from YOGA *to* KABBALAH

religious exoticism and the logics of bricolage

VÉRONIQUE ALTGLAS

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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Oxford New York
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Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

CIP data is on file at the Library of Congress

ISBN 978–0–19–999762–6 (hbk); 978–0–19–999763–3 (pbk)

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

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Acknowledgments

THE SUCCESS OF academic work is not a single person's effort. It depends on the encouragement and contribution of many others. My greatest debts are to the many research participants who allowed me to "hang around" and agreed to tell me their life stories. This book would never have materialized without their contribution.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Jim Beckford, Monique Bénard, Françoise Champion, Robert Fine, Roberte Hamayon, and David Lehmann, who have profoundly influenced me throughout the years of my education and early career. I hope they will feel the time and attention they spent on me has not been totally in vain.

I am particularly grateful to my colleagues of Queen's University Belfast for their willingness to read and comment on parts of this book: Nicola Carr, Lisa Smyth and, most of all, Matthew Wood. His boundless patience, intellectual interest, and critical reading have deeply stimulated and improved this work. The mistakes, omissions, and misconceptions are nonetheless mine alone.

From Yoga to Kabbalah

1

The Cultural and Historical Dimensions of Religious Exoticism

THIS FIRST CHAPTER is a preliminary step to the understanding of the dissemination of religious teachings rooted in Hinduism and Judaism in contemporary societies; it aims to provide an overview of the cultural and historical context of this process. Three sections structure this chapter. The first section looks at the emergence and dissemination of Hindu teachings in Euroamerican societies; the second section explores the spread of Kabbalistic teachings, within and without a Jewish environment. These historical sketches also give us an opportunity to present our case studies, the Siddha Yoga, the Sivananda Centres, and the Kabbalah Centre, and to get a sense of the context in which these religious teachings have been disseminated. These two historical overviews are followed by a general discussion, in the third section, regarding the ways in which exotic and mystical religions have been constructed and disseminated.

This chapter underlines that Vedantic and Kabbalistic teachings have been constructed, disseminated, and appropriated in ways which reflect desires and expectations that were, at first, external to traditional Hinduism and Judaism. Nineteenth-century romantic orientalism, Western esoteric movements, and later the youth counterculture of the 1960s all contributed to representations of Vedanta or Kabbalah not only as mystical and mysterious but also as universal and timeless sources of wisdom. Furthermore, these representations are inextricably linked to their polar opposite: the individualistic, materialistic, secular, and decadent West. Accordingly, the exploration and use of these *alternative* religious resources were hoped to revitalize Euroamerican contemporary religious and cultural life. Finally, this historical overview starts to introduce the various ways in which neo-Hindu gurus and Jewish leaders endorsed and contributed to these representations and desires. Overall, this

chapter describes the historical and cultural context that makes certain exotic religious resources appropriable, thereby structuring contemporary practices of bricolage. It emphasizes the fact that the elaboration of such appropriable exotic religious resources is not independent from ambivalent cultural relations and encounters. Because they trigger both fascination and repulsion, their appropriation is likely to be selective and to entail their detachment from their cultural environment.

Hinduism for the "West"

The first section of this chapter describes the contemporary popularization of Hindu teachings in the light of the general encounter between India and Europe that took place in the colonial context. Gurus and their teaching of yoga and meditation, as we now know them, have been the inheritors of what has been called a Hindu renaissance or reform. While this renaissance was undoubtedly an attempt to reassert the value of Hinduism, in response to both colonial rule and Christian missions with their civilizing justifications, it inevitably embraced European ideas about what Hinduism is or should be (Halbfass 1988, 1995; Jones 1989; Kopf 1969, 1979). Thus, to a certain extent, the "East" has been shaped in the "West's" own terms, even before being disseminated in Euroamerican societies. In addition, as we shall see, the dissemination of westernized Hindu ideas and practices is itself the result of this particular encounter between India and Europe; it is a form of counter-mission in response to colonial rule and Christian missionary activity in India.

The Emergence of Neo-Hinduism

A Hindu renaissance started in nineteenth-century India, in Calcutta, where European ideas, technology, and social change first spread. An anglicized Bengali elite founded socio-religious reform movements in order to transform society and in particular religious traditions, in order to achieve "progress." This effort involved the application of Western criteria, albeit through a return to a triumphant "golden age" of Hindu civilization (Jones 1989, 212). The emergence of these socio-religious reform movements (and hence of modernized, westernized forms of Hinduism) represents, to a certain extent, a response to Christian missionary work in India, as well as to colonialism's civilizing justification. By the end of the eighteenth century in India, more than 300 Protestant missions had been established; they became involved in moral, religious, social, and political matters. Missionaries unsurprisingly saw Hinduism as an obstacle both for social progress and for the dissemination

of Christianity in India. Crusading against idolatry, polytheism, ritualism, and the caste system, missions were providing social services and were the advocates of religious reforms (acceptance of monotheism, rejection of Hindu doctrines and forms of worship, etc.) in order to "save" the Indian population from darkness and bring them enlightenment (Oddie 1979). Far from being tempted by conversion, a section of the Hindu elite instead faced this challenge, making an effort instead to modernize Hinduism. The socio-religious reform movements they founded added a new dimension of social service to Hinduism, which, combined with the defense of monotheism, aimed to combat ritualism and popular religion, and in so doing, to restore the purity of Hinduism (Jones 1989, 208).

