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World Religions - THL 521

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June 16, 2015

## **Ramakrishna Monastery**

### **INTRO**

Since 1949 the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco Canyon has been an operating branch of the larger Ramakrishna Order of India, named after its founder Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886). Its few small buildings include a bookstore, dining hall, library, monks' quarters and a meditation shrine. Land-wise, the monastery sits on 40 acres of chaparral nestled among the rolling hills and sparse oaks overlooking the Upper Oso Reservoir on the outskirts of O'Neil Regional Park in the Mission Viejo area of south Orange County, California. Part of their land is put to farm use (vegetables from which are available for purchase in the bookstore). There is also a trail traversing the landscape called the "Shrine Trail," which pays tribute to the great religions of the world - in keeping with the Hindu tendency to see all religions as basically different paths leading to the same mountain top.

### **BACKGROUND**

Although Hinduism from its Vedic roots has always been a syncretistic system, this tendency to absorb other regional religions took a quantum leap forward in the modern Hindu movement (also called the Indian Renaissance).<sup>1</sup> Under the leadership of

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<sup>1</sup>Prothero, Stephen (2010-04-06). *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter* (p. 165). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

Ramakrishna, and his predecessor, Rammuan Roy (1772-1833), modern Hinduism driven in part by nationalist interest began seeing even other great religions from around the globe as merely alternate paths to the same spiritual destination. The syncretism of the regional Vedic religion had become the black hole of modern Hinduism. Many have forgotten today that prior to this nineteenth-century movement, the term “Hinduism” and the major world religion designated by it were not known as such.

Out of this modern Hindu movement and into the western world came Ramakrishna’s disciple, Swami Vivekananda. In 1893 Vivekananda represented this new conception of a unified Hinduism at the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago. With his Irish brogue, acquired from missionary school, Swami Vivekananda spoke against the encroachment of Christian missions to India and for the unity of all the religions of the world, making quite an impact. This priority of unity over diversity Boston University professor of religion, Stephen Prothero, describes as a two-step movement: the aim was “first, to collapse Hinduism’s many gods into one Brahman<sup>2</sup> and, then, to collapse the world’s many religions into one religion.”<sup>3</sup> In his book, *God Is Not One*, Prothero adds that the legacy of Roy, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda lives on today in the likes of best-selling authors on religion Huston Smith and Karen Armstrong.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this “all is really one” worldview seems to have found a warm welcome in today’s post-modern pluralism in America (more on that later in the discussion).

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<sup>2</sup> Brahman here is the Hindu word for the impersonal Ultimate Principle of the universe - sometimes called “God” in English, although not the same as the transcendent yet personal Triune God, Yahweh, of the Christian Bible.

<sup>3</sup> Prothero, 166.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Vivekananda was also responsible for founding the Vedanta Society (1894), the largest Hindu organization in the United States. It is this same Vedanta Society of which the Ramakrishna Monastery in Trabuco Canyon is a member. Vedanta, as the name suggests comes from the sanskrit words *Veda* (as in the *Vedas*, or early Hindu scriptures) meaning “knowledge” and *anta* meaning “end of.” So, “Vedanta” refers to the end or summit of knowledge. Interestingly, it could also refer to the *Upanishad* holy texts, which historically come after the *Vedas* and are also the more philosophical Hindu scriptures on which the Vedanta school is based. It is only the Vedic scriptures that are considered *sruti*, “that which is heard,” as in heard from the gods - implying a slightly more weighty authority or level of inspiration. Different sects of Hinduism, nevertheless, gravitate toward their own favored sources of scripture. For Vedanta it is the *Upanishads*.

The Vedanta philosophy is divided into two main schools: the Dvaita (dualistic) and the Advaita (nondualistic). The Ramakrishna Monastery is self-consciously committed to the Advaita Vedanta school. Whereas the dualistic school of Dvaita is monotheistic, more devotional in its approach and recognizes God’s transcendent attributes over other separately created entities, nondualistic Advaita is aggressively monistic. Advaita finds and favors such passages in the Upanishads, for example, that seem to assert the identification of Atman (man’s non-ego soul) with Brahman (the universal Oversoul or impersonal Ground of All Being). “This self is Brahman,” “I am Brahman,” “Consciousness is Brahman,” are three such “go to” passages for the Advaita faithful.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.5; Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10; Aitareya Upanishad 3.3, respectively.

