

Swami Vivekananda. Reform Hinduism, Nationalism and Scientistic Yoga

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Abstract

This article deals with Narendranath Datta (1863–1902) more known under his monastic name Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda was a representative of the Bengal renaissance, a movement that is famous for its contribution to the modernization of India. Vivekananda became one of the architects of neo-Hinduism and a pioneer of modern yoga. His ideas also contributed to the rising Hindu nationalism. The article outlines his biography and religious socialization. A closer look will be given to his concept of religion and the way he relates it with India's national identity. A second major part of the article examines Vivekananda's understanding of religious experience that is crucial for his yoga philosophy and his philosophy of religion in general.

Keywords

Vivekananda – Neo-Hinduism – Vedānta – Indian nationalism – religious experience – modern yoga

The following article will look at Narendranath Datta (1863–1902), who became known under his monk's name Swami Vivekananda, a late representative of the so-called Bengali Renaissance, a movement that in the nineteenth and early twentieth century contributed – even beyond the borders of Bengal itself – decisively to the modernisation of colonial India. Vivekananda is regarded as one of the architects of modern Hinduism, a pioneer of Hindu missionary activities in the West and founder figure of modern yoga. His political

importance resides in how he provided salient ideas on Hindu nationalism and its ideology of Hindutva (“Hindu-ness”).¹ Philosophically and theological-ly he was probably the most influential co-founder of a modern rereading of Advaita Vedānta known as neo-Vedānta.

After offering a biographical sketch and reflecting briefly on the uniqueness of his work I will concentrate on his understanding of religion, how he relates religion to the Indian nation and his idea of religious experience, which plays a pivotal role in his philosophy of yoga.

1 Historical Roots and Biography

Vivekananda was born in Calcutta (since 2001 Kolkata) in 1863 into the family of a lawyer. He liked to present himself as a *ksatriya*, a member of the caste of warrior nobility and kings. In reality his family belonged to the sub-caste of the *kāyastha*, today counted amongst the higher castes but whose membership to the warrior nobility is questionable. In Bengal they are considered to be a caste of scribes and landowners.

Vivekananda went through a British-style schooling and came into contact with modern European philosophy at an early age. Typically influential names here were the exponents of German Idealism as well as Arthur Schopenhauer, Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill. Herbert Spencer’s philosophy played a special role for the young Vivekananda. He translated Spencer’s *Education* into Bengali and corresponded with the famous philosopher. In his later work Vivekananda was still engaging with Spencer’s thought, particularly with respect to themes in the field of the philosophy of nature and the relationship modern science has to religion.²

During his grammar school and early university years he was involved with Sādhāran Brāhmo Samāj and Nava Vidhāna Brāhmo Samāj, two splinter groups of the Brāhmo Samāj reform movement founded by Ram Mohan Roy in 1828

1 At times he was seen as belonging to the socialist camp. During a stay in Europe in 1900 Vivekananda met socialists, social democrats and the anarchist Kropotkin, discussing the socio-political situation in India with them. He also studied the works of Michail Bakunin. Actually, there is no evidence in his work of him advocating incisive social changes in the spirit of socialism or anarchism. Rather, he saw socialism and anarchism as the harbingers of a dangerous worldwide social revolution, whereby the *śūdrā* caste (the lowest social stratum) threatened to gain dominance without ever discarding their negative *śūdrā* characteristics. See VCW [= Vivekananda 2006] IV, pp. 468 et seq. Vivekananda’s works have been compiled into eight volumes, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. This article refers to them using the abbreviation VCW I–VIII.

2 For more on Spencer and Vivekananda, see Brown 2011.

and particularly influential in Bengal at the time. As in other variants of neo-Hinduism, this movement discussed and reinterpreted the Hindu traditions in a global context. Under the impression of Western science, the philosophy of the Enlightenment and elements of Christianity, and in conjunction with the Western criticism of South Asian traditions drawn from these sources, the aim was to modernise the richly-faceted religious heritage and unite its diverse strands into a form acceptable across the subcontinent. Polytheism, popular veneration of images, extreme forms of asceticism, dependence on priestly rituals as well as blatant abuses and wrongs like the suttee, were all rejected by the Brahmo Samaj. Its reform initiatives took place under British colonial rule. They therefore also need to be interpreted as a conscious attempt to bolster the self-confidence of the subcontinent's population, suffering as it was under foreign domination and thus contributing to the rise of Indian nationalism.

A role model for the young Vivekananda, Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–1884), the leader of the Nava Vidhāna Brāhmo Samāj (“Church of New Dispensation”), was at an early stage of his career heavily involved in social reform.³ In 1875 he met Ramakrishna Paramahansa and introduced him to Brahmo circles. Ramakrishna was the priest of a Kali temple in Dakshineswar, a fringe suburb of Calcutta. He had experienced states of religious ecstasy since childhood and preached worship of the goddess Kali. At the same time he was interested in Christianity and Islam, believing that for all their differences the religions venerated the same divinity, which he was able to glimpse in his ecstatic states. Under the influence of Ramakrishna, Sen devoted himself to religious practice and the comparative study of religions. This confluence gave rise to a theory of religion influenced by American transcendentalism and Unitarianism. Sen considered that all religions are based on an intuitive experience of the divine spirit, inherent in all humans. To practically implement his teaching he founded the religious lay community Sadhan Kanan in 1876, which evolved into the prototype for modern ashrams like those still to be found in India today.⁴ One can describe his community as a hybrid new religion which adopted elements of the Hindu traditions while at the same time deliberately drawing strong distinctions.⁵

In 1884 Vivekananda completed his bachelor degree at Scottish Church College, the oldest Christian tertiary institution in India, and commenced law studies. He joined the Free Masons, at the time a not unusual step for ambitious

3 Keshub Chandra Sen and his theology are discussed by Kopf 1979, pp. 249–287 and De Michelis 2004, pp. 74–91.

4 See De Michelis 2004, p. 79 and p. 8.

5 See Figl 1993, pp. 40 et seq.

men from the middle- and upper-classes in Calcutta, not least because Free Masonry had a reputation for enabling one to forge career-boosting contacts.

Both his father and Keshub Chandra Sen died in 1885. The family was now beset by financial difficulties. In this time of personal crisis Vivekananda became a close disciple of Ramakrishna, whom he had met in 1881. He soon had a leading position amongst Ramakrishna's younger devotees. As the guru then died in 1886, together with others from this circle he took monk vows (*sannyāsa*) and as a group they founded a monastery in Baranagore. After a period of studying religious Sanskrit literature and intensive spiritual practice, between 1890 and 1892 he undertook a pilgrimage through India as an itinerant *sannyāsin*, travelling on foot and by train. He was confronted with the poverty of the people and what for him was the disillusioning real state of Hinduism. As he described it, towards the end of his wanderings he had a life-changing insight, ushering in a crucial turning- point.

