

Vivekananda, Sarah Farmer and global spiritual transformations in the fin de siècle

Abstract:

As Swami Vivekananda travelled West at the end of the nineteenth century to propagate what has become known as 'Hindu universalism', the American Sarah Farmer travelled to Palestine to embrace the new Baha'i Faith. This article will ask why both wished to create 'universal' religions, and why they found inspiration at Green Acre, Maine in 1894 in the wake of the Chicago World Parliament of Religions [1893]. They discussed 'divine femininity', engaged with men like Vivekananda and Abdu'l-Baha, and began to criticise colonial hierarchies in the search for spiritual reconciliation, all concerns which touched on questions of 'Eastern' religion. However, spirituality was not a mere epiphenomenon of larger historical developments. Rather, the 'transformation' discussed here drew on an essentialised notion of 'Eastern Wisdom', that contrasted spirituality with materialism, tolerance with intolerance, transcendence with instrumentalism. Such polarised characterisations, however, misjudged the ways Baha'i and Hindu Universalism de-stabilised the very categories of East and West, while retaining a vision of 'Eastern Wisdom' untouched by Western corruptions.

Keywords: Vivekananda, Sarah Farmer, Hindu Universalism, Baha'i, Green Acre, , Anti-Imperialism.



In 1894 Swami Vivekananda, the founder of 'Hindu Universalism'¹ and the first guru to gain a substantial following in America, visited Green Acre, Maine. A photograph recording the occasion shows him sitting with his Indian turban amongst the respectable Americans who had gathered under the pine trees in search of spiritual enlightenment. To his right sits Sarah Farmer, the patroness and founder of the rural retreat, and the woman who had invited him. Six years later, however, she became a disciple of Abdu'l Baha, and a devotee of the Baha'i. It might seem that the moment the camera records is little more than a footnote to the mainstream history in which waves of spiritual enthusiasms periodically wash over American religious sensibilities. However, the prominence of two such figures

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¹ See Jyotirmaya Sharma, *A Restatement of religion: Swami Vivekananda and the making of Hindu nationalism*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013); Shashi Tharoor, *Why I am a Hindu* (London, Hurst Publishers, 2018).

and philosophies representing differing forms of 'Eastern Wisdom', suggests that something more important was afoot.

The spiritual transformation underway at Green Acre was thus not just about 'orientalism' and its impact on the West, or about the emergence of comparative religion, or about popular science and its effects, though all of these were factors in the story.² Under Farmer's auspices, spiritual seekers discussed 'divine femininity', engaged with men like Vivekananda and Abdu'l-Baha to explore 'Eastern' religions, and began to criticise colonial hierarchies as they searched for spiritual reconciliation. These abstract discussions, which focused on gender, race and empire, were productive in furthering new religious syntheses, but proved distorting, even tragic, for the individuals involved. Sarah Farmer's 'submission' to what was called the Persian Revelation was used against her, and she was incarcerated as a madwoman; while Vivekananda struggled against those who cast him as an African-American or accused him of seducing unsuspecting women with his 'exotic' practices.

In highlighting the role of gender, race and imperialism, however, the argument does not mean to imply that spirituality was a mere epiphenomenon of larger historical developments. Rather, such issues loomed large because this spirituality increasingly drew on non-Christian ideas in which gurus and disciples, non-duality, meditation and celibacy were important aspects of spiritual transformation. They heralded the value of 'Eastern Wisdom', an essentialist notion that contrasted spirituality with materialism, tolerance with intolerance, transcendence with instrumentalism. However, creeds such as Baha'i and Hindu Universalism de-stabilised the very categories of East and West, and their supporters,

² Mishka Sinha, 'Orienting America: Sanskrit and modern scholarship in the United States, 1836-1894', in *Debating orientalism*, eds. Anna Bernard, Ziad El-Marsafy, and David Atwell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 73-93; Tomoko Masuzawa, *The invention of world religions: or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

in casting such categories aside, sought to usher in a new age of religious universalism while keeping intact the appealing vision of a monolithic 'Eastern Wisdom' uncontaminated by Western corruptions.

Until now, historians have tended to separate the transnational and global dimensions represented by Hindu Universalism and Baha'i from the growing questioning of Christian religious orthodoxy and emerging anti-imperialism. Consequently, Green Acre and its metaphysical spirituality have been explored solely in its American context. Catherine Tumber recognises the important gender dimension of Green Acre's experimentation, but criticises what she sees as its 'American Gnosticism' and its role in removing women from the public sphere and political activism with its emphasis on 'self'.³ By contrast, Leigh Eric Schmidt views the movement that began with Transcendentalism and blossomed at Green Acre through the lens of American religious liberalism. He concludes that these spiritual innovations offset the intermittent intolerance of evangelical Protestantism, by welcoming more progressive social and political possibilities.⁴ Catherine Albanese expertly traces metaphysical beliefs that stood either outside or on the margins of both denominational and evangelical Christianity to reveal the mystical and often unconventional aspects of American spirituality.⁵

In turning to India, we find that historians have examined religious change even more intensely than their American counterparts. They have written extensively on the history of 'Hindu Theism' and the Brahmo Samaj under Roy Mohan Roy and his successors, Debendranath Tagore and Keshub Chunder Sen, and on Vivekananda's guru, the great

³ Catherine Tumber, *American feminism and the birth of new age spirituality: searching for the higher self, 1875-1915*, (Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc), 2002.

⁴ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless souls: the making of American spirituality from Emerson to Oprah*, (New York, Harper San Francisco, 2005).

⁵ Catherine L. Albanese, *A republic of mind and spirit*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2007).

nineteenth-century mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa.⁶ They have also focussed more on imperial and global themes, by examining the impact of both Christianity and western science (especially evolutionary theory) on Hindu intellectuals⁷; and addressing how Bengalis refashioned Hinduism in the light of British social and political ideas, as well as German idealism.⁸ However, their attention centres on Bengal, Vivekananda's home, which saw the earliest and most elaborated reform movements during the Raj.⁹

The impact of the 'East' on America has been less studied, although there have been valuable accounts of Vivekananda and his Western triumphs¹⁰; the importance of 'orientalism' on the American 'transcendental' tradition¹¹; and work on the transmission and reinterpretation of yoga.¹² Specifically, the impact on Western thought and religious practice, and the consequent linkages back to the subcontinent and to imperialism, have yet

⁶ For a sampling see Ajit Kumar Ray, *The religious ideas of Rammouhun Roy: a survey of his writings on religion particularly in Persian, Sanskrit and Bengali*, (New Delhi, Kanak Publications, 1976); Amiya Sen, *Rammouhun Roy: a critical biography*, (New Delhi, Penguin, 2012); C.A. Bayly, *Recovering liberties: Indian thought in the age of liberalism and empire*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007); for the extent of the controversy see Swami Tyagananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Interpreting Ramakrishna: Kali's child revisited*, (New Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers 2011).

⁷ C. Mackenzie Brown, *Hindu perspectives on evolution: Darwin, dharma, and design*, (London, Routledge), 2012); D. Killingley, 'Hinduism, Darwinism and evolution in late nineteenth-century India', in D. Amigoni and J. Wallace (eds), *Charles Darwin's Origin of species: new interdisciplinary essays*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995); Dhruv Raina and S. Irfan Habib, 'The moral legitimization of modern science: Bhadrakalok reflection on theories of evolution', *Social studies of science* 26 (1996), 9-42; Pratik Chakrabarti, *Western science in modern India: metropolitan methods, colonial practices*, (New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2004).

⁸ See fn.11 and Torkel Brekke, *Makers of modern Indian religion in the late nineteenth century*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 13-40.

⁹ Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in global concept history: culturalism in the age of capital* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Marie Louis Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the west: new discoveries*, 6 vols., (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1984-1992).

¹¹ Arthur Versluis, *American transcendentalism and Asian religions*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 51-79; S. Pike, *New age and neo-pagan religions*, pp.49-50; W. J. Hannegraaff, *New age religion and western culture: esotericism in the mirror of secular thought*, (Leiden, Brill, 1996).

¹² Elizabeth De Michelis, *A history of modern yoga*, (London, Continuum, 2008); for the encounter with evolution see Cheever Mackenzie Brown, *Hindu perspectives on evolution; Darwin, dharma, and design*, (London, Routledge), 2012.

to be systematically integrated.¹³ Vivekananda's Hindu universalism was inseparable from the cultural nationalism that underlay it; his attempt to 'missionise' without conversion grew out of a simultaneous desire to propagate neo-Vedanta abroad and social engagement back in India. In comparison, Sarah Farmer at first offered a spiritual smorgasbord at Green Acre, but later pushed the universalism of Baha'i and desired to use Green Acre to win converts.

