Swami Vivekananda Revisited

Continental Collision and the (Re)Packaging of Hindu Traditions

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Abstract

This study seeks to analyze the how Vivekananda's voice impacted the (re)packaging of Hindu traditions in the 19ᵗʰ century. By first problematizing the Western terms 'religion' and 'Hinduism' It will establish the framework within which Vivekananda's influence can be understood. It uses the term 'continental collision' to demonstrate how the East and West impacted each other thereby confirming that the exchange of ideas was multidirectional and not one sided. This study highlights Vivekananda's Indian roots and local influences thereby taking into account the fact that Vivekananda's voice was uniquely Indian and not simply a result of Western ideology. This volume relies extensively on Swami Vivekananda's English publications thereby allowing Vivekananda to speak for himself. It surveys Vivekananda's experiences at the Parliament of Religions in 1893 and his triumphant return in order to determine how he was able to cultivate a hierarchy which privileged Advaita Vedanta over all other native Indian traditions. By highlighting the way Vivekananda created the hierarchy amongst Indian traditions, a hierarchy that is still thriving in modern India, it draws attention to how this is detrimental to the integrity of the Indian landmass. Using modern scholarship, it shines a light on the way Vivekananda's ideas have been appropriated by the Hindutva movement who, in turn, have interpreted his hierarchy to be in support of creating a Hindu state in India. Thus, it reveals how this particularly Indian voice of Vivekananda's, due to the immense 'continental collision' that occurred during the British Raj, was able to (re)package Hindu traditions; a repackaging that resulted in a hierarchy that must be dismantled by Hindus today.

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the 'continental collision' that occurred during the colonial era, and the role that Vivekananda played in the (re)packaging of Hindu traditions, when natives were searching for a unifying force in their quest for independence. One of the questions I would like to engage with is whether imported systems of classification were passively accepted by the natives, without any analysis (as some scholars seem to suggest) or, if instead, these foreign ideas were appropriated, assimilated and then reconfigured by the natives to suit their needs during the British Raj. I will argue that the needs of the Westerners were soon superseded by the needs of the natives in their effort, not only to represent themselves to an audience that did not share their traditional heritage, but more importantly, to find ways to embrace their past while facing their future. This implies not a passive acceptance, as is often suggested, but instead an active takeover. In, "Remembering Rammohan: An Essay on the (Re-)emergence of Modern Hinduism" Brian Hatcher observes that the 'founders' of the various movements in India, during colonization, represented areas of negotiation:

> On the one hand, we are accustomed to attributing the rise of modern Hinduism to the agency of a number of founding figures, men like Rammohan Roy, Keshub Chunder Sen, Swami Vivekananda, or Dayananda Sarasvati. On the other hand, it is now widely accepted that the reiterative imagining of modern Hinduism owes a great deal to the classificatory and disciplinary matrix of European knowledge. To say this is not to advocate a return to simplistic models of European "impact" on South Asian religion, but rather to increase our awareness of the complexity of the intra- and intercultural processes that contributed to the emergence of modern Hinduism. If modern Hinduism reflects this complicated process of reiteration and reformulation, then it becomes especially important that we

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[1] This is a concept that is developed by Ashis Nandy which we will investigate in detail later in this chapter.

[2] A phrase that I have coined which we will unpack in the following pages.

think carefully about the role of those particular individuals thought of as founders (2006, p.52).

As Hatcher points out, there were several natives who effected this change, natives who could all be considered 'founders'. However, I would like to narrow my study considerably by focusing particularly on Swami Vivekananda[3], a Hindu monk who acquired great acclaim both in the West, as well as on the Indian subcontinent, and whose name still inspires respect amongst Hindus today. I will endeavour to demonstrate that whereas Western Orientalists may have tried to impose their system of classification on the natives, it was not until the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, when Vivekananda took this label 'Hinduism', and helped redefine it, that we witness a pan-Indian, and indeed a pan-global adoption of this term.

Furthermore, I would also like to explore the ways in which Vivekananda navigated through the accepted definitions of other labels and terms, theories and practices, both in India and the West. I will demonstrate that by repeatedly turning his gaze onto Western practices and ideologies he compelled his Western listeners to reassess the ways in which they viewed their own traditions. In *Unifying Hinduism* (2014), Andrew Nicholson recognizes that this is an issue that needs to be addressed by contemporary scholars:

> Emphasizing the heavy influence of the European Indologists in the modern period often conceals something else, the influence of premodern Indian texts and native scholars on those Europeans themselves. The Saidian model, portraying Orientalism as a pure product of European imperialism with no engagement with Asian texts and ideologies, is untenable in the face of overwhelming evidence of a two-way cultural influence. Not only were modern Indians transformed by their British rules into tea-sipping, ersatz Englishmen. In varying ways and to varying extents, European Orientalists also became "Orientalized" through their engagement with Asian cultures and ideas (2014, p.143).

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[3] Born Narendranath Datta (1863-1902)

To accomplish this goal, I will first conduct an in-depth study of the terms 'religion' and 'Hinduism' since this will allow us to establish a foundation upon which we can then juxtapose Vivekananda's engagement with these terms, and the impact they had on Hindu traditional ideas. Indeed, Vivekananda's interpretations of these concepts not only influenced the trajectory of ideas in India but simultaneously challenged the framework used by his Western contemporaries. For example, in *The Invention of World Religions* (2005) Tomoko Masuzawa explores the creation of the category 'world religions' which, in turn, questioned the very category of 'religion'. As she points out, one of "the efficient causes, so to speak, that finally brought about the new discourse of world religions… [were] the preconditions and the aftermath of the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago" (Masuzawa, 2005, p.27). As far as Vivekananda is concerned however, not only did he appropriate the term 'Hinduism' in such a way as to make it a label that Hindus could wear with pride, but in doing so, he was also one of the non-Western voices who challenged the very category of 'religion' and the parameters within which it operated. Accordingly, Vivekananda argued that 'Hinduism' could not be easily contained within the limited boundaries and definition of the Western term 'religion'. Masuzawa calls this exchange "globalization under duress" (2005, p.282) when she highlights the process whereby colonial subjects were expected to expound upon their philosophies at the Parliament:

> Typically, it was a symbiotic process in which the natives came to articulate their own identity by utilizing concepts and ideas initially forged by others, and in which the native articulation came to feed into the reality status of these ideas in a complicated way (2005, pp.282-283).

An unforeseen aspect of Vivekananda's legacy however, is that while he helped problematize the term 'religion', he was also eventually instrumental in the creation of a more restricted identity for 'Hinduism'. This was a by-product of the need felt by

nationalists to unite India under a single banner during the British Raj; a point that

multiple scholars highlight in the following chapters. Whereas Vivekananda's efforts

may have been necessary in colonial times, now his arguments need to be reexamined

to help us understand the legacy of the man who helped make 'Hinduism' a normative

term on the Indian subcontinent. I am not suggesting that Vivekananda was the only

person responsible for the popularity of this pan-Indian label 'Hinduism'. Rather, as we

shall discuss in the ensuing pages, the role he played was one of a catalyst. He brought

together forces and ideas that were already present, but which had not yet fully

crystallized into the 'Hinduism' that inspired national leaders to form a united front in

their battle against the Raj. It is precisely for this reason that Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan

(1888-1975) reminisces about the days when Vivekananda gave Indians a reason to

raise their heads up in pride:

> It is that kind of humanistic, man-making religion which gave us courage in the
> days when we were young. When I was a student in one of the classes, in the
> matriculation class or so, the letters of Swami Vivekananda used to be circulated
> in manuscript form among us all. The kind of thrill which we enjoyed, the kind of
> mesmeric touch that those writings gave us, the kind of reliance on our own
> culture that was being criticized all around- it is that kind of transformation
> which his writings effected in the young men in the early years of this century
> (Radhakrishnan, 1973, p.97).

The strong sentiments of Hindu pride that Vivekananda evoked makes him an

important subject to study today. There are three main ideas that I would like to explore

through the lens that Vivekananda's life and work provide. First and foremost, the

notion that both the East and the West were deeply impacted by the exchange of ideas

that occurred during this 'continental collision'. Second, that Vivekananda helped

(re)package 'Hinduism' in such a way as to encourage a hierarchy amongst Hindu

philosophical schools. And last, but not least, I would like to question whether this

hierarchy needs to be disassembled if modern India hopes to retain its unique approach

to diversity. In order to accomplish this goal, I will divide this study into seven chapters. In this chapter, I will outline my resources, interpret Ashis Nandy's idea of 'colonized minds' and elaborate on what I mean by 'continental collision'. In the next two chapters, I will explore how the terms 'religion' and 'Hinduism' are unpacked by a variety of scholars. This will give us a framework from which to understand the importance of Vivekananda's engagement with these two concepts. This will then provide me with the necessary tools to demonstrate, in the following chapter, that natives, like Vivekananda, were not passive recipients of Western ideas during the British Raj, but instead, were using Indian analytic tools to explore Western concepts and theories. Thereafter, in the ensuing two chapters, I will analyse Vivekananda's speeches, lectures and writings to try to determine why he believed that Hindu traditional ideas needed to be repackaged if they were to survive globalization and Hindus were to overcome the cultural inferiority that was the result of colonization. This will, in turn, allow us to understand how Vivekananda was able to help create a hierarchy within Indian philosophic thought. And last, but not least, in the final chapter, I will explore the way Vivekananda's ideology has been translated into the idiom of Hindu supremacy. A development that has been gradual, but which is undeniable in the current political environment in India with the rising popularity of the Hindutva movement over the last few decades.

Resources and Method

Much has been said about the accuracy of the compilations and translations produced by the Ramakrishna Mission, who are responsible for the publication of Vivekananda's writings, which are largely contained in the eight volumes entitled *The*

Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (2009).[4] Whereas some of the issues that previous scholars have had with these editions may be warranted, for the purposes of this study I am interested in understanding, and analysing, how Vivekananda himself, and then the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, promoted this image and message that went on to influence both the Indian elites and the masses. It is this persona of Vivekananda's, that informs my research since this 'version' of Vivekananda has left its mark on the way Hindus perceive their traditions and philosophy. Consequently, I will primarily engage with these English editions since they were, and continue to be, the public voice of Vivekananda; the voice that helped formulate this pan-Indian version of 'Hinduism' that continues to survive today. As a result, I will not be focusing on his Bengali manuscripts since these have a limited viewership and I am convinced that his reach, both during his lifetime and after, was not regional but rather, as I have already stated, a pan-Indian phenomenon. Indeed, I have found that even scholars who rely on these Bengali manuscripts, find themselves returning to *The Complete Works* to determine how Vivekananda presented his ideas to the public at large, since it was this voice that was ultimately heard.[5] I do not mean to suggest that the Bengali manuscripts are not important to understand certain aspects of Vivekananda's message; they continue to be a valuable resource. However, for my purposes here, where I want to trace the impact his message had both in India and in the global context, his English 'face' offers me a better lens by which to analyse his methods and strategy.

Furthermore, it should go without saying, that there are many biographical accounts of his life, most of which vary dramatically in style, format and content.

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[4] For example, Narasingha Sil (1997) and Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya (1999) both conduct an in-depth survey of the way the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and the followers of Vivekananda do not give an accurate account of his life and works.
[5] For example, see Sil (1997) and Basu (2002).

Oftentimes however, these works tend to be wildly polemic, a point that Narasingha P.

Sil highlights in *Swami Vivekananda: A Reassessment* (1997):

> Like his spiritual mentor Ramakrishna, the Swami became a celebrity and a legendary figure during his lifetime. Hence it is not an easy task to see the historical and human Narendranath through the hagiographical halo that surrounds the personality of Swami Vivekananda. The problem is compounded further by a paucity of critical analyses of his character and career. All the existing biographies of the Swami, including Sister Gargi's monumental six-volume *New Discoveries* on Vivekananda's activities in the West, reaffirm the larger-than-life stature of a princely, handsome, erudite, and eloquent young man – the roaring Vedantic lion of the fin de siècle India. Even the most recent anthologies, based on the researches of leading Indian scholars, regard Swamiji as a hypercosmological and ultramundane *sannyasi*, who was also a profoundly original thinker and social reformer – the patriot-prophet of modern India (1997, p.23).

Indeed, several of the biographies or essays about Vivekananda, such as Swami

Nikhilananda's *Vivekananda: A Biography* (1989) are written by Vivekananda's

followers and as such must be classified as hagiographical accounts. These reports build

Vivekananda up to be a great saint, with mesmeric oratory skills, that moved millions of

people. Some even go further and equate him to a Hindu god. For example, in the

opening pages of his biography, Nikhilananda tries to establish that Vivekananda was an

incarnation of Shiva. Accordingly, he reports, "one night she [Bhuvaneshwari,

Vivekananda's mother] dreamt that this supreme Deity [Shiva] aroused Himself from

His meditation and agreed to be born as her son" (Nikhilananda, 1989, p.1). What

complicates matters even further is that the Ramakrishna Mission has also published

collected essays, in commemorative issues, written by well-known citizens, which

applaud, but do not critique, Vivekananda's role in Indian history.[6] In recent years, some

critical accounts have emerged which focus on Vivekananda's shortcomings and the

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[6] For example, see *Swami Vivekananda: Centenary Memorial Volume* (1963). In this volume, the "Forward" is written by Dr. Sarvapali Radhakrishnan, President of India, and the "Homage" is written by Dr. Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, formerly Governor-General of India.

way he manipulated certain 'Hindu' ideas to develop his own philosophy.[7] This is

obviously as a consequence of the numerous hagiographical accounts of Vivekananda's

life. As a result, scholars like Sil, have written 'counter' biographies in an attempt to

highlight some of the misconceived theories that have been promoted by Vivekananda's

followers; theories that do not always hold up to the standards that are usually set for

scholarly research:

> My study seeks, inter alia, to find answers to a number of questions: Was
> Narendranath really inclined to spirituality since his childhood maintained by all
> his biographers? How and when did he study the Hindu scriptures he taught in
> the West? What were the contents and interpretations of Hindu religion and
> culture he propagated abroad? What was his real attitude to women in general,
> and what were his experiences with some of his women devotees and disciples?
> And finally, how should a historical evaluation of his achievements be reconciled
> with his colossal image in the studies that are extant? (1997, p.25)

Sil articulates the difficulties he incurred when writing about Vivekananda:

> It has at once been an exciting and exasperating experience to write a critical
> evaluation of such a historical figure. Sifting the chaf from the grain in almost all
> the sources for his life and *logia*, the author has risked resentment of friends,
> fellow-scholars, and of course, the devotees of Swamiji in this country as well as
> in India (1997, pp.11-12).

Thus, many of the biographies available on Vivekananda are either written by his

followers, and therefore must be considered hagiographical, or instead, are responses

or reactions to these hagiographies. A useful, but slightly dated, reference for the

published works focusing on Vivekananda is provided by Rajagopal Chattopadhyaya in

Swami Vivekananda in India: A Corrective Biography (1999)*.* Here, Chattopadhyaya

devotes a chapter titled "Reviews and Notes about Important Published Works on

Swami Vivekananda, 1897-1996" which, as the name suggests, offers an extensive

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[7] For example, Amiya Sen's *Swami Vivekananda* (2000). Sen's work is useful because he
presents Vivekananda in a manner which allows him to be seen as a complex individual who
continues to be difficult to analyze (2000, p.1).

commentary on the way Vivekananda is interpreted by varying scholars (1999, pp.289-371).

Biographies are not the only secondary literature available on Swami Vivekananda. There are several volumes written that describe the way Vivekananda impacted the nationalist movement, the role he played in India's struggle for freedom, his role as an outspoken 'neo-Vedantin' or alternatively the influence he had on the development of the Ramakrishna Mission. Vivekananda's career has been examined in great detail and scholars have repeatedly offered insights on the trajectory of Vivekananda's short life. For example, in *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service* (2006b), Gwilym Beckerlegge explores the relationship between Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and The Ramakrishna Mission for whom *seva* or service became a central focal point:

> The findings of these critical inquiries have challenged the Ramakrishna movement's understandings of the origins of its most characteristic beliefs and practices – the practice of seva, its conviction that Ramakrishna was an Advaitin, and the basis of its faith in Vivekananda's role as a faithful interpreter of Ramakrishna's message and priorities (2006(b), p.2).

On the other hand, Paul Hacker was more concerned with the role that Vivekananda played in the Indian nationalist movement and the emergence of what Hacker classifies as the 'Neo-Hindu':

> Vivekananda's practical application of Vedantism reveals the Neo-Hindu whose primary concern is nationalism. His commitment to religion was surely genuine, but nationalism was part of this very commitment. Thus, he was consistent in making the religious heritage subservient to the tackling of modern national problems (1995, pp.240-241).

In contrast, Tapan Raychaudhari, in "Swami Vivekananda's Construction of Hinduism" (1999) explores the role that Vivekananda played in the Hindu revivalist movement and argues:

> he [Vivekananda] rejected with contempt the central planks in the propaganda of Hindu reaction. The fact that he had an equal lack of regard for the Babu-sponsored reforms has obscured that act of rejection (1999, p.2).

I have found this secondary literature to be invaluable in helping me to understand Vivekananda. It is with the aid of this impressive (yet sometimes problematic) secondary literature that I will attempt to analyse Vivekananda's writings, and the role he played, in the development of the term 'Hinduism'. As I trace the ideas with which he engaged I will demonstrate how he used them to formulate his own ideas, and the resulting impact, they had both in India and in the diaspora. Vivekananda's repackaging of 'Hinduism' is one of the most important aspects of his legacy since it allows us to understand the ways in which his epistemology influenced a number of accepted definitions and worldviews. This, in turn, resulted in what some might call a hegemonic form of 'Hinduism' that needs to be problematized in contemporary times if Hindu traditions are to maintain their fluid boundaries. Keeping these ideas in mind, we can now turn to Ashis Nandy in order to unpack some crucial, yet oftentimes underestimated, aspects of colonization. As we shall see, colonization was not one-sided, nor was it limited to the upper echelon of society. Vivekananda, and his peers, were also in a position to impact the West; an idea that Ashis Nandy explores in some detail.

Ashis Nandy[8] and the 'colonization of minds'

Ashis Nandy's book *The intimate enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (2006) consists of two essays which focus on the psychology of colonization

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[8] Nandy is a scholar of psychology and the politics of culture and has an extensive body of work. However, for the purposes of this discussion I will concentrate on *The intimate enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (2006) since it is arguably his most recognized contribution to post-colonial theory and the one which directly addresses some of the issues I would like to analyze.

in general, and the British colonization of India in particular. However, Nandy quickly

clarifies that it is not only the psychology of the so-called main protagonists, i.e. the elite,

that he is interested in studying but also those who typically have not had a prominent

voice in this historical exchange:

> If beating the West at its own game is the preferred means of handling the
> feelings of self-hatred in the modernized non-West, there is also the West
> constructed by the savage outsider who is neither willing to be a player nor a
> counterplayer (2006, p.xiii).

Consequently, Nandy warns his readers that his approach is non-conventional and

asserts:

> Fidelity to one's inner self, as one translates, and to one's inner voice, when one
> comments, may not mean adherence to reality in some cultures but in some
> others they do. At least that is the sole defence I have for my tendency to speak of
> the West as a single political entity, of Hinduism as Indianness, or of history and
> Christianity as Western. None of them is true but all them are realities (2006,
> p.xiii-xiv).

With this statement, Nandy indicates the problematic nature of categories, and

classifications, especially when they are adopted from alien cultures. His primary

concern however, is with the labels 'colonizer' and 'colonized' which he argues are

deceptive when one examines the consciousness of the participants. Indeed, one could

argue that Nandy's most provocative idea appears in the preface of his work which, sets

the tone for his subsequent discussions. He contends that his main issue is not with the

physical colonization of lands and peoples but instead with:

> the second form of colonization, the one which at least six generations of the
> Third World have learnt to view as a *prerequisite for their liberation*. This
> colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within
> the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all. In the process,
> it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and
> temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within
> the West and outside; in structures and in minds (Nandy, 2006, p.xi, emphasis
> added).

Accordingly, he stresses:

This is primarily the story of the second colonization and resistances to it… with a colonialism which survives the demise of empires. At one time, the second colonization legitimized the first. Now it is independent of its roots. Even those who battle the first colonialism often guiltily embrace the second. Hence the reader should read the following pages not as a history but as a cautionary tale. They caution us that conventional anti-colonialism, too, could be an apologia for the *colonization of minds* (Nandy, 2006, p.xi, emphasis added).

In this manner, Nandy reminds his readers that whereas adaptation to, and adoption of, the ideals, language and value systems of the colonizers may have been a 'prerequisite for their liberation' before Independence, the continued adherence to such a system signals a much deeper rooted problem that needs to be identified and addressed. However, since Nandy is not only concerned with drawing attention to the 'colonized minds' of the Indian elite, he also turns his attention to those Indians who he believes have not only resisted this colonization but have covertly fought back. Thus, even though he doesn't directly affiliate himself with the subalternist scholarship that begins to emerge during the 1980's, his arguments, which advocate for the neglected role of the indigenous class, seem to resonate with subalternist philosophy. Indeed, one could argue that Nandy's premise, with which he begins his discussion, is reminiscent of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's now famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988)[9] Nandy asserts:

the colonized Indians do not remain in these pages simple-hearted victims of colonialism: they become participants in a moral and cognitive venture against oppression. They make choices. And to the extent they have chosen their alternative within the West, they have also evaluated the evidence, judged and sentenced some while acquitting others (2006, p.xiv).

Interestingly however, Nandy is not satisfied with this binary argument and takes his analysis one step further. Consequently, he is not only concerned with the

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[9] In this essay Spivak explores the ways in which the subalternist project has tried to give a voice to these neglected Indians and questions the validity and effectiveness of this scholarship (Spivak, 1988).

Indians who adjusted and accommodated their belief system to fit the needs and demands of their Christian masters. Nor is he just interested in the Hindus who continued to practice their polytheistic rituals and pray to their multiple idols despite paying passing homage to the ideas of their political rulers. Instead, Nandy takes a three-pronged approach and presents his readers with the third dimension of his view of colonization. Accordingly, he contends that the colonizers, who were vested with the power associated with empire, were very often forced into positions, by their subjects, that resulted in choices which they may not have made under other circumstances. Here, we are reminded of the western philosopher Michel Foucault, and his ideas regarding the discursive network of power.[10] Nandy elaborates on this idea when he asserts that he is not simply arguing that the colonized made choices, and had a certain degree of power to do so, but rather, that this power was taken to the ultimate level when it, in turn, colonized the minds, and lives, of the colonizers themselves. Naturally, this raises questions of influence, and impact, because if we are to accept Nandy's premise then we would also have to acknowledge and examine the way the colonized Indians colonized the minds of their Western masters. Analysing this three-dimensional version of colonization is precisely what Nandy sets out to do.

Nandy begins his argument by elaborating how Indian intellectuals reinterpreted their own ideology and philosophy by using the yardsticks provided by their colonizers:

> once the two sides in the British-Indian culture of politics, following the
> flowering of the middle-class British evangelical spirit, began to ascribe *cultural*

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[10] For example, Foucault asserts, "Power relations are rooted in the system of social networks. This is not to say, however, that there is a primary and fundamental principle of power which dominates society down to the smallest detail; but, taking as point of departure the possibility of action upon the action of others (which is coextensive with every social relationship), multiple forms of individual disparity, of objectives, of the given application of power over ourselves or others, of, in varying degrees, partial or universal institutionalization, of more or less deliberate organization, one can define different forms of power" (1982, p.793).

meanings to the British domination, colonialism proper can be said to have begun (2006, p.6, emphasis added).

One of the 'cultural meanings' that came to play a big role in the psychology of colonization in India was the idea of sexual domination. The British Empire had convinced themselves that they had been invested with manly attributes such as "aggression, achievement, control, competition and power" (Nandy, 2006, p.9). Thus, this allowed them to rationalize that they were naturally equipped to dominate over the less aggressive, and therefore more feminine, colonies.[11] According to Nandy, it was as a result of this cultural colonization that the affluent and educated class of Indians began searching for heroes, within their scriptures, who emphasized qualities that were usually associated with masculinity to demonstrate that these attributes were not absent from their native culture. One such example is the work of the poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73) whose classic Bengali interpretation *Meghanadvadh Kavya*:

> retells the Ramayana, turning the traditionally sacred figures of Rama and Laksmana into weak-kneed, passive-aggressive, feminine villains and the demons Ravana and his son Meghnad into majestic, masculine, modern heroes (Nandy, 2006, p.19).

Another popular argument from Western philosophers, such as G.W. Hegel, was that Indian civilization represented the childhood of humanity from which, it was necessary to progress via the 'rational' ideology of the West that had been provided by colonization.[12] Nandy argues that it was in an effort to neutralize this impression of infantile Hindu traditions that the scholar Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) ignored the beloved stories of the child-god Balgopal. Instead, Bankimchandra

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[11] We will explore this concept of 'effeminacy' in some detail in Chapter 5.
[12] For example, "The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning" (Hegel, 1901, p.163).

emphasized the manly, powerful god-King Krishna, ruler of Dwarka, "a normal, non-pagan male god who would not humiliate his devotees in front of the progressive Westerners" (Nandy, 2006, p. 24). Nandy contends that many elite Indians, who were exposed to British ideals began identifying with, and adopting for themselves, the value systems that were prized by their colonial masters. This absorption and simulation is what makes the colonization of minds so dangerous:

> More dangerous and permanent are the inner rewards and punishments, the secondary psychological gains and losses from suffering and submission under colonialism. They are almost always unconscious and almost always ignored. Particularly strong is the inner resistance to recognizing the ultimate violence which colonialism does to its victims, namely it creates a culture in which the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter. It is not an accident that the specific variants of the concepts with which many anti-colonial movements in our times have worked have often been the products of the imperial culture itself (Nandy, 2006, p.3).

Nandy then moves on to his next assertion whereby he argues that he does not believe that all Indians succumbed to this kind of colonization. He is keen to draw attention to the Indians who not only resisted colonization, but in fact, pushed back in ways that were not always evident. What is interesting however, is that the examples he cites are of Indian men who are normally considered to belong to the intellectual elite; such as M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891). Naturally, this raises questions as to how these Indian elite can be confused with the unheard voices that Nandy says he is keen to bring to light in the preface of this work, where he unequivocally states, "it is the unheroic Indian coping with the might of the West I want to portray" (Nandy, 2006, p.xiii). Why then does Nandy choose to highlight the experiences and examples of these well-known Indian heroes? As a result of his choices, one cannot help but question if Nandy has fallen into the very trap that he has been trying to warn his readers of, that labels of any kind are not easily avoided. Indeed, Nandy tucks away his emerging awareness, in a footnote,

where he describes his experiences when he was first studying two Indian scientists, the lesser known Srinivasa Ramanujan and the acclaimed Indian hero Jagdish Chandra Bose. Nandy acknowledges that in the first stages of his analysis, his sympathies lay with Ramanujan, who he considered to be the underdog since he had not embraced Western ideology, in contrast to Bose, who seemed to represent the very epitome of the modern Indian man. However, Nandy himself admits that he soon grasped:

> Ramanujan was not especially vulnerable after all… Nor was Bose particularly inauthentic; the cultural problems he dealt with in his science were real and immediate. And he, too, was vulnerable. As he negotiated his way through the ruthless world of modern science, he had to cope with the hostility which the liminal man always arouses as opposed to the proper alien (Nandy, 2006, pp.102-103fn).

Thus, one gets the impression that Nandy himself is struggling with the realization that classification, in any category, is relative to the argument being made, and that even elites like Gandhi, are heroes only when viewed from a certain perspective. Indeed, when examined from the context of the British elite, who were forced to engage with him, then Gandhi himself, could be qualified as a subaltern voice![13]

In fact, it is this idea, which Nandy gives birth to, but which he never overtly develops to its logical conclusion, that turns out to be the most fascinating aspect of his study. Unfortunately however, Nandy skirts around the edges of this argument by using Gandhi as his primary example, of a person of Indian origin, who does not allow his mind to be colonized by Western ideals. Yet, he never explains how Gandhi fits into this category of 'unsung' heroes. After all, instead of using Gandhi to make his point about the Indian minds who covertly resisted colonization shouldn't Nandy be highlighting instances where such resistance emerged from people who he describes as the "savage

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[13] According to Ranajit Guha, "The word 'subaltern' …stands for the meaning as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that is, 'of inferior rank'" (1994(b), p.vii).

outsider who is neither willing to be a player nor a counterplayer" (2006, p.xiii)? Rather, Nandy chooses to elaborate on the way Gandhi (an Indian who is rarely described as a 'savage'[14]) refused to accept the premise that the West deserved to be mimicked since it had classified itself as both 'civilized'[15] and modern. According to Nandy, it is worth noting that Gandhi ignored the Western value system that prized masculinity, by adopting weaving, an activity that was usually relegated to women. Nandy also acknowledges that Gandhi was sensitive to the traditionally accepted ideas of '*shakti*' when he points out that Gandhi naturally assumed that there was a "closer conjunction between power, activism and femininity than between power, activism and masculinity" (2006, p.53).[16] Moreover, Gandhi recognized the "primacy of maternity" (Nandy, 2006, p.54):

> In sum, Gandhi was clear in his mind that activism and courage could be liberated from aggressiveness and recognized as perfectly compatible with womanhood, particularly maternity. Whether this position fully negated the Ksatriya world view or not, it certainly negated the very basis of the colonial culture (Nandy, 2006, p.54).

Additionally, Nandy draws attention to the fact that Gandhi did not make any excuses for this playfulness and childlike qualities which were deemed infantile by his more 'proper' peers:

> Not only did every Westernizer and Westernized Indian who came in touch with Gandhi refer at least once to his child's smile, his admirers and detractors dutifully found him childlike and childish respectively. His 'infantile' obstinacy and tendency to tease, his 'immature' attacks on the modern world and its props, his 'juvenile' food fads and symbols like the spinning wheel – all were viewed as planks of a political platform which defied conventional ideas of adulthood (2006, p.56).

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[14] The closest one could come to such a categorization would be Winston Churchill who famously referred to Gandhi as the 'half naked' fakir (The Times, 1931).

[15] A popular hagiography has Gandhi blatantly refusing to even acknowledge that the West was civilized. He is said to have responded, when asked "what he thought about Western civilization" by saying, "I think it would be a good idea."

[16] We will return to the ideas of femininity and maternity in the final chapter.

What is particularly perplexing with these arguments about Gandhi, and others Nandy

makes regarding Aurobindo and Vidyasagar, is that it is almost as if he is trying to tear

down the premise with which he started i.e. the colonization of the minds of the Indians

who were in close contact with their colonizers. As a result, once again, we witness

Nandy's own struggle to understand the Indian consciousness when he states:

> one could perhaps say that in the chaos called India the opposite of thesis is not
> the antithesis because they exclude each other. The true 'enemy' of the thesis is
> seen to be in the synthesis because it includes the thesis and ends the latter's
> reason for being. (2006, p.99).

Is Nandy suggesting that the so-called colonized minds of the Indians were simply a

form of synthesis that thereby allowed them to survive? Isn't this the very antithesis of

his opening argument in which he laments the minds that have been colonized by the

West?

What then of the third kind of colonization? This idea, which is compelling in and

of itself, is one that has been previously alluded to in Western literature. Indeed, Nandy

himself highlights the work of George Orwell whose essay "Shooting an Elephant" deals

with the way colonizing officers were forced into unpleasant, and unsafe, situations due

to their roles as officers of the empire. Nandy asserts that Orwell:

> clearly sensed that British colonialism had created the demand for a 'mother
> culture' – and a production line for colonial rulers – which alienated the
> colonizers not only from their political subjects but also from their own selves…
> that the subjugation of the ruled also involved the subjugation of the ruler, that
> the subjects in the colonies controlled their rulers as surely as the rulers
> controlled their subjects (2006, p.39).

What Nandy's arguments underscore is that literature such as Orwell's, and others like

Rudyard Kipling and Oscar Wilde, served to accentuate the problematic aspects of

colonization for the colonizing country's general population:

> Since about the seventeenth century, the hyper-masculine over-socialized
> aspects of European personality had been gradually supplanting the cultural
> traits which had become identified with femininity, childhood, and later on,

'primitivism'. As part of a peasant cosmology, these traits had been valued aspects of a culture not wedded to achievement and productivity. Now they had to be rejected as alien to mainstream European civilization and projected on to the 'low cultures' of Europe and on to the new cultures European civilization encountered (2006, p.37).

Accordingly, Nandy argues that since the colonizers themselves had to adjust and accommodate their belief system, to be able to effectively prove that they deserved to be rulers, both in the colonies and back home, they were in fact, to some degree, colonized themselves. Let me just state here that I do not believe that Nandy is belittling the immense hardships faced by the Indians who were colonized, or that this argument seeks to diminish the extent of their suffering and sacrifice. Instead, Nandy is keen for his readers to understand that nothing is as it seems, and that the issue of colonization cannot be studied as a one-dimensional problem. Instead, it needs to be understood as a complex component of our history, a history that is shared by both the colonizer and the colonized, and from which neither is easily liberated.

On the one hand, Indians need to be particularly careful when using Western languages, terms, ideas and theories. This is because they are oftentimes embedded with covert constructs that are linked to the philosophy and traditions that were popular in the West when they 'came of age' during the Enlightenment. Without realizing it, non-Western traditions still continue to try and find a way to make their native categories adjust to Western concepts which have been accepted as normative (and therefore more valuable) such as modernity, monotheism and masculinity. Such categories reside in colonized minds and need to be removed and re-examined. On the other hand, Nandy also wants to argue for the voice of those who have been silenced. However, his inability to present viable options for this category leads to the conclusion that Nandy, though sympathetic to this unheard voice of the masses, is unable to find a way to represent them faithfully and as such, switches gears to examine the mind games

played by the colonized elites. Once one gets away from the fact that these tales of covert resistance are not stories of the indigenous population, one realizes that Nandy is convinced that many of these Indians, whose bodies were certainly colonized, had not allowed their minds to be colonized as well. Nowhere is this more evident than when he recounts the story about the Aztec priests who, even when they were pressurized by their conquerors, refused to accept that their Gods were dead and were killed because of their stubborn loyalty to their traditional beliefs (Nandy, 2006, p.107). In contrast, according to Nandy, *brahmin* priests would have never allowed themselves to be killed in this situation, and instead, would have bowed down to the Christian God, written beautiful treatises and hymns about Jesus whilst still holding firm to their own traditions and values. So much so, that eventually, "their Christianity would have looked after a while dangerously like a variation on Hinduism" (Nandy, 2006, p.108). Similarly, Nandy quotes J. Duncan M. Derrett who, in 1979, realizes that Indians never really became like their English masters:

> Very late in the day the present writer woke up to what he believes to be the fact, namely that Indian tradition has been 'in charge' throughout, and that English ideas and English ways, like the English language, have been used for Indian purposes. That, in fact, it is the British who were manipulated, the British who were the silly somnambulists. My Indian brother is not a brown Englishman, he is an Indian who has learned to move around in my drawing room, and will move around in it so long as it suits him for his own purposes. And when he adopts my ideas he does so to suit himself, and retains them so far and as long as it suits him (as cited in Nandy, 2006, p.77).

Now, whereas it may suit some Indians, and Westerners, to argue that Indians were never really colonized, or that their minds are still colonized, or better yet, that they colonized the minds of their colonizers, the truth of the matter is that every aspect of this argument has merit. Indeed, depending on the examples one presents, or the position one takes, all the above premises could be verified, qualified and/or denied. These answers are not fixed or simple but fluctuating and complex. Context, purpose,

and perspective, all play a key role in the answers that we arrive at. Indeed, Nandy's arguments are particularly useful in shedding light on a phenomenon that I call 'continental collision', an idea that I hope will offer some clarity on the complexity of this discussion.

Continental Collision

A term that I have adopted that I think best describes the interchange of ideas during the nineteenth century is 'continental collision'. I am aware that 'continental collision' is a phrase that is usually used to describe the geo-scientific phenomenon associated with plate tectonics whereby two continents, previously divided by a body of oceanic water, collide to form one landmass. This collision causes disruptions on both continents at the plate's boundaries, such as earthquakes and volcanoes, and the creation of great mountain ranges, oceanic ridges and trenches. This also results in the uneven fusion of layers of landmass from both continental crusts, which create suture zones. These suture zones are continuously pushing against, yet at the same time merging with, their counterparts. One could compare such a scientific geological event with what happened when Western ideas collided with Eastern philosophy.[17] This intellectual 'continental collision' also has suture zones; suture zones that were formed when the two sides exchanged ideas which resulted in mounds of upheaval that were, and still are, felt economically, socially and politically. This clash of two alien cultures has resulted in ideas intermingling in ways that have oftentimes made each side's individual contribution difficult to discern. These suture zones, where contrasting

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[17] I am using a creative license here since I am aware that these geological changes occur over millions of years and that this component of time would have to be drastically modified for this metaphor to be appropriate in this situation.

ideologies are forced to interact, can create an ideal atmosphere for the exposure and exchange of foreign concepts. It is here where one could place first-responders like Rammohan Roy and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. They adopted some Western ideas, but used Indian materials to build the shields they needed to protect themselves from complete annihilation, due to this impact between the colonizing Europeans and the colonized Indians. These suture zones become areas for negotiation and renegotiation.

As one moves away from the immediate site of suture zones, the effects of this collision are not as evident to the naked eye since they are occurring below the surface, where different layers of ideas are searching for ways to stabilize after the collision. It is this unseen impact that scholars have drawn attention to in recent years.[18] Not because it can, or should, be stopped but because it needs to be understood and acknowledged. This is the unseen 'colonization of minds' that Nandy warns us against. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, we have those elements that intentionally push back against these suture zones in an effort to maintain some of the integrity of the landmass before collision. They are the bulwarks against complete integration and the ones who realize that certain ideas cannot, and must not, be compromised because that would lead to a debilitating blow and the complete submission of one landmass under the other. These people are the ones who recognize, albeit instinctively, that fault lines exist, which, if they are not protected, will result in the devastation of their native culture. This is where Nandy places Gandhi, and I would place Vivekananda, because a case can be made that he was responsible for pushing back in ways that are still evident today.

Geological metaphors have been used before and one of the most useful elaborations of this theory, regarding India, has been put forth by Gerald James Larson

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[18] Some of these ideas are explored in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (1982).

in *India's Agony Over Religion* (1995). However, before embarking on his own

exploration Larson draws attention to:

> the work of Fernand Braudel and Michel Foucault both of whom have made use
> of geological metaphors in their discussions of world history, stressing, on one
> level, the need for a broad perspective over time (*la longue durée*), while
> stressing, on another level, the need for an appreciation of basic discontinuities
> in the historical process, disruptions and upheavals that belie all attempts at
> fashioning simple continuities (1995, p.50).

Larson's use of this metaphor, however, focuses particularly on the Indian subcontinent:

> Indian civilization is viewed in terms of layers or levels of sedimentation
> together with the juxtaposition of discrete tectonic plates that interact with one
> another, forming fault lines that become foci over long periods of time for the
> release of gigantic pressures, a release of pressures exhibiting on occasion
> catastrophic violence and upheaval. From one point of view, there is great
> stability which derives from the preservation of many layers and the peculiar
> balance of forces that are largely distinct from one another but nevertheless
> interdependent at certain crucial pressure points. From another point of view,
> there is always the risk of violent upheaval and dissolution (1995, p.50).

Despite his concern with "violent upheavals and dissolutions" Larson nonetheless

acknowledges:

> What is especially illuminating... is the manner in which a rather messy mixture
> of apparently discontinuous components can come together to form an overall
> continuity, in the case of the geological metaphor, the sedimented layers and
> tectonic plates of diverse origins nevertheless coalescing into a given, continuous
> portion of earth (1995, p.51).

What Larson's discussions emphasize are the multi-layered dimensions of the Indian

civilization which have been accrued, layer after layer, over time. Indeed, one could

argue that these many layers were what made the foundation of India's civilization

strong, thereby allowing its indigenous population to build on earlier layers, instead of

being annihilated by invading traditions. For the purposes of this study, my research

will concentrate on the areas of collision, the suture zones, and the varied ways in which

Hindus reacted and responded to these 'violent' disruptions. Especially since, it was

these collisions that caused the ripple effects that eventually resulted in new layers of

ideas; ideas that contribute to the unique, multifaceted quality of the Indian subcontinent.

What I hope the term 'continental collision' conveys is that this meeting of minds, and cultures, was a symbiotic process. Ideas were not simply imposed upon the Indian people in a way which did not leave them any choice but to be passive responders. Instead, the collision that was caused by this encounter reverberated on both sides of the world. A great example of this is the search for a Hindu term for the Western idea of 'religion'. The label was not passively translated in the Indian subcontinent as nationalist, and religious leaders alike, struggled to find a term that best reflected their ideas. A fact that is evidenced in the continued ambiguity of terms such as '*sanatana dharma*' or even simply '*dharma*'. For example, in *Dharmatattva* (1888), which is written in the style of a dialogue between a teacher and his student, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay contends:

> DISCIPLE: But a confusion remains. We use dharma to mean Christian dharma, Buddhist dharma, Vaishnava dharma, and so on. Should we not say Christian culture, Buddhist culture, Vaishnava culture instead?
> MASTER: You have created confusion for yourself by standing the word 'dharma' on its head. The word is used to convey a wide variety of meanings, but the sense in which you have used it is not home-grown but merely a modern equivalent of the English word 'religion'.
> DISCIPLE: Very well, let us hear about religion then.
> MASTER: Whatever for? Religion is a Western term, and Western scholars have turned out various theories on it. It is another matter that not one of these theories tallies with another.
> DISCIPLE: But is there no eternal law that can be found in all religions?
> MASTER: There is; only, there is no reason to call it religion. Call it dharma instead, and all your doubts will be dispelled (2003, pp.46-47).

Indians were active participants, who used the many layers that were already evident in their history, to help them manipulate the way they could push back, at the suture zones, that were created by this European invasion. Indeed, when looked at in this way one could just as easily ask: how did Hindu traditional ideas change the way Western

traditions came to view themselves? How did the discovery of Hindu traditional norms change the meaning of 'religion' in the West? And perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this study; how did Vivekananda, who grew up under the shadow of British colonization, challenge the Western ideology that threatened to subsume his traditions in this 'continental collision'? What makes this analysis of Vivekananda particularly important today is the fact that, until recently, scholarship primarily focused on the impact that Western ideas have had on the emergence of this normative label 'Hinduism'. Richard King argues that this does not necessarily mean that scholars are not sensitive to the role that Indians played in the development of this concept:

> Much of the work exploring the colonial emergence of the concept of "Hinduism" in the 1990s attempts to highlight the role of orientalist influences rather than deny indigenous agency (2006, p.709).

Whereas this may be true in certain cases, the fact is that overall there has been a much larger emphasis on how Western ideology influenced Indian ideas. Accordingly, Vivekananda offers us an opportunity to examine the way an authentic Indian voice not only impacted this label 'Hinduism' but also the term 'religion'. I am not suggesting that I am the first person to address this discussion. Instead, I am attempting to build upon arguments presented by a vast array of scholars, many of whose arguments we will encounter in the ensuing pages. These academics have already written about some of the ways Indians took an active role in the construction of their own identities despite colonization. However, to the best of my knowledge, scholars have not yet analysed, in detail, the role that Vivekananda played in assuring that this 'continental collision' did not result in a loss that would have been devastating for the survival of Hindu traditions and philosophical ideas. Hopefully this study will shed some light on Vivekananda's contribution to the creation of a pan-Indian Hindu identity that relied as much as, if not more so, on its Indian heritage as it did on its colonizers' terminology. Only then will we

be able to understand how this native voice continues to impact the Hindu nationalist movement in India today. And why it is imperative that we shed some light on how some of his ideas, like the creation of a hierarchy, which may have been necessary for nation-building, could prove to be detrimental to the preservation of the dynamic Indian landscape in contemporary times.

<u>The Heathen is not the only one who is blind…</u> (Balagangadhara, 2005)[19]
<u>A brief survey of the theories of 'religion'</u>

It is not often that we pause to think about the deeper implications that are embedded in the words that we use daily. Very often, these words have accumulated a variety of significances, over centuries of usage, that are not always apparent. In fact, it could be argued that such attention to language is usually confined within the walls of institutions of higher learning, where students are occasionally encouraged to analyse the language they use, so that they might recognize how words can manipulate the way we interpret the world around us. It is an awareness of this unseen influence, that language has upon the way we construct our world, that Michel Foucault seems to be referring to when he declares "knowledge is power." In a series of interviews conducted in the 1970's, Foucault warns his readers:

> The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power… Knowledge and power are integrated with one another and there is no point of dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power… It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power (1980, p.52).

Consequently, it has become a common practice, amongst lecturers of undergraduate religious studies courses, to begin the semester by asking students to define the term 'religion'. Especially since, they understand that this attention to the power of definitions cannot be taken lightly with this term. Lecturers are rarely surprised when the ensuing discussions, and arguments, are usually heated and result in such a wide range of definitions, that the students themselves are bewildered by their inability to collectively define a word they have used in everyday language for most of their lives.

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[19] This is a play on the title of S.N. Balagangadhara's book.

The fact that no conclusive definition can be established for this most commonly used term, seems like an appropriate place to start the present discussion. By surveying the way modern historians of religion[20] have endeavoured to investigate the boundaries of this term we will have a multifaceted understanding of the many 'genealogies of religion'[21]; a necessary tool in current times. Not only will this allow me to use this term with a relatively adequate recognition of its variant significances, but it will also permit me to determine where I 'stand' in this continuing debate.[22] And, most importantly, by conducting an in-depth exploration of the contemporary usage of this term we will be better equipped to perceive, in the following chapters, how Vivekananda engaged with this Western concept, what aspects he rejected and which components he embraced. This, in turn, will allow us to understand that Vivekananda was not simply responding to his colonizers' ideas but instead, was an active participant in a dialogue that still rages on today.

W. C. Smith

W.C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1963) is considered to be a classic for students interested in the study of comparative religions. (Asad 2001, p.205). His is one of the earliest contemporary voices to have emphasized the inherent problems with the term 'religion', and how this word had, and continues to have, a particularly

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[20] This is, by no means, an exhaustive survey of the scholars who have spoken on this subject. Rather, these are some of the voices who have been influential in my own understanding of these arguments.

[21] According to Foucault, there is not just one genealogy, of any idea or concept, that can be traced through history. Rather, there are many genealogies, which compete depending on the discursive elements present during their evolution. (1980, p.117).

[22] J.Z. Smith, makes the argument that a historian has 'no place to stand' (1978). This suggests that academics do not, and should not, have an agenda when they study 'religion'. Unfortunately however, this is rarely true since scholars come with their own contextual bias that naturally influences the 'stand' they take.

Western bias. Voices like Smith's, eventually forced other scholars of 'religion' to pause, and take note that they were using Western linguistic tools to understand the non-Western world. Smith draws attention to the fact that the words that academics utilize must be carefully chosen and understood for them to be used appropriately in contemporary times:

> To understand the world, and ourselves, it is helpful if we become critical of the terms and concepts that we are using. Further, to understand other people and other ages, it is requisite that we do not presume uncritically that their meanings for words are the same as ours. A mature history of ideas must rest on careful scrutiny of new words, and also of new developments in meanings of old words. Once attained, it may further our realistic understanding of the world itself… We must be alert lest, out of casualness or lack of historical perception, we fail to notice changes in word usage that may be quite significant, so that we read back into the past what are actually our innovations (1963, pp.16-17).

According to Smith, 'religion' is a term whose equivalent is not easily found in many languages. Nevertheless, colonized countries with alternate traditions, have been forced to compensate for this apparent lack in their vocabulary by creating new terms, or utilizing words with somewhat similar identities, to fill this void. Consequently, Smith articulates, in detail, the many ways this term has been (mis)appropriated, and applied, not only to the so-called 'primitive' people of North and South America, but also to the evidently 'sophisticated' societies of Egypt, Iran, India and China; all of whom lack an equivalent term for the word 'religion' (1963, pp.54-55).

What is important to note is that Smith is not arguing against the existence of worldviews which include gods, rituals and traditions in these 'other' parts of the world. Rather, he is denying that there is some kind of 'essential' religious characteristic that exists in these diverse communities, which can then be isolated by scholars in order for them to be studied. Smith asserts, "essences do not have a history. Essences do not change. Yet it is an observable and important fact that what have been called religions do, in history, change" (1963, pp.143-144). He traces the history of this term to support

his claim whereby he argues that the term 'religion' has a distinctively Western (and Christian)[23] bias and demonstrates how this word has evolved over centuries. First, at the hands of Greek, Roman and Christian philosophers, and then via the discoveries of Western explorers and invaders. This, he argues, belies the assumption that 'religion' is a label that can be applied universally to other cultures without prejudice:

> The concept 'Religion', then, in the West has evolved. Its evolution has included long-range development that we may term a process of reification: mentally making religion into a thing, gradually coming to conceive it as an objective systematic entity (Smith, 1963, p.51).

This is especially important when one contrasts Smith's work with scholars from the latter half of the 19th century such as Max Muller, one of the founding fathers of the 'science of religion'. Muller advocated for, and succeeded in, establishing a separate discipline with this name, which was supposed to be based on rational thought. Ironically however, this is the same person, who in his first lecture on the 'Science of Religions', in 1870, saw the necessity of 'selling' his ideas to the Christian public who needed to be convinced that he was not trying to undermine the supremacy of Christianity (Muller, 2002, p.118). In contrast, Smith contests the essential quality of 'religion' by using a double edged sword. On the one hand, he makes a case against a Christo-centric reified idea of 'religion' that can be used to evaluate traditions across the globe. On the other hand, he challenges the essential characteristic of any 'religion', Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc. because these belief systems have not remained static, but rather, have evolved over time in such a way that even followers of the same tradition rarely understand them identically.

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[23] I am aware that using the label 'Western' in the singular is problematic since there are numerous Western societies, all of which are not homogenous. Similarly, I am also aware that there are many 'Christianities' whose philosophies are not consistent. However, for the purposes of this argument, it is the most efficient way to describe these entities since their influence on this subject has been relatively uniform.

What is interesting however, is that whereas Smith recognizes the inherent problems with this label, nevertheless, he is not willing to relinquish the ideas that are associated with it. Indeed, not unlike Mircea Eliade, one gets the impression that Smith was also advocating for a kind of *homo religiosus*:

> we must note that what we call 'religion' is of much wider prevalence and of much longer standing than is the use of this term, or indeed of any other term, to designate it. In every human community on earth today, there exists something that we, as sophisticated observers, may term religion, or a religion. And we are able to see it in each case as the latest development in a continuous tradition that goes back, we can now affirm, for at least one hundred thousand years (Smith, 1963, p.18).

Consequently, Smith surmises that the best way to retain the ideas associated with 'religion' is by discarding this term and replacing it, by what he considers to be, alternative, non-conflictive labels. As such, Smith advocates for the use of 'cumulative traditions' and 'faith' instead of 'religion' because he believes these words will better represent the history and evolution of the diverse belief systems that have developed across the world. Accordingly, Smith defines these terms:

> By 'faith' I mean personal faith… For the moment let it stand for an inner religious experience or involvement of a particular person: the impingement on him of the transcendent, putative or real. By 'cumulative tradition' I mean the entire mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit, as it were, of the past religious life of the community in question: temples, scriptures, theological systems, dance patterns, legal and other social institutions, conventions, moral codes, myths, and so on: anything that can be and is transmitted from one person, one generation, to another, and that an historian can observe (1963, pp.156-157).

The issues with these replacements that Smith puts forth are surprisingly obvious. On the one hand, it could be debated that any search for a 'universal' label is filled with pitfalls since this will naturally require it to have some 'essential' characteristics; which is the crux of Smith's concern with the term 'religion' in the first place! Furthermore, if one decided to include every aspect of society into a definition of 'cumulative traditions' then would it not be easier to simply stick to categories such as history and

anthropology? Why do we need a separate designation called 'cumulative traditions'?

On the other hand, the term 'faith' is a very common Christian idea and one cannot help

but be taken aback by Smith's naiveté at not realizing that this term will also come with

its own set of Western (and Christian) baggage. It is evident that Smith does not realize

that the concepts 'faith' and 'cumulative traditions' also have the potential to take on

'reified essential' characteristics just like the term 'religion' which he wants us to

discard. This seems to indicate that Smith was still looking for a way he could

homogenize some terms in order to make them applicable globally. Considering that

this seems to be what he was arguing against in the first place, his work leaves us with

more questions than answers. Indeed, ultimately one gets the impression that whereas

Smith was able to see the problematic nature of the study of 'religion', he was, in the

end, unable to make a clean break from the use of the linguistic tools that he had grown

accustomed to using.

J. Z. Smith

Perhaps it is because there was such a need for academics to make bold

statements and take a radical stance, to separate themselves from scholars such as

Smith, Muller and Eliade, that the celebrated scholar, J.Z. Smith, makes this, oft quoted,

statement in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (1982):

> while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences
> and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one
> criterion or another, as religious – *there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely
> the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic
> purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has
> no independent existence apart from the academy. For this reason, the student of
> religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-
> conscious. Indeed this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his
> foremost object of study (1982, p.11, emphasis in original).

It is obvious that J.Z. Smith is challenging the rules of this discussion since he is calling

for religious studies scholars to completely separate themselves from arguments, that

are even remotely influenced by the idea that 'religion' is a sensitive category, and

therefore must be treated with particular care. An argument that is eloquently conveyed

by W.C. Smith when he states, "[i]t has been said that one must tread softly here, for one

is treading on men's dreams" (1963, p.5). Instead, J.Z. Smith argues that 'religion' must

be treated like any other academic category that has been created for scholars to

examine a certain aspect of human society. What is interesting however, is that J.Z.

Smith, like W.C. Smith, is also arguing against any 'essential' quality of 'religion'.

To support his ideas, in the essay "Religion, Religions, Religious" (1998) J.Z.

Smith relies on David Hume's discussion in the *Natural History of Religion* (1749-51).

Hume argues against the innate quality of 'religion' on the simple premise that no two

'religions' are identically described by their followers. Despite the widespread usage of

the term 'religion', nevertheless, Hume contends that 'religion' is not an original aspect

of nature (Smith, J.Z., 1998, p.274). By using arguments like Hume's, which contest the

validity of the idea that 'religion' is "an original instinct or primary impression of

nature" (as cited by Smith, J.Z., 1998, p.274) and James H. Lueba's (1912) contention

that there are more than fifty definitions for the term 'religion' J.Z. Smith asserts that

'religion' "is a second-order generic concept" (1998, p.281). As such, he argues, "there

may well be a primary and valid human experience that gives rise to the secondary

religious interpretations, but the truth of the experience is no guarantee of the validity

of the interpretation" (Smith, J.Z., 1998, p.274). Accordingly, one of his principal

concerns is the way this term, and the ideas attached to it, are treated differently than

any other discipline in the academy. Indeed, he seems to be diametrically opposed to

W.C. Smith who spends a considerable amount of time defending the views of

theologians and practitioners, who he believes are not given their due place in this

discourse. In contrast, J.Z. Smith argues that the way 'religion' is understood and

categorized has a lot to do with the power dynamics of society:

> the distinction of religion, has usually been attempted in a monotheistic fashion. Scholars have engaged in the quest for the unique and definitive *sine qua non*, the "that without which" religion would not be religion but rather an instance of something else. In the main, the results of this enterprise have not been convincing; they have failed to achieve consensus. They have been poorly formulated and violate the ordinary canons of definition. But this is less disturbing than the fact that the presuppositions of the monotheistic enterprise have been deliberately tampered with for apologetic reasons (1982, p.5).

Instead, J.Z. Smith advocates that historians of 'religion' adopt a polythetic approach if

they want to arrive at a more complex understanding of the ways in which religious

ideas have been influenced by various power structures. He believes that only when

scholars develop a more efficient system of categorization, which allows for multiple

points of identification will these ideas be applicable to a wider range of religious

traditions. He argues this can be achieved with the polythetic method, which he adopts

from a study on taxonomy done in 1963:

> [a] mode of classification which surrendered the idea of perfect, unique single differentia – a taxonomy which retained the notion of necessary but abandoned the notion of sufficient criteria for admission to a class. In this new mode, a class is defined as consisting of a set of properties, each individual member of the class to possess "a large (but unspecified) number of these properties, with each property to be possessed by a "large number" of individuals in the class, but no single property to be possessed by every member in the class. If the class contained a large population it would be possible to arrange them according to the properties they possessed in common in such a way that each individual would most closely resemble its nearest neighbor and least closely resemble its farthest. The probability would be high that the individuals at either extreme would scarcely resemble one another, that is, they may have none of the properties of the set in common (Smith, J.Z., 1982, p.4).

However, according to J.Z. Smith:

> this would have to eschew the impossible supposition of a common ancestor, replacing it by a model of multilinear evolution. But I know of no such attempt... I know of no examples of attempts at the polythetic classification of religions or

religious phenomena. It is in this area that the most fruitful future work will be done (1982, p.8).

J.Z. Smith is also arguing against the idea of an 'essential' definition of 'religion'. Nonetheless, unlike W.C. Smith, he is not advocating for the replacement of this word by other terms but rather a change in strategy and methodology in the study of these 'religions'. This ties in neatly with his argument that Leuba was not actually lamenting that there were so many definitions of 'religion' but rather that "the moral of Leuba is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways" (Smith, J.Z., 1998, p.281).

According to J.Z. Smith, the only means to get away from a monothetic, and therefore 'essential', categorization of 'religion' is to avoid looking for something that makes it unique and special. Instead, he believes that the best method for a student to approach the study of 'religion' is by finding a way to understand and appreciate the commonalities:

> Does one focus on those things which "excite horror and make men stare," or does one concentrate on "common stories" on "what we see in Europe every day"? It is a tension between religion imagined as an *exotic* category of human experience and expression, and religion imagined as an *ordinary* category of human expression and activity.
> It has been my continued presupposition that the latter choice for imagination is the more productive for the development of history of religion as an academic enterprise (Smith, J.Z., 1982, pp.xii-xiii, emphasis in original).

Whereas there is much to be commended in J.Z. Smith's approach, which questions the way 'religion' and religious studies have been categorized, lamentably he does not actually articulate how this polythetic approach of his would work. And perhaps most importantly, he does not specify how such a 'set of properties' would be identified, nor which linguistic tools scholars would use to create these classifications. Would each tradition use their own set of classifications? What language would they be in? Who would decide which 'terms' were to be utilized? If we do not use the same terminology,

then how will we make ourselves understood by 'others'? After all, for us to celebrate

the 'common stories' do we not first need to decide if there is a common language that

can be spoken? And most importantly, whose language is that going to be? Is there a

language that we can share whose words are not already embedded with meaning?

Talal Asad

The questions mentioned above are similar to the ones that the anthropologist,

Talal Asad, seems to be asking in his collection of essays *Genealogies of Religion:*

Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (1993). He begins by noting

that it is still considered important for non-Western students to study the 'religion' and

philosophy of the West since it is presumed that these ideas must have directly

influenced non-Western thought. However, he notes that on the other hand, Western

scholars and students do not always feel the same need:

> the assumption that Western history has had an overriding importance – for
> good or ill – in the making of the modern world… It has sometimes been noted
> that peoples from the non-Western countries feel obliged to read the history of
> the West (but not each other's histories) and that Westerners in turn do not feel
> the same need to study non-Western histories. The history of modern Western
> thought, for example, can be (and is) written on its own, but not so the history of
> contemporary Arab thought (Asad, 1993, p.1).

Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising that Asad also speaks out against the

essentialist definition of 'religion' because it is evident to him that this essentialist

structure cannot be applied to *all* 'religions':

> My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only
> because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but
> because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes
> (1993, p.29).

One of the strategies that Asad uses to convince his readers of this premise is to dissect Clifford Geertz's well-known definition of 'religion' and articulate the reasons why this emphasis on symbolism cannot be used without prejudice (Asad, 1993, p.29).

