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Was Swami Vivekananda a Hindu Supremacist? Revisiting a Long-Standing Debate

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Abstract: In the past several decades, numerous scholars have contended that Swami Vivekananda was a Hindu supremacist in the guise of a liberal preacher of the harmony of all religions. Jyotirmaya Sharma follows their lead in his provocative book, *A Restatement of Religion: Swami Vivekananda and the Making of Hindu Nationalism* (2013). According to Sharma, Vivekananda was “the father and preceptor of Hindutva,” a Hindu chauvinist who favored the existing caste system, denigrated non-Hindu religions, and deviated from his guru Sri Ramakrishna’s more liberal and egalitarian teachings. This article has two main aims. First, I critically examine the central arguments of Sharma’s book and identify serious weaknesses in his methodology and his specific interpretations of Vivekananda’s work. Second, I try to shed new light on Vivekananda’s views on Hinduism, religious diversity, the caste system, and Ramakrishna by building on the existing scholarship, taking into account various facets of his complex thought, and examining the ways that his views evolved in certain respects. I argue that Vivekananda was not a Hindu supremacist but a cosmopolitan patriot who strove to prepare the spiritual foundations for the Indian freedom movement, scathingly criticized the hereditary caste system, and followed Ramakrishna in championing the pluralist doctrine that various religions are equally capable of leading to salvation.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda; Jyotirmaya Sharma; Hindu nationalism; Hindutva; religious pluralism; religious inclusivism; caste system; Sri Ramakrishna

1. Introduction

For decades now, there has been heated debate about whether Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) was a Hindu fundamentalist who paved the way for right-wing Hindu nationalist movements. It is indisputable that many right-wing Hindu organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) view Vivekananda as one of their chief inspirations (Beckerlegge 2003, 2006a; Nicholson forthcoming). The key question, however, is whether this is a case of misappropriation.

Some scholars have contended that Vivekananda’s views have strong Hindu fundamentalist overtones and implications.¹ Dixit [1976] (2014), for instance, claims that Vivekananda, in his support of caste distinctions and the “inequitable social system” (p. 32), provided “an ideological rationale to the politics of Hindu communal movements” (p. 39). More recently, Baier (2019, p. 255) has argued that Vivekananda’s ideas “still exert a formative influence on contemporary, religiously tinged Indian nationalism.”

¹ See, for instance, Nandy [1973] (2014), pp. 293–94; Dixit [1976] (2014), pp. 38–39; Gupta [1973] (2014), pp. 271–72; Hansen (1999, pp. 69–70); Patel (2010, pp. 107–8); and Baier (2019).

By contrast, numerous scholars have argued that Hindutva ideologues have misappropriated Vivekananda.² For instance, Beckerlegge (2003, p. 54) has shown, through a careful examination of some of the foundational texts of the RSS, that RSS figures like M.S. Golwalkar and Eknath Ranade drew “selectively upon Vivekananda’s ideas” and pushed to extremes “emphases and refrains that are softened within the context of Vivekananda’s recorded teaching as a whole.” Likewise, Raychaudhuri (1998) convincingly challenges the “stereotyping of Vivekananda as a militant Hindu” (Raychaudhuri 1998, p. 2) by clarifying the late-nineteenth century colonial context within which Vivekananda articulated his views on Hinduism.

Still others have adopted an intermediate position, identifying both liberal and Hindu supremacist strains in Vivekananda’s thought. Sen (1993, p. 335), for instance, finds an “apparent contradiction” between Vivekananda’s “professed Catholicism and Universalist appeal” and his “faith in the superiority of Hinduism.” Likewise, Nicholson (forthcoming) has argued that Vivekananda was highly critical of the existing hereditary caste system but was also “both a Hindu supremacist and an inclusivist,” who viewed Vedānta as “the fulfillment of all other religious paths.”

One of the latest contributions to this ongoing debate is Jyotirmaya Sharma’s provocative book, *A Restatement of Religion: Swami Vivekananda and the Making of Hindu Nationalism* (Sharma 2013a).³ Sharma (2013a, p. xv) attempts to prove that Vivekananda was “the father and preceptor of Hindutva” by defending three main claims. First, he contends that Vivekananda, in spite of his reputation as a liberal champion of the harmony of all religions, was actually a Hindu supremacist who considered Hinduism—and Advaita Vedānta in particular—to be superior to all other religions. Second, according to Sharma, Vivekananda more or less favored the existing hereditary caste system. Third, he argues that Vivekananda consciously deviated from his guru Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), who placed religious paths on an equal footing and taught a *bhakti*-oriented spiritual philosophy rooted more in Śākta Tantrism than in Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta.

This article challenges all three of Sharma’s main theses by critically assessing his textual justification for them and by clarifying and contextualizing Vivekananda’s views on Hinduism, religious diversity, the caste system, and Ramakrishna. Section 2 makes the case that Vivekananda was not a Hindu fundamentalist but a cosmopolitan patriot who laid the spiritual foundations for the independence movement by instilling in his fellow Indians—who had become demoralized and ineffectual under British colonial rule—not only strength and self-confidence but also a reverence for their own ancient spiritual heritage and an openness to learning from other countries. Section 3 argues that Vivekananda’s views on the harmony of religions actually evolved. For a brief period from mid-1894 to mid-1895, he did sometimes relegate non-Hindu religions to lower stages in a hierarchy culminating in Advaita Vedānta. However, Sharma and other scholars have failed to recognize that by late 1895, Vivekananda abandoned this hierarchical Advaitic doctrine in favor of the more egalitarian doctrine that every religion corresponds to one of the four Yogas, each of which is an equally effective path to salvation. Section 4 presents evidence that Vivekananda both prophesied and welcomed the demise of the existing hereditary caste system and sought to restore what he took to be the *original* caste system, based not on heredity but on a person’s natural tendencies, which can be modified through one’s own thoughts and actions. Section 5 challenges Sharma’s thesis that there was a “rupture” between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, who—Sharma claims—viewed his guru’s spiritual experiences as hallucinations and refused to accept Ramakrishna as a divine incarnation. Sharma, I argue, overlooks a crucial incident that took place two days prior to Ramakrishna’s death which led the young Vivekananda to repudiate his earlier skepticism about Ramakrishna’s divinity and spiritual

² See, for instance, Mukherjee [1973] (2014); Raychaudhuri (1998); Bose (1998); Beckerlegge (2003); Rambachan (2005); and Long (2012).

³ The Indian edition of Sharma’s book was retitled *Cosmic Love and Human Apathy: Swami Vivekananda’s Restatement of Religion* (Sharma 2013b).

stature. Finally, Section 6 identifies some of the major methodological flaws in Sharma's approach to Vivekananda and summarizes the arguments presented in Sections 2–5.

2. Hindu Supremacist or Cosmopolitan Patriot?

According to Sharma, Vivekananda paved the way for the Hindutva movement by promoting Hindu nationalism, asserting the superiority of the Hindu race, and vilifying the West. Let us examine some of Sharma's evidence for these claims. Claiming that Vivekananda's "indictment of the West" was "searing, categorical, and final," Sharma ascribes to Vivekananda the view that "the Westerner is an asura" and that the "the West believed in matter alone and was 'addicted to the aggrandisement of self by exploiting others' countries, others' wealth by force, trick and treachery'" (Sharma 2013a, p. 121). Sharma refers here to a passage from Vivekananda's essay, "The East and the West" (1900), but Sharma *reverses* Vivekananda's intended meaning by taking the passage out of context. Vivekananda begins the essay by sketching dramatic portraits of the stereotyped and superficial ways that Indians and Westerners often view one another. The "English official," he writes, tends to see Indians as "the embodiment of selfishness" and as having a "malicious nature befitting a slave" (CW5, p. 442).⁴ By contrast, the "Indian" tends to view the "Westerner" as "the veriest demon (Asura)," "believing in matter only," and so on (CW5, p. 442). However, what Sharma fails to mention is that in the very next paragraph, Vivekananda remarks: "These are the views of observers on both sides—views born of mutual indiscriminability and superficial knowledge or ignorance" (CW5, pp. 442–43). In the remainder of the essay, Vivekananda goes on to *critique* these stereotyped views and to present a more nuanced account of what he sees as the complementary ideals of India and the West: namely, that the "national ideal" of the West is "dharma," ethical living based on the dignity of labor, while the national ideal of India is "mukti," spiritual liberation and fulfilment (CW5, p. 443–55). As we will see, this is just one of many instances where Sharma, by taking Vivekananda's statements out of context, ascribes problematic views to Vivekananda that he never held.

To be sure, Vivekananda himself sometimes referred to "the materialism of the West." Take, for instance, this passage: "I believe that the Hindu faith has developed the spiritual in its devotees at the expense of the material, and I think that in the Western world the contrary is true. By uniting the materialism of the West with the spiritualism of the East I believe much can be accomplished" (CW7, p. 284). However, two points are worth noting. First, his position is more nuanced than a monolithic essentialism, since he does *not* claim that the West is exclusively materialistic and India is exclusively spiritual. Rather, he claims that the West emphasizes the material "at the expense of" the spiritual, and vice-versa. Moreover, as in the passage cited in the previous paragraph, he sees materialism and spirituality as complementary rather than antagonistic ideals. Second, Vivekananda views Western "materialism" not as a demonic addiction to matter but in *positive* terms as scientific and technological advancement, social equality, humane living conditions, and so on. For instance, in an 1897 lecture, he refers to the "materialism of Europe" and then remarks: "Materialism has come to the rescue of India in a certain sense by throwing open the doors of life to everyone, by destroying the exclusive privileges of caste, by opening up to discussion the inestimable treasures which were hidden away in the hands of a very few who have even lost the use of them" (CW3, p. 157).

Sharma cites a passage from Vivekananda's 1897 lecture on "The Future of India," in which he urges his fellow Indians to worship "Virāṭ" (that is, God in the form of the universe): "This is the only god that is awake, our own race—'everywhere his hands, everywhere his feet, everywhere his ears, he covers everything.' All other gods are sleeping. What vain gods shall we go after and yet cannot worship the god that we see all round us, the Virāṭ?" (CW3, pp. 300–1). Pouncing on the phrase "our

⁴ Throughout this article, all references to *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* will be abbreviated as follows: "CW," the volume number, then the page number. References to the Bengali edition of Vivekananda's complete works, *Svāmī Vivekānander Vāñī o Racanā*, will be abbreviated as follows: "BCW," the volume number, then the page number.

own race,” Sharma (2013a, p. 137) claims that Vivekananda was a Hindu nationalist who encouraged Indians to worship Virāṭ in the form of the “Hindu masses alone” as “the only god that was awake and worthy of worship.” Here again, Sharma distorts the meaning of the passage by taking it out of context. In the sentences leading up to this passage, Vivekananda chastises his fellow Indians for their slavish mentality:

[I]f one of our countrymen stands up and tries to become great, we all try to hold him down, but if a foreigner comes and tries to kick us, it is all right. We have been used to it, have we not? And slaves must become great masters! So give up being a slave. For the next fifty years this alone shall be our keynote—this, our great Mother India. Let all other vain gods disappear for the time from our minds. (CW3, p. 300)

The context makes clear that Vivekananda was trying to arouse self-confidence, dignity, and pride in his fellow Indians, who had internalized a slave mentality under British colonial rule. His timeframe of “the next fifty years” is also significant for two reasons. First, it suggests that he had a very specific and finite purpose for emphasizing the regeneration of Indian pride and self-confidence in the contemporary context of the British colonial predicament. Hence, it would be a serious mistake to interpret such passages as paving the way for Hindu supremacism. Second, it is striking that Vivekananda made this comment about “the next fifty years” in an 1897 lecture, since India would go on to gain independence *exactly* fifty years later in 1947.

