

Eastern Seeds, Western Soil

THREE GURUS IN AMERICA



Polly Trout

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San Diego State University

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Preface

This book examines the lives and teachings of three spiritual leaders born in India who came to the United States in the first half of the twentieth century and made important contributions to the American religious counterculture. Paramananda, Yogananda, and Krishnamurti helped disseminate Hindu ideas into American popular culture. They also contributed to the modern phenomenon of the search for universal religion—a spiritual worldview in which the world’s religions are unraveled in a search for relevant wisdom and recombined into a pluralistic tapestry.

In telling this story I have two goals. First, I wish to sharpen our understanding of the lives and teachings of these three men by placing them in historical context and applying interpretive strategies drawn from psychology and the social sciences. Second, I want to encourage readers to reflect on what these historical figures can teach us about living a fulfilling spiritual life in the modern world. I hope readers find this book to be entertaining and accessible, but at the same time scholarly and educational. The

book is designed to complement the curriculum of a wide range of classes within Religious Studies, such as Introduction to Religion, Religion in America, Psychology of Religion, Hinduism, Mysticism, Asian Religions in America, Religion and Culture in Modern Society, and New Religious Movements. The following features should enhance the effectiveness of this text in the classroom.

I demonstrate the interdisciplinary methodology of Religious Studies. By drawing on the social sciences, psychology, history, and hermeneutics, a concrete example of how the multidisciplinary approach can produce a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of religious material is provided.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the basic tenets and practices of Hinduism. Paramananda, Yogananda, and Krishnamurti were deeply influenced by Modern Hinduism and the historical trajectory that produced it. I review the basics of Hinduism and sketch the cultural background of the religious teachers in such a way that their creative innovations can be better understood.

Chapter 3 surveys the growth of the religious counterculture in the United States. When these teachers came from India to the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, they were welcomed by American sympathizers and seekers. The reactions and motivations of their American followers make more sense when viewed in historical perspective as the outcome of a long period of religious change and modernization.

Chapters 4–6 summarize the biographies and messages of Paramananda, Yogananda, and Krishnamurti. Although the three men shared important interests, each has a fascinating story of his own. The life and beliefs of each are presented in a succinct and clear manner.

After chapters featuring each teacher, I compare and contrast their views along several dimensions. Once the students are familiar with the basic messages of Paramananda, Yogananda, and Krishnamurti, they will be ready to tackle key themes with more depth. I focus on two clusters of interpretive issues: the way the three teachers struggled with issues of power and authority in the American cultural context and their quest for a universal religion that

would speak to the specific challenges to traditional religion posed by social modernization.

I balance the social scientific approach with the phenomenological approach. Finally, the text illustrates a perennial debate within Religious Studies: When is it appropriate to take a secular, critical stance in the interpretation of religion, and when is it more appropriate to emphasize respect for and acceptance of beliefs that challenge the scientific worldview? I offer critical theories as interpretive strategies, but I remind the reader throughout that these are only theories. In the final analysis, each reader must decide for him- or herself where to draw the line.

My scholarship has been informed by the trend within American religious history, pioneered by Sidney Ahlstrom, of understanding the religious narrative as one of diversity and competition rather than homogeneity. Within this broader movement, some scholars have worked specifically on Buddhist contributions to American religious history; their work has been invaluable to me. I have particularly relied on the interpretive models of Thomas Tweed, Stephen Prothero, and Richard Seager.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In 1893, a young missionary from Calcutta shivered miserably on the deck of a steamer, eyeing the fur coats of his fellow travelers with envy as they regarded his tropical robe with a mixture of disdain and fascination. His name was **Swami** Vivekananda, and he was headed for the New World. He had no money, no connections, and no invitation. He believed that his divine calling was to spread the universal truths embedded within Hinduism to the West, and that he would do so on a podium at the World's Parliament of Religions. Against great odds, it worked: A few months later he catapulted from obscurity to instant fame, the darling of the American press as his rhetoric rang out triumphantly in Chicago.

