Westernization of an Eastern Faith: Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and the Vedanta Society in America

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WESTERNIZATION OF AN EASTERN FAITH: RAMAKRISHNA, VIVEKANANDA, AND THE VEDANTA SOCIETY IN AMERICA
This work is an all too brief introduction to a part of our American Society which is for the most part unknown. As the project has progressed, I have found that I am only just now, at the completion of the paper, scratching the surface. This paper has gone through a multitude of revisions in order to bring it to its present state. This is not a complete picture by any means, but perhaps it will encourage others to take a look into Vedanta for themselves.

I have endeavored to remain unbiassed, and I apologize for those instances where I fail in the attempt. Vedanta has been for me a new world; an uncharted land. The exploration has been a joy and a labor. I hope that the reader will find my journey an interesting one.
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Introduction

How does a man become a god? How can one man's philosophy progress to a faith and then a religion? Surprisingly, the process is not a rare one. Throughout history men have stepped forward to assume the role of God. These men's teachings became the doctrine for a great number of followers. The world is going through a period in which new religions begin daily, and new "gods" appear like magic. Some will remain while others quickly pass away. It has always been that way. Christianity is founded on the teachings of Jesus Christ, who came to earth claiming himself to be God. Christianity lasted. Other faiths have not fared as well. In New York in the mid-1970s, thousands flocked to hear a man called Majo speak of truth and heaven. Today, this man, who believed himself to be God, cannot be found, and his followers have all disappeared.

There are still other faiths which, though they have not stood the test of time, have not shown any signs of faltering, either. One such faith is the Vedanta Society of America. Founded by a humble Hindu member of the priestly caste, Vedanta has found a home in the United States which has lasted eighty-nine years.

To look at the story of Vedanta and its impact on America, it is necessary to trace it back to its very roots.
It is imperative that the lives of its founders be included, for much of what Vedanta is revolves around the men responsible for it.

The spiritual father of Vedanta in America is Sri Ramakrishna. His life is a colorful, sometimes puzzling, always interesting saga. This is a man who was considered God on earth, and his teachings opened the door to a new faith in America.

Vedanta was not brought to America by Ramakrishna, however. That task was left to a disciple of Ramakrishna’s, the Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda, so committed to the principles espoused by his Master, placed himself in servitude to the mission of spreading the teachings of Ramakrishna. Sacrificing home, health, and security, Vivekananda spent many years in America so that Vedanta might take root.

Not only did Vedanta take root in America through the efforts of Vivekananda, but it blossomed and flowered. From the very beginning there was a place in the United States for this strange and wonderful faith. Disciples developed immediately and organized worship centers. Throughout this century Vedanta has continued to grow and expand. The principles have changed somewhat, but the basic philosophy has remained the same.

Vedanta, like any other system of belief, has both good and bad aspects. Whether good qualities outweigh bad qualities, or vice versa, must be left to the individual to decide. Regardless of personal opinion, Vedanta has established itself as a small part of American culture, and it looks as though it is here to stay.
Christopher Isherwood called him a phenomenon.\(^1\) Aldous Huxley called him a "superman."\(^2\) Thousands have called him Master; millions consider him a Hindu saint. Venerated by nearly everyone he met, Sri Ramakrishna revolutionized a major portion of the Hindu faith and opened the door to non-materialistic Hindu worship in the materialistic West. Looking at the story of this unassuming little Hindu brahmin, one must wonder how it was possible he could have made the impact he did. Yet, an impact he did have, and the resulting effects of that impact are still being felt today.

Ramakrishna's story begins not with his birth, but months before. In a tradition similar to that associated with Christ, the birth of Ramakrishna was a widely heralded event. The story is rich in supernatural and spiritual events: visions, visitations by gods, transcendent enlightenment, and an immaculate conception.

In May 1835, a respected member of the brahmin class left his home in Kamarpukur, a small village seventy-five miles northwest of Calcutta, on a spiritual pilgrimage. Khudiram Chattopadhyaya bid farewell to his wife and left for a neighboring village. Not long after he had gone, Khudiram had a vision. While deeply involved in daily devotion,
Khudiram found himself transported from his usual surroundings and in the presence of a spiritual being. Khudiram was told that he was to be entrusted with a most holy child, one who would be worshiped by the masses. His next child was to be a manifestation of Vishnu—a living, breathing, flesh and blood incarnation of Krishna. With great haste, Khudiram made his way back to his wife, Chandra. Chandra, however, had been having experiences of her own. On a regular trip to the marketplace, Chandra stopped at a shrine to spend a few moments reflecting on her many blessings. As she focused on one of the idols, it suddenly became animate and was bathed in a brilliant light. The light grew, shimmering and moving. As Chandra watched, a beam separated from the idol, passed into her body, and filled her with a great joy and warmth. Immediately, Chandra knew she was pregnant, and she grew fearful of the reactions she would receive from her husband and the other members of her village. As much as she relished the experience she had had, she feared telling anyone. While agonizing over her situation, Chandra was visited by a god. Though various authors recount the story with different gods, the message remained the same. Chandra was told she was blessed among all women, and that she was to give birth to the flesh and blood form of God. As Rama, Buddha, Christ, Mohammad, and Krishna who had passed before, God once again would dwell on the earth in the form of a man. The god left Chandra with her thoughts and fears, but also with a great joy.

Khudiram returned to Kamarpukur feeling much of the same anxiety that his wife experienced. Neither Chandra nor
her husband were completely convinced that their visions had been real. Each had serious doubts concerning his own sanity. Immediately upon seeing one another, though, all their doubts disappeared. Intuitively, each knew that the other had received the same proclamation. Both shared their visions; each rejoiced in the good fortune. Time passed, and the birth of God incarnate in the nineteenth century fast approached.

Early in the morning of February 17, 1836, Chandra gave birth to a lively, cheerful son. Named Gadadhar, the new child won the hearts of all who saw him. Many reports indicate that upon viewing the child a wide variety of people immediately recognized Gadadhar as the Lord Vishnu incarnate. The child grew up surrounded by those who saw him as God on earth. With such nurturing, it is hardly surprising that as a young boy Gadadhar's mind was filled with spiritual things.

By the time Gadadhar was six years old, he sat for hours watching the religious plays which were performed periodically in the village. He would gather his young friends and work for days and weeks mimicking the adult performers. He memorized long speeches and amazed the older members of the village with his ability to recite major portions of the plays. He sat with the older men of the village and listened to them discuss their pilgrimages and the importance of spiritual discipline. As the years passed, the young Gadadhar focused all his attention on these activities, leaving the more mundane studies of math and science behind. Whenever Gadadhar was pressed to do chores or finish school
work, he would sneak off to the country to recite his plays and to meditate. The older he grew, the less willing he was to take responsibility. This lack of responsibility was ever excused by Gadadhar's "spiritual nature."

Gadadhar continually amazed members of the village with his deep insight and understanding. On one occasion a group of men puzzled over a difficult problem for hours as the then twelve-year-old Gadadhar sat quietly listening. Softly, the young boy began to speak, and the entire crowd grew silent. Gadadhar succinctly analyzed and solved the problem. The men of the village marveled at the abilities of the young brahmin.

Gadadhar's growth continued at a prodigious rate. He involved himself almost exclusively in personal worship. He grew devoted to the images of Krishna and Rama, and as a sign of this intense devotion, he adopted the name Ramakrishna during his sixteenth year. Soon after, Ramakrishna moved to Calcutta with his older brother, Ramkumar. In Calcutta, Ramakrishna served as family priest for many members of the city. It was during this time that he met a widow, the Rani Rasmani, who offered him that which he desired most: the opportunity to devote himself body and soul to the worship of the gods he so dearly loved.

In 1847, Rani Rasmani had purchased a large tract of land and had built a lavish temple garden. In the center of the garden, a shrine was erected in honor of the Divine Mother Kali. Kali was chosen by Rani Rasmani as her ideal to follow. By 1853, Rani Rasmani found herself in need of someone to tend
the garden and take care of the shrine. After careful consideration, Rani Rasmani selected Ramakrishna to be caretaker. Soon after, Ramakrishna also accepted the Divine Mother Kali as his ideal deity. Each day Ramakrishna spent working the garden, meditating, and cleaning the temple shrine. It was during one of these cleanings that Ramakrishna had his first vision of the Mother Kali.