We are so many Sannyasins wandering about and teaching the people metaphysics – it is all madness. Did not our Gurudeva [Ramakrishna, KB] use to say: 'An empty stomach is no good for religion.'? That those poor people are living the life of brutes is simply due to ignorance. [...] Suppose some disinterested Sannyasins, bent on doing good to others, go from village to village, disseminating education, and seeking in various ways to better the condition of all down to the Chandala [member of the lowest caste, KB], through oral teaching, and by means of maps, cameras, globes, and such other accessories – can't that bring forth good in time? [...]. We as a nation have lost our individuality, and that is the cause of all mischief in India. We have to give back the nation its lost individuality and *raise the masses*.⁶

This idea led him to establish a new form of monastic life, adding a neo-Hinduist form of monasticism to the mixed form of worldly and spiritual life already discussed and practiced in neo-Hinduism since Ram Mohan Roy. Vivekananda's attempt to generate sufficient financial funds to launch his project in India failed. He decided to head for America and later described the strategy he was successfully pursuing in the United States in simple terms: "I give them spirituality, and they give me money."⁷

In 1893, he took part in the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago as a highly acclaimed orator. With his talks and lectures proving extremely

6 VCW VI, pp. 254 et seq., emphasis in the original.

7 VCW VI, p. 255.

popular he decided to stay longer than planned in the United States. Soon this was not just to raise funds for humanitarian projects in India; rather, Vivekananda became a pioneer of spreading Hinduism in North America and Europe. In 1894 he founded the New York Vedānta Society, the first Hindu organisation to be set up in the West on a permanent basis that admitted non-Indians. Under his guidance, the first yoga retreat ever held outside South Asia took place on an island in the St Lawrence River in the summer of 1895. He conferred two Americans – one woman, one man – *samnyāsa*, another historical first. In the same year he also visited England, where his lectures attracted enormous interest. A further European journey followed in 1896 with lectures and courses on Indian philosophy and yoga, during which he met the famous Indologists Max Müller and Paul Deussen.

Vivekananda returned to India in 1897. After having worked on mobilising and organising his Indian followership while in America, he now founded the Ramakrishna Mission Association and restructured the devotees of Ramakrishna living monastic lives into Ramakrishna Math, the monastic branch of the movement, which in cooperation with the Ramakrishna Mission Association spread the teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and established schools, hospitals and orphanages.⁸ In 1899 he visited the United States and England again. Upon returning to India he withdrew from public activities. He died of diabetes in 1902, aged 39.

Vivekananda was not an academic philosopher or theologian. He considered himself first and foremost a learned monk, a religious reformer and a missionary. His works were compiled mostly out of manuscripts and transcripts from lecture series or specific speeches, which, addressing a broad public, were reworked for publication while maintaining the character of the oral form. He also wrote – not unusually for a Bengali intellectual – poetic works. A stirring orator and gifted letter-writer, he formulated his thoughts to specifically fit the respective addressee, aiming to change their attitudes and behaviour. To achieve this he was not shy of rhetorically effective polemics and simplifications.⁹ In contrast, systematic consistency and stringent argumentation were of secondary importance.

He is one of those thinkers who identify with certain religious traditions and, from there, formulate a theory of religion which claims validity for all religions. He not only positions Advaita Vedānta as the highest stage and essence of all Hindu religions, but also considers it as exceeding all the particular religions, being the religion *per se* and articulating the kernel and goal of all

8 See Müller 1986.

9 For an insightful analysis of Vivekananda's rhetorical strategies, see Koppedrayar 2004.

religions.¹⁰ This corresponds to a mode of thinking typical of universal religious movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the context of rapidly growing knowledge and reciprocal relativizing of different traditions, they claimed to embody a wisdom encompassing all specific religions and thus, while recapitulating them, being also capable of transcending their particularity.¹¹

Unlike Keshub Chandra Sen for example, Vivekananda's reform project is more traditionally oriented and draws in particular on resources from brahmanical traditions, seeking to develop a Hinduism in keeping with the times. He presses ahead with sacralizing India's national identity, but refrains from advocating that the religious sphere exert a direct influence on politics, the economy and social conditions. He is open to secular elements, adopting the line of thinking taken by the natural sciences and Enlightenment's ideas of criticism of religion unnecessary repetition, and integrates them into his concept of religion. The pivotal role of religious experience is – as I hope to show below – closely allied to this. Again, Vivekananda's neo-Hinduism shares these aspirations with a number of religious movements which have arisen since the nineteenth century. Specifically however, the experiential- and practice-based orientation is cast into a paradigmatic form, encapsulated by the term “yoga”, which has had – and continues to have – an enormous influence both inside and outside of India. Before looking closer at this I would like to turn our attention to Vivekananda's project of a reformed Hinduism, for which his conception of a yoga-based spirituality serves as fulcrum.

2 Reformed Hinduism as the Source of National Revival

Whenever Vivekananda reflects on religion, then mostly he thinks immediately of India and the deplorable state of his country. What kind of relationship does he see as existing between nation and religion? In his view, the nations and their disparities are based on different races. Each nation has its own specific karma due to its racial characteristics, i.e. it has a specific mission upon which its inner unity, individual uniqueness and strength are based.¹² The vitality of a nation depends on how firmly and resolutely this core theme is asserted. Vivekananda's repeatedly expressed lament that India had lost its individuality

¹⁰ See Halbfass 1988, p. 238.

¹¹ See the relevant study by Figl 1993. For the theme of universal religion in modern Hinduism, see Sharma 1998.

¹² See VCW III, p. 152.

means nothing other than the nation had lost sight of the specific mission incumbent on the dominating race of the Aryans.¹³

The consequences are described in drastic terms on several occasions. The mass of his compatriots have become physically and psychically inert, possessing neither the courage to face life and foster hope nor a spark of enthusiasm. He criticises the predominant slave mentality and a loss of virility. While social reformers have blamed religion for this degeneration, it is not religion but in fact its demise that, according to Vivekananda, is the true reason for the nation's deplorable state. This is because India's national identity is religiously determined, while in contrast the political system simply does not connect with it.

There may be a nation whose theme of life is political supremacy; religion and everything else must become subordinate to that great theme of its life. But here is another nation whose great theme of life is spirituality and renunciation [...]. The secret of a true Hindu's character lies in the subordination of his knowledge of European sciences and learning, of his wealth, position and name, to that one principal theme which is inborn in every Hindu child – the spirituality and purity of the race.¹⁴

For this reason he advocates a revitalising of Hinduism, including a reinvigoration of the Brahmin caste and a reform of the caste system (but not its abolishment), as the most urgent reform projects.¹⁵ Like other Bengali intellectuals of the time, social reforms, originally to be implemented together with the British colonial rulers, are no longer considered that pressing. Instead, the regeneration of the national culture is now accorded primacy, and it is to emanate from what he considers to be the core, i.e. religion, or more precisely a unified "Hinduism", the identity marker of which is to be the school of Advaita Vedānta.