Whereas Asad's arguments about Geertz are interesting, it is his emphasis on the problems with post-Enlightenment ideas of secular society that are most compelling. To begin with, he echoes Foucault's arguments about power when he states "I want to examine the ways in which the theoretical search for an essence of religion invites us to separate it conceptually from the domain of power" (Asad, 1993, p.29). Additionally, he also highlights the fact that Western society's inclination to limit 'religion' to the private sphere has resulted in a situation whereby religious identities that do not necessarily limit themselves to the so-called 'private' sphere are considered problematic and dangerous. He argues that this effort, in and of itself, to corral 'religion' in the private sphere is a power play since it only allows for a Western, post-Enlightenment understanding of the space that 'religion' must occupy, which does not always resonate with religious ideas in other parts of the world.[24] This insistence, of most modern Western nations, to separate 'religion' from state, according to Asad, just serves to disguise the fact that the secular state has managed to convey the impression that its philosophy is unbiased, without prejudice and universal, in comparison to those nations that allow 'religion' to play a more significant role in public society:

> Perhaps the feeling that secular arguments are rationally superior to religious ones is based on the belief that religious convictions are the more rigid. But there is no decisive evidence for thinking this. Religious traditions have undergone the most radical transformations over time. Divine texts may be unalterable, but the ingenuities of human interpretations are endless – quite apart from the fact that some of the conditions of human doubt and certainty are notoriously inaccessible to conscious argument. Fanatics come in all shapes and sizes among

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[24] This is an issue that we will explore in the final chapter, since the Hindu nationalist movement is quite vocal about 'Hinduism' being the foundation upon which India was built.

skeptics and believers alike – so do individuals of tolerant disposition. As for the claim that among the religious, coercion replaces persuasive argument, it should not be forgotten that we owe the most terrible examples of coercion in modern times to secular totalitarian regimes – Nazism and Stalinism. The point that matters in the end, surely, is not the justification that is used (whether it be supernatural or worldly) but the behavior that is justified. On this point, it must be said that the ruthlessness of secular practice yields nothing to the ferocity of religious (Asad, 1993, pp.235-236).

Identifying who is speaking, and for whom they are speaking, are Asad's main concerns and he repeatedly demonstrates how different power structures impose, and coerce, those around them. Interestingly, this argument could be augmented by those made by the American scholar Robert N. Bellah who states that the birth of the nation created something called a civil 'religion' which, in turn, produced its own set of symbols and rituals. Bellah contends that the American Constitution, the many monuments created in the memory of the leaders of this nation, and rituals like the Pledge of Allegiance, can all be interpreted as symbols of a civil 'religion'. "America [is] the promised land. God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all nations" (Bellah, 1970, p.175). Arguments such as Asad's and Bellah's, highlight the fact that the term 'secular' is not benign or without significance, as we are led to believe. Instead the labels 'secular' and 'religious' are reciprocal categories which are equally involved in the struggle for power and hegemony and as such cannot, and must not, be considered less prejudiced or biased than the other.[25]

Accordingly, Asad questions the categories 'secular' and 'religious' by tracing their boundaries, and demonstrating the ambiguity of their borders, and contends that that the walls dividing these categories are more porous than is usually assumed. Asad is building on some of Foucault's ideas here, a debt he openly acknowledges, in an

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[25] In the final chapter, we will analyze this term 'secular' and its impact on the emergence of a strong nationalist agenda in India.

interview conducted by David Scott. Asad claims Foucault, "suddenly had made strange all those things that are so familiar to us, [and] forced us to think about the assumptions on which they are built" (Scott, 2006, p.275). A philosophy which Asad then adopts for his own work when he tries to expose how these terms are the location of a power struggle. He attempts to trace the complex past of these terms by problematizing the manner in which rituals have been translated as symbolic acts in modern secular society. Asad points out, in contrast, that in the past the embodiment of ritual performance was more closely associated with ideas of discipline and embodied involvement in religious traditions. Consequently, he laments that whereas historically, rituals were conducted to help a person to 'better' themselves, by learning how to imbibe religious teachings, and acquire learning through action, in the modern world, religious rites are oftentimes simply symbols of the 'religion' one claimed to profess. Accordingly, Asad quotes the theologian Hugh of St. Victor (c 1096-1141) who contends, "Sacraments… are known to have been instituted for three reasons: on account of humiliation, on account of instruction, on account of exercise" (as cited in Asad, 1993, p.78). Consequently, Asad deduces that these rituals were "parts of a Christian program for creating in its performer, by means of regulated practice, the 'mental and moral dispositions appropriate to Christians" (1993, p.78). Asad claims that a single dimensional reading of ancient terms results in inefficient definitions and translations that are an attempt at "simply domesticating the original" (Scott, 2006, p.275) which, more often than not, lead to erroneous conclusions. "In modern thinking, *belief* is the core of religion and therefore the core of that which is private, truly one's own. This goes back to a sharp body-mind distinction that was established in early modernity" (Scott, 2006, p. 287, emphasis in original). However, Asad argues:

> This is not a matter of simply leaving out a dimension that is very real in people's lives and that enables them to be carriers of a tradition. It raises questions about the autonomy of a space for argument. Because argument is itself interwoven with the body in its entirety, it always invokes historical bodies, bodies placed within particular traditions, with their potentialities of feeling, of receptivity, and of suspicion (Scott, 2006, p.288).

What Asad offers us here is a keener understanding of the discrepancies inherent in the terms that scholars of 'religion' continue to use. By nuancing some of these concepts, and demonstrating the inability to contain these categories, he highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the history of such terms, with their embedded meanings that are not immediately evident. Asad focuses on many of the issues with these modern categories, while also accentuating how Western and non-Western traditions are not on a level playing field. However, whereas Asad does point us in the right direction he does not offer us any solutions that can be easily implemented. Consequently, his emphasis on the need for scholars "to suppress their personal distaste for particular traditions if they are to understand them" (Asad, 1993, p.200) is not accompanied by a methodological explanation of how this (almost) impossible task of keeping context at bay is to be achieved. In fact, if one is to understand Asad correctly, then one is left with the impression that this can only be accomplished either by scholars limiting their studies to their native cultures, or, by somehow exorcising contextual bias from any interpretations or debates. Therefore, while his answers are certainly thoughtful and provocative, unfortunately they do not provide a course of action that is viable.[26]

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[26] The scope of this work does not allow me to explore all of Asad's work and, as such, my critique is limited to this particular book, which has, undoubtedly, been his most recognized work to date.

S.N. Balagangadhara

It is this sense of frustration that one hears when reading *The Heathen in his Blindness* (1994) by S.N. Balagangadhara. This work, which is bombastic in its tone, calls for the elimination of the term 'religion' for any belief system other than Christianity, Judaism and Islam (Balagangadhara, 2005, p.336). Many scholars before Balagangadhara have called for this term to be discarded and, as such, this is not a novel call to arms. For example, we have already examined W.C. Smith's, J.Z. Smith's, and Talal Asad's arguments and they are not alone. They are accompanied by other interesting voices, such as the French anthropologist Daniel Dubuisson who argues:

> what is in question is, in fact, nothing more or less than certain pretensions of modern Western science to conceive of humankind and the world according to codes that *it* has elaborated and to points of reference *it* has fixed. Or, if we prefer to turn this observation into a blunter question, is Western anthropology, religious anthropology in particular, in its quest for the Other and for our very humanity, capable of discovering anything but itself – that is, anything other than its own categories and its own way of conceiving the world? (2003, p.6, emphasis in original)

Similarly, scholars such as Russell McCutcheon and Timothy Fitzgerald have also challenged the validity of this category of 'religion' and the subsequent need for a separate department of religious studies, arguing instead, that these ideas are just as easily categorized as history, sociology or anthropology. For example, Fitzgerald laments:

> religion is still widely if somewhat loosely used by historians and social scientists as if it were a genuine crosscultural category. Typically such writers treat religion as one among a number of different kinds of sociocultural phenomena whose institutions can be studied historically and sociologically. This approach may seem to have some obvious validity in the context of societies (especially western Christian ones) where a cultural and juridical distinction is made between religion and non-religion, between religion and the secular, between church and state… in most crosscultural contexts such a distinction, if it can be made at all, is at best unhelpful and at worst positively misleading since it imposes a superficial and distorting level of analysis on the data (2000, p.4).

Likewise, McCutcheon argues that the assumption that 'religion' is:

unique, and sociohistorically autonomous, is itself a scholarly representation that operates within, and assists in maintaining, a very specific set of discursive practices along with the institutions in which these discourses are articulated and reproduced (1997, p.3).

Perhaps it is in response to arguments such as these that Balagangadhara feels the need to showcase, in exhaustive detail, the way this term 'religion' is (almost) synonymous with the ideas normally associated with the Abrahamic 'religions' in general, and Christianity in particular. This leads Balagangadhara to the conclusion that 'religion' is an illegitimate category when applied to any of the non-Abrahamic traditions.

To prove his theory, Balagangadhara highlights how the word 'religion' originates from the Latin word *religio* or *traditio*, i.e. tradition, an alternative term used for the same purpose during the Greco-Roman period.[27] Indeed, *traditio*, or *religio*, were associated almost entirely with the enactment and fulfilment of ritual duties which were an integral aspect of one's familial obligations and crucial to the well-being of society. So embedded were these words in the idea of rites and rituals that Balagangadhara contends that when this word was eventually used by Christians, in relation with doctrine and belief, the Romans could not comprehend how the Christians claimed to have 'religion' when they were against the continued performance and practice of familial religious rites (2005, pp.52-53). Nevertheless, the term was eventually appropriated by Christians who gave it a very different identity. Balagangadhara points out that initially, according to the etymology outlined by the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero (c65 BC), "those who carefully reviewed and so to speak retraced the lore of the ritual were called "religious" from '*relegere* (to re-trace or re-read)'" (as cited in Balagangadhara, 2005, p. 222). However, approximately three hundred years later

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[27] Balagangadhara is not the first scholar to trace the etymology of this term. W.C. Smith also offers up a concise history that is very useful.

this definition was declared 'inept' by the Christian philosopher Lactanius (c320 AD) and was replaced by a new etymology, which was better suited to Christian ideas. This was articulated by the modern Belgian philosopher Leo Apostel, "re-ligare (to tie together, to link)… religious phenomena as instruments of connection, as modes of union" (as cited in Balagangadhara, 2005, p.222). Furthermore, according to Lactanius:

> The name of religion is taken from the bond of piety, because God has bound and fastened man to Himself by piety, since it is necessary for us to serve Him as Lord and obey Him as father… They are superstitious who worship many and false gods; but we, who supplicate the one true God, are religious (as cited in Balagangadhara, 2005, p.223).

Thus, Balagangadhara demonstrates how early Christians, who, according to the Romans had no *religio* because they had no *traditio*, neatly renovated the argument whereby the Roman 'pagans' had no 'religion' because they had no clear doctrines, covenants, saviours or scriptures.

Thereafter, Balagangadhara goes on to trace the evolution of this term from early Christianity all the way through modern times. What he accomplishes with the telling of this intricate history is to convince his readers that this term 'religion' became one of the most important ways in which Christians identified themselves. So much so, that he states, "if the word 'religion' refers to something at all, it refers at least to Christianity because the latter refers to itself as a religion (i.e. it uses the word with respect to itself)" (Balagangadhara, 2005, p.292). However, he does not limit this definition to Christianity and goes on to argue that Judaism and Islam are also 'religions' since "Christianity did not merely baptize Judaism and Islam as rival religions. The latter also saw Christianity as a rival religion under the same description" (Balagangadhara, 2005, p. 292). And therefore, according to Balagangadhara, they too accepted this label 'religion' for themselves. What makes this particular argument difficult to accept is the way he reasons that Judaism and Islam must also be 'religions':

> Of course, it is possible that Judaism and Islam merely *reacted* to the attacks of Christianity and accepted Christianity's self-description… [however] Each of these three religions singled out exactly the same rivals under the same description elsewhere *unerringly*. Judaism had singled out the Roman *religio* as its rival before Christianity was even born; Islam had picked out precisely those Indian traditions as its rivals, which Christianity was also to identify, centuries before the European Christians launched their major and massive evangelising activities (Balagangadhara, 2005, p.293, emphasis in original).

One could counter this argument in multiple ways; first, let us not forget that the Christians, and then the Muslims, appropriated the Hebrew Bible as their own, thereby identifying a common history. Naturally, this also meant that they would have to adopt the so called 'rivals' of the ancient Jews. Secondly, whereas it may be true that the Jewish people had also recognized the Romans as their rivals, it is also evident that they were challenging the validity of each other's traditions and ritual activities, *not* their doctrines. This is a point that Balagangadhara himself sheds light on when he argues that the Jews had already proven that they were a people with *traditio* that was older than the Romans since they had traced their history to Moses who clearly predated Homer (Balagangadhara, 2005, pp.47-48). This allowed the Jewish community to establish that they came from an ancient people with whom they shared a common ancestry, traditions and rituals. Moreover, whereas it may be possible to argue 'Islam picked out precisely those Indian traditions as its rivals,' this would simply prove that the Muslims recognized Indian traditions as just that, i.e. rival *traditions*. Furthermore, Balagangadhara claims that Islam and Judaism are also 'religions' because of the way 'religion' has been formulated and defined. If this is the case then one presumes that the Jews and the Muslims, just like the Christians, must have also embraced this identity without question. However, there are many Jews and Muslims who are not comfortable with the parameters and boundaries that the term 'religion' has set. We have already seen that Asad argues against the separation of 'religion' from state since, according to

him, this is not a natural division in many Islamic states. Similarly, Daniel Boyarin, a scholar of Jewish studies, does not accept that Judaism adopted this label without reservations. Instead, he highlights the complexity of these issues in *Borderlines* (2004):

> While Christianity finally configures Judaism as a different religion, Judaism itself, I suggest, at the end of the day refuses that call, so that seen from that perspective the difference between Christianity and Judaism is not so much a difference between two religions as a difference between a religion and an entity that refuses to be one (Boyarin, 2004, pp.7-8).

Why is it so important for Balagangadhara to include Judaism and Islam in the parameters he has set for this term 'religion'? One could speculate that this may make Balagangadhara's ensuing arguments, which claim that Hinduism is not a 'religion', more compelling because it allows him to separate the Western Abrahamic 'religions' from Indian traditions who, presumably, do not share the same ancestry. Be that as it may, what he does accomplish is a particularly convincing argument that firmly harnesses the label 'religion' to Christianity, and its relevant history, which makes it extremely difficult to use this term without even graver reservations. However, whereas this may convince us to discard the term 'religion' when not speaking about Christianity, it does not offer us any answers on how to conduct studies of a religious nature from here on out. Thus, although Balagangadhara himself acknowledges the necessity for some linguistic tools (2005, p.341), which will allow for these investigations to be carried out, he also admits that he does not have any answers. Nevertheless, he does insist that replacing the term 'religion' with alternative terms like 'worldview', which was made popular by Ninian Smart (Balagangadhara, 2005, p.341), would not resolve this dilemma but would simply lead us back to the same impasse with essentialized ideas that become reified over time.

Richard King

According to Richard King in *Orientalism and Religion* (1999). the best way to address this impasse is by "changing the subject" (1999, p.1):

> I wish to argue that both philosophy and the history of ideas should take more seriously not only the social location of the concepts under examination but also their involvement in a wider cultural field of power relations, or what has become known as 'the politics of knowledge'. In particular, I wish to argue for an awareness of the mutual imbrication of religion, culture and power as categories. This is not to say that religion and culture can be reduced to a set of power relations but rather that religion and culture are the field in which power relations operate (1999, p.1).

For King, the first issue that needs to be investigated is not the different ways 'religion' has come to be defined. Instead, he wants to question *why* 'religion' has been categorized in a manner which forces it to be restricted to the private domain. To emphasize his point, he links the concepts 'religion' and 'mysticism' together. At first glance, one would assume that whereas the two concepts are related, they are not the same. However, he highlights how extensively these terms have been used interchangeably after the Enlightenment era. He argues that since the term 'religion' became so embedded in its institutional background, scholars like William James[28] began adopting the term 'mysticism' to distinguish what they believed was the 'essential' core of religious experiences from its outer trappings of doctrines and dogma. Indeed, "for James 'organized' or institutional religion was 'second-hand' religion. True religion was to be found in the private, 'religious' and mystical experiences of individuals (King, 1999, pp.21-22). As King points out, one of the key strategies used

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[28] William James seminal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902) is a crucial turning point in the way the term 'mysticism' began to be widely used to describe religious experience for a wide range of religious traditions. For a detailed survey on William James and his impact on modern scholarship, refer to *William James and the varieties of religious experience: a centenary celebration* (2005). Ed. Jeremy Carrette

here is that the 'mystical' is taken from the public sphere and placed squarely in the private realm (1999, p.13). In hindsight, this shift is not surprising in the post-Enlightenment era when rationality and science were regarded as the priceless gems of modern civilization. As a result, 'religious' experiences, which were now being labelled 'mystical' experiences, were viewed as 'private' experiences, which did not need confirmation or validation from outside sources. For example, Grace Jantzen quotes James when she points out that "he concludes famously that mystical states 'are and have the right to be absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come' yet 'non-mystics are under no obligations to acknowledge in mystical states a superior authority'" (as cited in Jantzen, 2005, p.98).

According to King, this move, which took the 'mystical' from the public realm to the private sphere, was in fact, a power play. He argues that removing the 'religious' or the 'mystical' from its context severely underplays the role that 'mysticism' has played, and continues to play, in social and political situations:

> The very fact that 'the mystical' is seen as irrelevant to issues of social and political authority itself reflects contemporary, secularized notions of and attitudes towards power. The separation of mystical from the political is itself a political decision! (King, 1999, p.10).

Like Asad, King links this strategy to the way the Western world continues to judge (usually negatively) any state where 'religion' is openly involved in political decisions. The way these states and their politics are discredited, gives the reader an idea of how the privatization of 'religion' has allowed many Western states to (wrongly) presume that any government that allows 'religion' to play a role in policy making is invalid:

> One consequence of the modern distinction between the spheres of religion and politics has been to foster a suspicion among Westerners that any linkage of the two realms is an example of a 'merely rhetorical' use of religious discourse to mask some underlying political, ideological or 'worldly' intention (King, 1999, p.13).

Furthermore, he also argues, "this has allowed the West to define itself as progressive, scientific and liberal in contrast to the superstitious, tradition-bound and 'under-developed' Third world nations of Asia" (2005, p.111).

It is evident that the Enlightenment era was a crucial turning point for the development of Western religious ideas. It was during this period when Christianity was being contrasted with science, and found to be wanting in this age of reason. According to King, "the association of 'the mystical' exclusively with a realm denoted by the term 'religion' is a product of secularization which 'filters out' the religious dimension from other aspects of human cultural activity" (1999, p.17). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that it was this term that was used to describe the Orient, "the representation of Hinduism and Buddhism as 'mystical' has functioned to reinforce Western stereotypes of Eastern religion and culture as world-denying, amoral and lacking an impulse to improve society" (King, 2005, p.111).

This was further complicated by the fact that Western countries were actively colonizing the rest of the world, which not only resulted in a power struggle, but also the subsequent interaction of different cultures, and an exchange of ideas that was unprecedented. This soon led to the development of the category 'world religions' which gave the semblance of plurality and a non-hegemonic attitude by including the Abrahamic 'religions' with the newly discovered 'religions' of the East. However, King contends:

> As Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) has recently argued, the discourse of 'world religions', whilst appearing on the surface to represent a liberal and pluralistic improvement on the older nineteenth century discourse of Christian superiority, continues to perpetuate an underlying Eurocentric logic that frames the 'rest of the world' as little more than *ersatz* versions of European civilizations – variations on a single theme. This has been the main consequence of the universalization of the category of religion across disparate geographical, temporal, ethnic and civilizational zones, namely the establishment of a

paradigmatic template for writing 'universal history', framed by the categories, experiences and local histories of white Europeans (2010, p.104).

Indeed, Masuzawa states:

> the new discourse of pluralism and diversity of religions, when it finally broke out into the open and became an established practice in the first half of the twentieth century, neither displaced, nor disabled the logic of European hegemony – formerly couched in the language of the universality of Christianity – but, in a way, gave it a new lease (2005, p.xiv).

Similarly, King is also interested in highlighting the role that European ideas have played, and continue to play, in the formation of these modern categories. Furthermore, he is particularly concerned with exposing the role that politics has had in the so-called 'private' realm of 'religion', both in the East and West:

> The broad methodological stance that I have been advocating throughout this book could be described as an attempt to 'anthropologize' the West (Paul Rabinow), in particular to render contemporary Western constructions of reality 'exotic' by drawing attention to the cultural particularity of such knowledge systems and their historical involvement in the systematic and violent suppression of non-Western ways of life, forms of knowledge and constructions of reality (King, 1999, p.187).

He is advocating for a contextual analysis which would help to eradicate some of the issues surrounding the definitions of these categories. However, whereas his suggestions do give us a way in which to decipher the past, he does not offer us a method for dealing with the current usage of these categories, which is undeniably necessary if scholars today are to continue to dialogue with cultures other than their own. Indeed, he seems to be aware of this dilemma and acknowledges, "the postmodernist and post-structuralist interest in dissolving unities into more complex heterogeneities has much in common with similar postcolonial moves but has been seen by some as undermining the legitimacy of the 'search for identity' by oppressed groups" (1999, p.197). Thus, even though we get the sense that King recognizes the issues, since he stresses the need for definitions to be constantly contextualized and not "disengaged

from [their] historical location" (1999, p.198), he does not offer us the tools that are necessary for continued dialogue across cultural divides.

<u>Conclusion</u>

If I am to be completely honest however, I should acknowledge that I do not have any real answers either. Indeed, I would argue that it is for this very reason that I keep searching for solutions in the works of these and other scholars. Unfortunately, I have not come up with a response that seems immediately viable. As such, even though discarding these terms seems like the simplest solution, it can be one of the hardest things to put into practice. After all, these concepts have become tools of communication for too many people for scholars to simply advocate for their removal. Yet, continuing to use them is also problematic, and frustrating, for those who are aware of the limitations of these categories but cannot find a way out of this dilemma. One of the solutions that scholars offer is the need for an awareness of the complex history of these labels, and no doubt this is a step in the right direction. But, where do we go from there? Any new terms that academics might come up with will eventually be fraught with the same issues. This leads us to an impasse. Nonetheless, since we have to move forward, I must choose a label that can be used for the word 'religion', a term which will also be recognized as a tentative term; a virtual house of cards since all these concepts run the risk of becoming essentialized or reified. Keeping these arguments in mind, I will nevertheless use the term 'tradition' since it is a label that seems to best allow for the inclusion of embodied rituals, texts, relationships with the supernatural, location, ancestry, philosophy and most importantly, context. However, I do so with the explicit understanding that like W.C. Smith, if too wide a definition is used for the term 'tradition' then it will soon become an empty concept which serves no real purpose.

And finally, the main reason why it was so important to begin this project with a detailed survey of some of the ways the term 'religion' has come to be understood is because Vivekananda himself struggled with defining this concept. Accordingly, we will see how many of the dilemmas identified by these modern scholars, with using the label 'religion', are not new discussions but rather the continuation of a debate that began centuries ago with colonization. In fact, W.C. Smith's effort to find alternate labels, J.Z. Smith's search for a common web of ideas, Asad's refusal to relegate 'religion' to the private sphere, Balagangadhara's arguments against the Abrahamic religions, and King's rejection of overarching labels are all topics that were addressed by Vivekananda. Consequently, this survey of modern voices debating the value of the label 'religion' allows us to have a framework from which to comprehend the value of investigating how Vivekananda's voice impacted these discussions. In the previous chapter, we saw that Bankimchandra refused to limit the definition of 'dharma' to the western concept of 'religion'. Similarly, in Chapter 5, we will discuss how Vivekananda also resisted the use of this term 'religion' as he did not believe that it adequately articulated the nuances in Hindu traditional ideas. This in turn, highlights how 'continental collision' does not imply a simple domination of one culture over another but rather, areas of negotiation and renegotiation; repercussions of which are still being felt in the discussions of the scholars surveyed in this chapter. Keeping these arguments in mind, we will now investigate some of the nuances in the so-called creation, and history, of another hotly contested term, 'Hinduism'.

The 'Hinduism' Question

One simply has to look at a shelf of books on modern 'Hinduism' in order to realize that the use of the label 'Hinduism' is fraught with issues that are yet to be resolved. Titles such as *Imagined Hinduism* (2006), *Imagining Hinduism* (2003), *Was Hinduism Invented* (2005) and *Who Invented Hinduism* (2006) alert readers to the fact that this label has become a sparring ground for many scholars of Indian traditions. Especially since this has, in turn, led to the production of volumes of essays such as *Representing Hinduism* (1995), *Hinduism Reconsidered* (2005) and *Defining Hinduism* (2005), all of which offer excellent observations, but which unfortunately, do not put many of the pertinent issues to rest. Indeed, as we saw with the term 'religion' in the previous chapter, scholars have raised questions about the appropriateness of using a term like 'Hinduism' to describe the many diverse Hindu sects for centuries now. Consequently, it may not surprise readers to learn that the more one investigates these issues, the more confusing they become, and that even academics who claim to have taken a side, are unable to draw clear lines of separation. Instead, we are left with multiple fuzzy borders and overlapping ideas that challenge the very categories that are being used to analyse this data in the first place. As we trace the arguments of some of the voices in this field, we will realize that it is not the data that is confusing, but rather, the repeated use of Western categories that may be keeping scholars from arriving at a resolution that is appropriate for the Indian traditions that they are attempting to interpret. Indeed, these contemporary discussions are a continuation of arguments that were being debated amongst natives, and their colonizers, during the British Raj. And, as we will witness in the ensuing chapters, this was a dialogue that Vivekananda was deeply invested in. He not only refused to use these terms without first dissecting them

and then refashioning them to suit his needs, he also made an effort to challenge their

western definitions thereby participating in this ongoing controversy. As such, this

current survey will offer us a frame of reference from which to better understand the

complexities of the position he took, not to mention, the enduring relevance of his

arguments today.

<u>Paul Hacker</u>

Paul Hacker was one of the earliest contemporary academics to investigate, in

some detail, the many components of what he considered to be a hitherto unexamined

use of this title 'Hinduism'.[29] In his essay "Aspects of Neo-Hinduism as Contrasted with

Surviving Traditional Hinduism" (1995) Hacker argues that there is a distinction

between intellectuals who believed that Western colonization had resulted in the much

needed reform of Indian traditions, and those who held that Western influences had

simply been the catalyst that led to an Indian renaissance:

> The use of the term 'reform' betrays the European who wishes to bring
> betterment to India; 'renaissance', on the other hand, indicates the atmosphere
> of Hindu nationalism… In the Indian cultural life of the nineteenth and early
> twentieth centuries there actually were events, which, if evaluated from the
> angle of European culture, can be described as 'reforms'. But these very reforms
> were claimed by Hindus as their own achievement, which is quite correct
> inasmuch as Hindus effected the changes. Thus it is quite natural that Hindu
> nationalism saw these changes as a revival of Hinduism (Hacker, 1995, p.230).

Hacker mainly focuses on Indian nationalists, most of whom, he claims, preferred using

terms like 'revival' when bringing about change since, this coincided more effectively

with their nationalist ideals. It is interesting to note that while Hacker acknowledges

that native voices like Rammohan Roy's were precursors to those from the nineteenth

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[29] Whereas Hacker was a prolific writer I will concentrate primarily on his essay
"Aspects of Neo-Hinduism as Contrasted with Surviving Traditional Hinduism" (1st ed.
1970).

and twentieth century, he does not concede that these early leaders would have probably classified themselves as reformers. Perhaps this is because this would undermine Hacker's theory which argues that the Western influenced Indian nationalists were more comfortable with the title 'revivalist' rather than the designation of 'reformer'.[30] Be that as it may, Hacker only seems to be concerned with leaders from the late 19th and 20th century; leaders who he then goes on to label as 'Neo-Hindus.'

To describe what he meant by Neo-Hindus Hacker first contrasted them with the Hindus who he considered to be their 'other'; that is, those who were explicitly intent on retaining their ancient ideas and rituals, whom he labelled 'Traditional Hindus'. This idea of Hacker's, which suggests that there were two kinds of people who called themselves Hindus, is worth paying closer attention to since it sets up a binary that is oftentimes challenged in the work of later scholars who study 'Hinduism' (as we shall observe with Wilhelm Halbfass in the next section). According to Hacker, the main difference between the two groups was their connection with the past. Hacker seems to be implying that whereas Traditional Hindus were not averse to incorporating new ideas into their existing worldviews, they were unwilling to allow these concepts to undermine their association with their ancestral texts. In contrast, Neo-Hindus, in Hacker's opinion, had at some time, been disenchanted with the traditional system in which they grew up, and as such, were more willing to accept foreign ideas and use them to reinterpret their ancient scriptures and ideology:

> Neo-Hinduism and Hindu traditionalism are not two definite systems but rather two distinct mental attitudes… Traditional Hinduism assimilates and absorbs extraneous elements in a manner characteristically distinct from Neo-Hinduism. Unlike the latter, it maintains a living continuity with the past. Even in the past,

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[30] In *Nationalization of Hindu Traditions* (1999) Vasudha Dalmia unpacks the complexities embedded in these labels, and the way Hindus either appropriated or rejected them. A topic which we will return to in Chapter 6 when we try to establish which designation best suited Vivekananda's agenda.

Hindu groups often absorbed foreign elements. These certainly changed the appearance of the religion of the respective groups. But at the same time most of the old values retained previous vitality.

In Neo-Hinduism, on the contrary, the continuity with the past is broken. The typical Neo-Hindu has at some period of his life lost his confidence in his native religion (1995, p.232).

Despite articulating this distinction between these two groups, Hacker quickly clarifies that he is not implying that this signified the existence of a cohesive or comprehensive tradition. Instead, he contends:

Neo-Hinduism is not a unified system of ideas. In fact, it is chiefly because of one common trait that I classify religious thinkers as Neo-Hindus. Their intellectual formation is primarily or predominantly Western. It is European culture, and in several cases even the Christian religion, which has led them to embrace certain religious, ethical, social and political values. But afterwards they connect these values with, and claim them as, part of the Hindu tradition (Hacker, 1995, p.231).

The underlying conflict in this argument of Hacker's is noteworthy. On the one hand, he argues that the Neo-Hindus were the intellectual offspring of Western colonialism and their actions were predominantly influenced by Western ideas. Yet, on the other hand, Hacker's reflections also highlight what made the political struggle of these prominent Indian nationalists uniquely different from those of their Western counterparts. They were convinced that the only way to bring about the change necessary for India's independence, was to encourage a much-needed overhaul of the existent system. For instance, when speaking of India's second president, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and his vision for the future of India, Hacker observes that whereas the Western idea of a 'nation state' had taken root in Radhakrishnan's imagination, nevertheless, it had done so in a rather unique fashion:

this nationalism appears in a peculiarly Indian garb. Radhakrishnan attributed the political downfall not to political causes but to the intellectual incoherence and ethical rottenness of his national religion. Accordingly, he seeks the remedy for the evil not in political measures but in religious change (Hacker, 1995, p.233).

One is immediately struck by the fact that Hacker is surprised that the separation between the public and the private sphere, which had become mandatory for Western society, was not reflected in the way Indian nationalists were attempting to structure their own society. Moreover, Hacker recognizes that Radhakrishnan was not alone, since other leaders like Bankimchandra, Vivekananda and Gandhi were also invested in the idea that the best way to improve the state of the country, was by enabling a modernization of the national 'religion', i.e. 'Hinduism'. Indeed, as far as Hacker is concerned, this was one of the most important factors that qualified these leaders as Neo-Hindus. However, their insistence on the fact that India's success was intimately associated with its ability to modernize its traditional ideals raises several questions.[31] For example, if these nationalists' intellectual formation was so indebted to Western ideals then why were they not incorporating the separation of 'religion' and state in their own political campaigns? Did this imply, as both Asad and King have suggested, that the Western categories of politics, state and 'religion' were not easily transferable on to this uniquely Indian situation? Unfortunately however, instead of exploring the validity of these categories, and their application to the Indian subcontinent, Hacker simply states that this leads "to the conclusion that nationalism is the chief impulse of typical Neo-Hindu thinking" (Hacker, 1995, p.233). Whereas this may be true, Hacker does not explain how nationalistic ideals could have anything to do with 'religious' beliefs and why these categories could not be separated neatly in the Indian context.

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[31] Whereas 'modern' and 'modernize' are complex terms that can be interpreted in a myriad of ways, for the purposes of this project I will limit myself to Gustavo Benevides definition; "since signification takes place within a system of oppositions, in order to count oneself among the *moderni* one had to distinguish oneself from the *antiqui*" (1998, p.186)

In fact, Hacker simply ignores the issues that emerge because of his findings, preferring instead to focus on how alternate interpretations of Hindu terms were adopted by native followers, which he argues, led to the creation of an undeniable divide between Traditional Hindus and Neo-Hindus. He points out that for Traditional Hindus, the concept of "*dharma* comprises norms or patterns of conduct, most of which differ according to a man's caste and stage of life" (Hacker, 1995, p.237). This implies that for Traditional Hindus, caste was not a category that could be ignored or discarded. Alternatively, he contends, "most of the prominent Neo-Hindus, on the other hand, have reinterpreted *dharma* more or less radically according to Western models" whereby caste no longer played a central role in its definition (Hacker, 1995, p.238). He also uses the example of Bankimchandra to demonstrate how many Neo-Hindus had practically reinvented this concept to make it compatible with Western ideology:

> Bankim Candra Cattopadhaya [sic] was perhaps the first to offer such a reinterpretation [of *dharma*]. In order to evaluate his novel concept, we first have to note that the word *dharma* has other meanings beside the meaning 'pattern of conduct' ... The word may also signify 'an essential quality' of a thing. Moreover, many modern Indian languages use it as an equivalent of the European word 'religion'. Bankim achieved his reinterpretation by fusing all the three meanings I mentioned, namely (1) pattern of conduct, (2) essential quality, (3) religion. Thus he arrived at the conclusion that religion is man's essential quality, denoted by the word 'humanity' (*manusyatva*) but it is at the same time a pattern of conduct, an ideal whose realization man is obliged to strive for (Hacker, 1995, p.238).

By using examples such as these, Hacker concludes that Neo-Hindus adopted many of their ideas from Western philosophy, and then went on to restructure Indian terms to fit foreign models.[32] On the other hand, when speaking of how Traditional Hindus adopted some of the same ideas, Hacker argues that they did so by introducing new concepts into their traditional texts. This allowed them to reinterpret certain aspects of

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[32] For e.g. Hacker suggests, "Bankim remodeled Hinduism according to what he had learned from the positivists Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill" (1995, p.238).

their scriptures, without calling for a "transmutation" of the ideas that were previously

held by the community. Accordingly, he demonstrates how the idea of '*seva*' (service)

for *brahmins* was viewed negatively in ancient times because *brahmins* were the

'superior' caste, and as such, could not be seen demeaning themselves by serving those

who were of a lower caste. However, Hacker asserts that during the British Raj, when

the emphasis was placed on 'service' by various Christian groups, Traditional Hindus

reinterpreted their texts to reflect the ideas of their colonizers:

> the ideas of *seva* with the attitude of "being pleased with the well-being of all
> creatures," which has been an ethical value commonly recognized in India at
> least from the time when Buddhism was preponderant in the subcontinent, and
> which occurs in the Bhagavadgita and in a considerable number of passages in
> the Great Epic. Yet the modern notion of *seva* ... gives an active turn to what
> previously was essentially a mental disposition, and it is precisely this turn
> which reveals influence from outside. Nevertheless, the addition of the new value
> does not imply a transmutation of the traditional concept of *dharma* (Hacker,
> 1995, p.238).

No doubt, this term '*seva*' acquired different caveats at the hands of Traditional

Hindus, which, in turn, changed the way this concept was to be understood. As such,

Hacker's argument that this *did not* constitute as a "transmutation" highlights the

difficulty with distinguishing the way Traditional Hindus reinterpreted ideas, in

comparison with the methods adopted by Neo-Hindus.[33] Indeed, as if to complicate

matters further, on the one hand, Hacker argues that Neo-Hindus took new ideas from

other traditions, especially Christianity, and found a way to connect them with

dominant native traditions. Yet, on the other hand, he argues that Neo-Hindus

reinterpreted Hindu concepts in such a way to make them more compatible with

Western ideals, which in turn, made their native identity unrecognizable. For example,

Hacker classifies Gandhi as a Neo-Hindu who was evidently influenced by his exposure

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[33] This concept '*seva*' is one of the cornerstones of Vivekananda's legacy and is a topic
that we will investigate extensively in the following chapters.

to Western philosophy, literature and 'religion'. Nevertheless, Gandhi went on to advocate for the return of '*Ramarajya*' (the rule of Ram), a period when the King Ram, who was known for his moral backbone and devotion to *dharma*, ruled his kingdom justly. So, is Gandhi really a Neo-Hindu or is he a Traditional Hindu? Is it possible, or even necessary to draw this distinction? After all, what purpose does it serve? Is this distinction only important because it allows scholars to divide modern Hindus into categories, i.e., conservative, liberal, traditional, 'neo', etc., that are a natural component of Western 'religious' theory? Indeed, one could argue that the walls dividing Traditional Hindus and Neo-Hindus have such porous borders that the continued use of these terms would only further complicate matters.

The most ironic aspect of this argument is that Hacker himself recognized the problems that could be associated with distinguishing these two categories when he states, "[i]t may even happen that one and the same person combines elements of both ways of thinking" (Hacker, 1995, p.232). Thus, one has to wonder why, if Hacker saw the pitfalls of such a distinction, he still insisted on dividing the Indian intellectual public in this rather futile way. Moreover, what makes this attempt of Hacker's, to separate Hindus into these distinct identities, even more frustrating is that it takes away from one of the more compelling aspects of his argument; that Hindus, in general, have tended to adopt foreign ideas and reinterpret them in such a way as to allow them to be compatible with their own traditions. This concept that Hacker calls 'inclusivism' is not applicable only to Neo-Hindus but instead is a term that can be used for both groups.[34] Indeed, Hacker himself recognizes this because he states that this attitude:

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[34] We will return to this term 'inclusivism' in the final chapter since it is a label that has been used for 'Hinduism' in general, and Vivekananda in particular, and as such, has become a defense mechanism for many Hindus and the nationalist movement when they are accused of being intolerant towards other traditions.

is not restricted to Neo-Hinduism. In fact, it stems from hoary antiquity. In some publications of mine I have called it 'inclusivism.' It consists in claiming for, and thus including in, one's own religion what really belongs to an alien sect (Hacker, 1995, p.244).

Consequently, if this is a trait that is common to both Neo-Hindus, and Traditional Hindus, doesn't this problematize the lines of division, that Hacker has drawn between these two categories, even further? This trait 'inclusivism' exemplifies one of the most important aspects of Hindu traditions; i.e. the fact that the categories, which scholars have grown accustomed to using, are not airtight on the Indian subcontinent and, as such, must be used with extreme caution and many disclaimers. By explicating this inclusivist attitude, that is relatively common amongst Hindus, Hacker demonstrated why it is still so difficult, even today, for scholars to articulate what 'Hinduism' is because so much can be included in this category that eventually the label itself is oftentimes deemed redundant. Keeping Hacker's ideas in mind, I will now turn to Wilhelm Halbfass, who not only engages with Hacker's arguments but also goes on to build valuable ones of his own.

Wilhelm Halbfass

In *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (1988), Wilhelm Halbfass responds to Hacker to problematize some of his key ideas. For instance, Halbfass also agrees that the differentiation between 'neo' and 'traditional' is not clear; "Hacker's two categories are not mutually exclusive and not always clearly distinguishable. There are possibilities of transition, overlap or combination" (1988, p.220). However, he argues that it is because these 'neo' and 'traditional' ideas can co-exist harmoniously even within a single person that results in:

> the peculiar ambivalence and range of variation which may be seen in modern Indian thought: orthodoxy and receptivity, openness and self-assertion, the new

interpretation of indigenous concepts and a Hinduization of Western concepts, all these intermix in a variety of ways (Hacker, 1995, p.220).

In his opinion, to understand 'modern Indian thought', it is necessary to trace the development of orthodox ideas into those which are considered 'neo' Hindu. This leads him to make an interesting observation, whereby he suggests that in fact, Neo-Hindu ideas are the midway point between orthodox beliefs and Westernized theories:

Standing between traditionalism and orthodoxy on the one hand and a mere mimicry of Western models on the other, it [Neo-Hinduism] represents, so to speak, the xenological core of modern Indian thought (Hacker, 1995, p.222).

He contends that whereas Neo Hindu ideas "may indeed be contrasted with traditionalism" it makes more sense to see them not at opposite ends of a spectrum, but rather, as two adjacent points on a single trajectory.

Perhaps the reason why this is such an intriguing idea is that Halbfass is arguing against the commonly held belief that Neo-Hindus are the most Westernized Hindus. Instead, Halbfass contests Hacker's ideas of binary concepts and alternatively offers up the suggestion that Neo-Hindus may simply be just a few shades more Western, or less orthodox, but not completely different entities as is oftentimes asserted. Unfortunately however, he eventually concludes that, "[i]n general, it is obvious that Hacker's scheme is a simplification, although a useful and convenient one" (Hacker, 1995, p.221). What is problematic about this statement is that even though Halbfass recognizes the ambiguous nature of these labels, and repeatedly tries to add nuances to their definitions, he nevertheless feels compelled to use them, and even goes as far as agreeing with Hacker that they are "useful and convenient." One cannot help but ask; "useful and convenient" for who? For scholars who have become accustomed to using them? Doesn't this insistence on the continued use of questionable labels suggest a certain bias? Why is Halbfass so intent to find a way to warrant their use? Is it because

Western scholarship has grown accustomed to describing Indian ideas and Hindu intellectuals in this manner? And perhaps most importantly, why haven't Indians today adopted these labels and made them their own? After all, whose convenience are we interested in, and is convenience a good enough reason to comply with the status quo? Halbfass argues:

> Self-questioning and the critique of Eurocentric preconceptions are necessary ingredients of any responsible study of India. However, the attempt to eliminate *all* western constructs and preconceptions and to liberate the Indian tradition from all non-Indian categories of understanding would not only be impractical, but also presumptuous in its own way. Although it would seem to be diametrically opposed to the Hegelian Eurocentric method of subordinating and superseding non-European traditions, it would raise the problem of a "reverse Eurocentrism" (2005, p.25, emphasis in original).

This may be true in certain cases, particularly when the 'natives' have adopted and appropriated such labels for themselves, but this is not the case here. Indeed, one could argue that Halbfass' observations on the connectivity between these two categories should actually compel him to discard these labels but this is not the stance that he takes. Fortunately however, this does not diminish the value of the rest of his arguments, whereby he draws interesting conclusions regarding certain ideas and tendencies that he believes were very influential in the development of the Hindu identity.

Halbfass begins by basing his theories on a basic premise, that should be self-evident, but which he argues is oftentimes ignored:

> Traditional Hinduism has not reached out for the West. It has not been driven by the zeal of proselytization and discovery, and by the urge to understand and master foreign cultures. It has neither recognized the foreign, the other as a possible alternative, nor as a potential source of its own identity. "It has at no time *defined itself* in relation to the other, nor acknowledged the other in its unassimilable otherness." India has discovered the West and begun to respond to it in being sought out, explored, overrun and objectified by it. Its initial position in the encounter was that of a target of European interests and expectations. It was not the course of Indian history, not the inner dynamism of the Hindu tradition, that led to the encounter. Europeans took the initiative. They went to

India. This is a simple and familiar fact. Yet its fundamental significance of the hermeneutics of the encounter between India and the West is often forgotten (1988, p.172, emphasis in original).

The issues that Halbfass seems to be struggling with revolve around his interest in uncovering who speaks for this tradition, and why. This leads Halbfass to a series of questions which ask how one can actually decide the role that traditional ideas have played, whether they need to be 'reformed' and if they should, in fact, be considered to be the 'only' valid voice of Hindu India:

> Can those who preserve the traditional schemes of knowledge not just as contents of historical awareness, but as ways of seeing the world – can those guardians and representatives of the tradition and its authoritative language provide it with a living presence? Can they, who speak the language of the tradition, also speak for it in the modern world? Can they present it to the West and the Westernized world without simply being used as sources of information or objects of historical curiosity? Can they in turn comprehend this world within the horizon of their own inherited knowledge? Do they possess traditional means of understanding which are sufficient to respond to and interpret the modern world? Does the tradition itself provide such a framework of understanding? Is the tradition of the Sanskrit pandits the most authentic form of survival of traditional Hinduism? Are they more qualified to speak for the tradition than the Neo-Hindus? Do they represent the continued life and strength of the tradition – or its final petrification? (1988, pp.260-261)

It is with questions like these that Halbfass gets to the heart of his own investigation which tries to determine who is speaking for the Hindus, whether they are qualified to do so, and perhaps most importantly, if the lens that is commonly used to analyse these traditions is useful when trying to understand Indian ideas.

One of the most interesting observations that Halbfass makes is that historically, Hindus did not engage with 'other' invading traditions in quite the same manner as the West was accustomed to. He points out that early Indian philosophers did not need the foreign 'other' to form their own identity. Instead, these ancient Hindus cultivated an attitude whereby they believed that they had nothing to learn from the '*mlecchas*'

(foreigners) who repeatedly invaded their territories. Halbfass highlights ancient and medieval Sanskrit literature which seem to imply:

> Why should a Hindu who sees himself as part of an all-inclusive tradition and is committed to a truth which is timeless and complete be interested in foreign customs and traditions? Why should he explore the amorphous multitude of the countries of *mlecchas*? What could he possibly learn from them? Certainly nothing that could affect his understanding of *dharma* – the sacred norm, the hereafter, those goals and means of human existence which are not accessible to empirical knowledge. The Veda is the only legitimate source of transempirical cognition (1988, pp.182-183).

There are two main ideas that need to be unpacked here. On the one hand, Halbfass argues that Indian literature does not report on philosophical or 'religious' debates and indeed could be accused, in this respect, of being "a tradition of silence and evasion" (1988, p.182). On the other hand, he also highlights that these Sanskrit texts did not simply ignore the physical existence of these other traditions, nor did they fail to recognize these *mlecchas* as "able soldiers, craftsmen, artisans, etc." (Halbfass, 1988, p.186). Thus, the foreigners were not completely ignored, but rather, only their efficiency and skill was acknowledged in a limited fashion. In contrast, in matters regarding tradition, philosophy or social norms, these *mlecchas* were not allowed to weigh in; indeed, they were not even considered viable opponents. Is it because they thought these foreigners were unworthy? Or, instead, as Halbfass suggests, is it because they considered their world view to be so complete that they did not even feel the need to consider the validity or value of external philosophical or traditional concepts?

Another interesting idea that emerges from Halbfass' exploration of the depiction of foreigners, in Indian literature, is the idea that the Vedas, in spite of not being the central texts for many Hindus, served as a point of departure from which Hindus could describe their own traditional positions:

> regardless of the highly elusive and ambiguous nature of the historical relationship between the Veda and Hinduism, the Hindu tradition has, for many

centuries, defined itself in relation to the Veda... We may even say: There would
be no Hinduism without the Veda; its identity and reality depends upon the idea,
or fiction, of the Veda (2005, p.21).

Halbfass asserts that even if a certain group of Hindus completely rejected the Vedas,

their position could, and oftentimes was, evaluated by its relationship with these texts.

Consequently, he argues that for many Hindu sects, the Vedas actually provided the

'other' by which different groups organized their own ideas. This could explain why

Hindu traditions did not find it necessary, to evaluate or compare themselves to *mleccha*

philosophical ideas, to form their own identity. This is especially surprising for many

scholars since it is an accepted Western norm to believe, that it is by defining the

external 'other', that one is able to define oneself. Scholars have argued that it is only

with the invasion of Western colonialists, who were deeply invested in comparing

Western 'religions' with Eastern philosophies, that Hindus felt a need to form a

collective identity. However, one could just as easily argue that this did not necessarily

imply that Hindus did not have an internal connectivity with each other (albeit a

negative one in many cases) which allowed them to form a collective identity; a

collective identity that was eventually labelled 'Hinduism'. Indeed, Halbfass contends:

It is important, however, not to overlook the traditional, premodern dimensions
of unity and identity, contextuality and coherence, and the centripetal and
inclusive elements in what W. Cantwell Smith calls the "luxuriant welter" of
traditional Hindu life. To be sure, this is not the dogmatic and institutional
identity of an "organized religion"; but on the other hand, it is neither an
"Orientalist construction," nor can it be reduced to a Brahmanical fiction or
projection (2005, p.27).

Halbfass is invested in ensuring that Hindu agency, in the development of their own

identity, should not be ignored. Indeed, he is particularly interested in affirming that the

label 'Hinduism', whose ancestry and origins are repeatedly challenged, should not be

discarded. By exploring the relationships that Indians had with their *mleccha* invaders,

he argues for the validity of his contention that the label 'Hinduism' is not one that was simply applied by foreign *mleccha* invaders:

> The modern idea of "Hinduism," or of the "Hindu religion," is a reinterpretation of the traditional ideas and, in a sense, a hybridization of the traditional self-understanding. Yet it is by no means a mere adaptation of western superimpositions. It is also a continuation of the tradition, an expression and transformation of that self-understanding which articulates itself in its commitment to the Vedic revelation. It is this commitment that provides the focus for traditional Hindu self-understanding, and that provides a paradigm and exemplary precedent even for those movements that pay little attention to the Vedic revelation, or try to supersede and replace it (Halbfass, 2005, p.28).

It should not come as a surprise then that this particular assertion about the validity of the label 'Hinduism', its origins, and its continued applicability to modern Hindu thought, has been the crux of numerous arguments. Another scholar who has done a considerable amount of research on this issue is David Lorenzen.

David Lorenzen

In his essay "Who Invented Hinduism?" (2005) David Lorenzen attempts to unravel some of the arguments that scholars have made regarding the legitimacy of this label 'Hinduism' and the people who are accredited with, or who take credit for, its 'invention'. Lorenzen begins by separating scholars on Hindu traditions into two distinct categories. In the first group, he places those who:

> have put forward the claim that Hinduism was constructed, invented, or imagined by British scholars and colonial administrators in the nineteenth century and did not exist, in any meaningful sense, before this date. Prominent among scholars who have made this constructionist argument, if I can call it that, are Vasudha Dalmia (1995), Robert Frykenberg (1989), Christopher Fuller (1992), John Hawley (1991), Gerald Larson (1995), Harjot Oberoi (1994), Brian Smith (1989) and Heinrich von Stietencron (1995 and 1997) (Lorenzen, 2005, p.52).

Lorenzen chooses to highlight some of these scholars since they have made strong statements in defence of their positions. For example, Heinrich von Stietencron argues:

Hinduism in *toto*, with various contradicting systems and all the resulting inconsistencies, certainly does not meet the fundamental requirements for a historical religion of being a coherent system (2005, p.46).

Robert Frykneberg goes even further when he states:

A continued and blind acceptance of this concept [Hinduism] – not to mention an uncritical but all too common holding of many underlying assumptions about it during the past century – is not only erroneous, but, I would argue, it is dangerous (2005, p.82).

But perhaps the worst argument comes from John Hawley who contends:

Hinduism – the word and perhaps the reality too- was born in the 19th century, a notoriously illegitimate child. The father was middle-class and British, and the mother, of course, was India (1991, p.20).

This insensitive visualization of 'Hinduism' as an "illegitimate child", and of India as a mother of questionable morals, is exactly the kind of argument that has caused such a furore over the legitimacy of the use of this label. As such, it is disappointing that Lorenzen regards it as "one of the wittiest" (2005, p.55) analogies made by recent scholars. That being said however, Lorenzen perceives himself as belonging to the opposing team of scholars:

On the other side of the argument are several scholars who have directly questioned this claim from various points of view. They include Lawrence A. Babb (1986), Wendy Doniger (1991), Gabriealla Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi (1989), Alf Hiltebeitel (1991), Cynthia Talbot (1995), Thomas Trautman (1997), Peter van der Veer (1994), and myself (1995) (2005, p.53).

Considering this stance, it is fitting that Lorenzen dedicates the rest of his essay to try and demonstrate that the:

claim that Hinduism was invented or constructed by European colonizers, mostly British, sometime after 1800 is false. The evidence instead suggests that a Hindu religion theologically and devotionally grounded in texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Puranas, and philosophical commentaries on the six *darshanas* gradually acquired a much sharper self-conscious identity through the rivalry between Muslims and Hindus in the period between 1200 and 1500, and was firmly established long before 1800 (Lorenzen, 2005, p.53).

On the other hand, Lorenzen is also quick to clarify that this does not imply that he believes that the *label* 'Hinduism' was used extensively before the arrival of the Westerners. Instead, he agrees with other contemporary scholars who have shown how "the word 'Hinduism' became common in English only in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, and mostly in books by British authors" (Lorenzen, 2005, p.54). Accordingly Lorenzen states:

> In a search through several early nineteenth-century journals, I managed to find one example of the word "Hinduism" (with a "u") in a letter published in the 1818 volume of *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* (London) and no less than seven examples (also with a "u") in an article by John Crawfurd on Hinduism in Bali, published in the 1820 volume of *Asiatick Researches* of Calcutta. More significant are two appearances of the term in English language texts by Rammohan Roy published in 1816 and 1817, which have been noted and discussed recently by Dermot Killingley (1993) (2005, p.53-54).

Interestingly, parts of this argument have recently been refuted by Geoffrey A. Oddie who has shown that Charles Grant, a director of the East India Company:

> was one of the first Europeans (if not the first) to use the term 'Hindooism' in both his private and semi-official correspondence. He used the term in correspondence with Thomas Raikes in September 1787 (2006, p.71).

Oddie makes an interesting observation when he contends:

> Also significant is the fact that Grant seems to have assumed that an England-based recipient of his letter would already understand the meaning of the word when he used it in his letter to Raikes in England in September 1787 (2006, p.71).

Ironically, Oddie's comments strengthen Lorenzen's argument that 'Hinduism' was not constructed in the nineteenth century. As such, it is especially puzzling that, despite being aware of Grant's work, which he mentions in his essay (Lorenzen, 2005, p.61), Lorenzen fails to make this connection himself. Particularly since this is the crux of Lorenzen's argument, whereby he is most interested in demonstrating that even though it hadn't been labelled 'Hinduism', the *idea* of 'Hinduism' was widely prevalent before British colonization.

To make his point, Lorenzen argues that 'constructionist' scholars have privileged the geo-cultural definition of the word 'Hindu', whereas he believes this label carried strong religious implications as well:

> everyone agrees that the word derives from Sindhu, the native name for the river Indus. There is also a consensus that the name Sindhu became "Hind" or "Hindu" in Persian languages and then re-entered Indian languages as "Hindu," originally with the sense of an inhabitant of the lands near and to the east of the Indus. Most proponents of the British construction of Hinduism, not surprisingly begin by stressing this geographical etymology and then simply deny that use of the word "Hindu" in a religious sense was of any importance until the nineteenth century (2005, p.57).

In contrast, the basis of Lorenzen's argument is that, before the Western colonizers arrived, the Hindus already had a collective identity that had been necessary in the face of Muslim domination. He contends that the designation 'Hindu', was not a term simply used for geographical and ethnic reasons since this would imply, by default, that the Muslims who had settled in India, or those who had converted to Islam, should also have been called Hindus.

> What then of the vast majority of Muslims in India who were indigenous converts of low-caste Hindu origin? If "Hindu" remained a purely ethno-geographical term, except perhaps in the eyes of a few Muslim intellectuals, at least these converts should have been called "Hindus" or "Hindu Muslims." There is in fact little or no evidence that this ever happened (Lorenzen, 2005, p.58).

This fact is contested by Frykenberg who asserts:

> In this sense reference to "Hindoo" Christians or "Hindoo" Muslims – namely references to Christians and Muslims, etc., of India who were characteristically and distinctively 'Hindoo" or Indian in their culture and style of life – are not uncommon (2005, p.85).[35]

Perhaps Lorenzen feels justified in ignoring these cases, where Christians or Muslims were assigned this prefix 'Hindu', due to their negligible numbers (in comparison to the

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[35] Furthermore, in a personal email exchange with Dr. Frykenberg dated October, 21st, 2011, where I asked for clarification on how he came to this conclusion, he stated that these ideas were mined from petitioners in the Manuscript District Records regarding the regions Tinnevelly and Tanjore between the periods 1790 to 1835.

majority who were not labelled in this fashion). Instead, he bases his arguments on the

premise, whereby converts were not called Hindu Muslims or Hindu Christians, and

investigates numerous accounts of 'Hinduism' that have been recorded dating back to

the fifteenth century. He argues that there are three main sources for these accounts;

European, Hindu and Muslim. Lorenzen contends that even though there are "three

different master narratives; one metaphysical, one historical and one classificatory"

(2005, p.58) however:

> there is almost no text on Hinduism that follows any one model exclusively.
> Nonetheless, the dominant model is undoubtedly the historical one, and one of
> the first fully-developed examples of this model is presented in Monier Monier-
> Williams' influential book *Hinduism*, first published in 1877 and later reprinted
> in several revised editions. The importance of this text justifies, I think, taking its
> account of Hinduism as a "standard model" of the religion (2005, p.59).

This is important because Lorenzen then goes on to demonstrate how the different

histories of 'Hinduism', preceding this text, all share common traits with this 'standard

model' thereby belying the notion that the idea of a collective Hindu identity did not

exist earlier. Thus, Lorenzen questions:

> When, then, did British and other European observers first identify Hinduism –
> whether called Hinduism, Hindu religion or religion of the Hindus – as a single
> set of religious beliefs and practices? I have already mentioned the 1820 article
> by John Crawfurd as one of the earliest sources to use the word "Hinduism."
> What is also interesting is the fact that Crawfurd uses the terms "Hinduism,"
> "Hindu religion," and "Hindus" in the context of Bali, where the Hindus are
> clearly not Indians in any racial or ethno-geographical sense. What I want to
> show here, however, is that virtually all of the more scholarly observers among
> the European visitors and residents in India before 1800 had identified
> Hinduism as a diverse but identifiable set of beliefs and practices clearly
> distinguished from Islam, and, less clearly, from the Sikh and Parsi religions as
> well (2005, p.61).

By charting out the different European reports and documents that describe Hindu

religious traditions, Lorenzen successively illustrates how British scholars and

administrators cannot be the only Europeans accredited with the 'construction' of

Hinduism. Instead, he identifies Protestant, Catholic, Portuguese, Spanish and

missionary accounts, each with different perspectives and agendas, but nevertheless

describing Hindu ideas in a relatively similar manner; all of which are comparative to

Monier Williams' 'standard model':

> The fact that virtually all European accounts – whatever the language or period
> in which they were written, and whether or not they are likely to have mutually
> influenced each other – follow this same general outline suggests that the
> European writers were in fact "constructing" Hinduism directly on the basis of
> what they observed and what they were told by their native informants. These
> informants were in turn simply summarizing *a construction of Hinduism that*
> *already existed in their own collective consciousness*. This does not mean that
> Hinduism was unchanged during this period, nor that the European and colonial
> presence did not foster important changes in the way Hinduism was
> conceptualized by the Hindus themselves, but it does clearly show that the idea
> that Hinduism was constructed or invented by nineteenth century Europeans is
> mistaken (Lorenzen, 2005, pp.67-68, emphasis in original).

Of course, one could argue that the reason why the Europeans gleaned the same

information from their native informants was because they were approaching these

traditions with their own cultural baggage. And, as such, were asking the same

questions and looking for the same answers. As if in response to this Lorenzen turns his

attention to the relevant Hindu sources. Interestingly, Lorenzen picks up on Halbfass'

argument, that premodern Sanskrit sources minimized their account of the Muslim

presence and, as such, Lorenzen agrees that it is hard to ignore Halbfass' suggestion that

these texts were guilty of a "self-imposed cultural isolation" (2005, p.69). However,

Lorenzen argues that whereas it may be true that these texts refused to engage

extensively with the Muslim 'other', it was also true that vernacular literature did not

operate under the same pretexts:

> The bulk of this evidence takes the form of texts composed by the popular
> religious poet-singers of North India, most of them members of non-Brahmin
> castes. This literature does precisely what Sanskrit literature refuses to do: it
> establishes a Hindu religious identity through a process of mutual self-definition
> with a contrasting Muslim Other (2005, p.70).

By describing the various references that were made to the 'Muslim Other', Lorenzen highlights numerous ways in which these early Hindu poets demonstrated a collective identity which they didn't call 'Hinduism', but, which could be read back as just that. For example, he uses quotes from the religious songs of the Indian poet Kabir who lived approximately between the years 1450 and 1520 A.D:

> Who is a Hindu, who a Turk?
> Both must share a single world.
> Koran or Vedas, both read their books (as cited in Lorenzen, 2005, p.72))

Furthermore, Lorenzen points out that in a "historical romance called *Kirtilata"* a text that was written approximately "a hundred years before Kabir," there is a reference made to the *dhamme* (*dharma*) of the Hindus and the Turks which "apparently mean[t] something quite close to 'religion of the Hindus' and 'religion of the Muslims'" (2005, p.73).

