THE EARLY SPREAD OF VEDANTA SOCIETIES: AN EXAMPLE OF "IMPORTED LOCALISM"

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Summary

Sri Ramakrishna, in whose name the Ramakrishna Math and Mission were created, and Swami Vivekananda, the disciple largely responsible for their organization, have been recognized as early examples of the "global gurus" who, over the last hundred years or so, have attracted both Hindus and those not born into Hinduism. This article will examine the establishment of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in the United States and London. As a consequence of its attachment to the ideal of an emergent universal religion, but one linked to the claim that Hinduism is the "mother of religions," the movement has looked to the Hindu tradition for authoritative paradigms. This tendency has been matched by an expectation on the part of followers not born into Hinduism that the movement's belief and ritual activity should reflect practice in India. It will be argued that this pattern cannot be explained adequately in terms of existing theoretical understandings of the interaction between globalization and localization. Instead, it will be argued that Vivekananda's teaching led to the emergence of the related yet distinct phenomenon of "imported localism," which has been at odds with the ideal of a universal religion.

The Ramakrishna Math and Mission: A "Global" Movement[1]

It remains far from clear whether Sri Ramakrishna (c1836–1886 CE) commissioned Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902 CE) to institutionalize his legacy.[2] Ramakrishna, nevertheless, is honoured today in 147 Ramakrishna Math and Mission centres around the world. Although the majority are in India, the contemporary movement would

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[1] This article is a revised form of a paper given at the European Association for the Study of Religion, 3rd Congress, at the University of Bergen, May, 2003. I am grateful to Professor Gustavo Benavides for comments that greatly assisted its final revision.

[2] See Chapter 2 in Beckerlegge 2000 for scholarly debate about the extent of continuity between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.

commonly be thought of as "global." In addition to signifying geographical extent, "global" may also suggest ". . . a different kind of consciousness which takes into account a new order of complexity wherein the particular and the universal, the local, regional, and international, interact in a quite new and previously unknown way" (King 1992:153). "Globalization," whether understood as a process distinct from "modernization" or to a significant degree continuous with it (see Beckford 2003:104ff., 121f.), signals the advent of the profound and more comprehensive understanding of global unities outlined by King, with all this implies for human beings singly and collectively. We shall be concerned with this richer sense of "global" in exploring the extent to which the distinctive nature of the earliest Vedanta Societies/groups, which were created by Vivekananda in the United States and Europe between 1893–1897 and 1899–1900, can be understood adequately through reference to a relationship between processes of "globalization" and "localization."

Intimations of a New World Order

Vivekananda's "mission" to the West required the dramatic reordering of time and space implied by incipient globalization, enabling him as a "transnational actor" to manage the propagation of his message (Cohen and Kennedy 2000:33). Lacking the concept of "globalization," he alluded to increasingly complex inter-relationships between regions and political, economic, technological and cultural systems, when he wrote in 1899 of the "virtual presence of England" behind the armies and missionaries, ". . . whose war flag is the factory chimney, whose troops are the merchantmen, whose battlefields are the market-places of the world. . ." (Vivekananda 1989, 4:452). He recognised the unprecedented power that Britain exercised over the spread of ideas, and was quick to utilise the media (1989, 3:31f., 40; 6:365f.; 3:223). He relied heavily upon the railways. The developing international postal service made it possible for him to influence followers simultaneously in the United States, London and India, and to foster collaboration between them.

Addressing his "Sisters and Brothers of America" at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Vivekananda anticipated the emergence of a "universal religion," identified with Advaita Vedanta, which would be in tune with the spirit of the increasingly globalized age in which he lived and put an end to intolerance. At this event, arguably for the first time, representatives of different religions began to make common cause in the light of their shared experience of global pressures exerted by scientific and other socio-economic forces. Vivekananda's encounter with the sense of globality fostered at Chicago in turn may have increased the pressure on him to identify and clarify the place of Hinduism in the world (see Beckford 2003:115). After all, he had come to Chicago ostensibly to raise funds to alleviate conditions in India, and not initially to promote a universalist religious philosophy. In his first speech at the Parliament, Vivekananda spoke of religions as different "streams" or "paths" leading to the same goal (1989, 1:4). Individuals unable to appreciate that their various religions had arisen from the ". . . same truth adapting itself to the varying circumstances of different natures" (1989, 1:18) were likened to frogs in their own wells (1989, 1:5). Yet, Vivekananda proclaimed in the same breath that Hinduism was the "mother of religions" (1989, 1:3).

Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita), one of Vivekananda's closest western disciples, noted that he ". . . believed that the time had come when nations were to exchange their ideals, as they were already exchanging the commodities of the market" (Nivedita 1982:18). By 1894, although Vivekananda continued to elicit financial support for his project to alleviate material conditions in India, he had come to view this as part of an exchange for the spiritual wisdom he had imported from India (for example, Vivekananda 1989, 6:255). The creation of Vedanta Societies/centres was understood in these terms, as were the journeys to India by several of his closest western disciples. As the "first Hindu missionary" in the West (Brekke 2002:46), Vivekananda anticipated the gurus of global Hinduism of the 1960s and subsequently. In much the same way, several of Vivekananda's closest followers prefigured the Americans and Europeans who made

"the journey to the East" (either literally or figuratively) during the latter half of the twentieth century.

The Appeal of Vivekananda's Universal Religion

The relative ease with which Vivekananda established Vedanta centres in New York (1894) and San Francisco (1900) and gathered a circle of supporters in London would initially appear to confirm Jackson's judgement that it was ". . . a story of the convergence of the right movement and the right time" (1994:1).

The nineteenth century saw assaults on regionally dominant expressions of Christianity in both the United States and England. Few of those attracted to Vivekananda's message in the United States were ". . . actively and meaningfully involved with main-stream Christianity. . . . movements such as Theosophy and Christian Science were way stations between participation in the institutional Church and an identification with Vedanta," as were New England Transcendentalism and New Thought (French 1974:98; cf. Jackson 1994:14; Veysey 1978:216). Some had entirely rejected Christianity and any other form of religion (for example, Gurudas 1919:163). Several of Vivekananda's American supporters were from the elite, and through education, wealth and opportunity were open to new and foreign ideas (Jackson 1994:29; Veysey 1978:212f.). Laura Glenn (Sister Devamata) joined the New York Vedanta Society, part of "a remarkable non-sectarian religious organization," having met Vivekananda in 1899 (Devamata 1975:1, cf. 80). A Vassar graduate, she had studied in Europe and spent time in an Anglican convent but had also read the Upanishads and *Bhagavad Gita*, as well as Arnold's *Light of Asia* (His Eastern and Western Admirers 1983:122; Jackson 1994:94f.). Leon Landsberg (later Swami Kripananda) had travelled through Theosophy, finding "some truth" in all the religions he had studied ". . . but too much encrusted with superstition" (Anon. 1896:195). Ellen Waldo had similarly tested different teachers (Devamata 1932:243; Jackson 1994:91f.). Sister Christine (Christina Greenstidel), a former Christian Scientist, found in Vivekananda ". . . the touchstone for which we have been searching," yet something "strangely familiar" for "I have known that *mind* be-

fore" (Sen 1930:420). For Josephine McLeod, Vivekananda was ". . . a Rock for us to stand *upon*. That was his function in my life, not worship, not glory, but a steadiness under one's feet for experiments! At last *I'm free. . .*" (Amiya 1950:28).[3]

Some held Vedanta to be compatible with existing religious commitments. Mary Phillips, a key worker in the New York Vedanta Society, asserted, "We are not giving up the religion of our forefathers nor the Christ of Nazareth. . . . It is a delving to the roots of all religions, leaving us free to worship in whatever form we choose. . .." She spoke of there being many Christs who had all represented "fundamental principles of the philosophy of the Vedas" (quoted in French 1974:99). According to Josephine McLeod, however, something of a divide persisted between those who continued to believe in "the necessity of Christianity as a saving power" and those willing to relativize this conviction within the tenets of a universal religion. She observed that "Our Swami's great exposition of Vedanta Philosophy always favored rather than denied the mission of Christ, and left Christians better Christians, and this is what essentially appealed to Mr. Leggett [first President of the New York Vedanta Society], and in fact to all of us" (quoted in French 1974:98f.). Nevertheless, some felt uncomfortable with Vivekananda's criticisms of Christianity (Atulananda 1970:261f.). Miss Dutcher, Vivekananda's host at Thousand Island Park in 1895, has been remembered as ". . . a devout Methodist who had difficulty with some of Vivekananda's frontal assaults on her orthodoxy" (French 1974:65; cf. His Eastern and Western Admirers 1983:164f.).

In Britain, Vivekananda again drew his earliest disciples and supporters from different clusters of spiritual seekers, similarly disillusioned with the exclusivism of institutionalized Christianity. E.T. Sturdy, Henrietta Muller, and Captain and Mrs Sevier had direct acquaintance with India and Hindu religious thinking. Sturdy and Muller, who first invited Vivekananda to London, were former Theosophists.

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[3] Similar testimonies are to be found in the compilation of appreciations of Vivekananda, His Eastern and Western Admirers (1983:142, 154, 250, 418f.).