In this quest for a restored Hinduism, interactions with European orientalists were crucial. The Bengali elite, with their Brahmin caste status, were perceived by European scholars as the equivalent of the Christian ecclesiastic authority, and they were involved in the European translation and study of India's languages, literature, and religious and philosophical systems. Accordingly, the Bengali elite significantly contributed to the shaping of knowledge and representations of Hinduism (Frykenberg 1997, 89–90). Yet at the same time, they were influenced by the ideas of European scholars, especially by the romantic idealized representations of India (Kopf 1969). European orientalists tended to perceive contemporary India as a civilization in decline, consequently in need of the tutelage of European civilization. Indeed, these Europeans had no interest in popular and contemporary religious life, which was seen as a degradation of Hinduism. Instead, they were looking for its "golden age," an apparently pure Hinduism to be found in the Gita and the Upanishads. A romantic orientalism was looking after untouched mysticism and truths, apparently lost by a soulless modern European society (Inden 1986). Romantic orientalists thus described a primordial, spiritual, and mysterious India, the universal source of all civilizations, which, in the romantic mindset, contrasted with a modern, secular, and decadent West. Accordingly, European scholars were eager to explore Hindu systems of thought in the hope that they would rediscover the ancient sources of their own civilization, thereby sparking a new renaissance in Europe, as had once happened with the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Latin sources. In other words, while nineteenth-century Europe was experiencing rapid and frightening social changes (individualism, industrialization, urbanization, secularization) through which it seemed to lose traditional forms of life, a primordial and religious Indian civilization was expected to provide an alternative source whereby European degeneracy might be overcome (Inden 1986; Schwab 1950). This was the fate of the "mystical East." However, this representation

of a Hindu "golden age," capable of generating a European renaissance, was not simply a unilateral discourse imposed on others. It was also orientalism's "most enduring ideological contribution to India's cultural self-image" (Kopf 1969, 284), appealing to the Indian elite, who were trying to reform traditions and shape a national identity through religion. In other words, for the Indian elite, the idea of renaissance meant regenerating India, rather than Europe, even if, paradoxically, this rehabilitation meant the modernization and westernization of Hinduism itself.

The Hindu renaissance relates to nineteenth-century Indian socio-religious reform movements, the most significant of which are the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Theosophical Society, and the Ramakrishna Mission (I will present the latter in the following section, as its dissemination in European and American societies initiates a new phase of the development of this nascent "neo-Hinduism.") The Brahmo Samaj was founded in 1828 by Ram Mohun Roy (1772–1833), called the "father of modern India" (Halbfass 1988, 198). Ram Mohun Roy was the first Hindu to write extensively on law, religion, education, or politics; his translation of the Upanishads into English greatly facilitated its access to European scholars (Killingley 1993, 2). Born to a Brahmin family, he worked for the East India Company and was therefore familiar with the colonial milieu before dedicating his life to social and religious reform in India. Familiar with the works of European orientalists and intellectuals (Kopf 1969, 198), he explored and interpreted the Vedic literature in search of a pure Hindu tradition; he found it in the Vedas, identifying what he considered to be a monotheistic principle and the universal essence of religion (Sharma 1990). Ram Mohun Roy actually embraced contemporary Western rational theism, defining his religion as "the rational worship of the God of nature." He also used the Enlightenment's terminology and spoke of the "Supreme Being" (Killingley 1993). He thus defended monotheism, rejected Brahmanic ritualism and popular religious practices that he considered idolatrous, polytheistic, immoral, and not in conformity with the true spirit of original Hinduism. In doing so, he was furthering the European distinction between a true Hindu tradition, which he identified with Advaita Vedanta, and a corrupted Hinduism—a representation that other Indian thinkers such as Gandhi and Vivekananda continued to depend on (Killingley 1993, 63–64). Ram Mohun Roy's organization, the Brahmo Samaj, discarded ritual and the use of images, focusing instead on the reading of Upanishads and the singing of theistic hymns (Mukherjee 1978a, 274–275), in ways which reflected the rational theism of the Unitarianism that had influenced Roy. Indeed, interestingly, in 1821 Ram Mohun Roy had founded the "Unitarian Committee" with Unitarians, to promote the worship of one God (it was his followers who

suggested establishing a distinct organization, the Brahmo Samaj, in 1828). He was also influenced by Unitarianism's advocacy of social reform when he opened the Brahmo Samaj to all castes. Against the rigidity of the caste system, he defended an egalitarian principle: he insisted on the possibility that anyone could come to know God and find salvation. He advocated access to the Hindu scriptures for all, supporting their translation into vernacular languages. Roy also attempted to apply principles of social ethics and welfare to Hinduism. His most well-known struggle in this respect was against the practice of *sati*, the burning of widows, which was subsequently forbidden in 1829. He also fought against child marriage and polygamy, and he promoted a westernized education system. Ram Mohun Roy was celebrated by European and American orientalists and philosophers as a bridge between East and West. However, he was at the same time criticized by both Christian missionaries and orthodox Hindus, who disliked his westernized interpretation of that tradition. Indeed, Ram Mohun Roy would become the symbol of an affirming Hindu identity, confronting Christianity on its grounds (Halbfass 1988) and claiming the superior universality of Hinduism. Strikingly, his universalism may have been influenced by Western theism. The Brahmo Samaj remained an intellectual movement influenced by European thought, whose audience was limited to an elite (Mukherjee 1978a, 289). While it was pivotal in awakening Indian pride, it declined at the turn of the twentieth century, as nationalism rose and generated new expressions of Indian identity. However, the representation of a monotheistic and universal Hinduism was to become the cornerstone of neo-Hindu teachings, which later spread beyond Indian borders.

