

Editorial

Emerging Divinity

In our last issue, we considered the Divine Feminine in India, Mexico and ancient Greece. In this issue we consider Christian, Jewish, secular American and Native American manifestations.

Although Judaism and Christianity generally conceive the Divine as masculine, there are aspects of those traditions that give scope to a feminine representation. Beatrice Bruteau, James M. Somerville and Laura Bernstein explore these aspects. Pravrijika Akhanda-prana celebrates a very special American goddess whom we often forget and abuse, while Sr. Judith, Hermit of Sarada, honors her indigenous roots with a poem to the Great Mother.

Beatrice Bruteau examines two concepts which relate the sacred to the world: the Theotokos of Christianity and the Shekhinah of Judaism. The Theotokos—the God-bearer, the Mother of God—and the Shekhinah—the presence of God on earth—are interpreted by the author to represent the divinity in the material world.

Swami Vivekananda once said, “If the Buddha is the evolved amoeba, the amoeba was the involved Buddha also” (III: 407). From the standpoint of spiritual evolution, the potential for life, mind and enlightened awareness lies within matter itself. The world bears the seed of the sacred. Given the right circumstances, the potential will become actual. Life will evolve, mind will evolve, consciousness will emerge. This is the sacredness of Mother Earth: she has been the scene of the divine emergence. Buddhas and Christs have lived and walked here. Sublime art, music and literature, acts of transcendent love and service, unflinching search for truth have happened here. Overcoming all obstacles, defying all odds, spirit has manifested. Having manifested, spirit sees spirit inherent in all things. The saint sees the divine presence everywhere. All beings are seen as incarnations of the divine, participating in the ongoing creation of the world.

The artistic impulse is part of this creativity. To select and represent, to bring together in a conceptual whole of beautiful form, to discover the meaning behind the form and to communicate this meaning to others, is part of the emergence of spirituality. *American Vedantist* supports efforts to create sacred art. In the current issue, Laura Bernstein includes with the sharing of her spiritual journey two musical settings of a prayer from Biblical Psalms which she uses as a mantra; John Schlenck describes the building of an interfaith oratorio to celebrate interreligious harmony; Sr. Judith shares a prayer poem to Mother Earth; P. Shneidre continues his modern English rendering of the poetry of the medieval Kashmiri saint Lalla, to be recited as a performance monologue; and a sketch is shown of the new worship hall to be built for the Vedanta Center of Atlanta.

—The Editors

Theotokos and Shekhinah

Beatrice Bruteau

The Christian scripture of the Gospel according to John (1. 3) speaks of the world as being made by the formative power of the Logos, the Word and the Intellectual Principle or Reason, and speaks of the Logos itself as having been generated from an Original Principle of Existence called, in relation to the Logos, the Father, an appellation of God among both Jews and Greeks. John 1:18 says:

No one has ever seen God. The singly-generated God (*monogenes theos*) who is in the emptiness (*kolpon*: usually rendered ‘bosom,’ but really meaning ‘pocket,’ from ‘hollow’) of the Father, that one has exegeted.

The world, therefore, is the exegesis of the Invisible God.

This is the beginning of an answer to questions about the nature and value of the world, the ground for believing in ecological values and practicing ecological virtues. Since all forms are forms of the Formless (Emptiness, *Shunyata*), children of the Invisible God called Father, this is the foundation for that universal kinship on which is grounded our general attitude toward the world as sacred.

The Theotokos

Now I want to introduce another icon for the sacred world, one which carries the same message but reverses the metaphoric roles. This is the icon of the Theotokos, the Godbearer, the Mother of God. The Father/Child emphasized the generative character of the Invisible, for which reason it was named Parent. The icon of the Theotokos takes up the birth-giving character of the world and regards the offspring as divine. It draws attention to gestation, gradual formation and emergence. The divine is hidden in the body of the material world, where it grows secretly, in terms of its own internal programs of formation, until it can be birthed into full visibility.

A feeling for this value in the world shows in medieval alchemical work. where the metaphor for the development of spiritual consciousness out of human animality is the transmutation of base materials into the gold of the spirit: the liberation of God from matter. Carl Jung felt that “for the alchemist the one primarily in need of redemption is . . . the deity who is . . . sleeping in matter.”

The alchemist is working to see whether he can free the divine soul.¹ The alchemist thus becomes a kind of midwife, understanding and assisting the birth, while the actual mother is the cosmos itself, and the child to be born represents divinity incarnate in the world. One thinks of the Epistle to the Romans:

The whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now. . .
For the creation waits with eager longing for the emergence of the
children of God . . . because the creation itself will be set free from its
bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of
God. (Rom 8:22,19,21)

This aspiration has been taken up by poets:

The cherub with his flaming sword is hereby commanded to leave his
guard at the tree of life, and when he does, the whole creation will be
consumed, and appear infinite, and holy, whereas it now appears
finite and corrupt. . .

But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be
expunged.

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to
man as it is, infinite.

— William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*)

The gradual appearance of consciousness, freedom, holiness, divinity, the infinite, is the gestation taking place in the cosmic Theotokos. It is a cosmic effort, work, organic process, growth, whose intention is to bring forth the values of the infinite and the divine in the forms of finitude and matter.

And Jesus progressed in wisdom and age and giftedness before God
and humanity. (Lk 2:52)

The progressive growth of the Divine Child is the story of the universe, the unifying factor that makes it a single intercommunicating system. In this systemic growth, everything participates, everything contributes. Nothing is insignificant, nothing is lost, nothing is wasted, nothing can be held private. Everything is knitted in and has its consequences. It is a community project. The offspring of the Theotokos is “the image of the invisible God,” in which “all things hold together” and in which “all the fullness of God” can “dwell,” because “all things, whether on earth or in the heavens” are thereby harmonized and brought into unity (Col 1:15,17,19,20).

The fructifying stage of the Theotokos comes when the Cosmos-Community becomes conscious enough to realize that it is the self-expression of the Invisible God. Thus the world does not exist to be escaped, or to be subjected to human

1. Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), 299-300.

manipulation, or to be neglected, but to be nurtured to “maturity, to the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ,” as a single and “whole body, framed accurately together and lifted up together, through every connection and channel of communication and supply, according to the operation in measure of each one's part”; in this way “the growth of the body” advances as something that is “building itself in love” (Eph 4:13,16).

[B. Bruteau, “The Theotokos Project,” in Albert J. LaChance & John E. Carroll, eds., *Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 57-58.]

Shekhinah

Another word for the relation of the sacred to the world is the Hebrew *Shekhinah*, meaning the dwelling or presence of God on earth. It is used to avoid a misleading anthropomorphism and to signify some kind of divine immanence.

In Kabbalistic mysticism, the Shekhinah is regarded as the female aspect of God.

The feminine principle . . . is . . . identified with the Divine Presence, the essence of God that pervades all creation. It is this Essence that is the true beauty of all things. Thus, whenever one contemplates any beauty, he must realize that this is the Divine Essence.

—Nehunia ben Hakanah (tr. Aryeh Kaplan)²

She is also Torah, who puts on the garment of this world. “But the essence of the garment is the body; the essence of the body is the soul! . . . The Communion of Israel is the body who receives the soul, the Beauty of Israel. . . who is real Torah.” As with the Johannine Logos, it is also said of Torah that She created the angels and all the worlds, and that the soul of Torah is the generative invisible God. Torah must sit in this garment of world-stories, but those “who know more do not look at the garment but rather at the body under that garment,” and the wise ones “look only at the soul, the root of all,” and “in the time to come they are destined to look at the soul of the soul. . . the Holy Ancient One.”³

This Presence speaks to the mystic, identifying herself: “I am the Mother . . . I am the emissary of the Holy One. . . I watch over you steadily.” She gives instruction similar to that in Vedantic texts:

Go to a pure place, thinking constantly of Torah without letting your thoughts wander even for a second, even while you are eating or talking. . . Unify your heart constantly, at all times, at all hours, in all

2. Perle Besserman, ed., *The Way of the Jewish Mystics* (Boston: Shambala, 1994), p. 57.

3. *Zohar* (tr. Daniel Chanan Matt) quoted in Besserman, pp. 52-55, rearranged.

places, thinking of nothing except me, as I appear in my Torah and ritual. This is the mystery of unity, where a person yokes himself literally with his Creator. For the soul that attaches itself to Him, along with its body and limbs, literally becomes a “Camp of the Shekhinah.”⁴

She is also Sabbath:

She is Sabbath! United in the secret of One, to draw down upon Her the secret of One. . . . When Sabbath enters She is alone. . . . All powers of wrath and masters of judgment flee from Her. There is no power in all the worlds aside from Her. Her face shines with a light from beyond; She is crowned from below by the holy people, and all of them are crowned with new souls . . . and beaming faces.⁵

Returning to the Christian scriptures, the Apostle Paul says, “And we with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the glory of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect” (2 Cor. 3:18). Thus the work of the Theotokos/Shekhinah is to enable God to emerge in and as the world through the world's own creative activities. Matthew Fox reminds us of Meister Eckhart's strong words, “The seed of God is in us. . . . The seed of God grows into God,” and goes on to say growing into God means that “we are ourselves part of the cosmogenesis and its patient and evolutionary ways.” Therefore, we may trust the world's experimental, adaptive creativity as we participate in the world-project, which, as Fox continues, “consists in our growing more and more brightly into birthers and creators like God.”⁶ □

Mary and the Myth of the Divine Mother

James M. Somerville

The Catholic Church does not say that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a divine incarnation, and it is careful to condemn any attempt to deify her. But in practice she is so highly honored with impressive churches built in her honor, with miracles attributed to her intercession, and with her appearances at shrines such as Lourdes in France and Fatima in Portugal, that she has almost achieved the status of an avatar.

