

*Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism*  
(Oxford University Press, 2022)

Swami Medhananda

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**Synopsis**

Swami Vivekananda, the nineteenth-century Hindu monk who introduced Vedānta to the West, is undoubtedly one of modern India's most influential philosophers. Unfortunately, his philosophy has too often been interpreted through reductive hermeneutic lenses. Typically, scholars have viewed him either as a modern-day exponent of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta or as a "Neo-Vedāntin" influenced more by Western ideas than indigenous Indian traditions. In *Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism*, Swami Medhananda rejects these prevailing approaches to offer a new interpretation of Vivekananda's philosophy, highlighting its originality, contemporary relevance, and cross-cultural significance. Vivekananda, the book argues, is best understood as a cosmopolitan Vedāntin who developed novel philosophical positions through creative dialectical engagement with both Indian and Western thinkers.

Inspired by his guru Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda reconceived Advaita Vedānta as a nonsectarian, life-affirming philosophy that provides an ontological basis for religious cosmopolitanism and a spiritual ethics of social service. He defended the scientific credentials of religion while criticizing the climate of scientism beginning to develop in the late nineteenth century. He was also one of the first philosophers to defend the evidential value of supersensuous perception on the basis of general epistemic principles. Finally, he adopted innovative cosmopolitan approaches to long-standing philosophical problems. Bringing him into dialogue with numerous philosophers past and present, Medhananda demonstrates the sophistication and enduring value of Vivekananda's views on the limits of reason, the dynamics of religious faith, and the hard problem of consciousness.

**Endorsements**

"This is the first, and by far the best, analytical study of the original philosophy of Swami Vivekananda—who was not just a preacher, mystic, and orator, but a critical Kantian Vedāntist. Meticulously engaging with cutting-edge twenty-first century epistemological debates on testimony of spiritual experiences and with late nineteenth-century metaphysical debates about the relation between God and the world, this work establishes Vivekananda as a major modern systematic philosopher and perhaps the first 'fusion philosopher' of the world. Combining profound textual scholarship with lucid, argument-rich writing, it should become a must-read textbook of world philosophy."

— Arindam Chakrabarti, Stony Brook University

"In *Swami Vivekananda's Vedāntic Cosmopolitanism*, Medhananda brilliantly spearheads a fresh appreciation of Vivekananda, a key member in a group of extremely insightful and innovative Indian philosophers active in the eve of Independence. Medhananda challenges

the simplistic classification of these thinkers as ‘Neo-Hindu’ or ‘Neo-Vedāntic,’ demonstrating instead how Vivekananda is a pioneering voice in cosmopolitan philosophy, a creative intellectual who develops new philosophical theories inspired by both Indian and European materials.” — Jonardon Ganeri, University of Toronto

“Swami Vivekananda was not only an enormously influential religious leader; he was one of the pre-eminent Vedānta philosophers of the Indian renaissance. He offered a vision of Vedānta continuous with its classical history and in dialogue with modernity, and in doing so demonstrated how Indian philosophy could be pursued in a cosmopolitan voice. Swami Medhananda presents us with the first detailed exploration of Vivekananda's entire philosophical program, setting it both in the context of classical Indian philosophy, and in the context of Indian renaissance thought. He shows that Vivekananda has a great deal to contribute to contemporary debates in the philosophy of religion and metaphysics. This book is erudite, clear, and compelling. It is essential reading for anyone who cares about global philosophy or religion.” — Jay Garfield, University of Melbourne

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S  
**VEDĀNTIC COSMOPOLITANISM**



SWAMI MEDHANANDA

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আমার motto এই যে, যেখানে যাহা কিছু উত্তম পাই, তাহাই শিক্ষা করিব ।  
—স্বামী বিবেকানন্দ  
(১৮৯০-এ স্বামী অখন্ডানন্দকে লেখা চিঠি)

My motto is to learn whatever is great wherever I may find it.  
—Swami Vivekananda  
(1890 Letter to Svāmī Akhaṇḍānanda)

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# Abbreviations of Texts

## Texts Relating to Swami Vivekananda

[Throughout this book, whenever I cite a passage from any of the works listed below, I use parenthetical citations in the body of the text. In case of multi-volume works like *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (CW), I cite the abbreviated title, followed by the volume number and page number. Whenever I cite a passage from an originally Bengali text written or spoken by Vivekananda, I first cite the Bengali original and then the English translation.]

- CW Vivekananda, Swami. [1957–1997] 2006–2007. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda: Mayavati Memorial Edition*. 9 vols. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama.
- BCW Vivekānanda, Svāmī. [1964] 2009. *Svāmī Vivekānander Vāñī o Racanā*, fourth edition. 10 vols. Kolkātā: Udbodhan.
- LSV Anonymous. 1989. *The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples*, sixth edition. 2 vols. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama.

## Texts Relating to Sri Ramakrishna

[Whenever I cite a passage from Svāmī Sāradānanda’s *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga*, I first cite the volume number, fascicle number, and page number of the Bengali text (*LP*) and then cite the page number of Swami Chetanananda’s single-volume English translation (*DP*).]

