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IV. Philosophical and Religious Objectives

Examining the teachings of Indians and Westerners concerning the same religious philosophical subjects will definitely result in an expansion of knowledge. An India-Western religious philosophical dialogue will uncover for both sides new discoveries that reveal hidden implications in the present set of ideas. In India Vedantic ideas are central and mainline, while in the West many of them are peripheral and not well known by the majority of educated people. Consequently, they are far better developed in India. If you inquired among a large group of Western university professors concerning for example the Divinity of the Soul or Self, most would probably have little knowledge concerning the subject. Indian Vedantists, particularly the Swamis of the Ramakrishna Order are doing a great service to the West by explaining the theoretical and practical importance of these sublime ideas. They are more likely to be accepted by Westerners when they realize Vedantic ideas have been discussed to some extent (using a different terminology) in their own religion and intellectual culture. Because religions have remained so distant from one another for centuries, most people have not recognized these similarities. While an exemplary thinker like Shankara is identified as a Hindu or Thomas Aquinas as a Catholic Christian, it must be remembered that they were striving to present universal truths that transcend a specific religion. Indian philosophy is both a practical existential path to salvation and liberation by

knowledge and a detached exercise in theory-construction and conceptual clarification.

1. Vivekananda and the Unity of Indian Philosophy

On an international level, Swami Vivekananda's religious philosophical synthesis is totally remarkable and unique. In Western Europe a number of influential thinkers like Hegel, Marx, Spencer, Logical Positivists, Post-Modernist, and others devoted their life to attempting to create a Unified Theory of Philosophy, yet they failed while Vivekananda has succeeded. With intense spiritual insight and brilliant intellect he was able to synthesize traditional Indian philosophy with modern ideas in a highly creative manner. In the West, philosophers were able to create viable limited systems of thought, but they were never able to unify the various views into a coherent whole. In fact one system was often conceived as being in direct opposition to another (e.g., idealism vs. realism, dualism vs. monism, spirituality vs. materialism).

The Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) revealed, "The going forth of Vivekananda, marked out by the Master [Sri Ramakrishna] as the heroic soul destined to take the world between his two hands and change it, was the first visible sign to the world that India was awake not only to survive but to conquer.... Once the soul of the nation was awake in religion, it was only a matter of time and opportunity for it to throw itself on all spiritual and intellectual activities in the national existence and take possession of them.... The visit of Swami Vivekananda to America and the subsequent work of those who followed him did more for India than a hundred London Congresses could effect. That is the true way of awakening sympathy—by showing ourselves to the nations as a people with a great past and ancient civilisation who still possess something of the genius and character of our forefathers, have still something to give the world and therefore deserve freedom—by proof of our manliness and fitness, not by mendicancy."¹

Concerning Vivekananda, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan made these statements, "When I was a student in the early years of this century, a student in high school and college classes, we used to read Swami Vivekananda's speeches and letters which were then passing from hand to hand in manuscript form, and they used to stir us up a great deal and make us feel proud of our ancient culture.... By standing up for the great ideals of Hindu religion, the great ideals that alone can save humanity, by standing up for them, Swami Vivekananda tried to lead humanity to a nobler and better path than that which it found itself in.... If you really believe in the Divine spark in man, do not for a moment hesitate to accept the great tradition which has come to us, of which Swami Vivekananda was the greatest exponent."² "If there is any call which Vivekananda made to us, it is to rely on our own spiritual resources. Man has inexhaustible spiritual resources. His spirit is supreme, man is unique. There is nothing inevitable in this world, and we can ward off the worst dangers and worst disabilities by which we are faced. Only we should not lose hope. He gave us fortitude in suffering, he gave us hope in distress, he gave us courage in despair."³

In the volume *Radhakrishnan: A Religious Biography* (1987) Robert N. Minor, Chairman of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kansas, provides examples of the influence of Vivekananda on the ideas of this distinguished Indian philosopher. "Accepting 'Hinduism' or 'the Hindu religion' as a reified entity as did the critics, Radhakrishnan's attitude was reversed by the work of Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), whose definition of this reified 'Hinduism' would have a lasting impact in India and abroad. Radhakrishnan's own understanding can be almost directly credited to Vivekananda. In 1963 he spoke to fellow Indians about the hope Vivekananda's work gave him: 'It is that kind of humanistic, man-making religion which gave us courage in the days when we were young.'... Radhakrishnan believed, he later said, that Vivekananda and the Swami's guru, Ramakrishna (1836-86), were in touch with the essence of 'Hinduism' and, not surprisingly, Radhakrishnan's definition of 'Hinduism' is almost identical with that of Vivekananda." "Vivekananda's definition of 'Hinduism' was as the 'Eternal Religion,' Sanatana Dharma, behind

all religions, that recognizes the Absolute as a state of pure consciousness identical with one's true Self and this true Self as an ineffable One without a second. The basis of the Eternal Religion is experience, however not doctrines and creeds.... Not only could Radhakrishnan be proud of his fellow countryman as a defender of India, but he found in Vivekananda's definition a definition of his own which agreed with the values he had absorbed from his education ... But the Advaita he affirmed was mediated most positively to him through the work of Swami Vivekananda. Almost fifty years later he remembered that it was Vivekananda's works that provided an existential salvation, an appreciated solution to the 'depressing feeling of defeat' which resulted from taking the criticisms seriously in his student days."⁴

Vivekananda is what is called a "Grand Theorist" working more on the large-scale macro level rather than on the micro level, striving to be as broad and compressive as possible. Nothing he did was trivial. His ideas were characterized by depth and originality, broadness of scope, and the practical and theoretical importance and meaningfulness of the material he covered. When dealing with the particulars, he often does so in relation to a larger system of ideas of which they are a part. He concentrates on universal and eternal principles that even transcend cultural-historical events, rather than focusing in on the daily political, economic, social, entertainment, and athletic occurrences and ideas that are currently in vogue and will soon be forgotten by most people. Since his mind was on a high spiritual and ideological level, it will take time for people to appreciate his undertakings.

Vivekananda was working in the direction of a "Grand Unified Theory of Religious Philosophy." His goal was to synthesize the three systems of Vedanta, each of the four yogas, and to some extent the six systems of Indian philosophy (Darshanas) into an internally coherent and consistent logical system of ideas. Unity, synthesis, and integration are the prevailing themes of Vivekananda's philosophy, religion, and social theory. The approach he employs is integrative (sattvic) not destructive (tamasic), absorption not fighting, striving for a universal ideology and a higher level of systematization. Buddha taught the "Middle Way" or the "Middle Path," and the eminent Greek

philosopher Aristotle's (384-322 B.C.) prescribed the "Golden Mean" as a balance between two extreme forms of action. We might think of Vivekananda as following the "Middle Path" not exactly as the Buddhists describe it, but in the sense that he often took the middle ground (sattvic) between various points of view seeing the good in each. Knowledge is gained through unification, i.e., combining ideas and through division, i.e., breaking the concept into subgroups.

During his East-West encounter, Vivekananda would sometimes explain Indian ideas using Western concepts. At other times he would reverse the process and interpret Western ideas, like heredity and evolution for example, employing Indian ways of thinking. He also employed a method of combining two independent components from different sociocultural conceptual systems (such as Samkhya cosmology and modern theoretical physics or Indian yoga and modern psychology) into a higher order synthesis. In seeking unity, Vivekananda sometimes employs a system of logic that is akin to Aristotle's principle of locating a genus that connects two sub-classes or categories. For example, the practices of karma yoga and raja yoga are to some extent contraries (opposite in nature or characteristics), but they do not contradict each other. For Vivekananda, both yogas properly performed lead to selflessness (the overcoming of egocentricity), which is a common genus that connects these two sub-classes. He integrated elements that appear to be incompatible by identifying a higher order of generalization. He was able to spot many hidden relationships between various entities. Sometimes he employs the unifying "Principle of Linear Vertical Categories," as in the case of the three schools of Vedanta: Dvaita (Dualism), Vishistadvaita (Qualified Nondualism), and Advaita (Nondualism), which are each true from three different perspectives and three different levels of Being. He also presents the continuum of different levels or grades from matter to spirit.

Though Vivekananda focused in on Indian philosophy, the ideas he presented for a more unified system of thought can also be applied to Western philosophy. In the West, the Russian born Harvard University Sociologist Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968) advocated an integral system of philosophy that benefits

humanity "in eliminating the mutually conflicting claims of science, religion, philosophy, and ethics through reconciliation and unification of their real knowledge into one integral system of truth." The West is in particular need of these metaphysical ideas today, since many of the most respected and looked up to Western philosophers of today are secular oriented modern skeptics, who not only deny the belief in God and afterlife, but reject the validity of much of traditional metaphysics all the way back to the time of Socrates and Plato. They make the mistake of considering the part (the secular) to be the whole. Religion explains the meaning of life that cannot be provided by a secular knowledge by itself.

As Vivekananda stated in an Indian newspaper interview of February 1897, "My watchword is construction, not destruction.... All along, in the history of the Hindu race, there never was any attempt at destruction, only construction.... We have had a host of reformers--Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, and Chaitanya. These were great reformers, who always were constructive and built according to the circumstances of their time. This is our peculiar method of work. All the modern reformers take to European destructive reformation, which will never do good to anyone and never did. Only once was a modern reformer mostly constructive, and that one was Raja Rammohan Roy [1772-1833]." That year in another setting, "He further said that by a destructive method no progress either for the society or for the country could be achieved. In all ages and times progress has been effected by the constructive process, that is, by giving a new mould to old methods and customs. Every religious preacher in India, during the past ages, worked in that line."⁵ In spite of their many accomplishments, all of the major Hindu thinkers discussed in the first section of Chapter II were critical of Nondualism and some wanted to do away with ritual and image worship. Their understanding of religion was very limited compared to the encyclopedic approach of Swami Vivekananda.

In his integrated philosophical analysis, Vivekananda applies the cooperation oriented "Constructive Dialectical Method" based on a "Philosophy of Syntheses." Vivekananda's conceptual Ideological Pluralism and Dialectical Logic accept both the higher aspects of the thesis (the first member of the pair)

and of the antithesis (the second component) in the following dichotomies: India-West, Tradition-Modernity, Nondualism-Dualism, spiritual knowledge-scientific knowledge, sacred-secular, meditation (Raja Yoga)-action (Karma Yoga), knowledge (Jnana Yoga)-devotion (Bhakti Yoga), and reason-feeling. First, with a fluid and flexible mind he analyzed and expanded upon the virtues of each member of the pair from its own standpoint independent of the other member. He rejected the Principle of Bivalence, the idea that any proposition is either true or false, there is no in-between. Then in many cases, Vivekananda creates a higher order synthesis that integrates the best characteristics of both the thesis and antithesis. Following the process of sublation part of the thesis and antithesis are negated while the rest is preserved as a partial element of the synthesis. The result is a more general theory that incorporates both elements increasing the scope of understanding. A higher unity preserves the essential truth of each component in a noncontradictory way. Vivekananda does not criticize the traditional thinkers, but broadened the scope of their ideas making them more understandable and meaningful to modern humanity. This is the broad, tolerant, flexible, universalistic way of looking at things. He states, "My hope is to see again the strong points of that India, reinforced by the strong points of this age, only in a natural way. The new stage of things must be a growth from within."⁶ Following the epistemological interpretation of the gunas the thesis which is presently held is *tamas*, the antithesis that involves change is *rajas*, and the higher order synthesis is *sattva*.

According to Hamilton's Law, "However different any two concepts may be, they both are subordinate to some higher concept--things most unlike must in some respects be like."⁷ If we have only a thesis eventually stagnation is apt to occur, and so an opposing antithesis helps bring about change. We can learn from those who hold ideas we disagree with. A synthesis is necessary to resolve the conflict between a thesis and its antithesis. Also, there is the "Pendulum Theory" that goes from thesis to antithesis and then back to the thesis. For example in the American presidential race since the end of the Second World War, there has been a continual cycle of twelve years (only once)

or less from Republican candidates to Democratic and then back to the Republicans and so on.

Vivekananda's approach differs from the destructive conflict oriented dialectical method of Karl Marx (1818-83), where the thesis (Capitalism) is to be done away with by the antithesis (Dictatorship of the proletariat). It also varies from the traditional idea of the dialectic, in that he does not give the synthesis a new name, nor does it become a new thesis that eventually is replaced by another synthesis. Traditionalists accept only the thesis, and radicals only the antithesis. They think in terms of dichotomies rather than trichotomies. One of the two contraries is selected as the truth while the other is rejected. Following Vivekananda's "Dialectical Method," the higher aspects of the thesis and antithesis do not contradict but complement one another; in their totality they yield a higher and more comprehensive understanding. They are logically and empirically integrated into a unified socio-cultural system. In world history there has been a tendency when adopting a new paradigm, to abandon too much of the former one, to go from one extreme to another. Vivekananda's mind was so broad that he accepted the ambiguities and paradoxes of human existence, and would analyze the same phenomena from many different angles. He totally avoided "false absolutism" that considers a part as the reality and then denies or belittles other aspects of the whole.

