

Article

Vivekananda: Indian Swami and Global Guru

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Abstract: This article seeks to integrate the “Indian swami” with the “global guru” and reflects upon why Vivekananda’s teaching was conveyed so differently to different audiences. It argues that Vivekananda’s distinctive form of “counter-preaching” had its roots in *Adhikari-bheda*, a tradition that seeks to tailor spiritual instruction to the needs and capacities of individual aspirants. I will show how he applied this technique to larger audiences because he believed that “truth” had a relative dimension that had to account for cultural difference. I investigate how instruction in Hindu “man-making” and spiritual democracy in India was matched by lessons designed to counter “muscular Christianity” in Euro-America. Vivekananda wanted both to reinforce a vision of eastern wisdom and counter western (and at times Indian) prejudices, whilst also attempting to shift entrenched but fallacious generalizations in each arena. In working within this seeming contradiction, I will show how his nationalism and universalism were inextricable, and also tied to his innovative formulations of Advaita Vedanta, karma yoga, and especially “practical Vedanta”. I will conclude by explaining how his methods generally sought to pull his audiences away from extremes. The kaleidoscopic qualities of his teachings, I will suggest, explain why his legacy has been so variously deployed by both the right and left in contemporary Indian political culture.

Keywords: Vivekananda; nationalism; universalism; *Adhikari-Bheda*; “man-making”; Advaita Vedanta; karma yoga; practical Vedanta



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1. Introduction

In India, Vivekananda is lauded as the unknown monk who came to the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and electrified his audiences by arguing for religious and racial equality. Even though he was not the first Indian to become a noted spiritual teacher in the New World, he was unique in globalizing aspects of Hinduism and asserting its importance as a world religion (Medhananda 2022; Masuzawa 2005). However, his fame does not match the extent of his influence. In India, he is often praised and sometimes condemned, but is nevertheless a household name. In the European-American world, he is little known in contrast, to say, Gandhi, Nehru, or even Tagore. When speaking about him in Europe and the United States, audiences generally require an explanation of who he was before anything else. This is surprising, given how important his ideas were in shaping Euro-American perceptions of “Eastern Spirituality”, the practice of meditation, and notions of “self-realization”. Vivekananda is also significant today because his legacy is so often cited in the current Indian political arena. Narendra Modi, India’s prime minister, has attached Vivekananda to the cause of extreme Hindu nationalism, a coupling which suggests how imperative it is to reflect on his multifaceted message, and how he sought to apply it in his own time and in very different circumstances (Krishnan 2023, pp. ix–xviii).

Vivekananda reified categories such as “East” and “West”, unity, and diversity, as well as universalism and particularism, especially in relation to India and Hinduism. His rhetoric depended on such oppositions, on essentialising cultures, religions, and civilisations in ways that were readily grasped. But by making his ideas easily understood, he also appeared to alter his message according to his audience. In the west, he emphasized universality, insisting that Christians recognise the world’s diversities (Vivekananda 1962a, vol. 1). In India, however, he was apparently concerned with the

“Gita and the Biceps”, a phrase now associated with Hindu nationalism that he uttered only once (Vivekananda 1964m, vol. 3, p. 242). Even if we set aside such stereotypes, there is no doubt that he asserted a man-making message in India, especially when speaking to his guru brothers and monks (Vivekananda 1964h, vol. 3).

These dissonances suggest that Vivekananda was no system-bound philosopher, but rather a man intent on communication who altered his message according to context. I will argue that he did this not because he spurned “truth”, or obscured his ideas in incoherence, but rather believed that truth had a relative dimension that had to take account of personal and cultural difference. His method was interactive, at times even improvisational. He worked very much on the hoof, adjusting and tailoring his lessons to different audiences. He was a master of the unexpected, constantly challenging his audiences to think outside of accustomed patterns of thought. Indeed, as a spiritual democrat, he used the time-honoured techniques of a guru designed for individuals (*Adhikari-bheda*) and adapted them for larger audiences. *Adhikari* indicates a person qualified for a specific path or action, while *bheda* points to the differences among people that qualify them for different religious paths (*margas*). This was, as will be seen, particularly important in the teaching of Vivekananda’s guru, Ramakrishna (Sen 1993, pp. 34, 299, 301). When he insisted that he wanted to speak “to every man . . . in his own language”, Vivekananda upheld this tradition, found truth in diversity, and universalized this possibility by providing spiritual lessons to all people, including those of low castes and women. By traveling west, he also sought a global public for Hindu ideas, intending to spread the message of Vedanta as a means of changing the attitudes that underpinned imperialism (Harris 2022).

This may be the reason that publics as diverse as respectable New Englanders and Swadeshi “terrorists” responded to him so fervently, and explains why historians have generally focused either on his Indian or Euro-American trajectory. At times it is difficult to integrate the “Indian Vivekananda” with the “global guru” that westerners (and many Indians as well) came to see as the epitome of Indian spirituality, tolerance (a term to be discussed below), and universalism. So, commentators have often asked if Vivekananda was a religious universalist or a nationalist. In his own time, however, his version of “Hindu universalism”, like the other “religious modernisms” in the Buddhist or Islamic world, tended to assert the duality and inextricability of the national and the universal (McMahan 2009; Lopez 2008; Blackburn 2010; Singh 1997; Keddie 1972; Hourani 1983). When, for example, Vivekananda argued that India was the Mother of Spirituality, he claimed that India had a special capacity for religious invention, while simultaneously providing proof of India’s ability to foster coexistence and refuge. These assertions were integral to national pride and suggest how respect for different religious paths was simultaneously embedded in both his nationalism and universalism.

