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Pain and Power.
Reflections on Ascetic Agency

1. *Introduction*

January 2001 I saw in one of India's English-language newspapers a photograph of an Indian ascetic who had taken a bath in the sacred confluence of Yamuna and Ganges at Allahabad during the Kumbh Mela, a bathing festival occurring once in twelve years and attracting more than 20 million pilgrims. The caption read: "This sadhu has taken his bath at the Kumbh and now he is off again to the Himalayas". At one level this can be taken to express the essence of asceticism, namely that its proper place is outside of normal society, in a cave in the Himalayas. At another level one can take also this as expressing the normative view of modern, English-reading Indians, namely that ascetics do not belong to modern, secular society and thus should be confined to their Himalayan caves. When these two levels coincide, the modern view with the essentialist one, the historian and anthropologist is alerted to the task of deconstruction. Indeed, how much of asceticism can we understand with our modern frame of mind, our modern conceptual apparatus? But, at the same time, why do we feel the constant need to put asceticism as modernity's 'other', as it is nicely captured in English-language Indian newspapers where happenings in the Kumbh Mela and developments in the Information Technology sector vie for attention on the front pages.

These structural oppositions also haunt sociological theory of asceticism. It is, of course, Max Weber who, in his analysis of the emergence of modernity, meaning Protestantism, makes a famous distinction between inner-worldly asceticism and outer-worldly asceticism.¹ The latter belongs to the grand religious systems of ancient civilizations, like Hinduism and Buddhism, while the former is central to the emergence of capitalist modernity. Again, Louis Dumont in his influential essay on world renunciation posits the caste society of the householder as a holistic universe against the renouncer as the individual outside of society.² These oppositions which are deeply embedded in ideologies of tradition and modernity raise the definitional problem of 'asceticism' as well as the methodological one of how to study it comparatively.

The second issue that we will have to address is that of the nature of ascetic agency. This is not unrelated to the question of modernity, of course, but it has to be tackled in its own right. One will have to determine what the nature of ascetic disciplines and practices is to be able to conceptualize what is considered to be agency within them. We have to enter conceptual universes, so to say, which may be alien to the enlightened mind and therefore difficult to understand or to discursively engage.

Finally, these disciplines and practices do not exist outside modernity but have been gradually domesticated in modern ways of thinking and doing, thus creating much of the conceptual trouble in the construction of modern, nationalized religions. This will also bring us to the third question how to understand so-called 'political ascetics' or, broader conceived, the question of the so-called politicization of religion. All these questions of definition, of agency, and of politics have been illuminated in that part of Gananath Obeyesekere's work that has dealt with religious virtuosi in Sri Lanka, especially in the brilliant *Medusa's Hair* and the volume written with Richard Gombrich that was meant to complement it (Obeyesekere 1981; Gombrich, Obeyesekere 1988). In this tribute to the work of Obeyesekere I will in general stick to examples from Indian Hinduism with which I have a greater familiarity.

¹ Weber 1925, I.

² Dumont 1966: 324-350. Appendice B, "Le Renoncement dans les Religions de l'Inde".

2. What is asceticism?

The simple answer is that I do not know. Like other important concepts, such as religion or ritual, asceticism is used as a universal concept, although it derives from a particular Christian tradition. As such, it belongs to that large conceptual apparatus which is used in the European expansion to make other cultures legible and manageable. Anthropology, as a discipline of modernity, is always caught in the conundrum of how to relate these universalizing concepts with an increasing knowledge of particular traditions in particular times and places. This is correctly conceived as the problem of translation, but we have to remind ourselves of the simple fact that less powerful languages are usually translated in more powerful, that is more universal ones.

