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Reassessing Religious Experience in a Scientific Age: Early Approaches to Religious Pluralism

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Theology and Religious Studies
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Abstract

In this thesis I am investigating the religious ideas of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, H. P. Blavatsky and Annie Besant as examples of early approaches to religious pluralism. In this context, the term 'religious pluralism' refers to the belief that all religious traditions are paths to genuine religious ends. Thus, religions other than one's own are considered to be of significance to people of all faiths and even to those who are not believers.

I relate the appearance of these early notions of religious pluralism to the historical and ideological setting in which they were proposed, particularly the late nineteenth-century debate about science and religion in the West and its spheres of influence. I argue that theories of evolution, in addition to the emerging field of historical biblical criticism, presented a serious challenge to traditional understandings of religion. Together, these two strands of thought made a strong case for a purely materialistic worldview and for the further development of modern sciences on such a basis. In response to this crisis of religion, the four thinkers proposed religious teachings inspired by their own intense religious experience. They emphasised the experiential aspect of these teachings in order to claim an epistemic status of religious knowledge equal to that of scientific or empirical knowledge. In order to universalise this claim, they appealed to religious experience and religious knowledge originating in all faith traditions.

In my assessment of these arguments I suggest that the two main thinkers, i.e. Ramakrishna and Blavatsky, may have been led towards pluralistic ideas of religion through their endorsement of the esoteric traditions of Tantrism and Hermeticism, respectively. Moreover, I trace the impact of the British colonial presence in India on the content, presentation and reception of the teachings of all four thinkers.

I conclude that the teachings of Ramakrishna *et al.* represent early attempts to engage with the fact of religious plurality from a religious perspective. Thus, the four thinkers encouraged people to relate to the beliefs and practices of other faiths and to explore them in relation to their own life. These early efforts in interreligious understanding represented the initial steps towards our current debates about religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue.

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List of abbreviations

- CWV Swami Vivekananda, 1953 [1915]. *The Complete Works of Vivekananda*, vols. 1-9. Delhi: Advaita Ashrama.
- GM Swami Saradananda, 1956. *Sri Ramakrishna. The Great Master*. Swami Jagadananda, trans. Second edition. Mylapore, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math.
- GSR *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 1957. Swami Nikhilananda, trans. Third edition. Mylapore, Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math.
- Isis Blavatsky, H. P., 1910 [1877]. *Isis Unveiled. A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*. Vol. 1 & 2. London and Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society.
- LSR *Life of Sri Ramakrishna. Compiled From Various Authentic Sources*, 1955. Advaita Ashrama: Calcutta.
- NVB Swami Nikhilananda, 1953. *Vivekananda. A Biography*. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center.
- SD Blavatsky, H. P., 1938 [1888]. *The Secret Doctrine. The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*. Vol. 1 & 2. Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House.
- SD a Blavatsky, H. P., 1888a. *The Secret Doctrine*. Theosophical University Press Online Edition (reproduction of the 1888 original). <http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sd/sd1-3-15.htm> (Retrieved 26 Nov 2011).

1 Introduction

In this thesis I shall investigate the religious ideas of Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886) and his main follower, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and her main follower, Annie Besant (1847-1933), with respect to their understanding of religious diversity and its religious significance. In their view, all religions in some way and to some degree mediate a divine truth that is of existential relevance to human beings. The position that all religions communicate something of religious relevance to people of other faiths has reoccurred in recent debates in theology and religious studies, where it is usually called ‘religious pluralism’. I therefore consider these four thinkers as early explorers of the questions and challenges of pluralist religious views, although the term is applied retrospectively.

The term ‘pluralism’ denotes the acknowledgment of the existence of a multiplicity of things, for example ethnic groups within a society or religious traditions in the global community. However, pluralism sometimes implies not merely an objective acknowledgement of the many, but also a positive appreciation of this state of diversity. In order to distinguish between these two aspects, I shall use ‘plurality’ to refer to the existence of multiplicity and ‘pluralism’ to include the positive valuation of plurality. As such, ‘religious pluralism’, in its most basic meaning, denotes the acknowledgment and positive appreciation of the existence of multiple religious traditions in the world. In the following chapter I shall introduce and discuss the notion of religious pluralism in greater detail.

I argue that these nineteenth-century theories of religion containing significant pluralistic elements were developed at that particular time, and in their particular contexts, as responses to a perceived general crisis in religion. This crisis was caused by the rise of a materialistic view of science in the wake of Darwin’s theory of evolution, which was regarded by some people as a serious threat to the very fabric of human brotherhood, charity, morality and cooperation. The pluralistic religious hermeneutics developed by Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Annie Besant are characterised by an emphasis on religious experience and personal spiritual growth directed by a ‘scientific’ method of spiritual progress – in both instances based on Vedantic Raja yoga – that allowed these thinkers to defend and mobilise all religion against the perceived threat of the claims of the emerging materialistic scientific worldview.

I shall also argue that it was significant to the development of the pluralistic character of their thinking on religion that the two original visionaries, Ramakrishna and Blavatsky, had a background in an esoteric tradition, namely Tantrism and Hermeticism, respectively. Previous discussions of this area of scholarship have established that the religious upheaval in Victorian society, aggravated by the promotion of evolutionary hypotheses and the rise of historical biblical scholarship, caused a surge in alternative religious expressions. These included spiritualism, the beginnings of psychical research, and widespread popular interest in esoteric and occult or magical traditions, for example alchemy. Similarly, scholars of Western esoteric traditions have previously shown that pluralistic understandings of religions sometimes have a basis in esoteric traditions.¹ I shall argue that a connection exists between the crisis in Western religion in the nineteenth century and the emergence of the pluralistic understandings of religion of Ramakrishna and Blavatsky and their followers, thus providing the final element in the triangular relationship between the nineteenth-century religious crisis, esoteric and occult ideas and pluralistic religious hermeneutics.

The two-fold purpose of this thesis is then (1) to examine the climate of ideas out of which these early examples of pluralist approaches to religion emerged and in relation to which they were shaped, focusing on the crisis of religion in the face of modern science as a materialistic worldview and esoteric notions of religion and science; and (2) to establish the case for a relationship found in the teachings of the four thinkers between the science and religion crisis of the nineteenth century and their pluralistic understanding of religion, with particular emphasis on the importance of religious experience as the element by which they claimed to prove their ideas and endowed them with a scientific status able to compete with the claims of the spokespeople for science. As the subject matter of this inquiry crosses the territory of several academic disciplines, I shall use methods and insights from the history of ideas, religious studies, the study of esotericism, philosophy of religion and theology.

I have chosen Ramakrishna and Blavatsky as the main figures of this examination of early pluralistic ideas because they were both concerned with issues that relate directly to important elements in the science and religion debate in the late nineteenth century. Both, though in different ways, based their argument for a pluralistic approach to religion on their own intense personal religious experiences. Their emphasis on this point was due to their belief that certain kinds of religious experience could provide the individual with

¹ See, for example, Faivre 1993a: xix, xxi.

evidence for the existence of God or a spiritual transcendent reality that was on epistemic par with the emerging scientific claims of the nineteenth century.

Moreover, Ramakrishna, Blavatsky and their followers all operated in the general climate of British colonial India, although Blavatsky began her life in Russia, and worked within the East-West discourse that grew from that colonial environment, which influenced the ways in which their ideas were presented. Both main characters have also, personally and through the efforts of their followers, had a significant impact on religious attitudes in both the East and West through the activities of the two organisations founded to promote their teachings, namely the Ramakrishna Mission and the Theosophical Society.

The course of my examination will be as follows: In Chapter 2 I define the key terms and discuss the historical context of the main ideas involved in the study, i.e. the science and religion debate of the nineteenth century; the significance of esoteric traditions; the role of religious experience; religious pluralism; and insights from critiques of orientalism. In Chapter 3 I examine the life and religious experiences of Ramakrishna, focusing on the way in which he deliberately tested the practices of the different religions around him in order to assert their truth and validity as paths to the divine. The subject of Chapter 4 is the life and work of Ramakrishna's most renowned follower, Vivekananda, who formulated a coherent system of pluralist religious thinking inspired by Ramakrishna's religious experiences and based on Advaita Vedanta philosophy.

In Chapter 5 I discuss the life and work of Blavatsky with emphasis on her concern to champion the reality of the spiritual against the emerging materialism in society at large, on the basis of which she wrote her main works and founded the Theosophical Society in New York and India. In Chapter 6 I examine the life and work of Annie Besant, Blavatsky's successor in the Theosophical Society, focusing on her developments of Blavatsky's religious teachings concerning the different religious traditions and Christianity in particular. In Chapter 7 I discuss the religious thinking of Ramakrishna, Blavatsky and their followers in relation to the context of ideas in which they worked. I shall argue that the four figures, each in their own way, attempted to show that religious experience within all faiths provided proof of the reality of the spiritual dimension of life. In the final conclusion I summarise my main points and propose some directions for further study in this area.

2 Historical context and main themes of the study

2.1 Introduction

In this study I am chiefly concerned with what I call the pluralistic elements of the religious teachings of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Besant, i.e. those of their teachings that propose that all religious traditions are genuine paths to a divine end. Their understanding of the purpose of religion and the methods by which individuals could approach a genuine religious end along different paths was closely related to their understanding of the phenomenon and meaning of religious experience. *Religious experience* and *religious pluralism* are thus central concepts in my discussion. The purpose of this chapter is to define these two terms and to present the context of ideas in which the four thinkers proposed theories of religion containing pluralistic elements and to which their emphasis on religious experience was intended to provide an answer.

The main historical and ideological context in which I discuss the ideas of the four thinkers is the science and religion debate of the late nineteenth century. In the wake of Darwin's evolutionary theory and the space this debate left for the development of a particular kind of religious thinking, it was suggested that religious experience could also be a scientific form of exploration leading to genuine knowledge of a superphysical reality. I shall argue that the emphasis on the rationality and epistemic potential of religious experience in these theories of religion led to their having pluralistic characteristics. The following chapters will show that despite similarities, these characteristics were more or less central to the theories as a whole and served different purposes within each teacher's framework of thought. Having established this general framework for my inquiry, I shall present my definitions of the notions of religious experience, religious pluralism and esoteric traditions.

The particular characteristics of the theories of religion that I present in the subsequent four chapters are also historically conditioned by the British colonial presence in India, and the exchange and interaction of ideas and people that took place as a consequence of this cultural encounter in India, Europe and America. I shall demonstrate some characteristic influences of this colonial heritage in the thinking of Blavatsky, Ramakrishna and their followers with reference to the discourse of orientalism, problematised in Edward Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*.¹ The assumptions and ideas that Said

¹ Said 1995 [1978].

called “orientalism” to a certain extent framed the reception of Ramakrishna’s teachings through Vivekananda and the impact of Blavatsky’s ideas in the Victorian period in Europe and America. In the concluding section of this chapter I shall explain in more detail the influence of this colonial context on the work of the four thinkers.

2.2 Religion and science in the late nineteenth century

As stated in the introductory chapter, I argue that the nineteenth-century pluralistic approaches to religion developed by Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Besant were responses to a perceived crisis in religion that originated in the emergence of materialistic science in both Western societies and the cultures influenced by the West through its colonial presence. Of course, this development itself was part of a continuous discussion about the nature of the created world and the human quest for knowledge of it. I have chosen to begin this study with the Victorian period in particular because it is a time in which industrialization had begun to radically change the physical structure of people’s lives, and the evolutionary theories about the world’s development began to change the intellectual climate by introducing ‘evidence’ for new ways of conceiving of the origin of humanity. In this section I shall highlight some of the issues raised by this cultural context and the questions to which the pluralist religious ideas were intended to provide an answer.

In Britain the Victorian period was a time of great social change, characterised in particular by the continued growth of an industrial culture which had repercussions for all aspects of people’s lives. As a result, natural science appeared to have, and was sometimes promoted as having, the power to explain and manage areas of life which had previously been the domain of the churches. The two main developments in science that had an impact in this respect were the increasingly sophisticated geological examinations of the Earth’s past history, and the appearance of evolutionary theories, particularly that presented by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* from 1859.² The postulated mechanism of natural selection, through which Darwin understood the development of species, fundamentally challenged the hitherto prevalent conception that species and other parts of creation were fixed, having been made by God as they currently appeared, and within a relatively short time.

While geologists were engaged in discussions of whether the universe had a ‘history’ that could be reckoned in millions of years³, many Christian believers had their own tradition of

² Darwin 1964 [1859]; cf. Turner 2010: 88.

³ Cf. Burchfield 1998: 139ff.

time-reckoning based on biblical interpretation.⁴ According to the elaborate chronology of Dublin's prominent archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656), the act of Creation was believed to have taken place in 4004 BC. Ussher's calculations had been included in some authorised editions of the Bible since 1701, thereby acquiring a measure of credibility, and they were still considered valid into the nineteenth century.⁵ However, with the newly conceived geological timelines opening up vast temporal expanses in which Darwin's supposed mechanism of natural selection had ample time to develop and shape the various species of flora and fauna, the role of God in creation seemed dangerously diminished. The view of humanity as the apex of a conscious act of creation by the divinity no longer seemed self-evident when regarded from the Darwinian perspective.

Darwin himself was highly cautious about spelling out the implications of his theory with regard to the origins of humankind in *On the Origin of Species*. The book ends with his acknowledgement of the Creator who has set in motion the wonderful process of evolution though which life on the planet may progress.⁶ Not until *The Descent of Man* (1871) did he finally conclude that there is no one point at which humanity as such comes into existence, but rather that a process of development from lower species may have resulted in the current humanity, with the possibility that humanity in the future may develop further. This notion of possible future development of humanity is particularly significant in light of Blavatsky's similar views, explored in Chapter 5 below.

The implication of the evolutionary theory that humanity was not uniquely created threatened the traditional belief in the soul as a special faculty with which God had endowed the crown of his creation: human beings.⁷ If the evolutionary theory were to win wide acceptance, some people feared that the soul, which was understood to be the seat of morality, would cease to be important and as a consequence human society would descend into a mindless animalistic struggle for survival. As I shall show in Chapters 5 and 6 in particular, this concern was very strong in both Blavatsky's and Besant's work.

⁴ Cf. Burchfield 1998: 138.

⁵ See Craig and Jones 1982.

⁶ Cosslett 1984: 8; Darwin 1964 [1859]: 488.

⁷ Cosslett 1984: 2.

2.2.1 Religion and science as enemies or partners

As has been explored recently in both history and theology⁸, it would be incorrect to regard science and religion as ‘natural’ enemies. Scientists working on theological questions and theologians concerned with science have argued that science and religion are complementary partners in our human attempts to understand the world in which we live, through the different methodologies involved in their respective kinds of inquiry. Indeed, from a historical perspective the relationship between science and religion has been overwhelmingly productive rather than antagonistic. The Christian tradition, for example, has a strong heritage of natural philosophical inquiry which existed in close interaction with biblical reflection on the nature of creation⁹, not to mention the advanced Muslim scholarship of the Middle Ages which greatly influenced Western thinking.

The term natural philosophy was used to describe systematic inquiries into the workings of nature until it was largely superseded by the term science during the nineteenth century. Many natural philosophers were also clergy, and natural philosophy formed part of the medieval *quadrivium* of studies which preceded further studies in medicine, law and theology in the early European universities.¹⁰ There were certainly individual cases in which church authorities clashed with the curious explorers of the secrets of nature, e.g. in the famous trials of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Nevertheless, the insights gained from the study of nature were mostly a complement and a stimulus to faith, from the early reflections of Augustine to the Natural Theology movement. The mutual stimulation of scientific and theological inquiries continues to our own time in the work of, for example, Ian Barbour, John Polkinghorne, Ted Peters and Antje Jackelén.¹¹

Yet the problematic aspects of the relationship between science and religion must not be ignored. In his book *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’*, Richard E. King has argued that Enlightenment thinkers emphasised rationality as a secular value to such an extent that the presence of religion in society was challenged on a large and fundamental scale. This view of rationality implied a definition of the religious as essentially irrational, and thus irrelevant to the secular order and government of an enlightened society. With religious ideas and phenomena considered to be superstitious

⁸ See, for example, Dixon, Pumfrey and Cantor, eds., 2010; Polkinghorne 2008; Cosslett 1984.

⁹ See, for example, Peters 2003.

¹⁰ Cf. McGrath 1999: 2.

¹¹ See Hick 2010; Barbour 1998; Polkinghorne 2008; Peters 2003; Jackelén 2005.

and ignorant, they could legitimately be excluded from the public and civic spheres of influence. King suggests that this Enlightenment definition of religion as irrational and irrelevant played a significant role in creating the chasm between science and religion that remains an issue today and, for many people, is unquestioningly accepted.¹²

Following this Enlightenment view of rationality and religion, ‘the rational’ became associated with the public sphere, power, politics, authority and knowledge, along with the authority to define what constituted knowledge and how it was legitimately obtained. Natural philosophy and its nineteenth-century successor, science, were easily associated with this category. To the category of ‘the religious’ was ascribed the irrational, superstitious and private, which effectively formed an argument for why religion should be kept separate from the sphere of public influence. Religious knowledge was regarded as irrelevant to issues concerning society at large.

More recently, prominent scholar of Western esotericism Wouter Hanegraaff has argued that the Enlightenment critique of religion was often positively inclined toward a sober form of monotheistic faith that supported rational Enlightenment values. The targets of criticism and, most devastatingly, ridicule, were traditions of belief and practice that fell outside the demarcation of acceptable belief. In Hanegraaff’s analysis, this namely meant traditions associated with the pagan past of Western thought, particularly those inspired by the Neoplatonic, Hermetic and alchemical ideas of the Renaissance, even where these ideas had clear reference to writings of the church fathers as they engaged with the pagan culture of the early church.¹³ Thus the Enlightenment view on religion was not exclusively negative, but exclusive toward elements of belief that could not be incorporated into the reigning discourse of reason and progress.

Natural science developed its own findings and methodologies in this context, while a corresponding development took place in theology and the arts in the form of Romanticism. In response to these two movements, F. D. E. Schleiermacher challenged the Enlightenment understanding of rationality in his essays *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799)^{14, 15}. He argued from the perspective that religion had its own realm of meaning and its own epistemology which were different to the rational-scientific ones, but no less valid. German scholar of religion Rudolf Otto took up this line of

¹² Cf. King 1999: 3f.

¹³ Cf. Hanegraaff 2012: 130, 148, 257.

¹⁴ Schleiermacher 1988 [1799].

¹⁵ Cf. Crouter 2005.

argument in his famous book *Das Heilige* from 1917 (*The Idea of the Holy*¹⁶), in which he explored the realm of specifically religious meaning. In response to the Enlightenment critique of religion, Otto argued that religion addresses the ‘non-rational’. Similarly, in the influential *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959)¹⁷ Mircea Eliade argued that an abyss divides the two “modalities of experience”, the sacred and the profane, into two radically different existential situations or modes of being in the world.¹⁸

In effect the argumentation of Schleiermacher and Otto accepted the Enlightenment separation of the rational (including the scientific) and the religious, although they emphasised that the religious has meaning and is not irrelevant to human existence. In their view, the religious operates in a realm that cannot and should not be subject to the criteria of the realm of the merely rational. The early psychologist William James must be mentioned as another major defender of the position that religion and religious knowledge are rational within their own realm, although not necessarily subject to the principles of rationality outside the realm of the religious. His important work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902)¹⁹ represents an early exploration of the phenomenology and epistemology of religious experience as a kind of human experience. In light of the ideas of the four thinkers I am examining, it is important to note that all these classic defences of religious experience did not directly question or challenge the assumption that religious belief and ordinary rationality were fundamentally different. Instead, they represented the religious as a complementary realm of meaning in which religious ideas and experiences are rational in themselves, while not necessarily rational or relevant in a wider or more general sense.

The question of the relationship between rationality and religious belief has been highlighted recently in the public debate between the influential secular philosopher Jürgen Habermas and theologian Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI.²⁰ As part of this debate, the two thinkers explored the meaning of rationality as a common human faculty acknowledged by religious and secular people alike. They defined rationality as a faculty for understanding ourselves and the world around us. Ratzinger further argued that religious perspectives provide an additional dimension to this faculty, in

¹⁶ Otto 1973 [1917].

¹⁷ Eliade 1987a [1959].

¹⁸ Cf. Eliade 1987a: 14.

¹⁹ James 1982 [1902].

²⁰ Habermas and Ratzinger 2005.

which values originate and shape the way that rationality is exercised in society.²¹ The point that a religious understanding of the world could integrate ordinary rationality with religious insights was also part of the position of the four thinkers I discuss in the subsequent four chapters.

Analysing the influence of the Enlightenment category of rationality, Richard E. King has shown how ‘the religious’, which had previously been an integral part of the public and private aspects of life and wider European society, was made into a separate realm and ascribed every ill and backward quality.²² Hence the expressions still invoked today in relation to lack of progress, such as “medieval superstition”, “the dark ages”, etc. King emphatically reminds us that these categories are inventions that were created for the purpose of securing the right to define who and which ideas had influence in society.²³

The debate between proponents of science and religion in the late nineteenth century was to a large extent a continuation of the struggle for the right to define the scientific. Moreover, the authority to pronounce on the nature of the world and the means through which truth could be assessed in a budding industrial culture was also at stake. This right and authority had hitherto resided with the church and its spokesmen, who were then challenged by the rise of a class of professional scientists.²⁴ This context, only a little more than a hundred years old, forms the basis of the idea of a perpetual and essential ‘conflict’ between science and religion, as historians of science Frank Turner and Geoffrey Cantor, among others, have explored.²⁵

The notion of a conflict between scientific and religious worldviews is still topical, as demonstrated by popular interest in the work of atheists such as Richard Dawkins²⁶ and Christopher Hitchens²⁷ and their adversaries. Recent publications by prominent scholars on the religious side include Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs’ *The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning* (2011)²⁸, and neuroscientist and philosopher Raymond

²¹ Cf. Habermas and Ratzinger 2005: 71, 78ff.

²² Cf. King 1999: 10.

²³ Cf. King 1999: 11ff.

²⁴ Cf. Harrison 2010: 27.

²⁵ Turner 2010; Cantor 2010.

²⁶ See, for example, Dawkins’ *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (1986) or *The God Delusion* (2006).

²⁷ See, for example, Hitchens’ *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* [UK title: *God is Not Great: The Case Against Religion*] (2007).

²⁸ Sachs 2011.

Tallis' *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (2011).²⁹ The latter title clearly refers to the Darwinian notion that humans descended from apes; Blavatsky also found this idea bizarre and ridiculous.

Where religion and science did clash in the past, it was usually over matters of biblical hermeneutics and the authority to sanction different interpretations of scripture. Thus, another powerful factor that contributed to the crisis point in the relationship between science and religion in the late Victorian period was the emerging field of historical and critical biblical scholarship.³⁰ Many traditional believers and clergy were deeply unsettled by the pressure they felt from scholars to regard the biblical texts as human fabrications whose authors and production environments could be subjected to examination. In combination with evolutionary theory, historical criticism threatened the traditional understanding of the human soul and the divine origin of holy scriptures.³¹

It is in this context of a religious crisis in the West that the proposed alternatives to traditional beliefs must be regarded. They were intended to bridge the realms of science and religion through advocacy for a religion based on scientific principles, as well as the promotion of a science with a religious goal. This field of struggle attracted groups who had been on the fringes of each side, such as alternative religious groups and proponents of alternative sciences. They partook in the debate in the hopes of being able to influence the direction of the new and advancing natural sciences as well as the direction of a traditional religious culture that was forced to adapt to the new secular climate. Through her emphasis on esoteric philosophy and occult practice, Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, for example, was ideally placed to bridge the two sides. It offered at once a spiritual content and direction to science and a 'scientific' basis for a modern religious society.

2.3 The role of religious experience in the work of the four thinkers

As stated previously, I shall discuss the role of religious experience in the teachings of Ramakrishna *et al.* in order to argue that a connection existed between the pluralistic elements in their teachings and the context of the science and religion debate of the

²⁹ Tallis 2011.

³⁰ Cf. Cosslett 1984: 12.

³¹ Cf. Cosslett 1984: 12ff.

nineteenth century. Whether vaguely, as in Ramakrishna, or very explicitly, as in Blavatsky, all four thinkers believed that deep religious experience had the potential to provide certain knowledge in addition to a perspective from which to understand all human activity. The suggestion that religious experience is a source of knowledge recurred in the 1990s in epistemology debates in the philosophy of religion, and in Reformed Epistemology in particular.³² Aside from these debates, religious experience is usually discussed as part of the study of mysticism, as its practical aspect.

Mysticism is usually considered to be a branch of the study of religion in general. In Louis Dupré's definition, mysticism encompasses those aspects of religion concerned with "a state of consciousness that surpasses ordinary experience through the union with a transcendent reality".³³ Apart from the experiential side, mysticism also includes those teachings within different traditions that aim at the achievement of transcendent experience, particularly experience of deep unity with the divine.³⁴ The notion of mysticism itself is closely related to the development of the study of religion in Europe, and while its adjectival forms 'mystic' or 'mystical' are often applied to other traditions with prominent experiential aspects, notably Eastern traditions, post-colonial critics of religious studies have emphasised that the idea was firmly European.³⁵ In the remainder of this section I shall present my working definition of religious experience, followed by a short discussion of the hermeneutical position of the four early pluralist explorers in relation to the element of perception in religious experience.

2.3.1 The term 'religious experience' as used in this study

The sense in which I use the term *religious experience* is based on Dupré's definition of mystical experience. Since mystical experience may occur outside of a traditional religious setting, such as in cases of nature mysticism³⁶, I have chosen to use the more specific term 'religious experience'. This emphasises that the experience occurs and is understood within a framework defined by ideas derived from the experiencer's religious background. My concept of religious experience focuses largely on encounters with a transcendent reality attained in states of consciousness beyond the ordinary. Instead of the longer term 'religious mystical experience' I shall use 'religious experience'.

³² See, for example, Davis 1989; Alston 1991, 1993.

³³ Dupré 2005 [1987]: 6341.

³⁴ Cf. von Brück 2010: 656.

³⁵ Cf. von Brück 2010: 656f.

³⁶ Cf. Dupré 2005: 6342; Moore 2005: 6356.

Additionally, I use an expanded notion of religious experience that includes what is often referred to as ‘psychic’ or ‘paranormal’ phenomena, such as clairvoyance, communication with disembodied entities and awareness of past lives. This is an unusual inclusion, since most of the religious experiences that are the subject of discussion or are used as examples in debates in the philosophy of religion are rather of an internal and emotional kind. They differ from the bold claims concerning life beyond our normal consciousness that are found in, for example, Blavatsky’s writings. However, these claims are central to Blavatsky’s theory of religion and the foundation of her teachings. Hence, I shall treat them in the same manner as other, more typical religious experiences such as Ramakrishna’s first vision of Kali, since both are experienced and understood as being of religious significance.

From the characteristics identified in William James’ classic analysis of religious experience, *ineffability* and *integration* are the two qualities that resonate most immediately with the teachings of the four thinkers I investigate.³⁷ These qualities are present in mystical experience in a paradoxical way. Ineffability denotes the experience that something of real importance is being communicated to the experiencer, though in a form beyond words or concepts. Integration in mystical experience of transcendent reality challenges the notion of identity, i.e. the experiencer feels completely at one with this higher reality while simultaneously being aware of him or herself as a participant in the union or unity.³⁸ Such questions of communicability and personal identity in relation to transcendent reality were to a certain extent addressed by the four thinkers, although rarely in any direct manner, as their teachings were concerned with motivating people to practice religion rather than clarifying the meaning of concepts in a systematic manner.

This definition of religious experience highlights some issues of central importance in the exploration of the role of religious experience in the work of the four thinkers. These issues concern the possibility of human encounter with the transcendent reality, how this is attained, and what the meaning of such an encounter is for a human being. In the subsequent four chapters I shall examine the different ways in which Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Besant responded to these issues.

³⁷ Cf. Dupré 2005: 6341f.

³⁸ Cf. Moore 2005: 6355.

2.3.2 The relationship between experience and hermeneutics

It is important to keep in mind that these thinkers attempted to relate insights gained from religious experience through general teachings or as contributions to a public debate, before Heidegger (1889-1976), Gadamer (1900-2002) and Ricoeur (1913-2005) had questioned more thoroughly the relationship between being, knowledge and understanding.³⁹ Although Schleiermacher and Dilthey had established the grounds for discussion of the principles of interpretation, the role of the consciousness in the creation of experience, as presented in Husserl's phenomenological approach, was not developed until after 1900.⁴⁰ By this time Ramakrishna and Blavatsky were dead, Vivekananda was very ill, and Annie Besant was occupied with her political mission for India.

On the basis of insights provided by hermeneutical reflection, it is clear that the main difficulty with discussing religious experience as a source of knowledge lies in its subjective nature, and thus potentially unlimited meanings. As stated above, the framework in which I shall discuss religious experience and its role in the teachings of Ramakrishna, Blavatsky and their main followers is the nineteenth-century debate between science and religion. I have argued that their teachings emphasised that religious experience provided a unifying perspective from which religious and scientific knowledge were integrated. It thus had the potential to bridge the two realms of religion and science in the interest of a more humane and conscientious future science and a more practically applied and intelligent religious faith.

This position in itself is a strong hermeneutical stance which, however, requires some further explanation. Blavatsky, the most erudite of the four thinkers, referred to Plotinus, Kant and Hegel, while Annie Besant referred to church fathers Clement and Origen for her hermeneutical principles. Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, in particular, relied on the teachings of Advaita Vedanta. Their hermeneutical reflections did not engage directly with what are today considered essential questions, such as the ambiguity of subjective experience, or the role of preconceptions in shaping experiences, as well as the understanding or interpretation of experiences.⁴¹ Instead, they focused on perception as the element of religious experiences by which knowledge and, as they saw it, meaning, was determined. In the following chapters I shall argue that religious experience, as explained in terms of perception, carried scientific-sounding associations with the physical senses

³⁹ Cf. Jasper 2004: 104ff; Stiver 2001: 36ff.

⁴⁰ Cf. Jeanrond 1994: 57f.

⁴¹ Cf. Jeanrond 1994: 5.

and empiricism. This discourse could thus serve to validate the author's statements concerning the status of the knowledge acquired in religious experience *vis-à-vis* scientific knowledge in the context of the science and religion debate.

Ramakrishna, Blavatsky and their followers were concerned with the knowledge gained in the experience of transcendent reality, or other states of consciousness. They promoted a kind of religious practice which would lead people to individual realisation of a higher state of being, and from this perspective achieve a deeper knowledge of the world and the self. As I shall show in Chapter 5, Blavatsky went so far as to state explicitly that, through dedicated practice, human beings are able to transcend the chasm between the phenomenal and the noumenal, and perceive the reality of ideas directly. However, such a degree of insight happened only extremely rarely. Similarly, Ramakrishna was famously known for being able to achieve the highest union with the formless *nirguna brahman*, which in Vedantic terms means a direct insight into the nature of reality.

The view that this degree of insight is possible implies that there exists an ultimate truth which humans have the ability to penetrate via the highest degree of mystical experience of the transcendent. The four thinkers agreed in matters of ordinary perception with the modern hermeneutical view that perception and understanding of experiences are conditioned by the previous ideas of the experiencer. However, they also insisted that in extraordinary cases of profound unitive experience of the transcendent, the spiritual element of humans, usually called the 'soul', encountered the transcendent in a more direct way than the intellect was able to. The notion of the soul in different religious systems is a complex issue that I cannot expand upon further except to say that in Western thought it derives from Plato, where it denotes the life principle of the body and is considered to be immortal.⁴² In a religious sense, the soul may be understood as the vitalising essence of the human person, which is somehow connected to God either through the giving of the 'gift of life' or through a notion of communion or participation.⁴³ The four thinkers conceived of a soul-principle in similar terms, emphasising particularly that the soul was a divine element that lay at the heart of the human person. As such, the soul at once united humans to the divine and to all other humans on a deep and essential level.

As I shall show in the following chapters, the four thinkers' understanding of the role of perception in religious experience was central to the pluralistic elements of the theories of

⁴² Cf. Swinburne 1998: 44f; Hart 1995: 464.

⁴³ Cf. Ritschl 2008: 125ff.

religion they developed. The insistence on the possibility of perception of the ultimate and discovery of a common spiritual truth, coupled with the emphasis on openness to a creative influence in the encounter with the higher reality, lies at the heart of these religious ideas. It is at once a closed and open approach to knowledge and experience, which postulates an object of knowledge (i.e. the ultimate reality) only truly known in the intimacy of the subjective self. This ambiguity of closedness and openness, or objectivity and subjectivity, may have been an important contributing factor to the failure of these theories to have any further impact on the public debate about the development of modern sciences at the time, as this debate was strongly focused on the establishment of solid facts that could be experimentally verified. In the final chapter I shall discuss the four thinkers' views on the nature of the transcendent reality in greater detail, in relation to questions of how a human being can encounter it, and what the meaning of such an encounter is.

2.4 Notions of religious pluralism

The second term requiring definition is the notion of religious pluralism. Religious *pluralism* is a response and an approach to religious *plurality*, i.e. the fact that there is more than one religious tradition in the world. In this section I shall provide a brief definition of pluralism and emphasise some problematic aspects of the notion. Finally, I shall suggest the possible role of pluralist claims in the religious thought of the four thinkers, which will be discussed more fully in the subsequent chapters.

As I defined it briefly in the introductory chapter above, religious pluralism in its basic meaning denotes the acknowledgment and positive appreciation of the existence of multiple religious traditions in the world. In a theological context, the issue is what it means for a follower of one religious tradition to affirm a pluralist view of religions, and to acknowledge positively the specifically *religious* value of a plurality of religions. The urgency of this question has increased in the past decades as the cultural diversity of Western nations in particular has prompted believers and scholars alike to engage critically with the challenge of religious plurality. Current efforts in interfaith encounter and dialogue are concerned with the question of how to make sense of religious plurality in a religious manner.

Different approaches to religious pluralism emerged in the course of these debates and encounters with religious others, and fed into what is now an established field of study.

Prior to these developments, however, religious thinkers who had experienced interreligious encounters reflected in their own way on the meaning of these situations and their implications for the concept of religion. The four thinkers I am investigating came to believe that the plurality of religions in the world had a very special meaning and importance for people of any faith. In this sense they were religious pluralists in the most basic sense of the term, and in the course of my investigation I shall describe and discuss the ways in which each of them understood the role of the different religions in a global context, and the specifically religious meaning of the plurality of religions.

2.4.1 Recent theological approaches to religious pluralism

It was only in the late twentieth century that the notion that different religious traditions constitute different paths to the same goal was defined as ‘pluralism’ in the philosophy of religion and became subject to debate in a theological forum. I am therefore applying the term ‘pluralist’ retrospectively to the ideas of the four nineteenth-century thinkers. The term religious pluralism, in the sense I am using it, is usually traced back to Alan Race’s 1983 book *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religion*.⁴⁴ There, pluralism features as a particular attitude to other religions in the context of Race’s suggested threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. This typology, and each of its options, has been critically challenged in theology and philosophy of religion. Perry Schmidt-Leukel offered a defence of Race’s typology in a 2005 article⁴⁵, in which he clarified the original typology and asserted its comprehensiveness against the criticism appearing in the years since its initial publication.

Schmidt-Leukel’s understanding and clarification of the typology is informed by John Hick’s pluralist hypothesis.⁴⁶ According to this hypothesis, a transcendent ultimate reality exists that cannot be perceived and analysed directly, but comes to our awareness through our contingent, conditioned human consciousness. It therefore takes various forms across cultures and societies, and even between individuals. Spiritually sensitive people throughout time have been impressed more strongly with this transcendent reality and have attempted to communicate it through what are commonly venerated as religious scriptures, items, rites and customs. Certain outstanding individuals have gained followers of the

⁴⁴ Race 1993 [1983]; cf. Race and Hedges 2008: 17.

⁴⁵ Schmidt-Leukel 2005.

⁴⁶ Presented in Hick 2004 (first edition from 1989).

presentation of their experience of the ultimate, and these groups constituted the foundations of the major religious traditions.⁴⁷

According to Hick, the realisation contained in the encounter with the ultimate is particularly concerned with producing in people a response of turning away from self-centeredness, and opening the individual to a profound commitment to the fellowship of all humans, accompanied by a radical compassion for others.⁴⁸ This *conversio*, or turning from self and self-concern to other and community-concern, is both the goal of religion in general, and the litmus test of genuine faith and religiosity. Hick calls this phenomenon ‘salvation’.⁴⁹

On the basis of this view, Schmidt-Leukel regards the three-fold typology as an exhaustive model of the possible attitudes to other religions in the following manner: We are given P, which states that a religion mediates a salvific knowledge of the ultimate reality, thereby enabling its followers to turn away from their self towards the other. The following fundamental options exist: Either one agrees, or one disagrees; the latter being *atheism*, which is discarded because it is not a religious option.⁵⁰

If one agrees that P, either P applies to one religious tradition (one’s own), or more than one. If the former, we have *exclusivism*, which means that one holds only one religious tradition to communicate genuinely salvific knowledge of the ultimate reality. If the latter, again there are two options: either P is maximised once, or more than once. If P is maximised once we have *inclusivism*, which states that salvific knowledge is communicated maximally in one religion, but to an inferior degree in at least one other tradition. If P is maximised more than once we have *pluralism* in its minimal form, holding that transforming, salvific knowledge of the ultimate reality is sufficiently available in several, even if only in two, religious traditions. According to this logical analysis there are four approaches to the question of truth in religious plurality, of which only three are genuine religious possibilities. While there may be different sub-types within each category, there is no other way of approaching the question of whether P, which is the

⁴⁷ Hick 2004: 29ff.

⁴⁸ Hick 2004: 10; 300ff.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Cf. Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 18f, 24.

typology's purpose for Schmidt-Leukel: It is a tool to identify the way in which a religious tradition regards the question of P.⁵¹

Among those who have critiqued Schmidt-Leukel's reaffirmation of Race's original typology, theologian Paul Hedges holds that the typology must be descriptive of actual practices, rather than merely a formal, analytical tool. He prefers to use the plurals of each of the original categories, 'exclusivisms', 'inclusivisms', and 'pluralisms', to denote what he sees as flexibility between various observed approaches, rather than the logical necessities of Schmidt-Leukel's view and use of the model.⁵²

I find both these uses of the typology helpful, as the categorical or analytical use clearly distinguishes between the different types of approach to religious plurality, while Hedges emphasises the fact of variety within each category. In addition, pluralist approaches in themselves represent context-dependent and contingent ideas that are firmly located in historical and ideological situations.

What I mean by 'pluralism' in the following is, then, the view that elements of other religions have genuine importance and relevance to people of other traditions, in any degree. It includes cases in which different traditions share values and overlap in other aspects of belief and practice. Of course, followers of one religion will always believe that their own is 'better', simply because it is where they belong and with which they identify socially, culturally and religiously. But they may also recognise that a follower of another religion stands in a similar position regarding his or her own religion relative to other religions. If this is a general opinion, it will take someone with no adherence to any religion in particular to be a 'true' pluralist according to the typology, i.e. to accord complete equality to all religious traditions under consideration. However, I do not see a need to adopt the definitions of the three-fold typology in such a strict manner in order to use 'pluralism' or 'pluralistic' as a term descriptive of the attitude to other religions mentioned above.

With regards to my use of the term 'pluralistic' in this study, as critics of the typology have often pointed out, the boundary between 'inclusivism' and 'pluralism' is very fuzzy, and in practice often impossible to mark with any clarity. As I have chosen to use it in this study, the notion of pluralism as an active appreciation of other religious ways does coincide with Race's category of inclusivism, as well as pluralism, as a matter of degree. And in the

⁵¹ Cf. Schmidt-Leukel 2005: 17f.

⁵² Cf. Race and Hedges 2008: 27.

teachings of the thinkers I am examining, some teachings tend to one pole, and others to the other. I have therefore decided to break with the typology and to focus on the central question of the issue (namely, the question of how to respond as a religious person to the teachings and practices of other religions) without trying to stick to a theoretical framework that is too rigid to accommodate the ideas of these thinkers. This thesis is thus partly an attempt to test this more accommodating notion of pluralism on the teachings of four different thinkers. In the following, I examine *pluralistic elements* in their work, rather than trying to identify them as explorers of early forms of ‘pluralism’ as a definite –ism, which I believe it is not. The teachers and teachings examined in the following certainly represent pluralistic elements, but their work as a whole does not by any means constitute complete ‘pluralisms’. In Chapter 6 I shall discuss the commonalities and differences between the pluralistic elements of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Annie Besant.

2.4.2 Theological challenges to notions of religious pluralism

The notion of religious pluralism itself has been severely critiqued within theology, however, and there are two main problems in the presentation of pluralist approaches based on Hick’s pluralist hypothesis. Firstly, pluralism has been accused of being nothing but a hidden instance of exclusivism, i.e. the position in Race’s threefold typology according to which only one approach to the divine is true, and all others false. This applies to pluralism when the pluralist maxim that all religions (potentially) lead to unity with God (or however one wants to denote the ultimate reality) is emphasised as a meta-statement, under which the claims of traditional exclusivist believers are brushed aside. Among others, Gavin D’Costa argued this point strongly with Hick in his 1996 article ‘The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions’.⁵³ In response, Hick pointed out that his pluralist hypothesis was different in kind to the exclusivist claim because the hypothesis is precisely a hypothesis, i.e. it is a suggestion for how things may be regarded and not a faith affirmation in itself.⁵⁴

But the problem remains, and as I shall show in the subsequent chapters, the early proponents of pluralist notions of religion often felt the need to emphasise the fact that their approach was not a new religion. Instead, they wished to offer a new hermeneutical

⁵³ D’Costa 1996.

⁵⁴ Cf. Hick 1997: 163.

perspective on religion and a way of understanding its purpose and function in relation to all religious traditions that could be incorporated into each existing faith.

The question of whether pluralism itself constitutes a new religion is related to the second major problem with the pluralist hypothesis. This concerns the fundamental assumption that all religions have a goal, and this goal is to foster a particular kind of unitive relationship between the individual believer and ultimate reality. Due to his Christian background, Hick calls this special relationship ‘salvation’, but he finds the same basic structure of a transformation from self-centeredness to other-centeredness present under other names in other traditions. Thus, in Hick’s view, nirvana, *moksa*, paradise and eternal life are all terms for this ultimate state of ideal union with the divine.⁵⁵ The general notion of the establishment of a salvation-like relationship as the purpose of religion is also characteristic of the approaches of Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Besant in particular, as I shall show in the subsequent chapters.

While there no doubt are common features regarding these ideal end-states and their achievement across religious traditions, critics of Hick hold that his general picture is far too sweeping and ignores the real differences of terminology and meaning between these and other terms. For example, the orthodox Christian notion of salvation essentially and crucially contains some highly specific features that would be inapplicable to the ultimate hopes of, say, a Buddhist. Through his practice he does not aspire to share eternally in the vision and life of the Trinity, but rather to attain nirvana.

Theologian S. Mark Heim has argued that, similarly to Paul Hedges’ exclusivisms, inclusivisms and pluralisms, one should use the plural ‘salvations’ when talking about notions of end-states across religious traditions, and even across groups within the same tradition. According to Heim, the notion of salvation is a specifically Christian concept with a specifically Christian meaning. It should not be used to denote ideas of end-states in other faiths.⁵⁶ Heim’s main point of criticism is that such an indiscriminate use of religious concepts across traditions not only confuses the true meaning of the concepts in their original setting, but also undermines the characteristics and unique concerns of the individual traditions.⁵⁷ The approach implied by Heim’s argument belongs to what Paul Hedges calls ‘particularisms’, a fourth category of approaches to religious diversity. According to this view, religions are regarded as essentially bounded and isolated entities

⁵⁵ Cf. Hick 2004: 34.

⁵⁶ Cf. Heim 2001b: 168.

⁵⁷ Cf. Heim 2001: 3.

whose concepts and terminology can only be appropriately applied within their own sphere. Hedges characterises particularisms as distinctly postmodern perspectives in which meta-narratives, such as the pluralist hypothesis, are rejected.⁵⁸

In the context of interreligious dialogue, Catherine Cornille has been concerned with clarifying the conditions for fruitful dialogue between representatives of different religious traditions.⁵⁹ On the matter of pluralism, she remarks how a pluralist position appears to be helpful at the outset of dialogue. This is because pluralism (of the kind proposed by Hick in *An Interpretation of Religion*) acknowledges the need to establish a tradition-neutral central common denominator, which in Hick's proposal is found in the notion of the 'Real'.⁶⁰ Such a neutral position might eliminate problems of dealing with superiority claims and value judgments between traditions.

Cornille's critique of Hick's pluralism model hinges on this supposedly neutral Real. She finds it problematic not so much because it is not really neutral (as argued by D'Costa and others⁶¹), but because of the assumption that proposing a 'neutral' religious idea on which all religions can agree is the answer to the problem of pluralism. In her work on possible conditions for interreligious dialogue, one of Cornille's main points is that genuine dialogue is a balancing act between openness to the interlocutor and commitment to one's own tradition. In an attitude of what she calls "epistemic or dogmatic humility"⁶², informed by the hermeneutical insight that all knowledge is created in the interplay between object and subject, dialogue partners must be open to the possibility that the religious other possesses a truth which one's own tradition has not adequately grasped or expressed, while at the same time holding firmly to at least some characteristic doctrines of their own tradition.

If the balance slides too far in the direction of openness and is no longer grounded in a traditional basis, the encounter will result in a syncretistic individual position that Cornille generally labels "New Age".⁶³ If the balance slides too far in the direction of the traditional standpoint, the encounter results not in dialogue but in self-affirmation that does not engage seriously with the possibility that the other may contribute with anything

⁵⁸ Cf. Race and Hedges 2008: 112.

⁵⁹ See Cornille 2008.

⁶⁰ Cf. Hick 2004: 24.

⁶¹ Cf. Cornille 2008: 125; Cornille 2009: ix ff; see also D'Costa 2000; Abe 1995.

⁶² Cornille 2008: 10.

⁶³ Cornille 2008: 64.

essentially worthwhile. In this context, according to Cornille, a pluralist position based on Hick's model is too weak on the point of commitment to be of any use in establishing genuine interreligious dialogue and is therefore rejected. Early in the debate about interreligious dialogue, David Tracy also underlined the importance of respecting the doctrinal positions of religions as essential properties, rather than something superfluous that conveniently could be brushed aside when they appeared to be in the way of the search for a common religious denominator.⁶⁴

While Cornille's argument is concerned specifically with the parameters of dialogue, it also raises a crucial question in relation to the purpose of pluralist notions of religion such as those I present in the following chapters. From a traditional theological perspective, there is a deep concern for the integrity of religious traditions, and the status and role of their established doctrines and practices, in a pluralist view. As the problems raised in this section show, most pluralisms are far from being neutral positions. Rather, they imply either a supposedly tradition-neutral religious central notion, such as 'salvation' or 'the Real', or follow in the perennial philosophy tradition (more on which below), postulating an even more complex body of teachings in which the role of the different religious traditions is determined in greater detail.

As a possible solution to this problem, other scholars have tried to suggest different paradigms through which to approach religious plurality. Hans Küng's attempt to establish a global ethic on the basis of insights drawn from different religious and philosophical traditions may be seen as one such effort.⁶⁵ Werner Jeanrond has suggested that instead of specifically religious notions, such as 'salvation' or 'ultimate reality', a central category for interreligious understanding may be found in a redefined concept of love.⁶⁶ Love is a universal human phenomenon as well as an integral part of the messages and teachings of all faiths, and it has a genuine basis in the cultures in which religious traditions emerged. As such, it may be used as a path to explore another universal human phenomenon with different particular characteristics: religion.

Furthermore, as a central element in interreligious questions, Jeanrond regards the strength of the category of love to be its essential relationality.⁶⁷ An attitude of love thrives on difference, i.e. because of the *otherness* of the other. The bond of a genuine loving

⁶⁴ Cf. Tracy 1987: 84f.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Küng 1991a and 1991b.

⁶⁶ See Jeanrond 2010a.

⁶⁷ Cf. Jeanrond 2010a: 51f.

relationship remains the essential point, without attempting to smooth over genuine differences or subsume otherness under some kind of theological or pragmatic agenda.⁶⁸ This emphasis on relationship rather than intellectual reflection on encounters with others, including religious others, is intended to reorient the problematic aspects of pluralism from concern with ideas to a concern for the religious other as a person. Similarly, historian of religion Karen Armstrong has recently developed an inclusive reading of religion focused on the notion of compassion, which she promotes as a basis for global peace⁶⁹.

I shall argue that the early approaches to religious pluralism developed by Ramakrishna *et al.* also emphasised the relational aspect of religious faith and practice, but that these four thinkers expressed their understanding of religion with regard to the current concerns of their time and place. Thus, they discussed the value of religious insights in a way that supported religion in general against materialism and a materialistic understanding of modern science. Accordingly, all religion must unite in the face of a materialistic worldview, and present a broad and varied challenge to the universalist claims of modern materialism. Hence, in their different ways, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Besant each proposed an understanding of religion according to which people of all religious traditions would be able to support a religious worldview in which human potential depended on a crucial and essential link to each other, and to the life of the entire universe through the possession of a divine spirit.

2.5 Esoteric traditions and the development of pluralist views on religion

At this point, it might be helpful to introduce in more detail the significance of the esoteric influence on the thinking of Ramakrishna and Blavatsky, and its importance in the context of this study of early expressions of religious pluralism. As stated in the introductory chapter, I argue that Ramakrishna and Blavatsky's emphasis on religious experience as a means of obtaining knowledge about spiritual matters derived from their grounding in the esoteric traditions of Tantrism and Hermeticism, respectively. Thus, in this section I shall discuss some characteristics of esoteric traditions in order to clarify what I regard as a connection between esotericism and religious pluralism.

⁶⁸ Cf. Jeanrond 2010a: 49, 52.

⁶⁹ See Armstrong 2011. Also the project's website "Peace starts here": charterforcompassion.org

The study of esotericism is a relatively young academic field that is still developing its terminology and scope of study.⁷⁰ In recognition of the danger of definitions resulting in restrictive and reified ideas, scholars often prefer to describe their subject as the study of ‘esotericisms’. This emphasises that esoteric traditions originate in many different contexts and that esoteric movements exist within different non-esoteric traditions, such as the more established religions. Prominent esotericism scholar Jacob Needleman even suggests that major religious traditions may be institutionalisations of what were originally esoteric schools.⁷¹

In a Western context, the genealogy of esoteric traditions is relatively clear, as presented in Wouter Hanegraaff’s latest monograph, *Esotericism and the Academy*.⁷² The book traces the academic conception of esoteric traditions from their origin in the early Renaissance through Reformation and Enlightenment and through modern and postmodern critiques. Hanegraaff’s overall purpose is to show that what is conceptualised as ‘esoteric traditions’ is really a ‘waste-basket’ of rejected knowledge, ideas and views that did not fit in with the accepted opinion, particularly since the Enlightenment, and what forms essentially a dark reverse of the academic self-identity of rational, sceptical, historically-informed ‘truths’.⁷³

In the process of making this argument, Hanegraaff identifies what he holds to be the core of Western esoteric traditions, namely an appeal to a narrative concerning an *ancient wisdom* possessed by pre-Christian peoples. This aspect is very strong in the work of Blavatsky and Besant, as I shall show below in their respective chapters. Hanegraaff argues that the ancient wisdom narrative in the West grew out of the uncomfortable coexistence of Christianity and paganism in the first centuries of the Common Era.⁷⁴ In their earliest years, Christian groups and their prominent spokespeople, to whom we now refer as ‘Fathers’, were a minority in a pagan empire. The challenge then was to argue for the superiority of the Christian faith to the pagans who set great store in tradition. One of the great oddities of Christianity was that it appeared to the Romans as a novelty, which was regarded as highly suspicious, for example by the early critic Celsus, made famous by church father Origen’s response to his critique.⁷⁵ The ancient wisdom narrative at this point was developed in order to explain how the Christian faith was not at all a new religion, but

⁷⁰ For an overview, see Hanegraaff 2012: 356ff. Also Hammer 2001; Stuckrad 2005.

⁷¹ Cf. Needleman 1992: xxvi.

⁷² Hanegraaff 2012.

⁷³ Hanegraaff 2012: 369.

⁷⁴ Hanegraaff 2012: 369.

⁷⁵ See Origen, *Contra Celsum*. Chadwick, trans. and ed., 1953.

merely the perfection of a wisdom that had always been present with humanity, revealed by reason and also by mystical access to God.⁷⁶ This wisdom had informed the pre-Christian peoples, particularly Moses and a line of sages who had come into contact with the Mosaic teachings and applied them as well as they could before the ultimate revelation in Christ.