Naturally, this raises questions about the very definition of '*dhamme*', or *dharma*, and whether it was used in the same way as 'religion'[36] or, if in fact, it had other definitions that could be applied to it as Hacker has already highlighted. Indeed, because Lorenzen translates it as 'religion' we get to what might be a crucial problem with his argument. This need of Lorenzen's, to define '*dhamme'* as 'religion', a Western infused label, undermines some of the emphasis he lays on the need to accept that 'Hinduism' may be a native construct. After all, Lorenzen contends that there was a collective Hindu identity and he offers up considerable evidence to support this claim. Moreover, this collective identity is comparable to what Lorenzen calls the 'standard model' of Hinduism. Lorenzen even demonstrates that the famous Persian historian, Al-Biruni, has an account of the 'religion' that he found on the Indian subcontinent which is

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[36] A point that Bankimchandra refutes in the first chapter.

remarkably like the 'standard model' accredited to Monier-Williams approximately

seven hundred years later (2005, p.75). However, one cannot help but wonder if those

who apparently had this collective identity, i.e. the Hindus, would have accepted this

'standard model' or if instead, as Halbfass has suggested with the Vedas, they would

have identified themselves in relation to it, by accepting some of its norms, and rejecting

others. Indeed, it is only with the arrival of the British that this web of ideas had to be

concretized, whereby walls were put up around the 'religion' called 'Hinduism'.

So, in a sense, one could argue that it was not that a Hindu identity did not exist,

but that for the first time in history, this massive body of intertwined ideas was being

forced into a box called 'religion', under the subheading of 'Hinduism'. The question

then arises as to why this label, which simply names this collective identity, and calls it

'Hinduism' should be discarded. Instead, shouldn't we discard the parameters that are

set for 'Hinduism' by some scholars? One could argue that it is not the term that is the

problem; it is the need to use Western theoretic tools to define it that is the real

problem. Thus, whereas Lorenzen is convincing in his argument that 'Hinduism' existed

before the British arrived, unfortunately he is not able to break from his need to

describe it as a "single religious community" (2005, p.54) rather than as a multi-layered

plural yet connected identity. So the question is not 'who invented Hinduism?' or "who

constructed Hinduism?" but rather *why* this identity does not conform to Western

religious models. These are some of the questions which Richard King seems to be

grappling with.

Richard King

In *Orientalism and Religion* (1999), Richard King argues that 'Hinduism' has

come to represent an idea that did not exist, in this form, before colonialism. As such, he

endeavours to shed some light on the role that Western Orientalism has played in the

development and definition of this term:

> The notion of 'Hinduism' is itself a Western-inspired abstraction, which until the
> nineteenth century bore little or no resemblance to the diversity of Indian
> religious beliefs and practice (King, 1999, p.98).

King seemingly takes an opposing stance from Lorenzen:

> The term 'Hinduism', which of course derives from the frequency with which
> 'Hindu' came to be used, is a Western explanatory construct. As such it reflects
> the colonial and Judeo-Christian presuppositions of the Western Orientalists who
> first coined the term (1999, p.100).

Moreover, he laments the fact that scholars of Orientalism, such as David Kopf are:

> seemingly unaware of the Eurocentric agenda underlying it and the extent to
> which the superimposition of the monolithic entity of 'Hinduism' upon Indian
> religious material has distorted and perhaps irretrievably transformed Indian
> religiosity in a Westernized direction (King, 1999, p.100).

What is important to note however, is that King is not simply asking scholars to discard

the label 'Hinduism'. Rather, he urges them to understand that when they use this label

they are, in all actuality, using a term that has been shaped by Western ideology and as

such, "the modern conception of Hinduism is indeed a *modern* development" (King,

1999, p.101, emphasis in original). What this signifies, for King, is that 'Hinduism', as it

came to be used by the British colonialists and the native elites, was deeply influenced

by the categories that were privileged by Western concepts of 'religion'. This is reflected

in the fact that texts such as the *Dharmasastras*, the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the

Puranas all came to occupy a pivotal role in the creation of this category; a textual

emphasis that was not evident to such a degree in earlier times when practice and ritual

played a central role. Furthermore, he asserts that since these Western ideas were

themselves strongly influenced by Christian values, the result was a 'construction' of

'Hinduism' that bore a stronger resemblance to the 'religion' of their oppressors rather

than to the traditional ideas of their ancestors:

Many of the early European translators of Indian texts were also Christian missionaries, who, in their translations and critical editions of Indian works, effectively constructed uniform texts and a homogenized written canon through the imposition of Western philological standards and presuppositions onto Indian materials. Thus the oral and 'popular' aspect of Indian religious tradition was either ignored or decried as evidence of the degradation of contemporary Hindu religion and superstitious practices that bore little or no relation to 'their own' texts (King 1999, p.101).

In addition to this emphasis on textual authority, Orientalists were also inclined to look for an ecclesiastical hierarchy, a model with which they were familiar, and the elite *brahmins* filled this requirement perfectly. King highlights the fact that the combined effect of textual emphasis, and the need for a native hierarchical support system, resulted in the privileging of the *brahmin* caste who, as a result, benefitted both socially as well as economically.

The question that arises then is as to why the other castes, sects and religious groups, whose practices and philosophy did not play such a pivotal role in the formation of this modern 'religion' called 'Hinduism', did not object strongly and resist this *brahmin* 'take over'. King, agreeing with scholars like Heinrich von Stietencron and Robert Frykenberg before him, argues that the reason why a large portion of the Indian intellectual community was amenable to this situation was because this allowed them to present a united front in their struggle for freedom, by claiming a national identity, that bound them together, i.e. 'Hinduism'. Accordingly, King concurs with von Stietencron:

western students saw Hinduism as a unity. The Indians had no reason to contradict this; to them the religious and cultural unity discovered by western scholars was highly welcome in their search for national identity in the period of struggle for national union (as cited in King, 1999, p.103).

Furthermore, King also reminds us that according to Frykenberg:

Brahmins have always controlled information. That was their boast. It was they who had provided information on indigenous institutions [for Western Orientalists]. It was they who provided this on a scale so unprecedented that, at least at the level of All-India consciousness, a new religion emerged the likes of which India had perhaps never known before (as cited in King, 1999, p.104).

King demonstrates how this quest for a national, united front, resulted in the emergence

of a 'Hinduism' that did not, and could not, correspond with what had existed before the

arrival of the Western Orientalists. Consequently, he agrees with the Indian historian

Romila Thapar when she contends:

> this new Hinduism, furnished with a brahmanical base, was merged with elements of 'upper caste belief and ritual with one eye on the Christian and Islamic models', and was thoroughly infused with a political and nationalistic emphasis (King, 1999, p.104).

Furthermore, he argues that this 'Hinduism' had:

> the tendency to emphasize Vedic and brahmanical texts and beliefs as central and foundational to the 'essence' of Hinduism, and in the modern association of 'Hindu doctrine' with the various brahmanical schools of the Vedanta (in particular, Advaita Vedanta) (King, 1999, pp.102-103).

According to King, this is problematic, and needs to addressed, because this 'essential

Hinduism' was, in actuality, mimicking the beliefs and ideas of the Abrahamic 'religions'

with which it was competing, and with whom it wanted to stand as an equal member in

the category of 'world religions':

> This reflects the tendency, during and after European colonialism, for Indian religion to be conceived by Westerners and Indians themselves in a manner conducive to Judeo-Christian conceptions of the nature of religion, a process that Veena Das has described as the 'semification' of Hinduism in the modern era. Thus, since the nineteenth century, 'Hinduism' has developed, and is notable for, a number of new characteristics, which seem to have arisen in response to Judeo-Christian presuppositions about the nature of religion (1999, p.104).

At first glance, it appears as if he is offering up the opposing argument to

Lorenzen since he is quite firm in his belief that the term 'Hinduism' is problematic.

However, one should be wary of simply categorizing these two scholars as opposing

counsel. On the hand, it does seem as if King would disagree with Lorenzen's argument

that the 'standard model' of 'Hinduism', that Monier-Williams first published in 1877,

was already evident centuries before the arrival of the British. On the other hand,

whereas this 'standard model' may not resonate with King, he is not denying Lorenzen's

argument that there was a collective or connected identity that existed before the arrival of the British. Instead, King argues that this identity has been misrepresented, due to colonization, and the subsequent insistence that this Indian identity be made to conform with Western religious ideas and categories. He asserts that the 'religion' that is described by the term 'Hinduism' does not, in fact, accurately reflect the traditions of the Hindu masses. This naturally results in an obvious need for further analysis and interpretation, a need that he is aware of.

King presents an interesting solution in "Colonialism, Hinduism and the Discourse of Religion" (2010). According to him, one way to resolve this issue would be to recognize that, unlike Western religious traditions, which tend to operate under a centripetal model, Indian traditions are better described by a centrifugal, or perhaps, a polycentric model. He argues that Western religious traditions operate under "a profoundly centripetal dynamic that seeks to overcome difference and plurality and unify all members of the group under a common rubric" (King, 2010, p.106). However, one should be cautious of such tendencies:

> Why must civilization be seen as centripetally organized in terms of unitary identity-relations to be accorded cultural respect? How might one move to portray non-western civilizational traditions in the public sphere in a way that resists the framing of discussions about 'Hinduism' in terms of the binary logic of its 'sameness or difference' in relation to Christianity (or say, Islam)? (King, 2010, p.107).

He answers these questions by arguing that the centripetal model is not conducive to Indic ideas. As such, newer ways, which do not privilege Western explanatory models, should be explored. Furthermore, according to him, Indian traditions are, in actuality, one of the best examples of such an alternative method:

> I would contend that a centripetal mono-logic of this kind, with its concern to maintain homogeneity and a non-porous and bounded, unitary identity in the face of 'the other' (whether labelled heterodox, pagan, heathen, or 'other world religion') has *not* been the dominant model in operation in Indic identity-

formation. This is not to say that Indic movements have had no interest in constructing an identity in opposition to 'others' (*mlecchas; varna-jati; brahmanic-Srmanic* classifications etc.), but rather that the lack of a single dominant ecclesiastical institution (such as the Church) within Indian society resulted in models that took accommodation, plurality and a certain degree of interactive boundary-porousness (what in the West has often been pejoratively labelled 'syncretism') as normative. Rejecting the centripetal model embedded in dominant western assumptions about 'religion' when speaking of an Indian context does not entail the representation of Indian traditions as 'chaotic, undifferentiated collections of religious beliefs and practices (Lorenzen 2007), unless one is unwilling to think beyond the kind of (false) binary opposition through which mono-logical systems of representation operate – where 'unitary' and 'chaotic and undifferentiated' become the only possible conceptual options (King, 2010, p.107-108, emphasis in original).

Nonetheless, he is reluctant to simply call these Indian religious tendencies centrifugal, because he wants to avoid setting up binary categories that could lead back to the very issues he is arguing against. Instead, he suggests adopting Julius Lipner's (1996) suggestion to approach Indian religious traditions as a polycentric model that does not easily slip into Western monolithic categories (2010, p.108).

That being said, however, we are still left with the dilemma of naming; a dilemma that King is not unaware of but for which he doesn't offer any solutions. This is important because Hindus, both in India and in the diaspora, have come to identify with this label 'Hinduism', a title that names their traditional ideas and practices. Now, scholars are free to argue that the 'concept' that this label identifies is simply a myth. However, this particular myth has become the reality by which Hindus today not only live their lives but also understand their own history. Therefore, whereas this label does not conform to the parameters that have been set by Western traditions, it is, nevertheless, a way many Hindus have come to understand their own traditions, a myth which helps to define their identity. King addresses this idea of 'myth' in "The association of 'religion' with violence" (2007). Here, he is not using the word 'myth' in the negative way that it has oftentimes been used in popular literature, and as it is

defined in the Oxford dictionary; "a fictitious or imaginary person or thing; a widely-held but false belief or idea; a misrepresentation of the truth" (Oxford Dictionaries). Instead, he is utilizing the word 'myth' much in the same way that Pierre Bourdieu uses the word '*doxa*', which is a term he coined to describe the worldview of a people whereby:

> the established cosmological and political order is perceived not as arbitrary, i.e. as one possible order among others, but as a self-evident and natural order which goes without saying and therefore goes unquestioned (Bourdieu, 1972, p. 166).

King concurs with Bourdieu who argues:

> a *doxa* occurs when a particular taxonomic system presents itself as corresponding to 'nature' – the way things really are, rather than as a culturally constructed artifice. It is constituted by that which is taken for granted in a specific social setting, that which remains literally unquestionable because its arbitrary and socially constructed origins have been occluded. *Doxa* forms the unquestioned truth or authority that frames the very possibilities of thought itself – the stage upon which orthodoxies and heterodoxies can be played out according to a set of rules and assumptions that none of the participants question (2007, p.229).

This appears to be what King is implying when he argues that 'Hinduism' is a myth that was created by both the Western scholars and native elites, but which now presents itself as an eternal 'religion' beyond the limits of history. Bourdieu and King's arguments indicate that certain worldviews, become so deeply embedded into the psyche of the people, that they are not challenged because "the questions they answer cannot be explicitly asked" (Bourdieu, 1972, p.168). Thus, one could argue that the questions that would need to be asked of the Hindu public, regarding their collective identity and shared traditions, are ones that are so deeply embedded that they could threaten the very fabric of their self-identity; particularly when faced with presenting their ideas to non-Indians. Once again we must consider whether it is this label 'Hinduism' that the Hindus use to describe their traditions that is faulty, or, if instead, it

is the category into which they are supposed to fit that is the problem. Indeed, could it be that if we redefine 'religion' using categories such as centripetal, centrifugal and polycentric, we may be able to address some of these issues? Of course, one could also argue that this does not resolve the fact that many aspects of Hindu traditions are not included in the mainstream definition of 'Hinduism', which, in turn, oftentimes leads them to be left out by popular text books and testimonies.[37] Fortunately, scholars, on both sides of the fence, are actively trying to rectify this deficiency and this trend, to privilege Western tools and categories, is decreasing. As for the Indian masses, one might argue that whereas they may spout Vedantic ideals when pushed by outsiders to define or encapsulate their practices and ideas, they do not usually replicate this in their personal and public lives. For example, Hindu festivals like Ganesha Chaturti or Durga Puja, display a panorama of Gods in their polytheistic glory being celebrated as distinct identities with no apparent evidence of monolithic, monotheistic or Advaitic principles present. Is this a true testimony of the complex traditions that Hindus call their own? Or instead, is the historian Romila Thapar accurate when she labels these traditions, calling them 'Syndicated Hinduism', a *doxa* that has been created by the Hindu elite. It is to her arguments that we must now turn.

Romila Thapar

In her essay, "Syndicated Hinduism" (2005) Romila Thapar opens her discussion by trying to distinguish what 'Brahmanism' means, especially when compared to its

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[37] Vasudha Narayanan addresses how textbooks oftentimes misrepresent, or simply ignore, crucial aspects of Hindu traditions; an issue that we will return to in the final chapter.

apparent opposite, 'Sramanism'. According to Thapar, 'Brahmanism' has its roots in the

Vedas:

> The Vedic compositions even if they might incorporate elements of the earlier religion, emphasize the central role of the sacrificial ritual of the *yajna*, are suggestive of some elements of shamanism, include a gamut of deities where the *brahmana* is the intermediary to the gods and worship focuses on rituals without images. Because of the pivotal role of the *brahmana* it is sometimes referred to as the beginnings of Brahmanical Hinduism to distinguish it from other important forms of Hinduism. The Vedic compositions and the Dharmasastras (the codes of sacred and social duties) are said to constitute the norms for Brahmanism and the religious practices for the upper castes (Thapar, 2005, p.57).[38]

In contrast, the Sramanas were:

> those who were often in opposition to Brahmanism such as the Buddhists, Jainas and Ajivikas and a number of other sects associated with both renunciatory orders and a lay following, who explored areas of belief and practice different from the Vedas and Dharmasastras (Thapar, 2005, p.58).

However, Thapar contends that although several of these dissenters from 'Brahmanism'

could arguably be included under the umbrella of 'Hinduism' nevertheless there has

been a concerted "attempt to define Hinduism as Brahmanism based on upper caste

rituals" (2005, p.61) As far as Thapar is concerned, this effort is largely due to the

impact of colonization and is ill suited to the Indian subcontinent:

> The yardstick of the Semitic religions which has been the conscious and the subconscious challenger in the modern structuring of Hinduism, would seem most inappropriate to what existed before (2005, p.57).

According to Thapar, there are a range of beliefs and sects, ideas and philosophies,

rituals and practices, that co-inhabit this area, but which are left out from the all-

inclusive label 'Hinduism', thereby making this kind of categorization problematic.

Instead, she highlights the differences between the way traditions that are classified as

'Hindu' emerged and developed in comparison to their Western counterparts. For

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[38] For the purposes of this chapter I will limit my comments to this essay of since it is her application of the label 'syndicated Hinduism' that I would like to examine.

example, there are no linear trajectories that can be traced between the various Hindu traditions:

> Present-day Hinduism therefore cannot be seen as an evolved form with a linear growth historically from Harappan through Vedic, Puranic and Bhakti forms, although it may carry elements of these. In this it differs even from Buddhism and Jainism leave alone Christianity and Islam (Thapar, 2005, p.56).

Thapar points out that, as a result, 'Brahmanism' was especially different from its counterparts because, whereas amongst other traditions, when a sect breaks away it "still retains the historical imprint of the founder, the text and the institution… Brahmanism was free of this" (Thapar, 2005, p.58). Thapar argues that this is because of the caste system, since different castes highlighted distinctive aspects of scriptures and traditional practices, thereby privileging alternate rituals, depending on the community to which they belonged. However, Thapar concedes that despite these obvious differences Hindu traditions were often seen as part of a whole since Brahmanism was influential and Sanskrit was the language of choice, thereby giving the impression that these divergent ideals formed some kind of unity:

> Within Brahmanism there was also segmentation but seen from the outside it seemed an entity. Brahmanism did maintain its identity and survived the centuries although not unchanged, particularly after the decline of Buddhism. This was in part because it was well-endowed with grants of land and items of wealth through intensive royal patronage, which in turn reinforced its claim to social superiority and enabled it further to emphasize its distance from other castes and their practices. The extensive use of Sanskrit as the language of rituals and learning enhanced the employment of *brahmanas* in work involving literacy such as the upper levels of administration and gave them access to high political office in royal courts. This again supported its exclusive status. the use of a single language – Sanskrit – gave it a pan-Indian character, the wide geographical spread of which provided both mobility as well as a strengthening of its social identity (Thapar, 2005, pp.58-59).

Thapar also uses the example of the *Bhakti* movements, that emerged in the medieval era, to make her point that even though different groups were oftentimes linked, in reality, they were quite separate:

> The Pasupatas, the Alvars and Nayannars, the Saiva-Siddhanta and the Lingayats, Jnanesvara and Tukarama, Vallabharcarya, Mira, Caitanya, Sankaradeva, Basava, Lalla, Tulasidasa, and so on are often bunched together as part of the Bhakti stream. In fact there are variations among them which are significant and need to be pointed out (Thapar, 2005, p.59).

Accordingly, Thapar highlights the fact that native traditions were vastly complex and had many qualities that distinguished them:

> The sects included in the honeycomb of what has been called Hinduism were multiple and ranged from animistic spirit cults to others based on subtle philosophic concepts. They were oriented towards the clan, the caste and the profession or else on the reversing of these identities through renunciation. The social identity of each was imprinted on its religious observances (2005, p.61).

However, Thapar acknowledges that despite this disparity between philosophies, rituals, and practices, eventually Indian leaders perceived the need for a united front in the face of repeated external invasions, and the colonization of this region. After all, natives were now being grouped together as the 'other'; an 'other' that had to find a way to define themselves:

> The impact both of missionary activity and Christian colonial power resulted in considerable soul searching on the part of those Indians who were close to this new historical experience. One result was the emergence of a number of groups such as the Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Theosophical Society, the Divine Life Society, the Swaminarayan movement *et al.*, which gave greater currency to the term Hinduism (Thapar, 2005, p.65).

Thus, unlike in the ancient and medieval past, when *brahmins*, who had the upper hand, could afford to ignore the *mlecchas*, as Halbfass demonstrates, now, the priestly class, along with the nationalists, had to find ways to respond to this colonizing 'other'.

Here, Thapar may be referring to an idea that gained momentum because of the theories presented by Edward Said in his ground breaking book *Orientalism* (1979). Said not only outlines the problems and dilemmas entailing the categorization of the 'other' but he also points out how this need for definition of the 'other' is, in all actuality,

a need to define oneself (1979, pp.1-4).[39] In fact, one gets the distinct impression that

Said's concepts resonate with Thapar as she asserts:

> The first step towards the crystallization of what we today call Hinduism was
> born in the consciousness of being the amorphous, subordinate, other. In a sense
> this was a reversal of roles (2005, p. 63).

She does acknowledge however, that since it was the upper class educated natives who

interacted with these colonizers, first Muslim, and then Christian, that this change was

particularly visible amongst the Indian elite. Furthermore, as King has already pointed

out, Thapar argues that since "[t]here was much more dialogue of upper caste Hindus

with Christians than there had been with Muslims" (2005, p.65) the idea of a unified

'Hinduism' really emerged during the British Raj. As a result, Thapar notes:

> Those among these [native] groups influenced by Christianity, attempted to
> defend, redefine and create Hinduism on the model of Christianity. They sought
> for the equivalent of a monotheistic God, a Book, a Prophet or a Founder and
> congregational worship with an institutional organization supporting it. The
> implicit intention was again of defining "the Hindu" as a reaction to being "the
> other"; the subconscious model was the Semitic religion (2005, pp.65-66).

It is because of this interaction, and the subsequent efforts of the Indian elite to present

a united voice for the ensuing nationalist struggle, that gave cause for the emergence of

what Thapar calls "Syndicated Hinduism". Thus, she contends that despite the obvious

variations, and contradictory philosophies that engaged with each other, and which

continued to be in evidence, nevertheless, the combined requirement of administrative

efficiency by the British, and the need for a united voice for political reasons by the

natives, resulted in the so-called syndication of 'Hinduism':

> Inevitably the Brahmanical base of what was seen as the new or neo-Hinduism
> was unavoidable. But merged into it were also various practices of upper caste
> worship and of course the subconscious model of Christianity and Islam. Its close
> links with certain nationalist opinion gave to many of these neo-Hindu
> movements a political edge which remains recognizable even today. It is this

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[39] Said presents this idea in the "Introduction" but then goes on to develop this theory
throughout this volume.

development which was the parent to what I should like to call Syndicated Hinduism and which is being projected by some vocal and politically powerful segments of what is referred to as the Hindu community, as the sole claimant to the inheritance of indigenous Indian religion (Thapar, 2005, p.74).

Thapar advocates against this united front because she sees it as a vehicle to silence those natives whose traditions do not fit comfortably with the ideas championed by the advocates of 'Syndicated Hinduism':

Syndicated Hinduism claims to be re-establishing the Hinduism of pre-modern times: in fact it is only establishing itself and in the process distorting the historical and cultural dimensions of the indigenous religions and divesting them of the nuances and variety which were major sources of their enrichment (2005, p.79).

It is evident that Thapar is concerned about the fact that the strategies that were used by the nationalists, during India's struggle for independence, are still being utilized despite being both outdated, and inappropriate. Accordingly, she speaks out against the growing power of 'Syndicated Hinduism' which she thinks is particularly problematic since its continued success can silence the diverse Hindu traditions that were prevalent before colonization.

Perhaps the major asset of what we call Hinduism of the premodern period was that it was not a uniform, monolithic religion, but a flexible juxtaposition of religious sects. This flexibility was its strength and its distinguishing feature, allowing the inclusion even of groups questioning the Vedas, disavowing caste and the injunctions of the Dharmasastras. The weakening or disappearance of such dissenting groups within the framework even of religious expression would be a considerable loss (Thapar, 2005, p.75).

This stance of Thapar's has invited a fair amount of criticism from contemporary Hindu nationalists, who are threatened by her championing the cause of the subaltern voices that that have emerged over the last few decades. This subaltern scholarship, spearheaded by Ranajit Guha, in conjunction with other Indian and Western scholars, is intent on shining a light on the history of the non-elites whose voice, they argue, has been subdued and ignored in favour of the roles and opinions of the elite, both Western

and Indian. The subaltern scholars, and Thapar, are concerned about the silencing of the unheard, and therefore undervalued, indigenous voices. Thapar's argument against 'Syndicated Hinduism' resonates with Guha's contention whereby he asserts that subaltern scholarship sheds light on "*the failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation*" (Guha, 1994(a), p.5, emphasis in original); an issue that Nandy also highlights in the first chapter. What is ironic is that Thapar herself has been accused of belonging to the Indian elite by contemporary nationalists, a point we will return to in the final chapter. For now, it must suffice for us to accept that whereas Thapar makes some valuable arguments, against the continued reliance on a 'syndicated' form of 'Hinduism', she, like other scholars we have examined in this chapter, does not offer any concrete solutions on what label, or labels would best describe the traditions of India.

Conclusion

What should be evident by now is that the idea, that multiple traditions are all expected to somehow find a way to adopt this label 'Hinduism', as their own, is a challenging proposition. Indeed, one could even ask why holding on to such a title has become so important to scholars such as myself. After all, the fact that Hindus who celebrate the polytheistic aspects of 'Hinduism' during festivals like Ganesha Chaturti and Durga Puja can coexist, and participate, in the same landscape as Vedantins who embody monotheistic ideals brings us back to the identical questions with which we started. Thus, not only are we still asking if Hindu traditions can be grouped together, but we may also be wondering why such a collective identity is so crucial, not only to a great number of Hindus but also to many scholars. The answer (in true Hindu fashion?) is multifaceted. The first, and perhaps the most pragmatic response, is that this label

allows Hindus to have "a place at the multicultural table" (Kurien, 2007).[40] Hindu

scholars are naturally concerned that if 'Hinduism' is no longer considered a valid

category, then that will result in the splitting up of this entity, into multiple identities,

which could result in Hindus having to relinquish their seat at the 'multicultural table',

at which the so-called 'religions of the world' sit. Furthermore, it is also important to

remember that, without this 'conventional' label, it would be difficult for modern

Hindus to represent their traditions outside India. In fact, what is of utmost importance

is that Hindus, when pushed, whether in India or in the diaspora, will acknowledge and

in fact lay claim to, this collective status. Now, we may argue that this shared identity

was first emphasized by the colonizers and was not an essential part of their make-up

before this period. However, even if one were to agree with this stance, the reality is

that Hindus have adopted this kinship as part of their identity today. So much so, that

Hindus generally acknowledge the occasional need for this collective identity and access

it when they are required to describe themselves to non-Indians. This does not mean

that it is a central aspect of their traditional make-up, but simply, one of the

characteristics of their multi-faceted world-view. For scholars to demand that they

discard this idea would be as presumptuous as it was for colonizers to try and fit Hindu

ideas into Western categories. This concept of connectivity is still useful, especially as a

conventional label and particularly in conversation with non-Indians, for it to be

discarded arbitrarily by scholars, albeit Hindu ones such as myself.

On the other hand, it also cannot be denied, that many scholars would argue that

this is a simple case of hegemony which needs to be rectified. So much so that certain

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[40] This is the title of Prema Kurien's book which explores how Hindus in the diaspora
have adapted to the American religious environment.

academics, such as, Timothy Fitzgerald[41] and S.N. Balagangadhara[42], have called for the dissolution of the very category 'religion'. Similarly, Tomoko Masuzawa has outlined, in detail, how the category 'world religions' is primarily a Western construct created to enforce and give expression to a Western 'religious' agenda:

> what I hope to bring to the foreground is a certain logic or certain ideological persuasions that are covered over by and at the same time still operative in our present-day discourse, that is, in the now familiar, routinized strategy for mapping the world religiously. It will be suggested, in effect, that the new discourse of pluralism and diversity of religions, when it finally broke out into the open and became an established practice in the first half of the twentieth century, neither displaced nor disabled the logic of European hegemony – formerly couched in the language of universality of Christianity – but, in a way, gave it a new lease (Masuzawa, 2005, p.xiv).

In the last chapter, we have already seen how this category 'religion' is difficult to divorce from its Western influences despite the alternate options that are regularly proposed. The truth is that even though suggestions such as "cosmological formations" made by Daniel Dubuisson hold many charms, the probability and logistics of such a change occurring, in the near future, is not very promising. Thus, whereas we may chafe at the use of this label and category and may even opt, like myself, to use a modification of it, the fact is that a real alternative has yet to be identified.

Indeed, despite the reservations raised by Bankimchandra in the previous chapter, I also believed that for the purposes of this project I would eventually discard the title 'religion' and instead, adopt the Hindu term '*dharma'*. In fact, I was enthusiastic when I discovered the myriad of ways in which this Sanskrit word has been used to

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[41] In *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000) Timothy Fitzgerald explores the value of the category 'religion' and its continued use in the academy. According to him this is oftentimes an invalid category created by Westerners, for Westerners, and as such should be incorporated into other, and according to him, less problematic, categories such as sociology, history and anthropology.
[42] See previous chapter for a short survey on Balagangadhara's issues with the continued use of the label 'religion' and his reasons for discarding what he perceives to be a 'Christian' category.

denote Hindu traditions.[43] I was convinced that it would be the perfect tool to describe

the various Hindu sects that are included under the banner 'Hinduism'. However, I also

discovered that not unlike the term 'religion' which has strong ties with Christian

ideology, the term *dharma* can be equally associated with Vedic and Brahmanical ideals

of maintaining order in society. Thus, it is worth noting that in a recent exchange on the

RISA-Listserv[44] the President of The South Asia Research and Information Institute, Dr

Sudalaimuthu Palianappan contends:

> What you say about 'Hindu dharma' meaning 'Hinduism' does not apply to Tamil
> usage… In fact, to me, if a person uses 'Hindu dharmam' and 'Sanātana dharmam'
> in Tamil, it is a very likely indication of the person adhering to either orthodox
> brahminism (as in the writings of late Kanchi Śankarācārya) or Hindu
> nationalism.[45]

Comments like these naturally made me cautious since the last thing I would like to

encourage is a reestablishment of the dominance of Vedic ideas over non-Vedic ones.

Unfortunately, to prove, or disprove, that *dharma* would be an appropriate replacement

for the category 'religion', an extensive amount of research would be required, which, is

beyond the scope of this project. Thus, I return to my previous stance whereby I will use

the word 'tradition' in the hope that I will be able to avoid at least some of the pitfalls

that have been highlighted by scholars regarding the term 'religion'.

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[43] A good place to begin this investigation is with Halbfass (1988). In the chapter
"Dharma in the Self-Understanding of Traditional Hinduism" Halbfass covers, in some
detail, the many ways this term *dharma* has been used and applied by Indian texts,
philosophers and religious leaders.

[44] RISA (Religion in South Asia) is a section of the American Association of Religion
(AAR). Members, who are usually scholars involved in South Asian study programs,
have access to an official email list which allows them to communicate with their peers
by asking questions and presenting dilemmas. RISA-Listserv is that official email list.

[45] Sudalaimuthu Palianappan, RISA Academic discussion list. "… but what is wrong with
"Hindu theology"? October 14th 2011. In a personal email exchange with Dr.
Palianappan he suggested "that the connotation of orthodoxy in the use of 'dharma'" is
explicated in the work *Hindu Dharma: The Universal Way of Life*, Chandrasekharendra
Saraswati, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Mumbai, 2008.

As far as the label 'Hinduism' is concerned, one significant factor to keep in mind is that this title has provided Hindus, especially in recent times, with a voice that they may not have had if these traditions were split up (into Vedantic, Shaivite, Vaisnavite, etc.) and the title 'Hinduism' was dissolved. No doubt, there are times when these divisions are helpful and necessary, just as titles such as Protestant, Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist etc. are important ways in which to describe the complexities of Christianity. However, the label 'Christianity' also serves a purpose, a purpose that may be vastly different from the one that 'Hinduism' serves, but which is important nevertheless. Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook highlight this occasional need for overarching labels when they cite the feminist Denise Riley who argues:

> If feminism abandons the category of women and the proposition that they have a different history, it dissolves its own subject. Although feminists contend strongly amongst themselves as to whether the concept of woman constitutes a universal category, they must for some purposes and at some levels continue to act as if such a category indeed exists, precisely for the reason that the world continues to behave and treat women as though one does (O' Hanlon & Washbrook, 1992, p.154).

Similarly, there are certain circumstances when the title 'Hinduism' has served as a conventional tool that has been necessary, especially when discussing diverse traditions in a global setting. This does not mean, just as the Buddhist teaching implies, that this label is an 'ultimate' or final category, but rather, that there are certain circumstances where its use has some benefits. Some scholars have argued that this label did not exist before the colonial period (King, 1999, p.107). Whereas this may be true, the suggestion that, as a result, it should not be used retroactively to signify a collective Hindu identity, is much harder to accept. Rather, it may be more accurate to recognize 'Hinduism' as a web of ideas that was developing on the Indian subcontinent. For example, King explores the notions of polycentric, centrifugal and centripetal theories which then leads him to suggest that Indian traditions may be an interesting source for further

investigation, and the eventual disentanglement from a "universalized 'discourse of religion'" (2010, p.110).

Ancient Indian traditional ideas (Shaivite, Tantric, Vedic, Sramanic, etc.), coexisted in varying degrees of harmony and dissent without having a strong urge to form an overarching bond. This does not suggest that there was no sense of kinship, or shared identity, amongst certain groups (geographical, linguistic, scriptural, etc.) during that era, but rather, that there was no imminent need to name these identities. However, with the Muslim invasion beginning in the 9th century CE, the indigenous residents of this subcontinent were suddenly forced to engage with a fully formed traditional entity that had very clear boundaries of belonging. Perhaps it is because these natives were compelled to examine their belief systems and worldviews, in the face of this external challenge, that they realized that even though they might not be identical to their neighbours, they nevertheless, had more in common with other native traditions than with the philosophic and ritual ideals of their conquerors. Let me quickly state here, before I continue to examine the ways in which these indigenous bonds developed, that my purpose for pursuing this historical timeline is not to lay any blame on the Indian Muslim community. Rather I am simply identifying a historical event that served as a catalyst in the development of the Hindu identity. Furthermore, I am also aware that Hindu and Muslim ideas oftentimes merged to form a special kind of bond which, is evidenced in the teachings of the many Sufi saints who continue to be extremely important in the Indian landscape. And finally, by highlighting the invasion of the Muslims 1000 years ago, I am not challenging the rights, influence or credentials of the Muslim communities who share in the rich heritage of India today.

That being said, once the Muslims arrived there emerged a need for identification, and naming, that had not been evidenced prior to their arrival. Indeed, as

we have already seen, this is one of the points that Lorenzen successfully conveys

through his research. However, it is also important to recognize that this need for

identity was vastly different from any that occurred in other parts of the world. The

major differences have been pointed out by scholars and historians over the past few

centuries. Accordingly they argue; here is a tradition, many of whose practitioners claim

a shared identity, but yet there is no common founder, no common texts, no common

rituals and practices, no common God/gods, no common prayers and no common

histories. Indeed, when examined with this rubric, there is little reason to see

'Hinduism' as a common identity for the Hindus. As such, this was not a tradition like

any other; indeed, the fact that it did not fit the Western rubric of 'religion' is what

caused so much trouble in the first place! However, on the other hand, Hindus do have a

shared identity, which can, and for practical reasons must, be named. This is easier said

than done, which is evidenced in the many attempts made by scholars and practitioners

to appropriately describe this phenomenon. One of the most interesting analogies

comes from Julius J. Lipner:

> Consider the magnificent banyan tree (Ficus bengalhensis) of the Calcutta
> Botanical Gardens. As a banyan, it has the characteristic of sending down aerial
> shoots many of which have grown thick and strong to resemble individual tree
> trunks. As an ancient and proliferating banyan, it resembles an interconnected
> collection of trees and branches without any obvious botanic centre. Put
> simplistically, the conception of Hinduism I wish to propose is something like
> this: it is macrocosmically one though microcosmically many, a polycentric
> phenomenon imbued with the same life-sap, the boundaries and (micro)centres
> seeming to merge and overlap in a complexus of oscillating tensions. Further,
> unlike the botanic model, the Hindu banyan does not appear uniform to view.
> Rather, it is a network of variety, one complex shading into another and so
> forming a multifaceted unity (Lipner, 1996, p.109).

Whereas Lipner's analogy is helpful in understanding 'Hinduism', his suggestion that

'Hinduism' is "macrocosmically one" is problematic since this takes away some of the

fluidity that these traditions seem to champion. Furthermore, the fact that Lipner feels

the need to identify 'Hinduism' even at a 'macro' level in the singular raises red flags

that we have already encountered with Lorenzen's work when he suggests that Hindus

all belong to a "single religious community" (2005, p.54). One may ask at this point; is

this not, in fact, what I am arguing for myself? The truth is that whereas I am defending

the idea that a Hindu identity began emerging from the 9th century CE this does not

automatically imply that I believe that it was singular. Rather I would propose that this

collective web of ideas was anything but singular.

Keeping this distinction in mind, the closest example I have encountered to

describe 'Hinduism' in its multivalent reality, has been from Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-

Luzzi when she cites the ideas of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein:

> The rectification of our thinking about concepts had to await Wittgenstein's
> discovery that concepts need not have common attributes and clear-cut
> boundaries but may be held together by "a complicated network of similarities
> overlapping and criss-crossing" (Wittgenstein 1976: para 66), in other words
> that a "family resemblance" may exist among their members. Concepts formed in
> such a way now called polythetic cannot be defined but only exemplified (2005,
> pp. 294-295).

According to Ferro-Luzzi this is especially important for a tradition like 'Hinduism':

> The clear definition of one's subject matter has long been taught to be an
> indispensible condition of any scientific investigation. Students of Hinduism with
> its bewildering variety have found this requirement quite problematic (2005,
> p.294).

Consequently, she states:

> I wish to show that it is not necessary to abandon the term Hinduism or deny it
> the status of a religion. What should be abandoned instead is the conviction that
> all concepts can be defined because they must possess common attributes and
> clear-cut boundaries (Ferro-Luzzi, 2005, p.294).

She then goes on to quote the Indian scholar M.N. Srinivas, who in the 1960

Encyclopaedia Britannica argued, "[w]hile it is not possible to define a Hindu, it is not

very difficult to identify a person as a Hindu" (as cited in Ferro-Luzzi, 2005, p.295). This,

Ferro-Luzzi notes, only serves to accentuate her argument that "while a "family

resemblance" cannot be defined by any constant attribute, it is often possible to identify

a person as belonging to a certain family" (2005, p.295). What is interesting about this

idea of Ferro-Luzzi's is that it is remarkably similar to the argument that J.Z Smith made,

in the previous chapter, when he argues for a system of classification which would do

away with an 'essentialist' definition of religion. Ferro-Luzzi seems to be on the same

trajectory and perhaps it is not a coincidence that she is applying this theory of a 'family

resemblance' to 'Hinduism', a tradition that has continuously defied definition and

closed classifications. This polythetic approach of Ferro-Luzzi's which acknowledges

"sporadic overlapping similarities" (2005, p.298) is particularly effective because, as she

argues, it acknowledges that Hindus such as "Tukaram, the seventeenth century

Maratha saint poet" and "the Tamil saint poet and *yogin* Tayummanavar" each accepted

at least some aspects of 'Hinduism' despite being contemporaries who, at face value,

seemed to be on two ends of a spectrum (2005, p.299). Similarly, how else can we

explain the fact that Tantric ascetics who live on burial grounds, Radhasoamis who

reject rituals and idol worship, Vaishnavas who celebrate Gokulashtami with pomp and

splendour (to mention just a few) all lay claim to the title 'Hindu'?

Another aspect of Ferro-Luzzi's argument that is interesting, and relevant to this

current discussion, is that she does not ignore the indigenous traditions that are native

to India, but whose practitioners do not claim to be Hindus. In fact, she contends:

> it has precisely been my purpose to demonstrate that all boundaries of polythetic
> concepts are fuzzy. Buddhism and Jainism are separate religions because of their
> members' wish to be separate and not because of any intrinsic criteria justifying
> their separate status. For instance, the rejection of the authority of the Vedas and
> of Brahman priesthood, the major ground on which Buddhists and Jains base
> their separateness, also characterize certain sections of Hinduism. This is not to
> say, of course, that Buddhism and Jainism have no features distinguishing them
> from Hinduism… But a community's possession of such distinctive features is no
> sufficient criterion for being classified as a separate religion. Also Hindu
> communities have distinctive characteristics, as we have seen, and yet they do
> not leave the Hindu fold (Ferro-Luzzi, 2005, p.300).

Thus, Ferro-Luzzi concludes, "Hinduism should be considered a polythetic concept made up of a criss-cross of overlapping strands rather than a bounded unit possessing essential features" (2005, p.300). This is the most significant aspect of Ferro-Luzzi's argument i.e., the idea of a 'family resemblance' and a polythetic approach to 'Hindu traditions'; not to mention, her unique way of including, yet excusing, Buddhist and Jain ideas from the Hindu fold. This, once again, brings us back to the idea that these categories are not airtight but porous. Indeed, the theory that there is no 'essential' quality by which one can define 'Hinduism' is a challenge to the very structure upon which religious studies has been built where science and reason have oftentimes been given the highest place of honour. However, Ferro-Luzzi argues:

> To abandon the idea that patently different things called by the same name must have some kind of unity and to accept vagueness and disorder for what they are is not the end of the scientific endeavour but a new start (2005, p.303).

This is an interesting and unique way to re-examine not only 'Hinduism' but other traditions as well. Perhaps it is worth noting that more than any other tradition, it is 'Hinduism' which has challenged the boundaries of the category 'religion', a point that is acknowledged by several scholars. In fact, one could also argue that 'Hinduism' is one of the main reasons why the category 'religion' has received so much scrutiny. So once again we need to ask if discarding the category 'Hinduism' is prudent, or if instead, it would be more constructive to reconfigure this idea 'religion'. Surely it is time to adopt a wider definition of this category so that it can include traditions which do not conform, and should instead, be identified as polythetic, polycentric, centrifugal, etc., to name just a few suggestions made by the scholars presented here. Fortunately, scholars are increasingly recognizing the latent deficiencies with the Christo-centric tools that are still used to analyse 'other' traditions. Indeed, this recent scholarship encourages academics to use different lenses in order to appreciate complex histories.

As far as the actual title 'Hinduism' is concerned it may also be time to admit that this particular label has been tainted by years of colonial rule and hegemony. Indeed, the title 'Hinduism' was a colonial title that was constructed in the mould of Western models that it was expected to mimic. This label, and the ideas it often described during the colonial period, were largely influenced by Vedic ideals and did not mirror the lives of many Hindu practitioners. One of the reasons why this label has become problematic today is because modern scholars are aware that Hindu ideas and practices were not adequately understood by those in power during colonial times. What was included under the label 'Hinduism' was limited because only the concepts which corresponded to Western 'religious' ideas were allowed, or encouraged, to be incorporated. Thus, even I, a Hindu academic living in the diaspora, have to admit that the term 'Hinduism' is becoming progressively harder to use because it suggests a closed, and rigid, identity that does not fit the need of modern scholarship and of the diversity inherent in the Hindu population. Therefore, in a move similar to the one I made with the term 'religion', I propose to use the label 'Hindu traditions'[46] because whereas this allows me to separate myself from the 'isms' that have gained such notoriety in recent times, it also permits me to acknowledge the 'family resemblance' thereby retaining some level of connectivity with Hindu ideas, ancient, medieval and modern. I am hoping that this will

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[46] I prefer to use the label 'Hindu traditions' instead of the term 'Indic civilization' (as King has suggested) because the other traditions that lay claim to the label 'Indic' actively maintain a separate identity from the term 'Hindu'. Therefore, as Ferro-Luzzi points out, whereas many Hindus might include all 'other' traditions within their fold this does not mean that the 'other' traditions are not averse to this kind of syncretism. Indian Muslims, Parsis, Indian Christians, Indian Buddhists and Sikhs, when faced with having to explain their traditions to non-Indians, would not classify themselves as Hindus. It is out of respect for their need for separation that I would prefer using the term 'Hindu traditions' instead of 'Indic civilization', especially when referring to the period after the British invasion, with which my work is primarily concerned.

permit me to encompass, within its plurality, the many Hindus who claim these traditions, but reject any vestiges of conformity.

And finally, as we conclude these two chapters, which have focused primarily on how contemporary scholars engage with these concepts, we should have a reasonably comprehensive foundation from which to analyse Vivekananda's contributions to this debate. He was one of the earlier native voices to have influenced the way these terms were constructed, or rejected, on the Indian subcontinent. As such, a detailed study of where this discussion stands today, and why these concepts are framed in a certain way was essential. Vivekananda did not simply embrace these terms and use them unwittingly. He was acutely aware of how 'continental collision' had effected language and consciously made decisions about the terms and ideas he adopted from his colonizers. Not only was he careful in his selection of certain terminology, he also aggressively pushed back when he felt these labels did not reflect Hindu ideas adequately. Indeed, many of the points Vivekananda raises, and which we will examine in the ensuing chapters, are reflected in the arguments made by these contemporary academics. For example, Hacker's emphasis on 'inclusivism' and his interest in distinguishing Traditional Hindus from the natives he classified as Neo-Hindus. Halbfass' stress on the role of the Vedas. Lorenzen's efforts to emphasize the historical ramifications on the cultivation of this term. King's argument that India's polythetic approach serves to highlight the unique nature of Hindu traditions. And, Thapar's attempt to give a voice to the masses of India. All these ideas, which are presented here as modern debates, are topics that Vivekananda engaged with. Consequently, examining the questions raised by contemporary academics allows us to be better equipped to appreciate the relevance of Vivekananda's arguments. This, in turn, will help us to identify how his interpretations continue to impact modern scholarship. Hopefully, this

will lead to an overt acknowledgement of how extensive this sharing of ideas has been

over the past few centuries.

<u>**Swami Vivekananda: Made in India**</u>

<u>**A very brief biography**</u>

Swami Vivekananda was born Narendranath Datta on January 12th 1863 to
Bhuvaneshwari and Vishwanath Datta. He was their first son and was welcomed with
much love and gratitude. His father, a successful lawyer, belonged to the Bengali elite
and was a worldly, well-read man who was known for his generosity towards his
extended family. He had a vast circle of friends and acquaintances from all walks of life
and religious traditions. In contrast, Vivekananda's paternal grandfather had chosen to
renounce the world after the birth of his son, Vishwanath, and Vivekananda is often
compared to him since he also chose the path of a renunciate. Vivekananda's mother
was a devout Hindu woman who, along with Vivekananda's grandmother, brought up
her children to respect the Hindu pantheon of Gods. Vivekananda was a friendly and
good natured young man who was popular with his friends and family especially since
he was both intelligent and fun-loving. Vishwanath arranged for his children to be
educated by a private tutor during their younger years. As such, until the age of eight,
Vivekananda was home-schooled, along with the children of relatives and neighbours.
When he was eight years old Vivekananda was enrolled in Vidyasagar's Metropolitan
Institute from where he graduated in 1879. Thereafter, he attended The Presidency
College but due to ill-health, which resulted in poor attendance, he was forced to move
to the General Assembly Institute (Scottish Church College); both colleges were in
Calcutta. Vivekananda studied Western logic and philosophy along with ancient and
modern European history. It is at the General Assembly Institute that he first heard
about Ramakrishna from the principal of the Institute, William Hastie. Hastie, while
teaching students about people who apparently slipped into mystic trances, told his

students that there was a mystic in the outskirts of Calcutta, in Dakshineswar, who went into a trance while praying to Kali. Vivekananda, who was sceptical about such claims did not immediately visit Dakshineswar even though his interest was piqued. Instead, he continued to attend meetings of the Brahmo Samaj hoping to find rational answers to his own philosophical questions. Occasionally, he was asked to sing devotional songs at these Brahmo meetings and it was in such a setting that Ramakrishna first met Vivekananda and invited him to visit his temple in Dakshineswar. The impact on both these men, when they first met, has been recorded and interpreted extensively. Vivekananda was initially wary of the ways in which Ramakrishna seemed to be able to mesmerize him. Eventually however, Vivekananda gave in to his natural inclinations towards the life of a *sanyasi* (renunciate) and became part of the inner circle of devotees who served Ramakrishna. This, even though his father, Vishwanath, had died suddenly leaving his family in poverty. It was a time of great angst for Vivekananda as he chose a path that his family had not envisioned for their eldest son.

Before Ramakrishna took *samadhi* in 1886, he told Vivekananda that he was bestowing all his spiritual gifts upon him so that he could continue Ramakrishna's legacy. Vivekananda and ten of his other brother disciples, who were not householders, took monastic vows soon after Ramakrishna's death and began their spiritual life at the Barangpore Math (monastery). Between the years 1886 and 1893 Vivekananda travelled across India. He returned intermittently to Barangpore or Calcutta depending on the state of his health. At times, he travelled alone and at times he was accompanied by one, or more, of his brother monks. The time he spent travelling across India is considered, by most of his biographers, to be his formative years since he reportedly met people from all walks of life who inspired his future plans. For example, one of the places he visited on numerous occasions was Madras, in South India, where he became

quite popular. Similarly, he developed a lasting friendship with the Raja of Ramnad who became one of his staunchest supporters. Eventually, his well-wishers in South India helped collect the funds required for him to travel to Chicago for the Parliament of Religions that he had expressed an interest in attending. He left from the port in Bombay on May 31st, 1893. His trials, travails and successes in the West are well documented and Vivekananda eventually travelled across the United States and Europe gaining loyal followers, and meeting some well-known personalities, on both continents. He helped establish the first Vedanta Society in New York, the first of many such centres that continue to spread their message to Westerners and Indians in the diaspora.

After his first visit to the West, Vivekananda brought back a few of his Western followers to India in the hope that they would help tackle the problems of poverty that were rampant in India. He hoped to accomplish this through the Ramakrishna Mission Association that he helped establish in 1897. This association eventually became simply the Ramakrishna Mission and received legal status in 1909. Vivekananda also helped establish the Belur Math in the outskirts of Calcutta in 1889 which is the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Order of monks. Eventually, the governing body of the Ramakrishna Math was also responsible for the philanthropic and social service projects of the Mission. The Ramakrishna Mission and Math have branches all over India and in some Western cities.

Of the Western followers who remained dedicated to Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble, 1867-1911) is the most well-known, both because of her publications as well as for her involvement in Indian politics. Vivekananda made a second tour of the West but it took a toll on his health and eventually Vivekananda, who had always been delicate of health, passed away at the very young age of 39 on July

4th, 1902. A short poem published in *The Indian Mirror* on July 10th, 1902, sums up the

way Swami Vivekananda was remembered by his many admirers:

A Tribute to Vivekananda

> Lo, India weeps, with the sound of the deathnell tolling:
> A star has faded in the Eastern sky.
> The dreaded foe, the fates of men controlling
> Coldly refuses to pass the hero by,
> Weep India of thy noblest son bereft!
> Ahy [sic] genius claimed him as her very own.
> Upon his brow her glorious mark she left,
> His soul was kindred to the gods alone,
> And India gives him with a bitter groan.
> *****************************
> Honoured by Thee, revered and loved abroad;
> Who, ah, too soon from their midst has gone.
> He tread the path that patriots have trod.
> And loved his country as he loved his God (as cited in Chattopadhyaya, 1999, p.286).

The Early Years

As we saw in the previous chapter one of the most common accusations that has

been hurled at the Indian elite, who emerged during the colonial period, is that they

were simply a product of Western influences. For example, Gerald James Larson states:

> Modern Indians notions of religion derive from a mixture of Christian (and mainly Protestant) models, Orientalist and largely Western reconstructions of India's religious past, and nineteenth century indigenous reform movements most of which were defensive reactions against the onslaught of Westernization and Christian missionizing (1995, p.5).

I intend to demonstrate that this argument does not hold true for Vivekananda thereby

making him an ideal example to combat this theory. Indeed, Vivekananda's impact on

the West, whereby he pushed back against many of the preconceived notions that

Orientalists had popularized, came from a man who was not simply a Western creation,

but rather, home grown (with a little help from some imported fertilizer). Similarly,

Nicholson also contends:

No one can deny the importance of these intellectuals, including Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Mohandas Gandhi, in shaping Indians' self-understanding and the political formation of India as a modern nation-state. Once the theory of the British invention of almost everything in modern India has been *properly debunked*, we can look realistically at the ways that such thinkers creatively appropriated some Indian traditions and rejected others (2014, p.18, emphasis added).

What Nicholson highlights, is that there is still a covert sense amongst academic writers, that voices such as Vivekananda's were heavily influenced by Western ideology. The suggestion, or conviction, that is still apparent in many of the ways in which Vivekananda is represented, as a product of Western thought, needs to be 'properly debunked' if we are to engage with the ideas that were put forth by Indians like him. For example, as we will see presently with Tapan Raychaudhari, even scholars who want to undermine this notion that 'all ideas are Western' eventually return to it, almost as if moths drawn to a flame. Perhaps the problem also lies with the fact that they themselves are influenced by earlier scholars who framed their way of thinking. For example, Agehananda Bharati in "The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns" (1970) argues that scholars like B.G. Tilak (1856-1920) chose to translate the *Bhagavad-Gita* into Marathi because it had already been popularized by Orientalists:

Yet even Tilak chose the *Gita*, not only because it was the text into which political action might be fitted with impunity – there are dozens of other epic texts which prompt their audience toward activism. There is no doubt in my mind that Tilak knew one or all of the several English translations that had been published by this time (1970, p.275).

Arguments such as these, remind us that it is important for us to take note of these biases that are oftentimes ingrained, a 'colonization of minds' if you will, when we analyse the way Vivekananda is represented, even by scholars who are apparently impartial in their interpretations.

Returning to Vivekananda, we learn that like many other Bengalis from affluent Indian families in the nineteenth century, he had a rather broad education that

encompassed the many traditions to which he was exposed, in colonial India. For example, his father taught him to show respect for his Muslim and Christian brethren and their traditions and scriptures. Accordingly, Bhupendranath Datta, Vivekananda's younger brother, writes in *Swami Vivekananda: Patriot-Prophet* (1954) that their father was a well-read man whose library was filled with Sanskrit, English and Persian books in topics ranging from history, religion, Western philosophy and literature:

> Bisvanath [Vishwanath] was the product of old Hindu-Moslem [sic] Civilization and the new English culture spreading in his time. He had European friends. He had tastes for both. In dress, food and etiquette he followed the old joint Hindu-Moslem tradition. Again, in some matters of daily life he followed European custom like other gentry of the period. But he never deviated from orthodox traditions. He gave *dakshinas* to the Brahmans, and honoured the *pirs* as well (Datta, 1954, p.100).

> As for Vivekananda's mother, she exposed him to Hindu rituals and rich stories

from 'Hindu' mythology. So influential were his mother's teachings that in *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal* (2002), Tapan Raychaudhari observes that Vivekananda:

> repeatedly drew upon this storehouse of simple wisdom in his lectures abroad. [and] Nivedeta's *Cradle Tales of Hinduism* based on stories she heard from her master, is generally traced to the same source (1988, p.223).

This dichotomy in Vivekananda's early childhood is mirrored throughout his adult career. On the one hand, he was influenced by traditional philosophies that resonated with him at a very deep level and which he related to in a visceral way. This is reflected in the way he used Hindu parables to make his point throughout his adult career. For example, he explains the concept of *maya* by using the story of Indra, the king of the *devas*, who forgot who he was when he was incarnated as a pig (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.248). On the other hand, since he was exposed to both Western and Islamic concepts during his early years, he continuously looked for ways to make his traditional

ideas relevant to the rest of the world. For example, he used Christian, Jewish and Islamic theories to demonstrate that his belief in monism was superior:

> Mohammed found that Christianity was straying out from the Semitic fold and his teachings were to show that Christianity ought to be a Semitic religion, that it should hold to one God. The Aryan idea that "I and my Father are one" disgusted and terrified him. In reality the conception of the Trinity was a great advance over the dualistic idea of Jehovah, who was for ever separate from man. The theory of incarnation is the first link in the chain of ideas leading to the recognition of the oneness of God and man. God appearing first in one human form, then re-appearing at different times in other human forms, is at last recognised as being in every human form, or in all men. Monistic is the highest stage, monotheistic is a lower stage (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.7, p.100).

We will return to Vivekananda's arguments favouring monism in the following chapter. For now, suffice it to say that he was exposed to the intricacies of these theories in his youth.

On the other hand, whereas it is true that this 'continental collision' began early in Vivekananda's life, it is also evident that one of the strongest influences in his early years was that of his mother, Bhuvaneshwari Devi. Unfortunately, Vivekananda himself does not speak of his early childhood in his vast body of writings and as such we must rely on other sources to get a sense of this time in his life. Nevertheless, by culling through various biographies written about Vivekananda, a common story does emerge. First, we learn of Vivekananda's fondness for wandering monks to whom he gifted anything of value that he could lay his hands on, resulting in his being regularly "locked up when monks came to ask for alms" (Chattopadhyaya, 1999 p.16). This affinity for holy men stayed with him throughout his life. After all, not only did he become a disciple of the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna but he also repeatedly sang the praises of holy men and advised his followers to learn from these teachers:

> open the windows of your hearts to the clear light of truth, and sit like children at the feet of those who know what they are talking about – the sages of India. Let us then listen attentively to what they say (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.44).

What is more relevant for the purposes of this discussion however, is that Vivekananda highlighted the difference between the way holy men were respected in India, in comparison to the West. Thus, he exhibited his early training when he learned how to treat sages and monks as great teachers, or gurus, who must be honoured by society:

> With the teacher, therefore, our relationship is the same as that between an ancestor and his descendant. Without faith, humility, submission, and veneration in our hearts towards our religious teacher, there cannot be any growth of religion in us; and it is a significant fact that, where this kind of relation between teacher and the taught prevails, there alone gigantic spiritual men are growing; while in those countries which have neglected to keep up this kind of relation the religious teacher has become a mere lecturer, the teacher expecting his five dollars and the person taught expecting his brain to be filled with the teacher's words, and each going his own way after this much has been done (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.52).

These kinds of statements, whereby Vivekananda highlights the differences between the Western and Indian valorisation of teachers, indicates that Vivekananda was relying on his Indian heritage for his cues on how to behave, rather than on the Western education that he received both in his childhood and in his adult years.

Another aspect of Vivekananda's childhood that is important is that he was exposed to female deities when he was very young. Vivekananda learned to pray to the Hindu goddesses at an early age as his evening classes would end with prayers to Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning. This early exposure to the maternal deities was to influence Vivekananda throughout his life and would go on to inform the way he viewed the feminine principle, a subject which we will examine in some detail in the final chapter. He was further influenced on this topic by his guru, Ramakrishna, whose attachment to the Hindu goddess Kali is legendary. So enamoured did Vivekananda himself become with the maternal aspect of the divine that *The Complete Works*, are peppered with reverential references to the Mother, and also record a number of

devotional poems dedicated to the Goddess, specifically in her maternal form.[47]

Furthermore, not only did Vivekananda learn about Hindu goddesses in his childhood,

he was also taught stories from the Hindu epics on a regular basis:

> Hymns in praise of river Ganges and Karna of *Mahabharata* were memorized…
> as well as passages of great length from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*
> (Chattopadhyaya, 1999, p.17).

Bhuvaneshwari Devi was an educated woman who taught her children many tales from

these Hindu texts. So relevant were these teachings to Vivekananda, and so aware was

he of their merit, that towards the end of his life he advocated for the translation of

these texts into a form that would make them amenable for younger students:

> We must compose some books in Bengali as also in English with short stories
> from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Upanishads, etc., in very easy and
> simple language, and these are to be given to our little boys to read
> (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, p.371).

Indeed, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* were an extremely important source of

reference for Vivekananda, throughout his adult life, which is evidenced by the fact that

he not only gives lectures on *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata,* but he also used

stories from these epics to elaborate his own philosophy and teachings (Vivekananda,

2009, vol.4, pp.63-101).[48] Stories that he not only heard from his mother but as well as

from his great-grandmother who also played a role in Vivekananda's early religious

education:

> She [Vivekananda's great-grandmother] was a Vaishnava devotee and most of
> her stories were from the *Bhagavatam* or other *Puranas*. She used to wake up the
> children at dawn and chanted the names of Krishna. Mahendranath comments
> that Swami Vivekananda acquired his story-telling ability in childhood thus and

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[47] For an example of Vivekananda's poems dedicated to the divine mother see, "Kali The Mother" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.4, p.384), "Who knows how Mother plays" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, p.439) and "My Play is done" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.175)

[48] For example, Vivekananda (2009) Vol.4, p.102, p.162, p.439; Vol.5, p.232; Vol.7, p.297, p.345.

many of his lectures in the West were learnt from his great-grandmother (Chattopadhyaya, 1999, p.19).

What is particularly interesting about Vivekananda's childhood however, is that whereas he was taught Hindu traditional values at an early age, as we have already seen, he was also exposed to Muslim and Christian ideas because of his father. In fact, Datta highlights the role their father played in making them into the men they became:

> The writer [Datta] is grateful to his father for bringing the younger generation out of the octopus of priestly superstitions and pointing out a new ideal of life. Bisvanath was a liberal Indian with a synthetic mind. That is the reason why his offsprings became "radicals" in ways of thinking. Swami Vivekananda was the product of his social environment (Datta, 1954, pp.101-102).