The Arya Samaj, founded in 1875 by Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883), was more conservative and unwilling to incorporate elements of European culture; nevertheless, it also offered a modernization of Hinduism that drew on Western influence. A Brahmin from Gujarat, Saraswati studied Vedanta and yoga and reached the conclusion that the worship of divinities is not contained in the Vedic scriptures (Sharma 1978, 320–321). Contemporary Hinduism was therefore in his views impregnated with superstition and ignorance, and a reform was necessary to return to a certain religious authenticity. Preaching with a solid knowledge of Sanskrit and the scriptures (and of orientalist works on the Vedas; Jordens 1978, 56), Saraswati claimed that in the Vedic literature God is one and infinite and should not be represented as an "idol"; he also rejected some of the taboos linked to caste, ritualism, and popular devotional practices (Jordens 1978, 60–71). His celebration of the authority and the universality of the Vedas underlined a Hindu self-assertion, similar to that of Brahmo Samaj. For Saraswati, the Vedic tradition must become the national

religion of India—and the Arya Samaj was to become the seed of emergent Indian nationalism (Jaffrelot 1993, 31). Saraswati frequented the Brahmo Samaj and was influenced by their organizational structure and their liberal approach to education and the social role of women (Jordens 1978). He shared the movement's commitment to monotheism and its critique of popular religious practices. Yet he was opposed to the westernization that, in his view, the Brahmo Samaj represented. More confrontational, he openly criticized Christianity, entered into theological arguments with missionaries (Jaffrelot 1992, 376), and claimed the superiority of the Vedic tradition that, according to him, Christianity had poorly imitated. In its attempt to counter Christian missions, Arya Samaj not only engaged in various educational, philanthropic, and economic programs, combated child marriage, and promoted education for girls, but also aimed to re-convert Christians and Muslims to Hinduism. As Hinduism had not had any ritual of conversion, the Arya Samaj used a ritual of purification for this purpose, thereby imitating Christianity. Like the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj illustrates the emergence of modern forms of Hinduism in the colonial context, combining Hindu self-assertion with Western criteria (monotheism, rationality, social reform, universality) and representations (a superior Hindu golden age). In other words, reclaiming Hinduism paradoxically meant including Western values and expectations, thereby conforming to the orientalist representation of the "mystical East" while adapting it to modern Western values. Again, this is crucial, as contemporary neo-Hindu movements teaching in Euroamerican societies have drawn from this reformed Hinduism in many ways, as we shall see.

Finally, the Theosophical Society, an esoteric movement founded in 1875 in New York, has usually been understood as part of the Hindu renaissance. Indeed, like Hindu reform movements, the Theosophical Society in India was strongly influenced by orientalism and asserted a Hindu identity in confrontation with what was perceived as European imperialism. Considering that religions practiced today in their exoteric form are shaped by ignorance and superstition, the Theosophical Society aimed to purify them by revealing their authentic and common meaning (Besant, 1993, 13). Its well-known founder, Helena Pretovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), had been impressed by the works of the orientalists, becoming convinced that the Vedas were the source of all religious traditions. The Theosophical Society thus celebrated and looked for India's antique wisdom, although its understanding of Hinduism was undoubtedly closer to Western occultism than to the Vedas themselves (Hanegraaff 1998, 449, 455). This quest for Eastern ancient wisdom was combined with a strong criticism of the colonization of India, the goal of which was to rule rather than learn from its culture. Therefore the founders of the Theosophical Society,

William Q. Judge (1851–1896), Helena Pretovna Blavatsky, and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), aimed to help Indians rediscover their glorious past, which, in romantic fashion, they opposed to a degenerated Western civilization.[1] It is from this perspective that the Theosophical Society first sought alliance with Dayananda Saraswati, founder of Arya Samaj and vehement critic of British imperialism. This letter, sent by Colonel Olcott to Saraswati, announcing their coming to India, is very revealing:

> A number of Americans and other students who earnestly seek after spiritual knowledge, place themselves at your feet, and pray you to enlighten them. They are of various professions and callings, of several different countries, but all united in the one object of gaining wisdom and becoming better. For this purpose, they, three years ago, organized themselves in to [*sic*] a body called the Theosophical Society. Finding in Christianity nothing that satisfied their reason of intuition... They stood apart from the world, turned to the East for light, and openly proclaimed themselves the foes of Christianity.... For this reason, we come to your feet as children to a parent, and say "look as us, our teacher; tell us what we ought to do.... We place ourselves under your instruction." (cited in Jordens 1978, 209)

