

HINDUISM AND VEDANTA

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In his lecture on “Vedantism”, Swami Vivekananda says: “The word Hindu, by which it is the fashion nowadays to style ourselves, has lost all its meaning, for this word merely meant those who lived on the other side of the river Indus (in Sanskrit, Sindhu). This name was murdered into Hindu by the ancient Persians, and all people living on the other side of the river Sindhu were called by them Hindus. Thus this word has come down to us; and during the Mohammedan rule we took up the word ourselves.”¹ Hence the word does not refer to any religion but only to people living in a particular geographical region, namely on the “other side of the river Sindhu”. Technically therefore it refers to all people living now in India. It does not refer to any religion, though it has acquired such a meaning.

Vivekananda says “the word, therefore, covers not only Hindus proper, but Mohammedans, Christians, Jains and other people who live in India.”² Realistically speaking, the question “Are you Hindu?” is not dissimilar to the question “Are you American?”: just as the idea of being American implies no religious affiliation, nor should the idea of being Hindu. Yet it does. If by the word “Hinduism” we mean the religion of the Hindus, then it follows that it is the union of all religions, and this brings us closer to the ideal of Vedanta. For Vivekananda, Vedanta is the framework for understanding all religions, nay, all disciplines of human endeavour. Just as science is the framework for understanding the external world, Vedanta is the framework for understanding the world within. But the distinction between the inner world and the outer world is a human construction. There is, in reality, no division between the two. Vedanta, in its comprehensive meaning, includes all the sciences and all the humanities. It includes all human aspirations to realize the Infinite.

Yet, over centuries, the words “Hinduism” and “Vedanta” have acquired rigid religious meanings. With respect to the notion of “Hinduism”, the early Vedic tradition was not in favour of creating any “ism” or any theology. It did not want to restrict the individual to only one approach to the Infinite but fostered a grander outlook of “as many faiths, so many paths”, as Sri Ramakrishna taught throughout his life. Vivekananda expresses this idea poetically: “As so many rivers, having their source in different mountains, roll down, crooked or straight, and at last come into the ocean – so, all these various creeds and religions, taking their start from different standpoints and running through crooked or straight courses, at last come unto Thee.”³ Thus the words “Hindu” and “Hinduism” are not of Indian origin.

By contrast, the concept of Vedanta had its birth in India. It is

rooted in the ancient Vedic tradition and signified a universal view in both knowledge and understanding. Its attitude is conveyed beautifully by the poetic Rig Vedic verse, “Let noble thoughts come from all sides.”⁴ However, the later categorization of Vedanta as one of the six systems of Indian philosophy combined with its further association with Shankara’s tradition of Advaita Vedanta, has led to the perception that it is a part of Hinduism. In his writings and lectures, Swami Vivekananda attempted to rectify this error, and his contributions are further classified by some scholars (both Western and Eastern) as “neo-Vedanta”. This has led to a great deal of confusion and it is the purpose of this essay to parse through some of this confusion and delineate clearly the noble ideal of Vedanta that Vivekananda tried to convey.

The fact that the notion of “Hinduism” was thrust upon India from the outside does not mean the people of India had no religion. On the contrary, if we go back to the earliest days of recorded history, the religion of the Indian Subcontinent was universal in outlook and adopted diverse methods and symbols. In his essay on Krishna, Swami Vivekananda writes: “It is the most curious fact that the disciples and descendants of Krishna have no name for their religion although foreigners call it Hinduism or Brahmanism. There is one religion and there are many sects. The moment you give it a name, individualise it and separate it from the rest, it is a sect, no more a religion. A sect proclaims its own truth and declares that there is no truth anywhere else. Religion believes that there has been and still is, one religion in the world.”⁵ Here, the word “religion”, as Swami Vivekananda uses it, must be understood in the universal Vedantic sense.

The idea of categorization was later taken up by the historian Edward Saïd. In his scholarly classic *Orientalism*, Saïd argues that in the 18th and 19th centuries, when European imperialism was at its zenith, Western scholars defined the East by using categories that created and fostered a division between West and East, a division which continues to contribute to global conflicts. This way of thinking gave rise to the notion of a “superior race” and consequently “inferior” ones. Cognate to this division is the notion of the “civilized world” and the “uncivilized world”, which in turn gave justification for colonization and proselytization by Christianity. Saïd writes that “to these ideas was added a second-order Darwinism, which seemed to accentuate the ‘scientific’ validity of the division of races into advanced and backward, or European-Aryan and Oriental-African. Thus the whole question of imperialism, as it was debated in the late nineteenth century by pro-imperialists and anti-imperialists alike, carried forward the binary typology of

advanced and backward (or subject) races, cultures and societies.”⁶

This superficial and dubious scholarship had further repercussions. It provided an escape from any further inquiry and galvanized the primitive and exotic image of India and other cultures that continues to be perpetuated. Though based on dubious scholarship, these works of comparative philology gained momentum through the successes of the scientific revolution in Europe. Before long, they gained currency even in India.