The preceding example shows how, despite the rhetoric of oppositions, he refused easy answers, and how he endlessly sought to encompass rather than to exclude. However, by overusing Orientalist distinctions of the “materialist west” and “eastern wisdom”, he sometimes found it almost impossible to escape the civilizational clichés that both he and his audiences had accepted for their conversation. These parameters meant he had to vanquish the vision of the idolatrous, nihilistic, and morally deficient Indians in favour of a tolerant, mild, idealised Indian beset by Christian and imperial coercion. He both wanted to reinforce a vision of eastern wisdom and counter western (and at times Indian) prejudices, whilst also attempting to shift entrenched but fallacious generalizations about both. Herein, I will show how he sought to work within this inescapable paradox. The effort demanded was gruelling, as he constantly sought to shift and transform, reshape, and reformulate in cultural worlds that remained very far apart. I will speak more about the western context than the Indian one, above all because the process of speaking in the former domain—where the ideas and religions practices were often novel to him—demonstrates the sometimes Herculean effort he deployed to communicate.

2. Vivekananda Defends Indian Thought and Religion

Vivekananda's appearance at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 was an important example of how he both urged people to think differently while simultaneously sharpening the East–West distinctions he sought to soften. When he took the podium, he challenged the stereotypes of both Indians and westerners merely by not looking like anybody they had ever seen. And yet, the famous scarlet tunic and orange turban were in themselves “orientalizing”, an amalgam of his own imagination and the advice offered by his New England female friends who had met him before the Parliament. The costume meant he resembled neither the wandering *sadhu* of orientalist imaginings nor the western Christian minister, in sombre black with a white collar. It was an invention, and one that facilitated his address in this new world while retaining the “spiritual” demeanour so important to his approach. Words, bearing, and character all challenged what he regarded as Western fanaticism.

Rather than being grateful for being allowed to speak at all, he defiantly addressed his audience as “sisters and brothers”, not as masters. He also readily accepted Christ as an *avatara*, the Sanskrit word for a divine incarnation, and later said, “If I, as an Oriental, have to worship Jesus of Nazareth, there is only one way left to me, that is, to worship him as God and nothing else. . . .” (Vivekananda 1966a, vol. 4). He added, “We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions to be true” (Vivekananda 1962d, vol. 1). Such remarks placed Christ within a Hindu pantheon (among Krishna and Shiva), and resisted the Christian conviction that Jesus was the sole or higher path to religious salvation, while also accepting Christianity as “true”.

Somehow, he tapped into a vein of self-criticism, doubt, and vulnerability within his western hearers. A young philosopher present recalled years later how there was a “gasp running through the hall” when Vivekananda contradicted the doctrine of “original sin”, a staple of their religious upbringing (Burke 1992, vol. 1, pp. 117–18): “it is a sin to call a man so; it is a standing libel on human nature” (Vivekananda 1962g, vol. 1). His words fell on fertile soil, as they chimed with Americans’ growing rejection of a punitive God and reconsideration of their childhood relationship to the story of Genesis.

But while the Parliament’s audience may have been momentarily caught up by these novel and freeing possibilities, his remarks did not have the same effect on Orthodox Christians. Even famously progressive missionaries such as Charles Freer Andrews—Gandhi’s closest Christian associate—continued to berate Vivekananda as late as 1913 for denigrating the Christian preoccupation with sin and redemption. Andrews believed that without this fundamental understanding, many Indians would continue with their “old bad practices, while their coarseness [would be] allegorized away” (Andrews 1912, pp. 128–30). Though Andrews, like many dissident western intellectuals, admired the ethical flights of the Bhagavad Gita and praised Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna Mission for its service to the poor, he continued to regard much of Hinduism as degenerate (Kapila and Devji 2013).

Given such views, it is not surprising that Vivekananda reacted badly when Americans suggested that Indians were primitive (for example, when one person asked him if Indian women really threw their babies to crocodiles (Vivekananda 1966b, vol. 4)). He remained often on the defensive. An American journalist tapped into a potent Protestant strain of anti-Catholicism when he suggested that “he has something Jesuitical in the character of his mind”, a characterization that suggested that sophistry underpinned a superficial brilliance (Vivekananda 1964g, vol. 3). Another speaker at the Parliament insisted that Hindus did not have “the requirements of conscience . . . Of personal responsibility . . .”. Even the remarkable philosopher and psychologist, William James, in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), said that Hinduism was ultimately nothing more than “a sumptuousness of security” (James 2014, pp. 153–54), a cliché about the Hindu inclination towards “dreaming of the unlimited absolute spirit.” This was a time-honoured orientalist trope that Hegel had popularized in his *The Philosophy of History* (Hegel [1837] 1956, p. 204) and may have derived from an understanding of Brahminical scholasticism that prioritized intellectual

abstraction. Vivekananda, who had engaged on other occasions with James, rejected this vision of characterless Indians and their incapacity to deal with real-world problems.