This letter illustrates the fact that the fascination for Asian religions is intrinsically intertwined with a romantic and nostalgic critique of Western modernity; I contend that this remains an implicit element of the twentieth century's fascination for Asian religions. Thus, the movement was temporarily renamed as the Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj of India in 1878 and recognized Saraswati as its leader. At the time, Blavatsky seemed to share with Saraswati the belief in the Veda as the authentic and unique source of truth. But disagreements on doctrines, in particular regarding the theosophists' criticisms of contemporary Hinduism (which is also consubstantial to orientalism and its imperialistic foundation), rapidly led to the separation of the two parties (Kamerkar 1978, 400–402). In India, the Theosophical Society's orientalist discourse attracted as many Indians as Europeans. It condemned the West's imperialism and materialism, its insatiable quest for the technological control of the world, instead celebrating the glorious and ancient past of India, the sacred land that had engendered Western civilization. The Theosophical Society also criticized Christianity for its individualism, while Hinduism was said to replace the individual in the cosmos as a manifestation of the divine, thus fostering a certain sense of service, duty, and solidarity (Bevir, 2000, 164–165). A library in Adyar and schools were opened to promote the study of Sanskrit

and ancient texts, with the support and enthusiasm of Hindu religious leaders and the Indian elite, attracted by this study in a flexible and non-religious environment (Oddie 1991, 191–211). Theosophists also contributed to social reform, condemning caste distinctions and promoting education and the participation of women in civil society. The influence of the Theosophical Society in India is far from insignificant—more than 100 branches existed in India in 1884. It responded to Indian resentment regarding European arrogance and fears regarding the possible expansion of Christianity; it also accompanied the emergence of nationalist sentiments and political activities (Risseuw 2000, 184; Oddie 1991, 192). Indeed, the theosophists' discourse on India's golden age and universal wisdom contributed to the shaping of an emerging national identity, providing counterarguments to European contempt and criticisms. British journalist Annie Besant, successor as the head of the Theosophical Society, was to pursue this celebration of ancient India, becoming a prominent political actor who was involved in anti-colonial troubles and who ultimately became president of the Indian National Congress in 1917 (Kamerkar 1978, 406–409; Bevir 2000, 175). Finally, it should be noted that beyond the Indian peninsula, the role of the Theosophical Society for the dissemination of Asian religions was pivotal. The Society renewed Western esotericism to a considerable extent, in drawing on Asian religions. Furthermore, as the first esoteric channel of knowledge of Hindu and Buddhist ideas in Europe and North America, it facilitated the success of the first Hindu personalities who were to teach in Euroamerican societies (French 1974, 92).

Overall, these socio-religious reform movements of colonial India throw light on the fact that certain expressions of Hinduism have been considerably transformed by its encounter with European culture in the colonial context. It gave rise to a "neo-Hinduism"[2] whose leaders, despite their ideological differences, share one common trait:

> Their intellectual formation is primarily or predominantly Western. It is European culture, and in several cases even the Christian religion, which has led them to embrace certain religious, ethical, social, and political values. But afterwards, they connect these values with, and claim them as, part of the Hindu tradition. (Hacker in Halbfass 1995, 231)

Neo-Hinduism is therefore best characterized by a process through which Western values are first embraced and then incorporated into a new vision of Hinduism, in a quest for its primordial purity. In a colonial encounter, the assimilation of those values to which the superiority of the "West" is attributed (rationality, monotheism, universalism, egalitarianism, textualism, and

congregational worship) represents a means of more effective resistance (Jaffrelot 1992, 378), even if this meant reshaping "Hinduism" on the model of Christianity (Thapar 1997). Nonetheless, neo-Hinduism, as Hacker stresses, always claims to go back to its primordial and genuine sources. According to Halbfass (1988, 220), what is specific to neo-Hinduism is its particular invocation of tradition as the source of "the power and context for its response to the West."

It is precisely this westernized form of Hinduism that was to spread to Euroamerican societies. Consequently, what has come from the "East" has been profoundly inspired by Western culture, in particular by what the "West" expected the "East" to be: a cultural supplement in the shape of a timeless and universal wisdom, but which leaves behind its rituals, the worship of multiple divinities, and all that the Euroamerican mindset is not ready to value. The reception of religious resources from Asia cannot be understood as a surprisingly natural complementarity between "East" and "West."

Hindu Mission and Westernization

The very idea of a universal and missionary Hinduism results from the encounter with Europe. In fact, the transnational dissemination of neo-Hinduism can be understood as a "counter-mission" (Hummel 1988, 16) that responded to and confronted the colonization of, and Christian proselytism within, India—in such a way that religious revitalization, national identity, and mission abroad could be interwoven. In other words, the popularization of Hindu teaching is partly the result of the colonization of India and the westernization of Hinduism and cannot be understood solely by a tendency of modern Euroamerican societies toward bricolage. Furthermore, disseminating neo-Hinduism in these social environments entailed taking into account expectations of a universal, practical, and inner-worldly Hinduism that emphasizes individual self-realization. Accordingly, the trend of westernization, involving partial detachment of Hindu concepts and practices from their cultural roots, is accelerated as it is widely disseminated. This is already suggested by the Ramakrishna Mission, the first neo-Hindu movement implanted in North America and Europe.