In an 1894 letter to his brother disciples, he clarified what he meant by the worship of Virāṭ as follows:

If you want any good to come, just throw your religious ceremonials overboard and worship the Living God, the Man-God—every being that wears a human form—Virāṭ and Svarāṭ [God in the form of the individual]. The Virāṭ form of God is this world (*ei jagat*), and worshipping it means serving it (*tār sevā*)—this indeed is work, not indulging in ceremonials. Neither is it work to cogitate as to whether the rice-plate should be placed in front of the God for ten minutes or for half an hour—that is called lunacy . . . Now the Lord is having His toilet, now He is taking His meals, now He is busy on something else we know not what . . . And all this, while the Living God is dying for want of food, for want of education! (CW6, p. 264; BCW7, pp. 52–53)

Vivekananda’s definition of the “Virāṭ form of God” as “this world” as a whole makes clear why Sharma is mistaken in equating “Virāṭ” with “the Hindu masses alone.” In fact, contrary to Sharma’s rather serious charge of “human apathy” against Vivekananda,⁵ Vivekananda’s call to worship Virāṭ embodies the social activist dimension of his philosophy of “Practical Vedānta” (CW2: 291–358): we should worship God first and foremost in *human beings* by serving the poor and needy. Moreover, he explicitly credited his guru Ramakrishna for first teaching him the doctrine of “*śivajñāne jīver sevā*” (“serving human beings knowing that they are all manifestations of God”) in 1884 (Saradananda [1919] 2003, p. 852).⁶

Sharma’s misinterpretation of Vivekananda as a Hindu supremacist stems, in part, from a fundamental weakness in his broader approach to Vivekananda—namely, his astonishing historical amnesia regarding Vivekananda’s late-nineteenth century context. As Krishnan V. (2014) quite rightly observes, Sharma “writes as if Vivekananda and Ramakrishna exist in some ahistorical transcendental space, while complaining at the same time that Vivekananda’s views are ahistorical.”⁷ Raychaudhuri (1998) and Bhattacharya (2012) have convincingly shown that it is impossible to appreciate the nuances of Vivekananda’s views on Hinduism and Vedānta without taking into

⁵ I have in mind here the title of the Indian reprint of Sharma’s book: *Cosmic Love and Human Apathy* (Sharma 2013b).

⁶ For detailed discussion of Vivekananda’s Practical Vedānta and its roots in Ramakrishna’s teachings, see Maharaj (2020).

⁷ Zutshi (2014, p. 159) also faults Sharma for his lack of attention to Vivekananda’s historical context.

account three interrelated aspects of his late-nineteenth century historical context: the British colonial rule of India, aggressive Christian missionary efforts to convert Hindus, and the ubiquity of gross misconceptions and stereotypes about Hindu practices in Western countries. Through his articulation and defense of Hinduism, Vivekananda encouraged Indians to “give up being a slave” (CW3, p. 300) by appreciating, and taking pride in, their own great spiritual heritage. At the same time, he strove to correct wildly mistaken views about Hinduism in the West and to counter Christian missionaries who were bent on converting Hindus to Christianity. For instance, when he was lecturing in America, he was often confronted with the question, “Do the people of India throw their children into the jaws of the crocodiles?” (CW4, p. 201).

Rambachan (2005) has convincingly shown that the Hindu nationalist V.D. Savarkar’s narrow definition of Hinduism in terms of “nation (*rashtra*), race (*jāti*) and culture (*sanskriti*)” is diametrically opposed to Vivekananda’s much broader conception of Hinduism as “a distinctive worldview with a relevance and appeal that transcends ties of nationality, race and culture” (p. 127). Vivekananda, as Rambachan (2005, p. 125) notes, consistently defined a Hindu not in terms of ethnicity or blood but as “a person who subscribes to the doctrines and practices of Hinduism.” For instance, in his 1893 “Paper on Hinduism” (CW1, pp. 6–20) and his 1897 lecture “The Common Bases of Hinduism” (CW3, pp. 366–84), Vivekananda propounded Hinduism in terms of a set of shared philosophical doctrines such as the divinity of all human beings, reincarnation, and the ideal of realizing God. As Rambachan (2005, p. 127) points out, since Vivekananda understood Hinduism in doctrinal rather than ethnic terms, he—unlike Savarkar—had no difficulty embracing non-Indians such as Sister Nivedita into the Hindu fold.

Sharma (2013a) is only one of several scholars who have viewed Vivekananda’s refusal to become involved in politics as a sign of his status quoism and of his indifference to the colonial plight of his fellow Indians.⁸ Dixit [1976] (2014) claims that Vivekananda was an “exponent of political inaction” (29) who “viewed the global empire of England as a boon to the Hindus” (26). In fact, however, Vivekananda was unsparing in his criticism of the injustice and cruelty of British colonial rule. In a conversation with some American friends in August 1893, he remarked that the English “have their heels on our necks, they have sucked the last drop of our blood for their own pleasures, they have carried away with them millions of our money, while our people have starved by villages and provinces” (CW7, p. 280). Moreover, Sen (1993, p. 292) rightly faults Dixit for overlooking the possibility that Vivekananda made “political gains . . . through work that was not overtly political.”

Indeed, those who fault Vivekananda for his political inaction overlook entirely what might be called his “spiritual politics.” In stark contrast to later Hindutva ideologues, Vivekananda consciously distanced himself from politics while striving to prepare the *spiritual foundations* for enduring political change and social reform.⁹ As he put it in an 1894 letter to Alasinga Perumal, “I am no politician or political agitator. I care only for the Spirit—when that is right everything will be righted by itself” (CW5, p. 46). From Vivekananda’s standpoint, political action is doomed to be superficial and ineffective unless it is grounded in a more fundamental spiritual transformation. Accordingly, in an 1895 interview held in London, he remarked that “religion is of deeper importance than politics, since it goes to the root, and deals with the essential of conduct” (CW5, p. 200).

Significantly, even though Vivekananda eschewed direct political intervention, a whole host of Indian freedom fighters—including Bose (1935, pp. 29–30); Pal (1932); Rajagopalachari (1963, p. xiii); and Nehru (1949)—specifically credited Vivekananda for his pivotal role in preparing the moral and spiritual foundations for the independence movement by instilling self-respect, dignity, and pride in his fellow Indians. For instance, Nehru (1949, p. 197) made the following remark about Vivekananda in a speech delivered two years after India’s independence:

⁸ See, for example, Dixit [1976] (2014) and Nandy [1973] (2014).

⁹ Long (2012) is one of the few contemporary scholars to have highlighted this point.

He was no politician in the ordinary sense of the word and yet he was, I think, one of the great founders—if you like, you may use any other word—of the national modern movement of India, and a great number of people who took more or less an active part in that movement in a later date drew their inspiration from Swami Vivekananda.

Nehru proves to be much more nuanced and historically sensitive than Sharma in his understanding of Vivekananda's key role in late-nineteenth century British-ruled India. Ironically, Sharma's charge of "human apathy" (Sharma 2013b) against Vivekananda could be more appropriately leveled against Sharma himself, who ignores one of the most traumatic chapters in India's history. Sharma is only able to paint Vivekananda as a Hindu supremacist by overlooking his colonial situation and his crucial role in inspiring self-confidence and pride in a subjugated people.¹⁰

Sharma and other critics of Vivekananda have also ignored his cosmopolitan outlook, his radical openness to other cultures and his eagerness to "learn whatever is great wherever I may find it" (CW6, p. 234; BCW6, p. 250). Recently, Madaio (2017, p. 9) has made a convincing case that Vivekananda was a "cosmopolitan theologian" who creatively engaged with both Western and indigenous Indian sources in order to develop a distinctive Vedāntic worldview. In fact, in a candid 1897 letter to Mary Hale, Vivekananda remarked about his own cosmopolitan identity: "What am I? Asiatic, European, or American? I feel a curious medley of personalities in me" (CW8, p. 395). Similarly, he often insisted that he was not just an Indian but a citizen of the world: "I belong as much to India as to the world, no humbug about that" (CW5, p. 95). Far from vilifying the West, Vivekananda encouraged his fellow Indians to learn from other nations:

Several dangers are in the way, and one is that of the extreme conception that we are *the* people in the world. With all my love for India, and with all my patriotism and veneration for the ancients, I cannot but think that we have to learn many things from other nations . . . At the same time we must not forget that we have also to teach a great lesson to the world. We cannot do without the world outside India; it was our foolishness that we thought we could, and we have paid the penalty by about a thousand years of slavery. (CW3, p. 272; emphasis in the original)

Vivekananda was prescient in recognizing the "danger" of holding the "extreme" view that Hindus are "*the* people in the world"—which is precisely the kind of rhetoric favored by later right-wing Hindutva ideologues. It is telling that Sharma fails to address this important passage, which explicitly denounces the Hindu supremacist attitude Sharma ascribes to Vivekananda. In the passage, Vivekananda goes on to contrast Hindu chauvinism with a cosmopolitan form of patriotism that combines a "veneration for the ancients" with a broadmindedness and an openness to learning from other countries. He thereby anticipated the contemporary philosopher Appiah (1997, p. 618) conception of the "cosmopolitan patriot," who balances an openness and receptivity to other cultures with a patriotic love for her own country, with its "own cultural particularities."¹¹ It is perfectly in keeping with such a cosmopolitan patriotism that Vivekananda scathingly criticized British colonial rulers for their cruelty and plundering while also acknowledging that the British rule of India had the "one redeeming feature" of bringing India "out once more on the stage of the world" (CW8, p. 475).

Sharma's misinterpretation of Vivekananda as the "father" of Hindutva, then, stems not only from his failure to take into account Vivekananda's late-nineteenth century colonial context but also from his mistaken conflation of Indian patriotism with Hindu supremacism, which leads him to overlook the spiritually-grounded cosmopolitan patriotism actually espoused by Vivekananda.

¹⁰ Bhattacharya (2012, p. 379) succinctly explains this aspect of Vivekananda's historical role.

¹¹ I discuss Vivekananda's cosmopolitan outlook in greater detail in Maharaj (2020, pp. 185–86) and in the introduction to my book manuscript in progress, "Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism."

3. Vivekananda's Views on Religious Diversity: Inclusivist or Pluralist?

Although it is uncontroversial that Vivekananda championed the “harmony of religions” (CW2, p. 377), there has been a great deal of scholarly controversy concerning precisely *how* he harmonized the world religions. In 1983, the Christian theologian Alan Race proposed a threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism that has been extremely influential in shaping recent discussions of religious diversity (Race 1983). Scholars of Vivekananda have debated where in this typology to place his views on religious diversity.

