

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM AND YOGA

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Good afternoon. My hosts have given me thirty minutes to explain the entire history of Unitarian Universalism and its connection to the current yoga craze. Well, why stop there? We've got a whole half hour. Let's begin with the dawn of creation.

After the fall and the expulsion from Eden, humanity expanded from tribes to villages, then from towns to cities and nation states. With the expansion came private interests, which contended with religion for humanity's energies. Religious figures in those pre-modern times had no idea how to compete with private interests. Most clergy, then as now, were trained to address the needs of congregants, not the needs of emerging global markets, and over time belief grew anachronistic. Each interest group developed its own brand of faith, often in competition with the others. As the old saw goes, God turned to the Devil and said, "I have this great idea. I'm going to call it religion," in response to which the Devil said, "That is a great idea. Let me organize it for You."

In this explosion of civilization, each culture had its own vision of what God wanted for humanity—and how to get around that vision to suit their more important economic and political goals. By the Industrial Revolution, Divinity had become anachronistic. What was once the fruit of devotion now grew on the tree of enterprise. The necessities of life could be gained through commerce and hard work, and voices proclaimed a human purpose at startling odds with former times.

"We are not divine beings," they said, encouraged by scientism and the growth of commerce. "We are consuming machines."

Simply put, gratifying desires felt better than denying them. In this acquisitive environment, liberation was no longer defined as a self unencumbered from its material shackles but a self completely immersed in those shackles. Freedom equated to freedom from scarcity. Expansion, profit, and the supremacy of man were in ascent, and whatever challenges faced us now would be met not by supplicating invisible deities but by tapping the unlimited potential of

our intellect and ingenuity. We were, at last, masters of our own fate. And we have been paying the price every since.

An outstanding model of this expansionist mentality was set by the British Raj in India. Once the Mughal Empire collapsed in 1707, British East India officials moved in and by the mid-1700's British interests had essentially obliterated India's indigenous culture along with any possibility for an organic adjustment to Modernity. What was that indigenous culture? It was a yoga-based culture, meaning that every man, woman and child knew that life is divine, that all beings are sparks of the one God of creation; and it was a culture that fostered simple contemplative techniques for reawaking that divine consciousness.

But it looked strange, clearly “un-Christian,” and so it had to be eradicated. How did the British do that? They built schools, handed out tracts decrying idol worship, and unabashedly declared Hinduism to be backward and profane. Missionary Alexander Duff wrote in 1839, “Of all the systems of false religion ever fabricated by the perverse ingenuity of fallen man, Hinduism is surely the most stupendous.”¹

In fairness to the missionaries and educators, what they were reacting to was not actual Hindu thought but perversions that had sprung up over a thousand years of foreign rule. Wife burnings, infanticide, and unrestrained sexual practices performed in the name of divine love—these were not the original elegant ideas of the Sanskrit texts. The British outrage was not completely unwarranted.

But their proposed cure was to kill the patient, meaning that if Hindu heathens were ever to take their place on the world stage, they would have to abandon their indigenous beliefs, and the chief weapon against those beliefs was education. By the turn of the century the Raj had built five major universities and more than 1,500 secondary schools. Who went to these schools? Mainly upper-class Hindu intellectuals who wanted to move up in the world, modernize India, and erase the stigma of being a backward nation.

An early dignitary in this group was Ram Mohan Roy. Roy is remembered for founding the Brahmo Samaj, a reform movement whose goal was to “purify Hinduism” through Bible study and the purging of old ways. Little thought was given by the Brahmo Samaj to the

¹ Rev. Alexander Duff, *India and Indian Missions, Including Sketches of the Gigantic system of Hinduism, Both in Theory and Practice* (1839), pp.204-05

possibility that some precious truths were being tossed out with that ideological bathwater.

Well, enter the Unitarian Universalists who by the early 19th century had begun inviting non-Christian churches to be part of their fellowship. In 1825 they formed the Society for the Promotion of Christianity in India, which supported the work of American minister Charles Dall. Dall admired Hindu thought, and one of his close friends was a Bengali magistrate named Kedarnath Datta Bhaktivinode who was head of the Vaishnava community. Vaishnavas worship Vishnu or Krishna, God in personal form.