4. Joseph Caro (tr. Aryah Kaplan) quoted in Besserman, pp. 56-57.

5. *Zohar* (tr. Matt) quoted in Besserman, pp. 60-61.

6. Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear, 1983), pp.183-84.

Oddly enough, we learn very little about Mary from the Gospels. She doesn't speak in the Gospels according to Mark and Matthew or in the Acts of the Apostles. Even Luke's Gospel gives us little insight into what she might have been like. When an angel tells her that she, though still a virgin, is to become the mother of the redeemer, she believes the angel and accepts the assignment, saying, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). When, after searching for three days, she and her husband Joseph finally find the truant twelve-year-old boy Jesus in the temple, Mary scolds him, saying, "Why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety" (Luke 2:48). In the Fourth Gospel she shows compassion at the marriage feast in Cana when she calls Jesus' attention to the fact that the wine has run out. The few words attributed to Mary do not greatly advance our knowledge of her character and personality. (The canticle attributed to Mary—her Magnificat—and the canticles assigned to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and to the elderly Simeon in Luke's Gospel are usually regarded as compositions of the evangelist.)

An Icon of Cosmic Proportions

With so little information available about Mary, the fact remains that from a devotional point of view and from subsequent theological elaborations, she has grown in stature in the minds and hearts of her devotees in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches to become an icon of cosmic proportions. She is the embodiment of the Great Mother, the Everlasting Woman, the Archetypal Feminine. Like her son Jesus, she did not inherit the stain of original sin handed down from our first parents. Like her son Jesus, she was assumed into heaven after her death and reigns as Regina Caeli, Queen of Heaven. Literally thousands of books have been written about Mary in scores of languages. Yet, the fact remains that we know little more about her beyond the fact that she was the mother of Jesus.

Among the archetypes of the unconscious lies the category of "The Woman." She may be a sorceress, a temptress, a sinner like Eve, a virtuous virgin, or a benevolent mother. Mary is portrayed as both virgin and mother. She fulfills a human need for the maternal aspect of deity. The Western view of God is heavily weighted with masculine imagery. God the Father is male; so too is his Son. Yet, as anyone with any degree of spiritual sophistication knows, God is beyond sex. Jesus chided those who thought that sexual differences would remain after death. No, in the resurrection they will be like the angels, like God? beyond the male-female distinctions (Matt 22:30).

But as Ramakrishna knew so well, we may approach God without form, as the Absolute, or with form as the divine Mother. We may apply to her what Lex

Hixon in *Coming Home* speaks of as the “Continuum of Consciousness,” which disports itself in the world of forms without ceasing to be the Formless. Mary, like the Egyptian goddess Isis, is a Mater Dolorosa, a mother who suffers the loss of a loved one, and like Isis who is traditionally pictured holding her infant son Horus in her arms, she is the Madonna *par excellence*. Mary inherited the mantle of the Greek and Roman goddesses without missing a beat. Psychologically, she fills the role of a feminine incarnation or avatar.

Several things distinguish the story about Mary from the stories about other highly favored women. First, there were biblical women who bore a child in their old age. Sarah, Rachel, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, were all beyond the age for conceiving when they became pregnant as a special favor granted them by God. However, they conceived in the ordinary way. Mary conceived without human intervention. Secondly, unlike women in pagan mythology, she was not impregnated by a God. The manner of her conceiving was a true parthenogenesis. She conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit without insemination. There was no male contribution of any kind, whether human or divine. Thirdly, while other women in the Bible conceived in their old age, Mary was, if anything, under age, possibly as young as fifteen. So hers was presented as an authentic virginal conception.

Fulfilling a Psychological Need

As a consequence, Mary fills the role of the archetypal virgin as well as that of the archetypal mother. She is portrayed as the daughter of the Father, the mother of the Son, and the spouse of the Holy Spirit, almost like a fourth person of the Holy Trinity. All whimsy aside, it should be evident that Mary, the antithesis of sinful Eve, fulfills a psychological need that is latent in the human psyche for a heavenly spiritual Mother as well as a heavenly Father.

Should devotees be disturbed by the fact that Mary, like Radha and Sita, has become a mythic figure concerning whom we know so little from a strictly historical point of view? No, because the Formless is beyond the reach of most of us. We make our first contact with it in and through its formed manifestations. Few are able to stand, like Sri Ramakrishna, in bhava mukha, that is, at the interface between the formed and the Formless, keeping both in tension at the same time. It would be interesting to know whether any of the Christian mystics has managed to gain access to the Formless through devotion to Mary. No doubt even a largely mythic Mary has been a powerful influence in bringing many Christians to a fully satisfying spiritual life. □

The Goddess of the U.S.A.

Pravrajika Akhanda-prana

Ma is a feminine root through which many goddesses around the world are addressed. In some languages (including Sanskrit) *ma* also means, “to measure out.” The ancient Egyptian goddess Maa or Maat measured out the course of the sun and all things both in this life and the next. The Greek goddess Demeter or Damatiir measured out the bounties of agriculture and is said to have given the plow to the people. It is quite possible that she was one of the first to measure according to a metric system as found in Europe. In Russia Mat Syra Zemlya or Moist Mother Earth, was the one to whom the peasants used to pray for favorable weather, good crops and success in life. There were also Mami of Babylonia, Uma of India, Hokhmah of the Hebrews, Andre Mari—sun goddess of the Basque, Amaterasu—sun goddess of Japan and others. So who is Ma USA and what does she measure out? What does she give and teach us to share?

The goddess of the United States gives life, light (wisdom), liberty, compassion, generosity, forbearance and peace. These seven qualities are reflected in her sun crown of seven rays that encircle her head. In one hand she holds a giant torch into which several people can fit, and in the other hand a book. There is a large museum in the base of the statue telling the story of the creation of her image in France, of being presented to the American people and of standing in New York Harbor to greet the millions of immigrants who crossed the Atlantic by ship to find a new life in a “new land.” The seven rays of her sun crown also represent the seven continents and seven seas from which and through which the immigrants came. Her essence and her spirit are eternal, but this particular shape and form at this particular time and place are new. (Images and idols of the past were really only meant to be signs—not eternal in themselves). She is “The Statue of Liberty.”

A Spark of the Great Shakti

Ma Liberty is nothing less than “a chip off the old block”—a spark of the Great Shakti (primordial energy) of the Universe and a daughter of the ancient sun goddess who could be found from Europe to India to Japan. In India the sun was traditionally shown with seven rays. These rays are the same energy of the seven traditional Hindu planets and of all things moving and shining. They are the same energy shining in the seven energy centers or chakras of the human body. In the goddess scripture, the Devi Mahatmyam, it says, “By You alone, the Mother, this Universe is filled. . . You, the Devi, the Shining One.” In the

Isha Upanishad it says, “The Underlying Power is everything—It is in every bit of existence.” Even in the Bible and in the Koran it says “Let Us make humans in Our image, after Our likeness.” Who is this “Us” and “Our?” It is the Totality of which she is an essential part.