The awesome figure of Kali stood at the center of the shrine. Part of the ritual of cleaning the temple was to polish and dust the painted stone statue that represented Kali. On one particular occasion, as Ramakrishna began to routinely clean the statue, he became aware of a warm breath against his cheek. He realized that the stone image had taken on life. From that time forward, Ramakrishna had numerous encounters with the incarnation of the Divine Mother Kali. He devoted himself to the temple and to the worship of Kali. He adorned the statue with fine robes and hung bracelets around the wrists and ankles of the goddess. He prepared lavish meals for the stone figure and bathed it daily. The fanatical proportions to which Ramakrishna carried his devotion for Kali characterized the dedication he practiced throughout his life. Ramakrishna began to see Kali in everything on the earth. All women looked to him to be images of the Divine Mother. Friends and family members feared a terrible mental illness had befallen Ramakrishna. As time passed, he completely ignored his personal health and hygiene because it took him away from his worship of Kali. Hoping to break the cycle that they saw as so destructive, those
closest to Ramakrishna urged him to take a less strenuous position in a new environment. To appease his friends, Ramakrishna moved to Dakshineswar in 1858, where he remained for the rest of his life. He took over the position of temple priest in the shrine of Kali, and immediately entered a life similar to the one he had left behind in Calcutta.

About this time Ramakrishna returned to full health and happiness. Others attended to the maintenance of the temple, freeing Ramakrishna to his devotions. Without the stress of routine chores, Ramakrishna thrived. Whereas those who knew him in Calcutta had assumed him insane, worshipers at Dakshineswar honored Ramakrishna as one who had attained spiritual ecstasy. Ramakrishna's devotion was overwhelming to many, and thousands sought out the little Hindu for guidance and advice.

With what his parents considered to be a return to full mental health and a position of respectability, they decided it was time for Ramakrishna to take a wife. After a brief selection process, the parents decided on Saradamani, aged five years, for their 22-year-old son. Ramakrishna returned to Kamarpukur for his wedding and remained there for about a year and a half. At the end of that time, he returned once more to Dakshineswar. It was nine years before Ramakrishna saw his young wife a second time.

The years following Ramakrishna's marriage were filled with personal devotions, spiritual pilgrimages, and the early signs of his role as a great teacher. During one of his daily devotions Ramakrishna slipped into a deep trance
that lasted for six days. Those who were close to him feared for his life. When he came out of the trance he was changed. He claimed he could no longer see any evil anywhere in the world. He had deeper understanding and appreciation of things around him. He no longer had any questions about the existence of God. Contemporaries report that he radiated warmth and joy. A traveling priestess looked at him and proclaimed that he had entered samadhi. Word spread quickly and pilgrims traveled from all over India to sit at the little Hindu's feet and hear him speak of life, past, present and future. As he grew older, he seldom left Dakshineswar, preferring instead that the people should travel to where he was. And travel they did. Thousands came to Dakshineswar before Ramakrishna's life ended. By the beginning of 1870, Ramakrishna had established himself as the most holy of the Hindu brahmin. It was also at this time that Ramakrishna realized himself as God on earth.

Ramakrishna was troubled throughout his spiritual at the number of different religions in the world. He was puzzled that there could be so many different "truths" about God. Driven by an intense curiosity, Ramakrishna devoted himself to the study of Islam in order to learn its truths. During his meditations one day, Ramakrishna was visited by the image of Mohammed. Upon the termination of this experience, Ramakrishna proclaimed that Mohammed was truly God on earth and that Islam was a valid path to God. Soon after, Ramakrishna once again turned from Hinduism to pursue Christianity. Once again, during an intense meditation, he
was visited, this time by Christ. The two holy men spoke at length, and afterwards, Ramakrishna proclaimed Christianity true and valid. One by one, Ramakrishna tackled the major religions and gave them his approval. At last he proclaimed that all religions were compatible and consistent, and that through knowledge of God, all men could understand that there was no difference between them. All paths led to God, and no path was any better than any other.

In each case Ramakrishna experienced the other religions of the world, but he avoided the Scriptures used by the various faiths. Ramakrishna claimed that the Scriptures did nothing but cloud the truth of God and that they were unnecessary. But a historian who followed the life of Ramakrishna theorizes that due to Ramakrishna's aversion to structured learning, he most probably was unable to read the sacred writings and gave up in frustration. This theory makes sense in light of the fact that Ramakrishna encouraged others to find out as much as they could about other faiths in order to understand and accept them.

Toward the end of his life Ramakrishna collected a solid core of disciples, who spent most of their days worshiping and learning at the holy man's feet. One disciple, and the chronicler of most of Ramakrishna's teaching, Mahandra Nath Gupta, saw the Master every day for a period of seventeen years. Modern Hindus still look at the devotion of Mahandra Nath Gupta as an ideal to be pursued. His commitment was absolute, and it continued long after Ramakrishna's death.

The majority of Ramakrishna's disciples went out into
the Indian countryside and preached the teachings of the Master. They devoted themselves to comforting the poor and sick. At the time of Ramakrishna's rise to prominence, India was suffering some of her worst poverty and famine, plague and pestilence. Though Ramakrishna's words were comforting, they did little to ease the tribulations of the general population. This situation deeply troubled one of Ramakrishna's most devout disciples, the Swami Vivekananda. It was his hope that somehow the teachings of Ramakrishna could be used to help the troubled people of India. Though he felt powerless to do much to help, Vivekananda took encouragement from Ramakrishna. On more than one occasion Ramakrishna took the Swami aside and told him of great things that lay ahead of him. In glowing terms Ramakrishna predicted that Vivekananda would be his greatest teacher and prophet. Vivekananda doubted the Master, but his doubts proved erroneous. Ramakrishna's predictions came true. Vivekananda became to the Master what Paul became to Christ.

Vivekananda grew close to Ramakrishna in the last years of the Master's life. As the year 1886 began, Vivekananda became aware that Ramakrishna would not long live to teach and lead his disciples. Cheerful until the end, Ramakrishna, for all his goodness and spiritual prowess, could not fend off the ravages of cancer. Slowly the disease consumed him, until on August 16, 1886, it finally won the final battle; Ramakrishna passed into the final samadhi. During his life, he had planted many seeds, and his influence had yet to reach its peak. In death there came power to the
unassuming Hindu and his teachings. The Master had died, but his spirit lived on. And the followers of Ramakrishna were not about to lose heart. Through the love, commitment and devotion of the Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna's closest disciples banded together to form a society which still remains today. Fifteen followers of the Master established a shrine in Baranagore, a small village between Calcutta and Dakshineswar, and from this place they devoted themselves to serving those in need in India. Every effort made by the disciples of the Master was for the betterment of their fellow men. It was this desire on the part of Vivekananda which eventually brought him to America.

Vivekananda and the Birth of Vedanta in America

Were it not for the efforts of one man, the teachings of Ramakrishna would never have spread as they did. The Swami Vivekananda brought Ramakrishna's philosophy to the United States, and under his watchful eye it blossomed into a full-fledged religion. Just as Christianity grew and flourished due to the efforts of the apostle Paul, Vedanta flourished due to Vivekananda. As Paul took Christ's teachings to the pagan Gentile, Vivekananda taught Ramakrishna's philosophy to the materialistic, pagan West.

Vivekananda, born Narendranath Datta in Calcutta in 1863, became a disciple of the Master Ramakrishna in 1881. Although only eighteen at the time, Vivekananda was a very bright, mature, skeptical young man. Repeatedly he tested
Ramakrishna, questioning almost every teaching. Ramakrishna from the very first meeting held Vivekananda in the highest esteem and often alluded to great works ahead for the young Hindu. Though Ramakrishna never spelled out exactly what the great works might be, it became apparent as Vivekananda grew older, becoming spokesman for Ramakrishna both in India and later in the United States.

Vivekananda was not an easy convert for Ramakrishna, but as the Master had once told the young man, "He who doubts greatly is also capable of great belief." In Vivekananda's case, this was very true. Of all Ramakrishna's disciples, Vivekananda remained one of the most devout until the end of his life. The commitment made Vivekananda the ideal successor to Ramakrishna upon the Master's death in 1886. When Ramakrishna died, the close devotees, fifteen in number, were held together by the leadership of Vivekananda. They formed a commune, called a Math, where they worshiped daily and lived by the rules taught by Ramakrishna. The Master's ashes were enshrined in the center of the Math and the commune became a Hindu landmark, the destination of thousands of spiritual pilgrims over the years. During the time that the Math existed, Vivekananda was its leader and guide.