13 Vivekananda mingles in ethnic and religious aspects into his conception of Aryanism. See Halbfass 1988, p. 237: "The *true* Aryans are those who have attained a knowledge of the nature of the divine Self: In Vivekananda's view however, these are de facto the Indians, who have preserved their sacred knowledge within the Sanskrit tradition." (emphasis in the original).

14 VCW III, p. 152.

15 In contrast, Vivekananda considers the European vision of equality, freedom and fraternity to be a source of millenarianism, dangerous because it inevitably gravitates towards fanaticism, which had first become powerful in Christianity and then found expression in a modern form in the French Revolution. See VCW I, p. 113.

According to Vivekananda, the subcontinent had always faced the problem of how to unify socially and culturally a heterogeneous, multilingual population made up of different tribes, groups and races. Unlike other nations, where diversity was suppressed under a unity, thus levelling difference, the subcontinent established a hierarchical order under a hegemonic culture. Ancient India was shaped by one main race, the Aryans, and from early on the nation's high culture flourished on this foundation, whereby he assumes that it had not migrated into the country but lived in the North of India and from there spread throughout the subcontinent.¹⁶ Sanskrit was established as the holy language, functioning as the root and model for all the other languages in India, and moreover used in the Vedas, the scriptures binding for all Hindus. The Brahmins embodied the authoritative ethics and religion. Considering it constitutive for traditional Indian identity, this is the model that Vivekananda wishes to establish once again: "Just as Sanskrit has been the linguistic solution, so the Arya the racial solution. So the Brāhmanhood is the solution of the varying degrees of progress and culture as well as that of all social and political problems."¹⁷

Behind this model of society is an idea that Vivekananda took from the Mahābhārata: originally (i.e. in the Golden Age, the *satya yuga*) the Brahmin caste was the only one that existed, before over time social segmentation brought with it a differentiation into various castes. The telos of the historical process is the restoration of the original state, achieved by and resulting in a Brahminisation and Sanskritisation of the whole society.¹⁸

He regards the priesthood to be the indispensable guarantor of the nation's individual uniqueness. The priests are not only the guardians of the religion but exemplify how all Hindus are to lead their lives and behave, while providing an orientation for all others living in India as well. A unifying of religion, practiced and sustained by the Brahmins, is the first and most urgent step in the direction towards a better future: "The unity of religion [...] is absolutely necessary as the first condition of the future of India. There must be the recognition of one religion throughout the length and breadth of this land."¹⁹

For this purpose he imagines a Hinduism that could furnish a common basis for the different Hindu religions while simultaneously offering orientation for all the other religious communities in India. According to Vivekananda, the school of Advaita Vedānta is best suited for such a pan-Indian religion because

16 For Vivekananda's position on the question of the Aryan invasion, see VCW V, pp. 534 et seq.

17 VCW IV, p. 309. See Sharma 2013, pp. 138 et seq. and pp. 178 et seq.

18 See VCW III, p. 293.

19 VCW III, p. 287.

it superiorly formulates the fundamental principles underlying all religions. As he sees it, the religious differences are mere outer husks in comparison to this religion in the singular. For the sake of national unity its principles must be known throughout the land and implanted in the life of the population. The unifying power of this genuinely Indian religiosity – to be accepted by all living in India and ultimately worldwide – would sweep away the social, linguistic and national problems besetting the land. How exactly this reformed Hinduism is to relate to the other religions is the next issue we shall consider.

3 Vivekananda's Attitude towards Other Religions

The fact that very different religions were able to gain a foothold in India shaped Vivekananda's environment from his childhood, and he sees it as a reason to be proud of his country. He interprets the enormous religious diversity as a sign that the value of religion is appreciated there far more than elsewhere: "I have been acquainted from my childhood with the various sects of the world. Even the Mormons come to preach in India. Welcome them all! That is the soil on which to preach religion. There it takes root more than in any other country."²⁰ Hinduism makes this religious diversity possible because it goes beyond merely practicing tolerance and acknowledges that all other religions possess a kernel of truth: "We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true."²¹ From his very first speech before the World's Parliament of Religions onwards, he portrays Hinduism as the religion of tolerance and pluralism *per se*, extolling how it recognises that other religions also offer paths of salvation.²² This pivotal motif for the self-portrayal of modern Hinduism, which generated enormous sympathy on the global stage, demands closer consideration.

Vivekananda asserts that perhaps the most important idea he gleaned from Ramakrishna was that the religions do not contradict one another. He explains this view in his own words as follows: "They are but various phases of one eternal religion. That one eternal religion is applied to different planes of existence, is applied to the opinions of various minds and various races."²³ The relationship of the religions to one another is modelled on the principle of "unity in diversity", a principle that manifests itself everywhere, in nature and human history, and, as part of this history, in the religions. He gives unity the

20 VCW IV, p. 181.

21 VCW I, p. 3.

22 For Vivekananda's idea of tolerance, see Sharma 2013, pp. 155 et seq.

23 VCW IV, p. 180.

attribute of divinity, infinity, immutability and absoluteness, while diversity covers the finite, mutability and relativity. Unity is moreover conceived as the creative wellspring for a potentially unlimited number of variants, which in turn respectively reflect this unity in a unique way.²⁴

Couched in very general terms, this approach leaves a twofold question unanswered: how the different religions, with each being a manifestation of the divine, relate to one another exactly and how the plurality of religions is to be practised under the given social and cultural conditions. Vivekananda's stance here is somewhat inconclusive. In several instances he seems to firmly reject inclusivism, wherein one religion (usually one's own) conveys most consummately the redemption that the other religions only provide in limited form: "We have to recognise that each one of them has the same saving power as the other."²⁵

However, he links such statements resonant with pluralism to maintaining the superiority of Hinduism. This is not that surprising given that he proceeds ontologically from a hierarchically-tiered participation of the many in the one, an ontological caste system of being, so to say. From Vivekananda's perspective, the religious tolerance of the Hindus and their keen interest in everything religious is explainable on this basis – that they possess a superior insight into the one divine origin and thus into its relationship to the various religions. From this elevated vantage point, the truth of the religions can be seen as a graded participation in the one absolute truth. All religions are acknowledged to possess a certain degree of truth, without this however impacting on the superiority of Hinduism. The other religions are true "as each is but a different stage in the journey, the aim of which is the perfect conception of the Vedas."²⁶ There may indeed be uncountable manifestations of truth, each justified in itself, but the ultimate insight lies with the Vedic seers, the *r̥ṣis*, whose vision of God described in the Upaniṣads consummately recognised the divine One and thus sets the standard for appraising other religions: "Whether we call it Vedantism or any *ism*, the truth is that Advaitism is the last word of religion and thought and the only position from which one can look upon all religions and sects with love. I believe it is the religion of the future enlightened humanity."²⁷

Up until now we have spoken often of Vedānta and Advaita Vedānta. The following section aims to clarify these terms. They mark the orientation within the Hindu religions Vivekananda identified with and which he then gave a

24 VCW IV, p. 180.

25 VCW IV, p. 182.

26 VCW I, p. 331.

27 VCW VI, p. 415 (emphasis in the original).

new direction under the name “practical Vedānta”. His interpretation was a decisive contribution to the rise of a modern Hinduism scholars have labelled neo-Vedānta.