Ma is also part of the language of animals—starting with a hum on closed lips and ending with the full expression of an open mouth. Is this perhaps the first word and the beginning of communication and thinking? In Navajo language, earth and sheep are identified with the suffix *-mah* which means “mother.” The Navajo primordial goddess Changing Woman is often referred to with the suffix *-mah*. It is truly amazing to hear how baby goats, sheep and calves can sound exactly human when they say “ma.” It not only has meaning—it has various meanings depending on circumstance and inner feeling—a cozy sleepy mama will not sound the same as an inquiring or hungry maa, or a life threatening, urgently cried ma-a-ah.” These three kinds of *ma* are the beginning of *tamas* (dull, sluggish activity), *sattva* (balanced, measured activity) and *rajas* (hyper activity). Is it a coincidence that the first person verb “to be” in English is “I am?” The root *am* (pronounced “um”) is a feminine root just as *ma* is. There can be no “I” without the Mother— “am.” Likewise, there can be no “ma-n” without—the mother—ma. In many languages or dialects vowels become fluid and inter-changeable. In German, the word for “man” is *mann*, pronounced “mun.”

There is one forgotten aspect of Ma Liberty, the sun goddess of the United States. Long before her coming, the Dutch started the settlement of New Amsterdam that later became New York. According to some scholars, the Dutch rather than the English Puritans, were the real founders of the new land of liberty. The Dutch have been known to be more liberal and enlightened on many issues, since the days of the Roman Catholic Inquisition, when many refugees fled to Holland to escape persecution and death. The Puritans on the other hand became infamous for the Salem witch trials.

Mother Nature Gives to All

Deutschland, or Germany, once included a vast land of northern Europe, including what is known as Holland, where the Dutch live today. Somewhere in that land the peasant people once honored a great goddess—probably a sun goddess. Her name was Hel, which in the German language means luminous, bright, intelligent, and holy. Interestingly, in ancient Welsh the word for “sun” was *haul*, in ancient Breton it was *heol* and in Greek it was *helios*. Mother Nature, as well as her sun and rain, has long been famous for giving to all—the rich, the poor, the good, the bad—to people and creatures in all conditions. It is

not just an accident that life around us was not called “Father Nature.” In fact, there was a time when biological fatherhood was not even understood.

According to Marija Gimbutus, who did much archeological research in Europe, Old Europe was once a land of the goddess—often a sun goddess. There is no evidence of armies or warfare, and almost no evidence of a warrior father god. When Odin/Woden and other warrior gods arrived on the scene, everything got turned topsy turvy. Hel was made Queen of the Underworld, where all common people went when they died. Odin’s highest heaven was reserved exclusively for warriors bearing wounds. The warrior Christians later came and co-opted Hel’s name and made it a place name for the region to which sinners are consigned. There are similar stories from other cultures where a prominent goddess of light meets her demise or is compromised, such as the story of the dawn goddess Ushas of India. This is the sordid past, which Ma Liberty has somehow survived.

Bringing Back Respect for the Earth

At the present moment, Ma Liberty stands on a significant crossroad of time—a time of weighing and measuring our past, present and future. How much longer can we continue to function in a less than ideal warrior mode of existence? In India the priestly and educated class of people are still considered primary. The warrior class is considered second in line and war was usually the last resort used in problem solving. The third class is considered “service occupations” such as merchants and farmers. The modern world, in contrast (perhaps since the victories of World War II) seems to have made war, war technology and the warrior mode into the first solution to all problems. The work of merchants is no longer “service” but how to get the most profit possible from your environment. Agriculture is too often unhealthy big business. Ma Liberty now has many sons and daughters of practically every race, religion and nationality. Many of them are asking, “How can we live in peace and in well-being? How can we bring back the old values—the sacredness of the earth, the sky, the waters, the air; the sacredness of he and she, the primacy and the first respect due to she? Ma Liberty calls for responsible liberty, holistic liberty, liberty for me and you at the same time, liberty and respect for all the earth, liberty and respect for all cultures and religions. They are all different but similar paths to the same ultimate truth, the same mountain top. As the many Great Goddesses of the past have been saying, “Learn to make the whole world your own” (Sri Sarada Devi). □

The Shekhinah and Adonai

Laura J. Bernstein

I can no longer remember my introduction to the Shekhinah more than a decade ago; only that the discovery of a feminine dimension of the Divine in Judaism touched me deeply, resonated in my soul's contours, and left me hungry for continued contact. A need for God as "She" cried out as a counterpart to the omnipresent "He" and the patriarchal insistence on Lord and Master, on our Father, our King. Like flowing waters, the Shekhinah made my inner garden bloom with images of God as Nurturer, Mother, Wise Woman, Intimate Companion, Soul Sister. The word comes from a Hebrew root that means "to dwell;" Shekhinah could be translated as "She Who Dwells Within." This indwelling feminine spirit took up residence in my psyche. She pervaded my vocabulary, appeared in poems and dreams, and presided over prayers and chants.

When it came time to choose a mantram as part of my spiritual practice, I naturally wanted Her name in my sacred phrase. I chose a time-honored line from Psalms (Psalm 16:8), which translates, "I place the Divine Presence before me always." In Hebrew, the name of God here translated as "Divine Presence" is the four letter unpronounceable word known as the tetragrammaton (the Hebrew letters are yud, hey, vav, hey, and are sometimes depicted as YHVH). Because this holiest name of God cannot be spoken, Jews traditionally substitute Adonai, which means "Lord." With encouragement from the Jewish Renewal Movement's more feminist sensibility, I took the liberty of substituting "Shekhinah." The line in Hebrew thus reads, "Shiviti Shekhinah l'negdi tamid."

Using a Mantram Is Like Calling God Collect

I have used this repeating phrase happily and gratefully at times of stress, fear, frustration, anger, or anxiety for a dozen years. It has accompanied and calmed me through shaky airplane rides, agitating arguments, sleepless nights, and troubled days. It lulls me to sleep, awakes joyfully with me in the morning, and has become an indispensable companion on the path. It enriches walks with my dog (and husband) and makes waiting for red lights, trains, doctors, or late-arriving friends a pleasure rather than an annoyance. As instructed by my spiritual teacher Eknath Easwaran (founder of the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation in Tomales, California), using the mantram is like calling God collect; it is available at a moment's notice, whenever the need arises. And the more you use it, the more powerful it becomes.

About a year ago, I began having misgivings about using the name Shekhinah in my mantram. Sri Easwaran stresses the importance of choosing a mantram “that has been sanctified by long use.”⁷

The many repetitions by spiritual practitioners of past centuries add power to the phrase, and make it more effective as a healing tool in the deepest levels of consciousness. While I was certain my mantram had indeed been used by kabbalists, sages, and seekers throughout the centuries, I was not as certain about my choice of holy name. This uncertainty continued to gnaw at me. Would Adonai (Lord) or HaShem (which means “The Name” in Hebrew, and is used by orthodox Jews in place of the tetragrammaton) be a more appropriate choice? Would I be doing a disservice to the Shekhinah (and to my feminist values and aspirations) were I to change the name of God in my mantram?

After much soul searching and consultation (and some gratefully received help from spiritual friends), I decided that the change which was calling to me needed to be honored. Research indicated that Adonai was the name of God most often used in this line from Psalms, the name whose millions of repetitions over the millennia would give the mantram additional spiritual energy. Despite my personal preference for Shekhinah over Lord, something deeper was at stake here. Having been assured that my devotion to the Shekhinah in the years of using my mantram would transfer to Adonai, I made the switch while on retreat last March.

Two Dimensions of the Same Underlying Reality

What has been the result of this alteration? The transition has seemed remarkably smooth. Nothing earth-shattering has yet to happen (other than the completion of my first book, which will be published this fall). Neither lightning bolts from the feminine within nor thunder from the masculine without has been forthcoming. Instead, the experience has been more of a still, small voice whispering that Shekhinah and Adonai are two dimensions of the same underlying Reality which is genderless, nameless, and beyond all conception. I have not currently abandoned She Who Dwells Within and I was not neglecting the Lord of Love before. Both are indispensable facets of the Unnameable Mystery.

Kabbalah (the body of Jewish mysticism) maintains that the Shekhinah (the indweller) and Adonai (YHVH, the transcendent) need to be united in order for the healing and transformation of the world (what Jews call *tikkun olam*) to take

1. Eknath Easwaran, *Meditation: A simple 8-point program for translating spiritual ideals into daily life* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1998), p. 69. See chapter 2, “The Mantram,” pp. 57-86.

place. The Shekhinah is depicted as being in exile with us, appearing whenever we study Torah (our sacred scripture) or perform acts of lovingkindness. We thereby become the dwelling place for God's abiding Presence, and the vehicle for God's work here on earth. When we unite the feminine and masculine aspects of ourselves through harmonious relationships, peacemaking, and creativity, we bring together YHVH and His Shekhinah. We thus partner with God to bring wholeness and holiness into the world.⁸

As my spiritual practice matures and deepens, I find myself less concerned with divine gender and more concerned with accessing ultimate reality in whatever form it chooses to manifest. Perhaps that is what allowed the possibility for Adonai to emerge as an acceptable name of God in my mantram. Sometimes Lord is the very word we need in order to unite the transcendent dimension of God with the more earthy, available feminine Presence.

