

Evangelizing the West



In 1893 an unknown Hindu monk arrived at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He was Swami Vivekananda, whom I have mentioned already. He made a stunning impression on those who heard him, both by his appearance — beturbaned and robed in orange and crimson — and by what he said. He was immediately lionized by high society in Boston and New York. Philosophers at Harvard were mightily impressed. And it wasn't long until he had gathered a hard core of disciples who supported him and his grandiose dream: the evangelizing of the Western world by Hinduism, and more particularly, by Vedantic (or monistic) Hinduism. Vedanta Societies were established in the large cities of this country and in Europe. But these centers were only a part of his work. More important was introducing Vedantic ideas into the bloodstream of academic thinking. Dissemination was the goal. It mattered little to Vivekananda whether credit was given to Hinduism or not, so long as the message of Vedanta reached everyone. On many occasions he said: Knock on every door. Tell everyone he is Divine.

Today parts of his message are carried in paperbacks that you can find in any bookstore — books by Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Somerset Maugham, Teilhard de Chardin, and even Thomas Merton. [Next...](#)

Thomas Merton, of course, constitutes a special threat to Christians, because he presents himself as a contemplative Christian monk, and his work has already affected the vitals of Roman Catholicism, its monasticism. Shortly before his death, Father Merton wrote an appreciative introduction to a new translation of the Bhagavad Gita, which is the spiritual manual or "Bible" of all Hindus, and one of the foundation blocks of monism or Advaita Vedanta. The Gita, it must be remembered, opposes almost every important teaching of Christianity. His book on the Zen Masters, published posthumously, is also noteworthy, because the entire work is based on a treacherous mistake: the assumption that all the so-called "mystical experiences"

in every religion are true. He should have known better. The warnings against this are loud and clear, both in Holy Scripture and in the Holy Fathers.

Today I know of one Catholic monastery in California where cloistered monks are experimenting with Hindu religious practices. They were trained by an Indian who became a Catholic priest. Unless the ground had been prepared, I think this sort of thing couldn't be happening. But, after all, this was the purpose of Vivekananda's coming to the West: to prepare the ground.

Vivekananda's message of Vedanta is simple enough. It looks like more than it is because of its trappings: some dazzling Sanskrit jargon, and a very intricate philosophical structure. The message is essentially this: All religions are true, but Vedanta is the ultimate truth. Differences are only a matter of "levels of truth." In Vivekananda's words: "Man is not travelling from error to truth, but climbing up from truth to truth, from truth that is lower to truth that is higher. The matter of today is the spirit of the future. The worm of today — the God of tomorrow. The Vedanta rests on this: that man is God. So it is for man to work out his own salvation. Vivekananda put it this way: "Who can help the Infinite? Even the hand that comes to you through the darkness will have to be your own."

Vivekananda was canny enough to know that straight Vedanta would be too much for Christians to follow, right off the bat. But "levels of truth" provided a nice bridge to perfect ecumenism — where there is no conflict because everyone is right. In the Swami's words: "If one religion be true, then all the others also must be true. Thus the Hindu faith is yours as much as mine. We Hindus do not merely tolerate, we unite ourselves with every religion, praying in the mosque of the Mohammedan, worshipping before the fire of the Zoroastrian, and kneeling to the cross of the Christian. We know that all religions alike, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, are but so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realize the Infinite. So we gather all these flowers and, binding them together with the cords of love, make them into a wonderful bouquet of worship."

Still, all religions were only steps to the ultimate religion, which was Advaita Vedanta. He had a special contempt for Christianity, which at best was a "low truth" — a dualistic truth. In private conversation he said that only a coward would turn the other cheek. But whatever he said about other religions, he always returned to the necessity of Advaita Vedanta. "Art, science, and religion," he said, "are but three different ways of expressing a single truth. But in order to

understand this we must have the theory of Advaita."

The appeal to today's youth is unmistakable. Vedanta declares the perfect freedom of every soul to be itself. It denies all distinction between sacred and secular: they are only different ways of expressing the single truth. And the sole purpose of religion is to provide for the needs of different temperaments: a god and a practice to suit everyone. In a word, religion is "doing your own thing,"

All this may sound far-fetched; but Vivekananda did an effective job. Now I'll show how successful he was in introducing these Hindu ideas into Roman Catholicism, where his success has been the most striking.

Swami Vivekananda first came to America to represent Hinduism at the 1893 Parliament of Religions. 1968 was the 75th anniversary of this event, and at that time a Symposium of Religions was held under the auspices of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society of Chicago. Roman Catholicism was represented by a Dominican theologian from De Paul University, Father Robert Campbell. Swami Bhashyananda opened the meeting with the reading of good-will messages from three very important people. The second was from an American Cardinal.

Father Campbell began the afternoon session with a talk on the conflict of the traditionalist versus the modernist in modern Catholicism. He said: "In my own university, surveys taken of Catholic student attitudes show a great swing towards the liberal views within the last five or six years. I know that the great Swami Vivekananda would himself be in favor of most of the trends in the direction of liberal Christianity." What Father Campbell apparently didn't know was that the modernistic doctrines he described were not Christian at all; they were pure and simple Vedanta.

So there will be no question of misinterpretation, I shall quote the Father's words on the modernists' interpretation of five issues, just as they appeared in three international journals: the Prabuddha Bharata published in Calcutta, the Vedanta Kesheri published in Madras, and Vedanta and the West, published in London.

On doctrines: "Truth is a relative thing, these doctrines and dogmas (i.e., the nature of God, how man should live, and the after-life) are not fixed things, they change, and we are coming to the point where we deny some things that we formerly affirmed as sacred truths."

On God: "Jesus is divine, true, but any one of us can be divine. As a matter of fact, on many points, I think you will find the liberal Christian outlook is moving in the direction of the East in much of its philosophy — both in its concept of an impersonal God and in the concept that we are all divine."

On Original Sin: "This concept is very offensive to liberal Christianity, which holds that man is perfectable by training and proper education."

On the world: "The liberal affirms that it can be improved and that we should devote ourselves to building a more humane society instead of pining to go to heaven."

On other religions: "The liberal group says: 'Don't worry about the old-fashioned things such as seeking converts, etc., but let us develop better relations with other religions.'"

So says Father Campbell for the modernistic Catholics. The modernist has been led like a child by the generous offer of higher truth, deeper philosophy and greater sublimity — which can be had by merely subordinating the living Christ to modern man.

Here, then, we see the spectacular success of Hinduism, or Swami Vivekananda, or the power behind Vivekananda. It's made a clean sweep of Roman Catholicism. Her watchdogs have taken the thief as the friend of the master, and the house is made desolate before their eyes.

The thief said: "Let us have interfaith understanding," and he was through the gate. And the expedient was so simple. The Christian Hindus (the Swamis) had only to recite the Vedanta philosophy using Christian terms. But the Hindu Christians (the modernistic Catholics), had to extrapolate their religion to include Hinduism. Then necessarily, truth became error, and error, truth. Alas, some would now drag the Orthodox Church into this desolate house. But let the modernists remember the words of Isaiah: Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! (Is. 5:20-21).

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by Seraphim Rose