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Guest Editors

*Diana Câmpan, Gabriela Chiciudean, Rodica Chira, Sonia Elvireanu,
Maria-Ana Tupan*

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Early America, American Theosophy, Modernity—and India

Mark L. Kamrath

University of Central Florida, USA

Abstract

The history of East-west relations in general and between America and India in particular is one of cultural, literary, and philosophical encounter. Using a post-colonial and postmodern theoretical lens, this essay charts American intellectual constructions of India from the colonial period to the present, with an eye on how American transcendentalists, theosophists, and Hindu spiritual leaders negotiated Hindu and Christian belief systems. It argues that over time, as individuals and cultures came into contact with one another, the historical assimilation of their religions testifies to the dialectical, syncretic nature of modern belief.

[**Key words:** Philosophy, religion, East-West, theology, modernity, transcendentalism, post-colonial approach, postmodernism]

“For we have seen his Star in the East, and are come to worship him”

--Matthew II. 2, *Bible*

Early American contact with India

India has long been a source of fascination to the West, dating back to 1492 and Christopher Columbus’s plan to reach the East Indies and its riches by sailing westward over the Atlantic Ocean and establishing trade. Similar to how the “New World” was imagined by Europeans, over the centuries American travellers, missionaries, and writers have each looked to India with different motives and represented its history, people, and culture in a variety of ways.

During the colonial era, observes Susan S. Bean, “American merchants and their

customers were familiar with Indian products,” including various spices, teas, and cotton and silk goods (Bean 31). As early as 1711, for instance, newspapers such as the *Boston News-Letter* regularly advertised “Hollands for Shirtings and Sheetings, fine Cambricks, Musings, India Chints” (1711: [2]) and “Garlix, Sugar, Cotton, India Counterpanes, & c” (1716: [2]). Books about India were published in London and also part of the commercial exchange.¹

In terms of non-commercial interest in India though, Cotton Mather’s pamphlet *India*

¹Typical of the books published in England and then sold in the American colonies is Sir Thomas Herbert’s *Some yeares travels into divers parts of Asia and Afrique: Describing especially the two famous empires, the Persian and great Mogull: weaved with the history of these later times also. manv rich and spacious kinadoms in the*

Oriental India, and other parts of Asia; together with adjacentiles. Severally relating the religion, language, qualities, customes, habit, descent, fashions, and other observations touching them. With a revival of the first discoverer of America (London: Printed by R. Bip. For Iacob Blome and Richard Bishop. 1628)

Christiana. A Discourse Delivered unto the Commissioners for the Propagation of the Gospel among the American Indians which is accompanied with Several Instruments relating to the Glorious Design of Propagating our Holy Religion in the Easter as well as the Western Indies. An Entertainment which they that are Waiting for the Kingdom of God will receive as Good News from a far country (1721) was among the first to represent India or the East, like the wilds of America, as a territory needing the word of God and spiritual salvation.

Several decades later, after the American Revolution, India was largely viewed through the eyes of missionaries, British travellers or military personnel, and other figures and depicted as an object of cultural marvel, appropriation, or conquest. To be sure, newspapers provided accounts of the East India Company, and oriental tales increasingly appeared in periodicals in the 1780s and 1790s. Publications such as Donald Campbell's *A Journey Overland to India, partly by a Route never gone before by any European* (1797) intrigued American readers with accounts of shipwreck and imprisonment with Hyder Ali, along with other adventures.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, India became a major focus of missionaries. A sermon on February 26, 1809, by the Reverend Claudius Buchanan (1766-1815) of India at the Parish Church of St. James in Bristol, England, for the benefit of the "Society for Missions to Africa and the East" ran into no less than twelve American editions. Entitled "The Star in the East," it explained how the "ministry of *Nature*" led three eastern wise men to Jerusalem to honor Christ's birth and how such prophecy was foretold in the "ancient writings of India" (Buchanan 4-5). In addition, some American editions added an appendix entitled "The Interesting Report of the Rev. Dr. Kerr, to the Governor of Madras, on the State

of the Ancient Christians in Cochin and Travancore, and an account of the Discoveries, made by the Rev. Dr. Buchanan of 200,000 Christians in the Sequestered Region of Hindostan." By 1812, the publication was expanded and retitled as *The Works of the Rev. Claudius Buchanan, LL.D. Comprising his Christian Researches in Asia, His Memoir of the Expediency of an Ecclesiastical Establishment for British India, and his Star in the East, with Three New Sermons. To Which is Added, Dr. Kerr's Curious and Interesting Report, Concerning the State of Christians in Cochin and Travancor, Made at the Request of the Governor of Madras.*

