

Article

A Complex Ultimate Reality: The Metaphysics of the Four Yogas

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Abstract: This essay will pose and seek to answer the following question: If, as Swami Vivekananda claims, the four yogas are independent and equally effective paths to God-realization and liberation from the cycle of rebirth, then what must reality be like? What ontology is implied by the claim that the four yogas are all equally effective paths to the supreme goal of religious life? What metaphysical conditions would enable this pluralistic assertion to be true? Swami Vivekananda's worldview is frequently identified with Advaita Vedānta. We shall see that Vivekananda's teaching is certainly Advaitic in what could be called a broad sense. As Anantanand Rambachan and others, however, have pointed out, it would be incorrect to identify Swami Vivekananda's teachings in any rigid or dogmatic sense with the classical Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara; this is because Vivekananda's teaching departs from that of Śaṅkara in some significant ways, not least in his assertion of the independent salvific efficacy of the four yogas. This essay will argue that Swami Vivekananda's pluralism, based on the concept of the four yogas, is far more akin to the *deep religious pluralism* that is advocated by contemporary philosophers of religion in the Whiteheadian tradition of process thought like David Ray Griffin and John Cobb, the classical Jain doctrines of relativity (*anekāntavāda*, *nayavāda*, and *syādvāda*), and, most especially, the *Vijñāna Vedānta* of Vivekananda's guru, Sri Ramakrishna, than any of these approaches is to the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara. Advaita Vedānta, in Vivekananda's pluralistic worldview, becomes one valid conceptual matrix among many that bear the ability to support an efficacious path to liberation. This essay is intended not as an historical reconstruction of Vivekananda's thought, so much as a constructive philosophical contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversations about both religious (and, more broadly, worldview) pluralism and the religious and philosophical legacies of both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The former conversation has arrived at something of an impasse (as recounted by Kenneth Rose), while the latter conversation has recently been revived, thanks to the work of Swami Medhananda (formerly Ayon Maharaj) and Arpita Mitra.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda; religious pluralism; Hinduism; Vedanta; Sri Ramakrishna; philosophy of religion; yoga

1. Introduction

This essay will pose and seek to answer the following question: If, as Swami Vivekananda claims, the four yogas are independent and equally effective paths to God-realization and liberation from the cycle of rebirth, then what must reality be like? What ontology is implied by the claim that the four yogas are all equally effective paths to the supreme goal of religious life? What metaphysical conditions would enable this pluralistic assertion to be true? Swami Vivekananda's worldview is frequently identified with Advaita Vedānta. We shall see that Vivekananda's teaching is certainly Advaitic in what could be called a broad sense. As Anantanand Rambachan and others, however, have pointed out, it would be incorrect to identify Swami Vivekananda's teachings in any rigid or dogmatic sense with the classical Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara; this is because Vivekananda's teaching

departs from that of Śaṅkara in some significant ways, not least in his assertion of the independent salvific efficacy of the four yogas.¹ This essay will argue that Swami Vivekananda's pluralism, based on the concept of the four yogas, is far more akin to the *deep religious pluralism* that is advocated by contemporary philosophers of religion in the Whiteheadian tradition of process thought like David Ray Griffin and John Cobb, the classical Jain doctrines of relativity (*anekāntavāda*, *nayavāda*, and *syādvāda*), and, most especially, the *Vijñāna Vedānta* of Vivekananda's guru, Sri Ramakrishna, than any of these approaches is to the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara. Advaita Vedānta, in Vivekananda's pluralistic worldview, becomes one valid conceptual matrix among many that bear the ability to support an efficacious path to liberation. This essay is intended not as an historical reconstruction of Vivekananda's thought, so much as a constructive philosophical contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversations about both religious (and, more broadly, worldview) pluralism and the religious and philosophical legacies of both Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. The former conversation has arrived at something of an impasse (as recounted by Kenneth Rose),² while the latter conversation has recently been revived, thanks to the work of Swami Medhananda (formerly Ayon Maharaj) and Arpita Mitra.³

2. The Four Yogas in the Teaching of Swami Vivekananda: Independent Paths to Liberation

One of Swami Vivekananda's most distinctive contributions to Hindu thought, and to religious discourse more generally, is his systematization of the four yogas as four independent and equally effective paths to God-realization and liberation. As Swami Medhananda has argued, this view of the four yogas is foundational to Vivekananda's religious pluralism, at least in its mature form, as reflected in Vivekananda's teachings from late 1895 until the end of his life. "... [I]n his lectures and writings from late 1895 to 1901, Vivekananda consistently taught the harmony of religions on the basis of a Vedāntic universal religion grounded in the four yogas."⁴

The four yogas, as presented by Swami Vivekananda, are four basic types of spiritual discipline whose purpose is to enable their practitioners to approach the ultimate goal of Vedāntic practice. This goal, which is variously denoted by Vivekananda as "God-realization," "Self-realization," or simply as "realization" culminates in the liberation of the individual soul—the *jīva*—from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This liberating realization is typically presented by Vivekananda in what could broadly be called Advaitic, or non-dualistic, terms as the awareness that one's true identity does not rest in the body, the mind, or the ego, but with the *ātman*: the true, divine Self (with a capital 's'). This awareness, however, is not simply a matter of cognition. It is not merely a matter of accepting and affirming the truth of a proposition stated in the Vedic scriptures. It is, rather, more akin to an embodiment: the "making real" (if we may take the word "realization" at face value) of this awareness in one's whole being. Indeed, Vivekananda asserts that one cannot finally "know", in the sense of mere cognition, the true nature of divinity; for our finite minds cannot ever fully grasp That which is infinite. Rather, one manifests this divinity as one's own essential nature. It is not so much that one *knows* it as that one *is* it. Vivekananda asks, "Can we know God?" He answers, "Of course not. If God can be known, He will be God no longer. Knowledge is limitation. But I and my Father are one: I find the reality in my soul."⁵

Why are there multiple spiritual practices, multiple paths toward the same realization? If the ultimate goal is one and the same for everyone—realization of and identification with our true, divine nature—then why is there not also one clear path to attaining it? The reason Vivekananda gives for the great variety of spiritual practices and paths that exist is the variety in human beings: "Every man must develop according to his own nature. As every science has its methods, so has every

¹ (Rambachan 1994).

² (Rose 2013, pp. 25–42).

³ (Maharaj 2018; Mitra 2014, pp. 65–78 and pp. 194–259).

⁴ (Medhananda 2020, p. 9).

⁵ (Vivekananda 1979, p. 323).

religion. The methods of attaining the end of religion are called Yoga by us, and the different forms of Yoga that we teach, are adapted to the different natures and temperaments of men.”⁶

What are these yogas? “We classify them in the following way, under four heads:

- (1) Karma-Yoga—The manner in which a man realizes his own divinity through works and duty.
- (2) Bhakti-Yoga—The realization of the divinity through devotion to, and love of, a Personal God.
- (3) Raja-Yoga—The realization of the divinity through the control of mind.
- (4) Jnana-Yoga—The realization of a man’s own divinity through knowledge.”⁷

Ultimately, there are, according to Vivekananda, as many yogas as there are individual beings seeking liberation. The four yogas are not intended to be mutually exclusive or, by themselves, exhaustive of the possible ways in which liberation might occur. They define, rather, four broad types or trends which are based on the personalities of those who take up the spiritual path. Most importantly for the purposes of this essay, all four of these types of practice are conceived by Vivekananda as independent and equally effective routes to the goal of realization. This is distinct from more traditional Hindu models, in which one yoga will be seen as the highest, with the others being seen as preliminary practices which lead up to it. In classical Advaita Vedānta, for example, jñāna yoga, the path of knowledge, is typically seen as the one effective path to realization. The other yogas can prepare one for knowledge by making one’s mind into a fit receptacle for it. They are, one could say, purificatory practices; but they are not themselves independent paths to knowledge.