Ramakrishna Mission's leader, Vivekananda (1863–1902), was the first Indian religious figure to successfully introduce Hinduism on the international scene, at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1893). The aim of this event, organized by Unitarians, was to celebrate the unity of people and religions, despite the fact that they expected this convergence would result from the acknowledgment of Christianity's universal value (Bainbridge

1997, 181). Vivekananda was considered to be one of the most outstanding personalities of the Parliament (French 1974, 55). Like the neo-Hindu reformers I have already presented, Vivekananda was deeply influenced by Western culture: in addition to the English education he received at the Scottish Presbyterian College and his familiarity with European philosophy (Halbfass 1988, 229), his initiation into the Masonic lodge of Calcutta in 1884 probably familiarized him with Western esotericism (de Michelis 2004, 93–100). His involvement in the Brahmo Samaj during his youth has also been considered a predominant influence in his approach to the Vedantic literature, much more than the traditional approach of his master, Ramakrishna (1836–1886). Vivekananda's aim in coming to the Parliament of Religions in Chicago was originally to seek material help for his country. However, his unexpected success in the United States encouraged him to begin missionary work instead. It persuaded him that relations between East and West were changing direction, announcing a new era of glorification for India.

Vivekananda's success was the result of the way he expressed the opposition embedded in orientalism between the materialistic, nature-controlling, egoistic, decadent, and secular West, on the one hand, and India's "golden age," where Hindus were the spiritual leaders of the world, on the other (King 1985, 8–11). He therefore embraced the orientalist myth of the East-West difference and complementarity: "You of the West are practical in business, practical in great inventions but we of the East are practical in religion. You make commerce with your business; we make religion our business" (cited in Burke 1986, 160–161). No doubt this opposition between the materialistic West and the religious, spiritual East echoed Western self-criticism and aspiration toward revitalization through Asian religions. Indeed, this was a discourse shaped by the West that was offered to North Americans and Europeans, but which at the same time accorded a primary role to India in the world. In fact, the glorification of Hinduism's spiritual heritage and conversion of Westerners represented a means by which national Indian pride and identity could be revalorized and India's role could be redefined as a spiritual guide for the West. This self-asserting Hindu identity was also clearly evident when, returning to India, Vivekananda spoke to his countrymen:

> Heroic workers are wanted to go abroad and help to disseminate the great truth of Vedanta. The world wants it; without it the world is destroyed.... We must go out; we must conquer the world with our spirituality and philosophy. There is no alternative, we must do it or die.

> The only condition of national life, of awakened and vigorous national life, is the conquest of the world by Indian thought. (Vivekananda 1985, 100)

In other words, missionary ambitions in Europe and America were combined with orientalist representations of Indian-ness in a quest for the revitalization of Indian society and the shaping of a national identity. This was made clear by the fact that on his return to India, Vivekananda was acclaimed as a national hero (Mukherjee 1978b, 13; Sharma 1998, 61), despite criticisms from those who thought his teaching was too Westernized. There, he spoke in defense of traditional Hinduism and expressed greater anti-Western sentiments (Beckerlegge 2000, 52–78; Jackson 1994, 30–31).

After participating in the Parliament, Vivekananda spent two years in the United States. He also traveled to France and England, where he made some of his most important disciples (French 1974, 67), and again to the United States between 1899 and 1900, when the neo-Hindu mission spread most successfully. The first "Vedanta Society" was founded in New York in 1895: the Mission would continue to strengthen with Indian disciples whom Vivekananda later sent to maintain local branches. Vivekananda inaugurated the collective teaching of Hinduism to Europeans and Americans. He attracted individuals from the middle and upper middle classes, generally close to the margins of religion in North America—the New Thought, Unitarianism, esoteric circles such as Theosophy and Rosicrucianism. Vedantic societies were adapted to their new environment, for example by giving to satsangs (religious gatherings) the shape of dominical services and using the organizational models of Christian organizations as Vivekananda knew them in India (French 1974, 156; Jackson 1994, *passim*). Vivekananda was actually happy to adapt his teaching to please his new disciples (Killingley 1999); he was aware that Westerners liked only "some" of the ideas of the Hindu scriptures, while some topics like caste, sacred doctrines, or the status of women seemed better avoided (De Michelis 2004, 120). There was a relative absence, on the Western side of the Ramakrishna Mission, of prescriptions regarding practices and behaviors; no particular Hindu god was celebrated, and there was no insistence on a body of doctrine either (French 1974, 156, 158). Vivekananda and his swamis presented Vedanta as "practical" rather than doctrinal, and consequently relevant to modern daily life (Jackson 1994, 64).

The crucial point here is that the transnational diffusion of neo-Hinduism entailed presenting itself in ways that Euroamerican societies would expect and celebrate, in ways which required that its teaching be detached from particular aspects of Indian religious life, social norms, and values (hence a start

of de-contextualization). Despite the fact that Vivekananda felt compelled to defend traditional Hinduism in Euroamerican societies against misrepresentations and criticisms by missionaries, this is not the "modern Hinduism with all its ugliness" that he wanted to present (Vivekananda cited in Beckerlegge 2000, 57). Instead, this was a purified, universal, inner-worldly, and practical Vedanta.[3] In tune with Ram Mohun Roy's universalism, Vivekananda claimed that, contrary to Christian transcendence and personal God, only Vedanta could transcend religious creeds.

