

# The Orient in America

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**H**INDUISM AND BUDDHISM HAVE PROVIDED most of the influence of the Orient in North America. Both religions came to this continent in three different ways: as an intellectual influence, as a missionary movement and through immigration. Because space prohibits examining these religions in all their diversity, in considering the missionary movement in Hinduism the article will confine itself to the Ramakrishna Mission and the Hare Krishna movement. It will do so because these movements have attracted the attention of large numbers of Americans of occidental descent. In considering the missionary movement in Buddhism, the article will restrict itself to Japanese Zen and Tibetan Buddhism for the same reason.

## *Hinduism as an intellectual influence*

As an intellectual influence, Hinduism has existed in America since the early nineteenth century. The New England Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman all read the *Bhagavad Gita*. Emerson even wrote a Hindu-inspired poem called 'Brahma' and his transcendental philosophy includes elements that resonate with Hinduism, such as the idea of the 'Oversoul'. This early wave of Indian thought also influenced movements such as Theosophy and the Unity School of Christianity.

## *The Hindu renaissance*

At the very time when Americans were being exposed to Hindu thought, Vivekananda (1863–1902) and other Hindu intellectuals in India were busy trying to respond to the criticisms of western missionaries that the Hindu faith was mythological and other-worldly, and to rebut the Christian claim that salvation is through Christ alone. In this struggle the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta came to the forefront as the leading system of Hindu thought.

Advaita Vedanta is a philosophy based on the Upanishads. According to Shankara, the best-known eighth-century proponent of this philosophy, underlying this world of change and appearances there is an essential, unchanging Reality called Brahman. When referring to Brahman-within-the-creature, Advaita Vedanta uses the term 'Atman'.

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In Christian terminology, Atman is God Immanent; Brahman is God Transcendent. The goal of human life is to realize that our essential nature, our Atman, is identical with the unchanging Reality, Brahman. Meanwhile, before this occurs, our Atman is entangled in the world of appearances, and in our ignorance we superimpose on the world multiple interpretations of Reality.<sup>1</sup>

### *Vivekananda*

Vivekananda responded to Christian exclusivism by relying on the claim of Advaita Vedanta that, for those with (trained) eyes to see, all distinctions – between subject and object, word and referent, religion and religion – are ultimately illusory. For him what is real is the single, undifferentiated Reality, Brahman, which is beyond words, beyond thought, beyond all conceiving. The apparent differences among the messages of religious teachers are due to the different social and cultural contexts in which the messages were received, not to any disagreement among the teachers. The diversity of religions merely means that there are many paths to the same God, Brahman. Vivekananda's use of Advaita Vedanta is not sectarian or exclusive, since it is a philosophy rather than a creed. As a philosophy it appeals over the heads of sectarians and dogmatists to the practising mystics of all religions.

In keeping with his understanding of religious diversity, Vivekananda had a positive view of Christ. He saw Jesus as one of many messengers of God who came to reveal to human beings a path to God, and therefore one whose teaching is of sacred significance. In Vivekananda's view, Christians are free to follow the path of Christ, but they are not free to reject all other messengers of God, much less to make the claim that salvation is through Christ alone.<sup>2</sup>

### *Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Order*

Hinduism arrived as a missionary movement in America when Vivekananda attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. There and subsequently he preached the universality of religious truth and attacked western materialism. He contended that while India needed the this-worldly knowledge of the West, the West desperately needed the spiritual wisdom that India had to offer, a wisdom which emphasized the need for a real experiential encounter with God over against dogma.

To spread his message of the universality of truth, Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Order of Monks and in 1897 formed the Ramakrishna Mission as an outreach agency of the Order. The Ramakrishna Order has given America many distinguished monks. Swami Akhilananda, head of the Vedanta centre in Boston, was noted for his work in the psychology of religion. Swami Nikhilananda established the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Centre in Manhattan in 1933, and lectured widely in New York City. The author of many books, he attracted famous disciples, including Margaret Woodrow Wilson, daughter of the American President, and the comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell. None, however, has exceeded in reputation Swami Prabhavananda, for many years head of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. In the late 1930s he attracted such well-known writers as Gerald Heard, Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood, who were living in Los Angeles. Prabhavananda's published works include a widely distributed interpretation of *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, translations with Christopher Isherwood of the *Bhagavad Gita*, *The crest jewel of discrimination* by Shankara, and a translation of the *Yogas Sutras* of Patanjali, with commentary. In collaboration with Frederick Manchester, he produced a translation of the Upanishads.

