

Editorial

The Need for Newness

Sometimes it seems that the modern world is obsessed with novelty. Manufacturers are constantly trying to produce new products to entice potential customers. Indeed, the consumer society, the entire economic framework of today's world, is dependent on the constant purchase of what is packaged as new and exciting—and is often unnecessary.

From the highest spiritual standpoint, this can all be dismissed as *maya*, the illusion of change. Ultimate spiritual reality is beyond time, space and causation. And so we should engage ourselves in trying to break through the surface changes to get to the underlying Changeless.

But even Shankara acknowledges that as long as we are aware of the relative world, it is real for us. We have to play our part in the ongoing drama of the world. To play our part, we have to deal with questions of old and new, questions of relative value.

Here it is useful to refer to the ancient Sankhya belief that the world is constituted of the three *gunas*—*sattva* (harmony and balance), *rajas* (restless activity), and *tamas* (inertia, dullness). While this conceptual framework may be dismissed as simplistic in reference to the physical world, it contains a penetrating psychological insight. An individual or a society cannot progress directly from dullness and inertia to meditative harmony and calm. The rajasic stage of activity, ambition, desire, must be gone through before sattvic serenity and harmony can be attained. Further, stasis in the relative world is not really an option. As Vivekananda said, either we go forward or we go backward. A static civilization or individual is an illusion. When a society ceases to be creative, it declines. Resting on our laurels is not an option.

Vivekananda and other early Asian visitors to America were astonished by the energy of the American people, contrasting sharply with the lethargy of their own ancient civilizations. Vivekananda strove mightily to waken his slumbering nation. Now the world is astonished by the energies that have been released in India and China.

What is true for civilizations is also true for religions, which, as Toynbee said, are another species of society. A spiritual movement which ceases to be creative must decline. We in Vedanta need to ask ourselves, “Are we being creative? Are we finding new ways to express our ideals, new ways of reaching out to today's and tomorrow's world? Or are we resting on Vivekananda's laurels, thinking he did everything and we don't need to do anything more?”

Some of the entries in this issue of *American Vedantist* explore new approaches to old ideas and beliefs.

—The Editors

Finding Novelty in an Old Religion

Beatrice Bruteau

Christianity is an old religion. Of course, they're almost all old. Only Islam, Sikhism and Baha'i are younger. But the curious thing about Christianity in this context is that it is so centrally about novelty. Although it had to make a great fuss about being "ancient" in order to get "licit" standing in the Roman Empire, its message was that it was announcing, bringing, demonstrating something radically new.

This is the theme of Lex Hixon's chapter in his *Coming Home: The Experience of Enlightenment in Sacred Traditions* (Burdett, NY: Larson, 1995) entitled "The New Aeon Has Dawned: The Letters of Saint Paul." It is a deeply Vedantic interpretation of the Pauline gospel, and it is remarkable how well it can be made to work. Many familiar texts suddenly assume a clear and obvious meaning.

Most of this interpretation hinges on the referent of the word "Christ." Hixon says it means the deep central consciousness of our true Self, what we really are, always have been, always will be, the divine core of our being, of all beings, It is true of *all* people, whether Greek or Jew, male or female, slave or free [Gal. 3:28]. On this level all are absolutely equal and are called to recognize one another as such. Since this is what we all have in common, it is the Unity binding us in Community. This is what is meant by being "in Christ."

Radical Social Consequences

A Vedantist might say "in Brahman," or "in the core subject/Atman." So that's not new. But for Paul it has radical social consequences—as it did, to some extent, for the Buddha, who abolished the caste system but failed at first to welcome women. And the social consequences are decidedly new. "In Christ. . . you are all children of God. . . neither Jew nor Greek. . . slave nor free. . . male nor female." (Gal. 3:26,28)

"Christ" is only the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Mashiach," meaning anointed, commissioned, inaugurated, installed in office, empowered for a particular office or social function, such as king or prophet [1 Ki 19:16]. But kings and prophets shape societies. And the ultimate Mashiach was expected to inaugurate a whole new kind of world, a world of justice and peace and plenty, of transformed hearts and natural knowledge of God [Jer. 31:33-34]. It was the beginning of this transformation that Paul was announcing, the opening of the Messianic Age.

The *newness* of it and the radicalness of it are encapsulated for Paul in the great messianic sign, the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is not understood as a return to the same kind of life but as a total transformation into another kind of life. The old “heavens and earth”—the world, the personal and social reality—will pass away and be forgotten, replaced by new “heavens and earth” [Isa. 65:17, 66:22]. The “location” of God in the “heart” of the human—read “self-realization,” says Hixon—gives rise to this new social/community, reality, this new world. The old way of thinking of oneself, of identifying, perishes, and the true realization rises up. Ignorance disappears and enlightenment floods all. That is the meaning of the messianic sign of death/resurrection, transformation of the total reality, from the root upwards. That’s what Paul means by being “in Christ.” It isn’t the name of an individual but of a level of consciousness or realization and of the community formed by that consciousness.

The Community Itself Becomes the Messiah

Self-realized humans, freed from ignorant efforts to shore up a finite and threatened being, become naturally generous and loving toward one another, and the community itself becomes the Messiah. It is commissioned to spread this freedom by showing love to others, and it constitutes the Messianic Presence. It is like what Vivekananda said of American democracy: “The king has gone into all the people.” The Messiah has gone into all the people. (Cf. Rabbi Robert N. Levine, *There Is No Messiah and You’re It*, Jewish Lights, 2003.)

It is important to emphasize, says Hixon, that this—being the Divine Core—is the truth for absolutely everyone. The realization of it is not reserved for the aristocracy, for social elites, or religious elites—monastics and formal renunciates, or adherents to any particular religion. It is not restricted or modified by sex, race, history, talent, or any other finite descriptor. The whole point is that we are not identified by any of these. This, again, is new. Most of us still haven’t altogether accepted it, even now. We continue to think that people can be privileged by their human characteristics. What the myth is telling us is that all these characteristics have to “die,” die out of our imaginations and our social customs. Only then can the “resurrection” to a new kind of life take place. It is a work still in progress.

This same idea, that the Easter Event can be interpreted as a proclamation of newness, a new creation, a new world, is also a prominent theme in Arnold Benz’s *The Future of the Universe* (Continuum, 2000): “The notion that in this world, in space and time [known to us through science], something new can actually come about” is “essential to Christianity.” “Time does not repeat itself”; the old falls away and the new arises. (117) It is also characteristic of Judaism, which expects the future to produce realities that “have never been before.” Isaiah (43:19) represents God as announcing, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” And continues: “I make you hear new

things, hidden things which you have not known. They are created *now*, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them.” (Isa. 48: 7-8, italics added)

Benz sees Easter, “the defining experience of Christian faith,” in this light: it demonstrates the “notion of newness emerging from current reality,” in “the here and now.” (118) Those who were able to see (the reality and meaning of) Jesus after his death and able to experience his aliveness, realized the opening of a new era, a new kind of being-in-the-world. The future, which incorporates the past, begins from this point, from now. Aliveness persists in spite of death, through death, even by means of death, with ever-amazing newness.

Cell death during *development* of the individual is necessary, and differential dying among species and variants is the means by which evolution advances. New forms that come about by *symbiosis* require the surrender of independence by participating organisms from whose *interactions* the new thing emerges. In any phase transition a whole set of organizing, structuring and operating principles is abandoned for new principles.

If Christianity chooses to see itself as a *radical newness* in the world, then it will be appropriate for it to identify which perceptions, feelings, ideas, behaviors, and social forms it lets perish and which it creates and encourages to come forth. Rene Girard and Gil Baillie suggest that the right to *victimize*—even if it brings the community together—is one of the things that the Easter Event says has to perish. We might push this further to the abolition of all punishment, including especially the concept of punishment as a crucial category in religion.