Vivekananda became aware of the intense poverty of his homeland, and he and the other devotees of Ramakrishna dedicated themselves to working for the betterment of all India. They dedicated time, effort, and all available resources to improve conditions. Still, Vivekananda felt more could be done. He was amazed at the progress occurring in the
West, and it was at this time that the Swami resolved to visit America. Though the actual trip was still four years in the future, Vivekananda dedicated most of his free time to studying the ways of the West. By the time he actually arrived in the United States, he was extremely articulate concerning American beliefs and customs. This, more than anything else, worked greatly in Vivekananda's favor. Single-handedly, Vivekananda changed a major population's image of the inhabitants of India. The picture Vivekananda presented was not one of the uneducated heather mystic but rather of an intelligent, committed man with a wonderful sense of humor and a sparkling personality. All of Ramakrishna's predictions of great work ahead came to a sudden climax when Vivekananda set foot for the first time on American soil.

The occasion for Vivekananda's first visit to America was the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. The Parliament was intended to bring leaders from a wide range of faiths together in one place as a tribute to man's conviction and dedication to religion. The Parliament was a part of the World Columbian Exposition, commemorating Columbus' discovery of America. In the main, the Parliament accomplished very little, but from the point of view of a select few, it was one of the most significant events in the history of religion in America.

On September 11, 1894, the Swami Vivekananda first stepped to the podium at the Parliament of Religions. The audience, a rather subdued and austere body, fell immediately silent as the Hindu leader spoke. Vivekananda held the crowd
spellbound with his smooth-as-silk voice and his warm sense of humor. As he spoke of world brotherhood and unity among different faiths, the crowd broke into uncharacteristic cheers, culminating in a raucous standing ovation as he referred to the crowd as his "American sisters and brothers." By the time Vivekananda ended his first speech he had established himself as the favorite of the Parliament. In the ensuing days he was the most sought after of the speakers. When the Parliament ended, an independent lecture bureau offered to sponsor Vivekananda for a continental tour, and he accepted.

For the next two years Vivekananda toured the United States, speaking chiefly in Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Boston. By the time he was ready to leave for his native India, he was exhausted and in poor health. The trip across America was a hard one, due primarily to the curious image the small Hindu presented. During the late 1800s, many parts of the country were still isolated and backward. For every stop that Vivekananda made where he was looked upon with awe and respect, there was another stop where he was seen as some kind of sideshow freak. Many times he was applauded; many times he was jeered, but always he was in demand, and the touring agency exploited his popularity continually. Through it all Vivekananda kept his keen sense of humor. He never refused a speaking engagement, even though he was often scheduled to make three appearances in one day. He took his failures in stride and accepted his successes with humility. On occasion Vivekananda met with anger and rejection. Remarks, equating ants with angels and Jesus Christ with an earthworm, earned
Vivekananda some extremely negative reactions.\textsuperscript{34} Vivekananda looked upon these times with amusement. He could not understand why Westerners were so defensive about their beliefs, especially since there were so many ways of believing. Vivekananda saw very little consistency in the things Americans chose to believe. Even so, Vivekananda took all experiences, both good and bad, with the same gentle, jovial spirit.

One of the primary reasons that Vivekananda held on to such a good attitude throughout his time in America was undoubtedly due to the successes he had. Though much was unpleasant and trying about his touring, everywhere he went he developed an immediate following. Much the same way Rama-krishna had attracted disciples, Vivekananda, too, gained followers. By the time Vivekananda neared the end of his time in America, a dozen devotees followed him wherever he went. Before he left, he took these twelve devotees and formed a commune much like the one he had left behind in India. He established a Math at Thousand Island Park on the Saint Lawrence Seaway.\textsuperscript{35} Once the Math was established Vivekananda left the United States to tour France and England. Then, in December of 1895, Vivekananda returned to the United States. At the urging of his many devotees, he founded the first of the Vedanta Societies in America.\textsuperscript{36} Vivekananda stayed in America this second time only to get the Vedanta Society of America established. Longing for the sight of his native India, Vivekananda set sail from America late in 1896 for Ceylon, stopping briefly in England on the way. It was during this stay in England that Vivekananda defined the
ideals of Vedanta, the purpose of the Vedanta Societies, and their relation to Sri Ramakrishna.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{The Spirit of Vedanta}

Vedanta itself did not begin with the Swami Vivekananda. The Vedas, the sacred scriptures of the Hindu people, were written almost three thousand years earlier. Those Vedas sprang forth from Vedanta—the philosophy and beliefs underlying the lives of those who set the scriptures down on bark and papyrus. The faith known as Vedanta dates back to a time when stories were passed along from mouth to mouth, long before anything was written down. Historically, it is impossible to date a beginning to Vedanta, but the name first appeared about 350 B.C. Vedanta came to be associated with the priests and scholars who studied the Vedas. These men became the teachers and spiritual leaders of the Hindu people. They were considered most holy, somehow specially connected with the impersonal Brahman from which everything came and to which everything would return. These men were thought to have achieved the highest spiritual level possible for men of flesh and blood. From these holy men the "laws" of Vedanta issued forth.

A number of key concepts form the basis of Vedanta. These concepts are vital to the Hindu faith, and they remain to this day as a part of modern-day Western Vedanta. Basically, there are three building blocks to the Vedanta faith upon which all other ideas are built. These are: the
equality of all men with God, the universal good of all creation, and the never-ending cynical nature of all things.

To speak of the equality of all men with God is to invite confusion because of the different views of God between the Hindu faith and the typical Judeo-Christian faith. God is not the anthropomorphic creation of man's mind that the West has invented. For the Hindu, God is a manifestation of the impersonal Brahman who takes many forms and visits many generations of mankind. There are different gods which represent different aspects of Hindu life and belief. Even though these gods appear as distinct characters, they remain merely forms of a larger whole. Mankind is also a part of this larger whole. Both gods and mankind spring forth from the same source and return to the same source. The gods act as guides and ideals to follow in attaining the highest spiritual goals. To return to the Brahman, men must move through the earthly stages and rise beyond earthly constraints. In time, all people will reach this ideal state.

Implicit in this idea of returning to the source is the idea that all people possess an inherent goodness. There is nothing that does not come out of the Brahman. There is no real sin, no evil, no hell. There is nothing that exists that is less than the Brahman. Ramakrishna saw good in all things once he had first entered samadhi. He understood evil to be just an imperfect manifestation of good. In all things which appear bad, there is still the seed of good. Good is eternal. Ultimately, it is this good which will prevail, and anything which appears evil is illusory. No matter
how bad a situation may seem, it is a component of a greater good.

This is true of death, poverty, illness, and other tragedies of life. Though these things are indeed negative, they are viewed as steps in a process and, therefore, necessary. Without death, there can be no life, or re-birth; without poverty there is no prosperity, no chance to be thankful for that which we do have. Without illness, there is no recovery. Life, for the Hindu, is a perpetual process. It does not end with death; it simply changes structure and direction. Illness, poverty, or other temporal events have imperceptible effects in the overall scheme of existence. People pass from life to life, state to state, all toward the end of reunion with the Brahman. Everything runs in cycles, with no beginning and no end. Even reunion with the Brahman is not an end. Once more, it is merely moving into a new, different state.

Though these are extreme simplifications of Hindu beliefs, they provide a framework for Vedanta and, particularly, a foundation for Vedanta as it was defined by Vivekananda and practiced in America. This is the spirit of Vedanta. This is the inspiration by which Ramakrishna found truth and enlightenment. And this is the basis for the Vedanta Society as it exists in America today.

Ramakrishna and the Metamorphosis of Vedanta

According to Vedanta, throughout history the essence
of the impersonal Brahman has been incarnated in human form time and time again. These very special people—Rama, Buddha, Christ, Krishna—all contributed new depth to the knowledge of the Brahman. Each man changed the way Vedanta was viewed and set the faith on new paths. Many people saw Ramakrishna as one of these manifestations. He, too, had a great influence on Vedanta. Under his teaching, Vedanta grew and took on a number of new aspects. His contributions to the understanding of Vedanta include: the equality of all faiths, the personalization of the impersonal Brahman, the need to develop and perfect the god-nature within all people, and an emphasis on Raja yoga as a means to understanding God.