The Seviers, who returned to India to build up the Advaita Ashrama, declared that Vivekananda met a spiritual need they had been seeking to satisfy for years (Basu and Ghosh 1969:132). Other supporters, such as Eric Hammond and Isabel Margesson accommodated Vivekananda's message within existing personal philosophies already sympathetic to the notion of a universal truth manifested constantly in different religions (His Eastern and Western Admirers 1983:291f., 380). Eric Hammond and Henrietta Muller respectively found points in common with the Baha'i faith and Christian Theosophy (see Beckerlegge 2000:158–60). Margaret Noble (Nivedita 1982:20) referred to the "equal truth of all religions" as the "master-thought" to which Vivekananda constantly returned in his talks in London in 1895 and 1896. She declared, "The doctrine that while no one religion was true in the way commonly claimed, yet all were equally true in a very real way, was one that commanded the immediate assent of *some* of us" [emphasis added] (1982:21).

The Ramakrishna movement's approach to the issue of religious pluralism has continued to appeal strongly to its western devotees. For Christopher Isherwood (1948:1), Vedanta was nothing less than "a statement of the Philosophia Perennis." John Yale (1961:10, 12), later Swami Vidyatmananda, declared that the universalism of the Ramakrishna movement enabled him to be ". . . religious without being provincial" (cf. [Swami] Atulananda [born C.J. Heijblom] 1970:262). Pravrajika Vrajaprana's (2000) discussion of the recent progress of Vedanta in the United States refers uniformly to thinkers attracted to mysticism, notions of a perennial philosophy, and religious universalism.

The ideal of a universal religion has proved equally attractive to those training in Britain for acceptance into the Ramakrishna Math, disillusioned with the confines of Christianity and indeed any dogma maintaining that God ". . . manifested himself at only one time and place" (Carey 1987:136). In an interview in 2001, Swami Dayatmananda, Swami-in-charge of the Ramakrishna-Vedanta Centre at Bourne End, UK, maintained that Vivekananda had disseminated Vedanta, and not the "ethnic religion" of Hinduism, and that the Ra-

makrishna movement had taken up this task.[4] Swami Shivarupananda (born in Canada and then raised in England) had found that it was "... conceivable to think of the Divine as having form and being formless. . . . I can't see God as a plc, limited to one particular cult, religion or religious expression." He added, "I can't be really a Hindu. I was moving into a universal religion."[5] Adopting a Vedantin stance, therefore, had not involved a desertion of Christianity, the religion of his birth, but was an evolutionary process of moving beyond an attachment to one form of the Divine. He believed Ramakrishna's ideas to be in tune with "... a world framework now marked by globalization and unification."

Local Difficulties

Vivekananda's message found a small but ready audience in the West. The creation of stable organizations, however, was far from trouble-free. Vivekananda had to face defections and conflict between his followers. The New York centre survived this turmoil, although it was temporarily suspended in 1910, but the nascent London centre collapsed by 1899. The causes of this instability were varied.[6] Many who came to hear Vivekananda were never likely to be drawn to the Vedantin core of his message. Others brought a greater openness to the religious challenge of his ideas but very different understandings of how it related to their existing religious convictions. The temperaments and ambitions of individuals also came into play.

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[4] Interview material gathered by this writer in January, 2001, while making the video programme, "In the presence of gods and gurus," for the Open University course (AD317) *Religion Today: Tradition, Modernity and Change.* (Producer: Marinella Nicolson; Series Producer: Tessa Coombs: BBC, 2001).

[5] Writing in 1919, Brahmachari Gurudas/Swami Atulananda (born C.J. Heijblom), in contrast, identified himself as a "Hindu," but as "a spiritual child of the Indian Rishis" rather than in a cultural sense (Gurudas 1919:161f.).

[6] For a more detailed account of these developments, see French 1974, Jackson 1994, and Veysey 1978 on the United States, and Beckerlegge 2000: Part Three on London.

In New York, there were tensions between Swamis Kripananda and Abhayananda, the first two disciples initiated into *samnyasa* in the United States in 1895, and between these swamis and Vivekananda, and between them and other supporters. The most serious threat to the future of the New York society arose from a disagreement over its management between Swami Abhedananda and a cluster of Vivekananda's closest supporters and financial sponsors (Jackson 1994:54–57). Leggett subsequently resigned as the society's president and was replaced by one of Abhedananda's disciples, and the society continued under new rules that gave the swami-in-charge more control. Leggett, McLeod and Sara Bull then largely withdrew from the New York Vedanta scene, although did not sever their links with Vivekananda. Writing in 1900 to his close disciple, Christina Greenstidel, Vivekananda described the New York Vedanta Society as ". . . nearly broken to pieces" (quoted in Burke 1987:267).

Vivekananda spent less time in England than in the United States and confined his activity to London. As in the United States, fluid audiences fluctuated around a core of financial sponsors, such as Sturdy and Henrietta Muller, and a cluster of unswerving disciples. In 1899, Vivekananda found himself in conflict with some of these supporters and sponsors, which proved to be destructive for the immediate future of the London Vedanta centre. Unlike the United States, in England these critics turned their fire on Vivekananda's conduct as a *samnyasi* (see Beckerlegge 2000: Part Three).