As Christianity was adopted as the faith of the empire itself, the ancient wisdom narrative remained largely the same. Moses was still regarded as the primal sage, while figures such as Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato and others could be invoked as necessary to support arguments along different lines, usually depending on the origin of the writer. During the Renaissance period, where the idea of the ancient wisdom was fully developed thanks to the rediscovery of Greek ancient texts, it was believed that Plato, who had supposedly travelled in the East, had learned from this lineage of Eastern sages and incorporated their wisdom into his philosophy. Plato was thus regarded as a further link in the chain of transmission. Of course, what Renaissance authors read was mostly Neoplatonic representations of Platonic philosophy. But Hanegraaff warns that it would be unfair – not to mention anachronistic – to judge these early writers for lacking a systematic, historical critical approach to the material. Renaissance appreciations of the (Neo)Platonic writings regarded these texts as direct links to an ancient wisdom tradition, and did not think of them as individual contributions to a field of philosophy.⁷⁷

In order to distinguish this renaissance view from Neoplatonism and Platonism as they are now conceived, Hanegraaff prefers to use the term ‘Platonic Orientalism’ to refer to this very central view of the Greek texts and their role in the Western Renaissance mind. The term refers to the fact that Plato was believed to be a link in a chain of transmission of the ancient wisdom that had come through a line of wise men in the East who had either discovered or had revealed through mystical insight the tenets of the universal wisdom.⁷⁸ The central concern for the Renaissance appeal to the ancient wisdom narrative was then to rediscover what the ancients had known that might be relevant to people of later times, and thus to find and restore the truth ‘hidden’ under the cover of paganism.⁷⁹ At least, this was the positive interest in the ancient texts and their possible relevance to people of later times. At the same time, a negative response took place, whose representatives saw the

⁷⁶ Hanegraaff 2012: 14.

⁷⁷ Hanegraaff 2012: 43, 74.

⁷⁸ Hanegraaff 2012: 12ff.

⁷⁹ Hanegraaff 2012: 64ff.

work of demons in the Neoplatonic practices and condemned the use of related texts and ideas as evil.⁸⁰ This tradition of negative appeal to the ancient wisdom forms the basis of much later criticism, particularly from within the different churches, of ideas associated with esoteric thought as demonic and ‘black magic’. As I show below, both Ramakrishna’s Tantrism and Blavatsky and Besant’s esotericism were subject to criticism in this respect.

With regard to the notion of religious pluralism, esoteric traditions and pluralist religious views often are related. For example, pioneering scholar of Western esotericism Antoine Faivre has argued that one of the essential characteristics of an esoteric tradition is its focus on the significance of similarities, or concordances, between things and ideas, as expressed in the famous Hermetic maxim, “as above, so below”.⁸¹ In this view, elements of the cosmos are related in an inner way, and qualities of one part of the concordance are transferred to corresponding elements. Examples of elements include heavenly bodies, colours, the humours, numbers, herbs, animals and parts of the body. Moreover, Faivre argues that this belief in correspondences and concordances is often extended to established religious traditions. These are regarded as exterior branches of a common root in which the true gnosis of all the traditions is concentrated and which the branches manifest in different ways.

In Western traditions, these postulated common teachings are often termed *philosophia perennis*.⁸² Details of the contents of the inner ‘gnosis’ vary between different esoteric traditions, but the general notion of an inner body of religious truths with outer manifestations of its different parts embodied in the established religious traditions is found in several forms of esoteric thought. The lineage of religious sages itself also displays a bold disregard for traditional notions of religious boundaries. As I shall show in the subsequent chapters, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Besant all present some version of this idea of an elusive inner gnosis held in common among religious traditions.

If we accept that the idea of an ancient wisdom tradition ties together esoteric currents in Western religion, it also opens the way to a particular kind of pluralistic religious idea. As I shall describe below, specifically in relation to my two Theosophical representatives, the ancient wisdom narrative formed a strong part of their pluralist model of religions, down to the same genealogy of sages mentioned by Hanegraaff. This is what I would call a

⁸⁰ Hanegraaff 2012: 86, 94.

⁸¹ Cf. Deghaye 1992: 215; Hanegraaff 1996: 185, 325ff.

⁸² Cf. Gilbert 2004: 305; Hanegraaff 1996: 389ff and a more in-depth discussion in Hanegraaff 2012, Chapter 1.

deductive model of pluralism, in which one begins with a set of doctrines that can be retrieved (or imagined) in any tradition one desired to fit into the scheme. From a current academic point of view, this view of religious traditions is of course highly problematic in that it assumes to know the right answer from the outset and rides rough-shod over historical particularity. However, the narrative had a strong appeal even in the Victorian period, and still to this day it has faithful followers among groups who continue to promote such teachings in the West (notably Theosophical Societies and their off-shoot groups).

On the other hand, the wisdom narrative is unique in its willingness to disregard traditional religious boundaries and to look for not only superficial similarities but to postulate a profound, essential unity across religious practice and belief and to consider seriously religious claims and insights from other traditions. With regard to mystical practices, the ancient wisdom narrative allows that genuine religious insight may be obtained outside of one tradition (Christianity in particular), but that the ‘sages’ of other faiths and times might have something of real value to contribute that might be worth exploring. At least, this is the ideal argument. As above, the argument suffers from the problem of imposing a new narrative superstructure on the development of individual traditions and forcing a complete reinterpretation of the religious traditions considered. However, it remains that the ancient wisdom narrative as the basis of Western esoteric thought does allow for positive appreciation of other religious traditions, even if only within the narrow margins of the narrative itself.

Blavatsky began her studies in the library of her grandfather, who possessed a collection of books on Hermeticism, alchemy and Freemasonry. These traditions all form part of the Western esoteric heritage and have developed in relation to Christianity and different philosophical schools.⁸³ The presence of Jewish thinkers and the Hebrew esoteric tradition of Kabbalah in Europe, particularly after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, also contributed strongly to the character of Western esotericism. A Christian Kabbalah was thus developed from its Jewish foundations.

Esoteric traditions take their name from the *eso* – inner things – of the Platonic mystery schools. This is understood to mean that these sometimes highly diverse traditions share an intense concern for individual knowledge and experience of the inner aspect of things, of the hidden powers that govern the universe in large and small things.⁸⁴ It includes ideas

⁸³ Cf. Gilbert 2004: 304ff.

⁸⁴ Cf. Hanegraaff 1996: 385ff.

about the movement of heavenly bodies and their significance, the purpose of life, the working of the human body and mind and the relationship of the human consciousness to the larger cosmic processes, as exemplified in the different systems of astrology.⁸⁵ Traditions often claim access to a higher knowledge as well as methods for obtaining it.⁸⁶

Different traditions of esoteric thought and practice may be classified as either dualistic or non-dualistic, according to whether their basis is mainly in Gnosticism or Hermeticism. Heavily Gnostic traditions, drawing on, for example, the second-century teachings of Marcion in which the created world is regarded as the product of evil, emphasise ascetic practices and do not engage with the world.⁸⁷ Traditions based more strongly on Hermeticism are non-dualistic and essentially optimistic with regard to the created world, which is considered part of the unity of life and the medium by which the inner and outer worlds are related. In the following I shall refer mainly to this non-dualist group of traditions when discussing esotericism. The distinction is important to emphasise, as some common elements of esoteric teachings are sometimes referred to as ‘gnosis’ in the sense of an intuitively perceived wisdom concerning the universe. These are not, however, directly related to the ‘gnosis’ of the historical Gnostic traditions of the early centuries of the first millennium.⁸⁸

Occultism in this context, according to Blavatsky, refers to the knowledge and practice of manipulating the hidden powers through an act of will, in order to attain effects in the outer world. This definition of occultism corresponds to the idea of magic as practiced, for example, by the Order of the Golden Dawn (a British society for the study and practice of ceremonial magic, established by ex-Theosophists in 1888⁸⁹). It also lies at the heart of much of the practice of Neo-Pagan witchcraft and magic today.⁹⁰ Blavatsky used the term ‘occultism’ largely to denote active manifestations of esoteric knowledge, although she also used the term ‘magic’ on some occasions.

Esoteric traditions may exist in relation to an established religious tradition and form a part of its heritage, whether recognised by the established religion, as in the case of Islamic Sufism or Jewish Kabbalah, or unrecognised, as in the case of Christian esotericisms.

⁸⁵ Cf. Hanegraaff 2012: 154.

⁸⁶ Stuckrad 2005: 83.

⁸⁷ Cf. Faivre 1993b: 7ff.

⁸⁸ Cf. Faivre 1993b: 8; Gilbert 2004: 304.

⁸⁹ Cf. Butler 2011: 2f.

⁹⁰ Cf. Pearson 2002: 24f. See, for example, Holland 2008: 29; Netzley 2002: 163.

Other esoteric movements are essentially unrelated to a major religion, such as Renaissance alchemy and Hermeticism. Where an esoteric tradition is related to a religious tradition, it often forms a school of mysticism and contains teachings on religious experiences and individual spiritual progress. Due to this emphasis on individual practice and attainment of knowledge of ‘inner things’, esoteric movements occupy a liminal position in relation to established religions and their authority. This accounts for the suspicion with which mysticism and esotericism are often regarded by religious authorities who recognise the potential challenges to their exclusive possession of religious truth.

Looking to the East, the picture is much less clear. I shall be arguing that Ramakrishna’s background in the Bengali Shakta Tantra tradition may have had an effect on this outlook similar to what Blavatsky received from her Hermetic studies, i.e. a willingness and curiosity to transgress traditional boundaries of religion and to relate ideas and experiences across traditions. Studies of Western esoteric traditions clearly allow for such an argument to be made, as shown above, but I have not been able to retrieve similar support for the Eastern counterpart although I believe this is only due to lack of studies of the area. Studies of Tantrism in India are very few and mostly with a psychological focus. In studies of Indian religions Tantra is commonly referred to as an ‘esoteric’ tradition,⁹¹ but it is clear that the use of the term in the context of Indian religion is not directly comparable to its use in a Western context, and it has not undergone anything like the rigorous debate that applies to the notion of Western ‘esotericisms’. However, Tantric traditions share some core features identified in Western esoteric traditions, such as an emphasis on attaining hidden powers and knowledge of the inner energetic workings of the universe; a ‘scientific’, i.e. systematic discipline for such attainment; an understanding of the outer and inner worlds being essentially linked and a belief in divinising the material world through embracing it in the Tantric practice; a system of correspondences as a basis for Tantric magical rites; focus on sound and symbols in meditations and rites.⁹²

In other words, in my treatment of Ramakrishna I shall merely draw attention to coincidences of belief and practice that are parallel to Blavatsky’s, and my discussion of Ramakrishna’s Tantrism as an esoteric tradition must therefore also be regarded as suggestive rather than definitive. This is clearly also an area that would benefit from the attention of further study.

⁹¹ For example in the introductory essays of the anthology *Tantra in Practice* (White, ed., 2000).

⁹² White 2000: 8ff; Bühnemann 2000: 448f; Singh 1976: ix, 44.

2.5.1 *The meaning of ‘secrecy’ in esotericism*

The term ‘esoteric’ also implies the existence of secret teachings passed down from master to pupil, often involving degrees of initiation through which the pupil progresses as his or her esoteric knowledge increases. However, as Jacob Needleman has suggested, the way in which secrecy functions in esotericism is less concerned with the need or desire to keep a certain knowledge from others, and more concerned with the essential quality of what constitutes the esoteric.⁹³ The inner truths with which esoteric traditions are concerned are believed to require a certain degree of understanding that simple outer, exoteric, truths do not require. Thus, the secrecy of esotericism is inextricably bound up with a distinction between the inner and the outer worlds and the kinds of understanding and knowledge that belong to each realm.

From an exoteric perspective, esoteric teachings are hidden because they are unavailable to the exoteric way of understanding. However, from the inner perspective, esoteric knowledge is freely available to anyone who learns the way to access it. As I show in Chapter 6, the words of Jesus are sometimes quoted in arguments to support the presence of an esoteric tradition within the earliest Christian groups. The saying, “Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matt 11:15) is taken to imply that Jesus taught some things that only those initiated into the esoteric way of understanding would be able to grasp.

2.5.2 *Sacralisation of the profane*

Needleman has also suggested that esoteric traditions or esoteric movements within larger traditions have an affinity with a modern understanding of science. He gives this as a reason for the modern (and postmodern) fascination with mystery traditions, for example in the form of the wide spectrum of New Age and Neo-pagan revival groups. In contrast to “belief faiths”, i.e. traditional established religions in which the follower is required to subscribe to a creed and a set of beliefs, Needleman argues that the appeal of esoteric movements is that they put less emphasis on beliefs and more on providing psychological techniques with which the individual may work. Crucially, they provide a real sense of a deep and meaningful relation between the world, nature and the self which is lacking in both traditional religious forms and in a secular materialistic worldview.

⁹³ Cf. Needleman 1993: xxviii ff; Stuckrad 2005: 83.

It has always been a hallmark of esoteric traditions that they embrace both the inner and outer world, and place great importance on the external world as a means of sanctification and a gateway to the inner realm.⁹⁴ According to an esoteric way of thinking, it is not necessary to do “holy” or religious things to be religious, as the sacred is always present. Like the secret teachings of esoteric masters, the sacred is plainly presented but can only be perceived by those who have the esoteric ears to listen and eyes to see the spiritual truth hiding in plain sight. Drawing on Eliade’s categories of the sacred and the profane, Needleman thus characterises esoteric traditions as sacralising the profane, while warning that the risk of profaning the sacred is always simultaneously present.

With this sacralisation of the profane in mind, it becomes clear why traditions such as the Tantric ‘left hand path’ are regarded as paths to the divine, although dangerous and highly risky. Through the embrace of the lowest and most material aspects of life, the esoteric practitioner of Tantra may achieve the same lofty goal as the Vedantin. In relation to religious pluralism, Faivre and Needleman have argued that the perennial philosophy strain of esoteric thought, i.e. the ‘ancient wisdom narrative’ mentioned above, is the cause of the relationship between esotericism and pluralist religious thinking. On this view, the ‘perennial wisdom’ represents common inner teachings shared among the religions, and to which they are all essentially related.⁹⁵ This is true on the level of ideas. However, I would add that on the level of practice, the esoteric tendency to sacralisation of the profane better accounts for the emergence of pluralist religious ideas in an esoteric context. In this sense I use the term “profane” figuratively, denoting ideas or traditions that are not commonly counted among the genuinely sacred, i.e. that which belongs to one’s own religion. This is clearly the case with Ramakrishna, as I shall explore in the following chapter.

2.6 Critique of orientalism in relation to religion

I have already referred to the importance of what Edward Said has called “orientalism”: a discourse in which to talk about, define, rule and control ‘the East’ and its people from a Western perspective. Of course, there is no ‘East’. Even in geographical terms it is not absolute but exists only in relation to a location further west. The discourse of orientalism, which has burdened much of the Western study of, and interaction with, the peoples of

⁹⁴ In his study of the origins of New Age movements, Wouter Hanegraaff has explored what he calls ‘this-worldliness’ as a characteristic of esoteric traditions, which expresses their concern for the created world. (See, for example, Hanegraaff 1996: 116f.) With regards to Tantric traditions, see White 2000: 8ff.

⁹⁵ Cf. Faivre 1993: xiii.

Asia, is a thoroughly Western approach with definite presuppositions regarding the observer *vis-à-vis* the observed. As such, in a study concerning religious ideas with a basis in Eastern traditions, it is necessary to briefly discuss the idea of orientalism and the critique of it which has brought to our awareness some presumptions regarding the relationship between East and West, and the study of religion in general.

In his analysis of the construction of the categories of religion and science, Richard E. King has examined attitudes to religion and science that formed part of the context of what Said defined as orientalism. King has shown how science, from the Enlightenment onwards, was ascribed the qualities of masculinity and rationality, as well as social and public relevance. All these qualities supposedly had a firm basis in the West, and in Western European culture. In contrast, religion came to represent the irrational, the private and the socially irrelevant. Furthermore, one of the main points of this critique is that the category of religion was deliberately applied to 'the East', i.e. the colonial territories and particularly India, where unfamiliar religious activities were a conspicuous part of social life. It was also applied to 'the feminine', contributing to the conception of women as a class of irrational and publically irrelevant humans.

In relation to the East, King has shown how the Enlightenment struggle to create a vision for European thought and public leadership was accomplished against perceptions of Europe's own not so distant past, a past of 'medieval superstition', irrationality, monkish effeminacy, and a lack of public concern. This bundle of qualities was projected onto the newly discovered territories in the East, forming the basis of the intellectual heritage of colonialism and orientalism as defined by Said.

King's analysis of the construction of 'the East' has implications for the study of religion that are important to my argument. The identification of religion as irrational meant that Western studies of Eastern and Western religion alike became focused on the element of the 'irrational' in religion, i.e. the area of mystical experience in religions. In the West this can be seen in attempts to defend religion as 'irrational' or 'non-rational'. I have shown above how this was the case in, for example, Schleiermacher and Otto's defences of religion.

But the experiential aspect of religion was emphasised particularly in the study of the native religions of the colonial territories in the East. Through widespread use, the idea of 'the mystic East' soon became a standard phrase. The more contemplative traditions of Indian religion came to represent the highly varied spectrum of religious belief and

practice there. The elite philosophical tradition of Advaita Vedanta, with its focus on the union of the individual soul with the divine Brahman, was presented as the general aim of Indian religion, although it is only represented by a very small minority of Indians, most of whom are Brahmins.⁹⁶ In fact, it has been argued, as I discuss below in Chapter 4, that the term ‘Hinduism’ itself as a name for ‘the religion of India’ was only applied in the context of the British Raj as a means of cataloguing the different people of the subcontinent. As I shall argue, it is absurd to attempt to incorporate the religions of India under one heading. Nevertheless, the label of ‘Hinduism’ was appropriated by native Indians themselves in an attempt at self-definition and empowerment in the colonial context.

The four thinkers I am investigating each presented a response to the public understanding of religion, of the East and of ideas about ‘mystical’ religion based on religious experience. They also each engaged in different ways with the place of women in this discourse. As I shall show, Ramakrishna, the subject of Chapter 3, initially seems to fit the stereotypical Western notion of an Eastern mystic very well. He was an illiterate, effeminate Bengali, prone to ecstasies and overly fond of some of his boy disciples. In this view he is almost a caricature of the feeble-minded mystic.

In this role as “Eastern mystic”, however, Ramakrishna was able to offer truly pioneering pluralist religious teachings based on his extraordinary religious experiences. And while he was an ambiguous person in other matters, he was highly precise and disciplined with regard to his religious practice. His deliberate exercises in the different religious traditions present in his native Bengal provided Ramakrishna and his followers with indubitable proof of the truth of all religious paths (or at least of different branches of Indian religion, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism) through the attainment of realisation of unity with God, according to what he perceived to be the path laid out by each particular tradition.

Swami Vivekananda, the subject of Chapter 4, was profoundly inspired by Ramakrishna’s practical realisation that all religions led to the same goal. Vivekananda made this insight the basis of his two-fold mission to (1) unite and empower Indians in his and their home country through a new appreciation of their own religious heritage in a Neo-Vedantic understanding, and (2) to promote a notion of religious pluralism abroad in order to bring the best of both worlds together in cooperation for the common good of the world. In this effort Vivekananda drew heavily on the categories of East and West, and on the construed idea of the religion of ‘Hinduism’ as the true faith of India.

⁹⁶ Cf. King 1999: 102f, 119.

Of the four thinkers, H. P. Blavatsky most directly challenged assumptions about the (ir)rationality of religion, the mystic Orient and the feminine. In Chapter 5 I shall show how she deliberately used common notions of East and West, and their associated qualities, in her argument against what she perceived as a creeping materialism that would eliminate belief in the divine source of the human spirit. Blavatsky refused to acknowledge the supposed separation of 'religion' and 'science', consciously promoting her teachings as bridge-builders between the two realms of knowledge and experience. Moreover, she was a paradoxical proponent of religion. She was a woman, yet highly unfeminine; she was religious, but offered an alternative vision of the world based on science and supported this vision with scientific claims that have since been validated by research; she was a mystic, but argued for her insights on the basis of an occult science with laws and techniques as precise and objective as any empirical investigation.

Annie Besant, the subject of Chapter 6, followed in Blavatsky's path with regard to the emphasis on combining insights from 'religion' and 'science'. Besant also personally embodied the rebellion against the stereotyping of East and West, although she, like Vivekananda, used these common notions in her own attempts to promote unity between colonisers and colonised in India and England. The qualities that best define Besant's life and work are 'public' and 'political', with which she as a woman, a religious advocate and eventually a resident of India, would not naturally be associated. She began early in her life with the publication of critical articles for Freethought journals, moving through public speaking and writing to social and political activism. When she renounced her atheism and joined Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, Besant continued the political focus of her work in her campaigns for better education and Home Rule in India, under the grand vision of her hope for a rejuvenated and more spiritual global humanity.

The four thinkers thus embodied an awareness of and an active resistance to the ideas and the effects of the public discourse Said named 'orientalism', and to the Enlightenment assumptions regarding human rationality, 'religion' and 'science' undergirding this body of ideas. The Oriental men, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, spoke to their fellow (male) Indians in response to the colonial presence and its influence on the culture, beliefs and practices of the native population, while Vivekananda travelled to the West and made a significant impact on Western attitudes to the East and Eastern religion there. The Western women, Blavatsky and Besant, both led public careers, and both lived in India for a time, a country to which they felt particularly attached. These two females challenged the scientific claims of the West through their endorsement of a native Eastern occult or

spiritual science, which in their view produced knowledge that was far superior to the limited methods and findings of Western materialistic and empirical investigations. In Chapters 3 to 6 I shall demonstrate how the four, from their different positions and perspectives, reacted to the assumptions of Western, male, materialistic and ‘scientific’ authority.

The theories of religion proposed by each of the four thinkers are remarkable in their display of traits I have defined as pluralist, promoting the notion that each faith, when practiced in a genuine spirit, leads to a shared goal of freedom, liberation or salvation. This notion is quite unique for its time and became a subject for serious theological debate only in the late 1980s and ‘90s. A century earlier, the idea of a pluralist approach to religion was already being championed by these four people in the context of what they regarded as the struggle to break down the purpose-built wall between the realms of ‘science’ and ‘religion’, and bridge the gap between these two wrongly separated areas of human existence. Although their theories differ in detail, they offered a method through which the four thinkers envisioned the unification of science and religion: Through religious experience and practice people will eventually come to realise that the end of all religious traditions is a common goal, namely union of the human soul with the ultimate reality through the divine spirit in which all humans share. The emphasis on religious experience and practice served as an empirical claim to scientific authority, and challenged the range of subjects to which the method of materialistic science might be applied.

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the framework for my study and introduced its key terms and concepts of religious experience and religious pluralism. I have examined the historical and ideological setting in which these concepts were deployed, namely the debate concerning the role of science and religion in the late nineteenth century, the importance of the esoteric background to Ramakrishna and Blavatsky’s thinking, the important context of the British colonial presence in India, and the consequences of this relationship on the mindset of people in East and West alike. I have highlighted issues regarding religious experience and religious pluralism that I shall discuss further in connection with the four thinkers in the final chapter.

3 Ramakrishna Paramahansa

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with Ramakrishna (1836-1886), the first of the four thinkers I examine in this study. The purposes of this chapter are, firstly, to show the extraordinary capacity for religious experience that Ramakrishna possessed and how he used it to test the claims of other religions and, secondly, to demonstrate the ways in which his understanding of religion and the relationship between the different world religions differed considerably from his contemporaries. He lived in a period of Indian history that was particularly alive with the spirit of religious reform and in which many groups and voices by different means vied for supporters to their causes. I shall argue that Ramakrishna embodied a unique approach of inclusivity and practical acceptance of other religious traditions, based on his own experiences with the practice of different religions inspired by his grounding in the esoteric Tantric tradition.

In many ways, as I shall show in the following, Ramakrishna fits the stereotypical Western image of the ‘Eastern mystic’. He was renowned for his capacity for deep religious experiences while also displaying some of the less flattering qualities ascribed to ‘Orientals’, such as effeminacy, infantile behaviour, lack of political awareness, and a general weakness and public irrelevance. However, in my presentation of Ramakrishna’s life and influence I shall demonstrate how his practices and teachings nevertheless formed at once a deliberate opposition to the classification of religions under the British raj and reinforced by the presence of missionary organisations in Bengal as well as providing the inspiration for Vivekananda’s campaign for a reinvigoration of India according to a powerful, rational and masculine Vedantic faith.

I shall begin with a brief presentation of Ramakrishna’s life and religious experiences according to the biographies produced by his disciples after his death, followed by a reassessment of his biography according to recent scholarship. The final part of the chapter locates Ramakrishna in his historical context, particularly in relation to other active religious reform movement in India in the late nineteenth century.

3.1.1 *Different accounts of Ramakrishna*

Ramakrishna is almost exclusively known in the West through the missionary efforts of the Ramakrishna Mission, founded by Vivekananda, and subsequent writers who drew on that

tradition. However, as I shall argue, the “official” account of the life of the Bengali master is quite unlike the man found in the original sources. The traditional image of Ramakrishna is based on interpretations of the master’s life and sayings, and interpretations of these in the later generations of writers. The following is an overview of some of the most important works that contributed to the creation of the image of Ramakrishna the Paramahansa. *Paramahansa* is an honorific given to Vedanta masters who are believed to have attained liberation. Its literal meaning is ‘supreme swan’, referring to the swan as a bird that is equally at home in the water and on the ground, as the liberated soul is at home and free in the worldly as well as the spiritual realm.

The earliest written material about Ramakrishna is exclusively in Bengali, starting with the first biography written by Vivekananda’s cousin Ramchandra Datta and known as *Jivanavrttanta*.¹ When it came out in 1890 this biography was highly controversial. It was severely condemned as “bosh and rot” by Vivekananda², prompted a lawsuit (probably by Vivekananda also)³, and has never been translated, merely reprinted in Bengali for the first time in 1995.⁴ Satyacharan Mitra’s more officially acceptable biography appeared in 1897⁵, after which publication of one of the two standard works on Ramakrishna began, the so-called *Kathamrita* by the close disciple “M” or Mahendranath Gupta. This is a five-volume transcript from memory and from M’s journals of life in the Ramakrishna group between 1882 and 1886.⁶ The other standard work, *Lilaprasanga*, also in five volumes, appeared for the first time in 1912-17 and is an official Ramakrishna biography by disciple Swami Saradananda.⁷ These official accounts, *Kathamrita* and *Lilaprasanga*, eventually became available in English where they are known as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, respectively.

In the West, Ramakrishna’s teachings appealed to the father of comparative religion, F. Max Müller. In 1898 he published the first English biography, *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings*, based mainly on Vivekananda’s writings and personal communications to Müller.⁸

¹ *Srisriramakrsna Paramahamsadever Jivanavrttanta*; cf. Kripal 1994: 154.

² CWV 5: 53f. *Epistle XXII*; cf. Sil 1993: 50.

³ Cf. Kripal 1998: 630f.

⁴ Cf. Kripal 1995: ix f.

⁵ *Sri Sri Ramakrsna Paramahansa: Jivana O Upadesa*; cf. Kripal 1995: xx.

⁶ *Srisriramakrsnakathamrita*, the five volumes of which were published in 1902, 1904, 1908, 1910, and 1932; cf. Kripal 1995: 3.

⁷ Cf. Kripal 1994: 154.

⁸ Müller 1898; cf. Kripal 2004: 503.

In 1928 Romain Rolland, the French author and inspiring acquaintance of Sigmund Freud's, wrote the second major Western Ramakrishna biography, again on the basis of Vivekananda's writings and letters.⁹ In 1965 novelist Christopher Isherwood published another important biography¹⁰ that also followed the official line, although, as contemporary Ramakrishna scholar Jeffrey K. Kripal has shown, with Isherwood's research the official picture of the master was beginning to crumble. Isherwood, however, carefully checked his text with Ramakrishna Movement authorities before publication so that his book would be acceptable to them.¹¹

In the 1990s two works appeared that were significantly different from previous Ramakrishna scholarship. The two studies used similar approaches and drew some new, coinciding conclusions (despite much disagreement between them!¹²). They are *Ramakrishna Paramahansa: A Psychological Profile* by Narasingha P. Sil¹³, and Jeffrey J. Kripal's *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*.¹⁴ I shall discuss the impact of these studies after the following presentation of Ramakrishna's traditional biography.

3.2 Ramakrishna's life and experiences

3.2.1 Biographical sketch

It is difficult to arrive at an accurate biography of Ramakrishna for three main reasons. Firstly, the local biographies that emerged among the followers after his death are clearly hagiographical and often recorded up to twenty years after the fact. Secondly, the devotee biographies are purposefully edited works, and the information contained is selected and presented according to the aim of the authors with rather little regard for what was historically said and done, when and how.¹⁵ Translation into other languages and a desire to present an ideal image of the master to a foreign public abroad has led to further distortion of the original events in the written sources.

⁹ Rolland 1928.

¹⁰ Isherwood 1965.

¹¹ Cf. Kripal 1998: 631.

¹² Cf. Kripal 1995: 298; Kripal's Foreword to Sil 1998: xiii-xv; and Sil's own Preface to 1998: xvii-xix.

¹³ Sil 1991.

¹⁴ Kripal 1995.

¹⁵ Cf. Sil 1998: 5; Kripal 1995: 2ff, 330.

These problems have come to light relatively recently, as scholars of religion began to inquire into the life and teachings of Ramakrishna by historical and textual analytical approaches. They discovered that the original sources gave the image of a Ramakrishna who was significantly different from the one in Vivekananda's presentation, and from the biographical works translated into English. In his preface to the severely bowdlerised translation of the *Kathamrta, The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, the disciple 'M' strongly understates the amount of revision undertaken, when he says that he "omitted only a few pages of no particular interest to English-speaking readers" and that he has sacrificed literary grace "for the sake of literal translation".¹⁶ Neither is true; the so-called translation is in effect a different book. While it relates many descriptions of what took place and was said at certain times and places, it often fails entirely to convey the setting and context of some of the stranger sayings of Ramakrishna, often making them impossible to understand.

The same is true for the translation of the second Ramakrishna classic, Swami Saradananda's biography *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*. Saradananda followed Ramakrishna's leading disciple, Vivekananda, in presenting their master as a Vedantic genius, and any actual events and sayings that were considered unsuitable – rather than "of no interest" – for the English-speaking public were painstakingly omitted or rephrased. As I shall argue in the following section, the recent studies of Ramakrishna reveal that these radical revisions in the translations and subsequent presentations of Ramakrishna are due to the disciples' discomfort toward Tantrism. This esoteric school determined to a large extent Ramakrishna's practice and teachings, and also his naturally uncouth and rather vulgar common speech which they felt might bias their educated listeners against the master's message. Due to these omissions, M's record presents readers with a strange, inexplicable creature proclaimed, and claiming, to be an incarnation of God. This, of course, is also the message of the Ramakrishna Mission.

The leaders of the Ramakrishna Mission are highly censorious when it comes to "unorthodox" publications about their master that do not follow the institutionally acknowledged course of his life and teachings.¹⁷ However, such restrictions must be challenged in the interest of achieving a more nuanced image of Ramakrishna. In the recent biographies, in which the Vivekananda-inspired image of the master rapidly disintegrates, the naked facts portray Ramakrishna as an even more extraordinary,

¹⁶ GSR: Preface, x.

¹⁷ Cf. Kripal 1995: 311.

convincing and thought-provoking example of a spiritual man. This approach is even supported by an early devotee, who said in defence of his master:

Let him stand before the world as he was and the light of Heaven show him in its true light. Why allow myths to grow about him in the light of the present day. If truth is stranger than fiction – the real Ramakrishna will come out better the less there is myth about him.¹⁸

I shall take the devotee's words as an illustration of a methodological point: In trying to throw light on the circumstances in which the strange practices and ideas of a religious visionary developed, we gain a perspective on their actions and thinking that emphasises the value of what they were trying to accomplish. In this and the following chapters I shall explain the strangeness of Ramakrishna, H. P. Blavatsky and some of their followers by relating their activities to the historical setting of events and ideas in which they operated. This method gives a clear purpose to much of what, at first sight, seems odd and shows that these unusual nineteenth-century public voices (as Orientals, women and religious seers) were creative agents in this particular transformative period of Eastern and Western religious, social and political history.

3.2.1.1 A note on names and transliteration

There is some debate about when Ramakrishna became known as 'Ramakrishna', since his birth name was Gadadhar Chattopadhyaya. 'Ramakrishna' was possibly a family pet name, since the family were devoted to forms of Rama and almost everyone had a 'Ram' in their name.¹⁹ All familiar names of people and places are presented in an anglicised transliteration, rather than with diacritics. Indian names vary between local dialects and in the source material they also vary between authors, as some refer to the Bengali versions, others to the Sanskrit. The closest we have to an authority on the matter must be the Ramakrishna Mission, which have published their editions with anglicisation of the Sanskrit. I shall follow their lead on this matter, although I use some names as they are found in Kripal's work. Technical Sanskrit and Pali terms, most of which are familiar ones such as *nirvana*, *samadhi*, *jati*, etc., are also presented in anglicised transliteration without diacritical marks.

¹⁸ Sil 1998: 9.

¹⁹ Cf. Sil 1998: 13n2; LSR: 1, cf. 53n1.

3.2.2 *Early life*

Ramakrishna was born on 18 February 1836 to a Brahmin family in a village in Bengal. In 1855 he moved to Dakshineswar near Kolkata, where his oldest brother, Ramkumar, had been appointed priest of a new temple complex. After losing his beloved father at the age of seven, Ramakrishna was devastated at Ramkumar's untimely death in 1857 and took refuge in his temple service to Kali, the Divine Mother, urgently longing to experience her presence with an anxiety gradually mounting to desperation.²⁰

I was then suffering from excruciating pain because I had not been blessed with a vision of the Mother. I felt as if my heart were being squeezed like a wet towel. I was overpowered by a great restlessness and a fear that it might not be my lot to realise Her in this life.²¹

The early biographer Datta adds his observations to this spectacular state of desperate anxiety for the goddess, during which people used to come to watch Ramakrishna, now in his twenties:

Crying, "Ma! Show yourself to me!" he would fall down suddenly as if he were mad. His face and eyes were bloody red, his eyes were rolled up back into his head. His chest was ceaselessly wetted by such a stream of tears that the ground below him on which he sat looked like it had been rained on. (...) If someone would raise some food to his mouth, he would eat it. He would defecate and urinate unconsciously, and yet he was only able to say "Ma," and saying it, he would weep. (...) When one looked at Ramakrishna, one immediately thought of an infant who cannot see its mother and so cries "Ma! Ma!" and will not be consoled.²²

One day Ramakrishna's perseverance paid off, and he had his first overwhelming experience of the goddess:

I could not bear the separation any longer: life did not seem worth living. Suddenly my eyes fell on the sword that was kept in the Mother's temple. Determined to put an end to my life, I jumped up like a madman and seized it, when suddenly the blessed Mother revealed Herself to me, and I fell unconscious on the floor. What happened after that externally, or how that day or the next passed, I do not know, but within me there was a steady flow of undiluted bliss altogether new, and I felt the presence of the Divine Mother.²³

In Ramakrishna biographies the period immediately following this first vision of Kali is called the period of "spiritual madness", and it was a time of puzzling behaviour, intensified visions and unconscious lapses during which he once more lost control of his

²⁰ Cf. LSR: 65f.

²¹ LSR: 71.

²² Kripal 1995: 62.

²³ LSR: 71. Cf. GM: 140f.

bodily functions and had to be cleaned and fed by his cousin Hridayram.²⁴ His family thought that Ramakrishna's strict sexual abstinence was the cause of his antics, which they began to fear were real insanity.²⁵ In order to pacify his relatives, the twenty-three-year-old Ramakrishna eventually agreed to marry a young village girl, Saradadevi, in 1859.²⁶ According to his own, later admission, he also married her because he needed a cook!²⁷ According to custom, after the marriage the five-year-old girl returned to her family's house until called to join her husband, and all parties appear to have been pleased with this arrangement. Sarada's family had their little girl back and Ramakrishna's family were content that by agreeing to marry he was, on the one hand, fulfilling part of his Brahmin duties and, on the other, giving them hope that once his wife was matured their conjugal relations would ease some of his ascetic tension. Ramakrishna himself happily returned to Dakshineswar and took up his *sadhanas*, or spiritual exercises, with renewed vigour.²⁸

He first followed what he called "the practices according to the Puranas"²⁹ in which, among other things, he acted the part of the god Rama's monkey servant Hanuman. He thus spent several weeks jumping around in the trees in the temple garden with his loincloth tied around the waist like a long monkey-tail. Then came the "state of the handmaid"³⁰, in which he would imitate Radha, the lover of Krishna, act like a "girlfriend" to local young women, and wear women's clothing and jewellery. This was much to the delight of the temple boss, Bishwas, who lavished the effeminate young priest with presents and eventually installed him in his own home at the temple mansion.³¹

3.2.3 Ramakrishna's spiritual teachers

In the course of his period of instruction Ramakrishna subjected himself to the teachings of two representatives of different Indian traditions, namely Tantra and Vedanta. In 1861 a female Tantrism teacher, Brahmani Bhairavi, arrived at the Dakshineswar temple complex. Ramakrishna agreed to receive her teachings, and the two became strongly devoted to one

²⁴ Cf. Kripal 1995: 101.

²⁵ Cf. GM: 89; Kripal 1995: 78f, 121.

²⁶ Cf. Sil 1998: 196.

²⁷ Cf. Kripal 1995: 111.

²⁸ Cf. GM: 103.

²⁹ Kripal 1995: 91ff.

³⁰ Kripal 1995: op. cit., 103.

³¹ Cf. Kripal 1995: 103ff.

another, calling each other “Mother” and “Child”.³² The Bhairavi stayed with Ramakrishna for up to twelve years, and apart from the Tantric exercises she also led Ramakrishna through some Vaishnavite devotional practices. These involved him taking on the role of a woman in imitation of the *gopi* milkmaids of Krishna, reminiscent of his earlier handmaid states.³³

The Tantric *sadhanas* were, however, where most of the Bhairavi’s efforts were spent and although it seems that her exercises were never entirely successful with the complex-ridden Ramakrishna³⁴, Shakta Tantra came to form the unconscious basis of his future life’s practice and teaching.³⁵ The essence of the Shakta Tantra practice that the Bhairavi taught was, in Saradananda’s words, the “renunciation of aversion”. Through this the traditional categories of purity and impurity are transcended and dissolved, rendering the whole world full of God.³⁶ Having tried, unsuccessfully, in several other ways to persuade Ramakrishna to participate in the final element of ritual intercourse, the Bhairavi brought him to a local, (in)famous Tantric sect. There he predictably collapsed in a defensive semi-unconscious ‘*samadhi*’, crying “Ma! Ma!” at the alluring women who in return considered him “just a beginner, still not aware of his shortcomings”.³⁷

Around the time when Ramakrishna’s Tantric exercises were coming to an end, probably in the mid-1860s, a monk and accomplished Vedanta teacher, Tota Puri Paramahansa, came to Dakshineswar. He initiated Ramakrishna in the Vedanta traditions, particularly Shankara’s Advaita school.³⁸ The otherwise itinerant Tota Puri, whom Ramakrishna called “Nangta” or The Naked One due to his renunciation of the wearing of clothes³⁹, surprisingly stayed in Dakshineswar for eleven months and spent most of the time in a small tree hut with Ramakrishna for the purpose of Vedantic instructions. Nangta was “a man of great knowledge”⁴⁰, i.e. an intellectual of his day, and he was at first derisive of Ramakrishna’s childish devotion to the Divine Mother and his observance of rituals. But after only a few days together he became more positive towards Ramakrishna’s unique

³² Kripal 1995: 115.

³³ Cf. Kripal 1995: 115.

³⁴ Cf. Kripal 1995: 115.

³⁵ Cf. Kripal 1995: 100, 117, 151.

³⁶ Cf. Kripal 1995: 116f; GM: 196.

³⁷ Kripal 1995: 123f.

³⁸ Cf. GM: 245ff; Kripal 1995: 151f, 337nl.

³⁹ Cf. Kripal 1995: 160; GM: 475.

⁴⁰ GSR: 90.

capacity for religious experiences. This was because Ramakrishna was able to attain the state of *nirvikalpa samadhi*, the highest vision of the formless *brahman* according to the Advaita teachings and a feat it had taken the monk his entire life to realise.⁴¹ It appears, though, that Ramakrishna found the Vedanta teachings themselves extremely boring and that what he found most fascinating about his instructions in Vedanta was that his teacher was naked and they got to eat their meals outside.

After thus both teaching and being taught, Tota Puri left Dakshineswar and Ramakrishna became lost in a particularly deep form of *samadhi* for six months. During this time he was subject to fits of uncontrollable weeping and severe, bloody dysentery in which he had to be cleaned by others and beaten hard with a stick in order to bring him around long enough to occasionally be force-fed. While this period is traditionally interpreted as a consequence of Ramakrishna's outstanding Vedantic abilities, Jeffrey Kripal questions whether Vedanta was all that passed between the two naked men in the tree hut.⁴² As shown above, Ramakrishna was already prone to fall into defensive trances when challenged sexually, and the coincident occurrence of Tota Puri's sudden departure with a deeply unconscious, internally bleeding Ramakrishna is perhaps telling.

Kripal's insinuation of the nature of the relationship between the two is unlikely and also irrelevant to the development of Ramakrishna's teaching on religion. It is certain that whatever took place in the tree hut during the months of Vedantic instruction certainly did nothing to stabilise Ramakrishna physically or psychologically, and indeed may have had the opposite effect. In any case, the departure of Tota Puri marks the end of Ramakrishna's period of instruction after which he took no further teachers. Having succeeded in attaining the highest realisation and thus, in his understanding, mastering the two paths of Tantra and Vedanta, he instead set out to test further ways of religious being.

3.2.4 Experiences of other religions

After his eventual return to consciousness, in his own explanation because the dysentery called him back to physical presence, Ramakrishna now desired two things: experience of other religions, and followers whom he could instruct in the spiritual life. In the case of the first, a supposed Muslim named Govinda Ray conveniently arrived at Dakshineswar. As an appellation of Krishna, Govinda is a rather unlikely Muslim name. Saradananda was also doubtful as to how faithful a Muslim Govinda in fact was and how far he observed the

⁴¹ Cf. GM: 251f.

⁴² Cf. Kripal 1995: 160.

customs of Islam.⁴³ However, he was probably a Sufi⁴⁴ and did “initiate” Ramakrishna into Islam, whereupon the master would chant “Allah” as a mantra, dress in Muslim clothes, pray at the appointed times, and not visit the temple deities.

In three days this practice yielded a vision of Allah as an old man with a long beard who became illuminated and merged into the *nirguna brahman*, God without attributes.⁴⁵ Thus, the experience here was clearly interpreted in the Vedantic terms of Saradananda. This brief effort in Islam may seem like a very superficial encounter, but from the perspective of Saradananda, and also Ramakrishna himself, the master had indeed adopted the religious way of Muhammad; through the Muslim practices of characteristic habits and prayer he had attained the realisation of God, thereby demonstrating that this particular path was indeed divine.⁴⁶

Some time later Ramakrishna had encounters with the Christian religion. His devotee and patron Sambhuchandra Mallick lived next to the Dakshineswar temple, and while it is not clear whether Mallick himself was a Christian (this is unlikely), he used to invite Ramakrishna to his home and read to him from the Bible.⁴⁷ Another Mallick, Jadunath, had a picture of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus in his house. On one occasion when Ramakrishna went by the image, a ray of light shone out of it into Ramakrishna’s heart “and changed radically all the ideas of his mind!”, as Saradananda put it.⁴⁸ On this occasion the Master had an overwhelming experience, which is related in terms that make it sound almost like a conversion:

On finding that all the inborn Hindu impressions disappeared into a secluded corner of his mind and that different ones arose in it, [Ramakrishna] tried in various ways to control himself and prayed earnestly to the Divine Mother, “What strange changes art Thou bringing about in me, Mother?” But nothing availed. Rising with a great force, the waves of those impressions completely submerged the Hindu ideas in his mind. His love and devotion to the Devas and Devis vanished, and in their stead, a great faith in and reverence for Jesus and his religion occupied his mind, and began to show him Christian padres offering incense and light before the image of Jesus in the Church (...).⁴⁹

⁴³ Cf. GM: 259.

⁴⁴ Cf. Sil 1998: 112.

⁴⁵ Cf. Kripal 1995: 165; Sil 1998: 112.

⁴⁶ Cf. Kripal 1995: 165, 268.

⁴⁷ Cf. Kripal 1995: 168.

⁴⁸ GM: 295.

⁴⁹ GM: 295.

According to Saradananda, this state absorbed the Master for three days, corresponding to the three days it took Ramakrishna to master Tota Puri's teachings and the instructions in Islam. At the end of this period he had a vision of "Jesus the Christ, the great Yogi"⁵⁰ coming towards him, embracing him and disappearing into his body, leaving Ramakrishna in another fit of ecstatic unconsciousness. This time he was lost, very specifically, in *saguna brahman*, "the Omnipresent Brahman with attributes".⁵¹ This passage by Saradananda is an interesting description in that it is so emphatic about the "inborn Hindu impressions" and "Hindu ideas" being completely excluded from Ramakrishna's consciousness in the encounter with Jesus and throughout the following ecstasy. It was clearly pressing on Saradananda's mind that there should be no doubt that Ramakrishna did not merely venerate Jesus as a master of religion but that Jesus, as the Jesus of the Christian churches, was in those three days the sole focus of Ramakrishna's devotion and rapture.

Nevertheless, even though Saradananda's description of Ramakrishna's encounter with Jesus emphasised that Ramakrishna really was a Christian in the moments of realisation, we can see that the Hindu categories had not vanished from Ramakrishna's mind but continued to form his experience of the event. In the first part of the quote Ramakrishna calls for Kali, his Divine Mother, when he feels the changes beginning to happen in him. And Saradananda found it the most helpful to explain the state of absorption attained through the master's Christian experience as a specific state of the Vedantic *samadhi*, namely "Brahman with attributes".

This experience and the form in which Saradananda presents it illustrate the inherent embeddedness of religious terminology, particularly with regard to subjective experience. It seems suspicious, almost illegitimate, that Saradananda argued that Ramakrishna was a Christian using his own (Vedantic Hindu) terminology to explain the rapture and visions in these highly unfamiliar terms. For good measure Saradananda attached to the brief accounts of Ramakrishna's Muslim and Christian experiences a few paragraphs on Ramakrishna's view of "the other main religions prevalent in the world",⁵² i.e. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Judaism goes unmentioned. All are found to lead their followers to become "eternally united with the supreme Brahman"⁵³, again in highly Hindu-embedded

⁵⁰ GM: 296.

⁵¹ GM: 295.

⁵² GM: 296.

⁵³ GM: 296f.

terms. Buddhism is authorised because “It is certain that the Buddha was an incarnation of God”⁵⁴ and therefore “There is no difference between the faith founded by him and the Vedic path of knowledge.”⁵⁵ Ramakrishna offered incense to images of Jesus and Mahavira, thus showing his respect for the teacher of the Jainas, and he acknowledged that the Sikhs also followed a path laid by holy men.⁵⁶

The mentions of these remaining traditions are very brief, and on the basis of the material it does not appear that Ramakrishna made any extra efforts to validate these traditions through obvious ecstasies or other means as he did with Islam and Christianity. In particular, the comments about Jainism and Sikhism seem very weak since Ramakrishna only offered incense to an image of Mahavira (with no description of sudden *samadhis* or other similar proofs of the efficacy of the Jain tradition) and told the disciples that “the founders of Sikhism” were holy men (who remain unnamed). No reason is given why the master did not concern himself with these traditions in as great detail as he did with regard to Islam and Christianity.

A possible explanation of this is that Islam and Christianity did not originate in India and thus were more foreign to Ramakrishna’s followers, requiring a slightly more solid defence. Additionally, it would also have been desirable to appear as a friend of Christianity in order to secure the goodwill of surrounding missionaries and other groups seeking reconciliation and approximation between Indian religions and Christianity. I shall discuss this point in more detail below in relation to the Brahmo Samaj.

Above I have given examples of how Ramakrishna, in his own way, sought to confirm the truth as he saw it in other religions by testing them with his *samadhi*-litmus test. Having succeeded in realising God via different Hindu paths (through forms of Bhakti, Shakta Tantra and Vedanta), he turned to other, particularly non-indigenous religions. He also succeeded in attaining the deepest realisation through the practice of Islam and Christianity, and stated that other Indian traditions of Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism were also paths to unity with God and therefore true.

On the basis of these experiences, the idea that all religions were paths to a religious end, which I have defined as pluralist, became a significant feature of Ramakrishna’s teachings. And as he was practically illiterate and unlearned, he taught only what he had experienced

⁵⁴ GM: 297.

⁵⁵ GM: 297.

⁵⁶ Cf. GM: 297.

personally and felt to be true. Despite the textual-critical problems I have considered above, the accounts of his efforts convey the honesty and seriousness with which he engaged the different religious traditions in order to realise unity with God in as many forms as possible.

One may reasonably ask why he felt the need to undertake these diverse investigations in the first place. Characteristically, he did not give a reason for embarking on his varied exercises, although Saradananda as a conscientious biographer supplies one. The reason, we are told, is that Ramakrishna desired simply to

tread along various scriptural paths, thus giving him the opportunity of comparing his first vision of [Kali] with the ultimate result of all the Sadhanas.⁵⁷

The other religions are here being referred to as “*sadhanas*” or religious exercises. The explanation is, then, that the first overwhelming vision of Kali had set the focus for Ramakrishna’s entire life and that he set out both to pursue comparisons with the vision of Kali and to experience the intense union in any form possible. This explains the voracity with which he sought different kinds of religious experiences and with which he threw himself into various kinds of practices.

Saradananda does not draw any further or more generalised conclusions about his master’s mission. It is uncertain whether or not Ramakrishna expected to find anything that could compare to the glory of the first vision of Kali. But in the quote above it seems as if “the ultimate result of all the Sadhanas” amounts to the same thing, which is different from the very specific Kali vision. However, we have also seen that the “ultimate results” of Islam and Christianity for example did not amount to the same thing at all, but to the states of *nirguna brahman* and *saguna brahman*, respectively. Nothing more is said in Saradananda’s biography on whether one tradition is better or more effective than others, and it is not until Vivekananda’s more comprehensive interpretation of Ramakrishna’s life and teaching, which will be discussed in the next chapter, that we are presented with a coherent account of the relations between the different religious traditions and the relative benefit of their practices.

3.2.5 Ramakrishna’s disciples and the end of his life

At this point Ramakrishna had gone through his major experiences and a new stage began in his life. After the period of madness and the extraordinary variety of *sadhanas*,

⁵⁷ GM: 294.

Ramakrishna began to attract a crowd of disciples who came to see him and to benefit from his presence as much as from his teachings. By this time, “the mad Master of Dakshineswar”⁵⁸ had already become something of a local celebrity. He interacted with many famous Bengalis of his day, most notably among them Keshabchandra Sen of the Brahmo Samaj, who became a great admirer.⁵⁹

The best known of the disciples is Narendranath Datta, who became known to the Western world by his monastic name of Swami Vivekananda. To say that Ramakrishna adored the young Narendra is an understatement, even as the traditional biographies have it. The master more than doted on Narendra and yearned for his presence with his usual, heart-rending “anxious desire”.⁶⁰ Narendra was uneasy about this embarrassing special attention and preferential treatment, but he was in turn devoted to the master and his essential teachings. In spite of his initial scepticism, during which he at one point called Ramakrishna “a brain-sick baby, always seeing visions and the rest”⁶¹ and derided his Bhakti devotions as “Krishna-fishna nonsense”⁶², Ramakrishna later became the lord, god, world saviour, and even “God’s big daddy” in Vivekananda’s presentation, and the focus of his evangelistic programme to empower his beloved India.⁶³

Apart from chronic stomach problems, Ramakrishna suffered from an irritable throat and in the 1880s this ailment developed into cancer. After various attempts from indigenous and Western doctors to cure him, he died from this cancer after a long and harrowing period of illness. During his illness he behaved very much unlike a serene and detached god-man, throwing tantrums and demanding unreasonable service of his wife in particular.⁶⁴ For example, Saradadevi lived in a small, dark room and was constantly occupied with acquiring, preparing and serving food for her husband and his guests. She had to endure his enraged tellings-off if she failed to procure a particular spice the master desired that day.⁶⁵ Towards the end of the illness the angry outbursts when she failed to serve Ramakrishna’s desired dishes became harsher. When she once refused to kill clams

⁵⁸ This was his popular name. (Cf. Sil 1998: 215)

⁵⁹ Cf. Kripal 1995: 205. See below on the Brahmo Samaj for more on the relation between Sen and Ramakrishna.

⁶⁰ Kripal 1995: 65, 69f, 343n55; Sil 1993: 41f.

⁶¹ Kripal 1995: 213.

⁶² Kripal 1995: 26.

⁶³ Cf. Sil 1998: 3, 215f.

⁶⁴ Cf. Kripal 1995: 253f; Sil 1998: 188f.

⁶⁵ Cf. Sil 1998: 188.

for a clam stew that Ramakrishna wanted, he was so infuriated that she eventually overcame herself.⁶⁶ Despite the care thus shown to his diet, the cancer put an end to Ramakrishna's life on 16 August 1886; he was aged fifty-one.