The World Parliament and Green Acre

Neither Vivekananda's introduction of Hindu Universalism to America nor Sarah Farmer's Green Acre experiment would have happened without the World Parliament of Religions. Held in conjunction with the quinquennial celebration of Columbus' discovery of America, the Parliament sought to usher in the 'American Century'. Alongside the gargantuan display of neo-classical architecture, newly-built canals and a Ferris wheel, the organisers presented Protestant Modernism as central to America's anticipated global hegemony.¹⁴ The so-called Court of Honour, with its massive, white concourses, included enormous displays of machinery and commercial products, and sought to encompass all the architectural heights of previous civilisations while celebrating the industrial exuberance of the American present. This display of material abundance and cultural distinction was decidedly secular and capitalist, privileging technological achievement.

The Parliament, in contrast, sought to demonstrate American spiritual aspirations, the importance of 'Mind' not 'Matter,' with a commitment to a largely Protestant spiritual

¹³ D.H. Killingley, 'Vivekananda's western message from the east', *Swami Vivekananda and the modernization of Hinduism*, in ed. W. Radice, (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998); S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern religions and western thought* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1940).

¹⁴ For images, see *Worlds' Columbian Exposition of 1893* (Paul V. Galvin Library Digital History Collection, Illinois Institute of Technology at <http://columbus.gl.iit.edu/>).

reflection and a concerted attempt at some form of ecumenicism.¹⁵ Technology and wealth were integral to this self-image of American prowess, but so was a vision of the Republic as a New Jerusalem. The Exposition was described both as a 'Heavenly City' and as a 'Fancyland Palace', the juxtaposition of the divine (sacred) and the luxurious (profane) underpinning the tension inherent in its excess.¹⁶

The organisers, Presbyterian clergyman like John Henry Barrows and jurist Charles Bonney, sought to steer a difficult path between a belief in Western superiority and a commitment to the American exceptionalism that contrasted with European colonialism. They believed that this exceptionalism was grounded in the reform-oriented and ecumenical agenda which they promoted, a kind of practical Christianity that brought the Kingdom of God to earth. Although they orchestrated the Parliament with care, they did not manage to keep total control of its deliberations.¹⁷ However politely, Eastern representatives took the opportunity to criticise Western materialism and its brutality, thus linking the spiritual concerns to the coercion of Christian mission that they despised, and extended their critique to encompass the injustices of a world order based on imperialism.

Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian and other 'world' delegates joined in the assault.¹⁸ Chief among them was Vivekananda, who stood out in a scarlet robe and orange turban. The costume exemplified the different social and political worlds he now inhabited; the turban was a gift from Ajit Singh, the Raja of Khetri, a steadfast patron and admirer who supported

¹⁵ Justin Nordstrom, 'Utopians at the parliament: The World's parliament of religions and the Columbia exposition of 1893', *Journal of religious history* 33 (2009), pp.348-365.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 353.

¹⁷ The Japanese were particularly outspoken, James Ketelaar, 'Strategic occidentalism: Meiji Buddhists at the World's parliament of religion', *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 11 (1991), pp.37-56, and Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the west: orientalism, occidentalism, and the Columbia exposition*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Richard Hughes Seager, *The World's parliament of religions: the east/west encounter*, Chicago, 1893, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

his family while he travelled.¹⁹ His female devotees in Massachusetts, who had never seen a 'Hindoo' before, helped fashion the robe which, along with a more clerical-looking black coat that he wore on other occasions, became his sartorial trademark. Their help in creating his image was early evidence of his collaboration with women who would become his steadfast friends, devotees and disciples. His self-presentation gave him the air of an Oriental prince and was precisely the impression he sought to cultivate. Both spiritually refined and physically manly, he offered a broader programme of 'man-making' as part of the struggle to emancipate his compatriots from British oppression.²⁰ His very presence challenged the stereotype of the effeminate Bengali 'babu', who carried out the orders of the white rulers. Part of this campaign was the rejection of the high-caste vegetarian strictures of orthodox Hinduism to advocate meat-eating among his countrymen.

For the audience, he was a revelation. Regal in bearing, with perfect English, he was intellectually sophisticated, witty and assured. Coming from respectable Bhadrakalok circles (the prosperous, well-educated generally upper-caste groups of Calcutta), Vivekananda had read Kant, Mill, Hegel, and Spencer. He had encountered Ralph Waldo Emerson in India, not in New England, a reflection of the cosmopolitanism of his native city. The same was true of some alternative therapies, such as homeopathy, which were so Indianised that Hannemann was called regarded as a Mahatma by many Indians who followed his healing regimes.²¹

Because his free-thinking father had prodded him to join the Freemasons, Vivekananda was also acquainted with their peculiar blend of esotericism, fraternal association, Theism, and

¹⁹ Sophie Kim Jung, 'Rethinking Vivekananda through space and territorialised spirituality, c.1880-1920', (Cambridge University Ph.d. dissertation, 2018), p. 41.

²⁰ See Sikata Banerjee, *Make me a man!: masculinity, Hinduism, and nationalism in India*, (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2005), especially ch. 3.

²¹ Shinjini Das, *Vernacular medicine in colonial India: family, market and homoeopathy*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

philanthropy. He even knew of Western purity campaigns through the Calcutta branch of the Band of Hope, a teetotal organisation originally founded in Leeds that also opposed smoking. By the time he came to America, he was *au fait* with Western fashions and intellectual currents and spoke to an audience which knew next to nothing about India.

It was primarily to continue the work of the World Parliament by furthering understanding between different religious traditions that Sarah Farmer created Green Acre.²² She cut a very different figure from the unmissable Vivekananda. She often wore grey with a hint of lavender, very like a Quaker, and finished off the ensemble with a touch of white lace around her throat, simple attire which admirers claimed set off the mobility and radiance of her plain face.²³ At first glance she and Vivekananda seemed like polar opposites, with the gendered dimension of their self-presentation suggesting the diversity and novelty of the connections being forged. Vivekananda was the dark Indian man in scarlet and orange who was deliberately self-orientalising and masculine, while Farmer was the pale New England lady, with the discreet, modest dress and vivid feminine personality. While Vivekananda drew on the intellectual and spiritual fervour of Calcutta, Farmer seemed to embody New England's spiritual and intellectual wealth. She was the daughter of an inventor father and an abolitionist mother. Influenced by the Protestant blends that typified the region, she was raised with a strong Unitarian influence, which focused on Christian virtue and the capacity to increase good in the world. The Unitarian strand focused on 'self culture' and the capacity for freedom to exercise conscience over scripture. 'Culture' in this sense also implied an organic dimension, the sowing of a seed which would germinate if not thwarted by spiritual

²² Pravrajika Prabhuddhaprana, *Saint Sara: the life of Sara Chapman Bull, the American mother of Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta, Sri Sarada Math, 2002), pp. 85-89.

²³ M.R.Ford, 'Sarah Farmer', p. 1.

dearth. There was, however, a tension with an equally strong emphasis on husbandry, on discipline and the idea of spiritual perfection so common to American religion.

Transcendentalism sprang from Unitarian soil with its emphasis on notions of self-divinization, ideas to which, once again, Vivekananda would appeal when he suggested that all was *Brahman*, or non-duality. Emerson had famously engaged with 'metaphysical Asia' after reading the *Bhagavad Gita* and an essay on the *Vedas*.²⁴ In his 1841 essay on what he called the Over-soul, he had expressed a non-Abrahamic vision of non-duality in which all souls – and hence all humanity – were united.²⁵ Farmer wanted to 'sweeten the soul', to enhance self-realising tendencies associated both with the men like Thoreau and the many utopian transcendental educational projects.²⁶ She had already been dreaming of Green Acre, with its emphasis on 'self-culture' and enlightenment when she went to the Columbia Exposition to help her father set up an exhibition of his inventions. Although he had never commercialised his projects, he was a true innovator, who had invented an incandescent light bulb and an electric trolley.²⁷ In a sense, the duo epitomised the tension between the Exposition and Parliament, the practical (and potentially commercial) and the spiritual, linked in ways that remained unresolved, even problematic. Indeed, Moses Farmer's reluctance to profit from his inventions was transmitted to his daughter, who also found it impossible to combine spirituality and financial acumen. The triumph they envisaged did not come about; he was already seriously ill when he arrived in Chicago, and died before the exhibition even opened.

²⁴ This term is 'Albanese' in *Republic of mind and spirit*.

²⁵ This essay, considered one of Emerson's best, is in *The spiritual Emerson: essential writings*, ed. David M. Robinson, ed. 2003; see also Versluis, *American transcendentalism and Asian religions*, pp. 51-79; Pike, *New age and neo-pagan religions*, pp.49-50; . Hannegraaff, *New age Religion and western culture*, p 238 still viewed the religion of the East with some disdain.

²⁶ See Albanese, *Republic of mind and spirit*, pp. 160-163.

²⁷ Tumber, *American feminism*, p. 123.

For Farmer, this loss was catastrophic, not least because she had hoped his inventions would finance the educational project she had in mind. Grief-stricken, she was whisked away by friends before the Parliament even began. It was only later that she returned and met Vivekananda, the Sri Lankan 'Buddhist modernist' Dharmapala, and other representatives of Eastern religions, all of whom she invited to the opening of Green Acre. Such personal connections with American intellectuals, female truth seekers and Eastern religious figures were crucial to her enterprise.