4 Practical Vedānta

His conception of Hinduism proceeds from the Vedas as the authoritative scriptures for all Hindus because they present the divine revelation underlying their religion:²⁸ “The Hindus have received their religion through revelation, the Vedas. They hold that the Vedas are without beginning and without end.”²⁹ According to Vivekananda, the qualifying of the Vedas as “without beginning and end” is to be understood in the sense that they are not written books, but a timelessly valid treasure of spiritual laws, revealed to the wise and seers of the ancient past and later rendered into writing in book form. These laws deal with the moral, ethical and spiritual relationships of spiritual beings among themselves and to their origin in a detailed, undistorted and hence unrivalled manner. An intuition of truth is also evident in later Hindu literature and in the religious scriptures of other races, but

still the fourfold scripture known among the Aryan race as the *Vedas* being the first, the most complete, and the most undistorted collection of spiritual truths, deserve to occupy the highest place among all scriptures, command the respect of all nations of the earth, and furnish the rationale of all their respective scriptures.³⁰

Vedānta means “conclusion” or “completion” of the Vedas. The term is used to designate the Upaniṣads as the concluding parts of the Vedic scriptures. Additionally, Vedānta is the name for the Brahminic schools in which the Upaniṣads, as the consummation of the Vedic revelation, are accorded the highest rank. Vivekananda follows the common doctrine of the three sources (*prasthānatrayī*), which states that the orthodox Vedānta schools are based on

28 The Veda (“sacred knowledge”) is the most ancient literature of South Asia. It is comprised of four text collections, the Vedas, which mainly contain hymns praising the gods, songs and sayings, used in the sacrificial rituals conducted by Brahmins and interpretations of the meaning of the rituals. The oldest of these collections, the Ṛgveda, is usually dated today as stemming from the period between 1200 and 1000 BCE. The most recent sections of the Veda, from 600 to 300 BCE and even later, are those known as the Upaniṣads.

29 VCW I, p. 6.

30 VCW VI, p. 182.

a triadic canon: the Upaniṣads, the Brahmasūtras as the authoritative systematisation of the Upanishad teachings and the Bhagavadgītā, read as the definitive commentary on the Upaniṣads.³¹

Depending on how the relationship between the divine origin and the world is conceived, three schools are distinguished: Dvaita Vedānta (dualism), Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta (non-dualism qualified by difference) and Advaita Vedānta (non-dualism). Vivekananda recognises all three schools to be legitimate exponents of the Vedānta teachings. He fits them into a schema of the gradual internalisation of God by the “ancient Aryan thinkers”, whereby the Advaita Vedānta represents the highest attainment. In his view this schema reflects the general phases in the evolution of religion, which are hence embodied in the Vedas themselves.³²

We shall see how they took, as it were, this old idea of God, the Governor of the universe, who is external to the universe, and first put him inside the universe. He is not a God outside, but He is inside; and they took Him from there into their own hearts. Here he is in the heart of man, the Soul of our souls, the Reality in us.³³

Although *advaita* (“non-dualism”) is a negative term, Vivekananda, like many other devotees of this direction, understands it in a positive sense, as unity. His entire thought may be read as a metaphysics of total unity. There is only one single truth: *brahman* also called “God” or “Lord” by Vivekananda. Being immutable and eternal, solely Brahman truly exists. It is further characterised as *satcitānanda*, the unity of being, consciousness and bliss. As a manifestation of *brahman*, the whole reason of the world is in fact to relate to what truly exists. The liberation all religions strive towards resides in an insight: that the human being has an immaterial soul (Vivekananda employs soul, Self and *ātman* in this context synonymously) that is one with the single, absolute reality of *brahman*. The identification of this spiritual self with the body is described as the everyday form of the delusion giving rise to the illusion (*māyā*) that the world of manifold appearances is the true reality: “We first have to learn what

31 See VCW III, pp. 395 et seq.

32 Vivekananda engages with the evolutionary theories of the history of religion as put forwards by Spencer, Tylor, Max Müller and others, at the time a topic of heated debate. In his conception of the history of religion, the gradual internalisation of God runs parallel with investigation into the depths of the soul and the overcoming of the constraints of the senses by achieving ever-higher spiritual states. This development had been first achieved, and with the greatest consequence, by the Vedic seers. See VCW II, pp. 57 et seq.

33 VCW I, pp. 355 et seq.

ignorance is. All of us think 'I am the body, and not the Self, the pure, the effulgent, the ever blissful.' And that is ignorance."³⁴ The teaching of a bodiless, immaterial and blissful core of the human being – identical with absolute reality and knowledge of which liberates us from all evils and suffering – is at the centre of his theology.

One could conclude that this understanding of religion, which in many places recalls the famous formulation in the early work of Augustine that knowing God and the soul is the sole goal of all religion, paves the way for a soteriological individualism fixated on one's own salvation that can have little interest in social engagement.³⁵ But Vivekananda gives it an eminently practically nationalist meaning, employing martial tones to claim it as essential for the upswing of India because it nurtures physical and spiritual strength and builds self-confidence.

What our country now wants are muscles of iron and nerves of steel, gigantic wills which nothing can resist, which can penetrate into the mysteries and the secrets of the universe, and will accomplish their purpose in any fashion [...]. That is what we want, and that can only be created, and strengthened by understanding and realising the ideal of Advaita, that ideal of oneness of all. Faith, faith, faith in ourselves, faith in God – this is the secret of greatness. [...] We have lost faith in ourselves. Therefore to preach the Advaita aspect of the Vedanta is necessary to rouse up the hearts of men, to show them the glory of their souls. It is therefore that I preach this Advaita [...].³⁶

At the time, the New Thought movement was enjoying great and sustained success in America with its propagation of a new religion based on the power of positive thinking, a religion which claims that it is possible to link together secular success, a healthy life, healing and spiritual growth. Vivekananda was greatly impressed and, half-jokingly, called the proponents of New Thought Vedāntins, for, in his view, they had grafted ideas from Advaita Vedānta onto the Bible. Conversely though he implanted elements gleaned from New Thought into his neo-Vedānta, for instance the use of so-called affirmations, and the

34 VCW I, p. 238.

35 Augustine in his Soliloquies: "Deum et animam scire cupio. Nihilne plus? Nihil omnino." ("God and the soul I strive to know. And nothing more? Absolutely nothing."), Augustinus 1990, c.2, n.7.

