

Where the Jordan Meets the Ganges: Swami Vivekananda and the Confluence of East/West Culture

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ABSTRACT

While it is common to categorize Eastern and Western culture using quantitative scales, modern researchers are beginning to view culture as a fluid oceanic commodity that cannot be entirely captured without reference to the dynamic context. This paper uses a central event, Swami Vivekananda's participation in the 1983 Chicago World Parliament of Religions to explore the confluence of cultures as played out both before and after Swami Vivekananda's lecture tours to the West. Vivekananda played a pivotal role in a global mixing of disciplines as diverse as philosophy, literature, education, physical science, social service, and organizational theory that has perhaps not been adequately appreciated outside the Indian continent. Vivekananda's lectures in the West are used as a focal point to show multinational interactions, which were forerunners of the modern proliferation of yogic themes in the West and capitalistic trends in the East. The paper ends with very broad questions about modern social issues prompted from a consideration of the blind spots and problems highlighted by Vivekananda's pioneering efforts to synthesize and articulate the strengths and weaknesses of Eastern and Western cultures.

INTRODUCTION

The Ganges, Yamuna, Mississippi, Jordan, and the Chinese Yellow River are listed among the world's most polluted bodies of water (Rahman 2013), while poverty, violence, religious intolerance, ethnic conflicts, and industrial waste are common problems around the world. More than \$67 Billion of goods moved between the US and India in 2014 -- \$22 Billion in American exports and \$45 Billion from Indian imports (US Census). As world economies become increasingly intertwined, political and economic stability is threatened by the misreading of cultural concepts and iconography. Even the boundaries of culture are difficult to define as trade and intellectual constructs mix to form unpredictable eddies not bound by legal geographic boundaries.

"Culture can be compared to an ocean. In a given context at a given time, we identify visible values and behaviors just like we identify visible wave patterns on the surface of the ocean. Nevertheless, the culture we see at this moment does not represent the totality and the entire life process of that culture." (Fang, 2005-6, p. 83)

When observing the confluence of two rivers, it can be difficult to tell where one stream ends and another begins without a mechanism to highlight the mixing and merging process. When forty pounds of vegetable dye is used to color the Chicago River for St. Patrick's day (Heigl 2015) or when colored powders and water balloons are tossed in the air to celebrate a

traditional Indian *Holi*¹ festival on Harvard's Quad (Cohen 2015), one cannot help but notice the merging of waters, colors, and cultures. Because Swami Vivekananda's influences and activities in bringing Indian culture to the US and Europe have been closely documented, his debut at the 1893 Parliament of World Religions can be used as a point of reference, which emphasizes the intersection of Eastern and Western values in a global society. The Chicago address, beginning with "Sisters and brothers of America ..." ² was held in what is now known as the Chicago Institute of Art. The auditorium used in the 1893 address was constructed for use in the Columbian Exposition, commonly referred to as the Chicago World's Fair. This event celebrated the four-hundred-year anniversary of Columbus' landing in the Americas by bringing together a sampling of the world's best artistic, industrial, scientific, and religious contributions. Best known today for the development of a prominent neo-Vedantic organization with a headquarters in India that blends religious and human services elements, the bulk of Vivekananda's speaking and writing activities were conducted in the West. As a social critic and synthesizer of religious philosophy and scientific inquiry, Vivekananda's vision of inter-faith and inter-disciplinary dialog still exerts influence on politics, literature, and science.

Vivekananda had first-hand experience of British rule in India and was exposed to Western-style education in India, including many of the emerging ideas of Western science, even as Oriental religious philosophy was emerging as a field of academic study in elite American and European colleges. Porter (2006) sees elements of modern American culture and economic interests that are reminiscent of the British Empire's influence at the beginning of the twentieth century when Vivekananda was most prominent on the Western lecture circuit. Yet, most American college students have limited academic exposure to the history of the British Raj and its impact on Indian culture, psychology, and religion. The complexity of Indian history and the prominence of spiritual themes in Hindu culture pose a particular challenge for American educational institutions. Separation of church and state in the US constitution may be used as an apologetic for limited attention to spiritual and religious aspects of world culture. This may be compounded by vocational and testing emphases favored by government funding mechanisms,

¹ Indian *Holi* festivals are celebrated with Spring revelry that ends in a bonfire which recreates one of several mythical tales. In one legend about the origin of the festival, a villain is burned to death for their evil deeds even though they were thought to be impervious to fire. Other versions of the festival's origins focus on pranks played by avatars in their role as lovers.

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIwZNMgFBWM> for a simulated version of the speech.

which arguably treat training in sensitivity to symbolic elements of culture, liberal arts perspectives, and multi-disciplinary research as subservient to economic ends.

Even where religion is included as an academic discipline, a Western bias could unknowingly impose if academic questions are framed as 1) What do members of a certain religion 'believe'? 2) Who were the 'authors' of their primary religious books? and 3) What is the 'goal' of the religion's practices? In contrast to Abrahamic based worldviews, Eastern religious traditions are often more concerned with duties than beliefs. Even asking who wrote an Eastern religion's major documents can be seen as denigrating a world view that conceptualizes scriptures as coming from a transcendental realm where individual human authorship or even prophetic reception at a specific point in time is not considered relevant. Practitioners of some Eastern religions may be insulted by the question 'what is the goal of your religion' as this can be viewed as reducing religious practice to a 'shopkeeping' mentality consistent with a Western worldview of the pursuit of the dualities of gain and loss for the benefit of the individual self or ego.

