

Responding to Fanaticism

The resurgence of religious fanaticism is a fact of our time. For much of the modern era, it seemed that fanaticism was on the wane. The Age of Reason, beginning in the middle of the seventeenth century, proclaimed that human life would henceforth not be dominated by dangerous religious passions but would be based on a rational analysis of the human condition and rational attempts to better that condition. For several centuries it seemed as if this was actually going to happen. Irrational religious dogmas were counteracted and sidelined by the steady growth of science, reason-based political systems and the spread of secular learning.

By the beginning of the twentieth century it seemed to many that reason would conquer unreason and fanaticism would die a natural death. Succeeding events of that century gave us a rude awakening. New forms of dogmatic fanaticism emerged, based not on religion but on secular dogmas and passions: nationalism, fascism, communism. We learned by hard experience that these forms of fanaticism were every bit as dangerous to human survival as religious fanaticism. But having learned that lesson, it seemed near the end of the century that reason might prevail after all. Just then, fanaticism re-emerged with a vengeance.

The biggest threat came from Islamists bent on recreating the Caliphate which would defeat modern secularism and rule the world. But fanatics abound in other areas as well. Ethnic and nationalist passions still bedevil much of the world. Religious fundamentalism in the United States experienced new growth. Scientific reason, seemingly triumphant, was again under attack by believers who insisted that every word of scripture was literally true, that Biblical creation myths should be taught in public schools at least in addition to evolution.

Can Reason Regain the Upper Hand?

Why has reason not triumphed over fanaticism? Both ancient wisdom and modern psychology have shown that underneath a veneer of reason and control, subconscious drives and passions dominate much of our lives. Instead of basing our lives on reason, we use reason to justify what we want to do, what we want to believe. How can reason regain the upper hand? How can dangerous passions be curbed?

On this subject, Vedanta and other spiritual traditions have a great deal to say. Through spiritual practice, passions can be brought under control and redirected. The ego, which insists that it is right and that others who disagree are wrong, can be curbed. Generosity, humility, compassion can be cultivated. But

this cannot be done simply by talking about it. The texture of the mind has to be changed. This takes steady effort and requires motivation.

What motivates us to put forth that effort? What motivates some people to become fanatics? Why does reason sometimes not win the battle?

Let us step back and ask, What are the basic things human beings seek? What makes us human?

We seek joy. We seek beauty. We seek security. We seek meaning, direction and purpose in our lives. We seek to know, to understand ourselves and our surroundings. And we seek transcendence, being part of something larger than ourselves. Reason by itself is not sufficient to achieve these goals. We can and should use reason to help us map a course toward these goals, but by itself reason cannot take us there. We have intellect, we have emotion, we have a propensity for action. All of these need to be harnessed to reach fulfillment.

To Be Affirmed and Valued

Sociologists tell us that the most important social value in any society is social status—where we stand in the social ranking system affirmed by our particular society. It may be by family or sex or age or wealth or office or skill or virtue or sheer celebrity for whatever reason. If the society has a dominant religion, it will also be by one's standing according to that religion.

What are we looking for? We're looking to be affirmed and valued by the criteria of our society, and we hope and try to be valued more highly than others. Those dissatisfied with the value-rank accorded them may form sub-societies within which they can be important and powerful. In this way fanatics can arise in any society.

In our efforts to understand and deal with fanaticism and terrorism, we need to appreciate the driving power of feeling **disrespected**. Thomas Friedman says:¹ “Humiliation is the key. . . Terrorism is not spawned by the poverty of money. It is spawned by the poverty of dignity. Humiliation is the most underestimated force in international relations and in human relations. It is when people or nations are humiliated that they really lash out and engage in extreme violence.”

Friedman goes on to speak of “the economic and political backwardness of much of the Arab-Muslim world today” and quotes a couple of Muslim leaders. Mahathir Mohamad focused his farewell speech as prime minister of Malaysia (at an Islamic summit, 2003) on “why their civilization had become so humiliated,” a term he repeated five times without instances, because, he said, “Our only reaction is to become more and more angry. *Angry people cannot think properly*” (our emphasis). Friedman later (January, 2004) found a tape of bin Laden through *al-Jazeera*, in which bin Laden blames the “great deterioration”

¹ Friedman, *The World Is Flat* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 488.

of “all Arab countries” on the lack of “accountability” of the rulers. Spain, “an infidel country,” has an economy stronger than “all Arab countries” put together “because the ruler there is accountable.” (Bin Laden and company are angry with us, not only because we also are more successful, but because we support these unaccountable governments in the Arab countries.)

One other important remark: The countries that make the Arab-Muslims feel put down are open, free, and innovative. During the last twenty years of the twentieth century, all the Arab countries together produced 171 international patents, while South Korea alone registered 16,328 (an official count by Arab social scientists).² Innovation. Freedom to invent something new and get credit for it. In an open society, it may take off, be copied, be successful. Just being creative produces positive, self-respecting feelings.

Fanaticism and terrorism speak to the urgent need to get out of the state and the social condition of being undeveloped, disrespected, left-behind and angry. And those who are vulnerable to attack by those moved by this anger need to help alter the condition and bring the rest of these people to full participation and benefit. By no means an easy thing to do, or even try to do, because the trying itself may be insulting.

Enterprise and Employment

There are, in the world, almost 90 million unemployed males between the ages of 15 and 24, and one-quarter of them are in these Arab-Muslim countries. What if profitable enterprises were started in their countries and they were employed (and appropriately educated) at good wages with upward mobility for skill and productivity? Much of the world is already so interactive that mutual respect is the obvious order of the day. Isn't that the quick way to enter? What about these “unaccountable” rulers? If the First World could put a little more effort into energy-innovation, maybe it could reduce propping up these rulers. Just a suggestion. Meanwhile we could try to find one country in which to make an experiment with enterprise and employment.

All this, of course, is very reminiscent of Swami Vivekananda's excitement after visiting America and his vigorous preaching to his “backward” nation. How moved he was by the change in self-respect he saw on the streets of New York. The downtrodden immigrant stumbles in, bent over and insecure. A few weeks later he is striding down the sidewalk like he owns it and everything in it! He is the equal of every other man in the country. Vivekananda's message: You can do that, too! Is there a way to make something like that our anti-terror “weapon”?

—John Schlenck and Beatrice Bruteau

² Ibid., 486.

Facing Fanaticism: Vivekananda's Spiritual Democracy

Beatrice Bruteau¹

As if anticipating the frightening need of our current situation, Swami Vivekananda, in his first speech to the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, attacked "sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism." These human ills have long "filled the earth with violence," threatened whole civilizations and reduced many to despair. He went on to warn us of the dire consequences we face by forgetting the spiritual unity of all beings, and he called for a recovery of the consciousness of true selfhood, the bond of unity. If we fail to heed this call, we will face the unforgiving law of history: "You may not believe in the vengeance of God, but you must believe in the vengeance of history."

Who Is a Fanatic?

Peoples who live by honor codes are bound to repay every injury with at least as great a return injury. Those who do not claim honor may say they are defending themselves, even to the point of taking preemptive action where they anticipate injury. Some may be making the world safe for their particular lifestyle. Are they—are we—all fanatics? If we are engaged in a clash of civilizations, a two-generation struggle with our mutual opposite numbers, are we fanatics? Swami Vivekananda seems to say that to the extent that any of us on planet Earth considers that we alone have the truth, the right way, and the mission to bend all others to our way, living or dead, then we may proudly claim the name of fanatic. And, he warns, another world of fanatics will arise to destroy you as you destroyed your predecessors. If you want the world to be a general success for all, you must all renounce fanaticism: "all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and. . . all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal."

Clearly he sees another vision of who we are and what is good for all of us together. His vision and his peace are based on the insight that "the same soul dwells in every one of us." But it is not a sameness that obliterates diversity. It is a sameness that cultivates and celebrates diversity. Is that possible? Yes, because

¹ This essay is a set of extended reflections on our current problems, inspired by and arising from Swami Adiswarananda's Introduction to his book, *Vivekananda: World Teacher* (reviewed elsewhere in this issue of *AV*). The article makes great use of Vivekananda's words and ideas, as meaningfully gathered together and summarized by Swami Adiswarananda. The discussion focus and opinions are mine.

what each soul has in unity with every other soul is precisely its care that the other succeed in being its full, whole, good and beautiful self. The only catch is that none must exclude or decry the others.

Vivekananda proposes a spiritual democracy. In a democracy each citizen is the political equal of every other. Those who are governed by the laws are to be the very ones who frame the laws. All citizens are to regard others with the same degree of respect that they desire for themselves. The fact is that this is a very difficult social arrangement to achieve. Even in self-proclaiming democracies there have been restrictions on who may really be a participating citizen—allowed to vote, to run for or hold office, and so on. Women may be citizens bound to obey the law but not permitted to have any say in setting up the law. Race may matter, religion may matter. At the present time it is being debated who can claim a "human right" to be free until charged under evidence and by due process to be incarcerated, and even more seriously, who has a "human right" not to be tortured. These are not equal political rights.