Perhaps his success was the result of his own chutzpah; perhaps it was an inevitable outcome of that dense tapestry of cause and accident we call history. Either way, the forces that propelled Vivekananda across the Pacific have left a faint trace over American culture. Today, as I leaf through the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, the vocabulary of his conquest shimmers in the half-light of imagination. Karma. Reincarnation. Dharma. Brahman. Atman. Yoga. All, now, a part of our language—a part of “American heritage.” I want to tell you part of the story of how Americans

came to embrace the language of Hinduism as a part of the vocabulary we use to construct our world.

Vivekananda's journey represents the beginning of a new era in which Hindu religious teachers and their American disciples embarked on a quest for the Holy Grail of modern religion: a universal teaching that could lead each and every person, regardless of their point of origin, to spiritual perfection. They believed that they could accomplish this by creating a *science* of religion. Through reason and experiment, they believed they could cull what was good and true out of all the world's religious traditions, leaving superstition behind. This is the story of the women and men who made that journey, of what they learned, and of the limits of their success. The search for universal religion led them to believe that at its best religion is as individual and personal as a love affair. The **gurus** (authoritative spiritual teachers with Asian Indian philosophical leanings) had hoped to transcend the confining grid of cultural assumptions, but their disciples hijacked their vision to help build a worldview that was unmistakably American.

In the decades that followed Vivekananda's passage, a handful of Indian religious teachers journeyed to the United States and joined this new religious counterculture. I compare three representatives from this movement: Swami Paramananda of the Ramakrishna-Vedanta Society, **Paramahansa** Yogananda of the Self-Realization Fellowship, and Jiddu Krishnamurti.

The individual lives of these teachers and their students cannot be fully appreciated unless they are viewed within their social and historical contexts. To that end, I argue that early American Hindu movements can be viewed as a case study in religious modernization, and that thinking about them in this way helps us both to better understand the movements themselves and to better understand what it is like to live a reflectively religious life in the modern world.

To focus my discussion of such a broad theme, I look in particular at the relationships between these teachers and their students. What goals did they have in common? Where do their

needs and dreams differ? Did cultural assumptions bind them or separate them? What role did gender play in the way male gurus influenced female disciples? What does it mean to have or be a “guru,” and how has this role influenced the development of the American religious counterculture? When the lives of these people are examined in light of these questions, two patterns emerge. First, the students, regardless of their rhetoric of obedience, were active players in this drama, shaping the teachings to meet their particular needs. Second, while the rational quest for universal truth brought the gurus and disciples together, what kept them together in the end was the redemptive miracle of face-to-face love, the healing encounter between self and other that transcends reason and renders the quest for **universalism** meaningless. These patterns of interpersonal relationships have something to teach us about why religion remains a vital force in American society, and how the idea of the religious quest is continuously modified to meet the spiritual and psychological demands of individuals living in modern society.

In order to provide a deeper understanding of the religious worldviews of these historical figures, I use methods from psychology and the social sciences. The academic study of religion is a multidisciplinary field, and religion scholars use many different interpretive strategies. Some scholars practice the phenomenological approach. This means that they report thoughtfully and carefully on the beliefs of others, but do not think that it is appropriate to pass judgment on whether these beliefs are true. A scholar using this method, for example, would faithfully report on the belief that a miracle had occurred and leave it at that. Another approach used by scholars in religious studies is the social scientific approach, also called the critical or skeptical approach. These scholars seek natural explanations for religious phenomena. When these scholars study the report of a miracle, they ask whether the event can be conclusively documented. If not, they ask if it is possible to explain the belief in the miracle in a scientific way, without reference to supernatural events.

In this book, I offer critical theories concerning some aspects of religion and the teachings of the gurus I study. They are *only* theories; there is no way to scientifically prove or disprove the truth of religious beliefs. However, by looking at them from a variety of perspectives and considering in turn both phenomenological and social scientific interpretations, we have an opportunity to deepen our appreciation for the complexity and mystery of the human condition. In the end, each reader must decide for himself or herself whether the supernatural events reported by these gurus are literally true or can be better understood from a critical perspective.

