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In search of wisdom and its blind spots: Catholic reflections on Swami Vivekananda's 150th birth anniversary

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Abstract

The 150th birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda is an occasion for interreligious reflection on the enduring significance of his teachings and their potential for reflective engagement. This essay presents and engages select motifs from his four lectures on 'Practical Vedanta', particularly his understandings of sin, solidarity, and the relevance of his thought to the pervasive challenge of religious absolutism in contemporary experience. The essay notes some blind spots or vulnerabilities in his teachings owing to historical context and adopts these as tools to assist in Catholic theological reflection on analogous weaknesses in that tradition.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda; Vedanta; Interreligious dialogue; Sin; Solidarity; Parliament for the world's religions

It gave me pause when I was asked by an organizing member of the Hindu-Catholic Dialogue Group of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to present some Catholic reflections on the enduring contributions of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) in honor of his 150th birth anniversary[a]. Pause because while I am generally comfortable with Vivekananda's thought and with the Neo-Vedanta intellectual trajectory of Hinduism which he represents, his eight volumes of collected works are expansive, dynamic, deeply reflective, delicately situated in a complex historical context, and are therefore unfavorable to quick judgments and easy expressions meant to capture his meaningfulness. The invitation quickly became an opportunity to get clearer on who I am as a reader and as a comparative theologian who investigates Vedanta for interreligious meanings and possibilities. Of course this particular Catholic represents only himself, and the Buddhist in this Catholic understands the 'self' to be composite and dynamic, a moving target, one who fluctuates and responds over time to received tradition, new experience, and learning. How one apprehends and internalizes Vivekananda's thought is a dynamic affair situated in time and place, and will likely shift in the future, and this observation feels fitting with respect to the superabundant content and interreligious possibilities contained in Vivekananda's corpus.

A second source of pause arose upon checking out from my university library and reading through the eight volumes of his collected works and realizing that my current age of thirty-nine is the same age at which Vivekananda prematurely succumbed to an untreated diabetic condition. So the pause quickly became an anxiety, a sense of being

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quite outmatched by someone who at least with respect to age was my peer. Reading the volumes became an unusual experience of reflecting upon he and I together – our age, stamina, and abilities, but also historical and cultural locations, systems of injustice, and joint interest in the Parliament for the World's Religions which he and I both attended just once – his the first ever in 1893 in Chicago, mine the most recent in 2009 in Melbourne[b].

Three sets of observations follow. The first addresses two areas in which Catholics might learn more about sinfulness and solidarity from Swami Vivekananda. A second observation raises discomforts with a few tendencies in his thinking which, through interreligious encounter, can function like a mirror into which Christians might gaze to perceive analogous shortcomings in their own tradition. A third observation explores how Vivekananda's thought helps us to understand and confront pervasive global experiences of religious fundamentalism and absolutism.

Catholic leanings: sin & solidarity

Christians may find a somewhat natural, spontaneous entrance into the thought world of Vedanta, and perhaps especially Vivekananda's Vedanta, since he taught it as a kind of export from India to the rest of the world which supplies humanizing sources of wisdom that teach people about their inherent 'divinity', and in ways that appeal to universal human understanding. Review of his various lectures given in London, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and elsewhere makes it clear that much of his communication was to first-timers, people who knew little or nothing about Hinduism or the Vedas but perhaps a lot about what suffering and ignorance feel like. His charismatic and straightforward language can help Christians to recognize his diagnosis of the human condition as resonant or familiar. In the fourth and last lecture he gave on the topic of 'Practical Vedanta' in November 1896, Vivekananda offered what he called 'the highest prayer that the Advaita teaches'. It reads as a summons:

> Rise thou effulgent one, rise thou who art always pure, rise though birthless and deathless, rise almighty, and manifest thy true nature. These little manifestations do not befit thee (Vivekananda 1976d, 357).

So stark, so pristine that last statement: *these little manifestations do not befit thee*, disclosing what should be recognized upon examination, namely, that much conditioned thinking and acting diminishes persons' presence in the world because it dissociates them from the true self which is non-different from the ground of all being, or Brahman.

A few sentences later he continued:

> So if we are advaitists, we must think from this moment that our old self is dead and gone. The old Mr., Mrs., and Ms. so-and-so are gone, they were superstitions, and what remains is the ever-pure, the ever-strong, the almighty, the all-knowing – that alone remains for us, and then all fear vanishes from us. Who can injure us, the omnipresent? All weakness has vanished from us, and our only work is to arouse this knowledge in our fellow beings. We see that they too are the same pure self, only they do not know it; we must teach them, we must help them to rouse up their infinite nature (Vivekananda 1976d, 358).

