which homogenising feminist discourses have often been apt to overlook. As Anne McClintock observes, although white Western women were, to some extent, complicit with imperial efforts, they were barred from decision-making roles, experienced few of the benefits that colonialism bestowed upon white males, and were, in fact, restricted by its practices and discourses.⁴³ The idealisation of the (white Western) woman had become an especially powerful feature of British thought during the nineteenth century with the growth of 'domestic ideology', serving to regulate female participation in various spheres of life (according to their deemed propriety for the rarefied 'English lady'). It also became an integral part of British thought and practice in India, and the 'ennoblement' of women was widely upheld as an index of a civilisation's advancement.⁴⁴ Paradoxically, however, the perception on the part of the British male that it was especially necessary to defend 'ladies' in India from any possible affront (or worse) by 'degenerate' Indian men strengthened the importance and authority of discourses on what Sinha has termed the myth of 'white womanhood', which, in turn, actually increased the social restrictions on

⁴¹ Raychaudhuri, "Love in a Colonial Climate," 369-70.

⁴² Krishnaswamy, 4.

⁴³ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.

women's lives.⁴⁵ Colonial conceptions of European women in India were thus decidedly overdetermined: women were both revered by, and required the protection of, European men (who thereby proved their masculinity), and these women were also considered to have a special responsibility for upholding the pride and purity of the 'white race' (by upholding British ideals of femininity and domesticity, and avoiding 'improper' contact with 'natives').⁴⁶ As well, the emerging women's rights movement in England that threatened to challenge masculine power and authority in the metropole made it imperative to locate the essence of the ideal Englishwoman in her 'traditional' feminine and domestic spheres, which lacked the potential for destabilising the status quo.⁴⁷ Interestingly, Sinha notes, Anglo-Saxon women also served as models to which Bengali male 'effeminacy' was unflatteringly likened and with which British male 'masculinity' was favourably contrasted.⁴⁸ While such qualities as public diffidence and a physically indolent lifestyle were considered befitting for a woman, and, in fact, were even deemed essential ingredients of her 'femininity', they were 'unnatural' and blameworthy qualities when attributed to the Bengali man.

It is noteworthy that, although the constructions of Indian and English women and their respective, characteristic 'femininities' diverged in their particulars, and were formulated differently by Indians and Britons, both were characterised by abstracted portrayals. The women of India became 'the Indian woman'; their British counterparts were representatives of 'white womanhood'. In both cases, women's 'womanhood' was

⁴⁴ Metcalf, 94.

⁴⁵ See Sinha, 46-56.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 46-7.

⁴⁷ Beynon, 40.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 34-5.

largely constructed *for* them, not *by* them.⁴⁹ As is typical of imperialist discourses, shades of difference and plurality were homogenised into idealisations that could be invoked for whichever purpose—religious, national, racial, or the like—required them. The portrayals of English and Indian women were also intimately interconnected. The British woman in India was constructed as both ‘not masculine’ and ‘not Indian’. (The fear of ‘going native’, or losing cultural superiority through contamination by the other, remained an ever-present concern for the British in this regard.) The Hindu woman, for her part, was represented as simultaneously ‘not male’ (i.e., as characterised by a unique *strīdharmā*, or woman’s duty) and ‘not white’ (and, therefore, still requiring the intervention of colonial forces to ‘uplift’ her), and thus was doubly disempowered.⁵⁰

Hindu and white women both served as symbolic guardians of domestic and national spaces. By her faithfulness to her husband and to ‘Hindu tradition’, the Indian woman maintained the continuity and sanctity of the Hindu home and, by extension, the Hindu nation. The white woman preserved the separation and superiority of British civilisation, which remained encircled by the ever-present threat of intrusion by the native, threatening to destabilise the coloniser’s hegemony. In these roles as ‘protectresses’, both the Indian Hindu woman and the British Indian woman ensured not just the preservation of their respective cultures, but also defended the masculinity of their respective male counterparts (whose maleness was perpetually constructed against the women’s femininity), and the purity and strength of their respective ‘races’ and

⁴⁹ For a discussion of women’s lack of voice in the debates on the position of Indian women, see Barbara Southard, *The Women’s Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal: The Quest for Political Rights, Education and Social Reform Legislation, 1921-1936* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 11-13.

castes/classes (by preventing miscegenation and other 'improper' social admixture).

That these idealistic constructions did not take into account the immense diversity of actual women's daily lives in modern Indian, British, or Anglo-Indian society—or, in most cases, even desire to do so—hardly needs mention. Their importance, rather, lay in the ways in which Hindu women and British women both served as contested sites for a multiplicity of powerful discourses within the colonial setting.

Sexual Otherness

Closely related to considerations of gender as such, sexuality marked another ground upon which questions of colonial authority and hegemony were fought. Nineteenth-century English author Charles Kingsley and his fellow proponents of 'manly' or 'muscular' Protestantism gave a prominent place in their writings to the role and regulation of sexual expression, a theme that found resonance in the veiled social and sexual desires of Victorian Britain. For Kingsley, all aspects of 'human nature', including sexual drives and desires, were 'spiritual' and, according to David Rosen's analysis, were regarded as "sanctified force[s] of male behaviour."⁵¹ Provided they were regulated and expressed within 'lawful' boundaries (in this case, meaning heterosexual Christian marriage), the satisfaction of sexual urges was not merely considered morally tolerable, but virtually a holy necessity, a manifestation of "the divine spirit moving with."⁵² It will perhaps come as no surprise that Kingsley and other 'muscular' Christians tended to

⁵⁰ This theme is explored most notably in the work of Gayatri Spivak. See Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

⁵¹ David Rosen, "The Volcano and the Cathedral: Muscular Christianity and the Origins of Primal Manliness," in *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*, ed. D. E. Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 26.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 25.

display a quite-strident anti-Catholicism, for reasons including, among others, the Catholic stress on the value of celibacy. This perspective was evident in certain Protestant missionary criticisms of Hinduism, the espousers of which—when they were not, paradoxically, condemning Hindus as sexually perverted, uncontrolled, and licentious—were given to invoking Indian religiosity as a screen onto which to project sectarian diatribes against ‘priest-ridden’ religion and the sexual repression it was regarded as fostering.⁵³ This position drew further support from pronouncements regarding human sexuality from the emerging field of psychoanalysis, as well as the growing Western ethos of *scientia sexualis*.⁵⁴ Thus, the colonisers’ sexual exotification of Indians could take the form of either an attribution of moral degeneracy and wantonness to the Hindu ‘race’, or the branding of the same, via ‘scientific’ discourses, as pathologically repressed; in both cases, the Indian’s sexually remained fundamentally ‘other’.

Gendering the Nation

In recent decades, gender and sexuality as categories of analysis have been incisively applied by feminist and womanist scholars not merely to the construction of human identities, but also to the formulation and representation of ideas, concepts, and other phenomena. “Sexuality as a trope for other power relations,” notes McClintock in

⁵³ Marriott notes this phenomenon of Protestant transference of anti-Catholic sentiments to brāhmanical Hinduism in a general sense (Marriott, 207). Consider, for example, Mill’s conviction that India’s ‘priest-dominated’ social order was a manifestation of its primitiveness, in implied contrast to the ‘enlightened’ religious autonomy of Protestant Europe. (Mill’s views are discussed by Robert Inden in *Imagining India* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990].)

⁵⁴ Once, in the course of an American lecture delivered in 1900, Vivekananda railed against the growing emphasis on interpreting chastity as ‘sexual repression’ in Western medical circles, exclaiming: “You doctors in this country, who hold that chastity is against the law of nature, don’t know what you are talking about. You don’t know the meaning of the word purity. You are beasts! beasts! I say, with the morals of a tomcat, if that is the best you have to say on that subject!” (quoted in *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 2, 518).

this regard, “was certainly an abiding aspect of imperial power.”⁵⁵ In particular, in the context of unpacking the rhetoric of colonialism, an examination of the application of gendered language and thought to ideas of place, space, and nation often reveals much of significance. Commonly, the gendered language and imagery which is deployed contains deeply ambivalent signifiers. As Christopher E. Gittings reminds us, “the British empire allegorised its hegemonic relationship to its colonies in a mother-daughter image”⁵⁶—an image which disguised and displaced the masculine narrative and brutal reality of colonial imperialism with a benign, maternal representation of the deific figure Britannia.⁵⁷ Gendered discourses were an even more dominant feature of the Indian cultural terrain, even in pre-colonial times. The notion that *bhūmi* (a term embodying a different set of connotations than does the English word ‘land’) is feminine, even itself a divinity (Pṛthivī), has long been an accepted tenet within Hindu religious thought. The deployment of the rhetoric of Bhārat Mātā (‘Mother India’) by Hindus in the nineteenth century to refer, in a minimally differentiated sense, to the ‘Indian nation’, the geographical territory and topography of India, and a particular manifestation of the Divine, reflects not merely this ancient identification of the land with the Goddess. It also embodies a perception of India’s ‘inviolability’, and an implication of the profound moral consequences of the (colonial) breach and desecration of the same. (After all, the juxtaposition of maternal imagery and imperialist ‘rape’ could hardly fail to be a powerful motivator of colonial resistance.) As Sumanta Banerjee has noted, the concept of Bhārat Mātā underwent a shift towards the close of the nineteenth century, with her

⁵⁵ McClintock, 14.

⁵⁶ Christopher Gittings, ed., *Imperialism and Gender: Constructions of Masculinity* (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1996), 2.

earlier conception as a benign figure of collective prosperity (much like Annapūrṇā-devī) recast in the fierce image of Kālī, a model of aggressive power bringing transformation through the embrace of death, and reflecting a shift in nationalistic striving from the rhetorical to the militant.⁵⁸ Thus, in the Indian setting, the imbrication of gender and nation was often discursively displaced onto the 'authoritative' terrain of religion.