Above all, and in deliberate contrast to Christian missionaries, Vivekananda sought no converts, and distanced himself from formalized church-building (while creating Vedanta Societies). Instead, his goal was only to make “the Methodist a better Methodist; the Presbyterian a better Presbyterian; the Unitarian a better Unitarian” (Vivekananda 1964i, vol. 5). He could not compete with established Christianity, nor did he want to. He sought instead to exemplify the “tolerance” that, for him, was central to Hinduism, describing India’s welcome of Jews after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and the embrace of fleeing Zoroastrians (Vivekananda 1962a, vol. 1). His reflections on tolerance, a word he did not really like, were central to his appeal and revealed another aspect of an essentialised Hinduism that he universalised and promoted as important to his cultural nationalism. From the very beginning, he accepted diversity as integral to India and to Hinduism, and contrasted it with “sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism” (Vivekananda 1962e, vol. 1). The last he associated especially with Christianity.

Such remarks veiled the constraints under which he presented his case. He praised “Spiritual” India at the Parliament as an eternal refuge, but remained silent about growing intercommunal rivalry between Hindus and Muslims, sectarian tensions among Hindus, as well as the vexed subject of untouchability. He also sidestepped the critique of Pandita Ramabai, the female Sanskrit scholar who had converted to Christianity. She had been fabulously successful in garnering American support for a school for young widows and was famous for maintaining that Hinduism was cruel to women, especially to upper-caste widows (Bhagabati et al. 2021; Frykenberg 2016; Kosambi 2000; Ramabai 1977). Vivekananda disliked white women and missionaries claiming to protect Hindu women from Indian patriarchy, and therefore their alliance with Ramabai confounded him. His reluctance to speak publicly about the plight of Indian women (which was nevertheless an important personal concern) showed the polarising effects of the idea of “spiritual” India.

He rejected the occult as foreign to the Hindu traditions he sought to cultivate, and was irked when audiences assumed that, as a yogi, he would be able to perform magical tricks not dissimilar to the Indian snake charmers who drew crowds to American vaudeville theatres. (Zubrzycki 2018, p. 99). He displayed this attitude yet again in his 1896 manual on *Raja Yoga*, when he concentrated on mental states and spiritual illumination rather than on “getting powers”, and when he refused to speak about the miraculous (Vivekananda 1962c, vol. 1). Yet in writing *Raja Yoga*, he had used not only Sanskrit texts, but also works on hatha yoga that came from the theosophical orbit (White 2014, pp. 31–32). He did not like their fascination with the yogic powers described in Patanjali, but he too occasionally had recourse to their writings. (Harris 2022, p. 212).

Indeed, he worked in a global context in which the overlap between occult, scientific, and religious thought was so great that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish among them. Vivekananda attempted to do so by emphasizing a spirituality that embraced rationality and especially western science, while also refusing to separate science from religion. Talking about science and speaking about both its value and deficiencies was an important means of communicating with western audiences, but also often with Indian publics. Such views allowed him to dismiss disparaging western commentary on Hindu “heathenism” by accusing Orthodox Christians of superstition because of biblical literalism. When he preached to Euro-Americans, he spoke on evolution, used Pasteurian and embryological metaphors, and engaged in neuropsychological speculation. Certainly, he was not the first Indian spiritual thinker to speak about Hinduism’s relationship to science, which was a speciality of Brahmo intellectuals from the nineteenth century (Knopf 1979; Brown 2012). Vivekananda, however, had a unique capacity to communicate the connections between science and religion, and the way he saw them operating on different levels. In this way, he not only rejected Christian exclusivism, but also the universalist claims of the European enlightenment, and conveyed the dangers of accepting the arguments of scientific polemicists at the cost of spiritual knowledge:

If a man quotes a Moses or a Buddha or a Christ, he is laughed at; but let him give the name of Huxley or a Tyndall . . . [an Irish physicist] and it is swallowed without salt . . . (Vivekananda 1963l, vol. 2)

But if he thought Huxley and Tyndall were extreme in their views, it did not mean he was not serious about, or was uninterested in, science. He even, it seemed, penned an article (anonymously) for the *New York Medical Times* on “The Ether”, which laid out the Sanskrit concept of “Akasha” to describe the first element created and the substance out of which the material world emerged.¹

He thus situated science as the handmaiden to Vedanta, and in this way seemed able to step outside the polarised categories of “science and religion: “it seems to us. . .that the conclusions of modern science are the very conclusions that Vedanta reached ages ago [but]. . .in modern science they are written in the language of matter” (Vivekananda 1964l, vol. 3). Like Hindu “tolerance,” such beliefs were a source of religious and cultural pride. But Vivekananda maintained that the long cyclical epochs of Hindu spiritual time (the *yugas*) made sense of many scientific theories (e.g., geological time); meanwhile, work in modern physics and evolution supported theories of constant change and cosmic dynamism. Moreover, he asserted that processes of creation and destruction—again outlined in evolution—were already present in the laws of Karma.

