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# A Religion “Based Upon Principles, And Not Upon Persons”: The Heart of the “Strategic Fit” of Swami Vivekananda’s Promotion of Vedānta?

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**Abstract** Adapting the SWOT matrix used in the study of the effectiveness of organizations, this article employs the notion of “strategic fit” to examine reasons frequently put forward to explain the positive reception of Swami Vivekananda’s message by sympathizers during his visits to the United States and England. The article suggests that Vivekananda maximized the strategic fit of his message by addressing prominent Christian theological concerns of the day, which would have impinged on many in his circle who retained their Christian identity. It is argued that, by recasting these concerns within the framework of his understanding of Vedānta, Vivekananda loosened, if not completely untied, the theological moorings of the religious way of thinking of his audience, as exemplified by his invitation that each person should accept Ramakrishna “in your own light” and his emphasis on the “most intensely impersonal” nature of the religion he offered. The article concludes that Vivekananda’s insistence on the “impersonal nature” of the religion he promoted, and the fluid interface between Hindu arguments and his idea of a universal religion, arguably left contentious questions for later generations of devotees to resolve.

**Keywords** Swami Vivekananda · Ramakrishna Math and Mission · Vedanta Societies · strategic fit · transplanting of Vedānta · Transcendentalism · Christianity

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## Introduction: Strategic Fit

There is little question that Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) journeyed to Chicago in 1893 primarily to use the World’s Parliament of Religions as a platform from which to seek financial support for his plan to lift material and spiritual conditions in India.<sup>1</sup> His letters record that he experienced a moment of self-doubt in 1893 (for which he subsequently apologized, *CW* 5: 19) prior to his personal triumph at the Parliament of Religions. It was then, it seems, that he first entertained the possibility of traveling to England en route back to India, regarding this as his last chance to revive his planned project, which was in danger of stalling because of lack of financial support (*CW* 5: 18–19). Having been unable to secure the funding he had hoped at the Parliament, after it had ended Vivekananda accepted an invitation to make a lecture tour of America, similarly hoping to raise money for his India project. After approximately eighteen months, Vivekananda parted company with the lecture bureau convinced he had been cheated by its organizer. It was through this extended interaction with American audiences, however, that Vivekananda came to realize there was a potential audience with a serious interest in his teaching to be reached in the West,<sup>2</sup> and that he would be able to arrange his own lectures and classes, many in response to invitations. By August 1894, Vivekananda was referring to the United States as “a great field for my work,” declaring that everything achieved there “prepares the way for my coming work in England,” which he first visited in 1895 (*CW* 5: 42). He did not return to India until 1897 and journeyed again to the West in 1899.

The number of those who embraced Vivekananda’s teaching of Vedānta during his time in the West was modest, but to have brought about *at that time* what would later prove to be a durable transplanting of Vedānta was remarkable, especially when it would unavoidably have involved engaging directly with the predominantly Christian populations of the United States and England, as Vivekananda himself recognized (*CW* 5:12). Yet, it was arguably the decision itself that was the more remarkable, given the obstacles Vivekananda would have been likely to meet.<sup>3</sup> To aid the examination of the reasons that have been put forward to account for the positive reception of Vivekananda’s message, and the way in which he tailored his message, I shall draw on the SWOT matrix and the notion of “strategic fit.” The SWOT matrix, which examines Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats,<sup>4</sup> has been widely used by businesses and organizations to test the extent to which their internal environment matches the external environment—the degree

<sup>1</sup> See *CW* 6: 254–55. Throughout this article, citations to Vivekananda’s *Complete Works* follow this format: *CW* volume number: page number.

<sup>2</sup> The article adopts Vivekananda’s use of the terms “West” and “Westerner” when referring geographically to England, Europe, and North America. I refer to England, rather than Britain or the British Isles, because Vivekananda concentrated his efforts in London and the surrounding region.

<sup>3</sup> On the problems experienced by the New York Center, see Jackson (1994), and on the more protracted difficulties in England, see Gambhirananda (1983: 259) and Beckerlegge (2000, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> When these four terms are used in this article in relation to the SWOT matrix, they will be given in italics.

of strategic fit.<sup>5</sup> Maximizing strategic fit, by enhancing *strengths* and addressing *weaknesses* (internal to the organization), it is held, enables an organization to respond best to *opportunities* and *threats* (external to the organization).

There are, of course, evident differences between the contemporary world of business and Vivekananda’s mission. Not least, as a *saṃnyāsīn* he was dependent on devotees and supporters for financial help, as in the case of his journeys to the United States and England. This severely limited the extent to which he could make even short-term decisions, let alone the longer-term, sequential decisions normally associated with a “strategy.” Both Vivekananda, it is said, and his devotees viewed events as falling within a divine economy, “the will of the Lord,” rather than being shaped by human forward planning.<sup>6</sup> To say this is not to deny that Vivekananda was prepared to engage in such planning as, for example, when giving form to the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission on his return to India. Unlike a more conventional use of the SWOT matrix, my analysis centers, not on an established organization as might be expected, but on one seminal figure. There would be little to be learned from applying the SWOT matrix rigidly to the institution with which Vivekananda is most closely associated, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, as its creation took place after his return to India in 1897. The limited human and material resources of its early years would almost inevitably count as a *weakness* in SWOT terms.

Despite the differences between the nature of Vivekananda’s mission and the concerns of the worlds of business, administration, and management, I have drawn on and adapted aspects of the SWOT matrix because an analysis of the obstacles to success and the reasons for success relating to Vivekananda’s decision to plant Vedānta in the West at the end of the nineteenth century would arguably cover similar, if not the same, variables as those considered in this matrix. Also, although Vivekananda was not involved in a commercial enterprise, he was offering a “product,” in his case teaching and a new worldview, to a new market and attempting to establish a long-term organizational presence in the West. The United States and England, however, were two highly competitive “marketplaces” where there were long-established and influential Christian denominations, not least an established church in England. The impact of secular critiques of religion, and particularly of Christianity, on the reading publics in these countries during the nineteenth century could be viewed as signaling the presence of new and rather different competitors in the marketplace, which would prove destructive of old certainties concerning religion for a significant number of people.<sup>7</sup>

In my occasional, earlier contributions to the study of Vedānta in the West, I have written about the growth of Vedānta in both the United States and England

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Sammut-Bonnici and Galea 2014.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *His Eastern and Western Disciples* (1989, 1: 402, 412) on Vivekananda’s chance meetings with Katherine Sanborn and Mrs. George Hale when he needed accommodation and accreditation to speak at the Parliament of Religions; compare pages 470–71.

<sup>7</sup> The diffusion of secular critiques of religion among the urban, working class is illustrated by the Unitarian minister William Binns’ description of the attendance of workers and their families at a large open-air meeting in Yorkshire to listen to “metropolitan speakers” (Bartholomew 1988: 172–73), which was published in 1862 in the *Westminster Review* (see also Moore 1988: 370–82).

(Beckerlegge 2004) but have concentrated on England (2000) and more recently on Europe (2020). Accordingly, I shall focus more closely on England in this article, although the chronology of Vivekananda's career will require me on occasion to develop my discussion with reference to the United States. In the next section, I shall explore *opportunities* and *threats* as interwoven characteristics of the "ambivalent" environment in which Vivekananda conducted his mission, rather than as separate elements as they appear in the SWOT matrix.

## An External Environment Characterized by Ambivalence

It is not uncommon to find two emphases in explanations of the positive aspects of Vivekananda's reception in the United States and England. The first emphasis points to *opportunities* in what otherwise might have been, at best, an indifferent and, at worst, a hostile environment. These were created by existing, sympathetic currents of thought and by individual supporters, including prominent thinkers and eminent scholars, some of whom identified themselves with these outlooks. The second emphasis characterizes more generally the populations in the West with whom Vivekananda would interact as ripe to respond to his message because it spoke to an unfulfilled spiritual need, thus creating *opportunities* to propagate the message of Vedānta among receptive audiences. I have endorsed these broad approaches to varying degrees in previous publications. In this article, extending an argument in a conference paper (later published Beckerlegge 2014), I have set out to reconsider the way in which Vivekananda's mission in the West has frequently been contextualized.