In India around this time, Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), a Brahmin who alienated himself from his family because of his willingness to forgo traditional beliefs and who pushed for social and religious change, published *A Defence of Hindoo Theism in reply to the attack of an advocate for idolatry at Madras*, along with *A Second Defence of the monotheistical system of the Vedas. In reply to an apology for the present state of Hindoo worship* (Calcutta 1817). According to Joscelyn Godwin, Roy was "the first Brahmin to fall under the spell of Enlightenment ideas, and the first emissary from India to the West" (Godwin 312). He upset Christian missionaries because while he admired the teachings of Jesus and the gospels, he also embraced Islam and Hinduism. His actions, however, might also be understood in light of what Homi Bhaba calls a strategy of "hybridity," a position in which the colonized subject takes on the values and language of the colonized in order to subvert them (Bhabha 112).² In that sense, Roy was accommodating Christian colonizers by sanitizing Hinduism through the lens of Western monotheism.

If Roy's argument was that Vedic culture had been originally monotheistic but had fallen into a corrupt polytheism or idolatry, his

²Other postcolonial studies, in addition to the work of Edward Said, that illuminate East-West relations include: Richard King's *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India, and the Mystic East* (New York: Routledge,

1999) and Jane Iwamura's *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

inclusive, and essentially Unitarian belief in God and the divine in every person, amounted to a “combination of deism, religious tolerance, and social justice” that would contribute to India’s embrace of democracy (Godwin 315). His ideas “prompted commentaries that appeared in the *North American Review* in 1818 and in the *Christian Register* during the 1820s” (Bean 20-21). In fact, it was his translations and “Wilkins’s *Gita* that were read by the American Transcendentalists and gave them an appreciation for Hinduism, or at least for Vedanta, for which there was as yet no parallel in other countries” (Godwin 313).

As interest, therefore, in India’s political and cultural history as well as its missionary potential increased so did interest in Eastern religions such as Hinduism or Vedic scriptures as they pertained to Brahma, or an understanding of God, the creator. Nowhere is this more evident than with the American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862).

If, for instance, Emerson’s earliest familiarity with Hindu thought came from what he read in the *Christian Register* about Rammohun Roy during his years at Harvard, his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, challenged him further to reconsider his stereotypical views of Indian culture in “Indian Superstition” (Rusk 93).

Two decades later, Emerson, in an October 1848 journal entry, observed of the Vedic texts and the *Bhagavad-gita* or “song of God” in particular that “It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spake to us[,] nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent[,] the voice of an old intelligence which in another

age & climate had pondered & thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us. Let us not go back & apply a minute criticism to it, but cherish the venerable oracle” (Emerson 1848: 360).³ According to Richard Geldard, “Seeking answers to the nature of God and the human relation to God, Emerson found in Eastern texts a confirmation of his own intuitions, and it is in the *Gita* that the concept emerges” (2001: 55-56).

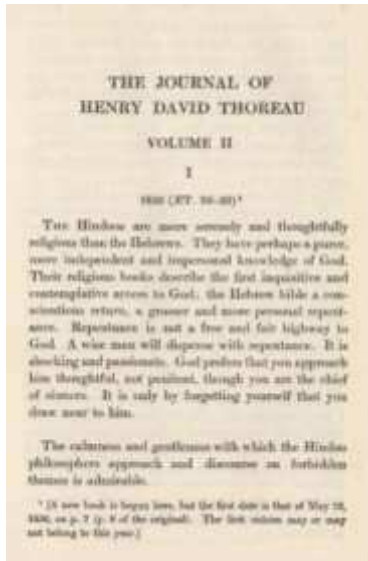
In his later years in “Essential Principles of Religion” (1862), Emerson shares his more mature beliefs, especially about the universality of spiritual truth. He wrote: “Can any one doubt that if the noblest saint among the Buddhists, the best Mahometan, the highest Stoic of Athens, the purest and wisest Christian,—Buddha and Menu in India, Confucius in China, Spinoza in Holland, could somewhere meet and converse,—they would all find themselves of one religion,—would find themselves denounced by their own sects, and sustained by these believed adversaries of their own sects” (Emerson 1862: 273).

Of Emerson’s gradual awakening to Hindu scripture, Lawrence Buell remarks that Emerson “allowed India the last word in defining his own religious beliefs” or “spiritual deparochialization” (Buell 176-177), and that his “understanding of the core vision of Hindu mythology—the material world as an illusory mask of the God that lay within all beings—spoke to him most powerfully” (Buell 179). “Hinduism,” says Buell, “and to a lesser extent Islamic and Confucian texts, helped him toward a greater critical distance on western Protestantism and toward a more catholic spirituality” (Buell 180).⁴

³Written in Sanskrit approximately 500 years before the teachings of Christ, *The Bhagavad-Gita, or Dialogues of Kreeشنا and Arjoon* was first translated into English in 1785 by Sir Charles Wilkins. By contrast, the four Vedas, also written in Sanskrit and older than the Bible, are the oldest Hindu scriptures, dating back orally to around 1500

BCE. H.H. Wilson completed the first English translation (6 volumes) from 1850-1888.