But in discussing science, he sought to critique what we would now call “scientism” (Medhananda 2022). He accepted evolution, but rejected the competition of natural selection, especially for the higher reaches of human development. (Killingley 1990; Raby 2001).² When instructing westerners, he argued that “good” science confirmed Vedanta, while scientific reductionism promoted brutality and extermination. In this regard, he fought against scientific hubris, and joined forces with some American idealists and pragmatists who similarly challenged such ideas (Bayly 2014; Otter 1996).

He also rejected what we now call “social Darwinism” and believed that the “survival of the fittest” “furnished every oppressor with an argument to calm the qualms of conscience” (Vivekananda 1962b, vol. 1). Although he did not mention Cesare Lombroso and his notion of the “born criminal”, he condemned Americans “who say that all criminals ought to be exterminated and that that is the only way in which criminality can be eliminated from society” (Vivekananda 1964e, vol. 5). In a different context, he remarked that “the attempt to remove evil from the world by killing a thousand evildoers, only adds to the evil in the world” (Vivekananda 1964a, vol. 7). He deplored the European genocide of aboriginal peoples and said so forthrightly: “wherever you have found weaker races, you have exterminated them by the roots” (Vivekananda 1964j, vol. 5). With insight rare for the period, he saw that scientific debate, as much as religious controversy, could be pervaded by metaphor, bias, and unacknowledged prejudice.

His interventions suggest how he used the opposition of science and religion to create a bridge to Indian thought in a way that his New England audience might comprehend. He turned to Patanjali, the Hindu mystic and philosopher, who became famous for his Yoga aphorisms and his conviction that the “true secret of evolution is the manifestation of the perfection which is already in every being” (Vivekananda 1962d, vol. 1). Along with many of the Unitarians and Transcendentalists he addressed, he focused on nurture and cultivation, on the notion of “infilling of nature”, and the simile of peasants irrigating fields (Harris 2022, p. 185). This statement appealed to his western followers, who saw the idea of the “essential self” as something innate, precious, and indestructible that manifested through spiritual nurture. Once again, he spoke in the language that he believed his audience would understand, urging them towards “self-realization”, while simultaneously harping on what he saw as enslaving obsessions, such as Christian duty and sin. Vedanta, he argued, embraced the lessons of “good” science to free up spiritual potential, while rejecting “bad” science and its destructive and immoral lessons.

They could only understand his ideas through their own cultural lens. We can explore his methods better by examining his perceptions of the American ideas and therapeutic methods he observed at Green Acre, Maine. He appeared in Eliot in the summer of 1894,

and there encountered people interested in comparative religion and Eastern philosophy, as well as New Thought, a movement that often overlapped with theosophy, vegetarianism, mesmerism, and homeopathy (Albanese 2007; Schmidt 2005; Harris 2022, pp. 189–203). Overall, he was not impressed with what he saw, even if he liked and often admired the people there. He was already *au fait* with Theosophy, which had implanted itself in Adyar outside of Madras in the 1880s, and knew something of mesmerism and homeopathy, which both flourished in India (Das 2019; Winter 1998, pp. 187–212). He was taken aback by their Christian metaphysics, which he called “horribly stony”, and in private made fun of “mailclad [sic]” women, referring to women’s corsetry and the physical rigidity it seemed to reveal.³ For this reason, he gave lessons in yoga under the so-called Swami’s Pine which later became the basis for *Raja yoga*; he thereby sought to foster insight and physical suppleness in this inflexible, if virtuous, audience.

Of all the novelties he encountered, Christian Science especially intrigued him, as all his closest female associates had at one time or another experimented with the ideas of Mary Baker Eddy (Podmore 2011; Gottschalk 2006; Voorhees 2013; Gill 1998). Her creed had burgeoned in the 1880s and 1890s, especially in New England and Chicago. Eddy was a semi-invalid who had experienced marital disappointment and periods of intense grief. In her search for cure, she had learnt magnetic healing through her mentor, Phineas Pankhurst, and had understood the importance of positive thoughts and feelings in promoting healing. But neither of them could achieve lasting remissions. After Eddy had fallen on ice in 1866, she read the story of Jesus’ cure of a man with palsy and walked with no pain. She claimed that she had discovered God’s “science”.

She refused to wait for the coming of the Kingdom of God but insisted instead that the realm of spirit existed in the present, and that confined mentalities veiled its presence. She asserted that humanity’s suffering was nothing more than “waking dream shadows”. By calling Christian Scientists “Vedantins” in 1894, Vivekananda readily grasped the possible connection between Eddy’s beliefs and the Hindu concept of *maya*, the illusory existence of everyday existence that obscured the truer realm of spirit that lies beyond. (Vivekananda 1963f, vol. 6). Eddy, it seemed, had known something of Vedantin ideas from her editor James Henry Wiggin, an erstwhile Unitarian minister who may have inserted a quotation from the Bhagavad Gita into an edition of *Science and Health*, the work that enunciated her creed, even if her key inspiration remained biblical (Harris 2022, pp. 180–81).