As such, one cannot accuse Vivekananda of choosing Hindu ideals due to a lack of awareness of other traditions but rather, acknowledge that his affinity for the stories and songs that he learned when he was a child informed his sensibilities, even when he was an adult. Raychaudhari remarks:

> The cultural ambiance in Biswanath's family was a mixture of Indo-Muslim and the new Indo-Anglian mores. But in no way was it alienated from the traditional practices and beliefs of Puranic Hinduism and the simple piety that went with it (1988, p.223).

So much so, that although Vivekananda went on to become a strong supporter of Vedantic ideals he nevertheless acknowledged the role that *bhakti* played in the development and survival of Hindu traditional ideas:

> He [who] wants to love God, he relies upon and uses all sorts of rituals, flowers, incense, beautiful buildings, forms and all such things. Do you mean to say they are wrong? One fact I must tell you. It is good for you to remember, in this country especially, that the world's great spiritual giants have all been produced only by those religious sects which have been in possession of very rich mythology and ritual (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.2, p.392).

Unfortunately however, some scholars prefer stressing the Western influences that Vivekananda was exposed to as he grew up. For example, despite being aware of the traditional experiences that influenced Vivekananda, nonetheless, Raychaudhari feels

compelled to conclude, "The young Narendranath, before his encounter with

Ramakrishna, was very much a typical product of western education" (1988, p.224).

This simplistic conclusion that Raychaudhari arrives at is hard to reconcile with the

words of Vivekananda, who, instead declared on his return to India in 1897, after the

Parliament in Chicago:

> if there is one word in the English language to express the effect which the
> literature of India produces upon mankind, it is this one word, "fascination". It is
> the opposite of anything that takes you suddenly; it throws on you, as it were, a
> charm imperceptibly. To many, Indian thought, Indian manners, Indian customs,
> Indian philosophy, Indian literature are repulsive at the first sight; but let them
> persevere, let them read, let them become familiar with the great principles
> underlying these ideas and it is ninety-nine to one that the charm will come over
> them, and fascination will be the result (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.110).

These ideas of Vivekananda's can hardly be because of the training that he received

from Ramakrishna as Raychaudhari suggests. Instead, they seem to indicate a

confidence in traditional Indian ideas, a confidence that was developed at an early stage

in his childhood home. So much so, that according to Vivekananda, the rest of the world

would also eventually be enthralled by Hindu traditions and cultures, especially since

they all owed their own heritage to the Indian subcontinent!

> All the different religions which grew among different nations under varying
> circumstances and conditions had their origin in Asia, and the Asiatics
> understand them well. When they came out from the motherland, they got mixed
> up with errors (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.321).

As we will see in the following chapter, this propensity of Vivekananda's, to combine all

'other' traditions under a single banner, a banner that he believed was 'made in India' is

something he learned to do at an early age thanks to the education he received under

his parents' tutelage. So much so, that eventually it became a trademark of the

'Hinduism' that Vivekananda propagated in his later years; a 'Hinduism' that Hacker

later goes on to associate with 'inclusivism'.

The Brahmo Samaj

The Brahmo Samaj (initially named Brahmo Sabha) was founded by the Indian

reformer Rammohan Roy in 1829. Thereafter, it was headed up by Debendranath

Tagore and was one of the most influential reform movements with a strong 'religious'

component in colonial India. It could be argued that since the Brahmo Samaj, and all its

off-shoots, were created by Western influenced Bengali elite men, it should be classified

as part of the impact that the West made on Vivekananda since he was quite involved

with this group in his youth. However, this would be a simplistic solution since the West

may have impacted these men but it must also be acknowledged that their responses to

these Western ideas was uniquely Indian. In *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the*

Modern Indian Mind (1979), David Kopf draws attention to the fact that Rammohan was

influenced by Unitarianism[49] which in turn affected the vision and ideals that he had for

the Brahmo Samaj. However, Kopf also acknowledges:

> the problems faced by a Rammohun Roy were always magnified by the
> perspective of cross-cultural contact… Rammohun was continually challenged by
> the question Europeans in India invariably raised: do you improve the lot of
> Hindus from within the system or must you undermine it by assimilation to a
> foreign system? (1979, p.11)

Kopf argues that Rammohan, due to India's colonization, was constantly aware of

having to find a way to reconcile alternative viewpoints. One could surmise that

Rammohan felt the need to find a way to manoeuvre through this 'continental collision':

> Equally interesting was Rammohun's use of the comparative religious approach,
> which constituted another marked difference between himself and his Western
> Unitarian counterparts … Rammohun was challenged by the need to reconcile at
> least two major faiths. In the process Rammohun was compelled to think

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[49] According to Kopf, Unitarianism "represented a new and radical approach to religion, society and ethics. It was a pioneering faith that emerged out of the changing conditions of the nineteenth-century world. It challenged many of the religious presuppositions of the traditional societies of Eurasian civilizations. Though Unitarianism was never a mass movement, the implications of its protest had far-reaching effects among the modernizing intelligentsia in India" (1979, p.3).

comparatively, with the result that his vision sharpened in a refreshingly expansive manner, leaving a narrow sectarian view of the universe behind forever (Kopf, 1979, p.13).

Accordingly, Kopf advocates scholars to be sensitive to the differences in the circumstances that guided reform movements in the West, versus movements like the Brahmo Samaj in India, which were dominated by their need to reconcile colonial attitudes with traditional values:

> It is in this context that we ought to assess the social aspect of the Hindu reformation. There is little doubt that Rammohun was as much inspired by the social gospel of Unitarianism as he was by its rational religion. But it is well to be reminded of the differences between historical circumstances in Bengal and in the West. We have already noted that Unitarians in England were among the first to point an accusing finger at nominal Christians for ignoring the plight of the proletariat in the new urban industrial centers. But in India in the early nineteenth century, there was no fundamental change in technology, no Industrial Revolution, no industrial urban centers, and no industrial proletariat. Moreover, foreign rule in India placed social reform in the context of cultural encounter. The question of social reform, therefore, was less the need to cope with the consequences of a changing social, economic, and political order as it was a question of British attitudes to Indian culture and Indian responses to those attitudes (1979, p.14).

Consequently, the Brahmo Samaj had a rocky history and underwent a number of schisms before we finally witness Vivekananda engaging with their members. When Vivekananda was a young man he joined the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj which was a group that separated itself from Keshubchandra Sen's (a disciple of Debendranath Tagore) Brahmo Samaj of India in 1878.[50] According to Chattopadhyaya:

> 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 Samaj in his college days. But there was a singular lack of involvement in such ideas (1999, p.32).

Chattopadhyaya contends that Vivekananda was not particularly interested in expounding Brahmo ideas but rather that his association with the Samaj was largely

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[50] For a detailed history of the Brahmo Samaj refer to Kopf (1979).

limited to him singing devotional songs. So much so, that many scholars have even

argued that this opportunity to display his musical talent was the only reason for his

interest in the Brahmo Samaj (Chattopadhyaya, 1999, p.32). However, a far more

moderate view is that Vivekananda's relationship with the Samaj was complicated. For

example, as Sil points out:

> Brahmananda Keshabchandra Sen suggested that India should learn practical
> knowledge from Europe and in exchange should teach the world religious
> wisdom. Keshab wrote in his "Religion of Love" (1860) that the religion of the
> Brahmo Samaj "is not the religion of any particular community, epoch or
> country: it is *universal religion*; it is a Human Catholic Religion." It is Sen's
> concept of universal religion that the Swami imbibed in his early youth as a
> regular visitor to the Brahmo Samaj and now appropriated and preached in
> Chicago (1997, pp.155-156, emphasis in original).

It is telling that some of these ideas are reflected in a lecture that Vivekananda gave

upon his return to India after the Parliament in Chicago in 1897, on his way from

Colombo (presently Sri Lanka) to Almora:

> Ours, as I have said, is the universal religion. It is inclusive enough, it is broad
> enough to include all the ideals. All the ideals of religions that already exist in the
> world can be immediately included, and we can patiently wait for all the ideals
> that are to come in the future to be taken in the same fashion, embraced in the
> infinite arms of the religion of the Vedanta (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, pp.251-
> 252).

Statements such as these, which seem to echo the words of Keshabchandra Sen, make it

easy to construe that this interaction with the Brahmos, at a youthful age, may have

impacted Vivekananda's discursive methods. Bhupendranath also speaks of his

brother's involvement with the Brahmo Samaj and suggests that the Brahmos had a

larger impact on Vivekananda than many may acknowledge:

> Narendranath in his young days, joined the Brahmo Samaj. That was nothing
> unusual in those days amongst the youthful intelligentsia. He came in contact
> with Keshubchandra Sen and Pandit Shivnath Sastri. He became a member of the
> Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. Perhaps the mysticism of Keshubchandra seemed too
> much [sic] irrational to him. He used to sing in the choir of the church… The late
> Haromohan Mitra used to repeatedly say to the writer, that Swamiji used to say:
> "But for Ramakrishna I would have been a Brahmo missionary." He was an

enthusiastic Brahmo during that time. But that trait never left him. Inspite of Ramakrishna and medieval Vedanta, from a social reformer he turned a social-revolutionary. This the reformers have failed to notice (Datta, 1954, pp.154-155).

Similarly, Kopf also asserts:

Though future events built on Vivekananda's alleged discipleship under Ramakrishna have obscured the actual influences in his early development, contemporary evidence points clearly to the formative importance of Keshub and Brahmoism. K.K. Mitra, who also knew Vivekananda in the early 1880s, has stated that the latter engaged in Brahmo activities, attended Brahmo meetings, lived among Brahmo students, and loved to sing Brahmo songs (1979, p.205).

Furthermore, Sil draws attention to the fact:

Narendranath's intellectual interests had been greatly influenced by the enlightened social and spiritual gospels of the Brahmo Samaj. As early as 1819, the founder of the Brahmo movement, Raja (king or prince – title for a native chief) Rammohan Roy, had translated *Kathopanishad* into English – a work that he claimed was "intended to assist the European community in forming their opinion respecting Hindu theology." He had emphatically declared that "by a reference to history it may be proved that the world was indebted to our ancestry for the first dawns of knowledge which sprang in the East" (1997, p.50).

What is especially noteworthy is that Vivekananda himself acknowledged his respect

for Rammohan's social work in India, on August 1st 1895:

The great Hindu reformer, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, was a wonderful example of this unselfish work. He devoted his whole life to helping India. It was he who stopped the burning of widows. It is usually believed that this reform was due entirely to the English; but it was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who started the agitation against the custom and succeeded in obtaining the support of the Government in suppressing it. Until he began the movement, the English had done nothing. He also founded the important religious Society called the Brahmo-Samaj, and subscribed a hundred thousand dollars to found a university. He then stepped out and told them to go ahead without him. He cared nothing for fame or for results to himself (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.7, p.86).

So indebted did Vivekananda feel Indians should be to Rammohan that he asserted in

1897, at the reception held for him in Calcutta, when he returned triumphantly from the

West, that one of the main reasons that Indians and India had fallen behind was because

"we did not compare notes with other nations" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.317) and

that it was thanks to Rammohan that this had changed:

The little life that you see in India, begins from the day when Raja Rammohan Roy broke through the walls of that exclusiveness. Since that day, history in India has taken another turn, and now it is growing with accelerated motion (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.317).

Apart from Rammohan, as we have already seen, various scholars have argued that Vivekananda was influenced by Keshabchandra Sen, one of the leaders of the Brahmo Samaj whose group, some argue, he eventually did join. For example, "[a]ccording to Christopher Isherwood, the neo-Vedantist biographer of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda did join Keshub's Brahmo Samaj in 1880" (Kopf, 1979, p.205). Furthermore, Gwilym Beckerlegge suggests, "[i]t is possible, therefore, that Vivekananda continued to move between these two Brahmo groupings, which had parted company with some bitterness" (2006, p.140).

What is much more important to note is:

Given Vivekananda's own eclectic nature, his family background, and expectations of professional employment, which were bolstered by his father's ambitions, it is, perhaps, hardly surprising that, as a young man, he moved between and sought the company of some of the most noted celebrities of his day; Keshab Chandra Sen was, after all, 'the hero of a hundred platforms' and 'the idol of young Bengal'. This is very much the view of Bhupendranath Datta, Vivekananda's brother, who observed that all students of that period were imbued with ideas of reform and also noted Keshab's appeal to the young as a 'unique all-India leader' (Beckerlegge, 2006(b), p.140).

Sil is so convinced of Keshabchandra Sen's influence on Vivekananda, and his efforts to repackage Hindu ideas and India's role in the world, that he draws attention to the following passages in Keshabchandra Sen's writings:

In 1863 Keshab declared in a speech titled "The Brahmo Samaj Vindicated" that the Brahmo scriptures were grounded in the Vedantic truths predicated on natural reasoning. He declared in Bath, England, on 15 April 1870 that he could "never look upon the redeeming features of India in past history without feeling a thrill of patriotic feeling." When the social worker Pandita Ramabai met with him and discussed the project of female regeneration, Sen presented her with a copy of the Vedas so that she would act in consonance with the cultural traditions of India (1997, pp.50-51).

Arguments such as these give one pause, especially since the idea of a 'universal religion', and the centrality of the Vedas in Hindu traditions, form some of the cornerstones of Vivekananda's philosophy. In an essay titled "Hinduism and Shri Ramakrishna" Vivekananda's arguments are remarkably similar to Keshabchandra Sen's:

> The authority of the Vedas extends to all ages, climes and persons; that is to say, their application is not confined to any particular place, time and persons.
> The Vedas are the only exponent of the universal religion. (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.181).

The natural question to ask then is why this Brahmo link is downplayed by Vivekananda and his followers. The answer lies in the antagonism that developed between Vivekananda and Pratap Mazoomdar, a Brahmo follower who Vivekananda encountered at the Parliament in Chicago. Initially, when they met at the Parliament Vivekananda states in a letter to his brother disciple, Alasinga, dated 2nd November, 1893, "Mazoomdar and I were, of course, old friends" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, p.20). However, this friendship could not withstand the competition to be the 'voice' of India and by 1894, in a letter to his brother disciples Vivekananda comments, "I could do much more work but for the Brahmos and missionaries who have been opposing me unceasingly" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.263). The animosity between Vivekananda and the Brahmos has been well documented and Beckerlegge points out:

> Vivekananda's later comments on the Brahmo tradition became extremely hostile prompted by the conviction that Protap Chandra Mozoomdar and other Brahmos had attempted to undermine his credibility in the United States (2006(b), p.141).

Perhaps it is this conviction that leads Vivekananda to assert in a letter to one of his American disciples, Professor John Henry Wright dated the 24th of May, 1894, "I *never* identified myself with Mr. Mazoomdar's party chief. If he says so, he does not speak the truth" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.7, p.468, emphasis in original). The editor of

these volumes states that here Vivekananda is referring to Keshubchandra Sen when he speaks of the 'party chief' and this is probably accurate since Vivekananda's tone becomes more aggressive as he continues:

> I had connection with Pundit Shiva Nath Shastri's party [Sadharan Brahmo Samaj] – but only on points of social reform. Mazoomdar and Chandra Sen – I always considered as not sincere, and I have no reason to change my opinion even now… The Brahmo Samaj, like Christian Science in your country, spread in Calcutta for a certain time and then died out. I am not sorry, neither glad that it died. It has done its work – viz social reform. Its religion was not worth a cent, and so it must die out. If Mazoomdar thinks I was one of the causes of its death, he errs. I am even now a great sympathizer of its reforms; but the "booby" religion could not hold its own against the old "Vedanta". What shall I do? Is that my fault? Mazoomdar has become childish in his old age and takes to tactics not a whit better than some of your Christian missionaries. Lord bless him and show him better ways (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.7, pp.468-469).

What is relevant in this discussion is that the relationship between Vivekananda, the Brahmo Samaj, Keshubchandra Sen and Protop Mazoomdar was ambiguous. In spite of this, one still gets a clear impression that Vivekananda was remarkably aware of their teachings and ideas, and that their ideology was responsible for shaping some of his own. He even recognized India's debt to the Brahmo Samaj when he stated in an article titled "Modern India" as late as 1899:

> it is an undoubted fact that if there had not been the advent of Kabir, Nanak, and Chaitanya in the Mohammedan period, and the establishment of the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj in our own day, then, by this time, the Mohammedans and the Christians would have far outnumbered the Hindus of the present day in India (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.4, p.463).

Similarly, his comments, and compliments, for Rammohan, that are cited above, are dated after the Parliament when he had already had his falling out with Mazoomdar. Thus, this acknowledgement by Vivekananda, whereby he admits that missionizing movements in India were kept in check by groups such as the Brahmo Samaj demonstrates his awareness of how crucial the Brahmos had been, not only in the early

stages of this 'continental collision', but also in his own personal experience of colonial

domination.

Of course, as was mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, one could still

argue, at this juncture, that the Brahmo Samaj itself was largely influenced by Western

ideology. It is as if in response to arguments such as these, which are reminiscent of

Hacker's binary categories in the previous chapter, that Hatcher warns readers not to

limit their thought processes to simple dichotomies, such as traditional vs. modern.

Instead, they should build arguments that allow for a deeper, more comprehensive

understanding of the past:

> The logic of the tradition/modernity dichotomy seems to force certain
> intellectual moves when it comes to the study of Hinduism. We might presume,
> for instance, that we can identify a recognizable "break" with tradition.
> Identifying Rammohan as the father of modern Hindu reform is to see in him the
> marker of such a break. However, the counterpoint necessarily follows. Don't
> Rammohan's endeavors build upon important elements of previous intellectual
> and religious life in South Asia? If so, one is compelled to conclude that no radical
> break took place. (2006, p.54).

Hatcher explores the ways in which Rammohan in particular, and the Brahmo Samaj in

general, did not break ties with their traditional past but instead, re-interpreted it to

suit their needs in colonial India. As Hatcher explains it, not only did Rammohan

maintain his connection with his traditional past, but in fact, studied it in detail which,

in turn, allowed him to create his own ideological path:

> Though born a Brahmin, Rammohan's spiritual development took him down a
> number of intellectual avenues. Early in life he is said to have studied in both
> Patna and Benares, centers for Arabic and Sanskrit learning respectively. His first
> published essay was a lengthy rationalistic appeal for monotheism, written in
> Persian. *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin* (A present to the believers in one god). Much of
> his most mature work would focus on mastering and translating Sanskrit texts
> on Vedanta from the Upanisads to the Brahma Sutras. In addition to his
> immersion in Indo-Persian and Vedantic learning, Rammohan also studied
> Tantra and had worked in close contact with the English collector, John Digby,
> for a dozen years in the outlying districts of Bengal. Thus, by the time he settled
> in Calcutta in 1815, he had amassed the kind of experience that would earn him
> acclaim as a polymath scholar and polemicist (2006, p.57-58).

Hatcher concludes that when Rammohan established the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, he did

so by using Vedantic tools:

> Those gathering with Rammohan were encouraged to know the Supreme God according to Rammohan's reading of the Upanisads, which he referred to as the Vedant (i.e. Vedanta). Following the classical Hindu tradition, acquisition of such knowledge would require study, meditation, and diligent restraint of the passions (2006, p.59).

Indeed, Hatcher points out that Rammohan was particularly despised by Christian

missionaries since he had found a way to bypass their insistence on Christ:

> Not only had Rammohan dared to subject the Gospels to rational analysis, in the Brahmo Samaj he offered a monotheism devoid of both grace and atonement. To the missionary, what Rammohan offered was not simply heathen error, but worse, the means to be a theist without becoming a Christian (2006, p.65).

Furthermore, he demonstrates that Rammohan's philosophy was kept largely intact

even through the many incarnations that the Brahmo Samaj went through.

Consequently, if we take a moment to analyse Hatcher's arguments, then it stands to

reason that the influence that the Brahmo Samaj had on Vivekananda cannot be

considered a result of Westernization, but rather, another example of how this

'continental collision' reverberated on both sides of the globe.

Sri Paramahamsa Ramakrishna

To argue that Vivekananda was impacted by his guru, Ramakrishna, would be

stating the obvious, because the relationship between Ramakrishna, and Vivekananda,

has been well documented by several scholars since Vivekananda was, by far,

Ramakrishna's most famous disciple.[51] Instead, I will limit my inquiry by highlighting

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[51] Most biographers of Vivekananda and Ramakrishna cover this period in their lives in some detail. For example, Sen (2000), Sil (1997) and Kripal (1995). Naturally this is not an exhaustive list but instead simply a cross-section sampling of the scholars who have written about both men.

the way Ramakrishna engaged with traditions other than his own. If we take a moment to examine Vivekananda's propensity to view all spiritual journeys and paths as headed for a singular goal, it will become evident that his narrative was strengthened by his master's teachings. Considering the fact that this idea, that all traditions have a common trajectory, goes on to form the main impetus behind the 'Hinduism' that Vivekananda advocated, it is crucial to examine how Ramakrishna presented these beliefs, and how Vivekananda imbibed them. Hopefully, this demonstrates that Vivekananda was not simply mimicking ideas presented by Western Universalists, but rather, that this concept of 'oneness' was also inspired by Ramakrishna's interpretation of a variety of traditions.

Unlike Vivekananda, Ramakrishna did not come from an eclectic, Bengali intellectual family. Instead, he was the son of a strict Brahmin family of priests and received no formal education in his youth. However, as a priest in a Kali temple in a small town neighbouring Calcutta, Ramakrishna was well-known for his devotion to Kali and the euphoric trances into which he fell when he was transformed by his *bhakti* for the Mother. Indeed, Ramakrishna became quite famous amongst the Bengali intelligentsia, and in *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal* (1993), Amiya Sen states:

> By implicitly upholding the validity of Hinduism and the Hindu way of life within the broad framework of Universalism, by not insisting on strict ritual enforcement within religious life, by suggesting that God-realization was a tangible and attainable human objective, Ramakrishna paved the way not only for a new pride of race and culture but also for the toning up of moral and religious life in late nineteenth century Bengal (1993, p.294).

In "Comparative Mystics: Scholars as Gnostic Diplomats" (2004) Jeffrey Kripal, one of Ramakrishna's most recent (and controversial)[52] biographers, draws attention to the

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[52] Jeffrey Kripal's book, *Kali's Child* (1998) ruffled quite a few feathers since he openly insinuates that Ramakrishna had homoerotic tendencies, which he occasionally acted upon. Indeed, this interpretation of his forms a large part of his research. For a

fact that Indian history has had many examples which showcase "the fluidity of culture

and the mystical denial of religious difference" (2004, p.491). However, in Kripal's

opinion, what made Ramakrishna unique was that not only were his experiences

"distinctly mystical and unorthodox," but that they were "carried on in a social

environment imbued with debate and reform inspired by the dominating presence of

Western religious thought" (2004, p.492). What seems to have made Ramakrishna's

experience, of this 'continental collision', especially interesting to his Indian followers

was that even as a devotee of Kali, he experimented with other Hindu traditions, as well

as with Christianity and Islam:

> he engaged in Vaishnava, Shakta and Advaita Vedantic *sadhanas* (spiritual
> disciplines). Or as he put it himself, he practiced and thought "according to the
> Puranas," according to the Tantras," and "according to the Vedas," three classes
> of Hindu scripture that represent the ways of theistic devotion, erotic
> transgression, and philosophical deconstruction, respectively (Kripal, 2004,
> pp.492-493).

Raychaudhari suggests that one of the reasons why Ramakrishna was popular, and

gained so much traction with the Bengali intelligentsia, was because he offered them a

way to access their traditional beliefs in a manner in which they could take pride:

> The new sociocultural movements [of the 19th century] had focused attention on
> religion and thus produced both an uncertainty and a concern about faith and
> spirituality. But they had failed to provide solutions acceptable to large
> members. Keshab's inspired preaching in the *mohullas* of the city was a
> conscious assault on this anomy in religious life. It had considerable appeal.
> Many of the young people who became devotees of Ramakrishna were at first
> Keshab's followers. The fiery orator was a seeker after God. By his own
> testimony, Ramakrishna was a person in communion with the Deity. Sections of
> the intelligentsia, concerned about essential religiosity and tortured by doubts,
> accepted the soothing news as true. The news was all the more satisfying
> because the saint personified the tradition of syncretism (1988, p.237).

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measured, discussion on the way this controversy can be interpreted see Francis X.
Clooney S.J. "The Meaning of a Saint" (2012)

However, Raychaudhari points out that whereas Hindu conservatives appreciated some

aspects of Ramakrishna's message they were not always convinced with his methods:

> The veneration of Ramakrishna by a section of the urban intelligentsia was based
> on the psychological need for a satisfying spiritual ideal, generated by decades of
> religious controversy. The religious idiom and overtones of the burgeoning
> nationalism probably enhanced that need as well as the veneration. Hindu
> revivalism may have found some comfort in the reflected glory of a great saint,
> especially after he was accepted as such by eminent westerners. Ramakrishna
> for them might be a positive proof of Hindu superiority, but his infinite tolerance
> and unsectarian spirituality was hardly their cup of tea (1988, pp.237-238).

It is this syncretism, that may not have been a palatable 'cup of tea' for many

conservative Hindus, which made Ramakrishna unique, thereby allowing him to be the

perfect springboard from which Vivekananda was able to rise to great heights.

A few words about 'syncretism' might help clarify how scholars have used this

term and how it helped Ramakrishna gain popularity amongst certain sections of

Bengali society. According to Peter van der Veer, in "Syncretism, multiculturalism and

tolerance" (1994b):

> Syncretism is a term used in Christian theology since at least the seventeenth
> century. According to *the Oxford English Dictionary*, it denotes an 'attempt to sink
> differences and effect union between sects or philosophical schools'. While
> Erasmus and Rotterdam used the term in 1519 in the sense of reconciliation
> among Christians, the theologian Calixtus of Helmstadt was the first to use
> 'syncretism' in theological debate to mean the sinking of theological differences,
> at a church conference in Thorn in 1645. While syncretism thus sounds like a
> positive strategy to contain conflict and promote tolerance or, in recent parlance,
> at least 'dialogue', it is striking how pejoratively the term is often used by the
> defenders of 'the true faith'. It is seen as a loss of identity, an illicit contamination,
> a sign of religious decadence. In theological disputes it was generally regarded as
> a betrayal of principles, or as an attempt to secure unity at the expense of truth
> (1994(b), pp.196-197).

On the other hand, van der Veer also recognizes that the term 'syncretism' is often used

by historians, and comparative religionists, to describe the ways in which traditions

have changed over time:

> Syncretism is a term which in comparative religion refers to a process of
> religious amalgamation, of blending heterogeneous beliefs and practices. As

such, it is an aspect of religious interaction over time. This can be seen as such a broad process that indeed every religion is syncretistic, since it constantly draws upon heterogeneous elements to the extent that it is often impossible for historians to unravel what comes from where (1994(b), p.208).

As a result, he acknowledges the complexities of this term and warns readers to pay special attention to the context in which it is used:

> Syncretism is a term within that discourse which acknowledges the permeability and fluidity of social life, but is used to evaluate it. That evaluation depends on the context in which it is made. Syncretism can be seen, negatively, as a corruption of the absolute Truth. It can be seen, positively, as a sign of tolerance. In all these cases it has to be discursively identified (van der Veer, 1994(b), p.209).

The question thus arises as to whether the syncretism, that is accorded to Ramakrishna by scholars such as Raychaudhari, is the syncretism which argues in favour of the superiority of particular 'essential' truths or, if instead, it is used in the way which Wendy Doniger suggests it can be defined, that is, "with the understanding that it denotes the fusion of a number of religious elements, none of which is in any way a pure essence" (Doniger, 2009, p.548fn). Interestingly however, in the case of Ramakrishna, this idea of syncretism takes on another form because, whereas he was quite eager to experiment with other traditions, he was also extremely clear on the fact that he had already chosen his path, the path of Kali. Thus, Ramakrishna's syncretism had more to do with him advocating multiple paths to a single goal rather than the idea that all paths were the same. This is what made Ramakrishna's ideas so attractive during this time of 'continental collision' because, he recognized and respected other traditions' validity, while never swerving from his own ideals. Accordingly, Sen remarks:

> In truth, Ramakrishna's ideas did not consider a broad respect of tolerance towards all faiths to be innocent of personal commitment to one. This would explain his eagerness to learn the fundamentals of Christian faith but his rather stiff attitude towards Madhusudan Dutt, the eminent convert to Christianity... Ramakrishna never questioned the primacy of this religious identity, his basic

> objection was towards religious bigotry… The preachings of Ramakrishna though quite unconnected with any political vision, nevertheless insist on qualities of mutual respect and tolerance (1993, p.309).

So much so, that Sen argues, "[t]he Universalism of Ramakrishna is palpably different from that professed by Rammohun, Bankim or Keshab Chandra. Its hallmark was not syncretism but tolerance" (1993, p. 308). Ramakrishna was nothing like the Western Universalists that influenced Indians, like Rammohan Roy or Keshubchandra Sen, since Ramakrishna had had no exposure to Western education. Therefore, it would be more accurate to link him with syncretic Hindu traditions that predated the advent of the West, and the subsequent colonization of India. Raychaudhari acknowledges this:

> Ramakrishna's unqualified reverence for all faiths, including Keshab's Christianized devotionalism, Christianity itself and Islam, links him with the syncretic tradition of the Indian middle ages rather than the nineteenth-century Hindu revivalism (1988, p.236).

Kripal is in agreement with this assessment since he also argues that Ramakrishna reflects the "fluidity of culture and the mystical denial of religious difference" that was evident in other historical figures in India's history such as the poet Kabir, the Sikh founder Guru Nanak and the Mughal emperor Akbar (2004, p.491). What made Ramakrishna particularly relevant in nineteenth century colonial India however, is that he did not limit himself to exploring only traditions that had emerged in India but rather went on to experiment with Islam and Christianity as well. For example, at one point, before he gained local fame as a saint, Ramakrishna adopted Islam:

> He repeated the name of Allah, wore Muslim clothes, prayed the daily Muslim prayers, and even refused to visit the Hindu deities. After three days of this discipline, it is said that he underwent a vision of a brilliant human figure with a long beard (that is, a male) and then merged into "the Fourth" state of the unconditioned *brahman* (Kripal, 2004, p.493).

Vivekananda also speaks of Ramakrishna's experiments with other traditions in his speech "My Master":

He wanted to understand what other religions were like. So he sought teachers of other religions. By teacher you must always remember what we mean in India, not a bookworm, but a man of realisation, one who knows truth at first hand and not through an intermediary. He found a Mohammedan saint and placed himself under him; he underwent the disciplines prescribed by him, and to his astonishment found that when faithfully carried out, these devotional methods led him to the same goal he had already attained. He gathered similar experience from following the true religion of Jesus the Christ. He went to all the sects he could find, and whatever he took up he went into with his whole heart. He did exactly as he was told, and in every instance he arrived at the same result. Thus from actual experience, he came to know that the goal of every religion is the same, that each is trying to teach the same thing, the difference being largely in method and still more in language. At the core, all sects and all religions have the same aim; and they were only quarrelling for their own selfish purposes – they were not anxious about the truth, but about "my name" and "your name" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.4, pp.173-174).

The reason why these experiences of Ramakrishna's are especially important, in regard to Vivekananda, is because Vivekananda himself, following in the footsteps of his Master, became a champion of syncretism. In an interview that Vivekananda gave to the *Sunday Times* in London in 1896 he stated:

I am a disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, a perfect Sannyasin whose influence and ideas I fell under. This great Sannyasin never assumed the negative or critical attitude towards other religions, but showed their positive side – how they could be carried into life and practised (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, p.190).

Moreover, Ramakrishna's approach differs quite substantially from the Universalists since he does not suggest that other paths offer partial truths. Rather, he insists that just like his path via *bhakti* encompassed all his needs, so also Christianity and Islam offered their followers a way that was the whole truth. Multiple whole truths that co-exist in harmony remains a novel thought even today. In fact, Ramakrishna's position was more tolerant than Vivekananda's emphasis on Vedanta. A fact that Vivekananda himself seemed to acknowledge. So much so, that Vivekananda even went on to declare upon his return to Calcutta, in 1897, after his successful experiences in America, that his guru was "a man whose whole life was a Parliament of Religions as it should be" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.315). Considering the propensity that both Ramakrishna

and Vivekananda had towards finding a sense of compatibility within traditions, one might be wont to argue that their positions may not have been very nuanced or that they may have tended to take a simply perfunctory view of the similarities between traditions. However, Kripal is quick to point out:

> It is also important to realize that Ramakrishna's tendency to compare religions did not prevent him from criticizing positions that he found dubious or dysfunctional in one religion or another. He was particularly hard on the orthodox Vaishnavas and the Christians, whose respective doctrines of sin struck him as useless and ultimately destructive (2004, p.495).

Similarly, as we shall see in the following chapters, Vivekananda did not shy away from criticizing other traditions even while he held them up as valid paths, a skill he adopted from his guru, who on the one hand, "rebuked Vivekananda for criticizing certain Tantric sects" while at the same time was himself critical of certain aspects of Theosophy (Raychaudhuri, 1988, p.236). However, Ramakrishna, unlike Vivekananda, never suggested that the different religious paths were a hierarchical system that culminated in Vedantic philosophy. Or, that there were different stages to enlightenment that were marked by certain religious paths. Instead, he held on to his belief that his devotion to Kali was the only complete truth he would ever need. In contrast, whereas on the one hand, Vivekananda accentuated his appreciation for the similarities and differences within traditions while observing his guru's behaviour; on the other hand, he adopted only the aspects that suited his own needs. As Jyotirmaya Sharma explains it in *Hindutva* (2003):

> Vivekananda did not experience this oneness of faiths like Sri Ramakrishna. His attempt remained confined to the intellectual plane and lacked the intensity of living another man's faith with one's 'whole heart'. Between Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, the disparity in method to arrive at the same conclusion made all the difference. Like Jesus, Sri Ramakrishna was after all the pure sort, unencumbered by history or context, but immensely rich in experience. Vivekananda was like Paul, the thundering sort, who had to spread the light quickly and effectively. He understood well that religion was not an intellectual activity but an act of realization. But he was often impatient. Hinduism as a

tolerant and all-embracing faith remained for him an aspiration, never an experience (2003, pp.90-91).

Be that as it may, for the purposes of the present discussion, it is especially important to note that whereas Ramakrishna believed in the idea of a universal goal, he did not arrive at this conclusion because of Western influences. Instead, Ramakrishna responded to the 'continental collision' he experienced around him by relying on Indian traditions and philosophy which then allowed him to articulate his position. Both these men, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, used tools provided to them by their traditions; tools which then permitted them to engage with Western concepts that they encountered due to this 'continental collision'.

Conclusion

The Indian influences in Vivekananda's life are not limited to the ones covered in this brief overview. Indeed, after the death of his guru, Vivekananda set out on his own and toured India extensively, meeting people from all walks of life, saints and kings, peasants and city dwellers. He describes many of these wanderings in his letters and speeches, and it is generally accepted by scholars that it was because of these travels that he decided to make the trip to Chicago, in search of funds to help his fellow countrymen. In these crucial years before he embarked on his remarkable journey to the Parliament of Religions his interaction with Western civilization was limited at best. Instead, he sat at the feet of the Indian saint Pavhari Baba, learned Sanskrit by studying Panini's grammar, and argued about Indian philosophy with Parmadananda Mitra, a wealthy learned *brahmin* householder. Vivekananda wandered from one holy city to another, rekindling old friendships, and making new ones, as he experienced the hardships and the subsequent generosity of the natives towards a wandering monk

between the years 1887 to 1893. Thus, to argue that in spite of all these Indians who fed

him, cared for him, inspired him and honoured him that Vivekananda was a product of

Western colonization is problematic. Even Raychaudhari, who is wont at times to give

too much credit to Western influences, finally surmises:

> Vivekananda eventually acquired a masterly knowledge of Indian philosophy, but his basic beliefs and religious outlook were shaped by his childhood environment. Philosophical skepticism created a temporary disquiet. It never displaced entirely the faith he had accepted without question early in life. ... Vivekananda later assessed the moral and spiritual life of the western peoples using yardsticks familiar since childhood. His discipleship of the saint and scholarly studies confirmed and elaborated the values implicit in a religiosity he had absorbed almost with his mother's milk (1988, p.238).

As we turn to the next chapter, which traces Vivekananda's experiences in the West, and

how this influenced the way he presented Hindu ideas, it is important to recognize, that

at least as far as Vivekananda is concerned, Western colonization did not usurp or

dominate his thought process. Instead, Vivekananda continuously found ways to

accommodate Western concepts and ideas, with the Indian traditions that he had grown

up with during this period of 'continental collision'.

<u>Swami Vivekananda: At the Parliament</u>

At a conference celebrating the 150th birth anniversary of Vivekananda, Dr. Kapil Kapoor, a well-known scholar of Indian intellectual traditions, of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, spoke about the rich Indian ancestry that preceded Vivekananda.[53] According to Kapoor, Vivekananda did not appear on the international scene from an intellectual vacuum, but rather, was one of the more recent Indian voices in a long tradition of great Indian minds. He argued that Vivekananda rose to the repeated challenges made to his traditional beliefs by using Western terminology in order to better dispute the colonizers who were demoralizing Hindus in India. Kapoor contends that Vivekananda outwitted Western attacks on Hindu traditional ideas by deftly appropriating the very methodology they used. It is arguments such as these that make it so important to analyse Vivekananda's time at the Parliament. After all, it was in Chicago that he began accomplishing the feats that he has been credited with. Highlighting details of Vivekananda's speeches and writings will demonstrate how his success at the Parliament crucially impacted the way Hindu ideas came to be 'packaged' in order for them to be better appreciated; both by Western audiences and by educated colonized Hindus. Consequently, in this chapter, I will determine what Vivekananda believed his message was and how he conveyed it to the Western world. Thereafter, in the following chapter, I will examine how he adapted and accommodated these ideas when presenting them to his Indian audiences. In order to accomplish this goal I will concentrate on two sets of lectures; the speeches delivered by Vivekananda at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, and the speeches he made upon his return to

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[53] Kapil Kapoor, *De-subjugating Timeless Vocabularies- Swami Vivekananda as an Intellectual Catalyst*, Saturday International Keynote Speaker, USC School of Religion, International Conference on Swami Vivekananda, October 18-19th 2013.

India in the early part of 1897. By closely examining these speeches and papers, a relatively clear picture of Vivekananda's interpretations of certain key concepts should emerge. And, perhaps more importantly, it will become evident how he strategically used them to suit his own needs. One might ask why I have chosen these particular periods in his life in order to offer up a window into Vivekananda's impact on Hindu ideas. This narrative that Vivekananda recounted at the Parliament will help clarify my reasons:

> A frog lived in a well. It had lived there for a long time. It was born there and brought up there, and yet was a little, small frog. ... it everyday cleaned the water of all the worm and bacilli that lived in it with energy that would do credit to our modern bacteriologists. In this way it went on and became a little sleek and fat. Well, one day another frog that lived in the sea came and fell into the well.
> "Where are you from?"
> "I am from the sea."
> "The sea! How big is that? Is it as big as my well?" and he took a leap from one side of the well to the other.
> "My friend," said the frog from the sea, "how do you compare the sea with your little well?"
> Then the frog took another leap and asked, "Is your sea so big?"
> "What nonsense you speak, to compare the sea with your well!"
> "Well, then," said the frog of the well, "nothing can be bigger than my well; there can be nothing bigger than this; this fellow is a liar, so turn him out."
> That has been the difficulty all the while.
> I am a Hindu. I am sitting in my own little well and thinking that the whole world is my little well. The Christian sits in his little well and thinks the whole world is his well. The Mohammedan sits in his little well and thinks that is the whole world (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, pp.4-5).

This anecdote illustrates what Vivekananda saw as being the primary problem that emerged when traditions that had, for centuries, existed in a relative state of isolation, tried to engage in meaningful discussions. Consequently, there are a number of subtle messages that can be drawn out of this narrative. First, Vivekananda could be compared to the frog from the sea who knew that all philosophic truths were not contained in a single well and therefore took the opportunity to educate his fellow frog of the world of ideas that existed in distant lands. Secondly, Vivekananda implies that he

was comparing his audience to the frog in the well who, despite being told that there

was a world outside his realm, was reluctant to acknowledge this truth. Thus, we

understand that for Vivekananda this moment, when people from multiple wells had

come together at the Parliament, was a turning point, an opportunity that needed to be

grabbed with both hands and not simply squandered away. Indeed, in his description of

the role that Vivekananda played in Indian history, Wilhelm Halbfass states:

> Vivekananda was aware of the fact that in his undertaking to carry Indian
> spirituality into the West, he had seized an historical opportunity created by
> Europe itself, he had to utilize channels of communication which were provided
> by the West (1988, p.242).

The second moment in Vivekananda's life, that bore equal importance, was when

he returned to his homeland. Now, he was the frog from the sea, who, if one should want

to take this story to one of its logical conclusions, came back with tales to tell of the

sights he had seen, and the lessons he had learned and imparted. It was in these two

moments that Vivekananda was at his most influential. Initially, when he found himself

on a world stage as a speaker at the prestigious Parliament of Religions, surrounded by

dignitaries from across the globe. And thereafter, upon his return to India, after his

initial Western trip, when he came back in the role of a conquering hero. And, whilst this

may not have been a world stage, it was nevertheless a moment in time when he had the

eyes of his country turned towards him.[54] These two specific periods convey how

Vivekananda influenced the theoretical framework the West utilized to understand

India and its traditions and, perhaps more importantly, how the Hindus chose to

represent themselves to outsiders. These events in Vivekananda's life highlight how his

methodology seemed to anticipate the need that society would have for 'consumer

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[54] For a detailed review of the way Vivekananda was portrayed in Indian publications
before his return see "Swami Vivekananda in Indian Newspapers 1893-1896"
(Chattopadhyaya, 1999, pp.134-195).

friendly packaging'[55]; a need that was met efficiently by the way Vivekananda framed his interpretation of India, Indians, and Indian traditions. Unfortunately, this approach also resulted in many casualties that continue to effect India today.

The Swami Gets Acclimated

The first speech that Vivekananda gave at the Parliament was relatively short, and simply skimmed on the topics that he would delve into with more detail a few days later. However, before we examine this speech it is important to note here that Vivekananda spent six weeks as the houseguest of various American families before his first speech at the Parliament. This period was very relevant for Vivekananda because it allowed him to acclimatize himself to American social norms which impacted the fluidity with which he spoke at the Parliament. Initially, Vivekananda seemed to be at a loss as to how to proceed on American soil. Eventually however, he was fortunate to be taken under the wing of some influential Americans thereby giving him the opportunity to test his arguments, and narrative style, with smaller Western audiences before having to face the world at large. Perhaps an example would help to clarify how Vivekananda adjusted his methods, once he realized that if his critique of Western society was not subtle, then it would only serve to upset his audience and cause them to distance themselves from him.

The following anecdote is from Marie Louise Burke's six-volume work *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (2013). Here, she reports about a talk that took place in a New England village a few weeks before the Parliament. This dialogue,

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[55] I realize that this is an anachronistic use of the term 'consumer friendly packaging' but it seems rather appropriate considering the way Eastern philosophy has become a 'hot commodity' in the West.

which has been reprinted here in its entirety, draws attention to how pivotal those

initial weeks were for Vivekananda. It gave him the opportunity to experiment with

certain facets of his talking points, before a live Western audience, prior to his debut at

the Parliament. Furthermore, it serves as an excellent contrast to the words that he

spoke on that world stage, efficiently showcasing how quickly he learned the best way

to 'package' his words and message.

> "Ah, the English," he said, "only just a little while ago they were savages,... the vermin crawled on the ladies' bodices,.. and they scented themselves to disguise the abominable odor of their persons.... Most hor-r-ible! Even now, they are barely emerging from barbarism."
> "Nonsense," said one of his scandalized hearers, "that was at least five hundred years ago."
> "And did I not say 'a little while ago'? What are a few hundred years when you look at the antiquity of the human soul?" Then with a turn of tone, quite reasonable and gentle, "They are quite savage," he said. "The frightful cold, the want and privation of their northern climate," going on more quickly and warmly, "has made them *wild*. They only think to kill.... Where is their religion? They take the name of that Holy One, they claim to love their fellowmen, they civilize – by Christianity!- No! It is their hunger that has civilized them, not their God. The love of man is on their lips, but in their hearts there is nothing but evil and every violence. 'I love you my brother, I love you!' .. *and all the while they cut his throat*! Their hands are *red* with blood." ... Then going on more slowly, his beautiful voice deepening till it sounded like a bell, "But the judgment of God will fall upon them. 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord,' and destruction is coming. What are your Christians? Not one third of the world. Look at those Chinese, millions of them. They are the vengeance of God that will light upon you. There will be another invasion of the Huns," adding with a little chuckle, "they will sweep over Europe, they will not leave one stone standing upon another. Men, women, children, all will go and the dark ages will come again." His voice was indescribably sad and pitiful; then suddenly and flippantly, dropping the seer, "Me, - I don't care! The world will rise up better from it, but it is coming. The vengeance of God, it is coming soon."
> "Soon?" they all asked.
> "It will not be a thousand years until it is done."
> They drew a breath of relief. It did not seem imminent.
> "And God will have vengeance," he went on. "You may not see it in religion, you may not see it in politics, but you must see it in history, and as it has been, it will come to pass. If you grind down the people, you will suffer. We in India are suffering the vengeance of God. Look upon these things. They ground down those poor people for their own wealth, they heard not the voice of distress, they ate from gold and silver when the people cried for bread, and the Mohammedans came upon them slaughtering and killing: slaughtering and killing they overran them. India has been conquered again and again for years and last and worst of

all came the Englishman. You look about India, what has the Hindoo left? Wonderful temples, everywhere. What has the Mohammedan left? Beautiful palaces. What has the Englishman left? Nothing but mounds of broken brandy bottles! And God has had no mercy upon my people because they had no mercy. By their cruelty they degraded the populace, and when they needed them the common people had no strength to give for their aid. If man cannot believe in the Vengeance of God, he certainly cannot deny the Vengeance of History. And it will come upon the English; they 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."

And then, having had his say, the Swami was silent. A babble of thin-voiced chatter rose about him, to which he listened, apparently unheeding. Occasionally he cast his eye up to the roof and repeated softly, "Shiva! Shiva!" and the little company, shaken and disturbed by the current of powerful feelings and vindictive passion which seemed to be flowing like molten lava beneath the silent surface of this strange being, broke up, perturbed (Burke, 2013, pp.31-33, emphasis in original).

This rather dramatic exchange that is recounted by Burke, who is a follower of Vivekananda, and whose works have been printed under the auspices of the Ramakrishna Mission, helps to give us an insight into the way Vivekananda occasionally retaliated when addressing issues such as colonization and greed. That being said, whereas his anger and frustration here are apparent, it is also necessary to note that anecdotes such as these are few and far between. Indeed, Vivekananda was not usually wont to speaking like this in public, which is evidenced by the fact that even during the six weeks before the Parliament he gained many admirers and followers. So much so, that he was able to convince the audience at his first lecture in an American church (which also took place during those relevant six weeks) to make a very strange, for its time, donation that Burke comments on:

this was undoubtedly the first collection "for a Heathen college to be carried on on strictly heathen principles" ever to be solemnly contributed to by a New England congregation; and no one but Swamiji could have brought such a marvel to pass (2013, p.39).

Vivekananda frequently gives meaning to the phrase 'an iron fist in a velvet glove' throughout his career whereby he delivers many a powerful message without seemingly leaving a mark. A skill that we shall see he repeatedly demonstrated throughout his time at the Parliament. Obviously, this does not mean to suggest that Vivekananda's public speaking skills, and his comfort level when speaking to large audiences, are not to be commended. Instead, this narrative should simply serve to remind readers that he was fortunate enough to have had a few weeks of intense discussions with some prominent Americans, such as the author Kate Sanborn and Dr John Henry Wright, Professor of Greek at Harvard University, which no doubt prepared him for this endeavour. This is reflected in how carefully he chose his words at the Parliament, a fact that is highlighted by contemporary newspapers, many of which report on the warm welcome Vivekananda received and his lightening rise to fame.[56]

"Response to Welcome" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, pp.3-4)

The first speech that Vivekananda gave at the Parliament was in response to his welcome on the 11th of September 1893. He began by addressing the audience as "sisters and brothers of America." This was obviously not a common way to address audiences in the West since Reverend John Henry Barrows, the chairman of the World Parliament of Religions states:

> When Mr. Vivekananda addressed the audience as "sisters and brothers of America," there arose a peal of applause that lasted for several minutes (1893, p.101).

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[56] For example, a news report titled in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, September 30, 1893, states "He is a great favorite at the parliament, from the grandeur of his sentiments and his appearance as well. If he merely crosses the platform he is applauded." Similarly, the *Critic*, October 7, 1893, states "no one expressed so well the spirit of the Parliament, its limitations and its finest influence, as did the Hindoo monk" (as cited in Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, pp.472-475).

One can only imagine that Vivekananda, dressed in his long orange robes and turban, must have been quite a sight to see leaving no doubt that this was a representative from a distant land. Yet, here was this exotic man, addressing the audience in a way that immediately indicated his desire to create a familial bond with his listeners. Vivekananda then goes on to introduce himself as a representative "of the most ancient order of monks in the world" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.3) thereby establishing both his own ancestry and his tradition's ancient heritage. This is followed by him thanking his audience "in the name of the mother of religions" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.3). It is hard to imagine that this choice of words was not intentional since, by stating that he belonged to a tradition which he believed to be the 'mother of religions', he was essentially arguing that there was a hierarchy amongst the speakers present, and that he placed the tradition that he represented, at the top of that system.

This argument of antiquity, whereby Vivekananda claims that 'Hinduism' is the 'mother of all religions' since it is the most ancient, is a topic that was being hotly debated in the 19th century. In 1859, Charles Darwin published his much-celebrated theories of evolution in *On The Origin of Species*. These ideas were then applied by Orientalists when studying other 'religions'. One of the most common arguments used in the 19th century, was that 'religion' had developed from primitive pagan ideas to the sophisticated ideology of Christianity. Eric J. Sharpe contends that the search for origins had become a popular lens by which Western scholars studied Eastern traditions:

> In the evolutionary scheme religion came to be viewed entirely in terms of history... Scholars such as Taylor, Marett, Frazer, Jevon Caird and Max Mueller concentrated on the analysis of legend, myth, magic, ritual and philosophy. Interest came to be centered more and more on the 'origins' of religion viewed as a human function, a universal fact of human experience – and on the 'primitive' religions... By the end of the century... it was coming to be believed that all religions could be arranged in 'stages' corresponding – for the method was pure analogy – on the 'stages' of biological evolution (as cited in Basu, 2002, p.46).

It was not only Darwin's premise that influenced these thinkers but rather, they were also responding to theories presented a few decades earlier by G.F Hegel. As Nandy points out (see Chapter 1), Hegel surmised that India had remained in the infancy stage of human history, and as such, Indian religious ideas were to be understood as immature and undeveloped. King observes:

> Hegel's representation of India is bound up with his own conception of history as the unfolding of the world-spirit and of systematic philosophy as a movement towards a consciousness of freedom. Within this universal picture of world history, divided by Hegel into childhood, adolescence and maturity, India represented the first period in human history – the childhood of mankind. Thus India had nothing to contribute to modernity (1999, p.124).

This was a negative, and indeed, condescending view of Eastern ideas. In fact, what Hegel's hypothesis demonstrates is that whereas many European scholars were willing to accept that civilization may have originated in the East, they also firmly believed that these beginnings were stunted and that it was only in the Western world that civilization had matured. Accordingly, King contends:

> This nostalgia for origins, usually grounded in an evolutionary history of humankind, tended to conceive of India as a throwback to the 'childhood' of humankind. While Europe and the New World were undergoing enormous social and political changes, India seemed to have remained unchanged for thousands of years, representing a crucial example of static archaism with which the dynamic modernity of the West could be successfully contrasted (1999, p.118).

Many Orientalists even went as far as to argue that Christianity was the best example of a modern 'religion' since its ethics were compatible with reason and science. In *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse* (2002), Shamita Basu notes:

> The missionary strategy was to make Christianity appear as an apostle of modernity, as [Alexander] Duff regarded 'true literature and true sciences' to be 'our very best auxiliaries'. The discourse of Protestant Christianity, particularly as it existed within the Evangelical orders in the nineteenth century, was not just valorized as a religion, but as a moral system, a bearer of ethical values that were universal. It was through this discourse of 'the modern as the Christian' that Christianity came to extrapolate some of the Enlightenment conceptions within its own liturgy (2002, pp.46-47).

It is against this backdrop, which invoked images of infancy and immaturity, that many

Christian European scholars developed their narrative of Western superiority when

referring to Hindu traditions. Balagangadhara concisely highlights why such

terminology is problematic:

> A slight bit of an unpacking of this notion of 'childhood' and 'the cradle of
> civilization' is necessary to understand what the German Romantics were really
> saying. Irrespective of what any single thinker said or did not say, each of them
> had accepted the framework of a universal history of humankind. Whether they
> liked it or not, there was a consensus that the European culture had matured.
> One may mourn the absence of innocence and spontaneity of childhood; one may
> long to rediscover the absence of affectation and deceit in the childhood; but it
> remains incontrovertible that this is how an adult looks back. By calling the
> Indian culture the childhood of Man, the Romantic thinkers did not go beyond or
> against the Enlightenment tradition – but merely extended it with a fanciful
> twist.
> The same reflections are applicable to the appellation 'cradle of civilization'. To
> use that with respect to a culture long dead and gone, like the Greek or Roman,
> might be construed as a way of paying homage, tribute, or just acknowledgement
> to the contributions of the past. What does it mean when used to characterize a
> living culture? It can only mean that those who live in this culture are still in their
> cradles – and have been there during the last thousand years – unlike their
> European counterparts (2005, p.124).

As far as Vivekananda is concerned, one simply has to read his remarks on Hegel

in *The Complete Works* to learn that he was not only familiar with his theories, but that

he vehemently disagreed with them. For example, his disdain for Hegel was apparent

when he not only rejected Hegel's theories, but, adding insult to injury, also argued that

Hegel's premise had already been discarded by early Indian philosophers:

> Just as you find the attempts of Hegel and Schopenhauer in German philosophy,
> so you will find the very same ideas brought forward in ancient India.
> Fortunately for us, Hegelianism was nipped in the bud and not allowed to sprout
> and cast its baneful shoots over this motherland of ours. Hegel's one idea is that
> the one, the absolute, is only chaos, and that the individualized form is greater.
> The world is greater than the non-world, Samsara is greater than salvation
> (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.342).

In contrast, Vivekananda embraced Darwin's theory of evolution but only with the caveat that the ancient Indian philosopher, Patanjali, had also put forth a similar theory of evolution:

> You have heard of the doctrine of physical evolution preached in the Western world by the German and English savants. It tells us that the bodies of the different animals are really one; the differences that we see are but different expressions of the same series; that from the lowest worm to the highest and most saintly man it is but one – the one changing into the other and so on, going up and up, higher and higher, until it attains perfection. We had that idea also (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.406).

Indeed, for Vivekananda, these ideas of evolution originated in the Vedas; "[t]he idea of evolution was to be found in the Vedas long before the Christian era; but until Darwin said it was true, it was regarded as a mere Hindu superstition" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.8, p.25). As Vivekananda explained it, India may have been the 'childhood of humanity' and the 'cradle of civilization', but that did not mean that it had not matured as Western Christian scholars were wont to argue. Instead, for Vivekananda, India was where *all* valuable knowledge had first originated. Indeed, according to Vivekananda, this 'continental collision' had been occurring for centuries:

> Once in far remote antiquity, the Indian philosophy, coming in contact with Greek energy, led to the rise of the Persian, the Roman and other great nations. After the invasion of Alexander the Great, these two great waterfalls colliding with each other, deluged nearly half of the globe with spiritual tides, such as Christianity. Again, a similar comingling, resulting in the improvement and prosperity of Arabia, laid the foundation of modern European civilization (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.4, p.402).

Vivekananda is probably basing his arguments regarding the relationship between India, and the Ancient Greco-Roman culture, on the fact that philologists in the 18th century had revealed a direct correlation between Sanskrit and European languages. In *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, (2002) Thomas McEvilley explores, in great detail, how the Greeks and the Indians had a shared philosophic ancestry. McEvilley points out that

the discovery of the linguistic connection between Sanskrit and European languages

was literally 'explosive':

> The situation reached explosive volatility in 1786, two years after the founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (later the Royal Asiatic Society). The bombshell was Sir William Jones's historic assertion to a meeting of the Society "that no philologer could examine them all three [the Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit languages] without believing them to have sprung from some common source" (2002, p.xxi).

This led to further investigations on how these ancient civilizations may have also

shared other basic ideologies. As McEvilley explains it, at least initially, there was great

excitement amongst a certain section of Western intellectuals who believed that India

may very well be the 'cradle of civilization':

> At about the time of Jones's discovery – roughly the moment when the Late Enlightenment was giving way to the Romantic era – Western scholars undertook a quest for the absolute source of civilization, which was to be discovered by means such as philology, and, later, archeology. As Raymond Schwab has argued, the discovery of the linguistic cognateness of India to the West occurred at the perfect moment to intersect with that search. For a brief period of about thirty-five years – about 1785-1829 – the leading candidate for the Ur-civilization was India.
> In that heady Indocentric phase, on the heels of Jones's epochal pronouncement, it seemed that the western world's search for its origin – that is, its true self – would be fulfilled by plumbing the mystery of far-off and little-known India. India somehow held the key to the West's quest for ultimate self-knowledge. Schlegel declared enthusiastically: "Everything, yes, everything without exception has its origin in India." This conviction led him to respond to Jones's discovery by declaring that Sanskrit was not only cognate with, that is, a sibling of, Greek and Latin; in fact it was the "mother language of Greek, Latin, Persian and German." Not dissimilarly, Schopenhauer, in line with his belief in "the underlying unity of all things," thought that both Christianity and the Ancient Egyptian religion had originated in India (2002, p.xxii).

Eventually however, with the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in Egypt in 1821, India was

displaced as the source of all civilization. What is perhaps more important to note here

however, is that this idea, that India was the 'cradle of civilization' did not sit well with

colonial objectives. After all, the British defended their right to colonize with the

argument that they were uplifting a fallen race. If India was not in need of 'saving' then

they could lose their moral argument for domination. As McEvilley puts it:

> In time an account was worked out that dissipated the problem of the Indo-Europeanness of Sanskrit by asserting that the Aryans had indeed been white people, but they had been absorbed into a nonwhite matrix, leaving their language intact while their skin color – and with it their cultural identity – was mostly lost. Modern Indians, then, are not really white people, though they use a language left behind by earlier white conquerors, and the racial justification for colonization does apply after all: The British were going in to finish up the job the Aryans had begun long ago. The Greek colonization of India had reinforced the original Aryan input, but it too had been dissolved and absorbed by the larger brown body of humanity. The Greek infusion of whiteness, coming after the Aryan, constituted a tradition which the British could honorably carry on. As one British imperialist author wrote: "Ex Occidente Imperium; the genius of Empire in India has come to her from the West; and can be maintained only by constant infusions of fresh blood from the same source." James Mill's idea, from the same period, that "the Indian civilization never prospered except under foreign domination" seemed a clear justification for imperialism as a civilizing mission (2002, p.xxiii).

It seems likely that Vivekananda was responding to these arguments when he claimed

that India was an ancient civilization that was, in actuality, responsible for impacting

Western thought. Of course, Vivekananda was not the first, nor the only Indian, to be

pushing back against these ideas presented by nineteenth century European scholars.

Instead, there were other Hindu scholars who forcibly fought fire with fire by

presenting their own theories of Hindu superiority. For instance, the Arya Samaj were

similarly engaged in challenging Western claims of superiority:

> Locating the 'essence' of the Hindu tradition in origins (*arche*), in this case the ancient Vedas, however, was also prevalent among the nineteenth century Hindu reformers as a nationalist and anti-colonial stratagem. For Dayananda Saraswati and the Arya Samaj, for instance, the Samhitas were the source of all legitimate manifestations of Hinduism and also provided evidence of the superiority of Hinduism over 'younger' religions such as Christianity. For Saraswati, Christianity was a poor imitation of the Hindu religion. Indeed, all knowledge, he believed, could be demonstrated to have originated in Mother India from time immemorial, including modern technologies such as aircraft, long-forgotten and now claimed to be the sole invention of the colonizing Westerners (King, 1999, p.119).

This helps explain Vivekananda's strategy, of calling 'Hinduism' the 'mother of all religions', which was probably intentional, since this immediately put to rest the idea that India was simply the 'cradle of civilization'. Instead, he argued that India was also the 'hand that rocked the cradle'!