However, in numerous places in Vivekananda’s *Complete Works*—the posthumous compilation of his published writings, his correspondence, the notes taken by others on his lectures, and media accounts of his lectures and other interactions with the public—Vivekananda affirms the idea that the four yogas constitute four independent and equally efficacious paths to liberation from death and rebirth. It is a consistent theme of his teachings, again, from late 1895 until his death in 1902. “You must remember”, he states in his 1896 work, *Karma Yoga*, “that freedom of the soul is the goal of all Yogas, and each one equally leads to the same result”.⁸ Later in the same text, he writes:

Our various Yogas do not conflict with each other; each of them leads us to the same goal and makes us perfect . . . Each one of our Yogas is fitted to make man perfect even without the help of the others, because they have all the same goal in view. The Yogas of work, of wisdom, and of devotion are all capable of serving as direct and independent means for the attainment of Moksha [liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth]. ‘Fools alone say that work and philosophy are different, not the learned.’ The learned know that, though apparently different from each other, they at last lead to the same goal of human perfection.⁹

3. The Diversity of Yogas and the Diversity of Religions: Yoga as a Religion

Although yoga involves many different methods, many forms of practice, the goal of all of these is seen by Vivekananda as being one and the same: realization of our inner divinity. This is the ultimate goal of all human beings, as well as the ultimate aim of all religions:

The ultimate goal of all mankind, *the aim and end of all religions*, is but one—re-union with God, or, what amounts to the same, with the divinity which is every man’s true nature. But while the aim is one, the method of attaining may vary with the different temperaments of men

⁶ Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 292.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, Volume One, p. 55.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 92, 93. It should be noted that Vivekananda, characteristically of authors of his time, uses the terms ‘man’ and ‘men’ to speak of humanity and human beings. Although this is jarring to contemporary sensibilities, he should not be taken as referring exclusively to males. There is abundant evidence from his life and writings that he viewed women and men as equally capable of achieving realization. Interestingly, his native Bengali language is genderless, and is thus arguably better suited than the English of his time for conveying the expansive perspective of his thought.

... Both the goal and the methods employed for reaching it are called Yoga, a word derived from the same Sanskrit root as the English 'yoke,' meaning 'to join,' to join us to our reality, God. There are various such Yogas or methods of union—but the chief ones are—Karma-Yoga, Bhakti-Yoga, Raja-Yoga, and Jnana-Yoga.¹⁰

It is noteworthy that Vivekananda elides the differences between the non-dualist understanding of divinity as the nature of the ātman, or Self, and the theistic ideal of a personal God with just five words: "what amounts to the same". "The ultimate goal of all mankind, the aim and end of all religions, is but one—re-union with God, or, *what amounts to the same*, with the divinity which is every man's true nature".¹¹ For Vivekananda, the paradigm by which one conceives of divinity—as an inner or outer reality, as the divine Self within or as the Supreme Being who orders and maintains the cosmos—matters less than the fact that one does conceive of it and dedicates oneself to its realization, according to whatever conception resonates best with one's own understanding. This is consistent, as we shall see, with the teaching of Vivekananda's guru, Sri Ramakrishna, as well.

Importantly, for Vivekananda, the diversity of yogas is inextricably linked to the diversity of religions. On Vivekananda's understanding, religion, for all intents and purposes, *is* yoga. And if there are many yogas, many disciplines that have the ability of leading their practitioners to God-realization, then it follows that many religions can do the same. Religions are, in effect, yogas.

It is noteworthy that Swami Vivekananda, in a passage where he essentially identifies yoga with religion, points out the etymology of the word *yoga*; both *religion* and *yoga* are, in their etymological roots, connected with the ideas of "union" or "re-union". The Latin root of *religion*—*religare*—literally means "to bind, to tie". Similarly, the Sanskrit root of the word *yoga*—*yuj*—also means "yoke, unite". In their initial meanings, both words refer to the literal act of tying, binding, or yoking—such as yoking an ox to a cart or tying a cow to a post. But both words have gradually come to refer metaphorically to a "binding" or "yoking" of a more profound kind: the binding or yoking of the individual self to its divine source, whether this is conceived, again, as a divine being—God—distinct from the self (as in bhakti yoga and theistic religion) or to one's own divine nature, which is distinct from one's "false", "illusory", or "lower" self, or ego (as in jñāna yoga and traditions, such as Buddhism, that are more focused on the realization of an impersonal truth than on a personal deity).

Although it has become a standard practice to translate the English word *religion* as *dharma* or *dharm* in Indic languages such as Sanskrit or Hindi, one could argue that it is truer to the original meanings of both *religion* and *yoga* to translate *religion* as *yoga*. Both words refer, in the thought of Swami Vivekananda, to the practices and total way of life employed in taking one to one's ultimate goal: to God-realization. Both vary in practice because, as Vivekananda says, "while the aim is one, the method of attaining it may vary with the different temperaments of men".¹² In the words of Mohandas K. Gandhi, "In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals".¹³ This emphasis on religious pluralism, the idea of there being many true and effective paths to the realization of our inherent, potential divinity, shows Vivekananda's debt to Ramakrishna, his guru, whose central message was *Yato mat, tato path*: Each religion is a path to the realization of God. Ramakrishna famously claims:

I have practiced all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths ... He who is called Krishna is also called Śiva, and bears the name of the Primal Energy, Jesus, and Āllāh as well—the same Rāma with a thousand names ... God can be realized through all paths. All religions are

¹⁰ Ibid, Volume Five, p. 292. Emphasis mine.

¹¹ Ibid, emphasis mine.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ (Richards 1985, p. 156).

true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope . . . It is not good to feel that one's religion alone is true and all others are false. God is one only and not two. Different people call him by different names: some as Allah, some as God, and others as Krishna, Shiva, and Brahman. It is like water in a lake. Some drink it at one place and call it 'jal,' others at another place and call it 'pani,' and still others at a third place and call it 'water.' The Hindus call it 'jal,' the Christians 'water,' and the Mussulmans 'pani.' But it is one and the same thing. Opinions are but paths. Each religion is only a path leading to God, as rivers come from different directions and ultimately become one in the one ocean . . . All religions and all paths call upon their followers to pray to one and the same God. Therefore, one should not show disrespect to any religion or religious opinion.¹⁴

Vivekananda's linking of the concept of *yoga*, of joining or of reuniting one with God, or "what amounts to the same",¹⁵ of realizing the divinity which is already our true nature, with the concept of religion is a connection that has been made by others, notably Joseph Campbell:

The Indian term yoga is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *yuj*, "to link, join, or unite", which is related etymologically to "yoke", a yoke of oxen, and is in a sense analogous to the word "religion" (Latin *re-ligio*), "to link back, or bind". Man, the creature, is by religion bound back to God.