According to the logic of the dialectic, history is a process of continual change. The synthesis becomes a new thesis and then the dialectic becomes a law of historical motion and change. This process occurs in both historical events and in human thought.

At times Swami Vivekananda expressed his ideas using what the German Sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) called "Ideal Types." They are abstract concepts, idea-constructs that facilitate generalization, by emphasizing a phenomenon's most predominant characteristics and ignoring others. They are not meant to correspond to all of the empirical characteristics of any one particular case, but rather to stress certain elements common to most cases of the given phenomena. Utilizing Ideal Types is a useful technique for comparing one thing with another, such as Indians and Westerners, Christianity and

Hinduism, raja yoga and karma yoga, jnana yoga and bhakti yoga, monastic and householder, intellect and feeling, etc. Ideal Types being theoretical constructs are only approximated in the empirical world.⁸

In 1962 Thomas Kuhn (1922-96) came out with the highly influential book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that introduced the idea of a "Paradigm Switch." He applied this concept to the history of the physical science but it quickly was expanded into the social sciences. Historically in India, the primary cultural paradigm (worldview) is that of "Traditional Hinduism." This paradigm worked well for many centuries and consequently it was seldom questioned or modified. The coming of the British in the mid-18th century and the concomitant Industrial Revolution brought radical changes in many areas of Indian society and culture. This process was accompanied by a radical increase in urbanization, which meant a shift from the traditional to a more materialistic secular society, with less interest in the sacred, the family, and ritualistic expression of beliefs and attitudes. Methods and beliefs that were at one time functional became dysfunctional. In addition, the British introduced a new paradigm, which we might call "Western or Modern Secularism" that challenged and criticized the prevailing traditional beliefs of the Indians. With the advent of Westernization (or some might say Modernization) many Indians lost faith in the dominant paradigm. An ever-increasing number of incongruences and contradictions appeared. It became absolutely necessary to modify the existing paradigm to some extent so that it would be compatible with the changes that were occurring in Indian society.

When a breakthrough occurs (such as the new paradigm presented by Ramakrishna-Vivekananda) as Kuhn states, the success of the new paradigm draws people to it and a widespread consensus is formed bringing about collective progress. Traditionally the worth of a paradigm (such as the teachings of Swami Vivekananda) is judged in relation to five factors: correspondence to reality, internally consistent (within itself) and externally consistent (in relation to other ideas), broadness of scope (importance and meaningfulness of the paradigm), easiness to comprehend, and pragmatic fruitfulness for further development. The Ramakrishna-Vivekananda paradigm

has implications not only for India, but for the whole world. According to Kuhn, a shift in paradigm can lead to a difference in one's experiences. Hence, some things that were considered vitally important in the older tradition might disappear, while other things that were looked upon as trivial might become significant in the new tradition. The older terms and concepts are still used, but in a modified way taking on new meanings.⁹

A note of caution, the teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda do not represent a complete paradigm shift, since they accepted much of traditional Vedanta that preceded them. They added new perspectives to Vedanta rather than replacing the old ideas. They incorporated most of the concepts and practices that preceded them along with some modifications. Also, the main problem they had to deal with is not that Vedantists could not solve new intellectual difficulties as with contemporary science, but that many people had lost faith in religion.

An example of a religious paradigm shift is from Catholicism to the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. A paradigm shift involves a hermeneutic shift, a new way of interpreting the scriptures and religious practices. Rejecting much of Catholicism the Protestants returned to what they considered to be biblical and early Christian practices. Rather than solely progressing in a linear and continuous way, the study of religion undergoes paradigm shifts. New approaches to understanding open up that would never have considered acceptable before.

Formerly in 1769, the German Pastor Johann Herder (1744-1803) introduced the concept of "Zeitgeist" into the German language, meaning "the spirit of the times." The Zeitgeist no doubt has an important influence on many thinkers at any time in history. It is the general socio-cultural, intellectual, ethical, religious, or political climate within a nation or a specific group. Another German term, "Weltanschauung" refers to the framework of ideas and beliefs, through which an individual, group or culture interprets the world and interacts with it. A worldview should provide an explanation of the world, a theory of knowledge, values and answers to ethical questions, a theory of action of how to attain our goals, tell us where we are heading, and a rationale that justifies

itself. It refers to philosophies of life, ideologies, and cultural or religious perspectives encompassing the cognitive, evaluative, and volitional aspects of human experience. Having some idea of the worldview of other people helps us to understand the way they act and think.¹⁰

2. Religion in General

From a functionalist perspective religion makes many contributions to a society. It unites people helping them to maintain social solidarity through common beliefs and shared rituals. Religion is a major source of stability and order in society, fostering group cohesion, reinforcing social norms, and helping to create a moral, stable, and peaceful community. Religious teachings provide moral guidelines that maintain conformity and control in society. People learn the difference between moral and immoral patterns of behavior. In addition, religion explains the meaning and purpose of life. Psychologically religious activity gives people satisfaction and a feeling of belonging. Religion provides social support and offers a place to meet others who hold similar values. It helps to bring people together, including families and to create friendships.¹¹

There are many psychological advantages to being religious. Most scholarly research studies have found that religious involvement is positively correlated with many indicators of psychological well-being. A religious person is more likely to experience satisfaction with their life, happiness, self-esteem, and have higher morale. They are less likely to be depressed, suicidal, to engage in drug and alcohol abuse, and in promiscuous sexual and criminal activity.¹²

Religion functions spiritually by providing answers to religious questions and preparing people for entry into a higher form of existence; ethically by promoting virtues and inspiring people to live a moral life; socially by uniting people in a society with common ideals, beliefs, and behavioral patterns and creating a place for social interaction, forming groups, and exercising social

control; social psychologically by providing a social support system; psychologically by bringing meaning and purpose to life, a sense of self-identity, inspiring discipline, and engendering peace of mind; and intellectually by providing answers to certain fundamental questions such as the purpose of life, what happens after death, etc.¹³ Religion starts from the top and then infers downward (deduction), while often times physical science start from the bottom and then infers upwards (induction). While science deals with the outer physical world, mysticism views reality from the inner spiritual realm. Religion deals with areas of study that the physical sciences are not able to address

Following the theory of structural-functionalism, religions are composed of an organized and complex system of ideas, practices, norms and values, and organization. In each of these four areas, ideally the components work together to promote solidarity, mutual support, social cohesion, stability; and the belongingness, identity, collective consciousness, and dedication of the individuals to the group. These four items combine to make the religion effective and functional. Practices include meditation and prayer, rituals and ceremonies, performing duties, ethical behavior, attending lectures and sermons, and observing religious holidays. Religions are evaluated by their spirituality, intellectual creativity, productive activity, population size, longevity, influence, etc., which are subject to change.

Among other things religions are constituted by: Ideological: a set of beliefs, feelings of reverence, religious scriptures, and sacred symbols; physical: physical church or temple and a place of worship; institutional: an organization; and active: functionaries within the organization, ritual, ceremonies, austerities like fasting, and participating in holy days.

In religious life the devotee seeks a transcendent relationship with something greater than oneself. The result is a self-identity that yields meaning and purpose to life and helps one to deal with negative events. Morally this lifestyle requires adhering to spiritual values, striving for personal development, an absence of egocentricity, a mature concern for others, and appreciating spiritual diversity. Learning about different faiths benefits a devotee's personal

development and understanding of spiritual [SEP] truth, since they share a common spiritual bond.

Every religion has a culture that includes a set of interrelated beliefs, products, activities, institutions, traditions, behaviors, customs, values, and language. Religions are defined by conceptual and organizational boundaries that distinguish one faith from another. This way its members become aware of themselves as a separate group that distinguishes them from other religions. A religion has an external environment that both affect it and it affects. It has its causal boundaries, is influenced by the circumstances it is involved in (context), defined by its structure, function and role, and expressed through its relations with other systems. Homeostasis is the tendency of a religion to maintain its key characteristics in order to maintain a stable, constant condition. Yet, it is an open system willing to make changes if they will benefit the organization. Adaptation is the tendency of a religion to make the changes needed to protect itself and allow it to fulfill its purpose. This enables it to adjust to changing circumstances so that it can sustain itself over an extended period of time. Decisions are in part due to the information contained in feedback loop. The religious system is composed of subsystems, the smaller groups such as the various denominations, sects, etc.¹⁴

Spirituality offers a worldview where one realizes that there is more to life than sensory enjoyments and material possessions. It strives to answer questions about the meaning and purpose of human existence, how people are connected to each other, and what happens after death. Higher levels of spirituality have also been linked to increased compassion, improved self-esteem, better health, successfully dealing with the challenges of human experiences, and a more optimistic outlook on life.¹⁵ According to one 2005 poll, about 24% of the United States population identifies themselves as "spiritual but not religious."¹⁶ This should not be necessary since a complete religion provides spiritual benefits.

Systems thinking involve studying the linkage and interactions between the elements that are component parts of the religious system. Interactions are both within the system and between other systems. The main areas of study

include context, connections, relationship between the parts, boundaries, the environment, and the feedback loops of the system. Important goals are for the religion is to adapt to the environment through a process of revision and rearrangement while maintaining stability, learning from experience, and striving for self-maintenance.

Today the primary factors in bringing about social change are located in technology, science, the economy, and the political realm. When *Time Magazine* annually lists who they consider to be the 100 most influential people in the world, few represent religion. For one thing many modern secular thinkers view religions as socially constructed and causally determined by cultural, and historical factors. They are apt not to think of religion as being transhistorical and transcultural with an autonomous essence. Religion is looked upon primarily as an epiphenomenon of society, an effect, rather than a cause. Conversely, Vivekananda wanted religion to regain its original force and become a major dynamic factor in social and psychological change. Religion is certainly an important contributor in maintaining a moral society and bringing about altruistic activity. He wrote, "The fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world must vanish, for the Vedanta teaches oneness--one life throughout. The ideals of religion must cover the whole field of life, they must enter into all our thoughts, and more and more into practice."¹⁷ Some people think of religion as a post-mortem experience that they will deal with when the time comes. In the past some intellectually superior but religiously or morally weak cultures have gone into rapid decline.

It is significant that of the many religions of India, Vivekananda placed the emphasis on Vedanta, the most intellectually advanced philosophical system. Vivekananda proclaimed, "Ours is the universal religion. It is inclusive enough, it is broad enough to include all the ideals. All the ideals of religion that already exist in the world can be immediately included, and we can patiently wait for all the ideals that are to come in the future to be taken in the same fashion, embraced in the infinite arms of the religion of the Vedanta." "In religion there is no caste; caste is simply a social institution."¹⁸ This approach is in accordance with Alexander Cope's Law of biology that states, "The degree of survival of a species is directly

related to the extent which the species remains unspecialized ... and correlatively, the extent to which it does not enter into a specialized branch of development."¹⁹ For example, applying this law to religion, some Hindu groups of the 19th century like the Brahmo Samaj specialized in social reform, and when they were put into law, the groups were no longer needed for that purpose. Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of the spiritual life is so broad and potent that every spiritual ideal and every humanistic ideal finds a place within the scope of its transforming power.

Vivekananda presentation fulfills four aspects of Vedanta as meta-religion, a "universal religion": 1) Geographically Universal being found throughout the world, 2) Conceptually Universal containing a wide range of ideas, 3) Ritualistically Universal in accepting many varied religious practices, and 4) Socially Universal being open to all types of people of varied occupations and social levels.

Some Westerners have little interest in religion because they think of it as something alien from everyday secular life. They picture heaven as being "wholly other," as a far off realm completely disassociated from earthly life, something they will deal with after they die. Vivekananda teaches a religion of immanence, making every attempt to show that the world and Spirit are vitally connected because Deity is omnipresent, ubiquitous, everywhere. Removing the sense of a dichotomy between Brahman-God and the world, he perceives both Spirit and matter not as opposites, but as interconnected entities. We can think of Brahman-God and divinity either as the ground and root of our existence, the source of our being, or as the background of our finite existence. As Reverend Glyn Richards (1923-2003) of the Congregational Church in Wales put it, "He [Vivekananda] recognized, as Gandhi did, that religion applied not to just one dimension of a man's life but to every aspect of his existence. Both rejected the attempt to keep religion in a compartment of its own and by implication removed the demarcation line between the sacred and the secular."²¹.