Many scholars argue that although Vivekananda may *seem* to have championed the pluralist doctrine that all religions have equal truth and salvific efficacy, he actually subscribed to a “hierarchical inclusivism,” according to which different religions occupy different stages leading to the highest truth of Advaita Vedānta.¹² As Gregg (2019) contends, Vivekananda was “no simplistic pluralist, as portrayed in hagiographical texts, nor narrow exclusivist, as portrayed by some modern Hindu nationalists, but a thoughtful, complex inclusivist” (1), who upheld “the superiority of a monistic, *Advaita Vedanta* interpretation of reality” (120). Likewise, Sharma (2013a, pp. 230, 249) claims that while Ramakrishna was a genuine religious pluralist who placed all the world religions on an equal footing, Vivekananda parted ways with his guru in holding the inclusivist view that each of the various world religions corresponds to one of the three stages of Vedānta: Dvaita (dualism), Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified nondualism), and Advaita (nondualism). Unlike Gregg, however, Sharma claims that Vivekananda’s Advaitic inclusivism was in the service of a Hindu supremacist agenda. According to Sharma, the “liberality attributed to Vivekananda is only in name” (Sharma 2013a, p. 239), since he actually believed that Hinduism—and Advaita Vedānta in particular—was the only truth and that non-Hindu religions “were mere sects with inadequate notions of God” (Sharma 2013a, p. 157).

By contrast, some scholars claim that Vivekananda held a consistently pluralist stance that did not privilege either Hinduism or Advaita Vedānta over other religions.¹³ For instance, according to Mitra (2018, p. 45), Vivekananda “was neither a supremacist nor an inclusivist” but a “pluralist” who appealed to “Vedānta” as the underlying basis of all religions but did not equate Vedānta with “the philosophical school of Advaita Vedānta.”

Meanwhile, still other scholars argue that Vivekananda’s position on the world religions combines elements of both pluralism and inclusivism.¹⁴ For instance, Long (2017, p. 256) claims that Vivekananda’s views occupy “a position on the boundary between inclusivism and pluralism.”¹⁵ Similarly, Paranjape (2020, p. 102) characterizes Vivekananda’s position as “a combination of pluralist and inclusivist.”

It is worth noting that scholars in all three of these camps, in spite of their differences, adopt a *synchronic* approach to Vivekananda, since they assume that his views on religious diversity did not evolve significantly from 1893 to 1901. By contrast, Green (2016, p. 150) and Beckerlegge (2006b, pp. 220–21) adopt a *diachronic* approach, arguing that he advocated a pluralist stance between 1893 and 1894 but later shifted to a more inclusivist Advaitic position beginning in 1895.

The first step in adjudicating this debate is to note that different interpreters of Vivekananda have employed the terms “inclusivism” and “pluralism” in a variety of ways, and often without sufficient conceptual precision or consistency. As McKim (2012) and Griffiths (2001) have shown, it is crucial to distinguish questions about the *truth* of religions from questions about their *salvific*

¹² Inclusivist interpreters of Vivekananda include Hacker [1971] (1977); Neufeldt (1987, 1993); Halbfass (1991, pp. 51–86); Barua (2014, 2020, pp. 266–69); Raghuramaraju (2015); Rigopoulos (2019); Baier (2019); Gregg (2019); and Nicholson (forthcoming).

¹³ See Elkman (2007); Bhajanananda (2008); Mitra (2018, pp. 44–46); and Maharaj (2019).

¹⁴ See, for instance, Aleaz (1993, esp. p. 214); Schmidt-Leukel (2017, pp. 55–58); Long (2017, pp. 249–61); and Paranjape (2020, pp. 114–48).

¹⁵ In a more recent article, Long (forthcoming) puts this same point in a different way by claiming that “Vivekananda’s theology of religions contains an element of the ‘perennial philosophy’—the idea of a shared conceptual and experiential core existing within the mystical strands of the world’s religions—and an element of ‘deep religious pluralism.’”

efficacy. Questions about truth concern the extent to which religions provide an accurate account of reality. Questions about salvific efficacy concern the extent to which religions are effective in leading to salvation (however salvation and effectiveness are understood).

McKim (2012, p. 8) rightly notes that positions on truth and salvific efficacy are logically independent:

Truth and salvation are very different matters. No particular position on the one entails or requires the corresponding position (or the most closely related position) on the other. For example, someone can consistently believe that members of some or all other traditions will, or can, achieve salvation, even in cases in which the distinctive beliefs associated with the relevant tradition, or traditions, are believed to be largely or even entirely mistaken.

Hence, it is perfectly possible for a pluralist about salvation to be an inclusivist or even exclusivist about truth. In scholarship on Vivekananda, I believe there has been a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding concerning his views on religious diversity, in part because scholars have not been sufficiently careful about specifying whether they are defining pluralism and inclusivism in terms of truth, salvific efficacy, or both.

I define the three basic positions on the question of salvific efficacy as follows:

Exclusivism about Salvation (ES): Only one religion has a high degree of salvific efficacy, and no other religion has any salvific efficacy at all.

Inclusivism about Salvation (IS): Multiple religions have salvific efficacy, but one of them has greater salvific efficacy than all the others.

Pluralism about Salvation (PS): Multiple religions have an equally high degree of salvific efficacy.

With respect to doctrinal truth, it is important to specify which religious doctrines are being considered. For present purposes, I am concerned with doctrinal truth with respect to fundamental claims about ultimate reality (with the subscript “f” standing for “fundamental”). The definitions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are then as follows:

Exclusivism about Doctrinal Truth_f (ET_f): The doctrines about ultimate reality in one religion are true, while contradictory claims in other religions are false.

Inclusivism about Doctrinal Truth_f (IT_f): The doctrines about ultimate reality in only one religion *R* have the most truth, but the doctrines about ultimate reality in other religions have some truth as well, though not as much truth as *R*.

Pluralism about Doctrinal Truth_f (PT_f): The doctrines about ultimate reality in multiple religions are equally true.

In light of these definitions, it should be clear that it is perfectly possible to be a salvific pluralist (PS) but a doctrinal inclusivist (IT_f). In fact, I would argue that no coherent salvific pluralist position can avoid being doctrinally inclusivist, since salvific pluralism presupposes the truth of some kind of doctrinal metaframework which explains *how* multiple religions can lead to the same salvific goal.

With these definitions in place, I will defend a new diachronic interpretation of Vivekananda’s views on religious diversity, arguing that they *evolved* significantly from 1894 to 1896.¹⁶ While I follow Green (2016) and Beckerlegge (2006b) in adopting a diachronic approach, I disagree with their assumption that Vivekananda’s final position was an Advaitic inclusivism. Through a chronological examination of Vivekananda’s lectures and writings, I have found that he grounded his doctrine of the harmony of religions in the three stages of Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Advaita only for a brief period

¹⁶ I defend this diachronic interpretation in much greater detail in my book manuscript in progress, “Swami Vivekananda’s Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism.”

from September 1894 to May 1895.¹⁷ By late 1895, Vivekananda abandoned this hierarchical approach in favor of the more egalitarian Vedāntic view that every religion corresponds to at least one of the four Yogas—namely, Jñāna-Yoga (Yoga of Knowledge), Bhakti-Yoga (Yoga of Devotion), Karma-Yoga (Yoga of Works), and Rāja-Yoga (Yoga of Meditation)—each of which is a direct and independent path to salvation. On this basis, he defended not only a full-blown salvific pluralism (PS) but also the radical cosmopolitan ideal of enriching our spiritual lives by learning from, and even practicing, religions other than our own.

In the nine-volume *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, I have found only four lectures and writings—all dated between September 1894 and May 1895—in which Vivekananda harmonized the world religions on the basis of the three stages of Vedānta: the “Reply to the Madras Address” (CW4, pp. 331–53), written in September 1894; the lecture “The Religions of India” (CW1, pp. 329–32), delivered in New York on 30 December 1894; the lecture “Soul, God and Religion” (CW1, pp. 317–28), delivered in Connecticut on 8 March 1895; and a letter to his disciple Alasinga Perumal dated 6 May 1895 (CW5, pp. 79–83). Vivekananda’s May 1895 letter to Perumal contains what appears to be his final attempt to explain the harmony of religions on the basis of the three stages of Vedānta:

All of religion is contained in the Vedānta, that is, in the three stages of the Vedānta philosophy, the Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita; one comes after the other. These are the three stages of spiritual growth in man. Each one is necessary. This is the essential of religion: the Vedānta, applied to the various ethnic customs and creeds of India, is Hinduism. The first stage, i.e., Dvaita, applied to the ideas of the ethnic groups of Europe, is Christianity; as applied to the Semitic groups, Mohammedanism. The Advaita, as applied in its Yoga-perception form, is Buddhism etc. (CW5, pp. 81–82)

In this passage, Vivekananda places Buddhism on an equal salvific footing with Advaita Vedānta, but he places all devotional religions on a lower salvific footing by conceiving them as lower stages on the way to the highest Advaitic stage of realization. Moreover, since he makes the very strong claim that all three stages are “necessary” for our “spiritual growth,” all practitioners of devotional religions *must* eventually go on to attain Advaitic realization before they can attain the highest salvation. His position in this May 1895 letter, then, is not so much salvific pluralism (PS) as an Advaitic salvific inclusivism (IS).

To be sure, Vivekananda did continue to teach the three stages of Vedānta in subsequent years, in both India and the West—for instance, in his 1896 lecture on “The Vedānta Philosophy” at Harvard University (CW1, pp. 357–65) and in his 1897 lecture on “The Vedānta in All its Phases” in Calcutta (CW1, pp. 322–54). Crucially, however, after May 1895, he never again appealed to the three stages of Vedānta *in the specific context of the harmony of religions*. Instead, in his lectures and writings from late 1895 to 1901, Vivekananda consistently taught the harmony of all religions on the basis of a Vedāntic universal religion grounded in the four Yogas.¹⁸

Toward the end of his lecture on “The Methods and Purpose of Religion” delivered in London on 14 May 1896, he provided an especially succinct explanation of how the Vedāntic framework of the four Yogas harmonizes all religions:

¹⁷ For a helpful chronological list of Vivekananda’s lectures, see [Hohner and Kenny \(2014\)](#).

¹⁸ In chronological order, his lectures and writings relating to the harmony of religions from late 1895 to 1901, all of which appeal to the four Yogas, are as follows: “Abou Ben Adhem’s Ideal” (7 December 1895; CW9, pp. 482–83); “The Ideal of a Universal Religion: How It Must Embrace Different Types of Minds and Methods” (12 January 1896; CW2, pp. 375–96); “Four Paths of Yoga” (essay written during his first visit to America [exact date not known]; CW8, pp. 152–55); “The Doctrine of the Swami” (19 January 1896; CW9, p. 484); “The Ideal of a Universal Religion” (31 January 1896; CW, pp. 484–87); “Sri Ramakrishna” (fall 1896; CW4, pp. 160–87 [title in CW: “My Master”]); “The Ideal of a Universal Religion” (4 March 1896; CW9, pp. 487–88); “Philosophy of Freedom” (21 March 1896; CW9, pp. 489–91); “Ideal of a Universal Religion” (26 March 1896; CW9, pp. 493–96); “The Methods and Purpose of Religion” (14 May 1896; CW6, pp. 3–17); “The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion” (28 January 1900; CW2, pp. 359–74); “Hinduism and Sri Ramakrishna” (1901; CW6, pp. 181–82, BCW6, p. 3).