In Western academic courses on global trade, money is commonly treated as a generic currency that can be used as an all-purpose measure of value that supersedes national boundaries and worldviews. A tenet of the theory of comparative economic advantage is that low-cost production of increasing volumes of goods and services is an unmitigated positive that can stimulate the economy, lead to full employment, and maximize shareholder wealth. The legitimacy of unlimited expansion of sales and consumer wants that drive those sales is treated as a fundamental axiom. This goal orientation of Western consumer driven societies is in stark contrast to some Eastern religious ideals, which, in theory, claim to be oriented toward moving the practitioner away from self-interested desires. Yet, in actual practice, both the US and India have significant issues in the inequality of wealth since three-quarters of the wealth in both countries is held by the top 10% of the population.³

Management by objectives is the accepted wisdom in Western schools of business. Organizations determine goals, set strategies for attaining the objectives and incentivize agents to

³ The 2014 *Credit Suisse Global Wealth Data book* shows that in the U.S. 74.6% of all wealth is held by the richest 10% of the citizens. In India the per cent is 74.0%. This compares to 77.5% in Hong Kong, 73.3% in Egypt, 77.2% in Indonesia, 71.7% in South Africa, 68.9% in Chile, and 84.8% in Russia. The level is 54.1% in the U.K., 51.1% in Australia, 48.5% in Japan, 57.0% in Canada, and 54.5% in Finland.

share the principals' goals through systems that gather performance metrics for use in meting out punishment and rewards. Accounting measures of profit are imperfect metrics that do not include the full cost of environmental devastation. It cannot fully separate out individual contributions to value, and it seems to return a higher share of organizational rewards to top management and providers of capital than to lower level workers and allow artificial transfers of multinational profits to lower tax areas.

Classes in international management have come to recognize that organizational behaviors differ in the cultural setting. Hofstede (1980) popularized four categories or dimensions of cultural variability: 1) power distance, 2) uncertainty avoidance, 3) individualism vs. collectivism, and 4) masculinity vs. femininity to which he later added Confucian dynamism. When Hofstede began his work, Western businesses were trying to apply administrative structures without reference to cultural differences and were resistant to the idea of altering organizational structures to fit the location. Management researchers do not all agree with Hofstede's categories (McSweeney 2002), while Brewer & Venaik (2012) argue that Hofstede's dimensions are often misapplied at the individual level. Fang (2003, 2005-6) suggests that the problem with the Hofstede paradigm is that cultural dynamism and change have rarely been systematically analyzed. In personal interviews, Hofstede himself notes that because cultural values exist on an emotional level that is embedded in language and run deeper than outward behaviors (Carragher 2003; Hoppe 2004; Hodgett 1993), it is risky to use research categories as a lens that precludes personal investigation of the underlying cultural and historical framework. In an interview with the Carragher (2003), Hofstede argues that researchers have gone too far in trying to analyze culture with quantitative tools alone without attention to the qualitative background.

The purpose of this paper is to go beyond categorical stereotypes of Eastern and Western culture through a discussion of the cultural dynamism between East and West by using a central event, (Swami Vivekananda's participation in the 1983 World Parliament of Religions), to explore the intersection of cultures as played out both before and after Swami Vivekananda's lecture tours to the West. While the intellectual connection between Martin Luther King, Jr. and the works of Mahatma Gandhi is widely recognized, those outside India may have a lesser appreciation of how Vivekananda's writings on the lost grandeur of Indian civilization and his

message of spiritual freedom served as inspiration for Indian freedom fighters. Vivekananda played a role in the global dialog across areas as diverse as philosophy, literature, education, physical science, social service, and organizational theory. This paper presents Vivekananda's lectures in the West as a mechanism for reflecting on how interactions between Indian and Western worldviews can prompt a mutual re-examination of the respective strengths, weaknesses, and blind spots of both cultures.

WHAT BROUGHT VIVEKANANDA TO THE WEST?

Background on the Cultural Milieu

To understand the influences on the future Swami, it is important to paint the set with a few broad brush strokes about the historical and cultural milieu in India, which would have impacted his formative years. The word "Hindu" itself is a result of a misunderstanding by invaders who mispronounced the name of a river and called those living on the other side of the Sind River "Hindus." The modern Indian continent has seen a constant mixing of Islamic, Buddhist, Jain, and Hindi cultures. The classic Hindu literature traces its origins to somewhere between 2000 and 5000 BCE or even earlier in the form of Vedic hymns. The etymology of the word Vedas comes from *vid*, a root word for knowledge. While Abrahamic based religions choose to codify or canonize their literature into a dominant book, Hindu's monastic orders generally do not have a closed literature, even though most recognize a hierarchy of authority. In the Hindu tradition, Vedic hymns are viewed as having no specified date of origin but are viewed as Truth that adherents spell with a capital letter to indicate that it was discovered gradually by various authors and eventually put together in an anthology rather than being penned by a single seer or prophet.

Central Ideas of Hinduism

There are four principal Vedas that have survived. The hymns include sections that seem to praise the forces in nature, documents ceremonial protocol, and set forth the underlying philosophical principles of the prior portions. The philosophical writings are referred to as the Vedanta – from *veda*, i.e., knowledge, plus *anta*, a word meaning end. "End" suggests a dual meaning as 1) appearing toward the final portion of the Vedas, which were preserved from oral hymns or mantras, and 2) as the goal, i.e., the underlying purpose of the ceremonies with human life being seen as a sacrifice as well. Portions of the Vedantic writings are referred to as the Upanishads, which means the essential teachings received at the foot of a master. As the teaching was traditionally transmitted orally from master to student, even lengthy Vedas do not include a

complete do-it-yourself manual but are often characterized by short, aphorisms, or threads, i.e., *sutras* as they are called by Hindu and other religions from the Indian continent including Buddhists and Jains. Thus the literature is intended to be accompanied by more detailed instructions than the condensed written instructions. The Vedas as a whole and the Upanishads contained within them are referred to as *Shruti* (truth which was heard), meaning not created by an author but merely intuited or received from a state that transcends rational empirical senses. The Vedic literature is sometimes also referred to as the *Sanatana* (eternal) Dharma because truth is seen as being eternal. Other writings are referred to as *smriti* (that which is remembered) and serve as commentaries that expand on the basic writings or mantras.