## EXPERIENCE

Experience is a key word in Hinduism; a follower or disciple, in the end, must experience or “see” for him or herself the ultimate truth about God, one’s self and reality. No one can see it or adequately describe it for you. Enlightenment is ineffable. Those disciples or devotees a little further along the path than the rest of us can show you the path, but you must take it, yourself, all the way to its liberating end, hopefully. Those who show you the path are called swamis, or masters. My tour guide for a day visit to the Ramakrishna Monastery was a swami who received a new name when he became a monk (his Christian name at birth had been “Chris”). His new name, “Swami Ramakrishnananda,” was a special combination of names in that it happened to recall the modern Hindu leader, “Ramakrishna” (for whom the Order of the monastery was named) and his esteemed disciple, “Vivekananda,” the ambassador of the Advaita Vedanta path who came to America and founded the Order. There was a lovely statue of Swami Vivekananda prominently positioned under the archway at the end of the central gravel path leading to a complex of small buildings.<sup>6</sup>

The layout of the overall grounds was as deliberate as it was telling. My tour guide, Swami Ramakrishnananda, showed me the path - literally. There is a path around the hilly acreage of the monastery that they call “The Shrine Trail.” “You should take it,” the swami said. So I did. And, inasmuch as each must journey on his own, “Swami R” (as he said I could call him), did not go with me (he had other obligations).

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it should be further noted that this statue sat among a pond of lily pads that drew almost a swarm of buzzing bees. This is reminiscent of the famous poem of Guru Nanek (of Sikh tradition) entitled, “Oh Honey Bee, Thou Art Lost In Worldly Flowers” (15th century). The picture here is of people buzzing around for the sweet things in life - lost and only able to find their way at the feet of an enlightened guide - here Vivekananda - where one can meditate in tranquility.

The path, about a mile in length, is described as “moderate” in difficulty level. But it is just as much an exercise in spiritual meditation as it is in physical conditioning. The Shrine Trail gets its name from the fact that along its windy course one can stop and meditate at any of several shrines built in honor of the world’s great religions. There is a shrine with a large crescent moon and star (maybe eight feet tall) next to a contemplating bench and sign equal in length to that bench which reads, “Islam.” Further on, one encounters another such arrangement in a grove with an almost life-sized cross next to its sign for “Christianity.” Then there is a shrine for Judaism (with the star of David) and, further still, a meditating Buddha statue sits motionless under a tree for the outdoor Buddhist shrine. The fifth shrine I encountered is one dedicated to Native American religions. And the capstone, the sixth shrine at the topmost point of the mountain, is the shrine for Hinduism - only the sign does not read that; rather it reads, “Vedanta” (whose meaning, again, is the end or “summit” of knowledge). For this summit shrine the enlarged symbol raised fourteen feet or so above ground on a giant gateway frame (through which all the valleys below could be seen in full panoramic glory) is the “Om” symbol - the sacred mantra used in eastern meditation that is said to resonate with deepest Reality and able to bring one into union with the Brahman, Itself.

The message that the layout of this well-designed Shrine Trail is sending is clear (and should be familiar by now): all religions are but different paths to the same mountain top. And, so, this trail that the traveller experiences becomes a microcosm of the Hindu’s *Axis Mundi*, the center of his universe - which is his Mount Olympus, as it were. In the Hindu epics, the *Puranas*, there is indeed among the Himalayas a legendary Mt. Meru, which is said to be the abode of Brahman and the gods, a joining point between

heaven and earth.<sup>7</sup> And so, the suggestion is that, here, in this place one can experience union with God.

But there is another message that comes through, as well. That message is a mixed one (especially for the inquiring monotheist). While one of the opening lines on their visitor's pamphlet assures the reader that "Vedanta teaches respect for all religions"<sup>8</sup> (why else would they have included them all on the Shrine Trail, right?), the very next paragraph seems to strain the meaning of respect when it steps squarely on the monotheist's toes:

Though impersonal, beyond name and form, God assumes various personal forms to reveal himself to us. God is our soul. We are primarily consciousness, part of the cosmic consciousness.

All the incarnations (manifestations of God on earth) are actual embodiments of Divinity. *No one incarnation* can be regarded as the *only* manifestation of that Divinity.<sup>9</sup> [emphasis added]

This last statement, in juxtaposition with the foregoing, "Vedanta teaches respect for all religions," cannot help but come off sounding at best a bit inconsistent. As one fresh off The Shrine Trail who made the meditative stop at the "Christianity" shrine, one of the Christian scriptures that came to mind was from St. John's Gospel, chapter 1: "No one has ever seen God, but the *one and only* Son, who is himself God and is in closest

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<sup>7</sup> Ariel Glucklich, *Strides of Vishnu: Hindu Culture in Historical Perspective*, New York: Oxford University Press (2008), 127.