Farmer envisaged Green Acre as a summer tent city in a forest of pines, with a place for lodging (Green Acre Inn, which she bought) and 'Bittersweet', her home, at the centre of the annual spiritual encampment. She was seconded by Sara Chapman Bull, another influential woman who was even wealthier and better connected than Farmer herself. Bull also had a summer residence in Green Acre where she seems to have played a steady role, moderating Sarah Farmer's enthusiasms.²⁸ Bull too had experimented with unconventional spirituality, deserting her father's Protestantism to engage first with spiritualism and then with Mohini Mohan Chatterji, a member of the Brahmo Samaj, the rationalist Hindu reform movement to which Vivekananda had also belonged in his youth. She used to go to lectures to hear Chatterji read the Christian Bible, and also began to peruse his translations of Hindu texts.²⁹ These encounters led her to move away from her occult preoccupations. She was the first, and most enduring, of Vivekananda's women disciples, and was central to his entry into Harvard intellectual circles, where he met the likes of William James. For Vivekananda, Bull became his Dhira Mata, or the Mother of Steady Wisdom, a financial supporter and advisor as he sought to build Vedanta in America. We will never know why Sarah Bull chose

²⁸ Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana, *Saint Sara*, pp. 61 -63.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 62

to follow Vivekananda, while Farmer chose Abu'l Baha, but their mutual regard for, and interest in, Eastern Wisdom affirms the importance of these new 'Oriental' teachers for educating strong-minded American women.

Farmer's vision for Green Acre was inclusive. In a pamphlet of 1898, she described its far-reaching aspirations, which ranged from scientific farming and self-sufficiency to investigating the 'purest ideals' of religious systems around the globe.³⁰ She was in step with philosophical perennialism, or the view that world religions shared metaphysical truths, a universalism that had infused both Transcendentalism and Unitarianism, and was now being reshaped by Theosophy. Theosophy, founded by the Russian medium Helen Blavatsky, sought to combine science and religion, embraced evolutionary doctrines and endorsed notions of spiritual evolution, karma and non-duality.³¹ When Blavatsky moved to India in 1876, she championed the 'brotherhood of man' and was welcomed for undermining colonial hierarchies by emphasising spiritual universalism. At her headquarters in Adyar, however, Blavatsky created a 'great white brotherhood [with] little dark helpers', Indian disciples whose inferior status plagued Theosophy for generations.³² Still, Buddhist Modernists like Dharmapala adored her, and were attracted by Theosophy's fraternal

³⁰ 'The Green Acre ideal', p. 2, Baha'i Archives, Wilmette (place of publication not cited).

³¹ S.L. Cranston, *HPB: The extraordinary life and influence of Helena Blavatsky, founder of the modern Theosophical movement*, (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons) and Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist: the Asian odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996). Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient wisdom revived: a history of the Theosophical movement*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980) pp.8-20; Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, imagination, tradition: studies in western esotericism*, (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2000); Isaac Lubelsky, *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the birth of Indian nationalism*, (Sheffield, Equinox, 2012); J. Barton Scott, 'Miracle publics: Theosophy, Christianity, and the Coulomb affair', *History of Religions*, 49 (2009), 172-196; Mark Bevir, 'Theosophy and the origins of the Indian National Congress', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 1-3 (2003), pp. 104-5. Gauri Viswanathan, 'The ordinary business of occultism', *Critical Inquiry* (2000) vol. 27, pp. 1-20.

³² Alan Trevithick, 'The Theosophical Society and its subaltern acolytes (1880-1986)', *Marburg Journal of Religion*, 13(, no. 1 (2008), p.16-7.

aspirations.³³ Vivekananda, however, privately judged Theosophy as an ‘Indian grafting of American Spiritualism – with only a few Sanskrit words taking the place of spiritualistic jargon’.³⁴ He thought it was nonsense, with whatever truth Theosophy contained of Indian origin.

Vivekananda was thus ready to condemn universalism that he considered wrong-headed. Farmer, by contrast, was less critical but catalysed all kinds of discussions. She demonstrated her commitment not only by inviting Vivekananda and Dharmapala, but also by summoning Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, providing a platform for both Eastern gurus and Afro-American intellectuals. She may have sensed some relationship between imperialism and the history of American slavery, or at least perceived herself as following in the abolitionist tradition of her mother, Hannah Shipleigh, although the loss of her papers means that we will never know if this was the case. From the outset, Green Acre also continued the Parliament of Religion’s work through the Monsalvat School of Comparative Religion, managed by G. Lewis Janes, the head of the Brooklyn Ethical Society and another of Vivekananda’s allies.³⁵ The School taught the main tenets of all religions and questioned Christian dogmatism. For the people at Green Acre who championed this approach, comparative religion was above all about education and understanding, not about conversion to other faiths.

Green Acre was distinctive in encompassing these elements of intellectual debate and marrying them to the arts, domestic science, and literature, taking on the feel of an avant-

³³ Steven Kemper, *Rescued from the nation: Anagarika Dharmapala the Buddhist world*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015), 33, 93-5.

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https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Complete_Works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_4/Writings:_Prose/Stray_Remarks_on_Theosophy ,(consulted 25 February 2019).

³⁵ For his activities, see *Lewis G. Janes: philosopher, patriot, lover of man* (Boston, James H. West, 1902). The school’s work is described in ‘Comparative religion notes’, *The Biblical World*, 8(1896), p. 166.

garde intellectual hothouse linked to spiritual searching and practical engagement. The encampment distinguished itself by its aura of spirituality and quest for world peace, combined with the conviction that the process of exchange would secure this goal. In many ways Green Acre could be likened to a Chautauqua,³⁶ or the popular adult education communities of the 1880s, in its emphasis on moral improvement, but its concerns were not limited to academic teaching or conventional reform.³⁷ Hence, all kinds of spiritual healers, Christian scientists, experts in mind-cure and other therapies also found a ready welcome. The psychologist and philosopher William James, who spoke at the summer encampment, described the spiritual wave it embodied in his *Varieties of religious experience* (1902):

An... optimistic scheme of life, with both an speculative and practical side....it has taken up into itself a number of contributory elements, and it must now be reckoned with as a genuine religious power...One of the doctrinal sources of Mind-cure is the four Gospels; another is Emersonianism or New England transcendentalism; another is ...idealism; another is Spiritism, with its messages of 'law' and 'progress' and 'development'; another the optimistic popular science evolutionism ... and, finally, Hinduism.....³⁸

This summary was apt, especially its mention of the power of 'optimism', in which the tenets of Harmonial Religion and New Thought. Designed to restore balance and secure rejuvenation, their practices underscored the possibility of harmony and transformation rather than damnation. Many of the Protestants at Green Acre were in revolt against the legacies of Calvinism, especially the emphasis on sin, predestination, and the inevitability of suffering. Women in particular distanced themselves from the alienating gender hierarchies of orthodox Protestantism, seeking salvation instead in union, solace and comfort.

Sometimes they found the answer in more unconventional Christian denominations, such as

³⁶ These assemblies were named after a lake in southwestern New York, and the name was American Indian in origin. These travelling schools were modelled after the original institution in western New York.

³⁷ Tumber, *American feminism and the birth of new age spirituality*, p. 25.

³⁸ William James, *Varieties of religious experience*, (New York, Dover Publications, 2013), p. 114.

Swedenborgianism,³⁹ which focused on the relationship between microcosm (the individual/nature) and macrocosm (Mind, Spirit). There was a mystical bent to its holism, a rejection of a preoccupation with transgression and repentance in favour of harmony. Sin was often regarded as nothing more than ignorance and error, to be overcome by restoring the balance between the universal and particular. In mid-century, Andrew Jackson Davis had pioneered a popular variant that blended its spirituality with popular science and mesmeric healing,⁴⁰ currents that women fed into radical feminism, social utopianism, and spiritualism.⁴¹ For example, in February 1894, a few months before Vivekananda's visit to Green Acre, a Detroit newspaper proclaimed that, after hearing Vivekananda, Swedenborg was nothing more than a 'European successor of an early Hindoo priest.'⁴²

Such observations suggest how many Americans, and Vivekananda in turn, sought to explore the overlapping possibilities of their metaphysical systems. Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, the fastest growing denomination in America, provided another case for comparison. She too rejected a vision of a fire and brimstone Patriarch.⁴³ After decades of ill-health and spiritual malaise, she had embraced the Divine Mind behind Christ's healing powers, proclaiming that the human mind was diseased, riven by immorality, and error. She argued that confined mentalities blocked entry to the Kingdom of God in the present, and

³⁹ Ann Braude, *Radical spirits: spiritualism and women's rights in nineteenth-century America*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1989). As early as mid-century, some female spiritualists had deserted Presbyterianism because of its perceived harshness.