Early scholars were motivated by a sincere zeal to learn. They also envisaged an “Oriental Renaissance” that would be an antidote to the prevailing materialism which was engulfing Europe. We see this, for example, in Arthur Schopenhauer’s preface to his monumental *The World as Will and Idea*, first published in 1818. He wrote: “The influence of the Sanskrit literature will penetrate not less deeply than did the revival of Greek literature in the 15th century.”⁷ Yet the Sanskrit renaissance of which Schopenhauer spoke of never came about. Why not? There are several reasons for this. The renaissance of Greek literature in the 15th century was concurrent with colonial expansion and developed independently in intellectual circles. By contrast, the discovery of Sanskrit literature by European scholars occurred at the height of colonialism and consequently was hijacked by imperial interests. Indology became an industry for securing European imperial power. Thus, along with learned discourses of such early scholars as Alexander von Humboldt, the Schlegel brothers, Schopenhauer and William Jones, there was also an “increasing influence of travel literature, imaginary utopias, moral voyages, . . . innumerable speculations on giants, Patagonians⁸, savages, natives and monsters supposedly residing to the far east, west, south and north of Europe. . . . For even as Europe moved itself outwards, its sense of cultural strength was fortified. From travelers’ tales, and not only great institutions like the various India companies, colonies were created and ethnocentric perspectives secured.”⁹ That is, “orientalism” was used as a tool for imperial expansion and essentially extinguished any form of Sanskrit renaissance predicted by Schopenhauer.

Commenting on this phenomenon, Swami Vivekananda writes: “The earliest school of Sanskritists in Europe entered into the study of Sanskrit with more imagination than critical ability. They knew little, expected much from that little and often tried to make too much of what little they knew. Then, in those days even, such vagaries as the estimation of Shakuntala as forming the high watermark of Indian philosophy were not altogether unknown! These were naturally followed by a reactionary band of superficial critics, more than real scholars of any kind, who knew little or nothing of Sanskrit, expected nothing from Sanskrit studies and ridiculed everything from the East. While criticising the unsound imaginativeness of the early school in whom everything in Indian literature was rose and musk, these, in their turn, went into speculations which, to say the least, were equally highly unsound and indeed very venturesome. And their boldness was very naturally helped by the fact that these over-hasty and unsympathetic

scholars and critics were addressing an audience whose entire qualification for pronouncing any judgment in the matter was their absolute ignorance of Sanskrit. What a medley of results from such critical scholarship!”¹⁰

In the modern age of instant information, this sort of fragmented research continues to sway the world. In this context, Sri Aurobindo writes that “knowledge is not for the hasty mind but only for the dhira who can sit long accumulating and arranging his store and does not rush away with fragments like a crow darting off with the first morsel of food on which it can seize”¹¹ And what was the result of such slipshod scholarship? Vivekananda explains: “Suddenly one fine morning, the poor Hindu woke up to find everything that was his was gone; one strange race had snatched away from him his arts, another his architecture, and a third, whatever there was of his ancient sciences; why, even his religion was not his own!”¹²

Thus the writings of the later Indologists gained wide currency, so much so that the native people of India had to learn about their own philosophy and their own mythologies from these European writings of piecemeal scholarship. How is it these interpretations were accepted without critical inquiry? One reason emanates from the psychological dimension underlying “Orientalism”. The race or nation categorized and compartmentalized, views itself from the confinement of such categories. Another reason has to do with the momentum of the scientific revolution. The remarkable successes arising from the discoveries of science combined with their technological advances were also used as a vehicle to promote the Eurocentric view of the world. Elaborating on this psychological phenomenon, Aurobindo writes: “The successes of European science have cast the shadow of their authority and prestige over the speculations of European scholarship; for European thought is, in appearance, a serried army marching to world-conquest and we who undergo the yoke of its tyranny, we, who paralysed by that fascination and overborne by that domination, have almost lost the faculty of thinking for ourselves, receive without distinction all its camp followers and irregular volunteers as authorities to whom we must needs submit.”¹³

The serious student of Vedanta must therefore subject all such writings to a thorough process of critical inquiry. Sadly, even today, we see that this trend has not diminished and the most glaring of all examples is how the profound concept of “yoga” has been reduced and degraded into a series of physical exercises. And this the modern Indian receives as part of his ancient heritage! Such forms of intellectual colonization must be rejected forthwith. It must be replaced with serious intellectual study and critique, which is the ideal of Vedanta. The divisive intellectual framework of “orientalism” must be discarded totally.