Christians reading these words from his fourth lecture on Practical Vedanta may feel at home. The old self: *gone*. Upon conversion from the tattered and defeated old self to the real, pure, and all-knowing self: *fearlessness*. From recognition of the self as one's true ground erupts a *confidence* in a whole new horizon of truth and meaning that have just opened up to perception. Clearly Vivekananda is calling for a kind of conversion experience, akin to what Christians would call *metanoia*, a turning away from brittle narrowness and constriction and a turning toward magnanimity and charity that is all-inclusive and synced with the depth of reality (Barron 1998). Or we might enlist the language of "vocation," which in my tradition functions as a call or imperative more fully to become the person (the imperative) one already is on account of divine action (the indicative). The revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ discloses persons to be God's good creatures who are fallen or broken creatures, but whose brokenness is not the last word or the most definitive word about them. For, as creatures of God, persons are defined through the creative and redemptive action of God which makes and remakes them in ways that are more profound and constitutional than the brokenness they inherit and in turn replicate in their own lives with others. Christians familiar with this trope can therefore hear resonance in Vivekananda's call to transition away from the old self which is experienced as weakness even in its illusory reality toward the new – or real – self, described as an "infinite" and "all-knowing" nature, which constitutes already the depth of one's identity even as the knowledge of this identity remains to be "aroused" in oneself and in others.

Could this be relatable to what Paul meant in various letters recounting his experience of receiving and accepting through faith the new life given him from God, in Christ? For example, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul recounts a salvific vision similar in its structural claims and call for transformation to what is found in Vivekananda's lectures on Practical Vedanta. Resonance is not identity of course; while Paul and Vivekananda operate with distinctive theological horizons of meaning, one may yet determine whether some resonance and dialogue between the two is possible. In Ephesians 2 Paul writes,

> You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life (Ephesians 2:1–10).

To oscillate back and forth between this selection from Paul and that selection from Vivekananda helps one learn into a perennial human experience or condition – call it

ignorance or misapprehension (*avidya*), sinfulness, or by another category that instructs us not especially of guilt but the clear ways in which our lives proceed against their natural grain, against their most true identity, distorted not in some fixed or static manner yet in one that while pervasive is susceptible to change, conversion, growth in identity. To use the language of the great Reformed theologian Karl Barth, we live in self-contradiction, but in Christ are shown what 'real humanity' looks like, how it is responsive to God and responsible to others. Realization, in other words, is crucial to the spiritual projects of both Paul and Vivekananda (Sharma 2003, 91).

The convergence of voices notwithstanding, clear differences between Paul and Vivekananda emerge in the second half of each man's statement, namely, that for Vivekananda the path out of the muck and misunderstanding is through *self*-realization of one's own inherent divinity; in short the position of Vedanta, that the self or atman is one with the universal self or Brahman, such that the deeper "reality in every man [*sic*] should be the object of worship" (Vivekananda 1976d, 358). Whereas for Paul, human subjects are acted upon by God in Christ, and only then are able to become active in the faith that trusts in God and works in love for all. Faith here signals 'trust'; trust that in Jesus Christ God has confirmed and raised the human person to dignity, to reconciliation with God and with fellow persons, and that as a consequence of such divine action and human response, one is now free to live rightly in covenant relationship. The soteriologies – if we can use the term "vaguely" – of the two men signal clear distinctions in their understandings of the human person as well as consonance in their shared sense of the difference right understanding makes, the difference made in an identity-confirming positive response to vocation (Neville and Wildman 2001, 198; Sheveland 2011, 1–3). This difference is spelled out powerfully in a life of authenticity with and in the company of others, in what Paul refers to as 'new life' and 'good works' and Vivekananda as 'seeing every man as God' (Vivekananda 1976b, 326).

Many know that Swami Vivekananda was uncomfortable with the language of 'sin'. No doubt some of the Christian missionaries in India about whom he was rightly concerned are to blame in part. Analogously, many Christians today are themselves uncomfortable with sin-talk. For many it connotes an unavoidable condition of guilt implicating the physical and indeed sexual self. Even worse, for some, sin-talk connotes a twisted creator who in the words of Christopher Hitchens "creates people sick and commands them to be well"[c].

While none of these reactions to the doctrine of sin are doctrinally adequate or pastorally sensitive, these misunderstandings have become regnant in the minds of many Christians due to a complex of factors and conditions, among which can be included inadequate pastoral leadership and religious education. Still, what Vivekananda rejects in the language of sin, Christians can likewise reject. In his first lecture on Practical Vedanta Vivekananda remarks on sin in a way that suggests not merely intellectual or philosophical dispute with the doctrine, but a dispute grounded as well in the historical and cultural context through which he learned it.

> The Vedanta recognizes no sin, it only recognizes error. And the greatest error, says the Vedanta, is to say that you are weak, that you are a sinner, a miserable creature, and that you have no power and you cannot do this and that. Every time you think in that way, you, as it were, rivet one more link in the chain that binds you down,

> you add one more layer of hypnotism on to your own soul. . . . The veil drops away, and the native purity of the soul begin to manifest itself. Everything is ours already – infinite purity, freedom, love and power (Vivekananda 1976a, 295).