Still, other important writings called Puranas are epics which on their surface, seem to present the dramas and problems of various historical figures or mythical gods and goddesses in India. These epics often form the basis for stories, music, and dramas, which have a significant influence on popular culture even in modern India. The nature of these Puranas is that they appear in a popular form that would be entertaining to a mass audience that gets caught up in the dramatic elements of war, love, and incest that are portrayed with much pageantry, yet which have a much deeper symbolic layer of meaning as well. For example, in *Sita Sings the Blues* (full version available at <http://www.sitasingingstheblues.com/>), a Westernized version of *The Ramayana*, the heroine is captured and swept away by Ravana, a ten-headed character who causes mental suffering even though he does not cause her outright bodily harm during extended captivity. A religious or psychological interpretation of the story is that Sita was captured by her senses when she asked her husband to chase a particularly beautiful deer for her. The partially civil, partially evil form of Ravana represents an embodiment of the self-imprisonment deriving from one's own desires, which are outward-looking through the ten organs of sense and action (Chinmaya International Foundation 2010, p. 4). Some versions of the story suggest that Sita was Ravana's daughter. Unlike Western fables that are prone to gravitate toward a single 'moral' for the story, traditional Eastern tales relish in the uncertainty of multiple interpretations. The hold this story has on the Indian psyche is shown by its role in the summer of 1988's garbage strike when sanitation workers used rising garbage mounds to force the Indian Government to sponsor more television episodes of the *Ramayana* after the first year of funding ran out (Narayan 2006, p. vii).

Western missionaries in the nineteenth century were shocked at the sheer numbers of Indian gods and did not view them through the same lens as Indian philosophers who see Hindu 'idols' as mere symbols which allow humans to grasp the otherwise ungraspable through depictions of different aspects of a single underlying substrate of reality. A story within the Indian epics that has been criticized by Abrahamic missionaries is that of Krishna sporting with the *gopis*. *Gopis* were married shepherdesses of cows who gave up everything to chase after Krishna, a mischievous avatar who split himself into multiple selves to dance and sport with the *gopis* in an ecstatic dance on the river bank. Aurobindo (1995) purports to break the secret code of the Vedas that has vexed scholars, but literal, translations of this literature when he argues that *go* in Sanskrit has a double entendre of not only bovines but also spiritual resources. Similarly, flowing rivers in Sanskrit literature are not just flows of water but are intended to evoke an image of blissful streams of consciousness. Thus the tale is taken by Hindus as demonstrating that one gives up everything for the bliss of spiritual union with the Divine.

Without these understandings, Christian missionaries to India interpreted the story of Krishna sporting with the *gopis* as illustrating the sexual depravity of Indian society even as Western academics were viewing the literature through an alternative lens of archetypal fertility rites. Both interpretations are in stark contrast to the conservative sexual mores of mainstream Indian culture that frowns on displays of affection such as kissing or holding hands in public even between married couples. On the other hand, even Vivekananda seemed to be embarrassed by the scenes of sexual orgies and bestiality which appear on the facades of some Indian temples. Art critics note that scenes like those in Khajuraho, Central India, appear only outside the temple, not inside. In Indian culture, the sensual images on the outer and lower levels of the structure may be intended to indicate the difficulty in passing by the endless choices of sensual delights for the steeper path to transcendental forms of spiritual ecstasy⁴.

While Indian literature has posed a challenge for Westerners, who have tried to translate the highly symbolic and figurative language in literalist fashion, the multi-layered symbolism that pervades Indian myths and stories have played a role in Hindu cultural longevity. Invaders were more effective in decimating Buddhist than Hindu culture because the great Buddhist colleges such as the one in Nalanda held secrets known only to insiders. Once Buddhist centers

⁴ Khajuraho, The Temple of Love, Ancient India Documentary: Erotic Sculptures of Madhya Pradesh, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QXGLwoPk8Q>

were burned and destroyed, their knowledge was not readily reconstructed by the masses, whereas the diffuse motifs in Hindi art, plays, and music known by even illiterate villagers could not be so easily wiped out.

On the other hand, some traditional Indian myths and stories seem to have evolved into cultural ligatures that are prone to hold back economic and social advancement. Vedic scholars claim that the original purpose of the India caste system was to develop a social hierarchy that would protect its spiritual heritage by honoring those of highest abilities and prevent excessive, ruthless interactions that can exist in highly competitive market regimes. Castes also called the *varna* system, evolved to a pattern of *jatis* (trade guilds), untouchability, and social stratification that can make it very difficult for citizens to upgrade their economic standing. The Vedic language that glorifies the capacity for the Ganges to purify the devotee is taken literally by many Indian bathers even as they ignore the pollutants, garbage, and dead carcasses that have turned its waters into a serious health hazard. Vivekananda was among those Indians who recognized that the Vedic literature had become the trade secrets of the Brahmins who did not allow it even to be shared with those of lower castes, or those of no caste like his Western audiences. Vivekananda did not just criticize Western culture, but also decried the extent to which Hinduism had devolved to a 'kitchen' religion of ritual purity that ignored higher order concerns.

After Vivekananda's visits to the West, some European scholars began to look much more carefully at the implied shadow language of the Vedas. Water motifs appear in many religions. While many Buddhist sects use the figure of an ocean of samsara, a story in the Jodo-Shinshu sect suggests that by accepting life and ceasing to struggle against its seeming problems, the ocean can become a benevolent support (Tanaka 1997, pp. 1-3). Jains are called *tirthankaras*, those who show others the ford to cross a stream. Judeo-Christian interpretations of the origins of the world use a metaphor of God moving on the waters and often repeat a refrain that "God is love." Varenne (1973,1976) explains that Vedic literature combines water imagery with erotic symbolism that views the phenomenal world as originating and being held together by *kama* (desire).

'... [T]he initial kama manifested itself in the form of a drop of divine sperm falling into

the primordial waters. Thus impregnated, the waters produced a golden embryo⁵ (also called *brahmada*, "egg fertilized by Brahma") from which the universe emerged. (p. 73)

In Hindu philosophy, Brahma is not the same as Brahman. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the creator, preserver, and destroyer manifestations of the energies of the supreme substrate of the universe, which has no characteristics that can be described in empirical terms. Hindu stories that refer to Brahma as chasing after his daughter in search of an incestuous relationship are allegories for the creator falling in love with its created manifestation of self (Pattanaik 2003, p. 49).