The plan of Vedānta, therefore, is: first, to lay down the principles, map out for us the goal, and then to teach us the method by which to arrive at the goal, to understand and realise religion. Again, these methods must be various. Seeing that we are so various in our natures, the same method can scarcely be applied to any two of us in the same manner. We have idiosyncrasies in our minds, each one of us; so the method ought to be varied. Some, you will find, are very emotional in their nature; some very philosophical, rational; others cling to all sorts of ritualistic forms—want things which are concrete . . . If there were only one method to arrive at truth, it would be death for everyone else who is not similarly constituted. Therefore the methods should be various. Vedānta understands that and wants to lay before the world different methods through which we can work . . . Take any path you like; follow any prophet you like; but have only that method which suits your own nature, so that you will be sure to progress. (CW6, pp. 15–17)

In his exposition of the Vedāntic universal religion throughout this lecture, the “three stages” of Vedānta are conspicuously absent. Instead, in the first sentence of this passage, he specifies that the Vedāntic universal religion has three fundamental components: (1) the “principles” underlying all religions, (2) the “goal” of all religions, and (3) the various “methods” by which we can all reach this goal. Earlier in the lecture, he explains that the “grand principle” of Vedānta is “that there is that One in whom this whole universe of matter and mind finds its unity,” known as “God, or Brahman, or Allah, or Jehovah, or any other name” (CW6, p. 11). Notice that Vivekananda does not privilege Advaitic Brahman over the personal God in any way. For Vivekananda, the same infinite impersonal-personal God is conceived differently by different people, and called by various names, depending on their temperament and individual circumstances.

Indeed, contrary to Jyotirmaya Sharma, I believe there is strong evidence throughout the *Complete Works* that Vivekananda rejected Śaṅkara’s view that the ultimate reality is *exclusively* impersonal and without attributes (*nirguṇa*) in favor of Ramakrishna’s more expansive view that the ultimate reality is *both* impersonal (*nirguṇa*) and personal (*saguṇa*), and *both* with and without form.¹⁹ Just as Ramakrishna taught that the impersonal “Brahman” and the dynamic personal “Śakti” are “inseparable” (*abhed*) (Gupta [1902–1932] 2010, p. 84; Gupta [1942] 1992, p. 134), Vivekananda repeatedly asserted that “our religion preaches an Impersonal Personal God” (CW3, p. 249).²⁰ Moreover, he explicitly credited Ramakrishna with teaching him the insight that “we may have different visions of the same truth from different standpoints” (CW4, p. 181). A clear implication of this statement is that Vivekananda followed his guru in placing devotional religions on an equal footing with Advaita Vedānta, since all religions conceive the same impersonal–personal God from different, but equally valid, standpoints.²¹ According to Vivekananda, the “goal” mapped out by Vedānta is the salvific “realisation” of the impersonal-personal Infinite God in whatever aspect or form one prefers (CW6, pp. 13–14).

Finally, Vedānta teaches that there are various “methods” for attaining this common goal of God-realization. Crucially, he does not privilege any one method over all the others. Instead, he claims that any given religious practitioner will make the most rapid spiritual progress by adopting the method that best suits his or her particular “nature”—be it “emotional,” “philosophical,” “ritualistic,” or otherwise. Although he did not explicitly explain these various methods in terms of the four Yogas in the long passage cited above, he did so in numerous other lectures and writings from 1896 to 1900. Take, for instance, this passage from his lecture on “The Ideal of Karma-Yoga” delivered in New York on 10 January 1896:

¹⁹ I defend this claim in Maharaj (forthcoming) and, in more detail, in chapter 2 of my book manuscript in progress, “Swami Vivekananda’s Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism.”

²⁰ For similar statements, see (CW3, pp. 335–36 and CW2, p. 319.)

²¹ In chapters 1 and 3 of my book *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality* (Maharaj 2018), I argue that Ramakrishna taught an expansive, world-affirming philosophy of “Vijñāna Vedānta” that ascribes equal ontological status to the impersonal Brahman and the dynamic Śakti and that upholds the equal salvific efficacy of theistic and non-theistic religious paths.

The grandest idea in the religion of Vedānta is that we may reach the same goal by different paths; and these paths I have generalized into four, namely those of work, love, psychology, and knowledge. But you must at the same time remember that these divisions are not very marked and quite exclusive of each other. Each blends into the other. But according to the type which prevails, we name the divisions . . . We have found that, in the end, all these four paths converge and become one. All religions and all methods of work and worship lead us to one and the same goal. (CW1, p. 108)

According to Vivekananda, we can reach the same goal of God-realization through “different paths,” which he generalizes into the four Yogas: Karma-Yoga (“work”), Bhakti-Yoga (“love”), Rāja-Yoga (“psychology”), and Jñāna-Yoga (“knowledge”). Two points are worth noting. First of all, he is careful to emphasize that his division of paths into the four Yogas is not meant to be restrictive or exhaustive. Indeed, in an essay entitled “Four Paths of Yoga” which he wrote at some point during his first visit to America, he explicitly notes that there may be religious paths that do not fall neatly into any one of the four Yogas. As he puts it, the “Yogas, though divided into various groups, can *principally* be classed into four . . . ” (CW8, p. 152; emphasis added). His view seems to be, then, that most, but not necessarily all, of the various religious paths can be grouped into one of the four Yogas. Second, he notes that the four Yogas should not be understood as air-tight compartments. Each Yoga, as he puts it, “blends into the other,” since each Yoga contains elements of the other three Yogas to varying degrees. Moreover, the frequently overlapping nature of the Yogas reflects the fact that no human being exclusively embodies only one personality type. Nonetheless, he claims that most human beings exhibit a prevailing “type” or “tendency,” which corresponds to one of the four Yogas, while also having other tendencies to a lesser extent.

From late 1895 on, Vivekananda consistently harmonized the world religions on the basis of the four Yogas rather than the three stages of Vedānta. Moreover, he argued that this Vedāntic framework of the four Yogas provides the philosophical basis for salvific pluralism (PS). His argument for salvific pluralism proceeded in two basic steps. First, he claimed that every world religion corresponds to one of the four Yogas. As he put it in his 1896 lecture “Sri Ramakrishna,” “A man may be intellectual, or devotional, or mystic, or active; the various religions represent one or the other of these types” (CW4, p. 178).²² Second, he consistently affirmed that each of the four Yogas has equal salvific efficacy. For instance, in a class on “Karma-Yoga” given on 3 January 1896, he declares:

Each one of our Yogas is fitted to make man perfect even without the help of the others, because they have all the same goal in view. The Yogas of work, of wisdom, and of devotion are all capable of serving as direct and independent means for the attainment of Mokṣa. (CW1, p. 93)

Salvific pluralism follows directly from Vivekananda’s two premises: since each Yoga has equal salvific efficacy, and each of the major world religions corresponds to one of the Yogas, all of these religions have equal salvific efficacy. Accordingly, in his 1896 lecture “Sri Ramakrishna,” he explicitly affirms that each religion “has the same saving power as the other” (CW4, p. 182).

He would often invoke an analogy of a circle and its many radii to illustrate his salvific pluralist position—for instance, in the following passage from his January 1896 lecture “The Ideal of a Universal Religion”:

If it be true that God is the centre of all religions, and that each of us is moving towards Him along one of these radii, then it is certain that all of us *must* reach that centre. And at the centre, where all the radii meet, all our differences will cease; but until we reach there,

²² He similarly claims, in his undated written piece “Four Paths of Yoga,” that “each religion represents one” of the “systems of Yoga” (CW8, p. 152).

differences there must be. All these radii converge to the same centre. One, according to his nature, travels along one of these lines, and another, along another; and if we all push onward along our own lines, we shall surely come to the centre, because, “All roads lead to Rome.” (CW2, pp. 384–85; emphasis in the original)

By likening the various religions to different “radii” converging toward the same “centre” of God-realization, he affirms salvific pluralism, since the circumferential endpoints of all the radii are equidistant from the center, which indicates that the various religions have equal salvific efficacy. Each radius, representing one particular religion, is different from all the other radii, since different religions are suited to different natures. Nonetheless, since every religion corresponds to one of the four Yogas, each of which has equal salvific efficacy, all religions also have the same salvific efficacy (PS).

In his lectures from late 1895 to 1901, Vivekananda also consistently affirmed pluralism about truth (PT_f)—as, for instance, in this passage from “The Ideal of a Universal Religion” (1896):

We must learn that truth may be expressed in a hundred thousand ways, and that each of these ways is true as far as it goes. We must learn that the same thing can be viewed from a hundred different standpoints, and yet be the same thing. . . . Suppose we all go with vessels in our hands to fetch water from a lake. One has a cup, another a jar, another a bucket, and so forth, and we all fill our vessels. The water in each case naturally takes the form of the vessel carried by each of us . . . So it is in the case of religion; our minds are like these vessels, and each one of us is trying to arrive at the realisation of God. God is like that water filling these different vessels, and in each vessel the vision of God comes in the form of the vessel. Yet He is One. He is God in every case. (CW2, p. 383)

From Vivekananda’s perspective, various religions provide apparently conflicting conceptions of God because the same God is conceived in a variety of ways by people of varying natures. Hence, different religious conceptions of God are actually complementary, since they all describe the same ultimate reality from “different standpoints.” Just as it would not make sense to say that a jar holds water better than a cup does, it is wrong to claim that one religion’s conception of God is truer than that found in other religions. Hence, by means of this analogy of water and differently shaped vessels, Vivekananda affirms a pluralist stance toward various religious conceptions of ultimate reality (PT_f).

It is, of course, perfectly possible to accept PT_f and PS and still maintain that there is little or no need to learn from religions other than one’s own. After all, if my own religion is as salvifically efficacious as any other, why should I even bother to learn about other religious paths? For Vivekananda, however, the Vedāntic universal religion based on the four Yogas provides a philosophical rationale for deepening salvific pluralism into what I call “religious cosmopolitanism”—the endeavor to learn from, and assimilate the spirit of, other religions.

For present purposes, I would emphasize two key dimensions of Vivekananda’s religious cosmopolitanism. First, since different religions provide different, but complementary, accounts of one and the same Infinite Divine Reality, every religious practitioner can enrich and broaden her understanding of God by learning about other religions. From Vivekananda’s standpoint, we can all think of God in the way we prefer, but we should never *limit* God to what we can understand of Him. In his undated lecture “Sri Ramakrishna: The Significance of His Life and Teachings,” he notes that he learned this insight from his guru: “If there is anything which Sri Ramakrishna has urged us to give up as carefully as lust and wealth, it is the limiting of the infinitude of God by circumscribing it within narrow bounds” (CW7, p. 413). According to Vivekananda, the greatest help in remaining alive to God’s infinitude and illimitability is to acquaint ourselves with various religious views of ultimate reality, ranging from the loving personal God of theistic traditions to the Śūnyatā of Mahāyāna Buddhism and the impersonal nondual Brahman of Advaita Vedānta.

Second, in his lectures beginning in 1896, he explicitly highlighted the cosmopolitan implications of his Vedāntic framework of four Yogas. Take, for instance, this passage from his “Lessons on Bhakti-Yoga” held in London in the summer of 1896:

We want to become harmonious beings, with the psychical, spiritual, intellectual, and working (active) sides of our nature equally developed. Nations and individuals typify one of these sides or types and cannot understand more than that one. They get so built up into one ideal that they cannot see any other. The ideal is really that we should become many-sided . . . We must be as broad as the skies, as deep as the ocean; we must have the zeal of the fanatic, the depth of the mystic, and the width of the agnostic . . . We must become many-sided, indeed we must become protean in character, so as not only to tolerate, but to do what is much more difficult, to sympathise, to enter into another's path, and feel *with him* in his aspirations and seeking after God. (CW6, pp. 137–38; emphasis in the original)

For Vivekananda, even though any one of the Yogas can take us to salvation, we can accelerate our spiritual progress and develop a “many-sided” personality by combining the four Yogas. Moreover, since each religion corresponds to one of the four Yogas, and the ideal is to combine all four Yogas to the fullest extent, the greatest help in realizing this ideal is to learn from—and, indeed, even *practice*—religions other than our own. Hence, Vivekananda's doctrine of the four Yogas serves as the basis for a radicalized version of what contemporary theologians call “multiple religious belonging” (Oostveen 2018; Drew 2011). While remaining firmly rooted in our own religious tradition, we should strive not only to incorporate the spiritual practices of other religions into our own practice but also to remain open to all the new religions that are yet to come.