A highly suggestive remark on the category of sin at the close of the nineteenth century, these words seem to bear a thick colonial and evangelical missionary experience inflecting them with additional meaning beyond the theological. While one can debate the degree to which Vivekananda's construal of the doctrine was conditioned by missionaries through whom he and many Indians came into contact with the teaching, neither his speeches nor Lectures on Practical Vedanta offer any clear evidence that he was aware of the connective tissue between sin and grace. In the emphasis he gives to sin as constitutive of persons, of sin as a belief which erects prohibitions and incorrectly binds one down finally against one's true nature as a creature of God, Swami Vivekananda does not appear aware of the narrative of grace by which sin-talk can be meaningfully Christian. In this disagreement, Swami Vivekananda and the Catholic tradition actually find themselves in substantive agreement despite appearances. For both can agree that the human person is most adequately appreciated and addressed in terms of her nondual "native purity" (Vivekananda) or redetermination by God in Christ (Paul) rather than the distortions and suffering to which she frequently succumbs.

Certainly Vivekananda's nondualism looms large in this statement. But also looming large in Vivekananda's lived-experience are some poor ambassadors of the gospel who tried to evangelize the sub-continent in a climate of not just colonial oppression but also – and Vivekananda picked up on this – a climate wherein Indians themselves had internalized a colonial, Western, Christian critique of them as weak and emasculated, as idolaters, and as sinners acutely in need of redemption from some external source. According to the Christian message as he understood it, as he received it, sin simply designates what human beings most basically are in a static, fixed manner. As we now know very well, one of the most pernicious traits of colonial oppression is that the oppressed internalize, adopt, or begin to see themselves through the eyes of their oppressors. The sort of optic lens that appears to have been thrust upon Vivekananda is one through which Christians themselves see poorly and should, with Vivekananda, eschew (Sharma 2003, 84). If Christians give the impression that sinfulness simply spells human negativity and weakness in absolute or fixed terms, they've not told their story well (Vivekananda 1976a, 300). His polemic makes sense as a pastoral intention to empower colonized Indians who may have internalized oppressive religious judgments, more sense than an abstract or doctrinal disagreement with Christianity.

At the risk of oversimplifying a complex and systematic theological issue, in the context of this Catholic interreligious engagement with Vivekananda, four ground rules for sin talk can be outlined which stress the pastoral function of the teaching and may, therefore, help to recover the salutary nature of the doctrine. First, it disabuses one from the habit of *mis*-taking subjective experience as somehow exhaustive of objective reality or fact; in other words we chronically suffer from hubris. Despite his discomfort with the term, Vivekananda happens to reference this dynamic of sin throughout his writings in the terms of the rope and snake analogy he learned from the Upanishads; partiality and misapprehension have one confusing a rope for a snake, with the all the consequent fear and anxiety. The perception of self and other needs attention, for our

current *modus operandi* offends not only the Creator but perhaps most significantly the creature's own given nature or being as a creature of God. Second, and as a consequence of such hubris or failed perception, we tend to fall out of right relationship with others in direct proportion with ego-conditioning, for the ego conditions the terms of our relating with others in the world. Sin is not well understood merely as a vertical offense against God, nor reductively as transgressive acts; the nature of it as offense is made incarnate and visible *through* the distorted horizontal relationships with others that ensue as its consequence. Perhaps more pivotal than failures of personal piety or rectitude, the category of sin underscores dissociative and dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics scarring concrete human lives in encounter in a way that both precedes and perpetuates all encounters as their conditioning factor.

Third, the reality and depth of sinfulness or self-contradiction is disclosed precisely in the experience of being healed in Christ, in the experience of being personally and gratuitously the subject of divine grace experienced as mercy, healing, and reconciliation. This means the word 'sin' functions like an ungrammatical utterance when ripped from the grammar of grace which provides rules for its coherence as a Christian category. Without the experience of forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ, one lacks even the insight to name what sin is, much less diminish its effects of personal and interpersonal brokenness. Fourth, sin-talk actually helps to clarify victimization and redress its destructiveness more accurately and sensitively. The sort of victimization entailed in, for example, sexual abuse of children has been explored as one such example (O'Laughlin 2013). Recent research argues persuasively that sin-talk meaningfully captures the dynamics of pathology that begin in the abused themselves; never mind the abuser for the moment. Consider the experience of young children abused in developmentally sensitive periods of their childhood: the violation of body and self by persons perceived as trustworthy and in positions of authority gives rise subsequently to victims' total relational disorientation that ruins their cognitive and emotional capacities to enter into rightly ordered relationships in the future. If this weren't enough personal loss, consider the statistics demonstrating that the majority of abusers were, themselves, previously victims of abuse. Distorted and distorting, this pattern of human relating represents the pathology of sin (McFadyen 2000, 57–79, 228–229).

Because there is such connective tissue between 'sin' and 'grace' in the Christian imaginary, we might notice one theme in Vivekananda's writings that seems to function as the corollary. For him as well, the purpose of sin-talk in Vedanta is to cast greater light upon the oneness of all life. Scattered throughout his Lectures on Practical Vedanta, the oneness of all life surfaces as a repetitive trope. But let me back into Vivekananda's treatment by addressing it first in my own tradition.