36 VCW III, pp. 190 et seq.

principle of ‘mind over matter’.³⁷ In a letter from America to his fellow monks in India Vivekananda put it as follows:

Have faith in yourself – all power is in you – be conscious and bring it out. Say, ‘I can do everything.’ Even the poison of a snake is powerless if you can firmly deny it.’ Beware! No saying ‘nay’, no negative thoughts! Say, ‘Yea, Yea,’ ‘So’ham, So’ham’ – ‘I am He! I am He!’ [...]. Summon up your all-powerful nature, O mighty one, and this whole universe will lie at your feet. It is the Self alone that predominates, and not matter.³⁸

At the same time, it cannot be overlooked that, strictly speaking, in Vivekananda’s theology individuals are unreal, the only reality being the one divine Self that manifests itself as plurality. The dynamics of relationships and conflicts taking place between concrete persons and groups may be difficult to comprehend from the vantage point of such a lofty monist metaphysics. On the other hand, deriving principles of a practical philosophy from the identification with collective entities such as the Indian people, all people in need and distress or even the entire cosmos, poses no great problem for Vivekananda conceptually. As he sees it, the ethics of altruism and of compassion, extending to embrace the whole world, are a direct consequence of his Advaita credo:

The Atman, Self, is the same as Brahman, the Lord. The Self is all that is; It is the only reality. [...] There is one Self, not many. That one Self shines in various forms. Man is man’s brother because all men are one. A man is not only my brother, say the Vedas, he is myself. Hurting any part of the Universe, I only hurt myself.³⁹

In 1896 Vivekananda gave a lecture series in London that would become famous. Entitled “Practical Vedānta”, it explored the ethical and social dimension of his philosophy and theology of non-duality. Turning the focus of his monist metaphysics to how they can be practically applicable, he incorporates the engagement for suffering and needy humanity into the essential determination of religion. At one point, meanwhile celebrated and often quoted, he says:

37 See VCW VI, p. 270.

38 VCW VI, p. 274.

39 VCW VIII, pp. 100 et seq.

I do not believe in a God or religion which cannot wipe the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth. However sublime be the theories, however well-spun may be the philosophy – I do not call it religion so long as it is confined to books and dogmas.⁴⁰

Some commentators noticed that such a practical orientation is not to be found in the old Advaita texts. Hence, related European approaches, probably familiar to Vivekananda, some of them already influenced by Hinduism, were seen as possible sources of inspiration, namely the philosophies of Arthur Schopenhauer and Paul Deussen.⁴¹

Vivekananda himself regards his practical Vedānta with its insistence on social practice in the form of aid and education programmes for the poor and needy to be something fully new within Hinduism and in this respect emphasises like nowhere else in his thinking how the traditional Vedānta needs to be further elaborated and refined. Translating the knowledge of the unity of every human soul with the whole of humankind and God into concrete action was yet to be achieved.

To this effect, he believes that a practical Vedānta can and indeed should learn from other religions. Buddhist compassion, the vigour shown by Christians and the brotherhood idea of the Muslims can and should enrich Hindu spirituality.⁴² His concrete suggestions for the practical Vedānta did not however go beyond ideas and programmes of charitable welfare already long articulated and pursued in both India and elsewhere.⁴³ Vivekananda's innovation thus resided in how he succeeded in harnessing Hindu monasticism for aid campaigns and education projects, whereby one aspect of this was to counteract Christian and Muslim proselytising of the lower castes.

5 The Scientistic Turn of Modern Experiential Religiosity

Often dealt with under the label of “mysticism”, forms of religion placing religious experience at their centre have attracted enormous interest particularly

⁴⁰ VCW V, p. 39.

⁴¹ See Hacker 1961 and Halbfass 1995.

⁴² See VCW VIII, pp. 79–80.

⁴³ See Dixit 2014, p. 35: “What plan of action did Vivekananda himself put forward to improve the material condition of the Hindu masses? Charitable hospitals or doling out of free food to the victims of natural calamities could hardly bring about the end of their misery and social backwardness. These were age-old methods which did not require a Vivekananda to formulate them.”

amongst the educated classes since around 1800 and then once more with greater intensity around 1900 in societies characterised by an immense impact of modernisation processes. This was not very different in colonial India than in Europe and America. Wherever the traditional religion was beginning to lose approval and its matter-of-course-status, whilst various (atheistic or new religious) alternatives emerged as rivals, then personal experience gained in importance as a possible source for furnishing religious visions of life with a plausible foundation. Long-entrenched “dogmas” and the religious institutions representing these authoritarian belief systems were met with growing scepticism or outright rejection. Attractive promises were connected with this “return of mysticism”: there was no longer any need for the consoling promise of a hereafter – coming into contact with the salvific reality of God was possible in the here and now; and instead of moralistic indoctrination by religious authorities an inlet was offered to the exhilarating personal experience of an ultimate reality. The Enlightenment criticism of the so-called instruction-model of revelation and its accompanying heteronomous religiosity were a firmly accepted element in the new religiosity already at the end of the nineteenth century; so too the criticism of a conception of God as a father figure and authoritarian ruler who satisfies infantile wishes and thus merely cements the immaturity of believers.⁴⁴

The experiential orientation of the religiously interested in the fin de siècle was further strengthened by another factor. At a time when the Christian churches were locked in a gruelling struggle with modern natural sciences and their findings, both Buddhist and Hinduist Modernism, as well as movements like Spiritism and Theosophy, played a new trump card: scientific religion.

Following Olav Hammer, this describes a kind of mimicry of science, wherein scientific terms, methods, calculations and theories, in particular those used in physics, the exemplar of modern science, are invoked to articulate core areas of the respective religious current. This does not mean investigating religion with various scientific methods, but rather religion itself is presented as a kind of science. The rhetorical cogency of hegemonic science is used to legitimate one's own convictions, without however actually adhering to its methods and

44 When considered in terms of doctrinal instruction, revelation means the edifying or imperative imparting of specific statements or practical directives (commandments) through God or persons authorised for this purpose by God. The weaknesses in this model were recognised by many in modern Christian theology and replaced by dialogical or communicative conceptions, with revelation now seen as an experiential direct communication with God. For the criticism of the instruction-model of revelation by Enlightenment thinkers and experience based alternatives see Schmidt-Leukel 2017, pp. 190–203.

remaining within the limits of what is expressible in this framework.⁴⁵ The goal of religious scientism is to represent the respective religion as knowledge of equal status and trump the hegemonic sciences on their own field.⁴⁶ This kind of pseudoscience annuls the boundary between the natural sciences and religion. One consequence of this is that religious experience is stylised as corresponding to the empirical standards of the natural sciences, enhancing their status.