⁴For an in-depth account of how American Unitarianism influenced Roy, how Roy influenced Emerson’s transcendentalist principles, how Emerson and Thoreau affirmed or departed from principles of Hindu belief, and



[Illustration of *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, originally published in 1850]

Henry David Thoreau, on the other hand, approached an appreciation of Hindu theology, and the *Bhagvat-Geeta* in particular, through nature. His earliest observations appear in his *Journal* (1850), and contrast conventional Christian beliefs with Hindu philosophy.

He writes of the Hindus and their beliefs, especially from the *Vedas*:

The Hindoos are more serenely and thoughtfully religious than the Hebrews. They have perhaps a purer, more independent and impersonal knowledge of God. Their religious books describe the first inquisitive and contemplative access to God; The Hebrew bible a conscientious return, a grosser and more personal repentance. Repentance is not a free and fair highway to God. A wise man will dispense with Repentance. It is shocking and passionate. God prefers that you approach him thoughtful, not penitent, though you are the chief of sinners. It is

only by forgetting yourself that you draw near to him.

The calmness and gentleness with which the Hindoo philosophers approach and discourse on forbidden themes is admirable.

What extracts from the Vedas I have read fall on me like the light of a higher and purer luminary, which describes a loftier course through a purer stratum,--free from particulars, simple, universal. It rises on me like the full moon after the stars have come out, wading through some far summer stratum of the sky.

The Vedant teaches how, 'by forsaking religious rites,' the votary may 'obtain purification of mind'.

One wise sentence is worth the state of Massachusetts many times over.

The Vedas contain a sensible account of God. The religion and philosophy of the Hebrews are those of a wilder and ruder tribe, wanting the civility and intellectual refinements and subtlety of the Hindoos (Thoreau a. 3-4).

In *Walden* (1854) several years later, Thoreau wrote in "Economy" that material "luxuries" obstruct higher thinking and that "The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek, were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward" (Thoreau b. 25). "How much more admirable the Bhagvat-Geeta than all the ruins of the East!," he remarked (Thoreau b. 92). In "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," he uses an anecdote from "a Hindoo book" about a prince's mistaken identity to explain how one's soul can be revealed. He writes, "So

how Vedanta societies developed in America at the end of the nineteenth century, see Carl T. Jackson's *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth-Century Explorations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), Arthur Versulis's *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Elizabeth De Michelis's *A History of Modern Yoga:*

Patanjali and Western Esotericism (Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), and Ann Gleig's unpublished dissertation "Enlightenment After the Enlightenment: American Transformations of Asian Contemplative Traditions" (Rice University, 2011).

soul', continues the Hindoo philosopher, 'from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be *Brahme*.' I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things" (Thoreau b. I: 152). In "Higher Laws," addressing the alienation humans feel from their own body because of social mores and shame, he remarks, "We are so degraded that we cannot speak simply of the necessary functions of human nature. In earlier ages, in some countries, every function was reverently spoken of and regulated by law. Nothing was too trivial for the Hindoo lawgiver, however offensive it may be to modern taste" (Thoreau b. II: 345).

It is, however, in "The Pond in Winter", where he most fully expresses his desire to read the *Bhagvat Geeta* and absorb its truths, Thoreau observes of Walden and Brahma:

Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! There I meet the servant of the Bramin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or

dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges (Thoreau b: 459).

For Thoreau, Walden's waters represents the kind of metaphysical truths that the *Bhagvat Geeta* contains, if one is willing to meditate upon them. Symbolically, the waters and truths of the East and West commingle, and with "favoring winds" they circulate the globe.⁵ Thoreau's desire, suggests Eric Leigh Schmidt, to "move beyond the usual ligatures of New England Protestantism and to question standing religious authorities" ultimately represents "a wider cultural convergence and realignment, a crossing from Christian exemplars of holiness to more diffuse sources and inspirations" (Schmidt 66-67).

Indeed, just as Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) fueled skepticism about religion in general and the authority or divinity of Biblical teachings in particular, so "Philosophical speculations like those of Herbert Spencer, the esthetic revolt of men like Ruskin, the penetrating truculence of Carlyle, and the rejection of conventional attitudes by such writers as Dickens, Eliot, Balzac, Tolstoy, Whitman, and Dostoevsky, all aided in the pioneer work of the Theosophical Movement" (Cunningham Press).⁶

However, while these individuals contributed to an ethos of independent spirituality, it would be a group of bohemian intellectuals and spiritualists who physically travelled to India that would result in real, not imagined, cultural and religious assimilation.

