Rethinking Neo-Vedānta: Swami Vivekananda and the Selective Historiography of Advaita Vedānta

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Abstract: This paper problematizes the prevalent model of studying the “Neo-Vedānta” of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) principally in terms of an influx of Western ideas and nationalism. In particular, I demonstrate how scholarly constructions of “Neo-Vedānta” consistently appeal to a high culture, staticized understanding of “traditional” Advaita Vedānta as the alterity for locating Vivekananda’s “neo” or new teachings. In doing so, such studies ignore the diverse medieval and early modern developments in advaitic and Advaita Vedāntic traditions which were well-known to Vivekananda and other “Neo-Vedāntins”. Redressing this discursive imbalance, I propose that close attention to the way in which Swami Vivekananda drew from Indic texts opens up a wider frame for understanding the swami and the genealogy of his cosmopolitan theology.

Keywords: Swami Vivekananda; Neo-Vedānta; Advaita Vedānta; Advaita; modern Hinduism

1. Introduction

Reconsidering the study of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), perhaps the most influential architect of global Hinduism, is instructive for shedding light on certain problematic trends in the analysis of precolonial and colonial period advaita related movements. It also calls reflexive attention to the way in which interpretations of Vivekananda’s life and teachings can often be implicated in what H. White calls the “practical past” (White 2014); that is, readings of the past that are ideologically pursued in the service of the present. Widely considered a national hero, and cited as an inspiration by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Vivekananda is increasingly, albeit selectively and anachronistically, appropriated into the rhetoric and mediascapes of the political right in India; in turn, he has also become the subject of the left’s intellectual critique. The legacy of Vivekananda, linked with notions of Hindu nationalism and muscular Hinduism, is, in that way, a locus of contemporary disputes that can be as much about the trajectory of India’s future as an authentic understanding of the past.

The concern of the present paper, however, is not with how contemporary politics or a priori suppositions influence the unfurling of historical narratives (or, for that matter, with broader postmodernist critiques of history); rather, the aim is to de-stabilize the predominant explanatory model at the basis of numerous depictions of the swami in scholarly literature. This widespread, interpretative approach locates the etiology and development of Vivekananda’s theological innovativeness in terms of colonial period nationalism and, in particular, Western influence. Vivekananda’s thought emerges

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1 Versions of this paper were delivered at a DANAM panel at the national meeting of the American Academy of Religion (Madaio 2013) in 2013 and at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (Madaio 2014) in 2014. This paper, and my argument here pertaining to issues of historiography and neglected text genres, was also partly summarized in a RISA-L discussion thread (Madaio 2015).

2 Pertinent here is A. Nicholson’s (Nicholson 2010) path-clearing work on the role that precolonial doxographies (samgraha) played in the configuration of modern Hinduism.
from this type of inquiry as an eclectic derivative of the colonial encounter. What is key for our interests here is how this assessment is repeatedly reinforced by appealing to earlier Indological scholarship that portrayed Vivekananda’s “Neo-Vedāntic” theology as a rupture from “traditional” or “classical” Hinduism, particularly the “orthodox” Advaita Vedānta of the eighth century Śaṅkara.

While there are certainly insights to be gained from scholarship carried out within the horizon of the above approach, such a reading does, however, entirely omit from consideration theological developments in medieval and early modern Indic traditions. This is remarkable because Swami Vivekananda, not unlike other “Neo-Vedāntic” figures, repeatedly references pre-colonial Indian philosophical works. Vivekananda’s orientation toward Indic sources is evident, for example, in a letter to Alasinga Perumal: “In translating… pay no attention… to the orientalists… Explain according to our sages and not according to so-called European scholars” (Vivekananda [1942] 2008, pp. 268–69). Vivekananda had a great deal of admiration for non-Indian scholars, but this remark is certainly a sign that he rejected wholesale purchase of Western exegesis and ideas.

In the discussion that follows, I argue that scholarly interest in historical origins and certain high culture forms of “traditional” Advaita Vedānta underrepresents the multivocality and diversity of advaitic theology. And it is precisely the underrepresented periods and text genres which were key sources for “Neo-Vedāntins”, such as Vivekananda. In my view, the failure to take seriously developments in medieval and early modern advaitic traditions is paralleled by an inadequate recognition of the ways in which colonial period Hindus recalibrated the apt performance of their inherited tradition in relation to the exigencies of their colonialized and, increasingly, globalized world. Unfortunately, space here allows for only an initial discussion of conceptual and historical links between Vivekananda and his precolonial predecessors. My intention, in that way, is to lay groundwork for future studies to examine how categories and ways of thinking, derived from pre-colonial advaitic and Advaita Vedāntic sources, were critically and creatively employed by Vivekananda in conversation with his global cosmopolitan milieu.