Furthermore, Vivekananda invited his followers not to consider Vedanta as a doctrine but as a "practical" method of liberation. This definition of the teaching as a "practical spirituality" (Vivekananda 1968), here implicitly opposed to the doctrinal and theoretical character of religion (hence of Christianity), is a recurrent theme among neo-Hindu movements today. It also provides the justification for de-linking these teachings from their religious and cultural roots. For Vivekananda, the "practical" quality of Vedanta mainly meant that it was compatible with engagement in the world—a crucial claim, since the otherworldly character of the Hindu salvation paths was seen, in particular by Christian missionaries, as unsuited for social engagement and activities and hence entailed no moral or social consequences (Halbfass 1988, 241). Thus, while the material world is considered illusory in Vedantic philosophy, Vivekananda innovated in providing an inner-worldly interpretation. This allowed him to see in the Vedanta an invitation to social reform (Beckerlegge 1998, 159–160) and to involve the Ramakrishna Mission in education, social reform, and medical relief in India (Vivekananda was greatly impressed by the social institutions developed by Christian missions; French 1974, 169).

This perspective also contributed to the universalisation of Vedanta: far from only concerning a minority of people who could become ascetics and renounce the world, salvation was instead made compatible with inner-worldly activities (Jackson 1994, 31), and Vedanta therefore became applicable to all, regardless of caste, gender, occupation, creed, walk of life, and so on. This can be understood as a revolution in Hinduism, if one remembers that traditionally Hindus contribute to the cosmic order precisely by rituals and social duties that are specific to gender, age group, and hereditary social group (caste) from which those who are not born in India were in theory excluded (Halbfass 1988, 331).

In the United States, possibly influenced by the New Thought's emphasis on personal responsibility for individual development and healing (de Michelis 2004, 122), Vivekananda's "practical spirituality" also emphasized the presence of the divine in each person and the ability for all to reach self-realization. Indeed, for Advaita Vedanta, Maya generates an illusory sense of personal

existence that prevents human beings from knowing Brahman as truth, consciousness, and bliss. Salvation comes from the realization that the self (*atman*) is not an individual "I" but nothing other than Brahman itself. Yet Chapter 5 of this volume will show that in Euroamerican societies, "self-realization" is largely understood as a very individualistic quest for personal fulfillment and growth, rather than the annihilation of individuality. In other words, Vivekananda promoted a profoundly exoteric, inner-worldly, and individualistic path, attracting its first disciples through Vedanta's alleged universalism, its practical dimension, and its distinct methods for encountering the divine (Jackson 1994, 100). Hinduism was thus abstracted away from its collective manifestations (caste customs and duties, rituals, festivals, and pilgrimages) and shifted toward individual salvation (Brekke 1999). It did not have to be consubstantial to the Indian social organization anymore: this combination of universalism and individualization contributed to making Hinduism exportable.

All these aspects—universalism, inner-worldly orientation, religious individualism, and practical character—are still at the core of teachings spread by modern gurus and can be understood as the key to their success outside India. Paradoxically, while we can see with Vivekananda that the drive of this diffusion of Hinduism was a means to assert a particularistic national and religious identity, it entails more adaptation to new expectations. With Vivekananda, the seeds of de-contextualization were already sown, and modern gurus accelerated this process. At a time when the counterculture was to represent a new opportunity for Asian religion, the popularization of neo-Hindu teachings in Euroamerican societies accelerated this universalistic presentation of Hinduism that downplays its particularistic aspects.

The 1960s and Mass Popularization

It is hardly insignificant that it is precisely in the 1960s, when the critique of a utilitarian culture, a bureaucratized social life, and impersonal relations arose (Tipton 1982), that some in the West began to "turn East" in an attempt to reinvent social roles in close-knit communities, reunify the divine and the self, and rediscover emotion and self-expression in religious life. However, the youth counterculture initiated a new approach to Asian religions, as pointed out by Mircea Eliade who, long before them and like orientalists, had taken an intellectual path:

> I made the effort of learning Sanskrit in order to read texts and be able to work with the authentic representatives of the Indian tradition. In brief, I was approaching Indian spirituality "from inside" as we say, but without renouncing Western disciplines: philology, critique of texts, exegesis, etc. (in Ceccomori 2001, 113, my translation)

Beyond the rather normative character of this observation, Eliade was right to underline that the counterculture generation was not motivated by intellectual or philosophical concerns, but looked for a direct experience detached from a study of doctrines, as a means to initiate changes in values and lifestyles. But adapting to this experiential approach entailed a greater detachment from Hindu cultural roots and norms, as we shall see throughout this study.

Indeed, this new phase of dissemination was also characterized by a far greater fragmentation and diversification of Asian religions and practices in Euroamerican societies. By and large, Buddhism, first practiced by the Beatnik generation, expanded to counterculture students; so did Japanese movements such as Mahikari and Sokka Gakkai. The counterculture was also a fantastic period for Indian gurus, and most neo-Hindu movements present today in North America and Europe spread between 1960 and 1975. Influenced by Vivekananda's rhetoric, contemporary gurus also represent the continuation of the mosaic of Hindu sects that had coexisted with Brahmanic orthodoxy for centuries. Those traditional communities were based on the teaching of a guru, who relatively freely reinterpreted Hindu doctrines and philosophy for his own purposes (Renou 1952, 621). Thus, this fragmented and effervescent religious milieu represented a fertile field for religious innovations, schisms, and heterodoxies, expanded beyond India's borders.