The concept of asceticism, then, despite its universal application, always continues to refer to the early Christian Saints, their lives of self-discipline, of abstinence, of celibacy in particular as the basis of monasticism in the early Christian Church. When the concept is used to translate other traditions, such as those of Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, then it is family-resemblances, which make the translation plausible. We have to recognize two things, however. The first is that what resembles something else is not equal to it. That is to say that one can call sufis, sadhus, and bhikkhus ascetics, but one has not done much by doing so. Sufis, sadhus and bhikkhus are, first of all, to be understood within their own discursive traditions. The second is that the translation into the concept of asceticism is part of a larger conceptual transformation, which we call modernity and which is in this case, specifically, colonial modernity. The translation of one thing into another is therefore not innocent, but part of new understandings and shapings of the world, from which in fact nothing can keep its distance. To tell the Hindu ascetic to go back to the Himalayas will not help.

The family-resemblances between these traditions are obvious, but it is not self-evident that a general sociological theory, like that of Weber, can explain them. In the Indian traditions much seems to turn around the notion of sacrifice. It is generally assumed that Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions of renunciation have emerged in opposition to the Vedic sacrifice and to the central role of the Brahman priesthood in them. *Ahimsa*, then, is not so much, as it is often translated, 'non-violence' in general, but 'not killing sacrificial animals', a very specific ritual injunction. Ideas one finds in some Vaishnava and Shaiva renunciatory traditions turn around the rejection

of the sacrificial fire as the center of the household and the re-valuation of the fire as the center of ascetic power, *tapas*. All these notions have their history and are embedded in theological disputes and ascetic disciplines. As such, they are far removed from what are the major concerns in renunciation in Islam or Christianity. Even if we encounter celibacy in Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity it has to be interpreted in different ways, since the discourses around sexuality to which celibacy relates are so vastly different.

Nevertheless, one can find certain sociological mechanisms (causes and consequences) in a vast number of comparable cases. This would move us from questions of meaning to questions of practice. I do think that an institution like monastic celibacy has social consequences of a far-reaching nature. In principle it replaces ideas of natural kinship and reproduction with those of spiritual kinship and reproduction. This is quite immediate in the case of the Ramanandi sadhus, among whom I have done fieldwork, and who use kinship terms like *parivar* (family) and *bhai* (brother) to refer to the ties between celibate initiates of one guru. They refer to the initiation-formula as the seed-mantra (*bija-mantra*), mimicking natural reproduction rather closely. In such a way an alternative social network emerges which can be used for all kinds of purposes. Such a network is a reasonable conduit for pooling resources over a longer period of time, which explains the active role of Hindu ascetics in money-lending over a long historical period. Since the status-considerations which are central to marriage practices in hierarchical societies are of less relevance to the ascetic networks they tend to be more open, more mobile, both spatially and socially, and thus quite amenable to particular economic activities, such as long-distance trading and soldiering, which a sedentarized, agrarian population finds more difficult to engage.

Anthropologists like Evans-Pritchard and Gellner have rightly pointed out that certain structural positions inhabited by religious specialists offer particular social possibilities and advantages. However, it is important to understand such sociological mechanisms not within a functionalist, static system, but processual in relation to new historical opportunities and hindrances. I have argued in earlier work that the opportunities for Hindu ascetics to engage in long-distance trade, money-lending and soldiering drastically declined during the 18th century due to the transformations brought by the colonial regime (Van der Veer 1988). The fa-

mous Sannyasi rebellions of the end of the 18th century are a clear expression of this changing landscape. At the same time one has to acknowledge that the institution of celibacy does provide sociological possibilities which have their use and effect in any historical context.

The tendency among social scientists to assume that there is a system at work is clear, for instance, in arguments which asserted that Hindu asceticism is in structural opposition to the caste system. It is already clear from much ethno historical work that caste as a system is more or less the product of colonial systematization, while caste society before the colonial intervention was a much more variable, complex, and changing set of configurations. Similarly, Hindu forms of asceticism are immensely variable and complex. It has to be understood as a social field of interactions in which indeed caste, and especially the difference between Brahmans and non-Brahmans, plays a significant role. This difference receives a new significance in the light of the emergence of caste movements at the end of the 19th century in response to colonial census politics. There is nothing static in the positioning of ascetics towards caste and it is striking how much of it has to be interpreted within the wider history of peasant rebellions and peasant movements.