Unlike earlier studies that have focused mainly on individuals and currents of thought in the West sympathetic to Vivekananda, I argue in this article that closer attention needs to be paid to popular attitudes to organized religion in the United States and England at that time in order to understand more adequately the challenges that faced Vivekananda in these settings and the strategy he adopted. In the process, I bring to the fore the way in which Vivekananda engaged not just with the perception that the Christianity of the churches was exclusivist and intolerant. This was certainly, as we shall see, a view shared by several of his admirers and has often been emphasized in earlier explanations of how Vivekananda succeeded in gathering followers in the West at that time. I suggest that this emphasis has encouraged an unrealistic appreciation of the nature and degree of spirituality in the West, which I identified in the earlier publication cited above as arguably a factor that has hampered the continuing work of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission in the West.<sup>8</sup> I argue in this present article that it was the way in which Vivekananda engaged with a range of Christian theological issues, the same issues that are frequently mentioned in studies of growing disenchantment with Christian teaching during this period, which enabled Vivekananda to present Vedānta as of relevance to audiences as yet largely unfamiliar with Hindu thought. These audiences comprised some who had turned their backs on Christianity and others who,

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<sup>8</sup> See Beckerlegge 2014: 67–77.

although maintaining an allegiance to Christianity, were searching for a more generous interpretation of Christian teaching than that offered by their own church.

In the United States, the role of preparer of the ground in which Vivekananda would sow his Vedāntic seeds has frequently been ascribed to New England Transcendentalism,<sup>9</sup> more particularly to its most well-known representative Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82), and others associated with Transcendentalism, including later sympathizers who interacted directly with Vivekananda. Rejection of conventional Christian religiosity was one of the hallmarks of those associated with the so-called Transcendentalist Club.<sup>10</sup> Transcendentalists and “Emersonians” made a point of attending Vivekananda’s addresses at the Parliament of Religions, and Vivekananda later spoke at the Free Religious Association founded by Emerson.

Carl T. Jackson acknowledges, while stressing the importance of prominent Unitarians in the “American discovery of Asian religion,” that “[Transcendentalists] may be judged the most illustrious early Americans to view the Asian Religions in a positive light,” and thus to have contributed to Americans becoming “much more aware of and sympathetic toward the Asian religions” by the eighteen-nineties (1994: 9). A “push” factor behind growing American interest in Asian traditions, according to Jackson (1994: 14), was these traditions’ resurgence in their historic homelands and a new confidence that inspired teachers and movements to carry their message to the West. A “pull” factor was the spiritual crisis in the United States associated with the Gilded Age, a period of rapid economic growth and industrialization around 1870–1900. Emerson declared in “Worship,” first published in a collection of essays in 1860, “Tis a whole population of gentlemen and ladies out in search of religions” (Emerson 1895: 401). It might be thought that he was referring to an expanding religious pluralism that possibly embraced Indian traditions. He was, in fact, referring primarily to the declining confidence in a range of familiar religious positions, including Calvinism, which had previously been dominant in New England.

The early Unitarians, according to Winthrop. S. Hudson (1965: 161), asserted their right to hold an optimistic view of human nature, partly in reaction to the perceived pessimism of Calvinism. By way of illustration, Hudson refers to the affirmation by W. E. Channing, the prominent Unitarian preacher and theologian, of the essential sameness between God and “man.” For Channing, Jesus’ significance was that of a moral leader, enticing individuals to divine perfection. Boston, where Unitarianism took root in the United States, has been described as “liberal before it became Unitarian, and its Unitarianism was primarily ethical and social” (Haroutunian 1932: 179–80). Boston was where Vivekananda sought lodgings on arrival in the United States and where he first established contacts with American intellectuals, some of whom would become his supporters. One expression of New England’s liberalism was the gathering in 1836 of what came to be known as the

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Jackson 1994: 9.

<sup>10</sup> For example, “Spiritual Laws” in Emerson 1895: 30–31.

Transcendentalist Club. Transcendentalism reached the height of its influence in the years around the eighteen-seventies.<sup>11</sup>

The *Boston Evening Transcript* of August 13, 1894, observed that “Emerson and...all of the old Concord [where Emerson lived] set would have enjoyed sitting out under the stars to listen while the Hindu Vivekananda rolled forth the solemn poetry of the Vedas” (cited in Burke 1994: 151). This romanticized image reflects Emerson’s often reported disclosures that he “read the Vedas” (letter to S. G. Ward, 1840, cited in Christy 1928: 45) and that “I only worship Eternal Buddha in the retirements and intermissions of Brahma” (letter to Thomas Carlyle, 1840, cited in Christy 1963: ix). When read in isolation, these statements conceal Emerson’s profoundly ambivalent feelings about Hindu tradition and India. Twenty years prior to that in 1821 while at Harvard, Emerson had written the poem “Indian Superstition,” in which he declared “Dishonoured India clanks her sullen chain,” describing India as a “dark land” where “fiends resort” and “Superstition” holds court (Emerson 1954: 49). This negative dimension of Emerson’s appreciation of the Hindu tradition resurfaces in the same letter of 1840 to Ward, referred to above, in which Emerson went on to state “nothing is easier than to separate what must have been the primeval inspiration from the endless ceremonial nonsense which caricatures and contradicts it through every chapter.”

Like other prominent nineteenth-century enthusiasts about the Veda, and more particularly the Upaniṣads, Emerson was drawn to Hindu sources that chimed with his own idealism, rather than to the realities of Hindu practice and belief. Emerson’s construction of “Indian superstition” and his highly selective engagement with Hindu tradition were undoubtedly influenced by his reading during the period prior to and around the time he was writing “Indian Superstition”<sup>12</sup> and subsequently. This included several lurid articles in popular journals, including the *Quarterly Review* and the *Edinburgh Review*, in which reviewers in their references to India frequently looked back to a Vedic past age but did not hesitate to dismiss the Hinduism of their day as false, idolatrous, and corrupted by vice.

We find a similar ambivalence expressed by the Oxford-based scholar Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900). Müller evidently sensed an affinity between his own views and those of Emerson, saluting Emerson as his American *guru* on Emerson’s birthday. Like Emerson, Müller never visited India, harked back to a distant Vedic golden age, and held India and Hindu practice and belief at arm’s length, working from a distance for reform in India. By playing host to Vivekananda in Oxford and being one of the first to take a scholarly interest in Vivekananda’s *guru* Ramakrishna (1836–86), Müller, as an internationally recognized philologist and translator of Hindu texts, could be said to have lent credibility to this then-barely known Hindu teacher and his disciple.

Müller is renowned for his affirmation late in life that he knew of no better preparation for death than the philosophy of Vedānta (cited in Beckerlegge 2000:

<sup>11</sup> See Stark 2017: 129.

<sup>12</sup> See Kenneth Walter Cameron’s commentary in Emerson 1954: 55–63.

17). Vivekananda, however, noted in 1895, “Prof. Max Müller in all his writings on the Hindu religion adds in the last a derogatory remark” (*CW* 8: 337).<sup>13</sup> Despite acknowledging Ramakrishna’s originality and that he was a “Real Mahātman” (not an imposter), Müller held it would not be desirable that the “Samnyāsins of India” should “ever find followers or imitators in Europe” (1898: 1, vi). In fact, Müller was interested in Ramakrishna partly because Müller believed Ramakrishna could bring about the very changes Müller sought in India. Vivekananda was clearly aware of the limits of Müller’s sympathy. Having agreed to assist Müller in completing his more comprehensive study of Ramakrishna (Müller 1898), Vivekananda was careful to advise those responsible for providing Müller with additional sources: “We must take care to present only the universal aspect of his [Ramakrishna’s] teaching” (*CW* 6: 364). A similar awareness might have lain behind Vivekananda’s realization that, in the climate of that time, to foster support for his planned project in India from the platform provided by the Parliament of Religions, he would need to offer a powerful apologia for “Hinduism,” a concept he helped to shape in the process.

Just as not all Transcendentalists were sympathetic to Asian thought (Jackson 1994: 9), a significant number of Vivekananda’s early sympathizers in both the United States and England were drawn more to the universalist strand of Vivekananda’s message than to its explicitly Hindu aspects and Vivekananda’s commitment to the plight of the oppressed in India.<sup>14</sup> Reading publics in the United States and England would have been exposed to the same negative images of India and Hinduism that Emerson imbibed from popular reviews and current literature. Christian missionary groups were similarly prejudicial in their representations of India in the interests of fundraising. There was no popular nineteenth-century publication that extolled the virtues of the Hindu tradition and its adherents in the way that Edwin Arnold packaged the Buddha for the Western world in his poem, *The Light of Asia* (1879).

