

Indian Religious Innovators and their Influence as an Evolutionary Stage
in Modern American Concepts of Religion: 1880's- 1960's

Research Thesis

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Introduction

Romanticism is often discouraged when seeking to gain an understanding of the ways of another culture. Just as an ethnocentric view will keep the observer on a pedestal, romanticism will keep that which is being observed on a pedestal. One must maintain a certain degree of self-reflexiveness to insure that one is not operating from either extreme. But, I would argue that romanticism is a valid starting point. It may be compared to falling in love. At the onset, we are completely enthralled every time we look at that person. Then, as an intimate relationship progresses, we lose some of the idealism that we were experiencing in the early stages. But, if the feelings begin to wane, we are able to recall the times when the mere sight of that person sent us into ineffable bliss. So, while I would caution one to avoid being blinded by romanticism, a little infatuation can get you through a rough spell.

Certain elements of Hindu religious imagery can be fascinating to the curious westerner. It seems so different, so 'other', that it may be very easy to use the images and concepts as a form of escape. In a televised interview Joseph Campbell once said that, "All religions are essentially traps, but they only work if one becomes trapped". As we have seen with many ideological imports from the East, such as martial arts; yoga; religions; and philosophies; all have become reworked within the Western context. This might occur in ways that are beneficial and promote mutual respect, and in other ways may be seen as disrespectful by some mainstream adherents. Of course, these views sometimes vary with individuals from both contexts.

A number of Americans were probably familiar with the value of introspection, and with the idea of 'self-actualization' as being the top tier of Abraham Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs*. However, it was through the popularization of the uniquely Indian concept of *Self-Realization*, that Americans were exposed to a more detailed and methodical approach toward the attainment of such a state. During the 1960's American was divided over the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, as well as disenchantment with the American Dream, a growing number of people may have been open to the ideas of *transcendence* and an inherent unity of all things. These concepts were not emphasized within American mainstreams religions, and as we have seen, there were members of society who sought alternatives.

My own interest in Indian religious imagery was probably sparked by quiet observations of an incense holder that sat on a table in our living room in the early 1970's. It was a ceramic piece, molded into the form of a bearded man who was seated 'Indian Style' wearing a turban and a robe. There was a small bowl in front of his crossed legs. Inscribed on the bowl was the word "YOGI". I figured that the word must have been related to 'yoga', which I had seen on a PBS exercise program. I recall asking my mother to light cone-shaped pieces of incense to place in the bowl. I would then sit quietly in front of it, while watching the smoke rise and encircle the mysterious figure. Obviously a romantic entry point, but I was only seven years old. In those days, the sounds of sitars were heard on Saturday morning cartoons, and 'top 40' pop songs. You also heard about young people leaving home to go 'find themselves'. People were talking about reincarnation, karma, and cosmic consciousness.

Perhaps the most notable period to examine would be that of the mid 1800's to the mid 1900's. Even though there was some exposure to Indian religious thought before this period, these ideas had not yet become a significant part of the fabric of American spiritual views. It seems that the beginning of this period can be seen in the persona of Ramakrishna, an iconoclastic Hindu saint. Then, from his disciple Vivekananda, through a procession of influential swamis and gurus, we will make our way to the 1960's. It was at this time that America had more people who were receptive to Indian religious influence than ever before.

For many, the images of India seem to capture the imagination. One might entertain thoughts of a faraway land full of wise mystics with miraculous powers, beautiful architecture, quaint scenes of rural life, and throngs of devotees worshipping in temples. Of course, these images have led some to believe that this is all that India is, a land of gurus, spicy food, meditation, and yoga, while being completely blind to social inequities, bureaucratic corruption, and grinding poverty. On the other hand, there are those who only focus on the aforementioned problems of India, while failing to see the transcendent ideals that originated from the culture.

These two extreme point of view only lead to either orientalist naivete or ethnocentric reductionism. There is no way to 'explain' India, or to find a solution to all of its problems. Our purpose here is only to examine a particular aspect of Indian religious ideology as it was going through a notable stage of development during a specific time period, how it was able to have a lasting global influence, particularly in America, and what this period represents within the evolution of religious thought.

Throughout this article, I will be referring to Indian religious ideals which are commonly called 'Hindu'. The history of this term is very dubious. In the 19th century, it was used as a societal by foreign rulers, and inaccurately applied to the religious practices of Indians who were not Muslim, Christian, Jain, or Sikh. However, Indians were able to use the term for establishing solidarity and a sense of nationalism in the stand against British rule. Use of the term as a religious category has been accepted, even though the range of practices associated with the name may be so broad that many have origins that are probably unrelated. ¹

Gavin Flood has said that he, "takes the view that 'Hinduism' is not purely the construction of western orientalist attempting to make sense of the plurality of religious phenomena within the vast geographic area of South Asia, but that 'Hinduism' is also the development of Hindu self-understanding; a transformation in the modern world of themes already present". ²

As we have seen, every area of human achievement, be it material or spiritual, goes through stages of development. Existing concepts have been formed through exposure to pre-existing concepts, and so forth. There are often times when syncretization occurs through unrelated lineages of religious and philosophical ideals coming in contact with each other. The process of renewal may then occur in one or both of the traditions.