The assumption of a structural opposition between caste and renunciation leads to confusion in the interpretation of devotional movements in India. Of Sikhism it is often said that in contrast to Hinduism it is egalitarian and anti-caste, but the historical facts are much more complex. The founding guru of the Sikhs was a Khatri and his successors belonged to the same caste. Caste differences between, for example, Jats and Ramgarhias are pronounced among the Sikhs. But one of the elements of caste politics, the refusal of commensality across caste boundaries, is lacking in the Sikh *langar*, communal meal. The interesting point of division among these devotional movements may in fact not so much be the sociological one of caste, but a theological one of the use of images in worship. There is a strong current in Hindu devotionalism, which emphasizes that God has no form, has no qualities, is *nirguna* and can thus not be represented by an image. This view leads to the diminishing importance of purity regulations in worship, since one does not need a Brahman or high-caste priest anymore for approaching and touching a sacred image. In earlier work I have suggested that there is a linkage between a social con-

figuration of footloose ascetics who do not pay much attention to caste differences and this theology of the formless God (Van der Veer 1987: 680-695). As soon as one worships images and builds temples, one becomes part of a sedentary caste society, which reflects upon one's religious practices.

Sacrifice and image worship as well as their denial in asceticism are powerful examples of religious practices and discourses, which have wide social ramifications. An element that tends to escape from such sociological observations, however, is that of the nature of ascetic power and of transgression as a mobilizing force. This brings me to the second issue raised in the introduction, the exploration of ascetic agency.

3. *What is ascetic agency?*

In a recent article Talal Asad has pointed out that our modern notion of agency hinders us to understand other traditions, which engage questions of power, pain, and moral agency (Asad 2000: 29-61). The modern notion of agency entails assumptions of freedom, legal and moral responsibility, rationality and individualism. There are, obviously, a great number of theories within this tradition, focusing on one or the other element in agency. Whatever the differences in these theories one generally ends up with the metaphysical notion of a individual, rational actor who acts upon the world and is responsible for his actions.

It is difficult to understand ascetic agency fully in these terms. While Mircea Eliade in his book on *yoga* speaks about freedom as an essential element in the disciplines, which lead to immortality, it is clear that this freedom is different from the liberty which is the focus of Enlightenment traditions, including Liberalism (Eliade 1958). Of course, Buddhism and other traditions focus on freeing oneself from desire and Hindu ascetics are free-moving, seemingly independent actors, but this kind of religious freedom is attained through rigorous following of rules, disciplines, and especially the commands of higher authority, especially the guru. Sufi traditions speak of being like a dead body in the hands of the master. This kind of agency is alien to the modern notion.

A similar disjunction can be found if one looks at the notion of power. Within modern Western theories of agency there is much emphasis on the notion of self-empowerment. This would seem to fit the case of the ascetic who attains

powers through ascetic discipline. The ascetic goes through a series of actions in which he inflicts pain and violence on his body or in which he undergoes severe self-humiliation. These are acts of self-disempowerment to attain a particular selfhood, which has its own powers. For example, to remain silent for years (the ascetic vow of silence) is to deprive oneself of the essential human power of speech. To become a slave (*das*) of god is to willingly enact a drama in which all the power is attributed to a transcendent, divine actor. I use the metaphor of drama deliberately since Vaishnava religious disciplines are built upon Sankrit dramatic theory, focusing on particular dramatic enactments that are meant to induce specified emotional states. The actor inhabits a particular role in a cosmic plot and disempowers himself to do so. Involved in this are not only the ascetic, but also the laity, which is the human audience of this role-playing. Other ascetics suffer self-inflicted pain, but doing so does not make one into a patient (a sufferer) only, but also into an agent since one inflicts it upon oneself and the pain itself transforms one from one kind of person to another. Disciplines of the body (including violence and pain) transform one's mental states. Pain then is not negative, but positive.