Bhaktivinode is a role model worthy of careful study. He was a large man whose robust body and meaty hands were offset by kind eyes and a gentle heart. He wrote dozens of books filled with references from a wide range of sources. He attended a leading British school where he studied Kant, Goethe, Hegel, Hume, Voltaire, and Schopenhauer and read works by Milton, Macaulay, Hazlit, Carlyle, and Edison. Bhaktivinode made friends with Charles Dall and the two discussed the writings of Channing, Parker, Emerson and Newman.

All this exposure to Unitarian thinking had its effect, and at age twenty-three Bhaktivinode decided that Ram Mohan Roy's amalgam of Hinduism and Christianity was sincere but a disservice to the Hindu texts. In particular Bhaktivinode followed the 16th century Vaishnava saint Chaitanya whose philosophy of "simultaneous oneness with and difference from God" says that the world we see, the creation around us, not only symbolizes the greater concept of God but is not different from God.

Care must be exercised in distinguishing between the monistic notion that "everything is God" and Chaitanya's theology that "nothing is different from God." Vaishnavas would never agree with the monistic proposal that "everything is God," as this obviates the unique individuality which makes God the ultimate object of love. "Nothing is different from God" acknowledges God's unlimited power and his ability to be simultaneously in his eternal realm and present within every corner of his creation. It is this visceral sense of the Deity's personal presence in all creation that compels Vaishnavas to engage with the creation as an act of devotion.

How clearly devotees perceive Krishna's presence in creation depends on their level of advancement in devotional practices. Neophytes appreciate phenomena on a literal level: "This is a tree." More advanced devotees appreciate an object's deeper symbolic meaning: "This is an eternal soul in a tree body," or "This tree is a hair on the body of Krishna's Universal Form," and

so on. Advanced Vaishnavas see Krishna everywhere, and on that *rasik* plane of pure perception everything becomes a stimulus for love of God.

For Vaishnavas, seeing God in creation is not a religious sentiment but an ontological reality since everything in creation is constituted of the same basic element, *brahman*. Vaishnavism maintains that the *brahman* energy emanates from a personal energetic source, namely Krishna. And because Krishna's energy and Krishna himself are not different, advanced devotees perceive him in the phenomenal world.² This is the message of central Hindu text Bhagavad Gita, which says that "True yogis observe Me in all beings and also see every being in Me. Indeed, the self-realized souls see Me everywhere. For those who see Me everywhere and everything in Me, I am never lost, nor are they ever lost to Me."³

Bhaktivinode's commitment to the Chaitanya School prompted him to write a polite but clear critique of Ram Mohan Roy's attempt to reconcile India's devotional tradition with Christianity. He wrote, "Ram Mohan Roy was an able man. But Ram Mohan Roy was also a patriot. He wanted to reform his country in the same way as he reformed himself... [He] claimed the truths inculcated by the Western Saviour as also the property of himself and his countrymen, and thus he established the *Samaja* of the Brahmos independently of what was in his own country's scriptures. His noble deeds will certainly procure him a high position in the history of reformers. But then, to speak the truth, he would have done more if he had commenced his work of reformation from the point where the last reformer in India [Chaitanya] left off."

Taking the idea further, Bhaktivinode suggested that progressive people of God are inspired by the beauty of scriptures from other traditions. "Subjects of philosophy and theology," he wrote, "are like the peaks of large towering and inaccessible mountains standing in the midst of our planet inviting attention and investigation. Thinkers and men of deep speculation take their observations through the instruments of reason and consciousness. But they take different points when they carry on their work. These points are positions chalked out by the circumstances of their social and philosophical life, different as they are in the different parts of the world. Plato looked at the peak of the Spiritual question from the West and Vyasa made the observation from the East; so Confucius did it from further East, and Schlegel, Spinoza, Kant