Vivekananda's Manly Men: Muscular Hinduism

Vivekananda, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, was himself born into a Bengali *kāyastha* family whose hereditary occupation was clerical and legal work. In this respect, at least in his pre-monastic days, he belonged to the very socio-cultural group that was the main target of imperial discourses of masculinity and the unfortunate object of *bābū*-rhetoric. That he did not remain unaffected by the psychological and practical consequences of these discourses, even in his youth, is apparent. Consider, for example, young Narendra's fondness for *akhārās*—gymnasia—and his efforts to cultivate his skills in a number of aggressive sports, including the Indian art of '*lāthī*-play', boxing, and wrestling.⁵⁹ While these activities might not be considered unusual for an energetic male youth, their prominence and popularity as pastimes in colonial Bengali society was fostered in part by the ethos of 'spiritual athleticism' which had emerged in the colonial metropole as well as its satellites during the nineteenth century. As was typical in Calcutta *akhārās*, the choice of young men's sporting activities exhibited a 'martial' cast

⁵⁷ Banerjee, 201-2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 203.

⁵⁹ *The Life of Swami Vivekananda: By His Eastern and Western Disciples*, 6th ed, vol. 1 (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), 35.

that made them all-the-more appropriate counters to the assertions of middle-class Bengali physical degeneracy.⁶⁰

Even a casual reading of Vivekananda's work will reveal the dominant role of discourses of masculinity in his thought. The binary patterns of imperialism are particularly visible in the intense and recurring rhetoric of 'strength' versus 'weakness'. 'Strength', for Vivekananda, is—as it was for the Victorian Britons of his day—a physical, mental, moral, and spiritual quality, and one that was perceived as a necessary support for achievement in any area of life. In this respect, Vivekananda was well in accordance with the personal, social, and religious ideals advanced by nineteenth-century Anglo-American 'muscular Christianity', referred to above, which constructed the male body as a site of personal strength, competence, and self-control, mirroring the central thrusts of the imperialist project, with which it was contemporaneous.⁶¹ This construction of the 'manly Christian Englishman', as we have discussed above, was instrumental in forming Britain's perception of itself as "a land of rugged warriors far removed from metropolitan life with its unhealthy, politically restless men,"⁶² suited instead to adventure and conquest in far-off lands. The British discourse of masculinity intimately and explicitly linked this image to ideas of national vigour and cohesion, moral and religious superiority, and racial purity. Beyond its manifestations through colonial apparatus and evangelical British Protestantism, its ethos was also appropriated, in

⁶⁰ Sinha, 21.

⁶¹ The term 'muscular Christianity' had its origins in T. C. Sandars' review of Anglican clergyman Charles Kingsley's book, *Two Years Ago*, published in 1857. For more background on the concept, see Donald E. Hall, ed., *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁶² C. J. W.-L. Wee, "Christian Manliness and National Identity: The Problematic Construction of a Racially 'Pure' Nation," in Hall, 67.

subtler ways, by other writers on spirituality (including Emerson,⁶³ of whose work Vivekananda was fond).⁶⁴ As with all colonial self-representations, however, an ‘other’ was required upon which to project the disavowed opposing qualities of delicacy, effeminacy, and cerebralism—and, as mentioned, the Indian (particularly, the middle-class Bengali) became a particularly advantageous object for this.

The influence of these discourses upon Vivekananda was not insignificant. In particular, the various accounts of his ‘*parivrājaka*’ days in India during 1890-93, which he related to various audiences and acquaintances throughout the subsequent years of his life, are suffused with the theme of personal improvement through adventurous living in the rugged outdoors, surviving by wits and endurance. His stories emphasise incidents such as his courageous response to a troop of threatening wild monkeys in Varanasi,⁶⁵ or walking miles amongst snowy Himalayan peaks without sufficient food.⁶⁶ As in the case of contemporary British literature invoking imperial masculinity, women are almost completely absent as active agents in his Indian travel narratives; his significant and transformative encounters generally take place alone or, occasionally, in the company of other males. Similar to the military and ‘survival’ narratives produced for young male British readers of the period,⁶⁷ Vivekananda’s accounts of his days as a ‘wandering monk’—and even moreso the secondary biographical writings on this period of his life—often read like patriotic adventure stories for Hindu boys dreaming of an escape from the

⁶³For a discussion of the modified form which muscular Christianity assumed in the thought of Emerson, see Susan L. Roberson’s essay, “‘Degenerate Effeminacy’ and the Makings of a Masculine Spirituality in the Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson,” in Hall, 150-72.

⁶⁴ Vivekananda himself makes reference to Emerson’s work in “The First Steps” [*Addresses on Bhakti-Yoga*], *CW*, vol. 4, 16 and “The Mahabharata,” *CW*, vol. 4, 95.

⁶⁵ “What is Religion?” *CW*, vol. 1, 338.

⁶⁶ “My Life and Mission,” *CW*, vol. 8, 84.

⁶⁷ Beynon, 30-38.

harsh reality of imperial rule, and rediscovering the ‘real’ untamed (and unconquered) India. (In fact, the institution of the 1871 ‘Criminal Tribes Act’, designed to stamp out the practice of *thagī*, had made all such habitual ‘wanderers’, living outside of the boundaries of settled and respectable society, suspect as potential criminal agents—not excluding *sādhus*, despite their substantial numbers.)⁶⁸ This theme emerges most strongly in Vivekananda’s famous “Song of the Sannyasin,”⁶⁹ whose lines are replete with idealised portraits of the unfettered *parivrājaka* life, largely drawn from earlier Sanskrit hymns:

Wake up the note! the song that had its birth
Far off, where worldly taint could never reach,
In mountain caves and glades of forest deep,
Whose calm no sigh for lust or wealth or fame
Could ever dare to break; where rolled the stream
Of knowledge, truth, and bliss that follows both.
Sing high that note, Sannyasin bold! Say—
‘Om Tat Sat, Om!’

.....
Have thou no home. What home can hold thee, friend?
The sky thy roof, the grass thy bed; and food
What chance may bring, well cooked or ill, judge not.
No food or drink can taint that noble Self
Which knows Itself. Like rolling river free
Thou ever be, Sannyasin bold! Say—
‘Om Tat Sat, Om!’

.....
Few only know the truth. The rest will hate
And laugh at thee, great one; but pay no heed.
Go thou, the free, from place to place, and help
Them out of darkness, Maya's veil. Without
The fear of pain or search for pleasure, go
Beyond them both, Sannyasin bold! Say—
‘Om Tat Sat, Om!’
.....

The ironic circumstances of this poem’s composition—Vivekananda penned it during a stay at a comfortable retreat home at Thousand Island Park, New York, in 1895—

⁶⁸ Metcalf, 125.

illustrates its nature as an artifact of the imperial imaginary: not so much an account of lived experience, as an atavistic dream of an uncomplicated, heroic, 'man-making' spiritual life in an India which was never really encountered by a young man brought up in a socio-political environment in which foreign hegemony was all-pervasive, and in which 'masculinity', in the case of its native subjects, was a glorified ideal always discursively deferred.

Vivekananda's appropriation of the central themes of muscular Christianity are perhaps most apparent in one of his best-known maxims, expressed to a Madras audience upon his return to India in 1897, that "you will be nearer to Heaven through football than through the study of the Gita."⁷⁰ His specific mention of football (North American 'soccer') is not insignificant, as J. A. Mangan has observed that, in the context of colonial India, football "was considered by the colonisers to carry with it a series of moral lessons, regarding hard work and perseverance, about team loyalty and obedience to authority and indeed involving concepts of correct physical development and 'manliness'.⁷¹ As such, its promotion was an integral part of the colonial *mission civilisatrice*. Football, and its twin British obsession, cricket, were "directly linked with the development of skills for Empire service,"⁷² in the discourses of the period. Not only the muscular development (and thus, the prevention of racial degeneracy) that it fostered, but also the more-abiding values of competition, 'fair play', consciousness of masculinity, and sublimation of sexual energy that such sports were believed to encourage were part of the British push

⁶⁹ "Song of the Sannyasin," *CW*, vol. 4, 392-9.

⁷⁰ "Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life," *CW*, vol. 3, 242.

⁷¹ Paul Dimeo, "Civilizing the Sporting Body: Fear and Anxiety in the Colonial Project," In *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission: Cultural Ideology in British India*, ed. H. Fischer-Tine and M. Mann (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 166.

behind the promotion of these games. Not only (male) British citizens in India, but also Indian youth took to these sports with great enthusiasm. Importantly, the accompanying colonial values were—ideally—internalised by participants in a way that allowed these sports to function as agents of coercive disciplinary power while lacking the appearance of external dominance and control.

In the context of his ‘football’ exhortation, Vivekananda further elaborates his own perspective on the importance of physical culture:

These are bold words; but I have to say them, for I love you. I know where the shoe pinches. I have gained a little experience. You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger. You will understand the mighty genius and the mighty strength of Krishna better with a little of strong blood in you. You will understand the Upanishads better and the glory of the Atman when your body stands firm upon your feet, and you feel yourselves as men.⁷³

The extent to which the rhetorical style expressed in this passage and its surrounding text mimics that of muscular Christianity cannot be overstated. The stress on athleticism, bodily health, and physical competence as foundations for spiritual development is well in the vein of the popular British Protestantism of the day. That Vivekananda’s appropriation of this discourse did not dispense with its embedded ethnologic ideology and implicit stress on national identity formation is clear from the statements with which he prefaces the above selections. Condemning Indians’ “physical weakness” as the cause of the centuries of mental occupation with petty religious and inter-caste squabbles to which he claims Indians have fallen prey,⁷⁴ the lecture is infused with blunt words and sweeping racial and cultural criticism:

⁷² Beynon, 42.

⁷³ “Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life,” *CW*, Vol. 3, 242.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Compared to many other races, I must tell you that we are weak, very weak. First of all is our physical weakness. That physical weakness is the cause of at least one-third of our miseries. We are lazy, we cannot work; we cannot combine, we do not love each other; we are intensely selfish, not three of us can come together without hating each other, without being jealous of each other.⁷⁵

The agreement between the sentiments expressed by Vivekananda in this passage and the recurrent criticisms of Bengalis articulated through the gendered and racialised discourses of the colonial rulers is indeed striking. Such explanations suggest the degree to which Vivekananda, like his middle-class Calcutta peers, was socialised into an intellectual environment that espoused a firm linkage between (purported) collective physical characteristics and mental/emotional/behavioural traits, setting the stage for a perception of cultural gender identities and roles as intrinsically beholden to physiological considerations.