Relationship with the Ineffable Name

My relationship with the letters themselves (the yud, hey, vav, hey of the Ineffable Name, as the tetragrammaton is sometimes called) is another important piece in this puzzle of which name to choose. I tend to visualize the letters when reciting the mantram (even though this is not standard practice in mantram use), and it is their presence, more than the verbalized substitute name, that carries the spiritual weight for me. They relate to the Hebrew root for the verb "to be," and point to the mystery of existence itself. In my experience, those four unpronounceable Hebrew letters have a power and resonance beyond any word that replaces them.

The feminine face of God continues to speak to me in myriad ways. She conveys a softness that I find irresistible, a maternal quality that loves unconditionally, that protects fiercely. Her empathy is unmatched; she cries with me, suffers with me, delights with me and in me. Her wisdom is intuitive and creative; she leads me down surprising roads and nudges me toward unconventional outcomes. She has no body, but She knows what it is to have one. She appreciates sensuality and beauty. Her sense of humor is exquisite. Perhaps I could relinquish Her name from my mantram because She is so undeniably alive in me.

I include here two chants of my mantram, one using Shekhinah, the other Adonai. I composed the first one some years ago while walking along a rocky shoreline in Maui; if it has a somewhat Hawaiian flavor, that would be the

2. See Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within: A Feminist Revision of a Renewed Judaism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1995), pp. 19-23 ("A Brief History of Shekinah, She Who Dwells Within").

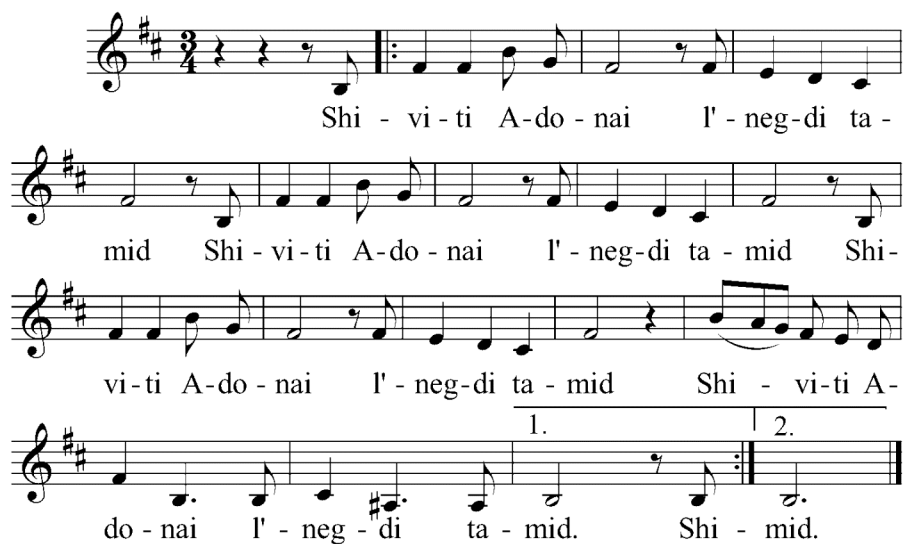
explanation. I composed the second chant last March while on a brisk mantram walk on Dillon beach just outside of Tomales, California, with a group of retreatants from the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation. This beach has particular significance because it is where my teacher, Sri Easwaran, of blessed memory, left so many footprints and so many mantrams. I dedicate the chant to him.

Shiviti Shekhinah



Shi - vi - ti She - khi - nah Shi -
vi - ti She - khi - nah Shi - vi - ti She - khi - nah
1. & 2. 3. 3.
l'-neg-di ta - mid. Shi - l'-neg-di ta - mid.

Shiviti Adonai



Shi - vi - ti A-do - nai l' - neg-di ta -
mid Shi - vi - ti A-do - nai l' - neg-di ta - mid Shi -
vi - ti A-do - nai l' - neg-di ta - mid Shi - vi - ti A-
1. 2.
do - nai l' - neg - di ta - mid. Shi - mid.

Religious Harmony through Music: Building an Interfaith Oratorio

John Schlenck

In the late nineteen-eighties, San Francisco Vedantist Maj Berger contacted me with an idea: an extended musical work with an interfaith theme. Maj and I had already collaborated on *The Illumined Self*, a cantata based on Shankara's *Crest Jewel of Discrimination* with quotations from the Upanishads. In that work, a spiritual aspirant approaches a teacher with yearning, asks for instruction, practices spiritual discipline and attains enlightenment. Maj's idea was to follow that same story line in an interfaith context. She drafted a libretto in which three seekers in three separate traditions—Christian, Jewish and Vedantic—seek enlightenment within their own traditions. It was a nice thought, but would have made a very long musical work. We did not have the musical resources to perform such a work on a single occasion, either at the Vedanta Society of Northern California or the Vedanta Society of New York. On the other hand, if it were performed, say, in three successive years, the interfaith dimension would be largely lost.

Celebrating the Common Spiritual Search

After thinking it over, I hit upon the idea of telling the story through a collage of texts from different traditions. This would reduce the length of the work and at the same time strengthen the interfaith dimension. Texts would flow one into the other without a break, ideally like a seamless garment, demonstrating that the different traditions basically support each other in a common spiritual search.

One further thought occurred to me: instead of starting with an aspirant who is already committed to the search, why not begin with the question: what leads an ordinary person to become a spiritual seeker?

A four-movement work developed from these ideas: (1) Why We Seek; (2) The Divine Promise; (3) Who Shall Ascend to the Hill of the Lord?; and (4) Enlightenment / The Beatific Vision.

When Pope Paul VI visited India in 1964, in a generous gesture he uttered the ancient Upanishadic prayer: "Lead us from the unreal to the Real; / Lead us from darkness to light; / Lead us from death to immortality." This almost generic prayer, simple, profound and universal, seemed a logical place to begin.

In the Chhandogya Upanishad, Narada approaches Sanatkumara and asks him to be his teacher, saying, "I have studied all the branches of learning—art,

science, music, philosophy and the holy scriptures—but have gained no peace.” A very similar idea is expressed in Ecclesiastes: “I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were in Jerusalem before me. . . The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing. . . In much wisdom is much vexation. . .” I decided to use these as my next building blocks.

Ecclesiastes continues, “Then I said to myself, I will make a test of pleasure; come now, enjoy yourself.” And he does. Not satisfied with simple pleasures, he builds houses and plants vineyards and orchards, buys slaves and livestock, gathers gold and silver, entertainers and concubines, and becomes greater than any of his forebears. What does he find out? “Then I considered all that I had done, and the toil I had spent in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.”

After Seeing the Face of Death

To reinforce this conclusion, I turned to the Katha Upanishad. Nachiketa resists all Yama’s temptations, saying: “These things endure only till the morrow, O Destroyer of Life, and the pleasures they give wear out the senses. Keep thou therefore horses and chariots, keep therefore dance and song for thyself. How shall he desire wealth, O Death, who has once seen thy face?”

Having tried learning, pleasure and wealth, and having seen that death is the end of all, we consider Buddha’s First Noble Truth, “. . .the noble truth of suffering: birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful. . . Not getting what one wishes is painful. All kinds of grasping are painful.”

Not only that: through our selfish actions we create bondage for ourselves. St. Paul observes: “Whatever a man sows, that will he also reap.” All of this leads up to Vivekananda’s terrible litany in the Chicago Addresses: “Is man a tiny boat in a tempest, raised one moment on the crest of a billow and dashed down into a yawning chasm the next. . . powerless, helpless. . . in an every-raging, ever rushing current of cause and effect, a little moth placed under the wheel of causation, which rolls on crushing everything in its way and waits not for the widow’s tears or the orphan’s cry? . . . Is there no hope. . . no escape?”

Not yet finding an answer, we return to the opening prayer, “. . .Lead us from darkness to light. . .” This concludes the first movement.

After a short pause, the second movement of the oratorio begins with Buddha’s analysis of the cause of suffering: “the craving which leads from birth to death to birth, together with greed and desire. . .” Summing up the human condition, Vivekananda says in *Jnana-Yoga*: “And this is Maya. . . This play of light and darkness. . . awake and at the same time asleep. . . bound by laws of time, space and causation.” He then quotes Krishna in the Gita: “How hard to break through is this my Maya, made up of qualities.”