Ramakrishna was survived by his widow who for a while became the centre of the Ramakrishna devotion, encouraged by Vivekananda's interpretation of her role in the community. Vivekananda soon took over the leadership of the remaining disciples, and after a period of reflection he began to work for the establishment of the Ramakrishna Order and Mission. The further work of Vivekananda will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. In the rest of this chapter I shall discuss the contributions of more recent Ramakrishna studies to our understanding of Ramakrishna as a human being, and show how Ramakrishna's pluralist ideas of religion were unique for his time.

3.3 Reinterpretations of Ramakrishna's life and work

The Ramakrishna encountered in works such as M and Nikhilananda's *Gospel* does seem to be a very strange man. In Saradananda's heavily glossed *Great Master*, he tries to aid our comprehension with extensive expositions on what he sees as the Vedantic subtext underlying his master's antics and teachings. At first sight these two works, even though they exist as 'sanitised' translations, certainly convey the strangeness of Ramakrishna and challenge serious consideration of his teachings. There is a great deal of weeping, falling unconscious, seeing visions and speaking in tongues, not to mention the eclecticism of Ramakrishna's practices. This seems so extreme that it borders on the irrational, over-emotional or inauthentic.

However, as previously mentioned, the original sources of our knowledge about Ramakrishna contain much material that has been censored by the official Ramakrishna publishers in the later translations, but which has recently come to light in certain reassessments of the Bengali original texts. The conclusions of these studies make some of Ramakrishna's seemingly strange behaviour more intelligible because they add a refreshingly human context to what is left in the wake of the omissions and deliberately Vedantic interpretations in the devotee works. This section presents some insights from a psychoanalytical reading of Ramakrishna and an analysis of his religious practice and

⁶⁶ Cf. Sil 1998: 188f.

teaching from the perspective of the Tantric tradition, both of which throw new light on some difficult aspects of his character.

3.3.1 Looking for the person Ramakrishna

The author of *Ramakrishna Revisited: A New Biography*, Professor Narasingha Sil, is himself Bengali and trained in the Western psychoanalytical method. His study of Ramakrishna provides “a phenomenological analysis of the motivations and modalities of Ramakrishna’s spiritual behaviour”⁶⁷ in contrast to the hagiographical, traditional accounts that I presented above. Sil’s own motivation is a desire to discover the human being behind the myth, the “dehumanized image of him as an avatara”⁶⁸, and he uses a psychological approach, working from the almost impossibly inaccessible Bengali texts – inaccessible in practical, hands-on terms.⁶⁹ In his Introduction, Sil concisely summarises the discoveries of recent Ramakrishna studies, which convincingly argue for and present us with a

very earthly Ramakrishna, whose eventful career was marked by a curious conglomeration of conflicting attitudes and assumptions: constant emphasis on celibacy and renunciation and yet a fondness for a comfortable life under the patronage of wealthy devotees; his pronounced androgynous behaviour as well as his misogynistic convictions; his disgust with the carnal but his penchant for the erotic, particularly his attraction for young boys; his progressive eclecticism in sermons and teachings and yet his faith in casteism and culturally sanctioned taboos and superstitions, and above all, his projection of himself as a rational Master who disparaged the supernatural and the magical and yet his insistence on considering himself an *isvarakoti*, God in human disguise.⁷⁰

Sil is aware that this method will not grasp the theological and mystical essence of what takes place in religious experience, and thus by this admission hopes to exclude his study from accusations of Freudian reductionism and the like.⁷¹ Rather, as a sceptical “native” he wants to “expose the naive, Western enchantment with the cutely mysterious Eastern mystic as frankly obscene”.⁷² He believes that by shining a fresh, bright light on the phenomenon of Ramakrishna, it is indeed possible to understand the human aspect of the “mad saint”. This is contrary to the assessment of M and others who were either ignorant

⁶⁷ Sil 1998: 5.

⁶⁸ Sil 1998: 5.

⁶⁹ Cf. Sil 1998: 5.

⁷⁰ Sil 1998: 7f.

⁷¹ Cf. Sil 1998: 9.

⁷² Sil 1998: 9f.

of, or by their careful excision of “inappropriate” material helped make others ignorant of, their master’s human side.⁷³

3.3.2 The Master’s Tantric secret

In the study of Ramakrishna published in *Kali’s Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna*, Jeffrey Kripal arrives at the same basic findings as those of Sil’s quoted above. Kripal has also struggled to retrieve texts such as the first and most explicit of the Bengali biographies, the still untranslated 1890 publication *Jivanvrttanta* by Ramchandra Datta. Like Sil, Kripal, too, has read the common biographies in Bengali and provides quotes in his own translation.

Kripal is also on the quest to understand Ramakrishna, working from the presumption that the Master had a secret that his official editors worked – and still work! – very hard to keep hidden. Kripal concludes that this secret is the fact that most of Ramakrishna’s spirituality was Tantric; his practices, his *samadhis*, his teachings, and his entire worldview were not only indebted to, but firmly based on and expressing, what Ramakrishna called the “dirty path”. In other words, Ramakrishna was a Tantrika.⁷⁴ Considering Ramakrishna’s practices and teachings, Kripal’s hypothesis is credible. The violent furore of critique the study raised, however, shows what a surprising conclusion it is, i.e. how the official image of the “mad master” differs from that construed from the recent scholarly readings of the source material. It also shows that Kripal’s discovery of the Tantric influence has touched a very sore spot in the Bengali public soul and in the soul of “orthodox” Ramakrishna Mission followers.⁷⁵

Vivekananda, the founder and driving force behind the Ramakrishna Order, and Saradananda, the chief official biographer, both proclaim in no uncertain terms that their master was a master of the Vedanta and that (Advaita) Vedanta is the end and pinnacle of Indian religion. Tantra, on the other hand, was and is regarded with great suspicion in India. Ramakrishna himself also had a highly paradoxical relationship to this diverse and esoteric strand of Indian religion. As mentioned above, he studied under a female Tantra master for up to twelve years, and Kripal convincingly demonstrates that Ramakrishna’s language, practices, and teachings betray an overwhelmingly Tantric mind.

⁷³ Cf. Sil 1998: 10.

⁷⁴ Cf. Kripal 1995: 5, 287ff.

⁷⁵ Cf. Kripal 1998: 630.

Although Ramakrishna's devotion to Kali is shared by ordinary worshippers of Shakti⁷⁶, his emphasis on this practice and teaching is clearly Tantric, even if the master was also himself unconscious of this evident emphasis. When fully conscious he was greatly adverse to the practices of the various Tantric sects when teaching the devotees⁷⁷, but he simultaneously excused the obviously Tantric form his actions sometimes took by going into '*samadhi*', in which the disciples would not hold him accountable for himself.⁷⁸ In this respect Ramakrishna was indeed an unconscious Tantrika in more than one sense. The following examples illustrate some of the points made by Sil and provide an interesting supplement to the authorised biographical information.

3.3.3 Revisions of Ramakrishna's biography

Celibacy and carnal disgust vs. the erotic. As even the translated texts amply show, Ramakrishna was desperately concerned with sexuality. Though references certainly remain, this is the most carefully excised element of the translated biographies. Kripal holds that much of Ramakrishna's psychology, and therefore also his religious mentality, was conditioned by his somewhat warped attitude to sexuality.⁷⁹ Statements by Ramakrishna's own relatives and friends in the published texts confirm this, as they urge him to marry and to be less strict in his ascetic abstinences.

In the recorded statements, he constantly condemned the common man's obsession with "woman-and-gold"⁸⁰, and contact with women caused him physical pain.⁸¹ However, he was also married and practiced Tantric rites, and above all else, his religious visions are overwhelmingly related in erotic and often quite vulgar, colloquial terms. For example, he sees God not only in the perpetual intercourse of Shiva and Shakti present in everything⁸², but also in the vagina of a bitch dog during mating.⁸³ Vagina-shaped lotuses are licked in a ritual manner in order to awaken the sleeping *kundalini shakti* or power⁸⁴; he went into

⁷⁶ Cf. McDermott 2005: 3607ff.

⁷⁷ Cf. Kripal 1995: 289.

⁷⁸ Cf. Kripal 1995: 5.

⁷⁹ Cf. Kripal 1995: 22f; Sil 1998: 8.

⁸⁰ See, for example, GSR: 391f, and many others.

⁸¹ Cf. GSR: 960; Sil 1998: 63.

⁸² Cf. Sil 1998: 77f.

⁸³ Cf. Kripal 1995: 349n71.

⁸⁴ Cf. Sil 1998: 77; Kripal 1995: 127; GSR: 814.

samadhi while praying with beads using the word for ‘cunt’⁸⁵; and he waxed ecstatic at an inner vision of a small *paramahansa* boy whose penis he playfully fondled while laughing.⁸⁶ Moreover Ramakrishna seemed very often to have ecstatic visions of beautiful young men when he was on the way to, or in the act of, defecating.⁸⁷ These are only a fraction of the examples of behaviour which have partially disappeared in the English translations, but they demonstrate just how different the actual Ramakrishna was from the Vedantic sage image propagated by Vivekananda *et al.*

Attitudes to men and women, and the ecstatic love of young men. Another puzzling feature of Ramakrishna is his ambiguity with regard to his own gender. From an early age he liked to dress up and put on very effeminate looks and mannerisms, especially during his *bhakti* period of imitating Radha or the *gopis*. But even as a grown man he continued to play the woman with his young male disciples. During Ramakrishna’s time in the temple mansion, the owner bought him women’s dresses and jewellery, adored him, took him on secret carriage rides, and made him sleep in his bed. Ramakrishna explicitly stated that he could not say whether he himself was a man or a woman.⁸⁸ He so passionately yearned for the young Narendra, and Purna and Rakhal among the smaller boy disciples – there were never women in the inner group – that separation from them caused him intense pain and anguish, causing M to wonder in frank reflection,

Why does he caress the body and feet of Narendra so?,

What love! He is crazy for Narendra and cries for Narayana [another disciple]. (...) He cries to bathe them, to lay them down, and to see them. He runs all over Calcutta to see them. He flatters and sweet talks people into bringing them from Calcutta to him in their carriages. (...) Is this worldly affection? Or is it the pure love of God?⁸⁹

For the majority of his life, Ramakrishna was a passionate devotee of Kali, the universal Mother, and sought her presence and approval in everything. He regarded women as mothers and instances of the Great Mother, even the commonly despised prostitutes.⁹⁰ He

⁸⁵ Sil 1998: 73. Sil does not give the Bengali word for this reference. It would not have been unusual if Ramakrishna had been meditating on the word *yoni*, which also means ‘vagina’. In this case, however, the original form must have been the vulgar one, since Sil consistently translates references to either physical or symbolic vaginas from what probably would have been *yoni*. Moreover, in this passage Sil mentions that Ramakrishna has a great fondness for “swear words” and *yoni*, or vagina, can hardly be thus considered, so Sil’s translation seems credible. Cf. Kripal 1994: 163 for the same point made with regard to Ramakrishna’s use of the word *lingam* (for phallus or penis).

⁸⁶ Kripal 1995: 160. Compare this to the same passage according to GSR: 796: “I used to joke with him.”

⁸⁷ Cf. Kripal 1995: 292; cf. GSR: 796.

⁸⁸ Cf. Kripal 1995: 184.

⁸⁹ Kripal 1995: 81.

⁹⁰ Cf. Kripal 1995: 131.

also embodied the mother state with some of the boys by holding them in his lap, putting them to bed, running to visit them at night, feeding them by hand, and even suckling them.⁹¹

At the same time, however, in conversation he often referred to women by the colloquial Bengali for “bitch” or “whore” and expressed disgust with the natural processes of female bodies. He criticised the married disciples for their bond to women and once told M to let his near-suicidal wife take her own life rather than waste his energy on her.⁹² On other occasions, Ramakrishna counselled the close disciples (in private, never in public where the ‘official’, detached *paramahansa* image was maintained⁹³):

Never trust a woman even if she rolls down on the floor weeping in devotion. (...) One must not trust that race [of women]. Women ought to cook only (...) Only cooking helps them become good.⁹⁴

This is a far cry from Ramakrishna portrayed as the pioneering protagonist of women’s rights in Vivekananda’s preaching. The more or less consciously manipulated remembrances of different people that constitute the sources of our knowledge of Ramakrishna make it impossible to draw any definite conclusions about Ramakrishna’s real attitude to women. Either the sources are biased, or the master was ambiguous on this point also. This is entirely likely when we keep in mind Kripal’s point that Ramakrishna’s teaching differed between the group of general followers, and his inner circle. Those in the latter were treated to some passages of “secret talk”, i.e. special teachings, sprinkled around in the *Kathamrta*, which were not to be made easily available to general readers.⁹⁵

However, with relation to females, Sil adds that the horror of woman as an obstacle to spiritual attainment is an attitude deeply ingrained in Brahmin men, and that the violent rejection of alluring females may betray a fear of yielding to female eroticism as well as a “negative fascination” with it. Ramakrishna’s homoeroticism thus appears as partly a “displaced sexuality”, a safe outlet in the platonic love of the boy disciples.⁹⁶ Yet in the experimental phase of his youth Ramakrishna was under the intimate instruction of the Bhairavi, who was also recognised by others as a religious master in her own right, even if

⁹¹ Cf. Sil 1998: 48f; cf. GSR: 118.

⁹² Cf. Kripal 1995: 284f.

⁹³ Cf. Sil 1998: 68.

⁹⁴ Sil 1998: 69, quoting from untranslated memoirs of several devotees, among them Datta, Vivekananda’s cousin. Compare the ‘clean’ version of these statements in GSR: 725, 787.

⁹⁵ Kripal 1995: 11.

⁹⁶ Sil 1998: 72ff; cf. Kripal 1995: 286; Raab 1995: 332.

it was in the liminal tradition of Tantrism. Had Ramakrishna simply been a bigoted sexist he would hardly have agreed to train under the Bhairavi or let her teachings form the basis of much of his own mature teaching and practice.

The original biographers were anxious lest these details should become known more widely, as they felt that the Tantric secret and its manifestations in the life of the master would put off Western readers in particular, as I shall discuss further in the following chapter. But the added details now made available give a fuller picture of Ramakrishna, and make him seem not necessarily less divine, but a great deal more human. And as this particular god-intoxicated madman becomes more of a man, one begins to relate to him, understand him, and amidst all the craziness, to admire the total integrity of his commitment to the spiritual life.

Similarly, the fierce critics of modern analyses of Ramakrishna, most of whom react on instinct and who have often not even read the books they condemn⁹⁷, seem to fear that the scholarly enquiries into the personality of their master take away from his authority as a spiritual genius. But I hope to have shown that on the contrary the humanising studies, such as those of Sil and Kripal, make Ramakrishna seem even more extraordinary in his humanity. He appears to be a real mediator of the human and the transcendent, embodying with great difficulty, as he did, that double-reality forced on people of acute spiritual senses and pressing the possibilities of being human to their absolute limits.

In this section I have reviewed the findings of two recent studies of Ramakrishna in order to integrate their understanding of Ramakrishna as a human being with the authorised Ramakrishna descriptions that are concerned with presenting him as an *avatara* and a rational Vedanta master for the whole world. The recent studies point out that Ramakrishna was trained in the Tantric tradition, often regarded as an “impure” and less respectable way, and that Tantric ideas formed his practice and thinking to a large extent. A central element of the tantric way is to make oneself ‘low’ and this path thus encourages finding God in the most unlikely and unexpected places, and this may be a further encouragement for Ramakrishna to take up the other religious paths in order to seek union with God. In the following section I shall show how Ramakrishna’s diverse practices were unusual for his time, but make sense from a social and historical perspective.

⁹⁷ Cf. Kripal 1995: xi.

3.4 Ramakrishna and Indian religious reform movements

It must be emphasised that Ramakrishna's pluralist attitude to the doctrine and practice of other religions was most unusual; this only becomes clear when his teachings and practices are set in their historical context. In this section I shall discuss Ramakrishna's significance as a unique voice in late nineteenth-century Bengal. As explained in more detail in the following chapter, this period in Bengal was a time of insecurity because traditional beliefs were being heavily criticised by Christian missionaries who had the backing of colonial representatives. In response to this, several religious revitalisation movements arose that emphasised the superiority of Indian religion, or 'Hinduism', with a strong focus on the Vedic tradition and the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta.

Around Ramakrishna's time these native religious reform movements were active throughout the country, attempting to serve as identification and rallying points for a traditional religion and an independent Indian nation, as well as providing outlets for various other indigenous concerns under British rule.⁹⁸ Several of these movements (both Muslim and Hindu) had religious issues as their main objective, and this led to the formation of numerous interest groups and societies that combined religious sentiments with a new kind of political consciousness. There was avid competition for supporters and followers of these new voices and for the first time public preaching and pamphlet distribution was employed on a major scale as a means to attract new members.⁹⁹

3.4.1 *The Brahmo Samaj*

One of the most prominent organisations with a Hindu background was the Brahmo Samaj. It was initially founded as the Atmiya Sabha ("Friendship Association") in 1815 and reordered as the Brahmo Sabha ("Association of Brahmos", worshippers of Brahman) in 1828 by the Bengali Brahmin Rammohan Roy (1772-1833). Educated in the English system, Roy developed a strong aversion to the Brahman priesthood and their conventional authority and rituals. He saw these as a perversion of a pure, rational and ethical original Hinduism, and he offered instead a revision based on the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Vedanta-Sutras. The authority and standards of Roy's revised Hinduism were to be found in scriptures and social order rather than what he saw as worthless Brahman customs, such

⁹⁸ Cf. Jones 1989: 2.

⁹⁹ Cf. Jones 1989: 1, 3.

as the suppression and non-education of women, and the supposedly “traditional” practice of *sati*, or widow-burning.¹⁰⁰

Regarding the pluralist attitude to other religions as an option in the ideological climate around the time of Ramakrishna, the basis of Rammohan Roy’s original society, the Brahmo Sabha, was an effort to appreciate ‘ethical’ Christianity – “a simple code of religion and morality”¹⁰¹ – on the same level as a purged, ‘ethical’ Hinduism. Therefore, in 1830 the Brahmo Sabha passed a “principles Deed” agreement, known as the “Trust Deed” of the association, under which criticism of other religions was banned.¹⁰² With regard to belief, the following objective formed the basis of original Brahmo ‘pluralism’:

people without distinction (...) shall behave and conduct themselves in an orderly and sober religious and devout manner for the worship and adoration of the Eternal Unsearchable and Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe but not under or by any other name designation or title peculiarly used for and applied to any particular Being or Beings by any men or set of men anywhere (...)¹⁰³

During its formative years, the Brahmo Sabha encountered opposition for its equation of ethical Christianity and Hinduism from several bodies, notably the conservative Dharma Sabha.

After Roy’s death the Brahmo Sabha was taken over and reformed by the illustrious Devendranath Tagore (father of the poet and novelist, Rabindranath), who brought new life to it. He renamed it the Brahmo Samaj (“Brahmo Society”) and significantly changed the basis of the society’s attitude to other religions from one of seeking equality by focus on social and ethical practice to one of holding Vedantic Hinduism as superior to all other traditions.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the society was still disregarded by those organisations concerned with the preservation of an exclusivistic Hindu identity, and the Brahmo Samaj, to their own great horror, was in 1872 declared “not Hindu” in a court ruling.

3.4.2 Ramakrishna and Keshabchandra Sen

Keshabchandra Sen, the leader of the Brahmo Samaj of India in Ramakrishna’s time, joined the society in 1857 and refocused it several times, particular around social action

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Jones 1989: 32.

¹⁰¹ Jones 1989: 32.

¹⁰² Cf. Jones 1989: 30ff.

¹⁰³ Coward 1991: 19.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Jones 1989: 32ff.

schemes.¹⁰⁵ As a vastly influential figure due to his dynamic character and position as leader of the Brahmo Samaj¹⁰⁶, Sen's friendship with Ramakrishna is important to the extent that Sen serves as an alternative channel for Ramakrishna's teachings, separate from the later, heavily edited ones from Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission. Sen died in 1884, two years before Ramakrishna, and from the moment of their first meeting in 1875, they sustained a profound and mutually enriching friendship.

Ramakrishna initiated the acquaintance upon hearing about Sen, and although Ramakrishna was very suspicious of supposedly spiritual men engaged in worldly activities, he met him with the recognition "Your tail has dropped off".¹⁰⁷ He was referring to Sen's advancement from a water-dwelling (i.e. exclusively worldly) tadpole to a frog that was able to move both in water and on land (i.e. both in the world and in the spiritual realm). Sen had a house in Calcutta, and the two would meet several times a week if at all possible. There is no doubt that Sen was greatly taken by the authenticity and plainness of Ramakrishna's religious life. Thus:

By virtue of his own spiritual sensibility he discovered Ramakrishna's spirituality which he brought to the attention of people.¹⁰⁸

Sen began "preaching" Ramakrishna to the Indians through the newspaper articles and lectures that he had organised for the Brahmo Samaj and had it not been for Sen's ceaseless activity in this area Ramakrishna would probably have remained obscure and merely of local significance.¹⁰⁹ In other words, Sen's efforts in promoting Ramakrishna are of great importance, even if for no other reason than because they attracted several of those who would become Ramakrishna's close disciples.¹¹⁰

After the death of these two masters a veritable war raged between the followers of both as each side claimed their own master as the teacher of the other by listing all the various ways in which the other had adopted their own master's teachings.¹¹¹ The details of the war between the two camps of followers are insignificant, as both sides produced ample

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Jones 1989: 34ff.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Sil 1998: 259; Embree 2005: 8227f.

¹⁰⁷ GM: 312.

¹⁰⁸ Sil 1998: 260.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Sil 1998: 260; Kripal 1995: 205; GM: 375n2, 685, 710 and others.

¹¹⁰ Cf. GM: 710.

¹¹¹ Cf. Sil 1998: 261ff.

propaganda with very little actual substance.¹¹² The most objective assessments, however, agree that Ramakrishna was the cause of Sen's change of heart seen in the more pluralist nature of his "New Dispensation" teaching near the end of his career.¹¹³ Previously Sen had been very Christ-focused in his preaching and publishing, which caused problems and eventually contributed to ruptures within the Brahmo Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj of India under his leadership of both.¹¹⁴

Ramakrishna's relationship with Sen is also interesting for another reason: Sen is held among Christian theologians to be one of the founders of an indigenous Indian Christian theology.¹¹⁵ The theology of the early Sen was heavily focused on the central role of Christ, and thus one may ask whether Ramakrishna had played a role in developing Sen's Christology. However, Sen's most heavily Christian period (around the time of his famous lecture of 1866 in Calcutta, 'Jesus Christ, Europe and Asia'¹¹⁶) falls well before his first encounter with Ramakrishna in 1875. In addition, the textual evidence suggests the opposite, that Sen moved away from a Christocentric theology after this time, and eventually formed his New Dispensation along the much more pluralist lines of Ramakrishna.¹¹⁷ Of course, it is possible to read this as a modification of Sen's Christology as well, in terms of universalising the work of Christ, but there is no recorded evidence that the two masters ever discussed Jesus Christ directly.¹¹⁸

In conclusion, the understanding of other religions in traditional Brahmoism, closer to that in Rammohan Roy's founding Trust Deed of the Brahmo Sabha, was essentially different from Ramakrishna's widely embracing and practical pluralism. The various degrees of reformed Brahmos, following Sen and his New Dispensation religion, developed much more in line with Ramakrishna. But by this time Sen had only a very few followers, and after his death it seems that the momentum of the reform impulse had shifted from the Brahmo Samaj to new initiatives. One such was of course the Ramakrishna Movement under Swami Vivekananda, which in an interesting quirk of fate later practically adopted the purpose of the original Brahmo Samaj by promoting Vedantic Hindu superiority and

¹¹² Cf. Sil 1998: 261.

¹¹³ Cf. Thomas 1970: 74.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Coward 1991: 28f, 33; Thomas 1970: 118f.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Thomas 1970: 58.

¹¹⁶ Thomas 1970: 59.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Thomas 1970: 119; Embree 2005: 8227.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Thomas 1970: 116. Although this source is old, there are no references in either GSR or GM to any such discussion between Ramakrishna and Sen, so Thomas' statement is probably reliable.

advocating ethical social action and spiritual responsibility on a national and global scale.¹¹⁹

3.4.3 *The Arya Samaj*

The second major reform society of Ramakrishna's time is the Arya Samaj, which will be briefly introduced in this section through a comparison of their attitude to other religions in contrast to Ramakrishna's.

Dayananda Sarasvati, the founder of the Arya Samaj of 1875, took the national reform efforts to an extreme in his attempt to unite and empower Hindus or, as he put it, "renewing the Aryan personality" by returning to what he saw as the root of Indian religion, the Vedas. He violently criticised everything coming after the strictly Vedic tradition as crude and perverted additions.¹²⁰ Through claims to possess the right understanding of Indian indigenous religion, the critique of contemporary practices from the Arya Samaj prompted reactions from conservative Hindus.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the movement, and Sarasvati's charismatic personality, attracted a great many members (1.5 million by 1947) and was able to open and run schools co-funded by the British administration.¹²²

The Arya Samaj distanced itself from other religions as much as from the supposedly illegitimate Indian forms. The last few chapters of Sarasvati's book *Sathyartha Prakash* (*Light of Truth*, also from 1875) contain scathing condemnations of other religions based, as one would expect, on an evaluation of their scriptures. The Christian God is described in strongly negative terms as "destitute of mercy", "like a butcher", "like women and children!" and "not wishful of [the] welfare" of his people, until "now it is quite clear that the Biblical God possesses finite knowledge and that He is not Omniscient".¹²³ In conclusion:

The Christian Bible contains hundreds of thousands of things that are condemnable. (...) Except a few things, all others are false. Truth adulterated with untruth can never remain pure and hence the works that contain it can never be acceptable.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Cf. Thomas 1970: 45; Urban 2003: 135.

¹²⁰ Cf. Prakash 2000: 290f.

¹²¹ Cf. Jones 1989: 80f.

¹²² Cf. Jones 1989: 97ff; Langohr 2001/02: 42f.

¹²³ Cf. Sarasvati 1984: 599ff.

¹²⁴ Sarasvati 1984: 648.

Similarly, Islam must stand or fall on the truth or falsehood of the Qur'an, as Sarasvati reads it. Through an absurd argument based on the opening line of the first sura, he claims to prove that Allah is neither wise nor merciful, since he has sanctioned his people, the Muslims, to "inflict great suffering on other creatures by killing them for their food."

There is no doubt in this book; it is a direction to the pious (...) The revelation of the Quran is of no use, since the pious are already treading the right path without extrinsic aid, while the wicked are not directed by it.¹²⁵

And the directions on killing the infidel seems to put the stamp on Islam for Sarasvati:

Such teachings deserve to be utterly discarded. Such a book, such a Prophet and such a religion do nothing but harm. The world would be better off without them.¹²⁶

A hypothetical questioner appears at the end of the chapter on Islam, which is also the end of *Light of Truth*, saying; "No one ever expounded this theory (...) before; how can we then believe you?", to which the author replies, using what is in effect a sanction of the Arya Samaj and its activities because it is based on the Vedic texts:

Our statement cannot be wrong whether you believe it or not.¹²⁷

Above I have shown how two major socio-religious movements in Ramakrishna's time, the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj, conceived of other religions. It is clear that even the Brahmo Samaj, which under the leadership of Keshabchandra Sen moved toward openness to other religions, originally focused only on the ethical commonalities between Hinduism and Christianity. Thus it did not express in greater detail any shared aspects between the two faiths in terms of doctrine or practice, and did not concern itself with other religions at all. The following section gives some further examples of how Ramakrishna's pluralist attitude to other religions was unique among his contemporaries.

3.4.4 Three examples of Ramakrishna's unusual pluralism

In this historical context Ramakrishna was extraordinary because he believed that all religions were different but true paths to the divine and he practised them and tried to realise their truth in his own life, as I have shown in the previous sections. Partial examples of this attitude did precede Ramakrishna in India (and inspired him¹²⁸), such as the hugely

¹²⁵ Sarasvati 1984: 653.

¹²⁶ Sarasvati 1984: 673f.

¹²⁷ Sarasvati 1984: 721.

¹²⁸ Cf. GSR: 80, 85, 274.

influential poet saint Kabir (o. 1500 CE) whose verses caused religious fervour in Hindus and Muslims alike¹²⁹; the Punjabi teacher Guru Nanak (1469-1539) who gathered Muslims and Hindus to follow his teachings of a common path to God¹³⁰; and the Bengali Bhakta master Chaitanya (1486-1533) who worshipped Krishna and welcomed Muslim – probably Sufi – devotees.¹³¹ In the political arena, Mughal Emperor Akbar (1542-1605) sought to facilitate interreligious dialogue and understanding.¹³² Apart from these few and almost coeval predecessors, a systematic openness toward other religions is not the historical standard in Indian religion. It is often assumed that Hinduism is open in precisely this way, but this is arguably because of the effective preaching of Vivekananda and others who so effectively promoted this belief that it has become a common misunderstanding. The following examples of Ramakrishna's pluralist attitude are therefore certainly significant.

With regard to Islam, the main opponent of Hindu Indian freedom and autonomy through many centuries, Ramakrishna tried practising it or at least believed that he did so.

Furthermore, he had a famous vision of being fed rice from the hand of a Muslim, and sharing this meal with Muslims, dogs and Englishmen¹³³, three of the most unworthy categories of beings in a traditional Brahmin worldview under the aegis of colonialism. This vision is usually interpreted as an example of the master's great inclusiveness, since sharing food with impure beings is entirely unacceptable by traditional Brahman custom.

Indeed, Ramakrishna himself spent the first part of his time at the Dakshineswar temple cooking and eating alone, away from the communal area, because the temple had been built by a low-caste widow and the young priest could not bear the idea of eating the food of her temple.¹³⁴ Only later did his various *sadhanas* bring him to transcend purity limits relating to food. Ultimately, however, perhaps as his stomach and throat problems increased, Ramakrishna reverted to following the Brahmin food observances. But the ideological statement contained in the vision of eating rice from the hand of a Muslim in the company of Muslims, dirty animals and Englishmen can hardly be overestimated.

¹²⁹ Cf. Vaudeville 1987: 5015f.

¹³⁰ Cf. Ingram 2004: 143.

¹³¹ Cf. Jones 1989: 13.

¹³² Cf. Katz 2000: 158f; Husain 2002: 54. See also Kripal 2004, where Kripal sees Ramakrishna as heir to Akbar's vision.

¹³³ Cf. Kripal 1995: 268, quoting the *Kathamrita* 3.46.

¹³⁴ Ramakrishna's brother only accepted the appointment to work as a priest because the school where he worked had to close, leaving him penniless. No other Brahmins would accept the position due to Rani Rasmani's caste status, as the staff would therefore also be of low caste. This is why Ramakrishna refused to eat their food for a long time. (Cf. Kripal 1995: 60)

Among Indian religious traditions, some aspects of the different traditions are more commonly endorsed than others. Tantric practices, for example, are highly culturally stigmatised, although respectable members of society would often secretly engage in them.¹³⁵ Ramakrishna, however, was instructed “according to the Tantras”¹³⁶, was openly devoted to the Tantric goddess Kali, and mentions Tantra as a regular element of Indian religion. Although it is “a path by which one gets very dirty” akin to “entering the house through the latrine”¹³⁷, he saw the way according to the Tantras as a path to God, like all the others, and he claimed to realise it in his own life – though, as we have seen, without actually successfully completing the prescribed exercises.

Finally, there is Ramakrishna’s endorsement of the Buddhist *dharma*. Buddhists and Hindus have fought bloody wars and accused each other of depravity and perversion and misunderstanding of scripture, so Ramakrishna was again extremely unusual in endorsing the teaching of the Buddha as a true way. As shown above, he recognised the Buddha as a genuine incarnation of God, which alone is extraordinary, and then goes on to say that “there is no difference between the faith founded by him and the Vedic path of knowledge”. In the common Indian opinion, according to the Puranas, the Buddha was indeed an avatara of Visnu, but one that intended to lead astray the undeserving and immerse them in ignorance rather than bring them to liberation.¹³⁸

Naturally, the relationship is often awkward and strained between religions that share a body of scripture, such as the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, or where one has grown out of the other and strives to establish itself apart from its parent, as in the cases of Buddhism and Jainism emerging from the Brahmanical tradition of the time. So when Ramakrishna endorsed the way of the Buddha as on par, at least in principle, with the Vedic path of knowledge, he was expressing a deliberate anti-traditional statement *vis-à-vis* conservative Hinduism.

Vivekananda, so successful in turning the Western religious attention eastwards, was an emphatic proponent of the notion that a reformed version of Hinduism was superior to other religions, on the grounds of, among other things, its inclusive attitude to other

¹³⁵ Cf. Kripal 1995: 112. Kripal also relates the little known fact that Ramakrishna’s wife had been secretly initiated into a local, highly controversial Tantric community, the Kartabhajas, and that she feared her husband’s discovery of this. Surprisingly, however, he was not angry when he found out. (Cf. Kripal 1995: 113, 225.)

¹³⁶ GSR: 503.

¹³⁷ Kripal 1995: 286, quoting the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center’s 1984 edition of GSR: 513.

¹³⁸ Cf. Schmidt-Leukel 2008: 156.

religions.¹³⁹ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the famous scholar and politician, was of the same opinion. He advocated that Advaita Vedanta is the core of true religion, and, while apparently acknowledging all religions as fundamentally both true and misleading, he claimed that Advaita held the key to a right understanding of religious life and practice.¹⁴⁰ Both men in this way demonstrated “the exasperating tendency of the educated spokespersons to claim a kind of all-inclusiveness for Hinduism”¹⁴¹, a hidden superiority claim identified by scholar of religion in India Ronald Neufeldt.¹⁴² This suggestion is in line with the position of the prominent German Indologist Paul Hacker (1913-1979). He argued that inclusivism, in the sense of “claiming for, and thus including in, one’s own religion what really belongs to an alien sect”¹⁴³ was a characteristic Indian approach to other religions, and that it even applied between the different Indian religious paths. Hacker’s studies affirm a generically inclusivist character of Indian religion, and show that the pluralist position of Ramakrishna was a highly unusual one in an Indian context.

3.5 Conclusion

3.5.1 *Ramakrishna’s position on religious experience, science and religion*

At first glance, Ramakrishna’s teachings and practice do not appear to be at all concerned with science or the debate between science and religion in the nineteenth century. As I have mentioned, Ramakrishna never received any formal education, although he spent many years being tutored by different religious teachers, including a Vedanta master who represented one of the strongly philosophical Indian traditions. Because of this training he had an advanced vocabulary with which to describe and discuss his different experiences and relate his insights to his group of followers. However, there is no evidence in the early or later biographies that Ramakrishna was interested in science or was even aware of the debate that went on in Europe.

It is clear, however, that Ramakrishna emphasised the role of realisation through religious experience as a means, above all else, through which true knowledge about what he

¹³⁹ Cf. Urban 2003: 148, 154f.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Coward 1992: 680f.

¹⁴¹ Coward 1990: 28.

¹⁴² Cf. Coward 1990: 28.

¹⁴³ Halbfass 1988: 404f.

considered the most important part of life was attained. The realisation of union with the divine was for Ramakrishna also an epistemic pursuit, through which the self might grasp a little of the great truth underlying the manifested universe and thus comprehend the nature and purpose of the entire world. In Ramakrishna's perspective, drawing on both Advaita Vedanta and Shakta Tantra, the knowledge attained in deep religious experience was at once knowledge of the self, the divine and the world. What makes Ramakrishna stand out from other contemporary Indian teachers is the fact that he practised according to a Tantric tradition where, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the quest for realisation is firmly rooted in the material world and actively engages with the physical reality as a genuine means to liberation.

In Tantra, the way of realisation lies in recognising the self in the world or even *as* the world, not as the true reality behind an illusory world.¹⁴⁴ Tantra, like some Western esoteric traditions, holds a unitive (not to say pantheistic) view of creative spirit and created world, and considers true knowledge of both spiritual and material aspects of reality to depend on inner realisation.¹⁴⁵ In relation to the issues at stake in the Western debate about religion and science, I would therefore suggest that because of the Tantric character of Ramakrishna's teachings (where we have them available without the official Vedantic Ramakrishna Mission gloss), he can be read as a voice against the artificial separation of 'the religious' from 'the scientific' in the public discourse.

In summary, Ramakrishna regarded religious experience as a source of knowledge essentially concerned with both the realms of 'religion' (i.e. the divine *brahman*) and 'science' (i.e. the material world) and united through the knowledge of the self, acquired through the practice of techniques taught in religious traditions. This position is strikingly close to the arguments of Blavatsky and Besant, which were developed more specifically to address the Western debate about the prominence of materialistic scientific thinking versus a 'religious' perspective on the world. The pluralist nature of Ramakrishna's teachings follows from this emphasis on the unity of the ultimate truth and its attainment through the practice of techniques taught in the religious traditions.

3.5.2 Ramakrishna and the influence of esotericism

I have argued that there is a possible connection between the Tantric principle of the 'left-hand path', which is also found in many other esoteric traditions, and Ramakrishna's

¹⁴⁴ White 2000: 8f.

¹⁴⁵ Singh 1976: x.

decision to experiment with other religious traditions. In the context of his practice and experiences, and this background in Tantra particularly, it appears that the motivation for his unusual endorsement of religious paths other than traditional native ones within the Hindu spectrum was a recognition of the Tantric insight that the highest realisation may be achieved through the ‘lowest’ means. From this perspective, I regard Ramakrishna’s pluralist embrace of other traditions as a clear result of his background in Tantric practice. The Tantric teachings had proved to Ramakrishna that it was possible to attain the highest realisation through what were otherwise considered ‘impure’ means, such as eating caste-forbidden food, touching dirt and feces and practicing ritual intercourse.

The move to embracing the practice of ‘lesser’ or ‘impure’ paths to the divine, in the form of intense veneration of Jesus, the Buddha, Mahavira and the Prophet of Islam, was a possibility for Ramakrishna, and through this Tantric exercise he opened up an entirely new prospect for religious tolerance and interrelation in India. This unique heritage was taken up by Vivekananda who saw at once the individual value and global significance of his Master’s particular approach to religious truth and experience.

3.5.3 Ramakrishna and postcolonial critique of orientalism

The postcolonial critique of the notion of ‘religion’ and the orientalist discourse as identified by Edward Said provide important perspectives on questions of religion and experience in the context of the colonial period, and interactions between Eastern and Western ideas. In the case of Ramakrishna, this critique draws our attention to two particular aspects of his teaching: First there is the emphasis on religious experiences as a source of true knowledge on par with other empirical ‘scientific’ knowledge, as discussed in Chapter 2. Secondly, there is the way in which his followers went to extraordinary lengths to present his teachings as ‘Vedanta’, advocated as a sort of pure and rational philosophical system which, presumably, they thought would appeal to Western readers. As shown above, Ramakrishna’s actual words, which were often unrefined and rude, and his strange Tantric practices were expurgated from the official English biographies in a deliberate attempt to cater to what they considered to be the rational intellectual tastes of Westerners.

His mission appeared to be to encourage people to strive towards realisation of their own religion, no matter which tradition they belonged to. But in effect his followers were almost exclusively Hindus and many had a background in some form of colonial training. Therefore, Ramakrishna’s teaching was given mostly to Hindus who were unsure about the

status of their own traditional faiths. They received from him confirmation that the traditional schools of Indian philosophy did indeed provide highly sophisticated teaching on knowledge, experience and liberation which could compete with the more rational beliefs and ways of thinking of the Western colonial superiors. In this way, Ramakrishna consolidated the value of Indian traditions and argued for the superiority of a religious over a merely materialistic worldview.

In this extended biographical sketch, illustrated with quotes from Ramakrishna's recollections of his religious experience and his followers' reflections on them, I have presented Ramakrishna as an early and outstanding proponent of a pluralist attitude to other religions based on personal appropriation and practice. For all his strange behaviours, both his sublime states of religious feeling and his preoccupations with food, feces and fondling his boy disciples, Ramakrishna demonstrated a solid attachment to genuine religious experience. He sought through his many practices to relive and evaluate the intensity of his first meeting with Kali and to test the authenticity of the methods of other religious paths against this standard.

In effect Ramakrishna tested the religious claims of the other religious traditions and of the various traditions within the Hindu religious spectrum by experience, and as long as he was able to attain a realisation as strong as the first one he experienced of Kali, he was convinced that the religious tradition in question was a true path to unity with God. In this way Ramakrishna's approach to other religions belongs to what I have defined as pluralism in that he believed (through personal experience) that several religions lead to the same ultimate end of realisation or unity with God.

I have shown how Ramakrishna's approach was highly unusual for his time and that pluralism was not the common attitude to other faiths in India, not even in the reform-hungry environment of nineteenth-century Bengal where many new religious societies flourished, offering different agendas. In the following chapter I shall present Ramakrishna's most prominent disciple and exponent, Swami Vivekananda, and present his interpretation of Ramakrishna's message to the world.

4 Vivekananda

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I shall discuss Ramakrishna's main interpreter and favourite disciple, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), and the theory of religion that he developed on the basis of his teacher's pluralist ideas of religion. First I present a summary of Vivekananda's life that shows how his sense of mission emerged after the death of Ramakrishna. I then place Vivekananda and his mission in the context of the movements for reform in India mentioned in the previous chapter, followed by a brief discussion of what constitutes Hinduism and Hindu identity. After these introductory sections I present Vivekananda's theory of religion with an emphasis on how it hinges on two dynamic points, unity and diversity. He argued for his position using the idea of Raja Yoga as a means of realising the unity of God in one's soul, and traditional notions of caste and life stages to account for the propriety of diversity and the co-existence of diverse religious paths in mutual acceptance. Finally I shall briefly discuss how Vivekananda's view on pluralist religion compares to Ramakrishna's original insights.

4.2 Vivekananda's life and the scope of his work

In this section I discuss Vivekananda's biography and show how he came to discover his life's mission of a spiritual reinvigoration of India. I then place him in the context of the reform spirit that was highly prevalent in India around this time, followed by a brief discussion of his mission in relation to Hindu identity and of the term Hinduism itself, which have both been heavily critiqued through the past several decades.

Information about Vivekananda's life and thought is mainly found in his authorised biography from the Ramakrishna Mission¹ and in Romain Rolland's biography.² Few recent studies have focused on his biography as such and are concerned mainly with his interpretation of Hindu identity, his impact on Neo-Hindu movements and his construction of a Neo-Vedantic tradition.³ The Ramakrishna Mission biography of Vivekananda is subject to the same reservations as the official Ramakrishna biographies, in that it seeks to

¹ Nikhilananda 1953.

² Rolland 1931.

³ See, for example, Beckerlegge 2006; Radice 1999.

present an ideal picture of the Swami as a coherent preacher of peace and unity rather than to provide accurate historical and biographical information.

In contrast to Ramakrishna, Vivekananda himself wrote prolifically in his short period of public activity and these writings form the basis of the following sketch of his life and thought. His writings are all published in the *Complete Works*⁴, which contains all his public speeches in addition to his personal correspondence. As shown in the following, he was often ambiguous when discussing religious matters and made a clear distinction between the opinions he presented in public addresses and the ones he expressed in personal letters, a fact that demonstrates that he was highly conscious of his own role as a representative of Indian thought and a shaper of Indian identity.

4.2.1 Biographical sketch

This brief sketch of the main events in Vivekananda's life begins at the time of his meeting with Ramakrishna. In the previous chapter I mentioned how Ramakrishna immediately took a very strong liking to the young Vivekananda, who at that time went by his first name of Narendra. He was a well-educated, active and highly intelligent young man, and Narendra at first had little patience for Ramakrishna's ecstasies and overflowing emotional attitude toward him. However, he had from early boyhood been strongly spiritually inclined⁵, perhaps encouraged by a saintly mother who remained a great inspiration to the end of his life.⁶ When he was in his late teens he decided to find a teacher to help him progress further in a spiritual path. Most of the teachers he encountered made no impression on him, although he did find a temporary spiritual home in the Brahmo Samaj, which at the time was under the leadership of Devendranath Tagore.⁷ While he was there the rumour of a strange holy man in Dakshineswar aroused Narendra's curiosity.

The traditional biographies of both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda mention how Ramakrishna had visions of meeting Narendra before even coming into incarnation, and describe in some (selective) detail Ramakrishna's strange behaviour towards the young man when they finally met in the flesh. However, Vivekananda's own reason for attaching himself so firmly to the instruction of Ramakrishna, despite their differences in personality, was his utterly superior competence in the one area that Vivekananda had failed to see

⁴ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. (CWV in the following)

⁵ Cf. NVB: 2; LSV: 10ff.

⁶ Cf. NVB: 2, 4.

⁷ Cf. NVB: 30.

demonstrated among other men, even in the illustrious Tagore. He went to see Ramakrishna and asked him:

“Sir, have you seen God?” Without a moment’s hesitation the reply was given: “Yes, I have seen God. I see Him as I see you here, only more clearly. God can be seen.” Narendra was astounded. For the first time, he was face to face with a man who asserted that he had seen God. (...) He could feel that Ramakrishna’s words were uttered from the depths of an inner experience. They could not be doubted.⁸

The initial meeting describes well the general tenor of their relationship, based on the same unbounded love of the master for his disciple and the recognition of the disciple that here was a teacher who, in spite of his outward strangeness, had attained the end of human aspiration in the body and was worthy of imitation. It is also clear from this description of the meeting that confirmation “from the depths of an inner experience” was the kind of proof that Vivekananda held to be the ultimate authority on matters of truth.

Towards the end of his life Ramakrishna asked Narendra to take care of the other disciples once he was gone.⁹ Thus, after Ramakrishna’s passing in August 1886, Narendra took it upon himself to gather the devastated students into a group and continue teaching them as the master had ordained.¹⁰ They formed a monastic community at a house in Baranagar, not far from Dakshineswar, and remained there together. Narendra constantly challenged the others to live in a spirit of renunciation and vigorous intellectual discipline in order to keep both them and himself from plunging into despair and grief over their loss, and to train them for the future.¹¹ During this time, Narendra was deeply torn between the desire for the life of a monk and the life of activity, to which he felt strongly but diffusely and unclearly called.¹² In 1890 he finally struck out from the Baranagar monastery on a tour of India, dressed in rags and begging his way along, like a *sannyasin*.¹³

Travelling the country from Kolkata to the Himalayas and south to the tip of the continent, Narendra for the first time experienced the real state of India. He had grown up in a wealthy family that had been cast into poverty at the death of his father¹⁴, but the strain under which he and his family had been put then was nothing compared to what he saw in

⁸ NVB: 13.

⁹ Cf. LSV: 147f.

¹⁰ Cf. NVB: 34, 36.

¹¹ Cf. NVB: 38.

¹² Cf. NVB: 39; Rolland 1931: 14f.

¹³ Cf. NVB: 39.

¹⁴ Cf. LSV: 88ff.

the roads and villages of the rest of the country. His experiences in the course of the journey finally shaped what was to be his mission, and brought into focus that blurred sense of vocation he had previously felt.¹⁵ The poverty and illiteracy of the general populace tore at his heart, and the hopelessness of their situation and the neglect with which those more fortunate treated the poor and underprivileged greatly offended his sense of justice and mocked his pride in being Indian. As he later wrote, after visiting a women's penitentiary in America in which the inmates were treated humanely:

Ah, how my heart ached to think of what we think of the poor in India. They have no chance, no escape, no way to climb up. The poor, the low, the sinner in India have no friends, no help – they cannot rise, try however they may. They sink lower and lower every day, they feel the blows showered upon them by a cruel society, and they do not know whence the blow comes. They have forgotten that they too are men. And the result is slavery. (...) No religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism.¹⁶

This quote mentions three main concerns that were to form the basis of Vivekananda's mission, namely the innate dignity of all humanity, and the need for both spiritual and social reinvigoration of India and Hinduism.

At the end of the Indian journey he was staying with the Maharaja of Khetri in the north-western state of Rajasthan, who had devoted himself to Narendra's teaching.¹⁷ The Maharaja, and other friends, encouraged him to attend the World's Parliament of Religions which was to be held for the first time in Chicago in the summer of 1893.¹⁸ After a period of reflection on his burning urge to serve and to elevate the poor masses of India, Narendra conceived the idea that by going to the West he could convince them to financially assist his cause for India. He had no financial means of his own, and his brother monks were as penniless. But funds would be required to establish his scheme for the poor, and he thought that the progressive West, in the form of America, could help on this crucial front.¹⁹ Tickets to the ship for America were bought, and before his departure the thirty-year-old monk was advised by the Maharaja to change his name.²⁰ So with a firm purpose and a new name, Swami Vivekananda set out for Chicago.

¹⁵ Cf. Rolland 1931: 26f.

¹⁶ CWV 5: 15. *Epistle IV*, 20 August 1893.

¹⁷ Cf. NVB: 47.

¹⁸ Cf. NVB: 52.

¹⁹ Cf. NVB: 52.

²⁰ Cf. NVB: 56.

In the first few days of his stay in this new world, Vivekananda was greatly impressed by the activity and technical accomplishments of America, and also by the generosity and benevolence of many Americans. He was thus fuelled with an optimism for his mission that he brought with him to the World's Parliament of Religions. He gave his first speech in the afternoon of 11 September 1893, the so-called "Hindu address". Its opening, "Sisters and Brothers of America", received a long ovation from the large gathering.²¹ This address, along with one given on the 19 September 1893 on the topic of Hinduism, contain the basic outline of Vivekananda's theory of religion.

He remained in America for three years, during which he travelled, lectured and taught classes extensively.²² Afterwards he went to Europe, lecturing in England and making the acquaintance of Sanskrit scholars Max Müller and Paul Deussen, with both of whom he enjoyed warm and stimulating friendships.²³ He returned to India in early 1897, receiving the welcome of a hero²⁴, and continued to lecture in India. He also formally founded the Ramakrishna Order and the Ramakrishna Mission on 1 May 1897 with the help of the funds he had secured through his teaching work in America.²⁵

These bodies, which were originally one but were later separated in order to devote themselves better to their individual tasks, undertook the training of teachers and monks following Vivekananda's ideas of a reinvigorated, virile and expressive Hindu religion. The Mission in particular undertook concrete charitable tasks, such as famine relief, nursing and hospital assistance and education of the underprivileged.²⁶ After a final visit to Europe and America in 1899 to ensure the survival of his project in the West²⁷, his health began to rapidly deteriorate. A few years later the strain of his ceaseless activity was finally eased, as Vivekananda died amongst his brother monks of the Ramakrishna Order on 4 July 1902, aged thirty-nine.²⁸

²¹ NVB: 61. Recordings of several of Vivekananda's Parliament of Religions addresses may be found on youtube.com, for example <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxUzKolt5aM> (Retrieved 15 November 2011).

²² Cf. NVB: 65, 76ff.

²³ Cf. NVB: 99ff; NVB 103f.

²⁴ Cf. NVB: 115f.

²⁵ Cf. NVB: 125f. The resolutions of the organisations are quoted in Rolland 1931: 120f.

²⁶ Cf. Rolland 1931: 120; NVB: 127n30.

²⁷ Cf. NVB: 150.

²⁸ Cf. NVB: 167, 178.

4.2.2 Vivekananda's contribution to the construction of Hinduism

To understand Vivekananda's project of invigorating India by recollection of its proud religious heritage, we must situate him in the proper historical and ideological context. Regarding the first point, he is often mentioned in literature as a 'reformer' of Hinduism, or a contributor to the creation of 'Neo-Hinduism'. However, it can also be argued that no such entity as 'Hinduism' existed before the so-called reformers and Neo-Hindus. Hinduism was neither reformed nor recreated by Vivekananda, Rammohan Roy, Keshabchandra Sen, Dayananda Sarasvati etc.²⁹ so much as it was *created* by them against a background of the British colonial presence and the challenge brought upon Indian culture and society from a relatively uniform political and religious, Christian imperial power and the discourse in which that power addressed those who were non-British and non-Christian.³⁰

With this reservation in mind, I shall continue to use the familiar term 'reformers'. The terms Hindu and Hinduism are still subject to scholarly debate, with sides either claiming that the terms are false and meaningless external fabrications, or the opposite, i.e. that they were indigenous efforts at self-identification.³¹ Following recent studies by Hinduism scholars Brian Pennington and Gavin Flood, I argue for the latter position, showing that although 'Hinduism' emerged from a complex historical process of encounters, given certain reservations it is still a meaningful term used to describe the various native Indian religious traditions.

The etymological root of the term 'Hindu' is Persian and appears in eighth-century sources, in which it is applied by Muslim settlers in the Indus valley to the non-Muslims who lived there. However, these early 'Hindus' may also have called themselves such, and certainly did so occasionally in Sanskrit sources from the fifteenth century onwards.³² In the British colonial period, the British were doubly identified by native Indians as Christians as well as colonial rulers, and as a result Christian missionaries were a political presence as well as a religious one. Of course, the British colonial missionaries were far from the first to arrive on the Indian sub-continent. Portuguese Catholic missionaries had been present in India since the early sixteenth century, and British missionaries had been

²⁹ See, for example, Salmond 2004.

³⁰ Cf. Pennington 2005: 3.

³¹ Cf. Flood 2005: 2.