The principle of solidarity is an important category in modern Catholic Social Teaching; most often we hear ethicists make use of the category, and while there is a small canon of papal and Vatican texts that call for greater attention to solidarity in our globalized world, in my view solidarity as a theological category suffers from underdevelopment, not terribly well differentiated from neighbor love even as it signals dispositions and a level of conversion upon which acts of neighbor love would be reliant. Use of the principle must confront some conceptual vagueness. Use of the principle might also confront the failure of Christians to apply the discipline of solidarity consistently in their daily lives, political commitments, international politics, ecological care, border crossings or any other arena

in which the principle of solidarity, when rightly understood, succeeds in illuminating moral blind spots. We do not have a theologically developed and nuanced statement that defines theologically what solidarity is, nor have we statements that explore how we might develop and deepen our appreciation for it through interreligious consultations through which Christians can gain exposure to the wisdom of other religious paths by taking seriously the permission given in *Nostra Aetate* 2 to embrace and internalize the elements of truth and goodness in other religions. There is a world of difference between tacitly acknowledging the possibility of truth and goodness in other religions versus internalizing one's exposure to concrete experiences of truth and goodness in other religions so as to recast and deepen the attitudes and actions of solidarity. Solidarity is at once a tremendous yet underdeveloped resource for Christians, complicated by the fact that it targets blind spots, our preferences and biases to which we become attached, including biases of religious preference.

Because the principle of solidarity addresses persons and communities in their blind spots or unconscious and distorting ideological views, with injunctions that might be understood tacitly and abstractly but not quite grasped or acted upon in the radical ways demanded by the Gospel, solidarity functions like a prophetic category redirecting persons to right relationship, and in so doing it exposes the chronic failure to cope with the radical care enjoined in the Gospel. In this way, solidarity is like conversion, in that both need care, nurture, and growth, and one should expect setbacks while inclining oneself to critical voices and perspectives. Solidarity does not denote moral rectitude or purity, but grounds the brokenness of the human condition in a framework of unity, healing, and acceptance.

Christians grappling with the meaning and compass of solidarity may benefit from Vivekananda's vision available in his first lecture on Practical Vedanta:

> The old religions said he was an atheist who did not believe in God. The new religion says that he is the atheist who does not believe in himself. But it is not selfish faith, because the Vedanta, again, is the doctrine of oneness. It means faith in all, because you are all. Love for yourselves means love for all, love for animals, love for everything, for you are all one. It is the great faith which will make the world better. I am sure of that. He is the highest man who can say with truth, 'I know all about myself'. Do you know how much energy, how many powers, how many forces are still lurking behind that frame of yours? What scientist has known all that is in man? Millions of years have passed since man first came here, and yet but one infinitesimal part of his powers has been manifested. Therefore you must not say that you are weak. How do you know what possibilities lie behind that degradation on the surface? You know but little of that which is within you. For behind you is the ocean of infinite power and blessedness (Vivekananda 1976a, 301–302).

Poetic and edifying, this passage reveals so much of his thought: the inadequacy of categories like theism and atheism to depict Vedanta; the search for self not as a selfish enterprise but one that explodes into a felt sense of unity with all creatures beyond conventional boundaries viewed as real by social consensus; and a gentle pastoral encouragement to go beneath the surface of our degradation or self-contradiction to discover, trust, and live into a whole new world of authenticity and recognition, where all are one.

He seems to want to expand into social consciousness the principle of unity with which Vedanta Hinduism is familiar. A few pages later he writes,

> To be able to use what we call Viveka (discrimination) to learn how in every moment of our lives, in every one of our actions, to discriminate between what is right and wrong, true and false, we shall have to know the test of truth, which is purity, oneness. Everything that makes for oneness is truth. Love is truth, and hatred is false, because hatred makes for multiplicity. It is hatred that separates man from man; therefore it is wrong and false. It is a disintegrating power; it separates and destroys (Vivekananda 1976a, 304).

One begins to get a handle on the radical challenge of his interpretation of Vedanta in this statement upon considering his historical moment with its multiple fractures in the human community and in Indian society, certainly among them being the Hindu-Muslim tensions stemming from the hundreds of years of Mughal Islamic rule in India only to give way to the British East India Company and then eventually to the Raj, which coincided with the life of Vivekananda and with the more prejudicial, racist, and exclusivist Christian presence in India (Sharma 2003). This is a man intimately acquainted with human division and destruction in his own life span and in his people's historical memory under systemic oppression. The 'purity' of 'oneness' to which he referred in the statement above must have been an urgent pastoral need in his time and place, not merely a philosophical insight. Perhaps it is in the light of the Islamic and British colonial phases that Vivekananda can write:

> So, it is not right to say that the Impersonal idea will lead to a tremendous amount of evil in the world, as if the other doctrine never lent itself to works of evil, as if it did not lead to sectarianism deluging the world with blood and causing men to tear each other to pieces. 'My God is the greatest God, let us decide it by a free fight'. That is the outcome of dualism all over the world. Come out into the broad open light of day, come out from the little narrow paths, for how can the infinite soul rest content to live and die in small ruts. Come out into the universe of Light. Everything in the universe is yours, stretch out your arms and embrace it with love. If you ever felt you wanted to do that, you have felt God" (Vivekananda 1976b, 322–33).