In his book, Saïd traces the growth of imperialism, as well as the causes of the two world wars, to such a destructive idea. As noted above, the second danger of this categorization is that the race or culture so classified views itself through the prism of such

categories. This phenomenon is still prevalent today. In his "Lectures from Colombo to Almora", Swami Vivekananda addresses this tendency repeatedly. At the same time, he indicates how one can neutralise this danger by understanding the essential message of Vedanta. And what is this essential message? It is the perfection of the individual, or more precisely, Vedanta is the science of human potential, of human possibilities. Just as science is not the property of a single nation or race, so also Vedanta is not limited to India or Indian culture. It is a framework for comprehending the universal aspiration for knowledge and understanding.

Not all scholars were guilty of this categorization and oversimplification of Indian thought, but most were. The writings of any scholar must not be taken in isolation but be viewed in the larger landscape of historical chronology and culture. This is evident in the earliest of translations of the Rig Veda and the Upanishads. Even an erudite scholar such as Max Müller, who translated the Rig Veda into English and marvelled at the profundity of philosophic thought contained therein, was of the view that these scriptures were primitive precursors to the acme of Christianity. He writes:

"History seems to teach that the whole human race required a gradual education before, in the fullness of time, it could be admitted to the truths of Christianity. All the fallacies of human reason had to be exhausted, before the light of a high truth could meet with ready acceptance. The ancient religions of the world were but the milk of nature, which was in due time to be succeeded by the bread of life.... The religion of Buddha has spread far beyond the limits of the Aryan world, and to our limited vision, it may seem to have retarded the advent of Christianity among a large portion of the human race. But in the sight of Him with whom a thousand years are but as one day, that religion, like the ancient religions of the world, may have but served to prepare the way of Christ, by helping through its very errors to strengthen and to deepen the ineradicable yearning of the human heart after the truth of God."¹⁴

But later, in his essay "India, what can it teach us" Müller also wrote: "If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most fully developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered over the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant, I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of the Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw the corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human a life... again I should point to India."¹⁵ Thus, even great scholars are victims of their own times and traditions. It is therefore essential to

take a larger and more objective view of their contributions. On the one hand, we should not diminish the value of their scholarly contributions. At the same time, we should note the hidden bias in some of their writings and investigations as we proceed. This is the true Vedantic spirit approach to knowledge. We must be open to let "knowledge come from all sides."

Many of the contradictions in Müller's writings come into bold relief if we examine the chronology of his writings. The bias of which we spoke earlier is most pronounced in his writings of 1860. However, as his research and understanding moved forward, a change in opinion became evident. For example, his essay "India and what it can teach us" espouses a different perspective and it was written in 1882. Years later, on May 28, 1896, Swami Vivekananda had lunch with Müller at his home in Oxford¹⁶, after

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which the two toured the university, and the Bodleian Library in particular. During their conversation, Vivekananda asked him, "When are you coming to India? Every heart there would welcome one who has done so much to place the thoughts of their ancestors in the true light." Relating this incident in an article published by Vivekananda a few days later, on June 6, 1896, he wrote: "The face of the aged sage brightened up – there was almost a tear in his eyes, a gentle nodding of the head, and slowly the words came out: 'I would not return then; you would have to cremate me there.' Further questions seemed an unwarrantable intrusion into realms wherein are stored the holy secrets of a man's heart."¹⁷ Müller was 73 at the time of this meeting. He died four years later in 1900. Clearly from this meeting, we see another facet of his personality. This is revealed in his later articles and writings. Indeed, he wrote an article on Sri Ramakrishna for the magazine Nineteenth Century and was also planning a book about him. Commenting on this, Vivekananda continues: "Max Müller is a Vedantist of Vedantists. He has indeed caught the real soul of the melody of the Vedanta, in the midst of all its settings of harmonies and discords – the one light that lightens all sects and creeds of the world, the Vedanta, the one principle of which all religions are only applications. And what was Ramakrishna Paramahansa? The practical demonstration of this ancient principle, the embodiment of India that is past, and a foreshadowing of the India that is to be, the bear-