³² Cf. Flood 2005: 2f.

introduced into East India Company territories in 1813.³³ The colonial missionaries used highly polemical terms to pit their own religion against what they saw, and much of the time what they heard about second-hand, on the ground in India. Simultaneously the colonial administration, for bureaucratic census purposes, fabricated the category of 'Hindu' to denominate those of the population who were neither Christian, Muslim nor of any other obvious religious belonging.³⁴

As more Indians became educated in the British schooling system, they began to question their traditional roots, and many doubted their value when confronted with fierce missionary polemicists. The reform movements before Vivekananda, such as the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj, were also deeply critical of 'idolatrous' practices in India, arguably prompted in this by outside condemnation from Christians and also Muslims.³⁵ Where a diversity of religion in India had previously been the norm, native Indians of different traditions were now being regarded under the one heading of 'Hindu'. They were ascribed degrading, inferior and misunderstood practices and beliefs, and this prompted the Indians to define themselves against these accusations. The pressure mounted in political, religious and socio-cultural terms to assert and defend a native Indian identity in the face of the colonial presence and power, missionary criticism and internal voices for change.

In one sense, the activity of defining this identity was a reaction to the context that prompted it and was therefore necessarily cast in similar form.³⁶ But this does not mean that the outcome, i.e. the terms Hindu and Hinduism and the movement for Indian nationhood, were not entirely indigenous efforts.³⁷ The debate about the origin and meaning of, for example 'Hinduism', clarifies the great extent and creative ways in which Indian identity-creators, such as Vivekananda, Roy, Sarasvati, Sen and others, used the means given to them by history to create terms by which the Indian state and religions in India exist, and struggle with, to this day. Vivekananda and other reformers who loved India, and what they considered its glorious past and intellectual and spiritual heritage, made it their life's mission to not so much reform Indian religion, i.e. what we nowadays

³³ Cf. Pennington 2005: 4.

³⁴ Cf. Flood 2005: 3.

³⁵ Cf. Hildebeitel 1987: 4007f; Pennington 2005: 19 suggests that the violent polemics against image-worship in particular by evangelical Protestant missionaries was influenced by their rejection of Catholic practices. That is, they saw the face of a familiar evil and based their case against Indian religions on an inter-Christian point of contention.

³⁶ Cf. Indian historian Tapan Raychaudhuri (1999: 1) prefers to call the movements for reform "the Hindu reaction", rather than reform or revival movements.

³⁷ Cf. Pennington 2005: 5.

generally call Hinduism, but rather to reclaim the term ‘Hinduism’ from the British and imbue it with what the reformers considered to be the true nature of Indian religion. In this perspective, they are indeed ‘reformers’ in the sense that they were refashioning a term whose content had been constructed by the British, and trying to cast this content more in indigenous Indian terms.

And while defending the existing diffuse identity of Indian cultural and religious practices from enemy fire, the so-called reformers were in effect constructing that identity. Taking Vivekananda as an example, with every speech and publication he was telling Hindus what he believed they should be, do and think, at a point in time when self-identification as ‘Hindus’ was still in an embryonic state. The miracle was that by the time Vivekananda returned to India after the initial long mission of preaching in America and Europe, he was received at home as a teacher and exponent of Indian religion and identity. His creation, ‘Hinduism’, was thus endorsed by many ‘Hindus’ – that is, his construction of an Indian identity was embraced and used by those at home. It was by no means embraced by all, but many yet,³⁸ and his part in the self-identification has only grown stronger with time.

Thanks to the work of Vivekananda and the other ‘makers’ of Hinduism in India, ‘Hindus’ were given a more or less ready-made cultural and religious identity that they could use against the attacks of the Christians, and a notion (accurate or not) of a unified religion of India which they could use against the confident presence and claims of the Christianity of their foreign rulers. As Indians sought means of governing their own country, the identity of India as a nation evolved in intimate relationship with the religious identity of Hinduism. Out of this development, there inevitably came more directly political movements, such as those that led to the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, and the Indian independence movement. Later yet, the heavily nationalist Hindutva movement was strongly influenced by a certain strand of Vivekananda’s thought and used it in support of a separatist policy.³⁹ In all these forms, the interaction between definitions and re-definitions was an active and creative, rather than a merely passive or reactive one.

4.2.3 ‘East’ and ‘West’: Vivekananda and the world

In comparison with the other reformers Vivekananda’s most significant point of difference was that he was globally concerned. His conscious mission was not only to empower the

³⁸ Cf. Raychaudhuri 1999: 2, also 11 about negative responses from priestly orthodoxy.

³⁹ Cf. Pennington 2005: 3f, 7; e.g. Radice 1999: vii. A number of studies of Vivekananda’s political thought were prompted by the demolition of the Muslim Babri Masjid shrine by Hindu national fundamentalists on 6 December 1992.

masses of India and give them a place in the country, but also to give India a place in the world. In this respect he differed from previous identity-formers, such as Roy and Sarasvati, who focused their efforts exclusively on India.

I mentioned above how Vivekananda conceived his mission in relation to a particular notion of ‘the West’, i.e. that he wanted to collect money (possessed by the affluent, emergent industrial societies symbolised by America) for India in exchange for spirituality (which India had aplenty, although it sometimes failed to practice it adequately). In fact he was quite blunt about this side of the mission:

As our country is poor in social virtues, [America] is lacking in spirituality. I give them spirituality, they give me money.⁴⁰

Apart from the collection of money, which arguably was the initial reason for going abroad, Vivekananda also took from his conception of the ‘West’ one element of what he would preach to India – the idea of masculinity and active power, *rajas*. He saw this as completely lacking in the *tamasic*, or inert, nature of what India had become. His speeches on manliness and robust, strong religion were inspired by the power of Western technological society. Although they draw on Vivekananda’s ideas about the characteristics of Western society, these characteristics are nevertheless used to serve an argument about spirituality. Thus, the typical ‘material West-spiritual East’ dichotomy is loosely used in this example. Hinduism scholar Dermot Killingley has explored other ways in which Vivekananda’s programme of exchange between East and West diverged from the stereotypical assumptions mentioned in Chapter 2 above, in which the East is portrayed as a dark reverse of the rational, masculine, public, political and scientific West.⁴¹

Upon arriving in America, Vivekananda was initially overwhelmed by the material progress he saw. He was impressed with America’s prosperity and the uses to which the prosperity was put in social and charitable causes, and he wrote home about it in enthusiastic terms. But once he saw the flipside, which he identified as an obsession with moneymaking and business without regard for others, he became critical of the cost to spiritual mentality that the material success seemed to require. His unhappiness with Western culture resulted in the construction of a useful East-West dichotomy that came to frame much of his general discourse on religion, and the role of India as the beacon of spirituality in a world of materialistic depravity. However, his sometimes harsh

⁴⁰ CWV 6: 255. *Letter to Ramakrishnananda*, 19 March 1894.

⁴¹ Cf. Killingley 1999: 139.

denunciations of ‘Western’ culture must be read in parallel to his equally harsh treatment of India’s lack of practice of its precious spiritual heritage.

Recent critical scholars sometimes overemphasise Vivekananda’s rhetorical treatment of ‘East’ and ‘West’⁴², but it is clear from the *Complete Works* that he was both genuinely positive and negative about both poles and the rousing public speeches he gave did not present the full picture of his attitudes to East and West. The private Vivekananda who appears in the personal letters was in fact more appreciative of ‘the West’ and more critical of Indian spiritual laxness than the one who gives the public speeches. At the same time we must of course acknowledge that when we consider Vivekananda as a maker of modern Hindu identity, it was his public work that had the greatest audience. Therefore, his notion of India as superior became widely known at home and abroad, while the private reflections in his letters remain relatively unknown.

4.3 Vivekananda’s theory of religion

Vivekananda’s life and career as a teacher of religion were extremely influential, especially given their brevity. His public work began with his arrival in America in July 1893, at the age of thirty. From then and until his death only nine years later, he had not only fulfilled his initial mission of collecting money for the poor of India and establishing organisations through which they could be educated and otherwise assisted, but had also managed to popularise his interpretation of Hinduism in the West, and to a large extent reinvigorate Indian Hindu identity.

This intense period of work ensures a relatively homogenous body of teaching from Vivekananda, mainly in the form of recorded and transcribed speeches and lectures. In the following I present the core of his teaching, which is concerned with the meaning and purpose of religion. The main elements of the theory are contained in his early public addresses at the Parliament of Religions, which I use as my main sources. I shall show how the theory operates as a dynamic between the notions of unity and diversity, and the idea that the many paths to God suit different stages of spiritual maturity.

⁴² See, for example, Urban 2003 (in the chapter ‘Deodorised Tantra’) and Sil 1993 (‘Vivekananda’s Ramakrsna: An Untold Story of Mythmaking and Propaganda’), both of which hint in this direction. Compare Radice 1999: vii and Raychaudhuri 1999.

4.3.1 *The aspect of unity in Vivekananda's theory of religion*

Vivekananda's two famous addresses at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago contain the two main points of dynamic in his theory of religion: The inner *unity* of the great world religions, and the *diversity* of forms which they take in the concrete world. This section is concerned with the element of unity, and the following section with diversity.

Vivekananda states in the paper on Hinduism and a later talk on Hinduism:

Unity in variety is the plan of nature⁴³

In the heart of everything the same truth reigns⁴⁴

*That which exists is One: sages call It by various names.*⁴⁵

I shall discuss these statements in turn as paths for exploring the unity element of Vivekananda's theory of religion.

4.3.1.1 *"Unity in variety is the plan of nature"*

This statement expresses Vivekananda's fundamental conviction that there is an intended order in the universe of phenomenal things, a "plan of nature". He generally refers to the agent of this intention as "God", "the sum total of all energy", a supreme creating being⁴⁶, whose will is perceived by the prophets of humanity⁴⁷ and whose voice is present in the world's religions.⁴⁸ The first statement also presumes at least two levels of perception in which objects may appear contradictory. On the one hand, this position expresses that phenomena appear genuinely different when seen in one way, while on another level of perception they exhibit unity.

The quote thus expresses the position that human consciousness can be focused on different levels of perception or abstraction, and that apparently contradictory states can logically coexist in the consciousness when approached from different levels of perception.

⁴³ CWV 1: 17. *Paper on Hinduism*.

⁴⁴ CWV 1: 18, *Paper on Hinduism*.

⁴⁵ The Rg-Vedic motto, which Vivekananda used repeatedly. See, for example, CWV 3: 113, *First Public Lecture in the East*, 15 January 1897.

⁴⁶ Vivekananda 1985: 17. *Hinduism – Its Common Bases*. Lahore, 1897.

⁴⁷ CWV 1: 7. *Paper on Hinduism*.

⁴⁸ CWV 1: 18. *Paper on Hinduism*.

For example, “There are several world religions” is true when looking at the religions as forms of expression, while “There is one universal religion”⁴⁹ is also true for Vivekananda, who believed the world religions have a common unity of purpose and origin in God. The brief quote also hints at Vivekananda’s understanding of religion as a matter of perception, and ‘right’ perception at that, an almost Buddhist-sounding view. Religion, when rightly understood, is concerned with perceiving and thereby *realising* this inner unity that binds together the varied external phenomena of the world. And when finally the perceiver of unity identifies with the unity, or perceives it in himself, ultimate realisation is attained and he enters the realm of divine existence.

“Unity in variety is the plan of nature” is also in effect a statement that works as an argument from ‘divine will’ for the position that diversity is ultimately good. In another place Vivekananda used the opposite version of this argument, saying:

had it been the will of an All-wise and All-merciful Creator that one of these religions should exist and the rest should die, it would have become a fact long, long ago.⁵⁰

It says nothing about unity, because it is assumed on this view that the supreme will that ordains variety in the universe is essentially one and hence that unity, as an essential property of God, does not require further explanation. So there is no need to argue why unity should exist at the heart of things because in Vivekananda’s view, the unity is already there *qua* the divine existing as the ground of reality.

This statement is therefore partly ontological and sets the framework for a theory of religion based on the existence of a transcendent Creator that imbues all created things with its own being, its unity or oneness. This unity may be perceived by humans when they discover and employ a means to perceive the unity of the divine in their own nature, which enables them to perceive this inner unity in all phenomena. For Vivekananda, the purpose of the world religions is to train their followers to perceive this fundamental unity between humans and God and also between all members of humanity. The various teachings, devotions, rites and mystical practices of the religions exist only to serve this purpose.⁵¹

⁴⁹ CWV 2: 379ff. *The Ideal of a Universal Religion*.

⁵⁰ CWV 2: 362. *The Way to the Realization of Universal Religion*.

⁵¹ Cf. CWV 1: 325. *Soul, God and Religion*.

4.3.1.2 *“In the heart of everything the same truth reigns”*

The second statement illustrates the epistemological position in Vivekananda’s theory of religion. It is, of course, intimately connected to the ontological position of a divine unity underlying all diverse phenomena and being perceivable by humans who, through following a prescribed course of spiritual training, have attained the means to see it.⁵²

When a person develops the faculty to see the inner unity of the universe, humanity and God, its truth is self-evident and becomes a solid anchor of the religious life and the rest of the person’s existence. The quote refers to the “truth” as Vivekananda saw it, that the great world religions all have the same purpose, i.e. that they, regardless of dogmatic differences, essentially all worship the same God. It is implied that human souls at the point of liberation realise their own unity with this great sea of oneness, apart from which nothing can be said to exist. The epistemological implications of this quote require some further reflection.

Firstly, it implies once more that one fundamental quality lies at the core of the universe. This quality is a truth that is embodied in human thought-forms in what we humans call the religious traditions of the world. Its content, as shown above, is that humanity is one with the world and one with the great Source of the world. According to Vivekananda, this can be verified by human experience through the practice of religion, which develops the faculty for perceiving universal unity.⁵³ Secondly, it implies that the ability to perceive and reflect, i.e. consciousness in other words, is the most central operation of humans, because it is the means by which we as beings realise our essential oneness with all. The exercise of rationality, which characterises human beings, is therefore highly important and should be applied to religious matters.⁵⁴

Vivekananda was well-read in the Vedanta and Sankhya philosophies, so he by no means considered rational thought to be the only function of the human mind. For example, the intuitions of higher realms of being that Ramakrishna demonstrated so amply were not the result of rational deliberations. But according to Vedanta the ordinary function of human beings is in rational terms, and thus the perception of the non-conceptual realm of unity appears to the human consciousness as a “truth”; the encounter between man and the

⁵² Cf. Vivekananda 1920: 2.

⁵³ Cf. Vivekananda 1920: 79ff.

⁵⁴ Cf. Vivekananda 1920: 80.

unitary reality triggers an automatic mental reflex that creates a conceptual statement about the nature of reality in rational terms.⁵⁵

Ordinary human perception is thus conceptual, and experiences register mentally as rational statements, i.e. ‘truths’ that are subject to the laws of logic. In his earlier years Vivekananda was fond of philosophical argumentation and of discussing questions of consciousness according to logic.⁵⁶ Ramakrishna, whose mind was usually engaged at a ‘non-rational’ level, did not approve of these exercises, which appeared to him to completely miss the point of human consciousness. For Ramakrishna this point was the realisation of the inner unity of the world, emphatically not the discussion of the forms it took in the rational minds of men.

4.3.1.3 “That which exists is One: sages call It by various names”

Many times in the course of his speeches and lectures Vivekananda referred to this ancient Vedic quote in support of his conviction that the One divine reality referred to in all religions (present even in what he called “agnostic” Buddhism and “atheistic” Jainism⁵⁷) is the same. The quote illustrates Vivekananda’s hermeneutical position and touches on three theological elements: Firstly, there exists a supreme, unified, ultimate reality; secondly, this reality is perceived by “sages”; and thirdly, it is perceived differently by these sages.

In the first case, although Vivekananda was attracted to several kinds of ideas before encountering Ramakrishna, he came from a devout Hindu family and was, as we noted, inclined to spiritual practices from childhood. Even during his intellectual and argumentative periods he never lost faith in the existence of the ultimate reality, and when he decided to take his religious practice seriously and went to seek a teacher, his criterion was whether the teacher had experienced this divine reality for himself and would therefore be able to instruct an ambitious young man.

In Ramakrishna he saw the postulates of the Vedanta personified⁵⁸ and he knew that realisation of God was indeed possible. According to the biographies, Vivekananda also attained the greatest form of union with Brahman according to the Vedanta, *nirvikalpa samadhi*, before the point of death⁵⁹, at which he appears to have voluntarily entered a state

⁵⁵ Cf. Vivekananda 1920: 13, 83.

⁵⁶ Cf. NVB: 14.

⁵⁷ CWV 1: 18. *Paper on Hinduism*.

⁵⁸ Cf. CWV 7: 413. *Notes of Class Talks. Shri Ramakrishna: The Nation’s Ideal*.

⁵⁹ Cf. NVB: 33.

of consciousness from which he knew there was no return.⁶⁰ The existence of God, therefore, was not at all debatable for Vivekananda. This is in contrast to discussions in Western philosophy with which he was also well acquainted. His theory of religion was therefore based on an indubitable assertion of the existence of ultimate, divine reality.

Regarding the second theological element, the ontology and epistemology of Vivekananda's position combine to form the logical conclusion that a human being, essentially rooted in the supreme being of the ultimate reality, can learn to commune with that reality. Because of the way our minds work such communion is perceived as communication from universal consciousness to human consciousness, and in the mind the communication takes the form of concepts. Concepts then become applied to the experience of ultimate reality, in other words this ultimate reality is "given names" by the perceivers. Vivekananda called these perceivers "sages", setting apart a category for them, because serious dedication is required to attain a state of perfected being in which one can perceive ultimate reality, or "see God", as he asked of Ramakrishna. And although the state is in theory possible for every person, few put in the required effort and thereby merit the title of sage or seer, *rshi*.⁶¹

The third element is the variety of the sages and the names by which they call the divine One. As it appears to each seer, the unbounded nature of the ultimate reality, which Ramakrishna often referred to as a vast ocean of blissful consciousness, takes different forms depending on the condition of the perceiver, or rather of the perceiving mind.⁶² For Vivekananda the ultimate reality is One and the same, so the reason for perceived differences lies not in the object of perception but in the instrument, i.e. the human mind. The concepts of each perceiver, or each sage, seer or prophet from across the religious traditions, are different and therefore condition the impression received in the mind of the seer.

So to explain the Vedic verse along the lines of Vivekananda, we could say that the sages call the ultimate reality by different names because their minds contain differing concepts about the ultimate reality. They perceive and "name" what they can according to their mental furnishings – furnishings or concepts that in most cases come from receiving

⁶⁰ Cf. NVB: 178.

⁶¹ Cf. CWV 1: 7. *Paper on Hinduism*; Vivekananda 1920: 81ff.

⁶² Cf. Vivekananda 1920: 78.

religious instruction along the lines of a particular tradition.⁶³ And this brings us now to consider Vivekananda's position on the diversity of religions.

4.3.2 The aspect of diversity in Vivekananda's theory of religion

Above I have shown how Vivekananda believed that there is a fundamental unity of being underlying everything, and that humans perceive this unity differently according to their mental conditioning. This is because the concepts of rationality are insufficient to explain impressions from this level of perception. One of the main points of his work is the emphatic insistence that diversity in the world, and especially among religious opinions, is natural and valuable. This section discusses Vivekananda's position on the diversity of religions and its value and place in human society and in the spiritual life of humanity.

4.3.2.1 Diversity, tolerance and acceptance

In his opening address at the Parliament of Religions Vivekananda quoted the verses:

*As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.*⁶⁴

*Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me.*⁶⁵

Both clearly state that all the religious traditions are but paths to the same goal of union with the divine reality. Apart from this scriptural evidence, Vivekananda believed that he had seen proof in the person of Ramakrishna for the truth of these statements, since his master had realised God not only through the Indian traditions but other religions as well.⁶⁶ For his listeners, who did not know Ramakrishna, he presented the existence of the Parliament of Religions itself as evidence that holiness had been attained by members in all the great religions represented at the convention, and so not one single religion could claim exclusive rights to the production of saints.⁶⁷

At the very least this was for Vivekananda an obvious reason to respect other religions, but he was also aware that many religious people did not consider matters in this perspective,

⁶³ Cf. CWV 4: 375. *Fundamentals of Religion*.

⁶⁴ CWV 1: 4. *Welcome address at the Parliament of Religions*. The words are from the traditional hymn *Siva Mahimnastotra*, 7, and the image features extensively in the Upanishads.

⁶⁵ CWV 1: 4. *Welcome address at the Parliament of Religions*. Paraphrase of *Bhagavad Gita*, VII.21.

⁶⁶ Cf. CWV 4: 174. *My Master*.

⁶⁷ Cf. CWV 1: 24. *Paper on Hinduism*.

seeing instead all religions as competitors. In a parable he demonstrated the ignorance of such people who are like a frog living in a well, visited by another frog that lives in the sea. The well frog asks if the sea is bigger than his well, and when the other frog explains the expanse of the sea, the well frog says:

nothing can be bigger than my well; there can be nothing bigger than this; this fellow is a liar, so turn him out.⁶⁸

To Vivekananda religious people of such a ‘well frog’ mentality refuse to see religion in its proper context as a universal phenomenon, but see only their own perspective and react forcefully when it is challenged or questioned in any way. He mentioned India as an exemplary nation in its toleration of other religions, giving a home to refugees, Jews escaping from Roman persecution, the remnant of the Zoroastrians, and early Christians and Muslims who came to India for various purposes.⁶⁹ This view of India as an exemplar of religious toleration is of course highly romanticised and overlooks the historical facts of wars and politically and religiously motivated violence between Hindus and non-Hindus.

Mere toleration, however, while certainly desirable over intolerance, was not the final stage of universal harmony in Vivekananda’s view. This was rather *acceptance* – a positive respect for the presence of the other religions and their followers. With keen psychological insight he said:

Our watchword, then, will be acceptance, and not exclusion. Not only toleration, for so-called toleration is often blasphemy, and I do not believe in it. I believe in acceptance. Why should I tolerate? Toleration means that I think you are wrong and I am just allowing you to live.⁷⁰

The theological reason for this acceptance of other religions follows from his conviction of the essential unity of the religious traditions and their nature as paths leading to the same goal, or being “*different streams having their sources in different places*” that eventually enter the same body of water.

The analogies of paths or streams leading to the same place assumes that the different starting-points are genuinely different, although they are also connected by their common goal which already exists. However, both analogies imply a passage through time and space from the diverse position to the unified position. But we could imagine the view from the perspective of an elevated outside observer who can see at once the paths and

⁶⁸ CWV 1: 5. *Why We Disagree*. 15 September 1893.

⁶⁹ Cf. CWV 1: 3.

⁷⁰ CWV 2: 374. *The Way to the Realization of Universal Religion*. California, 28 January 1900.

streams coming together in the centre, something like a map of the religious landscape. This shift of perspective is what Vivekananda wanted to emphasise to his listeners in order to make them look up from plodding along in their own track. They should instead rise above their individual concerns and look on the entire picture of what all the religions are accomplishing: the herding of people along the various ways that are all headed for a common centre of being. Along the way, by keeping an eye on the paths that others are treading, they would learn more about their own path by seeing it in relation to those of others.⁷¹

4.3.2.2 *Many paths, temperaments or stages*

As shown above, Vivekananda held that the apparent diversity in the field of religions is a “divine decree”, or a law of nature. He explained the variety according to three main ideas. The first is that the religions are paths that different people follow, but which all lead to the same goal. In arguing for an attitude towards other religions of positive acceptance, rather than mere toleration, Vivekananda offered the argument that human beings come from many kinds of backgrounds and have many kinds of personalities, preferences and temperaments. This is also indicated in the hymn where it says that the religions are “*different paths which men take through different tendencies*”. It is desirable to have different religions with different kinds of teaching and practice, in order to help a greater number of people:

The greater number of sects, the more chance of people getting religion (...) that more people may have a chance to be spiritual.⁷²

Because few people think alike, it is normal that many groups want to express their understanding of religion in their own way. The point is humorously made:

any attempt to bring all humanity to one method of thinking in spiritual things has been a failure and always will be a failure. Every man that starts a theory, even at the present day, finds that if he goes twenty miles away from his followers, they will make twenty sects. You cannot make all conform to the same ideas: that is a fact, and I thank God for it.⁷³

Thus, a diversity of religions is practical, inevitable, and ultimately desirable.

However, the most common framework in which Vivekananda discussed the fact of religious diversity is that of *stages*. The goal of religion is the realisation of unity with the

⁷¹ Cf. CWV 1: 329. *Soul, God and Religion*.

⁷² CWV 2: 368. *The Way to the Realization of Universal Religion*.

⁷³ CWV 2: 362. *The Way to the Realization of Universal Religion*.

divine and arriving at this goal is, as we have seen, usually described as a journey, even a journey of the individual soul. Vivekananda considered this journey to be composed of stages toward an eventual spiritual maturity. The journey begins at a crude stage of image worship, and is guided along the path by a variety of aids, such as books, temples, rituals, devotions, moral codes, teachers, and so on, until the soul discovers its own essential unity with God and final realisation is attained. Of people who insist on the literal adherence to dogma, especially where they conflict across religions, he says:

Creeds and sects have their parts to play, but they are for children, they last but temporarily. (...) The end of religion is the realisation of God in the soul. That is the one universal religion.⁷⁴

According to Vivekananda, Jesus taught the inner divinity of man in his lessons on the kingdom of God⁷⁵; as for the address “Our Father, who art in Heaven”:

He was talking to the uneducated masses when he said the latter, the masses who were uneducated in religion. A man may be the greatest philosopher in the world but a child in religion. When a man has developed a high state of spirituality he can understand that the kingdom of heaven is within him. That is the real kingdom of the mind. Thus we see that the apparent contradictions and perplexities in every religion mark but different stages of growth. And as such we have no right to blame any one for his religion. There are stages of growth in which forms and symbols are necessary; they are the language that the souls in that stage can understand.⁷⁶

This quote contains several important aspects of Vivekananda’s theory of stages of religious life. Firstly, there existed for him a ladder of spiritual achievement on which people of all religions are distributed, occupied with those elements of their own religion that appeal to them and through which they can progress up to the top. Outward-focused practice with many rules for thought and behaviour is at the bottom of the ladder, while internal, reflective practice ranks nearer the top. There is also clearly a hierarchy among the types of doctrines and practices that are contained in the world religions – an important point for the discussion of the nature of Vivekananda’s pluralism in the following section.

The latter half of the quote is mainly directed at those who were influenced by reports from Christian missionaries in India which decried the “idolatry” and “polytheism” of popular Indian religion. However, after a defence of such practices as merely *apparently* idolatrous and polytheistic, Vivekananda explained that even such “immature” devotions was perfectly suitable for those spiritual children (reminiscent of St Paul) who were incapable

⁷⁴ CWV 1: 324. *Soul, God and Religion*.

⁷⁵ Cf. CWV 1: 324. *Soul, God and Religion*.

⁷⁶ CWV 1: 324. *Soul, God and Religion*.

of grasping more sophisticated guidance. On this basis he thus retorted, according to the principles of acceptance and spiritual progress:

Would it be right for an old man to say that childhood is a sin or youth a sin? If a man can realise his divine nature with the help of an image, would it be right to call it a sin? Nor, even when he has passed that stage, should he call it an error? To the Hindu, man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth. To him all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realise the Infinite, each determined by the conditions of its birth and association, and each of these marks a stage of progress (...)⁷⁷

The Hindus have discovered that the absolute can only be realised, or thought of, or stated, through the relative, and the images, crosses, and crescents are simply so many symbols – so many pegs to hang the spiritual ideas on. It is not that this help is necessary for every one, but those that do not need it have no right to say that it is wrong.⁷⁸

What may seem like lower or lesser stages of religion are here defended as valid and valuable practices. And as both quotes demonstrate, Vivekananda underlined that it is precisely in Hindu teachings that this position is to be found.

4.3.2.3 *Endorsing diversity while preserving the identity of traditions*

It is clear that Vivekananda advocated a generous acceptance of all religions, which he saw as the expressions of various attempts of humanity to reach God. While his own preference was clearly for Indian Vedantic philosophy⁷⁹, he boldly proclaimed his love for the other religious traditions and for Indian traditions other than the Vedantic, in their wide variety that appealed to so many different kinds of people and gave them all a chance to become attracted to and enter upon the spiritual life. He says:

I may declare to you that I belong to no party and no sect. [All the religions] are all great and glorious to me, I love them all, and all my life I have been attempting to find what is good and true in them.⁸⁰

And again:

I accept all religions that were in the past, and worship with them all; I worship God with every one of them, in whatever form they worship Him. I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the Christian's church and kneel before the crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhistic temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and in his

⁷⁷ CWV 1: 17. *Paper on Hinduism*.

⁷⁸ CWV 1: 17. *Paper on Hinduism*.

⁷⁹ Cf. CWV 1: 14. *Paper on Hinduism*; Vivekananda 1985: 34.

⁸⁰ Vivekananda 1985: 32.

Law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of every one.⁸¹

These two similar quotes demonstrate that Vivekananda considered the religious traditions as distinct cultural elements and that he respected them as such, although viewing them as expressions of the same fundamental search for the divine. Above we saw how he based his endorsement of religious diversity on ancient Indian words about the different ways by which men travel to God. There appears to be, in both the ancient words and in Vivekananda's own words, an acknowledgment of the adjective 'different'. That is, the religions are genuinely different expressions, and as traditions contain a definite, though evolving, body of beliefs, trends and practices. But on the other hand, his theory of religion also operates with a strict hierarchy of spiritual attainment, according to which he judged various practices and beliefs.

In this section I have presented Vivekananda's theory of religion by focusing on the two central notions of unity and diversity around which he developed his argument. I have shown that Vivekananda held 'all religions' (generally speaking) to be paths to liberation or unity with God, his notion of the purpose of religion, which appeal to different kinds of people. He emphasised that the Indian religious traditions uniquely teach the position that different people require different paths to God and that the religious traditions are suited to the people who have shaped them, which I shall discuss further in the section below.

4.4 Caste as a model for Vivekananda's theory of religion

4.4.1 Caste and religious options

In this section I shall discuss the role of the caste notion in Vivekananda's theory of religion in order to develop his idea that the different religions serve the spiritual needs of different kinds of people. I shall first briefly define caste and describe the traditional importance and place of it in Indian thought and society; the changes to caste-understanding presented by some of the other reformers roughly contemporary with Vivekananda; and the issues related to caste with which they were struggling.

The issue of caste is an integral part of Indian thought and thus it is impossible to ignore in a discussion of both the question of unity and diversity in an Indian context, and also in

⁸¹ CWV 2: 374. *The Way to the Realization of Universal Religion*.

relation to the reform ideas that have been suggested to either preserve or abolish it. Like a definition of the term 'Hinduism', the issue of caste also poses complex questions, and I can only treat it here in a very brief and selective manner. Below I shall focus on a few elements that are relevant to the discussion of Vivekananda's attitude to caste and its relation to his stages theory of spiritual maturity in the theory of religion.

4.4.2 Traditional understanding of caste

Caste is the English term (from *casta*, Portuguese for 'pure' or 'clean', coined by the early colonialists on the sub-continent) denoting a traditional distinction of Indian society into four classes (*varna*). This idea stems from the ancient *Purusasukta* myth in the Rg Veda (10.90) and is emphasised and strengthened in the later *Manusmṛti* rules for social organisation (particularly 6.34-37).⁸² The Vedic story relates how the heavenly man is sacrificed, and the Brahmin (priest) caste then appears from the mouth, the Ksatriyas (warriors, rulers) from the arms, the Vaisyas (commoners) from the thighs, and the Sudras (servants) from the feet.⁸³ These basic traditional distinctions emphasise difference and have been related to a wealth of other cosmological, physical, social and personal phenomena. They have been codified into various schemes of correspondence of what belongs to the different castes, with regards to for example occupation, diet, habits, environment, temperament and character.⁸⁴ Furthermore, a large number of sub-castes (*jati*) exist as informally organised occupational groups that are of importance in matters of marriage, employment and inheritance.⁸⁵

The integral role of caste in Hindu life can hardly be overestimated; in the context of a critique of the fabricated pan-Hinduism of modern nationalist movements, Indian scholar Nemai Sadhan Bose has remarked that nothing else really unifies the Indian religions, not even the Vedas, which are not accepted by some groups. The practical relevance of caste seems to him to be the one unifying element, but one that for various reasons is not stressed by the propagators of nationalism.⁸⁶ Part of the complication in relation to the issue of caste in the colonial period, and its critique by British and native voices, stems from the two kinds of grouping, *varna* and *jati*, translated by the one term, caste. In the following I shall not distinguish particularly between *varna* and *jati*, but shall use caste

⁸² Cf. Klostermaier 1998a: 48; Marriott 2007: 360f.

⁸³ Cf. Marriott 2007: 360.

⁸⁴ Cf. Marriott 2007: 360.

⁸⁵ Cf. Bayly 1999: 115.

⁸⁶ Cf. Bose 1999: 281.

instead, because in addressing an Anglophone audience at home and abroad Vivekananda and other reformers were not consistent in making this distinction either.⁸⁷

The simplistic assumption is that *jati* refers more to a social order grouping, while *varna* is a scripturally based grouping upheld and perpetuated mainly by the Brahmins who, as such, were singularly authorised to enforce the distinctions on a scriptural and traditional basis. Critics of caste, for example the Brahmo Samaj, primarily reacted fiercely against this Brahman superiority, although they sometimes maintained the *jati*-based segregation and assigned social roles.⁸⁸ It is therefore the *varna* sense of caste as “an ideology of spiritual orders and moral affinities”⁸⁹ with which I am concerned in the following. These ‘spiritual orders and moral affinities’ stem in part from the large amount of traditional ascriptions to people belonging to different groups and periods. In addition to *varna* rules there are also important scriptural and traditional regulations for conduct according to one’s *asrama*, or stage in life:⁹⁰ *Brahmacarya* (youth), *grhastya* (householder), *vanaprastya* (life in a forest, i.e. retired from active life), and *sannyasa* (ascetic life of a renouncer). In each of these, one of the traditional four aims of life (*purusarthas*) is accomplished: the practice of righteousness (*dharma*), the acquisition of wealth (*artha*), the enjoyment of the senses (*kama*) and the attainment of liberation (*moksa*), respectively.⁹¹

Each stage has prescribed ideal ways in which the aim of that stage should be attained by the various groups, and the regulations related to caste are called *varnasrama-dharma*.⁹² Conversely, these set prescriptions furnished the other caste-groupings both with material for criticism of those who did not live up to the standards, and for prejudice against people of other (usually lower) castes based on the general characteristics of the groups. For example Susan Bayly quotes the liberal caste-critical Brahmin Ranga Rao, who was trying to instil confidence in the despised Holeya outcaste group by the following kind of speech:

What are you? (...) You have no lands, no house (...) no education. Your approach is considered unholy, and your very shadow hated. (...) You are called by all by that abominable term Holeya (...) A liar or a thief, a drunkard or a traitor (...) is called a Holeya. (...) Do not foolishly think that all the higher classes are against you. If higher

⁸⁷ However, for a more detailed discussion of the problem of caste for Vivekananda’s contemporary co-reformers the distinction is crucial to uphold as, for example, Susan Bayly does in Bayly 1999.

⁸⁸ For example the Brahmo Samaj and Prarthana Samaj. (Cf. Bayly 1999: 107f)

⁸⁹ Bayly 1999: 97.

⁹⁰ Cf. Klostermaier 1998b: 29.

⁹¹ Cf. Klostermaier 1998b: 30.

⁹² Flood 1996: 58.

caste people ever beat you, that is because you become abusive when drunk. Behave properly, be humble and polite but at the same time try to improve your condition.⁹³

This example is full of Brahmin presuppositions about the meanness of his outcaste audience, presuppositions he nevertheless perpetuated, despite being an agent for change and reform and the elevation of the lowest in society.

4.4.3 Reformers' issues with caste

Ranga Rao is one example of a number of indigenous Indian contemporaries of Vivekananda who struggled with the ancient category of caste in their attempts to improve Indian society, often with a political, nation-building concern in mind. The issue of caste was therefore often debated in the public arena in response to previous European statements about caste as an immoral and oppressive feature of Indian life that had caused a natural dissolution between individuals across the country and which was preventing the emergence of nationhood.⁹⁴ In critiquing this position some reformers took the opposite view and sought precisely a traditional basis for nationhood in the idea of caste.

Negativity towards caste was generally expressed as a rejection of Brahmin privileges and a concern for the poor lot of some *sudras*, and eventually with the outcaste.⁹⁵ Some groups, for example the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj, rejected the gross *varna* caste idea, but forgot or ignored *jati*. They would hold conspicuous, and hugely controversial, public inter-caste (*varna*) marriages and even widow remarriages⁹⁶ and inter-caste banquets in “daring displays of food-sharing”, while for example continuing to employ cleaners of the cleaner caste (*jati*).⁹⁷

Others positively endorsed *jati* as the basis of, and an indigenous force for, national coherency. One example is the case of the prominent Justice M. G. Ranade, who elevated the Maratha Empire (1674-1820) as a period in which solidarity by exchanges based on the shared morality incorporated in the caste system resulted in a stable region and reign, while respecting the diversity of the groups in the empire, creating⁹⁸

⁹³ Report of a Ranga Rao speech from the *Indian Social Reformer*, October 1908. Quoted in Bayly 1999: 130.

⁹⁴ Cf. Bayly 1999: 93.

⁹⁵ Cf. Bayly 1999: 100, 108, 117f.

⁹⁶ Cf. Jones 1989: 35.

⁹⁷ Bayly 1999: 128.

⁹⁸ Cf. Bayly 1999: 113f.

a fruitful alliance of caste groups who retained their distinctiveness, but shared equally and heroically in the spirit of Sivaji's new realm.⁹⁹

This idea of a fruitful diversity living together in harmony to the mutual benefit of all resonates well with Vivekananda's vision of the advantages of a global society of various religions.

Critique of caste around Vivekananda's time was thus intimately bound up with reform concerns of national identity and the search for caste's traditional indigenous basis, whether it resulted in rejection or reinterpretations of the ancient prescriptions and assumptions about caste and life stages. As we have seen already, Vivekananda's efforts to reinvigorate his environment were very much directed to a similar end, although not with a purely political agenda. As much as he spoke about India's conquest of the West by spiritual means, he was essentially concerned to inspire a desire for personal transformation and communal action towards a practical endorsement of the religious ideals of service to one's neighbour.

4.4.4 Vivekananda on caste

At first glance it would seem that Vivekananda was ambiguous about caste, with statements like the following:

The conviction is daily gaining on my mind that the idea of caste is the greatest dividing factor and the root of Maya [illusion or wrong perception]; all caste either on the principle of birth or of merit is bondage (...) It is in the books written by priests that madnesses like that of caste are to be found, and not in books revealed from God.¹⁰⁰

Then what was the cause of India's downfall? – The giving up of this idea of caste (...) what I have to tell you, my countrymen, is this, that India fell because you prevented and abolished caste.¹⁰¹

The positive statements, however, far outweigh the negative, and on closer reading Vivekananda was in effect quite consistent in his statements on caste when they are set in the context of his general spiritual reinvigoration mission. His statements on caste are thus concerned with both spirituality and social organisation, which leads to some confusion and allows for contradictions that may be exploited by those who have wished to use Vivekananda's statements in support of political aims beyond what he himself was trying to do. Regarding the nationalist groups that have used him for their own ends, it must be

⁹⁹ Bayly 1999: 114. Quote from M. G. Ranade's book *Rise of the Maratha Power* from 1900.

¹⁰⁰ CWV 6: 394. Letter 124, 30 May 1897.

¹⁰¹ CWV 4: 372. *A Plan of Work for India*.

kept in mind that Vivekananda's statements about society are, without exception, related to his concern for the spiritual reinvigoration of India, and they exhibit at the same time an extreme conservatism and a radical reinterpretation of the ancient notion of caste.

Vivekananda consistently invoked an ideal distant past in which the strong group of Aryans, "through the force of its superior culture"¹⁰² subdued other tribes in India and constructed a society on the basis of the *varnashrama* classifications, or regulations for caste and stage in life, mentioned above.¹⁰³ In Vivekananda's understanding, the caste system of India is "one of the greatest social institutions that the Lord gave to man"¹⁰⁴, through which rulers are able to "ensure a healthy uprise of the races very low in the scale of culture".¹⁰⁵

The institution of caste is thus conceived of as an instrument of civilisation, by which laws regulate the development of people as individuals, groups and factions in an ancient, tried and tested manner based on the insights of the seers of ages past. Those with knowledge and training in these rules are, of course, the Brahmin caste, and it is surprising to find Vivekananda, who elsewhere so passionately denounced lax, self-satisfied priests, holding a high view of the good Brahmins of the ancient ideal:

the Brahmin of spiritual culture and renunciation (...) I mean the ideal Brahmin-ness in which worldliness is altogether absent and true wisdom is abundantly present (...) he who has killed all selfishness and who lives and works to acquire and propagate wisdom and the power of love.¹⁰⁶

The ideal must be realised, for nothing is taken for granted by right of birth alone:

Any one who claims to be a Brahmin then, should prove his pretensions, first by manifesting that spirituality, and next by raising others to the same status.

Vivekananda did not question caste distinctions. In his opinion there was free mobility up and down the scale of the *varnas*, so that one's inclusion in the major Brahmin and Ksatriya groups is not firmly fixed (he did not mention the other two specifically); he also claimed that groups can move within the hierarchy as long as they move together as a group, and that he had seen this happen in his own lifetime.

¹⁰² CWV 4: 296. *Aryans and Tamilians*.

¹⁰³ Cf. CWV 4: 296.

¹⁰⁴ CWV 4: 299.

¹⁰⁵ CWV 4: 297.

¹⁰⁶ CWV 3: 197. *The Mission of the Vedanta*.

However, he was quite specific about the *jati* sense of caste. *Jati* for Vivekananda constituted the very essence of creation – meaning ‘species’, it implied that created beings are naturally varied and thus occurs diversity of groups in society. Their categorisation into distinct sections is an unavoidable state of the universe.¹⁰⁷ In this model, *jati* designates a predestined group in which the individual can optimally express their nature, and *jati* as such was originally (i.e. ideally, since Vivekananda drew this notion from a mythological ancient past) the freedom of the individual to flourish as who they very specifically are.¹⁰⁸

It is in this context that Vivekananda asked, “Then what was the cause of India’s downfall?”, and replies: “the giving up of this idea of caste. As Gita says, with the extinction of caste the world will be destroyed”.¹⁰⁹ He further stated that the idea of caste held in his contemporary India was no longer true to the original idea of freedom and dignity, but had become a hindrance to development. The true understanding of caste had been replaced by a false understanding, in which caste had been worked into a system of privileges and means for the strong upper classes to suppress and exploit the lower.

This had two major negative effects on India, according to Vivekananda: Firstly, the rigid system of regulations had extinguished all competition between groups and thereby contributed to the inertia and loss of manliness that he so often deplored, bringing about “the political downfall of India and its conquest by foreign races”.¹¹⁰ Secondly, the privilege mentality that remained was totally contrary to the Vedanta spirit of unity of soul and equality between all humanity that Vivekananda preached:¹¹¹

But the idea of privilege is the bane of human life. (...) None can be Vedantists, and at the same time admit of privilege to anyone, either mental, physical, or spiritual; absolutely no privilege for anyone. The same power is in every man, the one manifesting more, the other less; the same potentiality is in everyone. Where is the claim to privilege? (...) The idea that one man is born superior to another has no meaning in the Vedanta. (...) It is a privilege to serve mankind, for this is the worship of God.¹¹²

Instead of privilege there must be a spirit of equality between people, individuals and groups alike, and education and Sanskrit knowledge should be spread among all classes, even – and *particularly* – to the traditionally underprivileged:

¹⁰⁷ Cf. CWV 4: 372. *A Plan of Work for India*.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. CWV 4: 372f.

¹⁰⁹ CWV 4: 372f.

¹¹⁰ CWV 4: 468; CWV 7: 242.

¹¹¹ Cf. CWV 1: 423f.

¹¹² CWV 1: 423f.

Ay, Brahmins, if the Brahmin has more aptitude or learning on the ground of heredity than the Pariah, spend no more money on the Brahmin's education, but spend all on the Pariah. Give to the weak, for there all the gift is needed. If the Brahmin is born clever, he can educate himself without help. If the others are not born clever, let them have all the teaching and the teachers they want. This is justice and reason as I understand it.¹¹³

Vivekananda was not impressed by the efforts of the various reform movements that had been organised in the preceding century. He found that they had failed in several ways, either by trying to imitate the critique of Westerners and as a result either creating false distinctions between castes based on Darwinian racial theory, thus emphasising segregation, or by abolishing the caste idea altogether, losing its valuable elements, in particular its great force for social order. Other reform movements had been violently critical of bad elements of Indian society and of the other castes, and had brought no positive change because they focused on the evils of Indian society instead of providing a constructive setting in which to build up a spirit of love and humanism among all people.¹¹⁴

The ideal of India, according to Vivekananda, is the making of a society for “the production of a universe of Brahmins, pure as purity, good as God Himself”.¹¹⁵ By preaching this ideal, India can fulfil the purpose foretold in the scriptures, which mention a return at the end of the time cycle to a state in which there is only one caste of true Brahmins, just as it supposedly was at the beginning of the cycle. Therefore the goal of the caste system is to recreate that one caste of true Brahmins by elevating the low masses to a higher status through education and service.¹¹⁶ This was Vivekananda's reinterpretation of the ancient precepts.

In the meanwhile let us work and let us not abuse our country, let us not curse and abuse the weather-beaten and work-worn institutions of our thrice-holy motherland. (...) Our solution of the caste question (...) comes by every one of us fulfilling the dictates of our Vedantic religion, by our attaining spirituality, and by our becoming the ideal Brahmin.¹¹⁷

It is therefore clear that Vivekananda is in fact quite conservative about caste, but also reinterprets it in what he claimed was a way that was true to the ancient tradition. However, this is also clearly different to the old texts, in which nobody but the *dvijati* may

¹¹³ CWV 3: 193. *The Mission of the Vedanta*.

¹¹⁴ Cf. CWV 3: 194f, 214f.

¹¹⁵ CWV 4: 299.

¹¹⁶ Cf. CWV 3: 197.

¹¹⁷ CWV 3: 198f.

learn the Vedas and *sudras* must have their tongue cut out if they happen to hear a Sanskrit word;¹¹⁸ Vivekananda wanted to teach even the outcaste.

On the point of the *asrama*, or stages in life, however, he remains very traditional. But again, there is a discrepancy between the public speaker and the letter-writing Vivekananda: The public speaker held that there used to be four stages which in reality have since collapsed into two, the householder and the renouncer. Both should strive to be holy, but only *sannyasins* could attain realisation:

Don't listen to the words of those who say, 'We shall both live the worldly life and be knowers of Brahman.' That is the flattering self-consolation of crypto-pleasure-seekers. (...) Nobody attains Freedom without shaking off the coils of worldly worries. (...) Let people argue as loudly as they please, I have got this conviction that unless all these bonds are given up, unless the monastic life is embraced, none is going to be saved, no attainment of Brahmajñana is possible.¹¹⁹

As a mitigating factor, *sannyasins* may come from all *varnas*.

Vivekananda sharply ordered the monks of his Ramakrishna monastery to keep those in training strictly apart from the world until they are advanced sufficiently, since the foul stench of householders is enough to lower the spiritual concentration of young monks.¹²⁰ So in theory all people are equal in Vivekananda's eyes, but in reality one must account for difference in progress in relation to the provisions that must be made for all these equal individuals to develop in the most efficient way, even when it looks like inequality. Or, to put it in Orwellian terms: all are equal, but some are more equal than others. While people of all *varnas* are free to receive training and become *sannyasins*, as there is in Vivekananda's opinion essential equality between caste, there is also a strict hierarchy of realisation between *asrama*, which in his model refers to life orientation. This is a 'spiritualised' interpretation of the traditional rules for life stages, where the four *asrama* are reduced to two, and there is no lower limit as to when one may decide to enter upon the path of the *sannyasin* and realisation. The very important reason for this distinction is that, according to Vivekananda, it is up to the individual to decide whether or not to enter upon the way of liberation.

¹¹⁸ Cf. CWV 3: 295. *The Future of India*. Vivekananda commented on this old rule:

"This is diabolical old barbarism, no doubt, that goes without saying; but do not blame the law-givers, who simply record the customs of some section of the community. Such devils sometimes arose among the ancients."

¹¹⁹ CWV 6: 505. *Conversation* 10, Alambazar Math, 1897.

¹²⁰ Cf. CWV 7: 184: "Sannyasins cannot bear the smell of householders. Now I see it is true."

In this section I have discussed the role of the notion of caste in Vivekananda's theory of religion with regard to his idea that the religious traditions suit people at different stages of spiritual maturity. After a brief definition of the notion of caste and its importance in discussions of Indian thought, traditionally and in the reform atmosphere around Vivekananda's time, I then showed how Vivekananda was ambiguous on the issue of caste itself, whether it is good or bad, an aid or an obstacle to the spiritual life. And while he on the one hand harshly denounced lazy Brahmins who shunned the underprivileged and did nothing useful in life, Vivekananda's teachings also present a spiritualised reinterpretation of the idea of the Brahmin as an ideal religious person to which all can aspire and all (castes) indeed are called to imitate.

4.5 Vivekananda and Ramakrishna's teachings

Before his death, Ramakrishna marked Vivekananda as his successor and charged him to continue teaching the group of followers. It now remains to show what form Ramakrishna's simple thoughts came to take in Vivekananda's teaching. In this last section I shall first show how Vivekananda's central concerns were also the main issue of Ramakrishna's teachings, namely that realisation of God is the purpose of religion and that this realisation is possible through the major religious traditions. I shall then discuss in greater detail how this position qualifies as a genuine pluralist approach, considering that Ramakrishna's statements are very plain and simple on this point while Vivekananda's developments of Ramakrishna's insights are considerably more elaborate and ambiguous. I shall show how, despite Vivekananda's clear preference for the Indian Advaita Vedanta teachings and his desire for his master to be presented to the world in a respectable and acceptable format, he managed to construct an argument in which this preference fitted into his overall pluralist presentation of religion, and he is thus faithful to Ramakrishna's essential point.

4.5.1 The core issues of Ramakrishna's teachings

In Chapter 3 I pointed out that the followers who subsequently wrote about Ramakrishna were highly censorious in their editing and publication of the teachings of their master, and that for this reason it is difficult for us to generate a relatively accurate picture of Ramakrishna on the basis of the edited material. As it turns out, this policy of strictness

came in part from Vivekananda himself. As he wrote in an incensed letter from America after reading the first and explicit biography, *Jivanvrttanta*, composed by his own cousin:

Avoid all irregular indecent expressions about sexes etc. (...), because other nations think it the height of indecency to mention such things, and his life in English is going to be read by the whole world. (...) I am simply ashamed of the Bengali book [i.e. *Jivanvrttanta*]. The writer perhaps thought he was a frank recorder of truth and keeping the very language of Paramahansa. But he does not remember that Ramakrishna would never use that language before ladies. And this man expects his work to be read by men and ladies alike! Lord, save me from fools! They, again, have their own freaks; they all knew him! *Bosh and rot* (...) Beggars taking upon themselves the air of kings! Fools thinking they are all wise! Puny slaves thinking that they are masters! That is their condition. I do not know what to do. Lord save me.¹²¹

Vivekananda further outlined for the readers of his letter his own understanding of Ramakrishna, which amounts to a veritable programmatic framework for his mission and that of the Ramakrishna Order and Mission:

This is the theme [of what should be written about Ramakrishna, according to Vivekananda]. The life of Shri Ramakrishna was an extraordinary searchlight under whose illumination one is able to really understand the whole scope of Hindu religion. He was the object-lesson of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Shastras [scriptures]. He showed by his life what the Rishis and Avatars really wanted to teach. The books were theories, he was the realisation. This man had in fifty-one years lived the five thousand years of national spiritual life, and so raised himself to be an object-lesson for future generations. The Vedas can only be explained and the Shastras reconciled by his theory of Avastha or stages – that we must not only tolerate others, but positively embrace them, and that truth is the basis of all religions.¹²²

Vivekananda here claimed that Ramakrishna is nothing less than the embodiment of the entire religious history of India and also of the world, because he had seen and realised the end of all religions by his mystical experiences. The proof of Vivekananda's conviction of the truth of it is in the inhuman activity he exhibited until the end of his life in his attempts to publicise this message, preaching and teaching and organising wherever he went. There is no doubt that Vivekananda believed that Ramakrishna was "the object-lesson" for the world of his day, and he keenly felt it his mission in life to bring news of this lesson to as many people as possible.

Ramakrishna did not formulate much of a theory of religion or pluralism, apart from his assertion of the liberating efficacy of various Hindu traditions, Christianity and Islam, as well as endorsing the way taught by the Buddha and Mahavira based on his own attainment of *samadhi* by following what he regarded as their essential teachings and practices. Sharing Ramakrishna's position that realisation constituted the heart of religion,

¹²¹ CWV 5: 53f. *Epistle XXII*. USA, 30 November 1894.

¹²² CWV 5: 53. *Epistle XXII*.