Campbell, however, discerns a distinction between these two types of joining, in terms of how they have been understood, historically, by the traditions which have affirmed them, differentiating between the theistic paths, or religions, of the West, and paths of realization such as Advaita Vedānta:

However, religion, *religio*, refers to a linking historically conditioned by way of a covenant, sacrament, or *Qu'ran* [referring to the respective ways of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam], whereas yoga is the psychological linking of the mind to that superordinated principle "by which the mind knows". Furthermore, in yoga what is linked is finally the self to itself, consciousness to consciousness; for what had seemed, through *māyā*, to be two are in reality not so; whereas in religion what are linked are God and man, which are not the same. It is of course true that in the popular religions of the Orient the gods are worshiped as though external to their devotees, and all the rules and rites of a covenanted relationship are observed. Nevertheless, the ultimate realization, which the sages have celebrated, is that the god worshiped as though without is in reality a reflex of the same mystery as oneself. As long as an illusion of ego remains, the commensurate illusion of a separate deity also will be there; and vice versa, as long as the idea of a separate deity is cherished, an illusion of ego, related to it in love, fear, worship, exile, or atonement, will also be there. But precisely that illusion of duality is the trick of *māyā*. "Thou art that" (*tat tvam asi*) is the proper thought for the first step to wisdom.¹⁶

Campbell's differentiation of yoga from religion on the basis of his identification of yoga as being aimed at the realization of a divinity within, with religion being traditionally aimed at union with a God external to oneself through some historically mediating reality—"covenant, sacrament, or *Qu'ran*"—is not one which Swami Vivekananda seems to find particularly important. Again, for Vivekananda, if one realizes God through a devotional path, in which the divine reality is seen as a separate being from oneself—the path which Campbell identifies with religion—or if one realizes God through the path of knowledge, where divinity is seen as one's own nature—the path Campbell identifies with

¹⁴ (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 35).

¹⁵ Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 292.

¹⁶ (Campbell 1959, p. 14).

yoga—does not affect the final outcome. Again, for Vivekananda, these two paths “amount to the same” thing.¹⁷ For Vivekananda, yoga is religion and religion is yoga. What is true of one is therefore true of the other. If, therefore, it is true that many yogas can lead human beings to the same realization, it is equally true that many religions can do the same thing. The diversity and independent efficacy of the yogas is the basis for Vivekananda’s religious pluralism.

Vivekananda sees the diversity of religions not as a problem to be surmounted, but as a positive advantage, for the variety of religions speaks to the variety of human dispositions, making a path available to a person of every disposition: “These are all different roads leading to the same center—God. Indeed, the varieties of religious belief are an advantage, since all faiths are good, so far as they encourage man to lead a religious life. The more sects there are, the more opportunities there are for making successful appeals to the divine instinct in all men”.¹⁸ The diversity of the yogas and the diversity of the religions arise from the same source: the diversity of human natures and temperaments as we each strive for the realization of our divinity.

“Yoga means the method of joining man and God. When you understand this, you can go on with your own definitions of man and God, and you will find the term Yoga fits in with every definition. Remember always, there are different Yogas for different minds, and that if one does not suit you, another may”.¹⁹ Vivekananda is here enjoining a non-dogmatic attitude in one’s approach to the question of yoga and its ultimate purpose. If one finds that a particular method for realizing divinity does not work, due perhaps to one’s specific life circumstances, or due perhaps to other factors, like one’s culture, or one’s previous experiences with religion, then other methods are available. It is not the quest for God-realization itself that is to be abandoned; but rather, one might need to adopt another method for achieving it. Even terms like *God* or *realization* may not be suitable for some people. For many, the word *God* implies a personal being who is in charge of the universe, and they find this concept inconsistent with their understanding of science or on the basis of their own life experiences. For others, *realization* may sound too impersonal or isolated. They may prefer terms like *loving union*, *receiving divine grace*, or *salvation*. The details of how one speaks of or conceptualizes these things do not finally matter, according to Vivekananda, so long as the method one uses is effective in drawing one nearer to the goal: so long as one actualizes the potential present in each method.

An example that Vivekananda gives of the diversity of Yogas being rooted in the diversity of human characteristics is Jñāna-Yoga, which he defines as “The realization of a man’s own divinity through knowledge”.²⁰ “The object of Jnana-Yoga”, he says, “is the same as that of Bhakti and Raja Yogas, but the method is different. This is the Yoga for the strong, for those who are neither mystical nor devotional, but rational”.²¹ By ‘the strong,’ Vivekananda does not here mean that the practitioners of either bhakti yoga or rāja yoga—the disciplines, respectively, of devotion and meditation—are, in some sense, weak. But this yoga is for those who are confident in their own ability to reason through and to discern the reality of God through the powers of the intellect, without the aid of a divine grace bestowed from outside the self.

In bhakti yoga, one relies upon the grace of God, conceived as a being outside of oneself—though God is, on an Advaitic understanding, the Self beyond, or at the deepest level within, the empirical personality or ego which we conventionally conceive of as the self. Certainly, one may distinguish, even in Advaita Vedānta, with its non-dualistic perspective, a difference between the true Self and the false; for indeed, the practice of non-duality rests on this very distinction. In bhakti, the individual self or jīva—the living soul—is not unreal, but it is derivative from and dependent upon the divine Self—that is, God—who is conceived as the loving savior who rescues one from the sufferings of this

¹⁷ Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 292.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Vivekananda, Volume Six, p. 41.

²⁰ Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 292.

²¹ Vivekananda, Volume Eight, p. 3.

world. There is, furthermore, a lower self—the personality or ego—which is illusory and false and needs to be melted in the experience of divine love. Also, in *rāja yoga*, one sets aside the lower self and focuses solely upon the divinity within—the *puruṣa*—to the exclusion of all else. In *jñāna yoga*, the ego and intellect remain intact, but they deconstruct themselves through a systematic process which culminates, according to Vivekananda, in the same realization as the methods of devotion and meditation.²² Each of these paths is for a different personality type. Some are more intellectually inclined, and confident in their ability to reason things through. Others are of a more emotional disposition and need to rely on a personal savior. And others are mystically inclined, wanting to set aside everything and have the direct experience of inwardness. Finally, there are the natural workers—the *karma yogis*—whose motivation is to get something positive done practically in the world. This inclination, too, can be channeled toward the highest goal, according to Vivekananda, through the practice of *seva*, or selfless service.

4. Making Sense of the Four Yogas as Independent and Effective Paths to Realization

If, as Swami Vivekananda claims, the four yogas are independent and equally effective paths to realization and liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*moksa*), then what must the universe be like? What metaphysical conditions would enable such a pluralistic assertion to be true? What are the features of the ontology that must be presupposed by Vivekananda's claims about the independent effectiveness of the four yogas?

At first glance, Vivekananda's affirmation of the equal efficacy of the four yogas would appear to involve a problem of philosophical incoherence.²³ This is because each of the four yogas makes a set of assumptions about the ultimate nature of reality whose mutual compatibility is not obvious. The non-dualist understanding of divinity as one's own true nature, presupposed in *jñāna yoga*, and the theistic understanding of divinity as a God outside of oneself, presupposed in *bhakti yoga*, do not obviously "amount to the same" thing, as Vivekananda claims.²⁴ Indeed, adherents of these two paths have debated extensively throughout the history of Indian philosophy.

We have also seen that Swami Vivekananda also ties the diversity of the paths to realization—the diversity of the yogas—to the diversity of the world's religions. Each major religious tradition can be seen as, in essence, a variation on one of the yogas. Thus, Christianity comes to be seen as a form of *bhakti yoga*, Buddhism as a practice of *jñāna yoga*, and so on. This adds even further weight to the question of coherence. It is not only that each yoga, each of which can be traced to a different system of traditional Indic thought and practice, involves its own set of distinctive set of assumptions. Vivekananda is affirming the independent salvific efficacy of the world religions as a whole. All of their various worldviews thus come into play. How can traditions as disparate in their claims about the basic nature of reality as Jainism and Islam, for example, all be seen as efficacious paths to the same ultimate realization? This question of the coherence of this claim is faced by most pluralistic models of truth and salvation.