2. Mid-Twentieth Century Indology and the Quest for Origins

The mid-twentieth century disciplinary trend of (mostly European) Indology tended, not unlike its predecessors, toward the investigation of classical texts, often privileging the status of foundational works, commentaries and recensions. With regard to the study of Advaita Vedānta, this type of Indology focused on analysis of the earliest period of the tradition, particularly the quest for the historical Śaṅkara. The Indologist-theologian P. Hacker, for example, argued on behalf of a methodology for adjudicating which, out of the many works attributed to Śaṅkara, were actually composed by the historical, that is, adi or first, Śaṅkara of the eighth century (Hacker 1947).3

3 The remarks of R. Inden (Inden 2000, pp. 3, 25) are à propos: “postcolonial scholarship seems to have reinscribed a major divide in colonialist discourse, the divide between the traditional…and modern… It has shifted people’s attention away from the practices and institutions of the past before the advent of colonialism, and onto a fanciful remote past that seems to have little to do with their everyday life…”

4 Paradoxically, the need to take serious such sources, and their transmission into the colonial period, is as significant a lacuna as it is obvious. If Vivekananda’s own citations were not enough, even a cursory examination of the educational and publishing activities of the Ramakrishna Mission—or other “Neo-Vedāntic” groups, such as the Chinmaya Mission or the Divine Life Society (to say nothing of the teachings of the Śaṅkaraśāstras at the so-called “traditional” mathas)—reveals an overwhelming emphasis on precolonial sources, including hymns, hagiographies, independent works, as well as texts such as the Yoga-Viśiṣṭa, Aṣṭiṣṭotra-Gītā, Aṣṭiṣṭotra-Gītā, Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa (particularly the Uttrāndha), and so on. Indeed, the publications of such organizations provide a useful map for detecting the advaitic, yogic and narrative traditions that not only helped to build their respective outlooks but which were broadly popular on the eve of colonialism.

5 Helpful here is Talal Asad’s (Asad 1996) account of a discursive tradition, albeit put forth in a much different context.

6 The issue is a complicated one, but I intend here Indological scholarship after the orientalist period. Medieval vedāntic traditions were indeed influential in shaping the understanding of Hinduism and Indian philosophy among orientalist scholars such as H. T. Colebrooke, E. B. Cowell, Max Müller, Albrect Weber, Richard Garbe, P. Deussen, A. E. Gough, among others.

7 Hacker’s approach included consideration of whether a text had been quoted by Śaṅkara’s immediate disciples as well as the manner of attribution in colophons. With regard to the latter, if a work was attributed to the more ambiguous
The conclusions reached by scholars such as P. Hacker, S. Mayeda (Mayeda 1965a; Mayeda 1965b), among others, identified the works of the historical Śaṃkara as limited to commentaries on the Brahma-Sūtra, early Upaniṣads, and the Bhagavad-Gītā, as well as the independent work Upañadhīṣṭasāhasrī. As important as these findings are, they have functioned, at least in the Western academy, as a kind of precedent for what counts as “authentic” Advaita Vedānta. In that way, the mid-twentieth century Indological concern for philosophically reconstructing early Advaita Vedānta, as well as the historical biography and authentic works of Śaṃkara, brought about a perhaps unintended consequence: later Advaita Vedāntic works, particularly texts attributed to Śaṃkara but of later authorship, are all too often judged against the “authenticity” of the Śaṃkarite commentarial corpus. This judgement, in fact, carries with it the subtle sense that such texts—and their soteriological and hermeneutical modalities—are inauthentic beyond the issue of authorship. Indeed, scholarly trends are not objective enterprises but indexes of value that construct frames of reference via explanatory, historiographical models.

The penurious state of scholarly knowledge about Advaita Vedāntins after the Śaṃkarite period calls into question what the reference points are for drawing out difference and change in a tradition that spans at least fourteen centuries. Many works of post-Śaṃkarite Advaita Vedāntins, in fact, remain little explored. This is, perhaps, partly why scholars too often concretize a static school, conflated with the historical Śaṃkara, as the alterity for Neo-Vedāntic borrowings and inventions. This frame of reference, which overlooks medieval and early modern developments, is largely indebted to the problematic model proposed by the aforementioned P. Hacker which distinguished “traditional” from so-called Neo-Hinduism/Vedānta (Hacker 1995, pp. 227ff.). Hacker influentially argued that Neo-Vedānta was a nationalistic movement dependent on the “assimilation” of Western ideals. The category “Neo-Vedānta”, in that way, entered mainstream academic discourse as a pejorative term—indiscriminately used in reference to a number of different Hindu thinkers who held variant theological views—and connoting a sense of inauthenticity because “continuity with the past has been broken” (Hacker 1995, p. 232).