⁴⁰ Pike, *New age and neo-pagan religions*, pp. 48-9; Robert W. Delp, 'Andrew Jackson Davis and spiritualism', in A. Wrobel, ed. *Pseudo-science and society in nineteenth-century America*, (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1987) pp. 100-121.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp. 206-220.

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https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_complete_Works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_3/Reports_in_American_Newspapers/The_Divinity_of_Man, *Detroit Free Press*, 18 February, 1894, (consulted 25 February 2019).

⁴³ Stephen Gottschalk, *Rolling away the stone: Mary Baker Eddy's challenge to materialism* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006), 120.

insisted that suffering was nothing more than ‘waking dream-shadows’.⁴⁴ She added that the impression of egos inhabiting separate bodies was an illusion and dissolved in a greater reality that was Spirit.

Vivekananda called Christian scientists ‘Vedantins’, but qualified his view by saying that ‘they had picked up a few doctrines of the Advaita and grafted them upon the Bible’.⁴⁵ His characterisation was perspicacious; Mary Baker Eddy’s deepest inspiration was indeed Biblical, despite a distant familiarity with Vedantin ideas and Eastern thought. None the less, Vivekananda recognised ‘waking dream shadows’ as *maya* (worldly illusion) and gathered numerous female friends who had experimented with, or remained, Christian Scientists.⁴⁶ Many of Eddy’s contemporaries at Green Ace adapted her vision to the ‘mind-cure’ movement, facilitating healing by relying on the positive rapport between magnetiser and subject or hypnotiser and patient, rather than Divine Spirit. Depending on the point of view, such links could positively enhance spiritual healing or result in unscrupulous domination, especially if the operator was male and the subject female.

Both Sarah Farmer as devotee and Vivekananda as guru would become protagonists in these highly-charged debates infused with race and gender. After the World Parliament, Vivekananda was implicitly criticised for wrongly entrancing the women who heard him. On 30 November 1894, a newspaper announced, ‘In going in and coming out of the building, he was daily beset by hundreds of women who almost fought with each other for a chance to get near him, and shake his hand’. In 1897, a Christian missionary tract contended that it

⁴⁴ Ibid, quoted on p. 83.

⁴⁵ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Complete_Works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_6/Epistles_-_Second_Series/XLVII_Brother_disciples, consulted 25 February 2019.

⁴⁶ Gwilym Beckerlegge, ‘The early spread of Vedanta societies: an example of “imported localism”, *Numen*, 51(2004), 296-320, especially p. 299.

was not the 'sublime philosophy of the Vedanta' that had attracted the women, but Vivekananda's knowledge of their 'weaknesses' to which he 'skilfully adapted himself'.⁴⁷

In Vivekananda's case, such accusations of manipulation were ironic because he privately derided the mind-cure experiments that he witnessed at Green Acre. For example, he mocked Henry Wood, an important figure in New Thought, as a 'mental healer of metaphysico-chemico-physico-religious whatnot!'⁴⁸ and made fun of 'the Editor... of the Universal Truth... [who] is conducting religious services and holding classes to heal all manner of diseases and very soon I expect them to be giving eyes to the blind and the like!' ⁴⁹ To Mary Hale, one of his Chicago confidantes, he wrote, 'There you will find..., table turnings, palmists, astrologers, etc., etc. You will get all the "cures" and all the "isms" presided over by Miss Farmer'.⁵⁰ He made a larger point about the deficient spirituality he observed. Their vision of God, in his view, was extremely, limited. For the attendees, he wrote, 'God is either a terror or a healing power, vibration and so forth'.⁵¹ He objected both to fire and brimstone Protestantism and to the vogue for spiritualism, Christian Science, and mesmerism, but he did so with his characteristic wit and penetration.

Another of his talents, however, was to observe the spiritual climate and healing practices of these Westerners, and to re-orientate them in such a way so that they would provide a

⁴⁷ Anon, *Swami Vivekananda and his guru, with letters from prominent Americans, the alleged progress of Vedantism*, (London and Madras, The Christian Literature Society for India, 1897), p.iv.

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https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_complete_works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_6/epistles_-_second_series/XLIV_Sisters, (consulted 25 February 2019).

⁴⁹ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Complete...Vivekananda/.../XLIV_Sisters 5 September, 1894, consulted 25 February 2019.

⁵⁰ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_complete_works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_8/Epistles_-_Fourth_Series/XLVI_Sister, 22 June 1895, (consulted 25 February 2019).

⁵¹ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_complete_Works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_6/Epistles_-_Second_Series/XLIV_Sisters, 31 July, 1894, (consulted 25 February 2019).

bridge to, in his view, more sophisticated Neo-Vedantic ideas. His teaching at Green Acre shows that the germ of *Raja Yoga* (1896), the first English manual of its kind on meditation, was largely inspired by the sessions he held under the Pines. His Green Acre notes reveal how he sought to explain the centrality of a loving God and the importance of concentration. He explained that ‘meditation is a sort of prayer and prayer is meditation’. He insisted that the guru was nothing more than the higher self, thus asserting that domination (especially of women) had no role in spiritual guidance. Indeed, in *Raja Yoga* he would criticise mind-cure specialists and Christian scientists for intervening in the individual’s process of ‘self-realisation’ and potentially corrupting it. He remarked at Green Acre that understanding Yoga entailed realising that ‘our present consciousness is only a little bit of an infinite sea of mind’ that should not constrain us. He elaborated: ‘the word Yoga is the root of which our word yoke is a derivation — meaning "to join" — and Yoga means "joining ourselves with God" — joining me with my real Self’.⁵²

When *Raja Yoga* appeared, Vivekananda stated that ‘one exists as many’, that ‘there is no difference between the sun and you,’ ‘between the table and me,’⁵³ counter-intuitive assertions which exemplified the radical non-duality at the heart of his preaching. He offered meditation, or concentration, to arrive at ‘superconsciousness’ (*samadhi*) and reveal the transcendent non-duality he prized. He also emphasised experientialism, rather than scriptural exegesis, as the certain way towards spiritual advancement.⁵⁴ In this focus, at

⁵² These quotations all come from https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_complete_works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_9/Notes_of_Lectures_and_Classes/The_Religion_of_India, (New Discoveries, Vol. 2, pp. 145-49, 155-56.), (consulted 25 February 2019).

⁵³ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_complete_works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_1/Raja-Yoga/Prana, (consulted 25 February 2019).

⁵⁴ Thomas J. Green, *Religion for a secular age: Max Müller, Swami Vivekananda and Vedanta*, (London, Ashgate, 2016), p. 5; other works include Brekke, *Makers of modern Indian religion*; for the different currents of Vedantic thought, see B.A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and modern Hindu discourse*, (New York, Oxford University

least, he was right in step both with William James and especially the women devotees at Green Acre.

Vivekananda always believed that Vedanta had long harmonised science and religion, and so he readily used the metaphors of popular science familiar to his audience to heighten its appeal. He argued that ‘the realisation of divinity through control of the mind’ was a bodily practice with both a ‘science’ and a spirituality superior to the other experimental religions/therapies on offer. At Green Acre, he already referred to the ‘medulla oblongata’ and the ‘spinal cord’, showing his engagement with the body and neurological research, and later extended such ideas in the published work, describing the *prana* in a way that recalled mesmeric fluid and the healing made possible by ‘magnetic force’. In describing *dhyana* meditation, he used the vocabulary of electrical connection: ‘When the mind has been trained to remain fixed on a certain internal or external location, there comes to it the power of flowing in an unbroken current...towards that point’.⁵⁵ Metaphors of light, refraction and vibration pervaded the text: ‘the powers of the mind are like rays of light dissipated; when they are concentrated, they illumine. This is our only means of knowledge...this requires a great deal of practice’.⁵⁶ There was even mention of *akasha* or ‘ether’, with its theosophical, spiritualist and scientific associations.

He never abandoned the essence of neo-Vedanta itself and continually insisted that these physical techniques and transformations had to be at the service of spiritual goals. He thus juxtaposed the transcendence of Eastern Wisdom and practice against the instrumentalism

Press, 2006); B. Malkovsky, *New perspectives on Advaita Vedanta* (Leiden, Brill, 2000); A.P. Sen, *Hindu revivalism in Bengal, 1872-1905: some essays in interpretation* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁵⁵ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_complete_works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_1/Raja-Yoga/Dhyana_And_Samadhi, (onsulted 25 February 2019).

⁵⁶ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_complete_works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_1/Raja-Yoga/Introductory,(consulted 25 February 2019).

and materialism of the Western preoccupation with results and physical healing. Such rhetoric was part of his anti-imperialism, a way of contrasting eastern enlightenment with western coercion. Thus he compared missionary practice in India with his own attempts to bring spiritual illumination with no desire for conversion: 'I want you to keep your own belief: I want to make the Methodist a better Methodist; the Presbyterian a better Presbyterian; the Unitarian a better Unitarian'.⁵⁷ He frequently made reference to Christ and his passion, and above all the Sermon of the Mount, which South Asians (both Buddhists and Hindus) applauded as reflecting the compassionate morality that they themselves endorsed. He willingly engaged with the Bible and with Christianity, without according them any superiority over Hinduism. He wanted to introduce the spiritual wisdom of an ancient religion and culture without insisting that Westerners lose their own.