Original Christianity Was an Earthquake

In order for genuine newness to enter the world and spread, many concepts and categories have to die. If they don't, the community clings to old ideas and feelings and ways of life, and the new idea will fail to take root and flourish as it might have done. Heliocentrism replacing Earth-centered astronomy did not merely rearrange a star and its planets. It also displaced authoritarianism as a secure way of knowledge and installed observation and experimentation. Great newnesses have a way of doing this, of shaking the foundations. They shift all the presuppositions on which everything else in the knowing/feeling/behaving world is based. Thus original Christianity, basing itself on the insight that all people necessarily have the consciousness of the Christ-reality as their own innermost Self, concluded that all are socially equal, must be treated with equal respect, and must be cared for as one's own self. For a highly stratified society ruled by power politics and exploitative economics, this was an earthquake. The temptation to reduce it somehow to the old social forms was—and continues to be—strong.

What Benz is saying is that to reduce it is to lose it. The mysteriousness of the resurrection is essential to its message: you can't simply explain the new thing in the terms of the old. If you could, it wouldn't be new. You have to

change the principles—not only the answers but the questions and how an answer is obtained. We know that what is called for is some kind of radical shift. That’s what life, cosmic reality, is always doing. And you can never describe the new level of organization adequately in terms of the old, simpler level. The new creates its own intelligibility.

Finding Our Way in Unending Newnesses

And the creating is going on constantly, right here and now. It arises not in the past and not in the far future, but at this moment, out of the present situation. Thus Benz, having reviewed the history of the cosmos, concludes that we are justified in having hope for the future. Like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, he feels that “faith in the future” is well founded, for “the universe has been successful in the unlikely task of bringing human thought to birth in what seems to us an unimaginable tangle of chances and mishaps,” an emergence which “transformed” the universe “in the very laws of its internal development. Why then should we suppose that nothing new will appear... tomorrow?” (*The Future of Man* 81, 212; *Science and Christ*, 41) The world has juggled with too many crises, near destructions, needs for new inventions, and opportunities for astonishing creations, for us to doubt that it can continue to find its way to unending newnesses. (*The Phenomenon of Man*, 232)

It is as though the universe has access to an endless capital source, not only of raw materials and energy, but of emergent forms, those new things that come from the interaction of previous things. Hope is expecting this creativity to go on indefinitely. Faith is confidence that *no matter what disaster* befalls us in the course of cosmic nature, some wondrous new thing will arise out of that destruction. (Benz, 121) This is what Benz sees in the Easter symbol, as if this bottomless Source were saying I AM the Living One, endlessly resurrecting in ever new forms (John 11:25, Luke 24:5). □

The Wisdom Jesus

Richard Simonelli

We know Jesus as a man of love, forgiveness, justice, peace, and humility. The Gospel of Thomas shows us a wisdom Jesus. Discovered in 1945 near the modern city of Nag Hammadi in Egypt, individual entries in this collection of 114 sayings can provide a kind of startling direct experience. In the Gospel of Thomas #2 Jesus says, “Let one who seeks not stop seeking until one finds. When one finds, one will be troubled. When one is troubled, one will marvel and

rule over all.” Is Jesus speaking from what he has found? Having found, did he discover something ironic about what he found? What?

Irony is an incongruity between what actually happens and what might be expected to happen. It also refers to the use of words to suggest the opposite of their literal meaning. There are other sayings in the Gospel of Thomas that can stop the thinking mind and propel us to the heart when we understand. In Thomas #22 Jesus says, “When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make the male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then you will enter the kingdom.”

Breaking Through to Nonduality

The wisdom Jesus turns the world upside down and sends an unexpected 2000 year-old message that can't be solved like a riddle or understood rationally. What does it mean for the two to become one? How can the profound “twoness” of male and female be understood as a single one so that the separating identities of male and female do not exclude one another? What value does understanding this paradoxical saying have?

In Thomas #48 Jesus says, “If two make peace with each other in a single house, they will say to the mountain, ‘Move from here,’ and it will move.” And in #106 Jesus says, “When you make the two into one, you will become children of humanity, and when you say, ‘Mountain move from here,’ it will move.”

Jesus is asking us to break through the artificial division and separation of *twoness*. Twoness, or duality, means that we take the difference and separation that *two* implies too seriously and fail to find peace. Breaking through the hurtful separation of the two and finding the unity of the one is powerful. How powerful? Powerful enough for the mountain to move, or perhaps for impossible conflicts to come to an end. The breakthrough of two into unity is one that must happen individually for each of us. This breakthrough is a kind of living faith or faith in action. The belief in this breakthrough can become an actuality for each of us. Jesus is pointing at a kind of *non-duality* because he is saying, “Not two, but one.” This is the Jesus of non-duality speaking. Move, mountain! The words of the non-dual Jesus can reach us like a thunderbolt through the mystery of grace. □

What Hinduism and Being a Hindu Meant to Gandhi

Uma Majmudar

Gandhi acknowledged that he loved Hinduism as dearly as he loved his wife Kasturbai, and that no other woman in the world moved him the way she did. Despite knowing that neither she, nor he, was perfect, or perhaps because of knowing that, an “indissoluble bond” developed between them. While working patiently upon their faults, Gandhi continued to love his wife and to be true to her alone; he insisted on changing what must be changed, and accepted what he could not change. Imperfections thus became Gandhi’s spiritual incentives for self-improvement, self-purification, and self-expansion.

As Gandhi was devoted to his wife, so was he devoted to Hinduism, the religion of his birth and upbringing, the one ingested along with his mother’s milk. Yet, as he later became aware of Hinduism’s many flaws, some of them quite grave, he did not forsake it. Patiently and incessantly he tried to purge and purify Hinduism from inside out; remaining within the tradition, yet not bound by tradition, he set out to reform and re-form Hinduism. Like his spiritual predecessor Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi ardently spent his life re-defining Hinduism according to the need of his time. After his close encounters with other world religions, Gandhi became a confirmed Hindu, a Hindu by conviction, and not just by heritage or blind commitment. Only after experimenting with the truths of major world religions, Gandhi found Hinduism to be the most soul-satisfying and all-embracing religion on the face of this earth. He now realized its uniqueness, and experienced the depth and breadth of its vision. His natural fondness for Hinduism, as for his wife, thus ripened into wisdom over time.

Gandhi’s Pluralistic Religious Background and Mother’s Influence

One of the fondest memories of childhood that Gandhi recalled in his *Autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, was that of holding his beloved mother’s hand and visiting several Hindu and Jain temples in his hometown of Porbandar on the west coast of India. Though the adult Gandhi never liked visiting temples or performing *murti-puja* (image-worship) himself, he criticized no one who believed in observing such religious rituals; thus, he was neither an idolater nor an iconoclast. What made a permanent impression on his child-mind was the *bhakti*-soaked environment of his Vaishnava Hindu home, with its daily *bhajans* and *kirtans* (group hymn-singing), *kathas* and *vartas* (scriptural readings). He also distinctly remembered his father having informal religious discussions at home with his Jain, Muslim, Zoroastrian and other friends.

Gandhi loved both his parents, but his mother he just adored. What supremely influenced Gandhi was her “saintly” character, her deep piety, her undogmatic religiosity. Though unschooled, Putliba opened her heart and home to feed both the Hindu and Jain sadhus, to nurse the sick, and to help the needy. She observed the hardest of the hard vows and fasts unflinchingly, without complaining, and without any fanfare. Another vivid memory Gandhi later recalled was that of visiting his mother’s *Pranami* temple, where there were no *murtis*; instead, he saw displayed on the inner temple walls passages from both the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Qu’ran* of Islam. These seeds of religious openness and unpretentious piety planted in early childhood later sprouted to become a full-fledged tree of faith; it bore fruits which people of all faiths enjoyed. The adult Mahatma’s drive for self-purification, for moral perfection, for fasting and his ascetic self-control were all imbibed from the living example of his mother’s pluralistic faith and flawless character.