Elsewhere, in the course of an 1898 discussion with his acquaintance Surendranath Sen, Vivekananda directly employs the colonial concepts of masculinity and effeminacy to further deplore the present state of the Indian people, this time with an explicitly religious dimension, as he denounces the supposed effect of the Vaiṣṇava focus on *prema* (devotional love):

Look at this nation and see what has been the outcome of such an attempt. Through the preaching of that love broadcast, the whole nation has become effeminate—a race of women! The whole of Orissa has been turned into a land of cowards; and Bengal, running after the Radha-prema, these past four hundred years, has almost lost all sense of manliness! The people are very good only at crying and weeping; that has become their national trait. Look at their literature, the sure index of a nation's thoughts and ideas. Why, the refrain of the Bengali literature for these four hundred years is strung to that same tune of moaning and crying. It has failed to give birth to any poetry which breathes a true heroic spirit!⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid., 241-2.

⁷⁶ “Conversations and Dialogues [V: Shri Surendra Nath Sen],” *CW*, vol. 5, 345.

While the text does not mention whether the recorder has transcribed the dialogue from Bengali, or if it was originally carried out in English, the conceptual thrust of the characterisation remains unmistakable. Bengali ‘cowardice’, legendary in the minds of both the British and the Bengalis themselves, is supposed to have its root in the ‘effeminate’ forms of Hindu religiosity prevailing among the people of the region. In this respect, Vivekananda’s views mirrored the gradual withdrawal of Bengalis in the late nineteenth century from the devotional Vaiṣṇava cults that had dominated Bengal’s religious expression in previous centuries, with a corresponding increase in the vitality and public visibility of the Śākta tradition—a trend which is thought by many scholars to have been a corollary of the then-emerging Hindu national movement.⁷⁷ The criticisms that Vivekananda voices in this passage—the fostering of an emotional effeminacy, at the implied expense of a devotion that enhanced ‘manly’ traits (traces of Europe’s ‘muscular Christianity’ are visible here)—were considered by many Indian reformers to constitute points of Hindu vulnerability which could be exploited by both the colonial rulers and the Christian missionaries. (One significant political effect of this rise in goddess-centred religion and its increasing importance in the public sphere, specifically in nationalist discourses, was the increasing alienation of Indian Muslims from Hindu anti-colonial efforts.)⁷⁸

Vivekananda’s criticism of the emasculating consequences of these *bhakti* movements may perhaps seem quite anomalous, when one juxtaposes it with the emotionally charged, gender-bending, devotional behaviour of Vivekananda’s own guru,

⁷⁷ See Sumanta Banerjee, “The Changing Role of Kali in the Bengali Popular Psyche,” chap. in *Logic in a Popular Form* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2002), 31-60.

⁷⁸ See *ibid.*, 55-6.

Ramakrishna. Yet, the social and cultural spaces which Ramakrishna and Vivekananda inhabited differed substantially in the ways in which they were constrained by the discursive categories and boundaries of colonialism.⁷⁹ Vivekananda's perspective, impacted as it was by European discourses that presupposed the weakening and destabilising force of effeminacy (and, equally, the unspoken dread of homosexuality), had little scope to advocate such a fluid approach to masculine and feminine roles (as did Ramakrishna) and to simultaneously maintain the gendered aspects of the colonial thematic that he incorporated into his responses to imperial ideology. (Also, as Chatterjee⁸⁰ and Basu⁸¹ have each pointed out, Ramakrishna, despite his personal transgression of conventional male gender norms, also equated the feminine, in the form of *kāminī*, 'woman', with carnal and emotional elements that, he posited, must ultimately be transcended by the spiritual aspirant.) The discrepancy between Ramakrishna's feminised religious expression and Vivekananda's persistent emphasis on 'masculinity' further illustrates the multiplicity of possible strategies of resistance, of which the colonised could and did avail themselves, to the imposition of colonial stereotypes and restraints upon Bengali society. Even if Vivekananda accepted Ramakrishna's approach, inclusive of gender ambiguity, as a fully valid one in the religious sense (and we have

⁷⁹ Ramakrishna, for example, during his years of intense *sādhana*, spent periods of time cultivating the *madhura bhāva* ('sweet mood') of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa *bhakti* tradition, to which Vivekananda here refers; he even, for some time, dressed as and enacted the role of a woman, to spiritually 'perform' the role of a 'female companion' of the Goddess. (See Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, vol. 1, chapters 12-14.) Ramakrishna himself, however, is recorded to have remarked on several occasions that Vivekananda had a 'manly' nature, contrasting this with the 'feminine' persona of certain other devotees (see *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. by Swami Nikhilananda [Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1942], 459); however, in doing so, he did not appear to evaluate these traits hierarchically, but merely identified them as distinctive characteristics—a possibility of equality which was prohibited by the binary structure of gender discourses in the colonial social space which Vivekananda inhabited.

⁸⁰ Partha Chatterjee, "A Religion of Urban Domesticity: Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Class," in *Subaltern Studies VII*, ed. P. Chatterjee and G. Pandey (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 40-68.

⁸¹ Basu, 159.

every reason to believe that he did), the swami likely perceived on some level that, when addressing within the public sphere Indians' subjugated position, it would be most effective if his gender ideology meshed with the norms of the dominant discourses therein. Thus, while Ramakrishna's childlike self-presentation did defy, deliberately or not, the rigidities of colonial gender roles to some extent, Vivekananda, for his part, chose to appropriate the gender-discourses of the coloniser and utilised them in attempting to circumvent Western hegemonic authority.⁸²

Vivekananda's ascription of the above-mentioned qualities—weakness, languor, jealousy, effeminacy, cowardice, and the like—to sections of the Indian populace is, of course, very much in accordance with British assessments of its colonised subjects' racial and religious inferiority, and does indeed downplay the systemic nature of colonial oppression. However, in the swami's discourse, the situation is not quite as hopeless for the Indian as it appears to be in the rhetoric of the coloniser. The 'Indian race' may indeed have 'degenerated' into a state of 'weakness' over the course of centuries. But—unlike the views advanced by the colonial authorities, who at least in part lay blame upon the racially 'impure' heritage of the subcontinent's peoples and their 'barbaric' religion—for Vivekananda, neither are Indians condemned by any inherent inferiority nor must they reject (or even reform along 'modern' liberal Christian lines, as claimed the Brahmo Samāj) their Hindu faith and practices. Rather, he posits the crux of the solution to lie in a combination of spiritual commitment, moral reform, and social upliftment—much as it appeared to for exponents of 'manly' Christianity.

⁸² See the discussion of Ramakrishna's unconventional behaviour in Sumit Sarkar, *An Exploration of the Ramakrishna Vivekananda Tradition* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1993), 22-4.

However, Vivekananda's perspective, shaped by strong roots in particular Hindu traditions, differs somewhat from the Protestants' in a number of ways. For example, Vivekananda, in his various discussions of cross-cultural dietary habits and their consequences, seems to at least tentatively concur with the prevailing Western assessment that a strong physique is fostered by a meat-laden diet⁸³ (his own food habits, like those of the majority of Bengali Hindus, were not vegetarian, and he prided himself on the physical agility and stamina which he attributed thereto). However, he makes an even stronger appeal to the customary Hindu linkage between the consumption of animal flesh and the increase of *rajas* (the 'energetic' or 'passionate' quality) in the human body.⁸⁴ More than the development of 'strength' per se, Vivekananda sides with the view of the brāhmaṇical traditions that violence and militarism are the likely end products of such a diet, especially when taken up collectively by a social group or nation.⁸⁵ The emphasis on 'masculine' vigour to the point of framing aggression as a moral virtue, which colonial agents were wont to construe from the tenets of muscular Christianity,⁸⁶ was a step beyond what Vivekananda seems willing to entertain. "While military power dominates, meat-eating will prevail," he asserts, "but with the advance of science, fighting will grow less, and then the vegetarians will come in [to power]."⁸⁷ While Vivekananda's spirituality is less radically pacifistic than that of a strict *ahimsāvādīn* like Gandhi, he does part ways from the Anglo-Saxon discourse of masculinity in his conviction that "spiritual boldness" differs substantially from the aggressive and

⁸³ See, for instance, his attribution of the supposed differences in the physical prowess of those from Eastern and Western Bengal to the latter's meat consumption. ("Conversations and Dialogues [XV]," *CW*, vol. V, 402; "From the Diary of a Disciple," *CW*, vol. 7, 207.)

⁸⁴ "Conversations and Dialogues [XV]," *CW*, vol. 5, 402-3.

⁸⁵ "Inspired Talks," *CW*, vol. 7, 29.

animalistic “courage of a lion or tiger.”⁸⁸ Although he reportedly once admonished an American follower, “Do you think that a handful of Englishmen could rule India if we had a militant spirit? I teach meat eating throughout the length and breadth of India in the hope that we can build a militant spirit!”⁸⁹ Vivekananda could also not disregard the emphasis on non-injury that the expositors of influential Hindu disciplines, such as Pātañjala-yoga and the Vaiṣṇava *bhakti-mārga*, had historically promoted as essential for spiritual practitioners.⁹⁰ (He accordingly declared that “we would be disappointed if we hoped to see a military nation active on the field of spirituality.”)⁹¹ In this sense, Vivekananda appeals to Hindu sources in his construction of the body and mind of the spiritual aspirant as a site delimited and shielded, to at least a certain extent, from the norms of ‘masculine’ aggression—unlike the British colonial mindset, which strove to conflate Christianity with national and racial conquest.

Asexual Spirituality and the Threat of Emasculation

Likewise, the discursive representation of sexuality served as another point of difference for Vivekananda. Sexual regulation was undoubtedly a concern of his, but fundamental differences in worldview introduced irreconcilable differences between him and his Protestant critics.

For the latter, sexual desire served as a signifier both of natural and ‘holy’ appetites for intimacy and procreation, and of the hegemonic narrative of imperialism, which

⁸⁶ Rosen, 17-44.

⁸⁷ “Inspired Talks,” *CW*, vol. 7, 29

⁸⁸ “The Real Nature of Man,” *CW*, vol. 2, 85.

⁸⁹ Burke, vol. 5, 256.

⁹⁰ See Vivekananda’s discussions of the importance of *ahimsā*, with respect to yoga and *bhakti*, respectively: “Raja-Yoga in Brief,” *CW*, vol. 1, 189; “The Method and the Means,” *CW*, vol. 3, 67.