It is important to realize that Ramakrishna, though well respected by virtually all who met him, was not universally accepted as God on earth. Though the Hindus have made him a saint, Hinduism remains primarily unaffected by the things he taught. A small segment of Hindus accepted the changes he made, and the Vedanta Society in America practices a form of Hinduism based almost completely on the teachings of Ramakrishna. This is the extent of his influence, however. Once again, this has its parallels in Christianity. Ramakrishna did not change Hindu beliefs outright. He merely reshaped already existing concepts. He took Vedanta as it had been for a thousand years and brought it into the nineteenth century Indian culture. Still, his was a splinter group, a faction. His followers in India numbered only about 100 at the time of his death, his close disciples only 15.40

One of the reasons that his following was not larger
was his insistence on the equality of all faiths. Hinduism was not considered a religion as much as it was a way of life. The "truth" of Hinduism was not a discussion topic; it was fact. Ramakrishna presumed too much when he equated it not only with Christianity and Mohammedism, but also with the uneducated, primitive tribal religions and the likes of astrology. This was the dividing point for those who chose to follow and those who did not.

In the end, Ramakrishna disliked putting a title to religion. He even disliked calling a person's faith a religion. To him, truth was truth, and it did not matter how a person could come to know that truth. He often noticed Christians who were more "Hindu" than the most devout Hindu, Buddhists who were more "Christian" than Christians, and Hindus who were as Buddha-like as was possible. The title had very little to do with describing the individual.

Ramakrishna illustrated the way to God as a mountain with hundreds of paths to the top. Some were direct, while some wound round the entire mountain. Some were smooth, some rough, many crossed, and some even ended half way up (causing the person to backtrack and start again). Regardless, all eventually led to the top. Call one road Christian, one Hindu, another Islamic—it made no difference. The same God was at the top.

This concept of God at the top of the mountain was foreign to many Hindus. The worship of gods was an important part of their worship, but the ultimate goal was the Brahman. Ramakrishna agreed, but he declined to accept this Brahman as
an impersonal force. Though unlike a man, the Brahman was much more than force. It, to the thinking of Ramakrishna, had an identity and was knowable. It was beyond description, but not beyond comprehension. Ramakrishna taught that the Brahman could be tapped into while man still walked and breathed. Once again, this was not a widely accepted view of mainstream Hindus.

Ramakrishna explained the union of the individual with the Brahman as a discipline to be pursued. If in fact man is a part of the Brahman, and the Brahman is knowable and attainable, then it is man's responsibility, and well within his power, to make his own way to God. The Swami Vivekananda summed up the theory when he said, "Let the whole body be full of that one ideal, 'I am the birthless, the deathless, the blissful, the omniscient, the omnipotent, ever-glorious Soul'. . . fill yourselves with the thought of your almightiness, your majesty, and your glory." More than just realization that man comes from the same source as the gods, Ramakrishna taught that man needed to understand that he was the same as a god, or more precisely, God. Vivekananda, in one of the speeches he made while in London, explained, "If you are not God, there never was any God, and never will be. This, says the Vedanta, is the ideal to follow." Without man to perceive God and himself, there can be no God. This was one of Ramakrishna's more radical teachings and the hardest for Vivekananda to convey to his Western audiences.

Yet, the Vedanta that Ramakrishna taught hinged on the ability to perceive God within each one of us. Our God-status
was not something which automatically made itself manifest, but was a force which of necessity had to be developed. Ramakrishna's answer to the way of attaining this God-nature was through Raja-yoga.

There is no simple definition of yoga. Yoga exists in many forms and fashions. For the Hindu it is always spiritual, unlike many modern Western forms where it is viewed as a kind of physical exercise program. In Vedanta there are four forms of yoga which are usually practiced: bhakti, jnana, karma, and raja yoga.

Bhakti yoga emphasizes prayer, ritual, and worship as the means to knowing God. Jnana yoga is a practical discipline involving a concerted effort to seeing good in all things. Karma yoga is the practice of selfless service to others. Raja yoga is the knowledge of God through meditation and concentration. Ramakrishna, though he acknowledged the benefit of the first three, taught that raja yoga was the only form of yoga necessary for the understanding of God and the God-nature. Bhakti yoga allowed the individual to become trapped in the processes rather than in the spirit of worship. Jnana yoga was a good talent to develop, but it did little to teach a person about God within. Similarly, Karma yoga helped develop one aspect of a god-like nature, but it could not unlock the door to becoming God. Only through the contemplative life could a person become like God.

This reflects Ramakrishna's own life. He spent a great portion of his own time in deep thought and reflection. Through meditation he came to know the Divine Mother Kali,
Christ, Mohammed, and himself as Vishnu. The other things—knowledge of others as good, the importance of servitude, the place of worship, prayer and ritual in a person's spiritual life—came through this raja yoga. All things could be known through raja yoga, and this became an important cornerstone to the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna.

These were the teachings that the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna learned, took to heart, and in turn preached to others. These were the teachings that Vivekananda brought to America; hence, these are the teachings which form the basis for Vedanta in America. These were the ideals which Vivekananda shared when he visited England on his way home to India. Still, Vedanta in America had an identity all its own and this, too, Vivekananda shared with his audiences in London.

**Early Vedanta in America**

Even though the ideas of Ramakrishna met with wide resistance in India, the same predispositions did not exist in America. When Vivekananda presented Vedanta to his American audiences at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago, few people imagined that he was describing anything other than classical Hinduism. What appeared radically different to the Hindus in India was merely novel and intriguing to most Americans. The American listeners had nothing on which to base any dispute with Vivekananda. His words were revered, and so his description of Vedanta was accepted without question. Thus, Vedanta in America emerged as the pure form of the Hindu faith as described by Sri Ramakrishna.
Why, then, did Vedanta in America not bear Rama-
krishna's name? There are two primary reasons, both of which
were explained by Vivekananda. The first reason had to do
with establishing credibility. Vedanta, in its broadest
sense, refers to a belief system more than one thousand years
older than Christianity. There is tradition and time associated
with Vedanta. For a Hindu, especially a spiritual Hindu like
Vivekananda, this tie with tradition was an essential element
of the faith. Anything which could stand the test of three
thousand years would be hard to disregard. In associating the
new American order with the Hindu scriptures of the ages,
Vivekananda averted the criticisms of the Vedanta Societies
being only one in an ever-growing line of here-today, gone-
tomorrow cults. By his actions Vivekananda established a
faith with deep and far-reaching roots.

The second reason was one of identification. Vive-
kananda felt that it was important for the principles which
Ramakrishna taught to take precedence over the actual person
of Ramakrishna. In his own words he explained, "If I had
preached the personality of Ramakrishna, I might have converted
half the world; but that kind of conversion is short-lived.
So instead I preached Ramakrishna's principles. If people
accept the principles, they will eventually accept the person-
ality."\(^{43}\) Vivekananda was continually amazed at the way
American Christians lauded Jesus Christ yet seemed to ignore
the things that He taught. The idea that mere belief in a
person's deity is enough to make a man pure was ridiculous
to him. Vivekananda feared that followers in America would
set Ramakrishna in a comparable position and therefore lose sight of the truths that he had to teach. At no time did Vivekananda ever place Ramakrishna at the head of the Vedanta he taught in America. Ramakrishna was given a position of wisdom and knowledge, but not of Lordship. The first of the Vedanta Societies was established during Christmastime in 1895. It was not until late in the 1920s that Ramakrishna became known as the father of modern Vedanta in America. 

Vivekananda himself wanted to take no credit for establishing this new faith in America. For much the same reason as he worked to keep Ramakrishna separate from the order, Vivekananda felt his influence could possibly work to channel the devotees' spiritual energy away from true worship. He refused to allow the followers at Thousand Island Park to honor him or regard him in any way other than an equal. His key teaching in the earliest days of the St. Lawrence Math was that truth was eternal and what he taught was nothing new or original. In all of his appearances he emphasized that what he was saying was only what he himself had learned. Vivekananda was not interested in having others worship him. He wanted only for the light that Ramakrishna brought into the world to spread as far as it possibly could.

When Vivekananda left America in 1896, he promised he would return to continue the work that had been started. He was anxious, however, to get back to his homeland and check on the devotees he had left behind. After stopping on the way home in England, where he delivered the lectures defining and explaining the newly formed Vedanta Society, he
returned to Calcutta and stayed with his fellow disciples for two and one-half years.\textsuperscript{46}

This trip to India is important for a number of reasons. First, it gave Vivekananda an opportunity to take back to his home all of the things he had experienced and learned in the West. Secondly, it was a time where he set out to organize the disciples of Ramakrishna into an established religion. Finally, it gave him a chance to replenish the spiritual and physical resources he had depleted while in the West.