Vivekananda's **Hindu Universalism went further, however, to combine** anti-imperialism with the Divine Feminine. Although he offered the highly intellectual vision of the formless the highest Universal principle or Brahman while at Greenacre, Vivekananda also worshipped Kali, the black mother goddess of time and destruction. For western critics, Kali epitomised the 'savage', 'heathenish', and 'idolatrous' qualities of polytheistic India by sporting a necklace of skulls and severed hands on her girdle, and dancing on the body of her husband Shiva. What image, asked Christian missionaries, could represent more vicious and violent tendencies than Kali? For Vivekananda, however, Kali was Shakti, or the ultimate feminine power which underpinned the Universe's energy. She represented the endless cycle of reincarnation, and the indivisibility of both creation and death, of darkness and light, that underpinned his non-duality.

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https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Complete_Works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_5/Sayings_and_Utterances, (consulted 25 February 2019).

If he avoided mention of Kali in the early days, he was alive to the notion of the Divine Feminine that circulated at Green Acre. Within Theosophy, Blavatsky's vision of the soul as sexless attracted feminists, who offered their own version of the 'Divine Feminine';⁵⁸ while women, especially those involved in mind-cure and spiritualism, were seen as possessing a special capacity for what Joy Dixon calls 'spiritual enfranchisement'. At Green Acre, Farmer's admirers called her 'Motherheart', an epithet that linked the 'Divine Self' to the 'Divine Feminine'. The kind of reverence Sarah Farmer inspired can be seen from a description written by a Mrs. Morrison:

On the mirror of my soul was reflected, Green Acre, Miss Farmer, the last of her race. The sun with its glory no longer was on me. The flowers with their perfume were carried from sight, and the walls of the room were falling before me, replaced by Miss Farmer transfigured with light. On a knoll by the river she was standing alone, with the white flag of Peace, and garments all sheer. With Love, Faith, was beckoning 'e're beckoning on. The few slowly spanning the distance between. Soon the moss grew longer, she was leading them then. And many the flags that were waving in air, e'er constantly increasing with women with men, bringing their children with Love's tenderest care.

...Then Miss Farmer and flag was lost to my sight. And I mingled my tears with the tears hundreds shed; but wiping my eyes, I saw with delight she was leading them still with the host o'erhead. And I saw "ten thousand times ten thousand", in the host above, and the host below. Reaching from Green Acre to every land, and the good there from, even you shall know.⁵⁹

Here Farmer was transfigured by celestial light, leading a righteous, loving multitude from Green Acre to 'every land' with her message of universal peace. She was the spiritual nurturer of an entire community and, in the hopes of Mrs Morrison, of the world. Sarah Farmer's humanity was particularly treasured, and she was famous for her exquisite tact and taste, having an almost uncanny ability to remember everyone's name and personal

⁵⁸ Joy Dixon, *Divine feminine: Theosophy and feminism in England*, (London and Baltimore, the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

⁵⁹ Mrs. J. H. Morrison, letter Sarah Bull, Dec. 19, 1894, *Vedanta Society Archives*, San Francisco.

details. Mothering, however, was a mission done in surrogacy, as she turned down offers of marriage several times. She seems to have adopted two boys but gave them up to a cousin because of the demands that Green Acre imposed.

Indeed, the linkage of surrogate mothering and chastity were part of the spiritual world that both Vivekananda and Farmer inhabited. Vivekananda was the disciple of the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna, an illiterate Brahman famed as a *paramahansa*, or Holy Fool, and one whose ecstatic visions blended unorthodox Tantra with other more conventional Hindu beliefs.⁶⁰ Ramakrishna famously warned his Bengali disciples to eschew ‘women and gold’, both worldly temptations that would deter them from the true spiritual path.⁶¹ Indeed, his sometimes disgusted statements about women’s bodies and sexuality more generally have been cited as evidence of unbridled misogyny. And yet, his relationship to femininity was much more complex than such conclusions allow. Ramakrishna was raised by village women and was their confidante; in his mystical trances, he embodied the mother of Rama, and like many Vaishnava aspirants, became Radha, the love-crazed *gopika* of Krishna. He spent days in women’s clothing, and delighted in acting like a child, ‘playing in the lap of Kali’, and surrendering himself utterly to Her will.⁶²

⁶⁰ There are many works on Ramakrishna; the most controversial is Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kali’s child: The mystical and erotic in the life and teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); the full response and critique from the Ramakrishnan Mission scholars is Swami Tyagananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Interpreting Ramakrishna, Kali’s child revisited*, (New Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2011); Sumit Sarkar, ‘Kaliyuga’, ‘Chakri and ‘Bhakti: Ramakrishna and his times’, *Economic and political weekly*, 1992, vol. 27 (29), pp. 1543-1566. Sharma, *A restatement of religion*; Sudhir Kakar, *The analyst and the mystic: psychoanalytic religions on religion and mysticism*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991); Romain Rolland, *La vie de Ramakrishna: essai sur la mystique et l’action de l’Inde vivante* (Paris, Editions Stock); Amiya Sen, *Three essays on Sri Ramakrishna and his times* (Shimla, Indian institute of Advanced Study, 2001); Narasingha P. Sil, *Ramakrishna Paramahansa: A psychological profile* (1991) and *Ramakrishna revisited: a new biography*, (Lanham, University Press of America, 1995).

⁶¹ http://www.ramakrishnavivekananda.info/gospel/volume_1/22_advice_to_an_actor.htm; this famous phrase in Bengali is ‘Kama Kanchana’ (consulted 25 February 2019).

⁶² Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and his divine play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda, (St Louis, Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003).

Although married, he remained celibate, living only intermittently with his much younger wife, Sarada Devi. If Ramakrishna was an 'avatara', or man-god come down to earth, he designated Sarada as his Divine Consort, a role which she humbly accepted. Hindu mythology is replete with such pairings, but Sarada Devi, like her Green Acre counterpart Sarah Farmer, was destined to become a surrogate mother, and to remain a symbol of virgin purity. She was the Holy Mother, revered for her lack of ego, her resilience and what observers called her 'common sense'. Illiterate, poor, and in her youth mocked as the wife of a madman (Ramakrishna in the early days was considered insane), she took on a more important role after his death in 1884, above all in feeding, mothering and counselling Ramakrishna's disciples and in encouraging and helping poor women like herself.⁶³ Although she criticised those who erred, she was esteemed for loving all her 'children' equally. For Vivekananda especially she was vital, a special manifestation of Shakti, the terrible incarnation of Bangala, in the guise of Saraswati (the goddess of Wisdom).⁶⁴ Sarada was a mystic and saint in her own right, and with time her authority became unquestioned among the disciples. Vivekananda asked her leave before travelling to America; and, when his foreign female disciples arrived in India, she broke Brahman rules of purity by eating with them, and hence supported Vivekananda in his campaign against what he saw as the paralysing 'don't touchism' of orthodox Hinduism. Sara Bull arranged for Sarada Devi to be photographed so that she could worship her in America, and these images are now are revered around the world.⁶⁵ Sarada became as important to Vivekananda's western female

⁶³ The literature on the Sarada Devi is enormous, but see the recent and authoritative Swami Chetanananda's, *Sri Sarada Devi and her divine play*, (St. Louis, Vendanta Society of St. Louis, 2015).

⁶⁴ Swami Purnatmananda, ed. *Remniscences of Sri Sarada Devi by monastics, devotees, and others*, (Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, 2004), p.9 fn.1.

⁶⁵ Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana, *Saint Sara*, p.315.

disciples as she was to the emerging Ramakrishnan Mission that he established in India after 1897.

When Vivekananda met Sarah Famer, therefore, he was no stranger to saintly, spiritual women whose Motherhood was founded in virginal purity, with all the contradictions that the repression of earthly sexuality entailed. Except for Sarada, Vivekananda's spiritual associates had been the small coterie of men, the *gurubbais* or fellow monks, who had witnessed Ramakrishna's mystical trances, and whom he now sought to lead and discipline. Female connection was limited to family connections, his beloved mother and sisters who, remarkably for a Hindu household of the time, were educated at the first English girls' school in Calcutta.⁶⁶ Vivekananda grew up in a world where women were intelligent but hidden from view, betrothed at an early age, and obliged to live under the tutelage of their husbands' mothers.