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er of spiritual light unto nations.”¹⁸ Clearly, the meeting of Müller and Vivekananda was both emotional and spiritual. As the former remarked, “it is not every day one meets a disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa.”¹⁹ The tears in his eyes may have been the emotional response of one who sees his life at that moment, in a panoramic way, and sees the spiritual symbolism of the moment. He may have been thinking of the contrast between his views at that time and those of thirty years ago and how the meeting with Vivekananda heightened that contrast. Rather poetically, Vivekananda concluded his essay with these lilting words, “He remembers with his mind the friendships of former births, firmly rooted in his heart.”²⁰ We should therefore not take a scholar's views in isolation but view it in the cultural context in which they were born. We should also take into account that people's views change as they gain more knowledge and understanding. Scholars, like other human beings, are fallible and occasionally make errors, but that does not diminish their greatness or the value of their contributions.

In the scientific tradition, this is practised continuously with varying success. The ideal is to let “knowledge come from all sides.” For instance, Sir Isaac Newton is often thought of as a universal genius thanks to his revolutionary theories in mathematics and physics. Although his research in these fields was indeed revolutionary, he also dabbled in the occult, alchemy and Biblical interpretation. His writings in alchemy have been pretty much discarded now and have only historical and biographical value. The noted economist John Maynard Keynes wrote that “in the eighteenth century and since, Newton came to be thought of as the first and greatest of the modern age of scientists, a rationalist, one who taught us to think on the lines of cold and untinctured reason. I do not see him in this light. ... Newton was not the first of the age of reason; he was the last of the magicians, the last of the Babylonians and Sumerians, the last great mind which looked out on the visible and intellectual world with the same eyes as those who began to build our intellectual inheritance rather less than 10,000 years ago.”²¹ Today, we value the scientific contributions of Newton but do not ascribe any value to his researches in alchemy. Keynes remarks further that Newton spent the first phase of his life “with one foot in the Middle Ages and one foot treading a path for modern science.”²² Such idiosyncrasies add colour, as well as historical and cultural dimension to a personality. “In the pre-modern era of Newton's lifetime, the educated embraced a world view different from that of later centuries. Distinction

between science, superstition and pseudoscience were still being formulated and a devoutly Christian Biblical perspective permeated Western culture.”²³

Thus, a student of Vedanta proceeds cautiously and lets “noble thoughts come from all sides.” At the same time, we distil each idea in the crucible of reason and extract from it something universal. We reject any bias or prejudice that may have adhered to it because the thinker is often a prisoner of one's own times and traditions. This is the essential method of Vedanta. Out of this approach emerge ideas that apply to all of humanity. This is the idea of religion in the true sense of that word. For the word ‘religion’ is derived from the Latin “religio”, which means “to bind, to put together, to unify”. Understood from this perspective, Vedanta is a universal religion. And yet the word “Vedanta” has traditionally been identified with India – a fact which is hindering its global expansion. To some extent, the word “yoga” has entered the common vernacular of literally all languages and cultures, but this is often reduced to a system of stretching exercises, far from the ideal universal perspective of Vedanta. Part of the difficulty emerges from an incomplete understanding of the word “yoga”. Part of it emerges from bias and prejudice that yoga is part of “Hinduism”.. What word would serve the purpose of Vedanta? Perhaps one word that partially embraces the ideal is “humanism”. But then what does that word mean?

In his preface to the 25th anniversary edition of his book, Said wrote: “My idea in *Orientalism* is to use humanistic critique to open up the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis to replace the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity rather than understanding and intellectual exchange. I have called what I try to do ‘humanism’, a word I continue to use stubbornly despite the scornful dismissal of the term by sophisticated post-modern critics.”²⁴ He then proceeds to explain what he means by the word “humanism”. It is the ability “to use one's mind historically and rationally for the purpose of reflective understanding and genuine disclosure. Moreover, humanism is sustained by a sense of community with other interpreters and other societies and periods.”²⁵