Upon his arrival in Calcutta, Vivekananda immediately called the disciples of Ramakrishna together from the Math in Baranagore. He set about teaching them basic first aid and medicine, agriculture, and food preservation techniques. He instructed them on managing funds and distribution of labor among workers so that many could band together and cooperate to combat the poverty which ran rampant. Hence, Vivekananda became a spiritual leader for many in the West, but he also became a life saver of thousands in the East.

In order to use this newly acquired knowledge to its fullest potential, Vivekananda decided to reorganize and relocate the Math that had been built at Baranagore. On May 1, 1897, Vivekananda called together the remaining fourteen disciples, and by general agreement they established the Ramakrishna Order.\textsuperscript{47} The first order of business for the group was to build a new Math. They chose to locate the new Math in the home of their namesake, and so they built their commune at Dakshineswar. In great Western tradition, they then elected a
president for their new order, selecting Brahmananda. Vivekananda handed over all the funds he had collected in the West, and the Ramakrishna Order was officially in business. They set a number of goals and essentially defined those activities that they wished to pursue. It was decided that the best way to use the knowledge and skills that Vivekananda had returned with from the West was to go where the need was greatest. Thus, a mission, the Ramakrishna Mission, was built in Calcutta. The mission served as a famine and plague relief center, a religious temple, a school, and a hospital. Pilgrims flocked to the site to worship and work. As years passed, more missions were opened and the benefits of Vivekananda's trip to America were shared far and wide. At the time of Vivekananda's death, a second mission was being built. On the fiftieth anniversary of his death, the eightieth such mission opened its doors. In time, the Ramakrishna Order opened colleges and universities, industrial schools, libraries, and publishing houses. Through the supreme effort of the Swami Vivekananda, the prediction of Ramakrishna came to pass. Vivekananda indeed had accomplished great things.

One thing yet remained, though, in Vivekananda's amazing life. Vivekananda faced the prospect of his second trip to the West with mixed emotions. He very much wanted to return to the followers he had left in America, but he was drained and weary, and he wondered whether he had anything left to share with his American brothers. Disregarding the trepidation he felt, Vivekananda fulfilled his promise to return. In July of 1899 he and two other members of the
Ramakrishna Order, Nivedita and Swami Turiyananda, set foot in America.\textsuperscript{51} Vivekananda was amazed at the intense devotion he found at Thousand Island Park. The number of devotees was well over thirty, and the Math was being visited daily by more than just curiosity seekers. After a short visit at St. Lawrence, Vivekananda departed for the West Coast. He left Nivedita to work with the devotees at the St. Lawrence Math and took Turiyananda with him to San Francisco.\textsuperscript{52} There, in the fall of 1899, the second Vedanta Society in America was founded. He left Turiyananda in San Francisco and moved on to Hollywood. Both Nivedita and Turiyananda lived out their lives working with the Vedanta Societies in America. Vivekananda established a third Math in Hollywood.\textsuperscript{53} At the time he went, Vivekananda chose Hollywood because of its close proximity to Los Angeles and the simple, serene, and unspoiled atmosphere it provided. If he had known the future of the small suburb, perhaps he would have reconsidered his choice. Interestingly, the Hollywood Math is still thriving as the largest commune in America, while the San Francisco Math was destroyed in the earthquake of 1905 and was not rebuilt until the early 1960s. Vivekananda's vision for both of his West Coast monastaries could hardly have contained all the changes that both have gone through. Still, when he left the West Coast to return home, he could not have been happier with the progress that was being made.

After finishing his work in California, Vivekananda realized that all he had been through was finally catching up with him. He was ill, exhausted, and homesick. He left
America for India for the last time in 1900. Though he wished to one day return, it was a wish that was never fulfilled. During the time that Vivekananda was back in India he worshiped, prayed, and meditated at the Dakshineswar Math. He rested most of the time yet his health never returned. One day in early 1902, Vivekananda took a walk through the monastery gardens then sat down for his afternoon meditations. With a satisfied smile on his face, the thirty-nine-year-old Hindu swami--the founder of Vedanta in America and the most valuable legacy of Ramakrishna on earth--passed from life, and a special era in the history of Eastern faith passed with him.  

The Growth of Vedanta in America

The death of Swami Vivekananda came as a devastating blow to the Maths in America. The sense of loss was acute. Vivekananda had been leader, provider, comforter, and sage. Many felt that without him there was no Vedanta. The fact that he had died so young left many feeling cheated, and there was grave doubt as to whether the Societies could function without his support.

In India, the Ramakrishna Order sensed that there might be problems arising in the United States. The growth in India had been so phenomenal as the missions grew in number and spread across the country that the disciples of the Order felt they could safely send a number of emissaries to America to lend support and guidance to the suffering Maths.
The Swamis Vijnanananda and Shivananda, both future presidents of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, came to America in early 1903 to visit the existing Maths. Between these two men, and the efforts of Nivedita and Turiyananda, the Vedanta Societies survived this trying time.

For the next dozen years, the Vedanta Societies remained pretty much the same, changing very little. In most cases, the disciple who showed the most promise at each of the Maths was elevated to the position of leader. For a period of time in the early 1900s, most of the Maths were left in the hands of native Americans. It was not until the late 1920s that Hindu leaders from the Ramakrishna Order came back into the United States and reclaimed teaching positions in the communes. During the period when the Hindu teachers were out of the United States, Vedanta took on an even greater American character. Most of the men who headed the communes had backgrounds in mainline American churches, and so the largest change in the practice of Vedanta was a structuring of worship. When the leaders from the Ramakrishna Order returned to America, what they found was really not too different from what they had left. The followers in America had devoted themselves to preserving the Vedanta that began in 1895. There was no conflict over who would hold authority when the Hindu teachers returned. There was an immediate cooperation; the Americans acted as administrators and caretakers and the Hindus assumed the roles of teachers and spiritual guides.

Vedanta saw its first period of great change in the
1930s. The prosperity of the twenties provided people with very little reason to seek out the support and comforts of religion. As times became difficult, huge numbers of people turned to the church. For many, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism simply did not provide for their needs. Though Vedanta did not have a wide exposure, many still found their way to the existing Vedanta Centers. One account says that people traveled from well over 300 miles to the Vedanta Center at Thousand Island Park in upstate New York. Leaders of the societies quickly came to realize that something needed to be done to accommodate the rising number of devotees. People were making the effort to come to Vedanta, and it was decided that the time had come to take Vedanta to the people. From both of the main Vedanta Centers in America disciples chose to relocate in order to spread the spirit of Vedanta. By this time Ramakrishna had gained his place of reverence in the Society, and so wherever a new Vedanta Center was formed, he was honored and worshipped. What Vivekananda had feared might happen actually began to happen as Vedanta was spread across the country, and the ties with its foundations began to stretch thin.

By 1938, three new Vedanta Society centers had been established. The first was built in St. Louis, and today it is the largest of the thirteen in the United States. The second was established in New Orleans, and the history of this single center could fill a book by itself. The people of Louisiana, in general, had no use for the supposed Eastern faith which found itself there. Against bias, opposition, and
constant assaults, the Vedanta Center in New Orleans was built. Lastly, the Vedanta faith found itself back in Chicago, where it had first been proclaimed in America. One block from the convention center of the Columbian Exposition, where approximately forty-five years before the Swami Vivekananda had first stepped to the podium, the Chicago Vedanta Center was established. Within the first year of their existence, these three centers housed eight hundred devotees—four times that of the original two centers.

Though one thousand followers does not sound overly impressive, it is important to remember that each of the centers was intended to serve only twenty people or so. Thus, each served about ten times that number. Also, as will be seen later, there has always been a large discrepancy between the number of full-time devotees, and the number of people who choose to worship at the Vedanta centers. It is estimated that fifty thousand people worshipped at the Vedanta centers between 1936 and 1940.

The three Vedanta centers which were built during the thirties still did not provide for the needs of the many people who wished to find out what Vedanta had to offer. Thus, in addition to these full-sized Vedanta centers, twenty smaller worship centers, called ashrams, were formed. Ashrams were usually just houses or buildings which were purchased from private owners. It was not rare to find them in downtown areas, suburbs, heavily populated neighborhoods, rural areas—essentially, in every setting imaginable. Some ashrams were unwelcome in the area they moved into, and they
eventually moved or passed out of existence altogether. The ashrams were more mobile than the Vedanta centers, and their more modest size allowed them to move into the less populated areas. Four of the ashrams formed in the thirties still remain in their original locations. These are the ashrams in Connecticut (near New Haven); Zanesville, Ohio; Houston, Texas, and Santa Clara, California.