Concerns of the day, common to many religious and social movements, impinged upon the reception of Vivekananda and his message. For example, social constraints predisposed many independently minded women, such as Margaret Noble, Henrietta Muller and Marie Louise (Swami Abhayananda), to explore their spirituality within alternative religious communities. Asceticism also exercised a powerful attraction for individuals within certain late nineteenth-century religious and social movements (cf. Veysey 1978:217f.). Both Vivekananda and popular Hinduism were judged against these and other external criteria by individuals who took up Vedanta from different starting points, for example, Henrietta Muller (Theosophy) and Mrs Ashton Jonson

who led the London Vedanta group after Vivekananda's departure (Christian Science), as well as by individuals who claimed to draw upon criteria internal to Hinduism when judging Vivekananda as a *samnyasi*, for example, Sturdy (cf. Burke 1985:339f.; and Sil 1997:92, 163 on Swami Kripananda).

The development of formal Vedantic organizations superimposed affiliations to groups under presidents and swamis-in-charge upon highly personal relationships with Vivekananda (cf. Jackson 1994:55f.). Having exercised some influence over the direction of Vivekananda's mission through their financial backing and social connections, patrons like Leggett and Muller perhaps came to realize that the organization, if not their individual relationships with Vivekananda, was heading in a direction that they could not follow as it became a highly distinctive, modern Hindu movement. This did not preclude enduring loyalty to Vivekananda, anticipating the importance of the intensely personal bond between guru and follower in the later American Vedanta movement (Veysey 1978:214). Josephine McLeod, for example, defended Vivekananda from the defectors' charges with the same vigour as Sister Nivedita. Even after the difficulties in New York, she remained close to Belur Math and the centre in Hollywood run by Swami Prabhavananda.

Every bit as striking as the dramatic and often public defections from the embryonic Vedanta centres in the West is the number of supporters who appeared to stop short of identifying themselves unreservedly with the core of Vivekananda's religious philosophy, or, according to Sil (1997:163), "resisted" discipleship. In New York, several of Vivekananda's intimate and long-standing supporters did not receive initiation of any kind, and there is no evidence that this was ever a thwarted personal ambition. Josephine McLeod consistently stated that she was Vivekananda's friend, not his disciple (Amiya 1950:28). Perhaps her declaration that the essential appeal of Vivekananda's philosophy was that it ". . . favored rather than denied the mission of Christ, and left Christians better Christians. . ." gives a clue as to the kinds of limits that some individuals set upon their personal involvement with Vedanta, and the different ways in which Vivekananda's devotees ac-

commodated his philosophy. Such personal limits may explain to some extent the painful defections of Henrietta Muller and Mrs Ashton Jonson, and their respective biting criticisms of Sister Nivedita's willingness to defend Kali-worship in Calcutta and "worship at Swami's feet" (see Beckerlegge 2000:196f.).

Henrietta Muller's withdrawal from the British Vedanta scene has been viewed within the Ramakrishna movement as the result of pique, but this ignores her consistently stated feminist and personal religious principles, which she characterised as "Christian Theosophy" (Beckerlegge 2000:180ff.). To say that she "returned" to Christianity on distancing herself from Vivekananda's circle begs the question of the extent to which she ever ceased to be, in her terms, a "Christian Theosophist." Even though Muller publicly rejected the Ramakrishna movement, her abiding conviction that Christianity revealed the common, cosmic truth behind all religions was broadly in line with the beliefs of many members of the early Vedanta groups in the United States and London, although not all of these would have identified with her Theosophical outlook. In spite of falling outside "main-stream Christianity," few would have felt compelled by their universalist beliefs to cut their ties to Christianity. Even Sister Nivedita, who only severed her formal connection with the Ramakrishna movement after Vivekananda's death because she refused to abide by its declared principle of political neutrality, stated in 1902 that "I have never broken with my position as a member of the Church of England nor is there any reason why I should do so," adding that she was not a Theosophist (Basu and Ghosh 1969:283; cf. an interview in 1900 reported in Burke 1987:289). Recalling the days she spent with Swami Ramakrishnananda at Madras between 1907 and 1909, Sister Devamata (1975:58) emphasised that "He was always careful to make plain that I had not changed my form of faith. Almost invariably he introduced me with the words: 'This is our Christian Sister.' He believed in the practice of religion, not in conversion."

It has been claimed that the influence of western ideas upon Vivekananda's beliefs constitute an example of ". . . elective affinities, rather than of imitation," where convergences are sought and exploited in or-

der to bolster existing principles or projects (Gupta 1974:34). Several of Vivekananda's closest and most important followers appear to have handled his philosophy in a similar way, incorporating modified elements of it within their existing worldviews (for example, denominational Christianity, Christian Science, Theosophy etc.) rather than necessarily accepting it in its entirety. These responses represent different reactions to one element within the far-reaching processes commonly held to characterise "globalization." This capacity evinced by Vivekananda's early followers, who in many cases were drawn from higher socio-economic groups, was undoubtedly facilitated by their educational attainments. The fact that more recent members of the Ramakrishna movement in the West have continued to respond to Vivekananda's challenge in this manner may similarly be a consequence of the way in which the movement has continued to appeal largely to older, relatively affluent and well educated followers (see French 1974:171f.; Carey 1987:136f.; Whitworth and Shiels 1982:167).