Let us turn back now to Vivekananda's speech where we find that he is thanking his audience (and this is just in the first paragraph), "in the name of millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.3). Vivekananda adeptly claimed for himself the title of 'the voice of India'. An interesting tactic, especially since he was not the only Indian present at the Parliament. Besides him, to mention just a few, there was P.C Mazumdar of Calcutta who was representing the Brahmo Samaj along with B.B. Nagarkar of Bombay; Angarika Dharmapala, the General Secretary of the Maha-Bodhi Society representing the Southern Buddhists of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka); and representing the Jain community of Bombay were Muni Atmaramji and Virchand A. Gandhi (Barrows, 1893, pp.64-65). However, this ploy of Vivekananda's obviously worked because it is Vivekananda who is remembered as the 'voice of India'. In *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893,* (2009) which offers a contemporary in-depth analysis of the Parliament, Richard Hughes Seager reports:

> To his American audience, Vivekananda's physical presence evoked a sense of both familiarity and difference… The *Daily Inter-Ocean* noted that "great crowds of people, the most of whom were women, pressed around the doors leading to the Hall of Columbus… for it had been announced that Swami Vivekananda, the popular Hindoo [sic] monk who looks so much like McCullough's Othello was to speak." More substantially, Merwin Marie-Snell, Bishop John Keane's secretary, was quoted as saying Vivekananda was "beyond question the most popular and influential man in the Parliament (2009, p.111).

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Vivekananda's popularity at the Parliament was that he gained this position despite the fact that he pulled no punches.

Indeed, in this short introductory speech, Vivekananda finds a way to claim, for India, the mantle of tolerance and respect for other traditions that was being toted, by some, as the Parliament's greatest achievement.[57] Accordingly, he proclaims:

> I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered to our bosom the purest remnant of Israelites, who came to Southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, pp.3-4).

By highlighting that a certain Jewish sect, and a substantial Parsi community, had found a home in India Vivekananda was able to argue that this constituted a legitimate claim for Indians to be declared a tolerant people who embraced all 'religions'. Indeed, this premise of Vivekananda's, whereby he argued that 'Hinduism' accepted all traditions as valid, was to be one of the cornerstones of his arguments while in the West. He contended that 'Hinduism' was unique because of the fact that it recognized the need for many paths, or streams, of 'religion'. Consequently, since Hindus agreed that all these paths and streams were headed towards a single goal, this made them the most 'religiously' advanced people. To examine these claims of Vivekananda more closely however, a few definitions and clarifications are necessary. As such, I will attempt to shed some light on what Vivekananda meant when he used words like 'religion', God, Hindu and 'Hinduism'. Terms that, as we have already discussed in the first two chapters, are still hotly contested concepts in contemporary times.

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[57] "Diversity in unity was the dominant ideal that informed the aspirations of the Parliament's leaders. This was reflected in their optimistic vision of co-operation among all religions on a shared platform of tolerance and social progress" (Seager, 2009, p.xiii)

Religion, God, Hindu and 'Hinduism'

It is important to mention here that Vivekananda used these, and other Western terms liberally, and did not always find it necessary to explain what these concepts meant, or the context in which he was utilizing them. Indeed, even though he acknowledged that using the English language to describe Indian ideas could oftentimes be problematic, he nonetheless opted for these 'inadequate' labels because he wanted to reach a wider audience:

> A friend criticized the use of European terms of philosophy and religion in my addresses. I would have been very glad to use Sanskrit terms; it would have been much more easy, as being the only perfect vehicle of religious thought. But the friend forgot that I was addressing an audience of Western people (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.4, p.344).

Fortunately, however, Vivekananda did occasionally speak about the parameters that he set around these Western concepts. For example, he described what the term 'religion' meant to him:

> In every religion there are three parts: philosophy, mythology, and ritual. Philosophy of course is the essence of every religion; mythology explains and illustrates it by means of the more or less legendary lives of great men, stories and fables of wonderful things, and so on; ritual gives to that philosophy a still more concrete form, so that every one may grasp it – ritual is in fact concretised philosophy (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.72).

In a speech titled "The Necessity of Religion" he acknowledged that various theories of 'religion' had been presented by previous scholars and highlighted the two that he felt held the most substance:

> Two theories have gained some acceptance amongst modern scholars. One is the spirit theory of religion, the other the evolution of the idea of the Infinite. 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 (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.2, p.57).

Vivekananda then went on to present his own theory:

> 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 (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.2, p.59).

Furthermore, for Vivekananda 'religion' was not an optional state of being and he would have probably agreed with Mircea Eliade that man is essentially 'Homo religiosus':

> It is my belief that religious thought is in man's very constitution, so much so that it is impossible for him to give up religion until he can give up his mind and body, until he can stop thought and life. As long as a man thinks, this struggle must go on, and so long man must have some form of religion (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.4, pp.203-204).

In the above-mentioned speech, he also argued that 'religion' formed the basic fabric of every society, past or present:

> Of all the forces that have worked and are still working to mould the destinies of the human race, none, certainly, is more potent than that, the manifestation of which we call religion. All social organizations have as a background, somewhere, the workings of that peculiar force, and the greatest cohesive impulse ever brought into play amongst human units has been derived from this power (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.2, p.57).

His all-encompassing theories about 'religion' did not end there however, because he also presented a utopian interpretation of this concept:

> There is one religion and there are many sects. The moment you give it a name, individualise it and separate it from the rest, it is a sect, no more a religion. A sect (proclaims) its own truth and declares that there is no truth anywhere else. Religion believes that there has been, and still is, one religion in the world. There never were two religions. It is the same religion (presenting) different aspects in different places (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.438).

A couple of points need to be highlighted here. First, is the fact that since Vivekananda had attended English language schools and universities, he had been introduced to European philosophy and theories of scientific reasoning. As such, he was quite familiar with the different interpretations that Western scholars had put forth regarding 'religion':

> At the beginning of the nineteenth century man tried to find God through reason, and Deism was the result. What little was left of God by this process was destroyed by Darwinism and Millism. Men were then thrown back upon historical and comparative religion. They thought religion was derived from

element worship (see Max Muller on sun myths etc.); others thought that religion was derived from ancestor worship (see Herbert Spencer). But taken as a whole, these methods have proved a failure. Man cannot get at Truth by external methods (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.41).

Now, whereas it is the editors of *The Complete Works* who have inserted the names Max Muller and Herbert Spencer in parentheses here, it is more than likely because Vivekananda mentioned both these Western scholars frequently. In fact, Vivekananda was quite familiar with Spencer's work:

> There is also the story of Narendranath's writing a letter to Herbert Spencer, for the latter's permission to translate his book on 'Education' in Bengali, and 'the savant, on reading the letter, was much impressed by the writer's intellectual acumen. Mahendranath Datta says that his elder brother translated this book in his early student days. It was named *Shiksha* and was published by the Basumati printing press owned by Upendra Nath Mukherjee (Chattopadhyaya, 1999, p.31).

However, for Vivekananda, it was not enough to demonstrate that he was knowledgeable about these Western concepts. Instead, he made every effort to argue that Hindu philosophers had already discovered these ideas. Consequently, Vivekananda was not only willing to quote Spencer but indeed, to challenge him:

> What is Spencer's unknowable? It is our Maya. Western philosophers are afraid of the unknowable, but our philosophers have taken a big jump into the unknown, and they have conquered (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.104).

As for Muller, Vivekananda had a personal relationship with him and even helped Muller acquire the resources he needed to write his book, *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings* (1898). Vivekananda, like other Indian elites in his day, was familiar with Western and Orientalist scholarship and demonstrated this awareness whenever it was to his advantage. Dermot Killingley reminds us:

> Since the attitudes, values and assumptions of this [English-speaking] world had to a greater or lesser extent been accepted by English-speaking Indians, together with much of the knowledge that marked a cultured inhabitant of it, the West was not alien to them (1999, p.140).

As a result of this 'continental collision', we are also able to legitimately presume that

Vivekananda was familiar with concepts such as 'natural religion' that were made

popular by European historical figures like Jean Bodin (1530-1596) and Lord Herbert of

Cherbury (1583-1645). These Western scholars explored the theory of 'religion' and its

relationship to reason, and many of their ideas are reflected in terms such as 'natural

religion' and 'deism'. For example, Robert Yelle states:

> Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1645), who advanced a concept of
> natural religion and the origins of idolatry that anticipated the Deists, held
> similar views, as the titles of two of the chapters in his work *On Pagan Religion*
> (*De religione gentilium*) illustrate: "Why there were so many Names given to God,
> and what they were" and "The Worship of the Sun and his Several Names."
> Herbert cautioned that "wise people did not think that the Sun itself... was the
> Supreme God" (2013, p.56).

Similarly, Masuzawa reminds us:

> Earlier Deists – such as Herbert of Cherbury (1663) and John Toland (1696) –
> typically presupposed that there was the original, universal, rational and ethical
> religion common to all humankind, and that, with a passage of time, this original
> pure theism became variously "corrupted," with the result that different peoples
> in different regions of the world came to practice divergent and idiosyncratic
> religions. (2000, p.212).

As such, Vivekananda was not presenting new ideas to his audience, but rather, he was

using his familiarity with Western intellectual history in an effort to convince his

audience of the veracity of his claims. This should not however, diminish the

effectiveness of Vivekananda's methods because, whereas he may have known that his

audience was aware of some of the history of these terms, there could have been no

certainty of their widespread acceptance. Balagangadhara points out:

> It is equally essential for us to note that the ethnographic data about other
> cultures was neither complete nor exhaustive during this period. As we have
> already seen, they were not even free of ambiguity or inconsistencies. During the
> period of Bodin or Hume or even Freud, anthropological investigation had not
> come up with indisputable evidence showing that religion was a cultural
> universal (2005, p.148).

Thus, whereas it is true that Vivekananda was not pulling these theories out of thin air, it is also true that he demonstrated an acumen for appropriating these discourses, that were relevant in Western society, and allying them with his own concept of 'religion'. As we saw in the second chapter, a strong argument can be made that the term 'religion', has Christian undertones. However, Vivekananda took every liberty to define this concept in a way that appealed to his needs, and in doing so he, like many of his predecessors, tried to divorce it from its Christian roots. For example, in Chapter 1 we witnessed how Bankimchandra discarded the label 'religion' and replaced it with the Hindu concept 'dharma' which, as we have already discussed, is a complex term that is not universally applicable even when describing Hindu traditional life. Similarly, Vivekananda also attempted to define the label 'religion' in ways that better suited his needs:

> In Western religion the idea is that without the New Testament and Christ there could be no religion. A similar belief exists in Judaism with regard to Moses and the Prophets, because these religions are dependent upon mythology only. Real religion, the highest, rises above mythology; it can never rest upon that. Modern science has really made the foundations of religion strong. That the whole universe is one, is scientifically demonstrable. What the metaphysicians call "being", the physicist calls "matter", but there is no real fight between the two, for both are one. Though an atom is invisible, unthinkable, yet in it are the whole power and potency of the universe. That is exactly what the Vedantist says of Atman. All sects are really saying the same thing in different words (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.7, pp.49-50).

Of course 'monism', which is what Vivekananda was referring to here, was not an unfamiliar concept in the Western world and we will address those arguments later in this chapter.

That being said, it is interesting to note that whereas Vivekananda readily offered up his qualifications for 'religion', he was not able to define 'God' just as easily. Instead, he repeatedly suggested that he preferred to use Sanskrit terms, such as *Brahman*, since this resonated with his own concept of 'God':

What do I mean by the use of the English word God? Certainly not the word as ordinarily used in English – a good deal of difference. There is no other suitable word in English. I would rather confine myself to the Sanskrit word Brahman. He is the general cause of all these manifestations. What is this Brahman? He is eternal, eternally pure, eternally awake, the almighty, the all-knowing, the all-merciful, the omnipresent, the formless, the partless. He creates this universe (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.123).

Similarly:

Take for instance, the English word God. It covers only a limited function, and if you go beyond it, you have to add adjectives, to make it Personal or Impersonal, or Absolute God. So with the words for God in every other language; their signification is very small (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.219).

The dilemma that Vivekananda was facing here is not a new problem but rather an issue that has been a point of discussion since antiquity. According to McEvilley, this need, to find a way to define the 'undefinable', is actually one of the oldest philosophical enigmas that both hemispheres have struggled with:

Many passages in the early Upanisads describe *brahman*, or Being, in terms virtually identical to those with which Anaximander [circa 540 BCE] described the Infinite. "that from which these things are born, that by which, when born, they live, that into which, when departing, they enter. That, seek to know. That is Brahman". As Anaximander's Infinite is declared by him to be neither one element nor another, the *brahman* is declared to be "neither gross nor fine, neither short nor long, neither glowing red like fire nor adhesive like water". As Anaximander's Infinite is said by Aristotle to "surround all things and steer them," so the *brahman* is said in the early Upanisads to contain all things and to be their "inner controller". As Anaximander's Infinite is said by Aristotle to be divine and immortal, so the *brahman* "transcends hunger and thirst, sorrow and delusion, old age and death". As the ground of being, both of these concepts, *apeiron* and *brahman*, precede all specific qualities except that of existing; the source of the pairs of opposites, each is itself beyond them.
This concept of a state of being which is beyond qualities, or prior to them, is the first purely philosophical idea. It was obtained through a progressive stripping away of concrete imagery. It is one of the great and characteristic products of ancient thought – both Greek and Indian – and has retained force as an expression of both philosophical and mystical insights into modern times (2002, p.33).

In the case of Vivekananda, despite the fact that he found the word 'God' both limiting, and inadequate, he nevertheless continued to use this label since he could not replace it with *Brahman* while he was in the West. He probably realized that even though it had its

shortcomings, it was a word that had meaning for Westerners in the 19th century, and indeed for many Indians as well, and as such had to be endured.

Two other concepts that are crucial to our understanding of Vivekananda, and the role he played in 'repackaging' Hindu ideas during the colonial era, are the labels 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism'. As we have already discussed, these terms are ambiguous even today and are continuously being defined, redefined and challenged. Vivekananda gave definitive answers for what he believed these words meant in such a way as to seemingly leave no room for discussion. However, despite this apparent confidence, upon closer inspection it becomes evident that Vivekananda had trouble with these terms. Indeed, one gets the impression that he particularly struggled with defining the term 'Hindu':

> There is a word which has become very common as an appellation of our race and religion. The word "Hindu" requires a little explanation… This word "Hindu" was the name that the ancient Persians used to apply to the river Sindhu. Whenever in Sanskrit there is an "s", in ancient Persian it changes into "h", so that "Sindhu" became "Hindu"… Now this word "Hindu" as applied to the inhabitants of the other side of the Indus whatever might have been its meaning in ancient times, has lost all its force in modern times; for all the people that live on this side of the Indus no longer belong to one religion. There are the Hindus proper, the Mohammedans, the Parsees, the Christians, the Buddhists and Jains. The word "Hindu" in its literal sense ought to include all these; but as signifying the religion it would not be proper to call all these Hindus. It is very hard, therefore, to find any common name for our religion, seeing that this religion is a collection, so to speak, of various religions, of various ideas, of various ceremonials and forms, all gathered together almost without a name, and without a church and without an organization (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.228).

As a result of these inherent difficulties, Vivekananda came to what, at least initially, seems to have been a tentative working conclusion:

> The only point where, perhaps, all our sects agree is that we all believe in the scriptures – the Vedas. This perhaps is certain that no man can have a right to be called a Hindu who does not admit the supreme authority of the Vedas (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.228).

Interestingly, this is the same conclusion that the scholar Halbfass would come to, over

a century later:

> regardless of the highly elusive and ambiguous nature of the historical relationship between the Veda and Hinduism, the Hindu tradition has, for many centuries, defined itself in relation to the Veda. The Veda, or the idea of the Veda, has provided one indispensable focus for Hindu self-understanding (2005, p.21).

Now, even though Vivekananda finally surmised that only those who accepted

the Vedas were Hindus, he consistently appropriated Buddhist and Jain ideas and called

them Hindu. In a speech presented at the Parliament on the 26th of September 1893

titled "Buddhism, the Fulfillment of Hinduism" he stated:

> The relation between Hinduism (by Hinduism, I mean the religion of the Vedas) and what is called Buddhism at the present day is nearly the same as between Judaism and Christianity. Jesus Christ was a Jew, and Shakya Muni was a Hindu. The Jews rejected Jesus Christ, nay, crucified him, and the Hindus have accepted Shakya Muni as God and worship him. But the real difference that we Hindus want to show between modern Buddhism and what we should understand as the teachings of Lord Buddha, lies principally in this: Shakya Muni came to preach nothing new. He also, like Jesus, came to fulfil and not to destroy. Only, in the case of Jesus, it was the old people, the Jews, who did not understand him, while in the case of Buddha, it was his own followers who did not realize the import of his teachings. As the Jew did not understand the fulfillment of the Old Testament, so the Buddhist did not understand the fulfillment of the truths of the Hindu religion. Again, I repeat, Shakya Muni came not to destroy, but he was the fulfilment, the logical conclusion, the logical development of the religion of the Hindus (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.21).

I am not even going to try and address the multiple controversies that these statements

could raise, with both Christians and Jews alike, since that is beyond the scope of my

research. Instead, I would like to draw attention to the fact that not only did

Vivekananda think that Buddhism was the 'fulfillment of Hinduism' but that he believed

that the Buddhists had not understood the Buddha themselves. What is worth nothing

here however, is that one also gets the distinct impression that this was his way of

conceding that 'Hinduism' needed the reform that the Buddha provided. Whereas this

offers no consolation to a Buddhist, as far as Vivekananda was concerned, he probably

believed he was paying the Buddhists a compliment when he suggested that Buddhism

was the fulfilment of 'Hinduism.' After all, for Vivekananda, 'Hinduism' was the best

'religion' known to man and being the fulfilment of such a 'religion' could only be seen

as an expression of approval! Indeed, one gets a clear sense of Vivekananda's frustration

with the fact that the Buddhists did not want to be referred to as Hindus and that they

did not accept the Vedas as their ultimate authority.

Of course, this appropriation of the Buddha was not novel to Vivekananda.

Historians have argued that one of the reasons Buddhist traditions began to fade away

from the Indian landscape was because Hindu philosophers incorporated many

Buddhist concepts into their own ideological system. Nowhere is this more evident than

with the *smriti* scriptures in general and the *Vishnu Puranas* in particular, texts that

gained prominence during the Puranic period. For example, in *The Hindus* (2009),

Wendy Doniger observes:

> The myth of Vishnu's incarnation as the Buddha is established in full detail in the
> *Vishnu Purana*, represented on the sixth-to-seventh-century Dashavatara temple
> at Deogarh and mentioned in a seventh-century Pallava inscription and an
> eighth-century Tamil inscription (2009, p.482).

Furthermore, she elaborates:

> The *Bhagavata Purana* says that Vishnu became the Buddha in order to protect
> us from lack of enlightenment and from fatal blunders. The *Varaha Purana*
> advises the worshiper to worship Kalki when he wants to destroy enemies and
> the Buddha when he wants beauty. The *Matsya Purana* describes the Buddha as
> lotus-eyed, beautiful as a god, and peaceful. Kshemendra's eleventh-century
> "Deeds of the Ten Avatars" and Jayadeva's tenth-century *Gita Govinda* tell the
> story of the Buddha avatar in a straight, heroic tale based on the standard
> episodes of Gautama's life as related in the Pali canon, and Jayadeva says that
> Vishnu became the Buddha out of compassion for animals, to end bloody
> sacrifices. The *Dashavatara-stotra*, attributed (most apocryphally) to Shankara
> (who was often accused of being a crypto-Buddhist), praises the Buddha avatar.
> The *Devibhagavata Purana* offers homage to Vishnu, "who became incarnate as
> the Buddha in order to stop the slaughter of animals and to destroy the sacrifices
> of the wicked," adding a moral judgement to Jayadeva's more neutral statement;
> although the last phrase might be translated "to destroy wicked sacrifices" or
> taken to imply that all sacrifices are wicked, it is also possible that only wicked

(or demonic, or proto-Buddhist) sacrificers, not virtuous Hindu sacrificers, are condemned. These texts may express a Hindu desire to absorb Buddhism in a peaceful manner, both to win Buddhists to the worship of Vishnu and to account for the fact that such a significant heresy could prosper in India (Doniger, 2009, p.484).

What these examples from Puranic texts demonstrate is that Vivekananda was just another Indian voice who was echoing the widespread Hindu *doxa* that the Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu. While this was already deeply problematic when it was contained to the Indian subcontinent, it became exponentially worse when it was broadcast on a world stage.[58]

Another Indian community that Vivekananda took issue with were the Jains, which he also addressed by trying to include them under, what he perceived to be, the 'Hinduism' umbrella:

> Those that believe in the Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, as eternal revelations of truth, are called orthodox and those that stand on other authorities, rejecting the Vedas, are the heterodox in India. The chief modern unorthodox Hindu sects are the Jains and the Buddhists (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.2, p.238).

This is reminiscent of a recent argument made by Halbfass that should give readers a glimpse into the fact that issues such as these continue to be relevant, thereby highlighting the complex relationship between Indian philosophic traditions and the Vedas:

> The modern idea of "Hinduism," or of the "Hindu religion," is a reinterpretation of the traditional ideas and, in a sense, a hybridization of the traditional self-understanding. Yet it is by no means a mere adaptation of western superimpositions. It is also a continuation of the tradition, an expression and transformation of that self-understanding which articulates itself in its commitment to the Vedic revelation. It is this commitment that provides the focus for traditional Hindu self-understanding, and that provides a paradigm and exemplary precedent even for those movements that pay little attention to the Vedic revelation, or try to supersede it and replace it (Halbfass, 2005, p.28).

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[58] We will return to Vivekananda's engagement with the Buddhist traditions in the following chapters as we explore the hierarchy that Vivekananda tried to establish between Indian traditions.

As we discussed in Chapter 3, the difficultly with identifying who should be called Hindu is not one that is easily resolved even in contemporary times. As far as Vivekananda is concerned, it obviously became clear to him, at the Parliament, that the Buddhists and the Jains considered themselves to be distinct from the Hindus. I do not mean to suggest that Vivekananda was ignorant of these differences when he lived in India. Instead, I would argue that seeing representatives from the Buddhist and Jain communities, being acknowledged as separate from the Hindu representatives at the Parliament, must have made an impression on Vivekananda. After all, in India these traditions were usually grouped together by their Western colonizers. However, at the Parliament, they were expected to defend distinct traditions and identify what set them apart. This may have come as a surprise to Vivekananda since he had not applied formally to attend the Parliament, and therefore, was probably not aware of the various speakers that had been accepted as representatives of India. I do not know if one can qualify this as naïveté on Vivekananda's part but, it seems apparent that Vivekananda was not willing to accept these divisions, because he repeatedly tried to find ways to include the Buddhists, and the Jains, within the Hindu fold. Indeed, he firmly believed that they shared the same Vedic philosophic ancestry:

> upon severe analysis you will always find that the essence of Buddhism was all borrowed from the same Upanishads: even the ethics, the so-called great and wonderful ethics of Buddhism, were there word for word, in some one or other of the Upanishads, and so all the good doctrines of the Jains were there, minus all the vagaries (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.230).

Vivekananda evidently found the word 'Hindu' unreliable, but nevertheless like Lorenzen, accepted that its implementation had first become popular during the Mughal Empire (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.118). It is also significant that while Vivekananda acknowledged a complex relationship with the Jains and the Buddhists, he did not find it necessary to include Sikhism, which was another 'religion' that claimed India as its

birthplace. Indeed, whereas he did mention the Sikhs, and particularly Guru Nanak,

numerous times in his writing, he never engaged with them in a challenging way.

Instead, he simply swept them into his version of the history of Hindu traditions along

with Sankara, Kabir and Chaitanya (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, pp.165, 394). Perhaps,

this is because like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda also believed that "the Sikh Gurus were

but reincarnations of ancient Rishis" (Sen, 1993, p.298). Or, perhaps more accurately, it

was because the Sikhs were not considered to be one of the Western decreed 'great

traditions' and as a result they did not have a representative at the Parliament since it

was "[o]rganized around the idea of ten "great traditions" – Confucianism, Taoism,

Shinto, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam"

(Seager, 2009, p.xiv). Consequently, Vivekananda did not feel an inherent need to justify

why the Sikhs should be included under the Hindu banner, as he did with the Buddhists

and the Jains, who were well represented at the Parliament.

So what about the term 'Hinduism'? Was this just as problematic for

Vivekananda? Actually, one gets the distinct impression that defining 'Hinduism' was

not as challenging as defining 'Hindu'. Perhaps this is because for Vivekananda

'Hinduism' was just another way of saying 'Vedantism' (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, pp.61,

229). Indeed, he repeatedly defined 'Hinduism' as the 'religion' of the Vedas:

> You must remember that what the Bible is to the Christians, what the Koran is to
> the Mohammedans, what the Tripitaka is to the Buddhist, what the Zend Avesta
> is to the Parsees, these Upanishads are to us. These and nothing but these are our
> scriptures. The Puranas, the Tantras, and all the other books, even the *Vyasa-Sutras*, are of secondary, tertiary authority, but primary are the Vedas
> (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.332).

Vivekananda placed special emphasis on the Upanishads since he believed that the

Upanishads (also known as the 'end of the Veda', or Vedanta) were the most crucial

teachings in the Vedas. He argued that the term 'Vedanta' was the most appropriate

label for the 'religion' of the Hindus:

> The Jnana Kanda, as embodying the spiritual teachings of the Vedas known as the Upanishads and the Vedanta, has always been cited as the highest authority by all our teachers, philosophers, and writers, whether dualist, or qualified monist, or monist. Whatever be his philosophy or sect, every one in India has to find his authority in the Upanishads. If he cannot, his sect would be heterodox. Therefore, perhaps the one name in modern times which would designate every Hindu throughout the land would be "Vedantist" or "Vaidika", as you may put it; and in that sense I always use the word "Vedantism" and "Vedanta" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.229).

This leap that Vivekananda made from Hindus to Vedantins was problematic, especially

since the Vedanta *darsana* (school of philosophy) represents only one of the six

darsanas that are commonly associated with Hindu traditions. What further complicates

matters, however, is that not only did Vivekananda associate all Hindu ideas with

Vedanta but he also seemed to be conflating Vedantic and Advaitic ideas thereby

making it difficult to see the difference between them. Gwylim Beckerlegge points out:

> Vedanta represented for Vivekananda the highest insight of Hinduism and the clearest anticipation to date of the universal religion. In nineteenth-century Bengal, Vedanta was widely held to be synonymous with Advaita, and, by 1896, Vivekananda had come to identify "Vedantist" with "Hindu". The elasticity in the usage of "Vedanta," "Advaita," and "Hindu" served Vivekananda's purpose when he turned to a non-dualist form of Vedanta as the "highest generalization" of religious metaphysics and ethics. When speaking of Advaita/Vedanta in this vein, Vivekananda was prepared to reduce the complexities of this long-established Hindu philosophical tradition to a very generalized level of meaning (2004, pp.309-310).

> What is important to remember here, however, is that it is clear from his various

lectures and discourses, that Vivekananda was quite aware of the distinctions between

Vedanta and Advaita. In fact, he oftentimes pointed out the variations and made

clarifications:

> In general there are three sorts of commentators in India now: from their interpretations have arisen three systems of philosophy and sects. One is the dualistic, or Dvaita; a second is the qualified non-dualistic, or Vishishtadvaita;

and a third is the non-dualistic, or Advaita (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, pp.358-359).

Moreover, Vivekananda articulated the difference between these three schools of Vedanta:

> Dvaitism – small circle different from the big circle, only connected by Bhakti; Vishishtadvaitism – small circle within the big circle, motion regulated by the big circle; Advaitism – small circle expands and coincides with the big circle. In Advaitism, "I" loses itself in God. God is here, God is there, God is "I" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.122).

And, he acknowledged that Advaita was not the only school that used the Vedas as its basis:

> We all know that Advaitism is only one branch of the various philosophic systems that have been founded on the Upanishads. The followers of the Vishistadvaitic system have as much reverence for the Upanishads as the followers of the Advaita, and the Vishishtadvaitists claim as much authority for the Vedanta as the Advaitist. So do the dualists; so does every other sect in India (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.229).

Vivekananda seemed to recognize that these distinctions were not always obvious to most people. As a result, he conceded that these terms were often conflated and misquoted, "I want to make it a little clearer, for of late it has become the custom of most people to identify the word Vedanta with the Advaitic system of Vedanta philosophy" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.229). Ironically, he argued that part of the reason why there was this confusion was because of Western scholarship:

> In what is being written and taught in the West about the religious thought of India, one school of Indian thought is principally represented, that which is called Advaitism, the monistic side of Indian religion: and sometimes it is thought that all the teachings of the Veda are comprised in that one system of philosophy. There are, however, various phases of Indian thought: and perhaps, this non-dualistic form is in the minority as compared with the other phases (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.2, p.238).

Nevertheless, despite recognizing that Advaitic philosophy was 'in the minority' he argued repeatedly that it was this philosophy that distinguished 'Hinduism' from other 'religions' and was the pinnacle of any religious achievement in the world. For

Vivekananda, Advaita was "the fairest flower of philosophy and religion that any country in any age has produced, where human thought attains its highest expression and even goes beyond the mystery which seems to be impenetrable" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.2, p.247).

Similarly, he argued that Advaita:

> is the salvation of the world, because therein alone is to be found the reason of things. Dualism and other *isms* are very good as means of worship, very satisfying to the mind, and maybe they have helped the mind onward; but if man wants to be rational and religious at the same time, Advaita is the one system in the world for him (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.404).

Consequently, since in his opinion, Advaita was the highest level that any 'religion' could reach, and since it was a branch of Vedanta, it was appropriate to use the term Vedanta as a valid and legitimate alternate label for 'Hinduism'. I do not think that Vivekananda wanted to intentionally conflate Advaita with Vedanta. That much seems to be apparent since he consistently tried to highlight the fact that Advaita only represents one of the three branches that are routinely included under Vedanta. Rather, one gets the distinct impression that Vivekananda is struggling to find a resolution to this dilemma himself. A characteristic of his that oftentimes results in scholars who study him to argue, as Amiya Sen does in the previous chapter, that Vivekananda occasionally presented contrary viewpoints that can lead to opposing conclusions about him.[59]

That being said, at least as far as Vivekananda was concerned, one thing was certain. Advaita was the best, the most important, and indeed the epitome of all philosophy, in India and elsewhere. Therefore, the problem was that even though he distinguished between the three paths, he spoke most often, and the most highly of Advaita. Now, since he was speaking exponentially more about Advaita than any other

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[59] This is an issue that we will explore in some detail in the final chapter.

aspect of Vedanta, and since he readily conflated Vedanta with 'Hinduism', it is not

surprising that Advaita was often understood as a synonym for Vedanta, and therefore,

as an alternative label for 'Hinduism'; both by his listeners and his followers. And finally,

saying that these definitions are problematic would be an understatement. However, I

will have to leave that for further discussion and analysis in the following chapters. For

now, we have some working definitions with which to continue examining

Vivekananda's speeches. This should allow us to understand why Sister Nivedita stated,

in the introduction to *The Complete Works*:

> Of the Swami's address before the Parliament of Religions, it may be said that
> when he began to speak it was of "the religious ideas of the Hindus", but when he
> ended, Hinduism had been created (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.x).

"Paper on Hinduism" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, pp.6-20)

The main paper that Vivekananda presented at the Parliament was simply titled

"Paper on Hinduism." It was in this speech that he outlined his version of 'Hinduism'. A

version that captivated not only his American audiences, but which also inspired a

newfound respect for their own traditions, amongst his Hindu readers in India. Sister

Nivedita's claim that it was with this address at the Parliament that the term 'Hinduism'

was finally defined, seems to ring true. Vivekananda did indeed try his very best to

demonstrate that the 'religions of the Hindus' were a complex myriad of traditions,

philosophies and practices, which, despite their many contradictions and contrasting

theories, could be presented as a united whole. Vivekananda put forth a comprehensive

definition of 'Hinduism' as a vast, intricate and elaborate system; a description that is

remarkably similar to the ones that J.Z. Smith and Ferro-Luzzi propose in previous

chapters. This then allowed him to argue that it could, and indeed it should, serve as a

perfect example of how a 'universal religion' should appear.[60] Whereas, the end result of

his efforts did not culminate in a 'universal religion', it did give Hindus in India a

platform upon which they could unite and form a coalition against British colonialism.

Thus, even though Vivekananda repeatedly claimed that he was a renunciate and

therefore was not interested in political manoeuvrings, nevertheless, his speeches

inspired many to find common ground in their battle against foreign oppression:

> Nationalism thus decided to write the history of the Indian nation in the texts of
> neo-Hinduism. This history however was also supposed to be exemplary to the
> Indian people. The return to the essential past in the way that neo-Hindu
> ideologues like Vivekananda imagined was supposed to act as a great counselor
> to people in their project of nationalist regeneration (Basu, 2002, p.45).

Vivekananda began, what was to be his longest presentation at the Parliament,

by returning to his claim of antiquity for 'Hinduism'. He qualified this by saying that

there were two others that shared this mantle of antiquity with Hindu traditions,

Zoroastrianism and Judaism. However, for Vivekananda this similarity ended there

since he went on to state:

> 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 (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.6).

Once again, we see how Vivekananda invokes the image of the 'mother' an idea that he

believed was especially powerful.[61] Presenting 'Hinduism' as the 'mother religion' was

his way of granting it supremacy, while at the same time denying Western traditional

ideas the right to claim that Hindu philosophy remained in its infancy. Notice also how,

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[60] We will return to this idea of a 'universal religion' in the following chapters.
[61] In the final chapter, we will discuss in greater detail, Vivekananda's engagement with
the 'feminine principle' as 'mother'.

by stating "those sects were all sucked in, absorbed, and assimilated into the immense body of the mother faith" Vivekananda summarily appropriated all the ideas and philosophies that took birth on Indian soil. This problematic attitude of Vivekananda's was compounded by his next statement:

> From the spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes, to the low ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology, the agnosticism of the Buddhists, and the atheism of the Jains, each and all have a place in the Hindu's religion (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.6).

This single sentence is teeming with issues that would, and should, deeply concern contemporary scholars. First, he claimed a higher spiritual ground for Vedic philosophy, while arguing that contemporary theories of science and reason had already been expounded in the Vedas. Next, he placed idol worship on one of the lowest rungs of the Hindu hierarchy, thereby creating some distance for himself from these practices that were usually viewed unfavourably by the Westerners. And finally, he appropriated Buddhist and Jain theology in one fell swoop, claiming authority over these Indian traditions. That being said however, it also has to be recognized that there are a number of reasons why Vivekananda's use of such language must have appealed to his audiences, both at the Parliament and in India. As far as the West was concerned, this approach allowed them to understand, in language that was familiar to them, how traditions that were seemingly so contradictory could exist in relative harmony. King points out:

> it would seem that the key to the West's initial postulation of the unity of 'Hinduism' derives from the Judaeo-Christian suppositions of the Orientalists and missionaries. Convinced as they were that distinctive religions could not coexist without frequent antagonism, the doctrinal liberality of Indian religions remained a mystery without the postulation of an overarching religious framework that could unite the Indians under the flag of a single religious tradition. How else can the relatively peaceful coexistence of the various Hindu movements be explained without some sense of religious unity? Why else would

Hindus of differing sectarian affiliations accept the existence of rival gods unless they belonged to the same religious tradition (1999, p.105).

King's argument provides an explanation as to how Hindu elites, both before and during Vivekananda's time, recognized this inherent need that the Westerners had to see 'Hinduism' as a coherent and unified 'religion. In response, these elite voices tried to present a comprehensive version of their traditional ideas. On the one hand, this gave them an opportunity to be accepted on the world stage since they seemed to be offering a viable response to the hegemony of Western religious traditions. On the other hand, this also gave Indians a platform from which to create a nation. King goes on to clarify:

This Hindu attitude does not merely reflect the colonization of their thought-processes by the Orientalists. Postulation of Hindu unity was to be encouraged in the development of Indian autonomy from British rule. *Swaraj* (home rule) was seen to be inconceivable without the unification of India along nationalistic and cultural lines. Not only that, although sectarian clashes have always occurred, in general Indian religious groups appear to have been able to live together in a manner unprecedented in the history of the Judaeo-Christian religions in the West (1999, pp.106-107).

It was this theory, that Indians had found some way to co-exist in relative harmony, that Vivekananda repeatedly revisited and which formed a cornerstone of his argument. Thus, even though he oftentimes found ways to separate himself from idolatry, he never went so far as to say that such ideals required reform. Instead, he argued that they needed to be understood as an alternative, usually lower, but nevertheless viable, option for many Hindus.

As we saw in the previous chapter, this idea that there are different paths depending on the kind of person you are, or the background you come from, or the community you belong to, is one that was used regularly by Vivekananda's guru Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna routinely advocated, both with his words and his actions, that there were many ways to understand and engage with the divine. For example, Sen notes:

the broad eclecticism of Ramakrishna who seems to have cleverly grafted an innate defence of Hinduism into his fairly tolerant and flexible spiritual framework. This was achieved through the reemphasis on the traditional concept of *adhikari-bheda* – worship in keeping with the social and spiritual status of the individual (1993, p.34).[62]

Sen contends that this approach of Ramakrishna's "tended to make its [Hinduism] idolatrous forms of worship spiritually consistent with Vedantic monotheism" (1993, p. 34). Accordingly, Sen argues that many of Vivekananda's ideas, regarding the relationship between the Hindu philosophy that reveres a God with attributes (*Saguna Brahman*) versus those that honour a God without attributes (*Nirguna Brahman*) stems from Ramakrishna's teachings which "legitimized the worship of a Sakar – Saguna Iswar (God with form and attributes) together with a belief in the Nirakar – Nirguna" (1993, p.291).

These ideas of Ramakrishna's, ideas that were culled from traditional Hindu philosophy, are what Vivekananda now publicized and championed. One of the most unique aspects of Vivekananda's modus operandi was his ability to not only defend Hindu philosophy, ideals and practices, but, to present them in a way which was not hesitant or defensive, but rather, proud and forceful. It was this capacity of his, to highlight the accomplishments and validity of the Indian way of life, which made him stand apart from earlier Indian elites. Basu argues that it was with Vivekananda that both the West, and Indians alike, saw the potential that India had. This, in turn, allowed Indians an opportunity to regain their voice after centuries of colonial subjugation:

> This theme of cultural competence, the ability of colonial society to become modern, which in the case of nineteenth-century colonial India implied that it could make similar claims of universalism like the European Enlightenment, is crucial to all Third World nationalism. Before Vivekananda, the Brahmos, in order to be modern had discarded Hinduism. In opposition the Hindu revivalists discarded the modern in order to regain their autonomy as Hindu. In Vivekananda finally the modern is acclaimed as Hindu (Basu, 2002, p.38).

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[62] We will return to this idea of *adhikari-beda* in the concluding chapter.

Unlike many of his predecessors, who oftentimes took a defensive position when

engaging with the West, Vivekananda went on the offensive. He was not only wont to

uphold the many wonders of India but was equally capable of highlighting the errors of

Western ways. Accordingly, Sen states:

> By the late 1880s the entire Renaissance tradition in Bengal was replete with pungent critiques and counter-offensives *vis-à-vis* Western civilization and culture…. That the West was largely 'barbaric' at a time when civilization was at its peak in Asia is a belief reflected in the writings of many established writers in nineteenth century Bengal; none of them however, approached the question with as much courage and fervour as Vivekananda (1993, p.336).

Vivekananda repeatedly attacked European ideas and nowhere was this more evident

than in his strident critique of European civilization in his essay "The East and the

West":

> And may I ask you Europeans what country have you ever raised to better conditions? Wherever you have found weaker races, you have exterminated them by the roots, as it were. You have settled on their lands, and they are gone for ever[sic]. What is the history of your Americas, your Australia, and New Zealand, your Pacific Islands and South Africa? Where are those aboriginal races there today? They are all exterminated, you have killed them outright, as if they were wild beasts. It is only where you have not the power to do so, and there only, that other nations are still alive (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, pp.536-537).

Raychaudhari argues that in the case of Vivekananda, his propensity to highlight the

deeply problematic nature of colonization while at the same time elevate India's

accomplishments did not stem from a sense of 'inadequacy':

> The youthful monk's encounters with the West are overshadowed by his deep conviction, based on his life-experience, that in his chosen field of endeavour, he had nothing to learn from the dominant culture of the day. Instead, he offered to teach the West and advised his fellow countrymen to learn from those areas of western life where contemporary India was obviously deficient. His perceptions of Europe and America were deeply coloured by his faith in what has been reduced to a clumsy cliché – India's spiritual superiority. Cultural self-assertion was very much a part of his mission both abroad and at home. But his belief in the ultimate excellence of the Hindu spiritual inheritance – the Vedantic concepts as well as the way of Yoga in particular – was not informed by any need to compensate for the sense of inadequacy, the characteristic predicament of Europe's Afro-Asian subjects (1988, p.220).

It was this trait of Vivekananda's that gave him a sense of authority, which then allowed him to declare that India was more than competent to stand, shoulder to shoulder, with Western philosophic ideals.

The way that Vivekananda succeeded in accomplishing this goal was by using monistic Advaitic ideals. He created a hierarchy amongst Hindu traditions whereby the philosophical ideas of the Vedas, but especially the Upanishads, were considered the apex of all wisdom, Hindu and otherwise. Vivekananda set about presenting a worldview that allowed for all other traditional philosophies and practices to coexist, no matter if they were of Indian origin or not. He allowed them their validity, but only insofar as they ultimately agreed with the Vedanta. Of course, Vivekananda was not always blatant in his efforts to sell his worldview, but instead he relied on both overt and covert techniques to support his cause. In this speech at the Parliament he baldly declared, "The Hindus have received their religion through revelation, the Vedas" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.6), thereby establishing that the Vedas were considered to be 'revealed' truths. He must have known that this would raise the value of the Vedas in the eyes of his Judeo-Christian audience, which, in turn, would allow Hindus to claim equal legitimacy for their scriptures when challenged by their Western counterparts. Vivekananda then goes on to declare that creation was "without beginning or end" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.7) since, to argue anything else would be, according to him, equivalent to arguing that God did not always exist. This is a particularly interesting, and in some ways, antagonistic, tactic adopted by Vivekananda considering the fact that 'creationism' was one of the foundations of the Western worldview. Instead, Vivekananda chose to align himself with ideas of science and reason, thereby suggesting that Hindu philosophy was more amenable to these modern concepts than Christianity.

He further emphasized that the seers, to whom these revelations were made, also included women. This is especially important since a majority of his most avid Western listeners were female and as such responded well to hearing that female seers were revered in India. However, this was not only a means for him to endear himself to his audience but also a way in which he could demonstrate how well suited Hindu ideas were for a world in which women were beginning to question ideas of gender inequality. Vivekananda repeatedly used Western, scientific language to explain such Hindu ideas as time, an indestructible soul, and the idea of reincarnation. The language he used to highlight the strengths and glory of the Hindu past were catered to appeal to Western, scientific minds. Indeed, his language which offered up the complex ideas of Western philosophers like Hegel, Darwin, Spencer etc., in broad strokes and no-nonsense formulas, took both the West and India by storm.

Idol worship justified?

Before concluding this chapter, a few words need to be said about Vivekananda's treatment of idol worship. Particularly since this was instrumental in helping him to establish a hierarchy amongst Indian traditions; a problematic tactic that becomes evident when he returns to India. Especially considering that this hierarchy continues to influence the way many Hindus in India today view their traditional ideas. What is noteworthy is that it was only after establishing that the Hindu traditions he ascribed to were amenable to science and reason that Vivekananda took up the matter of multiple deities. It is true he did mention this 'hot button' issue in the opening sentences of his speech, but it was not until later, when he had already demonstrated that Indian ideas were not outdated, that he revisited this point in some detail; a smart tactical move on his part. First, he established the lofty ideals of Vedanta. Thereafter, he showcased how

these concepts were compatible with science and reason. Once he had his audience in

the palm of his hand, agreeing with the wondrous aspects of Hindu philosophy, only

then did he approach the topic of idolatry. No doubt, this was because he knew that this

was a tricky subject for Western listeners for whom idolatry, or polytheism, was usually

seen as a sign of a backward society. Perhaps Vivekananda surmised that to completely

ignore the issue could be seen either as a sign of shame, or mute acceptance and as such,

decided to tackle the question head on:

> At the very outset, I may tell you that there is no *polytheism* in India. 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 explain the situation. "The rose called by any other name would smell as sweet." Names are not explanations (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.15, emphasis in original).

It was important for Vivekananda to demonstrate why, just because someone prayed to

multiple deities, it did not mean that they did not comprehend that these were tools

used to understand *Brahman*. He accomplished this by stating that some of the holiest

men he had ever known prayed to various forms of deities, but who, by their actions

and deeds were enlightened souls. Clearly, Vivekananda was speaking of his guru

Ramakrishna here. Vivekananda then adeptly turned the focus onto the Christian use of

images and symbols and argued that the need for such tools, in order to engage with the

divine, was universal and not limited to Hindus:

> Why is the cross holy? Why is the face turned toward the sky in prayer? Why are there so many images in the Catholic Church? Why are there so many images in the minds of Protestants when they pray? 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 (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, pp.15-16).

In this manner, Vivekananda built his argument that stated that whereas Hindus did pray to idols and symbols, just like the Christians, they did this with an awareness that this was simply a stage in their journey towards *Brahman*. Arguments such as these have their basis in Advaita philosophy, but Vivekananda did not specify this here; instead he presented these arguments as if they were aspects of a pan-Hindu philosophy. Furthermore, in a very interesting, and at some level disturbing tactic, Vivekananda turned arguments that had been utilized by the West, against Hindu traditions in general, on to idol worship in particular. In an obvious effort to separate himself, yet show some level of unity amongst Hindu traditional practices, he adopted the 'childhood of humanity' argument when describing Hindus who worshipped idols:

> Mark, the same earnest man who is kneeling before the idol tells you, "Him the sun cannot express, nor the moon, nor the stars, the lightning cannot express Him, nor what we speak of as fire; through Him they shine." But he does not abuse any one's idol or call its worship sin. He recognizes in it a necessary stage of life. "The child is the father of the man." Would it be right for an old man to say that childhood is a sin or youth a sin?
> If a man can realize his divine nature with the help of an image, would it be right to call that a sin? Nor even when he has passed that stage, should he call it an error. To the Hindu, man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, pp.16-17).

As a result, we now have Vivekananda using images of childhood, and references to different stages of spiritual growth, that had previously been used against Hindu traditions. Images that he hotly contested, but which he now willingly applied to Hindu practitioners who adhered to *bhakti* versus Vedantic ideals. And, it was this Vedantic worldview that he used when he spoke of relative and absolute truths (not surprisingly, he does not credit Buddhism for these ideas), in an effort to establish the practical uses of idols and symbols in a layperson's life. This hierarchy that Vivekananda incorporated is of particular interest and I will return to this discussion in the next chapter as it is one of the most disturbing contributions of his legacy.

<u>Conclusion</u>

As we turn our gaze to Vivekananda's celebrated return to India there are a few aspects of his speeches at the Parliament that are particularly important to note, points which we will return to again in the following chapter. First, Vivekananda was very concerned about the way Hindu traditions were understood by his Western audience. As such, he was determined to 'repackage' their perception of India's philosophic legacy. However, unlike previous Hindu elites, who had engaged with Western audiences, Vivekananda was unapologetic about his traditional beliefs. Consequently, rather than embracing a reformist attitude, he exhibits a superiority complex when speaking of Hindu philosophical ideas. Secondly, he believed that the best way to justify his claims of superiority was by using Vedanta as his vehicle of communication. Of course, as we saw in the previous chapter, this was a strategy that had already been used by his predecessors like Rammohan and Bankimchandra. In fact, this is a point that we will revisit in the ensuing chapters as we investigate the ways Vivekananda fits into the dialogue that was taking place on the Indian subcontinent. That being said, in Vivekananda's opinion, Vedanta with its lofty non-dualistic ideals, highlighted aspects of Hindu philosophy that overshadowed Christianity's high moralistic credo, since it went beyond monotheism and championed monism instead. As far as Vivekananda was concerned, monism could claim the higher moral ground since its basis of 'no difference' placed everybody on an equal footing. It is important to remember here that whereas the term 'monotheism' is oftentimes laden with Eurocentric sensibilities, this does not mean that the philosophical questions which underscored such labels were limited to the Western hemisphere. For example, McEvilley draws attention to the fact that questions regarding 'monism' and 'pantheism' had been extensively debated by ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Indians, and their conclusions were remarkably comparable:

A monistic tendency of thought, gathering momentum, creates a meltdown in a polytheistic mythology. Toward the end of the New Kingdom this tendency reached the breaking point in the theology of Amon-Re. The priests of this school, at the great temple of Karnak, were on the verge of the abstract conception of monism. Their sacred discourse had gone beyond narrative, as they declared Amon-Re to be "the solitary sole one," "the one only," the "one who has no second," the "one one" – all ideas that are essentially antinarrative. Amon-Re was elevated beyond discursive reach, including the reach of mythological narrative and imagery, through a series of paradoxes – the first series of studied and carefully refined paradoxes on record (2002, pp.24-25).

Similarly, he highlights:

The *pantheos* was highlighted many times in India, where archaic concepts were not discarded but continued to exist, with the force of traditional validation, alongside new ones. The Upanisadic *atman*, or Universal Subject for example, is described as a *pantheos* in terms that mix the imagery of the *Purusasukta* with new more abstract elements (McEvilley, 2002, pp.26-27).

Interestingly enough however, McEvilley's conclusion resonates with Vivekananda's declarations that India was the place where such ideas were nurtured:

In India the whole tenor of literature changed when the polytheism was decayed, or was absorbed, into the monistic framework. All subsequent Indian literature is saturated with the monistic view. Yet in Greece, literature in general continued the polytheistic view of Homer and Hesiod as if the monistic revisions of Xenophanes and others had never occurred. The monistic attitude became a small enduring philosophical cult as it were, kept alive by special sheltering from society as a whole. It would seem that, if any diffusion claims are to be made as a result of this thorough and detailed parallelism, it is diffusion from India or elsewhere into Greece that is most likely to be its form, not the other way around (McEvilley, 2002, p.61).

What this demonstrates is that Vivekananda is building on philosophical arguments that had been evolving for centuries. Consequently, his theories were not developed in a vacuum (just as Kapoor contends in the beginning of this chapter). Rather, they were the result of the 'continental collision' that had been occurring since antiquity, which, in turn, made him just one of the more recent voices to have joined the fray. Be that as it may, it is noteworthy that by expounding on idol worship, he was willing to demonstrate that he was not afraid to not only discuss, but also explain, how and why praying to a myriad of deities was not something to fear or scoff at. As we turn to the

next chapter, where we explore the differences between the speeches that Vivekananda made at the Parliament, versus the declarations he made in India, we will be able to examine how he adjusted his message when speaking to an Indian audience. His technique offer us a unique window through which to observe the way Hindu traditional ideas responded to the 'continental collision' that occurred during the British Raj. Especially since those aftershocks are still being felt in India today with the widespread impact of the Hindutva movement and their message of supremacy.

Swami Vivekananda: A Hero Returns

Before we examine the speeches made by Vivekananda, when he returned to India, there are a few points we must keep in mind. First, when Vivekananda left India he was simply one of Ramakrishna's renunciate disciples, and as such, was relatively unknown. Secondly, despite his unheralded arrival in the US, Vivekananda was very well received at the Parliament, as a result of which, reports of his successful speeches reached Indian ears and were published in multiple Indian newspapers. And, finally, Vivekananda acquired several Western followers due to the various lecture circuits he participated in, and the multiple Vedanta centres that he helped establish, in the United States and England. This change in status, and level of recognition, are important when analysing the tone of his voice, and the authority with which he spoke, when he returned to India. The years Vivekananda had spent overseas had given him a better understanding about many Western theories, strategies and practices. Indeed, because of his time in the West, Vivekananda experienced a unique form of 'continental collision' that impacted how he packaged his ideas about Hindu concepts. And, as we saw in the last chapter, he was quick to adapt his message and use language and concepts that were more familiar for the Western world

In India, however, he was faced with the task of convincing his compatriots that his way of 'packaging' Hindu traditions was crucial if they wanted to convince both their colonizers, as well as the world at large, that Hindu philosophy was not only at par with other traditions but in fact was superior. Of particular interest to us are the strategies that Vivekananda used to accomplish his mission; strategies that continue to be used today by many Hindus, both in India as well as the diaspora. Vivekananda was one of the early architects of this phenomenon whereby Hindus began embracing the idea of

an all-encompassing, all-inclusive, almost monolithic 'Hinduism'. As I explore how the 'cyclonic monk'[63] took India by storm I will juxtapose his methods with the conclusions of certain contemporary scholars, who may not always recognize Vivekananda as one of the game changers of the nineteenth century, but, who nevertheless, identify how Hindu traditional concepts were restructured during the colonial era and beyond. In the second and third chapters of this study I offered up a theoretical analysis on how the terms 'religion' and 'Hinduism' developed over the centuries and across continents. This theoretical analysis gave me a framework from which to determine, in the previous chapter, how Vivekananda engaged with these concepts in an effort to present India as a united entity, with a comprehensible philosophical system, capable of standing shoulder to shoulder with Western states. Now, as he returns to India, we shall see that he continued on this trajectory thereby establishing that the Indian elite were not passive responders to this 'continental collision'. Instead, they actively participated in the restructuring of their society. Unfortunately however, some of this restructuring resulted in a derivative discourse that that can still prove to be harmful to the integrity of Indian traditions.

Perhaps a few points of clarification might be useful here. Vivekananda was not the first Hindu to try and repackage Hindu ideas in such a way as to make them more palatable to both Western and Indian audiences; there were many before him. For example, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay recreated the popular image of Krishna to suit, what he believed to be modern India's needs.[64] Many Hindu intellectuals, not only Vivekananda, opted to use religious language to help unite their countrymen. What

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[63] Vivekananda was referred to as the 'cyclonic monk' by several newspaper articles after he spoke at the Parliament.
[64] Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya, *Krishna Charitra* (1888).

made Vivekananda unique was the fact that he had lectured his audiences in the West, on the merits of Hindu traditions, in a forceful yet conciliatory manner; the likes of which were not seen again until Gandhi entered the world's political arena. As such, the tactics used by Vivekananda to build up the confidence and self-esteem of his countrymen, whilst at the same time redeeming the perceived image of Hindu traditions are an important stepping stone to understanding how Vivekananda's emphasis on Advaita Vedanta became so widespread.

No doubt, the additional insight that Vivekananda obtained, into how the Western mind worked, due to his close connections with several Western elites[65], helped him to identify how best to package Hindu ideas. Vivekananda himself acknowledged that he had seen a need for the adaptation of Hindu ideas and therefore had taken the liberty to do so. In a letter written by Vivekananda to his brother disciple, Alasinga, in February 1896, while he was still on his first American tour, he wrote:

> to put the Hindu ideas into English and then make out of dry philosophy 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 dry abstract Advaita must become living – poetic – in everyday life; out of hopelessly intricate mythology must come concrete moral forms; 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* (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, pp.104-105, emphasis added).

It is this vision of his that resulted in Vivekananda presenting Hindu traditions in a way, which he believed, would not only earn the West's respect, but, at the same time, make Hindus proud of their rich heritage. Ironically, it is largely due to his success in the West, where he was able to present Hindu ideas in a manner that made them both attractive

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[65] In *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries* (2013), Marie Louise Burke offers a detailed account of Vivekananda's travels and the people he met and cultivated relationships with. He not only engaged with an impressive array of foreigners but also developed long and meaningful bonds with many of them.

and powerful, which gave him the momentum to return to India and demonstrate to his countrymen why his interpretation of Hindu traditions was effective. If one adds this to the fact that his success coincided with the rising popularity of the Indian nationalist movement, who were also looking for ways to unite India under a single banner, then it becomes easier to understand why Vivekananda's ideas were so influential.

As we turn now to examine how Vivekananda presented these ideas to his Indian audience, we must be aware of a few consequences with this approach. Since Vivekananda's 'repackaging' of Hindu traditions emphasized the concepts usually associated with Vedanta, this resulted in a hierarchy that effected the diverse traditions that represent Hindu philosophic thought. Vivekananda was not the first person to overemphasize the importance of the Vedanta or the Upanishads. As we have discussed in previous chapters, both Indians, and Westerners, before him had used this tactic extensively. Now, we need to study how Vivekananda impacted this trend and the ensuing repercussions they had. A second, related consequence of Vivekananda's analysis was the demotion of dualism, or *bhakti* and the traditions and rituals associated with the various gods. This resulted in many Hindus believing that their conviction in a *Saguna Brahman* was somehow less advanced than the ideas associated with a *Nirguna Brahman*, a sentiment that continues to thrive today. Since it was the ability to coexist in relative harmony with others, whose belief structure was not only different from theirs, but whose final perception of the divine was at cross purposes with their own, the creation of this hierarchy was, and continues to be deeply problematic.

A quick word about how I will structure this chapter is required here. In this chapter I will, highlight certain recurring themes in Vivekananda's various public talks as he travelled from Colombo (now Sri Lanka) to Almora. This strategy will be necessary because there are many more speeches in this period of his life, and as such, addressing

them individually would be unnecessarily repetitious. Especially since, as we shall see,

Vivekananda had certain ideas that he wanted to convey and he brings them up

frequently to drive his point home. For example, one of Vivekananda's favourite stories

was about two birds that sat in a tree, and he used it at various times while he was in

the United States. He referred to it again in a speech he made upon his return to India:

> Upon the same tree there are two birds of beautiful plumage, most friendly to
> each other, one eating the fruits, the other sitting there calm and silent without
> eating – the one in the lower branch eating sweet and bitter fruits in turn and
> becoming happy and unhappy, but the other one on the top, calm and majestic;
> he eats neither sweet nor bitter fruits, cares neither for happiness nor misery,
> immersed in his own glory. This is the picture of the human soul. ... Man catches
> a glimpse, then again he forgets and goes on eating the sweet and bitter fruits of
> life; perhaps after a time he catches another glimpse, and the lower bird goes
> nearer and nearer to the higher bird as blows after blows are received. If he be
> fortunate to receive hard knocks, then he comes nearer and nearer to his
> companion, the other bird, his life, his friend; and as he approaches him, he finds
> that the light from the higher bird is playing around his own plumage; and as he
> comes nearer and nearer, lo! the transformation is going on. The nearer and
> nearer he comes, he finds himself melting away, as it were, until he has entirely
> disappeared. He did not really exist; it was but the reflection of the other bird
> who was there calm and majestic amidst the moving leaves. It was all his glory,
> that upper bird's. He then becomes fearless, perfectly satisfied, calmly serene. In
> this figure, the Upanishads take you from the dualistic to the utmost Advaitic
> conception (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3. pp.235-236).[66]

With the way Vivekananda told this tale one was immediately made aware of an

inherent hierarchy. After all, the only way for anybody to be free and majestic, like the

bird on the top branch, was by adopting Vedantic ideals. There was a higher and a lower

level in this story, and by using this ancient Hindu analogy, Vivekananda transmitted the

message that Vedanta was the higher ideal. And, if you did not adopt Vedanta, or at least

aspired to it, then you could not find happiness or *moksha*. Whereas Vivekananda was

not the first person to interpret Vedantic ideology in this manner, he was one of the first

elites to find himself in a position to address a pan-Indian audience. For example, while

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[66] This is an adaptation of the parable of two birds from the *Mundaka Upanishad* III. 1.1-
3, which seeks to identify the relationship between *paramataman* and *jivatman*

both Bankimchandra and Rammohan were largely limited to their Bengali audience, Vivekananda was promoting this Vedantic message to the country at large. A message that was so powerful that it continues to influence Hindu thought today. Many have asked why this was problematic, and the question is a valid one. The short answer is that by allowing a hierarchy to be created in India, and, by placing Vedanta at the apex, a crucial aspect of Hindu society was at risk of being lost. In this chapter, and the one concluding this study, I will not only highlight how Vivekananda was instrumental in presenting this hierarchy in a way which made it extremely attractive to his fellow countrymen, but I will also try and shed some light on why his ideas can still undermine many layers of Hindu thought, practice and custom, which in turn can shake the very foundation of modern India and its diverse traditions.

'Colonial Masculinity', 'Muscles of iron and nerves of steel'[67]

The first thing that one perceives when one reads the welcome speeches that were given upon Vivekananda's return to India is the enthusiasm with which he was received. These speeches emphasize that the people welcoming him, in the many places where he stopped upon his return to India, were enamoured by his apparent triumph in the West. However, it soon becomes evident that whereas Vivekananda's overall success interested them, it was one particular aspect of his accomplishments that made a real impact on how they viewed Vivekananda and his methods. Most introductory speakers marvelled at how Vivekananda had succeeded in promoting the idea that Hindu philosophy should be admired and lauded by the West. Especially since, this, in

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[67] I am not unaware of the many issues that feminists, like myself, can and should have with how masculinity was privileged during this era in general, and by Vivekananda in particular. However, for the purposes of this section I will not underscore these issues leaving them to be addressed in the chapter that follows.

turn, had highlighted the value of traditional concepts to the Hindu masses, particularly

the elite reformers, many of whom had, for too long, ignored the merits of their native

traditions. For instance, on Jan 15, 1897, when Vivekananda landed in Colombo, Mr P.