Vivekananda held his master's extraordinary ability to attain *samadhi* by various means to be a genuine, authoritative measure of truth, and he therefore subjected his enormous intellect to the humble genius of Ramakrishna on that most important point. If the two most essential ideas of Ramakrishna's existence are (1) the possibility of realising God and (2) the equal possibility of accomplishing this through all religions, then, in comparison to the conclusion above regarding Vivekananda's theory of religion, it is clear that they shared precisely the same concerns.

And the quote above also ascribes the basis of his theoretical framework to the teachings of Ramakrishna, namely that "[t]he Vedas can only be explained and the Shastras reconciled by his theory of Avastha or stages." The stages theory allows for doctrinal, i.e. 'superficial', differences between the religions and is thus part of Ramakrishna's insights also. The master had found, by experience, that differences of teaching and practice were not serious obstacles to the attainment of the goal of religion in any of the traditions that he tried. Vivekananda's version contained many other considerations and ambiguities, but fundamentally his theory was based on these two most crucial insights of Ramakrishna's practical experiences.

4.5.2 Vivekananda's ambiguous position on other religions

In this section I shall discuss the pluralistic features of Vivekananda's teachings in order to compare them with Ramakrishna's original ideas. It is characteristic of Vivekananda, and of Ramakrishna, that their religious pluralism rested firmly on a method of experiential verifiability. As Vivekananda's official argument went, if Ramakrishna, as the great master of alternative modes of experience, had tested something on the anvil of his own consciousness the results were absolutely trustworthy. And the pluralistic character of Vivekananda's position therefore also rested, as he sometimes argued¹²³, on what he considered evidence that all the religions have produced holy men and women. This transformation to complete and selfless purity for Vivekananda vouched for the efficacy of the religious path followed by the saint in question.

On this basis we may conclude that Vivekananda considered all the major religious traditions to be genuine paths to liberation. And if liberation in union with God is the single most important event in a human life, the most important point would be settled with that. However, the other aspect of pluralism, the epistemic state of the traditions, was also important to Vivekananda and he was ambiguous on this point. As shown above, his theory

¹²³ Cf. CWV 1: 24. *Paper on Hinduism*.

of religion clearly operated within a hierarchy of spiritual attainment, in which advanced spiritual people have progressed beyond the support objects and customs, such as totems, ritual formulae, deities, and so on, of “the lowest fetishism” to reach “the highest absolutism” in their religious life.¹²⁴ Naturally, this “highest absolutism” is practically synonymous with his own preferred tradition of Advaita Vedanta. In fact, he was occasionally quite specific that Indian thought, and Advaita Vedanta in particular, represented the source and pinnacle of all religion in the world. He addressed listeners at the Parliament of Religions as a representative of

the mother of religions (...) a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance (...) a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth.¹²⁵

In India alone, man has not stood up to fight for a little tribal God, saying, “My God is true and yours is not true; let us have a good fight over it.” It was only here that such ideas did not occur, as fighting for little gods.¹²⁶

And he suggested that, considering his theory of stages in spiritual attainment, humans move towards a conception of the universe and their own place in it, which is one of complete unity – *advaita*:

Science has proved to me that physical individuality is a delusion, that really my body is one little continuously changing body in an unbroken ocean of matter; and Advaita (unity) is the necessary conclusion with my other counterpart, soul.¹²⁷

From these quotes we can only conclude that Vivekananda considered Indian philosophy, crowned by Advaita Vedanta, to be superior in epistemic terms to all other religious teachings.¹²⁸

But while he clearly considered Advaita Vedanta as the supreme body of spiritual instruction and its teachings and practices most suited to reaching the highest peaks possible to the human spirit, his theory was also based, as shown above, on the points that (1) all human souls are naturally at different stages of progress, and (2) they are essentially one with each other and with God, who is beyond time and space. And because of the different stages of progress, maturity and spiritual sophistication, as Vivekananda

¹²⁴ CWV 1: 16. *Paper on Hinduism*.

¹²⁵ CWV 1: 3. *Welcome address at the Parliament of Religions*.

¹²⁶ CWV 3: 112. *First Public Lecture in the East*.

¹²⁷ CWV 1: 14. *Paper on Hinduism*.

¹²⁸ See also Vivekananda 1985: 61. *Hinduism – Its Philosophy*.

explained, humans need different levels of sophistication in the material they are being taught, and the following ideas lie at the heart of his entire religious position:

If a man can realise his divine nature by the help of an image, would it be right to call it a sin?¹²⁹

We can only know as much of the truth as is related to us, as much of it as we are able to receive¹³⁰

Humans can only grasp what they relate to, which evidently varies a great deal from person to person and must be not only respected, but actively appreciated by all religious people, because any form of approach to God as such is as good as another.

The man referred to in the first quote, who eventually realises his divine nature by worshipping an idol – a phrase probably intended as a boon to Christian critics of “Hindu polytheism” – is nevertheless achieving the same goal as that of the purest Advaitist. The method is irrelevant, in relation to point (2) above, because once the divine nature is realised, the person enters a realm of being in which time and space are of no consequence and so, on principle, who arrives there ‘first’ is entirely irrelevant.

The epistemic superiority of Advaita therefore only means that it relates advanced ideas to the advanced, whereas other traditions may offer lesser, but more appropriate, instruction to the less advanced. Presumably, this view entails that God has divinely decreed that the advanced people are reborn in India to take advantage of the Advaita teachings, as their karma allows. While one may find this spiritual elitism unappealing, it nevertheless provides an argument for the existence of an epistemic value scale within an overall pluralist view of religion.

Another point needs to be made in this context. I have shown above that the realisation of the divine lay at the heart of religion for Vivekananda and Ramakrishna. Vivekananda’s entire mission was a result of the fact that he saw in India, the land of what he considered the most spiritual traditions in the world, a complete lack of realisation of the glorious teachings it possessed. In lectures, and in particular in personal letters to his fellow Ramakrishna monks at home, he lamented in a passionate voice the complete disregard and even disgust that the self-satisfied Brahmins and landowners exhibited for the suffering poor of the country. He grieved to see Hindus fail in various ways to practice the concrete brotherhood entailed by their religion:

¹²⁹ CWV 1: 17. *Paper on Hinduism*.

¹³⁰ CWV 2: 366. *The Way to the Realization of Universal Religion*.

No religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism.¹³¹

Those thousands of Brahmanas – what are they doing for the low, downtrodden masses of India? “Don’t touch”, “Don’t touch”, is the only phrase that plays upon their lips! How mean and degraded has our eternal religion become at their hands! Wherein does our religion lie now? In “Don’t-touchism” alone, and nowhere else!¹³²

I believe in helping the miserable. I believe in going even to hell to save others. Talk of the Westerners? They have given me food, shelter, friendship, protection, even the most orthodox Christians! What do our people do when any of their priests go to India? You do not touch them even, they are MLECHCHHAS!^{133 134}

Educated Hindus fare even worse, “crushed by the wheels of caste divisions, superstitious, without an iota of charity, hypocritical, atheistic cowards.”¹³⁵ India had clearly failed, in Vivekananda’s view, to be worthy of its precious tradition and so in practical terms he was not afraid to complain over the lack of exercise of this tradition, which had stagnated among the priestly caste. As Raychaudhuri convincingly argues, Vivekananda “had a feeling of deep revulsion for many of the fundamentals of the Brahminical tradition.”¹³⁶ In Vivekananda’s ideal world, an India that fully embodied its religion would be obviously superior to the world, but as it was:

[The Pandits of India] do not know that India is a very small part of the world, and the world looks down with contempt upon the three hundred millions of earthworms crawling upon the fair soil of India and trying to oppress each other.¹³⁷

The quote continues with his hope for the future after a reinvigoration of Indian Hindu identity:

This state of things must be removed, not by destroying religion but by following the great teachings of the Hindu faith (...) ¹³⁸

And it ends on a surprising note:

and joining [the Hindu faith] with the wonderful sympathy of that logical development of Hinduism – Buddhism.¹³⁹

¹³¹ CWV 5: 15. *Epistle IV*. Massachusetts, 20 August 1893.

¹³² CWV 5: 27. *Epistle VI*. Chicago, 8 December 1893.

¹³³ *Mlechchha*, Sanskrit for a non-Aryan person. It carries strongly derogative connotations similar to ‘barbarian’ for the Greeks and designates a non-person relative to the Hindu social system.

¹³⁴ CWV 5: 52. *Epistle XXI*. Washington, 27 October 1894.

¹³⁵ Quote from Radice 1999: 11 in Tapan Raychaudhuri’s essay.

¹³⁶ Radice 1999: 14.

¹³⁷ CWV 5: 15. *Epistle IV*.

¹³⁸ CWV 5: 15. *Epistle IV*.

In conclusion to this part, we can thus assert that Vivekananda was not at all satisfied with putting the actual Hinduism of India on a pedestal over the other religions, but he wanted its teachings properly followed and ennobled by the active kindness preached in Christianity and the ingrained compassion of Buddhism – a Hinduism redeemed or *purified* and brought closer to what Vivekananda considered its true nature, through incorporation of elements that are more strongly emphasised in other religions.

The fact that Vivekananda believed that all the religions have an inner common core did not mean that he wished for an eradication of external differences and a smoothing over of the world's religious landscape. As shown in a previous quote, he talked about going to the mosque with Muslims, and kneeling before the cross of the Christian, which indicates a concern with maintaining the integrity of the traditions exactly as they are, at their best. He valued greatly the traditions as they were, with their good and less useful elements, because they had developed in relation to the people to whom they were most likely to appeal, and therefore to promote a spiritual attitude to life in a way that those people could grasp.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the theory of religion of Ramakrishna's main disciple and interpreter, Swami Vivekananda. He was almost singlehandedly responsible for promoting the teachings of Ramakrishna abroad and more widely at home in India, as well as helping to shape the budding Hindu Indian identity in the colonial period. I first discussed his contribution to the construction of the term Hinduism, with which he was very concerned in his mission to reinvigorate India and Indians and instil in them the power to create actively a better and more just society with the help of education and technology, ideas he picked up during his visit to America in the 1890s.

I then showed how Vivekananda's theory of religion was based on Ramakrishna's central insights that the purpose of religion is individual unity with God and that all religions are paths to this goal in different forms. Vivekananda developed this insight and argues for it, describing unity and diversity as two essential paradoxical characteristics of the spiritual world to which we as humans must relate properly. In Vivekananda's theory the outward diversity is explained by the traditional Hindu notions of caste and life stages, in which

¹³⁹ CWV 5: 15. *Epistle IV*.

people at different stages of spiritual maturity grasp the nature of God differently, in different terms and through different means on a scale of material-to-immaterial, so that forms of religion exist to appeal to all kinds of people and all have a chance of realising unity with God.

Although Vivekananda presented the Indian Advaita Vedanta teachings as the pinnacle of spiritual insight, he maintained that if someone can attain unity with God through idol-worship (which is considered a very low stage of spirituality), it is as valuable as a spiritually sophisticated person realising God through the Advaita teachings. I have concluded on this basis that Vivekananda was essentially a faithful representative of Ramakrishna's teachings. In the following chapters I shall proceed to examine the next pair of early pluralist thinkers, H. P. Blavatsky and Annie Besant of the Theosophical Society.

5 Helena Petrovna Blavatsky

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the life and teachings of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891). A highly controversial figure in life and even after her death, H. P. Blavatsky is a significant person in the religious development of Western Europe and America in the late nineteenth century. She is often regarded as the ‘mother’ of the New Age movement, since her teachings and books were in often the medium through which key terms of Eastern religions, such as meditation, karma and reincarnation, became part of the Western religious consciousness on a larger scale.

In her prolific writing and as co-founder of the Theosophical Society, she was a staunch defender of a spiritual reality against the emerging materialism in society at large, caused particularly by recent scientific discoveries and Darwin’s evolutionary theory. The express purpose of both her major works, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), was to secure a firm basis for belief in a higher reality and at the same time to claim science for the service of the higher reality, rather than allowing it to be based exclusively on a materialistic philosophy.

Blavatsky insisted that occultism, understood as knowledge of the hidden forces that operate in the universe, was the true science because it took into account insights obtained through means other than empirical investigation. This idea was based on her early studies of medieval and Renaissance alchemy as well as Hermetic and Kabbalistic philosophy which she supplemented with Indian and Tibetan esoteric philosophy. Religious insights into the nature of the world, drawn from different historical periods and different parts of the world, were superior to any so-called ‘scientific’ knowledge that limited itself to what could be observed in a laboratory or induced from empirical facts relating only to the physical aspects of reality. In combination, the two approaches to knowledge would produce a far superior system of true science, with the deductive and inductive methods united in the service of human progress. To Blavatsky, the dangerous prospect of a purely materialistic science was that it would ignore the great spiritual and mythological heritage of pre-modern humanity and limit future human endeavours to the realm of the physical world in a materialistic, selfish and individualistic scenario.

Apart from her influence in the context of the emerging materialistic scientific worldview in the late nineteenth century, H. P. Blavatsky is interesting in another related area as well.

In the course of her argumentation, she presented some details of the occult science that she claimed two Tibetan masters of occultism had taught her. As I shall argue below, this claim was partly an effort in the competition for a definition of science, where Blavatsky contributed her own scientific-sounding postulates to the public and intellectual debate. But contemporary scientists also took some of her ideas seriously as points of investigation. Thomas Edison (1847-1931), for example, became a member of the Theosophical Society, along with Sir William Crookes (1832-1919), the renowned physicist and chemist, and the French astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842-1925).¹

Sylvia Cranston, author of one of the most meticulously researched biographies of Blavatsky, found that Albert Einstein (1879-1955) always had a copy of *The Secret Doctrine* on his desk. She was so astonished at this discovery that she contacted the source of the information, a lecturer from the Theosophical Society in Adyar, who could vouch for its veracity. In the 1960s this lecturer had received a visit from a niece of Einstein's who, knowing nothing about Theosophy, had come to visit Adyar because of the book she had seen on her uncle's desk.² And it turns out that Blavatsky's occult theories of the nature of matter as presented in *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* have on certain important points been proved by later scientific discoveries, although in Blavatsky's time they were still unknown to the scientific community. The following three examples, which are now common knowledge, give an illustration of Blavatsky's extraordinary scientific insights:

1. *The divisibility of atoms*. Blavatsky insisted that atoms were divisible, contrary to the then reigning Newtonian understanding of atoms as solid, impenetrable particles. With the discovery of X-rays by Roentgen in 1893, radioactivity by Becquerel in 1896, and the electron by J. J. Thomson in 1897 (which Theosophists claim Blavatsky had predicted in *The Secret Doctrine*³), the old model of the atom as the most basic building block of matter was abolished. Prior to these discoveries, Blavatsky had said of atoms:

The atom is divisible, and must consist of particles, or of sub-atoms. (...) It is on the doctrine of the illusive nature of matter, and the infinite divisibility of the atom, that the whole science of Occultism is built.⁴

¹ Cf. Cranston 1993: xx.

² Cf. Cranston 1993: xx and xx n11, n12.

³ Cf. Cranston 1993: 430f; SD a: 612: " ... between this time [1888] and 1897 there will be a large rent made in the Veil of Nature, and materialistic science will receive a death-blow."

⁴ SD a: 520.

2. *Energy and matter are two aspects of the same and are convertible.* The quote above also emphasises the illusive nature of matter: at sub-atomic levels matter ‘disappears’ and is only perceivable as energy, and thus matter and energy can be converted. Einstein’s famous equation $E = mc^2$, from 1904, disproved the hitherto common understanding that matter and force or energy were two distinct features of the physical universe. In 1877, Blavatsky had stated in *Isis Unveiled*:

Every objective manifestation (...) requires two conditions: will and force – plus *matter* (...); and these three are all convertible forces.⁵

3. *Atoms are in perpetual motion.* According to the Newtonian view of atoms they were also static particles. Blavatsky had written in *The Secret Doctrine*:

Occultism says that in all cases where matter appears inert, it is the most active. A wooden or a stone block is motionless and impenetrable to all intents and purposes. Nevertheless and *de facto* its particles are in ceaseless eternal vibration which is so rapid that to the physical eye the body seems absolutely devoid of motion; (...) to physical science this will be an absurdity.⁶

This view of matter was later supported by Einstein’s work, and it is now fundamental to a modern understanding of matter from a scientific perspective. Blavatsky’s striking statement asserts that atoms are in constant motion, and that their movement produces the illusion of solidity, while in fact there is only the motion of tiny particles. Both insights did not become established scientific knowledge until the development of quantum theory in the early twentieth century. These examples demonstrate the unusual character of Blavatsky’s teaching in relation to the science of her day.

In the subsequent sections I shall begin with offering a short biography of H. P. Blavatsky and give a presentation of her major religious experiences (in a wide sense of the term). The chapter ends with a summary of her teaching on religion, with a particular focus on her understanding of the role of experience and the relationships between religious traditions. Two points need to be made in advance of this presentation of Blavatsky’s life and religious experiences. Firstly, regarding her biography, it is difficult to sketch many of the actual facts of her life and doings with any certainty. This is because she did not record many of the things she did or later claimed to have done. Even when records of these things do exist, they often do not match her descriptions of what happened and when.

⁵ Isis 1: 198; italics in original.

⁶ SD a: 507 (footnote); italics in original.

Moreover, like Ramakrishna, she was also deified by certain followers who presented her in their biographies in an uncritical light, and took many of Blavatsky's stories about herself – even when they are controversial, ambiguous and/or lacking in factual basis – at face value and represent them as real events. Or, conflicting accounts of her doings have been smoothed over in order to make the course of her life seem more coherent and logical. In addition to these problems, Blavatsky made many enemies who have been as creative as her followers in producing 'biographies' that are similarly unreliable, albeit with an unfavourable emphasis.⁷

In order to relate her teachings on religion and the relationships between the major faiths to her own varied experiences, I have therefore tried to keep the biographical section of this chapter limited to events that either illustrate her spiritual inclinations or play a part in the formation of her thinking on religion. This is because the facts of her life are so scarce, especially in relation to the most important events: her early travels and the supposed visit to the Tibetan monastery of the two spiritual supermen, Masters Morya and Kuthumi. In the following I have chosen to focus on Blavatsky's own use of her experiences, whether real or not, and the role they play as authorisation for her teaching on religion.

The second point I wish to make is that on many counts Blavatsky's claims to knowledge and religious experience rest on her physical visit to this monastery, the psychical abilities she claimed to have developed there, and her subsequent telepathic communication with the two Masters. I shall not attempt to assess whether or not her stay and occult training there really took place (or is even possible), but as these and similar experiences are an integral part of the structure of Blavatsky's teachings, I shall discuss them in relation to her teaching on religion rather than as a part of her biography. As mentioned in Chapter 2, I include psychic phenomena such as clairvoyance and telepathy in my use of the term 'religious experience'. When seen in this perspective, Blavatsky's experiential claims become relevant to her religious teaching rather than simply being a hindrance to an acceptance of any of her statements because she seems to argue on terms that might not be immediately accessible to the experiences of other people.

I have used a selection of Theosophical and other sources as material for the life and experiences of Blavatsky.⁸ There is some, but not much, contemporary scholarship on

⁷ E.g. Solvyoff 1895.

⁸ Dixon 2001; Cranston 1993; Washington 1993; Murphet 1988; Olcott 1895.

Blavatsky⁹, with Joy Dixon's 2001 monograph *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* as the only relatively recent in-depth study of Theosophy and the early Theosophical movement. On this backdrop I shall present Blavatsky's biography chronologically, with individual important experiences of a spiritual or supernatural character described in more detail in the subsequent section.

5.2 Biographical summary

5.2.1 Youth and early career

Helena Petrovna was born on 11 August 1831 during a severe cholera epidemic in the town Yekaterinoslav, now Dnepropetrovsk, southeast of Kiev in the Ukraine. She was sickly as an infant and often struggled with strange diseases during her childhood. Sudden violent attacks of unidentifiable illness also persisted throughout her adult life. The nomadic character of her early life would also continue as she, her sister and their mother followed in the train of her father who was a captain in the army and often moved around with his regiment.

Both parents were of noble ancestry. Her mother, Helena Andreyevna, made a name for herself as a novelist and pioneer in the early women's suffrage movement in Russia. She was the daughter of Princess Dolgorukov, Helena Pavlovna de Fadeyev (1789-1860), who was in her own right a renowned scientist and author at a time when women's contributions to the sciences were practically unheard of.¹⁰ The Dolgorukovs were an ancient Russian noble house that traced its roots back to Rurik, the Viking chieftain who is said to have founded Russia. Blavatsky's father, Peter von Hahn, was of the recently immigrated German Rottenstern-Hahn family that traced their roots back to a crusader.

Blavatsky's mother was also in poor health and died aged twenty-eight in July 1842. The eleven-year-old Helena Petrovna, her younger sister, Vera, and their infant brother were sent to be raised by their maternal grandparents.¹¹ Blavatsky's cousin Sergei Witte (1849-

⁹ These are mostly in the fields of literature and language, cf. Platt 2008; Case 2000; Hutton and Joseph 1998; other areas of study in relation to Theosophy are discussed in Morrisson 2008; Brown 2007a, 2007b; Edelstein 2006; Owen 2004; Kumar 2000; Rosenthal 1997.

¹⁰ Cf. Murphet 1988: 14f. Murphet's short biography is concise and summarises several older and more comprehensive biographies. I have based my biographical sketch of Blavatsky on his account, supplementing it with others where Murphet omits comment on other important elements.

¹¹ Cf. Murphet 1988: 13.

1915; son of Blavatsky's mother's sister Yekaterina), who was later Finance Minister (1892-1903) and Prime Minister of Imperial Russia (1905-1906) under Nicholas II, was also raised at the Fadeyev mansion with the Hahn children.

The prospect of becoming a society lady does not seem to have appealed to Helena, who played tricks on her governesses, skipped her classes to play with the servant children, rode her grandfather's horses bare-back, or hid in the cellars of the large mansion with books from the house library on alchemy and medieval magic which she devoured with intense interest.¹² The most characteristic traits of the young Helena are a lively imagination, an explosive temper and an iron will.

Sometime in 1848-49 seventeen-year-old Helena married the Vice-Governor of Transcaucasian Yerivan, Nikifor V. Blavatsky, but immediately after the wedding she changed her mind and tried to escape from her husband and return to her family. At her grandparents' home it was agreed that she should be sent to her father, but on the way there she deliberately missed the ship and went instead to Constantinople, setting out on the first stage of her many world travels. On this journey Blavatsky was probably in contact with a family friend, Prince Alexander Golitsyn, a Freemason and student of occultism who had encouraged her to pursue her desire for this secret knowledge and to travel the world in search of it.¹³ He probably also arranged for her to meet the Russian traveller Countess Kisselev in Constantinople.¹⁴ Together they appear to have travelled in Turkey, Egypt and Greece, continuing on to France and then to London.¹⁵

On this visit to London the spiritual search of the now twenty-year-old Blavatsky reached a critical stage. She felt she was getting nowhere in her quest for occult knowledge, she could not make sense of her own purpose in life, and was ready to put an end to it by drowning herself in the Thames. But shortly after this crisis, she wrote in her diary that she had finally met in the flesh a man she had often seen in visions, an Indian prince – the person she later calls Master 'M' or Morya – who told her that he had a great task for her and that if she agreed to cooperate with him, she would have to spend several years in Tibet in preparation and training.

¹² Cf. Murphet 1988: 14ff.

¹³ Cf. Murphet 1988: 26; Cranston 1993: 35.

¹⁴ Cf. Murphet 1988: 26.

¹⁵ Cf. Murphet 1988: 29f; Cranston 1993: 44.

From this meeting with her mysterious mentor, Blavatsky appears to have received encouragement to continue her world travels in search of occult knowledge from various groups that she believed held this knowledge. She reputedly went to North, Central, and South America, as well as the West Indies, after which she embarked with a small travelling party for India in an attempt to visit M, arriving sometime in 1852.¹⁶ During the following years she travelled between India and Europe and attempted to enter Tibet twice, apparently without success. In the following years she continued her journeys, interspersed with short stays with her family in Russia, and travelled in the Caucasus, Balkans, Europe, Egypt and the Middle East, until 1873 when she received word from Master M that her work was finally to begin.¹⁷

5.2.2 Theosophical beginnings

Blavatsky's travels and the beginning of what she perceived as her public work took place whilst the opposing factions endorsing Darwin's evolutionary theory on the one hand (*On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859), and Spiritualism on the other, were competing for support and authority (the first Spiritualist phenomena occurred in 1848 in Rochester, New York). It has been noted by several scholars how the public frenzy for Spiritualism, the occult and various esoteric interpretations of Christianity in this period relate to the rise of a materialistic, science-based philosophy in the wake of Darwin's theory in combination with a failure of the existing churches to adequately respond to these new ideas.¹⁸

The new, increasingly literate and socially engaged public of the middle classes¹⁹ was in need of a belief system that would assure them that their souls had not suddenly vanished with the emergence of the evolutionary theory. They craved a faith and a creed that could stand up to the soulless materialism on its own terms, i.e. by providing solid 'scientific' evidence for the existence of life after death.²⁰ While its supporters currently form a

¹⁶ Cf. Cranston 1993: xiii, xiv; Murphet 1988: 32f. Maria Carlson for one considers it almost impossible that Blavatsky travelled to India and the Americas prior to 1873. (Cf. Carlson 1993: 39)

¹⁷ Cf. Cranston 1993: xiv; Murphet 1988: 65.

¹⁸ Cf. Morrisson 2008: 4; Dixon 2001: 19f; Rosenthal 1997: 7ff.

¹⁹ Cf. Morrisson 2008: 4.

²⁰ On the effort of occult groups to legitimise their claims to knowledge, see Morrisson 2008: 5, drawing on sociological and social anthropological studies by Hess (1993), Wallis (1985) and Gieryn (1983).

negligible number, Spiritualism in the late nineteenth century really was a mass movement, “soaring into the millions” according to a recent study.²¹

Spiritualism as a movement took its impetus from these needs and provided mediums, séances and spectres for the darkened salons. A number of serious investigators believed, in principle, in the reality of spiritualistic phenomena – i.e. that the ghost-form of the departed could be summoned through a person acting as medium, and conversation could be had in this way with people who had died and were now reporting back from the other side, thereby proving the existence of an afterlife. Such people made it their mission to subject these phenomena to thorough examination to ensure there was no fraud involved, and to publish the findings as counterweight to the materialists.

In the early part of her career, Blavatsky was firmly allied with the Spiritualists and supported their claims against the Darwinians, although she neither agreed with the Spiritualist methods nor believed in their explanations of the phenomena. But she later explained that she had received instructions from Master M to go to New York and to support the Spiritualists by defending the possibility of genuine spiritualistic phenomena, and so she left for America in 1873.

In America Blavatsky encountered several of her future co-workers, the most significant being the two male co-founders of the Theosophical Society. In 1874 she met Col. Henry Steel Olcott, former army special investigator, then barrister and journalist for the New York daily newspaper *The Sun*. H. S. Olcott was a practical and rational man but became instantly fascinated by Blavatsky’s person and unusual abilities, and the two became great ‘chums’, as they liked to call themselves. Soon after they moved into a shared suite of rooms in order to better continue their journalistic work in the spiritualist cause.

In mid-1875, Irish-born lawyer William Quan Judge met the pair in New York. After a private lecture on ancient occult geometry held at Blavatsky’s house with other friends present, Olcott suggested that they form a society for the study of such topics. On 17 November 1875 the Theosophical Society (or TS) was officially founded, with H. S. Olcott as President and H. P. Blavatsky as corresponding secretary. The objectives of the TS were:

First. – To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

Second. – To promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literatures, religions and

²¹ Carlson 1997: 136.

sciences.

Third. – A third object – pursued by a portion only of the members of the Society – is to investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers of man.²²

The TS did not require members to subscribe to any of the ideas that the Society promoted. The name was decided by consultation with a dictionary, but the founders decided that Theosophy, meaning ‘divine wisdom’, or ‘knowledge of the divine’, was a suitable name for the new movement concerned with an all-embracing approach to the study of religious beliefs and practices. The term also had connotations to Neoplatonism and Renaissance esoteric philosophy, both of which to a large extent had influenced Blavatsky’s early thinking.

In the period immediately after its foundation, the Theosophical Society remained largely inactive while Blavatsky and Olcott worked at their journalistic efforts. In 1875 Blavatsky began writing her first major work, *Isis Unveiled*²³, much of which she claimed was produced by copying what she saw clairvoyantly from material shown to her by the Masters. They directly wrote other parts of it by taking possession of her body and writing through her physical instrument. Her account of the writing process was supported by Olcott’s record of the process in his *Old Diary Leaves*.²⁴ (For further details of the writing process, see the section below on Blavatsky’s experiences.) The final book was published in two volumes in 1877, a total of 1200 pages of small print, on the recommendation of consultant Prof. Alexander Wilder that:

the manuscript was the product of great research, and that so far as related to current thinking, there was a revolution in it, but I added that I deemed it too long for remunerative publishing.²⁵

However, when the first edition of one thousand copies sold out in ten days, more printings were commenced.²⁶ The book has been continually in print since then.

Isis Unveiled was written as a weapon against materialism and beyond the dictates of traditional religion,

to such as are willing to accept truth wherever it may be found and to defend it, even looking popular prejudice straight in the face. It is an attempt to aid the student to detect the vital principles which underlie the philosophical systems of old (...) a plea

²² Blavatsky 2002 [1889]: 371. ‘Aryan’ is used here in the sense of pertaining to early Indian culture.

²³ Cf. Cranston 1993: 153.

²⁴ Olcott 1895, Chapter XIII.

²⁵ Wilder 2009 [1908]: 555.

²⁶ Cf. Cranston 1993: 160.

for the recognition of the Hermetic philosophy, the ancient universal Wisdom Religion, as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology.²⁷

This dedication immediately identifies the author's attempts to address the spiritual insecurity between Darwin and a weak Christian faith, with its promise of a "key to the Absolute in science and theology". And along with the expected criticism (Blavatsky concluded the original Preface with the gladiator's hail, *Moriturus te salutat*), the book also received praise from qualified reviewers and major newspapers in America and England.²⁸ Intellectuals such as Alfred Russell Wallace and Herbert Spencer read it and commented that they found in it much of "the greatest value" and "beautiful and new original ideas".²⁹

After the publication of her first major work, Blavatsky was keen to become involved more actively in India, which she admired for its religious heritage and considered to be her spiritual home. In 1878 an opportunity arose to collaborate with a native Indian organisation which at first seemed to agree with the aims of the TS, and Blavatsky and Olcott made ready to move to India and set up the headquarters of the TS closer to the source of its life and origin, i.e. the Tibetan Masters.

After correspondence between Blavatsky and the president of the Bombay Arya Samaj, it was agreed and voted that the two organisations should be united. In May of 1878 the TS was briefly renamed 'The Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj'.³⁰ Soon after, however, Blavatsky and Olcott received a copy of Dayanand Sarasvati's manifesto for the Arya Samaj, mentioned in Chapter 3, and they realised immediately that the TS could not agree with the sectarian Arya Samaj. Sarasvati himself was also strongly opposed to Olcott's interest in the plight of the Buddhists in Sri Lanka, who in his eyes "followed false religions".³¹

In spite of this great disappointment, Blavatsky and Olcott left for India and arrived in Bombay in February 1879. They set to work immediately, although they were harassed by the British Secret Service who suspected Blavatsky of being a Russian spy, and even more so by Christian missionaries. The latter were furious that two Westerners should come and stir up in the natives an appreciation of their own traditions, in opposition to their tireless

²⁷ Isis 1: xv, xvii.

²⁸ Cf. Cranston 1993: 161.

²⁹ Cranston 1993: 160, 162; *The Theosophist*, April 1906: 559.

³⁰ Cf. Cranston 1993: 182f.

³¹ Olcott 1895: 1: 405.

efforts to convert them to Christianity.³² The journal *The Theosophist* began issues in October 1879 with Blavatsky as editor and main contributor, and soon gained an international readership.³³ It is still in print and currently published by the Theosophical Society at Adyar.

In 1880 Blavatsky and Olcott were finally able to visit Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, after a number of invitations. Missionaries in Sri Lanka were pressing the local Buddhists to convert to Christianity, and Blavatsky and Olcott supported the Buddhist side, helped by a Singhalese preacher who distributed passages of *Isis Unveiled* among his followers to inspire confidence in the Buddhist way and help produce resistance to the Christian missionaries' measures. On this occasion both Blavatsky and Olcott formally took *pansil* (i.e. promising adherence to the Five Precepts of a lay Buddhist), and they helped to establish several branches of the TS in Sri Lanka. Many locals joined the society, among them the young Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), who later became a significant Buddhist teacher in his own right.

After Sri Lanka, the two 'chums' Blavatsky and Olcott travelled further in India, discussing with religious and political figures, lecturing on Theosophy and making new acquaintances. During this period their friend and supporter Alfred P. Sinnett, editor of the leading newspaper of the British colonial government, *The Pioneer*, published two books on Theosophy, *The Occult World*³⁴ and *Esoteric Buddhism*.³⁵ The books were based partly on letters he received from a source claiming to be Blavatsky's elusive Masters M and KH³⁶, with whom Blavatsky was still constantly in touch through telepathic communication and letters. Sinnett's two books became very popular in India and in Britain, introducing on a large scale the Western public to a theory of karma and reincarnation and instigating furious debate.

In India, the headquarters of the TS were moved in 1882 to Adyar near Madras, now Chennai in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Here, all the parties involved worked at full capacity, writing, lecturing, forming TS branches, corresponding with branches and

³² Cf. Cranston 1993: 203.

³³ Cf. Cranston 1993: 204.

³⁴ Sinnett 1881.

³⁵ Sinnett 1884 [1883].

³⁶ Cf. Cranston 1993: 228. While many critics then and now presume that Blavatsky herself was the author of these letters, it has not been conclusively proven despite several examinations. The letters are currently held in the Manuscripts department of the British Library. The content of the letters to Sinnett was published in 1923, with a subsequent illustrated edition in 1926 (Trevor Barker 1926 [1923]).

associates in Europe and America and receiving visitors for discussions on religion and philosophy.³⁷

5.2.3 The Coulomb affair and Blavatsky's final years

Sinnett's book *The Occult World* contained descriptions of extraordinary psychic 'phenomena' that Blavatsky produced in India. This caught the attention of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR, newly established in 1882) and caused them to send a formal investigator to Adyar. At the same time, Blavatsky and Olcott had arranged a journey to Europe because Blavatsky wanted to visit the London lodge of the TS, and Olcott was to meet with the British government to secure official religious freedom on behalf of the Sri Lankan Buddhists.³⁸

While they were gone, the SPR investigator arrived at the Indian headquarters of the TS and began inquiring about Blavatsky's practices in the production of her 'phenomena'. He found two very talkative allies in the persons of the Adyar housekeeper and his wife, the Coulombs, whom Blavatsky knew from her early travels and had employed when they struggled financially.³⁹ The Coulombs in detail informed the young SPR investigator, Dr Richard Hodgson, about what they claimed were entirely fraudulent methods by which Blavatsky produced her so-called phenomena. In particular, they claimed that she had herself forged the letters from the Himalayan Masters M and KH. The statements of the Coulombs were published widely in Indian newspapers in late 1884 (though first, not surprisingly, in the *Madras Christian College Magazine*)⁴⁰ along with Dr Hodgson's report for the SPR in 1885.⁴¹

The effect of what appeared to be an unmistakeable exposure of Blavatsky as an ingenious fraud was shattering; her reputation and that of the TS were ruined, and many members resigned in disgust. Blavatsky was devastated that what she considered to be her life's mission had been ruined by two people she had trusted, and as soon as she came to know of the SPR report, she resigned from the TS in an effort to save the reputation of the

³⁷ Cf. Cranston 1993: 239.

³⁸ Cf. Cranston 1993: 242f; Olcott 1904: 112ff.

³⁹ Cf. Cranston 1993: 266.

⁴⁰ Cf. Cranston 1993: 262.

⁴¹ Cf. Cranston 1993: 265.

Society by removing her name from it.⁴² Nevertheless, the so-called “Coulomb Affair” did indelibly stain both the TS and Blavatsky’s name.

Considering the effect Hodgson’s report had on the Theosophical Society, it is remarkable that it took the SPR over a century to review the Hodgson report, and for an objective investigator to go through the evidence assembled by Hodgson against Blavatsky. This impartial examiner was Dr Vernon Harrison, handwriting and forgery expert and former Research Manager of the documental security and bank note printing agency Thomas de la Rue. The SPR retracted their charges of fraudulent behaviour against Blavatsky in 1963⁴³, but the report was not re-examined until the 1980s. The results of the re-examination were published in the SPR journal in 1986, concluding that Hodgson’s report was based largely on conjecture and was highly biased against Blavatsky, disregarding contrary evidence and drawing unsubstantiated conclusions in her disfavour.⁴⁴ Among other things it appears that the Coulomb couple had been bribed by a local missionary organisation to undermine the credibility of Blavatsky and the TS. In Harrison’s verdict, by modern standards the report is “a highly partisan document forfeiting all claim to scientific impartiality”, and he adds, “I cannot exonerate the SPR committee from blame for publishing this thoroughly bad report.”⁴⁵

After this crisis, her health regularly failing, Blavatsky decided to return to Europe. She left India for the last time in March 1885. The final years of her life were spent mainly in writing her second major work, *The Secret Doctrine*, but she also established a new TS lodge in London, as well as the Esoteric Section of the TS where advanced members of the Society received private spiritual instruction from her. She also founded a new journal, *Lucifer*, in which support for the TS could be published until *The Secret Doctrine* was ready for publication.⁴⁶ The name of the journal was chosen in typical Blavatsky style, to tease traditional Christian believers whose notion of a personal devil she found utterly ridiculous, and to reclaim what she regarded as the original meaning of the person *lucifer* – a lightbringer who in Christian minds had become a figure of evil. Blavatsky may have seen herself in the same position, especially since the publication of the Hodgson report.

⁴² Cf. Cranston 1993: 264.

⁴³ Cf. Sellon 1987: 246.

⁴⁴ Cf. Harrison 1986.

⁴⁵ Harrison 1986: 286.

⁴⁶ Cf. Cranston 1993: 323f.

In 1887 the manuscript of *The Secret Doctrine* was ready for editing; the first volume was published in October 1888, the second in January 1889. The full title reads: *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*. Volume 1 is *Cosmogenesis* and Volume 2, *Anthropogenesis*. Like *Isis Unveiled*, the first volume of *The Secret Doctrine* quickly sold out and was reprinted. In 1889 Blavatsky wrote both the main devotional work of Theosophy, *The Voice of the Silence*, and *The Key to Theosophy*, a textbook style introduction of questions and answers. The former had been endorsed by D. T. Suzuki⁴⁷, and the 1989 centenary edition was prefaced by the Dalai Lama who appreciated that the book had brought many people to the Buddhist way.⁴⁸ These works drew positive attention to the Theosophical movement, which began to expand again.⁴⁹

But Blavatsky's health was constantly breaking down, and the extra stress of the Coulomb affair, and her fear that its accusations might put an end to the Theosophical Society, did not steady her condition. She passed away in the house of her friend and pupil Annie Besant in London on 8 May 1891, and her body was cremated in Woking on 10 May.⁵⁰

Even this final event of her life shows Blavatsky's determination to do things her own way, and demonstrates how the early Theosophists were frontrunners not only in matters of belief, but in practice as well. Cremation was highly uncommon in the West at this time, as most Christians believed that people would benefit on the Day of Judgment if they had a whole body in which to rise at the call of Christ. Theosophists, following the Indian custom, held that the spiritual essence of a deceased human was released quicker and more completely into the afterlife through cremation.

An acquaintance of H. S. Olcott, Julius de Palm, was the first person to be cremated in America in 1876 in a procedure and ceremony organised by Olcott under the request from the deceased that he "should perform the last offices in a fashion that would illustrate the Eastern notions of death and immortality".⁵¹ Olcott was an active campaigner for the New York Cremation Society, which advocated the use of cremation on hygienic grounds. Woking Crematorium in Britain, where Blavatsky was cremated, opened in 1878 as the

⁴⁷ Cf. Cranston 1993: 84.

⁴⁸ Cf. Blavatsky 1989 [1889]: *Preface*.

⁴⁹ Cf. Cranston 1993: 393.

⁵⁰ Cf. Cranston 1993: 407, 409.

⁵¹ Olcott 1895: 1:150.

first official crematorium in Britain, and the first official cremation took place there in 1885.⁵²

In this section I have given a summary of the life of H. P. Blavatsky with the aim of showing her movements around the world, the organisational activities she initiated, and the writing she undertook to produce. All done, as far as she was concerned, on orders from her Master M in the battle against an emerging materialism. In the following section I shall present in more detail her unusual religious experiences and their relation to the different religious contexts in which she worked.

5.3 Blavatsky's extraordinary experiences

In this section I present some examples of Blavatsky's religious experiences. As mentioned in Chapter 2, under the heading of 'religious experience' I consider what in Blavatsky's case are perhaps better termed 'supernatural' or 'psychic' experiences, as in her case they are often incidents of telepathy and clairvoyance and described as such in the contemporary sources. However, Blavatsky considered these experiences to be an integral part of our human potential, and thus it would be inappropriate to term them 'supernatural'. For the purposes of this study, such experiences along with more traditionally conceived religious experiences (e.g. Ramakrishna's ecstatic vision of Kali) are characterised by similar features, and as far as they appear to the experiencer to clearly and overwhelmingly penetrate the ordinary physical reality and are experienced and/or interpreted within a religious/spiritual framework, I shall treat both kinds of experience as analogous.

In Blavatsky's case I have chosen to interpret her descriptions of extraordinary experiences, e.g. her claims and the claims of others that she was able to produce 'phenomena', to see texts clairvoyantly that were located miles away, and to communicate telepathically with her Indian teachers, on the basis of her belief in the reality of these events and phenomena, and that she in turn based her enormous body of teaching on these as if they were real. In consequence they are indispensable to an understanding of Blavatsky's teachings in the setting in which she wanted them to be seen.

⁵² Cf. Olcott 1895: 1:150ff. Old Diary leaves; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woking_Crematorium/ (Retrieved 7 Dec 2011); Cremation Society of Great Britain <http://www.srgw.demon.co.uk/CremSoc/History/HistSocy.html/> (Retrieved 7 Dec 2011).

This approach is an attempt, not only to circumvent the problem of assessing whether or not such experiences and events took place or are even possible, but also to enable readers of Blavatsky's work to see her teachings in the context of the mental world she inhabited. This is a world in which such events and experiences are integral and coherent. In order to emphasise this perspective, I shall not consider the possibility that Blavatsky was merely a fame-seeking fraud who consciously fabricated her own background and told wild stories in order to attract interest and notoriety. Such characterisations are not unusual even in recent writings about Blavatsky⁵³, but like the deifying biographies written by Theosophists, this position makes too many presumptions about the circumstances of the production of Blavatsky's work. It does not engage seriously with the ideas contained in her writing and is therefore unhelpful in understanding this difficult material.

I therefore propose that a middle position of reading Blavatsky's life and experiences as presented by herself and her followers gives the best setting for understanding her teaching as she wanted it to be understood. We are not required to believe in the reality of clairvoyance, mysterious Himalayan supermen, or the summoning or materialisation of letters, jewellery, cups and saucers out of the blue, except as ideas that play a part and fit into Blavatsky's eclectic system of thought.

Blavatsky is not usually regarded as a 'mystic' in a tradition of either Western or Eastern origin, although there is grounds for an argument in support of it due to her strong attachment to the inner life as she experienced it, and the way in which she lived her life completely according to the inner guidance she received through her visions and the communications with her Masters. In her early career she was clearly influenced by the Hebrew mystical system of the Kabbalah. Both *Isis Unveiled* and the later *Secret Doctrine* employ Kabbalistic ideas and terminology, e.g. the divine ineffable is called 'Ain Soph', and elements of the Tree of Life from the *Zohar* (a central book in the Kabbalistic tradition) are displayed as a diagram for understanding the creation of the world and the higher realms of being.⁵⁴ The article on Blavatsky in Mircea Eliade's multivolume *Encyclopedia of Religion* only mentions her childhood displays of "paranormal powers"⁵⁵,

⁵³ See, for example, Edelstein 2006; Carlson 1993; Washington 1993.

⁵⁴ See, for example, the inset diagram between pp. 264-265 in *Isis Unveiled* vol. 2; also chapters 5 and 13 of the book.

⁵⁵ Sellon 1987: 245.

and the fourth edition of *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* notes her writing and organising activities but omits the experiential motivation for her work.⁵⁶

In the following I begin with a discussion of Blavatsky's religious character, based on accounts of her early experiences as a child and young adult, and continue with a description of the experiences that shaped her sense of mission and directed her activity during the rest of her life. This includes some examples of her 'phenomena', or the displays of psychic ability that for better or worse marked Blavatsky's career. I finish this section with a short discussion of Blavatsky's acquaintance with different major faith traditions.

5.3.1 *Strange experiences in youth and early adulthood*

In journals and memoirs, Blavatsky's close relatives remark that already as a child she was unlike other people. She claimed to hear objects, rocks, plants and animals speaking to her, and treated things as if they were imbued with life. She also had a strong feeling of being watched over by the kindly mysterious figure that she later came to identify as Master M, who on several occasions intervened to save her from harm. She was fond of telling stories and could hold children and adults spellbound with her vivid imagination, often relating elaborate accounts of events she claimed to have been told of by animals or nature spirits.⁵⁷ Both the receptivity to unusual impressions and the fondness for relating them to eager listeners followed Blavatsky into adulthood and became trademarks of her later career and reputation.

Blavatsky's first travels, after her unsuccessful marriage, were undertaken with the express purpose of encountering spiritual and magical traditions that she had read about in her grandfather's library. She wanted to experience the practices of these traditions at first hand.⁵⁸ In her occult activities, as in her fierce defence of the Masters and of the Theosophical teachings, she was constantly emphasising the lived, practical aspect of faith over any merely intellectual assent:

Book learning (...) will always prove insufficient (...) unless supported by personal experience and practice.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Cf. Ellwood 1998: 1640.

⁵⁷ Cf. Cranston 1993: 29f; Sinnett 1886, 28ff, 37, 40.

⁵⁸ Cf. Cranston 1993: 41.

⁵⁹ Cranston 1993: 136ff.

When asked what set apart a Theosophist from the average Christian, she responded:

*We act, instead of talking.*⁶⁰

When she returned home, her relatives were struck by the increase in strange phenomena that occurred spontaneously around the young woman as she experimented with what she had learned.⁶¹ To give some examples, they relate that musical bells would sound in the air with no instruments around, the furniture would move, rearrange itself and change density before people's eyes, and raps and knocks would sound from various objects.⁶²

Furniture making noises and moving about was also a phenomenon known from Spiritualist circles, where it was explained as effects of the spirits of the departed. Similarly, the vaporous forms produced by mediums at séances were believed to be departed acquaintances of the sitters returned with greetings from beyond the grave. Blavatsky demonstrated in her home, and in America at the beginning of her stay there, that she could actively produce at will the same effects as the passive mediums from whom these phenomena emerged.⁶³

As stated above, she did not agree with the Spiritualist explanation, but because Spiritualism was so fashionable that it had even society people discussing the possibility of non-physical phenomena, Blavatsky found that it was a useful medium for her own work.⁶⁴ For example, after her meeting with H. S. Olcott, a believer in the reality of Spiritualistic phenomena, she taught him about occultism through the agency of what he believed was the disincarnate spirit of the buccaneer Sir Henry Morgan whose appearance she made visible before Olcott.⁶⁵ When Olcott was later able to understand Blavatsky's own explanation for the phenomenon, she told him that she had been instructed by a Master to teach Olcott about occultism. Since he was unfamiliar with the Masters' methods of communication, but open to Spiritualist explanations, she had been ordered to let him believe he was being instructed through her mediumship.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Blavatsky 2002: 66; italics in original.

⁶¹ Cf. Cranston 1993: 65f.

⁶² Cf. Cranston 1993: 67.

⁶³ Cf. Olcott 1895: 10.

⁶⁴ Cf. Olcott 1895: 8.

⁶⁵ Cf. Olcott 1895: 11f.

⁶⁶ Cf. Olcott 1895: 10f.

In another instance that is famous in Theosophical lore, Blavatsky interfered at a séance with Mrs. Holmes, a renowned American medium, and produced various phenomena through the latter, “helped by M. and his *power*”:⁶⁷

I had to keep alive the reality, the genuineness and *possibility* of such phenomena, in the hearts of those who from Materialists had turned Spiritualists, but now, owing to the exposure of several mediums, fell back again, returned to their scepticism. This is why (...) I went to the Holmeses. (...) She [Mrs. Holmes, through whom the ghostly persons appeared] was terribly frightened herself, for she knew that *this once* the apparition was real.⁶⁸

This passage again emphasises Blavatsky’s conviction that Spiritualism, although wrong in its explanations of phenomena, was the most powerful available resource in the fight to establish the fact of a supernatural reality in her cultural context.

Olcott’s six volumes of *Old Diary Leaves* offer plenty of examples of the strange things that could be expected to occur in the vicinity of Blavatsky in her adult life. She soon stopped producing phenomena for visitors because she did not approve of people coming just out of curiosity without being interested in the teaching that the phenomena were merely intended to illustrate and support. In common with esoteric Buddhist traditions, Blavatsky held that the *siddhi*, a Sanskrit term for spiritual powers, to perform phenomena came with natural spiritual development (for details, see the section below, *Blavatsky’s view of perception and its role in spirituality*), but these abilities were only a side-effect of a high degree of development and must never be exploited for their own sake. Moreover, a true spiritually advanced person would never want to use them, or even be interested in seeing them demonstrated, for anything other than a higher spiritual purpose.⁶⁹

Thus, if people were interested in the theory behind the practice, Blavatsky would use the powers to illustrate, as she did when instructing Olcott, but otherwise their use was in vain.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, she offered many random displays of these powers and Olcott complained that she often exhausted herself by performing them before unimportant people, when she might as well have done it before a prominent scientist, thereby converting him away from materialism and to the cause of the Theosophists.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Olcott 1895: 14; italics in original.

⁶⁸ Olcott 1895: 14; italics in original.

⁶⁹ Cf. Olcott 1895: 305f.

⁷⁰ Cf. Cranston 1993: 324f, from *Lucifer*, February 1888.

⁷¹ Cf. Olcott 1895: 49, 257f.

5.3.2 *The circumstances of Blavatsky's writing process*

Among the many strange occurrences related in the Theosophical literature, Blavatsky specialised in two varieties of unusual phenomena: the materialisation of objects, including letters, and the writing of books without physical access to reference materials. In the following I shall give an account of how Blavatsky and Olcott, who shared a desk during the writing of *Isis Unveiled*, describe the writing process. While this process seems fantastic, it fits in Blavatsky's overall worldview, and while her associates were certainly puzzled both by the incidents occurring around the production of the book, and by the contents and form of it, they accepted her explanations.

H. S. Olcott, W. Q. Judge, Alexander Wilder and others helped assemble the manuscripts for the two volumes of *Isis Unveiled*⁷², and other accounts exist from various people who witnessed unusual things during the writing process. Firstly, Olcott described the look of Blavatsky as she was composing:

To watch her at work was a rare and never-to-be-forgotten experience. We sat at opposite sides of one big table usually, and I could see her every movement. Her pen would fly over the page, when she would suddenly stop, look out into space with the vacant eye of the clairvoyant seer, shorten her vision as though to look at something held invisibly in the air before her, and begin copying on her paper what she saw.⁷³

Blavatsky's own explanation was the following:

I live in a kind of permanent enchantment, a life of visions and sights, with open eyes, and no chance whatever to deceive my senses! (...) For several years, in order not to forget what I have learned elsewhere, I have been made to have permanently before my eyes all that I need to see. Thus, night and day, the images of the past are ever marshalled before my inner eye. Slowly, and gliding silently like images in an enchanted panorama, centuries after centuries appear before me (...) and I am made to connect these epochs with certain historical events, and I *know* there can be no mistake.⁷⁴

Why should I be praised for [writing *Isis Unveiled*]? Whenever I am *told* to write, I sit down and obey (...) Why? Because *somebody who knows all* dictates to me. My *Master*, and occasionally others whom I knew on my travels years ago. Please do not imagine that I have lost my senses. (...) [W]hen I write upon a subject I know little or nothing of, I address myself to *them*, and one of them inspires me, *i.e.*, he allows me to simply copy what I write from manuscripts, and even printed matter that pass before my eyes, in the air, during which process I have never been *unconscious* one single instant.⁷⁵

⁷² Cf. Olcott 1895: 206.

⁷³ Olcott 1895: 208f.

⁷⁴ Sinnett 1886: 207.

⁷⁵ Olcott 1895: 213f.; cf. Cranston 1993: 158f; italics in original.