The biggest problem with such prodigious expansion was to provide adequate leadership to the new ashrams and Vedanta centers. While there had only been two Vedanta centers, leadership was not a problem. By the time that Vedanta had expanded to include twenty-five worship centers, some radical changes had to be made.

Vivekananda had taught that all men were God, and therefore each man was responsible for his own progress. Those people who were further along in their spiritual development than others could help to guide and instruct. This became the basis for the hierarchy of leadership in the Vedanta Societies. It was no longer feasible for members of the Ramakrishna Order to head the various worship centers. Few of them were familiar enough with American culture to serve effectively, and at any one time there were no more than six Hindu leaders in the United States. Disciples of Vedanta in America moved into the primary leadership roles. The Hindu teachers increasingly assumed the role of advisors and consultants.

This change in leadership was a great step in the westernization of Vedanta. As the ties with the Ramakrishna
Order, the followers of Vivekananda, and the teachings of Ramakrishna lessened, the influence of Hindu values decreased also. Vital Hindu teachings concerning detachment from earthly endeavors and material wealth were modified, and in some cases, ignored altogether. Current Vedanta is only now seeing a return to these Hindu values.

The structure developed in the late 1930s continues today. A person seeking to learn the way of Vedanta studies with a personal guru, in this case someone who is spiritually advanced. This guru in turn studies with a guru of his own, and on up through any number of levels. It is possible for a student to pass his guru in spiritual growth, but it is rare since all the time that the student is growing, so too his teacher grows. Those people who are most spiritually advanced run the Vedanta Centers, spending most of their time teaching, writing, and engaging in their own personal worship. The ashrams are run by the pupils of the Masters. The remaining gurus live and work in society. Found in occupations ranging from lawyers to plumbers, they live their lives to serve others and help them any ways they can to come to a relationship with God. The same is true of the students. Many who follow Vedanta do not feel qualified to teach. These people are at an early stage of their development and they worship under the guidance of those who have already learned the spiritual disciplines.

This indicates one of the most dramatic changes that Western culture has imposed on this Eastern faith. For Ramakrishna, the ideal of the spiritual life was to draw away from
everyday life and unite himself with the god-nature. For the modern Vedantist in America, the goal is to remain deeply within the world in order to provide help and support for others. In essence, the focus shifted from sacrificing the world for self to sacrificing self for the world.

According to the structure of Vedanta, it is inevitable that a person will eventually move on and become a spiritual guide for someone else. This does not mean, however, that a person recruits disciples. Vedanta does not believe in proselytizing. It is obvious that since all paths lead to God, and that all men and women will make it to "heaven" eventually, there is no reason to convert anyone. Vedanta looks upon itself more as the undertow to the current. A stream flows along in only one direction. At the banks, the water flows slowly, constantly swirling, being deflected and churned. Toward the center, the water flows more smoothly and a little more quickly. However, underneath the surface of the stream, the flow of the current is fastest, moving objects from its path and carrying what falls in its path at a furious pace. Thus, Vedanta does not necessarily state that it is the best faith, and never does it state that it is the only faith, but indeed it believes itself to be a better faith than most. Followers feel they have found the most perfect way to believe. Therefore, they can be patient in their dealings with those around them; they can wait for people to come to them, rather than trying to make converts.

Though the structure of Vedanta remained the same from the thirties on, many other things changed. As America
got herself back on her feet, and the world was propelled into war, there seemed to be less of a need for spiritual enrichment. In many areas in the forties, Eastern religion was looked on with growing mistrust. Vedanta had seen its golden age come and go in the thirties. The forties presented Vedanta with a reversal. The number of devotees nationwide was approximately 150 at the end of World War II. Fifteen of the ashrams disappeared. Once again, Vedanta became a monastic religion, secluded from the mainstream and practiced primarily by the devout. This was only temporary, though, because Vedanta was about to enter a new phase as the decade of the fifties dawns.

In 1948, some of the members of the Hollywood Vedanta Society purchased a small publishing house which had gone bankrupt. The intention of the group was to put into English the Vedas and the teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Before long, the Vedanta Society in Hollywood was importing books from India in addition to those it printed, and it became the supplier of Vedanta literature nationwide. Soon after, the Vedanta Society in St. Louis followed suit and began printing original books written by its members.

The publishing operations received national attention when two prominent authors, Christopher Isherwood and Aldous Huxley, published books with them. Isherwood, a devout Vedantist, undertook the task of biographing Ramakrishna and his disciples, and explaining Vedanta for the mass audience. His writings have been the most influential in the past twenty-five years. No longer was Vedanta a secretive society
which people only heard about by word of mouth. Suddenly, it was a faith with form and structure and writings which gave it a sense of credibility in the Western world. Once more, the intentions of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda had been undermined. The emphasis on not basing a faith on writings lost its favor. Somehow there was a great irony in the fact that every book about Ramakrishna speaks of his stand against learning faith from a book; from a book one is instructed not to read books. Still, it was this medium of print that kept Vedanta alive during the fifties when there was a definite swing back to the mainline churches in America. In much the same way as the Christian gospels found their way into print approximately forty years after the death of Christ, the scriptures of Vedanta found their home in print about fifty years after the death of its founder.

During the 1950s Vedanta enjoyed only moderate growth. This was a period of strengthening the already existing foundations. Because of the improvements in communication, India was brought much closer to the United States. Followers of Ramakrishna finally could get a glimpse of the homeland of their spiritual fathers. The fifties was a time for exploring the roots of the Vedanta faith. Because so much literature had come into the Vedanta Societies, there was a sudden interest in the heritage of the faith. The ideals and principles set down by Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were studies and there was a move back to the original Vedanta. This move continued into the sixties, and by the mid-sixties,
Vedanta once again began to grow quickly. It could be called Vedanta's silver age.

The sixties were a time for upheaval and change. America became a nation in search of herself. The youth grew discouraged with the world, and the world grew discouraged with the youth. There was rebellion and resistance, and many strange religions took hold and gave fertile soil to a growing pop culture. Interestingly enough, Vedanta remained above the influx of disgruntled youth. The sixties did not have the effect on Vedanta that one might expect. Vedanta had the same kinds of things to offer as some of the more outlandish, more occultish religions that popped up, but it did not have one thing which was vital to so many. It was not clannish. There was no sense of communalism for the general public. Where many sought to withdraw from society to form one of their own, Vedanta encouraged people to grasp the world and relate to it as its servant. Each person was his or her own authority. In addition, Vedanta did not uphold the values of many of the young. In regard to war, Vedanta accepts it and according to the teachings of Ramakrishna sees war as good. War is merely an expedient means to moving closer to god-nature. Protesting and rebellion were deemed unnecessary and useless to the followers of Vedanta. The college-aged people who investigated Vedanta labeled it a "do nothing, know nothing, be nothing kind of faith." Thus, Vedanta was left alone during the radical sixties.

The fact that the youth of America shunned Vedanta during this time does not mean, however, that Vedanta did not
grow, nor does it mean that Vedanta never did have an attraction for young people. As will be seen shortly, the seventies brought Vedanta and young people very close together.

Vedanta's growth in the sixties once more grew from a general discouragement with mainline Protestant orthodoxies' ability to provide for the spiritual well-being of the country. Not only were the youth of America searching for a better way, many people in their late twenties and thirties began growing restless. Though the growth was not as phenomenal as it had been prior to World War II, it was still impressive. There were two main reasons for the growth during this time. Both were byproducts of the growth which had taken place in the late thirties. First, the new followers of Vedanta were comprised mainly of second generation followers. These were the children of those who had followed before. When times had been bad before, Vedanta had provided answers for those in need. Even if the people had left Vedanta when things got better, they still held onto the principles that Vedanta taught. These principles were taught to the children of those earlier members, and when times got bad again, those children searched for a place which espoused the same kind of principles.