While Vivekananda accepted that this view of *maya* had some purchase in India through the influence of Buddhist teachers, he wanted his adherents to gain a more complex understanding of its meaning. In two lectures delivered in London in 1896, he spoke lyrically about the impossibility of escaping the futility of existence, despite hope, striving, and the accumulation of knowledge. He also explained that

... Maya is not a theory for the explanation of the world; it is simply a statement of facts as they exist, that the very basis of our being is contradiction, that ... wherever there is good, there must also be evil, and wherever there is evil, there must be some good, wherever there is life, death must follow as its shadow, and everyone who smiles will have to weep, and vice versa. Nor can this state of things be remedied. (Vivekananda 1963j, vol. 2)

He claimed that as divinity existed within all humanity, individuals could learn to detach themselves from the transience of embodiment and the physicality of “consciousness and subconsciousness to something greater and intangible” (Vivekananda 1963g, vol. 6). Although he found Christian Science naïve, he concluded by praising the strivings of its practitioners, and believed that, like Vedantins, they taught the “liberty of man and the divinity of soul” (Vivekananda 1963h, vol. 6, p. 90).

Words of this kind suggest why Vivekananda’s ideas concerning selfhood, consciousness, reality, and truth seemed tailor-made to address Euro-American preoccupations with subjective experience. Speaking again of *maya*, he remarked, “it is the most difficult and intricate state of things to understand ... but [it is] only believed in by a few, because until we get the experiences ourselves we cannot believe it” (Vivekananda 1963i, vol. 2).

He spoke directly about what today we would call “subjectivity.” Although he did not use this word, he described the “subjective mind” as a “great boundless ocean”, in which the understanding of *maya* provided a path to spiritual expansion (Vivekananda 1963k, vol. 6). As idealists who had rejected both conventional Christianity and a reductive positivism, his disciples appreciated this emphasis and the way it shifted attention away from intellect and textual study to forms of understanding that connected individuals to the divine. This was central to the semi-literate Ramakrishna who had prioritized his mystical experiences over sacred texts, and in the way William James emphasized it in his groundbreaking *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). By underscoring experience, both sides in the discussion underscored their search for transcendence and sought to move beyond embodied awareness.

The western and Indian view of the nature of religious experience necessarily differed, despite this common terrain. Vivekananda preached the primacy of Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism) as a path towards *moksha* (liberation). For some, *Advaita* referred to the oldest Sanskritic teachings that describe the relationship between *Atman* (here loosely translated as soul) and “*Brahman*”, a philosophy famously extended and developed by the eight-century theologian, Adi Shankara, whose teachings Vivekananda referenced.⁴ There are many different interpretations of this idea. When speaking in America, however, he bypassed learned commentaries and debates, and instead sought to convey his religious ideas simply, especially in the *Inspired Talks*. To his audience of would-be American *sannyasins* he distinguished between the *Aham*, the “I” or ego that was part of mundane reality, and the *Atman*, the self-effulgent entity that easily recognized the absolute. He said, “I am (*Aham*) is not the *Atman*,” a view which instead pointed to the Advaitic formula that “*Atman* and *Brahman* are one” (Vivekananda 1964f, vol. 7).

To New Englanders, his words resonated with the self-divinizing tendencies of American transcendentalism and Unitarianism, proposing the indissoluble connection between “self-realization” and “God consciousness”. But for many, these arguments remained obscure, even terrifying. Emma Calvé, the great soprano who was devoted to Vivekananda, responded: “I cling to my individuality . . . I don’t want to be absorbed into the Eternal Unity!” (Calvé 1922, pp. 187–88). Such responses meant that he continued to search for new ways to teach *Advaita* to people who feared his religion might suppress the self rather than liberate it.

After his first return to India in 1897, he sought to convey Advaita as the pinnacle of Hindu metaphysics, to show how the search for the formless union between *Atman* and *Brahman* was a superior metaphysical aim than an approach to a personal deity. But he also hoped that *Advaita* would unify Hindus notoriously divided by religious squabbling. He prioritised Advaita for metaphysical reasons, but also because he disliked the excessive symbolism that led to divisive rituals: “one sect has one particular form of ritual and thinks that that is holy, while the rituals of another are simply arrant superstition” (Vivekananda 1963i, vol. 2, p. 125). Advaita, by emphasising formlessness, asserted that unity existed above particularity. At the same time, he conceded that any religious path—even image worship—brings the devotee to the highest spirituality, hence the constant references to Tamil saints and Vaishnava poetry, to name only a few of the many traditions he praised. Nor did he ever forget that his beloved guru, Ramakrishna, had realized everything through an “idol” (his word), a remark which referred to Kali’s image at the Temple of Dakshineswar (Harris 2022, p. 280).

But he also maintained that Advaita Vedanta was necessary to bring unity through diversity to a population famous for its ethnic and religious differences: “here we have been the Aryan, the Dravidian, the Tartar, the Turk, the Mogul, the European—all the nations of the world . . . pouring their blood into this land”. He acknowledged therefore that language, race, or ethnicity could not bring Indians together. Instead, he emphasized an admittedly Hindu vision of Advaitic unity and maintained that all spiritual inclinations should shelter under its capacious umbrella. This is what he meant when he extolled “our sacred tradition, our religion . . . [as] one common ground” (Vivekananda 1964k, vol. 3, p. 286). He valued

this diversity when he wrote to his Muslim friend, Mohammed Sarfaraz Husain of Naini Tal, and explained his vision of Muslim–Hindu partnership: “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”. But once again, he hierarchized this relationship by giving credit to Hinduism as the genitor of religious universalism: “Advaitism is the last word of religion and thought and the only position from which one can look upon all religions and sects with love” (Vivekananda 1963c, vol. 6, pp. 415–16).