- K Gupta, Mahendranāth. [1902–1932] 2010. *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta: Śrīmakathita*. 1 vol. Kolkātā: Udbodhan.
- G Gupta, Mahendranath. [1942] 1992. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, translated by Swami Nikhilananda. New York: Ramakrishna-Vedanta Center.
- LP Sāradānanda, Svāmī. [1909–1919] 2009. *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga*. 2 vols. Kolkātā: Udbodhan. Volume 1 contains three separately paginated fascicles, and Volume 2 contains two separately paginated fascicles.
- DP Saradananda, Swami. 2003. *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, translated by Swami Chetanananda. St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis.

## Sanskrit Commentaries of Śaṅkarācārya

[Unless otherwise noted, translations of Sanskrit passages from Śaṅkarācārya’s commentaries are my own.]

- BSBh Śaṅkarācārya. 2007. *Brahmasūtram: Śāṅkarabhāṣyopetam*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- BhGBh Śaṅkarācārya. 2012. *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā Śāṅkarabhāṣya Hindī-anuvādasahita*. Gorakhpur: Gita Press.
- BṛUpBh Śaṅkarācārya. 2013. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. Gorakhpur: Gita Press.
- ĪUpBh Śaṅkarācārya. 2011. *Īśādi Nau Upaniṣad: Śāṅkarabhāṣyārtha*. Gorakhpur: Gita Press.

**Works by Immanuel Kant**

[As is standard in Kant scholarship, I cite the *Critique of Pure Reason* using the A/B edition pagination, and I cite all other works by volume and page of the Akademie Ausgabe (Ak.): Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin [now de Gruyter], 1902–).]

- CPR* Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- CPrR* Kant, Immanuel. 1996. *Critique of Practical Reason*. In Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, translated by Mary J. Gregor, 133–271. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LM* Kant, Immanuel. 1997. *Lectures on Metaphysics*, translated by Karl Ameriks and Steve Naragon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- OPA* Kant, Immanuel. 1992. *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*. In Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy: 1755–1770*, translated by David Walford, 107–202. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- RB* Kant, Immanuel. 1996. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, translated by George di Giovanni, in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 39–216. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## A Note on Sanskrit and Bengali Transliteration

Throughout the book, I transliterate Sanskrit words using the standard International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) scheme. The original editors of the nine-volume *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* used an outdated and inconsistent method of transliterating Sanskrit terms. For instance, in Vivekananda's lecture "Māyā and Illusion" (CW 2:88–104), the original editors rendered the first instance of "Māyā" as "Mâyā" but all subsequent instances as "Maya" without any diacritics. For the sake of accuracy and clarity, I have consistently transliterated all Sanskrit terms in cited passages from the *Complete Works* using the IAST scheme.

There is no standard transliteration scheme for Bengali, so I have adopted the scheme that I think will be most helpful to my expected readers. Whenever possible, I transliterate Sanskritic Bengali words in such a way that the Sanskrit root words are easily identifiable by those who have some knowledge of Sanskrit but little or no knowledge of Bengali. For instance, I render the Bengali word "bijñān" as "vijñāna," and I render "bidyā" as "vidyā."

Throughout the book, I generally transliterate the names of Bengali figures using the appropriate diacritical marks, *except* in the case of very well-known Bengali figures, the English spelling of whose names are already familiar, including "Swami Vivekananda," "Sri Ramakrishna," "Keshab Chandra Sen," and "Debendranath Tagore." Moreover, I cite the names of Indian authors in exactly the way the authors themselves wrote their names. For instance, I refer to "Swami Tapasyananda" instead of "Svāmī Tapasyānanda," since Swami Tapasyananda printed his name in his English-language books without diacritics. However, I always use diacritics when citing the names of authors of texts in an Indian language such as Bengali or Sanskrit. For instance, I refer to "Dineścandra Bhaṭṭācārya Śāstri" and "Svāmī Gambhīrānanda" as authors of Bengali books.

# Introduction

## Swami Vivekananda as an Immersive Cosmopolitan Philosopher

*Truth is my God, the universe my country.*

—Swami Vivekananda (1895; CW 5:92)

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the Bengali spiritual figure who played a pivotal role in reviving Hinduism in India and introducing Vedānta and Hinduism to the West, is also one of modern India’s most important philosophers. Unfortunately, his philosophy has too often been interpreted through reductive hermeneutic lenses that fail to capture the sophistication and originality of his thinking. Typically, scholars have argued either that he simply gave a modern ethical twist to the eighth-century Śaṅkarācārya’s philosophy of Advaita Vedānta<sup>1</sup> or that he championed a “Neo-Vedāntic” philosophy shaped more by Western outlooks and expectations than by indigenous Indian traditions.<sup>2</sup> Rejecting both of these prevailing interpretive approaches, this book offers a new interpretation of Vivekananda’s philosophy that highlights its originality, contemporary relevance, and cross-cultural significance. Vivekananda, I argue, is best seen as a cosmopolitan Vedāntin who developed distinctive new philosophical positions through creative dialectical engagement with thinkers in both Indian and Western philosophical traditions.