Young Gandhi in Search of Wider Horizons and Religious Knowledge

Parental examples of genuine observance of faith at home were a good headstart; they was not adequate, however, to quench Gandhi’s burning curiosity and questions regarding his own and other religions. As a young law student in London, Gandhi acutely felt his lack of formal religious training, as he was not able to read Sanskrit, or understand and explain the meanings of some of the words and passages of the Bhagavad Gita that Edwin Arnold had translated into English. Gandhi took up the challenge, however, and started reading not only the Gita but the Bible, the Qu’ran, the lives of saints, and other religious texts. He even wrote to his Jain friend, philosopher and religious role-model, Shrimad Rajchandra, to send him the names of many Jain and Hindu treatises. Later, in South Africa, when Gandhi was hard pressed to convert to Christianity by his well-meaning but orthodox Christian friends, he turned to Rajchandra for answers to some of the questions that plagued him about the exclusivity claim of Christianity, and the antiquity claim of the Vedas. Rajchandra challenged Christianity’s claim of exclusivity, that it was the only religion which contained “truth” or that it was “the greatest of all religions.” He also explained to Gandhi that “the antiquity of the Vedas” cannot be denied, because before the Buddha and Mahavir were the Vedas; however, antiquity does not mean perfection, and no religion can ever claim to be perfect. Rajchandra also explained what is “true religion”:

“Religion is not an ‘ism.’ It is not merely intellectual knowledge of or belief in any sect of doctrines. It is an innate attribute of the soul. It is that which enables us to define our duties in life as a human being, and

establish correct relationship with our fellows...it is the common heritage of all mankind.”¹

Gandhi, A Reborn Hindu

Turning his weaknesses into his greatest strengths was one of the Gandhian trademarks in all aspects of life, be it religion or politics, domestic or national crisis. Once his religious appetite was whetted, there was no stopping for Gandhi. Reflecting over Jesus’ message in the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, Gandhi compared it with that of his own beloved Bhagavad Gita, which he called, “Gita, my Mother,” and his “spiritual dictionary.” Jesus’ Sermon reinforced what he derived from *the Gita*, that “renunciation was the highest form of religion.” Now that his religious appetite was awakened, the Indian barrister, Mr. Gandhi, read books after books in South Africa; the ones that changed his life for ever were Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*, Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Thoreau’s *Essay on Civil Disobedience*, and of course, his own Bhagavad Gita. For Gandhi, however, reading alone was not enough; translating what he read into real life situations was the key to his spiritual development and growth.

No more a religious ignoramus, Gandhi used books to transform his inner life, change his lifestyle, and devote more time to community service; he even dared to resist the apartheid in South Africa with *the most powerful moral equivalent of war*, namely, *Satyagraha*, based on three cardinal principles: Truth, nonviolence, and self-suffering. Satyagraha to Gandhi was not merely a political technique to fight injustice or to topple mighty empires like the British in India or South Africa. The real import of Satyagraha to him was to *revitalize* the age-old concepts of *satya* (Truth), *ahimsa* (nonviolence), and *tapasya* (self-suffering) to change the existing status quo in any sphere of life. It was Gandhi’s spiritual genius that transformed such metaphysical principles as Truth and nonviolence into ethical tools for practical, social and political purposes.

Gandhi, a “Sanatani Hindu” or a “Non-conformist Hindu”?

Gandhi claimed to be a “*sanatani*” (*sanatana*: eternal or ever-lasting) Hindu because (1) he believed, as did every orthodox Hindu, in the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Manusmriti*, the *Puranas*, the epics of *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and other Hindu scriptures; he also believed in the *avatars*, and in the theory of rebirth. (2) Gandhi also accepted the logic behind the Hindu *Varnashrama dharma* (caste categories, but only in their Vedic sense²). (3) He venerated the cow but only as a symbol of the entire animal

1. English translation, *Mahatma Gandhi and Shrimad Rajchandra*, from the original in Gujarati (*Samvat*, 2005 according to the Gujarati calendar).

2. I.e., according to talent and disposition but not birth.

world. (4) He was not against *murti-puja* or image-worship, although he did not worship any form of deity, nor did he go to worship in any temple.

Gandhi parted ways, however, with orthodox Hindus by his nonconformist stand and efforts to eradicate untouchability, which was “the biggest blot on Hinduism.” Similarly, he dared to befriend Muslims and fight for the minority rights of all outcasts and outcastes of Hinduism—the poor and the lowly—which incensed the die-hard orthodox. Following in the footsteps of Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi worshipped God as “*Daridra-Narayana*,” or “God in the form of the poor!” Like a true Vaishnava, his heart bled at the suffering of others, but then again, like a true karma-yogi, he worked tirelessly to remove human suffering, injustice, inequality and the exploitation of the poor and the powerless by the rich and the powerful. Here I would like to quote from my book (p. 191):³

“Gandhi maintained a polar tension between the two apparent contradictions—being true to the essence and spirit of Hinduism versus being a nonconformist reformer who endeavored to purge Hinduism of all its impurities... A devout Hindu himself, Gandhi was not blind to the pitfalls of Hinduism, or to put it in Bhikhu Parekh’s words⁴: ‘though Gandhi valued his tradition, he was not a traditionalist.’”

Gandhi and Hinduism

A deeply religious man at heart, Gandhi worshipped God as Truth only—Truth which is one, yet many-sided, and he defined Hindu Dharma as a “relentless pursuit after Truth.” To Gandhi, the first verse of the Isha Upanishad was an “all comprehensive mantra;” it was “the golden key” that opened the many-gated kingdom of God or Truth. He translated the Sanskrit verse into English as: “God the Ruler (Isha) pervades all there is in this Universe. Therefore, renounce and dedicate all to Him, and then enjoy or use the portion that may fall to thy lot;” and the second line of the first verse says, “Never covet anybody’s possession” (*Harijan*, 30-31, 1937). This one verse summed up to him the essential message of “renunciation” at the heart of Hinduism proclaimed over and over in all the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and other scriptures. Nothing belongs to you, not even your existence and much less what you think you own or possess. Therefore, you dedicate everything to the Lord, and enjoy whatever you have, but humbly, as the grace of God only, and in the spirit of renunciation.

3. Uma Majmudar, *Gandhi’s Pilgrimage of Faith: From Darkness to Light* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

4. Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform* (London: Sage Publications, 1989).

Gandhi was a man of deep faith and a true *bhakta* (devotee) at heart; he was a man of prayer as well as action who lived constantly in the presence of God. Gandhi recognized God as Truth only. Though his own personal God or *ishtam* was Rama, Gandhi wholeheartedly accepted the non-dualism of Advaita Vedanta and believed in the “impersonal, all-pervading, universal principle of *Brahman*, otherwise known as *Sat-Chit-Ananda—That which alone is, pure intelligence, pure bliss!* Gandhi believed that God is pure, undefiled consciousness, which, though unseen, indefinable, and formless, pervades the whole universe, and is the very essence of all life. That is why he said that the first verse of the Isha Upanishad sums up the gist of Truth. He said:

To me God is Truth and love; God is ethics and morality; God is Fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist. . . He is the searcher of hearts. He transcends speech and reason. . . He is personal God to those who need His personal presence. He is the purest essence. He simply IS to those who have faith. . . He is in us and yet above and beyond us.⁵

A Living Organism

Gandhi was thus a true devotee of Hinduism or “*sanatana dharma*,” but he defined the Hindu Dharma as “a relentless pursuit of Truth through non-violent means,” and described it as “the most tolerant of all religions.” Further, he said, “the beauty of Hinduism lies in its all-embracing inclusiveness.” To Gandhi, who claimed to be “a *sanatani* Hindu,” Hinduism was not a “codified religion” but a “living organism liable to growth and decay, and subject to the laws of Nature. One and indivisible at the root, it has grown into a vast tree with innumerable branches.” Gandhi conceived of Hinduism as an “ever-evolving” and “ever-growing” living organism which by no means is a spent force or a dead religion.

Gandhi was the kind of Hindu to whom, “God is no God who merely satisfies the intellect. God must rule the heart and transform it. . . God must express Himself in every smallest act of His votary. This can be only be done through a definite realization more real than the five senses can ever produce. . . it is proved not by extraneous evidence but in the transformed conduct and character of those who have felt the real presence of God within.”⁶ Gandhi’s life is a testimony of the presence of God within. □

5. Raghavan Iyer, ed., *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), Vol. 1, p. 572.

6. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1950), p. 65.