3. Adhikari-Bheda

Vivekananda framed his instruction very much like a good guru, re-working Ramakrishna’s example that he had experienced first-hand during his five-year discipleship. Ramakrishna allowed Vivekananda to explore, argue, and play, with his guru responding in turn with gentleness, humour, and scolding, depending on the situation (Harris 2022, pp. 67–83). The guru brothers remembered how each disciple had enjoyed a unique relationship to Ramakrishna, some learning spiritual flexibility and expansiveness, and others accepting greater discipline according to their disposition and spiritual proclivities (Harris 2022, pp. 77–78).

One scholar of Hindu thought has called *Adikari-bheda* the “application of [the] notion of absolute relativity” to individuals and different kinds of groups (Sharma 2012, p. 14). Ramakrishna was expert in deploying this technique, while his widow Sarada Devi revealed this same aptitude in practice (Kathamrita, 1:36–37). She was famed for the way she cooked separate dishes to suit the constitution of each disciple, a perfect metaphor for the different ways people worshipped and “took in” God. Both Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi thus suggested that universalism did not just accommodate difference, but often *was* difference (Harris 2022, p. 65). In a letter to Swami Shuddhananda, Vivekananda reiterated this philosophy when he wrote that that a “skilful Brahman” would “choose from that sea of words known as the Vedas, which is flooded over with diverse courses of knowledge, that which alone will be of potence [sic] to lead to liberation” (Vivekananda 1963b, vol. 6). Sacred texts advanced many different channels of thought, and skilful teachers understood that choosing which channel to navigate for each person offered the best means towards higher consciousness.

Vivekananda admired his guru’s capacity to transform people through this skill and wrote the following: “We saw how often Sri Ramakrishna would encourage people who we thought were worthless and change the whole course of their lives! His method of teaching was phenomenal.”⁵ Indeed, Ramakrishna had provided Vivekananda with an object lesson in spiritual democracy; unlike his guru, Vivekananda was no Brahmin, but a young man of Kayastha origin, a subcaste of indeterminate standing. Indeed, his qualifications for spiritual leadership were regularly criticized because of his origins (Harris 2022, pp. 22, 264, 281).

Early on during his wandering apprenticeship across the length and breadth of India, he had turned to Adi Shankara to find evidence for spiritual democracy in Advaitic teaching, but was ultimately disappointed (Conway 2014). Although Orthodox Advaitists accepted unity among all beings, they believed it operated on a deeper level, and did not object when Dalits were prevented from entering temples, for example; in doing so they preserved mundane distinctions and the social conservatism that went with them. Brahmins also maintained that, because Dalits had nothing to renounce, the higher path was closed to them (Banerjee 2020, p. 28). Vivekananda’s insistence that Advaita could and should be democratized therefore had radical elements, which he justified in the name of compassion (Conway 2014).

In a remarkable lecture in London in 1896, entitled “Vedanta and Privilege”, he wrote that “the idea of privilege is the bane of human life. Two forces . . . are constantly at work, one making caste, and the other breaking caste; . . . And whenever privilege is broken down, more and more light and progress come to a race”. He continued:

the work of Advaita... is to break down all these privileges... It is the hardest work of all... If there is any land of privilege, it is the land which gave birth to this philosophy. (Vivekananda 1962f, vol. 1, p. 424)

In “The Future of India”, delivered at the end of 1897, he reminded Brahmins of their need to act rightfully, to fulfil their obligation to “work hard to raise the Indian people by teaching them what they know, by giving out the culture that they have accumulated over the centuries” (Vivekananda 1964k, vol. 3, p. 297). He thus defended the *social* value of caste as a bulwark against western individualism and as a means of collective identity and social action, urging a more dynamic and open vision of its meaning and practice. But he refused to countenance caste spiritual prerogatives and argued that both lower castes and women should have a Sanskrit education. (Harris 2022, pp. 108, 161).

If sweeping away such spiritual distinctions was essential for applying *Adhikari-bheda* to everyone, it was also crucial to his vision of practical Vedanta, his call for solidarity through recognizing and treating people as God (Sen 1993, p. 34). He detested what he called “don’t touchism”, a term that conjured up not only the cruelty of untouchability, but also the endless disputes over ceremonials, food prohibitions, and bans against caste intermarriage and dining. He scolded his guru brothers when they defended such empty forms: “Those whose heads have a tendency to be troubled day and night over such questions... simply deserve the name of wretches” (Vivekananda 1963e, vol. 6).