Prof. Hiram Corson of Cornell University, with whom Blavatsky was staying late in 1875 while she was writing *Isis Unveiled*, commented on the mysteriously acquired quotations:⁷⁶

She herself told me that she wrote them down as they appeared in her eyes on another plane of objective existence, that she clearly saw the page of the book, and the quotation she needed, and simply translated what she saw in English. (...) The hundreds of books she quoted were certainly not in my library, many of them not in America, some of them were very rare and difficult to get in Europe, and if her quotations were from memory, then it was an even more startling feat than writing them from the ether. The facts are marvellous, and the explanation must necessarily bewilder those whose consciousness is of a more ordinary type.⁷⁷

Olcott's observations of Blavatsky corroborated her own experience expressed in the second quote above, that she was manifesting different personalities during different phases of writing, and that the different personalities matched changes in her demeanour, temperament, style and fluency of writing.⁷⁸ It seemed to Olcott that the group of Masters whom Blavatsky had met in India and elsewhere would telepathically communicate with her to the extent of almost entirely possessing her body, writing, speaking and acting through her physical form, and sometimes also performing the most extraordinary phenomena through her.⁷⁹

For Blavatsky this process of inspiration and writing was merely an effect of her spiritual abilities, cultivated and refined by her Himalayan Masters, through which they remained in telepathic contact with her and could present images and ideas to her mind's eye while she was on another continent. In the section below dealing with perception in Blavatsky's theory of religion, these processes will be described in more detail.

5.3.3 *Blavatsky's experience of other religions*

In contrast to Ramakrishna, Blavatsky did not experiment with other religions in the same direct way, trying out their practices one by one until reaching a conclusion as to their truth or worth. Nevertheless, her theory of religion, which I present in the final section of this chapter, is essentially concerned with all religious traditions, and in the course of her writing she touched on almost all major faith traditions and offered interpretations of many of their doctrines and practices.

⁷⁶ Cf. Olcott 1895: 203.

⁷⁷ Lazenby 1910.

⁷⁸ Olcott 1895: 236ff.

⁷⁹ Olcott 1895: 244f.

Blavatsky's own religious background was that of an aristocratic Russian Orthodox Christian family, with some relatives who were very loyal to the Church, and others who were interested in occultism and esotericism. There are accounts from Blavatsky and her relatives and friends that, while her Christian relations were highly concerned about her interest in occultism and esotericism⁸⁰, she nevertheless consumed all the books on occultism in her grandparents' house that she could lay her hands on. As Maria Carlson has shown, 'Silver Age' Russia of the late nineteenth century was a time of great upheaval on almost all cultural fronts, the literary, dramatic, musical and religious. Interest in occultism and mysticism, inspired by the French occult revival, blossomed strongly along with these other movements.⁸¹ On this background we may therefore assume that Blavatsky was already as a young person conceiving of Christianity in the light of the early occult and alchemical studies she was undertaking with the help of her grandfather's library.

The first other religious tradition Blavatsky encountered was the Tibetan Gelugpa Buddhism of the Mongolian Kalmyk (or Oirat) community over which her father was made governor in the late 1830s.⁸² This early encounter is perhaps a reason for Blavatsky's later attachment to Tibet and the monastic tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. She appears to have been greatly impressed with the culture and pride of the Kalmyks, and her love of horseriding also stems from this period. The shamanistic traditions of the Caucasus also attracted her interest in early adulthood, before she travelled to the Middle East and became acquainted with Islam and Sufism in Turkey, and Hebrew Kabbalism in Egypt. Travels in India brought her into contact with the different branches of Hinduism as well as the Buddhisms of Sri Lanka and Tibet, in addition to Chinese philosophy. All of these traditions, along with ancient mystery traditions whose tenets she reconstructed from literature and her own clairvoyant investigations of the past (see the quote above regarding her writing process), became the material from which she drew inspiration and illustrations for the entire Theosophical worldview.

In this section I have presented some examples of the experiences Blavatsky had at various stages of her life and in different parts of the world where she travelled to learn about the occult practices of different cultures. I have argued for my use of these experiences, as they are related in Blavatsky's own writing and the writings of her family and followers, to form a basis for our understanding of her teaching on religion, in which they play a crucial

⁸⁰ Cranston 1993: 64.

⁸¹ Carlson 1993; Carlson 1997.

⁸² Cf. Cranston 1993: 15.

role. In particular I have focused on her encounters with, visions of and telepathic communication with the elusive Masters who in Blavatsky's account directed all her actions, ordered the founding of the Theosophical Society, and gave her all the information that she wrote down in book form in the two main works, *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*. In the following section I shall discuss Blavatsky's teachings on religion and on the relationships between the main religious traditions.

5.4 Blavatsky's teaching on religion

In this section I examine Blavatsky's teachings on religion. This examination has a dual purpose: (1) to identify elements of Blavatsky's teachings that may be characterised as pluralistic; and (2) to clarify how these pluralistic elements of her religious teaching were intended to work as an instrument in the battle of religion against materialism. Both these points will be discussed further in Chapter 7 in relation to Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and the more recent debate on religious pluralism. I shall first place Blavatsky's teaching in the context of her receiving public and their spiritual and intellectual concerns, building on some of the material presented in the previous section. I then summarise her basic teaching on religion based on an outline of her idea of an ancient wisdom religion.

Blavatsky's theory of religion is stated in the greatest detail in her two major works, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), although her teaching is summarised in other works, such as the slimmer introductory *Key to Theosophy* (1889), and various articles in her own journal and others. The essential elements of Blavatsky's Theosophical theory of religion are found already fully formed in *Isis Unveiled*, although *The Secret Doctrine* elaborates some points and corrects others. I have chosen to focus on the presentation given in *Isis Unveiled* because it is more concise and uses a more accessible vocabulary, whereas *The Secret Doctrine* employs mostly Vedantic and Buddhist terminology and focuses more on the details of her notion of creation and evolution, rather than giving an overview of the spiritual life of humanity, as found in *Isis*.

Blavatsky's first intention, as very openly stated in the subtitle of *Isis Unveiled*, was to provide "*A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*". While it seems a rather pompous claim, it is clear that such a key was precisely the desire

of the disillusioned and confused reading public who felt caught between Darwin's theory of evolution and the stagnant theology of the established churches.⁸³

Modern science, powerless to satisfy the aspirations of the race, makes the future a void, and bereaves man of hope. (...) The theology of Christendom has been rubbed threadbare by the most serious minds of the day. (...) Instead of expounding the rules of divine law and justice, it teaches but *itself*.⁸⁴

Blavatsky's purpose in writing was to present an argument for the existence of God and the immortality of the human spirit. In her Preface she further emphasised that her work was a response to this desire and to the dilemma of science and religion by saying that she studied the solution with some "Eastern adepts" who "showed us that by combining science with religion, the existence of God and the immortality of man's spirit may be demonstrated like a problem of Euclid".⁸⁵ Provided *Isis* lived up to its promises, Blavatsky would thereby solve the social spiritual crisis and set a solid foundation for the coming industrial age, giving the hope of firm logical proof of the immortality of the spirit and the existence of God, and relegating science to the secondary place as servant of the spiritual instead of being its competition.

5.4.1 Blavatsky's ancient wisdom religion

In her discussion of science and spirituality, Blavatsky often referred to Darwin and the evolutionary theory. But Blavatsky was not opposed to evolutionary ideas as such. In fact, she claimed evolution for her own cause, and in her interpretation evolution was still the process by which humanity advances to a better and more advanced state, which for Blavatsky meant a more integrated relation between the spiritual and other aspects of human nature. But *contra* Darwin, she denied that human evolution began in primitive forms and was at its current peak in her contemporaries. Blavatsky held that there was an ongoing spiritual evolution alongside the physical, aspects of which were not necessarily embodied physically.⁸⁶

At first sight it seems strange that Blavatsky should fight so violently against her contemporary scientists who proposed the evolutionary theory, whose purely physical details she largely agreed with. The shocking implication of Darwin's *Descent of Man*, that a superhumanity might evolve in the future, was not foreign to Blavatsky's beliefs. But her

⁸³ Cf. Goodrick-Clarke 2004: 1f; Washington 1993: 9.

⁸⁴ *Isis* 2: 639.

⁸⁵ *Isis* 1: xii.

⁸⁶ Cf. *Isis* 1: 31.

fundamental opposition to it stemmed from the fact that the purely materialistic ideas omitted any notion of a real spiritual human nature that was not dependent on the sudden, random appearance of man in the Darwinian tree of evolution. Blavatsky emphatically insisted on the priority of the spiritual reality and saw it as her foremost task to defend the reality of the spiritual before anything else.

The Darwinian theory was the target of so much of her polemic because it was a strong, well-founded and developed theory that held much attraction for the people Blavatsky was hoping to reach. She wanted to relieve their worries through the promotion of her own ideas and the presentation of her 'master-key to modern science and theology', offering the promise of proof of the immortality of the human spirit and of the existence of God through 'ancient wisdom'.

Her method was to refer to the past, in which she claimed there had existed a common tradition that she called 'the ancient wisdom religion'. In summary, Blavatsky's central ideas were the following:

- a.** *A global ancient wisdom tradition exists which unites science and religion.* As such, this 'ancient wisdom religion' will prove the immortality of the human spirit and the existence of God through the development of the higher senses, i.e. psychic abilities currently latent in the majority of humanity.
- b.** *All religions are based on the core teachings of this ancient wisdom, concealed in allegorical forms.* These core teachings may be discovered by correct interpretation of these remnants of myths, revealing the ancient fundamental religious, anthropological and cosmological knowledge. All truth in current religions is thus the spoils of the ancient teachings.
- c.** *Mystery schools have preserved the ancient teaching among their few initiates.* In all ages and countries this knowledge of the inner core meaning of the religions was taught in secret religious societies, such as the Greek mystery schools, where a small number of particularly pure and devoted initiates kept alive the teachings and handed them down to the next generations.
- d.** *Magic, also called occultism, is real and is the true science of religion.* The practical aspect of this ancient wisdom teaching is magic, which is also the occult 'science' by which the ancient wisdom is proven true. Magic in this context meant a manipulation of natural, psychological forces by the will, and also formed part of

the spiritual development of the initiates of the ancient wisdom religion. The magical techniques of the ancient teachings give dangerous occult powers over the forces of nature, including other people, and so are only taught to the most pure initiates.

e. *Initiates of the mysteries led the popular religion in allegorical forms.* In this ideal ancient setting, the priests of the popular religion were initiates of the mysteries of the ancient wisdom. They led the rest of the people in worship and devotion according to the allegorised religious truths in the form of myths concerning the lives of the gods. However, there have been initiates who were dissatisfied with the exclusive nature of this arrangement and who have sought to bring more of the teachings to the common people, for example Siddhartha Gautama and Jesus.

I have already pointed out how Blavatsky's constant emphasis on the *scientific* aspects of her ancient wisdom religion is a response to the general crisis brought on by the emerging industrial society, in which traditional religion was struggling to catch up with the progress of technological developments, and scientific theories began to be able to answer questions that previously belonged to the realm of the churches. However, the meaning of the word 'science' and questions of which methods and approaches qualified as scientific were fluid, especially in the beginning of the industrial era when Blavatsky was writing.

Blavatsky and her competitors boldly offered their own definitions of science in the promotion of their new knowledge in the public sphere. In this context, Blavatsky's frequent use of the notion of science in what is usually considered a treatise on religion is clearly a two-fold strategy. The work calls itself 'scientific' in order to appeal to rational consideration from her more intellectual readers, but equally seeks to define and reclaim the term 'science' from what she regarded as the materialistic natural science community.⁸⁷

It was also crucial for Blavatsky that the postulated common tradition was *ancient*, and it is constantly stressed that it is a tradition that dates back to "the hoariest antiquity".⁸⁸ This emphasis on age is possibly another parallel to the Darwin debate, since most people's awareness of the past had recently been dramatically expanded from the few thousand years of traditional biblical history to many millions.⁸⁹ In order to match, and outdo, this new materialistic perspective on human existence, Blavatsky firmly located her wisdom

⁸⁷ Cf. Owen 2004: 12.

⁸⁸ Isis 1: 625, and many similar expressions throughout the text.

⁸⁹ Cf. Burchfield 1998.

religion in an even more distant past. Drawing on Hindu and Buddhist ideas her cosmological calculations resulted in a cyclical reoccurrence of the universe in “Days of Brahma” separated by “Nights of Brahma”, of 4.32 billion years each.⁹⁰

The wisdom tradition, however, was not traced back quite so far, but remained within the scope of the present humanity. Nevertheless, because the teaching was as old as humanity itself, she held that “it is in the oldest texts – those least polluted by subsequent forgeries – that we have to look for the truth”.⁹¹ And the main text in *Isis Unveiled* begins with the following paragraph:

There exists somewhere in this wide world an old Book – so very old that our modern antiquarians might ponder over its pages an indefinite time, and still not quite agree as to the nature of the fabric upon which it is made.⁹²

This “very old Book” supposedly contained an account of the esoteric doctrine of creation, in which an emanation of the Divine Essence created and descended to the lower realms of existence before making its way back to the source, and in repeated outpourings gradually purified the material realms. This cyclically emanating process of spirit and matter, creation, purification and reabsorption lies at the heart of the secret mystery teachings that Blavatsky insisted were present in every culture in ancient and even pre-historic times.⁹³

As shown above, Blavatsky had stated at the beginning of *Isis Unveiled* that her doctrine advocated the ancient belief system through which humans may cultivate the latent ‘magical’ powers that we are endowed with by our nature as human beings.⁹⁴ And that through developing these powers, even in a minimal measure, it will become irreversibly obvious to practitioners that God exists. It is therefore necessary to mention Blavatsky’s concept of God and our relation to it as human beings.

Blavatsky’s concept of God draws mainly on Neoplatonic, Gnostic, Vedantic and Kabbalistic notions, in which the Divine is an impersonal omnipotent power which may be regarded from different aspects, e.g. in itself or in creation/emanation or in subtle activity through the operations of the natural world which is immersed in it, or “soaked through *by*, and *in*, the Deity”.⁹⁵ Blavatsky used the terms God and the Divine broadly to refer to the

⁹⁰ Isis 1: 32f.

⁹¹ Isis 1: 444.

⁹² Isis 1: 1.

⁹³ Cf. Isis 1: 1ff.

⁹⁴ Cf. Isis 1: 25.

⁹⁵ Blavatsky 2002: 67; italics in original.

force behind the universe – “the Divine Power which called into being all things, visible and invisible (...) of its majesty and boundless perfection we dare not even think”⁹⁶ – and to its manifestations along the cycles of involution and evolution.

Blavatsky’s cosmology is dualistic in the sense that the divine spirit and the matter through which it manifests itself during periods of activity are fundamentally different principles. During the “nights” or the “inhalation” part of the cyclical process of appearance and disappearance of the universe, the divine spiritual principle is truly hidden and unknowable. However, in manifestation the unknowable becomes knowable on every plane of being except the very highest, at which it remains a mystery to all but itself. The lower planes of being are related to this highest unknown principle in their very essence, being lower manifestations of the same high principle, but it is so far beyond the human capacity of understanding that it is irrelevant to any practical spiritual effort, according to Blavatsky.

The short version of her complex scheme of emanations and planes of consciousness is given at the opening of *Isis Unveiled*, where she states that a sophisticated understanding of God is not necessary in order to progress in the spiritual evolution, as long as one basic relationship is understood:

Nature is triune: there is a visible, objective nature; an objective, indwelling, energizing nature (...); and, above these two, spirit, source of all forces (...)
Man is also triune: he has his objective, physical body; his vitalizing (...) soul, the real man; and these two are brooded over and illuminated by the third – the sovereign, the immortal spirit.⁹⁷

The notion of a triune nature of man, God and the universe is obviously related to the Christian Trinity, the Hindu Trimurti and similar structures in other religions and philosophical systems, e.g. the anthropological teaching of St Paul, in which a human being is composed of spirit, soul and body. The notion of humanity as a microcosm of the greater cosmos belongs to the Hermetic philosophy and its maxim, ‘as above, so below’.

And with regard to God or the Divine Power:

It is enough for us to know that *It* exists and that *It* is all wise. Enough that in common with our fellow creatures we possess a spark of *Its* essence.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Isis 1: 29.

⁹⁷ Isis 2: 587f.

⁹⁸ Isis 1: 29; italics in original. Note the emphatic use of the neuter pronoun compared to the Christian use of the masculine in reference to God.

The notion of a spark of the divine essence being present as a basic element of human nature is characteristic of Gnosticism. These quotes illustrate the variety of influences that formed Blavatsky's worldview and the basis for the Theosophical teachings.

As human beings endowed with a part of the divine essence in the form of our spirit, which is immortal and eternal, the highest element of our nature⁹⁹, we can, through following the directions given in religious and philosophical schools, transform our entire human nature into a more spiritual nature, thereby realising our true human potential and attaining the eternal life of the spirit. In realising this divine spiritual essence of our human nature, we will by extrapolation know, in the sense of a profound realisation, that God as the source of it really exists.¹⁰⁰ This is the crux of Blavatsky's argument for the acceptance of the ancient mystery doctrines and their ability to shed light on the state of spiritual staleness in the world.

5.4.2 Blavatsky's view of perception and its role in spirituality

Blavatsky stated that "the Secret Doctrine or wisdom was identical in every country"¹⁰¹, and she wanted to prove this common underlying doctrine by showing how the same ideas emerge in ancient and more recent religions and philosophies. These comparisons occupy most of the pages in both major works.

Thus it is that all the religious monuments of old, in whatever land or climate, are the expression of the same identical thoughts, the key to which is in the esoteric doctrine (...) And the clergy of every nation, though practicing rites and ceremonies which may have differed externally, had evidently been initiated into the same traditional mysteries which were taught all over the world.¹⁰²

But at the same time there is a clear distinction between the esoteric truths of the ancient wisdom religion, which were the exclusive privilege of the mystery initiates, and the exoteric forms in which these truths were related to the rest of the different peoples of Earth.

The problem with this theory in relation to Blavatsky's desire to demonstrate her overall thesis and claim respect for the ancient wisdom tradition, is that in order to decode properly the allegories in the popular forms of religion, and understand their true references and meaning, one must be aware of the teachings contained in the mysteries.

⁹⁹ Cf. Isis 1: 12.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Isis 1: xii.

¹⁰¹ Isis 1: xiii.

¹⁰² Isis 1: 561.

Blavatsky, of course, claimed at the beginning of *Isis Unveiled* to have “a somewhat intimate acquaintance with Eastern adepts and study of their science”¹⁰³ and to have been taught the magical techniques that follow the secret instructions, the result of which she supposedly demonstrated in her phenomena. She was therefore uniquely privileged and spoke as an ‘initiate’, while her readers must remain content with her arguments and exoteric explanations.

The paradox of Blavatsky’s writing is her attempt to communicate the esoteric contents of the previously exoteric religious teachings. Whereas exoteric truths or information may be understood and processed rationally, she believed that a spiritual understanding was required to realise their meaning, to bring them alive, and to make them truly into those esoteric truths that transform the reader. And while Blavatsky claimed to have been trained in this spiritual hermeneutics during the course of her travels, it is not something that can be communicated to others through the pages of a book. However, she argued, through training in the inner, esoteric systems of thought, people might develop their higher senses and progress in spiritual development.

Blavatsky was sometimes ambiguous regarding the human capacity to comprehend God. In the beginning of *Isis Unveiled* she stated that God’s essential nature is not accessible by the investigation of our senses, and “can be studied only in the worlds called forth by His mighty FIAT”.¹⁰⁴ But, as shown above, this only applies to the highest non-manifested aspect of the divine, and she also held that this initial knowledge only refers to what can be grasped by our mundane, external senses. Once our higher senses are developed, and we begin to manifest the faculty of intuition, we are able to perceive the spiritual realm directly. We thus gain direct access to divine truth found in the noumenal realm of ideas.¹⁰⁵

She suggested that a different “faculty of perception is growing in man [i.e. humanity], enabling him to descry facts and truths even beyond our ordinary ken.”¹⁰⁶ The development of the intuition is therefore crucial, as it provides the epistemic ground for understanding esoteric teachings by “affording a criterion for ascertaining truth”.¹⁰⁷ It is also the answer to the human longing after deeper meaning:

¹⁰³ *Isis* 1: xii.

¹⁰⁴ *Isis* 1: 29.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Blavatsky 2002: 95.

¹⁰⁶ *Isis* 1: xi.

¹⁰⁷ *Isis* 1: xix.

this mysterious yearning after spiritual knowledge is inherent in every human being, and cannot have been given us utterly in vain.¹⁰⁸

The process of developing the intuition is partly within our control, and partly depends on our stage of spiritual development. Blavatsky operated with a notion of metempsychosis, which in *Isis Unveiled* involves souls pre-existing and having different conditioning prior to entering on the Earth-life. In her later writings, this idea is developed into a fully-fledged doctrine of reincarnation via progressively advanced psycho-physical vehicles on Earth. For the purpose of explaining the role of the development of the intuition in relation to human perception, however, we do not need to go further into the specifics of Blavatsky's evolving doctrine of reincarnation. Suffice it to say that some people are "ahead" of others on the path of spiritual development, but that the time will come for every individual when the path of progress becomes available to them.

The intuition is fully developed in what Blavatsky termed "adepts", i.e. people who have realised their spiritual essence in the lower nature, the mind, the personality and the body, and who control their entire being from a fully spiritual perspective. In this state spiritual perception is completely clear and accurate. This is the equivalent of perceiving the Platonic ideas, or the types of all things that exist. In her view this was possible for a living human being, although such a state of perfection is very rare, and people of this calibre have in fact completed the human evolution as such and have nothing further to learn from human incarnations. This is the state of the 'superhuman' in Blavatsky's understanding.

For people below this state of adeptship, whose intuition is still emerging, small flashes of truth are perceived but their meaning is confused in the physical brain and its vitalizing principle, which is the vehicle for perceptions of both the lower and higher senses. At this state of clairvoyance "the subject can get but glimpses of truth, through the veil which the physical nature imposes".¹⁰⁹ In this scheme the operation of the mind is limited by the physical instrument of the brain, and in all but the most advanced people, its capacity for perceiving higher, noumenal truths depends on the person's degree of union with the spirit.

Perceptions are experienced in the mind in a conditioned manner, "tinctured with the terrestrial perceptions of the objective world; the physical memory and fancy will be in the

¹⁰⁸ Isis 1: 64.

¹⁰⁹ Isis 2: 590.

way of clear vision.”¹¹⁰ Only in the most advanced can the spirit interact freely with the highest part of the intellectual understanding, providing direct vision of spiritual truth:

But the seer-adept knows how to suspend the mechanical action of the brain. His visions will be as clear as truth itself, uncolored and undistorted. (...) The seer can never take flickering shadows for realities, for his memory being as completely subjected to his will as the rest of the body, he receives impressions directly from his spirit.¹¹¹

For Blavatsky, the founders of the major religious traditions have been such seer-adepts who have seen the truth clearly and attempted to relate it to their surroundings. Their followers and interpreters were at best lesser clairvoyants, “who had glimpses of the truth, and fancied they had it all.”¹¹² In her view,

Such have failed to achieve the good they might have done and sought to do, because vanity has made them thrust their personality into such undue prominence as to interpose it between their believers and the *whole* truth that lay behind. The world needs no sectarian church, whether of Buddha, Jesus, Mahomet, Swedenborg, Calvin, or any other. There being but ONE Truth, man requires but one church – the Temple of God within us, walled in by matter but penetrable by any one who can find the way; the pure in heart see God.¹¹³

With these words we turn now to examine Blavatsky’s theory of the relationships between the major faith traditions.

5.4.3 The Theosophical theory of religion

On the basis of the model of human nature and spiritual development presented above, Blavatsky summarised her understanding of religion in the following manner:

Our examination of the multitudinous religious faiths that mankind, early and late, have professed, most assuredly indicates that they have all been derived from one primitive source. It would seem as if they were all but different modes of expressing the yearning of the imprisoned human soul for intercourse with supernal spheres. As the white ray of light is decomposed by the prism into the various colors of the solar spectrum, so the beam of divine truth, in passing through the three-sided prism of man’s nature, has been broken up into vari-colored fragments called *religions*. And, as the rays of the spectrum, by imperceptible shadings, merge into each other, so the great theologies that have appeared at different degrees of divergence from the original source, have been connected by minor schisms, schools, and off-shoots from the one side or the other. Combined, their aggregate represents one eternal truth; separate, they are but shades of human error and the signs of imperfection. (...) It but

¹¹⁰ Isis 2: 591.

¹¹¹ Isis 2: 590.

¹¹² Isis 2: 635.

¹¹³ Isis 2: 635.

needs the right perception of things objective to finally discover that the only world of reality is the subjective.¹¹⁴

To begin at the end of this quote, Blavatsky made it clear that she regarded the study or understanding of religion as essentially a hermeneutical task. In her view, the expressions of religion must never be taken at face value, but need to be set in their context before they will show their full meaning. The ‘subjective reality’ of the observer must be constructed by careful examination of the objective features of any religious phenomenon, and Blavatsky suggested that the purpose and meaning of the religious traditions as they appear in the world will become obvious by implication.

It is clear that for Blavatsky “religions” were different expressions of different human responses to a common spiritual yearning. With the image of white light being refracted through a prism into a spectrum of connected but different colours, she proposed that the different faiths, or the varied human responses to the spiritual yearning for divine truth, are fragmentary aspects of the truth. While they all embody parts of the great religious insights of humanity, they must be taken together to form the full picture.

This statement also explains Blavatsky’s original purpose in founding the Theosophical Society, as it was intended to be a forum for these kinds of investigations in particular, i.e. to study old and new faiths from home and abroad in order to compare elements of belief and practice, and to try to gather and discuss all the religious knowledge of humanity. It was done in the hope that people would see the truth of this approach, end sectarianism and begin to live their faith (of whatever persuasion) in relation to the main point of religion as Blavatsky saw it: to realise the existence of God and the immortality of the spirit, rather than cling to what she considered insignificant and dangerously divisive dogmas.

Blavatsky’s summary statement draws on her epistemological position that human nature is capable only of grasping incompletely divine truth directly, and that different people can understand different elements of the divine truth. On this view, the accumulated religious insight of all humanity is required in order to make known the full extent of the divine revelation, at least until people attain the stage of spiritual evolution where they are able to discover the subjective reality, i.e. God, for themselves. As I pointed out above, Blavatsky spoke as one who has risen to the position of being able to see a little further than most people, and who has had the privilege of being taught the magical techniques of spiritual transformation by some of the elusive adepts in the esoteric science. As such, she claimed

¹¹⁴ Isis 2: 639.

to have access to the level of intuitive insight into the real nature of things, and it is from this position that she delivered her teaching. In this perspective, religions are genuinely related in their innermost essence, but separated in the forms they have come to take due to the interpretations and misinterpretations in the developments that have followed their visionary founders' original teachings.

This understanding of religion forms the hermeneutical principle of Blavatsky's treatment of the world's religious traditions and it has been taken up by her followers, who in different ways attempted to apply this hermeneutic to the religions to which they had belonged prior to becoming Theosophists. They subsequently wrote interpretations of the doctrines and practices of the other major faith traditions, demonstrating how Blavatsky's model could be used to further an understanding of the function of religion and the role of the exoteric elements in reaching the esoteric or inner meaning of religious myths, teachings and rituals.

5.5 Conclusion

5.5.1 Blavatsky on religious experience, religion and science

Despite the usual characterisation of Blavatsky as a spiritual teacher, I have argued that the main concern in her public activities and writing was to influence the direction in which emerging scientific disciplines developed. Her books were, for the most part, arguments against contemporary scientists and historians and their limited point of view. In contrast to this, she tried to argue the case for an ancient tradition of wisdom teachings as the background of all later teaching in religion. She was urgently concerned that science was becoming a strictly materialistic institution, with the ultimate consequence of a complete neglect of the human spirit.

For Blavatsky, the prospect of materialism adopted as a popular ideology was a disaster for the future development of humanity. In her view, this development depended on a deep acknowledgement of the essential unity of the spiritual reality to which all human spirits belonged, and the brotherhood of all humans that this view entailed. Although she believed that the traditional religions lacked insight and were largely stuck in arguments about unimportant dogmas, they nevertheless took a stance for the existence of God and a spiritual reality.

However, Blavatsky felt that the Christian churches in the West had completely failed to provide a credible response to the rapid scientific and technological developments which seemed to imply that humans and society progressed rather well without considerations of God and spiritual things. As people drifted away from churches and found their moral supports in movements such as secularism, socialism and atheism, she feared that the belief in a human spirit with a shared origin in God would disappear with the inevitable result that human society would become entirely soulless. Even the good intentions of secularists and socialists had no ultimate basis if materialism became the reigning philosophy of the majority.

On this backdrop, Blavatsky proposed her teachings as a remedy against materialism and as a way of demonstrating that all the insights that science had come up with in recent years could be found in ancient religious and philosophical teachings from the various traditions of the world. She moreover argued that the religious traditions all contained a section of advanced instruction, in the form of esoteric schools, in which certain suitable people could learn occult methods for investigating the nature of the inner and outer world. These methods were infinitely more rich and precise than the empirical exercises of contemporary science, while being firmly based in a spiritual philosophy.

In fact, the premise of Blavatsky's occult science was precisely that the spirit in which all humans share is also part of the nature of the divine, and as such contains knowledge of the divine. Through occult training it is possible for serious students to gain glimpses of this spiritual realm and to perceive some ideas from the mind of God. For Blavatsky, this kind of insight was by definition true in the most objective sense, although she acknowledged that most people's vision of the spiritual truth was always veiled by their mental preconceptions, with the added difficulty of relating multi-faceted spiritual truths in plain human language.

5.5.2 The role of esotericism in Blavatsky's teachings

It is clear that Blavatsky considered the notion of the esoteric crucially important in matters of religion. For her, esotericism and the practical occult traditions, as expressed in different religious and philosophical traditions, provided precisely the missing link that could unite what she considered two falsely separated spheres of human activity, science and religion, for the immense benefit of both. She regarded the esoteric traditions of the world as the keepers of ancient and proven methods for individual spiritual progress, as well as social

and collective development which could be realised through a re-examination of ancient scriptures and practices.

In the context of this study it must be emphasised that for Blavatsky occultism and esoteric ideas were not merely exotic features intended to spice up her teachings and attract people to her Society, although it is often presented as such in unfavourable studies of her work. For Blavatsky, the esoteric methods of progress were essential means to cultivate an increasingly pure perception which would ultimately lead to an experience of the ultimate truth of the cosmos and of human potential. The only proof she could present in support of the veracity of her teachings was the progress happening through practice of these esoteric techniques, and thus it was crucial for her that people embrace them and try the techniques for themselves. She could promise no instant reward or security, except for the performance of phenomena (which were highly ambiguous), but could only encourage people to try the teachings and be persistent.

5.5.3 Orientalism and postcolonial critique in relation to Blavatsky's work

Like Vivekananda, Blavatsky was highly aware of her role in the public debate, and as a skilled performer she deliberately attuned herself to that role for maximum effect. As a Russian, she considered herself as a mediator of East and West by virtue of the vast country's location. In addition to dressing in strange Eastern-looking clothes, she often characterised herself as 'half-asiatic' with 'Mongol' features in order to emphasise this point and play on the popular image of the East as a place of mystery and exotic things. The New York flat nicknamed 'the Lamasery', in which she lived with Olcott around the time of the founding of the Theosophical Society, was also filled with 'Oriental' furniture, sculptures and knick-knacks. For example, they had a head of a lion and other stuffed animals, Buddha statues and prayer beads, not to mention the famous stuffed baboon. Olcott had dressed the animal in suit, tie and spectacles, and it carried a copy of *On the Origin of Species* and went by the name of 'Professor Fiske', a staunch defender of Darwinism.¹¹⁵ The frequent visitors to this curious habitation were overwhelmed with evidence that the household offered something unlike that found anywhere else.

Alongside this ironic self-representation, Blavatsky was aware of the negative side of the 'half-asiatic' identity of her person as well as the ideas she was advocating. It was impossible to deny the superiority with which many Westerners looked down upon not

¹¹⁵ Cf. Olcott 1895: 1: 421f. Though in general agreement with Darwin's theory of physical evolution, Blavatsky did not believe that humans were evolved from apes. She and Olcott ridiculed what they saw as the absurdity of such a claim by keeping this simian "Professor Fiske" in their flat.

only the religious and philosophical teachings, but the very people, of India and Asia in general. This prejudice caused problems for both the Theosophical Society and for Blavatsky's desire to appeal to a broader spectrum of people other than the progressive few who immediately had taken to her ideas and who found the 'Oriental' connection fascinating rather than ridiculous.

The biggest problem was that some people reacted against the prominent position of the Masters, who were native Indians. Eastern thought appreciated in books and discussion was one thing, but receiving instruction from natives in person, as Blavatsky supposedly did, was altogether different. Master Kuthumi addressed this question in his letters to A. P. Sinnett and questioned whether any Englishman would really let himself be guided by a "nigger".¹¹⁶ More visible natives were also prominent in the TS. Annie Besant presented Krishnamurti as the face of the Order of the Star in the East, which was not easy to accept for many members, and in Sri Lanka, Dharmapala was encouraged to speak publicly. This endorsement of Asians (and, indeed, women), positioning them at the head of organisations, educating them in their own traditions and encouraging them to rule themselves, was highly controversial at the time.

Finally, there is no doubt that Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society followed the popular habit of emphasising the religion of India as the most valuable asset of the country, and in this respect the TS was by no means an anti-colonial organisation, although many of its prominent members were actively involved in the Indian Home Rule movement. But at the same time, the Society was unique in its adoption of native Indian teachers as their semi-godly gurus, beginning the trend now so commonly found amongst Western 'spiritual seekers'. However, the greatest critical contribution of Blavatsky was her refusal to accept a separation of the realms of science and religion, which she believed were merely two approaches to the same human experience, and which could be understood through occult techniques.

In this chapter I have examined the life and work of H. P. Blavatsky, in order to show how her spiritual concerns informed her work, and how her thinking on religion became the accepted teaching of the Theosophical Society. I have argued first that Blavatsky is an important voice in the debate about experience-based religious alternatives in the context of the nineteenth century emergence of a materialistic science, because she claimed that the occult philosophy she had been taught possessed knowledge far superior to the science of

¹¹⁶ Cf. Dixon 2002: 26ff; Trevor-Barker 1926: 'Letter 5' from KH to Sinnett.

her time, due to its ability to explain the phenomena of the physical world as well as that of worlds beyond it.

I then showed how Blavatsky's understanding of the essence of religion, and the purpose and function of religious traditions, hinged on her theory of perception, which she developed in response to her own unusual experiences. Blavatsky's theory of religion is a hermeneutical approach to religious doctrine and practice that can be applied to individual traditions or to religion in general, under the perspective of her ancient wisdom religion as the source of all religious teaching in the world. The character of Blavatsky's theory of religion will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. Before this discussion, I shall examine in the following chapter how Annie Besant, Blavatsky's successor in the Theosophical Society, implemented her ideas, in particular the theory of religion, in her teaching and in organising the activities of the Theosophical Society.

6 Annie Besant

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I examine the life and work of Annie Besant (1847-1933), Blavatsky's successor in the Theosophical Society (TS). I shall focus on her developments of Blavatsky's teaching concerning the importance of a spiritual 'scientific' counterweight to materialism, the role of the different religious traditions, and a Theosophical interpretation of Christianity. I begin with a short presentation of the history of the TS after the death of Blavatsky, discussing briefly the unusual feature that the Society was founded and led by women at a time when female leadership was considered not only uncommon but almost unnatural. This section is followed by a short biography of Annie Besant and her path to the TS, a move that, although shocking to her earlier friends, does make sense when seen from the perspective of her later life. After breaking with the Christian church in early adulthood, she struggled to retrieve a form of the strong faith of her past that could support her mature knowledge and experience.

The next section discusses Besant's development of Blavatsky's religious teaching concerning the role and meaning of the different religious traditions in the world. The last section of this chapter is concerned with Besant's application of Blavatsky's insights to the Christian faith in particular, according to which she developed what she conceived of as a type of Christianity that could satisfy a spiritually mature and rational person through application of the principles of occult science to religion. She shared this concern to reinvigorate Christianity with fellow Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater (1854-1934), who co-established a church focused the around liturgical celebrations of the sacraments according to a Theosophical view.

6.2 The Theosophical Society after Blavatsky

The death of H. P. Blavatsky in 1891 was a severe blow to the Theosophical Society in India, Europe and America. Although she had been a problematic character in life, she was also the figurehead under which minor and even larger disagreements had been united in the organization. Without her, the different factions within the worldwide TS simply could not stay together, and even the authoritative figure of H. S. Olcott failed to unite the branches of the Society. Olcott remained President of the TS at Headquarters in Adyar,

while William Quan Judge, the third of the original founders, was head of the American TS that was based in New York. Shortly before her death, Blavatsky had nominated Annie Besant as her successor in the TS¹, but even Blavatsky's clear preference in this matter did not make the transition to new leadership smooth. Besant and Judge fought bitterly to control the majority of TS members worldwide, while Olcott struggled to instigate changes to the organisational structure.

The organization, which grew to considerable numbers and influence in the early twentieth century, had a large number of women in influential positions, and this unusual state of affairs requires a few comments. In her 2001 monograph, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*², Joy Dixon argued that the suffragettes of the early feminist movement in England had worked consciously to create a feminist spirituality. This spirituality was heavily influenced by the many members who belonged to the TS, which, as Dixon says, "had been founded by one woman (Helena Petrovna Blavatsky) and led by another (Annie Besant)."³ The book examines the place of Theosophy and the TS in the early English feminist movement. Dixon relates the stereotypical perceptions of the West as 'scientific' and the East as 'mystical' not only to traditional, rational religion (in the West) and mystical, exotic magic (in the East), but also to the masculine (West) and the feminine (East). She then applies these category sets to the development of the TS and its activities and finds that while there are tensions, the categories are useful in analyzing the role of the TS in the early feminist movement.

My examination of Blavatsky and of reports by people in the early TS does not support Dixon's image of mystical feminine spirituality *versus* rational male religion as an accurate reflection of the nature of the TS under Blavatsky's leadership. From the earliest beginnings of the TS, the gap between the philosophical and political organising activities of Olcott, and the emphasis on mystical, occult training of Blavatsky does appear to reflect this stereotype well. The male co-founder was engaged in practical and outwardly-focused activities, while the female counterpart was occupied in internal and affective mystical contemplation, among other things. However, as should be clear from my presentation of Blavatsky in the previous chapter, she was anything but a typical Victorian female. It was Blavatsky, rather than Olcott or any of the males in the early history of the TS, who publicly proposed an entirely new science based on ancient knowledge. It was she who

¹ Cf. Taylor 1992: 258.

² Dixon 2001.

³ Dixon 2001: xi.

presented insights gained from a broad variety of Eastern and ancient religious and philosophical traditions, and applied them to the current issues of the science of her day.

Despite its relation to mysticism and the East, Dixon grants that occultism as a “magico-clerical” tradition, belongs in the male category. However, as I also argued in the previous chapter, Blavatsky’s purpose in writing her two major works was precisely to place occultism and its insights in the current scientific debate as a contribution and inspiration to contemporary science, as its own branch of knowledge. In contrast to the science of occultism, she often talked about mysticism as an emotional, inferior and vague sensation. The scientific theories she proposed on the basis of the occult teachings, and which have since been vindicated by later scientific discoveries (as shown in the introduction to Chapter 5), should serve to further place Blavatsky alongside the male, the scientific and the rational.

In fact, Blavatsky’s associates, both male and female, struggled to define her as a woman. During her time in the TS, she was middle-aged and becoming obese, wore only strange oriental dressing-gowns, looked people straight in the eye with a penetrating gaze, swore, and smoked her hand-rolled cigarettes incessantly. In short, she showed no lady-like qualities or demeanour of any kind. She talked animatedly about everything, especially philosophy and science, and laughed in a loud and uninhibited manner. Olcott immediately took to her as his best ‘chum’, and they called each other by the nick-names of Maloney (Olcott) and Jack (HPB).⁴

Annie Besant, who took over Blavatsky’s role as the leading figure of the TS, differed a great deal from Blavatsky in personality and appearance. However, her actions led her, too, to clashes with the current standards of socially acceptable behaviour for a gentlewoman. Photos of Besant in her pre-Theosophical days show a highly fashion-conscious and very attractive woman in customary feminine Victorian dress. As shown below, an aspect of her personality led her to attach herself to powerful male figures, where she would display stereotypical ‘motherly’ self-sacrifice. However, this was neither for their children (for example Charles Bradlaugh’s daughters, with whom she tried to become friends), nor for her own children (the guardianship over whom she lost as a consequence of her involvement with Bradlaugh), but for the cause in which she and the respective man were involved.

⁴ Cf. Washington 1993: 43.

But despite this, Besant did not conform to Dixon's categories of the feminine either. In her own way she, like Blavatsky, was focused on the importance of establishing the scientific character of the occult teachings of Theosophy in relation to both science and religion, the rational presentation of them and the further explorations of their potential in the clairvoyant work she undertook with the help of Charles Leadbeater and his extraordinary abilities (more on which later in this chapter). I would therefore argue that although the TS was founded and led by women during its heyday, these were highly unusual and atypical women, considering the general image of the Victorian gentlewoman, who established themselves firmly in the domain of men. Moreover, the question of male or female leadership does not appear to have caused problems within the society, since Blavatsky's person had already transcended the categories of what was female, and Besant could therefore follow as leader without having to lose her femininity.

Outside the TS, Dixon's categories may be applied more appropriately. It is possible that non-members of the TS associated it with exotic Eastern mysticism and related this to the fact that the Society was lead by women. The tradition of Spiritualism had already suggested that women were superior when it came to dealing with 'spirits' and otherworldly beings⁵, due to their lack of the rational, scientific qualities of men. But within the TS, the traditional categories of male and female and their associated qualities are simply not as clear-cut because of the character of the women who were prominent in its early history. The TS was an extraordinary organization in that respect, blurring the boundaries of the otherwise strictly gender-traditional Victorian society. This important feature is also embodied in the Society's first objective, "to form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour"⁶, and it seems that this ideal was indeed practiced by Theosophists.

Returning to the summary of the history of the TS after Blavatsky, Annie Besant's nomination for the leadership was nevertheless contested. W. Q. Judge claimed that the Masters supported his candidacy, and he had letters from them to prove it. Besant accused Judge of forging the letters for his own advantage, and the two regional leaders ended up expelling each other from their respective factions of the TS. But as the mutual expulsions in effect cancelled their respective consequences, they were disregarded and both leaders continued in their work, Besant in India and Europe, and Judge in America.

⁵ Cf. Owen 1989: 6ff.

⁶ Blavatsky 2002: 371.

During the First World War membership of the TS increased significantly, despite continued unrest in the leadership of the organisation and a scandal involving Besant's close colleague, C. W. Leadbeater, accused of inappropriate guidance of some boys who were in his care.⁷ However, it is clear from the records of what became known as 'the Leadbeater Case' that what really troubled the examiners was the question of whether Leadbeater was homosexual, and whether this was compatible with his high status as the leading occultist in the TS.⁸ Unfortunately, issues of space prevent any further mention of the relationship between the idea of purity and spiritual progress in Theosophical terms, and of Leadbeater's efforts to create a new pedagogy of more free and liberated children and youth. This activity followed "the 19th century discovery of the child", as Peter Washington calls it, which generated a wealth of youth movements, e.g. the Scouts.⁹ As with Blavatsky and the Coulomb Affair, the accusations against Leadbeater were never proven, but the stigma of suspicion remained attached to his name and he moved to Australia in order to distance himself from the case.

During and after the war, Theosophical pamphlets expounding the doctrines of karma and reincarnation were distributed among soldiers and their families. They appear to have had a strong positive effect on people seeking meaning in the midst of the unimaginable horrors of the war and its aftermath, and many became members of the TS.¹⁰ In 1928, the Society had a membership of around 45,000¹¹, and a variety of smaller groups were organised, including those for children and women, and those based on charity, teaching and lecturing. A new grand headquarters was planned in London, and Christian church services were devised under the auspices of the newly established Liberal Catholic Church, of which Leadbeater was made a bishop, and a Masonic lodge was opened with Theosophical doctrine and full regalia and ceremonial for those so inclined.¹²

In addition to these activities, Leadbeater in 1909 discovered nothing less than the incarnation of the Divine Wisdom itself (*Theosophia*, the ideal after which Blavatsky named her teaching), in the person of a young Indian boy, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986). Besant adopted the boy, and she and Leadbeater raised him, instructed him in

⁷ Cf. Taylor 1992: 283.

⁸ Cf. Dixon 2001: 95.

⁹ Cf. Washington 1993: 212.

¹⁰ Cf. Dixon 2001: 87ff.

¹¹ Taylor 1992: 328.

¹² Cf. Washington 1993: 126f.

Theosophy and prepared him for his future career as “World Teacher”.¹³ This idea of the World Teacher came from Blavatsky, who had taught the Esoteric Section of Theosophists that the time was near when a new world religion would be proclaimed by a Master, who would for this purpose make use of the body of a close disciple. At the beginning of each new era in the progress of humanity, the Masters would deliver this new religious teaching – or rather, this new presentation of the familiar ‘ancient wisdom’ – as a guideline for the future humanity. This idea captivated Besant, who organised all her activities around its promotion.

Having obtained guardianship over Krishnamurti, she travelled the world with him, and he gave speeches and spiritual instruction to masses of young and old Theosophists in lecture halls and at hugely popular Theosophical summer camps. Eventually, however, he found himself unable to endorse the lifestyle of a spiritual superstar; he resigned from the TS, distanced himself from Theosophy, and began publishing his own teachings. The loss of Krishnamurti, whose artless appearance and simple spiritual teachings had attracted many followers, was a hard blow to the TS and its leadership. At his departure, the Society thus lost a vital member and began a steady decline. The TS remains in existence today, with lodges in many countries all over the world. The headquarters for the Indian and European sections are still in Adyar in the same buildings that Blavatsky and Olcott had moved into in 1882, and the American headquarters are now in Wheaton, Illinois.

While H. P. Blavatsky’s writings are still studied in the TS, a major appeal of the Society disappeared with the departure of Krishnamurti. It was his emphasis on simple personal devotion that attracted people, rather than the complex body of teaching and organisation that the TS had become under Besant’s leadership and Leadbeater’s writings. And most importantly for the purposes of this study, by the twentieth century the TS had definitely lost the battle with materialistic science with which it had fought on more equal terms in the late nineteenth century. The occult science relied on propositions, obtained through clairvoyance, that were ultimately rejected by the emerging scientific community, and it was doomed to obscurity.

In this section I have summarised the history of the TS after the death of Blavatsky, noting how the Society was unique in having two strong female leaders, and how its momentum declined during the early twentieth century. In the following section I shall present the life and work of Annie Besant. I shall focus on the way in which Besant went from a strong but

¹³ Cf. Taylor 1992: 290f.

naive childhood faith in Christianity, through a period of atheism and a complete rejection of religion, to a return to faith on a higher level through the synthesis of occult science and religion that she discovered in Theosophy. In this development, Besant represents the ideal type for whom Blavatsky wrote, hoping to satisfy the longing in both the heart and mind of her contemporaries.

6.3 Biographical sketch

I have chosen to focus on Annie Besant as the main exponent of Blavatsky's thinking because she was Blavatsky's immediate successor in the role as leader of the prestigious Esoteric Section of the TS, and because Blavatsky nominated Besant to fill her own role, as shown above.¹⁴ Blavatsky moreover appears to have recognised in Besant a comrade who shared her single-minded devotion to the cause of human freedom at all cost, who in Blavatsky's mind would be able to emphasise this crucial concern in practical activity, and who would hold firmly to what she believed in without regard for public opinion.

Annie Besant (1847-1933) became a Theosophist in 1889, after she had been given a copy of *The Secret Doctrine* to review for W. T. Stead's *Pall Mall Gazette*. On reading this book, Besant found that it suddenly made sense of her whole life.¹⁵ She was fascinated by the Theosophical ideas and immediately sought a meeting with Blavatsky, who at this time lived in London. Besant was by then a well-known public figure due to her activism in the causes of liberalism, atheism, free-thought, and later Fabian socialism. It was therefore a great shock to her associates when she began to espouse the views of Theosophy. But this was not the only sudden and dramatic conversion Besant had undergone in the course of her life, and her biographers and commentators often struggle to make sense of the seemingly abrupt manner in which she switched from the Evangelical Christianity of her youth to the atheism of her early adulthood to the Theosophy of her more mature years, and her complete devotion to activism in every new cause.

Some have suggested that Besant, whose father died when she was only five years old¹⁶, subconsciously sought a replacement for that lost father figure throughout the rest of her life. Two major features characterised Besant's life: intense desire for self-sacrifice for a

¹⁴ Cf. Taylor 1992: 258.

¹⁵ Cf. Besant 2007c: 230f.

¹⁶ Cf. Besant 2007b: 2.

noble cause, and the yearning for an intimate personal relationship with a strong male. In her early career the two are often fused, as Besant threw herself body and soul into the causes that caught her attention, and these causes were usually championed by a powerful male with whom she sought close association. Later in life, when she joined the Theosophical movement, the issue of male companionship was eclipsed somewhat by the variety of activities to which Besant could apply her incessant energy. She did, however, form a permanent work partnership with fellow Theosophist Charles Leadbeater, and this lasted to the end of their lives. Leadbeater was known as the leading clairvoyant of the TS, and his work with Besant will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

6.3.1 Besant's early Christian faith

The sacrificial trend in Besant's personality appears to have been with her from an early age. In her autobiographical writings, *Autobiographical Sketches*¹⁷ and *Annie Besant: An Autobiography*¹⁸, she describes her young self as a high-strung, highly passionate and intelligent girl who was extremely attached to her mother.¹⁹ They belonged to a tradition of Calvinistic Evangelical Christianity in which 'serious' was a term of highest praise.²⁰ At the age of eight Annie went to a Miss Marryat for her education²¹, where strict Evangelical devotion and idealism were continued and reinforced. The children were not allowed to visit theatres or read popular novels, but could only read edifying Christian books and recite the Bible.²² Annie dreamed of becoming a saint and was encouraged in pursuing the ideal of self-sacrifice for the sake of others. While staying in France on holiday, she almost converted to Roman Catholicism because she found a strong resonance with the mystical elements of the Mass.²³ Instead, she joined the Oxford Movement where she found her desire for dramatic liturgy and High Church ceremonial satisfied.²⁴

Her earliest male focus of attachment was the Jesus figure of this Christian mindset. She wrote passionate prayers to him, and dreamt of nothing other than to be united with him.²⁵

¹⁷ Besant 2007b [1884].

¹⁸ Besant 2007c [1893].

¹⁹ Cf. Besant 2007b: 16, 21.

²⁰ Cf. Taylor 1992: 19.

²¹ Cf. Taylor 1992: 6f.

²² Cf. Besant 2007b: 15; Taylor 1992: 10f.

²³ Cf. Taylor 1992: 12.

²⁴ Cf. Besant 2007b: 22; Taylor 1992: 15.

²⁵ Cf. Besant 2007b: 32f.

However, as her friend journalist and editor W. T. Stead later put it: “She could not be the Bride of Heaven, and therefore became the bride of Mr Frank Besant. He was hardly an adequate substitute”.²⁶ This young man, whom Annie’s mother had chosen, was a very ‘serious’ clergyman of the Church of England.²⁷ But the nineteen-year-old Annie did not want to marry and was far too dreamy to be a good vicar’s wife; she largely neglected her housekeeping in favour of reading or brooding over the miserable turn her life had taken.²⁸ Frank took to beating her in frustration, and also appears to have exercised his marital rights to her body although she begged him not to. Soon the young Mrs Besant plunged into a deep depression.²⁹ When their baby daughter almost died of the whooping cough (pertussis)³⁰, the last remnants of Annie Besant’s idealised notions of Christian neighbourly love and the goodness of the Creator were shattered³¹, and she began her pursuit of a meaningful worldview in which service to humanity, individual liberty and self-discipline lay at the heart.

This break with the consuming, intense faith in a personal God, and the love and concern of Jesus for every person that Besant had hitherto espoused and dedicated herself to, made her question all her former beliefs. She rejected the doctrine of the atonement and refused to sit through communion services, creating a spectacle in the small village parish where her bewildered husband worked.³² In 1878 their separation was finally agreed upon, although Annie had years previously found lodgings of her own with the help of family and friends, and had already begun to make a career for herself.

6.3.2 Besant’s journeys to atheism, free-thought and socialism

Besant discovered that she had a talent for writing, and as she was still passionately consumed with the issue of Christian meaning, albeit now from a critical position, she began writing articles and pamphlets analysing and questioning the orthodox tenets of the Church of England.³³ They were published by independent free-thought publisher Thomas Scott and attracted attention and sympathy from other radicals and freethinkers. Apart from

²⁶ Taylor 1992: 27, from *Review of Reviews*, Oct. 1891.

²⁷ Cf. Besant 2007b: 34.

²⁸ Cf. Besant 2007b: 42.

²⁹ Cf. Taylor 1992: 33ff.

³⁰ Cf. Besant 2007b: 45f.

³¹ Cf. Besant 2007b: 46, 57f.

³² Cf. Besant 2007b: 65.