Is such a thing as a spiritual democracy possible? Doesn't that "catch" set up a basic conflict between Vivekananda's view and almost all religions and a good many political systems and economic systems and social systems? Can each culture's values really be deeply rooted and practiced in that culture if they are admitted to be merely one possible way of living amongst others which are also good for their respective peoples? And are all the other value systems really good for their people? Is ours good for us, all of us? These are hard questions. Can right-in-itself be replaced by right-for-them/us-at-this-time? Maybe there is a clue in this very suggestion of a dynamic aspect. Let us see what else Vivekananda has to say.

Evolution and Divine Self-Expression

Life has evolved from the subhuman stage to the human stage, but evolution continues on the mental, moral, and spiritual planes. Mentally we recognize the interdependence of all living and even nonliving beings. Morally we are close to admitting that all persons have equal rights to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness and control of their own persons and actions. We are all to be free of oppression and cruelty. Spiritually we at least know or believe that we have some ultimate goal and reality and many of us hold that everybody is entitled to move toward this goal and enjoy this reality.

Vivekananda presents us with a positive view of the human individual and says that education should develop the perfection already present in a person. This is his spiritual humanism. It goes beyond secular humanism because it does not arise simply from what is superficially evident as human nature, but it derives its power from its insight into the true personhood of the individual, the expression of the Divine that the person really is. Therefore our mutual help and

care and service are not only for the sake of benefiting the human race and this or that human individual, but for the sake of "benefiting" the Divine itself whose self-expression these people are. Spiritual humanism embraces the whole of humanity, regardless of sex, race, culture, country, religion or social position.

"Each soul is a star," wrote Swami Vivekananda, "and all stars are set in the infinite... eternal sky—the Lord. There is the root, the reality, the real individuality, of each." God is not only absolute reality but also the sum total of all souls. When this ultimate reality is ignored or forgotten by us, we fall into poverty of spirit, suffering, and sorrow. The fall of a country or culture is caused by its spiritual bankruptcy. Spiritual fall brings in its wake moral fall, moral fall brings intellectual blindness, and intellectual blindness brings material downfall. We cannot move from such a position to the world which all of us desire.²

The Spirituality Necessary for World Unity

Recognition of the divinity deeply resident in each soul is the key to awakening. It is the core of the spirituality necessary for us to attain the world unity toward which the cosmic evolution is driving us. Even enlightened political considerations, economic interest, cultural ties, and our best humanitarian principles are not sufficient, because they do not arise from a sufficiently deep and secure root. The unity of each of our individual beings arises from the unity of our personal soul. Similarly, argues Vivekananda, world unity needs to be the expression of a world soul: the presence of God in each one and in all together, the soul of all beings, embracing the vast diversities of our experiences and aspirations. It must include all living things, the planet itself, and all the cosmic beings, which, as we now know, strongly relate to one another.

We are not responsible for the stars, but we now recognize that we have a certain responsibility for our planet. We are responsible for many of the living species whose lives we can affect. And we are intimately responsible for one another. Therefore, let us start with those aspects of the dynamic world where we can make a difference. Swami Vivekananda tells us that we are not living in the final days of our destiny. We can change our destiny by our perceptions, aspirations, and actions. "The world can be good and pure only if our lives are good and pure. It is an effect and we are the means. Therefore let us purify ourselves." Let us deepen ourselves, expand ourselves, and develop our moral insight and courage. Let us be both intelligent and vigorous in our contribution to the continued growth of the world as the expressed presence of God.

Swami Vivekananda's thesis is that deep respect for other persons, willingness to see others' points of view, commitment to meeting them in what we now call a "non-zero" interaction instead of a we-win-you-lose conflict, is the

² See p. xii of Swami Adiswarananda's Introduction, op. cit.

opposite of fanaticism and is the way to world unity. Unity of existence is the law of the universe. Individual or group selfishness and arrogance, together with disdain and desire to control, disrupt this unity and endanger the existence of all. Insofar as religion represents the over-all outlook, principles, and behavior of a society, it is an important forum in which we must meet our neighbors and learn to come into unity with them without destroying their way of life. For this reason Vivekananda wanted to find a very general religious outlook from which particular traditions could see themselves as special cases and local developments.

What we have still to face is the fact that it is precisely this generalization and universalization that the devout fanatic does not want. Crucial to the fanatic's self-identity is the insuperable difference between the accepted and the unaccepted. The rightness of the fanatic's position is dependent on the wrongness of others'. There must be outsiders, infidels, the unredeemed, the enemy. That is what makes the insider group cohere and feel secure and strong. To be on a more or less even footing with other groups, traditions, outlooks, and practices would be ruinous.

Seeing the Center of Goodness in All

Is there any way to overcome this most fundamental difference between the fanatic—understood now as any group that insists that its way is right and other ways wrong—and the anti-fanatic, or spiritual democrat? What is to prevent the fanatic from arguing that the spiritual democrat is just another variety of fanatic, insisting on the only right way?

Perhaps Vivekananda has put his finger on something that will work: Look inside yourself. What do you deeply feel, want? Don't you thereby know that everyone else feels this way, wants what you do? Basic goodness of life? Can't we start from this simple commonality with goodwill to find the next level of agreement? Everyone wants secure connection with goodness. Goodness within ourselves and goodness in our outward life. Can we come to see that we cannot have goodness outwardly unless we have goodness inwardly? And—hard step—we cannot have goodness inwardly if we deny goodness to others? It has to come by real interior experience, not by argument. Perhaps we can begin by looking for the center of goodness in everyone and helping others to find easily that center of goodness in us. Perhaps that would undercut all possibility of fanaticism and be close to what Swamiji meant by spiritual democracy. □

Memories of Swami Ritajananda

Swami Vidyatmananda

[Excerpted from Chapter 11 of an unpublished autobiography by the author]

Swami Ritajananda was born on 9 December, 1906, in Mylapore, Madras. He was from an orthodox South Indian brahmin family, his forebears having been temple priests. His father's name was T.P. Narayanaswamy and his mother was called Visalakshmi.. His mother died when he was twelve, and he went to live with his grandfather--a disciplinarian so restrictive that the boy decided--as he told me once--to be as permissive toward others when he grew up as his grandfather had been severe toward him. He seems to have been a shy youth, perhaps rather lonely, and convinced that he was not particularly attractive to others. He felt sure that the acquaintances he made were likely to find him uninteresting and were bound sooner or later to drop him.

He thus became rather defensive and developed a hesitancy to commit himself for fear of being disappointed. He turned into a bookish, solitary, self-contained person. He kept his thoughts as well as his emotions to himself. He learned early to keep his own counsel, not to reveal his true feelings; this quality manifested itself in later life as an admirable self-possession.

Predecessors in Europe

From his earliest days the future Swami Ritajananda admired English literature and was interested, also, in French books and writers. He read Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo in English translation when he was in his teens. He attended the University of Andhra, where he specialized in mathematics. At Madras he associated with monks of the Sri Ramakrishna Math at Mylapore, including Swami Yatiswarananda and Swami Siddheswarananda, both of whom, curiously, were to be his predecessors in Europe.

In 1931 at the age of twenty-five, on the birthday of Sri Rama, the future Swami Ritajananda arrived at Belur Math to join the Order of Sri Ramakrishna. His father opposed this move and appealed to the authorities of Belur Math for the return of his son; but the postulant vigorously rejected all such appeals, even warning his father that he would take up the life of an anonymous, itinerant sadhu if the authorities at Belur Math rejected him because of the disapproval of his family. He obtained his diksha initiation from the then President, Swami Shivananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. He took brahmacharya in 1936 from Swami Akhandananda, another direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, and sannyasa in 1940 from Swami Virajananda, a disciple of Swami Vivekananda.

Being a novice in a busy monastery in Bengal was very different from being a student in comfortable circumstances in South India. The food was foreign to him, and the language had to be learned. (Always interested in languages, he soon mastered Bengali; he already knew Sanskrit and English, as well as Tamil and Telegu. Later he was to learn Sinhalese while serving in the Ramakrishna Mission in Sri Lanka, and, after 1961, French.) The Bengali temperament is as distinct from that of the South Indian's as is, say, the Mediterranean personality from that of members of the Nordic nations. During his early years in the Order, thus, that same sensation of alienation known from his youngest days persisted.

During the period when he was a brahmachari Swami Ritajananda worked as a school teacher at the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith in Deoghar, Bihar, where he taught mathematics. During the war years he headed the Ramakrishna Mission school system in Sri Lanka, which consisted of several schools and an institution for orphans; it was a period of privation due to food and other shortages. In 1946 he was appointed proctor of the great Vivekananda Students' Home in Madras, where he remained till 1954. This large institution comprises a technical school, a high school, and a hostel. Academic work always appealed to the Swami. He was a natural teacher and liked young people. Former students from Deoghar, from Colombo, and from Madras continued to keep in touch with him throughout his life.

Extraordinary Talent for Friendship

In 1954 Swami Nikhilananda requested Swami Ritajananda's presence in New York as assistant minister of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre, 17 E. 94th Street. Having few duties there other than giving class talks weekly and occasional Sunday lectures, the Swami was able to read widely and start work on a biography of Swami Turiyananda. This was published in English in 1962 and in French in 1979. He also had time for friendships, and began to become known among the congregation as someone ready to listen to one's problems or just be companionable.