Varenne (1973,1976) goes on to explain that the river motifs in ancient Vedic documents arise from a Sanskrit sound phoneme in which *nadis*, i.e., channels within the subtle energetic body, is virtually the same as the word for physical rivers containing water. Classical Buddhist and Hindu documents both speak of Mount Meru as the center of the world. According to Varenne, Mount Meru is not a mistaken concept of geography, but rather a reference to the *shusumna*, an energy channel in the energetic body which corresponds with the central spinal column (1976, p. 155). Two energy channels, the *ida*, and *pingala*, run back and forth, intertwining along the central *shusumna* channel in a manner that reminds one of the caduceus carried by the Greek God Hermes or Mercury or the modern symbol of the medical profession. The *ida* current is referred to as the Ganges, the *pingala* as the Yumana, and the *sushumna* as the Sarasvati (Varenne 1976, p. 162). Each of these is recognizable physical rivers in India. The name Sarasvati is also used to indicate a goddess of wisdom, learning, and the arts. The symbolic interpretation evokes the flows from an awakened mind experiencing streams of transcendental consciousness.⁶

The snakes in the modern medical symbols used in the West seem plausibly connected to the *kundalini* energies that ancient Greek and Indian cultures claimed to have intuited lying dormant in the base of the spine. Though snakes are seen as something to be feared in the West,

⁵ Referred to as Hiranyagarbha in Sanskrit.

⁶ Similar language evoking images of rivers and mountains appears in the Bible, Joel 3:17-18 "Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain. ... And in that day the mountains will drip with sweet wine, and the hills will flow with milk, and all the brooks of Judah will flow with water." Whereas Biblical verses often mention wine, Vedic scriptures speak of Soma, an ecstasy producing plant. Western commentaries on Indian culture say the exact plant is unknown and speculate that it could have been ephedra, but the context suggests that soma is used symbolically to refer to pure spiritual bliss arising without any plant based catalyst.

Vishnu is often depicted in Hindu arts as reclining on a giant snake on the ocean of consciousness. One of the alternative names for Vishnu is Narayana, which means one who resides in the waters. The image of Vishnu on a snake in the ocean can be taken as representing God or spiritual consciousness moving, residing in, or communing with humans whose largest physical component is water.

The concept of reincarnation, as held by many Eastern religions, was often a source of organized heckling from Christian audiences in many of Swami Vivekananda's Western appearances even when it was not the main theme of the public talk. *Maya* was another construct that Vivekananda often discussed in his lectures. Often translated as 'illusion,' Vivekananda explained *maya* as the whole of the phenomenal world as apparently evolved from the One Unchangeable substrate called Brahman or *sat-chit-ananda* (being, consciousness, and bliss). Shastri's (1911) work on the evolution of the concept of *maya* claims that the word gradually came to have the meaning of the power, deception, or illusion inherent in names and forms, but originally meant that which is measured (p.29), or the type of knowing accomplished by measurement. *Maya* is seen as the dividing up or measuring of physical areas and concepts that split the One divine entity into apparent multiplicity. Through the dividing up of reality, the divine nature of the whole is disguised. Science is respected in both Eastern and Western cultures, but the theory of *Maya* was seen by Vivekananda as consistent with Kant's interpretation that there is a limit to where the empirical, rational mind can go. But as a mystic, he was interested in going beyond that limit.

British Influence in Nineteenth-Century India

The British gained initial inroads into India not through armed conquest, but through trade. Before official British rule, the British East India Company did a lucrative business on the continent. The Indian system of outsourcing tax collections through private agents, allowed foreign entities to become de facto arms of the Government under "The Company" even before the British Raj replaced its function in 1858. Being under the British Raj was not initially considered a negative outcome by Indian citizens who saw British administration as preferable to the still extant Islamic administrative structures that imposed a poll tax on non-Muslims.

During the nineteenth-century cottage industries were either 'upgraded' to industrialized industries by British merchants or were 'destroyed' depending on one's point of view. Indian

villagers became increasingly impoverished as the foreigners enjoyed a lucrative trade. Even Americans benefited from this wealth. Elihu Yale, the namesake of Yale University, made his wealth through side-contracts in trade, which eventually resulted in his ouster from a governorship with the British East India Company. As the British and other European citizens enjoyed wealth and brought many Western amenities and cultural amenities to the continent, the native Indians who aspired to positions of power in the British administration began to imitate British culture. Upper-class Indians began sending their children to Western schools and colleges, often sponsored by Christian missionary societies. Intellectual Hindus began to look down on traditional spiritual practices such as worshipping before images of various personal gods. Though some Indians chose to convert to Christianity and thereby lose their caste status, others formed religious reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj, which required members to sign pledges that they would only worship a formless God and not bow down to traditional images. In this environment, it was becoming fashionable among the university intellectual set to carry, read, and discuss modern writings such as Darwin's *Origin of the Species* and Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (Tattwamayanda 2015).

Vivekananda's Early Life in India

Swami Vivekananda was born Narendranath Datta in Calcutta. His birthdate of January 12, 1863, has been celebrated in Indian as National Youth day since 1985. Living only thirty-nine years, his death anniversary date of July 4, 1902, is viewed by some as symbolic of his connections with American society. His mother was very religious, undertaking conventional devotions and fasting. His father was an aristocratic lawyer with primarily a secular, agnostic outlook who associated with intellectuals from outside his own caste and religion. His sons were educated in Sanskrit, Bengali, and English. Naren, as he was known for short, was introduced to notable scholars for intellectual discussions as a teenager.

After graduating from high school, Naren attended Presidency College of Calcutta then Scottish Church College. Naren had a knack for grasping complex subjects easily and developed his method of speed reading by scanning the first and last lines of paragraphs or of whole pages to grasp the essence of the discussion. While many modern college students aspire to master enough material in a single night of cramming to gain high marks in the class after wasting time for weeks, Naren was one of the few able to carry off this feat. He used his extra time to study

literature, psychology, and arts of his choosing. He was known as a gifted athlete and musician. In addition to his academic pursuits, Naren was active in the Brahmo Samaj with its emphasis on formless worship without the use of traditional Indian 'idols.' Through that organization, he was introduced to Ramakrishna, a temple priest at Dakshineswar, a few miles to the north of Calcutta.