An important element in the agency of ascetics is transgression. Human behaviour is structured by rules and boundaries. Ascetic disciplines are not wild and transgressive as such, but they experiment with these rules and boundaries to attain other states of mind. The body is the terrain of these experiments. While avoidance of pain and the preservation of the integrity of the body are general rules in human behaviour, ascetics pierce their body, starve it, cut off pieces, let nails grow into their hands, let legs atrophy, curb sexual desire by breaking their penis, and so on and so forth. Asceticism is not only a theory but also a practice or rather it combines the two in discipline. In his article "Le Combat de la Chastete" Michel Foucault analyzes the texts of the fifth-century Christian author Cassian who makes a famous categorization of eight vices and the ways to battle them as the heart of ascetic practice (Foucault 1982: 15-25). What Foucault emphasizes is that ascetic practice is not so much an internalization of prohibitions, but the opening up of a domain of thought which is a quest of truth about oneself. Especially the complete absence of nocturnal pollution is a sign of sanctity, of total chastity, and thus of a divine gift of grace. The body is the battlefield between Evil and God

and one can never be sure, one always has to be watchful and indeed requires the surveillance by others to be sure. One can call these disciplines of the body also technologies of the self. Clearly such technologies are directly related to complex theologies and thus not universal in meaning, but it should not surprise us that the repertoires involved are quite similar across religions. While the modern observer tends to emphasize what is prohibited or what (in a Freudian sense) is repressed Foucault's analysis emphasizes what is enabled, what is opened up by closing other possibilities.

This is well illustrated by tantric practices, which are not focused on battling vices, such as gluttony and lust, by expelling them, but by performing them, so to say, in a completely ritualized fashion. Transgression and repression are two sides of the same coin, that is of a quest for Truth. The use of violence is crucial in these ascetic practices. In the Hindu traditions there is, as I already observed, a denial of sacrifice, of the killing of the sacrificial victim, but, again, this should not be glossed as 'non-violence', since the violence is directed at one's own body now. Moreover, many of these traditions not only encourage this inward violence, but also have nothing against directing it outward towards one's enemies. Most Asian martial traditions emerge from ascetic practices and combine the control of the self with the destruction of the Evil Other.

Ascetics have agency, particularly when they submit themselves to self-inflicted violence, to the absolute authority of one's masters, to the ultimate power of God. Their disciplines create new ways of self-understanding, including repertoires of feeling. The powers that one gains from ascetic practice according to some Hindu traditions are clearly not within the purview of the European Enlightenment. They include powers to heal, to predict the future, to travel through the air without vehicle, to be present at more than one place at the same time, and so on. According to the Buddha such are only secondary abilities which pale in comparison to the liberating knowledge one gains through these disciplines. That is to say that it allows one to stay clear of certain involvements or entanglements in the world which are inessential, false and un-virtuous. Ascetics, then, certainly are involved in self-empowerment, but this is understood in ways which can only be understood by the modern observer as 'backward', pre-modern', 'magical', or 'escapist' and thus essentially as powerless, since it does not provide a firm grip on reality and

does not contribute to progress. This brings me to the last part of my paper, which deals with the so-called 'politicization of religion'. How can the kind of agency, just described, allow one a role in modern politics?

4. *What is ascetic politics?*

The common response among modern, liberal observers, including some anthropologists, to the presence of ascetics in political activities and especially communal violence is that this is a travesty of 'real' religion. Ascetics who are politically active are *ipso facto* false ascetics, since in the modern world religion and politics are separate spheres. Obviously, when one has the image that Hindu and Buddhist religions are in their essence 'non-violent' and 'tolerant', it comes as an unpleasant surprise to see Hindu and Buddhist monks in the forefront of militant agitations against Muslims or Hindu Tamils. However, if one has been aware of the historical transformation of asceticism in the modern period these developments are much less surprising, although they still require further interpretation.

One element in the phrase 'politicization of religion' is that it assumes that something that was originally 'a-political' has become 'political'. While it is quite difficult to do historical research on Hindu and Buddhist asceticism it is abundantly clear that we deal here with social phenomena which have always played a crucial role in the political economies of the societies in which we find them and that they are therefore political in their very nature. The demand for a 'return to the original, purely religious nature' of these phenomena is a modern, secular demand, just like asking sadhus to go back to the Himalayas. We know much more about the colonial histories of ascetics and ascetic organizations than about their pre-colonial histories and what we can definitely see in the 19th century is a 'nationalization of religion', the emergence of 'religious nationalism' and the role of ascetics in this development.