⁹¹ “Reply to the Address of Welcome at Shivaganga and Manamadura,” *CW*, vol. 3, 165.

exhorted “male colonists... to inscribe their British authority on feminised overseas territories.”⁹² (Note, however, the ambivalent juxtaposition of, on the one hand, commingled sexual themes and colonial conquest, and, on the other, the dread of miscegenation, discussed earlier.) From this perspective, sex, like empire, was a God-given possession that could be employed for the benefit of those to whom the Almighty had gifted it.

For Vivekananda, however, sex and sexuality are much less deeply inscribed upon the human being, for, according to conventional Advaitic teachings, they belong to the realm of *māyā*, the cosmic illusion of differentiation. “There is no sex in the soul,”⁹³ the swami asserts; therefore, “how can they who are beyond everything have any sex idea? Everyone and everything is the Atman—the Self—the sexless, the pure, the ever-blessed.”⁹⁴ If biological sex is ultimately unsubstantial, so too, it stands to reason, are sexual desire and attraction, and the persistence of these illusions is perceived as hindering ultimate realisation—hence, the stress of the brāhmanical traditions on *brahmacarya*, ascetic self-mastery, as the final *āśrama*, or stage in an individual’s life. This position is also in accordance with the strong emphasis that Vivekananda’s guru, Ramakrishna, placed upon complete sexual continence for serious religious aspirants. Unlike some of his Hindu contemporaries,⁹⁵ Vivekananda seems not to have adhered to the notion that a male issue was essential for one’s salvation through the performance of obsequies (a belief which never held great sway within the renunciant traditions,

⁹² Gittings, 2.

⁹³ “The Atman,” *CW*, vol. 2, 249.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Raychaudhuri has discussed the enduring importance of this belief in the colonial period. See Raychaudhuri, “Love in a Colonial Climate,” 350-1.

anyways). For Vivekananda, the stress upon chaste marital relations is interpreted as only a cultural prerequisite for a society to cultivate the higher ideal of celibacy, not an end in itself.⁹⁶ Though Vivekananda may not have intended it as such, this assertion—that even in marriage sexual desire and its expression should and can be sharply curtailed—conveniently provides a pointed counter to the British disparagement of Indian men’s alleged sexual licentiousness and depravity, a matter of great concern to the nineteenth-century Bengali middle class.

Yet, in asserting the asexual nature of the spiritual goal, Vivekananda still continues to employ the gendered language of colonial discourse, which demonstrates the extent to which masculinity and strength have been discursively linked in Western thought: “Controlled desire leads to the highest result. Transform the sexual energy into spiritual energy, but do not emasculate, because that is throwing away the power. The stronger this force, the more can be done with it.”⁹⁷ Even if one’s Self is truly devoid of sex, one must continue to be wary of ‘emasculatation’! Thus, despite the assertion that religious aspiration operates in relation to an Absolute that ultimately transcends gender, this conviction does not, for Vivekananda, abrogate the all-pervasive discourse of masculinity. This paradox vividly illustrates the intensity and persistence of gendered thinking as a feature of both the colonial mindset and the Hindu response thereto.

Ideal Women: Mothers and Monastics

As the preceding discussion suggests, despite Vivekananda’s disavowal of intrinsic sexuality on an ultimate plane, gender plays an important role in his discourse, not only

⁹⁶ See “Letters,” *CW*, vol. 5, 180.

⁹⁷ “Inspired Talks,” *CW*, vol. 7, 69.

with respect to the questions of masculinity to which we have already made reference, but also to masculinity's 'shadow' concept, femininity. Throughout the swami's writings and lectures, we repeatedly encounter constructions of 'woman' and 'womanhood', articulated with respect to both Indian and European/American women. Importantly, Vivekananda's discussions regarding women help bring to light the ways in which colonial-era discourses on Eastern and Western women were interlinked and interconstitutive.

Vivekananda not infrequently makes reference in his work to the 'ideal woman', distinguishing between what he asserts are the differing 'ideals of womanhood' found in 'the West' and in 'the East': the former locating the feminine ideal in the 'wife', the latter in the 'mother'.⁹⁸ However, as always, the reality of his own view is rather more complex. In speaking of Indian women, for example, Vivekananda seems to vacillate between two disparate ideals. On the one hand, he exhorts women to take the initiative in improving their own condition via moral, spiritual, and intellectual development, and, in particular, character-forming education.⁹⁹ In this respect, he is at least partially in accordance with the Brahmo position, though he differs on account of his disagreement with that organisation's particular social-reform agenda for women's upliftment.¹⁰⁰ He condemns Indian women's "train[ing] in helplessness, [and] servile dependence on others,"¹⁰¹ and declares that they must "acquire the spirit of valour and heroism"¹⁰² ('masculine' traits), yet without abandoning such qualities as "feminine modesty and

⁹⁸ "Women of India," *CW*, vol. 8, 57.

⁹⁹ "Conversations and Dialogues [IV: Shri Surendra Nath Sen]," *CW*, vol. 5, 342.

¹⁰⁰ Basu's assertion that "Vivekananda was radically opposed to the idea of a strong reform to change the social position of woman" (Basu, 160) seems a little overstated; see, for example, his statements regarding the 1891 'Age of Consent' Bill ("From the Diary of a Disciple," *CW*, vol. 6, 492).

reserve.”¹⁰³ In particular, he advocates the re-establishment of women’s monastic institutions, but along modern lines, in order to

train some women up in the ideal of renunciation, so that they will take up the vow of lifelong virginity, fired with the strength of that virtue of chastity which is innate in their life-blood from hoary antiquity. Along with that they should be taught sciences and other things which would be of benefit, not only to them but to others as well, and knowing this they would easily learn these things and feel pleasure in doing so.¹⁰⁴

He also demonstrates his support for Hindu women assuming the role of religious teachers and missionaries to the West in a letter penned to Indian feminist Sarala Devi Chaudhurani (who is considered to have been greatly influenced by Vivekananda’s ideas).¹⁰⁵ He writes: “If an Indian woman in Indian dress preach[es] there [in the West] the religion which fell from the lips of the Rishis of India—I see a prophetic vision—there will rise a great wave which will inundate the whole Western world.”¹⁰⁶ The independent, educated, unmarried celibate woman is thus positioned by Vivekananda as a potential leader in religious, and even national, life.

Yet, despite his strategy to create this “great wave” of dedicated, celibate female teachers,¹⁰⁷ Vivekananda is recorded as publicly advocating the removal of men from decision-making power over women with respect to ‘reform’ questions:

¹⁰¹ “Conversations and Dialogues [IV: Shri Surendra Nath Sen],” *CW*, vol. 5, 342.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ “From the Diary of a Disciple,” *CW*, vol. 6, 491.

¹⁰⁴ “Conversations and Dialogues [IV: Shri Surendra Nath Sen],” *CW*, vol. 5, 343.

¹⁰⁵ See Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 33-4.

¹⁰⁶ “The Education that India Needs,” *CW*, vol. 4, 485-6.

¹⁰⁷ The ‘Sarada Order’ of *sannyāsīnīs*, founded in the middle of the twentieth century, took part of its inspiration from Vivekananda’s ideas for women’s advancement as expressed here. Although modeled upon the Ramakrishna Order of male *sannyāsīns* and its Math and Mission organisations, and representing itself as the female counterpart of the same, the Sarada Math and Mission have never been under the jurisdiction of the men’s Order, and run their own religious and social service centres and activities independently.

I am asked again and again, what I think of the widow problem and what I think of the woman question. Let me answer once for all—am I a widow that you ask me that nonsense? Am I a woman that you ask me that question again and again? Who are you to solve women's problems? Are you the Lord God that you should rule over every widow and every woman? Hands off! They will solve their own problems.¹⁰⁸

In encouraging men to permit women to act collectively on their own behalf, the swami is actually assuming a fairly radical position, given the importance attributed to Indian women's behaviour and activities in establishing and maintaining the social status of Indian men in the colonial setting. Vivekananda, in refuting men's entitlement to make these decisions on women's behalf, opens up a space for female agency—something that, in the debates by men over the details of these 'women's issues', was rarely addressed.¹⁰⁹ And yet, as we shall see, while suggesting that women be given the right to self-determination as far as practical gender-based development schemes are concerned, Vivekananda does not abandon his efforts regarding the construction of 'ideal' female gender identities, for the latter remains an extremely important component of his discursive resistance to colonial hierarchies.

As mentioned above, the semiotic entities 'mother' and 'motherhood' were particularly important ones in the Hindu discourses of Vivekananda's India. Certainly, the construction and acclamation of the role of 'mother' has a long history in Hindu religious thought, one which transcends the actualities of biological and sociological motherhood. The identification of the *devī*, in her varied forms, with the role of cosmic 'Mother' has always stood in an ambivalent relationship with the conceptualisation of actual Hindu women as embodiments of the same. Of the qualities attributed to the

¹⁰⁸ "Vedanta in Its Application to Indian Life," *CW*, vol. 3, 246.

¹⁰⁹ See Chatterjee's discussion in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, chap. 6: "The Nation and Its Women," 116-34.

‘divine mother’, only the most benign, domestic, and filial of these have conventionally been exalted as models for emulation by ‘real’ women (no matter how appropriate violent or erotic traits and behaviour might be in the ethical context of the Goddess herself). In particular, in Bengal (where, incidentally, upper-caste women have long appended *devī* as a title of respect to their given names), the predominance of the Tāntric traditions and of the more-terrific female deities, like Kālī and Durgā, intensified the ambivalence of the (divine) Mother = (human) mother equation. Nevertheless, the association, however complex, was maintained, not least of all, for our concern, in Ramakrishna’s own religious teachings.¹¹⁰ (And, as we have seen, it was also deployed by Hindus as a nationalist strategy.)

Throughout his discourse, Vivekananda often invokes this linkage of women, motherhood and divinity, and utilises its rhetorical constructions and binary oppositions. In a rather-apologetic 1894 lecture, delivered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on “The Women of India,” Vivekananda elaborates on the theme of woman-as-mother, in opposition to the Western ‘wife’:

The very peculiarity of Hindu women, which they have developed and which is the idea of their life, is that of the mother. If you enter a Hindu's home, you will not find the wife to be the same equal companion of the husband as you find her here [in America]. But when you find the mother, she is the very pillar of the Hindu home. The wife must wait to become the mother, and then she will be everything.... The mother is the God in our family. The idea is that the only real love that we see in the world, the most unselfish love, is in the mother—always suffering, always loving. And what love can represent the love of God more than the love which we see in the mother? Thus the mother is the incarnation of God on earth to the Hindu.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ In the account of Vivekananda’s own spiritual development, his ‘acceptance’ of the reality of the Divine Mother is given great emphasis as a ‘turning point’ in his religiosity, particularly in the eyes of Ramakrishna, who was reportedly elated at his young disciple’s new-found faith (see Saradananda, vol. 2, 921-31).