Ramakrishna was known for going into ecstatic trances in which he was said to see and merge with God, one of the highest ideals in Hindu religious circles. Some claim he was an avatar on the same order as Christ, Krishna, or Buddha. Critics said, "Why does India need another God when it already has so many?" Whatever the truth of the avatar claims may be, it is clear that the figure known as Ramakrishna⁷ was a mystic who experimented with many forms of Hindu, Christian, and Islamic rituals, taking instructions from both male and female yogis. Those predisposed toward criticizing unusual behaviors as a tool to debunk claims of any avatar but their own ideal can likely find some ammunition in the biographies of Ramakrishna. He details his worship of the Divinity within his wife⁸ and his experiments with cross-dressing and transgender identification (Saradanda and Chetananda, 2003, Vol 2, Mumukshananda 1976). Regardless of one's attitude toward the concept of an avatar, it cannot be denied that many intellectuals who met Ramakrishna were impressed with his ability to grasp profound philosophical arguments and express them in simple language.⁹

Though he received only a rudimentary education and did not study philosophy or scriptures on his own, Ramakrishna had an eidetic memory -- he could hear a play or a scripture read only once, then recite the whole passage verbatim while adding additional insights. Ramakrishna, unlike the young Naren, was a worshipper of images, and in particular, the image of Kali, who appears as a wild, blood eating character atop the inert body of Shiva. Ramakrishna encouraged Naren to broaden his worldview from a staunchly Western insistence on modern, scientific views of a formless ideal attained through a rational approach to life and religion to

⁷ Sri Ramakrishna's birth name was Gadadhar Chattopadhyay. He has born February 18, 1836, death/*mahasamadi* August 16, 1886. Sri is an honorific added to the name of admired personalities in Hindu culture. It is similar to adding H.H. in front of Dalai Lama.

⁸ According to his biographies he had a legal wife, but the marriage was a spiritual rather than a physical union.

⁹ Stavig's (2010) work *Western Admirers of Ramakrishna and His Disciples* runs nearly 1000 pages and details connections as diverse as Albert Einstein, Annie Besant, B.F. Skinner, Carl Jung, D.T. Suzuki, J.D. Salinger, Jane Addams, John D. Rockefeller, Joseph Campbell, Julie Ward Howe, Luther Burbank, Mark Twin, Paul Deussen, Philip Glass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Edison, William Butler Yeats, and Leo Tolstoy.

accept images, ritual, and symbols as means that are appropriate for some aspirants to use as a tool to move toward a higher realization. Vivekananda's later messages in the West and India could be interpreted as simultaneously 1) recommending that one should have the mental strength to give up all images and icons in favor of recognizing the inherent divinity in every human being, and 2) advocating the right of every individual to choose religious symbols and icons that could move them from a lower to a higher Truth.

Wanderings in India

As Narendranath was coming toward the end of his college studies in 1884, his father died, leaving the family destitute. The future Swami was torn between finding a way to provide for his mother and younger siblings and following Ramakrishna, who was terminally ill with throat cancer. After the Master's death, Naren and other male disciples, primarily of a similar age, rented cheap accommodations and formed a very financially insecure and weakly administered order to preserve the teachings and memory of their master. The administrative problems of the order were not helped by the fact that several of the monks, including Vivekananda, took to extended solitary wanderings across the Indian continent visiting sacred sites. From 1888 to 1892, Naren is said to have wandered penniless up and down and across the whole of India on foot, never staying more than three days in one spot and taking on various names to disguise his movements. He apparently witnessed enormous poverty and met with great sadhus and sages. At the end of his wanderings, he sought guidance and blessings from Ramakrishna's widow before coming to America. He hoped to share India's spiritual wealth in exchange for financial assistance to alleviate the crushing poverty of the Indian citizens. Even though he had neither an invitation nor any papers of introduction, he set sail for America in hopes of participating in the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Nikhilananda (1953, 1989, p. 56) claims that the name Vivekananda¹⁰ was bestowed on him by the Maharaja of Khetri, who paid for his steamer, which set sail May 31, 1893.

In America and the West

Traveling to the US via Colombo, Singapore, Canton, Yokohama, Osaka, Kyoto, and Tokyo, he arrived to find that the Parliament had been put off until September, that no one without

¹⁰ Monks in India change their name upon taking their final vows of poverty and renunciation (sannyasin). In this particular order, all monks have a single name that ends in ananda, which means bliss. Viveka means discrimination, emphasizing his keen powers of intellectual reasoning as his primary path in life.

credentials could be accepted as a delegate, and that it was too late to register as a delegate. He asked help from the Theosophists and was told they would only help if he formally subscribed to their creed. Someone suggested going to Boston, where it would be cheaper. As luck would have it, he met a wealthy American woman there who invited him to stay in her home. With her introduction, he met a superintendent of a women's prison and visited the facility, but even more importantly, he met Professor J.H. Wright, a professor of Greek at Harvard, who was a friend of the Parliament of Religion's chair of the committee to select delegates. Professor Wright was able to secure an invitation and paid Vivekananda's train fare back to Chicago. Once back in Chicago, in still another display of poor planning, the Swami found he had mislaid the address for the facility where delegates were to be housed, so he spent the first night sleeping outdoors in the railway freight yard. The next day he had no money for food but happened again to meet a woman of society, Mrs. George Hale, who was personal friends with the President of the Parliament and helped Vivekananda locate the Oriental delegate housing.

Some have suggested that a motive for the Parliament may have been for Christian theologians to promote the superiority of their philosophy and thought over other world religions. But as the Parliament progressed, the crowd became bored with the analytic papers being read by the successive rounds of presenters. Vivekananda deferred his address several times as he was apparently seized with stage fright because he had never delivered a speech to such a large audience. Finally, when he rose to give his unpenned message, the fact that he was talking to the crowd rather than reading from a script may explain in part the standing ovation received after only a few words into his heartfelt speech delivered without notes. The crowd was very receptive to his plea for nonsectarian harmony. He argued against religious sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism, depicting the various world religions as 'As different streams, having their sources in different places, [that] all mingle their water to the sea.' (Nikilananda, p. 62) He also forcefully argued the point that what Indian citizens needed was not more missionaries, but bread.