Religious symbols are a sign that indicates, signifies, or represents something else, such as a cross (signifier) is a symbol of Christianity (signified)

and a Star of David of Judaism. They are abstract in nature and their meaning is not inherent in the symbol itself, and therefore have to be learned and require interpretation. Symbols take the form of visual images, words, sounds (mantras), or gestures (mudras) and are used to convey other ideas and beliefs, objects (as in ritual), or relationships (as in prayer).²²

Religious philosophy is undertaken to gain a better understanding of the tenets of the religion, to compare it with other faiths, to defend the religion against objections and criticism, to bring about reforms, and to assist in the propagation of the organization.

Cross-national studies conducted between 1981 and 2001 found that countries with higher religiosity are more favorable to science. In the United States probably the most religious of the advanced industrial democracies, people hold very positive views of science and scientists. Even those individuals who accept a strict creationist view regarding the origins of life are mostly favorable toward science. People in the United States have stronger trust in science than those in Europe, Russia, and Japan, despite great differences across these cultures in level of religiosity (2008).²³

The degree of religiosity is measured on three dimensions of practice, values, and beliefs: Religious participation: How often does a person attend religious services (collective religious practices) and how often do they meditate on or pray to Brahman-God (individual religious practices); Religious values: How important is Brahman-God and/or religion in their life; and Religious beliefs: Do they believe in afterlife or the content of religious scriptures.²⁴

Sociologists are apt to view the structure of the social system as composed of economic, political, religious, social, educational, military, and other secular institutions. Each institutional element is interdependent, so that a change in one affects the others to some extent and the condition of the system as a whole. Religion like the other institutions contributes functionally to the maintenance of the social system. Yet, religion unlike the others has a definite spiritual dimension independent of the secular world. Contrary to this, some people might claim economic activity properly performed is religious if it

develops higher virtues such as honesty, diligence, and altruism (Max Weber's Protestant Ethic).

A "Sociology of Religious Knowledge" soon develops where religious ideas are intertwined with the social structure and social events. People born into the society accept the religious beliefs of their community and in a religious war are willing to sacrifice their life for these beliefs. Intellectual prestige is based on one's position in the hierarchy of religious leaders.

Religion is nomothetic in formulating abstract general principles that explain types or categories of objective phenomena and ideographic in analyzing concrete unique individuals.²⁵ Emphasis is placed on the religious organization and group and its well-being, or on the religious development of individual devotees. Its concerns are both objective and subjective, quantitative and qualitative.

The Universal Consent Theory for the existence of Brahman-God makes note of the fact that some form of religion is found in every society. Religion is a universal phenomenon, rooted in human nature itself. It is definitely a part of the constitution of the majority of members of the human race. Rene Descartes (1596-1650) held that belief in God is an innate idea found in most people.

In Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought the distinction is made between philosophers (p), theologians (t), and mystics (m). Philosophers emphasize reason, theologians focus on religious scripture, and mystics stress religious experience. For example, Jewish commentaries are from three separate sources, religious philosophers, Rabbinic theologians, and Kabbalistic and Hasidic mystics. Islamic studies are subdivided into Aristotelian-Neoplatonic rational philosophy, Kalamitic theology, and Sufi mysticism. From this tripartite division it is possible to create a sevenfold classification system, based on which of these three perspectives the religious thinker accepts, and which they reject or are indifferent to. Christian religious thinkers may accept all three (Augustine), accept p-t and reject or be indifferent to m (A. Ritschl), accept p-m (A. Schopenhauer), or accept t-m (M. Luther). They may concentrate primarily on p (I. Kant), t (K. Barth), or m (T. a' Kempis). Granted these examples might be open

to debate since there are few pure types of thinkers. For each of these religions, in application there is some overlap between each of the three areas of study.

Theology is the systematic study of the nature of a Personal God and religious beliefs and tradition. It deals with the existence, character, actions, and attributes of a Personal God, His laws and government, the doctrines we are to believe, and the duties we are to practice. This God is both transcendent and immanent, interacting with the natural world by revealing Himself to humanity. Its epistemological source is scriptural revelation (in Christianity the *Bible*). Theologians use various forms of analysis and argument (experiential, historical, sociological, psychological, mythological, ethnographic (customs), and others) to understand the nature of religion. Its exponents often are members of a University, College, or Seminary that through the academic study of theology trains their students for the ministry.²⁶

The Christian religion is divided into three major Churches-Ecclesials: Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox. Christianity is united in that in all three organizations they worship Jesus Christ, the Father in Heaven, and the Holy Spirit. Their religious scripture is the *Bible* though they vary in their translations and interpretations of it. Catholicism is divided into different Monastic Orders and Protestantism into many Denominations. They differ as to how Jesus Christ should be worshipped and interpret his teachings in multiple ways.

When no scientific explanation is offered for the occurrence of a physical event in the universe, there is the "God of the Gaps" fallacy where it is explained as the direct acts of a supernatural Deity. This phenomenon can also be referred to as *deus ex machina* (God in the machine). Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45) criticized the idea of using the action of God to explain the incompleteness of our knowledge. In such a case as humans gain more understanding of the workings of nature the area filled in by God's activity becomes less and less. As scientists fill in the explanatory gaps, the evidence for God disappears. On the other hand, we cannot say that any area of thought explained by science automatically excludes God's actions. The power of

Brahman-God works not only externally on nature, but also internally through electricity, magnetism, gravity, etc.²⁷

In the second half of the nineteenth century there emerged the Science of Comparative Religion, which is concerned with the scientific study of the systematic comparison of resemblance and difference of the ideas and practices, origins and history, themes and impacts of the world's religions. Comparative Religion yields a deeper understanding of the fundamental philosophical concerns of religion covering ethics, metaphysics, and the nature and forms of salvation-liberation. It should not be used to attempt to prove the superiority of one's own religion or to show that all religions are the same.

Following "Pascal's Wager" devised by Blaise Pascal (1623-62) the French philosopher and mathematician, if we wager our lives that God exists we stand to gain eternal salvation if we are right, and lose little if we are wrong. On the other hand by wagering that God does not exist little is gained if there is no God, and we lose eternal happiness if we are mistaken.²⁸ He assumes it is necessary to believe in the existence of God while living on earth in order to attain the Kingdom of Heaven.

Due to a "Quest for Certainty," many people are apt to oversimplify things and accept only the aspects of reality they understand and deny the rest. An example is Scientism (Scienocentrism) that teaches that science and its methods are the only source of human knowledge, thus denying the truth-value of religion and metaphysics. They believe that science alone gives us complete and reliable knowledge of reality and the nature of things. The natural-physical science and mathematics are considered to be superior to the social and behavioral sciences. The behavior of a physical object is much easier to predict than that of people either individually or as a group. This is because people can make choices unlike a physical object. An astronomer knows where a certain planet will be located ten years from now, but we cannot say for certainty where a particular person will be. Scientism rejects metaphysical, philosophical, and religious assertions, since the truths they teach are not apprehended by the scientific method based on objective observation,

evidence, induction, repetition, experiment, verification and testing, and critical analysis.

They do not realize that the scope of science is limited since it does not cover every aspect of existence and there are things that cannot be measured, quantified, or defined using scientific concepts and methods. Also, some scientific ideas are held for a while and later rejected.²⁹ Since it cannot explain them, scientism denies the existence of afterlife, spiritual experiences, and miraculous powers such as levitation, stigmata, psychokinesis, becoming invisible, and faith healing. They cannot account for out of the body experiences and how someone could watch the doctors operating on their physical body when their subtle body (mind) was suspended in the air, and afterwards they could tell the doctors what they saw. Also, there is a lack of people that possess these powers so they cannot be verified. The reason being is that modern urbanization and secularization are not conducive to producing people with these psychic powers. If the believer in Scientism meditated they would realize they have a subtle and spiritual body besides a physical body.

Scientism is a secular religion that like traditional religions offers a meaning of life and has its scripture, ideology, doctrines and dogma, and personal authorities. A 1998 survey among National Academy of Sciences members (all senior academics, overwhelmingly from elite faculties) found that 72.2% of its members disbelieved in the existence of God.³⁰

As believers in Scientism, according to the 2003 Cornell survey of the leading scientists in the field of evolution, 87% deny the existence of God and 88% disbelieve in life after death. They do not believe that evolution is directed toward an ultimate goal.³¹ Some cite Occam's razor, that evolution is explained by natural processes and there is no need for a God.

Advantages of the natural sciences are, "producing testable predictions, performing controlled experiments, relying on quantifiable data and mathematical models, a high degree of accuracy and objectivity, higher levels of consensus, faster progression of the field, greater explanatory success, cumulativeness, replicability, and generally applying a purer form of the scientific method." The findings of the natural sciences are considered to be

better integrated, having a superior organization of knowledge, more able to detect errors, harder to learn, with less researcher bias.³² Science is highly esteemed in the modern world because of its practical effects in increasing wealth by innovations in technology and increasing life expectancy through new medical discoveries.

The religious and scientific paradigms differ in their beliefs, values, and techniques and in their questions, aims, and interpretations so they are bound to use a different methodology. They mistakenly think that one part or aspect of knowledge represents the totality of understanding (Pars pro toto fallacy). Within the persons narrow range of ideas their thinking might be both consistent and coherent and their responses make logical sense to them. Only when they broaden their scope of ideas do they realize the limitations of their beliefs. In the past religions have made the mistake of not realizing the importance and value of studying non-religious matters such as physical science.

Just the opposite is Totum pro parte fallacy of thinking that the whole represents the part. For example, when a person (part) expects every member of a group (whole) to have their generalized characteristics.

As A. E. Taylor (1869-1945) of Oxford, University put it, "They are one and all partial aspects or manifestations of a whole of which none of them adequately exhausts the contents. When we forget this and treat any partial experience as though it were the complete and adequate expression of the whole nature of Reality—in other words, when we try to apply to existence or the universe as a whole conceptions which are only valid for special aspects of existence—we shall inevitably find ourselves led to contradictory and absurd results. Each partial aspect of a total system can only be ultimately understood by reference to the whole to which it belongs, and hence any attempt to treat the part in abstraction as itself a self-contained whole—or, in other words, to treat the concepts with which we have to work in dealing with some special aspect of the world of experience as ultimately valid in their application to the whole system—is bound to issue in contradiction."³³

3. Types of Religions

Like Vivekananda, Paul Tillich (1886-1965) the German-American theologian opposed what he referred to as the authoritarian Heteronomous cultural and morality. It "imposes an alien law, religious or secular, on man's mind ... It destroys the honesty of truth and dignity of the moral personality. It undermines creative freedom and the humanity of man. Its symbol is the 'terror' exercised by absolute churches or absolute states." In its dogmatic sterility, heteronomy involves strict obedience to the dictates of a supreme God, based more on fear than on love.³⁴ The heteronomous interpretation "understands the moral commandments as expressions of a Divine Will, which is sovereign and without criteria. It cannot be measured in terms of adequacy to human nature. It must be obeyed as it is given through revelation. But the question then is: Why should anyone obey the commandments of the Divine lawgiver?"³⁵ Historically, in the West, heteronomy was opposed by an autonomy of secular humanism based on "the obedience of the individual to the laws of reason ... In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ... it (autonomous culture) became shallow, empty, without ultimate meaning, and produced conscious or unconscious despair. In this situation powerful heteronomies of a quasi-political character entered into the vacuum created by an autonomy which lacked the dimensions of depth."³⁶

Conversely, a Theonomous cultural and morality that Vivekananda taught utilizes autonomous reason integrated with a higher spiritual reality beyond itself. Tillich writes, "The Spiritual Presence creates a theonomous culture and it creates a theonomous morality."³⁷ "The ultimate meaning of existence shines through all finite forms of thought and action; the culture is transparent, and its creations are vessels of spiritual content."³⁸ It "communicates the experience of holiness, of something ultimate in being and meaning, in all its creations."³⁹ There is a depth of understanding ecstatically experienced and symbolically expressed, a spiritual presence free from external influence directed towards an ultimacy of being and meaning. Religious life is undertaken so that the devotee

can manifest their higher spiritual nature. Theories should not be externally imposed upon the other person. They must accept them from within, as a fulfillment of their own basic needs. "The double fight against an empty autonomy and a destructive heteronomy makes the quest for a new theonomy as urgent today as it was at the end of the ancient world."⁴⁰

Using Tillich's concepts there are five levels of religion. People of a tamasic nature tend to be immoral and bigoted mistaking irreligion for religion. Combining tamas with rajas they follow a heteronomous morality of expediency, which is to their own personal advantage. Above this the rajasic person adheres to an autonomous morality. Combining rajas with sattva they perform many good deeds or they may seek intellectual religious knowledge. The wiser person is sattvic and follows a theonomous morality having no desire to be immoral. They cultivate religious understanding and mysticism to develop their higher spiritual nature. Religion is an end in-itself and not undertaken to gain some secular rewards.