The young Vivekananda’s upbringing and education in Calcutta, then the cultural and intellectual hub of British-ruled India, were thoroughly cosmopolitan. His father, Viśvanāth Datta, was a successful lawyer proficient in Bengali, English, Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, and Hindi. Endowed with a broad religious outlook, Viśvanāth was fond of reciting passages from the Bible and the *Dewan-i-Hafiz*, and he sometimes asked his son Narendranāth—Vivekananda’s pre-monastic name—to read aloud from these books as well (Gambhīrānanda

<sup>1</sup> For references, see note 2 of chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Hacker (1995: 227–350), Halbfass ([1995] 2007: 169–82), Fort (2007: 489–504), Baumfield (1991).

## 2 INTRODUCTION

1984, vol. 1: 16). Meanwhile, Vivekananda's mother, Bhuvaneśvarī Devī, was a traditional pious Hindu woman who performed daily worship of Śiva and regularly studied the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* (LSV 1:8).

From 1881 to 1884, Narendranāth studied at the General Assembly's Institution (now known as Scottish Church College) in Calcutta, where he took numerous courses in Western philosophy from mostly European professors, including Reverend William Hastie. As a college student, he studied such thinkers as Descartes, Hume, Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Auguste Comte, Charles Darwin, John Stuart Mill, and Herbert Spencer.<sup>3</sup>

As we will see in the course of this book, Vivekananda's early study of Western thought had an enormous impact on his thinking. As he himself later admitted in his lecture on "Soul, God and Religion" (1895), when he was "a boy," he got swept up in the "surging tide of agnosticism and materialism" and became skeptical of the very existence of God: "[I]t seemed for a time as if I must give up all hope of religion" (CW 1:317–18). However, in late 1881 or early 1882, his life took a decisive turn when he met the mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), who would become his guru. In an 1896 lecture, Vivekananda described his first life-changing encounter with Ramakrishna: "For the first time I found a man who dared to say that he saw God, that religion was a reality to be felt, to be sensed in an infinitely more intense way than we can sense the world" (CW 4:179). As I will discuss in detail in the first chapter, Ramakrishna trained and guided Narendra both spiritually and intellectually from 1882 to 1886, and shortly after Ramakrishna's passing in August 1886, Narendra became a *sannyāsin*, eventually assuming the name "Swami Vivekananda." After traveling throughout India as a wandering monk from 1888 to March 1893, Vivekananda took two extended trips to the West, giving lectures and classes on Hinduism and Vedānta in America and England from 1893 to 1896 and again from 1899 to 1901.

In a letter dated June 22, 1895, Vivekananda told Mary Hale, "I intend to write a book this summer on the Vedānta philosophy" (CW 8:341). Unfortunately, he never ended up writing that planned book on Vedānta, likely because he did not live long and spent so much of his time and energy lecturing and traveling. Nonetheless, those interested in Vivekananda's thought will find philosophical ideas and arguments scattered throughout the nine-volume *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, which contains an eclectic mix of his prose writings, transcribed lectures, often sketchy notes jotted down by students in his classes, letters originally written mostly in English and Bengali, recorded dialogues between Vivekananda and some of his disciples like Saratcandra Cakravarti in English

<sup>3</sup> For detailed information on Vivekananda's studies at Scottish Church College, see Dhar (1975: 51–61).

and Bengali, and poems and devotional hymns (*stotras*) originally written in English, Bengali, and Sanskrit.

Reconstructing Vivekananda's philosophical views is a formidable task, not only because of the eclectic nature of the available texts but also because of the way that the *Complete Works* has been organized and edited. The early editors of the *Complete Works* made numerous silent changes to Vivekananda's lectures and writings, sometimes modifying his language and, at times, combining or grouping his lectures and classes in ways that are counterintuitive or confusing. To mention just one example, Vivekananda's June 1896 lecture on "The Necessity of Religion" (CW 2:57–69), a wide-ranging sociological and philosophical discussion of the historical origins of religion and its essence, appears in the second volume of the *Complete Works* as the first of a series of lectures on *Jñāna-Yoga*, even though the lecture has nothing to do with the path of knowledge as taught in Advaita Vedānta.

Two other textual difficulties are worth mentioning. First, the English translations of Vivekananda's Bengali writings and dialogues in the *Complete Works* are often rather loose and sometimes inaccurate. Hence, throughout this book, whenever I refer to a passage from one of his Bengali works, I will also cite the original Bengali from *Vāṇī o Racanā*, the Bengali edition of Vivekananda's collected works, and I will modify the English translations of Bengali passages as provided in the *Complete Works* whenever I deem appropriate.