What is important to the present discussion is that Hacker’s understanding still constructs the range of vision for the majority of contemporary scholarly accounts. This horizon, in other words, is provided by the two-track method of analyzing Vivekananda in terms of Western influence and/or contrasting his westernized “eclecticism” to a vaguely defined “orthodoxy” typically associated with the historical Śaṃkara of the eighth century. Although Bimal Krishna Matilal did not mention Hacker by name, it is obvious that this bifurcation he had in mind when he insightfully comments that “. . . the Indologist’s frequent construction of a ‘neo-Hinduism’, distinct and distinguished from ‘traditional Hinduism’ by the influx of Western ideas and ideology . . . is . . . to be taken with a pinch of salt. The tradition was self-conscious. It has been interpreting and re-interpreting itself over the ages. It is hardly a new phenomenon. The myth is tied up with the Indologist’s romantic search for a classical, pure form of Hinduism . . . and is little better than a dream . . . ” (Matilal 2002, p. 40). In light of Matilal’s assessment, when Hacker claims that “continuity with the past has been broken”, we are indeed wise to interrogate what version of the past is in play.

“Śaṃkarācārya”, which was also the title held by the pontiffs, or mahants, of the ritual-learning institutions (mathas) linked to Śaṃkara, it was considered less authentic than the more reverential title used for Śaṃkara by his contemporaries (such as Bhagavat, Bhagavatpāda, and Bhagavatpūjyaśrīpāda). While Hacker’s conclusions have shaped subsequent European and North Atlantic scholarship, most Indian scholars are either unaware of, or have ignored, Hacker’s publications. Interestingly, Hacker’s approach appears, in fact, to be indebted to earlier work by Svāmī Saccidānandendra (Suthren Hirst 2005, pp. 4–5). Saccidānandendra, notably, set out to distinguish the method of the (historical) Śaṃkara, who wrote the foundational vedāntic commentaries, from later additions and, on his account, misrepresentations.

I elaborate elsewhere (Madaio, forthcoming) on Hacker’s theological premises and inclusivism.
3. The Problematic Alterity of “Neo-Vedānta”

Hacker’s popularizer, the prodigious Indologist W. Halbfass, noted the limitations of Hacker’s model but was also largely responsible for reifying his categories. In his magisterial India and Europe, Halbfass points out that Vivekananda was “... acquainted with the Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha and Aṣṭāvakra-gītā, Vedānta texts outside of Śaṅkara’s ‘orthodox’ tradition” (Halbfass 1988, p. 229). Although he did not, unfortunately, develop the point, Halbfass was certainly right to draw attention to medieval advaitic texts, but he also imposes a notion of orthodoxy that does not hold up. For example, Vidyāranya, the fourteenth century Śaṅkarācārya at Śringeri, a figure that Vivekananda lavishly praised (Vivekananda [1926] 1958, p. 330), shaped the soteriological project of his Jīvanmukti-viveka (JMV) around the (Laghu-)Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha, a work influenced by the advaita of Kashmiri Śaivism. After the Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha’s rise to prominence as an authoritative source text in the Advaita Vedāntic text tradition in the fourteenth century, the work was authoritatively utilized, or commented on, by later important Advaita Vedāntins, such as Prakāśānanda (fl. 1505), Mādhava Sarasvatī (fl. 1515), Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (fl. 1570), Mahādevānanda Sarasvatī (fl. 1645) and so on. One is left to wonder, then, the relationship of these figures to “orthodox” Advaita Vedānta (and what “orthodox” means for traditions without a fixed canon or creed).

Notably, Hacker’s and Halbfass’s reliance on the historical Śaṅkara as the backdrop for drawing out the newness of Neo-Vedānta, while overlooking medieval and early modern developments, exemplifies the explanatory framework of the majority of scholarly approaches (Bharati 1970; Rambachan 1994; Sil 1997; Hacker 1999; De Michelis 2005). For example, consider N. Sil’s characterization of Vivekananda’s theology: “Unfortunately, his [Vivekananda’s] success as a Vedantist in the West owed to his distortion of the traditional Advaita system as expounded by Shankaracharya...Vivekananda’s emphasis on the super-conscious state, that is, nirvikalpa samādhi, has no imprimitur from the Upaniṣads, the primary source of Vedanta” (Sil 1997, pp. 156–57, bold my emphasis). By casting Vivekananda’s teachings on non-conceptual absorptive concentration (nirvikalpa samādhi) as an inauthentic deviation from “the traditional Advaita system”, Sil discredits or ignores scriptural developments not only during the medieval period, such as the samnyāsīc and yogic Upaniṣads drawn on authoritatively by “traditional” Advaita Vedāntins, but also the polyvalent voices of medieval Advaita Vedāntic theologians. Indeed, what Advaita Vedāntins of different sampradāya allegiances share is not a uniform theology—whether in terms of philosophical positions, praxeology, pedagogical strategies or hermeneutical practices—but rather, common “architectural elements”.