What interests me here most is not so much the well-documented role of ascetics like Dayananda, Vivekananda, or Dharmapala in the development of proto-nationalist and nationalist movements. I think that it is quite obvious that in societies in which religious organizations occupy a large space in social life religious forms of nationalism come to play a significant role and ascetic models of leadership will be promi-

ment. What is much less understood, however, is how ascetic discourses and practices are translated and transformed by their incorporation in 'the service of the nation'. Quite simply, how is a term like 'seva' carried from the religious sphere, where it means 'service to god' to the secular sphere to mean service to the people or simply social work.

One of the most telling examples of this translation and of the nationalization of asceticism is the Hindu ascetic Swami Vivekananda. Western discourse on 'Eastern spirituality' is reappropriated by Indian religious movements in the second half of the 19th century.³ I would not quite know how to translate 'spirituality' into Sanskrit, but it is a fact that Hindu religious discourses are now captured under the term 'spirituality'. To be effective in the contestation of Christian colonialism the translation of Hindu discursive traditions into 'spirituality' meant a significant transformation of these traditions. This process can be closely followed by examining the way Vivekananda made a sanitized version of the religious ideas and practices of Ramakrishna for a modernizing, middle class in Calcutta. The *Ramakrishna Kathamrta*, a text dealing with Ramakrishna's life, has been the subject of two lengthy studies recently, one by the political scientist Partha Chatterjee and one by the historian of religion, Jeffrey Kripal (1995).

Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was an illiterate ascetic in a Kali temple who became successful among Brahmo literati in middle-class Calcutta thanks to his charismatic personality. He was a medium of the Mother Goddess Kali. Ramakrishna's ideas and practices were based upon a specific, highly eroticized tradition of Tantra, a fact which is easily forgotten when reading Chatterjee's analysis of the *Kathamrta*. Kripal circumscribes Tantra with 5 direct quotations from the *Kathamrta*: (1) "That about which in the Vedas and the Puranas it is said, 'Don't do this, this shouldn't be done', in the Tantras is called good". This shows the extent to which the Tantras are radically heterodox and transgressive of Brahmanical norms. (2) "They practice according to the views of the Tantras. They practice the Five M's". The five M's are: *madya* (wine), *mamsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (parched grain), and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse). (3) "In the first state there is form, in the second state there is the formless, and, after that, there is

³ See for a more detailed analysis the third chapter of my *Imperial Encounters* (Van der Veer 2001).

the state beyond form and the formless". This metaphysical statement is glossed by Kripal as saying that there is no dualistic opposition between *bhukti* (enjoyment) and *mukti* (liberation), but that they are dialectically related in the sexual union. (4) "Everything about a Tantrika is secret". An exasperating element of Tantric texts is that they hide their transgressive nature in a secret language (*samdhabhasha*), which makes it very difficult to interpret them without guidance by a guru. (5) "Shame, disgust, and fear —these three must not remain". In Kripal's reading fear has very much to do with the transgressive, and dark side of sexuality. In Chatterjee's analysis, however, fear refers to something quite different: "a mortal fear of the Englishman and of the world over which he dominated was a constituent element in the consciousness of the Calcutta middle class" (Chatterjee 1993: 57). One could perhaps argue that in Tantra one was engaged in a hidden ritual world, which transgressed both the oppressive world of Brahmanical norms and that of colonial domination. Tantrikas could derive considerable power and fearlessness from this engagement, which escaped surveillance from authorities. (6) "The Saktas follow the views of the Tantras". In Ramakrishna's tradition Tantrikas are the same as Shaktas, that is, worshippers of Shakti or Power, which is Mother Kali (Kripal 1995: 30-32).