Second, as the *Complete Works* is not chronologically ordered, it is difficult to determine whether and how Vivekananda's views on certain philosophical issues evolved in the course of his thinking. Fortunately, two intrepid researchers, Terrance Hohner and Carolyn Kenny (2014), have compiled an enormously helpful, day-by-day chronology of Vivekananda's lectures and classes in the West from 1893 to 1901. In compiling this chronology, Hohner and Kenny consulted numerous texts in addition to the *Complete Works*, especially Marie Louise Burke's *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, an invaluable six-volume biographical and historical work on Vivekananda's time in the West based on careful original research (Burke 1992–1999). At various points in my book, I have consulted both Hohner and Kenny's chronology as well as Burke's six-volume work.

At the methodological level, one of the primary aims of this book is to reconstruct Vivekananda's philosophical views on a variety of topics while keeping in mind the various textual issues just discussed. However, I will also make a sustained case that his philosophical positions and arguments are not merely of historical interest. Past scholars have tended to paint Vivekananda either as a modern-day exponent of Śāṅkara or as a colonial subject whose views were largely a reaction to Western hegemony and the British occupation of India. Instead, I join a growing chorus of recent scholars in advocating a more

nanced “cosmopolitan” approach to his thought.<sup>4</sup> In an important recent book, Nalini Bhushan and Jay L. Garfield argue that colonial philosophers such as Vivekananda, K. C. Bhattacharyya, and Sri Aurobindo exhibited a “cosmopolitan consciousness”—an intensely creative and agential philosophical intelligence that thrived on engaging a global intellectual community (Bhushan and Garfield 2017: 20–38). My book explores how Vivekananda exemplified this cosmopolitan consciousness both in his subtle development of ideas in Indian philosophical traditions and in his searching critico-constructive engagement with a host of modern Western thinkers.

However, since there are many varieties of cosmopolitanism (Scheffler 1999), an important question arises: what kind of cosmopolitan was Vivekananda? In confronting this question, I have found Jonardon Ganeri’s recent article (Ganeri 2017) on the “immersive cosmopolitanism” of K. C. Bhattacharyya (1875–1949), a younger contemporary of Vivekananda, especially helpful. Ganeri focuses on Bhattacharyya’s famous talk “Svaraj in Ideas” (1928), which diagnosed some of the main forms of intellectual “slavery” exhibited by colonial Indian philosophers and outlined a vision for achieving *svarāj*—that is, “self-determination” or “freedom”—in the sphere of thought (Bhattacharyya [1928] 2011). Bhattacharyya’s “immersive cosmopolitanism,” Ganeri argues, is embodied particularly in three key features of his vision for an intellectual *svarāj*.

First, Bhattacharyya stresses the need for reverential immersion in one’s own indigenous tradition, calling on his Indian philosophical peers to “resolutely think in our own concepts” ([1928] 2011: 110). He contrasts this conception of an immersive cosmopolitanism with a radically unrooted cosmopolitanism that is equally critical of *all* traditions, including one’s own. For Bhattacharyya, this kind of unrooted cosmopolitanism amounts to a mere “patchwork of ideas of different cultures” ([1928] 2011: 106), collapsing into a radical subjectivism that arbitrarily privileges “the accidental likes and dislikes of the person judging” ([1928] 2011: 108). While some of Bhattacharyya’s critics have argued that his emphasis on “reverence” for the Indian tradition amounts to another form of intellectual slavery, Ganeri justly claims that Bhattacharyya actually views reverential immersion as an act of freedom. As Ganeri puts it, “it is not that one simply finds oneself with roots in the ancient tradition, but rather one must actively plant oneself somewhere there. The activity of imagining with humility an ancient idea is a way of taking root in the tradition, and this is not passivity but spontaneity” (2017: 725). For Bhattacharyya, then, reverential immersion—far from being a passive and uncritical acquiescence—is a critical and dynamic

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Madaio (2017), Barua (2020), Ganeri (2017: 718–36), Bhushan and Garfield (2017), Hatcher (2004: 201–203), Maharaj (2020b: 185–186), Medhananda (2020: 3–6).

excavation of one's own tradition that involves revising or rethinking aspects of that tradition when necessary.

Second, Bhattacharyya claims that the uncritical acceptance of Western ideas, which was prevalent during his time, amounts to a form of intellectual bondage. According to him, foreign ideas should be approached with "critical reserve and not docile acceptance . . . docile acceptance without criticism would mean slavery" ([1928] 2011: 110). Third, he contrasts the slavish acceptance of Western ideas with his preferred method of thought: "vital assimilation," a dialectical engagement with Western views that combines receptive openness with critical scrutiny ([1928] 2011: 104). The truly free cosmopolitan thinker, Bhattacharyya affirms, should be equally ready to accept (though perhaps with some revision) or criticize any foreign ideas, depending on their intrinsic value. Finding such an attitude rare among his fellow Indian thinkers, he laments the fact that "[t]here is nothing like a judgment on western systems from the standpoint of Indian philosophy" ([1928] 2011: 105).