Christmas Eve and the Founding of a New Order

John Schlenck

On a cold night in December, 1886, nine of Sri Ramakrishna's young disciples were at the family home of one of them—Baburam, later Swami Premananda—in the village of Antpur, some thirty miles west of Calcutta. Sri Ramakrishna had passed away four months previously. Full of the spirit of renunciation, the disciples decided to build a “dhuni” fire, as traditional monks do, and meditate. After they had meditated for some time, Narendra (soon to become Swami Vivekananda) began to speak glowingly of the life of Jesus—his birth, his life of self-sacrifice, his death and resurrection, and the apostolic world where Paul had preached the gospel of the risen Christ.

The parallel with the disciples of Ramakrishna was palpable. Filled with the spirit of renunciation and self-denial, they took the vow of monasticism. They would give their lives for the realization of God, following the example and teaching of their Master. And they formed an indissoluble brotherhood.

It was only later that they discovered that the night of their vows was Christmas Eve.

At this time, it was not at all clear to them how this would play out. Probably most of them still conceived the unfolding pattern of their lives in a more or less traditional Hindu monastic way. Monks strove for self-liberation and, secondarily, taught spirituality.

The radical implications of Ramakrishna's life and teaching were not yet focused. The disciples knew that their Master was more than an ordinary saint, that something extremely important had happened at Dakshineswar, Shyampukur and Cossipore. They knew that their Master had lighted in them a burning fire of spiritual yearning, that they must strive intensely to realize God as he had realized God. And on that night at Antpur, Naren had charged them to become themselves Christs, to aid in the redemption of the world. Their lives were meant for more than their own liberation. And they knew that their Master had appointed Naren their leader.

But Naren was in many ways unorthodox. He had argued with and challenged Ramakrishna in a very untraditional way. He had also grasped implications of Ramakrishna's teaching that most of his brother disciples had

not.¹ Over the next dozen years, he would urge them to do things they had never thought of doing, things they did not hear directly from Ramakrishna. And some of them resisted, even accusing Naren (now Vivekananda) of urging on them his own ideas rather than their Master's ideas.

Two things they knew, however. They knew their Master's great love for and trust in Naren. And they saw that Naren's/Vivekananda's heart was growing as wide and deep as a Buddha or a Christ. Ultimately, these two things overcame their resistance and they supported him in the establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission: "For one's own liberation *and* for the good of the world."

A third factor may be mentioned, which helped to turn the tide in Vivekananda's favor: the Holy Mother, Ramakrishna's widow and first disciple, unwaveringly supported Vivekananda. She saw directly that he was an instrument of his Master, and that the work of service he urged his brother disciples to undertake was the Master's work. Ultimately all of Ramakrishna's disciples were convinced that the work of the Mission was Ramakrishna's work, whether or not they participated actively in the work.

Service of the Living God—God in the form of all human beings—was to be done on many levels. Efforts to remove human suffering were not to be restricted to spiritual teaching. Indeed, Vivekananda had realized that preaching metaphysics to starving people was "madness." The human being must first be fed and housed and healed before spiritual teaching could be assimilated.

Holy Mother saw an additional advantage of multi-layered service: It is good for the server. As she said, how many can meditate all the time? Work keeps the mind in good condition. As not all can assimilate spiritual teaching directly, all cannot dispense spiritual teaching. Other kinds of service are needed for the server as well as the served.

Finally, love and compassion can be "catching." The example of selfless service, of genuine love and concern for the well-being of others, can ignite spiritual awakening in those who are served and in those who witness such service.

In the chain of events which led to the full flowering of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda ethos, Christmas Eve, 1886, formed an important link. It was also an intersection between two great traditions. We can all derive inspiration from Vivekananda's exhortation to his brothers to become Christs. □

1. E.g., cf. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play / Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, V: 9.13-14.

Reflection on White Walls

Mind's eye concentrates its force,
Catching gleams, magician's fire.
Pale ghost-forms rise in unison,
Coached alive by my imagination.

That white wall standing innocent—
Only carefully selected light.
Energetic thought displayed in photons,
Newly-focused by my outer eye.

How can such magic be performed?
What power attracts or casts aside?
Is some Knower striving to be known?
I take such keen delight in wondering.

Then—quicksilver recognition!
Of course! I am That Knower.
In That, I feel re-membered.
In time, white walls return again.

—Sondra S. Barnes

Dark Retreat

1- Deep patterns
crisscross red
earth-streaked
snow, leaving a
mysterious message
in the melting slush:

2- to be a Red Indian
now, is to be in the
Unseen,
with the unknowable,
the disbelieved,

- 3- for it is a time on
Mother Earth when even
the green pines
and the white mountains
turn away,
protecting their own—
- 4- O Mother!
the day is now coming
when spring's virgin ear
will open to receive this
winter's darkest secrets,
- 5- and in the breaking
darkness, you will do
once more, that sly thing
which turns the wheel,
and brings our happy
renewal;
- 6- then, when the flood
gates will finally close,
and the sluice gate
gets opened,
in an awestruck silence
swallowing all words
and all worlds,
- 7- so quietly you will come—
a small yellow
bird,
a mountain chickadee,
resting
in the rainbow's
reflection.

—Judith, Hermit of Sarada,
Tsalagi (Eastern Cherokee)

An Ear Wiggles

By dawn's early light in late September,
At the Vedanta Retreat in Olema, California,
In the retreat's east hayfield within a stone's throw of the fence,
There lies a small black heap of skin and bones.
Ever so still it lies, a helpless newcomer on the pastoral scene, its
survival
questionable, seemingly a crapshoot.
It has the potential to provide an onlooker with a curious philosophical
reflection, but as to that, as of this magic moment, the onlooker hasn't
an inkling.

In the cold of a damp day that breaks forbiddingly on a gray horizon,
there arise from the small black heap wisps of steam.
Surely not more than two or three hours ago, if indeed even that, it was
deposited laboriously in the grass by its mother, a black angus cow.
The mother now and again licks residual amniotic fluid off the
motionless small black heap,
Hovers around it constantly, with an air, seemingly, now of awe, now of
curiosity, now of utter amazement at what she and a promiscuous bull
conceived a full nine months ago: "two ships passing in the night."
On the fence, strung like beads at four-foot intervals, one to a post, a
bevy of hopeful buzzards, patient, silently intent, watches and waits.

In vain, however, is their vigil.
Slanting rays of sunshine begin to lift the veil on an azure blue, an ear
wiggles;
The breath of life bestirs the bones of the small black heap,
Glistening now like glass in the benign sunshine, still quite moist, as if
with the dew.
Again an ear wiggles, issues with a vigorous finality a proclamation of
triumph;
The small black heap, a touching study in creeping animation, is here to
stay!

The buzzards, vanquished by the powerful affirmation of life implicit in
the mere wiggling of an ear, their hopes of feasting on the flesh of a
dead, small black heap dashed,
Get the message that it's time to move on and, with an audible threshing
of the air with the winnowing fans of their wide wings, mount the
moist air—

Grim scavengers of death, ever attentive to the call of carrion, foiled
occasionally, shadowy victims of a sort of practical joke, played on
them by a mischievous Mother Nature.

The onlooker who drank in this scene departs it with a farfetched fancy.
A new-born spiritual aspirant is up for survival in a manner problematic,
a precarious manner

Of which the new-born calf was vaguely suggestive.

In his spiritual infancy, with faults to overcome, virtues to acquire, more
dead than alive he might seem to be, his progress tortoise-paced, his
path imperiled.

To learn to live a godly life in an ungodly world is a trek through the
valley of the shadow of death.

Ever on the alert are the buzzards of satanic enticements—ravaging
scavengers, funereal, insidious, their wings black as soot against the
chaste white of a cleaned-up life.

Under sleepless surveillance they keep the fledgling seeker, their black
banner, emblematic of the death of high hopes, waving in an ill wind.
Eagerly, they await the death-rattle of his vaulting ambition—of his
desire to hitch his wagon to the star of Truth, of Freedom, of Universal
Love.

The aspirant, perchance, by dint of his do-or-die attitude, finds favor with
the goddess of fortune, Grace by name; almost imperceptibly (shades
of the new-born calf!), an ear wiggles.

A golden boy, bright-eyed, he manages to get a grip, succeeds in holding
on, with bulldog tenacity of purpose, to his cherished spiritual ideals:
Swami Vivekananda's "brave heart."