Rather than withdrawing from the world to assure purity, he argued against the “fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world”, another revision of orthodoxy, this time one demanding a changed idea of karma yoga (Vivekananda 1963k, vol. 2). He wanted more than pious devotions, insisting instead that service to one’s fellow human beings *was* the ultimate service to God. Like so many other Indian fin-de-siècle theorists, he looked to the *Bhagavad Gita*, and insisted on the need to detach oneself from the results of one’s actions. He believed, moreover, that precisely because renunciators had nothing to lose—not household, possessions, or caste—they could more easily maintain an otherworldly subjectivity while also tackling India’s problems. Vivekananda insisted that his guru brothers retain this same detachment while engaging in the roar of temporal life and assured them that it was the sure path to spiritual liberation. Nor were these instructions confined to renunciators, as Vivekananda also encouraged householders to engage in compassionate activism through “*Daridra Narayana*”, which equated service to the poor with service to the great God Vishnu, the Protector of the Worlds.

It is difficult to convey the magnitude of the internal shifts that such ideas required, especially for *sannyasins*. Ramakrishna had always condemned the search for “name and fame” that might lurk behind a mask of altruism or philanthropy (Sharma 2013, pp. 52, 195). Akhandananda, another direct disciple of Ramakrishna, wrote movingly (if retrospectively) about the famine victims he helped in the 1890s. He was discomfited by handling money and horrified that the *Math* insisted he publicise his activities. (Akhandananda 2013, p. 163).

What is less obvious, but equally true, is that this understanding of spiritual democracy also underpinned Vivekananda’s wider programme of global instruction and his belief in universalism. For these reasons, he felt *obliged* to preach against materialism, violence, and fanaticism in the Euro-American world, to draw his audiences away from muscular Christianity, and to counter the hardness of their minds and bodies through the teaching of yoga. Against the busy-ness of western industry and punctuality, he asserted the primacy of meditation and timelessness, and explained that processes of concentration were not ends but means. He told them not to think about faith, but to focus on realization and to jettison doctrines of sin and redemption that kept them imprisoned in notions of Christian duty. He did not seek miraculous cures as Christian Scientists did, but instead advised perseverance in the search for transcendence.

But this technique did not always produce the results he desired. When he applied this method on an individual basis, western women especially found the instruction hard to bear; he was not sensitive to the gender dynamics of their interaction, and the women balked during these ego-bashing lessons in “detachment” (Harris 2022, pp. 249–51). This

reaction was not universal, however. Christine Greenstidel, one of his female disciples, ultimately agreed with him when he criticised western chivalry as a form of sex that hampered women's strength (Harris 2022, pp. 223–29, 249–51). As much as among Indian men, he sought to promote robustness among his female acolytes, though he did not call it “man-making”. Indeed, the inability to find other words shows the deep rootedness of these gender stereotypes. Christine remarked: “Strange as it may seem, with these words came a new idea of what true reverence for womanhood means”, and with time, she accepted that he was right not to lend his arm when they clambered together over the rocks of Thousand Island in New York (Christine 1983). But besides the scolding, he also encouraged, and above all listened. Despite his socially conservative view of women and his conviction that marriage was a kind of austerity, he was immensely attentive to their spiritual and emotional needs. His often traditional statements about women did not preclude a vision of their spiritual importance or his authentic interest in their lives.

If this was his technique in the west, India required a different approach. Here again the vision of nationalism was in play, although not in the same way. He wanted to end what he saw as Indian timidity, to shift attitudes of subservience and fear, and above all, to resist needless imitation. When young and travelling across India, he took two books: the Gita, and Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*. The latter is a fifteenth-century text that guided Christian aspirants to withdraw from the world in search of spiritual growth. He valued the second book as a manual of devotion equal to any within his own tradition. He extolled it precisely because it indicted British missionaries who, he maintained, did not follow its teachings (Vivekananda 1958, vol. 8).⁶

But later, he became more ambivalent about “imitation” because it seemed to conjure up colonial subjection. He laboured to understand how one changed while remaining oneself, an existential concern to which he always returned. Such issues were personal, but also profoundly cultural and political: how did a people or a nation alter itself, or find new sources of strength, without surrendering its values and identity? These questions resonated keenly in India as people reckoned with the moral, psychological, and material impacts of colonialism and its humiliations. As early as 1894, he wondered if the Indian “masses” could become “occidental” in energy, activism, and equality, while remaining “Hindu in religion.” By “religion” he meant not only spiritual concerns, but also cultural values (Vivekananda 1964c, vol. 5; 1963a, vol. 6). How could India remain open to the world without losing itself in harmful western ideas? How were Indians, both as individuals and as a nation, to realise themselves?

I have suggested that he taught meditation to urge westerners away from busyness, distraction, and hardness. When he returned to India, he constrained the spiritual spontaneity of his guru brothers and novices with new routines and regulations (Vivekananda 1963d, vol. 6; 1964d, vol. 7). Here again, he was not always successful; one of the original disciples of Ramakrishna, Adbhutananda, nicknamed “Latu”, could not reconcile himself to the new routines and stricter rules that Vivekananda imposed. Adbhutananda ultimately left the Math after Vivekananda's death, but the majority of the guru brothers slowly accepted the new directives (Harris 2022, p. 299). Vivekananda showed his dedication to this “practical” approach even in small initiatives. For example, he instituted the Delsarte Method in Belur Math, a system of breath control and expression exercises pioneered by the French singing and acting coach, François Delsarte (Lokeswarananda et al. 2006, p. 247). In the west, he had mocked this method, advocating instead a control of the *pranayama* (illustration 9) (Vivekananda 1963i, vol. 2). But in India, he even joined these exercises to dumbbell training to deepen physical resilience so that his followers might be physically strong when they worked among the poor.