At this point there is a complete change in the quality of the music, with storm and darkness yielding to calm and light, as Vivekananda's quotation from Krishna continues: "Yet they who take refuge in me only pass beyond maya. They who come unto me cross the river of life." Vivekananda continues, quoting Jesus: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Gradual Acceleration to an Ecstatic Dance

Who is this "me"? We now turn to the revelation at Sinai: "I am the Eternal, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me." Only by turning wholeheartedly to the divine, seeking the eternal, can we overcome bondage and become truly free. The Upanishad continues the same line of thought: "There is no joy in the finite. Only in the infinite is there joy. Ask to know of the infinite." Jesus continues: "Ask and it shall be given to you: seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you." Musically, there has been a gradual acceleration, as the same divine assurance is given through different traditions. Now, with the words of Isaiah, an ecstatic dance ensues: "Seek the Eternal, for he may be found. Call ye upon him, for he is near." The dance continues with the Upanishad: "Who realizes eternal Truth does not see death nor illness nor pain. One sees everything in the divine Self; all bonds are loosed and freedom is attained."

The movement climaxes with parallel words from the Gita—

Fill your heart and mind with me, adore me, make all your acts an offering to me, bow down to me in self-surrender. If you set your heart upon me thus and take me for your ideal above all other, you will come into my being.

—and Revelation:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and abide there. He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne.

—and concludes with the Upanishad:

When the heart is purified. . . all bonds are loosed and freedom is attained.

Part of the challenge of an interfaith celebration of spiritual life is to present different types of spiritual striving as well as different traditions. Basically, I sought to incorporate three points of view—dualistic, non-dualistic and non-theistic—as parallel lines pointing toward the same goal of enlightenment. The third movement begins with a solo voice singing the words of the Psalmist: "Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice. Be gracious also unto me, and answer

me. When thou said, 'Seek ye my face,' my heart said unto thee, "Thy face, Lord, will I seek." These words alternate with Buddha's cool analysis, sung by the chorus: "Now this is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, the cessation. . . of craving: abandonment, forsaking, release, non-attachment. And this is the noble truth of the way that leads to the cessation of suffering: The Noble Eightfold Way. . ." Taking refuge in God and working out one's own salvation are both true paths; the common denominator is, as Shankara said, "yearning for liberation." Music has the capacity to express this yearning. In this movement a common tonality and common chord progressions reinforce the underlying unity of self-surrender and self-effort.

Ethical discipline is a necessary part of both approaches. As the Buddha details this in his Eightfold Path, so does the Psalmist: "Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord, and who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul unto what is false, and does not swear deceitfully. . ."

The Yearning that Precedes Enlightenment

And as the Psalmist expresses his yearning through sublime metaphor: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors! That the King of glory may come in"; so does Mirabai yearn through the language of intense human love: "I long to meet thee, Beloved! When wilt thou meet thy humble maid, Meera? As the dawn in beauty breaks, I move out every day in search of thee. . . Ages have I spent in search of thee. . . Mine eyes do ache for a single sight of thee!" The movement concludes with Guru Nanak's words: "O slayer of birth, death and fear, my mind yearns for thee day and night. Shower the waters of thy grace upon me."

The greatest challenge, of course, was the concluding movement, "Enlightenment / The Beatific Vision." How can one who has yet to achieve enlightenment hope to express it through music? Fortified by powerful texts, one has to do one's best, using imagination, and striving to express awe, exaltation, and ecstatic joy. The final movement begins with three long-drawn out tones, representing the conch shell used in India to herald auspicious events and the ram's horn of Jewish tradition. The instrumental introduction builds slowly and majestically to Buddha's ecstatic utterance of his enlightenment: "When my knowledge and insight was well-purified by the four noble truths. . . I attained the highest complete enlightenment. . . The release of my mind is unshakable." This is followed by Isaiah's vision, "I beheld the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. . . Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full is his glory," and by verses from the Upanishads celebrating the all-pervading presence of the Divine.

A quieter, more intimate middle section begins with a tenor solo, singing the words of the 15th century Indian saint Kabir. Like Nanak, Kabir bridged the Hindu and Muslim traditions. His hymn of enlightenment is remarkable for its combination of theistic and non-theistic imagery, drawing from both the Abrahamic and Indian traditions:

I have had my seat on the Self-poised One. I have drunk of the cup of the Ineffable. I have found the Key of the Mystery. I have reached the root of Union. Travelling by no track, I have come to the Sorrowless Land: very easily has the mercy of the great Lord come upon me.

A trio continues:

Joy forever, no sorrow, no struggle. There have I seen joy filled to the brim. . . There the Unstruck Music is sounded. . . There millions of lamps of sun and moon are burning. There falls the rhythmic beat of life and death. Rapture wells forth, and all space is radiant with light."

And the chorus concludes:

There adoration never ceases. There the Lord of the universe sits on his throne.

The Upanishads stress that God-illumination is to be attained in this life: "Blessed is he who realizes Brahman while he yet lives." These words are sung five times, beginning pianissimo and increasing to fortissimo, then are followed by the rest of the equation: "Who does not realize Brahman suffers his greatest loss."

The Nondualistic Climax

At the climax of the movement is the nondualistic realization of the Absolute, with texts from the Kena and Taittiriya Upanishads, St. Catherine of Genoa and the Sufi mystic, Al-Hallaj.

Finally, the opening prayer, "Lead us from the unreal to the Real. . ." is reprised, followed by a single long-drawn-out tone representing the conch and ram's horn.

The work, titled *Seek the Eternal: An Interfaith Oratorio Celebrating the Spiritual Life*, was first performed in 1989 with the amateur choir of the Vedanta Society of New York at the SRV Retreat Center in Greenville, New York, at the dedication of its interfaith temple, and at the Vedanta Society's annual July 4th Vivekananda Festival. Resources became available in 1993 to mount a professional performance, and the work was presented as an off-site event of the Parliament of the World's Religions at St. Peter's Church, Chicago, with Judith Karzen conducting the Halevi Choral Society and chamber orchestra. Appropriately, this work by a Vedantic composer was performed by a Jewish

chorus in a Catholic Church. This Parliament was held on the centennial of the original World Parliament of Religions at which Vivekananda and other Asian delegates first introduced their traditions to the West.

Seek the Eternal was recorded last year in Russia, with Timothy Mount conducting the Moscow New Choir, the Russian State Symphony Cinema Orchestra and soloists. For the recording, I revised and enriched the choral parts and the orchestration. The recording was released in August of this year on Albany Records. For information on ordering the recording, please see the flyer enclosed with this issue of AV. □

Earth Prayer

O Great Mother Spirit, Mother Creator,
hear our earth prayer;

bring our spirit home to Thee;
restore us to Thy holy unity;
establish us in Thy sweet harmony.

Our life is of Thee, O Mother Creator,
and of Thee, O Grandmother Earth:

reconnect us with Thee and with
all the natural people—heal our
natural lives!

May we know our oneness with Thee,
who are Thy sons and daughters, O Mother:

let the sun not set on our disunity;
show us the good Red Road to harmony;
rekindle in our hearts the Sacred Unity.

Let the days be not ended with our pain
and our sorrow:

teach us the beauty of harmony way;
show us the path of egolessness;
in swift rivers that flow into oceans
of peace,

May all spirits find release.

—Judith, Hermit of Sarada
Tsalagi (Eastern Cherokee)

Discussion

How Do We Respond to Fundamentalism?

Conversation with a Born-Again Minister

Juliette Seelye Karow

As a person seeking Ultimate Truth, I have groped along my chosen spiritual path always looking for understanding fellow travelers. It helps to have someone to bounce ideas off of to test the strength or weakness of my belief. Is it ultimately true, at all times and all places, for everyone? Or is it only partly true some of the time?

My most trusted companions have been books on Vedanta: the Bhagavad Gita, The Gospel of Ramakrishna, and books by the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. The truths that I have learned completely harmonized with my inner, deepest, intuitive knowing. I have been so steeped in Vedanta study for the past thirty years that I assumed, of course, that everyone else believed in the same basic Truths. Not so!!

I know all life experiences are our teachers and everyone we meet has something to teach us. On a recent airplane trip I had the good fortune to sit next to a fundamentalist Christian minister; a captive audience. I was raised a Christian and never really found any deep conflict with the way I view Christianity (on a mystical level) and my understanding of Vedanta. But, apparently, in my childhood, Sunday School days, something was left out.