Coomara Swamy of the Legislative Council of Ceylon stated:

> Western nations owe the priceless boon of being placed in living contact with the
> spiritual genius of India, while to many of our own countrymen, delivered from
> the glamour of Western civilisation, the value of our glorious heritage has been
> brought home (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.103).

It is interesting to read how similar these sentiments were amongst Vivekananda's

Indian admirers, and how they were motivated by his repackaging of Hindu ideas. One

is soon able to discern that Vivekananda had not only demonstrated how Hindu ideas

were relevant in the modern world, but, that he had in fact, at least in the eyes of his

compatriots, proved that in some respects they could be considered superior. For

example, one tactic that Vivekananda used was the repackaging of the concept of yoga,

the repercussions of which continue to be felt today. Peter van der Veer observes in

Imperial Encounters (2006):

> A major achievement was Vivekananda's creation of yoga as the Indian science of
> supraconsciousness. *Yoga* is a Sanskrit word that can be translated as
> "discipline." It has a complex history with a number of disparate traditions, but
> the classical text is Patanjali's *Yoga-sutras* which was probably composed around
> the fifth century A.D. Yoga was now made into the unifying sign of the Indian
> nation – and not only for national consumption but for consumption by the
> entire world. This is a new doctrine, although Vivekananda emphasized that it
> was ancient "wisdom." Especially the body exercises of hatha yoga, underpinned
> by a metaphysics of mind-body unity, continues to be a major entity in the health
> industry, especially in the United States. What I find important in Vivekananda's
> construction of yoga as the core of Hindu "spirituality" is that it is devoid of any
> specific devotional content that would involve, for example, temple worship and
> thus a theological and ritual position in sectarian debates. Vivekananda is, first
> and foremost, interested in Hindu unity (van der Veer, 2006, p.73).

What this example demonstrates is that Vivekananda's interpretations of ancient

scriptures gave Indians the opportunity to hold their heads up high amongst

Westerners. And, perhaps even more importantly, showed many, who had rejected their

Indian heritage, that they were mistaken to believe that the answers they sought for the advancement of Indian society could not be found in native texts. In Vivekananda, Hindu philosophy seemed to have found a voice that could resonate with both Western and Indian audiences. His message that India was the greatest nation, delivered in his uncompromising authoritative tone, on foreign soil, was infectious. Vivekananda clearly believed that whereas Indians were not openly aggressive, this did not mean that they had no backbone; instead he argued that this backbone was not politically, socially, or materialistically inclined but rather spiritually oriented (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.314). One cannot help but speculate if Vivekananda used 'religion' as his 'weapon of choice' because he knew that this would allow him to make political statements and declarations without impunity. Was this his Trojan horse? Was this a clever tactic that assuaged the colonizers concerns about political unrest? As we explore Vivekananda's views on political and national topics later in this chapter, perhaps we will be able to make an educated guess as to whether his motives were clear, or if they were intentionally ambiguous.

That being said however, it is evident that Vivekananda was deeply concerned about the impression that had been created during the British Raj, which suggested that Indian men were weak, and lacked a certain manliness that Western men possessed. This image of the 'effeminate', and therefore weak, 'Bengali *babu*' is examined in some detail by Mrinalini Sinha in *Colonial masculinity* (1995). Sinha first elaborates on what this title 'effeminate Bengali' *babu* means and how it came to be applied, at least initially, specifically to the Western educated Bengali men who often held clerical positions in British India:

> the 'Bengali *babu'* alludes to a quite specific historical ordering of colonial masculinity. By the late nineteenth century, the politics of colonial masculinity was organized along a descending scale: senior British officials associated with

the administrative and military establishment, and elite non-officials, those not directly related to the colonial administration, occupied positions at the top of the scale. Other groups and classes that made up colonial society supposedly shared some, though not all, of the attributes associated with the figure of the 'manly Englishman'. In this colonial ordering of masculinity, the politically self-conscious Indian intellectuals occupied a unique place: they represented an 'unnatural' or 'perverted' form of masculinity. Hence this group of Indians, the most typical representatives of which at the time were middle-class Bengali Hindus, became the quintessential referents for that odious category designated as 'effeminate *babus'* (1995, p.2).

Eventually however, this label was extended beyond the boundaries of Bengal and came to be applied more generally to Indian middle class men (Sinha, 1995, p.16). According to Sinha, this image that had been cultivated by the colonialists, in order to rationalize their dominant role in the Indian subcontinent, had become a rallying point amongst Indian political leaders who were intent on highlighting the most demeaning aspects of colonial rule:

> the degeneration of the body of the elite Hindu male became the symbol of the negative impact of colonial rule on indigenous society as a whole. On the other hand, the self-perception of effeminacy also facilitated a challenge, however limited and contradictory, to the dominance of the colonizing elites; for the emasculation of Indians was also the basis for challenging specific colonial policies (1995, p.7).

Indeed, it became quite routine for Indian leaders in the second half of the nineteenth century to draw attention to, what they perceived to be, a specifically Indian weakness and try to find ways to remedy the issue:

> Prominent nineteenth-century Bengali intellectuals were indeed concerned about the consequences of effeminacy. In the 1860's the famous Tagores of Jorasanko and the organization with which they were most closely associated, the *Adi Brahmo Samaj*, launched a concerted drive for the physical regeneration of the Bengalis. Bankimchandra Chatterjee, one of the most famous Bengali writers, oscillated between mocking the modern *babu* and attempting to answer the charge of Bengali effeminacy which he called *Bharat Kalanka* or the *Indian Stigma*. Bengali social and religious reformer, Swami Vivekanand [sic], was similarly a great proponent of cultivating a 'manly' physique, in his most quoted words on the subject he is reported to have remarked: 'You will be nearer to God through football than through the *Bhagwad-Gita* (Sinha, 1995, p.21).

Vivekananda made statements such as these liberally immediately upon his return to India. However, what makes Vivekananda's declarations unique, against what he perceived to be a weakness amongst his countrymen, was how he argued that this need for strength and 'manliness' would best be met with Advaita philosophy rather than the prevalent emphasis on dualism:

> When I was in America, I heard once the complaint made that I was preaching too much of Advaita, and too little of dualism. Ay, I know what grandeur, what oceans of love, what infinite, ecstatic blessings and joy there are in the dualistic love-theories of worship and religion. I know it all. But this is not the time with us to weep even in joy; we have had weeping enough; no more is this the time for us to become soft. This softness has been with us till we have become like masses of cotton and are dead. What our country now wants are *muscles of iron and nerves of steel*, gigantic wills which nothing can resist (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.190, emphasis added).

This assertion not only points to Vivekananda's acquiescence of this negative label, but indeed, highlights inherent attitudes which deserve to be examined. The first and foremost of which was his opinion that dualists were weak and as such had adopted a belief system which was holding them back from achieving true greatness. Considering that Vivekananda's guru, Ramakrishna, was given to weeping with his deity, it is rather interesting that Vivekananda considered this behaviour as a sign of weakness. For example, Sil points out:

> He [Vivekananda] was also quite contemptuous of ecstatic enthusiasm. Toward the end of his guru's life, at the Shyampukur residence, Narendranath openly inveighed against the Paramahamsa style of dances and trances indulged in by several eager young devotees of the Master. He boldly declared that shedding tears, experiencing horripilation or "even a temporary withdrawal of normal consciousness" was "the result of nervous weakness" (1997, p.104).

Another factor that makes Vivekananda's anti-dualism stance noteworthy is that he changed his emphasis substantially, when discussing Advaita with his Indian audience, in comparison with the speeches he gave at the Parliament. When in the West, Vivekananda championed Advaita Vedanta by stating that there was no philosophy that

resonated as deeply with a human being's desire to be compassionate and loving. For instance, at the Parliament he told his audience that the best way to worship the "Almighty and the All-merciful" was "Through love. 'He is to be worshipped as the one beloved, dearer than everything in this and the next life" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.1, p.11). When he returned to India however, he no longer accentuated Vedanta's basis of love, but rather emphasized its compatibility with 'muscles of iron and nerves of steel'! He used this argument against mysticism and occultism as well, once again attacking some of the basic premises of Ramakrishna's teachings. Now, there can be no doubt of Vivekananda's knowledge of Ramakrishna's mystic leanings, especially since he repeatedly warned his brother disciples to underplay those aspects of Ramakrishna when speaking of their master. For example, in a letter written from the United States, on 30th November, 1894, to Kidi (P. Singaravelu Mudaliyar), a brother disciple, Vivekananda asserted:

> As to the wonderful stories published about Shri Ramakrishna, I advise you to keep clear of them and the fools who write them. They are true, but the fools will make a mess of the whole thing, I am sure. He had a whole world of knowledge to teach, why insist upon unnecessary things as miracles really are! They do not prove anything (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, p.54).

Similarly, he repeatedly advised his fellow-disciples to avoid referring to Ramakrishna as a 'God', or an incarnation, as that would diminish the Vedantic aspects of his message. In a letter to his brother disciple Sarada (Swami Trigunatitananda) from New York in April of 1896 he stated:

> That Ramakrishna Paramahamsa was God – and all that sort of thing – has no go in countries like this. M – has a tendency to put that stuff down everybody's throat, but that will make our movement a little sect. You keep aloof from such attempts; at the same time, if people worship as God, no harm. Neither encourage nor discourage. The masses will always have the *person*, the higher ones the *principle*; we want both. But principles are universal, *not* persons.

Therefore stick to the principles he taught, let people think whatever they like of his person (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.362, emphasis in original).[68]

Considering that Ramakrishna is remembered as one of India's most important modern mystics, it is troubling to hear that Vivekananda made light of, dismissed, and even criticized this aspect of his master's teachings. Jeffrey Kripal points out:

> Rather than sacrifice his agenda to the fire of historical accuracy, however, the young preacher much preferred to throw his Master into the flames. Consider, for example, his reaction to a fellow monk's charge that, by falsely claiming that social service lies at the core of Ramakrishna's message, he had introduced Western ideas of service and action into a life where they did not belong. Narendra's reply is unambiguous: "What do you know? You are an ignorant man… Your Bhakti is sentimental nonsense, which makes you impotent… Hands off! Who cares for *your* Ramakrishna? Who cares for Bhakti and Mukti? Who cares what your Scriptures say? … I am not a slave of Ramakrishna" (1998, p.172, emphasis in original).

It is important to mention here that even though Vivekananda did make comments like these when speaking privately, or in his personal correspondence, he *did not* commit the mistake of making these claims in public, especially upon his return to India. Instead, he cleverly acknowledged his guru's devotion to *bhakti* and even used it to challenge some of the arguments made by Indian reformers (an interesting manoeuvre that we will discuss in the next section).[69] As such, Vivekananda was careful to articulate, in public, that when he was speaking of mystics, or weeping devotees, he was not referring to his guru, for whom he had nothing but the utmost respect. It could also be possible that Vivekananda was reacting to how mysticism was being disassociated from the so-called rational and scientific 'religions' of the Enlightenment

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[68] 'M' was Mahendranath Gupta, one of Ramakrishna's primary biographers.

[69] However, Ramakrishna's disciples were not as easily convinced and many scholars have highlighted Vivekananda's disagreements with some of Ramakrishna's most prominent householder disciples. They make an effort to demonstrate how different Ramakrishna's methods and ideology was when compared to Vivekananda; and how this often led to acrimonious circumstances between Ramakrishna's followers. For example, Chattopadhyaya (1999) pp.156-157, 234-235; Sen (1993) p.312; Sil (1997) pp.103-113.

era, a point that King articulates when he questions the label 'Hinduism'. If this is the

case, then it stands to reason why Ramakrishna's mysticism did not sit well with

Vivekananda's own vision of a strong Vedantic Hindu public that he was endeavouring

to inspire:

> We have become weak, and that is why occultism and mysticism come to us – these creepy things; there may be great truths in them, but they have nearly destroyed us. Make your nerves strong. What we want is muscles of iron and nerves of steel. We have wept long enough. No more weeping, but stand on your feet and be men. … The truths of the Upanishads are before you. Take them up, live up to them, and the salvation of India will be at hand (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, pp.224-225).

This skill of Vivekananda's, where he took arguments and allegations made by the West

against Indian society, and found ways to use the Vedas, particularly Advaita Vedanta, to

contest them, is what aided his efforts to place Vedanta at the apex of Indian philosophy.

In fact, it is this kind of manoeuvring that gives meaning to Sinha's premise, which, in

turn, harks back to Nandy's assertions that the walls separating the colonizer and the

colonized are porous:

> the categories of the colonizer and the colonized are not fixed or self-evident categories. Although these categories may appear to have represented 'natural' differences of race or national origin, there was nothing natural or fixed about them. There was a constant need, therefore, to define, and redefine the coloniser and the colonised. Moreover, since the coloniser and the colonised were themselves historically constructed categories, the relations between the two were neither fixed nor given for all time. Indeed, the relations between the coloniser and colonised were constantly rearticulated in accordance with the continually changing political and economic imperatives of colonial rule (Sinha, 1995, p.1).

Vivekananda is a prime example of this strategy whereby he endeavoured to adjust,

accentuate and accommodate his emphasis on the Vedanta to better package his

message upon his return to India. And, since these efforts of his were based on the

premise that India was more spiritually advanced than their British colonizers, this was

perceived, at least by his Indian compatriots, as a direct challenge to the supremacy of the West. Thus, Vivekananda declared:

> Great works are to be done, wonderful powers have to be worked out, we have to teach other nations many things… This is the motherland of philosophy, of spirituality, and of ethics, … my experience of the world leads me to stand on firm ground and make the bold statement that India is still the first and foremost of all the nations of the world in these respects (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.147).

Nandy who is particularly concerned with the psychology of both the colonizers and the colonized (see Chapter 1), raises some questions about this emphasis on masculinity and its ensuing ramifications. He contends that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century there were several elite Indian men who reacted to how masculinity was privileged in Western societies. These Indian elite had bought into the hyper-masculine image that the colonizers had adopted in order to warrant their motives for the colonization of India. One tactic that the British adopted was to argue that over the centuries the Indian man had become weak and effeminate. This theory allowed the English to justify their presence as the foreign rulers of India. Because, after all, as Nandy reminds us, "[c]olonialism minus a civilizational mission is no colonialism at all. It handicaps the colonizer much more than it handicaps the colonized" (2006, p.11). Nandy surmises that both the colonizers and the colonized bought into the theory that the Indian man had become unfit to rule because he lacked "what in the dominant culture of the colony had already become the final differentiae of manliness: aggression, achievement, control, competition and power" (2006, p.9). According to Nandy, Indian elites such as Madhusudan, Bankimchandra[70] and Vivekananda were responding to this colonial ideal when they championed masculine traits amongst their Indian brethren. Furthermore, he contends "[b]y the time Vivekananda entered the scene, the West had

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[70] See Chapter 1 where I refer to Nandy's analysis of both Michael Madhusudan Dutta and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay.

made deeper inroads into the minds of Indians. To him, therefore, the real threat was the West within" (Nandy, 2014, p.292). As such, Vivekananda found it necessary to use the Western ideals of masculinity to convince his fellow countrymen, who had already internalized this Western value system. In fact, Nandy goes a step further when he argues that Vivekananda and Dayananda Saraswati (who he lumps together as the "two redoubtable Swamis," a characterization which is problematic in and of itself) "identified the West with power and hegemony, which in turn they identified with a superior civilization" (2006, pp.24-25).

Now, whereas Vivekananda may have agreed that the West was more advanced in certain aspects, it is hard to find credence for this blanket statement that the West was a 'superior civilization' that Nandy projects onto him. On the other hand, one has to acknowledge that Nandy is right when he suggests that Madhusudan, Bankimchandra and Vivekananda, all searched for a way to communicate this need for aggression by highlighting examples within Hindu mythology:

> Many nineteenth-century Indian movements of social, religious and political reform – and many literary and art movements as well – tried to make Ksatriyahood the 'true' interface between the rulers and ruled as a new, nearly exclusive indicator of authentic Indianness. The origins and functions of this new stress on Ksatriyahood is best evidenced by the fact that, contrary to the beliefs of those carrying the psychological baggage of colonialism, the search for martial Indianness underwrote one of the most powerful collaborationist strands within Indian society (Nandy, 2006, p.7).

For example, Bankimchandra chose to do this by remodelling the image of Krishna, presenting him less as a lover of *gopis* and more as a Kshatriya king. On the other hand, Madhusudan vilified the Kshatriya king Rama, who pined for, and then rejected, his wife Sita and instead held up the Rakshasa king Ravana as the true model for Indian manliness. Whereas both images achieved some traction, Hindus today have not discarded their love for the Krishna who continues to be the centre of the ever-popular

rasa-lila. Similarly, whereas many have questioned Rama's treatment of Sita, the Ram-

lila continues to be an integral aspect for a great number of Hindu devotees.

Vivekananda chose a different tactic; a tactic that not only resonated with his

audience but also helped him to establish Advaita Vedanta as a tool to redeem India's

'lost' manliness. According to Nandy, Victorian culture recognized that there were two

kinds of masculinity:

> the lower classes [who] were expected to act out their manliness by
> demonstrating their sexual prowess; the upper classes [who] were expected to
> affirm their masculinity through sexual distance, abstinence and self-control...the
> latter was compatible with, of all things, one strand in the traditional Indian
> concept of manliness. The Brahman in his cerebral, self-denying asceticism was
> the traditional masculine counterpoint to the more violent, 'virile', active
> Kshatriya, the latter representing – however odd this many seem to the modern
> consciousness – the feminine principle in the cosmos (2006, p.10).

This argument suggests that the *brahmin* man who is austere and cerebral resonates

well with the British version of a highbrow upper-class 'manly' gentleman. If that is the

case, then it is easy to understand how a man like Vivekananda who was a *sanyasi* and

therefore naturally should be both austere and celibate, and who, in this case, was also

intellectually competent could have made such an impact. Here was a man who both the

elite, as well as the common man, could identify with and whose qualities resonated

with aspects of their own cultural background, albeit recessive ones. Nandy observes

that when two cultures collide it is common for traits that are normally recessive to

become more evident thereby "alter[ing] the original cultural priorities on both sides

and bring[ing] to the centre of the colonial culture subcultures previously recessive or

subordinate in the two confronting cultures" (2006, p.2).

Perhaps Vivekananda was not simply mimicking Western ideals blindly but

instead, was accessing aspects of his own cultural identity to reach out to his

countrymen. This, in turn, allow him to privilege Advaitic ideas that had previously been

championed by ascetics who were now being identified, at least subconsciously, as the 'manly' version of the Indian man. It is difficult to claim definitively whether this was an intentional tactic used by Vivekananda or, if instead, and this seems more likely, he instinctively reflected his own quest for perfection as a *sanyasi* onto Hindu men in general. Be that as it may, the end result was that Vivekananda had found that Advaitin philosophy, with its emphasis on austerity and its insistence on a monistic philosophy (a philosophy that apparently rested on a 'higher branch' than *bhakti*), was one way for Hindu men to be more 'manly'.

Reformer, Revivalist, Traditionalist, Orthodox...

Another recurring theme in Vivekananda's speeches, upon his return to India, was his penchant to critique the various elite Indian movements that were commanding attention and forming alliances in India. For example, he did not disguise his condescension for the Indian reform movement.

> To the reformers I will point out that I am a greater reformer than any one of them. They want to reform only little bits. I want root and branch reform. Where we differ is in the method. Theirs is the method of destruction, mine is that of construction. I do not believe in reform; I believe in growth (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.213).

Obviously, this leads one to question whether Vivekananda's vehement distaste for the reformers of his day indicated that he was, instead, more comfortable placing himself in the revivalist camp. However, one simply has to read Vivekananda's arguments against revivalists to realize that this label was not a comfortable fit for his ideals either.

> revival sometimes breeds fanaticism, sometimes goes to the extreme, so that often it is not even in the power of those who start the revival to control it when it has gone beyond a certain length (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.172).

Before analysing Vivekananda's arguments about these native responses to colonization, it is necessary to acknowledge that part of the problem here lies with the

difficulties associated with defining some of the terms used both by the movements

themselves, and by others, to describe their differing agendas. This leads us back to

Hacker's assertions (see Chapter 3), where I highlighted the dilemma with using labels

such as 'revivalist' and 'reformer' as they cannot be rigidly defined. Rather, they should

be understood as fluid categories relative to the groups and circumstances they

described; an argument that is explored in some detail by Vasudha Dalmia in *The

Nationalization of Hindu Traditions* (1997). According to Dalmia, the revivalist

movements played a much bigger role in effecting change in colonial India than they are

usually given credit for:

> Though the more radical reform movements served as catalysts the most vital
> issues concerning notions of cultural, religious and political identity were
> thrashed out in the traditionalist quarters as well, and perhaps with more lasting
> effect, and it was here that the face of modern Hinduism – within which temple
> and *varna* continue to play a prominent role – was finally to be coined (1999,
> p.4).

Dalmia contends that reform movements were quite comfortable with this label since it

suggested that their leaders were open to change and accommodation. On the other

hand, revivalists rejected any association with reform movements, and objected to the

suggestion that they supported reform (even if this was true), because they did not

want to advertise the modifications they occasionally advocated:

> The changes in traditional formations, widespread as they are, are simply not
> registered, since they do not choose to define themselves as different, and in fact
> emphasize the constancy of the tradition they stand for (Dalmia, 1999, pp.4-5).

Furthermore, she states:

> the nineteenth century social and religious leadership, specially when defending
> sanatana dharma, developed its own deliberately antiquarian vocabulary to
> designate its priorities and preferences, and equally deliberately, it set itself off
> from the modern. The traditional/modern polarity, used to establish the
> distinction between the indigenous and the alien, was a part of the self-
> representation of those who sought to depict their tradition as standing firm
> against the pressure of change (Dalmia, 1999, p.5).

Dalmia emphasizes that this was simply a tactic employed by revivalists and should not be misunderstood to suggest that they did not, in fact, execute numerous changes in accordance with the changing political and social climate. As a result, Dalmia argues that the term 'revivalist' is not a useful one since it can be both limiting and negative:

> 'Revival' then is not only misleading since it disallows the possibility of change, it has the added disadvantage of having been used pejoratively all too often, as if it referred to no more than outmoded religious practice which had lain inert up to then, but which had ultimately refused to be suppressed by the more enlightened reform movements, such as the Brahmo or even Arya Samaj (1999, p.6).

Instead, she suggests the use of the label 'traditionalist' "for their one binding feature was the stress on the sanatanata or constancy of tradition, rather than any breach with some original, more pristine past" (Dalmia, 1999, p.7). As for the label 'reformer', she believes, and I concur, that at least for the time being, it seems to serve its purpose as long as it is not coupled with the term 'Neo-Hindu' (a label which Hacker used liberally but which Dalmia states "reeks with inauthenticity" (Dalmia, 1999, p.7) and is recognized as a complex label, which has both similarities and differences when compared to the term 'traditionalist'. We should not lose sight of the fact that whereas traditionalists wanted to hold on to their inherited belief system they were also aware that some change was necessary. Especially since, they were endeavouring, at the same time, to bring together some extremely disparate ideas under a single banner; no matter if they labelled it 'Hinduism' or 'Vedantism' or '*sanatana dharma*'. With her detailed analysis, Dalmia warns us against using labels such as these without caution since, according to her, "reformist tendencies were common to all the movements. The difference lay only in selection and the degree of emphasis" (Dalmia, 1999, p.7). Furthermore, she reminds us:

> In itself the process of thus welding disparate elements was not novel. There had always been strong assimilative tendencies in the smarta traditions which had

tried to project unitariness and which had inevitably recurred to the Vedas as the legitimating instance (Dalmia, 1999, p.430).

Dalmia's arguments become particularly noteworthy when we apply them to Vivekananda. We already know that he did not like the label 'reformer' since he was constantly attacking them and would have been loath to be categorized as one:

> I grant that we have to take a great many things from other nations, that we have to learn many lessons from outside; but I am sorry to say that most of our modern reform movements have been inconsiderate imitations of Western means and method of work; and that surely will not do for India; therefore, it is that all our recent reform movements have had no result (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.195).

On the other hand, he was also quite liberal with his criticism of traditionalists (he referred to them as the 'orthodox') who insisted on holding on to certain rituals and regulations which he believed were not conducive to the advancement of India in the modern world:

> A petty village custom seems now the real authority and not the teaching of the Upanishads. A petty idea current in a wayside village in Bengal seems to have the authority of the Vedas, and even something better. And that word "orthodox", how wonderful its influence! To the villager, the following of every little bit of the Karma Kanda is the very height of "orthodoxy", and one who does not do it is told, "Go away, you are no more a Hindu" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.333).

According to Sen, Vivekananda had a very complex relationship with the orthodox. He argues that Vivekananda had been quite critical of the Hindu opposition to the Consent Bill that was passed by the British in March 1891 which raised the age of sexual intercourse for girls, married or unmarried, from 10 years to 12 years. This was a direct blow to child marriage and was viewed as an affront to conservative Hindu practices. Whereas Vivekananda did not openly come out and support the Consent Bill, he consistently opposed early marriages, criticism which the orthodox did not take lightly:

> His [Vivekananda] basic criticism of the orthodox position on the Consent Bill followed directly from his sharp and consistent opposition to the institution of early marriage; in fact he was plainly upset to find his brother-disciples back home were unable to show such forthright opposition. He should have realized

however that such remonstrances were far more easily made from the relative safety of American homes than from the heart of orthodox society in Calcutta. That premature marriages were a principal cause behind India's social degeneration was nonetheless an argument that was consistently upheld by Vivekananda (Sen, 1993, p.329).

But what did Vivekananda mean when he used the term 'orthodox', an equivocal term even for him? It was not always clear whether he was using this term in a derogatory fashion; rather, it seemed to depend on the point he was trying to get across. The truth is, once again, like most words adopted from the English language, we are left with an ambiguous answer. Nicholson articulates:

> The words *astika* and *nastika* are difficult to translate. One reason for this is the fluctuation in the meanings of the terms themselves between different periods of time and different social contexts in India. This difficulty becomes even worse when we look at those words in English that have been used to translate these two terms. Despite the best efforts of historians of Indian philosophy, the terms used to translate Sanskrit philosophical concepts are imbued with Eurocentric (and specifically Christian-centric) meanings. The two words most commonly used to translate *astika/nastika*, "orthodox' and "heterodox," come out of the Christian theological tradition and hence carry historical connotations that distort the understanding of native Indian categories of thought
> For late medieval Vedantins, the word *astika* denotes schools that nowadays are often described as "Hindu," and the *nastikas* correspond to the non-Hindu schools of Jainas, Buddhists, and materialists. Yet the term *orthodoxia* and *heterodoxia* in their early Christian usages did not simply correspond to Christian versus non-Christian doctrines. Rather, *orthodoxia* referred to true Christian doctrine, and *heterodoxia*, to both false teachings within the church (e.g. Gnosticism and Arianism) and the teachings of pagan philosophical schools (2014, p.176).

Vivekananda's ideas do not fit neatly into any of these categories making him an excellent example of why these labels should be used only as guidelines, not as airtight definitions. What is evident however, is that every position he took, every idea he defended, eventually led back to his belief that Advaita Vedanta was the answer to the modern Hindu's needs. As a result, he tailored all his arguments along these lines; even if at times it made him sound like a traditionalist, sometimes orthodox, and at other times like a reformer. Vivekananda's agenda was clear; he wanted to establish that the

Vedanta was the epitome of Hindu traditions and he was not concerned about which garb he had to don to convince his readers of this truth. He adopted any of these titles when it suited him and discarded them when they did not. For him, the end justified the means, and the end was to establish Vedantic superiority over all other schools of thought, Eastern and Western.

Conversely, one could also argue that Vivekananda recognized that Advaita Vedanta could be used as a strategic vehicle to bring diverse Hindu groups closer together. Of course, this came at a price. For example, as Dalmia points out, most traditionalists accepted the authority of both the *sruti* and *smriti* texts, held the *Dharmasastras* and *Puranas* as legitimate yardsticks to govern society, and "continue[d] to lay stress on the centrality of the temple and ritual practice" (Dalmia, 1999, p.8). We already know that the reformists did not agree with the traditionalists' premise. Of course, Vivekananda had his own interpretation of which texts had the authority to speak for *his* version of 'Hinduism':

> The first class of truths is chiefly embodied in our Vedas, our scriptures; the second in the Smritis, the Puranas, etc. We must remember that for all periods the Vedas are the final goal and authority, and if the Puranas differ in any respect from the Vedas, that part of the Puranas is to be rejected without mercy (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.173).

In *Eclecticism and the Modern Hindu Discourse* (1999), Brian Hatcher argues that Vivekananda represents "the eclectic spirit at its best" (1999, p.58). To explain what he means when he uses the term 'eclectic', Hatcher first defines 'syncretism' which he claims is oftentimes erroneously used as a synonym for 'eclecticism'. Hatcher agrees with van der Veer's assessment (see Chapter 4) when he contends that syncretism needs to be disassociated from its Christian context. Furthermore, Hatcher argues that because of this association this label has become normative, thereby infusing the term with a "pejorative sense of *illegitimate* mixing, as in the corrupting of something

originally pure" (1999, p.6, emphasis in original). Instead, he presents his own set of

guidelines on how to appropriately define and distinguish these terms:

> (1) the historian of religion has no business using the category of syncretism
> as a normative category; (2) if it is to be used, then it will serve as a kind of
> shorthand for the idea that religions are culturally constructed and are
> continually transformed through "the combining of various religious forms";
> and (3) if so used, then the concept should be carefully distinguished from
> other concepts, most notably eclecticism. That is, if syncretism is used to
> refer to broad processes of historical change and systemic interaction among
> religions, then eclecticism should be used to refer to something else. What I
> propose is that we use eclecticism to denote not patterns and processes of
> historical change, but a particular method of change – a method based on
> *conscious* selection – and the systems of criteria and classification that may
> (or may not) guide this method. To follow this distinction, syncretism names
> a historical process, while eclecticism names a method of interpretation and
> appropriation (Hatcher, 1999, p.8, emphasis added).

Keeping these guidelines in mind, Hatcher argues that men like Vivekananda, the

'founders' he refers to in Chapter 1, were not restricted by boundaries historically

created by philosophical schools, sects or even 'world religions'. (1999, p.4). Instead,

they used all of these ideas to freely construct their own brand of ideology. For example,

in the case of Vivekananda, he highlights how he used a smattering of concepts from

Vaisesika, Nyaya, Purva Mimamsa, Uttara Mimamsa and even Buddhism to finally come

up with his own brand of Advaita Vedanta:

> The goal is not so much to indict him for failing to achieve consonance with any
> particular classical system, but simply to highlight the eclectic pragmatics of his
> discourse: a bit of Nyaya here, a bit of Mimamsa there. And – as we shall see –
> why not throw in a touch of Buddha's heterodoxy to boot? It strikes us as odd to
> find Vivekananda juxtaposing such disparate authorities in his quest to
> universalize the means of attaining saving knowledge. The violence of his
> eclecticism can get a bit dizzying at times (Hatcher, 1999, p.65).

What is the most compelling, yet deeply problematic, consequence of this eclecticism

however, is that very often these eclectic ideas become the normative discourse, which

is certainly the case with Vivekananda's interpretation of Advaita Vedanta. Vivekananda

adopted and adapted existing philosophies to get his point across. Accordingly, he

developed an interpretation that appropriated bits and pieces from different native sects, philosophies and practices. An interpretation that celebrated only certain aspects of Vedanta traditions. An interpretation that oftentimes also showed a complete disregard for established systems that he considered to be at cross-purposes with *his* version of Advaita Vedanta.

It is this dilemma that Anantanand Rambachan seeks to address in *The Limits of Scripture* (1994). Rambachan highlights the vast discrepancies that exist between Vivekananda's assessment and translation of Vedanta, versus that of Adi Shankaracharya (ca early 8th century), who is considered, by most scholars, to be the authority on this particular *darsana*.[71] According to Rambachan, Vivekananda did not simply adapt Sankaracharya's interpretation to suit his needs but rather, he arrived at a version that Sankaracharya himself would have most likely rejected:

> Unlike Vivekananda, who presented the affirmations of *sruti* ['that which is heard' i.e. The Vedas] as having only a hypothetical or provisional validity and needing the verification that only *anubhava* [personal experience] could provide, Sankara argued for *sruti* as the unique and self-valid source of our knowledge of absolute reality (*brahman*). In relation to the gain of this knowledge, all ways of knowing were subordinate to *sruti*. In important contrast to Vivekananda's arguments that the declarations of *sruti* needed further verification to become conclusive was Sankara's contention that liberation (*moksa*) is the immediate result of understanding the words of the *sruti*. For a qualified aspirant, nothing beyond a proper investigation of the meaning of those sentences in the *sruti* revealing *brahman* is required (Rambachan, 1994, p.3).

Rambachan argues that whereas Vivekananda was within his rights to interpret Advaita differently from Sankaracharya, it also must be recognized that because of his unique circumstances it is Vivekananda's version that has become the most widely accepted

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[71] Sankaracharya himself did not escape the allegations of eclecticism, an issue that is investigated in Richard King's *Early Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism* (1995) where he articulates how Sankaracharya may have 'borrowed' some of his philosophical arguments from Mahayana Buddhism.

interpretation. This, in turn, has led to the repackaging of Hindu traditions in contemporary times:

> Vivekananda's influence is so pervasive that it is a difficult task to identify and extricate the individual elements that he contributed to the contemporary understanding of Hinduism. Not only did he largely formulate this interpretation, but he also gave it the language in which it is articulated. There is very little in modern Hindu, particularly Vedanta, apologetic writing that does not carry the clear imprint of Vivekananda's influence.
> The fact that Vivekananda was a representative of the system of Advaita did not weaken the impression that he made on the whole of Hinduism. Because Advaita, through Vivekananda, was the first Hindu system to be so elaborately presented to the West, its comprehension has considerably shaped the approach to Hinduism in India and abroad. This was fostered by Vivekananda's vision and presentation of Advaita as the natural culmination of Hindu religious thought. From his basis of Advaita, he generalized in his lectures and writings about the nature and features of Hinduism as a whole. In his own time, he was perceived as the spokesperson and champion of Hinduism, not of any specific tradition within it (Rambachan, 1994, p.7).

Rambachan's study allows us to see how Vivekananda was able to create, out of existing philosophy, a version of 'Hinduism' that was sufficiently familiar to make it palatable to Indians, but yet, universal in a way which also made it appealing to Western audiences. Thus, Rambachan concludes:

> While he did not reject the urgent necessity for change and innovation in Hinduism, Vivekananda subtly emphasized that what he desired was "growth" and "expansion" rather than "reformation." Describing himself as a nonbeliever in reform, he defined the reformist method as one of "destruction" whereas his was an attempt at "construction". This delicate and astute distinction enabled Vivekananda to be critical of the Hindu tradition while never alienating himself from it. He struck a very fine and original balance between an aggressive defense of Hinduism and a vociferous cry for transformation. This fact provides the most important clue to understanding Vivekananda's popularity and the nature of the reinterpretation that he formulated (1994, p.128).

This gives us an indication of why, on the one hand, Vivekananda was averse to acknowledging (at least in public) that he was reinterpreting many Hindu ideas to make way for modern political and philosophical trends; he wanted to avoid being labelled as a reformer. On the other hand, since he was calling for vast social reform, reform that would necessarily impact ancient religious ideals, he could not easily be categorized as a

traditionalist either. Rather he believed, and he convinced his followers of the same, that he had found the correct way to interpret ancient Indian philosophies. Interpretations which would allow for many social changes since they highlighted Advaitic monistic ideals that he presented as universal truths. Universal truths, which in turn, would resonate with the needs of modern India as it struggled to become a nation.

Another tactic that Vivekananda used to make his point that Advaita was the answer for all of 'Hinduism's' apparent ailments was to highlight the attention that was being paid by both, reformers and traditionalists, Westerners and Orientalists, on the issue of idol worship. As we saw in the previous chapter, this was a topic that Vivekananda could not afford to ignore. However, the arguments that Vivekananda made in India differed from the position the took in the West. This was necessary because he understood that this idea of idol worship had a different connotation on the Indian subcontinent. As such, once again we are faced with the dilemma of translation and the adoption of terminology that was foreign to native ideas. According to Geoffrey Oddie, one of the reasons why "idol worship" or "idolatry" was perceived so negatively was because of the influence of missionaries who came to India in the 18th and 19th century. Of course, these missionaries themselves had been impacted by their own religious history:

> The influences affecting missionary attitudes and responses to this issue go back to the time of Old Testament prophets, to at least as early as the prophet Jeremiah in the seventh century BCE. As one of the missionaries declared, 'the Bible everywhere condemns the practice, by precept and example, by prohibitions and threatenings'. Idols, wrote the prophet Jeremiah, 'are both stupid and foolish; the instruction of idols is but wood… They are the work of the craftsman and of the hands of the goldsmith… But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King'. Similarly, in the New Testament Paul, when speaking to the Athenians, declared that 'we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man'. The main objections to idolatry as expressed in these and other passages of Scripture were that it was 'stupid' or irrational; it involved the neglect of the worship of 'the *one* true god', and was conducive to polytheism; and third, it

involved worshipping the created thing instead of the Creator, a practice which led to every kind of corruption of religion and morals (Oddie, 2006, pp.24-25, emphasis in original).

Oddie contends that what made this repulsion for idols even more emphatic amongst the Protestant missionaries in India was "the fact that this practice and other rituals reminded them of much of what they had so vigorously opposed and attempted to abolish during the Reformation" (2006, p.26). What further complicated this attack on idol worship was that many Hindu reformers joined the missionaries on this crusade.[72] These reformers seemed to buy into the arguments that viewed these idols as crude tools of worship which were holding Hindus back from using reason and scientific knowledge to access the divine. According to Dalmia:

> When Hinduism as a whole was to be laid to siege, it was this practice which most often and most consistently came under attack, initially by Christian missionaries, and later increasingly by the leaders of the newer trends within Hinduism, which we have collectively termed reformists (1999, p.381).

However, idol worship as understood by Protestant missionaries, and the Hindu reformers who followed their lead, did not necessarily coincide with how it had been viewed by Hindus over the centuries. Indeed, Oddie points out that as early as 1841 J. Murray Mitchell:

> a missionary of the Church of Scotland, noted the complexity of the issue and the fact that many Hindu devotees had different views. He also realized that in commonplace Hindu worship, there was a special ceremony invoking the spirit into the image (or removing it) and hence an established distinction between the spirit and the image itself (2006, p.26).

> The truth is that the debate about idol worship was one that was carried out for

centuries between Orientalists, missionaries, reformers and traditionalists. Brian Pennington explores these arguments in detail in *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons,*

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[72] For example, both Rammohan Roy and Dayanand Saraswati were vociferous in their disdain of idol worship.

Indians and the Colonial Construction of Religion (2005) where he highlights both the missionaries' strategies, as well as how Hindu reformers and traditionalists responded (by using the press as their weapon of choice) in the late 1700's and early 1800's. Turning back to Vivekananda, it is interesting to note how he also tried to negotiate between these opposing viewpoints without completely alienating himself from his Ramakrishna brethren. Indeed, in a deft move, he criticized reformers for looking down on idol worshippers by using Ramakrishna as an example of an idol worshipper who had attained great spiritual heights:

> If such Ramakrishna Paramahamsas are produced by idol-worship, what will you have – the reformer's creed or any number of idols? I want an answer. Take a thousand idols more if you can produce Ramakrishna Paramahamsas through idol-worship, and may God speed you! Produce such noble natures by any means you can. Yet idolatry is condemned! Why? (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.218).

One naturally presumes, after reading this that Vivekananda was, in fact, upholding idolatry and not condemning it, a seemingly surprising move for him. Especially since, as we saw earlier, he had spoken out against idol worship at various times, particularly in his personal correspondences. Are we to surmise that Vivekananda was a hypocrite who believed his guru was wrong but was loathe to say so in public? The truth is that Vivekananda also argued, on many other occasions, that his guru was a Vedantic scholar who had taught him everything he knew. That he was in fact a 'Parliament of Religions' in and of himself:

> Ay, long before ideas of universal religion and brotherly feeling between different sects were mooted and discussed in any country in the world, here in sight of this city [Calcutta], had been living a man whose whole life was a Parliament of Religions as it should be (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.315).

So how did Vivekananda reconcile the idol worshipping Ramakrishna with the Advaitic scholar that he claimed he actually was? As far as Vivekananda was concerned *Nirguna Brahman* was the ultimate goal. However, he recognized that Ramakrishna believed that

this was a difficult path for many and as such had shown his devotees a path to *Nirguna Brahman* by using *Saguna Brahman* as a stepping stone:

> It has become a trite saying that idolatry is wrong, and every man swallows it at the present time without questioning. I once thought so, and to pay the penalty of that I had to learn my lesson sitting at the feet of a man who realized everything through idols; I allude to Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.218).

However, this does not imply that Vivekananda believed that idol worship was the best way, but rather, that he acknowledged that oftentimes this was the way that was most amenable to the masses:

> The highest ideal in our scriptures is the impersonal, and would to God everyone of us here were high enough to realize that impersonal ideal; but, as that cannot be, it is absolutely necessary for the vast majority of human beings to have a personal ideal (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.315).

Thus, Vivekananda argued that Ramakrishna had all the knowledge of the Vedas but chose to help those who could not grasp the higher truths by donning the garb of a *bhaktayogi*. And what a *bhakt* he was! Accordingly, Vivekananda told his listeners that if they thought they were capable of the one minded, utterly devoted *bhakti* that Ramakrishna demonstrated then that was acceptable. However, he argued that Ramakrishna's way was extremely difficult. Particularly since Vivekananda was certain that the dualist path was a means to an end, and that end was the ultimate truth of *Nirguna Brahman*. For others, *bhakti* was a treacherous path since it made them look weak, both in the eyes of their countrymen, as well as in the eyes of the world. Furthermore, unlike his guru, Vivekananda did not believe that this path was suitable for the emerging Indian nation who needed to prove that they had "muscles of iron and nerves of steel". Only Vedanta could display that kind of strength.

What Vivekananda did extremely well here was to exploit the divide that already existed between the reformers, and the orthodox, to establish that it was only with the

aid of Advaitic ideals that this gulf could be bridged. At times, it seems as if he was

endorsing the value systems of the orthodox. And indeed, at some level he was, since he

was arguing that they may be antiquated in their ways but, in spite of that, they had

remained loyal to their traditional values and had not 'sold out' to the Westerners. Upon

closer scrutiny however, it soon becomes evident that while Vivekananda may have

been speaking in favour of the orthodox, he was also aware that these orthodox ideas

required open reform, a reform that he believed would be best provided by Advaita

ideals:

> There are two great obstacles on our path in India, the Scylla of old orthodoxy
> and the Charybdis of modern European civilization. Of these two, I vote for the
> old orthodoxy, and not for the Europeanized system; for the old orthodox man
> may be ignorant, he may be crude, but he is a man, he has a faith, he has strength,
> he stands on his own feet; while the Europeanized man has no backbone, he is a
> mass of heterogeneous ideas picked up at random from every source – and these
> ideas are unassimilated, undigested, unharmonized. … His schemes of reforms,
> his vehement vituperations against the evils of certain social customs, have, as
> the mainspring, some European patronage. Why are some of our customs called
> evils? Because the Europeans say so. That is about the reason he gives. I would
> not submit to that. Stand and die in your own strength (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3,
> p.151).

A few points need to be highlighted in these declarations of his. First, it is

immediately clear that he believed that the reformers were simply puppets of the West.

Second, it is obvious that he was playing to his audience at Ramnad, a province whose

ruler, the Raja of Ramnad, was one of Vivekananda's main benefactors and who

Vivekananda himself acknowledged as an orthodox Hindu. That being said however,

what is the most interesting aspect of this speech is that whereas Vivekananda seemed

to be railing against the reformers and speaking in defence of the orthodox, he was in

fact stating that both these groups were 'great obstacles' for India. A point that

somehow gets swept away in this tirade against reformers and Europeans, but which he

obviously believed was true. Especially since he used this analogy, 'Scylla and

Charybdis', repeatedly in various speeches after his return. Indeed, it does not take long to discover that whilst Vivekananda did not want to completely antagonize the orthodox, or eradicate idol worship, he did want to place these ideas within a hierarchy, a hierarchy where their practices were on a lower rung than the ideals of Advaita Vedanta. What is ironic is that he chose to use analogies that Westerners had previously used in a derogatory manner for Eastern traditions. As we saw in the previous chapter, he used language which suggested that the Hindus who were on the path of *bhakti* were not wrong, but simply at a lower level of evolution, when compared to those who had relinquished their attachments to idols, and the rituals associated with them:

> So we should not speak ill of a man who worships idols. He is in that stage of growth, and therefore, must have them; wise men should try to help forward such men and get them to do better (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.363).

What these statements demonstrate is that whereas Vivekananda tried to show his compassion and understanding for those on other paths, he was not prepared to do so at the expense of acknowledging their equal worth.[73] Rather, he was only willing to grant them a place on the path, a spot that was nowhere near where he placed the practice of Advaita. So much so, that Vivekananda ultimately shrunk all the various *darsanas* into the three Vedantic ideals of dualism, qualified dualism and monism; only to finally declare that Advaita was the logical resting place for *all* philosophical ideas:

> we find they are a gradual unfolding of the grand principles whose music beginning far back in the soft low notes, ends in the triumphant blast of the Advaita, so also in these three systems we find the gradual working up of the human mind towards higher and higher ideals till everything is merged in that wonderful unity which is reached in the Advaita system (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, pp.396-397).

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[73] In the following chapter, we will analyze how this so-called 'inclusive' language can be both problematic and divisive.

The most interesting aspect of these arguments is that he did not believe that this change could be achieved without reform! The question that one must ask now however, is what were the motives that fuelled his call for reform? What was his agenda as he helped create this hierarchy between the different *darsanas* and traditions? One gets the distinct impression that Vivekananda had a vision for India that crystallized after he garnered so much attention from his countrymen, due to his success in the West. No doubt, he wanted to use his influence in a way that would promote the wellbeing of his homeland. And what better way than to emphasize the role that 'religion' in general, and Advaita Vedanta in particular, could play in building up the backbone of the nation. His success is what made him one of the major players in establishing national unity, a bona-fide political activist, a role he never openly claimed for himself.

Swami Vivekananda: Nation builder?

The main thrust of my research has been to identify how Vivekananda responded to the intellectual 'continental collision' between the West and India. He manipulated definitions and interpretations, which included large concepts such as 'religion' and 'Hinduism' as well as lesser labels such as 'reformer' and 'revivalist'. Another crucial concept that Vivekananda engaged with, and which will be necessary for us to examine to understand his role in India today is 'nationalism'. Nationalism is not usually conflated with 'religion' in the West. However, the same cannot be said for India. Vivekananda was one of the architects who helped renegotiate how this idea could be used to help create the Indian nation state. We have seen that Vivekananda was convinced that his version of 'Hinduism' was authentic, and wielded it like a powerful tool, to remind Hindus that they were fully equipped to view the world as

rationally as the Western world claimed to view their own. According to Vivekananda, it was Advaita Vedanta that allowed for all the nuances that existed within Hindu traditions, whilst at the same time offering a trajectory along which Hindus could aspire to perfection. Indeed, just like the birds in the tree, with which we started this chapter, so also Vivekananda saw all Hindus (and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs!)[74] as working their way upwards through the hierarchy of the system he had helped repackage. He was convinced that they would finally realize that Advaita was the ultimate resting place for all Hindus, nay all religions. So, how did he use these convictions to promote national unity?

One of the aspects of Western culture that seemed to resonate with Vivekananda was the apparent cohesiveness of their society. He argued that each nation had some common traits that bound them together thereby creating a sense of 'oneness'. This instilled a sense of pride and helped them identify as citizens of a particular nation:

> each nation has its own peculiarity and individuality with which it is born. Each represents, as it were, one peculiar note in this harmony of nations, and this is its very life, its vitality. In it is the backbone, the foundation, and the bed-rock of the national life (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.148).

This realization, that a similar feeling of unity needed to be encouraged amongst Indians but which, could not easily be accomplished by using the same language of nationality commonly used in the West, is an excellent example of how 'continental collision' worked. In the West, particularly since the Enlightenment, ideas of 'race', 'national history and 'national language' bound people together. However, this did not translate easily in India where colonization, coupled with multiple native principalities, had not bred a widespread sense of nation. Add to this the fact that different regions spoke

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[74] I have already demonstrated how Vivekananda conflated these traditions in the previous chapter. Additionally, I will address how this effects India today in the next chapter.

vastly different languages and it is not difficult to see some of the hurdles Indian

nationalists encountered. Vivekananda, and other Indian leaders like him, realized that

whereas they needed to find a way to unite Indians, they could not just as easily

replicate the Western model. Accordingly, Vivekananda declared:

> We see how in Asia, and especially in India, race difficulties, linguistic difficulties, social difficulties, national difficulties, all melt away before this unifying power of religion. We know that to the Indian mind there is nothing higher than religious ideals, that this is the keynote of Indian life, and we can only work in the line of least resistance. It is not only true that the ideal of religion is the highest ideal; in the case of India it is the only possible means of work; work in any other line, without first strengthening this, would be disastrous. Therefore the first plank in the making of a future India, the first step that is to be hewn out of that rock of ages, is this unification of religion (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.287).

This conscious decision, and intentional adaptation, is described metaphorically by how

landmasses accommodate collisions at geographical suture zones. Vivekananda

represents one such suture zone whereby he helped repackage the concept of national

unity to suit, what he perceived to be, India's needs. He believed he was maintaining

some of the integrity of the Indian ideological landmass whilst simultaneously

integrating layers of Western principles.

Of course, the downside of such a collision is that some integral aspects are lost

from both cultures, losses that oftentimes are not identified until it is much too late. This

certainly was the case with the nationalist discourse in India because whereas it

mobilized the masses, it also resulted in the loss of diversity; a loss that Guha, and other

subaltern scholars, strive to highlight. As Thapar points out (see Chapter 3), according

to this group of scholars, the Indian elite were not representative of the nation.

Consequently, Guha argues, "the historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long

time been dominated by elitism – colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism"

(Guha, 1997, p.xiv). Furthermore, he contends:

> What is clearly left out of this un-historical (elitist) historiography is the *politics of the people*. For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and intermediate strata in town and country – that is, the people. This was an *autonomous* domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter.
>
> The co-existence of these two domains or streams, which can be sensed by intuition and proved by demonstration as well, was the index of an important historical truth, that is, *the failure of the India bourgeoisie to speak for the nation*. There were vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people which were never integrated into their hegemony (Guha, 1997, pp.xiv-xv, emphasis in original).

What Guha seems to be highlighting here is that the nationalist project is inherently flawed and as such, it must be understood as only one way to survey the history of India, both during the colonial period as well as in contemporary India. Consequently, as we proceed to analyse how Vivekananda impacted the creation of the Indian nation, it is equally important for us to take note of the premise from which subalternists, like Guha, operate. We must not forget that whereas Vivekananda did become one of the dominant voices in India, this does not mean that his was the voice of the masses. Rather, his voice was one of the few that were heard amongst the many who spoke.

So, which kind of nationalism did Vivekananda promote and how did 'religion' come to play such a widely accepted role in its definition? Elite Hindu voices like Vivekananda did not simply try to mimic European national historical ideas; there was an integral difference. In *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (2008), Partha Chatterjee discusses the differences between Eastern and Western nationalism. Chatterjee cites the political philosopher John Plamenatz who states:

> nationalism is 'primarily a cultural phenomenon' although it often takes a 'political form'. One type is 'western', having emerged primarily in Western Europe, and the other 'eastern' to be found in Eastern Europe, in Asia and Africa, and also in Latin America. Both types depend upon the acceptance of a common set of standards by which the state of development of a particular national culture is measured (2008, p.1).

However, whereas Plamenatz and Chatterjee both recognize that there were similarities between the two kinds of nationalisms, they also clearly articulate the differences that set them apart. In particular, they highlight that there was an obvious disparity between importing the concept of nationalism into other Western nations, that were still developing ideas of citizenship, versus Eastern states that had been colonized. This resulted in distinct 'nationalisms' that they argue need to be defined and understood as separate entities in their own right:

> In the first type [Western]… although there is a feeling that the nation is at a disadvantage with respect to others, it is nevertheless already 'culturally equipped' to make the attempt to remove those deficiencies. Thus although the new global standard of progress may have been set for the rest of the world by France or Britain, they were based upon a set of ideas 'about man, morals and society' which, in their social and intellectual origins, were West European generally. Britain and France may have been the cultural, economic and political pace makers, and may have been envied or admired for this reason, but simultaneous with the process of their emergence as world leaders, there had emerged a 'comity of nations' in Western Europe 'which had already learned to think of itself as ahead of all the others' (Chatterjee, 2008, p.1).

Eastern nations however, did not function in the same way since they, unlike nations such as Germany and Italy, did not have "the necessary linguistic, educational and professional skills that were deemed necessary for a 'consciously progressive civilisation' (Chatterjee, 2008, p.1). Instead, Eastern nationalism was inherently 'alien' to the native cultures, a point that is not lost on Plamenatz and is highlighted by Chatterjee. The most interesting observation is not that these 'nationalisms' are different, but that these differences were accompanied by a:

> fundamental awareness that those standards have come from an alien culture, and that the inherited culture of the nation did not provide the necessary adaptive leverage to enable it to reach those standards of progress. The 'Eastern' type of nationalism, consequently, has been accompanied by an effort to 're-equip' the nation culturally, to transform it. But it could not do so simply by imitating the alien culture, for then the nation would lose its distinctive identity. The search therefore was for a regeneration of the national culture, adapted to the requirements of progress, but retaining at the same time its distinctiveness (Chatterjee, 2008, p.2).

Accordingly, Chatterjee goes on to argue that "the nation is 'thought out', 'created'"

(2008, p.19), an argument that holds true for how Indian nationalists 'built' the Indian

nation by borrowing some Western ideas but not without challenging and questioning

many of its claims (2008, pp.30-41). Indeed, he even goes as far as to assert that

nationalist texts must question colonial claims because if they do not, they cannot and

should not, be considered nationalist since they lose their claim to the individuality that

makes them stand apart from other nations:

> Thus nationalist texts will question the veracity of colonialist knowledge, dispute
> its arguments, point out contradictions, reject its moral claims. Even when it
> adopts, as we will see it does, the modes of thought characteristic of rational
> knowledge in the post-Enlightenment age, it cannot adopt them in their entirety,
> for then it would not constitute itself as a *nationalist* discourse (Chatterjee, 2008,
> pp.41-42, emphasis in original).

This analysis resonates with the fact that Indian nationalists in the nineteenth

century, like Vivekananda, were keenly aware that they had to find a way to unite India,

whilst using tools that were not commonly associated with nationalism in the West.

Thus, whereas they took the basic Western idea of nationalism they also adapted it to

accommodate the proclivities of Indian society, which was traditionally oriented.

Indeed, van der Veer states that he disagrees with the premise of Said's arguments in

Orientalism since scholars must be:

> wary of giving orientalism hegemonic force, as Edward Said has done in his
> important book. I do not agree with Said's notion that colonialism and
> orientalism created the reality in which Indians had to live. This notion is in itself
> an orientalist fallacy that denies Indians agency in constructing their society and
> simplifies the intricate interplay of Western and Indian discourses (1994(a),
> p.21).

This is a valid point, and one that I have been trying to emphasize by demonstrating

how Vivekananda was not simply imitating the West but, in fact, was participating in an

Indian dialogue, in an effort to respond to the needs of this newly developing nation.

Evidently, this dialogue led the Indian elite leaders to surmise that they would have to

build their nationalist dreams on a religious foundation.[75]Indeed, van der Veer echoes

some of Asad's arguments (see Chapter 2) when he recognizes that, "[e]xcept for those

of the Marxist left, Indian dreams of the nation always take religion as one of the main

aspects of national identity" (1994(a), p.23).

Similarly, Vivekananda emphasized the spiritual nature of India and stressed the

role that 'religion' would play in uniting Indians. He made this point repeatedly when he

returned to India:

> I have been in the countries of the West – have travelled through many lands of
> many races; and each race and each nation appears to me to have a particular
> ideal – a prominent ideal running through its whole life; and this ideal is the
> backbone of the national life. Not politics nor military power, not commercial
> supremacy nor mechanical genius furnishes India with that backbone, but
> religion; and religion is all that we have and mean to have (Vivekananda, 2009,
> vol.3, p.137).

So firmly did Vivekananda believe that 'religion' was the 'backbone' of national life in

India, that he reiterated this at every opportunity, and appropriated ideas from the

Manusmrti to make his point:

> Such is the law laid down by our great and peerless legislator, the divine Manu.
> This is true. Stand on your own feet, and assimilate when you can; learn from
> every nation, take what is of use to you. But remember that as Hindus everything
> else must be subordinated to our own national ideals. Each man has a mission in
> life, which is the result of all his infinite past Karma. Each of you was born with a
> splendid heritage, which is the whole of the infinite past life of your glorious
> nation. Millions of your ancestors are watching, as it were, every action of yours,
> so be alert. And what is the mission with which every Hindu child is born? Have
> you not read the proud declaration of Manu regarding the Brahmin where he
> says that the birth of the Brahmin is "for the protection of the treasury of
> religion"? I should say that *that* is the mission not only of the Brahmin, but of
> every child, whether boy or girl, who is born in this blessed land "for the
> protection of the treasury of religion". And every other problem in life must be
> subordinated to that one principal theme (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.152,
> emphasis in original).

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[75] It is important to recognize that Vivekananda was not attempting to create a
theocracy; a distinction that is sometimes lost on certain Hindu radical elements, which
will be discussed as we proceed into the final chapter.

That being said however, Vivekananda was also quite aware that 'Hinduism' was generally understood, as a vastly diverse, often contradictory entity, particularly as it had been described by Westerners and Orientalists for over a century. As such, he knew that it would be challenging for the various sects to find common ground. Consequently, his representation of Hindu traditions suggested that there was a real need to highlight the commonality amongst all that rich diversity. This, in turn, allowed him to champion the Upanishadic philosophy that forms the core of Advaita Vedanta; a philosophy that he believed emphasized universal 'religious' truths and explains why he was so successful:

> It is a man-making religion that we want. It is man-making theories that we want. It is man-making education all round that we want. And here is the test of truth – anything that makes you weak physically, intellectually, and spiritually, reject as poison; there is no life in it, it cannot be true. ... These mysticisms, in spite of some grains of truth in them, are generally weakening. Believe me, I have a lifelong experience of it, and the one conclusion that I draw is that it is weakening. I have travelled all over India, searched almost every cave here, and lived in the Himalayas. I know people who lived there all their lives. I love my nation, I cannot see you degraded, weakened any more than you are now. Therefore I am bound for your sake and for truth's sake to cry, "Hold!" and to raise my voice against this degradation of my race. Give up these weakening mysticisms and be strong. Go back to your Upanishads – the shining, the strengthening, the bright philosophy – and part from all these mysterious things, all these weakening things. ... The truths of the Upanishads are before you. Take them up, live up to them, and the salvation of India will be at hand (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, pp.224-225).

What made Vivekananda's arguments particularly effective was that he did not deny that differences existed in how his Indian brethren followed their traditions. He acknowledged them by name and repeatedly demonstrated that he was aware of the various sects and philosophies that formed the diverse Indian religious landscape. Nevertheless, he believed that these differences needed to be subordinated to the greater need of the unification of the nation:

> the first plank in the making of a future India, the first step that is to be hewn out of that rock of ages, is this unification of religion. All of us have to be taught that

we Hindus – dualists, qualified monists, or monists, Shaivas, Vaishnavas, or Pashupatas – to whatever denomination we may belong, have certain common ideas behind us, and that the time has come when for the well-being of ourselves, for the well-being of our race, we must give up all our little quarrels and differences (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, pp.287-288).

Of course, Vivekananda had the solution, a way to make all these so called 'minor' differences fit into the bigger picture; a bigger picture that was necessary if India was to become a united nation:

It is easy to find out the way of reconciliation that will not hurt the dualist or the qualified monist. There is not one system in India which does not hold the doctrine that God is within, that Divinity resides within all things. Every one of our Vedantic systems admits that all purity and perfection and strength are in the soul already. According to some, this perfection sometimes becomes, as it were, contracted, and at other times it becomes expanded again. Yet it is there. According to the Advaita, it neither contracts nor expands, but becomes hidden and uncovered now and again. Pretty much the same thing in effect. The one may be a more logical statement than the other, but as to the result, the practical conclusions, both are about the same; and this is the one central idea which the world stands in need of, and nowhere is the want more felt than in this, our own motherland (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.191).