Vivekananda, I would argue, both explicitly theorized as well as practiced the kind of immersive philosophical cosmopolitanism that Bhattacharyya would champion decades later. In 1895 letters to his disciple Alasinga Perumal, Vivekananda affirmed that "truth is my God, the universe my country" (CW 5:92), and that "I belong as much to India as to the world, no humbug about that" (CW 5:95). Similarly, in an 1897 letter to Mary Hale, he gave voice to his self-consciously cosmopolitan identity: "What am I? Asiatic, European, or American? I feel a curious medley of personalities in me" (CW 8:395). In all of these statements, he declared himself to be a cosmopolitan in its etymological meaning of "citizen of the world/universe." Vivekananda often specifically emphasized the cosmopolitan imperative to seek knowledge from the people and cultures of other countries. As he put it in a March 1890 letter to Svāmī Akhaṇḍānanda, "My motto is to learn whatever is great wherever I may find it" (BCW 6:250 / CW 6:234).

In fact, in his lecture "The Work Before Us" delivered in Madras on February 9, 1897, he went so far as to claim that India's *lack* of a cosmopolitan openness to other cultures was one of the main reasons for its protracted "slavery" at the hands of Muslim and British rulers:

To become broad, to go out, to amalgamate, to universalise, is the end of our aims. . . . With all my love for India, and with all my patriotism and veneration for the ancients, I cannot but think that we have to learn many things from other nations. We must be always ready to sit at the feet of all, for, mark you, every one can teach us great lessons. . . . We cannot do without the world outside India; it was our foolishness that we thought we could, and we have paid the penalty by about a thousand years of slavery. That we did not go out to

compare things with other nations, did not mark the workings that have been all around us, has been the one great cause of this degradation of the Indian mind. We have paid the penalty; let us do it no more. (CW 3:270–71)

Vivekananda’s immersive cosmopolitanism, like K. C. Bhattacharyya’s, combined a “veneration” for ancient Indian traditions with the imperative to “universalise” one’s outlook, to “amalgamate” the ideas of different global cultures, and to “learn many things from other nations.” Anticipating Bhattacharyya’s canny linkage of political and intellectual forms of slavery, Vivekananda traced India’s long-term political subjugation to its intellectual and cultural parochialism, its arrogant refusal to “go out to compare things with other nations.”<sup>5</sup>

On numerous occasions, Vivekananda likened the parochial attitude of many of his fellow Indians to the mindset of “frogs in a well” (*kūpa-maṇḍukas*) who think that their well is the whole world. As he put it in a letter to Svāmī Rāmakṛṣṇānanda dated March 19, 1894, “Nowhere in the world have I come across such ‘frogs in the well’ as we are. Let anything new come from some foreign country, and America will be the first to accept it. But we?—oh, there are none like us in the world, we men of Aryan blood!!!” (BCW 6:324 / CW 6:256). Likewise, in an 1895 letter to Rāmakṛṣṇānanda, Vivekananda specifically remarked that a cosmopolitan outlook is the precondition for intellectual originality and creativity: “Had I the money I would send each one of you to travel all over the world. No great idea can have a place in the heart unless one steps out of his little corner” (BCW 7:169 / CW 6:331).

However, just as K. C. Bhattacharyya would later warn against the “docile acceptance” of foreign ideas, Vivekananda, in his 1899 Bengali essay “*Vartamān Bhārat*” (“Modern India”), scathingly referred to the “mere echoing of others” (*parānuvāda*) as a “slavish weakness” that had become fashionable among his fellow Indians (BCW 6:194 / CW 4:477). In the same essay, he also indicated his cosmopolitan alternative to such blind imitation: “O India, this is your terrible danger! The intoxication of imitating the West has grown so strong that what is good or what is bad is no longer decided by reason, judgment, scripture, or discrimination (*buddhi vicār śāstra vivek*)” (BCW 6:193 / CW 4:477). For Vivekananda, cosmopolitan engagement with foreign ideas and values involves not servile acceptance but active assimilation through critical discernment.

At the same time, his reference to “scripture” signals his recognition of the importance of his own nation’s ideals and values. In his “Reply to the Address at Ramnad” delivered on January 25, 1897, Vivekananda called on Indians to cultivate a cosmopolitan receptivity to foreign ideas while remaining rooted in their own great Indian tradition:

<sup>5</sup> He made a similar point at CW 5:220.

Stand on your own feet, and assimilate what you can; learn from every nation, take what is of use to you. But remember that as Hindus everything else must be subordinated to our own national ideals. Each man has a mission in life, which is the result of all his infinite past Karma. Each of you was born with a splendid heritage, which is the whole of the infinite past life of your glorious nation. (CW 3:152)

Vivekananda's exhortation anticipated K. C. Bhattacharyya's ideal of "vital assimilation," which involves engaging with other traditions autonomously and critically while holding on to one's "national ideals." Vivekananda's cosmopolitan ideal can also be seen as a kind of "rooted cosmopolitanism," which—according to the contemporary philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (1997: 618)—balances an openness and receptivity to other cultures with a "patriotic" love for one's own country, with its "own cultural particularities."