9 Since the texts that Halbfass mentions did not originate in Vedānta traditions (sampradāyas), it would be more accurate to call them “advaita” texts rather than “vedānta” texts. In that way, it is possible to speak of sanskritic and vernacular advaitic texts (which are either explicitly non-dualistic or permit a non-dualistic reading) and “Advaita Vedānta” texts which originate within sampradāyas that claim an Advaita Vedāntic lineage. This, then, avoids the obfuscating tendency to subsume advaitic but non-vedāntic works under a “Vedānta” or “Advaita Vedānta” umbrella.

10 “He [Vivekananda] is not willing or able to see how far he has removed himself from the position of Śaṅkara …” (Halbfass 1988, p. 242). It is important to note, however, that Halbfass omits from consideration not only the medieval works attributed to Śaṅkara but also the well-known hagiographies about him. The historical Śaṅkara, who is the subject of Indological articles, has, of course, very little to do with Śaṅkara as he is understood on the ground. What might be called the “hagiographical Śaṅkara”, inherited by Neo-Vedāntins, and certainly well-known at Advaita Vedāntic mathas, entails a cluster of archetypes from a broad range of traditions: the paradigmatic brahmin-smārtī, the model ascetic-renouncer, and the goddess worshipping tāntrika. Śaṅkara was also well-known as a yogic siddha, composer of stotras and, of course, as a virtuoso debater. It should be noted that the reach of the “hagiographical Śaṅkara” would not have been limited to the sectarian spaces of patronized pūṇḍita circles, certain smārtī brahmin communities, or householders with allegiance to Śaṅkarite mathas, but also, the diverse and inerrant, dasanāmini renouncers. I must defer pursuing the implications of this issue for a later publication.

11 Sil, while apparently operating under the premise that the germination of a tradition is more authentic than later developments, cites a paper by M. Comans (Comans 1993) to prove his point. Ironically, Comans, in the last two pages of that paper, provides a few examples indicating the importance of samādhi in Advaita Vedāntic works during the medieval period. It is also worth pointing out that the works that Comans cites (not unlike the JMV) have all been published by the Ramakrishna Mission.

12 I adapt here L. McCrea and P. Patil’s “text tradition” model (McCrea and Patil 2010, pp. 3–7), originally employed in their treatment of the late eighth century Buddhist philosopher Jñānaśrīmitra.
Such structural commonalities include lineages of teachers and their works, as well as a paradigmatic understanding of authoritative scriptural genres. This framework allows for innovative theological engagements such as the appropriation of new scriptural corpora—which, in fact, need not be of “vedântic” origin or from the highest category of scripture (i.e., śrutis) to serve as authoritative, as the utilization of the Yoga-Vâsiṣṭha and Bhâgavata-Purâṇa by (early and late) medieval Advaita Vedântins make plain.

Returning to Sil’s assessment, we might ask how Vivekananda’s teaching on nirvikalpa samâdhi would look in the context of, say, the “yogic advaita” (Fort 1988) of the JMV which not only holds meditational yoga as essential to both realizing non-duality and securing it post realization but also identifies nirvikalpa samâdhi with the highest stage of liberation-while-living (jîvanmukti) (JMV 4.1.57 in Goodding 2002). The JMV, in fact, draws repeatedly on the Yoga-Śâstra as an authoritative text and, at the behest of the fictive interlocutor (pûrvapâksin), inclusively argues that the samâdhi taught in the Yoga-Śâstra leads to the realization of pure consciousness or ātman (JMV 3.10.1–8 in Goodding 2002). In fact, the soteriological utilization of yoga, and, in particular, stages of samâdhi, extends across a range of medieval Advaita Vedântic works, including popular independent treatises (prakaranas) attributed to Śaṅkara such as Vivekaçûdâmanâ (VCM) and Aparokṣanubhûti. For example, VCM, a work frequently drawn on by Vivekananda, as well as at “traditional” Advaita Vedântic ritual-learning institutions (maths), but largely ignored in scholarly discussion, conceives of nirvikalpa samâdhi as the premier method of Self-realization over and above the well-known vedântic discipline of listening, reflection and deep contemplation (VCM 362-365 in Comans 1993, p. 31). The diversity of Advaita Vedântic interest in yoga, in fact, extends even beyond the absorptive meditative practices of Patañjali and the yogic disciplines pertaining to the prâna-mind nexus taught in the Yoga-Vâsiṣṭha.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, certain Nâth and hatha yogic texts, which are amenable to an advaitic reading, were also viewed as authoritative on yoga by Advaita Vedântins (Bouy 1994).

The diachronic integration of yoga with Advaita Vedânta, and its flourishing in the late medieval and early modern period, has, however, eluded recent publications on the history of yoga. Following the approach of Sil and others, E. De Michelis’s account of Vivekananda’s “revisitation of yoga history”, for example, interprets the development of Vivekananda’s theology in terms of Western influences and in contradistinction to the vague notion of “classical Hindu approaches” (De Michelis 2005, p. 3). When pointing out Vivekananda’s “… attempts to integrate the Advaita tradition … into his yoga framework” (De Michelis 2005, p. 169), De Michelis neglects to mention this is not typologically innovative. There are, indeed, important Western and theosophical elements in Vivekananda’s approach; however, to elide medieval and early modern advaitic and Advaita Vedântic works from the discussion presents a rather one-sided account.