² "I worship Govinda, the primeval Lord, who is Shyamsundar, Krishna Himself, with inconceivable innumerable attributes, whom pure devotees see in their heart of hearts with the eye of devotion tinged with the salve of love." BS, 5.38

³ BG, 6.29-30

and Goethe from further West. These observations were made at different times and by different means, but the conclusion is all the same in as much as the object of observation was one and the same. They all hunted after the Great Spirit, the unconditioned Soul of the Universe.... It requires a candid, generous, pious and holy heart to feel the beauties of their conclusions.⁴

No commentator before Bhaktivinode had attempted to harmonize Hinduism on its own terms with the world's great philosophies. Prior to his time, India's religious traditions had been formulated and conveyed within their own parochial context, with little thought given to the global perspective that would emerge in the nineteenth century.

Bhaktivinode was an amazing exemplar of enlightened life. He would get up at 4:30am, bathe, do his prayers, answer correspondence, and as a magistrate would arrive in court by 9am, finish by 1pm, write his opinions in the afternoon, take a couple hours nap, have dinner, begin his personal writings, work all night, rest a little bit, and start the daily routine over again. So he was working about eighteen to twenty hours a day, and somewhere along the line he and his wife Bhagawati Devi had thirteen children, so he must have taken a break sometimes, but obviously it didn't interfere significantly with his work habits.

Bhaktivinode attempted to get the message of devotion to the West by sending a copy of his writings to McGill University in Montreal, where it was quickly lost on a library shelf. Yoga culture received its first boost in 1893 at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, sponsored by the Unitarians and the Universalists of the Free Religious Association, who invited Swami Vivekananda to appear as a representative of Hindu spiritual culture. He made a huge splash as the first Hindu to address a wide American public. Twenty-seven years later, these same groups sponsored Paramahansa Yogananda, founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship. Yogananda arrived in the United States in 1920 and spoke in Boston before the International Congress of Religious Liberals.

As important as these events were, by the 1920s post-World War One American wanted little to do with foreign cultures. The mood was Westward Ho, industrialize, and foreigners—particularly those of color—had no place in that scheme. In 1922, the Supreme Court ruled that Asians were not “white” persons and consequently not eligible for citizenship. This was followed in 1924 by the Asian Exclusion Act, which effectively cut off immigration from India and other

⁴ Bhaktivinode, *The Bhagavata*, pp. 9-10

Asian countries. Katherine Mayo's 1927 bestselling diatribe *Mother India* did an outstanding job of further prejudicing the public against Hinduism, and in 1929 when poet Rabindranath Tagore arrived in Los Angeles for a lecture tour, immigration officials treated him with such disdain that he turned around and went back to India, declaring that even Jesus would not get into America because he would be considered Asian.

The real Yoga explosion happened 40 years later, sparked by the repeal of Asian Exclusion Act. Yoga became so prominent at that time that TIME magazine declared 1968 "The Year of the Guru." Is anyone here old enough to remember 1968? You have my sympathies. Between 1924-64 only 16,000 people from Asia were given green cards to live in America. Over the next decade that number jumped to 800,000, and it was during this period that teachers, yoga instructors and religious figures from India made their way to the U.S.

What were they teaching? Many of these early figures decided the only part of yoga culture Americans could understand was the physical part, and until recently that was the perception of Yoga. Gradually, Yoga philosophy was added and now we are seeing a migration of Yoga concepts into areas of healthcare, early childhood development, environment, and mediation. The great Yoga teachers of the past and present are in agreement: Yoga is not about stretching the body but stretching the spirit. It is about correcting the tragic misidentification of self as a consuming machine that emerged in the Industrial era and about resurrecting a nobility of purpose that has all but faded into memory—a mission embodied in the writings of the Unitarians, such as this passage from Channing:

*To live content with small means; to seek
Elegance rather than luxury, and refinement
Rather than fashion; to be worthy not respectable,
And wealthy not rich; to study hard, think quietly,
Talk gently, act frankly.
To listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages
With open heart; to bear all cheerfully, do all
Bravely, await occasions, hurry never.
In a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and
Unconscious grow up through the common;
This is to by my symphony.*