It was thus that Swami Ritajananda began to exercise his extraordinary talent for friendship. That old sensation of considering himself an outsider disappeared. He told me that at a certain point--I don't know when this was--he had decided to see how many friends he could acquire! This process began in earnest in New York. The Swami had developed a sunny, permissive personality; one sensed that one could tell him anything and that he would be interested. Moreover he would not judge or condemn, and he would keep one's confidences. Unassertive in most fields of activity, he often took a strong lead in attracting and cultivating new contacts. He was especially interested in those individuals having adjustment problems: the misfits, the friendless, the inept. His early problems thus fitted him to understand and sympathize with others. And how they did respond to his

advances! Here he was assertive. I once told him he was an obsessive collector of wounded birds! . . .

The quality of not criticizing was firmly established as a part of his personality. When someone did something clearly unwise or obviously wrong, Swami Ritajananda's usual observation was: "But he's like that, that's his nature. What can he do?" And then he would probably add, "But he will surely change." That's the final line of the few negative assessments of people I ever heard the Swami utter: "He will suffer from the course he is taking and that will force him to change."

How many times I heard those words from him: "He (or she) will surely change." He never really looked at people according to the weaknesses that they manifested at the given time. Rather he considered them as, certainly not bad, but merely immature. He believed in the future spiritual success of everybody he came in contact with; and it is this belief in them that attracted so many people to him.

A Sympathetic and Conscientious Correspondent

Devotees from New York followed Swami Ritajananda to Southern California [where he was transferred in 1959] or kept in close touch with him by mail. And he made many new friends in Hollywood. By now receiving and answering letters was becoming a major part of his schedule. This "problem" of correspondence kept augmenting. In the 1980's at Gretz he was receiving ten or twelve letters a day, often long and complicated recitations of personal problems, and of course expressed in several different languages. Once he pointed out the stack of unanswered correspondence and confessed that he was overwhelmed by it. I reminded him: "But Swami, don't forget that you told me that you had once decided to acquire as many friends as possible. Here is the result!" I must add that his conscientiousness in responding to needs expressed was remarkable. Even boring people or those with difficult handwriting or those of clearly unstable personality received his positive attention. Noticing the flood of correspondence waiting to be answered, I asked on another occasion what it was that all these people wrote about. His answer was: "It's very simple. They want to tell somebody something that's important to them and assume that that something is interesting to the person to whom they are writing. So I try to reply, even a few lines. Generally not giving advice, but just being friendly and encouraging. It gives them comfort." I had thus a daily object-lesson of what Swami Prabhavananda tried to inculcate in me and which I was slow to learn. I can hear my guru still in that insistent, tender tone: "Feel for others, my child. You must learn to feel for others."

(to be continued)

The Harmony of Religions Revisited

William Page

The harmony of religions has always been an article of faith within the Ramakrishna movement, but the term is likely to raise eyebrows among people who are not familiar with it. There has always been a certain amount of doctrinal disagreement among believers in the different religions, and this has been exacerbated in recent times by the rise of religious extremism. Disinterested observers can be forgiven if they look at the contemporary religious situation and see not a harmony, but a cacophony.

Sri Ramakrishna taught that all religions are valid paths to God, that we shouldn't criticize any of them, and that we should be friendly and supportive to adherents of every faith. So far as I know, he never used the expression "harmony of religions," and never said explicitly that all religions form a harmonious whole. But he probably would have agreed with the idea.

It was left to Swami Vivekananda to develop the theory of religions as a grand harmony, with each sounding its own unique note.¹ Vivekananda was right when he said that every religion has a unique emphasis which the other religions can learn from.²

In Judaism, we see a strong emphasis on justice; in Christianity, on forgiveness; in Islam, on the brotherhood of believers; in Hinduism, on renunciation for the sake of realization; in Buddhism, on *mudita*, which is usually translated "sympathetic joy" and which means rejoicing in the good fortune of others. Each of these religions has other features that may also be singled out as

¹ See Arvind Sharma, *The Concept of Universal Religion in Modern Hindu Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), chapters 4, 5, and 6, on Keshab Chandra Sen, Sri Ramakrishna, and Swami Vivekananda, respectively. This book is highly recommended to students of Vedanta. Reading between the lines, it seems possible that the concept of religious harmony may have originated with Keshab.

There has been much disputation between the followers of Sri Ramakrishna and the followers of Keshab as to who influenced whom. It seems clear that Keshab agreed with Sri Ramakrishna that all religions are valid paths to God. But then he went one step further by talking about harmonizing them. He went another step further by trying to synthesize them into a single universal faith. He went a third step further by adding his own revelation to it, calling it the Church of the New Dispensation, and proclaiming himself its divinely appointed head. These three steps took him a long way from Sri Ramakrishna's original teaching. The hubristic aspect of the third step is especially noteworthy.

² Sharma, p. 58.

being unique. Put together all these positive qualities, and you would indeed have a grand harmony.

Disparate Belief-Systems

The problem comes when we consider the disparate belief systems that these religions offer. Judaism says that there is one God, who insists that people should worship him. Christianity agrees, but adds that God has a son, who also requires worship, and that God in fact is a tripartite entity. Islam agrees with Judaism, but says that if Christianity gets things wrong when it says God has a son and a tripartite nature, Judaism also gets a few things wrong, like not accepting Muhammad as a prophet. Hinduism says that there are 330 million gods, but adds that they are all manifestations of one underlying Godhead. Buddhism is silent about the possibility of an underlying Godhead; it accepts the pantheon of Brahmanism, but says that all the gods in it are subject to the law of karma and maintain their position only so long as their good karma holds out. This means that their godhood is only temporary, and makes them hardly gods at all.

Your average Westerner is likely to say that these religions can't all be right. Either there is one God, or 330 million gods—there can't be both. Either God has a son, or he doesn't. Either he's tripartite, or he isn't. Either there's an underlying Godhead, or there isn't.

The Relativity of Beliefs

Vivekananda answers this objection by saying that it is like looking at the sun from different distances.³ The sun looks big if we view it from up close, small if we view it from far away. Whether we regard it as big or small depends on where we're standing.

Vedanta has other answers that make the same point. There is the parable of the blind men and the elephant, and the simile of the chameleon. Ultimately, Vedanta says that all inconsistencies and contradictions of belief are swallowed up in the Godhead: that God appears as one to those who regard him as one; as having a son to those who regard him as having a son; as tripartite to those who regard him as tripartite; as 330 million to those who regard him as 330 million; and as being the manifestation of an underlying Godhead to those who regard him as such. The Vedantic God is a user-friendly deity who, out of love for his devotees, first adapts himself to their preconceptions, then gradually leads them to higher and higher insights.

³ Sharma, p. 57.

Despite these arguments, the average Westerner will look at these disparate belief-systems and say that it is impossible to reconcile them. He has trouble accepting the harmony of religions because he regards religion primarily as a matter of belief. To him, it is your beliefs that define you as a Hindu, as a Buddhist, as a Jew, as a Christian, as a Muslim. And these beliefs are mutually exclusive.

Harmony of Practice Rather than of Beliefs

Hinduism, on the other hand, regards religion primarily as a matter of practice. What matters is not so much what you believe, but what you do. This explains Sri Ramakrishna's famous saying, "*Yato math, tato path*"--"As many faiths, so many paths." Notice that he never said that the belief-systems of all religions are true. What he said was that all religions are paths that lead to God. This is a fundamental distinction that needs to be clarified whenever we talk about the harmony of religions.

When we view it as a harmony of practice rather than as a harmony of beliefs, the term begins to make more sense. There is a remarkable consensus among the various religions regarding the moral and ethical principles we should follow.

All of the major religions in the world today urge us to do good and eschew evil. The specific virtues they advocate may vary, but even here there is a surprising degree of unanimity. Most recommend a life of moderation and self-control, with varying degrees of abstinence. Most prohibit murder and theft. Some prohibit lying, cheating, sexual misconduct, and intoxication--and even those that don't prohibit such activities don't have anything good to say about them. No religion I know of has anything good to say about hatred, anger, jealousy, lust, greed, or excessive pride.

All religions urge us to identify with our fellow human beings in varying degrees. This may range from recognizing that we are all in the same boat (Buddhism), to loving our neighbors as ourselves (Judaism and Christianity), to acknowledging that our neighbors ARE ourselves (Vedanta). Always we are told to treat one another with kindness and fellow-feeling. Some religions advocate pre-emptive reciprocity: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Among the virtues that religions encourage are love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and charity.

There is also a remarkable consensus with regard to spiritual practice. The West Asian religions--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam--emphasize prayer as the primary spiritual practice. Although Sri Ramakrishna himself placed great emphasis on prayer, the South Asian religions in general--Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism--place more emphasis on meditation. These two spiritual practices are complementary. Both try to focus the practitioner's full attention on ultimate

reality, although the concepts of that reality may vary. Prayer seeks it outside, meditation seeks it inside; prayer reaches out, meditation dives within; prayer speaks, meditation is silent. But both aim at accessing whatever they regard as ultimate.