In the course of this book, I will examine how Vivekananda put this immersive cosmopolitan method into practice by actively reinterpreting and broadening his own inherited Vedāntic tradition and by critically engaging a variety of Western thinkers. Along the way, I will myself employ a cosmopolitan methodology to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of his views. As a cosmopolitan philosopher, I aim not so much to compare Vivekananda's positions with those of recent Western philosophers as to show how he directly contributes to contemporary philosophical debates by developing innovative approaches to long-standing problems.<sup>6</sup> While there are a large—and ever growing—number of book-length historical and biographical studies of Vivekananda,<sup>7</sup> books focusing on his philosophical thought are much rarer.<sup>8</sup> This is the first book-length philosophical study of Vivekananda that examines his cosmopolitan engagement with global thinkers as well as the contemporary value of his ideas and arguments.<sup>9</sup>

The book has four parts, each of which focuses on one important dimension of Vivekananda's cosmopolitan Vedāntic thought. Part I ("Integral Advaita"), comprising chapters 1 to 3, examines how he systematically reinterprets the fundamental tenets of traditional Advaita Vedānta in light of his guru Ramakrishna and the ancient Vedāntic scriptures. Part II ("The Experiential

<sup>6</sup> For some discussions of the difference between comparative philosophy and cosmopolitan/global/cross-cultural philosophy, see Ganeri (2016), Mills (2009), and Maharaj (2018: 4–5).

<sup>7</sup> For instance, see Sil (1997), Beckerlegge (2006), J. Sharma (2013), Sen (2013), Green (2016), and Paranjape (2020). In Medhananda (2020), I argue against interpretations of Vivekananda as a Hindu supremacist, especially Jyotirmaya Sharma's *A Restatement of Religion* (2013).

<sup>8</sup> Two of the most academically serious book-length studies of Vivekananda's philosophy in English are Rambachan (1994a) and Devdas (1968). I critically engage both of these books at relevant points in my study.

<sup>9</sup> In this book, I do not discuss Vivekananda's extensive critical engagement with Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy, since I have already discussed this topic in detail in Maharaj (2017a).

Basis of Religion”), comprising chapters 4 to 6, analyzes Vivekananda’s efforts to reconceive religion as an experientially grounded science and then reconstructs and further develops his sophisticated argument for the epistemic value of supersensuous perception. Part III (“Faith and Reason”), comprising chapters 7 and 8, examines his cosmopolitan views on the powers and limits of reason and the dynamics of religious faith. Finally, Part IV (“Consciousness”), comprising chapters 9 and 10, reconstructs his doctrine of pantheistic cosmopsychism, situating it within his late nineteenth-century historical milieu and demonstrating its importance for contemporary philosophical debates about the hard problem of consciousness.

I will now walk through the book’s arguments chapter by chapter. Chapter 1 elucidates Ramakrishna’s crucial role in shaping the young Vivekananda’s intellectual and spiritual development. Prior to meeting Ramakrishna, Vivekananda was committed to the rational theism of the Brāhmo Samāj. However, as a result of Ramakrishna’s close guidance between 1882 and 1886, Vivekananda’s worldview evolved dramatically. While he initially leaned toward the world-negating and quietistic outlook of traditional Advaita Vedānta, he eventually came to embrace what I call “Integral Advaita,” the nonsectarian and life-affirming Advaita philosophy championed by Ramakrishna himself.

With this background in place, chapter 2 provides a detailed reconstruction of the main tenets of Vivekananda’s philosophy of Integral Advaita, as expounded in lectures and writings in the 1890s. Militating against the dominant view that his philosophy follows Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta in all or most of its essentials, I contend that Vivekananda, under the influence of Ramakrishna, reconceived Advaita Vedānta as a nonsectarian, world-affirming, and ethically oriented philosophy. According to my reconstruction, Vivekananda, in contrast to Śaṅkara, held that (1) the impersonal Brahman and the personal Śakti are equally real aspects of one and the same Infinite Divine Reality; (2) the universe is a real manifestation of Śakti; (3) since we are all living manifestations of God, we should make Vedānta practical by loving and serving human beings in a spirit of worship; and (4) each of the four Yogas (i.e., basic forms of spiritual practice)—Bhakti-Yoga, Jñāna-Yoga, Karma-Yoga, and Rāja-Yoga—is a direct and independent path to salvation. Vivekananda also criticized the “text-torturing” of traditional scriptural commentators like Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, anchoring his own Integral Advaita philosophy in a subtle reinterpretation of the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and the *Brahmasūtra*.

Chapter 3 examines Vivekananda’s views on the harmony of religions. Most scholars claim that in spite of his pluralist-sounding statements that the different world religions are equally valid paths to the same goal, he was actually more of an inclusivist, since he affirmed the superiority and uniqueness of Advaita Vedānta and Hinduism vis-à-vis other religions. I argue that these scholars overlook the