³³ Cf. Besant 2007b: 66f.

forming a solid friendship with Scott and his wife, Besant became acquainted with Theist Charles Voysey and Unitarian Moncure D. Conway³⁴, who were involved in free-thought gatherings at which all manner of religious and philosophical issues were discussed.³⁵

She desired most of all to become a public speaker and found that she had a gift for it. At the recommendation of a friend, she went to hear Charles Bradlaugh speak, the leader of the National Secular Society (NSS) and campaigner for trade and labour unions.³⁶ He was a powerful orator, a republican and an outspoken atheist.³⁷ Apart from her fascination with Bradlaugh's impressive appearance and speaking style, she was inspired by his dedication to issues of liberty and social justice for the least advantaged.³⁸ She soon transferred her intense devotion to Bradlaugh and became a regular writer for the *National Reformer*, the newspaper of the NSS.³⁹ Their relationship remained professional, although Bradlaugh often worked all day in Besant's house.⁴⁰ She devoted herself full-time to working, writing and speaking in the secularist cause, travelling throughout England and Scotland on lecture tours and speaking regularly in the NSS London lecture rooms, the 'Hall of Science'.

The name Annie Besant became even better known during a court case in which she and Bradlaugh defended their publication of a pamphlet in support of birth control, written by the American doctor and birth control advocate Charles Knowlton. This case illustrates the motivations that fuelled her life in general. She insisted on defending the publication not only on the principle of free expression⁴¹, but also because she was strongly convinced that the great number of children born to poor families was largely responsible for keeping them in poverty with no possibility for improvement in their situation.⁴² At the very least, she believed, a public discussion of the matter of population control should not be repressed.⁴³

³⁴ Cf. Besant 2007b: 80.

³⁵ Cf. Taylor 1992: 62f.

³⁶ Cf. Besant 2007b: 81.

³⁷ Cf. Taylor 1992: 71.

³⁸ Cf. Besant 2007b: 84.

³⁹ Cf. Besant 2007b: 85.

⁴⁰ Cf. Besant 2007b: 115f. His wife was an alcoholic, and Bradlaugh had placed her in the country in her parents' care. (Cf. Nethercot 1961: 74, 82)

⁴¹ Cf. Besant 2007b: 110.

⁴² Cf. Besant 2007b: 117, 127f.

⁴³ Cf. Taylor 1992: 116.

Besant found it cruel and inhuman that their accusers in the case, who were anonymous, would prefer to deliberately withhold medical knowledge about conception from people on the grounds that distributing such knowledge was immoral and would lead to free love and a reckless gratification of desire.⁴⁴ She ferociously defended the publication of the pamphlet in court. Nevertheless, under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 the publication was condemned. The two publishers were given heavy fines and six months in prison each, but were eventually cleared of their punishments on a technicality.⁴⁵

The Knowlton case is also interesting because Besant wrote to Charles Darwin, asking him to be a witness for their case. Darwin rejected the offer as he was in very poor health, but also stated that he disagreed with their promotion of birth control as a measure of population management (the so-called ‘negative check’ on population). His reason was that negative checks on populations by preventative intervention would inhibit the progress of evolution by artificially reducing the material available for natural selection. In consequence, so-called ‘positive checks’, i.e. population reduction through natural means such as diseases, natural disasters, famine, etc. were to be preferred in Darwin’s opinion. Besant and Bradlaugh had already argued, on Neo-Malthusian⁴⁶ grounds, against the inhumanity of positive population checks, and had to go to court without the support of Darwin.⁴⁷

In the mid-1880s Bradlaugh, after a long struggle, managed to secure a seat as MP for Northumberland and Besant decided to study for a law degree at London University which had recently opened matriculation for women.⁴⁸ In preparation for the entrance examination in science she was tutored by the young Dr Edward Aveling, a doctor of medicine and avid Darwinist, who stimulated the conviction in Besant that science was the answer to the problems of society.⁴⁹ Accurate analyses of the needs of people coupled with a rational, technological application of improvements in food and living standards would lead to greater justice. Better living through science became Besant’s motto for this period, during which she absorbed all the scientific knowledge Aveling had to pass on,

⁴⁴ Cf. Taylor 1992: 112.

⁴⁵ Cf. Besant 2007b: 137; Taylor 1992: 106ff.

⁴⁶ A birth-control advocacy movement inspired by Thomas Malthus’ *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798).

⁴⁷ Cf. Besant 2007b: 131; Taylor 1992: 121ff.

⁴⁸ Cf. Besant 2007c: 164; Taylor 1992: 139.

⁴⁹ Cf. Taylor 1992: 140, cf. 87.

specialising in Botany, Anatomy and Physiology, and eventually tutoring other students.⁵⁰ Although she passed the entrance exam easily, Besant was nevertheless refused matriculation at London University due to the scandal attached to her name from the Knowlton case, and the reason she was given was that no decent woman would want to associate with her.⁵¹

Aveling, who like Besant had risen to fame in the NSS, then introduced her to the Fabian Society, a socialist group that sought an alternative to a materialistic world order in moral and artistic terms rather than directly political ones.⁵² Besant became strongly attracted to both George Bernard Shaw, who was a founding member, and to socialism, which she had come to believe was a necessary form of government if social reform was to be attained. Such a conviction went directly against Bradlaugh's radicalism and liberalism.⁵³

6.4 Besant becomes a Theosophist

In this period of the late 1880s, Besant was beginning to realise that the atheism she had championed with Bradlaugh and which had supported her through her own crisis of faith, was essentially dissatisfying.⁵⁴ It was built on the negative insistence that belief in God lacked proof, and that it was futile to believe until solid evidence was given.⁵⁵ Besant's strong intellect, and her disappointed feelings when God had failed to deliver on her childhood faith, were for many years seemingly satisfied with Bradlaugh's position. However, as she matured and became involved in political activism, she experienced the tough conditions under which common people struggled to live, and the difficulties involved in politics. The world and the social order were not going to change in a moment simply because she could provide reasons why they ought to. Besant came to realise that the social and political order were not imperfect because of a lack of knowledge, something she could remedy personally by travelling up and down the country lecturing to people.

⁵⁰ Cf. Besant 2007c: 164.

⁵¹ Cf. Taylor 1992: 157ff.

⁵² Cf. Taylor 1992: 161, 164.

⁵³ Cf. Besant 2007c: 200; Taylor 1992: 172f.

⁵⁴ Cf. Besant 2007c: 219f, 225f.

⁵⁵ Cf. Besant 2007b: 51; 2007c: 93f.

Instead, she began to feel that a greater underlying purpose was lacking, and that Bradlaugh's rejection of any such greater notion was ultimately fruitless.⁵⁶ Under the influence of the Fabian Society, three of whose prominent members were also members of the newly established Society for Psychical Research, Besant became interested in the phenomena of Spiritualism and its claims to be able to provide scientific evidence for the existence of another reality.⁵⁷ With Bradlaugh she had reported critically on this movement in the *National Reformer*, but now she began to investigate related literature in a more open-minded spirit.

Two of the first books she mentions reading in this context were A. P. Sinnett's *The Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*.⁵⁸ Like many sincere inquirers of the period, Besant hoped that Spiritualism would be able to afford the proof of the other reality in which she had at first believed so strongly. Although she had previously felt that it had let her down, she was now again coming to believe that it held the only real grounds for human fellowship. When Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* arrived for review in 1889, W. T. Stead sent it to Besant, and she found in it the very "master-key to science and religion" that she so intensely desired and that Blavatsky had equally desired to provide.

It is reported that, during their first meeting, Blavatsky expressed a strong desire that Besant should join the Theosophists. The *Theosophist* journal had for a time carried advertisements for the *National Reformer*, and in this journal Blavatsky had occasionally commented on the work of Besant and Bradlaugh. She regarded it as a service to human liberty, although she joked about their lack of a spiritual basis.⁵⁹ A radical celebrity like 'Red Annie' Besant would be a scoop for Blavatsky's TS.

However, I would also argue that Besant was precisely the type of person that Blavatsky hoped to win for her own cause. Besant had experienced personal tragedy in the form of domestic abuse, social ostracisation and the removal of her two young children by the law and at the hands of the Christian church. As a consequence, she had lost her faith. She had then been motivated by a scientific materialism to work for the improvement of society, but it had also failed to provide an ultimate reason for charity and human brotherhood.

⁵⁶ Cf. Besant 2007c: 225f.

⁵⁷ Cf. Besant 2007c: 227; Taylor 1992: 223f.

⁵⁸ Sinnett 1881, Sinnet 1883; cf. Besant 2007c: 227.

⁵⁹ Cf. Besant 2007c: 186; Taylor 1992: 240.

Blavatsky could offer her own definition of a science obtained through spiritual practice, and based on ancient occult teachings under the direction of God's task-force on Earth, the Masters of the esoteric wisdom. This vision at once provided Besant with scientific standards and laws through Blavatsky's descriptions of the spiritual practices required for individual progress; a definite ground of human brotherhood in Blavatsky's doctrine of the spirit as a spark of the divine in which all humans equally share; and a focus for platonic devotion in the persons of the Masters, ideal supermen of perfect spirituality and knowledge.

Despite the great leaps resulting from her attachment to different causes, there is a clear trend running through Besant's career, from the early Christian idealism, through the atheist and secularist period characterised by socialist activism, and into Theosophy and her later involvement in the Home Rule movement in India. Like Blavatsky, Besant was genuinely concerned with the welfare of her fellow human beings, and not only on an intellectual level. Her life demonstrates the extent to which she threw her physical strength into each cause she took up, working every hour of the day in an effort to change the world. Naturally, her causes were selective and related to her own experience. For example, the women's rights issue became salient around the time of Besant's own disastrous marriage and separation. After the verdict in the obscenity trial of the birth control pamphlet had judged her unfit to be a responsible guardian, she was stripped of the custody of her children. But she managed to see the larger social problems involved in the struggles she herself underwent and set about to change the causes of so much suffering.

Upon Besant's discovery of Theosophy, she embraced it as a complete philosophy that explained the reasons for human suffering (in the theory of karma and the spiritual evolution of humanity); she had finally found a framework that could contain and carry her own desire to serve humanity from the basis of an understanding of causality. After working for many years on particular cases in the political arena, she now felt the need to address the root of humanity's problems. She came to perceive this root as a spiritual issue, and Blavatsky's Theosophy provided the explanation and the solution to Besant's concerns, along with the positive security that Bradlaugh's atheism had failed to give on the question of the existence of God and the nature of the human mind.

For Besant, her years of active campaigning had left her acutely aware of the need for a fundamental principle of the unity of humanity from which to argue the case for liberty, justice and brotherhood. Atheism and socialism provided no such foundation other than a

vague idea of the innate worth of man. She recounts in the *Autobiography* how with Theosophy she had come full circle:

I have been told that I plunged headlong into Theosophy and let my enthusiasm carry me away. I think the charge is true, in so far as the decision was swiftly taken; but it had been long led up to, and realised the dreams of childhood on the higher planes of intellectual womanhood.⁶⁰

She had abandoned the intense faith of her youth because it, through her immature understanding, had failed to satisfy her sense of justice and righteousness. However, during the years of atheism and active work she had merely been ignoring the tendency in herself toward faith. The forty-two-year-old Besant had now discovered, in the Theosophical teachings on the divine spirit in all humans and a group of teachers guiding the progress of humanity, a technique for proving to herself beyond doubt the existence of God (in developing the higher senses). She also found a concrete basis for human brotherhood (i.e. the divine spirit in which all people share) and a suitable object of devotion and absolute dedication in the idea of Blavatsky's Masters.

6.4.1 Besant as Theosophical scientist

Besant's activity in the TS, during which the Society attained its largest membership, is characterised by two major trends which unsurprisingly relate to science and politics. Due to her own personal history, she was certain about the ability of the Theosophical claims to satisfy the intellectual and spiritual cravings of human nature with regard to the state of the world and humanity's role in it. She joined forces with fellow Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater, a former Church of England minister, who claimed, and was believed to possess, an extraordinary degree of clairvoyant ability. Together they explored the invisible realm of the 'astral plane', along with other unseen realms. Leadbeater described their inhabitants and details of deceased humans, monsters, ideas and dreams, emotions and thought-forms, as well as the past and future of the solar system, Planet Earth, the entire human evolution, and previous lives of prominent Theosophists.⁶¹

Besant herself was not a psychic, as both Blavatsky and Leadbeater noted.⁶² She claimed on a few occasions to have heard the voice and seen the appearance of her Master – 'M' was also in charge of her spiritual direction – but otherwise she relied on Leadbeater to provide descriptions of the occult worlds. In these investigations Leadbeater followed what

⁶⁰ Cf. Besant 2007c: 231.

⁶¹ See, for example, Leadbeater 1905; Leadbeater 1909b; Leadbeater and Besant 1960.

⁶² Cf. Taylor 1992: 241.

he considered a scientific procedure as far as he could, describing features carefully and arranging them in a systematic presentation.

When Besant and Leadbeater in 1908 published their clairvoyant exploration of atoms and sub-atomic particles in *Occult Chemistry: Clairvoyant Observations of the Chemical Elements*⁶³, they stepped firmly onto the territory of the materialists. Leadbeater's initial research in the area, instigated by A. P. Sinnett, had been published in a series of articles in Blavatsky's journal *Lucifer* as early as 1895, prior to the major scientific discoveries mentioned in the introduction to the previous chapter. In Sinnett's introductory chapter to the book he characterises Leadbeater's clairvoyant ability as "ultra-microscopic", certainly not employed merely as a figure of speech, but with reference to a particularly powerful version of that essential tool of the laboratory scientist.⁶⁴

As far as I am aware, there have been no serious scientific studies of the hypotheses and ideas presented in *Occult Chemistry*. The book presents accurate atomic weights for different isotopes of elements and, even more interestingly, it hints at quark-like structures in sub-atomic particles and a string-like nature of the smallest perceivable physical structure, what Leadbeater calls 'the ultimate physical atom'. Quarks and strings were not suggested in theoretical physics until the 1960s and later. In this area of science, too, Theosophists were remarkably ahead of their time.

6.4.2 Besant's new political focus

Politically, Besant found a new cause inspired by the Theosophical teachings. According to Blavatsky, every nation, like every individual, had a particular *dharma*, i.e. a duty or purpose to fulfil in relation to the entire evolution of humanity, the planet and ultimately the universe. India's role was to provide the spiritual leadership of the future global society, from which the new World Teacher would emerge and lead the formation of a renewed and more spiritually grounded humanity. This required a rediscovery and a fresh appreciation of the ancient religious teachings of India, in addition to a new devotion to the Vedas and the ancient institutions of the four *varnas* or castes of Manu, in which specific sections of society took their proper place in the order of things. This programme of renewal was in line with most of the Neo-Hindu reform movements, particularly the ideas of Vivekananda and Sarasvati. However, as a Westerner and a representative of the

⁶³ Leadbeater and Besant 1919 [1908].

⁶⁴ Cf. Leadbeater and Besant 1919: 1, 6.

colonial powers, her method of implementing the renewal was different from the native responses.

In the context of the British presence in India, which she had already been informed about through Bradlaugh, this meant two things for Besant: (1) The people and native leaders of India must be made aware of the future role of their country and its crucial importance as carrier of a precious religious teaching in the form of the ancient Vedic religion and its offshoots in the different Hindu religious traditions. (2) India must govern itself under a Home Rule agreement as an independent state within the British Empire.⁶⁵ In this way Indian religious knowledge would be ideally wed to Western scientific knowledge. The result of this would, in Besant's millenarian vision, provide both the necessary conditions for peace, justice and social harmony, and the best possible situation for the appearance of the World Teacher.

Besant thus began to work on the political front in India, which eventually led to her election as the first woman President of the Indian National Congress in 1917. This institution had been founded by fellow Theosophist Allan O. Hume in 1885, the co-recipient of the Masters' letters to A. P. Sinnett. She simultaneously lectured on Theosophy, where her instructions began increasingly to focus around the notion of the coming World Teacher and the role of India in the spiritual evolution of humanity. She also established an educational institution, the Central Hindu College of Benares (now Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi), in which the future leaders of India were to be raised in the style of a British public school, though with Vedic instruction and meditation classes in the morning.

She and Leadbeater began to search for a candidate for the role as World Teacher and discovered him in the person of the young Indian boy Jiddu Krishnamurti. He came under Besant's guardianship and was taken to Britain to be trained for his illustrious future. When, in adulthood, Krishnamurti removed himself from the Theosophical teachings and rejected the role as World Teacher in the Theosophical sense, he made a career as a spiritual teacher in his own right and gained a large following, and his books remain popular.⁶⁶ At the time of his departure from the TS, Besant was quite old and did not seem to really realise what had happened with her protégé. She continued to defer to what she

⁶⁵ Cf. Taylor 1992: 286.

⁶⁶ E.g. *The First and Last Freedom* (Krishnamurti 1954), *Think on These Things* (Krishnamurti 1964).

regarded as his superior wisdom in his decision to leave the TS, but did not make any connection to the kind of work she was doing in the Society.

Besant's conviction of India's role as the future religious leader of the world on the basis of the ancient Vedic teachings also had other implications. Even though she lived and travelled there, surrounded by the great diversity of the sub-continent, Besant clearly regarded her ideal India solely as the source of the Vedic teachings, and thus with a strong Hindu emphasis. Her political experience in Britain made her a powerful campaigner, and her attempts to rouse the Indian people to an appreciation of their own capabilities and pride in their national heritage on the basis of the Vedic past was received enthusiastically among the emerging Hindu nationalist movements in India.⁶⁷ She was one of the few campaigners at the time to insist that the Indian people were already able to govern themselves and required no further mentoring from British hands.⁶⁸ However, due to her emphasis, she appears to have had no awareness of the fact that a very large section of the Indian population were not Hindus, and they must have felt particularly opposed to being excluded from this vision of their country's future.

6.4.3 Clairvoyant 'science' causes unease in the TS

Within the TS, Besant's forceful political activism on behalf of India did not receive a great deal of support, neither in India nor in Europe or America. The Indian TS had been led by H. S. Olcott since its foundation, and he was, to the end of his life, heavily involved in the Buddhist cause in Sri Lanka and in Buddhism in general. He, his supporters and many older Theosophists were highly uncomfortable with the decidedly Hindu turn the official Theosophical teachings took in Besant's presentation. Moreover, in Europe and America Theosophists felt that with Besant and Leadbeater's clairvoyant investigations and their insistence on these as scientific undertakings resulting in solid evidence, the TS had practically acquired a body of dogma on the nature of the invisible worlds that members were unable to verify for themselves and therefore felt obliged to accept on faith.⁶⁹

This was entirely contrary to the objects of the early TS which, despite the availability of Blavatsky's more dogmatic teachings to those so inclined, was founded as an open organisation that first and foremost promoted the notion of a global human brotherhood. It

⁶⁷ Cf. Taylor 1992: 288.

⁶⁸ Cf. Taylor 1992: 294.

⁶⁹ Cf. Taylor 1992: 282.

offered a forum for exploration and discussion of religious and philosophical ideas with no particular doctrinal adherence required, not even to the Masters on whom the entire organisation and its vision supposedly hinged. Many members rejected Besant's "neo-Theosophy", and a "Back to Blavatsky" movement was founded, in which the original teachings and objectives of the TS were once again made central.

The end of Besant's career was marked by her inability to cope with the desertion of Krishnamurti. She withdrew into the establishment of a legion of different sub-groups and lodges within the TS that emphasised different aspects of charitable work and activism, all heavily equipped with regalia and ceremony. She passed away on 20 September 1933, a few months before Leadbeater.

6.5 Besant's understanding of religion and religious traditions

In this section I present Besant's understanding of the Theosophical theory of religion as given by H. P. Blavatsky and introduced in the previous chapter. I draw mainly on two lectures given by Besant in 1907 and 1911, in which her vision is clearly expressed, supplemented with two lecture series given in 1896 and 1901 on individual religious traditions. This presentation focuses on the role of religion in general and the specific traditions in particular within Besant's overarching Theosophical worldview. I also discuss these ideas in relation to the millenarian idea of the coming of a great World Teacher and the imminent revelation of a new world religion, which dominated her thinking and activity in the TS.

Besant's presentation of the Theosophical understanding of religion, as given in the two lectures *A World Religion*⁷⁰ and *The Brotherhood of Religions*⁷¹, centred on the notion of a divine plan according to which all life on our planet unfolds. Human efforts in religion and politics merely reflect and play into the overarching scheme of this plan, in light of which Besant presented her theory of religion. As such, Besant began her lecture with an encouragement to regard history as the story of the unfolding of this great plan of the Supreme Being, "the shaping of a great purpose".⁷² She focused on the social and political

⁷⁰ Besant 1916 [1911].

⁷¹ Besant 1913 [1907].

⁷² Besant 1916: 3.

factors that in her time had contributed to bringing closer the East and the West, shedding the light of understanding on the particular gifts and role of each.

In stereotypical terms she characterised the West as the possessor of logical scientific knowledge, where the East is a fountain of psychological and spiritual insight. This idea strongly echoes Vivekananda's speech at the World's Parliament of Religion (presented in Chapter 4), which Besant attended with the Theosophical delegation. She painted a picture in which the mutual discoveries of the other's signature gift results in a union of two hitherto separate parts of a common human heritage:

How that eastern mind, subtle and spiritual, is gradually becoming wedded to the western mind, scientific and practical, seeking to turn discoveries and knowledge to the practical prosperity of man. (...) How the eastern lack of public spirit is gradually being made good by the altruism and the public spirit and the patriotism of the West.⁷³

And despite her later active role in the Indian Home Rule movement, Besant boldly proclaimed British rule in India as the aegis under which this marvellous and even divine union of ideas was made possible.

This idea of a divinely intended union of diverse approaches to the same goal is similar to Blavatsky's understanding of the different religions as different local expressions of the same divine truth, as illustrated in the quote containing the image of the prism in the previous chapter. Besant adopted this notion in full and presented it using different metaphors, particularly the musical idea of a harmonic chord consisting of individual notes, or the image of different letters spelling out the full name of God.

Although their individual images depict the same basic idea – that the major religious traditions in the world all hold a part of a genuine knowledge and insight into divine truth – Besant's choice of metaphors, much more strongly than Blavatsky's, emphasise the value and necessary contribution of each individual tradition. In Blavatsky's prism analogy, the different religions are accidents of the imperfect human perception of the divine. This is in contrast to Besant's metaphors that emphasise the role of the different religions as building blocks of a more complete human understanding of the divine. Below, I shall show how Besant characterised each religious tradition and placed it in relation to the general overarching religious message that they together spell out.

⁷³ Besant 1916: 4f.

6.5.1 The ‘New World Religion’ and existing religious traditions

As we have seen, Besant was firmly convinced that a great religious teacher, “the World Teacher”, would appear (in the physical form of Jiddu Krishnamurti) within her lifetime and provide the basis for what would become a new world religion. Indeed, this would be the only true “world” religion, because it would combine all the insights from the different religious traditions, integrating common elements and expressions and thus appealing to all people. Besant held that up until this point, each religion had been given to locally focused groups. However, with new prospects of global communication and travel, the time had come for a true world religion that could meaningfully include the insights of all traditions under a common purpose of peace, brotherhood, progress and mutual understanding. In Besant’s view, giving each religious tradition a place and a voice in this intended harmony of divine wisdom would promote world peace and a genuine brotherhood among humanity, on the basis of which Besant’s constant ideal of service and charity could finally be the natural relationship between all people.

In her lecture *The Brotherhood of Religions*, Besant explained in some detail the constitution of this new world religion. Its general principle is that

all the great truths of religion are common property, [and] do not belong to any one faith.⁷⁴

In support of this statement she listed commonalities between the world’s major faiths under the headings of common symbols, common myths, common doctrine and common ethics.⁷⁵ Besant followed Blavatsky in insisting that there is an inner, esoteric meaning to religious myths, symbols and dogmas, which can be grasped through the intuition. The details of this meaning were those psychological, anthropological and cosmological tenets which had finally been made public and were openly presented in the Theosophical teachings. The fact that the different religious traditions shared symbols and other features demonstrated for Besant that they originated in the same ancient mystery teaching and that at this basic level the same essential elements were present in all the major traditions.

In Besant’s thinking the existing religious traditions played an uncertain role. She regarded them as integrated entities of doctrine and practice that clearly expressed a particular aspect of God or the Divine, and catered spiritually to those people who responded best to this aspect of religious matters. As such, all these responses to the divine reality were

⁷⁴ Besant 1913: 10.

⁷⁵ Cf. Besant 1913: 10ff.

crucial to the spiritual progress of humankind as a whole, and Besant therefore envisaged a future in which the different religious traditions would co-exist. Each would teach their tradition, doctrine and practice under the general auspices of the new World Religion.

Each lecture in *Seven Great Religions*⁷⁶ is based around the two-fold effort of demonstrating *unity*, by showing how key Theosophical ideas are present in different forms in other traditions, and *diversity*, by drawing out the characteristic features of each tradition that represents a specific type of human response to the divine reality. This emphasis again echoes Vivekananda's teaching on religion and was probably also inspired by the Parliament of Religion speech. Besant found that the different religious traditions represented certain virtues that characterised a beneficial relationship to the divine. Thus, Zoroastrianism represented purity⁷⁷; Buddhism represented wisdom and compassion⁷⁸; ancient Greek religion represented beauty⁷⁹; ancient Roman religion represented law⁸⁰; ancient Egypt represented science (i.e. true knowledge in occult 'science')⁸¹; Christianity represented self-sacrifice⁸²; Judaism represented righteousness⁸³; Hinduism represented *dharma* or duty⁸⁴, and Islam represented submission to the divine will.⁸⁵

She imagined the different faiths related to the World Religion as different Christian sects all form part of ecumenical world Christianity, that is, they retain significant differences but all have the same Christ as their focus.⁸⁶ However, she also emphasised that the existing religions, regarded from a Theosophical perspective, already contained the truth necessary to realise the divine spirit in humans, or at least to set the individual on the way to this realisation. She was therefore emphatic that conversion was not necessary, but encouraged people to explore the riches of their own tradition:

⁷⁶ Besant 2007a.

⁷⁷ Besant 1916: 8; Besant 1913: 9.

⁷⁸ Besant 1913: 9; slightly different in Besant 1916: 8.

⁷⁹ Besant 1916: 8.

⁸⁰ Besant 1916: 8.

⁸¹ Besant 1916: 8.

⁸² Besant 1916: 8; Besant 1913: 10.

⁸³ Besant 1916: 8.

⁸⁴ Besant 1913: 9.

⁸⁵ Besant 1913: 10.

⁸⁶ Cf. Besant 1916: 8.

Dig in the field of your own religion and go deeper and deeper, till you find the spring of the water of life gushing up, pure and full.⁸⁷

This was an important issue in relation to the very active missionary societies that followed the colonial expansion, and this statement could be directed to the native Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims of India and Ceylon. But Besant appears also to speak to Christians who struggled with traditional church teachings and were more fascinated by the novelty of Eastern teachings. For these people, she and her colleagues made a special effort to present a Theosophical interpretation of Christianity, which is presented in the last part of this chapter.

With Blavatsky, Besant insisted that the commonalities between the different religious traditions were due to their common origin. As I have shown above, in her early writings Blavatsky located this common origin in an Eastern mystical tradition that had been transmitted through mystery schools close to the exoteric faith traditions of each culture. Besant expanded upon this, drawing on teaching originally given by Blavatsky to members of the Esoteric Section, and claimed that the founders of every great religious tradition were members of a Brotherhood of Teachers, all of whom were in fact Masters alongside the two who taught Blavatsky.

In this Brotherhood, which Besant called ‘The Great White Lodge’, the religious teachings of humanity are stored. At moments of great spiritual crisis, a member of the Brotherhood will appear and speak to the world to clarify the essence of the teachings of religion. These appearances have historically resulted in the establishment of a new tradition of religious teaching with a different emphasis from what went before. Nevertheless, because of this common source in the Brotherhood of Teachers, all traditions are essentially related. This argument, unsurprisingly, also served to firmly locate the Theosophical Masters at the heart of all religious teaching in history and as central agents for its distribution.

This perspective sits somewhat uncomfortably with another point that Besant made, by which, following Blavatsky, she explained the variety of religious teachings as accounts of the experience of different seers of the higher reality. This is contrary to the idea that a divine teacher has appeared from the Great White Lodge and given out a certain teaching with a different emphasis. Generally, Besant’s emphasis on religious experience followed Blavatsky in that the aim of religion is to make people better by helping them to realise

⁸⁷ Besant 1913: 11.

their essential relatedness with God through their own spirit and, as a consequence, recognise their fundamental fellowship with each other.

Besant regarded different religions as the contexts in which teaching toward this end was contained – although not very clearly or openly – and should be emphasised and practiced. For that purpose she demanded the establishment of a proper “science of religion”, by which she meant a comprehensive method of training in spiritual progress following the Indian yoga schools, whose practices she found reflected in, for example, Buddhist and Catholic spiritual exercises. These contained

methods of teaching, methods of training, ways of meditating, which in every great faith are the only ways of awakening those faculties which enable you to know and not only to believe.⁸⁸

This argument is as central to Besant’s promotion of pluralistic religious ideas as it was to Blavatsky’s. Through religious experience, deepened through the practice of spiritual techniques that increase the human capacity for perceiving the higher realms of consciousness, people would come to know that they share in the same spirit, the Spirit of God. This would finally prove the reality of the spirit, the existence of God and the essential fellowship of human beings; it was ‘scientific’ proof of religion for Besant, as it was for Blavatsky.

However, for Besant, this realised human fellowship was only one step in the process toward the millenarian vision of the coming of the new World Teacher. As this idea took hold of her, she began to see the religions as means to an end, i.e. the end of encouraging and cultivating the right attitude to one’s fellow human beings. The individual character of the religious traditions, their history and concerns apart from this goal, were ignored and subsumed under Besant’s overarching Theosophical framework.

6.5.1.1 A note on Judaism in Theosophy

The book *Seven Great Religions*⁸⁹ contains lectures delivered in 1896 and 1901 in India and treats Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism and Sikhism. It concludes with a lecture on Theosophy in which Besant explains in more detail the Theosophical background for her analysis of the religions in the preceding lectures. Judaism is conspicuously absent from Besant’s list of ‘great religions’ there, and she does

⁸⁸ Besant 1916: 17.

⁸⁹ Besant 2007a.

not even comment on its absence – it is simply not part of her Theosophical religious landscape in this context.

Theosophy's relation to Judaism is a complex issue that I do not intend to discuss at length. However, it should be mentioned that Blavatsky, and Besant following her, did not consider Judaism a religion (i.e. a tradition given by a Master). It was rather a composite set of beliefs belonging to the ethnic community of Jews, including elements of Egyptian and Chaldean or Babylonian religion. According to Blavatsky's theory of human evolution as a process directed by the Masters following a set plan, different human ethnic groups (or 'races' in Blavatsky's terminology) are endowed with particular signature strengths. The intermarriage of races, under the direction of a Master who has this area of human activity as his speciality, results in a human type increasingly suited to spiritual progress. This biological refining is necessary, Blavatsky held, since spiritual progress depended on development of the higher, occult senses that must operate through a biological organism optimally suited to such development.

In Blavatsky's historical visions, however, she had seen that the Jews had refused to intermarry with the ethnic groups surrounding them, thus effectively opposing the divinely directed evolution of humanity. This combination of a pseudo-historical anti-Semitism with a eugenics theory is highly suspect, and, as Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke⁹⁰ has shown, Blavatsky's ideas did play a part in the development of the Nazi racial ideology.

For the purpose of my discussion, the racial aspect is significant in relation to religion in the Theosophical theory of evolution. According to this theory, at the beginning of each new era of human evolution, the leading⁹¹ ethnic group or 'race' is given a body of religious teaching directly from the incarnation of one of the Masters. Moses is venerated in Theosophy as the teacher of the Jews, and as an initiate of the sacred mysteries of Egypt, although the exoteric Jewish religion is not esteemed to the same degree as other faiths. For example, Blavatsky held that Yahwe was a tribal god and was not at any time conceived of as a universal deity. She rejected the Old Testament's role in Christianity

⁹⁰ See Goodrick-Clarke 1985, e.g. pp. 2, 101, 218f.

⁹¹ 'Leading' in the sense of being the current human biological type best suited to development of the higher senses and, thus, to spiritual progress. Blavatsky continued to believe that people of any type of Indian ancestry were utterly superior to 'white' people on this crucial point. Northern Indians and Central Asians, in particular, soared high above the Western peoples. (Cf. Blavatsky 1910: 1: 635) The ideal Aryans of India, of whom Blavatsky wrote, are not the blond and blue-eyed Teutonic 'Arians' of the Nazis. The latter are a construct of the Austrian Ariosophists who influenced Hitler and key members of the Nazi party. (Cf. Goodrick-Clarke 1985: 2, 192ff)

except to give a setting to the teachings of Jesus. In this respect, Blavatsky reveals a strong Gnostic persuasion.

On the other hand, Blavatsky's early work betrays a heavy influence from Hebrew Kabbalah, which she described as 'Chaldean' and considered to have been adopted by the Jews during their Babylonian captivity. Moreover, as mentioned previously, many of the explanations in *Isis Unveiled* draw on the *Zohar* and other Kabbalistic writings, including Hebrew script and terminology. Blavatsky therefore cannot be written off simply as anti-Semitic. In her overarching plan, the Jews were simply a stubborn and exclusive nation who refused to intermarry with other peoples. They thereby rejected the evolutionary path laid down by the Masters as leaders of humanity and thus no longer formed part of the plan for the rest of humanity, although individual Jews might still successfully pursue studies in their ancient mystery tradition.

Besant largely followed Blavatsky in this argumentation, excluding Judaism from her lectures on the world religions. But her list of religions was certainly also influenced by the fact that she delivered the lectures in India, where Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Sikhism were more commonly encountered. In the 1911 lecture *A World Religion*, given in Glasgow, she gave a list of religions including those of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, including Judaism while excluding Islam, Jainism and Sikhism, which were not a feature of Scottish religious life at that time. Following this, it may also be argued that since Judaism was not a major and commonly encountered religious minority in colonial India, it was left out of Besant's treatment for this reason rather than due to racist exclusivism. Nevertheless, her lecture on Zoroastrianism made the explicit point that clairvoyant examination of the historical records demonstrated that the early Parsis were an Aryan, not a Semitic people.⁹²

In this section I have given a presentation of Annie Besant's view on the purpose and characteristics of the major religious traditions in the world. I have shown how Besant's exposition of the world religions was determined by her conviction that the religious traditions served the very specific purpose of cultivating certain religious virtues in their followers and demonstrating a particular aspect of the human response to the divine reality. Besant argued that a variety of religious traditions was highly desirable, and indeed necessary in order to appeal to all kinds of people, and to provide a religious path for everyone, including those of moral, devotional, intellectual, mystical or occultist

⁹² Cf. Besant 2007a: 55.

temperaments. Besant's overarching concern was to encourage a global climate of positive religious respect and appreciation, into which the new World Teacher might safely appear and work for the establishment of the New World Religion.

6.6 Besant's 'esoteric Christianity'

In this section I shall present Besant's Theosophical interpretation of Christianity, drawing mainly on her book *Esoteric Christianity, or the Lesser Mysteries*⁹³, first published in 1905. It may seem strange that Besant should devote an entire book to the religion she spent most of her early career forcefully dismantling and ridiculing in public lectures and pamphlets, and against which Blavatsky had also raged in her books and articles. However, both women strongly believed that each religious tradition was tied to a specific part of the world and a particular culture, and that Christianity was given by the Masters as the guideline for the people and culture of the West, i.e. Europe and North America. The problem, in their view, was that the genuine teachings of Jesus had been subsumed and distorted by what Blavatsky mockingly called 'Churchianity'. This term implied that the church as an institution was more concerned with amassing wealth and social status for itself rather than exemplifying and teaching people principles of selflessness and neighbourly love. Besant suggested that a fresh interpretation of the true Christian teachings would restore respect and power to the faith of the West.

Once Besant had become a Theosophist, she began to regard Christianity in light of Blavatsky's Theosophical teachings and gradually developed a Theosophical interpretation of the Christian faith, which she called 'esoteric Christianity'. By promoting this view of Christianity, she hoped to reclaim some of the Christian tradition's credibility, which she herself had felt it was desperately lacking in its common popular form. The idea of integrating Christianity into a Theosophical context was not a new idea within the TS. The powerful and charismatic leader of the London Lodge in 1883-4 was Anna Bonus Kingsford (1846-1888), another extraordinary woman of this period. She was a medical doctor, possibly the second English woman to obtain a medical degree, and a convert to Catholicism. Kingsford had desired to turn the London Theosophists toward a more traditionally Western esotericism, uniting the Hermetic philosophy and Gnosticism with Christian mysticism, but A. P. Sinnett had opposed Kingsford by recalling Blavatsky's emphasis on the importance of the Eastern traditions. After the publication of Sinnett's

⁹³ Besant 1914.

influential books, the London Lodge members gravitated to either leader and the Lodge was gradually severed in two with the Sinnett faction eventually forming the majority.

Besant's fundamental claim regarding Christianity, similar to that of the other religions, was that it consisted of an outer, popular teaching, and an inner body of teachings concerning the anthropological and cosmological truths common to all the inner religious teachings of the world's faiths and gathered in the Theosophical teachings. Besant argued firstly that Christianity should have such a body of inner and more complex teachings, in opposition to those who claimed that nothing should be kept secret from anyone and that Christianity must be a faith fully comprehensible to every person. In response to this attitude, Besant claimed the support of Jesus, St Paul and St Clement of Alexandria that pearls be not cast before swine (Matt 7:6) and that there are some religious teachings that are incomprehensible to the less intelligent, but are still of great benefit to the more advanced (1 Cor 2; *Stromata* 1:12⁹⁴). For Besant this was a most crucial point: The current popular Christianity had been reduced to the lowest common denominator as all of the more advanced instruction had been cut away in an attempt to appeal to all people.

While she recognised that even the less intelligent and the immoral must be able to find something to nourish and inspire them in a presentation of the faith, Besant considered it a catastrophic mistake to reduce the legitimate teaching to a level suitable to only those people and to classify anything outside of this as heresy. Although such a limited approach supposedly sprang from a desire for inclusiveness and the spreading of the Gospel, she argued that it had had the effect of alienating people who were capable of grasping greater philosophical notions. Their spiritual growth depended on the challenges involved in living according to an even more advanced moral code, and their intellect was not satisfied with basic and crude interpretations of dogmas.⁹⁵

Besant claimed, again with the support of Jesus, St Paul and a selection of church fathers (the Alexandrians Clement and Origen in particular), that records from early Christianity proved that the Christian faith, like all other traditions in the Theosophical scope, had advanced spiritual teachings or mysteries given to those believers who had grasped the basic moral and religious lessons. They were intellectually capable of understanding more

⁹⁴ Schaff 1885: *Stromata*.

⁹⁵ Cf. Besant 1914: Foreword. This was also Besant's own experience during the period after her marriage. At this time, she struggled to find a way to continue to believe in Christian teachings regarding the nature of God and of the work in the atonement, but was unable to do so inside the orthodoxy of the Anglican Church.

complex notions and morally capable of living a purer form of life.⁹⁶ Besant spent a considerable part of the book (Chapters 2 and 3) establishing the case for the Christian mysteries on the basis of ‘Scripture and tradition’, clearly hoping that her arguments would appeal to churchmen and theologians who would develop her points further and integrate them into their own reflections and teaching.

In the Theosophical evolutionary thinking regarding humanity, the development of the intellect is a crucial factor and a more sophisticated intellect marks a higher degree of evolution. But morality is the deciding factor in matters of occult development and teaching. Repeating Blavatsky’s reservations, Besant stated that the advanced teachings in early Christianity, as in the other mystery traditions, were given privately to individuals or small groups of selected candidates who were morally pure as well as intellectually capable. Besant also believed that knowledge is power, and that the occult knowledge regarding the world and human nature, along with the manipulation of the unseen forces that govern life, gave the possessor power that was too dangerous to put in the hands of immoral or selfish people. She added:

Society [is] already suffering sufficiently at the hands of men whose intellect is more evolved than their conscience.⁹⁷

Besant’s purpose in writing the book was to establish the case for a revival of the mystery tradition within Christianity so that intelligent and morally advanced people would once again feel comfortable in the faith with its practices, doctrines and rituals. In words that closely recall her own experience, she argued:

[People] of strong intellect have been driven out of Christianity by the crudity of the religious ideas set before them, the contradictions in the authoritative teachings, the views as to God, man, and the universe that no trained intelligence could possibly admit.⁹⁸

And as for those who were unable to agree to such a low view of Christ’s teachings:

The rebels were not too bad for their religion; on the contrary, it was the religion that was too bad for them. The rebellion against popular Christianity was due to the awakening and the growth of conscience; it was the conscience that revolted, as well as the intelligence, against teachings dishonouring God and man alike, that represented God as a tyrant, and man as essentially evil, gaining salvation by slavish submission.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Cf. Besant 1914: 38-90.

⁹⁷ Besant 1914: 16.

⁹⁸ Besant 1914: 34.

⁹⁹ Besant 1914: 34.

Besant's main argument in the book was that only a revival of the mystery teaching that used to be a part of the early Christian tradition could ensure the survival of Christianity as the religion of the West, shaping and directing the further evolution of the people and society there.

[The current Christianity] must regain the knowledge it has lost, and again have its mystic and its occult teachings; it must again stand forth as an authoritative teacher of spiritual verities, clothed with the only authority worth anything, the authority of knowledge.¹⁰⁰

In Besant's view, this was the only way in which the disaffected and disappointed intelligent and morally advanced people would honestly be able to call themselves Christians. More importantly, it would enable them to progress further according to the timeless advice and guidance inherent in the mystery teaching, rather than in isolation and by their own devices. In this connection Besant again stressed the importance of the occult teachings and practices in developing the higher senses so that a genuine certain knowledge of the otherwise unseen realms of existence was acquired by the believer.

Besant then argued that a materialistic mindset had made its way into the study of religion via the discipline of comparative mythology, which regarded religions and their beliefs as expressions of "human ignorance and primitive explanations of natural phenomena"¹⁰¹, i.e. an unintelligent substitute for materialistic science. This approach to Christianity also frightened many believers who were convinced by the arguments of the comparative scholars and were not reassured by the churches' response to historical biblical scholarship.¹⁰² Against this background Besant proposed the revival of the Christian mystery teaching as a counterbalance to the materialistic 'science of religion' in comparative mythology.

The rest of the book discusses some of the major dogmas of the Christian faith and analyses them in light of the tenets of the Theosophical Wisdom Religion. Beginning with the doctrine of the atonement (with which Besant struggled early in her life), she covered the incarnation, the resurrection and ascension, the Trinity, prayer, the forgiveness of sins, sacraments and revelation. According to this interpretation, which Besant also found in the practice of the church fathers, dogmas have different levels of meaning. On one level they relate to the life of Jesus. His life story is mirrored in the life stories of other great religious

¹⁰⁰ Besant 1914: 36.

¹⁰¹ Besant 1914: 104.

¹⁰² Cf. Besant 1914: 106. On different church responses to historical biblical criticism, see Cosslett 1984: 1-25.

teachers (for example, Krishna and Buddha) whose original function was to relate astronomical and cosmological information. Jesus and the other teachers represent the sun as a symbol of the Supreme God, and the stories of their lives tell both the story of the sun's travel across the sky over the course of a year (hence the astrological significance of many religious feasts, e.g. Easter and Christmas) and, in allegorical terms, the story of God's activity in creating and sustaining the universe.

On another level the major tenets of Christianity make statements about Jesus as the Christ, which for Besant and Blavatsky are usually a references to the human soul, i.e. that part of a human being in which the divine Spirit connects with our human nature according to the Theosophical anthropology. For a person attuned to this Christ-principle, the essential unity of the spiritual realm is the prevalent feature of interpersonal relations, and Besant equated it with the 'Kingdom of God' of Jesus and the being 'in Christ' of St Paul. She argued that the purpose of the Christian mysteries was to train the believers to cultivate this Christ-nature in themselves by practical and occult means through moral living and a life of prayer and worship. It was through such a life that the spiritual inclination was strengthened through the cultivation of higher emotions such as devotion and idealism.

On this level of meaning, the dogmas of Christianity give information about the progress of the individual soul in spiritual development and the main events in the life of Jesus, when viewed in this perspective, tell of some of the characteristic trials that the initiate in the mysteries will have to pass through on the path toward greater unity with God. As an example, when Jesus cries out on the cross that God has abandoned him, Besant read this passage in the sense that there comes a point on the path of spiritual development when everyone must stop looking to an external deity and will have to rely solely on "the God within", the divine Spirit in us.¹⁰³

Besant's treatment of the notion of scripture as revelation in *Esoteric Christianity* is an expansion on the basic idea presented in the previous section, namely that the religious scriptures of the world are given out of the collective wisdom of the Masters, who periodically send one of their members to the world with a restatement of the Ancient Wisdom teachings concerning humankind and the universe, suited to the current time and the future.¹⁰⁴ In this book, however, Besant also included a statement on scriptural

¹⁰³ Cf. Besant 1914: 164f.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Besant 1914: 320.

hermeneutics, again drawing on the Theosophical beliefs and the practices of the church fathers, particularly Origen.

Following Origen, “one of the sanest men, and versed in occult knowledge”¹⁰⁵, Besant held that scripture has a three-fold meaning, as shown in the example regarding the meaning of the Jesus stories in the Gospels, that corresponds to the Theosophical understanding of the three-fold human nature, body, soul and spirit.¹⁰⁶ The ‘body’ of scripture consists of moral tales that are intended to inspire and direct those of minimal understanding. The ‘soul’ of scripture is found through examination of those inconsistencies in the ‘body’ that pass by the less perceptive unnoticed, but which provoke people of greater understanding to stop and think deeper.

Besant illustrated her argument with the statement from St Paul mentioned earlier:

The things of God knoweth no man but the Spirit of God (...) which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth.¹⁰⁷

Through pondering the soul of scripture, the seeker finds the ‘spirit’ in which the true meaning is contained. This understanding is only available to those who have developed the capacity to grasp spiritual truths. In Besant’s view this capacity refers to the occult development of the hidden senses that Blavatsky also insisted lay at the heart of any real understanding of the world in its natural or spiritual aspects.

6.6.1 Sacraments in Besant’s esoteric Christianity

The two chapters on sacraments contain Besant’s strongest argument for any relevance of Christianity to Theosophists (when they might as well be Theosophists without being Christian), and why esoteric Christianity is relevant to the world at large and to traditional Christians in particular. In Besant’s understanding, the notion of a sacrament and its enactment in a ritual context is precisely the nexus between the seen and unseen realms of reality, the study of which formed the third objective of the TS, and which Blavatsky and Besant had argued was the focus of the mystery traditions of every age.

¹⁰⁵ Besant 1914: 322. In Theosophical circles it was believed that Blavatsky and Besant’s Master M had been Origen in a previous incarnation, so it is not surprising to find Besant quoting this particular theologian so often.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Besant 1914: 322.

¹⁰⁷ 1 Cor 2:11, 13; Besant 1914: 322f.

Using the accepted definition of the Anglican Catechism, Besant defined a sacrament as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ Himself, as a means whereof we receive the same and a pledge to assure us thereof.”¹⁰⁸ The two main elements in a sacrament are thus the outward sign and the communication of a spiritual “grace” to the participants. She reminded Protestants in particular not to regard sacraments merely as forms, but to remember that a real effect was taking place in the enactment of the sacramental event.¹⁰⁹

In Besant’s Theosophical understanding, the sign or form of a sacrament was its exoteric ceremony consisting of words and gestures, and the communication of the spiritual grace was an occult transmutation of a spiritual power made available to participants in the sacrament through the agency of higher beings (i.e. ‘angels’) whose task it is to facilitate the manipulation and transmission of this spiritual energy. For Besant, sacraments were a precious part of the original Christian heritage, and she lamented the loss of respect and recognition of the power of the sacraments in the Reformation churches.¹¹⁰ She believed that all seven sacraments, as practiced by Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, were significant in that they gave special assistance all the way through life, from baptism to the last rites.

In light of Besant’s overall concern to establish the case for Christianity as an occult tradition with important teachings and practices that were relevant in her contemporary context, this strong position on the sacraments is crucial. In her explanations, Besant focused mostly on the sacrament of the Eucharist, although confession, marriage and the last rites are also discussed in the book. She emphasised the implication of the standard definition of a sacrament, i.e. that it effects an actual communication of a spiritual grace, and that without the sacrament that grace would not be communicated to the participants and thus to the world but would remain locked in the higher realms.

In order to help her readers understand why this was so important, Besant explained in some detail the Theosophical understanding of the different planes of being, our physical world belonging to the lowest and most dense. On this view, all matter in the physical world has a vitalising counterpart in what Besant called the etheric plane. This finer etheric

¹⁰⁸ Besant 1914: 284. A recent Anglican catechism defines a sacrament in much the same words, as “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.” (*Anglican Catechism*, Anglicans Online.org)

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Besant 1914: 285.

¹¹⁰ Cf. Besant 1914: 283.

matter contains the life energy of the physical matter and is diffused in it like salt in the sea. In the performance of a sacrament, through the special words spoken and gestures performed, the energy of the etheric plane is changed into a higher and more pure form of energy. This is then distributed through the medium of the denser physical matter involved in the sacrament – the host in the case of the Eucharist, ashes in the case of the old penitential rite, the gold ring in the case of marriage, and the oil in the case of extreme unction.¹¹¹ Through the influence on the etheric substance, other parts of human nature are affected, and emotions and thoughts are purified and become more receptive to higher ideals.¹¹²

A Sacrament serves as a kind of crucible in which spiritual alchemy takes place. (...) the Sacrament forms the last bridge from the invisible to the visible, and enables the energies to be directly applied to those who (...) take part in the Sacrament.¹¹³

For Besant and the Theosophists, a ‘spiritual grace’ was quite a concrete thing, although intangible, and the reception of it would influence the energy of the recipient and strengthen their spiritual tendencies, accelerating their spiritual progress.

The transmutation of the etheric energy of the materials involved into energy of a higher spiritual kind was accomplished through the agency of a higher being, which Besant called an angel. Theosophy operates with a gradation of being beginning with God, through a hierarchy of spiritual intelligences, to humans, animals, plants and minerals, including lower nature spirits. The lower and higher spiritual beings have different energies as their form or ‘body’, and can be perceived by clairvoyant people. Occultists trained in the knowledge of these usually unseen realms of being can communicate with the spiritual beings and manipulate them through the use of sounds, colour and symbolic gestures.

As Besant held that the sacramental rituals of Christianity were established by occultists who knew how to cooperate with these spiritual beings, she claimed that the effects of a sacrament, i.e. the energy transmutation itself, was achieved by these spiritual beings through the use of special words and gestures of power that serve as language in the unseen world. Thus, certain words must be uttered (Besant calls these ‘mantras’), and certain gestures must be performed in order for the spiritual being to know what to do. In relation to this, Besant mentioned the importance of the use of Latin in the (old) Roman Catholic Mass, as the succession of sounds produced in the pronunciation of the set phrases give the

¹¹¹ Cf. Besant 1914: 294ff.

¹¹² Cf. Besant 1914: 297.

¹¹³ Besant 1914: 283.

effect in the higher worlds that a direct translation of the verbal meaning of the phrases does not convey at all.¹¹⁴

6.6.2 A Theosophical view of liturgy in the Liberal Catholic Church

This very strong position on sacraments led to the formation of two institutions that were related to the TS during Besant's leadership: The Order of Universal Co-Masonry, a mixed-sex Masonic order after the Scottish rite with full ritual and regalia, and the Liberal Catholic Church (LCC) with complete liturgy and clergy. In this section I shall show how Besant and Leadbeater's thinking about the sacraments and the inner Christian teachings were expressed in the liturgy of the Liberal Catholic Church. I shall not discuss the Co-Masonic Order further, except to say that Leadbeater believed that the same "work" of occult transformation was being accomplished through both the Masonic rite and in the Christian liturgy of the LCC.

The Liberal Catholic Church was established in 1916 as an off-shoot of the Old Catholic movement in Britain. The movement consisted of a number of European schismatic Catholic churches that had united in opposition to Rome in the 1870's because of the introduction of the dogma of papal infallibility. Archbishop A. H. Mathew of the Old Catholic Church ordained C. W. Leadbeater to the priesthood in 1913 (although Leadbeater was already an Anglican priest prior to becoming a Theosophist), as he had ordained several other Theosophists, some of whom had also been made Bishops. The LCC could thus claim apostolic succession through the Old Catholic Church.

In 1916, Bishop J. I. Wedgwood (of the Wedgwood china family and who was also Grand Secretary of the Theosophical Co-Masonic Order) consecrated C. W. Leadbeater as bishop, and the two bishops together established the Liberal Catholic Church. The main focus of the LCC was liturgical celebrations, especially of the Mass according to the rite developed by Wedgwood and Leadbeater and described in Leadbeater's 600-page work *The Science of the Sacraments* from 1920.¹¹⁵ The liturgy was very traditional, based on the Roman Catholic Mass of the sixteenth-century Tridentine Rite, but in the vernacular. The LCC did not require its members to hold any particular beliefs as long as they honestly desired to serve "the living Christ". Belief in reincarnation was also allowed. Branches of the LCC still exist today and it is mostly active in America.¹¹⁶ The different branches of the church

¹¹⁴ Cf. Besant 1914: 291.

¹¹⁵ Leadbeater 1929 [1920].