He was perhaps remarkable in not losing his balance when he encountered the women at Green Acre, who were so different from the Indian women he knew. At first, they astonished him, and he mused repeatedly about their education, intelligence, and propriety as well as their virtuous eagerness to engage in worldly affairs. He was both enchanted and discomfited by this new world, but also grateful for the women's interest in and celebration of him.⁶⁷ If he was dismissive of the spirituality at Green Acre, he was impressed by the honesty, courage and sexual virtue that reigned there, especially since men and women lived together in the tent city without any hint of impropriety. When, in the following year, he set about gathering disciples, he acknowledged women's readiness, and began their

⁶⁶ Mani Sankar Mukerjee, *The Monk as man: the unknown life of Swami Vivekananda* (Gurgaon, Penguin Books India, 2011), pp. 1-90.

⁶⁷ <http://www.advaitaashrama.org/cw/content.php>, 'To his brother disciples', vol. 6, 25 September, 1894.

spiritual education at a quieter retreat in Thousand Island in upstate New York. This work could be fraught, involving the adjustment of the guru-disciple relationship to include women devotees, and hence new and ambiguous gender hierarchies. In these relationships, there was a problematic dynamic of mutual dependence and freedom on both sides that revealed the complicating effects of imperial hierarchies, race and gender. In America in particular Vivekananda felt the sting of race prejudice. In Baltimore small hotels would not 'take in a black man', and he had to go to a larger one, 'because', in his own words, 'they knew the difference between a Negro and a foreigner'.⁶⁸ He was keen to retain his autonomy and independence, but needed financial help for his projects, and had to depend on female supporters like Sarah Bull. Similarly, his women devotees and disciples record the harshness of his scolding, the fear that he might withdraw his love, and the longing to be near him.⁶⁹ Both sides struggled with the power of 'personal' love (Vivekananda admitted to being hurt by disciples) and the need for egoless 'detachment' to achieve spiritual transformation.⁷⁰ Later on, there was also the unexpected difficulty of finding Western men willing to take direction from a 'brown' man of a 'subject' race. Green Acre, however, provided Vivekananda with spiritual openness and human possibility, with Sarah Farmer exemplifying this broadmindedness. These qualities also left her enterprise increasingly unmoored. She took everyone's point of view seriously and insisted on a level of acceptance which some thought excessive. She was famous for saying, 'Never despise any rung of the ladder by which another is rising', a remark meant to express the

⁶⁸ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_complete_works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_5/Epistles_-_First_Series/XLIII_Alasinga, 1 July 1895, (consulted 25 February 2019).

⁶⁹ This problem was acute for Sister Nivedita, or Margaret Noble, who described it in her letters, Sankari Prasad Basu, ed. *Letters of of Sister Nivedita*, (Calcutta, Nababharat Ppublishers, 1960), 2 vols, and intermittently in *The Master as I saw him*, in *Complete works of Sister Nivedita*, vol. 1.

⁷⁰ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Complete_works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_8/Epistles_-_Fourth_Series/CX_Margo, 1 October, 1897, (consulted 25 February 2019).

Green Acre spirit of absolute receptivity.⁷¹ This trait was matched by an unrealistic generosity. Farmer refused to charge fees, not wanting to commercialise the spirituality on offer. She personally underwrote the expenses of the speakers and their families and was depleted both financially and emotionally when the yearly events came to an end. Her idealism later exasperated her collaborator, Dr. Janes, from the Montsalvat School.⁷² Moreover, there was a simmering conflict between his intellectual and academic focus on comparative religion at the School and Farmer's interest in mysticism and spiritual healing.⁷³ The tensions came to a head after her conversion to Baha'i, but even before that she paid dearly for her otherworldliness. Her correspondence is peppered with tales of money troubles. She was apparently so charming in her explanations that her creditors delayed their demands; however, when their own businesses and families were at stake, they became more exigent. Ultimately, she was besieged by lawsuits.⁷⁴

Sarah Farmer and Baha'i

Farmer's difficulties became so great that in 1900 she took a sabbatical and was ushered away on a world trip by her friend, Maria P. Wilson. The story of this voyage suggests the nature of the milieu she inhabited. On the ship sailing from New York to the Mediterranean, they met Josephine C. Locke, a pioneer in the kindergarten movement and an innovator in child art education. She was accompanied by her friend Elizabeth Knudson, and these two women possessed a secret book, which they tucked away when Farmer and Wilson approached. The volume was entitled *Hidden Words*, and the author was a certain

⁷¹ Ford, 'Sarah Farmer', p. 6.

⁷² Ibid, pp. 11-12

⁷³ Schmidt, *Restless souls*, pp. 195-6.

⁷⁴ Ford, 'Sarah Farmer', p. 15.

Baha'u'llah.⁷⁵ The title itself would have been sufficient to intrigue Farmer, fascinated as she was by the esoteric and occult.

This small book was her entry into the little known world of Baha'i, and to the story of Mirza Husayn-'Ali Nuri, a follower of Ali Muhammad Shirazi, or the 'Bab', a young Persian merchant who called for moral, social and spiritual regeneration. Bab means the 'gate', and he saw himself as the pathway to spiritual renewal in Persia where, in 1844, economic distress and the pressures of colonial interference launched the Bab into a messianic career as the returning Twelfth Imam. Prophet, ascetic and even miracle worker, he announced that humanity was on the threshold of a new Manifestation of God,⁷⁶ and linked his spiritual insights to a call for change. He fought against the Islamic restriction on moneylending, the prerogatives of orthodox clergy, and feudalism, and hence against many forms of social privilege. Government clerks and remote villagers responded, with unexpected rebellions breaking out among furtive communities of believers between 1848 and 1852. In the end the 'new prophet'⁷⁷ was executed, but his followers still threatened the regime when they attempted to assassinate the Shah. Rather than repressing the movement, the persecution consolidated it, with one wing under the aristocrat Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri, or Baha'u'llah, developing into the modern Baha'i movement. Forced into migration and exile in cities across the Ottoman Empire, Bab and his family ultimately landed in the penal colony of Acre in Palestine, where he was confined to the citadel barracks, living in harrowing conditions among murderers and political exiles.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.12.

⁷⁶ Christopher de Bellaigue, *The Islamic enlightenment: the modern struggle between faith and reason*, (London, Bodley Head, 2017), pp. 140-44.

⁷⁷ For more on the early Babist movement see, Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and renewal: the making of the Babi movement in Iran, 1844-1850*, (Los Angeles, Kalimat Press, 2005).

It is not clear how much of this history Sarah Farmer knew or understood when she, Locke and Knudson went in search of Bha'u'llah's son, Abdu'l Baha (Abbas Effendi) in 1900. The Baha'i system of belief was both familiar and novel, filled with themes that she knew from the Universalism of the World Parliament and from 'Eastern Wisdom'. For example, the Baha'i mixed the Abrahamic teaching of God's creation with a partial rejection of the belief that it 'appear[ed] out of nothing'.⁷⁸ God was separate from creation, but creation was eternal and never ending. Crucial to Baha'i were the Manifestations, men who were not incarnations of the Divine but who served God's spiritual purpose. The Manifestations included men like Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and the Bab himself, while Abdu'l Baha would later also add Buddha and Krishna.

Thus, a central tenet of Babism was that there was no single revelation, but a process of Progressive Revelation that mirrored creation itself. Here again was the kind of evolutionary (albeit non-Darwinian) vision of intrinsic, organic development.⁷⁹ Perhaps such ideas resonated with Farmer's Unitarianism, containing as they did a similar vision of inherent unfolding. Abdu'l Baha wrote, 'the Divine Manifestations are so many different mirrors because they have a special individuality, but that which is reflected in the mirrors is the same sun'.⁸⁰ He argued that all religions had the same source, and hence contained the same universal truths. This notion underscored other Baha'i emphases on human equality (hence the rejection of a priesthood or a scholarly elite), and the harmonisation of science and religion. Farmer had long championed this list of ideals, together with a mission to pursue world peace.

⁷⁸ William Garlington, *The Baha'i faith*, (Greenwood, CT, 2005), p. 25.

⁷⁹ For evolution as religion, see W Hanegraaf, *New age religion and western culture*, pp. 462-82

⁸⁰ Quoted in William Garlington, *The Baha'i faith*, p. 25.

There is no first-hand account of Sarah Farmer's encounter with Abdu'l Baha. Margaret R. Ford's unpublished memoir records that Farmer was overwhelmed when she met him, and wrote only that 'heart too full for speech – received by our Lord'.⁸¹ This way of speaking hints both at Abdu'l Baha's charisma, and Farmer's susceptibility; early converts in America did not fully grasp the concept of the Manifestations of God, with some believing that Abdu'l Baha was himself an Incarnation and hence a new Christ.⁸² We do not know if Sarah Farmer saw him in this way, but she certainly viewed him as possessing occult powers: she recorded that she had written down some questions, lost the paper, then realised he already knew what she wanted to ask. She only stayed with him for four days, but left a convert. She returned to America keen to establish Baha'i as the leading belief system at Green Acre, as she now had found a new creed that seemed to unite many of her diverse interests.