fact that his views on the harmony of religions *evolved* from 1893 to 1901 in three phases. In the first phase from September 1893 to March 1894, Vivekananda defended the equal salvific efficacy of the major world religions but claimed that a “universal religion” that would harmonize all the world religions was an “ideal” that did not yet exist. In the second phase from September 1894 to May 1895, he claimed that the universal religion *already exists* in the form of Vedānta, which he expounded in terms of the “three stages” of Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Advaita. However, by late 1895, he decisively abandoned his earlier attempt to ground the harmony of religions in the three stages of Vedānta. Instead, in the third and final phase of his thinking from December 1895 to 1901, he consistently conceived the Vedāntic universal religion in terms of his Integral Advaitic paradigm of four Yogas. According to his final position, every religion corresponds to at least one of the four Yogas, each of which is a direct and independent path to salvation. On this basis, he defended not only a full-blown religious pluralism but also the more radical cosmopolitan ideal of learning from—and even practicing—religions other than our own. On the basis of my diachronic examination of Vivekananda’s views, I argue that the vast majority of scholars have seriously misrepresented his mature Vedāntic doctrine of the harmony of religions by taking it to be based on the three stages of Vedānta rather than on the four Yogas.

Chapter 4 examines Vivekananda’s doctrine of the “science of religion,” which involved both a defense of the scientific credentials of religion and a Vedāntic critique of the scientism that was becoming prevalent during his time. Situating him in his late nineteenth-century historical context, I argue that his sustained attempt to reground religion in spiritual experience was a cosmopolitan response to the global crisis of religious belief. Vivekananda’s science of religion had both a negative and a positive dimension. Negatively, he criticized various forms of scientism, the tendency to overvalue the natural sciences and to deny the existence of realities that cannot be investigated through these sciences. As we will see, his prescient critique of scientism anticipated numerous contemporary arguments in the philosophy of science. Positively, Vivekananda defended what I call a “wide empiricism,” the view that while experience is the primary source of knowledge, the category of experience encompasses both the sensory and the supersensuous. While sensory experience is the basis of the natural sciences, supersensuous experience is the basis of the science of religion.

Central to Vivekananda’s science of religion, then, is the controversial assumption that supersensuous experience is a genuine source of knowledge. He defended this assumption by presenting a sophisticated argument for the epistemic value of supersensuous perception (hereafter AEV), which I reconstruct and further develop in chapter 5. To my knowledge, no scholar has even acknowledged, let alone grappled with, this strain of Vivekananda’s work. One of

the key premises of his AEV is an epistemic principle of perceptual justification that he adapted from traditional Indian *pramāṇa* epistemology—namely, *svataḥ-prāmāṇyatā*, the doctrine of the “intrinsic validity” of cognitions defended by Bhāṭṭa Mīmāṃsakas and Vedāntins. According to Vivekananda, it is a mark of rational behavior to take our perceptual experience of *F* as evidence that we really do perceive *F* in the absence of reasons for doubt. For instance, I am justified in taking my perception of a wall as evidence that there really is a wall in front of me, so long as I have no good reason to doubt the veridicality of my perception of the wall. It is equally rational, he claims, to trust the testimony of others regarding their perceptual experiences in the absence of reasons for doubt. On the basis of these epistemic principles, he argues that we are justified in believing the testimony of mystics who claim to have directly perceived supersensuous realities. In the course of the chapter, I refine and develop Vivekananda’s AEV into a seven-premise argument (AEV<sub>s</sub>) by drawing upon Vivekananda’s own ideas as well as contemporary analytic philosophy.

Chapter 6 addresses some of the most important objections to different premises of AEV<sub>s</sub> as well as Anantanand Rambachan’s influential criticisms of Vivekananda’s views on supersensuous perception. I respond to these objections and criticisms by engaging recent work in philosophy of religion and epistemology and by building on Vivekananda’s arguments.

Chapter 7 examines Vivekananda’s views on the powers and limits of theological reason, which he developed through a subtle cosmopolitan engagement with two groups of thinkers: Immanuel Kant, William Hamilton, Herbert Spencer, and John Stuart Mill on the one hand and Śaṅkara and Ramakrishna on the other. Siding with Ramakrishna against Śaṅkara, Vivekananda held that spiritual experience is the only authoritative means of knowing Brahman. Moreover, while he followed Vedānta and the Kantian tradition in arguing that reason can neither prove nor disprove the existence of supersensuous entities like God or the soul, he also criticized Kantian thinkers from a Vedāntic standpoint, arguing that they were not justified in ruling out the possibility of supersensuous knowledge. I contend, however, that Vivekananda, in spite of his rational agnosticism, defended the (limited) rational force of the argument from religious experience, an argument based on AEV that infers God’s existence from the testimony of mystics who claim to have perceived God. He also followed Mill and Ramakrishna in granting some degree of rational force to the argument from design for God’s existence, though he maintained that this was weaker than the argument from religious experience. Finally, I show how Vivekananda employed rational arguments—drawn especially from Śaṅkara and Ramakrishna—to refute the argument from evil against God’s existence, advanced by Mill and many others.