⁵ In his essay "Walking" (1861), Thoreau remarks "I walk out into a Nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in," highlighting how "Menu" originally authored Hindu religious law and is regarded as primordial (250). *Essays*, by Henry D. Thoreau. Ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

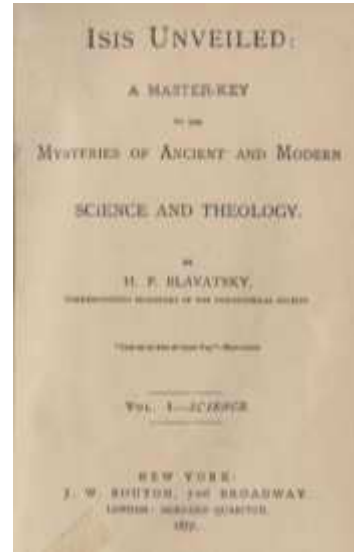
⁶Of the poem "Passage to India" (1881) and its emphasis on brotherhood and the voyage of the soul to the "seas of God," Walt Whitman said to Traubel WW that "There's more of me, the essential ultimate me, in that than in any of the poems. . ." (411, 421). Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass*, Ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. New York: W.W. Norton, 1973.

The American Theosophical Society

In 1875 Helena P. Blavatsky (1831-1891), a Russian immigrant with an aristocratic background, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), an American lawyer, William Q. Judge (1851-1896), an Irish immigrant who became a lawyer, and individuals familiar with Jewish and other forms of mysticism organized in New York City the Theosophical Society, or a society devoted to seeking God's truth about the universe.⁷ As Stephen Prothero points out, it initially was not devoted to promoting Eastern religious beliefs; instead, it challenged, along with "religious populists" like the Methodists and Baptists, conventional belief structures in favor of a more individualistic understanding of God (Prothero 199). Olcott and Blavatsky, he asserts, "discovered that they shared an interest in spiritualism, a disdain for its popular manifestations, and a commitment to its reform" (Prothero 203). Such was their interest in addressing "false science" and "false religion" that Olcott equated their search for knowledge with William Lloyd Garrison's cause against slavery (Prothero 206).

Toward this end, members were initially interested in how Neoplatonism, spiritualism, and other esoteric beliefs could reveal universal spiritual truths and wisdom. However, if Olcott had reform in mind, Blavatsky was, overtime, more interested in how the occult and rituals might yield spiritual truths. Toward this end, in 1877 Blavatsky published *Isis Unveiled*, where she explains the origins and secrets of the world's major religions and philosophies (Stein 106). Her philosophy attempted to reconcile the conflict between science and organized religion by "spiritualizing evolutionary theory and

emphasizing self-reliance in the quest for moral and spiritual perfection" (Wakoff 364).



[Illustration of the title page in *Isis Unveiled*, originally published in 1877]

Illustrative of the dialectic between American interest in alternative religious or metaphysical thought and Eastern religion, Blavatsky and Olcott left New York in 1878 and travelled to India and Ceylon, where she converted to Buddhism, and in 1882 established in Adyar the headquarters of the Theosophical Society. As explained in her *Key to Theosophy* (1889), the society had three objectives: "(1) To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, colour, or creed. (2) To promote the study of the world's religion and sciences, and to vindicate the importance of old Asiatic literature, namely, of the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Zoroastrian philosophies. (3) To investigate the hidden mysteries of Nature under every aspect possible, and the psychic and spiritual powers latent in man especially" (24). Over the years, the wording of these objectives would change some, and in 1884 the Society for Psychical Research would issue a report highly critical of

⁷ For a history of the American chapter of the Theosophical Society, see *100 Years of Theosophy: A History of the Theosophical Society in America*, by Joy Mills. Wheaton, Ill: Theosophical Publishing House, 1987. Michael Gomes's *Theosophy in the Nineteenth Century: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing,

1994) also provides a useful historical synopsis, along with a comprehensive bibliography. Also see Gershom Scholem's book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941), which discusses the ways Judaism and Theosophy intersected from the beginning, i.e., beyond sharing the seal of Solomon symbol.

various psychic feats or phenomena associated with Madame Blavatsky, including formal charges of deception and fraud in regard to the paranormal. Still, she was popular as a spiritual medium and religious philosopher, and promoter of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs.