Vivekananda was a pioneer of modern experiential religiosity oriented on scientism and in India became one of the founding fathers of the “Vedic science”⁴⁷ propounded by Hindu nationalists. Here he was able to take up the thought of Keshub Chandra Sen, who had already blended the pivotal significance of so-called mystical experiences in Ramakrishna with scientific empiricism.⁴⁸ From his first major speech before the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893 onwards, Vivekananda construed Hinduism to be a scientific religion consonant with modern sciences. The most recent discoveries made by the natural sciences seemed to him to echo the spiritual heights attained by Vedānta philosophy.⁴⁹ His philosophy of religion not only aligns religious theory and practice to the exemplary model of the natural sciences, but also forges a connection to the idea of the autonomy of human reason, which in turn possesses a dignity that religious authorities were not permitted to deny or violate.

There are certain religious facts which, as in external science, have to be perceived, and upon them religion will be built. Of course, the extreme claim that you must believe every dogma of a religion is degrading to the human mind. The man who asks you to believe everything, degrades himself, and, if you believe, degrades you too. The sages of the world have only the right to tell us that they have analysed their minds and have found these facts, and if we do the same we shall also believe, and not before. That is all that there is in religion.⁵⁰

45 See the chapter “Scientism as a Language of Faith”, in Hammer 2001, pp. 201–330 and also the anthology on the topic of pseudoscience from Rupnow et. al. 2008.

46 Neo-religious scientism often goes hand in hand with a strident criticism of science and claims to be in possession of a higher level of knowledge that the conventional sciences are moving towards only gradually. For this, see Rademacher 2010.

47 For more on “Vedic science” see Nanda 2003, pp. 37–123. Along with Sen, Akkhoy Kumar Dutt is another influential founding figure of this way of thinking in the Brāhmo Samāj. We will come back to this below.

48 See Nanda 2016, p. 160 et seq.

49 VCW I, p. 6.

50 VCW II, p. 163.

Unsurprisingly, in the very same breath he positions Hinduism as the exemplar of a religion free of dogmas, one that is founded on the unbiased investigation of the human spirit. Belief in the sense of merely accepting assertions and theories to be true is superseded by the notion of realisation, which according to Vivekananda corresponds to the religious mentality of the Hindus and which he presented in America and Europe as an attractive option, accommodating the wishes of his Western audience.

The Hindu does not want to live upon words and theories. If there are existences beyond the ordinary sensuous existence, he wants to come face to face with them. If there is a soul in him which is not matter, if there is an all-merciful universal Soul, he will go to Him direct. He must see Him, and that alone can destroy all doubts. [...] The Hindu religion does not consist in struggles and attempts to believe a certain doctrine or dogma, but in realising – not in believing, but in being and becoming.⁵¹

Self-realisation as the existential cognition of the unity between God and the soul in an act of direct, intuitive perception is the centrepiece of all religion according to this approach. Everything else the religions otherwise offer can at best serve as guidance towards this experience. Specific ways of life and religious practices dealt with in the Hindu traditions (and other religions of the subcontinent, which he ignores) under the title of “yoga” are highly valued by Vivekananda as methods leading to realisation. With their help, “Vedic science” is not only capable of investigating the outer, coarse material world, just like Western science, but moreover it can – moving beyond conventional sensual perception – penetrate into more subtle levels of the cosmos and soul. Vivekananda goes so far in his scientism to claim that yogic concentration and meditation practice is not only an empirical method for gaining knowledge of the psychic world that is superior to Western psychology; through the skill of knowing and mastering the subtle forces existing beyond normal sensory perception and the materialistic view of the world as knowable by Western science, the yogi develops a higher form of natural science and paranormal powers, enabling him to exert power over nature itself.

Vivekananda names no sources for his scientistic understanding of yoga. Aside from Keshub Chandra Sen’s theory of religion and Brāhmo Samāj’s rationalism, it seems very likely that Blavatsky’s theosophy exerted an important influence, although Vivekananda himself was very critical about it. It is clear that theosophy was intensively discussed in both the Indian Brāhmo circles

⁵¹ VCW I, p. 13.

he moved in as well as the alternative religious milieu his cliental in the US belonged to. Even before the Theosophical Society moved its headquarters to India in 1878, in her first major work *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and various essays Helena P. Blavatsky had extolled yoga as part of the ancient wisdom teaching which was to form the timeless reservoir of humanity's higher knowledge. She presented yoga as a philosophy, but also as an experimental psychology, possessing knowledge that goes beyond modern Western psychology and physiology.⁵² In 1881 she wrote in *The Theosophist*, a journal published in India and distributed internationally: "For six years now, we have been publicly asserting that Indian Yoga was and is a true science, endorsed and confirmed by thousands of experimental proofs; and that, though few in number, the true Indian Yogis may still be found when the right person seeks in the right way."⁵³ Statements of this kind prepared the ground for Vivekananda's role as an international emissary of "scientific Yoga".

As in theosophy and other variants of contemporary occultism, which he readily allowed himself to be influenced by, Vivekananda connects scientism and the belief in a kind of higher knowledge referring to secret powers unknown to mainstream science. For him the yogi is a magician, a belief evident in older South Asian traditions, but, of course, without the modern occultistic connotations. Nowhere is Vivekananda's megalomania more pronounced than when he discusses the yogic mastering of nature, whereby the employment of traditional secret knowledge was to obviously out trump the West precisely in one of its core areas of competency.

According to the Raja-Yogi, the external world is but the gross form of the internal, or subtle. [...] The man who has discovered and learned how to manipulate the internal forces will get the whole of nature under his control. The Yogi proposes to himself no less a task than to master the whole universe, to control the whole of nature.⁵⁴

At this point we have to bypass this highly interesting side of his yoga philosophy. Nor can we look at Vivekananda's closely related philosophy of nature. Instead I will concentrate on his religious scientism in the narrower sense. Crucial here is the opposition to the view that religious experience would be exclusively the reserve of individual founders of a religion or mystically gifted religious adepts. He claims instead that all experiential knowledge, no matter

52 See Blavatsky 1966, vol. 11, p. 22 and Baier 2009, pp. 297–303.

53 Blavatsky 1966, vol. 111, p. 105.

54 VCW I, pp. 132 et seq.

in which area of human life, is conform to the repeatability of the knowledge produced by the natural sciences. When a specific experience is gone through in one branch of knowledge, then it has to be assumed that it could have been had earlier and in principle be repeatable countless times. According to Vivekananda, yoga shows how experience is repeatable in the field of religion.

Uniformity is the rigorous law of nature; what once happened can always happen. The teachers of the science of Yoga, therefore, declare that religion is not only based upon the experience of ancient times, but that no man can be religious until he has the same perceptions himself. Yoga is the science which teaches us how to get these perceptions.⁵⁵

Religious truth claims are thus seen as factual knowledge, founded on reproducible perceptions. Spiritual practices are cast as experiments, serving to verify asserted truths. The relevant guidance to practices are understood as akin to experimental setups which in turn lead to demonstrable results.