The result may not spread throughout the entire spectrum of the particular religion, but certain iconoclasts may emerge, who represent the core ideals of their religious background in a new way that is more potentially appealing to outsiders. During this time there was an increasing interest in things that might be considered 'mystical'. Therefore, Hindu imagery became very attractive to quite a few American seekers.

This appears to have been the reason behind the large number of gurus and swamis who came to prominence just before and during the most of the 20th century. The timing was right and these were the vessels that would transport Hindu religious concepts to American society, where a growing number of people were eager to take a glimpse beyond culturally constrained views of spirituality. We will also consider the idea of ‘mysticism’, and how the perceived mysteriousness of Hinduism may have attracted many American seekers. The cognitive foundations of religion, which some argue to be the true source of the religious impulse, will also be seriously considered. Several of the religious and philosophical writings of ancient India advise the seeker to look inward as a method of realizing the absolute. It is possible that inner-awareness could be localized in the human brain. So many practices, such as chanting, breathing techniques, and visualization methods, all have a profound effect on cognitive function.

The interaction between India and the U.S., in terms of religious and philosophical exchange during this period, was perhaps the greatest stage of development in the American post-modern concepts of spirituality. While there has always been much controversy and criticism regarding the ways that Indian religious thought has been re-appropriated in the Western world, one can only hope that the fusion of these ideas can be seen as a starting point toward greater respect and understanding. It seems as though any outside influence that is to become fully accepted, usually goes through similar stages. Much like a the Western model of the stages of personal psychological development. These being: romantic fascination, egocentric indulgence, thoughtful application, and inner transformation. The Mandukya Upanishad very similarly describes these stages as being the four states of consciousness within the Self. 3

Indian Religious Innovators

There were many saints, avatars, and religious visionaries throughout Indian society, whose lives have been well-documented. However, no period had seen the emergence of so many Indian religious innovators whose influence reached the Western world, as there were from the middle of the 1800's to the middle of the 1900's. A variety of elements converged to allow this to happen. First of all, from the previous stages of philosophical development within Hindu tradition, and the rise of a Hindu nationalist agenda, came a modern version of Indian spirituality in which many of its subtleties could be explained in English. All of these increased the potential for dissemination of Hindu religious thought outside of India.

In 19th century America, there was an underground interest in the Bhagavad Gita as a result of English translations that had been done in the 1700's. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau read the Gita, and their interest in Vedanta was influential to the U.S. Unitarian Association, who had become ideologically aligned with the major Indian nationalist movement called Brahmo Samaj. The Unitarian Association brought Protep Chunder Mozoomar to the U.S. to address their group in 1883, predating Vivekananda's visit to Chicago in 1893. ⁴

There were several individuals from the 7th - 11th centuries, whose lives and teachings had a major impact on what was to become modern Hindu thought. Three of the most notable being, Gaudapada, Shankara, and Ramanuja. The popularity of the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta was the result of their influence. ⁵ This system of teaching was based on the writings known as the Upanishads. The word 'Vedanta' means 'the end of the Vedas'.

Therefore, these teachings were seen as the final stage in Vedic religious understanding. The Upanishads contains themes regarding the illusory nature of phenomenal existence, and the essential unity of all things as manifestations of Brahman. These ideas seemed to have laid the foundation for the future emphasis on self-realization, and the modern age of Indian religious expression was probably ushered in by the person known as Ramakrishna (1836-1886). India had seen plenty of god-intoxicated saints and mystics, but Ramakrishna could be considered the catalyst for a new level of universal relevance in Indian spirituality. Like many of the modern Indian saints, Ramakrishna displayed a heavy inclination toward introspection and falling into trance-like states of absorption with the Divine.

He was raised in a small Bengali village called Kamarpukur. At seventeen, he went to Calcutta where his older brother was the priest of the Kali temple at Dakshineswar. His brother died shortly thereafter, and Ramakrishna was appointed as the new temple priest. He became intensely drawn to remain in Mother Kali's presence, hoping to experience direct realization, and began to have series of visions. His behavior became very extreme and seemingly bizarre. Although many recognized this as evidence of the attainment of a high spiritual state, his mother worried about his mental stability. She felt that marriage was what he needed to find a balance. A marriage was arranged with a young child in his home village, he then went back to his temple duties and ecstatic revelatory experiences. ⁶ Though he was raised as a Vaishnava (Vishnu devotee), Ramakrishna had undergone initiation with a Tantric guru, and received visions that revealed the possibility of all religions being paths that lead to the same ultimate realization.

He was also initiated by a Sufi mystic, had a vision of Christ, and saw the Buddha's denial of the existence of the Divine as being evidence of the nameless, formless aspect of Brahman. ⁷

When Ramakrishna's bride came of age, he brought her to live with him at the temple.