Other issues that have been identified as the fault line between “traditional” and “neo” (Advaita) Vedânta include Vivekananda’s decentralization of scripture and his concomitant valorization of experience. Although I cannot unpack these arguments here, it is worth underscoring that such comparisons repeatedly conflate Advaita Vedânta with the eighth century Śaṅkara. The picture, of course, is more nuanced when post-Śaṅkarite traditions, which were well-known to Vivekananda, are taken into consideration. For example, is the VCM’s ambivalence toward scripture (VCM 59 in Madhavananda 1921) and its explicit declaration that experience (anubhûti) is a pramâna, or means of knowing (VCM 474 in Madhavananda 1921), a kind of Neo-Vedântic mysticism? Is the integration of Advaita Vedânta with Śâkta tantrism among Southern Advaita Vedântic maths after the seventeenth century (Fisher 2012) a type of Neo-Vedântic eclecticism? How “new” are Neo-Vedântic models of Hinduism in light of what M. Müller, in 1899, called “a certain freedom

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13 A. Rambachan, for example, relegates VCM to a footnote: “… his [i.e., Vivekananda’s] understanding of Śaṅkara was influenced by questionable works like Vivekaçûdâmanâ …” (Rambachan 1994, pp. 139–40, f.8, emphasis mine). One is left to ask: questionable to whom?
of thought” (Müller 1899, p. 108) in medieval doxographical depictions. When the great sixteenth century Advaita Vedāntin Appayya Dikṣīta (Ramesan 1972), in his Caturmatasārasangraha, pays homage not only to Śaṅkara but also to Madhva, Rāmānuja and Śrī Kaṇṭha—is this Neo-Vedāntic ecumenism?

4. Neglected Traditions and Genres

The continuing persistence of an over-generalized “traditional” versus “neo” framework is due, in part, to a selective historiography of the Advaita Vedāntic text tradition. Just as periodization involves hidden theories and value judgements, the scholarly privileging of some text genres over others is part of a long history of over-emphasizing not only the Śaṅkarite period but also a specialist scholar or pāṇḍita informed image of Advaita Vedānta. There are, however, other patterns of praxis, theological textures and text genres which do not conform to either the systematic exegesis (mīmāṃsā) or logical-dialectical (nyāya) mold emphasized in the majority of scholarly studies.

The dismissive treatment of Advaita Vedāntic hagiographies, which are often viewed as pseudo-history for the informed scholar to debunk, is an issue that is indeed caught up in the Indological notion of a philosophically “pure” Advaita Vedānta. Regardless of the fact that the hagiographies of Śaṅkara likely emerged during or after the fourteenth century, not unlike the mathās in their current institutional form (Clark 2006), they have shaped the lived tradition of Advaita Vedānta on the ground. The outlines of the multiple hagiographic lives of Śaṅkara serve as an organizing and orienting narrative structure for internal “histories” of the tradition.

The overlooking of medieval prakārana-s and hagiographies is similarly related to the ignoring of the vast array of Advaita Vedāntic stotras or devotional hymns (and hagiographies, such as the Śaṅkara-dīg-vijaya, include stotras in narrativized contexts). Vivekananda was, in fact, familiar with works from those genres and the theological articulations within them which challenge scholarly depictions of an Advaita Vedānta unconcerned with experience and ethics. Even though the stotras are perhaps the most pervasive genre of Sanskrit literature (Raghavan 1969), theistic devotion (or bhakti), and the practical role it plays in post-Śaṅkarite Advaita Vedāntic traditions, has barely provoked scholarly interest. As the bliss-laden stotras (Gussner 1976) bear witness, the rhetoric of experience and devotion, was not newly integrated with Advaita Vedāntic commitments in the colonial period. The “Advaitic theism” (Sheridan 1986) of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa (c. 10th century), for example, was authoritative not only for the Gosvāmīs of Vrindavan but also among Advaita Vedāntins from Kannataka to Orissa. Notably, as early as the fourteenth century, the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa was drawn on authoritatively by Vidyāraṇya and was later the source text of an influential commentary by Śrīdhara (15th century), an understudied renunciate linked to the Advaita Vedāntic mathā at Puri (Sheridan 1994) and a figure to whom, incidentally, Swami Vivekananda refers (Vivekananda [1942] 2008, p. 54). The Bhāgavata-Purāṇa was also formative to the theology of the mid-sixteenth century Advaita Vedāntin Madhusūdana Sarasvatī who argued on behalf of a complete and independent path to liberation by means of bhakti (Gupta 1966; Nelson 1988). Also of interest here is the utilization of the Śaṅḍilya and Nārada Bhakti Sūtras in Advaita Vedāntic lineages in the seventeenth century—such as in the work of the Advaita Vedāntin Nārāyaṇa Tirtha (Miśra 1967; Venkatkrishnan 2015)—an issue of particular interest since...