A sattvic "healthy-minded religion" concentrates on positive things like striving to realize Brahman-God, productive activity, seeking knowledge, treating others with respect, admiring the greatness of the founders, etc. Conversely, a tamasic "unhealthy-minded religion" focuses on negative things such as the sin and evil in the world, religious wars, bigotry and inquisitions, domination over others, etc.

The German theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) favored the mystical religion, which includes both religious experience, and a rationale and justification that explain it in a larger context. Mystical experience is in a sense a universal meta-religion since it encompasses all of the major religions of the world. In the broadest sense it applies to everyone including atheists and agnostics. Troeltsch tells us, "Mysticism realizes that it is an independent religious principle; it sees itself as the real universal heart of all religion, of which the various myth-forms are merely the outer garment. It regards itself as the means of restoring an immediate union with God; it feels independent of all institutional religion and possesses an entire inward certainty, which makes it indifferent towards every kind of religious fellowship. This is its fundamental

attitude; it does not vary whether the mystic adheres externally to the religious community or not. Hence forward union with God, deification, self-annihilation, become the real and the only subject of religion. This theme is then presented as the abstract content of mystical and is made the general universal essence of all inward and genuine religious processes. A union with God of this kind, however, further requires a general cosmic theory in which is established both the possibility and the manner of realizing this process of salvation.... A theory of this kind must be able to show how it came to pass that, in God, a separation between God and finite spirits could take place, and how this separation can be overcome by the very fact that the finite spirits have their being within God. It shows how all that is finite proceeds from God and returns unto God, for the sense of identity persisting through the separation becomes the very means by which the sense of separation is removed. This theory defines the degrees by which the creature falls away from and then rises up again into God; finally, it shows clearly that reflection upon and understanding of this process explains the religious experience to itself, and thus it attains an understanding of its own particular central content.... This basis is held to be that universal cosmic process, which is also the ultimate underlying truth in the Christian experience of salvation, of the descent of the Absolute into the finite world of sense, in which, however, God remains the Ground of the Soul, the Seed and the Spark even of the Creature, which in selfishness and sin asserts its right to an isolated independent existence. This is the great doctrine of the Divine Seed, of the Divine Spark which lies hidden in every mind and soul, stifled by sin and by the finite, yet capable of being quickened into vitality by the touch of the Divine Spirit working on and in our souls. This 'seed' is the source of all religious longing for and awareness of God. Simply quickened by the historic revelation, this 'seed' is developed into complete power of overcoming the world and of return to God by the purely inward movement of the Spirit which is kindled and strengthened within the soul. Here all the emphasis falls upon the present, immediate, interior religious movement of feeling and of thought, in contrast to all external authority, all literalism in faith, to all theories which would make salvation

dependent upon historical facts and upon the individual's knowledge and acceptance of these facts."⁴¹

In 1902, Ernst Troeltsch wrote a book on *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions*, in which he believed at that time that God's Self-revelation is far greater in Christianity than any other religion. But after World War I he lost confidence in the superiority of Western civilization. He became more religiously pluralistic, and in the year before his passing he wrote, "It is quite impossible to characterize Christianity as the reconciliation and goal of all the forces of history."⁴² He brought out the important points that each religion is a Self-revelation of God, and that there is a positive correlation between the quality of a civilization and the values of its corresponding dominant religion.

We can think of two "Ideal Types" of religion. First is intellectual religion that attempts to form correct beliefs and to grasp Divine reality as it is thought in the mind. It is concerned with metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, soteriology, and eschatology. To validate their theories, intellectualism utilizes abstract theories, *a priori* axioms, deductive systems, logic, formal models and constructs, symbols, ideal types, etc. The ability to make and employ abstractions (recognizing some set of common features in individual entities) is necessary for forming judgments (coming to conclusion and reaching decisions), learning from experience, and making inferences. The two primary functions of knowledge are to bring ideas together by seeking unity and to differentiate between concepts and areas of knowledge. This type of religion concerns the sheath of the intellect (Vijnanamaya-kosha) forming part of the subtle body (Linga-sharira or Suksma-sharira, mind body, thought body), which is developed in human beings.

Second is mystical religion that uses an experientially biased epistemology. The truth of mystical experiences is based on concrete evidence and verified by direct empirical observation at the spiritual level. Brahman-God and the Divine realm are not abstractions but are directly perceivable. Emphasis is on religious experience, involving a total transformation of the person (not just the intellectual belief system).⁴³

Following another typology we can conceive of two ideal types of religion. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Dualistic Vedanta favor a theistic external God. Religious practices included worship, prayer, music, and devotion centered around a church or temple. Conversely, Advaita Vedanta, Jainism, Sankhya-Yoga place more emphasis on the internal Atman, stressing Self-realization and Self-inquiry as to who really am I. Attention is placed on meditation, introspection, asceticism, and spiritual life in the search for Brahman-God.⁴⁴

Another distinction is between a religion that utilizes the world for realizing Brahman-God, and a religion that uses Brahman-God to create a better world, or to have a better life in this world. All religions have a theoretical-doctrine, practical-institutional, and behavioral-social aspect.

Many people accept the idea of basic differences between Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and the religions originating in India (Hinduism and Buddhism). The concept of Abraham religions has to do with the original source of the religions rather than their later development. Between these three religions there are significant differences in their foundational beliefs and even their view of Abraham.⁴⁵ According to this manuscript the similarities between the Indian and Abrahamic regions are much greater than commonly supposed. For example, Hinduism and Christianity are the two religions that accept the Divine Incarnation and related doctrines such as apostolic succession, salvation by faith and grace; justification, renewal, and sanctification, etc.

Theories of religion can be classified two broad categories. Substantive (or essentialist) theories emphasize what as religion is in terms of its content and meaning. Religions are special and autonomous focusing on a higher world and cannot be reduced to the social, psychological, or economical factors alone. Influential substantive theories have been proposed by the British anthropologists Edward Tylor (1832–1917) who considered religion to be a belief in spiritual beings that can be used to explain the workings of natural phenomena. He believed that Animism the attributing life, intentionality, and soul or spirit to inanimate objects is the earliest form of religion. Religion originates from a psychological need to understand the meaning of life, death,

and post-mortem existence. Religious belief originated because the primitive mind was not able to distinguish between dreams and waking consciousness. If they had a dream of a deceased friend or relative, they assumed that the person is still alive in some spiritual form. From dreams they conceived of a world apart from our daily life and the existence of spiritual beings. Two other substantivists, the theologian Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) wrote about the importance of religious experience, and Mircea Eliade (1907–86) considered religion to be a quest for the meaning of life and the longing for otherworldly perfection.⁴⁶

A second category is Functional theories that are interested in what a religion does in terms of its social and psychological functions for a group or a person. Religion reinforces a person's identification with their fellow citizens promoting social solidarity and stabilization. Shared religious belief reaffirms the values and beliefs of the society. It strengthens the desire to observe group norms and provides guidelines for human actions. A primary example is the teachings of Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) who provides a sociological explanation of religion. He stressed that religious conceptions are a reflection of human society since group life is the generating cause of religious ideas and practices. The social group is the source and driving force of religious institutions, values, and morals. Religion persists because it satisfies social needs with its beliefs, ceremonies, and rituals bringing about group cohesion. Society is preserved through the sacralisation of traditions and the sanctification of the norms and proper conduct of society. We notice a similarity in a person's attitude toward God and society since both inspire group loyalty, possess moral authority, and stimulate devotion, self-sacrifice, and exceptional individual behaviour.⁴⁷

If Durkheim is correct then one reason religions differ is because their respective societies differ. Is there a difference between a society that teaches monotheism and one who adheres to polytheism? When the European countries adopted Christianity was there a corresponding change in the nature of their societies? Have the changes in the American society from rural to urban brought about an alteration in religion?

4. The Unity of Hinduism⁴⁸

Just as it was necessary for the political leaders of the Indian National Congress (beginning in 1885) to seek the political unity of India, Vivekananda and the Modern Hindus sought to establish the religious unity of the country. Unlike Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam; Hinduism does not have a single founder nor like the last two, it is not based on a single religious scripture. This factor has the virtue of making for more diversity in the religion and a more pluralistic outlook. In addition, not a single deity is worshiped by all Hindus. During Vivekananda's time in India there were a vast number of religious practices taught in a wide variety of languages, without Western forms of Church organization. Another reason for the great diversity of Hinduism has been the traditional freedom of religious thought in the country. These and other factors made it necessary to locate the core and common bases of Hinduism, and to explain in what ways it is a unified world religion. The unity of Hinduism is most necessary in modern societies where group solidarity takes place in large groups, as compared to medieval traditional society that was oriented around small groups like the family and the village.

Inter-religious pluralism in India concerns bringing accord between Hinduism and other religions such as Islam and Christianity. It also involves being respectful to all of the denominations within Hinduism (Intra-religious pluralism). The fundamental idea is to show how each denomination contributes to the unity of Hinduism. It also means showing how each of the three systems of Vedanta is compatible with the other two, and how all four yogas properly performed lead to Brahman (God) realization.

Up until recent times Hinduism has had a greater national-cultural unity and identity than Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, given that these religions are located in many diverse countries. In addition, historically Hinduism had more of an ethnic unity than Christianity or Islam, since they are embraced by large numbers of adherents with different ethnic backgrounds. We might add if one looks at the statements about the characteristics of

Hinduism written by such representatives as Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Arvind Sharma, P. T. Raju, etc., one discovers as much consensus of opinion, as we would find in comparable cases of Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist self-representations of their own religion. Most important Hinduism teaches some distinct doctrines and religious practices that differentiate it to some degree from other religions. Hinduism has a sacred language, Sanskrit and a sacred literature (primarily the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*) accepted by all adherents of the Hindu faiths.

Andrew Nicholson of the State University of New York, Stony Brook cites the historian David Lorenzen Professor of South Asian History, El Colegio de Mexico who offers additional evidence of the historic unity of Hinduism. He correctly rejects the thesis mistakenly held by some Western Indologists that Hinduism is a nineteenth century European invention. "To defend this thesis, Lorenzen cites examples from a number of late medieval texts that do show a sense of self-conscious religious identity among groups we now call Hindu. While these authors did not use any equivalent of the term 'Hinduism,' they do show a clear understanding that those people known as Hindus shared religious practices that differed from those of other groups, particularly Muslims. Lorenzen draws his evidence from late medieval vernacular literature, including the poetry of Eknath, Anantadas, Kabir, and Vidyapati. Vidyapati (early 15th century) understands that there are differences between Hindus and Turks [Muslims], and that these differences have their basis in religion.... The celebrated fifteenth-century poet Kabir also composed numerous poems that depict two distinct religious groups, Hindus and Muslims, engaged in theological disagreement."⁴⁹

Historical records prove that during the Middle Ages, the Hindus definitely considered themselves as a distinct religion differing from the Muslims and later the Christians. Lorenzen also explains how the Muslim, al-Biruni (973-1048) recognized a separate and distinct Hindu religion differing from Islam with unique ideas concerning Brahman (God), the soul, Avatars, heaven, reincarnation, morality, and law, four yogic paths to liberation, a pantheon of Deities; four Vedas, social classes, stages of life and yugas; law books,

pilgrimages, special diet, and yearly festivals. Al-Biruni also mentioned the foundational literature of the Hindu's that includes the *Vedas*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Puranas*, *Patanjali Yoga Sutras*, text on *Sankhya*, and the *Vishnu Purana*. One study found fifty passages where the word "Hindu" appears in Bengal Vaishnava texts written between the early 16th and late 18th century. The word is used to differentiate the Hindus from the Muslims.⁵⁰

Bankim Chattopadhyay (1838-94) whose writings preceded Vivekananda's in searching for the common basis of Hinduism, considered Krishna and the religious scriptures concerning him to be the center of his religion. For Vivekananda the foundational core of the Indian religion was and is the *Upanishads* and the Vedanta philosophy. He also held great appreciation for the *Bhagavad Gita*, calling it "the highest authority in Vedanta"⁵¹ that stresses detached action and the harmony of the four yogas; and also for the *Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali* upon which he wrote a commentary.