Individual, influential supporters who aided Vivekananda by opening doors for him, permitting their reputations to further his cause, and taking an interest in Asian spiritualities created *opportunities* for him. The not uncommon ambivalence about India and Hinduism expressed even by some of those closely involved with Vivekananda, and the different boundaries they placed around the extent to which they were prepared to commit themselves to Vivekananda’s vision for India and to accept his teaching, might justifiably be viewed as constituting a *threat* to his mission, as proved to be the case in London.<sup>15</sup>

The other frequently invoked explanation, identified earlier, of Vivekananda’s initial progress in the West has centered on the characterization of many in the United States and England as receptive to Vivekananda’s message because of their disillusionment with the Christianity of the churches. Swami Atulananda (C. J. Heijblom), who met Vivekananda during the latter’s second visit to the West, declared: “For those...born in India it must be difficult to realize what...

<sup>13</sup> See also Müller’s “Prefatory Note” (1928: vii) to Dubois’ *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*.

<sup>14</sup> See Beckerlegge 2000: 143–201, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> See Beckerlegge 2000.



[Vivekananda's teaching] meant to us in the West, to us who had shaped our lives under the terrible doctrines of the churches: that we are impotent, miserable creatures at the mercy of a whimsical, autocratic God" (cited in French 1974: 106–7). Sister Nivedita (Margaret Elizabeth Noble) acknowledged the unorthodox outlook of many, including herself, who heard Vivekananda in London and described these individuals as not very "open to belief" (1982: 20). Such insufficiently and only partially contextualized testimonies conceal the wider challenge Vivekananda faced when bringing Vedānta to these countries.

Contrary to the popular image of the nineteenth century as the "age of faith," Geoffrey Best has suggested that, by the late nineteenth century, in England at least there was evidence of "decay or withering" (1985: 190–91). There is considerable evidence of a wide gulf at that time between large swathes of the population in both England and, to a lesser degree, the United States and the Christianity of the churches. Rapid economic and social changes during the nineteenth century had led to shifts in population in both countries from rural areas to newly expanding urban centers. Jackson (1994: 14) has described American Christianity as being "nearly overwhelmed" by attempting to minister to this relocated population and newly arrived migrants, while facing the intellectual challenges posed by Darwinism and the new biblical criticism. If church membership is a reliable measure of levels of commitment and involvement, the number of Americans belonging to a local church was comparable to levels in Europe between the late eighteenth century and the late nineteenth century until membership started to increase significantly during the twentieth century (Stark 2017: 127–28).

In England, similar shifts of large numbers of people to new, urban locations where Christian denominations more familiar with rural communities had not previously concentrated their energies and resources, led to a sustained period of investment in building new churches in urban areas. There is a danger at this point of assuming that this was in response to a manifest need voiced by these communities. But these were not people likely, in Emerson's phrase, to be "out in search of religions." As Keith Thomas has emphasized, that sectors of the English population were described in the nineteenth century as "little better than heathens" and that "the impact of organised religion upon the population of the industrial towns was often negligible" were not simply parts of a problem created by the pressures of industrialization (1971: 166). That problem "had always been there" (Thomas 1971: 166).

The reality of the presence of Christianity in nineteenth-century England, and indeed much of Western Europe, was that it had become increasingly fragmented since the Reformation by the coexistence of national churches and the growth of Protestant and non-Conformist denominations and sects.<sup>16</sup> During the preceding four centuries, the level of knowledge of Christian teaching was low even among the clergy<sup>17</sup> and even more so among the general populace. This is graphically illustrated by an entry from 1874 in the diary of the Victorian clergyman, Francis Kilvert (1992), which records a celebration of Holy Communion at an English rural

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Stark 2017.

<sup>17</sup> See Stark 2017: 11; compare K. Thomas 1971: 164.

church where there were only two communicants. When the communion cup was passed to the first, “he touched his forelock and said, ‘Here’s your good health, Sir.’ The other said, ‘Here’s the good health of our Lord Jesus Christ’” (Kilvert 1992: 217).

Rates of attendance at church and of baptism and confirmation were low (Thomas 1971: 166), and, as evidence from ecclesiastic courts reveals, behavior in church was often unruly and disrespectful.<sup>18</sup> Commentators do not deny that these people were religious in their own fashion,<sup>19</sup> “even if they hated going to church” (Stark 2017: 13), and clearly some were knowledgeable about Christian teachings. Many, however, had little to do with organized Christianity and have been variously described as perpetuating a “much lingering paganism” (Best 1985: 192), being part of a “wider culture of superstition” (Bruce 1995: 3) in which belief in supernatural powers and magic mingled together.<sup>20</sup>

References to rural England might appear to be very distant from, and thus hardly relevant to, Vivekananda’s experience. The diary entry by Kilvert cited above, however, was made only just over twenty years before Vivekananda’s first visit to England. Levels of engagement among the rural population with organized Christianity, especially with the established church, did not change greatly in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. It was from this same population that many of the migrants to the new, industrial towns and cities had been drawn.

In 1851, the religious census of England and Wales (which was never repeated in that form) took place when those attending churches on Sunday, March 30, were counted.<sup>21</sup> The report confronted Christians with the “gap between idea and reality” (Best 1985: 197). Out of a population of some seventeen million, some five million were missing on that Sunday, a measure of “the extent to which their countrymen had become... ‘habitual neglecters of the public ordinances of religion’” (Best 1985: 197).<sup>22</sup> This prompted missions in different parts of the country and the increased building of urban churches noted above, but Best concludes “it seems most unlikely that the proportion of churchgoers in Britain was higher in the [eighteen]-seventies than it had been in the [eighteen]-fifties” (1985: 212). During this same period, churches and chapels remained the hubs for a “busy church and chapel social life,” clearly in part “recreational” (Best 1985: 218), and for welfare and mission projects designed to convert “the heathen at home and abroad” (Hempton 1994: 306). Commenting on the seeming inconsistency between low church attendance and the scale of voluntary religious activity, David Hempton concludes that “Victorian Britain was thus at the same time remarkably religious and disturbingly irreligious” (1994: 306).

Several contemporary commentators on the state of Victorian Christianity in England, as did the Unitarians and Transcendentalists in the United States

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<sup>18</sup> See K. Thomas 1971: 159–61.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Bruce 1995: 3.

<sup>20</sup> See K. Thomas 1971; compare Stark 2017: 13.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, “H. Mann on the Religious Census, 1853” (Moore 1988: 313–21) and Best (1985: 196–218) on the census’ evidential value despite the problems involved in interpreting the data gathered.

<sup>22</sup> Compare Brown 2001: 25.

mentioned earlier, viewed the reputed harshness of Calvinism as an important, exacerbating factor in turning people in the post-Reformation period against organized Christianity and its teachings about Jesus. Inability to subscribe to central elements of Christian teaching, that the Bible is divinely inspired or literally true, doctrines of eternal punishment, hell, damnation, and atonement, and revulsion at the influence and alleged corruption of the church, all contributed to the spread of unbelief during the nineteenth century (Budd 1977: 107).<sup>23</sup>

To have been sufficiently motivated to take a stance on the issues generated by the intellectual challenges to Christianity during the mid- and late nineteenth century, if only to reject the Christian position after due consideration, or to seek out a “way station” between “main-stream Christianity” and unbelief (French 1974: 98), suggests, at the very least, a degree of involvement in matters of religion lacking in those for whom organized Christianity played little or no part in their life. Once placed within the context of an extensive and a deep-rooted apathy to organized Christianity, the real nature of the challenge that faced Vivekananda in the United States and England of the late nineteenth century becomes more apparent. The nature of this challenge was encapsulated by a secularist proselytizer who declared: “It is the hardest thing in the world to convert a ‘Nothingarian’ to Freethought. A much easier task is to convert a sincere believer in Christianity, or for a matter of that, a sincere believer in anything” (cited in Budd 1977: 120).

In the next section, I shall argue that the degree of match between Vivekananda’s message and the environment in the West he addressed, namely, its “strategic fit,” was greatly increased by his engagement with Christian theological problems, even where his starting point was from within his framework of Vedāntic assumptions. The theological issues referred to above that deeply unsettled many thoughtful, late nineteenth-century Christians were more extensive than the problem of religious exclusivism and the perceived inconsistency between Christian teaching and nineteenth-century scientific discoveries, which are frequently cited as major reasons for the appeal of Vivekananda’s message.