Instead of consummating the marriage, he worshipped her a manifestation of Kali. She was known as Sarada Devi. After Ramakrishna's death she was worshipped as the Divine Mother. ⁸

He has been quoted as saying, "Some devotees approach God by going from the aspect without form to that with form; others by going from the aspect with form to that without form. To realize that he is both with form and without form- that is best". ⁹

His foremost disciple was known as Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). The non-dualistic teaching of Vedanta, his guru's revelations of the common essence of all expressions of the religious impulse, his prior membership in Brahmo Samaj, and his Western education, made him the perfect ambassador of Hindu religious philosophy to the West. The ability to explain Hinduism through the use of modern scientific terms and Christian theological concepts made Vivekananda the most notable guest at the 'World Parliament of Religions' in Chicago (1893). His speech marked the beginning of Hinduism's acceptance as a 'World Religion'. ¹⁰ He then became the founder of the Vedanta Society in New York, and in 1895, and returned to India and founded the Ramakrishna Mission. ¹¹

Around the turn of the century, a South Indian saint began to attract attention in the village of Tiruvannamalai. He was known as Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950). Like Ramakrishna, he was spontaneously Self-realized without the guidance of a guru, or the study of religious writings. His primary teaching was to suggest that visitors ask themselves, 'Who am I'.

He spent most of his years in silence. People came from all over India, and from all over the world to see him at his home at the base of Mt. Arunachala. His simple, yet profound teachings regarding the nature of the self and of reality led to his being revered as an avatar. He also taught of a unity amongst religions and he read many religious books that seekers brought to him. ¹²

As the Indian Independence Movement was gaining momentum, one of its most adamant exponents, Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) was jailed for being a threat to the British Raj. While incarcerated, he reached a state of Self-Realization through a series of spiritual practices. ¹³ Like Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi, he had no guru. There appears to be a similar pattern with modern Indian religious iconoclasts; an unguided spiritual awakening; and a Vedanta-based view of religious unity. Aurobindo started a spiritual community near Pondicherry after his release from prison. A woman from France named Mirra Alfassa came to the community in the 1920's. He soon appointed her as head of the community, she was also seen as an incarnation of "The Mother", which is what she began to be called. The community of 'Auroville' attracted residents from around the world. Aurobindo's teachings seemed to focus on the descent of the 'Supramental', a divine aspect that would enter the world as an evolutionary step that will complete the stages of human development. Preparation for this process was a system of practices that he called Integral Yoga. ¹⁴ In the early 1970's, an Aurobindo disciple known as Sri Chinmoy became the guru of American musicians such as (Devadip) Carlos Santana, (Narada) Michael Walden, and the British jazz guitarist (Mahavishnu) John McLaughlin, who was responsible for introducing Zakir Hussain and L. Shankar to American audiences.

Also in the 1920's, a swami named Paramahansa Yogananda (1890-1952) had been invited to speak in Boston at an international religious conference. He founded the Self-Realization Fellowship in California, and wrote the seminal, *Autobiography of a Yogi*.¹⁵ Like Vivekananda, he was educated and very articulate, thus well suited for conveying Hindu ideas to American audiences. Neither of them were Self-Realized without the aid of a guru.

Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) was chosen as a child and taught by the Theosophical Society. Groomed to be the 'Great World Teacher', he went through an inner transformation that was above and beyond the expectations of the Theosophists. During his inaugural speaking engagement as 'World Teacher', he announced that he was not what the Theosophists claimed that he was.¹⁶ Stating that the 'Truth is a Pathless Land', he taught that the truth could only be found in the Self, and that the Self is beyond external identifications and emotional attachments.

His teaching was very much Vedanta-based, but with no use of Hindu imagery or references. Although he did not consider himself to be a part mainstream Hindu culture, he still sparked much interest in Indian philosophy throughout the world. He became well-known through filmed dialogues with people like quantum physicist David Bohm, and Tibetan Buddhist Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Even Bruce Lee, the tradition-breaking modernizer of Asian martial arts, had acknowledged Krishnamurti as an influence on his philosophy of life and his approach to martial arts. Krishnamurti was also the author of a large number of books, mostly published transcripts from his lectures, and many of these are still in print.

Another interesting figure who would have a strong and lasting influence was known as Sri Anandamayi Ma (1896-1982). She was also revered as an incarnation of the ‘Mother’ and attracted many devotees. She was visited by politicians, and even by spiritual leaders. Like others mentioned in this chapter, she had no guru, was spontaneously God-intoxicated and Self-realized. These experiences occurred before she was sent to be with her husband, whom she married at the age of thirteen. As with the marriage of Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi, she and her husband/devotee Bholenath supposedly never partook of sexual intimacies. ¹⁷

Her teaching was very similar to that of Ramana Maharshi, in the sense that she was not teaching anyone to become a Self-realized ‘Hindu’, but instead to become a Self-realized ‘Human Being’. When asked by a visitor to describe the most essential thing in life, she replied, “Try to find out “Who I am”!... When one finds one’s Self, one has found God; and finding God one has found one’s Self”. ¹⁸ When describing his first meeting with Anandamayi, Paramahansa Yogananda said that he had met many “God-realized saints from all over India, most of them male, but never a female saint that was held in such high regard”. ¹⁹

One thing that these individuals seemed to have in common (perhaps with the exception of Krishnamurti), was the ability to transcend the structure of Hindu tradition, while remaining very much ‘Hindu’. This caused their messages to have appeal to both Hindu and non-Hindu.