<sup>8</sup> From "What Is Vedanta?" A tract distributed by the Vedanta Society available at the Ramakrishna (and presumably other Vedanta) monasteries, front cover, accessed June 11, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, front inside cover.

relationship with the Father, has made him known.”<sup>10</sup> The “Son,” as Christianity teaches, is Jesus, the Christ, the same Jesus who later in John’s Gospel is described as “the Only-Begotten” (emphasis added) and then later as “*the Way, the Truth and the Life*”<sup>11</sup> (my emphasis) by whom *only* do we have access to the Father. So, the problem is how much “respect” is really taught for the Christian religion (for one) when Vedanta systematically dismantles biblical Christology point by point as a matter of fact (the same goes for Islam and Judaism, too, insofar as the Vedanta Society’s claim is that God is “impersonal, beyond name,” and “God is our soul” - two points with which Muslim and Jewish worshipers of *Allah* and *Yahweh*, respectively, would contend vigorously). The problem, especially in pluralistic America today, is not for the Vedanta Society (or anyone else for that matter) to teach that human beings are all part of the cosmic consciousness, which is God (though we would disagree with that doctrine). They have a right to teach that. We respect that right. The problem is one of logical consistency or fair representation of the other faiths considered when Advaita Vedanta claims (1) that we are all on the same mountain top together and (2) that with the flat-out denial of monotheism’s core tenets (i.e., belief in one transcendent God who is distinct from creation and yet personal and even has a Name) somehow the monotheistic religions are nevertheless being “respected.” Contradicted, corrected or, perhaps even, repudiated would seem to be more fair and accurate terms for what the counter claims of Vedanta are doing with respect to monotheism in general and Christianity in particular.

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<sup>10</sup> John 1:18 (NIV), emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> John 3:16 & John 14:6, respectively (emphasis added).

To say this is offensive, however, is saying perhaps too much; after all, in this context I was a guest of the monastery and earnest about remaining open to what they, themselves, have to say on their own terms. Still, the mixed message was as inconspicuous as the elephant head on Ganesh. Ironically, across the ravine clearly visible on an even higher mountain peak there stood at its summit a prominent Christian cross. It struck me that perhaps that scene was a more apt metaphor for the reality of the situation: Christianity and Hinduism are on two entirely different and unequal mountain peaks, instead of sharing the same summit at the end of their ascending paths (and in Christianity, Christ is the Great Sherpa who puts us on His back and does all the work of the higher climb).

## INTERVIEW

Hindu teachers are happy to acknowledge that different people need to take different paths (albeit they still agree that all these paths merge into the same Reality in the end, as has been discussed). Within Hinduism, the different paths are the different practices of *yoga*, which means a “yoking,” or uniting, with the divine. The four main yoga practices are Karma (action), Jnana (wisdom), Bhakti (devotion) and Raja (meditation). Swami R informed me that the Ramakrishna monastery there teaches Karma yoga - and with that emphasis on action, he actually put me into action tossing old couch pillows into a nearby garbage bin. The pillows were carried from the library where we then sat for a few minutes for an interview (and that interview, interestingly, went both ways).

The swami's understanding of his own goal to overcome the illusion of distinction or dualism (called *maya*) seemed clear and comprehensive. So, I asked him if he had, in fact, attained enlightenment already. He laughed and said that if either of us had attained "moksha" we would know it. *Moksha* is the goal of any Hindu devotee - the release from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. That endless cycle is *samsara*. According to one's *karma* (the merits or demerits of one's moral actions throughout his life), a person is accordingly born into the next life ahead of the game or two spaces back, so to speak. One may return as a sage who is that much closer to reaching enlightenment and moksha, or he may return as a lower caste member of society - or even a lower life form altogether (e.g., an earthworm). In any reincarnation, one must focus on and be faithful to one's *dharma* - that is, one's duty or righteous conduct according to one's proper place in the universe. This faithful pursuit of dharma creates good karma and a better positioning for reaching enlightenment going forward.

According to Advaita Vedanta, enlightenment is reached finally by meditating on the One until the "Beatific Vision" is realized. Interestingly, my tour guide, Swami R, used that expression. He was not only schooled in Hinduism, but he knew Christianity, as well. So, when he alluded to the Beatific Vision he also mentioned certain Christian mystics, like Theresa of Avila, who meditated until they achieved It. The "It," in this case being what he understood Jesus to be talking about in John 17 where he prays "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us... that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may

be brought to complete unity.”<sup>12</sup> This “complete unity,’ Swami Ramakrishnananda would say, is moksha - the final liberation from the struggles of samsara and the complete overcoming of the illusion of duality. An individual’s realization of and returning to this blessed Oneness is often compared to a drop of water going back into the vast sea.