Perhaps words like these are best interpreted in silence. But if we are to speak, then those words relate well to an incredibly brief yet revealing statement made by a noted Indologist, Christopher Key Chapple, in his book *Yoga and the Luminous*. At one point in the book Chapple records his early reflections on yoga discipline as a young man, particularly his growth in understanding the virtue of *satya*, which in yoga practice is the cultivation of truthfulness or honesty in a plain sense as well as in the more nuanced, reflective and felt sense of moral accountability toward others discovered through right encounter with them. He welcomes the reader into his own discovery when he realizes quite plainly yet powerfully that 'truth necessitates care' (Chapple 2008, 42). As though in the form of a *rahasya* (secret mystery), these three words approach what Vivekananda expresses in his rejection of dualism in favor of unity, of multiplicity in favor of simplicity, of hatred in favor of love, of disintegration in favor of

integration, of a heart that is brittle and unreconciled over one that is magnanimous and capable of seeing one in all and all in one. To see truthfully and act in truth is to be redirected – through practice – to encounter and care for others out of a felt sense of connectedness between oneself and others (Chapple 2008, 33–38).

Should one persist in misapprehending Vedantic Hinduism as still somehow self-centered, as a religion driven by self-discovery in some small, reductive sense, Vivekananda says:

> The watchword of all well-being, of all moral good, is not 'I' but 'thou'. Who cares whether there is a heaven or hell, who cares if there is a soul or not, who cares if there is an unchangeable or not? Here is the world, and it is full of misery. Go out into it as Buddha did, and struggle to lessen it or die in the attempt. Forget yourselves; this is the first lesson to be learnt, whether you are a theist or an atheist, whether you are an agnostic or a Vedantist, a Christian or Mohammedan [*sic*]. The one lesson obvious to all is the destruction of the little self and the building up of the real self (Vivekananda 1976d, 353).

Here Vedanta can help to develop Christian understandings of solidarity, especially where the meaning and impact of solidarity takes on a cruciform hue. Consider the definition by James Keenan, S.J.:

> Solidarity is not first and foremost a principle for action; solidarity is affective and spiritual union with others whose life situations are being challenged and compromised. From that union we are called to act in justice. Solidarity is then first a fundamental, existential, deeply felt sense of union; but secondly it is a call to engage in certain moral practices to better the life situation of the other (Keenan 2009, 50).

Another attempt to develop the teaching theologically draws support from the writings of St. Paul while utilizing some Buddhist features that are not different from what Vivekananda offers up for consideration.

> Solidarity is an active empathic response to neighbors near and far which senses them as dear and spontaneously gives rise to active resistance of structures of oppression. Far more than a passive sentiment of sympathy for the other, solidarity is active, transformative, and valorized by specifically theological commitments. That is, it is a spiritual virtue predicated on the radical, objective unity of persons with each other as constituent members of the reconciled body of Christ whose vocation it is to re-member that body, such that all members of that body are treated as 'somebodies' rather than 'nobodies', indeed, as 'somebodies' to whom I am spontaneously responsible (Sheveland 2010, 595).

Where Vivekananda can help to deepen – even radicalize – the meaning of solidarity for Christians is in the dawning realization of interpersonal union. In such union the conventional borders we habitually support and defend are shown to be something like the 'little narrow paths' and 'small ruts' to which he referred. He rests the performance of solidarity on the shoulders of a deep spiritual interiority. To be sure, the theological

terms from which Vedanta and Christian sources derive the truth of unity are distinct. But the outcome and perhaps the method appear to be highly analogous, namely, that solidarity is first a spiritual realization before it can become spontaneous redemptive action that reconciles living beings to each other. In other words, 'truth necessitates care'. Certainly by now one can appreciate why Vivekananda is still held in such high esteem by people today, whether Hindu or not, for it is simply edifying to peer into the reconciled and pristine mind of a person whose interior experience and realization not only resonate deep truth, but can be interfaced as a dialogue partner with Christian experience and hope.

Discomforts

All this notwithstanding, what is the reader to make of the less savory aspects of the Swami's thought? Four tendencies can be noted. As do all, he seems to reflect his times, for better or worse.

For example, consider the way he renders Hinduism into a stunningly homogenized, almost singular entity, called 'Vedanta', and what doing so may mean up against the fact that some of the most notable British Orientalist scholars likewise elevated Vedanta above other expressions of Hinduism, as the elite core of the religion's contribution to humanity (Sugirtharajah 2008). Likewise, what to do with his absorption of Buddhism into a Vedanta that itself had been reinterpreted in a sparse and homogenizing manner as a slightly heterodox feature of Hinduism, not an independent tradition related to but also rejecting key premises of Hindu traditions, to be considered on its own terms rather than domesticated? What to do with his variation of a pluralist theory of religions, widely critiqued in the literature as a bit simplistic and inattentive to the religious details and differences that might challenge his version of a pluralist hypothesis (Sharma 2003, 94)? Or more distressingly, what to do about his unacceptable impression of Islam, the prophet, and the Quran, which have led some commentators to suggest that Vivekananda operated with a 'soft' version of Hindutva, a nationalist ideology that after his death became rather virulent in its exclusion of Muslims as equal citizens and, despite its critique of the *mleccha* (foreign) West and colonial experience, actually emulated aspects of Nazi ideology (Vivekananda 1976c, 335; Vivekananda 1976d, 353; Hansen 1999, 70; Sharma 2003, 71; Nussbaum 2008, 152–185)?