Aside from prayer and meditation, most religions agree that communal worship, keeping holy company, singing hymns, and studying scriptures are all beneficial. So there is widespread agreement on the practices that lead spiritual progress.

When we talk about the harmony of religions, therefore, we need to make it clear that we are talking about harmony of practice rather than harmony of belief. We also need to emphasize Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that our practice will correct us if we go astray. That is, if we fall into error, whether of practice or belief, but continue to practice sincerely, God himself will eventually correct us and lead us in the right path.⁴ □

The Goddess

She is the stillness of a summer evening
her true self hidden in the sultry night
where shadows in the garden's opening
linger, the setting sun turning its light
all pervasive to the western sky
lest we ever fathom that formless being;
nor do we think to question as to why
her holiness has gone beyond becoming
until we find to our surprise a form
congeals itself and rises from the vastness
a love desiring in its self to be born
as a bodhisattva of compassion
of beauty and silence in the quiet of night
to be the Kwan-Yin struck by star-light.

—Elva Linnea Nelson

⁴ M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated by Swami Nikhilananda (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1942), p. 559.

A Spiritual Festival at a Vedanta Retreat

Vimukta Chaitanya

Attention, spiritually-minded people! You have a standing invitation to drop in at the Vedanta Retreat in Olema, California, some Memorial Day, and to attend there an open house. The open house is held under the auspices of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, whose property the retreat is—a hallowed island of 2200 acres within the confines of a national park on the Point Reyes Peninsula, about 35 miles northwest of San Francisco. "Open house," of course, means that the cost of putting on a day-long program is "on the house"; the meals served, the renting of hundreds and hundreds of chairs, of a number of comfort stations located in woods close by, the defraying of expenses that guest speakers incur—these and sundry amenities are all part of a package that the Vedanta Society presents as a gift to people who take an interest in the principles that underlie the life of the spirit, and in the appropriate practices. If the gift quickens that interest, helps even a few to strengthen the wings of their upward aspirations—could the Society ask for a more favorable outcome? It interprets it as a gift in return.

Memorial Day is annually observed on the last Monday in May. Most Americans have the day off. And of all the lovely days the retreat enjoys in the course of a year the last Monday in May is quite likely to be one of the loveliest.

Swami Prabuddhananda's Brainchild

The annual open house at the Vedanta Retreat was the brainchild of Swami Prabuddhananda, a much-respected senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, who has been in charge of the Vedanta Society since 1970. He dreamed up the idea in 1978, quietly and inoffensively overcame opposition to it, for naysayers there were, and from humble beginnings it has evolved into a great success.

Rome was not built in a day, and the open house is not made ready in a matter of minutes. Preparations get under way on the first Saturday in May. Monks in the Vedanta Society's monastery, sisters in its convent, devotees in its lay membership, as well as karma yogis and yoginis at large (people who practice selfless service as a means of spiritual enfoldment) —all roll up their sleeves and pitch in, to help "get the show on the road." Fields for parking have to be mowed and cordoned off; the ample grounds have to be given a face-lift by friends wielding weed eaters, rakes, shovels, trowels, and pruning shears; potholes in the

dirt roads have to be patched up; and three tents—a small information tent, a large book tent, a much larger main tent—have to be put up. Throughout all of these many activities, jointly undertaken by many hands, a spirit of camaraderie grows among the workers. It permeates the atmosphere and has an uplifting effect on the people in attendance.

A thousand people, more or less, from the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond, from all walks of life, of whatever faith, on whatever spiritual path—may be counted on to hearken to the call of the open house, which is really a call of the spirit. Their presence is not a rambunctious presence, characteristic of many a crowd; rather, it is peaceful and laid-back. A large number of people gathered together in the name of a conscious endeavor to elevate their lives has a built-in safeguard; the common investment in spiritual values is, in and of itself, a quieting influence. The scene that the open house presents is a triumph of warmth and conviviality, of peace and good will.

Promoting Interfaith Harmony

By way of promoting interfaith harmony and understanding, the Vedanta Society customarily invites guest speakers of distinction to participate—one or more well-credentialed representatives of other faiths, other movements. The Society displays its wares, but at the same time supports and appreciates and respects the cherished spiritual sentiments of people who see things differently, and welcomes them to use the retreat for the cultivation of the life of the spirit.

On this particular day, as you turn off Shoreline Highway into the retreat's entrance avenue, cross Vivekananda Bridge, drive through the "Green Cathedral"—a half mile of dirt road lined with eucalyptus trees whose limbs, overarching the road, are suggestive of the nave of a Gothic church—then enter the area where the main event unfolds, the first thing to jump out at you is a huge banner strung across the back of a handsome, commodious tent, on which are inscribed, in large letters: ANNUAL SPIRITUAL FESTIVAL VEDANTA SOCIETY OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA FOUNDED IN 1900 BY SWAMI VIVEKANANDA. The tent faces the men's retreat house, a white, colonial-style building that dates back to the gold-rush days and occupies a position of prominence on the well-watered extensive lawn in front of the house.

Entering the tent from the front, you will see, set up in the back of the tent, a large stage, offset by big bouquets of flowers in tall vases, tastefully arranged. On this stage the speakers of the day air their views, with the help of a public address system that reaches well beyond the tent. When the flaps on the sunny side of the

tent are raised, those who choose to sit in the grass next to the tent on that side, soaking up sun and air, are able not only to hear but also to see the speakers.

Close by is a smaller edition of the main tent in which the Vedanta Society installs most of the books from the large bookshop at its temple in San Francisco. The thousands of books displayed are representative of all the major religious traditions, and the sale of these books, during intermissions, is brisk. Many of them, along with incense, holy pictures, religious icons and the like, end up in the hands of open-minded people, who wish to deepen their understanding with new perspectives.

The open house is accommodating as to time. One may arrive whenever one gets the urge to take a breath of spiritual air in the company of kindred spirits, and to be present at a program that elevates the mind. It's a good idea, though, to arrive 15 or 20 minutes early, to allow enough time to park in the parking area and then to get from there over to the "big top" before 10 o'clock, when the opening ceremonies begin.

Principles and Practices

The proceedings commence with a few brief introductory remarks by Swami Prabuddhananda. A song by the women's choir is followed by a few minutes of meditation. The women then chant a number of verses from the Upanishads, Vedic scriptures that date back well over 2000 years. The women chant melodiously and with the rhythmic precision required by Vedic chanting. Taking the microphone again, Swami Prabuddhananda develops his introductory remarks and, in welcoming even as he introduces the guest speakers, provides a preview of coming attractions: in the morning the speakers are to treat of their subject from the standpoint of principles, in the afternoon from the standpoint of practices. The men's choir will inaugurate the session in the afternoon with a song and, with another song, ring down the curtain on it.

At 10:30 the program proper begins. Each speaker gives a talk that addresses the topic of the day, a given spiritual theme. The purpose of each talk is to inspire and to instruct, not to indoctrinate. The question-and-answer period that follows each talk militates against foggy exposition, for there are always plenty of people in the audience who listen with their ears perked up, and who like to get things straight. In the spirit of Swami Vivekananda himself, they resist assertions too obscure for general understanding, solely on the strength of someone's say-so; they want to distinguish fact from fancy, informed from uninformed opinion. Each person who asks a question is handed a microphone, to make sure that everyone hears the question.

The retreat feeds the multitude a light lunch and, in the late afternoon, by way of wrapping up the program, provides them with a buffet dinner. The Society requests that you give it a heads-up with a phone call if you think you would like to attend the program—so that it has some idea as to how many people it has to feed. (415-922-2323)

Over the years many people have had good things to say about the Memorial Day Retreat. Some have expressed their appreciation of how smoothly the events of the day unfold. Others have commented on the freshness of the food.

At the open house a few years ago, during a question-and-answer period, a woman in the audience got up and said, "Before I ask my question I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Vedanta Society for having an open house year after year. The gracious and informative program that the Society puts on means much to me and my family." This heartfelt expression of appreciation was greeted it with spontaneous applause from other members of the audience.

The Secret Ingredient

As the sun was setting on the Memorial Day festivities for the year 2003 and the last of the food was being served to those at the end of six lines of people, three women who had already partaken of the buffet dinner, recognizing me as a member of the staff, approached me with an air of diffidence and volunteered a curious piece of information: they thought they had tasted love in the food. I told them that they had correctly identified a secret, flavor-enhancing ingredient, nonetheless real for being intangible. I told them that about 60 women had a hand in the preparation and serving of the food and that it was because they carried out this assignment in a spirit of dedication and with a devotional attitude that they were able to invest the food with love, an ingredient you won't find on the shelves of supermarkets. The three women smiled in unison. It pleased them to know that they weren't just imagining things.