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14 M. Müller (Müller 1899, p. 108), who had himself met Vivekananda, argues that the Advaita Vedāntin Madhusūdana Sarasvatī as well as the Bhedābhedā Vedāntin Viśīnabhikṣu “. . . are bent on showing that there is behind the diversity of Vedānta, Śaṅkhyā, and Nyāya one and the same truth, though differently expressed; that philosophers, in fact, may be many, but truth is one”. Vivekananda was, indeed, familiar with the commentaries of Viśīnabhikṣu (e.g., Vivekananda [1942] 2008, p. 270) and one finds it hard to imagine he was unaware of Madhusūdana whose Gūḍārtha-dīpikā would later be rendered into English by the prolific translator Swami Gambhirananda, the 11th President of the Ramakrishna Mission. With regard to Madhusūdana Sarasvatī’s Prasthānabhedaḥ, J. Hanneder, for example, noted the work “. . . addresses the issue of integrating various religious and philosophical systems within the framework of Vedism and would therefore hold as a forerunner for a modern conception of Hinduism” (Hanneder 1999, p. 575). See the excellent aforementioned work by Nicholson (2010) on medieval doxographies which incisively develops the wider implications involved.

15 H. Stainton (Stainton 2013, p. 44) rightly points out that ”. . . the stotras attributed to Śaṅkara represent a significant weakness in the scholarly understanding of India’s religious history”.

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Swami Vivekananda utilizes both the Śāṇḍilya and Nārada Bhakti Sūtras as sources for his well-known Bhakti Yoga lectures.

The development and democratization of advaitic ideals in vernacular works is also an understudied, but relevant, issue. Distinguishing between “classical” Advaita Vedānta and “Advaita in the Vernaculars”, R. Balasubramanian, for example, notes that “it is wrong to think that the development of Advaita has stopped by the sixteenth century A.D. One should read the writings of the mystic-philosophers of the different regions to see the development of Advaitic thought, to understand the new applications of Advaitic principles, and to appreciate the liberalization of Advaitic discipline” (Balasubramanian 2000, p. xlix).

Regional and pan-Indian articulations of non-dualistic thought are certainly implicated in a number of currents of colonial period Hindu religiosity. Pointing in precisely this direction, M. Lederle (Lederle 1976, pp. 261 ff.), for example, argued against P. Hacker’s claim that the colonial period teacher and politician Bāl Gaṅgādhārī Tilāk (1856–1920) derived his non-dualistic approach to ethics from Arthur Schopenhauer. Lederle noted that Tilak was also directly influenced by the advaitic informed ethics evident in the work of the influential thirteenth century Vārkaṇī saint Jñāneśvar, legendarily known for having opposed the caste system and for writing the first commentary on the Bhagavad-Gītā in a vernacular language. Not unlike Tilak, Vivekananda’s citations similarly indicate familiarity with regional saints; for example, arguing that it is “vain . . . to attempt the lines of action that foreign societies have engraven upon us” (Vivekananda 1932a, p. 219), he cites the model of exemplary precolonial “reformers”, including the nirguṇī poets Dādū Dayāl and Kabir. Vivekananda, indeed, explicitly understood Kabir’s teaching as “attempting to raise the lower classes of India” (Vivekananda 1932a, p. 290). Vivekananda also advised Alasinga Perumal to pursue research on “the lives and works of Tulsi Dāś, Kabir, Nānak, and of the saints of Southern India” (Vivekananda 1936, p. 89).

Indeed, Vivekananda’s theological approach can be profitably understood as a kind of vernacular advaita. For example, while Vivekananda draws on the inclusivistic and legitimating categories of Śāmkarite Vedānta, his teaching, delivered to a broad and varied audience, is not limited to the “classical” texts of that tradition nor is it epistemologically circumscribed by the pramāṇa system and the horizon of varṇaśramadharma.

16 My thanks to R. Balasubramanian for conversations on this and other issues in Kaladi, Kerala in 2010. Also relevant here is M. Allen’s (Allen 2013) positioning of the work of Niścalās (1791–1863), and a plethora of understudied texts in Hindi, as part of what he calls “Greater Advaita Vedānta”.
17 Hacker also influentially claimed that Vivekananda had lifted a non-dualistic, Schopenhauerian ethics from P. Deussen. T. Green (Green 2012), however, argues that Vivekananda formulated his approach before coming into contact with Deussen.
18 Jñāneśvar was likely influenced by the Nāth tradition in Maharashtra, as evinced in his advaitic Anubhāvamrta (Chitre 1996). Movements linked to the understudied Maharashtrian Nāth tradition were formative to a stream of contemporarily popular “advaita” associated with the teacher, and Bombay merchant, Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981). Similarly, the Avadhūta Gītā, a popular text among colonial period advaita related groups, and a work cited by Vivekananda (e.g., Vivekananda 1927, p. 70), is also related to the broad Nāth tradition (Rigopoulos 1998).
19 Vivekananda also refers to a Hindi work entitled Vicitr-Sāgar written by Niścalās, a Dādūpanthi from the region of Haryana.
20 Swami Śivananda (1887–1963), founder of the Divine Life Society, who traces his familial lineage to the great Advaita Vedāntin polymath Appayya Dīksita, would later publish two volumes, in 1941 and 1947 respectively, on the lives of the Vedānta teachers and the Avadhūta Gītā translated in a vernacular language.
21 Swami Rama Tirtha (1873–1906) (Tirtha 1951, p. 79, 130) and Swami Śivananda (Śivananda 1963).
5. The Transmission of Advaitic Philosophy into the Colonial Period