The second byproduct of the thirties which had an influence was basically the social status that had come to be characterized with Vedanta. For a variety of reasons, Vedanta held an appeal for the upper crust when business went bad in the thirties. Vedanta was a hopeful faith which
condemned no one, accepted everyone, and helped elevate the ego of anyone and everyone who was down on their luck. To this day, the majority of persons associated with Vedanta in this country are upper income, upper education people. During the sixties, the well-to-do who had had no association with Vedanta before at least had some association with those who were followers. The second generation Vedantists had a great influence on their friends who found themselves discouraged with the world as it was. Vedanta found itself becoming a religion of the white collar worker. It is not difficult to anticipate that with this caliber of member, the future of Vedanta looked quite good. As the sixties came to an end, Vedanta was solidly established and on the threshold of another period of expansion.

The seventies began another important period for Vedanta. New ashrams emerged across the nation, and Vedanta Society centers were built in Texas, Michigan, Virginia, California, and Ohio. Awareness of Vedanta was heightened by the coverage media gave it when top entertainment personalities such as George Harrison of the Beatles and actor Alan Arkin became devotees. This, along with the fact that many college professors were joining the growing number of Vedantists, opened the door for many college age people to investigate Vedanta. During the early seventies, Vedanta gained its greatest number of devotees under the age of 21. Once more, the appeal of Vedanta was with more highly educated people. Though it had not set out to be a faith of the upper class, over time Vedanta had developed
a self-perpetuating source of high social status devotees in the United States.

Growth held steady throughout the seventies, and as the eighties have arrived, Vedanta has settled into a secure and comfortable position in America. There are currently thirteen Vedanta Society centers in America (the remaining three centers being built in Florida, Arizona, and Massachusetts), approximately thirty-five ashrams in twenty-one states, three publishing houses (Southern California, St. Louis and New York), and followers in all of the fifty states. There are Vedanta centers also located in Argentina, England, and France. The mean income of the devotees is $37,000 in the northeast and $24,500 nationwide. The average educational level attained is post-graduate. Currently there seems to be a shift in membership of the Vedanta Societies as more and more members are coming from lower socio-economic classes. This is due in part to the increased awareness of, and efforts to assist, the less fortunate. Knowledge of Vedanta is entering new sectors of the country, and this includes more middle class areas.

As far as the membership numbers are concerned, there is great discrepancy, depending on the sources used. The Handbook of Denominations sets the number of members at 1600. However, Bob Adjemian, spokesman for the Vedanta Society of Southern California, says that 1600 is way too low. Adjemian claims that the 1600 includes only those disciples who live at the Vedanta centers, teach in the schools, and work at the ashrams and publishing operations.
The Vedanta Societies count membership as the total number of persons who come to the Vedanta centers and ashrams to worship in the course of the year. Thus, they set the number at close to a quarter of a million. This number is also deceptive because it makes no allowance for someone who might visit an ashram once a month. Such a person would be counted twelve times. One disciple goes so far as to say that the number of Vedanta members is in the billions: since all faiths are compatible and each one leads to God, every man is a follower of Vedanta—most just do not realize it.

It is easy to see that there is no way to actually pinpoint the exact number of Vedantists in this country. Upon investigating the current activities of the Vedanta Societies, it is not difficult to see that there are more than 1600 individuals associated with the groups. However, there is virtually no evidence to support the idea that there are anywhere near 250,000 members. In the past few years many of the ashrams and Society centers have become the object of curiosity seekers. There very well may be 250,000 visitors to the Vedanta centers, but most are not devout proponents of Vedanta. It would not be an unreasonable estimate to say that there are probably between ten and twenty thousand members of the Vedanta Society in America. This is based purely on speculation. It is left to the individual to determine how many members there are due to the conflicting evidence.

The Vedanta Societies themselves put very little stock in numbers. It has never been the intention of Vedanta to
become an organized religion. It could even be said that Vedanta has striven to establish itself as an "un-religion."

There are a number of elements of Vedanta which have distinguished it from other faiths and which have made it very attractive to a good number of people. It is not unreasonable, however, to question the validity of Vedanta, nor is it unjustified to ask whether Vedanta can legitimately stand alongside other faiths.

The Merits of Vedanta

People can put their faith in anything they choose. Everyone believes in something. It is not easy, however, to decide whether something is worth believing in. There is no definite criteria by which all people can measure the value of an object of belief. It does, however, make sense to assess the merits of what you choose to believe in, both good and bad.

Vedanta as a faith system raises a number of questions, perhaps the most important one being: if it makes no difference what a person believes, then why bother believing in the teachings of Ramakrishna? Ramakrishna himself saw religion as a refuge. There is strong evidence that he never intended to found his own faith. He was preoccupied with spiritual activity for its own sake. Ramakrishna looked to spiritual exercise for only one thing: self-improvement. His was not a servant faith. It was Vivekananda who saw a need to work for others. Vivekananda went to where he was needed.
Ramakrishna waited for people to come to him. While Ramakrishna looked to see what he could gain from his spirituality, Vivekananda looked to see what he could give. The contrast of the two men is distinct, and yet, without the influence of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda never would have received the inspiration that he needed to move out into the world.

Though Ramakrishna taught that it did not really matter what a person believed, he did realize that people needed to believe in something. Belief in God and self was all important, and it was something that all people would come to at some point in their existence. Through reincarnation, men and women would move toward an ideal: god-nature. This god-nature was and is the reason to believe. Vedanta, according to Vivekananda, is the quickest, most practical way to achieve the god-nature. Truly, all people need to develop their spiritual natures.

Another question which arises from the study of Vedanta is: what does Vedanta offer to make it superior to other forms of belief? By looking at some of the unique qualities of Vedanta, the question can be answered.

The cornerstone on which Vedanta is built is humanity's equality with God. This concept has many implications; some are good, some bad. On the good side of the ledger, Vedanta provides people with a hopeful, positive, and compassionate picture of human nature. Sin and evil are temporary states, and they are unnatural qualities of men and women. Sin is illusory, because there is good in all things. Each person is an unrealized god—pure, powerful, knowing,
and good. There is no pressure to change, because all things work together for good. If a man is god, then all things, good and bad, must occur in order to provide perspective. The many religions must exist in order to provide knowledge of the many faces of god, and to make us more tolerant of different beliefs. Reincarnation allows people to hone and perfect their knowledge and power. For men and women to truly be gods, they must exist everywhere, in every age. No other religion provides so well for the self-esteem of its believers.

With the good comes bad. With great power comes great responsibility, and the possibility of great abuse. Regardless of whether sin is a temporary state or not, there is very little to recommend it other than the selfish satisfactions it might give the sinner. Evil, too, may be mere illusion in the grand scheme of things, but still it should not be ignored. Too many people suffer, and if we are indeed God, then it should matter to us that evil exists. To discount the hurt that one person may do to another by saying that it is all for the best, is to add insult to injury of the many victims who may not believe the same way. It is cruel folly to tell the survivors of the Nazi war camps that they are better off for their trials, and that the things they witnessed while imprisoned were actually wonderful and good.

A faith which demands little change of its followers appears to be extremely irresponsible. Alan Arkin, in his biography, tells of a problem he had with marijuana and
drinking. He avoided becoming tied to a religion because of the guilt feelings it would impose on him for his addictions. He saw no reason to give up drug and drink and wished for no hassle from a church or religion. The man who eventually became Arkin's guru told him to relax and not worry about change. Change would come in its own time. In Alan Arkin's case, his addictions were replaced by meditations. What it amounts to is that Alan Arkin was able to replace one crutch with another. A faith which excuses people from taking responsibility for their actions allows them to ignore their weaknesses. If we are to become as gods, we need to face our shortcomings and defeat them, not merely displace them.