In due course there dawns a day when, at a winding of the way, the
sovereign elixir of spiritual vitality surging strong in his veins, he
catches a glimpse of a world with a new look—

A world new and improved, clothed in a serene glory.

The aspirant's hopes brighten.

The buzzards' hopes—a spent candle flickering, smoking—die out.

An ear wiggles.

—Vimukta Chaitanya

A New Man Is Born on Earth
 A Nativity Carol for Sri Ramakrishna
 (Excerpted from an oratorio in progress)

John Schlenck

1 *Moderately fast* (♩ = 88)

p
 1. To Khu - di - ram and to Chan - dra a son is
 2. To Khu - di - ram and to Chan - dra a son is
 3. All ye who long for di - vine light, ap - proach and

4 *mp*

1. born in Ka-mar-pu - kur. To Khu - di - ram, burn - ing bright in faith and
 2. born in Ka-mar-pu - kur, A joy - ous child burn - ing bright in faith and
 3. see at Ka-mar-pu - kur A guide who takes us a - cross the sea of

8 *p*

1. truth, To Moth - er Chan - dra, full of lov - ing kind - ness,
 2. truth; His lov - ing kind - ness bids to break our bond - age.
 3. life, A lov - ing friend who yearns to save and free us.

12 *mf* *mp*

1. A child is born. A new man is come on earth, Bear - ing the
 2. O come and see: a new man is born on earth, Bear - ing the
 3. O come and see: a new man is born on earth, Bear - ing the

16 *p*

1. gift of life di - vine, Show - ing the way, the truth, the life.
 2. gift of life di - vine, Show - ing the way, the truth, the life.
 3. gift of life di - vine, Show - ing the way, the truth, the life.

20 *A little faster* (♩ = 96)

mf
 1. Sing al - le - lu - ia, ja - ya ja - ya Ra - ma - krish - na. Sing
 2. Sing al - le - lu - ia, ja - ya ja - ya Ra - ma - krish - na. Sing
 3. Sing al - le - lu - ia, ja - ya ja - ya Ra - ma - krish - na. Sing

23

1. ja - ya ja - ya Ra - ma - krish - na, ho - san - na in the high - est.
 2. ja - ya ja - ya Ra - ma - krish - na, ho - san - na in the high - est.
 3. ja - ya ja - ya Ra - ma - krish - na, ho - san - na in the high - est.

27 *A little slower* (♩. = 88)

mp

1. aa - ji pre - maa - nan - de man re gaa - ha raa - ma -
 2. Now the ve - ry God of gods re - news his sport in

30

1. krish - na naam: Sing to - day the name of Ra - ma - krish - na, dwell in
 2. hu - man form, To re - deem our weak - ness - es des - cend - ing through a

34

mf

1. joy di - vine. gaa - ha raa - ma - krish - na naam
 2. moth - er's womb. See com - pas - sion o - ver - flow - ing,

37

f

1. ja - pa raa - ma - krish - na naam: Sing the name of
 2. see the bliss of God re - vealed. Sing, "Ho - san - na,

40

1. Ra - ma - krish - na, cher - ish him with - in your heart.
 2. al - le - lu - ia, God with us: Em - man - u - el."

44 *Coda:*

mf

See com - pas - sion o - ver - flow - ing, see the bliss of

47

f

God re - vealed. Sing, "Ho - san - na, al - le - lu - ia,

50

God with us: Em - man - u - el."

Review Essay

A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How a New Faith Is Being Born

by **John Shelby Spong.**

Harper, San Francisco.

176 pages. Paperback \$14.95 2001

John Shelby Spong is a retired Anglican bishop and a leading spokesman for liberal Christianity. He believes that traditional Christian theology is no longer viable, that theism in general is untenable, and that the nature and role of Jesus have to be completely rethought.

In this he is heavily influenced by an acknowledged intellectual mentor, Bishop John A.T. Robinson, who published a book with similar themes, *Honest to God*, in 1963. Robinson was pilloried for deconstructing Christianity, but as Spong points out in his preface, he diagnosed the disease without prescribing a cure.

Spong attempts to prescribe a cure, and he admits it is a tough job. In doing so, he enlists the aid of two thinkers Robinson had also invoked: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich.

Although other thinkers have advanced similar arguments, Spong builds a case that is unusually thorough, forceful, and eloquent. He defines theism as belief in “a being, supernatural in power, dwelling outside this world and invading [it] periodically to accomplish the divine will.” He maintains that this belief arose in response to our ancestors’ fear of uncertainty and death. We needed assurance that somebody was in charge out there, so we invented God to give ourselves the illusion of security. (And by “God,” Spong usually means the Jewish, and later Christian, God portrayed in the Bible.)

The Unraveling of God’s Authority

So long as our knowledge of the world was limited, belief in God remained unquestioned. But when science began to make discoveries that challenged some of the beliefs enshrined in scripture, his authority began to unravel.

He was especially vulnerable to attack on moral grounds. In the Hebrew Bible he was often portrayed as irascible, vindictive, and violent. He was an interventionist deity, interfering in human history irregularly but spectacularly. Among other things, he parted the sea so that the Israelites could escape the Egyptians (Exodus 14), and even made the sun stand still so that Joshua could defeat the Amorites (Joshua 10:12-14).

Spong doesn't mention the divinely mandated genocide against the Canaanites which the Book of Joshua glorifies. (See Deuteronomy 7:1-2, 7:16, and 20:16-18; also Joshua 6:21, 8:2, 8:24-29, 10:28-40, 11:8-15, and 11:20-21.) But that alone constitutes reasonable proof that the deity depicted in the Bible was, shall we say, somewhat lacking in moral sensitivity.

In the teachings of Jesus, he mellowed. But then he regressed in the theology expounded by the apostle Paul. According to Paul's doctrine of Original Sin, God holds all humankind responsible for a sin committed by our earliest ancestors. That sin has infected all of us, and God will not redeem us from it unless we accept the atoning sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Spong justifiably admires a good part of Paul's thinking, but he takes issue with the doctrine of Original Sin. It is, he says, an "historically inaccurate and psychologically damaging definition of humanity that has resulted in a constant denigration of human life as helpless, depraved, sinful, and in need of divine rescue....the ultimate example of distorted negative thinking." He concedes that there is an element of evil in human nature, but regards it as a symptom of incompleteness, which has been caused by self-centeredness, which in turn has been caused by the struggle for survival.

A New Model of Deity

Given all this, Spong believes that we have to rethink our ideas about God's nature. We need a new model of deity.

Here things get interesting, because Spong goes to Tillich for his new model. In doing so, he discovers a concept of godhood remarkably close to the Vedantic concept of Brahman. God is not, Spong says, a mere being. He's not even a Supreme Being. God is Being itself—the Ground of Being, in fact—and the source of all life and love.

For Christians, there is still a problem: How does Jesus fit into the picture?

Spong demythologizes Jesus, rejecting on scientific grounds the virgin birth, the miracles, the physical resurrection, and the ascension. What's left seems to be a shrunken, desiccated shadow of a man.

But, Spong argues, there's more to him than we realize: Jesus is a champion of human freedom, openness, and egalitarianism. He uplifted women, the poor, the downtrodden, and the outcasts. In his parable of the Good Samaritan he championed despised minority groups. As a great liberator and egalitarian, he led humankind into a new fullness of life and love. By exemplifying what it means to manifest the Ground of Being in all its richness, he proved himself worthy of being called the Son of the new God.

Will This New Model Inspire Enthusiasm and Devotion?

Spong's new Christianity may be viable as an intellectual construct, but one wonders how much enthusiasm and devotion it will inspire among ordinary people. His Ground of Being, like Brahman, is vast, all-embracing, awesome, and deep. But it is also cold, impersonal, and abstract. It may appeal to the type of people Sri Ramakrishna called "dry jnanis," but bhaktas will be left high and dry and longing for a little flesh and blood.

Jesus provides that flesh and blood, but Spong's portrayal of him as a liberator and an egalitarian downgrades him from his previous eminence as the only Son of God and strips him of his uniqueness. There have been lots of other liberators and egalitarians in human history.