Vivekananda's "Glocal" Religion and "Imported Localism"

Beckford (2003:104, cf. 125ff.) has argued that it is ". . . unquestionably helpful to 'think with' the notion of globalisation, provided that the concept's limitations are kept in mind." For example, any reference to "globalization" begs the questions of its relationship to modernization and, as in the case of modernization, how far back the historical roots of this process should be traced. The periodization offered in response to these questions would appear to set clear limits on the categories of religious phenomena to which theories of globalization could be applied. As Beckford (2003:110) has pointed out, however, ". . . notions of globality have long been a feature of many faith traditions. . . ." Many of the most widespread "missionary" religions, moreover, have a long history of transplanting their teachings into new cultural settings by translating them into new cultural forms.

The evolution of a universal religion not bound to one authoritative form of cultural expression could be regarded as a predictable manifestation of the process of globalization and its effects upon systems

of belief. As we have seen, this view has been adopted within the Ramakrishna movement. Consequently, it might be assumed that the growth during the 20th century and subsequently of a global religious network like the Ramakrishna movement would particularly lend itself to explanation in terms of pressures generated by globalization, stimulating a reassertion of the local ("localization"), whether in terms of social/national identity, general cultural preference or in matters of religious belief and practice.[7]

The ideal of a universal religion promoted by Vivekananda not only differed from the ideals and goals that provided the dynamism behind the expansion of longer established "missionary" religions but also, as we shall see, marked a break with earlier expressions of Hinduism. For these reasons, closer examination of the growth of the Ramakrishna movement in the United States and London will test the usefulness of insights and explanatory concepts generated by the critical debate surrounding "globalization," suggesting a need to modify the way in which the relationship between "globalization" and "localization" has been commonly delineated.

The claim that Swami Vivekananda offered his followers a "universal religion" did not stem simply from the aspiration, found in certain earlier religions, that there should be no cultural or social bar to their worldwide expansion. Vivekananda's "universal religion" would ". . . have no location in place or time; which will be infinite like the God it will preach . . ., which will not be Brahmanic or Buddhistic, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development . . ., which will recognise divinity in every man and woman. . ." (Vivekananda 1989, 1:19). Anticipating a religion that would not be linked to "place or time," Vivekananda was convinced that diversity of belief and practice would continue but would come to be understood as the consequence of temperamental, cultural and historical factors, each being ". . . true as far as it goes" (1989, 2:383).

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[7] Compare, for example, Schaefer's (2002) study of Pentecostalism.

Vivekananda's advocacy of the timeliness of deriving principles of a universal religion from Advaita Vedanta has undoubtedly contributed to "... a distinctive approach to religious plurality [that] has been associated with Hinduism..." since 1893 (Sharma 1979:59). Hacker has asserted, however, that Vivekananda and other Neo-Hindu thinkers merely exploited the same "inclusivism" found within traditional Hinduism and that this was essentially different from tolerance (see Halbfass 1995:245).[8] Throughout its history, Hinduism has indeed shown a capacity to assimilate regional traditions. It has permitted the maintenance of fuzzy boundaries both between its different schools of thought and, at a popular level, between it and other religions such as Sikhism and even Islam, absorbing "... aspects of other religions without feeling the need to acknowledge their existence" (Smith 2003:34; cf. Copley 1997:57). Ramakrishna, Vivekananda's own guru, regularly affirmed the validity of different spiritual paths. It is important, however, to distinguish between this pattern and the new undertaking by those nineteenth-century, Hindu intellectuals who, being more fully exposed to global religious pluralism, felt drawn into a dialogue with representatives of European religious thinking (Copley 1997:57; cf. Young 1981:13). Vivekananda, in an unprecedented manner, created a modern organization that utilised certain resources from the Hindu tradition to invite both Hindus and those not born into Hinduism to participate in what he presented to them as a universal religion. The question of the extent to which his universal religion was other than a reinterpretation of Hinduism is one to which we shall return in the latter part of this article.

Vivekananda's redefinition of the Indian system of Vedanta in terms of more general emphases that would strike chords across cultural and religious boundaries may legitimately be said to represent a degree of strategic, "glocal" tweaking of received Hindu tradition (from "glocalization," the provision within global marketing for the marketing of difference according to local taste; see Robertson 1992:173f.). This

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[8] Hacker's theory of "inclusivism" and its relationship to Hacker's Christian position are discussed in Halbfass 1995:10ff., 244ff.

ploy may be compared with those acknowledged within the doctrinal frameworks of religious traditions with histories of missionary activity and expansion, although clearly this was a novel departure within the Hindu tradition.