The *Point Reyes Light*, a local newspaper awarded a Pulitzer Prize a number of years ago, once dispatched a staff writer to cover one of the Vedanta Society's Memorial Day programs. He treated it in positive terms in a well-written article that glowed with approval. He concluded the article with this sentence, whose every word was on target: "The ambience was wonderful—expansive, accepting, lightly humored, nonjudgmental, and hopeful." □

In Memoriam

Swami Ganeshananda (1926-2006)

Swami Ganeshananda (Charles Worth Rock) was born in a respected family in New Providence, New Jersey on November 1, 1926. His father and grandfather were Presbyterian ministers. From childhood Charles had great love for the outdoors, toddling off into the woods when he could barely walk, observing and collecting plants and animals. He especially loved snakes and would often carry them in his pockets. To pacify both him and his schoolteachers, his mother sewed zippers onto his pockets so that the snakes wouldn't emerge unwanted. Once, while on summer vacation in Maine, he had a remarkable dream which foreshadowed his later life. He dreamt that he grew up, lived his life and had all kinds of experiences, knowing all along that he would wake up and know that it was a dream. When he woke up, he felt that he wakened into that dream state.

An Adventurous Life

Charles served in the U.S. Navy from 1944 to 1946 as a weather tracker and was well liked by officers and crew. In his spare time he played the harmonica and the guitar and loved to be with fellow sailors who came from the mountains and taught him their songs. After leaving the Navy, he discovered his passion for geology. Majoring in that subject, he graduated with honors from Princeton University in 1951. He then worked for some years in Saudi Arabia as a geologist with Aramco. Once, out in the desert, he found that a wild animal was harassing a local Bedouin tribe, killing goats and endangering small children. He went out with several men to hunt the animal and shot and killed it. For this feat, the Bedouins held a feast in his honor and insisted on serving him the *piece de resistance*, the roasted tongue of the animal, which they believed gave strength to the eater. Among his many adventures, he crossed the Australian outback on a motorcycle.

In the early 1960s he moved to Santa Barbara, where he taught geology at the University of California. It was during this time that he discovered Vedanta philosophy and the Vedanta temple in Santa Barbara. He began living at the monastery of the temple in 1965 and formally joined the Ramakrishna Order the following year. He took the vows of *brahmacharya* (first monastic vows) in 1971 and of *sannyasa* (final monastic vows) in 1979, becoming Swami Ganeshananda. Soon after he moved to the monastery, Swami Prabhavananda (his teacher and the head and founder of the Vedanta Society of Southern California) told him he didn't need another name, that he should just remember that Peter was Christ's

rock. And so he often used both names, introducing himself as Ganeshananda Rock. Many friends continued to call him Rock.

Loving Kindness and Humility

Ganeshananda was a large-hearted person, much beloved by devotees and with friends in all walks of life. Many friends recall incidents of his spontaneous kindness. Once he visited a brother and sister, both artists and devotees, at a time of difficulty for the sister, who was raising four young children as a single mother. She recalls, "After dinner, Ganeshananda helped get the children ready for bed and when we tucked them in he led them in their nightly recitation of the Lord's Prayer. I cried, I was so touched by the power in his voice, and those words seemed to take on new meaning." Later, in Sacramento, when she visited the Center to paint in the garden and to visit the older swamis, "He always made sure of my comfort—bringing me food and refreshment and one time even erecting a sunshade so I wouldn't bake in the 100-degree heat."

An Indian swami who served in southern California for some years recalls, "For years he took care of me like an elder brother. He used to drive me to Santa Barbara from Hollywood every other week. He was so loving and kind. . . full of enthusiasm, never saying "No" to anyone. I went with him to the Sierras backpacking, stayed nine days under the sky at an altitude of 9,000 feet. Such enjoyable company. Learned so many things including some important things of geology. . . Our Ganeshananda is on the lap of Sri Ramakrishna."

One quality mentioned by many friends was his humility. One devotee said recently, "I cannot ever remember him taking a position of superiority over another." Another devotee writes: "Perhaps he compared himself to a higher standard than most, for he took seriously to heart the dictum, 'Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.' There is a line in Chaitanya's famous hymn: 'Be humbler than a blade of grass.' His friends often wished he would not insist on humbling himself below the least of us, but that was the foundation upon which Ganeshananda stood. It allowed him an unswerving truthfulness and an extraordinary ability to share both the downs and the ups on the spiritual path."

The same friend continues: "I don't know anyone who didn't feel his loving warmth and extraordinary personal support and encouragement, both 'in the church' and out. There are many who credit his loving support with saving their lives. Though he had traveled the world over, he said he had never in his life been afraid of another. He seemed incapable of seeing evil. If criticism of someone would arise in his presence, he would harrumph, 'Oh pshaw, only human foibles!' Perhaps that is why he could love everyone equally. Never a person in want passed Ganeshananda Rock without receiving help. His heart and his hands were always out-stretched."

Swami Ganeshananda lived for several years at the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco Canyon, Orange County, California. On the rugged terrain of the

monastery grounds, his love of nature found expression in bird-watching, and he identified nearly 125 species of birds while living there. Had he so chosen, he might have become a respected ornithologist.

Vedanta with a Western Flavor

The Swami also served at the Vedanta Society of St. Louis and the Vedanta Society of Sacramento. At both centers he gave lectures on Vedanta philosophy and in Sacramento classes on the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. One devotee recalls that his lectures tended toward nondualism. Another devotee writes: "I first got to know him at the Vedanta Temple in Sacramento. His lectures and personality were Vedanta with a Western flavor. Listening to his discussions and talks, I saw in him that I had both guru and fellow traveler. He felt no need for a manufactured image. He reminded me of Larry in Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*."

Swami Ganeshananda also spent a year in India. He regarded that year as one of the most significant periods of his life.

In his later years he returned to Santa Barbara, living mostly by himself in a trailer. Always a lover of nature, he explored the nearby hills, where he found a cave. In this cave he made a shrine to Holy Mother and spent time there in meditation and contemplation. Toward the end he developed a number of medical problems. He passed away peacefully on the afternoon of December 18, 2006 at Cottage Hospital in Santa Barbara, with two nuns and a devotee at his side chanting the name of the Lord.

—AV Staff

Film review

Happy Feet: A Wonderful Myth with Great Entertainment Value

Sister Gayatriprana

A couple of summers ago, Luc Jaquet's *The March of the Penguins*, the documentary shot by French photographers in Antarctica, riveted audiences by the intense devotion of these birds to each other and to their young. Living in almost unbelievable conditions, emperor penguins incubate their eggs during the dark Antarctic winter, with furious gales blowing, the aurora australis flickering over the sky and the temperatures something like seventy degrees below zero. While the fathers heroically hold the eggs on their feet as they huddle together with each other to conserve whatever heat there is, the mothers march up to thirty miles over the ice to the ocean where they can get fish for their about-to-be-born babies. When they return with food, the only way they can be recognized by their mate and offspring in the huge throng of penguins is by the unique sound or "song" each penguin makes.

This amazing saga caught the imagination, not only of America and the rest of the world, but also of George Miller, the Australian director of *Babe*, the 1995 blockbuster in which live animals talk to each other and a runty pig aims high in the scheme of spiritual things. He began work on *Happy Feet* before seeing *March of the Penguins*, but it is clear that he is fully aware of the facts of life of the emperor penguins, and has carried their implications forward into a timeless epic which speaks not simply to children, but to adults as well.

Bearers of Great Devotion and Love

The two features on which he builds are the feet of the penguins and the fact that each penguin has its own, unique sound by which its family knows and can find it. There is no doubt that the feet of the penguins are truly amazing. Large, dark and scaly, they can remain on the ice in sub-zero conditions and still continue to function as the precious egg is moved gently in and out of the huge mass of incubating fathers. What could such feet not do, given a little imagination? Not at all attractive in and of themselves, they are bearers of great devotion and love and potentially can convey great, universal truths. Then again, the “song” that each penguin sings and thereby makes itself known to others—how very amazing, how very geared to bringing together these creatures whose existence is so threatened by external conditions.

These features converge in Mumble, the hero of *Happy Feet*. His birth is most unusual: instead of his head popping out the top of the egg, his feet pop out the bottom. The egg rolls away from his horrified father, but stabilizes itself as the large, clunky feet begin to dance. What is going on! Finally the egg bursts and out comes Mumble—with blue eyes! Obviously, this is not your average emperor penguin. This becomes even more apparent at the singing class for newborns, presided over by a Mittel-European song mistress. She invites the chicks, including Gloria, the precocious and songful soul-mate of Mumble, to present their songs. But when Mumble’s turn comes, it is apparent that he is tone deaf and does not have a song that anyone can listen to. What will become of him? Mumble is put out of the class, and in his emotion, begins to tap dance, catching up the other chicks in the excitement.

But this is not going to do. What’s with the feet? This ain’t penguin! Thus begins the saga of Mumble, who has to struggle with ejection from the colony. The dour elders feel he is disobeying the Great Penguin in the Sky, he who showers fish on the penguins, and of whom they dream as they huddle in the long dark winter nights. The young penguins love Mumble and his dancing, but he has to go. Because of his ostracism and loneliness, he is exposed to many of the lurking dangers on the ice, but he overcomes all by dint of his indomitable spirit and enthusiasm. No matter what threatens, he offers up his dancing, and

somehow manages to break the ice (in a manner of speaking!) and make an escape. In the process, he also learns that there are other, alien creatures living beyond the ice shelf, who actively interfere in the life of the Antarctic animals.