## **A Religion “Based Upon Principles, And Not Upon Persons”**

Vivekananda’s earliest disciples who were not actively involved in “main-stream Christianity,” or occupied “way stations,” when they first encountered him, included Christine Greenstidel (Sister Christine) and Mrs. Ashton Jonson (the leader for a time of Vivekananda’s disciples and supporters in London after his departure). The former had been, and the latter remained, a Christian Scientist. Henrietta Müller, a significant benefactor before parting from Vivekananda, referred to herself as a

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the Oxford theologian and priest Aubrey L. Moore on “the revolt of the moral nature against an immoral religion and immoral views of God,” namely, the Calvinist understanding of God, the Fall, and predestination (reproduced in Moore 1988: 335–36); the Unitarian minister William Binns (referred to in footnote 7 above) on popular condemnations of the “immoralities of Calvinism” (cited in Bartholomew 1988: 173); and Murphy (1955: 816) on the impact of these and other “ethically outrageous” doctrines on prominent intellectuals such as Francis Newman and J. A. Froude, the historian and novelist who had originally intended to become an Anglican priest.

Christian Theosophist, and Sara Bull and Atulananda had also passed through Theosophy and New Thought.

A significant proportion of Vivekananda’s closest supporters, relative to the size of his initial following, clung to some form of Christian identity, even if an outlying one. Mary Philips,<sup>24</sup> Josephine McLeod,<sup>25</sup> Francis Leggett, and Laura Glenn (Sister Devamata<sup>26</sup>), are all said to have retained their allegiance to Christianity.<sup>27</sup> Even Nivedita insisted on several occasions that she retained her allegiance to the Church of England.<sup>28</sup> Mary Elizabeth Dutcher, who invited Vivekananda to use her cottage during the retreat at Thousand Island Park, prior to that had attended his classes in New York. Recalled by Greenstidel as a “devout Methodist,” she is said to have “held on” despite struggling with aspects of Vivekananda’s teaching she found “not only outrageous but blasphemous” (Burke 1985: 119, 121). Several professing Christians regularly attended Vivekananda’s lectures in London,<sup>29</sup> and he was invited to speak in churches in both the United States and England. Such differences in the extent and nature of continuing commitment to the claims of Christianity were recognized by individual followers of Vivekananda<sup>30</sup> and were reflected, as we have noted, in the different limits those involved with Vivekananda set around their engagement with his message, often despite deep admiration for him.

Accounts of supporting figures in the transplanting of Vedānta, in the main, are brief and celebratory rather than probing. It is far more difficult, therefore, to determine why early followers of Vivekananda who retained an attachment to Christianity accepted him as a teacher than it is to identify them. We have Atulananda’s forthright indictment of the “terrible doctrines of the churches,” referred to earlier in this article. Nivedita’s biographers have explained her determination to explore other worldviews as possibly the result of suffering under her first headmistress’ harsh form of Christianity, with its emphasis on self-denial to conquer sins and overcome faults, and the public shaming of pupils, including Nivedita. This experience might have been compounded by the character of Nivedita’s mother and her brand of Christianity.<sup>31</sup> These two accounts are consistent with reasons, noted in the previous section, for loss of Christian faith in the nineteenth century, namely, its perceived pessimistic view of human nature,

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<sup>24</sup> See quotation in French 1974: 99.

<sup>25</sup> See quotation in French 1974: 98–99.

<sup>26</sup> Invariably introduced by Swami Ramakrishnananda as “This is our Christian Sister” (cited in Beckerlegge 2004: 305).

<sup>27</sup> See Beckerlegge 2004.

<sup>28</sup> See Beckerlegge 2021: 70.

<sup>29</sup> See Beckerlegge 2000: 143–79.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Josephine McLeod quoted in French 1974: 98; Nivedita 1982: 21, 1988: 389; and Atulananda 1970: 261–62.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Beckerlegge 2021: 65. Jackson notes that Atulananda was “one of a very small number of Westerners who completely adapted to the life of a Hindu ascetic” (1994: 93). Nivedita has been said to have been the most receptive of Vivekananda’s devotees to his efforts at “Hinduizing” or “Indianizing” her outlook (*His Eastern and Western Disciples* 1993, 2: 337). As we have seen, these two disciples were the most explicit in their criticisms of church Christianity.

harshness, and unforgiving nature. Such characteristics, it could be argued, also lay behind a dismissive and condemnatory Christian attitude to other religious alternatives, but more commonly and immediately these characteristics gave rise to the repugnance felt by individuals at such a view of their own nature and the purpose of their life.

Those in the West who were drawn to Vivekananda as a spiritual teacher, initially at least, clearly would not have responded to him as would Hindus steeped in their tradition. His first Western followers typically responded to him through a complex interplay with Christian teachings and Christian theological problems, which for some were the cause of their distancing themselves from the Christian church. Vivekananda's mission and its strategic fit, therefore, need to be considered in relation to his success or otherwise in negotiating his way through theological problems constructed outside his tradition, which were for many of his followers the starting point of their journey to accepting him and his message concerning Ramakrishna and Vedānta.

Unlike Rammohan Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen, and Pratap Chandra Majumdar, or indeed Mohandas K. Gandhi several decades later, Vivekananda has not been associated with a distinctive preoccupation with a particular aspect of Christian teaching, for example, its ethical teaching, or with a particular representation of Jesus.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, there is nothing to suggest that Vivekananda reacted with hostility to any mediation of Christian teaching while he was a student, unlike his later admirer Eknath Ranade, the founder of the Vivekananda Kendra.<sup>33</sup> Once embarked on his mission, Vivekananda did become a vocal critic of Christian missionary activities. Educated at the General Assembly's Institution (later renamed the Scottish Church College) founded by the Scottish Presbyterian missionary Alexander Duff, Vivekananda was constantly exposed to Christian influence while a student and more generally in Calcutta. The subjects in which Vivekananda was examined included history and philosophy, but there was no formal study of Christian theology in his examined curriculum.<sup>34</sup> He referred throughout his mission, however, to Christianity and the Christian church, Jesus,<sup>35</sup> and to a lesser extent the Bible, although he often quoted from it.

Thomas L. Bryson (1992: 88, 90) has noted that the only Christian missionary influence Vivekananda acknowledged was that of William Hastie, principal of the Institution during Vivekananda's time there, who drew Vivekananda's attention to Ramakrishna. Vivekananda referred to European Sanskritists, but I have been unable to find any mention by Vivekananda of a major Christian theologian of that period. Bryson notes Vivekananda's attraction to Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, although Vivekananda used this fifteenth-century text primarily to

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, M. Thomas 1969.

<sup>33</sup> See Bhide 2003: 23–25.

<sup>34</sup> See Prabhananda 1979: 30.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, "Christ, the Messenger" delivered in 1900 in Los Angeles (*CW* 4: 138–53).

illustrate the ideal of true renunciation, the criterion against which Vivekananda passed favorable judgments on Jesus among other exemplars.<sup>36</sup>

Bryson also suggests that Vivekananda “absorbed some of the themes of liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth century, in particular, the call for a ‘practical’ application of Christianity” (1992: 116). He gives Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl as examples of theologians associated with this emphasis, noting that William Hastie translated German theological works and deployed the term “practical” in his polemics against Hinduism (Bryson 1992: 116). Bryson also refers to the Social Gospel movement in the United States led by Washington Gladden. The problem with pursuing further this line of inquiry into the shaping of Vivekananda’s ideas is that acknowledged by Bryson (1992: 117) and other scholars,<sup>37</sup> namely, Vivekananda rarely referred to any authors or works on which he had drawn. To expect otherwise, however, would be to confuse the nature of Vivekananda’s role as a public speaker and teacher in informal settings with that of a professional academic.

The timing of Vivekananda’s most comprehensive judgments on Christian theology as an enterprise and levels of participation in the church, which were voiced *after* his extended experience in the United States and England, might be significant. Although these judgments served an apologetic purpose within the context of Vivekananda’s mission, bolstering as they did his claims about the growing appeal of Hindu and Buddhist thought to Western intellectuals, the nature of his statements suggest that they had been shaped by personal observation and exchanges rooted in his recent experience, rather than arising from a more distant study, for example, while a student in India. Vivekananda (*CW* 8: 203) spoke of the unconscious atheism and complacency of many churchgoers in an address he gave in Detroit in 1894. In an interview given in London in 1896, he observed that “People merely go to church when they are marrying or burying somebody” (*CW* 5: 202). Responding to his interviewer, he explained that the purpose of his mission was to “show that religion is everything and in everything,” that it had nothing to do with ritual and dogma, and that it would be unlikely to lead to people going to church more often (*CW* 5: 202). The fact that he was asked about this latter point might be indicative of the popular preoccupation with disengagement from organized Christianity. Asked about the difficulties involved in trying to impart metaphysical teaching, he replied, “In all religions we travel from a lesser to a higher truth, never from error to truth” (*CW* 5: 202).