One of Vivekananda's greatest contributions was to offer many examples illustrating the common religious philosophical and theological beliefs and practices of the Indians, thereby portraying Hinduism as a vibrant and potent unified world religion. In his lectures, Vivekananda covers many of the common beliefs held by the Hindus such as the Atman, Vedanta Philosophy, four yogas, guru, lila, dharma, law of karma, reincarnation, yugas, etc. He was the leader in bringing about an ideological unification of the Vedanta-Hindu-Indian religion, allowing for internal variations. He stated, "The one common ground that we have is our sacred tradition, our religion. That is the only common ground, and upon that we shall have to build. In Europe, political ideas form the national unity. In Asia, religious ideals form the national unity. The unity in religion, therefore, is absolutely necessary as the first condition of the future of India. There must be the recognition of one religion throughout the length and breadth of this land. What do I mean by one religion? Not in the sense of one religion as held among the Christians, or the Mohammedans, or the Buddhists. We know that our religion has certain common grounds, common to all our sects, however varying their conclusions may be, however different their claims may be. So there are certain common grounds; and within their limitation this

religion of ours admits of a marvelous variation, an infinite amount of liberty to think and live our own lives."⁵²

In all areas, philosophy, religion, organization, and the social, Vivekananda taught that strength lies in "Unity in Diversity." Proving the unity of Hinduism created a sense of self-awareness, self-identity, and self-understanding, and an all-India national religious consciousness among the Indian people. It also aided in the development of an all-India political awareness, necessary to become an autonomous democratic country. In addition, ideological unification of the Indian religion helped to bring order and stability to the society by legitimatizing its norms and values. A major factor in bringing about this unity was to stress the equality of all the various Indian religions and paths to Brahman (God).

In 1966, the Supreme Court of India formalized a judicial definition of Hindu beliefs to legally distinguish Hindu denominations from other religions in India. The key tenets are belief in: the *Vedas* (primarily the original *Upanishads*) as the highest religious authority; a spirit of tolerance toward other religions, an endless succession of vast periods of creation, maintenance, and dissolution of the world, reincarnation and pre-existence of the self, many paths to liberation, the existence one Brahman (God) with many forms, and not being limited to a specific set of philosophical concepts. Most Hindus also accept the doctrine of karma, the guidance of a competent guru, the authority of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the importance of spiritual experience. Like most other religions, Hindus believe in an all-pervasive Supreme Being who is the immanent and transcendent creator of the universe; the efficacy of worship, rituals, and sacraments; and the necessity of moral life to attain liberation.⁵³

Formerly Sri Ramakrishna had expressed the eternity of Hinduism, "The Eternal Religion, the religion of the rishis, has been in existence from time out of mind and will exist eternally. There exist in this Sanatana Dharma [Eternal Religion] all forms of worship--worship of God with form and worship of the Impersonal Deity as well. It contains all paths--the path of knowledge, the path of devotion, and so on." "The Hindu religion has always existed and will always exist."⁵⁴ Hinduism differs from the other religions of the world in that it doesn't

have a single founder like Buddhism, Christianity, Islam; or a single religious scripture; and it condones the worships of multiple Deities.

On this subject, English born Ninian Smart (1927-2001) of the University of California, Santa Barbara insightfully mentioned that Vivekananda “helped to create the modern idea of Hinduism as a unified system rather than as a congeries of diverse religious movements and cults, overlapping but also variegated; basically a loose federation at best of often rival movements, and the pieties of half a million villages and a plethora of religions and towns.”⁵⁵ “Now Hindus could explain the unity of their own baffling, diverse religion or religions. It could be said that now Hinduism truly came into existence, or at least into self-conscious integrity. This was why Vivekananda's message became so immediately popular with the English-speaking elite.... As for nationalism, Vivekananda's ideology was perfect for India: it could unite all Indians, Muslims, Jains, Parsees, Christians, as well as Hindus. It expressed pride in India, for its vast cultural achievements, and it could do all this in ways that were not necessarily chauvinistic. With Vivekananda, Indian national self-consciousness came of age.”⁵⁶

Professor A. L. Basham (1914-86) author of the classic cultural history book *The Wonder That Was India* held the chair of the History of South Asia at London University. He expounded, “In the world history I believe that the great Swami Vivekananda will always have an important place, that he, more than any other teacher in the India of his time, taught his fellow Indians how to assimilate the old with the new. There was, in the late nineteenth century and the first decade of this one, a great danger that all the religious, cultural, artistic and literary traditions of India would slowly but surely fade away. More and more educated people were forgetting their country's past, often deliberately, in favour of a thoroughly Westernized attitude of thought and Westernized ways.... It was Vivekananda, more than any other teacher of his generation, who taught India self-respect, inspired his fellows to accept their own traditional culture, their own traditional values, their own traditional way of life, but to mould them and alter them as seemed necessary, pruning away the dead wood, and developing the new, here and there grafting on ideas borrowed from the

West and from other sources, but still keeping the parent tree alive and flourishing. For that, more than to any other individual of the period, India owes a debt to Swami Vivekananda."⁵⁷

Another thought is expressed by the German-American Wilhelm Halbfass (1940-2000), "In this view, the fact that, Hinduism is not a religion in the ordinary sense does not imply a defect; rather, it means that it is located at a different and higher level. It is something much more comprehensive, much less divisive and sectarian than the 'ordinary' religions. It is not itself a religion; i.e., it is not itself a sect. Instead, it is—according to this view—a framework, a concordance and unifying totality of sects... Hinduism as the Sanatana Dharma is not a religion among religions; it is said to be the "eternal religion," religion in or behind all religions, a kind of 'meta-religion,' a structure potentially ready to comprise and reconcile within itself all the religions of the world, just as it contains and reconciles the so-called Hindu sects, such as Shaivism or Vaishnavism and their subordinate 'sectarian' formations."⁵⁸

We can conclude that Hinduism like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam is a vast religious supersystem that combines many lesser ideological, ritualistic, and organizational subsystems. There is a unity in variety. For example in Hinduism there are the Advaitists, Shaktas, Shaivism, Tantra and the followers of Rama, Krishna, Chaitanya (Vaishnavas), and Ramakrishna (Ramakrishna Vedantists). They share many of the same basic meanings, values, and norms. Supersystems are aided by "Collective Representations," a term suggested by the French Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) that denotes the concepts, ideas, categories, beliefs, and symbols (such as a flag) that have a common intellectual and emotional meaning for the member of a particular group. They express collective sentiments and ideas that determine the way in which a person views and relates to the world. Collective representations give the group its unity and unique character, and contribute to the solidarity of a society or other social groups.⁵⁹

The core concepts of Hinduism include: Nirguna Brahman, Atman, Saguna Brahman, and Avatara; creation of the Divine world and the phenomenal world; reincarnation and the law of karma; religious scripture and revelation; four

yogas, meditation, ritual, and morality; Divine grace, samadhi, and liberation; and pluralism.

5. The Great Tradition and Little Tradition In India

“The Great Tradition and Little Tradition” ideology and conceptual framework was developed in 1956 by Robert Redfield (1897-1958) an expert on Mexican folk culture who visited India in 1955. The idea was applied to Indian society by Polish born American Milton Singer (1912-94) who spent many years in the country in the 1950s and 1960s, doing field research in Madras and rural areas. A pioneer in the field, Robert Redfield’s, *Tepoztlán: A Mexican Village* (1930) examined the relationship between “folk religion” and “official religion” in a peasant community. A folk religion is composed of a collection of cultural beliefs, practices, rituals, symbols, and mythology that are found in village communities and other traditional societies. It combines theological and liturgical forms of the official religion along with local customs. Due to its conservative nature it represents the survivals of older forms of religion.⁶⁰

According to Redfield and Singer’s conceptualization, the great tradition of a society is the official religion of its educated elites (*literati*), which include in India: Brahmins, pundits, monastics, and religious philosophers. They are highly literate, concentrating on the interpretation of religious scripture and works of philosophical theology. Swami Vivekananda like Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Jiva Goswami, and others worked at the level of the great tradition. They represent the core culture consisting of a body of knowledge associated with the literate and reflective few who are capable of analyzing and interpreting religious knowledge, and developing a comprehensive and integrated system of thought. In doing so they are involved in reflective and systematic thought, developing well-articulated ideological systems (philosophies, theologies, legal and moral codes). They specify the values and worldview of the religion to a degree of generalization, abstraction, and complexity, which their followers strive to comprehend and practice. As the foundation of the civilization and

widespread over large a geographical area, the great tradition is a major source of moral, legal, aesthetic, and other cultural norms. It becomes a way of life, a religious cultural consciousness that manifests in its adherents as a feeling of being united with one another as members of a common religious culture.⁶¹ Consciously cultivated, the tradition is handed down from generation to generation in a verbal and non-verbal written form. One might prefer the plural term "Great Traditions" since in India there are some differences in outlook among the three Vedantic, Yoga, Shaivite, Shakta, Tantra, and Vaishnava Schools of religion; and between the Older *Vedic, Upanishadic, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Bhagavata*, and *Puranic* scriptures. The cultural continuity of great tradition is based on the idea that people share a common cultural religious consciousness throughout the country.⁶²

As indicated by Milton Singer a great tradition is composed of, "1) A body of sacred scriptures and texts in which the great tradition is embodied and expressed; 2) A class of literati who have the authority to read and interpret the sacred scriptures; 3) Leading personalities, such as Gandhi and Nehru, who convey their vision of the great tradition to the masses of the people; 4) A 'sacred geography' (space) of holy places—rivers, holy places, temples, and shrine centers—defining a set of 'sacred centers' that provide the forum, media, and vehicle for expressing the great tradition; and 5) A 'sacred calendar' (time) of rites and ceremonies marking the important occasions of the individual life cycle and of the seasons."⁶³ Each is a source of inspiration that stimulates religious thought and emotions.

The folk religion and peasantry follow the little tradition, i.e., the village tradition that is based on local conditions and history. They undergo change due to their contact with the great tradition, the direction being from urban cultural structure and social organization to folk or peasant rural societies. Yogendra Singh also indicated that little tradition change can also be due to internal growth independent of contact with the great tradition. Little traditions communicate through the spoken rather than the written word. The norms, values, customs, ceremonies, and rituals are transmitted from one generation to the next by a process of socialization.

An important factor in the historical unity of Hinduism is that Hindu beliefs and practices of the great tradition filtered down (from the top-down) to religious subgroups, and to the localized little tradition that are found in villages and small towns and is preserved through oral transmission. The rate and degree of this transmission from the great to the little tradition depends on the particular societal structure of the civilization. The movement of cultural traits from great to little tradition is referred to as Parochialization by Mckim Marriott and from the little tradition to the great tradition as Universalization. Yogendra Singh also emphasized that little tradition change can also be due to internal growth independent of contact with the great tradition.⁶⁴

At the seminar on "Village India" held at the University of Chicago in 1954, M. N. Srinivas (1916-99) emphasized that all eight social anthropologists reached, "an unusual consensus that the Indian village is not a self-contained 'primitive isolate' but depends on an extensive network of social and cultural relations with other villages and towns, cities, and local and national political units."⁶⁵ It important to realize the unity of Hinduism, that historically each village did not have a separate religion. Milton Singer indicated that for millenniums, each Indian village has been "linked to other villages in its region, and to towns and cities, by complex networks of social relations based on caste, kinship, and marriage, trade and occupation, religious pilgrimages and administrative and political organizations."⁶⁶ "Recent village studies in India reveal, however, that the social anthropologist has discovered that the Indian village is not an isolated, self-sufficient social unity; rather, it is tied to the wider society and culture by many ties of marriage, caste, trade, religion, and politics. This discovery is producing a kind of research that gives considerable support to the conception of Indian civilization as a coherent structure of rural networks and urban centers, which at the same time acts as a medium for the mutual communication of Great and Little Tradition and of other cultural differences between and among tribes and castes, linguistic regions, regions and center, town and country."⁶⁷

Between the two types of traditions, there exist intermediary specialists and institutions, which act as channels of transmission between the higher and

lower levels of tradition. By means of the social network, religious ideas and practices are transmitted from one community to the next. There is a cultural continuity between countryside and urban centers, due to a common cultural consciousness shared by most Hindus, and expressed in essential similarities of mental outlook and beliefs. Though there are regional variations, there is a fundamental unity of ideas, values, institutions, and cultural forms among found in the rural areas of India. One of the great virtues of little tradition is that they continue on with a vigorous religious life, even when the great tradition is in a state of decline. Singer adds, "Perhaps the most striking aspect of the continuity in culture between village and city is the common stock of mythological and legendary themes shared by both villager and city man. The same stories from the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, and the *Mahabharata* are recited, sung, and played in both village and city."⁶⁸

One of the uniqueness of Sri Ramakrishna is that he represents the little tradition of the village influencing the greater tradition of Vedanta. Usually the causal flow is in the opposite direction. The rural tradition (where Sri Ramakrishna was brought up) is rich in mythological meaning, religious experience, and worship of deities, showing less interest in formal philosophy, theology, and secular history. Their belief patterns (as stated by Sri Ramakrishna) are expressed through proverbs, riddles, anecdotes, folk tales, legends, and myths. Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother took birth in the villages because unlike the big cities they retained the traditional Hindu way of life. Changes occasionally occur in villages, because they are linked to some extent (often indirectly) to the great tradition. Yet, Sri Ramakrishna as an adult was initiated into the great tradition (national) of Vedanta that included Tantra, Shakta, Shaivite, Vaishnava, etc. He incorporated these schools into his religious teachings. This way he was able to influence the national religion of India.