The young minister was very kind. We did not come to blows. We talked, debated, struggled with our differences during the entire 2 1/2 hour flight. I told him I respected his views even though they were considerably different from mine. And I expected the same respect from him. No Way!! He said God was Jesus and He was up there somewhere. There was no spirit within. He was basically sinful and could only be “saved” by accepting Jesus as the one and only God. I tried to explain to him that we are all the manifestations of the one and only Ultimate Reality, the Infinite Divinity, and as such we are potentially perfect. He accusingly asked me, “Do you think you are God?” I knew for one moment what it is like to stand with one foot on the sharp edge of a sword. If I stood still, I was in real trouble. An unequivocal Yes or No would not be the whole Truth.

I realized that very great areas of Religion had been left out of my childhood education. Even though my parents were nominal Methodists, their beliefs were dominated by Unity and the New Thought Movement. God was Love. . . period. That was my religion in totality.

I ended up answering “Yes” to the minister's question. Then I felt like an egotistical fool. But “No” would have been an outright lie, and just sitting there with my mouth open would make me a procrastinating idiot.

As the plane landed, I rose from my seat, turned to him and said, “I enjoyed talking to you.” He said, “I hope you find your path.”

Fundamentalism Can Exist in Any Tradition: The Response Is the Same

Sister Gayatriprana

Juliet Karow's experience with the Christian minister during a two and a half hour plane flight resonates with me. Last year I had a similar experience on an hour long BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) trip. In my case, it was a lovely young woman, an ardent Christian. We were very comfortable together and parted good friends—even gave each other a hug—but there was no doubt whatsoever that the idea of a God within was totally unacceptable to her. It was too difficult for her to place responsibility for herself within her own being. Her security rested completely in knowing there is someone “out there” who knows so much better than she what is “right” and what is “spiritual.”

It was borne in on me very forcibly how radically we can differ from each other in the way we see things and how deeply others may hold viewpoints so different from ours. Such differences do not prevent others from being sincere, pure-hearted and loving—as this young woman certainly was—but there comes a stage in the relationship beyond which we cannot go and no amount of trying is going to make any difference. In all honesty, I have to go further and say that such encounters are not limited to adherents of the Abrahamic religions, which for the most part do not accept the idea of the immanent God. Even within Vedanta, there are definite groups of people who prefer to think about external deities, puja and so on and become either horrified or derisory when the subject veers towards a more non-dual position. They, of course, do not have the notion of heresy—one of the big pluses of Vedanta—but, as far as sharing ideals and working together, the barriers can be as great as they might be with someone who belongs to a different religious background altogether.

Then again, even when ideals may be similar, how they are to be applied can also cause huge gulfs to emerge, even with people one might expect to be one's own. One very definite divide many of us Western Vedantists face is that many Indians we meet are primarily focused on India and building it up as a modern nation. They are committed largely to activities that support that agenda, with special emphasis on Indian cultural events and topics—interesting and valuable in themselves, but not really of primary importance to Western devotees, who for the most part are more interested in the inner life and interreligious

communication. At times Westerners feel that they are out in the cold, without any hope of getting a sympathetic ear from Indian Vedantists.

Does this mean that we can only move in a very small circle of like-minded people—of course, provided we ever find them? One of the central messages of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta is that every single being (not just human beings) has the divine within, and on that account we must value and respect them. How they have chosen to understand things and express themselves has been molded by their place of birth, education and life experience, possibly also by experiences in previous births. In most situations we have to graciously accept the differences—and, if the others are basically sincere and good-hearted, work out friendships and working partnerships that maximize the goodwill which such people basically have.

Politics, Not Religion

What causes problems are people who use their differences from others to exploit, frustrate, oppress or subjugate them. To my mind, this is politics, not religion, but we all know to what extent religions have resorted to such tactics. In the West we are acutely aware of these issues, and that is why the U.S. has woven into its constitution separation of church and state, a necessary precaution to prevent a recurrence of the likes of the Inquisition. To the extent that religion drives politics and vice versa, tremendous wedges get driven between us in the names of our differences—and the Abrahamic religions, once again, are not solely at fault. As we write, there is a brand of virulently ethnic and culturally imperialistic Hinduism which is working hard to undermine the inclusive and universalist teachings of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda which have done so much to bring religions together. Basically, such movements are seeking to bring back theocracy, a medieval throwback of which we all know the results from the news on the various media!

As I see it, we can only face such fundamentalism by holding on firmly to what works for us personally, respecting others and treating them courteously, despite our differences. At the same time, we must become more and more aware of our own beliefs and what they imply in terms of our life, while networking intensely with those who share our views and can help us to keep our ideals before others in the media. It seems to me that not enough has been done to get before the public eye Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta as Westerners see it, though there are one or two quite interesting websites coming up. Can we become more proactive and creative in holding up what we really care about, what has inspired us, and has led us to commit our lives to Vedanta?

Am I a Vedantist or a Hindu? Guidelines from Vivekananda

Sister Gayatriprana

(continued from the previous issue)

4. Can We See A Total Picture of Ramakrishna Vedanta?

Introduction

In our previous three articles we have sketched in the substance of Swami Vivekananda's teaching in both East and West. We have tried to demonstrate that, in his mind, he was teaching a modernized Vedanta inspired by Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings, which he considered a contemporary commentary on the Upanishads, the core texts of what has been called Hinduism in modern times. We also tried to make a case that in the West Swami Vivekananda favored the word Vedanta for what he was teaching, rather than the word Hinduism. In India, while he used the word Hinduism in speaking to people who thought of themselves as Hindu, he invested much energy in defining Hinduism in terms of Ramakrishna Vedanta and even stated that he would prefer to replace the modern term 'Hinduism' with the much more ancient 'Vedanta,' by which, again, he meant not the body of thought developed in medieval times, but the vibrant, contemporary interpretation of the Upanishads by Sri Ramakrishna.

On the basis of Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Vedanta, I would like, in this article, to consider whether we can bring the Western and Eastern teachings together and arrive at a total picture of what Swami Vivekananda was offering us. We may also get a better understanding of the respective roles of American and Hindu (Indian) Vedantists and how they can work together for their own development and the wider good of the world.

The Key Teachings

1. The basic teaching in Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta is human divinity. This ideal has its roots in the Vedantic great sayings, in which all aspects of human relationship—you, I, the Self, cosmic intelligence and this manifest world—are one with the divine Ground or Reality. In the framework of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta, human divinity is presented in the West as an ideal, based on the experience of the God within, our own Self. This is in contrast to the external God of the Abrahamic religions, in the experience of whom there was, by official decree, always a sense of ultimate separation rather than total identity. The challenge for us is actually to experience the God within, thus verifying its existence and truth, and around that experience to build up a culture, without sacrificing our existing mastery of the material world.

Because of their intense focus on the internal world accepted universally at the core of Hinduism, coupled with a traditional rejection of the world as “unreal,” Hindus lost the ability to be effective in the material world. Their challenge now is to learn how to master the external, particularly how to engage the material world in an out-and-out research mode, without losing sight of the Self, the heritage of Hinduism established thousands of years ago in the earliest Upanishads.

2. Key to Ramakrishna Vedanta is the idea that human and divine are, at bottom, different aspects of the same Reality. There is, therefore, the possibility, not only of humans becoming divine or realizing the Self through consciously directed effort (the emphasis of Vedanta in the West) but the divine becoming human, or the nondual experience at the heart of Vedanta taking concrete forms in the lives of all of its adherents and in society (the emphasis in India). In the language of Swami Vivekananda, the West has to *realize* its divinity, and India to *manifest* it. These are the dynamics behind the notion of yoga in Ramakrishna Vedanta.

3. There is no real progress, no radical self-transcendence of ourselves, without obstruction and struggle to overcome it. This is the fact behind the Vedantic notion of maya. The Western progress to the within is beset by the problem that for us, matter is what is “really” real, and God/Spirit/the divine are, basically, abstractions, no matter what religious beliefs (or none) we may have. In Vedanta we can only say we know God when God is as seeable, hearable, tastable, touchable and smellable as the world is to us at present. We have to overcome this obstacle by saturating ourselves in the ideal of the Self and unceasing efforts to realize it in our inner core. And, if we are to be true to ourselves, we must accomplish this without losing our ability to work effectively in the material world. Hindus have the problem that in their tradition, Spirit is the only thing that is “really” real and matter is, essentially, unreal. Obviously their problem is to discover where the reality of the material world lies and to master the techniques that permit them to work effectively in the material world without losing their ancestral grounding in the Self.