After his return to India in 1897, in his “Reply to the Madras Address” Vivekananda subscribed to the view that “the West is awakening to its wants” and “the ‘true self of man and spirit’ is the watchword of the advanced school of Western theologians,” although he did not identify this “advanced school” (*CW* 4: 346–47). He proceeded from this to offer a characterization, rather reminiscent of Emerson, of the state of Western theology at a time when “the old forts of Western dogmatic religions are crumbling into dust,” pulverized by the impact of modern science on systems rooted in faith or the authority of the church (*CW* 4: 348). In

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Rambachan 1994a: 127–29.

<sup>37</sup> For example, French 1986: 134–35.

contrast to the revival of Hinduism and Buddhism, “Western theology is at its wit’s end to accommodate itself to the ever-rising tide of aggressive modern thought”; “[sacred] texts have been stretched to their utmost tension under the...increasing pressure of modern thought”; and “the vast majority of thoughtful Western humanity have broken asunder all their ties with the church and are drifting about in a sea of unrest” (*CW* 4: 349).

The following of the Ramakrishna movement in the West since its inception in the late nineteenth century has been portrayed as largely older, relatively affluent, and well-educated.<sup>38</sup> Jackson (1994: 92) notes that some of Vivekananda’s first and closest followers in the United States, including Christine Greenstidel and Ellen Waldo, were from relatively modest socioeconomic backgrounds, although Ellen Waldo was reputedly a distant relation of Ralph Waldo Emerson and already familiar with the work of Friedrich Max Müller before she met Vivekananda. Education, and a degree of material security that provided sufficient time, would have exposed many of Vivekananda’s followers to Christian controversies of the nineteenth century, doubtless prompting some to reflect on their own positions in the light of theological issues of the day, just as some had been motivated to acquire new knowledge concerning Asian spiritual traditions, only recently made accessible in popular publications.

Had the strategic fit of Vivekananda’s mission and teaching been so narrowly crafted as to respond merely to the reaction against the exclusivism of Christianity as perceived by those, in Vivekananda’s words, “drifting about in a sea of unrest,” it is unlikely, given the small number of those involved in its Vedanta Societies (a *weakness*), that the Ramakrishna movement would have survived in the West. Vivekananda’s teaching, in fact, ranged far more widely over several, then highly topical, Christian theological concerns and controversies, although he frequently embedded these in claims intended to demonstrate the superiority of Vedāntic universalism. This enhanced the strategic fit of his message, suggesting that he not only appreciated the extent to which his audiences’ spiritual needs had been intensified by their frustrations with the Christianity of the churches, but also that these concerns were not confined to unease over Christian claims to superiority over other religions. If this had not been the case, there would seem to have been no reason for Vivekananda to have widened the theological agenda as he did.

One example of the strategic fit between Vivekananda’s message and the situation in which many of his sympathizers found themselves is that he did not press his followers to make an exclusive choice between maintaining their relationship, whatever that was, with the Christianity in which they had been raised or accepting him as their teacher and his message of Vedānta. In Josephine McLeod’s words, Vivekananda “left Christians better Christians,” or as Mary Phillips declared, “We are not giving up the religion of our ancestors” (cited in French 1974: 98–99). Vivekananda clearly tolerated such half-way-house positions while presumably aiming for an eventual, wholehearted acceptance of Vedānta, by adopting the “wonderful theory of Ishta” (*CW* 3: 184), “a principle big enough to accommodate the world” (*CW* 5: 235). This theory, a “chosen way” (*CW* 5: 301), as

<sup>38</sup> See French 1974: 171–72; Carey 1987: 136–37; and Jackson 1994: 100.

in *iṣṭa-devatā* and *iṣṭa-mantra*, allows individuals the freedom to choose their own path and teacher and was taken up by Nivedita as, for example, when she urged others to find their own “‘Master’—your own *Ishtha*, as I would rather say” (Basu 1982, 2: 688). In his “Addresses on Bhakti-Yoga,” Vivekananda spoke of *iṣṭa* as “allowing a man to choose his own religion” (*CW* 4: 54), but it is clear that this response to individuals’ different temperaments and conditioning<sup>39</sup> was rooted in the conviction that “each one sees God according to his own nature” (53) and that consequently the individual’s *iṣṭa* is sacred and “between you and God” (56). This theory also enabled Vivekananda to reject any attempt to “force another to worship what he worships” (*CW* 4: 54). Vivekananda’s theory of *iṣṭa* is reminiscent in certain respects of the Mahāyāna Buddhist theory of *upāya* (skill in means), which acknowledges that a *bodhisattva* has the skill to find the right means to bring individuals, according to their needs, eventually to *nirvāṇa*. It could also, perhaps, be likened to certain forms of Christian contextual theology of the later twentieth century, some of which provoked conservative backlashes.

The latitude afforded Vivekananda’s followers by his theory of *iṣṭa*, especially while they first explored the implications for them of Vedānta, must be viewed as a *strength* of Vivekananda’s approach. Many of Vivekananda’s followers had arrived at their worldviews instinctively and intuitively and had long felt the need for a teacher and looked to Vivekananda almost immediately to fulfil that role; for example, James Henry Sevier and his wife, Charlotte Elizabeth, who followed Vivekananda to India and founded the Advaita Ashrama. As important as the latitude he offered his followers was the vocabulary, in this instance, *iṣṭa*, Vivekananda placed at their disposal. This both provided a formal means by which they could explain their position and validated their experience with reference to the Hindu tradition, whose antiquity and philosophical richness they were coming to appreciate and respect.

In the context of nineteenth-century disengagement from Christianity discussed earlier in this article, it is significant that Vivekananda’s understanding of Vedānta led him to a position comparable to that adopted by Christians who were profoundly critical of the emphasis in certain strands of Christian theology on lack of forgiveness for sin. In his “Inspired Talks,” Vivekananda declared the bondage of those “imagination[s]” that assert “there is sin and sorrow and death in the world are terrible” can be broken by “imagination[s]” that affirm “I am holy, there is God, there is no pain” (*CW* 7: 99). M. M. Thomas notes the Vedāntic recognition of *avidyā* and “error” and Vivekananda’s vehement rejection of the “Christian idea of man as a sinner in need of grace” (1969: 123). In contrast, Vedānta begins with the “glory” of the human soul (*CW* 2: 294).<sup>40</sup> It has been suggested by Harold W. French that Vivekananda’s affirmation in the presence of those assembled at the Parliament of Religions that “the Hindu refuses to call you sinners” and that it is “a sin to call a man so [a sinner]” might have been a riposte to Joseph Cook, the Christian trinitarian theologian and critic of Unitarianism, who in an earlier address had

<sup>39</sup> See also *CW* 4: 57.

<sup>40</sup> Compare *CW* 7: 420.



declared “we cannot escape...our record of sin” and that Christianity alone provides for the “peace of the soul” (1974: 57, 56).

I referred earlier to Transcendentalism, which grew in part out of Unitarianism, as helping to create a context sympathetic to Vivekananda’s mission. M. Thomas (1969: 123–24) makes the point, however, that, contrary to what might be expected, Vivekananda rejected the “Unitarian Christ [who] is merely a moral man” (*CW* 7: 4).<sup>41</sup> Vivekananda declared that if he “as an Oriental” had to worship Jesus of Nazareth, it would be “as God and nothing else” (*CW* 4: 147). Commenting on this, Thomas states that Vivekananda rejected the “ethical Christ for the mystic Christ” (1969: 123), but this is to import an unnecessary Christian representation of Vivekananda’s position, which is better understood, as Thomas does elsewhere, in relation to the renunciation manifested in Jesus’ life and expressed in Jesus’ teaching, when properly understood, as ultimately Advaitin in character. Thomas (1969: 216) observes that Vivekananda drew on Jesus’ teachings concerning humanity’s relationship to God, but notions of divine justice and mercy and the problems of atonement and forgiveness of sins were irrelevant to Vivekananda’s Advaitin position, and thus he scarcely referred to beliefs concerning the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Vivekananda’s understanding of Jesus as a divine incarnation or *yogī* provides an insight into Vivekananda’s philosophy that led him to explain Christian teaching in terms of a progression from Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, to Advaita (*CW* 4: 148). This was central to his exposition of Vedānta, not a distinctive position adopted in relation to Jesus whom Vivekananda held to be one among many “Incarnations of God” (*CW* 4: 151).