In modern America, it is hard to imagine anyone being transformed from obscurity to fame by one academic paper or one sermon. Yet life-size posters of Vivekananda began to appear around Chicago, and newspaper reports spread to other cities in the US and back to India via magazines and newspapers even though many of the Indian readers did not recognize him under

his new monastic name. After the Parliament, the Swami was that era's equivalent of a rock star. His newfound notoriety gave him entry to the parlors of wealthy intelligentsia even as he was treated as a second class "Black" for purposes of travel and lodging. Agents were able to secure speaking engagements across the US, though often for the lion's share of the proceeds. He lectured in such widespread cities as Detroit, Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Memphis. Some Christian ministers invited him to speak in their churches, even as audience members repeatedly asked him if it was true that Hindus threw their children to the crocodiles¹¹. He had the opportunity to study and expressed amazement at the organizational skills of American institutions. Even as he sometimes severely criticized the material focus of the culture, he adapted the organizational structures of Western religious orders to create a mechanism for the development of the nascent monastic order in India. Unlike Gandhi, who later promoted a swadeshi movement for a cottage industry to reduce dependence on manufactured goods, Vivekananda was of the opinion that industrial development, even with all its ills, was inevitable and felt that it might as well be embraced (Roy 2013). He simultaneously hoped that the industrial complex would also come to value Indian spiritual values.

INTERNATIONAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Labeled the Cyclone Swami on some advertisements, Vivekananda lectured in London and Europe for a time before returning to the US and India. During this period, he wrote several volumes which synthesized Indian religious practices. Devotees took notes of many of his lectures and collected newspaper reports on his public lectures. During his travels he met many prominent businessmen and intellectuals in Europe and the US. In Europe, he met Max Muller, a German-born Oxford Sanskritist, and Indologist who had first introduced Europe to Hindu literature, the intellectual activities of the Brahmo Samaj, and to Ramakrishna. Many Indians first heard of Ramakrishna not from Indian word-of-mouth, but in English language articles and a book-length biography by Professor Muller. Muller had studied languages and Indian culture in Britain, Paris, and Berlin. The originals of his translated works were provided by the British East India Company, which funded the translations so that they could 'better understand' the culture of

¹¹ His standard response was yes, but mostly the girl babies because their softer bodies are easier to chew. Or sometimes he would say 'Yes, but I was too fat so they spit me back out'. He was sharp witted and very capable of dealing with hecklers. One Scottish audience member asked, 'What's the difference in a *Baboo* and a *Baboon*?' Vivekananda retorted, "Oh not much, about the same as the difference in a sot and a Scot. just one letter."

their subjects. Initially, Muller's private correspondence suggested a feeling that Indian culture could benefit from being converted to Western Christianity. His later writings seem to indicate a keen appreciation for Hindu concepts and philosophy in their rite. He is reported to have replied with a tear in his voice when Swami Vivekananda asked when Muller would be visiting India again, "I would not return ...; you would have to cremate me there." (Nikilananda, p. 100)

Vivekananda's mission to the West and his vision for India was much broader than the promotion of the Hindu religion. With a rationalist background, Vivekananda did not perceive the divide between religion and science that often appears in Western cultures. Even though he admitted that the details of the ancient Vedic documents were sometimes at variance with modern science, he felt that the physical sciences were fast approaching an understanding that would prove the general bent of the Vedic worldview. While the West was beginning to view the universe as evolving, he emphasized Vedic cosmological views of an evolving and devolving universe that may have parallels in modern concepts. Black holes may be suggestive of the antithesis of a Big Bang expansion, demonstrating the potential for contraction and stilling of energies. Consequently, Vivekananda used his public notoriety as an opportunity for meeting and talking with prominent scientists. In 1895 the actress Sarah Bernhardt introduced him to Nikolai Tesla, the namesake of the modern electric car company (Bardach 2012). Vivekananda encouraged him to work on a scientific proof of the equivalence of matter and energy, which was later expounded by Einstein. Vivekananda was an advocate for an alliance between religion and science, proclaiming "that the whole universe is One is scientifically demonstrable. What the metaphysicians call 'being,' the physicist calls 'matter,' but there is no real fight between the two, for both are one." (Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, Vol. 7, p. 50). Though Vivekananda's insights were new at the time, it is no longer uncommon for modern physicists to conceptualize their work as a search for a "God particle" or religious leaders and prominent scholars to participate in projects which meld together such diverse specialty areas as physics, religion, and psychology. (Dalai Lama 2005; Ricard & Thuan 2001; Jitatmananda 2012)

Just as Swami Vivekananda attracted influential patrons in the US, some Western admirers chose to support and even follow him to India as he worked to develop a basis for social service and religious education. One English couple, Charlotte and James Sevier moved to the Himalayas and bought a piece of wilderness property that was converted into the site for a

publishing press (Salm 2013). Margaret Nobel, later known as Sister Niveditta (the dedicated), was an Irish-born granddaughter of a clergyman who had been active in the Irish freedom movement. After meeting the Swami in England in 1895, she followed him to India in 1898 and accompanied him on a tour to the US in 1899. Trained in the skills of a journalist, social worker, and modern, child-centered educator, Margaret used her considerable political connections to bring together leaders from diverse groups in the early years of the Indian freedom movement and provided literature on the Irish and American revolutions for Indian freedom fighters' use. Some speculate that she may have also helped import guns to be used as last resort or as leverage for movements to be taken seriously (Reymond 1953). Consequently, some of her time in India, she had to travel incognito to avoid arrest.

Sister Nivedita supported herself in part by lecturing and writing books on Indian culture for Western audiences. With the Swami's blessing, she worked to establish a school to promote education for Indian women and girls who received little formal schooling at that time. Nivedita addressed the use of Indian ritual purity as an excuse for poor hygiene by cleaning up garbage with her hands to demonstrate the importance of sanitation efforts to prevent the spread of plague. It is perhaps ironic that the Swami's heir for his social work movement was a female in a male-dominated society. Nivedita was a patron of artists, social activists, and scientists alike. She influenced Abindranath Tagore's famous painting of Bharat Mata¹², which is intended to epitomize the spirit of India. She actively supported the work of J.C. Bose¹³, a scientist who had difficulty gaining recognition and adequate university support for his work in the areas of microwave transmission and plant physiology (Jana 2015). Nivedita died at 43 years old from dysentery on October 13, 1911, after giving her life for the Indian nation. As a consequence, a bridge and several schools and colleges in India have been named after her. In 1968, the Indian

¹² The term Bharat comes from the epic tale of the Mahabharata, the great Bharat. Bharat is a name for the Indian continent, there Bharat Mata means Mother India. Modern statues and paintings and even the epithet of Bharat Mata itself are used as symbols by political parties of their allegiance to a national ideal of either the solidarity of the nation as a whole or to promote a concept of classical Hindu culture which may or may not include all religions.