Assuming a large and predominant place in his oeuvre, Vivekananda's reflections on yoga explicate the idea of a "universal science of religion", or of a "natural religion" relevant for all human beings, as formulated by Akkhoy Kumar Dutt (1820–1886), a pioneer of the Brahmo Samaj influenced by European Enlightenment thought:⁵⁶ Dutt states "All worshippers of God practice meditation, devotion, acquire knowledge and do good deeds."⁵⁷ A religion in tune with the times and based on rational foundations is to be mystical and meditative and at the same time emotional and philosophically reflective, while in terms of action being capable of actively creating a world of good. Keshub Chandra Sen subsequently developed four types of religious life out of this conception, which then became the heart of modern yoga in Vivekananda: Rāja-, Bhakti-, Jñāna and Karma Yoga.⁵⁸

Vivekananda emphasises that in his Advaitic understanding these four paths to union (one of the meanings of the word "yoga") eradicate the hindrance of ignorance and bring about a manifestation of the unity of self and *brahman*, hence resulting in freedom (*mokṣa*). Although independent, these paths complement one another. Because they address abilities variously con-toured and developed individually, they need to be brought into an interrelationship appropriate to the respective dispositions of the individual person:

55 VCW I, p. 127.

56 On Dutt, see De Michelis 2004, pp. 62–63.

57 Akkhoy Kumar Dutt: *Who is a Brahmo?* (1854), pp. 9 et seq., quoted in Kopf 1979, p. 51.

58 See De Michelis 2004, p. 87.

“To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions is *my* ideal of religion. And this religion is attained by what we, in India, call Yoga – union.”⁵⁹ His explications on the various forms of yoga are tied to a criticism, primarily targeting Christianity, of heteronomous religion, which imposes limits on the autonomous use of reason.

No one of these Yogas gives up reason, no one of them asks you to be hoodwinked, or to deliver your reason into the hands of priests of any kind whatsoever. No one of them asks that you should give your allegiance to any superhuman messenger. Each one of them tells you to *cling* to your reason to hold fast to it.⁶⁰

Rāja Yoga, the yoga of meditation, describes methods for cultivating deeper concentration and in particular absorption (*samādhi*), the goal of all yoga practice because it is the prerequisite for attaining spiritual knowledge in the sense of a realisation of the unity with *brahman*. Vivekananda also calls this highest spiritual state attainable by humans, which transcends the limits of commonplace intellect, ‘superconsciousness’. One could speak of an extinguishing of the mind that does not however end in unconsciousness. The normal cognitive, emotional and volutative activities are to cease so that the divine One can reflect in the human mind like the moon on the surface of a perfectly still lake. “This mind has to be divested of all modifications (*Vrittis*) and reconverted into the transparent lake [...]. Then will Brahman manifest itself.”⁶¹ In *samādhi* all duality disappears and the oneness of the knower with the known can appear.

Vivekananda never satisfactorily described the relationship of the different yoga types to one another and, in particular, to liberating insight.⁶² Nor was he able to explain how Karma- and Bhakti Yoga could be integrated into his scientific conception of yoga. It seems to me most plausible to assume that Rāja Yoga functions in his thinking as a foundational discipline for all forms of yoga. The practice of meditation taught in Rāja Yoga can be interpreted as a method that expressly practices what is implicitly done and accomplished in the other types of yoga.

The central position of yoga in his theory of religion shows that he interpreted religion first and foremost as a system of practices which lead to the liberating experience of the absolute reality called *brahman* or *ātman*, and

59 VCW II, p. 388 (emphasis in the original).

60 VCW II, pp. 388 et seq.

61 VCW VII, p. 195.

62 See the detailed discussion of this question in Rambachan 1994, pp. 63–94.

moreover structure our relationship to the world in such a way that awareness of this reality can take place. Dogmas, priestly hierarchies, temple rituals and the referencing of holy scriptures prove to be – in comparison to the yogic disciplining of the mind – nothing other than mere ‘outward’ forms of religion and thus of limited benefit.

6 Yoga Practice and the Authority of Holy Scriptures

As indicated above, when considering the unity of the Indian nation and Hinduism, and thus concomitantly its superiority to other religions, Vivekananda emphasises the Vedas to be the factor forging identity and the superior collection of religious insights. Moreover, he is aware that on a global scale the religions invoking holy scriptures are more strongly represented numerically than those based on oral tradition only, many of which have long died out.⁶³

Nonetheless, the experiential orientation of his understanding of religion leads him to clearly downplay the importance of religious scriptures and their study.⁶⁴ Herein resides one of the main differences to traditional Vedānta, where one cannot attain the liberating knowledge of *brahman* without guidance through the revelatory scriptures.⁶⁵ Reading, reflecting and discussing on religious subjects, the learning of theoretical arguments, even the close study of the Vedas themselves cannot – on their own – convey knowledge of the divine self.⁶⁶ Many of his statements criticising religion comment on the dangers which in his opinion go hand and hand with textualising religious experience. He is also unsparing in his sarcastic remarks on the Veda-related fetishism within Hindu traditions.⁶⁷

The question as to the role authoritative scriptures were to play in conveying religious insight preoccupied him nevertheless. In his influential work *Rāja Yoga* (1896) he takes up the epistemology of philosophical yoga.⁶⁸ In line with

63 See VCW I, p. 126.

64 See Rambachan 1994, pp. 46–50.

65 See De Michelis 2004, p. 176 et seq. and Halbfass 1988, p. 390.

66 VCW 7, p. 70. At this point Vivekananda emphasises, as elsewhere, the importance of learning through personal contact with people who have attained a high level of realisation.

67 See for example VCW IV, p. 42: “There are sects in my country who believe that God incarnates and becomes man, but even God incarnate as man must conform to the Vedas, and if His [sic] teachings do not so conform, they will not take him. [...] Such is the meaning of book-worship.”

68 See VCW I, pp. 204–205. And the detailed consideration of Vivekananda’s theory of religious knowing in Rambachan 1994, pp. 41–62.

the philosophy of the Sāṃkhya system three valid sources of knowledge are recognised. All insight is based on:

1. direct experience (*pratyākṣa*), which apprehends the individual and/or general characteristic of an object perceived through the senses; or on
2. inferences (*anumāna*) drawn from a directly perceived sign as to what it signifies; and
3. reliable testimony passed down in language (*āgama*).