For the large and small cities, and villages, the overarching unity and continuity of the Hindu religion is transmitted through the family and local communities. Milton Singer mentions, "The unity [of Hinduism] is to be found rather in the continuities that can be traced in the concrete media of song, dance, play, sculpture, painting, religious story, and rite that connect the rituals

and beliefs of the villager with those of the townsman and urbanite, one region with another, and the educated with the uneducated."⁶⁹ In addition, religious tradition has historically been fostered and preserved by a multitude of avenues of communication: holy places of pilgrimage and worship attended by a vast number of people (sacred space); rituals, ceremonies, and the performance of sacraments (sacred ritual); oral tradition and religious texts (sacred teachings); seasonal festivals and holidays (sacred time); instrumental music (sacred music); and buildings, monuments, and architecture (sacred physical objects). The local Brahmin priests maintained the longstanding traditional religious ideas and practices. Wondering Holy Men did a great deal to spread the all-India religious teachings and customs around the country. Professor V. Raghavan wrote that centuries ago Sanskrit scholars taught the *Epics* and the *Puranas* to the village people. They "were recited to vast congregations of people gathered at sacrificial sessions by certain special classes of reciters." As an example of Professor M. N. Srinivas' "horizontal spread," Brahmins throughout India have much Sanskrit ritual in common.⁷⁰

Robert Redfield proposed that these traditional people have a distinctive culture that was just as much a part of the Indian or Chinese civilization as the high culture of the intelligentsia. Yet, up until the twentieth century the villagers have been ignored by most historians, who have focused almost exclusively on examining the literature, events, and personalities of the great tradition. As a departure from this practice, social anthropologists took more interest in empirical studies of Indian society, particularly in the villages, using interviews, observation, and other scientific methods.⁷¹ The same is true in Europe where historical studies have traditionally focused on the upper echelon of society rather than on rural and small town people who comprised the majority of the population.

Another important reason for the spread of the great tradition throughout history was uncovered by M. N. Srinivas (1916-99) when studying the Coorgs, who lived in small villages in the mountainous remote providences in the state of Mysore, South India. As a result, the term Sanskritisation (or Sanskritization) was introduced into Indian Sociology by Srinivas in 1952. He discovered that a

group such as a caste or village raises their position in the social hierarchy by adopting the deities, beliefs, rites, and customs of "Sanskritic Hinduism," as defined in literature and philosophy as practices by the Brahmins and other higher castes. Religious terms like karma, dharma, maya, samsara, and moksha were adopted in the villages. "In this process, local traditions (Little Traditions) become integrated into the Great Tradition of Brahmanical religion, disseminating Sanskrit texts and Brahmanical ideas throughout India." This phenomenon demonstrated that the caste system was not as rigid as previously thought. For over 2,500 years this process has been going on, which is a factor that explains the spread of Sanskrit ideas and religious beliefs throughout India, allowing for some regional variations and interpretations.⁷²

Milton Singer concluded, "'Sanskritic Hinduism' is, in Srinivas' conception, a model style of life, embodying a complex of practices and values associated with Brahmins, and with the Sanskrit scriptures—a model style which has spread throughout India and even abroad through the process of 'Sanskritization' [or 'Hinduization']. It includes—vegetarianism and teetotalism, wearing of the sacred thread, performance of life cycle rites by Brahmin priests, with the use of Vedic mantras and vegetarian offerings, prohibition of widow remarriage, acceptance of the varna ashrama system, a pantheistic bias [preference] in theology, and belief in the doctrines of Karma, Dharma, rebirth, and release. This lifestyle thus would seem to provide; such a standard and measure for the unity and continuity of Indian Civilization we are seeking."⁷³ "The process is essentially one of cultural mobility through which groups have been incorporated into Indian civilization by adopting a set of practices, beliefs, and values that Srinivas calls 'Sanskritic Hinduism' and identifies primarily with the Brahman way of life. The process of 'Sanskritization' has enabled lower castes within the civilization to raise their status in a generation or two."⁷⁴ In support of an all-India Hinduism, Srinivas found that common deities and objects of worship are more productive of solidarity than common ritual or cultural forms.⁷⁵

To give an example of how contact has been historically made between a rural area and the national great tradition of Hinduism, Sri Ramakrishna's

(1836-86) father Kshudiram (1775-1843) lived in the remote village of Kamarpukur about 60 miles northwest of Calcutta (Kolkata) in Bengal. Probably in the year 1824 at age forty-nine he set out on foot on a pilgrimage to Rameswaram in South India, a round trip distance of nearly 3,000 miles that took him a year to accomplish. He brought back with him a stone image of Shiva and began worshipping it daily. In 1835, a year before the birth of Ramakrishna, sixty-year-old Kshudiram travelled on foot to Varanasi [Benares] and on to Gaya "the abode of Vishnu" a round-trip distance of about 600 miles. Benares is an orthogenetic (indigenous) city with a religiously orthodox literati, as compared to a heterogeneous city like Calcutta (Kolkata) with many foreigners and cosmopolitans with emphasis on secular knowledge.

At that time many all-India deities were worshiped in the village of Kamarpukur. There was a Temple to Lord Shiva; and religious festivals and functions were held during the Durga Puja, Shiva Ratri, Krishna Lila, and in honor of Hari, Manasa, and Dharma; and for the Goddess Lakshmi in a nearby village. Sitala, Shiva, and Raghuvir Ramachandra (Rama) were worshiped in his household, while the people of Kamarpukur venerated Vishnu, Shiva, and Dharma. As a youth Sri Ramakrishna recited the Gayatri mantra and the *Puranas*, knew the stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, heard stories of Krishna during his youth, and at age nine he took part in the Brahminical Sacred Thread ceremony. Contact with the outside was also maintained by a special village rest house built to house pilgrims and wondering monastics, who would teach the *Puranas* and give spiritual instructions to the villagers. His oldest brother Ramkumar (1805-56) moved to Calcutta in 1850 where he opened up a Sanskrit School, and Ramakrishna followed him two years later.⁷⁶

6. Founding and Development of the Ramakrishna Mission and Math⁷⁷

Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother, and Swami Vivekananda possess what is called Charismatic Authority. For Max Weber (1864-1920), the brilliant German religious sociologist, personal charismatic authority is "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and

treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of Divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader." This authority that is considered to be of Divine origin, sacred, unique, and spontaneous, can result in the creative establishment of new movements, norms, and forms of thought. Due to their personal traits these people command great respect and have intense powers of attraction. Charisma depends on the capability of the leader to demonstrate the special nature of their mission, and to inspire their followers along these lines. A stable religious movement results, when charismatic phenomena are transformed or incorporated into the routine institutional structure of the organization. This provides a continuity of the religious organization that last for many centuries. Authority is transferred from one leader to another by means of apostolic succession.⁷⁸

Vivekananda gives us new insights into this idea of charisma. "The gigantic will-powers of the world, the world-movers, can bring their Prana into a high state of vibration, and it is so great and powerful that it catches others in a moment, and thousands are drawn towards them, and half the world think as they do. Great prophets of the world had the most wonderful control of the Prana, which gave them tremendous will-power; they had brought their Prana to the highest state of motion, and this is what gave them power to sway the world."⁷⁹ "For it is not what is spoken, much less the language in which it is spoken, but it is the personality of the speaker which dwells in everything he says that carries weight. Every one of us feels this at times. We hear most splendid orations, most wonderfully reasoned-out discourses, and we go home and forget them all. At other times we hear a few words in the simplest of language, and they enter into our lives, become part and parcel of ourselves and produce lasting results. The words of a man who can put his personality into them take effect, but he must have tremendous personality."⁸⁰ Another reason that their message is so full of vigor, and has such a great influence on other people is that they practice implicitly what they preach. They do not teach anything which they do not live by. They have intense faith in themselves

and in their hallowed mission.

Max Weber continues, "In all cases [there] are personal devotees [disciples] of the prophet, in contrast to priests and soothsayers who are organized into guilds or official hierarchies.... Moreover, in addition to these permanent helpers, who are active co-workers with the prophet in his mission and who generally also possess some special charismatic qualifications, there is a circle of followers comprising those who support him with lodging, money, and services and who expect to obtain their salvation [liberation] through his mission. These may, on occasion, group themselves into a congregation for a particular temporary activity or on a continuous basis.... Primarily, a religious community arises in connection with a prophetic movement as a result of routinization, i.e., as a result of the process whereby either the prophet himself or his disciples secure the permanence of his preaching and the congregation's distribution of grace, hence insuring the economic existence of the enterprise and those who man it, and thereby monopolizing as well the privileges reserved for those charged with religious functions."⁸¹

Following Weber's teachings, after the charismatic leader passes away, "a stable community of disciples" continue the group the founder has created. In order to perpetuate the spiritual power and knowledge of the charismatic leader, they have to be transmitted and infused into a new religious organization and tradition. A stable religious movement arises, when charismatic phenomena are transformed or incorporated into a routine institutional structure of society. There is a "routinization of charisma" and the continuation in a new form of the original religious experience. The religious institution evolves as patterns of worship and of beliefs, with an organizational form of leadership composed of clergy and laity. What's more the teachings and life events of the founder are institutionalized and perpetuated by the organization. The ideas of the founders receive group support and become actualized and embodied in the religious culture, after they have been incorporated in the institutional structure. In future years this gives the dedicated followers the opportunity to devote their life to the service of the religious organization and movement coupled with their spiritual activity. From

an organic standpoint, the whole Ramakrishna Order is qualitatively present in each local Vedanta Society, because the universal spiritual body of Sri Ramakrishna is present there.

The Ramakrishna Order was established to maintain the original practices, doctrines, and norms that Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples followed. Their ministry cannot be restricted to their lifetime since the present-day community is dependent on its founders who continue to influence the devotees. Tradition is the transmission of religious customs and beliefs from generation to generation. The Order's history began before it was created, in Ramakrishna's life and that of his disciples. The transmission of spiritual power is conveyed through apostolic succession, ordination, initiation, ritual, and religious ceremonies. The founders ideas and the descriptions of their life events are preserved by the Order.

An efficiently run religious organization requires: a chain of command and an accompanying division of labor, the possibility for advancement based on merit, prescribed and operating rules, training procedures for people who run the organization, prescribed duties, specialized experts, maintaining good relations with other groups, and providing a variety of activities for the lay members.⁸² A chain of command is created that distributes power and responsibilities to increase efficiency. Knowledge is shared and each person knows what they are responsible for.

Those at the top of the hierarchy are able to get things done by soliciting those people who can help them attain their goals.

The functions of people in charge of various aspects of the Ramakrishna Order include: Running and expanding an organization; Writings: intellectual, practical, translations, and biographical; Guru: spiritual and intellectual quality of their disciples; Public speaking; Meditation; and Social-friendliness.

Desired virtues include: a) Intellectual: analytical skills, attention to detail, innovation; b) Personal: adaptability, dependability, exerting effort, independence, initiative, integrity, persistence, self-control, stress tolerance; and c) Social: concern for, cooperating with, leading, and working with others.

Basic skills required include: a) Various leadership techniques such as communicating, coordinating, counseling, helping, listening to, managing, motivating, persuading, and training others; and understanding human behavior and the reactions of others. b) Practical knowledge of accounting, business, clerical skills, computers, practical matters, public safety, sales and security. c) Intellectual knowledge of historical events, language, mythology, religious philosophy, public speaking, reading comprehension, scriptures, and writing.⁸³

Consequently, the Swamis are dedicated to the organization that they believe in, enthusiastic about their work responsibilities, willing to do more than required, and friendly to one another. They feel a sense of belonging and that they are valued by other Vedantists. Most important, they are placed in a position where they can develop spiritually.⁸⁴

The Ramakrishna Order maintains good relations with the government and other secular organizations; sustains friendly relationships with other religions maintaining a pluralistic attitude; accepts a moderate amount of theological diversity and is open to some changes; adheres to a fairly routinized ritual and worship service; trains and utilizes professional clergy who meet the necessary requirements; and accepts a moderate amount of involvement from its members.⁸⁵

A sacred tradition is developed composed of two elements. First, is the Divinely revealed religious scriptures, containing the sanctified teachings and lives of the founders. Second is the living tradition, the commentary on the scriptures and the religious practices passed on from one generation to the next. After laying down the original scriptures, the Lord continues to work through the Religious Order to make it an affective agency in carrying out the Divine plan.