Thomas Merton's first encounter with the East was his reading of Aldous Huxley's *Ends and means* in the late 1930s. The book had a profound influence on Merton. Not only did it introduce him to mysticism, but it also facilitated his conversion to Catholicism.<sup>3</sup> Raimon Panikkar, former Professor of the History of Religions at the University of California (1971–1987), was familiar with the work of the Ramakrishna Order and made extensive use of Advaita Vedanta in his voluminous writings aimed at bringing Hindus and Christians closer together.<sup>4</sup>

Advaita Vedanta, as interpreted by Vivekananda, has proved to be attractive to many Americans. Some see the claim that each human partakes in divinity as a positive alternative to the Christian doctrine of original sin, according to which human nature is deprived or depraved through the Fall. Others find a harmony of Advaita Vedanta with modern science.<sup>5</sup> A widespread attraction of the Vedanta centres is that they do not pressure individuals for conversion. They offer practical techniques for achieving a direct spiritual experience of Brahman and ask only that they be tried. Moreover, Advaita Vedanta proposes a way to make sense of religious diversity. It offers Americans a new

understanding of their traditional religions without requiring that they be left behind.

At first the Ramakrishna Order elicited deep hostility from fundamentalist Christians and others. For example, in 1911, when Sara Bull of Boston left her fortune to the Ramakrishna Order, her will was overturned on the ground that her practice of Hindu methods of spirituality surely indicated that she was insane.<sup>6</sup> Today cordial relations exist between Vedanta centres and representatives of American mainstream denominations. For example, the Vedanta Society of Southern California participates in the Interreligious Council of Southern California. Swami Sarvagatananda in Boston conducts a Friday afternoon service in the chapel of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is a member of the United Ministry of Harvard University.

### *The Hare Krishna movement*

Vivekananda's most prominent successor in the missionary movement was A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. He arrived in the United States in 1965 when new immigration laws opened the door to Hindu immigrants. He taught a form of Krishna consciousness in the parks of New York City, and in 1966 established the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON). By the time of his death in 1977, he was the chief religious figure for thousands of young Americans who expressed their rejection of American values by looking eastward.

Most ISKON members in the mid-1960s were western converts from Protestantism and Catholicism. ISKON did not follow the practice of Vedanta centres of teaching techniques for realizing one's identity with the impersonal Brahman. Instead, Prabhupada taught a path of devotion to Krishna, the personal God of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Central to this path of God-realization is the repetition of the Hare Krishna mantra: 'Hare Krishna, Hare Rama, Hare Hare'. Devotees of Krishna committed themselves to chant sixteen rounds of this mantra daily, on a rosary.

Prabhupada's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, with commentary, posed a challenge to the Christian claim that the teaching of the Bible is unique, since what Jesus taught in the New Testament has its parallel in what Krishna taught in the *Gita*. More concretely, as I have shown elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> the *Gita*, like the New Testament, teaches that it is God who takes the initiative in reconciling us to Godself by becoming incarnate in the world; that God's offer of salvation is through grace;

that grace leads to repentance and the forgiveness of sin; that grace is a free gift of God and cannot be won by works; that through grace we grow in the knowledge of God; that ignorance is rooted in our false sense of self-sufficiency, and knowledge of God involves detachment from the self; that true knowledge is experiential and expresses itself in action out of the pure love of God; that the end of action is twofold; the salvation of oneself and the welfare of the community; and that our ultimate salvation is eternal communion with God beyond the world.

The significant difference between the *Gita* and the New Testament is the *Gita*'s teaching that there are many incarnations of God who can offer salvation (4:7-8). This theocentric view of salvation leaves Hindus free to grant that God has really spoken in Jesus Christ. However, many Christians do not feel free to concede that God has spoken through Krishna, in spite of the fact that the notion of salvation offered by Jesus and Krishna is similar. The *Gita*'s theocentric view of religious pluralism remains a challenge to the Christian exclusivist claim that salvation is through Christ alone.

Though the Hare Krishna movement represented only a small group, turning eastward, it was part of a larger and more immediate challenge to the churches. In the past, interest in the Orient was confined mostly to intellectuals, and was centred largely on ideas, not on devotional practices. However, by the 1960s large numbers of people, who were in no sense intellectuals, were in search of religious practices that lead to immediate, powerful and deep religious experience, rather than doctrinal ideas. On the whole, the churches could not meet this demand. Robert Bellah explains why:

The major Protestant churches in the course of generations of defensive struggle against secular rationalism had taken on some of the colour of the enemy, moralism and verbalism . . . The Catholic Church with its great sacramental tradition might be imagined to have been a more hospitable home for the new movement(s), but such was not the case. Older Catholicism had its own defensiveness which took the form of scholastic intellectualism and legal moralism.<sup>8</sup>

Many people had become disillusioned with western religions which gave them exhortations, commandments, prescriptions, but were unable to teach them practices that enabled them to love God. Prabhupada and other eastern teachers were succeeding because they

were able to teach people how to do so. When a journalist asked Prabhupada why so many people leave western religions for those of the East, he replied:

Because Judaism and Christianity are not teaching them practically. I am teaching them practically . . . Love of Godhead is being taught both in the Bible and in the *Bhagavad Gita*. But today's religionists are not actually teaching how to love God. I am teaching how to love God – that is the difference.<sup>9</sup>

The Hare Krishna movement provoked a hostile response from many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. In defence of their christocentric theology of salvation, they confronted members of ISKON in parks and major cities with imposing banners proclaiming 'Get Smart, Get Saved' and 'Turn and Burn'. The Catholic response was to focus on what Christians could learn from the movement. Thus, for example, John A. Saliba SJ observed that the challenge of the Hare Krishna movement could be seen positively as an opportunity for Christians to rediscover and build upon the riches of their own tradition.<sup>10</sup>

And indeed, Prabhupada's way to God based on the repetition of the name of God echoes Proverbs 18:10 that 'The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and are safe'. Moreover, in the history of Christian spirituality, this practice of repeating the name of God as a form of prayer was taught by John Cassian (360?–432?), John Climacus (579–649), the monasteries of Mount Athos, the Hesychast movement in the thirteenth century, and in recent centuries by the Orthodox churches, whence comes that little gem of a book, *The way of a pilgrim*.

### *Hindu immigration*

Significant immigration of Asian Hindus to America was possible only after 1965. Because of their recent arrival and their memory of the part that Christian missionaries had played in the denigration of their religion, there has been very little public interaction between them and the dominant religion of their new home. The few who have reflected on the Hindu-Christian encounter in America continue to reject the Christian claim that salvation is through Christ alone. For example, Bithika Mukerji, in her 'Christianity in the reflection of Hinduism',<sup>11</sup> and Bibhuti S. Yadav, in his 'Vaishnavism on Hans Küng: a Hindu

theology of religious pluralism',<sup>12</sup> both reject Christian exclusivism and see it as an impediment to dialogue.

### ***Buddhism as an intellectual influence***

Buddhism, like Hinduism, had an intellectual influence on American Transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau read what few Buddhist texts were available to them in the 1840s. So did the Theosophists Helen P. Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott. Blavatsky's *The secret doctrine* is still influential as a spiritual text after more than a century. Buddhism has also had an influence on psychotherapy through the Jungian movement in America, and on transpersonal psychology, both of which understand psychotherapy as sharing the goal of ending human suffering.

### ***Buddhist immigration***

While Asian Hindus came to America in significant numbers only after 1965, beginning with the California Gold Rush in 1849 thousands of Chinese and Japanese immigrants settled in the western part of the United States bringing with them a variety of Asian religions. The Buddhists among them did not proselytize, and so Buddhism stayed within immigrant communities. In the twentieth century, after World War II and America's contact with Japan during the Marshall Plan, and later after the Korean and Vietnam Wars, many Buddhist immigrants came as brides of American soldiers. In addition, thousands of refugees from South-East Asia came after 1975, bringing with them several distinct forms of Buddhism.

Buddhism is above all a religion of enlightenment. It teaches how to break through the fetters of discursive reason to gain a direct intuitive experience of reality. It does this by leading one to recognize Four Noble Truths: first, all life is suffering; second, suffering is the result of our drive for personal fulfilment as separate individuals; third, our suffering can be cured by overcoming our drive for separate existence; fourth, the way to overcome our self-seeking is through the Eightfold Path, which culminates in right concentration or meditation.

The various movements and schools of Buddhism, while agreeing on the central teaching of the Four Noble Truths, have emphasized different aspects of the teaching. Because of the limitations of space, what follows is an account of Japanese Zen and Tibetan Buddhism as missionary movements, because their methods of meditation have attracted large numbers of occidental Americans.

### *Zen Buddhism*

In finding enlightenment, Japanese Zen is so concerned with the limitations of words and ideas in knowing reality that it makes transcending them the central point of its method. The two principal schools of Zen, the Soto and the Rinzai, teach methods of concentration that try to get one unhooked from words and thoughts from the very start. The Soto school proposes concentration on one's breath, inhalation and exhalation, instead of on words, while the Rinzai school makes use of a koan (a puzzle or paradox) to put pressure on the mind until the structures of ordinary thinking collapse completely, clearing the way for one's entrance into intuitive consciousness and for the sudden flash of insight or enlightenment. The koan functions are not unlike the sayings of Jesus that oblige one to reach for insight beyond the normal conventions of thought: 'Those who find their lives will lose them' (Mt 10:39), and 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (Jn 12:24).