There are many truths which are universal. Among the many faiths that exist in the world, some basic principles are held in common. Even so, it does not take a great scholar to identify some irreconcilable differences. Wars have been fought over both minor and major differences. Just because an outsider from the nineteenth century proclaims that all faiths are compatible does not make it so. The sentiment is wonderful; the logic, questionable. Many people would find great insult in the idea that there is no difference between religions. Those things which make a religion unique can be a source of commitment and discipline. Indeed, by defining exactly what to believe, an individual sets for him- or herself standards and values, both important elements in most religions. In Vedanta, where it seems anything goes, commitment can be diluted.
Reincarnation, though a source of great comfort to those who have a somewhat less than exemplary life, is just another excuse for irresponsibility. Why take responsibility for what is done when an individual can escape into another life? What possible motivation is there for change when there is no penalty for wrong doing? This is especially true when the ultimate end for everyone is the same. With no pressure to change, corrupt behavior can be embraced. Though not the intention of the founders, it certainly is a possibility. Vedanta in America today has opened the door to a lot of behavior exactly like this. With each passing year, Vedanta moves further and further away from the Hindu values it was created with. Ramakrishna's concept of making a break with the material world has been twisted to allow some who possess great wealth to use, abuse and exploit that wealth for whatever purpose they choose. The excuse given is that they are not yet ready to make the break, but that in some later life they will have to do without; thus, everything will balance out in the end. This misapplication of broad Vedantist principles is a good example of the shortcomings of the faith.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, there is great potential for abuse in a faith which equates the believers with gods. The current trend in modern American Vedanta is to explore the qualities of omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and omnifariousness. Neo-Vedanta is a term which has been used only within the last few years; it describes a movement which is concerned with the disciplines of astral
projection, alternate realities, interplanetary travel, shape shifting, levitation, healing, time travel, etc. What was primarily deemed occult and supernatural during the sixties and seventies is fast becoming the orthodoxy of the Vedanta Societies. It is believed that in order for man and woman to become like gods, they must train themselves in god-like activities. Exercises in astral projection (out-of-body travel), alternate realities (experiences in the dream world, etc.), interplanetary travel, shape shifting (becoming other forms or objects), and time travel (traveling through a series of past lives), are all spiritual/mental activities. These things are taking place all around us, yet we cannot perceive them with our five normal senses. Healing and levitation are mind over matter exercises which test the spiritual powers within each of us. All of these things are fascinating, and whether a person pursues them or not, they can act to shift the attention away from true spiritual growth and turn it to less important things. These are traps to beware of, not to run blindly to.

Not everyone in Vedanta is moving this way. Practice of these activities is relatively small, but belief in them is growing quickly. Vedanta was intended to let people see themselves as they really are, but instead people are using it as a means to power and superiority. Egao has become the real god in all too many cases.

To be fair, though, these criticisms can be made of many religions in the world today. Many people come to a religion seeking something for themselves. The benefit they
get from it they cling to and use for their own ends. If there is something to be gained from a faith, surely it has some purpose other than selfish satisfaction.

This is the point where Vedanta breaks down completely. Once one attains the truth, once one has become God, then what? To what end does it all lead? What is the benefit? What is the good? Vedanta provides so many interesting things to do and think, but it is all merely mental gymnastics. We become the squirrel running on a wheel in a cage, exerting enormous amounts of energy and accomplishing nothing. Inevitably we can only justify our own existence, an existence with no beginning and no end. The good we do others, just as the evil, is only temporary. We are not moving on to heaven. Heaven is today, and yesterday, as well as tomorrow. We are already there; we just do not realize it. In a manner similar to Sisyphus, we roll our stone up the hill and watch it roll back down. There is a futility to Vedanta that cannot be ignored. What is to be gained from a religion that begins and ends with the self? Perhaps that is why Vedanta found a home in America. There can be something very satisfying about a faith which asks nothing and gives everything—at least for a time. American society has always been in love with itself. The American Dream promises that you can be anything you want to be. Why not God? Ramakrishna knew himself to be God, and he basked in the glory of that position until his death. But at least Ramakrishna taught, and taught well. The things he left with his disciples were more precious than gold. His greatest
legacy, a young swami by the name of Narendranath, preached these principles to the world. These principles grew and flourished, but in time, they conformed to the society in which they had been brought. The spirit of their founder slipped away, and in time the faith, Vedanta, became a mere shadow of the Hindu faith it had sprung forth from. The Eastern faith had been Westernized beyond recognition.
Conclusion: Tomorrow and Beyond

No faith is without its faults. No matter where or when, every religion will have its charlatans and miscreants. Vedanta undoubtedly has no more than its fair share. It would be irresponsible of this author not to point out some of the good that has come from Vedanta.

One of the strongest movements that has come from current Vedanta is that of charity. One of the key emphases of the eighties in Vedanta is the god-nature of all men and women. It has come to the consciousness of many members of Vedanta that the poor are entitled to the best treatment possible. Since Vedanta has remained a fairly upper-class faith throughout its years in America, its members are in a good position to help those in need. The Vedanta Society in America takes only contributions in the amounts needed for the most basic upkeep of the centers and ashrams. All other monies are requested to go to some kind of charitable work. In 1982, the New York Vedanta Center contributed $6,000,000 to relief funds throughout the state. The total came from the pockets of the two hundred or so members of the Society and the neighboring ashrams. That means each person gave an average of $30,000.76

In addition to the extreme acts of charity, the Vedanta Societies have been leaders in environmental protection
and wildlife preservation activities. The idea of reincarnation does present a concern for the future of the planet, since it is believed that all people will eventually return. As Ramakrishna pointed out, absorption in self eventually leads to selflessness. Understanding that we are God, and that we are one does indeed (ideally) lead to a concern for all people.

It is hard to imagine a man who walked on earth one hundred years ago was considered by so many to be God on earth. He was a simple, jovial man—hardly a man who would be thought of as God. Yet, the influence he had was tremendous. He caused hundreds to completely change their lives. In special cases, such as the case of the Swami Vivekananda, his influence caused followers to travel the globe, spreading the gospel he had received.

The devotion of followers like Vivekananda can be an example to believers of any faith. Such commitment is rare. In the course of history, there are few men as inspirational as Vivekananda.

Through Vivekananda's efforts, Vedanta came to be in the Western world. At the expense of his own health and well-being, Vivekananda built the faith which remains to this day. Though it has gone through many changes, Vedanta still bears the loving resemblance to the Swami Vivekananda and his Master, Sri Ramakrishna.

That resemblance will continue. There is a spirit to Vedanta that remains unchanged. There is great love for the fathers of Vedanta in America, and it is this love which
has held the Societies together through many tough times. It will be this love which will hold it together in the future.

Though Vedanta does not proselytize, it has never had difficulty growing. Regardless of its scarcity of leaders, it has never faltered. Currently, there is no distinct leader who will step forward to lead and guide the Vedanta Societies, and this may pose problems. Still, Vedanta's structure allows for great flexibility and change. Someone will come along who will give Vedanta the leadership it needs. Vedanta will endure. It has lasted for thousands of years in the East. It will last for thousands more, but with a Western counterpart: the Vedanta Society of America.
FOOTNOTES

1Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* (Hollywood, California, 1965), p. 332.


5Swami Satprakashananda, *The Significance of Sri Ramakrishna's Life and Message In the Present Age* (St. Louis, 1976), p. 11.

6Ibid., p. 12.

7Isherwood, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

8Ibid., p. 33.


10 Ibid., p. 22.

11 Ibid., p. 23.

12 Ibid., p. 21.

13Satprakashananda, *op. cit.*, p. 15.


16Satprakashananda, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

17 Ibid., p. 16.

18 Ibid., p. 17.


20 Ibid., p. 59.


23"What is Vedanta?" op. cit., p. 16.

24Gupta, op. cit., p. 92.


26Ibid., p. xxix.

27Ibid., p. xci.

28"What is Vedanta?" op. cit., p. 18.

29Vivekananda, op. cit., p. xxix.

30Ibid., p. ix.

31Ibid., p. xv.

32Ibid., p. xvi.

33Ibid., p. xxxi.

34Ibid., p. xviii.


36Ibid.


38Satprakashananda, op. cit., p. 22.

39"What is Vedanta?" op. cit., p. 12.


41Vivekananda, Practical Vedanta, op. cit., p. 17.

42Ibid., p. 25.

43Vivekananda, Teachings, op. cit., p. xx.


45Vivekananda, Teachings, op. cit., p. xxxi.

46Ibid., p. xxxv.

47Ibid., p. xxxiv.
48Ibid.
49Ibid., p. xxxv.
50Ibid.
51Ibid.
52Prabhavananda, op. cit., p. 111.
53Ibid., p. 116.
54Vivekananda, Teachings, op. cit., p. xxxvi.
55Prabhavananda, op. cit., p. 121.
57Ibid., p. 16.
58Ibid., p. 18.
59Ibid., p. 19.
60Ibid., p. 24.
61Ibid., p. 35.
62Ibid., p. 38.
63Ibid., p. 40.
64Ibid., p. 43.
65Ibid., p. 47.
66Ibid., p. 54.
67Ibid., p. 49.
68Ibid., p. 60.
69Vivekananda, Teachings, op. cit., p. xxxv.
70Adjemian, op. cit., p. 61.
72Adjemian, op. cit., p. 64.


75 Anandaprana, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

76 Adjemian, op. cit., p. 61.
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