He makes this point forcefully at the end of “The Way to the Realisation of a Universal Religion” (1900):

Our watchword, then, will be acceptance, and not exclusion . . . I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of every one.

Not only shall I do all these, but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future . . . We stand in the present, but open ourselves to the infinite future. We take in all that has been in the past, enjoy the light of the present, and open every window of the heart for all that will come in the future. (CW2, pp. 373–74)

According to Vivekananda, the perfect embodiment of this religious cosmopolitan ideal was his guru Ramakrishna, who had practiced multiple religions and fully harmonized all four Yogas. As he puts it, “Such a unique personality, such a synthesis of the utmost of Jñāna, Yoga, Bhakti and Karma, has never before appeared among mankind” (CW7, p. 412).

One final nuance in Vivekananda's position should be noted. McKim (2012, pp. 105–6) rightly argues that there is necessarily an “inclusivist dimension to pluralism,” since the very acceptance of pluralism about the doctrinal truth of different first-order religions (PT_f) entails a *second-order inclusivism* about truth (IT_f):

According to pluralism about truth, one can look to the other relevant religious traditions to supplement the account of reality offered by any single tradition, thereby arriving at an account of reality that is more complete than that proposed by any particular tradition . . . Someone who embraces the full pluralist account will be an inclusivist with respect to the particular accounts of the various traditions that are being accommodated in that account. The truths of any particular tradition, however significant they may be, are incomplete and hence second-class in comparison with the more comprehensive picture offered by pluralism and are incorporated within the comprehensive pluralist analysis . . . Actually, someone who asserts PT_2 [pluralism about truth] wears two hats. She is a member of a religious tradition, and she believes that tradition to do very well in terms of truth and believes other traditions

to do equally well. But she also subscribes to a deeper truth, a metalevel truth that other members of her own tradition, not to mention members of other traditions, may not be aware of. As a pluralist, therefore, she feels she understands the situation of others better than they themselves understand it.

McKim's cogent reasoning here can be applied easily enough to Vivekananda's approach to religious diversity. According to Vivekananda's first-order PT_f , many first-order religions—including all the various Hindu sects, Christianity, Islam, and so on—have equally true doctrines about ultimate reality. However, he justifies PT_f by appealing to a second-order Vedāntic “universal religion”—what McKim calls a “metalevel truth”—which is *inclusivist* with respect to the truth of all first-order religions. According to Vivekananda's Vedāntic universal religion, different religious accounts of the ultimate reality are equally correct, because they are different but complementary ways of viewing the same infinite impersonal-personal God.²³ This Vedāntic universal religion is inclusivist with respect to truth insofar as it provides an account of ultimate reality that is *more comprehensive* than the partial accounts of ultimate reality found in any given first-order religion. For Vivekananda, while different first-order religions typically correspond to only one of the four Yogas, the Vedāntic universal religion encompasses all *four* Yogas. Bearing in mind this distinction between first- and second-order levels, we can say that Vivekananda establishes the equal salvific efficacy (PS) and doctrinal truth (PT_f) of numerous *first-order* religions on the basis of a *second-order* Vedāntic inclusivism about truth (IT_f). That Vivekananda himself was aware of the second-order inclusivist dimension of his first-order religious pluralist position is clear from numerous passages in his lectures, such as his inclusivistic statement in his 1896 lecture “Sri Ramakrishna” that all religions are “part and parcel of the one eternal religion” (CW4:187).²⁴

From late 1895 onward, then, Vivekananda envisioned an ideal future in which all religious practitioners would “wear two hats” (to use McKim's apt phrase): they would belong to a particular first-order religion of their choice while also accepting the second-order Vedāntic universal religion. They would also be religious cosmopolitans who strive to broaden their understanding of the ultimate reality and enrich and deepen their spiritual practice by learning from, and even practicing, religions other than their own.

4. Vivekananda's Views on the Caste System: Conservative or Progressive?

Vivekananda's views on caste have been extensively discussed and debated in the scholarly literature. On the one hand, [Raychaudhuri \(1998, pp. 8–9\)](#) and [Long \(2012\)](#) have emphasized Vivekananda's strong criticisms of the existing caste system in India.²⁵ According to [Long \(2012, p. 82\)](#), “Vivekananda was quite clear, and characteristically blunt, in his rejection of caste and caste-related practices such as untouchability.” On the other hand, scholars such as [Dixit \[1976\] \(2014\)](#) and [Baier \(2019\)](#) have argued that Vivekananda largely favored the hereditary caste system. For instance, according to [Dixit \[1976\] \(2014, p. 30\)](#), although Vivekananda advocated the abolition of the “religio-cultural privileges of the Brahmins,” he nonetheless supported the existing “framework of the caste system” and “was not above traditional caste prejudices” ([Dixit \[1976\] 2014, p. 32](#)). Not surprisingly, [Sharma \(2013a, pp. 171–90\)](#) follows Dixit in painting Vivekananda as a Hindu supremacist who wanted to preserve the existing caste system in India with only a minor “readjustment” ([Sharma 2013a, p. 185](#)). [Sharma \(2013a,](#)

²³ How does Vivekananda account for Buddhist traditions that deny the existence of an ultimate reality altogether? While I do not have the space here to discuss this important question, I address it in detail in a chapter of my book manuscript in progress, “Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism.” In brief, Vivekananda holds that while non-substantialist Buddhist traditions are mistaken in denying the existence of an ultimate reality, they are nonetheless as salvifically efficacious as any of the other major world religions.

²⁴ Similarly, in his 1897 “Reply to the Madras Address,” he claims that “all the other religions of the world are included in the nameless, limitless, eternal Vedic religion” (CW4, p. 343).

²⁵ [Sen \(1993, p. 331\)](#) acknowledges Vivekananda's criticisms of the hereditary caste system while also faulting him for agreeing with “the graduated social importance that traditional Hindu society placed on various kinds of work.”

p. 138) further contends that Vivekananda “had an idealized view of the priestly caste and of the brahmins and always held them as an ideal indispensable for India.” He sums up his understanding of Vivekananda’s position on caste as follows: “Neither the brahmin nor caste as an institution ought to be condemned or be subjected to reform” (Sharma 2013a, p. 181).

Very recently, Nicholson (forthcoming) has convincingly argued that Sharma’s interpretation of Vivekananda’s views on caste is based on “a limited, partial reading of Vivekananda’s works.” Indeed, in opposition to Sharma, Nicholson has shown how Ramakrishna’s “world-affirming Advaita” philosophy led Vivekananda to criticize Śaṅkara for his casteism and to recognize that “the ethical ramifications of non-dualism are the complete elimination of caste distinctions.”

In this section, I will build on Nicholson’s critique of Sharma by further clarifying Vivekananda’s views on caste and identifying specific instances in Sharma’s book where he misinterprets or outright falsifies Vivekananda’s statements on caste. At the same time, I will try to break new ground by highlighting an important aspect of Vivekananda’s views not discussed by Nicholson—namely, Vivekananda’s appeal to the *Bhagavad-Gītā* in support of his key distinction between the existing hereditary caste system and the “original” idea of caste based on one’s inherent qualities.

Let us first examine more closely Sharma’s interpretation of Vivekananda’s attitude toward the Brahmin caste:

Brahmins, as long as they remained within the limits of orthodoxy, were to be looked upon as the spiritual mentors of the Hindus. Any trace of deviation from the path of the Vedas was immoral and unreasonable. This is what the brahmins did: because of their greed for power and in order to keep their privileged positions intact, they introduced non-Vedic doctrines into Hinduism . . . His [Vivekananda’s] frequently quoted diatribe against brahmins is directed against those among them who deviated from the path of Vedic orthodoxy. (Sharma 2013a, p. 174)

According to Sharma, Vivekananda idealized Brahmins as the spiritual leaders of Hindus and only condemned them when they strayed from “Vedic orthodoxy.” In fact, however, there are countless passages from Vivekananda’s work—none of which are even mentioned by Sharma—which indicate that Vivekananda faulted Brahmins not primarily for their deviation from the Vedas but for their greed, selfishness, and thirst for power, which led them to oppress and exploit the lower castes. Far from idealizing Brahmins, Vivekananda was often scathing in his criticism of them, referring to them in an 1892 letter as “Rākṣasas [demons] in the shape of the Brahmins of the Kaliyuga” (CW8, p. 290). In an 1894 letter, he attacked Brahmins for their cruel exploitation of the poor and their heartless indifference to their plight: “A country where millions of people live on flowers of the Mohuā plant, and a million or two of Sadhus and a hundred million or so of Brahmins suck the blood out of these poor people, without even the least effort for their amelioration—is that a country or hell? Is that a religion, or the devil’s dance?” (CW6, p. 254; BCW6, pp. 322–23).

He frequently condemned Brahmins for their “priestcraft” and their “social tyranny,”²⁶ going so far as to claim that the protracted foreign rule of India was the karmic consequence of “Brahmin and Kshatriya tyranny”:

Priestcraft is the bane of India. Can man degrade his brother, and himself escape degradation? . . . The mass of Brahmin and Kshatriya tyranny has recoiled upon their own heads with compound interest; and a thousand years of slavery and degradation is what the inexorable law of Karma is visiting upon them. (CW4, p. 327)

Indeed, in his creative piece “Matter for Serious Thought”—originally written in Bengali as “*Bhābbār Kathā*”—Vivekananda sketches a satirical portrait of a Brahmin named “Bholā Purī”:

²⁶ For similar criticisms of priestcraft, see (CW4, p. 368 and CW1, p. 428).

Bholā Purī is an out and out Vedāntin—in everything he is careful to trumpet his Brahminhood. If all people are about to starve for food around Bholā Purī, it does not touch him even in the least; he expounds the unsubstantiality of pleasure and pain. If through disease, or affliction, or starvation people die by the thousand, what matters even that to him? He at once reflects on the immortality of the soul! If the strong overpower the weak and even kill them before his very eyes, Bholā Purī is lost in the profound depths of the meaning of the spiritual dictum, “The soul neither kills nor is killed” [*Bhagavad-Gītā* 2.20] . . . He, too, has evidently thought the Lord more foolish than ourselves. (CW6, pp. 192–93 [translation slightly modified]; BCW6, pp. 34–35)

This passage stands as a direct refutation of Sharma’s claim that Vivekananda only faulted Brahmins when they deviated from “Vedic orthodoxy.” Significantly, Vivekananda singles out for attack Bholā Purī’s attempt to provide a “Vedāntic” justification of his cruel indifference to, and exploitation of, the poor and weak by citing passages from scriptures like the *Gītā*. It is clear that Vivekananda was not afraid to attack even the Vedic orthodoxy of Brahmins, when they used it as a means of justifying exploitation and cruelty. Tellingly, Sharma does not address *any* of the passages just cited from the *Complete Works*, which undercut his thesis that Vivekananda “idealized” Brahmins and only faulted them when they preached non-Vedic doctrines.