What is needed now is a unifying vision. The divisive idea of “orientalism” must be replaced with a larger, more cohesive and enlightened worldview. In this endeavour, all nations play a role – an idea which many serious scholars throughout history have

emphasized. The noted historian Arnold Toynbee, for example, wrote: "Today we are still living in this transitional chapter of world's history, but it is already becoming clear that a chapter which had a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race. In the present age, the world has been united on the material plane by Western technology. But this Western skill has not only 'annihilated distance'; it has armed peoples of the world with weapons of devastating power at a time when they have been brought to point-blank range of each other without yet having learnt to know and love each other. At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is an Indian way. The Emperor Ashoka's and Mahatma Gandhi's principles of non-violence and Sri Ramakrishna's testimony to the harmony of religions; here we have the attitude and the spirit to make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family – and, in the Atomic Age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves."²⁶

In the computer age, the world has been brought together so that we are now "virtual neighbours" with everyone. But this increase of technology has not translated into a corresponding increase in wisdom and understanding. If the human race is to survive, we must embrace Vedanta and its ideals of universality and put aside racial and cultural divisions, which are fragmenting the world. In his essay "Race Conflict", Rabindranath Tagore has some encouraging words. He writes: "When organized national selfishness, racial antipathy and commercial self-seeking begin to display their ugly deformities in all their nakedness, then comes the time for man to know that his salvation is not in political organizations and extended trade relations, not in any mechanical rearrangement of social system, but in a deeper transformation of life, in the liberation of consciousness in love, in the realization of God in man."²⁷

Vedanta is not a religion in the traditional sense of the word. It is a framework of thought that lets "knowledge come from all sides" and allows the human being to converge toward the ideal of realizing God in man.

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NOTES

¹ This verse is from Siva Mahima Stotra, Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Volume 3, p. 118.

² Ibid., p. 118.

³ Ibid., Volume 1, p. 390.

⁴ Rig Veda Samhita, 1.89.1: Aano bhadra krtavo yantu vishwatah.

⁵ Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Volume 1, p. 438.

⁶ E. Saïd, *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1978, p. 206.

⁷ A. Schopenhauer, *The World as will and idea*, p. 9, 1818. Available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38427/38427-pdf.pdf>

⁸ Though Patagonia indicates now a region in South America, this phrase refers to early European perceptions. According to Wikipedia, "The first European explorers of Patagonia observed that the indigenous people in the region were taller than average Europeans of the time, prompting them to believe that Patagonians were giants." See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patagonia>

⁹ E. Saïd, *Orientalism*, p. 117.

¹⁰ Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 4, p. 274.

¹¹ Sri Aurobindo, Collected Works, Volume 27, p. 370. See also Record of Yoga, available online at <http://www.sriaurobindoashram/ashram/sriauro/writings.php>

¹² Ibid., p. 275. Vivekananda is also giving a veiled reference here to the prevalent theory of the "Aryan invasion" of India.

¹³ Sri Aurobindo, Complete Works, Volume 27, p. 180.

¹⁴ M. Müller, *History of the Sanskrit Literature*, 1860.

¹⁵ M. Müller, *India, What can it teach us*, 1882, Lecture IV.

¹⁶ Vivekananda chronology, p. 37. Available at: <http://www.awakeningindia.org/Life/Chronology.aspx>

¹⁷ Swami Vivekananda, Complete Works, Vol. 4, p. 281-282.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 281.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 280.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 282. The quotation is from Shakuntala. See p. 185 of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, translated by Monier-Williams, Oxford, 2nd Edition, 1776, p. 185. The translation there is "When a being (in other respects) happy becomes conscious of an ardent longing on seeing charming objects and hearing sweet sounds, then in all probability, without being aware of it, he remembers with his mind the friendships of former births, firmly rooted in his heart." This may apply equally well to Swami Vivekananda.

²¹ John Maynard Keynes, Newton, The Man, Proceedings of the Royal Society Tercentenary celebrations, 15-19 July, 1946, Cambridge University Press, 1947, p. 27.

²² Ibid., p. 28.

²³ See Wikipedia: Isaac Newton's occult studies at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Newton%27s_occult_studies

²⁴ E. Saïd, *Orientalism*, p. xxii, Preface to the 25th anniversary edition, Vintage Books, 1978.

²⁵ Ibid., p. xxiii.

²⁶ Arnold Toynbee in Introduction to World Thinkers on Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, edited by Swami Lokeshwarananda, Institute of Culture, Sri Ramakrishna Mission, 1983, p. 6.

²⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: a miscellany*, Sahitya Akademi, 1996, p. 363.