When expounding his ideal of a universal religion, Vivekananda (1989, 1:17) frequently pointed to the acceptance of diversity within Hinduism, to its recognition that "... all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realise the Infinite...." Sceptical of the rationality of belief in a personal God, he asserted the superiority of belief in an impersonal reality on the grounds that it alone can be infinite and can include the sum of personal understandings. The Impersonal, therefore, is "our highest generalisation" (1989, 2:334). He presented his argument that one must proceed from the particular to the highest possible level of generalization and explain the particular in terms of the general as consistent with modern science and in accord with rationality (1989, 2:329, cf. 334–37). Sharma (1978:135) has noted that Advaitins in the tradition of Shankara had long recognised that to speak of the Ultimate as "formless" is a "mere formulation" of what can only be experienced. Advaita, according to Sharma, "... shares Hindu plurality, it does not supervise it" (1978:135). Vivekananda did not hesitate to affirm the superiority of the monistic position over the personalist stance while maintaining that the personalist stance is not lost or destroyed but is included within and explained by the higher level of generalization offered by monism. It was to Vedanta that Vivekananda referred, and not the religion denoted by the term "Hinduism."

Vedanta represented for Vivekananda the highest insight of Hinduism and the clearest anticipation to date of the universal religion. In nineteenth-century Bengal, Vedanta was widely held to be synonymous with Advaita, and, by 1896, Vivekananda had come to identify "Vedantist" with "Hindu." The elasticity in the usage of "Vedanta," "Advaita," and "Hindu" served Vivekananda's purpose when he turned to a non-dualist form of Vedanta as the "highest generalisation" of religious metaphysics and ethics. When speaking of Advaita/Vedanta in this vein, Vivekananda was prepared to reduce the complexities of this

long-established Hindu philosophical tradition to a very generalized level of meaning. Its secret was, "Believe in yourself first, and then believe in anything else" (Vivekananda 1989, 3:426). In a letter to Sturdy, he warned against inflicting "jaw-breaking Sanskrit terms and technicalities" upon western readers (1989, 7:490; cf. Jackson 1994:64). Vivekananda was similarly responsible for shaping a representation of Ramakrishna for western consumption, which detached Ramakrishna from his moorings in popular religion in Bengal, and instead highlighted more universal themes in Ramakrishna's teaching within the framework of Vivekananda's version of Advaita.

Vivekananda did not lace his own teaching with justifications taken from Ramakrishna's life and discourses, repeatedly reminding his brother-disciples that they should preach the principle, not the person (for example, 1989, 5:227; 6:274, 310). The emergent "universal religion" that Vivekananda presented to his western audiences, nevertheless, was one that appealed to Hindu textual authorities (particularly the *Bhagavad Gita* and Upanishads) and Hindu exemplars (including Chaitanya and Krishna), as well as to reason and current notions of evolution and social progress. But, as the proponent of a universal religion that claimed to be the "sum total" of beliefs and not simply a brand of Hinduism, Vivekananda opened up the possibility that his hearers, already sympathetic to the universalism of his message, might test both his teaching and conduct within the terms of their existing personal philosophies. Consequently, Vivekananda's mission provoked markedly different "localized" responses. This was the result in part of the bringing together of individuals and groups with very varied expectations, and in part of the difficulties in promoting a religion centred upon the universal and "formless" transcending cultural particularities.

Vivekananda's earliest followers on both sides of the Atlantic can be differentiated according to the extent to which they shared not merely a commitment to promoting a universal religion but also identified with their teacher's Hindu background and plans for India. His most enduring followers were those who accepted initiation as his disciples, in some cases adopting Hindu-inspired religious names/titles (for example, Laura Glenn [Sister Devamata], Ellen Waldo [Haridasi], Christina

Greenstidel [Sister Christine], Margaret Noble [Sister Nivedita], probably the Seviers), those who spent extended periods with him in India (several of the above and other American followers such as Josephine McLeod and Sara Bull), and those who resettled in India (the Seviers, Sister Nivedita). It is evident, nevertheless, that even these enthusiasts valued and responded to this connection to India and things Hindu in different ways. Ellen Waldo [Haridasi] declared that, in spite of her close association with Vivekananda, ". . . the idea of renunciation never once occurred to me. Nor did I ever think seriously of following him to India" (Devamata 1932:242). On the other hand, some followers, notably Margaret Noble, once in India were complicit in Vivekananda's intention of "Hinduizing" or "Indianizing" their outlook (His Eastern and Western Disciples 1989, 2:325, 337). Then there were close followers who appear not to have sought or to have resisted initiation, while one at least was refused *brahmacharya* (Henrietta Muller). A small minority claimed sufficient familiarity with Hindu tradition to criticise Vivekananda's conduct as a Hindu *samnyasi* against criteria they judged to be appropriate to this role. Finally, there were those who distanced themselves from Vivekananda and his movement.