Let us now assess Sharma’s other claim that Vivekananda wanted to preserve the existing caste system with only a minor “readjustment.” Sharma overlooks the fact that Vivekananda repeatedly draws a sharp contrast between the “original system” of caste and caste “in its degenerate state,” as in this passage not addressed by Sharma:

Modern caste distinction is a barrier to India’s progress. It narrows, restricts, separates. It will crumble before the advance of ideas . . . From the time of the Upaniṣads down to the present day, nearly all our great Teachers have wanted to break through the barriers of caste, i.e., caste in its degenerate state, not the original system. What little good you see in the present caste clings to it from the original caste, which was the most glorious social institution. (CW5, p. 198)

It is clear that Vivekananda was opposed to the present caste system based on heredity and even prophesied—indeed, welcomed—its demise with the “advance of ideas.” In a passage from his 1899 essay on “Modern India” not mentioned by Sharma, Vivekananda articulated his position on this issue even more explicitly:

Even the sons of the “Nagara Brahmanas” are nowadays getting English education, and entering into Government service, or adopting some mercantile business. Even orthodox Pandits of the old school, undergoing pecuniary difficulties, are sending their sons to the colleges of the English universities or making them choose the callings of Vaidyas, Kāyasthas, and other non-Brahmin castes. If the current of affairs goes on running in this course, then it is a question of most serious reflection, no doubt, how long more will the priestly class continue on India’s soil . . . [T]he Brahmin caste is erecting with its own hands its own sepulchre; *and this is what ought to be*. It is good and appropriate that every caste of high birth and privileged nobility should make it its principal duty to raise its own funeral pyre with its own hands. (CW4, p. 458; emphasis added)

Contrary to Sharma’s claim that Vivekananda idealized and favored the Brahmin caste, Vivekananda consistently maintained that the hereditary Brahmin caste would be abolished and that it was “good and appropriate” for Brahmins to raise their own “funeral pyre.” This passage also directly refutes Sharma’s unfounded claim that Vivekananda never called for hereditary Brahmins to take up the professions of non-Brahmin castes (Sharma 2013a, p. 183).

In an 1893 letter, Vivekananda was even more scathing in his condemnation of the hereditary caste system:

All the reformers in India made the serious mistake of holding religion accountable for all the horrors of priestcraft and degeneration and went forthwith to pull down the indestructible structure, and what was the result? Failure! Beginning from Buddha down to Ram Mohan Roy, everyone made the mistake of holding caste to be a religious institution and tried to pull down religion and caste all together, and failed. But in spite of all the ravings of the priests, caste is simply a crystallised social institution, which after doing its service is now filling the atmosphere of India with its stench, and it can only be removed by giving back to the people their lost social individuality . . . With the introduction of modern competition, see how caste is disappearing fast! No religion is now necessary to kill it. (CW5, pp. 22–23)

Vivekananda made four important points in this passage. First, he criticized the existing hereditary caste system in no uncertain terms, remarking that it was “filling the atmosphere of India with its stench.” Second, he noted that all past attempts by religious reformers to abolish the caste system had ended in failure. Third, he claimed that the hereditary caste system would die a natural death due to “modern competition,” as a result of which many Brahmins were beginning to take up non-Brahmin professions. Fourth, he indicates that the original caste system, which he favored, was based not on heredity but on “social individuality”—an idea, as we will soon see, that he explained in greater detail elsewhere. This more dynamic and socially beneficial original caste system later “crystallised” into the present caste system based rigidly on heredity. This passage makes clear why Sharma is mistaken in claiming that Vivekananda favored the hereditary caste system.

In an 1895 letter, Vivekananda both prophesied and welcomed the demise of the existing hereditary caste system and advocated its replacement by the *original* caste system, which he took to be based not on heredity but on the principle of “variation” (*vicitratā*):

Now, take the case of caste—in Sanskrit, *Jāti*, i.e., species. Now, this is the first idea of creation. Variation (*Vicitratā*), that is to say *Jāti*, means creation. “I am One, I become many” (various Vedas). Unity is before creation, diversity is creation. Now if this diversity stops, creation will be destroyed. So long as any species is vigorous and active, it must throw out varieties . . . Now the original idea of *Jāti* was this freedom of the individual to express his nature, his *Prakṛti*, his *Jāti*, his caste; and so it remained for thousands of years . . . Then what was the cause of India’s downfall?—the giving up of this idea of caste. As *Gītā* [3.24] says, with the extinction of caste the world will be destroyed. The present caste is not the real *Jāti*, but a hindrance to its progress. It really has prevented the free action of *Jāti*, i.e., caste or variation. Any crystallized custom or privilege or hereditary class in any shape really prevents caste (*Jāti*) from having its full sway; and whenever any nation ceases to produce this immense variety, it must die . . . Let *Jāti* have its sway; break down every barrier in the way of caste, and we shall rise . . . This variety does not mean inequality, nor any special privilege. (CW4, p. 372)

Here, Vivekananda contrasts the existing hereditary caste system with the original idea of caste, which was based on the “freedom of the individual to express his nature.” From Vivekananda’s perspective, each person has a unique nature and temperament, determined by the nature of her thought and behavior earlier in this life as well as in previous lives. The original caste system, he claims, recognized this natural variation among people and prescribed different social duties to different people, based on their natural tendencies and talents. Crucially, Vivekananda points out that the recognition of “variety” does *not* entail “inequality” or “special privilege.” Hence, Sharma (2013a, p. 183) is wrong when he accuses Vivekananda of holding that “differentiation and inequality” are “natural and desirable.” On the contrary, Vivekananda’s actual position is that while *differentiation*—i.e., variation—is natural, *inequality* is neither natural nor desirable. As he puts it elsewhere, “I am clever in mending shoes, you are clever in reading Vedas, but that is no reason why you should trample on my head” (CW3, p. 245). Moreover, far from favoring the existing hereditary caste system, Vivekananda goes so far as to trace “India’s downfall” to the replacement of the original caste system with the hereditary caste system.

Sharma, in the course of his attempt to prove that Vivekananda privileged the hereditary Brahmin caste, claims that during the celebration of Ramakrishna's birthday in 1898, Vivekananda gave the sacred thread only to hereditary Brahmins, "even lapsed Brahmins," but he only gave the Gāyatrī Mantra, and *not* the sacred thread, to "non-brahmins" (Sharma 2013a, p. 186). But here is what Vivekananda actually said on that occasion:

Every Dvijāti (twice-born) has a right to investiture with the holy thread. The Vedas themselves are authority in this matter. *Whoever* will come here on this sacred birthday of Sri Ramakrishna, I shall invest him with the holy thread. (CW7, p. 110; emphasis added)

Vivekananda noted that the Vedas hold that every "twice-born"—that is, all Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, and Vaiśyas—are entitled to receive the sacred thread. However, he then went on to declare that on the occasion of Ramakrishna's birthday, *everyone without exception*—including Śūdras—will be given the sacred thread. By failing to address this passage, Sharma misrepresents the entire incident. On that day, Vivekananda deliberately flouted Vedic strictures by giving the sacred thread to everyone who came to Belur Math, including non-Brahmins.

Sharma (2013a, p. 180) makes one further claim regarding Vivekananda's views on caste that requires interrogation: "Was it then possible for a shudra to acquire learning and become a brahmin? Vivekananda's answer is emphatically in the negative . . ." Here again, Sharma fails to address crucial textual evidence that contradicts his claim. Let us consider, for instance, this dialogue between Vivekananda and his childhood friend Priyanāth Sinha:

Once I went to see Swamiji while he was staying in Calcutta at the house of the late Balarām Basu. After a long conversation about Japan and America, I asked him, "Well, Swamiji, how many disciples have you in the West?"

Swamiji: A good many.

Q. Two or three thousands?

Swamiji: Maybe more than that.

Q. Are they all initiated by you with Mantras?

Swamiji: Yes.

Q. Did you give them permission to utter Praṇava (Om)?

Swamiji: Yes.

Q. How did you, Mahārāj? They say that the Śūdras have no right to Praṇava, and none has except the Brahmins. Moreover, the Westerners are Mlecchas, not even Śūdras.

Swamiji: How do you know that those whom I have initiated are not Brahmins?

Myself: Where could you get Brahmins outside India, in the lands of the Yavanas and Mlecchas?

Swamiji: *My disciples are all Brahmins!* I quite admit the truth of the words that none except the Brahmins has the right to Praṇava. But the son of a Brahmin is not necessarily always a Brahmin; though there is every possibility of his being one, he may not become so . . . *The hereditary Brahmin caste and the Brāhmaṇya qualities are two distinct things (brāhmaṇjāti ār brāhmaṇer gūṇ-duṭo ālādā jiniṣ)* . . . As there are three guṇas—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—so there are guṇas which show a man to be a Brahmin, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya or Śūdra . . .

Q. Then you call those Brahmins who are Sāttvika by nature.

Swamiji: Quite so. As there are Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—one or other of these guṇas more or less—in every man, so the qualities which make a Brahmin, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya, or Śūdra are inherent in every man, more or less. But at times one or other of these qualities predominates in him in varying degrees, and it is manifested accordingly . . . *Naturally, it*

is quite possible for one to be changed from one caste into another. (CW5, pp. 376–77; BCW9, pp. 263–64; emphasis added)

This passage shows just how wrong Sharma is. Vivekananda, as a Hindu with a liberal cosmopolitan outlook, did not hesitate to consider even his Western disciples “Brahmins,” since he conceived Brahminhood not in terms of heredity but in terms of a person’s inherent qualities. Conversely, Vivekananda also noted that not all hereditary Brahmins are *true* Brahmins, because they lack the *sāttvika* qualities characteristic of the true Brahmin. He refers here to the doctrine of three *guṇas* (roughly translated as “qualities”) of Nature (*prakṛti*) accepted by Sāṃkhya and Vedānta. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* elaborates in detail how a preponderance of one or the other of these three *guṇas* manifests as various traits of human character. A *sāttvika* person exhibits ethical and spiritual virtues such as tranquility, compassion, and self-control, while a *rājasika* person has a more active and passionate nature characterized by lust, anger, restlessness, and egoism. A *tāmasika* person exhibits qualities such as laziness, inertia, fear, and delusion.²⁷

It is clear, then, that Vivekananda understood caste in what he took to be its original sense as natural “variation,” and *not* in terms of heredity. Moreover, the italicized final sentence directly contradicts Sharma’s claim that Vivekananda denied the possibility that a hereditary Śūdra can become a Brahmin. For Vivekananda, it is a logical consequence of his three-*guṇas*-based conception of caste that it is always possible to change “from one caste to another,” since we can enhance or diminish the predominance of a particular *guṇa* by modifying our own thoughts and actions. Hence, from Vivekananda’s perspective, a hereditary Śūdra may either *already* have the qualities of a true Brahmin if she is sufficiently *sāttvika* in nature, or a hereditary Śūdra can *attain* the qualities of a true Brahmin by engaging in *sāttvika* behavior for a sufficient period of time.