Thinking now just in terms of the assumptions involved in the yogas themselves, as conceived by Vivekananda, *jñāna yoga*, the spiritual discipline of knowledge, operates on the assumption, found prominently in the non-dualist or Advaita system of Vedānta, that there is an ultimate nature of reality that is beyond all concepts of name and form—that is *nirguṇa*—and that is identical with the fundamental essence of all beings. This ultimate reality, or *Brahman* is identical with the *ātman*, or the Self. Liberation arises from the realization that this is the case: the experience of a radical reorientation of one's sense of selfhood, uprooting it from the body, the mind, and the personality with which we conventionally identify ourselves and identifying instead with the unlimited spiritual essence

²² See (Davis 2010).

²³ (Rambachan 1994, pp. 63–93).

²⁴ Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 292.

of all existence, which is *anantaraṃ sat-cit-ānandam*—infinite being, awareness, and bliss. Indeed, these are the terms in which Vivekananda himself most often speaks, and, during a brief period of his career—“roughly, from mid-1894 to mid-1895”—he conceived of the process of realization as involving a series of steps leading from a dualistic worldview to non-dualistic realization.²⁵

Bhakti yoga, the spiritual discipline of devotion, operates on the assumption that there is a Supreme Being, a personal ultimate reality, absolute devotion and surrender to whom will lead to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The Supreme Being, as a being with whom one enters into a relationship, is distinct from oneself. This is unlike the *ātman*, which is not so much a being as it is being itself. Liberation, in bhakti yoga, is a result of divine grace and compassion, as found in theistic religions.

Karma yoga, the spiritual discipline of action, operates on the assumption that by serving the living beings in our midst, we cause our ego to become attenuated. We thus become selfless beings, free from attachment to the results of our actions. By becoming free from the illusion of selfhood, in the sense of ego, we become liberated. In Swami Vivekananda’s terms, the essence of this ego is “self-abnegation”. “The highest ideal is eternal and entire self-abnegation, where there is no “I”, but all is ‘Thou’; and whether he is conscious or unconscious of it, Karma-Yoga leads man to that end”.²⁶

According to Vivekananda, it is not even necessary for the practitioner of karma yoga to have any religious beliefs. This yoga can be aided, though, by the belief that one is serving God, who is present in the suffering beings that one serves. Again, the yogas are not seen as mutually exclusive, airtight compartments. Theistic karma yoga can therefore be seen as a type of devotional practice: serving God in others. But non-theistic karma yoga—attenuating the ego by giving oneself to the service of others—is also possible and is no less efficacious for those who are drawn to it.

Finally, *rāja* or *dhyāna* yoga, the spiritual discipline of meditation, operates on the assumption that, by stilling the thought processes that characterize our conventional waking state, we are able to gain access to and experience the true nature of reality directly, becoming fully absorbed into that reality and thus attaining liberation. This assumption is not radically incompatible with those made by the other yogas. To the extent, however, that *rāja* yoga is understood by Vivekananda as being continuous with the system of yoga taught in Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*, it does involve a set of views whose logical compatibility with the Advaita Vedānta presupposed by *jñāna* yoga is not immediately obvious: views such as the real existence of many *puruṣas*, or souls, as opposed to the undifferentiated unity of Brahman affirmed in classical Advaita Vedānta.

If one draws attention to the original Indian systems of thought which seem to provide the conceptual foundations for each yoga, Vivekananda’s affirmation of the efficacy of all four yogas would seem to amount to the claim that the respective worldviews of Advaita Vedānta, the classical Vaiṣṇava bhakti traditions, the teaching of the renunciation of the fruits of action (*karma-phala-vairāgya*) found in the third chapter of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the eight-limbed (*aṣṭāṅga*) yoga of Patañjali are all true.

This is certainly not an impossible claim to defend. Indeed, one could argue that there are elements of each of these worldviews already affirmed in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a text frequently cited by Swami Vivekananda, and that his teaching on the four yogas is simply an extension of a concept which is already present, at least implicitly, in this central text of the Vedānta tradition.²⁷ One could well see Vivekananda’s teaching as a return to the pre-systematic Vedānta of the earliest Vedāntic texts, before this tradition was divided into branches based on its various interpretations, such as Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Dvaita, and so on.²⁸ Vivekananda’s teaching about the four yogas is consistent,

²⁵ Medhananda 2020, p. 24.

²⁶ Vivekananda, Volume One, pp. 84–85.

²⁷ The *Bhagavad Gītā* is one of the three texts making up the *prasthānatrayī*, or “triple foundation,” of Vedānta, along with the collected *Upaniṣads* and the *Brahma Sūtras* of Bādarāyaṇa.

²⁸ Indeed, Swami Medhananda identifies the teaching of Vivekananda’s guru, Sri Ramakrishna, with such a “non-sectarian” Vedānta. See (Maharaj 2018, pp. 15–16).

for example, with *Bhagavad Gītā* 12: 1–7, which claims that followers of jñāna yoga and bhakti yoga both reach God, though the path of jñāna is said to be the more difficult of the two for most spiritual aspirants.²⁹ Given, however, the history of polemics among adherents of these systems of thought—especially between Advaita and the various bhakti schools of Vedānta—the truth of this claim is far from obvious. Or perhaps we might say that the truth of this claim has been obscured by the tendency of the various schools of thought to take one particular approach and dogmatically elevate it above all of the others, rather than affirming the pluralism that is arguably implied by the primary Vedāntic textual sources.³⁰ Finally, as noted above, if one expands one's understanding of the yogas, as Vivekananda does, to encompass not only the Indic traditions on which they are most clearly based, but also the world religions and philosophies which operate with similar or analogous conceptions of the nature of reality, the question of how all of these systems can be both true and salvifically efficacious emerges with some urgency.

5. Truth, Salvific Efficacy, and the Blind People and the Elephant

To be sure, as Swami Medhananda notes, the truth of a worldview and the salvific efficacy of the spiritual practice in which that worldview operates are two distinct questions. Medhananda cites Robert McKim in this regard:

Truth and salvation are very different matters. No particular position on the one entails or requires the corresponding position (or the most closely related position) on the other. For example, someone can consistently believe that members of some or all other traditions will, or can, achieve salvation, even in cases in which the distinctive beliefs associated with the relevant tradition, or traditions, are believed to be largely or even entirely mistaken.³¹

This is certainly true. A Christian universalist may, for example, believe that the saving love of Christ will ultimately bring all people to salvation, even those persons who have adhered to belief systems which are entirely false. Is believing the practice of the four yogas can take their sincere practitioners to the goal of liberating realization a belief of this kind? Does it imply that the worldviews with each of the yogas operate are all, in some sense, true, or is this an unnecessary assumption? Is the truth of the worldviews associated with the yogas irrelevant to their efficacy?

We have seen that, according to Vivekananda, the liberating realization to which the yogas take their practitioners is not of a *wholly* cognitive nature. It is not simply a matter of knowing and assenting to the truth of a proposition or a set of propositions. It does, however, have a cognitive dimension. It is not, to be sure, simply reducible to cognitive knowledge. As noted earlier, God-realization involves a transformation of the whole person: transformation that all of the yogas are able to effect, if practiced with diligence. But the intellect is nevertheless *part* of the whole person. It must, therefore, be the case that cognition plays some role in the transformative process.