## REFLECTIONS

Unfortunately, time did not permit to go into deeper discussion with my monastic tour guide - dharma calls, and Swami R had meditation duties in the shrine. In reflecting back on our discussion and on his curiosity regarding my own faith journey (particularly what my baptism meant to me), there was at least a couple of questions that I would have liked to have inquired of the former, “Chris” (who says he was an unbaptized, nominal Christian growing up).

One question has to do with the metaphysical interpretation of reality to which his Advaita school of Vedanta subscribes. That view, again, is monism - that all reality is One, and that One, if we could but see it, is God (Brahman). This is an epistemological question: “Given that there are other schools of thought on the matter - even within Vedanta Hinduism (which take their cues from the same philosophical *Upanishad* texts of Hinduism) - how do you know that your Advaita (nondualistic) school is correct? What if you are wrong, and the Dvaita (dualistic) school has the right answer, implying that you are not God?” Perhaps one reason why this idea of being one with God is so elu-

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<sup>12</sup> John 17:21-23. Admittedly, this verse sounds a bit reminiscent of John Lennon’s lyric in the Beatles’ Hindu-influenced “I Am The Walrus,” which goes, “I am he, as you are he, and you are me, and we are all together...” Hinduism speaks of an ontological unity of all beings in contrast with the simple spiritual unity or mutual mindset that is traditionally envisaged by Christians.

sive and difficult to grasp (through meditation, dharma, karma, reincarnation) could be that it is simply not so. One can still be a Hindu and not subscribe to the arduous life and monistic tenets of an Advaita monk.

That said, my next question would involve an alternative take on Jesus - only I would not wish to identify Him up front: "What if there were good, solid evidence that there was One who, by His own superabundance of perfect merits, could grant by His sheer grace moksha in but ONE LIFETIME to all who looked to and trusted in Him? Would that be an interesting prospect worth investigating?"

## CONCLUSION

There is a lot of effort, concentration and discipline that goes into being a monk (at the Ramakrishna Monastery or any other for that matter). I, for one, was impressed with the commitment to Karma yoga that Swami R demonstrated. It took years of devotion for him just to begin his life as a monk at the monastery. And, for all his continuing effort, my heart goes out to him and people like him who struggle but don't quite get there. They don't make moksha in this lifetime, and don't know about the next. It is certainly a life of their own choosing, but that is cold comfort. Along with the Apostle Paul, seeing this wandering around among idols brings out the agitation in my soul.

In a time in American culture when *Newsweek Magazine* provocatively asserts, "We Are All Hindu Now,"<sup>13</sup> the streams of pluralistic religious options flood the marketplace like the proliferation of idols in St. Paul's day. It was among the many Greek gods

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<sup>13</sup> Lisa Miller, "We Are All Hindu Now: U.S. Views on God and Life Are Turning Hindu," originally published August 14, 2009 in *Newsweek Magazine* (online edition), <http://www.newsweek.com/us-views-god-and-life-are-turning-hindu-79073>, accessed June 17, 2015.

(and idols to them) on Mars Hill where Paul reached out to those who, at least with some degree of sincerity, were reaching out to God that they might find Him (Acts 17:27). When Paul spotted an idol dedicated to the “unknown god,” he locked onto that as his springboard:

People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious... you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you...

In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

In the midst of all their speculations philosophical and religious, and in all their struggles with self doubt, fears and seeking truth - God had broken through to the people of Athens - and has broken through to all people everywhere. God was in Christ reconciling Himself to the world, and He did not leave any question as to who He was and where He could be found. Jesus said, “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.”<sup>14</sup> And, likewise, God has not left it up to speculation as to the meaning or purpose of His coming to this lost and condemned world: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John 14:11.

<sup>15</sup> John 3:17.

In His mercy, God puts an end to our ignorant religiosity - be it Greek, Indian or American. Man's elusive search is over, as God has come down to us. The Word became flesh and pitched His tent among us<sup>16</sup> - and with Him comes the built-in proofs to back up this claim, namely the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. When in that personal God we place our faith, itself a free gift, we start a lifelong journey with Christ on the path with us wherever we go. This mode of travel brings with it true liberation from the endless spinning of speculative thoughts and uncertainties. We can know that a merciful God loves us and cares enough about us to reveal Himself to us and even die for us that we might live with Him "in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity."<sup>17</sup>

This is most certainly true.

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<sup>16</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, "Explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed" in Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press, 1959), 345.

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