The historian of religion S. G. F. Brandon (1969: 223) has noted the way in which Christian creeds have combined metaphysical statements with a reference to what many Christians have held to be an historical event, namely, Jesus’ crucifixion, observing that this has been said to give Christianity its distinctive character among other religions. Certainly, their conviction in the historical nature of the crucifixion and its soteriological significance has led some Christians to appeal to history in polemical attacks on other traditions. During Vivekananda’s lifetime, many Christian missionaries believed “that true religion derives only from true and accurately recorded history” (Sharpe 1982: 157). Claims, for example, that Hindu deities such as Viṣṇu were “imaginary,” that their whole history and that of Kṛṣṇa was a “wicked invention,” and that the “false Geography” of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* was further evidence of the baseless nature of Hindu beliefs, were a feature of Christian missionary polemics, as was a constant emphasis on the corrupt and sinful nature of Hindu practices (Anonymous 1902a: 33–36).<sup>42</sup>

In the period we are considering, the major intellectual challenges to Christian belief arguably came from newly acquired scientific knowledge and the application of critical historical methods to the study of religious texts, including the Bible, and the lives of seminal figures popularly held to be founders of religions. These challenges were often perceived within the church as a rationalist, secularist assault on faith. This was a very different situation from that facing the Christian church in

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, the reference to the position of Channing above.

<sup>42</sup> Compare Anonymous (1902b: 30) for similar polemical attacks on Śiva.

the latter decades of the twentieth century when the theologian Dennis Nineham could ask, “Is it any longer worthwhile to attempt to trace the Christian’s everchanging understanding of his relationships with God directly back to some identifiable element in the life, character and activity of Jesus of Nazareth?” (cited in Hastings 1986: 650). This question was posed in Nineham’s contribution to *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), which was edited by another academic theologian, John Hick. The title of this volume of essays gives some indication of the direction in which its contributors were traveling, some of whom have been described as only “nominal Christians” (Hastings 1986: 651). Some years previously Hick had published *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) in which, alluding to Hindu and Buddhist teaching, he affirmed the validity of all religions and a pluralism of “ways through time to eternity” (cited in Wolffe 1994: 32). John Wolffe has noted the implications of this shift for Hick’s revised Christology, which Hick knew to be in tension with “central traditional...doctrines concerning the nature and status of Jesus Christ as *uniquely God incarnate*” (cited in Wolffe 1994: 33; emphasis added). In Hick’s Christology, the incarnation became “an effective mythic expression” of the appropriate attitude to Jesus (cited by Wolffe 1994: 33).<sup>43</sup>

This brief excursion into late twentieth-century theology is a useful reminder of the differences between the preoccupations of influential Christian theologies during Vivekananda’s lifetime and those of the so-called “radical” school of Anglican theology towards the end of the twentieth century.<sup>44</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century, Protestant theology developed to a considerable degree in the aftermath of the impact of Rudolf Bultmann’s theology of “demythologising” the Bible. Global interfaith networks had been established, and the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (Vatican II) had reached out to other religious traditions in a new spirit of ecumenism. A far wider range of religious communities had been carried by migration to Britain and the United States.

Looking back over much of the period with which this article is concerned, Adrian Hastings (1986: 662–63) offers a judgment that could be extended to include the late nineteenth century and its theological controversies. He acknowledges the longstanding “gap between academic theology and what one may call the theology of the pew,” a feature that attracted, as we shall shortly see, Vivekananda’s notice in the United States. Hastings reflects that in previous ages (prior to the nineteen-seventies) there had remained a “sufficient link” between these two styles of theology. The same, he suggests, could not be said in relation to the theologies advanced by Nineham, Hick, and other academics of the nineteen-seventies and nineteen-eighties. Hick (1983) himself had spoken of the existence of two “different Christianities” within the Christian denominations, one radical, with which he identified, and the other conservative (Parsons 1993: 74). The dissemination of a theological understanding of Jesus’ life and soteriological significance that gave a central place to concepts such as myth, with what this implied for understanding the nature of the biblical text and accounts of the virgin birth and crucifixion, emanated

<sup>43</sup> See Medhananda (2022b:135–37) for fuller discussion of Hick in relation to Vivekananda’s philosophy.

<sup>44</sup> But compare Hastings 1986: 651.

from within the Christian community. It took knowledge gleaned from science and critical historical research, which had so challenged many Christians in the previous century, more as a given than as something still to be fully assimilated or possibly resisted. It sought to recast Christian understanding in a way that would divest it of supernaturalism in a world in which there was growing understanding of other religions and communities and a greater recognition of the need for theology to address contemporary social issues. The utilization of critical historical methods in the study of the Bible was common to both periods. In the nineteenth century, such an approach was relatively novel, and it was one that appeared to be almost exclusively bound up with what came to be known as the search for the historical Jesus.

The search for the “historical Jesus” provoked in Western Europe what Owen Chadwick has referred to as the “great question of the nineteenth century”; namely, “whether historians, by probing the moments of time associated with religion, could affect its meaning” (1975: 191). This search was fiercely opposed by some but welcomed by others, including the novelist George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) who in 1846 translated David Friedrich Strauss’ 1835 *Das Leben Jesu* into the English *The Life of Jesus*. Eliot’s role in disseminating new, critical studies of the life of Jesus is also important as an indicator that the findings of these scholarly studies were not confined to a scholarly elite but were assimilated by the educated classes, in much the same way as knowledge of contemporary research and writing about India and its traditions, including unsympathetic studies as noted earlier, was spread by popular reviews.

There is no evidence that Vivekananda followed the debate about the historical Jesus closely. Vivekananda was clearly aware of the gulf between the beliefs of many churchgoers and the conclusions of critical biblical scholarship and the impact of such research on judgments passed on the credibility of Christian truth-claims. It seems more than likely that his awareness of then-current debates centered on the critical study of the Bible and the lives of their great personalities would have been sharpened by his exposure to Christian theological concerns while in the West.

In a talk delivered in San Francisco in 1900, Vivekananda stated “we know the scholars and their writings, and the higher criticism; and we know all that has been done by study” (*CW* 4: 146). He reminded his audience “your orthodox idea of the Bible is quite different from the modern scholar’s” (*CW* 1: 447). It seems probable that Vivekananda was also familiar in broad terms with the current European, scholarly preoccupation with the historicity of Kṛṣṇa.<sup>45</sup> Vivekananda suggested “it seems quite probable that he was a king” (*CW* 4: 104). It is less certain whether, and to what extent, Vivekananda might have been directly influenced by Bankim Chandra Chatterji, who, when constructing his picture of Kṛṣṇa as the “ideal man,” has been said to have followed closely the approach of Ernest Renan to the life of Jesus (Ray 1986: 38). Like Strauss, Renan was the author of a popular and controversial life of Jesus.

Citing a story told by Ramakrishna, Vivekananda was adamant that “too much” dealing with words had its place but not in the “spiritual domain” (*CW* 3: 49–50). In

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Pusalker 1955: 84–111.

relation to the New Testament, he asserted that “It does not matter...whether the New Testament was written within five hundred years of his [Jesus’] birth, nor does it matter even, how much of that life is true. But there is something behind it, something we want to imitate” *CW* 4: 146). In fact, in its questioning of the point of such historical inquiry, Vivekananda’s position seems reminiscent of that of Max Müller. Although Müller believed that all religious texts should be examined with the same critical rigor as that applied to other ancient texts, he was dismissive of the quest for the historical Jesus as represented by the scholarship of Renan. Skeptical of the fragmentary nature of the evidence, Müller declared that the fruit of Renan’s research was “Renan’s ghost, or rather his corpse of Christ” (cited in Beckerlegge 2000: 13–14).