The last person that we must mention is Shree Maa of Kamakhya. She was born some time during the 1940’s, and is still alive. With her, we appear to have come to a completion of this particular era which started with Ramakrishna.

Like most of the others, her attainment of Self-Realization was not facilitated by following a physical guru. However, she does see Ramakrishna as her guru, though he died more than fifty years prior to her birth. She experienced visions of the saint, and followed his guidance. She gained a reputation in the 1960's and 1970's while wandering the Himalayas. She also broke tradition more than the previous female saints. She wandered alone, with no incidents, in a time when this was unheard of. She also completely ignored the rule pertaining to caste. Some have been inclined to suggest that she is a figure who promotes feminism and social equality, but Shree Maa insists that she has no such agenda. *20*

Along with her reverence for the Goddess Kali and the God Shiva, she also sees Jesus as a spiritual guide, and has even led Muslims in devotional ceremony. Like Ramakrishna, her message of religious unity has broken many conceptual barriers. She has also been considered to be a reincarnation of his wife Sarada Devi, who died two decades before her birth. Aurobindo had a western female counterpart as a completion of a physical representation of Shiva/Shakti, and Shree Maa, after having a premonition of meeting her counterpart, found one in the westerner Swami Satyananda. They have been living in the U.S. since 1984 after establishing an ashram in California. *21*

When one examines the dynamics of this period of approximately one hundred years and the shifting emphasis and awareness within Indian religious philosophy, it becomes clear that this era was a very significant stage in the development and transmission of Hindu thought.

Sensitivity to this may be an avenue for mainstream religious adherents to remain traditional, yet accepting the validity or utility of other forms of religious practice without perceiving them as threats or being inclined toward asserting superiority. Thus, going beyond mere tolerance and entering into a real understanding. This seems to be the vision of these great Indian saints and teachers. That, if we are Self-Realized we may then see an underlying unity in all phenomena.

Seeds of Tantric Yoga Bloom into Flower Power

During the time Vivekananda, Yogananda, and Aurobindo there was an underground interest in Hatha Yoga and Tantric ritual in the United States. The first American known to become a yoga teacher was Pierre Bernard. As a teenager in Lincoln, Nebraska he began studying the Vedas, Hatha Yoga, and Tantric philosophies with a man named Sylvais Hamati. Supposedly, this was to have taken place between 1887 and 1899. ²² Through displays of yogic skills such as the ability to use pranayama (breathing techniques) to render his pulse imperceptible while being examined by physicians, he attracted a following that was very eager to learn his methods of physical control, and of course his ‘secret’ Tantric teachings. ²³

Bernard, also known as ‘The Omnipotent Oom’ began teaching at resort in Nyack, New York and founding the ‘Tantrik Society of America’. He became very wealthy and quite controversial during the first few decades of the 20th century, even being subject to a police raid and interrogation on the suspicion that he was the leader of a ‘sex cult’. ²⁴

His nephew Theos Bernard, who was the son and student of Pierre's half-brother Glen, spent several years in India and Tibet under the tutelage of swamis and lamas. In 1943 Theos earned a PhD from Columbia University. The original title of his dissertation was "TantricYoga". It was rejected in 1938, and rewritten as "Hatha Yoga, the Report of a Personal Experience". After being published, it became a very popular book. It was illustrated with photographs of Theos in yoga asanas (postures), this being the very first time that pictures of an American in asanas had ever been published. 25

All of the preceding events such as Swami Vivekananda's speech in Chicago, Emerson's praise of the Bhagavad Gita, and the Beat Generation's infatuation with Eastern philosophy, only hinted at what was about to happen. During the time of Ramakrishna, the Emancipation Proclamation had been signed in America, freeing the slaves after a brutal civil war. One hundred years later, in 1965 the Civil Rights Act was passed, the restrictions on Asian immigration were lifted, and the Psychedelic Era had begun. Now, the Eastern philosophies that had only been the interest of a handful of artists, intellectuals, and societal drop-outs, were now being made accessible to the general public through the arrival of Indian swamis and yogis on American soil. Not to mention the growing popularity of psychedelic drugs, and rapidly shifting American social climate, all of which may have enhanced the receptivity of the counterculture toward new ways of thinking.

Not only were elements American culture affected by the sudden infusion of Hindu imagery, philosophy, and religious practices, but Indian culture was also affected by the number of American spiritual seekers trying to find 'enlightenment'.