She had also found a Master, and the 'tablets' or letters that Abdu'l Baha wrote her show how he viewed her discipleship. They were formal, archaic in style and written in Persian, with the gender dimensions clearly staked out. He treated her as the handmaiden of God, whose conversion would engender spiritual greatness: 'know in the reality of assurance that every true woman is attracted by the fragrances of holiness in the most glorious age' and that she 'will surpass even the most developed men of previous centuries'.⁸³ This promise of a specifically feminine role for her within the Baha'i movement would certainly have appealed to her as the 'Motherheart'. We do not have her letters, but his replies suggest that he encouraged her when she encountered opposition at Green Acre: 'Gird up thy loin,

⁸¹ Ford, 'Sarah Farmer', Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, p. 13.

⁸² Garlington, *The Baha'i faith* for these confusions see pp.77-78 and Peter Smith, 'The American Baha'i community, 1894-1917, a preliminary survey' in *Babi and Baha'i, History*, vol. 1, (Los Angeles, Kalimat Press, 1982), pp.100-102.

⁸³ 'Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas, vol. I (New York, Baha'i Publishing company, 1940), p.278.

strengthen thy back, be not discouraged or grieved if people are pouring the arrows of scorn and blame thee'.⁸⁴ He was pleased when she seemed to dispense with spiritual frivolities, and made indirect reference to New Thought: 'thou has dispensed with the telepathic wires of the world' in favour of the Spirit.⁸⁵ He even wrote 'a clear and efficient answer' to another devotee, 'out of love of thee and of her', when he sought to heal a dispute.'⁸⁶ When her house, Bittersweet, burned down in 1904, he understood her dismay, but urged her to remain detached from material things. These letters possessed some of a guru's assurances, but little of the discipline, nor were they like the intimate spiritual direction or penances shown by Catholic priests. They suggest instead an almost scriptural tone of uplift.

Nonetheless Abdu'l Baha pressed Farmer by disapproving of what he saw as the narrow discussions of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism that had made Green Acre famous. Baha'i was different and unique, and Green Acre should belong to it alone, purified of 'the mouldered, two-thousand-years-old superstitions of the heedless, ignorant peoples, whether of Asia or Europe'.⁸⁷ At first glance, such statements utterly destabilised categories of East and West. However, the reality was more complicated. For those at Green Acre, and there were many who opposed the imposition of a new orthodoxy, Abdu'l Baha was still seen as an Eastern Master, the head of an Islamic heresy. Westerners caricatured this world as despotic and hedonistic, where men had harems and mistreated women. Reports of early factional fighting within the Babist movement involving poisoning and murder strengthened the worst stereotypes.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Ibid, pp. 281-2.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 287.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 293.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 1907.

⁸⁸ Paul Carus, 'A new religion', *Open Court*, no. 578, 18 (1904) p. 403; Carus' account seeks to deny these rumours.

The attempt to establish the 'Persian Revelation' as a defining creed at Green Acre was also rejected by the liberal associates of the Monsalvat School, who preached religious reconciliation.⁸⁹ These people had little interest in what might have seemed to them like Baha'i's theological mishmash. Letters to Mrs. Bull are increasingly critical, with one Greenacreite Rena Haskell clearly outraged by Farmer's 'high handed doings' at Green Acre in 1901 after her return from Palestine. Farmer would no longer allow Dr. Janes to hold a meeting in the shade because he had refused the Revelation, which meant that his audience had to stand in the boiling sun.⁹⁰

Farmer, so dedicated to harmony, had now caused friction at her beloved Green Acre. Her new loyalty upset those who saw it as a kind of subjection to foreign male influence, which went against the tenor of her whole endeavour. Was spiritual freedom merely the right to choose one's authority, and then to accept the discipline it asserted without further discussion? When, in the words of Leigh Eric Schmidt, did freedom become self-surrender?⁹¹ These questions raised fears of an over weaning male outsider imposing himself on a goodhearted but overly-idealistic woman. Farmer's embrace of Baha'i also posed the question of whether a universalistic unfolding was possible. Did the blurring of boundaries between religious teachings empty traditions of substance and strength? And yet, it was her spiritual teacher Abdu'l-Baha who asserted that it was not Baha'i that lacked coherence, but the psychic experimentation and healing that had characterised Green Acre. Like Vivekananda, who had mocked the excess of New Thought, Abdu'l-Baha wanted to contain Farmer's 'spiritual receptivity', to impose constraint on a potentially wayward female disciple:

⁸⁹ .Schmidt, *Restless souls*, p. 186.

⁹⁰ 21 November 1901, Rena R. Haskell, Vedanta Society Archives, San Francisco, *Sara Bull papers*.

⁹¹ Schmidt, *Restless souls*, pp.181-227.

He explained that real religion was not composed of psychic experiences or man-made ritual and superstitions, that to encourage the study of these things would not lead to unity and peace, ...not an eclectic Faith but rather a fresh outpouring of the knowledge of the will of God as spoken through the pure channel of a Prophet was the only power that could transform human hearts.⁹²

This vision of Green Acre thus alienated not only those who resisted the ‘Persian Revelation’, but also those dedicated to the more experimental aspects of New Thought practice.

Vivekananda and Farmer Compared

Vivekananda and Sarah Farmer at first glance seemed to have much in common. They were attached to a universalism that was integral to religious reform, opposed to sectarianism, and receptive to a broader notion of ‘spiritual becoming’ for individuals. They both focused on the ‘divine feminine’ (though Vivekananda at first did so discreetly while abroad) and were affected by trends that sought a more unified vision of science and religion. But this list of similarities conceals important differences, which helps explain why their paths diverged..

Vivekananda tempered his enthusiasm for America with greater experience of its racism, exploitation and rampant materialism. The earliest letters record his delight in steam heating and the availability of ice, but he was too spiritually focused to be overwhelmed by material convenience and technology. His time in America was a very mixed experience; he made steadfast friends and disciples – such as Sara Bull – and had ready second homes across the country with women like Josephine Macleod and her sister Betty Legget.⁹³ It is

⁹² Ford, ‘Sarah Farmer’, p. 13.

⁹³ Linda Prugh, *Josephine MacLeod and Vivekananda’s mission*, (Chennai, Ramakrishna Mission, 1999).

important to realise that, of these stalwart devotees, Sarah Bull was the only one involved with Green Acre.

Soon after, Vivekananda realised that life in America would be challenging, even dispiriting, and that he would be easily exploited by the lecture agents who robbed him and diminished his spiritual stature: it was for this reason that he later often taught for no fee at all. He even had harsh words for his beloved Sarah Bull when, in 1895, he defied her wish that he confine his lessons to the 'right people' and taught instead in cheap lodgings in New York. For all that he loved and admired his female disciples, he really wanted to attract men of the world; despite the spiritual power of women in America, he realised that men had the social power needed to further his cause, in the way that the masculine Ramakrishnan Mission he founded did in India.⁹⁴ Several men in America were attracted to his teaching, but his most promising disciple, Leon Landsberg or Swami Kripananda, was unsteady and easily hurt, his fears of Anti-Semitism leading him to feel excluded.⁹⁵ Despite Landsberg's intellectual acuity and polyglot abilities, their relationship foundered. Vivekananda's relationship with an English devotee, T. M. Sturdy was also at times tense, and rarely did he find men eager to be as active as the women.⁹⁶ In the end, Vivekananda changed course by bringing in brother monks from India, many of whom succeeded by pleasing devotees through their 'authenticity', especially in California.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Swami Bodhasarananda, ed. *The story of Ramakrishna Mission: Swami Vivekananda's vision and fulfilment*, (Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, 2006) 1-323

⁹⁵ Many letters which reveal Kripananda or Léon Landsberg's personality are available in Sara Bull's correspondence at the Vedanta Centre of Northern California in San Francisco.

⁹⁶ Sturdy's criticisms were expressed to Josephine MacLeod on 23 Dec. 1899 VSSC. Vivekananda's stenographer, J. J. Goodwin, was an exception; see Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *'My faithful Goodwin'*, (Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1994).

⁹⁷ For one of the most ardent see Marie Louise Burke (Sister Gargi), *Swami Trigunatita, his life and work* (San Francisco, Vedanta Society of Northern California, 1997).

Others, such as Sister Christine, or Christina Greenstidel, abandoned a teaching career in Detroit to come to Calcutta and assist the British disciple Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita) at the school for girls the latter had founded.⁹⁸ When Vivekananda died in 1902, Nivedita left the Ramakrishnan Mission to devote herself to politics, infusing Vivekananda's ideas into her 'aggressive Hinduism' to counter British imperialism.⁹⁹ Vivekananda depended upon her audacity to introduce Kali to the British in Calcutta, on the grounds that a Western woman would explain the goddess' violence and power without accusations of idolatry and paganism.¹⁰⁰ Kali, as a symbol of an aggrieved and outraged mother, would become central to the political theology of early Indian nationalism.¹⁰¹

Vivekananda's vision of Hindu Universalism sought to lift up the Indian masses at home, launch 'karma yoga', and underpin a cultural nationalism that opposed imperialism and Christianity. His legacy today remains immense: Vivekananda is regarded as an influence both for contemporary *Hindutva* and a tolerant, inclusive 'Hindu modernism'. Although it would take time, he was effective in these ventures. There are 201 Ramakrishnan Missions and Vedanta centres around the world and almost 750 educational institutions, while famous Indian political activists on both Left and Right continue to cite him as an inspiration.