Because there is *some* cognitive dimension to this transformation—because it does involve the realization of *something* at the cognitive level—it cannot be said that the question of truth is wholly irrelevant to the question of salvation for Vivekananda. Because the practice of the yogas involves

²⁹ To be sure, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have not been the first Hindu thinkers to seek to reconcile the paths of jñāna and bhakti and their respective ontologies. Amongst the various systems of Vedānta, a prominent claim of many is that Brahman, the ultimate reality, is *bhedābheda*, or “both different from and one with” the reality of the world. Systems within this stream of thought include the Viśiṣṭādvaita of Rāmānuja (which affirms an organic rather than a non-differentiating unity between Brahman and the world), the Dvaitādvaita (duality and non-duality) of Nimbārka, and the Acintya Bheda-bheda, or “inconceivable difference and non-difference” of Caitanya. Caitanya, specifically, the founder of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theistic system, was a major influence upon Sri Ramakrishna, and it is not unreasonable to see a current of Acintya Bheda-bheda running through both his and Swami Vivekananda's thought.

³⁰ One could in fact argue that this pluralism is not only implied, but stated plainly in these sources, such as in *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:11, in which the divine Krishna states: “In whatsoever way living beings approach me, thus do I receive them. All paths, Arjuna, lead to me.” (Translation mine.)

³¹ (McKim 2012, p. 8).

one's own dedicated activity and personal choice—unlike the gift of grace in which our hypothetical universalist Christian believes, which saves all regardless of their personal beliefs or actions—there can be beliefs which might militate against the process of personal transformation. These beliefs might include, for example, materialistic beliefs, or the belief that one's own ethnic group is superior to others, as opposed to a belief in the inherent divinity of all. Vivekananda did believe in a definite worldview, in terms of which the claim that the practice of multiple yogas, or multiple religious paths, could be salvifically efficacious makes rational sense. We have noted that the Vedānta of Vivekananda is broadly Advaitic: that is, it is not identical with classical Advaita,³² but it does affirm the idea of the ultimate unity of all beings, and the indwelling presence of divinity within them.

What can be said of Vivekananda—as for his teacher, Sri Ramakrishna—is that there are truths which are essential to salvation, in the sense that the process of realization presupposes them, even if they are not fully grasped by all spiritual practitioners. The truth that there is, indeed, a spiritual reality at the core of one's being, and that all talk about and experience of this spiritual reality is not a mere projection, would be an example of such an essential truth. There are also truths which might be very helpful to spiritual practice, but that are in the end not determinative of whether one achieves the ultimate goal. The reality of the process of death and rebirth would be an example of a truth of this kind: for orthodox Christians and Muslims, for example, typically do not believe in this process, and yet their practices are salvifically efficacious. The fact that the process of rebirth, is something that occurs, according to both Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna—that reincarnation, in other words, is a real thing—does not prevent those Christians and Muslims who do not believe in reincarnation from attaining realization through their respective paths, because accepting the reality of rebirth is not ultimately as consequential to one's attainment of realization as other, more essential truths, belief in which is more central to the process of the transformation of character that is the point of the yogas. Finally, there are truths which are wholly irrelevant to the process of realization, except perhaps inasmuch as they function within a total way of life that is salvifically transformative. Specific historical claims, for example, that people of various religions take to be true would be of this kind.

Swami Medhananda has noted examples like these in the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna, where Ramakrishna clearly has a belief about what is actually the case in regard to a particular topic, but where a spiritual aspirant's assent to that belief is inconsequential to that aspirant's practice and their potential attainment of the ultimate goal. In regard to reincarnation, Mahendranath Gupta—the disciple of Ramakrishna who recorded his dialogues in the *Śrīśrīrāmākṣṇakathāmṛta*, which was later translated into English as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*—expresses some doubt about this phenomenon:

M. [Gupta]: "I haven't much faith in rebirth and inherited tendencies. Will that in any way injure my devotion to God?"

³² In referring to "classical Advaita" and differentiating Vivekananda's views from it, I am acknowledging the scholarly consensus which notes significant differences between Vivekananda's teachings and those teachings that have been attributed to Śaṅkara. As Rambachan, already cited earlier, explains, for Śaṅkara, at least in the texts which are undisputedly attributed to him, the hearing and correct understanding of the teachings of the *Vedas* in regard to the nature of Brahman and Ātman form a sufficient basis (*pramāṇa*) for the knowledge that gives rise to liberation. The *śabda pramāṇa*, or basis for knowledge in the form of the authoritative words of the *Vedas* forms, at least as Rambachan reads Śaṅkara, the sole necessary condition for liberating realization. To be sure, Vivekananda does not deny that a sufficiently evolved soul might, upon hearing and comprehending the words of the *Vedas*, attain instant realization. Vivekananda, however, conceptualizes the *Vedas* differently than Śaṅkara does, seeing these texts as the record of the experiences of the enlightened seers (*ṛṣis*) who first received them. Śaṅkara, in keeping with the earlier teaching of the Mīmāṃsā school of thought, sees the *Vedas* as *sui generis* and *apauruṣeya* (literally "not-man-made") knowledge. Vivekananda differentiates between what he calls the "eternal *Veda*" which consists of the sum total of metaphysical truth and the books which are known as the *Vedas*, thus opening up the possibility that these metaphysical truths might be apprehended through means other than the Vedic texts. See (Rambachan 1994; Long 2016).

Master [Sri Ramakrishna]: “It is enough to believe that all is possible in God’s creation. Never allow the thought to cross your mind that your ideas are the only true ones, and that those of others are false. Then God will explain everything”.³³

Similarly, with regard to the traditional Vaiṣṇava doctrine that God periodically manifests on the earthly plane as an incarnation, or *avatāra* (literally, “descent”), Sri Ramakrishna believes that this doctrine is true. He does not, however, regard such belief as essential to the path to realization. As Medhananda points out:

... [H]e [Sri Ramakrishna] upholds the traditional Hindu view ... that God incarnates as a human being in every age. According to Sri Ramakrishna, ordinary people can learn to cultivate *bhakti* [devotion] by witnessing the ideal *bhakti* of *avatāras* (“Incarnations”) such as Caitanya. Sri Ramakrishna also teaches that devotion toward an *avatāra* is sufficient for spiritual liberation ... On the other hand, Sri Ramakrishna points out that there are many spiritual aspirants who do not accept the *avatāra* doctrine, such as Advaita Vedāntins and those like Kabīr and followers of the Brāhmo Samāj ... Are Advaitins and Brāhmos soteriologically handicapped because they reject the *avatāra* doctrine? Sri Ramakrishna answers with an emphatic “No”: “The substance of the whole matter is that a man must love God, must be restless [*vyākul*] for Him. It doesn’t matter whether you believe in God with form or in God without form. You may or may not believe that God incarnates as a human being. But you will realize God if you have that yearning [*anurāg*]. Then God himself will let you know what He is like”.³⁴

Swami Vivekananda, like Sri Ramakrishna, sees religions as consisting of certain core ideas which are central to their practice, and so to reaching the eventual goal of God-realization. But this does not mean that every single claim of these religions must be affirmed equally as true:

Each religion, as it were, takes up one great part of the universal truth, and spends its whole force embodying and typifying that part of the great truth ... [W]e are all looking at truth from different standpoints, which vary according to our birth, education, surroundings, and so on. We are viewing truth, getting as much of it as these circumstances will permit, colouring the truth with our own heart, understanding it with our own intellect, and grasping it with our own mind. We can only know as much truth as is related to us, as much of it as we are able to receive. This makes the difference between man and man, and occasions sometimes even contradictory ideas; yet we all belong the same great universal truth. My idea, therefore, is that all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind ... You have seen that each religion is living ... At one time, it may be shorn of a good many of its trappings; at another time, it may be covered with all sorts of trappings; but all the same, the soul is ever there, it can never be lost.³⁵

Truth, therefore, for Vivekananda, as for Ramakrishna, is distinct from salvific efficacy, but it is also not entirely irrelevant to it. There is the larger truth of existence to which all human beings are oriented in various ways, and then there is the truth as we perceive it, each conditioned by our varying circumstances. An excellent analogy for the nature of truth in the thought of these figures is the ancient Indian parable of the blind people and the elephant, which Sri Ramakrishna narrates:

Once some blind men chanced to come near an animal that someone told them was an elephant. They were asked what the elephant was like. The blind men began to feel its body.