This example shows how he readily transferred the techniques of body and mind from one culture to another, even performing a volte face in his view of Delsarte's system. This is a perfect instance of *Adhikari-bheda* at work. It seems that in instituting the exercises, he was advancing nationalist masculinity, but he was equally stern in recommending meditation and yoga to his western audiences. Yet again, he made himself understood by operating

within the polarities of civilizational stereotypes, but harnessed new spiritual possibilities, he hoped, by tempering oppositions.

So far, I have concentrated on Vivekananda's attempts to pull his audiences away from extremes. But there was a radical edge to his thought and language that also emerged from his understanding of renunciation, and this was rather different from urging practical exercises to urge moderation. When he went on pilgrimage to Khir Bhawani in Kashmir in the summer of 1898, he plunged into mystical foreboding, and wanted nothing more than to sit in the lap of Kali. Sister Nivedita, one of his British acolytes, could not understand why such a man—with all his grand designs and hopes for his country—would abandon his projects in order to cultivate a baby-like “non-self” (Harris 2022, p. 317). But for him, this state of child-like detachment was the only way a sannyasin *might* rightfully intervene in the world. By returning to babyhood, he reclaimed otherworldliness, before re-engaging (Pinch 2006; Vivekananda 1964b, vol. 7; Banerjee 2020, pp. 23–43; Harris 2022, pp. 318–19).

This kind of detachment could infrequently, but strikingly, lead him into surges of militancy. When visiting the dungeon cages of Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy, Vivekananda muttered under his breath: “What a wonderful place to meditate” (Nivedita 2016, vol. 1, p. 158). He did not miss the parallel with British oppression in India when he was told that the prison cells had been designed for political prisoners who opposed Bourbon absolutism (illustration 10). By speaking of meditation, he thought of marshalling “vital energy” against tyranny, and suggested that the deepest renunciation could also encompass the highest “activism”, a paradox that he had elaborated in his 1896 *Karma yoga*. When the revolutionary activist Aurobindo Ghose was awaiting trial in 1908 in prison, he saw Vivekananda in a vision, and urged his comrades to follow a yogic form of revolutionary asceticism that entailed self-control, moral strength, and physical prowess to counter British hegemony over “feeble” Indians (Wolfers 2016, pp. 525–45).

Such radicalism intermittently sprang into view, and explains why, over a generation ago, it drew people to socialism and even communism on the left, especially in Bengal; today, it also inspires the more radical on the right, especially among those who wish to see Vivekananda as a scion of Hindutva (Banerjee 2020; Sharma 2013). By travelling so widely, and employing the kaleidoscopic possibilities of *Adhikara-bheda*, Vivekananda and his message were and are easily mischaracterised. The danger of reducing him to a sole position is all the more tempting because he died in 1902, at the age of 39, so we can never know how he might have developed as the national struggle intensified.

Such thoughts bring me back to where I started, to the risk of regarding Vivekananda as a defining figure in the development of extreme Hindu nationalism. Certainly, he was a Hindu monk, above all interested in Hindu theology, and keen to further the view that India was the Mother of Spirituality. But he was much more than this. His version of Hindu universalism was expansive, ecumenical, and aggressive, and his message international and innovative, at times insistent and often defensive, depending on individuals, groups, and context.⁷ This description suggests why the polarity of East and West could not, ultimately, contain the shifting moods, emotions, and ideas that he sought to express with so many different audiences. We may only grasp his significance if we accept that he operated in many different registers, trying to grapple with the difficulties of communication in different cultures and with the asymmetrical relations of power that imperialism imposed.

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Notes

- ¹ Swami Vivekananda, 'The Ether'. Available online: The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda/Volume 9/Writings: Prose and Poems(Original and Translated)/The Ether-Wikisource, the free online library.
- ² He was hardly alone in this view, as Alfred Russell Wallace, the co-discoverer of natural selection, believed it did not operate in producing the higher faculties; see (Raby 2001, p. 2).
- ³ Swami Vivekananda, 'Letters—Fifth Series: XXX'. Available online: The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda/Volume 9/Letters-Fifth Series/XXX Mother-Wikisource, the free online library.
- ⁴ For more on Vivekananda's soul-searching and the development of these ideas see (Sen 1993, pp. 311–46; Medhananda 2022, pp. 43–90).
- ⁵ Swami Vivekananda, 'The Swami on Ramakrishna and Other People He Knew'. Available online: <https://www.vivekananda.net>, Accessed on 27 July 2023.
- ⁶ Swami Vivekananda, 'Footnotes to the Imitation of Christ'. Available online: The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda/Volume 9/Writings: Prose and Poems(Original and Translated)/Footnotes to The Imitation of Christ-Wikisource, the free online library.
- ⁷ Amiya Sen (forthcoming), "Aggressive Hinduism: Ecumenical, Evangelist and Expansive", to be published in *Colonial Hinduism*, Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, cited with kind permission of the author.

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