Not all the disciples who identified with the Indian dimension of Vivekananda's work remained committed to him. Both Henrietta Muller and Sturdy had travelled in India prior to meeting Vivekananda. By the time Muller joined Vivekananda and other western disciples in India in 1897/98, however, Vivekananda had rejected her plea to take up the discipline of *brahmacharya*, and her relations with the group as a whole had soured to the extent that she travelled separately. She was on the brink of announcing the end of her association with the Ramakrishna movement. Her direct experience of India had made her highly critical of popular Hindu practice, and she gave the need for reform as the public reason for her separation from Vivekananda and "return" to Christianity. Having married just prior to his association with Vivekananda, Sturdy had bound himself to the life of the householder, bitterly observing, "Many things have come too late for me in this incarnation" (quoted in Burke 1985:217).

The reason for the seeming need to foster an attachment to India and forms of Hindu religious practice in the pursuit of a universal religion is not immediately clear. Something of the challenge facing Vivekananda in the West as the organizer of a religious movement, however, is illustrated by a discussion with Sturdy in which, contrary to his customary stance, Vivekananda considered devising a collective ritual of worship in order to meet the expectations of potential followers. On this occasion, it was Vivekananda who had to be dissuaded from this idea (Vivekananda 1989, 8:356f.; cf. Burke 1985:254ff., 306f.). As Vivekananda's not altogether successful attempt at preventing the worship of Ramakrishna at Advaita Ashrama (dedicated to non-dualist ideals) illustrates, members of both the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in India and the West have shown a consistent desire to perform rituals of worship derived from established Hindu models, including chanting of texts and the distribution of *prasada* (Beckerlegge 2000:123f.; cf. Cooke 1966:23; Jackson, 1994:103f.; Miller and Wertz 1976:136; Whitworth and Shiels 1982:165). The association of the movement's origins with Bengal inevitably has permeated to some extent the cultic activities of its Indian centres, but not to the exclusion of the celebration of festivals and great personalities associated with other regions of India and marking certain major festivals of other religions. For those not born into Hinduism, the compelling attraction of a previously unfamiliar form of ritual may stem not so much from its character as a *Hindu* practice but as a means through which to pass through the liminal state of adopting a new world-view. The very unfamiliarity of the ritual may give rise to a state of heightened self-consciousness, in contrast to the routine performance of more familiar rituals, which is no less beneficial to those taking up Vedanta. Similar points might be made about other aspects of the external organization and practice of Vedanta societies in the West.

Vivekananda had to manage his western audiences' expectations. He was determined not to delegate responsibility for the work in India to his western disciples, but he did speak of his intention of initiating some from their number to place in authority over his

supporters in the West. Some of these followers, however, were disappointed on finding Vivekananda's place filled by Kripananda (Burke 1985:466f.). In London, Abhedananda had more problems than Vivekananda in maintaining large audiences. Yet, Abhedananda's removal to New York proved to be a blow to the English wing of the movement whose members were thrown upon their own resources, no longer having a direct disciple of Ramakrishna as a spiritual leader. Sympathisers in both the United States and London looked to India and swamis who were the direct disciples of Ramakrishna, and pre-eminently Vivekananda, as authority-figures. To this day, the movement continues to place Indian *samnyasi*s, trained at Belur Math, in charge of its centres.

During the early phase of the movement's development in both the United States and England, we have seen that a significant number of followers *were* anxious to maintain the distinction between Hinduism and the universal religion dubbed "Vedanta." On finding either that it was not possible to do so or that the movement's direction was blurring this distinction, some distanced themselves from the movement. Perhaps for them, Vedanta was never more than a useful portmanteau in which to place universalistic religious sympathies that previously lacked a name. Even more recently, individuals training in Britain for admission to the Ramakrishna Math have been keenly aware of a tension between "the Mission's ideal of religious harmony and universalism" and its "cultural tradition" (Carey 1987:141). Like some of Vivekananda's earliest American followers, these more recent trainees have spoken of their deep attachment to Christian values and western monasticism. Having entered the Mission to expand their vision, they were troubled by their encounter with "the Hindu cult trappings of the Order" or "the devotional aspects of Hinduism" (Carey, 1987: 142f.). Commenting on the American movement, Jackson (1994:74) concludes that ". . . thousands of Americans have joined the Vedanta societies since 1893, in the process abandoning Christianity for a modern form of Hinduism. Despite all protestations, the swamis appear

to work as missionaries of Hinduism in the West."[9] McDermott (Un-published: 2–4) has described tensions resulting from the "new Indi-anization" of the Vedanta movement in America, which followed the increased migration of Indian families to America after 1965. She has referred to the lid being taken off the "bubbling cauldron of discon-tent" by a fierce debate between those ". . . calling for a revitalization of Swami Vivekananda's original vision for a truly Western Vedanta," and those who have pressed for Hindu food, music and ritual and who have been more accustomed to the style of relationship between devo-tees and swamis found in India.