Rather than these tendencies diminishing his influence, I suggest they confirm it. The very shortcomings in the human condition against which he warned his audiences and readers – such as the tendency to assess others according to one's own criteria rather than theirs – are so pervasive as not to escape manifestation even in his own life, despite the many countervailing concepts and practices evident in his speeches and writings (Sharma 2003, 86; Vivekananda 1976e, 24). Such disconnects may actually render his critique of dualisms and his prescription for solidarity that much more powerful, urgent for today, and fitting for interreligious collaboration. Catholics who register these shortcomings in Vivekananda's outlook as worthy of attention can do so primarily because analogous discomforts are on display in their own tradition and perhaps – more to the point – in their tendencies as human beings. His shortcomings are like a mirror into which a Catholic might choose to gaze more accurately at her own tendencies and the inconvenient artifacts of her time, place, tradition, and inheritance.

One can note in passing an analogous list of four tendencies, as shortcomings, in the Catholic tradition experienced today. First, it clings to an "inclusive" or "fulfillment" theology of religions that many have argued homogenizes and flattens out religious differences by absorbing or relocating them within distinctly Christian and Catholic frameworks of Christ and Church. All of this despite and because of the clearly inclusive ethos of the Second Vatican Council and its monumental if brief Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), and a series of papal and Vatican documents on the subject since 1965, whose framework for inclusion is vulnerable to the charge of domestication (Clifford 2005). In its historical context, the development of an inclusive theological assessment of religions articulated first in 1965 and refined since represents a truly remarkable development in the history of Christian thought. Still, one may yet probe the degree of inclusion or the theological *a priori* givens around which such inclusion is made – for example, Christ as the unique, absolute savior, and as the unique "way" that fulfills all the other "ways" in which human persons strive to counter the restless of their hearts – and speculate as to whether the appropriate Catholic goal of theological inclusion can be achieved through alternative and *more* inclusive theological means[d]. Similarly, Vivekananda had a complex understanding of the relationship of his own Advaita to other religious ways, at times sounding pluralist in orientation and at other times thoroughly inclusivist, as was the case in his view that the truth realized among Hindus through Advaita rendered them more tolerant than other religious traditions could claim, and the only religion in which, he claimed, persecution of other religions had been absent (Sharma 2003, 84, 88).

Second, the tradition clings to what it thinks of as an ecumenical view of other Christian churches even as it refuses to acknowledge them as churches in the proper sense, unhelpfully labeling them as 'ecclesial communities', with apparent disinterest toward the pastoral implications such a judgment raises or the concrete pastoral warrants for which the judgment could be made. That is, what, pastorally, could warrant such a judgment, what is gained by it, and does catholicity require it?[e] These questions drive to the heart of what Christians understand themselves to be, as church. Similarly, Vivekananda revised and reasserted the merits of Hinduism for the world he encountered through travel and, much like the Orientalist celebration of Hinduism, the revision downplayed and even degraded the rich, heterogeneous expressions of South Asian Hindu traditions, such that Hinduism became an elite, cerebral universal faith readily exported to the world, largely shorn from its local variations and customs on the subcontinent. In this way, Vivekananda's Neo-Vedantic revisions echo the Orientalist assessment of what in Hinduism was deemed most valuable and exportable, lending probability to the view expressed by one author that Vivekananda was a "prisoner of history" (Sharma 2003, 84). Today, of course, scholarship of Indian traditions does not accept such a framework of understanding. Indeed, his stress on Advaita can be appreciated without accepting the implicit demotion of local and cultural variations within Hindu communities. So too, Catholics themselves increasingly question the meaningfulness of viewing their own community as "church" in the proper sense while reserving for other community's the inconvenient designation of "ecclesial communities." A recent development known as "receptive ecumenism" has gained momentum in Catholic circles in the North Atlantic by asking not what Catholicism can teach other churches,

but where and how other churches can therapeutically address weaknesses and woundedness in Catholic tradition and forms of governance (Murray 2008; Murray 2011; Lakeland 2011). Catholic views of the other as opportunity rather than threat are both more adequately Christian and more adequately honest to the experience of many Catholics today who find their communion to be a broken communion in ways that may not be sufficiently remediable through recourse to the tradition's own internal sources, but may stand in genuine therapeutic need of the insights of others.