Because many Christians equate prayer with thinking, they have difficulty recognizing the wordless meditation of Zen as a form of prayer. Nevertheless, many Christian mystics have taught a wordless, non-discursive path to God that resembles the teaching of Zen. For example, John of the Cross (1542–1591) advocated the abandonment of thinking in order to make way for intuitive consciousness when he observed: 'The attitude necessary . . . is to pay no attention to discursive meditation'. All that is required is to liberate oneself 'from the impediment and fatigue of ideas and thoughts and care nothing about thinking', for 'desires disquiet the soul and distract it from the peaceful quiet and sweet idleness of the contemplation which is being communicated to it'.<sup>13</sup> The Benedictine historian and exegete John Chapman (1865–1933) considered the spirituality of John of the Cross to be Buddhistic;<sup>14</sup> the Cistercian Thomas Merton (1915–1968) believed that 'Zen is nothing but John of the Cross without the Christian vocabulary'.<sup>15</sup>

Japanese Zen Buddhism came to America as a missionary movement started by Soyen Shaku, the Japanese Zen spokesperson at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. The movement was slow in attracting the interest of Americans. The period of great growth for Zen came only after World War II. When Alan Watts published his *The way of Zen* in 1957, it became an immediate bestseller. D. T. Suzuki also wrote about Zen for western audiences. He was fascinated by the similarities



and differences between Zen and Christian mysticism. In the 1960s his *An introduction to Zen and Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* were also on the bestseller list.

The widespread interest in meditation eventuated in the establishment of major Zen centres in Los Angeles (1956), San Francisco (1959), Rochester (1966) and elsewhere. By the early 1970s the first Zen masters of occidental descent, including Richard Baker of San Francisco and later Santa Fe, Phillip Kapleau of Rochester and Robert Aitkin of Honolulu, headed important centres, a sign that occidental Buddhism had come of age.

The various Zen centres around the country offer a variety of styles of participation. Frequently, they enable a person to have one type of relationship to conventional religion and another to the Zen centre. Many regular Sunday churchgoers also take Zen meditation classes on some other day. The point of being connected with a Zen centre is to be able to engage in sustained Zen meditation and to have an opportunity for personal spiritual guidance from a qualified teacher.

### ***Tibetan Buddhism***

Tibetan Buddhism took root in America with the arrival of Tibetan lamas as refugees after the Communist Chinese takeover of their homeland in 1959. Soon seekers and lamas found each other. Tibetan Buddhism's combined practices of meditation, visualization, chanting of mantras and elaborate rituals allow practitioners to achieve deep spiritual states and a profound sense of relief from suffering.

Today there are two large established schools of Tibetan Buddhism in America. The first is the Nyingma Institute of Berkeley, California, founded by Tarthang Tulku in 1969. The second is the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. It was established in 1974 by Chogyam Trungpa and is the major intellectual centre for Buddhist studies in the United States.

The Dalai Lama plays an important role in the Tibetan Buddhist-Christian encounter. For example, when Christians and Buddhists came together for the tenth annual John Main Seminar in September 1994, the Dalai Lama was the guest speaker. There he said that the most important and effective dialogue between the adherents of the two faiths is not intellectual exchange, but a conversation between sincere practitioners from the perspective of their own faith.<sup>16</sup> Again, when Catholic and Buddhist monks were considering having a five-day meeting in 1996, the Dalai Lama suggested that the meeting be held at

the Abbey of Gethsemani, the home of Thomas Merton. The theme of the Gethsemani encounter was the spiritual life in the Buddhist and Christian monastic traditions.<sup>17</sup>

### *Conclusion*

While Christian participants in the encounter are open to learn techniques of meditation from Buddhists, Buddhists have shown a keen interest in Christian ethics. This interest arises from the fact that the development and application of compassion are of central importance to Buddhism. Many Christians involved in the dialogue on ethics seem to assume that sensitivity to social issues is less fully developed in Buddhism. Many Buddhists in the dialogue agree with this assessment and urge Buddhist encounter with the Christian tradition as a way to deepen the relevance of Buddhism to the modern world.<sup>18</sup>

The Christian encounter with Buddhism in America has been more peaceful and creative than the Christian encounter with Hinduism. This is largely due to the fact that Japanese Zen and Tibetan Buddhism interpret and assess non-Buddhist religions in accordance with the principle of *upaya*. Essentially, *upaya* recognizes that any method of meditation, ethical discipline or doctrinal formulation can be used to help persons spiritually advance beyond where they are as unenlightened beings toward the final truth of enlightenment. This principle allows Buddhists to assume very positive attitudes towards the teachings and practices of other religions and explains why the Buddhist interaction with Christianity is dialogical rather than confrontational.

In the current encounter, when Christians are dissatisfied with the dry husks of dogma, the Buddhist emphasis that true religion originates from deep personal experience, and not from the affirmation of propositions, can help clear the ground for Christian truth to spring again in freshness, strength and vitality. As William Johnston observes, 'Not only Zen but all forms of Buddhism are going to make an enormous impact on the Christianity of the coming century'.<sup>19</sup>

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## NOTES

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- 4 Joseph Prabhu, *The intercultural challenge of Raimon Panikkar* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1996), p 278.
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