¹¹¹ “The Women of India,” *CW*, vol. 9, 201-2.

Here we find the valourisation of the Hindu woman that is typical of much Hindu reformist discourse. Not simply her husband's "equal companion" (as is the Western wife), she is represented as a rarefied being, of divine essence, set apart from the mundane world of the public, male sphere (where Western women have been mis/placed), free of "many a burden bound with legal tightness on the shoulders of Western women."¹¹² The Indian woman's role as "pillar of the Hindu home" situates her essence in the domestic sphere—feminine yet de-eroticised, outside of the political arena—and yet appropriates her as a vital support for the cultural and national life of the Hindu people. The passage above suggests that, for Vivekananda, the 'divinity' which is embodied by women is not fully manifest in all female bodies. Only with the ascription of the role of motherhood does the (sexual) 'wife' become the exalted (non-sexual) 'mother'. Vivekananda's positive comments on the celibate *brahmacāriṇī*-ideal for women suggest that 'spiritual motherhood' also constitutes grounds for a woman's inclusion in this lofty category.¹¹³ Basu, considering the matter from a nationalistic perspective, posits that

this sexless image of woman which Vivekananda borrows from Ramakrishna's depiction of [Ramakrishna's own wife] Sarada Devi is what he uses successively to bridge the gap between the two opposing ideas of progressive reform for woman as advocated by the Brahmos against the ideal of restraint and divinity that is contained in the proposals of the conservative Hindu reformers' views on the role of woman in the private sphere.¹¹⁴

The "incarnation of God on earth" that the mother/woman represents is not the terrific and eroticised demon-destroying Kālī, but the nurturing, benign domestic-goddess. At any rate, the desexualised aspect of the image of the mother/Mother would seem to

¹¹² "On Indian Women—Their Past, Present and Future," *CW*, vol. 5, 231.

¹¹³ "From the Diary of a Disciple," *CW*, vol. 6, 489-90.

provide an avenue of reconciliation between Vivekananda's promotion of celibate life (for both men and women) and his extolling of the more-popularly advocated domestic role for the Hindu woman. In both cases, the concept of 'purity' remains central to a woman's status, her social position and personal autonomy intimately linked to her relinquishment of sexuality.¹¹⁵

Vivekananda's mention of the woman/mother as sufferer, above, also recalls the divine figures of *itihāsa* (religious history) offered to Hindu women by colonial-period Indian discourses as prototypes for emulation. The swami addresses this matter directly in a lecture on the *Rāmāyaṇa* delivered to a California audience in 1900. "Sita is the name in India for everything that is good, pure and holy," Vivekananda declares; "[and she is] everything that in woman we call womanly... [Hindu women and girls] are all children of Sita, and are struggling to be Sita, the patient, the all-suffering, the ever-faithful, the ever-pure wife."¹¹⁶ The suffering and forbearance of the Hindu woman, he thus suggests, is redemptive, perhaps even a form of *tapasyā* (meritorious austerity). The Indian woman, in this account, though she may indeed be 'suffering', is not in need of emancipation by foreign interlopers, but is redeemed through her very subordinate status. Though the divine actors of *Sītā* and *Rāma* were foreign to Vivekananda's American listeners, the idea hardly was; indeed, the theme of the ideal woman as she who renounces all for her spouse, or even for a 'greater good' (such as empire) was a potent one in Western literature and social discourses during the period,¹¹⁷ and served to quell the male anxiety which stemmed from the growing power and agency of women in

¹¹⁴ Basu, 160.

¹¹⁵ See Sarkar, "Women's Emancipation," 166.

¹¹⁶ "The Ramayana," *CW*, vol. 4, 76.

Europe and America. The woman's proper, natural, spiritual role, in this account, is clearly situated in the domestic realm, regardless of any other spheres through which she may (tres-)pass.

At this point, the collusion between narratives of gender and nationhood in Vivekananda's discourse becomes unmistakable. "Rama and Sita," explains the swami, are the ideal of the Indian nation. All children, especially girls, worship Sita. The height of a woman's ambition is to be like Sita, the pure, the devoted, the all-suffering! When you study these characters, you can at once find out how different is the ideal in India from that of the West. For the race, Sita stands as the ideal of suffering. The West says, 'Do! Show your power by doing.' India says, 'Show your power by suffering.' ... Sita is typical of India—the idealised India.¹¹⁸

The fact that this talk was delivered before an American audience rather than an Indian one suggests that his purpose was not really the exhortation of colonial resistance through suffering, but rather the exaltation before the Western gaze of the endurance of Indians under the lived experience of imperial domination. If the indefinite continuation of colonial rule seemed inevitable (as it did to many Indians in the late nineteenth century), its subjects could at least be lionised as possessing the moral high ground through their acceptance of suffering and reluctance to raise a martial challenge to the colonising power. While the latter representation was itself often depreciatively advanced by the Raj as evidence of Indians'—and especially, Bengalis'—deficiency of the very 'masculine' strength and vigour they would require to govern themselves, in Vivekananda's discourse it becomes transformed into a confirmation of the collective inner fortitude and courage of the Indian people. Further, this stance distinguished Vivekananda's 'spiritual resistance' approach from those of the nascent militant Indian nationalist movement—the

¹¹⁷ See Metcalf, 98.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

portrayal and lauding of which would not have been likely to win from this lecture's American audience as much sympathy for Indians' plight as might the representation of India as bearing persecution and undeserved-yet-redemptive suffering in Christ-like dignity.

Yet there are still other significant gender constructs embedded within this same passage. Not only is the essence of Sītā (here explicitly identified with the ideal woman) defined by private suffering, she functions as the support—the voiceless impetus, the *śakti*—upon which depends the public life and mission of Rāma, “the most powerful of mortals,”¹¹⁹ represented by Vivekananda as the masculine face of India.¹²⁰ As in the rhetoric of other Indian social reformers of the time, women are entrusted with the responsibility of preserving the spiritual essence that sustains Indian men in their public acts, and thus females must carefully protect and fulfil their own ‘traditional’ familial roles, only by virtue of which shall India prosper. Contrast this beneficent image of Sītā with that of Bengal's more-familiar Kālī, dancing upon her prostrate male consort, or eastern India's equally beloved tiger-riding, demon-slaying Durgā; it thus becomes clear that Vivekananda's choice of Sītā as an ideal female prototype was a strategic choice which required sifting through pan-Indian Hindu mythology for an ‘appropriate’ representation of domestic femininity, rather than simply an appropriation of the most-logical indigenous cultural model of female divinity available to him. This to-be-emulated feminine ideal is anything but the macabre black Goddess—“Terror is Thy name, Death is in Thy breath”¹²¹—of Vivekananda's private religious devotion. The

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 68.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 75.

¹²¹ “Kali the Mother” [poem], *CW*, vol. 4, 384.

Hindu woman, in this case, is portrayed not as slaying deity but as sacrificial victim for the cause of national uplift, who must accept subjugation for the greater good of the Indian nation—as Sītā accepted banishment for the benefit of Rāma’s kingdom.

While mindful of the need to avoid uncritically imposing Western feminist notions of oppression upon an Indian context, it must nevertheless be observed that this particular understanding of gender and nation continues to sharply delimit the socially sanctioned scope of women’s roles and activities, defining them primarily in relation to men and male aspirations. Perhaps of equal importance, in Vivekananda’s discourse, Indian women are nearly always *represented*, that is to say, ‘spoken for’, by him on their behalf; this accords with Chatterjee’s observation that, with respect to gender, nationalist discourse is inevitably “a discourse *about* women; women do not speak here.”¹²² Further, and certainly unintentionally on Vivekananda’s part, this subtext has the potential to be read as validating the perception of the colonial power, which, as mentioned above, often appealed to the need to ‘protect’ Indian women from the oppression and tyranny of Indian men as a justification for maintaining colonial rule.

The perspectives that Vivekananda expresses with respect to Western women are laden with even more ambivalence, and are equally pervaded by nationalist themes. While still a relative neophyte (and exotic outsider) in American, and, later, British, society, his admiration for the primarily upper-class women he encountered there seemed unbounded.¹²³ Yet, his perspectives became more tempered with the passage of time, particularly as his growing proximity to Western culture and persons made him

¹²² Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 133.

¹²³ See, for example, the enthusiastic description of American women given in a letter he wrote from New York to his fellow disciples in India in 1894 (“Letters,” *CW*, vol. 6, 272-3).

increasingly able to penetrate the façade of Western gender roles and emancipatory rhetoric.¹²⁴ His later statements, delivered in India, almost invariably situate Western and Indian women in a relationship of binary opposition, with Indian women assuming the dominant position. In an 1897 discussion with a follower, Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, Vivekananda reportedly stated:

Still on this sacred soil of India, this land of Sita and Savitri, among women may be found such character, such spirit of service, such affection, compassion, contentment, and reverence, as I could not find anywhere else in the world! In the West, the women did not very often seem to me to be women at all, they appeared to be quite the replicas of men! Driving vehicles, drudging in offices, attending schools, doing professional duties! In India alone the sight of feminine modesty and reserve soothes the eye! With such materials of great promise, you could not, alas, work out their uplift! You did not try to infuse the light of knowledge into them. If they get the right sort of education, they may well turn out to be the ideal women in the world.¹²⁵

These sentiments on Western women and their Indian counterparts are virtually a complete inversion of the thoughts he expressed in an 1893 letter from Chicago only a few months after his arrival in America, in which he praised Western women's purity, chastity, and independence in pursuing work and studies, and lamented the condition of Indian women.¹²⁶ His later criticism mirrors the concern voiced among the British of the day about the loss of women's 'femininity' (by which Western men's 'masculinity' was bounded and defined) supposedly being encouraged among women by the growing feminist and 'women's rights' advocacy movements in England and America.¹²⁷

Speaking again with Chakravarty on the subject of Indian women's education, Vivekananda criticises "Western style" schooling, advocating a more indigenous

¹²⁴ See "Sayings and Utterances," *CW*, vol. 5, 412-13.