A lot could be said about Ramakrishna's tantric tradition which would avoid both the sociological reductionism of Chatterjee and the psychological reductionism of Kripal. I cannot do that here, but I would like to point out that the fact that we have so much hagiographic data on Ramakrishna may be exceptional, but that Ramakrishna himself was not an exceptional figure. One has to see that Ramakrishna was not some kind of isolated phenomenon, but rather a particularly gifted guru in a tradition which was available in many versions throughout Hindu India. One only has to look at Roxanne Gupta's work on Kina Ram in Benares, or my own work on the Ramanandis, or Morini's work on Bengali pilgrimage to see how many of the themes in the *Kathamrta* are reflected elsewhere in North Indian Hinduism. Ramakrishna belonged to a tradition which was and still is very strong in Bengal, much stronger than Brahmanism has ever been, also among the so-called middle class. "Every Bengali is half Vaishnava and half Shakta", goes the saying (Kripal 1995: 55). If there is an antinomian tradition in Hindu India it is definitely Shaktism, but it is less anti-State than anti-Brahmanism and its message has primarily

to do with gender and sexuality. For our purpose its main interest lies in the fact that it is so unpalatable for the Victorian Age.

Whatever the possibilities of Vivekananda's discourse, there was no way in which he could even begin to translate the beliefs and practices of Ramakrishna into a Hindu universalism. The Goddess Kali with her protruding tongue and her necklace of skulls dancing on the corpse of Siva stood perhaps for everything a Victorian Britisher would find abhorrent in Hinduism and thus could not easily be adopted in a Brahmo rational religion meant to mediate the worlds of the colonizers and colonized. Ramakrishna was outrageous. When he would go into trance, he would place his foot on the genitals of one of his young boy disciples, whom he called 'pure pots', that could hold the 'milk' of his divine love (Kripal 1995: 2). Kripal shows convincingly that tantra allowed Ramakrishna to enact his homosexuality, a sexual inclination deeply frowned upon both in India and in Britain. The aversion of Ramakrishna towards women cannot only be explained by referring to the tradition of renouncing the world as Chatterjee does, but has also to do with homosexual tendencies within that tradition (Chatterjee 1993: 62-68).

While we can still interpret most of Ramakrishna's beliefs and practices in terms of Hindu discursive traditions, we enter with Vivekananda the terrain of colonial translation. Vivekananda is the peculiar and unusual figure here. He was, on the one hand, entirely immersed in devotion to Ramakrishna, and on the other, decided to create a Hindu religious system, which sanitized everything that characterized Ramakrishna's beliefs and practices. There can be no doubt that Vivekananda was totally swept off his feet by his encounter with Ramakrishna and that he became an ardent disciple. Nevertheless, his education in Western philosophy and his engagement with Brahmo religion prevented him from accepting Ramakrishna's Shaktism. Vivekananda removed Tantric Shaktism and the awesome Kali from sight. Vivekananda's was a logocentric, masculine form of Hinduism, Vedanta, not Ramakrishna's feminized form of mad possession. Ramakrishna's highly eroticized meditation on Kali as Mother and Lover, on Kali on top of Shiva, on Kali's tongue were edited out of Vivekananda's message to the world. Kali was replaced by Mother India, as tantrism was by nationalism. Tantric enjoyment was replaced by ascetic dedication to the nation.

Vivekananda's translation of Ramakrishna's message in terms of 'spirituality' was literally transferred to the West during his trip to the USA after Ramakrishna's death. He visited the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, a side-show of the Columbian Exposition, celebrating the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus voyage to the New World, but perhaps more importantly Chicago's recovery from the Great Fire of 1871. Religions represented in this show or religious universalism included Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Islam, Shinto, Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism, and various others (Ziolkowski 1993). But the show was stolen by the representative of Hinduism, Swami Vivekananda. In his speech to the Parliament Vivekananda claimed that "he was proud to belong to a religion which had taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance" (Mullick 1993: 221). Vivekananda's spirituality was not modest or meek; it was forceful, polemical, and proud. As the response in the Parliament and in his further lecture tours in the United States indicate, this was a message which resonated powerfully among American audiences. His writings in English often compare the lack of spirituality in the West with the abundance of it in India. Vivekananda is probably the first major Indian advocate of a 'Hindu spirituality' and his Ramakrishna Mission, the first Hindu missionary movement, following principles set out in modern Protestant evangelism (Van der Veer 1994).