Nicholson (forthcoming) acknowledges Vivekananda’s key distinction between the existing caste system and the “original” caste system but notes that there is “little historical evidence” for his “revisionist understanding of the ancient Indian social order.” On this issue, however, I believe Nicholson’s interpretation of Vivekananda requires some nuancing and correction. Let us examine, first, the following important passage from Vivekananda’s 1889 Bengali letter to Pramadaḍās Mitra, which Nicholson does not address:

I have another question: Did Ācārya Śaṅkara discuss the *guṇa*-based conception of caste (*guṇagata jāti*) mentioned in *Purāṇas* like the *Mahābhārata*? If he does, where is it to be found? I have no doubt that according to the ancient view in this country, caste was hereditary (*vaṃśagata*), and it cannot also be doubted that sometimes the Śūdras used to be oppressed more than the helots among the Spartans and the blacks among the Americans! As for myself, I have no partiality for any party in this caste question, because I know it is a social law and is based on *guṇa* and *karma* (*guṇa- eboṅg karma-prasūta*). It also means grave harm if one bent on going beyond *guṇa* and *karma* cherishes in mind any caste distinctions. (CW6, p. 210 [translation modified]; BCW6, pp. 229–30)

Vivekananda states here that he believes that “caste was hereditary” even in ancient India. At the same time, he claims that some ancient scriptures like the *Mahābhārata* advocated a non-hereditary, “*guṇa*-based conception of caste.” Hence, he seems to infer from these scriptures that the original system of caste was based on the *guṇas* but that it quickly degenerated into a hereditary caste system. As he put it in his 1900 Bengali essay “*Prācya o Pāścātya*” (“The East and the West”), “I accept that the *guṇa*-based caste system was the original one; unfortunately, a *guṇa*-based caste system degenerates into a hereditary one within two to four generations (*guṇagata jāti ādi, svikār kori; kintu guṇ ducār puruṣe vaṃśagata hoye dāḍāi*)” (CW5, p. 456 [translation modified]; BCW6, p. 124).

²⁷ The *Gītā* explains the three *guṇas* in detail in chapters 14, 17, and 18.

Although Vivekananda does not refer to any specific verses from the *Mahābhārata* that suggest a *guṇa*-based conception of caste, he was likely thinking, in part, of the dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and the snake Nahuṣa in the Vanaparvan of the *Mahābhārata*. In this dialogue, Nahuṣa asks “who is a brahmin?”, and Yudhiṣṭhira replies: “He is known as a brahmin, king of Snakes, in whom truthfulness, liberality, patience, deportment, mildness, self-control, and compassion are found . . . The marks of the *śūdra* are not found in a brahmin; but a *śūdra* is not necessarily a *śūdra*, nor a brahmin a brahmin. In whomever the brahmin’s marks are found, Snake, he is known as a brahmin; and in whom they are not found, him they designate as a *śūdra*” (Van Buitenen 1965, p. 564). Nahuṣa then replies: “If you judge a brahmin by his conduct, king, then birth has no meaning, my dear sir, as long as no conduct is evident.” Yudhiṣṭhira replies as follows: “I think . . . that birth is hard to ascertain among humankind, because of the confusion of all classes when any man begets children on any woman . . . Therefore those see the truth of it who know that conduct is the chief postulate” (Van Buitenen 1965, p. 564). As Matilal [1989] (2002, pp. 141–43) has discussed, this passage from the *Mahābhārata* explicitly rejects a hereditary conception of caste in favor of one based on one’s inner qualities and conduct.

Moreover, in the 1889 letter quoted in the previous paragraph, Vivekananda’s remark that the original conception of caste was specifically “based on *guṇa* and *karma*”—a conception, as we have just seen, that is endorsed by Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata*—strongly suggests that Vivekananda also had in mind the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, which is, of course, part of the *Mahābhārata*. In 4.13 of the *Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa declares, “The four *varṇas* [castes] were created by Me according to the divisions of *guṇa* and *karma*” (*cāturvarṇyam mayā sṛṣṭam guṇakarmavibhāgaśaḥ*). In 18.40–44, Kṛṣṇa explains this *guṇa*- and *karma*-based conception of caste in greater detail. Verse 18.41 states that “the works of Brahmins, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras are divided according to the qualities (*guṇas*) born of their own inner nature” (*brāhmaṇakṣatriyaviśāṃ śūdrāṇāṃ ca parantapa | karmāṇi pravibhaktāni svabhāvaprabhavair guṇaiḥ*). In 18.42–44, Kṛṣṇa then goes on to detail some of the main qualities of each caste: Brahmins exhibit qualities such as purity and self-control, Kṣatriyas valor and generosity, Vaiśyas an aptitude for mercantile and agricultural work, and Śūdras an aptitude for service.²⁸

Vivekananda is hardly alone in taking these verses from the *Gītā* to endorse a non-hereditary conception of caste based on one’s inner qualities and conduct. As Llewellyn (2019) has discussed, both Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi also interpreted these *Gītā* verses in a similar manner.²⁹ More recently, Matilal [1989] (2002, p. 143) has argued that “a comment such as *guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ* (in accordance with the division of ‘qualities’ and actions) is to be regarded more as a criticism of the existing heredity-bound caste system, than an assertion of an already existing practice.” Whether the *Gītā* endorsed a non-hereditary conception of caste is, of course, a controversial matter, but for present purposes, what is important is that Vivekananda’s non-hereditary interpretation of the *Gītā* is not wildly implausible or idiosyncratic.

Nicholson (forthcoming), as we have seen, claims that there is “little historical evidence” for Vivekananda’s view that the original caste system was not based on heredity. While it may be true that there is little or no *direct* historical evidence for an original non-hereditary caste system, Nicholson overlooks Vivekananda’s argument that passages on caste in scriptures like the *Gītā* and the *Mahābhārata* themselves constitute at least *indirect* historical evidence for the existence of an original caste system based not on heredity but on inner qualities and conduct. Moreover, Nicholson’s own assumption that “[t]he *Gītā* explicitly supports the division of society into the four *varṇas*”—which he understands in hereditary terms—is at least as controversial as the non-hereditary interpretation of the *Gītā*’s conception of caste advocated by Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Gandhi, Matilal, and others.

²⁸ It is also significant that in the passage from an 1895 letter cited earlier in this section, Vivekananda explicitly referred to verse 3.24 of the *Gītā* in support of his view that the “cause of India’s downfall” was the “giving up” of the “original” idea of caste based on the “freedom of the individual to express his nature” (CW4, p. 372).

²⁹ Tapasyananda (1984, p. 139) also argues that the concept of *cāturvarṇya* in the *Gītā* “is not the caste system . . . solely based on birth” but “a division based on the natural constitution of man arising from the dominance of Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas . . . ”

In a recent article, Baier (2019, p. 236) follows Jyotirmaya Sharma in claiming that Vivekananda advocated “a reinvigoration of the Brahmin caste and a reform of the caste system (but not its abolishment).” Baier adduces as evidence Vivekananda’s statement that “Brāhmanhood is the solution of the varying degrees of progress and culture as well as that of all social and political problems” (CW4, p. 309; Baier 2019, p. 237). However, in light of my argument in this section, it should be clear that Baier makes the same two mistakes as Sharma. First, Baier fails to recognize that Vivekananda explicitly contrasts the “hereditary Brahmin caste” with “Brāhmaṇya qualities,” which he defines as ethical and spiritual traits deriving from *sattva-guṇa* (CW5, pp. 376–77). Second, Baier overlooks the many passages in which Vivekananda both prophesies and welcomes the day when hereditary Brahmins would raise their own “funeral pyre” (CW4, p. 458). More generally, social critics of Vivekananda like Baier, Dixit, and Sharma have not paid sufficient attention to Vivekananda’s key distinction between the existing hereditary caste system and an “original” caste system based not on heredity but on one’s qualities and conduct.

5. Ramakrishna and Vivekananda: Rupture or Continuity?

A major theme running through Sharma’s *A Restatement of Religion* is that there was a “rupture” between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and that they occupied “two worlds” that were largely “incommensurable” (Sharma 2013a, p. xiii). His argument for such a rupture has both a philosophical and a biographical dimension. From a philosophical standpoint, Sharma claims that Ramakrishna accepted a world-affirming, *bhakti*-oriented Tantric philosophy and placed non-Hindu religions on an equal footing with Hinduism (Sharma 2013a, pp. 38–81), while Vivekananda broke with Ramakrishna both in championing Śaṅkara’s world-denying philosophy of Advaita Vedānta and in asserting the superiority of Hinduism to other religions (Sharma 2013a, pp. 91–101). Sharma’s argument in this regard is hardly new, as numerous earlier scholars have already argued for such a philosophical rupture between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, including Devdas (1968, pp. 12–39); Neevel (1976); and Matchett (1981).

Recently, several scholars have challenged certain aspects of this rupture thesis. For instance, Beckerlegge (2006b, pp. 113–20); Nicholson (forthcoming); and I (Maharaj 2020) have all argued that there is a major continuity between Ramakrishna’s world-affirming Advaitic teachings and the ethically-oriented “Practical Vedānta” championed by Vivekananda. Likewise, in Section 3 of this article, I have contended that Vivekananda followed Ramakrishna, rather than Śaṅkara, in two key respects. First, Vivekananda propounded a world-affirming Vedāntic philosophy that upholds the ontological inseparability of nondual Brahman and the dynamic personal Śakti. Second, he affirmed the pluralist doctrine that all the major world religions are equally effective paths to God-realization, since they all correspond to one of the four *Yogas*, each of which is a direct path to salvation.

However, there is also a more novel biographical dimension to Sharma’s “rupture” thesis, which I will critically examine in this section. At various points in his book, Sharma (2013a, pp. 102–16 and passim) argues that Vivekananda, on a personal level, had serious doubts about Ramakrishna’s spiritual stature and accomplishments. According to Sharma, “Narendra [Vivekananda’s pre-monastic name] always thought of his Master’s trances as hallucinations, a figment of Ramakrishna’s imagination” (Sharma 2013a, p. x; emphasis added). It is indisputable that Narendra *did* seem to think that Ramakrishna’s visions were hallucinations up to some time in 1884. In fact, Ramakrishna himself, in a conversation with Narendra and other visitors on 9 May 1885, remarked: “At Jadu Mallick’s garden house Narendra said to me, ‘The forms of God that you see are the fiction of your mind.’ I was amazed and said to him, ‘But they speak too!’ Narendra answered, ‘Yes, one may think so’” (Gupta [1902–1932] 2010, p. 826; Gupta [1942] 1992, p. 772). However, Sharma is wrong in claiming that Narendra “always” considered his guru’s visions to be hallucinations. Sharma overlooks the fact that Vivekananda himself, on several occasions, explicitly stated that while he had *initially* doubted the veracity of Ramakrishna’s visions, he later came to accept their veracity. For instance, on 8 April 1887, Narendra remarked as follows to his brother disciples Mahendranāth Gupta and Rākhāl: “At first I

did not accept most of what the Master said. One day he asked me, ‘Then why do you come here?’ I replied, ‘I come here to see you, not to listen to you’” (Gupta [1902–1932] 2010, p. 1137; Gupta [1942] 1992, p. 984). The crucial words here are “At first,” which clearly indicate that he later came to accept Ramakrishna’s visions and teachings.

Later, in a private conversation with his disciple Sister Nivedita on 29 May 1899, Vivekananda mentioned that a specific incident in 1884 led him to accept the reality of Śakti and the veracity of Ramakrishna’s divine visions:

S. [Swami Vivekananda] “How I used to hate Kali and all Her ways. *That* was my 6 years’ fight, because I would not accept Kali.”

N. [Nivedita] But now you have accepted Her specially, have you not, Swami?

S. I *had* to—Ramakrishna Paramahansa dedicated me to Her. And you know I believe that She guides me in every little thing I do—and just does what She likes with me. Yet I fought so long.—I loved the man you see, and that held me. I thought him the purest man I had ever seen, and I knew that he loved me as my own father and mother had not power to do...His greatness had not dawned on me then. That was afterwards, when I had given in. At that time I thought him simply a brain-sick baby, always seeing visions and things. I hated it—and then *I* had to accept Her too!