¹²⁵ "From the Diary of a Disciple," *CW*, vol. 6, 491.

¹²⁶ "Letters," *CW*, vol. 5, 25-6.

¹²⁷ See, for example, Denise P. Quark, "'True Englishwomen' and 'Anglo-Indians': Gender, National Identity, and Feminism in the Victorian Women's Periodical Press," in *Imperial Co-Histories: National*

approach—in both form and content—to female education.¹²⁸ While he counterposes this ideal of the educated woman with the bleak view (one that he ascribes to even ‘educated’ Indian men) of women as merely “manufacturing machines,”¹²⁹ he defends his push for female intellectual and moral training primarily on the grounds that women so trained provide the necessary family environment for the advent of great men.¹³⁰ From this perspective, the woman’s natural realm once again becomes the domestic space, where her essential nature finds its proper expression through her “feminine modesty” and motherhood, rather than her public activities. Thus, we encounter here a dramatic example of the ways in which the ‘cult of domesticity’ that characterised Victorian British culture—and British society in India as well—had entered *bhadralok* discourse as a strategy for countering effeminisation through displacing women from the public realm (and the public gaze), where men ‘properly’ belonged and in which they achieved their masculinity. For the nineteenth-century middle-class Bengali male, the faithful, home-oriented wife served as “the last unconquered space in a universe increasingly dominated by alien Western values.”¹³¹ This appropriated gender rhetoric was rearticulated through the conceptual framework of Hinduism, cast upon its indigenous domesticated divinities as prototypes of womanhood (“Sita and Savitri”), and thus nativised.

However, considering the interrelationship that McClintock has demonstrated existed between domesticity and racialisation in the colonial setting,¹³² Vivekananda’s

Identities and the British and Colonial Press, ed. J. F. Codell (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 167-87.

¹²⁸ “Conversations and Dialogues,” *CW*, vol. 6, 488-90.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 489.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Sarkar, *An Exploration of the Ramakrishna Vivekananda Tradition*, 34.

¹³² See McClintock, “The White Family of Man: Colonial Discourse and the Reinvention of Patriarchy,” chapter 6 in *Imperial Leather*, 232-257.

acquiescence to the former ultimately, if inadvertently, acted in complicity with the imperial project, helping to solidify, not subvert, European hierarchies. For example, the privileging of the 'leisured lady' over that of the working-class woman, which is suggested by the above passage, bolsters the theme of the lower classes as degraded and degenerated, complicit with the racialised 'Othering' project that was occurring in the metropole.¹³³ This schema, in turn, helped to foster the intensification of the racial ideology that was deployed in the colonies. That these gender roles appeared to be agents of liberation for the colonised (the colonised *male*, at least), however, was in keeping with the inherently duplicitous nature of colonial discourse. Thus, perhaps not coincidentally, as Vivekananda increasingly became a figure of interest to the nationalist movement in India (even if he himself declined to participate in an explicitly political fashion), his stress on the value of conventional (that is, conventional *Western*) constructions of masculinity increased, as did his emphasis on their corresponding feminine gender roles.

An Ambivalent Motherland

Further, as in the discourses of other nationalist figures, the application of gender rhetoric to India itself was utilised by Vivekananda, particularly in his public lectures before Indian audiences, wherein references to 'Mother India' and 'our motherland' are not to be found lacking. His deployment of highly gendered characterisations of India's colonial situation in his Indian lectures is particularly striking. During the course of his lecture, "The Future of India," delivered in Madras in 1897, Vivekananda boldly states:

¹³³ See *ibid.*, 43-44.

There is yet another defect in us [Indians]. Ladies, excuse me, but through centuries of slavery, we have become like a nation of women. You scarcely can get three women together for five minutes in this country or any other country, but they quarrel. Women make big societies in European countries, and make tremendous declarations of women's power and so on; then they quarrel, and some man comes and rules them all. All over the world they still require some man to rule them. We are like them. Women we are. If a woman comes to lead women, they all begin immediately to criticise her, tear her to pieces, and make her sit down. If a man comes and gives them a little harsh treatment, scolds them now and then, it is all right, they have been used to that sort of mesmerism. The whole world is full of such mesmerists and hypnotists. In the same way, if one of our countrymen stands up and tries to become great, we all try to hold him down, but if a foreigner comes and tries to kick us, it is all right. We have been used to it, have we not? And slaves must become great masters! So give up being a slave. For the next fifty years this alone shall be our keynote—this, our great Mother India. Let all other vain gods disappear for the time from our minds.¹³⁴

This dramatic (and oddly unproblematic, it seems, from Vivekananda's perspective) juxtaposition of the laudatory rhetoric of 'Mother India' and the pejorative equation of femininity/effeminacy with India's 'slavery' illustrates the deep ambivalence that characterised the colonial predicament, particularly in the attempted amalgamation of existing Hindu religious concepts and appropriated imperialistic categories of gender and nationality. In articulating his position, Vivekananda is cautious not to sully the notion of 'proper' femininity (that of the all-suffering Indian *Sītā*-esque female), but rather invokes the 'unnatural' (or rather, corrupted) femininity of the Western woman, whose efforts at self-liberation are deemed ineffective because of mean-spirited interpersonal discord. The suggestion that the children of "Mother India" must unite under a common ideological banner to overcome divisive jealousy and conflict before the "mesmerism" of imperialist rule can be cast off, is yet couched in language which itself colludes, unfortunately, with the colonial emasculation of India through the discursive approach of similarising Indian men to Western women.

As in the case of Vivekananda's social reform-minded contemporaries, constructions of masculinity and femininity (with their exemplary ideal man and ideal woman), and their attributed origins in ancient religious sources (illustrating their distinctively 'Hindu' character), assume an amplified importance and visibility in the swami's work, in accord with his increasing perception of the need to foster in Indians a unified national consciousness. Faced with the reality of the presence and power of these discourses, Vivekananda chose to appropriate and deploy them as tools in his efforts to articulate a persuasive and cohesive modern Hindu identity. That the consequences thereof were not always wholly in accordance with his professed goals is a corollary of the convoluted nature of colonial power structures, and of the internal relations of opposition between men and women that they inculcate—the roles and identities of each inextricably bound up with considerations of imperial authority and resistance.

¹³⁴ "The Future of India," *CW*, vol. 3, 300.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

Throughout the preceding chapters, a number of aspects of the relationship between Vivekananda and the discursive forms and content that characterised colonialism have been considered in some depth. Vivekananda was a prominent figure hailing from a society that, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, was in the midst of significant changes effected by the pressures of the colonial web of power. In particular, significant ideological contact and conflict was acutely felt by that sector of Bengali society which had received an ‘English’ education and was exposed to a steady influx of new ideas through other channels as well. That a significant number of Vivekananda’s contemporaries—persons like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Keshabchandra Sen, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, Sasadhar Tarkachudamani, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Aurobindo Ghose, and many lesser-known figures as well—gave significant, thoughtful consideration to possible ways in which the encounter between these oftentimes-dissimilar streams of thought could be brought together in a coherent and productive fashion, should leave no doubt as to the perceived exigency of the situation. Clearly, there was deemed to be a need to negotiate these intersecting worlds and their characteristic discourses.

Further, Vivekananda's extensive overseas travels, lectures, and writings placed him in a position with which very few of his nineteenth-century compatriots could claim parity. The impact of these shifts in cultural locale is reflected in the changing character of his discourse from one situs to another. In articulating his positions, he was obliged to take into consideration the unique power dynamics he encountered in each situation—in the West, persistent stereotypes of Hindus, widespread interest in a vaguely defined popular 'spiritualism', and the all-pervasive assumptions of modernity; in India, the influence of a diverse collection of religious and cultural traditions, an internalised attitude of colonial subjugation, and what he believed to be a collective latent spiritual power waiting to be roused. Yet, these audiences and environments, despite their dissimilitude, were often not wholly 'separate' from one another—in the sense that virtually any of Vivekananda's talks and writings, even during his lifetime, had the potential to reach diverse interested parties in his homeland, in the dominant imperial centre, and in a country that was fast becoming the seat of twentieth-century neo-colonial power. The swami was fully cognisant that his public enunciation was a performance for multiple audiences, and he responded with measured expositions of his sometime-contentious views. In doing so, this exceptionally well-read and widely travelled monk drew from a large range of concepts, ideas, and rhetorical strategies, seeking to utilise and respond to the expectations, preconceptions, and worldviews of his listeners and readers as effectively as possible.

Even in the context of urban Calcutta itself, Vivekananda was faced with a complex social and intellectual environment, especially among his own class of origin. Portions of the English-educated populace in Bengal had, by the time Vivekananda commenced his

‘mission’, already begun to react against the unmitigated enthusiasm expressed in earlier decades of the nineteenth century for a dawning of a European-inspired ‘Age of Reason’ in India. While this strand of thought certainly still remained prominent, its supporters had to contend with the growing voice of those who sought instead to ‘revive’ what was considered to be “the primal state of the Hindu dharma.”¹ Vivekananda, to the extent that he desired to garner widespread support for his vision of Hindu unity, was confronted by the task of negotiating the growing discursive division between these factions—an undertaking which, as Basu has demonstrated in *Religious Revivalism*, he managed with considerable success.²

Given that the result of this interplay of factors was the inclusion within Vivekananda’s expressed perspectives of elements originating from a variety of contending discourses, what does this mean for the way in which he is to be situated with respect to the assumptions and themes of the colonial project? Hopefully, the preceding chapters have made it clear that the complexity of his discursive positions thwarts their classification into simple binary categories. Vivekananda cannot fairly be dismissed as a naïve colonial clone, merely mimicking back the norms of these discursive formations in a different guise. Nor does the representation of the swami as a fervent patriotic pioneer—an image advanced by many modern Hindu nationalists—suit the sophistication of his views. Yet, at the same time, both of these simplistic assessments hint at elements that can legitimately said to be present within his discourse.