The absence of any contextualizing discussion of medieval and early modern advaitic and Advaita Vedantic traditions in many scholarly presentations can leave the impression that advaitic theology was resurrected from an ancient past in the service of nationalism, thereby laying the foundation for contemporary Hindutva politics (e.g., Sharma 2013). One of the problems with this kind of depiction is that advaitic traditions were not “fossilised” artefacts unearthed by the Royal Asiatic Society, as if Egyptian coffin texts, but thriving on the subcontinent before and after, say, the naval Battle of Swally off the coast of Gujarat in 1612. Indeed, it was in the medieval and early modern periods that the intellectual production of Advaita Vedantic traditions amassed an “… enormous quantity of modern Sanskrit literature” (Shastri 1912, p. 7). In his recent social history of Advaita Vedanta, C. Minkowski, for example, points out that from the sixteenth century to the colonial period “Advaitin sannyāsins and householders occupied positions of prominence in the literate institutions and public spaces of Banaras” (Minkowski 2011, p. 218). Notably, out of the seven dominant pāṇḍita families in Vārānasi on the eve of colonialism, all except one held Advaita Vedāntin commitments. In other words, “the intellectual scene in Banaras” was dominated by Advaita Vedānta so much so that it can be considered “the establishment position in the city” (Minkowski 2011, p. 218). Further, H.P. Shastri has noted: “In 1791, the Benares Sanskrit College was established and the Dakshinā Brāhmaṇas were its principal professors. Even at the present moment, the Dakshinā element preponderates in the staff of that College” (Shastri 1912, p. 12). These “Dakshinā Brāhmaṇas” (or brahmins “from the southern country,” i.e., the Deccan) are, indeed, the brahmin pāṇḍita families, of overwhelmingly Advaita Vedāntin allegiances, mentioned above.

Important in this context is the Anglo-Sanskrit professor at Benares Sanskrit College, Pramadadas Mitra. Mitra, although not a brahmin (nor a traditional pāṇḍita), hailed from a wealthy merchant family and was a major intellectual figure at the College and in the city. Well-versed in Advaita Vedāntic traditions, he was connected to the pāṇḍita community and also an associate of Swami Vivekananda. The letters sent from Vivekananda to Mitra document their close relationship and Vivekananda’s eventual, but indeed explicit, break from the perceived parochialism of Mitra’s traditionalism (Jitatmananda 1982). They also record a number of Vivekananda’s queries, such as those related to concordances across Indian traditions, texts on Sanskrit grammar, and comments on a range of philosophical–theological issues. Vivekananda’s questions include those about Advaita Vedānta’s relationship to the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras of Mahāyāna Buddhism and how, for example, the nirvāṇa of the Avadhūta-Gītā, and important advaita text, tallies with the mokṣa of the Advaita Vedāntic Brahma-Sūtra (Vivekananda [1942] 2008, pp. 7–11). Such curiosity reveals an inquisitive and complex individual grappling with the diversity of Indic sources in order to verify and refine his own theological understanding.

It can be safely asserted that Vivekananda deepened his awareness of advaitic and Advaita Vedāntic traditions in multifarious forms during his renunciate travels across the subcontinent after the death of Ramakrishna, including multiple visits to Kāśi where he stayed at the house of Pramadadas Mitra. This, of course, includes, broadly speaking, yogic traditions, such as the one Vivekananda encountered during his brief tutelage under the “Raja yogin”23 (Vivekananda 1926, p. 202) Pavhari Baba, who lived for some time in a cave in Girnar, Gujarat, a region, Vivekananda notes, that was “sanctified by the stay of the great Avadhuta Guru Dattatreya” (Vivekananda 1932b, p. 235). Scholarship to date, however, has largely overlooked the ways in which Vivekananda was informed by Indic sources. Indeed, rarely discussed in articles on Vivekananda is his study of Sanskrit and broader

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22 J. Sharma (CNN-IBN 2013), for example, problematically suggests that “substantial portions of his [i.e., Vivekananda’s] work … are a call to a dead, fossilised tradition”.