On June 16, 1880, for example, *The Pioneer* of Allahabad, India, reported in an article entitled “Theosophy in Ceylon” that:

The visit of the delegation of Theosophists to Ceylon has stirred the native society of the island to its depths. The local officers declare that they never saw such gatherings in the southern district before. The visitors were expected on the 11th, on which day 4,000 people gathered at the landing-pier, the boats in the harbor were decorated with flags, a native committee boarded the P. and O. steamer as soon as she dropped anchor, and great preparations were made to give the delegates a proper welcome (3).

While the article reports that a schedule change occurred and that a different crowd of similar size greeted them elsewhere, it also details how Olcott spoke to “3,000 Buddhists” and how his message on “Theosophy and Buddhism” was received by the “entire English colony.” His argument, it is reported, “was to the effect that the universal yearning of humanity for some knowledge of divine things was satisfied pre-eminently in the system which Buddha bequeathed to the world,” and that a society of Buddhist should be formed to spread the Hindu gospel. Olcott, says the report,

was happy to say that this suggestion had received the entire approbation of the greatest Buddhist priests and the most respected laymen, whose presence at this time showed the state of their feelings. Megittuwatte fully corroborated Colonel

Olcott’s statements, and bespoke the goodwill of every true Buddhist for the Theosophical Society, of which he himself had been a fellow for the last two years (1880: 3).

The article ends with a listing of the delegation, including Blavatsky and several Indian officials. Its importance here is the manner in which Indians represented the arrival of theosophy in Ceylon, and makes clear the motives and actions of those involved.

Schmidt observes that

“Over the next decade Olcott especially emerged as a pivotal player in his support for an anticolonial revival of Buddhism in Ceylon and even produced his own Buddhist Catechism for use in schools there and elsewhere. His catechism—by 1897, it had been ‘published in twenty languages, mainly by Buddhists, for Buddhists’—was a strange mix. On the one hand, it showed Olcott’s immersion in the life and teachings of the Buddha and displayed his considerable sympathy with basic Buddhist precepts...it could easily have been read as a primer on Transcendentalist spirituality in its evocation of “wise and dignified hermits in their forest solitude and its emphasis on mystical experience” (Schmidt 159).

Regardless, he gained many followers and converts who were eager to revive Buddhist teachings.⁸

In American newspapers and periodicals, the progress of theosophy in India, England, and the United States was reported on widely from the *New York Herald* and *Philadelphia Inquirer* to the *Kansas City Times* and *San Francisco Bulletin*. In 1885, for instance, the Reverend J. P. Jones published “Theosophy in

⁸ For a more detailed account of Olcott’s life and his efforts to reform Buddhism and Hinduism in Asia; his fall out with Anagarika Dharmapala, a native theosophist who left Olcott to lead his own Buddhist revival movement in India; and how “cultural contact and interreligious

interaction” in general resulted in a philosophical and social “creolization”(ix), see Stephen Prothero’s *The White Buddhist: The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

India,” which critically examined Blavatsky’s and Olcott’s efforts in India while defending that of Christianity. Jones observes that “it is a remarkable fact that few towns of any significance can be found in South India in which there is not a branch society of this movement” and that “the same is true, to a lesser degree, of other parts of India.” Further, he writes:

These branches may not be strong in numbers, but their members are, almost to a man, possessed of influence and education; and they are enthusiastic in the use of both these agencies for the advancement of their cause. The daily papers of this presidency constantly print hazy expositions and senseless platitudes from these Theosophists in advocacy of their so-called religion. Nor are the Hindus the only ones who are won over to it. The leading English daily in South India finds it politic to-day to defend Theosophy. It does this, however, as a patron rather than as a devotee.

Englishmen of literary and journalistic fame, and of high military rank in this land, have been duped by it, and identify themselves with it (1885: 5).

While he remarks that it is “hard to understand how Christianized Europeans can be duped by Theosophy,” his exposés aimed primarily at illustrating the tactics used by the “proselytizing agency” of Blavatsky and her “method of deceiving the people” (Jones 6). Despite, he says, that the “active adherents” of Theosophy are drawn from “the heathen,” Christianity in India is “undisturbed”: “yea, more; it feeds upon this new opposition and spreads more deeply and widely its roots in every direction, showing that even Theosophy is one of the means which God will indirectly use to further his own blessed cause in India” (Jones 6).

By contrast, also published at this time in the United States was “Religion in India. A Native’s View of the Situation—Christianity

and Theosophy,” which appeared in the *Trenton Evening Times* (October 1, 1885). After explaining how “Christianity has been losing all charm for the educated Indians” and even Indians of the lower classes, the author remarks that “The Theosophical society has done one great good in India—it has turned the attention of many an educated Indian to the treasures which the literature of their great ancestors contain. English educated Indian youths have been in the habit of condemning everything Hindu as unscientific or superstition, or worthless, and the Theosophical society has been doing much to cure the Indian youth of this wrong habit, and in this work I wish the society all success” (Jones 5).