Vivekananda himself served as a site of encounter and negotiation for the competing rhetoric, conceptual formations, and religious, scientific, and political

¹ Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

discourses of the nineteenth-century world—a world in which ideas were anything but confined by national or hemispheric boundaries. While currents of thought have always transversed the borders between countries and cultures, the ideological interchange during this period, particularly throughout the territory of the British Empire—a great machine with “its wonderful system of circulation and distribution,” to recall Vivekananda’s imagery—was unprecedented in terms of speed, extent, and, most critically, depth. Furthermore, the varied vehicles through which Western knowledge and ways of knowing were transmitted to the colonies, and the complex array of competing ‘native’ discourses which these encountered, resulted in new hybrid forms that were rarely consistent with the patterns, or the intent, of their original articulation in the metropole. It should not be surprising, therefore, that a figure who was not only the product of this discursive *mélange* but who deeply engaged it and intentionally sought to appropriate from it what he deemed useful, cannot be slotted into a single, definable position. Vivekananda was an adherent of (multiple) religious traditions with roots running far back into antiquity; he was also a reformer inspired by the ideas and ideals of modernity. He was an advocate of a strong and united Indian ‘nation’ and, at the same time, was a man whose politics were deeply informed by religious convictions. He was profoundly impacted by Euro-American discourses on race, caste and gender, and, by all indications, accepted some of their tenets as valid—and yet, he believed that the Indian cultural heritage offered much insight into these concepts where he found elements lacking or amiss in Western interpretations. The ever-tempting classificatory query, “In which category—Hindu revivalist, religious nationalist, social critic, modern

² Ibid., “Conclusion,” 193-202.

philosopher—is it most appropriate to situate him?” (or, put more simply, “Yes, but which was he *really?*”) is an erroneous one—illustrative, in fact, of the essentialist nature of conventional patterns of Western inquiry, scholastic and otherwise, and the tendency to divide phenomena into exclusive categories fostered thereby. At the most basic level, however, both Vivekananda’s discourse and those of colonialism are intimately connected through their necessary entanglement in the thematic of modernity.

It is, however, perfectly legitimate to inquire to what extent Vivekananda’s critical and often creative engagement of modern ideas and concepts was able to take him beyond the limitations imposed by what we have identified as ‘colonial’ patterns of thought and their allied discursive formations (Orientalism, post-Enlightenment philosophy, Western sciences, and so forth). Was Vivekananda, despite the decidedly imperial nature of his historical and geographical circumstances, a ‘postcolonial’ thinker in at least some respects?

Many of the most important and influential scholars whose work is identified with a consciousness of postcoloniality—including Said, Bhabha, and Spivak—have emphasised the remarkable capacity of colonial constructions, and their particular orderings of human experience, to persist in spite of shifting political forces and even the concerted efforts of those who have imbibed the deconstructionist leanings of the postmodern age. While the extent to which colonial and Orientalist representations have been presented as inevitable and inescapable has led to criticism of some postcolonial theorists’ work,³ the tenacious nature of these wide-ranging and deep-rooted discourses is nevertheless evident. Given, then, that the *postcolonial*, even at the present time, is often

difficult to disentangle fully from the *neocolonial*, how much more problematic must it have been for one who read, experienced, spoke, and wrote amidst the lived reality of empire to eschew its consequences?

Thus, to reformulate the question in a more precise and nuanced fashion: Was Vivekananda able to develop and articulate, in an authentic and meaningful way, a perspective reasonably unrestrained by the suppositions and consequences of colonialism? The answer, I think, must necessarily entail a degree of ambiguity, and—to employ Bhabha’s cherished term—ambivalence. Disembedding oneself from the unquestioned assumptions and metanarratives of empire is no easy task, to be sure. While, granted, in the context of Vedāntic religious practice, Vivekananda sought a direct experience of ‘unconditioned’ knowledge of the ‘uppercase-R’ Reality (*brahman*), he also lived and worked very actively in what he understood as the ‘lowercase-r’ reality of the *sāṃsārika* world, eagerly absorbing through reading, discussion, travel, and cultural exploration the forms of knowledge that the West had constructed about India, about itself, and about the rest of the world. It is, consequently, unrealistic to expect that he would somehow manage construct a ‘pure’ body of knowledge and epistemology uninfluenced by the pervasive norms of imperialism—an absolute impossibility, in fact, when considered from a postmodern or postcolonial perspective.⁴ In the preceding chapters, we have considered the ways in which specific elements of his perspective are resistant to, and yet tethered by, this powerful Western thematic.

³ For an example, see Philip A. Mellor, “Orientalism, Representation and Religion: The Reality Behind the Myth,” *Religion* 34 (2004): 99-112.

⁴ Incidentally, it is worth noting that even the pre-colonial Advaitin philosophers demonstrated an awareness of the folly of seeking to articulate ‘objective’ knowledge unsullied by the contexts of its

Perhaps even more important is the recognition that such a complete disentanglement would not necessarily have been desirable from the swami's perspective. The very body of knowledge, epistemological views, and rhetorical skills that Vivekananda utilised to constructively 'answer back' to the colonial mentality were in large part a legacy of the same system that perpetuated it. His education in European philosophy and religion, his awareness of Western-style historiography and the 'scientific method', and his remarkable dexterity with the English language were aspects of the colonial bequest that he valued and put to use for his own ends. However, along with these adopted discursive formations inevitably come entrenched assumptions, limits, divisions, and prohibitions, originating out of particular cultural settings, unique historical circumstances, and a distinctly modern *episteme*. It is this aspect of the situation, typical of the ambivalent nature of the colonial subject's predicament, which deeply problematises assertions of Vivekananda's postcoloniality. As we have seen, his stated positions on subjects as diverse as religion, nationalism, race, caste, and gender often incorporate essentialist assumptions that follow the same lines as those characteristic of Western discourses on the Orient, even where his expressed desire is to oppose the particular set of power relations embedded within them. The results are sometimes liberating, sometimes limiting, and, most often, an ambivalent admixture of the two.

Certainly, in some instances, Spivak's notion of the strategic employment of essentialist constructions by anti-colonial agents does offer a highly plausible explanation for Vivekananda's discursive choices—for example, the swami's refashioning of

enunciation and transmission, classing even scripturally derived knowledge as *aparāvidyā*—literally, 'non-

‘brahmin’ from a hereditary status-marker into a signifier denoting personal spiritual fitness, or his presentation of Kṛṣṇa as a model of morality along the lines of Christological ethics. Through doing so, Western categories, though maintained in structure, often acquired new content and meanings in Vivekananda’s discourse. His ‘Indocentric’ essentialism provided him with a powerful means to position the Hindu subject advantageously, responding to, in Spivak’s words, Britain’s “specific policies of exploitation.”⁵ Indeed, the historical study of nationalism, including Vivekananda’s perspectives on the same, seems to support the notion that, in seeking to generate a politically expedient movement against colonial ideology and practice, one of the most effective strategies is the appropriation and inversion of at least some of colonialism’s own essentialist binaries. (Perhaps understandably, it would seem a difficult proposition to ‘rally the masses’ around a postmodern campaign of disunified subjectivities.) Vivekananda was far from alone in this respect; Basu has demonstrated how, in the Bengali context, both the conservative *paṇḍits* and the modernist reformers propounded essentialist visions of Hinduism. It is doubtful that, given the particular time and circumstances, a thoroughly ‘postcolonial’ approach would have had an impact on Vivekananda’s audiences, Indian or otherwise, equal to that of his potent style.

In others cases, however—such as the swami’s expositions on masculinity and femininity that, while seeking to refute ideas of Indian women’s oppression and Indian men’s effeminacy, sometimes actually entrench existing gender-based colonial denigrations—an explanatory appeal to strategic essentialism is rather less credible. In such cases, the distinction that Chatterjee employs between the colonial thematic and

ultimate’ and, thus, subject to error.

problematic becomes a particularly useful one. The ability of this framework to account for the apparent contradictions within a wide array of counter-discourses in the colonial setting by appealing to, in Chatterjee's words, the "distinction of 'levels' within the structure of a body of knowledge,"⁶ can help us to understand how Vivekananda's carefully considered positions often remain at least partially embedded within the same epistemological assumptions as do the views he aims to refute.

For example, in the case of his appropriation of the rhetoric of Victorian-era 'muscular Christianity' to counter the colonial representation of the Bengali male as effeminate, Vivekananda advocates that Hindus—at least, Hindu boys and men—ought to challenge this perception by cultivating and performing 'manliness'—for multiple audiences—through physical training and discipline. In this respect, he refutes a particular colonial problematic, by asserting that what the dominant discourse claims to be true and fixed (effeminacy) is, even if perhaps valid, nevertheless subject to alteration through the active agency of the colonial subject. Yet, in adopting this approach to the matter, Vivekananda does not deeply interrogate the underlying essentialist constructions of masculinity/femininity/effeminacy, nor does he fully question the moral import and legitimacy of the meaning and power embedded within these concepts in Western discursive traditions. By virtue of his implied acceptance of a Euro-American conception of masculinity as a proper telos—at least in part—for Indian males, he also does not engage the ways in which these gender-constructs have been culturally created and

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13.

⁶ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (Tokyo: United Nations University, 1986; reprinted in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37.

historically used to justify restrictive behavioural norms for both women and men, in colonised societies and in the metropolitan centre.

Further, Vivekananda's distinctive blend of a modern Western thematic and a text-based brāhmanical philosophy is set forth with such apparent aplomb and authority on his part that it often seems to amount to the *imposition* of a new order in place of the old, rather than a *querying* of the existing status quo. In fact, given the explicit mooring of his views in religion—an immensely powerful medium for the dissemination of ideas, particularly in the Indian context—his assertions sometimes appear, if anything, potentially more tenacious than those of 'secular' colonialism. If the discourses of colonialism are rooted in the legacy of the European Enlightenment, which posited universal principles of human nature and the promised discovery of the same for material nature, Vivekananda's approach audaciously claims a foundation in a universal nature characterising *all reality*, and already identified, encountered, and articulated by Vedāntic thinkers. Yet, his hybrid Advaita-modernity positions do not consistently contest the binary and hierarchical nature of colonial discourse, and may even entrench it further via the force of his appeal to a transcendent authority.