¹³ Chauduri & Chattopadhyay (2009) claim that, "A unique aspect of Bose's career was the realization (much ahead of his time) that science is about addressing problems in nature, and not compartmentalizing knowledge in water-tight compartments with labels such as 'physics', 'chemistry', and 'biology'. "(p. 319)

Government issued a postage stamp in her honor.¹⁴

Americans were undoubtedly more receptive to Vivekananda's message as a result of the groundwork laid by Emerson and Thoreau. English translations of Sanskrit literature only became available in the early 1800s but quickly came to be appreciated by Emerson, who, in turn, influenced Thoreau, Alcott, and even Mary Baker Eddy's early writings on Christian Science. It is widely known that Martin Luther King's civil rights work was influenced by Gandhi's civil disobedience movement in India. Gandhi was influenced not only by his reading and re-reading of the Bhagavad Gita¹⁵ but also by Thoreau's essay on *Civil Disobedience* and by his correspondence with Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy himself was influenced by both Christian and Hindu scriptures. The difficulties of getting a civil service job in India under the social restrictions there drove Gandhi to relocate to South Africa, where he was moved to fight against another form of racial and social stratification before becoming involved in civil disobedience worked aimed at ending British rule in India (Gandhi 1957).

The theory of comparative advantage is often used by economists to justify global trade. Vivekananda was hopeful that India and the West could trade material and spiritual strengths. He felt that the West in time would come to sense a psychological void behind its material wealth that could be filled by Eastern philosophy and spiritual practices. Attempting to analyze Vivekananda's writings and speeches from the standpoint of religion or philosophy alone, however, would miss his influence on social service, science, and women's education. Vivekananda's message was highly influenced by both Eastern and Western concepts of evolution and the scientific method. As Toynbee predicted in 1952, the world today is still highly influenced by Western culture, but the East is rising (Smith 1978, p. 5). Eastern metaphysical concepts like karma, yoga, and reincarnation have become ubiquitous in Western culture in recent decades. Historic myths and religious concepts influence business brands. It is unclear how many Westerners recognize that Nike was a Greek goddess of victory, or that the automobile brand name "Mazda" comes from Ahura Mazda, the Persian God of Light. When

¹⁴ <http://www.indianpost.com/viewstamp.php/Alpha/S/SISTER%20NIVEDITA>

¹⁵ The title Bhagavad Gita means the Song of God. The story tells of a great battle in which the charioteer Arjuna wrestles with great ethical questions about the battle against his relatives while directed by Lord Krishna. Like other Indian stories it has many layers of drama and spiritual interpretation. The story is part of a larger epic, the Mahabharata, the story of a great Indian king which is an anthology of many classical stories and myths.

actresses are referred to as divas, the etymology of the word is associated with goddesses or shining beings, a common terminology in both Greek and Oriental mythologies.

CONCLUSION

More than a century after his address at the Chicago Parliament of Religions, it seems that the Western world has adopted an eclectic mixture of elements from traditional Indian culture. Still, one might observe that Hatha yoga products commercialized as a means for enhancing the psycho-physical body and the use of 'avatars' in video games are not entirely consonant with Vivekananda's message of renouncing ego, name, and fame. While some hatha yoga programs have a small emphasis on meditation and insight, other programs emphasize that they 'have nothing to do with religion.' Yet some public school programs based on yoga stretches and mindfulness training have seen resistance from parents who fear that yoga practice is a form of religious indoctrination (Williamson 2012, Haynes 2013).

The number of Vedanta centers in the West is small and Indian expatriates tend to outnumber Western adherents, but it is not at all clear that the spread of institutional religion was Vivekananda's primary aim. His concept of Universal Religion did not seem to be that the whole world would adopt Hindu rituals and forms of worship, but that there should be a place for rationalist, poets, philosophers, artists, and all kinds of human temperaments to find their path (Vivekananda (1900, p. 373).

If there are twenty forms of religion in the world, it is very good; if there are four hundred, so much the better -- there will be more to choose from. ... Would to God that religions multiplied until every man had his religion, quite separate from that of any other! (*Complete Works*, Volume IV, p. 37)

Perhaps that vision is reflected by the trend toward workplace programs for diversity and spiritual intelligence (Ratnakar & Nair 2012) and the activities of ministerial alliances engaged in interfaith dialogue.

Concepts of religion and spirituality are not easily delineated. Joseph & Sailaksmi (2011) argue that the terms spirituality and spiritual intelligence have no connection to and nothing to do with religion or belief systems. Yet when they describe spiritual intelligence as "an internal, innate ability of the human brain and psyche, resting in that deep part of the self that is connected to wisdom beyond the ego, or conscious mind" (p. 21), this could be taken as a modern recognition of Vivekananda's vision for a Universal Religion. Alternatively, spirituality in the

workplace could be viewed as a re-branding of religion for commercial purposes as, indeed, religion, politics, and commerce have historically never been entirely separate.

This paper has demonstrated the mixing of Eastern and Western cultural perspectives by tracing some of the paths by which ideas from the Bhagavad Gita moved to Europe and the US then back across the ocean to South Africa and India, as summarized in [Table 1](#). The underlying agenda for the paper is not to provide answers but to raise questions about the potential for blind spots in both Eastern and Western cultures. A few questions that could be derived from the exercise of writing this paper follow with further questions appearing in [Table 2](#). The overarching question is how much of Western culture is being subtly impacted by an underlying philosophical base, religious or otherwise that makes Westerners think there has to be a simple, 'correct' answer to issues and impacts what and how they choose to see the world. A secondary question is the degree to which the boundaries of countries, fields, and intellectual constructs are much fuzzier or permeable than they are depicted in either the popular or academic press. Many academic fields today do not consider papers worthy of publication if they do not frame problems in terms of empirical formulas, and so one could also wonder, 'Could the Western drive for empirical facts be viewed as *maya*, measuring for the purpose of establishing power and control?'