In North America and Europe, the young generation listened to gurus giving conferences and lectures on university campuses and even traveled to India to discover ashrams and practice yoga or meditation. Some of these gurus are now well-known. Rajneesh, called the "sex guru" for his liberal ideas on gender relations and sexuality, attracted thousands of Westerners to his ashram in Poona, where his teaching heavily drew on therapies of the emerging Human Potential movement (Palmer 1994, 46). In the late 1970s, about 30,000 people were visiting his ashram each year (Thompson and Heelas 1986, 19). Transcendental Meditation, introduced by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and popularized by the Beatles, claimed to have initiated millions of followers to meditation worldwide. In reference to a fifteenth-century devotional movement dedicated to Krishna, Swami Prabhupada founded in New York in 1965 the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), a conservative Vaishnava organization which, at the turn of the 1970s, was already a transnational movement, with thousands of members and more than 75 centers and communities (Rochford 1991, 10, 277). Through ISKCON, hundreds of young people were seen adopting this communal life, a strict lifestyle in terms of

gender relations, clothing, diet, and religious practices, dancing and chanting in the name of Krishna, as well as engaging in proselytizing activities in public spaces. While Sathya Sai Baba did not travel to Europe and North America as much as others, he is one of the most famous charismatic Indian gurus today, in particular for his miraculous materialization of ashes, food, and sweets, as well as his alleged healing power. Branches founded by his Indian and Western disciples exist all over the world and have spread Sai Baba's teaching based on the universality of religion, meditation, and healing. Finally, without creating circumscribed religious movements, some Indian masters became highly influential regarding philosophical, spiritual, and psychological issues, such as Krishnamurti and Deepak Chopra, whose books became alternative medicine and personal growth classics.

Hindu practices and concepts also penetrated Euroamerican societies in the 1960s through the emerging quasi-religious therapies of what has been called the "Human Potential" movement. The world of psychology was transfigured in the 1960s: in contrast with classical psychoanalytic schools, emergent and heterodox therapies aimed not to cure mental disease and relieve pain caused by hysteria or depression, for example, but to stimulate personal growth, self-fulfillment, body awareness, or self-realization. These post-psychoanalytic therapies, as Castel (1981b) described them, include "encounter" groups, Gestalt, Transactional Analysis, Humanistic Psychology, Bioenergetics, Primal therapy, and so on. They are generally characterized by a holistic approach uniting body and mind and a quest for self-transcendence, an experience of the divine within. This explains the appeal of Asian religions, which are believed to be holistic, include body practices, and assert the divine nature of human beings—hence the encounter of therapists of the Human Potential with gurus, Buddhist lamas, and yoga teachers in places such as the Esalen institute (Pelletier 1996, 58–59). By and large, Asian religious practices started to be included in increasingly heterodox therapies. Finally, throughout the 1970s, practices such as martial arts and yoga began to develop mass popularity in North America and Europe. This popularization had already taken the shape of a diversification and a fragmentation of teachings, which became "techniques" detached from their original cultural and philosophical context, and used for other purposes than religious salvation.

It is in this context of diversification and popularization of Asian religions that Siddha Yoga and the Sivananda Centres began to spread transnationally. Siddha Yoga is a neo-Hindu movement that emphasizes a strong devotional relationship between the disciple and the guru, who bestows the awakening of divine energy, called *shaktipat*. This experience, as well as meditation and chanting, is supposed to lead to self-realization, that is to say, in Siddha Yoga,

the awareness of God within. Muktananda (1908–1982) was the founder of Siddha Yoga. On behalf of his master, Nityananda (?–1961), he claimed to have the mission of creating an ashram, disseminating his teaching and going to the West. A few months after Nityananda's death, in 1961, Muktananda started his own ashram, near Bombay, and welcomed Westerners. The seeds of Siddha Yoga, the "path of the perfect ones," were already planted: the voluntary work of Western and Indian disciples enabled the development of Muktananda's ashram in Ganeshpuri and the first publications of his teaching. Local centers and communities began to be established in Europe and North America in the 1970s by disciples who had come back from India (Brent 1972; Brooks et al. 1997; Yeo 1987, 81–82). It was they who supported his tours in the United States and Europe and introduced him in alternative and spiritual circles. Muktananda made his first world tour in 1970, primarily in the United States but also in Australia and Europe; a second tour in 1974, the Muktananda World Tour, firmly established the movement worldwide, with more than 150 centers and three ashrams since then, administered from the United States by the SYDA Foundation (initials of Siddha Yoga Dham, "abode of Siddha Yoga"). As he was engaging with this second tour, Muktananda declared:

> Today, with my Guru's command and grace, I am going away from India for some time. Owing to our limited vision, we consider various countries as different. For God, all countries are his and all beings are his. In God's house there's no particular region or sect or faith. To him all are the same. I am going abroad to initiate a revolution, a meditation revolution. As a result of this revolution, man will regain his prestige which has been vanished. (Brooks et al. 1997, 82)