Building on these claims, chapter 8 reconstructs Vivekananda's nuanced cosmopolitan account of the dynamics of religious faith. I argue that he made a unique intervention in late nineteenth-century debates about faith and reason by steering a middle course between the stringent evidentialism of W. K. Clifford and T. H. Huxley and the anti-evidentialist fideism of William James. Vivekananda justifies religious faith on the basis of what I call an "expanded evidentialism," arguing that supersensuous perception and mystical testimony are valid sources of evidence that support the rationality of religious belief. Having identified his intervention, I then argue that Vivekananda's various remarks about faith hint at a dynamic conception of religious faith, according to which one's faith evolves in the following three stages: (1) faith as sub-doxastic intellectual assent, (2) faith as belief, and (3) faith as self-authenticating realization. According to Vivekananda, the vast majority of sincere spiritual aspirants occupy the first stage of faith, since they do not yet *believe* that God exists, but they "assent" intellectually to God's existence; these aspirants strive to attain the second stage of belief in God by purifying their minds through ethical and spiritual practices. In the context of the second stage of faith-as-belief, I argue that Vivekananda subscribed to what contemporary epistemologists call "doxastic involuntarism," the view that beliefs are not subject to direct voluntary control. For Vivekananda, the belief that God exists arises spontaneously in those who have attained a sufficiently high level of mental purity. Nonetheless, he maintains that the journey of faith culminates not in belief but in the direct supersensuous perception of God, which removes all doubts. I conclude the chapter by bringing Vivekananda into critical dialogue with William Alston, who was one of the first Western philosophers to distinguish doxastic and non-doxastic forms of religious faith.

The final chapters of this book concern what contemporary philosopher David Chalmers has called the "hard problem of consciousness"—the problem of explaining how conscious experience arises. Chapters 9 and 10 provide an in-depth reconstruction of Vivekananda's Sāṃkhya-Vedāntic solution to the hard problem of consciousness and demonstrate its relevance to contemporary philosophical debates. In chapter 9, I first outline Ramakrishna's mystically grounded views on consciousness and the views of five of Vivekananda's prominent Western contemporaries. I then examine Vivekananda's own approach to the hard problem of consciousness and his critique of modern materialist theories of consciousness. Combining elements from Sāṃkhya, Advaita Vedānta, and the teachings of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda defends a metaphysics of panentheistic cosmopsychism, according to which the sole reality is Divine Consciousness, which manifests as everything in the universe.

Chapter 10 reconstructs Vivekananda's philosophical justification of panentheistic cosmopsychism and his account of how the single Divine Consciousness

individuates into the varied conscious perspectives of humans and animals. I suggest that he provides two complementary arguments in favor of panentheistic cosmopsychism: (1) an “involution argument” for panpsychism, which is based on the Sāṃkhyan *satkāryavāda*, the doctrine that an effect pre-exists in its material cause; and (2) an argument for panentheistic cosmopsychism, which is based on two sub-arguments—namely, the argument from design and the argument for the epistemic value of supersensuous perception (i.e., AEV, discussed in chapter 5). Vivekananda, we will see, defends the premises of both these arguments through a cosmopolitan engagement with Indian and Western thought. I then explain what I call his account of “grounding by self-limitation,” which lies at the core of his panentheistic cosmopsychism. Following Ramakrishna, Vivekananda holds that the single, impersonal-personal Divine Consciousness manifests as everything in the universe by playfully limiting, or veiling, Herself through the individuating principle of *māyā*. I conclude the chapter by bringing Vivekananda into dialogue with the contemporary philosopher of mind Miri Albahari, who has recently defended a “perennial idealist” theory of consciousness derived from the world-denying metaphysics of classical Advaita Vedānta. Since Vivekananda’s panentheistic cosmopsychism holds that the world is a real manifestation of Divine Consciousness, I argue that it has considerable advantages over Albahari’s perennial idealist theory, which ultimately denies the reality of both the world and the grounding relation.

Before we conclude the introduction, it is worth addressing an important hermeneutic issue. Many scholars have distinguished between “insider” or “emic” work on Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and “outsider” or “etic” work.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, self-styled “outsider” scholars have tended to denigrate “insider” literature as uncritical and hagiographic, while “insiders”—that is, monks and devotees of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition—have often faulted “outsider” scholarship for its “cultural monovision” (Tyagananda and Vrajaprana 2010: 241), its scrutiny of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda through the distortive lenses of contemporary Western conceptual categories and cultural assumptions. While there is some truth in these criticisms from both sides, I believe the insider-outsider dichotomy is largely unhelpful and misleading, both because some scholarship on the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda tradition cannot be so easily pigeonholed as *either* “insider” or “outsider,” and because the insider-outsider dichotomy wrongly implies that the two approaches are mutually exclusive. As a scholar-monk of the Ramakrishna Order who was educated at major American and European universities, I see myself as straddling the border between “insider” and “outsider.” Indeed, for me, the hermeneutic ideal is

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Beckerlegge (2013: 445), De Michelis (2004: 119, 182), Rigopoulos (2019: 450n1, 451n2), and Olson (2011).

to combine the virtues of both “insider” and “outsider” approaches. Accordingly, I have attempted throughout this book to combine a critical and scholarly approach with a sensitivity to the specific historico-cultural *Weltanschauung* within which Vivekananda developed and expressed his philosophical ideas. To what extent I have succeeded I leave to readers to judge.