23 Elsewhere, Vivekananda notes that Pavhari Baba’s “Raja Yoga”, which apparently indicates a mediational yoga that culminates in samādhi, also includes some sort of postural practice: “I had heard that Pavhari Baba knew the science of Hatha-Yoga” (Vivekananda 1927, p. 240).
Indian philosophical works, whether during the nascent period of the Ramakrishna Mission, at the makeshift matha at Baranagar, or under the guidance of Indian scholars. Importantly, Vivekanandā’s corpus indicates significant familiarity with the neglected text genres discussed above that fall outside specialist practices of pandita circles or the arcane intellectualty of sectarian dialectics.

6. Swami Vivekananda as Cosmopolitan Theologian

What is important to keep in mind, however, is that Vivekanandā’s “Neo-Vedānta” was not a passive project of assimilation but rather a critical and constructive one. Not unlike Christian thinkers who have reshaped and reframed their received tradition in relation to political economic exigencies, modern science, religious pluralism, feminism, post-humanism, etc., Vivekananda can be fruitfully regarded as a kind of cosmopolitan theologian. His cosmopolitanism is evident in, for example, his willingness to imbibe and engage multiple intellectual vistas. “My motto”, he declares, “is to learn whatever good things I may come across anywhere” (Vivekananda 1926, p. 203). Thus, rather than advocating a simplistic return to a pure golden age, Vivekananda freely adopts what he considers as positive in foreign cultures while also proffering “internal” criticisms of certain elements of Indian society and religiosity. His approach, however, is undergirded by a sense of rootedness that engages other worldviews while remaining committed to certain theological premises and non-negotiable positions. In other words, Vivekananda implicitly situates himself in a stream of inherited tradition, upon which he brings to bear an advaitic hermeneutics shaped by a reverential loyalty to a beloved guru and his nascent sampradāya. And so while he draws from Western modes and models, he does so only to a certain degree, as indicated in his critiques of Christian doctrines and the philosophical views of the likes of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer and even Paul Deussen. In this way, Vivekananda carried out an agential and active process of Hindu philosophical theology within a global intellectual forum. In the context of the colonial occupation of India, Vivekananda articulated ways in which an advaitic theological framework could speak to both contemporary and proleptic concerns. In carrying out such an agenda, he also initiated a different kind of discourse from that of Ramakrishna, the illiterate priest and Kālī devotee at Dakshineswar. And it would indeed be the discourse of Vivekananda, which accommodated the globally dominant philosophical and scientific currents of his day, that would come to typify a generation of Indian thinkers that succeeded him.

7. Conclusions

In making a provisional gesture at the historical transmission of ideas, this paper does not argue that Vivekananda lacked innovation or that he was somehow uninfluenced by bhadrālok sensibilities or the global episteme of his colonialized milieu. I do argue, however, that the current understanding of Vivekananda’s innovations, and his epistemic discontinuity with precursor Hindu traditions, is proportional to the limited consideration of the diverse (and, in particular, post-“classical”) Indic traditions he critically and creatively engaged. Indeed, there remains much work to be done in thinking through the way in which “Neo-Vedāntic” figures such as Vivekananda were informed by, and repurposed, precolonial Indic sources. A closer examination of neglected periods and genres reveals, in fact, theological currents that prefigure, and are echoed in, important aspects of Swami Vivekananda’s “neo” theological perspective.

24 Such scholars include, Pramadadas Mitra, Pandit Shankar Pandurang of Porbandar, Pandit Narayan Das, and Pandit Sunderlal Ohja of Khetri. The biography of these figures, and the exact nature of their relationship with Vivekananda, remains an issue yet to be adequately documented.

25 Given the nature of Vivekananda’s “collected works”, it is also not a theology that is most fruitfully approached through a lens of systematicity, considering that much of Vivekananda’s corpus consists of talks and dialogues, many of which were pedagogical encounters, situationally tailored to a broad range of audiences of different educational and cultural backgrounds.
If we take a balanced approach to the cumulative tradition of Advaita Vedānta: that is, not privileging certain periods over others, not imposing evaluative judgements on high and low points of “philosophical” flourishing, and not marginalizing certain text genres over others—and combine this with more serious consideration of developments and practices related to the lived tradition of Advaita Vedānta on the ground—then a de-essentialized, polyvalent and theologically expansive Advaita Vedānta emerges. From this vantage point, which is sensitive to the appropriation of advaitic but non-vedāntic traditions and their varied historical and linguistic contexts, essentialistic and dichotomous classifications, such as traditional and neo, orthodoxy and distortion, or blanket claims about ruptures with the past, are seen for what they are: neither particularly meaningful nor helpful. It is within the space that this recognition affords, that scholarship on Swami Vivekananda, a key cosmopolitan theologian of the nineteenth century, and a pioneer of cross-cultural pedagogy, can move beyond ossified categories and comparisons.

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References


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