A religion is composed of individual members; an organized body of interacting people with a particular purpose and a division of functions and role assignments; and a culture. The totality of shared ideas, values, and norms possessed by the interacting persons make up the ideological culture (intellect). The actions through which the ideas, values, and norms are objectified,

socialized, and taught to other people constitute the behavioral culture (energy). The material vehicles through which the ideological culture is manifested, externalized, socialized, and solidified compose the material culture (matter). Religious values are the matrix from which all other values including the Good, the True, and the Beautiful are derived. Norms define the rights and duties, roles, and functions, and means and goals of its members. Religious ideas, norms, and values are related and adapted to the other elements of the prevailing culture. The religion prospers if the behavior of its members corresponds with their higher ideas, values, and norms.⁸⁶ A Religious Order is necessary because Brahman-God is leading us to liberation-salvation as individuals through a community.

Social institutions such as a religious organization satisfy a basic human need or function that is necessary for the survival of a society. They comprise an interrelated system of social roles and norms that define the expected behavior of its members oriented to the fulfillment of the particular need. This stable, valued, and recurring pattern of rules govern the behavior and interactions of a set of individuals within a given organizational structure. Knowledge of these rules though often unwritten generates behavioral regularities that are shared by the members. They maintain a level of persistence and continuity within the organization.⁸⁷

Through the socialization process the devotee becomes integrated into the Vedanta Society by learning the beliefs, values, norms, attitudes, and behavioral patterns of other devotees. To learn what is expected of them, how to behave appropriately in various situations, how to interact with others, and the behavioral patterns that are necessary to properly function within the Vedanta Society, the devotee must observe the way other people act. In addition, they also seek a personal, intimate or face-to-face relationship with some of the members. Much of this is not formally taught but is transmitted through interactions with other devotees. Some of this is relatively passive, unconscious or semi-conscious process that happens without much conscious effort. Over time the Individuals views are gradually changed by rejecting some former ideas, while adapting and expanding new ones. The process involves

internalizing the norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies of the Vedanta Society members, thereby modifying their personality, character, and outlook on life. After they come to see themselves as members of the group, they consider what they can contribute to the group based on their personal skills. The devotee develops a new conception of them self (self-identity) by interacting with other and through the functional and social roles they fulfill depending on the situation and whom they are dealing with. This socialization process is necessary to maintain the stability and survival of the group as is acquiring new members.⁸⁸

The formation of a Religious Order created a Social Support System both for the leaders and the laity that integrates the members into a supportive social network. The functional-social network provides five basic types of social support in the ways people assist each other. Tangible support (or Instrumental support) concerns material needs, services, and financial assistance. Informational support helps others by imparting valuable educational advice, guidance, suggestions, and a variety of useful information. Ideological support in being likeminded in sharing common values and ideas. Companionship support yields a sense of social belonging, and especially when engaged in shared social activities. Emotional support offers encouragement through acceptance, affection, caring, concern, empathy, intimacy, love, and trust. It lets the person know that they are valued. This support is energizing and a strong motivational force. It provides security, companionship, acceptance, and a sense of belonging. In addition, social support can be structural fostering social integration, referring to the extent to which a person is integrated within a social network. It can be functional relating to the job activities the individual is involved in. Support may be individual or group oriented, and also visible or invisible when the recipient is not aware of it. A proper social support system is associated with social cohesion and solidarity, greater work efficiency, increased psychological well-being and self-esteem, reduced psychological stress, and better physical health. It might come from personal associates, more formally from organizations, or from social media.⁸⁹ The Order also creates a group of people who will support the ideas of Its founders over the future

centuries. Creating a Religious Organization provides great motivation to its members by allowing them to functionally relate to the Vedanta Society. In this way they develop a karma yogic tie with the Order which is a great source of motivation. They also retain a raja yogic tie through meditation; jnana yoga by means of study; and bhakti yoga from devotion to the Lord, the organization, and to its other members.

As Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) in France pointed out the members of a society and a religious organization have a "Collective Consciousness" (1893), which is a set of shared beliefs, ideas, values, moral attitudes, and social norms that operate as a unifying force. They unite members through the creation of a common consciousness. Members act as a community sharing similar values leading to cohesiveness and a strong group solidarity.⁹⁰

Collective consciousness is not a reification with an independent existence apart from people, but is something common to many individuals. Possessing shared ideas, each person can think, judge, decide, act, and interact on them in their own individual way. The collective identity can be one of religion, politics, gender, ethnicity, geographical location, etc. that incorporate into a group. Societies and groups with a higher level of collective consciousness are more likely to emphasize cooperation rather than competition. Mini collective consciousnesses that differ somewhat from each other can combine into a single unified whole with a common feature. They require human participation to provide them with a deeper meaning.⁹¹

The Ramakrishna Order or Vedanta Society is a Reference Group that the monastic and lay members relate to. The organization represents a body of values and traditions shared by its members. It is the devotee's frame of reference and source for ordering his or her experiences, perceptions, cognition, and ideas of self. Reference groups give a devotee some idea of what is normal and expected of them in terms of their values, ideas, behavior, and personal appearance. The individual has a sense of identity with his/her reference group along with a feeling of belonging that serves as the bases for one's self-judgment. The Vedanta Society is important for defining and determining a member's self-identity in terms of beliefs, attitudes, values, and

social ties. It becomes the basis of reference in evaluating their qualities, aspirations, goals, circumstances, behavior, performance, and achievements. Each member must choose which norms and dominant values to exemplify in their thoughts, behavior, and interactions with others. How we relate to the reference group determines our status within the organization. The concept of reference group was introduced by the American sociologist Herbert H. Hyman (1942). Social identity that is defined by group memberships can be important than one's identity as a unique individual. A Religious Order promotes fellowship, characterized by a friendly association with the other members of the organization. The result is the companionship of like-minded devotees united by a common system of beliefs, purposes, and goals. A lay devotee should serve the Order by offering their skills be they writing, lecturing, singing, artistic, business oriented, legal, maintenance, computer, secretarial, clerical, cooking, etc.⁹²

The way people behave is determined by their "Definition of the Situation," a social-psychological process by which an individual examines and evaluates a situation. It is determined by their prior experiences and knowledge of the organizations values and social norms. The way people act in given circumstances is based on how they define the situation. They come to know what is expected of them and what to expect from others. A redefinition of the situation changes the way people act.⁹³

The growth of a religious group tends to increase when they constructively (rather than rapidly) build a solid foundation; have more creative minds; a better integrated, deeper, and a more comprehensive system of meanings, values, and norms; they fulfill a primary long-lasting need; there is more solidarity among its members; and a balance of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Too much heterogeneity can lead to conflicts and factions, and too much homogeneity to rigidity and stagnation.⁹⁴

A "Consciousness of Kind" developed by the American sociologist Franklin Giddings (1855-1931) at Columbia University in 1901 occurs when people experience a mutual feeling of like-mindedness with others who share common ideas and values. They then feel similar emotions, arrive at similar judgments,

and act in concert creating a common social mind. It can arise from interaction, communication, imitation, toleration, co-operation, and alliance.⁹⁵ Members of the organization are the custodians of the religious culture, which is transmitted through a formal educational system and practiced in a structured manner, within a stable institution. In addition religious organization serves as a vehicle for the transmission of spiritual power as Vivekananda pointed out.

It is very important for a devotee to establish a positive lasting group identification with the Ramakrishna Order and Vedanta Society. Group Identification is a process in which the person incorporates into themselves the expectations, standards, values, and goals of the group. They are used in the organization and stabilization of their social self. The group the individual identifies with is a positive reference group for that person, and the group's prestige and survival become identified with the individual's own self. In identifying with a group, one internalizes the interests, standards, and role expectations of the group. The goal is to achieve a high degree of consensus, group loyalty, and we-feeling among the group members. Esprit de corps an important element in social cohesion is a feeling of unity and intimacy on the part of group members. "It is characterized by the identification of group members with each other, concern for each other's welfare, an emotional feeling of belonging together, and a sense of common purpose."⁹⁶ Affiliations with the Ramakrishna Order produces a shared identity with others members. The Order is united by a common belief system, behavioral norms, ritual, and religious traits. The collective identity due to belonging to this group is so strong that a person who identifies with it will dedicate their life to the organization.

Religions are composed of: specified components of meanings (ideas)- norms (ethics)-values that determine the doctrines or systems of beliefs; interacting members that use, operate, realize, and exchange these meanings; activities such as meditation/prayer, ritual, and work; and physical objects through which the components of meaning are objectified, realized, and socialized. Religious ideas have functions, roles, duties, goals, ideals, values, and norms. They are related to personal behavior and attitudes, offer emotional

support, have social status, and are combined into many different ideological (mental) forms. Members of the Order share common motives and goals, and norms and values. Pitirim Sorokin adds, "Prayers, rituals, worship, sacrifice, and all the religious vehicles not only objectify and articulate the religious values-meanings-norms, but unify and socialize and organize the believers into one fellowship, with all the characteristics of group organization and solidarity."⁹⁷

Swami Vivekananda desired to establish a cenobitic monastic community to carry out the ideals and teachings laid down by Sri Ramakrishna. This is different from an eremitic wandering monastic without a permanent home or an anchorite. A cenobitic religious organization stresses a more organized structure of community life with the monks living together guided by religious rules, emphasizing renunciation of wealth and celibacy. It creates uniformity, continuity, and stability in the Order; and provides a social support system that aids the monastics in their spiritual struggle.⁹⁸

As a result, the Ramakrishna Mission was founded in May 1897, and the Ramakrishna Math at Belur in 1899. Professor David Miller, Department of Religion, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada indicated, "Indeed, Vivekananda moved quickly to put his words of Hindu modernity into practical results in a program that Williams and others have titled "Practical Vedanta." On May 1, 1897, Vivekananda assembled his fellow monks and lay disciples and founded an association known as the Ramakrishna Mission, which sought to use the talents and the energies of his monastic and lay followers to achieve a new awakening in India and to undertake religious, educational, and philanthropic projects directed at social upliftment rather than radical social reform. He was critical of the social reform program promoted by the Brahmo Samaj denouncing it as elitist and therefore, misdirected. Rather, social reform, Vivekananda argued, can be successful only if the masses of the poor and the down-trodden are educated by Western scientific and rational standards supplemented by spiritual training in Neo-Vedanta and are given a higher standard of living since, indeed, the less privileged are, in reality, ONE with the more privileged. The record achieved by Swami Vivekananda and his disciples in the two-year period 1897-1899 is nothing less than phenomenal."⁹⁹

The term "Neo-Vedanta" is sometimes used. Many Vedantists object to this phrase. To give an example, the Protestants never referred to themselves as Neo-Christians

Vivekananda also raised the topic of a future Math for women saying, "With the Holy Mother as the centre of inspiration, a Math is to be established on the eastern bank of the Ganga. As Brahmacharins and Sadhus will be trained in this Math here, so in the other Math also, Brahmacharinis and Sadhvis will be trained."¹⁰⁰

The Ramakrishna Math and Mission brought about a new direction in Hindu monasticism. It demanded of its monastics the spiritual enrichment of one's religious convictions along with selfless service to others.¹⁰¹ Nobel Prize winning French author Romain Rolland (1866-1944) offers a summary of resolutions that were passed at Swami Vivekananda's instigation:

1. An association is to be founded under the name of the Ramakrishna Mission.
2. Its aim is to preach the truths, which Ramakrishna, for the good of humanity, preached and taught by the practice of his own life, and to help others to put them into practice in their lives for their temporal, mental, and spiritual progress.
3. Its duty is to direct in a fitting spirit the activities of this movement, inaugurated by Ramakrishna "for the establishment of fellowship among the followers of different religions, knowing them all to be only so many forms of one undying Eternal Religion."
4. Its methods of action are: i. "To train men so as to make them competent to teach such knowledge or sciences as are conducive to the material and spiritual welfare of the masses; ii. To promote and encourage arts and industries;" iii. To introduce and spread among the people in general Vedantic and other religious ideas as elucidated in the life of Ramakrishna.
5. It was to have two branches of action: The first to be Indian: Maths (monasteries) and Ashramas were to be established in different parts of India for the education of Sannyasins and lay brethren (householders) "as may be willing to devote their lives to the teaching of others." The second foreign: it was

to send members of the Order into countries outside India for the foundation of spiritual centres, and "for creating a close relationship and spirit of mutual help and sympathy between the foreign and the Indian centres."