In Search of the Featherless Aliens

In his adventures, he is befriended by Spanish-speaking Adelie penguins who live, presumably, on the islands between Antarctica and South America. These characters, led by Ramon, voiced by Robin Williams, introduce endless humor and Latin music, as they enthusiastically join Mumble in his dancing and other antics. Lovelace, an overweight Rockhopper penguin with spectacular feathers over his ears, a vast ego and a smoochy preacher style, is accepted as “the guru”, and joins Mumble and his friends as they set off in search of the featherless aliens who have created the various problems besetting Antarctica. Particularly troubling is the dearth of fish—leading to increased predation on the penguins by powerful sea birds and seals—and the various mechanical artifacts and debris cluttering the waters.

But Mumble’s companions can only go so far. Finally he has to go on alone into an unknown world, full of difficulties completely beyond his capacity to understand or deal with. Gone are the wonderful, catchy songs of the penguins and their friends, of Mumble’s dancing and the riotous antics of the Adelie penguins. Captured by humans and imprisoned in a huge “sea-world,” where he lives on a plastic island and is fed fish mechanically, he begins to lose his balance. Only the sight of a little girl appealing to him for attention gets Mumble dancing again—with consequences far beyond his or our imagination.

Packed with popular music and popular themes—including the human impact on the environment—this film also resonates with Vedantic values: the development of character, the growth of self-knowledge and the need to stand firm in one’s own vision of what is true. From the standpoint of the other penguins, Mumble is hopelessly disabled by not being able to sing and by having the strange proclivity to tap-dance. But his social isolation only strengthens his resolve, opens his mind to realities that the other penguins, totally caught up in the legend of The Great Penguin, cannot conceive of, and empowers him to go on his forbidding quest, which takes him through many fearsome adventures. It is surely no accident that the role of Mumble is played by Elijah Wood, who in *Lord of the Rings* portrayed Frodo, a role almost unbelievable in all that has to be endured up to and beyond the gates of hell.

Reviews of *Happy Feet* have ranged from ecstatic to deeply disparaging; but to this reviewer it is a very inspiring fable, made all the more enjoyable by the variety of personalities we meet, as well as by the carefully crafted dance routines and the endlessly inventive music. Whether or not it wins an Oscar, for which it is now in the running, it is wonderful entertainment and a tale of enduring value. □

Book Reviews

Vivekananda World Teacher: His Teachings on the Spiritual Unity of Humankind

Edited and with an Introduction by Swami Adiswarananda

Skylight Paths, Woodstock VT & Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York

Quality Paperback Original 272 pp. \$21.99 2006

I think American Vedantists will be pleased with this book, edited and introduced by our own Swami Adiswarananda and attractively produced by Skylight Paths, who advertise it as showing Vivekananda as "a visionary for spiritual unity and world peace."

The text consists of speeches delivered at churches and lecture halls in the United States and England, beginning in 1893, reports of him in newspapers, various appreciations from outstanding authors and spiritual leaders, including even Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother, and various reminiscences by women who were associated with him here and in India. The book concludes with a selection of letters from Vivekananda to disciples and friends and some of his poems. A Chronology of important points in Swamiji's life is appended.

The central theme for the selection of these pieces is the spiritual unity of humankind as it stumbles on its way, with many ups and downs, toward the realization of a universal religion. In Vivekananda's view, one has only to consider the meaning of religion itself and the real nature of the human being, to see how the great spiritual teachers of the world have brought the same message of the unity and divinity of the human race. And Swami Adiswarananda elaborates this message by his choice of material touching on Vivekananda's presentations of these traditions as he sees them bearing witness to the Ultimate as a constant living Presence among us.

The first chapter in the book is Swami Nikhilananda's paper, "Swami Vivekananda: India and America," which may be familiar to many of our readers, but the Introduction is a new piece by Adiswarananda, in which he highlights the social doctrine of Swamiji, more relevant today than ever. In the face of our present large scale conflicts "between secular values and faith, between the economically developed and the underdeveloped societies, between generations, between religions, between reason and dogma, between human beings and nature," he says, we find all the more compelling Vivekananda's proclamation of "the oneness of existence, unity of faiths, nonduality of the Godhead, and divinity of the soul."

This insight "makes a person see that life is interdependent... No one can be at peace while others are unhappy. No one can enjoy prosperity while surrounded by a world of poverty," says Adiswarananda. I note here an absence of the notion that anyone's poverty or unhappiness is simply the outcome of one's karma and we ought not to interfere. Instead, I notice he brings out that "evolution continues on the mental, moral, and spiritual planes," and "self-sacrifice for the good of others, giving and serving," is spiritual practice.

World peace, social peace, depends on individual peace, which is achieved only by knowledge of the true Self in its positive value. So we ought to educate ourselves and one another to "manifest the perfection" already in us. Political reform and economic regeneration alone will not do it. "The world is in need of a new spiritual revival. . . . Fear, hatred, bigotry, and war are symptoms of a forgotten spiritual unity" which can be restored by our realizing that "the same God dwells in all." This is Swami Adiswarananda's urgent message to us through this fine book on Vivekananda.

There are a good number of photographs in the book, some of which I had not seen before, a helpful and convenient Chronology of Swamiji's life, and a full page about Swami Adiswarananda himself.

This volume is an example of Skylight Paths' creative venture into co-publication, in this case together with the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York. The inside covers and last few pages are given over to information about other books available both from that Center and from Skylight Paths, which offers the fundamental texts of a good variety of spiritual traditions as well as modern commentaries and spiritual practice presentations. I appreciated having this catalogue right in the book itself.

—Beatrice Bruteau

The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason

By Sam Harris (with a new afterword)

W.W. Norton & Company. New York and London

348 pp. paperback \$13.95 2005

1. Steven F. Walker

Written in the aftermath of the Islamist terrorist attacks of 9/11, Harris' book is a kind of intellectual terrorist counter-attack of its own sort, designed to make complacently religious people wake up and realize how much their own indulgence in fuzzy thinking and tradition-sanctioned, self-righteous "faith" continue to feed the kind of religious fanaticism that threatens the world today. In his attack on "faith" Harris takes no prisoners. For him, nothing in "the pervasive and lunatic influence of religious belief" (234) is worth preserving, not even when it gives the appearance of being benign.

For Harris, people who believe they can be selective in their choice of things to believe in are just deluding themselves; sacred texts, the source of enshrined superstition, cannot be read selectively, as religious liberals insist, since the very mode of believing on faith what you cannot see or experience condemns even thoughtful people to the state of being dangerously delusional. So if you allow yourself to start going dewy-eyed over guardian angels, soon you will wind up sanctioning others joining the celestial army of the Angel of the Apocalypse; if you start working up some warm devotional feeling for the baby Krishna, don't be surprised if less meekly devotional folk bring on the "light brighter than a thousand suns" of the nuclear holocaust. There is no such thing as a peaceful or even innocuous faith for Harris: "the whole terrible edifice of religious certainty still looming dangerously over the world" is something he fervently wishes to be demolished. (233). In other words, Harris has his own Twin Towers to attack, and for him they are the Twin Towers of Faith and Superstition, each one a mirror image of the other—identical twins, so to speak. As an enlightened skeptic who actually has real respect for mystical experience, Harris believes that we must resolutely resolve to replace "the dogma of faith" with "genuine inquiry and genuine criticism" (223), and that, if our determination wavers, we must remember that "the men who committed the atrocities of September 11 . . . were not lunatics in any ordinary sense. They were men of faith—perfect faith, as it turns out—and this, it must finally be acknowledged, is a terrible thing to be." (67)

The Value of Exaggerated Clarity

The last statement may seem—as do many of Harris' more extravagant pronouncements—more than a bit fanatical in its own way. But there is real value in enunciating things with what we might call "exaggerated clarity," and I personally feel that there is definitely something thought provoking in Harris' diatribe, even at its most abrasive. For that reason I would like to juxtapose three quotations as a way of getting into what I feel is the positive dimension of his discussion. First of all, a quote from Adam Gopnik writing on Voltaire in the March 7, 2005 issue of the *New Yorker*: "It is still bracing, at a time when the extreme deference we pay to faith has made any attack on religious beliefs unacceptable, to hear Voltaire on Jesuits and Muslims alike—to hear him howl with indignation at the madness and malignance of religion—and to be reminded that free-thinking, which inspired Twain and Mencken, has almost vanished from our world." (p. 81) The second is a comment by Vivekananda on Ramakrishna's teachings (in the booklet *Sri Ramakrishna As I Saw Him*): "Do you know what the ruling sentiment amongst us is? Non-sectarianism. Our Lord was born to point that out. He would accept all forms, but would say that, looked at from the standpoint of the knowledge of Brahman, they were only illusory Maya." (p. 148) And finally, another quote from Vivekananda ("Practical Vedanta," CW II,

p. 302-3): “Would to God no superstitions had been put into your head! Would to God we had not been surrounded from our birth by all these superstitious influences and paralyzing ideas . . . But man had to pass through all this . . . What is there to be taught more in religion than the oneness of the universe and faith in oneself?”