Prior to this period, India had occasionally hosted the random curious American, and America had seen a swami or two. But, now the Indian influence was unprecedented and timely. America had never been more ready to accept it, and India had never been more ready to offer it. The non-dualism of Vedanta found fertile ground in boundary dissolving cultural field of America in the 1960's. While the use of mind-altering substances was also leaving a number of psychological casualties by the wayside.

While there were quite a few seekers who approached these Indian teachers in search of disciplined study and practice, there were a number of burned-out young people living on the fringe of society with no place to go. Some of them sought the refuge of communes and devoted themselves to gurus out of a desperate attempt to balance their lives without resorting to integration into mainstream society. Swamis such as Paramahansa Yogananda had already been here and set up established centers prior to this time, but the first to really catch on was Swami Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada (1896-1977). He arrived in New York City's Greenwich Village in 1965. In the right place at the right time, with the right package. Bhakti Yoga.

Teachings such as Yogananda's Kriya Yoga was better suited for the calm intellectual type, or the Christian who may seek to enhance their understanding of the archetypal symbology of Christ in way that goes beyond that which is offered by the mainstream church. But, as for the 'flower child' drop-out who has a bacchanalian flair for ecstatic music, dancing, and good food, they would feel much more 'at home' in a Bhakti setting. Prabhupada's International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) provided all of this, but with a heavy dose of austerities.

For those who might be disinclined to follow the stoic approach, there were alternatives such as Tantric practices. These had a large appeal, and were subject to gross reinterpretations with emphasis on sexual praxis. This kind of morphing was completely natural considering the social climate that the ideas had been transplanted to. And of course, with a little practice under their belts, a few American were ready to teach their own versions of Indian religious practices. As many sought freedom from bondage to the ‘American Dream’, Hindu-influenced communes and meditation centers sprang up across the country.

A man known as Ram Dass was at the forefront of the fusion of Hinduism and psychedelic culture. He had once been the Harvard Psychology professor and noted researcher, Richard Alpert. He has a colleague of the infamous Timothy Leary. They co-authored the 1964 classic, “The Psychedelic Experience”. This was a manual for the use of L.S.D. that was based on the ‘Tibetan Book of the Dead’. Through extensive research and personal experimentation, Alpert had determined that there was efficacy in the use of psychedelic substances for the dissolving for conceptual structures of the identity, and to go beyond the normal ranges of perception. In search of a method that did not require the use of substances for reaching these states, he went to India in search of an ‘enlightened’ being.

He was finally introduced to Neem Karoli Baba. Alpert being filled with doubt, was stunned when the Baba was able to tell him about a very personal matter. One which it was not possible for him to know. Then, he became the committed devotee Ram Dass. ²⁶ After returning to the U.S., he wrote very influential “Be Here Now”. For many, this book was the first exposure to Hindu imagery, philosophy and terminology.

The book also inspired a significant number of Americans to go to India in search of a guru. Ram Dass has been in the public eye for more than 40 years as an author and lecturer. Through the use of psychoanalytic description, quick wit, amazing stories about the life of his guru, and candid exposure of his personal shortcomings, he had helped to shift the emphasis from escapism to integration for many Americans who were curious about Indian Religions. 27

Bhagavan Das, whose picture appears in ‘Be Here Now’, is the one who took Ram Dass to meet Neem Karoli Baba. He was a Californian named Michael Riggs who went to India in 1964, and stayed until 1971 living as a sadhu. Bhagavan Das had the distinction of being the first Western disciple of a variety of gurus and Tibetan lamas, a few of whom became very well-known in the West. 28 He is now an in-demand kirtan singer who released an album produced by rapper Mike D. of the Beastie Boys. In 1997, his book called, “It’s Here Now (Are You?)” was published. It is possibly one of the most amazingly entertaining and informative spiritual autobiographies since Yogananda’s “Autobiography of a Yogi”.

It should also be noted that the two major music festivals that served as the ‘bookends’ of the Psychedelic Era were; the Monterey Pop Festival in California (1967), which began with an electrifying performance by Indian sitar master Ravi Shankar; and Woodstock in New York (1969), which began with words from Swami Satchidananda. It was during this time that Hindu philosophy seemed to have the biggest impact on America, through its subculture, as did the use of psychedelic drugs. Author of ‘The Harvard Psychedelic Club’ Don Lattin, in a recent public appearance made mention of how we still see the effects of this period, in yoga studios, Steve Jobs, Deepak Chopra, and the popular idea of being “spiritual, but not religious”.

It seems as though the adventurousness of the 1960's may have caused quite a few minds to be open to the influx of Indian religious ideals, the decadent tendency toward escapism caused many of these 'open' minds to be unable to process these concepts in a practical way. Perhaps the break from the post-war era's ideal of the 'American Dream' created a vacuum in which anything that entered it would be used primarily for escape. Ironically, this dynamic may have even affected the way that Indian gurus taught Western disciples who were seeking a quicker path toward enlightenment and possessed greater disposable income. And at times, these gurus fell prey to the same temptations that they were supposed to be leading disciples away from.