³³ Nikhilananda, p. 259.

³⁴ (Maharaj 2018, pp. 104–5). The quotation within this citation is from Nikhilananda, p. 449.

³⁵ Vivekananda, Volume Two, pp. 365, 366.

One of them said the elephant was like a pillar; he had touched only its leg. Another said it was like a winnowing-fan; he had touched only its ear. In this way the others, having touched its tail or belly, gave their different versions of the elephant. Just so, a man who has seen only one aspect of God limits God to that alone. It is his conviction that God cannot be anything else.³⁶

The first extant version of this parable in textual form is from the *Tipiṭaka*: the Pāli canonical texts of Theravāda Buddhism (specifically, from *Udāna* 6.4:66–69). In this version, one of the disciples of the Buddha comes to him with his mind full of confusion after hearing the members of various schools of thought debating the nature of reality. The Buddha responds to his disciple's confusion by telling him this story, the moral being that reality bears more complexity than can be articulated in a single worldview (*diṭṭhi*). One should therefore not be excessively attached to any given view.

In the *Kathāmṛta*, Ramakrishna tells this story in order to explain to a Vaiṣṇava interlocutor that, contrary to the views of those who argue either that God is formless or that God has a form, both affirmations are true. According to Sri Ramakrishna, one who has perceived God directly, in contrast with one who only adheres to the dogma of a particular tradition, will understand the deep complexity of the divine reality and not be, again, excessively attached to any given view to the exclusion of all others. Dogmatism is thus a marker of spiritual immaturity:

Some people indulge in quarrels, saying, “One cannot attain anything unless one worships our Krishna”, or, “Nothing can be gained without the worship of Kālī, our Divine Mother”, or, “One cannot be saved without accepting the Christian religion”. This is pure dogmatism. The dogmatist says, “My religion alone is true, and the religions of others are false”. This is a bad attitude. God can be reached by different paths. Further, some say that God has form and is not formless. Thus they start quarrelling. A Vaiṣṇava quarrels with a[n Advaita] Vedantist. One can rightly speak of God only after one has seen Him. He who has seen God knows really and truly that God has form and that He is formless as well. He has many other aspects that cannot be described.³⁷

Ramakrishna then tells the story of the blind men and the elephant, as cited above, to illustrate the idea that God has many aspects: an aspect with form, a formless aspects, and “many other aspects that cannot be described”, that cannot even be confined by such concepts as *form* and *formlessness*.

The person who can see, and so who is thus in a position to explain to the blind people that they are each partially right and partially wrong—that they have each captured a real portion, but only a portion, of the elephant—is, in Ramakrishna's use of this image, the person who has truly “seen God”. The blindness of the blind people rests in their adherence to dogmas in the absence of any experience of the divine reality *in its wholeness* to justify that adherence.

The blind people may, indeed, have some direct experience of the divine reality, but it is limited to those aspects of this reality that are affirmed in the teachings of their particular traditions. As is argued in constructivist accounts of religious experience, the precise phenomenal character of a mystical experience tends to be shaped by the assumptions, beliefs, and practices of the tradition to which the mystic adheres. Theistic religious practice will therefore tend to issue in theistic religious experiences: experiences that involve a personal God. Non-theistic religious practice will similarly tend to issue in forms of experience in which the personal God is absent. Also, the theistic practices attached to a particular tradition will tend to issue in experiences of God as conceived in that tradition. A Vaiṣṇava mystic will therefore tend to have an experience of Kṛṣṇa, and not of Jesus, and a Christian mystic will tend to have an experience of Jesus, and not of Kṛṣṇa. Similarly, with non-theistic practices, the experience of non-dualistic realization in Advaita Vedānta and the experience of *satori* in the Zen

³⁶ (Nikhilananda 1942, p. 191).

³⁷ Ibid.

Buddhist tradition, while certainly sharing many common features, are nevertheless described in phenomenologically different terms.³⁸ None of these, according to Ramakrishna, are experiences of the divine reality in its totality, though each is a valid experience of a *portion* of that reality.

Through the centuries, the story of the blind people and the elephant has been used by Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu teachers to convey the same basic points: that reality cannot be fully encompassed by any one worldview, that there is some truth in many worldviews, and that one should therefore not indulge in bitter conflict with those whose views differ from one's own.

At the same time, each of these articulations has tended to work with an implicit assumption that there is a true worldview which would correspond to the elephant in its totality: a worldview from which the claim that views tend to be partial and incomplete can be coherently made (like the perspective of the person who has seen God, in the teaching of Ramakrishna, or the awakened perspective of the Buddha, in Buddhist versions of this story, or of the Jina, in Jain versions). The understanding, in each case, is that there is an ultimate truth of existence. There is an elephant that is really *there* and that possesses certain features. But perceiving only a portion of the elephant is not inimical to one's eventually realization of the truth in its totality, so long as one is not dogmatic and insistent that one's limited, relative perspective alone must be the whole, absolute truth.

In Jain thought, this story becomes a way to illustrate the concept that reality is *anekānta*: that is, "many-sided", or complex. This is a central Jain teaching about the essential nature of being: *utpāda-vyāyava-dhrauvya-yuktaṃ sat*, or "Being is that which undergoes arising, perishing, and endurance".³⁹ Some philosophies affirm the nature of being as arising and passing away, whereas others affirm the nature of being as continuity or endurance. Jain thought affirms both aspects.

The ontological conception of reality as complex entails the epistemic understanding that it can be viewed in many ways, from many valid perspectives. These perspectives are known in Jain thought as the *nayas*. Because one's grasp of truth is conditioned by the perspective that one uses to perceive it, one should express views about the nature of reality not as absolute generalities—as claims which are true in all times, places, and circumstances, and in regard to all aspects of reality—and certainly not in a way that is dogmatic or insistent, but in a way that is attentive to the specific assumptions one utilizes in arriving at one's conclusion. Claims about the ultimate nature of reality are true *syāt*: that is, in a certain sense, or from a certain point of view, and not absolutely. In the words of Bimal Krishna Matilal, according to Jain thought, "Add a *syāt* particle to your philosophic proposition and you have captured the truth".⁴⁰ One can see Jain thought as expressing a sensibility not unlike that of Ramakrishna, when he asserts that making dogmatic assertions and quarreling about the nature of reality are habits to be avoided.

Mohandas K. Gandhi was very fond of citing the story of the blind people and the elephant as a way to convey the same basic idea that we have seen expressed by Ramakrishna and by the Jain and Buddhist traditions: that there is truth in many views and that one must therefore have humility whenever one asserts one's perspective. Even those with whom one may disagree are in possession of a portion of the truth:

It has been my experience that I am always true from my point of view, and am often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we are both right from our respective points of view. And this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics. The seven blind men who gave seven different descriptions of the elephant were all right from their respective points of view, and wrong from the point of view of one another, and right and wrong from the point of view of the elephant . . . Formerly I used to resent the

³⁸ See (Hick 1989, pp. 292–95).