In an age of digital communication, where ideas easily cross rivers and oceans, why does there seem to be a tendency to cling more tightly than ever to concepts of country, profession, and traditional forms of academic discourse where things can only be said if someone else has said something similar recently and where presence on a widely visited blog is taken as *prima facie* evidence that the thoughts are not high level enough to count as serious scholarship? Has traditional academic research become a hyper-symbolic ritual that is not even concerned with human problems? In the quest for name and fame, accrediting bodies in narrowly proscribed fields audit programs for measures of academic 'impact', but impact is measured by the 'seemingly' neutral rubric of citation counts of peer reviewed journal articles which reside behind the firewalls of expensive subscription services not available to the general public. Does this remind us at all of the Vedic rituals that were appropriated by India's Brahmin class and treated as off limits to the masses?

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APPENDIX

Table 1 A Timeline of Selected International Events

India	English Isles	America	Europe/ Russia	South Africa
6000-1500 BCE origin of oral tradition of Vedas	8000 BCE first settlers	Earliest peoples by perhaps 12500 BCE		
6 th century BC origin of Jainism	Approximately 500 BC Celts arrive			
5 th century BCE origin of Buddhism				
629AD first Mosque in Kerala	432 AD St. Patrick begins promoting Christianity			
Dehli Sultanate Muslim Kingdom 1206-1526		Fifteen century, Europeans begin arriving		1480's Portuguese arrive
1700's East India Company in India - took control of revenue collections in 1765, established a capital in Calcutta 1773	1604 King James Bible Commissioned 1641, 1798, 1803, 1848 various Irish Rebellions		1615 Bhagavad Gita comes to Russia	1652 Dutch founding of Cape of Good Hope
1784 Act gave Britain legal control of the company, After Government of India Act of 1858 established British Raj, direct control after 1857 Sepoy Mutiny		1775 War of Independence		Great Britain takes over Good Hope area 1795
1836 Birth of Ramakrishna			1818 Schopenhauer's <i>The World as Will and Representation</i> published, based on transcendentalism of Kant; 1830 Rosen translation of the Rig Veda into Latin	
1858 Birth of JC Bose; 1863 Birth of Vivekananda		1849 Publication of Thoreau's <i>Civil Disobedience</i>	1856 Muller translation of the Rig Veda into German	
	1867 Birth of Nivedita; 1869 Birth of Gandhi; 1880 JC Bose studies medicine in London			Diamonds discovered 1867; gold in 1884 -increases immigration
1885 Bose is named first Indian Professor of Physics; 1886 death of Ramakrishna; 1888-1892 Vivekananda's wanderings; throughout India; 1894 Gandhi founds Natal Indian Congress; 1898 Nivedita comes to India; 1897	1888 Gandhi begins study of Law in London; 1895 Vivekananda lectures in London; 1896 meets Max Muller, Ramakrishna biographer, in London	1893 Speech at World Parliament and lecture circuit; 1898 second visit to the US	1894 Tolstoy's <i>The Kingdom of God is Within You</i> ; 1895 Vivekananda visits Paris & 1896, Lucerne, Switzerland & Berlin; meets with Duessen a disciple of Schoenhauer and	After returning to India in 1891 goes to S Africa in 1893

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India	English Isles	America	Europe/ Russia	South Africa
Vivekananda in India, late 1900 returns to Calcutta, 1901 goes to Bodhgaya with Japanese Buddhist ministers			follower of Kant; 1900 Parliament of Religions in Paris & visit with JC Bose;	
1902 death of Vivekananda; 1905 Nivedita role in Partition of Bengal; 1908 Tolstoy <i>Letter to a Hindu</i> , 1911 death of Nivedita; 1915 Gandhi returns to India, 1920 non-cooperation movement	1914-1918 WWI			1906 Gandhi begins satyagraha philosophy; 1910 founds Tolstoy Farm
	1931 Gandhi to England to discuss 'communal' issues (Hindu vs. Islamic)			
1947 Indian Independence; 1948 Gandhi assassination				1948 apartheid solidified by law

Table 2 Additional Questions for Reflection

1. Does anything in this paper cause you to question whether Western society is in denial about its caste-like structures where minorities are more likely to drop out of school early, go to jail, or both, and college graduates from middle and lower income families are taking on high levels of debt in their attempts to attain professional careers?
2. Does anything in this paper cause you to question the logic of using the Rio Grande or any other physical river as a borderline that seeks to prevent the mixing of cultures by legal edict?
3. Why is it that the world's societies are not doing a better job of solving problems like water scarcity and pollution?
4. What would it take to motivate members of society to put the long-term interests of society above individual short-term considerations?
5. To what degree is the secular realm of Western society affected by themes derived from a social base of Abrahamic religious thought that presumes questions should have a single one-size-fits-all answer?
6. Is the shortage of American citizens who are interested in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics linked to a Western worldview that is uncomfortable dealing with the uncertainties inherent in the new quantum direction that science has taken?
7. Does a study of comparative religions help promote cross-cultural understanding or only provide ammunition for an egoistic quest to be more right than someone else?
8. Is the concept of comparative economic advantage just an excuse to send economic slavery and pollution offshore?

9. Is a competitive, consumer-oriented society likely to result in long-term happiness for the majority of society's members or not?
10. What is the alternative to a consumer oriented society and how could it be brought about? What dangers lie in the undertaking?
11. What are the limits of categorizing and measuring organizational performance? When is it useful? When does it become a form of overly restrictive social control?
12. Does the discipline-centered and testing-based culture in academic institutions reflect an attempt to control rather than understand society?
13. What can India teach Western societies about the enduring quality of highly layered, multidimensional elements of literature and art in the long term survival of a culture?
14. How does one create or infuse an artistic sensitivity into societies that are driven by dominant pragmatic, vocational aims? Are these attributes antithetical?
15. Have legally protected brand names and trademarks become the ritualized symbols and 'gods' of modern secular societies?
16. Are the rituals of testing, posting of grades, credentialing, degree attainment, and competitive performance evaluation evolving into caste-imposing 'sacred cows' of the West?