Third, the tradition has made progress toward but has not yet fully expressed a theology of Judaism and the Jewish people that resists domestication, homogenization, and for some, supersessionism (Cunningham 2012, 33). While Nostra Aetate in 1965 unequivocally affirmed fraternity and unrestricted neighbor love toward all while rejecting all forms of prejudice, discrimination, and violence, a theology of Jesus Christ that succeeds at being particular and unique on the one hand, and non-homogenizing or domesticating of Judaism and Jewish people on the other, remains elusive. For example, Roman Catholic liturgy continues to utilize biblical texts that contain anti-Jewish and supersessionist interpretive opportunities. It is not at all clear that these elements within the biblical witness are seen clearly for what they are: evidence of the painful political and interpersonal divorce occurring in the synagogue between Jews who confessed Christ as Lord and Jews who did not. Nor is it clear that Catholics, today, appreciate Judaism as a developed and developing tradition beyond the comparatively narrow confines of early rabbinic Judaism disclosed in the New Testament witness. Since 1969 these and other scenes of growth in identity and understanding have been explored by a group of scholars engaged in Catholic-Jewish dialogue, called the Christian Scholars Group. In 2002 the group published a ten-point statement entitled "A Sacred Obligation: rethinking Christian faith in relation to Judaism and the Jewish people" and, in 2005 the group published an edited collection of essays entitled *Seeing Judaism Anew* which includes chapter length expansions of each of the ten points. While none declare that sincere Catholic dialogue with Jews and Judaism has reached maturity, the dialogue to date has been marked clearly by careful attention both to orthodox Christian commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord while also making space – theologically – for an appreciation of the enduring covenant with Israel and a willingness, self-critically, to reinterpret anti-Jewish possibilities in biblical texts with hermeneutical and ethical sophistication. All this in a spirit of hospitality wherein Christians hear the calls of their Jewish brothers and sisters to be seen as they *are* and not according to the predetermined roles or "scripts" they – and their tradition – had been assigned by outsiders in the past (Connelly 2012).

Fourth, religious leadership as well as the faithful not infrequently have uttered public and unfavorable characterizations of Islam, the Quran, and of Muslim people and the prophet Muhammad, and for some in today's truly regrettable climate of sectarian division and violence within Islamic communities and prejudicial assessments made by many outside of those communities, these utterances are simply accepted as true and universal, despite abundant learning opportunities through scholarship and from interreligious dialogues involving leaders, professionals, and the faithful, which falsify such misconceptions or deeply complicate them and therefore render them inadequate as generalizations. Like Vivekananda in his own time, many today are "prisoners of history" when it comes to seeing Islamic people and traditions favorably or, at a minimum,

in terms of their own historical development, multi-cultural ethos, internal ideological diversity, and the ongoing toxicity of a colonial past functioning as a key ingredient in the political instability and religious radicalization plaguing many Muslim societies today. Like Vivekananda in his own unfortunate historical moment of colonial disfigurement, many today are unable to rise above the stereotyped features of an Islam that is intolerant, fractious, and bloody, one easily contrasted with a Christianity presumed to lack these vices, not unlike the manner in which Vivekananda tended to tar Islam and then contrast it with his understanding of a more universal and superior Hinduism. The well-known document entitled *A Common Word Between us and You*, released in 2009 by Jordan's Royal Al Aal-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought and endorsed by a large global cohort of Islamic scholars from a broad consensus of traditions, has been instructive for Christians[f]. They have learned that initiatives of solidarity do come from outside their own tradition, even in politically unfavorable circumstances like our own and from communities unhelpfully stereotyped as intolerant, and even when their own leadership has not, in this case, acted first with sensitivity and prophetic courage. Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg address might have been maligned and used as reason to disengage further from Christians, but it was not. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad and the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute converted the Regensburg moment into an opportunity to recover and deepen the theological and ethical bonds between these two global communities. Since the initiative began five years ago, an historic and perhaps unprecedented dialogue has developed between Muslims and Christians worldwide. If Vivekananda operated with a 'soft' version of Hindutva, one in which Hindu identity was predicated in part on selective antipathy toward Islam, Christians today have the chance to reassess their own views of Christian identity and perhaps nationalism as well to probe the marginalized persons and traditions on which such identities seem to depend. Here too, such probing is likely to disclose as much about Christians as about Muslims.

Fifth, and in relation to the fourth, who could deny that many Christians across an array of denominations in the United States and on both sides of the political aisle have more or less allowed Christian identity to be assimilated into specific understandings of American nationalism and exceptionalism, so that reductive views of nation and political persuasion become uncritically related to or confused with what counts as Christian in the public and private spheres (Nussbaum 2008)? Who can deny that in many quarters, ideological cooptation of discipleship and Christian living harm those deemed outsiders and, therewith, the public face of Christianity and the church? The problematic linking of Hindu identity to nationalist concerns in post-colonial India is best viewed not as a problem to which others have succumbed but as a ubiquitous shortcoming entailed in being human to which persons across an array of traditions, times, and places, can and do succumb.

However inconvenient Vivekananda's shortcomings were, noted above, they are not ones from which Christians have been immune. Indeed, the study of Vivekananda and his historical context on these matters can be instructive for all who wish to confront honestly such vulnerabilities while retrieving – critically yet sympathetically – wisdom and learning available in both traditions. The analogies briefly noted here are exploratory and suggestive, not conclusive; they invite deeper thought into both historical moments and the role of religious narrative and authority evident therein, and they invite

a willingness to reconsider the ways in which the solidarity of human frailty functions as a great equalizer in religious and other affairs.