³⁹ Umāsvāti, *Tattvārtha Sūtra* 5: 29 (translation mine).

⁴⁰ (Matilal 1981, p. 61).

ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me *and vice versa*.⁴¹

Most recently, comparative theologian John Thatamanil has made effective use of this same story, in much the same vein as Gandhi, as an allegory for the process of inter-religious learning and the reformulation of one's own beliefs on the basis of such learning. For both Thatamanil and Gandhi, this story invites one to engage in dialogue with those whose perceptions of reality are different from one's own, to learn from them, and also to teach them:

As I walk around the elephant with the guidance of others and learn from them (*comparative theology*), I retain elements of my warranted belief that the elephant is like a giant fan, but I am prepared to supplement that belief as necessary. I see now that the others' judgments are also warranted. That recognition compels me to revise my initial account of other elephant surveyors and their claims (*theology of religious diversity*). As I begin to recognize the validity and truth of other accounts of the elephant, I acknowledge that my account of ultimate reality, as first formulated, was partial even if that knowledge was granted to me by way of [divine] revelation. I am compelled to recognize that my earlier account of ultimate reality stands in need of revision (*constructive theology*). When others told me that I was mistaken to say that the elephant was a fan, they were right even though they were wrong to dismiss the truth of my position. There are good grounds to hold that my neighbors can often see me not only better than I can myself, but they are sometimes in a position to discern the limitations of my seeing. Now, I can also see how they came to believe that the elephant was a rope.⁴²

While the image of the blind men and the elephant is beautiful and effective for conveying the idea that reality is always more than any given worldview can encompass, and that we would all do well to exercise epistemic humility when making assertions about the nature either of divine reality or of existence as a whole, there are also skeptical questions that can be raised about just how apt this image is, particularly as an image for a divine or ultimate reality, whose existence can itself be questioned. Kenneth Rose notes:

It could, after all be the case that materialism is correct despite all the arguments, experiences, and realizations that religious people produce as evidence to the contrary. To put this in terms of the famous Jain and Buddhist parable of the blind people and the elephant, there may not actually be an elephant there for the blind people to touch, since even the people telling them that they are touching an elephant may also be mistaken, deceived, or subject to an illusion.⁴³

In short, one could question whether the elephant itself is really "there", or is a mere projection.

Even if one grants that the perceptions of religious people are not wholly delusory, but that there is some kind reality to which they all point beyond themselves, and which each really does, to some extent, grasp, one can also ask whether the many realities perceived by diverse traditions are, in fact, the parts or portions of a singular entity. One can question, in other words, Swami Vivekananda's claim that the many yogas, the many religions, really all do lead to the same goal of re-union with God, or God-realization. Thatamanil describes this affirmation as a hypothesis which must be tested, and as a hope which underlies the practice of dialogue:

... [T]he hope that the various traditions refer to the selfsame reality is a working and contested hypothesis. Traditions may, after all, be oriented to entirely different realities. Of course, every allegory falls short. In the case of religious diversity, the point must be readily granted: there are no omniscient knowers.⁴⁴

⁴¹ (Gandhi 1981, p. 30).

⁴² (Thatamanil 2020, p. 12).

⁴³ Rose, p. 35.

⁴⁴ Thatamanil, p. 9.

Thatamanil's last point is an important one, as it contests an assumption made, as we have already seen, by many who have traditionally utilized this image. That is the assumption that there is in fact a point of view from which one can say that there is an elephant which is being perceived only partially by the adherents of diverse worldviews. There is Sri Ramakrishna's person who has seen God in God's wholeness. There is the awakened perspective of the Buddha which makes one aware of the futility of grasping at views. Finally, there is the perspective of the enlightened Jina of Jainism, which reveals the complex nature of reality, and which is, indeed, affirmed in this tradition to be an omniscient perspective.

One might, of course, affirm, on the basis of religious faith, the idea that there are omniscient knowers: that Sri Ramakrishna, or the Buddha, or the Jinas of Jainism, such as Mahāvīra, or Jesus, were such beings. One would then still be left with the fact, though, that even an omniscient being, when communicating with the non-omniscient beings (such as the rest of humanity) will be limited by non-omniscient human imagination and the languages to which it has given risen. Alfred North Whitehead, in affirming that the first principles of existence can, indeed, be apprehended, tempers this affirmation with an understanding of the limits of language:

There is no first principle which is in itself unknowable, not to be captured by a flash of insight. But, putting aside the difficulties of language, deficiency in imaginative penetration forbids progress in any form other than that of an asymptotic approach to a scheme of principles, only definable in terms of the ideal which they should satisfy.⁴⁵

Perhaps the "elephant" of ultimate truth could be conceived, also, asymptotically, as an ideal which religions and worldviews constantly approach, but which they never fully realize (unless there is indeed such a state as omniscience, but even this state would have to be conveyed in language).

There is, of course, a belief within Indic and other traditions that ultimate truth can be conveyed non-linguistically. The Digambara Jain tradition, for example, affirms that Mahāvīra did not teach in words, but through a divine sound, or *divyadhvāni*, which his disciples then translated as Jain teaching.⁴⁶ There is also, of course, the famous account of Sri Ramakrishna passing on all of his knowledge to Swami Vivekananda with a touch. As with much of religious experience, though, such revelations are only fully and immediately available to those who receive them. The rest of humanity must depend upon verbal accounts.

6. Discerning the Outline of the Elephant: The Ontology of the Four Yogas

Granting that any perfect representation of ultimate truth is always going to be incomplete, and that the approach to truth, at least through linguistic and conceptual means, is going to be, at best, asymptotic, is it possible to discern, at least to some extent, what reality must be like if it really is the case, as Swami Vivekananda affirms, that the four yogas are independent and equally effective paths to God-realization?

Some suggestion of the answer to this question is already implicit in the foregoing discussion of the nature of reality that is implied if one takes a non-dogmatic approach to diverse worldviews as expressing partial, but incomplete, insights into ultimate truth. The picture that emerges is one of reality that is complex.

As mentioned previously, each of the four yogas involves a set of assumptions about the nature of existence. Affirming the efficacy of all four yogas therefore involves affirming a conception of reality which enables all of these assumptions to be true.

Furthermore, Vivekananda identifies the yogas with the world's religions, and affirms that just as many yogas can lead to realization, so can many religions. The same thing, therefore, must be said

⁴⁵ (Whitehead 1978, p. 4).

⁴⁶ See (Kabay 2013, pp. 176–93).

about the world's religions: that Vivekananda's pluralism entails a conception of reality which enables the central ideas or themes of each religion to be true. We have already seen that Swami Vivekananda, like his guru, Sri Ramakrishna, avoids the difficulties of a self-defeating and self-contradictory relativism by avoiding the claim that all of the claims of every religion must be true in the same respect and at the same time. There are the core claims of the religions and there are their "trappings", which can change with time. The resulting worldview must therefore entail that the basic affirmations of the religions—those which would correspond to the essential ideals with which the yogas operate—are all, in some sense, true. Again, this is a conception of ultimate reality as possessing or being made up of many different forms and aspects.