¹¹⁶ See the LCC website, <http://www.thelcc.org/>

remain largely conservative with respect to liturgy, but some are highly liberal in other matters. For example, the current leader of the British Province of the LCC is a female Archbishop¹¹⁷, and the church encourages dialogue with mystical schools of other religious traditions as it believes that all major religious traditions are divinely inspired and come from a common source.¹¹⁸

In *The Science of the Sacraments*, Leadbeater explained the liturgy of the LCC with emphasis on the effect it has on the inner worlds. In other words, the book presents a clairvoyant's view of the celebration of the Mass, and it is richly illustrated with sketches of the effects of the ritual. The liturgical form of the original LCC Mass closely follows the Roman Catholic Tridentine form, but the wording of some elements have been changed and the entire liturgy is translated into the vernacular, as stated above. This at first seems to contradict Besant's statement that 'words of power' lose their efficacy when translated into another language, but she did make the reservation that true occultists could make translations that also conveyed the power into a new language. Leadbeater did not mention this reservation, but instead repeatedly emphasised the importance of the participants' understanding of what is taking place in the ritual because their understanding adds to their concentration and devotion, which in turn increases the energy present in the event and the result of the liturgical celebration.

Leadbeater's main argument in the book was that he, as a clairvoyant, had seen the inner effect of the celebration of the Mass. This is a huge outpouring of divine spiritual energy, not only on the clergy and participants, but on the entire neighbourhood in a wide area around the church. He claimed that this outpouring was indeed the main purpose of the celebration of the Mass and the institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist, which Christ taught to his disciples after his death and resurrection. This later notion comes from the Gnostic treatise *Pistis Sophia*, which also played a large part in Blavatsky's and Besant's interpretation of Christianity. Following this tradition, the true Eucharistic celebration as an occult ritual originated in the mystical teaching of the risen Christ and not from the Passover stories in the Gospels, which are regarded as symbolical accounts. And the Mass as such is a channel for divine energy, and the purpose of this energy is to stimulate the spiritual progress of humankind.

¹¹⁷ Senior Pro Vice Chancellor of Winchester University, Prof Elizabeth Stuart.

¹¹⁸ See Website of the British province of the LCC: <http://www.liberalcatholic.org.uk/>;
<http://www.crossdenominationalmission.org.uk/liberalcatholic.html/>

Leadbeater meticulously explained how every step of the liturgy forms part of a process that accomplishes this outpouring of divine energy, down to details and diagrams of how to plan the layout of a church building and how the clergy should vest themselves to promote the optimal flow of the energies released. As mentioned already, he also made it very clear that the participation of the people present, showing an appropriate attitude of devotion and concentration, was of crucial importance to the result of the celebration. The congregation was encouraged to sing with the clergy; with a vernacular liturgy they could understand every word and more easily adopt the right state of mind.

To Leadbeater's clairvoyant vision, negative emotions appeared as dark, dull colours that diminished the positive effects of emotions and intentions of joy, hope and charity. For this reason, he and Bishop Wedgwood changed the text of the original Catholic liturgy to avoid passages that unduly emphasised sin and the corruption of human nature, guilt, fear, and the wrath of God, and replaced some traditional formulae with more positive and affirmative ones.

The celebration of the Mass is accomplished through the agency of one or more great angels, who manage the energy invoked, concentrate and refine it guided by the actions of the priest (codified from ancient times in certain words and gestures of power)¹¹⁹, and finally release it at the Eucharist and again at the Benediction. In the consecration of the host, Leadbeater described a huge pillar of white spiritual energy streaming down from above and causing the little disc to radiate like the sun in the hands of the priest. Transubstantiation occurs as the higher nature of the bread (all physical objects having counterparts in the higher realms) is changed into a piece of God, as it were.¹²⁰ In communion, this fragment of high spiritual matter enters the energy system of the individual communicant and strengthens their spiritual qualities, while the entire Mass celebration does the same for the whole region in which the church is located.

Leadbeater's treatment of the purpose and function of the liturgy is descriptive and systematic. He presented the features of the different parts of the Mass celebration in great detail, supplemented with accounts by another clairvoyant LCC priest in Holland who made similar observations. The terminology of the book is 'scientific' and precise: The Mass sets up a "mechanism" for the distribution of spiritual energy¹²¹; the angel builds a Eucharistic thought-form more accurately than any team of human engineers; the flow of

¹¹⁹ Cf. Leadbeater 1929: 153.

¹²⁰ Cf. Leadbeater 1929: 209f.

¹²¹ Leadbeater 1929: 4.

forces through the church decorations and items of vestments are described minutely with illustrations¹²²; and the title of the book itself also emphasises that this approach to Christian worship is a rational and logical form of worship and service, based on scientific occult knowledge of the application and flow of forces directed intelligently and with the right intention.

This emphasis distances itself from a vague, mystical, emotional Christianity, typically understood as feminine, and reclaims the holy sacrifice of the Mass in imitation of the ‘sacrifice’ of God in the creation of the world. It is a (literally) forceful, intelligent, masculine form of worship, the purpose of which is active participation in the service of God (through the distribution of the spiritual force invoked in the ritual) rather than passive observation of the work of the clergy.

In this section I have presented Annie Besant’s Theosophical interpretation of Christianity, which she hoped would give disaffected Christians in the West a fresh perspective on the faith that he believed was divinely intended to guide the development of Western culture. The case of Christianity illustrates Besant’s approach to religious traditions in general, emphasising their purpose as guidelines given by the Masters as possessors of a true understanding of the divine will for the development of the nations of the world. Through application of the hermeneutical principles of Blavatsky and comparison with common features in the different major religious traditions, Besant argued that each tradition expresses one characteristic way of relating to the divine. Therefore all the religions taken together give a more complete picture of the possible human responses to the spiritual reality.

Through her partnership with clairvoyant Theosophist C. W. Leadbeater, Besant offered a ‘scientific’ basis for the teachings of the TS, supported by Leadbeater’s observations. I have argued that while the TS flourished and reached its highest membership worldwide during Besant’s leadership, the clairvoyant investigations published by Leadbeater and Besant did not accomplish their intended purpose of converting materialists back to a more open-minded understanding of the world in which religion was regarded as a source of knowledge about the physical world. In fact, Theosophists also became uneasy about the results of the occult science, which in their eyes took on the nature of doctrine, and during the 1930’s the membership of the Society began a steady decline.

¹²² Cf. Leadbeater 1929: 480ff.

6.7 Conclusion

Annie Besant's career has been the focus of this chapter as a whole, with a particular emphasis on her concern for the problem of materialism in science, which was also the focus of much of Blavatsky's work. In presenting Besant's biography I have argued that she fitted the ideal character of those whom Blavatsky desired to win for her cause. A disillusioned Christian, Besant had become an atheist and a spokesperson for materialistic science until she realised that the atheistic position did not satisfy her need for a deeper sense of the meaning of life and a focus for global human brotherhood. In the Theosophical teachings Besant found what she had desired.

The points made with regard to Blavatsky in the conclusion of the previous chapter apply to Annie Besant as well. She also believed that occult spiritual insights obtained in deep religious experiences were superior to any knowledge produced through empirical research methods limited by a materialistic worldview. She lived for many years in India and encouraged the native population to appreciate their own faith traditions rather than simply conform to the Christian values and practices of the colonial rulers.

A particular characteristic of Besant's career, in contrast to Blavatsky's, was the heavily political emphasis. From her earliest independent work Besant had been interested in influencing the political and social environment, first in England and later in India. As described in Chapter 2, in the prevailing discourse women were classified in the same categories as native populations, religious superstition and private concerns. Besant refused to respect this segregation and lived a decidedly political life as a public female politician, affirming the rationality and political potential of native Indian traditions, based on a religious framework inspired by Blavatsky's Theosophy.

These influences shaped Annie Besant's understanding of religion and the relationship between the major religious traditions in a particular way that shares certain features with the more recent pluralist view of religion as presented by John Hick and Alan Race. I shall discuss these similarities, and the differences between the approaches, in the following chapter.

7 Variations of religious pluralism

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss questions arising from the different theories of religion presented in the previous four chapters. I have focused my previous analysis of these theories on their appeal to religious experience, aspects of the debate about science and religion in the nineteenth century, and the influence of ideas originating in the esoteric traditions of Tantra and Hermeticism. I have chosen these theories of religion in my analyses because their attitudes to other religious traditions in different ways display elements that I have characterised as pluralistic (see Chapter 2). Thus, the purpose of this discussion is to examine these early approaches to pluralistic thinking in light of some questions raised about religious pluralism in recent debates.

Addressing those questions using the religious ideas of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Besant, I have been mindful of Edward Said's critique of orientalism and the postcolonial critique of the concept of religion developed on the basis of Said's insights. The central point of these critical perspectives is a radical awareness of the embeddedness of ideas. This critique reminds us that notions of truth, knowledge and experience, including religious concepts, come to have meaning only in a particular setting and for particular people. This point is complemented by a hermeneutical critique of experience. The hermeneutical position insists that the form and content of individual experience, including religious experience, emerges in the encounter between the experiencing person and the experienced reality. Thus, both ideas and experience do not in themselves possess any "objective" meanings but are given a particular meaning in relation to the person encountering them. In my analysis of the religious ideas of these four thinkers I have tried to take this insight into account. Thus, my presentation of their ideas is an attempt to reconstruct the concerns that may have informed the creation of these early pluralistic ideas.

In the first part of the subsequent discussion I begin by characterising the pluralistic elements in the work of each of the four thinkers in order to explain the individual purpose for the presentation of such ideas according to their own historical and ideological context. This is done through a discussion of the positions of the four thinkers in relation to the themes of religious experience, science and religion and influences from esoteric traditions. In the second part of the discussion I address

questions arising from the recent debate on pluralism and interreligious dialogue to the ideas of Ramakrishna *et al.* in order to highlight similarities and differences as well as ongoing concerns in the discussion of interreligious issues.

7.2 The meaning and role of religious experience in the four theories of religion

7.2.1 *Experience of transcendent reality as a source of true knowledge*

Part of my argument in this study is that these early pluralistic ideas about religion and the relationship between different religious traditions grew out of particular historical contexts in which specific issues and questions were part of the public conversation about religion and its role in a budding technological society. I have chosen to focus on the debate about religion and science and the authority of scientific *versus* religious knowledge, in order to emphasise this point. The summaries below demonstrate the ways in which the four thinkers responded differently to this situation, from the vague awareness of the issue in Ramakrishna's teachings to the direct confrontation in Blavatsky's books.

Ramakrishna's teachings were focused on the 'realisation' of God. In the Vedantic context, in which his followers presented his life and work, this refers to a state of profound unity of the individual soul with ultimate reality. In this state of oneness the experiencing subject gains awareness of the nature of the ultimate, i.e. a kind of knowledge about absolute things, including knowledge of human nature as well as of the natural world. As I have suggested above in Chapter 3, Ramakrishna was not directly concerned with, or perhaps even aware of, the science and religion debate that was ongoing in Western societies. Nevertheless, his teachings imply that in the highest state of realisation, *samadhi*, humans are capable of attaining true knowledge about absolute things. I have argued that this position, however unconscious, contradicts the fundamental terms of the science and religion debate, namely that the realms of science and religion represented two separate areas of human experience and knowledge. Science is thus portrayed as 'rational' and religion as 'irrational' or 'non-rational'. For Ramakrishna, the knowledge obtained in religious experiences had the potential to grant insight into the self, the divine and the world; the pursuit of such knowledge was for him, therefore, a rational undertaking.

Vivekananda followed this line of thinking by locating the notion of realisation at the heart of religion and of human endeavours to know things of the highest significance. He believed that Indian traditions, and Advaita Vedanta in particular, possessed techniques as well as the necessary perspective to understand the importance of realisation that was superior to any other school of thought. He used this insight in his own discussion of the religion and science debate, and argued that the West, representing science, rational knowledge and technology, must complement its intellectual insights with the Eastern knowledge of spiritual things. For Vivekananda, the spiritual knowledge of the East (again, particularly the insights of Advaita Vedanta) was required in order to make proper use of non-spiritual knowledge. He believed that the affluent West, due to its lack of spiritual knowledge, did not know the right way to use its wealth, while the poor East lacked the means to materialise the high spiritual ideals present in its religious heritage. Regarding knowledge, Vivekananda placed less emphasis than Ramakrishna on the unifying potential of spiritual insights obtained in religious experience. Instead, he emphasised the complementary nature of intellectual and spiritual insights, and the different approaches to life and social organisation following from each.

Of the four thinkers investigated here, Blavatsky was most directly involved in the religion and science debate. She argued against what she regarded as a false separation of the areas of science and religion. Instead she proposed that religious traditions contained sophisticated hidden or 'occult' teachings that revealed a deep knowledge about the world, ranging from a huge cosmological scale down to the intimate processes of the human mind. Through intense practice of occult techniques some people were able to refine their perception so much that they could experience the higher nature of reality and glimpse pure unmediated truth. For those less advanced, the myths and dogmas of the religions could be interpreted to reveal lower degrees of this hidden knowledge. In her books she gave examples of how occult knowledge surpassed the findings of contemporary science and thus how 'religious' knowledge also yielded knowledge about the world.

Besant began her public career as an atheist and teacher of science. When she later read Blavatsky's books, she felt that she had been missing the right perspective through which to understand the relationship between empirical science and religious knowledge. Following this epiphany, she adopted Blavatsky's position in which occultism encompassed both traditional religious knowledge as well as results of

modern scientific inquiry. Besant taught that the truth of this scheme could be asserted through personal practice of the Theosophical teachings. Unlike her mentor, who had argued for the general acknowledgement of the validity of religious insights, Besant was particularly concerned with the positive social effects of religious values and the personal transformation that the Theosophical understanding of religion emphasised. In this respect, she continued her role as public educator and activist even though her basis had changed from a strictly secular view to a religious one.

The recourse of these positions to religious experience as means of knowledge raises important questions. In the first instance it is necessary to consider the question of the limits of human encounter with transcendent reality with which all four positions are concerned. What is transcendent reality in these four perspectives? How and to what extent is it possible for human beings to experience it, perceive it and understand it? Following these questions, I discuss how, for Ramakrishna *et al.*, the deep religious experience of encountering transcendent reality constitutes a kind of knowledge. I shall also examine the status of this kind of knowledge compared to empirical scientific knowledge. Finally, I shall discuss what the four thinkers considered to be the *meaning* of encounter with transcendent reality.

7.2.2 The meaning of ‘transcendent reality’ for the four thinkers

All four thinkers referred to transcendent reality. It is variously called ‘God’, ‘the ultimate reality’, ‘the absolute’, ‘the divine’ or other similar terms. Since their concern was not with philosophy but with the engagement of ordinary humans in the practicing of their own religions, they did not present any full philosophical account of this reality, but drew instead on their own sources of inspiration in order to hint at its nature. Thus, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda often talked about it as ‘the ultimate reality’, a standard Vedantic term, while Blavatsky and Besant usually referred to ‘God’ because their readers were mostly Westerners with a Christian background. Despite this difference in terminology, all four thinkers conceived of transcendent reality in a similar way and it played a similar role in their teachings. I suggest that the notion of transcendent reality was used in these four theories of religion as a means to illustrate the full potential of the human being. In this sense, the four thinkers understood transcendent reality as a kind of hyper-consciousness, or the perfect self-awareness of the highest possible being. This idea, which is present in the thought of all four people, resonates both with Indian

philosophical notions and with the Hermetic idea of humans as microcosms in a larger macrocosm.

On the basis of this understanding of the transcendent reality as a kind of absolute consciousness, Ramakrishna's and Vivekananda's focus on 'realisation' meant in one sense the achievement of unity of the individual soul with this unlimited consciousness. However, the achievement of this was a highly advanced stage of spiritual progress, which the majority of people were not expected to pursue. Both Indians taught that there were degrees of realisation, from which degrees of insight into the nature of the transcendent resulted. They believed that through the practice of religious techniques taught in all religions, though most completely in the Vedanta, people could gradually develop their capacity for realisation, growing in understanding of the transcendent reality and their own place as a human being in relation to it.

Blavatsky, followed by Besant, gave a similar but slightly different perspective on this question. On the one hand she wrote about 'God' or 'the divine' as an impersonal reality with which it was possible to merge through the most advanced spiritual exercises. Blavatsky thought of the entire cosmos as a kind of gradation of being and consciousness in which different kinds of beings occupied different bands or strata. The highest levels were completely inaccessible to humans, and she therefore refrained from writing about them. Below this inaccessible reality, however, lay the realm of the 'spiritual', which she believed was a state of consciousness through which all humans were essentially linked in the core of their being, or 'spirit'.

This notion of the 'spirit' was crucial for Blavatsky's understanding of humans' relation to the divine reality. Drawing on Eastern ideas in combination with Christian and Hermetic thought, she located the 'spiritual' reality at a higher level than that of the intellect and its concepts and categories, and therefore accessible only through the intuition. As explained in Chapter 5, she believed that the intuition represented a faculty higher than the intellect, and possessed the ability to glimpse a non-intellectual reality beyond merely mental ideas. The intuition was able to communicate a hint of the Platonic ideas to the intellect, i.e. the divine forms of things, which in the prisms of human minds were refracted into so many different meanings. For Blavatsky, as for Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, this 'higher' reality of the spiritual realm as glimpsed through the intuition provided a perspective for the right understanding of the cosmos and the self, and their essential relationship as different kinds of consciousness.

7.2.3 Encounter with transcendent reality as a source of knowledge

On the basis of such an understanding of the transcendent, divine or spiritual reality, we may answer the question of how encounters with divine reality constitute a kind of knowledge. All four thinkers believed that encounters with divine reality went beyond a merely intellectual experience and drew on a higher human faculty, which they called the soul or spirit.¹ Nevertheless, they acknowledged that the intellect always played a significant part in human experience, and although it was incapable of fully grasping the insights of the spiritual realm, it made its own interpretations of those insights. These resulting interpretations varied according to interpreters, although the similarities of many of the world's religious teachings constituted a solid argument for why this model of perception was basically true. The four acknowledged that it was impossible to express fully the highest truths about reality in the words of the limited human intellect, but they also believed that serious religious teachings contained hints at these truths that were as close to expressing the truth as was humanly possible. Indeed, Blavatsky's argument for why all religions should be discussed and compared openly was proposed precisely in order to form a kind of consensus about these common teachings concerning spiritual things, drawn from the collective religious knowledge of the world.

In this sense, the four thinkers believed that the knowledge of transcendent reality obtained through religious experience did in fact contain knowledge of that reality, although only in an indefinite and incomplete way. This is because the experience was mediated through the human intellect which was not equipped to comprehend spiritual truths fully. However, these incomplete ideas were still considered useful contributions to the understanding of the world and human affairs, especially when compared with other accounts of the same things.

The four thinkers pointed out that the materialistic worldview implied a limited view of human understanding and held empirical facts and rational deductions to be the most complete forms of knowledge. They believed that this view neglected the most important insight from religions, namely that humans possessed a mysterious core of being which was inexpressible in words, but which the religious traditions of the world had tried to conceptualise and express ever since the earliest human cultures. They

¹ Confusingly, all four thinkers often used 'soul' and 'spirit' interchangeably, but other times with reference to distinct aspects of human nature. However, since they understood the faculty of the intuition as the mediator between the mind and any higher realms of experience, it is not strictly speaking necessary to distinguish between the two in this context.

therefore regarded purely materialistic philosophies as dehumanising and dangerous to the future progress of the world. I have argued that this concern provided the basis for their arguments against materialism as well as for Blavatsky's direct participation in the science and religion debate.

7.2.4 *The meaning of human encounters with transcendent reality*

The four thinkers suggested that deep religious experience yielded a kind of knowledge that was not only complementary to empirical scientific facts, but also provided the right perspective from which to understand and apply empirical knowledge. In one sense, this was a moral perspective, as Besant warned that what the world needed was not more intellectual knowledge but the conscience to use it for the benefit of all humanity. In another sense, it was much more than a moral perspective because its appeal to a realm of divine meaning provided a model according to which human private and social affairs could be arranged in the best possible way, with the ultimate aim of encouraging the development of an increasingly spiritually oriented humanity. I am suggesting that it was in order to further this purpose that they, in different ways, argued for a pluralist approach to religion in which the insights from other traditions were taken seriously as religious insights of real significance.

Because of this emphasis in their teachings, the final issue requiring clarification is therefore what the four thinkers believed the *meaning* of an encounter with this transcendent or spiritual reality was. In discussing this issue I shall focus on the notion of 'realisation' which was so central to the message of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and which was also at the heart of Blavatsky and Besant's teachings, although they used other words to describe it. In this respect the Theosophical call to a dedicated practice of one's religion is similar to what the two Indians meant by realisation, since both notions refer to what the four thinkers believed was the goal and purpose of religious practice for the individual.

In this discussion of the meaning of religious experience for the four thinkers I draw upon the notion of subjectivity, which provides a useful perspective for understanding a central concern in the teachings of Ramakrishna *et al.* The notion of subjectivity implies that any sense or experience of self is only established in encounter with and relation to an other. This basic insight holds true for interpersonal relationships, but it is also highly significant in religious reflections in which a notion of God or some kind of

reality beyond the individual person is postulated as a possible partner for encounter.² When applying 'subjectivity' in this sense to the religious teachings of Ramakrishna, Blavatsky and their followers, which all include a notion of God as a higher kind or realm of consciousness, deep religious experience becomes a situation in which a person has the possibility of becoming their 'true' self or the best possible self they could be. If the encounter with a human other brings awareness of one's self as a human being, how much more must even a partially understood encounter with transcendent being bring a sense of the immense potential of human nature and personality.

The religious theories of the four thinkers all espouse a notion of God as an unlimited consciousness or reality with which humans are capable of having a real relationship because they are endowed with a 'spirit' that is part of this reality. In this relationship God is the radical other. For the four thinkers this did not mean that God was radically different from created beings but that in the encounter with this radical other, human beings became their true selves, i.e. who they were 'supposed' to be in themselves or in a right relationship with others. Because all four thinkers believed that the 'spirit' that all humans possessed was somehow part of the divine reality, the essence of 'spiritual' life was for them a life of profound relationality to other people.

I propose that this is the meaning of 'realisation' for all four thinkers: becoming the full potential of human being in the encounter with transcendent reality as radical other. This understanding of realisation supports the above argument about why the four appealed to religious experience as a kind of knowledge. Apart from insights into the nature of divine reality, this knowledge also provided the right perspective for the use of other types of knowledge to pursue a truly human existence in relationship with others. Because of this strongly relational aspect, Vivekananda and Besant, in particular, emphasised that religious ideals must be made manifest in a social and political context and bear real fruit among people.

In summary, in this discussion of the role of religious experience in the teachings of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Besant, I have argued that they all described transcendent or divine reality as a kind of ultimate consciousness. Human beings participated in this by virtue of possessing a part of it, i.e. the 'spirit' or 'soul'. I further argued that the four thinkers believed that experience of this higher reality resulted in true knowledge, even though it was mediated incompletely through the human intellect

² See, for example, Jeanrond 2010a: 52 and 2010b.

which was incapable of grasping the full reality of the higher ideas. More importantly, however, religious experience had the potential for providing a new perspective on human existence, knowledge and understanding. In the encounter with the greater reality beyond the bounds of ordinary consciousness, the self-understanding of religious experiencers was radically altered and their outlook on themselves, the world and the whole cosmos took on a new meaning. I have argued that this transformation is what the four thinkers meant by ‘realisation’ as the goal of religious practice, and that it was central to their teachings because of its potential to integrate ordinary and religious knowledge into a single worldview in which religious ideals shaped human activity in the world.

7.2.5 The influence of esoteric ideas on the development of pluralist notions of religion

As I have argued above in Chapter 2, Ramakrishna and Blavatsky’s background in esoteric traditions may have contributed to their development of theories of religion containing pluralistic elements. In this section I shall briefly summarise and discuss the conclusions of each chapter with respect to the role of esotericism in the theories of religion proposed by each of the four thinkers.

Concerning Ramakrishna’s teachings, I have argued that there is a likely connection between the Tantric principle of the ‘left-hand path’ and his decision to experiment with other religious traditions. It appears that the motivation for his unusual endorsement of other traditions was inspired by the Tantric insight that the highest realisation may be achieved through the most humble or disregarded means. This principle is also present in other systems of esotericism, as shown in Chapter 2, and I have found it recurring in the thinking of Blavatsky and Besant. Because of the strong taboo surrounding Tantra in India, Vivekananda decided to change the framework for his master’s teachings from a Tantric to an Advaita Vedantic one in order to make his message more appealing to both native and foreign listeners. In doing so, he nevertheless maintained Ramakrishna’s central insight that uncommon means might lead to the same end as traditional ones, and he made this insight the basis of his advocacy for a theory of religion in which other traditions were also considered to be paths to genuine realisation.

Esoteric ideas played a central role in Blavatsky’s work. Similarly to Ramakrishna, but inspired by the Hermetic maxim ‘as above, so below’, she believed in a fundamental

correspondence between humanity, the world and the realm of the divine. This belief motivated her to participate in the debate on science and religion and she argued that the two realms were different and complementary approaches to the quest to understand human existence. She believed that certain teachings originating in the ancient cultures of the world contained a common core of knowledge regarding the true meaning of religious dogmas, as well as knowledge about cosmological events. She called this body of teachings 'esoteric' because it was present as a hidden inner meaning in the obvious doctrines and practices of the different world religions. Annie Besant adopted Blavatsky's basic idea that esoteric philosophy and occult practice provided the link between religion and science. From this position she set out, with her clairvoyant colleague C. W. Leadbeater, to establish the practical and logistical framework for the further promotion and implementation of these ideas.

The study of esotericism is a rapidly growing field of scholarship, but current debates in religion only rarely engage with the insights its scholars have achieved. In this study I have pointed out possible areas in which esoteric ideas may have influenced the development of the religious teachings of Ramakrishna and Blavatsky and their followers. The main question raised by this suggestion is, of course, whether esoteric traditions in general or in particular really do contain ideas that lead in the direction of pluralist religious views, or whether the connections I have pointed out are merely coincidences which apply only to the cases of Ramakrishna and Blavatsky. Addressing this questions is beyond the scope of this thesis and is a matter for scholars of esoteric traditions to resolve. However, I wish to emphasise that serious engagement with questions of esotericism has the potential to provide some new and surprising insights for the study of religion in general.

7.3 Variations of religious pluralism

In the preceding chapters I have argued that the teachings on the relationship between religions given by Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Besant share similarities with current notions of religious pluralism. In the most general sense, what these early approaches have in common is that they in some way legitimise several religious traditions as genuine means to a religious end, although whether this end is the same or different in these religious traditions is not clear. As discussed in Chapter 2, the notion

of religious pluralism has been subject to severe criticism on many accounts, particularly when it has been proposed as a neutral category that may be applied unproblematically to different religious traditions.

Against this claim, critics have pointed out that pluralism itself is a contingent or context-dependent notion that inextricably relies on a set of assumptions regarding the ultimate goals of different religious traditions, human nature and its relation to the rest of the world. However, I have argued that it is still meaningful to speak of theories of religion having pluralist characteristics insofar as, at the very least, they acknowledge that different religious traditions may equally be paths to genuine religious ends. In some cases of pluralism, such as the ones examined in this study, this minimal requirement is extended to include the claim that what may appear to be different religious ends in fact constitute the same transcendent reality to which all humans *qua* humans are essentially and intimately related.

Below I shall summarise the positions of the four thinkers in order to clarify the particular characteristics of their theories of religion and in what way it may be meaningful to speak of them as pluralistic. After summarising their positions I shall discuss them in relation to some of the fundamental questions in the pluralism debate. My questions are: What characterises the ideas of the four thinkers as pluralistic? What is the ‘goal’ or ‘goals’ of religions according to these pluralist schemes, and are all religions equally ‘effective’ in reaching it or them? What purpose do pluralistic claims serve in these four theories? Finally, I shall describe in more general terms my findings regarding the pluralistic elements in the work of the four thinkers.

7.3.1 Ramakrishna

As shown in Chapter 3, Ramakrishna embraced and practiced other religious paths without reserve, to the extent he believed necessary in order to ‘prove’ them true by attaining the realisation of God through the means prescribed by each tradition. For Ramakrishna the goal of religious belief and practice was this ‘realisation’ of union between the individual soul and the Ultimate Reality. From the time of his early career, when he had an overwhelming unitive experience of *brahman* through devotion to the goddess Kali, he sought other ways of recreating this experience through the means of other religious traditions, within native Indian forms as well as foreign ones such as Christianity and Islam. Through these remarkable and unusual exercises, Ramakrishna

wished to demonstrate beyond doubt to both himself and others that the realisation of God was indeed possible in all the religions and traditions he had personally tried.

From this, we may conclude that Ramakrishna held the ultimate reality, *brahman*, to be a unified reality in which it was possible to participate through different means, although the experience of the participation might differ according to the abilities or capacities of the experiencers and also according to the means by which they sought participation. However, it is important to note that, according to Ramakrishna, the realisation attained through different paths was not the same regardless of which path was chosen. For example, Ramakrishna identified the realisation attained through the practice of Christianity and the veneration of Jesus as a distinct encounter with ‘Brahman with attributes’, or *saguna brahman*. The realisation attained through the practice of Islam was different in kind, namely an encounter with ‘Brahman without attributes’, or *nirguna brahman*. Ramakrishna was familiar with both states through his previous experience in various indigenous Indian traditions.

The formless *nirguna brahman* state is usually considered to be a ‘higher’ or more complete state of realisation in the Advaita Vedanta school, describing a state in which the conceptual consciousness has been transcended and a pure state of unity with the divine occurs. However, Ramakrishna regarded both *saguna* and *nirguna* states as genuine realisations and neither he nor his followers, who otherwise did not refrain from interpreting their master’s experiences to show the superiority of the Vedantic philosophy, made any attempt to grade the different religions on the basis of the quality of realisation that Ramakrishna had attained.

In light of the meticulous editing that was involved in the publication of Ramakrishna’s teachings, this point is truly remarkable. Had they wanted to emphasise the superiority of Vedanta, it would have been easy for his followers to emphasise the difference in kind between the ‘realisations’ attained through the various religions. They could then simply have ranked the religions according to efficiency, with Vedantic practice at the pinnacle. The fact that they did not do this suggests that the followers of Ramakrishna chose to emphasise what I have called the pluralist nature of his teachings when presenting his insights, i.e. his belief that all religious teachings, as far as he had tested them, did provide a possibility for realisation of the divine reality and that this was what mattered.

This may give us a hint as to the greater purpose of Ramakrishna's pluralistic teachings. It seems that his pluralist adventure originated in the experience of the Kali vision. Thus, it was from the beginning a personal quest to discover all the possible ways to attain similar experiences by testing the claims of other religions. The other strong emphasis in Ramakrishna's teachings, to his closest disciples as well as to the general public, was the danger of 'woman-and-gold', i.e. a warning against the attractions of a materialistic and pleasure-seeking worldview. The call to live life with a spiritual focus is therefore made universally relevant to people of all faiths when combined with a pluralist perspective. I would suggest that Ramakrishna, perhaps inspired by the poet Kabir and Emperor Akbar, conceived a pluralist vision of religion in which all faiths called their followers to the same ultimate end.

The particular focus of the pluralist element of Ramakrishna's teachings is on discovering what unites the different religions. His emphasis on 'realisation' shows that he believed that this unitive element of religion was the common ultimate reality, *brahman*, which could be reached through the different paths offered by the world's religious traditions. The role of this claim was to motivate people not only of his own persuasion, but also from other religious traditions, to live a life oriented to a spiritual end, and he made this view part of his teachings in order to give them a potentially universal significance. This potential was immediately recognised by Vivekananda, who then took upon himself the task of manifesting Ramakrishna's vision.

7.3.2 Vivekananda

In Chapter 4 I identified the two themes of unity and diversity that structure Vivekananda's theory of religion. In this dual perspective, religious phenomena may be regarded from a point of unity or diversity, with different, though related, meanings. Vivekananda believed that the ultimate reality of *brahman* is one, and that this fundamental unity underlies the entire universe, including our varied experience of it. The diversity of human experience accounts for the various religions and their many beliefs and practices. In his view, humans have a limited capacity to grasp the fullness of the transcendent truth, except in glimpses that are perceived and interpreted according to our individual abilities and preconceptions.

As I have suggested, Vivekananda's understanding of caste may have been a model for what I have called his pluralistic religious ideas. In his conception of caste, people are 'destined' or born to belong to different groups (whether castes or faiths) and ultimately

fulfil their duty or arrive at the intended goal in different ways. These groups are ranked according to their spiritual quality, as the original Vedic Purusha-myth justifies the creation of the Brahmin caste from a part of the Purusha higher or more inherently worthy than the lower parts from which the other castes originate. However, in his speeches and writings Vivekananda was emphatic that the ideal image rarely applies to actual practice, as for example in his scathing condemnations of lazy, greedy Brahmins who leech off of the faithful and do not live up to the spiritual responsibility belonging to their status as Brahmins. He stated that ‘spiritual Brahmins’, as a type of people capable of the highest realisation, might come from all castes, and by extrapolation from all religious traditions.

In his teachings specifically concerning the different religious traditions and their relation to ultimate liberation, Vivekananda was somewhat ambiguous. He simultaneously claimed both the essential equality of the major religions, when followed seriously, and the superiority of Indian spiritual teachings, particularly those found in the Advaita Vedanta school. I have argued that this ambiguity stems from the fact that his mission was a double mission with at once a religious and a political aspect, which he could not separate. The clear religious message of Vivekananda was to encourage people to practice their faith seriously regardless of their tradition. But his political objective was to empower the people of India by stirring up pride in their indigenous heritage, emphasising in particular the ancient philosophical and religious systems originating on the subcontinent. Confusingly, these two messages often occurred in the course of the same speech or lecture.

In Chapter 2 I have explained that I define religious pluralism differently from the use of the term found in the discussions of Alan Race’s so-called three-fold typology. Thus, I am not concerned with the question of whether or not Vivekananda is a ‘pluralist’ or an ‘inclusivist’ according to Race’s definitions. Rather, what I wish to demonstrate is that some of Vivekananda’s teachings, notably his large-scale public speeches on religion, contain strong pluralistic elements. As I showed in Chapter 3, pluralistic ideas of religion that affirm truth of existential importance in other religious traditions were highly unusual in India (and elsewhere) at this time. It is therefore important to point out in what context they did appear and to make an attempt to explain why it might have happened.

However, it would be going too far to characterise Vivekananda's teachings in general as pluralistic. In other teachings, notably his private instructions to groups in India and in speeches related to the Ramakrishna Mission, his focus is on preaching Ramakrishna as a new *avatara* for the world, and the true meaning of all religion incarnate. Often the two strands of thinking are simultaneously present in a speech, where Vivekananda struggles to encourage people of other religions to make the best of the faith to which they belong, while keeping in mind that Ramakrishna in his life and practice showed the world how a religious existence was to be realised in the fullest possible manner. As I have shown above, these two strands of Vivekananda's teaching sit uncomfortably together with no obvious way of reconciliation. On the background of Vivekananda's life and his sense of a double mission to India and the world, I have argued that he wished to press both lines of argument (a more emphatic pluralistic line, and the Ramakrishna-as-*avatara* line), but due to his illness and early death the paradox was never addressed further.

Looking at Vivekananda's work as a whole, I regard his appeal to a pluralist view of religion as first and foremost a means to increase the impact of his teachings by including other traditions in his scope. Like Ramakrishna, although in a much more conscious manner, Vivekananda may have thought that pluralistic ideas provided a way to speak to people outside of Indian traditions about the meaning of religion in general as he saw it, namely as the activity of human beings travelling towards a common ultimate goal along different roads. Vivekananda believed that this perspective offered a unique and highly valuable perspective on religion, something India could give to Western culture in exchange for material assistance. In addition to this religious purpose, it is also possible that Ramakrishna and Vivekananda felt that an appeal to a pluralistic view of religion provided an argument against conversion. Pressure to convert was a problem due to the strong presence of Christian missionary establishments in colonial India and in West Bengal in particular, where the British colonial administration was based at Kolkata. Arguing that all religions were legitimate paths to the divine in this context implied that conversion was unnecessary.

7.3.3 Blavatsky

What I have identified as pluralistic elements in Blavatsky's thinking follow from her belief that humanity shares in one spirit, and that this spiritual unity is a central truth taught in all religious traditions. In her view each tradition contained its own particular

presentation of this truth and a context in which to present it, adapted to different places and cultures. On this basis she concluded that the religious traditions of the world had something of the highest significance in common, even though their doctrines differed widely in many other respects, a fact which she considered to be of minor importance. Blavatsky used the image of light passing through a prism as a metaphor for the relationship between the ultimate truth of transcendent reality and the varied human expressions of encounters with it. In her interpretation, the prism image illustrated how the pure spiritual truth was refracted differently through the variously conditioned minds of people. The result of this refraction of truth was a spectrum of related but distinctly different religious truths. Regarding the teachings of different religions from this perspective, she believed that people would come to understand that all expressed religious truths were relative statements about a generally inaccessible reality from which the different insights derived, but which they were unable to fully communicate.

Blavatsky held that religious wars and arguments lay behind much of the suffering and inequality in the world. She believed that discussions about the different religious views could motivate people to learn from each other and relate to others in a new and creative way, improving understanding between people of different faiths and different worldviews in general and establishing the basis for a lasting world peace. The realisation of the ideal of human brotherhood, to which she had dedicated her life, thus directly depended on acknowledging not only that religious teachings contained important insights into the nature of reality and the place of humans in the world, but also that these insights must be understood merely as partial truths that only made sense when viewed in relation to each other.

The pluralistic elements of Blavatsky's teachings represent religions as different traditions of expressing the experience of encountering the ultimate reality and its meaning for human existence. Thus, each tradition had a particular emphasis or colour in the spectrum of human religious knowledge. Because of the limited scope of the individual traditions, it was crucial that people became familiar with the teachings of other religions so that they might learn more about those aspects of the greater truth that their own tradition did not emphasise. Perhaps even more importantly, it was through meeting with other traditions of thought that people might come to acknowledge that their own way of understanding the world was merely one possible viewpoint. The epistemic humility brought about by such an acknowledgement was for Blavatsky the first step on the path to a truly spiritual life. Religious people would begin to regard

themselves as participants in a much larger process of human endeavour in which their knowledge and beliefs were not conclusive, but depended in a crucial way on their interactions with others and their openness to the possibility of an unknown ultimate truth.

The ‘goal’ of religion, then, was several things for Blavatsky. She believed that the goal of religious belief and practice was to create a habit of openness to transcendent reality, through prayer and worship, in order to broaden the capacity of each person to experience this reality, and to try to understand the personal meaning of such an encounter. On a social level, she regarded the various religious traditions and their institutions as guardians of the ‘exoteric’ side of faith, including different histories and doctrines. These exoteric institutions were outward expressions of ‘esoteric’ or inner spiritual teachings which, in contrast to the exoteric faiths of the world, remained the same throughout all ages and cultures. These esoteric teachings could only be understood by people who had developed a certain grasp of spiritual things through individual practice and openness to inspiration from the higher reality.

As with Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, the pluralistic elements of Blavatsky’s teachings enabled her to address people outside her own immediate audience by appealing to a principle that lay behind all expressions of religious belief. But it must also be emphasised that Blavatsky was not concerned with religious people in particular. Instead, as I have argued, she wanted to remind all people that as far as knowledge was concerned, all human perspectives were limited and must be regarded in relation to other perspectives. In particular, she objected to the separation of the realms of scientific and religious knowledge that was becoming an accepted feature of public discourse in industrial societies and in the wake of the evolutionary theories of the nineteenth century. In defence of her position she argued that religious knowledge was important and relevant for science, and *vice versa*. In this context, the pluralist character of Blavatsky’s thinking supported her argument for why these two realms of knowledge should not be regarded separately, but as a deeply interrelated. Combining the two approaches to knowledge and understanding of the world, she was presenting a model of how one might be religious in a scientific age.

7.3.4 Besant

Annie Besant’s pluralistic ideas drew on the Theosophical model created by Blavatsky, but with a different emphasis. In addition to her teaching responsibilities as leader of the

Theosophical Society, Besant used Blavatsky's framework of ideas for her own cause of promoting social and political progress. Since encountering Theosophy, she had organised her work around the belief that there was a particular purpose for the world and the development of human society on the planet. Her teaching on religion strongly reflected this idea when she explained the purposes of the different religions traditions as ways to bring about global peace and progress for all nations.

Blavatsky, like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, regarded the encounter with the transcendent in deep religious experience as the moment of truth that would remove ignorance and set people on the right path, no matter which religion they followed to achieve this great moment of insight. Whereas Blavatsky often explained the variety of religious teachings as a fault of the human capacity to comprehend spiritual reality, Besant presented this variance in a positive light. She claimed that the different approaches to the divine were building blocks with which humanity could construct a set of common teachings concerning the relationship between human beings and the divine reality. People from all traditions could agree on this common body of religious knowledge and it would form the basis of a new global faith. From this foundation in common belief, religious strife would end and a peaceful relationship would be established between different national and religious groups. This state of peace and brotherhood would in turn provide the setting for the return of the World Teacher, a central figure in the Theosophical hierarchy of spiritual masters who would appear on Earth and provide the central teachings for a new world religion.

The role of the pluralistic elements of Besant's teachings is more ambiguous than in those of the other three thinkers. She agreed, in principle, with Blavatsky that it was possible to achieve knowledge of higher realms of being through occult or deep meditation techniques taught in different religious traditions. But in her presentation the ultimate goal of religion became so closely bound up with her millenarian vision for the coming of the World Teacher and the new religion taught by him, that the event of the encounter with the transcendent or 'realisation' for the individual itself lost priority. She was distracted by the grand vision of the return of the World Teacher and instead focused her religious teachings on the new world religion and the conditions that would make this vision real for all nations. Thus, in her later teachings the emphasis on the particular value of each tradition and its contribution to the great 'chord' or 'harmony' of diverse global faith, which she had previously expounded, became lost in this greater scheme.

Besant's later religious teachings, emphasising the idea of the new world religion and the coming of the World Teacher, offered a particular framework in which to understand the purpose of religion as well as a summary of doctrines derived from common elements drawn from various traditions. While Blavatsky had emphatically stated that Theosophy was not a new religion, but a new perspective in which to view one's own religion, Besant proclaimed a 'new world religion'. And while she insisted that it allowed participation by people of all faiths, in effect it only included those elements of other traditions that suited Besant's summary of the tenets of faith that were part of the new world religion.

7.3.5 The different kinds of pluralism represented by the four thinkers

In the final part of this chapter I wish to draw out common features of the pluralistic elements and ideas of the four thinkers. I shall then discuss them in relation to challenges put forward by recent critics of the idea of pluralism in the scope of interfaith dialogue.

As the preceding summaries of the four nineteenth-century positions show, the pluralistic ideas of Ramakrishna *et al.* have certain key elements in common. I have argued that what characterises elements of their teachings as pluralistic is the claim that several religious traditions, when practiced seriously, are able to bring the practitioner to an encounter with transcendent, divine or ultimate reality. All four thinkers believed that such an encounter lay at the heart of religion and as such was the 'goal' of religious practice and belief.

As explored in the first part of the discussion in this chapter, they each taught that encounter with the divine reality had a profound impact on the self-understanding of the person having the experience, and changed the way they saw themselves, their surroundings and particularly their sense of relatedness to the people around them. Blavatsky explained this insight in terms of a deep knowledge about the meaning of human existence, which held true for every individual, even though the experience of the encounter with the ineffable divine reality took on different forms depending on the backgrounds of people having the experience.

Because of the necessarily conditioned human experience of the ultimate, the four thinkers argued that the ultimate reality was described in different ways across the various religions, but that the basic human relation to it was the same regardless of the

tradition through which it was approached. The function of religions from this perspective was to provide guidelines and teachings that would help people progress toward the unifying experience with the ultimate or divine reality, according to the tradition to which they belonged.

It is clear that the four thinkers believed that it really was one and the 'same' ultimate reality that lay behind the different religious expressions in the world. Even though religious descriptions of it varied considerably, it was nevertheless a common goal that all the different accounts and theories tried to describe and understand. As I have shown in Chapter 2, this position is also part of the more recently developed pluralist ideas of John Hick, and may be challenged on two critical points. Firstly, from a modern hermeneutical perspective it is problematic to make any statements at all about the ultimate reality. If human beings are always limited to experiencing and understanding any kind of reality through their own conditioned consciousness, it is impossible to make any claims about a transcendent reality except as it appears to people through the limitations of the human mind. As such, the claim that one and the same transcendent reality is the basis of the variety of different human expressions of it is therefore purely speculative and cannot be verified with any certainty. While it is a very attractive claim, and may seem a likely one given the many similarities between religious accounts of mystical experience, it is nevertheless a hypothesis and not a fact that can be established for certain under the current academic consensus about the limitations of human perception and understanding.

As I have shown, the four thinkers generally held a position similar to the modern hermeneutical one in that they acknowledged that human understanding is limited and depends to a certain extent on one's previous knowledge and experience. In addition, however, they also believed that in some extreme cases highly spiritually advanced people had the capacity to actually transcend the limitations of the merely human mind and in some way directly perceive glimpses of the ultimate reality. This kind of transcendent perception was a possibility because they believed that human beings possessed in their nature an essential link with this transcendent reality through what they called the human 'soul' or 'spirit'. This spiritual element of human nature was potentially a faculty for some degree of perception of the ultimate reality, although in most people it was never realised.

While it may sound almost paradoxical, the four thinkers believed that this kind of ‘spiritual’ perception, i.e. an experience of the transcendent through this spiritual faculty, made possible a sort of direct knowledge of the divine realm which would be understood as a spiritual truth by advanced seers. These seers might come from any tradition, and their most important task was to translate the spiritual insight into human words. In postulating this possibility of transcendent spiritual perception, the four thinkers were able to claim that while most religious knowledge was contingent and context-dependent, some of the essential truths that lay at the heart of religious teachings, such as the existence of a greater reality and its significance for human beings, had been established on solid experiential grounds by certain experts in spiritual perception and as such were not open to discussion.

The second important critique of pluralism is closely related to the question of such ultimate claims. As S. Mark Heim has pointed out, certain pluralist theories implicitly accept that the ‘end’ or ‘goal’ of religious belief and practice is the same across traditions.³ This position is illustrated, for example, by images of different paths going up a mountain and converging at the top, or in Blavatsky’s image of the prism in which one beam of many-coloured white light, symbolising the one divine reality, is refracted into many constituent parts, symbolising the different religious traditions of human experience and interpretation. As I have shown above, the four nineteenth-century thinkers also believed that the transcendent reality was one and the same, and that the different religious traditions all tried to reconnect their followers in a profound manner with this unified reality, despite the different outward forms of teaching and practice.

In their view, the notion of a common end or goal of religion followed naturally from their ideas about the origin of religion. They believed that the religious traditions were developed from the insights of great seers who had perceived the transcendent reality and constructed their teachings around this experience. Since these true seers were able to perceive only parts of the divine reality, the resulting religious traditions differed according to the words in which the seers had been able to phrase their experiences, but nevertheless shared the same origin, i.e. in the one divine reality. It was therefore self-evident that the ends of religious traditions would also be the same.

Heim objected to the pluralist assumption that the ends of all religions are the same due to his concern for the integrity of religious traditions, and Catherine Cornille has made

³ See Heim 2001.

the same point in relation to interreligious dialogue.⁴ One of the main efforts of participants in that area has been to develop a form of conversation that avoids both making superiority claims and speaking about the meaning of other traditions on a meta-religious level. Instead, each tradition is encouraged to speak to, and about, religious others in a constructive and respectful way without suggesting some kind of greater perspective in which the traditions of others might be better understood by an outsider. In this effort to speak on the same level, pluralist approaches clearly offer a meta-perspective on religion and are thus unacceptable as frameworks for dialogue, even though in their own way they respect the individual traditions as containing precious insights into the meaning of human existence of relevance to all people.

Additionally, the pluralist ideas of these early thinkers are particularly unacceptable in this regard because they were not content with the hermeneutical reservation that all human knowledge is ultimately contingent knowledge. They postulated instead that absolute knowledge about the meaning of human existence is to be found in a particular understanding of religious teachings (i.e. a pluralist one). In this sense, their theories of religion are vulnerable to the critique that they constitute a new religion in themselves, i.e. a complete system of beliefs and a hermeneutical framework that are incompatible with other traditional understandings of religions. Perhaps in this respect Annie Besant had accepted the consequences of Blavatsky's pluralism when, in the later part of her career, she began to advocate for the coming of a 'new world religion' instead of simply preaching Theosophy.

7.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the pluralistic elements of the teachings of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Blavatsky and Besant in relation to questions about the role of religious experience and the epistemic status of religious *versus* scientific knowledge. In the main part of the chapter I questioned the pluralistic ideas of the four thinkers in relation to current critiques of pluralism in theology. I have demonstrated that the pluralistic ideas of the four thinkers share the basic belief that transcendent or ultimate reality is one and the same reality to which all religious traditions are a response, and with which all religious traditions aim to connect their followers in a profound way.

⁴ See Cornille 2008.

They acknowledged that human perception and understanding in general was limited by the ideas and preconceptions of each person, but further believed that certain highly advanced spiritual practitioners were able to perceive glimpses of transcendent reality directly through the intuition. In these instances of spiritual perception, a form of non-conceptual experience of the higher reality was attained. It was on the basis of these experiences that religious teachings could be developed that were 'true' for more than one religious tradition.

I have argued that for the four thinkers, the central importance of such deep religious experience stemmed from their belief that human beings were essentially connected at the spiritual level through the human soul or spirit. As a consequence, religious experience and teachings resulting from genuine encounters with ultimate reality both proved and manifested this deep relatedness of all humans, and made it clear to people who understood religion from this perspective that true humanity was a process of relationality. Following this understanding, all four thinkers encouraged religious and social practice in different ways, while they all emphasised the importance of service to others and a deep interest in the ideas and worldviews of people of other persuasions. Critics of pluralist ideas have pointed out the paradox that this kind of openness to new ideas is often combined with the insistence that such openness is the only correct approach to knowledge and experience.

Finally, in my study of these early pluralistic ideas I have argued that elements of religious pluralism can take many forms and although the varieties presented in the previous chapters share some common central characteristics, they are nevertheless dependent on the contexts in which they were developed. I have demonstrated how the ideological and historical situation of the four thinkers may have influenced the development of these pluralistic approaches to religion. Thus, despite their claims to communicate a measure of ultimate truth, the theories themselves are contingent notions that can only be understood through an analysis of their larger context and their own relation to the intellectual environment in which they were formed and grew.

8 Conclusion

In this thesis I have discussed the religious ideas of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, H. P. Blavatsky and Annie Besant as early approaches to religious pluralism. I have argued that the development of theories of religion with pluralistic elements was related to the context in which they were proposed, particularly the religion and science debate of the late nineteenth century. Through their emphasis on deep religious experience as a source of knowledge, the four thinkers argued that religious believers of any faith in which such experience was central were justified in holding certain beliefs about the nature of the world, human beings and transcendent reality, and what they saw as an integral relationship between them. Appealing to the wisdom of all faiths, the four thinkers sought to establish a unified position against materialism centred on the notion that all humans were essentially related through their possession of a 'spark' of the divine, which they called 'soul' or 'spirit'.

In my discussion of the pluralistic character of these ideas, I have argued that they share the basic belief that transcendent or ultimate reality is the same reality to which all religious traditions represent differing responses, and to which all religious traditions direct their followers. But although the four thinkers conceived of the transcendent in similar terms, their pluralist approaches were developed along different models. Thus, Ramakrishna followed the Tantric method of embracing unusual paths to realisation; Vivekananda was inspired by the traditional notion of caste; Blavatsky based her teachings on the idea of a perennial wisdom tradition taught in esoteric schools within every religion; and Besant tried to show how this wisdom tradition had developed in the different traditions and could now be used in the creation of a harmonious global society.

I have presented these four theories of religion as different attempts to engage constructively with the challenge of religious plurality from a religious perspective. I argued that they may be seen as early approaches to what would now be called religious pluralism. And while these early notions of pluralism do not consider many of the themes that are central to today's debates on the topic, they nevertheless contributed to the beginnings of modern theological engagement with the beliefs and practices of people of other faiths.

This study leaves open several prospects for further work in related areas. With respect to the influence of historical circumstances on the development of pluralistic religious notions, it might be fruitful to examine the work of later generations of people who have

been inspired by the four thinkers. In particular, I suggest Blavatsky's most prominent follower, Alice A. Bailey (1880-1949). A Christian missionary in her early career, Bailey later proposed pluralist ideas of religion similar to Blavatsky's. Her teachings were published between 1919 and 1949 and engage critically with the role of religion in times of deep crisis, such as the two world wars, and with the prospects for developing world peace and cooperation.

Another possible area of further inquiry might be found in the insights of the study of esoteric traditions in relation to more mainstream or traditional religious developments, as well as the relationship between eastern and western esoteric traditions. Particularly when approaching recent religious expressions, new religious movements and 'new age' phenomena, the study of esotericisms affords valuable, though underappreciated, perspectives. These perspectives have relevance beyond religious pluralism, to which I have restricted my discussion, and may impact on many other aspects of our understanding of religion.

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