⁹⁸ For recent titles see Reba Som, *Margot: Sister Nivedita of Vivekananda*, (New York, Viking, 2017); Amiya Kumar Mazumdar, ed., *Nivedita: commemoration volume (Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, repr. 2016)*; and Pravrajika Jnanandaprana, ed. *The Divine Legacy, Sister Nivedita's 150th Birth Anniversary Publication* (Kolkata, Sri Sarada Math, 2017).

⁹⁹ See Volume three of *The complete works of Sister Nivedita*, Pravrajika Atmaprana, ed, (Kolkata, Advaita Ashrama, 5th reprint, 2014), pp. 491-511.

¹⁰⁰ Margaret E. Noble, *Kali the mother*, (New Delhi, Indigo Books, 2007).

¹⁰¹ Rachael Fabish, 'The political goddess: Aurobindo's use of Bengali Sakta Tantrism to justify political violence in the Indian anti-colonial movement', *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 30 (2007), pp.269-292.

At moments, he worried that the rise of 'organisation' had undermined Ramakrishna's mysticism, but he did not try to stop its march.¹⁰²

In comparison to Vivekananda, Sarah Farmer was endowed with both financial and cultural capital. She was well-connected and irrepressible and, even though a woman, able to go to the Exposition and gain easy access to Eastern 'stars' like Vivekananda and Dharmapala. How many women would have been able to envisage and sustain a project like Green Acre? Her trip to Acre in Palestine with her companions showed that same ability to break through obstacles in search of spiritual discovery.

Her conversion to Baha'i was her undoing. The constant strain of fighting with erstwhile friends and collaborators, given her commitment to harmony, was a psychic catastrophe, and she increasingly withdrew from former contacts. For those who had accepted the Baha'i faith, she was a visionary; for those who wished to further inquiry into religious traditions with no conversion, she had become seriously unhinged. The stereotypes of feminine emotional weakness were advanced to explain her 'susceptibility' to Abdu'l Baha and Baha'i's spiritual errors. This receptivity, which had previously been one of her gifts, was now held against her. Her exhaustion intensified with the effects of old and newer physical injuries. Intermittently, she had voluntarily gone for rest cures in private hospitals, but in 1910 she was taken for a ride to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and placed in a sanatorium with a guardian appointed to make decisions for her. She was put away for five

¹⁰² See his letter to Josephine MacLeod, , https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Complete_works_of_Swami_Vivekananda/Volume_6/Epistles_-_Second_Series/CLVIII_Joe, 18 April, 1900, (consulted 25 February 2019).

years, and ultimately became almost bed-ridden. Much of this story is still obscure, but it betrays more than a hint of tragedy.¹⁰³

During this period, her one joy was the arrival in 1912 of Abdu'l-Baha for his important American tour.¹⁰⁴ Like Vivekananda, then, Abdu'l-Baha made his way West, and especially to America, but unlike Vivekananda, he travelled in search of converts who would accept the Persian Revelation as the true religion. Followers flocked to see the great man, and Farmer's project was taken up by others, most notably by Phoebe Hearst, philanthropist, feminist and suffragist, and the mother of William Randolph Hearst, the media magnate. Her large donations were essential in making the movement important in elite circles in America. In 1913, Green Acre officially became a headquarters of the new religion, but Sarah Farmer took no part in these events. She was still committed, and it was only in 1916, when she was 'rescued' by her friends that she returned to Maine. She died soon after.¹⁰⁵

For those who thought Farmer 'mad', her new-found faith was symptomatic of a dangerous manipulation by an eastern spiritual leader who had somehow tricked or mesmerised her. This was the very suspicion also levelled against Vivekananda and his influence, though when it became a public scandal he was already dead. These fears were explicitly addressed when Sara Bull died in early 1911, leaving a large portion of her vast fortune to the Ramakrishna Mission in India. Her daughter, Olea, complained that her mother had been 'hypnotised' by the Hindus, and that she had been dispossessed of her rightful

¹⁰³ There are those who say that she was taken to New Hampshire without her consent; others imply that friends acted benignly, See , *Restless souls*, pp. 210-11.

¹⁰⁴ Robert H. Stockman, *Abdu'l-Baha in America*, (Wilmette, Baha'i Publishing, 2012.)

¹⁰⁵ See' Carrie Kinney's account of the rescue of Sarah Farmer from Dr. Cole's sanatorium, unpublished manuscript, Baha'i Archives, Wilmette, Indiana.

inheritance.¹⁰⁶ She won her case in court, but died on the day of settlement. Still, Olea's argument about the danger of Hindu swamis had been heeded, as was the more general point that Bull had been a 'bad mother', unwilling to care for her only child, and susceptible to the blandishments of the gurus.¹⁰⁷

Farmer's critics felt that she too had surrendered her freedom to a charismatic figure. At first glance, this was surprising, given Baha'i's apparent emphasis on the equality of men and women. Indeed, six of the original nineteen disciples in the west were women. Because it rejected a privileged male clergy, women were important in the movement from the outset, and played key roles in cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, San Francisco and Washington DC.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the growing emphasis on 'world unity and social harmony', on 'equality of the sexes... full civil rights for all people; [and] education for all' were universal teachings entirely in step with the progressive view of women in the movement.¹⁰⁹ For those who engaged in metaphysical reflection and comparative religion, New Thought experimentation and Spiritual Motherhood, Baha'i was an appealing, all-encompassing creed, its emphasis on Continuous Revelation paralleling the process of 'spiritual becoming' to which they had dedicated their lives. And yet, we should be wary of labelling Baha'i as a 'feminist' theology. Its structures remained patriarchal: the Universal House of Justice, the supreme institution of the Faith, was all male. Male spiritual leaders

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Prothero, 'Hinduphobia and Hinduphilia in U.S. culture', in *The stranger's religion: fascination and fear*, ed. Anna Lannstrom, (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), pp. 13-37.

¹⁰⁷ Jacqueline Brady, 'Wise mother? Insane mother? Sara Chapman Bull and the disarticulated subjectivities of turn-of-the-century motherhood', in *Disjointed perspectives on motherhood*, ed. By Catalina Florina Florescu, (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 201-216.

¹⁰⁸ Sandra Hutchinson and Richard Hollinger, 'Women in the North American Baha'i community', in *Encyclopedia of women and religion in North America*, eds., Rosemary S. Keller & Rosemary R. Ruether, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 777.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid p. 776.

like Abdu'l Baha called Sarah Farmer a 'handmaiden', a status that, once again, reinforced a vision of her feminine subordination.

Conclusion

The life stories of Vivekananda and Farmer dramatically reveal the complicating realities of race, gender and imperialism in the global spiritual transformations of the fin de siècle in which an essentialist view of 'Eastern Wisdom' played a key role. Their global outlook enabled them to question 'old religions' in new, idealistic ways. Farmer left what she saw as the rigid, patriarchal and sect-ridden world of American Protestantism for adventures in psychic experimentation and ultimately the theological synthesis of Baha'i. Baha'i itself was a revolt against the spiritual orthodoxies and elite privileges of Shi'a Islam, and its global flowering was an expression of religious and political philosophies that seemed liberating and harmonious, especially for women. Her opponents, however, saw Farmer's 'surrender' to Abdu'l Baha's directorship and developing orthodoxy as a betrayal, despite the way Baha'i claimed to embrace all religions.

Vivekananda, too, was a reformer in religion, and created his neo-Vedantic synthesis partially by leaving a purely Indian context. He had imbibed what he saw as the westernising reformism of the *Brahmo Samaj*, defended meat-eating, and condemned the 'don't touchism' of orthodox Hinduism, instead crafting a vision that appealed to Westerners through yoga and meditation. His formulation was not without new forms of hierarchy, as the discipleship of western women and charismatic Asian figures suggests. Moreover, Vivekananda's message was more double-edged than his followers in the West appreciated. His universalism was explicitly anti-imperial and rested on an assertion of the superiority of Hinduism as a Mother-creed able to embrace, and even subsume, all others. He retained a

strong cultural nationalism, sometimes with an aggressive insistence that became central to the anti-colonial struggle.. He never forgot that his neo-Vedanta was a *Hindu* universalism. The sharper edge of his thought was more readily expressed in India, when Nivedita openly elaborated on its aggressive dimensions. But unlike Farmer, he never sought converts in America, hoping merely to teach a respect for different paths to the supernatural – a key dimension of Ramakrishna’s thought, and a core aspect of his anti-imperialism. People who meditate are rarely aware of the political struggles which underpinned their practices, or the imperialist context from which they developed.

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