What Vivekananda emphasized was the number of “Incarnations” associated with India’s religious tradition and that if “any one or more of these Incarnations, and any one or more of our prophets are proved not to have been historical, it does not injure our religion at all; even then it remains firm as ever, because it is based upon principles, and not upon persons” (*CW* 3: 183–84). Preaching a principle, not a person is “the glory of the Advaita system” (*CW* 4: 311). It is a principle that is the “background of every religion” (*CW* 6: 17). Vivekananda deployed his point about India’s religious traditions, and more specifically Vedānta, being “based upon principles, and not upon persons” apologetically against “almost all the other great religions of the world,” which are “inevitably connected with the life or lives of one or more of their founders...from whom they [these religions] get their sanction, their authority, and their power” (*CW* 3: 184, 182–83).<sup>46</sup> He continued that the details of such lives are “not now seriously believed in” or are seriously doubted (*CW* 3: 183). For, when “there is one blow...to the historicity of that [the founder’s] life, as has been the case in modern times...that rock of historicity, as they pretend to call it, is shaken and shattered, the whole building tumbles down” (*CW* 3: 183).<sup>47</sup>

In a letter of 1894 (no other information given) to his brother-disciples, Vivekananda wrote “Call him [Ramakrishna] a man, or God, or an Incarnation, just as you please. Accept him each in your own light” (*CW* 6: 266, also 274).<sup>48</sup> As this letter appears to assume that his brother-disciples were already aware of his plan for India (laid out in the letter of March 1894, *CW* 6: 250–56, which is cited above), it is probable that this letter was sent some time after March 1894, possibly closer to a letter of September 1894 in which Vivekananda again urged his brother-disciples to focus on the teaching, not spreading Ramakrishna’s name (*CW* 6: 274). The date of the letter is significant because, although addressed to his brother-disciples in India, like so many of Vivekananda’s most distinctive, extended statements, it followed after a considerable period spent in the West. In making this observation, I do not imply that Vivekananda’s ideas were dependent on a necessary stimulus lacking until he had spent time in the West. Also, one cannot assume that the dates of key sources in which new ideas or developments first appear indicate when these were conceived or first put in motion because there might have been a considerable

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<sup>46</sup> Compare *CW* 6: 7.

<sup>47</sup> Compare *CW* 3: 280.

<sup>48</sup> Compare interview of 1898 (*CW* 5: 227).

period of germination and systematization prior to that. The evidence suggests that his first visit to the West did give Vivekananda, as it would any observant visitor from another country, a far more informed appreciation, not just of the spiritual needs of those he encountered, but also of the context within which these needs were shaped; namely, the current state of church Christianity in the United States and England, its vulnerabilities in the face of new knowledge, and its irrelevance to certain sectors of society. His earlier exposure to missionary polemics in India, and the brand of Christian triumphalism that shaped them, would have been unlikely to have broadened Vivekananda's understanding of the pressures acting on the church in the West beyond those generated by the debates about the theory of evolution.

It is noticeable that by 1894 Vivekananda had begun to talk to his brother-disciples in India about his close followers in the West in the same way that his exchanges with those in India were peppered with mentions of other devotees in India. In other words, by this time Vivekananda had begun to think about an international organization with a wider scope than simply his project for India, a commitment that was past the embryonic stage when on his return to India in 1897 he was closely involved in drafting the inaugural aims and objects of the Ramakrishna Mission Association (Sangha) and the slightly later "Belur Math Rules" (Gambhirananda 1983: 95–96, 107–11). There is reference to a Foreign Department to train members of the Math and to work in other countries where "only spirituality is necessary" (Rule 8) (Gambhirananda 1983: 108). In "My Plan of Campaign," a speech delivered in Madras after his return to India, Vivekananda reiterated that his plan was to create institutions in India to train "preachers" in "India and outside India" (*CW* 3: 223). In tandem with this, came the realization that there was an *opportunity* to expound Vedānta and that, consequently, his message would need to appeal to constituencies with very different cultural backgrounds. This was not just because the religions of these constituencies differed. The social and political pressures acting on the Hindu tradition in India and Christianity in the West at that time, as one would expect, also significantly affected the reasons why individuals of Hindu and Christian backgrounds respectively might look to Vivekananda.

Vivekananda's positioning of Vedānta as "based upon principles, and not upon persons" was a motif of considerable importance in his promotion of Vedānta in the West and it remains so. It has been echoed by *svāmīs* in the West more recently. For example, Swami Vidyatmananda, an American by birth, has maintained that "the adherence of the devotee is stated to be not to an individual leader, not to the authority of the organization, but to the ideal" (Nd: Chapter 10, Section 10). For Vivekananda reliance on principles, rather on the authority of sages and incarnations, no matter how brilliant, is the "unique position in India," and consequently "our claim is that the Vedanta only can be the universal religion, that it is already the existing universal religion in the world, because it teaches principles and not persons" (*CW* 3: 250).

In relation to Vivekananda's understanding of the meaning of "universal religion," Anantanand Rambachan has stated that "universal religion" for Vivekananda meant the absence of exclusiveness, particularly that associated with sects; it was "more than anything else, a particular outlook on religious diversity"

(1994b: 91).<sup>49</sup> Rambachan makes the important point that Vivekananda foresaw failure in any attempt to promote religious uniformity or the triumph of one tradition over others.<sup>50</sup> (The Protestant Christian missionary theory of “fulfilment theology” could be viewed as an example of the latter.) In his talk “The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion,” given in Pasadena in 1900, Vivekananda urged, “We must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes” (*CW* 2: 383).

Implicit in the nexus of beliefs we have just explored, however, is Vivekananda’s understanding of Advaita Vedānta as the highest form of understanding and his more equivocal view that, although “there is no harm in” being devoted to “prophets or teachers” as guides, “you must keep to a firm background of eternally true principles” (*CW* 3: 184). Thus, although this universal religion embraces both an “Impersonal...yet a Personal God, so is our religion a most intensely impersonal one” (*CW* 3: 183). It is the monistic which is the “highest stage” and the monotheistic the “lower stage” (*CW* 7: 100). The language Vivekananda uses in these statements is not overly technical, and he does not draw heavily on either Hindu philosophical or theological concepts. Much of the cumulative argument, the scaffolding that supports these summative statements, has been built in his Vedāntic commentaries on the nature of the divine, the prominence given to the human soul in, for example, his rejection of Christian notions of sin, and crucially in his repeated assertion that religious truth does not depend on the historicity of the figures believed to embody it.

Vivekananda’s affirmation in his exposition of a universal religion of an “Impersonal...yet a Personal God” in an “intensely impersonal” religion, characterized by “stages” that appear to subordinate the “monotheistic” stage to the “monistic” stage has raised questions for scholars about the nature of Vivekananda’s Advaita philosophy,<sup>51</sup> which segue into the debate about whether Vivekananda was a Hindu supremacist.<sup>52</sup> Is the lower stage, in Vivekananda’s words, only “true as far as it goes”? If this were his position, such a basis for a universal religion would surely be disputed by many in monotheistic traditions, as would his elevation of the

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<sup>49</sup> Sharma has noted that “a distinct approach to religious plurality” associated with Hinduism since Vivekananda’s contribution to the Parliament of Religions has been both described and formulated in different ways (1979: 59). Sharma argues that the correct statement of the Hindu position is that it maintains all religions are valid, meaning “the validity of another religion cannot be absolutely questioned” (67).

<sup>50</sup> For example, *CW* 1: 24, 2: 363, cited by Rambachan (1994b: 91).

<sup>51</sup> This article will address only briefly critical questions concerning continuity between Vivekananda’s teaching and that of his master, Ramakrishna, and inherited Hindu tradition. These questions are central to the scholarly study of Vivekananda’s relationship to Hindu tradition, but the article is concerned more narrowly with the reception of his teaching in the West. Although questions about Vivekananda’s authenticity were voiced by a small number of disaffected followers in London, concerns about the nature and extent of his continuity with earlier Hindu tradition did not loom large for many of his earliest Western audiences and followers. The article does not suggest that understanding the reception of Vivekananda’s message rests upon a particular view of these more technical questions about continuity. For an overview of scholarly studies of Vivekananda, see, for example, Beckerlegge 2013; and for an examination of various scholarly perspectives on Vivekananda’s Advaita philosophy, see Medhananda 2022b: 43–46.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Medhananda 2022a.

monistic view over personalist theologies at the heart of other Hindu devotional traditions. This takes us to a major consideration for many scholars in their analyses of Vivekananda's philosophy, namely, the extent to which Ramakrishna or Śāṅkara exercised the greater influence over Vivekananda's understanding of Advaita and his ideal of a universal religion and the extent of continuity between his teaching and theirs.<sup>53</sup> Vivekananda's emphasis on the impersonal or monistic would seem to suggest that his position was closer to that Śāṅkara. Swami Medhananda, however, maintains that "the vast majority of scholars have seriously misrepresented Vivekananda's mature Vedāntic doctrine of the harmony of religions by taking it to be based on the three stages of Vedānta rather than on the four Yogas" (2022b: 93). He also acknowledges that at times Vivekananda "vacillated, however, between the Advaitic inclusivist view that non-Advaitic religions were lower stages on the way to Advaita and the more pluralist view that all the major world religions contained, at least in germ, all three stages of Vedānta," but regards this as a transient stage in Vivekananda's thinking (Medhananda 2022b: 93).