In India, newspapers also widely reported the struggle between Christian missionaries and members of the Theosophical Society, and the impact of the movement upon Indian culture. For instance, in the *Amitra Bazar Patrika* (January 30, 1879) of Calcutta, it was reported that “The doctrine of Theosophy is in bitter antagonism with Christianity, and hence it is easy to believe that Mdme Blavatsky is in no great favour with those who would ‘let things be as they are.’ A coalition is said to have formed between the Theosophic Society and the Ayr Samaj of India, and it is expected that the author of *Isis Unveiled* will make quite a sensation in religious India by her presence” (1879: 6). The *Madras Mail* (April 22, 1884), in an article entitled “Religious Movements in India. Brahmoism and Theosophy,” reported how, after a lecture by S. Sathianadham, various native and non-native speakers discussed Theosophy relative to Christianity and Hinduism. In response, for instance, to Sathianadham’s observation that Theosophy was “originated by foreigners” and, strangely, “Hindus took more to Theosophy than to Brahmoism,” others responded by observing that the “moral precepts” of Christ were “as high as those of Buddha and every other religious teacher” and that “true Christianity, i.e., the precepts of Jesus Christ, was nothing else than Theosophy, pure and

simple.” While a Christian minister “rose to defend his Church,” the “audience became impatient” and the Chairman of the lecture turned discussion back to the advertised topic (5).⁹

Over time, Blavatsky published in London *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), which attempted to explain various themes concerning the world’s major religions and which inspired Annie Besant to join the Theosophical Society and to be an advocate for its causes, particularly in regard to women’s roles in society. After Blavatsky’s death in 1891, Olcott and Besant led the Theosophical Society that was based in Adyar, India, and Judge led the American chapter. Although the movement in the U.S. declined, Judge “revived the Theosophical organization by conducting public meetings and publishing a monthly magazine, the *Path*, which appeared regularly from 1886 to 1896. Through Judge’s efforts as a lecturer and a frequent contributor to the *Path*, an increasing number of middle-class Americans found Theosophy to be a viable alternative to the religious cultures in which they were raised” (Ashcraft 7228). In 1896, the Theosophical Society of America was formally established.

While it would take much of the nineteenth century for Indian leaders such as Dayananda Saravasty (1824-1883) to reclaim the ancient teachings of the Vedas and denounce the caste system, the Theosophical Society played, according to Leah Leneman, “an important role in the Hindu renaissance of this period.” Of the belief that Christianity was the “only true religion,” she remarks, “The Theosophists vehemently disagreed with this view. By their

dissemination of Hindu religious writings they created a new interest in Eastern religion throughout much of the Western world, while their unqualified admiration for Hinduism created a feeling of confidence and worth which helped to revitalize religious life in India” (1980: 24).

To illustrate: Swami Narenda Vivekananda (1863-1902) was heavily influenced by Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886), a visionary Brahmin of Dakshineswar. He travelled through India where he witnessed poverty, developed a sympathy for the diversity of Indian peoples and beliefs, and advocated social justice. Of his impact in India, Bruce F. Campbell observes that,

“Members of the Theosophical Society or persons strongly influenced by Theosophy were central to the founding of the Indian National Congress, to the revival of Buddhism in Ceylon, to the consolidation of the Indian independence movement after World War I, to the development of educational systems to serve the native populations of in India and Ceylon, and to the creation of campaigns for the revival of Sanskrit and for the betterment of the position of women, outcastes, prisoners, and others in India” (1980: 172).

Vivekananda, however, also made a significant impact in the West when he appeared at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, a part of the Columbian Exposition at the World’s Fair. Intended to showcase “Christian triumphalism,” the parliament instead became, ironically, “the first

⁹ The December 30, 1886, issue of *The Madras Mail* reported that “The eleventh anniversary of the Theosophical Society was held yesterday evening in the new Council Hall at the Adyar. There was a large attendance of native gentlemen and students—including about 120 delegates who had come from different parts of India.” The Secretary reported that while the Society had increased “25 per cent,” there was “also an increased attempt on the part of the members to lead a higher life and to unite themselves with the everlasting *logos* through which alone man could obtain immortality (Loud

Applause).” It also reported how the “spread of western education had made most of the young men born in Hindu—in Brahmin families—give up their daily rituals enjoined by the Shastras, but the Theosophical Society had already succeeded in bringing such men back to a sense of their religious observances.” The society meeting concluded with Colonel Olcott affirming that “the star had already begun to shine in the East, in the literary and religious as well as political sense” and that the Theosophical Society’s “ideal” or goal was to “learn the truth and proclaim it at all hazards” (5).