N. Won’t you tell me what made you do that Swami? What broke all your opposition down?

S. No that will die with me. I had great misfortunes at that time you know. My father died, and so on. And She saw Her opportunity to make a slave of me. They were her very words.—“To make a slave of you.” And R.P. [Ramakrishna Paramahansa] made me over to Her—Curious, He only lived 2 years after doing that... Yes, I think there’s no doubt that Kali worked up the body of Ramakrishna for Her Own Ends. You see Margot I cannot *but* believe that there is, somewhere, a Great Power that thinks of itself as Feminine and called Kali, and the Mother!—And I believe in Brahman, too ... (Basu 1982, p. 157)³⁰

Vivekananda explicitly notes here that he had initially thought that Ramakrishna was a “brain-sick baby, always seeing visions and things,” but that an incident in 1884 led him to accept Ramakrishna’s greatness and his visions of Kālī. While Vivekananda does not explain the specific incident in detail, he does provide several clues as to what transpired. Two pieces of information indicate that the incident took place some time between March and December 1884. He mentions that Ramakrishna “only lived 2 years” after the incident, and Ramakrishna passed away on 16 August 1886. Vivekananda also states that the incident occurred just after his father had died, and we know that his father Viśvanāth Datta died on 25 February 1884 (Paranjape 2015, p. xlvi). It is also significant that during this overwhelming incident, Ramakrishna made Vivekananda a “slave” of Kālī, clearly indicating that the incident led him to accept the reality and supremacy of Śakti. Accordingly, Vivekananda told Nivedita that he felt that Kālī “guides me in every little thing I do.”

Strangely, while Sharma (2013a, p. 12) briefly mentions the first part of this important passage, he mistakenly claims that “the ‘fight’ lasted all the years Vivekananda had known him [Ramakrishna],” completely ignoring the second half of the passage, where Vivekananda explicitly mentions that an incident “2 years” prior to Ramakrishna’s death made him *accept* Śakti and the veracity of Ramakrishna’s spiritual experiences. When taken as a whole, the passage also lends further support to my argument in Section 3 that Vivekananda—contrary to Sharma’s claim—followed Ramakrishna, and not Śaṅkara, in upholding the Tantric doctrine of the inseparability of nondual Brahman and the dynamic Śakti.

Sharma also tries to demonstrate a “chasm between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda” (Sharma 2013a, p. 112) by arguing that Vivekananda, unlike devotees like Giriścandra Ghosh, never accepted

³⁰ For a slightly different version of the same conversation, see (CW8, p. 263).

Ramakrishna as a divine incarnation. In support of this claim, Sharma cites several statements of Narendra from 1885 to 1886, which suggest that he looked upon Ramakrishna not as an *avatāra* but as, at best, a “godlike man” (Sharma 2013a, p. 113). Sharma does acknowledge that Narendra, on certain occasions, did explicitly accept Ramakrishna as an incarnation—as, for instance, when he told Ramakrishna on 15 March 1886, “All created things have come from you” (Gupta [1902–1932] 2010, p. 1026; Gupta [1942] 1992, p. 945; cited in Sharma 2013a, p. 113). However, Sharma claims that such statements should not be taken at face-value:

In the months leading to Ramakrishna’s death, when directly confronted by his Master on issues where they had serious disagreements, Vivekananda would invariably agree in order not to cause the ailing Ramakrishna any grief. But once removed from Ramakrishna’s presence, he would affirm his own position clearly. (Sharma 2013a, p. 113)

In the first sentence of this passage, Sharma asserts, without a shred of evidence, that any time that Narendra expressed his agreement with Ramakrishna’s views, he did so in order to avoid upsetting his ailing guru. In fact, Narendra was never afraid to speak his mind in front of Ramakrishna, as is clear from the fact that on 11 March 1885, Narendra, when debating with Girīścandra Ghosh in Ramakrishna’s presence, refused to accept the very possibility of God incarnating as a human being. Ironically, Sharma (2013a, pp. 110–11) actually discusses this debate between Narendra and Girīścandra in some detail, which undercuts his own unsupported claim that Narendra would agree with Ramakrishna’s views in his presence only to avoid upsetting him.

More fundamentally, Sharma’s discussion of the question of whether Narendra accepted Ramakrishna as an incarnation suffers from a serious methodological flaw: he cites various statements made by Narendra in 1885 and 1886 in non-chronological order, instead of examining whether and how Narendra’s understanding of Ramakrishna *evolved* from 1885 to 1886 (as Vivekananda himself later attested). Indeed, when we examine Narendra’s statements chronologically, we find that Narendra consistently doubted the possibility of God incarnating as a human being up to the end of 1885 or early 1886. On 27 October 1885, Narendra, in Ramakrishna’s presence, told Doctor Sarkār: “I do not say that he [Ramakrishna] is God. What I am saying is that he is a godlike man” (Gupta [1902–1932] 2010, p. 979; Gupta [1942] 1992, p. 904). Indeed, as Vivekananda himself later remarked, doubts about Ramakrishna’s divinity continued to linger in his mind until two days before Ramakrishna’s death on 16 August 1886, when the following watershed incident took place (tellingly, an incident not mentioned by Sharma):

One day while he [Ramakrishna] was staying at the Cossipore garden, his body in imminent danger of falling off for ever, by the side of his bed I was saying in my mind, “Well, now if you can declare that you are God, then only will I believe you are really God Himself.” It was only two days before he passed away. Immediately, he looked up towards me all on a sudden and said, “He who was Rāma, He who was Kṛṣṇa, verily is He now Ramakrishna in this body. And that not merely from the standpoint of your Vedānta!” At this I was struck dumb. (CW6, p. 480)

There is overwhelming textual evidence that after this decisive incident on 14 August 1886, Vivekananda consistently looked upon Ramakrishna as a divine incarnation. For instance, in an 1894 letter to Swami Shivananda, Vivekananda wrote in an impassioned tone:

My dear brother, that Ramakrishna Paramahansa was God incarnate, I have not the least doubt . . . Whether Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa was born at all we are not sure; and Avatarās like Buddha and Caitanya are monotonous; Ramakrishna Paramahansa is the latest and the most perfect—the concentrated embodiment of knowledge, love, renunciation, catholicity, and the desire to serve mankind. So where is anyone to compare with him? He must have been born in vain who cannot appreciate him! My supreme good fortune is that I am his

servant through life after life. A single word of his is to me far weightier than the Vedas and the Vedānta. (CW7, p. 483; BCW7, p. 50)

Here and elsewhere, both in private and public, Vivekananda unambiguously affirmed that Ramakrishna was not only a divine incarnation but the last and greatest of all incarnations.³¹ For Vivekananda, Ramakrishna was superior to all previous divine incarnations because of his liberal acceptance of all religious paths, his harmonization of *bhakti* and *jñāna*, his compassion, and his renunciation.

Such textual evidence should suffice to disprove Sharma's thesis that there was a personal "rupture" or "chasm" between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Sharma's fundamental mistake is to assume that Vivekananda never evolved beyond his initial skeptical period—up through late 1885 or early 1886—when he doubted the veracity of Ramakrishna's divine visions and was reluctant to accept Ramakrishna as an incarnation. As I have argued, however, this assumption is unwarranted, since Sharma not only fails to address the watershed incident on 14 August 1886 that convinced Narendra that his guru was an incarnation but also ignores the countless statements made by Vivekananda *after* Ramakrishna's passing—in recorded dialogues and writings from 1887 to 1901—which clearly indicate that he looked upon Ramakrishna as the greatest of all divine incarnations. In short, Sharma's non-chronological approach leads him to overlook the gradual evolution of the young Narendra's attitude toward Ramakrishna—the kind of evolution that is typically present in a *guru-śiṣya* (master-disciple) relationship.

6. Conclusions: Debating Vivekananda's Legacy

This article has challenged Sharma's book-length argument that Vivekananda was a Hindu supremacist who favored the existing caste system, denigrated non-Hindu religions, and deviated from Ramakrishna's more liberal and egalitarian teachings. Along the way, I have also shown that Sharma's arguments throughout his book are vitiated by three serious methodological flaws. First, Sharma has a tendency to "cherry-pick" statements from Vivekananda's corpus without paying sufficient attention to their context and without taking into account relevant statements in other places in his work. As a result, he often distorts, and sometimes even outright falsifies, Vivekananda's views. Second, Sharma discusses Vivekananda's remarks about Hinduism in an ahistorical vacuum, ignoring his late-nineteenth century colonial context. Third, Sharma is not sufficiently attentive to the ways that Vivekananda's views on certain issues evolved in the course of the 1880s and 1890s.

While this article has focused on Sharma's book in particular, my broader aim has been to shed new light on Vivekananda's views on Hinduism, religious diversity, caste, and Ramakrishna. Section 2 made the case that Vivekananda's nationalistic statements, when properly contextualized, reveal him to be not a proto-Hindutva ideologue but a cosmopolitan patriot who strove to prepare the ethical and spiritual foundations for the independence movement by encouraging his fellow Indians to give up their "slave" mentality and to appreciate India's great spiritual heritage while also assimilating the best ideas and values from other countries.

Section 3 defended a new diachronic interpretation of Vivekananda's views on religious diversity. Through a chronological examination of his lectures and writings, I found that it was only for a brief period—roughly, from mid-1894 to mid-1895—that he harmonized the world religions on the hierarchical basis of the three stages of Vedānta. As far as I am aware, no scholar has recognized that from late 1895 to 1901, Vivekananda consistently harmonized the world religions *not* on the basis of an Advaitic hierarchical inclusivism but on the more egalitarian basis of the four Yogas, each of which he took to be a direct and independent path to salvation. Accordingly, he echoed Ramakrishna in

³¹ For instance, Vivekananda also refers to Ramakrishna as the greatest of incarnations in a letter to Swami Brahmananda dated 4 October 1895 (CW6, pp. 345–47; BCW7, pp. 139–40), a letter to his brother disciples dated 27 April 1896 (CW7, p. 496), and in his 1901 Bengali essay, "*Hindudharma o Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*" (CW6, p. 185; BCW6, p. 5).

affirming that all religions have “the same saving power” (CW4, p. 182) and conspicuously refrained from privileging Advaita Vedānta over non-Advaitic paths.

Section 4 built on recent scholarly work to militate against the view—held by Sharma and others—that Vivekananda more or less favored the hereditary caste system. Vivekananda, I argued, not only scathingly attacked the existing caste system but also prophesied and welcomed its demise. At the same time, he advocated its replacement by the “original” caste system based not on heredity but on one’s inherent qualities (*guṇas*) and conduct (*karma*)—a system which, he claimed, was advocated in scriptures like the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Finally, Section 5 highlighted the evolution and maturation in the young Narendra’s attitude toward Ramakrishna, as he gradually moved away from his initial skepticism and came to look upon his guru as the greatest of all *avatāras*, one who was unparalleled in his catholicity and renunciation.

In the current academic climate, it has become fashionable to knock prominent Hindu religious figures off their saintly pedestals. While Vivekananda is certainly not above criticism, I hope to have shown that some of the more serious criticisms that have been leveled against him by Sharma and others are based on an inaccurate or partial understanding of his rich and multifaceted corpus.

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