6. "The Aims and Ideals of the Mission being purely spiritual and humanitarian, it would have no connection with politics."¹⁰²

The Vedanta movement will succeed for a number of reasons. First, it was established by a "creative elite." Second, it encompasses the highest level of truth and value. Third, there is an urgent need for it, particularly at this time in history. Fourth, the result will be a cross-fertilization of ideas between and within the various religions of the world. The addition of new concepts creates the possibility for a new synthesis and creative combination of ideas.

In 1961, Vincent Sheean (1899-1975) a leading foreign war correspondent, journalist, biographer, and novelist wrote the Ramakrishna Mission "teaches and heals; its hospitals, schools, shelters and free kitchens are models; in every famine or flood, in every riot or war or other disaster to which the conditions of life in India may lead, the monks of Ramakrishna are there, like the Franciscans of the thirteenth century Italy, to serve."¹⁰³

Federico Mayor (Zaragoza) from Spain, the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (1987-99) mentioned in 1993, three remarkable similarities between the message of Vivekananda and the goals of the Ramakrishna Mission and the objectives of UNESCO, "First, his commitment towards universalism and tolerance.... Second, his concern for the poor and destitute. The mission that he established in India and which has now spread all over the world is working to reduce poverty and eliminate discrimination among the different segments of society. He said: "The upliftment of the women, the awakening of the masses must come first and only then can any real good come about." Third, his preoccupation for human development with education, science and culture as instruments for such development."¹⁰⁴ "I am indeed struck by the similarity of the constitution of the Ramakrishna Mission which Vivekananda established as early as 1897, with that of UNESCO drawn up in 1945. Both place the human being at the centre of their efforts aimed at development. Both place tolerance at the top of the

agenda for building peace and democracy. Both recognize the variety of human cultures and societies as an essential aspect of the common heritage."¹⁰⁵

During the Middle Ages in the Indo-European society the most brilliant people, the greatest geniuses often became monastics and priests like Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhva in India; and St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, and Meister Eckhart in Europe. By the time of the 19th century in Asia and Europe, monastic scholarship had declined. They had moved from a creative phase to a preservation phase. Ramakrishna encountered outstanding mystics like Tota Puri, Pavhari Baba, and others, and in Europe there were some meditative saints, but they were not exemplary intellectual monastics. From a secular standpoint the most intelligent of the 19th century European monks was the Austrian Gregor Mendel (1822-84) who working with pea plants in the monastic gardens discovered the Laws of Heredity. But even in his case, the abbot had many of his papers burnt before they were published. Max Müller (1823-1900) informs us, "The best Sanskrit scholars of late years have not been among these Sannyasins, but among the Pandits and professors at the Indian Universities, or in the Maths of Southern India."¹⁰⁶ On the other hand there were many miracle producing Holy Men in India with large followings during the 19th century.¹⁰⁷

Vivekananda wanted monasticism to be an intellectual force in the modern world. Monastics should interact with society and make their presence known. One of the most phenomenal events was the quick revival of monastic intellectualism in the Ramakrishna Order. While other projects like "Western Vedanta" could take decades or even centuries to develop, the remarkable thing is that the intellectual process was almost instantaneous. A revolution in the presentation of Indian religious concepts was quickly brought about by Vivekananda and Abhedananda in theoretical knowledge; Brahmananda, Shivananda, Premananda, Turiyananda, Trigunatitananda, Adbhutananda, Ramakrishnananda, Akhandananda, Subodhananda, and Vijnanananda in practical teachings; and Saradananda and Mahendranath Gupta in biography. The practical teachers are more interested in human mental transformation and

release from the bondage of suffering than in establishing a metaphysical ontological system. Other aspects of writing include translating, editing, writing poems, and composing music. Through their combined efforts, Ancient and Medieval Indian religious thought was made understandable to modern men and women in the East and West. Furthermore, this is an ongoing process, since to this day the intellectually creative monastics of the Ramakrishna Order have continued to produce books, articles, music, and art of the highest quality. For the spread of Ramakrishna Vedantic ideas, Vivekananda inspired others to establish three journals: the *Brahmavadin* (1895) with editor Alasinga Perumal, *Prabuddha Bharata* (1896) with editor B. R. Rajam Iyer, and the *Udbodhan* (1899) with editor Swami Trigunatitananda. A wealth of spiritual and intellectual knowledge has come out in these journals since their inception.

Swami Brahmananda is known primarily for the work he did in establishing the Ramakrishna Order in India and the Belur Math. In addition, he worked through his disciples who came to America like Swami Prabhavananda and others guiding their establishments of new Centers in the West. Prabhavananda mentioned how much he relied on Brahmananda for the work he was undertaking.

Sister Devamata (1867-1942) related an interesting story about the creation of the emblem for the Ramakrishna Order. When Vivekananda returned to the New York Center in the summer of 1900, "Mrs. Crane, the housekeeper [at the Vedanta Society], told me that Swami was sitting at the breakfast table one morning when the printer arrived. He said he was making a circular for the Society and wished to have an emblem to go on it; could the Swami suggest something? Vivekananda took the envelope from a letter he had just received, tore it open and on the clean inner surface drew the waves, the swan, the lotus, and the sun circled by a serpent.... He threw the bit of paper with the design on it across the table and said, 'Draw it to scale.' Henry van Haagen, the printer, was an able draftsman as well as printer. He converted the rough sketch into a finished drawing."¹⁰⁸

As far as the Ramakrishna Order is concerned, first generation are the monastics disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. The second generation are those

Swamis who interacted with Ramakrishna's monastic disciples. Next, the third generation Swamis are those who associated with the second generation Swamis, and so on into the future.

When a person comes to Vedanta they combine their pre-existing knowledge with the new ideas they learn from the group members. They observe other individuals and receive instructions on these matters. New knowledge is absorbed through a process of internalization, which involves a change in life-style, generating new habits, and by transforming old ideas into new ones. The devotee is then able to externalize their newly learned Vedantic ideas that include values and norms by expressing them to other devotees and in the process creating shared concepts. They are expressed through language and their actions. Through a process of legitimation these new ideas, beliefs, and practices are authorized by the group and validated and accepted as being correct by others (institutionalization). The abstract becomes more concrete (reification). In this way new members are socialized into the Vedanta Society or small groups within it. If they make the wrong move, they are corrected and guided. The group works with predefined patterns of action, which sets up a system of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures that provide stability and meaning to the functioning of the organization. There is a hierarchy of roles operating at multiple levels of jurisdiction and so the individual must decide what functions and roles they want to fulfill in the organization. In the process the devotee develops a new individual identity that is formed as they adopt new roles and behavior patterns.¹⁰⁹

People become members of the Ramakrishna Order-Vedanta Society because: Its ideals are compatible with their pre-existing values (compatibility), the methods and procedures are not difficult to understand and perform (complexity), and the results of their efforts can be tested (testability). The devotee undertakes the methods of self-improvement to become the person they desire to be (self-evaluation), they feel they have the ability to successfully perform the required actions (self-efficacy), anticipate future success (expectations) and see that these methods have produced desirable results in other people (operability). As a result they experience tangible results, (self-

observability), and receive encouragement and positive reinforcement from the people they associate with (social support).¹¹⁰

The Vedanta Society is composed of Ashrams that aid in a devotees spiritual growth. It is a religious community of both monastics and non-monastics headed by a Swami with activities focusing on daily meditation worship, communal singing (bhajans), celebration of pujas, and religious lectures and classes. In the past Ashrams were located in rural settings amidst nature conducive to spiritual instruction and meditation, but in modern times some are also located in urban areas.

The book *What Vedanta Means to Me* (1961) edited by the future Swami Vidyatmananda presents sixteen testimonials by a wide assortment of Westerners, on why they became interested in Vedanta and how it brought a personal transformation in their life. The seven most mentioned appealing factors are that Vedanta:

1) affirms that one can progress spiritually and know Brahman-God in this very life: "The teachings of Vedanta are to me like a chart of the spiritual realm ... Ramakrishna and his disciples actually journeyed to that realm. It is their enthusiastic reports that made the idea of traveling there myself conceivable and desirable. When the swamis in teaching Vedanta tell us that the true nature of man is divine, and the goal of life is to realize this divine nature ... religion is essentially a matter of direct, personal experience" (Pravrajika Saradaprana at the Santa Barbara Convent).

2) provides an empirical approach to spiritual development that can be tested: "Vedanta made me understand, for the first time, that a practical working religion is experimental and empirical. You are always on your own, finding things out for yourself in your individual way" (Renowned author Christopher Isherwood).

3) emphasizes the importance of the guru-disciple relationship: "The guru, the teacher, transmits his teachings on two different levels. It is a combination of what he says and what he is.... I only know that, as far as I am concerned, the guru-disciple relationship is at the center of everything that religion means to me. It is the one reality of which I am about" (Christopher Isherwood).

4) provides therapeutic power to remove internal and external tensions and conflicts, and to reintegrate the personality: "I have seen far more drastic and desirable personality changes effected through the practice of yogic meditation than I have through psychoanalysis" (Joan Rayne).

5) is a rational religion: "Vedanta appealed to me because it is attractive rationally. It allows one to be cosmopolitan, permissive, broad. It furnishes a psychologically sound program for personal growth and development. Its tenets square with reason and with the discoveries of modern science; and they provide a basis for equitable social practice. It illumines history. And Vedanta copes successfully with the problem of evil" (John Yale, Swami Vidyatmananda).

6) teaches universal toleration that reconciles religious differences: "I think that this, to me, is the greatest significance of Vedanta: its all-embracingness, and its assertion that all religions are paths, some more and some less direct, to the same end" (John van Druten winner of the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best play of the year).

7) explains that each major religion is a path to Brahman-God: "The third Vedantic premise, that the different religions are so many paths to God, was not a mere verbal formula with Ramakrishna, but an experience of the same ineffable truth which he realized by following the methods of the different sects of Hinduism, and the ways of Islam and Christianity" (Pravrajika Saradaprana).

8) leads to a better understanding of Christianity: "It was only after I became a Hindu that I could accept and understand the teachings of Christ.... And now as a Hindu I realize that the great value of Vedanta lies in the fact that it reconciles all religions. It breaks down all barriers of sectarianism and dogmas and it establishes absolute freedom of thought.... It was through a Hindu that I first came to understand who Jesus really was. I looked upon Jesus as a great and good teacher; a holy man. But through Swami Vivekananda I have learned to regard him as one of the incarnations of God." And I told him [a Christian missionary] that only after coming to India had I learned to appreciate many of Jesus' sayings and parables. Only in India had the stories of the Bible become real and lifelike to me. Jesus' most valuable teachings had remained obscure

and meaningless to me, until I came to this country" (Dutch born Swami Atulananda).

9) is exemplified by the Swamis: "And lastly I met several of the Vedanta Swamis, and knew from a moment's listening or conversation that there, in their eyes and spirit, was real goodness like a light. I knew that these were men who had known and seen something that, whether or not I myself could ever know it as they had, was proved true and miraculous by the radiance that shone from them" (John van Druten).¹¹¹

In the West the Ramakrishna Order often attracts people who are open to religion, but who do not belong or fit well in any existing religious group. Many non-Indians who join the Vedanta Society are first-generation converts.

A new devotee must be trained so that they have a sense of meaning concerning the teachings and purpose of Vedanta. They gain understanding (Jnana Yoga) through attending or watching lectures on the Internet, reading, meditation (Raja Yoga), and association with older members. Western Vedanta is like a sect in that a relatively high percentage of its members are involved in the maintenance and expansion of the organization unlike a denomination. This is because Western Vedantic organizations are relatively small and they attract a high percentage of creative people. Some people come to the Vedanta Society because they are having problems. After they are healed and relieved of their difficulties they leave the organization.

It is best that they feel they "Belong" in the Vedanta Society and are valued by others. Belonging is enhanced through a functional identity of productive activity (Karma Yoga) and establishing a social identity of friendly relations (Bhakti Yoga) with the other members. A spirit of friendliness raises the morale in the Vedanta Society so that more people will want to join it. Belonging promotes a sense of community, social interaction, and teamwork. High morale produces dedication to the Society, enthusiasm about work responsibilities, a feeling of achievement and confidence in performance, a willingness to work harder than required, and a desire to socialize with fellow workers.

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