A major achievement was Vivekananda's creation of yoga as the Indian science of supraconsciousness. Yoga is a Sanskrit word that one can gloss as 'discipline'. It has a complex history with a number of disparate traditions, but the classical text is Patanjali's *Yogasūtras* which was probably composed around the fifth century AD.⁴ Yoga was now made into the unifying sign of the Indian nation and that not only for national consumption, but for the entire world to consume. This is a new doctrine, although Vivekananda emphasized that it was ancient 'wisdom'. Especially the body exercises of *hathayoga*, underpinned by a metaphysics of mind-body unity, continues to be a major article of the health industry,

⁴ Mircea Eliade has written an important study of yoga placing it in the discipline of history of religions without even mentioning Vivekananda. His neglect of the historical context of his own work is the more surprising if one remembers that it was largely done in Calcutta under the supervision of the Principal of Sanskrit College, Professor Surendranath Dasgupta. See Eliade 1958.

especially in the USA. What I find important in Vivekananda's construction of yoga as the core of Hindu 'spirituality' is that it is devoid of any specific devotional content that would involve, for example, temple worship and thus a theological and ritual position in sectarian debates. Vivekananda is first and foremost interested in Hindu Unity:

Here am I, not to find difference that exists among us, but to find where we agree. Here I am trying to understand on what ground we may always remain brothers, upon what foundations the voice that has spoken from eternity may become stronger and stronger as it grows [...] National union in India must be a gathering up of its scattered spiritual forces. A nation in India must be a union of those whose hearts beat to the same spiritual tune. There have been sects in this country. There are sects enough in the future, because this has been the peculiarity of our religion that in abstract principles so much latitude has been given that, although afterwards so much detail has been worked out, all these details are the working out of principles, broad as the skies above our heads, eternal as nature itself. Sects must exist here, but what need not exist is sectarian quarrel. Sects must be but sectarianism need not.⁵

This lack of religious specificity together with the claim to be scientific is crucial for the nationalist appeal of Vivekananda's message. From Vivekananda's viewpoint religion is based upon reason, not belief. Yoga is legitimized as a scientific tradition in terms of rational criteria. An off-shoot of this is that health issues could be addressed in terms of a national science of yoga. I would suggest that Vivekananda has developed a translation of Hindu traditions in terms which are remarkably similar to what is cobbled together in theosophy and its later off-shoot, Steiner's anthroposophy.

Vivekananda's construction of 'spirituality' and its relation with nationalism has had enormous impact on a whole range of thinkers and movements. It has influenced thinkers on India as different as Savarkar, Aurobindo, Gandhi, and Nehru, but it also had a huge impact on a great variety of Western spiritual movements, including the current New Age-movement. As I have argued elsewhere, it is a construction crucial to the notion that one can be a renouncer and still be active in political and social causes. Hindu nationalism could hard-

⁵ Lecture entitled, "Common Bases of Hinduism", quoted in Basu 1997: 76.

ly exist without such a notion. Lise McKean has shown the extent to which the idea of spirituality is even used in promoting national products, such as Indian handlooms and handicrafts (McKean 1996). There seems to be no escape from the relentless marketing of India's spirituality today.

Vivekananda's peculiar hybridity was the result of his mediation of Ramakrishna's world and the colonial world. He found an authentic religious authority in Ramakrishna, but had to translate his ideas beyond recognition to allow them to make sense in the colonial world he inhabited. If we ask the question what is ascetic politics today we have to historicize asceticism and examine colonial and postcolonial translations which makes it possible to interpret the role of Buddhist monks like Walpola Rahula in Sri Lanka, Hindu ascetics like Swami Chinmayanand, the founder of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, but also ascetic politicians, like Mahatma Gandhi. The latter's 'experiments with truth' form a fascinating translation of ascetic discipline in the discourse of modern politics.

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