The shortcomings and abuses of this period are often seen as evidence that things went wrong, but there was not a specific agenda in place. Thus, there was nothing was inherently 'wrong'. In cross-cultural exchange there is often misunderstanding and misappropriation, but aside from the mess that is made, both cultures may derive some lasting benefit. It appears to have been a logical, and perhaps necessary stage in the evolution of religious transmission.

Other than references to a substance known as 'soma', which was mentioned in the Vedas, and Shaivite's (Shiva Worshipper) sacramental use of cannabis sativa, the Hindu traditions appear to have no historic relationship with psychotropic substances being applied to spiritual practice. Instead, elaborate systems of ritual, fasting, breathing exercises, and meditation have been used as ways of altering perception and opening the mind to heightened states of awareness. Traditional Western religions as practiced in America are not inclined to employ these methods, because Self-realization usually isn't the ultimate goal.

Without a cultural background that in some ways makes room for this type introspection, the thought processes may have become too rigid or confined. Therefore, the mind may require a radical event that perturbs it. At this point, the complexities and depth of Hindu religious concepts may not seem so alien. In 1960's America, when external 'reality' was constantly being upended through experiential experimentation, a Hindu view of inner reality seemed to provide some with an alternate explanation of the nature of phenomenal existence. This may be India's greatest contribution to America, and to the evolution of American religious thought.

Self-Realization as an Evolutionary Step

Some scholars of Evolutionary Psychology and Cognitive Theory believe that the history of ideas represent modes of consciousness that are going through evolutionary stages. This may be easily observed in the progression of concepts relating to spirituality. Through exposure to scientific explanations of reality and generations of people who moved beyond the belief of myth and magic, we are still left questioning the nature the Self and the meaning of existence. This may be the reason why the 'religious impulse' has never gone away. We have questions that may not be fully addressed by scientific research, while the sometimes vague 'logic' of philosophy only deals with a specific range of inquiry, which like science, seems to reduce everything to sets of terms and calculations. The theories of human purpose and potential are endless. The wide range of circumstances, interests, and goals can make the search for a summarizing statement regarding the idea of identity and ultimate collective destiny virtually impossible.

Quite naturally, mythic frameworks were formed in a variety of cultural settings. These 'systems' have proven to be valuable for establishing a sense of connectedness through shared cosmology within the particular group. Thus, creating a group identification which leads to self-identification. In earlier stages this would have been a necessary mode of consciousness for daily survival, but as we have become technologically advanced, our levels of self-awareness have not expanded accordingly. Some propose that technology is the cause of the problem, and feel that the solution can be found in mass regression to a primal stage.

But, as with Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, it would probably serve us best to become Self-Realized without seeking to escape the situation. For Arjuna, this required the abandoning of his accumulated adjustments to what is considered 'normal'. However, this was only possible after Krishna gave him a glimpse of what Aurobindo referred to as the 'supranormal'.

To follow a set of ideas because they represent the extent of one's knowledge may prove to be sufficient within the given range of personal experience and social adjustment. However, there have been many figures who receive a glimpse of dimensions of reality that exceed the temporal or mundane, as seen with shamans, sadhus, and 'medicine men'.

Some would probably argue that these are only self-generated psychological states, giving no consideration to facets of existence that are clearly operable, but cannot be experienced through normal thought processes. Hindu cosmology seems to describe the immensity and the depth of physical and metaphysical phenomena in elaborate detail, when compared to many other cosmologies. There have been those who intently set out to go beyond the established parameters of convention, or those who have experienced spontaneous integral awareness.

Examples of this can be seen in the lives of the Indian religious figures that have been previously mentioned. These levels of awareness may be an underemphasized features of human evolutionary potential. Steps have always seemed to occur through the introduction of novelty which is actually latent within a given species. The right set of factors increase the likelihood of the step to occur, then the result is usually beneficial for the whole, even though the whole may not be immediately affected by it.

Just as the Middle East was the geographic region that introduced written law, agriculture, money, marriage, ownership of property, and the like, it seems that one of India's greatest contributions was the concept of Self-Realization which spread through the dissemination of Vedanta and of course, Buddhism. Dhyana was the method of meditation that Bodhidharma brought from India to the Shaolin Temple in China. There it was called Ch'an, and after spreading to Japan, it became known as Zen.

Within the cultural context of India there have been many schools of thought, and myriad forms of religious expression, each with an established hierarchy. Through the syncretism of Indian and Western religious philosophies, forms emerged in each that would appeal to the other, or perhaps certain terms and concepts were slightly altered in translation so that they be more easily understood by the other. This process may have been a positive influence on the acceptance of Hindu religious ideas on the part of interested Americans, as compared to previous outsiders who had been exposed to Hindu temples and ritual activities. However, it may have been earlier 'orientalist' assumptions that laid the groundwork for some of the future postcolonial theory regarding Hindu iconography and cosmology.