public rebuttal in the United States to colonialism and Christian missions by representatives of Asian religions” and, says E. Allen Richardson, an opportunity to “establish their own faiths in the heartland of America.” Vivekananda, Anagarika Dharmapala, and Kinza Hirai in particular challenged Western Orientalism or assumptions about Eastern peoples and religions as being inferior, deceitful, or immoral, and charged Christian missionaries and Christianity with ethnocentrism, intolerance, and institutional idol worship (2012: 417-419).¹⁰

After the conference, he toured the United States and in 1897, he established the Vedanta Society in New York—the first Hindu-lead organization that aimed to promote Hindu beliefs. In defending the religions of India against Western ethnocentrism, he became “an ally of liberal universalists at home and abroad,” and “proved a crucial broker of Hindu-inspired ‘practical spirituality’ in the United States” (Schmidt 162).

Modern Representations of India and Hinduism

In the twentieth century, while social reformer Katherine Tingley took the reins of the society in the United States, and was the driving force in 1897 behind the Theosophical utopian community in Point Loma, near San Diego, California, the Vedanta movement that Vivekananda began in New York expanded to

San Francisco with the building in 1906 of the first Hindu temple in America, along with other cities.¹¹

In 1934, after several splits and changes, the American Theosophical Society was renamed “The Theosophical Society in America.” Its current headquarters are in Wheaton, Illinois, where it is largely focused on “revitalization of the ancient religious traditions of the East and the worldwide realization of interreligious harmony” (Prothero 1993: 210). It publishes *Quest*, a periodical that seeks to explore “the common ground between philosophies and religions, between East and West, between science and religion.” While the movement is no longer as robust as before, it played an important role in westernizing Eastern religions. As with Emerson and Thoreau, however, one can argue that it could not always meet Indian religions completely on their own terms and instead affirmed a Western metaphysical ideal of the East in general and Hindu beliefs in particular.

Several decades later, as a response to Christian exclusivism by preaching tolerance and religious universalism, Yoganda (1893-1952), who had started the Self-Realization Fellowship in 1920 published his *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946), which became a best-seller on spirituality (Wessinger 1975: 173-177). In 1959, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi first introduced Transcendental Meditation to the United States, helping spread the practices of yoga and meditation.¹² Of this time, Ann Gleig and Lola

¹⁰ At the end of his talk on “Hinduism,” Vivekananda asserted that if there ever were to be a “universal religion” its God would shine his rays upon “the followers of Krishna or Christ; saints or sinners alike; which would not be the Brahman or Buddhist, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all of these. . . . It would be a religion which would have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, and would recognize a divinity in every man or woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force would be centered in aiding humanity to realize its Divine nature” (1893: 133).

¹¹ For a discussion of how the Point Loma Theosophical community was founded, see W. Michael Ashcraft’s *The Dawn of the New Cycle: Point Loma Theosophists and*

American Culture. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002.

¹² In 1968, the Beatles met with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in Rishikesh, India, as part of their desire to learn Transcendental Meditation—a method for achieving inner peace. The embrace of “TM” by Western celebrities accelerated its popularity. For a basic overview of the period, see Philip Goldberg’s *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation—How Indian Spirituality Changed the West*. New York: Harmony Books, 2010. Also see Trout, Polly. 2000. *Eastern Seeds, Western Soil: Three Gurus in America*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Pub. Co.

Williamson observe that if Swami Vivekananda “demythologized Hinduism” and replaced “devotionalism” with “western values such as rationality, ethics, and tolerance,” most “second wave” gurus of the 1960s and 1970s “placed a universal mystical experience at the core of all religions and offered meditation techniques as scientific tools for accessing higher states of consciousness” (2013: 4-5).

By 1966, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) emerged, primarily as a result of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada travelling in the West (International Society 1999: 2). As stated in one of its brochures, “The movement’s main purpose is to promote the well-being of human society by teaching the service of God consciousness (Krsna consciousness) according to the timeless Vedic scriptures of India” (1999: 1).



[Illustration of a brochure cover entitled “On Chanting Hare Krishna.” International Society for Krishna Consciousness]

Over the decades, centers for study opened in major cities in the U.S., along with Europe, Africa, South America, Asia, and Australia—and ISKCON also returned to India, established cultural centers in Mumbai, New Delhi, Ahmedabad, and other cities, and now influences modern day Hinduism (1999: 8-9).