It was in the creation of this hierarchy, whereby he insisted that Advaita was the crowning jewel of Hindu traditions, that Vivekananda left his most significant mark. Vivekananda was one of the architects of a monolithic 'Hinduism' that encompassed all of India's native religious vagaries under a single banner. And one of the primary reasons he did this was to inspire a sense of unity that he found lacking amongst his Indian brethren. What is ironic about this is that Vivekananda repeatedly claimed that he was not interested in becoming involved in national movements. So much so, that in one of the letters he wrote to his brother disciple Alasinga, even before he returned from his first visit to the West, he vehemently denied being involved in anything that could be considered political:

One thing I find in the books of my speeches and sayings published in Calcutta. Some of them are printed in such a way as to savour of political views; whereas I am no politician or political agitator. I care only for the Spirit – when that is right everything will be righted by itself… So you must warn the Calcutta people that

> no political significance be ever attached falsely to any of my writings or sayings. What nonsense! ... I heard that Rev. Kali Charan Banerji in a lecture to Christian missionaries said that I was a political delegate (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, p.46).

Despite his disclaimers, the role that Advaita played, with Vivekananda's assistance, in uniting India cannot be ignored or denied. One simply has to read the speeches given by leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru or Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan to understand how their interpretation of Hindu traditions was strongly influenced by Vivekananda's presentation of Advaitic philosophy. What is of particular interest to us however, is that not only did this Vedantic ideology impact the nationalist movement but that these Vedantic repercussions continue to be represented in how contemporary Hindus view their traditions today. By highlighting Vivekananda's tactics for encouraging national unity, via Advaita, we can understand how effective his methods were and how necessary it has become for contemporary Hindus to unpack some of these ideas. It is time to reassess if this version of 'Hinduism' has not only outlived its usefulness but indeed, in many cases, has become a dangerous worldview which can threaten the very survival of the diversity that exists within Hindu traditions. A diversity that most modern Hindus wear as a badge of honour. Indeed, Hindus need to ask themselves if Vivekananda's methods, which have permeated through most of modern Hindu ideology, are truly conducive to how Hindus actually practice their traditions.

Conclusion

In *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (2003), Jyotirmaya Sharma makes an interesting claim where he argues that Vivekananda was one of the precursors, to the Hindu activist V.D. Savarkar, who created the term 'Hindutva'; a concept that has become the battle cry for a great number of conservative Hindus today:

> Savarkar legitimately claimed paternity for the idea of Hindutva; but Hindutva could lay claim to an equally formidable patrimony in the thought of Dayananda, Vivekananda and Aurobindo.
> What binds these four thinkers together is the systematic marshalling of a Hindu identity in the service of Indian nationalism (2003, p.4).

So what did 'Hindutva' mean according to Savarkar and how does it relate to what Vivekananda was saying a quarter of a century before him? *Hindutva: What is a Hindu?*, which was published in 1923 under the pen name 'A Maratha' (since Savarkar was still in jail when he wrote it) is where Savarkar identifies certain traits that constitute the concept Hindutva. According to Savarkar, a shared 'religion' was not enough to determine a certain 'Hinduness' that linked his native Indian brethren. In *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (2007) Christophe Jaffrelot highlights the main characteristics that Savarkar viewed as essential to Hindutva:

> Savarkar defines the nation primarily along ethnic categories. For him, the Hindus descend from the Aryas, who settled in India at the dawn of history and who already formed a nation at that time. However, in Savarkar's writings, ethnic bonds are not the only criteria of Hindutva. National identity rests for him on three pillars: geographical unity, racial features and a common culture. Savarkar minimizes the importance of religion in his definition of a Hindu by claiming that Hinduism is only one of the attributes of 'Hinduness'. ... The third criterion of Hindutva – a 'common culture' – reflects for Savarkar the crucial importance of rituals, social rules, and language in Hinduism. Sanskrit is cited by him as the common reference point for all Indian languages and as 'language par excellence'. Any political programme based on Hindu nationalist ideology has after Savarkar demanded recognition of Sanskrit or Hindi – the vernacular language closest to it – as the national idiom (Jaffrelot, 2007, p.86).

As Sharma suggests, when one compares Vivekananda's ideas with some of Savarkar's statements, there are certain undeniable similarities. For example, in *Hindutva* Savarkar declares:

> It must not be forgotten that we have all along referred to the progress of the Hindu movement as a whole and not to that of any particular creed or religious section thereof – of Hindutva and not Hinduism only. Sanatanists, Satnamis, Sikhs, Aryas, Anaryas, Marathas and Madrasis, Brahmins and Panchamas – all suffered as Hindus and triumphed as Hindus. Both friends and foes contributed equally to enable the words Hindu and Hindusthan to supersede all other designations of our land and our people (Savarkar, 1989, p.45).

This statement sounds remarkably like Vivekananda, when he declared that all the differences between the sects must be subsumed under Advaitic philosophy. Vivekananda's approach seems more benign because, whereas Savarkar was intentionally identifying those who must be left out of the Hindutva movement, Vivekananda was insisting that *all* philosophical and religious ideas could find a place under the Advaitic umbrella. The question we must ask ourselves now is; what if some of these groups do not accept Advaita as a valid option? Are they to be forcefully included? Is that fair? Isn't it equally important for us to respect their need to be different? Don't they have equal rights as Hindus, or more importantly as Indians, if they do not adhere to Vedantic principles? While most scholars acknowledge Vivekananda's appropriation and adaptation of Vedanta to suit his needs, very few recognize that his interpretations, which have become so widespread, can now actually threaten the integrity of the landmass that he fought so hard to preserve. Whereas many of his ideas are valid and can still serve a purpose, others can prove to be extremely detrimental to the unified India that he dreamt of. Vivekananda was instrumental in giving Indians a voice that they deserved. He modified and adapted large concepts to suit the Indian philosophical landscape. He challenged Western labels and questioned their validity repeatedly. These are all essential aspects of his legacy. However, he also created a hierarchy that can threaten the Indian religious model that has allowed India to be one of the only nations to have survived colonization with its religious ideals relatively intact. Although the two birds in the tree is a wonderful way to look at the quest for *Brahman*, let us not forget that there are many other trees in the forest, and that the birds in those trees may be learning different lessons.

The current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, has taken to citing Vivekananda in an effort to draw a nexus between Vivekananda's ideology and his own. No doubt, the reason that Modi is making such a concentrated effort towards allying himself to Vivekananda is because the popular image of Vivekananda is one of religious tolerance, inclusivity and 'manly' youthful vigour.[76] Accordingly, Modi's recent 2014 election campaign not only used quotes from Vivekananda, but also imagery which included, but were not limited to, life-size posters of the Swami side by side with Modi, both bearing statements from their respective public speeches. One journalist suggested, "Modi has replaced Mahatma Gandhi, the icon of non-violence, with Vivekananda, the 19th century Hindu revivalist who was obsessed with making India a 'manly' nation" (Mishra, 2014). This ploy was obviously successful since Modi not only won the election, but has also gone from being a man who was refused a visa to the United States in 2005,[77] to being welcomed at the Madison Square Garden in New York, by the Indian diaspora and accorded a "Rock Star Reception" in 2014 (Sinha, 2014). So effective has Modi been in cultivating a connection between himself and Vivekananda that President Barack Obama gifted him a rare volume of speeches from the Parliament of Religions in 1893 when Vivekananda shot to fame. A note accompanying the book reads, "This gift celebrates Swami Vivekananda's valuable contribution as a bridge between India and US and honors our two nations' shared traditions of pluralism and diversity" (HT Correspondent, 2014). Keeping this recent resurgence of Vivekananda in

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[76] I am aware that the word 'inclusive' is a complex term and I will unpack some of the issues associated with using it in the following sections.

[77] This was as a consequence of Modi's alleged involvement in the 2002 Gujarat riots, where he was Chief Minister at the time, which resulted in the unfortunate deaths of numerous Muslims.

Indian politics in mind, it has now become imperative to question why Modi, and the

Hindu nationalist movement in India, have been able to appropriate Vivekananda and

his teachings. Do Vivekananda's words lend themselves to Hindutva interpretations? Is

this Hindu nationalist image of Vivekananda's unfounded? Or, if instead, as other

scholars have also intimated,[78] have these ideas always existed in Vivekananda's

message, albeit shrouded in the idiom of inclusivity? Although Vivekananda has

oftentimes been ignored, or marginalized, by political scientists when speaking of the

emergence of Indian nationalism in the 18th and the 19th century,[79] recent studies have

begun to take notice of the role he played in the creation of the Hindu nationalist

movement. Especially since, he is resurging as a key inspirational figure for proponents

of Hindutva, a faction that has become a force to be reckoned with in 21st century India.

And, as we shall discover, very often it is Vivekananda's brand of 'Hinduism' that the

followers of Hindutva are promoting.

 In keeping with this renewed focus on Vivekananda, popular journalism has

taken to referring to Vivekananda and Modi as the 'two Narendras' (Bhattacharya,

2013). However, for the purposes of this study, I am more interested in focusing on the

Narendra who, as Swami Vivekananda, toted ideas of inclusivity, masculinity and

Vedanta in the 19th and 20th century, versus the Narendra who has become the Swami

most commonly associated with Hindu nationalism in the 21st century. Is there a nexus?

Do they share the same ideology? Does the Hindu nationalist movement, currently led

by Modi, have good reason to appropriate this Indian hero? And if they do, is it time for

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[78] For e.g., Jyotirmaya Sharma (2003), Shamita Basu (2002) and Gwilym Beckerlegge (2009).

[79] For e.g. Partha Chatterjee ignores Vivekananda in his seminal study, *National Thought and the Colonial World* which was originally published in 1986. Similarly, Vivekananda is absent from the work done by Christophe Jaffrelot including, but not limited to, his recent edited work titled *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (2007).

Indians to revaluate the words of Vivekananda, and come to terms with the fact that whereas his brand of inclusivism and 'manly' stance may have been exactly what the nation needed when they were fighting for their freedom from the British Raj, today, much of what he advocated can cause more harm than good to an Indian nation that is so proud of its diversity.

In this chapter, we will first survey how Vivekananda's propensity, to privilege Advaita Vedanta as the epitome of Hindu traditional ideology, undermines alternate Hindu philosophical schools and sects who historically never considered themselves to be travelling on a lesser path. To do this, we will investigate the ways in which 'inclusive' language can be quite problematic. Furthermore, we will examine what Vivekananda had to say about his Buddhist, Christian and Muslim brethren, and whether his views are respectful or, if instead, they are covertly (and oftentimes overtly) intolerant. Moreover, we will also determine whether Vivekananda's opinions on women are views that we want to imbibe in the 21st century. Has his language of masculinity had adverse effects on how the Hindutva movement views the role of women in contemporary India? And last but not least, we will determine whether the way Vivekananda has been appropriated, by the Hindu nationalist movement, is justified. And if, as a result, this means that we must be prepared to view our national heroes without the pedestals we have placed them on, but rather, as ordinary people who sometimes achieved great feats; people who we cannot afford to emulate unconditionally.[80]

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[80] I owe this idea to James Loewen whose book *Lies my Teacher Told Me*, not only inspired me to look deeper for truths in Indian religious history but also to understand that heroes who are ordinary men and women are more likely to be emulated by the youth than those who are believed to be completely untainted: "Whatever the causes, the results of Herofication are potentially crippling to students… Our children end up without realistic role models to inspire them" (Loewen, 1995, p. 25).

As we saw in the last two chapters, Vivekananda intentionally privileged Advaita Vedanta over all other schools of thought. For him, Advaita was the answer, Advaita was the way, Advaita was the highest level of philosophy that one could attain. But what does this mean for other paths? How did this effect the validity and position of the other sects, and traditions, that he was relegating to a lower rung on the Hindu totem pole? How did this hierarchy affect them and the Indian spiritual landscape? And perhaps most importantly, why did these sects allow Advaita to be privileged over their own ideology? There are multiple, complex reasons for why such a hierarchy was not only allowed to be cultivated, but at some junctures even encouraged. One could argue that this was a by-product of 'continental collision'. As King and Thapar have already pointed out, similarly, Basu argues that elites across India were clear on the fact that they had to find a way to unite the country:

> Nationalists in nineteenth-century India were in search of an appropriate concept for describing a society which was like a mosaic, being composed of diverse races and religions; the challenge for the intellectuals of that time was to find a justification for this unique social structure without denying its presence. The Advaita theology provided the answers to both these problems; it enables its acknowledgement while at the same time it provided a philosophical defence (2002, p.78).

Vivekananda's success at the Parliament served as a catalyst for Hindus who had been struggling amongst themselves to find a cohesive path. His declaration that India's greatest strength was its spirituality gave other elite leaders a way to find common ground. This had not been easy since, as we have already discussed, traditionalists and reformers were not always in consensus. However, Vivekananda seemed to have struck a chord with those who wanted a banner under which they could all unite.

For the reformers, his emphasis on Vedanta, which was a rational philosophical school of thought, that seemingly promoted universal religious ideals was a cause they could rally behind. Of course, this was not a new development but rather one that had

been maturing for over a century. For example, we saw how Hatcher highlighted that

from the time of Rammohan Roy, the Brahmos had defended Vedanta philosophy in

their own unique fashion. Indeed, the Brahmos had a long and complicated history with

the Vedas and whereas they did not accept these texts to be infallible scriptures, they

did accept that they contained certain invaluable truths:

> One of the missionaries' favorite targets from early in the nineteenth century had
> been the philosophy of Vedanta, by which they meant the renunciant monism of
> Sankara's Advaita Vedanta. Rammohun had internalized enough of this critique
> to wish to argue that the core philosophy of Hinduism was not monistic
> illusionism but a monotheism consistent with that found in Judaism, Christianity
> and Islam. At the same time, however, Rammohun would not concede everything
> to the missionaries. Instead, he worked zealously to retain and redeem the name
> of Vedanta by publishing and commenting on his own Bengali translations of its
> Sanskrit sources, namely, the Upanisads and the *Brahma Sutras*. The implication
> of this is that from the time of Rammohun, Vedanta became what we might call
> the sacred cow of the modern Hindu interpreter – a cultural marker, but one
> which needed constant explanation and defense (Hatcher, 1999, p.112).

This complex relationship continued over decades with the Vedanta becoming an

"embattled emblem" which the Brahmo leaders continuously fought to uphold by

arguing:

> their Vedantic theism was not an innovation but simply a return to the so-called
> unitrarian, or monotheistic, religion of the ancient Vedas. However, Rajnarain's
> [Bose, a Brahmo leader in the 19th century] essays also appealed to modernist
> arguments drawn from rationalism and natural theology (Hatcher, 1999, pp.112-
> 113).

Thus Hatcher concludes, "The creative eclecticism of Vivekananda… did wonders for

giving Vedanta a central place in the emerging discourse of apologetic Hinduism and

Indian nationalism" (1999, p.115).

Similarly, for the traditionalists, the fact that this school privileged the ancient

Vedic scriptures, that formed the basis for much of their own orthodox rituals and

practices, calmed their fears of their way of life being usurped by reform in the name of

modernity. Indeed, Vivekananda began his campaign to promote Advaita Vedanta, as

the voice of Hindu ideas, by first establishing the primacy of the Vedanta, with the

traditionalists, soon after he returned to India from his first visit overseas; "All the

philosophers of India who are orthodox have to acknowledge the authority of the

Vedanta" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.120). So much so, that Anantanand Rambachan

contends that one of the main reasons why Vivekananda's version of Advaita became

the dominant model for 'Hinduism' in India was because:

> He saw clearly that the acceptance of the authority of the Vedas was one of the few common points around which different religious allegiances in India could be united... Like his employment of the distinctions between *sruti* and *smriti*, Vivekananda's stress on the common authority of the Vedas and his equation of it with orthodoxy must be placed in the wider context of his anxiety for and commitment to national and religious unity. One of the most common of Vivekananda's themes throughout this triumphal lecture tour was the view that religion constituted the central, indispensable characteristic of national life in India (1994, p.57).

Consequently, as we turn to this final chapter on the current effects of

Vivekananda's legacy, we will focus on unpacking how his words have been

appropriated by the Sangh Parivar.[81] How have they interpreted his message in such a

way as to advocate for Hindu supremacy in India? And, how, by privileging the

supremacy of Advaita Vedanta, multiple, alternate voices have been marginalized. One

simply has to investigate how textbooks are being challenged, and scholars are being

silenced, to understand how problematic this stance is.[82] Heterodoxy is a trait that has

been cultivated on Indian soil since ancient times. Different sects, and so-called 'world

religions' came into existence on Indian soil because they refused to comply with the

dominant world view. This, is what made India both strong and unique. This, is what

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[81] The Sangh Parivar is a Hindu nationalist conglomerate whose parent organization is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS)

[82] I will outline the way history textbooks and historians are being interrogated later in this chapter when we discuss how other traditions are marginalized by using Vivekananda's ideology.

allowed Hindu traditions to endure multiple 'continental collisions' and survive. In *The Argumentative Indian* (2005), the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen states:

> It is indeed important to understand the long tradition of accepted heterodoxy in India. In resisting the attempts by the Hindutva activists to capture ancient India as their home ground (and to see it as the unique cradle of Indian civilization), it is not enough to point out that India has many other sources of culture as well. It is necessary also to see how much heterodoxy there has been in Indian thoughts and beliefs from very early days (2005, p.xii).

Accordingly, Sen contends:

> The contemporary relevance of the dialogic tradition and of the acceptance of heterodoxy is hard to exaggerate. Discussions and arguments are critically important for democracy and public reasoning. They are central to the practice of secularism and for even-handed treatment of adherents of different religious faiths (including those who have no religious beliefs). Going beyond these basic structural priorities, the argumentative tradition, if used with deliberation and commitment, can also be extremely important in resisting social inequalities and in removing poverty and deprivation. Voice is a crucial component of the pursuit of social justice (2005, p.xiii).

It is my contention that the most useful way to analyse how Vivekananda's words have been brought into the 21st century is by examining how the Sangh Parivar has been using the language and ideology that Vivekananda helped popularize. As such, I will use the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (henceforth RSS) and the Sangh Parivar as a lens through which to unpack Vivekananda's statements and its impact on India. So, who are the Sangh Parivar? What is the RSS? And, what is their relationship with the Hindutva movement?

The Sangh Parivar

In the previous chapter we saw that V.D. Savarkar conceived the term 'Hindutva', whereby he articulated that 'Hindu-ness' was comprised of three basic characteristics, "geographical unity, racial features and a common culture" (Jaffrelot, 2007, p.86). One of the reasons why Savarkar formulated these ideas was because he was reacting to

growing hostilities, between the Hindus and the Muslims, in the 1920's. It was

presumed that a pan-Islamic movement could prove to be a formidable opponent to the

Hindu community, since the British were intent on using 'divide and rule' tactics to

control their colonies:

> [Savarkar's] book was the first attempt at endowing what he called the Hindu Rashtra (the Hindu nation) with a clear-cut identity: namely Hindutva, a word coined by Savarkar and which, according to him does not coincide with Hinduism... Savarkar argued that religion was only one aspect of Hindu identity... The first criterion of the Hindu nation, for him, is the sacred territory of Aryavarta as described in the Vedas... Then comes race: for Savarkar the Hindus are the descendants of 'Vedic fathers' who occupied this geographical area since antiquity. In addition to religion, land and race, Savarkar mentions language as a pillar of Hindu identity. When doing so he refers to Sanskrit but also to Hindi: hence the equation he finally established between Hindutva and the triptych: 'Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan'. Hindu nationalism appears for the first time as resulting from the superimposition of a religion, a culture, a language, and sacred territory – the perfect recipe for ethnic nationalism (Jaffrelot, 2007, pp.14-15).

However, whereas Savarkar was the person who created the ideology for Hindu

nationalism, it was Keshav Baliram Hedgewar who took Sarvarkar's ideas and went on

to form the RSS in 1925:

> This organization – which quickly developed into the largest Hindu nationalist movement – was intended not only to propagate the Hindutva ideology but also to infuse new physical strength into the majority community.
> To achieve this twofold objective the RSS adopted a very specific *modus operandi*. Hedgewar decided to work at the grassroots in order to reform Hindu society from below: he created local branches (*shakhas*) of the movement in towns and villages according to a standard pattern. Young Hindu men gathered every morning and every evening on a playground for games with martial connotations and ideological training sessions. The men in charge of the shakhas, called *pracharaks* (preachers), dedicated their whole life to the organization; as a part of RSS cadres they could be sent anywhere in India to develop the organization's network.... The RSS soon became the most powerful Hindu nationalist movement but it did not have much impact on public life because it remained out of politics (Jaffrelot, 2007, p.16).

Not surprisingly, this ban on politics in the RSS did not last long and "the Bharatiya Jana

Sangha (forerunner of the present Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP)" was founded in 1951

(Jaffrelot, 2007, p.17).

However, politics was not the only arena where the RSS wanted to start exerting its influence, but rather, it established several different organizations for a wide array of social categories and, as such, there was a proliferation of associations that emerged over the following decades, a few of which are mentioned below:

> Thus in 1948 RSS cadres based in Delhi founded the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP – Indian Students' Association) … In 1955 the RSS gave itself a workers' union, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS – Indian Workers Association) [which] became India's largest trade union… in 1952 it founded a tribal movement, the Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA – Centre for Tribal Welfare), which aimed above all to counter the influence of Christian movements among aboriginals of India… In 1964, in association with Hindu clerics, the RSS set up the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP – World Council of Hindus), a movement responsible for grouping the heads of various Hindu sects in order to lend this hitherto unorganized religion a sort of centralized structure… Another subsidiary, Vidya Bharati (Indian Knowledge), was established in 1977 to coordinate a network of schools… Lastly, in 1979 the RSS founded Seva Bharati (Indian Service) to penetrate India's slums through social activities (free schools, low-cost medicines, etc.). Taken together, these bridgeheads are represented by the mother organization as forming the 'Sangh Parivar' or 'the family of the Sangh', that is, of the RSS (Jaffrelot, 2007, pp.18-19).

What is interesting is that many of the tactics, that the RSS used to spread its message and influence, were ideas that Vivekananda himself had spoken about during his lifetime. According to Vivekananda, the best way to improve the lives and circumstances of his poverty stricken, uneducated Indian brethren was through selfless *seva* (service). Indeed, this was a goal that was extremely important to him, and which he fought to accomplish, even when it meant going up against many of his brother disciples who did not always agree that Vivekananda's interpretation of *seva* was what Ramakrishna had in mind. *Seva*, in the religious context, was commonly understood to be service to the divine, an act of devotion towards a deity or a guru. However, Vivekananda argued that one could also interpret this term to signify service to humankind, in the name of the divine.

Of course, Vivekananda was not unique in highlighting the need for service to humanity. After all, social service was an important aspect of Christian missionary activity during the colonial era. Furthermore, the Brahmo Samaj can be accredited with several social reforms and projects. However, it was Vivekananda who encouraged his brother disciples to become *sanyasis* who took action in the world by urging them to dedicate their lives to the poor and downtrodden. He argued that by selfishly choosing personal salvation they were turning their backs on the poverty and hardships that their fellow human beings were facing. Some scholars have argued that Vivekananda, like the Brahmos, was simply incorporating ideas that he had imbibed from the West. However, in *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service* (2006), Gwilym Beckerlegge cautions against scholars who take a simplistic, West to East, linear view of how social service and philanthropic movements developed in India. Rather, he contends:

> Vivekananda's early involvement in famine-relief marks the point at which feeding the hungry, already a charitable act required within the dictates of Hindu dharma, became transformed into a form of 'social service' as that phrase has come to be understood. This was sustained intervention on an expanding scale that required planning, organization, fund-raising, liaison with other agencies, and thus public accountability. It was no longer an ad hoc expression of charitable action nor merely the sum of individually motivated actions. The nineteenth century saw the introduction also in Britain of measures that signalled a realization that private, in this context Christian-inspired, philanthropy could no longer be relied upon to redress the extent of social deprivation encountered in a rapidly industrializing society. Similar changes were taking place in the United States. Although different in kind, British India experienced no less sweeping changes during this same period which made plain the limitations in the capacity of traditional forms of charitable action to meet new levels of need. Vivekananda's policies in this respect were thus very much in tune with the new 'scientific spirit' that had begun to percolate organized activity in the West (Beckerlegge, 2006(b), pp.177-178).

Beckerlegge articulates, in detail, the pitfalls associated with suggesting, as J.N. Farquhar does in his seminal work *Modern Religious Movements in India* (1915), that Vivekananda's '*sadhana*' of service was simply inspired by the West:[83]

> Ultimately, arguments that the mature Ramakrishna movement's commitment to serving the poor and oppressed is founded upon a discontinuity between Vivekananda and Ramakrishna, and thus between Vivekananda and the extended Hindu tradition, may carry implicit judgements on the capacity of the Hindu tradition to change and to provide an authentic basis for social activism (Beckerlegge, 2006(b), p.3).

> Be that as it may, this was not a common interpretation of *seva,* and it is not surprising that Vivekananda met with a considerable amount of resistance when he put forth his ideas.[84] Indeed, Sumit Sarkar surmises:

> He [Vivekananda] had to fight, in a way, against an entire Hindu tradition in which charity might at times be considered a part of the dharma of a king or householder, but where the sanyasi's principal ideal was individual moksha, not improvement of the world (2014, p.207).

However, despite his many critics, Vivekananda was obviously successful since the motto, to this day, for the Ramakrishna Math and Mission is:

> *Atmanomo mokshartham jagad hitaya cha*
> For one's own salvation, and for the welfare of the world[85]

Vivekananda began his efforts towards this goal as soon as he returned to India from his first Western tour. He encouraged his listeners to serve humanity by linking it to service to God. Not surprisingly, he used an anecdote to get his point across and, for added emphasis, he presented his ideas in a temple setting:

> A rich man had a garden and two gardeners. One of these gardeners was very lazy and did not work; but when the owner came to the garden, the lazy man would get up and fold his arms and say, "How beautiful is the face of my master", and dance before him. The other gardener would not talk much, but would work

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[83] Farquhar clearly states "the truth is that ancient Hinduism does not teach the duty of service at all" (Farquhar, 1915, p.206). Beckerlegge defines 'sadhana' as 'means of attainment' or 'spiritual discipline' (2006, p.1-2).
[84] See Beckerlegge, (2006b) for a detailed study on this topic.
[85] http://belurmath.org/

hard, and produce all sorts of fruits and vegetables which he would carry on his head to his master who lived a long way off. Of these two gardeners, which would be the more beloved of his master? Shiva is that master, and this world is His garden, and there are two sorts of gardeners here; the one who is lazy, hypocritical, and does nothing, only talking about Shiva's beautiful eyes and nose and other features; and the other, who is taking care of Shiva's children, all those that are poor and weak, all animals and all His creation. Which of these would be the more beloved of Shiva? Certainly he that serves His children. He who wants to serve the father must serve the children first. He who wants to serve Shiva must serve His children – must serve all creatures in this world first. It is said in the Shastra that those who serve the servants of God are His greatest servants. So you will bear this in mind (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.142).[86]

Here, Vivekananda made it abundantly clear that he believed that *seva* entailed serving

the poor and downtrodden. And, Vivekananda had a vision for what *seva* he wanted the

Ramakrishna Math sanyasis to focus on:

> know for certain that absolutely nothing can be done to improve the state of things, unless there is spread of education first among the women and the masses. And so I have it in my mind to train up some Brahmacharins and Brahmacharinis, the former of whom will eventually take the vow of Sannyasa and try to carry the light of education among the masses, from village to village, throughout the country (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.489).

Before departing for his second tour in the West, Vivekananda instructed the junior

sanyasis of Belur Math:

> In our country, the old idea is to sit in a cave and meditate and die. To go ahead of others in salvation is wrong. One must learn sooner or later that one cannot get salvation if one does not try to seek the salvation of his brothers. You must try to combine in your life immense idealism with immense practicality. You must be prepared to go into deep meditation now, and the next moment you must be ready to go and cultivate these fields (Swamiji said, pointing to the meadows of the Math). You must be prepared to explain the difficult intricacies of the Shastras now, and the next moment to go and sell the produce of the fields in the market. You must be prepared for all menial services, not only here, but elsewhere also (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.447).

It is rather surprising to discover that the similarities between Vivekananda's

instructions to his *sanyasis*, regarding *seva*, and the Sangh Parivar's rules for their

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[86] The subtle criticism that Vivekananda aims at *bhaktas* is evident in this anecdote; an issue that we will address in the following section.

organizations' dedication to service, are remarkably homogenous. Both required their

leaders to be celibate and austere. Both advocate for reform at a grass roots level. And

both expect their followers to be prepared to travel to spread their message.

Beckerlegge highlights the parallels that can be drawn between the Ramakrishna

Math and Mission, and the Sangh Parivar, by investigating the similarities in their

respective concepts of *seva,* and the commonalities in the structuring of their individual

organizations. Interestingly, the first two leaders of the RSS had been influenced, in

their youth, by Vivekananda's ideology and methods:

> Both the first two supreme leaders (*sarsanghchalaks*) of the RSS had significant
> degrees of association with the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. Keshav Baliram
> Hedgewar (1889-1940), the founder of the RSS, participated in relief operations
> organized by the Ramakrishna Mission (1912/1913) while a student in Kolkata.
> The second *sarsanghchalak* and one of its most influential ideologues, Madhav
> Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906-1973), was devoted to Swami Akhandananda (1865-
> 1937) of the Ramakrishna Math, who had been Vivekananda's *gurubhai* [brother
> disciple]. Had it not been for Akhandananda's death in 1937, Golwalkar might
> well have offered himself for training to enter the Ramakrishna Math
> (Beckerlegge, 2010, p.71).

Indeed, the connection between the RSS and the Ramakrishna Math and Mission is not a

recent phenomenon, especially since the RSS routinely "makes considerable use of

images of Vivekananda and quotations from his works in its literature and websites"

(Beckerlegge, 2006(a), p.49). What is of particular interest:

> The role of the *pracharak*, the full-time worker and organizer who is expected to
> remain unmarried and to maintain a celibate and ascetic lifestyle has also been
> central to the creation and management of *seva* projects within the RSS
> (Beckerlegge, 2006(a), p.49).

These leaders of the RSS are not expected to become *sanyasis* but they are asked to

show an extremely similar sense of devotion to their chosen path. The development of

the Vivekananda Kendra, which is another organization within the Sangh Parivar, is also

noteworthy:

> Vivekananda Kendra – a lay order of men and women dedicated to promoting Vivekananda's teaching and offering *seva* (in this context, service to humanity) – was created out of the residual momentum built by the RSS's national campaign to erect the Rock Memorial (Beckerlegge, 2010, p.72).

The Rock Memorial was built in 1970, by the RSS, in Kanyakumari, to commemorate the place where Vivekananda is said to have made his decision to travel West in search of a solution to alleviate the poverty he had witnessed amongst his Indian brethren. Some hagiographies also claim that this is where Vivekananda experienced enlightenment. The fact that it was the RSS who took it upon themselves to build this monument and, who continue to run it using the funds they collect to support the service projects they spearhead in this region, shows a remarkable attachment to Vivekananda and his mission. What Beckerlegge accomplishes with this study is to demonstrate how Vivekananda's ideology has been appropriated, and cultivated, by the Sangh Parivar and how closely the RSS has been associating itself with the legacy of Vivekananda. It could be argued that one of the reasons why the RSS has been able to gain such a large following is specifically because of the multiple service programs that they have established, and continue to maintain, across the nation. Using some of Vivekananda's methods, they have been successful at reaching the masses the way he envisioned. Yet, it is only recently that Vivekananda has come to be linked with the Sangh Parivar. Why is this? Why have renown political scientists like Partha Chatterjee and more recently, Christophe Jaffrelot chosen to ignore Vivekananda's role in the development of the Sangh Parivar? For instance, in his study which focuses primarily on Hindu nationalism, Jaffrelot offers the following justification for excluding Vivekananda:

> The selection of the political thinkers, or ideologues, included in this anthology has been determined by a very simple consideration: those who have played a role in organized Hindu nationalist movements have been systematically preferred to individuals who have never been mentors to institutionalized socio-political associations. As a result Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda – whose

thought processes had affinities with Hindu nationalism – have been omitted (Jaffrelot, 2007, p.24).

What is it about Vivekananda that, despite scholars (like Gwilym Beckerlegge and Jyotirmaya Sharma) who underscore the role that he played, and continues to play, in the philosophy of the Sangh Parivar, that Vivekananda continues to be seen as a benign universalist who only sought to promote a united 'Hinduism'? Perhaps the clue lies in the fact that Vivekananda apparently never tried to promote a Hindu nation the way that the RSS does? Or did he? Was he just more careful and better at camouflaging his message than his RSS progeny? As we compare his message with that of the Sangh Parivar perhaps we will find that the Narendra who spoke at the time when India was searching for its place in the global arena transforms into a completely different Narendra when we are faced with a nation that is being threatened by fundamentalist ideas.

Or, alternatively, could this apparent dichotomy be more visible now that Vivekananda's corpus of writing is available, as a whole, for scholars to examine and unpack? Could Vivekananda's writings be susceptible to a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'? This theory, that post-modern scholars occasionally opt to use when analysing primary texts could be applicable here; a theory that was made popular by the "masters of suspicion":

> Marx, Freud and Nietzsche – each in his own way – suggest that subjectivity may indeed be deceived, not from without, but from within: it is self-deceived... The Marxist therefore engages in a critique of ideology in order to uncover the covert interests lurking behind the apparent meaning of the text. A Freudian is suspicious of received texts for quite different reasons, but the hermeneutical effect is comparable. Here the 'ideological' factor is not economic and social but unconscious and individual: to understand a text rightly the interpreter must take into account the *unconscious* motivations that may be at work behind the façade of rational discourse. With Nietzsche the situation is more complex... but the need to take a kind of false consciousness into account links his positions to that of Marx and Freud (Green, 2005, p.401, emphasis in original).

For example, in *In Search of Dreamtime* (1993), Masuzawa analyses Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912). Here, she contends that Durkheim seems to be 'shadow boxing' with himself when he is developing the arguments he presents in his book (Masuzawa, 1993, p.34). She argues that this is because Durkheim apparently has two theses, which are at cross purposes with each other. The question any reader of Durkheim has to ask then is whether he was aware of the split personality of his book or, if instead, he was unable to silence his inner voice sufficiently, resulting in it rearing its head unbeknownst to its creator, in the most inappropriate spaces.

> While the author [Durkheim] claims that there is one origin of religion and it is simple, the text also demonstrates that it is not so, that origin as such is something disjunctive. In due course, the reader comes to recognize a certain unnamed and unacknowledged element that continually interrupts and obfuscates the authorial writing. In effect, this unauthorized "voice" silently criticizes the metaphysical quest that motivates the text, and in time induces some muffled confessions concerning the disparity that inhabits every assertion of origin (Masuzawa, 1993, p.34).

Are we witnessing a similar dissonant voice in Vivekananda's writings? It is no secret that scholars who have worked with Vivekananda have oftentimes found him contradicting himself.[87] One can argue, that Vivekananda's message changes depending on who his audience is. Similarly, one can also argue that his public speeches and lectures have a different tone and tenor than his private correspondence. However, this may not be all we are dealing with here. Perhaps, as Masuzawa suggests with Durkheim, now that we as Vivekananda's readers must interpret his written words, alternate strands of his arguments are becoming visible. Strands that do not correspond to his dominant message of a *sanyasi*. An Advaitin *sanyasi* who was primarily interested in

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[87] Brian Hatcher, Narasingha Sil, Anantanand Rambachan and Rajgopal Chattopadhyaya, to mention just a few, all allude to Vivekananda's contradictory statements and penchant to give seemingly opposing arguments.

promoting philanthropic projects while articulating how *his* version of 'Hinduism' was best suited to represent Hindu traditions. After all, the fact that his words are being appropriated so blithely by the Hindutva movement would suggest that there are latent messages in his ideology that must be brought to light. That we may indeed be dealing with multiple Narendras.

Is it time to reject the hierarchy?

One of the topics that we have covered extensively is Vivekananda's propensity to paint all Indian traditions with an Advaita whitewash. Whereas this may have been a useful tactic during the colonial era, it has now become a problem that is escalating at a rapid pace with the help of the Sangh Parivar. This hierarchy, that these methods have cultivated, have not only marginalized multiple religious traditions, but, have also changed how many Hindus justify their continued regard for devotional and ritual practices and norms. An essay that impacted me when I started my graduate studies is Vasudha Narayanan's "Diglossic Hinduism: Liberation and Lentils" (2000). Here, Narayanan highlights how she was dismayed when she discovered that the Hindu traditions she grew up with, were not considered to be important aspects of the 'Hinduism' she had come to study as a graduate student at Harvard University. This experience propelled her to make the following observations:

> The Hindu tradition, like many other religions, is complex and diglossia is rampant. There are clear distinctions between androcentric Sanskrit texts and practice. There is a further removal from the "on the ground" picture when we come to the representation of "Hinduism" as a tradition trying to fit the straightjacket of a nineteenth-century understanding of "religion." To some extent this is because early western Indologists and scholars of religion relied on male brahmins for their understanding of the tradition. None of this was wrong; it was just that the epic stories, the variations of the stories, the varieties of devotional activity, the celebrations of festivals, and the fuss about food seem far more important than doctrine and philosophy in the practice of Hindu traditions (Narayanan, 2000, p.762).

Accordingly, she draws attention to the fact that not only are a multitude of practices, that many Hindus consider to form the basis of their religious belief, absent from textbooks but also:

> Hindus do not usually walk around worrying about their karma or working toward *moksha* (liberation), nor are most folk familiar with anything more than the name Vedanta among the various schools of philosophy (Narayanan, 2000, p.762).

Narayanan reasons that this myopic view of Hindu traditions has been fuelled by the textbooks that speak for Hindu traditions:

> What was left out of almost all of these texts that presented the "religion" of "Hinduism" includes (a)dharmic practices like the giving of gifts, making donations, and merit-making exercises like digging wells or celebrations in planting trees; (b) vernacular literature and therefore, the voices of women, who did not compose in Sanskrit but, rather, in the regional languages; (c) rituals and practices of the so-called lower castes, especially of women; and (d) practices that came under the categories of "pollution" and "purity." "auspiciousness" and "inauspiciousness." The latter include the much lamented lentils that my grandmother made (the right one for the right occasion), the right astrological times for starting journeys or embarking on any task, celebrating weddings and so on. These were just a few of the topics jettisoned when the concept of Hinduism was matched with the term *religion*. Some of these concepts were mopped up by anthropology, others like temple rituals have only recently made it to textbooks.
> What we have, therefore, in some of the popular texts that have been around for many years is a tradition based on *parts* of the Sanskrit textual tradition. This reliance immediately indicates two things: the texts were written by *men* who were generally *high caste*. Among the choice of texts written by these high-caste men, it was the ritual of the Vedas; notions of karma, *samsara*, and *moksha*; the spiritual paths of the Bhagavad Gita; and the philosophical traditions of the later period that were the focus of most discussions (Narayanan, 2000, pp.763-764, emphasis in original).

Unfortunately, Narayanan does not draw a nexus from these texts to Vivekananda's teachings or the RSS' influence. However, we just have to examine how Vivekananda demoted *bhakti* and orthopraxy to realize that these texts, which are lacking in so many integral aspects of Hindu religious life, are simply reflecting the groundwork that was laid a century before. For example, even in the short anecdote that was quoted in the previous section, we find that Vivekananda belittled the 'gardener'

(read 'devotee') who danced and sang in front of his 'master' (read 'deity'). Most of Vivekananda's references to *bhakti* are shrouded in this kind of language. He did not reject it from the religious landscape of the Hindus but he did repeatedly demote it to a rung lower than Advaita. For instance, one of the issues that Vivekananda had with *bhakti* was that it brought out the feminine principle in its devotees. Indeed, he was quite vociferous in his denouncement of the Vaishnava sects whose followers often adopted feminine traits:

> Vaishnavism was proclaimed as the religion of the heart which relied on the feminine principle of piety, devotion, and emotional attachment to God which was in contrast to what was seen as the masculine principle in religion that centered on dry philosophical discussions (Basu, 2002, p.155).

Even though this mode of *bhakti* bears a distinct resemblance to Ramakrishna, it was, as we have already seen, not the kind of devotion that Vivekananda was willing to encourage. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Vivekananda thought it was necessary to highlight, what he perceived to be, the problematic stance taken by the Vaishnavites at a time in history when Indians needed to demonstrate 'nerves of steel and muscles of iron' to their colonial rulers:

> Vivekananda launched a frontal attack on the neo-Vaishnava practices of Sankirtan [communal singing of devotional songs] ... one of his favorite objects of ridicule was the rendition of devotional songs by the Vaishnavites. He was particularly enraged by the fact that during times of plague, the neo-Vaishnava cult took recourse to Sankirtan as the most appropriate religious instrument for the protection of people from the scourge of the dreaded disease. The way Vivekananda justified this equivocal position of uplifting Bhakti while simultaneously negating the efforts of the Vaishnavites suggests an inherently complex but familiar ruse to 'sanitize the popular' in order to make the popular eligible as the modern and the national (Basu, 2002, p.157).[88]

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[88] In a move that is remarkably similar to the ones he makes for other religious leaders like Ramakrishna, Jesus and Buddha, he disengages the Vaishnava sects from their founder Chaitanya, arguing that the followers are not living up to their master's ideals (Basu, 2002, pp.155-158).

Of course, Vivekananda was careful to cloak his words in language that was both tolerant and inclusive but nevertheless, the message was usually clear. *Bhakti* and rituals were simply how Hindus began their relationship with the divine. And unless the *bhakti* they practiced was of the purest form, like Ramakrishna or Chaitanya, it was not enough; neither to attain *moksha* nor to form a strong and independent nation. For those goals, Advaita ideals would eventually have to be embraced.

Perhaps this would be a good place for us to unpack what the terms 'exclusive', 'inclusive' and 'pluralist' can signify. This should offer us some insight on how Vivekananda was actually demeaning certain traditions and sects without any outward signs of violence. Many religious scholars in general, and Christian theologians in particular, have grappled with these terms over the centuries. I do not presume to offer up an exhaustive study here, but rather, will streamline my argument so that it sheds some light on how Vivekananda's ideas can be interpreted. Although there are multiple definitions available, it is Perry Schmidt-Leukel's interpretation that appears to be the most comprehensive:

> It is, however, possible to define the terms of the tripartite scheme in a clear and consistent way so that one finally arrives at a coherent and – if naturalism is added – a logically comprehensive classification. If the crucial question in the assessment of religious diversity is whether there is truth in the claims of the various religions (made in different forms) to relate humans in a soteriologically decisive way to transcendent reality, the answer can be either 'no' or 'yes'. While the 'no'-answer signifies *naturalism* the 'yes'-answer is open for further sub-classification. Does this 'yes' relate to the claim of only one religion or to more than one? Affirming the first would constitute *exclusivism*, affirming the second would lead to the further question whether among the various true religions one is standing out as superior to all the others or whether there is no such single superiority. The first position defines *inclusivism* and the latter *pluralism*. Note that in this definition pluralism does not say that the soteriological claims of *all* religions are equally true and valid. Some of these could indeed be deficient or even entirely wrong. But what it says is that at least some religions, despite their differences, can be understood as being indeed on the same level and truly and efficiently mediating a saving relation to an ultimate transcendent reality, that is: this position adds indeed theological 'parity' to 'plurality' (Schmidt-Leukel, 2010, pp.57-58, emphasis in original).

What is of particular interest, for the purposes of understanding where Vivekananda fits

into this classification system, is that the term 'inclusive', even though it has such a

seemingly positive quality to it, in actuality is a word that promotes a hierarchy.

Schmidt-Leukel draws attention to this point:

> Inclusivism cannot really appreciate diversity. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith once
> said in comparing his own views to the inclusivist position of Karl Rahner: 'He
> has assumed that Christian formulations are the making explicit of the truth of
> God's relation to humankind, whereas I have observed that they are *an* explicit
> formulation, but not *the'* (2010, p.59, emphasis in original).

In the third chapter of this study we engaged with Paul Hacker's theories which

included, but were not limited to, his use of the word 'inclusivism' when describing

Hindus and their traditions. Now however, it is clear that this description of the Hindu

propensity, for engaging with other traditions by 'including' them into their ideological

framework, is actually just as problematic as the 'exclusivist' position. Indeed, some

could argue that it is worse since it comes across as a benign label but, in actuality, it is

creating a hierarchical scheme whereby the tradition that is doing the 'including' is

actually claiming its superiority. This is reflected in John Hick's definition:

> By inclusivism I mean the view (advocated by Karl Rahner in his influential
> theory of 'anonymous Christianity' and largely adopted, though without use of
> the term, by Vatican II) that *one's own tradition alone has the whole truth but that
> this truth is nevertheless partially reflected in other traditions* (1983, p.487,
> emphasis added).

Of course, scholars who might want to come to the defence of Vivekananda could argue

that he did not invoke this title himself, but rather, is one that is routinely applied to his

ideology.[89] Perhaps, it may be more appropriate to label him as a pluralist? However,

according to Gavin D'Costa even the label 'pluralist' is laden with undertones:

> the pluralist by virtue of the act of exclusion of Jim Jones or the Nazis, can
> thereby include various other doctrines and practices in so much as they do not

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[89] For example, Basu states, "The concept of inclusivist Hinduism came to be preached
by such diverse thinkers as Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore" (2002, p.67).

contradict their own basic truth claims and in this act of inclusion and exclusion such pluralists are logically no different from exclusivists who simply argue that those who properly relate to the revelation are included in salvation and those who do not are excluded (D'Costa, 1996, p.226).

One scholar who has addressed some of these issues, in relation to Vivekananda, and his interpretation of Hindu traditions, is Glyn Richards:

Vivekananda's expressed preference for the impersonal concept of God as the fundamental ground or basis for any understanding of the personal concept meant that the type of religion that had the greatest appeal for him was that which propounded impersonal rather than personal concepts of the absolute. He was well aware that certain historical religious laid claim to universality, but he doubted whether it was possible for any historical religion to make such a claim which presumably included Advaita Vedanta (1995, p.132).

However, Richards is not really convincing because he then goes on to admit that as far as Vivekananda was concerned, "dualism (*Dvaita*) is on a lower level of understanding than qualified non-dualism (*Visistadvaita*) and perfect non-dualism (*Advaita*)" (1995, p.133). Richards argues that even though Vivekananda has been at the receiving end of much criticism regarding his seemingly exclusive stance, in truth he is actually speaking of the 'principle' of non-dualism, rather than its particular manifestation as Advaita Vedanta:

The question is whether he equates non-dualism with Advaita Vedanta as a particular, historical religion or rather as a principle that ought to determine our understanding of ultimate reality and the absolute. His critics would accuse him of the former and *ipso facto* guilty of sectarianism (1995, p.134).

According to Richards, this criticism is too harsh since he believes that Vivekananda would view any 'religion' that took a non-dualistic view of existence to be a valid and equal path, comparable to Advaita Vedanta. However, there is one major problem with this argument because Richards also argues that Vivekananda, like the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, believes "it is not possible to nominate a particular historical religion as the perfect embodiment of the essence of religion" (Richards, 1995, p.136). And since, Vivekananda considered the Vedas, and the tradition

associated with it, to be the only tradition *not* to be historically founded, like

Christianity, Islam, Buddhism etc., one could just as easily conclude that for

Vivekananda only the Vedanta, with its presumably ahistorical roots, could reflect the

essence of the divine. In fact, these sentiments are amply demonstrated in his words:

> This is a peculiarity which we have to understand – that our religion preaches an Impersonal Personal God. It preaches any amount of impersonal laws *plus* any amount of personality, but the very fountain-head of our religion is in the Shrutis, the Vedas, which are perfectly impersonal; the persons all come in the Smritis and Puranas – the great Avataras, Incarnations of God, Prophets, and so forth. And this ought also to be observed that except our religion, every other religion in the world depends upon the life or lives of some personal founder or founders. Christianity is built upon the life of Jesus Christ, Mohammedanism upon Mohammed, Buddhism upon Buddha, Jainism upon the Jinas, and so on. It naturally follows that there must be in all these religions a good deal of fight about what they call the historical evidences of these great personalities. If at any time the historical evidences of these personages in ancient times become weak, the whole building of the religion tumbles down and is broken to pieces. We escaped this fate because our religion is not based upon persons but on principles (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.249).

Similarly:

> Today I stand here and say, with the conviction of truth, that it is so. If there is any land on this earth that can lay claim to be the blessed Punya Bhumi, 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 vending 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 (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.105).

And finally:

> You have also heard, quite within recent times, the claims put forward by Dr. Barrows, a great friend of mine, that Christianity is the only universal religion. Let me consider this question a while and lay before you my reasons why I think that it is Vedanta, and Vedanta alone that can become the universal religion of man, and that no other is fitted for the role (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.182).

Of course, one could make a legitimate argument, as has been done repeatedly in

previous chapters, that terms like 'inclusive', 'exclusive' and 'pluralist' are Western,

Christocentric terms that are being applied to Vivekananda. Sumit Sarkar seems to

anticipate this allegation by articulating how Vivekananda's methods can be interpreted

using the Hindu concept of *adhikari-bheda* which Sarkar describes in some detail:

> immense catholicity, going along with firmly conservative maintenance of rules
> appropriate for each level, jati, or *sampraday* (community), which are all
> conceived as having a place in a multiplicity of orthopraxies. Adhikari-bheda had
> emerged as a formal doctrine in the seventeenth-eighteenth century as a high-
> Brahmanical way of accommodating difference in philosophy, belief and ritual. A
> particular application of it was the concept of *smarta panchopasana* – the equal
> validity and orthodoxy of devotion to Ganapati, Vishnu, Siva, Shakti, and Surya.
> The roots, perhaps go much further back, to the notion, basic to Hindu concepts
> of hierarchy and caste, of each human group having its *svadharma* (one's own
> religious path) (2014, p.188).

However, like most terms of this kind, Sarkar is quick to highlight that there are

different interpretations of this concept that are relevant:

> Adhikari-bheda is open to somewhat different implications, depending on
> whether looked upon 'from below' or 'from above'. Adhikari-bheda catholicity
> has allowed the formation and survival of a multitude of practices and beliefs,
> numerous sampradayas with a fluidity and openness in their initial phases which
> makes even classification as Hindu or Muslim not always easy (2014, p.188).

Unfortunately, sometimes this ideology can also be interpreted in a less than exemplary

manner:

> Catholicity, grounded in adhikari-bheda, can also have an opposite thrust. In
> official, high-caste doctrine, adhikari-bheda often becomes synonymous with, not
> fluidity or openness, but neat compartmentalization, the drawing-up of more
> definite boundaries, and the arrangement of the various philosophies, rituals,
> beliefs and sampradayas in a *fixed hierarchy* culminating in high-Brahman
> practices and Advaita Vedantist philosophy (Sarkar, 2014, p.189, emphasis
> added).

What Sarkar does here is to describe a classification structure which can be compared

to the 'exclusive, inclusive, pluralist' system used by contemporary scholars using

Western terminology. Not surprisingly, both these methods of classification arrive at a

similar verdict:

> In Vivekananda, we shall see, the transition would be completed, with Vedanta
> jnana firmly placed at the apex of a single, well-defined hierarchy. This was
> accompanied by a much sharper definition of dividing lines between Hindu and
> other religious traditions (Sarkar, 2014, p.190).

It is imperative that we note here that Vivekananda was not only relegating other historical traditions to a lower rung, but also the other Hindu traditions that are associated with the *srutis* and the many incarnations of the divine. However, he takes pains to create a distinction between *bhakti* in its highest form, where it is pure love for the divine, versus *bhakti* in its orthopraxis form, which involves symbols and images and rituals. The difference seems subtle but in reality, it is not. The *bhakti* that Vivekananda accepts as a good and equally valid path to the divine is complete and utter surrender:

> He alone has attained the supreme state of love commonly called the brotherhood of man; the rest only talk. He sees no distinctions; the mighty ocean of love has entered into him, and he sees not man in man, but beholds his Beloved everywhere. Through every face shines to him his Hari. The light in the sun or the moon is all His manifestation. Wherever there is beauty or sublimity, to him it is all His… Such men alone have the right to talk of universal brotherhood (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, p.76).

Anything less than that was just not good enough; "Temples or churches, books or forms, are simply the *kindergarten* of religion, to make the spiritual child strong enough to take higher steps" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.2, p.43, emphasis added). Basically, Vivekananda is relegating all the Hindus who are orthopraxic to a lower realm, indicating that they have not yet realized that they need to give up all their rituals and images. What Vivekananda does with these arguments of his, which are extremely skilful, is accept that *bhakti*, a la Ramakrishna, is an exalted path but at the same time argue that the *bhakti* that millions of Hindus practice, which are wrapped up in bells and rituals and lentils, are a lesser way. Vivekananda is not the first Indian to make such proclamations. After all this is the Advaitin path. However, what makes his declarations problematic is that his conceptualization of Hindu traditions has become so widespread that they have influenced, and continue to influence, the Hindu psyche. Indeed, a great number of Hindus actually ascribe to this hierarchy. Perhaps a personal anecdote will

help clarify my point here. I still remember when, a few years ago, I was asked by a student if I believed in a *Saguna Brahman* or a *Nirguna Brahman.* I responded that I was a devotee of Krishna and as such ascribed to a *Saguna Brahman.* However, even before I realized what I was saying, I continued by acknowledging that acceptance of a *Nirguna Brahman* was a higher ideal and one that I was working my way towards. With a start, I acknowledged that I had internalized the emphasis on the superiority of Advaita Vedanta, I had internalized this hierarchy.

Of course, Vivekananda does not limit this hierarchy to Hindu traditions. He goes on, as we have already seen in some of the quotes cited above, as well as in the chapter based on his speeches at the Parliament, to argue that Vedanta was the highest path, superseding *all* other traditions. Most of his comments are shrouded in the cloak of inclusivity, which, as we have already seen, is a problematic stance when speaking of other traditions. One of the tactics that Vivekananda used to include other traditions under the Hindu umbrella was a call for a 'universal religion'. He used a multi-pronged approach to accomplish this. On the one hand, he praised certain aspects of other traditions and claimed that these traits deserved to be emulated. On the other hand, he criticized them saying that they had flaws that could only be overcome by adopting Advaita principles. The ultimate goal, according to Vivekananda, was to identify a 'universal religion' that would be suitable for all humanity.

Needless to say, the search for universals is an ancient one. According to McEvilley:

> The first philosophical question, "The Problem of the One and the Many," expresses the same ordering impulse that fueled the obsession with astronomy and geometry – the desire to find unifying principles behind apparent diversity. It is also an attempt to justify the claims for certainty of knowledge that the mathematically based sciences inspired. If things are different and separate, then the universe at large is unknowable since only specific things may be "known," one at a time. The preoccupation with The Problem of the One and the Many

expressed a desire to know the universe in some larger sense than that, by finding principles which would render every situation knowable with or without direct experience of it. Superficial diversity was to be tamed and made knowable by apprehension of underlying unity (2002, p.24).

Indeed, McEvilley quotes Aristotle who argues that Plato's *Theory of Forms* is based on the expressed need to find such unifying symbols:

> "Essential reality [for Plato] is the One," says Aristotle; "the Forms are the essential cause of all other things, and the One is the essential cause of the Forms" (as cited in McEvilley, 2002, p.157).

Accordingly, Vivekananda was just another voice trying to find a way to make his ideology applicable to the world at large. Ironically, his arguments for describing his idea of a 'universal religion' are rather fragmented, a point that Arvind Sharma articulates in *The Concepts of Universal Religion in Modern Hindu Thought* (1998):

> Vivekananda's concept of universal religion is characterized by a certain measure of fluidity. Sometimes he uses the term universal religion to emphasize the multiplicity of religions; sometimes the eternality of religion; sometimes the complementarity of religions; at other times, the humanity of religions; yet again, the harmony of religions; and yet again, the unity of religions. Sometimes he even discusses the possibility of Vedanta as a universal religion. Even this description does not exhaust the ways in which Vivekananda works with the concept of universal religion, for sometimes he proceeds to identify it with his own version of an ideal religion as well (1998, p.54).

What Sharma is referring to, when he tentatively states that "sometimes he even discusses the possibility of Vedanta as a universal religion" is a lecture that Vivekananda gave titled "Is Vedanta the Future Religion?" Here, Vivekananda seems to be resigned to the idea that his vision of Advaita becoming the 'universal religion' was a dream that might never be fulfilled:

> Unless society changes, how can such a religion as Vedanta prevail? It will take thousands of years to have large numbers of truly rational human beings. It is very hard. It is very hard to show men new things, to give them great ideas. It is harder still to knock off old superstitions, very hard; they do not die easily (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.8, p.136).

What also becomes abundantly clear, when one reads the many ways that Vivekananda speaks of 'universal religion', is that he was a man on a mission. A mission he doubted he would be able to succeed in, but one which he was, nevertheless, going to attempt no matter the consequences. Accordingly, even though he repeatedly claimed that he was not trying to create a hierarchy, he continually elevated Vedanta by advocating that it was the most viable option for a 'universal religion'. It must be noted however, that Sharma disagrees since he argues that as far as Vivekananda is concerned:

> Vedanta may be the *eternal* religion but it was unlikely, that, in the near future, it was going to be the *manifest universal religion*. It remained potentially and ideally universal in the sense that it upheld the unity of all existence, but whether such unity would ever be realized in practice defies prediction (1998, p.64, emphasis in original).

Thus, Sharma concludes, "the teachings of his [Ramakrishna's] disciple Vivekananda could be reduced to the motto: 'Advaitic preferences but no exclusion' (1998, p.72).

Similarly, Basu also argues against Vivekananda's intent to create a hierarchy:

> Vivekananda tries various principles, religious, social, and spiritual, for the construction of the Hindu identity. What is implicit in the argument is that differences will continue to exist but hierarchies must be abolished (2002, p.79).

However, in my opinion, even though Vivekananda does say that other religious traditions must be allowed, nay encouraged, to coexist side by side, his underlying message is that they need to exist because humanity is not yet capable of overcoming such differences. Only Advaitins, like himself, can see the unity of creation. And, as such, a hierarchy is created. Even though it is evident that this attitude of his seems to coexist uncomfortably with his alter ego that celebrates other traditions.

For example, Vivekananda gave a talk at the Parliament on Buddhism even though he had befriended Anagarika Dharmapala who was the representative for Buddhism in Chicago. As such, one could argue, that there was no reason for Vivekananda to give a speech on Buddhist traditions. Nevertheless, not only did he

choose to give a lecture on the Buddha and his teachings at the Parliament but he also

went on to speak about Buddhism on multiple occasions while he was overseas. What is

even more problematic is that on the one hand, Vivekananda appropriated Buddhist

ideas and incorporates them into Vedantic ideology. On the other hand, he also went on

to criticize the contemporary followers of Buddhism by claiming that they did not

understand the teachings of their founder.[90] Considering that Buddhism survived, and

indeed dominated, the Indian religious landscape for close to a thousand years, this

flippant disregard for its Indian history could be interpreted as the language used by

victors when speaking of the people they have vanquished. Thus, according to

Vivekananda:

> In spite of its wonderful moral strength, Buddhism was extremely iconoclastic; and much of its force being spent in merely negative attempts, it had to die out in the land of its birth, and what remained of it became full of superstitions and ceremonials, a hundred times cruder than those it was intended to suppress. Although it partially succeeded in putting down the animal sacrifices of the Vedas, it filled the land with temples, images, symbols and bones of saints (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.4, p.326).

Eventually he surmises:

> extreme adaptability in the long run made Indian Buddhism lose almost all its individuality, and extreme desire to be of the people made it unfit to cope with the intellectual forces of the mother religion in a few centuries. The Vedic party in the meanwhile got rid of a good deal of its most objectionable features, as animal sacrifice, and took lessons from the rival daughter in the judicious use of images, temple processions and other impressive performances, and stood ready to take within her fold the whole empire of Indian Buddhism, already tottering to its fall (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, pp.162-163).

It is obvious that for Vivekananda, Buddhist traditions, more than Jain or Sikh traditions

were a threat to his argument for the ancient and authentic *brahmanic* roots of Vedanta.

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[90] For a detailed study on Vivekananda's engagement with Buddhism, see Sharma (2014) and (Brekke, 2002).

He knew that these traditions had a shared history of ideas and wanted to ascertain that there was no ambiguity as to where the credit for Vedantist ideals must lie:

> Our ancient philosophers knew what you call the theory of evolution; that growth is gradual, step by step, and the recognition of this led them to harmonise all the preceding systems. Thus not one of these preceding ideas was rejected. The fault of the Buddhistic faith was that it had neither the faculty nor the perception of this continual expansive growth, and for this reason it never even made an attempt to harmonise itself with the preexisting steps toward the ideal. They were rejected as useless and harmful (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.2, pp.346-347).