THE HISTORY OF AMERICA'S FASCINATION WITH HINDUISM

American fascination with Hindu ideas has a long history and can be divided into three periods. The first period lasted from the early nineteenth century to 1893.¹ During this time, English translations of Asian philosophical texts were increasingly available to American intellectuals and sparked a fair amount of interest. Salient ideas were plucked out of the Asian context and reworked by American thinkers, filtering in turn to their readers, who first came across ideas such as reincarnation and **karma** as embedded planks in non-Hindu worldviews. During this time, American interaction with Hinduism was entirely intellectual and textual; how actual Indians lived and thought was not considered relevant.

This situation changed in 1893, when the Chicago World's Fair hosted what was to become a watershed event in American religious history: the World's Parliament of Religions. The Parliament gathered speakers from the world's religious traditions to share their beliefs in a relatively tolerant setting. One of the speakers, the dynamic Swami Vivekananda, stayed on in America. He made an extensive lecture tour and set up the Ramakrishna-Vedanta Society, which for many decades would be the most successful disseminator of Hindu teachings in the United States. His success was enthusiastically followed by Indian nationalist news-

papers and inspired other Hindu teachers to follow his example. From 1893 onward Americans interested in Hindu philosophy had the opportunity to study under actual Indian gurus rather than from texts alone. It is this second period of American Hinduism, lasting from 1893 to 1965, that is the scope of this book.

In the early 1920s, a series of bigoted immigration laws made it difficult for many ethnic groups, including those from Asia, to come to the United States. These laws were lifted in 1965, ushering in the third and contemporary period of the history of Hinduism in America. The subsequent explosion of Asian religious options in the United States is more familiar to the American public. It is often forgotten that this explosion was in part made possible by earlier pioneers, who for decades had been publishing, speaking, and organizing as a vital part of the American religious counterculture. The Asian flavor of the 1970s counterculture was the fruition of a long flirtation with Indian philosophy.²

The increase of Hindu religious options in the United States has coincided with a larger trend in American religion. Since the early nineteenth century, American religion has become increasingly diversified and privatized, especially among the intellectual elite. From the Transcendentalists onward, a distinct American subculture has been developing within which experimentation with religious ways of life beyond Christianity is commonplace. Within this movement Hindu ideas have jockeyed for position with a colorful menagerie of spiritual options: Spiritualism, Theosophy, New Thought, New Age, Neo-Shamanism—the list goes on and on, yet members of all these groups are in some sense co-travelers. Among them, individual choice based on reason and personal experience is more important to the participants than inherited dogma. Individuals often move from group to group within the counterculture, and over time creatively combine elements gathered from a variety of traditions into a uniquely personalized religious worldview.³ American Hindu groups, from their inception, not only have participated in this counterculture, but also have intentionally helped shape and defend it. In fact, all three of the teachers discussed in this book—Paramananda,

Yogananda, and Krishnamurti—defined themselves primarily as internationalists who transcended local traditions rather than as Hindus.

The desire to transcend cultural assumptions and grasp absolute truth has been a part of the Hindu tradition since ancient times. These men did not invent this attitude but, rather, rediscovered it and refashioned it to meet the spiritual needs of a new generation. They then brought it to the United States. Many of their Western disciples came to believe that this way of looking at religion—as an experimental quest for truth rather than an act of blind faith in received dogma—provided them with a new way of living a spiritual life that was in step with the challenges of the modern world.

THE RISE OF AMERICAN HINDUISM

I am getting ahead of the story. First, it is necessary to backtrack to India and the social forces that propelled these teachers toward America in the first place. In the nineteenth century, religious options in India were also shifting due to rapidly changing social conditions. Calcutta was the hub of a religious reform movement known as the Indian Renaissance. The Renaissance was driven by Indian intellectuals who had received Western educations and ingested many modern, Western values, but who retained an affection for their own traditions and an appreciation for the complexity and sophistication of Asian religious philosophies. They found Western science, democracy, and ethics enormously compelling, but a combination of cultural pride and keen observation of the failures of Western culture ruled out straightforward assimilation. Although the Renaissance affected a variety of cultural activities—literature, music, philosophy, politics, economics—I am concerned here only with the rise of Modern Hinduism, a reform movement that sought to purge traditional Hinduism of what was seen as superstition and social injustice while preserving its philosophical grandeur. During this time, a variety of religious teachers, influenced by Western education and national pride, set