During this period, as postmodern philosophy and secular thought has evolved, organized American religion as a whole also changed and become less homogenous.¹³ Despite, for example, the ecumenical movement and the rise of megachurches since the 1970s, interest in the United States in mainstream Christianity (as measured by attendance) declined, and institutional Christianity paid, and continues to pay, little, if any, attention to other world religions.¹⁴

However, even as Christian evangelical outreach has increased and become more humanitarian in focus in underdeveloped countries, more conservative groups such as the Jack Van Impe Ministries have waged a religious media war with world religions other than Christianity. On TV and in other media, they routinely represent Hindus and Muslims as “Other,” evil, or deceptive. In its *Perhaps Today* series, for instance, the Van Impe ministry asserts in its “World Report” that “Mohammed is dead. Buddha is long gone. Hinduism’s 100,000,000 (one hundred million) idol gods are not the answer (*Perhaps Today* 2012: 14). Further, Gandhi’s praise of

¹³ Besides Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, the writings of Martin Heidegger, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Frederic Jameson, Richard Rorty, and Michel Foucault are often considered as being the most influential postmodern thinkers, especially in regard to how society, ideologies, and knowledge are constructed relative to power and language. While ethnocentric, Nels F. S. Ferre’s *The Sun and the Umbrella* (1953) is representative of Cold War era efforts to think critically, relative to other world religions,

about how Christian theology and the Bible can become idols and obscure truth. Catherine L. Albanese, by comparison, argues in *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (2007) that various metaphysical traditions, alongside evangelicalism, shaped American religious history and the rise of alternative spiritual traditions.

¹⁴ A May 15, 2015, Pew Research Center study entitled “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” reports that the number of Americans who describe themselves as Christian has dropped from 78.4% in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014 while the number of individuals who describe

Muhammed is evidence of what Peter meant in the Bible when he said “there were false prophets also among the people” (*Perhaps Today* 2013: 27).

By sharp contrast, the Unitarian Universalist Association, established in 1961 as a result of a merger between the Universalist Church (founded in 1793) and the American Unitarian Association (founded in 1825), has created a religion that is inclusive of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and other faiths. It embraces a range of principles compatible with American transcendentalist beliefs about nature and Theosophist ideas about individual conscience, human rights, liberty, and justice. Unitarian Universalism worship today draws from Hindu poetry, scripture, philosophy, and *kirtan*, and affirms, like Hinduism, “the personal search for spiritual truth, the idea that all things are connected, and a respect for other religious paths.”¹⁵ Recent books such as Brian McLaren’s *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha and Mohammed Cross the Road* (2012) also attempt to understand the relationships between these traditions and promote interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance over conflict or hostility.

In the end, and in a postmodern world where “universal truths” are in question or subject to multiple interpretations, distinguishing philosophical mimicry from assimilation, or how different generations and populations of Americans constructed India in general and Hinduism in particular, is difficult. Just as the American encounter with Eastern religion has been dialectical and marked by the assimilation of India to Western categories of belief through Christian exceptionalism and affirmative Orientalism, so Hinduism itself has

undergone change. Therefore, as Ronald Inden observes, we need to be careful about creating essentialist ideas of Hindu belief, of “equating Indian thought with Hinduism and equating Hinduism with the monist pantheism and idealism attributed to Advaita Vedanta” (130).

Indeed, while institutional Christianity, in its many forms, remains the one true religion for many in America, others “have seen his Star in the East, and are come to worship him” in a way that is more consistent with Eastern religious belief itself and an individual relation to the universe.¹⁶ Still others, both Christian and Hindu alike, question the role of holy books, institutions, and philosophical metanarratives in representing “the truth”—or, at least, the illusion of knowing it—and desire a simpler spiritual existence.

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themselves as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” has increased from 16.1% to 22.8% during that same time period.

¹⁵ There are three types of Unitarianism in India: the Unitarian Christian Church of Chennais in Madras (founded in 1795); the Brahma Samaj (founded in 1828 by Rammohun Roy); and the Unitarian Church of the Khasi Hills (founded in 1887 by Hajom Kissor Singh).

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Mark L. Kamrath is an early Americanist scholar and English Professor at the University of Central Florida. He is General Editor of the Charles Brockden Brown Electronic Archive and Scholarly Edition and Co-Director of the UCF Center for Humanities and Digital Research. His books include a revisionist study in the cultural politics of Charles Brockden Brown's late works: *The Historicism of Charles Brockden Brown. Radical History and the Early Republic* (Kent State UP, 2010). He co-edited the *Letters and Early Epistolary Writings, Volume 1 of the Collected Writings of Charles Brockden Brown*, Bucknell University Press (2013). He has served as an inspector for the MLA-Committee on Scholarly Editions, and as a grant panelist for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). He is currently completing, with others, the Charles Brockden Brown archive, and he is a founding member of the Florida Digital Humanities Consortium.