Now there is a kind of progression in the quotes as I have given them, a sequence of ideas. First of all, there is the thesis that religious superstition is not a harmless thing, but rather something baneful that has had and continues to have terrible consequences, as Harris emphasizes repeatedly in *The End of Faith*, and so would best be wiped off the face of the planet; we would be well advised to “crush the Awful Thing,” as Voltaire frequently urged: “*Ecrasez l’Infâme!*”. Secondly, that idea’s antithesis: religious superstitions, and indeed all ways of representing or theorizing the divine, may be ultimately illusory from the standpoint of Ultimate Truth, but there is no point in fighting about them or trying to eliminate them; they need to be accepted equally as partial truths. The third idea—the synthesis—is that, ultimately illusory as they may well be, superstitions have still been a necessary evil as steps in the gradual ascent to truth.

Satisfying Regressive Needs with Enabling Fiction

But Harris would have none of this, since he hopes to replace religious superstitions—what he calls “faith,” things accepted without evidence—with experiential mysticism and science. This sounds very Vedantic. But let’s pause before we cheer. How ready are most people for an attitude that rejects the crutch of faith, and accepts mystical experience—realization—as the only guarantor of truth? Not many. How often are even the best of us ready to dwell on the heights of self-reliance and to cultivate constantly the sense of the oneness of the universe? To “love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself”? At best, probably not all the time! In the meantime, we all have regressive needs, and maybe it is the function of religious faith—superstitions—to provide us with the enabling fiction that keeps us from losing our mind and so our capacity to struggle spiritually in the dark night of the soul where nothing seems sure and the way seems to lead into a labyrinth of doubt and confusion.

But Sam Harris can be persuasive when it comes to the issue of soothing oneself with apparently innocuous fairy tales that in fact ought to be called the “mountains of life-destroying gibberish” (23) found in so many “sacred” books, especially when we live in an age where, for example, India and Pakistan are “poised to exterminate one another with nuclear weapons simply because they disagree about ‘facts’ that are every bit as fanciful as the names of Santa’s reindeer.” (26-27) All right—it may be that Harris is ranting and raving here, but his remark suggests to me the analogy of “faith” with nuclear power. Both can be

useful, but both can also destroy the world. It would be nice to keep both out of the hands of crazy and evil people, but if that is not possible (Harris does entertain the idea of “reforming” religions, but is in the end not too sanguine about this option), then to eliminate both altogether—nobody gets to use it, for good or for evil. This is not a totally off the wall idea; after all, at one point in its history, Japan outlawed the use and possession of Western firearms. So might it not be possible, for the good of humanity, to outlaw faith? Totalitarian dictatorships tried that—the results were not permanent, and in all events required a dictatorship to do it. Then why not try an enlightened, liberal solution: get the United Nations to adopt Vedanta as its official religion! No, no, no—bad idea. Would never work—never *should* work. As the Koran says (words much quoted by those Harris sees as desperately trying to place a happy face on Islam) “there should be no compulsion in matters of religion.”

Religious Faith Is What People Make of It

So it would seem to me, but not to Harris, that we are *stuck* with “faith” (just as we may be stuck with nuclear power), and that we had better learn how to handle it better than humanity has done in the past. Harris’ project of “desacralizing faith itself” assumes that you can take the sense of the sacred out of faith and still call it faith. I don’t think so, although I certainly agree that “as long as it is acceptable for a person to believe that he knows how God wants everyone on earth to live we will continue to murder one another on account of our myths.” (*The End of Faith*, p. 134) Harris is particularly critical of Islam, although what he quotes from Fareed Zakaria would seem to apply to any religion: “the problem with thundering declarations about ‘Islam’s nature’ is that Islam, like any religion, is not what the books make it but what people make it.” (p. 148) Look at it this way: Ramakrishna worshipped Kali (another ultimately illusory deity, from the standpoint of Maya theory), and was all loving and accepting. But the Thugs also worshipped Kali with great fervor, and sacrificed—murdered—so many people to her over the centuries that Louise Richardson, the leading expert on comparative terrorism, is willing to grant them the status of the most successfully murderous terrorist organization in human history. That fact would leave us to conclude that there is no heavenly faith that human beings cannot make into a hellish thing, and so we are back to Voltaire’s and Harris’ depressing list of the very real crimes of “the Awful Thing” throughout the length of human history. Faith mixed with human psychological and social pathologies is a real witch’s brew, a nuclear cocktail of the third kind. Someone is bound to use it the wrong way. And, with nuclear arsenals backing up the armies of the faithful, that may be The End.

But let’s not panic. Since we cannot expect a future in which really nasty psychopaths and outright crazies will cease to exist or will in all events not “get

religion,” we probably need to devise ways of *managing* faith, not of *eliminating* it. One way—and it is a way that sincere and good-hearted people of faith have instinctively practiced from time immemorial—is to insist on the primary value of faith as a stimulus for individual growth in spirituality. Individual spiritual struggle is an absorbing task, a *life*-absorbing task, and keeps a person centered and minding his or her own business. If a person “cultivates his own garden” (as Voltaire argued at the end of *Candide*), he or she will have enough problems to deal with, and will not have the time or the energy to go and tell other people how to live their lives.

Internalizing the Apocalypse Myth

Let us conclude with two examples of how this time honored procedure of minding one’s own spiritual business works in practice. First of all, let’s consider the apocalyptic myths and obsessions that Harris rightly fears will contribute to war and worse in the near future. Now it may be true that the expectation that the world is about to undergo a Really Big Transformation into a Brave New World is a clear sign of a childish mentality. But the hope that one may someday (hopefully soon!) experience a radical individual transformation, and the faith that this is not merely a false hope, is a beneficial faith that has pragmatic value, in that it keeps a person struggling spiritually even when the going gets tough. This faith is the result of an *internalization* of the Apocalypse myth, that is, of taking it as referring to the spiritual transformation of the inner self and not to the physical transformation of the outer world. When taken this way as a myth of individual spiritual transformation, the Apocalypse myth serves as a stimulus to individual effort, rather than feeding zany power fantasies of a New World where the faithful will lord it over the rest of us.

Secondly, religious fanaticism is certainly a most serious problem in our world, and Harris is right, I believe, in castigating religious “moderates” for not standing up against it. But fanaticism can be a good thing, *if* it is made to concern the individual person of faith and not other people, that is, if it is *internalized*. We do not wish to act like the fanatical and narrow-minded servant Joseph in *Wuthering Heights* (Chapter 5), “the weariest self-righteous Pharisee that ever ransacked a Bible to rake the promises to himself and fling the curses to his neighbors.” Let’s keep the promises *and* the curses for ourselves, and seriously worry about working on our own spiritual life and not about correcting or criticizing or demonizing others. For Vedantists in particular, *ishta nistha*, the intense and unwavering inner devotion to one’s own spiritual ideal, includes that beneficial type of internalized fanaticism but precludes sectarianism. So, if the ideal is right for me, that is enough—God will take care of everyone else according to their own needs. I just need to keep at cultivating my own garden—thank you, Voltaire!

2. John Richard Orens

Sam Harris has written a screed against religion filled with errors, half-truths, and outright falsehoods. That *The End of Faith* includes a defense of mysticism does little to redeem it. Yet critics have showered it with praise, some because they do not understand religion, others because they do not understand Harris's intentions.

The End of Faith is not a plea for religious moderation. It begins with a portrait of a suicide bomber because Harris contends that the archetypal religious believer is a bloodthirsty terrorist. It is a claim that is absurd on the face of it, and one with which no responsible anthropologist, historian, or theologian of any tradition would agree. But Harris ignores anthropology, abuses history, and misinterprets the little theology he has read. His subject is not religion as it is actually practiced, but religion as he imagines it to be, and that religion is very ugly. It is, he tells us, the source of all our woes: every war, every cruelty, every sexual neurosis. Jewish, Christian, and Islamic monotheism, in particular, wreaks havoc by propounding irrational dogmas based on incompatible books that the faithful revere as verbatim transcripts of God's word. Blinded by their "delusional and psychotic" creeds, believers are thus doomed to wage war on one another and on anyone who disagrees with them.

Making Sense of Religious Faith

An indictment as broad as this would at first seem to defy criticism, and Harris makes it clear that he is uninterested in what Jews, Christians, and Muslims might say in their own defense. Since religion is absurd, he writes, there is no point in talking to those who cling to it. One might as well enter into dialogue with people who believe in Batman or unicorns. But although Harris is unwilling to question his preconceptions, we must do so, for only if we dispose of his simplistic infidelity can we make sense of the religious faith that, for good or ill, continues to shape our world.

One of the most glaring faults of *The End of Faith* is its obsessive present-mindedness. Everything we believe, Harris insists, ought to be discoverable now. And this means that religion has no place in the modern world because, he claims, it alone among all the forms of human endeavor is enslaved by unchanging tradition. Harris sounds the tocsin of modernity, but none of what he says is true. No single human being, no single generation, could verify the principles that sustain our common life. Whatever may be said of the natural sciences, whose methods are closer to those of theology than Harris believes, religion, like art, literature, music, and morality, embodies the collective wisdom of centuries.