Conclusion – interiority as antidote to absolutisms

A major challenge for western people as Vivekananda understood them at the close of the nineteenth century was for them to overcome decadent materialism and the painful absence of proper spirituality, which India and Vedanta in particular provided. But in the opening years of the twenty-first century, I suggest that our attention turn to a different if related priority.

In concluding his first speech at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago on *September 11*, 1893 – the date is ominous – Swami Vivekananda expressed hope that the Parliament gathering would be the death-knell of "sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism. . . ." (Vivekananda 1977b, 4). While the Parliament has gained steam since 1893 and will reconvene in 2015, so has religious fanaticism and absolutism. On balance we don't appear to have leapt over that dangerous hurdle in religious commitment; post-independence democratic India may be better off on the whole from the long view of history, but this means nothing to its millions of victims of communal violence over the last one hundred years and counting. Religious absolutism plagues individual lives, communities, and governing bodies, and it tends to shelter other '-isms' that deny peoples' dignity, ruin lives, and condition futurity toward the same (Sheveland 2015).

Contemporary Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson convincingly argues that faith traditions have become imperiled by a trend toward identifying religious belief with external or what he calls "exoteric" markers at the expense of their spiritual, mystical, or "esoteric" substance (Schuon 1984). In deploying the distinction of esoteric and exoteric to describe this contemporary worry, Johnson is perhaps influenced by the perennialist analysis of religions available in Frithjof Schuon, who was himself strongly influenced by Advaita. More significant than so-called clashes *between* religious traditions, Johnson believes the real clashes are occurring *within* traditions, between the exoteric and esoteric versions of each. "Exoteric" markers of identity privilege the visibly external expressions of religion, particularly as these contribute to an explicit social vision serving as a criterion for orthodoxy. These markers are political in nature and have a group-binding effect. At an extreme, the markers can be absolutized in fundamentalist religious commitment and deployed publicly as tools to homogenize religious community precisely through manufacturing difference and division. In contrast, the "esoteric" markers of identity locate the core of religious belief in spiritual or mystical experience of the holy. As mystical, the esoteric experience of holiness is as beautiful as it is ineffable; the mystical cannot be reduced to exoteric markers, for it remains irreducibly personal and ineffable, even as the mystical must find expressions in words, rituals, and concretely in human bodies.

Johnson's lament isn't that the exoteric markers of identity are inherently problematic. They are not. It's that the appropriate balance between the esoteric or mystical and the exoteric or expressive is frequently abandoned today by many who seek security of identity in outer conformity shared with others, rendering religious life disturbingly void of mysticism and little more than "dry bones." What is needed, Johnson proposes, is a recovery of balance between the mystical and the political, a balance

between the internal depth of the heart's experience and the visible, verbal, and embodied markings of orthodoxy (Johnson 2010; Vivekananda 1977a, 116)[g].

If Johnson's assessment of contemporary religious life is instructive, then Vivekananda's example of deep spiritual interiority presents itself again to the world with renewed relevance and urgency. In response to fanaticism, Vivekananda turned to the *Bhagavad Gita* ('Song of the Lord') for an endorsement, as he saw it, of a pluralism of religions all leading to the same source – the god Krishna – believing that this could be India's solution to the scourge of extremism. But I rather wonder if a more incisive contribution from him begins instead with his seemingly "esoteric" felt sense of truth as union with all living beings, a solidarity from which we can then move more maturely toward the vision of each other not as orthodox or heterodox, in-group or out-group, conformed or unconformed, but as living beings whose 'truth necessitates care' (Chapple 2008, 42). Perhaps we might all, as Vivekananda enjoined in his second lecture on Practical Vedanta, go deep into ourselves in order to '[c]ome out into the broad open light of day. . . [c]ome out into the universe of Light', where the human drive for purity functions not to divide but to render us what we already are, as one (Vivekananda 1976b, 322–323).

Endnotes

[a]The Los Angeles archdiocesan Hindu-Catholic Dialogue Group held this event immediately prior to the conference *Vedanta: Its Many Manifestations Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, 15–16 June 2013, Loyola Marymount University. http://bellarmine.lmu.edu/yoga/doshi/doshivedanta/

[b]The website for the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions can be found here: http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/index.cfm. The summary report of the Melbourne Parliament can be found here: http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/_includes/files/reports/PWR2009-Report.pdf. Last accessed 11/21/2013.

[c]The Munk Debates, 2010, http://www.munkdebates.com/debates/religion. Last accessed 07/23/2014.

[d]Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2. Available here: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

[e]E.g., Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus: on the unicity and salvific universality of Christ and the Church*, no. 17. Available here: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

[f]*A Common word between us and you: five year anniversary book*. Available here: http://www.acommonword.com/

[g]Luke Timothy Johnson, "Dry Bones: Why Religion Can't Live without Mysticism," *Commonweal: a Review of Religion, Politics, and Culture Commonweal* 137/4 (February 26, 2010): 11–18. Available here: http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/dry-bones

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