The attempt to recast Jesus as the Divine Egalitarian, too, seems to be a retrojection of 21st-century attitudes upon a first-century mind. True, Jesus was sympathetic to women, the downtrodden, and minority groups. He could be disparaging toward Gentiles (Matthew 5:47, 6:7, 6:31-32; Mark 7:26-27; John 4:22), but he was favorably impressed, and moved to compassion and generosity, whenever they showed faith in him (Matthew 8:5-13; Mark 7:28-30).

Even so, there is no evidence that he preached a conscious, consistent, or systematic egalitarianism. It has been left to later thinkers to articulate egalitarianism as a doctrine, and for modern theologians, operating from the benefit of hindsight, to project it onto Jesus.

And there are other problems. The teachings of Jesus that have come down to us are unabashedly theistic. They say nothing about a Ground of Being. His god was what Vedantists call a personal god: a king who sits enthroned in heaven with the earth as his footstool (Matthew 5:34-35), a heavenly father who makes the sun rise on the evil and the good (Matthew 5:45), feeds the birds of the air (Matthew 7:26), clothes the lilies of the field (Matthew 7:28-30), numbers the hairs of our heads (Matthew 10:30), and watches every sparrow fall (Matthew 10:29). Like the god portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, the god of Jesus is an interventionist deity. If he had been asked, he would have sent legions of angels to save Jesus from the Romans (Matthew 26:53). Certainly in the indefinite future he will send Jesus back to judge the world and inaugurate the kingdom of Heaven.

Reconstructing Jesus as a Humanist

In reconstructing Jesus, Spong uses the language of contemporary humanism. Jesus, he says, calls us to "a humanity without boundaries," to "courageous

living,” to “human dignity,” “a new and deeper selfhood.” We must “live fully,” “love wastefully,” and “have the courage to be.”

All of this sounds very grand. But what does it mean? In practical terms, it translates mainly into a liberal agenda emphasizing tolerance, acceptance, inclusiveness, and universal love. Nothing wrong with that—but to this reader, at least, it comes as a disappointment. From Jesus we expect something more daring, something more original, something less suggestive of humanistic platitudes.

We also expect something a little closer to the recorded teachings of the historical Jesus. This objection is based on terminology. A reconstructed Christianity, to be worthy of the name, ought to be based on the teachings of Christ. When we reduce those teachings to tolerance, acceptance, inclusiveness, and universal love, we may be focusing on their main point, but we are also leaving out a lot that made Jesus’ teachings unique, and recognizably his own: his emphasis on the kingdom of Heaven, for instance, which provided the rationale for the extreme morality he taught. (Why return good for evil, love for hatred? Why turn the other cheek? Why go two miles with someone who forces you to go only one? So that you may please God, and be found worthy of entering his kingdom when it comes.)

Is This the God Jesus Worshiped?

When we abandon the notion of God as a loving father, too, and replace it with the idea of an impersonal Ground of Being, we are opting for a concept of deity that is more sophisticated, more up to date, more intellectually respectable. Because of its similarity to Brahman, it is bound to be popular with Vedantists. The question is: Is this the god Jesus worshiped?

Based on his recorded teachings, the answer has to be no. And while later Christians, most notably Meister Eckhart, have gravitated toward such a god, any claim that this is the kind of god Jesus worshiped would contradict massive evidence to the contrary, and would require proof.

While Spong’s reconstruction of Christianity has much to commend it, without the kingdom of Heaven and the concept of God as a loving father, it is barely recognizable as Christianity. It would be more accurate to call it a kind of Christian humanism. But so long as it doesn’t claim to be the actual teaching of Jesus, there’s nothing wrong with Christian humanism. The version Spong has created will have considerable appeal for Christian intellectuals, religious humanists, and those who are dissatisfied with traditional Christianity. Certainly it is a heroic religious and intellectual endeavor which provides much food for thought.

—William Page

Discussion: Are Western Vedantists Hindus?

Am I a Vedantist or a Hindu? Guidelines from Vivekananda

Sister Gayatriprana

(continued from the previous issue)

5. Is Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta “Religion,” and Is It Practical?

Introduction

We arrived, in the last issue of *American Vedantist*, at an overall view of the basic principles of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta and how American and Hindu Vedantists can find common ground in Reality and the Self in all. From there I think we can begin to see what Swami Vivekananda meant by the *universal religion* he spoke of in the West and the *solidarity with all life* which was a leitmotif in India. With the outlines of such a worldview taking form before us, the question that now arises is: Can we really call this a religion? Is the Vedanta of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda practical in any way?

A Definition of Religion

These are very important questions, the answer to which turns on one’s definition of the words *religion* and *practical*. Focusing on what would seem to apply most to the West, I would suggest that, on the basis of Ramakrishna Vedanta, *religion is primarily the acceptance of the depth dimension of ourselves and the universe*, a concept now being taken up in earnest by Western scientists. The intellectual challenges of quantum mechanics and the discoveries of transpersonal psychology are moving the Western mind deeper and deeper into the levels of experience possible to the human psyche, demonstrating more and more clearly the “altered states of consciousness” and what they mean in terms of our behavior. Another crucial aspect of the religious view is the *commitment to developing our deeper potential through consciously chosen and time-tested methods*. Here the Indian tradition is the prize exhibit, for developing such methods has been the primary thrust of Vedanta since time immemorial. It is also true that such methods have evolved and developed over time, up to Swami Vivekananda’s own magisterial presentation of the four yogas in contemporary English and compatible with the outlook of Western science. We have a whole smorgasbord of methods available to us, and also the wonderful freedom to experiment and find our own, for the Reality underlying all that we do ensures that any genuine and sincere effort will bring positive results, while the Vedantic

viewpoint underpinning our efforts is a protection from any lapse into misguided fanaticism.

Is Ramakrishna Vedanta Too Generic?

No doubt such formulations seem very generic and freewheeling to people committed to pre-existing religious traditions, and we can understand why it is hard to see how they could be considered “religious”. But, if we are all going to the Self and sincere effort will indeed make accessible to us its tremendous, constructive energy, why should there be anxiety about conforming to any given paradigm? Swami Vivekananda said it all when he told his American students, “Go into your own room and get the Upanishads out of your own Self.”¹ The image that suggests itself is that Vedanta is a form of “spiritual algebra”, which can be worked out in many modes, each of them giving constructive results compatible with all others, because of the coherency of the underlying “algebra.”

The New Age and Its Relationship to Vedanta

Such an approach commends itself so much more to the contemporary mind than a list of rules, regulations, rituals, taboos, and so on, no matter how hoary and venerable. Science has made it inevitable that people want to do their own experiments and prefer the evidence of their own experience to anything else. People are abandoning authoritarian and sectarian religions in droves and opting to conduct their spiritual lives according to what works for them. To the extent they have a philosophy, they believe loosely in the Self and its power to direct them. To my mind, this is the general characterization of the New Age, which no doubt began in the West but is now spreading worldwide. On the face of it, these are the people who are really living Vedanta—but we also know with what mixed results. It is hard to get the old “maya” behind us. In the West, that means our ingrained materialism. As we become more subjective through our practices, there is a very serious danger of losing sight of the ethical underpinnings of our culture, not simply because we are becoming more “inward,” but also because those ethics are based on the old, dualistic *thou shalt* and *thou shalt not*, based on external authority. The end result is at risk of becoming “spiritualized hedonism,” which has given the New Age such a bad name. I feel that we are in urgent need of an ethics that connects up our inner experience of the Self with our behavior in the physical world. To my mind, Ramakrishna Vedanta supplies such a view, because it does not deny the reality of the world, as does more traditional Vedanta and Hinduism itself. Rather, it sees the spiritual and physical worlds as intimately connected, grounded in a Reality which contains both, permits them to be what they are, and also unifies them.

1. *Complete Works*, Vol. 7: Inspired Talks, July 7, p. 71.