On the other hand, although seemingly offered the universal reli-gion of Vedanta as distinct from Hinduism, many of Vivekananda's earliest and most devoted western disciples and their successors ei-ther have chosen to ignore this distinction, or finding it meaningless in practice have been untroubled by this. This tendency might be termed "imported localism"; i.e. a self-imposed "Hinduizing" distinct from "localization," the reassertion of immediately local markers of identity (whether, for example, Christian, Christian Scientist or Theosophical), Vivekananda's "glocal" version of Vedanta as the universal religion, and his "Indianizing" of Nivedita in India. This relocation of selective elements of Hindu religion and Indian culture was largely mediated by Vivekananda in his role as transnational actor. It has given rise to expressions of Hinduism that are different from both earlier forms of popular religious activity in India and Vivekananda's "glocal" philos-ophy of Vedanta. The development in the West of a cult centred upon Ramakrishna and the use of Hindu ritual forms and artefacts, which were not central to Vivekananda's philosophy, and the maintenance of close links with the movement's Indian centres are examples of the persistence of this "imported localism." While the continued, exclusive appointment of Indian *samnyasi*s as leaders of the movement's centres may reflect an engrained sense of "cultural tradition," it also matches the expectations of a significant number of western followers.

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[9] Contact with Vedanta has also led some to view Christianity in a new and positive light. See Jackson 1994:101; Gurudas 1919:163, 183ff.

Conclusion

The introduction of the term "imported localism" to describe the "Hinduization" so eagerly sought or accepted by many of the most prominent of Vivekananda's early followers in the United States and London inevitably begs the question of what Vivekananda himself intended, and more specifically whether his promotion of the universal religion of Vedanta was ever more than a device to be deployed against the West as part of a Hindu apologetic, while he acted to encourage "imported localism."[10] His western devotees repeat his assertion that he had come to make them better Christians, not Hindus (for example, Atulananda 1970:259, 264; cf. Vivekananda 1989, 3:501; Swami Ashokananda, quoted in McDermott, Unpublished: 7). Whatever Vivekananda's motives might have been, his affirmation that diversity of religious belief and practice was nothing more than a consequence of temperamental, cultural and historical factors, and thus only ". . . true as far as it goes" (1989, 3:383), should have provided no inducement to take up previously unfamiliar and culturally alien forms of religious practice in pursuit of the universal religion.

Forsthoefel (2002:114) has argued that Shankara's system of Advaita combined ". . . a theoretical universalism and a fundamental internalism, but heavy doses of externalism as well." He suggests that a "radical form of Advaita," which relies more consistently upon an internalist epistemology based on reason and religious experience, ". . . may be properly universalist." He finds this in the thinking of Ramana Maharshi in a form of Vedanta that ". . . transcends . . . the social and cultural settings of South Asia," while discerning a similar universalism in Vivekananda's philosophy (Forsthoefel 2002:154f.). Our study of the early phase of the Vedanta movement in the West suggests the need to qualify Forsthoefel's judgement on the extent to

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[10] For fuller discussion of this, see Beckerlegge (forthcoming). See also Basu 2002:67ff., who argues, citing Nivedita, that Vivekananda's "universalisation of Hinduism," based on "the Advaita principles of Universalism," formed part of his nationalist endeavours.

which Vivekananda's system reduced dependence upon an external-ist epistemology shaped by Hindu forms of knowledge and practice, whether related to texts, forms of worship or the disciplines of spiritual training. Vivekananda's championing of India and its "mother of religions," while proposing that Vedanta could provide the foundations of a universal religion in the West, limited the extent to which he was able to rely more exclusively upon the kind of internalist epistemology that Forsthoefel (2002:114) argues would be more in harmony with the "theoretical universalism" of early Advaita. A legacy of these two aspects of Vivekananda's role as a transnational actor is arguably the tension that continues to the present-day between the Ramakrishna movement's ideal of religious universalism and its "cultural tradition" (Carey 1987:141).

As long as the search for a universal religion is tinged by some degree of conscious rejection of the "local" religion, it is likely that individuals will respond warmly to the form of the system that appears to hold out the possibility of realising a more comprehensive vision, even when its mediator appears not to require this of them. The adoption of previously unfamiliar rituals, this article has suggested, might assist in strengthening the individual's identification with a new world-view as well as providing a measure of confirmation of its "universalism." Consequently, "imported localism" is likely to continue to be a characteristic of what aspires to be a global, universal religion. This may not be an exclusive characteristic of enterprises centred upon the ideal of a universal religion, although it is likely to be more pronounced in such instances because of their inherent claims. Distinguishing between "glocalization," "localization" in its broader sense, and "imported localism," therefore, may assist in the analysis of the transplantation of religions more generally.

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