To put the matter another way: if we hypothesise a situation in which Vivekananda's Vedāntic vision were to be implemented in full as a guiding political philosophy for the Indian nation (as the imperial mindset similarly served for nineteenth-century Britain), it is not clear that those under its sway would accordingly have a greater degree of agency to question it, restructure it, or provide alternative interpretations of reality, than was the case when that society was ruled by British colonial power and hegemony. We have also seen, for example, in the case of Vivekananda's construct of

'ideal (Indian) womanhood', how an idea which, from one perspective (such as that of the nascent Indian 'nation'), may seem liberatory, does not necessarily appear so when viewed from another (that of the modernising Indian woman herself), and could even be read as a re-colonisation of the subaltern. Likewise, Vivekananda's grounding of his 'universalistic' perspective in the framework of Advaita metaphysics means that access to its intrinsic structure for purposes of contestation or revision of its various elements (rather than its refutation in toto) is dependent upon a preliminary acceptance of its guiding worldview. This fact makes it problematic for those adhering to substantially differing *Weltanschauungs* (for example, 'orthodox' Muslims or Christians) to actively participate within this form of 'universalism' in a meaningful way, and thus it fosters the displacement and re-inscription of Hindu 'otherness' onto these alternative/marginal positions and groups within the Indian setting. This should perhaps be considered illustrative of the reality that another set of ideological positions implanted where the colonial problematic has been disrupted is not necessarily 'preferable' in every respect—especially upon subaltern populations—to those norms which it replaces, merely by virtue of its production by a 'native' thinker as opposed to a 'foreign' agent.

The intent of these observations is not, however, to portray Vivekananda as a failure in his efforts to reformulate societal dynamics, but to demonstrate how obdurate is the powerful covert thematic of which colonialism is a historical and discursive manifestation, and how its very structure acts to frustrate, though perhaps not completely thwart, the possibility of fundamental change. Indeed, the nature and extent of individual agency within the constraints of colonial discourses remain much-contested topics among scholars, and are questions presently lacking settled conclusions. Vivekananda's

predicament, therefore, is by no means unique; even the leading figures in present-day postcolonial theory often stand accused of merely trading one imperfect framework for another, and of being unduly influenced by essentialism, cultural assumptions, class biases, and the 'elitist' power structures of academia.

To say, then, that the various conceptual constructions to which Vivekananda contributed have thereby been 'decolonised' would not be accurate. Yet, as Chatterjee has pointed out, when a counter-colonial discourse incorporates elements of the colonial thematic, "it is deliberately and necessarily selective... [and] the quarrel with colonialist thought will be necessarily carried into the domain of justification."⁷ Indeed, it is evident from our discussions in the preceding chapters that, at times, Vivekananda was consciously aware of—and even sometimes explicitly acknowledged and articulated—parts of the strategies that allowed colonialism to persist and function, both through hegemony and violence. (Consider, in this regard, his sardonic comments on the adverse consequences of sartorial mimicry by Indians of the British, as quoted and discussed in Chapter Four; or his criticism of the employment of Social Darwinian ideas by political authorities to justify oppression and carnage, examined in Chapter Five.) In the case of the gender roles mentioned above, Vivekananda's negation of colonialism's emasculation of the Bengali male involves the rebuttal of the racialised justification of the same, as he asserts that the alleged lack of masculinity among his Indian contemporaries is an acquired trait, and can and should be remedied by means that lie fully in the hands of Indians themselves, outside of the sphere of British management. As well, by designating personal 'spiritual' practice as a site at least partially exempt from the norms of

⁷ Ibid., 41.

aggressive masculinity, he opens up the possibility of subversion through the circumvention of these gender-norms (a route that Gandhi was to take shortly thereafter, albeit more forthrightly and dramatically). To this extent, Vivekananda may well be considered a participant in the discursive deconstruction of empire.

Further, the necessary complexification of Vivekananda's relationship with Western discourses should not be misread as diminishing the very real advances he made through his efforts to engage and modify the dynamics and effects of colonialism. Indeed, the very fact that modern Indian religious and nationalist movements situate Vivekananda prominently in their respective—and often intertwined—narratives, demonstrates the perception on the part of these groups that his efforts made a tangible impact upon their ability to assert a collective self-identity that challenged existing representations by Western discourses. Put another way, the willingness of many modern Hindus (and even non-Hindu Indians) to describe themselves as indebted to Vivekananda for the latter's 'defence of Hinduism' and/or for his boldly proclaimed 'Indian pride' shows that the colonial discourses which functioned—be it by design or not—to inculcate in the Indian imperial subject a 'shame' in the effeminate degeneracy of his/her religious and national life were rendered, at some point, less hegemonic and, consequently, less effective. Though Vivekananda was only one among many figures who played a role in Indians' discovery (*recovery*, Vivekananda himself would no doubt say) of a strong communal sense of dignity and self-respect throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the symbolic value of his contribution should not be underestimated, as his subsequent pan-Indian canonisation as a 'patriot saint' makes evident.

The response of those outside of the borders of India and of the sphere of Hinduism also lends support to the contention that Vivekananda made some true headway in destabilising the foundations of these powerful mindsets. Naturally, few scholars of religion (or, presumably, scholars of nationalism, sociology, or gender studies) would argue that the consequences of long allowing the post-Enlightenment thematic to go unquestioned have been expunged from present-day discourses. But, the Hinduism with which North Americans and Europeans, as well as Hindu Indians themselves, are today acquainted appears in many ways unlike that which was represented 'to the West by the West' in an earlier, pre-Vivekananda period.

This is not to wholly refute Said's assertions concerning the persistent hold that Orientalist constructions continue to have upon perceptions of 'the East'. The nineteenth-century Orientalists' hierarchical classificatory schemes and Eurocentric analytical approaches lurk remarkably close to the surface, even in academic contexts; the mutually contradictory tendencies towards semitified 'saming' and exoticist 'Othering' are still prevalent in Western ideas of Hinduism, especially on the popular level. Indeed, the essentialism that underlies these divergent-yet-interwoven discursive aspects has proven remarkably tenacious.

Yet, at the same time, Said's claims regarding the utter inescapability of the colonial paradigm appear somewhat problematic in light of the shifting representations of Hinduism in the century following Vivekananda's passing. While bearing definite marks of the Orientalist mindset, Hinduism has also been the subject of novel articulations that challenge the persistent hierarchisation of earlier colonial perspectives. It seems fair to state that those whom we might term members of the liberal-minded Western public

(including, today, many diasporic Hindus) are highly likely to view Indian religion with lenses coloured by a Vivekananda-esque appraisal of the capacity of ‘Hindu wisdom’—resembling most often Advaitic philosophy—to transcend cultural and even religious boundaries, even to function as a liberating agent for the non-Hindu world, be it on a personal or societal level, or both.⁸ An example of this is to be found in the widespread interest in the affiliation between Hinduism and science, addressed in the work of such popular writers as Fritjof Capra and Deepak Chopra, employing comparisons between contemporary scientific thinking and decontextualised versions of purportedly ‘core’ Hindu teachings to provide mutual justification and elucidation of each viewpoint. This is not to claim that this perception of ‘Hinduism’ as an entity separable from its religious, historical, and sociological moorings is an *accurate* one, either historically or doctrinally, but only that it has been, and continues to be, an influential theme within modern ‘multicultural’ social milieux. Again, Vivekananda himself certainly does not deserve the full credit for this—arguably, well-known Indian thinkers like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, as well as the American Transcendentalist writers such as Emerson and Thoreau, have been equally, if not more, influential in the dissemination of this perspective. So, too, have a variety of twentieth-century Hindu teachers, many of whom have travelled and taught in Western countries much as Vivekananda did in years previous. However, a significant number of these persons themselves have openly acknowledged an appreciation of Vivekananda and a degree of

⁸ To be fair, however, Religionist Jane Naomi Iwamura has drawn attention to the “racial coding” couched within this ostensibly positive representation of “oriental wisdom,” which is implicitly set off against “black magic” and “white science” in popular Western discourses. (See Iwamura, “The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. B. D. Forbes and J. H. Mahan [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], 34.)

acquaintance with his work that suggest the probable influence of the latter upon the former. As well, the Vedanta Societies founded by Vivekananda have multiplied over the course of the preceding century, spreading throughout North America, Europe, and Asia (and even finding footholds in some South American, African, and Oceanic countries), and the influence of their growing body of published literature—much of it, Vivekananda-authored or not, in accordance with the broad outlines of his thought—has increased as well. If Orientalism still survives strongly into the present era, as Said asserts it does, it is also difficult to deny that its manifest expressions have undergone profound shifts, to which the swami's perspectives have contributed and continue to do so.⁹

Even more than this, the very fact of Vivekananda's vigorous and vocal participation on a global stage, of his insistence to be taken seriously as a thoughtful analyst of human phenomena and ideas (be these religious, national, racial, or otherwise), is itself significant from the perspective of destabilising Eurocentric discourses. As Said has written, according to the norms of the Orientalist perspective, "Orientals were rarely seen or looked at: they were seen through, analysed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined, or—as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory—taken over."¹⁰ Vivekananda, as one of the first Hindu spokespersons to directly contact a significant audience in the United States and Britain over an extended period, contributed towards real change in this respect. By putting himself into the role of an authoritative interpreter, he offered resistance against the tendency of the West to portray Hindus as passive objects to be scrutinised and explained (away). Instead, he both

⁹ King's work, as described, has duly traced the bi-directional flow of some of these ideas about the India and its religions through various channels, including Vivekananda, between the East and the West.

¹⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books [Random House], 1978; reprinted, 1994), 207.

represented and interpellated them as active—and often privileged—agents in the depiction and analysis of their own traditions, as well as those of others. This was especially important in the colonial Indian context, for Vivekananda was up against pervasive foreign discourses that functioned to represent back to Indians their own nature and position only in ways that the West deemed appropriate. His actions were, effectively, a reclamation of Indians' right to establish for themselves a distinct epistemological space, albeit one permanently altered by the impact of Western thought. His querying of disparaging racial discourses, his focus on the purportedly 'rational' and 'scientific' nature of Hinduism, and his assertions of Hindus' full and active participation in a trans-cultural quest for 'universal religion', effectively claimed for Hindus a legitimate subjecthood. Further, the nationalistic themes woven throughout his discourses granted Hindu Indians 'citizenship' in a nation which, though it did not yet exist as a political entity, strongly did so in spirit. In Vivekananda's eyes, 'Orientals' were not "problems to be solved" by the West, but, rather, were poised to become, at least in the 'spiritual' sphere, solvers of the West's problems.

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