4. Swami Vivekananda invoked the contemporary idea of evolution on many occasions, investing it with the meaning of a movement from matter to Spirit – now familiar to us as the notion of spiritual evolution, a buzzword in the West and based, I believe, on the process of realization we are all so interested in. He balanced that idea with the Indian notion of “infilling”, by which he meant that, behind all phenomena is divine Power, which automatically flows into, and spiritualizes a mind or activity from which the obstacles that constitute maya are being, or have been, removed. His call to Indians to manifest divinity was, I believe, fulfilled by his conviction of the inevitable inflowing of power into spiritualized and motivated effort, and I think we can also call it involution, the balancing power to the evolutionary process with which Westerners are so much more familiar.

5. A key idea in Ramakrishna Vedanta is holism, although the word was not coined in the English language until the nineteen twenties. However, the emphasis on a Ground or Reality supporting and giving actuality to both matter and Spirit is holistic, in that it validates both the Western perception of matter and the Indian perception of Spirit. It is holistic in accepting as valid both realization and manifestation, and assigning them “special duty” in the different spheres of West and East. Again, its approach to overcoming maya recognizes the special problems of West and East and provides a working framework for both to break through from their “hang-ups” and emerge into the daylight of “flow”—the West to evolve spiritually and the East to involve its spiritual heritage into action in the world. Finally, there is no radical separation at all in any of these projects.

All this seems to sew everything up very well. The question is: does it work, can we trust the system, and where will it go? I will try to address these questions in the last essay in this series. □

The Alarm of Silence in the Ear of Nothing: A Monologue Based on Lalla of Kashmir

P. Shneidre

[Continued from the previous issue. Based on the sayings of Lal Ded or Lallehwari, a religious ascetic who roamed the forests of Kashmir in the 14th century. When this is recited as a performance, improvised music is heard in the background: drone, drums, flutes, bird calls.]

Is there life before death?
Sometimes.
But there is always
knowledge after

Whatever I do will follow me,
except what I made Yours

Push past hunger and thirst,
O my mind

It was exciting to see the mind run away
at a million miles a thought
but, unfortunately,
that was the same horse
you must break to ride home

Who dies?
Only one who
took a breath
and dove into a world
too shallow to swim back from

Be careful to keep your mind
on the path.
You'd love to be with your mother now
but as a baby, even in her arms
you were restless

You can't find God
by looking in the heart of a Hindu
or a Moslem.
Another's heart is too far away

All you have to do, O mind,
is think of the self.
On everything else, including religion,
you waste yourself

It's easy to live forever.
All you have to do is
hunt down a wild elephant
that's lived its whole life
in your heart,
and teach it to go down on one knee
and fan you

What a fool.
You killed a live animal
to make a stone happy

I tried every mantra
before the alarm of silence
woke me up

Brick by brick
say this mantra
and build a bridge
from your mind to all minds,
and then use it

I don't care what your name is,
Doctor. Heal me

I stood there
outside his locked door forever,
just standing there.
Well, maybe not forever

It isn't easy being a baby
or having one,
yet here all the babies come
again, not having found God

Better hurry up
and look at God now,
while you have the chance.
What if you die
and can't see?

He's as close to you
as you,
O my mind.
You don't know where he is
because you don't know
where you are

I burned everything in my soul
that was impure.
I put all my passions deep into my heart
and then flattened it.
Then I spread the hem of my garment
and knelt on it in surrender to him.
I was no one.
When I looked up,
everyone was watching

I wandered everywhere looking for him.
Suddenly, I saw that he'd also been
everywhere. Don't you get it?
In all those places,
he was on his way here

I was going to wait all night
under the moon,
but it melted down into me

When I dropped my pain
into the thought of God,
it sizzled gently

I thought of God so loud
he woke up.
Then he turned over
and went back to sleep,
taking my mind.
Since then, it hasn't wanted to know

I must have cut down
six forests of desire.
The more I controlled myself,
the more the world shrank.
So was I the world?

I don't eat meat,
but when I roasted my desires
in love I met God
in that fire

[to be continued]

An Appeal

Dear Friends of Vedanta:

What you see here (opposite page) is a preliminary sketch of a Worship Hall to be built at the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, a 501(c)(3) organization incorporated as "The Eternal Quest." We are soliciting your assistance in raising the funds required to erect the Hall with its accompanying parking lot.

This structure will have as its center and focus the present shrine of the Vedanta Center, dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, Swami

Vivekananda, Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ and other divine figures. Facilities for worship, platform and podium, seats for fifty or more people; restrooms and service facilities complete the basic requirements. A corridor will connect it to the present Center. The total cost of the plan is estimated at \$225,000.

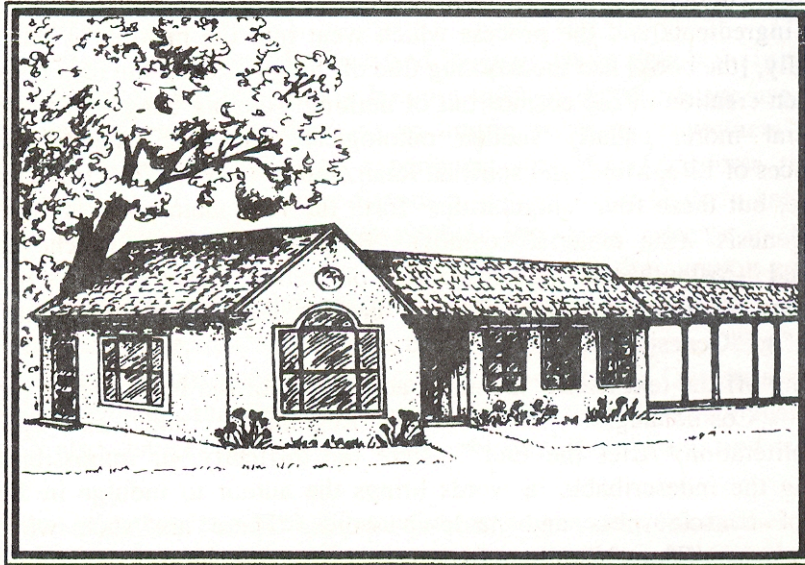
If you are not familiar with the history and work of the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, you may see our website, www.vedanta-atlanta.org, and/or send for a copy of the booklet, "A Brief History of Vedanta in Atlanta."

In March of this year, two of our Board members and I stayed at our Headquarters in India, Belur Math, for two weeks, consulting about having the Center affiliated as an official branch of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission. We were assured that our request would be acted on favorably at a future date. Faith, enterprise and vitality as a community are expected of us, and the building of the Worship Hall will testify to that; we hope it may shorten our wait.

We will be grateful for tax-deductible contributions, in whatever amount, by check made payable to the "Vedanta Center of Atlanta—Building Fund" and mailed to the Vedanta Center of Atlanta, 2331 Brockett Road, Tucker, GA 30084. They will be acknowledged most gratefully and efficiently employed.

In the name of Sri Ramakrishna,

Swami Yogeshananda



Book Reviews

One Cosmos under God: the Unification of Matter, Life, Mind and Spirit

Robert W. Godwin

Paragon House, St. Paul, Minn.

315 pp. Paperback \$19.95 2004

The author of this amazing journey through the evolution of the cosmos, from the big bang to the ultimate state of consciousness, describes himself as "a sadhak of Sri Aurobindo's yoga," but is also "happy to be inclusively described as a Judeo-Vedantic esoteric Christian Taoist yogic hermeticist." (p. 298, n. 1)

Robert W. Godwin, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist whose interdisciplinary work has focused on the relationship between contemporary psychoanalysis, chaos theory, and quantum physics. In his private practice, Dr. Godwin specializes in the treatment of psychological barriers to spiritual growth. The author (in a statement for Amazon.com) says that, "*One Cosmos under God* is the fruit of a lifetime of thought attempting to synthesize material from a number of diverse domains, including cosmology, theoretical biology, quantum physics, developmental psychoanalysis, attachment theory, anthropology, history, mysticism and theology, into a coherent, self-consistent, non-reductionistic whole." The publisher calls the book "an intellectual amusement park ride through the whole of creation," and this is not a bad description.

In the "Autobibliography & Self-References" Godwin provides a glimpse into the ingredients and the process which went into the making of this book. "Originally, [the book] had the working title of 'Singularities,' the idea being that the sudden creation of the cosmos out of nothing—the big bang—was followed by several more, equally sudden ontological mutations, specifically, the appearances of Life, Mind, and spiritual Realization." (p. 267) The title changed, of course, but these four 'singularities' form the four main parts of the book: "Cosmogenesis" (the material cosmos), "Biogenesis" (life), "Psychogenesis" (mind) and "Cosmotheosis" (the realization of Spirit). Gustave Dore's mystical illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy* provide the perfect transitions from "Genesis" to "Genesis."