Finally, he declares, "[p]resent-day Hinduism and Buddhism were growths from the same branch. Buddhism degenerated and Shankara lopped it off!" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.120)

As if to add insult to injury Vivekananda also contends; "My religion is one of which Christianity is an offshoot and Buddhism a rebel child" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.105). We can surmise, from this quote, that Vivekananda takes a similar approach when speaking of Christianity. As we saw in his speeches at the Parliament, he believed that India was the land of spirituality and 'Hinduism' was the mother of all traditions. Obviously, Christianity was not exempt from this appraisal and Vivekananda argued, in no uncertain terms, that Christianity with its foundation built upon a historical figure, could not be considered a legitimate candidate for a 'universal religion':

> Excepting our own almost all the other great religions in the world are inevitably connected with the life or lives of one or more founders. All their theories, their teachings, their doctrines, and their ethics are built around the life of a personal founder, from whom they get their sanction, their authority and their power; and strangely enough, upon the historicity of the founder's life is built, as it were, all the fabric of such religions. If there is one blow dealt to the historicity of that life, as has been the case in modern times with the lives of almost all the so-called founders of religion – we know that half of the details of such lives is not now seriously believed in, and that the other half is seriously doubted – if this becomes the case, if that rock of historicity, as they pretend to call it, is shaken and shattered, the whole building tumbles down, broken absolutely, never to regain its lost status (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, pp.182-183).

Similarly:

> No religion built upon a person can be taken up as a type by all the races of mankind… How is it possible that one person as Mohammed or Buddha or Christ, can be taken up as the one type for the whole world, nay, that the whole of morality, ethics, spirituality, and religion can be true only from the sanction of that one person, and one person alone? Now the Vedantic religion does not require any such personal authority (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.3, pp.250-251).

What is fascinating is that this did not stop him from completely appropriating aspects of Christianity that he found appealing. For example, Sister Nivedita recounts:

> One gathers that during his travels in Catholic Europe, he had been startled, like others before him, to find the identity of Christianity with Hinduism in a thousand points of familiar detail. The Blessed Sacrament appeared to him to be only an elaboration of the Vedic *prasadam*. The priestly tonsure reminded him of the shaven head of the Indian monk; and when he came across a picture of Justinian receiving the Law from two shaven monks, he felt that he had found the origin of the tonsure. He could not but remember that even before Buddhism, India had had monks and nuns, and that Europe had taken her orders from Thebaid. Hindu ritual had its lights, its incense and its music. Even the sign of the cross, as he saw it practiced, reminded him of the touching of different parts of the body, in certain kinds of meditation. And the culmination of this series of observations was reached, when he entered some cathedral, and found it furnished with an insufficient number of chairs, and no pews! Then, at last, he was really at home. Henceforth he could not believe that Christianity was foreign (Nivedita, 1993, pp.229-230).

Vivekananda oscillates between admiration for Christianity and his denigration of its beliefs throughout his adult life. However, even though he spoke out against most religious traditions in his inimical 'inclusive' way, Christianity was the tradition with which he seemed to suffer the most angst. No doubt, this was because he was a product of colonization and, as such, had felt the reverberations of this 'continental collision' most closely. Accordingly, we find that he fights an intense battle with Christianity, a battle which interestingly, takes precedence over the arguments he made against Islam. Nandy makes some valuable observations regarding this precedence which, he believes, Christianity took in Vivekananda's arguments. In his essay, "Vivekananda and Secularism" (2014) Nandy contends:

> By the time Vivekananda entered the scene, the West had made deeper inroads into the minds of Indians. To him, therefore, the real threat was the West within,

particularly the attractiveness of Christianity and Brahmoism to the young *babus*, rather than the colonial system. Vivekananda in this sense was dealing with more divided men and was perhaps himself a more divided man (2014, p.292).

Nandy reiterates that Vivekananda could never commit fully to the idea that he was playing a political role when he was finding ways to unite Indians. Instead, Vivekananda insisted that his role was limited to the spiritual arena which, in turn, resulted in his ignoring the importance of identifying Islam, not Christianity, as the tradition with which his Hindu brethren most needed to find common ground:

> Perhaps because of the career he chose for himself, Vivekananda always remained associated with the earlier religion-as-key-sector model. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the low emphasis which he placed on Hindu-Muslim relations as a crucial problem of Indian secularism. Because he was, paradoxically, a highly political animal and deeply sensitive to the colonial situation, the basic inter-religious relationship to him was always that between Hinduism and Christianity. (Brahmoism, his other *bête noire*, was to him virtually an offshoot of Christianity.) That is why he spent most of his time demonstrating the supremacy of Vedanta over the Judeo-Christian system, not over Islam (Nandy, 2014, p.292).

This does not imply that Vivekananda had nothing to say about Islam, he most certainly did; he just wasn't as vociferous in his criticism of them. As we have already observed, he included Islam to the category of historical traditions which, as far as Vivekananda was concerned, were built on shaky foundations and could be undermined at any time. Unfortunately however, he did not stop there with his negative remarks:

> The Mohammedan religion allows Mohammedans to kill all who are not of their religion. It is clearly stated in the Koran, "Kill the infidels if they do not become Mohammedans." They must be put to fire and sword (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.2, p.335).

On the other hand, he also believed that the brotherhood that Islam advocated was one that Hindus needed to aspire towards:

> For our own motherland a junction of the two great systems, Hinduism and Islam – Vedanta brain and Islam body – is the only hope

I see in my mind's eye the future perfect India rising out of this chaos and strife, glorious and invincible, with Vedanta brain and Islam body (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.6, p.416).

What should be apparent by this point in our discussion is that Vivekananda was intent on creating a 'universal religion' in India. A 'universal religion' which may have included all other traditions, but at a heavy price. No doubt, he believed he was being both tolerant and all-embracing but oftentimes his language belies his intended message. This is evident in the many ways he argued for the continued existence of alternate traditions; an existence that was not to be confused with complete parity. At times one actually believes that he was committed to being unbiased and respectful. At others, there is no way to find a positive way to interpret his message. Indeed, there are too many instances where his words are filled with intolerant subtext. Consequently, Nandy surmises that there exists a 'crucial dichotomy' in the messages of Vivekananda and the mission he founded:

> They granted the equality of all religions, but in a special sense. They conceived Hinduism as consisting of two subsystems: the Hindu *dharma* as a system of *action* and the Vedantic metaphysics as a system of thought. They were quite willing to equate Hindu *dharma* with other *dharmas*. After all, all paths led to God and if somebody chose a long-winded or inferior path that was his business. But the Hindu metaphysical system, which was considered to be above and beyond Hindu *dharma* and a summation of the principles of universal laws and godliness, was considered to be superior to all others. In other words, they introduced the concept of hierarchy into Hindu metaphysics and the concept of equity into Hindu institutions. As a technique of change, this had its handicaps in a system which thrived on ideological flexibility and institutional rigidity. Besides, in this formulation, the very tolerance of Hinduism became proof of its metaphysical superiority. As a corollary, the non-Hindu's fear of being engulfed or of being fitted into the Hindu hierarchy became an indicator of his metaphysical poverty (2014, p.293).

So how do the RSS and the Sangh Parivar use these ideas to further their cause? Nowhere is their emphasis on these issues more apparent than in their war on textbooks and scholars who have alternate, opposing opinions. This is where we must turn our attention next.

The War of the Textbooks

One of the most acrimonious battles that the RSS has fought, and continues to

fight, over the last few decades has had to do with textbooks, and in particular history

textbooks, that are used in primary and secondary education across the Indian

subcontinent. In the 1970's, when Morarji Desai, of the Janata Party, became the Prime

Minister of India he got embroiled in the 'Textbook controversy'. Desai had risen to

power with the help of a coalition government which included the Bharatiya Jana

Sangha (precursor to the BJP). As such, he could not afford to ignore this issue which

was evidently crucial to the RSS who had already begun making inroads into the

educational system of rural India:

> Morarji Desaii revealed the intensity of his Hindu traditionalist outlook in the
> 'Textbook Controversy'. In May 1977, he received an anonymous memorandum
> demanding the withdrawal from public circulation of four history books, of
> which three were intended for use in teaching. The books in question were
> *Medieval India*, by Romila Thapar, *Modern India*, by Bipan Chandra, *Freedom
> Struggle*, by A. Tripathi, Barun De and Bipan Chandra, and Communalism and the
> *Writing of Indian History*, by Romila Thapar, Harbans Mukhia and Bipan Chandra.
> The memorandum criticised the works above all for not condemning forcefully
> enough certain Muslim invaders in the Medieval period and because they
> emphasized the responsibility of leaders like Tilak and Aurobindo for
> antagonism between the Hindus and Muslims. The RSS campaigned separately
> for the withdrawal of these textbooks (Jaffrelot, 1996, pp.287-288).

Furthermore, this government was encouraged, and eventually obliged, by their

coalition, to lend their support to an alternate organization, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,

"which had published a *History and Culture of the Indian People* under the direction of

R.C. Majumdar, the veteran of Indian nationalist historiography whose pro-Hindu bias

was allegedly becoming more pronounced" (Jaffrelot, 1996, p. 288). However, the Janata

Party did not stay in power long enough to effect any permanent change to the

educational system at a federal level. On the other hand, the RSS took education very

seriously, much like Vivekananda, and started a grassroots program which enabled

them to spread their brand of Hindu nationalism:

> The expansion of the RSS educational sector was also a shrewd move given the growing demand for education and the reluctance of some citizens to rely on the ill-managed and underfunded public system. Vidya Bharti ('Indian knowledge'), the RSS affiliate and umbrella body which runs the Saraswati Shishu Mandirs, was responsible for managing 700 such schools in 1977, the year of its foundation. By the early 1990's the organisation had 5,000 schools (1,325 of which were in Uttar Pradesh and about 1,000 in Madhya Pradesh) with 1.2 million pupils enrolled and 40,000 teachers employed. Shishu Mandirs are increasingly running classes aimed at the poor (Jaffrelot, 1996, p.531).

Consequently, it is not surprising that when the BJP came to power in 1998, education

was one of the areas where they focused their attention. Accordingly, Sylvie Guichard

states in *The Construction of History and Nationalism in India: Textbooks, controversies*

and politics (2010):

> Shortly after it formed the government coalition in 1998, the Hindu nationalist BJP announced that education should be 'Indianised, nationalized and spiritualised'. New subjects were introduced at the university level such as astrology and Vedic mathematics and the entire school curriculum was overhauled. Immediately, journalists, researchers and members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) severely criticized these reforms and accused the BJP of attempting to 'saffronize' education. After the change in curriculum, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), which is the federal institution in charge of elaborating curricula, syllabi and textbooks, prepared new textbooks for primary and secondary classes. Public criticism of the new curriculum focused in particular on the history textbooks, pointing at the ideological bias they contained. The main accusations concerned historical distortions by way of purposeful omission of important and meaningful historical events from the textbooks, the stigmatization of the Muslims as the main cause of India's misfortunes and the general glorification of everything related to Hinduism (Guichard, 2010, pp.1-2).

What ensued was a battle that is still ongoing between the RSS and the so-called liberals

who disagree with them.

One of the major issues that the Sangh Parivar has against these textbooks, that

were first published in the 1960's, is that they are intensely secular. 'Secular' is another

term that has multiple connotations and needs to be unpacked before we can proceed.

Amartya Sen offers a clear and concise definition of Indian secularism:

> Secularism in contemporary India, which received legislative formulation in the post-independence constitution of the Indian Republic, contains strong influences of Indian intellectual history, including the championing of intellectual pluralism. One reflection of this historical connection is that Indian secularism takes a somewhat different form and makes rather different demands from the more austere Western versions, such as the French interpretation of secularism which is supposed to prohibit even personal display of religious symbols or conventions in state institutions at work. Indeed, there are two principal approaches to secularism, focusing respectively on (1) *neutrality* between different religions, and (2) *prohibition* of religious associations in state activities. Indian secularism has tended to emphasize neutrality in particular, rather than prohibition in general (2005, pp.19-20).

However, Hindu nationalists have been accusing the federal government of not actually practicing secularism but rather charges them with being 'pseudo secularists'. This allegation is meant to highlight how the government, led by the Congress party, made certain concessions for minorities, particularly the Muslim community. They are referring to the fact that Sharia law continues to be allowed in the Indian Penal Code which delineates laws derived from the Koran and the Hadith. Jaffrelot points out that the RSS are particularly opposed to the policies concerning marriage and divorce which they argue should be universal for all Indians in a secular state:

> Ironically, Hindu nationalists have always looked at themselves as more sincere secularists than have Congressmen. They denounced the Congress Party as 'pseudo-secular' because of its bias in favour of religious minorities. As early as the 1950s the Sangh Parivar criticized the Hindu Code Bill which reformed Hindu customs of marriage, adoption and inheritance, whereas the shariat and the personal laws of other religious minorities remained untouched. This issue resurfaced in the 1980s during what is known as the Shah Bano affair, when the Congress was accused of pampering its Muslim vote bank by reaffirming the status of the shariat in regulating the private sphere of this minority (Jaffrelot, 2007, p.313).

> According to L.K. Advani, who is one of the leading voices for the RSS, these

'pseudo-secularists' have tried to suppress the Hindu ethos of the nation, an action that has negated the very character of this predominantly Hindu nation. He reminds

listeners that Gandhi had repeatedly called for '*Rama Rajya*' (a moral kingdom worthy

of the Hindu god Ram) and, as such, had never denied his Hindu roots. In contrast, he

argues in the "The Ayodhya Movement":

> Unfortunately, for four decades now, in the name of secularism, politicians have been wanting the nation to disown its essential personality. For the left inclined, secularism has become a euphemism to cloak their intense allergy to religion, and more particularly, to Hinduism (as cited in Jaffrelot, 2007, p.292).

Advani's statements against the politicians who he labels 'pseudo-secularists' do not

disguise his primary motives, which clearly argue for India to be unabashedly

recognized as a Hindu nation:

> The BJP is unequivocally committed to secularism. As conceived by our Constitution makers, secularism meant *sarvapantha sama bhava*, that is equal respect for all religions. Secularism as embedded into the Indian Constitution has three important ingredients, namely (i) rejection of theocracy; (ii) equality of all citizens, irrespective of their faith; and (iii) full freedom of faith and worship. We also believe that India is secular because it is predominantly Hindu. Theocracy is alien to our history and tradition.
> Indian nationalism is rooted, as was India's freedom struggle against colonialism, in a Hindu ethos. It was Gandhiji who projected *Rama Rajya* as the goal of the freedom movement. He was criticized by the Muslim League as being an exponent of Hindu Raj. The League did not relish the chanting of *Ram Dhun* at Gandhiji's meetings or his insistence on *Goraksha* (cow-protection). The Muslim League at one of its annual sessions passed a formal resolution denouncing *Vande Mataram* as 'idolatrous'. All this never made leaders of the freedom struggle apologetic about the fountainhead of their inspiration (as cited in Jaffrelot, 2007, pp.291-292).

Of course, Advani's sympathies are no secret since he is one of the architects of the

Ramjanmabhumi movement, which demolished the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. An

unprecedented act of violence against a minority tradition in recent Indian history. As

such, his proclamation that he is a true secularist and is not calling for a theocracy does

not ring true.

Unfortunately however, the historians who wrote the first set of textbooks that

are being challenged, in the 1960's, were intent on building a nation out of a mosaic of

communities. As such, they may have been overzealous in their attempt to diminish the

existence of differences, preferring instead to accentuate the similarities between these

groups:

> writing a decade after independence and partition, the texts were shaped by the intellectual climate of the time. Troubled by the memories of communal carnage and the traumatic experience of the partition years – when thousands of Hindus and Muslims killed each other – the intellectuals of this new India struggled to create a secular and democratic public culture. Inspired by the ideals of democratic citizenship, they hoped for a society where individuals, emancipated from their religious and affective ties, would be reborn as secular citizens of a democratic state. Historians turned to the past to counter communal representations of history, question communal stereotypes and write a secular national history. The history textbooks written in the 1960's embodied this secular ideal (Bhattacharya, 2009, p.102).

Romila Thapar, who was one of the authors of these textbooks offers some insight into

the thought processes that went into writing these texts:

> The history of 'the nation' also became a focus. Was the nation a creation of the colonial experience? Or did it emerge from factors related to modernization such as the coming of industrialization and capitalism as well as the need for a democratic and secular society? The issue was not just one of building a history which required a common history, memory and culture, but also of explaining the nature of the societies and economics of the past that contributed to this commonness (Thapar, 2009, p.92).

However, other historians have argued that this not only misrepresented the diverse

traditions of India's past[91] but also gave Hindu nationalists a soapbox from which to

attack the federal government's secular policies:

> The textbooks of the 1960s and the '70s provoked controversy from the moment they were published. The Hindu right in particular was impassioned in its attacks. And for the next three decades, while these textbooks remained in print, controversies surfaced over and over again around a set of core issues (Bhattacharya, 2009, p.102).

> Not surprisingly, most of these core issues, which the Hindu nationalists argued

against, had to do with the secular representation of Indian history which denied the

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[91] For a detailed survey on the way Indian historians continue to discuss the complexities and ramifications of secularism in India see Nandy (1997) and Nandy (1988) and Thapar (2013).

notion which asked, "should the Indian past be framed through religious categories?" (Bhattacharya, 2009, p.102). This denial, in turn, allowed the secular historians to focus attention on the social, economic and aesthetic qualities of different eras thereby diminishing the need to emphasize the negative impact of the Mughal Raj. Furthermore, this method of historiography also undercut the Hindu right's glorification of ancient India which they attributed to the mastery of the Vedic sages. Interestingly, Thapar argues that this view of history is actually a remnant of colonial interpretations which the Hindu nationalists have, ironically, adopted as their own:

> Mind you, their own understanding – the Hindutva understanding of India – is rooted in colonial theories which they try and project as the "indigenous understanding" of the Indian past. Among these are the theories that Indian civilisation originated with the Vedas, that of Hindus and Muslims having been antagonistic towards each other, and that Hindus were victimised under Muslim rule. Given these beliefs, the observances of the Vedic Aryan model of society are advocated, even for contemporary times – or at least what they think was such a model. And revenge must be sought for the tyranny of Muslim rule. These are ideas that come from nineteenth-century colonial writing and have little to do with indigenous views (The Caravan, 2016).

Be that as it may, the Sangh Parivar continues to be deeply invested in overturning the way the Hindu past is represented in the textbooks that the next generation of Hindus are reading. In Gujarat, which is Modi's home state, students are using books written by Dina Nath Batra "the founder of the Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti (Save Education Foundation)" which belongs to the Sangh Parivar (Krishnan, 2015). Batra, who is responsible for bringing the civil suit against Wendy Doniger's controversial book *The Hindus,* begins all his texts with "a salutation to the Hindu Goddess Saraswati, known for knowledge and wisdom and will have essays, couplets, stories and poems to inculcate Indian values" (Krishnan, 2015). Indeed, Michael Witzel, along with a group of other consenting authors, who are responsible for the recent pushback in this textbook controversy argue:

The curriculum designed by the NCF [The National Curriculum Framework established in 1998 by the BJP] in 2000 and the textbooks published a year later also interchanged the roles assigned to science and spirituality. The earlier emphasis on science – seen as essential to the creation of a rational, modern, and enlightened society – was supplanted in the new framework by the idea of a unique and distinctive "Indian tradition" based on formulaic notions of spirituality and religion and a conservative social bias. The new framework was severely criticized for violating the constitutional commitment to secularism by advocating the idea of religion-based value education as a crucial factor in the syllabi. Value education, however, was integral to the NCF's plan its main plank to launch the spiritual and moral renewal of India. It was only through learning of the "lives of prophets, saints and the sacred texts" that children could achieve higher SQs (Spiritual Quotients) and EQs (Emotional Quotients) (Visweswaran, et al., 2009, p.103).

Unfortunately, this trend continues to spread under Modi's government since in 2015:

Culture Minister Mahesh Sharma stated unequivocally that the BJP-led government will not be deterred by criticism that it was trying to promote RSS ideology. His department is already chalking out a roadmap where lessons from epic Hindu literature such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita would soon be taught in school and colleges to rid the country of "cultural pollution" and inculcate "values" among young minds (Krishnan, 2015).

Drawing a nexus between the arguments put forth by the Sangh Parivar and the ideology of Vivekananda is not very difficult. Vivekananda argued repeatedly that India was governed by its spirituality. He also insisted that the Vedic past had scientific answers that modern minds have only recently 'rediscovered'. He may not have been as aggressive in his denunciation of Islam, as he was of Buddhism and Christianity, but Nandy may have reason when he argues that by attacking any tradition so viciously Vivekananda actually left the door open for others to do the same:

It allowed one to extend to Islam Vivekananda's attitude to Christianity. If the Swami attacked one religion did he not, by implication, think of other religions in the same terms? (2014, p.293)

What makes matters worse is that this battle over textbooks has spread to the diaspora whereby Hindu nationalists, living in the United States, have begun demanding changes in the depiction of Indian culture in the textbooks used in the United States. Even though they were not successful in their endeavours, this action sheds light on how the

RSS has gained momentum on the international scene, whereby they now have support for their nationalistic efforts from the wealthy, educated Indians living in the diaspora. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fact that eminent scholars such as Wendy Doniger, Sheldon Pollock and Michael Witzel,[92] to mention just a few, have all had to defend their right to interpret Hindu traditions. What should be evident is that the Sangh Parivar, like Vivekananda, are not comfortable with any arguments or theories that impede their worldview which clearly places Hindu ideology at the apex of all intellectual endeavours, past and present.

Mother India: Chaste but fiery

As we saw in the previous chapter, 'masculinity' or a 'manly nation' were issues that were of great importance to Vivekananda. Naturally, this language leads one to question where he placed women since he was so adamant that Indian men could no longer afford to be 'effeminate'. According to Basu, Vivekananda tried to distinguish between 'effeminate' (which was viewed negatively) versus 'feminine':

> In his portrayal of the national hero as the gallant, masculine, and valiant he evoked the category of the feminine with great ingenuity in order to outwit the charges of anti-feminism through a conceptual strategy of distinguishing the effeminate from the feminine (2002, p.158).

These efforts led to some interesting contradictions in the 'feminine' narrative, many of which continue to impact the lives of Indian women today. Indeed, some scholars have

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[92] For example see, "Why Hindutva groups have for long had Sheldon Pollock in their sights" https://scroll.in/article/804517/why-hindutva-forces-have-for-long-had-sheldon-pollock-in-their-sights; "I am not a Hindu hater" http://m.rediff.com/news/2005/dec/30inter1.htm; and "Indian publishers nervous about taking books that might offend Hindutva: Wendy Doniger" https://www.google.com/amp/m.economictimes.com/magazines/panache/indian-publishers-nervous-about-taking-books-that-might-offend-hindutva-wendy-doniger/amp_articleshow/50940104.cms?client=safari

argued that the role of women in Indian society became one of the most crucial

battlegrounds for nationalists, both reformers and traditionalists, in the nineteenth and

twentieth century. For example, in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2010), Tanika Sarkar

draws attention to the way the literature of this period reflected this trend:

> Patriotic themes came to constitute a significant domain in Bengali literature
> from about the 1880's, and the corpus went through many developments and
> mutations down to Gandhian times. A constant preoccupation was with the
> figure of the woman. She dominates Bengali works through the conceptualisation
> of the country itself in her image; by investing the ideal patriot with womanly
> qualities; and by the reconstruction of feminine roles and duties – and,
> consequently, of the familial universe by the nationalist enterprise (Sarkar, 2010,
> p.250).

Uma Chakaravarti concurs with Sarkar's basic premise when discussing the works of

nationalist leaders like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Dayanand Saraswati.

Accordingly, in "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" (1990) she contends:

> How much and what aspects of tradition went into the construction of a new
> feminine identity varied from one writer to another but on many essentials there
> was considerable similarity; indeed the convergence on the fundamental
> characteristics of Hindu womanhood cut across the liberal-revivalist divide
> (Chakravarti, 1990, p.52).

> What is clear is that in the nineteenth century we witness a 'continental collision'

which had religious, social and economic repercussions. Indian intellectuals had begun

to push back against British colonization and, as such, the colonizers needed to prove

that the Indians required colonial rule since they were unfit to govern themselves. One

example of a writer who put forth this theoretical framework was James Mills in *The*

History of British India (1840) whereby he debunked the previous, more positive,

Orientalist literature, which had marvelled at India's Vedic culture, declaring it to be the

'golden age' of Indian civilization. It was arguments made by scholars such as Mills that

leads Chakravarti to conclude:

> The degeneration of Hindu civilization and the abject position of Hindu women,
> requiring the 'protection' and 'intervention' of the colonial state, were two

aspects of colonial politics. The third aspect was the 'effeminacy' of the Hindu men who were unfit to rule themselves. On all three counts British rule in India could be justified on grounds of moral superiority (1990, p.35).

In fact, one of the main thrusts for reform, from the British Raj, concerned the state of women and how they were mistreated, particularly via the institution of marriage:

> Around this time numerous reform bills focused on marriage. The Age of Consent controversy, debates about the Restitution of Conjugal Rights and the Marriage of Widows had accentuated the 'barbaric' practices of the Hindus and thrown up questions about the nature of the conjugality such unions encouraged (Chowdhury, 2014, p.389).

Thus, one could argue that Hindu nationalists had no choice but to respond to these allegations against the treatment of women in Indian society. Chakravarti traces how Hindus like Rammohan Roy, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Dayanand Saraswati articulate their arguments and create a new narrative for Indian women. So much so, that Chakravarti concludes that this resulted in the cultivation of a powerful myth, a *doxa*,[93] that continues to influence the role of Indian women in society today:

> What was gradually and carefully constituted, brick by brick, in the interaction between colonialism and nationalism is now so deeply embedded in the consciousness of the middle classes that ideas about the past have assumed the status of revealed truths. Any suggestion that we might fruitfully analyse the manner and the different stages by which this body of knowledge was built up, or how and when we came by our immediate intellectual and cultural heritage (which is often only a hundred and fifty years old) would therefore be considered quite unnecessary or even futile. But for women in particular this heritage, this perception of the past, of the 'lost glory' is almost a burden. It has led to a narrow and limiting circle in which the image of Indian womanhood has become both a shackle and a rhetorical device that nevertheless functions as a historical truth (1990, p.28).

Unfortunately, Chakravarti does not spend much time analysing Vivekananda's role in the creation of this *doxa* since she believes that by the time he was popular the nationalists had already 'closed ranks' and as such "there is no women's question for Vivekananda" (1990, p.78). However, seeing as Vivekananda has become such a crucial

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[93] For a detailed explanation of this term 'doxa' see Chapter 3.

element in the Hindutva movement, and that his battle cry for a 'manly' nation continues to be used, it seems imperative for us to understand the way he interpreted the role of women in India.

So, is Chakravarti right in presuming that other than arguing for a 'manly' nation, Vivekananda did not engage with the question of women? Did women not figure in his theoretical 'manly' nation? Vivekananda seemed to have a complex relationship with the feminine principle. On the one hand, as we saw in the previous section, he demoted *bhakti* because it was too feminine. On the other hand, he was a devotee of Kali and wrote poems dedicated to her. When addressing the role of women in India his answers were not only ambiguous and complex, but also, oftentimes filled with a chauvinistic ideology that can take the reader by surprise. Indeed, simply reading his lecture "Women of India" which he delivered in 1900, on his second visit to the United States, leads to the realization that there definitely was a 'women's question' in Vivekananda's vision of India. However, one just has to scratch the surface to recognize that the only concept of femininity that Vivekananda was comfortable with, and which he upheld, was the role of the mother:

> Now, the ideal woman in India is the mother, the mother first and the mother last. The word woman calls up to the mind of the Hindu, motherhood; and God is called Mother (Vivekananda, 2009, vol. 8, p.57).

This, of course, is not a new concept, but rather one that had been developing since Rammohan Roy and his peers began investigating the role that women played in the Vedic age. Examples such as Gargi and Maitreyi became very popular since both were scholarly women who, reportedly, had not only held their own, but at times bested, their Vedic male peers with their philosophical acumen (Chakravarti, 1990, pp.33, 43). However, it was with Dayanand Saraswati that we witness the way the ideal Hindu woman becomes 'sacralized' in the role of the mother. Interestingly, it was not

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only the Hindu woman, but also the Hindu nation that was seen as a reflection of the

feminine principle and was idolized as the 'Motherland'. Tanika Sarkar emphasizes how,

even though this is a relatively new phenomenon, it has become an ideology, a *doxa* if

you will, that is irrefutable in the modern Hindu's worldview:

> The first such principle and cultural artefact is the concept of the Motherland –
> *Deshmata*. As is usual with other nationalist discourses, the country is not just a
> piece of land with people living on it. It is abstracted from the people and
> personified as the Mother Goddess, the most recent and most sacred deity in the
> Hindu pantheon. The people, then, are not the 'desh' itself, but are sons of the
> Mother – detached from an imagined entity and put in a subordinate relation to
> it. Through long and continuous usage this concept has acquired such a seeming
> naturalness that its disjunction as a cultural construct is worth emphasizing
> (2010, p.251).

As far as Dayanand Saraswati was concerned, Hindu women needed to do all they could

to provide the Motherland with strong and virile sons who could protect the nation:

> What was central to Dayananda's thinking was his understanding of the role of
> women in the maintenance of race, and inter-alia, concern about their sexuality.
> Motherhood for Dayananda was the sole rationale of woman's existence but
> what was crucial in his concept of motherhood was its specific role in the
> procreation and rearing of a special breed of men (Chakravarti, 1990, p.56).

Bankimchandra, on the other hand, strove to create an image of a Hindu woman who

could stand shoulder to shoulder with her husband to fight for freedom from colonial

oppression. Accordingly, in his most acclaimed novel *Anandmath* (1882),

Bankimchandra presented a new revised version of the perfect Hindu woman. It was no

longer sufficient for a woman to be a loyal partner to her husband in his religious

activities, nor was it enough for her to be intellectually advanced like Gargi and

Maitreyi:

> Externally and internally the threatened moral and social order desperately
> required a new kind of woman for which the old sahadharmini [partner in
> religious duties] model was too passive and could only apply once order had
> been re-established. A ravaged nation required heroic action from both men and
> women; if anything it was women who could actually release the potential for
> such action. It was therefore incumbent upon them to energize men who might
> easily fall into temptation otherwise. Only women, by controlling or sublimating

their sexuality, could release both men and women for the selfless sacrifices required for the liberation of the ravaged motherland. Bankim thus provided a powerful image of womanhood, one that dynamized the image of a sahadharmini of the past into a force for the present and the future. In this aspect the transformed woman "defied the normal canons of femininity in order to join the resistance against the crisis in the order (Chakravarti, 1990, p.53).

What is particularly noteworthy about Vivekananda's interaction in this ongoing debate is that he did not fall squarely into any of these camps. Instead, he argued that the best course of action for all women, and all men associated with them, was to encourage celibacy.

> For, mind you, our religion teaches that marriage is something bad, it is only for the weak. The very spiritual man or woman would not marry at all. So the religious woman says "Well, the Lord has given me a better chance. What is the use of marrying? Thank God, worship God, what is the use of my loving man? Of course, all of them cannot put their mind on God. Some find it simply impossible. They have to suffer (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.8, pp.65-66).

Accordingly, he was not interested in the reproductive role of women, neither did he encourage any of his young male followers to get married. Rather, he encouraged one and all to follow the path of the *sanyasi*, while labouring to uplift the masses. Thus, whereas it is true that Vivekananda revered the woman in the role of the mother, it was as a chaste mother, not a reproducing one:

> Woman! thou shalt not be coupled with anything connected with the flesh. The name has been called holy once and for ever, for what name is there which no lust can ever approach, no carnality ever come near, than the one word mother? That is the ideal in India (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.8, p.58).

Given his narrow minded and restrictive ideas regarding the role of women in Indian society it is not surprising to learn that women's issues proved to be somewhat of a thorn in his side. First, as we saw in the last chapter, he endured the wrath of the traditionalists when he refused to speak out against the Age of Consent Bill. However, even though he did not publicly side with the traditionalists on these matters, he nevertheless makes his views on these reforms abundantly clear:

In my opinion society in every country shapes itself out of its own initiative. So we need not trouble our heads prematurely about such reforms as the abolition of early marriage, the remarriage of widows, and so on. Our part of the duty lies in imparting true education to all men and women in society. As an outcome of that education, they will of themselves be able to know what is good for them and what is bad, and will spontaneously eschew the latter. It will not be then necessary to pull down or set up anything in society by coercion (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.8, p.493).

Moreover, he also had a few unpleasant encounters with Pandita Ramabai, an Indian widow who became quite popular in the West because of her willingness to speak out publicly against the atrocities committed against widows in India. In "Spiritual Masculinity and Swami Vivekananda" (2014), Indira Chowdhury argues that that these allegations, about the state of women in India, rattled Vivekananda considerably:

The missionary construction of a heathen mother who lacked in maternal emotions required the pedagogy of the Bible, and it is with reference to these that we can comprehend Vivekananda's statements about glorified motherhood. The same mechanism operates on his statements about widows – he repeatedly refused to acknowledge the hardships imposed on them by Hindu society. Throughout his stay at America, Vivekananda reiterated this points at times *taking it to an absurd limit*: 'a large part of the property in the country is held by widows. In fact, so enviable is the position of widows that a woman or man either might almost pray to be made a widow' (2014, p.398, emphasis added).

Thus, Chowdhury concludes:

At one end of this spectrum of self-representation stood the learned Ramabai, herself a widow, elucidating the reasons for a woman's low status in Hindu society, while at the other stood Vivekananda with his refusal to recognize her experience. Vivekananda construed Ramabai's activities as ultimately strengthening the hands of the missionaries, and his 'silences' as well as his contrary assertions form an essential part of his efforts at validating a Hindu identity (2014, pp.398-399).

For Vivekananda, the only idealized image of an Indian woman that he was willing to promote was of a chaste mother. After all, as a *sanyasi* himself:

The feminine counterpart of the ascetic masculine could only be incarnated by this grand narrative in spiritual terms – the mother whom no lust could touch (Chowdhury, 2014, p.399).

In fact, even though he had benefitted from the hospitality of numerable American women, who he spoke of in the highest terms,[94] he could never envision a similar situation in India and, as such, differed substantially from his predecessors. It is true that he also upheld Vedic women, like Gargi and Maitreyi, using their example to prove to his Western listeners that women were not denigrated in India. Nevertheless, he envisioned a different kind of woman for the modern age and he freely deprecated feminine traits which he wanted to eradicate from the Indian psyche. Thus, he declares, in a letter to his brother disciple Alasinga, "I shall have to come and manufacture men out of you. I know that India is only inhabited by women and eunuchs" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, p.86). Needless to say, this single faceted version of the Indian woman is deeply problematic. Women were not viewed as dynamic beings but rather as tools to accentuate and aid the vision that their male counterparts had for Indian society and the Hindu nation. Women were not seen as full partners in the project of nation building but rather as cogs in a male oriented universe. This is extremely disappointing, especially in regard to Vivekananda, who not only had rich and meaningful relationships with a number of his female Western admirers and followers, but also because he acknowledged the power of the divine mother. Consequently, when one considers his multifaceted relationship with the feminine principle, it is disheartening to learn that he held such an archaic view of the Indian woman's potential and role in society. Thus, he tells the Western women he encounters on his travels:

> I should very much like our women to have your intellectuality, but not if it must be at the cost of purity… Intellectuality is not the highest good. Morality and spirituality are the things for which we strive. Our women are not so learned, but they are more pure (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, p.412).

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[94] For example, in a letter to his disciples in Madras, Vivekananda writes "About the women of America, I cannot express my gratitude for their kindness. Lord bless them. In this country, women are the life of every movement, and represent all the culture of the nation, for men are too busy to educate themselves" (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.5, p.28).

Accordingly, it is with grave concern that one realizes that Vivekananda's model of a chaste, renunciate mother is what comes to mind when one examines some of the women who are currently active in the Hindutva movement.[95] In "Feminism Inverted" Amrita Basu highlights the image of three women who have become key players in the Sangh Parivar. Whereas she acknowledges that there are many ways in which these three women differ from each other, she does recognize that there is one crucial trait that is common to all three:

> There is, amidst their many differences, one striking similarity between Scindia, Bharati and Rithambara, that is critical to the project of Hindu nationalism. All three women are celibate: Vijayraje Scindia is a widow and Uma Bharati and Sadhvi Rithambara are *sanyasins* (*Sadhvi* means celibate).
> Their chastity heightens their iconic status for it is deeply associated in Hinduism with notions of spirituality, purity and otherworldliness; these qualities also make these women reliable spokespersons for the future Hindu *rashtra* (Basu, 1995, p.161).

There are several factors which make the popularity of these women particularly troubling. Sadhvi Rithambhara, for example, is one of the people attributed with the success of the Ramjanmabhumi movement. Tape cassettes with her speeches, riling up her audiences to rise up and take down the Babri masjid, are credited with the violence that erupted after this event. This led to many of the unforgivable acts of rape and murder that were committed by Hindus upon Muslims. Tanika Sarkar reports:

> Her ringing exhortations to Hindus to arise and kill Muslims have paid rich dividends in the form of anti-Muslim pogroms even in places earlier free of communal conflict. At the small western UP town of Khurja, for instance, the old lanes were strewn with nearly 200 Muslim corpses after two bouts of violence in December and January 1990-1. Interviewing some of the inhabitants we were told that though old habits die hard, and though peaceful coexistence had been one such old habit, repeated broadcasts of Rithambhara's cassette over successive days at local temples had finally done the trick. Priests from Basti in

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[95] The Hindutva movement does not only use the role of the mother to further its' political agenda. They also utilize Bankimchandra's and Saraswati's concept of womanhood quite liberally. However, for the purposes of the current discussion we will focus on the concept of the chaste mother, which Vivekananda promoted, and the way it operates within the Sangh Parivar.

UP informed us that they had suspended their normal programmes of recitation from sacred texts at temples in order to continuously play the cassette. The Pesh Imam of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya pleaded with P.K. Datta, a member of our investigating team, to help ban the cassette via an agitation in Delhi. He said that this cassette had by itself 'erected a wall of hatred between hearts' (Sarkar, 2010, pp.269-270).

Under no circumstances am I suggesting that Vivekananda would have condoned such actions. He never advocated for violence in any situation. However, one can also argue that his call for a virile, manly nation could be interpreted as a call for aggression. Similarly, his devotion to Kali, who is the most formidable of all Hindu Goddesses could also be viewed as a nod towards personalities like Rithambhara, who, after one watches just a few minutes of her speeches (they are readily available online), leaves one with the impression of an extremely angry and impassioned female ascetic, a veritable Kali.

Yet, Amrita Basu highlights how these women, despite being powerful voices in the public arena of Hindutva politics, insist that nevertheless, a woman's place, is first and foremost with her family. So much so, Vijayraje Scandia, who is a widow herself, was unwilling to speaking out against *sati*, a practice that has been outlawed for over a century:

Reiterating a position that she had made publicly, Vijayraje Scandia defended sati in an interview with me. Referring to religious scriptures, she drew a highly questionable distinction between voluntary sati, to which she attributed a glorious tradition, and the coerced sati of recent times, which she considered immoral. She was evasive when asked how she would describe Roop Kanwar's sati, saying that it must have been wrong if in fact it had been coerced but she could not be sure. In other respects she remained committed to asymmetrical gender roles. She argued that Indian religion and culture supported the notion that women's primary duties were as wives and mothers (Basu, 1995, pp.167-168).[96]

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[96] Roop Kanwar was an 18-year-old woman who allegedly committed sati in 1987. For a deeper analysis of this controversial issue see Banerjee (2011).

The double standards employed by Scindia are not lost to some, leading the communal harmony activist Ram Puniyani to quip, "somehow she herself never exercised this right herself" (Puniyani, 2012).

What makes the efforts of women such as these particularly disturbing is that they represent a growing number of females who are associating themselves with the Sangh Parivar and their ideology. The women's wing of the RSS was established in 1936, 11 years after the RSS was formed, and is called the Rashtrasevika Samiti. Sarkar argues that this apparent inclusion of females, in what had been an all-male organization, should not be taken to signify equality between genders. Accordingly, she draws attention to the fact that the word 'volunteer' is absent from this title:

> We must note that while the name Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh means 'Nationalist Volunteers', the term Rashtrasevika denotes women who serve the nation. The difference in the names is significant in several ways. It not only relegates women's work within the Samiti organization to a domestic role, but also consigns their domestic labour firmly to the sphere of humble service. The sense of autonomy and self-choice that are associated with the word 'volunteer' are notably missing (Sarkar, 1995, pp.184-185).

Be that as it may, this group is rapidly gaining access and influence over middle class women in India today. These women are given physical training and taught how to defend themselves since, more often than not, they are required to work outside the home. However, it is evident that the most crucial aspect for the formation of this woman's group was so that the RSS could disseminate their ideology via the vehicle of the Hindu mother, who is responsible for the early education of her Hindu sons:

> The mother is pivotal to the RSS scheme of mobilizing its own family. Golwalkar also advised her [the *sevikas*] to make 'useful contacts among the women folk within the neighborhood and carry out programmes which would inculcate our cherished ideas among them and their children.' Mothers, then, are political creatures and agents and we will not grasp the deeply political import of this agenda unless we are clear about the directly political and not merely ideological significance of everyday relations, personal disposition and habits, of domestic ritual and practice within the RSS scheme for hegemony, and the full significance of the much used and key term '*samskaras'* in the Sangh vocabulary. The mother

is to instil habits of deference, of obedience, of respect for the RSS version of patriotism. She should scramble the child's earliest notion of history, mythology and patriotism through moral lessons about 'faith in Dharma and pride in our history', and instructions about '*tirthas* and temples'. The importance of learning them in earliest infancy when critical faculties are not aroused, of learning them through stories whose format demands a suspension of questioning and passive listening is enormous. As to how important the lessons in Dharma and history, pilgrimages and temples lumped together are, should be evident in the success of the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign which pitted a Muslim king against the sacred figure of Ram, and insisted that the destruction of the Babri Mosque was not only a religious but also a patriotic duty. One cannot learn these lessons too young (Sarkar, 1995, p.189).

Whereas there are multiple aspects of these methods and ideology that are deeply disturbing, for the purposes of our current discussion it becomes clear that organizations such as these do not encourage female empowerment in the normative sense. Indeed, Elen Turner in "Empowering Women? Feminist Responses to Hindutva" (2012), emphasizes the need to recognize that these women would not consider themselves feminists even though many of their activities and programs use feminist "symbols, slogans and ideas":

> Despite these womens' own unconventional images and lifestyles, they by no means encouraged women's emancipation in ways that feminists understand. Calls for women to leave traditional roles or step outside of patriarchal society were solely for the sake of Hindutva. This represents a fundamental political problem for feminists at the level of strategy – outspoken, politically engaged and unconventional women were utilising methods and discourse akin to those used by feminists to promote anti-feminist ideology. This allowed the right wing to occupy discursive spaces that feminists believed they had control of, forcing re-evaluations of the supposedly pacifist nature of women and the role of feminism in Indian society (Turner, 2012, p.4).

One of the biggest concerns with this development, whereby women are pitted against women, is that this allows the male population to maintain the patriarchal status quo in India. In "Women, Muscular Nationalism and Hinduism in India: Roop Kanwar and the Fire Protests" (2011), Sikata Banerjee makes an interesting observation that highlights how such methods only result in harming women themselves.

In muscular nationalism this focus on the purity and chastity of female bodies stems from their role as border guards. By border guards I mean the notion that the boundaries separating 'we the people' from 'them' are represented by chaste women's bodies. Put another way, this line of thinking argues that our women are chaste and pure, yours are not. This is the difference that separates our nation from yours. Women's role as border guards requires that their purity be vigilantly guarded. Thus, other members of the national community (usually men, but sometimes other women) police their bodies and behaviour (Banerjee, 2011, p.273).[97]

Thus, she contends:

Hindu muscular nationalism highlights the role of women as border guards of the nation. Indeed, the masculine is reliant on the virtuous woman. In short, Hindu male martial spirit loses some of its value if female chastity fails to be a dominant symbol of the national community (Banerjee, 2011, p.274).

The idea that Hindu women have to be chaste has already had numerable negative consequences for women in India. For instance, it is not uncommon for rape victims to be blamed for the attack because of how the women are dressed or because they are perceived to be promiscuous.[98] Similarly, women who visit bars, or have pre-marital relationships and engage in any activities that are deemed to be 'Western', are considered to be 'loose' and 'immoral' and at some level, deserving of any inappropriate or violent acts committed against them.[99] An Indian magazine, Tehelka, highlights this narrative that is being publicized by the Hindutva movement in an article that is aptly titled "Rape. And how men see it" (2013):

How endemic is the prejudice that stalks our society? What produces and perpetuates it? What creates the idea of women as 'fair game' for sexual violence? What, in effect, do Indian men think about women?
It would have been comforting if vile foolishness in India had been the domain of a few. But Asaram Bapu is not alone when he says one hand cannot clap by itself.

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[97] Interestingly, these theories have been put to the test by journalists who have conducted investigations to uncover the way the "Hindutva brigade" have tried to combat the 'sullying' of chaste Hindu girls by Muslim men (Bakhshi, 2015).
[98] For example, see, "The Anatomy of a Rape" http://www.tehelka.com/2013/01/the-anatomy-of-a-rape/
[99] For example see, "Politics of Kiss" http://www.tehelka.com/2014/11/kerala-kiss-of-love-protests-indian-culture-moral-policing/ and "Valentine's Warriors" http://www.tehelka.com/2009/02/valentines-warriors/

> Or that taking *diksha*, reciting a mantra and pleading with her rapists as brothers might have saved the young girl that fateful night.
> The clergy of Jamaat-e-Islaami-Hind are not alone when they advocate co-educational institutes to be shut down, pre-marital sex to be outlawed and girls to dress in sober and dignified clothes as ways to prevent rape.
> Mohan Bhagwat is not alone when he asserts more rapes happen in 'India' than 'Bharat' – the first a synecdoche for promiscuous modernity, the latter for a more pious and traditional order where women live within boundaries prescribed by men (Chaudhury, 2013).

The scary truth is that these 'absurd' claims are not dissimilar from the 'absurd' ones that Indira Chowdhury highlights regarding the way Vivekananda defended the Indian treatment of widows when faced with the allegations of Pandita Ramabai. Furthermore, his insistence for chastity, when taken to its logical extreme, could be used as an excuse for attacking girls at a local pub in Kerala because they were allegedly behaving promiscuously. As both Tanika Sarkar and Uma Chakravarti have reminded us, this vision of the chaste Hindu woman/mother has become a *doxa* that is almost impossible to challenge in India today. Unfortunately, it is a worldview that both genders involved with the Hindutva movement have embraced. Thus, even though it is true that Vivekananda cannot be blamed for how his vision of a chaste mother, who would uplift India, has been appropriated, it is hard to forget his words:

> Even I, who have never married, belonging to an Order that never marries, would be disgusted if my wife, supposing I had married, dared to displease my mother. I would be disgusted. Why? Do I not worship my mother? Why should not her daughter-in-law? Whom I worship, why not she? Who is she, then, that would try to ride over my head and govern my mother? She has to wait till her womanhood is fulfilled; and the one thing that fulfils womanhood, that is womanliness in woman, is motherhood. Wait till she becomes a mother; then she will have the same right. That, according to the Hindu mind, is the great mission of woman – to become a mother (Vivekananda, 2009, vol.8, p.59).

Conclusion

One of the central purposes of this thesis has been to articulate the impact that Vivekananda has had on the way Hindu traditions are interpreted to date. Particularly

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since his influence is oftentimes still shrouded either in hagiographical accounts (and their rebuttals) or by Orientalist influenced scholarship that refuses to recognize the role he played in Indian politics. Consequently, I began by describing this exchange of ideas, between the East and the West, as a form of 'continental collision'. This allowed us to establish that there was a mutual sharing of theories and philosophy; that it was not one-sided. 'Continental collision' not only highlights the fact that this was a clash of civilizations but also that the effects of this encounter continue to reverberate today. This point is driven home by Nandy who with his explication of 'colonized minds' opens up a conversation whereby we can begin to appreciate how, and why, men like Vivekananda, who were prominent over a century ago, can still impact the daily lives of Indians. Vivekananda's popularity, combined with the tremendous effects of this 'continental collision', put him in a unique position to push back against the suture zones that were forming between the West and the East. By challenging Westerners on the concepts and terminology they used to describe Indian philosophy, and by demonstrating that Vedanta could stand shoulder to shoulder with Western philosophical truths, Vivekananda created an atmosphere of hope and pride amongst his Indian listeners. Thus, Vivekananda, and other leaders like him, fought against the 'colonization of Indian minds' that was rampant in colonial India.

However, in order to analyse Vivekananda's impact on modern India, we had to first examine the definitions of two key concepts, concepts that Vivekananda engaged with closely and which modern academics continue to grapple with. As such, in the second chapter, we explored how scholars have struggled to define 'religion', particularly when it is used to describe traditions other than Christianity. This allowed us to consider the lens that is commonly used to analyse cultures, a lens that academics have repeatedly determined is compromised because of its emphasis on Western

models. With the help of a variety of scholars we were able to identify the numerous risks associated with the indiscriminate use of this label. In fact, by tracing the complexities associated with the history of the concept 'religion' I was able to defend the use of the term 'tradition' since its versatility is better suited to describing India's diverse past. Furthermore, this analysis allowed us to determine, in subsequent chapters, how Vivekananda struggled with this concept and the parameters it used to define traditions that were 'worthy' of being classified as 'world religions'. Thus, we learned that despite repeatedly arguing for the unique qualities of Indian traditions he was still susceptible to the influence of this terminology.

Similarly, in Chapter 3, we saw that the term 'Hinduism' continues to be a minefield for scholarship associated with the study of Indian traditions. By highlighting the dilemmas that are commonly linked to the usage of this label we discussed the precarious nature of 'naming' ideas that do not naturally lend themselves to essentialist categories. We saw how scholars were divided into camps, who were supposedly arguing opposing viewpoints, but who, in reality, were simply two sides of the same coin. This only helped to reinforce the predicament with bundling the vastly different traditions that are native to India, under the umbrella of 'Hinduism'; a point that is stressed by Balagangadhara and Thapar. Unfortunately however, despite the fact that I determined that I would opt, instead, to use the term 'Hindu traditions', I had to do so with the explicit understanding that it was non-conclusive. Nevertheless, this analysis gave us a framework from which to understand the importance of this label and how Vivekananda's description and usage of this term continues to be relevant in modern scholarship. Indeed, we saw how even Vivekananda, despite being keenly aware of the polythetic quality of Indian traditions, was instrumental in confining Hindu philosophy and practices under a single banner.

As we saw in Chapter 4, what made Vivekananda's packaging of Hindu traditions so successful was his eclectic upbringing and eventual association with Ramakrishna, which led to his acceptance of monks' orders. We discussed how his strong Indian roots, combined with his aptitude to analyse Western concepts to suit Indian audiences, while dressed in the garb of a *sanyasi,* converted him into the ideal symbolic figure of a burgeoning nation. In this way, Vivekananda's Indian voice, coupled with his capacity for appealing to a vast variety of audiences, propelled him into becoming an influential personality. We were able to determine that even though scholars like Hacker, Frykenberg and von Stietencron, to mention just a few, have repeatedly argued that a united Hindu identity owes its creation to Orientalist scholars, the truth was that Indian voices like Vivekananda's were equally responsible for this apparent unification. Consequently, we explored how Vivekananda's early childhood education, interaction with the Brahmo Samaj, and relationship with Ramakrishna contributed to the development of his message.

By investigating Vivekananda's speeches at the Parliament in Chapter 5, we ascertained how he developed his arguments which led him away from Ramakrishna's experimentation with other paths to the repackaging of Hindu traditions. This repackaging allowed him to present Hindu philosophy as the perfect vehicle for a 'universal religion'. He argued, unlike Hegel, that India was not only the birthplace of 'religion' but that Vedanta was the mother of all 'religions'. Drawing out the complexities associated with such claims allowed us to discover how Vivekananda began to privilege Advaita over all other forms of tradition, both Eastern and Western. Throughout the analysis of Vivekananda's methodology in cultivating a united front for Hindu traditions, we measured how he appropriated and accommodated ideas that he culled from both Western philosophy and Eastern traditions. Indeed, it was while he

was still at the Parliament that we witness Vivekananda's privileging of Vedanta at the expense of other native Indian traditions which included, but were not limited to, Buddhist and Jain traditions and the path of *bhakti*.

In Chapter 6 we observed that Vivekananda continued on this trajectory when he returned to India whereby he refused to side with the ideals of the traditionalists or revivalists because neither resonated with his vision for India. Here, we established how Vivekananda pulled away from devotional traditions by calling his countrymen to cultivate "muscles of iron and nerves of steel". Indeed, even though he claimed he was not interested in entering the political arena nevertheless, he argued that India responded best to religious arguments. Add this to his call for *sanyasis* to put themselves at the service of the masses and it becomes clear that Vivekananda's message had a high visibility profile which could prove to be a useful political strategy. Accordingly, we saw that through his emphasis on a united front, which was based on the universal appeal of Vedanta, he was able to help create a hierarchy thereby undermining other Indian traditions by insisting that they belonged on a lower rung, the apex of which was Advaita.

In this final chapter, I brought Vivekananda into the 21st century by articulating the role he continues to play in Indian public policy. Thus, even though political scientists like Chatterjee and Jaffrelot have chosen to side-line his impact on Indian politics, recent events have demonstrated otherwise. This is why he has been appropriated by the Indian nationalist movement who are trying to establish a Hindu state. Indeed, what these arguments should have highlighted is that by taking certain positions Vivekananda lent himself to a more fundamental form of Hindu thought. His stance on women, his argument for the superiority of Indian philosophy, his call for a more muscular nation, and his dismissal of *bhakti* as a lesser path have all allowed him

to be appropriated by the Indian nationalists for their cause. Vivekananda has been adopted as a role model by Indian nationalists. As such, it has become necessary for Hindus to closely analyse his message in order to really understand how deeply his words have influenced the Indian psyche. Asad made a very strong argument whereby he warned readers not to ignore the role that traditions play in public policy. Ironically, Vivekananda would have agreed with Asad because he also argued that 'religion' was a crucial element when communicating with the Indian masses. He knew that it was a motivating factor and used it when speaking to his audiences in India. The Indian nationalists are using Vivekananda's playbook. The Babri masjid, the textbook controversies, the restrictions on women's' freedoms and the recent spate of horrific lynchings all have a 'religious' undertone. It has become imperative for Indians to take notice of what is being said in their 'name'.

This urgent need is highlighted in an article titled "Not in my Name: I refuse to cede Hinduism to those who want to make India a Hindu rashtra" (Viswanath, 2017). Here, Sunita Viswanath makes the argument that Hindus, who are witnessing the atrocities committed in the name of their traditions have to stand up and take action. They must lay claim to the traditions that right-wing politicians have dominated over the last few decades. This has allowed groups like the RSS to dictate what Hindu traditions signify and in turn have changed the religious landscape of India. Could it be that the relegation of 'religion' to the private sphere in countries where this is not a natural state of affairs has brought about this fundamental landslide? Is it because the Hindu public, in general, ignored the use of 'religion' by politicians because they were comforted by the Western concept of separation of 'church and state'? Is this why they did not take the incursions of the religious right into politics seriously? Has India been lulled into a state of complacency? Why have they forgotten that religious traditions

have always formed one of the pillars of Indian society? Vivekananda, Gandhi, Bankimchandra et al, acknowledged the place of Hindu traditions in Indian life. Only after Independence, with secularism becoming such a crucial slogan of the newly independent state, was it relegated to the private sphere. This, in turn, has led to the present where Hindus are finding themselves in a position where they must defend their vision of Hindu traditions or else be at the receiving end of scathing editorials which legitimately accuse them of being complicit with the violence being committed against minorities because of their silence (Mehta, 2017).

And finally, I have argued that Vivekananda had many faces. That he was intent on uniting 'Hinduism'. That he believed that Advaita was the perfect vehicle for a universal 'religion'. That he was guilty of undermining other traditions in order to reify his own. That he had controversial views about women. But he never advocated for violence. Vivekananda would have never condoned the lynchings that are being carried out in India today (Bhattacharjee, 2017 and Halarnkar, 2017). It is easy to imagine him clearly stating in his inimitable, oratory voice, "Not in my name!" That is the Vivekananda we need today. A Vivekananda who, as Hatcher reminded us, was quick to assess his surroundings and the needs of his nation. He was a master of adjusting the narrative to suit his situation. He helped create a hierarchy because he believed it was necessary to unite his people. Would he be just as willing to dismantle this hierarchy if he thought it was the only way to maintain the integrity of the Indian landmass? I would like to believe he would. After all, Vivekananda was extremely adept at renegotiating concepts and ideas and as such it is this strategy of his that Indians must try and emulate today. Indeed, it is the skill with which past leaders like Vivekananda were able to rethink and accommodate traditional Hindu concepts that allowed for their continued survival. Is it really hard to believe that Vivekananda would have shifted his

emphasis from a hierarchical tradition that was threating the integrity of the Indian landmass? I think not. One could argue that one of the most important lessons that Vivekananda imparted was his will to survive. A will that he imposed on the traditions he loved. A will that helped him create a hierarchy. It is that same kind of will that Indians must now use to re-examine the dangerous trajectory of Hindu nationalism.

To conclude, there are a few crucial points that have conceivably been brought into focus with this survey on Vivekananda and his influence on the (re)packaging of modern Hindu thought. First and foremost, by cultivating the alternative lens, 'continental collision', with which to analyse the exchange of ideas that occurred during the colonial era, we were able to clearly determine that this exchange was not one-sided, but rather multi-directional. Hopefully, this will help to address the continued emphasis on the impact of the West on the East in modern scholarship. Academics need to constantly 'debunk' these theories if we want to engage in a truly equitable discussion of philosophy whereby each traditions' contributions are recognized as equally valuable to the global dialogue. Furthermore, the framework provided by 'continental collision' shows the continued relevance of Vivekananda's arguments which challenged the very premise of certain Western concepts; concepts that are still being disputed today. This could allow for further research on how other Indian voices have also impacted such discussions which, in turn, should accentuate the arguments that other scholars have also made as to why Western terminology must not be used indiscriminately to describe alternate traditions.

Secondly, by turning our gaze on to the hierarchy that was cultivated by Vivekananda, I was able to highlight how the continued use of this hierarchy can prove to be detrimental to the survival of the multiple diverse Hindu traditions in contemporary India. Not enough attention is paid to this hierarchy and the damage it

has done, and continues to do. Nowhere are Nandy's observations about 'colonized minds' more rampant than in this milieu. Unfortunately however, since India was declared a secular state after Independence the ramifications of this hierarchy have been, at least until recently, developing under the surface of Indian society. Consequently, much was lost in an effort to prove how worthy Indian philosophy was, when compared to Western ideology. The need to present a united front when facing the West resulted in the creation of a hierarchy amongst Hindu traditions that still threatens to undermine the layers of sedimentation that are part of India's rich heritage. The irony is that the very creation of this hierarchy was in response to the claim that India's traditions lacked a sense of order and conformity. As such, one could just as easily argue that the hierarchy which was created by Indian men, such as Vivekananda was, in reality, a way of succumbing to the colonization of their minds! By privileging Advaita over other Hindu traditions, the complex web of ideas with which India is oftentimes identified is compromised. Hopefully this study will alert both academics, as well as practitioners, that they need to be vigilant if they want to protect the integrity of India's diverse landscape.

And finally, I demonstrated that whereas Vivekananda always insisted that he was not interested in politics, one could also surmise that his emphasis on the 'religious' nature of the Indian population has lent itself to the creation of a Hindu nation. Particularly when this is coupled with his emphasis on Advaita and the establishment of a hierarchy amongst traditions. Whereas this may have been acceptable during the colonial period, due to its usefulness when fighting for Independence, today it promises to undermine the very foundation upon which Hindu ideas were built. This study has made it evident that Vivekananda had a multifaceted personality which needs to be unpacked and not taken at face value. Not enough scholarship has focused on this aspect

of Vivekananda's contribution and his continued relevance for modern Indian thought. It is time for academics to recognize the need for a deeper exploration of the impact of Indian voices like Vivekananda's. Otherwise we might find ourselves in a situation where his ideology, which is not only harmful to the inherently polythetic nature of Indian traditions, but can also be chauvinistic and prejudiced, will become second nature in India. By examining the role that Vivekananda played in the creation of this hierarchy we are one step closer to disassembling it before it causes an eruption from which India cannot recover. Turning the spotlight on the underlying messages of Vivekananda's arguments is a good place to start.

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