What is not in doubt is that, when addressing a very different world from that of Śāṅkara and even Ramakrishna, Vivekananda drew selectively on Hindu ideas, which he treated flexibly by giving them new and extended meanings.<sup>54</sup> It is this capacity to draw on his exposure to European and Christian thinking, as well as Hindu resources, when addressing pressing concerns in colonial India or offering Hindu teaching to North American and English audiences during his lifetime, that has prompted polemical responses from critics such as Paul Hacker and Agehananda Bharati about his susceptibility to European and Christian influence.<sup>55</sup> Yet, this was the hallmark of Vivekananda's approach, which is nowhere more evident than in his presentation of Vedānta to the West. I would suggest that a more nuanced understanding of the various contexts of Vivekananda's mission would allow that there would almost inevitably have been an evolving and, at times, fluid quality to Vivekananda's ideas. Medhananda has referred to a "vacillating" tendency at times. I have referred on several occasions elsewhere to Vivekananda's mission as an "unfinished project." I have also emphasized the importance of appreciating the transformed social contexts in which Vivekananda's developed his, indeed experimented with, constantly evolving ideas about *sevā* (service), which were similarly marked by selectivity from Hindu resources, including what he took from his own master, Ramakrishna, and earlier Hindu teachers such as Śāṅkara.<sup>56</sup> These same characteristics are evident, as we have seen, in Vivekananda's offer of a religion "based upon principles, and not upon persons" to his earliest Western admirers.

Apart from some of those who had allied themselves with what French has dubbed "way stations" such as Theosophy, many in Vivekananda's sympathetic but largely Christian audiences in the West would have been accustomed to the way in which Christian creeds presented Jesus' crucifixion as an historical event, which

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Rambachan (1994b) in relation to continuity with Śāṅkara.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Rambachan 1994b: 92.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Beckerlegge 2013.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Beckerlegge 2006.

was to be understood as a once-and-for-all salvific event through the resurrection. Vivekananda’s urging his disciples in relation to his own *guru* Ramakrishna to “accept him each in your own light,” on the basis that Vedānta is “based upon principles, and not upon persons,” must have appeared to have loosened, if not completely untied, the theological moorings of the religious way of thinking with which they were most familiar. It undoubtedly opened new possibilities of being religious for some, while others responded to it more as a nudge as to how to make their continuing commitment to Christianity less exclusive.

## Concluding Remarks

By setting Swami Vivekananda’s mission in the West within the social context of a greater disengagement from the Christianity of the churches, rather than focusing on those who had started to explore Asian spiritual traditions or were actively looking for a new teacher, certain aspects of his mission become clearer. This article has demonstrated a close “strategic fit” between Vivekananda’s message and the needs of those drawn to him (a *strength*). His mission attracted relatively well-educated and affluent sympathizers. Although this might be regarded as a narrow base, and thus a *weakness* for an organization, I have argued it is unlikely that Vivekananda could have attracted a wider cohort of followers, given popular attitudes to organized religion at that time. These were increasingly polarized between those still involved in the churches and those for whom organized Christianity had either lost its meaning or never had much relevance. Vedānta was unlikely to have been spread by the style of missions and revivals of the late nineteenth century. Vivekananda’s standing as a Hindu teacher was made plain from the outset at the Parliament of Religions. It was thus probable that those initially drawn to him would have come from circles beginning to explore Asian traditions or actively seeking to resolve their own religious uncertainties by looking beyond Christianity.

An important consequence of the way in which Vivekananda launched himself as a *guru* in the West was that his approach was attuned to Christian theological controversies of the day, and he ranged far more widely than addressing the one issue of Christianity’s perceived dismissal of all other religions. It was not an approach that simultaneously attempted to tie his followers in the West to a specified practice, although this would become more defined as Vedanta Societies matured. Meditation was a constant emphasis in Vivekananda’s teaching as was his insistence that his was a “practical religion” because “You must see God. The spirit must be realised” (*CW* 4: 246), and “to realise the spirit as spirit is practical religion” (247).

A longer-term consequence of Vivekananda’s approach in the West, which was institutionalized in the Belur Math Rules under Vivekananda’s guidance, has been the perpetuation of a certain kind of mission in the West. Reflecting on the relatively small numbers of people drawn to Vedanta Societies and the individualistic and meditative path fostered in the movement, Vidyatmananda (Nd) conceded that it was hardly surprising that the movement tended to appeal to a spiritual minority. Whereas Vidyatmananda might have regarded this as a *strength*, the recognition of



this as a problem by others within the movement when looking to the future<sup>57</sup> suggests that this could also be viewed as a *weakness* and one that puts the movement at risk from *threats* from its larger competitors in the increasingly global, spiritual marketplace. I have suggested elsewhere that there is now a considerable difference between the way in which Vivekananda used the term “spirituality” and its cognates when reflecting on what he perceived as a need in the West, and thus as an *opportunity* to share the message of Vedānta, and the popular associations of “spirituality” and its benefits in the increasingly secular West of the twenty-first century (Beckerlegge 2014: 73–74).

It is fair to say that Vivekananda’s deployment of resources from the Hindu tradition did not lead him to bypass theological problems that were beginning to vex some Christians and some adherents to other theistic traditions, but enabled him, through his interpretation of Vedānta, to recast the nature of these problems and to offer a different way of responding to them. His engagement with those Christian theological issues that had caused many of his followers to question the Christianity of the churches undoubtedly aided the understanding and dissemination of his teaching. The limits of his systematic analysis of certain problems, however, notably the nature of the universal religion and its relationship to the Hindu tradition, left questions unanswered for later generations of devotees,<sup>58</sup> as well as creating an agenda for scholars. For all his insights into current Christian theological issues, Vivekananda did not appear to grasp the significance for devout Christians of what many believe to be the salvific event at the heart of the Christian gospel, the crucifixion and resurrection, and the powerful response this evokes in the faithful. Had Vivekananda not been addressing his message primarily to sympathizers who were in the main on, or beyond, the boundaries of Christian adherence, it is unlikely that his willingness to reflect on other currently contentious doctrines would have compensated for his very limited recognition of this cardinal Christian conviction.

I suggested in the beginning of this article that Vivekananda’s decision to attempt to promote Vedānta in the West at the end of the nineteenth century was as remarkable as the measure of success he achieved in bringing about the transplanting of Vedānta at that time. His references to Christian theology often served apologetic ends and at certain key points in his argument, as noted above, he fell back on assertions that would inevitably remain contentious. It remains striking, nonetheless, and reflects the composition of his first cohort of followers, which enabled him to do this, that Vivekananda was able to advance his late nineteenth-century mission in the West relying so heavily on an engagement with theology, Hindu and Christian, rather than employing a mix of other, arguably more accessible media.

I referred above to the impact of Vivekananda’s influence on some of his followers acting as a “nudge” as to how to make their continuing commitment to

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<sup>57</sup> See Beckerlegge 2014: 74.

<sup>58</sup> The impact of attendance at Vedanta Societies by an increasing number of Hindus who had migrated from India or East Africa and their descendants, and the perceptions of existing adherents of a consequent “Hinduizing” (see footnote 31 above) of Vivekananda’s vision of a universal religion, have been explored by Carey (1987) and Beckerlegge (2004) with reference to Britain and by McDermott (2003) with reference to the United States.

Christianity less exclusive. This raises the intriguing question of whether Vivekananda could possibly have foreseen that some decades later Christian theologians, as we have seen in this article, would draw on allusions to Hindu and Buddhist sources to redefine the relationship between Christianity and other religious traditions, perhaps in part also because of a “nudge” from Vivekananda’s diffusive influence. Or would Vivekananda, living when he did in the late colonial period, never have envisaged the emergence of alternative expressions of Christian commitment of the kind fostered by late twentieth-century Christian theological developments, which aimed to free Christian living from absolute belief in the Bible and an historical figure whose life provided an exclusive and once-and-for-all route to salvation and would recognize other religious traditions as valid “ways through time to eternity.”

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