Setting off the text itself, "the alpha and omega of the book," are a prelude, entitled: "Cosmonaught: Before the Beginning" and an epilogue, "Cosmobliteration: After the End." Here the difficulty, or impossibility, of describing the indescribable in words brings the author to indulge in Joycean stream of consciousness and made-up words. There are such wonderful expressions as: "The abbasolute first day, before eve or any other middling relativities." "Ah, this old ombody's so philled with jehoviality, can't He create anamour?" (My computer hates this—every other word is underlined in red!)

The beginning of the main text captures the sense of wonder and amazement that permeates the whole book: “So begins—and ends—the most unlikely, the most thoroughly mind-boggling how-, why- and Whodunit we can possibly try to imagine. It is actually the only story that is, because it is the story of ALL that actually is: the improbable account of how a blank singularity evolved over 13.7 billion years to produce everything we perceive and everything we are, the marvelous all-without and the inexplicable all-within.” (p. 18) While the book includes the newest scientific discoveries, it is clear that for Godwin, there is Something more—Something (or Someone) behind it all, and only by going within can we begin to comprehend This (or That, in Vedantic terminology). Put in Aurobindo’s terms, there must be “a secret Consciousness greater than Life-Consciousness or Mind-consciousness

. . .a supramental consciousness-force... the power of that which is the supreme essence and substance of all things, a power of the Spirit.” (*Life Divine*, quoted in Beatrice Bruteau’s *Worthy Is the World*, p. 83)

For the spiritually-minded, it is the fourth section, “Cosmotheosis: It’s a Onederful Life,” that is the most exciting and thought-provoking. Here Godwin is concerned with the essentials (essence) of religion, the spiritual “facts,” with spiritual “research” in the scientific sense. He speaks of spiritual “Cosmonaughts”—researchers who delve into inner (interior) spiritual experience as the scientist does research in exterior realities. “Any claims about Spirit must in the final analysis emanate from (at least someone’s) spiritual experience, not from spiritual belief, hearsay, rumors, dogma, tradition, faith, or authority. . . The knowledge we are seeking cannot ultimately be taught, but it can be discovered.” (p. 191)

In the effort to be “scientific,” we find language to be a problem in trying to express spiritual experience, chiefly because most of the words we use are “so saturated with meaning that they are no longer useful as ‘containers’ for the accumulation of meaning through experience.” (p. 194) Of course the most saturated word in all of religious discourse is “God.” So Godwin sets out to formulate “a language of interrelated symbols that ‘map’ religion in the most abstract way possible, while at the same time leaving the symbols relatively ‘empty,’ so they may accumulate meaning.” (p. 206)

He entitles this section, “Building a Better Logos: Insert your Deity Here.” It turns out to be great fun using symbols instead of words (e.g., O is the symbol for God or the Ultimate, the Ground of being, (*) becomes the individual human ego) but it also changes the way one thinks about all these words and what they mean.

Godwin says that “this book is intended for the general reader rather than the scholar” (p. 21), but this reader finds it more for the “cage-free intellectual or ‘free-range’ spiritual aspirant” than for any “general reader.” One needs some familiarity with the “new sciences,” theories of evolution, and human

psychological development to grasp what the author is getting at, and some experience with the philosophy of Vedanta and Aurobindo will serve the reader well. Godwin's writing can be dense and complex, but he is often profound as well as provocative, and his sense of humor breaks in to lighten things up when the going gets tough.

There have been so many books in recent years about the evolution of the universe and the development of human consciousness. Some take a purely materialistic view—that it all happens by natural selection, chance, etc.—but more and more scholars and writers are beginning to admit some kind of “intelligent design” behind it all, a design that does not conflict with a scientific view, although few would call this Intelligence by the name of God. For Godwin, it is clear that the incredible order of the cosmos implies the necessity of a “cosmic intelligence of some sort.”

He begins and ends his story with mystery and so leaves the reader with the sense that there is more to come. “I know this place. Been here before. Where we started. No it this time. A huge mythunderstanding. The word made fresh. Non-friction. Telos when it's over. Now. ... We'll meet again. Up ahead, 'round the bend. The circle unbroken, by and by. . .” (Epilogue) Godwin sees spiritual evolution as the culmination of material evolution. Our spiritual journey begins with the big bang and continues on. This is 21st-century spirituality: “The unification of matter, life, mind and spirit.” It is an evolutionary spirituality in which science and spirit are not in conflict. This book has the power to deepen and change one's view of the inner journey.

—Barbara Henry

Waking Up Together: Intimate Partnership on the Spiritual Path
Ellen and Charles Birx.

Wisdom Publications, Boston

240 pp. Paperback \$16.95 2005

This beautiful book addresses itself to the needs of Westerners who are married or committed couples and who wish to develop their relationship in a deeply spiritual way. Its authors, Ellen and Charles Birx, have themselves eminently practiced what they preach, having been married for thirty-seven years and authorized together as Zen teachers by Roshi Robert Kennedy some thirty years into their marriage. Their whole relationship has been centered on their lifetime of intense Zen practice, which puts this work quite definitely into the class of spirituality, not of the “feel good” variety, but of the traditional school of hard work and transcendence of egos.

As professors at Radford University in Virginia—Ellen in psychiatric nursing and Charles (retired) in Education and Human Development—they are also very

eloquent and precise in their writing, which adds considerably to the clarity and impact of their work.

The materials basically follow the historical pattern of the evolution of a relationship in forty-five or so short chapters, which present specific problems, how they impact a relationship, how insights from the lives and teachings of the Zen Masters throw light on the situation and lead on to increasingly fluid and flexible answers, carrying the relationship into and through the challenges it is facing. These little episodes are presented in a refreshingly simple way, in terms of the day-to-day experience of the Birxs, at their Zen retreats, at home, at work and in relationship with the rest of the family, including their daughter and later her children. Charles and Ellen have lived and worked on a Native American reservation as well as in rural Virginia, and one gets a very invigorating sense of a deep commitment to America, its land, its people and culture, while at the same time focusing on the very core of the Zen spiritual heritage, in which there are no quick fixes, but simply steady commitment to the ideal and placing spiritual development and practice at the very center of one's life.

As the authors emphasize, they have used the discoveries of what has been a purely monastic tradition to deepen and enrich their “secular” lives, a very important work which contemporary Buddhists are doing with great success and which we Vedantists would do well to look into in our own tradition. Although the examples they quote are from the Zen tradition, my own feeling is that the teachings are totally universal and apply with ease to all of us. Furthermore, I feel that what is made available here can be applied to any close human relationship, and need not be restricted to marital relationships. I myself don't have a “partner”—but I do have nine “wives,” with whom I live in very close contact, as well as a wide circle of deeply cherished friends, all relationships to which this book speaks with ease.

The book is a beautiful picture of what love is really about, something that goes to the very heart of the matter—service, compassion, self-surrender, seeing everything in the bigger picture, all coming from the deepest core of what we are. Nothing glamorous or “cool”—just things as they are (or should be, at least!). This book ultimately speaks of an impersonal love which goes out to every person it meets, no matter what the “relationship.” We witness in this account how love can be nurtured in a single relationship and finally go out to encompass all beings. To begin with, we work within ourselves, we “journey alone,” but when we break through the limitations we impose on ourselves, we “wake up together.” (p. 5) To my mind, at least, this is the most important thing anyone can do with his or her life. These ideas are vitally important for our divided, dualistic culture, and it is a tremendous service to have brought out a book of this honesty and caliber, speaking to the very conditions we live with here in the United States.

I have recommended this book to a number of my friends with varying degrees of marital problems. In addition, several of the sisters in our convent saw me reading it when I was eating my supper and told me they want to read it! I hope it sells well. That would bode very well for the couples (and singles!) of America.

—Sister Gayatriprana

Contributors

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P. SHNEIDRE has created theater pieces on the lives of religious innovators including Buddha, Jesus, Vivekananda and others. He is presently completing the libretto for *Out of Egypt*, a musical theater piece begun several years ago as a collaboration between composer John Schlenck and the late Erik Johns.

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SWAMI YOGESHANANDA became a monastic member of the Vedanta Society of Northern California in 1945. At present he is working in Atlanta with a group started by the Chicago Vedanta Center. It now has its own premises and is known as the Vedanta Center of Atlanta. His writings include *The Visions of Sri Ramakrishna*, *Six Lighted Windows*, and *Waking Up*, a booklet introducing Vedanta.