It is quite easy to observe the continuity with Vivekananda's missionary Hinduism, combining a claim of universality with the orientalist hope for the regeneration of Western societies by Hindu wisdom. In the United States, some of Muktananda's sympathizers were famous and influential in the counterculture milieu, including Werner Erhard and Ram Dass (Brooks et al. 1997, 75–78). These personalities presented his teaching and introduced him in countercultural milieus as well as on university campuses. In 1982, when Muktananda died, Siddha Yoga represented allegedly 300 centers in 52 countries, which were said to attract 300,000 disciples, a third of whom were American. In France and England together, Siddha Yoga has a thousand disciples, although it may attract many more sympathizers. These disciples and sympathizers are overwhelmingly Westerners: Siddha Yoga does not seem to attract individuals having South Asian origins in the United States

or Europe. I do not know the composition of local branches in India, but it seems that they mainly attract Westerners (Healy 2010, 17–18). Currently a woman, Gurumayi (1955–), is the leader of the movement. Like the Kabbalah Centre and many NRMs, starting with the Beatles and Transcendental Meditation, Siddha Yoga attracted celebrities in the 1980s (Graham 2001, 107), and Gurumayi is known to have been the guru of Diana Ross, Isabella Rosselini, Melanie Griffith, and many other "Hollywood dharma-seekers" (Kuczynski 2001), before the Kabbalah craze of the late 1990s. At that time, the media—in particular, Harris (1994) in *The New Yorker*—revealed sexual abuse and secrecy in Siddha Yoga. As a result, many disciples left, and the movement experienced a stark decline in membership and resources. Since then, Gurumayi has considerably reduced contact and communication with her disciples and has closed her ashram to visitors. The new emphasis on the study of scriptures and deeper personal commitment also have contributed to making Siddha Yoga a relatively more exclusive movement than it previously had been.

The name of Sivananda is today associated with one of the most well-known teachings of yoga. Yet Sivananda (1887–1963) never left Asia. Preceding the counterculture's fascination with the "East," he aimed to extend his influence primarily in India (Strauss 1997, 120–121). It is his Indian and Western disciples who disseminated his teaching transnationally. Sivananda established a movement called the Divine Life Society in 1936 in Rishikesh, with the aim of propagating yoga as a means for universal, social, and individual progress. Sivananda's Yoga Vedanta Forest University promoted studies of texts, *sadhana* (religious discipline), and research on Vedanta, yoga paths, and religious studies. The Yoga Vedanta Forest University became renowned for the practice of yoga: at the end of the 1950s, roughly 300 disciples were living in Sivananda's ashram (Miller 1989, 103), with an increasing number of Americans and Europeans at the beginning of the 1960s. After his death, some of his Indian followers were to leave for a less "westernized" ashram (Strauss 1997: 102). The ashram became an extraordinary breeding ground for the diffusion of yoga: called "Swami Propaganda" (Ceccomori 2001, 187), Sivananda urged his disciples to create new branches of the Divine Life Society, to organize conferences and yoga classes, and to translate and publish his numerous books.

One of his students and yoga teachers in his ashram, Vishnu-Devananda (1927–1993), successfully disseminated his teachings outside India. Sivananda was said to have given him this mission: "Vishnu Swami, one day you must go to America. People are waiting there for you to teach them yoga" (Sivananda Centres 1994). What Vishnu-Devananda retrospectively said about his motivation to undertake this mission sheds light on the enduring nature of orientalist representations:

> I knew that although there were many materialistic attitudes in the West, there were also people who could turn towards an inner world. They knew that there was more than the pursuit of material objects; they took to hard discipline. I realized that here was fertile ground to sow the yogic seed. I knew that even Indians wouldn't take his kind of discipline. They wouldn't do what those students did. (cited in Krishna 1995, 40)

This also underlines the enthusiasm of Westerners, learning yoga at Sivananda's ashram and engaging with a new lifestyle. Vishnu-Devananda left India for the first time in 1957, and with the support and help of his first students, he opened an ashram in Quebec in 1959. He had wished to found it in New York, but could not because of US immigration regulations of the time (Sivananda Centres 1998), which explains why the headquarters of the Sivananda Centres are located in Canada. A second ashram was created in the Bahamas in 1967, thanks to the support of an American sympathizer; ashrams were opened in California and New York in the 1970s with the support of disciples. Vishnu-Devananda endlessly traveled, trained yoga teachers, and initiated swamis, enabling them to establish and run centers in their own countries. He never stopped organizing yoga classes, demonstrations, and conferences; hosted in his ashrams, these events drew all sorts of New Age personalities, representatives of different religious traditions, and artists, thereby celebrating the universality of yoga beyond cultural and religious differences. There are today 9 ashrams and 19 Sivananda Centres, located mainly in European and American metropolises. These different ashrams and centers are managed by acharyas, the board of the monastic order founded by Vishnu-Devananda in 1969, called the True World Order. The Sivananda Centres also developed a Teaching Training Course, through which they have trained more than 10,000 yoga teachers. As in Siddha Yoga, Sivananda Centres attract Westerners, and it was exceptional for me to meet individuals having South Asian origins in the French and British local branches. Their ashrams and centers in India certainly welcome Indian followers, yet the ways in which their activities are advertised online show that they do cater to Westerners, for example through the use of English, the provision of "cultural information" and directions for non-locals, and the emphasis on the exotic charm of the locations (Sivananda Centres 2012).