Tentatively, then, we can say that if the four yogas are independent and equally efficacious paths to God-realization, then reality must include a feature which corresponds to the impersonal ultimate reality of traditions such as Advaita Vedānta, Jainism, Buddhism, and Daoism. This would be the facet of ultimate reality accessed by those who practice a form of the jñāna yoga, the way of knowledge. It must also include a feature which corresponds to the personal Supreme Being of theistic traditions such as Vaishnavism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This would be the facet of ultimate reality accessed by those who practice a form of bhakti yoga, the way of devotion. It must also include a feature that corresponds to the living entities which populate our shared human experience: the suffering beings for the sake of whom one practices compassion and engages in service. This would be the facet of ultimate reality accessed by those who practice a form of karma yoga. It is also important to note that accessing this facet of reality does not require religiosity in a traditional sense, as involving belief in either a Supreme Being or ultimate principle. As Swami Vivekananda affirms, it involves, at minimum, subordinating one's ego to the good of all. Secular philosophies which aim at some vision of human flourishing can also, therefore be included in the vision of reality which the independent efficacy of the four yogas presupposes. Finally, this model of reality must include the real possibility of accessing the deeper nature of existence through the process of quieting our mental processes—the *citta-vṛtti-nirodha* affirmed in the *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali (*Yoga Sūtra* 1: 2).

The resulting overall picture of reality which results from the incorporation of these features into it is akin, in many respects, to the Whiteheadian process worldview articulated in the *deep religious pluralism* of such contemporary thinkers as David Ray Griffin and John Cobb.⁴⁷ This worldview is a form of *naturalistic theism* which affirms the reality of God as a cosmic mind whose "whose mutual implication with the remainder of things secures an inevitable trend towards order", in the universe.⁴⁸ This cosmic mind can be seen to correspond, in many respects, to the Supreme Being of most theistic religions. This mind forever envisions an eternal ideal of creativity which it then makes available to the actual entities making up the cosmos. This eternal ideal or cosmic principle corresponds to the idea of an impersonal ultimate reality found in such traditions as Advaita Vedānta, Buddhism, and Daoism. Then, there is the cosmos of actual entities themselves, which corresponds to the sacred reality of the cosmos as found in indigenous, nature-oriented traditions from around the world. On this basis, deep religious pluralists in the Whiteheadian tradition argue, one can see diverse religions as paths which are distinct in their orientations toward reality, just as the yogas involve distinct ways of approaching existence. Yet, all can co-exist within a single coherent worldview.

Finally, the worldview implied by the independent efficacy of the four yogas is also close to the worldview presented in the *Vijñāna Vedānta* of Swami Vivekananda's teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, as it has been reconstructed by Swami Medhananda (formerly Ayon Maharaj).⁴⁹

Deep religious pluralism has been articulated, at least in part, as a criticism of and an alternative to monistic or "identist" pluralistic models which insist that the many paths must lead to the same

⁴⁷ See (Griffin 2005).

⁴⁸ (Whitehead 1967, p. 115).

⁴⁹ See (Maharaj 2018).

ultimate goal. One could yet raise a question, in reply to this critique. Even if we do see the goals toward which the different paths aim as distinct from one another—with Advaitic realization, for example, being a qualitatively and phenomenologically distinct experience from being born again in Christ, and with differences even obtaining internally to the various broad types of yogic path, with Advaitic realization also being different, in important respects, from Zen awakening—if one is going to affirm even the co-existence of these diverse goals within a singular, coherent account of reality, it is necessary to develop some conception of how they all might fit together.

To be sure, this is precisely what deep religious pluralists, at least those in the Whiteheadian process tradition, do, correlating the impersonal acosmic ultimate reality of impersonalist paths with Whitehead's principle of creativity, the personal ultimate reality with the ever-emergent God of naturalistic theism, and the cosmos of living beings with the collective actual entities that make up the concrete cosmos at any given moment. In the end, it seems that the question of whether one should speak of the religions as being oriented toward distinct ultimate realities, or toward distinct facets of one, complex ultimate reality may involve a mere difference of emphasis. Certainly, for Vivekananda, and for thinkers, like John Hick, who have similarly developed models which see the world's religions as being oriented toward a single ultimate reality and goal, the emphasis has been on the side of the equation which emphasizes what holds the cosmos together as a singular unity. The corrective move of deep pluralism is certainly a welcome one, to the extent that affirmations of the ultimate unity of the goals of the religions can tend to flatten out or disregard genuine areas of difference. Rather than rejecting the concept of unity altogether, however, one can, instead, see the initial positing of unity as a thesis, to which deep pluralism is the antithesis, and conclude with the synthetic view that the goal is one, but that it can take many forms—realization of an ultimate truth, loving union with a personal divine reality, an experience of harmony amongst all beings making up the cosmic organism, and so on—in terms both of the phenomenology of the experiences it involves and the facets of ultimate reality to which these experiences are oriented. What all of these diverse experiences share in common is a deep and clear apprehension of the true nature of reality, which is ultimately beyond the capacity of words and concepts to express in its full totality.

7. Conclusions

It has become understandably fashionable in scholarship on Swami Vivekananda, particularly if one considers the extent to which he has been exalted in modern Hinduism, to seek to find fault with this figure and to contest the many assertions that have been made about him by his devotees. Fair criticism should, of course, be welcome, even by Vivekananda's devotees, for this is precisely what he, himself taught: not that he should personally be worshiped, but that his teachings should be studied and put into practice:

My name should not be made prominent; it is my ideas that I want to see realized. The disciples of all the prophets have always inextricably mixed up the ideas of the Master with the person, and at last killed the ideas for the person. The disciples of Sri Ramakrishna must guard against doing the same thing. Work for the idea, not the person.⁵⁰

At the same time, just as the thesis of the ultimate unity of the goal of all religions is one that can be tempered by the antithesis of deep religious pluralism, resulting in a synthesis which is able to preserve the core insights of both, in the same way, critical scholarship on Vivekananda can be met with a more refined understanding of his teachings that does not reject their basic premises.

⁵⁰ Vivekananda, Volume Five, p. 68.

Amongst the scholarly assertions that have become increasingly commonplace about Swami Vivekananda are the claim that (a) his teaching is radically different from that of Sri Ramakrishna, and that (b) his teachings are ultimately incoherent and lacking in philosophical rigor.⁵¹

The hope of this essay is that it has at least suggested that these claims have been overstated: that there are, indeed, important correlations that can be made between Sri Ramakrishna's and Swami Vivekananda's conceptions of the nature of truth (as involving an absolute dimension that is ultimately greater than any single worldview can encompass, and a relative dimension which is amenable to diverse range of representations and interpretations), and that the resulting ontology is not, in fact, incoherent, but is, indeed, an attempt to reconcile worldviews and practices which are all too often pitted against one another by the forces of irrational dogmatism: of inter-religious violence and hatred.

I propound a philosophy which can serve as a basis to every possible religious system in the world, and my attitude toward all of them is one of extreme sympathy—my teaching is antagonistic to none. I direct my attention to the individual, to make them strong, to teach them that they are divine, and I call upon them to make themselves conscious of the divinity within. That is really the ideal—conscious or unconscious—of every religion.⁵²

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⁵¹ In regard to the differences between Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, a prominent one which has not been discussed here is the very prominent role of the Goddess Kālī and of Tāntric thought and practice more generally in the life and teachings of Ramakrishna and their relative absence in the teaching of Vivekananda. To be sure, this is a significant difference between them in terms of the way they presented themselves and their ideas to the world. It does not, however, seem to have any impact upon their shared affirmation of multiple paths to ultimate reality and a corresponding pluralistic ontology, which is the main focus of this paper.

⁵² Vivekananda, Volume Five, pp. 187–88.

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