This does not mean that religion is enslaved by the past, although at times Harris seems to think that it should be. He accuses liberal believers of intellectual dishonesty, complaining that faced with the challenges of the Enlightenment and its offspring, they have adulterated their scriptures and dogmas without admitting it. But, at least for Jews and Christians, it is fundamentalism that is the post-Enlightenment novelty. The biblical authors themselves delighted in metaphor and allegory. Talmudic rabbis and church fathers alike interpreted their holy books with a freedom that would shock Harris as much as it would the zealots of the religious right. Most exponents of traditional doctrine have shown a similar intellectual flexibility. Blinkered by his narrow conception of truth, Harris treats doctrine as if it were a set of arcane propositions deduced once and for all by theological idiot-savants. But Jewish, Christian and Islamic theology is a living thing that develops from the encounter between scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. Far from restricting our vision, orthodox doctrine at its best has sought to expand it. This is why the great Christian creeds are shot through with paradox.

Unfortunately, Harris is too much the literalist to grasp any of this. In his eyes the Bible and the Qur'an are little more than "mountains of life-destroying gibberish." And he ridicules the central doctrines of Christianity without even a hint that he has tried to understand them. Noting, for example, that the Christian faith offers no immediate and verifiable payoffs, he asks what value there could be for struggling human beings to know that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. Of course, if Christians looked upon the resurrection merely as a supernatural anomaly, the answer would be "none." But if the resurrection reveals something about our common fate and thus about the meaning of life, accepting it could have enormous value. Placed in the context of Christ's self-sacrifice, it might even help us learn how to love, as it has helped generations of Christians past.

Has Religion Done More Harm Than Good?

But Harris sees the past very differently. As he tells it, the history of the Church—indeed the history of all religions—is a catalog of horrors. Here, at last, Harris would seem to be on firm ground, for religious faith has inspired plenty of horrors, as Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars readily admit. But Harris's account suffers from three fatal flaws. First, it is so heavily weighted on the dark side as to distort the past beyond recognition. Harris assures us that his chronicle is bleak only because religion has done more harm than good, but the historical record reveals otherwise. The second flaw in Harris's argument is that he assumes that if crimes are committed in the name of faith, it must be faith that is to blame. Thus, when Bishop Raymond de Faugeres, whose persecuting zeal was excessive even by medieval standards, had an old Cathar woman burned at the

stake, Harris writes that the prelate was only acting as a good Christian should. That the bishop might have been acting as a bad Christian never crosses his mind. And so he has not the slightest doubt that Osama bin Laden is only acting as a good Muslim should.

The history Harris recounts has yet another flaw: often it is just plain wrong, the victim of sloppy research and personal animus. Like many secularists, Harris does not like St. Augustine, and so he is willing to believe the nastiest things about him on the flimsiest of grounds. Writing about the Roman use of torture in judicial proceedings, Augustine reluctantly concluded that there were times when the practice could be justified. Relying not on Augustine's words, but on the potted account in Otto Friedrich's *The End of the World*, Harris trumpets this as proof not of secular cruelty, but of Christian savagery. And when Friedrich misinterprets the fourth-century bishop and accuses him of holding rape victims responsible for their own suffering, Harris follows suit.

Are Apostles of Reason Immune from Murderous Hatred?

The same recklessness and prosecutorial zeal mars Harris's forays into modern history. Drawing heavily on Daniel Goldhagen's controversial studies, he places almost the entire blame for secular racism and anti-Semitism on religious prejudice. Harris admits that the Nazis were anti-Christian as well as anti-Semitic, but he insists that they too were religious, for in Harris's mind to be dogmatic and irrational, as the Nazis surely were, is to be religious, just as to be religious is to be intolerant. Not surprisingly, in Harris's world, apostles of reason are immune to murderous hatred. Reading *The End of Faith* one would not know that there was such a thing as Social Darwinism, nor would one suspect that rationalists could denounce Christianity and still be anti-Semites, among them the renowned positivist philosopher Eugen Dühring, who called upon his fellow Germans "to exterminate these [Jewish] parasites as we exterminate snakes and beasts of prey." If, as Harris argues, reason has the power to extend our moral sympathies, that power is uncertain and severely limited.

To give him his due, it is not only western monotheists that Harris criticizes. Everyone with whom he disagrees receives the same slash-and-burn treatment, be they pragmatists, relativists, or the pacifists he ridicules as "moral imbeciles." But, convinced that the love of God is the root of all evil, it is to religion that Harris always returns. Trying to account for the depth of his fury, one might assume that it has been provoked by the threat of Islamic terrorism. But sometimes Harris gets overwrought simply because religion gets in the way of his personal autonomy. He lumps sodomy, prostitution, and pornography together as if it were self-evident that they are equally victimless activities, and then castigates religious folk for wanting to outlaw them. Without a scintilla of evidence, he accuses Jews and Christians of inspiring the war on drugs because

they fear that psychotropic chemicals, among them DMT and ecstasy, would enable people to do without God. He even has a kind word for crack, apparently finding it less objectionable than the Eucharist.

Yet for all his scientific and libertarian bravado, Harris is neither a materialist nor a moral anarchist. Like a growing number of modern skeptics, he acknowledges that mystical experience reveals truths about the universe and ourselves that would otherwise be inaccessible. The most important of these is that the dualistic distinction we make between the self and the world is an illusion. To experience this truth, writes Harris, is to find the root of compassion and love. Mystics of all faiths and none have long known this, and Harris is doubtless right to argue that one can plumb the depths of consciousness without believing in God. But just when the religious might hope that Harris is opening the door to conversation with them, he slams the door in their face. "Religion," he declares, "is nothing more than bad concepts held in place of good ones for all time." To bring reason, spirituality, and ethics together, is not to find common ground with faith, but to end faith once and for all.

It is a sad end to a sad book, and it again raises the question of why Harris prefers diatribe to dialogue. To suggest that he longs to be the Anne Coulter of atheism would only beg the question. Perhaps part of the answer lies in the oft repeated words of Harris's bugaboo, St. Augustine: "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." One need not believe in Augustine's Lord, or any lord, to find in Harris's angry prose evidence of an unsettled heart. Where it will find its rest remains to be seen. □

Report

Vedanta Center of Atlanta dedicates new chapel

Friday had been cold, by Georgia reckoning, in the fifties and cloudy. Saturday morning, January 13th, dawned sunny and bright, taking us to 70 degrees. Sunday, the same! Obviously the Divine Mother had smiled on our double holy celebration, as Monday was again quite cold. It must have been especially welcome to our two guests from southern California: Swami Swahanandaji and Swami Ishtanandaji. The former had graciously agreed to do the dedication of our newly-built Chapel (or prayer hall, as some prefer to call it) to Sri Ramakrishna. Swami Swahananda is one of two monks now in America who are the spiritual sons of the Master's great Disciples, the other being Swami Sarvagatanandaji of Boston, who no longer travels.



Exterior of Chapel



Swami Ishtananda, Swami Swahananda, a Devotee, Swami Yogeshananda



Interior of Chapel



Swami Swahananda



Musical Group



Swami Ishtananda, Swami Yogeshananda

Swami Swahananda has always shown interest in, and furthered, the work of the Vedanta Center of Atlanta. It was he who came in 2000 to dedicate the property when it was acquired. His stimulating message was a central part of Saturday's program. Other features were Vedic chants; prayers of blessing from representatives of Buddhism, Judaism, Sufism, Christianity and Sikhism; bhajans led by Swami Ishtananda; instrumental music from a group led by Amitava Sen's sweet violin; music on the vina; and songs by American devotees of the Center. A large tent had been set up in the yard where lunch was served to all. Over one hundred persons attended the Dedication.

On Sunday the Center observed the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda. Swami Ishtananda performed the worship and sang bhajans. Swami Swahananda spoke on the significance of the life and teachings of Vivekananda. The devotees had the customary opportunity to offer flowers. Over lunch they talked with the Swamis.

Need for More Room

Services had been held in the original house since 1999. As attendance and membership grew, it had become clear that the house did not have a room large enough to meet our needs, and plans were laid to erect a meeting place on the nearly one-acre property. The brand new Chapel is located a short distance to the east of the original house. Its shrine, however, was built in 1994. We moved it from the house, where it had been the focus of worship there. The mural, painted by the French artist Ode Droit, is reminiscent of Rajasthan painting. Overall planning was done by the well-known Atlanta architect Kermit Marsh. Important parts of the building were contributed by the work of talented devotees.

Thus the design of Swami Bhashyanandaji, the founder of the Center, to have Vedanta permanently established in the city of Atlanta, as another unit of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, comes closer to fulfillment. As a small Center, we were only able to accomplish this expensive undertaking with generous financial contributions, as well as a commercial loan. We are very hopeful and prayerful that sympathetic and devoted persons will come to our assistance to repay it quickly.

—Swami Yogeshananda

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