The third source is generally identified with the authoritative religious scriptures and this is how Vivekananda understands *āgama*. The principle of experience once more comes into play when explaining the reason for the reliability of *āgama*. He argues that the views set down in these texts represent truths in so far as they stem from persons who have passed on knowledge based directly on their experiences or on conclusions drawn from these experiences. The sources 1 and 2 are thus applied. These persons are however Vedic seers or yogis who had attained extrasensory perception and can therefore make reliable religious statements. Persons of this kind have no need to pass through the same processes of gaining insight as average people. Past, present and future open up like a book before their mind in an experience of utmost subtlety.⁶⁹ Their words possess validity because they are based on this kind of inner insight. For this reason the holy scriptures – for Vivekananda this means in the first instance the Vedas – are to be considered a source of knowledge in its own right.

Vivekananda sees the problem this kind of theory generates: how can one know whether statements are based on higher yogic experiences? “Any madman may come into this room and say he sees angels around him, that would not be proof.”⁷⁰ To deal with this difficulty he proposes a set of criteria enabling us to evaluate the credibility of oral or written religious testimonies like those of the Vedic seers and yogis.

The most important criterion is the moral integrity of the person claiming the authority of a religious experience. Unlike other types of knowledge, religious insights cannot be attained by persons of doubtful morals. Only “a perfectly unselfish and holy person” is capable of such attainments; persons claiming to have had credible religious experiences are thus neither greedy for wealth or fame, nor do they demand exorbitant sums of money for their knowledge.

Secondly, such persons must be able to demonstrate that they have genuinely gone beyond the bounds of normal sensory perception. How this is to be

69 See VCW I, p. 20.

70 VCW I, p. 205.

demonstrated is unfortunately not elaborated on. As a disciple of Ramakrishna he was often present when his guru achieved ecstatic states and deep meditative absorptions, so we may assume he had something similar in mind. The experience of Ramakrishna's personal presence, described as "filled with God", was probably the most important source for Vivekananda's relativizing of the importance of sacred texts.⁷¹ Referring to Ramakrishna, he emphasises that the truths set down in the Vedas become manifest in seers again and again, spontaneously, due to divine providence, i.e. without any need of scriptural knowledge as a prerequisite, and this phenomenon is crucial for the vitality and pervasive power of religion:

In order to show how the Vedic truths [...] reveal themselves spontaneously in the minds of the Rishis purified from all impressions of worldly attachment, and because such verification and confirmation of the scriptural truths will help the revival, reinstatement and spread of religion – the Lord, though the very embodiment of the Vedas, in this His new incarnation has thoroughly discarded all external forms of learning.⁷²

Thirdly, he invokes a criterion based on a coherence theory of truth. What a yogi says needs to be compatible with the findings produced by other areas of knowledge and older insights. In his view a newly discovered truth does not refute knowledge attained in the past, but rather "fits into it".

Fourthly, the truth based on religious experience must be presented by its propagator in a way that is principally verifiable by each and every person. Whenever proclaimers of religious truths deny that their fellow humans are capable of attaining the same insights, then what they have laid claim to loses all credibility. The legendary seers of the Vedic epoch and their successors such as Ramakrishna are extolled as the ideal for the Hindu practitioner and indeed every religious person. Every person should become a *ṛṣi*.⁷³ Here the democratising effect of his experiential religiosity once more becomes evident. This should not be understood however as an expectation of the impending dawn of a mystical age (millenarianism was never a consideration for Vivekananda), but more in terms of an ideal that individuals get closer to achieving through several incarnations, and not thanks to blindly following precepts and doctrines but through, as best they can, gaining experiences within the framework of religious practice and making use of their own reason.

71 See Rambachan 1994, pp. 48 et seq.

72 VCW VI, p. 184.

73 See VCW III, pp. 254 et seq.

The Vedas are therefore for him superior to other holy scriptures also because they originate from the insights of an indefinite number of diverse visionaries and are not based solely on the authoritative words of individual founders of a religion and prophets. In certain respects they resemble the results produced by the collective research of a scientific community. As is so often the case, Christianity serves as a negative foil here.

This is another point of our religion that you must always remember, that in all other scriptures inspiration is limited to a very few persons, and through them the truth came to the masses, and we have all to obey them. Truth came to Jesus of Nazareth, and we must all obey him.⁷⁴

On the other hand, one can read in the Vedas that scriptural knowledge alone is insufficient for attaining the liberating experience of the divine self: “The scriptures themselves say so. Do you find in any other scripture such a bold assertion as that – not even by the study of the Vedas will you reach the Âtman? You must open your heart.”⁷⁵ As underlined by the Vedas themselves, the insight into the indispensability of religious self-experience and its superiority over any scriptural disclosure is one reason why, according to Vivekananda, Hinduism is a religion that is best suitable under the conditions of modernity to become the globally leading religion.⁷⁶

7 Conclusion

Before dying at a young age, Vivekananda – displaying intellectual creativity, élan and great powers of persuasion, but also resorting to crude reinterpretations and simplifications – succeeded in linking religious, philosophical and socio-political currents of his age which, at first glance, seem virtually impossible to reconcile. The result was a traditional-oriented reform Hinduism that claimed to be a universal religion while simultaneously promoting Indian nationalism.

His project of re-sacralising Indian society is based on a scientific understanding of religion, influenced by the European Enlightenment and the empiricism of modern European natural science. Upon closer inspection however, the religious pluralism propagated from this foundation and the concomitant

74 VCW III, p. 283.

75 VCW III, p. 283.

76 See VCW III, p. 279.

recognition of other religions turn out to be an inclusivist vision concocted out of a sense of the superiority of the Advaita Vedānta.

These contradictions and shallowness in his thinking have not deterred later Hindutva ideologues from glorifying Vivekananda and exploiting his teachings for their purposes. Hinduism as a unifying factor and basis of national identity; the Vedas as a manifestation of a knowledge encompassing and surpassing all religions while being compatible with Western science and, indeed, anticipating its results; and India's spiritual superiority, arising out of Hinduism's experience-centred approach, in the global context – all these ideas, for which Vivekananda strongly campaigned, still exert a formative influence on contemporary, religiously-tinged Indian nationalism.

Vivekananda's interpretation of yoga laid the ground for the numerous neo-Hindu forms of yoga. It also contributed to the rise of modern yoga into a global mass movement, which only superficially draws on traditional South Asian sources. But just as validly can the nationalising and Hinduising of contemporary yoga, as pursued foremost by the "Take Back Yoga" movement and the Modi government, can refer to him.

Contrary to the glib hagiography favoured by Hindu nationalism and also evident amongst some practitioners of contemporary yoga drawing on Vivekananda, the present article has sought to shed light on the internal tensions and unsolved questions in his thinking. As noted, they continue to influence our present. To precisely delineate how this influence is exerted and to detail possible solutions is however the task of another study.

Biography

Karl Baier studied philosophy and cultural anthropology at the University of Vienna. Today he works as a Professor of Religious Studies and Head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Vienna. He has published on the history of the reception of yoga in the West, modern yoga research as well as alternative religious movements and the European history of meditation practices.

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