Which in turn may have led to a self-reflexive, non-ethnocentric understanding of these ideas as a reaction to the narrow scope of prior methodology. When an individual encounters that which is initially seen as ‘exotic’ or ‘other’, there are stages of understanding which are usually passed through, each one building upon the other. Society as a whole may also pass through these stages, and the stages may be seen in time periods and levels of development.

An approach that may be seen in the work of scholars such as Pascal Boyer and Todd Tremlin, is to view religions as being the result of certain types of social stimuli converging to form religious thought within a particular culture. Although there is some value to this approach, the end result is the assumption that every aspect of religious thought has no meaning outside the context of society, and this may not always be the case. While certain imagery, ritual practices, moral codes, and forms of social stratification may be used to justify that assumption, the foundations of religious impulse may not be adequately explained as merely the result of social constructs. As those elements are external influences, the possibility of internal influences (*i.e. biochemical*) must also be considered.

This is the importance of the infusion of Vedanta into the sphere of comprehensive religious understanding. It implores one to look ‘within’ in a way that is perhaps more adaptable and detailed, instead of being only vaguely implied, as we see in many other religious modes. Every existing philosophical and religious expression plays a part in the overall understanding of the cognitive impulses that relate to spirituality. The modern period of Indian saints, and what their lives represent, could have possibly been the most profound entry point into an age of religious understanding in which a growing number of people may transcend the ‘concept’ of religion.

The evidence becomes clear if one looks beyond the fringe of the 1960's subcultural fascination with Eastern philosophies, free thought, and the dissolving of social boundaries. The period can be seen as a cognitive stage that humanity has passed through as part of the process of conceptual maturation. In this sense, Self-Realization itself may be seen as the 'salvation' that is alluded to in the ideas of eternal life, nirvana, or samadhi.

While structured socio-religious methods have served a valuable purpose for some, we have seen them misused by many, and ineffectual for others. The idea of Self-Realization can not be confined to any particular socio-religious structure, and these modern Hindu iconoclasts have all appeared to appeal to this notion. The climate of change that America was entering into during the period in question and America's growing global influence, made it the perfect spot for this infusion to take place.

From Ramakrishna, to the influence of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's Theosophical Society in both America and India; the lives of Ramana Maharshi, Aurobindo, Anandamayi, Krishnamurti, and Shree Maa; and the boundary-dissolving psychedelic revolution of the 1960's; the stage was set for the average person anywhere to experience a more expansive view of the nature of existence. Scientific evidence of the way this works can be found in Rupert Sheldrake's theory of Morphic Resonance, which assumes that the introduction of novelty causes the that same trait to emerge elsewhere without any direct exposure to the source. This may occur as novelty is transmitted through a 'Morphogenetic Field'.²⁹ To prove the theory, isolated groups of animals were taught a new behavior. One which enhanced their ability to survive.

Later there were animals of the same species who exhibited the same new behavior without having had any contact with the isolated group. He proposes that the rate of this informational transfer will eventually rival that of the internet. ³⁰ Atomic theory and the discovery of DNA are also reminiscent of the story of Indra's net of jewels, in which one can see the reflection all of the jewels in the entire net by gazing at any one of the them. This may be the main thrust of Self-Realization. That one may be able to see all that is, by seeing the Self. And, that by seeing the Self, all of the distinctions that lead to attachment and fear can be seen as illusory. In this state, one may experience the one state that many religions are striving for, that being inner peace and assuredness of the well-being of our existential selves.

Yes, there is definitely an external social element to these events. But some theorists have been able to examine the phenomena in light of our evolutionary cognitive history, suggesting that essential human development occurs as a result of biochemical responses to stimuli for the purpose of survival. And, for the accumulation of meaningful categorization that provides conceptual tools that may be used to navigate through not only our physical environment, but also through our cognitive landscapes. The religious impulse may be an integral part of human brain function. It may be a pathway that can be traced neurologically to gain an understanding of the dynamics of human existence that are experienced, though not easily explained. Dr. Rick Strassman writes about this in his book, 'DMT: The Spirit Molecule'.

To transmit and preserve 'religious' abstractions, there would have been a need to anthropomorphize the interaction of energies. Through use of personas and dialogue, it would be easier to convey the ideas in both simple terms, and with extremely dramatic articulation.

This is where ancient Indian philosophical writings have proven to be among the most elaborate and insightful. Though the Vedas are heavily laden with deities and ritual, the end of the Vedas (Advaita Vedanta) found in the Upanishads represents the essentials of Indian religious thought without the embellishment. The cultural constructs then coalesced into concepts that could eventually be later applied universally. For this reason many Western scholars probably chose the Upanishads as the essence of Hindu thought. Of the many schools of Indian thought, Vedanta also took center-stage through the influence of Shankara. This assessment must have been proven to be appropriate, because Vedanta was the primary vehicle for the transmission of Hindu thought amongst Americans.