The Urgency of Spreading the Vedantic Idea of Ethics

I believe it is rather urgent that Westerners grasp as clearly as possible what they mean by Vedanta and begin to propagate it in language that speaks directly to the millions of people who are sincerely trying to find “Vedanta” (or what they would probably call the perennial religion) so that they can be exposed to this important connecting link between the religious traditions of East and West. “Becoming spiritual” does not absolve us of ethical responsibility, as seems to have happened in the New Age, as also in classical India, where behavior in the name of religion that Western onlookers could only describe as barbaric was permitted to flourish without let or hindrance. Even Swami Vivekananda, when with his fellow Indians, would excoriate this unfortunate side effect of too much “spirituality.” The spirituality of Ramakrishna Vedanta contains not only the inner truths of Vedanta but also Western respect for the individual and his or her rights (because of the indwelling divinity). When others are ourself in the deepest sense of the term, how can we dominate, abuse or hurt them? This is the universal ethical idea that is so needed today, not only by Westerners, but also by Indians, as they struggle to assimilate so many different worldviews, each with a different code of ethics.

Let Us Work Out the Vedanta We Have Been Given and Let the Forms Emerge in Their Own Way

I feel the time has come to permit sincere people to come up—like lions, as Swami Vivekananda would say—to realize and manifest their deep intuitions of who they are, working as brothers and sisters in a shared effort to understand and apply the “spiritual algebra” we have been given by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. In our pluralistic, scientific and democratic world I think nothing else will be “practical,” in the sense of appealing to people on all levels of their being and experience. If such ideas are disseminated, if proper freedom is given, forms will emerge of themselves, will meet the needs of the people and gain their enthusiastic support. No doubt American and Hindu Vedanta will take different forms—because the needs they are meeting are different—but if we bear in mind our shared principles, such differences will be seen as complementary to each other, as supporting each other, and fulfilling each other. That, in the words of Shakespeare, would be “a consummation devoutly to be wished.”² Let us stop wishing and actually bring it about.

(conclusion)

2. *Hamlet*, III.1.56

Vedanta in the “Far” West

The following selections are from the San Francisco lectures of Swami Vivekananda. We can say they are apropos of the primacy of nondualism in religion as the highest ordinate in spiritual life, and the existence of the spiritual state of awareness called vijnana as the final experience in spiritual life: the unity of all existence.

When Thomas Jefferson was inaugurated as President in 1801, he said that sometimes it is said that man cannot be trusted with the government of himself, what to say the republic. He dissented and rejected the haughty chatter and disdain of the Blue-Bloods about the American people and about their clamorous, roughneck democratic republic. He wryly asked, shall mankind find angels to govern themselves? Jefferson asserted that mankind was worthy of trust and worthy or self-governance and that he intended to promote such trust and governance among the American people by ensuring their liberty based on human rights inalienable in every person.

Almost a century later at Chicago in 1893, the first public words spoken by Swami Vivekananda at an extraordinary world meeting were "Sisters and Brothers or America." He hailed us as members of his family and during the years he visited and lived in the United States, he showed his confidence and trust in the American people, sharing with them the highest truths of soul and God. As he had realized these truths in his own life, he was convinced that Americans could also realize them.

—Theodore H. Chenoweth and Gail T. Gregory

What is the God of Vedanta? He is principle, not person. You and I are all Personal Gods. The absolute God of the universe, the creator, preserver, and destroyer of the universe, is impersonal principle. You and I, the cat, rat, devil, and ghost, all these are Its persons—all are Personal Gods. You want to worship Personal Gods. It is the worship of your own self. . .

* * *

God is the infinite, impersonal being--ever existent, unchanging, immortal, fearless; and you are all His incarnations, His embodiments. This is the God of Vedanta, and His heaven is everywhere. In this heaven dwell all the Personal Gods there are—you yourselves. . .

* * *

Worship everything as God—every form is His temple. All else is delusion. Always look within, never without. Such is the God that Vedanta preaches, and such is His worship. Naturally there is no sect, no creed, no caste in Vedanta. . .

* * *

If Vedanta—this conscious knowledge that all is one spirit—spreads, the whole of humanity will become spiritual. But is it possible? I do not know. Not within thousands of years. The old superstitions must run out. You are all interested in how to perpetuate all your superstitions. Then there are the ideas of the family brother, the caste brother, the national brother. All these are barriers to the realization of Vedanta. Religion has been religion to very few. . . .

* * *

There is another side to the question. Everyone says that the highest, the pure, truth cannot be realized all at once by all, that men have to be led to it gradually through worship, prayer, and other kinds of prevalent religious practices. I am not sure whether that is the right method or not. . . .

* * *

For thousands of years millions and millions all over the world have been taught to worship the Lord of the world, the Incarnations, the saviors, the prophets. They have been taught to consider themselves helpless, miserable creatures and to depend upon the mercy of some person or persons for salvation. There are no doubt many marvelous things in such beliefs. But even at their best, they are but kindergartens of religion, and they have helped but little. Men are still hypnotized into abject degradation. However, there are some strong souls who get over that illusion. The hour comes when great men shall arise and cast off these kindergartens of religion and shall make vivid and powerful the true religion, the worship of the spirit by the spirit. . . .

—from "Is Vedanta the Future Religion?"³

. . . Do not say "God". Do not say "Thou". Say "I". The language of [dualism] says, "God, Thou, myFather." The language of [non-dualism] says, "Dearer unto me than I am myself. I would have no name for Thee. The nearest I can use is I...

* * *

"God is true. The universe is a dream. Blessed am I that I know this moment that I [have been and] shall be free all eternity; ...that I know that I am worshipping only myself; that no nature, no delusion, had any hold on me. Vanish nature from me, vanish [these] gods; vanish worship; ...vanish superstitions, for I know myself. I am the Infinite. All these—Mrs. So-and-so, Mr. So-and-so, responsibility, happiness, misery—have vanished. I am the Infinite. How can there be death for me, or birth? Whom shall I fear? I am the One. Shall I be afraid of myself? Who is to be afraid of [whom]? I am the one Existence. Nothing else exists. I am everything."

1. *Complete Works*, Vol. 8, pp. 133, 134, 136, 139, 140, 141.

It is only the question of memory [of your true nature], not salvation by work. Do you *get* salvation? You are [already] free.

* * *

Go on saying, "I am free". Never mind if the next moment delusion comes and says, "I am bound." Dehypnotize the whole thing.

* * *

[This truth] is first to be heard. Hear it first. Think on it day and night. Fill the mind [with it] day and night: "I am It. I am the Lord of the universe. Never was there any delusion..." Meditate upon it with all the strength of the mind till you actually see these walls, houses, everything, melt away--[until] body, everything, vanishes. "I will stand alone. I am the One." Struggle on! "Who cares! We want to be free; [we] do not want any powers. Worlds we renounce; heavens we renounce; hells we renounce. What do I care about all these powers, and this and that! What do I care if the mind is controlled or uncontrolled! Let it run on. What of that! I am not the mind. Let it go on!"

* * *

. . . This is the religion of [non-dual] philosophy. [It is] difficult. Struggle on! Down with all superstitions! Neither teachers nor scriptures nor gods [exist]. Down with temples, with priests, with gods, with incarnations, with God himself? I am all the God that ever existed! There, stand up philosophers! No fear! Speak no more of God and [the] superstition of the world. Truth alone triumphs, and this is true. I am the Infinite.

* * *

. . . Just see what it takes to become a philosopher! This is the [path] of [Jnana-] Yoga, the way through knowledge. The other [paths] are easy, slow, ...but this is pure strength of mind. No weakling [can follow this path of knowledge. You must be able to say:] "I am the Soul, the ever free; [I] never was bound. Time is in me, not I in time. God was born in my mind. God the Father, Father of the universe—he is created by me in my own mind..."

* * *

Do you call yourselves philosophers? Show it! Think of this, talk [of] this, and [help] each other in this path, and give up all superstition!

—from "The Soul and God"⁴

2. *CW*, Vol. 1, pp. 500-502.

*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 Laleshwari, 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.]