Conclusion

From the 1860's to the 1960's there very serious questions being asked in regard to justice, freedom, equality, and truth, both in the U.S. and India. Though not political allies during this time, there seemed to be a few existential parallels. At the time of the American Civil War, though still subject to British oppression, India was experiencing a Hindu Renaissance. Even though much of this was political, there was an emergence of figures who transcended that aspect of the situation, and became examples of the human potential for tolerance and wisdom. Later, America's Civil Rights Movement was led by Martin Luther King who was inspired by Mohandas K. Gandhi. It seems to be no coincidence that when the Asian Exclusion Act was repealed, the Civil Rights Act was signed. And, for a growing number of Americans were no longer content with the status quo and religion of their forefathers.

Being exposed to the religious ideals that differed from their own, they were intrigued and found refuge. Some latched on because they found an escape, others because they found an alternative. But, I would like encourage others to gain a different understanding of the time by first examining lives of the extraordinary Indian men and women who I have only briefly mentioned. In doing so, one may uncover a wealth of information that could very well expand their view of themselves and others.

I hoped to avoid idealizing the 1960's as being 'The Dawning of the Age of Aquarius', but it was a very unique time as far the many ideological changes that were taking place. Hindu religious concepts helped many to navigate that journey and I think that American culture, though not perfect, is better off for having gone through it. Indian religious ideas still have plenty to offer us, being useful in expanding our outlook, and in our way of relating to ourselves. Just like the figures that we looked at earlier, the idea is not to convert to anything or follow any kind of 'rulebook'.

The term 'religion' is only a concept. A way to categorize certain aspects of culture for the sake of possibly comprehending it. Richard King states that, "What is required of the study of Indian culture and 'religion' in a post-colonial context is an attempt to think across and beyond traditional Orientalist representations - to 'transgress the boundaries' imposed by normative Western models of 'religion'".³¹ It seems as though the innovation of the modern Indian saints was the ability to 'transgress' the limiting social construction of their own mainstream religious concepts, while finding an expression that represents the essence of concept, devoid of cultural baggage and restraints.

This may explain the relevance of the Indian religious influence on America during the approaching 20th century, and why the 1960's was the culmination of that period. Simply put, there was a significant number of people in America who were trying let go of the 'baggage'. In the brief interpretation of the cognitive evolutionary elements of religious thought, I hoped to present ideas on the way that syncretism plays a role in the spreading of ideologies that could be termed 'spiritual'. And, that the structure of religious cosmologies develop from a combination of sources. The popular models of spirituality in America were not known for being integrative. Within their given social context, they didn't have to be. However, once that social context began to change very rapidly, the desire for alternatives increased.

The lives of these Indian religious innovators provided inspiring examples of the ability go beyond the traditional ways of being 'religious'. While some became enamored by the 'mystical' imagery associated with Hindu religious practices, others were able to see the pragmatic and timeless applications of these practices and ideas. Religious expressions in both India and America were changing with the times. There was the assertion of a 'Hindu' identity coupled with the emergence of a succession of religious visionaries in India.

During the same period (1880's-1960's) there was a growing assertion of individuality and social equality in America. The desire for freedom, both internal and external, led many curious seekers to the Indian religious concepts that were beginning to find their way into modern American culture. Even though both cultures remain different, and there are aspects of Indian religion that are still misunderstood in America, its introduction to this culture has had some very positive and lasting effects.

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2. Flood, *Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 8.
3. Easwaran, *The Upanishads*, p. 203-205.
4. Flood, p. 269.
5. Heehs, *Indian Religions*, p.233-243.
6. McDaniel, *Madness of the Saints*, p. 93-103.
7. Heehs, p.430-431.
8. Flood, p. 256-257.
9. Prabhavananda, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, p. 349.
10. King, p. 93-94.
11. Flood, p. 258.
12. Heehs, p. 447-449.
13. Heehs, p.455-464.
14. Joshi, *Aurobindo and the Mother*, p. 8-17.
15. Heehs, p. 511.
16. Flood, p. 270.
17. Lannoy, *Anandamayi: Her Life and Wisdom*, p. 29-31.
18. Heehs, p. 533-541.
19. Hallstrom, from *The Graceful Guru* (Chapter 3), p.109-115.
20. Urban, *The Power of Tantra*, p. 178-183.
21. Biernacki, from *The Graceful Guru* (Chapter 7), p. 181-188.
22. Syman, *The Subtle Body*, p. 82-83.
23. Urban, *Tantra*, p. 211-212.
24. Love, *The Great Oom*, p. 147-159.
25. Veenhof, *White Lama*, p. 318-328.
26. Ram Dass, *Be Here Now*, p. 6.
27. Goldberg, *American Veda*, p. 227-228.
28. Bhagavan Das, *It's Here Now, Are You?*, Chapters 1, 2, 13, 15, 16.
29. Cranston, H.P.B., p.440-448.
30. Sheldrake w/ McKenna and Abraham, *The Evolutionary Mind*, p.122.
31. King, p. 210.

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