I stepped into Om,
reached out and
pulled myself in.
My body became hot as a coal
but desire cooled.
From then on, the path
has been straighter and easier
to where light gave birth to us

To think I went in search of thee,
O love that now won't let me be

I wore myself out, trying to learn
about you. What I learned:
no one ever found you that way.
Knowledge is beyond the mind.
So I stopped searching,
and love took me to a tavern
full of untouched wine,
which together we touched

I rinsed my mind of every thought,
then you were there, where I was not

I am engraving my words in the heart
of the world

A pilgrim went from shrine to shrine
looking for someone who was with him
the whole way

Minds like you, O my restless one,
make people leave home
or the ashram, or each other.
Don't be one of those. Stay

Time is a web made of thin strands
of longing. Without them,
nothing gets caught

The gods are less jealous
than you think.
They love you to chant God's name

Some, though asleep, are awake.
Some, though awake, sleep.
Even after they wash, some are dirty.
And some, even though they live
in a house and do things
in the world, are never home
and their work is done

Is everything possible?
No:
stopping a running stream
making a cool fire
leaving footprints on a cloud
milking a wooden cow
looking away from God

There's a little lake I know.
It's so full, another mustard seed
would make it overflow.
Every living thing goes there to drink.
Deer, jackal, rhino lean
over it together, close their eyes
and fall in. It's the world.
I see you fell in too,
O my mind

Does what I say seem familiar?
We were here always, that's why.
And always will be.
The sun always rises and sets.
Shiva keeps creating, dissolving,
and creating the same thing again
instead of repeating himself

The ignorant aren't different
from you or me. They just keep tying
their knotted rope into more knots,
knot after knot, hundreds of them.
Then even the knots get knots in them.
Then they come undone. Born again,
the ignorant start remembering
the art of knots
and can't wait to tie a few more

Who is dozing off,
trying to think of God?
What is the lake
that's eternally evaporating?
What can we give to God?
As you see, many important questions
have only one answer:
you, O my mind

[To be continued]

Book Reviews

Gandhi's Pilgrimage of Faith: From Darkness to Light
by Uma Majmudar, Foreword by Rajmohan Gandhi
State University of New York, Albany
xv + 280 pp. paperback 2005 \$21.95

The virtue of the life of any mahatma, any “great soul,” is that it is capable of being a model for others. What Uma Majmudar has done in this fine scholarly book is display that potency by tracing the expansion of soul in the example of Mohandas Gandhi. As grandson Rajmohan Gandhi says in his Foreword, “he is not on a pedestal.” This is what makes the mahatma helpful. He is real and our reality engages his.

As a scholarly work, the book makes an application of James W. Fowler's “stages of faith” paradigm to Gandhi's struggles, conflicts, doubts, growth, and breakthroughs. Fowler himself commends it, appreciating the convergence of his theory with the author's intimate knowledge of Gandhi's own milieu.

As an inspirational work, we can use it as a suggestive personal guide. Perhaps every journey of faith is built around one central and overwhelming value; for Gandhi it was Truth (see his book, published posthumously in 1955, *Truth Is God*). Whereas he had once held that “God is Truth,” he came later to say it the other way around, “Truth is God” [186].

Satyagraha (*satya*, truth; *agraha*, adherence: the power that comes from adherence to the truth, and actions that can be undertaken in the name of that adherence and its power [138]), or “truth campaign,” became his devotion to God and his karmic instrument for freeing the people from injustice. The salt satyagraha in 1930 was his most dramatic and successful satyagraha. By it he showed that “his fingers were on the pulse of the poor,” bringing the “lofty principles of truth and nonviolence” down to the homely “pinch of salt,” essential to life. Defying the government and demonstrating India's right to life and capacity for self-sufficiency, he “lifted the mundane to the level of the spiritual, and made the spiritual accessible to all” [184].

This took place in the context of Fowler's Stage 5, “Conjunctive Faith” (from Nicolas of Cusa's coincidence of opposites), or “the multidimensionality of truth,” as the several conscious and unconscious inclinations of the soul move toward integration [10], widening one's perspectives, making one critical of one's own social and religious myths and prejudices, and starting one on the transcendence of race, nation and tradition.

This stage had been preceded by the earlier stages of Fowler's scale of faith. After a preliminary stage of being mothered, Stage 1 is Intuitive-Projective Faith in the world of language and imagination when self-awareness first appears. Stage 2 is Mythic-Literal Faith in the traditions and practices of one's immediate

community. This is followed by Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional Faith, consisting of mutual perspectives in the peer group: of identity images and efforts to fit into one's society and be acceptable to others.

At Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective Faith, the value system established by "others" is transcended in favor of "relocation of authority in the self," requiring the creation of a meaning framework for which one is responsible. Finally, beyond Stage 5's Conjunctive Faith, one reaches Universalizing Faith, in which the significant environment is "inclusive of all being" [11], and the person becomes capable of spontaneous respect and compassion toward all, for all are immeasurably valuable [11-12].

In this context Majmudar retraces Gandhi's life, his ventures and "experiments," and his growth into the reality of Godness. She corrects popular myths and misunderstandings about him and explains the Indian cultural context for Westerners.

Gandhi was not a born mahatma, he was an *achieved* mahatma, and as such can encourage us all, although his life does not make anyone feel that enlargement of soul through these stages can be expected to come easily or to result in absolute perfection [241]. Instead, Gandhi shows us, and Majmudar's book shows us, "the metamorphosis of an ordinary man," proving the real potentiality for any of us to advance "from darkness to Light, from untruth to Truth, from death to Immortality" [17, 241].

Sri Ramakrishna, The Face of Silence

by Swami Nikhilananda and Dhan Gopal Mukerji

Edited and with an Introduction by Swami Adiswarananda,

Foreword by Dhan Gopal Mukerji II

Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock VT

xiii + 329 pp. hard cover \$29.95 2005

In *The Face of Silence* we have two accounts of the life of Sri Ramakrishna, one by Swami Nikhilananda, Swami Adiswarananda's predecessor at the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York, and the other, which gives its title to this book, by Dhan Gopal Mukerji.

The Nikhilananda piece, though only 122 pages long, covers all the main points, the stages in Sri Ramakrishna's life, the Holy Mother and the disciples, other outstanding persons, all in the framing dynamic of the spiritual quest of the Master and his avatarhood.

The other account, *The Face of Silence*, while it does not undertake of be a perfect source for historical material, is a testimony to the power of Sri Ramakrishna's life in that of Dhan Gopal Mukerji. As the latter's son, Dhan Gopal Mukerji II, explains in his Foreword, *The Face of Silence* completes a

trilogy of “a man's search for his soul” (the two earlier volumes being *Caste and Outcast* and *My Brother's Face*) [vii].

Swami Adiswarananda himself writes a preface in which he relates the career of this text and an introduction entitled “Sri Ramakrishna and His God-Consciousness,” focusing on the Master's ability to probe and illuminate “the vast and unknown realms of the human soul in all its dimensions” [3], a power arising from his deep and comprehensive God-consciousness: “I see that it is God himself who has become all this” [12].

The main text, *The Face of Silence*, was, according to the author's son, the first book written in English to make Sri Ramakrishna known outside India.¹ “Its author,” his son tells us in his Foreword, “saw it as a follow-up to Swami Vivekananda's famous visit to America in 1893.” He goes on to say that when it appeared in 1926, it was such a success that publishers in Europe wanted to offer it to their readers in appropriate translations. It was in this way that Romain Rolland came to read it in French and later to meet its author in person. The latter put Rolland in touch with Belur Math and introduced him to several of the direct disciples. The consequence of these events was Romain Rolland's twin books on the lives of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, which, I am happy to say, I discovered accidentally in the stacks of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and which brought me into Vedanta.

The text is engagingly written and recounts a number of incidents in the life of the author that are both instructive and inspiring. I especially appreciated the recital of the three meditations taught to the brahmachari [119-20] and the conversation with an unnamed “old holy man” on the difference between the “final touch” in initiation and hypnotism [124] and the difference between the stages of illumination and samadhi [125-28]. The chapter on Turiyananda's resolve to remain in the part of the monastery devoted to Saguna worship is also valuable.

The book is enriched with a number of our familiar photographs and some I had not seen, such as Nikhilananda as a young man, plus the photos of Dhan Gopal Mukerji. An Appendix offers insight into the spiritual quest of Mukerji through a collection of letters to and from various persons connected with him, including Josephine MacLeod. There is a glossary but no index.

This book is an important item for any Vedanta Center library and personally valuable for individual Vedantists. I was very pleased to come in contact with these memories.

—Beatrice Bruteau

1. It is the understanding of AV's editors that Max Muller's *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings*, published in 1899, was written in English and published in England and America.

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